

DOROTHY LIVESAY

The Love Poetry

Peter Stevens

IN HER SOCIAL POETRY of the 1930's Dorothy Livesay is concerned principally with human fellowship and the poems call for freedom from capitalist tyranny. There is no mention of the problem of freedom for each individual: the question of the roles played in society by man and woman is not raised. I suppose that she had tackled the problem indirectly in the long poem in *Signpost*, "City Wife" but that poem seems more concerned with the personal relationship of husband and wife, not with an examination of woman's role in contemporary life and not in any large sense with aspects of the relative freedoms and responsibilities of man and woman in modern society.

Her later poems, however, show a greater interest in woman's individuality, her need for freedom, her right to exist in her own way. Woman as herself is very much a part of her love poems as we shall see later. The love poems in *The Unquiet Bed* are preceded by a section of personal poems in which the poet concentrates on various aspects of herself as woman. In "Woman Waylaid" she sets up a contrast between the opposing sensitive and practical sides of her nature. In this poem the sensitive side wins out. She prefers to pick flowers, not to collect wood for the cool evenings. So she returns

empty-
handed
to face
pot-bellied stove
its greed.

She makes her choice as individual woman and she is free to make the choice. Although it may mean that she will be uncomfortable in "the cool evenings/by

the lake," at least she has herself made the decision. Too much must not be made of this poem but in the context of the whole book (and the arrangement of the poems and sections of *The Unquiet Bed* is an important aspect of the book) this poem, and most of the others in the second section, are directly concerned in an unpretentious way with the problem of woman's position in modern society. Dorothy Livesay still insists that woman is involved in the natural cycle of growth. In "Sunfast" she sees herself as part of the whole life force symbolized by the sun. She takes in the sun like food; the sun refreshes and re-orders the world just as human beings try to establish patterns. But the poet seems released to some higher mode of life than suburban pattern and order

I am one
 with rolling animal life
 legs in air
 green blades scissoring
 the sun.

In a general way the image of a 'sunfast' is close to images used by Gwendolyn MacEwen, particularly in *Breakfast for Barbarians*. And it is perhaps significant in this context to remember that Dorothy Livesay has written a poem "For Gwendolyn" in which she expresses her feeling that the younger poet could have been her child.

The feeding on nature, the immersion in it as well as the recognition of one's place in it, is expressed in several poems in the second section of *The Unquiet Bed*, for instance, "Process". "Pear Tree" has the same notion at its centre. The tree in this poem becomes almost a symbolic mother, for it hears "children chugging on the chains/of sound/practising language." But the reference in the poem takes on a wider significance, for the tree connects daylight with darkness, and so perhaps foreshadows the idea of union and communication achieved through the man-woman relationship in the love poems:

Lucky this pear tree seeped in sun
 shivering the air
 in her white
 doldrums
 taps with her roots
 the worms' kingdom.

The question of individuality in relation to the male-female principle Dorothy Livesay herself finds so prevalent in her poetry crops up humorously in the poem

“Flower Music”, particularly in the section titled “Peony.” The male neighbour grows peonies easily — the language suggests something rather brutal and violent about the male’s bringing forth these flowers, an attack perhaps on the nature of the peony itself, its virgin purity. The poet herself peevishly resents his success. She has tried to make them flower by using the brute power perhaps associated with the male principle. She has been a tyrant to the flowers but they do not blossom. The poem ends ironically, for she suggests that the man’s masculinity, his power brings forth beauty “so light/so silken.” This sense of opposition and contradiction between male and female, expressed somewhat obliquely in the poem, is very much a part of Dorothy Livesay’s view of human love, and it turns up in the next section of *The Unquiet Bed* which is devoted exclusively to love poems.

BUT THESE LOVE POEMS were not the first that Dorothy Livesay wrote. There are quite a number of love poems in *Signpost*, and it is interesting to look at them now to see how her views on the role of woman have changed. The love poems in *Signpost* are attempts to express the changing moods and emotions of a love affair. They are personal poems but they are also objectified to make more universal statements about love, as Robert Weaver in the Fall, 1948 issue of *Contemporary Verse* suggested. He said that the poems were poems

about love; about the paradoxical, even tragic desire to lose oneself wholly in passion and love, at the same time retain something essential of oneself. The person, invaded, often resisted successfully, or fled. But already, in this microcosmic human relationship, Miss Livesay was being strongly drawn towards identification with something outside of the self.

Obviously, these remarks in some sense could apply to her later love poems, although I think that Dorothy Livesay is much surer of herself as a woman in the later poems so that she can afford to be more open, direct and honest, make the poems in fact much more personal. The early poems still have some romanticism clinging to them, although some of the poems are admirable statements of the wayward passions, misgivings, deceits and contradictions of love. And certainly they are the first attempts in Canadian poetry to express a modern approach to love, even though they are not always successful.

In "Song And Dance," Dorothy Livesay suggests some of the literary and philosophic (if that is not too pedantic a word in this context) motivations behind these early love poems:

Through my twenties an experimentation with sex . . . was simply [a] search for the perfect dancing partner. I had read Havelock Ellis's *The Dance of Life* and I believed of [sic] the consummation of two bodies into one, the merging of the self in other self. Also, it goes without saying, I had read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

The partners in love try to keep each his own individuality, in order to prevent being overwhelmed and overpowered by the other partner. The poet attempts to protect herself by keeping herself close to natural things. This she uses as "armour" ("Weapons") because in love she feels vulnerable but if the other merges with her own essential faith in nature, then she is defenceless. Thus, love can become a kind of struggle for power; it may be impossible to wall oneself in, for love demands openness between partners. This idea is reminiscent of that expressed in other early poems, in which the poet, in talking of the immense external reality in terms of an outer darkness, often used the image of enclosed space within which she kept the darkness at bay. But even in erecting a shell around one, one senses that it is futile. In the same way, love seems to be an enormous force in the love poems in *Signpost* and defences against it are fragile, particularly as love demands frankness and searches out the private sanctities of personality. Even if one of the partners takes refuge in nature, as the poet suggests in "Sun," recognizing the naturalness of love, then the other partner can uncover the whole, can see everything open to his eye as he looks at nature. The poet expresses her love as a purely natural phenomenon:

I am as earth upturned, alive with seed
For summer's silence and for autumn's fire.

Caught in the creative urges implicit in nature, she feels unified with nature but does not wish her partner to recognize her surrender to these primal promptings: "I am all things I would not let you know." But this natural development beyond words is still apparent, so even as she thinks she escapes with a retention of her own self, she is caught by a lover through his acceptance of her implicit union with nature:

I may escape — you hold my body still
In stretching out your hand to feel the wind.

Love is all-encompassing in these poems, so the poet, surrendering to it completely with candour and honesty, lays herself open to attack. The full knowledge of another individual as a necessary part of a complete love leads each partner to be at the mercy of the other. Thus, love is not all sweetness and a bringing forth through union; it can be ruthless. In "Ask Of The Winds" the poet uses details from spring to suggest the awakening of love within her, but she senses the power of her lover, a power which so shakes her that in spite of the emergence of new life, she realizes the ruthlessness and coldness in his love. Indeed, so overwhelming is his strength that often she feels left outside his experience:

What was it, after all,
The night, or the night-scented phlox?
Your mind, or the garden where
Always the wind stalks?

What was it, what brief cloak
Of magic fell about
Lending you such a radiance, —
Leaving me out?

What was it, why was I
Shivering like a tree,
Blind in a golden garden
Where only you could see? ("Alienation")

The notion, then, of distance, a notion that crops up time and again in Dorothy Livesay's poetry, a distance between people, in this case between lovers, is part of the poet's concept of love. She seems to be suggesting that union through love is only momentary and that it includes struggle for dominance. The release from individuality through complete union seems to be too open a position, may bring about such a thorough nakedness of soul as to threaten the very basis of the personality. In "Blindness" Dorothy Livesay uses the image of dancing as a symbol of this ecstatic release but within the poem she expresses the idea that that release is too dangerous if seen by the other partner. It might lead to a destruction of individuality:

You did not see me dancing,
Even then!
Your blindness saves my soul's integrity.

Perhaps the poet is even suggesting that the blindness is an effect of love and so paradoxically the power of love capable of dominating is denied that power

because of the ecstasy of love itself. But the paradox within love becomes more complex in the context of such a poem as "The Unbeliever", for here the poet takes up the problem of individuality again. The poem poses the question of commitment. It suggests that there must be total involvement, no holding back, the state that might menace individual integrity. Yet at the same time anything less than complete commitment leads to failure and lack of communication. As if to stress this aspect, "The Unbeliever" develops by a series of questions. The poet asks why she put no trust in the words of her love; seemingly, she believes that she could retain her own self this way. But it has led to a breakdown. The voice she did not believe is now silent so she is "Quiet now in these lonely places."

In fact, three or four of the poems in *Signpost* are concerned with the loss of love, the moving apart of the lovers. In "Consideration", for instance, the opening stanza suggests how words become weapons, destructive with "biting analysis/Of one another." "A Song For Ophelia" is a simple lyric about loneliness, the sense of desolation after love has broken down. Yet love persists, if only in the memory; sometimes, in spite of the deliberate attempt to forget it, love returns, somewhat shadowy, after its "cobweb image" ("Dust") has been brushed from the heart. The ghost of love returns, seen in objects associated with it — and at such times the anguish of the loss of love returns as well:

Whenever I passed the house
At far, rare intervals
Memory stabbed,
The tree at the gate grieved.

But now, passing it daily,
I scarcely remember —
Pain has a too familiar look
To need the averted head. ("Neighbourhood")

The same kind of feeling is expressed in a poem "Time" which does not appear in *Signpost* but from its position in *Selected Poems* was probably written at the same time:

I opened wide a furnace door
And hot flame seared my face:
I was surprised, that after breach of time
I could not love you less.

Perhaps this discussion of the early love poems has suggested an overly schematic approach on the part of the poet. This is not so. The poems are

attempts to express the varying moods occurring during the course of a love affair with images pointing to psychological states and conflicts. Not all the poems dealing with love in this volume are successful. Some retain a kind of adolescent vagueness of romantic feeling, some strive for ambivalence of meaning which results only in obscurity or, conversely, over-simplification. But on the whole, Robert Weaver's summary of these poems quoted earlier is accurate. They convince as personal statements; they are believable as notations on personal experience. At the same time, however, they reach a certain objectivity because of the tone of directness amounting in most cases to a starkness. The images are not often over-developed; the poems themselves are generally short and to the point, as if the poet — and this is somewhat surprising considering both the age of the poet when she wrote these poems and the general poetic atmosphere in Canada when these poems were published — as if, then, the poet is determined to get to the root of her emotions in order to express them as openly and frankly as possible without making them too private in their connotation. Indeed, the closing poem in the volume, "Protest," is in its series of questions a kind of manifesto about honesty, a pledge of openness and candour:

Can I help it, if the wind
Catches crows and holds them pinned
Across the skyway in a row,
Scaring off the rain and snow?
Can I help it then, if I
Seize forgotten extacy —
Give away closed thoughts of mine,
Hang my secrets on the line?

In view of the association of crows and flight in her poetry with re-birth and release, she may even be suggesting in this poem that a poetry of real honesty is a defence itself against the loss of love, that by expressing it accurately, the poet can retain a good deal of the meaning and joy of the experience of love.

HONESTY AND CANDOUR are essential components of the poems she wrote about her later experience of love in *The Unquiet Bed*, and *Plainsongs*. These poems, stemming as they do from her maturity as both poet and woman, taking into consideration her wholehearted concern about the posi-

tion of woman in society and therefore the integrity of woman in a love relationship, are obviously for the most part more compelling statements than those in *Signpost*.

The poet prepares us for the section devoted to the love poems in *The Unquiet Bed* by closing the previous section, which as we saw earlier concentrated on the individual liberty of woman in personal life, with two poems about the re-awakening of love within woman. And again she expresses this in an intensely personal manner. The first of these poems is "Eve". The poet notices an old apple tree, "the last survivor of a pioneer/orchard" which is "miraculously still/bearing". She stoops to pick up one of the fallen apples, to possess it, to taste it "earth-sweet". And the tree she now recognizes as a symbol of herself:

In fifty seconds, fifty summers sweep
and shake me —
I am alive! can stand
up still
hoarding this apple
in my hand.

She feels this earth sweetness developing within her as an "unwithering" in the second of these poems, "Second Coming". She thinks of blossoms in autumn, colours of growth and purity. Through love she grows to another vital existence, "coming be/coming". This poem prefigures perhaps the insistence on physicality in the love poems which follow. But the titles of both these poems with their general religious implications also suggest that physical manifestations of love, however momentary, may include some spiritual meaning and revelation, and in some of the love poems the spirituality does arise from the physical presences of the lovers themselves, so that the ideas of separation, darkness, silence and distance in these poems take on weightier values because of the context in which they have been placed.

An insistent demand runs through the love poems, a demand that comes from her essential individuality but also a demand that comes from the masculine opposite partner. "Be woman", is the opening line of "The Taming" and in this poem being a woman means being submissive in sexual union but paradoxically that basic femininity has its own strength which will take away some of the mastery of the male. In a way "The Taming" is a poem that emphasizes the give-and-take of love in the strictest sense. The sexual experience puts her at the mercy of the partner:

Be woman. I did not know
the measure of the words
until that night
when you denied me darkness
even the right
to turn in my own light.

The language here suggests that love must be fully acknowledged in the open; woman must give herself in order to release her own womanhood. Although this sounds like the passive feminine element as described in "Bartok And The Geranium", the closing lines of "The Taming" indicate that this release through sexual union in fact gives the woman at least an equality of mastery in the experience:

Do as I say, I heard you faintly
over me fainting:
Be woman.

Thus, the sexual experience makes her face her essential self, her womanhood with both its submissive qualities and its strength. Through the physical experience comes a release from physicality. Woman is not to be considered merely as a physical piece of property. Love must give her freedom to remain herself even within the gestures of submission. "I'm not just bones/and crockery," she says in "The Unquiet Bed". She wants the freedom to be part of a unity, a loss of one kind of freedom in order to release a true individuality. She has held to the idea that

love
might set men free
yet hold them fast
in loyalty.

So love must always "make room for me", the "I", the individual human being, even in the act of union.

In spite of the ecstasies and freedom of love, in spite of the joy she experiences in rediscovering love at this point in her life — see particularly "A Letter" which repeats the image of the tree used in "Eve" and "Second Coming" — the poet acknowledges the terrors, failures, and paradoxes of love. She sees its creative joys but also its abysses, gaps, and silences. "And Give Us Our Trespasses" can be seen as a poem about the dark kingdom of human love.

It is a poem coming out of darkness, involving the darkness and the silence in itself. Love is the swaying form; the first section shows the room of love shaking and quaking. This movement dispels the darkness "at midnight":

a socket
was plunged in the wall

and my eyes sprang open.

Love is beyond words, perhaps a parallel with poetry which tries to catch the more complex beat beneath ordinary language. Speech in love is "out of turn". One must listen. "I heard only your heartbeat." The poet recognizes her inadequacies, a sort of recognition of the impotence of language even in the act of using words. The movement and the image of light breaking returns in the poem's fifth section:

quivering water
under the smite
of sunlight

But after this epiphany there is the return to words, to make sense of the silence and darkness. "The telephone" is "always available/for transmitting messages" but to make the effort to speak is like trying "to push the weight/ of a mountain" so the poem closes with an acceptance of that large area of silence "between the impulse to speak/ and the speaking" for in that area "storms crackle". So we are finally apart in love because of our inadequacies just as we finally have to rely on the silence beneath words because our use of words is always inadequate. There is distance between lovers; there is distance between silence and speech:

Forgive us our
distances.

Images of dream and sleep figure a great deal in the love poems in *The Unquiet Bed*. The poet sees the experience of love as something other-worldly and dream-like ("A Book of Charms"), something beyond words as in a dream ("The Dream"), but at times sleep and dream represent loneliness and distance, as in "The Vigil".

Some poems in *The Unquiet Bed* and *Plainsongs* attempt to describe the momentary blisses and fearful transient qualities of human love. "Old Song", in *The Unquiet Bed*, expresses in controlled and resigned tone the passing of love, the impermanence of a human relationship even though it may achieve harmony

and union. "You cannot hold/what vanishes." Humans must accept transience in love, "Your bones may melt/in me/or in another woman" but that acceptance of momentary things is of the essence of love, for "the essence is/to catch the bird in season." In a later poem in *Plainsongs*, "Con Sequences", Dorothy Livesay uses images drawn from nature to suggest the distances between lovers and also the growth and violent surge of love. When there is no desire in the lovers, then a face "is stone/carved bone" but this hardness can crack and disintegrate through love:

I wait for lightning
an avalanche
to tear the hillside

Underneath the placid surface, love rests, waiting for growth:

Kick the leaves
aside
yellow roots
cry for greening.

So love is a kind of undersurface that rises through the union of sex. Love, paradoxically, is there, both in lack of desire and in passionate response:

The sun shines
on the bald hill
or the lush valley
equally fiercely.

"Four Songs" (*The Unquiet Bed*) expresses Dorothy Livesay's personal explanations about her need and desire for love as a mature woman. She assesses frankly her indulgence in sexual love, trying to counter superficial arguments:

People will say
I did it for delight
you — for compassion

but she establishes in the first song that it was indeed a matter of give-and-take:

*Give me the will, you said
and in return
take from my fill
of passion.*

In those terms, then, people's opinions about this affair were wrong, for

You did it from design
I — from compulsion.

She recognizes the dangers of mere indulgence in passion but she cannot reject the passion, even though it may be quenched for both herself and her lover. The fire of her desire "envelops" her lover; "attracts the moth/and the murderer too". She realizes the double-sidedness of insistence on passion:

Dido knew
this fire
and chose
that funeral.

She finds her passion urgent and insistent, a "hunger." Her body is "blunt" and needs "the forked light/ning of tongues." Her passion is assuaged but "thirst remains" for the gentleness and calm of love. In this third lyric there is an indirect return to the idea of words in "tongues" and the fourth lyric gathers together the images of fire, thirst and words. The inexpressible experience of human love is cooled to the level of words, giving a taste of the sensual pleasure just as a poem in a way gives a sense of the ineffable experience which may give rise to the poem:

I drink now
no fiery stuff
burning the mouth
I drink the liquid flow
of words and taste
song in the mouth.

"The Touching" is another series of lyrics which describes the sexual experience more explicitly. The image of coldness and warmth is repeated as love is seen as a protection against coldness. Love as a kind of violence, a union of entrance and submission, ("pierce me again/gently") leads to completion, to a merging in new life. The joining of man and woman in the sexual experience enlarges the individuality of woman, for the "steady pulse" of the penis she feels as "my second heart/beating".

The second lyric plays with concepts of light and dark, revelation and darkness, submergence in warmth "under the cover" so that love lightens that darkness.

The third lyric repeats the notion of growth, for the poet acknowledges a kind

of re-birth beyond words through love. It releases her into new elements; she becomes “part of some mystery”. She is swallowed within her lover but although she loses her own individuality, she feels herself within a larger, more basic and elemental self:

I drown
 in your identity
I am not I
 but root
 shell
 fire

so that at the moment of climax, that moment of completion and union, she is somehow alone, deep in some underworld of darkness from which she struggles to be born anew. At this epiphany she becomes both mother and child at the moment of birth:

I tear through the womb's room
 give birth
and yet alone
 deep in the dark
 earth
I am the one wrestling
the element re-born.

Here again is the image of isolation in a dark world, the image of violent struggle leading to a break-through to creation. This same image is repeated in “The Woman” (*Plainsongs*), in which she cries for relief, for “the fearful knot of pain” to be untied. She wants release through the climax to the urgency of love:

When you make me come
it is the breaking of a shell
a shattering birth

how many thousand children
we have conceived!

Through love she lives on the tips of her senses. Through submission to her lover her whole sensual life is opened, even though she recognizes that she is in some way held and lost to herself:

never thought me bound
until one night all night I lay
under your will and mind

and heard you play my secrets
over and over in your hand (“The Cave,” *Plainsongs*)

so that

over all
my body's fingertips
day breaks
a thousand crystals (“At Dawn,” *Plainsongs*)

The idea of loss of self, of complete submission in order to reach to the elemental life in which a new self is released opens “The Notations Of Love” (*The Unquiet Bed*). The poem moves into the area of silence in the sense that at one point the poet is accused of being unable to speak of love. There is only cruelty but she sees love as being hard in its strength and asks her lover to take love “the hard way”. Then in “facing the rock” he will feel “the fountain’s force”. This force of love goes beyond age and time. Of the senses it is touch, the joining of flesh that offers its secrets. A finger may trace crows’ feet round the eyes but

the lips stay fresh
only the tongue
unsheathes its secret skin
and bolts
the lightning in.

Thus, lovers come to union through experience beyond words; they are joined across silence and darkness, and even when separated by distance, the substructure of their love can seem to join them at almost a physical level:

especially around
these absences
our minds are twins
they circle and unite
my left arm is your right arm
bound even in flight

The physical union of lovers continues even after the act of love and “The Notations of Love” closes with the idea of continuance beyond sexual love. Out of “the dead/of night” comes light; she has lost one kind of individuality but has gained a new understanding of her essential elemental self:

day or night, I
am undressed

dance
differently.

Paradoxically, the poem following "The Notations Of Love" which closes on the idea of new release and a kind of continuance is a poem that hints at the break-down of love. "Moving Out" uses the dismantling of a house as a symbol of the paring away of love. The physical features of the house make the house, just as the physical love of the lover makes the love so that now she can only

find an upright bed
between your bones —
without the body of your house
I'd have no home.

The poem, then, contains an allusion to the possibility of parting, to the disintegration of love and indeed in *Plainsongs* there are poems which offer a bleak statement of the gradual collapse of love. In "Auguries" the poet drops into the darkness, perhaps that darkness that love can lift her from. Here, however, she waits in the dark and has ominous dreams, waiting perhaps to be broken by love like "a shell in your hand". She finds herself alone in a dark garden, the trees shrouded and black around her. After the presentation of these dismal dreams, there is a stark statement of the denial of love: "you have said no." The poem ends with a series of questions, listing her hopes for a return to love. In the future she wants the dark garden of her dream to become "a green place", where she will be held again in a landscape where "your hands were the sky itself/cupping my body". She waits hopefully to be lifted "on girders of sunlight" out of the gloom of her present state.

Two other poems in *Plainsongs* give indications of the loss of love. In "The Sign" there is a reference to separation, though there is "yet touching". The progress of a log rushing along with the flow of a river, whirled and battered against the banks, sucked under the surface, then swept out of sight represents the vicissitudes of their love, so that, even though the poem ends in a joining of hands, the emphasis in the poem has been on separation, distance and disappearance. "The Uninvited" also suggests that the shadow of a third lies between the lovers, and the poet is conscious at the end of the poem of "another voice/singing under ice."

The closing pages of *Plainsongs* seem to concentrate on the separation of the lovers and the attempt by the poet to assess her situation, to come to terms now with the absence of love. In "Another Journey" she sees herself as escaping from

the captivity of love. She recognizes signs around her in nature that might make her cling to the past: a switchback trail that almost turns back on itself, but she moves steadily upwards, her eyes fixed resolutely in front of her. She may be moving in a darkness, but the poem closes with a glint of light, a return to life:

Night
 spills stars
 into the valley
 I am aware
 of cedars breathing
 turning the trees
 move with me
 UP the mountain.

THROUGHOUT THE LOVE POETRY in *The Unquiet Bed* and *Plainsongs* Dorothy Livesay emphasizes the physical aspects of human love, so it is not surprising that the poem “The Operation” (*Plainsongs*), connects her experience of love and her recovery from it, together with a general reassessment of her situation of her life as she found it at that time.

“The Operation” opens with a sense of crisis. The poet has reached a crucial point in her life, this crisis made all the more emphatic in her mind because it happened after her tremendous experience of love:

And I too
 after the blaze of being
 alive
 faced the wall
 over which breath must be thrown.

Her view of the doctor corresponds to her view of her lover. He is one who uses violence, a knife, to save her. She is a “victim/grateful to be saved,” so she gives herself completely to him.

After the operation the doctor watches over her with “silent white precision” and with solicitude until there grows between them an “intimate flashing bond”. So far in the poem the hospital experience is a kind of parallel with her experience of love, so that her emergence from the hospital is in a sense a re-birth. She must learn to live again; she must learn to face the world of external reality: “I have to breathe deep here/to be alive again”.

The second section is devoted to a meditation about her response to love. She

tries to evaluate it. Just as she has to rely on herself to effect a complete physical cure after the operation, so she must assess her chances in the aftermath of love, which she now sees as “a sickness” which the lovers attempted to cure in many ways: by separation or even by physical indulgence. The disease racked them and at times their sexual union was an effort to effect a cure. Eventually, their separation has led to some kind of cure, at least for her lover, as she now watches him “a well man”, though she herself is still trapped in gloom: “rain/ smirches the pain.” This image suggests that she cannot face her new situation in a clear-sighted fashion and the poem adds further details of poor vision:

I face
 wet pavement distorted
 mirrors

A picture of her lover suddenly breaks into the poem but she dismisses it by the choice of an act of violence:

I decide to complete the operation
 tear myself into four quarters
 scatter the pieces.

This will lead to re-creation, a new life, in “uncoiling/animal sun —/another kingdom.”

The last section of the poem returns to a key image in Dorothy Livesay’s poetry — a doorway — used generally as an entrance to new experience, as a release, a revelation or emergence into some new world. Here, as she stands in a doorway, she takes stock of herself in specific physical terms. She realizes that by an acceptance of what she is now she can rebuild a life. She can now see her lover in an objective light, enabling her to concentrate on her own life:

for now the *he* the *you* are one
 and gone
 and I must measure me.

Thus, she imperatively exhorts herself to grow again, to stretch for the life force of the sun, “reach a dazzled strangeness/sun-pierced sky.”

The process of recovery and the stoic insistence on individual growth are expressed again in two poems as yet uncollected in book form. Both appear in a magazine *First Encounter*, which appeared in 1970. It is significant that both poems repeat images that have been part of the love poetry. “Rowan Red Rowan” takes up the tree image previously used in “Eve”, “Second Coming” and “A Letter”. She sees herself here somehow like a tree

winter enclosed crystal
 pale mouth stiff
 and the smile frozen

But there are bright berries on the tree. Still, the numbness she feels is perhaps a kindly numbness because spring, like a time of new growth, may release her frozen tears:

I cannot cry till the far green time
 when the hills loosen
 and the tears in streams rove through my veins
 into frenzied blossom.

The long hard look she has been forced to take at herself is the subject of the other poem, "Fancy!". Her self-regarding has revealed some undesirable features to her. It has made more aware of her "burdened body/the shrivelling eyes/the withered chin". Yet the poem closes with an image of life:

Yet still I live! move with the dancer
 stamping within.

So she has emerged from crucial experiences not unscathed but with knowledge and with a stoic evaluation of her own life. The sequence of the love poems in *The Unquiet Bed* and *Plainsongs* are the most candid revelations of the experience of love as seen by a woman in Canadian poetry. Some poems fall short of their aims because the poet seems more concerned with poetic theories about form and lining. Sometimes the structure of lining seem arbitrary, although in most cases the use of broken short lining together with rhyme, half-rhyme and assonance mirrors the changing and breathless quality of the experiences themselves, as well as rendering some sense of the spirituality of the experience, for the best poems in the sequence seem enclosed in suspension, caught in an ecstatic calm. At other times the poet mars a poem by making the reader too conscious of an image, so that it becomes for him a conceit, a rhetorical device that militates against the tone of honesty and directness in most of the poems. There is occasional over-emphasis and repetition, even (though rarely) an indulgence in romanticism and sentimentality. But these are only minor blemishes on an otherwise distinguished set of poems.. They are examples of the very best in Dorothy Livesay's later work in which she is not afraid to be intensely personal and frank because she is able to express her feelings immediately and yet objectively so that she herself is subjected to the appraising and critical apparatus she uses in her own poetry.

CATALONIA

Dorothy Livesay

THE FLAG of darkness lowers at half-mast
blotting the blood-stained hieroglyphs from eyes
strained from the smoke, the flares, the rat-tat-tat
of guns' incessant bark. A sudden lull
fans wind on brow, recalls from far off hills
the ones who rest . . . oh unbelievably
a girl who rests tired head on easy arm
and sleeps encircled by her own heart-beat.

But we, grey snakes who twist and squirm our way
from hump to sodden hump, roll in a hole
of slime, scarring our knees to keep awake
(earth's fermentation working overtime).
Horizons reel, groping for an axis,
stars burn in whirling rockets overhead —
we wrench ourselves over the last trench, down
down, down in scurrying scramble tossed
towards lost lines, lost outposts, lost defence . . .

THE CAPTAIN of the third brigade
sprang from a hillock where he peered
into the flare-lit dark. He crouched
and doubled up, ran to a gunner's nest.
"They've quit" he hissed. "They've left the ridge
and swarmed to cover, in the wood . . .

Thirty years ago the last great battle of the resistance by the Loyalist Government of Spain and the International Brigades against the invasion of General Franco took place in Catalonia. Short news reels of the battle, newspaper reports, letters from Mackenzie-Papineau Brigade volunteers from Canada provided the background for this poem, written in spring, 1939. It was never published, probably because in Canada there were no magazines or quarterlies interested.

Background information on the political events which stirred those times has been admirably documented in "Unamuno's Last Lecture", by Louis Portillo, published in Cyril Connolly's Horizon.

D. L.

The tanks? they've left the bloody tanks
 defenceless . . . wounded men will be inside."
 Then Sorensen came up. He'd seen
 the tired retreat from our right flank.
 Tall, lean — as a stripped tree —
 he hung above the captain, panting words.
 "What's that?" The captain thrust a fist
 in the man's face. "You mean it, Sorensen?"
 "I'll go" the lean one said . . . and down
 he slithered on his knees, towards the tanks.

INSIDE a tank the smoky darkness lurched
 and stupidly the air, acrid with oil,
 clutched at a face. It shoved his nostrils in,
 clung to his palate with a gritty clamp,
 branded his lungs. He choked and coughed
 tried to restrict his chest from heaving rasps —

crouched on the floor, head thrust against steel wall.
 And now again pain stung his shoulder-blade
 his arm, still bleeding, hung beside him limp —
 a stranger's arm. He looked at it, and saw
 himself the same, inertly cut away
 from human contact, blood of brotherhood.
 The sweat broke on his brow, the blood closed down
 against all sound of guns. He swayed, and fell.

THE BOY he fell upon stirred from his dream,
 moved, and felt out the knife-wound in his side.
 The soggy bandages were now a wad
 of blood, clotted and warm; the quivering flesh
 throbbed like a heart-beat pounding through the room . . .
 his room at home so clear now in his mind
 shuttered with slanting shafts of light, the chinks
 of day on rosy plastered wall, his chairs
 hunch-backed, the cool tile floors with candle-grease
 scattered in silver coins beside the bed . . .
 But O, that voice . . . what voice sang out to him
 screaming in siren tones, Arise, awake,
 stand up and strike, strike back and shoot,
 shoot till the last strip fumbles in your hand — ?
 till silence huddles in the muffled tank.

The tank! He rose up, leaning on one arm
 then crawled away from his companion's side.
 The fumes, the oily fumes, spluttered within his brain
 but dragging himself up, he reached the slit
 and peered outside. The earth still seemed to heave
 with showers of fire still bursting from its bowels.

Then something moved, a shadow writhing low
 upon the ground; and Sorensen burst in
 upon the tank, gasping and hurried, thrusting bandages
 towards him, helping him stand up and breathe.
 "The other soldier's dead." They took his gun

and letters spilling from his pockets, these
the two remembered. Then ploughed on to find
the next tank, and the next, where other men
lay trapped and helpless, ammunition gone.

NOW WE RETREAT in better order, confident
of gun on shoulder, captain in command.
The wounded swing in swift-made hammocks, safe
from guttering death or prisoner's assault.
And as they move others are marching down,
people are shuffling down the roads of Spain
bundled with babies, chattels, cooking-pots
a donkey-load of warmth; a basket, light
with bits of bread, dried beans, remains
of other hasty meals, swallowed between
the zoom of air-raids over village streets.
People are marching with all song
gone out, all sunlight flattened grey
upon their faces; now in steady haste
pushing ahead to valleys where the mountain shade
leans kindly down, where snow
looks good to sleep upon. No winds can blow
more fiercely than a bomb, and winter's frost
will pierce steel needles lighter far to bear
than thrust of shrapnel splitting under skin.

People are marching, marching, and they meet
the tattered tunics of the soldiers, some of whom
walk bare-backed in the cold. A woman stops
and gives a shawl, a skirt for covering
for soldiers on ahead, who march to make
a further stand.

Though darkness fall once more,
a tattered flag, the men will stand upright
spirit sustained, the floor of Spain
a ground not tilled in vain with blood

with bones of young men scattered far;
not fertilized in vain, O grey-green gloss
of olives, wind-bent on a hill, of earth
supported by the vineyards' yield, and wheat
crisp in the sun. No more sterility
or drouth or barrenness is yours
O rolling plains; who make a covering now
for breath and bone; for growing hands
whose fingers work beneath the roots, to burst
out of the earth again, another spring!

1939