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"HOW SILENCE SINGS" IN THE POETRY OF DOROTHY LIVESAY 1926 - 1973

In the forward to *Collected Poems—The Two Seasons*, Dorothy Livesay makes two observations: first, that the poems "create a psychic autobiography", and second, that "always one or more of these symbols occur: the seasons, day and night; sun, wind and snow; the garden with its flowers and birds; the house, the door, the bed." Although these symbols remain constant, both the psychological dimensions which they reveal and the poetic techniques which Miss Livesay uses, change. Consequently, the *Collected Poems* creates not only a "psychic autobiography" but also a record of the changing techniques fashionable in Canadian poetry over the past forty-six years.

The epigraph from Blake which prefaces these poems suggests that they may be classified under two general headings—the "Child's Toys" and the "Old Man's Reasons"—but the poems themselves fall more naturally into three groupings with respect to the psychic stages represented. Those in the first group—and these include the earliest poems, written before Miss Livesay was nineteen—reveal a sense of growing self-awareness and concomitant sense of mystery; those in the second group, a sense of the collective "other" and an awareness of social ills; those in the third, a mature realization of the "separateness" of the self, an almost pagan exultation in nature and sexuality, and a passionate desire for fulfillment. Common to these three groups is a feeling of the inadequacy of human relationships, a restless search for satisfaction, an impatience with restraint—and a technical skill which ensures that the reader, too, is made aware of the "music behind the rhythm of the words." Also common to these three groups is the image of "silence"—a symbol which the poet does not include in the foreword but one which serves in part to "create a psychic autobiography" and

to disclose a facet of the poet frequently overshadowed by her more vital imagery.

The poems in the first group include those from *From Green Pitcher* to those from *The Garden of Love*, written when the poet was between fifteen and twenty-three. These are the poems of self-discovery, the tentative recognition of one's "otherness" which characterizes youth. Somewhat paradoxically, this recognition of the self as "separate" is accompanied by a recognition of the self as part of a mysterious unity, and the psychological tension which prevails throughout most of the later poetry is established here in the conflicting desires of preserving one's "separateness" and at the same time achieving "unity"—a conflict the poet is unable to resolve satisfactorily. Awareness of separateness and unity first comes to the poet through the world of nature. Finding a stone "grey with water's passion", she intuits the commonalty which exists between the individual and the objects of her surroundings:

I found a stone
And was shaken, suddenly
Discovering myself. ("The Forsaken")

This sense of identification with the world of nature anticipated the Black Mountain theories concerning man's place in the universe or "objectism" by nearly forty years and is even more explicitly stated in "Hermit", written when Miss Livesay was still in her teens:

Take silence now. You think I'm lonely, yes:
Because, near to the land as you have to be,
You do not feel yourselves at one with it.
You have grown out of it, forgetting that
Man has a kinship with each stone, each tree
Which only civilization drove him from:
If he returns, he'll find no loneliness.
Instead, a silence lifted from the heart
Which in a certain way, bears questioning.

The feeling of "kinship" with nature in these early poems approximates a mystical intuition, and the mood which predominates is one of wonder and contemplation. In "The Invincible" Miss Livesay states,

In the dark garden
I hear strange rhythms
Rising and falling,

but the image or "symbol" which occurs most frequently is that of silence. Like the silence in "Hermit", that in Miss Livesay's poems "bears questioning" for what she listens for and hears in "silence" changes in the course of her poetry. While the recurrent symbols noted in the foreword trace the development of the passionate and vibrant woman, "silence" reveals the poet as "listener" and sensitive observer, complement to the "lovely whirling girl / Laughing her errant laughter" and to the woman who goes "walking running / leaping in the sun."

At first, the "silence" in the early poems is that of nature as the poet's growing awareness of herself is accompanied by a growing awareness of what Hopkins recognized as the "dearest freshness deep down things". She responds to the intense silence of beauty, asking

Give me such silence in a little wood
Where grass and quiet sun
Shall make no sound where I have run,
Nor where my feet have stood. ("Such Silence")

In the contemplation of "little things", she finds both herself and the restorative qualities of nature which are to sustain her throughout her life:

I have been lost
These many springs:
Now I can hear
How silence sings. ("Secret")

The songs of silence are varied, however, and often analogous to those silences found in the world of people:

...Not a robin sings
And plaintive silence, like a child grown still
From too much weeping, wearily now rests
Upon each drooping grass, each dusty leaf. (August ii)

Although "plaintive silence" suggests that the poet is projecting the melancholy that adolescent girls are prone to affect, it also suggests a sensitivity in the poet to the moods of nature and of people. In keeping with the adolescent's awareness of feminine potentiality, there is an indication that "silence" also suggests the fecundity of approaching womanhood responding to the fundamental rhythms in nature:

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

The anticipation of maturity and the recognition of herself as woman rather than as child for whom "beauty was imperative" is now wholly pleasurable. It is accompanied by the realization that suffering will be her lot, anticipating "the marriage never long delayed / of pain with singing ecstasy." Thus the nature which she first viewed with wonder and with which she felt an affinity is tried and found wanting—although it will sustain her, it can never satisfy completely:

This beauty that only the eye spelled,
 Would it be strong enough to answer pain?
 From morning into darkness are we sent. ("Growth")

Her sense of "otherness" becomes painfully acute. Paradoxically, it comes from that world which initially provided her with the feeling of "unity"—and there is an implicit feeling of betrayal when she recognizes the reality of her situation:

Encased in the hard, bright shell of my dream
 How sudden now to wake
 And find the night still passing overhead,
 The wind still crying in the naked trees,
 Myself alone, within a narrow bed. ("Reality")

Here, the absence of "silence" in the world of nature leads the poet to the awareness of another silence, that of the vacuum which now exists in her human world where she is "alone, within a narrow bed". Furthermore, she has become more observer than participant in nature—and although she will use objects as the sun, flowers, and mountains throughout the remainder of her poetry, they will never be seen with quite the same sense of wonder as they were viewed in these early poems. Like Wordsworth's child "trailing clouds of glory" she has heard "how silence sings". She has also recognized the "shades of the prison house". It is not surprising then, then, that the poet views "silence" as the means of escaping a future which she senses will be painful, asking:

Lie me safe on lonely northern ground
 Safe in the snow;
 Wrap me in silence, let me not ever know
 When the sun burns, nor whither flies the crow. ("The Shrouding")

Although the world of nature provided Miss Livesay with much of the subject matter for these earliest poems, she rarely descended to the merely "descriptive". Rather, she used nature in such a way that while it was realized in vivid detail as existing in its own right, it also functioned as metaphor for the complex and paradoxical poet, who as "listener" heard that

...the voices of gulls
 Were human, piercing and anguished
 As of someone lost, calling vainly to another
 Then silent for a moment, listening
 To the faint anguished echo...("The Gulls")

yet was filled with such irrepensible *joie de vivre* that she "leaped up and danced" and "running and shouting...plunged away from the wind/ Out with the gulls through the warm, thundering water."

The sonnet "Threshold" serves as transition for the remainder of the poems of the first grouping. Written when the poet was barely into her twenties, it reveals her

Balanced for this brief time between the thought
 Of what the heart has known, and must yet know.

Up to this point, "what the heart has known" has been learned chiefly from the observation of nature. The poet has heard "how silence sings" and has progressed from simple wonder to the realization that in this silence she is restored to herself. It has also become the means whereby she would escape from the "burning sun" of reality. Most important, however, it has provided her with the knowledge that she requires more than nature for self-fulfillment—that the "unity" which will satisfy is not to be found here. Consequently, while nature and silences continue to pervade her poetry, they change in function and kind. What had been the source of wonder and contemplation becomes the means of self-protection, for the poet has recognized her vulnerability:

Lest I be hurt
 I put this armour on:
 Faith in the trees,
 And in the living wind. ("Weapons")

Ironically, this choice of "weapons" proves to be a double-edged sword—while it "protects" her separateness, it also isolates her from

others. In "The Difference" the poet's instantaneous response to a "falling flame, a flower's brevity" is not shared, and she complains "Your way of loving is too slow for me." Although the poet is to experience many encounters in love, for the most part they prove transitory and the reader senses that only one who has "proclaimed her faith" and "invaded her skies" can satisfy her, that only when the mystical experience of the earliest poems is shared will she be able to achieve "unity" with another. As the poetry moves from the world of nature to the world of people, there is an indication that happiness and a fulfilling relationship depend somehow on a union of these two worlds. As "Song from The Multitudes" demonstrates,

Not until the mad impossible day
Arrives, when you and I return again
To the wide heaven and the farstretched earth,
And know ourselves through knowing quietness.
Not until then, dear love, will there be joy
To cover us with gold, a sun-like web.

Nearly all of Miss Livesay's poetry has an undercurrent of intense loneliness, and one is reminded of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's lines: "Making a poet out of a man: /The true gods sigh for the cost and pain..." Part of the "cost and pain" where Miss Livesay is concerned appears to come from her inability to find others who have shared her experience of nature. Those who "shut out evening from their eyes" as do the farm people of "Prince Edward Island", have also excluded the poet. She feels alien to a people who

...do not linger to hear the slow moving of hooves
The soft breathing of friendly cows among the grasses
Or the soft thunder of a young calf, startled
At wind caressing a grove of birches...

Thus the "silence" of which she writes now is frequently that of loneliness and regret, as in "The Unbeliever":

Could I have thought there was something
For my heart to gain
By running away untouched, unshackled,
Friends only with sun and rain?

Because she has been unwilling to relinquish part of what she knows of her "separateness", she has placed herself in a position where she must acknowledge:

Quiet now in these lonely places
 I listen for your voice—
 Yet why? When in my heart lay knowledge
 In my own mind the choice.

There is, however, another “silence” which is neither that of nature nor that of loneliness, for the poet experiences the intensity of a shared moment where the “silence” is that of unity:

I never knew much about silence
 Until I knew
 Your silence over mine,
 Your breath blowing mine out.
 Then the night flowed in
 And our one listening heart
 Pounded the question. (from “The Garden of Love”)

The response of the poet to this last “silence” is to find analogies in the world of nature. “Joy” has led her to “know to what tune the earth blossoms” while “terrible, beautiful loving” leads her to identify with the tree:

I have struggled upward toward the light
 And born the wind in my branches—
 Grown upward with the wind.
 I have lain still in a delicate rapture
 I have been wordless before a sudden peace. (from “The Garden of Love”)

Despite the intensity of the “silence” of sexual union, the poet is not satisfied. Somehow, both human love and the natural world are inadequate:

I think I have not learned
 Not yet
 Not after all this living
 Love by itself.

Up to this point, the “psychic autobiography” created in the poems by silence reveals the gradual progress from sensitive adolescence to equally sensitive young womanhood, and a change in focus from the physical world to that of man. The poet still recognizes herself as “separate” and still intuits a “unity”—but no solution has presented itself to reconcile these contraries. At the end of this first group of poems she has yet to learn “love by itself” which even the “one listening heart” of sexual union could not provide. This union did not supply an answer—rather, it “pounded the question”.

That nature in these early poems is more than a convenient metaphor may be inferred from the fact, already noted, that it is seldom used for simply descriptive purposes. Almost invariably the poet recognizes—or intuitively—that she has some elemental and mysterious kinship with it. Similarities have been noted between the metaphysics of such writers as Thoreau and D.H. Lawrence,¹ where Miss Livesay's poetry was shown to demonstrate both Thoreau's conviction that "wholeness of being came through an acute sensual awareness of the physical world" and his "awareness of his fusion with the natural elements", and Lawrence's thesis that "the act of sex unites man with the cosmos." Although these parallels do exist, Miss Livesay's "metaphysic" is neither that of Thoreau nor that of Lawrence, for what her early poems make clear is that neither nature nor sex can adequately achieve a "fusion with the natural elements" or "union with the cosmos". The early poems suggest that Miss Livesay's experience of nature was mystical, and similarities can be seen between these and the writing of St. John of the Cross which suggest that Miss Livesay, initially at least, was potentially a mystic.

The poems of the second group are those which demonstrate the poet's concern for the collective "other" and an awareness of social ills. Although recognition of the "other" is a normal stage in the process of maturation, one wonders if what Miss Livesay failed to find in the physical world or the world of the individual, she next sought through a concern for "others". For the most part, these poems of the second group were written during the poet's "middle period" when she was between thirty and forty.

Miss Livesay uses a variety of technical forms in her poems of social protest and, from the point of view of technique, they are impressive. In my opinion, however, these are the least satisfying poems in the collection, for they lack the conviction of the more personal poetry. Perhaps Miss Livesay is naturally a "private" poet and therefore her "public" voice sounds contrived. Perhaps social conditions have changed so radically over the years since these poems were written that the particular form of protest in them has become *passé*. Perhaps, too, social indignation is best served by satire—and Miss Livesay is not particularly satirical. Whatever the reason, these are the only poems in the collection which appear "dated"—at times, they also appear ludicrous. In "In Green Solariums", for example, the unwed mother

newly converted to "solidarity" awaits the "birth of the International", saying,

Yet it will come! I watch the city sleep
 And wake each morning with a wider look,
 A restlessness of movement, a hoarse shout,
 That sometimes hurls defiance down a street.

The poet does not make it clear just whose is the "hoarse shout"—and such ambiguity is so rare in her writing that it comes as a surprise to the reader. Furthermore, since the reader has been led to expect the birth of the illegitimate child, the news that the "International's born" has a bathetic quality probably not intended. Similarly, a poem with such lyrical passages as

Once only did I sleep with you;
 And sleep and love again more sweet than I
 Have ever known; without an aftertaste.
 It was the first time; and a flower could not
 Have been more softly opened, folded out.
 Your hands were firm upon me: without fear
 I lay arrested in a still delight—
 Till suddenly the fountain in me woke...

has the incongruous title "Comrade". Despite the concluding lines

But sealed in struggle now, we are more close
 Than if our bodies still were sealed in love

the reader is not convinced that the poet really believes this herself. It would appear that the "union" the poet is seeking is not that to be found in even the most idealistic of social movements—and for one so jealous of her "separateness" such an attempt must have done violence to her nature. That it caused her to do violence to the world of nature is clear from the unfortunate image in "Speak through Me", where the poet invites the mountains with their "granite wisdom" and "walled heart of patience" to speak through her and "mention the small life quivering in its armpits". If "granite wisdom" were to speak, it is doubtful that the "small life quivering in its armpits" would be the subject of its discourse—and the poet's suggestion that the mountains "mention" such a ticklish topic seems wildly inappropriate and rather indelicate.

In fairness to the poet, one must acknowledge that she recognized the inadequacy of her poetry to voice social protest:

But I can't stretch a hand out yet
To someone I have never met

And shout the answer, stride the wall
Crying, here is room for all.

I am a coward yet, the task
Is too stupendous that you ask. ("Depression Suite")

Whatever the reason for the weakness in these poems of social protest, it is not "cowardice" in the poet. From the manner in which she still drew her imagery from the world of nature, even in such a poem as "An Immigrant", one realizes that the disparities between the "silence in a little wood" of the poet's youth and the depression world of the thirties were keenly felt. In such imagery, the reader recognizes the sensitive mystic of the early poems. However, there is room for neither poet nor mystic in a depression, and one must admire Miss Livesay for having tried to protest, in the only way she knew, the injustice and insensitivity she recognized. Unfortunately, many of these poems contain the vocabulary and rhetoric of organized protest—"comrade", "solidarity", "bosses"—and their emotional impact is dissipated and the poet's voice made impersonal. The reader has the impression that the poet is "observer" rather than "participant" in the events of the depression.

The image of silence is rarely used in these poems of the second group, for the situation in which the poet finds herself is chaotic and frenzied. In such a situation, "silence" becomes that of human indifference to suffering, even suffering itself, as in "Day and Night" or "Queen City". The familiar silences of nature still exist, however, and by contrast are the source of restoration and peace. Like the Psalmist who would "lift up his eyes to the hills from whence cometh his salvation", so would the poet. Her "salvation" during this period comes in remembering what she had known in her youth:

...Speak through me, mountains
Till the other voices be silent
Till the sirens cease and guns muffle their thunder.
Till the monstrous voice of man is sheltered by quiet—
Speak through me, speak till I remember
Movement in the womb and green renewal
Sundrenched maples in September
And the sweep of time as a gull's wing slanting. ("Speak through Me")

Although many of the poems in this second group imply a sense of restlessness and dissatisfaction, suggesting that the world of the "collective other", too, had been tried and found wanting, not all the aspects of the poet's psychic autobiography during this period are frustrating. In what must be one of Miss Livesay's most exultant poems, the subject is the "furtive, insistent: /recurrent, imperative...knocking/ the terrible knocking" of her son. What she had foreseen much earlier would be the "marriage" of "pain with singing ecstasy" is realized in this poem. The physical pain—"Bare body wracked and writhing/ Hammered and hollowed. To airless heaving"—is replaced by "singing ecstasy" as her son is born:

Rising and soaring
 On into high gear...
 Sudden knowledge!
 Easy speedway
 Open country
 Hills low-flying
 Birds up-brooding
 Clouds caressing
 A burning noon-day...
 Now double wing-beat
 Breasting body
 Till cloudways open
 Heaven trembles:
 And blinding
 searing
 terrifying cry! ("Serenade for Strings")

This experience has been so intense for the poet that the "firmament is riven" and the frustration and dissatisfaction implicit in so much of the poetry written during this period is forgotten. What she had intuited as part of the creative process of nature she has realized within herself—she has brought "seed" to fruition:

Now it is done.
 Relax. Release.
 And here, behold your handiwork:
 Behold—a man!

This poem marks a subtle change in the poet's attitude toward the "other". Having been participant in a fundamental and "natural" process, she becomes more participant than observer in the world of

"others". There is a new empathy in her poems from this point on and a sense of the poet's more personal involvement where others are concerned. Her attitude now is more one of sympathy with the oppressed—as in "Call My People Home"—than one of censure against the indifference of the "collective other".

"Silence", too, reveals a new dimension. In "Inheritance" it becomes the legacy of a "sad parent" whose "burdened brood" will "face the day, the dark; housed in a quiet mind." Here it is consonant with understanding, and marks the poet's realization that she is herself a "collective other", for the "rooms" of her mind and heart are peopled—in this poem, by her father. Implicit here is awareness of a "separateness and unity" which involves human "roots" and is as mysterious and paradoxical as that which she had intuited in the world of nature. The experience of motherhood had also given a new dimension to the poet's awareness of social ills. Now she would mourn "desecrations done"

Not on the lovely body of the world
 But on man's building heart, his shaping soul.
 Mourn, with me, the intolerant, hater of sun:
 Child's mind maimed before he learns to run. ("Of Mourners")

The poetry of this period thus creates the "psychic autobiography" of the poet as mother. This role has acquainted her with "pain and singing ecstasy", as we have seen. It has also given her deeper understanding of her own parents and fresh insight into herself. Further, it provides her with new topics for her poetry and a new "collective other", for she has been led from the particular and individual provided by her own children to the universal which embraces all children. The realization in her early poems of the commonalty which exists between the individual and the objects of his surroundings is extended, for the poet now recognizes the commonalty existing not only between child and adult but also between the world of the child and the world of nature. She sees that children's talk is "bird brief, irresponsible" but

Their song is man's
 Own early voice
 Heart free and eased
 Throat seized
 With tremors of light
 Sun's scale from branch to branch
 Storming delight. ("Small Fry")

While children are a "source of delight" for the poet, they also set limitations to her freedom:

She cannot walk alone. Must set her pace
 To the slow count of grasses, butterflies
 To puppy's leap, the new bulldozer's wheeze
 To Chinese fishman, balancing his pole. ("The Mother")

Such limitations are not onerous, however, for implicit in the poems for and about children is the poet's satisfaction that she has chosen

...To sit, to hear
 The day's confessions eased from tired tongue,
 To soothe the small lids down to drowsiness
 Till childhood sleep perfumes the darkened room.

The strain of loneliness present in so much of Miss Livesay's poetry is missing from that which reveals the poet as "mother", and the reader senses that the peace implicit in these poems comes not only from this role but also from the poet's having found, for at least a time, someone with whom she could share her experiences, one who also "knew the secret wood". That this was indeed the case is made explicit in the selections titled "In Time of War".

In these poems, Miss Livesay associates her husband with the world of nature:

You knew the secret wood. Absorbed
 Its effortless surrender into spring:
 Pink cameo pinned on a furred stem,
 Hepatica; then bloodroot's waxen wing.

He was one who, like herself, "knew green shadow" and saw maple "bursting in tongues of flame." Some twenty years later, when the poet had to "dig frantic the pocket of memory/ pull out all the irrelevances/ and lay them on the table", her husband's pipe with its "dead fires" reminds her that the union between them was inextricably linked with this shared experience of nature:

—It was his view of mountains:
 he puffed them into his pipe
 and out again.
 Now I can recognize
 mountains. ("Postscript")

The "psychic autobiography" created by the poems "In Time of War" makes it clear, however, that the war "shattered the world" of the poet's inner peace, and made her aware of yet further dimensions, not only of "silence" but also of herself as "separate".

The "silence" which these poems reveal is psychological and the product of suffering. The first poem in this series describes that of inarticulate emotion occasioned by physical separation:

You went, wordless; but I had not the will
Nor courage to find fanciful or plumaged phrase
To camouflage my solitude.

It is not the physical separation which the poet fears so much as it is the psychological separation she foresees will result:

...For should we greet again
This hushed horizon will have widened so
You'll not find solace walking in the Park
Or watching storm snarl over English Bay.

Thus the silence of the "hushed horizon" will become that of experiences which, because they are not shared, will separate, and the "unity" which she had known will be destroyed. Characteristically, she finds the analogy for the resultant chaos and disorder of her private world in the world of nature:

O what a winter is there now
For us who, separate, have known
Blood on the snow this year! Disaster's news
Ripping the sky where the geese had flown.

Although we noted the conflict between "separateness" and "unity" which existed in even the earliest poems, Miss Livesay's concern here is with separation *from* a unity. Just how intense and satisfying this short-lived "unity" was may be inferred from the fact that it apparently was not experienced again, for the restlessness and dissatisfaction missing from the poetry preceding this is resumed again, coupled with a sense of the poet's loss.

The selections from *The Thirties* marked the beginning of Miss Livesay's concern in poetry for the collective "other" and demonstrated her awareness of social ills. As we have seen, the poems of this second group showed the various changes in the poet's attitude toward these. We have also seen how the image of silence underwent a series of

progressive changes, only those silences found in the world of nature remaining constant. The concern for "separateness" and "unity" found in the poems of the first group was somewhat eclipsed by the events of the depression and apparently resolved by the poet's experiences as wife and mother—but this apparent resolution was disrupted by the events of the war. Consequently, one of the last poems in this second group, "Variations on a Tree", introduces the theme which is to characterize those of the final group, namely a mature realization of the separateness of the self and the poet's renewed concern with the paradox of "unity" and "separateness":

Confined to a narrow place
 This consciousness, the Word
 Is my predicament to be,
 Separate, yet joined,
 Single, yet twain,
 Twined in the ancestry of roots
 Yet roving in the upper space.

The poet now recognizes that she is "confined", and the fact that she is in part "twined in ancestry of roots" and in part "roving in upper air" becomes the "predicament" which she attempts to resolve in the poems of the final group.

The "psychic autobiography" now reveals the poet's dissatisfaction not only with the restraints her life imposes on her, but also with herself. She knows that "men prefer an island" but she is "mainland"; she says in "This Arrow",

I am not whole; and shall not be again.
 I am not whole, as flesh is known to be
 But more divided; here, on earthy feet
 There, flashed with heaven's heat.

She acknowledges that she is "one so self-encircled/ Only a thoroughbred could hurdle/ These tough hedges"; that she is a "country field, untamed/ Restless for rider." Even nature, which previously served as restorative, now intensifies her acute loneliness:

Now that I walk alone along the stones
 I am compelled to cry, like the white gull
 Light as snow on the undulating wave
 Riding, lamenting...("At Secht")

She sees herself as "shorebound" and "seared by sun", and recognizes:

...still we are, each one,
The bird, the human, riding the world alone
Calling for lover who could share the song
Yet bow to the denial...

Although the world of nature in the preceding poem provided her with parallels for her own loneliness, in "Praise and Lament" even it rejects her, so that she no longer feels the mystical affinity with it which she once intuited:

The wind at Land's End on a day so bare
Of sun, engendered its own solitude,
Tore flesh from heart, revealed its lonely beat—
The drum of men sounding beneath earth's skin
To moss and stone not kin; unearthly, separate.

What she had recognized in the early poems as the paradox of being separate as well as being part of some mysterious unity is a paradox no longer: "separateness" now is synonymous with acute loneliness and in recognizing that she is "not kin" to "moss and stone", she knows there can be no "unity".

Because the "psychic autobiography" shows the poet stripped of everything which once provided her with comfort, it is not surprising to find that she seldom uses the image of silence in these last poems. From what we saw earlier, "silence" most frequently was associated with some kind of comfort—and no comfort is possible for one suffering the "dark night of the soul" as the poet appears to be here. The image which replaces "silence" is the sun—and in the light of the "psychic autobiography" this sun is inaccessible yet compelling, the source of comfort and the source of pain—in short, it is as illusive, deceptive, and destructive as the poet's own desires, and it has a fatal attractiveness which she cannot resist.

Despite the passionate and intense encounters recorded in these last poems, the poet is brought finally to the realization that she has been-and is-a "disaster of the sun". Consequently, she warns:

Keep out
keep out of the way of
this most killing
northern sun
grower destroyer ("Disasters of the Sun")

This realization comes only after the "gold garnered/ incredible sun" has carved her with "splayed scalpel". In her "jumbled" and "fumbled" life she searches to find the "one sweet piece". Her hands that used to be "leaves" have become "roots gnarled in soil" "knotted bones whitening in the air", and like the sunflower that had "stood up straight/ outstaring the June sun", she has "wilted" and "collapsed" under a pitiless July sky". She says,

I tell you
we live in constant
danger
under the sun bleeding
I tell you

The once "gold garnered/ incredible sun" she now sees is "no goodfather/ but tyrannical king" and,

When the black sun's
gone down
connect me underground:
root tentacles
subterranean water

This time, however, the poet does not seek to be "wrapped in silence" as she did in her earlier poems. That she is not a total "disaster" can be inferred from the fact she might be persuaded to leave this subterranean retreat:

no more lovely man can be
than he with moon-wand
who witches water. ("Disasters of the Sun")

The psychic autobiography of the poems in this collection thus marks the gradual transition of the sensitive and intelligent young woman searching for a way in which to reconcile her "separateness" with her desire for "unity", to the mature woman "bleeding" from her "jumbled" and "fumbled" life. Only for a brief period were these contraries reconciled. Her initial mystical experience of the world of nature was short-lived; her relationships with others proved ephemeral and disappointing, especially those recorded in the last poems. It would seem that there has been almost "too much music" and "too much singing" for the poet, but, as Miss Livesay wrote nearly forty years ago,

After too much music who desires
Anything but silentness, any tune

But windy fragments sounded in the grass?
 After too much singing, who would not
 Forget all words, stand quite still and watch
 The silent sun follow the silent stars,
 The moon without a sound rise up and pass
 All unprotesting through the voiceless sky? ("Song from The Multitude")

Nine Poems of Farewell, a small chapbook published by Black Moss Press in 1973, continues the theme of near-despair begun in "Disasters of the Sun" and serves as last completed chapter of the "psychic autobiography". The girl who heard "how silence sings" has become Coheleth of Ecclesiastes—she has "seen all things that are under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a chase after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is missing cannot be supplied." (Eccl. 1:14-15)

The two things which she valued most highly—love and the world of nature—have become a "chase after wind". At one time able to share these, she no longer has the self-confidence to do so. The "singing" wood of her youth has become the "brooding forest" of her age:

As you stood under the red arbutus trees
 on rock reflected in brown water
 I didn't dare
 to become a part of the mirror—
 but walked, unsure
 back from the shore
 into the brooding forest. ("The Magnet")

"Every bone" is "dispossessed" and "all merriment pretense":

for to have known complete
 completion
 then have it wrenched away
 is savage desolation. ("Down Beat")

The poet's "fine vertical arrowing/ has fallen flat" and the validity of her life is only "a few poems caught and netted/ a few strong feelings/ about love and dying/ and loss..." She is betrayed by her body and "no yesterdays come back":

My body haunts me
 thieves in on me at night
 shattering sleep
 with nameless pointless pains. ("Aging")

Only her "roots" give her hope:

O, to survive
 what must we do
 to believe?
 In the trees, my grandson.
 In these roots. In these leaves. ("Grandmother")

The comradeship she now experiences is that of old age:

All I can do now
 is hold your hand
 all I can say
 is *tovarisch tovarisch*
we are not alone. ("The Prisoner of Time"—for an old man)

There is "silence" in these last poems—but it is not the silence of peace. Like the wise man, the poet has realized that

In much wisdom there is much sorrow, and he who
 stores up knowledge stores up grief. (Eccl. 1:18)

1. Jean Gibbs, "Dorothy Livesay and The Transcendentalist Tradition", *Humanities Review* ('70-'71), pp. 24-39.