

# What am I Looking for or, the Art

by Sarah Anne Mills

*L'auteure fait l'examen de ses critères pour les amants et découvre que pour les femmes, elle demande qu'elles soient des féministes actives alors que pour les hommes, il n'en est rien.*

Walking through the woods to town with an agenda of cat food and mail, I reflect on a recent development in an e-mail correspondence. My friend Anne and I have been discussing, with varying degrees of amusement and seriousness, the idea of preparing a list addressing the question "what am I looking for in a sweetheart?" The list, Anne challenges, can be approached with a sense of infinite possibility and can be used to help clarify a starting place. I reject the idea suggesting that forming lists of this sort can limit relational possibilities to the restrictions of our imaginations.

As I walk, I think that the truth, if there is such a thing, lies somewhere between these merging hues of clarity and restriction and I resolve to construct such a list for myself. My next correspondence to Anne contains my list. I send her a solid page of brainstorming of such wholly unobtainable things as: "a person who never fails to surprise me, all the while offering me a consistency I can trust;" "a person who can spend twenty minutes blissfully luxuriating on the subtleties of any one square inch of my body, and who inspires me to relish in receiving this;" and my personal favourite "a person who has secrets and yet tells all." I end my brainstorming session with an amused tribute to Ani Difranco, and ask; "do you think I am asking too much?"<sup>1</sup>

When constructing my list, I was conscious not to think of anyone in particular, but rather an anonymous, idealized, unknown person built from traits that I find desirable right now. As well, I was very aware of trying not to envision a particular gender. For as a lover of both sexes and genders, I was holding tight to my belief, which I wish were true, that my desire is oblivious to gender lines. Also, I really didn't want to do the hard work of making two lists and trying to figure out the places where my tangents of desire merge and dissipate based on slippery and unnamable gender distinctions. So when I completed my list and sent it off, I thought (falsely) that was the end of that.

Resting in bed a few days later, in the company of a newly discovered lover, I am whacked with a dull thud of realization. Slowly, reluctantly, but with a certainty I trust, I realize there is a definite difference in the list I would make for a man and for a woman. It is absolutely necessary that a woman I adore be a feminist who is active, engaged, and critically enraged. Yet this criteria does not hold true when it comes to what I look for in a sweetheart who is a man. What is this about?

In an attempt to dismiss my uncomfortable realization as a matter of semantics, I revisit my original list. I am eager to find evidence there of a sort of "feminist essence," to prove to myself that I desired the spirit, if not the name, of feminism all along. And I do find some reassurance, for my list contains items that I deem necessary components of feminism: "a person who has a commitment to laughter, reflection, challenge, and work; a person who is brave enough to respectfully challenge all that is ridiculous—including themselves and me." And, a person "who holds a deep felt responsibility for the effects of one's life and a knowledge that the world is unbelievably messed up in most every way, yet retains a willingness to struggle for beauty."

But the reassurance I find in these words, does little to ease my discomfort. Although these criteria may be necessary to feminism, they are insufficient. Feminism is absent from the list I have constructed, yet it would not have been if I had imagined my sweetheart as a woman. And then a thud of further questions: what does it mean to be a feminist? How much is feminism a part of what I desire? What am I assuming and expecting about feminism and gender? Oh, my body and mind resist the hard work of these unanswerable yet crucial

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questions. And I think to myself, this couldn't have been what Anne had in mind when she inspired me to write this list.

In the next few days I do a lot of walking, and my thoughts drift to these questions. If a "feminist essence" were to be found in my list, it would include such things as: a person who engages with all that is personal as informed by and forming a larger sociopolitical reality; a person who challenges all that is known and imagined for stains of oppression; a person who makes them self vulnerable to critique, challenge, and transformation; a person who takes risks and asks difficult questions; a person who does the hard practical work of impacting change, knowing it will never be "right"; a person who knows there is no one story to be told; a person who devotes their life to unraveling the gendered contradictions of this world and how they intersect with race, class, sexuality, and all other criteria used to divide people; and a person who works to relinquish power over. But in my pursuit to be gender neutral, these things were absent from my list.

As I walk, I wonder, does the fact that I include "feminist" in my criteria for women and not for men suggest that I do not expect men to be feminists? At what level do I not expect engagement? Is it at the level of discourse, or social networking, or is it at the level of the principles and problematics of feminism? Does this mean that I accept more crap from men than I do from women? Or just crap of a different variety? Do I expect only women to be feminists? If this is so, we are all in trouble. What do I expect the relationship between men and feminism to be? Thinking over these questions, it seems to me that I do not expect the men in my life to take on the fights of feminism, though I am grateful when they do. Yet I expect and demand no less from women. This realization does not rest well.

Why is this simple, now obvious, realization so unsettling to me? Perhaps because it demands introspection about what I tolerate, facilitate, and perpetuate in my intimate relations with men. It inspires me to examine the different ways I interact with, and desire, men and women. It challenges me to engage with the conversations I avoid, and to state the concerns I have left unsaid with the men that I love. It reeks of my own self-compromise and makes me flush at how intimate the demands of feminist politics are, and how much work I have yet to do.

Tonight, I sent Anne an amendment to my previous letter. I included the word "feminist" to my list of paradoxical criteria for what I look for in a sweetheart. Now, I will walk a little more and think about the uncertain nature, problematics and possible benefits of making lists. And as I reach my home and greet my sweet lover, perhaps I will engage in the hard vulnerable work of talking with him about feminism.

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## References

Difranco, Ani. "Asking Too Much." *Not A Pretty Girl*. Buffalo: Righteous Babe Productions, 1992.

