

Thoughts From a Friend

by M.T. Kelly

Gwendolyn MacEwen, who died last year at the age of 46, met the world with such emotional intensity that when you talked casually with her she would often turn her feelings aside with a joke, a stream of conversation as she turned her head away, an evasive twinkling gleam in her eye. She readily acknowledged the passion and mysticism of her poetry, but her role as a writer, as a feeling person, seemed to tire her at times, and if you ran into her in the Annex neighborhood in Toronto where she lived she often talked about how her BMX one-speed bicycle from Canadian Tire was preferable to a bicycle with gears, about how many lengths she swam at the Y, about how much she slept in winter or what kind of mineral water she was favoring at that moment.

Her world was a haunted one. She is on record as saying that at times she found it difficult to distinguish between realities except when she was writing, but she wrote all her life, and all those who are interested in "the real, unexplored country which lies *within* the country we think we have conquered" will always be grateful for her perceptions of reality.

Hers was a fragile, precocious talent and she published at an early age in the Canadian Forum. But she was a hard worker, and from her first book *Selah*, published in 1961, to *Afterworlds*, published last year, she published 20 works, including novels, children's books, travel works and plays. Her interest in Greek mythology was evident in her translation of *The Trojan Women* and in a less concretely literary way in that she was one of the founders of the Trojan Horse coffee house on the Danforth. Her spiritual generosity will remain a strong memory of anyone who talked with her there over strong Greek coffee. She was open and generous with young, unpublished writers, and like her public statements at writers' gatherings, humorous and honest.

Gwen MacEwen was forthright about her unhappiness at the place of the artist in our society, as she said publicly in letters to the editor and certainly if asked. Her anger seems justified. I remember visiting her in her tiny apartment on Robert Street and as we talked about the Indians' spirit world she brought more heat into

the room by turning on her oven and opening the door. She made a joke about the glowing coil in the oven being a hearth, but I thought at the time that there was something profoundly wrong in a society that rewarded even its greatest artists and singers thus.

It would be impossible to forget her. She was perhaps the best reader of poetry in Canada and her shimmering, magical images could possess the mind like spirits.

Perhaps her way of seeing was too intense. In *Afterworlds* she writes, "Let me make this perfectly clear. I have never written anything because it was a Poem..." She concludes, "What matters is what is out there in the large dark/And in the long light/Breathing." In retrospect *Afterworlds* seems an ominous book.

The last time I saw her, just before she died, she had asked me to come over to her house to lend her some money because a cheque from the CBC had not arrived — the usual writer's complaint. But when I went to her house that dark, thick evening in the darkest time of the year she seemed fine.

We talked about how the ancient Celts were right to worry if the sun would ever come again at this time of the year, and how they celebrated it at the feast of *Samhain*. Yet she seemed somehow unbearably gentle, disconnected and when I gave her \$40 she said, "Wait, wait," and went into her apartment, leaving the door open. A glow from the light inside, and that open oven door, surrounded her. When she came back she gave me one of her children's books, *Dragon Sandwiches*, and a little metal butterfly. She pressed the butterfly into my hand.

"Gwen," I said, "there's no need for this. I'll see you in a couple

of days. I'll see you at the donut shop."

"No, no," she said. "Take it." It had started to rain.

"Thanks," I said, as must anyone who ever knew her, as must anyone who cares about literature, or who has ever seen the whole world charged, when everything is alive, and all is wonder.



"Vigil," c. 1944. Photograph by MacEwen's father, Alick. Gwendolyn is seated on the far right.

M.T. Kelly, a Toronto writer, is the author of *A Dream like Mine*. A version of this obituary originally appeared in *The Globe & Mail*, December, 1987.