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PREVIEW

BOATS FOR WOMEN

by

Sandra L. Yannone

A DISSERTATION

**Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Hilda Raz

Lincoln, Nebraska

December, 1998

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Boats for Women

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BOATS FOR WOMEN

Sandra L. Yannone, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1998

Adviser: Hilda Raz

Boats for Women is an original collection of poetry whose central theme is the survival of personal disasters to reach personal epiphanies. The collection chronicles a series of personal crises and their moments of resolution against the backdrop of historical figures and historical disasters to demonstrate the psychological effect of catastrophe.

Central to this collection is an exploration of the *Titanic* disaster of 1912 as a metaphor for loss and survival. The speaker's anonymous, personal disasters are weighed against the magnitude of a public tragedy which remains a significant icon in 20th century history.

The collection also examines elements of personal identity and sexuality. Tracing the process of coming out as a lesbian against the backdrop of childhood. The collection attempts to use language to break through all myths: the myth of the *Titanic* disaster, the myth of childhood, the myth of lesbianism, and the myth of time.

The collection grapples with issues of becoming lesbian feminist identified in a society which has throughout the 20th century portrayed a negative view of women. *Boats for Women* examines the relationships between girl child and family, woman and

woman, woman and man, and woman and society to comment on the continuing difficulties gender and sexuality impose on women in American culture.

PREVIEW

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I dedicate this book to Carol Guess.

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Connecticut Review: "Bess Houdini Recalls The Curtain In the Modern World"

Many Mountains Moving: "Because I Tell Myself I Don't Want Children" and "What The Lines On My Hands Can't Tell You"

Phoebe: "The Next Thirty Years"

Ploughshares: "Bess Houdini Remembers Night Before the Modern World" and "My Date With Elvis: Cybill Shepherd, 1973"

Quarterly West: "Other Women"

13th Moon: "Recipe for Red Sugar"

Women's Review of Books: "The Insignificant Weight of Clothespins" and "Phlebotomy"

A final wish for peace to Wallie who sat with me as I wrote.

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Before

When a poet doesn't know what to say, she looks back in time. She tries to make new meaning of what she thought she already knew. By nature, I am a collector. I hold onto things in order to keep the memory of them intact. I require a physical reminder of a mental state. A poem, therefore, is always an attempt to create a souvenir, a mark, a scar, something that cleaves the memory of experience to the experience.

Consequently, for years the individual poem has been sacred to me. Each poem represents a block of time that I am unable to live again. But each poem is a block, an object like the shell or rock I bring back to Nebraska after visits home to the coast of Connecticut.

Before, I believed that if I collected enough poems to tell my history, my work as the poet would be complete. I would write a series of poems that created a timeline of my thoughts, interests, desires, and visions, and the collective consciousness of this work would reveal a new world.

However, reading Suzanne Gardinier's first collection of poetry, *The New World*, changed this vision. Her book placed her in the swirl of all history to locate desire in the present. Her understanding that history links chains of events to reach the present broke open my vision of poetry as not just about one single life or event. She forced me to ask the question, "How does my life connect me to other places and people in time?"

I began to struggle with the sanctity of the individual poem by recalling my childhood fascination with disasters. I remembered walking down the hall of the Bloomfield Middle School during recess to a small book annex where, tucked into the book carousel, were book after book about disasters. I would sit

enraptured on the floor and read until I scared myself silly with all the death and destruction as depicted in shipwrecks, fires, deadly pile-ups on freeways, train wrecks, and airplane crashes. I was obsessed with the split second switch from the every day to catastrophe.

And I remembered Suzanne Gardinier lauding Muriel Rukeyser for her ability “to rest her fingers at the pulse of historical and personal truth, which fade into each other, and to speak her witness, in spite of horror, loss, isolation, and despair.” (Gardinier 30) I began to recognize that the poems I had been writing were not simply saying as Elizabeth Bishop claims to in her poem, “One Art,” “[t]he art of losing isn’t hard to master/ though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster.” (Bishop 178) The events of my poems are disasters: the lies to the self, the failed love affair, the silences, all hold consequence and magnitude as the stories did in those books I read in the fifth grade.

1984

“1984” is the moment of impact when knowing and unknowing collide, the true fusion of before and after. The moment of impact, the moment of disaster is when someone utters, “We can’t ever talk about this again.” The moment erases the past and insures no future. The moment of disaster is the loss of hope and voice. “1984” is the spine, the poem which represents the in-between world of personal and historical disasters.

After

As *Boats for Women* neared completion, I remembered an early language experience. Dit-dit-dit, da-da-da, dit-dit-dit, the sounds of distress Harold Bride, assistant Marconi telegraph operator, tapped out into the night of

April 14, 1912. The *R.M.S. Titanic* went down in history for many reasons, but one of the least frequently cited is that she was one of the first ships to use the new international distress call, S.O.S. Perhaps historians do not boast this historical marker in light of the outcome of the events of that evening.

However, almost sixty years later, I propped myself up on the picnic table bench on our front porch in Connecticut, five hundred feet from Long Island Sound, and memorized the rhythmic sounds of that distress call. My father sat across the table and said, "Repeat after me, Dit-dit-dit, da-da-da, dit-dit-dit." And then because it was summer and we were bored, my father suggested we make flash cards of the phonetic nautical alphabet. For the next two weeks, I sat in my grandmother's breezeway diligently painting replicas of the nautical flags, and after they dried wrote the name of each flag on the back of the appropriate card. Late into the salty night, my father and I drilled each other until we could identify each flag by its letter and name. And then we learned how to spell: Sierra - Oscar - Sierra.

Had I been alive on the night of the Titanic disaster I could have understood the distress call as it came across the wireless. I might have saved the ship. However, in some small ways I did receive the message Harold Bride tapped out feverishly that night in 1912 because in 1998 as a poet, I am transmitting the distress call again. The poems in *Boats for Women* are about the construction of disaster; they document disaster's precarious timelines and what survives any historical or personal event: the stories, the myths, the lies, "the call for women and children first," and the syllables which every life utters at various moments in time, dit-dit-dit, da-da-da, dit-dit-dit.

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Bishop, Elizabeth. *Collected Poems: 1927-1979*. New York: Farrar, Giroux, Strauss, 1987.

Gardinier, Suzanne. *A World That Will Hold All The People*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1996.

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"And the time taken for each part of an action is decided both by the time of the whole, and of the parts before and after."

-- Elizabeth Bishop

The Girl Who Catches Everything

We have all the time in the world --
in pants pockets, in the space between our breasts,
on our tongues, and in the future twirling

over us like a girl's fire baton hurled
into the sky. In her hands, she will catch
all she has, all the time. The world

will not throw her off-balance. Yet the crowd will swirl
in their stadium seats waiting for the least
mistake to reach their mouths. In the future, twirling

naked in bed, we will remember these girls
we did not have the chance to undress
when we had all the time in the world.

We will remember their hair, every curl
we did not allow our fingers to address,
or our tongues, or the future twirling

away from their bodies. We will purl
our lives with the minutes lost. The rest
we will have, all the time, in the world
and on our tongues, where the future twirls.

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