

Washington, D.C. — before and after

Jesse Helms, we are your daughter, your son, your cousin, neighbor and co-worker. We are your minister and your grocery clerk doing it together . . .

B Y L E E L Y N C H

The March on Washington took place, for me, in my heart.

I'd been in D.C. the weekend before, so felt as if I'd been part of the preparatory madness. Looking back, I realized I was there before the 1979 March, too. Then, I'd heard a great deal from warring factions: the city of Washington was doing just fine without busloads of strangers pouring in to freak out the local politicians. This time I heard not a breath of this kind of fearful

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AMAZON TRAIL

resentment, bred by lack of self-confidence. It was just plain excitement and manic pre-demo jitters: have we done enough, have we got enough, ARE WE READY THIS TIME?

They were, all of us were. I was back in Oregon when the first news reports came over National Public Radio. I had my little walk-person clipped to my fatigues, my head-phones snug against my ears as I watered Girl-

friend's incipient, still potted, palm and eucalyptus forest. Girlfriend was in Washington marching. Under her young thirsty fronds I was crying. Crying at all those beautiful gay people getting married like we did last year; crying at the brave enormity of the procession itself; crying at the arrests outside the Supreme Court. I cried especially over the AIDS quilt interviews: a monument the size of two football fields and, tragically, growing. Giving a spicy eucalyptus an extra dousing in celebration of life, I thought, we sure have emerged from the shadows and learned to take up our space.

I'd wondered how straight America was reacting to this many-headed queer monster prancing, or stomping, through the capitol. Later in the week the local paper ran this AP report: *The Senate voted overwhelmingly Wednesday to deny federal money for AIDS education materials that critics say promote homosexuality.* On NPR, conservative senator Jesse Helms, instrumental in this vote, was quoted after he'd examined safe sex comics produced by the Gay Men's Health Crisis Center of New York. He said, "I almost threw up."

I wanted instant replay of the March after his words, a march bigger and more outrageous, louder and more demanding, once a week until so-called humans like Helms were vomited out of office. I mean, what do these conservative breeders think? That we're bred on another planet and imported to offend them? Jesse Helms, we are your daughter, your son, your cousin, neighbor and your co-worker. We are your minister and your grocery clerk doing it together, your teachers and the people who



write the songs, who make the films that move you. What shook you up so much about your sexuality that you cannot even look at graphics of men making love?

My anger took me back to an office where I used to work on the East Coast. I had become very close to a gay man (are you out there, Vipe? Are you alive still in this war against sexual enlightenment?). We used to talk about everything under the sun — or under the fluorescent office lights. One day the odd subject of heterosexuality came up. "I think it's perverse," Vipe whispered, "what they do together." "Wow!" I cried, at the risk of losing our jobs. It was the first time I'd ever heard another person say my feeling out loud. To me, female-male sex is very queer. I was never convinced until recently that people really do enjoy it. I think it's great that they do, but they can have it. Meanwhile, I'm healthy enough, and secure enough in my own sexuality that visuals of such lovemaking do not make me barf. Good thing. They are everywhere.

As we were everywhere in Washington. I would have loved to have been able to march with Girlfriend, but I'm humble: I'll settle for having been in the vanguard.

I was asked to D.C. by Lammas Bookstore and a community group called Brother Help Thyself. Both Lammas and Lambda Rising bookstores scheduled a series of readings;

Brother held a dinner to honor gay writers. The latter was given at the Meridian House International. Now, you all know how difficult it is to outclass dykes in dykey clothes and backpacks. But this dive managed. There we were. Debbie Morris, manager of Lammas Dupont Circle, and Mary Farmer, Lammas owner, and me, trudging up imperial-palace-style wide marble stairs under chandeliers and ancient tapestries. It didn't get any easier. All around were guys in evening wear amongst the ornate antique furniture. I felt as if I was in the apex of Washington Society. As if Jesse Helms would feel more comfortable there than me. Until, that is, I started talking to some of the guys. Like Cornelius from Brother. He charmed me into feeling comfortable. Or David with his cowboy boot fable. Or John, the waiter, hovering like a devoted den mother. I think I could get used to that kind of style. If they still let me wear my dungarees and backpack.

My original '79 trip to Washington was a chance to meet, in person after about twelve years of correspondence, Barbara Grier, one of the four founders of Naiad Press. I also met Donna McBride that weekend, another of the four. Imagine my surprise this year when the other two founders, Anyda Marchant and Muriel Crawford, appeared at my reading. You could have knocked me over with a drag star's feather boa. Once more I was charmed, this time by these two farsighted members of our older generation who have given lesbians so much.

Right after my reading Ann Allen Shockley, author of *Say Jesus and Come to Me*, *The Black and White of It*, et. al., arrived to sign books. Small and sprightly, with an air of sharp understated intellect, Ann Shockley is one of the most accomplished of this generation of feminist writers.

It's always gratifying to spend time with other writers. My contact with Shockley was brief, but I was able to hang out with Becky Birtha for almost twenty-four hours. I'd liked the stories in her first book, *For Nights Like This One, Stories of Loving Women*, but her work felt as untried as I knew mine was. With her new volume, *Lovers' Choice* (SEAL), I am very sure of her talent and skills. Her prose is soft-spoken, almost plain, but its light is bedazzling, shining on and enlightening my life and the lives of the women I see around me. In person she is soft-spoken, too, appearing serious and delighted by turns, with the brightest sparkle in her eyes that I have ever seen.

It is said that art lays the groundwork for revolution. Did this cultural weekend presage the March?

I suspect, Mr. Helms, that you may also have been reacting to our March when you experienced your desire to belch forth the contents of your system. Just think! Half a million strong though we were, Becky and me, Muriel and Anyda, and who knows how many others had already gone or never left, home. Contemplate, sir, the unsleeping mountain that we are, whose spirit invades those nallowed streets, always. You can insult our work, disdain our presence, but you can't still the marching in our hearts. •

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