



» ROBIN MORGAN'S MEMOIR » THE AUNT JEMIMA DILEMMA

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Susan Estrich on
Sex & Power

The Body Shop's
Anita Roddick on
Money & Mayhem

Jean Kilbourne
Decodes the Ads

She Slams

Alix Olson is a road poet on a mission

I walk and I teach it and
I poet and I preach it
I hold it and I mold it and
I know it co... give to...

DISPLAY UNTIL JANUARY 29



diary
of
a

slam poet

A year—
with
poetic
license—in
the life of
a national
poetry
slam
champion

BY ALIX OLSON
PHOTOGRAPHS
BY EARL RIPLING

I HAVE ALWAYS HAD A BIG MOUTH. THIS HAS NOT, HOWEVER, always been recognized as an art form. The Nuyorican Poets Cafe can take credit for that. Nice girl with rebel rising, I was raised in a conservative steel town. In ninth grade, I was sent to the principal's office for refusing to pledge allegiance to the flag. At the Nuyorican, I was sent to the National Poetry Slam Championship for tossing allegations at the flag in "America's on Sale." A good artist learns that what gets you in trouble in high school is worth paying attention to.

I moved to New York City after college to pursue *art*—an ambiguous goal, I know. I was a feminist. And a dyke. I'd been acting my whole life. I'd always written and loved poetry, savoring the freedom of words in my mouth, but begrudgingly counting pent-

ameter on the page. I would fool around with my guitar late into the night, but five chords weren't enough to make me a folksinger. And so, my amalgam of passions found its home through the prompting of a college professor who had extolled the Nuyorican as "the institutional bedrock of radical poetry." After three weeks of waiting tables, I talked my friend Pete into coming with me to the café. "Poetry Slam?" he said. "They don't throw stuff, do they?"

No, they don't. At a slam, poets get up on stage and perform their work before an audience, which then chooses its favorites. Slam poetry sticks out its tongue at the corporate monolith of rock 'n' roll-over. Its worth is not determined by literary critics but by the people who show up to hear it. It's a tongue-in-cheek competition, a method of enticing people to gather on a Monday night and watch po-

etized that *all* of my poems are love poems.

Spoken word poetry is as innate to me as radical feminism, and in my career, they work side by side. Both give voice to the silenced, battling the elite to redistribute privilege; both are rooted in liberation, valuing the personal as political; both have an incredible sense of humor; both in-fight passionately—and often; both are an art form, a balancing act, a gold mine. And neither one throws stuff.

Many of us who claim slam poetry as our home base but who no longer compete have gone on to recreate ourselves in other ways. These days I feel like a word musician—voice as electric guitar, syncopation keeping the drumbeat, lyrics releasing my inner punk-rock chick—traveling across the U.S., sharing all sorts of communities. I feel lucky to be the producer of my own stories. I tell it like I feel it, choose the frequency of truth.

And the World Bank Leaders / And the WTO and Disney and Visa and Monsanto / And Goodyear and Texaco all smile and say, / "Sure is nice to own the paper on a day like today."

—from "Criminals"

Slam Granny is a busy woman. She runs two sister venues, one in Salinas and another in Santa Cruz called The Washrock, which doubles as a laundromat. Tonight I'm in Salinas, where the audience is composed mainly of Mexican farmworkers. Women are bouncing screaming babies on their laps. Slam Granny tells me their English skills are pretty limited. My English-speaking tongue moves fast. At the end, they've got a lot of questions; they're curious about my lesbian identity. We talk about connecting oppressions, about women's rights, immigrant rights. About sharing

They've made us **fear** every
year / Every **extra hair** that
sprouts on **tit** or chin / Til we
begin to forget the

etry instead of *Ally McBeal*. Mostly, it's a resurrection of community storytelling.

That first night at the Nuyorican was like a blind date with a cute girl who shares your politics and makes you laugh—you know it's headed somewhere. Someone once told me that my poems were too political, that I should write more love poems. On stage, I real-

Sometimes my words resonate with the audience, sometimes I face dissonance. But always there are reverberations.

JANUARY 1999 SALINAS, CALIFORNIA

In the New York Times, it's handcuffed protestors in Seattle / And the headline reads: "Angry Activists Start a Battle" /

the world. A seven-year-old girl summarizes: "I treasure the rain / Because rain is good for our crops / And all of us just want to be filled / To the top."

APRIL 1999 GRINNELL, IOWA

Sometimes anger's subtle, stocked in metaphor / Full of finesse and dressed in

diary of a slam poet

*allure / Yeah, sometimes anger's subtle,
less rage than sad / Leaking slow through
spigots you didn't know you had / But
sometimes it's just / Fuck you, Fuck you /
You see, and to me / That's poetry too.*

— from "Don't Think I'm
Not a Nice Girl"

"My alma mater is a radical campus," my partner Neeve assures me. It's nice to preach to the converted sometimes. But I've learned that political awareness and emotional healing are separate entities. During the show, a woman cries loudly, and I am pained by the influence of my words. I think of Eve Ensler, author of *The Vagina Monologues*, stopping short during a rape story as a woman sobbed. "Is someone holding that woman?" she asked firmly. "Yes!" a group of women answered. Following Ensler's example, I seek out the woman after the show. "Are you alright?" I ask, unsure of the artist/audience boundary. "Oh yes!" she says. "I wasn't crying with sadness. I was crying with rage. It felt great!"

JULY 1999 PORTO, PORTUGAL
FALADURA (STRONG WORDS) POETRY FESTIVAL

*I believe art is universal / If you're a
straight white male artist talking to*

for a moment. "Well, there are some, but it is not a welcomed thing like in America."

I am the only female spoken word poet at this international festival. For five days, I'm surrounded by male poets eager to bond across cultural barriers. It's a cornucopia of breast-size jokes. On the last evening, a poet from Holland who I have studiously avoided all evening leans toward me and says, "Holland doesn't have sexism, so I'm not used to this American feminist thing." He leans back, drains his beer, and confides the Secret to Art: "Preaching ruins poetry."

AUGUST 1999 AMHERST, MASSACHUSETTS

*Cinderella was sitting at home, quite
content with being alone / She was play-
ing with the mice and singing with the
birds / And they're the only ones who ever
heard these words / She said, "I'll get in
the damn pumpkin, do it all right / Weep
and lose my slipper / Freak out at mid-
night / But there's one thing the Prince
might not like / It's the Fairy God I'm af-
ter / I'm a dyke."*

— from "Fairy Tales"

Some women live double lives. My most devoted fan is a woman who teaches at a

partment. She tells me that my work speaks to her, not politically, but viscerally. "You're my car preacher," she laughs. As of her last e-mail, she and her girl were back together.

SEPTEMBER 1999 NEW YORK, NEW YORK

*Nike bought the revolution / Law schools
bought the Constitution / Tommy Hil-
figer bought the Red, White, 'n' Blue / A
flag shirt for fifty dollars / The one being
burned is you! / MasterCard Gold bought
the national soul / Broadway bought tal-
ent and called it — Cats! / The Republi-
cans bought out the Democrats! /
America's on Sale! (Restrictions may ap-
ply if you're Black, Gay, or Female...)*
— from "America's on Sale"

What is the current lifetime of a grassroots art form? The seconds before a corporate executive hears about it. I receive an invitation to appear on an MTV slam poetry show pilot. I don't do the show, but I attend the studio taping with a few other poets. As we enter, the bouncer scolds us, "Are you on the preferred list?" Apparently, we are not. Finally, we're escorted to "standing-room," our heads bumping lighting equipment as we

wisdom we've collected

*straight white men / I believe feminism's
in reversal when we believe art is
universal / Cause then we're just
believing them.*

— from "I Believe"

"Well, there was one lesbian singer in Portugal, but she went back in the closet when she became famous," my Porto host tells me. "Feminists?" He thinks

small Bible college and works for a fundamentalist Christian CEO. Really. She often recruits company employees from Promise Keeper gatherings. Her lesbian partner has left her several times to join the ex-gay movement. Yet every day she slides my cassette into her car tape deck, slips on her rainbow necklace, and drives to work. Upon arrival, she hides the tape and necklace in the glove com-

crane our necks to scan the seated crowd. Although the four performers are our peers, representing an assortment of ethnicities, races, and sexualities, the audience is a monolith of white, heterosexual couples. We learn later that models were invited to play audience members. "People at home want to relate to the audience," I am told.

diary of a slam poet

OCTOBER 1999 BURLINGTON, VERMONT

I talk it and I teach it and I poet and I preach it / I hold it and I mold it and I know it so I give it / Cause I'm sure that I believe / I'm still learning how to live it.

—from "I Believe"

It has been a slow-dawning realization that ingesting abuse is not a part of this job. And that my offstage persona is nowhere near as cheeky, irreverent, and confrontational as my art. After the show, a young man approaches. His fists are clenched as he accuses me of being a male-basher and a Communist. He's dragging his mortified girlfriend behind him (am I projecting?). I watch myself engage with this guy, politely answering his questions and struggling to maintain my composure. I check my watch. It's late. "I have to go," I tell him. "No, no," he says. "You've had your time in the spotlight. It's my turn now!" As he bends my book back and forth, my rage builds. I tell him he can destroy it if he buys it. "You're a hypocrite!" His voice follows me out to the parking lot, "Communists believe in free art!"

NOVEMBER 1999 CHICO, CALIFORNIA

You say we are not nuclear, but charged, we force ahead looming large... / There is nothing more nuclear than this hot core / We are dykes, not bombs. We don't drop. We transcend.

—from "Dykes Not Bombs"

Greyhound buses are convenient only in their affordability. With cramped legs, I hobble out at the next rest stop to call the show's organizer. There's a long pause on the other end of the phone. "Oh, god. Your show's tonight, isn't it?" he whimpers. Seems the guy has gotten his weeks confused. I curse

myself for choosing this ridiculous lifestyle. He assures me he can whip together a show for the next evening. I'm doubtful.

The next day I spot large fluorescent signs: LESBIAN POET IN TOWN! "Oh lordy," I mutter, and slink into a coffee-house. That night, the venue is packed with women. I turn to the organizer, shocked. "How'd you do it?" "Easy," he replies with a delighted smile, "I called the Head Lesbian!"

DECEMBER 1999 RIKERS ISLAND, NEW YORK, ROSEWOOD HIGH SCHOOL

They sit me down in a big green police chair / With a big green light cornering my soul / They say, "You tell us who's the boogey-man, ma'am / You point out the criminal" / So, I finger the composites stacked in my hand / I flash my big bright model-citizen smile / I say "I'm sorry, sir / But the criminal ain't in this pile."

—from "Criminals"

So, this is prison. The air is stale. Christmas elevator music pipes through the concrete walls. The female high-school students are awaiting either trial or sentencing for their upstate prison term. They're eating turkey and cranberry sauce from plastic platters. As I perform with two other artists, the young women cheer on our anti-institutional banter, hoot at our women-centered work, and periodically cry. After our show, one of the students does a kick-ass gospel piece that has us all praising her lungs. I'm not sure I should, but I ask her what she's in for. She stashed her boyfriend's drugs as the cops approached. Another student tells me she shot a man as he raped her best friend. "Justice doesn't apply to black women," she says. "That's why we call it the Just Us System in here." I'm the holiday entertainment. So, I'm making

jokes. Laughing. But there's not much that's funny.

DECEMBER 1999

WELLESLEY, MASSACHUSETTS

They've made us fear every year / Every extra hair that sprouts on tit or chin / Til we begin to forget the wisdom we've collected / Til we've defected to the "distinguished" older men / And they win again. . . .

—from "Witches"

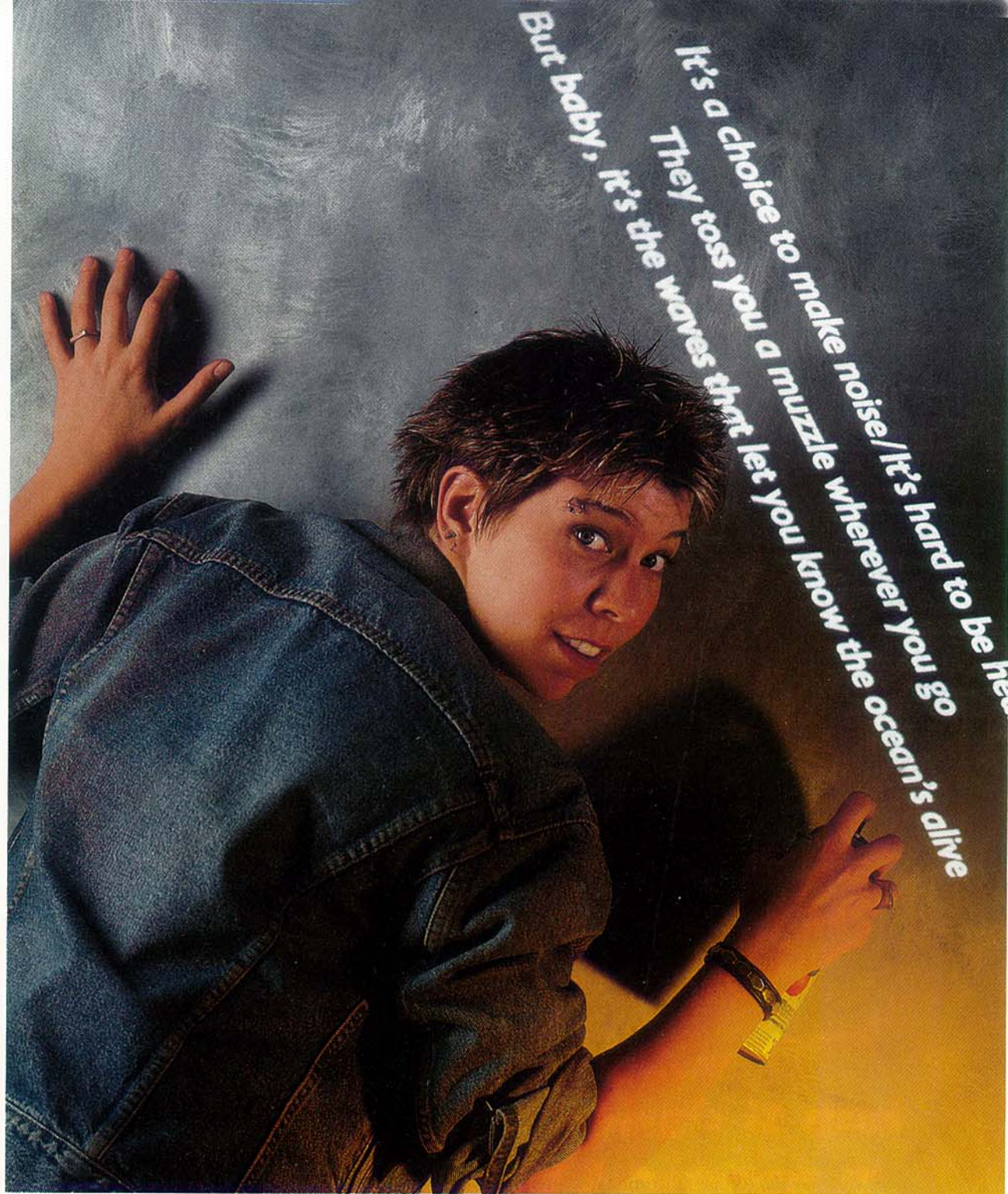
"You better pack pearls," says my friend Eileen. She's an alum. "Do they, um, know what you write about?" She's smirking. So I'm anticipating a conservative twentysomething crowd. But I'm disconcerted when an abundance of older couples in formal attire stream into the venue. I tap my host on the shoulder. "What's going on around here?" I ask. "It's Parents' Weekend." Oh. "You're on the events list." Oh Gawd. Unsure of the audience's comfort level, I periodically check in: "Are ya hangin' in there?" After my performance, a woman in a tailored suit pokes me forcefully, "Listen, young lady," she pauses. "Don't assume some of us parents aren't lesbian feminists." She breaks into a smile and tells me she wants to order 15 copies of my book for her coven of witches back in Oregon.

JANUARY 2000 MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

She'll crave what makes her burn / She'll learn her cunt's good name / The layered liquid lips / And little hot tip / No more of this cryptic shit! / This Vagina Will Be Known!

—from "My Daughter"

I watch a woman laugh out loud at this mention of "cunt," then pause to apologize to the man seated next to her. I see this everywhere. Women poised between grinning, leaning into the words, and



guilt, a reassuring hand on their male partner's tensed thigh. We are learning, tentatively, to celebrate ourselves.

FEBRUARY-MARCH 2000
BRONX, NEW YORK

*There'd be torture chamber exhibits /
 With tall skinny heels / Inviting little
 girls to "Try this and see how this feels!" /
 Cunted creatures wore these to work, or*

*to anywhere formal. / This pain was
 called ... "sexy." This process was called ...
 "normal!"*

—from "Cunt Cuntry"

Eager to connect with little lives, I accept a placement as an artist-in-residence in a South Bronx elementary school. My job is to teach whatever subject they're learning through theater. This week's topic is biology; so I teach

gender—it's women's history month, and there's not even a poster up! "O.K.," I dive in, "Can someone tell me what gender is?" Silence. Blank staring. "Any ideas?" Finally, one brave soldier raises her hand, twisting her braids. "Isn't that a list?" she offers tentatively. I'm stumped. "A list?" I coax. "What kind of list?" She pauses, screws up her face in concentration, and replies confidently. "Like a list of stuff you have to

diary of a slam poet

do." I get it. "An agenda," I say. "Hey, that's pretty close." And it is. Gender: noun, a list of shit you have to do.

MARCH 2000 TIDEWATER, VIRGINIA

*I believe in hardship / In traveling
through hard shit / Then, I believe in
coming home. . . .*

—from "I Believe"

I'm in a warm car, headed for a warm sofa, in a warm home in Virginia. By all appearances. My host leans across the stick shift: "I came out to my husband two years ago, but I just e-mailed him that I want a divorce." She tells me that he is in the navy and has been away for three weeks. He's waiting at home for us; it will be their first encounter since the news. "Oh," she adds, "I told him you're a major inspiration for the decision!"

I'm a fierce radical feminist on a mission. I want my mommy.

MARCH 2000 BUCKNELL, PENNSYLVANIA

*We gotta use our black and blues like a
second skin / Let our bruises thicken, then
begin again / We gotta get up when we're
pushed to the ground / They ain't gonna
hear us if we're screaming face down /
We gotta rise to double the size of our
sound / Warriors are better the second
time around.*

—from "Warriors"

I arrive on a campus where both lawn and students are impeccably tailored. That night the cafeteria fills with white, heterosexual couples, except for a tiny group of queer students who claim the front row. They call themselves Friends of Gays and Lesbians—apparently the euphemism eases gay life on the conservative campus. As I perform, I am filled with pride for this small, raging, cheering community. Together, for this one night, we make the cafeteria their terri-

tory, their space.

After the show, I meet the only lesbian, only interracial couple on campus. They have received numerous death threats and sexually harassing phone calls, yet the campus women's center refuses to intervene. "They're scared to be called dykes," they shrug sadly.

APRIL 2000 BETHLEHEM, PENNSYLVANIA

*All the white people in their Christmas
attire / Main Street's all lit up like a hot
white sin / And I am wandering around
the streets of my hometown / Wondering
what was I doing here / And why'd they
let me back in. . . .*

—from "Hometown"

Conservative hometown meets radical homegrown. It was gonna happen. I peek out from behind the curtain. Seventh-grade English teacher and husband. My dad's political science class. The woman who owns my folks' favorite breakfast joint. I feel myself becoming twelve years old. My head is buzzing. Is the air sorta fuzzy? I find the microphone and plunge. "Cunt." "Fuck." "There," I say, "I am much more relaxed now."

APRIL 2000 TIDEWATER, VIRGINIA

*Dear Mr. President: I don't want to be in
your military / I don't want to bury my
own kind / I want to make up my own
mind about who I hate / Not what the
national slate has in mind / You see, the
American interest / Is rarely in mine. . . .*

—from "Mr. President"

I'm performing at a dyke bar in Pat Robertson's Virginia hometown, a major U.S. naval base. After the show, a navy chick calls my work a "true inspiration." Eyes glittering with tears, she tells me she has been a feminist her whole life. "I'm the first woman in my crew to work in missile control," she says. "Oh

yeah? You don't shoot people then, do you?" I ask, hopefully. "Nope," she replies, wiping beer foam off her top lip, "But when I do, it's going to be the proudest day of my life. Women can do anything, right girl?"

APRIL 2000

BRYN MAWR, PENNSYLVANIA

*Danger: She-Men Working Above / And
beyond you / Yes, we are de-construction
workers / Exposing unfounded bedrocks
that bed us with one sex / That wed us to
one gender / We are overturning those
stones / We are throwing them back / We
are making Revolution a Gender
Evolution.*

—from "Vagina Poem"

Jackie is a first-year student at an all women's college. He is challenging the biological parameters of campus policy. The student community generally embraces his transgendered identity. The administration is confused. For now, Jackie (not his real name) can stay as long as he remains a "vagina'd individual."

I'm proud of my generation for its boldness. I'm proud of us for clearing out yet another closet, for disrobing the gender binary. Transgenderism exists within the space created by radical feminists—a space that challenges external power and encourages self-definition.

Women artists from Audre Lorde to Ani DiFranco have been upsetting the "natural order of things" for a long time. Art has increasingly become the feminist home for my generation, a place to collect the fire that fuels our everyday activism. I'm proud to be a part of that burning. **MS**

*Alix Olson and her partner, Amy Neevel,
cofounded Feed the Fire Productions,
which is sending spoken word artists to
underserved communities. For more
information, visit www.alixolson.com.*