

DOING TIME

Himani Bannerji. Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1986.

Leslie Sanders

Himani Bannerji begins her second collection of poetry, *Doing Time*, with a long prose poem, a formal paradox that signals much of what follows. In this poem, the poet complains of the inadequacy of poetry for her subject and in these times: "If we who are not white, and also women, have not yet seen that here we live in a prison, that we are doing time, then we are fools..." She cannot write poetry, she laments, because "things have been ever more of themselves... They are fully un-covered. All the bricks, barbed wires, concrete, chrome, glass, gasses, bombs... and Wallstreet Journals are there for us to see." Thus finding metaphors is difficult. Accused of being too "bitter, angry and impatient," and of sacrificing personal life to her concern for others, she responds "personal life is constructed with a personal history, personal tokens, which you give up at the warden's office as you enter... Yes, I have no personal life — but then again, don't I? I have become so many people."

The collection rests on such paradoxes: although imprisoned, the poet is not silenced; although speaking for many, her voice remains singular and intensely personal. Moreover the reality against whose literalness she inveighs becomes metaphor for the inhumanity that must be resisted. In Bannerji's poetry, anger, sorrow and pain fuse to create a haunting beauty: "I often think of her/this thing called a wife/... I try to think of her/even as I am/a woman/a small limited form/marked by softness curves/hair teeth two giving hands/and a little resting place inside/which expands with need/... she is molded into the shape/of a house/a cave house/with two windows for eyes/I see frightened people/cowering inside her/husband children and aged politicians/the world is too dark for them" ("wife").

Bannerji's poetry often puns, seeking its insight in the transformations embedded in the shift in meaning. Wife is she who houses others: womb, cave, a "monolith," a "fearful construction." "Bitterness filters through the evening/the sky is bitter and grey/a mad wind lashes the earth/... The weight of the world was love./and now this bitterness" ("bitterness"). Her most powerful poem of this type, "Mother, do you have a will?," contains in it all the paradoxes on which

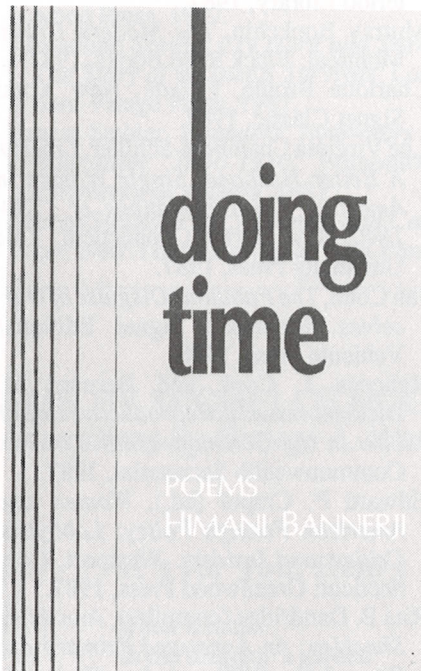
this volume is based:

Mother, do you have a will?

Madam, have you made a will?...

The answer is 'no'. I have no will. Not of the sort that you write of sane mind, witnessed by the wire thin fingers of a notary's clerk...

There, however, is a will of a different kind. It is constructed in pieces like a stained glass window for my child, my daughter, my posterity, who begins from the zero shape of the ova, from the zero hour of her beginning...



She is ready. We kiss each other good-bye and the journey begins...

I can see her at the bend of the road. She is becoming smaller like a pupil contracting in the light...

I see the earth opening out in front of her like my mother's palm leaf fan in motion on a hot afternoon and my will is speeding her on.

The poem juxtaposes the property of matter with that of spirit, legacies that are fixed with those that are fluid ("my will, my self, my history, carried/away into the future, into new landscapes, new times"). The mother wills her child's freedom, sending her into the world on her own, yet remaining with her, seeing in her child's progress her own will fulfilled. The power and concentration in this poem are almost terrifying.

These poems are the meditations of a

woman who feels with extraordinary clarity how bitter is the suffering racism visits upon its victims, how confining the space accorded to women, how ruthless the society that sees both as inevitable. However, the paradoxes in this volume are perhaps not truly paradoxes. Rather they are incongruities that result as the poet restlessly explores all the experiences that make up "doing time," finding in some occasions for sadness, others rage, still others power.

IMMUNE TO GRAVITY

Mary di Michele. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986.

Luciana Ricciutelli

Mary di Michele's new book of poetry, *Immune to Gravity*, deals with an impressive range of ideas and emotions embracing a central theme concerned with the natural cycle of life: birth, childhood, sexual development, motherhood and aging. The volume is, for the most part, marked with a subtle cynical quality: the voice of a mature woman attempting to come to terms with her life. A resilient determination nevertheless emerges that speaks of the poet's desire to arrive at a measure of completeness through an exploration of her personal history, as is suggested by the quotation from Dante that prefaces the collection: "Such waves of yearning to achieve the height swept through my soul, that at each step I took I felt my feathers growing for the flight."

That di Michele should choose Dante to echo an interior emotion is no accident. She, too, is Italian and throughout the volume there are indications of her need to reconcile her past as an Italian with her life in the present. In "Life is Theatre Or O to be Italian in Toronto Drinking Cappuccino on Bloor Street at Bersani and Carle-vales," the poet recalls:

You were afraid of that millionth part difference in yourself which might just be character

What you had was rare and seemed to weigh you down as if it were made of plutonium. What you wanted was to be like everybody else.

What you wanted was to be liked.

The volume is also marked by a frank exploration of the poet's sexuality and her identity both as a sexual being and as a mother. A large part of that exploration is concerned with societal stereotyping of

male/female roles and relationships. It culminates in a haunting and chilling poem titled "Hunger" which, based on a composite of persons and events, deals with a young child found stuffed in a refrigerator after having been sexually molested:

Breathless in plastic wrap:

*she is dressed for outdoors
in the pleated skirt
her mother gave her for Christmas
And in a brown sweater, its bulky
knit
camouflaging her sex,
breasts a boy might have,
tender breasts,
pink and sweet as cinnamon hearts.
In a fridge, like a foetus folded
into that white space
where all dreams end
where she has been made to be
of man unborn.*

At their best, the poems are pervaded with sensual and erotic flower imagery that speaks evocatively of love, sexual desire and womanhood. The poet decries "wild flowers [that] fade fast... droop in a man's pocket/with flagging desire," opposed to "prairie lilies [that] stalk the fields/sparkled, hungry as wildcats," sunflowers that "don't die easily," whose "centre firm" is "a power that won't let go, a dynasty of the field that's heart/harvesting love enough/to feed a nation." Nowhere is the poet more jubilant than in the unrestrained celebration of motherhood: "I can't live without this child in my arms./A spray of crimson gladiola."

The poems in this volume are tough and questioning as they thrust from past to present in their exploration of the poet's identity as artist, as mother, as woman. They are the work of a woman who, "immune to gravity," is now ready to soar!

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