We Sing Our Struggle

A Tribute To Us All

For Meridel LeSueur

Edited by Mary McAnally

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A Tribute to Radical Writers of the 80's, who carry a firestick passed on from hand to hand, generation to generation; who form a circle dance, a spiral dance; whose company is not exclusive; who invite all to join us; we are legion. In the words of Meridel LeSueur, "come, let us enter each other."

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--Mary McAnally, Editor and Publisher

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Circle Poem by Agnes Wolohan Smuda
Calligraphy by Sean Smuda

PARTICIPANTS

Molly Culligan
Florence Dacey
Sharon Doubiago
John Crawford
Mary C. Dunford
Nancy Coleman
Vincent Ferrini
Franklin Brainerd
Joy Harjo
Bernadine
Terry Hauptman
Teresa Anderson
Anita Holladay
C. J. Hunter
Will Inman
Joan Isom
Meridel Lesueur
Joel Lipman
Mary McAnally
Tom McGrath
Bobbie Malarson
Lorelei Means
Phiz Mezey
Joseph Napora
Winona Nation
Bob Nilsson
Irene Paull
Harold Preece
Betty Shipley
Agnes Smuda
Sean Smuda
Nancy Gage Staley
Rachel Tilsen
Tecla
Dorothy Walters
Norma Wilson
Fred Whitehead

...sts Anne Dethrow, Kate ...
...ller, Bam McAnally, Tandi Mc...
Scarborough, and Bill Turley.

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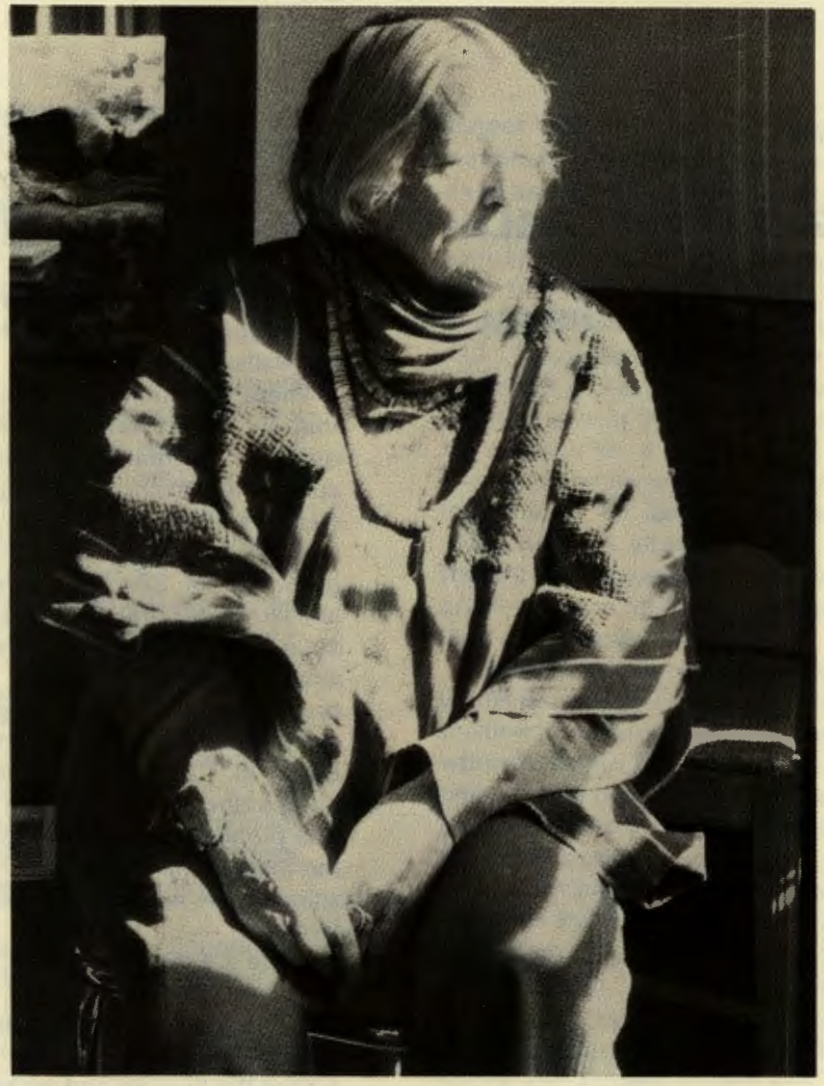
THE CIRCLE IS NEVER CLOSED

'Come, let us enter each other....' **Meridel LeSueur**

"I am luminous with age . . ."
Meridel LeSueur
from *Rites of Ancient Ripening*



Meridel LeSueur in Fred Whitehead's Library
(Photo by C. J. Hunter)

Introduction

WE SING OUR STRUGGLE

A TRIBUTE TO US ALL

For Meridel LeSueur

It began this way: she loved me. She encouraged me in my work. And when I felt like all I could do was cry, she helped me turn that cry into a communal hymn. Now there are no more times of feeling all alone, powerless, voiceless. There are all these people out there who are also crying, and our cries make this harmonic tremor that reverberates against the hills and around the globe, and that tremor will bring down the walls of the empire.

There are moments during this long trek together that are bright flashes, illuminating the whole. Tiny dots on this great spiral of life and struggle that have special importance. Like the day we went to Perry, Oklahoma together, Meridel, my mother, my daughter, a friend, and myself, and visited the home of Meridel's grandmother. She showed me the bay window where she wrote her first short story at age 9. The year was 1909, and Oklahoma was a brand new socialist state, where women had the vote. She and her mother and brother had fled here from Texas, where women had no rights at all. She told us about her march down Main Street in Tulsa in 1911 with the Women's Christian Temperance Union, singing "Down With King Corn." The pioneer women knew the evils of alcohol. While the men drank up paychecks and life savings in the saloons, the women and children starved on isolated farms.

There are all the stories of women from the depression, from the dust bowl of the thirties, and now we hear these stories with an ear to the ground, and the sound of marching feet reverberates across the years, across the prairies and meadows, and the cadence is repeated in our work songs, our poems, our dances.

At some point we know we must write them down.

We must collect these threads into a tapestry that weaves together the ardor and the anguish of our communal struggle into a fine tribute to each other. Meridel reminds us that "the whole thing should be the controversy or the sense of the struggle to find out what women's commonality is . . . to speak to the strengths of each other."

> And what is a celebration or a tribute in the woman's sense? How should we pay tribute to each other in a communal sense and not an ego sense? Do we need great hierarchical figures, or do we need what the word "goddess" really means? Archetypes of our entire strength, of the communal strength and the reflection of us all. What a wonderful thing it would be if this would reflect our struggle together. What is this resonant and reflective resound of women's strength? This is what we have to ponder, not how one of us seems to contain, or if one is elevated (no elevation to a circle). Then she is upheld on the hands of all, and the strength is communal, a flow of the river of strength. How can we do this? How can we invoke this from each other? The goddess means not a person but the hierarchical image of our *continuous and indominatable communal strength.*
> (Letter from Meridel LeSueur to Mary McAnally)

Each of us could describe many of the countless and terrible faces of our oppression; doing so breaks the silence imposed upon us by that selfsame oppressor. She teaches us that we must not fear the labels that we are given in order to silence us:"confessional", "strident", "personal"; and we begin to speak a new language together. Our *con*fessions become *pro*fessions, and *communi*fessions. We see a light on the distant meadow, and we lunge toward it. All that matters now is that we are in the meadow together. We have become the meadow. "It all comes in whatever you got left," she wrote, and we know when we have been knocked to our knees one more time, that precisely at the point where we think we have nothing left, precisely then, at that moment, we find something left, and we stand up, and we march again.

Meridel LeSueur and Irene Paull marched together across a span of fifty years. On Meridel's 80th birthday, Irene wrote her a poem that is included here. As we read it, we weep for those who have fallen during the long march, for Irene Paull who died on August 11, 1981, at age 73, after 63 years of marching. We use our tears to wash each other's feet, to put salt back into the ground, to spring forth new buds and sprouts in our lives and struggle together.

One of Meridel's reviewers wrote that she frequently writes of running. There is this constant running with the firestick, the passing of it from hand to hand, in her writings, in her life, in our lives. We pass around the fetishes that bind us together; we run across the hills, under the guns, poised and aimed. This run-dance is at once both ecstatic and agonizing, as we move through fires and brambles, into the full-fruited meadow, across the fields and dungheaps. And although we often have doubts whether we can make it the long distances we still have to go, we are still here together, legs aching, lungs filled, Meridel with us, tugging, pushing and shoving, heaving each other into new births, new nadirs and zeniths of love and work. We are always together. We only have each other. It is enough.

Mary McAnally

O what is the inordinate and terrible desire for physical life, the forest, the garden, the gentians, the tiny bright hepaticas, the rain, hail, lightning, thunder, the wonderful flashing on the body of the earth, the day on the river, the children wonderful-solid, the bearded farmers, the wild dark-crusted earth like a grape.

Meridel LeSueur
from "Autumnal Village" in *Harvest*

For The Hags, Harpies, Crones Who Sent Me Spinning

for Meridel luminous in firelight

The women who cast their spells on me
The women who threw me to winds
Alive with music like the siren
The old women emblematic as the turtle shell:
The tree women laughing in rain gnarled and broken
The ginkgo women who left me in the deep spring of night
The tempestuous women running for their lives
The earthwomen tickling the bellies of armadillos
The dark women whose mother-tongues were stolen
The tumultuous women playing sycamore flutes in city ruins

The women who threw me to shadows like wolves
The women who formed me sultry with ambition

The firewomen who rescued me from my surrealism
The lavender women who inspired my realism

The cave women weaving baskets of light
The bag women ferrying to the other side

The women who left me deep in summer clawing dust
The women who left me deep in winter climbing ice ropes

The women who sent me journeying for my own good
The women who returned to me volatile under coyote moon.

Terry Hauptman

for meridel

we circle the presence of
an important body of woman
the black garments
gather and rumple
like the skin of a horse
over muscle
the form this woman was meant for
like a mountain, like a river, like a whale
her hunger glides like power through water
I want to swim with her
oceans, gulf stream, into the bay and up
the river, the mountain streams and back
to the artesian well of her springing
where you know she began as big and aged as
you see her now
and you know she could turn this cart upside down
and run, but she is
someone's actual grandmother
she delivered, contracted and heaved into life
babies, children who bore children,
gathered in her is the power of one whole life
of menstruating
those breasts have known the moon close up
she is the menstrual hut now
young women know their force in her presence

Nancy Gage Staley

I Arise On This

Because of Meridel,
I can write this love poem.

I arise on this clear morning
yawn into my shoes, consult my body
(I do not deal anymore
with alienated objects)
find no hand upon my throat,
neither invaded nor occupied
no colonial subject
or archeological dig,
no noun, named, objectified,
put outside, pedestaled,
denigrated, seized, loved,
hated, manipulated, exploited
nor studied. I admit tits,
admit cunt and ass, admit rot,
decay and defecation, admit
the fertilizer—nourishing
destruction essential to growth,
admit my own images, the child
never lost sight of during birth.

We are not linear or narrative
but cyclical and circular,
lined in the matrix of this life.
There is no outside, no periphery,
no border crossing. In this vision
bent 180 degrees, there are two choices.
We will not chance cosmetic reality.
We are all in this together.
When we hurt everything resounds
and trembles in harmony,
and when we tune ourselves
you are tuned.
We will not desert you.
We would have to kill you first.

Betty Shipley

Meridel LeSueur

socialist tribal mother
casts out the line curved
deep to freshet core

net of stream vibrations
weaves to that living
thread

fish and woman
stretch tongues and gills
and swimming reach
the whole stream, whole casting
move each into each
no catch no hold
all moves flowing

fish goes rainbow in her throat
hunger turns forgiveness to joy

we swim inside the cataracts
of her song she
wakes in our singing
fins

Will Inman

Tucson
26 February 1981
at work

Letter to Mary McAnally

from John Crawford, 9/8/81

Dear Mary,

I would try to make this an essay but it is about elusive, lifestruck things, moments that vanish under scrutiny, about Meridel, how I met her and our first five years of acquaintance.

It began when I worked on the staff of the *Daily World* in summer 1976. A copy of Jack Conroy and Curt Johnson's collection *Writers In Revolt*, pieces from the *Anvil* magazine of the 30's, passed my desk. I found two sketches of Depression women by Meridel in it, and I asked an old hand at the paper, Konrad Komorowski, who this woman was and whether she was still alive. He told me stories. And, soon, I had written a letter to Minnesota, and hopped a Greyhound halfway across the country to see a woman I did not know, to ask her to tell me stories, and whether I could publish her books...

It was September, 1976; we have her answer on tape. That beautiful, clear, almost girlish voice, with its

seemingly unquenchable richness and optimism. "Oh, well, yes. I have a cellarful of manuscripts. I've been waiting for you to come along all these years . . ."

But Meridel asked much more of us. She asked that we share her vision. Her first question was, "Well. How can we show that America was built by the people?"

Five years later, I look back on what she has encouraged. We are only a small part; but West End Press has produced 22 books, including four of her own; won three NEA grants; helped sponsor three midwest cultural conferences; seen perhaps a hundred writers of talent developing through us and other small presses—all with Meridel's encouragement. She has organized people around the country; bankrolled projects when she had no financial certainty herself; initiated a book which was to honor her best friend, Irene Paull, in life and now must do so posthumously . . .

And she has talked in, and walked to a thousand places in the time I have known her, age 77 to 81. One of her best appearances, to me, was in your territory, Mary, in Oklahoma City, where she exhorted a small crowd of writers in a restaurant to continue to write, to understand the struggles in society, to never retreat into mass media passivity or feel helpless or alone. "There was a preacher somewhere in my family," she has said. . .

Different communities have tried to call Meridel their own. One of the great sources of wonder to her, I believe, is how her audiences must feel sometimes sitting next to one another: farmers and feminists, Communists and professors, the young and the old.

But there is a natural circle of acquaintances for Meridel: it is as if she were the living and truthful Statue of Liberty, seeking the tired, the poor, the hungry, hearing their voices cry out—and writing down every word, and publishing it as broadsides and leaflets, and, to mix metaphors, smiting the oppressors with this slingshot full of words. She is the champion of the oppressed, of women, of minorities, of workers, and she never forgets her responsibility to them, to tell the truth about them, to demand social justice, to stick by them to the end.

One night in 1978 I was reading the manuscript of stories which were to go into our pamphlet "Women on the Breadlines" in Meridel's capacious basement, which houses her writings. She came in late, and poured herself a shot of tequila out of the vial she keeps in her handbag. "You're reading about those women?" she said, with that peculiarly midwestern expression of unbelief she has, as if to say, I am surprised you would bother. A pause, and then she said, "I have been visiting them today, those women. They have been, most of them, in hospitals since 1939, when I wrote down their stories."

She has befriended so many women in the brief time I have known her that one could hardly begin to register what it has meant—to the women, to their accomplishment, or to the present state of American writing. I could name a few writers who are also close friends of mine: Virginia Scott, Mary McAnally, Anya Achtenberg, Teresa Anderson, Mary Joan Coleman, Joy Harjo, Sharon Doubiago. There are hundreds more.

Meridel is a mother, and a grandmother, and a great-grandmother. Her daughter, Rachel, wrote a touching afterword to *The Girl*, which says, simply, that this is a story of mothers and their daughters and their daughters to come, and the society that they must build. Her grand-daughter-in-law, Barb Tilsen, set Irene Paull's poem to music and made it perhaps the most moving and beautiful anthem of the struggle for survival to come out of the 70's. And still the women-children come; and the remarkable men in the family, who have, in some way I find hard to express, come through; who act, in the old words of the Pueblo Indian myths, "like a man and a woman."

She will struggle as long as she lives. She is interested in all our survival. She will use whatever weapon is at her disposal to help ensure it: but most of all, love. She never stops speaking of unity: the unity of women, the unity of us all against oppression.

That is why she is so resplendent now. It is a reflected and reflecting glory: all the love that she has sent out in the world shines back on her, and then she sends it out again.

Love, John

I have seen the spring like an idiotic lost peasant come over your prairies scattering those incredibly tiny flowers, and the frozen earth thaw to black mud, and a mist of greening come on the thickets, and the birds coming from the South, black in the sky and farmers coming to the village through the black mud. I have seen your beauty and your terror and your evil. I have come from you mysteriously wounded. I have waked from my adolescence to find a wound inflicted on the deep heart. And have seen it in others too, in disabled men and sour women made ugly by ambition, mortified in the flesh and wounded in love. Not going to Paris or Morocco or Venice, instead staying with you, trying to be in love with you, bent upon understanding you, bringing you to life. For your life is my life and your death is mine also.

Meridel LeSueur
from "Corn Village," in *Salute to Spring*

Womanvoice

counterpoint for two voices

You are the flower struggling in the wheatfield to sing your name
Her voice a thicket of blood she sings her name
The black leaves of twilight roar with fire to sing your name
Her voice a singed wing in winter she sings her name
Night rain in gardens to sing your name
Delirium in roses she sings her name
The earth soft with sorrow to sing your name
The sky swift with distance she sings her name
Carrion at midnight to sing your name
Droning in doldrums she sings her name
Shrivelling in silence to sing your name
Crying with fever she sings her name
Bloodwings in your throat you sing your name
Her voice drumming mesquite she sings her name
Rivermusic
Cresting the wave
Women in reverie sing your name
Improvising at the edge she sings her name

Woman Woman Woman

Terry Hauptman

It Begins Softly

it begins inside first
when finally
we've learned to question and grow
and grow to love
and learn to give giving
a great deal more than hope;
it begins when we've understood
that tomorrow needs
every atom of strength now;
it starts
when we've committed ourselves
selfishly
and selflessly
to tha forces of life.
    it's tha fetus inside we have
    no choice
    except
    to feel it grow
    to aid its coming

    and tha revolution begins
    just this softly

12/18

Bernadine

Nacimiento

Long sister of slender frame
silver limbs of the willow
we are the roots that grow wings
mountain woman of valleys
dark sister of the delta
we are the land of the people
pale sister of flaming eyes
we are the moan in the wind trembling
olive sister of the abuelitas
our voice speaks the dream of returning
sister of the black eyes' anger
we are the sea and storm rising
sister of small hands building
we are the fire of healing
sister of the voice-in-thunder
we are the fire of time.

Oh all my sisters,
fire leaps in the buried grain
in sinews and joints of old women
who carry the light
like a child borne in blood
growing in darkest silence
leaping up at the light
    we are rising!
And the word in our first cries
    is fire!
Like fruit borne through the snow
from blossom and bud emerging
    we are born!

Teresa Anderson

Letter To Mary McAnally From Joan Shaddox Isom
November, 1981

Dear Mary:

In re-reading my mail, I came across a letter from Judith Rose, a young woman in California whom I met at Women's Voices. Judith had sent me some corn she was given by Meridel LeSueur. Meridel plants all over the world, as you know. Judith had just been to Greece with her last spring, and she sent me seven grains of the corn Meridel gave her. I'm sending you a grain, now, at harvest time. Perhaps you can plant it in the spring and watch it grow.

Love,
Joan

Testimony Given at Meridel's 80th Birthday Party, February 23, 1980

Meridel, since we met her in 1973, after our Wounded Knee liberation, has provided to us and our people's struggle a lot of strength and we see in Meridel the direction for our struggle. The Tilsens themselves, especially Rachel, has done so much for us out in South Dakota and for Indian people all over the country. We love them and we love Meridel and we know the struggle will go on to the generations.

Lorelei Means
Women of All Red Nations

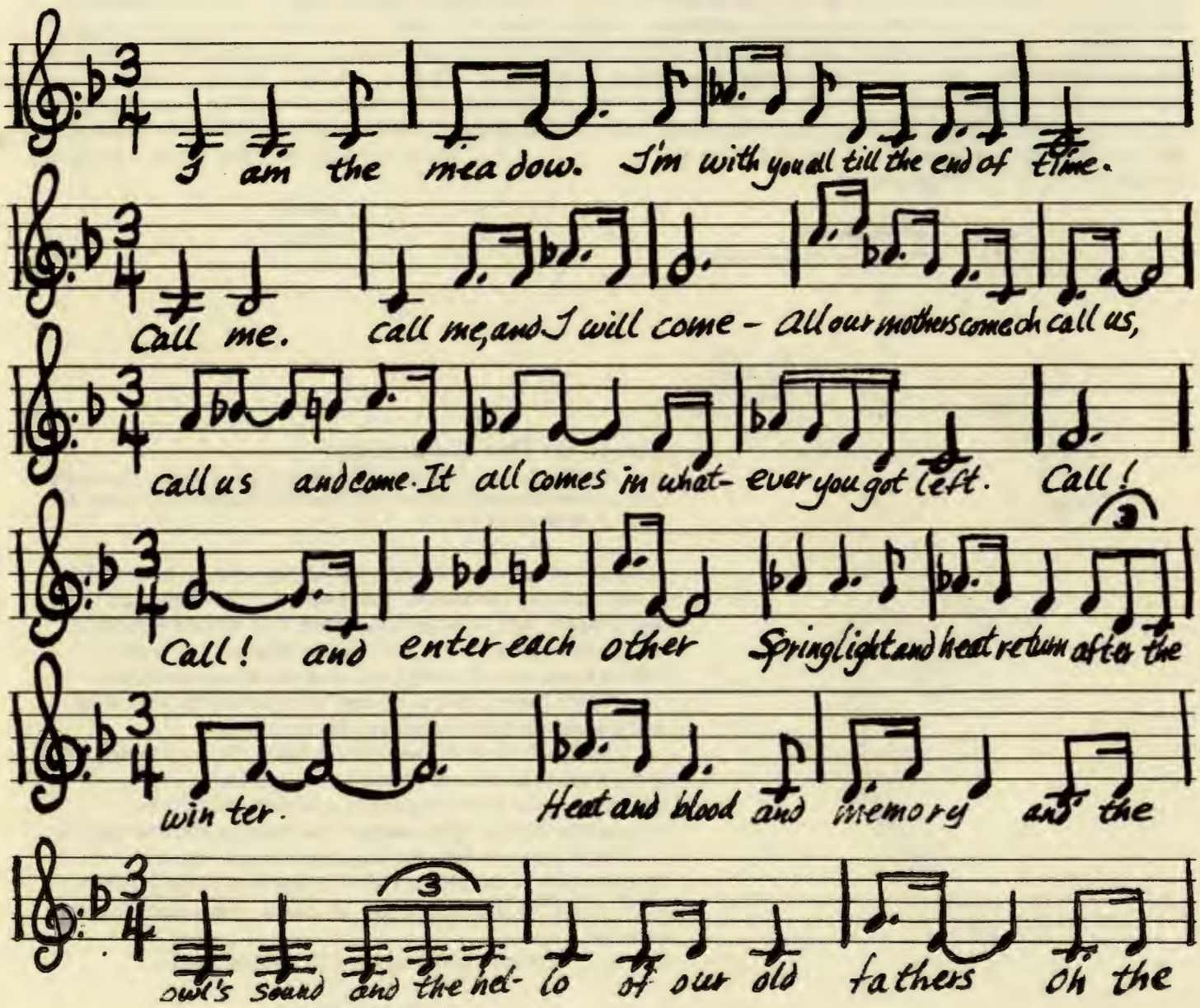
Song For The Grounding

(The meadow figures in Meridel, Agnes Smuda and Elizabeth Sanford's opera. When they were watching the meadow separate from the pit, this poem climbed out of me.)

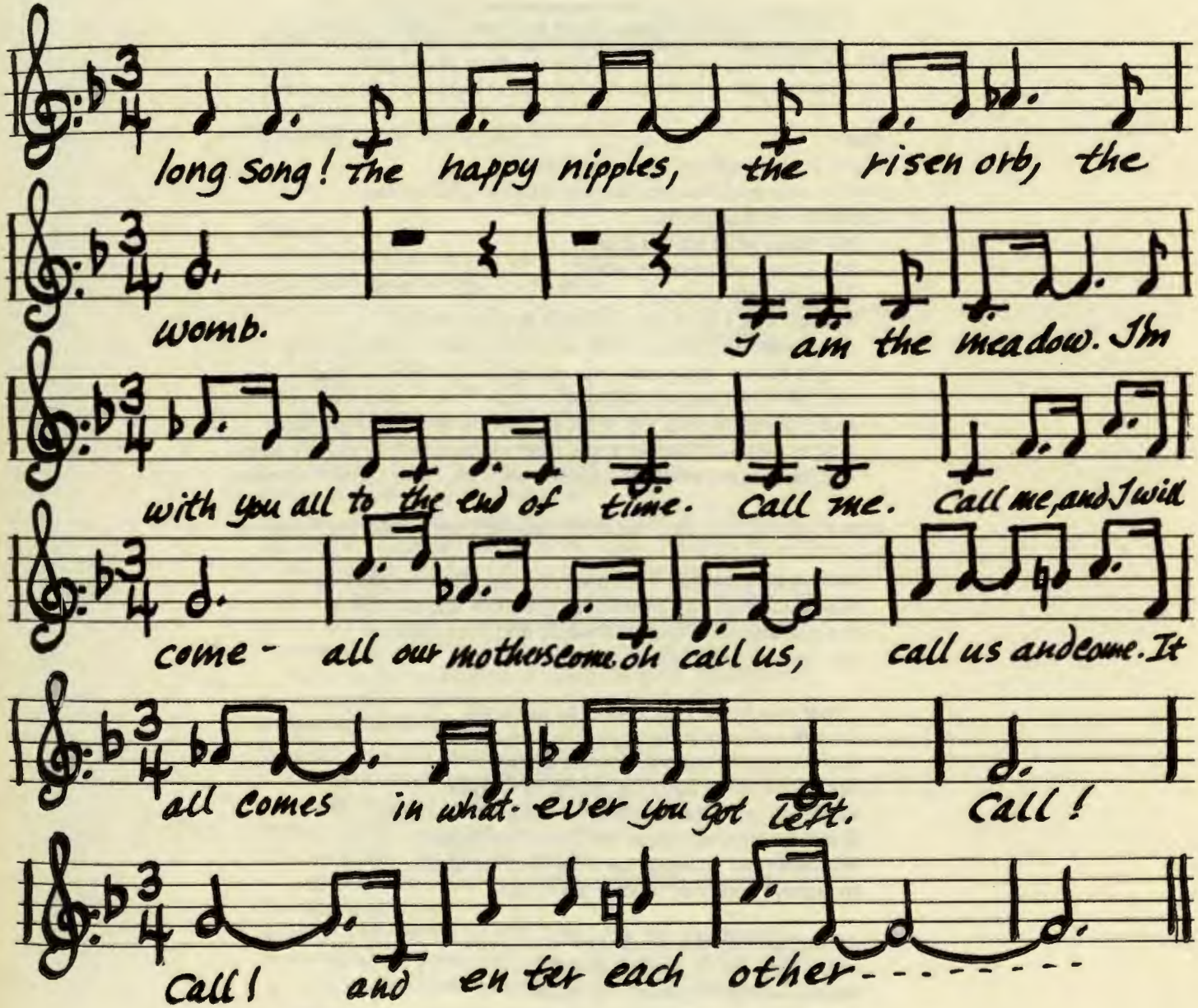
I sing and the grasses dance, bending into smooth brown earth.
A wide sun stops above me, tracks with light the single butterfly,
mapping her way through columbine. The ground is moving.
Light weaves me into the rhythm of small round hills.
Fill the meadow with song I will, and wake the cornflower
on her high green stalk. A killdeer stops to watch. And dives.
And keens, her small bright eye drawing mine.
The clover blooms, the rhubarb bears. These peonies nod
in the breeze, knead my flesh with their color,
smooth my skin to shining in the gold rich middle hour.
All is out on the face of the earth and written in tomorrow's book.
Grass patterns ease the day together over my feet.
Oh breathe with the dance I tell me, dance with the greening,
grow quick in the brightness of noon. I've come into the meadow,
the meadow comes green with much singing into me.

Bobbie Malraison

I Am The Meadow



words by Meridel LeSueur music by Agnes Wolohan Smuda



Lines From A Letter, In Two Parts

(One gray afternoon in a Minnesota winter thaw, Meridel and I talked for a long time about dying and ripening, pain and the coming together of spirit forces. Then I wrote her a letter.)

Part I

I hear you breathing, I feel you dancing.
I move with you moving, Meridel, Mother of Candles,
full of fire and brightness.
We share what you've eaten
and I see you sleeping now.
Take me into yourself,
woman who's sent me speeding into the moon.
Our bodies fall away, no boundaries close us in any more:
a light brown egg grows into the shape of the new moon,
the full moon, moons without number, concentric embryos
and crowns, moons full of faces, moons fat with brightness,
moons without number show themselves to me in the fastness
of time, moons moving in unison with the contraction of moons:

light travels sideways. The snow's going silver underneath moons.

Moons blot the sun from a winter day. Strange day this is,
Rose Monday, day of eclipse. The tides and the rivers,
the soil and its sifting, the winds and the cyclones,
my Sisters and friends.

I hear you breathing, I feel you dancing.
I move with you moving and we are one.
I take you into myself, Candle Mother,
full of hot white light. I'm going to Oregon
to sit with my Grandmother. The earth is moving.
She's dying: I will touch her, hear her speak,
walk with her walking, take her into me again.
In vision I send her to you: we're one.

An egg grows into the shape
of the new moon, the full moon,
moons without number, my Sister,
my Mother, my Daughter, my friend: wash her. Touch her.

Walk with her walking, watch when she's sleeping.
Hear her song when she's speaking. Breathe when she's dancing.
You must feel her speeding into the moon with me, Meridel,

in the universe of closings.

Part II

I wonder, where are you *now*, Father?
From somewhere deep inside stone
the gods' boulder voices come to me: they say your mother is dying.
They keep time for the falling water I'm watching.
I see the water falling still.
How their voices tuned it to the music
of the river ages ago, for the rising
of monoliths, and for my coming, no one says.
Multnomah, water which began to move
before the counting of days I see:
clearwater running, water in great clouds, the strong spray
rubbing my face, rainbows breaking on the deep red drum,
Multnomah, my father's song. Clear water
only I hear. Everywhere water, water in chaos, thoughts
of my father. Earth cleanser, fern colorist, deer furrier,
man who carved motion behind strands of my hair
damp from the singing, singing, singing "Multnomah,"
such singing in voices,
brings me my father.
Who sings to you gone from me, Father?
Climbing down from the falls I count
the kinds of moss I was watching change
in the water-churn from one green
to others. Next my Mother speaks,
and her spirit voice wraps the quick rain about me,
its cadence calmed
by such shifts in the vision. Green are the mosses still,
in my thinking. Some soft, some wiry, all growing north
to touch with their singing the rushing Columbia.

Bobbie Malraison

Green Corn Rebellion

Charcoal drawing of Meridel LeSueur

by **Tecla**

I dreamed Meridel LeSueur. She healed me in a ceremony that took four days. Dreamtime, it could have been centuries, or just a moment. There was a small room, and she and I and her altar. I needed to be healed because there were those who would have me be quiet. The ceremony began with smoke and with Meridel bending over me surrounding me with words, sounds like rock, and stars, and other places and times that I would repeat. Other times her hands were above me, balancing me, weaving. Other times she would be sitting nearby, having a smoke, watching, watching, an ancient rock, herself. It was four days of dreaming, of fevers, of waking to hear her speaking around me. We moved in a powerful vortex of healing . . . alive.

Joy Harjo
13 April 81
Tempe, AZ

Antoinette Berfield Lucy's home in Perry, Oklahoma. Meridel's mother fled Texas in 1907 with Meridel and Meridel's brother, and came to live here until 1912. In the bay window on the right Meridel sat to write her first short story at age 9 in 1909.

(Photo by Mary McAnally)

Marie Antoinette Berfield Lucy, d. 1929.
Mother of Marion Wharton and grandmother of Meridel LeSueur.

(Photo courtesy of Rachel Tilsen)

She was embarrassed by any excess of feeling and had a way of turning down her lips bitterly. She had that acrid, bitter thing too about her body, a kind of sourness as if she had abandoned it. It was like an abandoned thing, perhaps it had not been occupied. The Puritans used the body like the land, as a commodity, and the land and the body resent it.

Meridel LeSueur
from "Corn Village"
in *Salute to Spring*

The home of Meridel's grandmother in Perry, Oklahoma.

Such streets have a deep and sinister identity. The houses seem to bear sorrow like the bodies of women do. They are sad, mysterious and silent. To those who can read the lineaments of such houses, what life there is in them. They bend and sway and murmur their history like a tree—telling how a whole family have given their lives to buy it—the misery, poverty inside, the long years of anxiety so that the very wood seems dark and sad.

Meridel LeSueur
from "The Dead in Steel" in *Salute to Spring*

Cellar door
behind the house.

(Photos by Mary McAnally)

Marion Wharton LeSueur, mother of Meridel and pioneer midwestern feminist educator.

(Photo courtesy of Rachel Tilsen)

. . . she hadn't wanted more
than to touch, to be made
to move like wind and fire
with grace toward what
might be rich.

Meridel LeSueur,
from "Fudge" in *Harvest.*

For Rachel

Perhaps after this child is born, then everything will harden and become small and mean again as it was before. Perhaps I would even have a hard time remembering this time at all and it wouldn't seem wonderful. That is why I would like to write it down.

How can it be explained? Suddenly many movements are going on within me, many things are happening, there is an almost unbearable sense of sprouting, of bursting encasements, of moving kernels, expanding flesh. Perhaps it is such an activity that makes a field come alive with millions of sprouting shoots of corn or wheat. Perhaps it is something like that that makes a new world.

from "Annunciation," in Salute to Spring.
by **Meridel LeSueur**

Meridel LeSueur and her two daughters, Rachel and Deborah.

(Photos courtesy of Rachel Tilsen)

"Their compass points toward the inevitable weapon of Marxism. Their strength continues in us at the portal where they always stood, the door to the future. Our faces bare to the bone, our mouths gagged with the wind, we work in deeper paths than they knew. They had a dream, we *see* the reality. Even our enemies are weaker than theirs, for capitalism is a decayed, faceless nightmare, exposed by the people of the world, who reach across the world market to touch hands, to affirm again relationship and love. . . this is our inheritance."

Meridel LeSueur

writing of her parents, Arthur and Marion LeSueur,
in *The Crusaders*

It's not the suffering of birth, death, love that the young reject, but the suffering of endless labor without dreams, eating the spare bread in bitterness, being a slave without having the security of a slave.

Meridel LeSueur

from *Women on the Breadlines*

When men are hungry they at first mass silently, coming closely together, and then after that they are likely to do something. They are very docile at first, standing together, and then they are not docile any more.

Meridel LeSueur
"What Happens in a Strike," in *Harvest.*

Irene Paull,
Meridel's friend and companion for over 50 years of marching, died on August 11, 1981, at age 73. She wrote this poem in celebration of Meridel's 80th birthday in 1980 and it was set to music by Barbara Tilsen.

Marching

It's blowing in the wind again,
it's drifting in the rain.
Before the dead have mouldered yet
or wounded healed their pain.
I am so old, my grandsons,
that I remember when
I marched to hail the Armistice
and I was barely ten.
That was the war against the war,
to save democracy.
Praise God, they said,
we've won the peace
for all eternity.

I marched again when some years passed.
I marched and marched and then
there was the war to end all war
and so I marched again.
I marched in Minneapolis,
Chicago and Duluth,
in San Francisco and New York
I marched to shout the truth.
I marched in Hiroshima
and knelt before a stash
of tens of millions bones of people
atomized to ash.
And with the distant rumble
of new regiments of men
I read the warning on the tomb
"This must not be again."

I marched to staunch Korea's blood,
I marched for Vietnam.
I marched to stop the napalm
and I marched to stop the bomb.
I marched and marched and marched, O Lord.
I'm sure I've done my due.
I've marched since I was barely ten,
and now I'm seventy-two.

I should be lying in the sun
or dreaming in the grass.
But how, when generals everywhere
are polishing their brass?
Entranced with dreams of four-star roles,
so help me Lord, they're glad.
They say that whom the gods destroy
they first must render mad.
Their burning eyes see No Man's Land
and armies poised for action
and you, my warm and loving sons,
you're merely an abstraction.

It's geopolitics again, and oh with what finesse
the players push their pawns about,
these master-minds of chess.
How cunningly they plot each move,
how logically they spar,
and checkmate one another
like the masters that they are.
How stimulating, how intense!
A world to lose or gain.
Except for one dismaying fact:
the players are insane.
Composed, dispassionate they play
this game that madness spawns.
And I can't even look away.
My grandsons are the pawns.

Some people keep on fighting
when they've lost an arm or leg.
Some still keep up the struggle
when they're fragile as an egg.
I've heard men rasping "I object"
with voices turned to gravel.
I've seen a woman raise a fist
who couldn't lift a gavel.
And even with a broken heart
one still can take a stand.
So lead, my grandsons, lead the way,
reach back and take my hand.
We'll march again, confound them all!
Don't quibble at my age.
I'll shield you with my brittle bones.
I'll nourish you with rage.

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I marched and marched and marched, O Lord,
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Irene Paull

Doan Ket

*(**Doan Ket** means "solidarity" in Vietnamese. This poem was sent to the North Vietnamese where it was translated into Vietnamese and warmly received. The poet received a letter of thanks from the women of Vietnam.)*

How can we touch each other, my sisters?
How can we hear each other over the criminal space?
How can we touch each other over the agony of bloody roses?
I always feel you near, your sorrow like a wind in the
great legend of your resistance, your strong and delicate strength.

It was the bumble bee and the butterfly who survived, not the dinosaur.

None of my sons or grandsons took up guns against you.

And all the time the predators were poisoning the humus, polluting
the water, the hooves of empire passing over us all. White
hunters were aiming down the gunsights, villages wrecked
mine and yours. Defoliated trees, gnawed earth, blasted embryos.

We also live in a captive country, in the belly of the shark.
The horrible faces of our predators, gloating, leering,
the bloody Ford and Rockefeller and Kissinger presiding over
the violation of Asia.

Mortgaging, blasting, claiming earth and women in the chorale
of flayed flesh and hunger, the air crying of carbon and thievery.

Our mutual flesh lights the sulphur emanation of centuries of
exploitation. Amidst the ruins we shine forth in holy mutual
cry, revealing the plainest cruelties and human equation,
the deprivations of power and the strength of numbers and
endurance and the holy light from the immortal wound.

The only knowledge now is the knowledge of the dispossessed.
Our earth itself screams like a bandaged, roaring giant about
to rise in all its wounds and bear upon the conqueror.

Lock your doors in the cities.

There are no quiet dead—and no quiet deed.
Everything you touch now is ticking to its explosion.
The scab is about to infect.
The ruined land is dynamite. Cadmus teeth of dead guerrillas
gnaw the air. Nature returns all wounds as warriors.
The Earth plans resistance and cries, "Live".

What strikes you, my sisters, strikes us all. The global earth
is resonant, communicative.
Conception is instant solidarity of the child.
Simultaneity of the root drives the green sap of the flower.
In the broken, the dispossessed is the holy cry.

We keep our tenderness alive and the nourishment of the earth green.
The heart is central as lava.
We burn in each other. We burn and burn.
We shout in choruses of millions.
We appear armed as mothers, grandmothers,
sisters, warriors.
We burn.

II

Sisters, the predators plan to live within our bodies.
They plan to wring out of us unpaid labor.
Wrench their wealth from our bodies.
Like the earth they intend to bore inside the woman host,
open the artery like weasels, use, consume, devour, drill for
oil, eat the flesh of the earth mother.
Like the earth they will consume all woman flesh and the
commodities of her being.
The harbors of the world will be for the sale of her body.
The sweat shops will multiply stolen wealth of her living skin.
They slaver at the cheap labor of women around the world.
They will ground us on the metate, like living corn.
We will be gutted and used by the Companies to make wealth.
General Motors, Ma Bell, Anaconda, pickers of cotton and
coffee, hanging our babies on our backs, producers of hand
and brain and womb.
The world eaters sharpen their teeth.
Out of the unpaid labor of women they will triple their wealth.
Women far down under are trashed, pressed into darkness,
humiliated, exploited.

Half the women of Puerto Rico sterilized, the salt savor of
our sweat tiding like an ocean.
Brothels called meat markets in all the ports of the conqueror.
We are the wine cast struck to the ground, spilled.
We are a great granary of seed smashed, burned.
We are a garrotted flight of doves.
We are face out of bone. Years of labor bend the bone and back.
Down the root of conquest our bodies receive the insult.
Receive a thousand blows, thefts of ovum and child.
Meadows of dead and ruined women. There is no slight death.
After the first death there is no other.
The Body trashed, dies.
There is no abstract death or death at a distance.
Our bodies extend into the body of all.
Every moment is significant in our solidarity.

In solidarity I stood at the gates of Honeywell where the
"Mother Bomb" is timed and triggered. I hid my grandsons from the gun.
I crouched under the terrible planes of Johnson, Nixon and Kissinger.
I felt the boots on your throat as my own
I saw the guns pointed at us all.
It was the gun used on my sister.

Now in the "white house" another mask of white criminals
turn upon us, on our native people at Wounded Knee, cut food for
our children and promise us a bigger army. Children are shot
down. I hear mothers crying from the black belt.

Women of the earth, bear the weight of the oppressor,
bearing us down into deep to glow upward from the dark,
from the womb, from the abyss of blood, from the injured
scream, from below we glow and rise singing.

III

I saw the women of the earth rising on horizons of nitrogen.
I saw the women of the earth coming toward each other
with praise and heat
without reservations of space.
All shining and alight in solidarity.
Transforming the wound into bread and children.
In a new abundance, a global summer.
Tall and crying out in song we arise
in mass meadows.
We will run to the living hills with our seed.
We will redeem all hostages.
We will light the bowl of life.
We will light singing
across all seas
The resonance of the song of woman,
lifted green, alive
in the solidarity of the communal love.
Uncovering the illumined fruit
the flying pollen
in the thighs of golden bees.
We bring to you our fire.
We pledge to you our guerrilla
fight against the predators of our country.
We come with thunder,
Lightning on our skin.

Roaring womb singing.
Our sisters
Singing
Choruses of millions
Singing

Meridel LeSueur
from *Rites of Ancient Ripening*

Keening

(for Meridel)

Through the streets
I keen in the wind,
with the wind,
your going.
A great sail I am
being goodbye to you,
being goodbye.
You are sailing out
over the ice.
I am crying
in your cape,
coming home.
I am showing you
my babies.
You give me back everything
I ran across the back yard for,
my cape flying.
Everything that was
in my wings
you give me back.
My wings are by my side
gathering oil, unction,
to kiss my forehead
to call me darling
to love me
to let me fly and float.
I see in my ear.
The smell I longed to touch
is the smell of my body,
singing.
I wear feather earrings.
I am something
the cat dragged in -
dark and glowing,
bloody and beautiful.
Alive.

Agnes Wolohan Smuda

Agnes Wolohan Smuda in Meridel's Irish keening cape.

(Photo by Sean Smuda)

Poems to Discover What the Leg Pains Are

A collaborative poem by
Agnes Smuda and Mary McAnally

for Meridel

I

I will not walk anymore.
I will sit under the pear tree
and the bees will hum my skin and sinew,
lift me up, and hang my carcass
on the branches musky with pollen.
The sun will dry me,
pale parchment blossoms shaking softly,
yellow dusting my eyes fallen on the ground
in constant seeing trunk and bloom.
New moon of roots and stars.
New moon.

2

Because the legs bore you beneath the blows
Because they carried you into battles
Because they knew the bitter root
the sucking mud
Because the river roots them up
Because the river roots them up to stand
Because the river roots them up to stand the ground
to stand the ground
to bear the blows
to carry into battle
Because the river roots them up
Because the earth receives them
Because they separate you from the earth
Because the earth delights in you
Because the earth receives what the river roots up
Because the earth and the river receive you
Because they separate you from the earth and the river
Because you do not have wings

3

Pelts, I said.
The skin of legs is shed by the pond.
I do not need the legs.
They follow me by heart.
They run after me
saying wait wait.
I will not wait.
Come with me, quickly,
into the cave.
I will tell you a secret.
We are talking in a cave
behind the knee.
We are living in the legs.

We can do nothing.
They will walk away.

4

Between the legs
lies the Hall of Peace.
Anyone who would enter
must check their guns at the door.
The legs have held away the guns.
The legs have borne the shields.
The legs are notched for the lives
spent by the guns.
The legs are pistol-whipped.
The legs are bruised and gnarled.
The armistice is at hand.
There are no more guns.

5

I am offering my feet,
the two girls staring.
I am putting them down
upon the altar.
Come sunrise,
and all my toes are candles.
A bird splashes
in the pools of my feet.
I see myself mirrored in brass.
A small bell rings.

6

There was a man whose thing
was big as his legs.
He used to say
"You can cut off my legs,
but leave me my thing."
He went to Viet Nam
and musta planted a hunnerd babies
in those little Vietnamese bellies.
then he stepped on a mine
(one of his own)
and lost both his legs.

7

The pain.
Someone closes the door.
I am serving dinner—
bowls of steaming food.
They turn
and do not tell me
where they are going.
No more stories to tell.
All of them
are holding out their arms.
I cannot sit down.

8

We sing a song to the legs!
Hear, O legs, how we sing to you!
How we praise your morning and your evening,
how we wrap you in garlands of oleander
and jasmine, myrtle and fern;
how we swathe you in oils and perfume
of naphtha and balm; olcinthe and jimsin;
O legs, may your kneecaps sparkle!
may your toejam rise in the air to our noses!
may the beetle root in your thigh,
the turtle behind your knee.
Sweet legs, O legs of birth and birth,
O heel, O ball of foot,
O arch most high, O dear,
most dear,
all praise the legs,
Praise legs!
Praise legs!

9

Vine held sinew swung horizon's arc.
My inner eyes are turning
as the earth turns.
I lurch, standing still.
Long after I have stopped.
Long after my legs hurt.
Long after the stars appear to point me.

10

The woman whose legs ache
writes a letter to the woman whose head aches.
She tells the woman
to take care of her mother whose heart aches.
The woman's headache disappears.
The woman with the bad heart senses this, relaxes.
The heart responds. Strengthens.
The woman whose legs ache
heals the other women.
Her legs still ache.

11

Wild strawberries trailing,
leaf hidden.
Sweet flesh of fruit.
Gentle the vine tendril,
soft against the belly of the earth.
The baby laid on your belly
before the cord is cut.
Look down,
all the way down the long river,
the long line of vision.
See the fruit laid on your belly.
The blood is returning
to your empty womb,
coming back from your feet,
back from your thighs,
returning.

Sound of the drum,
the child.
Pulse of your legs,
the child.
All is given,
the child.

All returns,
the child.

12

Another woman writes some poems
for the woman whose legs ache.
She sends them to the woman whose head once ached.
They are accompanied by a letter
that talks of lots of aches
and talks of anger and love
and we begin to see that love is not the opposite of hate
but anger is the opposite of hate
and yin and yang
and anima and animus
and tells the other woman about anger talking to love
and saying, "look, look, you created me,
don't spurn me now; I am your child"
and how love continues to love
and somehow anger begins to create
and then the woman whose legs ache
writes a letter about not leaving the table
but continuing to fill the cups and bowls
and there are lots of metaphors in poetry
and because we are learning
how to articulate our anger
and because we are teaching each other
and because we fill each other's cups
and because our legs ache
and our mothers have heart trouble
and our heads ache from butting against the wall
of our own anger
because of this
we all have aching legs
my legs ache too
and your heart aches too
and this is how we learn about love
and anger
and pain.

13

A long scarf around her throat,
flying behind.
I am touching the fringe,
not wanting to hurt her,
following.
Stumbling on hills' rims.
They are watching me from the village.
They have written stories about me.
They do not know why I do this,
but they see me running after her
every day.

(Sections 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13 of this poem appeared in *Great River Review*, and sections 1 through 12 appeared in *Womanchild 3*. It is a poem in process, constantly changing and undulating through the fields and woods like a river.)

To Meridel Le Sueur

Reach through the corn Brother
Reach through to the green of my heart.
Reach brother, male twin in the corn
And we will be together as bread.
Meridel LeSueur
Rites of Ancient Ripening

It is you who stands before me
when I call "Earth-Mother."
Eighty years wise, tall, strong
with wide arms welcoming life
as she brings her unfortunates
to you for redemption by bread.
You plow, you seed, you harvest.
I see you gathering the saçramental corn
of the Hopis and Navajos.
Early, late, you bend above the grinding stone.
I hear you singing ancient songs
to those who will pass through your prism
and become light.
You keep for them a House of Plenty.
They dance with you in the ancient rites of spring.
You are the High Priestess of their Full Loaf.

Sometimes I see you tall as stars
where the blue planet curves.
You hold a cornucopia.
From it falls food,
red wool coats and eiderdown blankets.
(Friends in Chicago in the thirties
collected coins to keep you
from the cold.)
The coat was armor for you eleven years.

You are an anthem
the ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed
and ill-considered hear.
They run to you
from the wrath that always comes.
You are still at the grinding stone,
your song a bold rebellion
against the incumbents who consider
the masses expendable.

I search for words to describe you
but you are greater than words.
You defy adjectives. You are all verbs.
All being, all consciousness.
Yet as elemental as rain
or a hidden seed.
Out of you comes yearly
the testimonial of new corn
and canticles for a distressed century.
For you the young gods dance,
knowing your plenitude.
"Ripeness is all," you told me
one wet April afternoon.

Teach me, great-breasted mother of the needy,
the laws of your infinities,
the courage of battle,
the origin of your personal myths.

Mystic, archetyplal, primitive,
possessing purity and strength of an original,
accept me as one who would learn
depth, breadth, height of the human heart
as you know it
that someday I may take my place beside you
at the grinding-stone.

Winona Nation

Born of the Pain

I have turned my eyes away
from words that spoke of anger
of pain
even of sorrow.
Encourage anger?
No.
Not yours,
not my own.
But today
I hear the words that are right,
that speak of grieving
and of hope
not of anger alone.
Words that comfort
and strengthen,
acknowledge
and care.
I hear the words of a woman
who knows the dark grandmother
who knows the depths
who sings a song of the spring
flowing up
flowing out of the deep
the strong song is born of the pain
and flies above it.

May I sing my own songs
not walled from the pain
but flying
high above.

Anita Holladay
Tulsa, 1979

Curandera *

You climb the blackjack tree
Sipping tequila from tortoise shells
And you swear
Slamming lizards in the dry-rot ditch
That you mean to heal the wounds.

I see you on the bellies of mesas
Through the dead hives of cholla
Rubbing sweetgrass in the loneliest hours
Where the earth swells in silence
Crying
Don't sulk in backrooms sisters:
Plot and swoon.

You climb the Kiamechi mountains
The blue edge of sagebrush your serpent hiss
Smear the foxfire of spittle
On the desert's cracked pelvis
Smoking yerbabuena through the Rio Grande
Harvest moan of the berrypicking moon
Singing
Don't sulk in backrooms sisters:
Plot and swoon.

Terry Hauptman

*healer

Engles said a hundred years ago that in the horrors of capitalist decay there were only two subjects for the artist—the showing of the moribund, the dead corpse of a dying society, or of the viable, the rising of the new society out of the death of the old. We have many poets of the corpse. How private seductive the artist has become, serving the criminal elite, covering the diseases exploitation and genocide. They have plans to injure us all. They are carrying out their plans for sacrifice. From our injury we cry a warning. From our wounds come warriors.

Meridel LeSueur
from the Introduction to
it begins softly, a collection of
poems by Bernadine, published
by Women for Racial and
Economic Equality, New York,
November, 1980.

I was marching with a million hands, movements, faces, and my own movement was repeating again and again, making a new movement from these many gestures, the walking, falling back, the open mouth crying, the nostrils stretched apart, the raised hand, the blow falling, and the outstretched hand drawing me in.

I felt my legs straighten. I felt my feet join in that strange shuffle of thousands of bodies moving with direction, of thousands of feet, and my own breath with the gigantic breath. As if an electric charge had passed through me, my hair stood on end, I was marching.

Meridel LeSueur,
from "I Was Marching,"
in *Salute to Spring*.

What We See

for Meridel LeSeuer

is changed by our seeing.
But how, in what way changed,
we can never see.
A rock is never just a rock.
There is the rock hurled
by my enemy at me,
and there is the rock
I hurl at my enemy.
There is the rock polished
by wind and sand.
There is the rock polished
by sand and sea.
Every *thing* in relationship.

(Did I imagine reading or hearing before what you told me Einstein said: that Relativity could be described in the languages of the Chinese and American Indian Peoples, but never in the English Language . . . ?)

Everything
in relationship.
For the rock,
seen falsely,
alienated
from its web
of relationship
to the seer,
leads to:
property,
pillage,
rape,
war,
exploitation,
Armageddon.

Mark Pawlak

Deep in the Soul of the Earth

for Meridel

Deep
women flowing from
aquifers.

Immersion in *The Girl*
or *Song for My Time* is
not like reading.

These women growing
moving us
to embrace our grief
our love.
They are the women in us.

These men
Bill Herron and brother Bud
the soil
for our sons.

We weep
for them
for our earth made into radon
daughters by Kerr McGee, TVA, Exxon.

We weep for
miscarriages at Pine Ridge
for our water made into poison.

From deep
your blood song moves us and
within us a song has begun
that is rising to a crescendo of birth
from deep
in the soul of the earth.

Norma Wilson

Meridel LeSueur in Fred Whitehead's library in Kansas City.

(Photo by C. J. Hunter.)

Out of the Catacombs: Revelation

for Meridel LeSueur

toward midnight following the sybil descend into the dark catacombs
drunk trembling weary shaken thinking of the great archetypes of history
sleeping there papers and manuscripts and files everywhere piled up
in a storage room shelves and shelves of books caressed with affection
the motherlode of American radical literature salvaged from the jaws of time
a steel cabinet with notebooks since 1918 as many words as sprung from
Balzac's vast fiery brain waiting there attempt to imagine what else this
is like the final deep mysterious quartets of Beethoven the last rough
unfinished statues of Michelangelo in this crypt the papery skeletons of
all our word wizards repose then from the boxes of manuscripts the metaphors
begin to hum and pulse she breathes life into the slumbering images of her
people here bending down with kindness pulling and dragging them from the
tombs red statues begin to rouse the bones clatter up and together again
proud hearts pump blood through the sinews flexing in ancient strength
courageously going out to battle against the oppressors as of old she leads
them all toward the stars moved by love crossing the far bridges of time

Fred Whitehead
from: *Quindaro*, #6-7 (1980).

Meridel LeSueur

tribal sister
grandmothers
space
Black Hills restore living
feathers to rainbows
full circles behind eyes
open places among us
rhymes and resonance
invisible arms
embrace
we cannot hold
we share
the motion of all things
sings
in who we are
and how
together

sister, i do not name you to stop you
begin over and over
and never were not always
rushing still
in our waking
joy

Will Inman

This Poem Is For The Muse

thick-boned bent
old woman staring
into a mirror arthritic

fingers unlock
out of pain into a moment's
softness tracing along the folds
of skin that map her face caress

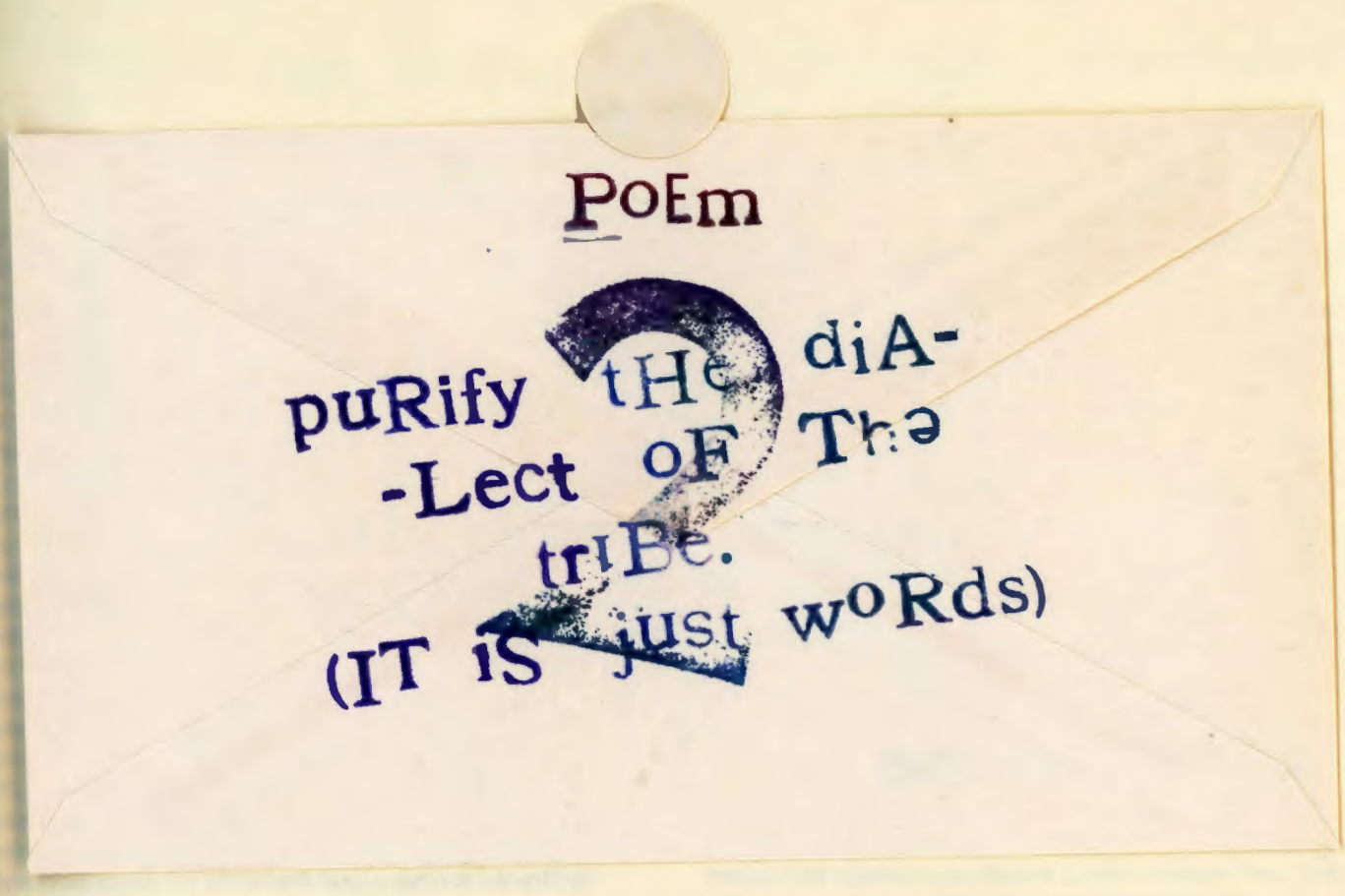
her breasts
that rest on her belly what
does she think of now the children
who nursed until they were three years old
the first time she exhibited her hunger flushed
with blood's desire now

she conceals behind thighs swollen
with fluids her necessary mysteries

from the depths of her memory two lovers
walking hand in hand in the outskirts of Warsaw the
constant struggle for food
for life living a new birth not
to be denied her she

stands now
upon her large cracked feet

Joseph Napora



poeMvelope designed and printed by Joel Lipman.

PoeMvelopes wed form and function: They are USEABLE art, a message around the message, from one hand to another. They are boldly public.

The reader is urged to use this poeMvelope to write Meridel or another contributor, or the State Department protesting Dennis Brutus' possible deportation to South Africa.

American Monolith

Meridel LeSueur is to the American conscience what Romain Rolland was to France or Kathe Kollwitz to pre-Hitler Germany. Her work, just beginning to receive adequate attention, looms on the literary spectrum for its recording of what she has seen and known . . .

The Great Depression: that bland stupidity of the Coolidge era. Two world wars and their ultimate spinoff of the Vietnam war. The civil rights struggle, whose gains are now so threatened. The long lines of unemployed men and women outside personnel offices. The cynical demagogy of politicians and the daily searing lives of women selling themselves to pay room rent. All these things Meridel has described with her penchant pen flowing as eloquently now in her eighties as it did during her twenties and thirties.

Twice over a period of 42 years I have had the honor of spending some time with her. The first time was in Chicago during the summer of 1938. I was still a recent arrival from Texas, my homeland, and hers for a brief time. Meridel was a visitor from Minnesota, where her roots are comparably deep. During those too-brief hours we talked about the state of the nation and of American Literature. I was especially interested in Minnesota's strong Farmer-Labor Party. Meridel wanted to know more about the disenfranchisement of southern Blacks and poor whites through the poll tax instituted by the South's agricultural lords.

Naturally she also asked questions about the possibilities of progressive political action through the recently organized CIO. Within the South at that time workers of both races were being recruited into the same trade unions—something entirely new for Dixie. We discussed each other's published work. She wanted to know how I had reacted to specific articles of hers in progressive journals. I was grateful for her comments on mine. We also talked about the spate of small left-oriented publications in America. One was the historic *Anvil*, edited by Jack Conroy, whom I would come to know after he came to Chicago from Missouri.

After that first meeting, I continued to read her stories and articles as they appeared because they had the dust of the American earth and the hopes of America's working people embodied in them. As my own output began reaching larger audiences, I hoped that my Minnesota colleague would remember me within that community of socially conscious writers.

As a Southern regional writer, I was deeply impressed with the way Meridel interpreted her own region—the Midwest—that area which had given our country Clarence Darrow, John P. Altgeldt, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg, and so many other great writers of the people. I was especially appreciative of Meridel's book-length classic, *North Star Country*, published in the 40's, for inside its covers one caught the authentic flow of life and history in her marvelous Midwest.

Inside *North Star Country* one could feel the majesty of the great rivers, the large fields of corn and wheat, the power of the blizzards that swooped down from Canada. But more importantly, one could learn of the torrential political movements, such as the Non-Partisan League, the Farmer Labor Party, and the Populists scaring hell out of both the Democratic and Republican oligarchies. This is Meridel's turf. She knows how to define it, and best of all how to portray and speak for its peoples—not glorified thieves like Jim Hill and Jim Fisk, antisocial like the rest of their odious kind, but the masses of hard-working citizens from all the region's ethnic groups. The Scandinavians breaking soil for their industrious settlements, the Germans and the Irish, the Native Americans, and those conglomerate Americans of so many threads known as Anglo-Saxons.

In *North Star Country* one also reads of the varied worker categories: the railroaders, the miners, the lumberjacks, the boatmen, the migrant workers and hobos, men and women longing for "work that is real" (to quote Marge Piercy). In the more than 30 years since it has been available to the American reading public, this book still is the finest historical and cultural work on the Midwest ever written.

In the spring of 1980 I met Meridel LeSueur another time. We greeted each other as long-time friends and colleagues, though 42 years had passed since our first meeting. She was visiting Oklahoma at the invitation of Mary McAnally, and came to visit me in Edmond, Oklahoma, on her way to do a poetry reading at the Town Tavern in Norman. It was wonderful to see her still vital and strong after the many years of harrassment and struggle against those who would silence her. I was delighted to know that her work was being "resurrected" by the small press—especially by John Crawford's remarkable West End Press, and that she was reaching a new and younger community of radicals in these difficult times.

Whatever persecution Meridel has encountered during her arduous and ardorous life, she has held onto her craft, using it to speak for the oppressed, the silenced, the trashed and the dead. The voices of countless thousands continue to have a forum through her, and her work now forms a true American monolith.

Harold Preece

Letter to Mary McAnally from Molly Culligan

March 3, 1981

Glory, Mary, as I put my feet up to launch into —How it was with Meridel and me and *Ripenings*—my whole self flows with the love I feel for her and the gratitude for what she's given me of herself—and for what I'm now able to give of her to all those others out there who respond with such obvious gratitude for what *Ripenings* makes them feel—better about it all and about themselves. Is she magic? You and I know the imp in her. Is she a priestess? I know there's something sacred about this work. I just read a very current message she spun off out of her passions in the middle of the night in "some corner of Georgia, another country," for all the artists who will be attending "The Gathering" in St. Peter, Minnesota this August. "To bring back the matriarchal cyclical relationship of life would be to strike at the heart of death . . . a straight line leading only to the bomb. This is basic to the kind of art in the future and its protein and organic conception." Her monumental concepts about the fix the world's in and what we must do to help the earth continue to survive.

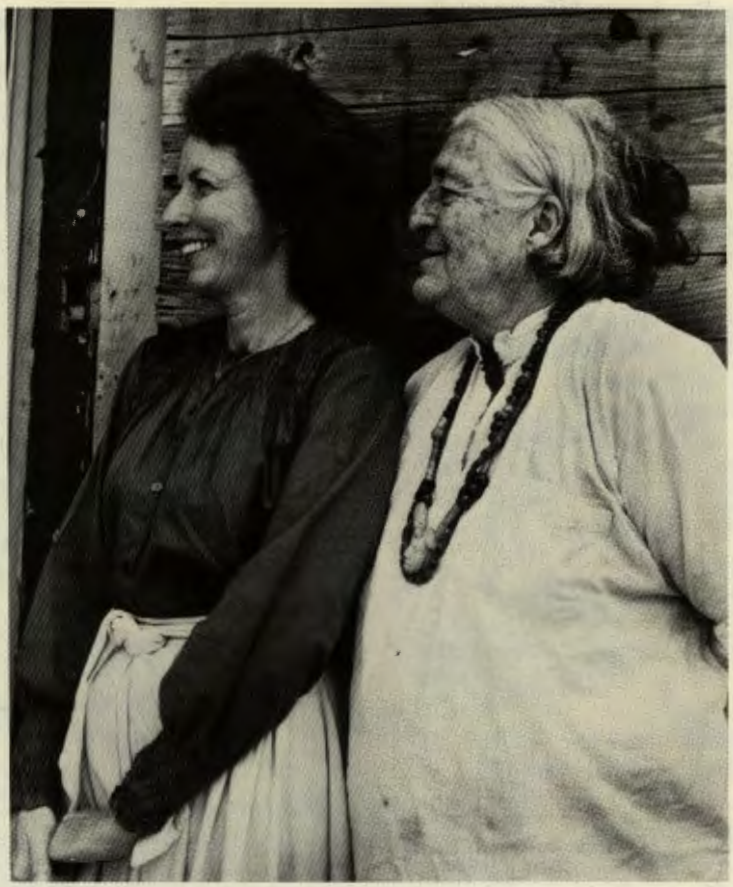
And the breathtaking command of her birthday speech last summer at the Prom in St. Paul. Mary—weren't you stunned? To have her happen to my life, midway, what a shot in the arm! She's helped me mature, know my strength, reaffirmed my love of trust, made me know the absolute value of my creative work to my wellbeing and happiness and survival in this not so easy place. And she's given me always her love . . . watching it blossom has given me the most intense delight. How was it for us? The first time we met at the Anvil folk school weekend at Milville? It felt like two forces slamming together in recognition. I saw a woman of great beauty—spiritual, mental, physical—oh those hands. And she made me feel the same. There has been such a lovely sharing of our love of femininity and interesting clothes—gypsy clothes?

And she is so funny, Mary, isn't she? Gad that trip to KCMo—painful for you I know—but such a high time for us three, Meridel and Jan Attridge and I. We couldn't get back to Marjorie Eucalyptus' house fast enought to make our own fun. And the car trip—Meridel is graciousness herself. She's the best company on earth. Did you know we stopped in Murray, Iowa to visit "the house where I was born?" I tell you! There we were together—*Ripenings* is always alive with her presence, but the play lived on that summer afternoon. I say in the play, "See that farmhouse over there? The one with the paint peeling off and the loose clapboards blowing in the wind? Our house was like that one. The house where I was born." I used to open the play with, "When you start going West, it's the most morning morning of the world!" *Now* I say —"When you start going *SOUTH!*"

My times with Meridel are always "the most morning mornings of the world." She's my friend, my mother, my mentor. Makes me well up, Girl.

There's so much I could say, Mary. If you were to ask me what I admire most about the walking Rennaisance woman Meridel, I would say it's her respect for other people's creative efforts, for it is from the respect she gives us that comes the phenomenal support to shoot on and on to achievements of which we're amazed we're capable. Meridel's the Atlas of the art world—and the radical world—of the human world. I'll never forget at the end of the folkschool weekend when I told her I wanted to do a play based on her writing and I wanted to be sure I laid out there where we were different; she opened wide her arms and said, "I respect your vision." Since then I become ever more aware of the in-tuneness of our root convictions and our happy souls.

Molly Culligan
St. Paul



Ripenings

Adapted by Phyllis MacDougal *Directed by Lynn Kremer-Babcock*

Ripenings is a one-woman touring performance of a play written for Molly Culligan, based on the down-to-earth prose and poetry of Minnesota's Meridel LeSueur. The play extolls the Midwest and tells a story of a young girl's ripening into womanhood. It gives insight into Meridel LeSueur's positive life and philosophy. As with her former work, Molly Culligan's goal is to bring theater to the community—to colleges, adult education programs, artists' courses, political events, churches, and social gatherings. She is associated with The Performers' Ensemble. For information and/or booking:

Molly Culligan
475 Laurel Ave., #2E
St. Paul, MN 55102
(612) 291-0195

Letter to Mary McAnally from Vincent Ferrini

My Dear Mary,

Such good news to celebrate our dearest Amazon, who is first among the three great creators of American Art, Georgia O'Keefe second, and Louise Nevelson, whose ego preponderance impedes her work, but her power is triumphant.

Did you see that photo of the two of us dancing at the Conference last year at the Foolkiller in Kansas City? It's a jewel flashing in my shack, she's the ace of spontaneity, in her gut and in her head, and one has to possess lightning in the toes to trip with her, and she's my mate.

She almost came to visit with me in Fishtown, but her schedule interfered, too bad in a way, I would have loved to show her this granite island, and to deck her with a necklace of our beaches, and the meadow of Dogtown for a night's bed, the electrical axis underneath would echo in her blood, bones and mind, the doubled immortality the coven of feminists on Cape Ann are working with.

A miraculous consciousness has been alerted as never before, and Merry Dale's antennae never stop; it is so busy going both ways, it takes a wizard to be in control.

Strange how in the earlier days of our forging we had to work separately underground in the underground overground, the official Left will never again have the Authority it once had, never again, there's too much individual independence in America. Merry Dale is a hot brand and so am I, and the love-hate relationship with the country is an on-going process, and it's taken all her life to reach what she has always been in touch with.

I am with the women, they are in the vanguard for the big changes; once they repossess their bodies there will be immediate repercussions. I am with them all the way.

Mark me down as a radical Feminist, and you will feel where the enclosed poem comes from in praising Merry Dale.

Love, Vincent

The Female Universe

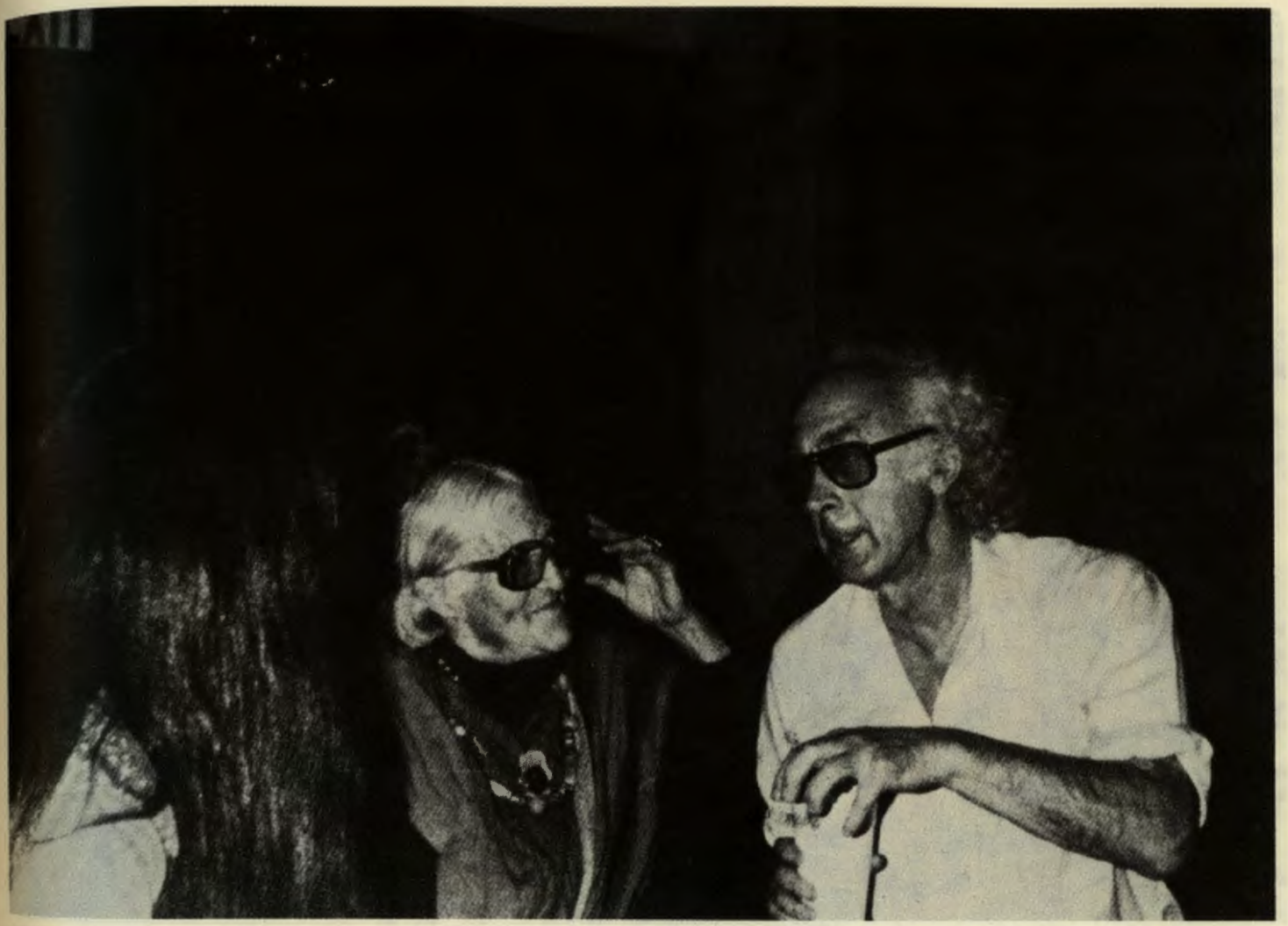
for Merry Dale LeSueur

Afterlife & the whorling Earth is behind
us, & here you are, the astonishing human galaxy
intimate with all the tricks & the honed
suppressions filling your maw's appetite, you saw
you seer, using beauty & truth as the twin force
against the Unspontaneous, still raging, high
on the weeds of loving, as we try matching your fierce
devotion, Beloved of the Oppressed, ah ho ho
Sorcerer, fine as a wireless filament, I adore
your lust, your clutch, the bounce of your thought
so buried in the we, the seeds go halleluiah,

because we dare

as you do for the Most, holy committed, O how we thirst
for your springs you spill into ours, & we go mad
with Divine Delight & something else is made!

Vincent Ferrini
Feb. 25, 1981



Joy Harjo, Meridel LeSueur, and Vincent Ferrini at the Foolkiller in Kansas City for the Midwest People's Alternative Culture Conference.

(Photo courtesy of Vincent Ferrini)

Tecla in her Harlem studio.
(Photo courtesy of Tecla.)

Meridel Le Sueur

I am not a painter
but I sat painting you
eyes doe-brown
but
umbilical to wind, dust, leather
and water troughs
and the
cadenced
clopping
of a pinto
pony

broken
nose arched
as if
thrown
from the loins
of Theodore Spotted-Bear

a jaw that firms
away
from this tremble-sculptured time

black-white hair
that Caesar-curls
saying
I came
I saw
and I am scarred
by the defeats of conquering

an inner image
of blood woman
bed woman
child bearer
whom no one dare call
Mrs.

Franklin Brainard

For Meridel

At "The Gathering"
August 1981

Your face
cross hatched, many colored
Pysanka,
dunked year after year
into color after color:
birthing, sex, kitchen-pot, causes,
words and more words.
Wax it with fish, deer, rabbit, cross,
sun, moon, the city's gates
so finely drawn.
Dip it, the eyes shine through.
Old egg, now the wax melts
to the candle's heat,
layers of intricacies, hues,
revealed at last.
Seal it.
Soon the inner self dwindles
to a fine powder
your grandchildren can shake
ever so gently and wonder
where the inside went.
It went golden,
to feed the world, of course,
but left its shell unbroken,
rainbowed small gourd
nested in the hands
of a child.

Florence Dacey

The Story and the Living:

Meridel LeSueur's *The Girl*

A Review *by Joseph Napora*

> Memory is all we got, I cried, we got to remember. We got to remember everything. It is the glory, Amelia said, the glory. We got to remember to be able to fight. Got to write down the names. Make a list. Nobody can be forgotten. They know if we don't remember we can't point them out. They got their guilt wiped out. The last thing they take is memory. Remember, Amelia says, the breasts of your mothers. O mama help us now.
>
> *The Girl*, p. 192

The book is in essence conflict (not always opposition), not only because change and process are conflict but because Meridel LeSueur's *The Girl*, written in 1939, is still not settled into any comfortable *stasis* within the literary tradition. The true classics never do, or never remain there long. *The Girl* is not a classic. An unknown classic is a contradiction of the language. That it will become a classic is in doubt only if our literature is in doubt.

The question is not will we fail to recognize the worth of this novel but whether we fail to establish that larger tradition within which this novel will find a place of worth. It will not become a classic because of any critical attention (this essay is not propaganda for it). But because of its influence on readers and writers and because of their influence on the culture that has up until recently effectively kept it hidden, it is classic.

In other words, the novel has the chance of being accepted within the tradition if the tradition is recovered and seen anew. But this larger conflict is not my immediate concern, even though it cannot be ignored that the past critical betrayal of *The Girl* is an indictment of the literary establishment—meaning the critics and reviewers not all of whom are academics but who have distorted the aesthetic judgment so that any work is pronounced flawed that has the possibility of altering the society's *status quo*.

I am intrigued by *The Girl* for several reasons, but the main one—the one that draws me back to successive rereadings—is the story. It is the story that has been denied us until now. *The Girl* helps rescue from oblivion a significant portion of our language. This story, like all true stories, continues to inform us now. This is one reason why LeSueur is a heroine to a large

and growing number of female readers. But considering gender as the issue does not reveal the main significance of the story, nor is it primarily developed along class lines. The story is significant now because the way it was told—how form and content are not separable—becomes a model for a renewed literature that puts the lie to the prevailing aesthetic prejudice that an art of the people is necessarily simplistic.

It is the internal complexities of *The Girl* that reveal the worth of the characters because of the novel being true—in a way very few novels that attempt realism have ever been true—to the story of those characters. In the afterward to the West End Press edition of *The Girl* LeSueur explains how various essential parts of the story were given her by her friends who lived them. The story is a collective, then, instead of solely the artist's imposition of the tyranny of the imagination. It is her being faithful to the dynamics of the people's stories that has kept process and conflict integral to the artistry—and hence recognizable—and hence true.

Booya

> *Ganz asked for you. He wants you to bring him his Booya. (p.3)*

Women as meat. This is not a revelation. *Playboy* magazine successfully demonstrates it. Only a woman, however, could tell us how pervasive is the identification. In this, then, LeSueur is sectarian. But it is a sectarianism born from love, not from the impulse to divide and conquer. The fact that a man could not reveal all of these identifications should move us to give thanks that this woman has done so.

> *Stirring the Booya pot so it wouldn't stick, Clara said, you might find that rich guy here you know, or a movie director or a talent scout. . . . (p.2)*

Making the woman into a whore in her own mind to feed the man with her body.

> *. . .a pot of gold. . . . (p.2)*

(If so, what is the rainbow? Can it be how a woman can see herself? Sometimes. With support from other women.) Women as money. Of course. But most of all a thing to consume. Meat.

> *O, Clara was so pretty with a little heart-shaped face and a white soft skin she greased every night. (p.2)*
>
> *(Belle). . . so big, with dyed red hair and white skin. . . . . (p.2)*
>
> *(Clara) Anyhow, kid, she said. I think I'm getting used looking. I can't speak to 'em like I used to when they thought they was getting chicken. (p.58)*
>
> *(the Girl) What would we eat? I said.*
> *I'd eat you, Butch said. You're sweet. (p.65)*

Women as meat is only one aspect of this society's need to turn us all into objects; but it is made explicit and can be seen even without a defined ideology when that act infects all relations between women and men, women and mothers, women and women.

Emily (the Girl's mother) trades a hand-made rug for a sheep so her family can eat.

> *It's a fierce feeling you have for your husband and children like you could feed them your body, and chop yourself up into little pieces. The stew boiled over, sizzled. . .Ah, what a meal. . . . (p.43)*
>
> *. . . opened the shed door and there it hung straight from its two feet tied together and the place bleeding where I had cut out a piece for stew. (p.41)*
>
> *(Butch) All right, let your blood out, open the gates! (p.40)*
>
> *(the Girl) I read all the sandwich signs american cheese, chickenhamporkcoffeemilk buttermilktomatolettucetomatohotbeef. They looked like signs like lovehatejealousy marriage. (p.49)*
>
> *(Butch) My God, he said, There's blood on the sheet. You're bleeding. (p.5)*

The woman as sacrificial lamb. Again, this is not new. Not invention. And because it is not, it is all that much more powerful as more is revealed to us. LeSueur is not inventing things to stimulate our imagination; she is revealing back to us what we already know, in fact what we, that larger thing we aspire to—a community, have told her. Her artistry is to tune the language so that it reveals meaning at every turn, where every turn can effectively move us. It is because of this possibility for moving that a world of difference exists between a crude joke that identifies a carrot with the cock and the scene LeSueur presents. That difference is art because of the faith she maintains in language as a bond common to us all.

> *(Belle, consoling the Girl, talking of her "initiation" with Butch. Belle, thirteen abortions.) If she don't feel good, Belle hooted, nevermind, the first time is the hardest and when is the last time? Put more carrots in, Amelia, I got all those horse carrots at the market, they're strong but good. (p. 57)*

The Market. The market place. Stock market. Prostitution. The endless reverberations of a common theme when the writer opens herself to these stories.

Woman as meat. But this is not, cannot be, an isolated theme. Intimate to it is the denial of a woman's true story. LeSueur, in the writing of *The Girl*, gives us that story. But she also records the loss of countless other stories.

And directly connected to that loss is abortion. Again, recurring in another guise—woman as meat.

> *(Belle) My luck, the first time and I got into trouble. He gave me a little money and I come to St. Paul where for ten bucks they'd stick a huge vet's needle into you and start it and then you were on your own. I tell you many farm girls died in the slaughter houses of St. Paul. I was lucky it came out that night and I wrapped it in a copy of the St. Paul Dispatch* and threw it in the river. (p. 54)

The theme is directly stated when the character needs to be explicit to reveal it to herself to ward off the assault of that theme each day.

> *(Amelia) They get your blood and bones one way or another, What are we? Just goods to be bought and sold? Yes, she answered herself cursing, that's what they think, buy and sell you and then use your body after you're dead! It's too bad, it's too bad they can't kill our babies and eat them like suckling pigs. What tender meat that would be! Stuffed babies with mushrooms. Why not? (p. 135)*

This explicit use of the language is just one aspect of the language that has been denied us in our literature. What has been considered as progressive and *avant garde* has usually been merely a liberal promotion of the market system that quickly turned "obscenity" into a commodity. Effective language, language of change, has been kept hidden. And the effect on our literature has been worse for that. The literature has been impoverished because the stories have been distorted. The distortion has also been to benefit the artists most firmly entrenched in the existing market system—whether it be the commercial or academic markets. The results have been the same—only the male story gets told. The female becomes merely the muse. Woman as meat to feed the (predominantly male) artist.

> *(Amelia) They stuff you up with fine words and then they stick you in the stomach like a pig. (p. 136)*

Cats

Booya is woman-meat. Cats is man-thing. Cats is also symbol. But most of all it is man—man made thing. Feeding on meat.

> . . . Booya. It's an elegant stew of chicken and veal and beef and every kind of vegetable and you cook it all night and all day very, very slow and it gets to smelling even out on the street and the cats look in the window. (p.1)

Voyeurs. Peeping Tom-cat-ism. The back-alley man. Alley cats.

> *Clara told me all about what was going on up there and it scared me—the men who came in the back alley door and went past the bar and upstairs scared me. (p.1)*

> *And Clara would take my place when Belle told me to take them beer, because she could "field" them better when they tried to make a homerun or a strike with their too-free paws. (p.1)*

It is not surprising to see men portrayed as beasts. What is surprising, because it is so rare a thing, is the sympathy and the refusal to make the too easy comparisons. Cats is also woman.

> *I liked to see Belle at the bar shaking dice and the big cat Sussybelly in a big bow by the register, with a piggy bank beside her full of money from the bets being put down on how many cats she would pop . . . . (p.2)*

Cats is woman turned by man into a thing.

> *Clara said, Look at that now, Cats get better care than humans. She got a cup of milk a day. (p.6)*

Then later, Clara forced into shock therapy. Mind gone but body still starved for milk. The women rally making milk for Clara the issue. The Hearst Milk Fund is a recurring bad joke. Readers looking for a literature that redeems itself through irony will get more than enough irony though little redemption. Redemption is harder to realize. It comes through values outside of the inner complexities of the novel. It comes through working for changing the cause of the need for irony.

The cat-as-woman identification points to the larger theme of birth—birth against a system that imposes death. This is the difference between this identity and the other, Cats-is-men. Amelia sees the necessity for the identification because she sees through but beyond the immediate social concerns.

> *She's a female like us, Amelia said, She don't know the father. She gives all she's got to make them come out whole healthy full of seed. (p. 6)*

The hope for the future. It is this living thing posed against the constant attempt illustrated by Cats-is-man to stifle and control it that gives these symbols a dynamism seldom seen in our literature.

Once again the issue becomes "Who controls the story, and why?" We know who has controlled it in the past. Thankfully this is changing somewhat. But even now the issue is still language. Man is cat / controller / eating, as opposed to Woman is cat / giver / birthing.

The gangster offers money for a "piece" of the girl. To buy her out to shut (plug) her up.

> *Ganz said, Jesus what a coat. You could have a good coat. Cat got your tongue? (p.63)*

Baseball

> *Tragically frightened, men fear authentic relationships and even doubt the possibility of their existence. On the other hand, fearing solitude, they gather in groups lacking any critical and loving ties which might transform them into a cooperating unit, into a true community. "Gregariousness is always the refuge of mediocrities," said Nikolai Nikolaievich Vedeniapin in* **Dr. Zhivago**. *It is also an imprisoning armor which prevents men from loving.*
>
> Paolo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*

Baseball is a man's game and a man's entertainment. A sport that quickly turns the living drama into numbers where each player is ranked into a hierarchy modeling the paternal business ordering that is the reality called *progress*.

There are many types of progress. Some include time in an authentic enlargement of opportunity based upon the past struggles of people—hence, the realization that personal sacrifice for the benefit of others is not a deception. The other kind of progress, the dominant kind in our culture, feeds on the illusion of bettering the lot of everyone to the real enrichment of the few. The push of modern medical research for such practices as heart transplants utilizing funds for community health

is only one of the more pronounced and pathological examples. More to the point of this story is the association of baseball with progress up the social ladder. Baseball equals making it. And making it means accepting, and promoting, the kind of competition that insures that for someone to progress, others have to be walked over.

Progress is the underlying mythos of the caplitalist system which demands expansion, because without it, it will die. To insure its own survival, especially in periods when it is nearly fatally sickened, the promotion of the myth of progress is virulent. And although big business is the spokesman for the myth, it knows that internal cooperation guarantees its success if it can also confuse its potential opposition.

It is fitting then that the character who completely accepts the idea of Progress is the ex-ballplayer, Butch. Butch who dies after being shot while robbing a bank—trapped within the slave mentality of unquestioningly acepting an idea that destroys him. Butch the robber. Not like Ganz the gangster and petty capitalist. Nor is he an outlaw who understands the system and inadvertently fights against it. He is just a desperate robber-to-be and ex-ballplayer living in illusions that only benefit a society bent on using, discarding, or killing him.

> *We're natural winners. You should have seen us playing ball. Our old man didn't want us to play on Sundays. We used to pray that ball right over home plate. I used to say to that ball, Go on baby do good. (p.5)*

Baseball as business as religion. The militant Calvinists who infused capitalism with justification from god couldn't have invented a more appropriate game.[1]

Assuming that Butch is baseball is capitalism and that capitalism must expand to survive, what is Butch's hope for the future?

> *Gee, honey, I'm crazy about you, you're so sweet. We'll have some land, we'll get you fat with roses in your cheeks and then we can have that ball player, fat and sassy. (p.25)*

No longer "only" a person, Butch is baseball—

> *Well, you're looking at me, he said, the handsomest ball player in the league ain't that so boys? (p. 77)*

But so is every man in the novel. They are all joined in this fake community, this mere gregariousness (. . . ain't that so boys?) that keeps them united on a superficial level to substitute for a unity that will threaten the economic system. Butch's brother is also a ball player. And it is the two of them who get jobs as scabs. And the brother is killed in the riot resulting from the attempt at strike-breaking. And then there is Joe, the girl's brother, whose language is not even his own, so complete has the process of dreaming and subservience undercut his ability to act.

> *Mama, if I was a millionaire I'd take you on a spree, I'd buy you some candy and crackerjacks I don't care if we never get back. (p. 39)*

This is not, however, a fatalistic picture. One time the identification of baseball and progress is shown to be a way of genuine advancement. It is within a community struggle for and with each other.

> *(Belle) Kid you should have seen the demonstration, hundreds outside the courthouse and the cops threw teargas out the windows and some of those ballplayers caught the bombs and threw them right back and kid you should have seen those bureaucrats, like rats, pouring out of the building and the street littered with those leaflets saying Milk and Iron Pills for Clara. (p. 145)*

The difficulty, realizing the opposition and then realizing just who it is you are playing the game for, how to transfer those skills for your own liberation, is that the language has been debased. Since she is a woman, the Girl cannot completely enter into the man's specially coded language since it excludes her and hence denies them a source of strength that could save them from themselves.

> *(The Girl, after her first intercourse, not love-making) Had Butch won, struck a foul, thrown a home-run, made the bases or struck out? How could you ever know? (p.53)*

The Girl does not finally need to know because she has not been as thoroughly victimized by the distortion of her language. With Butch it has become complete. So much so that it is a flaw, and a flaw we all suffer under to varying degrees, that makes Butch a tragic character (and which expresses some of the qualities that name this a tragic age). Butch never learns. His total acceptance of progress has undone him. As he bleeds to death he says

> *Where are we going? It's got to show soon. What are we looking forward to? You got to believe in the future. (p.107)*

The Philosophy of Beating

[When America's greatest revivalist preacher, Billy Sunday, entered New York on April 7, 1917, the day after the U.S. declared war on Germany, it was the occasion of his greatest truimph. He was to play to his biggest crowds, bigger than the ones that had cheered him at the Polo Grounds during his baseball playing days. Sunday had an immense popular following but had been used so often by the businessmen and government officials to confuse the workingmen and divide the people that he was in great demand as a strike-breaker or to be used to whip up the people for an expansionist war frenzy. He once, for instance, called for a march on Mexico. But this time he was in New York to help the American war effort, solidify friendships, and most of all to become a living legend. When he exited from the train at Grand Central Station he walked over to J.D. Rockerfeller and put his hand around his shoulders and said, "Hello old chap!"]

For Butch, for the revivalist, for the caplitalist, the world is a ball. Something to be manipulated for their own personal end. Each has accepted and promoted the conjunction of religion and business. For the capitalist the world is a neutral object to be made meaningful through treating it as a commodity infused with value by transformation of the material into something to sell. The revivalist seeks transformation of the matter into the equally abstract moral value that he can control. Butch, the confused would be petty-bourgeoisie—always looking to have a gas station of his own to manage—baseball was his only personal transformation, his only realization of success: a success that is after all so similar to the other two in that it approximates a rape, this need to be "on top of the world."

> *(Butch) I like to beat everybody in the world... Sure, beating's everything. Everything there is. Do you know winning is better than anything, than anything at all. When I used to play baseball I liked to beat. I was a good player. Jesus, my old man didn't want me to play baseball on Sunday. I used to pray to that ball, yeah man, I'd pray. I used to say to that ball, go on baby, do good! Yes, I got to be better than anybody, better than anybody at all. When you play ball you pray, that's the way I pray now, to be better than anybody. When you play ball you pray, those balls come over in the inside and connect. That's what I'm going to do. Let it come to me world, and connect. (p. 16)*

The philosophy of beating is the cult of the individual. It marks, more than anything else does, the difference between the men and the women in *The Girl*. Men are the individualists, the rugged capitalists modeled on the robber baron image. Women are cooperative, the emerging socialism, and an image of a primitive tribalism. In *The Girl* the conflict is between *balls* and *eggs*.

> *(Butch) It takes guts, he said, that's what it is, to go through the night. You got to be tough and strong alone.*
> *I don't like it alone, I said. I don't want to be alone. I want to be with others.*
> *He looked at me. Gee, women are funny eggs, he said, my mother's a screwy dame too! (p.17)*

The incompatability of balls and eggs is shown best in the language Butch uses when the Girl becomes playful. The slightest threat to the pathological type of masculinity that Butch has adopted has him react to the Girl's spontaneity by turning her from a "sister" to a whore.

You egged me on, he said, you got me going, now it's your fault. You got to take the consequences. I was surprised.
You got to take your medicine, he said, you egged me on. You did it on purpose. You got me riled up now. You can't say I wasn't treating you like a sister and then you jumps out of the car and runs like a harlot. (p. 27)

It is in his attitude toward women and his unquestioning acceptance of the myth of making it in America, which amounts in practice to the same thing, that Butch becomes the Girl's father becomes Ganz becomes every male figure either trapped or using their limited power to subjugate women. It is the attitude that denies Butch sisterhood with women.

(on the Girl's father) He wanted to be king, to boss, she said. Because he was a failure he wanted others to be so that they wouldn't be better than him. (p. 36)

(Stasia, the Girl's sister) He beat me before people. Now he'll never beat me again. I'm glad he's dead. (p. 37)

(the Girl dreaming) I didn't want to sleep, I dreamed about it every night. It was Butch in the grave instead of papa and they would both be after me to beat me up and mama would hide me. (p. 46)

It seems always to return to this. The story. And who should tell it. Who can tell it truly. And who has been preventing them from telling it.

(the Girl) I didn't feel good. I cried. Butch got mad and slapped me. (p. 47)

I remember my father always in anger, putting on his pants, leaving, yelling obscenities and coming back later, drunk, when he often beat mama, and it didn't sound too different from love-making. (p. 83)

Instead of answering he struck me full in the face . . . (p.83)

. . . Don't Butch, I whispered, someone will see. I could see his hand lifted, this time in a fist and it struck me in the mouth. . . . (p. 83)

If the Girl is the potential writer, the possible teller of stories, what kind of stories can she write? Who will they be written for? And why? Much of this is answered in the very writing of this novel, but what is certain within the novel itself is that the Girl will not be bent to serve the market system that is attempting to destroy her. Momentarily confused she sells herself thinking it the right thing to do, the only thing that will guarantee Butch's love for her, then she realizes the full extent of what she has risked.

I saw the ten dollars. I reached up and Hone put his hands around my waist.
I felt like somebody was hitting me on the top of the head with a wallet driving me into the earth, driving me deep down and I would never see anything more but darkness . . .
Ganz suddenly brought his huge mutilated hand back and struck me full in the face. (p.70)

Sisterhood

I wanted to find Belle and Amelia and Clara and my mama. (p. 53)

After giving herself to Butch and realizing he had nothing to give to her except the baby forming inside her, which was not given but which she unknowingly took from him, she turns for help to those able, in spite of all, to give it.

Leave her alone, Belle said.
No, Amelia says, nobody is alone. I'm glad you came here if you don't feel good. (p. 52)

[When do you know when to stop analyzing? I look at this fragment and see a skill whether deliberate or unconscious, "natural," that uses the past tense "said" to imply not only Belle's character, her partial acceptance of sisterhood and her partial acceptance of domination under Hoinek, but also to show in contrast with Amelia's "says" that the attitude of leaving each other alone is no longer possible, the belief and the acting on the belief that *no one is alone* is ongoing, is present tense.]

(Amelia) Why, she said, you will have a child and then you will belong to the whole earth.
I looked at her. She was the first person who seemed to be glad of it.
I feel lonely, I said.
Oh stuff, she cried, why you aren't alone now, she laughed . . . (p. 112)

It is obvious that the philosophy of beating is the philosophy of capitalism. Men embody that philosophy. But *The Girl* is not so naive a story as to draw the lines between men and women so firmly based on such a simplistic analogy.

I do not know what Meridel LeSueur's connection is with Marxism. I suspect that her brand of socialism would find little favor in the Soviet Union, though probably not as little as has been shown her by the official so-called culture in her own country. The cooperative attitudes displayed in *The Girl* seem more a realization of an intuitive tribalism than anything based on rigid systems.

> *Amelia said, It isn't the man. A man is a mighty fine thing, there is nothing better than a man. It's the way we have to live that makes us sink to the bottom and rot. (p. 112)*

The system. If Marxism can help to bring down that system, then Marxism. But there is something more basic, more positive, more spiritual, than any western philosophy, which all are basically philosophies of beating, that seems to inform LeSueur's work. I am thinking now of how the attack on the women in *The Girl* parallels the attempt by the government to kill the American Indian culture through sterilizing women—attacking fertility itself. Under the guise of liberal concern about over-population, it is continuing a policy of genocide begun at Plymouth over 300 years ago.[2]

LeSueur's fundamental theme of the need for women to retain their fertility, to continue the process of birth, and through that process "belong to the whole earth," puts her more in the membership of the Pequods who first resisted the European invasion than in any European sectarian group.

> *Miss Rice came in and smiled. Maybe if she hadn't smiled it would have been all right. Maybe if she hadn't said, I'm your friend, it's just between us. Maybe if she hadn't handed me that paper right at that moment and said, just a little routine matter, we want you to sign this, and I saw the word* **sterilization** *on it, and we want to give you some tests, she said, just a routine matter. (p. 129).*

Just a routine matter.

The expulsion of the Abenakis from Maine in 1722. King Phillip's War. 1678, Great Swamp Massacre. 1698. A familiar catalog of horrors. Wounded Knee 1870. Wounded Knee 1973. The current struggle to take the Black Hills for uranium, for atomic weapons. No, they are not familiar stories. They should be. And the most current one is the least familiar. Amelia saying, the "stories must be remembered."

Keeping the story alive means keeping the birth process alive. The story is not a substitute for the birth. They are the same.

> *I opened my pocketbook and looked in the mirror, and read a leaflet from the Workers Alliance, but I kept thinking—what did Butch want? He was playing the wrong game. They were trying to win—what? It was the wrong hold up, the wrong home run. It was funny but I kept thinking and feeling like I had just outfoxed the cops, the whole shebang, cracked the vault, made my get away with the loot under my belly. And I am the Treasure. (p. 134)*

This realization, contrasted with Butch's blindness, is the opposite of tragedy. Perhaps this is the biggest reason why the official culture has for so long ignored *The Girl.* The culture of exploitation is the culture of tragedy. Tragedy is used to substitute for recognition of real suffering.

The personal liberation experienced by the Girl is just the kind of liberation that is feared most by such a culture, since it leads to the realization that personal liberation is not a liberation unless everyone is free. And that it is necessary for us all to work for that freedom.

> *What do you get now? They won't give you anything for love. You got to fight for it. You can't just cry for yourself. You got to cry for all. Some face has got to shine with every other face. We must know that our suffering is together . . . The same enemy after us . . . the same mother over us, she said. (p. 134)*

Joseph Napora

1. [On December 30, 1907, a committee of baseball executives and 2 U.S. senators determined that Abner Doubleday had conducted the first baseball game, in 1839, at Cooperstown, New York. It is appropriate to my story that Doubleday had gained some fame in the expansionist campaign against Mexico and later for the Union army in the Civil War. It is also worth mentioning that the official version had it that the first players were military cadets under Doubleday's instruction. As much as the executives, the senators, the military would like to lay claim to the invention of the national pas time, it was a people's game played more than a century before. Doubleday imposed strict rules upon it. In this, Doubleday is similar to the grammarian attempting to control the language of the people, to impose an institutional order upon the living activity.]

2. [The Government Accounting Office report released Nov. 23, 1977: Indian Health Service performed 3,406 sterilizations on Indian women in Aberdeen, South Dakota, Albuquerque, Oklahoma City and Phoenix in 1973-1976.

...According to Dr. Uri, more than 25 percent of all Indian women have been sterilized since 1962.

...36 sterilizations were performed on women under 21 years of age in direct violation of the provisions of the 1974 court order that prohibits such operations on minors.

...two girls had been sterilized at age 15 before they had yet had children.

...they thought they were having appendectomies.]

(Photo courtesy of Dorothy Walters)

No Caribbean Cruise

for Meridel LeSueur

Like Rome or Pah-Gotzin-Kay,
The Revolution is a *place.*

Because of the shortage of maps,
Few can find it.

But there are real trees there. . .
And: children.

The water is pure
But too cold for tourists to drink.

Thomas McGrath

Temple Rite

Not even a poem could tell this secret.
When the great mother comes down
to prepare her child
for consecration of the horn
it is no words she gives her,
no amulets enriched with signs,
but patience of waiting
while the dark flood gathers,
unknown assembly,
ceremony of blood.

Caught in that broken tide,
nothing sustains,
neither images of roses
nor sudden remembered prayers;
the moment loosed,
the world is sucked to center:

That mother, that bull,
this earth, this sky.

Dorothy Walters

Excerpts selected from
Notes From Crete

by Meridel LeSueur

The great pots are really around a hole around empty space inside the jars the encompassing of holy space matter encircling snakelike the energy . . . it is the space that is holy not the jar a conduit from birth to death and back instantly in the spring in the urn put the bones of ashes of your death, then the fertilizer from your body, then the seed from last harvest which also is ancestor and then water . . . in spring attach great ropes to the bottom and the gathering of people early and pour it on the fields with loud singing dancing sacred ritual and it springs up to new season . . . conduit of space seed closed urn is large containing seed come here in the moment of earth turn from hemisphere to hemisphere in this instant mid valley of great continuance of enormous memory here Minoan Druid and American Shaman meet. O night the dark is falling like milk, I cling to the tits of the cob we all fall into the urn of procreation. Let loose give over fall . . . the vent of light . . . the cock set his cry into the first lid of light . . . there are no doors only openings we surround the opening the space with jars houses temples enclose the great and sacred space lie outside the great mounds and the temple of Knossos which is a frame for mother space. Great monuments of openings . . . that utter open before conquest . . . no idea of seizing or rape or conquest . . . two women riding side by side on little donkeys going to the field. Now the women fear the sow the pit and falling down. We all heave up the ladder. Success is up. Seizure rape possession. Brino makes Demeter laugh lifts her skirts take my kernel open as mandala ON THE OTHER SIDE OF ANXIETY IS THE CORN . . .

Christianity makes us rise out of the filthy female. They chose the most rocky barren needing hurting earth the Greeks and the Hopis. The sybil sat on her three-legged stool over her smoking crevasse. The sacred object endowed with ceremonial meaning is the true redeemer, it is the crucified flesh that becomes visible the Knossos stone still speaks. These black-clothed women on the plains in the fields seed grain the bin womb seed. Flesh of fruit, the bowlegged conquered lack calcium, beloved mother for these enormous peaches where do they come from out of the rock long green gourds out of the vine. Pain of stooping bones and the memory of the nazi invader the pain in the flesh weight of conquest, women central to the globe BIRTH THE ONLY LABOR no pay no charge. The sense of the global sounds at Knossos, lead unborn reverberating coming through the great sounds, sound of ancient blood beating . . .

Be bold fling out spit out blow out bow out let her go. Let images perish and be resurrected perish in each other . . . awake be born of each other . . . roused in hunger and necessity to each other . . . throw the pot . . . energy flows from violated body of emeric decapitated head of Medusa rites of participation, picnics town square town meeting evengelist meetings . . . moonlight schools . . . communal knowledge and action, kin and kinfolk multiplicity of communal meanings . . . interlocking dream risen equation correspondences . . . melodic coherence . . . disparate single thread moving changing in fabric . . . interlocking interweaving . . . we are the company of the living apprehension by the living related intellect . . . apprehension of each other by means of the generative potential intellect . . . imagination of the whole not the fragment . . . escape from closures . . . ecstasy of surrendering to communal consciousness . . .

The trail is readable where they drove us underground. The trail of the hunted. Trophies stuffed women the hunted doe has turned to rebuke them women have to live longer to see the men out. They cannot die alone. The reversal of birth . . .

We must go to each other I don't know how. It is too dark

to write now. The only light is the lantern of our flesh. The nuclear flesh hangs to the centuries bone and nucleus eat the dung and sing the journey the old men the chorus sings for you as they move as one their delicate feet caressing the earth knocking on her tenderly . . .

A single moment infuses all others . . . the force that draws me to the ground of duality . . . pins me down . . . this is the cross . . . indifference, outright murder . . . complex perception on the prairie. I always had this wheel within the wheel, flat horizon turning in many spirals sky earth air dryness moisture turning on the vast wheel. The speed of the earth turning in its own, a polution of thinking and relationship . . . our bodies are dulled rejective disappearing because we have no relationship or are afraid of it . . . crank the winding immobile syntax . . . forever healing Suffering shared is the only redemption . . .

My grandmother did not speak. She erected her massive body into the air, her only message . . . a wrathful flume . . . raging flesh, her rigid enraged body inside the fortress of her defense. Let go. The rose gives over its petals and dies to the rose hip full of calcium and swollen all winter on the crucified frosted stalk, poets who feed on themselves . . . community inheritance . . . revelations collapse invite ordered prospect by every calamity. What has been planted comes up.

As if in the act of love on the streets of San Salvador vision of their dead bodies the blood of the vision, vision and history bear upon our action . . . it is against reduction . . . it expands . . . call us in the root . . . in all memories in all seasons, all wounds and strengths . . . our own memory field is collective, coexisting, conjure forth the true action. Action of entire solidarity. Myth multifarious cooperative coexisting in all parts of the whole, the whole is more than the parts, the dream in which all things are living meaning whispering feathering in the tit of her multinational eggs . . . the nest the globe . . . and chambered spiral in the egg of our ancestral cell, "got made" a strange saying, force over us is blind coercive mute unconscious, it is its own destruction, america unacknowledged repeated are becoming visible in our deaths our blood is critical to uprising, revolt . . . fire hidden american seed . . . nature hold hearth power communal heat the blood of my people falls into my skin into my words, into my being, strife engendered music, the blood from our mothers, store in the veins, arteries, instantly, YES FREE THE GLOBE IT IS POSSIBLE.

Men are stalking the circle now the underworld has appeared. The ground of burial is cracking. Underearth has been plowed up and is becoming cadmus teeth of old warriors . . . where is the real body buried? Where is the cave seed? Who murdered us the mass assassin, where is he hiding, in movie actors made president . . . in polish emigres . . . rites of participation . . . re-entering. American culture indian greek gene of mother clan aztec mayan the dying chemical light of the new england factories the stench of the puritan merchandising utility of death . . . polluting the vast wilderness continent . . . now the suppressed the ghost the hidden the strangled appears.

There is only ONE event all the time everywhere . . . from the unknown to the explicit, always new emerging green something remembered at delphi dissolve in atlantis from lair kin and cauldron pivotal center placenta close to open furrow turned up sow blood in the vial love and kin in world light coming of all women into one fate

hit the pitch cordinate the land rendered to them total immense fruits . . . mound gathering together of spirits . . . let language speak and be resurrected speak into delphi speak into the valley of the moon of corn and wheat

I never knew a destination in my youth. I was always in the horizon wheel from texas to illinois . . . all the different colored earths . . . air grew warm and round to be entered to be alive . . .

Now I see the deep pattern Jean Toomer pointed out; it was about women . . . solidarity of hunger all kinds of

hunger . . . equals . . . here where the dead are . . . in economy of suffering nothing is lost . . . Reagan meets over the border with mexico who warns him about the people of south america what they contain how they will be together now nicaragua and san salvador and guatemala. Hunger is free. We are born in the blood of strangers who turn out to be brothers . . . child mother sister . . . the arriving future is alive you saw it born in the past in the seizure of guatemala it was already in the seed the people are a great crop with seasons and maturity and rebel seed catastrophe turning into crops . . . the rebel dead are not strangers . . . the young men sown like winter grain to come up in spring are your children . . . mad women bear it . . . the angel appears in the pus and bile and decompose of the corpse . . . in the single bowl of the human the mix of celestial. Here is where you go mad the past returning unregenerate how age can transform the past into seed this is the seed-maker the entire essence concentrate and walled in a seed to entirely receive the past and go mad don't reduce to intellectuality or analysis or little boxes . . .

Chemistry for planets the fruit is heavy and abundant general branches support fruit brew of things wine of grapes trampled . . . many mothered many fathered in mercy and compassion . . . profusion in excitement of final flower, generate profusion eros magic american magus shaman enduring and emanating essence as from corn, spurt at the full opening last great tide and ebb of central ovum, alchemical transforming release the whole essence of your life . . . spirit of inheritance recognition the helix multiple plan design double helix entered the wilderness as depth as entrance in the kiva downward in the breath the hearth of the prairie the great burning sacrificial alter, natural woman depth of silt and humus of woman laid down fold upon fold labyrinth of the journey transmitting generating moving running corn circuit (loss of energy is misuse of the helix energy which is perpetual cannot be used of deflowered or diminished)

We do not have the right to ask if we will fail. Failing and death are nothing in view of the stakes of the opposite. The enemy cannot win. Life is against everything against. There is no winning with the bomb. It is not even a choice. Death against death. There must be no doubting the strength of life over this kind of death, given our powerful common sense, our powerful love, our powerful numbers. Down with so-called logic of the vultures, who count on the carrion; there is only the powerful logic of our strenth, the right to life, the right of our ancestors and our progeny, our inner genes so cunningly multiplying with the maggots. We have no right to doubt our strength. Give your own tender and fearless heart as Lennon said. If you want to free Peru go free Peru . . . Summer women to all who need. Only the people have compassionate hearts and a clear view of the enemy and the stakes allowed. We do not have the right to doubt our strength and each other...

There is something useful in my power of reflection, something mysterious in the use of all light and heat and mineral in the usage of the flower unarmed without blast or aggression . . . something between mother and daughter between nourishment and appearance flower presence the faithful and never failing presence of spring out of the corpse . . . our strength is to use the fertilizer the violent disintegration of the corpse . . . out of it we make nitrogen. As for the stinking battlefields . . . we planted corn in their eyes and wheat in the decaying bellies . . .

Detergents paper cups kleenex and toilet paper terrible enemies we go around the world with toothpaste detergent poisonous sprays to keep clean cocacola bottles candy wrappers this is our gift . . .

Now I have spoken at Eleusis the same as speaking into the years into the old shells of the comrades at the party at the two birthday days of birth with the commune the community . . . the resonance of communal years . . . I feel the hill open the rocks sing my legs got absolutely flowing like water then I couldn't stand they became white smoke hollow reeds all the grief flowed out of them inner winds blowing over the continent of my ribs lungs and organs coming up from the sorrow stone. This is the communal circle . . . power turned ancient winds in tulleric circles . . . evil and ambiguity turned to benign . . .

Over the forgotten labyrinth double labia through which lips comes not edge but lips. I can't speak yet just hold up the corn and give the kernels out . . . there is no outside we are now descending or rising or turning no surface it is the same sun seed upon all faces the invaders will become impotent nothing to invade . . . it is given . . .

I pass over the kiva opening, the milky way, the solistic rhythm seen felt equally down and up . . . the center of earth up to the cosmos passing over through the vagina leaping vagina as central door into life.

In the earth at home kill the king reappearance in these embryos of form proteins of struggle these women keep house wherever they are rustle up food trash mend bathe organize their stuff . . . settle down in a moment keep doing stuff organize clean wash pick up crumbs from the floor put things in their place the moment of extremity birth and death conspiracy to commit murder is incessant in capitalism to appear ahead of accident about to happen there is no accident something gathering to draw to you conclusions of violence when you see your killer face to face as yourself as target for years the woman loves her murderer . . .

The intellectuals have no right to leech our strength with platonic unbelief and games of measuremen philosophy of decay and human wealth. At Knossos the cock crowing at five-thirty a dim lean cry he is not fat nor has a flock of good fat hens. He is like the soil of Crete, thin, rocky but brave, all crow the dawn, how easy the light opens on a new day, conquest break bull and butterfly virgin verg in vir gin brimbos piping the raucus the sow's song with short bowed legs and his hair in that fisherman's net the man and his vulcan face grinning he sidles over with cunning licentous crab walk he takes a bottle from his baggy pants. I think they are diapered up the middle like zapata (men come through the legs) and he has a small grimy bottle of greek brew he holds out. I take a swig and it is open fire, he wants to trade for one of my black cigarettes. I give him two and take another swig. He is sorry I can't walk, neither can he, his legs short and bowed he points to them and the pain in his boney knees he pulls up to show
me an incredible scarred dirty loamed strong and terrible leg, he beckons me over to his stand, keeping close to me with a smell of ancient soil buttermilk sweat and semen. He puts a claw on my shoulder and gives me his reed flutes he makes with no holes in them, a reed that wets and a wonderful shepherd's sound he makes a summons glinting over his bloodshot piercing eyes like an old goat. He is present, raucous as a goat, also entirely what he is, and he senses my mesmerization, and seeing of him, half repulsion and attraction which is what sex might be to him, he nods to the ravine below his stand, winking and slithering his greek eyes and like a goat without language indicates our enormous coupling, indicating an impossibly large member emerging from the great marsh of his pants but it is the phallic eye that is luring solanus vulcan primus all the unregenerate rapists. He indicates how wonderful in the sun in the great grasses and I gather we will be through before the tourists return down the hill and how merry we will be having had something they never had, what makes one reject these terrible moments, these wonderful ancient offerings. I turn smiling in the pressure of the heat, put my hand on his shoulder. I don't want to reject his wonderful generous offer. Just then around the old stone the tour appears against the sky, well dressed, all with hotel beds and showers to wash off the ancient lust. He watches me tenderly and grinning as they buy his little flutes and nets and cards made in athens, the glowing of all objects at noon with the hot ingot of his lacquer he made himself flowing through me . . .

Meeting Meridel LeSueur

Wrinkles, mortgaged furrows, which run deep
and flesh, the firm loam in between, both go
when they auction off your place to pay off Death
(the only honest banker left in town).
But there are long, long prairies in your face
not ready yet to meet the plow,
fourteen feet of prairie loam built up in Iowa,
it took some life to lay your kind of sod.

You said the Pueblos in their dance called Shalako
talk to the sun. "Brother, all this year
I tilled the soil. Prices were down.
I sold two bucks a bushel less than cost
and drank the losses up. Stick a lawyer,
miller, banker in a barrel. Roll them down a hill.
You'll end up with an S.O.B. on top.
Sun, I need you. You need me too. I am a part."

On just that part, that quarter section of the soil
you worked while struggling with the thugs.
I claim collateral. You've stuck. You proved it up.
I'm taking out a loan on what you've tried to do.
No one jumped your claim. You ran the sluggers off
and posted it, "No Middlemen Allowed."
There is no choice. Work your land, eat or be fed,
as food to fatten speculators up.

I watched you stroke yield into your soil,
seed smell, the tendril touch,
fold of the bud, blood and brood
bloom and back to seed before the fall.
I want my claim as deep, down in loam
rough to my length, but deeper in
than frost can go, plumb in the heart of stuff
ripe in the teeming atoms of our growth.

Sometimes we get lost, out beyond
where the trail thins out, not even a fork
to pose two choices, making it simple,
where neither right nor left can tell us where to go.
Twenty years ago I left this place
said goodbye, turned my back, gone for good.
But yesterday on meeting up with you
I laughed to think I thought I'd ever left.

Bob Nilsson

The Witch

I was always a nice girl
with a few bad habits.
I whistled a lot,
out gathering eggs.
When my brothers hand-wrestled
I insisted on winning.
The villagers said I walked like a boy.

My father used to eye me uneasily
and hold private conversations in the corner
with mother.

When the other girls married
I took no notice
though I threw rice at the churchdoor
along with the rest.
Whatever I was headed for,
it wasn't this:
a screaming cradle
and a man with soot for fingers.

Once I went to a meeting
in the heart of the forest.
Where shadows make shadows
I learned my true name.

Since then I have lived here at the edge of the wood
with my charms and my tabby,
my thatch needing repair.
My potions are famous all over in these parts.
When they ask what goes in I mutter,
"Roots and berries. Roots and berries."
How can I tell them it is themselves they taste?

Dorothy Walters

meridel le sueur

she gathers Indian skins about her
she is female
a circle
a teepee
the fire at her center is warm
there is a place for me to sit
her hands stir the cooking pot
stories rise with the steam of the stew
I eat
she is a prophet, a force
her hair is the grey and white
of winter storms
her face, the brown of the plains
under the sun
hills round her cheeks
the hooves of many buffalo
have pounded her body, wide and flat
her teeth are far apart
like spotted ponies running wild
chunks of blue sky hang on her neck

she looks at me and I am corn
important to her,
growing.

Mary C. Dunford

The Integral Touch of Heavenly Bodies

Venus
in conjunction with
the crescent of
Luna/Moon

One night
Perched on a silvery tip
Sent out a
Wave/

Women
listen to the she-shell
we're rocking in; even
the thigh a convoluting mountain
bathed in crimson and violet light
is of this room where
the legs open fluid flows

the hand a star
fish swimming
downstream
spiraling
deep as a dream encountering

Mary Ishler

Piglets Suckling at the Breast of the Great Sow
(Photo by Sean Smuda)

Journal and Memory Fragments:

Meridel LeSueur: To Re-Member The Dis-Membered

by Sharon Doubiago

She keeps introducing me as Mrs. Whitman. I poke her in the ribs. She introduces me as Mrs. Balzac.

She calls herself Mrs. Lazarus. "Because they've risen me from the dead." She says she's lucky. "80 million have been killed by the militaries since my birth in 1900." The Twentieth Century was 7 weeks old when she was born. She *is* the Twentieth Century. I make a note to study her horoscope. Perhaps some secret of our time is hidden there.

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I came here to deliver the manuscript of my epic poem, *Hard Country*, to Meridel and to John Crawford, editor of West End Press. I came with four women and four boy-children in two old cars from the Olympic Peninsula in Washington. The first night we slept on the grass beneath the Grand Coulee Dam. It was the first time, Dylan, six weeks, slept all night. Theresa, his 19 year old mother, was delighted. "Oh, yes," I told her, "when I have insomnia I try to sleep outside. There's a rhythm in the ground that makes you sleep."

"If that's what it takes," she vowed, "I'll sleep outside every night." We woke in the morning to two guys in park uniforms mowing the lawn. The sight of so many women and boys sprawled over their work area seemed to greatly please them. "Oh, just keep sleeping," they said, mowing around us. All during my five weeks in Minnesota there are moments when our eight bodies are still asleep under the awesome roar and pound of the Grand Coulee Dam, rainbow colors spraying everywhere and Woody Guthrie singing, "Roll on, Columbia, roll on...."

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I sleep in the attic bedroom of an old farmhouse about 15 miles out of St. Peter in the small community of Nicollet, having left my Port Townsend friends in Minneapolis and taken the bus here. We are here for The Gathering—a week-long festival of alternative theater groups from all over the country. I wake in the ash tree bed; lightning climbing up the horizon then leaping across the Minnesota River Valley. I can hear the thunder coming way-off like a train across the great earth. It's 2 a.m. and I hear Meridel still downstairs telling another story:

> *When I was 17 there was a terrible fire in the north. They were calling for people with automobiles to go up to help drive out the bodies. We went up, but most people couldn't handle it. There were burnt bodies everywhere. In the trees. On the roofs. I climbed the trees and brought down the charcoaled bodies. That was when I knew my own story. I could do this one thing so many others couldn't. I could carry down from the trees burnt bodies.*

She's 81 and she chain-smokes More cigarettes. The first day I was here an old man in the park nearly collapsed in tears at her feet when he saw her light up. He kept saying, "Bless you, bless you." She says someone must keep the old art of smoking alive. I remember that the first time I saw her was in the Town Tavern in Port Townsend. It was a Sunday midnight and I had just driven myself and four other poets up from California. The place was like a cold cave. Leonard whispered "I think that's her." A pitcher of beer hid much of her great face as she talked on and on to the others at the table, but when I looked I knew it had to be her. We sat at the opposite table but none of us had the courage to introduce ourselves.

I wake at 7 a.m. to the arrival of Mexican cucumber pickers in their station wagons and pickups. "Stoopers," Meridel calls them, then mumbles: "Pillsbury just swallowed the Green Giant. Swallowed him whole." The Mexicans make me homesick for Southern California. I come down from the ash tree bed that I share with Neala, spend all day with these women. It is like nothing I've ever known. They are utterly political — no, that's not it. They have *lived* 20th century radical politics and their language, their stories, their bodies, their psyches come from this. They are steeped in the facts of strikes, assassinations, wars, depressions, struggles, unions, blacklists, movements, factions, the decades, and all the names, the famous and infamous of the 20th century, writers, artists, politicians, friends, lovers, parents and teachers, *comrades,* and the daily reassessing, it seems, of where they stand *now* in the light of all that has happened. The endless task of Psyche: to sort the seeds, the fragments, to search out the dismembered parts, to re-create the fallen lover, who is the People. I came here because I know so little about the Midwest and about the history of radical politics in this country. One day in the bar I tend in Pt. Townsend Leonard Randolph shamed me for my ignorance. He is right. I know only the radical history I have lived, what is known now as the Sixties, the Seventies. I came here to find my political roots.

> *My mother died the same week my daughters, Rachel and Deborah, who were 20 and 21, were subpoenaed by the House of UnAmerican Activities. My brother testified against my whole family. Bob, my lover of many years, died a short time later. The 50s. A terrible, terrible time. The FBI men, about six of them, were waiting for my mother to come out of surgery. She had tubes coming out of everywhere. As she woke, they were telling her they had thought it was Rachel who was the Communist but now they thought that it was Deborah. And so she must tell them. "Gentlemen," she said, and these proved to be my mother's last words. "You may think you are looking at a woman who has had everything cut out of her. But I haven't had my integrity cut out."*

And I came here because I want to know her. (I first read of Meridel Le Sueur in *Ms. Magazine* in 1975, in the "Lost Women" series. I wrote her and she wrote back addressing me as *"Sharon, Woman Wanderer, Persephone,"* and criticizing the *Ms.* article as "in the male mode that is careerist New Yorkish sometimes outright smart. I am pursuing the idea that women should interview women in an entirely different way than in the fashionable male world." She sent me a list of "20 Midwest forgotten first-class women writers." I wrote her about *Hard Country* as if I had already written it. When she asked me to send her some of it I never answered. I spent the next 6 years trying to get it ready.)

Now as I write this, she spots me from the kitchen, wanders over, an extraordinary blazing mass of colors, jewelry, power, brown cigarette smoke, singing in her great lyrical river voice, "Sharon! Oh, Sharon! You are here. It's hard to believe. So literary. Yet, unlike most literary people, you have a body."

Yes. I have a body and it protests. I have been months at the typewriter trying to finish *Hard Country.* I've been a week in the car crossing the country. My ass hurts. And now days and nights sitting, talking politics and literature, telling stories. My body aches for activity, to dance, to fuck, to walk, to run, to lay itself down and have hands caress and massage it. She touches me on the head, focuses her eyes in mine. "You blonde witch."

• • • •

Meridel is on the phone to a Richard Bray in Chicago about the upcoming Writer's Congress in New York City. She and Toni Morrison are to be the keynote speakers. When I was 14 I was in love with a sailor named Richard Bray from Indiana. I wonder if it's possible....

> *The John Reed Club produced Wright, Terkel, Conroy, Algren, and me. The Writer's Congress of '36 in Chicago. We had a big meeting there. Out of that came the Midwest Magazine. Studs will tell you. We would have fallen into the tears, the shreds, what you fall into, if it hadn't been for that magazine. Out of the darkness, the Black of '35, we hitchhiked to get there. No one flew around then. Old jalopies, Fords....what kind of form are you going to have? It has to be different from the bourgeois.*

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2 a.m., giving up. Though like a kid made to go to bed I fear I'll miss something. Something fundamental to my understanding of all this. We've been talking, reading, lecturing, writing, meeting people, attending theater productions since 7 a.m. I *have* to go to bed. For my body. I remember that my ex-mother-in-law, Mary, used to tell me to go to bed because I was weaker than she because I still bleed. I climb the stairs of the old farmhouse. I always regarded Mary's theory as preposterous. But now at the top I look back down to Meridel and Neala, both well beyond menopause, rocking in their chairs beneath the cloud of brown cigarette smoke, still madly talking. I know I will live with this image for the rest of my life. These two extraordinary women.

But Meridel, Humanism is just metaphysical liberalism. It will shed some light on who you are.

I already know who I am.

I think you object that I've suggested you are an Anarchist in my paper.

You people want to label all of us Midwesterners Anarchists.

I said your affinities are for Anarchism.

I know. You have brilliant phrases like that. It's like labeling me a Communist or a Populist. I don't want to be labeled.

Emma Goldman was an Anarchist-Communist.

Oh, well, maybe *that's what I am. But I decided in 1916 not to be an Anarchist. I believe in direct struggle. Now who was it Gurly was in love with? That Italian Anarchist—he was up on the range during the strike. Oh, it's just that I object to the rigidity of labels. In a crisis I don't want to be in a position where I have to take sides.*

• • • •

She speaks repeatedly, in her lectures, in her writing, in her daily stories and ruminations, of "creating a new desire: to *re*-member the *dis*-membered." The dead. The lost history. The torn land. I'm sure this is the theme she has seen in *Hard Country*; why she has worked to get it published. Throughout the poem I've used the image of Isis wandering the world, face wet with tears, in search of the dis-membered parts of Osiris. "I've waited all my life for a woman to write this. I knew someday one would do it." But sometimes I am sad for her. "I already know who I am." A lifetime of writing, of clarifying herself, and still, it seems, she is in danger of being cut up, used; so many seeking claim to only parts of her for their own needs. So many writing their ph.d's on her. In English, American Studies, Political Science, History, Women's Studies, Creative Writing, even Music, Folklore, and Psychology. She seems in danger herself of becoming the dismembered Osiris. It is the fate of Pisces perhaps; world dissolution. From my ash tree bed, arms curled around my legs, trying to find my body, ... *what Isis could never find was Osiris' genital member...* I hear her going on, giving herself to her daughters, whatever parts that can be of use. I can hear one of them, long dead, singing, *"Take another little piece of my heart, now Baby..."* And from further off, down near the river, a much older daughter, *"I don't need it."*

Still, I feel her seeking someone who can put together some of the pieces. Perhaps this is what she sees in us. How well I *do* know that the sum of the parts never adds up to the magic, the flesh, the life, the poetry and music, the Muse, the Goddess. It is out of all this that I find my own label for her. She is the first person I have ever felt moved to call a Great American.

• • • •

I'm disturbed by the problem of regionalism. The theme of The Gathering is to transform the stories of one's locale into art. Everyone is charged with their local history and local color but too few seem to have understanding, belief, or interest in the lands beyond their own. Last night many of the New York City people walked out on Tennessee's production, charging stereotyping and racism. Personally I was transfixed. I thought I was witnessing all my relations up on stage. I think New Yorkers still can't comprehend an intelligent person talking with a Southern accent, or that a moral person of the 30s ever had to deal seriously with the social and economic power of the KKK.

And there's the phenomenon of regionalism from the other perspective, from the inside. In all my moving around lately, regionalism, as I experience it in my poet-friends, is strong, healthy, but not, it seems—though they are conscious practitioners of the art—as propounded or even understood. I am struck by the genuinely indigenous power of Los Angeles writing, of San Francisco writing, of Northwest writing, of Midwest writing, of writing from the South, the East, the Northeast. I have lived now at least a while, in all these places as a poet. How clear, how truly *accurate,* the voice, the true force of these places in the individual efforts. But I keep witnessing the absurd. Do I dare say the tragic? In time, each of these schools begins to propound on the "only way to write," which inevitably, is *their* way, in the dialect of their place. In their reading, in their publishing, their writing, their criticisms, their *thinking* and *feeling,* they tolerate only work that sounds like the voice of their place. They wage nasty little literary wars against the other places, the other voices, because they believe *they* possess the True Aesthetic. Yes, I dare to use the word *tragic* because they are poets, not politicians. They are visionaries. How is it that proponents of regionalism *forget* they are speaking from their special place? Why is it that they become deaf so quickly to foreign voices? We are, as a people, in danger of forgetting Earth's multitudinous, distinct regions, but we are equally in danger of regionalism: provincialism, isolationism, Earth cut up, dismembered.

I know all these faults in myself. It is why I came, a Pacific Coast person, to overcome my claustrophobia of the middle, my stereotyping of the people here as excessively sane and the same. "I don't like the Pacific Coast," Meridel says, "because its the end of America." How I love her. The silver witch.

• • • •

Neala takes me for a ride south to see Mankato, the college town she teaches in now that she's finished her thesis on Meridel. I try to discuss the problem of regionalism as I'm experiencing it. Foolishly (because of his excessive maleness), I mention Gary Snyder as a Sierra-Pacific Coast regional poet.

She dismisses him instantly. "Snyder is excessively romantic about the land." We are driving through beautiful farmland. Rows and rows as far as we can see of golden-tassled corn and the huge faces of sunflowers all turning as if to us as we come. Rainbow-colored pheasants cross the road in front of us. The agricultural development here makes the land look like a computer printout, except for the twisted Minnesota River, and the nature of the green, the life-energy of it, that transcends all planning, planting; a surging that almost hurts the eyes. Meridel speaks often of this valley. "When the first whites came, one of them wrote, 'The soil is 14 feet and not a stone.' Now "she says, "there's about six feet left, and this week Pillsbury swallowed the Green Giant. Swallowed him whole."

We drive right into the fog-snake that's been following us from the river crossing. I think that Neala means that Snyder is not a farmer. Having never been in the Sierras, in fact, having never been out of the Midwest, she has no comprehension of what life is like there, that the only way to live off the land is as a mountain person, as a hunter, logger, fisher, commuter, poet, teacher, metaphysicist. "Neala! Excessively romantic? What about Meridel?"

"Oh, no," she says, nonplussed. "Meridel combines great practricality with just a tinge of romanticism."

I give up at this point. Our geographies are too vast. It seems to me that she is saying Meridel combines Midwesternism with her romanticism. Gary is a Westerner, and everyone knows, east of the Rockies, that Westerner means Excessive Romantic. Oh, Neala, I think, if you could only know where I've been living for the past six years. *Mendocino, California.* I think again of humility, of my wanderlust. "Think Globally, Act Locally," a local paper's masthead urges. Mendocino still seems to me the only place that demands you hear and then speak in your own voice, rather than in the voice of those in power.

She stops at the Nicollet Tavern. It's Happy Hour. The place is crowded with rednecks, farmers, local men. She starts telling the bartender about The Gathering. "Oh, it's just wonderful. You really should attend one of the stage productions. There are famous people here from all over the country. When will you have such a chance again?" She introduces me. But these guys are not about to be impressed with a couple

of women from a commie-hippie event, especially not a female "author" from the West Coast. She keeps telling him about my book. I wish she'd shut up. He asks me to send it to him when it's published. He asks several times until I have to ask him for his name and address. He pulls out six books of matches from under the bar with his address. On each cover there is a different nude female playing in the Pacific surf. Every head down the long counter turns to watch my reaction. I can't help it. I crack up laughing.

Still, I've learned my lesson. I pull my Minnesota poem from the manuscript, throw it away. It's too superficial, though I was very fond of the central image:

in St. Paul once a man told me the only other
California girl he'd ever known
loved to come
by being driven at high speed to the edge of a
seacliff

and how frightened he was of her

• • • •

What did you do after you were blacklisted?

I got waitress jobs. A week after starting, the boss would say, sheepishly, "I'm sorry Meridel. The FBI's been here." I started a national correspondence school for writers. The post office let the FBI into my box. Every applicant across the country received a visit. My mother and I rented a rooming house, run as a collective. People paid, contributed what they could. But then the tenants were harrassed. The FBI visited the housing code people. The house was condemned. My mother died. My man died. My books were banned. My girls were grown. I was insane. I'd made my living on my writing for over 20 years. I nearly starved. I don't know what I did.

I realize, consciously, for perhaps the first time, that the McCarthy witchhunt was directed almost entirely at artists.

Yes. We are the dangerous ones.

How can we prevent it from happening again?

By remembering.

• • • •

Meridel on socialism:

Everyone is born a socialist. You really have to work hard to make a person greedy, racist, sexist.

Meridel on Marx:

Everything is revolutionary, but political dogma is a different thing. Marx was a human being, a rich human being, to whom nothing was alien.

Meridel on writing:

"I remember the future," the Indians say. This is what we must do. The linear leads straight to the bomb. In New Mexico the language of the Indians has no nouns. The language is based on relationships. They have a word for all the dialectical opposites: male/female, light/dark, good/evil, positive/negative. This is how I'm writing my novel, my nounless, circular novel. One of the most injurious things in our time is the male ego. When I began to publish, Hemingway was all the rage. My editors would say of a story about birth, "you write about such strange things." But fishing, fighting, and fucking were not my main interests.

Meridel on Feminism and the Party Line:

Nearly every time New Masses *ran a story of mine, they had an editor's note: "We are printing Le Sueur's story for its correct, political vision, but must express our reservations for the excessively feminine, subjective language in which it is written."*

Meridel on single mothers:

The villages have always been villages of women. My great grandmother, my grandmother, my mother, myself, all raised our children alone. My mother organized the first home for unwed mothers. She kidnapped us when I was 7 from Texas across the border in Oklahoma which wouldn't allow my father to extradite us. She was tried in 1916 for giving contraceptives to a woman with 14 children. The sentence was 99 years in prison. At the trial the woman refused to recognize her, so she got three years. My mother had to take the 14 children.

Meridel on history:

The destruction of history has been immense. They want us to have amnesia. It is not profitable to

remember. Near here, 38 Sioux were hung on the day Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. A few miles out of town is the Hospital for the Criminally Insane where so many of my friends, during the witchhunts, had lobotomies. There were years it seems when all I did was visit them. Where are those lost minds? We must not forget these people. We must find our birth out of their corpses.

Meridel on critics:

The Puritan at his most foul. Puritanism is the reason that the critic is more powerful in America than the artist. This is the only country in the world where this is true.The lives and work destroyed by the critic should be counted right up there with those destroyed by the FBI and the military.

Meridel on the Midwest:

The FBI riddled the farm communities. One farmer I know had to raise his windows because on a clear day they could look in his house from a hundred miles away.

Meridel on the movie Reds:

I haven't seen it, but as I understand, it's the love story between John Reed and Louise Bryant. I first knew Reed when he organized the Madison Square Garden Pageant. I didn't like Louise Byrant. The Revolution was a party to her. She was a terrible journalist. When Reed died she married that Ambassador Biddle, I think, with all his riches. And you know, if you desert your class, they won't always take you back.

Meridel late at night, sitting in the big chair doing her work. Going through papers on her lap. Reading the last pages of *The Collected Work of Carl Sandburg.* An old friend. She says she'll be writing on the day she dies.

Meridel in the morning on the way to The Gathering:

My old friend, she's 90 years old, she's a great artist, has magnificent canvases. But she cries now in my arms, sobs, *because she has realized for the first time that her sex life was stolen from her. The Puritans stole it.*

Meridel on herself:

I've been insane since I was 20.

• • • •

7 a.m. No one else is awake. I make coffee, sit down in Meridel's chair to read an essay by a woman named Omstein who maintains that Meridel is a Surrealist. Meridel is pleased and I agree. She *is* a Surrealist. But as I read I find notes in Meridel's handwriting on the back of the xeroxed pages: *Madness to react to male confinement. I was mad...around the terrible light of Bob, like a moth. Female reality extremely different than accepted reality. What kept me home? I am shocked back into my servitude and fright.... Do I want to stay awake? Oh, I long for sleep sometimes. No sex...no body...no bridge... Remain what you are like. Go mad. I must go mad. Sharon and madness. Joy-Deborah. The Mad Women. Go mad, but keep out of the asylums.*

And then I read it, surely the saddest, the most haunting line in all her writing. I'm uneasy for having come across something perhaps terribly private and yet, how much more I know of her and re-member myself in this one line:

Mac and Bob hated my writing.

• • • •

I'm washing the dishes. She's telling me that she quit school at 13. Her mother, not knowing what else to do with her, sent her to physical education school in New York City. She also studied acting, voice, performed on stage. She lived in an Anarchist house with Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. They edited a newspaper named *Mother Earth.* "That's when anarchists got a bad reputation. Emma would go out, work all day, but the whole household would wait for her to come home to cook dinner."

Someone has told me that Meridel's mother and Emma Goldman shared Berkman as a lover. "Then my mother sent me out to Hollywood to get rid of me. I was a nuisance to her. I'll never forget how lonely and betrayed I felt on that train. Then I just couldn't make it with the producers; you know, have sex. I just couldn't, and that was the only way then that an actress could succeed. And so because of my physical education background I became a stunt woman. I'm the one tied to the railroad tracks as Pearl White in 'Perils of Pauline'."

As she talks I see her clearly, a proud, lonely young woman, much like my 17-year-old daughter, Shawn, walking down sunny Santa Monica Boulevard.

Thinking of the history of my own inability, I ask her why she couldn't succumb to the producers. And why some can. She seems stumped by the question. "I don't know why."

She published her first story, "Persephone," at age 27 in *The Dial.* It was while doing time in a San Francisco jail for protesting the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti that she decided to have children. "I was sick with death. I needed to contribute to life." She speaks of her bitterness for the women of the 30s who turned against her for this decision. "They considered it a betrayal of the intellectual/artistic woman. They said you had to make a choice. You couldn't do both. So I took my babies up to the river and we lived in a houseboat. It was the Depression and people were starving. I got a $1000 check from *Saturday Evening Post,* so we bought supplies for everyone in the settlement. Once a week we rowed the supplies to people. It was a wonderful winter. I'd put the girls to bed, and then I'd put my head under the faucet and write a couple of hours ... You have to write everyday, like a dancer or musician.

Then she tells me about Jean Toomer and Marjorie Lattimer. (I have just recently read Toomer's magnificent epic poem *Cane,* a seminal work of the Black South.) Marjorie was Meridel's closest friend. Jean and Marjorie had a Guerjieffian wedding in Indiana. She describes the outdoor celebration in such detail that I'm surprised when she says she wasn't there "I wasn't invited because of Rachel and Deborah."

"I wish my letters to her could be found and our correspondence published. They were the important, formative years for both of us as writers. Marjorie had three published books. *This Is My Body* is one of the great books on the adolescent girl. But Toomer, in whatever it was that happened to him after Marjorie died in childbirth out in Carmel, he never wrote again. He became a dreadful alcoholic — wouldn't allow me to have her work or my letters. Fisk University has much of her work. I've been there but our letters aren't there. I've spoken to her daughter, the one she died having— Toomer would never let any of us see her while she was growing up—but she doesn't know about the letters or any of her mother's work. Toomer passed for white and joined the Quakers—the Quakers at that time wouldn't allow Blacks in. He became an awful man, forgetting his people, his history, his wife. I fear he burned everything."

My parent's drive-in restaurant in Ramona. I get off work at midnight. A fire is raging in the incinerator beneath the oak tree. In a week I will graduate from highschool and we will marry. We've been writing to each other daily for 3 years because we weren't allowed to see each other. Since I was 15, he 19. Doubiago. Russian for oak tree. He meets me at the backdoor. He says he's just burned all my letters. He wouldn't want anyone to ever read them. I look at the flames. They are my life from 15 to 18. They are my first writing. My love letters to him, my love for him, my body. I reel from nausea. The mistake. Little do I suspect that the losses have just begun.

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Can't sleep. Neala gone far away beside me. Watching Deborah undress in the other room that is still lit. Her beautiful full woman body. Then dark. The ash swaying and rushing all night. The bed becomes a circle. I wake still in the dream. In the dark I write:

Years later my old lover catches me in the street of a far-western city.
I beg him to have mercy, to leave me alone.
He says he can't live unless I forgive him.

I continue to write it out, word by word, the story:

He looks at me with murder in his eyes.

I know it's my grandparent poem. Meridel says we must remember the future.

I may die of sexual loneliness.

• • • •

Isis could never find Osiris' genitals. She had to become an artist and sculpt them. I've meditated on the meaning of this story now for six years but all I have found is the oldest truth, that without the male there is no female, without the female there is no male. We create the genitals of the Other. We re-member the dismembered.

• • • •

John Crawford says *The Girl* contains one of the few great conversations in American literature. I remember Butch—*o, Butch*— and I am sure his assessment is correct. He tells me her earliest journal writing is influenced by Lawrence.

Meridel tells me that her first arrest was at 15 when Goldman and Berkman organized the unemployed at the Fifth Avenue Church. At 17 her roommate in Greenwich Village was Edna St. Vincent Millay. When Millay discovered Meridel was still a virgin, she shamed her and fixed her up with Theodore Dreiser. Meridel couldn't stand him. "The pig." Meridel says her mother chained herself to the White House gate in 1918 with four other women to get the vote. She tells me her mother was a theosophist, that she herself was in Ojai in the 20s. I lived in Ojai in the early 70s, the Southern California mountain town in which Helena Blavatsky founded Krotona. Mary, my ex-mother-in law, bought a house from Krishnamurti and still lives there. Neala explains to me that the connection between Theosophy and Communism is Jacob Boehme, the 17th-century German who wrote *Six Theosophical Points* and *The Confessions.* She explains, "All the Russians read him. It's where their mysticism comes from. Theosophy is the answer. It integrates the dualism of Western thought."

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I'm told she lived in her van most of the 60s and 70s. *Her* 60s and 70s. Now she spends part of each year in Rachel's home in St. Paul. The basement study is legendary: a lifetime of unpublished work and letters of many 20th-century famous. I fantasize hiring on as her cataloguer. "Have you been out in public with her yet in the Twin Cities? She's a folk heroine. When you walk into a place, people whisper *Meridel Le Sueur.* People bring her their work to read. They come with tears in their eyes."

I'm told she took peyote on her 70th birthday in Taos. She keeps complaining of the Puritan in her body. She tells me it comes from her mean and bitter grandmother, the one described in "Corn Village." "She never took a bath except under her shift. She never lay down in the daytime even when she was dreadfully tired." She tells me of another grandmother, an Iroquois. "I'm part Indian." I say, "Oh Meridel you are *all* Indian." She says from her deep chair, "O, I feel it's time to get on the bus again." Something she does regularly to get near the people, to record their conversations and stories.

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Notes on Meridel's Lecture to The Gathering, August 11, 1981:

Engles said in 1870 there were only two choices for the artist: to write of the corpse, to write of the birth out of the corpse. Artists in my lifetime have painted the corpse. They've told us that's the only thing an artist can do.

We must fight the criminality of the old images. "The Wasteland" is one of the most corrupting and polluting images of my generation. Williams wrote Eliot and said, "you have prepared the way for the bomb." Melancholy, despair: the most terrible inheritance of the 19th century. Intimidation, inferiority, Puritanism—I have to struggle daily with these monsters. They are in my body.

It is hard to envision the new images. There will be a powerful 3rd party in America. There will be multi-national unions. If they're going to have multi-national corporations then we're going to have to have multi-national unions.

Einstein's 1908 essay on relativity is one of the great poems of our time. When a stone falls down a mountain, every other stone shifts in sympathy. There is no such thing as death in the globular world. All is transformed. It is a scientific fact there is no outside. All is inside. We are one. One. One. This is what solidarity is. We live on a globular earth. Even so, we still say the sun rises, the sun sets. We still don't realize that it is the earth that is moving.

Lorca said the artist takes the images of the people into the being and then gives them back to the people, clearer. We have such great unwritten sagas in our history. How the people become silent, how they rise up suddenly out of silence, how they disappear in silence. American people are ingenious at this. At Wounded Knee, when they were forbidden to do the Sun Dance, every family was given a dance, a story, one each, to preserve. The pipes were buried in secret places. The old ones selected certain children to keep away from white contact, to preserve the old ways....

The history of the Midwest has been a heroic struggle against monopoly. North Dakota was actually a socialist state under the guise of the Republican Party for one year. But the Eastern bankers wouldn't honor their money; they were killed off in World War I. Oh, the period before World War I, the period of panics and seizings. There were moonlight schools, protected by the Indians, finally destroyed by the vigilantes....

The creative artist doesn't want just to reflect. The suffering is immense. These people here in their big St. Peter's houses didn't know their aspirations would lead to killing Asians. The oppressed are the ones who have the truth of the oppressor. We have to see the body of the sufferers. The record is in their flesh. We should go to every kind of protest just to take a bath in humanity. It's a myth, you know, a lie, *perpetuated by Rockefeller and his profits on birth control that there too many people.* He *may not want any more children, but I do.*

We are living in a great time, the exposure of the criminality. We must create a new desire: to re-member the dis-membered. *We have no right, no moral right not to try to see the dialectical possibilities of change. It's immoral to give up hope. This will save us. It is not just a dream or fantasy. We have the responsibility to make it real....*

• • • •

The news is phoned to The Gathering that one of Meridel's oldest friends, Irene Paull, has died in San Francisco. I'm in the park leaning against the trunk of an old maple, still working on the "Lady in the Lake" section of *Hard Country.* "We still don't realize it is the earth moving." And so I change the line to *The trees rise to swallow the sun.* I see Deborah walking toward town, looking much like her great grandmother the Iroquois must have looked. She is carrying hard news to her mother.

• • • •

Later, at the theater, The National Black Theater of Harlem, standing in the front row with her, she says, smiling very delicately, like a girl: "I feel a hole opening up around me. Now that she's gone. Maybe something else will happen." Suddenly the lights go out. An electric violin screeches violently through the dark gymnasium and I am sawed back into a thousand lost pieces of a terrible love. *Ah, fuckin Isis. Will anything ever happen, will anything ever change? All I want is to dis-member the re-membered.*

• • • •

I wake early the next morning from a dream of traveling with Shawn. As in all my dreams lately we are trying to get home. But we don't seem to know where that is. We are stranded in the ghetto of some awful city having just missed our 9pm flight. We wander down through tenement rows, through broken glass and garbage. Men huddle in the doorways, snarling and grabbing for us as we pass. It's cold, getting dark, we are broke and frightened, and *she is my daughter. I am responsible for her safety, her happiness.* At the last moment, just when the danger is greatest, we come upon a group of old lefties from the 30s sprawled in sleeping bags under a freeway overpass. They are a welcome sight! Home? We decide to take up with them, even though the leader suddenly sniffs the air, puts his nose between my legs, and accuses me of having my period.

• • • •

Meridel is sitting in the chair when I come down. She's wearing a bright orange kaftan.

Well, she got out. She said she could hardly breathe in the air of her assassins. I only wish I'd called her on Saturday. We had a terrible disagreement at the end. I wanted West End to publish her writing. She refused. She wanted it burned.

She removes her large thick glasses. She lets her heavy silver head fall back against the chair. How beautiful, *clear,* young her face looks then. It seems the first time I've really seen her face. Her one enormous eye wanders to me as the other stares straight ahead. Deborah has mentioned this eye condition, corrected by thicker and thicker glasses. I think her wandering eye extraordinary, an explanation perhaps for her exceptional vision. "I've known Irene 50 years." And both eyes fill with tears.

She debates going to the funeral in Duluth. I offer to drive her, would in fact love to. But I can see she is deep in this room, her old chair, her body. "My brain shadows off, like a forest. It resists going through when I want something. I haven't any energy now to enter the past."

Sitting here in Neala's old farmhouse. Rock 'n roll coming from the mobile home below. The stoopers at their cucumbers. Neala says cucumbers ruin the soil.

You know that lake Lawrence describes in The Plume Serpent *in Mexico? Irene and I lived on that lake several months. A beautiful lake. Now you can't*

swim in it. It's full of toilet paper, condoms and abortions.

We tried to get her to come back for my 80th birthday party, but she said she couldn't breath in the air of her assassins. Oh, terrible things were done to her, to her whole family. They were Jews. You just can't know. The sexism, the racism, the blacklisting. It was nearly impossible to overcome. Everyone ended up in insane asylums.

All those males. Those miserable males.

I am distracted by the exposure under her loose-sleeved kaftan of a large, smooth, sloping breast. Its pretty brown eye stares at me, the skin more golden and smooth than I would have imagined. "That miserable cemetery in Duluth. I had to go there once and copy the poem on her father's gravestone." I don't think I've ever seen an 81-year-old breast before. I am struck by its beauty, its vitality, its sensuality. I wonder if she sunbathes. I remember someone asked her what her beauty secrets are. She answered that the only goodlooking people are the radicals. The people whose energy is lived out to the tips of every cell.

I love cremation. You can plant a tree. I still have some of my mother's ashes. Do you know Joe Hill? They put his ashes in an envelope, sent them all over the world. Then a year from his death they were opened. So he's planted all over the world.

• • • •

In the Embassy Bar on Minnesota Avenue Thomas McGrath is telling me he thinks Meridel has recently been taken over by the Feminists, but like so many who were blacklisted, *shit!* He interrupts himself. "That's blasphemy. Those years. Those people were dead, lost, you have no idea. The women have brought Meridel back."

There are three bartenders here, male. One has only one arm. I wonder where he lost it. In Viet Nam. Plowed into a near-by cornfield. Grime and asbestos of the freeway. Osiris' limbs are still being found in Egypt. She keeps saying there *must* be a way for the good citizens of St. Peter to remember the 38 Sioux they hung without being overwhelmed by grief and guilt. She uses the word *redemption.* She quotes Luther Standing Bear as saying white people will never understand this land until they have been born and reborn in the dust of their forebearers' bones. This afternoon she was telling about a Sioux woman, a political activist killed a year ago, it is suspected, by the FBI. Rachel's husband won the court order to have the woman disinterred for autopsy. Apparently to show their scorn, the FBI cut off her hands, sent them through the mails in mason jars, to the coroner, or to AIM or to someone. For me, as it must be with Meridel, the question has always been how *not* to remember the dismembered. You may think we are dead, Seattle said, when you walk your city streets, but we will be all around you. You'll never be free until you see us.

"I can't remember when I first knew her," McGrath (whose epic poem *Letter To An Imaginary Friend* I have only recently discovered) is saying, as we start our third beers. "She visited me in the 50s in L.A. I was living in the Elysian Gardens beneath Elysian Park. Later, they put a freeway through there. She came and described Wallace Beery chasing her across the Elysian Hills, giving out goat cries. She was beautiful. I mean, ravishing. Now she's sort of sunk into herself. But she was regal. *Regal.* The kind of woman walking down the street men just... You are one of Meridel's daughters. I can see that."

• • • •

I touch her from the backseat returning home that night. The sun has set spectacularly behind the corn rows; the settling sun, the symbol of Osiris, the corn god. His name means Many Eyes. Isis, the moon in her fullest state, is rising. She lights the ribbon of fog that runs parallel with us for miles down the two-lane. "How are you feeling now about your friend?"

She is quiet awhile. She inhales her More. "I've never known a death like this before. It's like giving birth to twins. O, it must be hard the first night in the ground. I guess I should have gone."

It's Friday night. Neala and Deborah run in to get six-packs from the Nicollet Tavern to take back to the farmhouse. Meridel sits silent and deep in the front seat. Beyond her Iroquois profile the tavern, a displaced structure from the 40s and from the city—or is it the 20s?, there is so much of this architecture in Minnesota, of glass blocktiles, reflected neon and rounded corners—jumps and rocks to the explosive

Country-Western music outside. "Those males. Those *miserable* males."

A tune ends. The roar of the crowd. Another begins. Neala and Deborah still inside.

When I was 12 I had diptheria. The doctor pronounced me dead. I was out of my body and it was wonderful. I had been in such pain. I was above my body and my mother. My mother was pregnant. Suddenly, after the doctor pronounced me dead she grabbed me and shook me violently. "You can't die now! I need you." And so very reluctantly, very painfully, I returned because my mother needed me. I've always remembered, most of all, how painful it was to re-enter my body. It was like squeezing back into an overly-small envelope. Oh, I didn't want to do it. I had felt such relief being out of it.

But ever since, I've understood something about life and death.

• • • •

The Closing Ceremony of The Gathering. David Olson, who has mortgaged his home to pay the $25,000 debt incurred when, at the last moment, the major businesses withdrew their support on the heels of the Women's Clubs accusation that the event is sponsored by the Communists, thanks the very special person here, the poet laureate of Minneapolis. Meridel Le Sueur stands in her heliotrope robe, her large silver-metal beads, her silver-gleaming hair and enormous glasses, to the wildly emotional applause. And remains standing after the applause. "Survival," she has written, "is a form of resistance." Until there is more applause. And more. And joyous, tearful laughter. Like a queen. A woman. An American. A worker. A human being. Yes. Regal. My daughter.

• • • •

Two months later Michael and I are in San Francisco doing a series of readings. We stay at Jack Hirschman and Kristen Wetterhahn's apartment in North Beach. One night very late Jack comes roaring into the kitchen slurring Russian expletives. He has the *Village Voice* in his hands. "This is why I left New York! The bastards! The fuckers!"

It's an essay by Arthur Bell on the Writer's Congress. "And Meridel Le Sueur, looking like an aging Joan Crawford, was a thousand laughs telling us about the poet who had his hands cut off."

"Can you *believe* he said that about Victor Jara? Can you believe it? Those critics. Those miserable critics."

I sit down to my glass of wine. He lights his More with a Nicollet Tavern match. Can you believe he said that about Meridel Le Sueur?

• • • •

August-December, 1981
Minnesota-California-Washington

(Sharon Doubiago, Box 646, Pt. Townsend, WA 98368)

Persephone

You may think this is a story
about a woman going down to a man,
her lover, sinking like smoke
into his flesh, dissolving
like mist into the shrubbery.

I tell you, her descent
was not to alien ground,
but rather a spiral through herself,
mysteries yielding at every turn.

And when, called back,
summoned by lady mother,
she rose, clutching in her hand something,
a seed, a flower,
she flew upward like a figure
from Chagall
to join that waiting woman.

Dorothy Walters

The Dance of the Zygotes

for Agnes

sotto voce in the wasted breath of the spoiled air,
in the caved-in mines and eroded hills,
in the flooded earth of the sperm-bed soil,
in the dark foul harbors of the boiling seas
in the meiotic splitting of the earth's chromosomes,
in the zygomorphic spheres of the earth's synapsis,

crescendo where the zygospores rest in mitotic dreams,
where the gametes reach for the homologous gametes,
where the zygotene move toward a zygomorphic union,
where the gametes begin a chimerical chiasma,
where the zygotes wiggle in a meitotic dance,

allegro then the language forms on the zygomorphic lips,
then the sounds emerge from the singing zygotene,
then the mitotic gametes do a zygomatic dance,
then the zygotes form a circle in the bowl of the air,

piano forte and the women and the women, and the men and the men,
and the women and the men, and the men and the women,
do the dance, do the dance,
do the dance, do the dance,
do the dance, do the dance,
do the dance, do the dance,

Mary McAnally

Letter to Mary McAnally from Agnes Smuda

Dear Mary:

Well, now I see what's been happening—and this morning, going to get the mail, the wind, tossing and turning and sheets of rain in the wind and the two of you tossing and turning and whirling around and around in some kind of dance of love—the two of you—your branches scratching each other in the wind, your branches aching and tender with new blossoms, buds, buds like nipples, all of us trees and wind alike. A storm coming and everything scurrying around, thinking we have to prepare, prepare for the storm and the storm only offers clarification, energizes the earth and she energizes the storm with her dancing. Can you forgive me for laughing in delight? Such a dance the two of you do and all of us rolling over and over down the hills and letting the rain fall where it may. No wonder you've been silent. You were dancing.

Talk about revelations, which have the possibility in them of incurring wrath and worse, silence. Both you and Meridel risking so much. I am envious but not of the bruises and scratches. I am laughing and crying all at once.

This is as true a mother daughter dance as any I have seen.

If anything, when I see you and hold you, I will question the path I have chosen, which leads me from such opulence. I am becoming monk-like, discalced, and soon I may even stop smoking. But oh, my dear, however much there is of you for me to hug I will be happy to hug you.

I think your dance with Meridel is the dance in the pit. We scratch and scratch with our fingernails, pulling hair, others' and our own, to get to the true heart, the true face, the true body. We insist upon it. We offer our lives to each other in exchange for finding the love. We hurt so much, ache for ourselves, ache for everyone. It's as though we are scratching at the dirt over us as we lie dead, scratching and digging to reveal all the dead, all the deaths. Are we scratching from under or over?

Mary, she is crying for us to return to ourselves. Yelling and screaming, fighting for us. And we trust her and, as you say, we expect criticism, expect to learn from her. She is not judging us. We judge ourselves. She tells us how her body, her soul react so angrily, so courageously to cages that the patriarchy has constructed around our hearts and minds, around our creativity. In her railing, she is having us *see* those cages. It is so painful because we think of this armor as being part of us. We think she is tearing away flesh. No. She is not. And you dare to reveal yourself to her, invite her revelations. You are a brave woman, full of courage and love. I have so much more to say . . . .

Deepest love,

Agnes

Partial Bibliography of Meridel LeSueur's Works

Poems, short stories, and essays have appeared in the following:

O'Brien's *Best Short Stories of the Year* (1936); *American Mercury* (12, Sept. 1927), (33, Nov. 1934), (34, Jan-Feb. 1935); *New Masses* (Feb. 26, 1935); *Yale Review* (26, Dec. 1936); *Prairie Schooner* (1937), (44, Winter 1969-70); *Kenyon Review* (7, Spring, 1945); *New Caravan* (1936 and 1945); *California Quarterly* (3, Winter 1954); *Plainsong* (1, Spring 1967); *Best Friends* (January 1976); *Great River Review* (Vol. 2, No. 1, 1979); *Spoor* (Vol. 1, No. 2, Summer 1980); *South Dakota Review* (Vol. 8, No., 3, Autumn 1970); *Sunbury* (1981); *Best Essays of 1936; Preferences* (1936); *The California Story Anthology,* 1960; *Poetry* (24, May 1924), (84, May 1928); *Dial* (82, May 1927); *Pagany* (1, Spring 1930); *Scribner's Magazine* (90, Aug. 1931); *Manuscript* (1936); *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* (1981);

Earlier works include:

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Crusaders (New York: Blue Heron Press, 1955)
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Mound Builders (New York: Franklin Watts, 1974)

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Rites of Ancient Ripening: Poems (Minneapolis: Vanilla Press, 1975)
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Harvest, Collected Stories (Cambridge, Mass: West End Press, 1977)
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Ripening (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982)

Cardinal Press 76 North Yorktown Tulsa, Oklahoma 74110

Four generations of matriarchs: Meridel LeSueur (in glasses), her daughter Deborah, (top right), Deborah's daughter Robin (right of Meridel), and Robin's daughters.

(Photo courtesy of Phiz Mezey)

We do not have the right to ask if we will fail. Failing and death are nothing in view of the stakes of the opposite. The enemy cannot win. Life is against everything against. There is no winning with the bomb. It is not even a choice. Death against death. There must be no doubting the strength of life over this kind of death, given our powerful common sense, our powerful love, our powerful numbers. Down with so-called logic of the vultures, who count on carrion; there is only the powerful logic of our strength, the right to live, the right of our ancestors and our progeny, our inner genes so cunningly multiplying with the maggots. We have no right to doubt our strength. Give your own tender and fearless heart as Lennon said. If you want to free Peru go free Peru . . . Summer women to all who need. Only the people have compassionate heart and a clear view of the enemy and the stakes allowed. We do not have the right to doubt our strength and each other . . .

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