

FEATURE REVIEW

Jenny Haysom

Poison in the Cupboard

Adrienne Gruber. *Q & A*. Toronto: Book*hug, 2019.

Brenda Leifso. *Wild Madder*. London, ON: Brick Books, 2019.

Elizabeth Ross. *After Birth*. Windsor, ON: Palimpsest Press, 2019.

Three recent collections of poetry—Adrienne Gruber’s *Q & A*, Elizabeth Ross’s *After Birth* and Brenda Leifso’s *Wild Madder*—all feature motherhood as their main subject matter. They each present poetic testimony, making material of their first-hand experiences, at times guiltily stealing themselves away from childcare and domestic work to write about it.

Maternity is the main subject of *Q & A*. From conception and pregnancy, through to birth and the postpartum period, *Q & A* offers an unflinchingly honest version of events. It’s a work, like Brenda Shaughnessy’s *Our Andromeda*, that is edgy and unabashedly confessional, in which activities like childbirth and breastfeeding are rendered in graphic language, all the ugly leaking made plain and personal. In “Push,” for example, the baby’s crowning head is described as a “cauliflower bulge / of scalp” which is “glass-cutting clit-splitting.” As the scene unfolds, this emerging head is then likened to a “planet forced through a rigid pelvis,” a moment of genesis that includes both mother and baby; together, they are born into an altered universe—and there’s no going back. Gruber details this new universe in “Supply and Demand.” We are told that “postpartum is the sewage system of a shrunken world,” and the mother its queen, “fused to pillows / piled in a throne.” Both sovereign and prisoner, she surveys her kingdom: a squalid

bedroom, “a dumpster” of “used diapers, takeout / containers, granola bar wrappers,” where “udders leak and / mix with drool.”

All together, ingested one after another, these poems can feel a little claustrophobic, and perhaps this is the point; we’re trapped in that “shrunken world” with the speaker, and it’s not pretty. Managing this feeling of discomfort (of over-sharing) may well be the enormous challenge of writing confessional poetry; the work so easily overwhelms the reader with its main subject-matter—the author. Perhaps that’s why Gruber has interspersed her autobiographical pieces with a series of impersonal poems that interrogate old medical texts and ideas about pregnancy and childbirth (which is, as the back cover tells us, “a grotesque history” in itself). But the poem that most successfully tempers the confessional and explicit with something more expansive is “One Fuck of a Year.” Here, we have an intimate and humane reflection on the suffering of others, a portrait of illness and death on the near periphery of new life, and that shrunken, postpartum world reaches outward. Perhaps this is the ultimate gift of motherhood; it may exhaust and imprison, making writing difficult—if not impossible—but it enlarges our view of life and creates with this new perspective a much greater capacity for love and compassion.

A similarly explicit view of maternity is foregrounded in Elizabeth Ross’s new book, *After Birth*. Her opening poem, “One in a Series,” gives us a vivid account of a difficult birth. Though the poet-speaker had hoped “to be a Madonna, / labouring on a bed of straw- / coloured sheets, illuminated / by flashlight,” instead, she is rushed to emergency, vomits repeatedly, accepts pain medication and other medical interventions, and wants “to shit the bed” for “the honesty of it.” The scene is far from idealized; it’s an unfiltered picture with all the “unmentionable” stuff included, because there is no such thing as an immaculate birth. Labour is *work*, and it’s ugly. But—and this is where Ross finds her poetry—it’s also miraculous: “I met my vision // head-on as I pushed / my baby beyond the halo, / burning into the mortal world.”

Because of these forays into the lyrical, *After Birth* doesn’t need to mollify its confessions in quite the same way as *Q & A*. Alongside her own graphic descriptions, Ross finds, in her range of domestic material, real moments of beauty and epiphany that offer the reader a breath of relief. For example, in the gorgeous poem, “Feeding Iris Strawberries,” we are

witness to a magical moment when mothering is not just drudgery, but a one-of-a-kind opportunity for revelation and joy. The poem opens matter-of-factly then immediately leaps, grabs our attention with a startling metaphor: “I chopped them so she wouldn’t choke. / Tiny organs prepped for transplant, / tumbled together in a smash- // proof container.” I love this image of “tiny organs,” the care with which they are prepared, and the everyday Rubbermaid in which they bash about, bloodied, the container itself ironically “smash-proof.” The metaphor is brilliantly extended as the toddler reaches in and “*muddle[s]* the juice into her knuckles / like a lazy surgeon” (emphasis mine; such well-selected verbs add freshness and vitality to the poem). Presumably, this is the first time that Iris is tasting strawberries, and her joy is transmitted, like electricity, from her mouth through to her mother’s fingertips. What unfolds is a vision of sensuous “firsts.” Ross experiences, in that instant, her daughter’s first taste of mother’s milk, first words, first steps, and then—flashing forward to an erotic first—she feels “the mouth // of the person / she will one day love / fed strawberries.”

There are several other poems in the collection that follow this pattern, but not every revelation of motherhood in *After Birth* is a good one. The fourth section of the book contains a suite of poems called “Happily,” in which Ross worries about the gendering forces of popular culture (Walt Disney’s 1950 film *Cinderella*) and her own complicity, as a role-model, in her daughter’s shaping. The sequence begins with a vague epigraph from the Disney film (*Isn’t it lovely? It was my mother’s*) and opens with an admission of sorts; her daughter wants to watch the movie every day, but instead, “I let her watch it every other. Dispense it / like a vaporous substance unlocked from a cupboard // of poison.” Sections following this scene reflect on Ross’s early marriage, her giving away her wedding dress (rather than saving it for her daughter), child’s play as idealized housework (complete with toy vacuum cleaners), and an imaginary scene in which Ross has kept that wedding dress and indulges her daughter’s fantasies. Ross’s “Happily” is pitch-perfect and will strike a chord with both poets and parents; she frets over the problem of raising a daughter and regulates influences as best she can, but ultimately chooses to mother with tenderness.

In Brenda Leifso’s latest collection, *Wild Madder*, the poet-mother is a little further along in the Cinderella story of not-so-happily ever after. She, too, got married young, had children (three) and now finds herself quite lost—and often longing for escape. It’s

a world of sticky fingers, “two a.m. wake-ups,” of “little boy pee” where it shouldn’t be, and globs “of peanut butter and jam melting in the sun.” Simone de Beauvoir was the first to liken the repetitive, soul-destroying nature of domestic work to the fruitless labours of Sisyphus. In *The Second Sex*, she writes, “few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day.” A hands-on student of feminist and existential theory, Leifso describes her drudgery accordingly: “the dishwasher,” she notes, is “to be emptied / and filled / and emptied / every day / all day long / world without end.” Occasionally, she finds meaning—and even beauty—in all this work and care, but faced daily with the gaping maw of the dishwasher, and other household demands, she more often than not despairs. And sometimes, she wishes it all away, longs to “simply wake up / and rise” unencumbered (“Someone”).

Leifso not only has the wish to walk away, she also feels a darker calling, and bravely acknowledges this in several poems. Standing far out, in snowshoes, in the middle of a frozen Lake Ontario, she imagines “the sharp gasp of falling through” and a “slow drift down,” ponders her options, but ultimately chooses life and decides to turn back (“Snowshoeing, Lake Ontario, February”). The speaker then admits that “there was nothing momentous / in the turning,” as if to suggest that this moment might happen to any of us, the way Robert Frost turns away, with his horse, from the dark woods, knowing he has obligations and work to do the next day. Specifically, she goes back to her children—a greater calling than any household duty, than all those Frostian “miles to go.” The poignant closing of the poem underlines her exhaustion, physical and spiritual, and even acknowledges that this is nothing special or unusual, that we’ve all felt it: “I came home, as we do, even when each vertebra in our spine bends / a little, when we want only / to lie down.”

Wild Madder is a book full of darkneses and yearning, the poet-mother so swamped with the physical demands of life, she has no time to attend to the spiritual. Mid-way through the collection, she even apologizes to her children for this: “How will I explain,” she asks, that “my hands were always too full / for cameras, / notebooks, / paintbrushes.” The meaning seems straightforward—the speaker is feeling guilty about not being a good mother, about not having these things in hand for her children. But perhaps she gestures at a larger dilemma; busy mothering, she has no time to nurture anyone’s creative

development, her own included. She simply has no opportunity to hold—let alone use—the instruments of self-expression.

Hindered but not silenced, the mothers in *Wild Madder*, *After Birth* and *Q & A* offer us important testimony; they refuse to be entirely selfless, and therefore take up the cameras, notebooks and paintbrushes to tell us their stories, the truths about motherhood we've been missing. It feels novel to read three strong poetry books published in the same year, in the same country, that put labouring, birth, and childcare front and centre, making fine material of the domestic so unapologetically.