

Minnie Bruce Pratt

“Driving the Bus : After the Anti-War March”

We had a different driver on the way home. I sat on the seat behind her, folded, feet up like a baby, curled like a silent tongue in the dark jaw of the bus until she flung us through a sharp curve and I fell. Then we talked, looking straight ahead, the road like a blackboard, one chalk line down the middle. She said, nah, she didn't need a break, she was good to the end. Eighteen hours back to home when she was done, though. Fayetteville, North Carolina, a long ways from here. The math of a mileage marker glowed green. Was Niagara Falls near Buffalo? She'd like to take her little girl some day, too little now, won't remember. The driver speaks her daughter's name, and the syllables ring like bells. I say I lived in her town once, after another war. The boys we knew came home men cocked like guns, sometimes they went off and blew their own heads, sometimes a woman's face. Like last summer in Ft. Bragg, all those women dead. She says, “One was my best friend.” Husband shot her front of the children, boy and girl, six and eight. She calls them every day, no matter where she is. They get very upset if she doesn't call. Her voice breaks, her hands correct the wheel, the bus pushes forward, erasing nothing. There was a blue peace banner from her town today, and we said stop the war, jobs instead, no more rich men's factories, refineries, futures built on our broke bodies. She said she couldn't go to the grave for a long time, but she had some things to get right between them so she stood there and spoke what was on her mind. Now she takes the children to the grave, the little boy he wants to go every week. She lightly touches and turns the big steering wheel. Her hands spin its huge circumference a few degrees here, then there. She whirls it all the way around when she needs to. Later I hear the crinkle of cellophane. She is eating some peppermint candies to stay awake.

~~for International A.N.S.W.E.R. (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism)  
initiator of worldwide demonstrations against U.S. war on Iraq~~

Minnie Bruce Pratt  
“Sunglasses” from S/HE

The waiter at the restaurant at water's edge directs us, "Come this way, ladies." And she and she and I follow him into blinding sunlight, and sit down at our table with sunglasses firmly on. We've just come from a discussion on gender, and one of us jokes that she's heard men can keep their sunglasses on when talking to others, but women won't. Women take off the glasses to be eye to eye with the other. The sun shines on us as if focused through a magnifying lens. We are three tall white women sitting down to lunch, one willowy, one matronly, one elegant. Three women, except two of us have just narrated their stories to the seminar I'm teaching, the story of a metamorphosis older than Ovid, the ancient transformation of male into female. The students were not satisfied with abstraction. They wanted detail, the path mapped out for them. They said to the women, "But what happened to you? How did you decide?" Some asked as if the desire to shift sex or gender was strange to them, some because they were looking down that way themselves.

Now we order ice tea and one of them says, looking right at me, "What is your story? How did you get here, to sit down with us?" I tell them about my masculine first girlfriend when I was five, my feminine first husband when I was twenty. I tell of standing as a girl at doors marked White and Colored, and not knowing what that meant until long after. The long blindfolded search for the boundaries around me, feeling for the barbed wire called "natural race," "natural gender." I tell my exhilaration, one summer day every year, when I gather with others accused of unnatural acts. We march through the streets searching for freedom, and some men prance like girls, and some women swing their arms like muscle men. The long street of people, hands crossed over and linked in every mixed-up way.

At the end of my story, the sun is so hot on my bent head that my hair feels on fire. I look up at the others, and see that one by one, unnoticed, we have laid our dark glasses down, to look at each other with naked eyes.

## Minnie Bruce Pratt

### “Profits” from S/HE

On the first anniversary of the Montreal massacre, I tell my feminist theory class about the moment when a man with a rifle entered an engineering class at the University. He divided the students up, men to one wall, women to the other. When he had decided who was male and who was female, he shot the women, killing fourteen of them. Later he said he wanted the women dead because they were "feminists" and were taking jobs away from men. I say that there is no record of how many, if any, of the women considered themselves feminists. Perhaps they were just women who wanted to work in a job designated male in this century, on this continent. I say crossing gender boundaries as women does not automatically make us feminists, but the consequences of doing so may, if we live.

During the discussion, a student raises her hand. At a women's music festival last summer, she had met a survivor of the massacre. The woman had lived because the male terrorist had perceived her as male, and put her in the group with the men. Although my student, who herself looks like a teenage boy, doesn't recount how the woman felt watching the other women die, her face is blotched and etched with anguish. I imagine that room: The woman facing a man so sure he knows who is man and who is woman. His illusion of omniscience spares her death, allows her to become an engineer, and then she spends years trying to find work. She gets turned down for jobs as "too masculine" if she is seen as woman, "too effeminate" if seen as man. To the students I say there is no gender boundary that can make us all either one or the other. There is no method, including violence that can enforce complete conformity to "man," to "woman." I say we don't know who was male or female in that Montreal room, how many genders lived or died.

In this basement classroom, the steam pipes crisscross the ceiling and drip on our heads. Other students on campus bait those who take this women's studies course—the men are called feminine, the women masculine. They are seen as crossing sex and gender boundaries simply because they question them. Today I and the students jump at noises in the hall, imagining that the one we fear stands in the doorway. Perhaps an unknown man, perhaps someone from our family with a cold murderous stare. The ones who believe the lie that there are only men and women, and that the first should rule the last. The ones who believe in the order to keep us separate, sheep and goats, until judgement day. It is 3 p.m., the end of today's class. I assign the readings on the origin of the family, private property, women, and the state. I say, "Next time we will talk about gender stratification and corporate profits."

## Minnie Bruce Pratt

### “Thaw” from S/HE

At the university, you speak in a sterile auditorium to an academic audience, in the location and dim lighting of my usual lecture. But this time I sit in the fold-down desk just being your girlfriend. I try not to clack my silver bracelets at odd moments. I feel flushed, uncertain, like myself but like a teenager. Everyone must see how I want your sure hand on my waist, your rough sweet voice in my ear. Tonight I am not a writer behind the lectern who uses words to reveal and hide, words falling like snow into silence, into crystal flakes that reflect a small angle of my desire. Tonight I could walk through the snow naked and warm, and everyone would follow the melted prints of my bare feet.

Later that night I sleep with you in a strange cold room. You warm me, neck to feet, with your length. Toward morning I dream: I am in that cold room in bed, in sheer black nightclothes, sunlight over me. You (yet this is not you) sit in the kitchen with a man, and then bring him in to look at me. When he leaves, you bring in two more men to look me over, and then a fourth man comes, looks, leaves. I walk out of the bedroom, wander through the building's maze, and return. I say, "What were you doing? Those men looked at me like I was your whore." The you-who-is-not-you laughs and I get up. I walk barefooted out of the room, out of the building, into the dirt yard. I know I am leaving you. That is when you wake me, with your arm close around me, wanting to know, "Sweetheart, is something wrong?" I tell you the dream, and you say, "That was not me." I say, "I know. It was me. I am still ashamed for anyone to see my desire."

At midnight in the bus station I waited for a lover. I wore jeans and a workshirt, and a bright red-and-purple shawl around my shoulders. I was flushed from my bath and with anticipation. I had nothing in my hands, no book to read, no way to pretend I was not alone. I was the only woman there when the other person waiting, a man, walked up and leaned over me. I said, "I don't want to talk to you" several times. He persisted, I repeated. Pissed off, he snapped his fingers at me, "Tighten it up, baby, tighten it up," to show the station attendant that I was his prostitute, and I'd fallen into line. Then he stalked out. If he had read me as a lesbian, what did that matter? He saw me as a woman marked as feminine, outside the house and alone. Even if I sat perfectly still, looking at no one, he thought my body solicited attention, set things in motion. He looked at me and knew that he saw a smile, a wink, beckoning.

The old laws said prostitutes could not walk in public places or display themselves in windows. The old laws said any woman who worked and lived alone in lodgings could have her room raided on the suspicion she was a common prostitute. The old laws said prostitutes could be reformed; they could work for no wages in a public laundry where they'd sweat and wring and learn to be good wives. The old laws said we had to wear something to show the difference between us, the whores and the wives. Some sign in our dress—sandals or headbands one year, black triangles in another—when we went out in public. Otherwise, when the wife went out of the home onto the street, any movement of her body could be dangerous. She would have to answer the question: Inside, outside, what was she worth?

Some see me as a blank passivity, like snow, a white surface waiting to be molded by your hand. Some watch greedily to see me dirtied by your tread. Others, and even my sleeping self, have damned me as whore. But in the beginning, when we all held each other in common like the land, when what we kept between our thighs was as precious as the earth, whore was a word that sparkled like water: dear, precious, cara, caresses.

I have lived exiled in the cold land of shame. Now that you are here, after all these years, you hold me in your hands. Under your fingers my skin warms out of a numbed sleep where I kept myself safe. You touch my wrist, my waist. My flesh begins to ache and I come back to myself, like the melt at spring thaw, snow heat rushing down through rivers, to whirl dynamos until the mouths of dams spit electricity. Now when we are alone, when we are where others watch, I show you with the arc of my neck, the bend of my arm, a hint of where I can take us and with what velocity.