

REVIEWS

In the Old Country of My Heart. Agnes Walsh. St. John's: Killick Press, Creative Publishers, 1996. viii, 64 pp., \$11.95, paper, ISBN 1-895387-63-9.

Skinny Dipping. Marian Frances White. Charlottetown, PEI: Gynergy Books, 1996. 93 pp., \$12.95, paper, ISBN 0-921881-39-8.

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"CAN I WALK anywhere without voices?" writes Agnes Walsh in her poem "Oderin." "Although it is the voices I came here for .../they cut too near the bone[.]" These lines typify the intensity and rich layering of head and heart, mind and body, that make Walsh's first collection of poetry a distinguished addition to contemporary verse, in Newfoundland and elsewhere. Walsh's poems resonate with an iconic beauty and sensuousness, and often with stunning imagery. Her writing takes us through a wide range of emotion and offers us much: wild coriander, tired violins, a lover's smells lingering on a poet's blouse. Clearly, Walsh's poems have been crafted with the utmost care, over a number of years.

Many of the fifty-one pieces in this collection interrogate past landscapes. These "old countries" are frequently mapped out as the poet's childhood home of Placentia, the woman's realm of desire and intimacy and, in a smaller group of poems, exotic and hauntingly beautiful old-world Portuguese landscapes. Though not overtly political, Walsh's Placentia poems articulate in a subtle manner the erosion of regional culture at the hands of American imperialism. For instance, in the dreamlike "Night in the Ashes," the poet extinguishes her candle while "pigeons gnaw Mary Brown's chicken bones" and "yet another person/crucifies the St. Anne's Reel." The ironic claim that "I got a french fry cutter and T.V. rabbit

ears/from the shambles of Americana” says much about the legacy of the American presence in Newfoundland, at least as this poet sees it.

Walsh examines the effects of economic imperialism as well, on personal and cultural identity. “The Time That Passes” explores how the vernacular, the personal voice, language and accents of a particular place are eroded by the homogenizing forces of capitalist expansionism. With formidable skill, Walsh sculpts her poem into a container for the vernacular:

If they left it alone, Mike said,
and someone got hurt, then they'd be blemp't for it.
I hold onto before, before our
tongues were twisted around correct speech.

...

I ranted that we're educated into ignorance,
but can get jobs on the mainland
or at radio stations,
our voices do sound so homogeneous now.

But you watch it, my mother said,
it's your tongue too that was dipped
in the blue ink, and do go leaking iambics
all the day long.

Walsh's 'mother voice' reveals how the daughter-poet inhabits a complex and layered country, partly situated in the time before, but also complicit in the world of "blue ink," print culture, technology.

Walsh's language is rich throughout the collection, but perhaps nowhere more than in the poems which deal directly with desire. In a poem like "What is this Air?" the intensity of an Emily Dickinson or an Anne Sexton is glimpsed:

What is this air between us, this space,
the block-solid square of blinding whiteness
that keeps our eyes so firmly locked off each other?

In the room someone moves, leans forward.
Like a speed reader, I devour all I can
of your face in the fraction of a second.

But I don't want this thievery of a coin-sized
glimpse. I know your hands, they are
orphans opening doors.

Where are your eyes? Those black jewels,
camels on a desert horizon,
indigo fingers dipping pearls into night.

These lines exhibit a formidable poetic voice, dignity, and an almost larger-than-life quality, a kind of high seriousness. But Walsh can be playful too, with a puckish, mischievous edge, as in "Falling:" "it is the perpetual motion I love/the never reaching the mission.position." Here, the rejection of heterosexual eroticism is subtle, but forceful, nonetheless.

In *Skinny Dipping*, also a first collection, Marian Frances White undertakes a much more overt exploration of desire and sexuality. Indeed, much of White's volume concerns itself with the themes of lesbian desire, as well as the pain inflicted on women in heterosexual relationships. White's collection is an ambitious one, containing seventy-two poems, subdivided into the following sections: "Open Iris," "Pressure Cooking," "Perry's Cove Revisited," and "March Wind Chimes (Tributes)." Although all the poems in White's collection are of a high quality, one feels that the author's most passionate concerns and her most forcefully articulated poetic insights are concentrated in the book's first two sections.

White devotes considerable energy to inscribing herself within a feminist tradition; numerous poems make reference to Nicole Brossard, Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, Vita Sackville-West, Jane Rule, Betsy Warland, and mythological females such as Aphrodite, Artemis, Selene and Hecate. It is hardly surprising that White, who is well known for her *Women's Almanac*, is so attentive to communities of women.

But White's aesthetic is a highly personal one, too, and she exhibits considerable skill with the confessional lyric. Poems like "Reclaiming the Untitled Self," for instance, reveal the feminist conviction that the personal is political, and that female identities are often most meaningfully inscribed outside of sanctioned institutions. "My quest," White writes in this poem, "is to reach this solid mass/the spirit of which/witch could never be found/in a church."

White attempts a great deal in her collection, as already suggested; her expose of the brutality of patriarchy in rape poems such as "Synopsis" and "I Wish I May I Wish I Might" make stringent demands on the reader. The other side of White's subject matter—her meditations on female spirituality and community—is more palatable, but it tends to be didactic. One can't help feeling that White's 'theorizing' in "On Reading Nicole Brossard," for instance, might have been better suited to a critical essay format. The importance of Brossard to White is already evident in the attention paid to language and its gendered constituents, in *Skinny Dipping*. At times, one wishes that White would adopt a little of Walsh's subtlety.

White works best when she deploys, as she often does, an ironic, humorous voice. In "Reclaiming the Untitled Self," she notes parenthetically, for instance, "(... please do not read *pure*/many of us are recovering Catholics)." Or with poignant irony in "Refined Chinaware," White writes about a broken relationship with a woman: "now I sympathize with people/who use paper plates in summer-time/there is nothing left to break."

Both of these first collections attest to the increasingly rich tradition of women's poetry in Newfoundland. To the poetic contributions made by Geraldine Rubia, Len Margaret, Helen Fogwill Porter, Mary Dalton and Carmelita McGrath, the names of Agnes Walsh and Marian Frances White can be added with confidence.