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Foreign tongues

We're being battered by free-floating homophobia

by Lee Lynch

I recently read a book about a highly principled dyke who resists the political wave of her time, is arrested for exhibiting her sexuality, hounded out of her vacation for being who she is and, for lack of a community, falls in love with a come-hither straight woman who doesn't have the guts to act on her feelings.

The novel, *Another Love*, by Erzsébet Galgóczi, is tragic, but even more tragic is the fact that the tale of a lesbian in Budapest during the 1950's Soviet occupation of Hungary should sound so startlingly familiar today. The concept of gay exiles is as ancient as closets. The most famous lesbian citizens of the United States during the first half of this century: Alice, Gertrude, Romaine, Natalie, Renee, Genet—were literally exiles. Today we're holding our ground in D.C. and L.A., in Dallas and Seattle, but we're no less exiles within our own lands.

How can we feel anything but *other* observing the presidential pseudo-election which speaks for us not-one-whit? How can we possibly feel *part* of when millions of movie-goers enjoy films that depict us as enemies of Decent People? How can we hold up our heads to be counted when voters cast ballots of disenfranchisement? This gay movement has been going strong for over 20 years and sometimes it's hard to see through the backlash to the patches of space we've won. Sometimes it's downright discouraging.

A friend just sent me one of my old letters, circa 1963. I romantically wrote about my "life work," about the need to change my impending college major from Phys. Ed. to English so that I could follow the example of Radcliffe Hall. "Someday," I wrote, "I would try to help. One novel, maybe, but a step further. One poem even. I'm going to help. I swear."

Thirty years later I sometimes wonder if I should have stuck to girls' sports. A friend who lives a closeted, apparently comfortable life recently confided, "I *hated* the word dyke." Right after that still another friend told me, "I *hate* that word queer." For at least ten years how many of us have been writing and talking about these being our words, reclaiming them from those who have made each queer term a curse. If we rejected every word tainted with jibes, insults, and threats, we'd have nothing to call ourselves at all.

To remain visible citizens of the world we need to grab back what's ours, claim it and stand up to be counted. Finally non-gay society is feeling a little bit better about using the word "gay," but it's become a male adjective. Lesbians are exiles even in our own language. The words we use to legitimize our lives become foreign to our tongues. As any oppressed people, we risk having not only no place, but no vocabulary that tells us who we really are.

The dykes and faggots in my small town talked for years about introducing a gay 12-step meeting into a huge annual recovery gathering. The first response from the non-gay organizers

was, "No! That's too dangerous, you'll get hurt!" Read: the organizers didn't want those big bad threatening words, lesbian and gay, on a program. We blended for a few more years into the general populace. But, we'd been to Living Sober in San Francisco and had tasted of freedom.

Recently I learned that last year's gathering hosted the first queer meeting. When I was told who led the meeting I tried to keep my mouth from falling open. "But she's not gay!" I protested. She's a kind, brave, wise woman who's been on the outside herself, but what does it mean when a non-gay must "lead" us? That we need a protector? That we don't think enough of ourselves or our sobriety to take our own space? That we need a translator who speaks the language of our oppressors to stake our claims? That we really and truly don't belong?

During Women's History Week I attended a local celebration. The audience was primarily lesbian. The performers were lesbian. The exhibiting artists were lesbian. The history had been to a great extent made by lesbians. Yet the event dared not name itself lesbian and the keynote speaker was not a lesbian. She acknowledged the fact immediately (very immediately) and spoke of the accomplishments of the straight women in the community. Her words revealed a clear dichotomy: Us and You. Only three of us walked out. Lesbians had invited her to speak. Lesbians gave her a standing ovation. The woman was well-meaning, but don't we respect ourselves enough to want to hear a lesbian speak? To recognize when we are, even unintentionally, being Matronized?

Something happened not long ago that took me right back to grammar school. I still remember the humiliation I felt when my best friend from first through sixth grade dropped me for a boy-crazy girl. Is it significant that I'd had my first lesbian experience with this lost friend? A few months ago Lover and I were hanging around with a non-gay woman. She seemed glad to have our company. Then she dropped out of sight. The next time I saw her she didn't acknowledge me, though she appeared to introduce her brand spanking new boyfriend to everyone else in the group. Is there a message here about where lesbians fit into society?

I'm feeling battered these days; ultra-sensitive. I see homophobia, internalized and free-floating, everywhere. Don't even ask me what I thought about the film "Fried Green Tomatoes," which demonstrated the most adept straddling of antithetical worlds I've ever seen. Yes, the lesbianism could have plucked at these queer little heartstrings, but my non-gay acquaintances assure me that you didn't have to see it, wouldn't see it, if you didn't want to. You wouldn't see it if you didn't live in lesbianland, a country within a country, where women are still starved for images of ourselves.

And that's what exile is about. The heroine in *Another Love* didn't have to die escaping over the border. She could have gone into a quiet exile without leaving Hungary, the way so many of us live in exile right here within our hetero-totalitarian states. But she was highly principled, a resister, impractically out. Like, thank the Goddess, so many of us.

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Correction

In the April issue of *Just Out*, Vol. 9 No. 6, the article by Tom Strong and Andrew Leavitt should have read: "This means: Stop the Oregon death plan and demand an apology from Gov. Roberts for supporting it; fight for increased, more comprehensive, coordinated and effective research for finding a cure for AIDS...." *Just Out* regrets the error.