

The Rhetoric of Love.

By Karen Heise

I was furious! Words—damn them all! I drove out of the parking lot in a spray of exhaust, tires screeching on the pavement, and shot into the feeder lane. My eyes glanced over and over at the pink piece of paper I had flung onto the seat, the cause of my anger: “We regret to inform you that the company will be downsizing due to the downturn in economic factors in the technology sector. You may pick up your severance packet on Friday. We wish you the best of luck in your next employment endeavor.” How about, “We’re going broke, so we have to lay you off. See ya!”?

I was jolted out of my rage by more screeching tires and honking horns. I had just sailed through a stoplight at one of the busiest intersections in town! I narrowly missed colliding with two cars—one on either side—and hadn’t even touched the brakes. Now it was time for me to pull over.

I whipped into a convenience store and parked on the side of the building, hung my head in my hands and cried. It wasn’t so much for the job—well, maybe it was—but for the shock of what had just happened to me. I could have been injured or killed, or seriously harmed someone else, all because I wasn’t paying attention. I had to get a grip before I continued home—and home, unfortunately, was across town, a good 45-minute drive in passable rush-hour traffic.

I was startled by a tap on my window. An old guy in a flannel shirt and jeans was looking at me. I rolled my window down just enough to see what he wanted. I was embarrassed.

“Hey, miss, can you spare some change?”

“Uh, no. I’m sorry,” I said, wiping away the tears as fast as I could and rolled up the window so he would go away. When I looked at the severance note the tears just started all over again, so I crumpled it up and got out of the car to throw it in the trash. There goes my nice 50k a year salary. Here come the collection agencies. Hell, my car still smelled new. So much for the “dot-bomb” revolution. I was beginning to get a little sick of being a casualty to revolutions and wars.

I finally joined the traffic again, paying better attention. Why can’t people just say what they mean and mean what they say? *You hypocrite!* my mind assailed me. *You didn’t do a very good job of that in your marriage, did you?* If I had, I would have just said to the man relentlessly pursuing me, “Look, I think I’m gay, and until I get this worked out, we’d better not consider this at all.”

Instead, I said the stupidest words possible, under pressure to do the “right” thing: “I do.”

I stepped through the door of Kindred Spirits, my favorite bar. K. D. Lang was blaring, a tune called “Save Me,” a sultry, lush slow-dancing tempter of a song. I immediately felt better. In the dim light I homed in on a place at the bar and ordered a beer. The place wasn’t full, but since it was a Thursday—I had to push away the reality of my Friday—I knew the bar would be packed by ten or eleven. I was pleased to hear they were apparently playing cuts from Lang’s *Ingenue* album. *Why hurt yourself/Can your mind conceal what the mind of love reveals?* she sang. Damn good question. I surely didn’t have the answer.

As I nursed my beer I noticed a woman two stools on my right. She appeared to be alone, too. She was pretty in a sort of plain way, her shoulder-length blondish hair framing a square but serene-looking face, as much as I could see. I hoped we could eventually strike up some kind of conversation, but for now I preferred to just sit quietly instead of engaging in the typical do-you-come-here-often banter. But K. D. Lang wasn’t helping one bit.

I was about to order another beer when the barkeep slid one in front of me, nodding at the lady to my right. She’d just bought me a drink. This might shape up to be a great evening after all.

I caught her eye, nodded my appreciation, and pointed to the chair between us. She wanted me to move, and I was happy to oblige. I stuck out my hand. “I’m Diane. Thanks for the beer. Next one’s on me.”

“Okay, and you’re welcome. I’m Trish.”

Her touch was a welcome balm on my aching soul. The conversation died and I wanted to revive it before it moved beyond saving; I searched frantically for something to say.

“Looks like you’ve had a rough day,” she said, relieving the silence.

“Yeah. I got canned today; the Internet consulting firm I work—*worked*—for just went belly-up.”

“Mmm. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I came here to sort of hash it out, I guess.”

She nodded, then asked what it was I did, exactly. I had to think about that one.

“I sort of wrote copy, built pages, checked platform programming, helped get other businesses up and running—a little of everything.”

“Sort of?”

I looked into her eyes for the first time. They were steady, gray, and safe. “Well, I guess I

did do all that, huh.”

“Sounds like it to me.”

K.D. Lang’s “Constant Craving” had begun. The music was getting louder, a perfect soundtrack for my soul. Where had the time gone? Trish shouted near my ear, “Let’s get a table.” We left the bar and found a spot in the corner. She set a large black briefcase into the empty chair. I wondered what was in it and why she didn’t leave it in her car. I asked her what she did for a living.

“I teach over at Rawlings. New this year.”

It struck me as strange that a community college teacher would be hanging out in a lesbian bar, but then, why not? *Maybe a great magnet pulls/All souls towards truth* Lang’s clear voice belted out. I found it increasingly hard to sit still. “What do you teach?”

“Rhetoric.”

“What is that?” I’d heard the word before, vaguely sure of what it meant, but had no idea anyone would actually want to teach it.

“Well,” she said, leaning back her chair, “I guess at its simplest definition it’s the art of persuasion ... but I’ve never been quite satisfied with that.”

My mind hung on “the art of persuasion”; I became both excited and disturbed by the thought that this intriguing woman could teach persuasion. For what cause? To whom? For what outcome?

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s so much more than that. It is persuasion, but also a way of getting at the real truth of things—which has been at the core of the dispute forever. Our notions of truth keep changing.”

I was becoming fairly enthralled both by her and the subject matter. Melissa Etheridge’s “If I Only Wanted To” began to hammer relentlessly, persuasion personified. I motioned for her to continue.

“What’s been argued, among other things, is can we know truth—is it “out there,” or is it the product of our behavior. In other words, is truth an absolute, or is it conditional?” She had leaned forward across the table, but stopped suddenly, smiling. “Sorry. I don’t mean to hold class. I’m off work, after all, but I just get carried away.”

I assured her it was fine. “I did ask you, and I really don’t know much about the use of words, and nothing about rhetoric.” Then I waved down a waitress for a new round of drinks and excused myself to the bathroom. The bar was already filling up. My errand took longer than I

expected, and a sudden fear seized me that she would be gone when I got back. I searched frantically over the swirling mass of women's faces and found hers at last. I was happy to be wrong.

"So, what's your version of truth?" Trish asked. "Tell me, and then I'll shut up about my job."

I told her I'd never really thought about it. "The use of words, I mean, the incorrect use of them ... no, now I sound like an English teacher! I mean to say that I wish words were just used in a direct way—" and then I remembered my own previous use of them, destined to forever dog me, and it made me a little sick.

"They're malleable, for sure!" Trish laughed. I had the distinct impression that she'd seen the cloud cover my face, because she then beckoned me wordlessly toward the half-full dance floor. Rescued from the mire of words, we danced and joked the rest of the night away. The next thing I knew, it was 2 a.m. and the bar was closing. We made our way out into the parking lot, which by now was mostly empty.

"It's been great, really great," she said, taking my hands in hers.

"Me, too," I said. Words seemed destined to forever fail me when I needed them most. From somewhere across the city, the vague sound of a siren reached us.

"I'd like to see you again," Trish said.

"So would I."

We both laughed and she pulled me into her arms. Our hug was long and intense, as only two women can give. We made plans to meet again over the weekend, then went to our cars with the utmost effort. Gradually, we each eased out onto the feeder, parting in opposite directions. As I drove home, the glaring light of the city gave way to the steady dark of the countryside. I had the feeling (vague though it was) that I was on the verge of something incredible. I would have called it the discovery of new body of truth, but I didn't know that then.

As I reached home, I stopped by my mailbox out near the highway and dropped the pile of bills and advertisements on the passenger's seat. A small envelope fell to the floorboard. I picked it up and glanced at the return address: Michael Jamison. I was tempted to throw it out the window and let the wind do the rest, but hauled it inside instead, burying it under the pile of mail. I simply couldn't deal with it just then, and went to bed, my head spinning slightly from the beer. Two hours later, my mind was still walking the tightrope question: What *was* my version of truth, anyway—and why did it take a rhetoric instructor to make me wonder?

* * *

The night air was sultry, mist-filled, and orange. The intricate silhouettes of oil derricks glowed eerily through the trees and just over the horizon. Their flickering flames made the night sky undulate; apart from the booze and the weed, I thought the entire world was on some kind of power surge, then power shortage. Occasionally, the roar of those immense fires reached us like some beast breathing. My clothes stuck to my body, my hair hung limp and half-wet. Our laughter and talking punctuated the quiet lapping of the lake to shore, backed by music blaring from one of the cars and the shattering of glass on the roadside.

Three of my friends and their dates, along with my childhood “boyfriend” had made a rendezvous to celebrate the near-end of our college lives. I was giddy with the thought of nearly being finished. I felt electric, and though I was technically “odd girl out,” I didn’t feel alone. I felt autonomous, proud, on the edge, and crazy, like anything could happen. I was sure before the night was over that it would.

Two of the couples wandered off around the lake, one in one direction and one in the other, and my closest friend, Laurie, and her beaux drifted over to their car. I could see their darkened shapes merge against the burnt orange of the sky. I looked at the lake instead.

“How do you think you’ll do on your finals?” my old friend asked me.

“I think I’ll do fine. The Linux programming class turned out to be a bitch, though. It was tougher than I expected.”

“Really? You’ve always been such a whiz at that stuff. I’m glad I stuck to Drama.”

“Yeah? And how do you think you’ll do?”

He drew hard on the joint he’d just lit, then passed it to me. “Okay, I guess,” he croaked. I laughed out loud at his attempt to converse and hold in the drag, which made him explode with laughter, too. He wanted to know why I usually managed to make him lose his hit; I honestly didn’t know, and laughed even harder at the question and my answer, the way marijuana usually made me do. We vowed that we would quit smoking weed when we “grew up,” then regained our equilibrium slowly, lapsing into chuckles.

“So, what do you think is really going on over there?” he motioned in a general way toward the glowing sky.

“Well, it’s the blowout from oil rigs. Excess gas, right?”

“Maybe,” he said quietly. “What if they really are tapping into hell—you know, going right

down there?”

The thought gave me the creeps. “Stop it.”

“Well ...?” He wandered over to the car to change the tape. I hoped he would put in something fast and happy and he obliged, reading my mind, I imagined. It occurred to me that I really did sort of like this guy, even if he leaned a bit too close to the philosophical and dramatic at times. I guess that’s why we had stuck together all these years. He’d been the “boy next door” while I was growing up, but never in the dorky or romantic way—just sort of a sympathetic listener and person to hang out with when I needed it. The long-standing rumor was that we were dating, but the truth was he’d never asked me, and I’d been both curious and relieved; I wondered if he was gay, as I was beginning then to believe I was. It seemed unfair—guys were just assumed to be gay, girls were just assumed to be ugly. Throughout my high school and college years I had steadfastly resisted any appearances of either accusation—not that I had that many chances to do otherwise. Guys were strange to me. I never really knew what they were thinking, no matter how straightforward they appeared to be ... except for the person walking toward me then, a cold beer in his hand for me, opened, no less. I hoped fervently that our friendship would never change.

He settled down close beside me on the fallen tree we used as a bench. I could literally feel his body heat coming to me in the darkness. I’d spent a lot of time in the sun earlier, and I was sunburned; my own skin radiated heat like a clay pot just out of the kiln. A particularly bright flash lit up the sky just then, actually illuminating briefly the color of his eyes, followed by a muffled boom. I couldn’t help it, but I shrank back from the flash and its sonic signifier.

“Big one,” he said, and I felt his arm encircle my back loosely. “Extra big hole, lots of demons got out on that one.”

“Geez!” I bolted from the bench and headed for the trees.

“Where are you going?” He bounded after me.

Words froze in my throat and I kept running, harder and harder, faster and faster into the woods. Branches scraped my face, legs, and jabbed indiscriminately into my chest and crotch. I knew I could get my eyes poked out but couldn’t stop running. My legs seemed to accelerate all on their own.

“Diane! Hold on! Stop!”

I sensed that he was gaining on me and ran that much harder. The music faded away and all I could hear was our desperate breathing, the cracking of branches, and some other sound that I

couldn't name, and still can't to this day.

“Diane—!”

Suddenly, my foot caught on a root and pitched me forward. I fell and fell, finally splashing face-first in a muddy stream. The fall knocked the wind out of me, and the last of my energy and bravery as well. I burst into tears, gasping desperately for breath.

In seconds he had scrambled down the bank to me, grabbing me in his arms and apologizing a hundred times. I simply couldn't get my composure and I cried and cried on his shoulder. I don't know how long it lasted, but it was long enough for our combined body heat to partially dry the front of my shirt.

“Are you bleeding? Let me see,” he said gently, easing us apart. The woods had blocked the glow so completely that we were two silhouettes. His hand gently traced the outlines of my face, my neck, my arms.

Finding nothing, he rocked me quietly, offering up a new round of apologies. “You told me to stop, and I didn't.”

“Something just ... came over me. I don't know what.”

“Yeah. I guess I should know when to shut up about certain things.”

Gradually, I began to hear the musical trickle of the little stream, and I knew I needed to move. I pulled away, but he only let me go so far. I looked into his eyes, even though it was too dark to see them. I knew by the steadiness of his breathing and the growing fierceness of his grip that he had other ideas.

“I have to tell you,” he said, his voice choked with emotion, “that I love you, Diane. I've waited long enough—too long, actually—to say it. Now is probably not the best time, but since I don't know when that will ever be—” He kissed me gently on the forehead, the first time he'd ever even dared to be so close—“now's as good a time as any, I guess.”

I didn't say a word, but struggled to my feet. As we walked out into the open orange-misty glow of the countryside, the smell of sulfur was sickening. Jeers and hoots greeted us. I fancied briefly they were the catcalls of little demons in their hellish land. I knew he was blushing. I, on the other hand, was a mixture of pain, fear, and grief: pain from my fall, fear that it might be over between us as simple friends, and grief in knowing it was so.

Yes, I thought, you should know when to shut up about certain things.

I woke with a start. Bright sun streamed through my window. I was late for work ... right. I robotted my way through my routine and wondered what I'd find on my desk today, or if I could even go to my desk, or if I even had a desk to go to. My dream came back to me in a hard rush in the shower, pulled forward into my consciousness by my examination of an old scar; the hot water had turned it aggravatedly red ... a scar from an old fall. Suddenly Michael Jamison seemed as near as the steamy heat. As I dressed and walked out the door, I was careful not to even look at the pile of mail that concealed the paper catalyst for my discomfort.

I made sure we didn't meet up after our college days. It was, in fact, at our ten-year high school class reunion that I next saw him. He'd heard about my marriage, and I haltingly spoke of its self-destruction, leaving out the part I was sure he knew. In a thirty-minute conversation, filled mostly with chit-chat, I realized things hadn't changed one bit for him in the years since that night, though he never verbalized it. I left the reunion early, feeling disoriented and slightly helpless. That was nearly a year ago.

If I knew my mind/Like the back of my hand/Gold in the rainbow/Nothing panned out as I'd planned sang Emily Saliers as I eased into the parking lot. I saw people I knew being escorted out by security guards. The dazed looks on their faces told me all I needed to know. I waved a workmate over as I got out of the car.

"It's like a morgue in there. Just get your crap and get out, you know?" she said, then hurried into her car, about to cry. *Been there, done that, sweetie.* My stomach knotted, and in two minutes I was back in my own running car, staring at my severance pay, mouth open. It was much more than I expected, and I was tempted to go back inside and ask if there was a mistake, but drove away instead. By the time I hit the second traffic light, I was convinced they owed it to me for being so evasive in their wording.

Over the din at Kindred Spirits, I heard my name. Trish waved to me from the other end of the bar. The place was so packed I hadn't even seen her, something that shocked and dismayed me. She bid a farewell to the woman next to her and suggested we find another spot. As we threaded our way through the crowd I grew more and more happy I came. No, I couldn't really afford it (even with the check), but I couldn't afford not to, either. Call it therapy. I determined tonight to ask Trish why she carried that huge briefcase with her, then waved down a waitress. After we ordered drinks,

we settled in.

“So, is it over?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah. There probably won’t be one thing left in that building by Monday morning. It just amazes me how a business can put up a wall of supposed integrity and competence one day and hand out pink slips the next!”

“I know what you mean. Sounds a lot like relationships in general, doesn’t it?”

I felt the world darken just a notch, but hoped it didn’t show. “Yeah. Only it’s a lot easier to find another job.” Even as we laughed, I hoped this was true.

“Well,” Trish said, as our drinks arrived, “I’m glad I didn’t run you off with my blabbing on and on about rhetoric.”

“What? No, not at all. In fact, I’ve been thinking about it, mostly subconsciously, I think.”

She nodded. “This is a good sign.” Her smile lit the dark corner of the room. “I’ll let you do the leading, okay? Ask whatever you want, and if I go off on a tangent, please stop me. I mean that.”

“Okay. I will.” But as we fell into a comfortable silence, I couldn’t imagine stopping her. We nursed our drinks for a bit and eventually had to make our way to the dance floor, energy being useful only as it is used. As we danced progressively longer and longer sessions, I became curious about the role of music in influence and wondered where in rhetoric it might fall; why does that particular style of guitar get to me? What about that voice? So when we finally sat down, laughing and sweating, I ventured to ask.

“It’s amazingly persuasive, I agree.” she said, “but I don’t know exactly. You know, the idea that one could be persuaded by language alone was—oops, I’m letting you lead.”

I nodded for her to continue.

“—well, that idea is, I think, still a fairly startling conclusion for some modern thinkers.”

“Why? That seems so common-sense.”

“Yes, but we’re sitting here in a bar in the twenty-first century. I suppose music would be a fairly close analogy to classical rhetoric. Where we used to convince others and convey knowledge by oratory, with or without ornamentation—fancy language, in other words—now I suppose we do it with music. It’s certainly an oral medium.”

She was tracking with me. Could she read my mind? “And aural,” I added, pointing to my ear.

“Nice job!” she said, laughing heartily, “But music is all just wordplay, designed to persuade the listener.”

Her use of the term “wordplay” was as melodious as it was mischievous. I remembered the old adage *you learn well what you must teach* and wondered again how well she could collude her words and their meanings.

“Consider this.” She leaned forward across the table. “The concept of being raped, so to speak, by language is quite old—well over two-thousand years—and we’re still wrestling with that very problem. Just look in the workplace at all the flap about what is and what is not sexual harassment. The definition is getting murkier all the time.”

I heartily agreed.

“And what about 900-numbers? And yet, it depends on the viewpoint of the recipient or the one inflicting the damage. Rape by language is still around, alive and well. But what the original author of that concept was saying was, hey, you really can’t blame anyone who may have been raped by language. Words, said just the right way at the right time, are strong stuff.”

I had to agree again, but wondered aloud, “Are you trying to say language can’t be resisted?”

“Yes, in some cases. But the particulars depend on each person.”

I studied her, wondering if I should ask what I was about to, and then overcame my fear; better to lose her earlier than later: “Do you think you could say something I might not be able to resist—rhetorically speaking, of course?”

Her eyes narrowed slightly but a slight smile spread on her lips. “Before I answer that, we’d better do some dancing.”

Faith must have a reason/Why else endure the season/Of hollow soul ... Lang was at it again. The dance floor was so full we could only sway in place. It was invigorating and nearly too much to bear. Trish’s hands pressed gently into my back, guiding me expertly in such a tight spot. After three intense, sultry, and agonizing songs, we pushed our way to the table. The dance floor remained packed solid no matter what was playing. The night’s desire, now steeped to its heady best, shone luminous on every woman’s face.

“Let’s get out of here,” I ventured. The heat, inner and outer, was about to make me faint. Meticulously we pushed our way out into the cool, clear night. It was like walking through a glass of water. The near-full moon glided among the trees; instinctively, we both let out a long, satisfied

sigh.

“I live three miles outside of town. Want to stop by? I’ve got a great deck that overlooks the creek.”

Trish nodded.

We reached our cars in silence, but this silence wasn’t the lapsing of conversation, but instead, the listening of comrades. I kept an eye on her headlights in my rearview, and when we reached the house I was nearly beside myself with joy.

We tossed our things on the couch, made a round of drinks in the kitchen, and then headed toward the deck. I turned the stereo on just loud enough for the music to visit us there. The moon was almost dead overhead now, beautifully sharp in its outline, floating alone in the sky. Below us, the creek, partially shrouded by trees, sounded like the applause of a small audience.

“Big improvement from the bar, huh?”

“Absolutely.” She didn’t look at me, but instead studied the creek. “Has this place ever flooded?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t lived here long enough.”

“Bound to, then. What is that line Any Rae says, ‘*You built by the river/It’s pretty but you’ll pay*’?”

“That’s the one.”

“Yeah, but what a deal.” She walked to the end of the deck. “Some things are just worth the chance.”

I couldn’t have agreed with her more. “It looks totally different depending on the day, and sometimes the time of day.”

She looked at me from where she stood. “I don’t doubt it. You have a copia of views, Diane. You’re rich.”

I laughed at the pronouncement and motioned for her to take a chair. “Glad to know it. Now, how do I get all these riches to translate into the things that make for life?”

She shook her head at me, smiling. “You have them. No need to translate them into something else.” She fell silent, and I considered this. She was right. As the silvery light on the deck dimmed slightly, our eyes were both drawn upward to the moon as a single cloud sliced it in half.

Quietly, she asked, “How would you describe that?”

I wanted to oblige, but suddenly couldn't think of anything to say beyond the banal.

"Here's a trick. Take the simplest way of describing that event—say, 'A cloud covered the moon,'—and literally begin by substituting a word in place of those in the sentence. For instance, for 'cloud' you'd say 'film' and for 'covered' you'd say 'obscured,' and so on, until you're done. Try it now."

"Okay ... a film obscured the heavenly orb."

"Yes, that's it. Maybe you've heard of Erasmus? Well, it doesn't matter, really. Anyway, he was very playful with language, and could take a sentence and restate it a couple hundred ways. He just could explode language into so many different things."

"That actually sounds like fun. Can you add words?"

"Yes, and you can rearrange the parts. Just don't change the original meaning."

I thought briefly. "The knife of a cloud slid across the whetstone of the moon." I was surprised at my eloquence.

She made a low whistle, her gaze riveted to me. She looked ethereal, as did everything on the deck, and the entire countryside. She sighed and murmured, "That was great. We'll make a rhetorician out of you yet. Try again."

The strains of Tom Barabas's *Sedonia Suite* drifted onto the deck. As I watched the light and dark slide subtly over each other, I suddenly felt as though I were floating high above the Earth. "The dark lacey cloud ..." I struggled, but the words had evaporated.

"... cupped the white, smooth breast of the moon," she supplied.

I forced myself to look at Trish. This little game could get dangerous for us both. So I said, "Would you like to dance?"

"Sure."

We swayed slowly there on my deck, relaxing into each other's arms. How much time passed, I couldn't begin to say. It felt like the pinnacle moment out of the last seven years of my life, but I didn't know how to say it, or if it should be said. What's a feeling good for?

"Kiss me."

Startled slightly, I looked at her beautiful face, just inches from mine, and did just that. Suddenly I knew the answer to the question I had so glibly asked earlier in the bar. How on earth could I have been innocent enough to think otherwise?

That was the beginning of a long, languid and intense summer. The streets seemed busier, the temperature hotter, the night air thicker, and the aching in my heart sharper. I'd gotten so used to it that it became a sort of chronic pain, but then again, seeing Trish was like becoming *aware* in a way I hadn't felt since ... well, since my college days.

As fate would have it, she helped me locate a job at Rawlings' shipping department. It paid enough to keep me hanging on, but hanging on took on so much more purpose. We spent a lot of time at the bar at first, but by summer's end we grew tired of the crowds, smoke, and noise, preferring either my house or hers. I wanted desperately to finish crossing the erotic threshold in our relationship. She, on the other hand, held me back—steadily, resolutely, and (as I see it now) compassionately. I continued to be fascinated by what she had to say about language, persuasion, and the history of our thoughts on knowledge; she joked once that we'd have a test at the end of the summer to see what I had learned. That wasn't exactly the kind of test I longed to take. She even loaned me a book, a huge black thing, called *A Survey of Rhetoric*. I examined (slowly!) the writers she pointed out: Burke, Toulmin, Booth, and one I liked in particular, Gloria Anzaldua, admittedly because she was a lesbian. I was a willing pupil, not just because of the intellectual stimulus, I had to darkly admit. This, Trish knew. I felt a nagging impatience growing in me and decided to talk to her about it.

One night near the end of summer, after a long evening boulder-hopping session on the creek, we laid down on a blanket in the pastureland between the creek and the deck. No moon graced the skies this time, but the millions of bright-pointed stars—some dense as clouds—sprawled overhead.... *Trying to read the Greek upon the stars/The alphabet of feeling ...* the "Language or the Kiss," indeed.

I lay there thinking about a word that had lately come to mean much to me, identity, and wondered out loud if what I thought I read of Burke was correct.

"What do you think he's saying?" she asked without taking her eyes from the heavens.

"I'm not quite sure, but I think it's that he's changing the definition, no, that's not it ... the *reason* for persuasion. I think he's saying that what we really want to do is not to persuade others, but to belong somewhere, maybe to identify with a group."

She turned on her side to face me. "You're correct. I'm impressed. What else are you thinking?"

"Well, I'm remembering that he says opposites tend to move toward each other, or else

groups of people start on one end of a spectrum and sort of move toward the other end ... in an effort to belong, really. Is that right?"

"Yes. It really casts a different light on what we all strive for as humans. You're right—persuasion isn't so much to change people's minds, he says, as much as to help us fit somewhere."

"The whole gay movement, in a way."

"Umm hmm."

We looked at the stars and she pointed out a satellite—*spewing words so that we can belong*, I thought—as it arced across the glitter. We watched it until it disappeared over the horizon.

"When did you first realize you might be gay?" she asked.

"Sometime in early high school, I think."

"How did you know?"

"Well, I began to wonder about women, other girls ... you know. There was just some kind of feeling, I guess."

"Did guys ever ask you out?"

"Occasionally." I remembered Michael Jamison, and the unopened letter I had thrown into the desk drawer months ago.

Trish was silent, thinking. "Have you read any Toulmin yet?"

"Yes. I like what little I can understand of him."

"I have found his approach interesting, too. He's been good at helping me sort of get at the bottom of things."

I was searching hard to get at the bottom of Toulmin just then. "He's the guy who said something about data and claims, right?"

"Yes. He's after the "warrant" or the real reason behind the claims we make and the data we use to back those claims up."

I considered this in light of the question of sexual orientation. Something began to bother me, like a fly walking across my mind somewhere. She saw my distress. "Would you like to try applying some Toulmin?"

I agreed hesitantly.

"Olay." She sat up. "You're a lesbian. How do you know that?"

"Well, let's see ... because I've felt this way a long time. Because I'm attracted to women. Because I'm not sure of men. Because I've never been able to figure them out. Because they scare

me, some. How's that?"

"Pretty good. But these are strictly evidences—and only evidences—right now."

I was surprised. "They are?"

"Sure. They are all *outward* evidences. Toulmin, if he were here, would say, 'Well and good, but what drives those claims?' He'd want to know what's really behind the claims you make and the evidences you bring forward." Trish propped her head on her knees. "Do you know?"

Her question forced me to think hard; I felt like a pupil. If the evidences themselves were not enough, then what else could I possibly say? The answer formed itself in my mind and landed near my tongue, but I couldn't let it out. So I said, "I don't know right now," which was a cop-out, but I just couldn't discuss it any more. I glanced off toward the creek; I wanted desperately to talk about something concrete, something I could quantify and count—something real.

"Have we finally overdosed you on rhetoric?"

Though I wouldn't look at her face, I knew she was smiling, which irritated me. I forced myself to turn and look at her, hard and long. "I want to talk about something I know about for sure." My voice had a hard edge to it that I neither wanted nor could remove.

"Okay. What's that?"

"I've fallen in love with you, Trish. Can't you tell? You've maintained a pretty even distance, so far, but I want you to know how serious this has become for me. Can we change that distance? I'm ready to do it." I felt raw and exposed and crazy with fear and desire; suddenly, I wanted more than ever for the teacher-pupil bond to disappear.

A thoughtful look came over her, and she said quietly, "I very much enjoy your company. I have from the beginning. That's still true. When we kiss, I know without a doubt how you feel about me, and I hope you can sense my desire. But you're right, I have been holding you back—and myself, I want you to know—but it's not to play head games with you. It's been for my protection, and possibly yours. I want you to think about something." She moved beside me and put her arm around me. "Those cultural and personal warrants of Toulmin's are actually very useful tools. Culturally speaking, I think you know why you've chosen the lifestyle you have. Personally speaking, I'm not sure it's so."

I felt as though I'd just lost my footing, somehow. "Why do you say that?"

She sighed, for once at a loss for words. "I wish I could tell you why I think that about you. But I don't know the answer—mostly, I suspect because I haven't known you long enough to put

my finger on the source of my doubts. I'm very attracted to you, frankly, but I'm afraid for all your eagerness to learn some of these things, there are places you haven't examined in yourself, and maybe other ways of looking at the truths of your life. As I see it, this is too dangerous a patch of ground for either of us to build a more intense relationship on, at least for now. I think you need to do some tilling."

I felt as though I was being hit with a hammer, or scolded for failing an assignment, and yet I knew in my heart she wasn't out to hurt me. "Are you saying we have no future?"

"No, no. Don't misunderstand me. I'm saying that I believe there are many ways to test everything. The danger comes—at least for me—when I won't apply all the tests I know I can, and believe me, I've been guilty of that very thing not so long ago. I'm concerned that it's a like danger for you, too." She kissed me gently. "Until you can do more work, I'm too afraid to proceed. It's just that simple, and it's not that I don't want to, believe me. I have to say this."

Later, as I watched her taillights disappear along my driveway, that nagging thing returned. I sat down outside, but the now too-cool air drove me inside. I sat at the desk and opened the rhetoric text, searching through its pages, for what exactly I didn't know. Because I liked Gloria Anzaldua and could most easily identify with her, I skimmed her section.

Near the end, this line jumped out at me: "The answer to the problem between ... males and females ... lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundations of our lives...." She had also listed the black/white and Mexican/Chicana dichotomies, but my eye kept focussing on the "male and female" part. Here was a lesbian writer claiming—admitting!—that there was a fundamental split between the two genders that possibly could be healed. I sat back in the chair, flummoxed. That possibility had never even occurred to me before. Anzaldua's piece on living in "borderlands"—hung between so many worlds—was even more spellbinding as I gave it a second and more careful reading.

I finally closed the book, turned out the light, and sat in the darkened living room. Anzaldua seemed quite adept at pushing against all the boundaries she knew in a frantic search for a way to calm her "psychic unrest." If she could do it, why couldn't I? I had to grudgingly admit that Trish was right. There was a test I steadfastly refused to take. I simply didn't want to. The unspoken words I wouldn't say earlier issued from my mouth into the darkness: I'm afraid of losing my identity.

It took a long time, but slowly my eyes fastened and fixed on the drawer. I thought about

Trish, about the real possibility of having a life with her, how sweet and powerful it would be, even as I realized there really are no guarantees in life. I knew then and there that I needed to, as she put it, “do some tilling.” I needed to take my fate—whatever it was—into my own two hands and live with the consequences ... or the rewards.

I turned on the light, opened the drawer, and in the thunderous silence of the night, tore the letter open.