Record of these years appears in her Diary Drawings, 1971-1978 (now in the Archives at York University)—long years of working only in black and white. Above all, the drawings are obsessed with weeping or sleeping female nude figures, unawakened spiritually and sexually and resonant in the Virgin Mary icons. It is in "Angelique," Helen's humorous story of a fallen angel created after the end of her marriage, that she is able at last to poke mischievous—and blasphemous—fun at her own process and the rigidity of the church.

When Helen’s work moves at last from black and white into colour, she calls this moment one of “life over death. Life over wasted life.” At the same time, and apparently without conscious effort, she moves away from figural subjects and toward flowers. Petals start to appear out of tears, blossoms from crucifixes. Finally, she lays claim to all the colours of the spectrum. She lays claim to female sensuality, and she sees it as good. Her painting has become a political act. In her private life she finds "a beautiful new partner." In her painting she foregoes rhythm and rhyme for prose; the poetry lies in the power of her images. Her setting is the natural world, a possible Elysium, in the form of a picnic, but what we get, through metaphor entirely, is a sense of that first world shattered.

The poem proceeds in a series of verse paragraphs, each representing a composition, a still-life, and each suggesting through what is depicted a more important absence. The opening paragraph, for example, “next to the wine glasses shoved at angles into the grass, ants scramble onto giant wheels, fan out in a plateful of legs,” is typical of the whole. The wine glasses are askew either because the terrain threatens their upright stability or because the wine has been drunk and the glasses abandoned. This is the first of a dozen delicate details in the poem's prosaic Eden. Ants, unwanted always, invade the scene, and are not prevented, perhaps not even noticed except by the poet whose image of a “plateful of legs” gives us both the sense of distance from the ongoing action and a sense of the whole accessible only in fragments.

BLOWING HOLES THROUGH EVERYDAY

THE WORDS I KNOW

NO COUNTRY FOR WOMEN

by Deborah Jurdjevic
Sheila Dalton’s first book of poems, Blowing Holes Through Everyday, reads as a dialogue between a pragmatist and a dreamer. The poet inclines toward first the one, then the other, moving steadily toward the penultimate poem “Whales on the Saguenay River,” from which the title phrase is taken. This is one of the better poems in the volume and one which melds the two voices. The strong opening line, iambic tetrameter, promises epic story telling, a hero, a plot along the lines of “The Ancient Mariner”: “The wind was strong, the waves were high.” But this is a late twentieth-century poem written by a woman with other concerns on her mind. She abandons both the promise of rhyme and an established rhythm for free verse more appropriate to the autobiographical and the confessional. She sees the whales as “a distant flash of truth,” hears them “puffing air against/ the silence/ blowing holes through the everyday,” and her concern is for the future of the small son she holds in her arms. The poem’s moral, that the world is a marvel for those committed to seeing, is defined by the whales who appear without warning and in the final line, remembering the epic form of opening, slide “onwards to the sea.”

“Tests,” the poem immediately preceding “Whales,” is also confessional in tone, immediate, and written for the sake of the “moral” which appears conventionally at the end. Unlike “Whales,” however, this is a pragmatic poem. Its governing metaphor is a diagnostic test made to determine the source of a persistent back pain. The physical exam tropes the set of circumstances testing the author’s willingness and ability to endure pain and frustration in order finally to write. Dalton concludes: “But not to try/ means yet another woman/ Silenced.” One takes the point, but wishes at the same time for less explanation and for a greater trust in the reader.

One of the riskier and, to my mind, one of the more successful poems is “Friends/Conversation” in which Dalton does trust metaphor to tell the tale. The subject of this poem is infidelity between husband and wife, between woman friend and woman friend. Nowhere is there anything approaching direct statement. Dalton foregoes rhythm and rhyme for prose; the poetry lies in the power of her images. Her setting is the natural world, a possible Elysium, in the form of a picnic, but what we get, through metaphor entirely, is a sense of that first world shattered.

The film may speak most eloquently to women, but it will also have universal appeal. As Lucas herself says in the film, “Everyone is on the same path....” I say, put this film on television, put it in libraries, put it on college courses—courses on women’s studies, the immigrant experience, the family, gender equity, women in art, and art history. It will educate in the best sense—the heart and the head.

1 The Diary Series, Early 011.
2 The Diary Series, Early 011.
The central image of dismemberment, with probable sexual overtones, points to the flaw in a supposedly functional human community. The poet tells us that there is something wrong in each of the subsequent scenes, and in the third paragraph alludes to a friend who is pregnant by another woman’s husband. Against this betrayal in the centre of the poem, conversation, ceremony, and laughter weave a web of community which seems to hold the participants of this drama. The tension between the conventional and its breach is assessed in the final lines. Conversation and its promise of friendship and belonging float free in time and space; the human actors turned to stone. The poem makes its own commentary on the soap-opera quality of the drama, and demands attentive reading.

In the preface to *Blowing Holes Through Everyday*, Dalton, like Leavis at the beginning of this century and Wordsworth at the beginning of the last, worries that a spiritual dimension is endangered in our commercial world. Her book is her response to that widely shared worry, and reflects her confidence that the particulars of daily life will show us, as they did the Romantics, if we will only look, “the world in a grain of sand.”

The particulars of daily life for Cathy Stonehouse in *The Words I Know* are not those which invite the reader to remember Blake’s songs, either of innocence or experience. Rather Stonehouse’s poems reveal an investigation into a private terror. Her manner, like Dalton’s, is confessional, and like Dalton, Stonehouse uses daily life as subject matter for her poems. Daily life, however, in *Words I Know*, yields a long sequence of poems organized around a pivotal childhood scene (or a series of such scenes) in which a young girl is raped by her father. There is an unmistakable integrity to these poems. They eschew self-pity. They make an exceedingly intelligent use of language to map an alternative world needed by a narrator whose childhood world has been distinctly hellish.

The poems divide into five sections; each section dependent on those preceding it. The opening poem, “Drought Summer,” connects images of a young girl’s budding sexuality with the death of summer moths. The first stanza offers us an image of butterflies drawn to a butterfly bush, nature’s creatures nourished by a plant seemingly provided specifically for them. The contrasting second stanza is important for the poem and for the series of poems which follow:

we put the moth trap out at dusk.
I counted the first ten moths
that flew into the bare white
bulb,
heard their wings rattle
at the metal rim, saw them fold
like flattened paper cups, then
went inside.

The final stanza draws a parallel between the young girl’s beginning breasts, “two soft wingbuds, pointed as if for flight,” and the moths. There is no justice, in this case; the trapped moths, coupled with a more general wasteland imagery, “drought summer,” establish a certain sense of imminent doom. Succeeding poems bear this out. “Ask Your Father,” the second poem in the series, gives us, in three short stanzas, three female narrators whose purpose in speaking is to defer to a male counterpart—“our Peter,” “your father,” “your uncle”—and we understand the element of female collusion; the child must be abandoned by the women she trusts before she can be raped by the father she trusted.

*Words I Know* makes painful reading. It is an important book, however, well worth the pain of reading not just because we hear a narrator naming a crime and working out a psychic healing process. These poems are important individually and particularly in the context of the whole, because they are carefully made. Central metaphors, like that of the moth, linking sexuality with death, hold these poems in distinctive relation, one to the other, and affirm the poet’s central thesis about the nature of language.

More important than an individual narrative (in this case the rape-centred story) is metaphor and the poet’s sure sense, demonstrated in poem after poem, that language is powerful: adequate to truth-telling, capable of rendering a second world based not just on experience but on experience plus the creative imagination. And the creative imagination, as Coleridge well knew, is of a different order from fantasy. The fantastical world might allow Stonehouse Pippa’s ironic message: “God’s in his heaven—/All’s right with the world,” an easy and false accommodation to intolerable circumstances. Stonehouse gives us instead the haiku-like poem “Dear god—” in which the narrator responds to her father’s death by collapsing “the great welsh grief” of the Atlantic, and her own futile attempt to photograph the wind in two final lines: “sea lettuce, sea stars/ perfect as children’s splayed hands.” Her grief is not for her father, but for the child he betrayed, and the image of a child’s “splayed hands” stands in place of explanation, lamentation, accusation.

Alternately fantasy might encourage pure escape from the world of experience. This form Stonehouse recognizes and then denies in “Rubbed Out.” She paints a Chagall-like picture of houses floating free, estranged by night from the day-time world:

each house now moored like a
boat
by a slim rope of path
to the floating dark, all space
between
rippling, widened.

In “Magic Lantern,” a poem about memory, she recognizes how tenuous is anyone’s connection to life:

when they tested the three-
minute siren
on the roof of our school
and we did nothing but listen,
carry on
our lives blown thin across the
chem lab walls
bunsen-blue, brief experiments.

Out of this recognition of the ex-
treme fragility of what we may call
the real world comes the intellectual
strength to build through language
an alternate world of poetry.

But in the rape sequence “Illumi-
nations,” fantasy appears to control
the images. In a passage linking the
dead moths of the early poem to an
obvious need to escape, the poet
writes:

while your hair fills my mouth
I rise above our house
lost in the logic of other houses
the map of the ever-repeating
night, imagine

unclothed on the bed
bound wings chafing at my chest
how I travel

The fantasy of escape, so necessary
in “Illuminations,” is powerfully
transformed in the last section of
poems, “The Hollow Planet,” where
we see the poet partly receiving, partly
creating her world. Stonehouse cel-
brates female heroes chosen to re-
place a non-existent family: Amelia
Earhart, Emily Dickinson, Gioconda
Belli, most importantly Frida Kahlo.

In “Corona,” a natural silence gives
birth to words:

Silence coats me,
amniotic, unbirthed.

Words,
their curved universe
full of unnamed planets:

my head with its shiftless comets,
this breath full of unseen stars.

The inspiration here is the poet’s
sympathetic identification with
Kahlo, her life, and her work. In
“Disintegration,” dedicated to Kahlo,
the poet reclaims her sexuality. Her
body, in response to her own caress,
“spills out sentences,/ showers the
earth with my heat.” In “I Write"
Stonehouse parallels the shape given
to Mexico by Kahlo’s painting and
the shape she gives to England:

Here grows a new texture,
a page between wound and
world. . . .
I am the aggressor here,
I write upon the outside of my
skin
the names of England,
therip in my heart that is home
and the truth that dries in there,
hardened to a pip.

Helen Vendler, in her recent book
on contemporary poetry, Soul Says,
remarks that unanalyzed obsession is
the opposite of moral intelligence. In
Words I Know, Stonehouse shows us
a moral intelligence of a high order.
She celebrates the resilience, com-
mitment, strength of the artist who
creates in the midst of suffering; her
poems demonstrate that both the
suffering and the commitment are
constant.

Anne Cimon’s book, No Country
for Women, shares with Dalton’s Blow-
ing Holes Through Everyday, and
Stonehouse’s Words I Know, an auto-
biographical form. Like Stonehouse,
Cimon gives us a central section in
which the father is figured as a preda-
tor. In “Tapestry,” a poem which
recalls Rich’s “Aunt Jennifer’s Ti-
gers,” Cimon paints a triptych of
women’s work through the centu-
ries, concluding with two unexplained
lines: “terror reserved for the father!
who often did not return.” In “Child-
hood Portrait,” based, Cimon tells
us, on the painting Mary Jane Smith
by Joseph Witing Stock in 1838, the
father appears as a wolf waiting in the
dark space behind the child; in “Lip-
sticks,” a variant form of father for-
bids his teenage daughter an adult
sexuality; by way of explanation
Cimon offers the parenthetical “(he
hated you/since you were born.)”

Unlike Stonehouse, Cimon does not
analyze this obsession, and the reader
may be unwilling to assent to what
appears to be a necessary equation
between fathers and evil.

The “motive” behind many of the
poems in No Country for Women is a
search for alternate worlds. In the
first section, “A Curl of Smoke,” a
contemporary Montreal disappoints
and threatens: trees are cut down;
buildings obscure the mountain; Ste-
Catherine Street represents commer-
cialized sex; an icy stair step endan-
gers the soul. The speaker in “The
Fur Coat” is an anorexic who identi-
ifies with the trapped animal and con-
cludes: “Now I am learning to pro-
tect what is wild and uncivilized, my
own nature’s will.” Her self-protec-
tive gesture takes her back both to the
natural world and eventually to the
world of books. In “Bass Rocks,”
from the second section, the poet
returns in memory to a seascape along
the Massachusetts coast, and discov-
ers a Wordsworthian moment-out-
of-time:

Throughout the ocean played
like a bass guitar
reverberating in the deepest cell
of me.

Death, that stalker, for a mo-
ment lay still as
the rocks beneath me,
and life swirled like the emerald
seawater
between its carved fingers, in-
side its rusty throat,
fearless, the tide eternally calling
it back.

The song that is the poem harmo-
nizes with the rhythms of the natural
world and gives us one of the lovelier
poems in Cimon’s book.

In the final section, “Hearing his
Music (Poems on H.D. Thoreau)”
Cimon offers a series of sympathetic
portraits celebrating Thoreau as an-
other who preferred the natural world
to the human one. His deliberate
choice of chastity makes him seem a
perfect soul-mate for the poet, who, in
an opening poem “Stranger in the
City Where I Was Born,” had asked,

Where are the men who wish to
touch my soul?
Where are the women who have
learned to say no?
In "Walden Song," the final poem in No Country for Women, Cimon's
narrator is comfortable with her own
"wildness" and imagines coming to
Thoreau,
my body liberated,
no longer tucked
into a heavy gown,
my feet no longer
cinched in laced shoes,
I can breathe
comfortable in a thin
cotton dress
with pink flowers
dark hair loose
my feet bare in sandals.
The reader may rejoice in the poet's
freedom and at the same time won-
der wickedly what Thoreau might
make of this uninvited guest.
The argument each of these au-
thors makes (and in the case of
Stonehouse's Words I Know, power-
fully makes), is that the country for
women is language and poetry.

A STONE IN MY SHOE:
TEACHING LITERACY
IN TIMES OF CHANGE

Lorri Neilsen. Winnipeg: Peguis Pub-

by Kristin Ruppert

A Stone In My Shoe means to shake up
literacy teachers who have become too
set in their ways or who may in
times of frustration think of them-
selves as mere classroom technicians.
An educator and writer from Nova
Scotia, Lorri Neilsen’s essays range
from accounts of her own struggles as
a young teacher trying to live up to
the mythical ideal of a schoolteacher
with encyclopedic knowledge, to an
awareness of the importance of her
own teaching experience which she
now values as "the richest source of
professional understanding."

Neilsen puts a human compassion-
ate face on teaching. The perspective
she offers is refreshing and the ideas
behind this book prove that she is a
teacher who takes her profession seri-
ously, knowing that the future of our
world depends to a large extent on
our children's education. She opposes
the conservative, mechanistic, and
linear view of teaching that sees chil-
dren as mere products that need to be
able to function in our society, and
advocates organic, growth-oriented
teaching that makes the needs of chil-
dren central and equips them with
practical life-skills and the knowl-
dge that they can move and change
their world.

Applying the industrial meta-
phor to education, especially lit-
eracy education, has resulted in
widespread alienation, inequal-
ity, and intellectual and spiritual
imprisonment.

The book consists of fourteen es-
says that can be read consecutively or
individually. Each of these essays can
stand alone and still convey Neilsen's
points; reading the whole book, there-
fore, means encountering the same
ideas tackled from different angles,
over and over again. This format does
not allow Neilsen to give her analyses
much depth and several times she
resorts to simplistic dichotomies, like
the one between "Uncle Research"
and teachers' research. Instead of re-
search that is being done by "experts"
in the field, who tend to have no
teaching experience, she wants to see
more research conducted by teachers
in classrooms. "Learning to think for
ourselves is becoming a priority for
literacy professionals." Dismissing
"expert" research so willingly, how-
ever, means giving up on many op-
portunities; it was for example such
research that proved that teachers in
the classroom attend more to boys
than to girls and are utterly unaware
of their gender biases.

Neilsen deplores the fact that teach-
ers' work keeps being degraded in the
media and "professional esteem is at
an all-time low"; for that reason she
urges teachers to trust their experi-
ence and intuition and accept that
"learning and growth are lifelong ac-
tivities" whose results cannot be mea-
ured by standardized tests. In an at-
tempt to instill professional pride in
teachers, Neilsen repeats her keywords
"professional renewal," "professional
confidence" in a mantra-like fash-
ion—as if visualizing it will make it
so. However, she does not suggest
many concrete strategies on how to
achieve professional renewal.

Neilsen's language and analogies
are reminiscent of New Age phraseol-
ogy as this small selection of essay
titles demonstrates: "Galaxies," "Of
Parachutes, Mockingbirds, and Bat-
Poets," "A Dance of the Heart, A
Song of the Soul." An analogy the
author draws in her essay "Gardens"
between teachers in Canada and illit-
erate women in developing countries
left me feeling quite uncomfortable.
Granted, it is the same patriarchal
hierarchical structures that keep
women there uneducated and teach-
ers here undervalued and underpaid;
nevertheless, I found it quite pre-
sumptuous to compare the relatively
small problems teachers face in
Canada—a country that per capita
uses up most of the world's natural
resources—to the life-threatening
problems women face in developing
countries.

Although I generally sympathize
with Neilsen's views on teaching, I
regret that her essays fail to explore
the issues she raises in more depth.
Perhaps, though, A Stone in My Shoe
will be a starting point for teachers to
re-examine their profession.

The hope for education, I am
convinced, lies in the spirit of
the growing numbers of teachers
who, like weavers, are examin-
ing their own practice and creat-
ing their own truths. And in the
spirit of all teachers, whose daily
dedication to other people's chil-
dren weaves tapestries wider and
more complex by the year, this
hope is enough perhaps to warm
a generation.