

The road to self-fulfillment

by Lee Lynch

I moved to Oregon for a myriad of reasons. The Southern Oregon Women Writers' Group, Gourmet Eating Society and Chorus was one of them.

The lesbian and gay world is filled, perhaps disproportionately, with talent. Is it the isolation which arises from our gayness that prompts us to reach out by developing our

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natural powers? Or is there something more positive in gay culture which creates a fertile climate for artistic growth? Whatever we ultimately find to be the reason, the Oregon hills are no different from the rest of this earth: full of talented dykes. And though it isn't specifically lesbian, a host of us flock to Writers' Group.

Last week I received a note from Group member Ruth Mountaingrove, photographer and former co-publisher of *Womanspirit* magazine. Reading her words I realized, once again, how really blessed we are. She commented about a recent meeting, "... a real good Writers' Group. When people come all the way from Eugene we must have something — and we do." What a dynamic gathering it was. What a wonderful creation, this Group. Whose vision had it been and what had made it successful?

I called Tangren Alexander to find out. A college professor who's built her own home on the side of a mountain, she is one of the founding members and a faithful participant. Often to me she feels like the keel of the group.

"Oh well," she said in that bashful I-can't-take-credit-for-any-of-it way of hers, "I just see it as a way to be heard." That, in itself, is pretty special: a place we can be heard. "It's the supportiveness that's important for me," she went on to say and I wondered how that support was consistently provided, given the wont of women's groups to evaporate like clouds and blow away.

"There's not a lot of brass tacks or working over a piece. When we 'check in' we say what we want, whether it's to get criticism, to be encouraged, suggestions where and how to publish — or anything else." The Group, then, is what each participant needs from it.

As she spoke, I recalled my first exposure, in 1982, to these spirited women. We met in that little woman-built mountain home, perhaps a dozen of us stuffed into a room with a woodstove, a well-used rolltop desk, a long row of Tangren's journals, and an incredible view of a mountainside before us. It was downright distracting for city-girl me to see what those clouds were doing out on that mountainside. Forming. Reforming. Drifting away all whole as if manufactured and patented in the USA and assigned to beguile city folk thousands of miles away.

The miracle of the clouds had competition, though. Two women read poetry. One sang her own songs. Another read a piece on alcoholism which left me speechless and

changed my perception of myself forever. A Cottage Grove artist was there. Someone writing about a black woman "cowboy." And others, all of whom had something to give, if only an ear. I'd found paradise. Back in the city I hadn't stumbled on this kind of sharing ever.

And it is, as Tangren pointed out, the supportiveness that is so special. No trashing or beating a point to death. Just the sort of positive reflection, with appropriate technical pointers, that I feel should underlie all feminist criticism. We need to open doors for one another, not close them. There is always something good in a creative work. It may take effort to identify it, but once acknowledged the creator has a road before her never before considered. Sometimes, it's the road to self-fulfillment. In the early seventies, when I was still struggling to write poetry, Judy Grahn suggested I try prose. Within the next ten years I'd completed my first novel and my short stories were being well-received. A place to be heard. A door opened. A road taken.

The Southern Oregon Women Writers' Group, according to Caroline Overman in her introduction to Tee Corinne's *Picture Book*,* began when poet Martha Courtot led a workshop at the Grants Pass Art Museum in 1980. At her suggestion Hannah Blue Heron, a wildly creative ex-nun, ex-hippie and veteran of the women's land movement, and Zarod, a frequent contributor to *Womanspirit*, organized the first Writers' Group meeting at Riverhouse on the Applegate River in Murphy the following February. The group decided to meet every third week thereafter and has to this day.

Originally, the plan was for each participant to bring her lunch. What has evolved is a Gourmet Eating Society which allows for socializing around the potluck table. There have been all-bean days and all-dessert days, but every lesbian has had her share of those! Before and after the feast women from age twenty up through their sixties read from journals, novels, autobiographies, cookbooks; read poems, book reviews, short stories, erotica, mantras; perform or teach songs to the chorus; play taped interviews; show their crafts, photography, artwork; share ideas for projects like a non-violent training handbook. This is the *real* feast, this cultural one. And the mix of women is as broad as our talents. At the last meeting, in a large living room on a circle of chairs, couches, benches and pillows, sat: lesbian separatists, straight women, farmers, professors, kennel-owners, a therapist, nuclear activists, artists, writers, poets, a phone company workers, grandmothers, publishers.

I've been gratefully part of this Group for over a year now. Having a platform for first drafts has been valuable to me. But personal testimony is not all I can offer. The Group speaks for itself in this partial list of what has been, or is scheduled to be, published: submissions to *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*,

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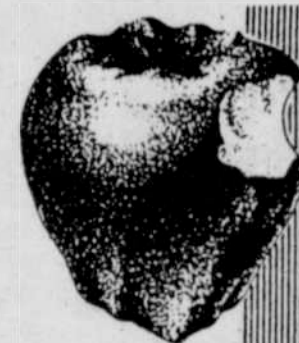
DRAWING BY TEE CORRINNE

Sinister Wisdom, Pleasures — Women Write Erotica, Just Out, Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence, Eugene Women's Press. Hannah's musical, "The Other Side of Madness" has been performed all over western Oregon. Tee's *Women Who Loved Women*, Tangren's *The Autobiography of Deborah Carr* and Caroline Overman's *The Scholar In Hot Pursuit* are all available in book form. And there's my own Naiad Press books, not a little influenced by these women.

I am glad to be able to offer final proof, here, that Oregon manufactures more than clouds. It may have even less monetary value than crop-nurturing rain, but we grow Art here, and nourish the artists forming on mountainsides.

*Corinne, Tee. *The Southern Oregon Women Writers' Group Gourmet Eating Society and Chorus Picture Book*. Pearlchild. OR. 1982. \$8.00 post. pd. to POB 804 Grants Pass, OR 97526-0069.

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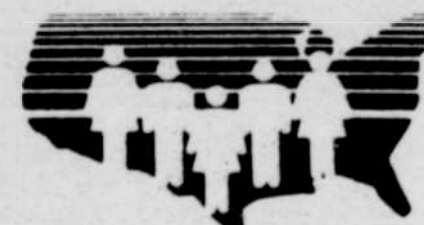
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