> What is there possibly left for us to be afraid of, after we have dealt face to face with death and not embraced it? Once I accept the existence of dying as a life process, who can ever have power over me again?[14]

Audre Lorde asks no more of us than she does of herself: that we pay attention to those voices we have been taught to distrust, that we articulate what they teach us, that we act upon what we know. Just as she develops themes, reworking and building on them over time to create theory, so, too, can we integrate the material of our lives.

Black woman, lesbian, feminist, mother of two children, daughter of Grenadian immigrants, educator, cancer survivor, activist. The essays and speeches in *Sister Outsider* give new resonance to that fundamental but much abused feminist revelation that the personal is political. We are all amplified by Audre Lorde's work.

> I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness, as I discover you in myself.[15]

—NANCY K. BEREANO
December 1983

Notes

1. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," p. 55.
2. "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," p. 151.
3. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," p. 112.
4. "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response," p. 73.
5. Ibid., p. 74.
6. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," p. 119.
7. Ibid., p. 114.
8. From an interview in *The Feminist Renaissance*.
9. "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich," p. 100, and "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," p. 68.
10. "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," p. 38.
11. "An Interview," p. 109.
12. Ibid., pp. 108–109.
13. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," p. 43.
14. *The Cancer Journals* (Aunt Lute Books, 1980), p. 25.
15. "Eye to Eye," p. 147.

Notes from a Trip to Russia*

SINCE I'VE RETURNED from Russia a few weeks ago, I've been dreaming a lot. At first I dreamt about Moscow every night. Sometimes my lover and I had returned there; sometimes I would be in warmer, familiar places I had visited; sometimes in different, unfamiliar cities, cold, white, strange. In one dream, I was making love to a woman behind a stack of clothing in Gumm's Department Store in Moscow. She was ill, and we went upstairs, where I said to a matron, "We have to get her to the hospital." The matron said, "All right, you take her over there and tell them that she needs a kidney scan and a brain scan . . . " And I said, "No, they're not going to do that for me." And she looked at me very strangely and she said, "Of course they will." And I realized I was in Russia, and medicine and doctor bills and all the rest of that are free.

My dreams don't come every night anymore, but it seems as if they've gotten deeper and deeper so that I awake not really knowing any of the content of them but only knowing that I've just dreamt about Russia again. For a while, in my dreams, Russia became a mythic representation of that socialism which does not yet exist anywhere I have been. The possibilities of liv-

* These are edited journal entries from a two-week trip to Russia that I made in 1976 as the invited American observer to the African-Asian Writers Conference sponsored by the Union of Soviet Writers.

ing in Russia seem very different in some respects, yet the people feel so Western European (so American, really) outside of Tashkent. And the afternoons in Moscow are so dark and gloomy.

I

The flight to Moscow was nine hours long, and from my observations on the plane, Russians are generally as unfriendly to each other as Americans are and just about as unhelpful.

There was a marvelously craggy-faced old blue-eyed woman in her seventies wearing a babushka, with a huge coat roll. On the plane everyone had one kind of huge coat roll or another except me. When I stepped out into the Moscow weather I realized why. But this woman was sitting in the seat right in front of me. She was traveling alone and was too short to wield her roll easily. She tried once, and she tried twice, and finally I got up and helped her. The plane was packed: I'd never seen a plane quite so crowded before. The old woman turned around and looked at me. It was obvious she did not speak English because I had muttered something to her with no reply. There was in her eyes a look of absolutely no rancor. I thought with a quick shock how a certain tension in glances between American Black and white people is taken for granted. There was no thank you either, but there was a kind of simple human response to who I was. And then as she turned to sit back down, under her very dowdy cardigan I saw on her undersweater at least three military-type medals, complete with chevrons. Hero of the Republic medals, I learned later. Earned for hard work.

This is something that I noticed all over: the very old people in Russia have a stamp upon them that I hope I can learn and never lose, a matter-of-fact resilience and sense of their place upon the earth that is very sturdy and reassuring.

I landed on September 10th about 3:30 P.M. Moscow time and stepped out into a very raw, familiar greyness. There was a winter smell to the air; almost nostalgic. The trees were

Thanksgiving-turned and the sky had that turkey-laden grey-pumpkin color. I saw three large, square-faced women arm-in-arm, marching across the airfield laughing and joking as they came. They were evidently workers just going off shift – they had grey coveralls and jackets with engineer caps and carried lunch buckets. They stopped beside a truck that had paused and started beating against the closed window, drawing the attention of the other woman inside with some half-hello/half-joke at the driver, who was obviously their buddy, because they all pointed fingers at each other laughing uproariously together there on the Moscow airstrip in the grim light, swinging their lunch pails and cutting up.

My Intourist guide's name was Helen, a very pleasant and attractive large-boned young woman in her thirties. She was born in the East, near Japan, and her father, who'd been a military man, was dead. She lived with her mother now, and she said that she and her mother had to learn to do a lot of things for themselves since there are so few men around these days and service is so hard to get.

In Russia you carry your own bags in airports and hotels. This, at first, struck me as oppressive because, of course, carrying a laden bag up seven flights of stairs when the elevator isn't working is not fun. But the longer I stayed there the fairer it seemed, because in this country it appears that everything is seen in terms of food. That is, the labor of one's hands is measured by how much food you can produce, and then you take that and compare its importance to the worth of the other work that you do. Some men and women spend their whole lives, for instance, learning and doing the infinitely slow and patient handwork of retouching Persian Blue tiles down in Samarkand to restore the ancient mausoleums. It is considered very precious work. But antiquities have a particular value, whereas carrying someone else's bag does not have a very high priority because it is not very productive either of beauty or worth. If you can't manage it, then that's another story. I find it a very interesting concept.

It's about thirty miles from the airport to the city of Moscow, and the road and the trees and the drivers could have been peo-

ple from Northern Westchester in late winter, except I couldn't read any of the signs. We would pass from time to time incredibly beautiful, old, uncared for Russian-Orthodox-style houses, with gorgeous painted wooden colors and outlined ornate windows. Some of them were almost falling down. But there was a large ornate richness about the landscape and architecture on the outskirts of Moscow, even in its grey winter, that seemed to tell me immediately that I was not at home.

I stayed at the Hotel Younnost, which is one of the international hotels in Moscow. The room was a square studio affair with Hollywood bed couches, and a huge picture window looking towards the National Stadium, over a railroad bridge, with a very imposing view of the University buildings against the skyline. But everything was so reminiscent of New York in winter that even as I sat at 9:30 P.M. after dinner, writing, looking through the blinds, there was the sound of a train and light on the skyline, and every now and then the tail lights of an auto curving around between the railroad bridge and the hotel. And it felt like a hundred nights that I remembered along Riverside Drive, except that just on the edge of the picture was the golden onion-shaped dome of a Russian Orthodox church.

Before dinner I took a short walk. It was already growing dark, but down the street from the hotel was the Stadium stop on the Metro, which is a subway. I walked down there and into the Metro station and I stood in front of the escalators for awhile just watching the faces of the people coming and going. It felt like instant 14th Street of my childhood, before Blacks and Latins colored New York, except everyone was much more orderly and the whole place seemed much less crowded. The thing that was really strangest of all for the ten minutes that I stood there was that there were no Black people. And the token collector and the station manager were women. The station was very large and very beautiful and very clean – shockingly, strikingly, enjoyably clean. The whole station looked like a theater lobby – bright brass and mosaics and shining chandeliers. Even when they were rushing, and in Moscow there's always a kind of rush, people lack the desperation of New York. One thing that characterized all of these people was a pleasantness in their

faces, a willingness to smile, at least at me, a stranger. It was a strange contrast to the grimness of the weather.

There are some Black people around the hotel and I inquired of Helen about the Patrice Lumumba University. This is a university located in Moscow for students from African countries. There were many Africans in and around the hotel when I got back from the Metro station and I think many of them were here for the Conference. Interestingly enough, most of them speak Russian and I don't. When I went downstairs to dinner, I almost quailed in front of the linguistic task because I could not even find out where I was supposed to sit, or whether I should wait to be seated. Whenever the alphabet is unfamiliar, there are absolutely no cues to a foreign language. A young Black man swaggered across my eyesight with that particular swagger of fine, young Black men wanting to be noticed and I said, "Do you speak English?" "Yes," he said and started walking very rapidly away from me. So I walked back to him and when I tried to ask him whether I should sit down or wait to be seated, I realized the poor boy did not understand a word that I said. At that point I pulled out my two trusty phrase books and proceeded to order myself a very delicious dinner of white wine, boiled fish soup that was lemon piquant, olive rich, and fresh mackerel, delicate, grilled sturgeon with pickled sauce, bread, and even a glass of tea. All of this was made possible by great tenacity and daring on my part, and the smiling forebearance of a very helpful waiter who brought out one of the cooks from the kitchen to help with the task of deciphering my desires.

II

It's very cold in Moscow. The day I arrived it snowed in the morning and it snowed again today, and this is September 16th. My guide, Helen, put her finger on it very accurately. She said that life in Moscow is a constant fight against the cold weather, and that living is only a triumph against death by freezing. Maybe because of the cold, or maybe because of the shortage of

food in the war years, but everyone eats an enormous amount here. Tonight, because of a slight error on the part of the waitress, Helen had two dinners and thought very little about eating them both. And no one is terribly fat, but I think that has a good deal to do with the weather. We had wine at dinner tonight, and wine seems to be used a lot to loosen up one's tongue. It almost seems a prescription. At every dinner meal there are always three glasses: one for water, one for wine, and one for vodka, which flows like water, and with apparently as little effect upon Russians.

A group from the conference with our Intourist guides went sightseeing today. It's hard to believe that today's Sunday because the whole city seems so full of weekday life, so intent on its own purposes, that it makes the week seem extended by an extra day. We saw the Novagrodsky Convent Museum and the brilliant, saucy golden onion steeples that shock me back from the feeling this is Manhattan. We went to see the University and of course many plaques for many heroes, but I never saw one that moved me as much as the tough old lady coming in on Aeroflot. And the Bolshoi Ballet Theatre. It was rainy and grey and overcast – a New York December day – and very imposing in the way the Grand Concourse at 161st Street in the Bronx can be imposing in the middle of December, or Columbus Circle. The golden onion steeples on some older buildings are beautiful and they glisten all the time, even in this weather, which makes them look like joyful promises on the landscape, or fairy palaces, and the lovely colors of greens, whites, yellows and oranges decorating and outlining windows make a wonderfully colorful accent in the greyness. I hope that I get a chance to see the Pushkin Museum.

I was interviewed by a sweetly astute, motherly woman who was one of the members of the Union of Soviet Writers. She was doing a study of "Negro policy," as she said, and of course she was very interested in women in the States. We talked for a good two hours and one of the things I told her was about the old woman on the plane with the medals, and I asked her if she had any idea what they were. She said the woman was probably an older farm worker who had been awarded and named a

"Hero of the Republic." Those were mostly given to people who worked very hard, she said. It was interesting because earlier, at lunch, I had seen a side of Helen, my interpreter, that surprised me. She was quite out of sorts with one of the waitresses who did not wait on her quickly enough, and it does take a long time to get waited on. Helen made a remark that the workers rule the country, and her manner and response to that seemed to be one of disgust, or at least rather put-off. I think Helen felt that she was being discriminated against, or that she was at a disadvantage, because she was an "intellectual," a translator as well as an interpreter. Which struck me as an odd kind of snobbishness because Helen worked at least as hard, if not harder, than any waitress, running after me and living my life as well as hers. Because always, she stuck to me like white on rice.

We were at the University and our guide was talking to us, in English, about the buildings, which had been built during Stalin's time. Material had been brought down from the Ukraine to sink into the earth to build such buildings because Moscow, unlike New York, is not built upon bedrock. This strikes me as strange, that this city of oversize, imposing stone buildings should not be grounded on bedrock. It's like it remains standing on human will. While we were standing in front of the reflecting pool having this discussion, a little tow-headed boy sidled up to me with a completely international air, all of ten years old, stood in front of me and with a furtive sideways gesture, flipped his hand open. In the center of his little palm was a button-pin of a red star with a soldier in the middle of it. I was completely taken aback because I did not know what the kid wanted and I asked Helen who brushed the child off and shooed him away so quickly I didn't have a chance to stop her. Then she told me that he wanted to trade for American buttons. That little kid had stood off to the side and watched all of these strange Black people, and he had managed to peg me as an American because, of course, Americans are the only ones who go around wearing lots and lots of buttons, and he had wanted to trade his red star button. I was touched by the child, and also because I couldn't help but think that it was Sunday and he was probably hitting all the tourist spots. I'm sure his parents did

not know where he was, and I really wondered what his mother would do if she knew.

The woman from the Writers' Union who was doing her book on Negro policy was, I'd say, a little older than I was, probably in her early fifties, and her husband had been killed in the war. She had no children. She offered these facts about herself as soon as we sat down, talking openly about her life, as everybody seemingly does here. I say *seemingly* because it only goes so far. And she, like my guide and most women here, both young and old, seem to mourn the lack of men. At the same time they appear to have shaken off many of the traditional role-playing devices vis-a-vis men. Almost everyone I've met has lost someone in what they call the "Great Patriotic War," which is our Second World War.

I was interviewed by Oleg this evening, one of the officials of the Union of Soviet Writers, the people who had invited me to Russia and who were footing the bill. In my interview with him I learned the hotel that we're staying in was originally a youth hostel and Oleg apologized because it was not as "civilized," so he said, as other Moscow hotels. I came across this term *civilized* before, and I wondered whether it was a term used around Americans or whether it meant up to American standards. Increasingly I get a feeling that American standards are sort of an unspoken norm, and that whether one resists them, or whether one adopts them, they are there to be reckoned with. This is rather disappointing. But coming back to the hotel, I notice that the fixtures here *are* a little shabby, but they *do* work, and the studio beds are a bit adolescent in size, but they are comfortable. For a youth hostel it's better than I would ever hope for. Of course, I can't help but wonder why the African-Asian Conference people should be housed in a youth hostel, particularly an "uncivilized" one, but I don't imagine that I'll ever get an answer to that. All hotel rooms cost the same in the Soviet Union. Utilities, from my conversation with Helen while we were riding the Metro down to send a cable, utilities are very inexpensive. The gas to cook with costs sixteen kopecs a month which is less than one ruble (about $3.00) and the most electricity Helen says that she uses, when she's translating all day long

in winter, costs three rubles a month. That is very expensive, she says. The two-room apartment which she and her mother share costs eight rubles a month.

Oleg does not speak English, or does not converse in English. Like many other people I was to meet during my stay in Russia, he understands English although he does not let on. Oleg said through Helen that he wants me to know it was very important for us to meet other writers and that the point of the Conference was for us to get together. I thanked him for the twenty-five rubles I had been given as soon as I arrived here in Moscow, which I have been told was a gift from the Union of Soviet Writers for pocket money. I spoke of the oppressed people all over the world, meeting to touch and to share, I spoke of South Africa and their struggle. Oleg said something very curious. "Yes, South Africa is really very bad. It is like a sore upon the body that will not heal." This sounded to me both removed and proprietary. Unclear. Willy, my South African poet friend, lives in Tanzania now and he may be here, which I am very excited about.

III

We traveled south to Uzbekistan for the Conference, a five-hour journey that became seven because of delays. We arrived in Tashkent after dark following a long, exhausting plane ride. As I have said, Russian planes are incredibly packed, every single inch being taken up in seats. They absolutely utilize their air space. Even coming from New York to Moscow it was like air mass transit. Certainly from Moscow to Tashkent this was true since there were 150 delegates to the African-Asian Writers Conference, myself, one observer, interpreters, and press personnel. All together, a traveling group of about 250 people, which is a large group to move around a country at least four or five times the size of the United States (and in a standard, not wide-bodied, plane).

As we descended the plane in Tashkent, it was deliciously hot and smelled like Accra, Ghana. At least it seemed to me that it

did, from the short ride from the airport to the hotel. The road to the city had lots of wood and white marble all around broad avenues, and bright street lights. The whole town of Tashkent had been rebuilt after the 1966 earthquake. We arrived tired and hot, to a welcome that would make your heart grow still, then sing. Can you imagine 250 of us, weary, cramped, hungry, disoriented, overtalked, underfed? It is after dark. We step out of the plane and there before us are over a hundred people and TV cameras, and lights, and two or three hundred little children dressed in costumes with bunches of flowers that they thrust upon each of us as we walked down the ramp from the plane. "Surprise!" Well, you know, it was a surprise. Pure and simple, and I was pretty damn well surprised. I was surprised at the gesture, hokey or not, at the mass participation in it. Most of all, I was surprised at my response to it; I felt genuinely welcomed.

So off to the hotel we went and I had the distinct feeling here, for the first time in Russia, that I was meeting warm-blooded people; in the sense of contact unavoided, desires and emotions possible, the sense that there was something hauntingly, personally familiar – not in the way the town looks because it looked like nothing I'd ever seen before, night and the minarets – but the tempo of life felt hotter, quicker than in Moscow; and in place of Moscow's determined pleasantness, the people displayed a kind of warmth that was very engaging. They are an Asian people in Tashkent. Uzbeki. They look like the descendants of Ghengis Khan, some of whom I'm sure they are. They are Asian and they are Russian. They think and speak and consider themselves Russian, for all intents and purposes so far as I can see, and I really wonder how they manage that. On the other hand, the longer I stayed the more I realized some of the personal tensions between North Russian and Uzbek are national and some racial.

There are only four sisters in this whole conference. In the plane coming to Tashkent, I sat with the three other African women and we exchanged chitchat for 5½ hours about our respective children, about our ex-old men, all very, very heterocetera.

IV

Tashkent is divided into two parts. There's the old part that survived the huge earthquake of 1966, and there's the newer part which is on the outskirts of old Tashkent. It's very new and very modern, rebuilt in a very short time after the earthquake that practically totaled the area. It was rebuilt by labor from all over the Soviet Union. People came from the Ukraine, from Byelo-Russia, from all over, and they rebuilt the city. And there are many different styles of architecture in the new part of town because every group who came built their own type of building. It's almost a memorial to what can be done when a large group of people work together. It was one of the things that impressed me greatly during my stay in Tashkent. The old part, which is really the center of Tashkent, looks very, very much like a town in Ghana or Dahomey, say Kumasi or Cotonou. In the daylight it looks so much like some parts of West Africa that I could scarcely believe it. In fact, if Moscow is New York in another space, in another color – because both New York and Moscow have a little over eight million population and should apparently have many of the same problems, but Moscow seems to have handled them very differently – if Moscow is New York, Tashkent is Accra. It is African in so many ways – the stalls, the mix of the old and the new, the corrugated tin roofs on top of adobe houses. The corn smell in the plaza, although the plazas were more modern than in West Africa. Even some flowers and trees, Calla lilies. But the red laterite smell of the earth was different.

The people here in Tashkent, which is quite close to the Iranian border, are very diverse, and I am impressed by their apparent unity, by the ways in which the Russian and the Asian people seem to be able to function in a multinational atmosphere that requires of them that they get along, whether or not they are each other's favorite people. And it's not that there are no individuals who are nationalists, or racists, but that the taking of a state position against nationalism, against racism is what makes it possible for a society like this to function. And of course the next step in that process must be the personal ele-

ment. I don't see anyone attempting or even suggesting this phase, however, and that is troublesome, for without this step socialism remains at the mercy of an incomplete vision, imposed from the outside. We have internal desires but outside controls. But at least there is a climate here that seems to encourage those questions. I asked Helen about the Jews, and she was rather evasive, I think, saying only that there were Jews in government. The basic position seems to be one of a presumption of equality, even though there is sometimes a large gap between the expectation and the reality.

We visited a film studio and saw several children's cartoons which handled their themes beautifully, deeply, with great humor, and most notably, without the kind of violence that we have come to associate with cartoons. They were truly delightful.

After two very busy days of meetings in Tashkent, we started out at about 7:30 one morning by bus for Samarkand, the fabulous city of Tamerlane the Great. After a short snooze on the bus I began to feel a little more human, to look about me and the countryside. We're heading southeast from Tashkent, and Tashkent was southeast of Moscow. The countryside is very beautiful. It feels strange and familiar at the same time. This is cotton country. Miles and miles of it, and trainloads of students were coming south from Moscow on a two-week vacation to party and pick cotton. There was a holiday atmosphere all around. We passed through small villages where I could see little markets with women sitting cross-ankled on the bare earth selling a few cabbages or a small tray of fruit. And walls, behind which you could see adobe houses. Even the walls themselves reminded me very much of West Africa, made of a clay mud that cracks in the same old familiar patterns that we saw over and over again in Kumasi and south of Accra. Only here the clay is not red, but a light beige, and that is to remind me that this is the USSR and not Ghana or Dahomey. Of course, the faces are white. There are other differences that creep through also. The towns and the villages are really in very good repair and there is a powerful railroad running parallel to our road. Long, efficient looking trains and tanker cars and ten-car

passenger trains pass by us, going through switch houses with blue and white ceramic tiles and painted roofs, all managed by women. Everything looks massive, bigger, in Russia. The roads are wider, the trains longer, the buildings bigger. The ceilings are higher. Everything seems to be on a larger scale.

We stopped for a harvest festival lunch at a collective farm, complete with the prerequisite but very engaging cultural presentation, while vodka flowed. Then we all danced and sang together with the busloads of students who had come to help pick cotton. Later on along the roads there were literally hills of cotton being loaded onto trains.

Each town that we pass through has a cafe, where the villagers can come and spend an evening or chat or talk or watch TV or listen to propaganda, who knows, but where they can meet. And all over, in between very old looking villages, there are also new four story buildings in progress, factories, new apartment houses. Trains full of building slabs and other kinds of materials, coal and rock and tractors pass by, even one with row after row after row of small automobiles. There are three different Russian automobiles. This is the cheapest, and most popular – hundreds and hundreds of cars stacked, all the same lemon color. Obviously, that month the factory was producing yellow.

I watched all of this industry pass and it came through to me on that bus ride down to Samarkand that this land was not industrial so much as it was industrious. There was a flavor of people working hard and doing things and it was very attractive. On top of that, I learned that this area between Tashkent and Samarkand was once known as the "Hungry Desert" because although it was fertile, no rain ever fell and it was covered with a coat of salt. Through technology devised to lift the salt, and a great deal of human hands and engineering, this whole area has been made to bloom, and it really does bloom. It is being farmed, mostly with cotton. People live here and there are massive irrigation ditches and pipes that maintain trees where there are towns and collective farms. All through Uzbekistan the feeling of a desert having been reclaimed and bearing huge fruit is very constant. Later on, as we headed on south after the great feast, we

stopped at an oasis, and I picked some desert flowers that were growing – small little scrub flowers that were growing in the sand. And just for so, I tasted one of them and as honeysuckle is sweet, so is this flower salt. It was as if the earth itself was still producing salt or still pouring salt into its products.

There's very beautiful marble throughout Uzbekistan. The stairs of the hotels and sometimes the streets have a beautiful pink and green marble. That was in Tashkent, which means "Stone City." But on this ride from Tashkent to Samarkand I saw no stones or rocks of any kind near the road. I don't know why, except that it is a reclaimed desert. The roads felt very good, and they were very broad because of course there was always heavy machinery and trucking traveling back and forth.

We had another glowing welcome in Gulstan, which means the "Hungry Desert." This is now the village of roses. We visited a collective farm, went into a house, saw the kindergarten. The woman's house into which we went was very impressive, as I said to someone later at lunch who asked me what I thought. I said, "She lives better than I do," and in some ways she did. The collective farm in Gulstan, called the Leningrad Collective, is one of the wealthiest collectives in the area. I will never know the name of the very kind young woman who opened her home to me, but I also will not forget her. She offered me the hospitality of her house, and even though we did not speak the same language, I felt that she was a woman like myself, wishing that all of our children could live in peace upon their own earth, somehow make fruitful the power of their own hands. Through Helen, she spoke about her three children, one of whom was only a nursing infant, and I spoke of my two. I spoke in English and she spoke in Russian, but I felt very strongly that our hearts spoke the same tongue.

I was reminded of her a few days later in Samarkand when Fikre, an Ethiopian student at Patrice Lumumba University, and I went shopping in the market. I remember the Moslem woman who came up to me in the marketplace, and she brought her little boy up to me asking Fikre if I had a little boy also. She said that she had never seen a Black woman before, that she had seen Black men, but she had never seen a Black woman,

and that she so much liked the way I looked that she just wanted to bring her little boy and find out if I had a little boy, too. Then we blessed each other and spoke good words and then she passed on.

There was the accomplished and very eloquent young Asian woman, an anthropology student, she said, who acted as our museum guide in Samarkand and shared her great store of historical knowledge with us. The night that we arrived in Samarkand and again the next day in looking through the museums, I felt that there were many things we were not seeing. For instance, we passed a case where there are a number of coins which I recognized as ancient Chinese coins because I'd used them for casting the I Ching. I asked our guide if these were from China. She acted as if I'd said a dirty word. And she said, "No, these were from right here in Samarkand." Now obviously they had been traded, and that was the whole point, but of course I couldn't read the Russian explanation under it, and she evidently took great offense at my use of the word *China*. In all of the women I've met here I feel an air of security and awareness of their own powers as women, as producers, and as human beings that is very affirming. But I also feel a stony rigidity, a resistance to questioning that frightens me, saddens me, because it feels destructive of progress as process.

We arrived in Samarkand about 9:30 P.M., quite wearied by a very full day. We got into the main square just in time to catch the last light-show at Tamerlane's tomb. The less said about that the better. But the following day, Helen, Fikre, and I played hooky from one mausoleum and ran across the street and went to a market. It is very reassuring and good as always. People in markets find a way of getting down to the essentials of I have, you want; you have, I want.

The tile tombs and the midrasas (ancient schools) of Samarkand are truly beautiful, intricate, and still. Incredibly painstaking work is being done to restore them. I could feel stillness in my bones, walking through these places, knowing that so much history had been buried there. I found two feathers in the Tomb of Bebe, Timor's favorite wife, and I felt almost as if I had come there to find them. The Tomb of Bebe

has beautiful minarets, but the Tomb itself was never used. The mosque was never used. There is a story that Bebe was Tamerlane's favorite wife and he "loved her with all of his heart." However, he had many, many journeys to go upon and he left her so often that he broke her heart and she died. When he returned and found she was dead, he was very upset because he had loved her so much, and he vowed that he would build the biggest mausoleum in the world, the most ornate mosque for her, and that is what he did. But then, just before it was completed, it collapsed. They say it was due to an error of the architect, but it was never used. One up for the lady shades.

The tile tombs and the midrasas are engrossing, but it's the market that caught my heart. We went later in that afternoon to another meeting of solidarity for the oppressed people of Somewhere. The only thing that I was quite sure of was that it was not for the oppressed Black people of America, which point, of course, I had questioned a number of days before and was still awaiting a reply. So we stood in the hot sun at the porcelain factory and it almost baked my brains, and I thought about a lot of things. The peoples of the Soviet Union, in many respects, impress me as people who can not yet afford to be honest. When they can be they will either blossom into a marvel or sink into decay. What gets me about the United States is that it pretends to be honest and therefore has so little room to move toward hope. I think that in America there are certain kinds of problems and in Russia there are certain kinds of problems, but basically, when you find people who start from a position where human beings are at the core, as opposed to a position where profit is at the core, the solutions can be very different. I wonder how similar human problems will be solved. But I am not always convinced that human beings are at the core here, either, although there is more lip service done to that idea than in the U.S.

I had a meeting the following day with a Madam Izbalkhan, who was the head of the Uzbekistan Society of Friendship. This meeting came about as a result of my request for clarification of my status here at the Conference. When all was said and done, why was there no meeting for oppressed peoples of Black

America? Enough said. Madam Izbalkhan talked two hours and she essentially said, well, here's what our revolution has done for us. And I felt she was implying that any time you want to get yours going, you know, be our guest, just don't expect us to be involved.

But she talked most movingly of the history of the women of Uzbekistan, a history which deserves more writing about than I can give it here. The ways in which the women of this area, from 1924 on, fought to come out from behind complete veiling, from Moslem cloister to the twentieth century. How they gave their lives to go bare-faced, to be able to read. Many of them fought and many of them died very terrible deaths in this battle, killed by their own fathers and brothers. It is a story of genuine female heroism and persistence. I thought of the South African women in 1956 who demonstrated and died rather than carry passbooks. For the Uzbeki women, revolution meant being able to show their faces and go to school, and they died for it. A bronze statue stands in a square of Samarkand, monument to the fallen women and their bravery. Madam went on to discuss the women of modern Uzbekistan and how there was now full equality between the sexes. How many women now headed collective farms, how many women Ministers. She said there were a great many ways in which women governed; there was no difference between men and women now in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. I was touched by these statistics, of course, but I also felt that there was a little more to it than met the eye. It sounded too easy, too pat. Madam spoke of the daycare centers, of kindergartens where children could be cared for on collective farms. The kindergartens are free in large cities like Moscow and Tashkent. But in Samarkand, there's a nominal fee of about two rubles a month, which is very little, she said. I asked her one question, whether "men are encouraged to work in the kindergartens to give the children a gentle male figure at an early age." Madam Izbalkhan hesitated for a moment. "No," she said. "We like to believe that when the children come to the kindergarten they acquire a second mother."

Madam Izbalkhan was a very strong and beautiful and forthright woman, excellently in charge of her facts, with a great deal

of presence, and I returned from my meeting with her almost overwhelmed and over-graped.

The grapes in Uzbekistan are incredible fruit. They seem to have a life of their own. They're called "the bridesmaid's little finger," and that's about the size of them. They're very long, and green, and they're absolutely the most delicious.

I came away with revolutionary women in my head. But I feel very much now still that we, Black Americans, exist alone in the mouth of the dragon. As I've always suspected, outside of rhetoric and proclamations of solidarity, there is no help, except ourselves. When I asked directly about the USSR's *attitude* toward American racism, Madam said reproachfully that of course the USSR cannot interfere in the internal affairs of any other nation. I wish now I had asked her about Russian Jews.

In Samarkand, Helen and I went looking for a fruit market. She inquired directions from a man who had passed by with either his little girl or his granddaughter, but I tend to think his little girl because so many of the adults here in Uzbekistan look much older than they are. It must be a quality of the dry air. Anyway, Helen stopped to inquire directions to the market and this gave him an opening, as frequently happens in Russia, to discuss anything. He wanted to know from Helen whether I was from Africa, and when he heard I was from America, then he really wanted to discuss American Black people. There seems to be quite an interest in Black Americans among the peoples of Russia, but it's an interest that is played down somewhat. Fikre, my Ethiopian companion who studied at the university, was often questioned about me in Russian. I had developed enough of an ear for the language to be able to notice that. Fikre frequently did not say I was from America. Most people in Tashkent and Samarkand who I met thought I was African or from Cuba, and everyone is also very interested in Cuba. This fascination with all things American is something that keeps coming up over and over again.

This man wanted to know from me whether American Black people were allowed to go to school. I said yes, and Helen said yes to him, and then he wanted to know if we were allowed to teach, and I said yes, I was a professor at the University of the

City of New York. And he was surprised at that. He said that he had seen a television program one time about the Black people of America. That we had no jobs. So Helen started to answer him and he stopped her. Then she angrily said he wanted me to speak because he wanted to look at my face so he could see how I answered. I told Helen to tell him that the question was not that we could never go to college, but that frequently even when Black people went to college, we had no jobs when we came out. That it was more difficult for Black people to find work and make any kind of living, and that the percentage of unemployment among American Black people was far higher than that of American white people.

He pondered that a little while and then he asked, do Black people have to pay for their doctors, too? Because that's what TV programs had said. I smiled a little at this and told him it's not only Black people who have to pay for doctors and medical care; all people in America have to. Ah, he said. And suppose you don't have the money to pay? Well, I said, if you don't have the money to pay, sometimes you died. And there was no mistaking my gesture, even though he had to wait for the translator to translate it. We left him looking absolutely nonplussed, standing in the middle of the square with his mouth open and his hand under his chin staring after me, as in utter amazement that human beings could die from lack of medical care. It's things like that that keep me dreaming about Russia long after I've returned.

There's much that I think that Russian people now take for granted. I think they take for granted free hospitalization and medical care. They take for granted free universities and free schooling as well as the presumption of universal bread, even with a rose or two, although no meat. We are all more blind to what we have than to what we have not.

One night after midnight, Fikre and I were walking through a park in Tashkent and we were approached by a Russian man with whom Fikre had a short, sharp conversation, after which the man bowed and walked away. Fikre would not tell me what they'd said, but I had the strong feeling he had tried to pick one of us up, either Fikre or me. Tashkent is, in some respects, a

Russian playground. I asked Fikre what the Soviet position was on homosexuality, and Fikre answered that there was no public position because it wasn't a public matter. Of course, I know better than that, but I have very few inroads into finding out the truth, and Helen is much too proper to discuss anything sexual.

V

The last few days after we returned to Moscow I got to meet one woman I had noticed all through the Conference. She was an Eskimo woman. Her name was Toni and she's Chukwo. They are from the part of Russia closest to Alaska, the part that wasn't sold by the Russians, across the Bering Straits. Toni did not speak English and I didn't speak Russian, but I felt as if we were making love that last night through our interpreters. I still don't know if she knew what was going on or not, but I suspect that she did.

I had been extremely moved by her presentation earlier in the day. We sat down to dinner, about ten of us, and Toni started speaking to me through our interpreters. She said that she had been searching for my eyes in the crowd all through her speech because she felt as if she were talking to my heart. And that when she sang the little song that she did, she sang it for a beginning that she hoped for all of our people. And this lady cast, let me tell you, a very powerful spell. There are only fourteen thousand Chukwo people left. In her speech at one point she said, "It is a very sad thing when a whole people ceases to exist." And then she sang a little song which she said her people sing whenever something new happens. Her dark round eyes and seal-heavy hair flashed and swung in time to her music. It sent a chill down my spine at the time, because although there are 21 million Black Americans, I feel like we're an endangered species too, and how sad for our cultures to die. I felt as if we alone, of all the people at the Conference, shared that knowledge and that threat, Toni and I. At dinner Toni kept telling me how beautiful I was, and how it was not only my beauty that she would carry with her always but my words, and that we should share our joys as well as our sorrows, and someday our children would be able to speak freely with each other. She made toast after toast to women and to their strength. All of this was through our interpreters. I was trying to decide what to make of all this when Toni got up, moved over, and sat down beside me. She touched my knee and kissed me, and so we sat all through dinner. We held hands and we kissed, but any time we spoke to each other, it was done through our interpreters, blond Russian girls who smirked as they translated our words. I suppose Toni and I connected somewhere in the middle of the Aleutians.

She kissed my picture on my book before she got up, thanked us for dinner, and went off with the male Latvian delegate from Riga.

VI

Now it is back to Moscow again, which is still cold and rainy. Moscow across rainy rooftops looks about as dreary as New York does, except the skyline is broken up by huge building cranes. There is an incredible amount of building, it appears, going on all the time in Moscow. There is in New York also, but it's not so obvious on the skyline. The buildings are not built in solid blocks the way they are in New York. You'll have perhaps two large apartment houses to a block, set at different angles, with a lot of greenery and perhaps some parks in between. In other words, it appears that quite a bit of thought has been given to urban planning and how people like or need to move about where they are. Both New York and Moscow have a population of about eight million and in Moscow it is possible and pleasant to walk out after dark without fear. Crime on the streets seems not at all a problem in Moscow. The official reason why and the actual reason why may be very different, but it is a fact. I was struck by the sight of many people, even children, walking through the parks after sundown.

Earlier, when I had first come to Moscow from the airport, I had noticed quite heavy steady traffic, but there did not appear

to be a traffic jam or great delay although this was the time when most people were coming home from work. It seemed quite an achievement in a city of eight million people, and I thought Moscow must be handling her problems of urban transportation in a new and creative way. Of course, when I saw the Metro, I realized why. Not only are the stations spotlessly clean, but the trains are quick and comfortable, and I'd never really thought that it could be an actual joy to ride on the subways.

VII

It will take a while and a lot of dreams to metabolize all I've seen and felt in these hectic two weeks. I haven't even discussed the close bonding I felt with some of the African writers and how difficult it was to get to know others. I have no reason to believe Russia is a free society. I have no reason to believe Russia is a classless society. Russia does not even appear to be a strictly egalitarian society. But bread does cost a few kopecs a loaf and everybody I saw seemed to have enough of it. Of course, I did not see Siberia, nor a prison camp, nor a mental hospital. But that fact, in a world where most people – certainly most Black people – are on a breadconcern level, seems to me to be quite a lot. If you conquer the bread problem, that gives you at least a chance to look around at the others.

So, for all of the double messages I received (and there were many – because of the places in which I stayed, because of a kind of both deference and unpleasantness that I received as an American, and because no matter how much is said and done, America still appears to have some kind of magic over many countries), no matter what the shortcomings were, there is enthusiasm about the people that I met in Russia, particularly the people I met in Uzbekhistan. And I recognize some of the contradictions and problems that they have. I am deeply suspicious of the double messages that kept coming and of the fact that when they are finished with you (and by *they*, I mean the government), when they are finished with you, they drop you

and you can fall very far. So what's new? I also am intrigued by the idea that there are writers who are paid to be writers and that they survive and they wield considerable power. I am also very well aware that if what they write is not acceptable, then it never gets read or it never gets printed. So what's new?

But you do have a country there that has the largest reading population in the world, that prints books of poetry in editions of 250,000 copies and those copies sell out in three months. Everywhere you go, even among those miles of cotton being harvested in the Uzbekhi sun, people are reading, and no matter what you may say about censorship, they are still reading, and they're reading an awful lot. Some books are pirated from the West because Russia does not observe International Copyright. In Samarkhand, Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* was the latest best seller. Now, how many Russian novels in translation have you read this past year?