A Feminine Context in Quebecois Poetry: 
Rina Lasnier, Anne Hebert and Celyne Fortin 
By 
Caroline A LeBlanc 

INTRODUCTION: The poetry of French Canada—more specifically Quebec—is a dark poetry full of white and snow and cold; of the deprivation and despair, anger and nationalist longing of people historically oppressed by the Roman Catholic church of their ancestors and the state organ and population of their English conquerors. From 1608, New France, including Acadia and Quebec, was settled. Their mother country neglected them and finally forfeited the provinces to England in 1863. By then, third generation colonials populated the province (Jack, 59). In his 1970 anthology, The Poetry of French Canada in Translation, John Glassco writes that “the poetry of French Canada is a poetry of exile—from France and North America alike...[T]he note of desertion, of nostalgia, of the dépayé [displacement]...forms ...a ground-bass to themes of avoidance, retreat and escape.” Glassco describes the population as proud and conservative, religious and restless, sentimental and neurotic. French Canada’s poets, “rather than her religious and political leaders have always been the true spokesmen of her reality.” The “uniformity [of] her literary attitudes” grows out of “the defensive armour generally assumed by people whose normal evolution has been checked and stifled...Nature, the Self and Death [are] the three constant sources of poetic inspiration (xvii-iii).” The history of French-Canadian literature is pocked with conflict over what constitutes the “appropriate language...in which to write a national literature,” the debate over centuries gravitating toward the central magnet of Quebec City and later, the Quebec dialect of Joual. As Jack notes, “contemporary writing... [celebrates] language(s) and [is] playfully self-conscious in terms of register” (58). French-Canadian literature was subject to severe censorship until the twentieth century and, as Jack observes, “the practical utility ...of the writing...discouraged experimentation... [and] encouraged orthodoxy.” The two poets who were
exceptions were both “exiled from Quebec society (one abroad and the other in a mental institution)” (72). The succès de scandale of Refus global—a 1948 manifesto by “Paul-Emile Borduas and fifteen co-signatories—is now referred to ...as the single event marking the beginning of ‘modern’ Quebec (Jack 61).”

As in other colonies of the European empires, imperial authorities regarded the development of colonial literature by the native population as subversive. The retention of their native language or the adaptation of the colonizer’s language—English and French, for example—for common use was equally discouraged (Jack, 72). The characteristics of words and language became as important a focus for literature as the narrative of story—in some senses they become the story. As Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin write in The Empire Writes Back, language “becomes the medium through which a hierarchal structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, order’, and ‘reality’ become established. The emergence of an effective post-colonial voice challenges and rejects such power “(7). They go on to quote Lee who notes that “‘the first necessity for the colonial writer’ [is]... for the ‘imagination’ to ‘come home’. But this is not possible for the colonial, because the ‘words of home are silent.’” They continue to quote Lee who posits, “perhaps our job was not to fake a space of our own and write it up, but rather to find words for our space-lessness (qtd. 141).”

The characteristics of post-colonial literature in English, elucidated by Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, easily apply to post-colonial literature in general. In their discussion of “Place and Displacement,” these authors note that the “post-colonial crisis of identity” occurs not only for indigenous populations who experience “cultural denigration” but also for those whose “valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation resulting from” voluntary or involuntary relocation to colonies. They note that the “dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of post-colonial societies whether these have been created by a process of settlement, intervention, or a mixture of the two.” As a result, “a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are...common to all post-colonial
literatures....The alienation of vision and the crisis in self-image which displacement produces is as frequently found in the accounts of Canadian ‘free settlers’” as in populations forcibly transported to colonies or colonized indigenous populations (9).

After three generations, Canada had become home for the descendents of the “free settlers” who first colonized French Canada in the 17th century. They had become “indigenous” populations who were forcibly “colonized” by the British victors in the 18th century. This does not negate the older claim of aboriginal people as the original indigenous population, even as the aboriginal claim does not negate the French Canadian’s existential experience of being indigenous to a territory later colonized by the British Empire. Time passed and as Jack notes, that by the time of “the Second World War Quebec had ...declined into a nation of struggling farmers, using out-of-date methods, and a growing poor urban proletariat...under the repressive control... [of their] Provincial Premier.” She further states that these “many appositions and antagonisms [are] dramatized in Quebec texts (57).”

FRENCH CANADIAN ANTHOLOGIES IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION: John Glassco’s anthology of The Poetry of French Canada in Translation was published in 1970. Included is Marc Lescarbo’s 1606 poem of “address to the members of Poutrincourt’s second expedition to Port Royal [now Annapolis, Nova Scotia](1).” There is a sampling of early folk songs as well as the work of forty-seven poets born between the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. As is characteristic of colonial literature, the early works recount the accomplishments of, and reflect the perspective of, the colonizing powers. After France surrendered its North American territories to England, the poetry took on a tone of abandonment and protest –as in Louis Reil’s work “A Sir John A MacDonald” (28) or the despair and displacement of Neree Beauchemin “The Haunted House.” Nelligen was the poet (mentioned above) who was exiled to the mental asylum. He wrote bittersweet poem full of nostalgia, hope and despair (42-53). The pervasiveness of Roman Catholic authority is apparent in poetry that either praises or challenges the political and spiritual authority of the church. The ancient spiritual richness of
Catholicism is as real as the administrative authority of the institution. It flavors most works even among more contemporary poets who denounce the church itself. The majority of the poems written in the twentieth century are angry and despairing as Quebec and its literary community escalated their aggressive and sometimes violent struggles to make French the official provincial language. This finally happened in 1977. Many agitated for total independence from Canada (which is unlikely, though still hoped for by many). Selections such as Paul Chamberlain’s poems are “an angry cry, a moment of violent rupture.” Jack also paraphrases Chamberland, another modern poet, as declaring, “poetry is subversive or it is not poetry” (85).

*Esprit de Corps: Quebec Poetry of the Late Twentieth Century in Translation*, edited by Blouin, Pozier and Jones, is a 1997 anthology containing poems by forty-five modern poets, included in order of birth date. Ten were also represented in the Glassco anthology. Some aspects of tradition continue. The tone of poems is predominately angry and/or despairing, those by men noticeably more despairing. The topics are nature, language, nation, love, “overcoming” in both a pragmatic and spiritual sense, and the state of being disenfranchised. Historical poems are more personal in scope. The poems are largely unmetered free verse, with short and/or irregular line length and irregular stanza structure. The syntax is fractured, as are the images, many of which are geographically and traditionally symbolic. A fair number of the poems are long, covering three pages or more. Unfortunately, in both anthologies, while the poet and translators are noted, the dates and sources of the original poems are not noted.

Since the 1970s “Quebec literature [has been] often self-reflexively and theoretically preoccupied. Often self-conscious, playful, and open-ended, the problems and significance of writing and the problematic of women’s writing, became important themes (87).” When the Parti Quebecois came to power in 1976, a number of liberation movement, including the Women’s Movement flourished. In literature, “feminist ‘strategies’ were … proposed, often departing [beginning] from the contention that ‘le privé est politique.’” Beck proposes the possibility that women’s “texts mimic, or can
be read as, a microcosm or meta-Quebec literature. The ‘colonized,’ relative powerlessness of women, the desire to write a language of difference, questions of influence and allegiance, are exaggerations of many of the problems of Quebec literature as a whole (88).” While I read as much grief and suffering in the women’s as in the men’s poems, paradoxically, I find less fragmentation and more seeking of ways to find, strengthen and assert the self in the women’s poems. The possible factors at work in this dynamic are too broad for this paper but I would propose that it has something to do women’s familiarity with “hiding” as a coping mechanism in ordinary life. This “hiding” functionally intensifies during times of social or political oppression and conflict. When it is safe, women again speak out of their enduring life force—wounded, angry, discouraged to be sure but also self-affirming—the most political of private behaviors. As Adrienne Rich wrote “What the male poets were mourning and despairing over has never been ours ...” so women’s perspective is broader, their emotional resources more tempered than those of male poets (qtd. Ramazani, Elegy 311). With this in mind, I will examine poems, included in Espirit de Corp and written by three women: Rita Lasnier, Anne Hebert and Celyne Fortin. The complete texts of the poems are attached in the Appendix.

THE POEMS: According to Jack, Rina Lasnier and Anne Hebert “established themselves as [leaders of] the older generation [of French Canadian poets]...during the 1950s.” Both women have poem in the two anthologies.

Rina Lasnier”s (1910-1997) work has a “mystical conception of the world” which inspires her poetry and dramatic texts (Blouin 154). She was born in Quebec of French Canadian parents, sent to private boarding school in England, then returned to study at the University of Montreal. She held degrees in French and English literature as well as library science. Though she never worked as a librarian, she did work as a journalist. Deeply religious, her poetry was often dismisses as Quebec artists struggled to break the clergy’s hold on their political and cultural life. However, her concern was the “the struggle of the human soul to reach God, [as well as] ways of communion with the ineffable.”
Toward this end she studied both ancient and modern, Eastern and Western religious traditions. She found the divine in nature and her poetic symbols derive from the animals and environment of Canada. She was unique in Quebec literature, especially in that “before and after World War II she has never regarded herself as an exile from French culture, or [sought to] establish roots in France.” She won many literary awards. However, the feminist and nationalist movements in Quebec did not influence her writing. She was a woman who spoke in her own voice—the highest goal of any liberation movement (Rina Lanier).

Lanier’s poem, “The Wild Goose” opens the Esprit de Corps anthology (13). “The Wild Goose” is a tightly crafted, free verse dramatic monologue that contrasts the instinctual vigor of the (very noisy) wild goose, the “courage-bird” with the malaise of a population—of French Canadians presumably. The speaker offers the “courage-bird” to her downtrodden people as an emblematic symbol of inspiration and daring. In line sixteen and eighteen, the speaker challenges her listener—her people: “how long shall we hide our brooding loves in silence? / ... How long shall cold fires mute our tongues?” The poem has twenty-two lines in three self-contained stanzas of 8/6/8 lines. The beginning of each sentence is capitalized as well as the beginning of lines that contain particularly powerful images, even when they are not the beginning of sentences. The stanza pattern mimics the tight phalanxes of migrating geese. Punctuation is sparse with only strategic commas, a period at the end of the first and second stanza, two question marks (lines 17 and 18) and a period at the end of third stanza. Though most lines are enjambed, most also contain a complete thought and the thought from one line runs into the thought of the next line through the poem. The picture of conditions surrounding the central action of the stanzas is almost buried its sentence. This form also develops another mirror image of the individual bird in the larger flock. The English translation has four to eight stressed syllables and an irregular pattern of unstressed syllables per line, except for line ten, which is one word, “flight,” extended to begin at the end of line nine and creating a kind of flying apex on the page. Rhymes are irregular and distant. The
sense of a cold, dark season and place—a common condition in Quebec—is well established by the descriptive phrases, especially in the first stanza, and is reinforced by the alliteration of words beginning the hard or plosive sounds of “c,” “d,” “b,” and “g.” A number of adjacent syllables are accented. These have particular meaning in the poem, such as in the first stanza which establishes the challenges, vitality and inevitability of the wild goose’s pursuit of its life course: “sun’s eye drags bloodshot” (2); “polar snows cast their drowned pallor” (3); “courage-bird born”(4); “hot matings, wing-beating in cold ocean surfs” (5). This intense imagery and pounding rhythm continues until line eleven when, though the intense imagery continues, the narrative line moves at an easier pace. The complex syntax continues, burying loaded subordinate clauses in the sentence. As mentioned above, line 10 is one word, “flight” placed to begin just below the end of line nine and match the “stretch” of the image: “your yearning stretch to the long / flight.”

Stanza 3 begins with two questions addressed to “Birds family-tied and faithful” (15) and meant to be “overheard” by the listener(s) to whom they are really addressed. Even as the questions challenge the listeners to overcome their discouragement, they paint pictures of the nature of the oppression that discourages them: “like forests’ shoulders bent with snow? / How long shall cold fires mute our tongues?” That phrase “cold fires” captures the paradox and paralysis of the situation. Line 19 to the last line is the speaker’s prayer to the “courage-birds”—a prayer for herself and her people: “wake in us.../ ...save us...for birthing / and this throaty call for words in place of exile.” Read religiously, these words refer to life in earth as an exile from the divine. Read politically, these words imply that whatever exile is imposed on the people from the outside, the challenge for them is to act out of their life force, rather than their despair and to replace their silent sense of being exiled from themselves by speaking what must be spoken. Ashcroft, Griffithe and Tiffin discuss how the post-colonial community must “transform the language” of the colonial power, “to use it in a different way in its new context and so...make it ‘bear the burden’ of their experience (10).” The image of forests and barren lands “precipitate
of poles” not only incorporates the image of the tree, central to French Canadians, it alludes to the concurrent fertility, heaviness and barrenness of the environment and the population’s situation. Such images as “teeth of tundra winds,” (4) “altitudes of the lesser americas” (12), “a land precipitate of poles” (20) certainly create for the reader a sense of feeling lost in the frozen north—frozen not only because of climate but also because of how the power elite “freeze out” the disenfranchised French-Canadian population. This is not a pastoral paradise, nor is the poem a soothing pastoral piece for the European elite. This poem effectively demonstrates how post-colonial writing subversively serves the “need...to escape from the implicit body of assumptions to which English [or the language of any imperial power] was attached, its aesthetic and social values, the formal and historically limited constraint of genre, and the oppressive political and cultural assertion of metropolitan dominance, of center over margin” (10).

Anne Hebert (1916-2000) was born and died in Quebec just a few years after Rina Lanier. In Hebert’s teen years, her father guided her early writing. She graduated from college in Quebec and worked for Radio Canada and the National Film Board of Canada before moving to Paris in the mid-1950s. She was prolific, write novels, poetry and plays. Like Ranier, she won many prestigious literary awards. While she visited Canada often, she did not return for good until the late 1990s when she was terminally ill with bone cancer (Anne Hebert).

While Lasnier’s poem uses an outer world event to evoke an appreciation of an inner state of being, in “Homeland (19)” Ann Hebert begins in the inner landscape of “the deepest hollow of sleep .“ However, like Lasnier, Hebert uses the archetypal images of the outer Canadian landscape—tree, snow, time of day, season, water and storms to create a picture of the damaged inner condition of the French Canadian living in an exile equivalent to that of a “colonized” native. The impersonal nature of Quebec’s vast and wild landscape is an apt metaphor for the attitude of the national English government and the repressive provincial government toward the French population. The French Canadian experience of
outer exile and the corresponding inner habit of defining oneself as an exile is another dimension of danger and lostness. This poem is about the habit, all too understandable, of dwelling on wrongs and living for the chance to revenge those wrongs. In this process, one kills even the small potential for life that survives the oppressive outer experiences. There is one chance—one must, as the speaker invites in the last lines, “depart, my love, the world melting like a city of cloth / Let the heart’s fierce resemblance to its homeland [of bountiful life and love] / Be fulfilled (15-7). This is not an escape though. This is a “carpe diem” kind of choice that must be consciously made after looking deeply into the landscape of the oppressed psyche; naming the wrongs and mining the moments when life breaks through the cold blanket of snow and the shadow of the “bitter tree” (2). This is the ultimate challenge of ethnic exile in one’s homeland or self-chosen geographical exile outside of one’s homeland.

“Homeland” is a free verse poem with a range of three to six accented syllables in its English translation. If one reads the lines with the same number of stresses—e.g., all the lines with three stress—one after the other, they create some interesting “sub-poems” within the larger text. “Homeland” has one stanza with seventeen lines. In keeping with the more traditional rules of French free verse, the majority of the lines have a caesura (a turn in the idea), usually a central caesura. The poem is one heavily enjambed sentence with only five commas—all of which bracket word of address and/or significant focus. A single period is at the end of the poem, though the convention of capitalizing the first word of each line is observed. Seven of the seventeen lines begin with an accented syllable, calling—even commanding—the listener’s and the reader’s attention the urgency of the situation and the choice to be made. The many words with “w” sounds help soften the harsh tone of the imagery and create a feel for the potential of waters flowing if the right choice can be made. Similarly, the assonance of words with a long “o” sound evokes a sense of the “hollow of sleep” in the “shadow... [of] the bitter tree” and the “silence... [of] its high shadow...on the core of words” (1-4). This path leads to impotence, to a lack of “fresh water” and to the barrenness of a season when “woman is brackish as algae.” But if
one can “drop this old dream” and “think of our love,”—for the other, for the earth—“the honor [can be] enough” to remember “the raw years” when the lover’s face and eyes were “candid” and “opened wide” (8-11)—with hope as well as with the ability to see injustice. The wounds and dangers have not changed but the speaker is inviting her listener to release bitterness and assume a different attitude toward them—an attitude that can make the difference between being overcome by “storms” or fulfilling the promise of “the heart’s fierce resemblance to its homeland,” to its vast horizons (16-7). The last line is its own command, “Be fulfilled” (17).

Celyne Fortin (b 1943) follows in Lesnier’s and Hebert’s footsteps. She also was born in Quebec—in Abitibi, the region and title of the poem examined in this paper. Trained as a nurse, Fortin went on to study visual arts and become a successful visual artist, poet and publisher. A number of her books include both her paintings and her poems (Celyne Fortin).

In her poem “To Write in Abitibi” (94-6), Celyne Fortin condenses the expansive perspective on inner and outer landscape into the description of a personal experience in relation to a specific place. The poem is a telling and a prayer in the litany form familiar to any Roman Catholic. The seventy-eight free verse lines, many with caesuras, are short and have a pattern of three and four accented syllables in the English translation. This complex poem has two parts. The first has six stanzas of varying length; the second has five stanzas of varying length. In Part One, the poem begins with fuzzy, more abstract images in a depersonalized second person “you.” It then zooms in on more personal images as the poem progresses in the third person “she” and “I,” meaning “person”, before zooming out again into general observations about the process. Part Two repeats this movement between a wide and a telescopic focus. It begins with general statements of intent addressed to no one in particular, moves to musings about the writing process, then back to the first person wondering if these are photos of “my” parents, and a first person plural “us” who misses the mother in the poem. An allusion to the Belgium painter Alechenski—and indirectly to the poet who is also a painter—follows. Finally, we are lost again in
the unfocused winter day—“pale,” “no more horizon,” “only an enormous grey sky / the seemingly endless / January snow (no period)“ of the last line of the poem. The tone is ruminative. There is a sense of uncertainty about the speaker’s ability to mine a sense of self by returning to her roots in Abitibi, a lumber and mining region in northern Ontario. Should she have gone to Paris as “others”, including Alechenski—and her poetic foremother Hebert—did to develop their artistic identities? The poem also reflects a struggle to find the balance between the more “loving” identity of “I” as woman in the speaker’s personal life and “I” as “lively” artist in Paris, neutered, perhaps even more masculine and voyeuristic.

The poem has no regular rhyme pattern. In the first section of the poem, there is a repetitive, rhyming play on the words “childhood,” “womanhood,” “women,” and “mothers.” The change of voice in the poem cues the reader to different points of view and enlivens the litany-like format of the poem. The poem tells a story, but it is not so much a narrative as a patterned collection of images, usually one per line and usually, but not always, in a phrase with a cohesive and complete idea. The only punctuation mark is an asterisk separating the first and second part of the poem.

The poem begins in ambiguity about the season—“was it snowing flowers / [the blossoms of] ...wild cherries”—was it spring? Did the impersonal “you” who “hardly heard the birds” have trouble hearing because she was so preoccupied and/or distraught or because it was winter and the birds were gone or quiet (1-3)? We know that she had “eyes locked on childhood (4)” memories, but the outer situation is unclear. In the next stanza, it is clear that the speaker has come to Abitibi to write rather than go to Paris as “others” do. We begin to get an idea of why—“to rediscover childhood (7).” But why—to heal trauma, to rekindle a lost vitality, to refine a sense of what is truly important in her life? The next three lines paint a nostalgic and vague word tableau that says “home” even before line eleven tells us of “the journey / from the village here to the city / from childhood here to womanhood. “ Line 14 tells us more of the adventure’s purpose—there is “ a whole story to be rediscovered.”
Line 15, the first line of stanza three locates the speaker more particularly in “La Sarre” which is the Abitibi Regional seat. The action as moved from the vast wilderness region to its center of civilization. Similarly, the speaker further defines the reason for the pilgrimage—“to write a woman’s story”—her own, that of a woman in her family, the emblematic woman? She wants to learn “the story of Quebec women” and to become a part of it to find a “link.../ that binds me to my mothers (15-25).” The stanza suggests that the speaker has lost, or never had, a sense of herself as a woman, certainly not a strong woman. The fourth stanza verifies this—it has eight lines and, the first line, then every other line begins with “this I”. The depersonalized phrase underlines the sense that the speaker is seeking to “know / who she is /... [and] where she is going,” because she has lost her way. She is “less lively” and at the same time “more loving (26-33),” i.e. she is less interested in worldly ambitions and accomplishments and increasingly interested in relationship. She must discover something about herself and her relationships by returning to her roots. In the next stanza, the speaker pulls back into the less personally immediate moment with paradoxically more universal and particular details. She remembers “kitchenware” and “music” and “tiredness” and “men’s shirts.” Without describing the details of the routine in her childhood home, the speaker creates a felt sense of the life there (34-9). The last stanza in Part 1 is a declaration, even a command issued by the speaker to herself: “you will return (41).” It is necessary because she is ambivalent, if not terrified, about “memory made domestic (40).” What woman with longing for both a professional identity and a “domestic” life has not felt this conflict? Add to this the traditional French Canadian proscription that a woman be wife and mother and it is easy to understand the intensity of the speaker’s dilemma. By zooming back into the wide lense of the indefinite “you,” the speaker invites the reader to join her “journey” affirming that the “le privé est politique.”

Part 2 begins with the lens wide and unfocused. We are back in the wild region of “Abitibi”. We are “under snow” and we have to “push ahead” in “the greys of this land / to rediscover the ghosts” of
“when one was young” and “to dig up the memory / of unknown time (43-50).” This is the land of repressed childhood memory AND the land of ancestors who settled this wilderness, yet were treated as second class citizens. AND it is the land of the feminine, the Great Mother, the source of life and death, the unconscious. No wonder it is “hard to fill this page” because of the “heaviness / of the hand on each word (51-4).” This is the swamp—or in keeping with upper Canada, the muskeg where one stumbles and sinks into the mire that is the history of pioneer settlements, of suffering, oppression, exile as well as the breading ground of abundant new life if one can manage to not be pulled under. One cannot get more impersonal than this. As if, in compensation, the next stanza brings us to the most personal, and still archetypal, lines of the poem. We learn of the father’s work in the “lumber camp’s epic”—a Paul Bunyan father held in awe but we cannot tell if it is the awe of hero worship or the awe of fear and intimidation, the young child’s awe or the adult child’s appreciation of the fullness of the father’s life story. And we learn of the longing for the mother’s “caress”. Lines 63-4 are the most ambiguous of the poem. The longing “haunts us / so often so far away.” Who is “us” and are they haunted often or often far away or both? Are there siblings and is the speaker an emissary of sorts? Is the speaker’s sense of herself so fractured that she is literally an “us” rather than the “I” of lines 26 to 32? Is the “us” a way of designating the distressing but less dramatic split the speaker feels between the urge to love or work? Is the “us” the many motherless women who long for the fortifying and validating caress of the Great Mother’s life energy we so easily lose contact with when our personal and professional lives get out of balance? When we lose connection with our roots? Is the “us” the creative person, man or woman, who longs for the inspirational “caress” of the muse? Personal father and mother become confounded with the divine father and mother in these lines.

Stanza 4 brings us back to the present and hints at a greater sense of personal authority in the allusion to the book “with a knife / there to find Alechenski / like an officer of words (68-70).” Is this a supportive inner or outer masculine figure? A role model? A personification of a daimon? The figure is
authoritative yet less overwhelming than the figure of the father. The figure also provides a bridge to the larger world for the woman speaker as adult. The allusion is to the fact that Alechenski found and used old documents as the ground for many of his paintings (Alechinsky). It is an allegory for how each new generation creates out of the legacy of past generations. The implication is that this is a soothing and inspiring image for the speaker and it fuels her hope that she can do something similar in her life.

But that possibility fades as the speaker moves into the last stanza and returns to the “pale,” “miserable” horizon less “grey sky” and the “endless January snow.” This is a surprising and distressing ending. The poem succeeds as poem by nature of the fact that it was written, and written well. However, as prayer, it has failed. The speaker’s plea, even excitement that she might know herself, to live her life more fully has dissipated. Perhaps the distress of the photos was too traumatic, the leap to Alechenski too ungrounding. There is no doubt about the speaker’s desire, however ambivalent, to learn what Abitibi has to teach her but, in this account at least, it is more than she can embody.

Whatever malaise has her feeling “less lively” (31) has won the day. There is always the love—and the waiting in faith for winter to pass into spring.

In these poems, Lasier’s voice is the most traditional and collective, calling on the forces of nature to inspire her people to fuller life. The more private voice of Hebert and Fortin’s poems is, however, no less public in its insistence that Quebecers—and by extension all oppressed people—individually examine and redeem their past. In all three poems, it is easy to see the similarities between the individual speaker’s experience and the experience of an entire people rooted in the nostalgia and suffering of exile, in the longing for success and equality in their homeland. All three women address archetypal themes of loss, trauma, oppression and exile from a feminine ground that, however tenuous it may be at times, endures, engages and seeks to redeem the realities of life for colonized people.
Works Cited


# Appendix 1: Poems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Poem: The Wild Goose by Rina Lasnier</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>When thick fogs blanket the autumn days and the sun’s eye drags bloodshot through shore drift when polar snows cast their drowned pallor across the land The courage-bird, born in the teeth of tundra winds after hot matings, wing-beating in cold ocean surfs, the goose already paired and gravid with maternal flesh Like a new vessel taking her fill of sky and sea Glides, beside the male, wild swan in a broad double wake.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Winging milk-starred in your yearning stretch to the long Flight</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Winging in phalanxes lofted on intangible whitenesses Skeins of blossom sounding the altitudes of the lesser americas by goslings and your heart’s blood called back, for the wind’s webs can never tangle your swimming feet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Birds family-tied and faithful to the Labrador steppe, how long shall we hide our brooding loves in silence like the forests’ shoulders bent with snow? How long shall cold fires mute our tongues? Courage-birds by the palmate prints of your paired feet wake in us the challenge of a land precipitate of poles and save us our wild vastnesses for birthing</td>
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and this throaty call for words in place of exile.

Translated by Judith Cowan
# HOMELAND

BY Anne Hebert

Land received in the deepest hollow of sleep
The bitter tree grows over us
Casting its high shadow upon the awakening
Its silence on the core of words
Its name to be carved on a field of snow
And you, brought back from daybreak,
Drop this old dream along the shores of the old world
Think of our love, the honor is enough
The raw years, the candid face the eyes opened wide
Fresh water is in season no more
Woman is brackish as algae
My soul tastes of the sea and unripe oranges
Forests on the alert rivers unbound

sing of the mother-waters of this time

A whole continent swept by storms
Let us depart, my love, the world melting like a
city of cloth
Let the heart’s fierce resemblance to its homeland
Be fulfilled.

Translated by Daniel Sloate
TO WRITE IN ABITIBI by Celyne Fortin

1 was it snowing flowers
the wild cherries changed season
you hardly heard the birds
eyes locked on childhood

5 to write in Abitibi
--others go to Paris—
to rediscover childhood
its smells its sounds its lights
the precise remembered place

10 the hearth you entered with life
the journey
from the village here to the city
from childhood here to womanhood
a whole story to be recovered

15 to write in La Sarre
to write a woman’s story
to read the story of Quebec women
wanting to be part of History
to admire the boldness of these women
their strength
to share their hopes
inscribing energy fervour
what have I come here to look for
a link perhaps

40 memory made domestic
you will return
to this aspect of things

45 to see Abitibi again
spread out under snow
to push ahead ever further
in the greys of this land
to rediscover the ghosts
of the time when one was young
to dig up the memory

50 of unknown time
hard to fill this page
where the writing won’t flow
there is the heaviness

55 of the hand on each word
is it really him
my father
in this dated photo
and the lumber camp’s epic
and my mother

60 how to recognize love her
motionless there
when the need for her caress
| 25 | one that binds me to my mothers       | still haunts us                                               |
|    | this I wants to know                 | so often so far away                                         |
|    | who she is                          | the pleasure of the text                                      |
|    | the I still doesn’t know very well   | the pleasure of reading                                       |
|    | where she is going                  | to open the office of the title                               |
| 30 | the I that every evening is a bit   | with a knife                                                 |
|    | less lively                         | there to find Alechenski                                     |
|    | this I that every day is a bit      | like an officer of words                                     |
|    | more loving                         | to come back on a pale Sunday                                 |
|    | a long time afterward               | of a miserable winter’s day                                   |
|    | still to remember                   | the light changing                                           |
|    | the kitchenware and its music        | there is no more horizon                                     |
|    | hands and their tiredness           | no more country                                              |
|    | on the stairs on the shutters       | only an enormous grey sky                                     |
|    | the men’s shirts                    | the seemingly endless                                        |
|    |                                     | January snow                                                 |

Translated by D.G. Jones