

Book Review

Green. Marilyn Bowering. Holstein, ON: Exile Editions, 2007; 98 pages; ISBN 978-1-55094-5; \$19.95 (paper).

The Selected Gwendolyn MacEwen. Meaghan Strimas, ed. Holstein, ON: Exile Editions, Ltd., 2007; material for book clubs and classrooms; introduction by Rosemary Sullivan xxii + 330 pages; ISBN 978-1-55096-111-9; \$32.95 (paper).

Much brings the poetry of Gwendolyn MacEwen and Marilyn Bowering together: a set of literary and natural references that supposes a similar approach to culture and nature, similar rhythms that bring the reader slowly into an intimate poetic universe that, if not tranquil, holds its deep-rooted silences close to its centre. Reading these two collections, it seemed to me that one of the most significant aspects they share is their mindfulness. When MacEwen writes about having “a belief that to live / consciously is holy, while merely to / exist is sacrilege” (62), she is developing Bowering's affirmation that “everything that lives is holy” (30). If the drive towards poetry is in the intrinsically human need to search through questions of existence, self, and meaning, questions to which only poetry seems able to respond, if only tentatively, then these two books lay that need bare.

This selection of MacEwen's work offers a comprehensive view of her evolution as a poet from *The Drunken Clock* (1961) and *The Rising Fire* (1963), written in her very early twenties, to *Afterworlds* (1987), published at the end of her life, and also includes a play adaptation published posthumously. The editor has also wisely chosen to provide additional material: artwork, an introduction by Rosemary Sullivan, questions for students and book clubs, and a bibliography, as well as a fascinating Scrapbook of typewritten letters, photos, newspaper clippings.

One of the particular talents Gwen MacEwen showed in composing her collections is reflected here: each of the publications has its own unique formal and thematic coherence, and yet all of the poetry is unmistakably MacEwen. Frequent references to myth, symbolism, and ancient civilizations (alluding to Greek, Egyptian, and in the 70's, Haida civilizations) layer and enrich her language. They sometimes collide with the domestic present: Helen's husband smokes too much and she portrays Penelope as a fat and lazy homebody; a “motorcycle Icarus” laments that “O baby, what hell to be Greek in this country / without wings, but burning anyway” (73); the peanut butter sandwich becomes “a symbol of itself only” (80). There are the complex relationships between the human and the physical world, in both metaphors from physics (protons, nuclei, an “electric garden” and “magnetic seas” (10)) and in the descriptions of the wild natural world: “jungled flesh” (5), the “loud outspoken flowers” (262) and the “breakfast wastelands” (5), breakfasts, of course, being one of the richest feasts of language for MacEwen, as the reader of her wonderful *Breakfast for Barbarians* (1964) knows.

Not surprisingly, nature is often portrayed as life giving, something to aspire to wards, in Marilyn Bowering's *Green*. As well as Lorca, PK Page, Nicole Brossard and others she acknowledges, there are hints of both Frost (for instance, "Stopping by woods and hills" (73) is a tiny gem of a poem) and Thoreau to reinforce the American imagist flavour of the collection, as well as a fundamentally Canadian ironic perspective on nature. "What wouldn't I give for a life in the woods!" she exclaims (75) and then follows it up by realizing, "Wait a minute, I live in the woods," and suggests that the jungle is encroaching on her home: "the forest leans against my windows;" "My hair straggles over my neck: my car needs washing."

In "Coda: Good morning fellow travelers," Bowering's strongest, most unforgettable verses evoke the essential goodness and wholeness of the world:

The air of the wood is vivid
with bird song:

life's work continues--
a making according to form,

square, level, honest,
of good material, and sound.
(92)

Nonetheless, life in a woods "deeply hidden from myself" (65) also means the loss of family, lovers, and children, a pervasive absence or destruction that extends into her own body:

My body's a mess,
I've missed everyone I've loved,
nonetheless, their love piles up
in me
like a car wreck...
(72)

The brutality of nature and perhaps God is evident, though sometimes subtle, and often directed towards women. MacEwen's disturbing refrain of "dance you, dance / you bitch" (11) also points to the indifference of the male for whom "it's all one thing for you, / cigarette, phallus, sacrificial fire" (73). The darkness can't help but creep in, it seems. However, while MacEwen argues that suffering, which is becoming harder and harder to escape, must be necessary for artists, Bowering moves towards an acceptance that might be transformative: "Like the destruction of selfhood enables / a real self to come into being" (29). One of the poet's prayers is, in fact, that "God help me to bury my ego in flowers, / or in the two rivers that run near my house" (64).

Perhaps it is because we know of the tragic end of MacEwen's life that it is hard not to read the overwhelming loneliness beneath her words, even when they offer a lovely tribute to a life of mindfulness: "When my real love is the mind / moving as a sailboat through the days, / the whiteness and the freedom of it" (12).

Such a comprehensive Selected Works is not only important; it is satisfying. We have an opportunity to travel the full circle of Gwendolyn MacEwen's too-short life, to feel the poet drift away and grasp at wholeness. In a way, despite being less than a decade older than Marilyn Bowering, MacEwen can be read as her foremother, and we are heartened by the discovery Bowering brings to light here: a green optimism that shows the world is ever able to become new and brilliant: "a collision of awakening // that might be a conversation with paradise" (30).

Jo-Anne Elder
St. Thomas University