The Ishtar Gate

Diana Brebner

The Ishtar Gate

The Hugh MacLennan Poetry Series

Editors: Kerry McSweeney and Joan Harcourt
Selection Committee: Donald H. Akenson,
Philip Cercone, Allan Hepburn,
and Carolyn Smart

TITLES IN THE SERIES

Waterglass Jeffery Donaldson

All the God-Sized Fruit Shawna Lemay

Chess Pieces David Solway

Giving My Body to Science Rachel Rose

The Asparagus Feast S.P. Zitner

The Thin Smoke of the Heart Tim Bowling

What Really Matters Thomas O'Grady

A Dream of Sulphur Aurian Haller

Credo Carmine Starnino

Her Festival Clothes Mavis Jones

The Afterlife of Trees Brian Bartlett

Before We Had Words Z.P. Zitner

Bamboo Church Ricardo Sternberg

Franklin's Passage David Solway

The Ishtar Gate Diana Brebner

The Ishtar Gate
Last and Selected Poems

Diana Brebner

edited and with an introduction by
STEPHANIE BOLSTER

McGill-Queen's University Press
Montreal & Kingston • London • Ithaca

© Estate of Diana Brebner 2005
ISBN 0-7735-2835-0

Legal deposit first quarter 2005
Bibliothèque nationale du Québec

Printed in Canada on acid-free paper that is 100%
ancient forest free (100% post-consumer recycled),
processed chlorine free

McGill-Queen's University Press acknowledges the
support of the Canada Council for the Arts for our
publishing program. We also acknowledge the financial
support of the Government of Canada through the Book
Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for
our publishing activities.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Brebner, Diana, 1956–
The Ishtar Gate : last and selected poems /
Diana Brebner; edited and with an introduction
by Stephanie Bolster.

(Hugh MacLennan poetry series; 15)
Includes poems previously published in
Radiant life forms,
The golden lotus and Flora & fauna.
ISBN 0-7735-2835-0

I. Bolster, Stephanie II. Title. III. Brebner, Diana,
1956– Radiant life forms. IV. Title: Brebner, Diana,
1956– Golden lotus. V. Title: Brebner, Diana,
1956– Flora & fauna. VI. Series.
PS8553.R3732I84 2004 C811'.54 C2004-905565-8

This book was typeset by Dynagram Inc.
in 10.5/13 Baskerville.

CONTENTS

Considered Passion:
The Poetry of Diana Brebner ix

RADIANT LIFE FORMS

Snow Angels 3
Immolation 5
The Children in That Country 6
Awake in the Morning Room, Newly
Painted 7
You, of All White Women I Have Loved 8
Radiant Life Forms 9
The Sparrow Drawer 10
What is Homeless in Me, and Sightless 15
Desire, Mother and Child 16
The Radiant Lady Poems 17

THE GOLDEN LOTUS

Open among the Lilies 25
The Golden Lotus 26
Karuna 30
Head of a Girl 36
The Perfect Garden 51
Eleven Paintings by Mary Pratt 52

FLORA & FAUNA

Flora & Fauna 73
The Black Swan 74
Poison Dart Frogs 80
The Green Canoe 84
Facing Buddha 86
Prints of Love 87
Pictures of an Eclipse 88
Polycarbon Butterfly Unfurled 90
The Pictures of My Heart 92
At the Schwarzschild Radius 97
The Blue Light of the Neutron Pool 102

THE ISHTAR GATE (*LAST POEMS*)

The Trout 109
My Hope 110
Porthole 111
Port 113
For the Poet Who Told Me to Think Less
and Feel More 116
Frozen 118
Waiting 120
Morning on the Guitar 122
The Bridge 124
detonation/notation 125
Variation on John Thompson's Ghazal
XXXVIII 128
The Narrow Lens 130
Venus Velvet 6557 HB 132

The Variable Swans 133
Listening to Winterreise 135
A Stranger 137
The Isis Rattle 138
Access the Calm Serene 139
Concern for My Soul 141
Karma's Girls 142
Servant of the Muse 143
Gaia Reclining 144
Our Kate 145
Orange Marmalade Keiller Recipe 146
Slicing Oranges in Kim's Kitchen 147
Blood Oranges 148
Silence 149
Silence II 151
The Nature of Weapons 152
That Blue Is All in a Rush 153

SELECTED PROSE

The Trout in the Well: Ideas on Order
& Poetry 157

Acknowledgments 165

This page is intentionally left blank.
Please scroll down.

CONSIDERED PASSION: THE POETRY OF DIANA BREBNER

In 1996, the League of Canadian Poets held its annual general meeting at the National Library in Ottawa. Amidst the string of poets launching their books, each reading a single poem, a woman stepped onstage; slightly stooped, neither short nor tall, in a long, dark dress. Her hushed voice made us lean forward a little. The voice strode and queried; it lulled and awoke us. The poem, "The Green Canoe," not only transfixed but transported. "We are back, each in a green canoe. Old Night / descends. Or do we ascend, touching the / stars?" The poem's speaker didn't fear vulnerability. Nor did this woman, poised and free of banter. There was no mediation between poem and audience, no apology. Take it or leave it, she seemed to say. If you find this too sentimental, too elemental, that's fine; there are other poets to come.

Even without her presence, Diana Brebner's poems radiate this assurance. In an unpublished essay, "The Instrumental Case," she described herself as "an instrument for the Muses," who felt their pull "into the strange netherland of neither-here-nor-there." An ordinary woman with an extraordinary calling, she chose no less than the giants as mentors. If these were the usual choices – for a poet writing in English (The Bible, Shakespeare, Donne, Vaughan, Herrick, Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, Auden); for a

North American poet (Whitman, Dickinson); for a Northern poet (Brodsky, Heaney, Rilke); for a woman poet (Plath, Akhmatova); for a Canadian woman poet (Atwood, MacEwen, Hébert, Waddington, MacPherson) – their influence coalesced into a distinctive poetry, alive with the tension between intellect and emotion, between rhetoric and lyric.

This writer, who, according to Ann Diamond, "gives the impression of being a visionary in her spare moments," lived a life that appeared innocuous enough (*Arc*, 1992). Raised in small towns and suburbs in Eastern Ontario and Quebec, she discovered poetry at a Catholic girls' school (where she, a Calvinist anglophone, had been sent to learn French), earned a BA in philosophy at the University of Ottawa, fell in love, married, raised two daughters, wrote and taught poetry. However, her challenges – among them abuse, cancer, divorce, and the pursuit of financial sustenance – made urgent and essential her search for a visionary state.

Though her first poem appeared in print in 1974, her book publishing career lasted merely six years, from 1990 to 1996. Yet during this time her work garnered almost all of Canada's major awards: the League of Canadian Poets' National Poetry Competition (1990), the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award (1990), the CBC Literary Competition (1992), the Pat Lowther Memorial Award (1993), and the Archibald Lampman Award (1997). Her voice, admirers and detractors agreed, was singular. Her techniques, distinctive and transparent, began

in her earliest surviving work – written in high school – and varied little: the dramatic caesura, the heavy initial stress, the comma splice, plain language, primary colours, full rhyme, repetition. Traditional in the deepest sense, her subjects risked appearing unfashionable: life and death, gods and goddesses, art and nature. She fashioned her poems of earth, fire, air, and water. God was there, but not in the details; largely abstract, the language, when concrete at all, tended to the general rather than the specific.

Despite critical acclaim and a slew of prizes, Brebner remained relatively unknown beyond the Ottawa region and parts of southwestern Ontario, where she had loyal supporters (among them, the editors of *The New Quarterly*). Perhaps this is because her ambitions were for her work only. For herself, she sought simplicity. Though at intervals she advanced her career strategically (reviewing for *Books in Canada* during the late 90s in an attempt to renew her visibility), the energy writing demanded left little for self-promotion. Intense, mercurial, she resembled other poets too much to find their company sustaining; most of her closest friends were not writers. Even among writers, she mingled with those whose company nourished her, not simply those with connections. To my knowledge, she never gave a reading west of Winnipeg, and even her Ottawa readings – dramatic performances, often with musical accompaniment, that left her drained – occurred rarely, particularly in her last years. That she published with a small,

specialized press, Netherlandic, which ceased operation in 1997, presented an additional obstacle.

Her predilection for traditional verse forms, deemed retrograde by many Canadian poets during the 80s and 90s, heightened her isolation. Yet her perverse playfulness was such that one wonders if she chose this path in protest – the "traditional" as a daring opposition to the norm of free verse – and to ensure the marginality that granted her independence and privacy. Certainly she acknowledged some degree of contrariness: "[W]hen I first started writing there were definite limits put on what was acceptable – that's why I started writing sonnets. There would be little footnotes at the end of calls for submissions saying 'all submissions welcome. No rhyme. No sentimental. No religion'" (*The New Quarterly*, 1993 [*TNQ*]).

Brebner called structure "a nuclear containment device" (*TNQ*), a view her unpublished poem, "Sylvia" (numbered 133 – she numbered all her finished poems – and dated 20 June 1984), advances:

> Let all the madness be, but to the page
> commit considered passion.

This tension between chaos and control spins at the core of her work. She recalled that, "[E]ven as a young child, I kept seeing contradictions. There would be an inside and an outside. There would be the clothes you wear to church, those pretty little things, and then there was the reality of your life"

(TNQ). Conceptually, two crucial dichotomies were art/nature and old world/new world. "The daughter of Dutch immigrants," as her book covers declared, she spent vacations canoeing in Algonquin Park. Of Canadian poets, she most resembles early Atwood, cerebral yet attuned to the earth and prone to vacillate between the rarefied and the irreverent – though Brebner's irreverence veered toward goofiness rather than irony. After writing, during cancer treatment, "Eleven Paintings By Mary Pratt," she, along with a friend, performed a good luck dance around the mailbox when she sent the poem to the CBC competition.

Tension between the life of the mind and daily life preoccupied her. Though she admitted, "[T]he children and marriage and all the other things that I do are a cover for what I really do; what I really do is write and think most of the time," she also claimed to feel "very integrated ... the two ways of being are so connected and give each other meaning – there's a sense of symbiotic relationship." (TNQ).

Brebner valued integration and connection, often citing Margaret Laurence's vision of a "tribe" of writers. Reliant on epigraphs, dedications, and borrowed lines, her work frequently refers to other media, particularly the visual arts. Exchange – literal or imaginative – with these individuals and their work opened a doorway out of the cloister in which her poetry might otherwise have existed and situated her within the tradition of ekphrastic poetry in Canada. This doorway led to some of her strongest

poems, including her League of Canadian Poets and CBC competition winners. She likely felt as close to the late Joseph Brodsky, a writer she'd never met – whose words provide the epigraph to her poem "Snow Angels" – as to her friend John Barton (a poet who happened to have studied with Brodsky and to whom the poem is dedicated).

The Ishtar Gate, for which she had written some thirty poems at the time of her death at the age of forty-four, was one of three planned collections (the authors were titled *Saffron Walden*, and *Starry Messenger*). Her last poems may be her finest – yet, dissatisfied with them, she told me that she hadn't been an active writer since the publication of *Flora & Fauna*, celebrated on the evening we met at the National Library. Beginning in 1996, with our participation in a mentoring programme through the League of Canadian Poets, she began to devote much time to teaching, a new vocation which granted her companionship and a meaningful sense of agency. The following year, frustrated and disheartened by her lack of professional recognition, distressed by her continued inability to generate income from her writing yet unwilling to compromise that writing for monetary gain, she decided to contribute to civic life by running as a regional councillor in the Ottawa area elections. Against two candidates with considerable experience, she met with overwhelming defeat. After the break-up of her marriage, she accepted a "day job" and found some sustenance in independence. Her last dated poems – two undated, unfinished

poems were written afterwards – were completed in 1999, two years before her death.

These disappointments and compromises, and her increasingly poor health, more than explain her diminished creative momentum. But deeper issues figured, too. In her heightened awareness of mortality, she sought happiness – she treated herself to a baby grand piano in her last year – and writing did not always bring her pleasure. Distrustful of her facility, she believed she needed to advance within her poetry and confessed wearily that she could write "Diana" poems in her sleep. Yet her list of future poem-ideas teems with Diana subjects: lemons, Welsh tunes, the work of van Gogh, Wallace Stevens, and Gustav Holst.

Perhaps, had circumstances differed, she would have transformed these ideas into poems. Perhaps, in setting them down, she'd freed herself to move on to other subjects, ones that would have surprised her and her readers. Perhaps, for the time being (just a month before her death, she referred in a note to her "hopefully future writing life"), she'd said what she had to say.

Just as it is tempting to exaggerate the darkness of Brebner's work, particularly given her early death and the tragic accident that killed her younger teenage daughter shortly afterwards, it is frighteningly easy to ascribe a foresight to the poems – to believe that, "visionary" as she was, she might indeed have been granted devastating knowledge. After all, she planned to write a series of poems drawn from Schubert's song

cycle “Die Winterreise” (Journey in Winter), which the composer, already a loner, wrote in strict seclusion the year before his death, while suffering from an incurable illness. Yet her final poem, “That Blue Is All in a Rush,” is an affirmation.

One wonders if she believed that her work would ultimately find a larger audience – that the qualities that alienated some readers would allow her poems, unlike much Canadian poetry, to transcend eras and national readerships. She may have trusted that, as was the case with John Thompson, with whom she felt a kinship, her poetry would find its most significant audience posthumously.

Diana Brebner understood that creativity, like the fire that is such a central element in her poetry, both generates and destroys. That she chose to make herself subservient to this work, as did many of those she honoured with her words, was a gesture not of naïve hope but of strength, not unlike that made by religious ascetics. She did not always possess that strength, but when she did, her subjugation was conscious, if not chosen, and at once selfish and selfless. It did not really matter what that National Library audience thought of her work because the real stakes were far higher.

Stephanie Bolster

RADIANT LIFE FORMS

This page is intentionally left blank.
Please scroll down.