

Laike and Nahum: A Poem in Two Voices

Ruth Panofsky.

Toronto: Inanna Publications, 2007.

Reviewed by M. Louise Ripley

Laike and Nahum: A Poem in Two Voices is a beautiful volume of poetry inspired by the lives of the author's maternal grandparents. Fictionalized voices portray motherhood as a sustaining thread through a story that follows the lives of the title characters who flee Russia in the early 1900s and settle in Montreal where they marry and raise a family.

Although she is scornful, Laike's mother makes room in her flat for her daughter and the cousin she must marry due to an unexpected pregnancy. Later, when Laike gives birth to a son in the cold of her own rented rooms, her sense of loneliness resonates with every mother: "The euphoria / of privacy / passes / long hours / alone / with the baby" (38).

Bearing another five children during the Depression, Laike voices a mother's deepest fears: "[p]alate dulled / plate bare / I struggle to keep / children healthy / and sated" (41). With money scarce, Laike takes in boarders. When her husband turns down a promotion because his Socialist pride will not allow him to assume the "burden of responsibility / for another's wife and children" (41), Laike asks, as the mother of his hungry children, "what pride have I, Nahum?" (42).

The spare, narrative poem follows the couple through years of unrelenting poverty and the agony of a tiny son plunging to his death from their tenement balcony, witnessed by five-year-old Hannah, Laike's only daughter, who afterwards turns from her mother, cold and distant. In this deeply personal story told in two alternating voices, only two brief poetic interludes refer to cataclysmic events taking place outside the life of the couple—"Synagogue whispermings / of crematoria" (64) and "Acrid fumes / from Hitler's ovens / drift overseas" (65)—but the book does not suffer for this; it is indeed its greatest strength.

We see some lifting of the burden of poverty as Nahum finds work "at union wages" (63) and when the children are grown, Hannah working, still at home. She "indulges / a longing / for cashmere" but Laike admits, "without her / wages / we could not manage" (70). Hannah marries, but her husband beats her children. Laike is distraught — "Hannah's sobbing / sears my heart" (72)—but after years of being shunned, she is unable to tell her daughter what she longs to say, "*come home*" (73), a reflection of the archetypal stubbornness of mothers and daughters. When Nahum finally urges, "*you must yield / to your daughter*" (98), Laike writes, "*my dear Hannah / can you ever / forgive my silence*" (84), and mother and daughter are reunited.

The last line of the poem encapsulates the power of motherhood. As Nahum describes his daughter seated at the kitchen table having tea with her mother, Laike reads her tea leaves and sees a happy future; Hannah turns to her father and announces: “*you see, Pa / I told you / if Ma says, / it’s true*” (101).

Laike and Nahum is a gentle and moving book that tells a story of motherhood, love, and survival.

We, The Women

Merle Nudelman.

Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2006.

Reviewed by Rosie Rosenzweig

Merle Nudelman’s first volume of poetry, *Borrowed Light*, probed her personal history. Now, in *We, The Women*, the poet examines specifically female subjects, including pregnancy and childbirth (even losing weight after delivery), children, mothering, dinner with mothers-in-law, and the inevitable memories of her own mother. She also limns the tender vulnerability of a young molested girl, as well as the mature career women molested under the corporate guise of billable hours.

The poignancy of “Variations of the Last Time” that she saw her mother, and “Mama Loshen,” about the native language of her mother, both rekindled memories of my own immigrant mother in Windsor, Ontario. Nudelman evokes her mother’s mother tongue of Yiddish:

I fit our words like puzzle pieces
into the sounds I knew,
stored these clues of meaning
inside my own secret cache.
I clicked them on to light your stories –
My lanterns into your Slavic wilderness.

Nudelman ranges widely across poetic form. Her repertoire includes lyrics, sestinas, pantoums, concrete poems, some modified sonnet forms, even a ghazal. Her adroit use of repetition showcases her natural cadence and rhythm.

The title poem, “We, the Women,” describes women as

tender repository of people-eggs,
tucked within like so many snug peas.
Calm spheres, each waiting her turn