

AUTUMN 1980

for Judith McDaniel

I spent the night after my mother died  
in a farmhouse north of Saratoga Springs  
belonging to a thirty-nine-year-old  
professor with long, silvered wiry hair,  
a lively girl's flushed cheeks and gemstone eyes.  
I didn't know that she had died.  
Two big bitches and a varying  
heap of cats snoozed near a black wood stove  
on a rag rug, while, on the spring-shot couch  
we talked late over slow glasses of wine.  
In the spare room near Saratoga Springs  
was a high box bed. My mother died  
that morning, of heart failure, finally.  
Insulin shocks burned out her memory.  
On the bed, a blue early-century  
Texas Star, in a room white and blue  
as my flannel pajamas. I'd have worn  
the same, but smaller, ten years old at home.  
Home was the Bronx, on Eastburn Avenue,  
miles south of the hermetic not-quite-new  
block where they'd sent this morning's ambulance.  
Her nurse had telephoned. My coat was on,  
my book-stuffed bag already on my back.  
She said, "Your mother had another shock.  
We'll be taking her to the hospital."  
I asked if I should stay. She said, "It's all  
right." I named the upstate college where

Marilyn Hacker, Assumptions (New York:  
Knopf, 1985)

I'd speak that night. This had happened before.  
I knew / I didn't know: it's not the same.  
November cold was in that corner room  
upstairs, with a frame window over land  
the woman and another woman owned  
—who was away. I thought of her alone  
in her wide old bed, me in mine. I turned  
the covers back. I didn't know she had died.  
The tan dog chased cats; she had to be tied  
in the front yard while I went along  
on morning errands until, back in town,  
I'd catch my bus. November hills were raw  
fall after celebratory fall  
foliage, reunions, festival.  
I blew warmth on my hands in a dark barn  
where two shaggy mares whuffed in straw,  
dipped steaming velvet muzzles to the pail  
of feed. We'd left the pickup's heater on.  
It smelled like kapok when we climbed inside.  
We both unzipped our parkas for the ride  
back to the Saratoga bus station.  
I blamed the wind if I felt something wrong.  
A shrunken-souled old woman whom I saw  
once a month lay on a hospital  
slab in the Bronx. Mean or not, that soul  
in its cortège of history was gone.  
I didn't know that I could never know,

## PART OF A TRUE STORY

for Margaret Delany

"We dress UP!"—Ntozake Shange

My dear Mrs. Bloomer:

The exigencies  
of my life demand rational costume.  
I noticed recently upon perusal  
of a number of your interesting  
journal, *The Lily*, that your radical  
bifurcate garment for gentlewomen  
is beyond suggestion; not to mince words,  
for sale.

My people, Mrs. Bloomer, are  
as well, south of the District, and until  
the last and least of us no longer is  
chattel, this woman must be radical  
to be rational. A woman of color  
is gentle as yourself, until provoked.  
I have been, since the age of six.

When I,  
aged twenty-some, returned to the scene  
of my truncated childhood, with the goal  
—which I achieved—of bringing forth my mother  
and my father from bondage, as I had  
my brothers, many of my sisters and  
brothers, I was obliged, for my safety  
and theirs, to come to them in male attire.  
(Does *attire* have gender?) I cannot pass  
as other than I am in one respect;

now, the daughtering magic to recall  
across two coffee-mugs the clever Young  
Socialist whose views would coincide  
with mine. I didn't know that she had died.  
Not talking much, while weighted sky pressed down,  
we climbed the back road's bosom to the all-  
night diner doubling as a bus depot.  
I brushed my new friend's cool cheek with my own,  
and caught the southbound bus from Montreal.  
I counted boarded-up racetrack motel  
after motel. I couldn't read. I tried  
to sleep. I didn't know that she had died.  
Hours later, outside Port Authority,  
rained on, I zipped and hooded an obscure  
ache from my right temple down my shoulder.  
Anonymous in the mid-afternoon  
crowds, I'd walk, to stretch, I thought, downtown.  
I rode on the female wave, typically  
into Macy's (where forty-five years  
past, qualified by her new M.A.  
in Chemistry, she'd sold Fine Lingerie),  
to browse in Fall Sale bargains for my child,  
aged six, size eight, hung brilliantly or piled  
like autumn foliage I'd missed somehow,  
and knew what I officially didn't know  
and put the bright thing down, scalded with tears.