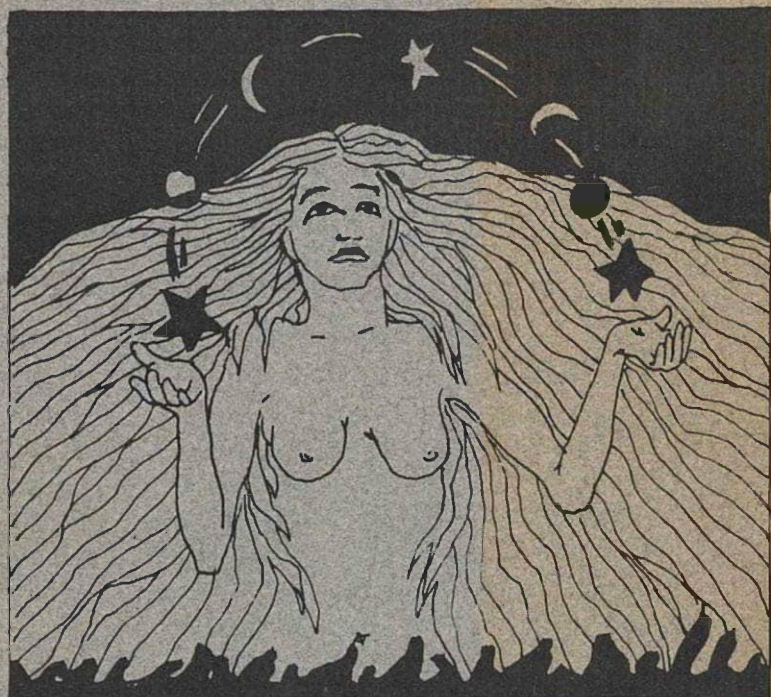


Amazon Songs

by Saj



Sarah

Amazon Songs

Amazon Songs

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Amazon Songs

Saj



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PIRAL

Wuthering Heights, Misrepresentations and Perimeters

Not long ago I was talking to a sensitive intelligent English teacher about *Wuthering Heights*. How amazing, he said, that she just sat down and wrote it. My hair prickled, a rush of words to the head stopped my tongue. Hang on — stop — wait — no — not — oh, hell. Where do I start? The moment passed . . .

That night I went to the book I think of as my New Introduction to Logic. Its actual title is *How to Suppress Women's Writing*; ¹ it has the same illuminating delight for me as my first introduction to logic, and for women writers is as, if not more, important. Where did that English teacher's comment fit . . . denial of, pollution of agency? Yeesss . . . False categorising? hmmm, partly. But partly "isolation" too, the "myth of the isolated achievement" whereby X appears in the history of literature because of/with one book and is therefore recategorised into something other than writer, as a woman who for this one book was as if divinely inspired but otherwise "wasn't really a writer" — or is it that "she didn't really write it"? Whatever it is, "she's anomalous" . . . and all those critical judgements, their logistic distortions, serve the underlying thesis: Women can't write. Or — they shouldn't have, it was the wrong thing, not art, genre, cross-genre, with help, confessional, too personal, too angry, too political, too (unacceptably) sexual . . . I exaggerate? Read the book; it should be a required text in every introduction to literature — and philosophy — in every university and teachers' college, in every editorial office and publisher's in-tray.

But — back to Emily Bronte who did not "just sit down and write it". "We who write are survivors" says Tillie Olsen, ² and Emily Bronte was a survivor too, as well as being a genius. Part of genius is being a superb craftswoman; her craft was developed and practised through a childhood sparse on external stimulation but imaginatively, atmospherically and sibling rich, honed in a domestic environment shadowed by her mother's illness and death, her father's tyranny, her brother's drug addiction, a chronic shortage of money and literary-social stimulation, responsibility for household and support chores expected of a clergyman's daughters, personal illness, loneliness, depression. How could she have written such obsessive-compulsive states had she not observed/known them intimately? How develop the stamina, concentration, self-disciplinary resources to produce such a book — let alone the wonderful poems — unless it had been worked for, through those

Introduction © Heather McPherson 1987
Text © Saj 1987
Cover illustration © Deane M. Crawford 1987

ISBN 0-9597593-6-0

Amazon songs was edited by Heather McPherson
and is published and distributed by

Spiral,
Box 9600,
Wellington,
Aotearoa (New Zealand).

Cover and text design by Robyn Sivewright, 100 Aro Street, Wellington.
Typeset in Century Old Style by Comset, 222 Willis Street, Wellington
Printed by Datastream Instant Print, PO Box 27096, Wellington.

nursery serials and play-acts; where did the confidence of a sense of audience come from, if not from there? Yet she is presented as a kind of pure vessel through which the bequeathment of genius worked . . .

And Emily Bronte had sisters . . .

Post World War II, internationally, we have had, says Nicole Brossard, a “fragile twenty years”³ of feminism in which to address each other. (This is not to deny past feminists from Sappho to Hildegard of Bingen to Mary Wollstonecraft to Vera Brittain to Elsie Locke; this is only to put the renaissance of a wide-spread feminist movement into post-cataclysm (world war) perspective after the fifties propaganda machine had sent women back to home-exile, motherhood-priorities, displacement from the work-force and exclusion-from-achievement arenas following war-time and post-war inflation of male importance and values; the new elements in the latest renaissance, apart from the numbers of educated women involved, are the hard-won visibility of lesbian feminists in the vanguard of theorists and artists, and government-backed “affirmative action” programmes in some Western countries; there may also be more economically independent women in such countries.) In this country we have a Human Rights Commission which recognises women’s rights as human; we have women’s bookshops, we have women reading to each other, talking work to each other, reading each other’s work; work — writing that is — understood as such by those who can choose the luxury of commitment to art/craft as part of or apart from economic survival. We are crossing territories formerly marked taboo, by our own commitment, and no sky falls . . . Only the reviewers. And someone soon will write a New Zealand version of *Hotv to Suppress* . . . perhaps titled *Why Women Writers Don’t Pass* . . .

As Joanna Russ says “active bigotry is probably fairly rare. **It is also hardly ever necessary**, since the social context is so far from neutral. To act in a way that is both sexist and racist . . . it is only necessary to act in the customary, ordinary, usual, even polite manner.”⁴ Recently I reviewed four books of poetry. Consciously, even carefully, I discussed “the poets”. When I received my printed copy it had been titled *Women Poets* . . . My praise of a Fleur Adcock poem with a MacBeth witches image, three women waiting for a fourth on trial in a custody case,⁵ was cut. Out. Would four *Men Poets* have been so titled? Was the editor “cleaning up” my review by taking out a real-life intrusion on literary convention, was it bad taste to talk about divorce, custody? Yes, yes . . . there were reasons of “space” — so why that poem? Was it as spatially inconvenient to include that poem as it has been to talk about — in a literary context — incest, rape; or women being lovers with each other? Those devastating, profound, life-changing experiences which so many women deal with in secret and hidings . . .

One of C.K. Stead’s spoken criticisms of the *the bone people*⁶ was that it was so violent. And his*own *Smith’s Dream*?⁷ The take-over of a

country, the killing of dissidents, the girl given a hiding by her father for sexual (mis)demeanour? Those imaginative re-creations, as *the bone people*’s child-beatings and aikido fight, are part of the memorable texture of memorable books, their uncompromising good faith towards the truth of experience. Is only the male allowed to explore violence? Is this part of the syndrome whereby *Wuthering Heights* was “a masterpiece if written by a man, shocking or disgusting if written by a woman”? — and the “double standard of content” applies?

This book of Saj’s poems is the work of a woman who has come to publication late, after her nuclear family — if not her community — mothering years, after the liberation movements’ expose of the racist, sexist, homophobic ideology of Western culture. Yet where can the attributes: woman, working class, lesbian, be accorded positive recognition or given an aesthetic response uncontaminated by social misconceptions?

“Every lesbian has been forced to walk past the distorting mirrors of homophobia before she could get down to the real problems of her work. Every lesbian artist knows that when she attempts to embody lesbian sexuality in her work she runs the risk of having it perceived pornographically, if it is not simply denied visibility . . . to choose between writing or painting her truths and keeping her child, she is flung back on the most oppressive ground of maternal guilt . . .”⁸

Economic survival, silencing, the long habits of over half a lifetime’s distractability, responsiveness to any body/thing ahead of writing, the struggle for continuity and fluency . . . are there any advantages for women coming late to writing? Well, sometimes we will be so far out of the social “acceptability” canon we can discard it. Not attempting (male) establishment approval we can be free of limiting models, content limits; we can refuse self-censorship, that squeezing of perimeters into dominant attitudes thus “falsifying one’s own reality, range, vision, truth, voice” which may be a vitiating coercive force on younger or more vulnerable women writers for whom keeping a job or protecting a child/family/public status may be survival essentials.

But our small women’s community can not yet support financially, and even, depending on location, emotionally, our writer-survivors whose lives and work would be less constricted if they had/felt the firm commitment of audience, without which, for the writer there is “a kind of death”.⁹ More education, more contexts, more support for local publisher and bookshop venturers who risk our “not financially viable” material is an obvious answer; as Virginia Woolf wrote, the greatness of literature lies not only in the great writers but also in that “which explains much, and tells much”.¹⁰

We need all our writers, not just to give voice to the “as innately capable: the born to the wrong circumstances, the diminished, the excluded, the lost, the silenced”¹¹ — but to provide a context for other

writers whose “strivings will be amplified, quickened, lucidified, through those of our peers”.¹²

“We want to see thousands of women painters, women poets, expressing **our** anger, realising **our** hopes, confirming **our** lives.”¹³

Especially we need, in our small community, to know that there are writers who are also working class lesbian grandmothers, writing well, from a reality as rich and varied as those of the “isolated”, “anomalous” women of the past.

I met Saj in 1974. Friends Morrigan and Allie had set up the meeting; it was in a spare — and bare — room of the Refuge, an old house made available by the city council to the women’s liberation group who had initiated this first Women’s Refuge and worked hard to make it habitable and welcoming for beaten wives and children with nowhere else to go; it was, too, the only public space for support groups springing up as part of women’s liberation philosophy. This particular meeting was for older lesbian mothers.

Saj was very nervous. I was nervous too, if less so; I felt — a new lesbian solo mum with the whole weight of society’s conditioning on my back — exceedingly non-threatening. As I got to know Saj and her unique blends of confidence and withdrawals, her life story (an almost-completed nursing training, eighteen years marriage and family rearing, an attempt at university English, involvement with alternative schooling for a dyslexic child), I appreciated the courage it had taken for her to come to this meeting. Saj didn’t look back.

The difficulties of leaving the marriage, setting up house as a solo mum, building a network of contacts, were dealt with; later, her Blue House, with a shifting woman-population became a focus for lesbian women, for regular Friday and Saturday night dances and parties, for meetings, for work-gatherings. I remember a dozen or so women putting together the pages of the first *Spiral* on the livingroom floor; I remember the dancing. From my preferred quiet life-style I came knowing this a “safe house” with the only requirements being goodwill and enjoyment. So many of us who had once hated dancing learnt to dance freely and carefreely, losing the self-conscious inhibitions of body-criticisms, of being exposed to others’ eyes.

And Saj was a life-line to younger lesbians, young women who without family or community support might have been or were sometimes in trouble, whose only (sometimes threatened) sense of community centered on the pub. Some of these women still call Saj mum. Their presence, many from workingclass backgrounds, kept our group grounded, the aims of feminism, advancement for all women, in front of us.

As some of us with arts commitments explored women’s arts movement philosophies we called on Saj for support — and for her original outlook and creative approach. She joined in poetry readings; the 1978

Diaries show at the C.S.A. included Saj’s, and Saj’s diary included the doll’s finger and sock dug out of her garden; she participated in the Women Artists group’s Women’s Environment for the 1977 United Women’s Convention and, with friends, contributed to the washingline with its painted sneakers, t-shirts, patched jeans and darned socks — the arts of the community.

Towards the end of the seventies many of our first women’s community shifted to other territory; a new group of women undertook organised activities in Christchurch. Our deep friendships continued but joint activities gave way to personal — economic or emotional — survival. Now we are settled through the islands; our sharing is long-distance but still vital in our life-support systems.

I’ve always liked Saj’s poetry, her ability to speak the “unspeakable” directly and movingly, her subjects rising so naturally out of her life concerns, the integral music of her language. I’m proud to introduce her work to a wider audience.

Heather McPherson

Notes

1. Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (London, The Women’s Press, 1984)
2. Tillie Olsen, ‘One Out of Twelve: Women Who Are Writers in Our Century’ in *Working It Out* (Eds. Sara Ruddick and Pamela Daniels, New York, Pantheon Books, 1977) p. 335
3. Nicole Brossard, *Women and Writing or Identity and Writing* (from seminar, 2nd International Feminist Book Fair, Oslo, 1986)
4. Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, p. 18
5. Fleur Adcock, ‘Witnesses’, from *The Incident Book* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986) p. 52
6. Keri Hulme, *the bone people* (Wellington, Spiral, 1984)
7. C.K. Stead, *Smith's Dream* (Auckland, Longman Paul, 1973)
8. Adrienne Rich, ‘Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women’, foreword to *Working It Out*, p. xxi
9. Olsen, ‘One Out of Twelve: Women Who are Writers in Our Century’, in *Working It Out*, p. 339
10. Virginia Woolf, preface to *Memoirs of the Working Women's Guild*, quoted by Olsen, ‘One Out of Twelve: Women Who are Writers in Our Century’, in *Working It Out*, p. 340
11. Olsen, ‘One Out of Twelve: Women Who Are Writers in Our Century’, in *Working It Out*, p. 335
12. Rich, ‘Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women’, in *Working It Out*, p. xxiii
13. Miriam Schapiro, ‘Notes from a Conversation on Art, Feminism, and Work’, in *Working It Out*, p. 302

The man stirred restlessly in the bed
cut his wrists and quietly bled
all over my clean white sheets.
When next I seek to choose a mate
I'll choose one who never makes
messes on freshly washed sheets.
I'm house-proud I guess
and loathe the mess
of untidily dying people.
If I were free in prison
burning in heaven
frozen in hell
I'd still demand at the end
a bed unpolluted by blood
semen, tears, or prayers.
Taking lovers only in my head
and never blemishing the virgin bed. ❖

Was there?
Was there a leaf?
Was there a leaf
beneath your feet
crushed as you trod
the path softly
towards me.

Did I hear?
Did I hear a bird?
Did I hear a bird call
a leaf fall?
as you trod the path
softly towards me.

Woman you came
with the sigh of a leaf
beneath your feet
the cry of a bird

so gently disturbed,
woman you came
treading the path
towards me. ❖

Jesus! that night hangs
between us
like a sharpened sword
poised, waiting to descend
and cut this relationship
wide open.

That that night had never transpired,
that moon had never risen,
sun never set . . .

Give me time, give me time.
Time to recreate, restore, repair.
Time to get together
the broken pieces.
Give me time, give me time.
Time alone, to think.
Time with you, to talk.
Give me time. ❖

More or Less

"You said you thought sometimes I
was a silly old woman but
then again you loved me."

Silly old woman dancing all night
you hold your own with the young
more or less,
more or less my friend
and have another drink,
lean awhile.

Wise old woman you lend your ear
to the problem my friend
This thing is less or more
more or less
Shall we making it more
retain it
Making it less divide it with me
I shall take half.
Shall we find a tribe
and divide it and divide it again
until the pieces become so small
they disappear,
more or less.

Strong old woman —
"anyone for Indian wrestling?
shall we dig the garden
or have another beer?"
less or more,
more or less.

Loving old woman
your arm hñld many a child

your own —
more or less.

Sad old woman
remembering lonely times with no-one
just the thought coming
sometimes less,
sometimes more.

Silly old woman
you took and you hold it
more or less,
less or more.

But then again you love me
less or more?
More or less?



The coffee boiled
and boiled, I turned —
turned it off —
turned and went —
I went into the bedroom
and found you —
found you there
with disarrayed hair
in the arms of your latest lover.

Shall I?
Shall I explain?
Do you wish me to explain?
The pain your actions cause me. ❖

Amazon Song

Sing
sing me
sing me a song
sing me an Amazon song
sing of the lateness
of time
of regrets
of loves
and of those not loved
Of revolution coming
not fast enough
Of my passing
too quickly
Of young ones growing
not fast enough
too slowly
Of my missing
of you and you and you
and the hugging and kissing
of you and you and you
the sleeping, weeping
with you and you and you
Of the picnics, parties
cold days, wet days
hot days, rotten days
Of our power, strength
Of our weakness and oppression
Of our hopes, dreams,
wild crazy schemes
Sing me on and on and on
Of the children we raised
hoping yet fearing
Of the never-ending caring

Sing of our creativity
destroyed or ignored
of the fight for recognition
of our artists, writers, musicians
slowly banding together
gathering their wimmin strength
Sing of our travelling sisters
meeting, greeting
of visions, missions
Sing on and on
Sing of the ancient ones
who died
Sing a death song
for them
of the knowledge
of the power,
of fear created
in the hearts of men
Sing of the flames
of bodies destroyed
but not spirits
Sing of our religion
preserved secretly
through it all
Sing louder and louder
Sing that the spirits
who departed
will hear
and return
Sing our Amazon song
shake, break
the patriarchal foundation
then sing with joy
and build again
Sing of renewal
of rebirth

Sing
sing me
sing me a song
sing me an Amazon song. ◆

And dreams of—

war, and plaster-cast models of soldiers
propped Beau Geste style
to fool the enemy
and of hand grenades
plastic
yellow and red
wrapped like easter eggs
and of cars
vaguely
and of babies
vaguely
and of you
not at all
and wonder why
vaguely
and am disappointed
really

◆

If I threw you away
what would you say?
“I’ll love you forever
my honey.”
Then jump in your car
and drive away far
and maybe screw with a man
for the money.

All those security deals,
you see how it feels
when they crumble
and turn into dust.
If we keep going this way
then maybe some day
I’ll throw you away
if I must?

◆

Skipping Song for Incest Victim

I hate rats
I hate mice
I hate men
who pretend they're nice.
Be kind to your daddy
be nice to his friends
be good to your brothers
it never ends.

I hate spiders
I hate flies
I hate men
who tell me lies.
You lied to me good
you lied to me well
took away my childhood
and gave me hell.



Autumn

and the leaves are falling

F a l l i n g
F a l l i n g
F a l l i n g

to the ground

and the days grow
shorter
shorter
shorter

all the time

and the sun gets
SMALLER
SMALLER
SMALLER

in the sky

and winter comes
nearer
nearer
NEARER

every day.



Through a godless window
I saw your image
and pursued it.
Don't be afraid.
It is only me
peeping in at
the window of your life.
Like a thief I have come.
But oh,
so guiltily. ❖

Whatcha do, whatcha do?
Killed a cat!
Well how about that!
Whatcha do, whatcha do?
Killed a man!
Shame, shame.
They declared you insane!
But _____
he was only a rat. ❖

You walk with extraordinary grace,
lioness.

Your beauty amazes me.

Tossing your tawny mane
over a bronzed shoulder,
eyeing this predatory jungle
with fearless glance.

The imprint of your feet
carves a track across
my territory.

I gaze warily from
the thicket of my mind,
astounded by your presence. ◆

Womin's place

Screw you man, I've had enough
of all yr shit & yr treating me rough
acting mean & acting tough.

I'm going to be free!

Rejoice, womin. Rejoice.

You'll see —

I'll find a place.

Make a place. A womin's place.

Have a meal, a few cold beers.

Without yr aggression
without yr stares.

Maybe dance or shoot some pool.

It'll be cool man,
real cool.

And you won't be there

with all yr shit
acting mean & acting tough

cause if you come

we'll treat you rough

in our place, our womin's place.

We'll be free, you'll see.

Rejoice womin, rejoice. ◆

Sisters in black
from "dreaming"

That future we speak of —
speak of nothing
of a nothing void.
Sharing a secret sisterhood pact
with those gone before.
Crying for a love
strong enough to retain,
to refrain from,
for love, forever.
Strangers, we do not
wish to be
strangers, but are.
Stranger still the silence
between us all.
Hushing, rushing, shushing
those that cry on their way.
Those that seek too soon,
too publicly.
Do not betray us.
Do not embarrass us.
Die silent and live silent.
Never die articulate
except on hidden scraps
of paper, such as this.
I see us all
with our pile
growing tall.
How tall must mine grow
to warrant, to justify
an end?
Taller still to justify
a beginning, a life.

My friends, tKat I could say

and explain these things to you.
That I love you to death beknown.
That you love me to death unbeknown.
We walk together
but I cry loudly at the injustice
and seek the side path often,
too soon, not enough.
My light, your light.
My pathway yours.
My life, my death,
before you always. ❖

You walk so busy
how come?
Like as if
you are going
somewhere very important.
Am I invited? ◆>

Bad Dreams

I thought to slip gently to sleep
and was surrendering my senses
when my head it seemed
became as four
separate orbiting planes of consciousness
and none revolved
at the other's speed
and none could reunite.
Then I screamed your name
in my fear and terror
and suddenly came together
clutching my errant head
with trembling hands
and repeating your name
over and over
like a holy protective litany ◆

How unobtrusively you crept
into my life.
Once you dwelt and slept
across the hall.
Now, waking beside you
each morning
I find a little more
of you has
crept quietly,
insidiously,
into my room.
Your perfume, make-up
and jewellery
lie beside mine
on the duchess.
Your books shoulder
mine for space
on the bookshelves,
our clothes lie intertwined
in a tangled heap
on the floor.
Are only we having a love affair?
Or are our possessions also?
Now the room even
smells different.
Your presence has permeated
the very air I breathe.
I like it, I love it,
but — how did it happen?
I do not believe
you were even aware of it
until I, feeling you stir
beside me one morning,
showed you and tried to share
my feeling of transformation,
the miracle. ◆

Lay down with me
in sweet green grass
let the hours happily pass
how slowly swiftly time
has flown
how slowly swiftly love
has grown
dreaming quiet idyllic dreams
scheming ideological schemes.
We'll overthrow the system
worship the moon —
the revolution's coming
it must be soon —
meanwhile my love
lie back awhile
how soft your skin
how sweet your smile.
A cottage in the country
just us two
running naked
in the morning dew —
we'll paint a few pictures
maybe write a poem or two. ◆

Apology'

I gave you all I had to give —
if I failed you
it was because of my humanity.
All humanity is weak —
have you not observed it?
My body was not ven⁷ wise
in the ways of love.
My mouth spoke words
now regretted.
My money did not multiply and grow
as plants do.
My wires of communication
rusted and fell
at your feet.
Short-changed. Perhaps you were.

Baby, lover, mother, sister,
comforter and needing comfort,
loving and needing love.
So many roles,
so many expectations
of others and self,
so many betrayals of self and others.

I grieve in my limited sphere.
Woman — I loved you as well as I could. ❖

Last night I dreamt
I killed the man
and possessed the land ❖

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2035-2040

2040-2045

2045-2050



Saj, formerly Gladys Gurney, is now 52, mother thrice, grandmother twice, Faults: smokes and drinks DB. Loves: people, earth, animals, wishes more people would. Ambitions: nil really but one day may surprise her friends and type a novel already written in longhand over twenty years. She's lived in Lyttelton for ten years, seven years with her companion, lover, friend, protagonist, Deane — and struggles to achieve happiness.



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