tion to understanding not only the life and work of Elizabeth Smart but the growth of the realm of art as a place where women might live and even prosper.

JOURNEY WITH MY SELVES: A MEMOIR 1909-1963

Dorothy Livesay. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991.

By Jennifer Henderson

"Many are the ways of telling the truth. There is his way and her way and now, my way." With these words, Dorothy Livesay introduces her reconstruction of the troubled relationship between her parents. But these words also frame the narrative of her own life in *Journey With My Selves*, a collage of memories recounting the poet's lifelong struggle to find her own way. No one who has read her poetry, spanning sixty years and never ceasing to re-invent itself, will argue that she has not succeeded in doing just that.

The journey begins with an attempt to come to terms with the extraordinary influence of parents with diametrically opposed personalities: "JFB" Livesay is faithfully remembered by his daughter — in his own words — as a "radical, one who goes to the root of things," while "FRL" (Florence Randall Livesay) is remembered as a prudish woman constrained by her Victorian mentality. The young Dorothy Livesay was, for her mother, a promising 'lady-poet.' Her father had different plans: he wanted a daughter who would think like Emma Goldman and write novels like George Eliot.

"Inheritance," a poem written by Livesay as a tribute to her father after his death, begins with the line: "In the rooms of my mind you pace." Indeed it is "JFB" with whom she allies herself — even when her engagement in left-wing activities becomes a little too much for the manager of the Canadian Press. It was her mother — a writer in her own right and a translator of Slavic literature — however, who first pushed the young poet to get her work published.

The relationship between Livesay and her mother is, among all the relationships recalled in this book, the most interesting. A woman who refused to say the word "obey" at her Anglican wedding ceremony, and who left her job at the Winnipeg *Telegram* in protest when she was made "part secretary and part women's page editor," there was undoubtedly more to "FRL" than her traditional Protestant upbringing. This "bag of tricks" — as she was called by her husband, who also beat her on one drunken occasion — was constrained more by marriage and motherhood in patriarchal society than by her own prudishness. This, perhaps, is the realization Livesay recalls having when she remembers reading her mother's diaries shortly after her death: "...I came to know that she had been, in her own way, a feminist. A feminist, but sadly restricted."

This autobiography overlaps somewhat with an earlier collection of memoirs from the 1930s: *Right Hand Left Hand*, published by Porcepic in 1977. That book was an attempt to recount the politicizing effect of the Depression on Livesay as a student at the University of Toronto, her involvement with the Communist Party in Canada and her experiments with agitprop.

Reading *Journey With My Selves*, I experienced the same discomfort with Livesay's lack of self-analysis that I had felt reading the earlier autobiography. In neither account does she come to terms with her class privilege — growing up in a middle-class family, attending a private school in Toronto, studying in France — and thus her approach to radical politics seems rather naive, at best a liberal-humanist approach to socialism.

But if some of the old gaps reappear in this book, there are also some new

honesties. Secret passions for other girls in her school years, an abortion performed by a comrade-doctor in the 1930s — but especially the chapter on Gina (Gina Watts Lawson), her fellow "bluestocking" and one of her closest friends. In this chapter, Livesay addresses her friend as if she were still alive and in her presence: "Ah Gina, is it only after seventy years of living that I begin to understand you?" Through excerpts from interviews with Gina, from Livesay's girlhood diary and from letters between the two friends, we learn of the tremendous love between two girls who were "started out on a direction completely the opposite from that of our fellow classmates." Witty and daring Gina, with whom Livesay discovered Elinor Wylie, Gertrude Stein, H.D., Katherine Mansfield and Emily Dickinson, was clearly an impetus to her early writing.

Livesay's friendships and associations with writers and literary figures such as Alan Crawley, Raymond Knister, Earle Birney and Malcolm Lowry give shape to much of this autobiography. In a sense, she is writing the narrative of her writing: with her poems, articles and letters in front of her, she recalls the inspiration behind a poem, or the influence at a certain moment in her writing, and these details become part of the story.

Not long ago in Canada, a woman was forced to give up her professional career as soon as she was married; in the late 1930s, Livesay had to give up her job as a social worker with the B.C. Welfare Field Service in order to make room for the employment of married men. She would subsequently teach in schools and universities and work for Unesco in Zambia, but being forced into unemployment at this early stage was devastating for a young woman who was full of energy.

The situation did give her more time to write however, and it was during this period that Livesay helped establish the literary journal, *Contemporary Verse*. Having children made it difficult to find the time to write, but she continued. "I was still writing poems, time snatched in the basement supervising an old washing machine with hand wringer, or waiting until everyone was asleep to put on a record and write to music." Livesay's husband, Duncan McNair, was supportive of her writing — like her father, he was "an advocate of women as creative beings." ("All this I was sure of," she writes, "until there were children, household du-

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

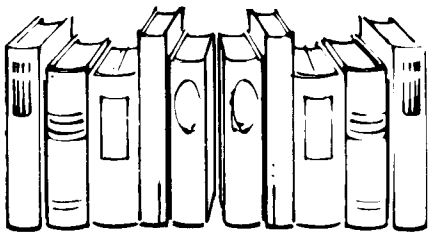
Libby Scheier. Stratford, Ontario: Mercury Press, 1990.

By Laura McLauchlan

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 female 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.