

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW:

ERICA JONG

a candid conversation with the author of the erotic novel "fear of flying"

Less than two years ago, she was known principally as a poet—one with a fondness for ampersands and startling metaphor ("& the hole in the penis/sings to the cunt") and sassy swipes at male chauvinism ("Beware of the man who praises liberated women; he is planning to quit his job"). Her poetry sold well—for poetry. Then, late in 1973, came publication of her first novel, "Fear of Flying," a bawdily adulterous romp across Europe by a young woman frantically searching for sexual and emotional fulfillment, which was greeted by a chorus of rave reviews (and a gaggle of horrified ones, from critics who were turned off by the book's no-holes-barred imagery or threatened by its feminist implications). Novelist John Updike was perhaps most accurate in his prediction: "Fear of Flying," he wrote in *The New Yorker*, "feels like a winner." It was. Last November, "Fear of Flying" was issued in paperback—and immediately took off like one of the jumbo jets that so terrorized its antiheroine, Isadora Wing. At last count, the Signet softcover was in its 28th printing with more than 3,500,000 copies off the presses, had been oscillating between the number-one and number-two spots on best-seller lists for months and was the topic of heated debates at cocktail parties, consciousness-raising groups, college

classrooms—and in locker rooms—throughout the country.

All of which took its author, 33-year-old Erica Jong (the J is pronounced as in John), totally by surprise. She had never expected to see the book published. (One printer, in fact, had refused to set the manuscript in type because of its considerable four-letter-word content.) Suddenly, she found herself alternately consulted as a sexual guru, solicited as a potential bedmate, sought after as a guest speaker, hailed as the most visible star in that new galaxy of liberated women writers described by *Newsweek* as "map makers of the new female consciousness" and, in effect, banned by the Smithsonian Institution. (Actually, it was Jong who, charging censorship, canceled a planned talk at the Smithsonian, after being advised she should avoid discussing sex and politics. It later turned out that Smithsonian secretary S. Dillon Ripley had already directed that her scheduled appearance be quashed.)

Since becoming a public personality, Jong herself has been the subject of conflicting reports: She was in a deep depression; she was bubbling with happiness. Her marriage was on the rocks; it was stronger than ever. She was writing; she wasn't. When the dust began to clear this past spring, the public learned

that Erica Jong was alive and well and living in Malibu; that she and her psychiatrist husband were divorcing; that producer Julia Phillips and Columbia Pictures were planning a film version of "Fear of Flying" and that she had two books ("Loveroot," a volume of new poems, and "Here Comes and Other Poems," a collection of previously published Jong poems and essays, plus a literary-magazine interview) coming out in June. "Loveroot," in fact, is a Book-of-the-Month Club alternate selection this month.

Jong is the first to admit that had it not been for her novel, her poetry wouldn't be on any book-club lists. The overwhelming success of "Fear of Flying" cannot, of course, be traced entirely to the book's raunchiness. One reviewer, intrigued by the "F.O.F." sales phenomenon, got the names of the book's female borrowers from local libraries and queried them about its appeal. They answered, in the main, that it was a book they could relate to—often that Isadora Wing was expressing thoughts and feelings they had previously believed were theirs alone. Surprisingly enough, many male readers agreed. As Christopher Lehmann-Haupt of *The New York Times* wrote: "I can't remember ever before feeling quite so free to identify my



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CHARLES W. BUSH

"Many women have the gut feeling that their genitals are ugly. One reason women are gratified by oral-genital relations is that it's a way of a man's saying, 'I like your cunt. I can eat it.'"

own feelings with those of a female protagonist—which would suggest that Isadora Wing, with her unfettered yearnings for sexual satisfaction and her touching struggle for identity and self-confidence, is really more of a person than a woman.”

There were minority opinions, some expressed stridently. Novelist Bill Brashler called it “a thoroughly obnoxious book. I read about 60 pages and then threw it against the wall.” Militant feminists have damned Isadora for the fact that despite all her struggles toward self-assertion, she still depends on men to give her self-assurance. They call the ending of the book—when a confused Isadora returns, albeit rather tentatively, to her husband—a cop-out. Its author has an answer for that one; the book was intended, she says, to be “a saga of unfulfillment.”

To find out what all the fuss is about, PLAYBOY sent Senior Editor Gretchen McNeese to California to determine whether Jong is really, as she herself once worried aloud, the “matron saint of adulteresses” or whether she is, as her pen-and-pun pal Louis Untermeyer, the poet, claims, “just a nice Jewish girl.” McNeese's report:

“When I arrived in California, I found my subject in a dither. The concrete floor of the Malibu beach house in which she lives with writer Jonathan Fast was at the moment being jackhammered into shards, the better to afford access to an odoriferously leaking sewage-disposal pipe underneath. Writer Henry Miller, with whom Erica shares a sort of mutual-admiration society, had taken her and Jon into his home in nearby Pacific Palisades to await plumbing repairs.

“Despite it all, Erica welcomed me graciously when I called at Miller's to pick her up. Everybody describes her as plump; I thought her round-faced but shapely. Her nearsighted, blue eyes are partly hidden by enormous, pink-tinted glasses that she pushes up into her thick shock of tawny-blonde hair when she's having her picture taken. I found her soft-spoken and articulate; she talks with vitality, in well-constructed paragraphs scarcely interrupted by the ‘y' knows' and ‘uhs' that clutter most people's speech.

“Our first session took place in my motel room, but by the following day, the beach house was sufficiently restored for us to meet there. It sits high on a bluff overlooking the Pacific and one wall is a wide expanse of glass; the effect is something like that of being in the wheelhouse of an enormous ocean-going vessel, setting sail for the Orient. In the living area, there's a jungle of philodendrons, rubber plants and other vegetation, illuminated by skylights. To one side is a kitchenette in which Erica brewed pot after pot of coffee to fuel our conversation. On the counter, awaiting

a quick pickup game, lay a Frisbee. On the other side of the house is the bedroom, dominated by a king-sized water bed; outdoors, there is a small Jacuzzi bath.

“As we talked, we could hear the rapid tattoo of Jon's typewriter; he was completing a draft of his first novel. (He recently sold a story for a made-for-TV movie, ‘Everybody's Watching,’ to—coincidentally—Playboy Productions.) Occasionally, he'd take a break, joining us for a joke or a sandwich or serenading us with a few strums on his banjo.

“Erica seems to attract devoted, not to say fiercely loyal, friends. One such, writer Alice Bach—whose stories for ‘young adults’ are as different from ‘Fear of Flying’ as is ‘Little Women’—was asked by a women's magazine (which she declines to identify) to do an exposé on Jong. She refused, reporting that there was nothing to expose. Another New York friend, Grace Darling—‘Foreign Affairs’ advertising director and the person who first brought Erica's work to the attention of publisher Holt, Rinehart & Winston—observes: ‘We all miss her terribly. It's as if the light went out when she left New York. But then, everyone who meets Erica loves her.’

“Which may well be true. It's certainly true that everyone who hasn't met Erica but has read ‘Fear of Flying’ wonders about the odd coincidences, if, indeed, they are coincidences, between the author and her novel's principal character, Isadora Wing. Both grew up in artistic, relatively affluent Manhattan families. Both are Phi Beta Kappa graduates of Barnard who went on, almost, to earn doctorates in literature at Columbia. Both are blonde poets; they write, in fact, the same poetry. Both have been married twice: first to a college sweetheart who had a nervous breakdown, then to a Chinese-American child psychiatrist with a monosyllabic surname. Just how autobiographical is ‘Fear of Flying’? I decided I'd ask.”

PLAYBOY: This is the question everybody's asking, so let's get it over with: How much of *Fear of Flying's* Isadora Wing is really Erica Jong?

JONG: You mean will the real Isadora Wing stand up? Or lie down—preferably on the analyst's couch? Sure, there's a lot of me in Isadora, but a lot of characters and events in the book are totally invented. I didn't set out to write autobiography; I set out to write a satirical novel about a woman in search of her own identity, and I did not stick to facts very closely—frequently not at all. There never was an actual odyssey across Europe, for example.

PLAYBOY: Isadora's Chinese-American psychiatrist husband, Bennett Wing, seems to have been modeled on your own husband.

JONG: You said it, I didn't.

PLAYBOY: But was there really an English

analyst like the one with whom Isadora ran off?

JONG: Hmmmm. Well, there are any number of impotent Englishmen to choose from. The one I chose was lucky—though I don't suppose you could call him a lucky stiff. At any rate, I doubt that this character would recognize himself.

PLAYBOY: Are the people who *did* recognize themselves in your book still speaking to you?

JONG: More than ever. People love any kind of immortality, from scratching their names on a wall to being depicted in a novel, even satirically. The friends who have been most incensed with me are those who can't hallucinate themselves into the book at all. They've complained, “Didn't I make any impression? I wasn't in that book!” I've heard many guesses at each character in *Fear of Flying*, and most of them were completely wrong. They were people I'd never even met or heard of. So I'm constantly explaining to people that what I write is an admixture of reality and fantasy, and that I mix it up as I please—to elevate it to myth, hopefully. Sometimes when I finish writing, I can't even remember what actually happened and what didn't. But I guess there are people who can't make the distinction between writing and life or between autobiography and myth.

PLAYBOY: We've heard that you've been annoyed with people who can't make that distinction—who expect the real Erica to be an easy lay because the fictional Isadora is so openly sexual. Is that true?

JONG: Oh, yes; I found that very unnerving at first, having men sort of sidle up to me and proposition me, thinking that because I put myself on paper in a certain kind of way, I'm available to anybody who asks. I remember one night before I went to the American Booksellers Convention, I asked Anne Sexton, who was a good friend, “What do I do when men come up to me on the convention floor and say, ‘Hey, baby, I want a zipless fuck?’” And Anne said, “Thank them. Thank them and say, ‘Zip up your fuck until I ask for it.’”

PLAYBOY: The zipless fuck—a quickie with a total stranger, without even having to unzip—is Isadora's most notorious fantasy. Is it one you share?

JONG: I don't happen to be in search of ziplessness at this point in my life. I certainly *had* those fantasies, when I was 23 or 24 years old, of wanting anonymous sex. Or thinking I wanted it. But, of course, whenever it was offered to me, or when I would wake up in bed with somebody who was unspeakably idiotic, I would think, *who needs it?* Probably the zipless fuck is better as a fantasy than as a reality.

PLAYBOY: Fantasy or reality, the zipless

fuck is a phrase you're likely to be stuck with the rest of your life.

JONG: Well, zippers are always getting stuck.

PLAYBOY: There's even a zipper on the cover of *Fear of Flying's* paperback edition. And a navel, which is also on the cover of your first book of poetry, *Fruits & Vegetables*. Do you have a belly-button fixation?

JONG: Do you think the publishers think of me as a navelist rather than a novelist? You should have seen the original design for the softcover edition of *Fear of Flying*. It showed a Happy Hooker-type lady sitting in the crack formed by the parted zipper, wearing a flimsy sort of Erskine Caldwell blouse and sucking her finger. She looked like a very tacky version of the *Cosmopolitan* girl, actually. The cover that was used seemed tasteful by comparison.

PLAYBOY: But that kind of cover sells books. So does sex inside. What do you say to people who accuse you of having put sex into your novel just to sensationalize it, to boost sales?

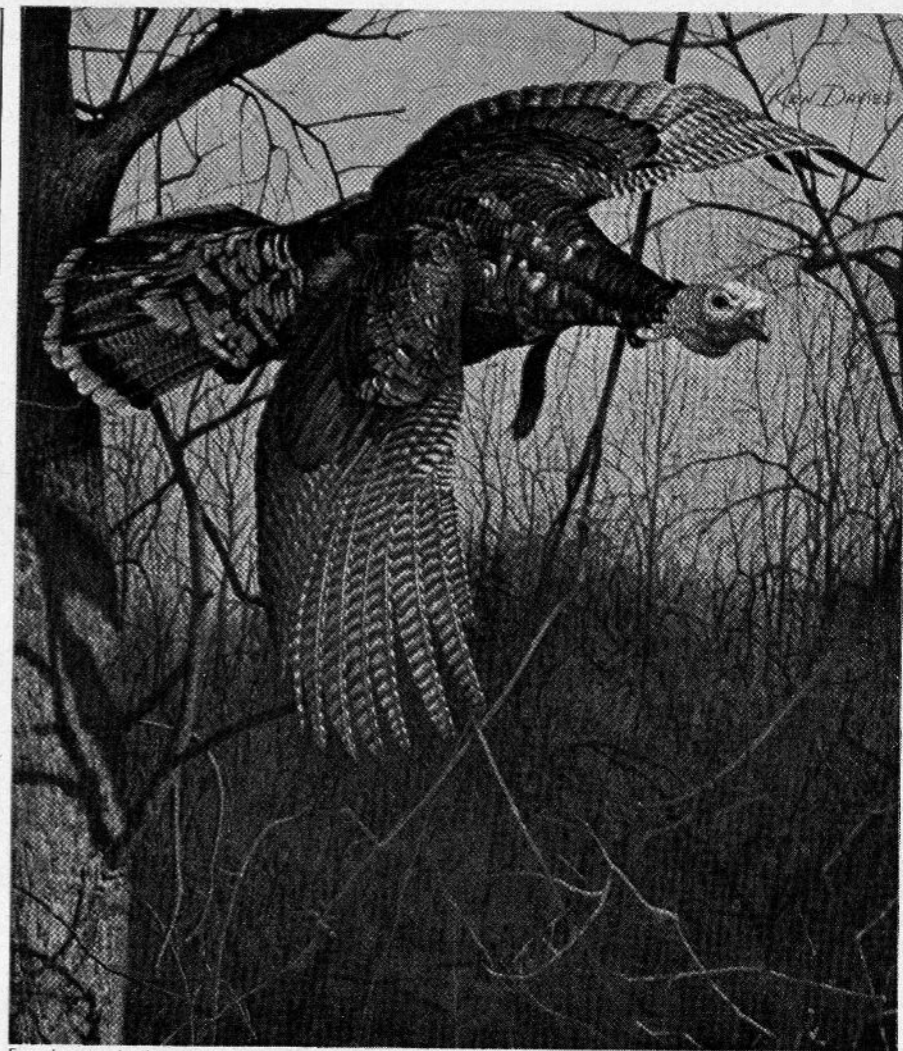
JONG: That's the kind of easy, top-of-the-head response I get from not very thoughtful people. It is *not* the response that I get from my mail. What I get from readers very often is, “Why did they put this sexy, lurid cover on your book? Why is your book sold as a sex book? Your book is really about identity, about a woman finding herself. The sex is incidental; the sex is *part* of identity.”

When I was writing *Fear of Flying*, I didn't think it would ever be published. To me, the important thing about this book was that it be honest about everything—about being Jewish in Germany, about wetting your pants when you get sexually excited, about all areas of life. That's the theme that runs all through my work, and sex is just one tiny part of that. It isn't all of life, but it is a part of life, and I always find it astounding when people concentrate only on the sex in my work.

PLAYBOY: But it *has* been promoted as sexy, hasn't it?

JONG: Oh, the logistics of mass-market publishing are such that a paperback publisher, like a movie company, needs a handle to advertise something by. New American Library saw my book as the first breakthrough novel about female sexual fantasies. Publishing is a faddish business; and after Nancy Friday's book *My Secret Garden*, sexual fantasies were, excuse the expression, hot. So that's the handle N.A.L. used for its sales force. After all, *every* product needs a handle in our consumer culture. I mean, nobody says PLAYBOY is the magazine that publishes John Cheever or John Updike, though I know that every time I turn to PLAYBOY, I can find a new short story I'll want to read. PLAYBOY is known as the magazine with the nude centerfold.

PLAYBOY: How do you feel about the



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nude centerfold? Some outspoken liberationists have complained that it exploits women.

JONG: No, I don't think they're being exploited, but they're not really *women* to me, they're almost figments of the imagination, sort of the apotheosis of the male mammary dream. I think they have a kind of fantasy value.

PLAYBOY: Could you fantasize *being* one?

JONG: Never—but then, I've always found my distinction in another area. If all I had to recommend me was the decorative value of my body, perhaps I would want that form of recognition. But I must say, I'm glad I don't have to get what I get in the world through my looks, because that's such an ephemeral kind of success, the kind that makes you fear your 30th birthday. But about the centerfold, I have no real objections to it. I recently learned, by reading between the lines of your Mel Brooks interview, that men all over America jerk off into it, and now that I know this, I think it serves a useful social function. "Redeeming social value," as they say.

PLAYBOY: We don't have any research to substantiate that finding, so we'll change the subject. There seems to be little doubt that the ways men and women deal with each other are changing. What do you see as the most important changes in relations between the sexes?

JONG: Is that like asking, "What relations between men and women would I take to a desert island?" I *do* see certain definite trends; one of them is that women are becoming increasingly independent economically. So they are in a position to choose men not out of desperate need for a social rudder or an economic supporter but out of their own desire for companionship, for friendship, for love, for sex. That time has come for only a fraction of women, self-supporting professional women. It has come for me. But when it comes for *most* women, we'll see great changes, because women will not put up with the stuff they've put up with for centuries.

PLAYBOY: What kind of stuff?

JONG: Being nursemaids to their men; taking what is dished out to them; being chief cook and bottle washer, baby sitter, nanny; entertaining the husband's guests, the whole servant-master relationship.

PLAYBOY: What about those women who are content with that conventional husband-is-boss relationship? Would you criticize them for that?

JONG: No, but I would hazard a guess from the mail I've gotten that many women who are *in* that kind of situation don't *want* to be, that they are chafing in it. And, in that sense, the men who fear women's liberation are right. The women's movement is going to take something away from them—the right to be masters in a master-slave relationship. If you can conceive of relations between people only in that way, certainly you

would much rather be the master than the slave. It's very tempting for me, too, at times. I mean, there have been times in my life when I've thought, God, wouldn't it be great to have a man at home who would be faithful, be there all the time, and I could run around and do what I wanted and still come back to this person?

PLAYBOY: Every woman should have a wife?

JONG: Yes. At times, I've fantasized about having the kind of relationship with a man that men have always had with women. But if you really stop and think about what that implies of your view of the other person, it's not so terrific. I frankly think that, for all the difficulties inherent in it, it's much better to have a relationship between two equals. So if men are losing some of their old prerogatives, I think they're gaining something better. But it's hard to convince them, sometimes.

PLAYBOY: Some psychologists speculate that many men are so threatened by these changes that they've become impotent. Have you run into many guys who can't get it up?

JONG: Isadora experiences that in the novel, but I haven't. I have had men say to me, "I'm *afraid* I would be impotent with you, because you are who you are." But it doesn't happen. In fact, one of the things that men often tell me is, "I'm so surprised that you're unthreatening. I'm so surprised that you're feminine. That you're warm. That you're funny. That you're cuddly." I don't know *why* they're surprised. I guess they make the assumption that a woman who is successful is going to be a ball breaker. It's not my fault that they have that crazy response. That's what the culture feeds them, that a successful woman must have become successful by being a ball breaker. This assumption does not exist about men. It's considered perfectly natural for a man to be businesslike, efficient, competent at what he does, without that going against his masculinity. But if a *woman* is good at what she does, and is strong-minded and determined, then it's assumed that in some way she must be unfeminine.

PLAYBOY: Have you, like Isadora, found yourself using your sexual wiles to get something you want out of a man?

JONG: I've never slept with an editor in order to get my work published or anything like that. But I've *thought* of it. And I'm sure I've done a lot of eyelash batting and handholding and kissing people on the cheek rather more warmly than I have meant it; everyone has. I was told, for example, that one woman author, when she was on a publicity tour, slept with all the book salesmen, and that they'd never had it so good. I have no particular moral objections to that, but I would be incapable of doing it.

PLAYBOY: Germaine Greer, in her *Playboy Interview*, says that any coercion of women for sexual purposes, even if it isn't violent, is rape. "If a man takes you out on a motorway and stops the car and says, 'Now you can walk or fuck,' and you fuck, then you've been raped," she claims.

JONG: She's right. I think women frequently feel they have to give sexual favors to get ahead. Women still have to take crumbs of power from men, so what do they do? A lot of things they wouldn't ordinarily do, and sometimes those things imply a kind of sexual submission—pleasing, Uncle Tomming, niggering it up, pretending to ideas they don't really hold. Maybe Germaine Greer would call that mental rape, and maybe she would be right. Example of mental rape: women who will not sign a political petition for fear that their husbands might not agree with it. There are such women. I was shocked to discover that there were.

PLAYBOY: Are you politically oriented yourself? We recall that Isadora refuses to get with boys who like Ike.

JONG: I *care* about politics, but I don't do enough about it. As for Isadora and Ike, that was true in my own life, only with me it was Nixon. I made it Ike in the book because it sounded more euphonious. I remember once back around 1955, when a prep school boy took me out in his car, and we went up to a secluded street in Riverdale and started necking. Then he said something about how Nixon was his ideal and I said, "Take me home." I was completely turned off.

PLAYBOY: You rejected him, then. Gay Talese, who has been studying modern American sexual lifestyles for a proposed book, has stated that women don't fear rejection as men do. Do you agree?

JONG: I like Gay, but I disagree with that statement completely. Women are very afraid of rejection. I think what Gay means is he thinks a woman can always get laid, whereas a man can't. I was at a party once where he asserted: "Any woman in this room could go out onto any street corner and get laid in half an hour, whereas I don't believe any man in this room could." And the men in that room were all very attractive. But if what he said is true, so what? Who wants to get laid in just half an hour? And who wants it on the street?

Women are *very* afraid of rejection. The rejection of not getting the telephone call, not being asked out, is just as bad as the rejection of being turned down for sex. But, you know, men are afraid of loneliness, too. I've seen men who fall apart more after a divorce than women do; men who have absolutely gone bananas when they've been left. I don't see vast psychological differences between the sexes. I'm not saying there *are* no differences; I believe there are. But I

think it would be much healthier for us all to stress the similarities.

PLAYBOY: What are some of the differences you do believe in?

JONG: Well, I think men are truly afraid of castration, in a way that is symbolic and also affects their daily lives. I believe women are stronger, more resilient emotionally and physically, partly because they are not coddled in the way that men are. They have to take care of everybody, and that makes for incredible toughness.

PLAYBOY: Another male fear, you claim in your novel, is that women are talking about them. You wrote: "Men have always detested women's gossip because they suspect the truth: Their measurements are being taken and compared." Is that really true?

JONG: My friends tend to be very explicit—at least with me. We talk endlessly about men in bed and their dimensions and how they fuck. I think if men ever heard the things we say to one another, they'd wilt.

PLAYBOY: Like what?

JONG: Oh, I've had long conversations with women friends about the anatomies and techniques of various lovers: What shape was his penis? How long did it take him to come? I know that women aren't supposed to talk like that, but to my knowledge, they do it much more than men. A lot of very sensitive men have complained to me, as a matter of fact, that they don't have as close relationships with their men friends as I do with my women friends.

PLAYBOY: Is that because of the old homosexuality bugaboo?

JONG: Buggery-boo, you should say. Yes, I think it is. I think it's also that they're very afraid of showing weakness in front of one another. Men construe intimacy as weakness. That's part of the sexist brainwashing our society subjects men to.

PLAYBOY: How about some of the other things our society lays on men? We hear a lot of talk that a woman should be free to choose between a career outside the home and a life as a housewife. Very few men have such a choice; they are expected to support at least themselves, if not a family.

JONG: I know lots of women who have absolutely no qualms about supporting a man, who do it and feel no conflict. I will tell you that I do not know very many men who can take it.

PLAYBOY: Why not?

JONG: It's not because women won't let them but because a man's identity in this culture depends so much on his profession, his monetary status, the plastic credit cards in his wallet, that most men cannot do without these props.

PLAYBOY: You've said that a great deal of your own identity comes from your professional accomplishments. If you had to identify yourself—introduce yourself to

a stranger, say—without reference to your work, how would you do it?

JONG: That's really a very interesting question. Almost impossible, isn't it? Hmm. I would probably say that I like to laugh a lot, that I'm a clown, which I tend to be; that I'm prone to put on weight; that I'm quite horny—

PLAYBOY: Does it surprise people when you admit to them that you're quite horny?

JONG: It surprises me to discover it about myself. I don't know if I'm hornier than other people, but I think I may be more in touch with my sexual feelings. My life seems kind of incomplete if there isn't a sort of sexuality in it. I don't mean random, promiscuous sexuality. I'm not interested in that. What I mean is that unless there is a person to whom I am attached, feel warmly toward and have good sex with, I feel that my life is really truncated. It's an important component in my life that I don't like having to do without.

PLAYBOY: Linda Lovelace prescribes daily orgasms for everybody. Otherwise, she says, people get very uptight. Do you buy that?

JONG: I don't know whether you have to have an orgasm every day, although it would be, certainly, very nice. I hate to quantify, because then people who read this are going to say, "Oh, my God, I didn't have one today!" Sort of like taking your vitamins. Or like those marriage manuals you used to see that said no orgasm is a good orgasm unless it's simultaneous with your partner's. That has fucked up more people than anything. That is the biggest, silliest myth. I mean, sometimes they are simultaneous, they just happen to be, and that's fine. But if you're thinking about it, it won't happen.

I do think one's feelings about orgasm are completely variable. Certainly there are times when, if you really love somebody, you can get totally into the idea of giving pleasure. This may sound like something that goes against all kinds of feminist beliefs, but a man can do it as well as a woman; I mean, there are times when you just want to give the other person pleasure. If it's consistently like that, then there's something wrong with the relationship. The fun in fucking is the variety.

PLAYBOY: Any particular variations you enjoy?

JONG: No, all kinds, I think. I like gentle sex, but I also like tough sex sometimes. I can get enormously turned on by being dominated in bed, although I would hate being raped. Sometimes I like to be the one who's active, absolutely driving the man wild, while he's relatively passive. Or you can both be equally active. I think it's nice to do it in all different positions, different ways, including hanging from the chandelier.

PLAYBOY: Have you ever tried it hanging from the chandelier?

JONG: No. And this house has no chandeliers. But I can heartily recommend sunken bathtubs, Jacuzzis, water beds.

PLAYBOY: Do you ever fuck outdoors?

JONG: A lifelong New Yorker? Fucking outdoors? Where? In Central Park?

PLAYBOY: Maybe you'll have more opportunity here in California. Speaking of fucking, what's your opinion of the diagnosis often made by men that all some women need is a good fuck?

JONG: A lot of men need a good fuck, but they're incapable of getting it because they regard their penises as sort of detached from the rest of their bodies. I think there are very few people who know how to get a good fuck, getting on that subject.

PLAYBOY: OK, how does one get a good fuck?

JONG: I think probably the essence of it is understanding that your body and your head are connected. The trouble with most people is that they're too focused on their genitals. I really think that's what makes some men bad lovers. There are certain men who will always grab for the clitoris, you know, massage it and then thrust home and that's it. And there are other men who—this is terrible—never take off their pajama tops while screwing. There are others who never take off their socks. There are others who never take off their glasses. Now, this bespeaks fragmentation. These men think sex is all in the genitals. There are other men who, immediately after having made you come, zing out, withdraw, roll over and go to sleep. For good sex, you should take time with it; treat it as something that's important, that you're not ashamed of, that is fun. Rolling around on the floor, licking apple butter off each other, if that's what you dig.

PLAYBOY: There's a lot of licking in your poems, isn't there?

JONG: Yes. Well, I'm a very oral person. I like licking a lot.

PLAYBOY: Licking or being licked?

JONG: Both. I also like barking.

PLAYBOY: Barking?

JONG: Arf! Arf! What I mean by barking is a certain kind of playfulness. Bed should be a place where you can to some extent regress and be childlike and funny and totally relaxed, and that relaxation can take any form, from making jokes to crawling around on all fours and barking like a dog. I think if adults don't have certain areas in their lives in which they can be playful, they crack after a while. And one of those areas, to me, is sex.

PLAYBOY: Have you always felt that way?

JONG: To some extent, yes, but I feel freer, better about my own sexuality at this point in my life than I ever have.

PLAYBOY: Are you saying that you felt bad about sex previously?

JONG: Oh, I think it's very clear in all my writing that for a long time I thought having pleasure was something to feel guilty about. My own adolescent sexual experience was fraught with guilt. I truly believed I was the only person in the world who ever masturbated, who ever finger fucked. I think I discovered masturbation to orgasm when I was about 13, and I was sure nobody else had ever done it.

PLAYBOY: Do you get off as well with masturbation as with intercourse? Or do you agree with another Greer dictum, that "a clitoral orgasm with a full cunt is nicer than a clitoral orgasm with an empty one"?

JONG: I much prefer an orgasm with a cock than without one. That's the best there is. But I think the distinction between vaginal and clitoral is totally mythic. Because, as far as I can see, every orgasm starts in the clitoris and ends up in the vagina, and it doesn't matter whether the orgasm is induced by somebody manipulating the clitoris with the hand or going down on you or putting his penis inside you. It was Freud who decided there were two kinds of orgasm. What did he know? He wasn't a woman. I would love to get him back here and ask him to explain it.

PLAYBOY: Demonstrate it?

JONG: God, no. Just explain. He said that a clitoral orgasm was immature and a vaginal orgasm was mature, and I think he probably meant that a woman who got satisfied by having a penis inside her was more "mature" than a woman who got satisfied by having her clitoris rubbed. What he was really saying was that whatever is good for men is "mature." I think the whole fuss is totally without foundation.

PLAYBOY: Some women swear they get their best orgasms with vibrators.

JONG: Really? Warm flesh is nicer.

PLAYBOY: Is it true, as reported in *Newsweek*, that some San Francisco sculptor sent you a marble penis?

JONG: It was a sculptor from Los Angeles and he sent me a marble penis to be used as a dildo.

PLAYBOY: Did you?

JONG: Marble makes a very cold dildo. But you know how it is with writers—anything for research.

PLAYBOY: How big was it?

JONG: About life-size.

PLAYBOY: Now we get into the whole thing about prick size. Does it really matter?

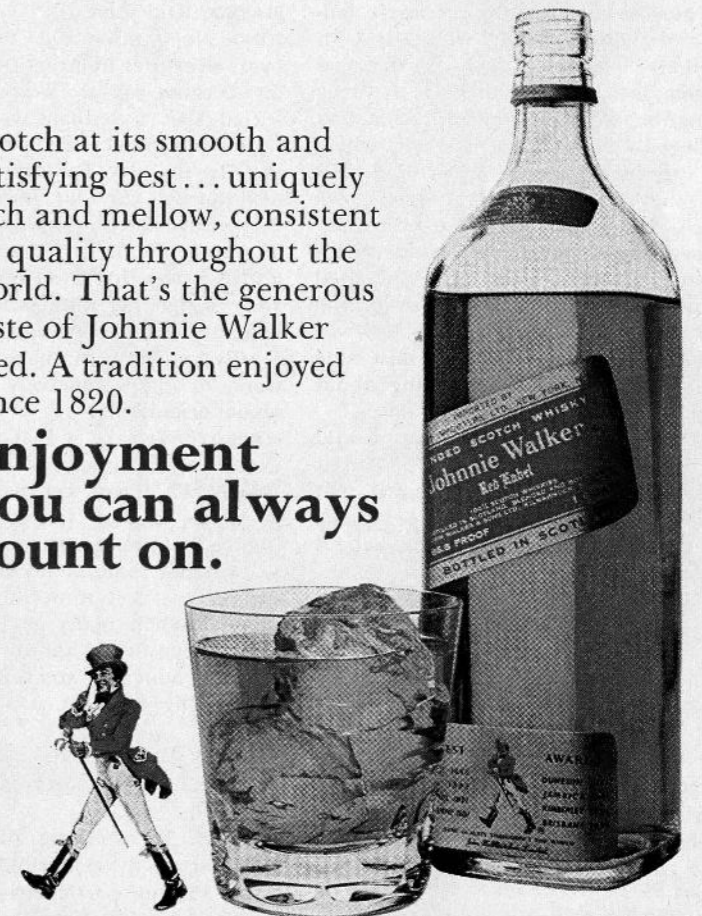
JONG: Well, I remember in college they used to say it's not the size but the stroke. My personal suspicion is that it's both the size and the stroke, but any answer to that question is going to make men all over America feel terrible—because every man has a subjective view of the size of his own genitals. Most men are going to tend to feel inferior, even if



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they are in fact well endowed.

PLAYBOY: As women are self-conscious about their breast size?

JONG: Exactly. I always thought that I had very small breasts, but I've been told by a number of men that, while they're not enormous, they're a pretty respectable size.

PLAYBOY: Did you ever want big jugs?

JONG: Who didn't? But the nice thing about mine is they stand up.

PLAYBOY: Women's libbers are sometimes described as bra burners. Do you see any connection between liberation and brassieres?

JONG: None at all. I rarely wear a bra myself. I frequently go without any underwear at all. But I can get into stuff like Frederick's of Hollywood lingerie for fun. I enjoy wearing make-up; I like sexy clothes. I don't think that's a true feminist issue at all. And no bras were ever burned by anyone, in fact. That's a media myth—one of many used to discredit feminism, or any revolutionary movement.

PLAYBOY: You have, whether you've intended to or not, been taken up as something of a guru by elements of the feminist movement. Do you see other feminist issues as bogus?

JONG: No, but I do get pissed when certain famous feminists say, "No more alimony" or "no more child support." They don't know what it's like to be 38 years old and have three kids, never to have graduated from high school or college, to have devoted your whole life to helping your husband up the corporate ladder, and then have him walk out with somebody else. I feel I'm in a privileged position in currently making a living writing, but a lot of women are not that privileged. They've spent their whole lives catering to men and children, and now they're supposed to start from scratch. It's impossible to expect that. Look—there are so many ways in which *successful* women are discriminated against; imagine how bad it is for the *average* woman.

PLAYBOY: Another burning feminist issue is abortion. What's your feeling about that?

JONG: Obviously, I think women should have the right to determine whether or not they need an abortion. I mean, that should be a basic premise. I *personally* have a lot of negative feelings about abortion.

PLAYBOY: You mean you couldn't have one yourself?

JONG: Psychologically it would be very tough on me, because I am 33 years old and have never had a child. I never lie about my age, by the way, with the result that frequently friends of mine who are five years older than I appear to be five years younger. But things happen to women who are past 30 and have never had a child; we get kind of crazy on the subject.

Abortions—I think there will always

be abortions. The question is whether there will be legal, safe abortions or back-street abortions. That's why the Right to Lifers infuriate me so. Their attempts to stamp out abortion through legal measures mean only that rich women will have safe abortions and poor women—the Puerto Ricans, the blacks, the college students—will die on kitchen tables. Or get blood poisoning or perforated uteruses. And I think that's just unconscionable.

PLAYBOY: Before we leave the subject of the dogma of women's lib, let's bounce this statement off you: "A feminist who admits to liking men is comparable to a Nazi leader who says he loves Jews."

JONG: I *hate* it when people polarize us like that. I don't see why being a feminist should be inconsistent with loving men. I suppose the trouble is that a lot of women, in order to love a man, feel they have to submerge their own identities. So if they want to be themselves, they have to give up loving men.

PLAYBOY: Do such women often come on to you sexually? Have you gotten letters from women propositioning you?

JONG: No, I haven't gotten many propositions from women. I do remember getting a letter from three women who said, "Dear Erica, do you want to be made happy beyond your wildest dreams? We are dykes and we can make you happy. Please call us at such-and-such telephone number."

PLAYBOY: Did you call?

JONG: No, I never did. But I don't get many overtures like that—I think probably because my work seems so heterosexual that a lesbian would assume I wasn't interested. I've been criticized for that, by the way. For example, the feminist journal *Off Our Backs* did a very, very vituperative review of my first book of poems, *Fruits & Vegetables*, and the gist of it was that the trouble with Erica Jong is that her mind's not open to bisexuality or to lesbianism. I think that's a silly criticism to make of a writer's work, to judge somebody on his or her sexual orientation.

PLAYBOY: We take it that yours is pretty exclusively heterosexual?

JONG: Well, I must say I feel there should be utter freedom for gay people, that they're unfairly persecuted. I could say to you that some of my best friends are gay, except that it would sound stupid. But I, myself, really *am* oriented more toward men than I am toward women.

PLAYBOY: Somehow you sound as if you're apologizing for that. Do you feel you must?

JONG: Well, in this day and age, one almost has to apologize for not being bisexual.

PLAYBOY: Do you dig photos of nude men, such as the centerfolds in *Playgirl*?

JONG: I'm not particularly turned on by those photos, but I think that's because I

look at those men and think, "God, I know how absolutely dumb he's going to be." One of the things that turn me on in men is intelligence.

PLAYBOY: What makes you think a man's dumb just because he poses nude? Are you really a female chauvinist prig?

JONG: Oh, those men always say they're posing to further their acting career or something. Besides, they never have erections! Real men excite me more than pictures.

PLAYBOY: What turns you on about real men besides intelligence?

JONG: Touch. And a real, live nude man walking across the room toward me turns me on immensely.

PLAYBOY: Some women, to the surprise of social scientists, are now admitting that they are aroused by pornographic movies. Are you?

JONG: My reaction to porn films is as follows: After the first ten minutes, I want to go home and screw. After the first 20 minutes, I never want to screw again as long as I live. Those endless blow jobs in slow motion, to me, are just tedious. The funniest porn film I've ever seen is one of two little girls in pig-tails—they're really women of about 30, but they're dressed up as little girls in pig-tails, with short skirts and knee stockings—making love to a man in an ape suit who has an enormous black-plastic penis that gets longer as they pull on it. One night I sat down with some friends in an apartment to watch some other porn films and we got so bored with running them forward that we decided to run them backward—so we could see the ejaculations returning and the cocks getting soft and the pants getting zipped.

PLAYBOY: Was that a turn-on?

JONG: No, but it was funny. None of those films was a turn-on, really. I found *Behind the Green Door* a turn-on for the first few minutes, but then it got repetitious.

I have been very turned on at times by erotic art, if the quality of the art is good. One thing that really turns me *off* is crummy prose, like you get in porn novels: "And then he pumped his hot pole into her wet pussy." It's so mechanical. Gigantic sexual organs thrusting at each other as if they didn't have people attached to them. Like those pictures in *Screw*.

PLAYBOY: You're not a fan of Al Goldstein's *Screw*?

JONG: I read your interview with Goldstein and I think he came across as a totally obnoxious human being from beginning to end. Both ends. *Screw* did publish a perceptive review of *Fear of Flying*, though. In the main, what I object to in *Screw* is those pictures of huge sexual organs taken out of context from the rest of the body.

You know, a friend of mine had a book of what people call wide-open beavers, crotch shots, that he got in

Copenhagen. It was just page after page of cunts. A black one, a white one, a Chinese one, with garters, without garters, with crotchless panties. And they were all pretty similar. The color of the hair or the skin might be different, but they were pretty much alike. Some people apparently find this sort of thing an object of fascination. I don't.

PLAYBOY: Your heroine in *Fear of Flying* is certainly fascinated with the idea of looking at her *own* cunt.

JONG: I can't imagine anybody growing up who hasn't had the desire to see her own cunt. I certainly did; I remember in my adolescence, like Isadora, putting my head through my legs and looking at myself backward in the mirror. It was just an object of intense curiosity for me.

PLAYBOY: But not beauty?

JONG: I may be killed by the feminists for saying this, but I think many women have the basic, gut feeling that their genitals are ugly. Maybe it has to do with the fact that your cunt is hidden, that you can't see it. Maybe it has to do with the fact that it has secretions and sometimes there are odors that are not pleasant. One of the reasons I think women are very gratified by oral-genital relations is that it's a way of a man's saying to you, "I like your cunt. It's good to me. I can eat it."

PLAYBOY: Is that the idea you were expressing in Isadora's fantasy of wanting her husband to go down on her while she was having her period? Is that one of your own unfulfilled fantasies?

JONG: I don't know whether I would really want to do it, but it does seem like a tremendous pledge of love. Do you love me enough to do anything? That's really what that's about. Do you love my menstrual blood? Would you eat my shit? Stuff like that. I don't think anybody actually *wants* to. You just want to hear the person say, "Sure I would." Reassurance.

PLAYBOY: Isn't that some kind of power play?

JONG: No, I think it's sort of asking for acceptance. One doesn't have to go on and *do* it.

PLAYBOY: Wouldn't you say there is rather a lot of emphasis on menstruation in your writing—your novel and your poems?

JONG: A lot? Every 28 days. Why not? I just think that for a woman it's a very, very important thing, that rhythm of menstruation. It's a kind of connection with your own mortality. Maybe it's hard to conceive of one's own death, but I don't think it's that hard to conceive of aging, or menopause. And one thing that's absolutely finite is your childbearing capacity. So every time a woman has a period, she knows that she is 28 or 27 or whatever number of days closer to the end—menopause, aging, death. It's a kind of biological time clock, a constant reminder of mortality.

PLAYBOY: A moment ago, you referred to

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vaginal odors, and certainly a multi-million-dollar industry devoted to feminine-hygiene sprays and such has sprung up in recent years. Yet many women put down these products and the advertising that promotes them. Do you?

JONG: I think those advertisements are terrible. My agent called me up one day and said some company wanted me to do a commercial for cunt wipers of some sort, and I said, "Don't even tell me who they are or how much money they're offering. I don't even want to know."

PLAYBOY: Would you have been tempted by the money?

JONG: No. I was shocked that anybody would ask a writer to do something like that. *Nothing* would have made me do the commercial. Anyway, what's wrong with soap and water? Bring the bidet to the New World! There's another thing I've always wanted to write to *The Playboy Advisor* about: OK, if you decide, as I have, that the form of contraception with the fewest side effects is the diaphragm and jelly, what do you do about oral-genital sex? The jelly anesthetizes the tongue and tastes terrible! Why don't companies come out with some kind of yummy-tasting contraceptive cream—grape flavor, maybe?

PLAYBOY: There *are* flavored douches and male-genital sprays on the market.

JONG: But that doesn't solve the contraceptive problem. And I really don't want to take the pill. I don't believe one should fuck up one's body with chemicals. I might take a sleeping pill occasionally, if I'm on a tour and can't relax in an unfamiliar hotel room. And I always used to carry penicillin tablets, because I have the greatest clap phobia of anybody in the world. I've always been terrified when I slept with somebody I didn't know well. I guess I'm just an alarmist, because when I travel someplace I take V-Cillin K, Lomotil and my diaphragms.

PLAYBOY: Diaphragms, plural? You have several?

JONG: A whole collection. I'm planning to send them to the Smithsonian. But—although this may go against the way people see me—I haven't really done all that much sleeping around. I was always preparing for it, just in case a really terrific guy came along—carrying around diaphragms in my briefcase and stuff like that, but the *number* of men I've slept with in my life is very small.

PLAYBOY: How many have there been?

JONG: Not many. I don't notch my bedpost, so I don't know, exactly. I do, however, have a good imagination, and I can describe sexuality clearly.

PLAYBOY: Who was your first lover?

JONG: My first husband. He was my college sweetheart, my best friend, my constant companion—a person I took courses with, long walks with, read books

with, did everything with. If it had been 1968, we would have shackled up together for a year or two and that would have been it. But because it was 1963, we got married. And we were much too young and too broke.

PLAYBOY: How old were you?

JONG: He was 24 and I was 21. We were married a year and a half, and then he had a nervous breakdown. That is the part of *Fear of Flying* that comes closest to something that actually occurred in my life.

PLAYBOY: When did you meet your second husband, the psychiatrist?

JONG: I met him in the fall of 1965 and we were married the next year. Then I went with him to Heidelberg, where he had a three-year tour of duty with the Army.

PLAYBOY: Like Bennett Wing, in *Fear of Flying*. Those were three years that Isadora Wing obviously hated. Have you been accused of being too rough on the Germans in that book? And why did you, or at least Isadora, lump the Viennese in with the Germans?

JONG: I know that makes the Viennese very, very angry, but I *see* them as being alike, Teutonic. Both Germans and Austrians were extremely anti-Semitic.

PLAYBOY: Were you being fair to them to generalize to such an extent?

JONG: I certainly wouldn't do it if I were writing nonfiction. But because I was writing a novel in which I was talking about people's gut feelings, I think I had the right to do it. You see, I had never been particularly conscious of being Jewish. My family was cosmopolitan; nobody cared much about religion. I never had been to a synagogue. All my life, I have had friends who were not Jewish—lovers, husbands, even. But in some way, that German experience changed something inside me, in that I came to understand what it means to have an identity you would fight for, and I began to burrow into those feelings. I wrote a lot of poems in Germany, and many of them dealt with the idea of being a victim and with rage. And from that I moved into writing about female rage and all those unexpressed negative feelings I had about family, about men, and so on.

PLAYBOY: Didn't you have other means of venting your rage? Specifically, didn't you, like Isadora, undergo an extensive period of analysis?

JONG: I was in analysis for eight years. I didn't have as many analysts as Isadora did; I had three. I'm not really sure why I spent eight years in analysis; one reason was that I was married to an analyst and it seemed to be the thing to do. I was greatly helped in a lot of things by analysis, though. I did suffer from writer's block and I was terrified of flying. I'm not anymore. Analysis really did

help me enormously. It freed me to write about things that matter deeply to me. If you can learn to be authentic and honest about your feelings on the couch, you can bring that authenticity into your writing.

PLAYBOY: One prominent New York psychiatrist made headlines recently when he was convicted of prescribing sexual relations for a patient, with himself as the sex partner. What's your opinion of that technique?

JONG: I'm totally against it. I think it's like child labor. Exploiting the helplessness of somebody who depends on you. When a person goes to a psychiatrist and puts his or her life in that person's hands and then gets a pass out of it, I think that's utterly immoral. And the psychiatrists who rationalize it as good for the patient are the lowest of the low.

PLAYBOY: What's it like being married to a psychiatrist?

JONG: It probably depends on the psychiatrist you're married to. They do tend to bring their work home with them, I think, and sometimes you feel you're being analyzed in the bedroom. And this sounds like a frightful generalization, but in the marriages of most psychiatrists I've known, there's an awful lot of daddy-baby stuff. The psychiatrist's wife plays a role: "Take care of me, Daddy." And the psychiatrist in turn plays a role: "I am the good daddy. I will protect you." For "protect," read: "control."

PLAYBOY: Is that what finally broke up your marriage?

JONG: It's very hard for me to talk about that marriage. But I'll say this: It was not the success of *Fear of Flying* that broke it up; my husband was immensely supportive of my writing, always. In fact, it was he who insisted that I use his name in my writing. I remember pointing out at a much earlier period of our lives, long before *Fruits & Vegetables* was published, that if I ever became a really well-known writer, it would ensure us much more privacy if I used my maiden name. But he was adamant about my using his name, Jong. He wanted this identification with me, as a bond between us—and he was relentless in his insistence. I think if he hadn't been so strong on it, I would have used my maiden name. Anyway, he was always proud of my work, proprietary, almost, and he never objected to the book. He read it all before publication and endorsed it heartily. Who can ever say why a marriage breaks up? We didn't share the same sense of humor—that's *part* of it.

PLAYBOY: How would you describe your sense of humor?

JONG: I see the world as a tremendous circus. I am very anti-elitist, anti-authoritarian. My real view of the world is a satirist's view, and more often than not, I find the games we play to gain

status very foolish. And I want to share that laughter with somebody; I mean, I can't get on with people who take all that bullshit seriously.

PLAYBOY: And your husband did take it seriously?

JONG: Most people do, and I think he did more than I did.

PLAYBOY: Is he a Freudian analyst?

JONG: Ask *him*.

PLAYBOY: We wondered because Freudianism is an extremely authoritarian discipline. If you're such an anti-authoritarian, how could you ever get mixed up with a Freudian analyst?

JONG: Mixed up is the key phrase there. I don't believe in systems, and I don't believe in breaking the world down into two types of people or two types of orgasms or any of those things. I do not want anybody to feed me any kind of orthodoxy, whether it's Catholicism or Seventh-day Adventism or Calvinism or Freudianism or anything else. Doctrinaire Marxists bore me. Doctrinaire Gestalt therapists, doctrinaire sexologists bore me.

PLAYBOY: What's your opinion of Freudian theories about sexuality?

JONG: There are a number of things in Freud's writing that lead me to believe he was extremely frightened of sexuality, very hung up and guilt-ridden.

PLAYBOY: Specifically, how about one of Freud's most controversial theories: Do you believe in penis envy?

JONG: *That* has a certain lilt, like a singing commercial for peanut butter. No, I believe that women envy the power men have in our culture, and well we might: I don't think we literally envy the *organ*. We don't have to; there's so much else we can envy. We can envy the fact that men make more money; we can envy the fact that society is structured for their benefit; we can envy the fact that they can go out to restaurants unescorted without getting pinched in the ass.

PLAYBOY: We thought you *liked* getting pinched in the ass, or is that only Isadora's predilection?

JONG: *Isadora* likes it. *Isadora*—she's incorrigible. I like to be pinched on the ass, but only by some people. And I want to pick the people. *Isadora* has a lot of weird tastes that I don't share. Most of her fears, though, are mine. Or *were*. I've outgrown many of them.

PLAYBOY: What besides your fear of flying?

JONG: I'm no longer afraid of being alone. That panic that *Isadora* feels—"Oh, my God, he's going to leave me and I'll be alone"—that actually is the irrational female panic that is ground into us from our earliest days and reaffirmed during our adolescence. God forbid that you should be without a date on Saturday night! God forbid you should be alone on New Year's Eve! God forbid your man should leave you! And then you discover, well, being alone is pretty nice. I like my own company. If I don't have a date



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on Saturday night, I'm reading a terrific book. I'm going out with a woman friend or with a man who is not my lover but whose company I enjoy. It's not so terrible. Life goes on.

PLAYBOY: You're in the process of getting a divorce. Why do you think so many marriages are breaking up these days?

JONG: Women are tired of bending, so they break up. I think that in some cases, divorce comes about through a healthy desire to fulfill one's own individuality. In other cases, it may be part of an endless quest for what is unfulfillable anyway. The things that used to hold the family together don't exist to the extent that they did. Childbearing is optional and even if you do have children, it doesn't take the whole of your life, because one child, or two children or even three children, is not a total lifetime's work in the way that it was when women had 14 children. I mean it doesn't go on as long.

PLAYBOY: You've been quoted as saying you have finally decided you'd like to have children.

JONG: I think I would. I certainly have waited and waited, as long as one can wait; but I don't believe I will get out of my childbearing years without having at least one child.

PLAYBOY: And it doesn't matter to you whether it is born in or out of wedlock?

JONG: Not at all. I'd rather be unwed than in a state of deadlocked wedlock. I don't think marriage guarantees a woman anything she can't have outside marriage—in terms of security, child support and the like. I only wish tax and inheritance laws did not discriminate against the unmarried. Unfortunately, they do. Other than that, I can't think of any reason one should be married. What can marriage offer me? It certainly doesn't guarantee that I won't stop loving somebody—nor does it ensure the continuance of a relationship. In some sense, it puts a sort of dutiful obligation on both parties that may make it harder to love freely. I'm not absolutely sure of this, but it's possible that if you feel locked together in a certain way, your love feels obligated rather than freely given. If you only live with somebody, it is taken for granted that you do so because you want to *be* with that person. Nothing in this world is more secure than that.

PLAYBOY: Do you agree with those who claim the trouble with modern marriage lies in the nuclear family? Would you rather live in a commune?

JONG: Boy, if I could find six people with whom I could live happily, I'd be glad to have a commune. But I think it's hard enough to live with one. It's practically a miracle when you live harmoniously with anybody. You know, theoretically I always said I would like to have a variety

of people in my life, a variety of men. And yet I always wind up pretty consistently with one man and am monogamous for long periods of time. Ziplessness unzips me. Monogamy helps me work and function and write. I think it's just that there are so few people in this world whom one can really love, whom you feel that tenderness toward. It doesn't happen to me every day. More often than not, I've felt a sort of intellectual contempt for many men. I know that sounds terrible to say, but I can remember, from the time I was an adolescent, thinking, "Oh, gee, he's so attractive, but he's so *stupid*."

PLAYBOY: Are you saying you couldn't go to bed with a man you didn't respect?

JONG: Oh, I could and I have, but I've always felt sorry afterward. For me, it is so much better to have a warm, loving, companionable relationship.

PLAYBOY: What would you consider an ideal relationship?

JONG: I have a new love poem that expresses it. It's about giving. I think we've always been afraid that if we give too much it will turn the other person off. And sometimes it does. Unfortunately, there are a lot of men—some women, too—in this culture who are terribly afraid of commitment. But I would think that if you could find somebody who was not turned off by it, you could just sort of renew each other, and that would be life's greatest pleasure.

PLAYBOY: Isn't there a contradiction between what you've just said, about commitment and monogamous relationships, and what you, through Isadora, had to say about the excitement of being unfaithful? The eroticism of sloppy seconds, so to speak?

JONG: It's not fair to blame me, three years after writing a book, for my character's views. Sure, one of the fun things about adultery—at least for a little while—is the sense that you're getting the best of two men. There you are, having a little affair and then going home to your husband; fucking two men in one day. The only trouble is it's very superficial. It really turns out you're not getting the best of either man. You're just getting a little piece—that's a pun, I guess—of both. Infidelity seems like a tremendous turn-on at times, but you really don't get much out of it. It's much better to have one really rewarding relationship than to have several fragmentary ones.

PLAYBOY: Do you think total marital fidelity is possible?

JONG: I think it's unreasonable to assume that one's mate is always going to be faithful. You *know* that people are not going to go for 20 years without ever fucking somebody else—for whatever reason; maybe just to assert independence, to prove you aren't caged. Sometimes out of a genuine compulsion. Or overwhelming attraction. It's unreasonable to assume

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that there won't be such occasions. But I'm the worst person to talk about that, because I'm very jealous. I'm really fascinated with jealousy and the effect it has on a marriage. There's something of that in my new novel.

PLAYBOY: Some married couples deal with this problem by permitting a certain amount of sexual freedom. How would you feel about open infidelity? Wife swapping or consensual adultery?

JONG: I feel much less threatened by it than by secret infidelity, and I think maybe in this respect, I'm like a lot of other people. The thing that gets me the most crazy about infidelity in the way that it's practiced in a conventional marriage is the secrecy. It re-evokes all your childhood terrors about things going on between the adults behind locked doors. When you find out that somebody has been cheating on you for years and that the night he was supposedly off studying for such and such he was really . . . that's what makes me crazy.

PLAYBOY: You don't subscribe to the "What you don't know won't hurt you" school of thought?

JONG: No, I don't, because I've had it both ways. I would have gone along with that idea until I actually experienced it, found out that things had been going on behind my back for years. And suddenly I understood all the overheard conversations, all the little innuendoes, whose car was parked in front of whose house—all those things—and they just came down on my head with sickening force. After that, I really felt I would rather know, painful as it is. I think lying corrodes a relationship. When you start lying to each other, you start with little things, lies by omission. And the lies grow and that ruins the relationship. I would rather have things out in the open.

I don't mean that you ought to call home from a business trip and say to the man or woman you're living with, or your husband or wife, "Darling, I just slept with So-and-So." I mean, you don't do that on the telephone. You wait until you're back together and talking in a kind of loving way.

PLAYBOY: What about, "Darling, I want to sleep with So-and-So"?

JONG: I honestly think that would be less threatening than keeping it a secret. But sometimes you take the steam out of the fantasy by actually speaking about it, and then you find you don't want to do it. But you see, if we all did that, there would be less fucking of other people out of rebellion and more doing it for the pure pleasure of doing it.

PLAYBOY: Do you think a lot of fucking is done out of rebellion?

JONG: Yes, absolutely, in conventional monogamous marriages. And when you read a lot of the novels of adultery that have been written by women, you see that pattern. Very often the woman finds

a lover who's not nearly as good in bed as her husband. Certainly, in *Fear of Flying* that's the case; the woman finds an impotent lover. He can't even get it up most of the time. So what's the need that's being fulfilled by this man? It's the need for rebellion, for saying, "Look, I'll show you." And I've talked to many, many women who have had affairs—sometimes persistent, constant affairs throughout their marriages—and they tell you overwhelmingly: "My husband is really a much better lover. He satisfies me more often; I reach orgasm more often with my husband; we're more attuned to each other." And so you ask, "Well, why the lover?" And they say, "Ah, I feel great. I feel alive. I feel reborn." What is going on that makes her feel that way? It's being appreciated again, not being taken for granted, being rediscovered as an individual, being validated in the eyes of a new man.

PLAYBOY: Do you have a need for validation in the eyes of men?

JONG: I don't believe I do, but I think that's the way many women live. I think validation comes very much from my work. But I must say that my sense of joy and of being at one with the world comes from having love in my life. I can live without it, as I said, but I really don't want to. I'm so much more *crotchety* when there's no man I love in my life.

PLAYBOY: In several articles that appeared earlier in the year, you were described as being depressed. Was the lack of a man in your life the real reason for that depression?

JONG: That may have been part of it, but I think mostly it was sheer exhaustion. I was inundated with mail after *Fear of Flying* came out, so much that I couldn't cope with it. This is something nobody can understand without going through it. Imagine opening your apartment door and finding a stack of mail that comes up to about mid-shin: four galleys in search of quotes, six books from editors saying, "Will you please write something about this?" 20 letters—15 of them from strangers, two from good friends, two or three requests for speaking engagements. It's amazing how many causes come out of the walls the minute your name becomes known. The Zionists of Upper Beverly Hills. The Feminists of Lower Mamaroneck. College Women in Search of Equal Pay. And they're all worthy causes, but nobody could keep up with them all. That was particularly difficult for me to deal with, because I'm the girl who can't say no. At first I tried to answer all the mail myself. I would categorize it, put it in big cardboard boxes: interesting fan mail, dumb fan mail, invitations to "stop for tea if you're ever passing through Seacaucus."

PLAYBOY: What were some of the interesting letters?

JONG: Well, I get certain categories of letters that interest me. There's the letter of heartfelt appreciation: "Thank you very much for writing that book. You wrote about my thoughts and feelings." This type sometimes comes from a woman and sometimes from a man; almost equally from both sexes.

PLAYBOY: Men identify with Isadora?

JONG: Absolutely. A lot of men are surprised when they find out that women have the same feelings they have. I don't know *why* they're surprised. When I was a kid and read *Great Expectations*, I identified with Pip. I identified with any number of famous characters from literature—Tom Jones, Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver, for God's sake. I never thought I couldn't identify with them because I was a girl. And yet it surprises men that they should pick up a book about a female and be able to identify with her. But men and women *do* face similar problems, like those Isadora faced: the difficulty of separating oneself from one's family, of achieving a sense of adulthood; the dilemma of wanting to be sexually free and yet wanting to be grounded in a safe, secure relationship. That's not a female thing alone. And men will say to me, "I feel just like Isadora. I feel I am Isadora." Or sometimes, "I'm glad that you wrote about the feelings of women so that I can see that *my* feelings are not so different. Perhaps the sexes are not as far apart as I thought." I find that kind of letter very touching.

PLAYBOY: Do you get letters that aren't so touching? Hate mail, for example?

JONG: Rarely. I once got a crazy letter from a man that said, "Dear Erica, I would like to tear your poems into little pieces and lick them off your body," which struck me as destructive, though I suppose he meant well. Perhaps the *oddest* letter I ever received was from a former nun who wanted me to meet a young man, perhaps have an affair with him. I think she was in love with him but didn't have the nerve to do anything about it herself and was sort of using me as an intermediary.

Other letters come from men who want to meet me. Sometimes they will say things like, "I have a wonderful 30-acre farm and I'm very wealthy. With a very long cock." No, they don't say that.

PLAYBOY: They don't?

JONG: They don't use the word cock, but sometimes they talk about what good lovers they are.

PLAYBOY: In your own writing, you call a cock a cock, but not all writers—or publishers—are so explicit. Some months ago, *The New York Times* printed an article by Henry Miller praising your work, and at the end there's an italicized footnote: "*The Times requested and Mr. Miller consented to alteration.*"

of some of the language in this article." One of the words the *Times* seems to have found it necessary to excise was bastard. How did that strike you?

JONG: As absurd. They wouldn't use the word lay, either. Or horny, which I thought was even funnier. I think writers should have full linguistic—even cunnilinguistic—freedom. But there are some people who scan down a page of prose, and if there's one cunt on that page, that's all they see. It's almost as if the thing were surrounded by a neon halo. This astounds me, because swearing was never taboo for me. It always seemed like an interesting way to make language emphatic.

PLAYBOY: With freedom, linguistic or otherwise, goes responsibility. Or so we've all been lectured. Do you feel that writers bear special responsibilities?

JONG: My own, as I've said, is to be honest. Beyond that, I've always felt writers should strive to be part of the common run of humanity, that they cannot be elitist. That's what bothered me so when I started having to delegate things, hire a secretary, get an answering service, retain an agent. I had always answered my own phone, my own mail. And I had to sort of reshuffle my head, tell myself, "OK, it's not terrible to have an answering service, to pull the phone plug out. You're still a nice girl." Once I made those decisions—and got out of New York—I felt much better.

PLAYBOY: Why did you have to get out of New York? What's a nice girl from Manhattan doing in a place like Malibu?

JONG: Hmmm. That's another whole book. I often wake up in the morning and don't know why the hell I'm in Malibu or how I got here. I think I'm probably a diehard New Yorker and that New York is so in my blood that I can't survive for too long away from it. But it was really getting to me. I used to think that writers who said they couldn't function in New York were being phony, because I wrote four books in New York. I had never anticipated what happens when you have a best seller, that you are suddenly on tap for the entire world. So it became necessary for me to get out of New York. I don't know if Malibu will become a permanent place for me. I somehow doubt it, but who can tell? Right now, I'm feeling more like a gypsy than ever before in my life. I have never had so few possessions as I have right now. I have three cartons of books and papers and four suitcases. I bought a portable typewriter and a couple of reading lamps at Sears Roebuck. Everything else is either borrowed or rented.

Actually, this is the first time in my life I've tried to live for myself. Simply. Not to worry about *things*, or about what people think of me, whether I'm pleasing people or not. Being able to choose my

friends from among people I really love. To be with a man I really love, somebody to whom I am extraordinarily close, with whom I can spend hours talking, giggling, laughing and kidding around, flinging jokes back and forth.

PLAYBOY: We assume you're talking about Jonathan Fast, the writer with whom you're sharing a home in Malibu.

JONG: Right. I think when I first met Jon, I had the sense that I was living with my other half, a sense I'd never had with another man, ever—that this was the other side of my personality. We are not exactly alike, but there is this tremendous kind of sharing of a way of looking at the world.

I had always assumed that men and women were sort of adversaries in a relationship, probably because of the experience I'd had before. The idea of living with someone without that sort of plea bargaining and competitive strife—I was astounded to find that that kind of a relationship could exist. I had convinced myself it was impossible and unfindable. But it's not. And that's a delight, I must say. We support each other in our work, too. Jon pushes me to work; he's much more disciplined in his writing habits than I am.

PLAYBOY: Which are you happier writing, poetry or prose?

JONG: I like doing both, but I think I enjoy writing poetry more. The sense of exhilaration is more acute. With a novel, you have to keep your eye on the thing over months and months, sometimes years. You have to keep track of the characters. You give a character red hair on one page, you don't want her to have brown hair two chapters later. So you have to keep rereading what you've written. I reread *Fear of Flying* so many times that now I can't even read it anymore. I don't think I could make it through one chapter.

PLAYBOY: Before long, you'll be seeing it onscreen. Did you ever think of playing the role of Isadora in the film version yourself?

JONG: Me? I'm not *thin* enough! I'm sure the book's fans will feel whoever plays the role is miscast, but then again, given the way Hollywood functions right now, it's a wonder they didn't get Robert Redford and change the heroine's name to Isadore.

PLAYBOY: What's your new novel about? Is it a sequel to *Fear of Flying*, with Isadora once more the heroine?

JONG: No. But the way I put together a novel is so anarchic and it goes through so many major versions that I never can say till the very end of the process what exactly it will become. I can tell you that it deals with a woman who has all the conventional female hang-ups and finally learns, as we all finally learn, that she has to be her own savior.

PLAYBOY: Do you feel you're *capable* of writing outside your own experience? Must you write at least partly autobiographically?

JONG: I'm fascinated with the idea of writing a fairy tale, or science fiction, or a panoramic historical novel. But right now I have a compulsion to write what I call "mock memoir." I feel that for the first time in my life, by doing so, I'm doing something that's not only pleasurable for me but socially useful.

PLAYBOY: You mean you feel you have a message to transmit?

JONG: Yes, oddly enough. It sounds almost corny to say that, but I do. And that message, in the broadest terms, is: Be honest about your own life, your feelings, your fantasies, your sexuality. I really believe that women writers are now in a unique position, in which we can uncover stuff that has been buried for centuries. And I'm not ready to stop doing that.

PLAYBOY: Do you see an increasing vogue for so-called confessional writing by women?

JONG: It's often called confessional writing by male reviewers, but I think the word confessional in this instance is a put-down. It implies that what these women are doing is just sort of spilling out whatever they have in their guts and that there's no craft involved in the writing.

PLAYBOY: How would you describe it, then?

JONG: I think it's a kind of confrontation with self that women are exploring for the first time. Women are confronting their own sexuality, dealing with things inside themselves they've been afraid of dealing with before: their own aggression, their negative feelings toward their families, possibly toward their men. Part of it is an exploration of healthy anger, and there's something important about being in touch with your own anger and moving from there to love. I think this is what is new in writing by women, and that's sort of the contribution I feel I can make.

PLAYBOY: Are you working on anything else right now, besides your novel?

JONG: A book of love poems, which is going to be called *The Long Tunnel of Wanting You*. They are erotic poems. One of them is about giving one's lover a blow job just before being interviewed on television.

PLAYBOY: And what effect does that have?

JONG: It loosens the tongue. Makes one feel very sassy. It's a wonderful poem, if I do say so myself. I'd rather have you print my poems than interview me. But I guess **PLAYBOY** doesn't print poems, does it?

PLAYBOY: Well, we might print a poem
(concluded on page 202)

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW (continued from page 78)

about that. [In fact, we're printing three erotic Jong poems.—Ed.]

JONG: It begins,

*My mouth seeded with your sperm,
I talked back to the interviewer.
It may also be this way with God.
Approach with a mouthful of stones,
you will be mute;
But speak semen and seed and the
words will flow.
Is heaven a television show?
Everything points to it. . . .*

and it goes on like that.

PLAYBOY: Your love poems are graphically candid, not to say earthy, and yet the public's image of a poet is of someone ethereal, fragile. Wouldn't you agree?

JONG: I'm not responsible for the public's false image of poets. The poets I know tend to be very full of their own sexuality. A lecherous lot. Male poets, especially. They go on tours, traveling from college to college, and they tend to use their poetry as a way of seducing college girls, teachers, other poets. They're desperate to get laid; they always come without their wives. In both senses of that word. A really terrific poet, of course, is supposed to be able to come just writing a poem. The muse screws.

PLAYBOY: The muse screws? Is that true of you? Can you come just writing a poem?

JONG: My head comes—in a manner of speaking.

PLAYBOY: At least your poetry has brought you other rewards. *Loveroot*, your latest volume of poems, made publishing history of a sort by being named a Book-of-the-Month Club alternate selection this month.

JONG: I hope all the people who buy my poems simply because they think I'm an outrageous celebrity will really discover they like poetry.

PLAYBOY: Do you see yourself as an outrageous celebrity?

JONG: Well, you see me, you see the way I live. I'm not an outrageous person at all; I live rather quietly. But certainly that's not my image. I'm shocked by some of the things I read about myself in print. I begin to sympathize more and more with people like Eisenhower, who never made a statement to the press that you could understand. Therefore, nothing he said could be held against him. But certainly I can't restructure my whole personality because now I'm the subject of interviews. It would go against everything I stand for. I am outspoken. I am candid. And if an interviewer is out to get me, I will come out sounding awful. I didn't understand at first that such people are directing their hostility at Erica, the commodity, not at Erica, the person—who is five years old inside, insecure and scared in the middle of the night like everybody else.

PLAYBOY: Why should Erica Jong, the famous author, feel insecure?

JONG: Fame can make you insecure. I mean, if your status can change so radically that people who previously would not even return your phone calls are now sucking up to you, asking you to lunch, dinner, breakfast, bed, you have to develop a tremendous sense of insecurity about the world. At a time like that, you need your friends more than ever and you find out who your friends really are.

PLAYBOY: So who are they?

JONG: Special people, people whose values are real. That's one of the things I like about Henry Miller, that his values are real. He will treat as equals a famous writer and some kid who has never published anything. He will be interested in both of them.

PLAYBOY: How did your friendship with Miller begin?

JONG: It all started when he wrote me a letter after having read *Fear of Flying*. He wrote, "You have written a female version of *Tropic of Cancer*. You have done for women in your book what I did for men in *Tropic of Cancer*." He raved on about the book and then he said, "Use any portion of this letter you wish with your publishers. Xerox it as many times as you want; send it anywhere you want." And as if that weren't enough, he wrote another letter to the publisher, saying the same thing. I was absolutely knocked out by his tremendous generosity. But Henry is like that. I first met him in person when I flew out here last fall to work on the screenplay of *Fear of Flying*, and since then, his house has been like a home to me. There are certain people who never are spoiled by fame, who never become aloof and who always remain folks. Henry Miller is like that. Anne Sexton was one of those. Actually, Anne and I saw each other only a few times, but we corresponded a lot and there was instant rapport. There are certain people in this world whom you meet and know you love, know that you could call them in the middle of the night and talk about anything. Anne was that kind of person; a very vulnerable lady and totally without any of the protective coloration of fame. I miss her.

PLAYBOY: Have you ever felt low enough to do yourself in, as Anne Sexton did?

JONG: Yes—but I don't think I'm a potential suicide. I identify with suicides; I could write about one. I know what they're feeling and I know why they want to shut off the world. They just feel so much pain that taking each breath is painful. I think that's what happened to Anne. But I don't think that I would ever actually do it.

PLAYBOY: Why not?

JONG: Perhaps because I tell myself,

"Well, the depression will lift. They always do. Ride it out." Perhaps because I think it's a terrible waste and because at just those times in my own life when it seemed that everything was falling apart, suddenly things got better. All last summer and fall, I was as low as I have ever been. I thought there was nothing to look forward to. I thought about suicide. I was in constant turmoil, partly brought on by the fact that my marriage was dying and I didn't have the guts to admit it to myself. So I just sat there immobilized, in pain. And then it all came together for me.

PLAYBOY: What pulled you out of it?

JONG: A couple of things. Making the decision to dissolve the marriage. Learning to live with the demands put on me by this whole fame thing; realizing that I was really very lucky to be able to do my own work and make a living at it, to be able to choose my friends from the people I really loved and not have to kiss ass to anybody.

The assumption is, I think, that what happens when you become "famous"—and I always want to use that word in quotes, because it really doesn't mean anything—is that people expect you to be different. A lot of friends drop away for that reason. J.F.K. is supposed to have made a statement about that that was marvelously quotable. One of his friends said, "Well, now that you're President, Jack, you're not going to have time for your old friends." And he said, "Oh, yes I am. The White House is a terrible place to make new friends." I think that's true of fame, also. Fame is a terrible place to make new friends, 'cause you never know who's asking you for what. I mean, you never know whether the man who's making himself so charming wants to publish your new book or wants to take you to bed or just likes you as a human being. And that's kind of sad, because fame is not one of the things that really matter.

PLAYBOY: What is?

JONG: Well, in the cosmic scheme of things, how hot you are today, or whether your picture is on the cover of a magazine, or how much money you get for the movie rights to your novel, matters not at all. It's nicer to have fame, success, than not to have it, just as it's nicer to be comfortably fixed than poor, but the things that truly matter, and I think will always matter, are: Can you write a poem that will last, like one of Emily Dickinson's poems? Not will they put your picture on the cover of a magazine but can you write something that people will still be reading to each other 100 years from now? Can you really love people, care about people and give yourself to them? Those are the things that matter. And all the rest is total delusion.



THREE LOVE POEMS BY ERICA JONG

TIME ZONES

*I start my day when dreams
are strangling you,
your eyelids flutter with the melon breasts
of women too enormous to be true.
You are fucking, muttering, loving
in your dreams;
I am in a taxicab downtown.*

*And then you wake—and I
sit down to lunch,
bored by another boring interview.
I interview the self I know by heart.
My luncheon partner interviews his dreams.*

*Meanwhile you pour your soul
into your fingers
& type the night's accumulated dreams.
& then once more I find myself a cab.
The driver drives himself—thinking it's me.*

*At three o'clock, I find myself alone.
You are running on a beach
under the sun.
You are lying in the glare & seeing me.
I tap the keys to reach you
through the clouds.*

*& then I go to dinner; you are home
writing to me & writing to yourself.
The two are one; we don't
require carbons.
I feel your thoughts before
you write them down.*

*& so to bed—I lie there until three—
to phone your midnight bed before I sleep.
I dreamily embrace you through the maze
of multicolored continental cables.*

*I'd put the telephone between my thighs
or wrap the cords & wires
around my waist
if it would bring you closer
but the time
is wrong, is wrong—
we have to chase the sun
from east to west
before we both come home.*

PROPERTY SETTLEMENT

*As we bought the furniture
we thought it would root us together:
every chair would be a child,
every mirror a glass for our passion,
every painting a patch of cracked wall
covered & covered forever.*

*But now we are moving on—
& all our treasured junk
which seemed so solid, so unmovable,
is like ashes in the fist of a mourner
outside the crematorium.
Scatter it over the sea!
I am moving to a bare house on a bluff
overlooking the Pacific.
I will furnish it with the multicolored love
of my red-bearded, green-eyed lover,
with the crushed kaleidoscope
of our passion,
& the bottle glass we find along the beach,
& the pure unclouded sunlight
that we pour
over & over each other.*

*If we don't have a bed,
we will make nourishing love
on the sun-struck kitchen floor.
If we don't have a chair,
we will rock
on each other's thighs.
If we don't have a table,
we will eat out of each other's
delicious bodies.
He will lick honey from my cunt,
& I will cover his cock with jam
& suck it off like a hungry baby.*

*Take the desk, the analytic couch,
the posters we bought in dead Vienna.
Take the scholarly journals,
the brokerage receipts,
the money, the money, the money,
& churn your worthless stock.*

*Put coins in your pocket;
they will not buy you love.*

*Make a blanket of bonds & passbooks;
they will not keep you warm.
Quilt yourself over with checks;
they will not bounce for you as I did.*

*You will be solvent & sane
huddled in the coinage of your coldness
but I am gone.*

THE PUZZLE

*They locked into each other
like brother & sister,
long-lost relations,
orphans divided by time.*

*He bit her shoulder
& entered her blood forever.
She bit his tongue
& changed the tone of his song.*

*They walked together astonished
not to be lonely.
They sought their lonelinesses
like lost dogs.*

*But they were joined together
by tongue & shoulder.
His nightmares woke her;
her daydreams startled him.*

*He fucked so hard
he thought he'd climb back in her.
She came so hard
her skin seemed to dissolve.*

*She feared she had no yearning
left to write with.
He feared she'd suck him dry
& glide away.*

*They spoke of all these things
& locked together.
She figured out
the jigsaw of his heart.*

*& he unscrambled her
& placed the pieces
with such precision
nothing came apart.*

