

Getting the Housework Done for the Dance. Libby Oughton. *Toronto: Williams-Wallace, 1988, Pp. 64.*

Libby Oughton's first collection of poems *getting the housework done for the dance* is the record of a struggle to know and sing the feminine self and its complex myths. Today many men and women want to be literally and literarily feminists. Many only succeed on one of these roads because they end up taking the literal, well-travelled one in their empirical lives. For Libby Oughton this is not enough, she wants to be a good poet, too, and by god she does it. With this work she participates pivotally in the tradition of feminist literature, which as a publisher, she helped establish in Canada.

Oughton was born to write one kind of poem and this is the exploration of feminine subjectivity. Her awareness of the difference between the male and the female and the origins of that difference speaks to us in the very first poem, "and we bleed":

it is because you don't bleed
that you think you can get away
with violent acts clean and unwounded

.....

listen i know blood
like my own heart beating
can you imagine us
taking up arms to shoot
red holes in the living

Here, Oughton already adumbrates what the third part of her book fully develops: the sense of true womanly power, the need to reassert a new authority over the world.

Over the first two parts of *getting the housework done for the dance* persists the theme of threat of male domination through rape, love and domestication of the woman. With personal directness Oughton tells (in "Heh! Paradise") of the ferocious domesticity in which women find themselves ensnarled, a drudgery which leads straight into madness. With captivating honesty Oughton casts an unflinching eye (in "grief and violence") onto the bottomless rage which seizes older women when their men leave them behind for young lovers:

the grief we women grieve
when our lover takes another
bursts in great black torrents
crumbles the wailing wall

"Two little bears" not only parodies savagely the disloyal older man who claims a place in the sun for himself and his young lover, but it also intuites the aching emptiness of the older woman who puts up with this:

He's wearing her highschool ring on his little pinky too. Hope it's small enough to make his finger swell right up. What'll be next—dyeing his hair (what there is of it)? Face lift? It's enough to put me ten feet under. Or him...

"notice to vacate" responds censoriously to this transgressing man who has had "it nice & easy," who has usurped not only the older woman's body, her "wisdom strength & faith," but also her living and financial space:

get out of my building
the apartment i rent you (cheapish)
return
my tables/chairs/dishes/towels/bed/etc
and the money you owe me

.....

so get out
you & the new one will be free
not to worry about the land/lady below

Compassion for all women who suffer is Oughton's real theme, whether it is for the old woman who dies alone on a city park's picnic table ("a lonely end") or for the one who fears impending mastectomy ("on my wall is a painting: woman with cancer at kitchen table"). Out of these "million of women's stories, etched in witches' blood" grow strategies for survival. For with its quick fine sensitivity and intimate sense of things, *getting the housework done for the dance* is also imbued with a fierce determination to assert female power. Its impassioned assertion of women's strength speaks loudest on the final pages of the book. Here the reader sees that the woman who knows "how words flow together" will re-invent the new identity for women. Oughton's prophetically visionary credo of the liberating muse reaches a crescendo in the nautilus metaphor of the penultimate poem and it falls on the last page to a very beautiful and subtle diminuendo:

down
to one fragile rose (or poem)
craving
gentle (unsilvery) rain
to water re/newed gardens
on a women's planet
this time (a)round