

# YIN FIRE



Alexandra Grilikhes

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**Alice Street Editions**

Harrington Park Press

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Published by

Alice Street Editions, Harrington Park Press®, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc.,  
10 Alice Street, Binghamton, NY 13904-1580 USA (www.HaworthPress.com).

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Cover design by Thomas J. Mayshock Jr.

Cover Art by Alexandra Grilikhes: *Compass*. Box construction with found objects.  
*A box of artifacts, woven together with fragments of artifacts, suggests both the personal myth and the way in which the novel's elements have been traced, constructed, and woven.*

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Grilikhes, Alexandra.

Yin fire / Alexandra Grilikhes.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-56023-212-9 (alk. paper)-ISBN 1-56023-213-7 (pbk : alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS3557 .R4899 Y56 2001

813'.54-dc21

2001022487

Alice Street Editions  
Judith P. Stelboun  
Editor-in-Chief

*Yin Fire*, by Alexandra Grilikhes

*His Hands, His Tools, His Sex, His Dress: Lesbian  
Writers on Their Fathers*, edited by Catherine Reid  
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*Weeding at Dawn: A Lesbian Country Life*,  
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## Foreword

Alice Street Editions provides a voice for established as well as up-and-coming lesbian writers, reflecting the diversity of lesbian interests, ethnicities, ages, and class. This cutting-edge series of novels, memoirs, and non-fiction writing welcomes the opportunity to present controversial views, explore multicultural ideas, encourage debate, and inspire creativity from a variety of lesbian perspectives. Through enlightening, illuminating, and provocative writing, Alice Street Editions can make a significant contribution to the visibility and accessibility of lesbian writing, and bring lesbian-focused writing to a wider audience. Recognizing our own desires and ideas in print is life sustaining, acknowledging the reality of who we are, our place in the world, individually and collectively.

*Judith P. Stelboun*  
*Editor-in-Chief*  
*Alice Street Editions*



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for EMW

## Acknowledgments

The author acknowledges, with gratitude, the extraordinarily dynamic and insightful presence of Charlotte Haines in the preparation of this book. Thanks also go to Phyllis Wachter and Carmella Viscuse for valuable commentary, to Michele Belluomini and Carol Coren for ongoing moral support, and to Karen Donnally for her perceptive and discerning friendship.

The author would like to acknowledge those magazines in which four chapters appeared as short fiction:

- “1503” in *Phoebe: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Feminist Scholarship, Theory and Aesthetics*. Fall, 1998.
- “The Letter” in *Fuel* 27/28, 2000.
- “Lovers, etc.” in *The Brownstone Review*, Spring, 1999.
- “Mama: The Shrine” in *ART:MAG*, Spring, 1998.

Some of the material about Oriental medicine is based on the author's notes that were taken in courses given by Drew DiVittorio, Jeffrey Yuen and Denny Waxman.



Advance praise for Alexandra Grilikhes'

*Yin Fire*

"A first-rate, literary novel, brilliantly written by a poet who knows how to make her heroine tangible, memorable, on fire. This is the kind of grown-up lesbian novel we've been waiting for. A shrewd, intimate, affirming look at lesbian life as it is really lived these days. I expect to see it on staff-pick tables in Borders and Barnes & Noble as well as on the bedside tables of young lesbians who need to revel in a sophisticated story about a real woman."

-Anne Kaier, PhD, Harvard University  
Writer

"*Yin Fire* chronicles one intense woman's desire to be taken care of, to be visible to others and herself, laying bare the feelings and questions we've all puzzled over. . . . Driving towards the reunion of self and center."

-Nancy Welsh, President 2000/2001  
Bay Area Career Women (BACW), San Francisco, California

"Powerful and poetic . . . takes the reader into the mind of a creative woman on a quest for wholeness. In the tradition of Faulkner and Morrison, Grilikhes lets us experience her lead character's intensity—the fear, anger, longing, and determination of one cast on the margin of society not only because of her status as woman, Jew, and lesbian, but by virtue of her reflexive refusal, despite repeated batterings, to efface her individuality."

-Charlotte Haines, PhD, Assistant Professor  
Delaware County Community College, Pennsylvania

“In this intense novel of self-definition, we enter the world of Greek myth and Chinese medicine guided by the main character looking for the powerful, mist-surrounded goddess, the Mistress of the Animals. In this search . . . the beautiful acupuncturist and herbal specialist, Hongwei, is compelling.”

-Elizabeth Floyd-Cameron, MA, MFA, Professor of Humanities  
Moore College of Art & Design, Philadelphia

“A thrilling novel of a woman’s love for women in all its exquisite and explicit detail. . . . A rhapsody in exoticism. . . . The narrative swirls and rivets the reader into the depths of relationships and in particular the life journey of the protagonist. It is exquisite. It is a learning experience. It is poetic joy.”

-Georgiana Peacher, PhD, Professor Emerita  
John Jay College, New York City

## About the Author

A native New Yorker, Alexandra Grilikhes has taught Creative Writing, Writing Memoir, and Women Studies at the University of the Arts for more than two decades. A long-time innovator in literary broadcasting, she hosted the only literary programs in Philadelphia, on public radio, for ten years. Director of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications Library, she organized and produced four groundbreaking international annual festivals of Films by Women at the Annenberg Center for the Arts.

A dance and performance art writer, critic, and author of nine small-press collections of poetry, the most recent of which is *Shaman Body* (1996), she was a 1999 Pushcart Prize nominee in fiction. Her stories, essays and poetry are widely published in such places as *Pleiades*, *Grand Street*, *Spillway*, *Fuel*, *The Seattle Review*, *Fish Drum*, *The Lesbian Review of Books*, *Pangolin Papers*, and *River Styx*. She is editor and publisher of the eleven-year-old independent, national literary/arts journal *American Writing: A Magazine*.

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## Venus in Scorpio

If she had been raised in the forest by wolves, Doris would have had a better idea of how to conduct herself in the world. As it was, she had been raised practically wild to not know what was expected of her by parents grieving the loss of their artistic selves, a brother absorbed in his burgeoning sexuality, a sister seized in the adolescent madness she would eventually overcome, but not until she forced Doris with her into her twisted vision of the world.

Doris had to learn every small and large thing there was to learn in the world on her body. And she can prove it by her scars. Her healed broken fingers, one on each hand. The scratched mosquito bite on her right forearm “frozen” by a doctor’s medicinal spray before being sliced open and healed to scar. The dark blue (from the dark blue of her jeans) scars on both shins from a bad fall on the ice; the bit of black lead pencil point (palm center, right hand), the leg-shaving scar she tore off so many times it gave up trying to go away. Both broken toes. Her missing tooth, the largest in her mouth, lower right incisor. The way she learned was through her muscles and nerve endings; that way she remembered. If she tried to learn through reasoning or admonition or thinking it turned into an exercise in pain, futility, non-mastery.

Rooted deep in Doris’s astrological chart was her Venus in Scorpio. Which meant difficulty in love. Too much emotion. Into the dark. She becomes molten lava and it has nothing to do with wanting or not wanting to be like that. She is where the planets point her on the date, the evening, the moment of her birth. Venus in Scorpio; first woman, first creature to know the place as water from which, wide and easy, the street flows.

It is a street she walks in her soul. A street which holds both secrets and answers—the wide girth of Gurney Street. But oh, to know the place from which she has set forth as if for the first time—where it is midnight, it will always be midnight—she will

never be free of it. It's wideness will never diminish, its face never dismantle. Even now she's driven to half-run down its wave of asphalt, looking, always looking for a certain thing, a key maybe.

She walks the wide girth of Gurney Street. As if she has been shot forth by the crash of the ocean which is separated from the street by a ten-foot-thick sea wall made of asphalt and cement.

But there is also that other street, Eleventh, between Fifth Avenue and Sixth, that other beginning place.

Cold.

Thick spit roils in her throat. She gathers it up, coughs unobtrusively, and delivers it to the dry mud at the base of a tree.

An ordinary tree-lined street in Greenwich Village. These are the woods of her past, the place from which she has set forth, the thick forest. Every week, winter and summer, she comes to this neighborhood to study Chinese Medicine and walk this street. On the next block is the building where her courses are given; her small school rents the space, Twelfth Street, fourth floor. She could easily go around this block, but every week she makes herself go down the path to shake herself up. Go down the path. Do it finally. Go in deep. Like sex. Today it is bitter cold. Cold sex.

Eleventh Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. Closer to Sixth. A place to which she returns. That won't leave her alone. She doesn't necessarily want to know the reasons. Just go there. Breathe into it. Let it come.

She turns her head to the right and finds herself looking into the windows of the ground floor apartment at 51 West, which is separated from the street by a thin wall of masonry and red brick.

The room seems brightly lit. Doris had once lived in this building for five years, and passed countless times through its inner and outer doors, crept up and down its six flights to her tiny apartment, which was dominated by the big desk whose stubby legs

she sawed off so she could get it through the door, a job she did alone, kneeling on the floor in the hallway outside her door, thinking there was nothing she couldn't do in those days, mostly because there wasn't anyone around to ask for help.

Once sawed, the desk could fit through the door, but without legs it was so low that when she sat down her knees couldn't fit underneath it.

She had to lean all the way down to its surface in order to write or read; she wrote and read nonetheless. On a bitter January eve when the fuses blew, she lit twenty-eight candles on the surface of the desk so she could peer all night at the floor plans of medieval cathedrals for her comprehensive examination the next morning. She memorized them in that dim but not warming candlelight.

With her Venus in Scorpio, she'd lived and wept in this apartment building, sixth floor front, had shaken with anxiety, shaken with love, had felt imprisoned and ripped by love in this house, had looked suddenly in the mirror one day and asked, with dread in her voice, "Who are you?" She had looked out of the window hundreds, no, thousands of times, killed the same plant with neglect over and over on the windowsill, but she had never before seen this street-level apartment or known of its existence. Although she had not known the exact layout of each apartment, she thought she'd known pretty well every cranny of the building and its position on each of the six floors; yet now, suddenly, at this moment, a large box-shaped room lit-up at early evening, a ponderous diamond-shaped iron grate across both of its windows, was revealed to her.

Hawked-up spittle.

Gurney Street. That other place. The sea. This street its mirror.

Her feet hurtling down the street after her.

Jammed with furniture, the room is dimly if unevenly lit by a floor lamp standing in one corner. A woman is seated on the arm of a stuffed chair talking on the telephone in what appears to be

the living room. At the instant the room flashes into her view and she sees the woman, Doris trips on a hole in the sidewalk and cracks her ankle so badly she cannot stand up for the pain.

It's as if a hole has opened and she is pulled into it by some incredible force. Thrown into the hole created when the opposing plates of the sidewalk don't meet. Where The Underworld bulges suddenly in her path just as she's gazing into the interior of a room at a woman she has never before seen instead of at the path in front of her.

In the room the woman is talking intently, the phone gripped in her hand, her eyes fastened on something not in the room. Doris's eye catches this momentary drama right before she spins down the crack towards The Underworld. To which she is overdue for a trip. A trip she has already set out for. A trip she is on. And the pain tells her as she makes several involuntary low moans and limps over to lean, then sit on a nearby step, that somewhere on this street something holds the key. That all she needs do is keep walking this street, tracking her way North or South. After X number of false starts, something will wake her up to who and what she is.

She understands that she is compelled here, knowing neither the reason nor the object of her search. But she is still bent on the search. It feels as if the key to The Underworld may be hidden somewhere on this street. What she needs is to keep tracking her way West or East until after the right number of missteps and fumbings, some magic will tell her who and what she is—a woman, lover of women, daughter of the Lady of the Beasts, the Mistress of the Animals, the bear-mother-hovering-woman-figure, the one she is forever seeking and loving or longing to love.

The bear/woman, Mistress of the Animals (called in ancient Greek the *Potnia Theron*) is a woman with many faces, none of which Doris has ever seen, because the woman is always surrounded by mist.

Although the Great Mother is the oldest of all of the deities the Mistress of the Animals is nearly as old. She is primitive and



powerful. Doris knows her as the one who has mastery over the wild beasts that are both inside and outside of her. In early sculpture and paintings she is surrounded by animals, grasping a beast in each arm or hand. It is she who has power over Scorpions, she who can tame them, she who can teach Doris to mitigate the powerful dark side of Scorpio.

This woman, her Mother of Many Eons, is taller and bigger than Doris and doesn't know any of the names she is known by, or even who she is. Or that she is surrounded by a strange mist. But she is home to Doris. Home in the best and truest sense that there is no other person, place or thing that is home to her but this woman-figure she sometimes encounters, is enchanted by, this fairy godmother, the queen of her desires, the first object of her feelings, the beginning and the end of them. Doris is afraid of her also.

Doris names the Potnia Theron's adumbrations in the following people who have crossed her path: her second-grade teacher on whose nude body she crawled in her imagination, the two of them in a state of erotic bliss, the teacher a full-grown woman, Doris six years old.

Regina Brown, the English teacher; Lois Carter, who became a lawyer; Edward Weinstein, the head of the dance department; Portia Forrest of the counseling program; Gretel Lanker, the archaeologist; Hongwei Zhu, the Chinese doctor.

Larger in every way and more clumsy than Doris, Gretel Lanker was the possessor of arcane knowledge. Her native language was Dutch. She was shy, supremely reserved, aloof. Always embarrassed. With a rich voice, big face and large head, she was a hearty sort of athletic Earth Mother. Thick glasses. Blue eyes that looked watery behind her lenses. She was very proper acting, but the propriety seemed as if it was just for show.

Portia Forrest. Taller, heavier than even Gretel Lanker. Anglo-Saxon with pale blue eyes that were sort of fearful and frozen looking. A big Earth Mother, athletic, yet soft enough to relax into. Maybe. An unemotional voice, high and girlish. Heavy, wide