

to be caught at noon all unprepared to meet the day, could also be 'just a fuckin real good poet.' Now I look back through the armour and remember what it necessarily implies. There is a reciprocity; the best defence is a good offence, the steel can be in the armour or at the core.

These are idea poems, often polemical even in their eroticism, dealing with time-honoured subjects, but from the point of view of woman and mother. There is a triad made up of 'The Poet as Beaver-Elect,' 'The Poet as Process' and 'The Poet as She,' which shows a kind of dialectical progression towards poetic and womanly self-awareness. The poet as Old Mother is a motif running through the whole collection, allowing all kinds of play on that magnificent verb 'to bear' with its connotations of giving birth, tolerating and carrying. This leads to what I consider the major quality of the poems: their wit, their delight in ambiguity, irony and multiple meanings, as in 'There Are No Lovers':

I was born female, born
to suffer my kind, be kind
to others.

No sister gives
me charity,
nuns are discredited.
Brothers ask.

I give
what I, too, a little despise

having nothing else left
to offer in exchange for humanity.

And then there is paradox, as in 'The Way':

... To guard love
is a way of making
it. To make it is a way of ending
it. For us no object
comes between; unnamed
love has no chart or claim,
only the inward
touch as bond, the bearing ground
a birthday to us both
though I die

falling.

A glance back over the quotations I have given, and at 'Listen to the Old Mother,' will show the qualities of metaphysical wit that please me most in this collection. When erotic wordplay turns to jingle in 'Playroom,' 'Reel Gone Jump' and others, I get a little impatient, even though they are fun.

I like these poems and they can speak for themselves. Judging from 'Rhapsody of the Fire-escape,' Helene is moving towards a much looser, narrative form with less obtrusive wit. A certain shedding of the armour.

Rhapsody

How we danced — at fifteen, in the park
that was like a secret place, half-hidden
behind the Children's Library on St. George,
flared skirts hooping our hips. . .

White whirling
flowers we must have seemed, Florence and I,
under the canopy of great elms in the dusk —
while Rose, her new friend,
watched: languid Rose
of the half-closed liquid brown eyes
and long curved neck.

And then — in a time-space just born
he was there, a sudden Byronic boy
on the rim of the dancing wheel,
face ivory in a frame of dark soft hair,
voice a bass chord rich in pedal as
he spoke:

to me! Singled *me* out
in that beginning instant of first love,
tuning the wires loose in my breast and
tightening them
for the arpeggio ecstasies;

as when we climbed
high up the fire-escape
on the side of the four-story building fronting on College
a block east of Spadina,
where the prisoners' voices leaned out summer nights
(their faces, arms, behind the bars a blur of white)
singing, the open windows
carrying the loneliness out as far as a train whistle:

If I — I-I-I had the wings of an angel
Far from these prison bars I would fly

the sadness
ineffable in the scented
humid air already burdened
with longings

... And how the world disclosed
new treasures to me at fifteen, when Danny
who said he was a poet (of course! I hadn't
thought! . . . expecting some embodiment
of music: like poor sensitive Tchaikovsky, or suffering
Beethoven in the novel *Jean-Christophe*) —
and that he was a journalist
for a Communist paper!

... when he, his best friend
"Knopfy" (yes, related to the publisher!) and I
went to see Peter Lorre in *Crime et Châtiment*, my first
foreign film, how I spun
in a new eminence of being
included in their male world of intellect
and friendship, me, a girl
cold with excitement as they walked me home
enthusing, the three of us, the boys
flailing the air with exuberance, paying homage
to youth and
culture — an inheritance I recognized
at once, though all those years in borrowed
books it had lain foetal

of the Fire-escape

in my head, until the film's dark brooding questions brought it home.

Back in my bed

I hugged this blessing
all night long — a joy
confused with a strange new agitation that kept
bubbling up
as from a sulphurous hot springs —
never to let go.

ii

Danny had his own gift, a talent
to dramatize, to transform
a space, any place — a city alley —
into theatre: usually night-deserted settings
where we improvised skits and scenes,
my tongue shedding its shyness like a cast-off skin,
quick and bold in its new power
as we struck lofty gestures, the long shadows
of *chiaroscuro* light thrown by the streetlamps
heightening the intensity,

or when we clowned
starting bells of laughter down the sleep-greyed streets.

Sometimes we played
in a real auditorium — the Labour Temple
on Brunswick, sneaking up past the janitor,
one of us on stage (nervous if it were I, performing),
the other, drama critic:
monarch of the rows of empty seats
...or, tremulous together
outdoors, watched our own dramatic close-ups
in black and white, on the
screen of our tandem wheelings
savouring the moments, the careening
denials of what we felt and wanted.

But though we did hold
hands that time in an immanence
high on the fire-escape, and a first kiss
dreams over the memory (as in a painting
by Kandinsky or Redon), though it might not
have actually come to pass yet, happening later
in the winter dark of Queen's Park, on a bench
snug in the middle of the crystallised
snow, the frostbite air
cheek warm against peach-fuzzy cheek —
the circle of traffic winding its river of light
around our throne as flakes fell slowly
— though this and two three other filmic
sequences remain, still as vivid
as the first reel caught them,
the dance — suspended on a frozen *pas-de-deux*
for two sick weeks that Danny did not call
came to an executed
end.

iii

Rose of the lily-columned neck,
disdainful, throaty Rose

whose utterances could issue forth in sibylline
hisses of hate, or coo and gurgle under a pour of honey
prepared a feast of Beethoven in her parlour
plush with cushions, mauve and rose-silk
lampshades fringed like dark-lashed eyelids
casting an exotic, a mysterious warm glow
as though the tender smile of the
Madonna played there.

This was for Danny,
for they had met again, at the Gallery.
And that night Rose, seated at her piano,
head thrown back, eyes closed, hands
abandoned to the *Appassionata*,
rose up in her ripe virginal passion seducing
both of them — as Danny told it, excitedly
to Knopfy, who
must have told it me, or
how else would I have known
the twist of my first knife?

iv

Florence, my best friend
before this, Florence
whom I'd left behind (as did Rose, too, alas)
was glad to have me back. We joined
the Friends of Music, listening to classical recordings
once a month in courtly homes up Yonge and Eglinton;
took up Spanish dancing, became
inseparable, step paced to step
to keep our balance on the sliding trap-
door of the world's ways.

Danny reappeared
one shocked day,
velvet on the telephone. Said
it was finished with Rose. Two years had passed.
Inside that crypt
where embryos of hope are
left for dead, too fresh for burial, something
lurched. I went to meet him.
Saw he was now
admiring audience only for his own
performance, taking all
the stage. And so, lone mourner at a funeral
I let him walk me, talk me,
earphone for his self-applause until
the swagger of his loveless
mouth on mine
brought home the insult. It was over.

Florence and I stayed
glued — a Siamese twin
for two more years, one half
gnawing at the other till
our growing bones snapped
out of it.

I broke first.
I was restless.
I wanted to live again.

Helene Rosenthal