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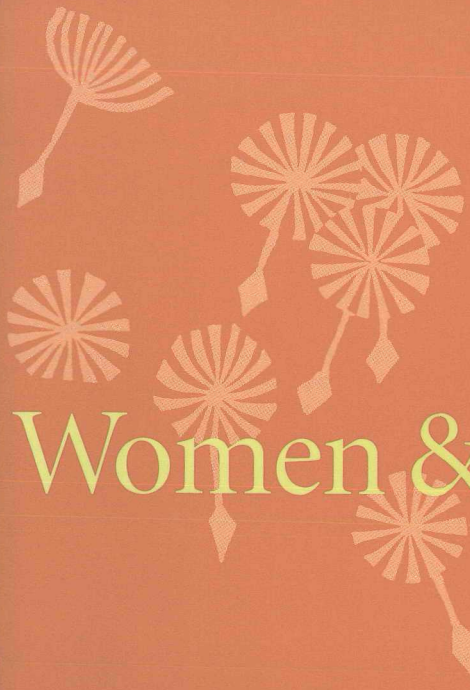

Women & Poetry

Canadian Literature

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Editorial

Home Economics

Kevin McNeilly

For Christina Sylka

1.

In "Overdue Pilgrimage to Nova Scotia," a five-sonnet tribute that first saw publication in the *New Yorker* in 1989 and was subsequently collected in his posthumous *A Scattering of Salts*, James Merrill retraces Elizabeth Bishop's homecoming to Great Village. He comes upon images and lines from her Nova Scotian poems and stories still being enacted, half a century later, almost timelessly, in the small and quaint world he discovers there: Esso stations, school primers, north-side moss and prim black hats. Even the suds in a car-wash recall Bishop's "The Shampoo". His homage is underscored by a tension between visionary chaos and rational sanity, a dichotomy that, as Merrill is well aware, informs the text both thematically and structurally, and that for Bishop more often that not resolved itself in lyric restraint. Onto the uneventful calm of her childhood town an echo of the past descends, suffusing it with what she describes, in the opening lines of "In the Village" (from her *Collected Prose*), as a strangely hushed scream:

> A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies. . . . The scream hangs like that, unheard, in memory—in the past, in the present, and those years between. It was not even loud to begin with, perhaps. It just came to live there, forever—not loud, just alive forever. Its pitch would be the pitch of my village.

That sustained, inaudible noise marks off what endures "there," a certain tactile immutability in this bygone and ever-present place. It is the distracted voice of her mentally ill mother, committed when the poet was very young to a sanitarium, and whom she would never see again; it is the sound of sustained loss, essential lack. By the story's close, Bishop's forever has

modulated with a pressing cognizance of mortality, of decrepitude. Small objects, the precursors to those in Merrill's poem, mark this muting:

> All those other things—clothes, crumbling postcards, broken china; things damaged and lost, sickened or destroyed; even the frail almost-lost scream—are they too frail for us to hear their voices long, too mortal?

Ephemera—small, homely, "other" things that constitute the "almost-lost"—become vestiges of an endurance, as well as indicators of the delicate collapse into which Bishop's writing casts its cold eye.

Bishop's broken, rural eternity contrasts compellingly with the epigone aestheticism of Charles G.D. Roberts's reverie over the Tantramar marshes, as the poet seeks to preserve through poetry—however self-deluding and fictive, however precious a "darling illusion"—a memorial vision immune to "the hands of chance and change." Bishop's Tantramar, passed on a bus in "The Moose," offers only a fleeting "smell of salt hay." If poetry can produce an artificial and temporary hedge against "the sensation of falling off / the round, turning world" (as she writes in "In the Waiting Room"), an assertion, however precarious, of balance—of a momentarily timeless, nostalgic stasis—then Bishop's efforts are characteristically muted, prepossessed by formal humility and quietly ironic dissociation. Merrill's eulogy echoes the echo, in its appropriately modest yet involuted textual economy:

> The child whose mother had been put away
> Might wake, climb to a window, feel the bay
> Steel itself, bosom bared to the full moon,
> Against the woebegone, cerebral Man;
> Or by judicious squinting make the noon's red
> Monarch grappling foreground goldenrod
> Seem to extract a further essence from
> Houses it dwarfed.

Romantic gestures toward remaking a world in metaphor—bared bosoms and eternal abstraction—are reduced to seeming, to deliberate shimmers in a squint that only appear as little glamours, visionary gleams; that further essence, that wonderful bafflement, Merrill suggests—rightly, I think—can only ever be for Bishop tempered by, or better temperate in, her need to take hold, to hang tight: a passionate patience, or as Merrill puts it, a "pent-up fury," waiting. What might have passed for the "visionary grain" in her work, "Silver-stitched . . . As by a tireless, deeply troubled inmate," moderates into an art that "refused to tip the scale of being human / By adding unearned weight," and stays put, clear-sighted, refrained.

Remarkable in both Bishop and Merrill is a specific verbal absence. "Your village," Merrill opens, "touched us by not knowing how." Houses, rooms, a shrine, a world, a space, are all hers, all "there" as she says in her story, but are never quite named the way it feels they ought. One word here remains unspoken, unspeakable: home. (Even when, in her story, she finally pronounces it, the word marks exclusion and inadmissability: "Back home, I am not allowed to go upstairs.") Any return immediately becomes leave-taking, an assertion of necessary distance, and a refusal to come to rest. ("We're off—Excuse our dust!" Merrill chimes.) Poetry, even when it confesses, even when it finds a purchase in autobiography, is no more than an act of passing through; it can never quite step back again into a familiar landscape, now blurred as if observed through a bus window, or into the comforts of what once felt stable, whole, or fixed. Merrill's tribute, like Bishop's own migratory geography, is the work of a poetic tourist, seeing the sights and taking notes—"Gathering phrases for tomorrow's cards"—but restless. It makes use of the world, converting it to verbiage, rather than living in it. Personal possession, laying claim, and impersonal dissociation, unknowing, mesh in Merrill's work in the same breath: "Your village"—"*my* village," as Bishop asserts—"touched us by not knowing how." Merrill can offer Bishop, properly, only an homage that tries to refuse its poetic excesses, the unnecessary fictions of homecoming or the easily belied charms of knowing, having, dwelling. The poor mimesis of inflated convention would have made her cringe, he thinks, especially his own dry self-consciousness: "What tribute could you bear / Without dismay?" Her work, read through Merrill or on its own, certainly, locates her in a striking liminality, a detached language, that Paul Celan once named in a speech *unverloren*, unlost. She writes across a presence that can only refuse, even as it embraces, the existential given of being there, of being echoed there: the almost-lost.

The "judicious squinting" in Merrill's text anticipates the vatic precision of "Poor Bird," a formal gloss on Bishop's "Sandpiper," from P. K. Page's *Hologram* (1994). The fraught visionary mechanics of Bishop's lyric are expanded in Page's literally interstitial poem, written between Bishop's lines as commentary, or digression, or response, as she describes a bird's uncertain hunt along a beach:

> So the search began—the endless search
> that leads him onward—a vocation
> year in, year out, morning to evening,
> *looking for something, something, something.*

Pecking down the strand, hungry, the sandpiper is a displaced figure of the poet—a student of Blake, Bishop calls him, following his visionary calling "in a state of controlled panic"; for the painter-writer Page, the bird styles himself a misdirected "Seurat (pointilliste) / or a molecular physicist," stabbing at the sand. At moments, however, for both poets, as when their voices coincide at the poem's close, a glint catches his attention:

> Yet when his eye is sharp and sidewise seeing
> oh then the quotidian, unexceptional sand is
> *mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.*

The italicized lines are Bishop's, and the roman belong to Page. Typography aside, Page's text is as porous as it is strict, and succeeds poetically, as an undismayed tribute, to the degree that two distinct voices interpenetrate, tracing out, as she puts it in her note on the poems, "[a] curious marriage—two sensibilities intermingling." A poem, especially this formal *glosa* for Bishop, is a means of seeing and hearing "sidewise," not of melding two languages so much as releasing oneself into the give-and-take of a conversation, and plotting a verbal trajectory, diagonally, toward that other person, that other voice. "Uninnocent," Bishop writes in careful partials in "Conversation," "these conversations start, / and then engage the senses, / only half-meaning to." Page points out the pleasures of poetic subjection when she describes the generic constraints of the gloss: "I liked being controlled by those three reining rhymes—or do I mean reigning?—and gently influenced by the rhythm of the original." What distinguishes this form, its guiding principle, is reversal, since by "constructing the poem backwards—the final line of each stanza is, in effect, the starting line." This reversal is not only stylistic, but conceptual; poetry is reciprocal, a returned gift. The rearticulations that Merrill and Page produce—drawing suitable lines from Bishop's cautiously freighted sentences, unfinishing and refinishing her architectures—attempt a kind of homing. They want to return her to her, to give her back something of the order that she has given them. They want to correspond. What they create, properly speaking, are poetic economies.

Those economies, however much we might imagine Bishop's retroactive protests, are essentially governed by gender. Gender, in fact, offers us a name for that network of exchange and reciprocity, for that economy itself. Gender is a mode of poetic—that is, fabricated, home-made—giving, of giftedness. Page's poem is a marriage between women. "The poets of my youth were almost all male," she writes. "To find what I needed I had to

jump forward in time to Elizabeth Bishop." What she needs formally—borrowed lines into which she can write herself with adequate grace—is also feminine, here, just as woman to woman, in Merrill's tribute and throughout Bishop's work, mother to daughter, or lover to lover, or friend to friend, connectives make their uneasy peace, as she writes in "O Breath":

> Equivocal, but what we have in common's bound to be there,
> whatever we must own equivalents for,
> something that maybe I could bargain with
> and make a separate peace beneath
> within if never with.

Being "if never with," unlost, characterizes a bargain, a trade between intimates, an interstice within which a subject can articulate itself as gendered, self-making and unmade—I, he, she, one—or, as Merrill put it in the resonant title of his own memoir, can discover "a different person."

2.

It turns out I went to junior high just a few miles from Great Village, in North River, a municipality just outside of Truro, Nova Scotia. Mine must have been the last generation in which boys were compelled to take "Industrial Arts"—metalworking, carpentry and drafting—while girls were forced into "Home Economics." (The three parallel units in their class are still a mystery to me, and as a teenager I never dared to ask, but I think they consisted of cooking, sewing and household management.) We had no choice: the genders were rigorously separated, and streamed. You became one or the other, and the right one at that.

Categories, particularly the bifurcations of gender, if we attend to the nature of their terminologies, can be enthralling. The word economics, for instance, comes from the Greek οἰκονομία, meaning, literally, home-management. "Home Economics," in other words, is a redundancy; economies are always forms of orchestration and circulation centred on the οἶκος, the hearth. Economies inevitably turn inward, home. Given that they are inherently disciplined and disciplinary, the mechanics through which girls are supposed bestowed, at least institutionally, their socio-sexual identities, home would appear to be essentially feminine. But home, we need to remember, is also a construct, and for Bishop essentially displaced and uncertain. Poetry, as ποιεῖν, refers to craft, to making; the junior-high boys were diligently learning, in the Greek sense, to be poets, artisans. But when economies reveal themselves as productions, as networks of making, then the categories

themselves begin to collapse into one another; a poetic economy—inherently contravening the givens, the established rules of engendering—makes its home in the instabilities of division and difference. It returns the gift.

I have been making covert reference to Anne Carson's brilliant set of lectures on Simonides of Keos and Paul Celan, *Economy of the Unlost.* Poetry, situated by Carson at the emergence of symbolic exchange from cultures of barter, positions itself as a liminal gift, at once substantial and abstracted. Its liminality is created in the duplicitous and unresolved tensions between the aesthetic and the economic, in what I have been suggesting (*pace* Carson) constitutes gender: an irresolution. The materiality of the gift—toward which, I think, the memorial texts of Bishop, Merrill and Page aspire—resists appropriation by representational structures, and wants connection, unmediated contact:

> Within a gift economy, . . . objects in exchange form a kind of connective tissue between giver and receiver. . . . A gift is not a piece broken off from the interior life of the giver and lost into the exchange, but rather an extension of the interior of the giver, both in space and in time, into the interior of the receiver.

Translated into symbolic form, abstracted into value, coin, image, or note, the gift can no longer ground itself in human presence, and loses its bond, its homebound sureness. It estranges itself, or, as Marx would say, becomes alienated: "Money denies such extension, ruptures continuity and stalls objects at the border of themselves. Abstracted from space and time as bits of saleable value, they become commodities and lose their life as objects." Carson reminds us that, in ancient Greece, the word *xenos* had two meanings that, in our present age, seem contradictory, but within the economy of the gift need not be so: guest and host, stranger and familiar. This "reversible terminology"—think of Page writing backwards—suggests the "reciprocal character" of the "connective tissue between giver and receiver": a return. But that return, viewed along the axis of language, a symbolic economy, is lost in translation, as it becomes commodity. "Commodification," Carson asserts, "marks a radical moment in the history of human culture," radical, that is, in the sense of both radix—rooted—and resistant. Carson recuperates Simonides as a poet grounded in this destabilizing shift:

> Finding himself born into a society where traditions of gift exchange coexisted with commodity trade and a flourishing money economy, balanced on a borderline between two economic systems and inserted into the disintegrating consciousness of that time, he took a naked view. He uncovered his eyes in both directions.

The tribute as an exchange within language, as conversation, becomes what Carson, through Simonides, names χάρις, "grace": "Grace is the strange and impetuous currency of [the poet's] transaction." Like *xenos*, *charis* is

> semantically reversible and includes in its lexical equivalents favor, gift, goodwill given or received, payment, repayment, gratification, pleasure afforded or pleasure returned, charity, grace, Grace. In other words, *charis* is the generic name for the whole texture of exchanges that constitutes a gift economy as well as for the piety that guarantees them.

But even as Carson aims to decode and to recover the bygone etymology of giving, what clearly emerges in her list of meanings are economies of the symbolic: the suffusion of commodity tropes can't be helped, in English. Alongside Carson, in other words, we reach back through the degraded condition of our present language toward some point of contact, of happening. And in so doing, we become duplicitous ourselves: "Closer to both art and what we are" as Merrill's tribute puts it. Or perhaps, as Carson writes in *Autobiography of Red*, we enter "a numb time, caught between the tongue and the taste," seeking an aesthetic—sensation, impact, presence—but always mediated by nervous abstraction. Consciousness is not contact; taste is not tongue, but its interpretation, its reflex. We are, as Geryon says, "neighbours of fire," proximate and closer, or in Bishop's terms there but never quite here. Poetry is not fire, but its neighbour, its vessel, its host: hearth, οἶκος.

In Carson's long poem "The Glass Essay" (1995), a woman writer comes to terms with a breakup and the loss of love by returning home to her mother in the Brontë country of western England, and by dream analysis and therapy; the text is a displaced talking cure. Our narrator engages critically with the writing of the Brontë sisters, particularly the poetry of Emily, to rethink her "lonely life" and "ungainly body." Carson, typically, fuses (or, more accurately, counterpoints) lyric with discursive commentary, autobiography with literary history, narrative with psychoanalytic reflection. As in *Autobiography of Red*, where scholarly apparatus conjoins with reworkings of Gertrude Stein and Emily Dickinson, or *Economy of the Unlost*, where an elaborate cross-talk among Simonides, Celan and Karl Marx, among others, works itself out, here in an extended poem Carson produces a poetic economy. Her writing—in a less formalist, though no less formal, mode than that of Page or Merrill—operates between texts, as connective perhaps, but at least in poetic exchange, in transit.

"The Glass Essay," however, presents that economy in a carefully gendered

context. "Oh I see," says the poet's mother, "you're one of Them." "One of whom?" the narrator responds, her voice gone "very high," but of course the answer has already been given, in her mother's first words to her that morning: "Those women!" Carson plays ironically with the stereotype of the shrill feminist, but the critical reception of her work has already been framed by the politics of gender. Harold Bloom, writing in the spring 2000 issue of *The Paris Review*, can easily be pressed into service as an academic straw man. His praise of Carson there is as close to unequivocal as he can come:

> Anne Carson, a Canadian, is quite remarkable. She has really captured me. I have been reading her obsessively over the past months. A stunning writer. One of her heroines is Gertrude Stein and another is Emily Dickinson. She is a disciplined version of Gertrude Stein; she is not of the caliber of Emily Dickinson, but then who is? In prose and verse I'd rather read Carson than Miss Stein [. . .] . Anne Carson has really come along . . . a sudden explosion recently with the remarkable *Autobiography of Red.*

Within a few pages, however, Bloom starts ranting about "*feministas*" and the canonization, apparently because of their gender, of "incredibly bad, minor poets, now raised to great eminence indeed. This is no joke." Carson, apparently, is an exception to Bloom's rule, more poet than woman, despite the clearly female lineage in which he locates her. What is worth pursuing in these remarks (and it isn't Bloom, whose authoritarian posturing is just too easy a target) is precisely how Carson articulates gender in "The Glass Essay," as if to anticipate comments such as Bloom's, as an all-too-serious critical joke; she quotes Charlotte Brontë on her sister's poems, fixing her terms of praise on an energetic and typically masculine imagination in her work, "Not at all like the poetry women generally write." Traded across this reiteration is the memorial capacity of Carson's own text, as a rereading of the work of her literary forebears—"This is my favourite author"—that draws Emily Brontë into what she calls, in *Economy of the Unlost*, embodied memory. "This poet," and she means Simonides, but could as easily be referring to Brontë or to herself, "is someone caught between two worlds, remembering both. His flame is in every grain. For him, memory is both commodity and gift, both wage and grace." Suspended between text and dream, a poetic tourist on a "visit" to her mother—the visit Bishop was never able to reenact—Carson recasts the poetry women write in a dark comedy of critical interchange, reading across her own ungainly presence to rediscover a balance between remembering and imaginative desire.

"Girls," she asserts with dry self-consciousness in "The Glass Essay," "are

cruellest to themselves." To shake free of the "many ways of being held prisoner," the gendered typecasting ("YOU KNOW MEN, / she was saying") and wilful subjection to which she is categorically subject as a woman in poetry, Carson doesn't reject her language so much as extend its purview, graciously, to disclose connectives, a corporeal and poetic economics in the last lines of her poem: "It was not my body, nor a woman's body, it was the body of us all." This is not a humanistic elision of gender politics, but a widening of concern, to suggest both the permeability and the reciprocity of homage and exchange; by reading, let alone responding or rewriting, we have been implicated, gendered, all of us. In one of her first books, *Eros, the Bittersweet* (1986), Carson focuses momentarily on a rhythmic excess, the blunder of an epic line attempted by Plato in his *Phaedrus*: "Our words are too small, our rhythms too restrictive." Eros, abstracting the sexual, anticipates the economic concerns of Carson's later work; poetry emerges—she recasts Marx in *Economy of the Unlost*—with "a surplus value that far exceeds its own calculus." Elizabeth Bishop's calculated refusal to exceed her means becomes in Carson the occasion of poetic grace, giving itself away.

3.

Poems, Simonides is reported to have asserted, are pictures that talk. Images and forms, committed to memory in language, are not so much drawn out of time in the poetic as they are temporalized, rhythmatized. Ekphrasis, literally *ut pictura poesis*, is more complex and crafty than word-painting; it is a giving over of the figural into kinesis, of mute vision into verbal abundance (and along this line, the old saw that "a picture is worth a thousand words" takes on a new meaning). Carson explains the expansive effort to translate between media, to find a verbal correspondence:

> [Simonides] is painting a picture of things that brings visible and invisible together in the mind's eye as one coherent fact. The coherence is a poetic conjuring, but the fact is not. Together they generate a surplus value that guarantees poetic vocation against epistemological stinginess. To make "paintings that talk" is to engage in a conversation that is more than words and beyond price.

That is, in verbal excess the visual discovers rhythm as its call. In *Two Bowls of Milk* (1998), Stephanie Bolster enters into that conversation with open eyes. As with Bishop, her work finds itself displaced, at once homing and homeless: "that place I left was never mine." "I'm out in it," she asserts, standing in a "Flood, Deer Lake, B.C.," positioned "here / where the path was last week," grounded through liquid uncertainty; interrogatives rather than sureties

mark her closure, replaying the shifting lost-and-found of Elizabeth Bishop's "there": "When was I not out there? / If I leave here, where will I be?" The rhythm characteristic of Bolster's writing emerges even in these brief lines as essentially recursive, a doubling back: verbal textures revisit themselves, dilate, unsettle, distill. Hers is a give and take of grace at work.

In a series of poems written on paintings and other art objects in the National Gallery of Canada, Bolster concentrates on representations of women, of women's bodies, and finds herself implicated in and identifying with the figures to which, to whom, she bears witness. Identification, for her, is not mimesis, however, not imposture, but a struggle over the often misdirected and excessive mirror-effects that inhere in the work of description itself. ("Inept at everything except perception," she ventriloquises in "Chemistry," "and even there subjective.") In "The Beheld," a meditation on a painting by Fred Ross, Bolster modulates from a refusal to collapse subject into portraiture—"Not mine," "Not me"—to the seductive allure of identification—"I know what she wants"—to the embarrassment of being contained, exposed: "I avoided lenses." Scopic stricture, in a painting by Gustav Klimt—"I narrow in your eyes"—collapses viewer into the viewed; this meld, however, is immediately countered with a resilient opacity in work by Jack Shadbolt: "she does not recognize / any of our shut-tight shapes." Bolster's texts map out a tension in vision, a conflict that may at first appear dialectical, wanting development or transformation as it vacillates between identity and differentiation, but is better understood as irresolute, always "plural, rampant," overflowed. Negation, in Bolster, is not diametrical but generative, excessive. "The interesting thing about a negative," Carson writes, "is that it posits a fuller picture of reality than does a positive statement." "I am," Bolster asserts in a broken identity, "no more myself: bones pitched inside a tent of skin; / fear; one bound hand and the other binding." Describing a body cast by Colette Whiten, Bolster shifts between positive and negative space, the object and its shape, as an explicit concern with the visual fabrication of gender: "All that remains / is the space a woman once took." But as writer and commentator, she assays her blindness to the ways in which she, as a viewer, is implicated in the act, the art, of seeing, of reinscribing that negative form: "It was so dark that I was blind / to shapes my face engraved inside." Writing out, making pictures talk, is more than an assertion of sympathy or likeness. It is, in Carson's terms, "fuller"; and the word, the figure, for that excess is inevitably woman.

4.

Naming, figuring, this complex set of relations, this economy, in a single term can appear reductive, and it's important to insist on the tensions and pluralities that inform the word. The venerable Victorian etymologist Walter Skeat asserts that "woman" is a "curious corruption" of the Anglo-Saxon compound *wíf-man*, which literally means "woman-man." Modern readers—including Skeat himself—hear in the Old English *wíf* its descendant "wife" (a potential meaning that the term clearly did have, much like the later English "mistress" or the German *Frau*), and thus associate the word "woman" with second-hand dependency and subjugation. But Skeat also points out that the Anglo-Saxon *man*, like the German *Mensch* (not *Mann*), could signify both men and women. This ambiguity means is that it is possible to read "woman" radically, from its roots, not as derivative or subjugated, but as an economy of gender-positions. Collided with one another, they destabilize any absolute, bifurcated categories (like boys and girls, for instance), opening those positions up to negotiation, from all angles. Possibilities multiply, rather than divide: "It was not my body, nor a woman's body, it was the body of us all."

I don't mean this digression on etymology as an exercise in pedantry, but as a way of suggesting a verbal strategy, a poetic means, of refusing an essentialist feminism. Call it home economics: a gift exchange, a return. Louise Bernice Halfe's *Blue Marrow* centres on giving back, through poetry, to the women who have come before her, who have shaped her polyphony, her many-voiced speech:

> Grandmothers hold me. I must pass all that I possess,
> every morsel to my children. These small gifts
> to see them through life. Raise my fist. Tell the story.
> Tear down barbed-wire fences.

Telling re-connects past and future; stories are forms of possession and containment, but also vehicles of resistance and excess, passages. They economize, in that they produce and locate a domestic centre, the οἶκος around which family gathers itself, and in that they also extend, translate, pass on. Halfe attaches stories to women's names, a quiet genealogy now uttered, given not only familial but public voice:

> Oh Sarah, Adeline,
> Oh Emma, Bella,
> tongueless in the earth.
> Oh *Nōhkomak*,

your Bundles I carry inside,
the full moon dancing
beyond my wails.
I've seeped into
your faces,
drowned in the pictures
I have gathered
and cannot
hold.

Pictures of absent women, like Bolster's ekphrastic work, offer both identity—in their porousness, in their internalization—and difference—in their imaginative instability, their refusal to be grasped. "Woman," a word that recurs at least a hundred times, mostly in a list of names, in the first five pages of Halfe's book, frames this intricate set of relations and interdependencies; the women on whom she calls remain distinctive, various and specific, even as they are gathered together. Her task, as she remarks in a note at the book's close, is to honour their lives, poetically:

> Although I chant and direct my prayers with names I've grown up with, as well as created, and names I've gathered from the archives, I do not claim or profess that they represent the ideas or thoughts in this reclaiming. They are, nonetheless, my saints, and in naming them I hope to honour their contribution.

Halfe writes in tribute, in homage, not to appropriate or to overwrite those in her gathering with her own voice—in her terms, not to make them representative. Instead, what she produces, prayerfully, respectfully, is conversation, a mutual interchange.

A women's poetry, read as Halfe or Carson or Bolster or Page or Bishop creates it, is not a category but an excursion, a writing outward. By thinking through gender as a poetic economy, as a fabricated, fluid set of relations and interchanges, as gift, we can all find a means to honour, in our reading, the manifold potential in the human and to discover our connective tissues.

With this issue, Canadian Literature *highlights the editorial work of Kevin McNeilly, who recently joined the journal as Associate Editor. An accomplished poet himself, he introduces this sampling of critical work on Canadian women poets. In a later issue, he will present an extended riff on Walter Benjamin, his Arcades Project and his correspondence with Adorno, and the relationship of all of these to Canadian writing. "Riff" is not an accidental choice of words. As readers of his "Word Jazz" essays in* Canadian Literature *#164 and #165 will be able to confirm, jazz and its literary resonances are also a subject he knows a great deal about. Add to this work on Franz Boas, Robert Bringhurst, and transcultural encounters, and it will be readily apparent why we were keen to bring him on board.*

Ian Rae

"Dazzling Hybrids"
The Poetry of Anne Carson

The subtitle of Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* only hints at the variety of genres that the Montreal poet employs. In *Autobiography of Red*, Carson brings together seven distinct sections—a "proemium" (6) or preface on the Greek poet Stesichoros, translated fragments of Stesichoros's *Geryoneis*, three appendices on the blinding of Stesichoros by Helen, a long romance-in-verse recasting Stesichoros's *Geryoneis* as a contemporary gay love affair, and a mock-interview with the "choir-master"—each with its own style and story to tell. Carson finds fresh combinations for genres much as she presents myth and gender in a new guise. Although men appear to be the subject of both the romance and the academic apparatus that comes with it, Carson sets the stories of Stesichoros, Geryon, and Herakles within a framework of epigrams and citations from Gertrude Stein and Emily Dickinson that, far from being subordinate, assumes equal importance with the male-centred narrative when Stein supplants Stesichoros in the concluding interview. The shift in speakers and time-frames in the interview, as well as the allusions to the myth of Isis, emphasize Carson's manipulation of mythic forms. Carson's retelling of the *Geryoneis* (itself a lyrical revision of an epic myth) draws inspiration from Stesichoros's portrait of Helen of Troy in the *Palinode* (a recantation of the poet's earlier, Homeric portrait), as well as from the mythic scenes in which Isis reconstitutes the fragmented body of Osiris. Negotiating this complex arrangement of literary allusions, Carson uses shifts in gender and genre to foreground her extensive alterations to the myths that underlie and frame *Autobiography of Red.*

Because it employs fragmentation and "radical recontextualization" to "overturn the conventional distinction between a framing 'master-text' and

a cited text that exists in supplementary relation to it" (Jones 14), *Autobiography of Red* could be situated in the Canadian tradition of "documentary-collage" (Jones 14) that Manina Jones traces in works such as Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic*. Indeed, Marlatt has written a favourable review of *Autobiography of Red* (Marlatt 41) and the cover of Carson's novel-in-verse bears a strong endorsement from Ondaatje: "Anne Carson is, for me, the most exciting poet writing in English today." However, the primarily Greek derivation of Carson's fragments has prompted Guy Davenport to situate Carson's poetry within a revived classicism. Introducing Carson's *Glass, Irony and God* (1992), Davenport displays his professional interest in the McGill professor of ancient Greek by arguing that Carson "is among those returning poetry to good strong narrative (as we might expect of a classicist)" (x). Carson's romance certainly upholds Davenport's argument for "good strong narrative," but the scholarly framework of Carson's novel-in-verse also borrows from her non-narrative experiments in poetry "Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings" (*Plainwater* 1995), as well as her essays on lyric form in *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986).

The reception of *Autobiography of Red* highlights the diversity of readings made possible by what Melanie Rehak calls Carson's "dazzling hybrids" (39), in a feature-length article on the poet in the *New York Times Magazine*. However, one should note the media dazzle that accompanies the discussion of Carson's hybrids when Rehak's article includes a full-page fashion shot of Carson in red (37). The success of *Autobiography of Red* has rocketed Carson from cult status in small literary magazines to international prominence, creating a mystique summed up by the opening question of an article in the *Boston Review*: "What if a Canadian professor of classics turned out to be a greater poet than any living American?" (Halliday). Assessing her most recent collection of poetry, *Men in the Off Hours* (2000), the *New York Times Book Review* calls Carson the "most instantly penetrating of contemporary poets" (Bedient 44), *Time Magazine*[1] declares that Carson "fulfills poetry's highest calling" (Bruck 98), and the *Globe and Mail* (scrambling to respond to the *New York Times Magazine* feature) proclaims that "Carson is where the action is in contemporary poetry" (Wilson D19). While Carson can mix and match with the best postmodernists, her ability to write essays, lyrics, narrative and non-narrative poetry with equal facility distinguishes her. This ability also creates contradictory appraisals of her talent. For example, in a review of *Autobiography of Red* for the *TLS* (3 Dec. 1999),

poet Oliver Reynolds praises Carson's attempt to blend intellect with emotion, but laments that the romance at the heart of her novel-in-verse could not "sustain the expectations created by its extraordinary first half" (24). In the same issue of the *TLS*, critic Karl Miller chooses *Autobiography of Red* as his book of the year on the strength of its "single magnificent and perplexing poem [the romance]" while suggesting that it "might have shed the gnomic appendices which both precede and round off the romance proper" (Miller 6). The reception of *Autobiography of Red* has been overwhelmingly positive (among reviewers such as Marlatt, Rasula, Miller, Moses, Siken, Macklin, and Beam), but some critics of the novel-in-verse find it either "top-heavy with its absurd apparatus" (Logan) or "so devoted to the emotional fluctuations of [the] protagonist" of the romance that the novel "ends up feeling like a lyric poem fantastically extended" (Halliday). However, a closer look at the manipulation of myth in *Autobiography of Red* reveals that the mock-academic apparatus surrounding the romance is neither absurd nor a simple extension of the lyric sequence.

The first section of *Autobiography of Red*, a proem entitled "Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?" introduces the reader to the ancient Greek lyricist. Stesichoros (also Stesichorus) was born in Himera, on the coast of Sicily, between 650 (*Red* 3) and 628 (Davidson 197) BCE. Of the "dozen or so titles and several collections of fragments" (*Red* 3) remaining from Stesichoros's works, Carson is particularly interested in a "long lyric poem in dactylo-epitrite meter and triadic structure" (5) called the *Geryoneis*. The eighty-four surviving papyrus fragments and half-dozen citations of the *Geryoneis* expand on the story of Geryon from the tenth labour of Herakles (also Heracles or Hercules). The fragments "tell of a strange winged red monster who lived on an island called Erytheia (which is an adjective[2] simply meaning 'The Red Place') quietly tending a herd of magical red cattle, until one day the hero Herakles came across the sea and killed him to get the cattle" (5). Instead of adopting the "conventional . . . point of view of Herakles and fram[ing] a thrilling account of the victory of culture over monstrosity," Stesichoros offers a "tantalizing cross section of scenes, both proud and pitiful, from Geryon's own experience" (6). Stesichoros gives Geryon an "unexpectedly noble" (Davies, "Stesichorus" 277) character and marks the transition from epic deed to lyric encounter as a shift from heroic conquest to subjective engagement. In the lyric sequence "Autobiography of Red: A Romance," Carson furthers this evolution by transforming the *Geryoneis* into a contemporary gay love affair between a leather-jacketed

Herakles and his little red admirer. However, as the organization of *Autobiography of Red* implies, it is necessary to understand Stesichoros's deviations from the epic form before engaging with Carson's romance. "[R]anked with Homer by some of the ancients" (Barnstone 109), Stesichoros achieved considerable fame by re-framing the epic narratives of Homer and Hesiod, as well as by reconsidering the targets of their abuse, such as Geryon and Helen of Troy.

Although Quintilian remarks that Stesichoros "sustained on the lyre the weight of epic song" (10.1.62; trans. A. Miller 77) and Carson has Longinus—in a slight manipulation of Longinus 13—call Stesichoros the "[m]ost Homeric of the lyric poets" (*Red* 4), Stesichoros's primary contribution to literary history lies in his alteration of epic for lyric purposes. Stesichoros was probably the first to combine elements of lyric monody (solo song), epic narrative and dance in order to recast the ancient myths as choral performance:

> Although he may well have been preceded by Terpander (and others unknown) in the invention of musical settings for the traditional epics, his poems on epic themes appear to have been distinctive in their completely "lyrical" form, composed as they were in a triadic structure and adapted to *nomoi* for the lyre. (Maingon 1)

Malcolm Davies cautions that Stesichoros's compositions were not strictly choral ("Monody" 601), but his verse differs from the monody of Sappho, Alcaeus and Anacreon in its preference for "an artificial language with a strong Doric flavour" and its triadic structure—in which "a strophe is followed by an antistrophe in the same metrical pattern, the antistrophe by an epode in a related but different rhythm" (Campbell 2: 262). Thus, instead of relying solely on the conventions of either lyric or epic, Stesichoros—like Carson—creates his own hybrid form.

In "Stesichorus and the Epic Tradition," Maingon examines Stesichoros's treatment of Homeric form and diction and offers these conclusions:

> Retaining the heroic theme, he amalgamated traditional and original material in narrative poems of about 1500 lines in length to be performed to the accompaniment of the lyre, either by solo voice or by chorus, or even both. Held within the bounds of this structure the poems were far more narrowly defined as far as content was concerned and less digressive than epic. The musical accompaniment in itself, the *nomos* which was traditionally divided into seven parts, imposed a finite structure on the theme. (Maingon 355)

Toying with these numerological conventions, Carson divides *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* into seven sections (in the manner of lyric performance)

and the lyric sequence "Autobiography of Red: A Romance" into 47 numbered sections (one short of the Homeric corpus). This kind of generic play becomes increasingly important towards the conclusion of *Autobiography of Red*, where the lyric/epic evolves into a "photographic essay" (*Red* 60) that gives way to an interview which appears to be part of a drama. In Western literature, this manipulation of genres begins, according to Carson's proem, with Stesichoros.

Carson explains Stesichoros's achievement in terms of adjectives, which she calls "the latches of being" (*Red* 4). "Homer's epithets," Carson writes in her proem, "are a fixed diction with which Homer fastens every substance in the world to its aptest attribute and holds them in place for epic consumption" (4). For example, in Homer "blood is *black*," "God's laughter is *unquenchable*" (4), and the name Helen of Troy is attached to "an adjectival tradition of whoredom already old by the time Homer used it" (5). As a young man, Stesichoros followed Homer in "mak[ing] the most of Helen's matrimonial misadventures" (Davidson 200) in his lost *Helen*. However, for "no reason that anyone can name, Stesichoros began to undo the latches" (*Red* 5) in mid-career. Suddenly there was "nothing to interfere with horses being *hollow hooved*" or a "river being *root silver*" (*Red* 5) and the fixed characterization of Helen as a whore was affected as a result. Whereas Homer has Helen qualify her speech in the *Iliad* with disclaimers such as "slut that I am" (Lattimore 3.180),[3] Stesichoros reconsiders the denigrating effects of these insults. By rejecting the presentation of Helen as a (self-described) "nasty bitch evil-intriguing" (Lattimore 6.344),[4] Stesichoros implicated the men who made her both the prize and scapegoat of the Trojan War.

Legend has it that Stesichoros's changed attitude towards Helen resulted from his blinding at her hands. Newly deified, Helen revenged herself on the epic tradition by blinding Stesichoros when he engaged in the standard Homeric slander of her name. To regain his sight, Stesichoros spontaneously composed a *palinode* or counter-song, and performed a kind of public retraction. In its use of inversion, the *Palinode* parallels other innovations by Stesichoros in style (strophe/antistrophe/epode) and diction. To cite one example of relevance to *Autobiography of Red*, Stesichoros assigns Helen her husband's distinctive hair colour, ξανθός or reddish-brown (*Oxyrhynchus* 43), in fragment 2619 14.5 (probably from the *Iliou Persis*). By Maingon's count, the epithet "ξανθός belongs primarily to Menelaus (16 times in the *Iliad* and 15 in the *Odyssey*) while it is used in the feminine of Demeter (twice), of Agamede (once) and Ariadne (once, in the *Theogony*)"

(86). Homer leaves Helen's exalted beauty unspecified, enabling her to stand in more easily as a synecdoche for all women of treacherous beauty. Undoing this particular latch, "Stesichorus probably intended the relationship between Menelaus and Helen to be accentuated (perhaps ironically) by th[e] transference of the epithet regularly expected with Menelaus to his misguided wife" (Maingon 87). This simple verbal transgression not only speeds Helen's conversion from archetype to individual, but also sets a precedent for Carson's manipulation of epithets and proper nouns in her final interview, where Gertrude Stein answers questions in place of the "choir-master," Stesichoros.

Stein maintains a strong presence in the academic frame of Carson's novel-in-verse. Carson begins her proem with an epigram from Stein, "I like the feeling of words doing / as they want to do and as they have to do" (3)[5] and then immediately situates Stesichoros "after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet" (3). Between the epigram and interview, Carson develops the connection between Stein and Stesichoros as a shared talent for fragmentation. Just as Stesichoros's adjectives broke with the standard diction of Homeric epic, Stein's experiments in sentence structure changed the face of twentieth-century narrative by "repudiat[ing] the conventions of syntactical causality" (Kostelanetz xiv). In Stein's "cubist" (xxiii) treatment of the verbal surface, "nouns . . . are used in ways that obscure their traditional functions within the structure of a sentence," adverbs that "customarily come before a verb now follow it, and what might normally be the object of a sentence either becomes its subject or precedes it. Instead of saying 'someone is alive', Stein writes, 'Anyone can be a living one'" (xiv). For Stein as for Stesichoros, fragmentation serves as a means to destabilize fixed modes of representation and perception. Thus, when Carson returns rhetorically to the proem's titular question—"What difference did Stesichoros make?"(4)—she offers a comparison that directly links early Greek lyric to high modernist portraiture: "When Gertrude Stein had to sum up Picasso she said, 'This one was working'. So say of Stesichoros, 'This one was making adjectives'" (4). The theme of working—as in working with, belabouring, modifying—fragments serves as a bridge to the proem's conclusion, where Carson invites her readers to create their own work:

> [T]he fragments of the *Geryoneis* itself read as if Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it to pieces and buried the pieces in a box with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat. The fragment

> numbers tell you roughly how the pieces fell out of the box. You can of course keep shaking the box. "Believe me for meat and for myself," as Gertrude Stein says. Here. Shake. (6-7)

The interjection of Stein's voice here completes her framing of the proem. Stein's quotation also makes her words essential to the semantics of *Autobiography of Red* because they provide a clue to the meaning of "Red Meat" in the first two chapter titles.

Stein's disturbing conflation of meat and self in a paragraph about the fragments of Stesichoros jars momentarily, but the interjected quotation points back to "The Gender of Sound," the final essay in Carson's *Glass, Irony, and God* (1992), where Carson contemplates sexual *double-entendres* in antiquity and asserts that "putting a door on the female mouth (mouth/vagina) has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day. Its chief tactic is an ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder and death" (121). In the midst of discussing epithets attached to the voices/mouths of Helen, Aphrodite, and Echo, Carson asks her reader to consider this description of the sound of Gertrude Stein by the biographer M.D. Luhan:

> Gertrude was hearty. She used to roar with laughter, out loud. She had a laugh like a beefsteak. She loved beef.
>
> These sentences, with their artful confusion of factual and metaphorical levels. . . projec[t] Gertrude Stein across the boundary of woman and human and animal kind into monstrosity. The simile "she had a laugh like a beefsteak" which identifies Gertrude Stein with cattle is followed at once by the statement "she loved beef" indicating that Gertrude Stein ate cattle. (*Glass* 121)

When compounded with details of Stein's "large physical size and lesbianism," Carson argues, Luhan's allusion to cannibalism completes the "marginalization of [Stein's] personality" as a "way to deflect her writings from literary centrality. If she is fat, funny-looking and sexually deviant she must be a marginal talent, is the assumption" (121). *Autobiography of Red* redresses this slight by giving Stein's voice increasing prominence in the story of a monster who tends a herd of mythical red cattle and whose name means "roarer" or "speaker." Stein's epigrammatic voice in the upper margin of the first page resurfaces as reported speech in the body of the proem, as a stylistic echo in "Appendix C," and eventually as an active voice in the final interview.

In the novel's second section, "Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros," Carson offers her own experimental translation of the *Geryoneis*. Carson

does not simply render the Greek into English. Instead, she blends details from the *Geryoneis* and her upcoming adaptation of it to create a hybrid translation. Her translations exaggerate the "strangeness . . . of language" (*Economy* 28) by incorporating foreign elements into fixed narratives and refusing the smooth transition of Greek into English. To alert the reader that scenes where, say, Geryon's mother takes him to his first day of school are not features of Stesichoros's text, Carson inserts anachronistic details such as "the ticking red taxi of the incubus" ("III") into the gaps of Stesichoros's narrative. Painting fragments in the manner of the cubists, Carson combines glimpses of ancient and modern narratives in a style that foreshadows the perspectival shifts of the novel's concluding interview. Translation, in this way, becomes an act of composing elements from different epochs and speech genres, rather than an exercise in maintaining a uniform identity for the text across languages and periods.

Even Carson's direct translations are highly unconventional. For example, Carson translates only the latter half of fragment 15 (which she numbers 14), focusing on the moment of penetration in the conquest of Geryon by Herakles. The clipped diction in Carson's translation contrasts sharply with the heroic tone in Andrew Miller's version:

(Fr. S15)

[T]he arrow held its course straight
through to the top of his head
and stained with crimson blood
his breastplate and his gory limbs.
Then Geryon's neck drooped
to one side like a poppy
which, disfiguring its tender beauty,
suddenly sheds its petals. . . .
(Miller 77)

XIV. Herakles' Arrow

Arrow means kill It parted Geryon's
skull like a comb Made
The boy neck lean At an odd slow angle
sideways as when a
Poppy shames itself in a whip of Nude
breeze (*Red* 13)

Traditionally, the three-bodied grandson of Poseidon posed a formidable threat to Herakles. The Greek folk hero, as Carson notes ironically, "[g]ot the idea that Geryon was Death" (37). Although Herakles and Geryon are descended from immortals, both suspect they are mortal. Malcolm Davies therefore speculates that "the labours involving Cerberus and the Hesperides are recent in origin" and reads the tenth labour of Herakles as a "heroic journey to the land of the dead" ("Stesichoros" 278) in which the hero must attain "immortality and triumph over death" (279). Carson's translation, on the other hand, makes Geryon a "boy" and sexualizes his

encounter with Herakles by limiting the imagery to penetration, nudity and shame. Carson's version of the *Geryoneis* remains a "matter" of life and death, but the contemporary poet explicitly eroticizes the border between mortality and immortality. As translator and author of the romance, Carson foregrounds a homoerotic subtext that would have been obvious to the Greek audience of Stesichoros, but under the generic title of autobiography, Carson's work as a whole suggests a heterosexual subtext.

Carson pioneered this kind of experimental translation in "Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings," a long poem in *Plainwater* (1995) that is the stylistic prototype for *Autobiography of Red.* The translations in "Mimnermos" combine fragments from the Greek lyric poet Mimnermos (also Mimnermus, c. 630 BCE) with contemporary details such that poet and translator seem to be engaged in a kind of cerebral copulation, or brainsex. To this unorthodox translation, Carson adds an essay and three mock interviews with Mimnermos, as she explains to Mary di Michele in "The *Matrix* Interview":

> When I was working on ["Mimnermos"], I started from a translation of a body of fragments, then added to the translation an essay, in some degree historical, explaining the background of the poet and how the fragments have come down to us. And in dealing with that historical material, I found a whole lot of what they call, in Classics, "testimonia," which means anecdotal stories about the poet or about the poem, that are passed down and aren't really regarded as credible history. But they shape our notion of who the poet was as a person. . . . So the interviews are about this interstitial matter that comes down to us in semi-historical sources. (12-13)

Elaborating on the model of "Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings," *Autobiography of Red* plays on the double-meaning of "body of fragments" by inserting the "body" of Gertrude Stein into the fragments of Stesichoros, at first as an intertext and later as a character. On a formal level, these fragments of "Red Meat" begin to cohere when Carson also works the myth of Isis (conventionally represented with cattle horns) into the story of Geryon. While Carson's use of the Isis myth is not conventional, the Montrealer insists that "[c]onventions exist to be re-negotiated" (di Michele 12). Instead of modifying the story of Geryon to match the Egyptian myth, Carson appropriates formal elements of the myth and uses them to shape her narrative framework.

Numerous elements of the Isis myth resonate with the *Geryoneis*—the characters, the fetishization of red, the goddess' journey and triumph over death—but one story does not transpose onto the other. With her husband/brother Osiris, Isis ruled Egypt in its earliest epoch, introducing magical

incantation, justice, and weaving in the company of the "watchdog of the gods," Anubis, with his "dog's head and spotted dog's coat" (Goodrich 30). Osiris taught writing, astronomy, poetry and "traveled throughout the world with his kinsman Heracles, spreading the science of agriculture" (Goodrich 30). Periodically, the siblings' peaceful kingdom suffered droughts brought on their evil brother Seth, father of "Orthus the hound of Geryones" (Hesiod 101). Seth "haunted the delta region, his red hair flaming" (Goodrich 33), and consequently Egyptians "abhorred the color red, considering it a manifestation of all the forces of treachery, murder, and jealousy" (Goodrich 33). According to Plutarch, the inhabitants of Coptos hurled asses off cliffs because the animals had red coats and Egyptians generally "sacrifice[d] red cattle" (165). Turning Egypt into a "Red Place," Seth trapped Osiris in a coffin and sent him floating down the Nile. Isis recovered her husband's coffin in Syria and revived him through a kind of necrophilic magic, only to have Seth chop him into fourteen fragments and cast them into the Nile. Isis retrieved the fragments of Osiris, but "did not find . . . his male member. . . . In its place Isis fashioned a likeness of it and consecrated the phallus, in honour of which the Egyptians even today hold festival" (Plutarch 145). Revived, Osiris ascended to the sky and left his wife to rule in his absence, her power confirmed by the symbolic phallus entrusted to her priestesses.

This theme of a reconstituted "body of fragments" provides the most important link to the structure of *Autobiography of Red.* The ordeal of Isis pertains to "Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros" because Carson's chapter title makes an explicit connection between authorial corpse and literary corpus. These terms are similarly interchangeable in Plutarch's *De Osiride et Iside* where the historian writes that Typhon (Seth) "scatters and destroys the sacred Word which the goddess [Isis] collects and puts together and delivers to those undergoing initiation . . . of which the end is the knowledge of the First and the Lord" (121). In this context, Carson's "brainsex" is a kind of necrophilia. "Words after all are dead," Carson tells di Michele, "[t]hey impersonate life vividly but remain dead" (14-15). Lacking the presence of Stesichoros's original text, Carson must work—Isis-like—with likeness (that is, citations, testimonia) and absence (textual gaps). "No passage longer than thirty lines is quoted from [Stesichoros]," Carson explains, "and papyrus scraps (still being found: the most recent fragments were recovered from cartonnage in Egypt in 1977) withhold as much as they tell" (6). The fragments of the *Geryoneis*—like the fragments of the story of the

house of Oedipus by Stesichoros recovered from a mummy case in 1974 are pieces of the Stesichorean/Osirian body that Carson must summon all her poetic and academic craft to revive. However, Carson does not, like Isis, use the power of inscription entrusted to her to uphold patriarchal codes.

Carson's translations are not simply a re-membering of the Greek poets in English. In choosing to work with fragments of Mimnermos and Stesichoros, Carson deliberately chooses texts that have been dis-membered—as the missing book in Carson's "epic" underscores. While Carson's scholarly work resuscitates these nearly forgotten poems, the fictional elements of her writing actively resist any attempt to restore the authority of "the First and the Lord." Thus, ironically, Stesichoros's "master-text" undergoes the same overhaul to which the lyricist subjected his epic predecessors and the Mimnermos interviews run aground over the Greek's insistently phallic language. In the first interview, Mimnermos corrects the interviewer's use of the word "mystical": "M: Mystical I don't think we had a word mystical we had gods we had words for gods 'hidden in the scrutum [sic] of Zeus' we used to say for instance, proverbially" (*Plainwater* 20). Similarly, the second interview terminates when Mimnermos (named for his grandfather) objects to the interviewer's question on disguises:

> M: Well eventually someone has to call a boat a boat you can't dismember everything
> I: Dismember
> M: Sorry I meant remember
> I: Freud was named for his grandfather too (22-23)

In *Autobiography of Red*, Stesichoros and Helen engage in a similar linguistic power struggle, but one which suggests a paradigm for Carson's translations. The red-headed Helen of the *Palinode* offers Carson a second role-model for reconstituting the male corpse/corpus with a difference.

Carson's "Appendix A: Testimonia on the Question of Stesichoros' Blinding by Helen" lets citations such as Isokrates's *Helen* 64 demonstrate how Helen goes from being the object of language to an active agent (in)forming it:

> Looking to demonstrate her own power Helen made an object lesson of the poet Stesichoros. For the fact is he began his poem "Helen" with a bit of blasphemy. Then when he stood up he found he'd been robbed of his eyes. Straightaway realizing why, he composed the so-called "Palinode" and Helen restored him to his own nature. (*Red* 15)

Carson offers no commentary here, but it is clear that in her appendices and "Red Meat" fragments Carson is also making "an object lesson of the poet

Stesichoros." Carson restores the "vision" of Stesichoros by reconstituting his literary corpus and presenting it to the eye of the modern reader. But just as Helen's magic altered Stesichoros's impression of her, Carson's translation of the *Geryoneis* creates a new portrait of the ancient Greek lyricist.

"Appendix B" consists solely of a translated fragment from Stesichoros's famous retraction. The thrice-repeated "No," unique to Carson's translation, "measures out the area of the given and the possible" (*Economy* 118) along a margin of negatives:

> No it is not the true story.
> No you never went on the benched ships.
> No you never came to the towers of Troy. (*Red* 17)

Such fragments withhold as much as they tell, as Carson observed earlier. Although Carson does not state it explicitly, Stesichoros's revised story of Helen amounts to "a revolutionary version of the legend of Helen. . . . Such an innovation called into question the entire mythical basis for the legend of the Trojan War" (Maingon 300). Contradicting Homer, Stesichoros argues in his *Palinode* that the *eidolon* (image, phantom) of Helen goes to Troy with Paris, while the real Helen waits out the war in Egypt, where Euripides finds her in his *Helen.* Carson, too, follows Stesichoros's version of the Helen story in her uncollected poem about the daughter of Tyndareus. Carson's "Helen" begins with the statement, "Nights of a marriage are like an Egypt in a woods," and proceeds to imagine Troy vanishing, "murmuring, stain / is a puzzle you do not want / the answer to" (*Boston Review*). Although there is some debate in the matter, A.M. Dale argues—in a view corroborated by Maingon (307)—that there can be "no serious doubt that, as all antiquity believed, the *eidolon*-story was the bold invention of Stesichorus, a volte-face in mid-career, possibly the outcome of a visit to Sparta" (Dale xxiii) where Helen was worshipped as a goddess. Stesichoros's Helen story never supplanted Homer's version, but it created a rival interpretation well-known throughout antiquity. Thus, in *The Republic,* Plato can remark without embellishment that "as Stesichoros says the wraith of Helen was fought for at Troy through ignorance of the truth" (9.586e). Using absence to define presence, the *eidolon* story stresses the fact that the Trojan war was fought, not over a woman, but over the way a woman was imagined.

In *Helen: Myth, Legend and the Culture of Misogyny,* Robert Meagher explains the crucial and codified role Helen played in the mythological foundations of Greece:

> Helen—goddess, wife, consort, whore—[figured as] the epitome of woman to the Greek eye. In ancient Greek poetry and art, Helen was indeed always more than *a* woman who brought on *a* war. The Trojan War, whatever its actual insignificance may have been, stood as the paradigm for all war and Helen, its reputed cause, was the avatar of the feminine, the provocatrice of all mischief and pain, the original *femme fatale*. This synecdoche by which Helen was seen as all women and by which all women were seen as "Helens" was a simple liberty taken by the ancient tradition and operative, in one guise or another, ever since. (Meagher 10)

Stesichoros's challenge to the received "truth" about Helen—the paragon of that "deadly race and tribe of women who live amongst mortal men to their great trouble" (Hesiod 123)—called her vilification into question. However, Carson is not content with a simple reversal of value judgements. Having apprenticed in "No," Carson attempts to go beyond the rigid opposition of truth and falsehood in "Appendix C: Clearing Up The Question of Stesichoros' Blinding by Helen."

In fact, the twenty-one syllogisms in "Appendix C" clear up nothing at all. On the contrary, the mock-syllogisms "induce a narcosis of logic" (Rasula 188) by manipulating the binary movement of statement and counter-statement. Pressuring the gaps created by language, Carson begins with the simple syllogism, "1. Either Stesichoros was a blind man or he was not" (18), and proceeds to more vertiginous and Steinian statements:

> 10. If we are now in reverse and by continuing to reason in this way are likely to arrive back at the beginning of the question of the blinding of Stesichoros either we will go along without incident or we will meet Stesichoros on our way back. (19)

Circling and supplementing, Carson draws out the phantom of doubt in deduction's linear movement towards truth. Welcoming this spirit of doubleness, Carson then launches her reader into "Autobiography of Red: A Romance," the principal narrative in *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse.*

The romance within the *roman* suggests a duplicity befitting the novel's second version of the Geryon myth. Likewise, the multiple potential meanings of "autobiography"—of red, of Geryon, of a concealed "I"—make a fitting introduction to the story of a monster whose "triplicity makes him a natural symbol of deceit" and whose spirit "presides over the second of the three lowest regions of Dante's Hell, the circles of those who sinned by fraud" (Robertson 210). Carson's "duplication" of Geryon makes little attempt to be true to the classical version. Gone are two of Geryon's three conjoined torsos, his blue hair and his yellow skin, familiar to classicists from his sculpture (c. 560 BC) at the Athenian Acropolis (Boardman 77;

"Geryon"). The red cattle and the "little red dog" of the fragments also disappear. Instead, Carson makes red a symbol of sexual drought in the romance and colours her anti-hero in the ochre of desire. By reducing details and narrowing the narrative focus to a lyric subjectivity that frequently approximates the first person, Carson makes Geryon the representative of passion *in extremis* in "Autobiography of Red" and concentrates the reader's empathy on her little red misfit.

Although Carson sometimes claims not to "fee[l] easy talking about blood or desire" (*Plainwater* 189), Eros is in fact the subject of her first collection of essays and the principal theme of her poetry. "The vocation of anger is not mine," Carson writes in "The Glass Essay":

> I know my source.
> It is stunning, it is a moment like no other,
> when one's lover comes in and says I do not love you anymore. (*Glass* 30-31)

By translating the power struggle between Herakles and Geryon in the *Geryoneis* into a story of sexual conquest and unrequited love, Carson once again addresses "that custom, the human custom / of wrong love" (*Red* 75). Geryon's love is not wrong because he is gay. On the contrary, Carson offers sensitive renderings of same-sex desire in several of her long poems, most strikingly in "Irony is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve" (about a professor of ancient Greek who falls in love with one of her female students). Geryon's sexuality serves instead to complete his alienation. His desire pushes him away from his (otherwise) supportive mother and makes him dependent on Herakles at the very moment that Herakles terminates their love affair. It is from this perspective of powerful desire and disempowering attachment that Carson prefers to explore "How people get power over one another,/ this mystery" (*Red* 79). Dominant-subordinate relations—particularly their inversion—fascinate Carson, whether the relations be between men, between women, between men and women, or between a master-text and its adaptation.

Carson's genre-mixing is appropriate in this context because, as she explains in *Eros the Bittersweet*, the "terms 'novel' and 'romance' do not reflect an ancient name for the genre. Chariton refers to his work as *erōtika pathēmata*, or 'erotic sufferings': these are love stories in which it is generically required that love be painful" (78). Most of Geryon's "erotic suffering" takes place in Erytheia, a combination of Stesichoros's mythic "Red Place" and contemporary Montreal. [6] "Somehow Geryon make[s] it to adolescence" (39) in

this setting, surviving his brother's sexual abuse and the humiliation that a public school would hold for a winged red child. Then, in "one of those moments that is the opposite of blindness," "Herakles step[s] off / the bus from New Mexico" (39) and Geryon falls in love. The term "wrong love" acquires a double-meaning in this scene because of the echo in Carson's metaphor of blind Stesichoros "restored to his nature." In Geryon's visionary moment of sexual awakening, he sees that gay love is right for him, yet he is blind to his choice of lover. It takes Geryon the entire course of the narrative to admit that his unrequited desire, his "wrong love" for Herakles, is "[d]egrading" (144).

There is a hint of national allegory here as Herakles makes a quick conquest of Geryon and, tiring of him, moves on to more exotic challenges in South America. Carson's portrait of Herakles matches his traditional profile as "the heroic individual, performing incredible feats, single-handed, in remote corners of the earth" (Maingon 292). In Stesichoros's *Geryoneis*, Herakles represents the unitary subject battling hybrid monsters at the edges of Greek empire. With a club and arrows dipped in the gall of the many-headed hydra (slain in the second labour), Herakles kills the two-headed guard dog Orthos and then destroys (the fragments suggest) each of Geryon's three heads individually. Similarly, in "Autobiography of Red," Herakles "slays" the man-dragon of the north and then assumes control over his Quechua-Peruvian lover Ancash—"a man as beautiful as a live feather" (112) whose name suggests both economic and cultural currency (Ancash's name occurs in a Quechua folk song that Herakles sings against Ancash's wishes). As if to confirm Herakles's covetousness, the "master of monsters" (129) enlists Geryon and Ancash to help him steal a statue of Tezca the tiger god when Geryon runs into the couple in Buenos Aires years later.

However, one should not push the national allegory too far. Carson has also taught at Berkeley and all but one of her books—*Short Talks* (Brick 1992), recollected in *Plainwater*—have been published in the United States. A recipient of the prestigious Lannan and Pushcart prizes, Carson has not yet been honoured with a Governor-General's award in her own country. Her border-crossing reputation is such that one American poetry editor calls Carson, without qualification, "our new Emerson" (Beam). While this is a high compliment in some circles, little in Carson's work suggests an interest in nation building, either Canadian or American. As the contemporary North American setting for her Geryon story indicates, Carson uses myth to span the borders of time and space, not to entrench national boundaries.

Furthermore, Carson's topography remains resolutely mythic. "Herakles' hometown of Hades" lies "at the other end of the island [Erytheia] about four hours by car, a town / of moderate size and little importance / except for one thing" (46), it has a volcano. On an early visit to this volcano, Herakles breaks up with Geryon and the molten, volatile volcano immediately becomes a metaphor for Geryon's emotional life. Years later, when Geryon runs into Herakles and Ancash in South America, they are recording the sound of volcanoes for a documentary on Emily Dickinson. The couple take Geryon with them to record the volcano Icchantikas in Peru, where Geryon finally frees himself from Herakles. Along the way, however, Ancash discovers Geryon's wings and tells him the Quechua myth of the Yazcol Yazcamac, eyewitnesses who descend into the volcano and "return as red people with wings, / all their weaknesses burned away— / and their mortality" (129). This mythic frame transforms Geryon's status as an outsider to that of a liminal figure—"One Who Went and Saw and Came Back" (128)—whose role is to transgress boundaries that others cannot cross.

The association of Geryon with volcanoes, "Lava Man" (59) and the Yazcol Yazcamac is not coincidental. In *Hercules' Labours* Jan Schoo argues that Geryon personifies the volcano El Tiede on the Canary Island of Tenerife. Schoo cites as evidence the meaning of Geryon's name ("roarer"), the winged images of the volcano Talos on Crete, and the fact that Geryon's dog Orthos is the "brother of Kerberos, the hellhound, one of the most outstanding representatives of the underworld" (Schoo 86). Maingon furthers the equation of Geryon with volcanoes by pointing out that in fragment 4 of the *Geryoneis*, Stesichoros uses the epithet κορυφή in its "less common sense of 'head'. . . . [R]etaining the epithet most frequently associated with the word in its sense 'mountain'[,] he has deliberately suggested both potential meanings, magnifying the dimensions of the monster" (Maingon 60). This monster occupies a critical position between nature and culture, disorder and order, inhuman and human.

However, if one tries to determine the gender of this volcano/monster, an important fissure emerges in the narrative. The first reference to a volcano in the romance occurs in the opening stanza of its epigram, a heavily allegorical poem about speech and immortality by Emily Dickinson, #1748. The first stanza of #1748 offers a surprising variation on Dickinson's "often reiterated analogy of the self as a dormant volcano" (Dobson 107):

> The reticent volcano keeps
> His never slumbering plan—

Confided are his projects pink
To no precarious man. (*Red* 22)

While the masculine adjectives in this stanza may refer to the "Jehovah" of the second stanza, I choose to apply them to the volcano because Dickinson usually (see, for example, #1651, #1686)—though not always (see #1601)—capitalizes adjectives and pronouns referring to God. In either case, as an epigram, "his projects pink" alludes to Geryon's "autobiography" which begins as "a sculpture" (*Red* 35) when the reticent monster is five years old. Ultimately, Geryon's autobiography "take[s] the form / of a photographic essay" (60) and helps Geryon to get over the precarious Herakles. However, the fact that Geryon's "photographic essay" is a thinly veiled metaphor for Carson's lyric sequence (which culminates in a series of eight "photographs") undermines Geryon's masculinity. The final two stanzas in Dickinson's poem compound this ambiguity. Like the antistrophe and epode in Stesichoros's verse, Dickinson's second stanza introduces a female counterpart to the male volcano, while the third stanza changes the mood with an abstract aphorism that reconciles male and female figures as "people" with a shared secret:

If nature will not tell the tale
Jehovah told to her
Can human nature not survive
Without a listener?

Admonished by her buckled lips
Let every babbler be
The only secret people keep
Is Immortality. (*Red* 22)

The prize of immortality for which Geryon and Herakles struggle is, in Dickinson's hymn, a secret divulged by neither the reticent volcano nor the woman with "buckled lips." While this secret is not directly verbalized, Dickinson none the less conveys it as a property of "lyric time" (Cameron 4)—that sudden eruption of past and future into the poem's present tense that Carson calls "*Volcano Time*" (*Red* 144). Both Dickinson and Carson prefer these lyric flashes of eternity to the plodding flow of continuous narrative: "Much truer / is the time that strays into photographs and stops" (*Red* 93). One of these moments occurs in photograph "#1748," the synchronic and synaesthetic climax of Geryon's erotic suffering, where Geryon takes Ancash's tape recorder to the summit of Icchantikas to record an instant that blurs the borders between acoustic and visual, female and male, nature and culture.

Photograph "#1748" stands out because, in addition to sharing the numbered title of Dickinson's epigram, it "is a photograph he [Geryon] never took, no one here took it" (*Red* 145). Following this ambiguous preamble, in which Carson once again casts doubt on the identity of the autobiographical subject, the "eyewitness" descends into eye/I of the volcano:

> He peers down
> at the earth heart of Icchantikas dumping all its photons out her ancient eye and he smiles for
> the camera: "The Only Secret People Keep" (*Red* 145)

The picture taken of the eyewitness by "her ancient eye" in this scene is a kind of mirror image—a self-portrait that borrows its title from the final lines of Dickinson's poem. Dickinson's interjected fragment, like the Stein quotation earlier, enters the narrative abruptly, yet comes close enough to the end of the romance to frame it. The once-reticent male volcano thus concludes the romance using a feminine adjective and speaking in Dickinson's voice. Carson completes this transition from phallic to labial imagery in the concluding lyric where the three men stare at "the hole of fire" in the side of the volcano and Carson explicitly distinguishes between the men and the fire to which they are "neighbors" (146).

Such "lateral fissures"—"called fire lips by vulcanologists" (105)—permeate Carson's romance. The most striking example occurs in the poem "She," where Geryon finds himself in the bedroom of Herakles's mother and asks, "Who am I?" (57). Surveying the mother's pearls and slips, Geryon is shocked to see himself "in the mirror cruel as a slash of lipstick. . . . / He had been here before, dangling / inside the word *she* like a trinket at a belt" (57). While this simile seems to disparage a sense of femininity as passive and ornamental, the pronoun "she" carries extra weight coming from a poet who tells di Michele: "I cannot stand reading reviews of my work (I skim) or in general sentences in which I appear as 'she'" (di Michele 17). Di Michele pursues the question of why Carson presents herself as "a person of no particular gender" (*Plainwater* 123) in her writing:

> MDM: In "The Anthropology of Water" you write: "I am not a person who feels easy talking about blood or desire. I rarely use the word woman myself . . . The truth is, I lived out my adolescence mainly in default of my father's favour. But I perceived I could trouble him less if I had no gender . . . I made my body hard and flat as the armor of Athena. No secrets under my skin, no telltale drops on the threshold." What is the relationship of your writing to this word "woman"? To being a woman?
> AC: A relationship of dis-ease as I suggested in the passage you quote.

MDM: Are "feminisms" of interest to you?
AC: Not currently. Particular females are of interest to me. (14)

Although Carson names Stein and Dickinson among the writers of interest to her, she clearly does not present herself as a proponent of an *écriture féminine*.[7] It is important to note, however, that Carson's relationship to patriarchy in "The Anthropology of Water" is also one of "dis-ease." This long poem begins with Carson struggling to understand the "word salad" (*Plainwater* 120) of her ailing father, who suffers from dementia, and concludes with Carson writing from the perspective of her estranged brother. As in *Autobiography of Red*, Carson treats gender here as a phenomenon to be explored through fictional guises. If Carson presents herself as a person "of no particular gender" in her writing, it is because she refuses to restrict herself to the perspective of a woman. Similarly, if Carson's novel-in-verse is of no particular genre, it is because Carson wants to explore what Manina Jones calls *That Art of Difference*: collage.

The fundamental question in *Autobiography of Red* is thus not whether Geryon is "he" or "she," but rather how this "monster" can negotiate the conflicts entailed by loving and existing in a world more complex than its social, linguistic, and literary conventions would suggest. "Gay, red and winged," Geryon "wants to know how to survive in a world where difference equals pain" (Marlatt 42). Herakles's photographer grandmother suggests one solution to this dilemma by redefining Geryon's question during a conversation on women and art: "Question is / how they use it—given / the limits of form" (67). Nowhere is Carson's questioning of gender as a question of genre more explicit.

The final section of *Autobiography of Red* tests the limits of gender and genre. Titled simply "Interview"—with "(Stesichoros)" set below the title and divided from it by a double line—it unfolds as a dialogue about literature:

I: One critic speaks of a sort of "concealment drama" going on in your work some special interest in finding out what or how people act when they know that important information is being withheld this might have to do with an aesthetic of blindness or even a will to blindness if that is not a tautology
S: I will tell about blindness
I: Yes do
S: First I must tell about seeing (*Red* 147)

Carson sets up the reader to expect Stesichoros to describe his blinding by Helen. However, the conversation makes a sudden chronological leap:

S: Up to 1907 I was seriously interested in seeing I studied and practiced it I enjoyed it

I: 1907
S: I will tell about 1907 . . . Paintings completely covered the walls right up to the ceiling at the time the atelier was lit by gas fixtures and it glowed like a dogma but this is not what I saw (*Red* 147)

This shift in time-frame alerts the reader that returning to Carson's "scholarly apparatus" entails entering "a wickedly parodistic parallel universe to the novel inside it" (Macklin). The proem and interview surrounding Carson's romance prove not to be merely a passive frame, but rather active agents in determining the course of the larger story. As Jacques Derrida argues in "Parergon," an essay on framing in *The Truth in Painting*, those elements marked as extrinsic to the *ergon*, or principal artwork, in fact perform an intrinsic function in mediating the borders of that artwork (71). Carson employs this mediating power to shift the focus of the story and resituate Stein, Helen, and Dickinson—women marked as extrinsic to the history of Stesichoros, Geryon and Herakles—in more intrinsic positions. This manipulation of frames is a question of self-definition for "ex-centric" (Hutcheon 4) writers because, as Derrida notes, "*Parergon* also means the exceptional, the strange, the extraordinary" (58), revealing how easy it is for exceptional writers such as Stein and Dickinson to be dismissed as merely strange.

With the temporal frame destabilized, the reader's eye turns towards the left margin of the interview transcript for several reasons. First of all, the references to a gas-lit atelier, paintings and 1907 make it clear that the "S" in the column stands for Stein, not Stesichoros. Second, *Autobiography of Red* has been, thus far, an autobiography without an "I." Suddenly the reader is confronted with an interviewing "I" speaking in the first person. Remembering that Stesichoros often "spok[e] in his own *persona* in the introduction and conclusion of his poems" without "intru[ding] within the framework of the narrative itself" (Maingon 358), one is to presume that the interviewing "I" is Carson's academic persona returning from the proem. Thus the women's voices framing the male narrative have moved from the extrinsic positions of epigram and proem to occupy more intrinsic positions in a story they actively create as direct speakers.

Carson achieves this subversive manoeuver within the limits of literary form. According to myth, each of Herakles's 12 *althoi* or *erga*, labours or works, included minor deeds called *parerga* or *side-works* (Schoo 7). Thus, the *ergon* of stealing the red cattle included the *parerga* of killing Geryon and Orthos. Stesichoros transforms the myth of Herakles into the *Geryoneis* by moving the parergonal figure of Geryon from the myth's periphery to its

centre stage. Carson duplicates this parergonal movement by having Stein supplant Stesichoros in the mock-interview. Just as Carson's opening section on Stesichoros begins with an epigram from Stein, the final section on Stein begins with the proper noun "(Stesichoros)" suspended in parentheses. The choir master unmastered figures as the starting point in a word play between Stein and Carson where the contemporary poet accentuates the epithetic origins of the Greek proper noun. Once famous for his adjectives, Stesichoros looks on from the wings as the women's concealment drama takes centre stage. The reputed inventor of the choral hymn (a form of performance involving multiple singers and dance and a precursor of drama) finds himself listening silently to a duet of female voices, neither of which appears to command control. This *hymn* become *her* casts an ironic pall over the title of the romance's final lyric, "XLVII. The Flashes in Which a Man Possesses Himself." Clearly, women's voices have taken possession of the narrative at this point.

Carson, like Stein, parodies autobiography's pretense to objective self-expression by using the genre as a means of fictional disembodiment. In Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, for example, Stein tells the story of her life through the fictional voice of her lover, Alice Toklas. Only on the final page of Toklas's autobiography does Stein concede her authorial ruse. Stein's originality—as Shirley Neuman argues in *Gertrude Stein: Autobiography and the Problem of Narration*—lies in her "repudiation for literary purposes of the continuity of the self":

> Once [Stein] reconceptualizes narrative as that written as though by someone else, as analogous to translation, she begins to free herself to write about the "self" without concern for its duration and consequent identity. (Neuman 17)

Carson, likewise, dons several literary disguises—Athena, Stesichoros, Geryon, Stein—in search of "another human essence than self" (*Glass* 137). Each of the distinct voices in her identity collage offers a kind of testimony that, while it cannot be "regarded as credible history," none the less shapes "our notion of who the poet [i]s as a person."

And Carson's concealment drama has a final act. Reading the interview's marginal inscription vertically, one finds that the Steinian "ISISISISISISISISIS" transforms—through the difference generated by repetition—from an assertion of being "*Is* is" to an ontological question "Is *is*?" And who could the subject hiding behind these verbs be but Isis, "she of the thousand titles" (Goodrich 27)? As a clue to this encryption, the Montrealer disguises her

voice in vintage Montmartre and shifts "Isis" from the left margin to the main narrative:

> I: Description can we talk about description
> S: What is the difference between a volcano and a guinea pig is not a description why is it like it *is is* a description (*Red* 148, my emphasis)[8]

Isis is not directly named here, she is de-scribed, her name fragmentarily crypted in a passage that stresses the difference between surface appearance and a dynamic understanding of form. Such concealment pays homage to the goddess, as Plutarch explains: "At Saεs the seated statue of Athena, whom they consider to be Isis also, bore the following inscription: 'I am all that has been and is and will be; and no mortal has ever lifted my mantle'" (131). The secret Isis keeps, having struggled hard to win it for Osiris and herself, is immortality.

Thus, Carson does not use the *Geryoneis* or the myth of Isis as a fixed template, but rather sets in motion a series of literary allusions that intertwines ancient and modern, masculine and feminine, Greek and Quechua, Egyptian and Canadian. These surprising juxtapositions are the hallmark of Carson's style, whether in long poems such as "The Glass Essay," where she "weaves and conflates one theme with another . . . tell[ing] two strong stories with Tolstoyan skill" (Davenport ix), or in academic works such as *Economy of the Unlost (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)*, where Carson explains her technique in a "Note on Method":

> To keep attention strong means to keep it from settling. Partly for this reason I have chosen to talk about two men at once. They keep each other from settling. Moving and not settling, they are side by side in a conversation and yet no conversation takes place. . . . With and against, aligned and adverse, each is like a surface on which the other may come into focus. (*Economy* viii)

In *Autobiography of Red*, Carson manipulates and conflates her source material, "exploding genres and making literature from shrapnel" (Greenman). Drawing female and male literary figures into closer focus through a series of alternating frames, Carson combines the Osirian art of writing with the Isian art of weaving to create "good strong narrative" through constant fragmentation and displacement of material. These shifting frames of reference are far from settled, as the reappearance of the "little red dog" (149) in the final lines of the interview underscores. *Autobiography of Red* thus demonstrates that the frameworks of myth, genre, and gender are volatile and constantly subject to revision.

NOTES

1 This review of *Men in the Off Hours* appears only in the Canadian edition of *Time*, however.

2 In translation, at least, "The Red Place" is a noun. However, the confusion of nouns and adjectives plays a key role in Carson's treatment of the epithetic proper noun "Stesichoros."

3 Also translated as "whore that I am" (Fagles 3.128) or "shameless bitch / that I am" (Lombardo 3.190-191). It should be noted that the translators make no attempt to lessen the pungency of these remarks. On the contrary, Lattimore's use of "slut" in a 1951 translation suggests a certain inventiveness and relish in the task.

4 Also translated as "bitch that I am, vicious, scheming" (Fagles 6.408) or "scheming, cold-blooded bitch" (Lombardo 6.362).

5 I have not been able to locate the text from which this quotation derives. It would not surprise me if the epigram is, in fact, Carson imitating Stein (as in "Appendix C") or Carson paraphrasing Stein (as in the interview).

6 Carson's Erytheia is a North American island where older brothers play hockey (34), where baby-sitters read from "the loon book" (32), where an American dollar bill is a novelty (29), and where schoolchildren examine "beluga whales newly captured / from the upper rapids of the Churchill River" (90).

7 Carson's reluctance to be identified as a feminist appears to stem from her general refusal of categories. Asked whether her multi-genre approach to writing poses a problem for bookstore clerks, Carson replies: "Not a problem but a question: What do 'shelves' accomplish, in stores or in the mind" (di Michele 10).

8 This statement is a paraphrase of Stein's meditations on style in "An Acquaintance with Description." Carson's syntax echoes a construction that Stein uses repeatedly in the piece: "What is the difference between a hedge and a tree. A hedge and a tree what is the difference between a hedge and a tree" (Stein 508).

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Elana Wolff

In the Conversation as Oracle

I tap each talk for tonic words,
supply them purport,
build them myths.
Like Icarus,

who stuck on wings with wax.
Had he not flown so close to the heat
on a hot day,
he would have been more sensible.

But the point, as I see it, is not to put
sense first.
Nor is it to teach us not to try to fly.

Every time I feel *aurora*
infiltrate a common word, I sizzle

with the vigour of disintegrating surfaces.

Jeanette Lynes

The Wrecker

He's come down from the mountain for our last-legs car but
doesn't discuss it, leans into it, red plaid shirt
shouldering rust off the driver's door. Unshaven, showing
    a certain
disdain for town. Finally, he speaks:

You seen all that bush along the Trans-Canada, all those trees?

They're not fuckin' real.

We're lost until he says
loggers left a wall of green. Behind it, carnage.

He's come down from the mountain to say
we've been tricked all this time, driving our ruin through
a stage set, what we thought
wilderness.

He laughs, lights a smoke. He's shown us
what's really going on. We'll take
    anything for the beater now.

Christine Wiesenthal

Taking Pictures with Stephanie Bolster

> Part of what brings me to the visual arts is my way of looking at things—that is, I'm a very visual person. My poetry is, I think, packed with images, and has interesting sounds, but is probably less concerned with textures, smells, flavours. . . . I think part of what makes me a poet rather than a fiction writer or a playwright is that I am inspired by what I see, whether that is a landscape [or] a photograph. I've always been an observer—socially as well as aesthetically.
>
> Stephanie Bolster[1]

White Stone: The Alice Poems, Stephanie Bolster's Governor-General's Award-winning first collection of poems, opens, suitably, eerily, in a Victorian "Dark Room": "We're here, the three of us, lit by one candle" (13). The triad transfixed in this flickering light around a developing photograph is composed of the photographer and author of *Alice in Wonderland*, Charles Dodgson (alias Lewis Carroll); his famous young subject, Alice Liddell; and the poet herself, figured here as an unseen third presence and observer: "I'm here, poet on the corner stool, watching" (13). Literally a ghost-writer who records the scene, transcribing this early exchange between Dodgson and his pre-pubescent muse, the "poet on the corner stool, watching," also inhabits the interior of the picture she is taking down in words. An invisible presence, she is at once the subject who looks and a faint, murky object in the image she reproduces and invites us to look at. Like Alice, who "gasps as she comes into view" in the "dripping" photograph Dodgson hands her, the poet begins as an undeveloped image, a figure first submerged or "steep[ed]" in shadows and depths (13). And if she surfaces or "comes into view" in subsequent poems, she does so only as fleetingly and sporadically as the "real" Alice Liddell whom the poet seeks throughout. This picture-taking poet is as elusive as her object. Now you see her, now you don't.

The opening "Dark Room" scene of *White Stone* suggests immediately one of the major preoccupations of Bolster's poetry: namely, its abiding fascination with images, whether photographic or pictorial. Indeed, the strong visual sensibility of her poetry is as readily evident in Bolster's more recent, second collection, *Two Bowls of Milk,* as it is in *White Stone.* In an opening poem that begins in another *poem, Two Bowls* indirectly signals Bolster's ongoing attraction to poetry that begins in *painting;* lifting a line from John Ashbery for its title, "come to the edge of the barn / the property really begins there" (3), the opening sequence of *Two Bowls* not only trespasses tongue-in-cheek on a predecessor's poetic "property," but invokes the voice of a poet whose own well-known interests in and influence by art establish an important intertextual referent or marker for mapping the terrain of Bolster's poetics.[2] Many of the ensuing poems of *Two Bowls,* moreover, turn directly to the pictorial and plastic arts, and occasionally to fine art photography, as a source and sounding board for poetry, an aesthetic focus that is firmly established by the volume's final two sections, "*Deux personnages dans la nuit*" and "Inside a Tent of Skin," which consist, respectively, of "poems from paintings by Jean Paul Lemieux," and "poems [found] in the National Gallery of Canada"(37, 51).[3]

Bolster is, then, an obsessive picture taker, in the sense that her poetry appropriates visual techniques, artefacts and images, re-producing or double-exposing them, and transforming them, in the process, into verbal portraits or "talking pictures." This subject matter situates her work in a long tradition of ekphrastic poetry,[4] suggesting one appropriate critical framework or lens through which to read her poems. Homer's descriptive "intermezzo" on Achilles' shield in Book 18 of the *Iliad* is typically discussed as the classical example of ekphrasis (Edgecombe 103-4; see also Krieger xv, 8; and Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 165-66, 176-81); other canonical examples most frequently invoked include Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"and William Carlos Williams, *Pictures from Brueghel.* More specifically in the context of Canadian women's poetry, Bolster's poetic practice may be aligned in this regard with the ekphrastic travel poems of P.K. Page and Elizabeth Bishop (Messenger 1994). From Horace and Aristotle onward, theories about *ut pictura poesis,* or the interrelationship between pictorial and linguistic signs, text and image, have debated the generic differences and conjunctions between painting and poetry as analogous though irreducible semiotic realms. Painting (or photography), so the commonplace observation runs, as an art of space, stasis, and arrested motion, constitutes a species of

"mute" poetry. Poetry, by smooth inversion, as a fundamentally temporal art of motion and action, can be conceived of as a form of "speaking" painting. However, as W.J.T. Mitchell emphasizes, the conventional oppositions drawn between poetry and painting "are neither stable nor scientific":

> They do not line up in fixed columns, with temporality, convention, and aurality in one row, and space, nature and visuality in the other. They are best understood as . . . allegories of power and value disguised as a neutral metalanguage. (*Picture Theory* 156-7)

Neither symmetrical nor invariant, the relationships posited between images and text, between visual and verbal modalities, reveal above all, "the social structure of representation as an activity and a relationship of power/knowledge/desire"—a relationship determined by specific institutional and historical contexts (*Picture Theory* 210, 180).

The critical legacy of *ut pictura poesis* and the intellectual debates to which it has given rise are worth invoking in relation to Bolster's work, if only because they prompt a recognition, *pace* Mitchell, that Bolster's concerns with seemingly arrested visual registers of experience necessarily entail a concomitant, and equally pervasive, preoccupation with relations in and across time. Bolster's poetry is as integrally engaged with problems of time—biographical, historical, aesthetic—as it is with image and space. Moreover, as a woman writer working a genre traditionally overdetermined by a gender division that assumes a masculine poetic perspective on the "feminine" art work—paintings and women alike being ideally silent and beautiful in Western culture—Bolster evinces in her work a distinctive sensitivity to those social and historical relations of "power/knowledge/desire" that theorists have shown come into play in the ekphrastic dialectic (see Mitchell, *Iconology* 95-115; Williams 24-28). In this regard, Bolster's pictorial poetry reminds us that representation is always "something done to something [or someone], with something, by someone, for someone" (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 180). As I will try to show, this effect is particularly true of the Alice poems in *White Stone.*

While the translation of images into words or pictures to texts raises complicated theoretical questions for semioticians and philosophers, the ekphrastic impulse also entails certain immediate, technical challenges for the poet. Bolster elaborates some of these challenges:

> Initially, my "painting poems" were attempts to translate into words my experience of looking at the paintings. I soon realized the limitations of this ([the result] doesn't necessarily mean much to one who hasn't seen the painting), and the

> superficiality. With the Lemieux poems, and the ones I wrote about art in the National Gallery, I was much more trying to use the art as a leaping off point to explore something deeper and more personal.

Rather than attempting faithfully to reproduce the aesthetic objects or external referents she takes as her subjects, Bolster's work thus throws its emphasis upon the essentially transformative nature of the encounter between viewer and viewed, poet and painting, self and other. Her poems about pictures and paintings are sites of metamorphosis: in them, we witness dialogues between art and life which effect complete re-creations of the reality from which they proceed in the first place.[5] Indeed, reality and identity are premises themselves thrown into question by Bolster's work, as concepts most frequently aligned with the insubstantiality and ephemerality of a perspective point inadequate before an already fading moment in time: "Each shadow my profile casts on page / or yours on canvas," as the poet of "Interieur" says to the painter, Lemieux, "makes another face / to live within. Until tonight" (*Two Bowls* 39).

Of course, the referential touchstone imaginatively revisited in the *White Stone* poems is as much symbolic, historical, and textual as it is visual or iconic; and Bolster is one of the more recent in a long line of readers who have been captivated by the brilliant magic of Lewis Carroll's tales, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). Margaret Atwood, in *The Edible Woman* (1969), is a relatively remote precursor here; Alberto Manguel, in his essay collection, *Into the Looking-Glass Wood* (1998), is a contemporary instance. The sketchy biographical details of the actual Charles Dodgson's intense (and, in 1863, abruptly severed) relationship with the actual Alice Liddell have also generated a great deal of critical attention, a body of literary and historical scholarship that is as much a culture industry in itself as that which has grown up around Lewis Carroll's *Adventures*. Dodgson first met Alice in 1856, when he was a mathematics don at Oxford, and she a four-year-old child. Historical records hint at a seemingly irresistible mix of innocence and prurience at work in Dodgson's penchant for child companions to photograph and listen to his tales. In *White Stone*, the poet wryly acknowledges both the enduring salacious thirst for the "facts" of Dodgson's potentially pedophilic predispositions, and the elusiveness of the historical "truth," which remains indeterminate.[6] Speaking from the "Dark Room," "the poet on the corner stool" ventures this much: "Although it's dim, I think I can

say with near / assurance he does not attempt / to unlatch her collar" (13-14). For Bolster, then, the nature of Dodgson's relationship with Alice Liddell remains suggestively ambiguous. Certainly, his responses to Alice as a child and adolescent are sometimes depicted as erotically charged; he is acutely aware of "[h]er foot just an inch / from his," for instance, or of "her breasts / the figure of an 8 turned / sideways, rising infinitely slowly" (*White Stone* 21, 17). Ultimately, however, if it is evidence of perversion the reader is looking for, then it is perhaps primarily the perversity of the camera as a "fantasy machine" (Sontag 13) that both heightens and thwarts Dodgson's sexual desire that Bolster's work explores.[7]

Alberto Manguel's recent reflections on his own readings of Carroll's tales afford, I think, an especially instructive comparison to Bolster's poetic treatment of the Alice stories and legends. Speaking of the formative influence of *Alice in Wonderland* in the context of his own (extensive) history as a reader, Manguel writes:

> The intimate sense of kinship established so many years ago with my first Alice hasn't weakened; every time I re-read her, the bonds strengthen in very private and unexpected ways. I know bits of her by heart. My children (my eldest daughter is, of course, called Alice) tell me to shut up when I burst, yet again, into the mournful strains of "The Walrus and the Carpenter." And for almost every new experience, I find a premonitory or nostalgic echo in her pages, telling me once again, "This is what lies ahead of you" or "You have been here before." (11)

As Carroll's *Alice* narratives continue to offer Manguel a symbolic template by which to measure, assess, and name personal experience, so too do they function for Bolster. But there are crucial differences here as well. Manguel's delight at the slippage of art into life is charming, but it is also predicated upon the fundamental assumption that "my first Alice" exists only in and as a fiction. For Bolster, on the other hand, who in numerous poems of *White Stone* inserts herself into the historical Alice Liddell's subject position—the life *behind* Carroll's art—this same slippage of fiction into fact seems appalling, nothing short, indeed, of a nightmare, as Carroll's fictional character overtakes the "real" Alice Liddell's life, constructing and defining others' expectations of her appearance, age, behaviour, and meaning:

> The critics overwrote each other
> till all their words were tattooed black
> upon her. *Have mercy,* she cried as they came
> with the thousand-volumed weight of archives,

but those words were not hers either.
("Portrait of Alice, Annotated" 43)

In other words, what Bolster's work recognizes and registers about Carroll's use of Alice as a "model"—for his fictions, no less than for his photographic portraits of her—is the pathos of the historical Alice's status as a "subject in representation," a subject who becomes, in effect, "the quasi-anonymous bearer" of various allegorical, narrative and critical meanings projected (or, in Bolster's word, "tattooed") onto her (Berger 100).

For the woman writer, then, the identification with the figure of Alice is at once far more extensive and far more self-critical. What in Manguel's prose is offered as a gently self- mocking anecdote of personal susceptibility to a particular symbolic fiction (Carroll's text), appears in Bolster's work as a trenchant critique of cultural susceptibility to the power of symbolic fictions in the broader sense of the fantasies structuring and guaranteeing the coherence of social reality. Such fantasies include, first and foremost, the symbolic fiction of naming as a male prerogative. "[M]y eldest daughter is, of course, called Alice," Manguel quips. He can afford to quip precisely because, "of course," he is not speaking from the perspective of a girl/woman, like Alice Liddell. Liddell's experience, as Bolster's work reveals, is named, defined and commodified by those—primarily, though not exclusively—male figures who represent her (Dodgson, her husband, reporters, critics, other photographers).[8] By contrast, the basis of Bolster's own identification with the figure of Alice—the woman as much as the character—is not so entirely fictional. Her own imaginary relationship with Alice is thus ultimately less a source of amusement for the poet than it is the catalyst of a sobering recognition for the need to resist internalized fantasies in the naming of an other. The concluding miniaturist portrait of "The Poet As Nine Portraits of Alice" tersely suggests as much: "If I had a daughter, I would like / to name her Alice, but I would not." (55) From the aesthetic and philosophical question of the relationship between fact and fiction, art and life, history and literature, *White Stone* thus extrapolates further questions about the ethics and politics of representation as an act done—to reprise Mitchell—"to something, with something, by someone, for someone" (*Picture Theory* 180).[9]

Unsurprisingly, then, whereas Manguel finds that his private "sense of kinship" with "my first Alice" strengthens over time, the obverse is true for Bolster, who, in *White Stone*, begins by looking for "the real Alice," but finds only complicated layers of male desire and mass-produced fantasy in which

she herself is strangely implicated. "And me: where do I fit?" the poet asks in "Thames," once again observing Dodgson and Alice, as the former begins to tell the child his tales. One possible answer: "I am his need / to make a story good enough to hold her / like no photograph" (21). Paradoxically, Bolster's quest for the Alice beyond Dodgson's looking-glass Alice suggests that she is, at once, everywhere and nowhere. Reborn through the ages, Bolster's Alice is a legend as "antique" as the mythical Persephone ("Portrait of Alice With Persephone" 45), and as hip as Elvis—with whom she is pictured as exchanging the occasional "argumen[t] over fame" ("Portrait of Alice With Elvis" 49). She is a Victorian girl, then matron, whose aging body belies Dodgson's fixed and fictive constructions of her as a child, an "idea of her" that is offered as an item for mass consumption, an "idea of her" that is as suffocating as being "kept under glass, scalloped like a fancy cake" ("Visitor From Overseas" 59).

"Visitor From Overseas" opens the final section of *White Stone*, which is entitled "Hide and Seek," "in which Alice discovers the New World and eludes the poet" (57). In a companion piece, "Visitor From Overseas, Reprise," the poet and Alice exchange positions as the "visitor," the poet in this latter instance having made the requisite pilgrimage to Alice's old world home, Oxford. She has come in order to finally find her, but, amidst the kitsch of over-priced souvenir shops, she is forced to conclude: "She is / nowhere. If I'm not getting warmer here, / then where? Who did I dream I'd find?" She buys a "thimble in her fictional image" (68). The trinket facsimile of the fictional character is about as close as the poet will get. The real identity of Alice Liddell eludes her still.

The concluding sequences of *White Stone* are, moreover, marked by a further movement and epiphany:

> Since I began
> to seek her, I've found
> love, moved to a land
> white as a page. I rarely stop
> to think of her these days.
> ("Still Life" 66)

Ultimately, the object of the search, little Alice Liddell, is subsumed by the poet's confrontation with the larger abstract question of identity, subjectivity as such. In one sense, that is, the object of the search has been the subject—the poet's own self—all along. In the final poem, "The Open Door," a phone rings. The sleeping poet wakes, walks through a dream-like "open

door" into a "winter field." A solitary figure against a vast, empty space, she is left with the terrible question of the meaning of an individual life as it appears against the immensity of such space. "What do these footprints mean? / They are mine," she reminds herself. Footprints, shadows: these ephemeral traces are all that the poet can point to as what she calls "evidence of being" ("Portrait of Alice as Spirit" 62). Identity, her own existence, is something so precarious it has to be inferred from "those spaces where my weight / has pressed the snow." It is this final "thought of weight" that precipitates perhaps the first and last genuinely real discovery of *White Stone*: "This is fear, this is here, / this is me" ("The Open Door" 69).

As I intimated earlier, if we fast-forward from "The Open Door" at the end of *White Stone* to the opening of *Two Bowls of Milk*, we find the poet contemplating "property" (3). In the broadest sense, *Two Bowls* is a collection about "property," about physical and psychical boundaries, borders, edges, and what it means to recognize and respect those limits—or not, as the case may be. "See those two bowls of milk, just there / on the other side of the property line [?]" the poet asks. "[T]hey're for the cats / that sometimes cross over and are seized by a thirst" (3). "Seized" by thirst or plain old curiosity, cats will not recognize any "property line," just as poets, seized by thirsts and curiosities of their own, may deliberately "cross over" into the "property line[s]" of other poets and artists, as Bolster does here with due acknowledgement to John Ashbery. This act of poetic border-crossing reminds us that the ekphrastic poet, as Bryan Wolf remarks, is fundamentally "revisionary in [her] impulses": "[she] refuses the myth of the artwork's autonomy and insists instead on the intertextual and miscegenating quality that links artwork to artwork and both to criticism" (186). *Two Bowls* probes aspects of "property," asking us to think about everything from what is so "real" about real estate, to what it means to own a body—or, more uncomfortably, even to assume we can or do own (and thus control) our physical being. As the trace of an ekphrastic imagination, however, *Two Bowls* should also be regarded as a sustained meditation on the properties of art, in all its various media.

Two Bowls of Milk places the image of two bowls of milk before us, first, in the creamy cover photograph by Adriene Veninger, and second, in the opening poem, in which the two bowls are explicitly figured as invitations to transgression. Indeed, the entire lyric, "come to the edge. . . ," reinforces this invitation. We are promised the taste of milk, and more: "Lick each

finger afterwards. That will be / your first taste, and my finger tracing your lips will be the second" (3). Third, the title poem itself concludes the first section of *Two Bowls.* It bears citing in full:

Two Bowls of Milk

Are two bowls of milk. They are round
and white and have nothing to do

with the moon. They have no implications
of blindness, or sight. They wait

on the doorstep like bowls
or like things that closely resemble

bowls in their stillness. The bowls do not
foreshadow cats. There are two

because two hands set them out
and each wanted to hold something.

Milk because not water. The curve of
milk against the curve of bowl. (19)

Though Bolster may well have been drawing on the archive of her visual memory in thus recurring to the image, it is worth noting that "Two Bowls of Milk" does not proceed from any particular artwork, as many of the other poems in this collection do.[10] Nevertheless, the poet's foregrounding of the bowls as objects for aesthetic contemplation represents an extension of the ekphrastic focus of her work, from art to artefact.[11]

In another respect, however, the title poem of *Two Bowls* signifies not only an extension, but also a modification, of the ekphrastic impulse in Bolster's work to a new level of self-conscious scrutiny. Indeed, as W.J.T. Mitchell remarks of Wallace Steven's "Anecdote of a Jar," so might we say of Bolster's "Two Bowls" that the poem "provides an allegory and a critique of its own generic identity and might . . . be seen as a parody of the classical ekphrastic object" (*Picture Theory* 166).[12] The bowls are set before us, full, only to have the manifold "implications" for meaning the poet evokes, revoked. They "have nothing to do / with the moon." Or with "blindness, or sight." Nor do the bowls "foreshadow cats" (the cats, alas, have already come and gone). And the only reason for the milk, a negative definition: "because not water."[13] Like Wallace Steven's jar, Bolster's bowls mobilize "the generic expectations of ekphrasis"—to reanimate the meanings of the inanimate object—only to strip them away, as though the poet is "testing the limits of the genre, offering us a blank space where we expect a picture,

a cipher in the place of a striking figure" (*Picture Theory* 166). Yet in the end, there is still the lovely "curve of / milk against the curve of bowl." The emphasis of the poem on the sensual shape and perfect "stillness" of the bowls and their contents makes it clear that, as with Steven's jar, these are "no 'mere' object[s], but a highly charged *form*, and a representational form at that" (*Picture Theory* 167, emphasis original). Paradoxically, then, it is not, as one might expect from the series of impassive negations through which the poem proceeds, an emptiness of meaning that marks the final couplet, but rather a sense of plentitude, or what Bolster elsewhere terms an "inrush" (70) of sensual appreciation that accompanies the final image. Still milk shaped by sculpted solid: the simple fact of their being, for the moment, seems meaning more than enough.

In Bolster's vision, though, the properties of substances such as bowls or milk are ultimately no more stable than the oppositions conventionally posited between the pictorial and poetic realms; tranquil moments of aesthetic containment, therefore, moments "held" as though "under a bell jar" (64), alternate with an emphasis on flux, mutability, and transformation. In "Chemistry," for instance, a "drop of water" transforms a "bowl of shallow milk," much as a "blot of half-and-half" cream causes a "hurricane" in a cup of coffee (28). Solid substances, too, are subject to similar sorts of compositional change. Thus, the firmly proprietorial "stake with the flap of orange plastic that marks / the beginning of the real" in the opening poem's survey of the land (3), soon gives way in subsequent sequences, such as "Poems for the Flood" and "Fargo in Flood," to dream-like, diluvial visions which chart land formations weirdly surreal: "This valley / was once a lake, until we made it land. See how the rain / against the windshield turns to fishes" (16). A space once liquid, made solid, threatens to dissolve again before our eyes, just as Manitoba, in flood, "grows heavy, / towel darkening with spill" (33).

As with land formations, so also with the human form. In "Dog-Woman," a poet's response to an Inuit carving, the sculptor's obviously arresting realization of "the idea of dog- / woman" in "greyish green stone" prompts the speaker to question: "Who's to say I'm not / that dog, that small / woman low to the ground"? (59). Fear and fascination with the prospect of the body's incipient transmogrification especially mark the final section of the collection, the "found" poems loosely based on art works in the National Gallery of Canada.[14] In this section, "Two Bowls of Milk" are displaced by bodies, especially by women's bodies, as objects of aesthetic

regard and anatomical scrutiny. Here, one of the bowls placed before us is of "Ancient Roman" vintage, and "embellished with a maiden" who is "bare to naked gazes" (68); in another instance, the half-sphere of the bowl's shape is completed in the "impossible" "taut globe" of a pregnant belly: "What does it *not* contain?" (74, emphasis added). Representations of femininity—from erotic photographs of women bathing ("Stop Motion," 69-70) to a medical engraving ("Still Life With Braid" 55), or an oil painting of Venus ("Three Goddesses" 72)—afford Bolster the visual bases from which she works through themes of desire and fear: desire and fear of fertility and sterility, of birth and death, of the body itself as a powerfully autonomous, yet temporary and fragile shelter of "bones pitched inside a tent of skin" (56).

But it is to the penultimate section of *Two Bowls, "Deux personnages dans la nuit,"* that I want to turn, finally. As an interrelated suite of poems inspired by a single French Canadian painter's life and work, "*Deux personnages*" arguably represents Bolster's most ambitious, technically disciplined and cohesive ekphrastic project. A series arising from the poet's move, in August, 1995, from her West Coast home to Quebec City, "*Deux personnages dans la nuit*" is in part a meditation on loss and coming to terms with cultural, geographic, and linguistic dislocation. "I think," Bolster has said, "I began looking at art," Lemieux's paintings in particular, "partly as a way of finding new material to write from, in the absence of a landscape with which I could connect—though I realized this only in retrospect." Wintery vistas of the sort captured by Lemieux's "Le Train de Midi" (1956) were particularly arresting for the Vancouver-born Bolster:

> On first entering the white
> field, I think I'm dead, and this
>
> no heaven. Aftertaste of sacrifice:
> I've left coast, crossed Rockies,
>
> plains and shield to sleep beside
> my love and learn his tongue. (40)

In its depiction of an individual dwarfed against—yet somehow persevering amidst—an immense landscape of "white / field," Bolster's text creates the verbal equivalent of a leitmotif discernible in many of the landscape paintings of Jean Paul Lemieux. It is a scene that also clearly recalls the open-ended closure of *White Stone* in "The Open Door."[15] Compounding the unease caused by the "absence of landscape with which [she] could connect"

is the unease—especially profound, for the writer—caused by the absence of a familiar language. The poet must now "learn" the lover's "tongue."

That Bolster should, while practising this new tongue—as she does in the French bits of *"Deux personnages"*—turn to the pictorial language of Jean Paul Lemieux for help and inspiration is, perhaps, no random coincidence. The gentle ironist at work in such bilingually titled pieces as "Le Far West" (1955) obviously knew a thing or two about the challenges of encountering and attempting to translate difference. In part, it is the pronounced and abiding concerns of Lemieux's life's work (in both his paintings and his prolific writings) with the preservation and celebration of indigenous Quebec scenery, folk life, art forms, and customs that make him an ideal guide for the anglophone poet struggling to interpret her new life and surroundings (see Robert 1975, 1978). To the degree that Lemieux's mature work also, however, comes to evince an "enormous nostalgia" for lost childhood—his "deepest source of inspiration," according to Guy Robert (66-67)—his thematic concerns clearly intersect with those of the author of *White Stone: The Alice Poems.*[16]

It is, however, rather to childhood as the focal point or "deepest source" of the adult artist's insecurities that Bolster seems to be responding in such poems as "*L'Orpheline* (1956)" (44) and "1910 Remembered (1962)" (47). In the latter poem, she reflects upon a self-portrait of Lemieux as a "boy, aged / six, striped into a sailor suit" (47). The painting seems to her pervaded by an air of apprehension—"that cloud a stone above your head"—as though the sky is about to fall: a version of Lemieux as Chicken Little (47). Bolster is perhaps responding to the compositional ambiguity of Lemieux's "1910 Remembered," which, like many of his portraits of children in family groupings, physically separates the child at some distance from the parental figures, who are often cast as shadows or inverted reflections of one another. In the case of Lemieux's "1910 Remembered," the artist-as-child is, indeed, figured, as Bolster notes, "alone / between two figures," positioned squarely before the viewer's gaze between parents, in profile, who stare over the child's head at each other, seemingly indifferent to his presence: an orphan in effect, if not in fact. It appears to be an anxious sense of solitude and childish vulnerability, then, that the newly uprooted poet perceives and with which she clearly connects, prompting this attempt at reassurance from the poet contemplating the artist's art: "Listen . . . / We're loved. Your wife sitting in the garden, / my love calling me in his magic accent. Our mothers / never leave us"(47). The security of that first, unconditional "mother['s]" love:

that is the "promise" to which the poet attempts to cling—but falteringly, as the last line of the poem suggests, with "doubt" intact (47).

There is, then, a marked affinity between poet and painter, who share a melancholic awareness of the separateness of human existence: "Whatever makes you and me believe / ourselves *tout seul* has got her too," as the poet observes of the haunting "grey" face of Lemieux's *"L' Orpheline"* (44). In Lemieux's paintings, such a melancholy often seems to manifest itself through the signature style the painter developed during the 1950s—significantly, a style he captured only after he left his home in Quebec City for an extended period of time.[17] Spare, stark, and uncluttered, his canvases tend to "weed out" any distracting details, to reduce the content of the picture "to its most simple and concentrated form" (Robert 90-91). Where human figures are portrayed, the paintings are also often "cropped in an unusual manner, such that occasionally, figures are cut in half vertically [or horizontally] by the edge of the painting," as though his subjects were "victims of some assault, some amputation" (Robert 90-91, 182). In *"Deux personnages,"* by contrast, it is, rather, the *addition* of sharp visual and sensory details—ice, white, blue, the snow, the biting sun—that convey a similarly austere impression of a painfully harsh physical world in which survival and self-preservation may at times—even on "Fine Days"—compromise that "promise" of love:

> Love bends me in more resistant shapes;
>
> my neck cracks like ice. I would not
> give you a shred of my blue, my own too few and far.
> (*"Les Beaux Jours,* 1937" 42)

In a sense, Bolster's verbal portraits are also oddly "cropped" fragments of the poet's ongoing imaginary dialogue with Lemieux: "This is only part of it," as the title poem announces, "Red smear / of her lips at the left, his at the right" (48). Each encounter is also a missed encounter. What is left out? Details of the histories of the figures in the paintings, and of the relationships of the old lovers (Lemieux and his wife) and the young lovers (the poet and her lover) are only lightly sketched in, evocative vignettes. Interestingly, what emerges from the poet's serial re-encounters with the work of the male artist is ultimately, as in *White Stone,* a relationship triangulated by the presence of a second female figure: in this case, Madeleine Lemieux. As often as not, it is the artist's wife with whom the poet aligns

herself throughout this series; indeed, the "*deux personnages*" featured in the title poem are the two women, waiting "in the kitchen" for the absent artist and clinking "glasses of red wine" in solidarity (48). Madeleine Lemieux, as "*Les Beaux Jours*" indicates, was herself a formally trained artist, whose own career appears to have taken a back seat to the caretaker role she assumed in relation to her increasingly prominent husband. Thus, as the poet observes, "This morning she laid aside / her brush to make you lunch / and has not picked it up again" (42). The two women are united in the "sacrifices" that each makes for love. Madeleine sets aside her brush to tend to her husband, still the artist-as-child. Before he dies, "she'll speak / of sacrifice as though it were a pool, / blood-warm" (42). Bolster leaves the coast to be with her lover, and remarks, similarly, upon the bitter "Aftertaste of sacrifice" (40). At what cost, art? At what cost, love? And how does the woman artist, socialized to nurture others, to make everybody else's lunch, balance the dual demands of love and art? These concerns complicate and add an element of tension to the poetry's exploration of the relationship between the female poet and the male painter.

Nor should we, however, lose sight of the fact that it is *out* of the poet's "sacrifice" in the name of love that poems are born, poems which, no less, record and make visible the "sacrifice" of the earlier, effaced woman artist, Madeleine Lemieux. There is "promise" and purpose yet for the displaced Anglophone poet, struggling to counter both a personal and existential sense of the barriers between people, places, languages—all those more or less intangible border lines Bolster explores in *Two Bowls*. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa Dalloway says the "supreme mystery" is "simply this: here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?" (127). Well, no. And that's no reason for utter despair, as the concluding poem of the suite, "*Les Beaux Jours, Reprise*," delicately intimates through its multiple ambiguities. With the faces of Lemieux's lonely orphans "still loom[ing]" before her eyes, under her very feet as she crosses a frozen river, the poet recognizes that the same ice which traps them sustains her, keeping her safe. Thus, "I do not bend / to crack open breath-holes / I could fall into" (49). Clearly, some barriers are about self-preservation, and this woman artist is determined to respect the integrity of those boundaries, even if she must also mourn their existence.

And as for "home"? That's something for the "*deux personnages*" or double "I's" of this picture-taking poet/lover to work out as best they can, in the untranslatable interstice between body and shadow:

Home is my feet

laying a path I'll follow back.
Sun streams through a buoyant

sky to dazzle snow. My shadow
flits, so quick it can't be fixed. (49)

NOTES

1 Remarks by Stephanie Bolster cited throughout this article are taken from personal correspondence, February 2, 1999 and September 1, 1999. An earlier version of this essay, translated into French by Charly Bouchara, appeared as "Stephanie Bolster au pays des images" in *Ellipse* 61 (Spring 1999): 57-70.

2 John Ashbery, author of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), a long poem inspired by the anamorphic self-portrait of the Italian Renaissance painter, Girolamo Francesco Mazzola (1503-40), has been also deeply influenced by contemporary American abstract art, and—gauging from his comments on poetics—possibly by photography as well: "I think that any one of my poems might be considered to be a snapshot of whatever is going on in my mind at the time" (qtd. in Baym *et al.*, 2645).

3 "*Deux personnages dans la nuit*," the suite of poems inspired by the paintings of the late Québécois artist, Jean Paul Lemieux, was one of two winners of *The Malahat Review's* 1997 long poem competition; some of the poems from the fourth and final section of the collection, "Inside a Tent of Skin," based on art works at the National Gallery, won first prize in the 1998 (M)Other Tongue Press Chapbook Contest.

4 According to W.J.T. Mitchell, "the narrowest meanings of the word ekphrasis as a poetic mode" relate to that genre of "literary pictorialism" which strives to "giv[e] voice to a mute art object" or offer "a rhetorical description of a work of art" (*Picture Theory* 153). As Mitchell and others note, however, the notion of ekphrasis as "a minor poetic genre" also gives way to "a more general application that includes any 'set description intended to bring . . . [a] picture . . . before the mind's eye'" (*Picture Theory* 153; *Mitchell is quoting Saintsbury* 491); not only is ekphrasis in this regard "a universal principle of poetics," but "[i]nsofar as art history is a verbal representation of visual representation, it is an elevation of ekphrasis to a disciplinary principle" (*Picture Theory* 156-57).

5 As Shimon Sandbank notes, in this regard the "relationship between poems and paintings" may be usefully conceived of "in terms of absence and supersession": ekphrastic poets do not so much attempt to "transpose . . . visual forms into their own verbal medium" as they do "exploit the lacunae of the visual medium to assert the power of their own" (226).

6 The extent to which *White Stone* interrogates the relativity and indeterminacy of the "truth" surrounding the historical circumstances of the Dodgson-Liddell relationship, and the poet's own participation in the sensationalism she exposes and explores, is seriously underestimated by one recent reviewer, who scolds the author for "cast[ing] a very lurid light on Dodgson," and "appropriating" the voices of "the silenced," even as she also, grudgingly, admits that Bolster "acknowledges the complexity of the moral ground" she is examining. I refer to Mary di Michele.

7 Sontag asks: "What exactly is the perverse aspect of picture taking? If . . . photographers often have sexual fantasies when they are behind the camera, perhaps the perversion lies in the fact

that these fantasies are both plausible and so inappropriate. . . . In fact, using a camera is not a good way of getting at someone sexually. Between photographer and subject, there has to be distance" (13).

8 "In Which Alice Poses For Julia Margaret Cameron, 1872" reinscribes Alice's dilemma as an object of representation in the hands of the pioneering female photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron, who is shown using Alice in an even more histrionic and stylized way than Dodgson. For Cameron, Alice poses as the model of various "types" of iconic femininity: dutiful daughter, goddess of fertility, virgin (*White Stone* 25-27).

9 On the broad question of "the relationship between representation and responsibility" in contemporary art and culture, see Mitchell *Picture Theory* 421-25.

10 Bolster does mention Pierre Bonnard's "The Bowl of Milk" (oil on canvas, c. 1919) as a visual referent which came to mind at the time she began thinking of the book's cover design (personal correspondence, September 1, 1999).

11 Indeed, as Mitchell points out, "the earliest examples of ekphrastic poetry are not . . . principally focused on painting, but on utilitarian objects that happen to have . . . symbolic visual representations attached to them. Goblets, urns, vases, . . . reliefs, frescos and statues *in situ* provide the first objects of ekphrastic description, probably because the detachment of painting as an isolated, autonomous, and moveable object of aesthetic contemplation is a relatively late development in the visual arts" (*Picture Theory* 165)

12 Alternatively, one might regard the self-reflexive procedures of "Two Bowls" in terms of the sort of "heuristic ekphrasis" Edgecombe discusses in relation to William Carlos Williams' *Pictures from Brueghel*, in which poetic form contributes as a comment on modes of perceiving visual art forms (112-13).

13 In this way, "Two Bowls of Milk" returns (mischievously) to questions *White Stone* raises about the grounds for interpretation, that very "symbolic logic" that Bolster's Dodgson, and all readers of signs, iconic or indexical, necessarily depend upon (*White Stone* 17).

14 Bolster, that is, invites us to think of these poems as "found" poems, insofar as they are subtitled "poems *in* the National Gallery of Canada" (51, emphasis added).

15 Readers will note that subtle, overlapping echoes of and to the "poems from paintings" by Lemieux mark the final segments of *White Stone*; Bolster was to some extent working concurrently on both projects, beginning the Lemieux suite while completing the Alice manuscript.

16 Moreover, to the extent that "ekphrasis is a way of ordering experience," it is, as Cynthia Messenger notes, "a particularly important strategy when it is employed in travel literature, for it acts as an intervention—and an intercession—between traveller/poet and place" (103). Bolster is not a "traveller" in the same sense as Page or Bishop, but the relationship between deracination and poetic technique is, nevertheless, comparable.

17 Guy Robert quotes Lemieux on this turning point in his career: "I had to leave Quebec before I really discovered things about myself" (82).

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Valerie Stetson

Tea-Stained Heart

any tea-stained fancy will do
for a cushion, a push-up bra
for a licked and shaved spirit
fasten a tie-clip and desert
the high road
its wintry view smashes
the piggy bank heart
during its wait
for a proper lover

here, on the soft path
by the river, a heart
smashes differently.
It's held under, over-sexed
telescoped and seized
with helium giggles
in the unlit night, suffering
a lover's weight

Sue Goyette

Full House

I'm waiting for whatever makes a woman strong
to arrive. This is such a windy August,
that restaurant in Pugwash, flattened. And my daughter
has learned poker. Who made the suicide king
so wild? Everyday, she takes me to the cleaner, cleans
my clock. Sits at the dining room table with her cards
and a pile of pennies, dealing out hands that make me
fold. One-eyed Jack, she says, flipping over
her four of a kind, jack wild. The wind and the hanging flowers:
wild. What is it that makes a woman
strong? Say there's seven levels of sadness
and this is the seventh. Say each step down is more exhausting
than the last and say I've started to watch t.v. in the daytime. I know
as soon as the announcer nicknames the vulture 'wounded
wing' that the bird is doomed. It's the nature
of the nature show. And at first his voice is
hopeful, affectionate even, but then he tells us the bird
made a bad choice, commiserates with words like *trapped*
and *final struggle.* The bird becomes a mouthful for an alligator,
its feet stuck straight out of its mouth like forks, each tine
curled around air and then swallowed. A strong woman
would turn the t.v. off. Would take a turn at shuffling, see her
five and raise her ten. A strong woman wouldn't have swallowed the bird
too, its wing, wounded and wrapped here, around the wishbone
of August. She would've mended the wing, swooped
the bird up and offered it back to the Amazon sky. A strong woman
would never call smiling queens wild, would never have to be told
by her daughter that there are no smiling queens.

Sara Jamieson

"Now That I Am Dead"
P.K. Page and the Self-Elegy[1]

Over the years, P.K. Page's poetry has reflected the varied experiences of her life. Not surprisingly, since entering old age, she has written an increasing number of poems in which she anticipates death and looks back over her long and distinguished career. By her own admission, there is "a lot about death" in her 1981 collection *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies* (Page, "Conversation" 75). Published in the year Page turned sixty-five, the collection contains elegies for friends, family, and fellow writers, as well as poems in which she meditates on her own mortality. This elegiac strain continues in *Hologram* (1994), a collection of *glosas* each incorporating the work of a different poet. To Page it seems appropriate that "towards the end of [her] life" she should use the *glosa* form as a way of looking back and "paying homage to those poets whose work [she] fell in love with in [her] formative years" (*Hologram* 9-10). *The Hidden Room*, a two-volume edition of Page's collected poems, appeared in 1997. Collected Poems may be viewed as "the modern equivalent of the epic," the form which traditionally closes the poet's career (Lipking 70). Page, of course, is still writing, but *The Hidden Room* is suggestively divided into sections whose titles mark the stages of a poet's inner life, from "To Begin Before I Was Born" to "Now That I Am Dead." This format characterises the collection as a comprehensive review of a lifetime of writing, ending with a look toward death and beyond.

Self-elegies are individual poems in which Page anticipates her own death, and this imaginative exercise may or may not be accompanied by a celebration of her life's accomplishment. The term "self-elegy" has been applied by Jahan Ramazani to designate "the genre of the self-standing

meditation on the author's mortality" (*Poetry of Mourning* 120).[2] The term is, he suggests, to some extent redundant, since "all elegists, like Milton, Gray, and Shelley 'turn' to lament their own destined urns" (Ramazani, *Yeats* 136). The self-elegy derives in part from the reflexive quality that is built into the psychological underpinnings of elegy in the form of the potentially self-destructive melancholic desire on the part of the mourner for identification with the dead (Freud 246). In addition to its affinity with the elegy proper, the self-elegy also draws upon the medieval religious tradition of the *ars moriendi* and its later literary manifestations such as Thomas Nashe's refrain "I am sick, I must die" ("A Litany in Time of Plague" 1592).[3] The self-elegiac tradition includes the self-epitaphic poems of Raleigh, Swift, and Coleridge. Keats, Dickinson, and Christina Rossetti, imagining their own deaths, bequeath the self-elegy to the twentieth century where it thrives in the hands of Yeats and Stevens, and is carried on by Auden, Plath, Larkin, and many others.[4] The flourishing of the self-elegy throughout this century has been attributed partly to the decline of traditional mourning rituals in the face of "technologies of war, medicine, and information which increasingly dehumanize death" (Ramazani, *Yeats* 136). In a contemporary North American society in which poets are economically marginalized, the elderly are hidden away in old-age homes, and death is regarded as something of a taboo subject, the self-elegy presents an opportunity to invest one's death with a sense of occasion, and to assess the achievement of a life.

Chief among self-elegiac conventions is the attempt to defeat death by rehearsing it (Ramazani, *Yeats* 167). The self-elegist may imagine his own death in ways that allow him to demonstrate his ascendancy over it and master his fears, but he must also come to terms with death's ultimate authority. This ambivalence produces a vacillation between authorial confidence and questioning that is characteristic of the form, as the self-elegist simultaneously confronts and represses the terror, isolation, and finality of death (Ramazani, *Yeats* 151-52). This paper will examine P.K. Page's unique handling of the form as she extends the tradition of the contemporary self-elegy. She is well aware that in trying to imagine and describe the otherness of death, she can only fall back on familiar narratives. Her self-elegies reproduce the kinds of consoling stories that we tell ourselves and each other in order to render death less frightening, but she also exposes the inadequacy of such stories by acknowledging the fears that they are designed to suppress. Page conveys this ambivalence through a graceful blend of whimsy and gravity. She often cultivates an appearance of acceptance in her

poetic confrontations with death, but my readings will emphasize the undercurrents of resistance that stir beneath this placid surface.

Moving on to poems in which Page's anticipation of death is accompanied by a review of her past work, I will explore the extent to which she views her art as a consolation in the face of old age, and a potential antidote to death. Page does not seek immortality by looking to her poems as unchanging artifacts, so much as seek self-renewal through revising her poetic vision. This type of self-elegy focuses on the successive stages of a writer's career. By imagining an act of identification between the self and the work, the poet presents her career as a process of continual self-improvement, "an evolution that defends the poet against merely withering into old age" (Ramazani, *Yeats* 137). In order to demonstrate Page's approach to this type of self-elegy, I will focus on an especially crucial period of transition in Page's career. Several critics have examined a palpable change that occurred in Page's aesthetic during the mid-1950s.[5] At this time, she turned away from the kind of social protest poetry with which she began her career, in order to explore more introspective themes. This change of emphasis was accompanied by the introduction of a new subjectivity into her work, in place of the modernist aesthetic of impersonality to which she had previously adhered. I am less concerned with the ways in which Page accomplishes this transition than with the ways in which she represents it as self-elegiac. Several poems written during this period, while they are not ostensibly about death, depict this remaking of the poetic vision as a remaking of the self. The new and improved vision emerges from the death of the old and is substituted for the poet's mortal body. This pattern of self-renewal has been recognized and interpreted in terms of Page's interest in the Sufi notion of life as a series of ascending stages, a "movement to a golden world and beyond" (Page, "Biographical Interview" 35).[6] By considering Page as a self-elegist, I aim to extend this approach to Page's work, and reveal the literary traditions that inform her representations of her poetic development.

Page explains her deepening preoccupation with the subject of death by commenting that "as one gets closer to death it is less inimical" (Page, "Conversation" 75). The conflict implicit in the apparent serenity of this statement (death is still inimical; it is just less so than before) is characteristic of many of Page's self-elegies. Faced with death, she often appears to advocate an attitude of calm optimism that she ultimately

exposes as either unattainable or too easy, somehow incomplete. She considers the various fictions through which we try to imagine a death that is acceptable, or at least less inimical, to us; she seeks refuge in them herself, but not without reminding us of all that they fail to encompass.

In "Voyager," she takes the memory of her father's death as an opportunity to rehearse her own:

> At the age at which he died and within
> days of that date
> I lie outstretched
> the robins listening on the grass (*The Hidden Room* 1: 183)[7]

Assuming the posture of a corpse, suggesting decomposition with the image of the robins listening for the worms that move beneath the grass, she seems willing to surrender herself to death's finality. The setting is a pleasant, if mildly surreal, garden with a "cerise rhododendron levitating" in the distance, and Page acts out a death as comfortable and unceremonious as a nap on a summer afternoon. At the same time, however, she resists the idea by locating herself in the present tense: her father has "died" and her own life may be "half over—*spent*," but she is still alive and firmly in control of her apparent surrender. The rest of the poem describes a recurring dream in which the dead father returns to his family as if from "some long intergalactic voyage," counteracting Page's initial acceptance of death and its consequences. Indeed, it becomes clear that her opening rehearsal of death is partly an attempt to connect with her father in order to alleviate some unresolved conflict between them,[8] and that her pose of apparent compliance is not as comfortable as it at first appears.

Similarly, in "Phone Call From Mexico" Page imagines a comforting, appealing version of death which she is ultimately reluctant to condone. She struggles to persuade a dying friend to abandon her "impotent blind rage" and submit peacefully, to "lay [her] head down gently like a quarrelsome tired child" (*HR* 1: 175). It is an image that would replace the terrifying isolation of death with a vision of maternal comfort and convert a sordid end into a new beginning, but Page cannot find a way to communicate this consoling message. She is prevented by the cold impersonality of the telephone and by the stubborn "railing and roiling" of the dying woman's anger, but also by her own sense that the message is inadequate. At the end of the poem she is in tears herself, knowing that however we might try to welcome death as a release from illness and old age, life, its pleasures and possessions, are never easy to relinquish.

This reluctance to subscribe to consoling versions of death and relinquish the life of the body even as it tiresomely ages is the subject of "Custodian," and here Page looks directly toward her own death. She represents the maintenance of her aging body as an endless round of menial chores:

> I watch it.
> Lock and stock.
> No joke.
> It is my job.
>
> I dust, I wash, I guard
> this fading fibre;
> polish even.
> Spit.
>
> And rub I it
> and shine
> and wear it to the bone.
> Lay bare its nub. (*HR* 1: 177)

In the midst of this flurry of activity, she pauses to remind herself that the body, its desires and the world that it inhabits, ought not to claim so much of her energy:

> It is but matter
> and it matters not
> one whit or tittle
> if I wear it out.

This stanza suggests that the division between "I" and "it" sustained throughout the poem may signify nothing less than faith in the doctrine of the soul's immortality. The consoling power of this notion, however, is trivialized by the diction ("whit," "tittle"), and the wordplay on matter/matters seems too glib a way to dispose of such a weighty issue. Sounding too much like a piece of conventional wisdom to be reassuring, this view of death does not distract Page for long from corporeal matters:

> Yet mend I it and darn
> and patch
> and pat it even
> like a dog

She is well aware, however, that this preoccupation has its limits. She spits on "this fading fibre" to polish it, but spitting can also express contempt. This one word, isolated at the end of the second stanza, thus expresses both excessive attachment to the body and excessive disdain for it. While Page

finds neither of these extremes acceptable, she moves back and forth between them in order to demonstrate the difficulty of giving the pleasures of this life their proper due, yet finding some way to accept their loss and face death gracefully. In "Phone Call From Mexico" she is moved to tears by the pain and helplessness of "all those . . . who age ungainly"; in "Custodian" she tries to come to terms with these feelings by regarding with self-deprecating humour her own struggle against age and death. The poem depicts her attempt to defeat her dread of death by domesticating it: the process of aging is made to seem as if it is no more threatening than a manageable series of household tasks, and the proliferation of active verbs ("dust," "wash," "polish," "mend," "darn" and so on) creates an illusion of her authority over her body's decline.[9] This authority is subtly undercut, however, by the housewifely pose that she adopts, alluding perhaps to the particular pressure our society places on women to look young: behind her illusion of agency, she labours at maintaining her looks in obedience to societal expectations. In the end, all this drudgery is of little use: Page moves from polishing and shining to mending, darning, and patching, suggesting that the material she works with is getting progressively shabbier; indeed, it is her effort that "wear[s] it to the bone," hastening the decline that she intends to forestall. The short, spare lines and self-consciously curt diction ("No joke. / It is my job.") create an impression of seriousness and self-importance that heightens the absurdity of what the last stanza reveals as wasted effort. The body in which so much has been invested will become

> that which the Auctioneer
> when I am gone,
> for nearly nought
> will knock down
> from his block.

In this imagined confrontation with death, it is not clear whether Page has made her peace with the idea or avoided it altogether. The phrase "when I am gone" could imply a renewed faith in the idea that the "I" of the poem will continue to exist after the disposal of "it," the body, accorded some respect as a former dwelling place of consciousness. On the other hand, the phrase has a euphemistic ring about it, and it allows Page to exit inconspicuously without actually having to confront this Auctioneer, or suffer the brutality of the final two lines. Thus while she seems initially willing to confront death with lighthearted confidence, at the last minute she retreats from it as something too dreadful to imagine.

In "The End," Page again anticipates death, and carries on from where "Custodian" leaves off, beginning with the moment of death and imagining its aftermath. Into this unknown territory she brings her familiar concern for the stories we tell ourselves in order to make death appear less frightening, and to imagine it as something we might be able to welcome. Her intense desire to enter into the spirit of such consoling narratives leads her to an affirmation of confidence and optimism at the approach of death. To the careful reader, however, Page reveals her awareness that what she proclaims herself ready to accept is not death, but rather a vision of death that she has constructed in order to suppress what she most fears. "The End" is a *glosa* which incorporates four lines by Mark Strand. Strand's lines focus on the difficulty of imagining one's own death ("No man knows what he shall sing at the end") and of finding an appropriate metaphor to describe "what it will seem like" (*HR* 2: 215). Page responds by considering various accounts from people who might be expected to know what it is like, those who have come close enough to death to sense what lies on the other side of this "high wall":

> Some who have scaled it say they were stricken blind
> yet lacked a blind man's skills—white cane, dark glasses.
> One girl I know clambered up and gazing over
> saw the familiar universe reversed
> as in a looking glass.

While these people claim to speak from experience, their authority is qualified by Page's use of partitive articles ("some," "one") which emphasize the dissimilar details of each account.

Seeking reassurance, she relates her own story of a dream-like encounter with a kind of revenant "composed of light." His invitation to her to touch him ("flesh, blood, hair") seems to cast her as a skeptical Thomas to his Christ, but it is he who has been converted, confirming her speculation that "it was not *not* everlasting there / as once he had assumed." Despite his refusal to be more specific, his visit inspires in Page a fairly detailed vision of a death from which "there was nothing to fear":

> For he belongs to the sea—we all do. We are part of its swell.
> And only the shoreline grounds us. Yet we stand
> hands tied, deluded, seemingly earthbound
> imagining we belong to the land
>
> which is only a way-station, after all.
> We are the sea's, and as such we are at its beck.
> We are the water within the wave and the wave's form.

There is a deliberate confidence here that almost obscures the discrepancies between these resounding statements and the numinous encounter which inspires them. In contrast to the diverse accounts preceding it, this vision of death as a return to an originary ocean stresses homogeneity, implying that we will all experience death in the same way. This insistence on community and shared experience contradicts the message brought by the ghostly visitor: "'It's personal. When your turn comes you'll know." His emphasis on solitude and individuality is opposed by Page's repetition of the word "we," which appears six times in the last stanza and reverberates alliteratively in words like "water" and "wave." While the visit seems meant to be reassuring, it is for Page "the purest heartbreak" and in the message of the solitariness of dying, she sees a terrifying isolation, the fear of which she tries urgently to suppress. While the *glosa* form counteracts isolation by creating a dialogue between two poets, in this case, the lines from Strand's poem deployed at the end of each of Page's stanzas continually bring her back to our aloneness and uncertainty before death.

The ecstatic vision of the final stanza is related with all the persuasive rhetoric of a personal creed, tempting us to forget that in a poem structured as a series of stories about death and its aftermath, this vision is simply one more story, no more authoritative than any of the others, and perhaps less so, since it is the only one not explicitly based on personal experience. The title of the poem is itself a euphemism that allows us to talk about death without having to mention the word. Moreover, the title elides the idea of death with "The End" of a book or a story, making it seem a little less final. From the title of the poem to the final vision, Page stresses that in her attempt to look directly into an afterlife she can do nothing but fall back on familiar stories, some of which echo beyond the perimeter of the poem. Shelley, for example, imagines death as a voyage toward a rejoining of origins, as does Wallace Stevens,[10] but the imagery of Page's final stanza also bears a significant resemblance to some of her own earlier poems. Her vision of death as a transition from an earthbound state to a long-forgotten aqueous one completes her portrayal of adolescence as a far more difficult and awkward move from water to land in poems like "Young Girls" (1946), "Blowing Boy" (1946), and "Boy with Sea Dream" (1954). Thus, at a moment when she appears to be proclaiming her acceptance of death most resoundingly, she is actually integrating death into the patterns of her own writing, making it seem less frightening by presenting it as a figurative event rather than a literal one.[11]

In "The End," Page thus imagines an anticipation of death that is accompanied by a retrospective glance at the beginnings of her long career. The poem is a fitting *envoi* to *Hologram*, a collection in which "one feels Page coursing back through a lifetime, summing it all up" through a series of "conversations with the loved dead," the poets whom she has admired from her youth and whose work has influenced her own (Sullivan, "Hologram" 124-26). The Janus-like stance that Page assumes in *Hologram*—one face turned toward old age and death, the other looking back over a lifetime of writing and reading—has surfaced in her work before. Take, for example, the opening of "The First Part" from *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies*:

> Great desire to write it all.
> Is it age, death's heavy breath
> making absolute autobiography
> urgent?
>
> Who would think that this old hive
> housed such honey?
> Could one guess
> blue and gold of a macaw
> blue and gold of sky and sun
> could set up such melodic din
> beat so musical a drum?
>
> Distilled from all this living,
> all this gold. (*HR* 1: 216)

In these lines, Page substitutes her vibrant, harmonious verse for her aging body. She envisions a miraculous doubling of her self, whereby she is the "old hive" and also of a piece with the images of dazzling beauty for which she is responsible. Her writing is portrayed as an alchemical process which transforms raw experience into gold that is suggestive of perfection, and, perhaps, immortality. While Page here acknowledges that it is her advancing age which makes this brief summary of her past work especially pressing, considerations of mortality and writing have long been intertwined in Page's poems and are not simply a preoccupation of old age. Throughout her career, particularly at moments of transition from one style of writing to another, she has regarded her poetry as a potential source of personal renewal.

Douglas Freake has argued that an abiding fascination with multiple aspects of the self is one of the central preoccupations of Page's poetry, and we have seen how this discontinuity between selves is crucial to her struggle

to come to terms with death: in "Voyager" she identifies herself with the deceased father whom she mourns; in "Custodian" she speaks of her own body as an entity separate from herself. In "The First Part," she imagines an escape from aging and death by identifying herself with a seemingly incorruptible art. While one might question this notion of a poem as a passport to personal immortality (and Page is not always so confident about this herself), poetry still affords the possibility of renewal, since it can be refurbished while the aging poet cannot. By imagining an identification between the self and the work, a poet can create the illusion that the self, like the work, can be "shaped, manipulated, improved" and so seem to evade the relentless decline toward death (Ramazani, *Yeats* 139). Page's customary practice of reselecting and rearranging previously published poems is evidence that she sees her work as "material for an ongoing reshaping of the self" (Freake 99), but this is only one aspect of a specifically self-elegiac exploration of poetry as a defence against death.

The scheme of self-doubling that Page employs in a poem like "Custodian" in order to gain a position of mastery over her aging body can also be used to demonstrate mastery over her body of work. That is, the self-elegiac relation between different aspects of the self is reconfigured as the relation between the poet and her work, and between present and past styles of writing. This self-reflexive concern with marking the stages of a poetic career is embedded within the elegy proper, as elegists traditionally exploit the occasion of another's death in order to celebrate their own literary comings-of-age. It is this careerist subtext that leads Celeste Schenck to define the elegy as "any lyric meditation proceeding from the thought of death that signals the readiness of the initiate for transcendence to new poetic modes, the 'fresh woods and pastures new' of Milton's *Lycidas*" (15). Other forms that include this division of the poet's work into categories of "then" and "now" include the palinode, in which the author renounces a former style or subject matter, and the traditional invocation which "distances the present enterprise from the previous discourses of the poet" (Ramazani, *Yeats* 140).[12] This "topos of authorial self-surpassal" characterises those self-elegies or "poems of transition" in which the poet adopts a new voice by trying to "author the death of . . . previous selves" (Ramazani, *Yeats* 140).

The contest between two distinct kinds of writing is the subject of "Elegy," first published in 1952, which can be read as a troubled record of Page's struggle to renounce a former style and proclaim a revised poetic voice. The poem is ostensibly a lament voiced by a chorus of mourners:

This spring is all small horses and stars
but you have closed your pores to its bombardment,
shut yourself up with the night that flowed into you like ink.

When that black haemorrhage began
your doors opened as if to sunlight
and the darkness roared in like a tidal bore.
Now your least thought is the poor type on cheap newsprint . . .

First we mourned you as if dead
and covered you with flowers
but when the blackness trickled on our hands
we stepped out of your deadly nightshade. (*HR* 1: 62)

From the references to ink, type, and newsprint, we may infer that the person to whom this lament is addressed is a writer, and one who seems caught between two different sources of inspiration. The "poor type on cheap newsprint" suggests a journalistic type of writing that seems narrow and mundane, at least in comparison with the "small horses and stars." While the writer in the poem does not seem to consider these latter things fit subjects for poetry, the implication is that to do so would be a better use of her talent. "Elegy" does not mourn an actual death so much as a lost communion with nature. The writer in Page's poem who once "walked giddy with gold" echoes the "dizzy raptures" that Wordsworth felt as a child and longs to recapture in adulthood ("Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" 85). Having lost this kind of child-like response to the natural world, Page's writer is mired in an adolescent state. The image of the overwhelming ocean of ink brings to mind the "amphibious" adolescents of "Young Girls," who are "perilously afloat" and "always drowning" (*HR* 2: 12). For the writer in the poem, one way out of this dilemma would be to attain a more mature style by recapturing something of this lost childhood sensibility, but this does not happen. Page has said that this poem is about "the subject's incapacity to get past a certain point in her own personality" (Page, "Conversation" 76). In "Elegy," she imagines a self-elegiac process of transition gone horribly wrong in which the attempted shift from one voice to another takes on a surreal, almost nightmarish quality. An attempt to move beyond this adolescent self by banishing it to the grave includes a grisly death scene ("you dribble black when you speak"), and the attempted burial produces the fear of contamination from a "dead" self that refuses to die. No transition can be accomplished, and the poem ends with images of desolation and loss, a "green tree" shrivelling into a lump of coal, the small horses refusing to "accept sugar / lightly with feathered lips from such pied palms."

The vocation of writing invites comparison between the subject of "Elegy" and Page herself. In addition to its portrayal of a state of arrested adolescence, I suggest that the poem has a specific autobiographical significance, and may be read as an allegory of the early years of Page's career, when she was living in Montreal and involved with the left-wing literary magazine *Preview*. The image of poor type on cheap newsprint effectively conjures up the *Preview* environment, the apartment in which the magazine was mimeographed on foolscap and stapled together by the poets themselves (Precosky 76), while the images of ink-stained hands possibly refer to the practical side of publishing and the editorial duties that Page shared with her colleagues. It was during this period that Page began to explore the themes and techniques that would long be associated with her poetic reputation. Poems like "The Stenographers," "Shipbuilding Office," and "Typists" expose the alienation and joylessness of modern urban life, evoking the drab despair of the boarding-house, and the tedium of an office routine that turns workers into mechanical extensions of their typewriters. Such themes reflect the *Preview* group's socialist commitment, while in terms of technique, these poems fulfil the group's desire to foster a literature of protest that fused "the lyric and didactic elements in modern verse" (Precosky 76). This technique, however, provokes criticism of these poems, and raises questions concerning the compatibility of style and subject. In "The Stenographers," for example, the sheer proliferation of images, combined with a rigorous striving after objectivity, tends to obscure the human sadness and suffering of which the poem treats (Sullivan, "Size" 35-36, Killian 91-93). While I hesitate to describe the meticulously crafted poems of this period as adolescent, Killian has suggested that they may well have become a source of embarrassment to Page (98). Speaking for herself, Page says nothing to contradict this assumption, calling herself "too politically unsophisticated . . . to write good political poetry" (Wachtel 49). Page has never repudiated her socialism, and the more recent poems "Address at Simon Fraser" and "Planet Earth" deal with environmental issues and signal something of a return to the intention if not the technique of the social protest poetry with which she began her career (Messenger 200). In the early 1950s, however, Page needed to modify her treatment of overt social themes in order to realize her full potential as a "poet of the imagination . . . [whose] poetry has more to do with folklore, myth, and archetype than with objective time, history, and social fact (Sullivan, "Size" 35). In its dream-like portrayal of a writer whose talent mysteriously sickens when she

excludes these elements from her work, "Elegy" demonstrates Page's own awareness of the need for a change of approach.

"Elegy" envisions the kind of transition that is achieved in "After Rain" (1956), "universally recognized by her critics as a pivotal Page poem" (Killian 97). In it, a woman stands aloof watching a gardener pace dejectedly through a sodden, snail-infested garden. Opening herself to the natural beauty of the scene, she luxuriates in a series of abstract and brilliant images: "garden abstracted, geometry awash— / an unknown theorem argued in green ink, / dropped in the bath" (*HR* 2: 109). She subsequently reproaches herself with the knowledge that her playful and exquisite vision of the garden fails to include the sorrow and pain that the gardener finds there: "I suffer shame in all these images . . . I find his ache exists beyond my rim" (110). Page's exposure of these images as "exclusive" and "self-involved" (Sullivan, "Size" 34) can be interpreted as a retraction, or at least a criticism, of her earlier work, those poems whose elaborate images tend to obscure the humanity of the office workers and urban misfits who populate them. Page ends "After Rain" by resolving not to let "myriad images" distract her from empathy:

> keep my heart a size
> larger than seeing, unseduced by each
> bright glimpse of beauty striking like a bell,
> so that the whole may toll. . . .

She is determined not to let her extraordinary talent for image-making overwhelm her sensitivity to human suffering. The image of the heart that surrounds and envelops the poetic vision represents the attainment of a new wholeness that is sought but pessimistically dismissed in "Elegy" with the oddly jaded lines, "we have seen our whole hearts / and known them black-edged as mourning envelopes" (*HR* 1: 62). In "After Rain," the "heart that knows [that] tears are a part of love" indicates a poetic voice that is not afraid of emotion. The poem shows Page's new willingness to break with a modernist credo of impersonal objectivity. Killian argues that the admission of subjectivity—a clearly feminine subjectivity—into "After Rain" in the form of "female whimsy" (*HR* 2: 109) represents a significant departure from Page's earlier work. This transition could not take place until Page "openly claim[ed] her poetic vision as *belonging* to a gendered self" (Killian 97). This would explain why the transition imagined in "Elegy" is so vexed. It is only thanks to Page's comment about the poem (quoted above) that we know that its subject is female; within the poem itself there is nothing that

clearly indicates the gender of either the subject or the speaker. It is the poem's silence on this matter, its own suppression of a subjective and gendered speaking consciousness, that shows "Elegy" to be implicated in the aesthetic it seeks to reject, and explains why its attempt at achieving a new vision is unsuccessful.[13]

In my reading of "After Rain," I am less concerned with how Page achieves this new vision than with the way in which she represents the transition self-elegiacally. Having ventured into the garden herself, Page transforms the dilapidation she finds there into a radical image of rebirth:

> the clothes-reel gauche
> as the rangy skeleton of some
> gaunt delicate spidery mute
>
> is pitched as if listening;
> while hung from one thin rib
> a silver web—
> its infant, skeletal, diminutive,
> now sagged with sequins, pulled ellipsoid,
> glistening. (*HR* 2: 109)

A skeleton that carries a child, and the skeletal infant itself are images converting death into birth, ending into beginning. Page represents the attainment of a new poetic voice through the death of an old one (the "mute" skeletal remains) in an attempt to assert her authority not simply over the development of her career but over death itself. The poem ends, however, on a slightly ambiguous note that conveys some doubt as to whether this new voice can be sustained. Page admits that she may yet be seduced by "each bright glimpse of beauty" and "do what [she] will," allowing the details to distract her from "the whole." This rueful confession that the transition to a new voice may not be complete translates in self-elegiac terms to the knowledge that any attempt at self-renewal through the figurative conversion of endings into beginnings will have limited success. Having created the illusion that she has triumphed over death by reinventing herself, she must finally submit to death's inevitability.

This pattern of triumph and submission is more thoroughly explored in "Arras" (1954), one of Page's finest and most discussed poems. "Arras" opens with a description of an imagined tapestry depicting a stylized garden. A process of self-revision is signalled by self-doubling, as "the poet seems to enter [the] garden scene . . . while, at the same time, she remains an observer outside of it" (Orange 252-53):

Consider a new habit—classical,
and trees espaliered on the wall like candelabra.
How still upon that lawn our sandalled feet.

But a peacock rattling its rattan tail and screaming
has found a point of entry. Through whose eye
did it insinuate in furled disguise
to shake its jewels and silk upon that grass?
. . . Who am I
or who am I become that walking here
I am observer, other, Gemini. . . . (*HR* 1: 46)

This twinning suggests an artist's sense of identification with her work; she is separate from it, but somehow part of it as well. Within the world of the arras, a contrast is immediately established between the "voluptuous" and decidedly un-classical peacock and the formal serenity of the classical design that is disrupted by this noisy intruder. The arras represents Page's poetic vision, and its contrasting elements suggest two different phases of that vision, two different styles of writing. The exact nature of Page's stance toward the arras, and toward its sandalled figures in particular, has for some time been a source of interpretive controversy, but critics such as Relke and Killian seem to agree that the figures are in some way representative of Page's concerns about her previous work. Relke calls the figures "elitist . . . all perfection, all blank reflection, all unseeing eyes" (28). They warn against "a formal realm of classical simplicity," a poetic vision which excludes a "multiplicity of human emotions": desire, passion, pain, empathy (28). The trees on the arras that resemble candelabra remind me of "Portrait of Marina" (1951) in which a girl's headache is represented as "a kind of candelabra—delicate— / where all her tears were perilously hung" (*HR* 1: 73). This echo of such an outrageously artificial image denoting pain and unhappiness connects the formalism of the arras to the problems associated with Page's earlier art. The remote, regal beauty of the arras figures indicates the stature of Page's accomplishment, but the "'classical' impulse" that produces them also suggests the limitations of that earlier, formalist poetry (Killian 99).

Indeed, as the poem progresses, something about the world of the arras makes Page increasingly uncomfortable. She tries to distance herself from it, to deny her complicity with it in a series of evasive questions: "Through whose eye . . . ?"; "who am I become . . . ?"; "what did they deal me in this pack?" This unease eventually produces a state of paralysis:

No one is moving now, the stillness is
infinite. If I should make a break . . .

> take to my springy heels . . . ? But nothing moves.
> The spinning world is stuck upon its poles,
> the stillness points a bone at me. I fear
> the future on this arras.

"Arras" has reached an impasse that recalls the poet's inability in "Elegy" to "get past a certain point" (Page, "Conversation" 76). It is only with Page's confession ("It was my eye"), her willingness to claim the disruptive peacock as her own creation, that the poem can resume its progress (Killian 99):

> Voluptuous it came.
> Its head the ferrule and its lovely tail
> folded so sweetly; it was strangely slim
> to fit the retina. (46)

Several critics (Paul, Rooke, Killian) have noted that the poet's eye/I is clearly gendered feminine, receptive to the peacock as the "phallus of love" (Rooke 141). Page's acknowledgement of the peacock marks the "dramatic entrance into the poem of the poet's subjective, female self" and is an important step in the journey toward the "new wholeness of vision" that is celebrated in "After Rain" (Killian 100). "Arras" thus dramatizes the emergence of a new poetic vision that supersedes an old one; or, more accurately, since the figures and the peacock are part of the same tapestry, the poem shows the expansion of that previous vision to include new elements. Since the poem makes explicit the poet's sense of identification with her work, this attainment of new vision can be seen also as an improvement of the self which counteracts the decline into death. There is something death-like about the inert, silent, staring figures, and the poet at times reacts to the arras (and to the playing cards that are equally flat and impersonal) as to a mirror of her own mortality: "the stillness points a bone at me"; "my fingers slipping on a monarch's face twitch and go slack." By considering her mortality in relation to a visual artifact, Page continues a tradition of ekphrastic self-elegy that finds its fullest expression in the Romantic period and is adapted and extended in the work of twentieth-century poets (Ramazani, *Yeats* 152-53).[14] The "classical" habit and "sandalled feet" of the arras figures, along with their stillness, bring to mind the figures on Keats's Grecian urn who will remain unchanged long after the poet and his entire generation have gone. The solemn, sandalled figures and jewelled bird of "Arras" may also seem to evoke the sages of "Sailing to Byzantium." Page's realization, however, that "[n]o one joins those figures on the arras" (46) indicates that even if the arras did represent an "artifice of eternity" (Yeats 218), she

cannot expect to be gathered into it. In contrast to the adamantine brilliance of the mosaic that offers Yeats a refuge from decay and death, the arras is fabric that can fade and fray with time. It is a *memento mori*, an image of limitation rather than transcendence.

In some of her Brazilian poems, Page's use of ekphrasis conveys the limitations of language; that is, she "write[s] 'visual art'" in an attempt to "articulate a 'foreign' perception . . . which [cannot] be copied into words" (Messenger 192). In "Arras," however, this practice is reversed as Page emphasizes the limitations of the visual artifact in order to celebrate the figurative power of her language. She projects her mortality onto the two-dimensional, silent arras figures, which are surpassed by the "rattling," "screaming," sensuous peacock; their message of death is defeated, and Page celebrates the triumph of a new poetic vision over the stasis and silence which threatened it earlier in the poem.[15] This kind of "substitution of figurative life for the marks of death is, as always in elegy, only partial" (Ramazani, *Yeats* 157). The ending of "Arras" is hauntingly ambiguous and questions the durability of Page's celebrated new vision. The orgasmic union of the peacock and the poet's eye is followed by the plaintive whimper, "Does no one care?" The final lines see the poet waiting for "another bird" to reveal itself, but this promise of regeneration is chastened by the persistence of the staring figures who remain as remote as ever, "motionless, / folding slow eyes on nothing." Rooke interprets the figures as representative of "the glory (the perfection of human life) that is sought by the poet throughout her work" (136); at the end, however, they also seem to be emblems of the unrelenting demands of that work. In retrospect, they are troubling harbingers of Page's ten-year period of poetic silence ended by the appearance of *Cry Ararat!* in 1966. The final stanza also reveals the limits of Page's figurative defeat of death. Her longing for human contact ("I dreamed the bite of fingers in my flesh") expresses the self-elegist's worry that her search for continued life through a "defensive attachment to [her] own language" has consigned her to a kind of living death, sealed off from life's immediacy (Ramazani, *Yeats* 188).

W.H. Auden has said that all writing is an attempt at immortality. "The writer is like a schoolboy who carves his initials on a desk; he wishes to live for ever" (Auden 16-17). Page dedicates *The Hidden Room* "To All My Family and Beyond," indicating her own desire to speak to future generations through her work. In the eponymous poem that introduces the collection, however, she worries about how that work will be received:

I am showing it to you
fearful you may not
guess its importance

that you will see only
a lumber room
a child's bolt-hole

Will not know it as prism
a magic square
the number nine (*HR* 1: 11)

The author who desires immortality cannot control the reception of her work; there is no way to ensure that, after her death, it will be interpreted correctly, or that it will be read and remembered at all. While Page has her doubts about a kind of immortality that amounts to "preservation in a literary pickle jar" (Ramazani, *Mourning* 15), she suggests that there is another kind that is more accessible and productive. One of the *glosas* in *Hologram* incorporates and develops the lines from Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" that indicate the only kind of immortality that is available to the poet: "He became his admirers"(*HR* 2: 199). Implicit in the *glosa* form itself is the message that however he may try to envision "monuments of unageing intellect" (Yeats 217) or otherwise seek in his own poetry a refuge from death, his best opportunity for continued life is in the work of other poets. It is an immortality that Page has already attained. Hers is still a living voice, and other poets have begun to incorporate her poems into *glosas* of their own.[16] Through her example, the lines of conversation are kept open, between the past and present, and beyond.

NOTES

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1 The quotation used in the title of this paper is the title of the final section of *The Hidden Room* vol. 2.

2 In his use of the term "self-elegy," Ramazani draws upon Helen Vendler'd examination of the "posthumous voice" of Wallace Stevens's late poems (32-35) and also upon Harold Bloom's discussion of the "hieratic poems" or "pre-elegies" in which Romantic poets anticipate their own deaths (90). For Ramazani's detailed readings of Yeats's self-elegies see *Yeats* 134-99. *Poetry of Mourning* contains readings of self-elegies by Stevens, Auden, and Plath.

3 For an account of the relationship between English Renaissance poetry and medieval religious formulas for meditating on one's own death, see Stein 67-118.

4 For a more detailed genealogy of the self-elegy, see Ramazani, *Yeats* 136.

5 For wide-ranging discussions of the change in Page's aesthetic that occurred during this period, see Sullivan ("Size"), Relke, and Killian.

6 Sandra Djwa hints at a self-elegiac interpretation of Page's autobiographical companion poems "Cullen" and "Cullen Revisited" by suggesting that the latter poem presents the shift from "socialistic journey to spiritual journey" as "a conflagration of the previous self" (Page, "Biographical Interview" 35).

7 In quotations of Page's poetry, all page numbers refer to *The Hidden Room*, henceforth abbreviated to *HR*.

8 In conversation with Djwa, Page alludes to this unresolved conflict, saying that her failure to be reconciled with her father has caused her to dream about him since his death. See Page, "Biographical Interview" 35-6.

9 In his reading of Yeats's "The Tower," Ramazani lists the series of active verbs through which the poet seeks to "reverse his passive relation to death" (*Yeats* 170).

10 Ramazani's reading of Stevens's "Prologues to What Is Possible" emphasizes its allusions to the ending of Shelley's *Adonais*. See *Mourning* 119-20.

11 Ramazani identifies a similar strategy in Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion." See *Yeats* 192-3.

12 Virgil, in the alternate beginning to the *Aeneid*, Spenser, in the invocation to *The Faerie Queene*, and Milton, in the invocation to *Paradise Regained*, all take care to distinguish between these works and the poets' earlier productions. For discussions of the invocation as a recapitulation of the stages of the poet's career, see Lipking 69 and Ramazani, *Yeats* 140.

13 A look at the intersection of gender and genre in "Elegy" sheds more light on the beginnings of Page's break with modernist values. Killian argues that this break is achieved in "After Rain," a poem which constituted a serious risk to Page's reputation as a modernist poet, because lines like "tears are a part of love" could have led critics to categorize and dismiss her as a "sentimental poetess" (98). "Elegy" is an important precursor to "After Rain" in this respect because of its generic associations. In a modernist critical climate, female poets who wrote elegies risked being labelled as "nightingales," and for this reason, major modernist women poets such as Gertrude Stein, H.D., and Marianne Moore tended to avoid the form (Ramazani, *Mourning* 21). While Page's choice of the elegy is thus a deliberate flouting of modernist taboo, her suppression of feminine subjectivity throughout the poem indicates a residual wariness of the modernist association of the form with sentimentality.

14 Ramazani argues that ekphrasis has always been linked to the idea of death, as some of the earliest examples of the form were tomb inscriptions. For a brief summary of the relationship between ekphrasis and the poet's mortality, and a discussion of Yeats' ekphrastic self-elegies, see *Yeats* 152-61. As a poem that describes an imagined work of art, "Arras" is an example of what John Hollander has called "notional ekphrasis" (209). Messenger finds the term useful in her approach to some of Page's Brazilian poems. See Messenger 193.

15 I am influenced in this reading of "Arras" by Ramazani's reading of Yeats' "Lapis Lazuli." See *Yeats* 156-57.

16 John Barton, Elizabeth Brewster, and Sandy Shreve have all written *glosas* based on Page's poems. They appear in *The Malahat Review* 117 (1996): 62-67.

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Anne Simpson

Self-Portrait with Eyes Closed

after Odd Nerdrum's self-portrait (oil on canvas, 1991)

I walk through blue shawls of early morning
to the Landing, where the fog raises one pale hand
after another—antebellum, the slow grace—

in a ballroom the length of a river, with yellowlegs
bowing, about to execute a quadrille. Isn't that a picture—
a portrait—there, hung between two dead elms?

Not something radiant: a Dutch family made holy
by Rembrandt. No. It resembles you—
mouth open, eyes shut—the way you might be

dying. Barely alive. I see faces everywhere:
ones I love, ones I do not know. Maybe all of us
walk this muddy track, slender as the slat of a blind,

between hawthorns garlanded with wild cucumber.
Crows heckle in the far-off trees, as we enter the place of no
and no, and stand in a clearing beyond,

while breath goes out of us and we are thinned,
made thin as a sigh. And all this time the mist
has been coyly retreating, and now every last apple

hangs red and brazen, wetlands golden with the new
weight of light which comes, keeps coming back,
so we turn to it for warmth, feel it under closed lids.

Sue Sinclair

Cafe Interior, Night

The windows become reflective,
forget the single thought
they acted out all day, letting time
pass. Now it doesn't exactly stand still
but seems to matter less, is less able
to come between us. The back of your head
becomes indistinguishable from my shoulder
two tables away. Even our gestures
are continuous. Dark and light meet
and acknowledge one another—we are all
strangers. Caught between panes of glass,
it is hard not to speak of ghosts. There
is little to fear in two dimensions, fewer ways
of being alone. Conversation has lost its urgency.
Something subterranean happens between us
and now talk is only a matter of habit.

Méira Cook

Bone Memory
Transcribing Voice in Louise Bernice Halfe's *Blue Marrow*

Sing. Sing, *Nōhkomak.*
Lend me your wind.
Over the prairie
her Voice rolled (*Blue Marrow* 56)

As marrow runs through bone so do the voices in Louise Bernice Halfe's second book of poetry run through the bare bones of her narrative. Halfe, who was born and raised on the Saddle Lake Reserve in Alberta, and attended Blue Quills Residential School, now lives in Saskatchewan. She has written two books of poetry, *Bear Bones & Feathers* (1994), and *Blue Marrow* (1998). In *Blue Marrow*, a Cree woman searches for a past that is both personal and communal, remembered and imagined, and finds this history in the stories her foremothers whisper, shout, and sing as their voices roll across the prairie. The poems are direct forms of address between the narrator and her foremothers—who are explicitly and exhaustively named in the opening pages (3-5)—through their collective stories. Apart from imagining, in this way, a fascinating dialogue between history, taletelling, and memory, Halfe also initiates an intriguing correspondence between the written text and its oral equivalent. As in the above quotation, the stories the foremothers relate are described as "wind," as "voice," and breath, a nomenclature that immediately establishes an opposition between the written text and what has been called oratory.[1]

Because the stories have been communicated to the narrator in oral form they may be termed oratory, yet our reception of them, of course, is through the written text, *Blue Marrow.* Halfe's writing mimes the idiosyncrasies and colloquialisms of speech through a wide range of dialects and registers

ingeniously communicated through typeface. Nevertheless, *Blue Marrow* is a written text, despite Halfe's presentation of multiple speakers whose clashing, intermittent language transgresses the authority of the conventionally bounded text. This translation of speech into writing is perhaps inevitable in the context of Western modes of production and reception, where poetry is typically communicated through the silent communion between the (absent) writer on one side of the page and the reader on the other. However, habituation should not allow us to ignore the implications of such an act of translation: the fixing of the fluency and elusiveness of speech within the materiality of writing. Barbara Godard calls such a process "amputation," since the oral text, when transcribed, is "a pale reflection of the original speech act" (92). Neither performance nor event, the oral text becomes a "rendering" of performance in another medium (93).

Halfe playfully exploits this double act of translation, first transcribing the voices her narrator hears into writing and then agitating these words to approximate the vividness and indeterminacy of speech in the process of resisting its writerly qualities. As breath, wind, speech, the stories the foremothers tell and that her narrator gathers from the prairie breeze resist the primacy and dominance of the written word, allowing Halfe to frame "oratory" as an act of resistance. Yet orality, in the context of First Nations' history and, more particularly, in Halfe's multilingual text, is a complex and politicized enterprise in which writing, inscription, becomes the medium for many acts of forced compliance from the Bibles the missionaries wield to the treaties that sign away land and identity.[2] The ingenuity with which Halfe troubles such binaries as speech and writing produces a text, *Blue Marrow*, that pulses with the opposition between writing as utterance and the lyricism and jubilance to be gained from the performance of orality.

1. The Structure: Bare Bones

> Grandmothers hold me. I must pass all that I possess,
> every morsel to my children. These small gifts
> to see them through life. Raise my fist. Tell the story. (5)

The poems in *Blue Marrow* comprise subtle points of transference between the narrator who "hears" and inscribes them in a writing act that is akin to dictation, and the generations of women—foremothers—whose voices she channels. As a conduit for the ancestors with their words of wisdom and grief, "every morsel" of which she is obliged to pass on (5), the first-person narrator enters a story that pre-exists her, a narrative that began "before I

was a seed," and one to which she is bound by the umbilical cord her mother strings in her moccasins (1). The "big book" through whose pages her grandfather guides her childish fingers (1) is another version of this predetermined narrative, a story whose words must be carefully gathered and whose bones must be strung and unstrung until they form the reconstituted skeleton of the "ferocious unburied woman" of the epigraph whose spirit, thus invoked, guides the narrator on her memory quest.

Halfe's narrator, whose "crumbs of memory" (5) have not proved equal to the task of storytelling with which she is charged, enters the narrative by way of the written word, an enterprise for which she is gently mocked: "When I returned to the cabin I filled the pockets between the logs with / papers, stacked the walls with my books. A man, braids hanging past his / shoulders, laughed" (1). In fact, this moment is the repetition of an earlier one: in the Afterword to her first book of poetry, *Bear Bones & Feathers*, Halfe reports a dream in which she repairs her cabin with paper and books. "I had entered this ceremony, the stirring of my marrow, a living prayer of building and healing, feeding my soul," she writes, going on to list the range of writers and texts she pores over in an effort to seek out an internal story that "demanded face" (*Bear Bones* 127). In this way the Afterword acts as a threshold, a doorway, connecting the reader with the grief-stricken poems of *Bear Bones & Feathers* and anticipating the multiple voices of *Blue Marrow*.

Equally significant, in the Afterword to *Bear Bones & Feathers*, is the narrator's construction of writing as a "natural process," a progression of "visible tracks" that she has to search out and interpret, becoming, by this means, a "wolf," a "predator on the scent" (*Bear Bones* 127). Such a trope recognizes writing and history as pre-existing narratives to which the narrator can be connected if she listens closely, or to extend the metaphor, if she proves herself a skilled enough tracker—one ear pressed to the ground the other obligingly cocked to the voices of the ancestors. In *Bear Bones & Feathers* the narrator takes dictation from the universe, detailing how "The Great Mystery" enters her dreams ("squirrels shared their chatter, the wind blew its soul into my ears, and the water spoke its very ancient tongue" 126), yet in *Blue Marrow* it is the voices of her foremothers she hears and for whom she must speak since they lie effectively silenced, "tongueless in the earth" (6).

Marked by her role as poet and storyteller—"On my left breast was a hoofprint. It disappeared when I began to walk for them" (3)—the narrator enters the "big book" of history *in medias res*, painstakingly acknowledging

the names of the women who have preceded her (3-5). As much a scar as a brand, the hoofprint upon her breast is what identifies her as woman and poet, as careful bone gatherer. As such, her problem remains one of genealogy: how to respectfully enter the narrative and how to heal the marked body in the process. She begins with intimate portraits of her four grandmothers in the form of prose poems, after which she invokes each woman directly announcing her obligation to remember and to imagine, to animate the lives of the "ferocious unburied" women who have preceded her and to pass their stories on to the women who will follow:

> Oh Sarah, Adeline,
> Oh Emma, Bella,
> tongueless in the earth.
> Oh *Nōhkomak,*
> your Bundles I carry inside,
> the full moon dancing
> beyond my wails.
> I've seeped into
> your faces,
> drowned in the pictures
> I have gathered
> and cannot
> hold. (6-7)

This free verse invocation emerges from the structure of the prose poem portraits that have preceded it as if squeezed out of alignment by the pressure of memory and the force of obligation.

It is significant that the narrator imagines herself, in the above lines, as an overflowing container, a vessel whose memories are too excessive to admit of containment. In the poems that follow the narrator hears the voices of her grandmothers flowing thick as marrow in the bone as she struggles to gather and hold them before us. As both listener and narrator she is a conduit between the grandmothers who speak and the reader who listens; she is the privileged outsider who assumes her position at the margins of narrative yet whose insight allows her access to secret histories. Through the metaphor of the window before which she sits and the bone she fingers as she listens to the voices, the narrator negotiates her way out of amnesia and into memory presented as story.

In the iconography of *Blue Marrow* the window is the site of inspiration and enlightenment where the narrator habitually sits clutching the bone that acts as a goad to memory:

This long bone I hold
leaves me calloused and cold.
A few months ago I chewed all the meat off
and now I've become clever
I press these words hard
with charcoal
over and over
so I can write. (11)

The bone, more particularly the "jaw bone of elk / lined with pearly teeth" (14) that the narrator chooses as *aide-mémoire,* hanging onto it through the double "whiteouts" of blizzard and amnesia (14), is both totem and *memento mori.* Although bones provide the charmed touchstone for a communal recognition of memory—"my bone / filled with the fists of women / of the fur trade" (12-13)—and a guide to writing—as when the bones "stand and sing" as they guide the narrator's fingers "on this page" (2)—they are also weapons, piercing the temples (38) and splintering the mouth (42).

The narrator who sits beside her window and who ironically confesses herself "clever" because she has gnawed the meat from the bone, pressing charcoal into the words she writes so that they will remain permanent, nevertheless knows that she is in imminent danger of obliteration. In the lines that follow she lists the ways in which the bones of her foremothers have been disturbed, whether through the ambivalent pleasures of assimilation—as when "blond children / bred through the blood of the fur-traders / seep through our women" (11)—or through the much more violent contamination of religious colonization in the reference to the "holy bones" of the missionaries (12), and the restless remains of Columbus, whose "bones at the cathedral of Santa Domingo" have been moved four times (13).

With bone in hand the narrator protects herself from the metaphoric dangers of weather and darkness. The repeated refrain of "Cree-ing alone in the heavy arm of snow" (14) deftly combines references to the Cree language with the wailing cry of a woman anticipating the moment when she "won't have to live / in whiteouts much longer" (15). The image of the blizzard as "whiteout" cogently evokes the plight of the narrator at her window, alienated as she is by the prospect of living in a world of white values, coldness, and lack of vision.[3] Instead she turns inward to listen for the voices that will guide her through emotional storms and psychic darkness, that will lift the fog and shatter the ice (16), and the narrative that follows is a record of these voices as they sing through bone like the "blue marrow" that provides both title and extended metaphor for these poems.

2. Jaw Bones

My inglish no good
Me stink of rawhide an burning drum.
Smoke my hair, greased in bear fat.
I no no udder way. (35)

The stories the narrator hears and inscribes from dictation follow their own tempo, gaining momentum as more voices join the chorus, each one contributing "stories so small" they must be pulled like thread through the eye of a needle (53). Sewing metaphors and biblical allusions aside, the stories, though small, are not insignificant and in order to communicate them the narrator must construct herself as medium, as conduit for the voices that crowd the atmosphere:

I bring to you
these Voices I will not name. Voices
filled with bird calls, snorting buffalo,
kicking bears, mountain goats.
I do not recognize who speaks. (17)

Anonymous, collective, and exuberant, the voices create an audible text that plays the border between orality and inscription.

While frequently referring to themselves by the collective pronoun "we," the foremothers also narrate individual stories introduced by the first-person pronoun. These stories appear as a sequence of narratives articulated either by a variety of speaking subjects or, alternately, by a communal presence inclusive of all voices in the text. Identifying themselves as "she who called" (27), the voices address the narrator as *Nōsisimak* and promise to guide her pen—"*We will flow, / we will flow, / the well / will never dry*" (27)—and her heart: "*We will hold you. / We will fill your lungs. / We will be there*" (28).

Although the message the voices bring is one of encouragement and acceptance—prepare a place for us, they seem to be saying, and "*we will come*" (28)—it is equally clear that speech is a fraught and precarious enterprise. The narrator describes her conversation with the voices as one in which words are squeezed through "blistered tongues" (17), in which the tongue itself is swallowed (17, 34) or torn out of the "open mouth" (18) and the mouth is alternately sewn shut or stifled by the fist (42).

It is no accident that the narrator's guiding bone is the jaw bone of an elk "lined with pearly teeth" (14), thus emphasizing speech and its various impediments. The voices in *Blue Marrow* are generous with their lives and stories, freely offering memories of abandonment and despair, yet the lan-

guage in which they do so, ranging as it does from translated English to untranslated Cree, bears witness to the discourse of colonization, in which to speak is to straddle the narrow border between learning to "ride English" (5), and "Cree-ing loud" into the night (14).

One example of a woman who is represented as telling her story while drawing attention to the difficulties of address in a colonizer culture is the foremother who speaks in dialect, confessing her "*inglish no good*" but knowing "*no udder way*" (35). She is ironically represented as outsider, as "*udder way*," as she stands in the snow outside the log cabin where the fur trader who was once her lover now lives with his British wife:

> *I look in big window. He read,*
> *she stand dere dall like dree holding his neck.*
> *I lift his baby to my breasts.*
> *He said dey brown jugs. I keep him still. His eyes*
> *dahching my face. My inglish no good.* (35)

In this case the window before which the narrator habitually sits in order to gain insight through listening to the voices and writing their stories, the window that keeps her inside the narrative, is precisely what marks the unnamed woman in the snow as outsider, dividing her from the lamplit scene of domestic harmony within.

The narrator gazes outside, hears the voices and absorbs their stories; the unnamed woman gazes inside and perceives the scene that marks her as outsider. As shared sign of enlightenment the window is the ironically transparent membrane between inside and outside, a glass that reflects the "outside" woman only as a reflection of "*[h]is eyes / dahching my face.*" The man who defines her as a woman with "*brown jugs*" and his new wife, who is unaware of her existence, are metonymically represented as twin mouths: her "*moudth pink like rabbit nose*" (35) and his mouth which she experiences as an enduring absence: "*I live wit his moudth . . . I live wit his moudth*" (35). The mouth—like the title trope of marrow in the bone or the ubiquitous image of the window—is the border between inside and outside, between speech and silence.

The narrator who sits at her window transcribing the voices as words on her page performs a peculiarly fraught transaction since she mediates the binaries of oral and written discourse and, as such, the territory between disenfranchised culture and colonizing presence. That she is aware of this opposition is clear in her construction of the technology of writing as a form of original sin:

My words get in your way.
I feel your sting.
My printer refuses to feed my leaves.
A squirrel stakes out
the sink.
I feed him my apple.
My printer sins. (31)

In a series of staccato, largely monosyllabic words the narrator establishes a rhythm to her invective. Like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, words "sting," the computer printer "sins," and the writer, in her guise as the temptress, Eve, offers an apple.

The allusion to Genesis is positioned as an ironic counterpoint to the voices that follow, which alternate between that of a dispossessed missionary who offers his life to "save savage souls" (31) and the chorus of foremothers who testify to the violence of the residential schools confessing, in the process, to their own acts of rebellion in the face of massive cultural appropriation and religious abuse:

We were the ones who burned down the jesuits'
church, trilled, danced and laughed through the night.
We watched those cabins eaten by our flames. We
were the ones, Nōsisim*, who hid the Bundles,*
held council when we learned how those brothers
lifted their skirts to spill their devils into our sons' night. (32)

Yet despite this subversion of the Genesis story as a narrative of sin and forgiveness, the allusion to an originary expulsion from Eden remains clear and resonates in the text's later references to Aboriginal land claims and First Nations' rights. At the same time, the use of the Biblical subtext as a further example of a narrative that has been transcribed from a variety of oral sources, reinforces the narrator in her role as scribe for the voices of the foremothers she hears calling perpetually from beyond her window.

3. Untranslated Borders

Ē-pēcimakik.
I haunt them.
My wailing stories. (49)

The narrator chooses to translate the stories she hears into English but this is a choice that is neither off-hand nor, as she makes increasingly clear, unproblematic. It is not explicit in what languages the voices speak, but the

appearance of words and phrases that have not been translated into English implies that much of what she hears comes to her in the form of the Cree language. In a departure from her first book of poetry, *Bare Bones & Feathers,* Halfe does not provide the reader with a glossary of Cree words conveniently arranged in order of their appearance in the text. This purposeful omission is an editorial choice that signals her acknowledgement that she is not writing predominantly for a white English-speaking audience.

Indeed, the poem sequence opens with a highly evocative scene in which the narrator's grandfather reads to her from a book, a phrase from which is rendered in pictorial form and which remains untranslated, in fact, given the form in which it appears, remains illegible for a reader like myself who is ignorant not only of Cree but also of the letters used in this alphabet:

> When I was a grasshopper my Grandfather would open a big book. His fingers traced the path of ᐊᒋᒐᐃᓐ, mouth moving quietly (1)[4]

I do not mean to imply that the letters are by nature illegible since a reader familiar with the language would find it an easy matter to read and understand the phrase that the grandfather shows his granddaughter. In acknowledging my own ignorance of the language I intend only to locate a position of ignorance that I presumably share with many other English-speaking readers of Halfe's text. The grandfather who points out the letters does not pronounce them aloud, and this too is significant in the context of the failure I share with other readers to translate or read this word.

The untranslated word that impels the narrative from this point situates a trope of incomprehensibility that functions to mark the non-Cree speaking reader as outsider, as opposed to his/her habitual mode of fluent language-user in the North American context where the linguistic currency is English. The grandfather's gesture, his gift of the word that his granddaughter chooses not to squander through a translation that could not possibly signify in excess of what the word represents in its pictorial form, anticipates the voices of the grandmothers who communicate with the narrator in a variety of spoken forms. The foremothers invoke, mourn, and exclaim in Cree and in English as well as in a dialect form that mimics the sound of English spoken in the accents of an habitual Cree speaker, one example of which is the "*my inglish no good*" speech. The patois functions to destabilize English as the colonizer's chosen discourse, a conclusion that has some credibility in the care with which many First Nations theorists and poets have taken to articulate their oppositional position *vis-à-vis* the English language.

In her essay, "Immersed in Words," the poet Roberta J. Hill describes her struggle with language by sharing a poetic allegory about an "Indian girl" and a boy named English. English, we are told, "loved the stuff, the goods, the hands-on boodle. He liked action, discovery, conquest" (84). But while English can't describe complex familial relationships in his language, the Indian girl's parents "offered seventeen different ways to describe relatives even if they gathered in one small room, with three old ladies sitting down to chat and nine boys heading out to go fishing" (84). After some time passes, the girl grows increasingly disenchanted with English, his arrogance, limited language, and acquisitiveness. Hill's story ends with an acknowledgement of the girl's continuing search for "ways to speak of relations" despite the fact that she has chosen to do so in a language—English—that is, as yet, ignorant of such connections (85).

Hill's implicit message—that English, as opposed to Indigenous languages, is a concrete signifying system too limited to communicate adequately the emotional ties between people—is a familiar construct in First Nations writing. Jeannette Armstrong writes eloquently and evocatively of a mother-tongue that speaks through landscape: "Voices that move within as my experience of existence do not awaken as words. Instead they move within as the colours, patterns, and movements of a beautiful, kind Okanagan landscape. They are the grandmother voices which speak" (176).[5] Poet and critic Marie Annharte Baker refers to English as a "borrowed" language (41),[6] while playwright Daniel David Moses articulates his difficulty with writing in English as an act of translation, not only from one language to another but from one set of values to another, "between, for instance, what each community thought was the definition of the word *human*" ("How My Ghosts" 137).

In *Blue Marrow* Halfe energetically takes up the challenge of what one First Nations writer calls the "Indianizing" of English[7] through her varied and complex use of italics. Italicizing words and phrases from a language other than the one used in the body of a text typically exoticizes the "other" language as foreign, alien, and in need of explanation. Similarly, the placement of a glossary at the back of a book of prose or poetry, by means of which these highlighted words are obligingly translated to a reader presumably ignorant of their meaning, sets up a relationship of discursive dominance by means of which the italicized language is subordinated, rendered difficult, troublesome, and in need of editorial intervention. Such words, it is implied, cannot be left to stand on their own but must be herded into a dictionary-like enclosure where their intransigence may be domesticated

through definition and correct usage. In a narrative that includes many speakers as well as multiple registers of discourse, Halfe uses italics to express her resistance to the act of translation as an easy alternative to the bilingualism inherent in a text that fluctuates between languages—Cree and English—and between discursive sites—the written and the oral.

Instead of exoticizing and subordinating Cree words through the use of a distinct typeface and a convenient glossary, Halfe multiplies her use of italics to indicate a range of voices and discursive functions, in this way resisting the monologic idea of one-to-one correspondence inherent in the act of translation. While it is true that she includes passages in which Cree phrases are apparently followed by their English equivalents, such mirroring, because it takes place simultaneously on the page (rather than the effect of textual footnoting that occurs when italics are referred to a glossary at the back of a book), gives the appearance of a bilingual text:

> *Pē-nihtacowēk, Nōhkomak.*
> Climb down, my Grandmothers.
>
> *Pē-nanāpacihinān.*
> Come heal us. (16)

This invocation to the foremothers in Cree and in English is closely followed by an ironically inflected quotation from the Catholic liturgy, also in italics:

> *Bless me, father. I've pierced my flesh. Dance*
> *with the Sun. Bathe my face in blood. I didn't mean to.*
> *Forgive me, father. I ask for absolution.*
> *I promise to say my rosary and serve my time.*
> *I promise to keep my hands to myself and swallow my*
> *tongue. Amen.* (17)

This catechism, with its ironic promise of self-mutilation and muteness, is very different from the elegiac invocation to the Grandmothers on the previous page, yet both are inflected by italics. Rather than the exact correspondence between "foreign" word and translated text that the use of italics typically announces, Halfe extends her italicized texts to include multiple voices and registers of discourse from the collective chorus of the foremothers to the lonely voice of the unnamed fur-trader's wife. The foremothers who promise to guide their granddaughter's heart and pen testify to their disenfranchised status. Whipped by the men as if they were dogs or plough-horses (27), they come to her by night, in disguise:

> *We will leave our tracks,*
> *laugh through the thunder*

Feel the crack of our whips.
We will cast lightning,
torch hearts
full of memory.
Listen. (28)

In the interstices of the season, between the lines of poetry arranged sparsely on the page, the foremothers speak, their words the "tracks" upon which the narrator must travel in her quest for memory and understanding. "*We are here,*" they cry, "*here, / here*" (27), the indeterminacy of such an ambiguous position as "here" opening out into the textual absences by which their presence may be "heard."

The use of italics in this case acts as a border[8] between the living and the dead, between the colonizer's language and the "whispering" but subversive words of the dispossessed (27). As a boundary line the italic exists as both a mark of connection and of division. In much the same way, geographical borders function to keep their inhabitants apart from marauding outsiders, but such borders may, of course, be opened, crossed, or eroded; indeed their very existence encourages such transgressions. In Halfe's intensely heteroglossic text no border is unidirectional, no sign is monologic. Instead, the italicized site of the border functions as a linguistic tear or pleat, folding the text over and over, connecting diverse voices and parallel stories. By this means the foremothers are structurally aligned with the narrator, the one they call *Nōsisim*, as well as with all the other dispossessed voices in the text, from the ironic recipient of the Catholic communion to the unnamed woman who has been abandoned by the fur trader:

Bitterness
eats me. I left too early,
was with him for five earths
before the talk of going over the waters.
One night
I felt the axe.
I watched him bury me. (43)

The woman who has died, yet whose voice resounds clearly, who describes her own death and watches her burial, occupies a liminal place within the narrative and one that is delineated through the use of italics. In an extended section (38-48) her italicized voice alternates with that of the fur trader and the narrator, both of whose "speech" is represented in regular typeface. The woman who returns from her own burial to remind the narrator of her existence performs a doubled and ambiguous act of inscription since she persistently

invokes her own disappearance (43): "*I do not exist, / have not / since my bones / dissolved*" (44). As wraith she is insubstantial and itinerant, yet as ancestral voice she occupies a potent position in the narrative: "*Ē-pēcimakik.* / I haunt them. / My wailing stories" (47). The oral tradition, transliterated into what one writer calls "the rhythms, structures, and techniques of contemporary verse" (Gould 798), finds (im)material form in the voice of this dispossessed woman who has bequeathed to the narrator her "wailing stories."

Halfe's poetry affronts the master narrative of imperialism and commodification by offering, in its place, a vivid account of the dispossessed who, though dead and buried, refuse to be silent and whose stories wind through them as thread through the eye of a needle:

> *aiy aiy aiy Nōsisim*
> *here this needle*
> *thread its eye*
> *oh these stories so small*
> *pull them out*
> *squeeze them through* (53)

If autobiography provides, as First Nations poet Gloria Bird phrases it, a vital and necessary "decolonizing strategy" (47), then no story may be considered too small, too insignificant to be unraveled by the narrative *aiy* / eye / I.

4. Cooking up Stories

> When the Voices roar,
> I write.
> Sometimes they sing,
> are silent.
> In those times
> I read, answer overdue letters,
> go for a walk or a jog,
> stoke my fire, prepare baloney
> mustard sandwich, wild rice salad. (48)

At her window, by the warmth of her wood stove and surrounded by "frozen woods," the narrator describes herself as "cocooned one hour from the city" (48). In the deceptive guise of other window-waiting women—Penelope and the Lady of Shalott, Tennyson's forlorn Mariana—the narrator does not loiter to be rescued by suitor or knight errant but instead waits upon the voices of the foremothers that "haunt" her (49) as her story haunts us. These moments of textual anchorage, where the narrator describes herself

and her surroundings as she writes, are few and fleeting and are inevitably followed by the voices with their discontinuous, unsigned tales. Since the tales in question are not owned but are conceived of as communal property, the tellers are often anonymous voices who are not always sure of their own identity. "I no longer know / who I am" (35), admits one such voice, the indeterminacy of this utterance along with what in another context James Ruppert calls the existence of "multiple narratives of identity" (vii) provides a powerful means of combating charges of essentialism that may conceivably be leveled at a text in which speech is constructed as oracular and the act of listening as a process of dictation.

In addition, the narrator deflates her heroic function by detailing the everyday tasks she performs when the voices are silent. She reads, writes letters, walks or jogs, and prepares food that is convenient and ordinary. This last point is hardly accidental; in the context of a narrative concerned with what (and who) has been consumed, commodified, and colonized and who has resisted these structures, the narrator's preoccupation with food is enormously significant. Shortly after her description of the baloney sandwich and wild rice salad she eats in the lulls between the voices, the foremothers instruct her to feed them. "We do not talk until we're fed," they explain (49), and what follows is the foods for which, presumably, they hunger:

> Saskatoon moose nose sturgeon soup
> Indian popcorn bannock lard
> laced bowels bible tripe duck
> neck bones deer steak goose roast
> cottage cheese cream tea
> corn rice raisin strawberry pudding (49)

In the middle of this nostalgically inflected list of traditional food the word "bible" intrudes. Positioned as a rude interruption to the flow of memory and appetite that the list initiates, the "bible" is buried in the inner organs (between "bowels" and "tripe"), a fitting reminder that the missionary enterprise colonized the bodies as well as the minds and souls of their converts.

In contrast to the narrator's hastily prepared meal of sandwich and salad, the foremothers demand a feast, a celebratory meal that encodes the stories they tell as ritual and reciprocal events to which they welcome the narrator as to a potlatch: "Young and old women sit in a semicircle. / Hands on each steamed bowl, pot and pan" (51). Yet food as a trope of digestion and assimilation is hardly an innocent metaphor. bell hooks begins her significantly entitled essay, "Eating the Other," with a phrase that frames the consump-

tion of food as colonization: "Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (21).[9] The eating of food, along with the pleasurable connotations of appetite, delight, surfeit, nourishment, and nostalgia, carries with it a darker freight of associations that link it to the dubious practices of assimilation. Ideas of greed, commodification, rejection, disgust, and consumption are staples of the colonizing enterprise and, in Halfe's text, are used interchangeably to describe the experience of being devoured and owned.

The woman who has been abandoned by the fur trader, for example, tells her child how she once cured the trader of his "*stink*" with a "*brew*" of nourishing herbs (47). Yet it is significant that whereas food is figured as curative in this image, the fur trader, in turn, is described as "*a slop of neck and gizzard*" (47). The man who does not give thanks to the animals he hunts for food and profit ("*Not once did the four-legged people / receive a Pipe*" 47) is himself transformed into a carcass, or more accurately, into unappetizing and inedible "*slop*." At the same time the woman who prepares an impoverished meal of "*[b]oiled roots and berries, / dried meat and potatoes*" (50) is, not surprisingly, wary of the "*sweet white-skin women*" whose glances, she fears, will "*devour*" her spirit (50). Deserted by the trader, she feeds her children with the "*small portions*" her neighbour's husband leaves her, and she describes her abandonment as a carnivorous interlude: "*Fed to the dogs, / I rotted*" (52).

At the same time, metaphors of consumption become the shorthand for all acts of trade, from the barter and commodification of goods to the spectacle of sexuality figured as flaying:

> *How many times as I lay beneath him did he remind me*
> *I am the bargain from my father's trade?*
> *How many times did he raise my dress,*
> *Sweated hands smeared with dirt and cow,*
> *bloody from skinning? And I received him joyfully.*
> *I am a gentleman's wife.* (52)

The woman who has been traded from father to husband receives the latter's caress in the knowledge that her body has merely replaced the body of the animal he has been butchering. Both woman and beast are obliged to receive his hands "*bloody from skinning,*" although in the case of the woman, his touch has another effect; that of awakening her into "gentility," a metamorphosis that is no less sinister since it carries with it associations of domestication that are apparent in the reference to his hands "*smeared with dirt and cow.*"

The extended metaphor that connects woman with cow and sexuality with the act of skinning, *via* its twin associations of violence and commodification, continues in the next stanza where the woman refers to the factors at the trading post whose knowing glances "*slide*" down her belly as they "*lay their needles, run / their hands on satin*" (52-53). In the space of some fourteen laconic lines the woman traces her progress from rotting carcass "*fed to dogs*" (52), to skinned animal in the process of being transformed into cultivated cloth, into the satin that may, in turn, be used to outfit other "*gentleman's*" wives (52).[10]

Forced to see herself, at every moment, as inhabiting the straightened confines of domesticated animal, she eschews the "*wild*" animals, "*the forest and its creatures*" that "*house*" her flesh (53), to subsist in the narrow interlude of assimilation. "*I have not learned to chime like their bells,*" she confesses, but can find no purchase in the culture into which she has been born since neither can she "*move like our canoes*" (53). In an effort to force whiteness upon herself and her children she admits that she has "*scrubbed with ashes,*" an enterprise that comes to nothing since her skin remains "*baked*" (53). This last word *chimes*—to use her verb—through the lines that precede it, resounding with the assorted connotations of meat skinned, fed, rotting, worked into leather and finally, cooked.[11]

Of course, the binaries of wild / tame, savage / civilized are less than a muted subtext to the questions raised in the foregoing about the nature of the woman's body constructed as site of trade and domestication. Yet Halfe effectively destabilizes the stereotypical association of Native woman with wild (or domesticated) animal by creating a complex web of associations that unfix this woman from any one identification. Instead, by self-consciously multiplying the forms and functions of the animals by which she (ironically) recognizes herself, Halfe's unnamed woman remains uncataloguable, non-generic, neither typical nor typologically classifiable.

Similarly, in a text that throngs with all manner of animal, insect, and bird life positioned naturalistically as well as metaphorically as tokens, the narrator identifies herself with the chameleon (58). And it is significant that this reference occurs immediately before the recital of another menu, similar in structure to the earlier catalogue of traditional foods demanded by the foremothers but startlingly different in content:

> Wild rice pine nuts
> coke potato chips baloney steak
> lobster dried meat rabbit kidney tripe
> earl grey cappuccino mint muskeg tea (58)

The chameleon, token of hybridity, is able to take on the hue of its surroundings and so make its way through potentially hostile territory existing, like the narrator, between competing cultures; symbolized here through the dissonant clash of traditional nourishment, junk foods, examples of so-called fine dining, and brand-name products. Each of the five stanzas that follow each focuses on a different theme—clothing, vehicles, musicians, dwellings, writers—and each provides a similar contrast between the traditional and the contemporary, between First Nations values and the values of a dominant literary, musical, or consumerist culture. Moccasins and buckskin rub up against hiking boots and jeans, Bach and Glenn Gould play alongside Buffy Saint-Marie and Mosquito Drums while Shakespeare and Pablo Neruda jostle for space with Louise Erdrich and Maria Campbell (58).

Although my instinct is to read these stanzas as representative of oppositional binaries, it is important to point out that Halfe simply lists her subjects in no discernible order and to no particular ideological effect. The catalogue exists as a general example of the commodification of writing, music, and history, and the appropriation of First Nations values by a dominant culture remains my own reading of Halfe's uninflected if not entirely neutral representation of contemporary culture.

I am not suggesting that Halfe has not intended this critique of appropriation *via* the commodification of goods and creativity, but rather that her catalogue is inclusive and offers many more choices than those afforded by the codified and hierarchical binaries of white/First Nations, writing/orality, and creativity/appropriation. For example, some of the names mentioned share traits from many cultures, evincing a chameleon-like ability to cross the lines between categories and so aligning themselves with the narrator whose characteristic stance is that of medium between past and present, between traditional stories and present-day contingencies, and between the foremothers who have gone before and the daughters to come.

5. 'Membering Story

> *My mudder and fudder were little bid Irish*
> *an French. My grandfudder, dough, he dick*
> *dongue white skin speak grandmudder's Cree.*
> *She, grandmudder, was a pure. I 'member dere*
> *stories.* (54)

Categories of purity and pollution are notoriously easy to hijack to the ends of racial stereotyping and derogation.[12] In her representation of the Métis

woman who speaks, like her grandfather, with "*dick dongue*," that is, in a patois transliterated from speech and represented as accented English, Halfe presents us with a character of mixed blood, mixed speech, and mixed antecedents. The narrator who wakes, on the first page, in her "white husband's arms" (1) is the first such character, the woman who marries the British fur trader is the second. These representations of women of "mixed" blood—or First Nations women married to white men—occupy a significant position in a text concerned with hybridity as a privileged site of survival and creativity.

Yet despite Halfe's careful positioning of hybridity in her poems, racial miscegenation remains a precarious and dangerous enterprise and one that directly threatens the woman, as doubly Othered subject, with effacement. The First Nations woman whose painstakingly related story takes up the first part of this text experiences herself as "disappeared" (43) and "dissolved" (44), since her body has been traded as a mere artifact passed between her father and the fur trader to whom she has been bartered. "*I was the open flap to all his trades,*" she admits in an image that is startling in its uneasy yoking of violence and sexuality with trade (41). In a later, poignantly lyrical, stanza she contrasts the spirited and graceful young woman she was with the currency she has become:

> *I, his youngest,*
> *with a squirrel's tongue,*
> *beaver-paw hands,*
> *elk's hips, deer walk,*
> *burned deep from the sun,*
> *fresh berry blood.*
> *I became the trade.* (51)

That the foremothers share this state of commodification and estrangement from their bodies is clear. Like the other woman, they too have been passed between men whose status, while very different, is always greater than their own: "*Our breasts that hang from the belts / of prairie settlers / now sway in the hands of our men*" (21). And, like the effaced and unnamed woman who tells her tale to the narrator, the foremothers reclaim their bodies through speech and storytelling, an oral discourse that has no commercial exchange value but that is priceless in the context of recovery and memory that this text implicitly values above all other currency.

In a contemporary parallel to these stories of appropriation, the narrator relates her discomfort at being present at a reunion of her husband's family.

One of "five Indians" in an extended family gathering made up of the children and great grandchildren of colonists who "preached the law of the land" and "taught the little savages to read" (61), the narrator feels the intense alienation of the "adopted" child whose membership in this family is contingent upon the oppression of her family of birth: "How many of my relatives were cattled / onto the reservation during their settlement? How / much of my people's blood was spilled for this / migration?" (61). The family reunion is implicitly contrasted to the communal feast of the foremothers but, in this case, the written word replaces food as the favoured medium of communication; each family has brought a book, we are told, containing "the history of their migration," and the "click of wine glasses" only draws attention to the absence of food (61).

Bereft and angry, the narrator comforts herself and repossesses her children with an act of storytelling that, like the tales of the foremothers, combines bravado with grief:

> Later, driving home,
> I weave a story for my children—how their
> great-grandma rode sidesaddle, waving
> her .22 in the air trying to scare those relatives
> away. I tell them how my relatives lived
> around the fort starving and freezing,
> waiting for diluted spirits and handouts
> from my husband's family. I tell them
> how my little children died wrapped
> in smallpox blankets. My breath
> won't come any more. (61-62)

The narrator who, in the opening pages, awakes in the "crook" of her white husband's arms, "cocooned" in warmth (1), and whose happiness distinguishes her from her unnamed ancestor, now recognizes that any alliance with the white family she has married into compromises her own history. In the story that she tells their children as an antidote to the encroaching narrative of colonization they have been subject to at the family reunion, she balances the boldness of their maternal great-grandmother who chased the settlers from her land with the pathos of the ones who starved and froze waiting for "handouts."

Beneath this poignant if conventional narrative of dispossession, however, runs a more radical subtext that is articulated at the level of the pronoun. The possessive first-person pronoun "my" claims children ("my children"), relatives ("my relatives"), in-laws ("my husband's family"), and finally, even

the children of her ancestors whom she describes as "my little children" and who die of a fatal contagion with the settler culture. The word "my" traverses these lines gathering children and history, reclaiming family and land, leaving her gaping at its narrative power until, "[m]y breath / won't come any more." Like her foremothers, the narrator employs the medium of storytelling to reverse misfortune, to claim space within an alien family, and to teach her children (as she herself has been taught in the preceding pages) that narrative is the nourishing food that makes of diverse "morsels" and "crumbs of memory" (5) a celebratory feast.

This apparent "craving" for story[13] does not preclude the rejection of this same story as unappetizing, difficult to swallow, and harmful to the digestion. At the same time, the story is transformative, and the last quarter of the book demonstrates this quality by transforming the narrator into storyteller, into the one who speaks rather than the one who listens and takes dictation. For in this final section the narrator is no longer the passive recipient of narrative, the one whose ear is poised to catch the voices of the foremothers. Rather, she is an active participant in the "'membering" of her own story through the reluctant but compliant voices of her father and mother.

6. The Structure: Footprints

> My father's dubious eye looks.
> I crawl into him,
> drag out
> his tongue. (72)

Blue Marrow is not, strictly speaking, arranged in sections, yet it is possible to read these poems in loosely organized parts, each one of which foregrounds a particular character. The voices progress forward in time from the undifferentiated chorus of foremothers, through the testimony of the fur trader and his wife, the narrator's grandparents, and finally, to the alternating dialogue between the narrator and her father, and her final recollections of her mother.

Having heard the stories of her grandmother and grandfather (62-71) the narrator undergoes a crisis of story; she hears doors "slamming," windows "crashing," and slices her fingers on "these musty pages" (71). She experiences the past as "fresh food," receives "the swallow's / tongue" and is ushered into her own voice which although "frail, withered speech" (71), is nevertheless the cracked but necessary medium for the telling of her own story through her father's memories and her mother's invective.

Although the most reliable witness to her immediate past, the father's voice must still be forced, the narrator is required to "crawl into him" and "drag out / his tongue." The story he tells of the removal of his children by "Indian Affairs," his homelessness, alcoholism, and poverty, is taken up by his daughter, whose "small footprint," the forlorn trace of her presence, he finally buries (73). This half-buried footprint, always in the process of erasure, is the narrative equivalent of the hoofprint the narrator discovers on her left breast in the opening pages, which "disappear[s]" when she begins to listen to the voices and "walk" for those who have preceded her (3).

The fugitive footprint and the invisible hoofprint mark the narrator as traveller, the one who leaves home with a one-way ticket (76), who holds her breath for "a hundred miles" (77), yet who returns to "walk" for the dispossessed, the unremembered (3). As walker, wanderer, she represents the position of First Nations people deprived of home, land, language, forced into a spurious nomadism that, in the case of the narrator's father, is the prelude to degradation, as when he finds himself "on 97th street, smoking lipstick-stained butts" (74). As well, and perhaps more pertinently, the incipient nomadism by which the narrator is marked provides a creative means of articulating her fluctuating position in this text; listener and speaker, vocal writer and aural reader, she is the wandering signifier whose aimless and purposeful trajectory is the only means of fixing the story in memory.

Like her father, the narrator's mother occupies a precarious place in the story, welcoming her daughter from the threshold, the "door frame" (81), where she leans as she "remembers another doorway" (81). The doorway is the position from which she watches her daughter and her grandchildren drive away, and she waits for them to return at her window described, rather surprisingly, as "a smear of greasy neck bones" (82). In contrast to the window the narrator sits beside as she writes, which is transparent, the mother's window is opaque, "smear[ed]" with memory and smoke from the food she "eat[s] and eat[s]" to keep her heart from rolling in her belly (81). The narrator's mother, who has been physically abused by her husband and sexually abused by the Jesuit priests at the residential school to which she was sent, hovers at all manner of literal and metaphoric thresholds waiting for her daughter to return and preparing a feast to welcome her.

In addition, and perhaps most importantly, her mother is the structural threshold between the narrator's personal and communal past insofar as it can be witnessed through the memories the foremothers relate and the vision of Ram Woman she herself experiences at Kootenay Plains:

> Ram Woman, I stood naked
> beneath the falls.
> Your hoofs pounded
> in that April rain. (87)

The hoofprint on her left breast that disappears as she begins her journey reappears in this incarnation of Ram Woman, who pounds fearlessly "in pursuit / of the laughing sun, the pregnant moon" (87), and who bequeaths the narrator her "large eye" to be used as a "stepping stone" (88).

Thus singled out for vision by Ram Woman's "large eye staring" (87), and symbolically instructed to pound, kick, thump, dance, run, plunge, and fly (all verbs used to describe Ram Woman's leaping progress), the narrator is prepared for the end of her journey by a series of questions she poses to the foremothers:

> Did our Grandmothers know we would be scarred by the fists and boots of men? Our songs taxed, silenced by tongues that speak damnation and burning? . . . Did they know our memory, our talk would walk on paper, legends told sparingly? (89)

In contrast to the immediacy of direct address conveyed through the agitation of free verse that has previously been the preferred form of poetic conversation between the narrator and her foremothers, these final lines are arranged as a prose poem and the address to the ancestors is indirect and formal.

In this way, Halfe's orally transcribed narrative approaches completion in the only way that it can—with the symbolic transmission of story. In the end, the story is never owned but merely passed along: from foremothers to narrator, mouth to ear, from speaker to listener, from writer to reader. A series of rhetorical questions initiates the narrator's final realization that she is no longer speaking directly to her grandmothers because she has, in the process of communicating their stories, assimilated them, becoming her own old woman, wise one, ancestral voice. The complex task of transcribing voice ends with the vision of Ram Woman who provides the narrator with the impetus to assume the guise of storyteller. This transition is accomplished in the final line, "Grandmother, the Woman in Me" (90) which earths the "ferocious unburied woman" whose "adored bones" have remained ungrounded since the epigraph, adorning them, at last, in radiant flesh and blue marrow.

NOTES

I would like to acknowledge the generous assistance of the Izaak Walton Killam Foundation.

1 In an interview, Lee Maracle uses this word, acknowledging that it was coined by Marlene Norbese Philip, to describe "the structure of Indigenous story" which is "not poetry in the European sense and not story in the European sense either" (167). One, but by no means the only, way that oratory may be used as what one critic calls an "act of narrative resistance" (Sands 4) is through an oral tradition that resists the strictly linear and chronological narration of stories. Instead, multiple versions of story move seamlessly between past and present and between subjects who share a communal storytelling tradition rather than being in possession of individual, autonomous stories.

Such a communal oral tradition suggests that subjectivity is provisional and best articulated through the interaction of many shared texts such as autobiographical narration, oratory, and historical narrative. In *Blue Marrow* Halfe presents a version of autobiographical storytelling that uses both textuality and oratory to chart the shifting relations between languages, between writing and speech, and between narrator and reader/listener. In this way she bypasses what Lenore Keeshig-Tobias in "The Magic of Others" calls "the great white imagination," a creative intervention, she maintains, that "kills Natives softly with white metaphors and poetry" (174).

2 Derrida's articulation of the supplemental status of writing *vis-à-vis* speech in *Of Grammatology* provides critics with a framework to discuss so-called oral literature. Julia V. Emberley, for example, emphasizes the orality of storytelling as a form that has been subsumed in the master code of colonial history. More pertinently, James A. Gray asks how it is possible to communicate an oral idiom in a language—such as English—that historically and aesthetically privileges the written: "How can novels in English . . . serve as vehicles of continuity for tribal oral traditions carried on for centuries in different languages embedded with different cultural assumptions and using narrative strategies dictated in part by their performative contexts?"(146-47).

Such a problem has direct relevance to my project and I take very seriously Janice Williamson's interview question to Lee Maracle: "What do you imagine my role as a White literary critic should be in relation to your work?" (168). At the same time, to pretend that Halfe's text, *Blue Marrow,* suffers in its translation from the oral to the written merely because Halfe is a First Nations woman and a writer engaged in retelling an "oral" text, is essentialism of the most offensive kind. Halfe's performance of "oratory" as writing is ingenious and engaging, and unworthy of the pretense that it is inaccessible to white critics.

3 In a similar way, poet Marilyn Dumont writes of being a "survivor of white noise" in her book *A Really Good Brown Girl* (59). In these poems Dumont, like Halfe, uses the metaphor of "white noise" to indicate the shrill but undifferentiated sound of a dominant culture that drowns out the "small single words / of brown women" (60).

4 The importance of this moment is clear in that it is referred to throughout the text, the narrator's grandfather frequently guiding her fingers through the "thick black book" (64), while she observes her grandmother's "shrill / fingers" paging through the "leather book" (65). Such emphasis on the "bookishness" of history deflates the stereotype of orality when applied to First Nations people.

5 Armstrong's construction of writing-as-dictation seems essentialist at first glance. However, in the same essay, she writes of her "continuous battle" against the rigidity of

English as an invasive and imperialist language (194). Such active confrontation of the rigours of English promotes a creative rather than essentialist solution to what she calls the "reinvention of the enemy's language" (175) from the perspective of the Indigenous writer. On the other hand, when critics attempt to discuss this construction of language from the unacknowledged position of outsiders, they fall into the essentialism concomitant upon stereotyping the Indigenous voice in First Nations writing, frequently drawing uncritical attention to what one such critic calls the "delightful 'Indian' humour" of Halfe's narrator when she assumes "a thick Cree 'accent'" (Crate 190).

6 Baker, who refers to herself as a "word warrior" and, more wryly, as a "word slut" (43), frequently coins neologisms, employs *doubles entendres,* and makes punning use of English poetry in order to escape the second-hand lineaments of a borrowed language.

7 A. A. Hedge Coke expresses her frustration at the insufficiency of language to find a term other than "colloquialism" to describe the reclamation of "even simple English words" from their connotations of encroachment. Rather than the term "colloquial," she proposes the adaptation of the verb "Indianizing" to describe the transformation of English words (107).

In addition, Hedge Coke professes herself opposed to what she calls "convenient translation" into English as well as the practice of using italics to indicate "foreign" words since "italicizing words causes them to appear garish or cartoonish, or a caricature of what they are" (114). While Hedge Coke's admonition is timely and well taken as a necessary reminder of the effects of translation, it is possible, as Halfe demonstrates, to use italics in a subtle and ironic manner, thus undermining their comical function.

8 The metaphor of the border is never used accidentally in First Nations writing, and is frequently constructed as a trope by which to articulate issues of appropriation, nationhood, and nomadism. Robin Riley Fast, for example, applies Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of borderland writing to a consideration of Native American poetry. For Fast, the border may signify the site of bilingual speech as well as the multiplicity of ways in which a text "signs" itself as Native American.

9 In her cogent discussion of narratives that "unabashedly dramatize a process of 'eating the Other'," hooks ends with a warning that, once again, utilizes the metaphor of consumption to caution against racial appropriation: "The over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate—that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten" (39).

Such tropes are neither accidental nor infrequent. In the preface to their anthology of *Canadian Native Literature in English,* Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie discuss the issue of appropriation in words that, once again, borrow the language of assimilation and hunger to describe the act of linguistic colonization. "There is a sense," says Goldie, "that a white appropriation of Native voice is trying almost to swallow Native culture and have it inside" (xv). Moses replies that such racial hunger "can't be filled by eating" (xvi).

10 In utilizing such empirical categories as raw and cooked food, freshness and decay, wild and cultivated flesh, I am, of course, borrowing Claude Lévi-Strauss's binary categories in *The Raw and the Cooked.* In Halfe's text, the transition from rotting meat to domesticated animal (cow), to the product of that animal (leather), makes a complex point about the inevitable racialized interpretation of myth and culture.

11 It is significant that the stanzas dealing with the woman's transition from rotting meat to baked flesh occur within the framework of the ritual feast the foremothers demand if they are to continue their stories. The exchange begins with "young and old women"

sitting in a semi-circle, their hands on each "steamed bowl, pot and pan" (51), and ends with an acknowledgment that food has been eaten (53). The framed narrative of the feast reminds us of the possibility that food may be consumed to the ends of communal harmony and peacefulness rather than the violence that Halfe's unnamed woman has gestured toward in her complex recital.

12 I refer here specifically to Mary Douglas's interpretation of the "abominations" of Leviticus in her book *Purity and Danger*. Douglas provides a reading of pollution and moral danger that derives from our perceived uneasiness with sites of ambiguity and hybridity. In her essay on abjection, *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva demonstrates how such intolerance for ambiguity may be applied to linguistic, semantic, religious, and racial categories.

13 In her essay on contemporary women's long poems, subtitled "Craving Stories," Susan Stanford Friedman describes a broadly defined "craving for narrative" (17), an "insistence on story" (38), as the distinguishing mark of narratives that claim historical or mythic discourse as a means of articulating feminine identity.

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Saskia Wolsak

Heaven Forbid We'd Be Happy

Got a ruby red desire
like a virus
like my last hope.
—Heather F.

So this is the week when my friend gets raped. Well, not really raped, cause she likes aggressive guys, and knew he was a schmuck, but still he was choking her and fucking her from behind. And it was just her virginity, not a big deal really since we all had it once and we all lost it once, but not really lost it, at least not that time I said, the real virginity being lack of love, the real loss coming when they care. But she cried a lot anyway, freaked out, said the cops were onto him, said she needed a doctor, said please don't tell don't tell don't tell, you never knew his name.

So, this is the week, so, this is the week we say to each other, you and I, that we can't trust each other after all, that really we're scared shitless that you're not the person I thought you were and I'm not the person you thought I was and so yeah I had these, quote, romantic fantasies, but fuck would I rather be cynical? So you look at me, all wary and shit, and all I can think is it's okay, it's okay, it's not you really, it's just that guy you know, it's
just the thought of women, I mean the thought of men.
And you want to be alone, well, me too, I think, it's just the thought of sex and the thought of sex.

"If your dreams came true what would you have to live for?" says my friend, smiling and skipping away.

"Happiness," I scream, "heaven forbid we'd be happy!" Which I guess my friend isn't now, what with her gates being split, the pearly gates split, the gates she no longer can cross. She looks at me now, smiling.

"I don't believe in God."

There was another story then. About some massage therapist named Jack. He heard what had happened to her and offered to help her out. She tells me he said her first chakra was open, and wow so was his and she needed a good experience to erase the bad, a good experience to erase the bad and he touches her, it's therapy, and she looks at me, she's smiling, and I'm screaming What? What? What the FUCK did he say?!

It's not that we're innocent victims. That's not what this is about. Just— "women are evil and men are pigs." Isn't that what you said you high-praying fuck, isn't that what you said you doctor of God, isn't that what you said, oh my sister?

That night I dreamt you were broken. The men came for me and found you instead. I tried to warn you but couldn't. And when I came into your bedroom there was this huge cardboard box just standing by the bed. I took out my knife and sawed through it. You in here? You in here?
My hands fell in the top. Felt smooth skin of limbs recently severed. Felt warm slip of blood. Oh God, you're in here. And you that night dreamt of guns.

Richard Sanger

High Seas
Elizabeth Bishop Returns Home

I

In September 1917, Elizabeth Bishop took a train ride from the small Nova Scotian village she had grown up in, Great Village on the Bay of Fundy, to Boston. She was six and a half years old, and an orphan. Her father had died less than a year after her birth in Massachussetts, and her mother, deeply affected, had recently been committed to the mental asylum in Dartmouth N.S. where she would die seventeen years later; Bishop would never see her again. Now her paternal grandparents were taking her back to Boston "unconsulted and against her wishes" to raise her properly—to save her "from a life of poverty and provincialism, bare feet, suet puddings, unsanitary school slates, perhaps even from the inverted r's of my mother's family", as she described it in a memoir written in Brazil in 1961 (*Prose* 17).

That memoir, entitled "The Country Mouse," begins with Bishop's paternal Grandfather, unable to sleep in his upper berth, snapping on an overhead light in the compartment as the train rattles through the black, seemingly endless night, through some black hairy forest. Through the young child's eyes, we see her very stiff, new, nineteenth-century grandfather descending half-dressed to climb into the lower berth with her grandmother. Then the light is flicked off. There are obvious hints of dark goings-on, of a child's first inklings of sex, as the train plunges through the woods and the Grandfather growls "savagely" (14)—their formality only makes such embraces seem more mysterious, more wild. More like the woods outside. Darkness, then light, then a greater darkness.

But there is also another image, another experience that lurks behind the scene, one Bishop doesn't describe but one that anyone who has travelled

on trains or buses by night knows. You've put your book aside to look out the window. Someone flicks a reading light on; the landscape you've been trying to make out, dark pines, a desolate gas pump, whatever, is suddenly replaced by a face staring. The window has become a mirror. Where are you coming from? Where are you going? you wonder, trying to get to know this unfamiliar reflection. And as you wonder, as you reflect, you look harder: now where your face was, there's the night again, darker pines, a more desolate gas pump, all speeding past.

This experience I associate with Bishop, not just because of her descriptions of train and bus journeys by night, and not just because she was preeminently a poet of observation and landscape—one who, like Wordsworth, finds herself in nature. Bishop once titled a series of poems "Geographical Mirror": the idea of the momentary reflection, no sooner glimpsed than dissolving, revealing a deeper truer darkness (common to us all), serves to illustrate something about the self we perceive in Bishop's poetry. No poet illustrates more clearly David Hume's famous assertion:

> When I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception [. . .] Setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind [who think they can perceive a self], I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. (228-29)

Bishop possessed many identities—American, Nova Scotian, social outsider, literary insider, Vassar girl, country mouse, lesbian, lover of men, alcoholic, snob, feminist, reactionary. What is exceptional or unusual about her poetry is that she never sought to reconcile them all in a grand narrative, a myth, a persona. Instead she offers only glancing reflections of herself, her various identities (plural, provisional, contradictory, North *and* South in one book) over the darker, constantly changing geography. Even the most obvious markers of identity (gender, nationality) are questioned and qualified; she famously refused to be a "woman poet," and, as Helen Vendler has argued, she "resists the label 'American poet'" (*Music* 295).

Bishop wouldn't falsify her plural identities (American, Nova Scotian, woman, poet); she acknowledges them but denies their claim to exclusivity, to explaining all of her. The whole is greater, and more mysterious, than the parts. Thus she reminds us of her difference—a female moose, Maritime place-names on her maps, "A dollar bill / American or Canadian," a frisson

of recognition felt when Canada geese fly overhead ("The End of March"), a pink dog with nursing teats—but never accedes to a single label. Like Auden—the only other poet in English whose reputation has experienced a similar ascent in the last decade—she is not a poet of personality, of a signature style; each poem gets the poet, the style it requires. If we wish, we can connect this effect with postmodern notions of personal identity (social constructs, subject position); most of all, it reminds us that poetry is not primarily about creating a self, a persona, a heroic, romantic narrative; it's about writing poems.

"The Country Mouse" ends with Bishop learning "three truths," the first of which is a lesson about just this myth-making. The six-year-old Bishop is sitting with Emma, a young girl who has been assigned to be her new friend in Massachussetts:

> She asked me about my parents. I said my father was dead; I didn't ever remember seeing him. What about my mother? I thought for a moment and then I said in a sentimental voice: "She went away and left me . . . She died, too." Emma was impressed and sympathetic, and I loathed myself. It was the first time that I had lied deliberately and consciously, and the first time I was aware of falsity and the great power of sentimentality—although I didn't know the word. My mother was not dead. She was in a sanatorium, in another prolonged "nervous breakdown." I didn't know then, and still don't, whether it was from shame I lied, or from a hideous craving for sympathy, playing up my sad romantic plight. But the feeling of distaste, whatever it came from, was only too real. I jumped up, to get away from my monstrous self that I could not keep from lying. (*Prose* 31-32)

It is a characteristic gesture, shedding an untrue self: correcting a simplification.

In praising Bishop in this way, we of course create a counter-narrative, perhaps just as mythic as any persona: she becomes the meticulous, impersonal artist. There is another problem: if what we find admirable in her work is her resistance to simplifications, her attention to detail, to the truth of disparate moments, how are we distinguish these qualities from the failure to create something bigger, more unified? The "lack of a larger vision" (34) Joseph Epstein lamented in a recent article in *The Hudson Review*? The traditional answer is to stress her powers of observation, her reserve and understatement, to make her into a painterly miniaturist.

I would instead like to look at one of her favourite devices—repetition—and how it reflects the larger concerns and vision of the self that I have outlined. Bishop uses repetition in many forms throughout her poetry: repeat-rhymes of "The Map", repeated adjectives ("iridescent"; Yeats), repeated lines. She also shows a predilection for forms that require repetition (villanelles,

sestinas, songs with refrains). For someone as homeless and estranged as Bishop was, the device has a significance that is more than just formal. If the self is just that momentary image in a train window, a glancing reflection that covers a deeper moving darkness, then only through finding the same image (or the same landscape) repeated there can a feeling of identity, of continuity begin. In Bishop's work, verbal or poetic repetition is a prelude to the more urgent and necessary forms of repetition we desire (a home, a self); ultimately, it leads her to recognize their absence, their impossibility. At the same time, it seeks to compensate for this lack by offering something we can repeat: words, lines, art.

> The art of losing isn't hard to master;
> so many things seem filled with the intent
> to be lost that their loss is no disaster.
>
> Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
> of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
> The art of losing isn't hard to master.
>
> Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
> places, and names, and where it was you meant
> to travel. None of these will bring disaster.
>
> I lost my mother's watch and loo! my last, or
> next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
> The art of losing isn't hard to master.

So she writes in her villanelle ("One Art"). That is, repetition becomes a way of creating a continuity (a self, a home) in words that acknowledge and assuage other inevitable losses.

II

In 1946, while her first book, *North and South*, was being published in New York, Bishop returned to Nova Scotia for the first time since her childhood (and her mother's death in 1934). "The Moose" was triggered by an incident on her journey back, described in a letter to Marianne Moore that year (*One Art* 139-41, dated August 29th, 1946); the poem, however, was not completed until 1972. It retraces (repeats) at a great remove the traumatic journey described in "The Country Mouse"; this time, we travel by bus, not train, and the poet hardly figures in the account. Nor do we get all the way back to Boston; nor do we dwell *à la* Moore on the moose that appears only at the end. Instead, the poem traces the bus's passage around the Bay of Fundy and a passage from outside to inside—from the externally verifiable facts of a lovingly

described geography to the more mediated and questionable ones of history.

The poem begins with a spectacular syntactical evocation of the landscape—one sentence beginning with "From" that takes us *to*, that mimicks in its movement, its stopping and starting "down hollows, up rises," the bus it finally leads us to. We have been watching the bus approach along the far shore to the east (the setting sun over our shoulders glances off the windshield); it arrives, a lone traveller boards and the poem says goodbye. To the day (with two stanzas of microscopically imagined detail: fog crystals on hens' feathers), and to the towns, to the Tantramar marshes. Night falls: A woman hails the bus, and climbs aboard: we learn where the bus is going (Boston) and, halfway through the poem, discover who the lone traveller is (we—first personal pronoun). Night has fallen and we are travelling through the woods again towards Boston. But just as we are leaving ("goodbye to the elms / to the farm, to the dog . . .") we also begin to return to something:

> In the creakings and noises,
> an old conversation
> —not concerning us,
> but recognizable, somewhere,
> back in the bus:
> Grandparents' voices
>
> uninterruptedly
> talking, in Eternity:
> names being mentioned,
> things cleared up finally;
> what he said, what she said,
> who got pensioned;
>
> deaths, deaths and sicknesses;
> the year he remarried;
> the year (something) happened.
> She died in childbirth.
> That was the son lost
> when the schooner foundered.

The hallucination is the poet's own—what she imagines hearing. Having entered the bus, we now enter the poet's mind, her past.The particular calamities that marked Bishop's life—death, madness, alcoholism—are retold here as general human sorrows "not concerning us / but recognizable, somewhere, / back in the bus. . . ." Bishop brings the diction and speech (the indrawn "Yes," inverted r's) of these characters (imaginary or remembered) into the poem to describe their own (and her) sorrows: as Wordsworth

wished in *Lyrical Ballads*, their diction and speech express and are wholly adequate to expressing their emotions. There is no metropolitan irony: this is the way things are (like the tides) and talking establishes it that way, lessens the hurt, lulls us.

But just as we're about to fall asleep (listening to the ancestors—or descendants talking about us), the bus stops; the moose appears. Both fantastic and real, it issues from both the geographical reality ("it's awful plain," "homely as a house") and from the world of reverie ("grand, otherworldly," it might have walked out of a child's storybook we'd been reading before bed). More surprises: it's no trophy, no trophy wife, "Look it's a she!" It's easy to freight the animal with all kinds of meaning (even, like Vendler, "pure phenomenological meaninglessness" ["Moose" 8]; it's hard not to see in this further surprise Bishop subtly underlining her own sexual difference. The moose is described largely in terms of its effect on the passengers; "Look! It's a she!" is the equivalent of that old "would you believe a woman did/made/wrote this?". We might also join others in finding a pun in the title: the Moose, the muse. Also significant is how the moose is perceived: it is seen, heard about, and finally smelled. We move slowly towards the more intuitive senses, to a final mixture of reverie and reality: "a dim / smell of moose, an acrid / smell of gasoline."

Until we meet the moose, the poem about returning from a return visit has turned back, towards the old conversation, the grandparents. The wonderful unhurried feel of the trimeters and stanzas, the random, almost accidental rhymes all contribute to this turning back; what really marks the rhythm, what really lulls us into the poem's reverie, are the repeated words and phrases in the first half of the poem. In each of the first five stanzas, in nine of the first fourteen, we find a word or a phrase repeated. We're leaving but we're in no rush to do so, and we keep returning to the same words, the same phrases: long tides, long rides; the bay coming in, the bay not at home; red sun, red sea; clapboard farmhouses, clapboard churches. The repeated phrase is tagged on casually—an addition, a correction, almost an afterthought, as if it were one more thing to say, one more possibility to prolong this lingering on the doorstep.

All the little returns these words make in the first half of the poem (stanzas 1-5, 8-10, 14), the geographical, descriptive section, prepare us for, carry us, lull us into the larger return to the past in the poem's second half. Here the repetition is explicit—the old folks are repeating things, and probably repeating themselves. Things are repeating themselves:

What he said, what she said,
who got pensioned;

deaths, deaths and sicknesses;
the year he remarried;
the year (something) happened [. . . .]

Talking the way they talked
in the old featherbed,
peacefully, on and on. . . .

But there's no tedium: returning to the same words, we return to a place. It's a dream of home (where things are repeated) which the moose's appearance (however "homely as a house") abruptly ends. All of a sudden the mirror becomes a window, the familiar reflection (the cosy world) vanishes, and in its place, we see something new and strange, a creature from "impenetrable wood." We can't return, can't go home again—but the moose creates a sense of camaraderie ("Why, why do we feel / *(we all feel)* this sweet / sensation of joy?") among the passengers on the bus that can perhaps momentarily replace what has been lost. (Do any of us really know what moose smell like? We are initiates now, the poem seems to say, to joke.)

III

"The Moose" tries to leave Nova Scotia but keeps lingering—at least, until the moose actually appears. The other poem that arose from that 1946 vacation in Nova Scotia, "At the Fishhouses," moves with equal trepidation and slowness but in the opposite direction. Not away from but towards—not necessarily towards home (featherbeds and families), but towards something before that, before the "from"—origins. (For someone who loses her or his parents at an early age, origins are always different from home—Where do you come from? Who created you? These are difficult questions, the ones we ask on the train, the bus).

We begin, however, with a slow approach—a description of the scene (evening, shoreline, old man, fishhouses, sea) by an apparently impersonal observer who slowly, slowly comes into the picture. We move slowly through the pronouns from the most impersonal ("makes one's nose and one's eyes water") to "my," "we," "I" and finally "you." As the description unfolds, we also move down towards the old man, the shore and finally to the sea. Like the old lady boarding the bus, the encounter with the old man makes the speaker reveal her- or himself—it gives us a character, a narrative:

> The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.
> He was a friend of my grandfather.
> We talk of the decline in the population
> and of codfish and herring.

He might tell the speaker something, we feel, something of where she came from and evidently left—she however soon falls to observing him and moves on, drawn somewhere else, drawn by something else. She has been enumerating and distinguishing the various hues of silver she sees (translucent, opaque, iridescent) and continues doing so, looking at the fish scales on his vest, the thin silver tree trunks on the ramp. . . . She follows her eye, drawn by something mysterious, or impelled by some strange purpose, some idea, and like hapless devotees we follow her:

> Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
> element bearable to no mortal,
> to fish and to seals. . . .

She is drawn to the sea but also hesitant about approaching it. Her fear is perhaps partly artistic: how will she describe its silver? But there's more than that. Twice she invokes the same description ("Cold dark deep and absolutely clear") and then, like someone afraid to dive in, turns back, digresses. Each repeated line is a wave: she seems to be steeling herself, waiting for the wave that will carry her off, dislodge her. Finally she turns to face it, and arrives:

> I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
> slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
> icily free above the stones,
> above the stones and then the world.
> If you should dip your hand in. . . .

"Above the stones and then the world"—the phrase repeated, repeated, builds up; the water carries her off. Of course, literally, all she has done is walk down to the shore and contemplate the sea—although "a believer in total immersion," she hasn't even dipped her hand or toes. (Note the progression of pronouns throughout: "One," "My," "I," "You," "we"). The poem is a version of what Karl Kroeber calls the "visionary lyric"—a poem that begins with the poet or "pensive traveller," in an unusual state of mind, needing or lacking something, and going out into nature to find it, in a vision that has no clear rational meaning but resolves her or his quandary; nothing dramatic happens (51-53).

It is also, we learn, like "Tintern Abbey," like Sir Charles G. D. Roberts's "The Tantramar Revisited," a romantic poem of return—the poet has been here before and has now come back to find some enduring value, some part of her younger self in the landscape. In such poems, there is always a caveat: "That time is past" (or: "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?"); this, however, only prepares the way for a vision of what endures, the continuing unity revealed beneath the surface differences: "Therefore am I still / A lover of the meadows and the woods / And mountains". (In the Intimations Ode, it's "Our souls have sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither, / Can in a moment travel thither. . ."). Just as we return to the sea and it remains the same, so we can return to our earlier selves and remain the same. For Bishop, however, the model is reversed: the caveat becomes the revelation. The sea appears the same yet any attempt to possess it is futile—like fire it will burn us, like fire it is always changing, "flowing, and flown."

The poem works up to this revelation slowly and by repeating certain key phrases ("iridescent," "Cold dark deep," "above the stones," "icily free," "flowing and"); here, the repeated phrases acquire a new force, not lulling but incantatory. The revelation we arrive at, though, is that we can't repeat past experience, we can't return:

> If you should dip your hand in,
> your wrist would ache immediately,
> your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
> as if the water were a transmutation of fire
> that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.
> If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
> then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
> It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
> dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
> drawn from the cold hard mouth
> of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
> forever, flowing and drawn, and since
> our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

Behind the imagery of the last lines there is obviously a female presence—again Bishop is gently but firmly underlining a sexual difference at a point in the poem where we can't possibly object. More obviously, it is maternal: the mouth (speaking mouth or vagina), the "rocky breasts" that Robert Lowell found "too much" (Millier 192). Remembering Bishop's own mother, we can understand the coldness of the images and the poet's reluctance to

face, to confront the sea, our mother. In some sense, she is making a different journey—the one she never made in life, to visit her mother in the mental asylum those seventeen years she lived on. The searing knowledge is of her origins in the briny wash, her flawed progenitors.

But the poem is also about origins in a broader sense. The final lines invoke Heraclitus in so many ways it is a wonder so few critics have noticed it: the idea of dipping or stepping into same water, water as a transmutation of fire (Heraclitus thought fire was "the primordial element"), the idea of constant flux or flowing (Incidentally, the transmutation of the "element bearable to no mortal" is enacted in the final past participle: we move from "flowing" to "flying" to "flown," water to fire). In her art, Bishop may try to create a receptive enduring landscape, a home by meticulous observation; nonetheless, it takes time for her to evoke each detail (a poem, unlike a painting, begins and ends in time) and as she works on one, the others grow obsolete. Trying, say, to build a dike across a stream, you get almost to the far shore only to realize that the stones you started with have been washed away; you go back, replace one or repeat a line, and while you're doing that, more are swept away. In other words, even recreating geography, its lateral expanses, we fall prey to history, and its onward rush. The sea is not immortal or constant; it will not flatter us in our illusions of selfhood; it will only give the momentary truth, one that will smart and hurt, and like the reflection on the bus window, vanish. Because there will always be more reflections, more truths to hurt us.

This is a sad realization—understandably so, given the story of Bishop's mother and the association with the sea and her origins (In fact, we might even connect the speaker's mysterious attraction to the sea with Bishop's alcoholism—it is literally firewater that reveals the truth). Nonetheless, there is something triumphant in the way the poem manages to articulate all this. It doesn't withstand or stop the flood, the onward rush—somehow, it manages to stay on top of it, to ride it, and like a toy ship launched on a wave, to illustrate by its exemplary progress the power of the waves.

I began by talking about Bishop's fragmented, provisional sense of identity. Bishop, who was called "the Bishop" at school, would have known that every bishop has a see; it's his official seat or centre of authority, his ecclesiastical home, so to speak. We may add that her see, the one that comes up, that swells and crashes across the meticulous structures of her best poems, was the the Bay of Fundy. But we should remember that the phrase "high

seas" has another meaning, one that suits Bishop, her background and subject matter well: "open seas not within any country's jurisdiction" (OED).

But I'd like to close on a different note, one that stresses her artistry not her origins. In "At the Fishhouses," Bishop writes of scales as "the principal beauty" of the fish and describes singing hymns to a seal:

> Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
> element bearable to no mortal,
> to fish and to seals . . . One seal particularly
> I have seen here evening after evening
> He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
> like me a believer in total immersion,
> so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
> I also sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

Hymn-singing, she said, was something she grew up with in Nova Scotia. In one of her last letters, to her lifelong friend Frani Muser, she tells her of an evening spent out, spent trying to repeat the pleasure of an earlier evening: "We had a very different hymn-singing last Sunday . . . We sang a lot of nice hymns, but there weren't enough of us and either the piano was tuned an octave too high—or I can't get any higher than middle C any more" (*One Art* 637, August 30th, 1979). The lines of "At the Fishhouses"remind us that she once did get higher—that, in poetry, at least she could return:

> I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
> slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
> icily free above the stones,
> above the stones and then world.

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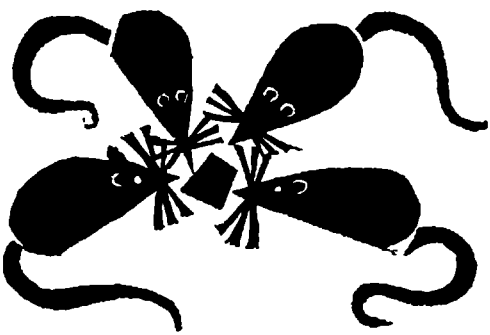

Sue Goyette

Meadow

A tree is a love letter, a tall pine,
slender and unopened, waiting
to be read. It is whisper, it's all ears
and it's moonlight
dressed up in wood
and needles and cloud. Roads stretch
all the way to morning
or all the way to night. All of darkness
may be behind you or just ahead,
all of light.
And this foot bridge, small and necessary,
is a hand reaching back, a lover
on her way home from his house, the placing of each plank,
her desire.
And the meadow is mirror and nest. The genealogy
of grass. Distant cousins. Great, great aunts. I am
surrounded. Beneath, above, they all move
through me and I lie on this bridge, each plank
a vow, each bird a wish, and I respond leaf
to leaf: *yes, I am yours* and *yes,*
yes, you are mine.

Sue Ann Johnston

The Mother's Mother

When the mother's mother sees her son
dancing on the rim of the Grand Coulee Dam
she holds her breath.

In the pause
he drops over the edge.

There is no sound or narrative but this—
a sudden erasure where there has been a boy,
squinting in the sun.
Background becomes foreground.

The mother's mother does not collapse,
does not go over the edge herself,
but dreams of diving into a river,
and in the dream there is time
to regret the weight of hiking boots—
the leather and the clay—
as she swims in the curl of a wave
released to—what?

A shape in the dark,
a boat occupied by Charon.
She asks if she can come aboard.
"You'll make it," he says.

Turns away, leaves her
on the shore of her dream,
praying to darkness.

Anne Compton

Ascension
Liliane Welch Talks About Poetry

Born in Luxembourg, Liliane Welch has lived for thirty-one years in Sackville, New Brunswick. A professor of French Studies at Mount Allison University, Welch is an avid explorer of the Fundy Marsh, a territory that is often the subject of her poems and essays. Welch is the author of fifteen books of poetry, the most recent *Fidelities* (1997), and of two collections of essays, *Seismographs* (1988) and *Frescoes* (1998). With her husband, the philosopher Cyril Welch, she co-authored *Emergence: Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud* (1973) and *Address: Rimbaud Mallarmé Butor* (1979). *Fidelities*, like her earlier work, is full of movement and travel, and whether the speaker is touring paintings that hang in European museums, climbing mountains, or driving beneath Maritime skies, there is a sense of urgency in the travel. In the autumn of 1998, Luxembourg saluted Liliane Welch's literary achievement by electing her to the Institut Grand-Ducal.

ANNE Recognizing that *Word-House of a Grandchild* (1987) initiated the return to the past, is it fair to say that *Fidelities* (1997) is the most autobiographical of your collections as its first section ("Where are the images") returns to your Luxembourg childhood?

LILIANE That question is discomforting to me because I do not believe that there is an autobiographical writing that is strictly autobiographical. All writing that is worth anything is fiction. Everything that a poet does with reality transforms it. Otherwise, it is not art; it might as well be journalism. I don't really think that you can take the "I" who speaks in these poems as my empirical "I." I believe what Rimbaud said, "'I' is an another." We receive from our experiences certain calls, and certain

impressions, and they are the trampoline from which we leap into something else. I would be very uncomfortable to say that such writing is very autobiographical. *Word-House of a Grandchild* is above all a "word-house." I never met my grandfather. Everything in that book about my grandfather is fictitious. I have very beautiful images of my grandmother, but again those are *images.* Our past and all of reality around us are very dynamic and elusive. We can never really hold it or grasp it, or understand it once and for all.

ANNE When the imagination goes to work on what was—the actual past—it is, of course, transformed. It becomes framed, but you *do say* in *Word-House*: "When I explore the paths of my background I write poems" (9).

LILIANE Yes, but "paths" has to be understood in the widest way. When I explore the paths around Fundy Bay, or the paths in the mountains, I also get pushed to write poems. I think in those concrete places, it has something to do with our relatedness to the earth or to reality. I believe—and I don't want to push this too much because it might sound romantic or elated—our mission as poets is to bear witness to where we are and what we are doing. And, of course, bearing witness is, in the end, to praise, to give an affirmative response. A poet can do that.

ANNE To speak the words of praise, then, is to salute?

LILIANE When you praise, when you affirm, you bring out the best in whatever you face. I have a long teaching career—thirty years here and, before that, at several other universities—and in that long career, you can imagine, one sees the spectrum of humanity in one's colleagues. I could never understand how some colleagues could go into the classroom with hatred or negativity in their hearts, rather than with an affirmative stance toward their subject and students. They end up denigrating the teaching situation. Similarly, poetry or writing can be that way. There are some writers with negative, evil agendas. Theirs is a work the opposite of praising and testifying. You have to be able to love whatever you write or do.

ANNE There is a pattern of images in *Fidelities*, particularly in the first section, that has to do with the mythic. Not only paths and roads, but also passageways, mining shafts, and waterways tunnel through *Fidelities.* Is the job of poetry connected in some way to this underground?

LILIANE Notice in "Winter Fires" (29) that the gladiators are running through the dark passage ways towards the sun. In that case, they run towards their deaths but, in general, the point is to get out from the

underground into the sun. You just have to think about Plato's cave.

ANNE Are these images of the underground a master trope for the writing of poetry?

LILIANE I think certainly in our Western tradition that theme comes up over and over again. Also, in the natural context, the underground of the water wells to the surface. Undergrounds are very mysterious places. Look at those Icelandic pictures with their beautiful underground caves. [These photographs appear in *Mosaics: Music, Images, Words*, a book and CD (1999), with text by Welch.] Perhaps the underground is that which conceals itself so that we will be put onto the search, be forced to make a clearing, find something. That, too, is a trope in Western literature—*dévoiler*—this wanting to unveil, not just women, but reality, the need to take away covers.

ANNE So searching the underground is really plumbing mystery . . .

LILIANE . . . which always withdraws itself. It might appear as a facile difference between science and poetry to presume that scientists might have an explanation of this mystery. All great scientists maintain that they, too, come up to the unknown, the *other*, which points to human limitation.

ANNE Does that image cluster—tunnels / caves / mines—appear to a greater extent in the work of women than in the work of men?

LILIANE I wouldn't think so. I don't look at literature in terms of genitalia. For me, it is literature. Whether the author is a man or a woman does not make that much difference to me. I think it is, rather, something that goes through our culture. Maybe those images go through other cultures too, but the one I know best is our Western culture.

ANNE "[B]ooks and mountains / Convene my days" (*Fidelities* 11), one speaker says. Are these the guides, the things by which this speaker finds his or her way?

LILIANE Yes, and they are forms of transcendence also. In the mountain, there is, of course, ascension, and that means transcendence of a lower region. Books, I think, are similar. Great books take us out of the everyday and light up that other domain. I always read with my students Baudelaire's "Elevation." To me, it is one of the most beautiful poems because you can take it as a guide. The narrator of the poem does what the Christian mystics might have done. He goes over nine different realms of our reality—oceans, mountains, plains, and so forth—until he comes to an emporium of peace and fantastic light. He breathes in this

divine *liqueur*, the air, but, strangely, right there occurs, also, the most sensuous image of the poem. The narrator feels that he is a very powerful swimmer, going through that air as though he were rolling through waves. The poem, in a Baudelairean way, shows that he is far away from the morbid valley miasmas. The students all cheer. Wasn't this the point—getting away from all those trappings that we have to put up with down here? But then comes the last line, where the narrator addresses his spirit, says that lucky or happy is the one who can, like the morning lark, take an ascension and can understand the language of flowers and mute things. So, you ascend to that region because you want to look down and get a real understanding of the things that you missed when you were down below. When you were caught up in the traumas and the miasmas, as Baudelaire calls them, you never look at what is close, what addresses you, beckons to you, but which, in all the machinations, you never bothered to be a witness for.

ANNE So the ascension enables us to see the inconsequential things in their consequences? There is a line in Rilke where he asks us to address the inconsequential things.

LILIANE The French poet Francis Ponge, in his book of prose poems *Taking the Side of Things*, writes of all the *seemingly* inconsequential things that we use and use up, misuse and maltreat, by not paying attention and respect to them. This, also, is a theme in the work of [Martin] Heidegger—the need to care for what is closest to us, rather than ignoring it. Often, in climbing, when we reached the peak of a mountain, I have thought about Sackville and those aspects of Sackville that I neglect because I am caught up in my professional life. Similarly, when you read a good book, it gives a different light to your everyday experience, validates it in some sense.

ANNE The ascension, then, is not to take flight from earth but to make us more noticing? We go back, not away, by going up?

LILIANE Yes, the ascension grounds us more authentically on the earth.

ANNE Things in their sensuality, persons in their sensuality, get noticed in your work. Do we owe our loyalties, our fidelities, finally, to our desires and passions? The second section of *Fidelities* begins with people such as the cyclist and the fisherman ("Still Life" and "Marriage," respectively) who are divided from their desires.

LILIANE For the fisherman, his desire was his labour, his work. It is a question of whether you can keep the fidelity. Infidelity means not completely

giving yourself to this labour or to whatever, veering off into other directions before the "marriage" has been consummated.

ANNE The poem "Marriage" suggests that the "mind's speed" has to do with body's speed.

LILIANE Intensity comes from facing the elements. For me, mountain climbing, or hiking at the Bay of Fundy, is an exposure to the elements. That has always been a source of inspiration to me. My source of inspiration would be exposure to the winds and the sun in rough circumstances.

ANNE Would you say that your poetry is against austerities and for the passions?

LILIANE I like the word "openness." Any kind of repression I abhor. Repression comes under many forms, many mantles—words and smiles—different guises. To remain open in one's passions, to remain alert and curious, to get beyond the masks and the self-imposed chains, that is important.

ANNE *Fidelities* moves between Europe and North America. Is this the traversal of most importance in your poetry?

LILIANE It certainly seems to come back as a constant theme in my poetry.

ANNE Perhaps the best expression of the Europe-Canada traversal occurs in the "Diptych" that introduces *Dream Museum.* In the second sonnet, winter is "A cathedral navigating angels / and miracles home through the dark" (13). Is this what the Maritime winter is for you?

LILIANE Yes, the Maritime winter is well elicited in that image. The plentitude I experience here in winter, I've never felt in the "splenetic" European winter months.

ANNE Your last book, the collection of essays *Frescoes,* is a very European book.

LILIANE *Frescoes* is not without America too. There is the essay on [Edmond] Dune and the essay on "Minescapes." Both re-locate European poetry, that of Dune and that of Anne Blanchot-Philippi, into the Maritime context of my poetry classes. Places, like other images, shift and travel.

ANNE Do you think of yourself as a migrant, an immigrant, or a Canadian?

LILIANE I am a Canadian. I feel at home here. I like the word "pilgrim," and I like the idea of journeying for adventure. Although I must say that when I compare my travels now with that period when we used to do extreme climbing, it is the earlier travelling that would qualify—at least in the public's mind—as adventure. Mind you, the mountains have been for me so heightened, so filled with plentitude, as a result of seeing them in the works of artists like [Alberto] Giacometti and [Giovanni]

Segantini and Giacometti's father [Giovanni]. I love to go into the Bregaglia Valley where Giacometti hails from. When I look at those mountains now, after having looked at them in paintings, they are so much richer than when I only climbed them.

ANNE So, painting helps you to see and to experience the landscape?

LILIANE In Holland, on the coast, we were surprised all the time by the showers, and we metaphorically flew into the museums. We thought then that we were right in the paintings. It was quite a wonderful experience. You can't walk very long on the dykes [in Holland] without being showered.

ANNE Every summer you return to Europe for the mountains and what might be called an immersion in culture. What would happen if you stayed all year round in Sackville?

LILIANE There are many things to be had, and still to be discovered, here. Eventually, when I am too old to fly, I'll stay here, buy myself two dogs, and with them, Cyril and I will run around the countryside all year long. Many of the *Frescoes* travel pieces speak of the return home to Sackville. The travellers long for the Maritimes.

ANNE The point of the compass in the *Fidelities* poem "Winter Fires" is "North." And in another poem, from where the speaker stands, the woods extend a thousand miles beyond "journey[ing] / to grounds unknown" (44). Is "North," like the mountains of Europe, access to the unknown?

LILIANE Yes, I have that feeling particularly here in Canada. I don't have it in the European forests because they are so different, so well-cared for. You have to have a permit to fell trees there. They have a different relationship to their by-now cultivated woods.

ANNE "Six Personae" are all women, all house-bound. The woman in "Dreamland" wants to trade "this stained north" for Florida. Other women, in these poems, are able to transform where they are through books or work. The transformation is imaged as "parachute" or as the "awakening" of the angel "lost in her body" (*Fidelities* 52, 51). Is this another version of the elevation pursued by climbers?

LILIANE Many angels appear in my work. As an artist, I am interested in angels as messengers. That woman [in "Mornings at Home"], with the angel lost in her body, is someone who might still answer to the call of that messenger. We have the choice in life to answer, in different ways, to those calls.

ANNE Your earlier word was "mission." Is the angel, or the messenger, the one who offers the mission?

LILIANE He brings a message. In Greek literature it was Hermes, the messenger of the gods, the patron saint of interpreters. In my literary criticism class, I tell my students that I want them to become hermeneuts, to deliver the text, to open its message. The angel's work would be in the framework of those images.

ANNE Rilke, you say, "called ordinary existence life unlived" (*Fidelities* 68), but in your Vermeer poem, it is the radiant ordinariness of Vermeer's figures—the way they handle "household tools"—that seems to make "everything possible" (67). What are the avenues to this exaltation in the midst of the mundane?

LILIANE It is a certain bearing on the part of the individual. If you look at Vermeer's milkmaid, her way of pouring that milk becomes a creative act. It all depends on whether you can make out of an ordinary experience, or a simple thing, something creative. Each Vermeer painting contains a very ordinary act. His work is a praise of those acts that normally escape us. Whereas Rilke, especially when you get to the *Duino Elegies*, conceives of the "mission" as something much more dramatic.

ANNE Rilke does say in Elegy Eight, after all his struggle with the angels, "Perhaps we are here in order to say house, bridge, fountain. . . ." He says that naming the ordinary is what we are here for.

LILIANE Yes. And it is why he finished his literary life by writing very humble and simple French poems. The epitaph on his gravestone ("Rose, oh pure contradiction, delight / Of being no-one's sleep beneath / So many lids" [*Frescoes* 66]) can be read to mean the human word does not violate the natural thing.

ANNE The work of many painters (Knaff, Giacometti, Colville, Memling), as well as Vermeer, is honoured in *Fidelities*, and in your other collections as well. In the poem "Holland," you say, "We sailed to those urgencies / Only paintings can hold" (66), and in another poem, the painting is a "Portal" (*DM* 36). What does this door open onto?

LILIANE A painting always invites you to go over a threshold. A transformation occurs. When you go into a dwelling—a painting in this case—you have to purify yourself in some sense. It is almost a religious experience.

ANNE In *Frescoes*, you talk about entering a painting—it's a Memling, I think—and that entrance requires a shift: "you must break to a different language, purify your words" (50). In one poem, the painting is an altar

(*DM* 39). Has painting—and the other arts—replaced religious ritual as an approach to the divine?

LILIANE For some people it has. However, the arts have always been competitors of religions, kinds of religions for those who practise them and for those who take them seriously. Still, that does not necessarily mean that they replace the traditional religions. Some churches today are filled with people who avoid museums, where you step over that portal and experience some sort of enlightenment. Although today when I contemplate the spreading of popular culture—its power on the minds and the bodies of the young—I often wonder about the chance of the arts in this new configuration. I believe that the arts will always be for the esoteric. That doesn't mean that there won't be herds of people racing through the museums. The deeply felt and procreated experience of art is never going to be that of the wide masses of people, or of the advocators of the herd-mentality.

ANNE Is there any way in which it could be made to do so?

LILIANE Not any that I can see today. You can take a Van Gogh, or other painting, and you can blow it up huge and have it flashing from billboards and from screens, but look what you have done. You have turned it into popular culture. It is no longer a religious experience of conversion or change. It has become trivialized. Being ripped out of habitual patterns, seeing with different eyes—that is what art does.

ANNE So is that liability for change open only to those capable of "esoteric" experience?

LILIANE I think anybody can have that experience, but you are never going to get it in a group.

ANNE "The herd" is what you said earlier. Is art, then, in its many forms elitist?

LILIANE I would say that it is condemned to be that way. This is not an easy burden to bear. Many poets yearn to be popular poets, and would do anything to be popular poets. Even great poets fall into that trap when they go on endless reading tours. Even great poets feel the need to be confirmed. I like Camus' story "The Exile and the Kingdom" about the artist who doesn't know that he exists and, therefore, seeks confirmation. The truly great works of art are never going to be heroic flags for mass and popular culture. Sad thought.

ANNE Was it otherwise once? What about the groundlings at the Globe Theatre watching Shakespeare. Or to put it in the Maritime context, poets like Bliss Carman and Charles G. D. Roberts had a wide public fol-

lowing. Is this a twentieth-century phenomenon: popular culture split off from the allegedly elitist culture? Were they once one?

LILIANE We are today living in a different world. The mass media have done so much and so little at the same time. When there was no television, when all that we take for granted was absent, people were not exposed to as much mass media. They had the time and interest then for even more elitist literature.

ANNE In " Chateau," you speak of those "airy cathedrals, / erected for a God already withdrawn" (*Fidelities* 70). If God and the angels are not in the cathedrals, have they gone from the world?

LILIANE Speaking now as a critic—the poems have to stand on their own—I would say religion in its traditional form, the godhead as it was conceived, is dead, as Nietzsche says. And remember, he said, too, that human beings have killed him. That doesn't mean that the sacred is gone. The sacred undergirds our existence here on the earth. The sacred is far removed from all of the myths or stories that say if you do this or that, you are going to get your bonbon after you die, and you will be singing in the choirs of the angels. And if you don't do that, you will go down into the frying pan. That type of reckoning, merchandising, mechanical explication of god, I have always found repulsive. Already as a child, I combatted the priests on that notion of the godhead. Hölderlin talked about the gods having fled and the poets and the artists being the wine gods' disciples. They are going through the night searching for the new gods who have not yet come. I think that the sacred is there, but we are on the brink of losing it if we give ourselves over to the labyrinths of the Internet, for example.

At this point the interview moves to the area made famous by Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, the Westcock marsh, where the dykes, built by the Acadians, rise above the reddish-brown flats. We are walking along the coast and looking for a spot—in this serenely peaceful landscape—that is sheltered from the wind so that we can carry on with the interview.

LILIANE At first when I saw the Bay of Fundy, I was stunned—I'd never seen water like that—but now I really love it. When the sun is on the mudflats, after the water has withdrawn, it is, perhaps, the most erotic landscape in the world, a landscape of bare flanks.

ANNE Europe was your birthplace, but coming to New Brunswick was your birth as a poet. Why did that move provoke poetry?

LILIANE I wrote [my] first poem on our first sabbatical leave away from New Brunswick. We went from Europe, where we were on leave, to Los Angeles for three weeks. To go from Europe to the farthest extremes of Western culture brought on quite a culture shock. It must have been around 1976. When I went back to Europe for the rest of the sabbatical leave, I suddenly started writing poems. I was also in the process of co-writing a book of literary criticism [*Address: Rimbaud Mallarmé Butor*, 1979]. The parts on Mallarmé and Butor were being written at the same time as the first poems. It was living here in New Brunswick that sparked my poetry. I don't think I would ever have written poetry if I had stayed in the United States. All the years previously down there never elicited poems from me. So it was very important that I came to New Brunswick and found a home here.

ANNE Your Maritimes are "primordial" (*Seismographs* 58), not pastoral. You speak of the "defiance and savagery" of the Tantramar marshes and the looming forests. After thirty years of living here, do the Maritimes remain, for you, "primordial"?

LILIANE Yes. That has never changed; it's truly amazing. When we come back from Europe, we go out to Wood Point [on the Fundy coast] and beyond to the last possible point. I always have exactly the same feeling—this is the primordial, originary, landscape of my life.

ANNE So you wouldn't use the word "pastoral" to describe this landscape?

LILIANE You have only to come here in the winter—the whiteouts, the fierceness of blizzards—and you couldn't possibly say it was pastoral. Also, in the winter, it becomes a landscape of gigantic constructions done by some enormous force. The tide, as it comes and goes, deposits huge blocks of ice right up to the dykes. It might look pastoral now because it is green, but there is a long, long period of the year when it is not like this. Someone from Toronto might see us here now—two women sitting on the dyke—and think that we came right out of a pastoral painting, but that is just one side of this landscape.

ANNE In an essay on Sackville in *Seismographs*, you say, "When I saw it first in a wild February storm, a desire arose to pierce the secret withheld from me. A language had to be invented to make the ground sing" (53).

LILIANE Yes. That is true. The Romans used to talk about the genius of the place. I believe that every place has a different genius. In Europe, too, there are different voices in the ground.

ANNE What, I want to know, are the features of the language that speak this ground? Is there a Maritime poetic?

LILIANE I think that my poetry answers that best.

ANNE Do you feel as though you belong to a Maritime community of writers?

LILIANE I suppose I do, but is there such a community? Aren't universities and university professors rounding up that community? Most writers work alone, but then because of [university] courses, they are suddenly rounded up.

ANNE You mean it is a definition after the fact?

LILIANE Well, you know if it hadn't been for your course in Maritime poetry and the "Poets Talking Series" [a series of lectures by Maritime poets held in conjunction with the course], I never would have met you, and we wouldn't be sitting in the Westcock Marsh, looking at the brown Fundy and talking about poetry.

ANNE It seems to me that it is on such occasions that the university is really doing its work—bringing people together, out of which comes further creativity. The Maritime community happens when we are talking together, or writing back and forth, about what we are working on, exchanging poems and manuscripts. That, not the one defined in the curriculum, is the Maritime community. I ask this question because you mention writing in solitude a great deal. In the essay "What Are Poets For" (*Frescoes* 78-84), you raise the question, Is poetry private or public?

LILIANE In that essay, I try to give you the experience that I had when I went to one of the most important poetry gatherings currently held in Europe. I went there, as an invited Canadian poet, but I also [was] thinking about the meaning of the whole enterprise. There were poetry readings and also big debates about whether poetry could still stand as a force in today's culture. The answer is there in the last sentence of the essay: "Poetry does not just tie us to the invisible, but also to the visible world, and to our fellows." Actually the question "What Are Poets For," is the one that Hölderlin asked. He was a man who took his position as a poet very seriously. His question goes on: "What are poets for in needy times?" I tried to loosely attach the essay to that question.

ANNE Silence is the word and the condition often associated in your work with Canada, but silence is also associated with the mountains of Europe. Is the achievement of silence—and the achievements in silence—what connects these two experiences: winter in Canada and the mountains of Europe?

LILIANE I have friends in Europe who go to the cafés because they must have noise around them to write. I must have something of the monk in

me because I value the silence most. I like music very much too, but it has to come out of the silence.

ANNE It seems to me that there are three Europes in your work. There is the Europe characterized by the church and domestic rigidities and social formalities—guardians of morality. Present-day Europe, which has replaced that earlier order, is characterized by bankers, finance, and cities thick with truck traffic. Then there is the Europe of your mountains and museums. Do these distinctions explain why the final section of *Fidelities* is called "The Past Released and Held," which seems to encode a gesture whereby the speaker would let some things go and yet hold onto others?

LILIANE There is another Europe: the Europe of my friends. To go even further—beyond the three Europes that you discern—Europe is now something very dynamic and changing, especially if I compare what Europe used to be [during the war, after the war] with what it has become, not just financially, but also culturally. There are so many cultural opportunities pulsing. It is really booming culturally. Even a small country like Luxembourg, which at one time was considered a provincial place, is now cosmopolitan. The leading musicians on tour in Europe think that Luxembourg is the place, better than Paris, to perform. In Luxembourg there is a very demanding public. Of course, they have a conservatory there. This renewal and vibrancy is connected with a United Europe. They are aware that they are, together, a very important political, economic, and cultural world power. They have great hopes for their future. Europe is a place that has a lot going for it right now. If Europe had not become an economic power, it would not have the cultural vibrancy that one finds there today.

ANNE In *Frescoes* there is a fear of the commercialization of the very art that has been enabled by that economic growth.

LILIANE Commerce and art are always rivals. Baudelaire expounded a fierce hatred of commerce in his vilification of the merchant. Commerce for us is a necessary evil.

ANNE In *Fidelities*, Europe is "an old lady . . . [who] believes in ruins" (57). Yet the New England nuns who visit can expect to find "deceit under marble floors." What is that deceit?

LILIANE Those nuns go to Rome; they do not visit the rest of Europe. In Rome, they examine the Vatican's and the church's power. That poem talks about what can be expected today of the Roman Church. The deceit is linked to whatever has been constructed in that seat of power. Actually,

now I find the church to be a very interesting historical phenomenon. As a young child, memorizing the catechism, the church didn't appear interesting to me at all.

ANNE In your essay on Rilke in *Frescoes*, you say, "Rilke's line 'Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror' . . . forced me to look at myself and at poetry with straighter eyes, with a sword in my hands" (66). Does this forecast a new direction in your poetry?

LILIANE There are always changes occurring. I'm still in the process of change.

ANNE The Blakean image of the sword in the hand suggests something revolutionary, but you mean there will be no more change in your poetry than there has always been—a gradual change?

LILIANE I would have to look into my diaries to see what I did the day after I visited Raron [where Rilke is buried]. I must say I was extraordinarily moved. I go there regularly, and I am moved everytime I go there to pay my respects.

ANNE Earlier you were talking about art and the spectator's willingness to be converted by art. Was that moment at Rilke's grave such a moment for you?

LILIANE I think we all have moments of enlightenment when we see with completely different eyes, with "straighter eyes." My first visit to Raron was very much that way. We also drove to Muzot, the house where Rilke lived. I was very affected there. Sometimes when you go to places where other great spirits have been, they seem to have left something there that speaks to you.

ANNE The poets whom you admire—such as Rimbaud and Rilke—were wanderers. Is there a link between travel and the transgression of boundaries, of limits?

LILIANE Yes. All travelling is a transgression of boundaries. That is particularly true in mountain climbing, but it happens in reading too.

ANNE Critics have focused a lot of attention on the cosmopolitan qualities of your poetry—its learning and culture—but actually you are, as well, an excavator of the domestic life, as in the "Accounts" series in *Dream Museum*. Husbands and wives have different accounts of their lives, and in the parent-child poems, parents thwart and deform their children's lives, unaware they are doing so. Are we all living different stories even when we live intimately together?

LILIANE A lot of people—not everybody—but a lot do lead different stories.

You will find a lot more on that theme in my very early books—*Syntax of Ferment, Assailing Beats,* and *October Winds.* (On that cover you see, by the way, a picture of this dyke.) I was preoccupied then by that topic, not so much any more now. The writing of poetry provides wonderful occasions to vicariously live other lives. I feel that often when I write poems about people. It's a chance of living another existence.

ANNE In *Life in Another Language,* the polarities are "well-plotted days" or "sedition" (16). Must the poet, in your opinion, live "Outside Approval," which is the title of the piece containing that pair?

LILIANE I would say that poetry, as all art, lives "outside approval," and is fundamentally revolutionary. Sadly, our educational institutions have been the instruments, over the centuries, for eroding that which is powerful in poetry, taking the revolutionary punch out of it. They reduce poetry to traditional frameworks and categories, and overlay it with obfuscations.

ANNE You have published a book of prose poems *Life in Another Language; Word-House* is an epic family narrative, and you have just published *Frescoes,* narrative wall paintings of places visited. What effect do these excursions into prose have on your poetry?

LILIANE I have written prose and poetry together for many years. I don't think that there is any particular effect. They go side-by-side. All the essays in *Frescoes* were written at the same time that I was writing poems. I write all of the time. Writing prose or poetry is a good way of living well.

ANNE In *Frescoes* you give us not only a map of Europe by way of your travels, but also a calendar of engagements, and the artists with whom you are engaged in that book are strong male artists. The book does end with an Emily Dickinson quotation, but otherwise the artists are male ones.

LILIANE Male and female artists came up naturally, without gender differentiation in the landscapes I visited for *Frescoes.* I don't like to see male and female pitted against each other for purposes of "agendas." When we did the extreme mountain climbing, in conditions of extreme danger, the only thing that mattered was getting to the top alive in a common effort (without gender thoughts). It is a terrible shame that today in universities, young women are taught to hate males or to see themselves, which is even more criminal, as the victims of men. Writing poetry is also an extreme situation. Questions of gender are beside the point.

ANNE You make the people and places of *Frescoes* feel familiar to the reader. And you make those artists and their work familiar, but the woman of note

that I remember meeting in that art world is "Annetta," the model (41-45).

LILIANE Annetta Giacometti, as far as I am concerned, is one of the most interesting women in the history of art. For more than fifty years, she was the model not just for her husband [Giovanni Giacometti], but also for her son [Alberto]. There is no other woman in the history of art that has been depicted as many times in paintings and sculptures. She is one of the strongest women that ever lived in the Bregaglia. Even today, a long time after her death, you meet people who either had relatives who knew her or have heard of her, and they still speak of her.

ANNE Your poetry has an East-West axis, but perhaps your permanent residency is in a house of books and pictures. I'm sorting through your library—reading the poems that you have written on poems. Are you—to use your phrase—"in conversation" with these earlier pieces of literature?

LILIANE All reading and writing is a conversing with art works, present and past. With other artists (poets, musicians, painters, and so forth), my work is part of the house of art. That house is grounded on the earth. And, changing the wording of Heidegger's phrase, I would add: "Art is the house of being."

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Zoë Landale

Lethe

This is the melancholy season of sky
where all we ever thought we'd learned
is taken from us.
How the dead nourish us
and we trudge on, unmindful of their roots,
white in sodden ground.
There was music once, and bright paint;
the harsh coats of dogs
smelled of wood smoke,
the cold freshness of stars.

In warm houses we stand, noses
to misty glass, breathe in
the forgetfulness that brought us here.
Some days the rain is horizontal, others, vertical,
whispering lines that blur memory.

This is the season of mountains saturated:
the snowline comes lower
every week.
Salmon streams are high
with blackened carcasses, the rush
and runnel of water.

It's hope we've lost,
a wondrous feather, blue
suffused with gold, the length of a woman's
forearm, something we found and swore to
keep forever, but we laid it down
at the edge of a field,
only we've forgotten what field,
on the edge of what river,
flowing clear and hurriedly over rocks
and sand.

Beside the feather
we recall shapes the current made;
jade arabesques in indented circles.
All the rest gone—
drums, the particular milky-green grace of oats
against sky—
with the endless persuasiveness
of water that promises
and promises revelations.

Nancy Kang

Hatchery

there is bay wading
imprints effaced in high water
a chorus of amber eyes
startled, then groping
open mouthed
the flick of tongues
massing with red spider mites
in nervous transit

plankton swirls amid this dim
choreography

no algal blooms
but beetleleg-black
rimmed mouths encircling the eggs

it may be
that the water dries
or the jelly is eaten

for now, still life

look closely, they will not blink

Janice Fiamengo

"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 Klovan 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* 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 interviews[12] 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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The Poet As Citizen

Margaret Avison
NOT YET but STILL. Lancelot $12.95

Paulette Jiles
Flying Lesson: Selected Poems. Oxford $12.95

Anne Szumigalski
On Glassy Wings: Poems New & Selected. Coteau $19.95

Reviewed by Pauline Butling

One of the books on my reading table this summer has been John Ralston Saul's 1995 Massey lectures, *The Unconscious Civilization.* Saul argues that contemporary Western society is largely an unconscious one in the grip of the ideologies of corporatism and globalism. By "unconscious" he means that we do not make connections between the ideas and information that we live by and the realities of daily life. He argues persuasively why and how social inequalities have dramatically increased in the United States, Canada, Britain and elsewhere in the past two or three decades and why the individual as an active, critical being has all but disappeared from the political arena.

But what does the poet have to do with any of this, I wondered, as I dipped in and out of these three poetry books that were also on my summer reading table. Here are three Governor-General's-Award-winning poets—an award which suggests they have performed some sort of valuable public service—but what are they being rewarded for? While poems are often praised for beauty of thought, word, or image, and for the "aesthetic" pleasures derived from contemplating such beauty—and certainly there is great beauty in all three books under review—I suggest that in the present moment, we might value poets as much for their high degree of *consciousness.* By that I mean—following Saul—their ability to connect knowledge and action. They do so by their acute attention to language constructs and ideologies, together with their highly developed capacity to doubt, to wonder, to embrace the messiness of experience, to pay attention to whatever is at hand. These three poets are the best of citizens in Socrates' notion of the good citizen (cited by Saul) as a "persistent annoyance."

Margaret Avison's *NOT YET but STILL* is a collection of new poems which show Avison's characteristically incisive, alert, thoughtful, playful intelligence at work to produce provisional, open-ended poems. The reader is positioned within the anticipatory "NOT YET" and the provisional "but STILL" of Avison's title, a position which demands that the reader be as alert and attentive as Avison. The titles of the seven sections which comprise the book suggest a progression from a passive observer to active participant—from "Looking Out" to "Being Out" (the first two sections) through "For The Fun of It" to the last section titled "*Job*: Word and Action." While following that line in a general way, Avison explores an assortment of meditative conundrums within which modes of action become possible, or where

she at least finds links between word and action, or links between the individual "I" and a communal "we."

In the first poem of the book, "Old Woman At a Winter Window," for instance, a lonely "I" finds solace in seeing tiny plumes of smoke from other houses. In making that human connection, "I" links up with "we"—a small group huddled together against the cold of winter and, more crucially, against the chilling anonymity of global culture, metaphorized as "a congealing It":

> We claim these square ceiling and walls
> and floor from the immensity
> as all that have, for us,
> meaning, against the encroaching ice.

But this familiar theme of the beleaguered self, intensified by a touch of millennium angst (compelling as it is), is knocked askew by the contradictory metaphor in the last stanza of the "ice" as both a "fearful" space and "a glorious amplitude." Throughout the book, Avison continues to skew conventional notions and to leave the reader with many questions. As she writes in "A Kept Secret": "Darkness is changed / once it is comprehended; it becomes / knowledge beyond our reach." Avison is at her best in such exploratory poems where she sets words spinning along the axes of contemporary thought, intersecting them with questions, jokes, and perturbing contradictions.

In the last poem in the book, she approaches the Book of Job from the angle of a book reviewer: "Why write about it . . . ?" she asks. Her answer is "Because I want / to cope with it / in human company." (That, incidentally, is also a good reason for reading Avison's poems.) Then, having established a comforting and comfortable relationship to the reader, she discomfits the reader: "Anyone who reads this book / risks losing forever any belonging that / he thought defined himself." Likewise, in Avison's book, as in the Book of Job, the poems disturb any self-referential, stable universe. Instead they point to the human responsibility to respond, to be conscious of and continually review the immediate particulars of thought, feeling, and perception. In short, to be *conscious.*

The collections by Paulette Jiles and Anne Szumigalski depend more on metaphor and simile than on meditative conundrums to challenge and expand the reader's consciousness. Their books also cover a longer time period (both are *Selected Poems)* and thus are more varied in form and theme. Jiles's selections are taken from *Celestial Navigation* (1984), *The Malahat Review* (1987), *The Jesse James Poems* (1988), and *Song to The Rising Sun* (1989). In form, the poems range from lyric responses to her experiences living in the Arctic; to chant-like voice poems written for radio; to a laconic retelling of the myths surrounding the infamous Jesse and Frank James of the American West.

Jiles's poems most often take the reader on a journey, a journey which metaphorizes a process of expanding awareness. "Flying Lessons," the title poem of the book, demonstrates this central theme. The "lesson" of the poem is ostensibly a lesson about how an airplane is constructed to make it fly: "These the wings. . . . These are the struts. . . . These are the cowlings. . . . These are the skis on which we take off." But it soon becomes a morality lesson along the lines of the Icarus legend. While there can be a temporary distancing from the problems of living on the earth, the poet realizes that our life is of the earth and on the earth:

> We return in our damp fur and parkas
> toward an artificial horizon,
>
> to everything that is unjust, unpaid-for
> and unwarranted,
> claimed by our bodies like baggage;
> we, the earth-people,
> descend again.

I find the selections from *The Jesse James Poems* are Jiles's most "annoying" poems,

in the sense defined by Socrates/Saul above. They chew away at myths and legends of the outlaw/hero; they ask us to examine our dependence on public figures for romance and excitement; they explore how and why the writer and reader construct such heroes. Like the bank robbers Jesse and Frank James, the writer/reader is also a kind of bandit, demanding "your money or your life"—except that the bank-robber goes for the money, the writer/reader goes for the life. In "The Last Poem in the Series," she proposes an "anti-bandit" who goes into the bank empty-handed and takes nothing: "And so you walk in the door of the bank; / your hands are empty."

Anne Szumigalski's *On Glassy Wings: Poems New and Selected* covers an even longer period of time than Jiles's collection—some forty years and nine books, ranging from her first, *Woman Reading in Bath* (1974), through eight subsequent collections, including the 1995 Governor-General-Award winner, *Voice*, to a short section of new poems. The selection was compiled by Don Kerr and is arranged thematically (at her request) into eight sections. It begins with poems on art, moves through poems on children, to a section titled "Desire," to sections on war, God, "Death and Other Abstractions," to the final section on earth and water ("A Thistle Called Holy"). It is a sprawling, wonderfully varied assortment, reminding me of an overflowing ragbag of multi-colouring, multi-textured cloth which refuses synthesis and order. Her consciousness takes in detail after detail, details which ignite from the intensity of her focus. As with the Jiles collection, Szumigalski's title thematizes flying. The title comes from an early poem, "A House With a Tower," from her 1980 collection *A Game of Angels*. In the poem, Szumigalski argues with a part of herself ("a distant cousin") against the ivory tower notion of poetry as a carefully constructed refuge from the world. She argues for a poetry that comes from "the Celt within / who likes to stand up and sing / ecstatic and undulating songs," for a poetry that includes lies, deceits, infestations. Put in Lacanian terms, one might say her poetry infests the world of received truth (Lacan's symbolic order) with a buzz of meanings that arise from both the mystical and the experiential.

Like Jiles, Szumigalski also often takes the reader on journeys, but her journeys are eccentric, quixotic rambles in the realm of dream, vision, legend, reality, and myth. Certainly, in Socrates' terms, such poetry constitutes a "persistent annoyance" in that it awakens the reader to new ways of perceiving or thinking about traditional stories. In "Green," for instance—a poem reminiscent of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, which Szumigalski's cites as important early influences—she follows Blake in complicating the fairy-tale notion of a happily-ever-after world for women. For Szumigalski, the "fire" of the woman's desires threatens the "green" world of purity and innocence:

> A woman longs to make her home in the green of a candle flame. How to do this? First she takes a taper and lights it at the fire. The fire lies in her mind like a dog waiting to bite. The dog lies across the threshold of the house she wants to enter.

While the woman does complete the journey—"at her knock the door opens quickly, and she jumps over the dog who makes a fruitless snap towards her crotch," the uniformly green world that she achieves at the end seems insipid. One wants the woman to wake up from dream, to reverse her journey, to return to the "hot white of desire."

To my ear, it is the language of the above poem that "awakens" the reader, as much as its theme, in its refreshing blend of the mystical and the colloquial, the serious and the playful and its forward and backward moving rhythms. The forty-year time span of Szumigalski's collection together with

the rag-bag assortment of themes and forms renders it impossible to encapsulate in a short review. About all that can be said in a general way is that her poetry will consistently "annoy" in the fullest sense of the word: it will expand awareness, offer many linguistic pleasures, leave the reader alternately pondering and laughing about the complexities of nature, dream, myth, female experience, the lives of animals, the secrets of plants, the world of bees, beetles, "chiggers and wrigglers," the roles of wife, mother, lover, grandmother, child, gardener, or poet.

Entre litote et emphase

Lisa Carducci
Ville-Coeur suivi de Cela (Poésie). Vermillon $12.00

Louise de Gonzague Pelletier
Sarabande (Poésie). Vermillon $13.00

Reviewed by Raoul Boudreau

Ces deux recueils de poésie proposés par l'éditeur d'Ottawa ont en commun d'avoir été écrits par des femmes qui ont déjà publié chacune une dizaine de recueils et quelques romans. La liste des publications donnée en début de volume nous apprend que dans les deux cas, ces ouvrages ont été publiés plus souvent qu'autrement chez de petits éditeurs; ces deux auteures, malgré le nombre de leurs publications, restent en marge des noms les plus connus de la poésie d'expression française au Canada. Cependant ces deux recueils sont assez différents pour ne pas dire opposés aussi bien dans la forme que dans la thématique, celui de Lisa Carducci notant les éphémérides d'une passion, alors que celui de Louise de Gonzague Pelletier est empreint de la gravité du deuil.

En quatrième de couverture, *Ville-Coeur* est présenté comme "le duo de Beijing et du coeur de l'auteure." La Chine est en effet discrètement présente tout au long de ce journal de la ville et du coeur, divisé selon les mois de l'année, de août à juillet. Lisa Carducci mise dans ce recueil sur une disposition typographique originale qui rompt la linéarité habituelle de la lecture. Les vers généralement groupés par trois sont disposés sur deux colonnes en ménageant irrégulièrement des espaces blancs, pauses propices à l'intériorisation du texte. S'il ne fait aucun doute que le texte doit être lu colonne par colonne, cette disposition aménage aussi des rencontres lumineuses entre les strophes mises face à face: "sur le bord de la fenêtre / la pluie télégraphie / quoi à qui // ai joué ma dernière carte / un message part / se rend-il." Un double prologue et un double épilogue, côté ville et côté coeur, partagés aussi selon les colonnes de gauche et de droite, suggèrent une piste de lecture qui accorderait à la colonne de gauche les inscriptions des réalités quotidiennes de la ville et à la colonne de droite celle des mouvements intérieurs du coeur. L'auteure a eu l'intelligence de ne pas diviser aussi mécaniquement sa matière, mais il reste que d'une manière générale, on peut accorder un aspect plus concret, plus factuel au texte de gauche et une tournure plus abstraite et plus intime à celui de droite. Il me semble qu'il y a là beaucoup plus qu'un simple artifice de présentation et j'y verrais même l'affirmation d'une certaine conception de la poésie que le recueil met en oeuvre. *Ville-Coeur* est une belle illustration du fait que toute sensation reste attachée à la situation concrète qui l'a fait naître ou qui l'a accompagnée. De même la poésie est inaccessible en elle-même et on ne peut que la suggérer par la convocation simultanée des multiples images, idées et sensations, fuyantes et lacunaires, qui traversent l'esprit et composent un moment privilégié, un instant poétique, qui sera sauvé du néant par le jeu de l'écriture, appelé à fixer ces impressions subtiles. Voilà à mon avis ce que tente de faire *Ville-Coeur*

et ce qu'il réussit fort bien grâce à un art consommé de la litote, de l'ellipse et de l'image: "ce clapotis / lune contre nuage / sur le canal." Dans cette perspective d'atténuation de l'expression, le prologue affirme d'emblée la conscience des limites de l'écriture: «l'innommable / reste encore à dire." L'érotisme et la sensualité, ressources si difficiles à manier et qui très souvent croulent sous la surcharge, sont ici bien servis par un sens très sûr de la mesure: "la pointe de mes seins / chatouille / celle de tes doigts."

Le fait que cet amour se termine par une rupture est ici très secondaire: ce n'est qu'une péripétie qui ne fait l'objet d'aucune dramatisation et qui était déjà annoncée dans le prologue. L'amour, comme l'écriture, doit bien s'arrêter quelque part: l'important c'est qu'il ait existé et qu'il ait laissé des traces.

La seconde partie du recueil intitulée *Cela* est parfaitement assortie à la première. Il s'agit, comme on pourrait presque le dire de *Ville-Coeur,* d'un seul long poème sur un amour voué à l'échec et qui travaille dans l'infra-discours et le non-dit: "Ne jamais prononcer / les mots / laisser dans le néant / l'inutile." Le titre désigne en effet par la plus extrême litote la rencontre fulgurante, inexplicable et douloureuse de l'amour et cette retenue dans l'expression donne à l'objet une force et une présence troublantes. Lisa Carducci fait donc ici la preuve de l'efficacité d'une écriture qui mériterait certes d'être mieux connue. Ajoutons en terminant que de très belles illustrations de Du Jinsu, parfaitement adaptées à la tonalité du texte, ornementent la couverture et le recueil pour en faire une réussite indéniable.

Sarabande de Louise de Gonzague Pelletier comporte comme le précédent un prologue et un épilogue, ainsi que trois parties intitulées "Soleils suspendus," "Saisons fragiles" et "Lumières errantes." Le texte présenté sous forme de prose poétique est distribué en paragraphes assez brefs qui n'occupent que le haut des pages. La motivation de l'écriture nous est donnée de manière très explicite et plutôt banale dans la dernière phrase de l'épilogue: "Le départ d'un ami très cher m'a fait écrire *Sarabande.*" La transposition d'une souffrance personnelle en poésie n'est pas chose facile car celle-ci exige beaucoup plus que sincérité et vérité: elle demande en plus la vérité de l'expression et ce n'est certes pas en commençant par "Ton souvenir mouille mon visage de mélancolie. Je te cherche, désemparée," que l'on peut prétendre à cette précision et à cette nouveauté dans le dire qui donnent la sensation d'être en face d'une expérience unique et inédite. En tentant de transmettre une émotion, *Sarabande* verse trop souvent dans la banalité: "La vie aboutit à la mort. Je ne peux rien changer," ou dans l'emphase et la grandiloquence: "Les larmes me troubleront, iront chercher cet espace infini qui nous transcende." La prose poétique ne peut davantage que la poésie en vers se passer de rythme et de musique, mais des expressions terriblement prosaïques viennent briser l'atmosphère poétique que l'on tente de créer: "L'échiquier social peut-il être solide sans affirmation du coeur?" Certes le recueil témoigne aussi d'un effort d'invention d'images poétiques originales, mais elles n'ont pas la précision, la cohérence, la continuité nécessaires à la construction d'un univers imaginaire convaincant.

La distance et le recul auraient été ici de mise, mais le texte est tout entier occupé par la présence de la première personne du singulier et la poésie, que l'auteure semble avoir sacrifiée à sa douleur, n'arrive pas à percer cet écran. L'auteure n'a pas cru si bien dire en écrivant: "Je demeure une prose inachevée."

Contemporary Poetry

Margaret Christakos
The Moment Coming. ECW $14.95

Catherine Jenkins
blood, love & boomerangs. Insomniac $11.99

Nicola Vulpe
Epitaph for a Good Canadian. University of Ottawa $3.00

Reviewed by Kathleen O'Donnell

The books by Christakos and Jenkins express with authenticity the very personal experiences of motherhood and of love. Vulpe's civic lament has a familiarity of subject and style, in contrast to the striking images of Jenkins and to the computer experiments used by Christakos.

The first part of *The Moment Coming* includes five sections: four of prose poems and a final series of computer poems derived from the fourth section. The pieces under the title "Sudbury" reflect growth and change resulting from leaving a home town: "There were so many words she learned the very year she left that place. When she returned for a visit, it seemed no one spoke them in a daily context. 'Context' was such a word." The gain of words is counteracted by a loss of communication with the people of Sudbury who were "still reeling from the INCO layoffs the year before." On her return, Christakos feels "naked, ousted and dumb."

"The Seating Place" consists of ten variations on the word "positions." The first piece states: "when the abdomen becomes a seating place / we know computers rate second." They rate here by forming lines from the last word of each line of the previous piece, a technique that provides no lyrical or thematic development, only mechanical interest. Christakos's dissections rearrange various excised words; while the original material of each poem may have the interest of the personal subject matter, these word-puzzles allow only the satisfaction of recognition and no meaningful extension of thought or feeling.

In the central part, "Bringing You Up," the title of each poem is selected from the previous poem. The technique seems highly mechanical, in contrast to the deeply emotional quality of the work. "The Moment Coming" forecasts for the child "the universal / symmetries / you will unhinge." The mother's feeling is stated nakedly: "I want to graft you to me / as if you won't become / soon enough / one of the impenetrable." In this group of fifteen poems without computer techniques, the author conveys effectively the most personal unembellished experiences of motherhood.

The ten prose poems of "A Woman Goes for a Walk" (the fourth part of the book) use a word from each paragraph as title. Seemingly insignificant elements, rather than the titles, intensify meaning. In these anaphoristic pieces, one such relevant detail, for example, is the change from "her husband" to "her boy friend" in the eighth and tenth pieces entitled "True" and "Plot." The prose poems offer a coherence of character and of narrative within the context of the whole collection.

The concluding part of the book, "The Difference Between Dawn and Dusk," returns to memories of early life and also introduces the subject of the birth of twins, with some reference to the computer techniques of the first part. Description and narration intermingle with reiteration, for example, in "Fickle Moments," through a poem playing and re-playing the same words.

The somewhat less experimental poems of the central part, "Bringing You Up," are the most effective. The less the reader is involved in or distracted by typographical play, the more palpable is her response. Identification of character and continuity of narration are prominent in the central part of the collection. There, the experiences of the author predominate over journalistic topics or experimental wording.

It would be impossible to cite verbal strategies as any distraction in Catherine Jenkins's book. The forty poems of *blood, love and boomerangs* present variations, often with shocking images, on the theme and experience of love. Frightening and violent though it may be, love yet serves to "chase away the demons / and ease the thought of death." It is a dangerous experience, through which the poet can present herself as "wondering if I can let you drown / knowing it's safer for me if I do / not sure I can bear the weight of your self-abused body." The alternative is equally unsatisfactory, "watching romantic comedies / wishful but disappointed by unrealistically happy endings." The obsession leads to "the nauseating realization that I use sex as a manipulation / as a weapon in this war— the same way you do."

Amidst the violence remains the possibility of tender feeling. A street person is "surprised when I talk to her / uncomfortable when I show concern." The feeling intensifies in the author's self-description as "ambushed by what would have been your fifteenth birthday" in an address to her aborted child. The poem concludes, "sometimes time decelerates and I am there / with you in my belly again." Here is the regret of the poet who comments on herself as "me so used to men telling me to lighten up."

There can be comfort received ("the gentleness of your hand") and comfort given ("I gave the last of my change to the girl with dirty hands / reminding me too much of myself before edges"). Any experience of love, however, is still violent: "bite marks on my arms and breasts / match your dental records." Truly a waste land remains for the poet: "sometimes I believe in angels / but I can't make myself believe in god." Finally, love is a minimal necessity: "I want to be enveloped in the wings of angels / but you'll have to do for now."

blood, love & boomerangs resembles many contemporary productions with its free verse, its monologic quality, its desolate outlook, and its totally personal record, set in a metropolis of casual assaults perpetrated or suffered by the persona. A sequence of poems leading to "15" (the poem that refers to the abortion) and subsequent pieces dealing with the "past settling on my skin in stages / like deposits of ulcerated context" provide some hope for redemption. The extended final poem asks "why not?" and gives all the reasons it can for love.

Love is most obviously lacking in *Epitaph for a Good Canadian,* which is actually more a life story than an epitaph, since the speaker remains living at the end though bereft and lost. The poem may have some reference to Auden's "The Unknown Citizen," although it uses the first person to portray strikes, cutbacks, and various social problems. The speaker describes his unemployment and its devastating effects on his family, as he finds himself isolated and poor. The poem ends in darkness: "The snow's blowing up, the lights have gone out / it's time to lie down / sleep till the thaw."

Reading those lines, one may question the nature of the poetry. While the lines move quickly, they are unmusical and prosaic. Some sympathy may accrue to a speaker who has extremely limited resources. In hard times, he could say, "I made wire toys / and the competition was tough." This portrait of a man defeated by social and financial circumstances, as well as limited in expression, reflects a familiar contemporary plight.

However, the ability to make the misfortune a stepping stone to new power is lacking in Vulpe's work. The poem (about one hundred lines) presents only misfortune, without any suggestion of a moral or imaginative victory to follow from the financial and social devastation.

Of the three books, probably *Epitaph for a Good Canadian* is the most readable with its sympathetic persona, its brevity, and its colloquial language. The same might be said of the few opening paragraphs of *The Moment*

Coming, a book in which an interest in composition and structure soon dominates feeling. The book with the greatest effect on heart and mind must be *blood, love and boomerangs* where the reader identifies with the poet "waiting for love after closing time / watching the word shuffle by."

Family Albums, Poetic Genealogies

Louise Bernice Halfe
Blue Marrow. McClelland and Stewart $12.99

Richard Harrison
Big Breath of a Wish. Wolsak and Wynn $14.00

Shannon Stewart
The Canadian Girl. Nightwood Editions $10.95

Reviewed by Kegan Doyle

All three of these excellent new volumes by young Canadian poets engage with the experience of family and reveal each generation's struggle to communicate with its past and its future. Louise Bernice Halfe's *Blue Marrow* concludes with a statement that sums up the book's subjects: "Grandmother, the woman in me." *Blue Marrow* is a fragmented autobiography that contains the stories of the author's spiritual and physical Cree grandmothers. As the title indicates, this book delves not just into the bone but also into the very marrow of tradition, a process at once painful and filled with spiritual illumination. The epigraph comes from Pablo Neruda's *Ceremonial Songs*, a title which could subtitle this volume, for *Blue Marrow* feels ceremonial. The poems take on chant-like rhythms and read like laments for lost ritual that are part redeeming ritual themselves: "Oh Nohkomak, / your Bundles I carry inside, / the full moon dancing / beyond my wails. / I've seeped into / your faces, / drowned in the pictures / I have gathered / and cannot / hold." Halfe writes with an almost mystical intensity, as if through language it were possible to become one with the *Nohkomak* (the Cree word for Grandmothers). Yet the catalogue of questions at the end of the book indicates that the grandmothers will always remain somewhat apart, something of an enigma. *Blue Marrow* is a poem including history, a polyphony of the tongueless, and abounds in times, peoples, and places, so much so that it is often difficult to follow its transitions. Some may complain that this difficulty is unnecessary and distracts from Halfe's point, but complex history necessitates a complex style. Also known as Sky Dancer, Halfe has published only one other book of poetry *Bear Bones and Feathers*, which won the Milton Acorn Award for 1996. Her second book confirms that she is an important new voice in Canadian poetry.

Shannon Stewart's impressive debut collection *The Canadian Girl* also explores the places where personal and public histories intersect, one of her central concerns being the lives of Canadian girls and women within the domestic sphere. Her book divides itself into four sections. The first, "The Canadian Girl," contains a semi-autobiographical sequence that follows the poet up to the age of sixteen. The author's gentle wit and striking imagery save these poems from the twin dangers encountered when writing about growing up: banality and sentimentality. The second and liveliest section of the book, "The Loves of Aunt Sophronia," is a series of meditations inspired by a column from a homemaker's manual of 1879 called *The Home Companion.* Next comes "Talking to God," a series that follows the development of the author's child from conception through birth to points beyond. The final section, "The Garden of Earthly Delights," is the most eclectic: topics range from barnacles and farting in elevators to a women-only circle jerk.

The poems in *The Canadian Girl* are poems of our climate, poems of earthly

delight and disappointment. Stewart's subject is the everyday—everyday objects (furnaces, stoves), everyday people (Mom, Dad)—and she speaks in a clear voice using the often richly sensuous diction of the everyday. Yet in her best poems, she also observes those times and places where the everyday becomes momentarily and magically transfigured. In a poem from the Aunt Sophronia sequence entitled "Hysteria," for example, the poet examines the sometimes strangely intimate relationship among people living in the same apartment building. The poem begins with a longish and fascinating entry from Aunt Sophronia on how to care for hysterics, which is followed by the poet's ironic lament for the dying art of hysteria. This subject leads her to discuss her downstairs neighbour who screams and throws objects at her husband and to whom the poet listens through the hot air vents. The poem concludes: "Tomorrow I'll wish / for the century to turn back, where / she could fall upon the grass, shaking, / and I'd be there, the resolute nurse / plying a womanly trade / of teaspoons and unguents." The poet does not really admire the culture which created hysteria, yet, perversely and paradoxically, waxes nostalgic for its objects (teaspoons, unguents) and its folksy moral certitude. In poems such as "Hysteria," Stewart reveals that she is a poet to watch out for. Her poetics are, as one of her poems puts it, kitchen poetics, refreshingly unpretentious and accessible, yet her poems are less simple than they first appear.

Like *The Canadian Girl*, Richard Harrison's fourth volume *Big Breath of a Wish* also observes the minutiae of infancy. With a naturalist's precision, Harrison documents the first year in the life of his daughter, Emma, and in particular her movement from babble ("aahgooh") to meaning. An author of a book of poems on hockey, Harrison is interested in the crease, the dangerous (and controversial) space of transition. In anticipation of his daughter's arrival into sense, Harrison even makes poems by running some of Emma's beautiful nonsense through the spell-check: "awahadh hunh / yeahwa budha yeow" becomes via the computer "oh egg, a bad hunch, / yeah, a buddha eye." So is poetry born. The first poem in the collection, "Birth Day: The Video," relates Emma's birth, focusing on that terrifying moment of silence, "where they lost the sound of the heart," and introduces us to two of Harrison's fascinations: sound and memory. Throughout he uses his daughter's utterances and activities as starting points for meditations on language. His poems combine an eye for the sensuous detail, an ear for the beauties of noise, and a deft intellect. For example, "Oral Stage: Inside Out" ponders the path towards knowledge. The father observes the way the world "goes in / piece by piece where / words come out to name it." Emma, in other words, comes to know the world by putting it in her mouth. This realization prompts him to mime this action himself by placing a rattle in his own mouth, which prompts the dull ache of memory and the melancholy thought that it will be too soon before the world will again reemerge from his daughter as a calling. The poem points to the sensual nature of language but also to the fact that the poet's calling is a sad one: for language is always already the record of loss. Harrison follows this thought with a mime poem "Oral Stage: Outside In" that reverses the action of the previous poem. As these titles indicate, Harrison has been reading Freud, Lacan, and Derrida. Unlike many theory-besotted poets, Harrison makes poems that are comprehensible and human—thanks largely to Emma, who keeps him rooted to the here and now. Alongside those of Halfe and Stewart, Harrison's book shows how younger Canadian poets are using their craft to keep memory, that fickle beast, alive. Like Halfe and Stewart, Harrison begins and ends his journey at home, but

he also uses his craft to take us into the treacherous terrain of memory. It is a trip worth taking.

Voices of Hope

Chris Harris
How To Paint. New Star Books $14.00

Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm
bloodriver woman. Kegedonce n.p.

Reviewed by Brenda Payne

The poetry of these Aboriginal writers is certainly not for the light-hearted or for those expecting to read tales about coyote (at least not in the obvious sense—Coyote can definitely be seen in Harris's humour and in the complex and often contradictory messages of Akiwenzie-Damm). Harris is a gifted storyteller who conveys his street experiences without sensationalism, blame or victimhood, while Akiwenzie-Damm illustrates reserve life through the eyes and mind of a poet. Both of these writers take on the responsibility of sharing their Art such that they not only contribute to the (re)writing of Native story, but they also generously share their vision for a society that respects and celebrates its First Peoples as human, feeling beings.

How To Paint offers intelligent insight into the experience of living along the margins of society, trying to dodge the labels that can adhere to, and limit, one's sense of identity and purpose. Chris Harris simultaneously conveys his anger and his ability to find irony and humour in his life as an addict, an Aboriginal and an artist. In many ways *How to Paint* is a depiction of the process of recovery from addiction and from the losses of life; furthermore, Harris's poems powerfully illustrate the erratic emotional and spiritual struggle that recovery necessitates. "Bear Cave" reflects the experience of living with pain and having a seed of hope for another way of life—an easier, softer, more loving existence—but being afraid to step out of the familiarity of "the cave":

> She know that I know about the outside, about beauty, about love. She feels I am lying. And she is right. I cannot tell her the truth . . . I cannot tell her I carried him [the bear] here from the last cave . . . I cannot tell her my eyes have adjusted to the blackness . . . It is almost comfortable and yet . . . .

Bear takes on another identity in "The Birth of Love, or Why the Earth Shivers," in which Harris celebrates the ability of women to menstruate and bear life and confronts and vehemently rejects the notions of shame and sin that Christian beliefs impose.

Similarly, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm's *bloodriver woman* reveals her struggle to unearth her spiritual path—a path that has become cluttered and tenuous because of the presence and teachings of the "White Man God." In "frozen breath and knife blades", she laments:

> there is a man who stares and calls
> me sister
> as if he was born to do so
> he walks among us and the people
> fall silent around him
> it's as if they can't remember
> their names in the face of
> his strange words. . .
> this man we call Father is watching.

bloodriver woman exposes the situation faced by many Aboriginal people who have survived residential school experience (either their own or the effects of being raised by parents forced to attend these institutions); specifically, many First Nations people are in the process of discovering, recovering and learning the traditional spiritual practices of their own cultures. It is an illuminating but tragic commentary on our country's policies that we have robbed so many children of their history; thankfully, because of the strength

and wisdom of Elders, many of our efforts to steal the pride and the beliefs of our First Peoples have failed. Akiwenzie-Damm's poems are filled with anguish, fear and confusion as she, at times, attempts to integrate her Christian convictions and traditional Native spiritual beliefs; in "Missionary Position," for example, "the prayer beads have names / and like to be held between the fingers / I hold them tightly / massaging each one carefully / I tell them about my visions / they listen without derision." Despite instructions to venerate a punishing and judgmental God, Akiwenzie-Damm does not hesitate to question and ultimately to reject the violent nature of Christian ideology. In "last rites," she seems to regard the complete embrace of a Christian faith as devious and dangerous at best: "the White Man God / is breath / and words made flesh / and flesh made clean / the White Man God / will set me free / for four days a vulture has circled my heart."

How To Paint and *bloodriver woman* share experiences that have come to be known as "typical" for Native people, namely, the struggles with alcoholism, violence, poverty, and prostitution, and the feelings of shame and confusion and the quest to remain Aboriginal in a White society; however, these poets share their stories in a manner that is thought-provoking, humorous and hopeful.

The Reaching of the Poetic Field

Janice Kulyk Keefer
Marrying the Sea. Brick $12.95

Stephen Guppy
Blind Date with the Angel: The Diane Arbus Poems. Ekstasis $12.95

Barbara Klar
The Blue Field. Coteau $10.95

Reviewed by Karen Mulhallen

These three books provide a glimpse of the state of poetry in English Canada; each is a strong collection, one by an accomplished writer at mid-career, and each exhibits quite different poetic gifts from the others. Lyric poetry, prose poetry, political poetry, the dramatic monologue, and the gnomic fable are all well represented, as they are in the English Canadian poetry community at large. The flowering of readings and performance over the last decade and a half, and the institutional support for this phenomenon, has allowed a remarkable development of new voices quite out of proportion to the reading population. We have become a country of poets in search of an audience. While our novelists are easily exportable, our poets in a sense remain on the margin. And so the accomplished poet in search of auditors frequently turns to prose narrative, the poetry if not abandoned at least temporarily set aside. Of course, not all eminent Canadian novelists have begun as poets, but the names of Jane Urquhart, Carol Shields, Margaret Atwood, and Michael Ondaatje remind us of just how many writers did. While there is very little relationship between the two practices, a writer is nonetheless a writer, and the brain is a large field.

Janice Kulyk Keefer's career is already distinguished by her critical talent—she has published books on maritime fiction and on Mavis Gallant—and by her skill as a fiction

writer. Her novel *The Green Library* was recently nominated for a Governor-General's award. *Marrying the Sea* is her second poetry collection, and it is substantial. Section one, "Sacra Conversazione," features the poetry of memory: in her case, a poetry of memory filtered through history. There is a beauty of image in these poems, the rough tongue of a horse on a child's outstretched palm, which transforms them from history into historical lyric.

Section two, "Sirens' Songs," continues the historical lyric but focuses female characters. These poems of character arise from paintings, myth, folktale and history. The voice is ironic, witty, even sentimental. The final superb sequence, "Isle of Demons," is a major work on its own, a deeply moving exploration of a young seventeenth-century French noblewoman abandoned on a small island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence after forming a liaison with a young officer on her voyage out:

> I have not come this far
> to hear birds sing. Force from me
> strict music—teach me to heal
> with bitter herbs, till they lick
> Your honey from my hands.

The final and titular section, "Marrying the Sea," is the weakest and seems to me to detract from the focus of this collection. It consists of poems on Keefer's marriage; it is dedicated to her husband and tends to the confessional, without the poignancy of the other sections. It would be better in a separate volume where it could achieve a voice untrammelled by the intellectual passion of the other poems in this particular collection. However, there are treasures here too, such as "Jealous," a superb poem on love and jealousy, with an enviable command of psalmic structure. And Keefer's final poem, "Adoration of the Mystic Lamb," provides a fitting resolution to this outstanding collection:

> We are already sailing back to them
> and we are setting out, never
> to return. We have vanished,
> and can still be seen by anyone
>
> looking out for us
> with the eyes of love.

Stephen Guppy's *Blind Date with the Angel: The Diane Arbus Poems* is a collection of dramatic monologues. Although only his second book, it is captivating and crackles with insights on its subject. The images of Diane Arbus's photographs have become commonplaces, as have the details of her life on the edge, but as Guppy enters into those very images, revealing their heart, he also enters into the heart of the photographer and her times. Part One, "In Available Light," begins with a chronology which is in some ways the least successful section, echoing the voice of Margaret Atwood's *Journals of Susanna Moodie* and various Ginsberg poems. Part Two explores nine specific frames, and opens with the searing "A Flower-Girl at a Wedding":

> All alone, I remain
> on the edge of my childhood
> my bouquet of wilting daisies thrust
> toward the photographer's camera,
> my small toes curled like molluscs
> in the shells of Mama's pumps.

The "Albino Sword Swallower," which follows, never misses in rhythm and image. And "A Woman in a Bird Mask" tears open the middle class subterfuges that Arbus herself probed. Part Three, "Blind Date with the Angel," brings the reader to the wider import of Arbus's story, the implications of image making itself:

> I withdrew into the necessary
> silence of my darkroom, secure
> in the vague suspicion that
> Art, the poor man's absolute
> is adequate justification
> for whatever crimes the heart commits—
>
> My philosophy has always been
> assault with a deadly weapon.

Blind Date with the Angel is a bravura performance.

The Blue Field by Barbara Klar ranges from tight images embedded in gnomic pronouncement to inappropriate non-poetic prose diary and document. A tighter editorial selection was needed here. When these poems are good they are very good, and the clarity and density, the packed quality, of her imagery, although arising from Klar's distinct voice, reminds one of Anne Michaels's first book, *The Weight of Oranges.* Klar's tendency to fable is clear in the brief poem "One Ton" where the opening word becomes exemplum:

> Country, you have shown me the crying
> widow at the auction, her husband's red
> '49 Fargo, once, twice, sold
>
> Cold, you will have me love
> the space between old women, heavy
> as the news of death in winter.

Her didactic strategy is epitomized in "The Woodcutter," which unfolds in eight numbered sections, each of which is called "Lesson." Klar does have a way with titles—"Four Words For My Body," "The Night of Told Secrets"—but the poems don't always live up to these evocative beginnings. Light and dark, thaw and water, sky and earth dominate her imagery, creating coherence.

The collection's title comes from her poem "Body of Many Blue Wings," itself inspired by a line in Gwendolyn MacEwen. In it, we can see the poet's strength, the talent for wresting metaphysical implications from the specific:

> We have fallen through the year
> to where the sky scatters
> flowers and a rope of suns
> burns on the tree west of us. Or
> it snows and we hang up
> white and gold. Two ways
> of seeing everything. Darkness
> as darkness or darkness as light. . . .
> ("Two Ways")

We witness her delicate drawing out of parallel worlds.

Art of Sinking in Poetry

Syliva Legris
Iridium Seeds. Turnstone $10.95

Lynn Crosbie
Queen Rat: New and Selected Poems. Anansi $18.95

Heather Spears
Poems Selected and New. Wolsak and Wynn $14.00

Reviewed by Jon Kertzer

Syliva Legris writes in a style so spare that even her haiku seem long-winded. She uses ellipses, pauses and blank spaces to dust her words over the page, scattering seeds, as her title suggests, that will root in the reader's imagination. This is a writing beyond understatement, recalling Ezra Pound's fragment "Papyrus," which records four words barely legible from a scrap by Sappho. The reader is forced to infer the missing lines and so to re-enact the unappeasable longing that the poem might have expressed. In the same way, Legris's readers must supply the missing context of what seems to be a prolonged elegy on the death of her mother. The entire book is like a single poem continually circling its grief, as in the following example, which actually covers an entire page:

> [say the word with pursed lips
> s t r e t c h e d
> earth over her
> hear her
> her heart
> *beatingbeating*
> e a r t h

Since iridium seeds are metallic particles implanted in the body to irradiate cancerous cells, these poems are a homeopathic response to the disease that claimed her mother. Perhaps mourning is the anguish that cures itself by finding tenuous expression in what Legris calls "ghostchords," "filaments of light," and a "blur of dust & gas." An epigraph from Muriel Rukeyser that mentions "resurrection music" and another title, "discontinuous prayer," hint that the

poems can also be read as prayers. If so, they do not appeal to God (notable by being absent) so much as to the earth—to flower and stone, to the raw elements of life that nourish the soil. The poems' recurring images (eye, breath, colours, flowers, minerals, nursery rhymes) draw the gaze downward:

> swelling earth
> pores
> filters
> to body
> *(air water fire . . .)*
> every cell
> a truth

Lynn Crosbie also sinks into language, but to a different depth. She cultivates poetic obsessions in which "forms of frenzy" evoke "dreams of mutilation" inhabited by derelicts, addicts and carnival performers in an underworld whose god is delinquent. She likes to present herself as a bad girl (as in her earlier title, *VillainElle)* frequenting bars and living in a cathouse (although in the midst of her delirium she managed to write a Ph.D. dissertation on Anne Sexton). Here is a publisher's notice for *Miss Pamela's Mercy,* which I quote out of sheer envy: "Like the potions of her voodoo queens, Lynn Crosbie's haunting imagery tentacles its way into the terrain of bizarre realities, passionately illuminating both the holy relics and the tissues of scars it collects on its journey to the underside of paradise." Recently Crosbie has gained notoriety for her novel based on the horrific Bernardo-Homolka murders, *Paul's Case,* but her poetry is actually more restrained and intelligent than this over-ripe promotion suggests. *Queen Rat,* which samples her career since 1992, reveals a style that grows increasingly relaxed but continues to be punctuated by violent, lyrical bursts, some of them quite dazzling: "My first / friendship like a shiver / the silken legs of the tarantula, that navigates / from wrist to elbow, feeling its way around."

Her poems effectively combine coarseness, tedium, rapture and delicacy: " I am applying Lee press-on nails and listening to / *The Magic of Mantovani* . . . / When he left, I wore a mourning veil and sewed / starfish over my eyes. I cried like a siren, I slashed my / wrists with a broken bottle." Crosbie is willing to take risks, including the risk of lapsing into melodrama, but there is usually a sustaining formality behind her wildness. The earlier poems are carefully staged as confessions, parodies, or wry responses to current events. The later poems are more casual, but they still rely on a pretext drawn from popular culture (the Godfather movies, Elvis, pop music), from literary allusion or, in "Alphabet City," simply from an alphabetical sequence of Toronto locations.

Heather Spears is the veteran of this group, and *Poems Selected and New* gives a welcome survey of her writing from 1958 to the present. Although she won the Governor General's Award in 1988, she is not widely known, unless I am mistaken, yet this collection reveals a deft poet who achieves intense effects without the insistence of Crosbie or the bated breath of Legris. The earlier poems are technically more adventurous than the recent ones, perhaps because she no longer feels the need to disconcert her readers. Nevertheless, concerting and disconcerting—bringing her subjects in and out of focus—is a dominant theme. As the picture on the book's cover testifies, Spears is also a talented painter, which may explain why her poems frequently explore the powers and limitations of the visual—"the dancing optics of a vast / seduced intelligence." They present her in the act of drawing: inspecting a scene for its composition and value, standing back from it in order to sink into its depth. This is a paradoxical situation, because the act of observing imposes an aesthetic distance that is simultaneously alienating and a source of command, while her power to plunge into a subject is simultaneously an act of com-

passion and an invasion. She enters a scene in order to leave it untouched, as in this impressionistic moment from "Orcas Island, sentimental morning":

> wherever there is light, there is blindness/
> the water
> has suspended itself between
> breath and planetary breath/ its surface
> is less real
> than this papery perceptual I extend
> to its lost peripheries . . .

In "On cultural expropriation," the paradox of insight is treated satirically as the dilemma of a hapless anthropologist in quest of an cultural authenticity that will be disrupted the moment she touches it. The same problem appears in various moods and guises in other poems, where an invisible otherness, which the artist must bring to light through an act of sympathetic distortion, is portrayed as animal life, depth of emotion, disease, crime, the cruelty of war, or death. All elude yet invite the grasp of art: "In a word I see you, the air / goes clear as water . . . / and my hand / steadies, my vision / writes indelibly, as with points of diamonds."

Supporting Ourselves

Eleonore Schonmaier
Treading Fast Rivers. Harbinger n.p.

Lynda Monahan
A slow dance in the flames. Coteau $8.95

Heather MacLeod
My flesh the Sound of Rain. Coteau $8.95

Jean Mallinson, and others
Quintet: themes & variations. Ekstasis $15.95

Maureen McCarthy
Sneaking through the Evening. Harbour n.p.

Reviewed by Andrea Sharman

These are books about chaos in pattern: they rupture, pull to pieces, and separate into parts, yet they renew and rework broken agreements. Written by poets from the Pacific coast to the Maritimes, these works meditate upon assumptions of freedom, health, fear, and personality. They resist essentialism, rectifying previous dismissals of women's experiences and emanating a tonal and structural courage characteristic of much women's poetry on the cusp of the new millennium. Between mothers and fathers, progression and fixedness, illness and wellness, there are these words.

Eleonore Schonmaier's *Treading Fast Rivers* initiates a current that rocks and lulls its readers. It begins by describing a father who cooks, knits, gardens, and loves his daughter dearly. The daughter grows up to realize "[t]he world is much larger / since I rediscovered clouds. / The sky is no longer a dark blue bowl dropped/ over my head but a deep cup to drink from." One of Schonmaier's most intriguing assertions is that illness is a part of health; health never promises physical wellness. Like the sea, health is unpredictable and can become tempestuous at unforeseen provocation. Who is Schonmaier's lighthouse keeper who "guided me clear / through illness and storm, kept me away / from cliffs, showed me the cloud / formations instead, and whispered / that it was time to row myself to shore"? This author's writing is delightful: from concrete poetry to couplets appearing sparsely on the page, *Treading* finds strength in conveying delicate enigmas: "my daughter says fear is a pebble / curved in the palm, not a stone in our shoes."

The differences between fear and freedom weave through Lynda Monahan's *a slow dance in the flames:* "when they told her / it was terminal / I remember thinking / it was like she was taking a trip / somewhere / & wanted to make sure / everything was looked after / while she was away." The image of a woman on fire, reminiscent of Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers,* emerges in "taper" Monahan writes, "she / can't / believe / no one notices / her hair / caught / on fire / this way." Despite women feeling

this disjointedness and invisibility, women also revel in a delectable freedom. The "the naked woman" dances, "raw as October / her hair / haloing the wind." In "where blue whales swim," we learn how "she belongs in their element / in the sea's slow dance / she longs to feel / what the blue whales feel / . . . going with them / to wherever it is / the blue whales go." Monahan's *slow dance* is a pleasure to read, its subject matter endearing and its insights clever.

Heather MacLeod's *My flesh the Sound of Rain* is also a refreshing read because of the author's ability to describe the emergence of a woman from terrible burdens. This book is about letting go of hurts and grudges. *My flesh* portrays a life-struggle to transcend memories of a father who raped almost all of his immediate family. MacLeod's character cuts his name out of her birth certificate, trying to rid herself of this grief. The woman gleans a certain amount of strength from her mother, and honours her:"[m]y mother taught me how to move; not how to dance or / swing my hips, not how to pirouette or arabesque, but how / to pack, tape boxes, disconnect the hydro and telephone. / She taught me how to let go." MacLeod mixes Christianity and mythology to come to terms with her background; by placing an Indian woman on Noah's ark, MacLeod relates at least two spheres, admonishing exclusivity: "I am only Half" and "[n]o one knows I'm Indian unless I tell them." She expresses pride when she discovers she is an integral piece in her family's history, belonging to a culture that welcomes her return: "I touched the bison, / wanted them to remember me. / When I come home / I greet the bison at the border, / in my mind I say my brother's name, / I say, *Buffalo* / and realize I've been gone too long."

Belonging to families, participating in relationships riddled with ambiguities, and adopting socio-political stances are key actions in *Quintet: themes & variations.* A self-described "exploration of the poetic possibilities of shared themes," the book is written by five poets and separated into thematic sections. The poems speak to physicality, corporeality, and tangibility against the abstract of memory. Sue Nevill focuses on luminous details. Pam Galloway describes a child witnessing spousal abuse in "touching the past": "she slammed the dough against the table / slapped and punched flat hands and fists / against a smooth pale skin." In this poem, the mother does to the bread what her husband does to her—but she is creating, he is destroying. "All those years, trying / to please everyone," writes Jean Mallinson, "I was dying. To please / everyone is to be / no one, to perform / an antic masquerade." Here, an easily identifiable perplexity is stated dramatically, giving it a validation and an urgency, as with Clelie Rich's observation: "she is almost looking forward / to being old she is sure / it will come back / this life whose moments she is forgetting / as quickly as she lives them." Eileen Kernaghan is eloquent and melodic. This collection satisfies a reader's desire for adventure, solace, and speculation on the construction of a sense of self.

Sneaking through the Evening by Maureen McCarthy is rather a departure from the other books in this review. Daring in its non-linearity, this book promotes an opacity that is well worth trying to envision. McCarthy's poems are mired with intense, thick vegetation, murky depths. Nature is wild and secretive and animals are infinitely more wise and interesting than us. Peace is "a hunted animal" while we are "hauled by our hair / through the calendar." Never a clear vision before us, we are nonetheless compelled to undertake the book's series of mental journeys. McCarthy will not let us forget that while we are experiencing different worlds, we are not actually going anywhere: "trace the Arno" in bed, or "listen to the radio, / it has every

sort of accent." This self-conscious grounding reminds us that we are firmly anchored to our lazyboys despite mentally participating in meta-realities. With lines such as "how many truths, can you remember," the dominance of medial caesuras and non-sequiturs give McCarthy's writing an elusive, though not impenetrable, quality.

New Poetry Collections

Esta Spalding
Lost August. Anansi $19.95

Heather O'Neill
two eyes are you sleeping. D.C Books $12.95

Clarise Foster
The Flame Tree. The Muses Company $12.95

Reviewed by Kathleen O'Donnell

These three volumes contain poems that are highly original, sometimes terse and poignant. Narrative, elegy, or aphorism give shape to the personal and the autobiographical.

The poems of *Lost August* express the plenitude of life, as well as the finality of loss and death. Details emerge with hesitancy and repetition. Even confusion is suggested by the opening of the first section: "*August—or was it August?*" The subject here is not the time-frame so much as the experience of the loss of a daughter. The first poem refers to "a grieving father" who sent "four lions to four / corners to bring his daughter home." In the father's fresco, the daughter returns; for her picture, she wears "a yellow dress," an image that provides the title for the third section of the book. The second group of poems, "Each girl, the one," portrays the love, nostalgia, suffering, and rapture of youth. In this section, a prose poem describes "the other side of your face laughing when you tipped your hat to that girl crouched on the glazed sidewalk, fingering cracks." Here, the pitifulness of life is described as well as some of the happiness as, for example, in the conclusion of "Recipe": "I'm finding my mind has / changed, branching, it drinks / sometimes entirely brightness—."

The last section entitled "A yellow dress" allows the pain of loss to be communicated even by "the sound of the rain." The inevitablity of grief is understood—"The pattern we laid / out for her. A needle / a spool of thread." The continuation of life brings further loss. No traditional source of consolation is offered, only the reality: "There's company in hornet noise. In the clock's logic." The reality is that "September will fall / with twilight's metal." Pain is necessarily assuaged by the sureness of "the earth's / constant rotation" and by the author's awareness that "It's death / who breathes the first / air into our lungs."

While the impulse and development of the book rely on loss in its many forms, not to be ignored are the many poems of love and innocence such as "Salad Days" or "Rainy Day List" in the first two sections. Such affirmations persist throughout. At the end, there is a woman who "learned to love what goes missing." With all its lyrical beauty, *Lost August* also emphasizes the intellectual strength which gives life direction.

Heather O'Neill's poems in *two eyes are you sleeping* can't be described as intellectual, but rather as witty, penetrating, imaginative, visual, and emotional. She could describe herself at age thirteen "crawling with STDs / like magic wands" and could say "I didn't think anything could break / certainly not my heart." Her own infant child laments: "I never had a father, and you never had a lover. / I will for sure be the real thing / if you look just once my way." Among the single mothers, many "are very competitive with each other / they lie about their boyfriends' incomes and get caught up in having babies." Nevertheless, in this subculture, one may have standards. "When Matty Sings" contains the lines" "I'm here with my daughter / I don't want

to be talking to a coke dealer." In "Hepatitis in C Minor," O'Neill states her belief that "Nobody is really good enough to love unconditionally." However, with her daughter, the poet realized that "it is truly awesome to love unconditionally / no matter what."

In the world of poverty, illness, and wandering, there can be surcease in pregnancy for "when you are pregnant / you feel kind of thick and easy with the world." At such a time, "people give you their seat on the bus / you get cut a bit of slack." The concluding poem presents other such aphoristic observations on life.

One of the first poems of the book describes life "in a Missouri I'm leaving and already missing." American influence is evident. One poem states "American money, I love it," while another complains, "only Canadian bills left, like ketchup without steak." The expression "24-hour convenience store / on the interstate," is used in one setting, and *dépanneur* for the corresponding shop in Quebec. Montreal street names (René-Lévesque, St. Christopher, Park Ave., St. Laurent, Jean Talon) occur as well as a reference to "the non-existent country of Quebec." The few changes in terminology do not alter the mentality of the work which retains the atmosphere of world beat rather than of a distinctly Québécois culture.

A specific place and culture is the background and often the subject in *The Flame Tree* by Clarise Foster. The poems are inspired by her sojourn in Guam where her brother died. The first of the four sections of the book is highly nostalgic, containing reminiscences of tropical Guam. The descriptions are reduced in the second section where human experiences, often of dissatisfaction and loss, are foregrounded. The third section entitled "The Poem Gets a Name" concentrates on aesthetic techniques with explicit references to modern painters and authors. Poetry becomes a consolation: "the poem has decided / to be my brother / the one who died of aids." The poet asks the poem to tell her "the ways a heart grows cold," and recognizes that "the poem sits without a stitch / leaving nothing to the mind but / the sweet rhythm of skin." Art cannot, though, provide a basis for the recommencement of life after her brother's death.

The last group of poems in the volume includes "grey," an elegy in seven parts, and the meditative poem "when i have not slept" which describes the absence of the deceased brother: "you leave not a scar / but an opening." The following piece records an unnecessary self-infliction: "the day after you died / i burned my hand / the need perhaps to feel / something other than grief." The pain is explained "as a kind of logic / you inflict upon yourself / when there are no other maps." In the face of suffering and death, not logic but vision might be helpful, vision supplied by the Guam legends that are presented as introductions to each of the four sections.

The Flame Tree has been justifiably praised for the beauty of its descriptions, and for its ability to convey the scene and atmosphere of Guam. However, in the sequence of poems, place becomes subordinate to the human experience of bereavement. The poet describes herself in the final poem as "fixed to the vision" of the natural scene and unable to "break from the blindness" that holds her. Self-revelation, more than knowledge of Guam, may be what draws readers to *The Flame Tree.*

Each collection has a highly distinctive viewpoint and style, the individuality resulting at least partly from autobiographical details. There is, though, a little obscurity as each author relies to some extent on traditional styles, on allusions, and on echoes to enrich the poems.

À la Recherche de D.G. Jones: Reading *The Floating Garden*

E.D. Blodgett

Next to his poetry, D.J. Jones's conversation possesses the same lightness, disconcerting shifts, and surprising insights. It is marked by a quality of wit that both Freud and Dr. Johnson would have felt blessed by. What is missed in his poetry when in print is the voice that sustains the conversation. It is a craggy voice, whose key signature is never clear, buoyed upon a sea where few sail. The words of his voice readily move from the most precise moments in contemporary Québec-Canadian anguish, to the spring floods in his basement and recollections of the Saguenay. Or anything else that may fall through the air of the mind. As in the work of many of his English Canadian contemporaries, empirical reality is never far from his range of perception, but the empirical does not seem to possess him so much as the real itself, whatever form it may take. Inasmuch, however, as it has no form of its own, it appears only realizable, if only temporally in the shifts of voice, where every fleeting sentence becomes a sign of an unknown reality that the empirical can only occlude.

Everything that I have mentioned has been known since the late 1970s when his utterly exquisite "The Lampman Poems" appeared and the recognition that his work demands began to move his way. The recognition was, for the most part, official. The paucity of studies devoted to his poetry is clearly disproportionate to its achievement. This may be because he is, perhaps, a poet's poet. Yet, for a poet whose *débuts* are so profoundly rooted in the dominant English Canadian consciousness of its time—his debt to Northrop Frye is well known and still apparent in his most recent collection—it is curious that his presence is not more manifest in contemporary Canadian poetry. Perhaps the association with Frye is a nemesis, but it has not been for other poets. Perhaps it is because he has published primarily with Coach House, which may limit his readership to a certain extent. Did his reflections on Lampman imbricate him too intimately with a romanticization of nature, which has but limited appeal? Is his Archie as palpable as Atwood's Susanna?

Although none of these questions is particularly relevant for a reading of his poetry since "The Lampman Poems," I raise them to return to the collection in which they were published, *Under the Thunder the Flowers Light up the Earth (1977)*. They dominated the volume, and, in a certain measure, they left the reader unprepared for the section which followed and concluded the book, "Winter Comes Hardly." Few of the poems in this section have the brevity of "The Lampman Poems," all of which are contained by the device of spelling the name of a flower with the first words of the line in their descent on the page: when the flower has reached its

maturity, the poem concludes. The poems in the last section are designed with a different intent: they tend to trail off. "It pays," he writes at the end of "13/1/77,"

> not to fix the location, to look at the world
> perhaps, with a single eye
> marking place, date, and purpose of visit
> uncertain
> or irrelevant
> or simply unknown
> (*Under the Thunder* 101)

When *A Throw of Particles* appeared (1983), which contained new and earlier poetry, few of the poems in this section were republished, with the exception of "The Diamond Sutra," which contains the almost programmatic sentence "the world keeps / dismantling the syntax, escaping / a final sentence" (69). Although the new poems of *A Throw of Particles*, develop what this statement asserts, they have the deceptive appearance of the earlier poems, most of them fitting onto one page and effortlessly containing paradox after paradox, many dedicated to friends, most asserting that while everything is for the most part no more than a throw of particles, the dismantled syntax was still capable of referential bearings. Even if we were not always given "knowledge," it was possible to rely on "a constant / reintegration" (*Under the Thunder* 97).

The Floating Garden by its very title suggests that the bearings have been cast adrift. These are poems that are not tied directly, only implicitly, to earlier poetry: one forgets the hold of Lampman, and the title urges us to call other things to mind that may not have impressed themselves at first reading. The lovely title in which "The Lampman Poems" appeared, *Under the Thunder the Flowers Light up the Earth*, may be linked with the title of a poem by Paul-Marie Lapointe, whose selected poetry Jones first translated in 1976, a year before his own *Under the Thunder*. While deeply moved by his turning toward Lampman, the reader may have overlooked the context in which he was moving, a context occasionally hinted at in both the poems and phrases in French scattered through his poetry. Jones's context, if there is a context more central than any other, is Québécois. For almost three decades, he and his wife Monique Grandmangin have been the active spirits behind the magazine *ellipse*, which is devoted to the translation of anglophone and francophone poetry, and their translations have played an extraordinarily significant role in making francophone poetry known in English Canada. Sometimes I have been prompted to ask whether it is insufficient, not to say wrong, to read Jones within a profoundly central Canadian matrix. Is he not, perhaps, a Québécois poet who writes in English, and is this not the reason why he appears somewhat inaccessible in English? Between his solid epigrams, which capture all his earlier poetry so pungently—"Prepare to die beloved / and let the small birds sing"—and his knowledge of a "disaggregate world" full of "abandoned particles" (*A Throw of Particles* 83 and 94), something disconcerting slips in. The disconcerting element is a kind of postmodernity rooted in the rise of surrealism in his native province. As he remarks of Lapointe's poetic,

> [t]he poem explodes like a seed and ramifies. More accurately, perhaps, it is a series of luminous tracks that betray the invisible electrons startled from their atomic sleep. Lapointe would remain faithful to the ambiguity, the indeterminacy, of the movement of experience. And with luck, the elliptical movement of the poem should retain something of its unpredictability, its mysterious coherence, its force. (*The Terror of the Snows* xv)

This is a primary matrix of Jones's poetry that would have been immediately noticeable under the sign of 'Lampman,' and a second matrix, still closer to *The Floating Garden*, is the poetry of Normand de

Bellefeuille, a translation of whose poetry he published in 1992. There he speaks of Bellefeuille's poetry as "a Floating Garden of signs, of discourse, within which we live; it helps to generate the poem, at the edges of discourse" (*Categorics One Two & Three* 76). The Floating Garden easily transmutes into the apparently pastoral world of a floating garden, where the phrase is repeated in a poem dedicated, perhaps not entirely ironically, to Northrop Frye (44), and laced with intertextual asides to Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." It is a poem that begins with an "empty urn" where the world in autumn is not clearly perceived beside and around it and where the beauty of Keats's "truth" becomes "this /articulate emptiness." The garden of Lampman, whose own favorite poets was Keats, has decisively become "a Floating Garden of signs."

Does it help, however, to infer that Jones is simply enmeshed in a poststructuralist abyss of homeless signifiers in which "for a time / the ten million words and the three thousand tongues / are reduced to a sigh / and an O" (*Categorics* 93)? To answer that question I want to move away from enticements of the postmodern and the poststructural, which have their own ways of overdetermining readings of the worlds they inscribe, and turn to Jones's translations of Bellefeuille's categorics on the assumption that few readers of poetry in English Canada are familiar with them. These are poems that situate themselves easily and without embarrassment in 'an unknown reality,' to use the phrase I have already used. Others might say that they construct such a reality, but Bellefeuille's practice suggests otherwise. Something seems, at least, to be given:

> The wheat makes a great stir in the standing heat of summer. This is it, the authentic touch of reality: the wheat makes a great stir in the standing heat of summer. And just there, confronting this image, my death must have begun. (*Categorics* 73)

What the reader constructs, at least, is someone who sees somewhere, perhaps in a picture, the wheat making a great stir, and it appears to possess "the authentic touch of reality." Then the reader makes a second move in which the real is to be understood as image, and in the encounter with the image of the wheat making a stir in its levels of the real the speaker's mortality is found. The speed, the ease, the playfulness is breathtaking. Everyone knows of wheat and heat and summer as parts of the whole of an empirical reality that they initially summon. But inside that reality another reality awaits, in this instance mortality awaits, which becomes: "A single image against the nightmare of History, [and] everything happens as if a single image created, there in the garden, the nightmare of History . . . the authentic touch of reality."

The other reality is, however, so present in the unfolding of the statement that the support of what we usually take to be our world is continuously eroded. Nevertheless, "only the real returns," which is "the blood and its whirlwinds; a nearly tropical landscape. The real returns while dancing upon, while crying out that, the real returns even while talking . . . about the things of the World" (*Categorics* 26). Bellefeuille's real—and it is not only his—is a real apart from "the things of the World," and yet it enters them, rearranges them, and places the speaker with his intimations of mortality somewhere there too. Its ineluctability is present, however, as

> a certain theory of the sentence, with its knots and bows behind it, with certain vowels and certain cries when perhaps especially it spreads to areas as close as you can get to silence, a certain theory of the sentence that defies the scene even as it crosses it, that defies the song that tirelessly, rising above the disorder and never for all that, adding to it, it repeats. (*Categorics* 15)

And so the world we think we know, "the scene," its presence as a certain environment

never wholly denied, is taken apart. It is precisely "a certain theory of the sentence" which possess this capability to speak "the trees without method. The sea without method. There where matter without worrying about filling a vacuum, or, for that matter, without denying either History or the World, becomes itself, finally, with its knots and bows, theatrical, affirmative" (*Categorics* 17). The reality is in a matter that "for that matter" is *sui generis* and carried in "a language that, beyond all consolation, in order to dream of a dance without predictability" (*Categorics* 49).

This is the matter that became Jones's after the culmination of "The Lampman Poems" and which is so effortlessly unfolded through *The Floating Garden.* Of course, the voice is different, the intonation and the uncanny humour. But the world, the garden where "the nightmare of History" is touched by an authentic reality, all float, the syntax dismantling, "escaping / a final sentence" (*Under the Thunder* 98). The effect is absolutely vertiginous, inasmuch as there is no assumption of ground:

> 'we are words
> that have lost their meaning' (Norris, K.
>
> since they never had any
> outside their relation with others, what
> does this mean
>
> like the Word, we must be absolute
> and empty or
> shifty, promiscuous, wholly
> intertextual
>
> happily
> my daughter called
> (*The Floating Garden* 23)

The complexity of this statement, while open to understanding as irony, raises a number of issues about its language and syntax that do not permit casual references to discourse or poststructural theory. True enough, the quotation from Ken Norris is an intertext, and the lines that follow comment upon the existential positions of intertextuality, but the concluding lines, which are projected as an interruption, prompt the reader to ask where the limits of intertextuality are, for example, "what / does this mean?" The four sections imply that by their contiguity they are all touched by the implications of intertextuality. But the language of the longest section, operating on a level of irony not apparent in the other three, plays off words and the Word in such a way as to suggest that, since the *logos* is a signifier without a signified, all we have left are words. There is no reason to believe, however, that words, having lost the power to evoke the holy, can be anything other than "wholly intertextual," that is, their signifying function is limited to other signifiers. The speaker's daughter, however, who is capable of using a telephone, implies that she is only a part ("happily") of the nexus of signifiers when she is inscribed into a poem. There may be—and indeed why would one doubt it?—a daughter who can be so inscribed and therefore part of an existence outside the text. Of course, one can doubt her existence, as one can doubt anyone's existence, beginning with the author, who may or may not have written the poem. Even when one cannot be sure of the daughter's existence, the lack of surety permits another kind of irony, which depends upon the possibility of more than one world touching upon one another: the textual world indicated by the gesture to Norris, the ironization of that world by the speaker, and the allusion to a world from which a daughter calls. Each world has its own ontological habitus, and, as a consequence, each affects the other. If we are permitted to be of two minds about the daughter as intertext, we can also wonder about the absolute status of the Word. Thus, we can also wonder how substantial, as opposed to "empty," the intertextual world is. Each world relativizes the other, which dethrones intertextuality just as

readily as the *logos*. The syntax dismantles.

This means that what one might call the law of the intertext is not absolute. The words of Jones's poem come from another level that combines intertexts, *logos*, signifiers, and daughters, not to speak of dogs, the Pentagon, emptiness, and the Year of the Rooster, into a world where they can all float together on the same plane, but caressing the various ontologies (or trajectories) of the worlds they represent into longer, lighter impromptus. But where, one might ask, is the real with which my text has been so preoccupied? Is the speaker's daughter calling the real—or the Word of words? The real, as Jones says *à travers* Bellefeuille, is something that returns "even while talking about the things of the World." It is the dream of the unpredictable dance or the dance of the unpredictable, to use a recurrent word (*or*) whether written into the text or not. And so we hear a voice beginning nowhere and saying, "there's been a paradigm failure" (94). And it is general:

> the signs drifting down, piling up
> emptied of difference
>
> erase the sound

The failure, at least on one level, is a failure of the Saussurean project with its echos of Derrida, and the poem unfolds as a series of seemingly unrelated statements, which are perspectives upon a poststructuralist paradigm that has been emptied as much as the *logos*, all questioned in the penultimate line, with no diacritical indication that it is a question: "how shall we bear these emerging relations?" The answer is that "woof! [a dog speaking?] we shall shake up the world." But this line is immediately countered by the poem on the following page: "The world will shake us." The real, then, is where the indeterminate, the unknown, and our mortality consort, and Theory is emptied of its theoretical bearing and allows Bellefeuille/Jones to assert:

> She stirs slowly, so that one can hardly say if it's gravity or the incredible lightness of being, when the leg, long and full, lifting and lowering, when the leg, long and full, falls and slips away from the hip almost disjointed, then, without insisting, lifts to here, indeed to here, to the point where with little hesitation one might write: "reality." (*Categorics* 37)

Where that "here" is can only be found by reading the sentence. And so the syntax only dismantles in appearance, and uncertainty is subtended by a certainty that can, perhaps, only be spoken in variations, thus alluding to certainty without naming it, and so affording glimpses of an unknown real that resides in and, by implication, somewhere outside (*hors texte*) the promiscuous signifiers that engender the floating sentence. In that place *The Floating Garden* finds itself, rising from a poetics that is deeply rooted in a French and Québécois discursive tradition drawn together through the *truchement* of Borduas' *Refus global*, where Jones is profoundly and happily at home, translating Lampman and Bellefeuille, and so, neither anglophone nor francophone in any ideological sense, but somehow floating through text and world to a point where Canada, as it used to be understood as a possession of French and English Canadians, despite the point of departure of Jones' meditation, dissolves in the dissolutions of Theory.

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