



One angelic kiss

Brenda Brooks

Though mostly you ignore me never bringing gifts that amount to more than a small tin of artichoke hearts and I would never be ridiculous enough to love you (though I am still ridiculous enough to love) there are nights filled with I don't care and so what anyway we're all going to die maybe sooner and hopefully more adventurously than we think and the sun's got to fizzle sometime and there's a world-class loopy tyrant ordering a new set of epaulettes even as we speak or

preferably,

even as we make a pragmatic date to get together for one last long angelic kiss which may be one of the few pure gestures left to aspire to aside from the kind of gesture made by the real lover to the truly loved when she raises a thin blue porcelain bowl so fine you can see every storm happening on the moon through it to the other's lips and tips thirty-six drops of rain individually collected just after dusk onto her tongue saying nothing because that kind of angelic kiss speaks for itself.

Local honey

Must be gathered slowly, at first, the tongue's tip, the fingertips,

are everything in this sweet, precocious business we set our bodies to.

The gatherer must love and live for honey (the faintest scent of slow nectar) from her fluted centre, and learn to say so, make it rise

with a touch implied and gestures sweetly unfulfilled

until they are fulfilled,

in the gatherer's own wild measurement of dripping time,

at the hurting moment honey becomes too heavy for itself.

But it must be slowly, at first;

the tip of such things being all -

the intense intent before the fact,

the near touch, the almost word, the ingenious, honey eye

that turns the gatherer into the gathered deeply in.

YOUTH STRETCH

photos: ka yin Fong



by Vinita Srivastava

There is a story that is told about the dhobi's (washer's) dog: The dhobi leaves his community with his dog every morning to go to the river to wash clothes all day. Playing with the river dogs, the washer's dog becomes almost but never quite at home by the river. Every night, the washer's dog runs, looking forward to going home. Only to realize he is not home there anymore either. His ways have changed. He is part river now.

Pratibha Parmar cautions us against the use of the term "exile;" she warns that the use of the word must be specific, for even though we may be "treated as exiles" or feel exiled in some sort of "psychic or cultural way," we are "not exiles, but settlers."

Remembering the half awakens of my breasts and
the stretch of your
black back
in the
black night
and the incredible softness of your lips - the cloud-like-texture
of
your
lips
so that when I go to kiss you
my lips meet the
soft
wet
cloud

this morning as I wake up,
I turn to squeeze you hello
turn to fall into your body. but instead.
I work hard to catch myself from falling down the empty
cliff at the edge of my bed.
Your sandalwood smelling skin sticks to my sheets.
frozen are quick moments of seriousness when I look into
your eyes and find you.
Your hand touches my neck.
At the airport, people stand around
mingling
there are two little girls running back and forth through the
luggage, the carts, the harassed faces, the hidden tears
They scream with delight.
An angry man comes to tell them to shut-up as he slaps
the younger girl who bursts into tears.
Her delightful screams stop.
I watch her sister, older, taller come to caress her cheek.
They stand con soul ling each other.
makes me think of my sister.
I need con soul ling right now.
Where are you?

The flight number is announced.
I feel your sandalwood skin, your back, your shoulders.
Your hand touches my neck.

At the airport, with screaming kids
A group of South Asian men walk by
staring
disbelieving
trying to determine;
which one of us is the woman, which, the man.
I am tired now, and I just want to be with you.
my goodbye.

And I lean in to kiss you.
smiling, you say, with your
ever working/activist voice,
we should make a video: gay and lesbian good-byes
at the airport

I pull you in closer.
I kiss you harder.
Listen up Toronto, Vancouver, Denmark, Austria.
I will kiss my woman lover.
smiling again, you say,
I hope you're not queer bashed on your way home.
Your hand touches my neck.

Many of us who identify as "queer" and South Asian
work hard to self-define. We do this through making
spaces in the arts communities, in the media, in academic
texts, in literature, and in airports. I believed from as
young as the age of seven that writing was going to make
me visible, was going to make people listen:

"Sun. June 12 1977:...My day was a tereble day..."
(sic) *Mississauga

*"April 3, 1981: Moira's an idiot. She was making fun of
our names..."* *Toronto

*"Sunday, July 18, 1982:...Meeta — girl — one year
older than me — black hair, brown eyes. Tall and skin-
ny. Smart. Browneyes. Pretty. Tomboy (?) Wearing
jeans and white top. Nice. My first time meeting her.*
*Toronto

*July 21, 1985:...I've spent many restless nights over
the Flight 182 plane crash, where 329 Indian people
were killed when the plane suspiciously crashed over
the Atlantic Ocean...A girl I really liked, Meeta Gupta,
was on the plane. I remember sharing our problems
together..* *Toronto

*"March 18, 1987: It won't work anymore. Because I
don't know what to write down. I don't know what is
bothering me...I feel...angry — no — I feel help-
less...yes?..."* *Toronto.

I never cry in public
And if someone were to have told me that I would get
on this airplane and cry I would have laughed because it is
too unbelievable.

I take my seat amongst all the *matajis* and *mausis* and
suddenly become overwhelmed at the thought of what I am
really doing. Which is leaving, returning.
Leaving you.

I busy myself with my luggage, my coat. The *mataji* next to
me smiles and tells me it will be a long flight, so didn't I
want to put my coat with hers — above us, in the carry-all?

She, the *mataji*, smiles. Asks me if I am missing my
friends and family. Tells me she understands how hard it
is to leave loved ones behind.

I am wishing
I
I am wishing
I
I am wishing

I was still looking at your red shirt.

The man sitting across from me has large hands. It has
been a while since I have looked at a man's hand up close.
They seem so large and big and clumsy.

Mataji next to me purses her lips, smiles and takes her
glasses off. I see her curiosity, looking at my tears. I am
glad I have worn my pink *Kurta*, because, at least in some
way, you *mataji* seem to feel connected to me; is it my
Indian shirt that smells like the perfumes that I sprayed on
at the duty free shop? All these perfumes, but I can only
smell yours. I walk into your space and the scent immedi-
ately finds me, sinking into my skin.

Anger and books and peers and older women taught me
how to express my feelings, how to fight for my rights, and
my communities' rights, how to live in this society that
wants to squash 'us' down so.

Writing down our lives, recording our worlds is a radical
act where so many wish us ill. Where so many want to erase
the lives of women who love women, of women who struggle
against racism, and of women who succeed.

It is important to remember that we are living in a pre-
sent where the histories of our lives have been erased or
manipulated. We are living a present in which we must cre-
ate images of ourselves which are not distortions of our bod-
ies.

Organizations like the Toronto-based Sister Vision Press
work hard to publish the voices of lesbians, bisexuals, and
feminists of colour. When I read Makeda Silvera's words of
greeting in *"Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Colour
Anthology"* I feel as if I am one of the silent women she
speaks of. She speaks of nourishment, and the need to
nourish each other. As 'silence' was, and often still is, a
political act for many black women, the writing down of black
women's lives by black women is one step towards taking all
the defining out of the hands of a white male hegemony.
Lesbians of colour who have created their own theories or
space, or have added to/manipulated existing ("white")
"queer" theories, have been an inspiration to lesbians of
colour coming out in an entirely different political context.

(right now I wish I were three years old) I think of you.
Your name sounds off my imaginary silent tongue. who are
you? want you to build sandcastles with me and go eat
candy and do somersaults with play games with race in the
park with fly a kite with lose sweaters with throw hats in
trees with chase the birds with skip rope with play house
with run with hopscotch with kiss with line up with get wet
with skate with draw with paint with complain with swing with
slide with trick or treat with grow with dance with
would I, at three years old?

Organizing Dosh Pardesh, an annual festival/conference
of South Asian cultures and politics in the West, not only put
me in contact with other South Asian lesbian, bisexuals and
gay men (from the diaspora), but it also gave me a place to
discuss and challenge issues which pertained to our lives in
an environment that I could almost always be assured had
an awareness of homophobia, classism, racism, sexism,
racialism, and communalism.

Unbreakable. A fuck-you festival.
We work together in this colossal task of community

building we have set up for ourselves.

My "third world" airplane is a comfort: there is comfort
here beyond the extreme luxury of the British Airways
Executive class. The people next to me carefully separate
what is left from their meals to offer to fellow passengers —
preserved unused sugar packets, milk cartons — we're not
gluttons.' They give back their trays in two parts: used and
unused. The older man next to *mataji* speaks a Hindi we
can't quite get our tongues around. He wants to know: "will
it be snowing in Canada? Do we have mountains? Is that
Disney World (pointing to the ground)?"

We can only give him short answers: Cold? yes.
Mountains. not really, but some. Disney World. no.

He asks for a little bit of coffee. When the steward
returns with a full cup, he is upset—a waste. Pouring some
coffee into a preserved paper cup (from his last cup of
water), he offers me half a cup of coffee and a saved,
unopened sugar packet.

The third Dosh Pardesh (1993) festival/conference
sought to bring together people of diverse communities and
backgrounds. The programming, which contained
material/work by "South Asian" lesbians and gays, proved
our diversity, yet many sought to build a united international
South Asian lesbian and gay movement on the basis of a
South Asian "queer" identity. Historian Nayan Shah believes
that the desire for this kind of community "has led to the
creation of a global South Asian queer identity, an identity
that has fought silence and invisibility to emerge." Creating
and building one South Asian queer identity does not seem
possible; however, organizing around this new identity in the
face of racism and homophobia helps to build skill-sharing
networks, resources, support organizations, and a sense of
belonging.

And
now,
without the short spurts of space, and arrogance, we scat-
ter, unaided by each other.
A brief cloud of your smell sometimes dances over my head
and I feel your hands on my waist.

I let my
mind, my body slide and wiggle into your insides so that I
can see you again. For a moment, I take you on—hear your
voice coming out of my mouth instead of mine. I look down
at my body and notice the shape has changed. I feel like
wearing your colours. I struggle to gain myself back as I
panic for a moment thinking you will be with me forever.
I try and remember the way we came together that night. The
loud breathing music that we heard in the bedroom woke us
up from our dream. To comfort. To rock. To sleep. I cradle:
you soothe me. My hands run by your warm and small ear —
on the edge between your hairline and face. I don't remem-
ber when the soft bristles of your hair became erotic, or
where you placed your soft kiss before you went to sleep.

I try and remember fighting with you: Fighting until there
was nothing left of us but our hands. (We ate the rest away.)
But we never fought.

We jump from the bed onto the floor — my legs curled —
wrapped inside your body.

YOUTH



Last night the bed sinks in, swallows us. First there is just a small depression in the centre of the bed, and then slowly, it is larger.

The bed caves in, creating a room for us.

Now the bed throws us out again. Spitting almost.

Laying us only on top.

on the flat surface.

Facing racism makes it difficult to talk publicly about the rifts we have. Instead we place impossible, incredible expectations upon ourselves and each other to fulfil our needs socially and politically as lovers, family, friends, and community organizers.

This ends up ripping us apart.

As we dig down

into what makes us Joyful, we find some sorrow, and when we find sorrow is it because we remember the joy in our lives?

We need to talk openly and comfortably about our religious, class, caste, racial, sexual, and gender differences.

The discussion of bisexuality which took place within the 1993 Desh Pardesh working collective made me bury my head in the sand. The argument about opening the term "queer," about allowing bisexual feminists either to form their own caucus or to join the existing lesbian caucus disrupted our identities, our places and our relationships to one another. I just wanted to fit in. Here. Somewhere. I wanted

"our community" to be cohesive. I didn't want to disturb it.

Clumsily I run through the joy and pride that I feel for the work that my peers have done before me and for the work that I contributed to the Desh Pardesh festival/conference. I can point to many wonderful discussions that happened and to coalitions that were formed. I want everyone to know about the amazing surge of energy and confidence I gain from attending and working on Desh Pardesh as well as working with other "South Asian" community organizations.

These groups and events provide us Asians with badly needed support and give us a forum to address the issues that are not always addressed in both the Asian or gay and lesbian communities. One of the issues that has begun to be addressed is the oppression of racism in the gay and lesbian mainstream. In the United States, our history has been excluded from lesbian history, our literature from gay and lesbian literature, and our images from our community's media.

(Sharmeem Islam, "Towards a Global Network of Asian Lesbians," 1993)

I feel odd about Sharmeem Islam's comment above. Can we be calling any gay and lesbian movement (even white) "mainstream"? Like her, I see the invisibility of and racism toward South Asian, East Asian, Latin, and African dykes and bisexual-feminists in predominantly white "queer" groups. The objectification and exoticization of our colour, bodies, and culture, and trivialization and reduction of our

get to know Me

culture to food, music, and clothing (this is all important, but not the sole definition of who we are as South Asians) leaves many of us feeling like we need to organize autonomously. However, deciding to call a white lesbian and gay movement 'mainstream' does not address the homophobia that we all face as lesbians, gays, and bisexuals.

As South Asian lesbian, gay and/or bisexual groups form in New York, in New Delhi, in London, in Toronto, the isolation felt by Pratibha Parmar twelve years ago has begun to be tackled. "There were very few South Asian lesbians and gays around," she says, but "we knew we were around and we would travel hundreds of miles to meet. Now, in Britain, we have Shakti." The New York South Asian Gay Association explains the reason they formed:

to address issues of concern to us which include the complex racial politics of gay and straight American life, the threat posed by AIDS to South Asians the world over, and the pressures and pleasures unique to our own situation: family expectations, migration and integration, and negotiating between the different roles that we play in working, living and loving.

("Dupattas on Fifth Avenue," *Trikone*, 1991)

In a recorded discussion, South Asian feminist Ravida Din explains this duality of identity by describing her conflict about which aspects of herself to hide: "that heterosexual,

middle class collective [women of colour] is still 'safer' for me than an all white lesbian group. It's a constant trading off—homophobia or racism."

now
my heart still skips a beat when I think of somersaulting with, flying kites with, eating candy with, and chasing birds with

you.

my hands open fingers stretch palms up flying into the air

this is how I feel when I dance

glorious I think.

"what?" she asks.

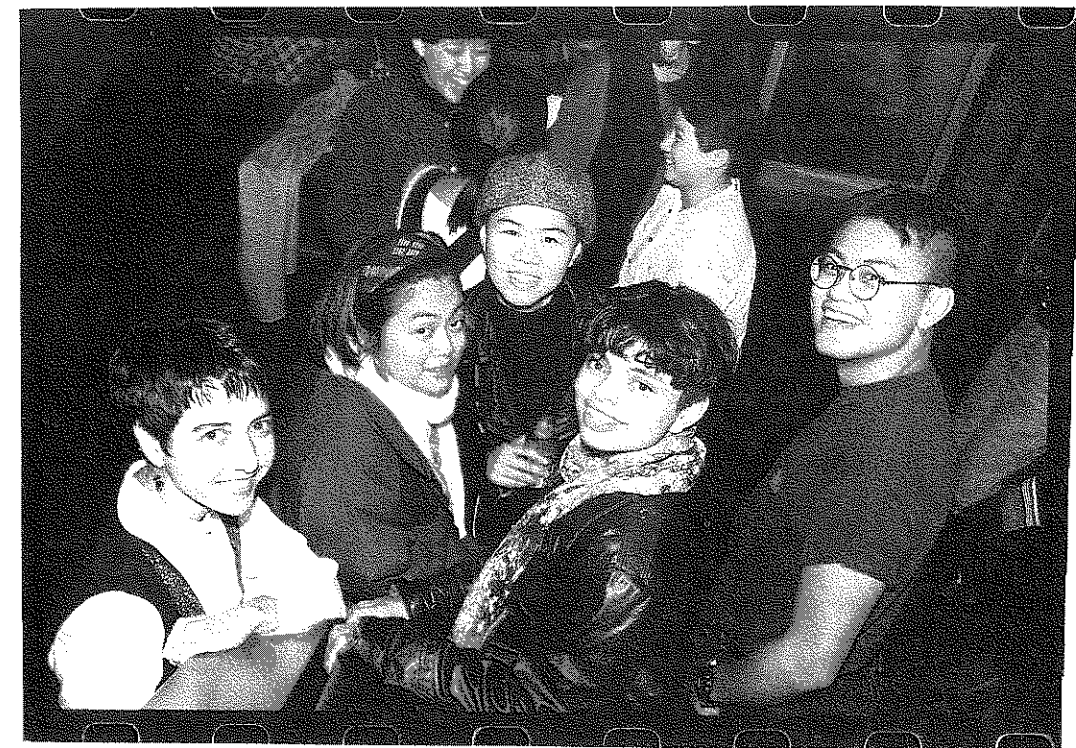
(she can always hear me think)

life I think.

"You" :

I say outloud. just in case she misses my thought.

Newsletters and books such as *Khush Kayal*, *Sami Yoni* (Toronto), *Shakti Khabar* (Britain), *Bombay Dost* (India), *Trikone*, *Shamakami*, (U.S.A.), *Shakti Report* (Britain), *Lotus of a Another Color* (U.S.A.) are creating spaces for "private" discussions in safe places. Too often, South Asian women are seen to be in need of rescue by 'white' feminists. In the case of arranged marriages, any public discussion leaves the South Asian communities open to judgements from the racist discourses of sociology, anthropology, social work, and even feminist organizing.



The risk of ostracism from one's family is something that many South Asian lesbians/gays/bis face; in a society that does not validate our culture, our families often become the only source of cultural asylum and resistance. The need for social mobility of "people of colour" emphasizes marriages; the importance of marriage in South Asian cultures creates a point of conflict for many lesbians, gays and bisexuals who fear "letting down" their families, as well as the rejection of a community that offers them a refuge from a racist society. This community can also be an economic cushion, as well as a source of political power for an individual otherwise marginalized. Urveshi Vaid, former head of the Gay and Lesbian Task force sends a message to South Asian lesbians and gays who fear family reaction:

One thing we have going for us Indians is that there is a very strong commitment to the family. I feel very committed to my parents and my sisters. It doesn't matter if I am gay, I know I am going to be part of their lives. Of course there are moments of awkwardness and pain, but you have to go through that. (Urveshi Vaid, *Trikone*, 1989)

While Urveshi Vaid's experience with family may speak to some of us, for many South Asian queers, lesbians in particular, arranged marriages pose a unique and volatile problem. As an unnamed contributor to *Shakti Report* states: "Great suspicions are aroused when a family member does not get married, or refuses to get married. Such an act is seen as wilful disobedience, an adoption of western values, a rejection of Asian customs." For many South Asians, maintaining their sexuality means losing connections to their family, and risking future prospects for younger siblings: one marries the family and the family's reputation. Asian lesbians often face very tough choices.

I ran away from home on the night before my wedding. I was nineteen. My parents had chosen this man from India, who I hardly knew at all. I just couldn't go through with it. I knew I was a lesbian. I ran off to live with my girlfriend. She was Asian and had also separated from her family. It was good to be with her, sharing the same background so to speak.

My family found out where I was staying a couple of months later. I don't know how. Somebody must have told them they saw me and then they must have watched me and followed me around. Anyway, they turn up to where we were staying at 1:00am. Four car loads of them. Smashed the door down, screaming and yelling at me, slapping me around and my girlfriend, shouting all sorts of bad names at us. They began dragging me out of the flat towards the car. Luckily a neighbour had called the police when she heard the noise. They were around there pretty quickly. They were really good.

Anyway in the end I had to get an injunction on them to stay away from me. My girlfriend and I had

to move away, get another job. I just kept my fingers crossed that they don't find me again.

(Anonymous, *Shakti Report*, 1992)

I think of corny love songs and the words and messages they send us. heart love deep believe never one day one day ya dream get you woman baby hip hair hey but still those love songs sometimes make the middle of my palms burn and tingle. a beautiful tiny burning sensation that starts in the centre of my hand and endearingly and slowly stretches out to my finger tips. you make me high sometimes.

Our self-definition as "settlers" must not be exoticized. We must not simply explain our differences to each other; we need to work with them. There is an overwhelming movement to reclaim history, create language, and put forth positive images that will allow us to discuss, politically and theoretically, issues with us defining the agenda. In all my debates surrounding the politics of identity, I have never been able to throw out a concept of identity that borders on essentialism. But we must be clear that there is no one South Asian "queer" identity; we must be clear as to why we are organizing together. And then we must go out and do it.

Thanks to Andrea, Amita, Julia, Vashti.

Vinita Srivastava is a writer/dreamer living in Toronto.

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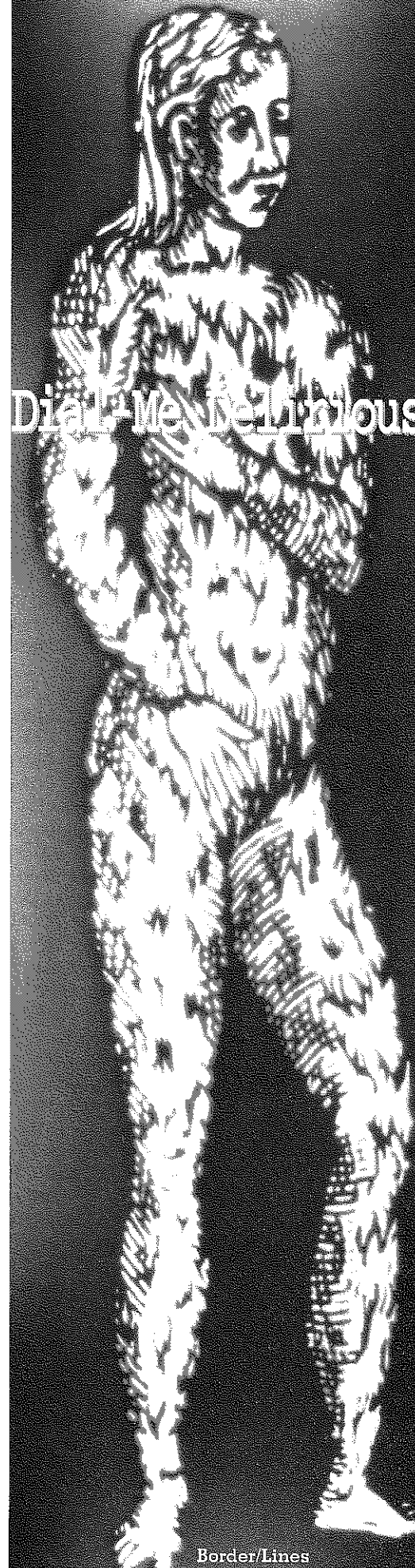
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Shonagh Adelman is a Toronto-based visual artist who has exhibited in galleries across Canada for over ten years. In other work, "Larger Than Life" and "Skin Deep," Adelman explores themes of the body, femininity, lesbian sexuality and fantasy. Her most recent project, "Tele Donna," was on view at A Space Gallery in Toronto, January 8 - February 19.

"Tele Donna: Dial-Me-Intimous Doll-Face"

An installation of eleven enormous black light boxes (8' high) arranged in the V formation of a family portrait, *Tele Donna* features bold line drawings of female figures from diverse historical periods. Among them are a nineteenth century Italian prostitute, a Doris Day-styled woman in a 1950s bird-cage bathing suit who sports boxing gloves, and a (thickly-matted) "hairy woman" from Medieval mythology.

The darkened gallery space and the eery purple hue emanating from each box suggest secrecy and erotic intrigue more commonly associated with scenes from a house of horrors or commercial peep shows along Yonge St. ("the sin strip") in the 1970s. Mounted on the side of every phonebooth-like box is a telephone receiver. Picking it up in public, in the company of other gallery-goers, one is startled to hear a very private and very explicit, three-minute phone sex message. Quite unexpectedly, I found myself slinking surreptitiously behind the box, receiver in hand, safely out of view: I was acutely discomfitted by Adelman's crafty deconstruction of "appropriate" public and private activity. At the same time, I experienced the thrill of being both a voyeur and a (turned on) participant in a compelling range of female-centred fantasy scenarios. I wasn't alone. Viewer responses recorded in the comments book included: "Great, now we have to cancel grocery shopping and go home and fuck," "Made me hot," "I'm tingling,"



and "This show's the next best thing to being there."

At the vertex of the angled arrangement, stands an image of two women performing a ballroom waltz in 1950s garb of wide, knee-length skirts and stiffly starched blouses. They trigger my sweet memory of Miou Miou and Isabelle Hupert in Diane Kurys' homoerotic classic, "Entre Nous" (1985). The

accompanying phone sex monologue plays with the butch/femme orchestration of dominance and surrender. The unsettling image of a turn-of-the-century murderess brandishing a knife suggests a portrait of Angelina Napolitano, a 28 year old Italian Canadian mother of four who sliced up her husband in their rented quarters in Sault St. Marie, Ont., in 1911. "Angelina's" violent yet liberatory act is matched by the breathless, taped description of one woman greedily fist fucking another to loud groans, the burbling of lube, and the snapping of latex. Another box features a stocky German girl, a Gretel from the Grimms' fairy tale, in leather harness and lederhosen. On the taped phone message, a 30-something sexterp arouses her caller by pretending she's an eleven year old who likes "girl chicken," pierced pussy, getting spanked and dressing up her playmate in "little girl clothes." This show is not for the sex pessimists at large. The bold, arresting juxtapositions of visual and aural stimuli explode age-old notions of feminine passivity and propriety. In the midst of a full-blown, reactionary moral panic about gender and sexuality, Adelman's "Tele Donna" re-centres the lusty and inextinguishable female spirit. I'd love to claim each and every one of the eleven "Donnas" as coveted members of my family tree.

Becki Ross