

SHARON H. NELSON

The Cycle Of The Jewish Year

Rosh Hashanah 1991

Rosh Hashanah:
a new beginning.

The challah, round and glossy,
round as the world, round as life,
is blessed and sliced.

In our house,
we honour the spirit,
not the letter, of the Law;
a woman says the blessing,
wields the knife.

Honey is on the table;
let us prepare
a sweet year.

The apple, fruit of the earth,
I polished with a soft cloth
as my mother's mother did.

I slice it,
careful to cut
a morsel for each mouth.

Let them eat,
first dipping fruit in honey
that trickles on their fingers,
drips on the plates.

Let the food be sweet
as Torah in their mouths.

II

You watch me.
Your eyes
follow my hands,
the way they hold the knife,
the way they cut
semi-circles of apple
as if you'd never before witnessed
fruit being sliced,
as if my hands were magic animals
performing mysterious acts.

All your energy
is gathered, focused

through your eyes.
Energy is heat.

Your eyes eat
my fingers, lick them
with intensity enough
to make the fruit,
the knife, my hands
ignite.

Simchat Torah 1953

On Simchat Torah
the Jews honour the holy books,
the end of one cycle of readings,
the beginning of the next.

They remove the scrolls
from the Ark of the Covenant,
carry them lovingly, one by one,
around the synagogue.

Sometimes the Torah wears a dress, glad raiment,
even a hat with splendid tassels; gold and silver
are the Law's bright coverings.

Old Jews, their faces illuminated by emotion,
wind the edges of their prayer shawls
around their hands.
With the ends and fringes
of their ritual garments
they reach their fingers towards
the embodiment of the Word,
touch the hand wrapped in the talith
to the scroll,
move their cloth-wrapped fingers
to their mouths.

Shabbes, Autumn/Winter 1992

I make Shabbes for you
when you're in town,
an early supper. Winter days
end quickly.

From your seat at my table,
you watch me,
a Jewish woman
in her kitchen
preparing supper.

Sometimes you follow me,
like a child,
from counter to stove.

Shapeless in my clothes,
I salt the soup,
slice fruit
to sweeten your evening.

You follow me with your eyes,
follow the movements of my body.

Under your breath
you mutter to yourself
like an old Jew
perplexed
by a difficult text:
packaging, packaging.



Norma Dvorsky, "Inherited Rituals," charcoal on paper, 92cm x 118cm, 1993.
Photo: François Turchon

Hope For An Early Spring, Purim 1993

I am waiting for Purim,
a holiday
of hundreds
of small pastries,
each one
filled with fruit
sweetened
with honey,
each one made
in the tri-cornered shape
of the hat
of the infamous
Haman;

Purim,
when it is customary
to distribute
sweets and fine baking,
and, as on all Holy Days,
charity;

Purim,
when even women
are called
to hear
the reading;

Purim,
the celebration
of miraculous
deliverance.

"The Cycle Of The Jewish Year," a chapter of The Multiple Meanings of Tongues, begins with a group of poems, excerpted here. It culminates in a midrash, "The Story Of Esther," concerning themes raised by the Book of Esther, Purim practices, and the poems themselves. Does the focus on Esther's beauty obscure the ugliness of her situation? Is preparation of Purim pastries a symbolic re-enactment of the beautifying of women's bodies for male scrutiny? Does "objectification" obscure the power relations implicit in the positions of viewer and viewed in Western art? Might Purim celebrate Jewish women who of necessity dispensed sexual favours and practiced the denial of their identity for the survival of the community?

Sharon H. Nelson's eighth book of poems, *Family Scandals* (1994), follows *The Work Of Our Hands* (1992), and *Grasping Men's Metaphors* (1993), in a series about the interplay of the constructions of language, gender, sexuality, and culture.