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YOU'RE ON TOP OF THE WORLD WITH INTRA

INTRA

Mothering a

by Lisa A. Trofymow

Hey, man: I'm a humanist — but according to my handy pocket Hugo I'm a human female, but not a human *being*. I sure envy "beings" — they spend far less on make-up and masks and they write and speak in a language formed by beings, for beings.

But Lola Lemire Tostevin brings hope for we mutually excluded through her poetry, her re-shaping of language. Her first book, *Color of Her Speech* (1982), speaks in four languages — feminine, masculine, English and French. About twenty of us ("beings" and "females") tracked Ms. Tostevin to her reading in Humanities, given on the 24th day of last month. Not yet recognized or criticized properly, Tostevin's work has been published by only small presses. Yet judging her poetry by her reading and by the high praise it has received, Tostevin should soon become a familiar name.

The poet read in a rhythmic, sing-song voice which made her presentation seem almost a concert. Unique too, was her frequent eye contact with her audience as she stood at ease by her podium — not hiding behind her words but penetrating her audience with her unusual re-definitions, alliterations, and word-plays. Especially in *Gyno-Text* (1983), Tostevin demonstrated a giving birth to ideas *beyond* the language of "beings," creating a language perhaps more accessible to all beings and females. Certainly she made herself accessible after the reading. So we talked.

Lisa: You came rather late into writing — how did that come about? I noticed you studied Comparative Literature here at the University of Alberta — does that have something to do with your burgeoning career in writing?

Tostevin: I did a little bit of writing when I was in Comparative Literature. When I did Comparative Literature at the U of A, it was after I had left university to get married and have two children, and it was — I was already in my 30s when I — or early 30s — when I came back to university. And then I didn't get into full-time writing until I was in my late 30s.

Lisa: So actually what started it — was it through having children that started you thinking more creatively?

Tostevin: No.

Lisa: ...or because you went back to school?

Tostevin: Yes, but I had always wanted to write, and I had an interest in language because I was brought up as a French-Canadian in an English community and I had a great interest in *words*. I actually used to look up English words all the time. And I remember thinking I'd like to be a writer, when I was growing up and a teenager, but that (writing) was something other people did. Like — being a doctor, that was something other people did. But it was always there. And finally when I came to university and I studied some French, and some women writers — I was very much influenced by French women feminist writers — I thought, well, maybe I *can* do that.

Lisa: If they can do it, you can do it too.

Tostevin: Yes.

"literature has been a tool which was not a true image of women"

Lisa: It's funny — I was wondering about your poem about the *Thorn Birds*, the mentioning of the "gingerbread household" — I guess there really wasn't all that much serious backing of say, you want to be a writer. I suppose there would've been more support if you'd said, "Oh, I want to be a doctor" — some sort of 'profession'. Do you find that more because you're a woman? Or because simply, writing is such a lucrative kind of business — although not so much now perhaps — you can always research the markets.

Tostevin: It was both. It was both. It was because I was a woman. Also, we as French Canadians living in an English community, it was always the other people that did the important things. So I felt I had a double...everything was removed *twice*, because I was French-speaking. So it just didn't occur to me, really, that I could take this (writing) seriously.

Lisa: Is French your native tongue?

Tostevin: Mm-hmm.

Lisa: It is. One interesting thing is why you chose to write in English.

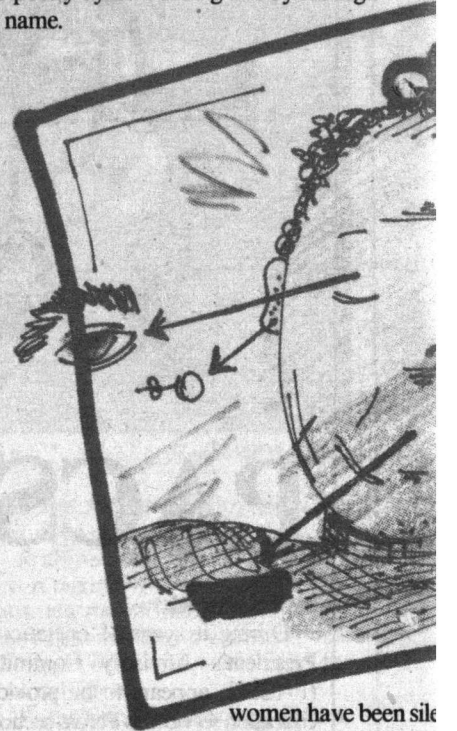
Tostevin: (French) is my native tongue, but — there's one poem that I didn't read today, in which I say French is no longer my mother tongue, and — but man says, "Neither is English," and I say "Well, what is?" And he says, "Fucking". So — it was not — it *was* my first language, my parents still speak to me in French, but I grew away from it so much and when I tried to write only in French I realized that it wasn't flowing, and English has become my mother tongue — or my first language. It's not my *mother* tongue, my mother tongue will always be French, but I've been totally assimilated.

Lisa: Well, how is it that when you hear — at least I've heard so many definitions of English being a very patriarchal language...

Tostevin: Mm-hmm.

Lisa: ...is that, do you find that (patriarchy) so much more in English or French? Which one of the two would you say is...

Tostevin: Well, for me all language is patriarchal because



women have been silent — they start in feminine *la, le* —

Lisa: And yet it's (French) else. Almost a stereotype

Tostevin: Yes, yes. To — literature has been women, it was all to

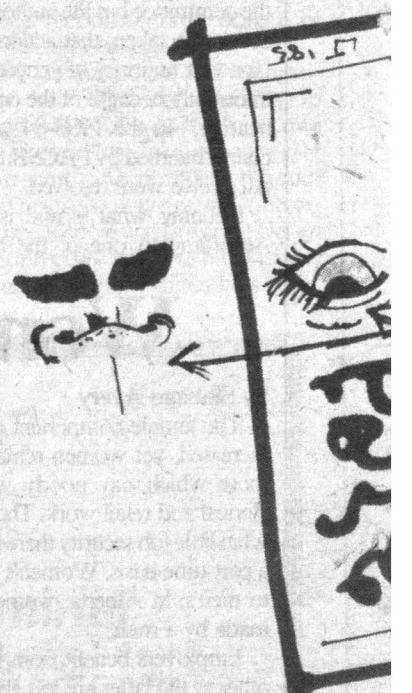
Lisa: So that words and definitions.

Tostevin: Well, the (men's) own end and — we're — it wasn't — they're such tiny little

It's a coming into language

Lisa: Oh, all over again

Tostevin: Yes. Sometimes I'd ever taken a creative



Graphic: Lisa Trofymow