

AMAZON TRAIL

Make a noise

Let us acknowledge the passing of Terri Jewell, poet, author and voluptuous outlaw

▼
by Lee Lynch

"Born Libran in Louisville, Kentucky. Spent 1974-1982 on East Coast and learned that lesbian writing is valid and needed on this planet. I'm stubborn and insolent, so rejections make me write that much harder." —Terri Jewell, in a biographical note from the quarterly *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, Fall, 1983

Terri Jewell was more full of life and plans and projects than any three other women I've ever known. She was like a power line, thrumming with barely contained energy. When I met her some years ago at a writing workshop at the National Women's Music Festival, she projected warmth, enthusiasm, support and empathy. I'd seen her name everywhere, yet there was no grandstanding. She was just another dyke writer anxious to learn and to share what she knew.

I never knew until her letter to me of Jan. 10, 1995, that there was another side to Terri, although I should have seen it in her work. In one poem she wrote that she "hugged death/ like a thick, blue blanket/ its borders embroidered/ with shiny new bullets/ saved for that time/ I could choose passage out."

I think I didn't want to know.

Terri Jewell died in late November. Just a year before, on Oct. 17, 1994, she'd written me: "My 40th birthday...this 40th year, Lee, is gonna be prime. I FEEL it.... I feel quite grown! The outlaw in me is ready to ride, girlfriend! Where do I go next?!"

Next came a list of accomplishments that Terri managed even while supporting herself full time with a straight job.

We've lost the author of *The Black Woman's Gunbo Ya-Ya*, *Quotations by Black Women* and the poet who published *Succulent Heretic*. Terri's poems, articles and stories have appeared in over 300 periodicals including *The African-American Review*, *Calyx*, *Kentucky Poetry Review*, *Women of Power*, *Spare Rib* and *The Black Scholar*. Her anthology *Dreadwoman Locksister: It Ain't All About Hair* is being completed by Stephanie Byrd. Karen Willis is helping prepare Terri's *The Black Woman's Perpetual Calendar*. Both works are scheduled for publication by Crossing Press.

Terri received a grant for and had completed a series of poems about James Baldwin. One of her dreams was to write *The Black Lesbian Culture Book*. She also wanted to do a book on black comedienne and another on black women philosophers.

Where did Terri, a self-described "voluptuous outlaw," even find time for her straight job, for deep depressions?

"Thanksgiving," Terri wrote me in a letter, "is the yellow light, Xmas flashes red."

On the other hand, how does any black lesbian keep going with the unendurable rejection of this society as constant companion? How can there be health when a seemingly invincible racist patriarchy prances across the television screen, trumpets from talk radio shows, and runs our homeland with a ruthless unconcern for most of us? Terri Jewell, thorn in the side of heterosexist white

America. Terri Jewell, a wild, loving woman.

Stephanie Byrd, also a poet, knew the spirit of Terri Jewell.

"We used to like to go out in the country a lot. One of the last things we did together was go fossil hunting in the White Water River Gorge in Indiana. We'd wander around, and if we didn't make our destination that was OK. Sometimes we'd stop and take pictures of wildflowers. We laughed a lot.

"One time we saw a great big sow taking a leak, and Terri wanted to get a close-up shot. The sow had a litter. I knew about sows from childhood and I warned Terri. But she had to get closer. She was a large woman—we both are—and neither one of us is given to moving quickly. When that sow came at her, I swear to God, Terri jumped back six feet at least. It was the funniest thing."

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Terri Jewell



PHOTO BY TEE A. CORINNE

Dorothy Hoogterp, another Michigan writer, remembers: "Sometimes when she would give a reading it would be absolutely hilarious. She could bring down the house, hamboning, using her whole body, while she recited."

Dorothy reports that Terri's poem from *Succulent Heretic* was used to start the memorial service.

I imagine Terri's delivery:

SHOW YOU HEAR

among my people it is rude to listen to another without making noises of acknowledgment. a famous anthropologist now deceased said the invention of the boat started racism. it is rude to listen to this silently. many men and many women say a good woman accepts their vision of whom she should be in the world. it is dangerous to listen to this without sucking one's teeth. i am a black woman. i am a lesbian. now make noise of acknowledgment.

"A lot of women call me for closure," said Stephanie Byrd, gently. "But you know, I figure Terri went out to that lake and she followed a higher calling."

Now let's make noise, all in our own ways, to protest Terri's unbearable pain, to celebrate her exuberant life, and to extol the extraordinary gifts she gave us.

"Show You Hear," from *Succulent Heretic*, 1994, Opal Tortuga Press. Permission by Stephanie Byrd.

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