

In the heart of the desert

There they were, the saguaros, tall cactus sentinels of the dry land, majestic and stubborn against the onslaught of people and concrete mixers

B Y L E E L Y N C H

I am awed by the western United States. To this city kid outdoors once meant sidewalks and handball courts, playgrounds and hanging out on the corner. In school we studied about the

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Grand Canyon. The Mississippi River. Mountains. Deserts. I didn't quite believe any of those phenomena existed. They were fairy tales, as unreachable as Rapunzel's tower. When I drove across the country for the first time in 1984, at age 39, I fell in love with the West, especially the mythical desert. Early in March of this year I returned to Arizona, half, I suppose, to reassure myself that it was really there.

I am happy to announce that it was, though in Tucson, my base of operations, there were times only the plentiful palm trees and landscaped cacti convinced me of that. The city

looks as though it is owned by a concrete conglomerate that pours night and day and then pours some more. Around the outskirts of this island of cement, though, are the saguaro cacti, the palo verde trees, the ocotillos that make the landscape magic.

And Tucson draws magical people to it. I was able to spend time with two of them.

Valerie Taylor has been in town for some years now. She's been on the lesbian literary scene a lot longer. *Whisper Their Love* (1957), *The Girls in 3-B* (1959), *Stranger on Lesbos* (1960), *Unlike Others, Return to Lesbos* and *A World Without Men* (1963), and *Journey to Fulfillment* (1964). Naiad Press has reprinted three of these and has published the recent *Love Image* and *Prism*. New work is coming both from Naiad and Banned Books. Valerie Taylor is not only a pioneer but a mandarin of lesbian culture.

In the early 1960s, when I was starving for community and enlightenment, my lover and I read Taylor's books. I imagine that they were handed down, dog-eared, from some Older Lesbian, or that we stumbled on them in a seedy Greenwich Village shop. Did the heroines go straight? The lesbians end badly? Whatever, those shocking paperbacks set fires in us. We were endlessly curious about the author. Was she? What did she look like? Were we likely to meet her in the bars when we were old enough? And would we too ever write books about lesbians?

What a thrill to get the still-unanswered questions answered in an exotic — to me — desert town in 1988. What a thrill to see Valerie Taylor

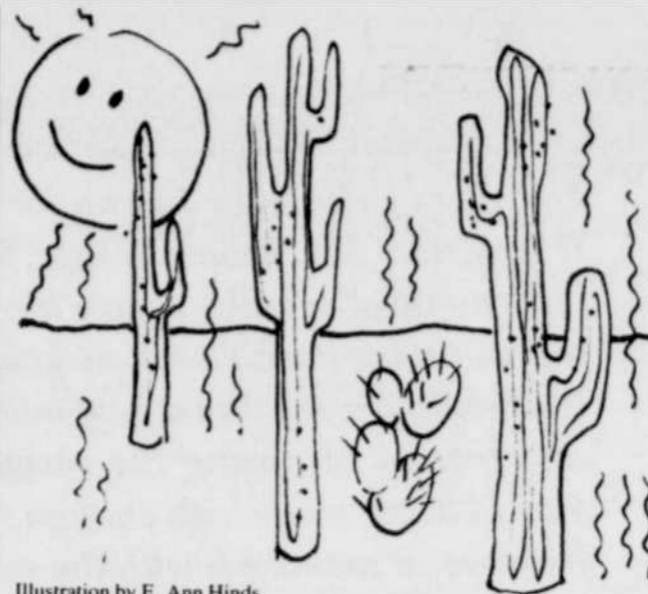


Illustration by E. Ann Hinds

at last, under a starry Western sky, in the doorway of her tiny concrete-block home. What a thrill to ask her to go out with me on a Saturday night. If anyone had told me, in 1960, that I'd ever ask Valerie Taylor out on a date!

Valerie is in her 70s now. She's little and dark-eyed and warm and generous and articulate. Back when I was reading her books she had just left her husband and was supporting her three boys by writing and editing. My teen lover and I weren't likely to run into her in the bars, but she was actively a lesbian. She is still actively a lesbian, for that matter. She is also busy in the peace movement and with the local food bank and . . . I cannot remember all the ways she spends her boundless energies.

In other words, Valerie Taylor turned out to be better than I'd fantasized. All I could imagine at 15 was some swashbuckling lady killer who had all the answers. What I found was a peace-loving feminist who has all the same questions about war and hunger and equality that I do.

Valerie and I went gallery-hopping that Saturday night, in and out of the Tucson art throngs. I had a wonderful time. What I'll probably remember best, though, is losing the car and walking this long-standing heroine of mine up and down the streets of Tucson trying to find it, and then our giggling hysteria as I proceeded to go in the wrong direction to take her home. She couldn't help — she only rides buses. We were well on our way to Mexico before I, red-faced, doubled back. Some gallant I make.

Our companion, before the disasters, was Hannah Blue Heron. Musician and writer, Hannah's work was included in *Lesbian Nuns* (Curb and Manahan, Naiad Press). She is one of the crew who run Womancraft Gallery in downtown Tucson, a large space devoted to women's art and craft work. I'd known Hannah in Oregon when she lived in a one-room cabin deep in the woods. She moved to Tucson to help her arthritis, and she immediately began to build an adobe home with the help of an assortment of women and good old-fashioned tools like shovels and her back.

Hannah is nearing 60, long-legged, white-haired, and actually has the aura of her graceful avian namesake. Her home is literally dug out of the ground, her living room a scooped-out

bowl whose contents have been shaped into the adobe bricks that became her walls. Her circular roof is a beautiful structure, almost one with the desert. The skylight at the center of the roof is often occupied by her dog, who simply clambers up there from the ground to assume his watching post.

The other dwellings at Adobeland, where Hannah lives, range from elderly travel trailers to two-story cabins, all women-made. I met the creator of this women's land, Adobe herself, an intense former physical-education teacher from the East Coast. With impressive staying power and, I would assume, great tolerance for the vagaries of our community, she has established something permanent and valuable. I also visited with Zanna, the poet and artist, and with Lee Lanning, publisher of *Ripening: An Almanac of Lesbian Lore*, an early classic of the women's movement.

But I spent most of my time at Adobeland with Hannah, admiring the accomplishment of her home, looking at photographs of its creation, listening to tales of building her life in the desert.

My visiting was done primarily at night. Days I devoted to the desert itself. My excuse for the trip was research for a book that's been in the works for years. One of the characters is Windy Sands, a retired motor-vehicle-department employee who lives in her own little shantytown of trailers and shacks where she raises miniature cacti to sell wholesale. Two other characters, women not unlike myself, visit her. One finds herself in the desert, the other gets from it what she needs to go on.

I'd expected to be enchanted; I hadn't expected to fall more in love. There they were, though, the saguaros, tall cactus sentinels of the dry land, majestic and stubborn against the onslaught of people and concrete mixers. They are everywhere, many-armed, looking down on the likes of me wandering the trails of the Saguaro National Monument. There is a feeling, under the naked Southwestern sun, alone but for jackrabbits and birds, cooled by silent breezes, lured on by the flat easy earth — there is a feeling of lonely strength there. One is reduced to a body and a strangely quiet mind in the presence of the simple divinity that is sun and earth, jackrabbit and the miraculously adapted plant, the cactus.

Those enduring women, Valerie, Hannah and Adobe, who may all be incorporated in Windy Sands, remind me of the cacti. Heartier than drought or oppression, more alive than floods and restrictive laws, they are setting down roots with their hand-built homes and courageous culture. How could baby-dyke me ever have anticipated this? A search that began so long ago in the bars ended in a place I'd never even believed existed: the magical, enduring desert.

For more about Valerie Taylor, see the interview by Tee Corinne and Caroline Overman in *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, Spring 1988. Biographical data from Grier, *The Lesbian in Literature* (Naiad Press).

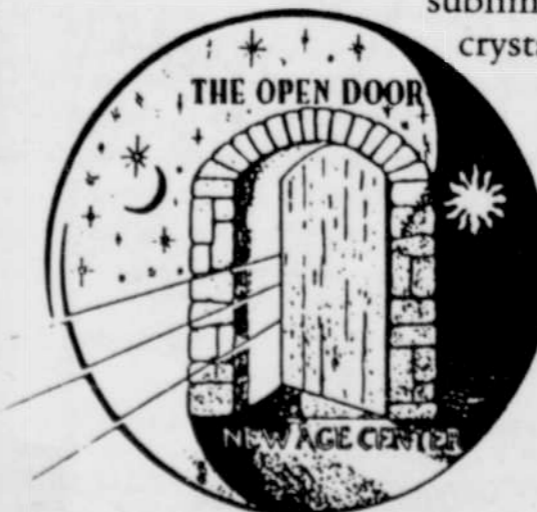
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