

“A Last Time For This Also” Margaret Atwood’s Texts of Mourning

In *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), Margaret Atwood includes a series of intimate poems about the death of her father.¹ Shorn of the poet’s hallmark wit, irony and mythic allusions, the poems in the fourth section are striking for their quiet probing of grief. Reviewing the collection, Charlene Diehl-Jones suggests that “a new turn of mind” characterizes the mourning poems (30); Nathalie Cooke describes them as “intensely personal, strikingly so” (*Margaret* 312) and George Woodcock sees them as “a great deal different from the earlier work; less acerbic perhaps, more resigned to aging and to loss in general” (“Atwood’s”). While most commentators have agreed that the poems demonstrate a new emotional openness on Atwood’s part, she has prepared for this mourning in some of her earliest work, in which the loss of both parents is prefigured as if in an attempt to manage, by anticipating, that inevitable separation. That the attempt to manage grief is bound to fail because the fact that “[n]othing gets finished, / not dying, not mourning” (*Morning* 100) confirms the intertextual logic linking the earlier prose fiction to this latest collection of poetry: mourning is an unfinished process repeated across texts. While scholars might profitably investigate the “new turn of mind” in the collection, *Morning in the Burned House* also presents an intensification of ongoing concerns rather than a new departure, demonstrating that elegy has always been central to Atwood’s writing.²

“[H]ere everything echoes” (40), comments the nameless narrator of *Surfacing* (1972) as she invites the reader to share her perilous journey into memory, and the echoes of memory form the keynote of the mourning sequence in *Morning in the Burned House*. For readers familiar with

Atwood's work, the parallels between the imagery in *Morning* and earlier fiction, particularly *Surfacing* but also *Cat's Eye* (1988) and some of the short stories, are immediately obvious.³ Most notable is Atwood's use of ice, water, and forest imagery to figure death as well as its denial. In *Surfacing*, the narrator admits ruefully that she has imagined her parents living forever, like "mammoths frozen in a glacier" (9). A strikingly similar image occurs in the poem that begins the mourning sequence, "Man in a Glacier," also about "prayers for everlastingness" (82). At the end of *Surfacing*, the narrator dreams of her father and mother "in a boat, the green canoe, heading out of the bay" (188); the green canoe appears again in "Flowers," and then, in "The Ottawa River by Night," the speaker dreams of her father paddling his canoe and "heading eventually / to the sea" (104). In both works, the speaker/narrator dreams of her parent(s) paddling when she begins to accept death. In "Two Dreams," the speaker's dead father is distant and unapproachable in a dream; she watches him disappear into the forest, oblivious to her presence, his "back turned" as "he's walking away" (97), not unlike the wolf-ghost of the father in *Surfacing*, which "tells [her] it has nothing to tell [her], only the fact of itself" (187). An even closer parallel is the reference to diving to recover the father's body, a pivotal scene in *Surfacing* that recurs in the dream poem in *Morning*: "I dove to find him— / the shells of crayfish, clam track on sand, / drowned stones with their bloom of algae /—but he was too far down. / He still had his hat on" (96). Even the hat signals reference to the favourite "grey hat" of the father in *Surfacing* (35). There are many more parallels one could name, but the explicit reworking of the image of the drowned father may be sufficient evidence that *Morning in the Burned House* invites readers to consider its exploration of memory in the light of other, fictive hauntings.

Although the discovery of the father's dead body occurs about two-thirds of the way through *Surfacing*, it is clear from the beginning that the narrator has metaphorically killed off her parents many years before their physical deaths, sealing them behind glass in angry response to their perceived "totalitarian innocence" (190). Imagining them as closed off from her "behind a wall as translucent as jello" (9), the narrator has never believed that "their artificial garden, greenhouse" (144) was vulnerable to time and therefore feels doubly betrayed by their real deaths. Conjuring their ghosts helps her to accept their deaths and to appreciate that in life they were always and only human, rather than the inaccessible gods she has imagined. In this early novel, grieving mainly involves exorcising anger. Susan

Fromberg Schaeffer pinpoints the ambivalence of the narrator's desire "to resurrect her parents and punish them, to join them and be devoured by them, to meet them once more and become free of them" (328). Peter Klován defines the novel in terms of a "general movement from hostility to reconciliation" (3), but hostility dominates the melancholic narrator's thoughts as she tries to come to terms with "the loss, vacancy" (39).

As if to compensate for this anger, "Unearthing Suite" (the last story in *Bluebeard's Egg*, 1983) and *Cat's Eye* revisit very similar narrative material with a much softer tone, the more mature perspective of a narrator who is herself a parent. "Unearthing Suite" presents essentially the same mother and father from *Surfacing* now viewed from the speaker's ironically tender perspective as complex and vital human beings. Now their otherness is humorously presented: towards their daughter they occasionally exhibit "the bewilderment of two birds who had found a human child in their nest and have no idea what to do with it" (240). Here is the naturalist father with his "battered grey felt hat . . . to keep things from falling into his hair" (243); he is a cheerful pessimist, the cold rationality of *Surfacing's* father transformed into "affable inquisitiveness" (244). The mother is brisk, hopeful, eccentric, her "only discoverable ambition as a child . . . to be able to fly" (242), an image recalling the narrator's memory of her mother's failed attempt at flight in *Surfacing* (123). Here again is a wilderness "haunted, by the ghosts of those not yet dead" (256), but this time the narrator is explicitly aware of her parents' mortality from the start. In the opening scene, the parents ask the narrator to look after their cremation and scattering of their ashes. At first the narrator is "appalled: surely they aren't leaving something, finally, up to me," but making "a rash decision" (241), she agrees. By entering into this contract, the narrator commits herself to a relationship governed by the expectation that she will outlive her parents. While the rest of the story tells with comic exasperation of the parents' "exhausting vitality" (247)—emphasizing that they are very much alive—the shadow of their mortality remains at the edges of the story, marking its brightness through contrast.

Cat's Eye, a novel suffused with memory, is another reexamination of parents concerned with the narrator's need to forgive them for their human failures. *Cat's Eye* focuses on the mother's helpless witnessing of her daughter's childhood unhappiness. Revisiting her own pain, the narrator Elaine accepts her mother's helplessness in retrospect: "If it were happening now, to a child of my own, I would know what to do. But then? There were fewer choices, and a great deal less was said" (160). Immediately following this

statement, Elaine describes a triptych she made of her mother “right after she died” (161); forgiving her mother is part of accepting and mourning her death through art. “I suppose I wanted her timeless,” Elaine reflects, “though there is no such thing on earth. These pictures of her, like everything else, are drenched in time” (161). The details of the parents’ lives—the father who tells doomsday stories as dinner conversation, the mother who refuses his pessimism and shocks her daughter with ice-dance lessons—clearly recall “Unearthing Suite,” except that ironic celebration is replaced by a wistful awareness that the parents’ lives have been as complex as the narrator’s own and that she will always, to some extent, be shut out from understanding them: “Against his bleak forecasting is set my mother’s cheerfulness, in retrospect profoundly willed” (*Cat’s Eye* 418). In this novel more than any other, the narrator comes to see that her parents live on inside her even as they have always escaped her full understanding.

In all of these texts, the paradoxes of memory are the subject of narrative and contribute to its structure. Even how to represent memory is a special concern of the narrator: “You don’t look back along time but down through it, like water,” Elaine tells us at the beginning of *Cat’s Eye*. “Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away” (3). The reflection that “[n]othing goes away” is both consolation and source of anxiety. What never goes away is neither lost nor preserved, can neither be recalled nor properly laid to rest: it is a kind of haunting. In *Morning in the Burned House*, memory is again at issue in relation to mourning when the speaker reflects that “Nothing gets finished, / not dying, not mourning; / the dead repeat themselves” (100). Memory is presented as underwater archaeology, an archive in which everything is preserved but always in flux; moments of illumination are shadowed by awareness of loss, and we are inhabited by people and places we cannot contain.

I have always been intrigued by Atwood’s decision to return to these memories of parents shadowed by death. The repetition means that small details—her father’s wide-brimmed hat, the canoe—become luminous across various texts of memory. Far from signalling a failure of creativity, these repetitions contribute to the texts’ explorations of loss, becoming a part of the mourning process. Atwood repeats characters, images, and even very specific details because such repetition is a way of acknowledging and compensating for loss. Confronting what is gone, we return to the past to sort things out, assign connections, assess significance: in short, we interiorize the past, seeking a “consoling substitution of life for death” (Reinhard 131).

But the substitution never successfully substitutes; Atwood's texts of mourning and memory are rich with particularized detail, yet something escapes the details, and the texts affirm, by repeating, what cannot be fully expressed. Such repetition raises implicit questions about the way we mourn loss. Is there a way of seeking consolation through representation that does not reduce or commodify the otherness of the mourned person? Is consolation even possible or desirable? One might say that Atwood is implicitly working through "an ethics of mourning" (Reinhard 117)⁴ in these texts, returning to memories of her parents out of a double sense that they must be recalled but cannot be made present; each text, like individual memory, is faithful both in attempting retrieval and in failing.⁵ Addressing her ongoing concerns with memory in the aftermath of her father's death, Atwood turns in *Morning in the Burned House* from prose fiction to lyric poetry to exploit poetry's capacity for intensity and intimate reflection.

In emphasizing connections with the fiction, I do not wish to downplay the significance of elegy in Atwood's earlier poetry. In poems such as "The Totems" and "Elegy For the Giant Tortoises" from *The Animals in That Country* (1968), the speaker explores how modern rituals are built over irrecoverable loss. The language of pain in these poems is muted by the speaker's detached, sometimes ironic, analysis of "what we have destroyed" (23), but understatement does not obscure the lament. In *Procedures for Underground* (1970), Atwood turns to family history for elegiac material, describing a picture of her young mother in "Girl and Horse, 1928" to reflect on the camera's (and youth's) illusion of permanence in a poem that looks toward "Man in a Glacier." The speaker experiences a shiver of loss as she examines a picture of her young and smiling mother. In "Woman Skating," Atwood elaborates the paradox of the resonant moment in the flux of time, cherishing the image of her mother skating for its suggestion of simultaneous power and vulnerability. In "There is Only One of Everything" (from *You Are Happy*, 1974), the speaker contemplates beauty and its imminent loss as two sides of the same coin. The autobiographical details of *Morning in the Burned House* connect it most emphatically to the fiction, but Atwood's investigations of personal grief have always crossed borders of genre.

Despite her evident preoccupation with loss, critics have seldom discussed Atwood's work in terms of "personal feeling and insight concerning the dead" (Scodel 11). Some, like Sherrill Grace, have vehemently refuted the appropriateness of referring at all to "the Canadian woman called Margaret Atwood who happens to be a writer of poetry and fiction" (189) and the

autobiographical question has been sidestepped by critics such as Molly Hite, Nathalie Cooke (“Reading”), and Coral Ann Howells (“*Cat’s*”).⁶ Instead, the focus has been on Atwood’s mythic, nationalist, and gendered constructions. *Surfacing*, for example, has been discussed as nationalist manifesto, as illustration of arguments from *Survival*, as feminist analysis of the female condition, and as a reworking of mythic patterns to create a distinctively female heroic quest.⁷ Much less frequently has it been considered a novel of mourning for dead parents although both *Surfacing* and *Cat’s Eye* might be defined according to Karen E. Smythe’s term “fiction-elegy,” which she describes as a “fictional autobiography” that “involves a quest for knowledge and self-identity (undertaken after a loss is experienced), which is accomplished by remembering the past and then *telling* it in a narrativized work of mourning” (5).

Perhaps one of the reasons why critics have not considered Atwood’s writing in the context of personal elegy is the consensus about the characteristic Atwood voice, which would seem to be aggressively anti-elegiac. According to Judith McCombs, that voice is “the ironic, detached, controlled intelligence that leads us into danger” (53). For Dennis Cooley, the speaker of the poetry is “[c]ool, distant, deprecatory, opinionated” (84). Linda Wagner-Martin, commenting on *Good Bones* (1992), refers to “that mocking tone of cynical, clear-sighted observation that had by now become characteristic of her writing” (84). Tom Marshall speaks of Atwood’s “cool, apparently detached tone” (89). The examples could be multiplied. As Robert Fulford observes in “The Images of Atwood” (1977), the roles within which we have understood the writer are those of “[f]eminist, nationalist, literary witch, mythological poet, satirist, [and] formulator of critical theories” (95) but not, it would seem, elegist. *Morning in the Burned House* may prompt critics to reassess such characterizations; Patricia Merivale’s article on Atwood’s gendering of elegy (“From”), and Howells’ essay on grief and consolation in *Morning* have begun this work.⁸

To argue that personal elegy is a significant mode for Atwood is not to advocate a crassly autobiographical approach. Protective of her privacy, Atwood has insisted that autobiographical readings are misguided. “[M]y parents are very much alive” (Sandler 47), she told more than one interviewer before her father’s death in 1993. But she has also said that “[t]he writer is both an eye-witness and an I-witness, the one to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for others” (*Second* 348). Moreover, in *Cat’s Eye*, where the artist-autobiographer has had a childhood

remarkably similar to what we know of Atwood's, the joke is on the critics who forget that art *is* personal. Art critics in *Cat's Eye* insist on complex political, sociological, and mythological readings of paintings that emerge from Elaine's lived experience (161; 426-30). While I agree with Grace that "[t]o conflate the 'I' or Subject of her writing with the real woman" is "to miss the point" (189), the repeated attention to parental figures in Atwood's work signals personal reflection on loss and death even if the "I" who speaks and the figures represented are always constructions. Jean Mallinson suggests that "self-dramatization" is a more helpful way to understand Atwood's presence in her poetry than "self-revelation" (2) and sees a movement towards greater self-presence in the later poetry. Recent autobiographical theory, in asserting that all self-inscription involves the representational strategies of fiction, enables us to understand, without any crude search for gossip, that personal elegiac reflection is a significant feature of Atwood's writing, sometimes contrasting but often coexisting with her characteristic irony, wit, and razor-sharp detachment.⁹

Contemporary critics of the elegy stress the surprising endurance of this age-old poetic form. Despite many proclamations of its death, the elegy remains significant for modern writers although many have moved away from its conventions.¹⁰ In *Poetry of Mourning* (1994), Jahan Ramazani has examined the movement towards anti-elegy among American poets at mid-century, noting the trend towards poetry that refuses consolation and tends "not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss" (xi). Exhibiting a form of mourning that is, in the Freudian schema, "unresolved, violent, and ambivalent," writers such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton "refuse such orthodox consolations as the rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself" (Ramazani 4). Often, these poets make war on their dead parents, exposing their failures in poems that angrily reject even sanctioned forms of grief. Yet Ramazani contends that more traditional concerns with consolation and inheritance reappear in the work of later poets, suggesting that "a more traditionalist mode of elegy may have become viable once again, so long as it is sufficiently tempered by the skepticisms of our time" (xiii). His definition might well apply to the wry and vulnerable, tough-minded and compassionate poems with which Atwood engages in this "ancient literary dialogue with the dead" (Ramazani 1). Unlike Howells, who finds in the collection a coherent movement towards "transcendence . . . where loss is transformed" ("*Morning*" 78), I am struck by Atwood's complex negotiations with elegiac convention, most particularly in her tentative and ambivalent affirmation of memory.

Mallinson has argued that “[p]erennial concerns, like love and death, move a poet towards traditional images—or towards a deliberate resistance to those images” (26). In *Morning in the Burned House*, Atwood works both within and against traditions of the elegy. She uses the seasons and times of day, for instance, to signal the cycle of life and death. The “bad weather” (81) that claimed the man in the glacier is paralleled by the father’s premonition of a “bad” winter “on its way” (84) at the beginning of his final illness. Immortalized on colour slides, the forever young father is framed by the blue sky of “a northern summer” (81). Contemplating the cultural meaning of wreaths—which are like ritual “Ohs” signalling our wordlessness before grief—Atwood reflects that we “go around / in these circles for a time, winter summer winter, / and, after more time, not” (102). Images of the outgoing tide and the river leading to the ocean dominate the poet’s visions of her father’s passage into death. In returning to these familiar elegiac images, Atwood’s poetry evokes a longing for the “safe arrivals” (104) that her skepticism prevents her from affirming.

Preoccupation with the presence of death as a possibility—even if not yet a reality—marks many of these poems with a pervading melancholy. “Man in a Glacier” prefigures mourning for the father as the speaker considers a “box of slides” (81) she and her brother find in the cellar. The slides contain pictures of their father, “younger than all / of us now” (81). The past preserved, “freeze-framed / simulacrum or slight imprint” (82), brings sadness and a heightened sense of our helplessness within time. Looking at the slides produces in the speaker a bleak intimation of mortality and a memory of “the first time we discovered / we could not stop, or live backwards” (82). Turning to geology to articulate the indifferent tyranny of time, the speaker understands her melancholy as a kind of reverse Sleeping Beauty syndrome in which the curse is not to sleep but to wake from sleep and enter time, the “icy arms of Chemistry and Physics, our / bad godmothers” (82). The relentless passage of time makes relics of the past, such as the slides, both precious and treacherous.

“Man in a Glacier” is a key poem in the sequence because it foregrounds the ambiguous relationship between preservation and loss that is so important to the collection as a whole. The poem establishes a link between the ancient man preserved in ice (the first verse paragraph) and the slide pictures of the father (the second verse paragraph). The parallel operates, first, on the level of syntax and diction: “my brother found” recalls “they’ve found” while the eyes “opened” to mortality reverse the “closed eyes” of the

man in ice; the “freeze-framed” images of the father ominously echo the ice man’s “death by snow,” and the “curse” of mortality inversely parallels the (ineffectual) “charm” against death worn by the frozen man. The nature of these parallels, however, remains obscure, as indicated by the ambiguous “Then there’s . . .” that links the two verse paragraphs (81). *Then* might be an innocent conjunctive adverb meaning “next” or simply “and.” Or it might suggest some relationship of analogy if the freeze frame of the camera represents a more sophisticated form of burial in ice, a humane technological equivalent. Are the “preserved” men eerily similar or significantly different? The poem leaves us wondering. Atwood’s preference for “or” as grammatical connector confirms indecision; frequently, two possible meanings are proffered by the poem (“and here’s my father, / alive or else preserved . . . in the clear blue-tinged air of either / a northern summer or else a film / of aging gelatin” [81]) and then suspended inconclusively. In the faded colours of the slides, we glimpse a trace of the absent father—but does the trace signify absent presence or present absence? The speaker’s assertion that her father is “there. There still” (82), with its deliberately ambiguous deictic, raises the question: Where is *there*? In what sense is the father *anywhere*? And what [*t*]his is “all we got” (82)? The only certain presence is the “icy” embrace of time.

The metaphor of geology occurs again in “Shapechangers in Winter,” a love poem suffused with sadness. The speaker is not mourning the loss of love; on the contrary, the poem affirms a love that continues despite the withering of the body and fading passion. Aqueous similes emphasize the sleek acrobatics of youthful love-making now slowed by age: “Once we were lithe as pythons, quick / and silvery as herring, and we still are, momentarily, / except our knees hurt” (123). The gentle comedy takes the edge off but does not minimize recognition of the body’s diminishment. Even the certainty of the speaker’s knowledge of her lover’s body vanishes: “Every cell / in our bodies has renewed itself / so many times since then, there’s / not much left, my love, / of the originals. . . . I used to say I’d know you anywhere, / but it’s getting harder” (123-24). Celebration shades into melancholy in the recognition of a loss that even loving physical contact cannot alleviate. Long-term love always involves a certain mourning, Atwood suggests, because it confronts us with the loss of the selves we once were. Throughout the poem, the “one candle flickering” (121) that lights a cold winter evening is a familiar elegiac symbol of the beauty and impermanence of the lovers’ light in the darkness, buffeted by the wind that is “like time”

in its association with “[t]he power of what is not there” (120). Focusing on the physical and temporal layers within which human lives are enfolded, this poem expresses the melancholy affirmation that marks the collection’s preoccupation with abundance and loss.

Because she has been so much concerned with gender in her poetry and fiction, one might turn to the poems about the death of the father expecting some reflection on father-daughter relations in a patriarchal society. As Ramazani comments on American women writers, “The daughter’s elegy for the father was among the subgenres that enabled Plath’s generation of women writers to voice anti-patriarchal anger in poetry—anger initially focused on the familial embodiment of masculine authority” (263).¹¹ Atwood does not fit this paradigm. Although sexual tension and feminist anger are present in *Morning in the Burned House* (particularly in “Manet’s Olympia”), daughterly resistance and aggression play no role in the poems of mourning. Instead, the mourned father in *Morning* exists primarily outside structures of social and family authority, represented as a worker in nature rather than a figure of the Law. Certainly the emphasis on the shrunkenness and diminishment of the father in “Flowers” has a gendered dimension, suggesting the father’s fall from his masculine power as head of the family. This shrunken man explicitly contrasts the vital, directing and energetic father carrying the “green canoe” (*Morning* 95). Yet the moment when the daughter articulates the dissolution of phallic power is hardly a triumphant one. If traditional woman elegists had sought to meet the father’s death with self-restraint and piety while more recent woman elegists have questioned death—and parental authority—with anger (Ramazani 295-97), Atwood is neither resigned nor vengeful.

In “Flowers,” the speaker visits her dying father in the hospital. The first part of “Flowers” is an extended anti-elegy that evokes and undercuts the association of flowers with healing and sympathy. The speaker brings flowers to her father, replacing the faded bouquet from the previous week with a fresh one. But her father cannot see her gift and the speaker has lost faith in it. For her, the flowers evoke the very futility and decay that they are meant to counter—smelling “like dirty teeth” (93), leaving “greenish water” associated with her father’s outgoing tide, and having to be cut with “surgical scissors” (93), impotent instruments of healing. The flowers are arranged in a jar, an image that for Atwood has represented confinement and death as in *Surfacing*, where jars refer to her abortion as well as to the deaths of insects and small creatures her brother trapped (*Surfacing* 106, 131, 143). The

foregrounding of elegiac objects here indicates Atwood's pointed situating of her poems within and against the elegiac tradition.

As in much elegiac poetry and fiction, representation is at issue. Language always fails before the excess of grief and worse, the loved one cannot hear our attempts to speak. In "Flowers," the speaker sits silently beside her father, who is already beyond the reach of her words, incapable of hearing or responding. Words come from him—but not spoken to her or anyone else: they are words of goodbye that cannot be answered. Recognizing the futility of language, the speaker admires the "large and capable" (94) hands of the nurses, which communicate with her father in the only good way left: lifting and turning him with the minimum of pain while the rest of the family are "helpless amateurs" (94). Pain is the language these women negotiate; it is "their lore" (94). For a woman who has made her living as a crafter of language, the helpless silence of her bedside vigil frustrates: "A suffering you can neither cure nor enter— / there are worse things, but not many," she observes (94).

Also addressing the failure of language is the earlier "Waiting," which precedes and foreshadows the grieving poems. Structured by a series of similes, "Waiting" evokes the possibility of correspondence it then fails to deliver. In the poem, the speaker reflects on all the melodramatic ways she has imagined mortality as she has grown older. Mortality is the "dark thing" (8), the felt presence of loss and annihilation, that the speaker can represent only by a sequence of self-consciously ineffectual figures. In each case, the figuration is introduced in the conditional past tense, "You thought it would . . .," to emphasize the already conclusive failure of the speaker's conceptions. The speaker has imagined the "dark thing" in a variety of monstrous guises, as something out of a gothic horror story that "would carry its own mist, / obscuring you in a damp enfolding," or as a child's nightmare creature, "hid[ing] / in your closet," or as emblem of industrial terror, something "swift and without sound, / but with one pitiless glaring eye, / like a high-speed train" (8). But the thing itself is nothing so clear; instead it is a kind of flicker from the past, a momentary apprehension, a memory of a childish fear on a perfectly ordinary evening "when the indoor light changed, from clear to clouded" (9). The moment can be described only in terms of the absence of things, for it has no outline of its own:

and you realized for the first time
in your life that you would be old
some day, you would some day be

as old as you are now,
 and the home you were reading the funnies in
 by the thick yellow light, would be gone
 with all the people in it, even you.

The reality of the “dark thing” that has finally come is as evanescent as a forgotten memory; though “come true,” it is still not fully present or accessible to language; it is only “a memory of a fear . . . you have long since forgotten” (10). Exploring the problematics of representing grief and fear, Atwood highlights her conscious participation in a contested tradition.

The collection also features self-elegy. Because mortality is at the root of our relations to others, every act of mourning is also a mourning for oneself, especially with the death of a parent, which prefigures one’s own death in taking away the person who stands between us and mortality. As the speaker sits beside her father’s hospital bed looking at him, finding him terribly reduced, almost “erased” (95), she tells herself that he is still, somewhere, the man she has known all her life. But the statement betrays doubt more than it asserts faith: “But somewhere in there, at the far end of the tunnel / of pain and forgetting he’s trapped in / is the same father I knew before” (95). To assert the “same” is already to admit the possibility of a difference; enumerating the attributes of that “same father” (he is “the one who carried the green canoe / over the portage” [95]), she seems only to confirm his present difference. The use of past tense to speak of “the same father I knew” places him irrevocably in the past, not timeless and not present. Moreover, her description locates the known father, as distinct from the diminished stranger in the hospital bed, only in the context of memory. To lose *that* father means loss of continuity with a cherished past and with a previous version of herself, the one “with the fishing rods, slipping / on the wet boulders and slapping flies” (95). To have the father only in memory consigns to the past the self she was with him.

Thinking of her lost father, then, the speaker is led on to think more generally of loss, of last times and lost things. The last canoe trip with her father brings the reflection that “[t]here will be a last time for this also” (95). “*This*” has no clear referent. At first it appears to refer to the act of visiting, bringing cut flowers to the white room. The reader may assume she is thinking about her father’s death. But the next line broadens the reference to loss: “Sooner or later I too / will have to give everything up,” the speaker muses. Her own death rather than her father’s preoccupies the speaker as she reflects that she will eventually lose “even the sorrow that comes with

these flowers, / even the anger, / even the memory of how I brought them / from a garden I will no longer have by then" (95). Imagining the loss of a version of herself following her father's death, she cannot help but think of her own approaching death.

The speaker thinks of death not only because she understands viscerally that if her father can die, then so will she, but she also realizes that her father will from now on live *only* within her. While she lives and remembers, he will still carry that green canoe on their last trip; he remains alive in her memory. With her memory loss and death, her father will die once more. She now carries the burden of her father's life inside of her but she is helpless to keep even this "life" safe.

Awareness of death also burdens and blesses the speaker in "Bored." In this poem, the speaker remembers long days spent with her father in the bush. She is "bored / out of [her] mind" (91) by the rhythms of their lives, the unvarying tasks completed only to be started again: "doing / things over and over, carrying / the wood, drying / the dishes. Such minutiae" (91-92). Comparing these mundane activities to the lives of animals ("ferrying the sand, grain by grain, from their tunnels, / shuffling the leaves in their burrows" [92]), Atwood suggests that boredom is only possible in the timeless present of a world without death. Perhaps boredom is happier than knowledge, she suggests, linking the animal perspective to the child's. The peculiar affirmation of mourning is suggested in the concluding statement of the poem, which is both ominous and reverent in highlighting how death shadows and heightens consciousness. "Now I wouldn't be bored," she asserts, "Now I would know too much" (92). With knowledge of time and mortality, the days with her father are charged with poignancy: "Why do I remember it as sunnier / all the time then," the narrator asks rhetorically, reflecting on the way that knowing changes remembering.

At first glance, "Bored" seems—with its many parallel structures and repetitions—to mirror in its diction and syntax the state of mind it initially describes: "Holding the log / while he sawed it. Holding / the string while he measured, boards, / distances between things" (91). But even the earliest passages, the ones most relentlessly concerned with the (seemingly) endless repetition of tasks, make poetry out of minute observation. The breaking of the lines, the many coordinating conjunctions to place objects side by side, the alliteration and spondees to slow the line ("rows and rows / of lettuces and beets"; "prow, stern, wheel / he drove, steered, paddled), all encourage readers to linger over the descriptions which, we see, are not dismissive but

careful, savouring the litany of activities: prizing exactitude, precision. Already the boredom of the past has become a recorded inheritance from the father, who taught her to see.

As the poem develops, the apparently mundane is transformed into a delicate collage of patterns and textures:

looking hard and up close at the small
 details. Myopia. The worn gunwales,
 the intricate twill of the seat
 cover. The acid crumbs of loam, the granular
 pink rock, its igneous veins, the sea-fans
 of dry moss, the blackish and then the greying
 bristles on the back of his neck.

In memory, the experience is not boring but beautiful and precious. The final lines express the paradox of memory, when “Now I would know too much” is followed by, corrected by, “Now I would know.” Knowing at all is knowing too much because it is knowledge of death. Knowledge makes the moment retrospectively precious but also forecloses the possibility of regaining the remembered experience because the happy boredom of a world without time is forever lost.

Mourning returns often to the combined necessity and impossibility of finding consolation in memory. The many images of the father paddling in the river or walking in the woods suggest the “cold pastoralism” cited by Merivale (“From” 267) as Atwood’s debt to P.K. Page. While the outward calm of many of these images might indicate a movement towards consolation and acceptance, Atwood also emphasizes that these visions are failed attempts at closure. The father always somehow eludes the speaker, neither successfully forgotten nor successfully remembered, always just turning a corner, turning away, leaving an ineffable trace that the speaker fumbles to articulate. The speaker’s father appears in her dreams in many different forms as if to mock her attempt to remember him, “like clumsy drunks / lurching sideways through the doors / we open to them in sleep” (100). The dreams discomfit, seeming to prove the inadequacy of memory, and yet they are necessary: “they clutch at us, they clutch at us, / we won’t let go” (100). The surprising *we* at the end of the line confirms the speaker’s need to be reminded of her loss. The multiple images of the father emphasize their failure to represent the *one* truly, signing their status as textual traces, representations that do not refer. Yet because they cannot substitute for the father, they are truer—in the sense of more faithful—representations, testifying to loss without achieving consoling substitution.

Other losses are interwoven with the presentation of personal grief. In one of the speaker's final dream visions of her father ("The Ottawa River By Night"), she sees him "moving away downstream / in his boat, so skilfully" (104). Perhaps this indicates the beginning of some sort of acceptance: "[h]e wears his grey hat, and evidently / he can see again." Once again, the sea is the father's final destination, but an unbridgeable gap has opened between the real sea and the mythic sea:

... He's heading eventually
to the sea. Not the real one, with its sick whales
and oil slicks, but the other sea, where there can still be
safe arrivals. (104)

In acknowledging that even the natural world—as we know it—may not remain for long after her generation, the speaker alludes to another unacceptable loss; human destruction of the natural world means that there will soon be no one and nothing to remember us after we are gone.

According to Smythe, the shaping force of the elegy is the movement towards, or refusal of, consolation (8). Although Atwood has spoken in interviews¹² of her admiration for Margaret Avison, there is nothing like Avison's firm Christian faith in these poems.¹³ In the absence of religious faith or even belief in a human future, consolation is impossible; yet Atwood refuses despair. The title poem of the collection, which ends the volume, articulates the complex gift of loss. In this poem, the speaker sits, in memory, in a house that no longer exists, in a body she has long since outgrown, aware of the simultaneous presence and absence of her family, whose "clothes are still on the hangers" (126). The burned house is both destroyed and preserved:

In the burned house I am eating breakfast.
You understand: there is no house, there is no breakfast,
yet here I am. (126)

In the paradox of possession and loss, nearness and distance, these lines suggest that the speaker has reconciled herself with, though not overcome, her sadness. The precise, flat clarity of remembered detail dominates the poem, in which long-destroyed objects have a concreteness that occupies memory. The speaker is not sure if this occupation of her inward sight is "a trap or blessing" (127), but she knows that she is "alone and happy" (127) with her family just "[o]ff along the shore" (126). The fact that it is "morning" signals some sort of resolution: both "mourning" and "morning" come after the darkness of death and night, dispelling and lightening it.

If this is consolation, it is a very ambivalent kind, but it is certainly a refusal of the pessimism and despair some critics have assigned to Atwood; and this refusal—which is by no means optimism—gives her sombre vision and her investigation of loss such complexity and power. Woodcock has noted in her writing “that transcendence of self-pity . . . which rigorous pessimism can bring about without denying compassion or the joy of living—which is intensified once one ceases to exist through hope” (“Transformation” 56). In the end, Atwood accepts her memories as a gift that can be neither repaid nor protected. The only ethical response is to accept them, not as one’s due but as unmerited moments of grace. In “Shapechangers in Winter,” the second-to-last poem in the collection, the speaker and her lover are tentative and confiding as they face aging and death together. Concluding that “the trick is just to hold on/ through all appearances; and so we do” (125), they “[t]ak[e] hands like children” (124). The line recalls an earlier passage from “The Ottawa River By Night,” where the speaker recalls a canoeing accident in which children drowned:

Once, midstorm, in the wide cold water
upstream, two long canoes full
of children tipped, and they all held hands
and sang till the chill reached their hearts.
I suppose in our waking lives that’s the best
we can hope for, if you think of that moment
stretched out for years. (103)

Atwood is not ironic in calling this “the best / we can hope for.” For Atwood, the clasp of hands represents more than bleak solidarity; it is a celebration rescued from suffering. As the best we can hope for, we reach out to one another in the awareness of our own and one another’s mortality, always a bitter sweetness in our songs as we hold on until death. Atwood’s ongoing engagement with forms of elegy in her writing is her contribution to the song that forestalls the inevitable chill.

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- 1 Carl Atwood died in January 1993 (Cooke, *Margaret* 311).
- 2 The title of Atwood's Empson lectures at Cambridge University, "Negotiating with the Dead," suggests that death and the writer's responsibility to the dead remain central concerns for Atwood.
- 3 Woodcock notes the "striking parallel between [*Morning's*] preoccupations and those of *Surfacing*, where a father dies and the daughter's search for him is traumatic" ("Atwood's").
- 4 Reinhard summarizes the problem of mourning in terms of a question: "[D]oes the greater 'devotion' rest in elegiacally reproducing the lost object or in refusing to represent and recuperate it?" (117).
- 5 In arguing for the inevitable failure of elegiac memory in Atwood's work, I am indebted to Derrida's "Mnemosyne," taken from the series of lectures he gave after the death of Paul de Man. Written in "the fervor of bereaved friendship" (xxii), "Mnemosyne" asks, among other things, what it means to be faithful to the memory of a loved one. In particular, Derrida investigates the paradox that mourning involves remembering in order to forget. We create and assimilate an image of the loved one in order to lay the beloved's memory to rest and carry on with life in the face of loss. But the beloved other always eludes our attempts at assimilation and thus mourning is bound to fail; the failure is even, Derrida argues, a kind of ethical necessity or respectful homage (Derrida 35). Although I have not explored Derrida's arguments in full, his reflections on the impossible necessity of mourning lie behind many of my thoughts about *Morning in the Burned House*.
- 6 Grace begins a discussion of autobiographical structures in Atwood's writing with the following disclaimer: "To initiate a discussion of Atwood's autobiography is not to invite gossip about the Canadian woman called Margaret Atwood who happens to be a writer of poetry and fiction; it is not to talk about a real life at all. It is *not*—because Atwood's autobiographical 'I' is always a fiction, a creation and a discourse" (189). Hite begins her "Optics and Autobiography" (1995) with the intriguing statement that "[m]ore than any other of Margaret Atwood's fictions, the 1988 novel *Cat's Eye* raises questions about the relation of the autobiographical 'real' to the meaning of a work of literature" (135), but she considers the relationship in purely theoretical terms. Cooke also avoids a discussion of autobiography in her article on *Cat's Eye*, declaring that "the emphasis of my discussion of the autobiographical elements in *Cat's Eye* lies more on Atwood's artistry than on the links between Atwood's life and her art" ("Reading" 162). Also acknowledging but dismissing autobiographical revision is Howells, who introduces her essay on *Cat's Eye* with the following clarification: "Arguably we could read *Cat's Eye* as Atwood's own retrospective glance back at the imaginative territory of her earlier fictions, but I do not want to pursue that exploration here" (204).
- 7 For an example of a nationalist reading, see Fraser; Woodcock ("*Surfacing*") discusses the parallels between *Surfacing* and *Survival*; a feminist reading is offered by Hengen; and Campbell considers the reworking of myth.
- 8 To my knowledge, Howells is the only other scholar so far to devote a full-length article to *Morning in the Burned House* ("*Morning*"). While Howells also reads the collection as "a late modern elegy," her focus is the collection's "organizational principle . . . with its arrangement of poems in pairs suggesting mirrorings and reversals, its pervasive images of mortality, and its shifts of emphasis from one section to the next" (70). Because her

- emphasis is on the treatment of death and reconciliation in the entire collection, Howells spends comparatively little time on the poems in the fourth section.
- 9 In her survey of developments in autobiographical theory, Egan notes “a recognition of the relevance of fiction to the kinds of truth autobiography could tell” as well as “a sharpened focus on autobiography as a literary or illocutionary ‘act’” (3).
 - 10 For an excellent overview of the traditional elegy and departures from it, see Ramazani; he argues that the traditional elegy is marked by “the psychological propensity of the genre to translate grief into consolation” (3). Smythe concurs, noting that the speaker of traditional elegy “engages the audience with the intent of achieving some form of cathartic consolation” (3). By indulging in memory and venting anger and grief, the poet/speaker comes to some sort of acceptance of the loved one’s death, often making the poem itself a source of consolation. According to Smith, the art work performs the work of mourning such that “extremity of grief” becomes “its abatement” (322). The traditional elegy transforms death into life by creating a lasting image of the loved one; it memorializes the deceased and overcomes grief through such conventions as idealizing representation, pastoral imagery, and celebration of the enduring legacy passed down from the deceased. Images from nature and references to natural cycles often allow the mourner the compensatory faith that somehow, the loved one lives on in another form as well as in the “brilliant artifact” (Ramazani 3) of the poem. Merivale argues that consolation occurs in the elegiac romance—fictional equivalent of the pastoral elegy—when biography becomes autobiography (“Biographical” 140). In writing the memorial to the beloved, the biographer creates a monument to himself (152).
 - 11 Ramazani finds in this generation “a collective determination . . . to rethink the daughter’s position within the family romance” (294). Kahane concurs, alleging that “mourning is not a gender neutral process” (50) and that “[w]hether one is a daughter or a son mourning a mother or a father makes a difference” (51).
 - 12 In an interview with Struthers, Atwood recalls her early poetic influences: “Avison I was very smitten with at that time and still am” (62).
 - 13 For a useful discussion of the “spiritual struggle between grief and hope” (59) in Avison’s formal elegy for Margaret Laurence, see Somerville.

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