

Points of Departure

1. B___, 1973 - 1976

Whether or not she touched me during those years or whether I touched her I don't now recall. Physically, I mean. If we did, it would have been the touch of boys: staged shoves or backslaps, testing the edges of the ability to control. Whatever it could mean to be a lesbian in those years, she was that, at least in our houses and among faces long familiar to us. Otherwise, her straight brown hair flowed loose to her narrow hips, to the tops of her legs, which I know were too short and I'm certain were too muscular. How could I describe her face other than as handsome?

It was all about sex and it had nothing to do with sex. Physically, I mean. Because we wanted her being a lesbian to mean something real to both of us, we would push at the edges of the constricted, military life we had trapped ourselves into and posture all the ways we'd shake them up if she would not have lost so much to a world that could not, finally, have cared or meant any less. Addicted to pocket-change rebellion, and hash, and speeders, and drinking, we waited for whatever a life 'in the real world' would mean, because whatever it would mean, we would be that.

Once, she tried to ask me something, at her apartment, with her partner H___ watching expectantly. I was vaguely aware of the weight of it in the moment, a point from which we'd change, and only much later did I feel its full press. I did not know. I could not say, though I know I tried hard to get it from her. But the moment broke, and she pushed down whatever they needed of me. Whatever it would have been, I would have been that. I knew somehow that lesbians in such situations trusted boys like me only once, and I knew somehow as well she was astounded we could love.

2. M___, 1982 - 1985

Sex is Art's point of departure: How could I have fathomed that
or fathom that white suburban vision had undeveloped sight?
Splattered down to my sneakers in the swirl of her movement
were wimmin unleashed, wimmin studied, herstories,
poems with spittal at the corners of the pages and inconsiderate volume,
and a rejection of dance, as I understood it, in favor of movement
alone. M___

mostly laughed at me, in a teacherly way I knew I had coming,
especially the day I shared that if I were a woman I'd be a lesbian.
What I thought that meant was that I'd picked up some vague notion, mostly
because of her passion (which is also to say her suffering), of how woman
could truly be moved only by woman, and I think I meant I thought that
that was better. I'm not sure specifically what it would be better than,
just that I thought it would be.

Sex is what waters our thoughts, she'd say, which can also mean
it extinguishes, an aspect I had been unable to consider.
One can overwhelm the other, which meant (I thought I was starting to see), that at
any given moment, one must be chosen. Not dance but movement alone. Not sex
but the water of it, spreading out despite attempts to direct it,
resisting or succumbing to any act of shaping. Think of raindrops on a window,
she'd say. One drop swirls into another and from that pointforward
both paths are recast. And so, I'd say to her, if I am to fathom
this at all (which is also to say grasp), this is the path I should take,
and she, spinning out what I still called a dance,
would laugh.

3. K__, 1983

Stripped
of everything me
but a likeness
of my white dick
sagging behind
some podium
spewing feelings.
Separatist.
Lesbian.
Radical. She
wanted nothing
of me or
likenesses of me
except whatever
lover I or the likes of me
might have. "Bring her
or them and I'll have come
and hearts in
my hand before
he has time to
finish withering. If you
keep him keep him
away." Startled —
how would I know
aspects of me or my
likenesses should
have been
secreted
before this
company?

4. J__ #1, 1984 – 1992

Art can not only be drawn
out by a delicate or hard touch of fingertips
over skin and into folds of body, but it also
can be spoken aloud. Groups of people
gather to hear this from you, and when I hear,
even though I'm open to the act,
I tip my face down at the thought.

I am unconvinced about confessing. Especially
about how speaking the erotic, which is both light and dark,
and maybe always both at once,
can liberate in either case. Something about this
becomes entangled passing through me. I see
an isolated, unhurried curve of an apparently woman's body,
smell in my mind the arousal, and even think I understand
how this leads to sound and movement free of thought.

But what scares me, sitting among groups of mostly
women who have come to hear you speak all this,
is thinking that I must now accept that
only a woman's body holds this kind of glistening art
and only the vibration of another woman's fingertips
can fully tease it out and into air.

5. L___ #1, 1993 – 1999

What risk was it to me to believe that her loving this woman would neither diminish nor deepen her love for me? Think of it as two flasks, she said, broad and deep at the bottom, rising to the narrowed neck meant not just to keep back spills but to keep back mixups. Think further that each fluid slakes only a specific thirst; one cannot satisfy the need relieved by the other. Even with this one — and she held one up — drained completely, this one — and she lifted the other -- full to the top of its throat, could do nothing. Sand to a body dried in the sun. And if, as you may wish, I were to risk breaking the one you think superfluous — and here she held one up at the level of her temple, released and watched it hit the floor intact, shuddering all the house — this one could do no more for me than it does now. And I was still uncertain which was which.

So, I thought, where was the risk?

Was it in my believing her — that she could love me no less and no more no matter how I or anything might change in any way? Was the risk in yielding to her way of feeling distinctions where I felt only singly? Or was the final risk in thinking I was risking something now that already had been changed, and therefore lost?

6. C___, 1992 - 2000

I had to come to believe, facing this down,
that sex was no more than two points of departure,
that gender slipped continuously between them,

an ebb, a flow of particulars of feminine
and masculine, the proportions of which shifted
within all of us, dependent wholly on who

or what we faced. I had to imagine
a midpoint, a fulcrum of identity
that you and I traveled near to and away from;

I had to think that we were different
in the same ways. And then I had to feel
that's why you had to love her

in ways that were the same as I.
What threat, then, following this thought,
could I be to myself? If what you did was balance

a part of her because of how you are a woman
and I counterbalanced because of how I am a man
then we must have finished off each other

in some less visible way, like echos finish sounds;
or shadows complete forms. And at the end
I couldn't stop wondering at what distance from its source

an echo becomes a sound in its own right?

We must each have been that to her as well,

but which of us was sound and which was echo

had finally to do with which of us she faced

at any moment, and which

she turned her back toward.

7. L__ #2, 1999 – 2000

At twelve-some years
I am in awe of where
we've come to, and in fear. We've left
so many worn guideposts
so far back on this path;
all the directions
I'd been given to follow,
scratched out on ragged scraps of paper,
litter the way behind.
I've abandoned searching common maps
for reassurances, and now just keep moving.

You have not taken me
toward any point in any distance I have not
also been compelled to move to,
nor I you. The ground
we've traveled has been spongy,
uncompressed, pungent
as our steps sank in
and then were pushed back.

I've come to understand
that walking ground like this,
ground most people never feel beneath,
leads to ways of seeing that are breath-
taking. And that's also now to say I have
no breath left
to go with you from here.

8. J__ #2, 2001 – Onward

You affirm for me
this fluidity of gender
I'm fixed on
is overrated. You love,
period.
All are welcomed who wish
welcoming; welcoming
what each one
shows and hides
breaches sexual and therefore
other walls obviously
and nearly irrelevant.
We who act as other than
as this or that should act
bring the richness of pain
– which itself is no more
singular than gender
and no less a series
of inventions. Love,
period.

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From Points of Departures, 2008