

## MAUREEN STILES

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Over Memorial Day weekend, Catt buys a \$25 bike at a yard sale. She uses the bike to go to the bank and the park, she leans it outside second-hand bookstores and the Nob Hill food co-op. It's an old trick she learned during her years in New York: if the bike's shitty enough, you don't have to pay for a kryptonite lock, because chances are no one will steal it. It's one more way to stay under the wire.

Instead of the Himalayas, she looks up at the Sandia mountains. By now, the job is almost running itself. Jamie's gone back to San Bernadino, which makes everything easier.

Before leaving town, Jamie took Catt out for a drink and asked if she could "cash him out" of the condo she'd promised him. This was startling. She took a deep breath and leaned back on her barstool while he chattered away: "of course it's adorable" ... she'd paid \$20K for the condo ... "but Ron told me last night he's *leaving*" ... though really what was the difference? ... "He says it's because I go out of town so often, but of course it's more complicated ..." His words circle around her like skywriting ... "And now he's moving out, and he says if I don't cash *him* out his share of the house ..." She takes another deep breath, "... he's going to take me to court ..." She's already given the condo away. If he doesn't want it she can rent it or flip it. She can get Lou to cut Jamie a check from the trust, Hank will help her think of a way to expense it. With these questions resolved in her mind, she turns to Jamie and says, "Ohmigod, I can't believe it, you must feel terrible."

It's such a relief to have Jamie out of the way. He'd been pissing off Virgil and Sharon, making all kinds of stupid suggestions and acting like he was the boss. Now that he's gone back to San Bernadino, she's able to stop by each of the job sites, make all her calls, check the receipts and the ledgers, eat lunch with the crew and then turn off her phone. Nights, she plays house with Paul at the apartment on Tulane. He makes green chili stew, they hang out and watch videos. After her morning duties are finished, she retreats to the condo.

During these free afternoons, she tries to recall the intensity that gripped her at earlier times in her life - being in a new place, and not knowing what's going to happen. She remembers evenings and weekends spent hanging out at Jeff Wright's East Village apartment with all of the poets. She was 21, 22, she hadn't yet met Michel. She was still thinking she'd be an actress, and the only reason she met Jeff Wright was because they were temping in the same office. She and Jeff picked up on each other's bad attitudes instantly, and then it turned out Jeff and his little family lived on 11th Street, 3 doors away. Catt could hardly believe someone like Jeff would have kids in such a precarious set-up, and at their age ... he and his wife were only 2 or 3 years older. But so did all of the poets!

Unlike the actresses, who were all single and gathered for brunches in West Village restaurants they couldn't afford, the poets never went out. They moved like a Bedouin tribe between each other's shitty apartments, talking about poetry, taking collections for quart bottles of Ballantine Ale and painstakingly typing mimeograph stencils for self-published magazines no one outside their tribe would read. The poets knew nothing, read everything. Their parents were nurses and traveling salesmen and shopkeepers. They'd dropped out of community colleges, spoke no foreign languages, but - with the help of a dictionary - translated poems from Russian and Sanskrit and Greek. Some of the girls, hoping to someday leave the East Village, started bands.

Still, except for Maureen Stiles - a boyishly good-looking lesbian who was hugely ambitious and devoted to poetry - the boys were the scholars. It was like they'd chosen poetry

as a career, even though there was no such career, except in each other's minds. They worked for minimum wage at a few East Village bookstores and didn't complain. Maureen, on the other hand, had a vision: she would speak to her time not by turning herself into a rock & roll clone but as herself, as a poet. Towards this end, she sold speed. Scoring unlimited Benzedrine scripts from a diet-pill doctor was the only advantage she took of her gender. She wasn't waiting for some Poet-in-Residence job that might never arrive. She was living the life of a poet, 24/7, right here and now.

What did they talk about? Catullus, the Symbolists vs. the Imagists, the Russian Revolution, Kurt Schwitters, Marina Tsetayova, Herrick and Pope, American Realism. The poets they favored most were the ones who projected themselves out of their time by throwing curve balls into the present, talking out the side of their mouths. The Minors. Baseball figured big as a metaphor. Danny, an old German guy who worked at the post office, got them all into Doblin. Maureen - whose family was working class Irish - adopted John Clare, a peasant, who, throwing himself into his native Lancashire landscape, was the first truly painterly poet. Famous for all the wrong things, he became 19th century London's mascot for all things rustic. When the fad waned, he drank his way into a mental asylum. "What about Christopher Smart?" Bob wanted to know. Born in 1722, Smart did his best work from St. Luke's Lunatic Asylum, including a poem to his cat:

*For first he looks upon his forepaws to see if they are clean  
For secondly he kicks up behind ...*

"It's like, the first list poem!" shrieked Rose.

"So that's where Ginsberg got *Howl*," Maureen suggested, pissing Bob off.

"Fuck's sake, Maureen, how can you rip off something that's 200 years old?" Bob had just started working for Allan. At 25, he was already the father of two and looked like a Midwestern businessman.

"Yeah Maureen, there's a difference between *influence*" Simon said snottily, "and being derivative." Simon had a BA from the University of Chicago.

Twenty-five years later, where were they now? Danny was dead, Simon left the East Village for Harvard and worked for the State Department, Mike had a PhD from Columbia, Jeff was divorced and supported himself hosting house parties. The girls were proofreaders, ambulance drivers, born-again Christians. Except for Maureen, the ones who'd been most successful were those who'd made a clean break with their youth. But Maureen - now 20 years sober - had persevered brilliantly, and was indisputably Maureen Stiles, culture hero, icon of queer rrrriot grrrls, lesbian poet. Catt realizes she's had a crush on Maureen for 25 years. Maureen had broken up with numerous girlfriends, ex-allies and publishers but with herself? Never.

Shit, Catt thinks to herself. Why haven't I told Hank about Paul? Catt was unable to break up with anything.

On these long hot afternoons, Catt shamelessly naps and reads randomly. She discovers an Olympic-sized outdoor pool three blocks away, and sometimes walks over to swim a few half-hearted laps. It seems important to stay out of the car, move around sparingly, and only under her own steam. In this way, it seems possible to step backwards into a different quality of time, something more viscous and full, because it was charged with discovery ... She remembers a film she used to show to her art students, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, the magnificence of Maya Deren's home-made surrealism ... a cheap hand-held camera trailing her walk through the florid and transient Hollywood neighborhood ... the way the iris contracts when Deren steps into the relative darkness of the creepy wood-paneled faux-Spanish room. The movie

was timeless, but at the same time so irreducibly locked into its time, cocooned from the Second World War in a quasi-Freudian bubble of symbols and signs, Los Angeles 1943 ...

"Deren uses specific cinematic devices in this film to convey deeper meaning," wrote Lewis Jacobs, a film historian. Which was so stupid – as if meaning's a noun – Deren didn't *use* anything ... rather, she willed herself into a parallel timescape whose contours can only be seen by its inhabitants.

Falling into a similar timescape, Catt finds it easy enough to pull out her old notebooks and work on a text about 19th century social reformers and opium addicts. "*Skull fuck, dirty, not-dirty, tripping out through each other's eyes,*" she writes. Is this memoir or cultural criticism? No, it's *historical fiction*, she thinks with a laugh. As a genre, it's perfect – as abject and anonymous as the City of Albuquerque, the gray-carpeted condo, the bike.