

ties and a very small income.”)

Widowhood is a new lease on life for Dorothy Livesay. Finding herself suddenly free from responsibility to family, and able to do things solely for herself, she finds that long sought-for “my way.” She travels, she loves, and she continues to write.

### AGNES IN THE SKY

Di Brandt. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1990.

### SKY: A Poem in Four Pieces

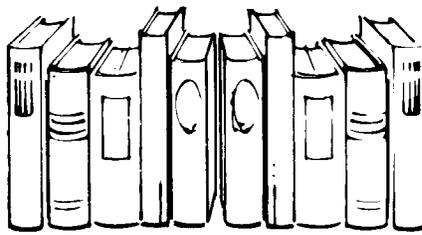
Libby Scheier. Stratford, Ontario: Mercury Press, 1990.

By *Laura McLaughlan*

Both Di Brandt's *Agnes in the Sky* and Libby Scheier's *Sky* are works of maturity, books which revise what Ann Sexton called “the middle age witch me.” The speaking subject in Brandt's poetry, her “i” and Scheier's “I”—“LS,” demonstrate what Alicia Ostricker's *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry* calls “revisionist mythmaking,” a process by which “the poet simultaneously deconstructs a prior ‘myth’ or ‘story’ and reconstructs a new one which includes, instead of excludes herself.

*Sky* is present in the title of both works, and significantly in each it constitutes the physical and psychic territory where both books re-vision myth. In Brandt's case the prior myth is of the Christian God, Lord of both heaven and earth in her Mennonite youth, the “God who is watching &... sees/ everything.” Scheier's *Sky: A Poem in Four Pieces* begins with a first section which evokes the scientific verities — the Prolegomena — of past generations of intellectual men. But her “Prolegomena” is “Sky Narratives: Prolegomena to any Future Sociology of Sky,” and what its speaker knows is that “we know only that we don't know....” The next three sections of Scheier's long poem are “Ocean,” “Earth Per Verse,” and “Fire.” In “Fire” she couples death with rebirth, offering a creation myth by which the speaking subject is able to “let the old ways go/ let them burn/ let the fires burn/ cover everything with ash.”

In Di Brandt's *Agnes in the Sky* the old



story of the “man in the pulpit (who quotes Jesus & Shakespeare to prove the world/is still round a perfect circle in/ God's eye...” is eclipsed. Story is a recurrent trope throughout the four sections of her book. It is introduced in the first section in “3 poems for Agnes.” In the third section of the book “if I told even a sliver of what i know/who would listen” we find poems which demonstrate eloquently how the old patterns of belief have failed both daughters and sons.

In “Scapegoat” “what the story was” is notably set in the past tense. The “Scapegoat” is, after all, a requisite figure in the old religious order which is left behind. In that mythology, the poem tells us, the most prized victims were “most of all mothers/sweet white ghost mothers cheerfully/sacrificing themselves to the world/denying themselves into goodness.” Throughout *Agnes in the Sky* the speaking subject is the transgressing female, a survivor who “wasn't your mother... (and) didn't die like she did....” The “i” of these poems remembers what has happened, but is painfully aware that her record is not the authorized version. She is “the one who hoards the family/stories secretly who feels her/way in the dark the one who has/no right....” The telling of story — whether of self or of others — is still, in itself, a transgressive act.

Women's stories are newly inscribed in Brandt's “sky.” “Agnes” is a neighbour who has died with “no one to care about/ the story...” of her lost love and “endless forgiving.” Her “priest” has given her a mythology of “the Virgin blessing heaven/ with her tears....” But in the “haven/ heaven” refigured in this work of revisionist mythmaking Agnes is to find not a chaste spiritual reunion with God the father, but “some holy black prince/caressing her broken spirit bones/into light....”

In this work Christian cosmology suffers a sea-change. The old story is finished. The “i” and the “you” of these poems love men and yet actively privilege the female line, “the tears of a woman/ might cry in middle age after/ a lifetime of swallowing them....” They find in the lonely spinster, the aging mother, the fe-

male friend in middle age, splendour enough for a newly mythologized sky.

Scheier's revisionist mythmaking in *Sky* is harder to read. It is both a tough piece of work and a rewarding one. Framed as this poem is in sky, water, earth, and fire — Aristotle's elements — *Sky* reminds me of Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table*, a work in which Levi, who was trained as a chemist, tells how he used his work to survive a death camp during the Second World War. Like Levi's prose memoir I read Scheier's poem as a survivor's account of a nightmare time: for Levi the War, for Scheier a two year period, from age five to seven, when she lived in fear of “Alan Turchin the child rapist/at 1504 Ocean Avenue in Brooklyn New York/ Alan Turchin the son of the superintendent....”

Scheier is insistent that the reader make a distinction between fiction and her own truth claim. In “Earth Per Verse” the record is set in the poem: “I am alone and my name is/ Libby not Jenny and this recounts events/ that happened”.

In Scheier's work the “tiny mouth/ telling what happened telling the adults the protectors” solicits no response, “nothing...” happened “...from the telling”. There are no periods or commas within this section of the poem. One feels that the nightmare of being abused, and fearing abuse, has no end. Even so the “telling” which this text so carefully contains constitutes a textual body where the poet performs a healing ritual with words. The unprotected child can “tell” once more and this time be soothed by Scheier's adult “I” with her “kind adult-woman mouth.”

As Scheier and Brandt write they trespass into the territory of the cultural and biological fathers who once held power over them. In their maturity they face “the dead father” (Brandt) and the live one (Scheier) with both anger and absolution. They face their own middle age with uncompromising hunger for self expression and beauty. They place what they need in their poems: “...give me more give me/ more than stones i want red raspberries” writes Di Brandt, “& wild roses blooming in the snow...” and later she writes “i want the huge narrative/ of the river the curved cry of the land....” Scheier writes “I want” as a chant in one poem summoning the power “to write,” and “to remember/ the dreams that draw me here.”

Both books are valuable works of revisionist mythmaking. I celebrate them.