

Word craft and fragility

Nancy-Gay Rotstein would never describe herself as a reluctant poet. "I've always written," she says, "because I *have* to." But for someone who was first published when she was 12, she's never been in a hurry to show off the results. "My grandmother, unknown to me, took one of my poems and submitted it to *Chatelaine* magazine, which ran it," Rotstein, 58, recalls with a smile. "My school principal announced it over the intercom. It was awful." Even her husband, Max, a prominent Toronto banker, "didn't know he was married to a poet until seven years after the wedding, when he found a poem I had left lying around."

So it's hardly surprising that Rotstein's new book, *This Horizon and Beyond* (McClelland & Stewart), a collection of her work from the past 25 years, has a considerable number of previously unpublished poems, new and old. Many were in-

spired by the stages of family life, says Rotstein, the mother of three adult children. "Even as I wrote the early ones, I thought to keep them back and eventually put them out together."

All her work is shot through with a historical consciousness that's both Jewish and Canadian. There are references to Masada, the Spanish Inquisition and the history of the Ottawa Valley. Alfred Dreyfus makes an appearance in a modern café, "his eyes schooled / in sadness . . . unseen among / the Sunday brunchers." That same consciousness is also in the family cycle, where Rotstein's children, even before birth, seem to be new beads strung along the great chain of being: "I take you with me / as a heartbeat / tucked inside my soul / into the backstreets / for you, will ask questions / the reason ghetto birthed." But there is also the present moment, and in *For Tracy*, as she

watches her youngest daughter sleep, Rotstein evocatively captures the stab of terror a child's vulnerability can inspire: "how I wish rabbit and bunny sentinels / could ever protect you from an / age that rapes childhood."

If there's a single theme that links a lifetime's work, it's just that—the impermanence of every human achievement, the fragility of peace, order and good government. Maybe that's why Rotstein was drawn to law school after her children were grown (though she has never practised as a lawyer, working instead as a board of directors member for the Canada Council, National Library and Telefilm Canada). Law is society's means of keeping anarchy at bay, she says, just as poetry is something permanent crafted from fleeting emotion and imagery, another way of creating order out of chaos.

Brian Bethune

