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#46

Spring 2003



**The Money
Machine:**

Selected Poems

by
Minnie Bruce Pratt



deadly nightshade, a cardiac and respiratory stimulant, having purplish-red flowers and black berries

The Money Machine: Selected Poems. © Minnie Bruce Pratt 2003
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multi-gendered, impossible to define, delicious to talk about, unpredictable,
dangerous with language.

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Cutting Hair

She pays attention to the hair, not her fingers, and cuts herself once or twice a day. Doesn't notice anymore, just if the blood starts flowing. Says, *Excuse me*, to the customer and walks away for a band-aid. Same spot on the middle finger over and over, raised like a callus. Also the nicks where she snips between her fingers, the torn webbing. Also spider veins on her legs now, so ugly, though she sits in a chair for half each cut, rolls around from side to side. At night in the winter she sleeps in white cotton gloves, neosporin on the cuts, vitamin E, then heavy lotion. All night, for weeks, her white hands lie clothed like those of a young girl going to her first party. Sleeping alone, she opens and closes her long scissors and the hair falls under her hands. It's a good living, kind of like an undertaker, the people keep coming, and the hair, shoulder length, french twist, braids. Someone has to cut it. At the end she whisks and talcums my neck. Only then can I bend and see my hair, how it covers the floor, curls and clippings of brown and silver, how it shines like a field of scythed hay beneath her feet.

7/29/02

Breakfast

Rush hour, and the short order cook lobs breakfast sandwiches, silverfoil softballs, up and down the line. We stand until someone says, *Yes?* The next person behind breathes hungrily. The cashier's hands never stop. He shouts: *Where's my double double?* We help. We eliminate all verbs. The superfluous *want, need, give* they already know. Nothing's left but *stay* or *go*, and a few things like *bread*. No one can stay long, not even the stolid man in blue-hooded sweats, head down, eating, his work boots powdered with cement dust like snow that never melts.

7/29/02

Reading the Classifieds

At the next table an African American woman bows her head over a pile of newspapers, her hand slant to her mouth, then to her ear, smoothing her temple, smoothing the pulse, fear. Her fingers again to her forehead, then to her heartbeat hollow. She sits, hair slightly askew, chin in hand, then quickly up and out, a glance at the clock. Two days later, another woman, same table, a Latina leaning forward into the paper, one hand with a yellow marker, one hand at her forehead, a mirror gesture. Her fingers pleating, smoothing, as her eyes scan down, over, as her hand unseeing fumbles toward the brown lunch bag. The other hand reaches to mark with a gleam the *data entry*, *benefits*, the *experience a plus*, the *knowledge a must*. Not yet the no experience, not yet the *home mailers*, *home workers*, or *escort needed*. No faxes, no phone calls. She gets up, bound for an overheated anteroom where she'll meet herself, sitting on plastic stacking chairs, five, ten, twenty times over. Next table a white man with shoes but no socks complains about the cold, says, *This weather. This fucking weather. Reminds me of what I was, on the street.*

6/12/02

Picking Up a Job Application

A spring wind hustles hundreds of pages into the street, discarded leaflets like pieces of a shredded textbook under the feet of high school students let out for lunch. A young woman bends and grasps a flyer: sliver of promise, passport to enter through the golden arches, gateway to the west, up escalator to immediate opportunity, and prosperity somewhere higher, those sky-reaching towers across the river looking down on her and the crowd scrambling to buy a dollar forty-nine cent special meal. Required? Just the have-a-good-day sticker on her backpack, the smiley face plastered over her eyes and nose and mouth every day. And one thing more, of course: *Fill in application on the reverse—English only please.* She speaks Hindi, Arabic, Tagalog, Spanish, Greek, half a dozen other tongues hide behind her smiles. The day she says *Hello* to her first customer is the day she says *Hello* to the other women behind the counter, who are talking, but not smiling.

7/29/02

Getting Money at the ATM

I can hear someone behind the money machine, a muffled clanking. The screen blinks and promises me *any time, any where*. A secret password gets me sixty dollars right in the palm of my hand, dispensed quick as candy. And not flimsy paper worn down like knee pads in work jeans, but crisp new money fronted by old faces, by big men who promise a pyramid of power, an all-seeing eye, every thing is mine if I hold this magic skin mottled and blotched with strange letters and numbers. Cash from last month's paycheck, from electronic pulses, from the hidden vault.

From me sitting at my desk last month, phone to my ear, words trembling on my tympanum, ten thousand words pounding on the membrane, how many thousand clacking between my teeth and tongue, the hyoid bone, the mandible working without being named, how many thousand words spoken by my fingers on the keyboard. Twelve eye muscles twisting to follow the serpentine light of the screen. Feet pushing the swivel chair back and forth, printer, phone, fax machine. Taking a break means walking down four flights, ten minutes up the street to the bank, then the post office. At the counter I hand over money, a paper token, a one-page book, all my comings and going hidden in it, mystified.

So, it's farewell and go, little book, and who will handle my life next, and not know it? Then, it's back. Back up the stairs. Sit at my desk.

7/29/02

Playing the Lottery

At the table two women stare down at their cards, classic bingo, cool cash: *For every dream there's a jackpot*. The cards gleam silver pastel fire. On the table are gloves, an old toboggan cap, two smashed paper bags, an orange plastic pill bottle. One woman folds her sandwich foil in half. The other scrapes her card with a nickel, *Nada*, clicking the coin on the table to clean it between boxes, as the numbers come up silver and gold, each box a window, a hundred new views. Or a door, behind each door a new car, a luxury vacation, next month's rent. *No le tengo*. Click, click, as if the turning wheel on *The Price Is Right* is slowing down to reach its final destination, after Vanna White dressed like a goddess has flung out her hand to settle with fate. These women keep their coats on, looking for something besides work, table, tavern, bed, the chance of the numbers runner who jogs past the corner, the casual lift of his hand to grab the paper slip stuck high on the light pole. One woman folds the scrap of foil again by four, eight, sixteen, then drops it into her purse to save. Every card needs just one more number to win.

7/29/02

Giving a Manicure

The woman across from me looks so familiar, but when I turn, her look glances off. At the last subway stop we rise. I know her, she gives manicures at Vogue Nails. She has held my hands between hers several times. She bows and smiles. There the women wear white smocks like technicians, and plastic tags with their Christian names. Susan. No, not Susan, whose hair is cropped short, who is short and stocky. This older lady does my hands while classical music, often Mozart, plays. People passing by outside are doubled in the wall mirror. Two of everyone walk forward, backward, vanish at the edge of the shop. Susan does pedicures, pumice on my heels as I sit on the stainless-steel throne. She bends over, she kneads my feet in the water like laundry. She pounds my calves with her fists and her cupped palms slap a working beat, *p'ansori* style. She talks to the others without turning her head, a call in a language shouted hoarse across fields where a swallow flew and flew across the ocean, and then fetched back to Korea a magic gourd seed, back to the farmer's empty house where the seed flew from its beak to sprout a green vine. When the farmer's wife cut open the ripe fruit, out spilled seeds of gold. Choi Don Mee writes that some girls in that country crush petals on their nails, at each tip red flowers unfold. Yi Yon-ju writes that some women there, as here, dream of blades, knives, a bowl of blood.

7/29/02

Picketing the Bargain Store, They Said:

We know the boss is out front getting photographed under the red-white-and-blue Grand Sale banner, there to remind shoppers of a national holiday, a victor's war. We know we are inside fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, once three days straight, no break, one pizza each day to eat. Inside, we bend, grasp, lift up onto the shelves the stuff for someone else's house, bottles of bleach, welcome mats, thin pastel towels, the green-and-gold peacock porcelain clocks, each crowned head arched back to look at how well it carries time in its belly. We make \$2.74 an hour, no benefits, no overtime. At night we sleep on the floor of someone else's 99 Cent Dream Bargain Store, and we are here today to tell you: *Basta! Not us, not any more.*

They said *Enough*, five of them. Not enough yet for the police to unload the barricades and put them in front of the store.

7/29/02

Chopping Peppers

The slice across the top, at right angles, and
I am inside. If I did this for a job, where would I be?
Sitting on a milk crate in a restaurant kitchen. Who
would I be? Someone chopping green peppers for
sweet-and-sour chicken. I hold the slippery bowl
and inside is the secret, an island of seeds, a palisade,
a reef, an outcropping of the future waiting for decay,
for the collapse of walls, for escape. Instead, I filigree
the flesh into odd bits of ribbon with the little paring knife,
the gesture effortless, no more than a minute, time to play
with these words, and my fingers and wrist don't feel a thing.

I was no metaphor when I fed a machine eight hours a day.
I was what came before words, my hands the spring,
setting metal jaws to shut, the same synapses to snap
together every second all day again and again
until what is being done can be named.

7/29/02

Driving the Bus : After the Anti-War March

We had a different driver on the way home. I sat on the seat behind her, folded, feet up like a baby, curled like a silent tongue in the dark jaw of the bus until she flung us through a sharp curve and I fell. Then we talked, looking straight ahead, the road like a blackboard, one chalk line down the middle. She said, nah, she didn't need a break, she was good to the end. Eighteen hours back to home when she was done, though. Fayetteville, North Carolina, a long ways from here. The math of a mileage marker glowed green. Was Niagara Falls near Buffalo? She'd like to take her little girl some day, too little now, won't remember. The driver speaks her daughter's name, and the syllables ring like bells. I say I lived in her town once, after another war. The boys we knew came home men cocked like guns, sometimes they went off and blew their own heads, sometimes a woman's face. Like last summer in Ft. Bragg, all those women dead. She says, "One was my best friend." Husband shot her front of the children, boy and girl, six and eight. She calls them every day, no matter where she is. They get very upset if she doesn't call. Her voice breaks, her hands correct the wheel, the bus pushes forward, erasing nothing. There was a blue peace banner from her town today, and we said stop the war, jobs instead, no more rich men's factories, refineries, futures built on our broke bodies. She said she couldn't go to the grave for a long time, but she had some things to get right between them so she stood there and spoke what was on her mind. Now she takes the children to the grave, the little boy he wants to go every week. She lightly touches and turns the big steering wheel. Her hands spin its huge circumference a few degrees here, then there. She whirls it all the way around when she needs to. Later I hear the crinkle of cellophane. She is eating some peppermint candies to stay awake.

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