

Classic Poetry Series

Judy Grahn
- poems -

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Judy Grahn(1940)

Judy Rae Grahn (born July 28, 1940, in Chicago, Illinois) is an American poet. Grahn's work focuses on the feminist and lesbian experience.

Judy Rae Grahn was born in 1940 in Chicago, Illinois. Her father was a cook and her mother was a photographer's assistant. Grahn described her childhood as taking place in "an economically poor and spiritually depressed late 1950s New Mexico desert town near the hellish border of West Texas." When she was eighteen, she eloped with a student named Yvonne at a nearby college . Grahn credits Yvonne with opening her eyes to gay culture. Soon thereafter she would join the United States Air Force. At twenty-one she was discharged (in a "less than honorable," manner, she stated) for being a lesbian.

At the age of 25, Grahn suffered from Inoculation lymphoreticulosis, or Cat Scratch Fever, which led to her being in a coma. After overcoming her illness, she realized that she wanted to become a poet. This realization was partially due to the abuse and mistreatment Grahn faced for being openly lesbian. Of the incident, Grahn stated "I realized that if I was going to do what I had set out to do in my life, I would have to go all the way with it and take every single risk you could take.... I decided I would not do anything I didn't want to do that would keep me from my art."

Grahn would move to the west coast where she would become active in the feminist poetry movement of the 1970s. During this period, many rumors surfaced pertaining to Grahn's weight and a possible eating disorder. Grahn attributes her thin frame to poor eating habits, smoking cigarettes, and drinking coffee.

She earned her PhD from the California Institute of Integral Studies. Until 2007, Grahn was the director of the Women's Spirituality (MA) and Creative Inquiry (MFA) programs at the New College of California.

Today, Grahn lives in California and teaches at the California Institute for Integral Studies, the New College of California, and the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology. There she teaches women's mythology and ancient literature, Metaformic Consciousness (a philosophy created by Grahn), and Uncommon Kinship - a course that uses theories from her Metaformic philosophy.

Helen In Hollywood

When she goes to Hollywood
she is an angel.

She writes in red red lipstick
on the window of her body,
long for me, oh need me!
Parts her lips like a lotus.

Opening night she stands, poised
on her carpet, luminescent,
young men humming
all around her. She is flying.
Her high heels are wands, her
furs electric. Her bracelets
flashing. How completely
dazzling her complexion,
how vibrant her hair and eyes,
how brilliant the glow that spreads
four full feet around her.

She is totally self conscious
self contained
self centered,
caught in the blazing central eye
of our attention.

We infuse her.
Fans, we wave at her
like handmaids, unabashedly,
we crowd on tiptoe pressed together
just to feel the fission of the star
that lives on earth,
the bright, the angel sun
the luminescent glow of someone
other than we.
Look! Look! She is different.
Medium for all our energy
as we pour it through her.
Vessel of light,

Her flesh is like flax,
a living fiber.
She is the symbol of our dreams and fears
and bloody visions, all
our metaphors for living in America.

Harlowe, Holiday, Monroe

Helen
When she goes to Hollywood
she is the fire for all purposes.

Her flesh is like dark wax, a candle.
She is from any place or class.
"That's the one," we say in instant recognition,
because our breath is taken by her beauty,
or what we call her beauty.

She is glowing from every pore.
we adore her. we imitate and rob her
adulate envy
admire neglect
scorn. leave alone
invade, fill
ourselves with her.
we love her, we say
and if she isn't careful
we may even kill her.

Opening night
she lands on her carpet,
long fingered hands
like divining rods
bobbing and drawing the strands
of our attention,
as limousine drivers in blue jackets
stand on the hoods of their cars
to see the angel, talking

Davis, Dietrich, Wood
Tyson, Taylor, Gabor
Helen, when she goes to Hollywood

to be a walking star,
to be an actor

She is far more than a product
of Max Factor,
Max Factor didn't make her
though the make-up helps us
see what we would like
to take her for

her flesh is like glass,
a chandelier
a mirror

Harlowe, Holiday, Monroe
Helen
when she went to Hollywood
to be an angel

And it is she and not we
who is different

She who marries the crown prince
who leads the processional dance,
she who sweeps eternally
down the steps
in her long round gown.
A leaping, laughing leading lady,
she is our flower.
It is she who lies strangled
in the bell tower;
she who is monumentally drunk and suicidal
or locked waiting in the hightower,
she who lies sweating with the vicious jungle fever,
who leaps from her blue window
when he will, if he will, leave her

it is she and not we
who is the lotus

It is she with the lilies in her hair
and a keyboard beside her,

the dark flesh glowing

She whose wet lips nearly swallow
the microphone, whose whiskey voice
is precise and sultry and overwhelming,
she who is princess and harlequin,
athlete and moll and whore and lady,
goddess of the silver screen
the only original American queen

and Helen
when she was an angel
when she went to Hollywood

Anonymous submission.

Judy Grahn

Paris and Helen

He called her: golden dawn
She called him: the wind whistles

He called her: heart of the sky
She called him: message bringer

He called her: mother of pearl
barley woman, rice provider,
millet basket, corn maid,
flax princess, all-maker, weef

She called him: fawn, roebuck,
stag, courage, thunderman,
all-in-green, mountain strider
keeper of forests, my-love-rides

He called her: the tree is
She called him: bird dancing

He called her: who stands,
has stood, will always stand
She called him: arriver

He called her: the heart and the womb
are similar
She called him: arrow in my heart.

Judy Grahn

Sheep

The first four leaders had broken knees
The four old dams had broken knees
The flock would start to run, then freeze
The first four leaders had broken knees

'Why is the flock so docile?' asked the hawk.
'Yes, why is the flock so docile,' laughed the dog,

'The shepherd's mallet is in his hand,
The shepherd's hand is on the land,
The flock will start to run, then freeze—
The four old dams have broken knees,'
The dog explained.

The hawk exclaimed:
'The shepherd leads an easy life!'

'I know, I know,' cried the shepherd's wife,
'He dresses me out in a narrow skirt
and leaves me home to clean his dirt.
Whenever I try to run, I freeze—
All the old dams have broken knees.'

'Well, I'm so glad he doesn't dare
to bring his breaking power to bear
on me,' said the hawk, flying into the sun;
while the dog warned, in his dog run:
'Hawk—the shepherd has bought a gun!'

'Why is the hawk so docile?' asked the flock,

'He fell to the ground in a feathery breeze;
He lies in a dumb lump under the trees,
We believe we'd rather have broken knees
Than lose our blood and suddenly freeze
Like him.'

But the oldest dam gave her leg a lick,
And said, 'Some die slow and some die quick,

A few run away and the rest crawl,
But the shepherd never dies at all—
Damn his soul.

I'd will my wool to the shepherd's wife
If she could change the shepherd's life,
But I myself would bring him low
If only, only I knew how.'

Judy Grahn

Slowly: a plainsong from an older woman to a younger woman

am I not olden olden olden
it is unwanted.

wanting, wanting
am I not broken
stolen common

am I not crinkled cranky poison
am I not glinty-eyed and frozen

am I not aged
shaky glazing
am I not hazy
guarded craven

am I not only
stingy little
am I not simple
brittle spitting

was I not over
over ridden?

it is a long story
will you be proud to be my version?

it is unwritten.

writing, writing
am I not ancient
raging patient

am I not able
charming stable
was I not building
forming braving

was I not ruling
guiding naming
was I not brazen
crazy chosen

even the stones would do my bidding?

it is a long story
am I not proud to be your version?

it is unspoken.

speaking, speaking
am I not elder
berry
brandy

are you not wine before you find me
in your own beaker?

Judy Grahn

The Common Women Poems, III. Nadine, resting on her neighbor's stoop

She holds things together, collects bail,
makes the landlord patch the largest holes.
At the Sunday social she would spike
every drink, and offer you half of what she knows,
which is plenty. She pokes at the ruins of the city
like an armored tank; but she thinks
of herself as a rip saw cutting through
knots in wood. Her sentences come out
like thick pine shanks
and her big hands fill the air like smoke.
She's a mud-chinked cabin in the slums,
sitting on the doorstep counting
rats and raising 15 children,
half of them her own. The neighborhood
would burn itself out without her;
one of these days she'll strike the spark herself.
She's made of grease
and metal, with a hard head
that makes the men around her seem frail.
The common woman is as common as
a nail.

Judy Grahn