

Old Woman, “bearer of keys to unknown doorways”

By Shelagh Wilkinson

Feminism is, after all, a revolution. It has stormed the bastille of our literature as well as other fortresses in our society. It is upsetting the tradition, the patterns, the literary canon. It has changed what is being written about, and how, and by whom.

— Lorna Crozier ¹

When I read this article I found myself nodding my head in agreement. I wanted to tell Lorna Crozier that she is speaking for me, especially about storytelling, a magical act and dear to the heart of many women. One of the greatest revolutionary acts that has taken place in Canadian literature in the past two decades is the honesty of the writing that I now read about myself — an older woman — in the novels, in the poetry — in the critical articles by women. And now, (who could ever have imagined it) we can even see ourselves in a movie, *The Company of Strangers*. And this is not just some homemade video affair. It's a serious film, a box-office success, a movie that people actually line up to see. And the stars are a group of old women who don't even seem to be acting, they gossip and grumble — they laugh and cry — about the same things as we do. Who would have believed that was possible back in the sixties — or even in the seventies?

We are now witnessing the first wave of post-menopausal women who, as a generation, have choices to make and a new life to live. As feminist research shows, these women “are often endowed with new energy and vitality, but society perceives them as declining and almost obsolete.”² In literature old women have rarely been portrayed as the resourceful, productive, vital, angry and joyful women

many of us are. As readers we remember only too well that the tri-partite symbol of womanhood: the virgin, the madonna/whore, and the hag has haunted us throughout our experience of the canon. The texts we read as students consistently showed us old women who were frigid spinsters, rapacious, litigious widows, or evil stepmothers. Alongside these depictions of women we found the virgin and the madonna/whore, those archetypes that still fall under the control of the patriarchy whenever they occur in traditional literature. It is only the hag that rides free. And this is why she is feared, ostracized, tortured and murdered. Or worse, she is deformed into a stereotype — the more easily to recognize and discount her. But the old woman, the crone, is that aspect of womanhood that is no longer controlled; she is the self that flies free:

*Here I go, flying
high, disguised as
a fairy godmother
whirling and twirling
my old-age wand;
just watch me —
I'm about to turn
a million glittering
cartwheels in milky
outer skies...³*

Miriam Waddington's poetry defies the cult of youth and its sexist bias that is rooted deeply in Western Society (a root which surfaces constantly on television screens, in advertising campaigns and in magazines). We must look to the women writers if we want to read those fictions about ourselves that give us new symbols — new paradigms — new stories to live into.

Three Yukon women, each one an Elder in her tribe, show us how central storytelling is in their lives. In *Life Lived Like a*

Story (University of Nebraska Press, 1990) we learn that the native women have much to teach us about the centrality of storytelling and about the empowerment women experience when they share their stories with each other. As these women comment on their current lives, they frame their interpretation within chronicles and mythologies of high and ancient ceremony — yet their stories are grounded in a local idiom that never fails to include the mundane, everyday experience that is often the vital, energizing core of the story being told. Again and again it is the power of the matrilineal line (woman as storyteller) that is overwhelming. And in a similar way these women know that the narrative process is the right vehicle for passing on knowledge that would otherwise be lost. There is a sense of moral surety in these tales, a base of shared, known, truths that enrich and ground their lives and the lives of the group. When Angela Sidney, born around the turn of the century, is asked about her life she replies: “Well, I've tried to live my life right, just like a story.”

Living right, and telling stories right, share the same moral base. As we read their stories these women of the Yukon teach us how important it is for us to listen — and share with each other — the stories that women writers are passing on to us. Their tradition is one that we should recognize and rejoice in. Too often we believe the media hype about our uselessness as we grow old, and because our bodies no longer conform to culturally accepted standards, we consider ourselves ugly and are silenced.

Instead we must read the story of Hagar Shipley — the great protagonist of *The Stone Angel* (1964) — and let Margaret Laurence unfold for us the rage, bitterness and frustration that this old woman feels at ninety as she is being carefully directed

into a retirement home. And we share with Hagar the empowerment she feels when she escapes and directs her life again, even for a few short hours. It is important to recognize that it isn't only the story that Hagar tells that vindicates us, it is the very structure of Laurence's novel that is vital for our vision of ourselves. The story is told from Hagar's vantage point of great age and it is told as a recollection of her life. The most distant facts are crystal clear now and, as Hagar sifts them through the wisdom she has gained as a very old woman, she is able to give them a new perspective, a new meaning for herself (and following her process we learn to put together the jigsaw of our own lives with a little more clarity and compassion). This protagonist also gives us permission to be feisty and irreverent; one aspect of Hagar's great story is caught by another woman in these lines:

*When I am an old woman I shall wear
purple
With a red hat which doesn't go, and
doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on
brandy and summer gloves...
And pick flowers in other people's
gardens
And learn to spit.⁴*

Jenny Joseph's poem captures the rebellion and the sense of autonomy that Hagar begins to experience at the very end of her life and it is reminiscent of the fiery young girl who dared to defy her father. We applaud such irreverence. But this is not the most compelling aspect of Hagar's story. It is her great gift of remembering that is valuable and empowering for the reader. By juxtaposing her responses to life — her neglect, her cruelty, her caring and her kindness — with her present response to approaching death, Laurence is able to show us how important it is to remember well. After menopause we often complain that our memory is letting us down; as we get older many of us fret about the inability to remember — but the things we demand that our mind hold onto are often the very clutter that fragments us. What we need most, during these years, is the ability to centre the self and develop the inner strengths that a long life can provide. Hagar's story shows us this aspect of our lives.

This gift of memory is not to be disparaged and it is Mary Meigs who best re-

minds us of that:

As a woman of seventy-one, I have lived the slow process of deprivation which has spread over our earth, the gradual reduction of all the elements essential to life: arable land, forests, hundreds of species of animals and birds, pure water, and, slowly but surely, the air we breathe. At the same time, I have seen us slowly deprived of hope — which is reduced, until we gasp for hope, as we gasp in our polluted air. As women, though, I believe we have to recognize that our power does not lie in hope (we can learn to live without it), but in our invincible power to remember and to warn.⁵

We do indeed have an incredible collective memory, a memory that encompasses silencing and, at certain historical points, annihilation. Indeed it is not a memory on which to nurture hope, but in the very act of re-membering our global and historical disempowerment does lie the seed of hope.

Virginia Woolf has told us that as women who have been 'locked out' of the structures of power we have never found ourselves on that slide into corruption which has been an incipient feature of masculinity. It is not because of some innate sense of piety that woman has been 'good' but rather because she has been trained into goodness, because she has been denied the opportunity of seeking power, of accumulating public honour and great wealth. She has, by default, missed the corrupting influences that have become the accepted way to achieve success in society at large. And now, because the planet is in such dire straits, we find ourselves searching around for other sources of inspiration and leadership. It should come as no surprise to us that in old age many women have those gifts. They are powerful and wise in ways other than those that are usually valorized in Western society. It is here that the culture has a tremendous resource; a resource that is rarely recognized and never tapped. When Mary Meigs speaks of memory she also names the 'fragility and the power' of memory and she names the 'byproduct of genocide' as 'memorycide.' This is the byproduct we must cultivate to the benefit of us all. Our collective memory will serve us well and provide for us the raised consciousness that is the most basic and

necessary tool if we want to divert the fall into chaos that the environment is already experiencing.

*Eventually, the body
must admit its limitations...
But strength grows in each step
towards the dark horizon*

*She learns laughter, vows ecstasy,
gathers pebbles, shells, grass,
the invincibility of earth;
and finally, wholly filled,
bursts forth again — a child
running green upon the streets,*

*in her a woman
breathing a greener grace.⁶*

And this ability to gather strength, to change a pattern of life, 'to run green upon the streets' even after old age begins, is recorded for us in *The Book of Eve* (1975) by Constance Beresford-Howe. Eva is a comic hero who escapes the 'Eden of marriage' the day her old age pension cheque arrives — she puts on her sneakers, pockets the cheque and is gone! Naturally, as an old woman without spousal support, what she escapes into is a life of extreme poverty in which sustenance often comes from grubbing in garbage pails. But emotionally and psychologically, the quality of Eva's life improves dramatically. As the victim of marital rape, her own sexuality has been nullified; after her escape she indulges her fantasies and allows her own sexual needs to be answered. By imagining this Eve into life, Beresford-Howe gives to older women facts about the sexual politics governing their lives, facts that few of us have analyzed before. Although the narrative suggests possibilities that seem bizarre — they are also seductive to many of us. The enormous quantity of mail that Beresford-Howe received from Canadian women after she had published this novel suggests the power of art to articulate life.⁷

And Toni Morrison in *Sula* (1973) writes for us another astonishing Eva — a woman who does not escape her family but rather is the life-force that sustains the family from annihilation. Eva is the matriarch who drives the story; she is an energy that wills the people around her to survive. Her sacrifices include allowing, and even helping, her own children to die so that the others who have a chance at survival might flourish. This Eva encompasses the

rage, the pain — the tragic knowledge — of a Lear. (And yet she is a poor woman who runs a boarding house for derelicts).

In a brilliant analysis of this book two women approach the text from their own cultural background: one is a black Afro-American, the other is a white American of Greek ancestry. Their critique of this portrait of the old Black woman — Eva — demonstrates how such a character reveals the spiritual/political significance of the old black woman for all women. As a foremother her stories ensure the survival of all of us — even that of white women. We need to hear what these critics say:

*Black feminism does not have to fight against the denigration of older women within Black culture the way that white feminism must, although in the larger U.S. community, old women of any ethnic background are lumped into negative categories. Age within Black culture, then, is not so much a social issue as it is a mythic and political issue.... Within her own culture, Morrison does not have to establish the worth of the old woman; that worth is a priori.*⁸

ble standard in the chronicle of aging. For a man, the signs of great age, the wrinkles, the lines, the heavy paunch suggest character, fortitude. They indicate a maturity and celebrate his engagement with life. For a woman they signal obsolescence. We are all aware that in Western society old women should hide themselves, ashamed that we no longer fit the mold of perfection that our society demands. Miriam Waddington does not flinch in telling us that:

*Old women
should live like worms
under the earth,
they should come out
only after a good rain*¹⁰

But old women who use their age to tap into sources of their own creativity remain vital and visible. They are like beacons showing us all new stories and new symbols to live into. A rare example of this self-creation into old age is given to us by Adele Wiseman in a book celebrating the life of her mother, Chaika Wiseman, *Old Woman at Play* (1978). Wiseman writes this book when her mother is eighty-two, tracing her life and

her work as a maker of fantastical dolls — thousands of doll couples who generate their own stories and myths. Wiseman proposes that

*what the artist creates is consciousness... [an] awareness of our situation, which enlarges creation and ourselves. This sense of enlargement, of augmented power, helps us, even briefly, to imagine that we may somehow become 'better'.*¹¹

Contemplating Chaika Wiseman's art, most aptly through her daughter's reconstruction of her mother as artist, we realize that the joy of this old woman's play could so easily have been lost. (Much as Mary Klassen's paintings would have been lost without the book written by her son, John Unrau, also in celebration of his mother's life as an artist.) So much of women's history and creativity has been expressed in unpublished material, in letters and diaries, or in lace, embroidery, tapestry, quilts, dolls and other 'trivia.' In *Old Woman at Play*, Wiseman demystifies and democratizes the creative process. In dislodging art from the concept of 'fine art,' she disrupts the male-defined

"Being an elder, I think, is a great honour."

— Matilda Lewis, P.E.I. weaver

This is what writers like Toni Morrison teach us: by reading the stories of native women and Black women, all elders of their tribe, we gain new insight into the aging process. The Western stereotypes that we have lived into are laid bare for what they are... useless, worn-out, lifeless things that never did have any validity. But they have been perpetuated because they served a patriarchy very well. An old woman from Prince Edward Island tells us:

*I think 'old' should take on a quality of respect. Why not change the word to 'elders' and emphasize the important role that we play? In fact, I'm holding out for being recognized as an elder.... Being an elder, I think, is a great honour.*⁹

Men often gain great honour as they grow older but there is a dou-



categories permanently. While the novelists and poets are bringing the total female experience into being — portraying us as old (and sexy) — Wiseman parallels the process by demonstrating that a 'disposable craft,' an 'old woman's play,' is a creative response to life and, as such, it is an important artistic statement that must be heard — especially by women.

Dorothy Livevsay has been writing poetry for fifty years and more. She has told us about the pain, frustration and anger that she feels when her aching body will no longer respond to the uninhibited call of the spirit and the flesh:

*My body haunts me
thieves in on me at night
shattering sleep
with nameless pointless pains...*

And every night

*my fingers search the wound, the old
spine curvature, the creaking
knees...
but tongues, the darting tongues
lick elsewhere, fan desire
until all yesterdays are gulfed
in freezing fire.*¹²

And it is important that our writers be honest about aging; anger, pain and sexual desire are essential aspects of this process and cannot be ignored. With the same honesty Livesay recalls many stages of her life in her poems. She sees herself as a young wife and mother — sometimes a reluctant mother and a depressed, guilt ridden wife. But she never balks at telling her life the way it is, the way our own lives are. And she is also aware of the great line of women who wrote before her and of the immense strength that she has gained from these foremothers. In an poem about "The Three Emily's" (Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson, and Emily Carr) she reminds us that these women did not have the encumbrance, or the joy, of small children. Although this makes a great difference in their lives and hers — all four share the urge to write, to paint, to create:

*And still they cry to me...
I born to hear their inner storm
Of separate man in woman's form,
I yet possess another kingdom, barred
To them, these three, this Emily.
I move as mother in a frame,
My arteries
Flow the immemorial way
Towards the child, the man;
And only for a brief span
Am I an Emily on mountain snows
And one of these...*¹³

This aspect of memory — bringing into perspective the long line of history that stretches across cultures — is one that has been neglected until very recently. Only now because of feminist scholarship are women retrieving their cultural memory.

Paule Marshall in an article "From the Poets in the Kitchen," explains the advantages of being a girl and growing up listening to the talk of the older women around the kitchen table: "Common speech and the plain, workaday words that make it up are, after all, the stock in trade of some of the best fiction writers." Marshall re-creates for us the scene of that kitchen; the women, 'bards' who never wrote more

than a letter back home to Barbados, but who gave to her a surety and a joy of language that has never left her:

*There was no way for me to understand it at the time, but the talk that filled the kitchen those afternoons was highly functional. It served as therapy... through language they were able to overcome the humiliations of the work-day... But more than therapy, that free-wheeling, wide-ranging, exuberant talk functioned as an outlet for the tremendous creative energy they possessed. They were women in whom the need for self-expression was strong, and since language was the only vehicle readily available to them they made of it an art form that—in keeping with the African tradition in which art and life are one—was an integral part of their lives.*¹⁴

For Paule Marshall the gift of language from these women is the never-forgotten legacy that makes her the dynamic and vital writer that she is. Without this matrilineal link the women who write would be impoverished and each woman is acknowledging the gift of the foremothers

"Well, I've tried to live my life right, just like a story."



in her written work.

Joy Kogawa in *Obasan* (1982) does not write about the connection that she feels with the women writers of the past; instead she is speaking about the silencing of her people during the diaspora. This was enforced by the Canadian Government during the Second World War, ensuring the end of all communication between the Japanese people in this country. The story is about Naomi, a young girl who grows up in this climate of suppression. But the most significant figure in Kogawa's story is the older woman — the Aunt Emily — who insists on breaking the silence that keeps the groups suppressed. During the process of writing the novel, Kogawa found her own creative and political voice; she is becoming the older woman she created and now works for the recognition of the fundamental rights of her people. Kogawa, speaking of her *Obasan*, her eighty year-old Aunt, whose 'voice' of grief is complete silence, says:

*Squatting here with the putty knife in her hand, she is every old woman in every hamlet in the world. You see her on a street corner in a village in Southern France, in a black dress and black stockings. Or bent over stone steps on a Mexican mountain village. Everywhere the old woman stands as the true and rightful owner of the earth. She is the bearer of keys to unknown doorways and to a network of astonishing tunnels. She is the possessor of life's infinite personal details.*¹⁵

This acknowledgement of the wisdom of old women is historical, we recall that Euripides in his drama about the Trojan women gave the greatest perception to the old Queen — Hecuba. And Gwendolyn MacEwan, in her adaptation of the play, portrays a Hecuba who guides and goads the other women into self-consciousness. Hecuba is the wise old woman who knows that 'malestream' history is "all a web of lies/Where all the gore becomes glory/In the telling and re-telling /Of the lies." Through the rage and despair of Hecuba's poetry we make discoveries about the roles of men and women — about the false code of honour that betrays men into death and about the illusionary role of beauty that betrays women even into old age. Hecuba, a prisoner who is about to be taken as a 'sexual' hostage, says:

What about me? Whose slave will I be?

Me with my grotesque body, the body Of a bug that's slept on the ground?

Me with my skinny, flailing arms? my interesting arthritis, my queenly limbs all wrapped around

This stunning cane? Eh, eh? Who gets My soul... my useless appendages, my selves?...¹⁶

In *Trojan Women*, Gwendolyn MacEwan shows that an unquestioning loyalty to a bankrupt culture, especially one that is built around the paradigm of stereotypic gender roles, is deadly. But MacEwan also shows that it is the figure of the crone who is the freeing agent. The old woman (who knows all of the past and who is willing to call the present into account) is able to accomplish this because she moves beyond patriarchal rules. And because she is more free than most of us it is the old woman who is 'righting' our stories, providing us with a future that is kinder and open-ended. When Paule Marshall is asked who her mentors are, she replies:

*True, I am indebted to those writers, white and black, whom I read during my formative years and still read for instruction and pleasure. But they were preceded in my life by another set of giants whom I always acknowledge before all others: the group of women around the table long ago. They taught me my first lessons in the narrative art. They trained my ear. They set a standard of excellence. This is why the best of my work must be attributed to them; it stands as testimony to the legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the wordshop of the kitchen.*¹⁷

Each one of us has a legacy of language and culture, and together we have a tradition of matrilineal knowledge that has never been recognized as a source of empowerment — especially by ourselves. We must stop believing the canon and write our own revolutionary stories to live into.

¹ Lorna Crozier, "Speaking The Flesh" in *Language in Her Eye*, Eds. Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard and Eleanor Wachtel (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990), p.93.

² Leah Cohen, *Small Expectations: Society's Betrayal of Older Women* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1984), p. 10.

³ Miriam Waddington, *Collected Poems* (Toronto: Oxford U P, 1986), p. 326.

⁴ Jenny Joseph, "Warning" in *When I Am An Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple* (Manhattan Beach, CA: Papier-Maché Press, 1987), p. 1.

⁵ Mary Meigs, "Memories of Age," *Trivia: A Journal of Ideas* (Fall 1988), pp. 57-65.

⁶ Eva Tihanyi, "Breathes Along The Run" in *Celebrating Canadian Women: Prose and Poetry By and About Canadian Women*, ed. Greta Hoffman Nemiroff (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1989), pp. 352-53.

⁷ In a lecture at Sheridan College, Oakville (October 1976), Beresford-Howe told the audience that the mail she received in response to the publication of the novel was overwhelming and totally unexpected. She insisted she was "not writing a blueprint for marital breakdown — just a story."

⁸ Karla F. C. Holloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, "Remembering Our Foremothers: Older Black Women, Politics of Age, Politics of Survival as Embodied in the Novels of Toni Morrison" in *Women As Elders: The Feminist Politics of Aging*, Ed. Marilyn J. Bell (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1989), p. 15.

⁹ Mary O'Brien, Lionel Stevenson, Terry Dunton Stevenson, *Elders of the Island* (Prince Edward Island U P, 1986), p. 1. (No author attributed).

¹⁰ *Collected Poems*, p. 324.

¹¹ Adele Wiseman, *Old Woman at Play* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1975), p. 59.

¹² Dorothy Livesay, "Aging" in *The Self-Completing Tree* (Victoria: Press Porcepic, 1986), p. 235.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹⁴ Paule Marshall, "From The Poets in the Kitchen," *The New York Times*, Book Review Section. Series: "The Making of the Writer" (February 1983).

¹⁵ Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1981), pp. 15-16.

¹⁶ Gwendolyn MacEwan, *Trojan Women* (Toronto: Exile Publications, 1981), p. 50.

¹⁷ Paule Marshall, *op cit.*