

Karen Brodine

from *Woman Sitting at the  
Machine, Thinking*

she thinks about everything at once without making a mistake.  
no one has figured out how to keep her from doing this thinking  
while her hands and nerves also perform every delicate complex  
function of the work. this is not automatic or deadening.  
try it sometime. make your hands move quickly on the keys  
fast as you can, while you are thinking about:

the layers, fossils. the idea that this machine she controls  
is simply layers of human workhours frozen in steel, tangled  
in tiny circuits, blinking out through lights like hot, red eyes.  
the noise of the machine they all sometimes wig out to, giddy,  
zinging through the shut-in space, blithering atoms;  
everyone's hands paused mid-air above the keys  
while Neil or Barbara solo, wrists telling every little thing,  
feet blipping along, shoulders raggly.

she had always thought of money as solid, stopped.  
but seeing it as moving labor, human hours, why that means  
it comes back down to her hands on the keys, shoulder aching,  
brain pushing words through fingers through keys, trooping  
out crisp black ants on the galleys. work compressed into  
instruments, slim computers, thin as mirrors, how could  
numbers multiply or disappear, squeezed in sideways like that  
but they could, they did, obedient and elegant, how amazing.  
the woman whips out a compact, computes the cost,  
her face shining back from the silver case  
her fingers, sharp tacks, calling up the digits.

when she sits at the machine, rays from the cathode stream  
directly into her chest. when she worked as a clerk, the rays  
from the xerox angled upward, striking her under the chin.  
when she waited tables the micro oven sat at stomach level.  
when she typeset for Safeway, dipping her hands in processor  
chemicals, her hands burned and peeled and her chest ached  
from the fumes.

while we know who makes everything we use or can't use.  
as the world piles itself up on the bones of the years,  
so our labor gathers.

while we sell ourselves in fractions. they don't want us all  
at once, but hour by hour, piece by piece. our hands mainly  
and our backs. and chunks of our brains. and veiled expressions  
on our faces, they buy. though they can't know what actual  
thoughts stand behind our eyes.

then they toss the body out on the sidewalk at noon and at five.  
then they spit the body out the door at sixty-five.

\* \* \* \* \*

knowledge this power owned, not shared  
owned and hoarded  
to white men, lock stock dollar  
skill passed down from manager  
to steal, wrench it back  
knowledge is something we have  
this is the bitters column  
around the chair, toe stubbing the floor  
and I am here, legs twisted  
on our own time the words clarify  
with all we are not taught  
I will know it and use it burning  
I sneak it home and copy it  
the Puerto Rican janitor, the older  
woman, the Black women, our heads  
held over stolen not granted  
in my stomach for all the access  
I have to sneak  
language is something  
get my hands on the machine  
he takes it all as his right  
eating lunch for granted his whole life  
get my hands on the book  
he's being taught what I am not  
angry words swallowing my throat

to take to take it back

and open and ribbon out and share

The Bitters Column.

\* \* \* \* \*

Line corrections  
Interview with Leola S.  
Typesetter: Karen B.

Born in Shreveport, Leola  
independence is important, she  
one of fourteen children, her  
housecleaning in San Mateo  
divorced now, she lives alone in  
serving dinner from 4-5pm every  
starting pay 1.53 per  
h o u r

she and some co-workers  
today more than ever in U.S.  
h i s t o r y

posed to discrimination by sex,  
race, color, religious or national  
o r i g i n

more women go to work in

enter the labor  
70 percent of the average wage  
Black women lowest paid of  
to organize the continuing fight  
determined to be heard  
plaints against unfair policies  
something worth fighting for  
sector of the working class  
w o m e n

\* \* \* \* \*

some buildings never sleep  
round the clock  
three eight hour shifts  
seven days a week  
centrifugal force irons us flat  
to the blank walls, speeding,  
whirling, intent as astronauts,  
eyes toward the clock,  
hands on the keys,  
shoulders pressed against the chair.

some buildings never sleep  
never shut down  
roaring and roaring and we shout,  
WHAT DID YOU SAY? HUH? WHAT?  
WHERE IS THE? WHAT DID YOU SAY?

continuous paper streams form the room  
words ratatat through our brains  
trains and earthquakes shutter the walls  
the long whistle of wind under the door  
all we know of outside

remember that fish  
that lives so deep  
it has grown its own light  
energy glaring out the bulbs  
of its eyes  
remember that fish formed flat  
under fathoms of water  
bones streamlined as ribs of steel  
precise and efficient, formed in duress,  
reaching, spinning the tough wire  
of its own life, and long before Edison  
vaulting out through its own demands.

(1981)

Editors' notes:

Raised in a socialist home in rural Woodinville, Washington, Karen Brodine (1947-1987) moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in the mid 1960s. She graduated from the University of California-Berkeley in 1972 with a degree in dance, and went on to receive an MFA in creative writing from San Francisco State University in 1974, where she taught part-time for six years.

During the early 1970s, Brodine co-founded the Women Writers Union in San Francisco, was a founding co-editor of Kelsey Street Press in Berkeley, and an editor at the Berkeley Poets Co-op. From 1975 to 1986 she supported herself as a typesetter while continuing her active involvement as a member of the National Women Studies Association and the National Writers Union.

Throughout the 1980s, Brodine worked as a national leader and San Francisco's organizer for both Radical Women and the Freedom Socialist Party, serving on the FSP's National Committee from 1982 on. From 1982 to 1984 Brodine coordinated the successful defense of Merle Woo's landmark suit against the University of California-Berkeley for discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation and political ideology. Karen Brodine died of cancer on October 18, 1987 at the age of forty.

Her books include *Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking: Poems 1978-1987* (Red Letter Press, Seattle, 1990), *Slow Juggling* (Berkeley Poets Cooperative, 1975), *Workweek*, (Kelsey Street Press, Berkeley, 1977), and *Illegal Assembly* (Hanging Loose Press, Brooklyn, 1980). She also edited, designed and published Gloria Martin's *Socialist Feminism: The First Decade, 1966-1974* (1984). Her critical essays include "Politics of Women Writing" (*The Second Wave*, V.5, #3, 1979), "Ancient Matriarchy and Modern Feminism" (*Radical Women Internal Discussion Bulletin*, V.11, #2, 1981), and "Giving Criticism Arms" (*FSP Pre-Convention Bulletin*, #3, April, 1982).