P oems from the Women’s Movement is a volume for feminists of all ages. An excellent introduction by Honor Moore describes what it felt like in that long-ago time of radical change, anti-Vietnam War protests, and visions of revolution, when activist women were walking away from the sexist and manipulative male Left, writing manifestoes like Robin Morgan’s “Goodbye to All That,” opening women’s bookstores and presses, publishing underground papers and journals with names like Rat and Moving Out, and starting consciousness-raising groups in which they discovered that the personal was political. Moore recalls the excitement of the jam-packed women’s poetry readings that began to sprout in the 1970s, where she encountered June Jordan, Sonia Sanchez, and Carolyn Kizer, and where women were writing poetry about fathers and mothers and sisters, about rape and women artists and Gertrude Stein, about miscarriages and the lost power of spinster aunts, about Milton’s daughters and washing dishes, about the forbidden love between one woman and another, about Harriet Tubman and the subversive talk of waitresses, the love of mothers for sons and the yearning of daughters for common cause with their mothers.

Full disclosure: I too remember the time well. My poem in this book, called “The Anniversary,” comes from a period in the late 1960s when I had two toddler daughters and what felt like a thousand freshman composition papers to grade each week. My husband was supportive but didn’t do diapers. I was the first woman in my department. My colleagues never mentioned their families, so I never mentioned mine, though family was my life. The two American women poets taught in my department were Emily Dickinson and Marianne Moore. The name of Edna St. Vincent Millay evoked smirks.

Does any of this sound familiar? If it doesn’t, you can thank the power of women’s vision combined with women’s action, and the poets who were a major part of that. If it does—well, we still have a way to go.

Moore covers the period from 1966, when Sylvia Plath’s Ariel was published in the US, to 1982, the year that Jane Cooper, who had self-censored her second volume of poems back in the 1950s, wrote “The Green Notebook,” in which she imagines finding “the poems of my life/ I mean the ones I never wrote.” The 58 poets brought together here are not often seen together, but from Plath to Katha Pollitt to Molly Peacock, from Diane Wakoski to Alice Walker, from Erica Jong to June Jordan, Lucille Clifton to Irena Klepfisz, they changed the course of American poetry (and American life!) with their rage, their humor, and their out-and-out brilliance.

Some of the poems will be old friends to many readers. Muriel Rukeyser’s “Käthe Kollwitz” includes the line that gave a title to one of the best anthologies of the period: “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? / The world would split open” (The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552–1950, edited by Louise Bernikow, 1974). Adrienne Rich’s “Planetarium,” “Diving Into the Wreck,” and “Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev” have become canonical, as have Lucille Clifton’s “Miss Rosie” and “the lost baby poem.” I remember gasping with delight at the wryness of Sylvia Plath’s “The Applicant” (you can find “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” in other anthologies), with its hustler trying to sell a “living doll” to a presumably male “empty head”:

Well, what do you think of that?
Naked as paper to start
But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver.
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

Carolyn Kizer’s “Semele Recycled,” which celebrates the comedic sacredness of sex, was among the first widely read poems of women’s revisionist mythology. Sharon Olds’s “Satan Says,” the title poem of her first book, opened a new era in the way we could write about parents with a mixture of intense love and intense anger. Louise Glück in her “Dedication to Hunger” breaks a taboo in writing of teenage anorexia, and the “soft, digressive breasts... the interfering flesh / that I would sacrifice.” June Jordan’s “Case in Point” breaks another taboo: Jordan responds to a woman friend who claims that “there is no silence peculiar / to the female,” by recounting a rape in which a local black leader rambled
what he described as his quote big dick
unquote into my mouth
and shouted out: “D’ya want to swallow
my big dick; well do ya?”
He was being rhetorical.
My silence was peculiar
To the female.

Some other poets and poems are less well known. Check out Jana Harris’ “Don’t Cheaper Yourself” for funk. Audre Lorde’s “To My Daughter the Junkie on a Train” for anguish. Pat Parker’s “For Wyllice” for a delicious lesbian love poem with a surprise ending.

As with any anthology, I would have made some different choices; the poems here by Anne Sexton, Maxine Kumin, Erica Jong, and Toi Derricotte, for instance, don’t seem to me their finest or most characteristic. I wish Moore had included some work by Native American, Chicana, and Asian women; Nellie Wong, Paula Gunn Allen, Linda Hogan, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and Alma Villanueva were publishing during the timespan of this book. But these are quibbles. It is lovely to have traditional and experimental poets, middle-class and working-class poets, white and black poets together in one volume, and I was particularly thrilled to see some of the visionary West Coast poet-activists who are so often neglected by the East Coast: Alta, Susan Griffin, Judy Grahn, Pat Parker. Susan Griffin’s “I Like to
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Think of Harriet Tubman" is one of three superb poems included here, any of which might catapult you back to her ecologist masterpiece, Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her. Judy Grahn's "A Woman is Talking to Death" is here in its revolutionary entirety, and is all by itself worth the price of the book.

In this multisession sequence, a young white motorcyclist foolishly standing laughing in the middle of the Bay Bridge is killed by a black motorist; Grahn and her lover flee, and later learn the driver was first beaten up by the cops, then held in jail for five days without a phone call, then sentenced to five-to-ten years in prison. This story becomes the center of many interlocked stories of betrayal: the European witch trials; Grahn's ejection from the Navy ("This woman is a lesbian be careful"); the drowning of 25 boatload of sailors when some new amphibious tanks don't work and nobody around gives an order to stop as each rolls into the water and sinks; the rape of an elderly Asian woman by a taxi driver; the "pain, shame and defiance" of Josie, a pregnant girl in Grahn's junior high-school class; the time Grahn was knocked down in a dinner by a Spanish-speaking kid who called her queer, and the counterman and cops were "pleased / at what had gotten beat out of me." When the powerless and intimidated—poor people, women, blacks, gays and lesbians—betray themselves and each other, Death is at work. In Death's "Mock Interrogation," the poet is asked if she has ever "committed any indirect acts with women." Her reply:

Yes, many. I am guilty of allowing suicidal women to die before my eyes or in my ears or under my hands because I thought I could do nothing. I am guilty of leaving a prostitute who held a knife to my friend's throat to keep us from leaving, because we would not sleep with her, we thought she was old and fat and ugly.... I regret all the women I have not slept with or comforted, who pulled themselves away from me for lack of something I had not the courage to fight for, for us, life, our planet, our city, our meat and potatoes, our love. These are indecent acts, lacking courage, lacking a certain fire behind the eyes, which is the symbol, the raised fist, the sharing of resources, the resistence that tells death he will starve for lack of the fat of us, our extra. Yes I have committed acts of indecency with women and most of them were acts of omission. I regret them bitterly.

At the close of the sequence Grahn bequeaths "the rest of my life" to her lovers and "the next batch of us...who try not to work for you [Death]," vowing "death, ho death! you shall be poor."

For a quick shot of inspiration, here is a short poem by Alta, entitled "eurodice," that could serve as a model for every creative woman:

all the male poets write of orpheus as if they look back & expect to find me walking patiently behind them. they claim i fell into hell. damn them, i say. i stand in my own pain & sing my own song.

Poems from the Women's Movement is compact enough to tuck in your purse and huge enough to blow the top of your head off. It is part of the series on American poetry published by the Library of America, which also has done volumes of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Muriel Rukeyser, Amy Lowell (also finely edited by Moore), and Gwendolyn Brooks.

Now for another full disclosure. The first time I saw Judy Grahn read was at a 1985 women's poetry festival: three exhausting days of panelists, interviews, readings, with hundreds of us packed in and wired, starved and gobbling, smearing our mouths with women's poetry, crushing women's voices into the spirals of our ears, the tops of our heads coming off. I made sure to get an aisle seat with an unobstructed view for Grahn's reading. Wise decision. A working woman among the flamingoes, she wore cotton pants, a skirt and vest not bought for the occasion, lace-up shoes. Without any sort of airs or graces except the occasional shadow of humor around the mouth, she stood straight up and read straight out. At that moment exhaustion left me, and I felt my body go into alpha rhythm.

It was like a tree speaking; that firmness, experience, rootedness. If dryads could be middle-aged—and why shouldn't they?—this woman was a dryad. Or some sort of spiritual-earthly being. As Grahn likes to say, "That's a fact."

More than any American poet I know, Grahn has contributed to the transformation of American culture while working almost entirely outside the conventional grooves of academic literary life. (Go to her website www.judysgrahn.org/ to see how wide her wingspan is.) Her first book, Edward the Dyke, a witty and exuberant challenge to linguistic as well as sexual conventions, rapidly became an underground classic in the San Francisco Bay Area and elsewhere. So did her "Common Woman Poems" with their stereotype-breaking subjects—copperheaded waitresses; mean boss; neighborhood caretaker and bail-bearer whose "sentences come out / like thick pine shanks"; closet lesbian; hippie girl; depressed picture-window wife. Love belongs to those who do the feeling includes much of this early work. It does not include "A Woman is Talking to Death," so you will have to buy both of the books I'm reviewing here, but it does include the equally amazing sequence "She Who," in which women's private experiences morph into collective myth and ritual. "The Queen of Wands" and "The Queen of Swords" are further explorations of women's spirituality; "The Queen of Wands" traces Helen of Troy backward to pre-Greek goddess figures and forward to Marilyn Monroe and Everywoman; "The Queen of Swords" is a modernization of the Descent of Inanna, a Sumerian female quest-myth.

The sheer craft of Grahn's poetry is formidable. Her cracking wit, her compression, her ear for rhythms and sounds, and her instinct for dialogic tension give her art music and beauty. Along with the common woman's twentieth century vocabulary, ancient and archaic uses of language become hers: naming as ritual, keening, cursing, spell-casting. If a word such as "love" has been deased, it is her task to redeem it, as in "Confrontations with the Devil in the Form of Love:

if Love means prevent then whenever I do not defend you
I cannot call my name Love.
if Love means rebirth then when I see us dead on our feet
I cannot call my name Love.
if Love means provide & I cannot provide for you
why would you call my name Love

Throughout her career Grahn's writing has had the prophetic power of Blake or Whitman. Impossible to describe in ordinary "literary-critical" terms, hers are the revelations by which human language and the human spirit advance. The "New and Future Poems" in this collection call for fresh rituals, and reverence for the planet and for its indigenous people and divinities. "Is poetry the intersection of natural and human forces, in verbal form?" she asks. The woman who is like a tree keeps putting forth green leaves.

Alicia Ostriker's 1980 antiwar poem sequence The Mother/Child Papers was recently reprinted by the University of Pittsburgh Press. She teaches in the low-residency poetry MFA program at Drew University.