

Soul Mouth

by Marilyn Bowering

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Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Marilyn Bowering has been publishing both poetry and novels since the late 1980s and has numerous books to her credit. Her poetry, initially written in a lyric style, has evolved into a narrative form, which she employs in her latest book, *Soul Mouth*. There is also in this volume an exploration of a new style – but more about that later.

Bowering reaches back to her place of birth in several of her collections, including this one. This is how she begins “Seine”:

I was born by the Seine River:
it rolled slowly,
it spilled and soaked the grasses,
many birds traversed it,
the river bank was forbidden
though aprons from the nearby houses
fluted the air like river gulls. (16)

This meditation on Winnipeg floats like debris on the river. The poem is interesting not just for the manner by which Bowering creates atmosphere, but also because of the repeat at the end. There is an opening stanza, quoted above, a middle stanza, and then the opening is repeated in variation. The variation ends with the “many birds” line. But then, another line is appended: “I was among them.” The question arises as to why Bowering selected the word “traverse” to describe the birds, as it doesn’t quite match the level of language in the rest of that stanza. As we see at the end, it is not just because “traverse” has a French Canadian feel, which is apropos, given the location of the Seine in Winnipeg, but also because the word seems to take one far beyond the immediacy of the Seine.

Soul Mouth is divided into three sections – Body, Soul, and The Storytellers on their Carpets. This quote is taken from the middle section:

I am afraid to startle the horses:
they are stabled, quiet at last
after such a long night of calling them.
.....
I do not know the ways and means and reasons of horses,
but they are safe with me, out of the snow.
I feed them; brush the painful burrs and spears from their coats. (49)

I’ve removed the middle three lines of this first stanza, the first line acting as the title of the poem, in order to create a better sense of the poem’s theme. The poem looks back from the vantage point of older middle age at the life of a woman and the men in that life. She does not claim any sort of wisdom

concerning men but neither does she seem to harbour any regret. They have been part of her, she of them, and she has provided them with comfort and safety. The second stanza begins with the lines: “Come, dear horses, the nights are long, / and there are few like me / who truly love you.” I interpret them as a comment about other women not having genuinely loved the men they’ve been with.

The final section of the title poem, “Soul Mouth,” begins with the line “The bed kneels in front of me” (77). Although the personification of the bed is interesting in itself, it is the fact that the bed is worshipping the person of the poem, this goddess of love – if we follow from the quotation above – that fascinates.

The poem “The Pupils of Plato” provides an example of Bowering’s exploration of a new style, which I alluded to earlier:

She was a pupil of Plato’s: she felt nothing for the table in front of her. Somewhere beyond the veils of atmosphere, extraterrestrial planetary life spun on. Nothing to do with her, but it was a comfort to consider the perfection of table. No gum stuck under the edge; no child, with a dog at its knees, across from her with a book. She could give herself a new name, if she liked. (101)

The poetic elements of this paragraph/stanza are pronounced. Take the punning on the idea of Plato’s ideal – “she felt nothing for the table” – which she goes on to consider as a “perfection.” It is a perfection because it is the ideal of table rather than its reality, and so cannot be physically “felt.” In the concluding sentence, she imagines herself as the ideal – if she so chooses. Note the lilting iambic feel of “comfort to consider the perfection of table,” and how she applies reality to the ideal by commenting on the absence of gum or a book.

This is an enjoyable collection of poetry that has much to offer to readers. ♡

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for *The Malahat Review*, *Arc*, *The Antigonish Review*, *The Fiddlehead* and *The Danforth Review*, in the US for *Quarterly Conversations*, *Rain Taxi*, *Rattle*, *Big Bridge* and *Galatea Revisits*, and in Australia for *Jacket*.

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