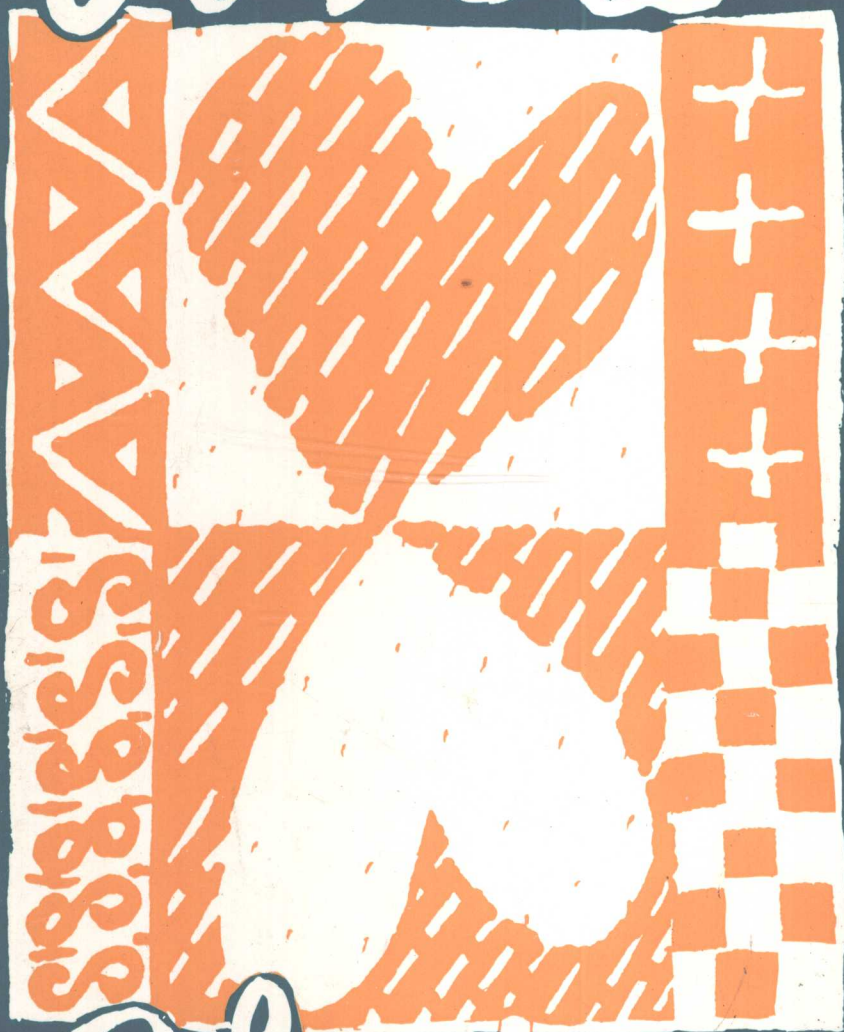


Lovers'



Choice

BECKY BIRTHA

1047344



LOVERS'



CHOICE



BECKY BIRTHA



THE SEAL PRESS 

Copyright © 1987 by Becky Birtha.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced by any means without prior permission from the publisher, except for the quotation of brief passages in reviews.

Cover design by Deborah Brown.

Composition by The Typeworks, Vancouver, B.C.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Birtha, Becky, 1948-

Lovers' choice.

1. Afro-American women--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3552.L7574L6 1987

813'.54

87-17281

ISBN 0-931188-56-3

Seal Press

P.O. Box 13

Seattle, Washington 98111

Some of these stories were previously published in the following publications: "Johnnieruth" in *The Iowa Review*, Volume 12, Nos. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 1981), and in *Extended Outlooks: The Iowa Review Collection of Contemporary Women Writers* (Macmillan, 1982).

"Baby Town" and "The Saints and Sinners Run" in *Hear the Silence: Stories by Women of Myth, Magic and Renewal*, edited by Irene Zahava (Crossing Press, 1986).

"pencil sketches for a story: The Gray Whelk Shell" in *Common Lives, Lesbian Lives*, No. 6 (Winter, 1982).

"Her Ex-Lover" in *The Things That Divide Us*, edited by Faith Conlon, Rachel da Silva and Barbara Wilson (Seal Press, 1985).

We gratefully acknowledge permission to quote previously published material:

The lines from "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" are reprinted from *The Poems of W. B. Yeats: A New Edition*, edited by Richard J. Finneran (Macmillan, 1983).

The lines from *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak (Harper & Row, 1963), are reprinted with the publisher's permission.

Acknowledgements

The work on this collection was made possible in part by an Individual Fellowship in Literature which the author received from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts in 1985.

The author would also like to express her appreciation for the assistance of the students and faculty of the Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program at Vermont College, and of the members of her feminist writers support group.

Table of Contents

Johnnieruth	3
Baby Town	10
Ice Castle	26
pencil sketches for a story: The Gray Whelk Shell	54
Route 23: 10th and Bigler to Bethlehem Pike	63
Both Ways	67
Her Ex-Lover	80
Past Halfway	90
The Saints and Sinners Run	111
In the Deep Heart's Core	121
In the Life	139

LOVERS' CHOICE

Johnnieruth

Summertime. Nighttime. Talk about steam heat. This whole city get like the bathroom when somebody in there taking a shower with the door shut. Nights like that, can't nobody sleep. Everybody be outside, sitting on they steps or else dragging half they furniture out on the sidewalk—kitchen chairs, card tables—even bringing TVs outside.

Womenfolks, mostly. All the grown women around my way look just the same. They all big—stout. They got big bosoms and big hips and fat legs, and they always wearing runover house-shoes, and them shapeless, flowered numbers with the buttons down the front. Cept on Sunday. Sunday morning they all turn into glamour girls, in them big hats and long gloves, with they skinny high heels and they skinny selves in them tight girdles—wouldn't nobody ever know what they look like the rest of the time.

When I was a little kid I didn't wanna grow up, cause I never wanted to look like them ladies. I heard Miz Jenkins down the street one time say she don't mind being fat cause that way her husband don't get so jealous. She say it's more than one way to keep a man. Me, I don't have me no intentions of keeping no man. I never understood why they was in so much demand anyway, when it seem like all a woman can depend on em for is making sure she keep on having babies.

We got enough children in my neighborhood. In the summertime, even the little kids allowed to stay up till eleven or twelve o'clock at night—playing in the street and hollering and carrying on—don't never seem to get tired. Don't nobody care, long as they don't fight.

Me—I don't hang around no front steps no more. Hot nights

like that, I get out my ten speed and I be gone.

That's what I like to do more than anything else in the whole world. Feel that wind in my face keeping me cool as a air conditioner, shooting along like a snowball. My bike light as a kite. I can really get up some speed.

All the guys around my way got ten speed bikes. Some of the girls got em too, but they don't ride em at night. They pedal around during the day, but at nighttime they just hang around out front, watching babies and running they mouth. I didn't get my Peugeot to be no conversation piece.

My mama don't like me to ride at night. I tried to point out to her that she ain't never said nothing to my brothers, and Vincent a year younger than me. (And Langston two years older, in case "old" is the problem.) She say, "That's different, Johnnieruth. You're a girl." Now I wanna know how is anybody gonna know that. I'm skinny as a knifeblade turned sideways, and all I ever wear is blue jeans and a Wrangler jacket. But if I bring that up, she liable to get started in on how come I can't be more of a young lady, and fourteen is old enough to start taking more pride in my appearance, and she gonna be ashamed to admit I'm her daughter.

I just tell her that my bike be moving so fast can't nobody hardly see me, and couldn't catch me if they did. Mama complain to her friends how I'm wild and she can't do nothing with me. She know I'm gonna do what I want no matter what she say. But she know I ain't getting in no trouble, neither.

Like some of the boys I know stole they bikes, but I didn't do nothing like that. I'd been saving my money ever since I can remember, every time I could get a nickel or a dime outta anybody.

When I was a little kid, it was hard to get money. Seem like the only time they ever give you any was on Sunday morning, and then you had to put it in the offering. I used to hate to do that. In fact, I used to hate everything about Sunday morning. I had to wear all them ruffly dresses—that shiny slippery stuff in the wintertime that got to make a noise every time you move your ass a inch on them hard old benches. And that scratchy starchy stuff in the summertime with all them scratchy crinolines. Had to carry a pocket-

book and wear them shiny shoes. And the church we went to was all the way over on Summit Avenue, so the whole damn neighborhood could get a good look. At least all the other kids'd be dressed the same way. The boys think they slick cause they get to wear pants, but they still got to wear a white shirt and a tie; and them dumb hats they wear can't hide them baldheaded haircuts, cause they got to take the hats off in church.

There was one Sunday when I musta been around eight. I remember it was before my sister Corletta was born, cause right around then was when I put my foot down about that whole sanctimonious routine. Anyway, I was dragging my feet along Twenty-fifth Street in back of Mama and Vincent and them, when I spied this lady. I only seen her that one time, but I still remember just how she look. She don't look like nobody I ever seen before. I *know* she don't live around here. She real skinny. But she ain't no real young woman, neither. She could be old as my mama. She ain't nobody's mama—I'm sure. And she ain't wearing Sunday clothes. She got on blue jeans and a man's blue working shirt, with the tail hanging out. She got patches on her blue jeans, and she still got her chin stuck out like she some kinda African royalty. She ain't carrying no shiny pocketbook. It don't look like she care if she got any money or not, or who know it, if she don't. She ain't wearing no house-shoes, or stockings or high heels neither.

Mama always speak to everybody, but when she pass by this lady she make like she ain't even seen her. But I get me a real good look, and the lady stare right back at me. She got a funny look on her face, almost like she think she know me from some place. After she pass on by, I had to turn around to get another look, even though Mama say that ain't polite. And you know what? She was turning around, too, looking back at me. And she give me a great big smile.

I didn't know too much in them days, but that's when I first got to thinking about how it's got to be different ways to be, from the way people be around my way. It's got to be places where it don't matter to nobody if you all dressed up on Sunday morning or you ain't. That's how come I started saving money. So, when I got

enough, I could go away to some place like that.

Afterwhile I begun to see there wasn't no point in waiting around for handouts, and I started thinking of ways to earn my own money. I used to be running errands all the time—mailing letters for old Grandma Whittaker and picking up cigarettes and newspapers up the corner for everybody. After I got bigger, I started washing cars in the summer, and shoveling people sidewalk in the wintertime. Now I got me a newspaper route. Ain't never been no girl around here with no paper route, but I guess everybody got it figured out by now that I ain't gonna be like nobody else.

The reason I got me my Peugeot was so I could start to explore. I figured I better start looking around right now, so when I'm grown, I'll know exactly where I wanna go. So I ride around every chance I get.

Last summer, I used to ride with the boys a lot. Sometimes eight or ten of us'd just go cruising around the streets together. All of a sudden my mama decide she don't want me to do that no more. She say I'm too old to be spending so much time with boys. (That's what they tell you half the time, and the other half the time they worried cause you ain't interested in spending more time with boys. Don't make much sense.) She want me to have some girl friends, but I never seem to fit in with none of the things the girls doing. I used to think I fit in more with the boys.

But I seen how Mama might be right, for once. I didn't like the way the boys was starting to talk about girls sometimes. Talking about what some girl be like from the neck on down, and talking all up underneath somebody clothes and all. Even though I wasn't really friends with none of the girls, I still didn't like it. So now I mostly just ride around by myself. And Mama don't like that neither—you just can't please her.

This boy that live around the corner on North Street, Kenny Henderson, started asking me one time if I don't ever be lonely, cause he always see me by myself. He say don't I ever think I'd like to have me somebody special to go places with and stuff. Like I'd pick him if I did! Made me wanna laugh in his face. I do be lonely, a

lotta times, but I don't tell nobody. And I ain't met nobody yet that I'd really rather be with than be by myself. But I will someday. When I find that special place where everybody different, I'm gonna find somebody there I can be friends with. And it ain't gonna be no dumb boy.

I found me one place already, that I like to go to a whole lot. It ain't even really that far away—by bike—but it's on the other side of the Avenue. So I don't tell Mama and them I go there, cause they like to think I'm right around the neighborhood someplace. But this neighborhood too dull for me. All the houses look just the same—no porches, no yards, no trees—not even no parks around here. Every block look so much like every other block it hurt your eyes to look at, afterwhile. So I ride across Summit Avenue and go down that big steep hill there, and then make a sharp right at the bottom and cross the bridge over the train tracks. Then I head on out the boulevard—that's the nicest part, with all them big trees making a tunnel over the top, and lightning bugs shining in the bushes. At the end of the boulevard you get to this place call the Plaza.

It's something like a little park—the sidewalks is all bricks and they got flowers planted all over the place. The same kind my mama grow in that painted-up tire she got out front masquerading like a garden decoration—only seem like they smell sweeter here. It's a big high fountain right in the middle, and all the streetlights is the real old-fashion kind. That Plaza is about the prettiest place I ever been.

Sometimes something going on there. Like a orchestra playing music or some man or lady singing. One time they had a show with some girls doing some kinda foreign dances. They look like they were around my age. They all had on these fancy costumes, with different color ribbons all down they back. I wouldn't wear nothing like that, but it looked real pretty when they was dancing.

I got me a special bench in one corner where I like to sit, cause I can see just about everything, but wouldn't nobody know I was there. I like to sit still and think, and I like to watch people. A lotta people be coming there at night—to look at the shows and stuff,

or just to hang out and cool off. All different kinda people.

This one night when I was sitting over in that corner where I always be at, there was this lady standing right near my bench. She mostly had her back turned to me and she didn't know I was there, but I could see her real good. She had on this shiny purple shirt and about a million silver bracelets. I kinda liked the way she look. Sorta exotic, like she maybe come from California or one of the islands. I mean she had class—standing there posing with her arms folded. She walk away a little bit. Then turn around and walk back again. Like she waiting for somebody.

Then I spotted this dude coming over. I spied him all the way cross the Plaza. Looking real fine. Got on a three piece suit. One of them little caps sitting on a angle. Look like leather. He coming straight over to this lady I'm watching and then she seen him too and she start to smile, but she don't move till he get right up next to her. And then I'm gonna look away, cause I can't stand to watch nobody hugging and kissing on each other, but all of a sudden I see it ain't no dude at all. It's another lady.

Now I can't stop looking. They smiling at each other like they ain't seen one another in ten years. Then the one in the purple shirt look around real quick—but she don't look just behind her—and sorta pull the other one right back into the corner where I'm sitting at, and then they put they arms around each other and kiss—for a whole long time. Now I really know I oughtta turn away, but I can't. And I know they gonna see me when they finally open they eyes. And they do.

They both kinda gasp and back up, like I'm the monster that just rose up outta the deep. And then I guess they can see I'm only a girl, and they look at one another—and start to laugh! Then they just turn around and start to walk away like it wasn't nothing at all. But right before they gone, they both look around again, and see I still ain't got my eye muscles and my jaw muscles working right again yet. And the one lady wink at me. And the other one say, "Catch you later."

I can't stop staring at they backs, all the way across the Plaza. And then, all of a sudden, I feel like I got to be doing something, got to be moving.

I wheel on outta the Plaza and I'm just concentrating on getting up my speed. Cause I can't figure out what to think. Them two women kissing and then, when they get caught, just laughing about it. And here I'm laughing too, for no reason at all. I'm sailing down the boulevard laughing like a lunatic, and then I'm singing at the top of my lungs. And climbing that big old hill up to Summit Avenue is just as easy as being on a escalator.

Baby Town

Mimi sat very still on the high back seat of the old Hudson. When her Aunt Berenice started up the car, it made a sound like it was trying to say its own name, but couldn't pronounce the "s." "Hudn, hudnnn, *hudnnnnn*," as the motor finally got going. Now it was Aunt Berenice's car, but before that it was Granddaddy's. It was funny that his car was still alive, when he had been dead for a long time now. She wondered if Granddaddy, up in heaven or wherever he was, knew that she and her mother and sister were here in Virginia, visiting with Grandma and Aunt Berenice. She wondered if he knew that they were going for a ride in his car this afternoon, and if he minded. Did he know they were on their way out to his cemetery?

Anyway, he must like it that Aunt Berenice took such good care of his car, keeping the outside polished, and the inside always swept and brushed perfectly clean.

Against the back of her legs, Mimi could feel the soft rub of the gray-brown plush. The seats in Granddaddy's car were so deep that if she sat all the way back it made her legs stick straight out before her, as if she were a much younger child. She could see the toes of her Sunday shoes, their patent leather greased with vaseline, so that they gleamed even in the dull interior of the car. They were the perfect shoes, simple and unadorned, with plain round toes and a single strap—perfect little girl shoes, like the kind Alice in Wonderland, or any other little girl in a book might have worn.

This morning, all morning, she had felt, magically, as if she really were a little girl in a book. They didn't let her wear her hair out, yet, but this morning her grandmother had combed it into soft,

twisted plaits that were much thicker than the way her mother made them. She had looked in the big oval hall mirror afterward and felt a touch of excitement. Usually looking in a mirror was a kind of disappointing surprise. She never looked the way she felt inside, like somebody special and not at all ordinary. But this morning, the part slanted off to one side, the hair lay flat and shining pulled back from her face, and the big, puffy braids hung almost to her shoulders. She looked like someone else. Like somebody that something magical and special might happen to at any time, maybe even this afternoon.

If she shifted a bit on the car seat, there was the comforting crumple of crinoline, her best slip, the one with the lace around the edges, and the double-tiered petticoats. And she loved the white dress, with its yards and yards of sheer fabric gathered into the skirt, and the delicate pink flowers embroidered along the edge of the yoke. It was much prettier, she thought, than Mindy's dress, which was longer and more grown-up looking, but not nearly so full.

She glanced at her sister, Mindy, who sat at the other end of the seat, separated from her by the old-fashioned arm rest that pulled down out of the seat back to make a big bulgy cushion between them. Mindy was watching out the window, lost in her own thoughts, her long legs doubled up beneath her with no particular regard for the wrinkles that that would make in her dress. Mimi faced forward again and leaned back, carefully, not to dislodge her hat.

In the front, the grown people were talking to each other, grown-up talk. "A whole lot's changed since you and Lewis left." Aunt Berenice was talking to Mommy. "This whole section—" she gestured out the open window, then returned her gloved hand to the wheel, "this whole section, Violet, from here to the city limits. And almost all of them have been sold."

"And it's the nicer class of people moving in, too," Grandma Devereaux put in.

Without even paying attention, Mimi knew who they were talking about—what they always talked about: colored people . . . and

white people. She concentrated on the houses they were passing, with their triangle roofs and big square picture windows. In front of one, a lady who looked like Aunt Berenice was holding a very chubby little boy by the arm, and locking the front door.

“Nice *respectable* people,” Grandma was emphasizing. “Family people.”

“You remember Jim Parsons, from Hampton? He and Ella just bought a lovely little place. It looks just like a picture post-card. . . .”

From her place on the back seat, all Mimi could see were the backs of the three women's heads. But those were so different from each other she might as well have been looking at their faces. All three of them wore their Sunday hats. Aunt Berenice's had a huge wide brim, with bunches of little apples and bananas around the crown. She must have picked it out on purpose to look as different from Grandma Devereaux as she possibly could. Grandma's hat was small-brimmed, plain, black, and looked very severe and proper, pinned firmly with two fierce pearl hatpins to the coiled gray braids that wound around her head. Mommy's small blue hat, fitted close to her head, the faded bunch of lilacs on its side, bobbed between the other two, dodging every now and then to keep clear of Aunt Berenice's flaring brim.

Mimi put her hands up to touch her own hat, a white straw one with two ribbons tailing down the back. It looked a little bit like the hats that the girls wore in *The Five Children*. Everything about her was perfect today, she decided. Except maybe her knees.

She examined them now. There were still scars on them that were years old. There was a rough, round one that came from the time Mindy pulled the wagon around the corner too fast, when Mimi was three. Was it ever going to go away? At least her legs were smooth and shiny, set off against the dust-colored seat. There wasn't a trace of ashiness left on them. But they were a very dark brown. Much darker than Mindy's—maybe darker than her mother's. She felt a slipping, sinking feeling. Maybe it wasn't any use, to be all dressed up. . . .

Still, Deacon Carter had said this morning after church that she