

'Every word should matter'

Spare and precise,
Nancy-Gay Rotstein's
poems paint large,
rich pictures of life

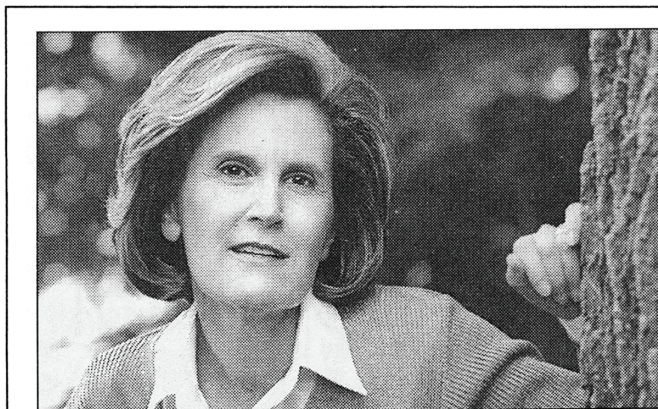
BY BRUCE DEACHMAN

At first blush, a poet brandishing a law degree might seem out of place. The language of law, after all, is precise, without intended irony, imagery or romance; a dialect void of distant train whistles or wind-whipped parapets. In legalese, there is little room for wiggling nuance, no demand for colour, and no need of hopeful prayer for our children.

Nancy-Gay Rotstein, who will launch her book of new and previously-published poems, *This Horizon and Beyond*, tonight at the National Library, crosses that seemingly polar bridge with an ease that belies the careful attention she gives her work.

She didn't begin studying for her law degree until she was 39, and by the time she finished realized she didn't want a legal practice. Rotstein never did end up practising law, but as with her master's degree in history, she says the training helped give her another vantage point from which to view the world.

Her poetry is at once dense yet wholly accessible, with descriptive prowess that cuts to the quick. Her textures of colour, light and history freeze moments to paper. She draws on readers' emotions, while transporting them to unknown places that seem familiar, from



Nancy-Gay Rotstein wrote this poem for one of her three children.

For Tracy

she sleeps silently
face white from suspended motion
open lips touching tiny gnawed fist
mouth quivering with dreams;
how I wish rabbit and bunny sentinels
could ever protect you from an
age that rapes childhood
for competition and success,
where dreams waken into nightmare
and change becomes revolution;
sleep, sleep my little one
and when you wake, wake slowly

nearby ice fields to distant lands, from the dark whirlpools of the Yangtze to the rummage sale down the street.

In his review of her first book, 1975's *Through the Eyes of a Woman*, Irving Layton wrote that "Her ability to craft observations into moving compositions and to confer significance on even the humdrum and familiar, surprises and delights again and again. Her eyes see clearly, and sometimes impishly, what other never see at all or don't wish to."

And she does it with remarkable brevity. The difference between prose and poetry, wrote Samuel Taylor Coleridge is that while prose requires putting words in their best order, poetry demands the best words in the best order. This Rotstein accomplishes, casting aside the superfluous and refining the remaining with a surgeon's exactitude, leaving in her wake surprisingly large, and extremely rich, pictures.

"Every word should matter on

the page," says Rotstein, "and say something, either in feelings or emotions and have that affect on someone."

"What a poem does to the person's life is important. What really makes writing work, whether it's poetry or prose, is that the readers find meaning in it for them."

Rotstein, who has served on the board of the Canada Council, Telefilm Canada and the National Library Advisory Council, has published three books of poetry and a novel, *Shattering Glass*.

Common themes invade her work, and her new book is divided into segment, focussing on such groupings as family (she has three adult children), geography and her travels. Her children could be our children. Her geography is Canada's. She has a strong sense of history, fair play and justice.

But other landscapes are unique. In 1980, after China's cultural revolution, Rotstein was granted a literary visa to

that country, enabling her to travel alone to places few Westerners had seen before. It was an opportunity made-to-order for the Toronto poet. Her keen eyes took it all in. Her mellifluous poetry have us the images and emotions. Her third book or poetry, *China: Shockwaves*, describes the turmoil, tensions and beauty of that trip.

"In this book," she says of the new collection, "I feel you really have a Canadian insight, into people, places, experiences and emotions."

"I don't think a poet should be talking about their own life," she adds.

"They should be opening up their thoughts so that people can see things in their life — in the reader's life — that has meaning for them."

Nancy-Gay Rotstein will read from *This Horizon and Beyond* tonight at 8 p.m. in room 156 of the National Library, 395 Wellington St. Admission is free.