

## White Ink: Poems on Mothers and Motherhood

Rishma Dunlop, ed.  
Toronto: Demeter Press, 2007.

### Reviewed by Jill Scott

Let me begin by saying that it is a decadent indulgence, almost a guilty pleasure, to review such a sumptuous collection of poems celebrating the maternal—dressed here in her finest garb. Reading such poetry is nourishment on the same scale as mother's milk and I feel mothered by this gorgeous anthology. Beyond the sheer beauty of its contents, *White Ink* is without doubt of historic and political significance. The censure of the maternal in our culture is real and the impediments to mothers who want to write are great. We should not underestimate the courage and determination necessary for mothers to squeeze time out for writing. Editor Rishma Dunlop only hints at her own challenges as a young mother and a poet, stealing away to tap at her keyboard when her daughters were in bed.

The title, *White Ink*, pays homage to the theorists of *écriture féminine*, most notably Hélène Cixous, who inspired a whole generation of women to write their bodies in all their sensuous corporeality. But this anthology goes far beyond any theoretical paradigm of the maternal. It is wide-ranging in its expressions of mothering, inviting men into the conversation and extending the maternal beyond the physical and emotional—birthing, breastfeeding, nurturing, teaching, loving, suffering (“if I defer the grief I will diminish the gift” Eavan Boland)—to include adoption, infertility, abortion, abuse, racism, and queer mothering, but also men and women honouring their mothers (“I touch the deep floor of your heart!” Mahmoud Darwish), mothers at their worst (“My mother, drunk again, her nightgown pulled up to her hips” Patrick Lane), and the mother tongue (“She is shaping a motherland in her mouth” Yerra Sugarman).

Dunlop includes a full spectrum of ethnically diverse voices, some poems in translation, well-known authors, both Canadian (Brandt, Brossard, Carson, Crozier, Godard, Lane, Layton, Marlatt, Musgrave) and American (Ginsberg, Hacker, Plath, Rich, Sexton), and lesser-known poets. Still, the volume does not feel at all forced or driven by either diversity or theme. Instead, the collection soars in the analogic links that thread together the various sections, cryptically and tantalizingly named after lines of verse rather than recognizable categories: “a woman leaning from a painting offering a life” (Nina Bogin), or “all the rivers of her red veins move into the sea” (Irving Layton), or “the sound of your blood crossed into mine” (Minnie Bruce Pratt).

Dunlop cleverly weaves the volume together as if it too were a poem.

But *White Ink* is not just a poem; it is a mothering poem. As such, Dunlop offers her own take on the ineffable oneness of mothering, while at the same time hooking these rhythms and rhymes together through surprising and surreptitious correspondences. Mothering is expanded into a welcoming canvas, indeed a vast landscape—these lovingly gathered verses enable readers to collectively imagine the maternal as a cultural discourse that goes well beyond actual mothers and becomes an attitude or a disposition of compassion that has often been silenced.

One could complain that the quality is uneven, but there is very good reason to include all expressions of the maternal, even the rough ones. Further, one could say that there is in these postwar poems a lack of formal sophistication, and yet the counterargument would be that such creative configurations of maternity cannot be contained within traditional genres (visions of swollen breasts and bellies bulging out from the sonnet's quatrains come to mind). Minnie Bruce Pratt writes of breaking the mould, "all the poets I knew / were men, dads eloquent on their sleeping / babes and the future," but Miranda Pearson reminds us that "this was my true self / emerging." This volume midwives such selves.

There are some institutional issues that deserve to be addressed. For all her importance as a postwar poet who introduced maternal themes, there is only one poem by Sylvia Plath, likely because the citation rights are so expensive. The cost of the volume is another concern. At \$39.95, this is a book that will be available for the most part only in academic libraries, away from the very women—mother-poets living on a shoestring—who could revel in these rhythms. One more minor quibble—the book is quite a tome, difficult to tuck into a purse or balance on a pillow. Such a lovely collection ought to be dressed in handier attire. These minor details aside, *White Ink* is a tour de force and a superb contribution to both the politics and the poetry of mothering.