this reciprocal loving can one truly feel what submission means, but also what divine might means. The Sufi quest of annihilation of the human self in the divine self is thus conceived by Rabi’a as the annihilation of human love in the perfect divine love.

I have loved you with two loves
a selfish love and love that is
worthy of You.
As for the selfish love, I occupy
myself therein with remembrance of
You to the exclusion of all others
As for that which is worthy of You
therein You raise the veil that I
may see You
Yet there is no praise to me in
this or that
Because all praise is with You.
(Nurbaksh 74)

Thus, unlike another major Sufi of the time, al-Hallaj, who, in the moment of self-annihilation with God’s essence, exclaimed: “I am with Truth!” a phrase that horrified ordinary Muslims and led to his punishment by death for espousing shirk (idolatry), Rabi’a, aware of the power of spiritual submission, humbly created a distance between her self and the divine self. So even though the self-annihilation was the final goal, Rabi’a and her followers consciously fell short of achieving it, preferring instead a continuous yearning that could never come to an end. A late ninth-century Sufi woman, Umm Ayman, explains:

Since my ultimate return is to You, how should I not always aspire to be with You? As I never saw any good from other than You, how should I not love You?
Since it is you who have set yearning with me, How should I not yearn for You. (Nurbaksh 90)

The process, then, is never to be completed, even though its aim is clearly defined. But achieving the aim in explicit terms would mean repeat-
ing al-Hallaj’s trap of self-glorification and overcoming the necessary submission. Without spiritual submission there is no spiritual strength. Without spiritual strength, there is no awareness of God’s glory. Thus, Rabi’a and her followers consciously created a meditative paradox, so as to insure that the tension between power and weakness, between submission and excellence, never subside and so did not cause self-destruction before the deserved self-annihilation. So whether wives, mothers, or ascetics, Sufi women opted to nurture spiritual strength with submissiveness, and submissiveness with strength. A Sufi woman of the late nine century aptly illustrated the reasons for keeping the tension alive:

Do not wonder at those [men] slain
In the dust at the Beloved’s door
Marvel rather at those [women]
who can survive
with their soul intact when opening the door.
(Nurbaksh 116)

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LYN LIFSHIN

When I Still Rode Horses

I couldn’t see I was fat and wouldn’t be asked to dance. By the time leaves went blood, before frost bloomed in the grey barnwood, doors, and the horses’ breath on skin warmed like breath of another body too close not to be part of my own. I felt blood pulse before I felt my own juice spilling onto pale cotton, or could imagine straddling a shape like and not like my own. It was as if something in me was pressed so into me I could feel the Morse code warning, “escape,” was sucked into some thing bigger than I was by flesh that like my mother’s belly was a scout sent out ahead, letting me know

Lyn Lifshin’s poetry appears earlier in this volume.