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VOICES FROM WITHIN

edited by Ann McGovern

Bernadine Adams

Leonore Coons

Glenda Cooper

Clementine Corona

*The
Bedford Hills
Poets*

Susan Hallett

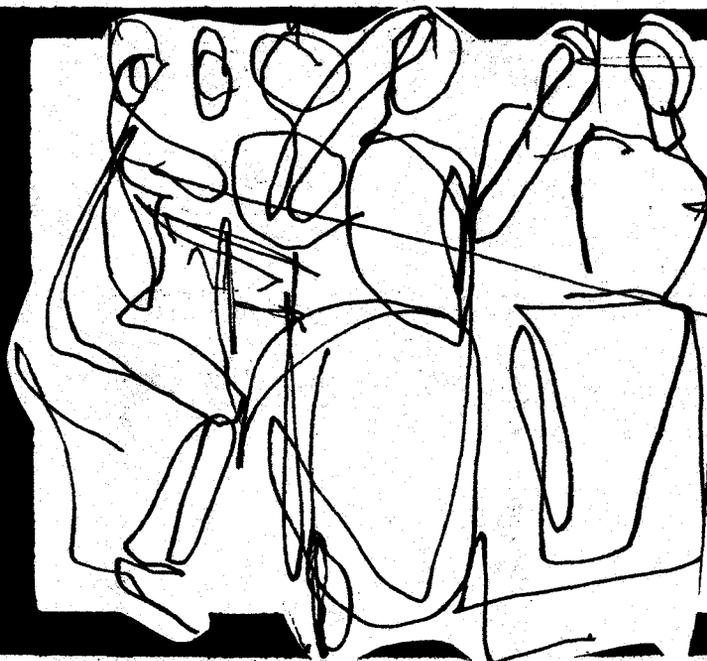
Theresa Simmons

Susan Smith

Constance Walker

THE POETRY OF WOMEN IN PRISON

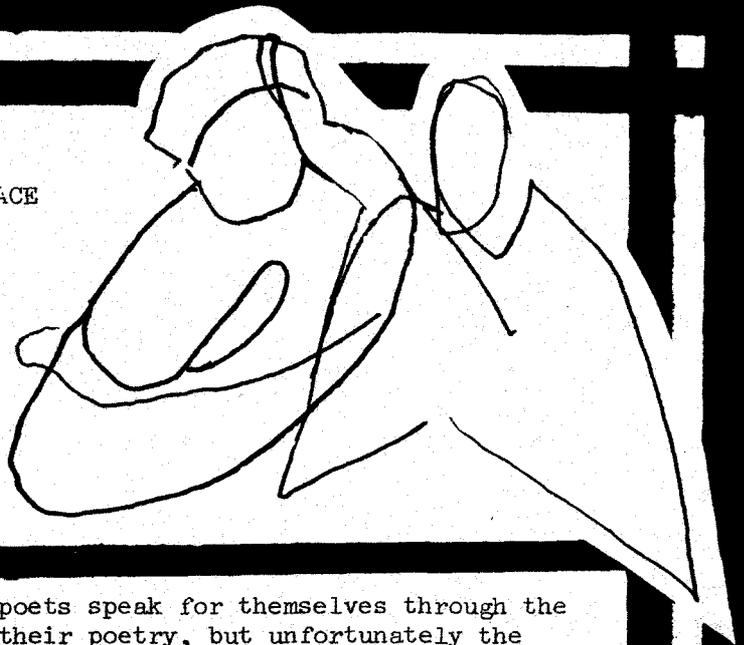
This book is dedicated to our sisters at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility with the hope that their voices from within will shape a song for tomorrow.



Heartfelt thanks to Joan Potter for introducing me to The Long-Termer's Committee at Bedford Hills Prison, to Louise Davidson who helped get this book in shape, to Hope Wurmfeld who photographed the women of The Long-Termer's Committee for promotion of VOICES FROM WITHIN, to Jeanne Hirsch for art work and design, to Mary Lee Lemke for printing, to Valerie Harms for generously publishing this book without profit, and to my loving family and friends who became involved.

--- Ann McGovern

PREFACE



Most poets speak for themselves through the voices of their poetry, but unfortunately the Bedford Hills Poets are not heard -- their voices are stilled within the walls of the prison they live in.

The eight women whose poems are printed here are members of The Long-Termer's Committee at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, New York State's only prison for women.

I first met them in November, 1974. Joan Potter, a Westchester journalist, had written a moving article about the sense of sisterhood she had felt when she visited these women and about the needed changes in prison legislation. I had responded to the article with a small check to help buy stamps for letters the women were writing to Albany. Joan had phoned to thank me on their behalf and we began talking about the prisoners, and about writing. One thing led to another until it led me to the locked steel doors of Bedford Hills Prison where I was scanned, searched, cleared and ushered into the bare room to meet the women who would soon become my friends.

Oh those old Hollywood prison movies: tough Susan Hayward-type prisoners, striped uniforms, scarred faces, heavy shoes and hard as steel all the way through. It took less than five minutes to shatter those stereotypes forever. These are intelligent, gentle, sensitive women whose support of each other makes them rare models of how women should treat one another. I didn't meet Leonore Coons, chairperson of The Long Termer's Committee that night. She was in the hospital recovering from giving a kidney to help her dying brother.

As I drove home that cold November night along the winding roads of beautiful Bedford Hills, warm in my heated car, I thought of my freedom in a new, uneasy way.

I thought of my new friends who would be walking the concrete floors of the long, bleak corridors to their small rooms where iron doors would clang shut--locked up until early morning when they would be awakened by shrill blasts to a new day that would be the same as the day before, where all tomorrows are like all yesterdays.

During the next months I went to the prison to start "writing nights". I tried different kinds of writing with the women -- dialogues, descriptions, haiku poetry -- but nothing worked as magically as Kenneth Koch's poetry-teaching techniques described in his book, WISHES, LIES AND DREAMS. I had not taught poetry before, but using Koch's techniques and variations, anyone can inspire good poetry. With the exception of Glenda Cooper, the women had not written poetry before, but now they are reaching into their deepest places and expressing their wishes, despair, feelings, hopes and yes, even laughter, in spontaneous, creative, shared writing.

Here is how we work on our poetry nights: I hand out sheets of paper but my friends are wiser in the knowledge of what value means. Why use a whole sheet of paper for a few lines? They tear the paper into halves and quarters knowing that a pack of paper could cost 75¢ -- about what they earn for a full day's work in the prison laundry or cutting rooms or kitchen.

I prepare the themes at home and write examples of each before I go to the prison. The first poem we usually do together -- a kind of warm-up exercise, with each woman writing one line. The women write quickly and spontaneously. Each exercise takes about five minutes of writing time. I tell them they don't have to sign their names to their work if they so choose. They hand them to me, I shuffle them and read them aloud. The women comment constructively and often the themes bring out pent-up feelings to be talked about. In time, they recognize each other's style and the criticisms become more sophisticated. Sometimes I bring in poems with similar themes to read aloud. I collect all their small pieces of paper and when I get home I type them and make copies for each woman. Soon their notebooks are bulging with work. Some of the women create in between our visits too -- essays, poems, autobiographical sketches, and these too, I type up and add comments.

By now the women and I share more than our writing experiences. Sometimes there is time for good talk. We rap about many things: old TV movies, their prison work, my kids, their kids (about 80% of women in prison are mothers). Bernadine Adams has discovered Anne Sexton's poetry. Susan Hallett talks about a literature course she once took in college. For fleeting moments, because we are sharing mutual interests warmly and naturally, I forget where I am. But that moment can't last. When we talk about our kids and family, I know I can see mine anytime; when we talk about poets, I know I am free to get to a bookstore or a library and read their work.

9:30 and the guard announces time is up. Whose time? It's never the right time. Bernadine is telling me about her horticulture course she's taking at the prison and I want to hear more. She writes about it:

I'm going to take some seeds, soil and fertilizer, and cultivate. That's getting down to basics. I'm sure love, patience, gentleness, joy, faithfulness and self-control will be demonstrated with my plants and myself reflecting God's goodness."

The women have asked me to include their major goals in this book. They've been hard at work to see them realized. Here they are, as stated in the position paper they wrote:

"WE SEEK TO RELIEVE THE UNJUST AND FRUSTRATING IMPACT OF THE DISPARITY BETWEEN SENTENCES (OF PEOPLE CONVICTED OF THE SAME CRIME). WE SEEK TO GIVE MEANING TO WORDS SUCH AS 'REHABILITATION'. WE SEEK HOPE AND INCENTIVE FOR THOSE IN PRISON. WE SEEK TO MAINTAIN TIES WITH OUR FAMILIES. WE ASK MODIFICATION OF THE LAW:

(1) to provide for periodic parole board review of each inmate, commencing at the end of the third year of incarceration;

(2) to restore 'good-time' allowances so that long-term inmates will have the incentive, by progress in prison, to reduce the minimum duration of sentences.

(3) to broaden eligibility for temporary release in cases of medical or family catastrophe, so that prisoners -- particularly those far from their homes -- can better maintain family ties."

In one of her poems, Susan Hallett wrote these lines:

*"Tomorrow shows no promise
To change and let me live again."*

Your help could make all the difference in the world.
Your help could change on little word of her poem to read:

*"Tomorrow shows a promise
To change and let me live again."*

The last paragraph of the Long Termer's Committee position paper speaks for itself.

"We need your help!!! We need advice, support, direction. For more than a year now, we have been sending correspondence to legislators, other influential individuals, and groups, requesting assistance and support.

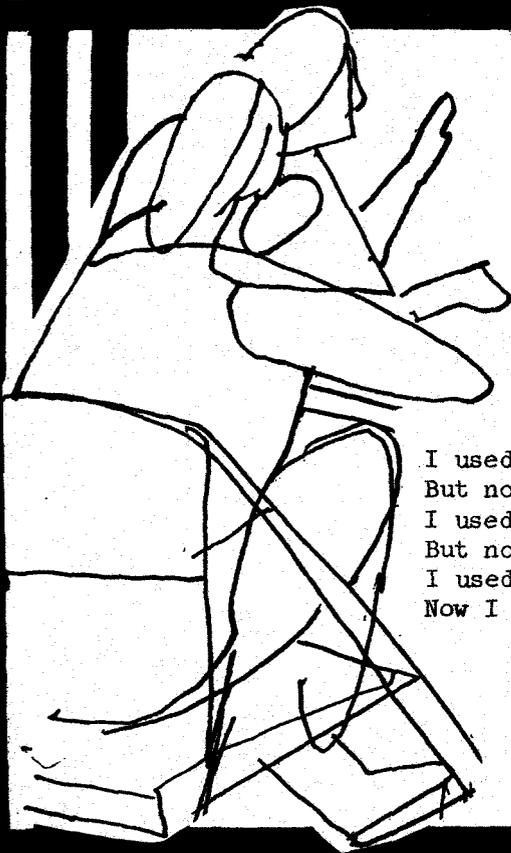
We ask you to help us into the community of which you are a member. We are not sitting around in here planning crimes to be committed upon our release. We are really not so different from you. Each of us is a human being who has done something wrong, and is being punished for it, and is trying to rebuild her own life and to help each other do so. We anticipate being free one day, free to be with our families and to enjoy the simple things in life like going to a movie, or hugging a child, or just walking in the rain."

You can help by buying extra copies of VOICES FROM WITHIN. Any profits from the sale of this booklet will go into the fund for the Long Termer's Committee to help make their goals a reality. For copies, send \$2.00 to MAGIC CIRCLE PRESS, 10 Hyde Ridge Road, Weston, Connecticut 06880.

--- Ann McGovern
April, 1975

I USED TO

"I used to...but now..." poetry exercise brought different responses: change, recollections, details of prison life. Susan Hallett's line: "I used to call but now I write" refers to the prison ruling of four calls a month. Each poetry exercise was a spontaneous experience - taking no more than five minutes.

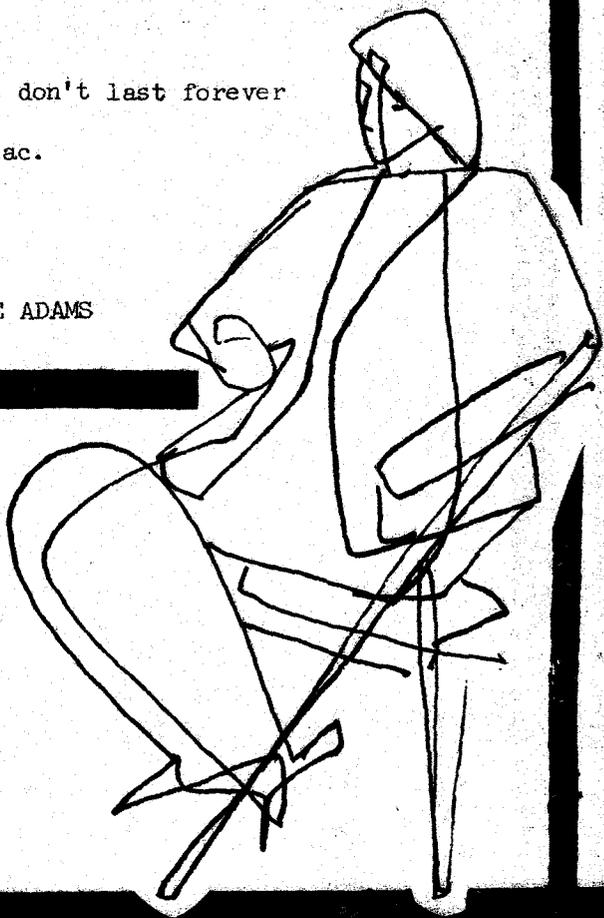


I used to think I couldn't
But now I know I can.
I used to think it was simple
But now I know how really difficult it is.
I used to not have to try at all
Now I try too hard.

SUSAN SMITH

I used to think good things don't last forever
I used to dance all night.
I used to drive like a maniac.
I used to love to travel.
I used to be fast.

BERNADINE ADAMS



I used to laugh but now I cry
I used to be free but now I'm a prisoner
I used to flee headlong but now I stop and think
I used to walk in the snow but now I walk on cold ground
I used to call but now I write.

SUSAN HALLETT

OBJECTS

We had fun with this exercise. Fun is a rare commodity at Bedford Hills Prison.

Bed

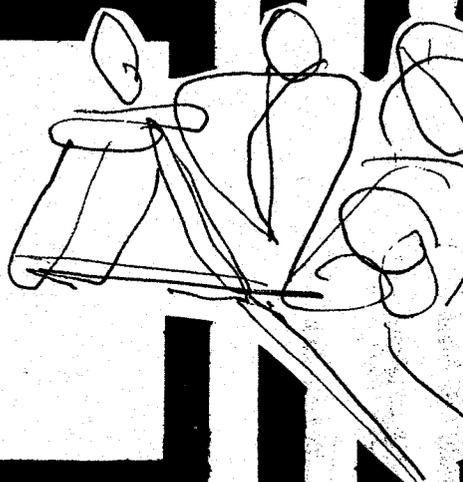
I am your bed, and toots, one day I'll let you down!
You sit on me, put your smelly feet on me and tonight
I'll groan when you lay on me.
I'm hard as a rock, never bending, because of that
board you put on my "spine."
I'll fight you, but you always win. You'll see,
one day I'll fall and sorry you will be!

SUSAN HALLETT

Cigarette

I am the cigarette
You are the puffer
You keep smoking me
and you gonna suffer -

LEGNORE COONS



Shoes

If I were your shoes I would be very soft and flexible.
I would hug your feet to the end in a very gentle way.
When you retire at night, I would wait patiently at your
bedside --
in clear view, so that you wouldn't pass me by when you
awake.
And we would continue on our journey to the end...

BERNADINE ADAMS

Bed

I am Theresa's bed and I'm bumpy, lumpy and hard
but she sleeps very well in me.

THERESA SIMMONS

IF I WERE THE SNOW

Glenda Cooper is a fine poet. She prefers to write slowly and in private moments. The others wrote in our usual five-minute spontaneous fashion.

If I were the snow I wouldn't fall in the city.
I would fall on the highest mountain top
and not be troublesome to anyone.
Whoever wanted to be with me could climb me,
leaving their snow plows behind,
bringing only their sleds or ski equipment
and glide with me, gracefully, in serenity.

BERNADINE ADAMS

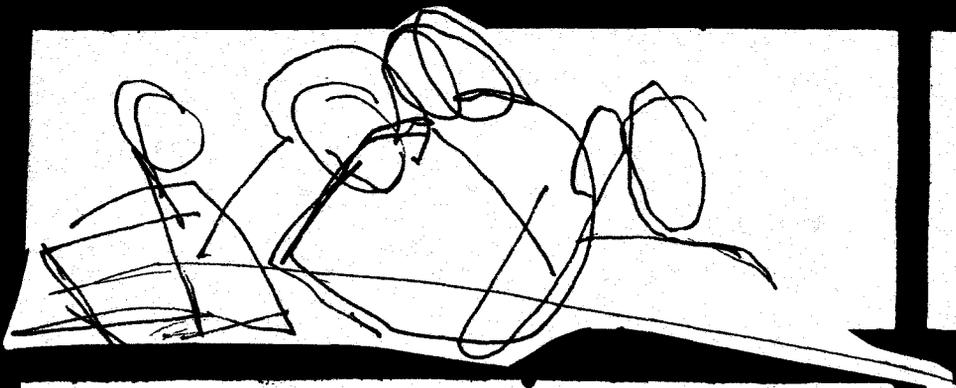


God, how dirty your ground is!
I want to spread my freshness
To make the earth beautiful,
To fall on brown and transform it all
to newness,
Too soon I'll melt, but give way to
greenness.

SUSAN HALLETT

I am the snow and I want to go on and on and on.

THERESA SIMMONS



If I were the snow I would like to be different from the snow today,

spread over the ground like a threadbare sheet,
soiled and worn by mud and feet.

I'd be like the snow I knew as a child.

smooth and heavy on top of the field
that could only be crossed with snowshoes and skis.

I'd be the mountainous snowbanks, many feet high,
with icy crusts that wouldn't cave in,
shining and glittering to the moon or the sun.

I'd be the soft snowflakes, with different designs,
whispering and rustling down past the trees,
quieted only by the evergreens.

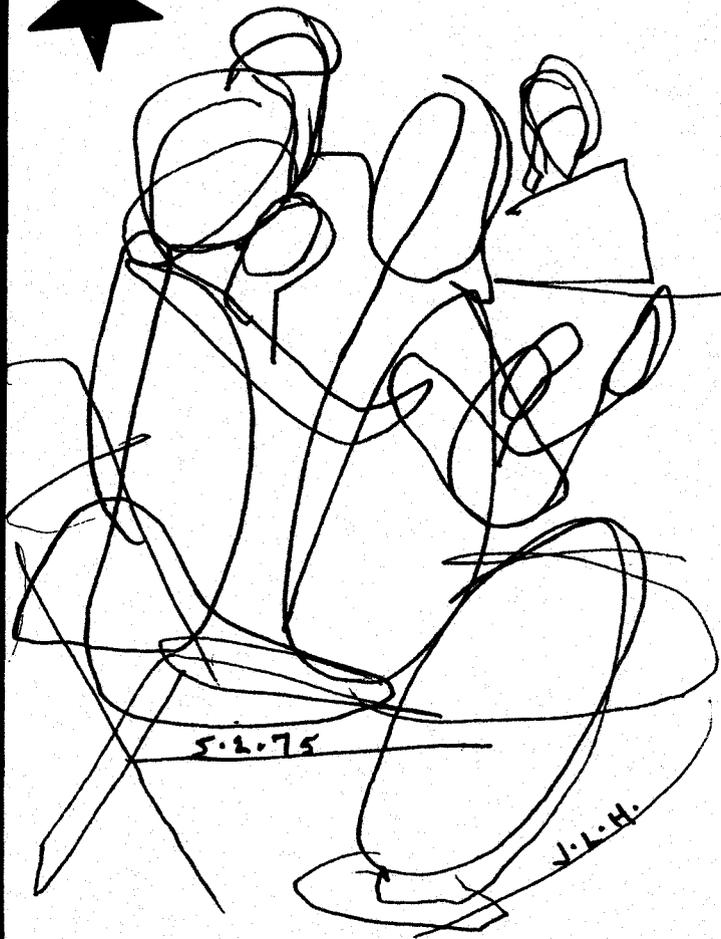
I'd be the snowman,
standing alone in the middle of a road,
paved so crooked by rolled-up snow,
as if he weren't sure which way he should go.

I'd be the snowballs used to make wars,
and the silly snow-forts that would always collapse,
ending the battles only children play well.

If I were the snow I would have to be different from
the snow today,

I'd be like the snow I knew as a child -
if I were the snow.

GLEENDA COOPER



5.2.75

J.L.H.



A STAR

Theresa Simmons extended the "If I were..." approach to this exercise.



Everybody loves a star,
Shining bright,
In the limelight.

BERNADINE ADAMS

I am a falling star
and I want to fall where you are.

THERESA SIMMONS

TAP, TAP

I took a pencil and tapped it on the table, and asked the poets to write what the tapping evoked. The response, as usual, was varied and immediate. Constance Walker is a guard who often joins us in writing poetry.

Tap tap I went but
Tap tap tap tap. I never did get a
Tap tap back.

THERESA SIMMONS

Rap Rap-a-tap, tum
Would somebody please give the
drummer some?
What is it he wants?
Recognition? -Or perhaps a new drum?
He'll most certainly need one if he continues with that
Rap Rap-a-tap tap, tum.

BERNADINE ADAMS

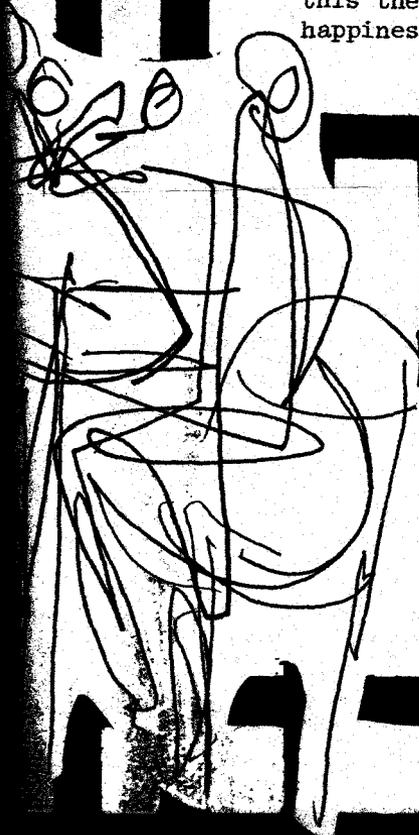


Ah - The sound of the judge's gavel
Ordering the courtroom's attention.
Ah - The sound of my heartbeat
Awaiting the decision.
Ah - The sound of my future
Beating away. I stand convicted
for Life.

LEONORE COONS

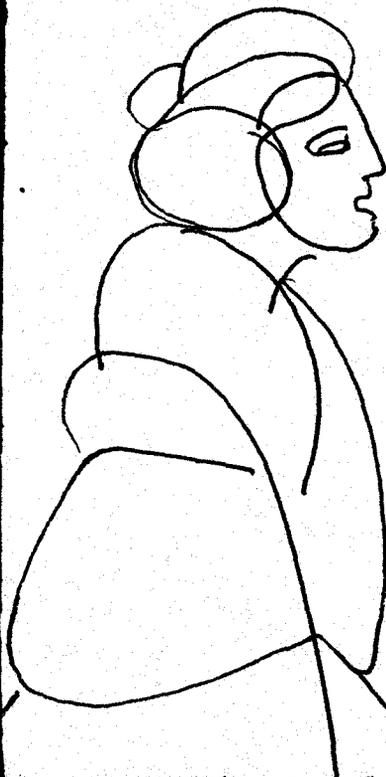
Tap Tap ... will today end and
tomorrow begin ... Tap Tap ... who
will leave today ... Tap Tap ... is
there someone that can help
here, never to return ... Tap Tap ... is
this the end ... Tap Tap ... will
happiness begin ...

CONSTANCE WALKER



THE SEA

*The sea seen as a new birth, as a yearning for freedom,
as awesome and strange.*



The sea is everything that is
and all that ever shall be.

Grab a piece of earth.
Take it out, bring it back.
A new birth.

Don't you believe me?
Try drifting out to sea,
There you go, to and fro,
Reaching out and back to shore.

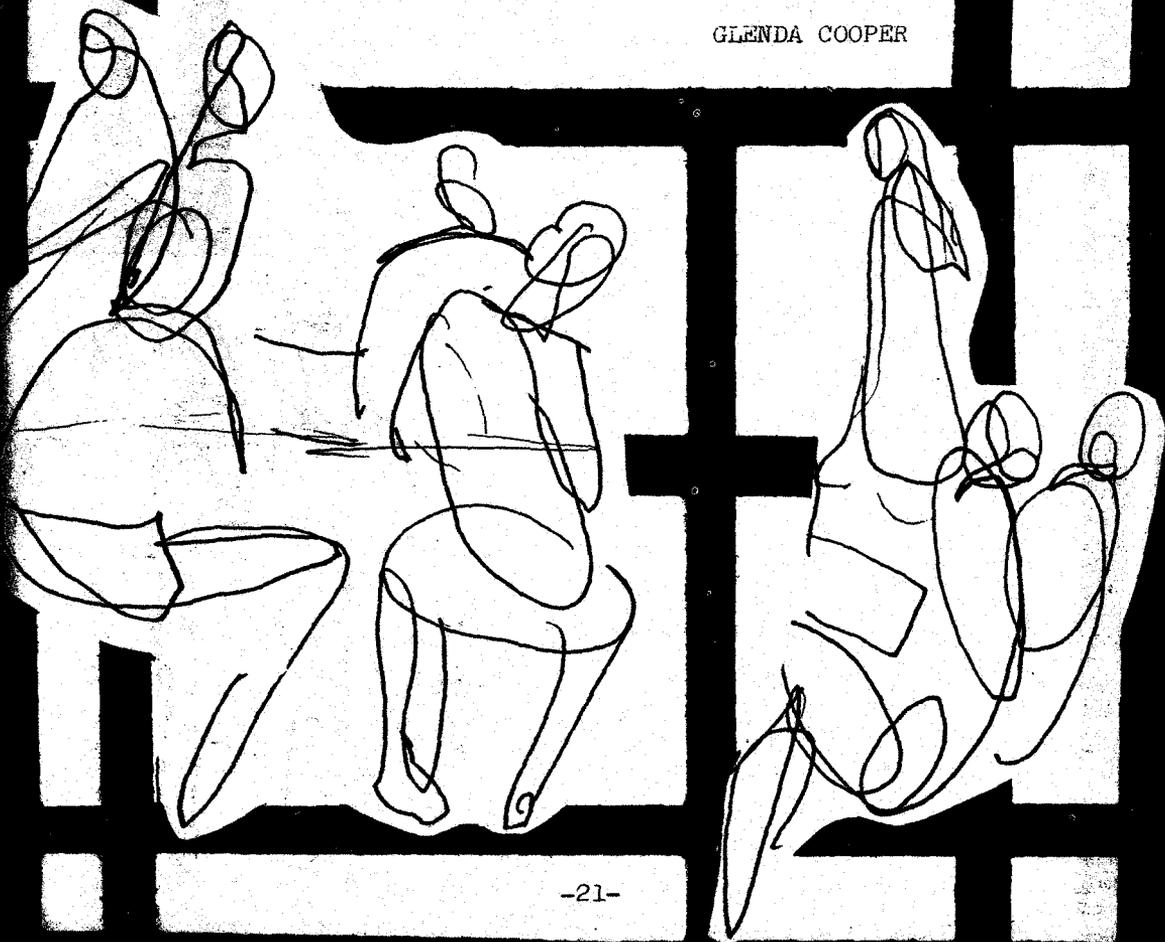
BERNADINE ADAMS

I have always wanted to be like the sea,
Forever going.

THERESA SIMMONS

The sea to me is an awesome world,
Full of strange creatures I don't want to know.

GLEND A COOPER



I SEEM TO BE ... BUT REALLY I AM

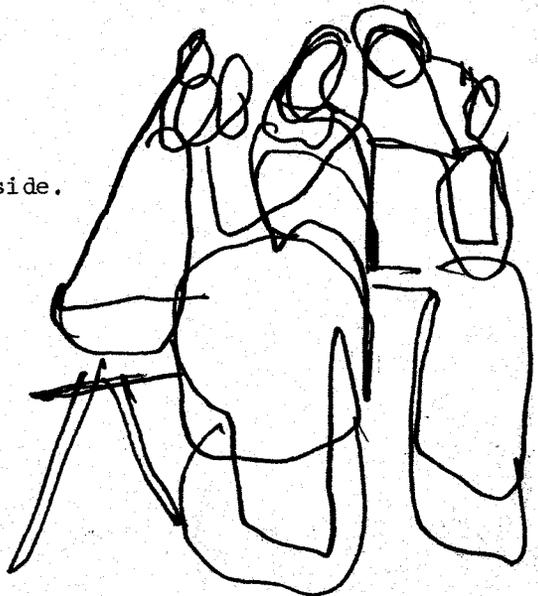
At 68, Clementine Corona is the oldest member of the Long-Termer's Committee. She enjoys our poetry sessions, but prefers to listen and comment rather than write. She was pleased with her poem, the first she ever wrote.

I seem to be two persons to some but I'm only one.

BERNADINE ADAMS

I seem to be fat,
but there's a skinny me locked inside.
I seem to play the jester
but I have depth no one sees.
I seem to be happy
but really I am sad.
I seem to be happy with my job
but I hate it.

SUSAN HALLETT

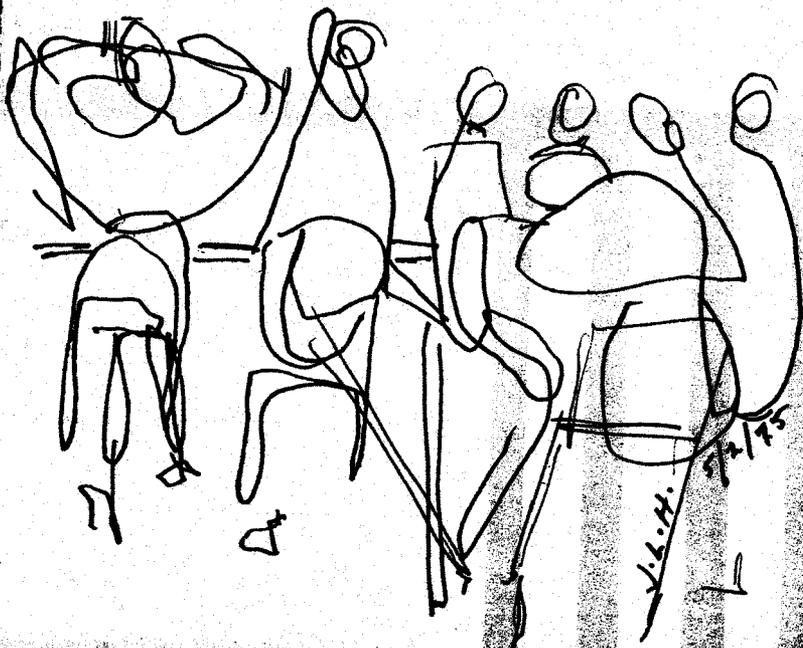


I seem to be a number.
I realize after 10 years I have a number.
But really I am very proud of myself.

CLEMENTINE CORONA

She seems to be happy today
because she got a letter.
She seems to be gay today
she had a visit.
She seems to be cheerful today
She made a phone call.
Look a little closer.
There is a tear.

LEONORE COONS



DREAMING

I prefaced this exercise by saying that these poems could be as wild and as far-out as dreams sometimes are -- but the dreamers at Bedford Hills awake to a harsh reality ... which their poems reflect.

When I do dream it is almost the same dream
about a tall dark man carrying me away to some secluded place
and making mad love to me.

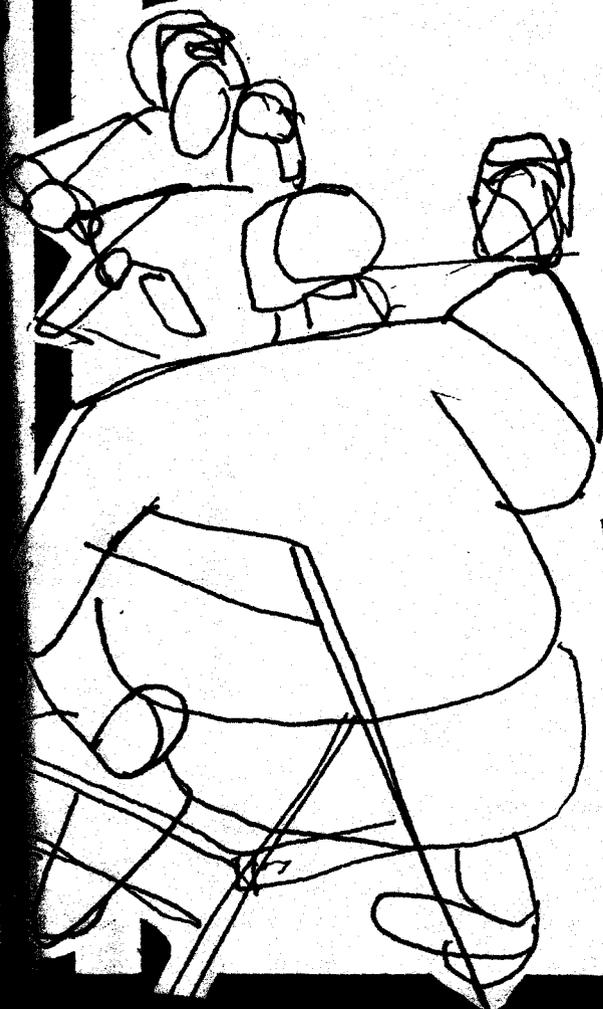
THERESA SIMMONS

We ran, laughed and shouted.
It rained, yet the day was bright.
I saw the early dawn, the noon sun
The stars and the moon.
Then I awoke to prison walls.

LEONORE COONS

Dreams are illusions,
causes a bit of confusion.
When one tries to materialize one that was really good,
and it doesn't work like she thinks it should.
I prefer realizing the dream to spiritualized thought.
That clarifies an illusion as nothing.

BERNADINE ADAMS



What a wonderful dream.
I wish I could dream.
If only my dream would come true.
In the morning I would not be so blue.

SUSAN SMITH

IF I WERE A SONG

In a way a song is a release, a kind of joyful freedom which many of these poems evoke.

If I were a song,
I would be a jolly song.
I would be sung in the shower.
I would be sung in the tub.
I would inspire the world,
And everyone who heard me
Would be happy and gay.

SUSAN SMITH

If I were a song I'd sing about love, not hate,
Not wars, nothing but love love love.

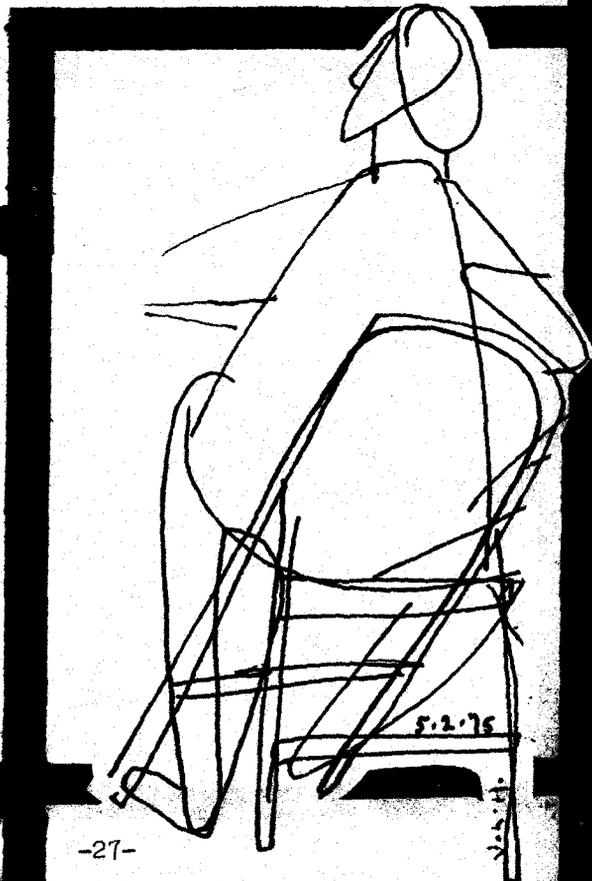
THERESA SIMMONS

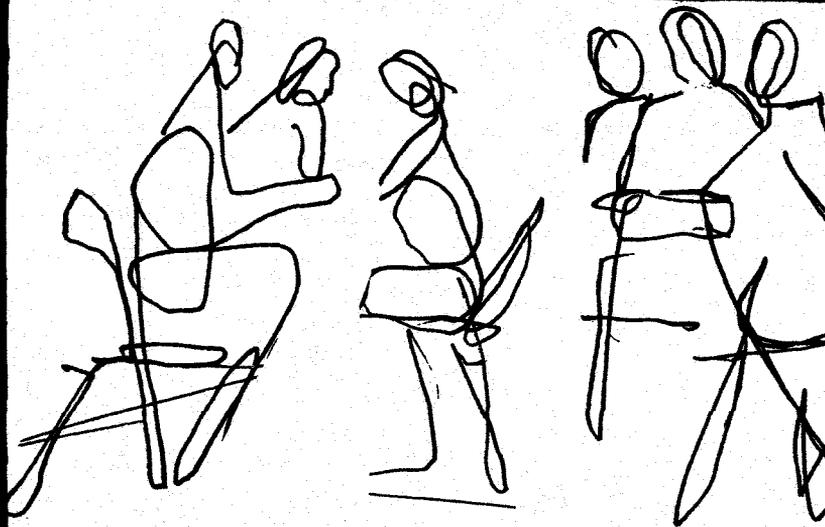
If I were a song,
I would sing early in the morning like the birds.
If I were a song
I would play pretty melodies for lovers.
I would sing songs of joy and love all the day long.

LEONORE COONS

If I were a song I would greet you in the morning,
Caress you all through the day.
And at night you would reflect on the mellow day we
spent together
-- good vibes.

BERNADINE ADAMS





If I were a song, I'd be clear and loud
I'd throw my words in the middle of a crowd.
I'd roar like thunder at each rising wrong,
And scream like a siren at any injustice.
I'd drum like the rain on stubbornness,
And stab like lightning at vanities.
If I were a song I would be firm,
But most important of all, I would be heard.

GLEND A COOPER

If I were a song
I'd wail and roar
If I were a song, I'd never be flat,
And if you sing me wrong, I'll die.
If I were a song
I'd be a ballad sad and blue.

SUSAN HALLETT

THE MANY FACES OF A SMALL BOY

Glenda Cooper wrote this apart from our spontaneous poetry sessions. She is constantly growing as a poet.

Have you ever watched a very small boy
his face all filled with wonder and joy
as he watched in awe
the very first caterpillar he ever saw?
One look in his eyes and it was easy to see
that he had just solved a deep mystery.
The reason God made bugs was so that boys
could have their very own "real live toy".
Can you remember his face when he did the strip
out in the yard and then gave you the slip?
And how high he danced
when you finally managed to put back his pants?
You couldn't have missed the love on his face
when he handed you grass for your very best vase.
Or his look that day when he locked you outdoors
Then drank with the kittens down on all fours.
Remember the day he was found in the tub
wearing only a shirt and trying to scrub
and there was your soap - the whole giant box -
in with his can of mud and collection of rocks?
When you remember these faces
you'll remember your thoughts
when your neighbor said -
"Well, he's past the age when my boy talked."

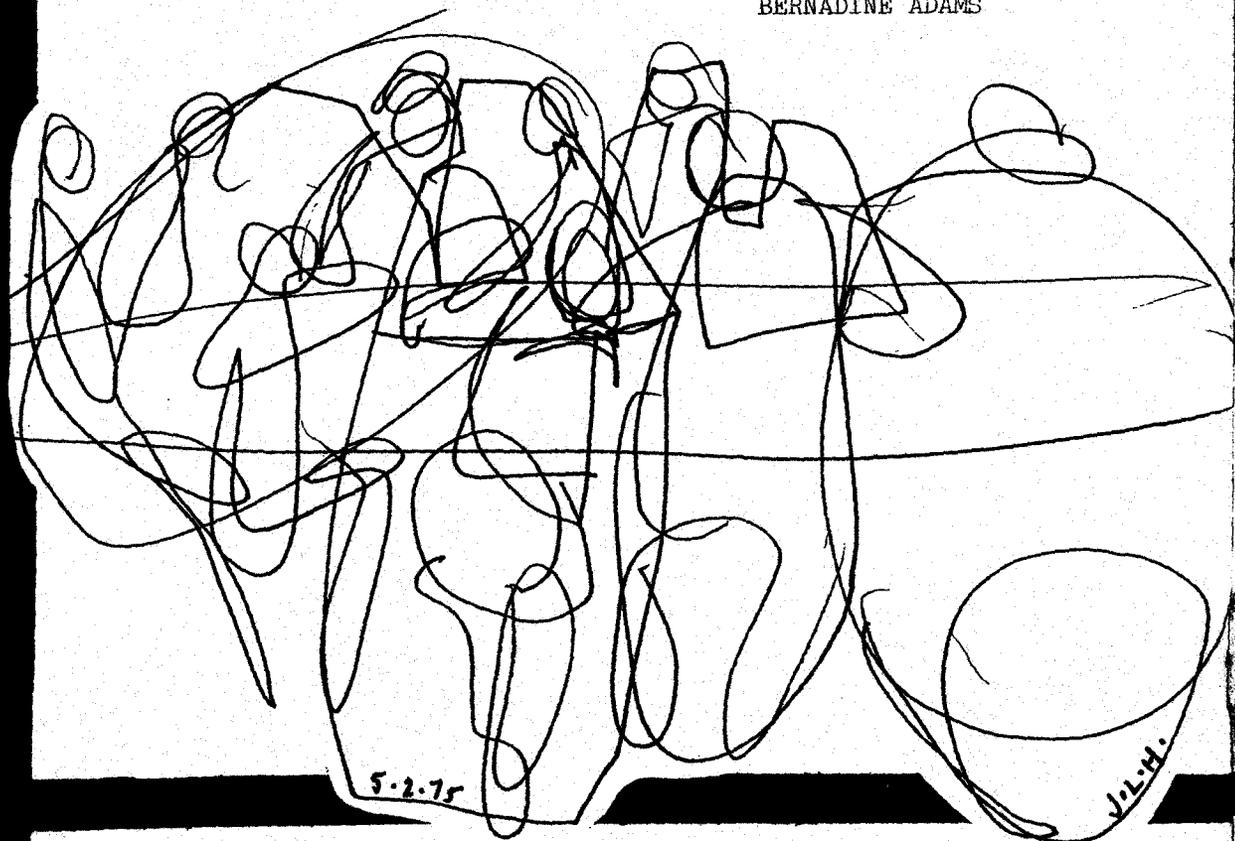
GLEND A COOPER

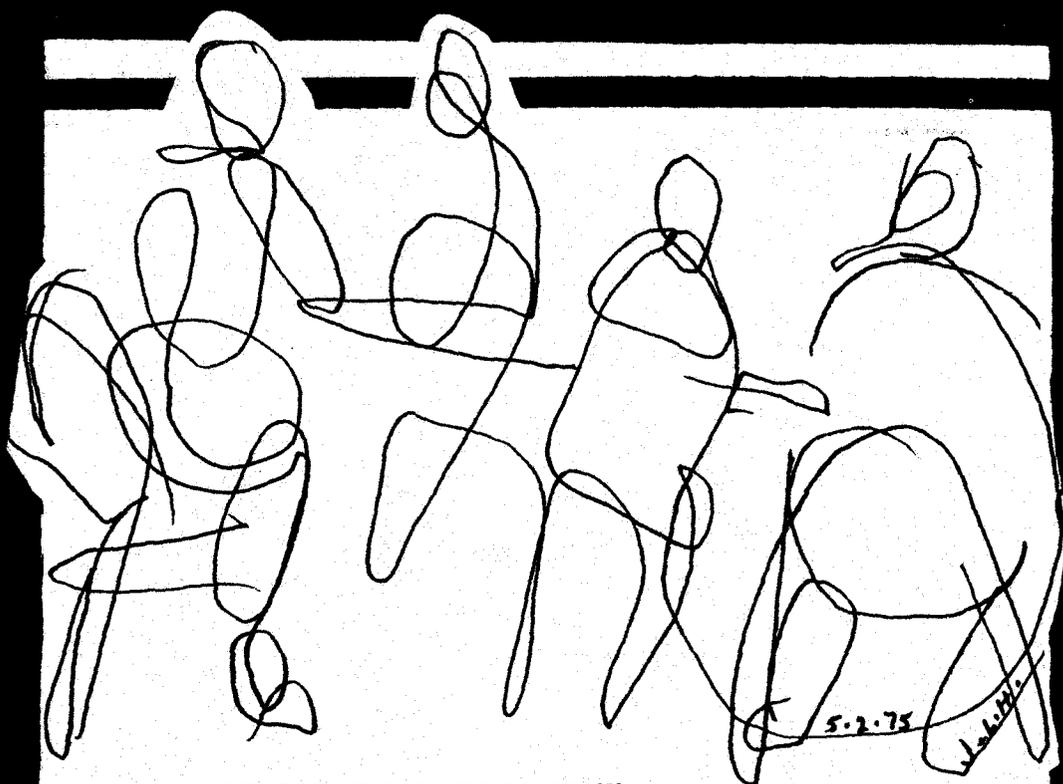
FEELING BAD OR MAD OR SAD OR GLAD

*These stretched from feeling to feeling, but Bernadine
Adams summed up what many feel.*

Feeling mad!
And that's really sad, because
There's not much I can do about it.
I've cried about it, laughed about it too.
I roll with this punch.
I won't give in, would you?

BERNADINE ADAMS





YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

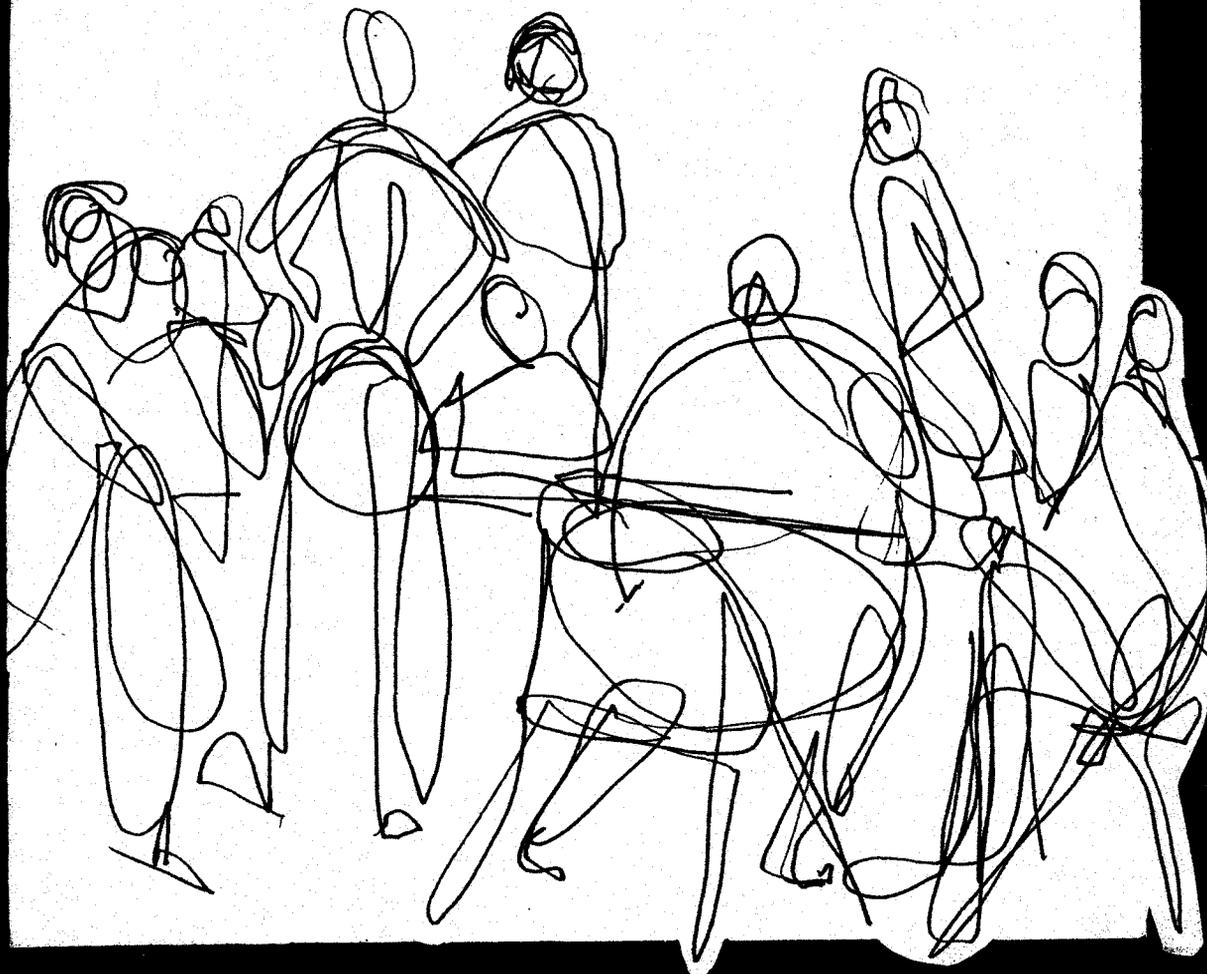
This speaks for itself and brought forth rarely-spoken wells of feeling.

Yesterday was long and fast
Today boring and slow
Tomorrow shows no promise
To change and let me live again.

SUSAN HALLETT

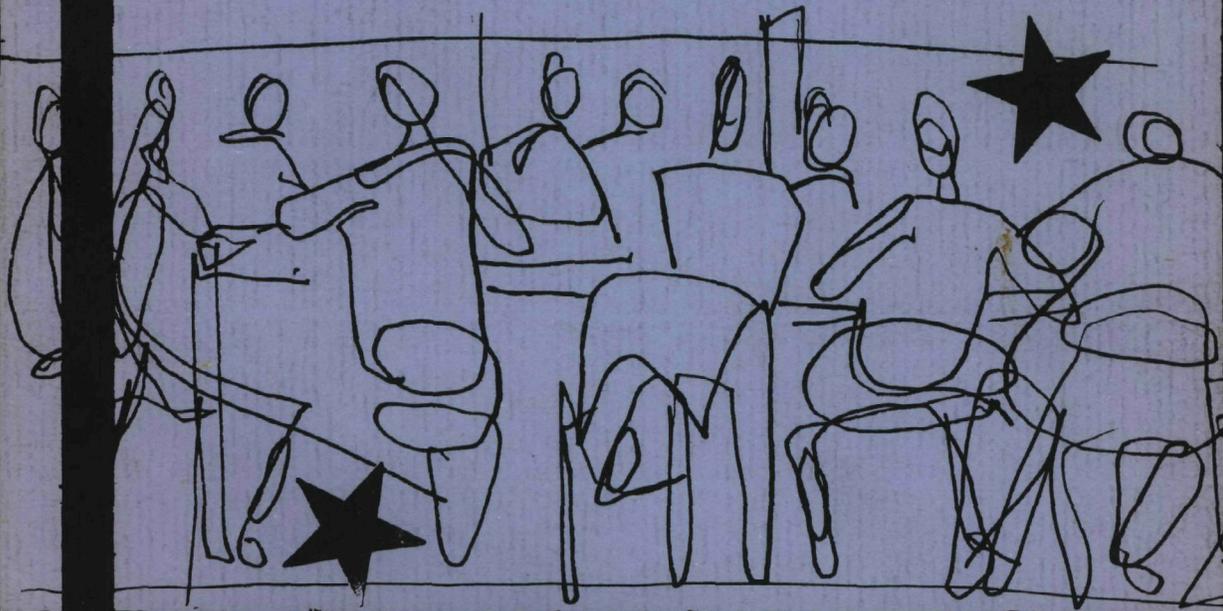
Yesterday I supposed.
Today I realize.
Tomorrow I'll actualize.

BERNADINE ADAMS



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