

Lady Pinball



a selection of poems
by Rochelle Ratner

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Biography & Acknowledgements



Rochelle Ratner's first volume of poetry, *A Birthday of Waters*, was published in 1971, shortly after her 21st birthday. To date she has published sixteen books and chapbooks of poetry, most recently *House & Home* (Marsh Hawk Press, 2003). Other books include a translation of the Belgian Surrealist poet Paul Colinet, two novels, and one book of criticism. The internet magazine, *Sugar Mule* (www.sugarmule.com) recently devoted a full issue to her writing.

During 1989-1990 she served as ghostwriter for three psychiatry books published by The PIA Press — on Manic Depression, Borderline Personality Disorder, and Co-Dependency. Working on these books, concerned with the problems which survivors of psychological and/or sexual abuse face when they enter into adult love relationships, offered new insights into the characters available to her fiction. Her second novel, *The Lion's Share*, is the story of a woman who, having been sexually molested as a ten-year-old, becomes involved in her first healthy relationship with a man at the age of thirty-four. Novels currently in progress examine other aspects of problematic personalities. And, in terms of what some would consider "problematic" personalities, a large thrust of her work over the past decade has been researching and editing the anthology *Bearing Life: Women's Writing on Childlessness*.

She's Executive Editor of *The American Book Review*, and reviews regularly for *Library Journal* and other publications. From 1995-2001 she served on the National Book Critic Circle's board of directors.

More information, and links to her other work on the Internet, can be found at her website: www.rochelleratner.com.

Some of these poems previously appeared in the following magazines and e-zines: *Bullhead*, *Pares Cum Paribus*, *Poetry Now*, *RealPoetik*, *TMP Irregular* and *Telephone*.

•

poor poor ron
only got one arm
and what with
that crutch
he's leaning on
bet he couldn't
brace himself
to play

but that don't
matter
cause we had
a fight,
at lunch just now
we hardly spoke
so with three blocks
walk to the office
he'd try anything
to get out
gracefully

hardly knows
what he started
giving me a quarter
to try my luck
ten minutes later
I'm begging him
stay with me
I might be afraid
alone here

little do I know
the next time
I try to pull
my little girl act
he'll smile
saying
I saw you
play pinball
I know how
strong you are—

poor poor ron
making me into
a cripple.

•

At no other time am I in control
At no other time do I lose myself

flipping those sides, flicking those wrists
I tighten my grip, honey
Watch it

hearing them bells go off
going off in my head
watching those lights in my eyes
watching that score mount

double or nothing
ace of spades, ten of hearts
knock down the target
and it bounces back up
with the next ball

back off and aim
trying to keep this one up there
where even the bumpers score
where the stakes are higher

two at a time
counting on my fingers
one ball down, four to go
Just one more quarter.

•

Are you still that kid
in Philadelphia
 playing that pinball
 waiting for that bus

Are you still the little girl
who spoke to him
 without the sense to give
 phony name and number

He said he was nineteen
Must have been thirty
 Tell me do you still
 not think he'll call you

Didn't you learn that night
right in front of your parents
 so long later
 you don't remember his name

He taught you how to kiss
that night. They had machines
 in every bus station
 from here to Florida.

 You could have gone there, yes,
 you could have followed him.

•

Take my pick of machines
move from one to another
trying to find the one
that fits my fingers

& it's always the one
I played last
that I'll remember

always the one I was at
when my money ran out

The only woman there, I take my pick.

•

Go away, little boy
I don't want to play with you.

Always hanging at the side
of my machine
tapping coin after coin.

I don't want your money.
Can't you see there's an energy going
I don't want to break

if I put my hands at my sides
for just a moment
without these flipper buttons
holding them
I might fall apart.

Go on home to mamma,
she's calling you.

Go find some other mamma
some other girl to play your game.
Half my size and half my weight,
don't keep staring that way.

•

Mister,
standing behind me
I know you just wanted
to get warm

tho with what you paid
for that bottle
you could have played
six games.

So drink it up
get drunk on my action
& when the girl goes out
tell her to take care.

If anybody
talks to her
you say come tell you
on account of you need
someone to protect

& she's one
of the only people
doesn't throw you out.
Just shut your eyes

it won't ever
dawn on you
that her old man
can match you
drink for drink.

Bottoms up,
watch that machine go,
that little silver ball
moving all alone.

•

Don't believe a word I say—

I deny the girl in me
who plays games

I'm not really tough

Hal, don't believe me
when I say I don't want
to play a game or two
in the bar

It's just that I
have to live next door,
don't want the men
who hang out there to get
the wrong impression—

No.

(the man cleaning up)

Hey, newspaper boy
I thought maybe
tonight
you weren't coming

who says
they don't teach
you kids
to get ahead

coming in
with all that
change
in your pockets

won a free one
just now
didn't you?
boy move your feet

I wanna sweep there
yeah, I'm gonna buy
one of your papers
tomorrow.

(old Gus's monologue)

I've been reading a book
about how to make friends
and it says to think
of the people you know

so I thought about
not seeing you lately

I notice there's a crease
in the back of your shirt
—it looks like the straight jacket
they had me in once
when I wanted to kill someone

After you finish with that ball
come and look at this turtle
my boss found

he eats lettuce, so we put some
in the box with him

he's twelve years old,
they say some turtles live
to be a hundred

After work I buy
a loaf of bread
then go sit in the park
and feed the pigeons

animals appreciate
what you do for them
not like people

a dog followed me home once,
in two days he learned
to sit and beg

waited outside the bathroom door
whining cause he thought
I'd deserted him

I took him to the park
and a kid asked me for him
so I let her have him

can't take him back to the bowery
or they'd take him away from me

can't go back to the bowery.

•

My mother's just
trying
to relate

tells me
her sister Nettie
was the only woman
she ever knew
who liked pinball

liked all kinds
of gambling,
her husband
Sam was so
furious.

I don't know
who this aunt was

she died
when I was five
I just remember her
skinny and crabby

never picture her
sneaking out,
if I could I'd
love her.

(ps)

In the city
won't do anything
but act the lady

but she goes
to the country
once a year

says
it's so the kid
can see sheep and
cows and rabbits

but the little girl
knew even then:

mother
liked the machine
in the diner
up the road

and well, it's okay
where nobody knows her.

•

Thinking about stories
of her mother's friend
who kept one chair
in her livingroom
covered with a blanket

how every time
she lost her temper
she would take a knife
and slash that chair

some times she had to slash
and slash again

how it took her mother years
to learn about it
and months after that
to accept what she'd seen

thinking back on how
even as a child
she understood

how she knows exactly
what the feeling is
how it comes without warning
some nights when she takes hold
of the machine.

•

She watches
the little Chinese boy
leaving the restaurant

he smiles up
at the man
holding the door
for him

'Let's go
to the game room
across the street.
I'm into games.'

The man tosses
his head back.
'Aha, now I know why
you wanted to come here.'

The boy runs back
to the table
for his gloves

the man offers
to hold them
while he plays
the games

he lets the door
swing closed behind
the boy's shoulder
like a gentle arm.
She watches.

the father

My son Jed
he was playing
in this little
Long Island club

and just as he
was about to set
the record score
on that machine

I said son
you better
come on home
we've got a ride
back to the city

he had just
one ball
left to play
and I wouldn't
let him

it was either
leave right then
or be stranded
someplace like Rose Point
Long Island

near as broke
my heart
but I said son
you get a move on

and he
just about to break
the all time high score,
just about fit to kill me.

Jed

"Sam says
there's this club
he knows about

it costs maybe
two dollars
to get in
and then
the games are like
fifty cents each

but he says
if you break
the high score
then there's this
naked lady
who comes out
from behind the machine

I don't know
maybe she kisses you
and goes back in

the high score
must be jacked up
so it's really high
and mostly she gets paid
to just sit there."

•

"I don't
understand

at home
he clunks around
at three and four
a.m.

kicks in
his bedroom door
if his hands
are full

where does that
patience
come from

that he nudges
the machine
so gently

where does it go?"

•

a 'birthday present'
from old Gus

a quarter

to add to
the Canadian one
I accidentally put
in the machine

'see that
you were lucky
to get it back

it's valuable,
you take it to
a coin collector,
bet he'll give you 27
cents for it.'

Gus

You know why
I like it
when you come in?
It's the way you
concentrate

other people
all they care about
is winning

a guy came in
the other day,
played that machine
over there

first time he ever
saw it

racked up 3 sevens
then 3 barrels,
four free games
then went out saying
the flippers stink

I said don't come back,
I told him.

for Susan

She wants to dye
her hair red

wants a fast
machine to match
all that energy
she's feeling back
in New York

plays fireball
cause it looks
like her

learns it isn't
quick or noisy

the sort of machine
that makes you pace
even your plunger
shots

that disc
in the center
spins 95 rpm
yet a ball trapped
there barely moves

last chance
to think things over
before it goes
somewhat crazy

sometimes two
sometimes three balls
has to knock one
down to play
the other

no sense of why
no sense of where
she's too wound up
even to question—

maybe now she knows
how her friends feel.

•

It's only a game when you say
you want to see me lose
my temper

but it's more than a game
when I shriek I don't
know how

Gus,
stay and talk to me,
tell me all the things
I'm doing wrong

tell me to push that machine
with the heel of my hand,
say that's why they put
flippers on the sides

shout NOW when my reflexes
want to do something else

make me so damn mad
I'll cuss and stamp my feet
this body don't have what it takes
oh please Gus it's Christmas.

•

Ain't no chicken,
you can't put in
a quarter
& make me dance
like that bird
over there

hands ain't feathers,
when they rub against
those flippers
just you feel
their force

now don't you get
all cuddly,
I can still peck
yes peck
your eyes out

you can't just
give me food
& make me do it
right

man, I tell you
this is serious,
ain't no cock
& doodler.

•

Baseball pinball
lady's baseball
barely movin' out there
fieldin' every trick
they got

fastball screwball
sinkers sliders
just one player
but man watch for
those curves

hit em single
score em double
a triple play that's
deep in every
catch

swing it easy
left side right side
this is one field
they made just
your size

little south paw
bunt it up there
look at her go
she's mommy's big
foul ball.

•

"Blonde white chic
just don't understand
how we Spanish
operate

here I am playing
three other guys
and winning

while she stands
there saying
*it's twenty-five
after two*

*you have to
get back to work*

I tell her
again and again
that clock's fast:
she won't listen

then to top it off
she starts to push
my son out
the door

I have to go
bring him back,
lift him up
and show him
the ball

*get back to work
get back to work
louder and louder
then, softly,
how'd you get
that free game*

wasn't even watching."

•

Just come from the meeting
we've been talking, discussing
the thoughts all tied up
in our heads

got a sick cat in the box here
and the vet's just gonna make
matters worse

Follow that
car

It's got a Captain Fantastic
blue, red, and gold
pinball machine
in the back

it's all dismembered now
but you know that's not
the way it'll stay

We're going where it goes

Anywhere
I don't care,
got to follow until
it's all patched up together

We at least got to see
to that.

the night owl

"I said hello. I asked
if we could play.

You thought I was
just another kid.
I play alone
usually.

I called your name, Rochelle.
I thought you heard me.

I've been in your house.
I spilled drinks on your floor.
You gave me presents.

I play alone. I'm confused.
I tell my father.

I don't want to play.
I'm scared
of the Night Owl.
It's dark in there
where he's supposed to see.

Nights when I was asleep
you tiptoed through my room.
You cared about me then.
I still remember — Love, Jody."

•

Don't close up yet
I don't want to leave

haven't seen my wife in so long
I'm going crazy

only way I know my wife
is by her belly

you ever see a woman
& she shows you her belly

got a lot of scars there
you tell her Gus still loves her

tell her I want to be buried
in Scarboro New York

upstate New York
don't want to funeral

nothing.

mills tavern

The lady in silver
moves right up
near that mike

keeps her eyes
glued to those musicians
smiling do you see
what you like

Robert's playing
Spencer's just
sharing his seat,
guy at the next table
taps out a bongo beat

Two old drunks
in the corner
rest their heads
down on the red
plastic table cloths

they carry bottles
wash glasses for beer

sleep here

And at the back
by the phone and by
the door
see that lit up box
I came in here for

Put a quarter in
it slides you right back
twenty-five —
talk to me baby
let me know this world's
alive

I got those pinball blues,
got those Bleecker St.
tired feet
and worn down shoes.
Got those pinball blues.