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 of the Virgin Mary icons. It is in "Angelique," Helen's humourous 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."[2] 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 is painting nothing but flowers in dazzling acrylics. 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." She says "For the first time the boundaries have opened right up." Her studio is her "place to dance in the sunlight, to celebrate life." We celebrate this film about Lucas, with only one quibble: Davy's ending to the film seems almost too happily-ever-after for real life. She leaves us wondering where there is for Lucas to go from here—undoubtedly a cinematic ending rather than a real life one.

This 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.

BLOWING HOLES THROUGH EVERYDAY

Sheila Dalton. London, ON: HMS Press, 1993.

THE WORDS I KNOW

Cathy Stonehouse. Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1994.

NO COUNTRY FOR WOMEN

Ann Cimon. Oakville, New York, and London: Mosaic Press, 1993.

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 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 which suggest that something is false 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.

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 contribute to and build on one another. 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 extreme 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 "Illuminations," 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 celebrates female heroes chosen to replace 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,
the rip 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, commitment, 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 *Blowing Holes Through Everyday,* and Stonehouse's *Words I Know,* an autobiographical form. Like Stonehouse, Cimon gives us a central section in which the father is figured as a predator. In "Tapestry," a poem which recalls Rich's "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," Cimon paints a triptych of women's work through the centuries, concluding with two unexplained lines: "terror reserved for the father! who often did not return." In "Childhood 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 "Lipsticks," a variant form of father forbids 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 commercialized sex; an icy stairstep endangers the soul. The speaker in "The Fur Coat" is an anorexic who identifies with the trapped animal and concludes: " Now I am learning to protect what is wild/ and uncivilized, my own nature's will." Her self-protective 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 discovers 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 moment lay still as
the rocks beneath me,
and life swirled like the emerald
seawater
between its carved fingers, inside its rusty throat,
fearless, the tide eternally calling
it back.

The song that is the poem harmonizes 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 another 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 wonder wickedly what Thoreau might make of this uninvited guest.

The argument each of these authors makes (and in the case of Stonehouse's *Words I Know,* powerfully 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 Publishers, 1994.

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 themselves 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 compassionate 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 seriously, 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 children as mere products that need to be able to function in our society, and advocates organic, growth-oriented teaching that makes the needs of children central and equips them with practical life-skills and the knowledge that they can move and change their world.

> Applying the industrial metaphor to education, especially literacy education, has resulted in widespread alienation, inequality, and intellectual and spiritual impoverishment.

The book consists of fourteen essays that can be read consecutively or individually. Each of these essays can stand alone and still convey Neilsen's points; reading the whole book, therefore, 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 research 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, however, means giving up on many opportunities; 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 teachers' 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 experience and intuition and accept that "learning and growth are lifelong activities" whose results cannot be measured by standardized tests. In an attempt to instill professional pride in teachers, Neilsen repeats her keywords "professional renewal," "professional confidence" in a mantra-like fashion—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 phraseology 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 illiterate women in developing countries left me feeling quite uncomfortable. Granted, it is the same patriarchal hierarchical structures that keep women there uneducated and teachers here undervalued and underpaid; nevertheless, I found it quite presumptuous 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 examining their own practice and creating their own truths. And in the spirit of all teachers, whose daily dedication to other people's children weaves tapestries wider and more complex by the year, this hope is enough perhaps to warm a generation.