Tanis MacDonald

The Pilgrim and the Riddle

Father-Daughter Kinship in Anne Carson's "The Anthropology of Water"

When is a pilgrim like a photograph? When the blend of acids and sentiment is just right.
Anne Carson, "The Anthropology of Water" (170)

The pilgrim, as a devotional practitioner, blends physical exertion and deprivation with spiritual contemplation, mortifying the body in order to exhilarate the soul. Practising another form of devotion, the traditional elegist contemplates the grief of corporeal loss in order to reach a spiritual consolation. Movement towards elegiac consolation is conducted through a trope of seasonal change that implies infinite renewal, a pastoral symbology of resurrection through which the poet and the lost beloved are offered up to immortality. In Anne Carson's "The Anthropology of Water," the elegiac prose poem from her 1995 text *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry*, the narrator's pilgrimage to the medieval Christian shrine of St. James functions as a quest for viable mourning practices, framed by the narrator's attempts to read the father's body and speech through his dementia from Alzheimer's disease. The text considers the difficulties of male-female relationships (filial, sexual and fraternal) as these relationships are presaged, and often precluded, by the father-daughter relationship. The daughter's relationship to the father is explored as a parallel to the pilgrim's relationship to the saint, he who inspires the pilgrimage and the contemplation; for Carson's pilgrim, "Love is the mystery inside this walking" (145).

Carson begins "The Anthropology of Water" with the father's contention that some truths are "as obvious as a door in water" (119), and so sets up the paternal function as both "obvious" and revelatory, positioning the father as bearer of Aristotelian *logos*, rational speech (*Glass* 128). But this debilitated father has lost the capacity for rational speech; Alzheimer's-related dementia has "released some spring inside him, he babbles constantly in a language

neurologists call 'word salad.'" (*Plainwater* 120). This stream of indecipherable speech suggests paternal knowledge codified by divinity as well as by disease: "Father had always been a private man. Now his mind was a sacred area where no one could enter or ask the way" (121). The father remains beyond the reach of the narrator's love, even as she strives to read him as an untranslated (and ultimately untranslatable) text that will not yield to traditional consolation. The father figure haunts "Diving," "Thirst," "Very Narrow," and "Just for the Thrill," but his influence on the pilgrimage in "Kinds of Water" situates him as an elegiac figure. The Compostela pilgrimage is echoed twice more in the text, in the narrator's trip across the continental United States with her lover in "Just For the Thrill," and also in the brother's journey around and through a lake in "Water Margins." The endless road operates as an inscription of melancholia, and poignantly emphasizes the tenacity of grief. Carson uses the trope of the pilgrimage to test the tension between mourning and resistance, although her larger project concerns an epistemological inquiry into the vicissitudes of filial devotion.

Recent scholarly interest in the twentieth-century elegy has prompted a number of investigations into negotiations of power and subjectivity in women's elegiac poetry, particularly in family elegies. Celeste Schenck argues that the fundamental conventions of the traditional elegy act out "a gesture of aspiring careerism" that imitates a Freudian Oedipal initiation. Her assertion that women lack mentors whom they may elegize seems rather wrong-headed in the wake of third-wave feminism, when women have had some success in discovering female mentors and sometimes elegizing them. (Consider Maxine Kumin's "On Being Asked to Write A Poem in Memory of Anne Sexton," Gwendolyn MacEwen's "Fireworks" in memory of Marian Engel, or Dionne Brand's "Blues Spiritual for Mammy Prater.") However, Schenck's contention that women poets "tend to mourn their personal dead" more often than they mourn "predecessor poets" (15) is undeniable in light of the number of familial elegies written by women in the last two decades. Jahan Ramazani, in identifying the subgenre of the contemporary family elegy, suggests that female paternal elegies are attempts to "re-think the daughter's position within the family romance" (294). In Ramazani's view, the defining feature of the modern family elegy is its marked ambivalence about the devotion due to the dead, an ambivalence noted in Carson's "blend of acids and sentiment."

If the limits of corporeal representation are a fundamental concern in any elegy, the ambivalence towards filial piety in women's paternal elegies sug-

gests a desire to delineate, and perhaps dismantle, the fidelity demanded by the father's death. In *Beyond Consolation*, Melissa F. Zeiger names the twentieth-century elegy as "the crucial and constitutive place of the living person's ongoing affection relations with the dead" (64). These ongoing relations, affectionate or otherwise, often concern themselves with the daughter's desire to inherit the father's knowledge, and Carson's prose poem situates the father as dismantled by illness yet still greatly desirable. The sight of a parent's aging or debilitated body may often precipitate an inquiry into kinship between parents and adult children, as it does in "The Anthropology of Water," where Carson suggests a strong parallel between the father's corporeal debilitation and the narrator's emotional stasis. She mirrors his distress, rocking her body as he does, "making little lunges with [her] chest," and answering his utterances with a prompt "Yes Father" (120). Although his single clear statement—"Death is a fifty-fifty thing, maybe forty-forty"—is bewildering and intriguing, she does not ask the "simple questions" that it inspires (120). In an effort to negotiate her way through these unasked questions, Carson makes her elegist both a pilgrim and a philosopher. The narrator assumes the elegist's persona in order to inquire into ways to live with the limits of the body. She assumes the pilgrim's persona to search for a way of asking for penance, and she takes on the philosopher's persona in order to question the function of knowledge in a limited, sinful body. The roles of philosopher and pilgrim, devotees respectively of the brain and the soul, function as disguises for the elegist, that devotee of the body. The pilgrim and the philosopher ask questions that the elegist forbids herself, just as she forbids herself "the unwary use of a kinship term" (*Plainwater* 190). The urgency with which contemporary theorists examine questions of loss and mourning underlines the erotically dangerous possibility of living with a thinking mind that may be swallowed up by thwarted desire. To situate the elegiac impulse at the intersection of mourning and critical theory is to observe the ways in which those two demanding and capacious practices are ravenous consumers of death and desire, poised at what Carson calls the "blind point from which you watch the object of your desire disappear into itself" (*Eros* 145).

In her recent study, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, Judith Butler wonders: "Is structuralist kinship the curse that is upon contemporary critical theory as it tries to approach the question of sexual normativity, sociality, and the status of the law?" (66). Butler discusses Antigone as a victim of "kinship's fatal aberration" (15), emphasizing how

Antigone's position as a female mourner for male family members (both her brother Polynices and father Oedipus) complicates notions of cultural privilege and gender in mourning practices. Questioned about Antigone's position in a just society, Carson asserts that Antigone operates as "an absolute insider, however radical that may be in any given time or place. It becomes very radical when other people value only outside things" (di Michele 13). The daughter-narrator of "Anthropology" struggles against the insistence of the Antigonal imperative; the narrator "wakes up inside a question" (*Plainwater* 135) and cannot distinguish the duties of mourning that Antigone takes up with passionate deference and decision. Butler proposes melancholia as a performance that negotiates for power, proposing that "autonomy is gained through the appropriation of the authoritative voice" that functions as "a simultaneous refusal and assimilation of that very authority" (11). If the paternal elegiac text pursues the father's knowledge as a function of mourning, the appropriation of the father's voice is problematized by the search for feminine subjectivity. The narrator of "Anthropology" attempts to appropriate authority through her manipulation of epistemological systems, but such systems only point to language as "an event of grievance" that does not satisfy as a mourning practice (Butler 80).

But what would satisfy as a mourning practice? The acquisition of the father's knowledge demands a kind of righteous melancholia, in which the daughter is unwilling to repudiate the father's word despite his loss of rationality. This emergence of epistemological concerns in women's contemporary paternal elegies is not surprising when considered alongside feminist psychoanalytic theories on the daughter's need to identify with the father. Jessica Benjamin claims a daughter's desire for her father's love is identificatory, "a homoerotic desire, a desire for likeness that often surfaces in the latency wish to be a buddy" (128), and asserts that "the complex nature of the father-daughter relationship has often been obscured by analytic acceptance of the fallacy that all opposite-sex love is heterosexual" (128). Jane Gallop proposes that the daughter's desire for the father yields an idealized fantasy of identification: " 'Love' has always been sublimated, idealized desire, away from bodily specificity and towards dreams of complimentarity, and the union of opposites, difference resolved into the One. 'Love' is tangled with the woman's complicity; it may be the bribe which has persuaded her to agree to her own exclusion" (79). The daughter's homosocial desires maintain the father's status as a desired subject while she remains excluded, even as his "buddy." Are contemporary female elegists writing out

of a desire to acquire the intellectual privilege of *logos*, or in order to dismantle privilege altogether? Carson seems to want both. In *Eros the Bittersweet*, she traces an epistophilic drive back to "an ancient analogy between the wooing of knowledge and the wooing of love," in which she claims that Socrates' knowledge was "*nothing but* a knowledge of 'erotic things'" (170; Carson's italics). In "The Anthropology of Water," the father's body and speech become an amalgam of knowledge and love that idealizes identificatory inheritance. The father's knowledge is trapped in his cryptic utterances; his pouring eyes become the physical manifestation of his silence, emphasizing the white space surrounding the text of his disjointed words.

Early in "The Anthropology of Water," Carson retells the Greek myth of the daughters of Danaos, fifty women who "loved their father so much it was as if they were parts of his body. When Danaos stirred in his sleep they would awaken, each in her narrow bed, staring into the dark" (118). The beloved father marries off his devoted daughters, all on the same day, to fifty bridegrooms, but the daughters' paternal loyalty asserts itself: "at midnight on the wedding night, fifty bedroom doors clicked shut. Then a terrible encounter took place. Each of forty-nine of the daughters of Danaos drew a sword from alongside her thigh and stabbed her bridegroom to death" (118). The forty-nine murderous daughters are cast into hell to haul water in sieves as their punishment, but Carson reserves special attention for the fiftieth daughter "who did not draw her sword. What happened to her remains to be discovered" (118). That which "remains to be discovered" concerns the agency of the fiftieth daughter, as well as her future. By allowing her husband to live, is she obeying or disobeying her father? Like Lear's Cordelia, the fiftieth daughter proves her love to her father by not proving it. She allows her husband to live and effectively to replace her father as her beloved. The murdering daughters are pathologically faithful; when the fiftieth daughter resists a fate in which she would remain "part of" her father's body (to invoke Carson's smartly salacious metaphor), her filial piety is impugned. By refusing to behave dramatically or pathologically, the fiftieth daughter escapes hell but also refuses the only form of father-daughter kinship offered by the myth.

Carson uses the discipline of anthropology to shape her questions about father-daughter relations, mindful of dangers of claiming kinship, suggesting "love makes you an anthropologist of your own life" (217). Butler asserts that female representations of the death of paternal figures are often problematically situated in sexual melancholy, and propose "a certain heterosexual

fatality that remains to be read" (72). Between what "remains to be discovered" and "what remains to be read," Carson and Butler, in separate projects, are zeroing in on a relational ellipsis between father and daughter that is indeed as dangerous as deep water. Butler suggests that female elegiac practices move towards a subjectivity in which "schemes of intelligibility make our loves legitimate and recognizable" (24). Assuming that questions of legitimacy do not refer to genetics, under what conditions could a daughter's love for her father be considered "illegitimate"? Such excursions into auto-anthropology are irrevocably challenged by the demands of filial piety. When the narrator of "Anthropology" admits that she is "afraid I don't love you enough to do this" (139), the ambiguous "you" in the pilgrim's journal suggests an expectant listener, an interiorized subject to whom she is obligated.

Jacques Derrida contends that writing about the dead demands an "unbearable paradox of fidelity" to an interiorized image of the deceased which has not yet surrendered agency: "we are speaking of a visibility of the body, a geometry of gazes. [. . .] *We are speaking of images.* [. . .] The image sees more than it is seen. The image looks at us" (*Work* 159-60). Derrida reminds us of the responsibility of speaking of the dead, but for a female elegist, this metaphoric gaze of the dead is highly problematic. Is this the gaze of Lacan's authoritative Dead Father, assuring that her regard is properly filial? If female elegists are caught in their fidelity to a male gaze from beyond the grave, then the elegy enacts only a muted feminine agency that is subordinate to a haunting male subjectivity. Fidelity is indeed an unbearable paradox for female elegists, not, as Derrida suggests, because of the impossibility of interiorization, but because of the patriarchal imperative that such interiorization serves. I prefer to sift this "paradox of fidelity" through Nancy Holland's question about Derridean mourning: "What becomes of the daughter in this hauntology, the daughter for whom the symbolic and the literal F/fathers, and thus also the duties and debts they engender, are always simply other, beyond any possible filiation or inheritance?" (65). A daughter's filial piety is more than paradoxical; it is linked to an imperative of loss. Paternal knowledge is denied to the daughter no matter how "true" her mourning.

Carson's version of "true mourning" has as strong a tie to Sophocles as to Freud, fuelled as "Anthropology" is by the ancient desire to be as devoted, and as satisfied to be devoted, as Antigone, that most devoted of daughters and sisters. When the narrator introduces the metaphor of men as water, an

element in which women may swim or drown, she reminds readers that water is an element in which, historically, women have been asked to demonstrate proofs of their virtuous femininity. Carson glosses the Salem witch trials when the male anthropologist figure tells the narrator about "a culture he had studied where true and false virgins are identified by ordeal of water. For an intact virgin can develop the skill of diving into deep water, but a woman who has known love will drown" (117). This formulation suggests a virgin with a hermetically sealed body, an untouchable Artemis figure. But at the same time, Carson's formulation of the virgin as the standard of "whole" woman begs the question of sexual experience. If a woman has "known love," would she not better understand the dangers of men as "deep water," and so increase her chances of survival? But Carson emphasizes the dangers of men as water, warning that "[t]he mechanisms that keep us from drowning are so fragile" (128). Carson's formulation of men as water reiterates women as beings who are vulnerable to drowning in the uncontrollable force of their own desire. The Romantic motif of drowning in desire is intimately associated with elegiac transcendence, whereby death by water provides deliverance from emotional and sexual frustration. Carson's "deep water" is as dangerous as the river or ocean of a traditional elegy, but water's masculine alliance with a Neptunian principle suggests that the danger of water threatens the female elegist as much as, or more than, the lost beloved.

Carson's metaphor of the father as "a door in the water" (119) creates a hinge on which the text swings back and forth from solid to liquid, from male to female, from father to daughter. A psychoanalytic reading would suggest that the father stands for the door through which a daughter must pass in order to reach adult womanhood. The father-door is a solid form in the threatening sea of the Lacanian symbolic order, a paternal life raft for the drowning daughter. When the narrator's war-hero father succumbs to "madness," her discovery that dementia is "continuous with sanity" (121) can be read as an insistence upon making meaning from the father's cryptic utterances, just as she constructs love from the smallest gesture of his undemonstrative manner.

Just as the daughters of Danaos loved their father so obsessively "it was as if they were parts of his body" (118), so when dementia begins to manifest in the narrator's father, he "lost the use of some of the parts of his body" (119). Physical debilitation is fashioned as a loss of the daughter, the "part of his body" to whom he has denied affection and recognition. The text's concern with his degeneration interrogates all the ways in which the father's body is

rendered opaque by his dementia; his body is unreconciled to the historical concept of the heroic male body, especially when contrasted with his military service. The narrator recounts her father's wartime memory in which German soldiers find nylon stockings aboard the father's downed plane and ask him "*Wo ist die Dame?*" ["Where is the woman?"] (209). Since he does not speak the language, the father cannot and does not reply; his silence and incomprehension parallel his tacit refusal to see, and accept, his daughter's increasingly feminine body. "Where is the woman?" is the fundamental unanswered question of this text, and significantly, a question that the narrator cannot (and does not) ask. If the narrator has difficulty in making her father visible to her questioning gaze, it can come as no surprise that the father as a Laius figure has failed to "recognize" his daughter since her adolescence.

The father's garbled speech presents as much of a problem to the narrator as his opaque body. As her father's dementia advances, his speech becomes increasingly cryptic and oracular. His inarticulate speech and uncontrolled body barely resemble his "known" text of order and masculine reserve: "Father was a man who knew the right way to do things" (198). But his love of order attempts expression even through his limitations. His pronouncement that "[d]eath is a fifty-fifty thing, maybe forty-forty" (120) indicates a some kind of surplus; the missing twenty percent implies something beyond death, something redemptive beyond physical deterioration. But the narrator offers no possible interpretation of this utterance, for, as much as it demands explication, the daughter does not ask; because the father can barely control his speech, she cannot (or will not) speak her question. The father's uninterpretable speech acts as an elegiac prosopopeia, a voice from the edge of consciousness that echoes Holland's contention that the father's *logos* will remain forever out of the daughter's reach. If the Lacanian Law-of-the Father ushers all children into the symbolic order, the daughter's struggle to find a key to "remaking all the meanings" inscribes both a return to and a rejection of the father as the bearer of *logos*. The father's struggle against his illness, and the daughter's struggle to receive the father's love, are certainly physical efforts, but they also represent the family's attempts to assimilate multiple versions of reality into their quotidian existence: "To live with a mad person requires many small acts of genius—the reverse of the moment when Helen Keller shouts 'Water!'" (121). This "reverse discovery" of water as the *logos* of madness and genius reminds us that the daughter was looking for "a door in the water" that only the father could provide. His mad utterances are as garbled (or as gargled) as if he is speaking underwater, thematizing

his madness as oracular wisdom from an element beyond the human.

The narrator's gaze upon the father's body, her "eye," is intrinsically bound up with, and frustrated by, Carson's play upon the confessional, elegiac "I." The act of riddling steps in as a substitute for the demands of the gaze to become a way to "be gentle when we question our fathers" (122). Despite the questions that the father inspires, he is interrogated very little in this text; the narrator's refusal of consolation manifests itself as a refusal to ask the questions that haunt her, especially the poignant "What is it that others know?" (127). Adam Phillips speculates in an earlier article on Carson that she defines "the power of love as a craving for something—knowledge, a person, or the knowledge that another person exists—that makes the difference visible and by doing so intimates the possible infinity of such differences, the sheer horror and exhilaration of how different we can be from ourselves" (115). Such studied horror at the differences between the father and daughter, and between the daughter's lived experience and her desire for love, brings "The Anthropology of Water" to examine the role that love and knowledge play in the desire for penance.

The text's use of riddles inscribes a melancholic mercuriality, proposing the pilgrim as philosophizing clown. Her first riddles display a vaudevillian razzle-dazzle, as her initial witty answers facilitate her deferral of mourning even as she moves, geographically and psychically, down the road to the place of devotion. The pilgrim seeks meaning as part of her penance; she embarks upon her pilgrimage in order to "look for the simplest question, the most obvious facts, the doors that no one may close . . . I was a strong soul. Look I will change everything, all the meanings! I thought" (123). The usual purpose of a pilgrimage to Compostela is to "ask St. James to change your life" (123), but the narrator wants "all the meanings" changed, and eschewing divine intervention, is determined to do it herself. However, a reconfigured meaning is very different from an answer. Her riddles represent an attempt to circumvent the rules of traditional philosophy, refashioning Socratic dialogue as a monologue that flirts with meaning while evading any clear answer.

As the narrator nears Compostela and potential apotheosis, her riddles become more simple and, paradoxically, less answerable. Carson notes that the heroes of Kafka's texts are trapped in their own psychic nightmares because of their inability "to ask the simplest question" (119), and so situates her narrator as both she who questions and she who will not, or cannot, give a simple answer. In an unpredictable world, Carson reminds the reader that "it is already late when you wake up inside a question" (135), and she

allows the questions to hang in the air, unanswered. The need to form and ask the simplest questions can impose order upon chaos, but even ordered, logical answers may bring about the pain that makes the most "alphabetical" ordered pilgrims "cry out" (143). "What is it that others know?" the narrator asks (127); how do others manage to love and not be destroyed by it? When the narrator suggests, "a pilgrim is like a No play. Each one has the same structure, a question mark" (148), she establishes the pilgrim as a philosopher who is also her own recalcitrant pupil.

Carson's inquiry cannot ignore the body's complicity in the structure of mourning. The riddles take on a corporeal concern, designed to "riddle" the human body full of epistemological holes: "When is a pilgrim like a sieve? When he riddles" (127). While this question cannot help but recall the punishment of the daughters of Danaos, its cheekiness also suggests subversive methods of survival, the fiftieth daughter's choice; Carson's pilgrim wishes for water (and men) to pass through her without drowning her. Riddling makes this particular trick of gender possible. She suggests the physical resistance to filial love and duty: "How is a pilgrim like a blacksmith? He bends iron. Love bends him" (176). The daughter bends towards her father's love (or the lack thereof), and the father fears bending to love his daughter. The father's illness softens him and confuses them both. Moving away from elaborate puns, the narrator begins to ask the "simpler" but less answerable questions, goading her own speech into seriousness. "What are we made of but hunger and rage?" she asks, invoking the insatiable Sphinx (175). Proposing a series of riddles as a philosophical inquiry positions the Sphinx as philosopher, and if this philosopher is a mourning daughter, this Sphinx may be read as Oedipus' challenging (and unacknowledged) daughter, with her riddles and her frightening, misbegotten body.

If the narrator acts as a Sphinx figure, the obvious Oedipus figure would be the father, and, good classicist that she is, Carson suffuses the text with images of blindness and madness, and frames the father as the embodiment of the Sphinx's riddle. Recall that the Sphinx's riddle concerns the aging body: the crawling infant Oedipus; the vigorous young man who kills Laius and governs Thebes; and the enfeebled blind Oedipus, a wanderer with his daughter, old before his time. Carson presents a parallel trio of vignettes about the father figure in "The Anthropology of Water." The father is a naïve young man who refuses to believe that his daughter will grow up to become a woman, then an older man who emphasizes righteous domestic order, and finally, the enfeebled "madman" who speaks cryptically and,

though not blind, is sightless. Like the cursed king of Thebes, whose physical blindness parallels his despairing insight, the father in Carson's text experiences a dementia that is "continuous with sanity" (121). This disconcerting play of sanity and madness manifests itself in an interpretative crisis whenever the father speaks to curse himself with "a sound not human" that Carson likens to a bodily mutilation (121), an utterance reminiscent of Butler's caveat that "language carries a violence that brings it to the limits of speakability" (80). These limits on the father's self-condemnation continue even as he smiles: "You bastard, you stupid bastard you goddamn stupid bastard you goddamn stupid useless bastard you" (216). The cumulative structure of these curses suggests a more structured utterance than the "word salad" about which the doctors have warned the narrator. He curses himself and, and in so doing, robs her of the privilege. His riddles transform him into an oracle whose putative wisdom must forever defer interpretation.

The father's difficulty with answering questions impedes his function as an Oedipus figure, and a curious shift occurs about halfway through the text. Carson's contention that "a pilgrim is a person who is up to something" (145) should be taken as a warning, for the pilgrimage seems to transform the narrator into an Oedipus figure. In asking the simplest but paradoxically most difficult questions, the narrator becomes a version of Oedipus in the grotto at Colonus, a wanderer whose knowledge of horror cannot satisfy the quest for meaning. Carson's reconfiguration of Oedipus as a young woman emphasizes the fundamental despair over gender that marks this text, perhaps suggesting that "a certain heterosexual fatality" includes an assumption of the annihilation of the feminine. When the narrator notes "My father and I shook hands on Christmas birthdays and farewells" (211), the controlled physical contact locates the father's fear of femininity in his daughter's body. The handshakes symbolize a stark, immobilizing fear of the physical body hidden behind a veneer of WASP *politesse*: "It wasn't until he went mad that I began to see I had always angered him. I never knew why. I did not ask" (122). The daughter is left with another "simple question" that is impossible to ask.

"The Anthropology of Water" is haunted by the persistent riddle of femininity: Where is the woman? How does she "always anger" her father? She turns into a woman, and worse, she turns into what the father refers to as "one of those helpless women" who cannot change a tire (198); her incompetence in outdoor living is painfully evident during the camping trip in "Just For the Thrill." But her adolescence was spent rejecting this kind of

helpless femininity, presaged by her father's gloating, "Oh, she won't be like them" (188); she won't grow up to be like other women, womanly, full of mysterious uncontrollable fluids. Upon hearing this comment, the daughter attempts to erase her gender. She grows into a body that is "hard and flat as the armour of Athena," sprung metaphorically from her father's wish to keep his daughter in an angular pre-adolescent body (189).

But if the father doesn't want the daughter to become a woman, neither does he seek manly competition with her. The narrator's attempt at embodying a paternally pleasing androgyny reaches an ironic crisis as a direct result of the father's physical debilitation. When the daughter returns from the woods with a Christmas tree she has cut down herself, a task she and the father have always performed together, Carson explicitly figures the father as Laius and the daughter as Oedipus:

> He was there in the kitchen. He looked at the tree and the saw and the ax. It was something perfectly quiet. "I didn't think you could do that," he said. Perfectly quiet. His hands hanging down. The tiny ticking kitchen. The snow-dark morning. It was draining from him into me. I had killed him. (205-206)

The narrator's possession of phallic tools, the saw and the axe, plus the singular signifier of the freshly cut tree, strike the father as surely as Oedipus struck Laius. Her pseudo-masculine performance is read as a usurping action instead of a filial homage. As father and daughter stand devastated in the kitchen, she feels his masculine privilege "draining" from him into her, and the unwritten extension of the metaphor of watery exchange suggests that she is flooded with guilt over accessing her father's agency. She becomes a pilgrim to seek penance for her symbolic patricide. The daughter acts as Sphinx and as Oedipus, a philosopher without answers, a mourner without a ritual to express loss, cut loose from Antigonal deliverance while still subject to the Antigonal imperative to mourn. Her body attempts to create an internal ritual of mourning; to appease her father's fear of femininity, the narrator does not menstruate for thirteen years (*Plainwater* 190). That "hard flat body" recalls descriptions of anorexic women who strive to maintain a boy-like body, accompanied by amenorrhea, a loss of the menstrual period brought on by maintaining a low body weight. The daughter's desire to "suppress the natural facts of 'woman' altogether" (189) becomes a bid for gender safety, as Susan Bordo asserts: "As [the anorexic's] body begins to lose its traditional feminine curves, its breasts and hips and rounded stomach, and begins to feel and look more like a spare, lanky male body, she begins to feel untouchable, out of reach of hurt [. . .] [and] she has unexpectedly

discovered an entry into the privileged male world, a way to become what is valued in our culture, a way to become safe, above it all" (23). In order to obtain the father's perpetually withheld approval, the daughter attempts, with some success, to become asexual, "a young, strong, stingy person of no particular gender—all traits advantageous to the pilgrim" (123).

However, feminine desire emerges in this text through the imagery of elemental fire. Phillips suggests that Carson is a Freudian, "if only in her sense that all language is the language of love, the language of self-betrayal" (116), and in "The Anthropology of Water," Carson's fire imagery represents the desire for the father's love that overwhelms the daughter. One of the pilgrim's early questions concerns the heat of desire that longs to be spoken: "What is the fear inside language? No accident of the body can make it stop burning" (141). The fire worsens on the journey, prompting the pilgrim's self-definition: "Pilgrims were people who were glad to take off their clothing, which was on fire" (154). The burning pilgrim endures the fire of rejection by imagining the relief of the father's soothing love, though the father's final utterance pronounces the daughter's desire for paternal love to be unquenchable: "Fires are the furthest in you are and the worst you are" (240). The father's transformation into an oracular figure gives him an authority that he did not have as a man who desired order above all else. The twisted syntax of "Fires are the furthest in you are and the worst you are," with its assonance of the half-rhymed "furthest" and "worst," is strangely and disturbingly lyrical. The "worst" and "furthest" fires in the human body are existential, and the "you" of the father's final utterance may be self-referential or accusatory. In this anthropology, what does the daughter-elegist do with the questions she forms? Is it preferable to drown in love or burn with memory?

Much in the same way that the narrator attempts to transcend femininity through her occupation of a body with "no particular gender," Carson writes the performance of penance as an attempt to go beyond pilgrimage. At the end of "Kinds of Water," the narrator travels past the cathedral that houses the bones of the apostle to arrive at Finisterre, the end of the earth (184). At this *ultima thule*, the text suggests a death as mysterious as that of *Oedipus at Colonus*, the corporeal vanishing that left no grave at which the distressed Antigone could mourn. "Kinds of Water" ends with the narrator lying, dead or dying, in the ocean off the rocks at Finisterre, a poetic death-by-water that fashions "Kinds of Water" into an auto-elegy, a journey towards the drowning about which Carson warns readers at the beginning of the text: "Clothe yourself, the water is deep" (118). The Sphinx throws herself into

the sea when Oedipus answers her riddle, and the narrator imagines an unspeakable answer to the riddle of "heterosexual fatality." When the narrator asks, "What is it that others know?" (127), the assumption that others have knowledge that makes love less bewildering makes the pilgrim's relationship to knowledge almost unbearably covetous. While this grandiose gesture affirms (and perhaps parodies) the tradition of the suicidal melancholic genius, the daughter acts out her monstrous self, and becomes the Sphinx as an embodiment of frustration. Caught in the "fearful ashy light that falls on the end of the world," the narrator's attempt to go beyond pilgrimage brings her not to transcendence but to a failure of the mind that echoes the father's madness. When Carson writes, "You take hold of my paws and cross them on my breast" (187), the daughter as dead Sphinx makes a ceremony of what Phillips calls Carson's "weird rationality of Eros that love is a ridiculous disfiguring" (115). The search for the union of *logos* and *eros* is ultimately thwarted in "The Anthropology of Water." Each section of the text repeats the journey that ends in frustration, whether the man fragments (the father), or withholds intimacy (the lover), or disappears (the brother). Though she is alive at the end of "Water Margins," she has transmogrified into a watching, curiously balding cat who "does [her] best" on the advice of the father (258, 260). The cat is doomed to "look out from very far back in its eyes," to observe the difficult and stealthy death that "ignores no one and never sleeps" (260). The cat, the silent observer, is an inverted Antigone figure, the devoted daughter who survives only to become subject to "too much memory," like her father before her (*Men* 101).

When Carson writes that "a question can travel into an answer as water into thirst" (122), she intimates a performable penance and a drastic cure for dutiful daughterhood, both of which depend on a pilgrimage towards knowledge. The pilgrimage ends with a declaration of faith, which presupposes in good elegiac tradition that death presents no obstacle to devotion: "I am one who has been to the holy city and tasted its waters, its kinds. / Pilgrims were people who carried little. They carried it balanced on the heart" (187). What happens to that which is carried off-balance: the unasked question, the untranslatable speech, the deteriorating body? Does that final taste of water offer consolation or another chance to drown? "The Anthropology of Water" carries forward an insoluble riddle about father-daughter kinship that refuses strategies of comprehension: "where is the woman?" The epistophilic daughter as unlocated woman remains a riddle to the reader and to herself.

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