MEMORIES HAVE TONGUE


THE TOUCHSTONE


THE WORK OF OUR HANDS


by Deborah Jurdevic

Frost has told us that many of his poems reveal his lover’s quarrel with nature, and Yeats has warned that a quarrel with the self yields poetry; a quarrel with others, rhetoric. For Canadian women writing poetry at the end of this century, ‘quarrel’, in one form or another, is certain.

Afua Cooper in Memories Have Tongue, her latest volume of poetry, quarrels with a racist patriarchal social structure as she has found it in Jamaica, as she finds it in Toronto. She moves back and forth in this volume between rhetoric (prose pieces unabashedly didactic: her Preface, “500 Years of Discovery,” “The Rich Have Colonised the Trees,” “Lavendar,” “How to Hold Your Man”) and a loosely structured poetry of lamentation and celebration. Her poem “Roots and Branches” is both of these. She begins with a short paragraph of Jan Carew’s in which Carew observes that “to rob people or countries of their name is to set in motion a psychic disturbance that can, in turn, create a permanent crisis of identity,” and a second paragraph by Maxine Tynes who draws her identity, she says, from the entire continent of Africa. Cooper names, in her poem, stanza by stanza, grandmother, great-grandmother, grandfather, redeeming them and giving them a context in poetry, and reaching out to others in her own community of poets and writers as she does so.

Memories Have Tongue serves the need for a revisionist history in North America, particularly a history told by black women; it reclaims wordlessness with language.

Like Cooper, Robyn Sarah, a Montreal poet, mixes prose and poetry in her new volume, The Touchstone: Poems New and Selected. The prose pieces—“Pardon Me,” “Study in Latex Semi-Gloss,” “Anyone Skating on that Middle Ground,” “De-tour,” “To Fill a Life”—provide a still life, fleshed out and fixed against the sparer rhythms of the poems. And through both prose and poetry runs a lité-motif of the quarrel—in Sarah’s work, much internalized. Her quarrel, like Frost’s, is a lover’s quarrel, with time and circumstance, and particularly with a male partner who turns up, a counter-point figure throughout the volume.

Many of these poems trace the decline of an initial love relationship. In “Mutu-al,” a pure, clear imagist poem, Sarah shows us the quality of what is lost.

The window is what the flowers need: the flowers are what the window needs.

A woman feels this, does not know it, places the flowers there, so. Raises the sash.

But it asks a man to see it.

“Mutual” is echoed in the prose piece, “Anyone Skating on that Middle Ground.” Two lovers are caught in unsatisfactory time. The woman begins to get the message first, leaves the house for the man who wakes up to find the bare images, which spoke balance in the love poem, altered in prose to speak of leftovers and escape: “the coffee is still warm. The window is what the flowers need. Any worthwhile quarrel has at least two sides, and Sarah is saved from the didactic by the vitality and faithfulness with which she renders the other point of view. Her quarrel with herself, her time and circumstance, occasionally disappears entirely in poems of pure celebration, like “Cat’s Cradle.” Rhythmic and incantatory, this poem recognizes its source of power in women who make of their shared time and language a verbal cat’s cradle from “sprung yarn [which] rolls down loose/from the spool of the moon.” Their communion together alters and revalues “ordinary” time: “the kettle boils dry and over” and they sing as they spin.

Sharon H. Nelson’s quarrel in The Work of Our Hands is with theorists, those who reduce to abstractions the body; it is a poised, elegant, powerful book of poems, very beautiful. There seems no subject she cannot tackle.

The opening poem, “Gross National Product,” is a poem about rape; the pun in the title does nothing to lessen the seriousness of her observations. The real villains of this piece, in addition to the nameless...
rapist, are those who make a profit from
an entertainment industry that promotes
violence and those who treat the rape
victims as though they were “indistinguishable from one another/as eggs in a
tray.” To paraphrase the poem in this way
is of course to do it an injustice. Nelson’s
argument is complex and runs through all
the pieces in the volume. She argues for
the truth of the body and she argues as a
poet would, in a language sprung free by
the power of her voice from mundane
connotations: section four of “Gross Na-
tional Product” concludes,

They may have seen
images on the screen,
images that fixate the mind,
that revolve until
they are focused and distilled.

We live in fear
and with reason.

Violent images
breed.

The tight, next-to-last couplet is closed,
locked in; the final two lines—three bare
words which seem unfinished, and are—
leave the reader with a clear understand-
ing on the on-going nature of the thing.

In “Heresy, a progress report,” Nelson
imagines an unholy collusion between
science and the church and notes that
although men recant, women burn. In
“Premenstrual Syndrome” she tells a truth
all women have always known. In poem
after poem she rights the wrongs of a
shabby world, lighting it with language.
Perhaps the loveliest and the most daring
of the poems in the volume is “Making
Waves:” “the sensuousness of words/is
the only death by drowning/poets know,”
she begins, and makes out of a metaphor
uniting water and body a poem with which
to caress a lover.

In the final section of The Work of Our
Hands, Nelson quarrels most audibly with
the theorists: theologians, engineers and
architects, cooks who work by recipe. It is
so easy, she writes

to confuse
science and engineering,
enGINEERING and building,
when words are not used with preci-
sion,

when knowing in general
is supposed
to be knowing enough.

And in the final section of “Recipes and
Algorithms” she concludes that even the
precise language of poets born of the body
fails before the body itself.

Language
fails us;

we grasp
each other’s
hands
hands untroubled by connotation,
unburdened by double meanings,
the multiple meanings of tongues
hands which have learned nothing
from assimilation
of restraint, politeness, distancing
unbound by recipes,
unmistakable in meaning.

These are wonderful poems.

UN MAL INVISIBLE:
L’ISOLEMENT SOCIAL DES
FEMMES

N. Guberman, J. Leblanc, F. David et J.
Belleau (L’R des Centres de Femmes
du Québec). Montréal: Les éditions du

par Sylvie B. Côté

Il est rare qu’un ouvrage présente avec
autant de simplicité les complexités d’un
problème trop souvent qualifié de banal,
donc de peu d’intérêt, soit la solitude des
femmes. Et pourtant, c’est ce que les
auteurs d’Un mal invisible ont réussi à
faire: elles mettent en évidence l’ampleur
de la solitude qui touche plus particulièremment les femmes et qui
contribute, par ailleurs, à leur isolement
social.

Dans un premier temps, les auteurs
font le point sur la terminologie qu’elles
emploient, soit les notions d’isolement
développées par le sociologue Robert
Weiss. Pour lui, il y a deux types
d’isolement, émotionnel et social, et
chacun mène à la solitude. Le premier
provient d’une carence de liens affectifs,
le second, du manque d’un réseau social.
Les auteurs expliquent ensuite les causes
principales de l’isolement en mettant
l’accent sur celui des femmes en
particulier. Elles en infèrent que cet
isolement est directement lié à la condi-
tion spécifique des femmes, au fait qu’elles
sont totalement ou partiellement
responsables des enfants, d’autres
personnes dépendantes, du travail
domestique. En d’autres mots, trop d’entre
elles, quelle que soit leur place dans la
société, n’ont pas d’identité propre.
Les auteurs poursuivent en laissant la
parole aux femmes qui vivent cet