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Dorothy Allison, Skin Talking

about Sex, Class, & Literature

(Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books,  
1994.)

## ***Survival Is the Least of My Desires***

I was asked to speak about survival. The difficulty for me is that survival is the least of my desires. I'm interested in a lot more than mere survival. And I do not feel old enough or smart enough to be able to tell other lesbian and gay writers how to survive, much less to send everyone out of this place feeling inspired, provoked, challenged, and determined; to convince people that we, as a community, are capable of so much more than endurance. What I do know is that we must aim much higher than just staying alive if we are to begin to approach our true potential.

I am part of a nation that is not secret but is rarely recognized. Born poor, queer, and despised, I have always known myself one of many—strong not because I was different, but because I was part of a nation just like me, human and fragile and stubborn and hungry for justice in an unjust world. I am past forty now. I have known I was a lesbian since I was a teenager, known I wanted to write almost as long.

My age, my family background, the region and class in which I grew up, and yes, my times—the political and moral eras I have come through—have shaped me. I was the first person in my family to graduate from high school, the first to go to college. It is hard for me to explain what an extraordinary thing that was: to be not only the first, but for a long time the only one of my people to step out-

side the right hostile world in which we were born. But I went to college in the early seventies, and I had the great good fortune of being there at a time when lots of other working-class kids were also confronting a world in which we were barely acknowledged. That experience spurred in me, as in many of us, an outrage and determination that questioned accepted barriers of authority, validation, rightness. I became convinced that to survive I would have to remake the world so that it came closer to matching its own ideals.

In college, I was involved in civil rights activism and antiwar demonstrations. I became a feminist activist when other people my age were marrying or joining the Peace Corps or starting careers. All those things that they were doing that I did not do shaped my life, what I thought I could do with my life. Understand me, I am one of those dangerous ones. I have never wanted to be rich. I have always wanted a great deal more. I have always wanted to remake the world, and that is a much more greedy, far-reaching ambition than cash. I joined a small nation of would-be revolutionaries, queers and feminists and working-class escapees, dreamers most of us, who wanted a world in which no one was denied justice, no one was hated for their origins, color, beliefs, or sexuality. Though it is rarely acknowledged, people like me have remade this world in the last few decades.

Let me make clear how much has changed in the short span of my life. Although there are few people who think of themselves as revolutionaries anymore, the world has been remade. Look around you. Apartheid is being dismantled and Nelson Mandela walks the streets of South Africa. Until a few years ago, I could not imagine that happening. Russia is a new place, so is China. The communist bogeyman I was threatened with throughout my childhood is gone. The world is no less dangerous, and people are still dying for their origins, beliefs, color, and sexuality, but I find myself full of startled awe and hope. The rigid world into which I was born has been shaken profoundly. *Homosexual* is no longer a psychiatric disorder, and my lover and I actually married each other down at City Hall

in San Francisco last spring.

The world is a new place, but it still needs to be remade. We still need revolutionaries. It was more than ten years ago that the first person I knew personally died of AIDS. Last year I lost four more friends, four more of the many who should not have died. This last year my lover's ex-girlfriend turned up in jail after living on the streets for two years, my last aunt followed my mother into death by cancer, and I went through each day without health insurance, knowing that most likely I, too, will die of cancer before I am sixty. Half of the people I know live without health insurance or the certainty of a living wage. The world needs to be remade. The brilliant, talented, young gay men and lesbian writers in my life earn barely enough to pay their rent, much less buy the time they need to write the books I want to read. We live, all of us, in the most impossible conflict, poor because of the work we choose to do, the lies we choose not to tell. Most of us know that sending applications to the National Endowment for the Arts or well-funded grants committees is like throwing a snowball into the sun. Our own organizations—our presses, magazines, bookstores, and writing programs—barely survive. Oh yes, the world needs to be remade.

If we, as writers, are to continue, we need more people of large ambition, people who refuse censorship, denial, and hatred, people who still hope to change the world. Writers who see themselves as revolutionaries, who turn up at demonstrations or envelope-stuffing parties with the shadows under their eyes that prove how many nights they've gotten up, after a limited sleep, to hone their skills and dream on the page the remade world.

I have lived my life in pursuit of the remade world.

When I was twenty-two, I helped organize a rape crisis center. That same year I was involved in starting a feminist bookstore, staffing a women's center, volunteering as a lesbian peer counselor, teaching a feminist anthropology course, editing a feminist magazine, trying to organize a waitress union, and organizing a lesbian-feminist living collective that became my family and home for eight years.

I did all of that before I was twenty-four, telling myself that if only I could give up more sleep I could get so much more done. These days I look around and think we need a few more people willing to give up a little sleep.

Except for the fact that I lived for eight years in that lesbian-feminist collective, I am like most of the other lesbians I know, the women I love. I have always written after everything else was done, in spare moments after filling in at the childcare center, or building shelves for the bookstore, or preparing grant applications, first for the women's center and then the women's studies department and then the magazines. I have worked with four feminist magazines. None of them still survive.

When I was twenty-four I read everything written by lesbians—and when I was twenty-four it was still possible. I rarely dealt with men, rarely contacted my family, was strictly nonmonogamous, wrote bad poetry when I was too tired to sleep, and taught myself, laboriously, to write fiction in short snatches of time stolen from my day job. I edited other people's writing for long years before I published my own. I didn't publish anything until I began to think I might be good enough. And to put it frankly, by my own standards I am still rarely good enough. What I want—my ambition—is larger than anyone imagines. I want to be able to write so powerfully I can break the heart of the world and heal it. I want to write in such a way as to literally remake the world, to change people's thinking as they look out of the eyes of the characters I create.

I am and always have been completely matter-of-fact about being a lesbian. The statements of gay writers who defensively insist that they wish to be seen as writers first and gay or lesbian secondarily, who insist they simply happen to be queer, that being queer has nothing to do with what or how they write; the arguments that take place between those writers and those others who despise the first category, who take their sexual identities as their primary subject and the underlying factor of their esthetic—those loud insistent arguments seem to me mostly intellectual, beside the point, and cu-

riously old-fashioned. I have never imagined that there was any question about my sexual preference, and as a feminist I know that my convictions shape what I write about, what voice I can manifest, and what kinds of characters I will imagine—what I can write at all. I am one whole person, one whole person who is a lesbian and a writer.

When I listened to Edward Albee speak at the second OutWrite conference in San Francisco in 1991, I kept thinking that the times and the ethos that had shaped his concept of who he was—both as a gay man and a writer—were not so maddening as tragic. That it was first and foremost a waste that he had spent so much of his life in a defensive struggle to claim himself and his sexuality in the face of an ignorant and hateful public. Worse, it seemed that fighting so hard for that sexuality had left him bitterly ignorant of how interlinked the struggles for gay rights and human rights are, unable to see how much the struggle for other people's hopes is related to his own. If we are forced to talk about our lives, our sexuality, and our work only in the language and categories of a society that despises us, eventually we will be unable to speak past our own griefs. We will disappear into those categories. What I have tried to do in my own life is refuse the language and categories that would reduce me to less than my whole complicated experience. At the same time I have tried to look at people different from me with the kind of compassion I would like to have directed toward me.

When I think about that generation of writers that Edward Albee is part of, I become more determined to remake the world. I work to make it possible for young queer writers not to have to waste so much of themselves fighting off the hatred and dismissal of an ignorant majority. But to make any contribution to other lives, I know that I must first begin in the carefully examined specifics of my own. I must acknowledge who has helped me survive and how my own hopes have been shaped. I must acknowledge the miracles in my life.

Yes, I have been shaped as a lesbian and a writer by miracles. Miracles, as in wonders and marvels and astonishing accidents, for-

tunate juxtapositions and happy encounters, some resulting from work and luck but others unexplained and unexplainable. It was a miracle that I survived my childhood to finish high school and get that scholarship to college. It was a miracle that I discovered feminism and found that I did not have to be ashamed of who I was. Feminism gave me the possibility of understanding my place in the world, and I claim it as a title and an entitlement.

But feminism, for me, was not only about sex. Sexual desire was more problematic. When I was very young I imagined that I would have to be celibate. I knew what I wanted from the first flush of puberty. I knew what I wanted to do with those girls in school. And all around me I saw fear and death and damnation. You cannot imagine how terrified I was at twelve and thirteen. I decided I would become a kind of Baptist Nun. That seemed a reasonable choice after my family moved to Central Florida and I snuck off to the gay bar down near the Trailways bus station in Orlando, Florida. I took one look at those women and knew I was in a lot of trouble. I knew, pretty much from the beginning, what was going to happen to me. I knew I was femme, opinionated, bossy, completely romantically masochistic, and that those girls were going to eat me alive.

So the choice was to be eaten alive or to become celibate.

It's a wonder there's a scrap of me left.

It was a miracle that I figured out what it was I enjoyed sexually that did not require my partner to be crazy drunk, violently angry, or to acquire permanent rights to my body just because she knew how to make me come. It was a miracle that I kept on writing fiction for my own satisfaction even when I truly believed in the women's revolution and was completely convinced it would never come about if I didn't personally raise the money for it, staff the phones, and cook the protein dish for the potluck where we would all plan it. Miracles, incidental and marvelous, women and men met at the right time or just past it, but still soon enough to save me from giving up or doing myself more damage than I could survive. I cling to no organized religion, but I believe in the continuing impact of

miracles.

Finally, I have to tell you that it was a miracle I did not kill myself out of sheer despair when I was told I was too lesbian for feminism, too reformist for radical feminism, too sexually perverse for respectable lesbianism, and too damn stubborn for the women's, gay, and queer revolutions. That I am here now, writing and speaking and teaching, and living out my own feminist ideals, is astonishing. I have changed nothing. The world has been remade.

I believe in the truth. I believe in the truth in the way only a person who has been denied any use of it can believe in it. I know its power. I know the threat it represents to a world constructed on lies. I believe any trick that keeps you writing the truth is all right, but that some tricks are more expensive than others. The one I have used most often and most successfully is that gambit in which I pretend that I am only one person trying to get down my version of what happened. My writing becomes fiction soon enough anyway. The truth is wider than the details of what really happened in my life.

I know the myths of the family that thread through our society's literature, music, politics—and I know the reality. The reality is that for many of us family was as much the incubator of despair as the safe nurturing haven the myths promised. We are not supposed to talk about our real family lives, especially if our families do not duplicate the mythical heterosexual model. In a world in which only a fraction of people actually live in that "Father Knows Best" nuclear family, in which the largest percentage of families consists of women and children existing in poverty, we need to hear a lot more about those of us who are happy that we do not live inside that mythical model. But I also believe in hope. I believe in the remade life, the possibilities inherent in our lesbian and gay chosen families, our families of friends and lovers, the healing that can take place among the most wounded of us. My family of friends has kept me alive through lovers who have left, enterprises that have failed, and all too many stories that never got finished. That family has been

part of remaking the world for me.

The worst thing done to us in the name of a civilized society is to label the truth of our lives material outside the legitimate subject matter of serious writers. We are not supposed to talk about our sexuality, not in any more than the most general and debased terms, our passions reduced to addictions or the subject of poorly thought-out theories of deviance and compulsion, our legendary loving relationships rewritten as the bland interactions of best friends or interlocking systems of dependence and necessary economic solutions.

I need you to do more than survive. As writers, as revolutionaries, tell the truth, your truth in your own way. Do not buy into their systems of censorship, imagining that if you drop this character or hide that emotion, you can slide through their blockades. Do not eat your own heart out in the hope of pleasing them. The only hope you have, the only hope any of us has, is the remade life. It is the only way we will all survive, and trading any of us for some of us is no compromise. It is the way we will lose our lives, all our lives.

The second worse thing done to us is a thing we do to each other. We ask each other to always represent our sexuality and relationships as simple, straightforward, and life-saving. We want to hear heroic stories, legends where the couples find each other in the end and go off into the sunset, with the one distinction that they are the same gender arm in arm and lip-locked into the next dawn. We need our romances, yes, our happy endings. But don't gloss over the difficulties and rewrite the horrors. Don't make it all easier than it is and soften the tragedies. Don't pretend we are not really murdered in the streets or broken in the darkened bedrooms of the American family. We need the truth. And yes, it is hard when fighting for your life and the lives of those you love to admit just how daunting that fight can be, to acknowledge how many of us are lost, how many destroyed, to pick apart the knots of fantasy and myth that blunt our imaginations and stalk our hopes for families in which we can

trust each other and the future. But if I am to survive, I need to be able to trust your stories, to know that you will not lie even to comfort.

I believe the secret in writing is that fiction never exceeds the reach of the writer's courage. The best fiction comes from the place where the terror hides, the edge of our worst stuff. I believe, absolutely, that if you do not break out in that sweat of fear when you write, then you have not gone far enough. And I know you can fake that courage when you don't think of yourself as courageous—because I have done it. And that is not a bad thing, to fake it until you can make it. I know that until I started pushing on my own fears, telling the stories that were hardest for me, writing about exactly the things I was most afraid of and unsure about, I wasn't writing worth a damn.

I write what I think are "moral tales." That's what I intend, though I grow more and more to believe that telling the emotional truth of people's lives, not necessarily the historical truth, is the only moral use of fiction. I'll give you an example. The historical truth about the child on whom I based my character Shannon Pearl is that she went on, a child of her culture, and lives that life still, as far as I know, back in Greenville, though the child I remember knew nothing about gospel music. I gave her that life to make a larger story. But what is emotionally true is that she was someone I thought of as squeezed down, her soul like a pearl compressed as tight and white as cold stone. Maybe the "truer" story of her life would be a better one than "Gospel Song," but I give myself the benefit of the doubt. This was the story I could write then, and it is as true as I could make it. Its veracity lies in the complexity of the character, that she is hated and hateful, that she is not a nice but a tragic person. I do not write about nice people. I am not nice people. Neither is anyone I have ever cared deeply about. The truth about our lives is not nice, and acknowledging that allows me to make the people in my stories more whole, to truly honor those I have lost. It's something I am not al-

ways able to do as well as I would like. But wanting this in my stories is about wanting myself whole.

Some of my stories that read hard from the outside are much easier in the writing, stories fueled entirely by rage. Anger is easy. Most of my short story collection, *Trash*, was written in rage. If I'd done it more in grief, it might have been a better book, but I needed to work through the rage first. Sooner or later, though, if you keep pushing yourself, you begin writing stories out of more than rage, and they begin to tear you apart even as you write them. Oddly enough, that tearing open makes possible a healing, not only in the writer but in the world as well. It is as if you were opening up scar tissue and allowing new growth. The easiest story for me to write is the one in which I sit down in front of the imaginary image of the one person I have always ached to say something to—my stepfather, or my mother, or my first lover—and I begin the story by saying, “You son-of-a-bitch . . .” That’s easy. I let the anger tell the story. The harder stories are the ones where I begin with grief or the attempt to understand, the stories that start, “I’m sorry,” or even, “I was so ashamed,” or, “Goddamn, I miss you so much.”

I want hard stories. I demand them from myself. I demand them from my students and friends and colleagues. Hard stories are worth the difficulty. It seems to me the only way I have forgiven anything, understood anything, is through that process of opening up to my own terror and pain and reexamining it, recreating it in the story, and making it something different, making it meaningful—even if the meaning is only in the act of the telling. Some things are absolutely unjust, without purpose, horrible and blinding, soul-destroying: the death of the beloved, the rape of a child. Situations some of us know all too well. There was no meaning in what my stepfather did to me. But the stories I have made out of it do have meaning. More importantly, those stories do not function as some form of retribution. They are redress for all those like me, whether they can write their own stories or not. My stories are not *against* any-

one; they are *for* the life we need.

It has taken me twenty years to be able to write what I write now, but what I wrote nineteen years ago was just as important. There’s an essay by Ursula LeGuin\* that I love, where she talks about the importance of women offering their own experience as wisdom, how each individual perception is vital. That’s what I believe to be the importance of telling the truth, each of us writing out of the unique vision our lives have given us. It is the reason I urge the young writers I work with to confront their own lives in their fiction. Not that they must write autobiography, but that they must use the whole of their lives in the making of the stories they tell; they must honor their dead, their wounded and lost; they must acknowledge their own crimes and shame, feel the impact of what they do and do not do in the world in their stories. I tell them they must take the business of storytelling completely seriously. I want the stories I read to take me over, to make me see people I do not know as they see themselves—the scared little girl who grew up lesbian, the faggot child who loved and hungered for truth, the young dying unjustly and too soon who talk about death familiarly and make me laugh at my own fears. Each of us has our own bitterness, our own fear and that stubborn tenderness we are famous for. Each of us has our own stories and none of them are the same no matter how similar some of the details. Tell me the truth and I make you a promise. If you show me yours, I’ll show you mine. That’s what writers do for each other.

Write your stories any way you have to frame it to get it out, any time you can get it done. Use any trick. I want to know what it was that you looked at unflinchingly, even if you did not know what you were seeing at the time. If nothing else works, start by writing that story for me. Imagine me. I was born to die. I know that. If I could have found what I needed at thirteen, I would not have lost so much of my life chasing vindication or death. Give some child, some thirteen-year-old, the hope of the remade life. Tell the truth. Write

\*“The Fisherman’s Daughter” in *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (Grove Press: New York, 1989)

the story that you were always afraid to tell. I swear to you there is magic in it, and if you show yourself naked for me, I'll be naked for you. It will be our covenant.

I tell people that I write mean stories, and I do—stories that tell the truth that I know and only the part I know, because I don't know that much. I know about being queer in this decade, about the grief inherent in losing so many friends, so many memories, so many members of our precious remade families. I have no aunts left to tell me stories, and three-quarters of the young gay men that I worked with and learned to love when I first began to write are gone, along with far too many of the lesbians.

AIDS and cancer have run through my community—not metaphors, but death in wholesale numbers. Sections of my life have disappeared with the ones we have lost, and I feel a great pressure to write the stories that would somehow preserve those times, those people, my friends: John Fox, Mary Helen Mautner, Allen Barnett, Geoff Maines, Vito Russo, Cynthia Slater, George Stambolian, and too many more to list in anything less than a massive memorial. Just my personal friends who have died, the list is too long. How can I not write mean stories? I don't have that child's easy hope for better times that fueled so much of my early stories. I have fallen in love with the hard side, with the women and men made tough by life and loss, who nonetheless have never lost their determined love for their own kind. If I am not mean enough to honor them, then I have no right to the stories.

I need you to write mean stories. I need you to honor our dead, to help them survive. More than ten years ago, I wrote a poem about a lesbian who died in Boston, a death I read about in the paper and knew immediately could have been my own. The death of a woman who "might not have been known to be a lesbian" but who, as I read her poem in public, I learned more and more about until I was certain that not only her death, but her life, could have been my own, and that very likely she, too, would have wanted the mean story of

her life told. I made a mean piece of hope out of telling about her, because I believe that if I died that death someone would sing my song, recount my story.

More and more of what I write now I write in homage to those we have lost. To do more than survive, that is what we need, what I need from you. I need you to tell the truth, to tell the mean stories, and to sing the song of hope. I need all of us to live forever and to remake the world. Listen again to the words of my poem and remember the life it honors, the remade life denied to one of us.

Boston, Massachusetts, many years ago  
a woman told me about a woman dead,  
a woman who might not have been known  
to be a lesbian.

No one is sure they knew that.  
The cops didn't say that, they said  
she was wearing a leather jacket, blue jeans, worn boots,  
had dark cropped hair and was new to the neighborhood,  
living in an old brick rowhouse with three other women.  
Said she was carrying a can of gasoline.  
They did not say why,  
a car waiting  
a jar of sticky brushes.  
Said she was white  
her friends were white  
the neighborhood was bad,  
she and her friends were fools  
didn't belong there  
were queer anyway.  
Said the young rough crowd of men  
laughed a lot  
when they stopped her,  
that she laughed back,



and then  
they made her pour the gasoline  
over her head.

Later, some cop said  
she was a hell of a tough bitch  
'cause she walked two blocks on her own feet,  
two blocks to the all-night grocery  
where another little crowd watched  
going

*Shiiiiit!*

*Will you look at that?*

*Look at that!*

I read about it in the paper—two paragraphs  
I have carried that story with me ever since  
wanting more, wanting no one to have to be  
those two stark paragraphs.

We become our deaths.  
Our names disappear and our lovers leave town,  
heartbroken, crazy,  
but we are the ones who die.  
We are the forgotten  
burning in the streets  
hands out, screaming,

*This is not all I am.*

*I had something else in mind to do.*

Not on that street,  
always and only that  
when there was so much more she had to do.

Sometimes  
when I love my lover  
I taste in my mouth

ashes  
gritty  
rainy

grating between the teeth  
the teeth of a woman  
unquestionably known  
to be a lesbian.\*

Keynote address at OutWrite 1992, the lesbian and gay writers conference.

\* *The Women Who Hate Me* (Firebrand Books: Ithaca, New York, 1991)