

MEMORIES HAVE TONGUE

Afua Cooper. Toronto: Sister Vision, Black Women and Women of Colour Press, 1992.

THE TOUCHSTONE

Robyn Sarah. Concord, Ontario: The House of Anansi Press, 1992.

THE WORK OF OUR HANDS

Sharon H. Nelson. Dorion, Quebec: The Muse's Company/La Compagnie des Muses, 1992.

by Deborah Jurdjevic

Frost has told us that many of his poems reveal his lover's quarrel with nature, and Yeats has warned that a quarrel with the self yields poetry; a quarrel with others, rhetoric. For Canadian women writing poetry at the end of this century, 'quarrel', in one form or another, is certain.

Afua Cooper in *Memories Have Tongue*, her latest volume of poetry, quarrels with a racist patriarchal social structure as she has found it in Jamaica, as she finds it in Toronto. She moves back and forth in this volume between rhetoric (prose pieces unabashedly didactic: her Preface, "500 Years of Discovery," "The Rich Have Colonised the Trees," "Laverne," "How to Hold Your Man") and a loosely structured poetry of lamentation and celebration. Her poem "Roots and Branches" is both of these. She begins with a short paragraph of Jan Carew's in which Carew observes that "to rob people or countries of their name is to set in motion a psychic disturbance that can, in turn, create a permanent crisis of identity," and a second paragraph by Maxine Tynes who draws her identity, she says, from the entire continent of Africa. Cooper names, in her poem, stanza by stanza, grandmother, great-grandmother, grandfather, redeeming them and giving them a context in poetry, and reaching out to others in her own community of poets and writers as she does so.

Memories Have Tongue serves the need for a revisionist history in North America, particularly a history told by black women;

it reclaims wordlessness with language.

Like Cooper, Robyn Sarah, a Montreal poet, mixes prose and poetry in her new volume, *The Touchstone: Poems New and Selected*. The prose pieces—"Pardon Me," "Study in Latex Semi-Gloss," "Anyone Skating on that Middle Ground," "Detour," "To Fill a Life"—provide a still life, fleshed out and fixed against the sparer rhythms of the poems. And through both prose and poetry runs a *liet-motif* of the quarrel—in Sarah's work, much internalized. Her quarrel, like Frost's, is a lover's quarrel, with time and circumstance, and particularly with a male partner who turns up, a counter-point figure throughout the volume.

Many of these poems trace the decline of an initial love relationship. In "Mutual," a pure, clear imagist poem, Sarah shows us the quality of what is lost.

The window is what the flowers need:
the flowers are what the window
needs.

A woman
feels this, does not
know it, places the flowers
there, so. Raises
the sash.

But it asks a man
to see it.

"Mutual" is echoed in the prose piece, "Anyone Skating on that Middle Ground." Two lovers are caught in unsatisfactory time. The woman begins to get the message first, leaves the house for the man who wakes up to find the bare images, which spoke balance in the love poem, altered in prose to speak of leftovers and escape: "the coffee is still warm. The flowers in the window, and the window's open."

Both prose and poem in Sarah's work owe something to established traditions of modernism. In the first prose piece, "Pardon Me," Sarah's narrator meditates on the thoroughly "unconscious" state of the man she lives with and imagines a breakthrough only into misunderstanding. "That is not what I meant at all; that is not it, at all," she concludes, appropriating J. Alfred Prufrock's earlier lament. In the wonderful "Suckers for the Truth," she outlines a courtship undertaken with-

out either risk or commitment, and turns to her own advantage both Frost's "momentary stay against confusion," and Williams' "Red Wheelbarrow," incorporating both image and meaning into a new text wholly of her own devising.

A camp stool, a tin pot, and an old umbrella, stage props for a stay against confusion, we find ways to laugh at the rain, and in it, and to accommodate our guests, so much depends on the things glimpsed in the rear-view mirror, wheelbarrows and such, it seems that with luck a kind of courtship happens between the lines and it's this we're after: without the risk what would be possible.

The 'quarrel' in *The Touchstone* is not always between lover and lover; in "Maintenance" it is between the writing woman and the world, symbolized, fittingly enough, as dust which "lies furry and/full of itself," which eats and smothers things, which intrudes ominously between the typewriter keys.

Any worthwhile quarrel has at least two sides, and Sarah is saved from the didactic by the vitality and faithfulness with which she renders the other point of view. Her quarrel with herself, her time and circumstance, occasionally disappears entirely in poems of pure celebration, like "Cat's Cradle." Rhythmic and incantatory, this poem recognizes its source of power in women who make of their shared time and language a verbal cat's cradle from "sprung yarn [which] rolls down loose/from the spool of the moon." Their communion together alters and revalues "ordinary" time: "the kettle boils dry and over" and they sing as they spin.

Sharon H. Nelson's quarrel in *The Work of Our Hands* is with theorists, those who reduce to abstractions the body; it is a poised, elegant, powerful book of poems, very beautiful. There seems no subject she cannot tackle.

The opening poem, "Gross National Product," is a poem about rape; the pun in the title does nothing to lessen the seriousness of her observations. The real villains of this piece, in addition to the nameless

rapist, are those who make a profit from an entertainment industry that promotes violence and those who treat the rape victims as though they were "indistinguishable from one another/as eggs in a tray." To paraphrase the poem in this way is of course to do it an injustice. Nelson's argument is complex and runs through all the pieces in the volume. She argues for the truth of the body and she argues as a poet would, in a language sprung free by the power of her voice from mundane connotations: section four of "Gross National Product" concludes,

They may have seen
images on the screen,
images that fixate the mind,
that revolve until
they are focused and distilled.

We live in fear
and with reason.

Violent images
breed.

The tight, next-to-last couplet is closed, locked in; the final two lines—three bare words which seem unfinished, and are—leave the reader with a clear understanding on the on-going nature of the thing.

In "Heresy, a progress report," Nelson imagines an unholy collusion between science and the church and notes that although men recant, women burn. In "Premenstrual Syndrome" she tells a truth all women have always known. In poem after poem she rights the wrongs of a shabby world, lighting it with language. Perhaps the loveliest and the most daring of the poems in the volume is "Making Waves:" "the sensuousness of words/is the only death by drowning/poets know," she begins, and makes out of a metaphor uniting water and body a poem with which to caress a lover.

In the final section of *The Work of Our Hands*, Nelson quarrels most audibly with the theorists: theologians, engineers and architects, cooks who work by recipe. It is so easy, she writes

to confuse
science and engineering,
engineering and building,
when words are not used with precision,

when knowing in general
is supposed
to be knowing enough.

And in the final section of "Recipes and Algorithms" she concludes that even the precise language of poets born of the body fails before the body itself.

Language
fails us;

we grasp
each other's
hands

hands untroubled by connotation,
unburdened by double meanings,
the multiple meanings of tongues

hands which have learned nothing
from assimilation
of restraint, politeness, distancing

unbound by recipes,
unmistakable in meaning.

These are wonderful poems.

UN MAL INVISIBLE: L'ISOLEMENT SOCIAL DES FEMMES

N. Guberman, J. Leblanc, F. David et J. Belleau (L'R des Centres de Femmes du Québec). Montréal: Les éditions du remue-ménage, 1993.

par Sylvie B. Côté

Il est rare qu'un ouvrage présente avec autant de simplicité les complexités d'un problème trop souvent qualifié de banal, donc de peu d'intérêt, soit la solitude des femmes. Et pourtant, c'est ce que les auteures d'*Un mal invisible* ont réussi à faire: elles mettent en évidence l'ampleur de la solitude qui touchent plus particulièrement les femmes et qui contribue, par ailleurs, à leur isolement social.

Dans un premier temps, les auteures font le point sur la terminologie qu'elles emploient, soit les notions d'isolement développées par le sociologue Robert

Weiss. *Pour lui, il y a deux types d'isolement, émotionnel et social, et chacun mène à la solitude. Le premier provient d'une carence de liens affectifs, le second, du manque d'un réseau social.* Les auteures expliquent ensuite les causes principales de l'isolement en mettant l'accent sur celui des femmes en particulier. Elles en infèrent que *cet isolement est directement lié à la condition spécifique des femmes, au fait qu'elles sont totalement ou partiellement responsables des enfants, d'autres personnes dépendantes, du travail domestique. En d'autres mots, trop d'entre elles, quelle que soit leur place dans la société, n'ont pas d'identité propre.*

Les auteures poursuivent en laissant la parole aux femmes qui vivent cet



isolement, ce qui ajoute beaucoup de richesse et de tendresse à leur ouvrage. Ces témoignages de femmes nous font pénétrer au cœur du problème et nous donnent un aperçu des complexités de l'isolement dépendamment des femmes qui le vivent. Naturellement, le statut et les rôles multidimensionnels des femmes ajoutent des nuances à leur solitude; l'isolement social d'une lesbienne est différent de celui d'une mère monoparentale ou d'une immigrante, par exemple. Les auteures sont conscientes des différentes réalités des femmes et c'est avec beaucoup de sensibilité qu'elles analysent l'isolement et la solitude des femmes en tenant compte du contexte