

“The poem of you will never be written”

Memoir and the Contradictions of Elegiac Form in Patrick Lane’s *There Is a Season*

In an interview with Margaret Atwood about his 2004 memoir, *There Is a Season: A Memoir in a Garden*, Patrick Lane describes his decision to write a prose memoir as a therapeutic alternative to writing poetry. Reflecting on the experiences of addiction and recovery that inform the memoir, Lane notes, “I knew I’d just begun the process of healing my body and my spirit. I wanted to write, but I was afraid to start writing poetry or fiction. . . . Nonfiction seemed a safe place to go” (n. pag.). *There Is a Season* might be considered a scriptotherapeutic text in its chronological, month-by-month account of a year of recovery from decades of alcoholism and drug addiction.¹ While the narrative of addiction recovery is at the forefront of the memoir, the work also incorporates an elegiac trajectory in which Lane explores other questions of recovery through the haunting figure of his mother. Having declared in a 1991 elegiac poem, “Mother,” that “the poem of you will never be written” (*Mortal Remains* 20), Lane turns to the memoir form to engage with similar questions about the possibility of articulating his mother’s life, death, and impact on his poetic vocation. While the memoir offers a more extended, prosaic form for these investigations, Lane’s use of the genre elucidates the strong connections between memoir and elegy, particularly in his use of elegiac themes of poetic inheritance and the reassuring cyclicity of the natural world, as well as the elegiac motifs of apotheosis—the departure of the deceased other into a heavenly space—and anagnorisis, or revelation. Yet as in Lane’s poetic elegies, the subversion and qualification of elegiac motifs in *There Is a Season* convey ambivalence about the possibility of elegiac consolation or poetic inheritance, especially

given his mother's silence as a victim of sexual and domestic abuse. Looking at the memoir alongside two of Lane's poetic elegies, "Mother" from *Mortal Remains* (1991) and "The Last Day of My Mother" from *The Bare Plum of Winter Rain* (2000), I argue that Lane's contradictory approach to elegiac consolation in *There Is a Season* culminates an ongoing negotiation of the gender and genre of elegy in his later work, which has received little scholarly attention in recent years.² A combination of disavowal and consolation in all three works allows Lane to confront the ethical dilemmas involved in representing his mother's legacy in the traditionally masculine elegiac mode, while the memoir form enables a reflective acceptance of the limited possibilities of emotional and physical recovery.

Lane's use of the memoir genre to explore elegiac possibilities and forms of recovery reflects a broader affinity between the two genres that has emerged as more writers turn to memoir to write about family members. While mourning and memorialization are associated with both genres, few autobiography critics have explored the formal use of elegiac motifs in the memoir; the term "elegy" is most often used thematically to describe content that involves an act of mourning. Thus, Sandra Pouchet Paquet's study of Caribbean autobiography identifies a "conjunction of elegy and autobiography" in poetic and prose texts by simply locating their similarity in a "lyric outpouring" (228) that expresses "elegiac themes of loss, mourning, and melancholia" (233). Nancy K. Miller's brief comparison of the genres in *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death* similarly identifies an affinity between memoir and elegy, but focuses on comparing the trajectory of memoirs of loss with that of the traditional elegy and, by extension, with Freud's theory of mourning:

Memoirs that write a parent's death share many generic and thematic features of the elegy. Traditionally, the performance that elegy entails for poets is the act of taking up and revising the precursor's task in their own voices. This is a part of the mourning process and requires a break with the past, a separation, and a replacement. (7)

While Miller's assertion that elegy and memoir writers "taking up and revising the precursor's task in their own voices" identifies important vocational and recuperative trajectories that are shared by the two genres, she does not elaborate on how similar uses of elegiac motifs also connect the genres. Incorporating familiar motifs like apotheosis and prosopopoeia—an apostrophe to the absent other, or inclusion of his or her voice—is an important way of signalling an elegiac framework in prose elegy, studies of

which have been undertaken by John B. Vickery in *The Prose Elegy* (2009) and by Karen Smythe in her study of Canadian “fiction-elegy” in the short stories of Mavis Gallant and Alice Munro. Smythe’s examination of “fiction written in an elegiac form” (5) considers how traditional devices of the poetic elegy are incorporated, reworked, or parodied within fictional forms, a model that fits even more aptly with memoirs that share the first-person voice of lyric poetry, a subjective engagement with experiences of mourning, and an association with recuperative writing.

The use of elegiac motifs in memoir complements the affinity that Miller points out between both genres’ investment in questions of recovery, inheritance, and authority. Melissa Zeiger identifies psychological recuperation and succession as the central threads of elegy criticism, observing that

two powerful models have dominated the discussion of elegy: an anxiety-of-influence model derived from Harold Bloom, and a work-of-mourning model based on Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia.” While the first model conceives elegy as a rivalrous attack on a dead but still overwhelming precursor figure, the second conceives the genre as a translation into literature of the grieving process following a death, leading to resignation or consolation. (3)

While Zeiger’s distinction between the psychoanalytic interpretation of elegy and the elegiac theme of poetic succession is useful, these two threads are often intertwined in practice, especially in the use of the concept of recovery. The term can refer either to a psychological recovery or to the recovery of a voice that represents poetic inheritance; most often, it encompasses both at once if the recovery of voice is depicted as *enabling* the psychological recovery and consolation. Celeste Schenck describes the elegy’s “first premise [as] the recovery of poetic voice from ritual burial of the past” (*Mourning* 181), a description that illustrates the fascinating ambiguity with which the word “recovery” is used in elegy criticism. Most predominantly, the idea of a recovery of voice refers to the surviving poet’s recovery of his or her own poetic voice after a period of silence and mourning, but this recovered voice is doubled in its association with both the deceased poet and the poetic successor. The idea that the voice is recovered both *from* and *due to* the burial of the past implies a recovery of the dead other’s voice as well as a therapeutic recovery that takes place only because of the closure involved in burial. Indeed, many prose memoirs that deal with grief, including Lane’s, end with scenes in which a grieving protagonist articulates and assimilates some meaningful words spoken by the deceased other, making them his or her own in a limited form of consolation and prosopopoeia.

While Lane's memoir incorporates both thematic and formal elements of elegy, his work indicates a strong ambivalence about both elegiac recovery and the possibility of succession or generational transmission—not simply because the poetic succession in elegy, as feminist elegy critics have pointed out, is typically a masculine one that relegates female figures to the periphery.³ In the English elegy's traditional trajectory towards consolation, the poet, having sung a lament and experienced the weight of mourning, is consoled by some reassurance of continuity, whether an apotheostic reassurance that the other's life continues in some other form, an emphasis on the continuity of nature, or a more compensatory sense that the poem itself—and the inherited ability to sing—acts as a lasting memorial to the other. Yet the idea that any poetic work can come to a consolatory conclusion in the face of death has become problematic for many twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers of elegy; as Jahan Ramazani argues, the majority of “[c]ontemporary elegists . . . refuse a facile poetic therapy—namely, the transfiguration of the dead into consolatory art or heavenly beings” (7). Ramazani concedes, however, that some modern and contemporary elegists “have reclaimed compensatory mourning by subduing its promise” (30). Lane's adoption of a subdued form of consolation is evident both in *Mortal Remains*, which includes a family-focused elegy sequence, and in *There Is a Season*. *Mortal Remains* concludes with an afterword on the limited, retroactive efficacy of consolatory art:

My brother's early death and my father's murder changed my life in the Sixties. It was only recently, twenty-five years later, I felt capable of approaching that time with poetry. *Mortal Remains* is a dark title yet it is somehow appropriate. Poetry cannot save us but it can provide us with some small redemption.
(n. pag.)

Here, Lane overtly rejects the therapeutic potential of elegy, allowing it to provide “some small redemption” but not, in itself, a compensation for or healing of the wounds of the past. A similar approach to the healing potential of art is evident in *There Is a Season*, which also addresses the losses of Lane's father, brother, and mother and revisits some of the traumatic events of his working-class youth. Although the memoir articulates Lane's renewed experience of life through his writing, his garden, and his marriage, Lane expresses his scepticism about any final healing by twice repeating a line by poet Weldon Kees: “Whatever it is that a wound remembers, after the healing ends” (49, 217). Thus he allows for some possibility of healing in elegy—as William Watkin puts it, “elegy is to be seen as treatment, a salve, or balm

applied to the psychic wound” (54)—but in both texts, Lane emphasizes the remainder—and reminder—left by experiences of trauma and loss.

The elegiac subtext of Lane’s memoir is immediately evident in the work’s concern with the impact of death and the ritual succession of voice. The memoir’s epigraph is taken from Lane’s elegy “Fathers and Sons,” from *Mortal Remains*; the line asserts that “if you listen you can hear me. / My mouth is open and I am singing” (19), gesturing to the work’s elegiac concerns with both the contingency of communication and the possibility of renewal. Accordingly, Lane’s memoir establishes a plot of poetic inheritance alongside his multiple narratives of recovery. Within the memoir, both of Lane’s parents and his brother, Dick (Red) Lane—also a poet, who died at age twenty-eight of a brain hemorrhage—are figured as poetic muses and predecessors. Shortly after the unexpected deaths of his father and brother, Lane’s grief-stricken wanderings are accompanied by their spectres, as “[m]y dead brother with his bloody brain sat beside me and my dead father with the hole in his chest where the bullet had blown apart his heart sat behind me, both of them whispering in my ears the lyrics to poems and songs I didn’t want to hear but wrote down anyway” (*Season* 51). Haunting imagery surrounds all three, including his brother, who after his death “suddenly appeared inside me, his face inside my face, his laugh. . . . I could hear him talking to me” (238). Yet Lane’s mother is the most central and recurring ghost throughout the memoir, partly because of the stark contrast between the early influence of her reading voice and the troubling silences that mark her later life due to traumatic experiences of sexual abuse by her father and to the domestic silence enforced by her husband. Recalling his mother’s practice of reading him and his brothers to sleep at night, Lane relates, “My mother’s voice was a soporific. It insinuated itself into all of our hearts and brought us to a waking sleep. It was a treasure of words, their rhythms and patterns, she was giving me and I have never forgotten it” (*Season* 33). Lane thus positions his mother as an early source of a healing, compensatory poetic voice, “the only stay we had against the darkness that surrounded us” (34), but both his poetry and memoir also reflect on the conflicted nature of his mother’s poetic legacy.

Lane’s ambivalence about representing his mother, who remains unnamed in the memoir, reflects both his troubled relationship with her and her personal struggles to manage her gendered experiences of abuse and confinement. Limited from social contact by her life on an isolated farm during Lane’s teenage years, her association with silence is solidified in a period of months

in which she does not speak to the family—a silence enforced by a patriarchal family structure and a familial acceptance of silence. Lane is instructed by his father not to speak to her, with no explanation; he relates, “It was six months before I spoke aloud to her and even then she reciprocated with a deep silence. . . . There was an impenetrable barrier between us” (*Season* 84). A similar repression of grief and of past events permeates the other communications between mother and son, even when she begins to speak again after her long period of silence. As Lane notes, “I know I lived in a family of words where nothing was said” (*Season* 214). After his father’s death, his mother does relate much of her past, telling “the story of her life through the dreary mask of rye whisky and television test patterns. . . . It was all a long monologue, ramblings, anecdotes, and snatches from her past” (60). Yet this mediated excess of confessional honesty also fails in the sense that she omits her childhood-long experiences of sexual abuse by her father, which Lane learns about in a posthumous revelation after which “every story . . . became something a little bent” (60).⁴ While Lane allows that “[t]he silence in our home and the denial of any kind of trauma was how we understood things” (85), he also insists upon the importance, for himself, of confronting the past rather than repressing it, a conflict between himself and his mother that is repeatedly played out in his writings about her. Lane’s ambivalent use of elegiac tropes reflects his desire to simultaneously capture his mother’s contradictions in writing and to respect her silences by refusing to overwrite them.

In “Mother” and “The Last Day of My Mother,” Lane expresses his difficulty with representing his mother in poetry, resulting in a contradictory movement from denial to acceptance in both poems. In “Mother,” an elegiac poem published the year before his mother’s death from cancer, Lane recalls her gardening in a red headscarf or “babushka” (*Bare Plum* 20)—a memory that becomes a repeated, haunting image in his memoir. Although the poem is part of an elegy sequence, it rejects the premise of an elegiac eulogy, suggesting, perhaps, his own—and others’—scepticism about the gendered limitations of the genre. As Priscila Uppal observes, “mother elegies written by mourning sons are practically non-existent” in English-Canadian writing (100). Yet Lane’s hesitance about recovering his mother in elegy also reflects the instability of their personal relationship, captured in the poem’s focus on the problematic transmission of sound and poetic voice:

The wind searches among the leaves
and your face returns, a shape that swells in the mouth

until it becomes a single sound, a strange happiness
mostly pain. The poem of you will never be written.
Each time I try to create you I fall into intricate lies,
a place of vague light, uncertain brooding. (*Mortal Remains* 20)

The apostrophic address to his mother recovers her face, a form of prosopopoeia, but it is transformed only into a “single sound”—a voice not her own, but one originating in the mouth of the speaker. Yet the speaker insists that this unitary sound can never be communicated as poetry, undermining the poem in which this idea is presented. Rather than offering a celebratory eulogy, the poem insists upon its own impossibility. Similarly, the poem overtly rejects an elegiac trajectory toward consolation, ending with the lines:

This poem goes nowhere
like a tree whose leaves are stripped by worms.
The wind blows, the branches move,
inconsequential, fragile and forgiven. (*Mortal Remains* 21)

The image of a static, worm-eaten tree suggests the impossibility of continuing growth, thus denying the significant elegiac consolation of natural rejuvenation; it also gestures to the impact of trauma on elegiac recovery. At the same time, the final line allows an ostensibly “inconsequential,” small, and natural redemption through the final image of forgiveness; the concluding words are accentuated by the gradual lengthening of the line that implicitly contradicts the assertion that the poem “goes nowhere.”

Lane employs a similarly contradictory approach toward representation and consolation in his later poem “The Last Day of My Mother.” Recalling his mother’s final day in a nursing home, the speaker reflects, “Tonight I don’t know how to take these lines and make them / poetry, any more than I could change my mother / who still looked upon me as a child” (*Bare Plum* 34). His reluctance implies a critique of poetry itself as an idealized, aestheticized, and figurative version of hard truths, whether of the indignities of his mother’s bodily functions in the nursing home, or the reality of her detached approach to their relationship; as he continues, “I don’t want to turn this into metaphor” (*Bare Plum* 34), leaving “this” importantly undefined. In line with this refusal to aestheticize his response to her death, he also rejects an elegiac framework for the poem, asserting that “I don’t want to turn this / into a lament. Death is in us, it’s how we’re born” (*Bare Plum* 35). By the end of the poem, however, the speaker acknowledges an elegiac inheritance with the reflection that

I carry her in my flesh, can smell her if I try.

 ... And there, I've made this into poetry.

What else can I do? ...

*There's more than just the dark, she'd say, and it was
 as if she'd said, There is no death, as I write and break
 these lines again and again, letting them fall where they lie.
 (Bare Plum 36)*

By emphasizing the embodied influence of his mother, the speaker succeeds in creating poetry, turning to her own words to close the poem with a compensatory view of life. The consolation of both poems is bittersweet, even angry, but still present; in “The Last Day of My Mother,” the resumption of poetic production is even presented as inevitable—“What else can I do?”—despite the ongoing “break[ing]” and explicit refusal to shape the long lines of blank verse. At the same time, the structure of each poem juxtaposes its limited consolation with an implied undermining of its truth; in this poem, the lines do not lie where they fall, but rather “fall where they lie”—an echo of the “intricate lies” in “Mother.” The poems’ contradictions resonate with both the representational concerns and the elegiac form of Lane’s memoir, which similarly ends with a prosopoeic turn to his mother’s final words.

Lane’s representational concerns and ambivalent use of an elegiac trajectory are even more marked in his memoir, which accentuates the difficulties of recovery both through haunting appearances of his mother after death and in the ghostly depiction of her life itself. The images of haunting reflect a central conflict in the memoir between Lane’s desire to recover his past and his mother’s insistent repression of past traumas. Appearing on several occasions over the course of the memoir, the spectre of Lane’s mother becomes a frequent, but always unspeaking, presence in his garden. The possibility of communication is particularly evocative in a haunting scene near the end of the memoir, in which “she kept raising her fingers to her mouth as if a word or sentence there could be pulled out and left to speak on its own” (*Season* 247).⁵ Although Lane wishes to ask, “*Tell me the story that brought you here*” (*Season* 248), the series of hauntings gradually lead him to the conclusion that these haunting encounters embody his own desire for story, recognition, and reciprocity. The repeated image of his mother kneeling in the garden, which replicates the imagery of the poem “Mother,” suggests the resurgence of a buried memory; as Lane reflects, “I must have somehow fixed her in my mind in some past moment for she is always the same”

(*Season* 247). He finally interprets the spectre's appearance as an internal effort to resolve his own unfinished business, not his mother's: "[I]t is me who brings her back. She does not come because she wants to" (248).⁶ This positioning of the hauntings as manifestations of Lane's memory and desire, including a desire for his mother to recover and voice the past, is further underscored by an earlier haunting scene in which "[s]he was trying to dig something up and I could see the frustration on her face" (225). With the ghost's inability to voice a story, Lane must simply accept the gap that exists between them.

Importantly, the memoir associates ghostliness and silence with Lane's mother not only in death, but also in depictions of her in life. In one scene during her period of silence, his mother catches him masturbating in the long grass outside a window, but he cannot read her response; she simply "gazed down at me, a paint brush in her hand. There was no expression on her face. She was there and not there, a ghost in an empty room. . . . Something passed between us at that moment, but exactly what I did not know then and do not know now. . . . [She] had a kind of woman's knowing that was alien to me" (*Season* 172). The opacity of gender to Lane as a young man influences his understanding of, and literally his alienation from, his mother. While this ghostly depiction partly works to convey a sense of an ongoing communicative barrier, the gendered, ghostly imagery is problematic given the work's invocation of elegiac devices. Feminist elegy critics have pointed out that the traditional elegy developed as a male homosocial and patrilineal form that "excludes the feminine from its perimeter except as muse principle or attendant nymph" (Schenck, "Feminism" 13); when women do appear, critics argue, they are often associated with death or division through what Louise O. Fradenburg calls "elegiac misogyny" (185). Zeiger observes that feminine figures regularly appear in English elegies in the form of "threatening or abandoning women" (7). The primary response of critics to this complexity of gender representation in the elegy has been to explore how women's elegies establish a counter-tradition, rather than to examine how men's elegies might also trouble these associations. Zeiger's suggestion that the problem can be partly resolved by focusing on historical rather than mythologized female figures, as Thomas Hardy does in his elegies for his wife, is an important starting point (Zeiger 19). While archetypes and individual personalities often converge in elegies written for parents,⁷ Lane's problematization of voice in his elegiac poetry and the ghostly depictions in his memoir primarily reflect concerns about the representability of a mother whose relationship to himself and to the past is obscured.

Although the depiction of his mother's silence as ghostly risks replicating the "elegiac misogyny" that associates women with death (Fradenburg 185), the imagery of ghostliness also contributes to a broader pattern in the memoir that more generally associates silence with death and dissolution and voice, in contrast, with life and existence. This pattern establishes questions of voice, representation, and prosopopoeia as central issues in the memoir. While Paul de Man declares that in the written form of autobiography, "[d]eath is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament" (930), this idea is reversed in Lane's ghostly imagery; that is, the linguistic predicament of voicelessness becomes represented as itself a form of death. Thus, Lane allows ghostliness to penetrate life as well, representing those who are unwilling or unable to speak. Recalling his own early life as a labourer and young father unable to reflect on and comprehend his own place in the world, Lane recalls being called a "ghost" by a Native lover. Although the name is a teasing comment on his race and pale skin, his retrospective interpretation infuses the term with the lack of voice and self-understanding he now associates with ghostliness: "I think perhaps I was a ghost back in those days" (*Season* 196). For Lane as a young man, poetry offers the solution that restores life and control. With the advent of poetic writing, he recalls, "I was certain that with language I could heal myself and control what surrounded me. . . . Death's only dominion was in a poem" (169).⁸ Although the writing of the memoir enacts this recovery of control for Lane himself, he confronts the limitations of language's healing potential in applying this paradigm to his mother's life of silence. Lane's reluctance to speak for his mother conveys the dilemma of representing and poetically succeeding a woman whose life is characterized, for him, by a deep silence; he cannot establish her voice as a marker of her existence.

Lane's subversion of elegiac devices in the memoir illustrates this central paradox. The ghostly imagery of Lane's mother culminates in a troubled parody of an elegiac scene of apotheosis, which again reflects the conflict between his own and his mother's approaches to the past. The final chapter relates an episode in which Lane convinces his mother to accompany him to his childhood home, against her wishes. In an evocative image of recovery that mirrors his mother's haunting act of digging in his garden, Lane spends the day digging in the dump below the house, "thinking that if he can only dig deep enough and far enough he will find something that will explain his life to him. He has forgotten his mother" (*Seasons* 289). Although Lane does find a toy truck that may have belonged to him, the moment of discovery

also reminds him of his mother's presence and inaccessibility. As he glances upward, he sees her in a transcendent image above: "He looks up and he sees his mother floating among the weave of branches, high above the ground. For a moment he thinks she has died and is now, at this moment, ascending toward some heaven only she knows" (*Seasons* 293). The image of ascension is a traditional device in the elegy, which Schenck suggests is in fact "the most important convention of elegy . . . the deification of the dead one in a process that lifts him out of nature, out of the poem, and, conveniently, out of the inheritor's way" (*Mourning* 34). This scene of shrouding—in the "weave" of branches—and ascension both invokes and problematizes the traditional apotheosis by applying it to Lane's living mother, who Lane later discovers is standing on a clothesline platform. The scene complicates the elegiac transmission of vocation from Lane's mother to himself, and suggests that rather than replacing his mother to take on his poetic vocation, Lane must succeed her without overwriting her voice and without her acknowledgement of his inheritance. Yet the memory of the scene also enables a successful posthumous scene of apotheosis, as Lane's reflections on it at the time of writing allow him to release her haunting figure from the garden by "quietly open[ing] the hands that grip her here. As I do I can feel her vanishing" (*Seasons* 295). Paradoxically, releasing his mother also entails an acceptance of the fact that his desire to recover her voice, story, and approval will remain unfulfilled.

In his lengthy narration of the ascension scene, which recounts the floating image three separate times, Lane shifts between third-person and first-person narrative voices to explore the possibility of voicing his mother's experience. The initial third-person narration of the scene includes a description of his mother's thoughts about her return to her former home, a place she had hated. Lane's narration imagines the sense of erasure that she may have felt: "The day she left here she swore she'd never come back. Now she is here and it is as if she had never lived here. All the mine buildings are gone, hauled away by the company" (*Seasons* 291). Yet Lane soon rejects these imagined thoughts by returning to a first person voice:

What I remembered for years when I thought of that journey was finding the toy. Now, ten years after her death I remember best her floating in the sky. . . . I don't know what she was looking at or what she was thinking. It would be easy for me to say she was lost in time and had gone back to those early years, but I don't know that. I don't know if what she felt was bitterness or joy, happiness or grief. (*Seasons* 295)

By acknowledging the limitations of his insights into his mother, Lane rejects the possibility of truly speaking for her. At the beginning of the chapter, he explicitly comments on his experimentation with narrative voice, which, like the hauntings, ultimately returns to his own point of view. He writes, “There are times I want to be in the second or third person. Like any writer, I’d rather be a *he* than an *I*. It’s simpler to be a fiction. . . . Yet even when I try to create the past using a point of view not my own, it is still and always mine” (*Seasons* 287).⁹ By drawing attention to the personal desire contained in both his apparitions and his narration, Lane simultaneously invokes and rejects a consolatory recovery of his mother’s perspective.

Although Lane subverts elegiac forms to problematize his efforts to recover his mother’s voice, the memoir’s episodic, chronological structure also develops a gradual sense of acceptance that ultimately does culminate in a limited but significant scene of vocational transmission. Like his poetic elegies, Lane’s memoir overtly refuses the elegiac trajectory toward revelation and consolation, and he declares that “[t]here are no accidents, there are no serendipitous moments. There are only fragile interludes of clarity and sometimes I don’t understand them fully when they happen” (*Seasons* 305). Despite this declared mistrust of serendipity, the final scenes of the memoir are presented as an “answer” to a question that Lane poses himself about the power of the word “sorrow” in his early poetry. The memoir presents this answer by recalling his mother’s deathbed and her final words, which emphasize beauty and futurity:

When my mother lay on what would be her deathbed I read to her from *The Old Curiosity Shop* by Charles Dickens. . . . I was reading quietly in the hope that she might hear the words from a book she had dearly loved. Halfway through a paragraph she suddenly sat up in her bed, tubes dangling, reached out, and gripped my wrist. . . . She held my wrist and stared into my eyes and said, *At every turn there’s always something lovely*. She let me go and fell back on the bed. Those were her last words to me. Three days later she died. (*Seasons* 306)

Although his mother’s words chronologically precede Lane’s year of recovery, Lane’s choice to relate this narrative of dying and his mother’s final words at the end of the memoir allows the reader to cathartically share in their sense of limited consolation. The words do not provide the sense of recognition that Lane desires to truly act as his mother’s successor—he regrets the fact that “[m]y life as an artist didn’t seem a disappointment to her, rather my life seemed irrelevant, my art of no import whatsoever” (*Seasons* 248)—but they recover a fragment of her perspective that bequeaths an eye for beauty within and despite the turns of life, which Lane adapts into a renewed ability for poetry

and revelation in his own life. As in Lane's poems, then, the memoir enacts an elegiac recovery even as it acknowledges the one-sidedness of that task.

If *There Is a Season* echoes the subdued consolations of Lane's earlier elegies for his mother, its conclusion is also significantly more hopeful. The final chapter ends not only with a realization that "weeks had gone by and I hadn't once thought of drinking" (297), but also with a seasonal anticipation of spring and renewal; elements generically associated with elegiac consolation: "spring follows on the heels of winter; the sequestered ones seek reintegration with the community; literary appearance suddenly calls for an appropriate audience of witnesses" (Schenck, *Mourning* 46). Lane's recovered ability to write poetry is evident in his late inclusion of a poem that attests to the cyclical and livening effect of nature (*Seasons* 273), while the memoir as a whole concludes with a gesture toward community in a shared act of voicing. Suggesting that "[p]erhaps it is enough to stand there with Lorna and praise the rain and our lives together," Lane offers an example: "There were three bees in the ivy today. Lorna and I were in the garden when we saw them. We both said, *Look, look at the bees!*" (*Seasons* 307). With this shared quotation, which is also the first time that Lane's wife, Lorna Crozier, is quoted directly in the memoir, Lane signals his emergence from the reflective elegiac mode into a shared celebration of presence and intimacy.

The comparatively hopeful conclusion of *There Is a Season* can be attributed both to the formal demands of memoir, which typically seeks closure through "the arrival of the individual at some sort of equilibrium" (Couser 68), and to its conclusion of more than a decade of reflection on Dixie Lane's legacy in Lane's work. It would be naïve to read the end of the memoir simply as an unconstructed representation of Lane's experience; the convergence of elegiac motifs and the deathbed scene is carefully orchestrated, and might be read in the same vein as the "intricate lies" of form that enable representation and consolation in Lane's earlier poems. Yet Lane's memoir and a prose elegy published the same year, "My Father's Watch," largely conclude his elegiac engagement with the figure of his mother, suggesting a resolution within Lane's broader career as well as in the memoir itself. Although Lane continues to "circle" his mother's absence in *Last Water Song* (65), the later poems retain the meditateness of *There Is a Season*, and reflects on "what the wound remembers" rather than the dilemmas of recovery. Ultimately, *There Is a Season*—perhaps along with Lane himself—finds consolation in its paradoxical acceptance of both the ethical limitations and the recuperative possibilities of elegiac form.

NOTES

- 1 Suzette Henke coins the term “scriptotherapy” in *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life Writing* (1998), arguing that autobiographical writing may be read as a written version of a Freudian talking cure in which “the narrator plays both analyst and analysand” (xvi).
- 2 Aside from Priscila Uppal’s analysis of Lane’s parental elegies in *We Are What We Mourn: The Contemporary English-Canadian Elegy* (2009), the most recent scholarly discussion of Lane’s work is Adam Carter’s 1995 analysis of political allegory, which joins several earlier articles on Lane’s complex representations of class, landscape, and language. Lane’s evolving interest in elegy has been evident in collections from *Mortal Remains* to *Last Water Song* (2007), which begins with a series of prose elegies for fellow poets. As Robert McGill recognizes in a review of *Collected Poems*, Lane’s later work “increasingly straddle[s] the border between poetry and prose” (87).
- 3 See Schenck’s “Feminism and Deconstruction” and Zeiger’s *Beyond Consolation*. I return to the question of gender later in this article.
- 4 The memoir does not reveal how Lane finds out about the abuse after his mother’s death.
- 5 This imagery is reminiscent of the dream sequences in Atwood’s *Surfacing*, in which the spectres of the narrator’s parents appear in a garden, and in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, in which Naomi Nakane dreams of her absent mother attempting to speak, her mouth linked by a thread to a package of letters. While Naomi’s mother’s story is posthumously recovered through a real set of letters, Lane ultimately accepts that his mother’s silence can not be spoken through.
- 6 I do not read these hauntings as uncanny or gothic moments because the scenes evoke reflection and gradual understanding rather than unease. As Lane describes them, his mother “does not haunt, for her presence . . . is not malevolent” (83). Rather than a threatening anxiety, they encapsulate a sense of acceptable uncertainty that is characteristic of the memoir genre.
- 7 See Tanis MacDonald’s work on women’s paternal elegies, *The Daughter’s Way* (23); Roland Barthes also notably merges mother and “Mother” in his reflections on bereavement in *Camera Lucida*: “In the Mother, there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother” (75). While Uppal suggests that Lane mythologizes his mother in his early elegies, representing her “as a goddess . . . but not, one might say, as an actual person” (104), I read “Mother” and *There Is a Season* as meditations on her individual character.
- 8 In this allusion to Dylan Thomas’ “And Death Shall Have No Dominion,” which emphasizes the residue of humanity left after death, Lane limits death’s power to the realm of poetry—the very site in which, according to his belief in language, death can be contained and transcended.
- 9 In “Autobiography in the Third Person,” Philippe Lejeune notes that a third-person pronoun can function as “a *figure of enunciation*” that is “often used for internal distancing and for expressing personal confrontation” (28). Lane’s use of the pronoun only for portions of this chapter illustrates the sense of “confrontation” and conflict he feels about this interaction with his mother.

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