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I Moved All My Women Upstairs. Roberta Buchanan. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 64 p., softcover, 1998, $14.95, ISBN 1-55081-120-7

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POEMS WRITTEN in the confessional mode comprise Roberta Buchanan's first volume of poetry, *I Moved All My Women Upstairs*. This seems less than surprising given the subject matter of this book and the fact that the poet is both a professor of English Literature and a feminist. Since the late 1950's, early 1960's, the confessional poet has been a fixture within English language poetry. For poets with a political agenda, especially if that agenda is overtly feminist, the confessional can seem almost *de rigeur*. Within the great house that is poetry, the confessional is often seen, somewhat ruefully, as a movement which has sacrificed a great deal of what is good in poetry for the immediacy of its claims. It has, however, forged itself a place in public consciousness and that is no mean feat in times when the public appetite seems no longer excited by anything literary.

Confessional poetry has caught attention because of its tendency, some might even say willingness, to shock. It shocks, not by showing us anything new — in human experience, there is nothing new under the sun — but by exploiting the societal habit of raising and lowering the bar when it comes to public and private morals. As everyone knows, there is always a pronounced difference between what is known privately and what can be acknowledged publicly. It is precisely this realm that confessional poets look to exploit. Poets who write from within this space seek to liberate us from hypocrisies and over-simplifications forced on us in the name of politics, religion, family, cultural or sexual identity, etc. Armed only with intuition, poetic skill and faith, the poet offers himself/herself as a kind of template against which society and its microcosm, the self, can be judged, and if proved

wanting, reformed. The virtue of this kind of writing is that even if it is unadorned, relatively ill-conceived and gushing, it is still capable of conveying an appealing sense of authenticity. Even if we, as readers, have not had the same experience as the poet, the excitement often generated by this type of writing can serve as a touchstone for comparable experience, thus furnishing us with the sense that we may yet face down those things in our own lives that ensnare and silence us. All this, of course, as in all poetry, depends entirely on the skill of the poet.

Roberta Buchanan's book, *I Moved All my Women Upstairs*, fails to generate in the reader either a sense of excitement, or any sense of an inner life that has been transformed, or even energised by the conception of this work. Nor does Ms. Buchanan's work in any way undermine, or subvert the public mores of the society in which we live. Had this book been published anywhere from 1900 to 1960, it may have proved to be a public as well as a private revelation. Published in the last years of the twentieth century, however, its content appears little more than a reiteration of well-established feminist attitudes toward power, mysticism, the literary canon, men and the patriarchy in general. Try this;

> O the joy of stamping on the faces
> Of you who have insulted me
> Ignored my power, denied my existence
> Relegated me to the realm of "superstition"
> The joy of twisting your guts in my hands
> And seeing you squirm
> I AM WARNING YOU:
> There was a man who sneered at me
> He fell off a mountain
> Broke his sacrilegious neck. (KALI POEMS I).

A few pages later we find a poem beginning, "The patriarchy rides on my back/Like the Old Man in Sinbad's tale," and ending a half a page later with, "I pray for his death/ To be able to stand up straight, tall/ To be free again" (THE PATRIARCHY RIDES ON MY BACK).

Another weakness in this volume is the author's apparent assumption of complicity on the part of the reader. Rather than offering us a complex picture of reality through language, Ms. Buchanan presents us with an oddly simplified one; the kind of simplification (ironically) that is useful in mass communication, governance, advertizing, etc., but which is anathema to poetry. In *HUSBAND*, we learn that the speaker was married and that this was dreadful because her spouse expected sex — (incidentally, all heterosexual sex in the book is presented as assault). Are we meant to believe that the speaker married without any positive feelings, that the relationship had nothing whatsoever going for it? Why not offer a more complex picture of the relationship? Some insight into the emotional/

intellectual complications that constitute any marriage, good or bad, would be better than this simplified version of events, which appears tailored to the author's agenda.

Anger, hurt, bitterness, hatred and revenge lie at the heart of this book. As poetic fuel, these kinds of emotions work a lot like alcohol, substituting broad (albeit intense) focus for precision. For poetry to occur, some distance is required and in Buchanan's work this is occasionally supplied by a wry/dry sense of humour, as in SUNDAY, LATE AUGUST IN LONDON or in the poem TRAFFIC SIGNS, here quoted in full;

> I see the sign marked YIELD
> And I would feign GIVE WAY
> Too often have I stopped at STOP
> And I have lost the way
> If one like you would ask me YIELD
> I would not say you nay
> Too often have I stopped at STOP
> And I have lost the way.

Likewise, if you have ever had the opportunity to hear Buchanan read, the over-the-top quality of her work is offset by a deliciously dead-pan delivery. Sometimes the necessary distance is supplied by the passage of time, as in THIS LITTLE GIRL: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY BEFORE AGE 9 and here her work has the power to evoke profound sadness. Where hatred is removed, a more complex, humane response in expressed, as in VALENTINES DAY where the foibles of a lover seem to be both acknowledged and tolerated. Nor is the speaker in these poems so unaware that she cannot see how indulging her hatred transforms her into the thing most hated. In the poems In/nocence and MALEVOLE, the speaker contemplates the act of revenge and both poems end on a strikingly similar note; "When I wake at night/My hands are stained with blood" (In/nocence);

> Who is the spider who the fly?
> You are watching for his fall
> You know something about hatred
> you are not as innocent as you seem
> you know it kills the hater
> not the hated (MALEVOLE).

Moments like this, unfortunately, are too few and far between and the collection as a whole is marred by the author's inability to control and give poetic shape to what she invokes.