SPEAKING IN TONGUES:

CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN LOVE POETRY

BY WOMEN

Méira Cook

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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Abstract

The first essay in Julia Kristeva's *Tales of Love* begins by claiming the writer's speechlessness in the face of a lover's discourse: "[n]o matter how far back my love memories go, I find it difficult to talk about them" (1). In the face of this claim to "speechlessness" I am interested in finding a language adequate to articulate a discourse of passion in twentieth century poetics, as represented in the works of six Canadian women poets. Tracing some potential models for articulating desire, passion and/or longing in the work of Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida, I suggest that these models are effective precisely because they are not definitive, but rather venture a tentative and highly subjective response to these affects. I consider how the writer positions herself in just such a precarious and subjective position in Kristjana Gunnars' *The Prowler*, and suggest that the figure of the narrator/prowler might be an effective entry into the amatory discourse.

I consider how Elizabeth Smart's desiring narrator in *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* uses her lacking and longing state to produce a metaphorically overdetermined narrative, thereby conflating the distinction between absence and excess. I then examine Dionne Brand's deployment of poetics as a marker of difference and resistance, her identity as a Black lesbian writer integral to her expression of political and erotic passion. I trace this politics of difference in Dorothy Livesay's erotic poetry, and consider how this explicitly

sensual writing about an older woman's romance with a younger man is constructed both by the poet and by her critical audience.

Reading Kristjana Gunnars' *Carnival of Longing* alongside Nicole Markotic's prose poem sequence, "No Goodbye, Just:," I discuss how confessional practice and amorous discourse are performed through two markedly different narrative structures: Gunnars' performance of abandonment and Markotic's language of revenge. Finally, I explore how Daphne Marlatt's engagement with language as a network of textual, intertextual, and extra-textual conversations creates an amatory discourse that listens for an answering touch. Throughout, I suggest that the structure and language of amatory discourse is always addressed to the reader, always engaged in seducing the reader and the writer through the illusory promise of representing the unrepresentable, the promise of an unknowable secret of desire.

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The Language of Love: an Oblique Beginning

> And is there any worse violence than that which consists in calling for the response, demanding that one *give an account of* everything and presumably *thematically*.
>
> "Passions"
> Jacques Derrida

In his essay "On Love," Adam Phillips observes that since the language of love borrows its referents from the discourse of theology and epistemology, it is both relentlessly redemptive and insistently enlightening (40). The lover, like the mystic or the paranoiac, is a reader of signs and wonders, all are terrorized and bewitched by the experience which, in the absence of a transcendental signifier, comes to stand in for our contemporary version of the sublime. If this is to be a true analogy, then it is possible to say that we have, in the late twentieth century, enshrined literature in the place of religion, making an endless proliferation of discourses possible because of an absence in the centre, an abandonment. In asking the question, is the discourse of love merely a linguistic sign under which certain actions can be performed, we have to take into account narratives of

abandonment and seduction, narratives that are essentially unrepresentable since the desire of which they are constructed cannot survive the achievement of its object.

In reading, we are asked to abandon any resistance to the erotics of the text. We are beguiled by the promise, long withheld, of an untold and deferred secret hidden somewhere between the thetic space and the depth model of perception. We do not, we have never had, the courage to stop reading.

As a reader, any reader, but one more particularly of love poetry, I was struck by the paradox of producing a detached and lucid account of a subject that, by all accounts, demands a passionate response. In thinking through this problem, I began to envisage alternatives to producing an academic yet passionless discourse on passion. What does it mean to write about love? Is one required, I found myself asking, to fall in love?

At the same time I began to be increasingly aware of my discomfort in juxtaposing what is popularly called "literature" with what is grudgingly called "theory." It seemed to me that in such an arrangement one is obliged to privilege one or the other of these categories by their position in space; one text is always positioned above or over the other. In this arrangement it is often "theory" that is imposed like a grid on the text(s) in question, reminding one of Durer's famous drawing on perspective, "Draughtsman Drawing a Nude," where the artist looks through a geometrical grille at the body of the woman he is studying.[1] Such an arrangement began to seem increasingly violent and violating; the male subject dissecting the object under scrutiny -- in this case the female-body-as-object -- in

an effort to gain perspective. In this metaphor I am not trying to align "theory" with the masculine gaze nor am I attempting to replace "literature" with the female body. Gender binaries aside, what seems important in this analogy is the spatial position of one text *vis-à-vis* the other. I began to wonder if there was any way to juxtapose texts, or realign them to create friction or conflict rather than dominance.

The biblical theorist Mieke Bal speaks of reading "dissymetrically" or reading towards the idea of "counter coherence" (*Death and Dissymmetry* 17). In her transgressive reading of *The Book of Judges*, Bal chooses dissymmetry over rigour as a way of acknowledging what she calls "the repressive and oppressive bearing of the endlessly repeated political coherence" (20). In choosing to read a variety of idiosyncratically chosen texts in conjunction with one another, she parenthetically recalls the idea of pleasure in writing. Can one write criticism for pleasure, I found myself thinking while reading her argument.

It may be observed, at this point, that the present writer has spent no little time talking to herself, but that, as I will suggest, is one -- and by no means the most serious -- of the consequences of engaging in the lover's discourse. In many ways then, writing on the subject of love is not without consequence. My own writing, no less than the writing I have chosen to study in the course of this project, inevitably falls prey to the effects of a discourse that has, since Ovid, posed a challenge to what Linda Kauffman has called "traditional concepts of authority and authorship, referentiality and representation" (*Discourses of Desire* 20). Part of my project, then, is to frame a language in which to speak of passion

as well as of the inevitable exclusions that any such enterprise involves. I will begin, in the spirit of Mieke Bal, by proposing to look at a number of related but necessarily dissymetrical texts, each of which, to a greater or lesser extent, interrogates the amatory discourse: Julia Kristeva's essays in *Tales of Love*, Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*, and an essay by Jacques Derrida fortuitously called "Passions: An Oblique Offering."

1.1 Tales of Love

In the first sentence of *Tales of Love*, in an essay provocatively entitled "In Praise of Love," Kristeva begins by claiming her own speechlessness in the face of the lover's discourse: "No matter how far back my love memories go, I find it difficult to talk about them" (1). When she does talk about "them" Kristeva uses words like "exaltation" and "eroticism," "miraculous" and "delirium," words that turn into passion because the language that we use to fix the amatory relationship is inadequate, a "flight of metaphors" (1). Literary but not literate, it is a discourse that can only be spoken in the past tense and from the site of the first person. The discourse of love is received, then, through a language that is overdetermined, discursive, metaphorical and connotative, in which contradiction and misunderstanding become the most significant figures by which we read the text, and errors, hallucination and deception are a requirement for the condition of *jouissance*.

What Kristeva calls "the ordeal of love" (2), what she refers to as "vulnerability hidden under a mask of vigilance" (1), is characteristic of a discourse that interrogates the denotative, referential function of language. Both identity and meaning are implicated in this process and the precision of both is compromised. Kristeva's *Tales of Love* is presented, then, as an archeology of the diverse images of love in the West, and what she calls "the consequences for discourse" of the amorous interaction of open systems (17). In this statement of her methodology she clearly privileges psychoanalysis as the instrument for this search:

> Analysis is not the supposedly detached, subdued writing of a book concerning the love life of men; it is an integral part of it ... It is then not a love life of men, of women that will issue from the pen of an analyst. No more than a complete or objective history of ideas on love. But there will be selections, insights, symptoms. (12)

What then of the consequences in this discourse for the analyst, the subject *à la-can* "who is supposed to know?" Kristeva has to become other than analyst in this process. Even more radically, she has to become lover. I want to suggest here that Kristeva is writing "in love," and that her writing is, in part, a performance of rapture, the rapture of the amatory subject who has lost control both of the univocality of language and the singularity of her own body. At the same time she is a skillful stylist engaged in a precise and ethical dissection of the lover's discourse, a process that mocks the naiveté of the engulfed subject that she is also trying to represent.

Each discourse transgresses the other. A double masking takes place: at the moment when the subject discovers herself to be most subjective because "in

love," she is represented as losing the power to construct this subjectivity because language has been flooded with meaning, metaphor, and oversignification. At the moment when she loses the power of speech, the subject falls under the impression of speaking "at last, for the first time, for real" (3). In this figure love is constructed as an affliction, a wound that makes it possible to speak of love, since pain -- and only pain, the suffering body -- bears witness to the experience. Of course, since Kristeva is both lover and therapist, her position is curiously doubled; both wound and cure, love in her discourse contains its own antidote.

This is not an unexpected construction. Since Freud the love relationship has been valorized as a model of correct psychic functioning. As a fiction invented to prove the subject's health, the discourse of love provides Kristeva with the talking cure that, in turn, frees her to reconstitute her desire in discourse. In the context of *Tales of Love*, love is constructed *via* the relationship of transference.[2] Kristeva identifies herself as analyst, further confessing that love is what allows her to cure her patients through "fleeting moments of identification" (11), an intense allegiance, provided, of course, that it is accompanied by recognition, insight, and renunciation.

Through transference love[3] the patient is induced to fall in love with the therapist whose function it is to detect love-as-symptom in the lovesick discourse. Through her formulation of love as sickness, Kristeva demarcates the role of the analyst/writer as the one who cures through deliberately establishing the precise site of the disorder within the body, whether that body be defined as text,

discourse, or flesh. But Kristeva's position is more radical still. In *Tales of Love* she is not content merely to analyze the state of love or to cure those who have fallen ill from its effects. Instead she immerses herself as subject in and of the lover's discourse; at the same time that she positions herself as theorist she performs her role as lover. As such, she presents herself as a doubled subject writing about a tradition from her contaminated position within it.

What can the above reveal to us of the problems connected with the lover's discourse? Or, to put it another way, what is the fate of the tale-teller when the tales s/he tells are love stories? What Kristeva demonstrates to us, through her performance as lover, no less than through the testimony of her work as an analyst, is the contagious nature of the amorous relation when translated into discourse. It is not possible, it would seem, to relate love stories without oneself falling in love and, if we are to believe the testimony of her tales, it is not possible to write about love without in some way replicating its effects in language. The example of Danté's Paolo and Francesca -- those Florentine lovers whose eyes met while reading of Lancelot's love for the Queen, and who "read no more that day,"[4] -- illustrates Kristeva's predicament, one that will become increasingly important in my reading of the poems that follow.

Speechlessness, the doubled subject, and an immersion in discourse -- these are the figures that Kristeva's text has so far brought to bear upon the subject of love. Yet we are still left with the question as to why the amorous discourse, unlike others, leaves neither narrator nor reader intact. Danté, on hearing Francesca's story, tells us that he swooned in pity and "as a dead man

falling, down I fell" (101). His dramatic fall anticipates a more metaphoric one. The speaking subject in *Tales of Love* falls as well, but in this post-Lapsarian world, hers is not a fall from grace but into love and language.

Kristeva's construction of passionate love is articulated as a structural problem. Since love is the example *par excellence* of an experience in which identity boundaries irreparably break down, the amatory discourse is governed by the *a priori* condition of metaphorical instability. Quoting Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*, Kristeva asks plaintively: "Do we speak of the same thing when we speak of love? And of which thing? The ordeal of love puts the univocity of language and its referential and communicative power to the test" (*Tales of Love* 2). The four hundred pages that follow are an attempt by Kristeva -- and one that is already under erasure -- of articulating and defining the various and diverse amatory discourses of the Western tradition: courtly, maternal, Christian, erotic, Platonic, oedipal, mystic, biblical, narcissistic, secular, carnal, psychoanalytic, sacred, adulterous, and extraterrestrial. These discourses are marked both by the confines of the condition of love and the powerlessness of language to express love, since the amatory discourse, "a whole imaginary, uncontrollable, undecidable flood" (3) is addressed -- *vide* Barthes -- to an unknowable and sometimes perverse Other. Indeed, Kristeva's position is even more radical. When in love, she seems to imply, the subject *is* the Other *via* narcissistic identification, transference, and a "delirium" that breaches all limits (4).

In the essay that follows her introductory "In Praise of Love," entitled "Freud and Love: Treatment and its Discontents," Kristeva clearly postulates a

symbiotic relationship between love and narcissism and implies that if we can name the conditions of narcissistic emergence, we will be closer to understanding the complex structure of the amatory relationship. In this she follows the Lacanian paradigm in recognizing self-deception as the basis of the subject's relationship to reality. For Kristeva, the gesture of misrecognition is what enthrones narcissism as the basis of the subject's choice of a love object.

Kristeva constructs narcissism as mimetic play that promises to establish psychic identities but which reveals itself only as a screen over emptiness. She emphasizes this emptiness which, she claims, is at the root of the formulation of subjectivity, paradoxically filling this "empty" space with significance at the moment that she claims it as container. There is, consequently, a misrecognition at the centre of her narcissistic formulation that establishes an "emptiness" that is simultaneously generative of multiple metaphors and configurations. This narcissism is constructed as a defense against emptiness, specifically the emptiness occasioned by the subject's separation from an imaginary unity with the mother. At the same time the narcissistic subject attempts to exorcise emptiness through the contrivance of imagery and representation. For Kristeva, the narcissist is nothing if not a subject of representation. As for the lover, s/he is a narcissist with an *object*.

Kristeva's formulation of love as imprinting -- the subject's identification primarily with a pattern that can be imitated, instead of with an object -- implies that the condition of loving is a condition fundamentally without object. What Kristeva implies by her formulation of the symbolic matrix of the amatory

relationship, is an identification previous to any object, an identification that sets up love as pattern and repetition for the sake of an object to come. What is privileged in this transaction is discourse, and the space of discourse, which is what Kristeva demarcates as transference.[5] For Kristeva, then, love is an object-less transaction, so that desire is constituted, not as psychoanalysts would have it, by the loss of the object, but by the failure of the object in the signifying field to begin with. Moreover, this desire is negotiated by the analyst who situates him/herself at the seam of the maternal and paternal positions -- thereby gratifying needs and establishing prohibitions variously, in a discourse that produces both meaning and absurdity.[6] The language of psychoanalytic discourse, like amatory discourse, is therefore (over)loaded with pre-verbal significance, non-representable meaning, as well as the apparently more precise articulations of figurative language -- in other words, the entire grammar of the unconscious, accessible only through such devices as fantasy and parapraxis.

The other subject of representation in Kristeva's text is the writer, and it is in this construction that her own doubled persona most clearly emerges. The narrative of *Tales of Love* consists of at least two distinctly calibrated voices that correspond to the figurative structure of language. The first is the metaphorical voice of the lover, at once jubilant and sacramental, and the other is the metonymic trajectory of the analyst in control of a scandalous narrative. For Kristeva, the metaphor is a movement toward the visible, in the sense that the amatory quest is a metaphor for the subject as it constitutes the literary or figurative nature of the lover's discourse through an overflow of semantic

features. In contrast, metonymy structures the trajectory of desire that controls the narrative. Neither "voice" is privileged since both are necessary to the doubled narrative of *Tales of Love*. In constructing herself as both theorist of love and as lover, Kristeva performs the apparent impossibility of the lover's discourse without erasing that discourse's insolubility. "The language of love is impossible, inadequate," she begins, and in her ensuing "philosophy of love" she attempts to catalogue the occasions of this impossibility (1).

In this text, Kristeva repeatedly defines herself as a psychoanalyst, generalizing that term to include one who analyzes amatory discourse: "*The reader will find here, interspersed with amatory theories and myths, banal tales of contemporary loves as told by analysands*" (17 Kristeva's emphasis). Her distinction between what is banal and what is presumably less so, seems less significant than her decision to combine the two narrative strands while nevertheless marking their difference through italics and the frame of the case-history. After a minute analysis of the Freudian narcissist, for example, in which she includes in her discussion such literary examples as Romeo and Juliet, and such philosophical figures as Hegel and Heidegger, Kristeva concludes with an italicized analysis of three patients, "John," "Marie," and "Matthew." This "heterogeneous confrontation" (17) is neither an effort to endow the discourses of patients with philosophic dignity nor an insolent attempt to demystify their lives by drawing parallels between cultural formations and "real life." Rather, Kristeva defines her project as one in which all discourses -- banal and unusual, philosophical, literate and literal -- are allowed free and equal play in the context

in which love may be praised. "In Praise of Love," then, is Kristeva's opening statement of intent, and one in which her anxiety as an analyst of amatory discourse clearly surfaces.

In her opening chapter, Kristeva seems to be implying that it is not solely as an analyst that she writes, but as a lover. The first sentence privileges the personal, the confessional, as much as it insists that these emotions are unrepresentable: "No matter how far back my love memories go, I find it difficult to talk about them" (1). This phrase, with its confession of intimacy and its warning of impossibility, rings through the text that follows, dividing the speaking subject into the analyst -- what Lacan would call the subject who is supposed to know -- and the lover, who knows only the subjective nature of her condition. Of course the word "divide" is reductive, even inaccurate, since the amatory discourse is one of excess and the Kristevan narrator is as over-determined as her narrative. All things to all readers, she constructs herself both as a subject of and in love.

In a transaction in which each subject is constructed only by her relation to the other, the only way that the erotic pact can be broken is through a moment of recognition, the naming of the subject by the Other (of the analyst by the lover, or the lover by the writer). Yet it is evident in Kristeva's *Tales* that no naming of the desired subject is sufficient to contain the object of desire; there is always a surplus, an excess at the border. This doubled (rather than divided) narrative is characteristic of amatory discourse despite the equally characteristic figuring of love as triangular in structure. Indeed, in a text that proclaims the impossibility of

the couple[7] it is ironic to notice the effect of doubling which is nowhere more evident than in Kristeva's essay "Stabat Mater." I would like to proceed with a detailed reading of "Stabat Mater" since, like the amatory discourse, it is a text that contains its own other, and as such, may provide valuable insights into the effects of the doubled narrative position.

1.2 Mothers and Other Lovers

In "Stabat Mater," first included in *Tales of Love*, Kristeva isolates the condition of motherhood as the variable that functionally defines the female integer. In this way she privileges reproduction as the means by which the woman inscribes her difference, at the same time implicating the female body as locus of subjectivity and writing. The paradox of her position is that while maternity constitutes a consecrated representation of femininity, at least in the western world, it cannot escape its illusory status, what Kristeva calls a "fantasy of a lost continent" (133), because of a prevailing idealization of primary narcissism: the belief in an unbroken dyad of infant and mother. Kristeva's point is that in resisting this image, feminists have become immune to the experience that the fantasy obscures. "Stabat Mater" is a poetic and analytic attempt to represent this experience, and as such, Kristeva's writing presents itself as the revelation of a secret. This secret, once decoded, promises to reveal not only a new discourse of maternal love, but also whatever it is that the prior discourse has concealed.

The maternal, defined simultaneously as biological category and as attribute of identity, largely situates the female as symbolic construct in the context of Christianity, which in turn sanctifies the female body by constituting it as virginal-maternal body. Kristeva asks what it is about the representation of this anomalous body that satisfies both male and female, what it is that supplies to the male what he lacks, and hides from the woman what it is she provides to complete his lack. In an examination of the history of the Marian doctrine situated on the right hand side of Kristeva's split page, site of reason and teleology, she examines the potency of the constructions of virginity while at the same time providing a creative left-hand gloss on the experience of maternity.

Kristeva concludes her analytic argument by invoking the mother's body as a "strange fold which turns nature into culture, and the *speaking subject* into biology" (149 Kristeva's emphasis). The implication for this fold of nature is that no signifier can represent it completely; it is a body located on the boundary of nature and culture, a body that explodes with pregnancy, a body both unique and anonymous, masochistic and jubilant, profligate and ethical. It is a body that represents desire as desire for continuity, and it is a body that finally encodes perversion in the transaction of patriarchal law in which the mother's share is the offering up of her own masochism.

If the maternal body cannot be represented entirely or in its entirety by the signifier, then we must read Kristeva's split text as a refusal to confine representation to signification. Consequently, the left-hand margin speaks allusively of conception, gestation, childbirth, care-taking and separation, of the

relationship of the mother to the child she has produced and the child once reproduced by her own mother. This site of memory and desire expresses Kristeva's need to construct an ethics appropriate to women, to bring to the Law the resonance of a feminine discourse, a *jouissance*. In this way, the left-hand margin contains the other text, the maternal text that has been disallowed in the academic / paternal / critical narrative of the right-hand margin, the acoustic text that brings the body to sound, to writing.

For Kristeva, the dialogic stream-of-consciousness discourse of the left-hand side approximates what she calls the semiotic, the mark or trace in language of the unconscious other. This is the language of the pre-oedipal where maternal rhythms, anarchic meaning, parapraxis and silence, all the oral and instinctual aspects of language precede the symbolic order, the language of signification. In this way, the maternal body is situated at the intersection of nature and culture; it is the threshold that resists the paternal order. In an interview with Mary Jacobus, Kristeva confirms this image: "I didn't want to give an impression of coherence, on the contrary, I wanted to give an impression of a sort of wound, a scar" (*Reading Woman* 167). In this reading, the text of "Stabat Mater" presents itself as scar, divided like the maternal body at conception and parturition, a metaphor for original division, the split between her participation in the paternal discourse and the *jouissance* of the mother: "I desire the Law. And since it is not made for me alone, I run the risk of desiring outside the law" (143). What she, the mother, gives birth to in this language event is herself as other, the

subject in and of language, the "I" interrogated by a discourse dissembled from another discourse.

Kristeva's split text in "Stabat Mater" marks out a space: the space of the outcast, the excluded, the abjected. This catastrophic place represents the precarious "casting out" that marks the signifying subject. In this context, the maternal body is constructed as a threshold, wound, or scar, something about which narrative arranges itself. In many ways we may read this text as a fantasy of coherence, a vision of maternal "wholeness" and love that attempts to heal the split in language through images of plenitude and imaginary completion.

In *The Acoustic Mirror,* Kaja Silverman is critical of Kristeva's text both as a genealogy of the body and as a poetical representation of maternity. She sees in Kristeva's exaggerated desire to distance the maternal from the symbolic order through the development of the Kristevan *chora,* a scene of subjectivity that is maternally connoted, a utopian figure in which the integration of mother and child is symbolized by the pregnant body of the mother. In this reading, the mother becomes both receptacle and inhabitant of the receptacle, as Silverman says "simultaneously the container and its contents" (107). What is the desire, asks Silverman, behind Kristeva's desire to enclose the mother within the womb? In answer to this she proposes a Kristevan fantasy: the desire to fuse daughter with mother and mother with her own mother, to relegate all mothers to the interior of the *chora* / womb.

Where Silverman's argument fails is in its assumption that in refusing one form of representation, Kristeva is substituting another. In reading the left-hand

margin as a subversive narrative of the woman, she is nevertheless presenting a realized and alternative narrative of representation. Far from trying to represent an alternative female image as an antidote to the masculine fantasy of the Maternal Virgin, Kristeva in "Stabat Mater" is inscribing the not-woman, the impossibility, given the essential reductiveness of signification, of any adequate representation. In this way, the split text is presented as a fiction by which we must learn to read the semiotics of significance. The implicit chronological assumptions, in Silverman's view, of the continuum from semiotic to symbolic language, is thereby questioned because, for Kristeva, the "Stabat Mater" constitutes a treatise on the possible positions by which we may read texts formulated in a spatial rather than temporal dimension.

What is the desire, we must now ask, behind Silverman's desire to read Kristeva's desire as approximation / substitution / metonymy, the means by which representation represents itself as other? In ignoring this reading by insisting on the monologic either/or position, Silverman indicts the consciously split text in a text that is unaware of its own split, that excludes its other, and that neurotically insists on the apparently seamless surface of the right-hand margin.

I want to raise two significant points by means of Kristeva's construction of maternal love in "Stabat Mater." The first is her representation of love as structural. The second is her demonstration of the limits, indeed even the impossibility, of representation. In *Tales of Love*, and more particularly, in "Stabat Mater," Kristeva examines historical myths of love in order to explore the various and contradictory positions of the subject both in language and in love.[8] Her

project is not thematic, she does not attempt to catalogue the various modes of love as did Denis de Rougemont in his 1940 study *Love in the Western World*. De Rougemont characterizes all love stories as adulterous and doomed since passion means suffering, romance inevitably forecloses in death, and "happy love has no history" (15).

In his sometimes reductive attempt to trace the thematic of the love story from its mythic origins through various religious, mystic and literary incarnations, de Rougemont seems to characterize these diverse amatory narratives as a series of containers, while "love" is the liquid he pours into each. In contrast to de Rougemont's *a priori* understanding of the discourse of love, Kristeva indicates, even in her title, that love is the unknown variable that may only be represented as structural device. Her title -- *Tales of Love* -- frames her subject as itself subject to representation, to the tale and its possible (mis)representations of tale-telling.[9] In addition, Kristeva does not begin with these tales, or at least does not allow her argument to conclude at the level of narrative. Instead she seeks out the amatory discourse within what she calls "borderline esthetics":

> It may seem paradoxical to be seeking the discourse of amatory relationships in borderline esthetics. It may seem strange that, instead of bringing to the fore the straightforward language of simple idealization of the love object, one analyzes the painful or ecstatic states where the object slips away. (267)

If the amatory experience has a linguistic correlative, this, for Kristeva, is the metaphor as conveyor of meaning that allows us to connect the speaking subject with the object of his/her love in discourse. And it is the metaphoric transaction that most nearly approaches the elusive nature of Kristeva's borderline esthetics.

1.3 The Field of the Metaphor

Since Freud's use of metaphor and metonymy to account for unconscious processes in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), the metaphor has undergone many transformations. For Freud, the symptom was a metaphor, injected with condensed but overdetermined meaning. In *Écrits*, Lacan's formulation of the subject's construction in language -- or the unconscious structured like a language -- led him to revise the Freudian grammatical tropes of condensation and displacement according to the structural tropes of metonymy and metaphor. While Freud characterized the metaphor as a container, Lacan analyzed it as a screen, a screen moreover, through which one could detect the workings of what he called *signifiance* (299). Kristeva, however, characterizes the metaphor as a primary component of amorous discourse, an internalized, resonant, condensed transfer of meaning from one site of affect (the lover's body) to another (the text). In her essay "Throes of Love: The Field of the Metaphor," in *Tales of Love*, Kristeva constructs literature as the privileged space where meaning is elaborated, destroyed, eluded and reviewed *via* the transformative effects of the metaphor. Her essay ends with these words, "we are all subjects of the metaphor" (279), by which she seems to imply that we are all, readers and writers alike, subjects in and of love.

In the pages of *Tales of Love*, through reminiscences, implication and confession, Kristeva repeatedly declares herself a subject of love. In an earlier

collection of essays, *Desire in Language*, she writes of the predicament that occurs when the identity of the reading subject atomizes and loses itself.[10] She characterizes this crisis as one of *jouissance*, where "one discovers one text under another, its other" (119). In such a case, she writes, *apropos* Roland Barthes, it is no longer the work we desire but our own language (*Desire in Language* 115). In *Tales of Love* Kristeva performs her own "atomization," losing herself in the *jouissance* of this dispersal and finding, when she recovers the text beneath the other, the text she has been writing or anticipating or desiring, beneath the diverse texts -- philosophical, literary and psychoanalytic -- that she has been reading.[11]

Her transformation, as we are beginning to discover, is not an unusual one for the reader/writer of love stories. Like Danté, she swoons -- metaphorically, of course -- in the presence of the love story, and in the process of telling tales of love; she writes with love, with passion, since the process of writing the love story is itself a love affair and one in which the writer/lover begins to desire her own language. In many ways the amatory discourse is one in which this narrative position is privileged, since passion, like death, has traditionally been constructed as a type of simulacrum, an image that does not refer back to an original and so continually narrates its own unnarratabilty. In his book *Passion and Excess* Steven Shaviro, quoting Maurice Blanchot, writes of passion as "the point at which language has been exhausted, and at which our ability to contain and appropriate experience, our powers of comprehension and expression, have broken down" (113).

If, under the duress of the passionate event, the writer suffers under the double burden of being compelled to speak and being unable to speak, if passion exceeds even our capacity to experience it, then it is irreducible, both to satisfaction and accomplishment. Blanchot writes of the "impossibility" of passion, since, if what he calls its "violence" cannot be exhausted by any measure of expression, neither can it find congruency in the language that would represent it:

> What is demanded is absolutely beyond my powers as a subject, something to which nothing in the first person, nothing I say or do, could ever adequately correspond. And this is why every thought, every experience of passion, in a sense ends in betrayal or failure. (Quoted in Shaviro 129)

Since the loss of signification is far worse than any loss to which we can assign significance, the writer of love stories is obliged -- as Kristeva does in *Tales of Love* -- to write herself into the amatory discourse, not merely as a privileged observer, but as a subject herself traversed by the effects of the passionate event. This narrative of implication, this performative act is in many ways a precarious position from which to conduct a study of love. Yet a short review of similar studies indicates that the alternative is an impoverished one.

In his study of passionate love, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality,* first published in French in 1957, Georges Bataille suggests that physical eroticism necessitates "a violation bordering on death, bordering on murder" (17), while in a later work, *Seduction,* Jean Baudrillard maintains that the only and "irresistible" power of femininity is the inverse power of seduction (15). Both texts speak knowledgeably of violence, rebellion, and anarchy, yet neither seem to recognize their own narrative responsibility in the equation. Their (masculine) judgments

about power, passion, and sexuality place themselves as writers and readers, outside the jurisdiction of the very systems of knowledge that they seem eager to deconstruct. What Foucault, in *A History of Sexuality,* has called the repressive hypothesis takes on a particular resonance in the context of Bataille and Baudrillard, neither of whom call attention to their position as writing subjects, and so present us with their separate narratives as *fait accompli.* In contrast, Kristeva's narrative stance in *Tales of Love* is highly self-conscious. It remains to be seen whether, and to what extent, self-consciousness is a necessary adjunct to the lover's discourse.

The problem, of course, is one of response. How can we respond to the amatory discourse without either becoming immersed or estranged? While Bataille and Baudrillard seem to be the unwitting proponents of this latter category, Roland Barthes in his "fragmentary" text *A Lover's Discourse* presents a highly self-conscious narrative reworking of the passionate event in the context of the lover's in/ability to write.

1.4 The Lover's Discourse

> To know that one does not write for the other, to know that these things I am going to write will never cause me to be loved by the one I love (the other), to know that it is precisely *there where you are not* -- that is the beginning of writing.
>
> *A Lover's Discourse*
> Roland Barthes

The narrator of *A Lover's Discourse* self-consciously constructs himself as lover, in the process emerging as writer. Barthes' narrator-lover inscribes within himself, as discursive site, the body of the absent, silent, other. And since the figures are no longer private devotions but, in the context of the book, public declarations, he implicates the reader in this transaction, inserting him/her as third term in a lover's discourse structured as triangle.

Barthes' double narrative consists of the love-sick figure of the young Werther, sometimes identified with Tristan and Pelléas -- whose love is passionate, heterosexual, and unrequited -- along with the figure of the unnamed narrator (named only as "a lover who speaks") and whose undisclosed but homosexual lover is available only as textuality (9). Werther's story is told to us by the first person narrator of Barthes' "Fragments," so that two narrative codes are constantly in collision in this text: the heterosexual trajectory of the mythic/romantic Werther and the homosexual and entirely personal love affair that is told between the interstices of the other stories. Both narratives are punctuated by meditations on the subject of love taken from the writings of, amongst others, Freud, Lacan, Plato, Hegel, John of the Cross, Nietzsche, Gide, Balzac, and Stendhal. The authorities that Barthes quotes are almost entirely male, yet the male body itself is absent, framed merely by the edges of clothing as an erotic space.

The narrative in *A Lover's Discourse* constitutes a double performance in which the narrative voice moves from subject to object in a self-referential, reflexive trope between the young Werther, the subject made spectacle, and a

controlling discursive voice, the voice of the lover oppressed by his own discourse, his figure as lover. In his failure to escape the desire of the image-repertoire, the metaphysical presence that, like discourse, exists prior to writing, the lover finds he is always *de trop*, alone, out of place, excluded.

In his "Fragments" Barthes suggests that discourse is transformed into a lover's discourse when it is addressed to another. The reader is the one to whom the lover addresses himself in the consecration of his beloved, but the reader is also the third term in a triangular relation, the one in the presence of whom the lover's discourse is enacted. In the self-conscious transformation of these figures -- reader, lover, beloved -- from private to public, we may even ask if it were possible to construct the lover at all except in the scopic field of an observing other, the witness in the presence of whom love is at once artifice and articulation.

If, as Barthes maintains, absence is the first premise of desire, then the love letter is the most perfect agent of its expression because it is the form of writing that transforms the beloved's absence into what he calls "an ordeal of abandonment" (13) through an episode of language. Caught between two locutions -- the lover/writer addresses his beloved, absent to him as object, at the moment when the beloved is most present to him as referent. The absence of the lover's body, and more specifically of the genitalia, is not unexpected in a text that purports to present us with a primary experience of language. Instead there is the lure of penitence and display; "I want you to know that I am hiding something from you" (42).

What is being hidden is the body, of course, since Barthes' lover's discourse is nothing so much as an elaborate strategy for resisting the body, keeping it at bay. Barthes makes it clear that the moment the body is displayed signals both the death of desire and the end of the amorous text:

> A mandarin fell in love with a courtesan. "I shall be yours," she told him, "when you have spent a hundred nights waiting for me, sitting on a stool, in my garden, beneath my window." But on the ninety-ninth night, the mandarin stood up, put his stool under his arm, and went away. (40)

It is clear that for Barthes, writing and the body do not intersect.

Barthes' lover writes to cure the absence of the beloved. In seeking to transform this wound into the originary place of desire, the lover ascribes a curative quality to the act of writing, as if in writing the absence, he is able to heal it. But it is the lover-as-writer who has conferred the wound in the first place, opening it to our inspection by invoking the beloved's body at the site of writing. In *A Lover's Discourse* Barthes' lover proceeds along a metonymic circuit of exchange in search of the one thing that can best stand in for the lost object of desire, what Lacan has called *l'objet petit a* (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* 76). And what is this object but that which is hallucinated and destroyed, but always *in effigy* -- as deferral, as fetish, as writing.

Like Kristeva's narrator, Barthes' narrator is supremely aware of his role as lover/writer. In both *Tales of Love* and *A Lover's Discourse*, the subject of love is framed by textuality, as "tales" or "discourse," and both texts testify to the difficulty of broaching the subject in the first place: Kristeva's essay opens with speechlessness, while Barthes' narrative presents itself in "fragments." In

addition, both texts are deeply concerned with the problem of representation -- with something that has been evaded, lost, left behind, substituted by metaphor, or deferred through metonymy.

1.5 Oblique Angles

The problem of representation, while central to the amatory discourse, is not , of course, exclusive to it. Yet it is one that has peculiar resonance for Derrida in his essay "Passions: An Oblique Offering." In this examination of the figure of the oblique Derrida speaks of "frontality" as being both violent and naive (11). "Instead of tackling the question or the problem head on, directly, straightforwardly, which would doubtless be impossible, inappropriate, or illegitimate," he asks, "should we proceed obliquely?" (12). The question, of course, is the question of passion, a passion that proceeds *via* a named or unnamed, but always necessary, and necessarily present, secret:

> There is in literature, in the *exemplary* secret of literature, a chance of saying everything without touching upon the secret ... when there is no longer even any sense in making decisions about some secret behind the surface of a textual manifestation (and it is this situation I would call text or trace), when it is the call of this secret, however, which points back to the other or to something else, when it is this itself which keeps our passion aroused, and holds us to the other, then the secret impassions us. Even if there is none, even if it does not exist, hidden behind anything whatever. (29)

Between the ruses of adopting and discarding the figure of the oblique,[12] Derrida introduces passion obliquely, by way of philosophy, ethics, geometry, and the secret that is presumed to be obliquely hidden, not "behind" but within the text.

Derrida instructs us to read passion obliquely, spatially, as a sideways cut across -- rather than through -- the text.

In the repeated statement "there is something secret," and in his refusal to reveal this "secret," Derrida presents us with a secret without content, a secret inseparable from its performative function in the text: "*There is something secret.* But it does not conceal itself" (26 Derrida's emphasis). Derrida's secret is unrepresentable; it is not even hidden but merely mute and impassive because it is foreign to speech. The secret in Derrida's "Passions" bears witness to the possibility which exceeds it, and we are left wondering whether the secret is merely another reason not to cast light upon the subject of Derrida's "oblique offering."

If there is "passion" in this text it has been effectively covered over, which is perhaps the point. As much as he wants to tell us that there is no secret in itself, Derrida is seduced by the secret. His text opens us to the failure of representation not least because the subject he chooses to offer us is absent except by analogy. Like the secret, passion is unrepresentable, hidden, obscure and inviolable. Like the secret, passion can only be introduced obliquely, if at all.

The poetic sequences in the chapters that follow represent passion and the amatory discourse in a variety of performative ways. All are as preoccupied with the limits of representation as Kristeva, Barthes, and Derrida have shown themselves to be. It remains to be seen how effectively poetic language re-frames the possibilities of amatory discourse and how, if at all, love poetry emerges as passionate, if oblique, offering.

[1] Professor Dawne McCance of St John's College, University of Manitoba first drew my attention to Durer's perspectival drawing in the context of reading "theory". As well she suggested that I consult Mieke Bal for a reading of "dissymmetry" in *The Book of Judges*.

[2] This is not to imply that transference love is the only construction of the amatory relationship in *Tales of Love*. There are at least two further figures by means of which Kristeva introduces herself into the lover's discourse. The first is through confession, where Kristeva constructs herself as a confessing subject, admitting to nothing less than her own autobiography. The second construction is love as transcendence, where the condition of being in love is experienced as a mystic communion. In this case the lover's discourse divides chronology into a "before" and "after," and necessitates a subject position that transcends these boundaries.

[3] Freud begins to write about transference as early as 1895 in *Studies on Hysteria*, and *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900 deals specifically and at some length with transference love from patient to analyst. In terms of Kristeva's text, transference love is a dynamic involving three positions: subject, object -- idealized or real -- and a stand in for a potential ideal, the Other, the analyst as subject who is supposed to know (in this case, to know how to love). This third position is also the position taken by meaning and discourse, the function of which is to invoke a "passion of signifiers" (14) through displacement and deferral, through a semiotic flow toward symbolization.

[4] The story of Paolo and Francesca is told in Volume One of Dantés *Divine Comedy*, Canto V, lines 82-142.The two young people fall in love while reading a famous love story together, thus powerfully illustrating how the lover's discourse may affect the reader.

[5] Kristeva manipulates transference as the means of creating a psychic space for analysis. Transference is the space wherein the lover's (patient's) desire opens in the interstices of the analyst's imperfect and failing trajectory of desire. By this means, the analyst/writer manipulates love as a discursive site.

[6] Kristeva criticizes Freud's naming of the father as the "magnet" for primary identification, since empirically, the infant's first affections are directed toward the mother. The Freudian position, represented, for example, in his "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905), that identification is a pre-ordained pattern, always already within the symbolic orbit and under the logic of language, implies that the constitution of subjectivity involves the subject's primal identification with the Father. Kristeva suggests that it is not important to differentiate between the parents as absolute origin of the capacity for love, but to emphasize rather the place that love as a discourse occupies in psychoanalysis as a site of transference.

[7] Kristeva's point is that the process of identification engenders a triangular structuration of desire that pursues the subject in one form or another through his/her amatory history. Identification is the formation of an archaic unity, made up of the imaginary father and the desiring mother who, because of her desire for the phallus is not a complete but a desiring subject. This archaic unity is the beginning of the idealized love object for the subject, what Kristeva calls the site of the Other. The subject exists in relation to the Other, because it belongs to the Other, and it is the subject's alliance to this non-representable ideal that causes him/her to be subject to love.

[8] This was certainly not a new direction for Kristeva. The essays collected in *Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, published in English in 1980 -- seven years earlier than *Tales of Love* -- address the question of female identity through an analysis of the subject in language.

[9] Kristeva's original French title, *Histoires d'Amour*, plays on the idea both of history and of fiction.

[10] The essay in question is entitled "How does one Speak to Literature" and is a review of Roland Barthes' place in literary theory and of Kristeva's own subjective displacement when reading his work.

[11] This under/over imagery is ubiquitous, both in Kristeva's language and in critical discourse in general, and I use it ironically here to indicate what I earlier called our "violent" tendency to privilege one text over another. In this case Kristeva seems to be deliberately vague as to which text -- her own or the one she is reading -- is to be placed like a transfer over the other.
[12] "On reflection, the oblique does not seem to offer the best figure for all the moves that I have tried to describe in that way" (13).

Love and Other Unofficial Stories: Occupied Countries and Narrative Prowling in Kristjana Gunnars' *The Prowler.*

> If there are scars they are all on the inside.
> Only occasionally do they surface, but when that
> happens it is a shattering experience. (*The Prowler* 149)

Kristjana Gunnars' text *The Prowler* begins with an epigraph, taken from Marguerite Duras's novel *The Lover,* in which the narrator is in the process of disowning and erasing her love story:

> The story of my life doesn't exist. Does not exist.
> There's never any center to it. No path, no line.
> There are great spaces where you pretend there used
> to be someone, but it's not true, there was no one.

Duras's novel is central to Gunnars' enterprise in *The Prowler* for many reasons, not least the way in which the writing subject is dually constructed as lover and prowler, writer and reader. In both cases the "story" as plot-device or narrative strategy is problematic; Gunnars' choice of Duras's epigraph and its

announcement of maplessness and indeterminacy makes this clear. For Gunnars, however, the problem begins at the level of form.

The Prowler is divided into 167 sections that may equally well be described as stanzas if we take this work to be a long poem, or as paragraphs if we choose to consider it a piece of prose.[1] In fact, Gunnars conflates the prose/poetry binary very early in her work. In the section numbered "3," her narrator writes that it is a relief not to be plotting a story "imprisoned by character and setting." Equally, it is a relief not to be creating a poem in which questions of prosody interfere with the process of writing. In her insistence that what she is writing is neither poetry nor prose, she seems to be dismissing genre in favour of immediate and unstructured content. The implication is that only through such direct and spontaneous means may the love story be communicated. It will become necessary to establish the extent to which the amatory discourse requires or resists form.

The indeterminacy that Duras's epigraph announces is promptly taken up by Gunnars' narrator: "[s]omewhere in all this, the story begins. It is not *my* story. If there is a God, it is God's story" (11). In disowning the story, the writing subject implicitly vacates her position as writer. In a later section she accomplishes this somewhat more explicitly: "[i]t is not my story. The author is unknown. I am the reader" (119). In the process of erasing herself from the story as writer, the narrator takes up the role of reader, a position that she is shown to have occupied from a precociously early age and one in which she is unusually proficient.[2] Not only does she know how to read, apparently without having been taught, but her fascination with books results in hours of silent reading "with a

total lack of comprehension" (159). Since she is "reading" books in German, Spanish, and Italian, languages that she has not learned, Gunnars implies that the act of reading itself is pleasurable. What can the act of reading, as a metaphorical activity phenomenologically bracketed off from considerations of meaning, imply about the status of the lover/writer in this text?

Gunnars' narrator, quoting James Joyce, speculates that the reader is a thief (59). If this is so, the writer must attempt to evade the reader so as to prolong the transaction. The writer is the prowler who skirts the edges of the text, the lover consigned to the condition of outsider. Again and again in the amatory discourse, the figure of the lover is metonymically displaced along an exchange circuit in which one action is substituted for another. Gunnars' text is particularly interesting in light of this proposition, since her "lover" is a consistently unstable figure, constructed alternately as prowler, writer, and reader. In the rapid fluctuation from one role to another, any attempt to fix the status and function of the lover is cursorily undermined. Instead we are presented with an array of possible identifications, any one of which may at any time be appropriate to a reading of the sign "lover." The question remains as to whether Gunnars' lover exists as anything but an empty sign capable of being filled by the desire of the Other, whether that Other masquerades as prowling reader or as self-deprecatory writer.

Of course *The Prowler* is particularly suited to this figure of displacement, since structurally it defines itself as a shuffle text. In a centrally located section, the narrator resists chronological time in favour of a metaphor that figures the

past as a deck of cards. In this image, memory is neither particular nor intentional but merely a series of arbitrary scenes that alternate in accordance with the way the deck is shuffled as the game is played:

> The same game may be played several times. Each time the game is played the configurations are different, and a new text emerges.
>
> I imagine a text that refuses to play its own game. (81)

In one of the final sections, the narrator relates how a text constructed as a house of cards inevitably collapses: "all memories come tumbling down, scattering at random over the tilting floor" (165). In its construction of memory as arbitrary, precarious, and subject to chance, the narrative further emphasizes the rapid transition from one identification to another that is so characteristic of amatory discourse.

2.1 Nothing to Say

> Love seeks refuge in figurative language. (101)

Like Duras's lover, Gunnars' narrator seems unable to imagine "a story that is not a romance" (53). If it is not a romance, she considers in a later section, "it is a nothingness. A staring at snowflakes coming down" (55). This failure of imagination seems to owe much to the paradoxical position of the lover who cannot speak because she is so full of love. Kristeva's "speechlessness" in the

face of the love story reminds us that love proceeds out of a profound failure of language, a predicament that is echoed by Gunnars' narrator:

> It is possible to be so full of love that the
> voice that is inundated with words is unable to speak.
>
> The simplest words clamour to get out, but all that
> emerges is silence. (101)

The frequency with which silence gives rise both to love and writing is apparent in this text. When faced with the evidence of her sister's illness, the narrator retreats into a "non-voice," an occurrence that is immediately followed by her first fictional enterprise: "at this time I wrote my first story" (88). The connection between speechlessness and creativity in this "first story" runs parallel to the larger project that begins with an audacious denial of the presupposition that the one who writes is a writer, and that what we are reading is writing:

> It is
> not writing. Not poetry, not prose. I am not a writer.
> Yet it is, in my throat, stomach, arms. This book that
> I am not able to write. (1)

In addition to the accusation that there are words that betray her is the inference that "he," the beloved, does not want her to write this book. All things seem to conspire to render the writer "voiceless," not least her overwhelming suspicion that the experience of love empties words of their referentiality:

> If I laugh at myself, it is
> because I have nothing to say and I am full of love.
> Because nothing I can say says anything. There will be
> mere words.
>
> It is because I am full of love that my words
> have no meaning. (4)[3]

Although Gunnars' narrator refuses the position of writer, the book that she declares herself unable to write takes up residence in her body, in her "throat, stomach, arms." By this means she sets up a Cartesian binary that threatens to essentialize what she will later call "the female story" (25). Yet I do not think Gunnars is here attempting that fraught impossibility, to write the female body "directly" in *écriture feminine*. Instead she is emphasizing the priority of presence. In much the same way that Derrida, in *Of Grammatology,* has distinguished between metaphysical presence, what he calls "the time of a breath" and the secondary fall into writing (18), Gunnars, in this perambulatory love story, recalls the prior claims of presence whenever speechlessness threatens to become intolerable. In two separate instances her narrator makes an almost identical statement when brought up against an apparently unspeakable loss: "perhaps, even though I say nothing, just being there is enough" (19). The first utterance of this phrase takes place at the bedside of her sister who is slowly starving herself to death, the other in the presence of her friend, Sigrun, who has lost her entire family. In both cases the narrator is rendered speechless by the enormity of loss; in both cases words are replaced by the consolation that is offered by her presence.

On a similar occasion the narrator visits an expatriate Russian couple in their adopted home in California, where she is curiously drawn to a doll that stands on the mantelpiece. When the Russian woman notices her guest's preoccupation, she takes the doll down and hands it to her as a gift. This transaction becomes enormously important to the narrator, not only because of

the significance of the gift that she treasures for "thirty years" but also because of the silence in which the exchange is effected:

> I detected the aura, which I have since identified as love, in the elderly woman's silence. It was an ethereal substance, I had noticed, that was oddly charged with warmth, sorrow and regret. It occurred most often among those who did not speak. (143)

Once again the narrator's definition of love coincides with speechlessness, once again it is replaced by presence, this time in the form of a gift.[4]

I want to return to the image of the narrator sitting at her dying sister's hospital bed because it is at this moment that the relation created between speechlessness and love widens to include all the disenfranchised, powerless voices that "speak" in this text precisely because they have been refused speech. Commenting on her incapacity to influence her sister, the narrator repudiates this attempt as one that produces "no voice at all" because "it has nothing to say" (19). In the context of the amatory discourse, such a statement is duplicitous without being deceptive. Since we are in the process of reading this text, nothing that it communicates to us about the process of silencing itself can succeed in convincing us that it has been effectively silenced. Any consideration of the manner in which *The Prowler* replicates a form of amatory discourse must include a consideration both of the processes of textual dis/empowerment, as this relates to personal and political speechlessness, and an account of the self-conscious tropes that allow this text to construct itself as doubled.

2.2 An Occupied Country

> Love is ashamed of itself, of its own transparency. It is vulnerable territory. A people without its own army, easily occupied by armed forces of other nations. (101)

The love story as told by Gunnars' narrator is the story of an occupied country, inhabited by the successive armies of encroaching nations, colonized by European culture and language, and preoccupied with narratives of the Russian steppes, the Hungarian plains and the Chinese mountains: "But for us way up here in the North there never would be a story" (83). The child who calls herself a "white Inuit" (7)[5] partakes of a family history of appropriation in which marriage becomes the "vulnerable territory" that is occupied by "armed forces of other nations." The woman from Copenhagen that her father, an Icelander, marries is perceived as something of a trophy insofar as Denmark is figured as the country of higher education, culture and prosperity. The child's first love story, then, is a narrative of colonization in which the new, virile nation is fertilized by exports from an older, more evolved, but necessarily diminished, country. In this new country "whose most notable product was love" (115), the child grows up divided by the effects of a nation whose borders are decidedly unstable.

The child – who is the product of a love story that is divided between two competing nationalisms – is an outsider to both. In her father's country she is branded a monarchist, a Dane, while the children of her mother's country whisper that she is a white Inuit and a shark-eater (16). Her sister does not care for this injustice and begins the long process of starving herself to death, but the narrator

reacts by reading herself out of both cultures and into an entirely alien one. In order to spread the rumour that she is indeed "the little Russian girl" (19) that she resembles, she begins to read Pasternak, Yevtushenko and Pushkin: " If familiarity with a language determines a person's identity, I considered, I would learn Russian myself" (133). Her attempt at evading identification through language -- a process that increasingly aligns her with the unnamed prowler who slopes through this narrative -- is unsuccessful precisely because the country in which she lives seems to allow for an apparently unending succession of occupiers, each enforcing their own tongue. If she were to become fluent in Russian, she thinks, this would only mark her as a colonist should the Russian army come to occupy this small island. In order to avoid being identified with an occupying force, she resolves to study many languages: French, German, Faeroese and Inuit. In this way, through dialogism and a deliberate return to Babel, she will "confuse them all" (133).

In this story love is the shortest distance between two points. The mother born in Denmark and the father born in Iceland both lay their claims upon the child whose true home comes to be the ship, *Gullfoss*, on which she travels between places where "people paraded in streets with small paper flags on flimsy sticks" (106). Reacting to these occupied land masses, the child conceives of "a desire to belong to the sea;" in other words, to occupy a place and a time unmarked by the gnosis of conflicting ideologies:

> Of being in a world without expectations, where the body
> was simply being carried forward in an environment
> where forward and backward did not exist. (106)

Predictably for the child, the sea becomes the no-man's-land between temporality and telos, an attempt at rewriting history that of necessity acknowledges that "[a]nything that came from far away was good. Life elsewhere was magical" (21).

Although the child receives the love story *via* the divided allegiances of her parent's marriage, the narrative of national identity is one that pre-dates her. And, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, such figures as colonialism, appropriation and occupation will be significant to my definition of the love story. In a previous meditation on writing, Gunnars' narrator imagines a story written by God in which there would be many "false corners" and "ironic twists" (28). This story would be labyrinthine in its challenge to the reader, who could only approach the centre after taking proper precautions and making due provision. What is striking about such a configuration is the idea of a master narrative -- what she has called "the God story" -- against which all other fictional endeavors may be measured. The hierarchical structure thus established between the master narrative and the transgressive story that Gunnars' narrator attempts (not) to tell runs parallel to the narrative of colonial expansion and appropriation by means of which the much beset Icelanders are positioned between the forces of aggressive American nationalism on the one hand, and a dominating European ideology on the other. More importantly, the narrator's concern with Icelandic self-definition contains within it many of the elements that seem to define the conventional love story: desire, unfulfilled longing, melancholy and abjection. As such, it would not be irrelevant to recapitulate some of these elements as they figure and are transfigured in *The Prowler* which, I will venture to assert, is initially

and predominantly a love story, and one in which love as transformative experience is always in question whatever else appears to be under discussion.

In this text America is repeatedly presented not merely as a land of plenty, but as one of surplus, while the home place is always pictured in the light of extreme privation.[6] "I do not think this is the story of a starving nation," the narrator ventures, but her evident prevarication proves that this is precisely such a story, although what exactly is being withheld -- the conflation of food and love is ubiquitous in this text -- is always in question (9).[7] Indeed, the defining characteristic of Iceland as a country seems to be that it is the country "where people died of starvation" (39). Although historical reasons are offered to explain this (the Danish trade monopoly has prevented the "white Inuit" from leaving the island or trading with other nations) nothing is sufficient to justify the enormity of the question the distraught narrator asks her principal: "Why has there been such a long history of starvation?"(44).

The phrase "us in the North" that is repeatedly used to distinguish between surplus and privation, between excess and subsistence, between abundance and starvation, is not even an accurate opposition, as the narrator makes clear. For despite eleven hundred years of malnutrition and disease, one plentiful source of food remains untapped:

> Yet the shores were filled with mussels. All
> along the water, the black and blue closed shells lay
> by the thousands. People refused to eat the mussels. (39)

The amorous discourse is characterized by indeterminate or overdetermined meanings, and so the word *mussel* does not simply represent a source of food

that the Icelanders have enigmatically denied themselves, but is instead a complex metaphoric trope that both reifies and resists meaning:

> Where there is no hope, the dream is all. The end is contained in the aspiration. Dreams are the closed mussels lying among the stones in the fjord. The shells are clamped tightly around a small bit of life. (38)

In refusing the mussels, the Icelanders refuse to be nourished by dreams that appear to be non-indigenous and therefore suspect to a country in which disease and starvation are claimed as "the national inheritance" (36).

Who inherits the love story? The narrator of *The Prowler* writes herself into a long line of readers/writers who take up the (bankrupt) narrative out of a sense of familial duty:

> Who are the people looking over my shoulder, writing stories in my name? Is it my great-great-grandfather from the remote North of Thingeyjarsysla ... Or is it my great-grandfather from the Danish island of Fyn, who gambled away his entire estate? If that man ever wrote a will, there could have been nothing in it. (15)

Even the story-teller's inheritance, her *story*, is divided between the rival claims of Denmark and the remote North. More to the point, however, it is a "gift" from the paternal lineage, and one that can neither be owned nor passed on, since "there could have been nothing in it." The feminine narrative is no less bankrupt: from her mother she inherits a pathetic story of privation and shame,[8] from her sister a belief in the transfiguring power of starvation.[9] The sister who goes on a hunger strike against God, the sister whose body is progressively erased in this text until

she is "no larger than her own skeleton" (92), becomes the physical sign of a national debt from which no one, least of all the narrator, is excluded:

> There was much illness. Large patches of months and years were blotched out. A kind of ink stain appeared in the text, where the consciousness became obliterated. It was not exactly unconsciousness that took over, but a state of exhausted ennui. A desire to forget. (103)

The conflation of illness with textuality, consciousness with illegibility, and forgetfulness with desire, is characteristic of an amorous discourse where the sign of "love" is at once overdetermined and empty, and capable, consequently, of endless metonymic signification.

It should not be assumed, however, that in this text Gunnars' narrator is unaware of the many inexact or indeterminate tropes that purposely seem to confuse the reader, nor that she is impervious to their power. False metaphors "prowl" through this text, precisely because the narrator (like the true reader or the true lover) is only able to recognize through acts of *méconnaissance*.[10] One afternoon, in her guise as prowler, she breaks into the home of an old couple, and, in wandering through the rooms, pauses to glance out of the window:

> The picture it portrayed was a map of the North: Greenland, Iceland and the Polar Cap.
>
> Much later I read in a medieval love sonnet that the lover's eyes are windows to the soul. (59)

The glib conventionality of the latter observation casts doubt on the former so that it is the map of the North that is in question here no less than the spurious cliché from courtly love. However, it would be precipitate to conclude that the narrator is herself fooled by fallacious comparisons and the consolations of a figurative

language. As an Icelander she knows that logic is the domain of the God story, the master narrative:

> Some Icelandic novels make no sense. They are not meant to make sense. They go nowhere, refuse to grasp reality, say there is no reality. Potentially there is no reality. My father's people have always known that potentially they do not exist. (30)

Her position as a woman and as an Icelander doubly displaces her from unrestricted access to a master narrative handed down from European stories of colonialism *via* North American narratives of appropriation.[11] *The Prowler* almost obsessively refers back to the "Great Tradition" through the mention of writers like Joyce, Lawrence, H.D., Malraux, Hans Christian Anderson, and the Brothers Grimm. Versions and anti-versions of fairy tales like "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," "Hansel and Gretel," and "The Ugly Duckling" abound, not merely as a nod to a pre-existing tradition but as a constant reminder that many versions of any one story exist. "That was certainly a story," exclaims the narrator after reading Malraux's *Man's Fate* (86), but the irony of the title -- both in its designation of gender and in its invocation of destiny -- does not escape us.

In the story-less North, where a writer "gets a certain amount of amusement out of rewriting old stories," the narrator is in the position of the ugly duckling who abandons her sister to her fate in "yet another version" of the story she tells (151). In this story there are two ugly ducklings and they are sisters. When the swans fly off for the winter the younger wants to join them, but the older sister stubbornly refuses. In the end the younger duckling flies off with the swans because she knows that she cannot survive another winter on the ground.

As she flies away leaving her sister alone, she looks back often "in a perturbed manner." This account combines elements of the love story -- the promise of sexual maturity, abandonment, the backward glance -- as it is transposed upon a narrative of cultural oppression and immigration. The "duckling" who leaves the barren island, but who remains backward looking and constrained by her past, and the "duckling" who chooses to die rather than migrate, are more similar than we might suppose. Both are determined by a choice that is totalizing, immediate and unalterable in its effects, and both remain caught in a perversely dual identification that owes much to the duplicity of the amorous discourse.

All the love stories told in *The Prowler* are structured as narratives of obstructed borders. The narrator's father is born to a woman who would have benefited from the medical treatment available in Copenhagen. But, as the narrator makes clear, the border between Iceland and Denmark is perceived as visible, impermeable, and difficult to navigate. Before they can set sail, her grandmother becomes too ill to cross the channel and she gives birth to a child (the narrator's father) whom she never sees since she is, by this time, blind and an invalid (152). Typically, the story is recounted as a non-story: "This area of my father's life was never spoken of. It was never allowed to become a story" (153). The storyness of the narrative is denied for two reasons: firstly because it takes place in the North where there are no stories, and secondly because it is a love story and, as such, incapable of being articulated.

The other love story that is contained within this text is somewhat more personal to the narrator, but is similarly governed by the stringent requirements of

the border. The narrator speaks of her own lover, "the one who I think would not want me to write this book" (60), at the same time that she denies that she is, in fact, writing a book about him. The amorous discourse is often characterized by narratives of duplicity and an attempt to conceal its own textual impulses. More to the point, the narrator's "non-story" centres on her lover's movement across borders, a highly significant act since it is almost the only one that we are allowed to witness. Despite her avowals that what we are reading is a love story, despite her positioning of this text *vis-à-vis* Duras's novel, Gunnars' narrator evades the conventional trajectory of the romance plot, so that we are only allowed into the love story at an oblique angle. We do not, for example, witness their romance either as it is occurring in the continuous present or as it has already occurred in some unspecified past. In this way Gunnars' lover is doubly absent -- absent in the sense that he is constructed as textual lack, the beloved other whose elsewhere-ness is a recognizable device for prolonging desire; but, more significantly, absent insofar as he is never present to us within the context of the romance itself. Instead of being constructed as protagonist within the love story, his life is given in brief glimpses, excursions into the areas that border the period during which he and the narrator were lovers.

One of these moments occurs early on, when the narrator relates her account of his escape from Hungary in 1956, after the Russian invasion. In this story the lover, as a young boy, is led across a large open field by a peasant who points toward the Austrian border before leaving the boy alone to walk into his future:

> Did he know when there was a border? Can
> borders be felt? Is there perhaps a change of air, a different
> climate, when you go from one country to another? (60)

This story, the narrator explains, has bearing on her book "only insofar as one is contained in the things one loves" (60). But if we are not to be fooled by her denial, neither should we be misled by her attempt to change the subject, as it were. In this text love is always a matter of uncertain borders, of semi-permeable and fluctuating boundaries.

In this story, a young boy (the one who will later become "the lover") leaves his embattled country to find refuge in another place, a new language. The narrator undergoes a similar series of displacements; from her ambiguous position as a half-Dane in Iceland she travels frequently to Copenhagen and eventually to America. In the process she learns many languages but never learns to trust meaning since "words are not what they signify" (52). Instead:

> Words are suitcases crammed with culture.
> I imagine a story emptied of containers. Bottles drained
> of their contents. Travel bags overturned, old clothes,
> medicine bottles, walking shoes falling all over the airport
> floor. To come to your destination with nothing
> in hand. To come to no destination at all. (52)

To reach the end of the journey in this narrative is to reach the moment when words lose their meaning, when culture as container is emptied out. This configuration of the empty signifier will become increasingly significant in my exploration of an amorous discourse where the structure of desire as lack is a frequent and recognizable figure since, as the narrator makes clear, what is

beloved is "aspiration," "fantasy" and "desire" (23), and not least of all the "fulfillment [that] is contained in the desire" (24).

The construction of desire in this text is wholly committed to the Freudian model of love as the repetition of a prior object identification:

> There was an imprint in those early years. I was looking for that imprint already in childhood. It was a face. I did not know whose it was, but someone looked at me and left an imprint. (121)

The narrator is nothing if not self-conscious in her evaluation of the glance's imprint. It is necessary, for example, to undergo the loss of the first face, she points out. Later, when she retells the story of her father's birth to a woman already blind, she makes the tenuous connection between a failure of the glance and inherited pathology: "It is possible, I thought, that if the first face you see cannot see you back, then one of your daughters will refuse to eat" (153). There is, no doubt, a hint of irony in Gunnars' genetic figuring of the etiology of desire, yet the model of desire as lack remains unchallenged. In other words, the unreturned glance leads to the unrequited experience of love. And since the longing to retrieve the first image can never be satisfied, the subject must be content with "the lover's unfulfilled desire" (122).

Unfulfilled desire is perhaps the most recognizable and conventional figure in amorous discourse. In this case, as we have seen, it is structured by the narratives of appropriation, colonization and obstructed borders that situate the narrator in a complex hierarchical system in which she characteristically occupies a position of ambiguity.[12] In what follows, I shall show that such ambiguity is a

function of the many self-conscious tropes that proliferate in this text, and which serve to distinguish writer from reader, lover from beloved.

2.3 The Lover

> Who are the people looking over my shoulder,
> writing stories in my name? (15)

Beginning with the epigraph, the word "lover" is always set at an oblique angle in this text, since we are never entirely sure to whom it refers: to the one who loves or to the one who is beloved. In asking who is the lover in this story, we are perhaps also opening the question as to who is the storyteller. Gunnars' narrator is at pains to conflate the function of lover with tale-teller insofar as they are both committed to a version of truth telling that is highly suspicious of its own motives:

> The text is determined to act like a demanding lover. The text demands of its author a ruthless honesty, which the author is unwilling to give. The author knows that once a quest for truth is begun it may possibly never end. Truth does not yield itself to its seeker. There is a suspicion that truth may not exist. Yet there is a certainty that what is being told is not a lie. (156)

The truth, when it does appear, is not unexpectedly "a paltry thing in rags," something small and bony, dressed in hand-me-down clothes and infected by skin disease and hopelessness (156). Speechless and without agency, the narrator's personification of "truth" is a necessary preface to her attempt to create

a dialogic text in which many versions of truth, many stories of love, exist equally: " I imagine a story that allows all speakers to speak at once, claiming that none of the versions is exactly a lie" (68).

In response to those "theorists" who claim that everything that is written is a lie and that there is "no such thing as truth" (68), Gunnars' narrator sets up a complex system of correspondences to take into account true stories that have never happened and false stories that are also true:

> There is a tacit acknowledgment in writing
> that stories that are true and stories that are false mirror
> each other. That in the business of stories, it is
> impossible to lie. (162)

Prophetic, self-deceiving, and unruly, the text is always curiously doubled in the narrator's story, so much so that she eventually creates a second reader/writer, the one who stands behind "the official author," the one who reads over her shoulder and chastizes her: "that is not what you intended to say" (63). In the place of the story that is being told, another story, "an unexpected story," appears (63). What is this story, this "great surprise," but the love story -- the story that is always "somewhere else":

> I imagine
> a book that pretends to tell an official story. In the margins
> there is another story. It is incidental, it has little
> bearing on the official story, but that is where the real
> book is. (47)

If the story is always about something (somewhere) else, why is this intertext, this second story, a love story? And why is it necessary to disguise the love story with narratives of detection, truancy, and nationalism? These questions, although

precipitated by a reading of *The Prowler*, have resonance beyond the boundaries of this text since they throw into question many assumptions about the love story. Gunnars' construction of writer and reader lays down certain paradigms for understanding how these figures are represented in amorous discourse.

Gunnars' writing subject does not entirely coincide with her narrator -- in this construction too there is a subtle doubling that allows us to read one voice between the lines of the other. In her essay "Avoidance and Confrontation" in the anthology aptly entitled *Trace*, Gunnars refines her contrapuntal technique through what she calls "Double Counterpoint," an attempt to create a dualistic narrative pair of voices that "can easily be inverted, taking turns being primary and secondary" (183). Taking her cue from the early Modernists,[13] Gunnars' poetic technique is evasive and indirect, since she constructs her writing as both an escape from, and an attempt at, meaning. And, as the narrator of *The Prowler* in her guise as reader makes clear, such an enterprise is as pleasurable as it is frightening:

> Reading in a language I knew, on the other hand, was a different matter. The added dimension of meaning appeared. *Meaning* was not always evident and always potentially terrifying. (160)

The "peculiar pleasure to be had from meaningless words" that the narrator earlier confesses herself prey to (159), gives way to the displaced pleasure of "meaning" in a narrative that appears to be divided between the functions of reader and writer.

Who are the people looking over my shoulder, the narrator asks, writing stories in my name? Such an oblique and protean narrative (the reader/writer reading/writing over the shoulder of the writer/reader) is significant in my account of the lover's discourse, since both activities -- reading and writing -- are highly eroticized constructs, both in the context of contemporary reading strategies[14] and in terms of Gunnars' agenda in *The Prowler*. I am thinking of Derrida's *envoi* to the lover/reader in *The Post Card*, a text in which the motive and the means of these love letters to an undisclosed other is initiated by the reproduction of a post card portraying Socrates writing while Plato reads over his shoulder. As Derrida makes clear, however, the apparent sequentiality of this image -- Socrates writing in front of Plato -- is both historically and strategically deceptive: "*Socrates* turns his *back* to plato, (sic) who has made him write whatever he wanted while pretending to receive it from him" (12 Derrida's emphasis). In this construction, Plato, while appearing to be a passive reader, is really the agent who precipitates writing in much the same way that Plato has traditionally been seen to represent Socrates in his dialogues, giving him voice and then putting this voice to the service of his own writing. In the alternative configuration, taking dictation from the Other, Plato performs the function of ghost-writer.

In allowing us to fluctuate between these two figures, Derrida problematizes the idea of historical sequence apparent in our privileging of Plato-as-writer over Plato-as-reader through his construction of the post card as a form of reversible inscription:

> What I prefer, about post cards, is that one does not know what is in front or what is in back, here or there, near or far, the Plato or the Socrates,

> recto or verso. Nor what is the most important, the picture or the text, and in the text, the message or the caption, or the address. (13)

We are never entirely sure, in other words, if what Derrida has called "this incredible representation" (15) is an image of Plato as a ventriloquist standing behind his dummy, or Socrates turning his back on a distraction in order to write. Moreover, Derrida does not neglect the sexuality contingent in their recto/verso positions, thus implying that the activity of reading/writing is a metaphor that can accommodate a variety of functions, both erotic and amorous, since in all cases what is sent is "an impossible message" between what he calls two "addresses" (25).

The open-ended, reversible positions of Derrida's writing lovers is a useful construction for the writing subject in *The Prowler*. To begin with there is no clear boundary between text and author, or indeed between inside and outside. The text, says Gunnars' narrator, is the writer's prison, but it is an imprisonment that, far from containing the author within the writing, instead locks him/her out: "Before there is a text the writer is imprisoned inside. After the text appears the writer is exiled from it. On both sides there are violations" (96). What is perhaps most transgressive in this statement is the assumption of a period "before" and "after" textuality, since Gunnars' narrator is nothing if not supremely self-conscious of her construction through writing. In her assumed position that there is an outside to language, we may perhaps accuse her of disingenuity, but it seems more likely that she is concerned here with the innately reversible structure of containment. What appears to be the agent of closure and

imprisonment in her text (the figure of the writer) is precisely what is enclosed and imprisoned by writing. And this writing subject, represented first as prisoner, then as exile, has important resonances for her textual construction both of the reader and of the lover.

Who then is the writer/reader not *of* but *in* this narrative? She is both the sister who sits beside hospital beds "not knowing what to say" (18) and the lover who suffers from an overabundance of stories and metastories (55). She is the thief whom Joyce accuses of having the unslakable desire "*to steal from the text*" (59 Gunnars' emphasis) and the detective following the footprints of the thief in the text: "There are stories where everything that is written is a clue" (51). She is a spiritualist "on the trail of ghosts" (17) and a censor in pursuit of "dead-end stories" (129). She is in all things dual, contrary, and perverse, since the act of writing is itself nothing short of divisive: "[i]t is in the nature of writing to contain a note of defiance. To confront its opposite, to stare it down" (105).

The reversible Derridean figure of the reader leaning over the writer's shoulder has much in common with Gunnars' dualistic construction of reading and writing in this narrative, not least because it forces us to confront the act of perception as one that is divided between the viewer and the viewed. In this case what has been rendered passive through representation, unexpectedly acquires the energy to *look back*. To illustrate this point Gunnars' narrator tells the story of her instruction in self-portraiture. A mirror is fixed to her easel, and she is required to move from mirror to canvas during which time, and apparently without effort, "a picture emerged of a disinterested face" (109). Later, having lost interest in the

project, she conceives of another such exercise. This time, however, the painter paints her image directly onto the mirror: "The viewer sees not the image of the artist, but his own face through the lines of oil paint. The face looking back at the viewer will have an expression of helpless concern" (111).

A number of things emerge from the juxtaposition of these two accounts of self-portraiture, an activity that is not unlike the autobiographical enterprise that the narrator has embarked upon. The artist decides to paint directly onto the mirror, thus foregoing the mediated image at the same time that the viewer's own self-image is mediated by "the lines of oil paint."[15] An exchange of faces seems to take place that recalls the narrator's Freudian account of love as a form of imprinting, an allusion that, in turn, suggests that issues of identity are never far from a reappraisal of amorous discourse. The viewer's perception of himself at the moment when he is engaged in viewing her portrait is a supremely narcissistic moment, and it would do well to recall in this context Kristeva's account of the lover as a narcissist with an object (*Tales of Love* 25).[16] As well, the pronouns that Gunnars' narrator chooses designate the viewer as masculine, the viewed as feminine, despite the fact that up until this point she has been engaged in a process of self-representation. The act of viewing is itself split at this moment into the self-referential gaze and the glance of the (masculine, heterosexual) other. It seems clear that, for Gunnars' narrator at least, every attempt at self-definition becomes an entrance into a potentially amorous transaction, with a consequent heightening of affect, as when in this case her "disinterested face" acquires "an expression of helpless concern."

If the writer and reader are, as they seem to be, almost indistinguishable -- or at least helplessly enmeshed -- perhaps it would be useful to attempt a simpler question: what is it that is being sent between them, what, in effect, is the function of the textual body that structures itself, to use Derrida's word, as an *envoi*? The narrator tells the story of the childless couple, Hanna and Palli, who visit an orphanage to adopt a child of their own. While they are there a red-haired boy runs up to Hanna and calls her "mother." Although the couple decides not to adopt, they always remember "that image of the red-haired boy" (100). The narrator is left searching for red hairs in the mirror since she finds herself longing "to occupy the space left open by regret" (100). Clearly what is being told here is yet another love story that relies for its impact upon the loss of a face. The image of the red-haired boy opens a space for regret in the lives of the childless couple just as the retelling of the story opens, for the narrator, a textual space that accommodates her personal image-repertoire of loss, abandonment, love, and regret.[17] This textual space is, of course, the book that we know as *The Prowler*, in which an unnamed narrator with dark blonde hair prowls metaphorically through her narrative, searching in vain for the red hairs that will prove that she is both the object of hallucinatory desire and the subject of loss upon which such desire is inaugurated.

The allegory of the red-haired boy is one way in which the text defines itself as a model of desire-as-loss. However we should not neglect the many self-conscious tropes in which the narrator addresses her text directly, beginning aptly enough with her admonition that "[t]here is too much knowledge. Too much self-

consciousness" (55). In the pages that follow the text is personified as a thinking subject, a *cogito* that, among other things, acknowledges its own sorrow (80), admits its desire (69), suppresses its happiness (99), attempts to rewrite itself (95), imagines its erasure (135), talks back (96), repeats itself (125), makes derisive comments (164), overflows (105), conspires (153), kills (90), and ultimately participates in its own self-construction: "The text admits: this is how I am sewn together" (74). Again and again, the story repeats the attempt at telling itself because "it knows that what is written is not exactly true" (69), and it is precisely in this desire for a self-definition that is simultaneously renewed and frustrated at every point that the text displays its most intimate allegiance to the lover's discourse.

In a certain sense determining *what* the text is (in terms of structure or genre), like defining *who* the reader is, is an arid enterprise in *The Prowler* since Gunnars seems determined to conflate protagonist with reader, narrator with author, and story with life:

> It is possible to imagine a story where the protagonist
> is a reader, who is therefore also the author.
> It is a story where the boundary between that which
> is written and that which is lived remains unclear. (146)

Given this refusal to be constrained by a monologic discourse that values "objectivity" and "point-of-view" (141), Gunnars' insistence on the figure of the prowler as an extended metaphor for her characteristic concerns of loss, displacement, alienation and estrangement seems contradictory. If the trope of the prowler is to be viewed in the light of a transcendental signifier, as that which

guarantees the structure of the whole by its presence, then this grandiose function is undercut by her text's self-conscious refusal to sustain any such endeavor:

> It was a long time before I understood that the point is an illusion. That portraits occur without center. In a puzzle every piece is its own center, and when compiled the work is either made up entirely of centers or of no center at all.
>
> In the metastory there are figurative prowlers looking for something. But there is very little for them to find. (110)

The narrator goes on to recall a riddle that she once knew: where is the best place to put something you don't want a person to find? The answer, of course, is on top of one's head! Like Poe's Prefect of Police, Gunnars' prowler does not know she already has what is being sought. The predominance in this narrative of jigsaw puzzles, riddles, clues, portraits, card-games and (red)herrings, each of which -- if correctly assembled -- could explain the whole, is clearly another way of decentering the fictional enterprise since every attempt to create an artifact that is self-explanatory and complete fails; the house of cards tumbles down and the jigsaw puzzle is disassembled by rough seas. Nevertheless, in this fiction as in Poe's short story, the mystery of the missing piece (the purloined letter) that will solve the whole is also, or perhaps entirely, a mystery of wrongful identification, of misrecognition.[18] There is, first of all and finally, the need to find out the identity of the prowler.

2.4 The Prowler

The question of the murder remained. (116)

There are two main prowler figures in this text. The first is the shadowy figure who wanders along the beach in Rungsted, Denmark, where the narrator visits her mother's family. In one story the narrator and her sister lie in silence in the dark as they hear the prowler climbing onto their balcony (56). In another version of the story, the narrator identifies with this figure and joins the prowler "in his imagined activities" (59). In yet another version, she relates how she, together with her friend Siggi, roamed the streets of the old Danish town and, as a result, were "passively adopted as the prowlers of these courtyards" (127). Apparently defined from the age of twelve by these scenes, the narrator's prowling marks her as outsider in a hierarchical social order in which each person occupies a designated place and in which movement from one level to another is actively discouraged:

> Prowling was an act of truancy. The more you prowled, the more useless you became. It was possible to work your way down to the bottom of all public estimation simply by prowling. (158)

The second prowler figure is the "anonymous person on board" who begins to assemble a jigsaw puzzle in the public lounge of the ship *Gullfoss* (107). Although it never becomes clear what the picture represents, progress is made on the jigsaw puzzle during the night and when the narrator and her sister come down in the morning they discover whole new sections of the picture. Since

they never see the man who has set himself this task they assume that he is a "night walker" and call him "the prowler." Later, in a characteristic act of identification, the narrator decides to join the prowler in his compilation of the puzzle pieces. For some time she puzzles over "the impossible lack of clarity" (108), then after due deliberation makes her contribution. "A kind of communication" exists between the prowler who works during the night and the narrator who works during the day: "The project was to clarify the picture. To make the patterns emerge out of a random *set*" (108). The project, of course, is , has always been, to create order out of chaos, design from disorder, and narrative from fragmented versions of storytelling. Predictably enough, the puzzle is never completed; during a night of rough seas it falls to the floor "in shambles" and no one has the inclination to begin again.

In the first representation of the prowler, an undisclosed crime has been committed, the responsibility for which seems to lie at the door of the unnamed burglar. He prowls through the narrative, and although we are never witness to any crime he has committed, the act of prowling in the context of a static social system marks him as transgressive. In the second representation of this figure, it is the detective rather than the criminal who has become the prowler, the one who is able to see the pattern in the pieces and who works patiently towards the solution of the crime. Since the narrator identifies with the figure of the prowler both as law-breaker and as law-giver, it is the narrative of detection itself, rather than any particular figure within it, that seems to be at stake here. Yet, as we have seen before in this text, generic categories function as overdetermined

tropes that diffuse narrative over its broadest spectrum rather than providing any one "reading" that is more significant than any other. As the narrator makes clear, there are prowlers everywhere: "They prowl about, looking for dialogue. They look for threads" (74).

Of course the identity of the prowler is not entirely irrelevant to the narrative. But, as with most of the elements in this highly self-reflexive text, the prowler proves to be all things to all people. The prowler is the writer in a story that lacks any other protagonists:

> The writer is a prowler in a given story that emerges in time ... There are no protagonists in the given story. Any subject is a contrived subject. The point of view is uncertain. The writer is necessarily part of the story. (120)

At the same time the prowler is the text reading itself in the absence of a writer. We are required to understand "[t]hat the text has been prowling in the reader's domain. Telling itself and then interpreting itself" (164). The potential answer to the question of the prowler's identity is multiple, contradictory and perverse. The prowler is writer, reader, lover, thief; the prowler is the criminal who commits the crime and the detective who solves it. And ultimately, the prowler is none other than *The Prowler*, the text in which all such constructions of identity and mis-identity circulate.

In the end we are left with one incontrovertible fact: a crime has been committed, a body found. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the "crime" in this case is love since the narrator displays herself as one who has been profoundly wounded by the presence of the Other[19] in much the same way that

the narrator of Gunnars' long poem *Carnival of Longing* is wounded by the absence of the beloved. In both narratives love is perceived as the repository of all spiritual and aesthetic longings, the moment when "the story comes together," and the picture becomes discernible. In *The Prowler*, the narrator describes this praxis as one in which the recognition of the beloved face that has existed as an imprinted memory leads to narrative and aesthetic recognition:

> When I
> got to the bottom of the stairs, I saw to my surprise
> a face I recognized.
>
> Some people have to wait for a long time
> for stories to come together. For pieces to fit. And there
> is always a chance, I thought just then, that the entire
> picture will slide off and shatter before the final pieces
> are in.
>
> That face belonged to the Hungarian boy
> much later in life. (163)

The potential for the violent destruction of the work of art or of the relation with the love object is always already present and looms most especially at this moment of recognition. It is not insignificant that the "novel" ends with a return to the inaugural moment, the "first" journey in which the young people -- who are studying in Copenhagen when war breaks out -- are returned to Iceland on the ship named *Esja*. The captain of the ship is aware of his responsibility for he knows that he has on board the future of Iceland "and one mine could shatter that future to pieces" (167). In the chapter that follows it will become clear that, for Elizabeth Smart as for Gunnars, the moment that shatters the structure, even if it exists only as potential, is what precipitates the love story as criminal act.

[1] These numbered sections take the place of page numbers which creates a slight logistical problem since page references cannot be give after quotations. Instead of the page, I provide the section number in the parentheses that follows the quotation.

[2] We are told that Gunnars' narrator is able to read before she attends school at the age of five. In a later section the principal places a book on her lap and tells her to read from it: "When I was done he looked at me very calmly and said: well, what shall we do with you? You already know how to read" (132).

[3] Of course this text is too duplicitous to allow such a univocal statement of intention to remain uncontradicted. In a much later section the narrator makes the opposite claim, that, in fact the experience of love is what precipitates writing: "If I were not full of love there would be no words on the page. There would be no text, no book" (89).

[4] As a citizen of a country without adequate resources to feed and clothe its inhabitants, the narrator is often in the position of one who receives "gifts" in the form of absurdly useless CARE packages from the United States and from Chuck, the visiting American service-man. She discards these packages since she knows that she is not the deserving beneficiary of such riches: "Even at that time I knew you must not keep that which does not belong to you" (40). It is only much later, after the elderly Russian woman's gift, that she is able to see herself as deserving, not only of the gift but also of what the gift has come to represent to her -- love: "There are gifts that are gifts and other gifts that are bribes. It later occurred to me that children always know the difference" (144).

[5] The first mention of this term comes in the form of an invocation or Biblical naming: "we are the white Inuit. We eat fish. And in summers we graze like sheep among the mountain grasses" (7). The effect of this trope is to locate the home place as an Edenic pre-Lapsarian country whose inhabitants find themselves placed in its landscape by Divine right, as opposed to the more hospitably habitual mode of occupation which requires a definition of nationality in which colonization is the structuring principle. Of course this "naive" construction of the country in which she is born does not remain idyllic for the narrator, whose growth into maturity includes the realization that "for us in the North dreams never did come true" (38).

[6] In one significant scene, the narrator tells of the time in America when she finds herself with money in her wallet: "I went into one of the thousands of stores filled to the brim with clothes and began to buy them" (10). The evident lack of restraint both in the action and in the exaggerated recounting of this scene speaks to a breakdown of restraint on the part of the narrator that is total but not without consequences. When she has bought "a carload" of these clothes, she returns home feeling "like a criminal."

[7] The same figure of reversal is used later when the narrator asserts: "It was not a country where murders took place"(48). The denial ironically prepares us for the murder that will, in fact, take place.

[8] When the narrator eats all the greenhouse tomatoes her mother has carefully saved up for the family, she is shamed by her gluttony. Her mother begins to cry because she has remembered a similar story from her own life. When she was a girl she worked all summer picking strawberries in order to earn the money to buy a record. She eventually buys the record, but on the way home she falls and the record breaks. The stories, involving as they do a fall from grace (in one case literal), the greedy temptation of fruit, and a descent into shame, not only resemble each other but also the archetypal myth of Eve's temptation and fall.

[9] In a strangely oblique scene, the narrator visits the family doctor where she removes her older sister's "hand-me-down clothing" (37). As she takes off jacket, mittens, sweater, and undershirt, she is revealed to him naked and diseased: "There was nothing to say. He could see for himself. My skin. Something had happened to all of my skin" (37). The transference from borrowed clothing to diseased body is implicit in what the narrator feels she has received from her sister.

[10] The word is a neologism coined by Jacques Lacan to designate a failure of recognition or misconstruction. In his seminar "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed

in psychoanalytic experience" Lacan uses this word to express the child's incoherent subjectivity, its (mis)recognition of its own image in the mirror (*Écrits* 6).

[11] In distinguishing between "male writing" or "the male line" and "the female story" (25) the narrator makes the distinction – common to *écriture feminine* – of linear narrative versus an unfolding of layers. The female story she imagines is sensual and lush:

> I imagine a story that has no direction. That
> is like a seed. Once planted, the seed goes nowhere.
> It stays in one place, yet it grows in itself. It blossoms
> from inside, imperceptibly. If it is a vegetable, it
> nourishes. (24)

Such a feminine construction of "story" no less than her position as an outsider to European and later, North American culture, serves to displace her *vis-à-vis* the narrative she is attempting to relate.

Significantly, in the master narrative of colonization that is being told, women are perceived as traitors. During the Second World War when the country finds that they have been occupied by the British to preempt the arrival of the Germans, and later, after the war when the country is occupied by the Americans – women are credited as the first to know about the change because their German/British sweethearts have suddenly become American (45). Indeed, the narrator's great-aunt Sirri enjoys the American occupation since, it is implied, it supplies her with oranges and chocolates from the base. If the Americans were to go, Sirri assures her great-niece, they would be replaced by the Russians (46). In these sections the woman is merely a conduit for a succession of "occupying" forces, a designation that, more than any other, conflates the amorous discourse with a narrative of nationalism.

[12] The narrator frequently occupies a position of indeterminacy in her social transactions. She is neither Dane nor Icelander, and she does not fit into the "shuffler" nor the "genteel" category at the school she attends in Copenhagen. In this context it is interesting to consider Mary Douglas's correlation of ambiguity with pollution in her anthropological study *Purity and Danger,* in which the danger of crossing forbidden boundaries is seen as the distinguishing marker of a social system that is vulnerable to contagion and, as such, demarcated by a complex grille of prohibitions. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva criticizes Douglas's system for neglecting to name a syntax of language that defines what she calls "the abject."

[13] In the same essay Gunnars explicitly names her debt to some of the formative Modernist writers, whose techniques, she maintains, provide a "staircase" from which to approach writing. In this context she cites Ezra Pound's intertextuality, T.S. Eliot's strategy of "undererasure," the evasiveness of Wallace Stevens and the "continual present" that is so evident in the poetry of Gertrude Stein (181).

[14] The titles of such theoretical works as *The Pleasure of the Text* by Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language* implies an eroticization of the function of reading and writing in contemporary discourse. The connection is even more explicitly made in so-called *écriture feminine* like Hélene Cixous' essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" and Luce Irigaray's text *This Sex Which Is Not One.*

[15] Since oil paint does not naturally fall into "lines" it seems to be clear that, at this point at least, the narrator is conflating oil-painting with writing, and by extension, the act of self-portraiture with the autobiographical enterprise.

[16] In *Tales of Love* Kristeva defines narcissism as a defense against emptiness, specifically the emptiness occasioned by the subject's separation from an imaginary unity with the mother. At the same time, the narcissistic subject attempts to exorcize this emptiness through the contrivances of imagery. Kristeva's narcissist is nothing if not a subject of representation.

[17] What gives rise to love in this story is always traumatic since the narrator affects a belief in originary stories precipitated by trauma, as when she finds herself "thinking something over": "There must have been something that determined the sudden configuration of thoughts. A shattering experience, perhaps" (2).

[18] I refer here, of course, to Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Purloined Letter" and to Lacan's "Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*" in which Lacan reads Poe's tale as an allegory of the signifier. Through a reading of what he designates as the primal scene and its repetition, Lacan constructs a drama of the glance and its return. The unopened letter that circulates between the protagonists in Poe's story, the letter that is hidden in plain view, remains as a symbol of a pact, a means of situating the subject in the signifying chain which constitutes him/her. The return (and return and return) of the letter can be compared with the return of the repressed. What is at stake is the withdrawal of the subject from the symbolic circuit of the letter. In this case subjectivity is constructed as remainder, or as Lacan says, "what remains of a signifier when it has no more signification" (317). The answer the sender of the letter receives (like the puzzled jigsaw puzzler in Gunnars' narrative) is his/her own message in reverse form: "Thus it is that what the purloined letter; nay the 'letter in sufferance' means is that a letter always arrives at its destination" (318).

[19] "I recognize that I love you," writes Derrida's lover and post card writer, "by this: that you leave in me a wound that I do not want to replace" (*The Post Card* 25).

Possessed by Love: The Metaphoric Production of Desire in Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept.*

3.1 I am

> I am possessed by love and have no options.
> (*By Grand Central Station* 39)

In her foreword to *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept,* Brigid Brophy praises what she calls Elizabeth Smart's "poetic prose" (7), an apt designation, since it takes into account both the narrative momentum of the text and its emphasis on metaphor, figurative language, and poetic rhythm.[1] In fact, Smart's book-length *cri de coeur* conforms to the elements of poetry rather more than to those of prose. The narrative of *By Grand Central Station* does not go beyond the three sides of a lover's triangle and much of the so-called plot must be inferred from the narrator's ecstatic lamentation. As such, I feel justified in

reading this text as an extended erotic poem in ten parts in which the narrator communicates the progress of her love affair in over-wrought, highly metaphorical, allusive language.

The poem begins with a sentence that locates the narrator as she waits for her lover to arrive:

> I am standing on a corner in Monterey, waiting for the bus to come in, and all the muscles of my will are holding my terror to face the moment I most desire. (17)

The first-person, present-tense grammatical construction "I am" is at once the most simple and most complex conjugation, being a statement of presence as well as an announcement of subjectivity. The phrase "I am" resounds through Smart's narrative, gathering all manner of amorous and rapidly changing identifications in its wake. From the initial phrase "I am standing" of the opening sentence, the narrator quickly progresses to a series of statements in which she is anything but upright: "I am over-run ... I am infested ... I am far, far beyond ... I am shot with wounds ... I am indeed and mortally pierced with the seeds of love" (23). These abject positions accrue through the course of the narrative until in Part Nine the narrator resolves to sit upright, "for even to recline reminds me of the stance of love, and *I am* unable to bear the pain of so much remembering" (94 my emphasis).

This contiguity between the narrator's subjectivity and her supine position is followed by the performance of the lover's discourse as an impossible language event:

> Who shuffles by me gripping chairs for support? I do. I myself . . .
> *I am* without words. *I am* without thoughts. But quia amore langueo.

I am dying for love. This is the language of love. (109 my emphasis)

The narrative position is resolutely abject: the subject shuffles by herself, gripping chairs for support. In answer to the question "who," the narrator replies with a profusion of first-person subjective statements: I am, I do, I myself.

The claustrophobic subjectivity that is so characteristic of *By Grand Central Station* derives in part from Smart's repeated use of the "I am" clause in all its conjugations and narrative identifications. In this case, the "I" that speaks professes to be speechless because she is dying of love. The statement "I am dying for love" is immediately followed by "[t]his is the language of love," implying that the former statement is a convention or conceit necessary to the lover's discourse but not strictly literal since the speaking subject can be neither speechless nor entirely moribund. The "I" who stood waiting on a corner in Monterey at the beginning of this narrative, straining to compose her terror and desire is, toward the end, shattered by the effects of both. It is the dissolution of this inaugural "I am" that is, perhaps, the central theme of Smart's poem. More specifically, it focuses on the breakdown of the Cartesian subject once capable of proclaiming like a disembodied and omnipotent deity, *I am that I am*, and who, by the end, can only greedily repeat, "I want the one I want" (97).

Early in the poem, Smart's narrator again waits for her approaching lover and watches as his shadow is flung against the window pane:

> When his soft shadow, which yet in the night comes barbed with all the weapons of guilt, is cast up hugely on the pane, I watch it as from a loge in the theatre, the continually vibrating I in darkness. (21)

This final phrase, Smart's "continually vibrating I in darkness" is highly evocative of what I have earlier called the narrator's shattered subjectivity.[2] Perhaps, more accurately, the vibrating "I" may be read as the mark of the narrator's vacillating consciousness -- at once approaching and retreating, confessional and secret, opening to the plenitude of our gaze and hastily withdrawing from our scrutiny. The metaphor of the spectator in the loge of the theatre is an appropriate one in this case, since it takes into account our position as readers, no less than the narrator's valiant attempt to observe the spectacle of her subjectivity. Yet the frequent repetition of the first person pronoun, the "I" that vacillates and vibrates in the darkness, effectively undercuts any attempt at detachment.

Although the narrator of *By Grand Central Station* proves herself a virtuosic writer and prolific reader by virtue of the large number of allusions and intertextual references that compose her narrative, she is, first and finally, a woman in love, a lover. Her "praise of love," unlike Kristeva's performance of writing/loving in that other narrative of the "standing" woman, "Stabat Mater," does not take the form of a deliberately divided consciousness. Instead, the narrator of Smart's poem seems to goad herself into an ever-intensifying subjectivity in an attempt to grasp at the form and meaning of the very word -- *love* -- by which she believes herself to be sentenced.

3.2 Subject to Metaphor

> What was my defense but one small word which I dared not utter,
> because jazz singers and hypocritical preachers and Dorothy Dix

had so maligned it. (61)

Skeptics like the Inspector at the Arizona border in Part Four, or Mr. Wurtle, who asks with a legal air, "'then I have it from you there is such a thing as Love?'" (41) do not seem to be questioning the emotion so much as interrogating the nature of the word love. Similarly, when the narrator's mother exclaims, "'Love? Stuff and nonsense!'" she merely replaces the word she has chosen to disregard, with a succession of abstract nouns: "It's loyalty and decency and common standards of behaviour that count'" (61). But her eyes, when she makes this pronouncement, "were like medieval wildmen in her head, clutching at her diminishing days" (61), and effectively negating her denial. What is it about the word love that simultaneously "offends with its nudity" (63), and proves intransigent to analysis, as when the narrator confides, "it is the language of love, which nobody understands" (112)?

Early on, in Part One, the narrator engages in an interior argument in which she tries to define for herself the precise nature and function of erotic love, and so justify the affair she has embarked upon with a married man. The extract which I quote below is remarkable for the way in which sophistry and logic are finally engulfed by a series of highly-coloured and somewhat incompatible metaphors:

> To deny love, and deceive it meanly by pretending that what is unconsummated remains eternal, or that love sublimated reaches highest to heavenly love, is repulsive, as the hypocrite's face is repulsive when placed too near the truth. Farther off from the centre of the world, of all worlds, I might be better fooled, but can I see the light of a match while burning in the arms of the sun? (26)

In attempting to speak plainly or honestly about love, the narrator is almost immediately forced into an intricate metaphor in which the denial of erotic love is compared to the ugliness of a hypocrite's face, and this metaphor, in turn, is swallowed in light, as hypocrite, truth, and all the articles of her scattered faith are subsumed by the brilliant light of the sun in whose "arms" she burns. Each layer of her argument is spuriously related to the next until, abandoning logic, she dives head-first into love as into the bright, obliterating light of the sun that, presumably, dissolves words and the necessity for speech.

The narrator frequently offers us mixed, sometimes mangled[3] metaphors in place of any real engagement with "love huge and simple" with "nothing more to be said" (26). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that *By Grand Central Station* is as concerned with obfuscating the nature of erotic love through ambiguously positioned, and at times, violently opposed metaphors as it is intent on deciphering "the language of love." Through the short-circuit of the metaphor Smart forces words to mean and the world to signify. The title itself brings together Grand Central Station and the Rivers of Babylon with the kind of audacity that is usually attributed to the Metaphysical poets, and the text is composed of layers of simile -- the word "like" is repeated endlessly -- metaphor, and personification.

Through a series of approximations, "love" in this poem is rendered as simulacrum, and what the narrator means by love is endlessly deferred through increasingly imprecise language:

> IT is coming. The magnet of its imminent finger draws each hair of my body, the shudder of its approach disintegrates kisses, loses

> wishes on the disjointed air. The wet hands of the castor-tree at night brush me and I shriek, thinking that at last I am caught up with. The clouds move across the sky heavy and tubular. They gather and I am terror-struck to see them form a long black rainbow out of the mountain and disappear across the sea. The Thing is at hand. There is nothing to do but crouch and receive God's wrath. (27)

The narrator's feeling of impending doom -- of which the landscape Romantically partakes -- does little to explain the nature of "IT," the "thing" that approaches but which remains essentially unrepresentable.

In the context of this poem, love or the act of love is an ellipsis that is best performed under the erasure of metaphor:

> Under the waterfall he surprised me bathing and gave me what I could no more refuse than the earth can refuse the rain. Then he kissed me and went down to his cottage. (24)

By this means, the poem's first and only explicitly carnal event is transformed into an act of nature. The moment of the narrator's "fall" into adultery, the moment she has raged against and by which she will come to measure all future pleasures, is glossed as a gift that cannot be refused, and represented only by the chaste kiss under the waterfall. Yet the prevailing tone of this text is hardly demure; the language that the narrator characteristically uses is highly sexualized, almost hysterically[4] charged with an eroticism that transforms all of nature and a good part of the urban landscape. Why then is Smart's narrator so carefully evasive when she comes close to describing "it," the "thing," the "fact" that this text repeatedly approaches and, as frequently, avoids?

> I review all I know, but can synthesize no meaning. When I doze, the Fact, the certain accomplished calamity, wakes me roughly like a brutal nurse. I see it crouching inflexibly in a corner of the ceiling. It comes down in geometrical diagonal like lightning.
> It says, I remain, I AM, I shall never cease to be: your memory will

> grow a deathly glaze: you will forget, you will fade out, but I cannot be undone. (80)

In this extract, the narrator's characteristic announcement of subjectivity, the "I am" by which, since the opening sentence, she has stood -- more or less -- firm, is over-shadowed by the "certain accomplished calamity" that remains unnamed but which hovers overhead "like lightning."

Anticipating another momentous series of events -- the birth of her child and the approach of her lover -- the narrator finds herself feverishly scrutinizing magazines and scurrying down streets, in an attempt to avoid what she again calls "the thing":

> I will not think of the thing now. I have no time. When I have washed my stockings I will. When I have sewn on a button I will. When I have written a letter I will. (88)

Although in this case we are given some insight into the event and the narrator's reasons for avoiding it, her reiterated denials cast doubt on her motives, and the indeterminacy of what she wishes to avoid is significantly greater than the sum of the ways in which she plots this avoidance.

In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot attempts to formulate a writing that at once approaches and retreats from the significant event. He calls this motion "imminence" (1), a writing that somehow comprehends the immediate in the past tense. In this context, the significant event is defined by our inability to equate words with it and to assign it a fixed place in a system of correspondences. Of course, Blanchot is writing about the disastrous event, but his reading is helpful to our understanding of Smart's narrator who constructs

love as an event that precedes and survives itself, anticipates and remembers, but never coincides with itself.[5]

The narrator of *By Grand Central Station* records, idealizes, and apostasies her love affair, but once she has done so she realizes that what has been described is not what happened. The experience, once taken hold of, is no longer an event. Indeed it is a non-event, a degree zero that escapes all reference:

> This state is far from longing because it is far beyond it. It is the state where the unbearable suffers eclipse and becomes coma. It is so much in the unremembering purgatorial state that I have no belief in revival, no real belief in the return of Spring, in love, in our joined mouths. (93)

The deliberate imprecision of a word like "unremembering," and the over-wrought pitch to which the language aspires, testifies to the narrator's sense that the event has somehow preceded itself, and that the writing that tries to give it form is at once prolix and precipitate.

The narrator seems to inhabit a world in which language is indeterminate, a world in which the subject never ceases to try to construct meaning. She tries in vain to decipher "the code of the eucalyptus" that thumps on her roof, and plots "anagrams to defeat anatomy" (34). She is shocked by a world in which nations of men "have been willing to die for a word" (64), yet professes that she would do the same for a different word. What she calls her "poverty-stricken word" (65), is at once a source of pain to her, since its meaning remains always beyond her reach, and a source of pleasure since it is generative of endless metaphoric transformation:

> I was taunted so long. The meaning fluttered above my head, always out of reach. Now it has come to rest in me. It has pierced the very centre of the circle. I love, love, love -- but he is also all things: the night, the resilient mornings, the tall poinsettias and hydrangeas, the lemon trees, the residential palms, the fruit and vegetables in gorgeous rows, the birds in the pepper-tree, the sun on the swimming pool. (41-2)

The word love seldom appears in this text without compulsively trailing a string of metaphors in its wake. In this instance, the rapid, almost Ovidian transformations of the beloved seem to follow directly from the invocation of the word whose meaning has for so long taunted the narrator. As we shall see, the use of metaphor in this text is complex, over-determined, and highly ambiguous.

3.3 Corrupt Language

> It is written. Nothing can escape. (22)

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva proceeds to recontextualize her ongoing discussion of the unrepresentable through a reading of purity and taboo that relates to the concept of the border. For Kristeva, borders are determined not only through geographical or physical frontiers, but by the phonological and semantic differences that articulate language. Kristeva criticizes previous theorists[6] for neglecting to name a syntax of language that defines what she calls "the abject". *Powers of Horror* is subtitled *An Essay in Abjection,* and the "abject," for Kristeva, denotes the ambiguity that results from problematical distinctions between subject and object. She has also referred to it as the "non-

distinctiveness of inside and outside" (63). Her construction of the abject as an unnamable, unrepresentable site of affect, a border passable only through pleasure or pain, has important implications for Smart's extensive and often problematic use of metaphor in *By Grand Central Station*.

In Part One of Smart's poem, the narrator explicitly presents herself in an abject state. "Over-run" and "infested" with desires, her body invaded by a menagerie, she constructs herself as a subject in the process of violent metaphoric transformation:

> I am over-run, jungled in my bed, I am infested with a menagerie of desires, my heart is eaten by a dove, a cat scrambles in the cave of my sex, hounds in my head obey a whipmaster who cries nothing but havoc as the hours test my endurance with an accumulation of tortures. Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders? (23)

The body that is metaphorically over-run in this extract, parallels a subjectivity overwritten by all manner of transformative discourses, literary allusions, and quotations from poetry, the Bible and the Classics. The last sentence invokes Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and is merely one in a multitude of references to English and European poets that include allusions to the works of Shakespeare -- *Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet,* and *The Tempest* are directly invoked -- Danté, Milton, Marlowe, Blake, Sidney, Herbert, Donne and the Metaphysicals, Webster and the Jacobeans, Byron, Wordsworth, Thomas Hardy, T.S. Eliot, and Dylan Thomas. Again and again, figures from Greek and Roman legend are referred to as terms of comparison in *By Grand Central Station*, among them: Daphne, Syrinx, Oedipus, St. Sebastian, Leda, Jupiter, and Prometheus. The poem gains

resonance through allusions to a wide range of Biblical texts, most notably the Psalms from which it derives its title, and the *Song of Songs* from which it quotes directly. In addition there are numerous references to passages from the *Book of Revelations, Genesis, Ecclesiastes,* the parable of the Prodigal Son, and the story of Doubting Thomas.

A narrative as thorough-going in its construction of love as to include references to both Marlowe's *Faustus* and Goethe's *Faust, By Grand Central Station* presents as a wildly over-determined text in which language admits to its own "corruption," as when the narrator prays God, "to understand my corrupt language and step down for a moment to sit on my broken bench" (32). If we are to use Kristeva's category, the narrator's language is abject or "corrupt" because there is no border between one metaphor and the next. Her discourse is characterized by rapidly changing metaphors that conflate difference and threaten the boundaries that protect identity:

> But I have become a part of the earth: I am one of its waves flooding and leaping. I am the same tune now as the trees, hummingbirds, sky, fruits, vegetables in rows. I am all or any of these. I can metamorphose at will. (42)

What is significant here is not the intensity of the particular images. They are, in fact, pastoral and pantheistic rather than explicitly threatening. However, the necessity for the lover to represent herself metaphorically through a sequence of rapidly changing metaphors is significant. She is suspect not so much because she is represented as Other, but because she changes so unexpectedly from one to (an)Other. While such flux is a characteristic of many discourses,[7] the

excessive variety and incongruity of the metaphors the narrator uses, and their rapid transformations, present love – the activity with which she identifies – as metonymic slippage:

> This is the grass of hope that grows indomitably over my mind, which dares not admit that perhaps tonight his mouth, like the centre of all roses, closes over a mouth not mine, burrowing with apologies and love, like a baby at the breast. (87)

The imprecision of a phrase like "the grass of hope," the sliding of pronouns from "her" mind to "his" mouth, and the intrusiveness of the similes in which the lover tries to communicate what is inexpressible through the limited language of comparison, combine to render this passage almost unintelligible. In Smart's construction, the lover is, first and finally, a subject of metaphor and all that the metaphor implies of transformation and metamorphosis.

The act of metaphorizing the world that the narrator almost compulsively engages in is the activity that most defines her as lover. In *The Rule of Metaphor*, Paul Ricoeur contextualizes the metaphor as that which transports language toward the transcendental. In Ricoeur's view, the metaphor attempts to return the semantic concept to its original, living, stature. When Jacques Derrida turns to the question of metaphor in his essay "The *Retrait* of Metaphor," he returns us to "a discourse whose rhetorical border is no longer determinable according to a simple and indivisible line" (22). Derrida interrogates the metaphysical values that Ricoeur attaches to metaphoric language, and calls into question the distinction between "living" and "dead" language on which Ricoeur grounds his argument. In questioning the status of the metaphor, both Ricoeur and Derrida note the

etymology of the word metaphor and the connotations of transport embedded in its derivation.[8] As a subject of metaphor, Smart's narrator/lover is transported beyond herself into a world of indeterminate borders in which everything conforms to the lineaments of gratified desire because *what* is seen is indistinguishable from the subject who sees:

> O the water of love that floods everything over, so that there is nothing the eye sees that is not covered in. There is no angle the world can assume which the love in my eye cannot make into a symbol of love. Even the precise geometry of his hand, when I gaze at it, dissolves me into water and I flow away in a flood of love. (39)

Certainly water is a medium well-fitted to metaphoric transformation, and consequently *By Grand Central Station* is awash in the "tidals of love" (39). Waterfalls, rivers, and oceans abound in this text, as do swimming pools, rain, tears, ice, steam, and amniotic fluid. In a narrative in which "everything flows like the Mississippi" (39), the narrator continually turns to liquid in order to "invade his every orifice" (40). Not surprisingly she finds herself, by the end, "drenched" (110), "drowned" (104), "dissolved" (81), and "submerged" (104) by a sea of love that "gushes out of [her] like an arterial wound" (104). Without borders, her body is at once the container and the contents of a fluidly constructed love that "craves violence for expression, but can find none" (104). As such the lover's body is, in *By Grand Central Station*, the example *par excellence* of the Kristevan abject, a subject "almost succumbed" (110) to the effects of the amorous discourse.

As a subject of metaphor, Smart's narrator is unable to refrain from metaphorizing her world and her words. In the second last section, Part Nine, she

impatiently awaits the birth of her child and the coming of her lover, in a state, she maintains, that is without metaphoric counterpart:

> Forty days in the wilderness and not one holy vision. Sights to dazzle the eye, but I bask in the sun without drawing one metaphor from it. Nature is using me. I am the seedbag. Jumping down rocks and hills I have a different balance, and fall backward or trip too easily, over-loaded in front.
> But I draw no parallels from patterns, and throw off no silver-sparkled words from my encounters. Pull down the blinds, my embryo, over my eyes. (98)

The excerpt opens with an allusion to the mystics and holy men whose desert wanderings were thought to yield ecstatic visions, and it closes with a conceit in which the eyes are figured as windows with the blinds pulled down. The narrator refers to herself as a "seedbag" but warns that she is unable to articulate her experience for lack of "silver-sparkled words." These metaphors and neologisms give the lie to her assertion that she is without words or the means with which to quicken language through artifice even when she is most resolved not to do so.

The pregnant narrator in Smart's poem is reminiscent of a later twentieth century construction of pregnancy. In her poem "Metaphors," Sylvia Plath provides us with a series of rapidly changing metaphor-conundrums:

> I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
> An elephant, a ponderous house,
> A melon strolling on two tendrils.[9]

By this process, pregnancy itself becomes a metaphor for metaphors, for change and transformation. In their efforts (not) to metaphorize pregnancy, the extent they go to multiply and metamorphose this most literal of functions, Smart's -- and Plath's -- anxieties surface. Their anxiety, however, and the fear of failure that it

seems to predicate, is not singular. As Helena Michie points out in *The Flesh Made Word*, in their attempt to produce and reproduce the literal female body, contemporary feminists have only succeeded in creating a further series of metaphors. Perhaps the central preoccupation of *By Grand Central Station* is this agonized attempt to produce a body -- the "literal" female body, the absent body of the beloved -- and its equally agonizing failure to do so.

Smart's poem ends with a reassertion that "there is never and nowhere a time for such a word" (80). The poem returns to the image of a blank page, or as Michie would say, the metaphor of the image:

> 'Have you seen my notebook dear?'
> 'It is under the desk my sweet.'
> Give it to him ... Let him write words that will acquit him of these murders. The page is as white as my face after a night of weeping. It is as sterile as my devastated mind. (111)

The conversation staged between the narrator's lover and his wife implies that the blank notebook under discussion is his, but it may equally stand in for the narrator's own page, the final page in her exhausted and exhaustive writing of this love story.

3.4 She/He

> O the language of love. The uninterpreted. The Inarticulate. Amore. Amore. Amore. (110)

> As intersection of corporeal passion and idealization, love is undisputably the privileged experience for the blossoming of metaphor. Julia Kristeva

In the chapter entitled "A Holy Madness: She and He" (*Tales of Love*), Kristeva discusses the Biblical text *Song of Songs* as an erotic allegory in which the distinction between lover and beloved is increasingly blurred: "The hymn of love at once confesses its source, its object, and its addressee -- Solomon the King, at the same time author and loved one, is also the one to whom the text is addressed" (88). In a discourse that closely mimes that of the Shulamite lover, Solomon picks up her phrases and returns them to her as she does with his words:

> How beautiful you are, my love, how beautiful you are!
> Your eyes, behind your veil, are doves. (Solomon, 4:1)
>
> My beloved is fresh and ruddy,
> His eyes are doves at a pool of water. (Shulamite, 5:1)

While the poem is signed by Solomon, it is spoken (anticipated or repeated) with equal strength by his beloved, the Shulamite, so that the relationship between the two is constructed by what Kristeva calls a "dramatic dualism" (91) that conflates the habitual boundaries between addressee and sender.[10] The often repeated phrase "I am my beloved and my beloved is mine" (*Song of Songs* 2:16), provides evidence of the conflation of pronouns in a field of representation in which amorous identities are frequently confused.

The *Song of Songs* is particularly relevant to *By Grand Central Station* because it is quoted directly in Part Four, during the Arizona episode, where the lovers are stopped by a border guard and prevented from crossing the state

border. Smart splices phrases from the *Song of Songs* between questions presumably put to the lovers during a police interrogation:

> What relation is this man to you? (My beloved is mine and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies.)
> How long have you known him? (I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine: he feedeth among the lilies.) (47)

The juxtaposition of these two opposing discourses, the erotic and the interrogative, is only one of the ways that Smart sets up an adversarial dialogue between the one who loves and the many who would oppose this love: policemen, propriety, border guards, Mr. Wurtle, and the narrator's mother, to name only a few.[11] Yet, what seems more interesting in the context of Kristeva's analysis of the *Song of Songs* and Smart's insistent quotations from it, is the way in which the narrator of *By Grand Central Station* frequently blurs the distinction, not only between herself and her lover, but between herself and her lover's wife. As Brophy points out in her foreword to the poem, the narrator's thoughts run often upon metamorphosis (11), most noticeably, I would venture to argue, upon the metamorphosis from "she" into "he."

At least twice in this long prose poem, the female lover turns into her male counterpart, while he, in turn, engages in an episode of amorous cross-dressing. One day, at the beginning of their relationship, he brushes against her in passing and she transforms into a reasonable, if somewhat surprising, facsimile of the male sexual organ:

> One day along the path he brushed my breast in passing, and I thought, Does this efflorescence offend him? And I went into the redwoods brooding and blushing with rage, to be stamped so obviously with femininity, and liable to humiliation worse than Venus' with Adonis

> purely by reason of my accidental but flaunting sex. (20)

On the face of it, words like "femininity" and "Venus" designate the female, yet the emphasis on "efflorescence" and tumescence destabilize the obvious gender construction and hint at a more transgressive meaning in the phrase "flaunting sex." In her *extremis* the narrator unwittingly transforms herself into an erect phallus among the redwoods, while her lover "is the hermaphrodite whose love looks up through the appletree with a golden indeterminate face" (20).[12] It is precisely at this moment in the poem, that he confesses his seduction by "a boy with green eyes and long lashes" (20), and the narrator responds by chastising her own flesh because it cannot "metamorphose" into a printshop boy (21).

Following this complex interweaving of sexual indeterminacy and gender (re)construction, the narrator returns to the trope of metaphor -- or in this case metaphor-lessness:

> Then days go by without even this much exchange of metaphor, and my tongue seems to wither in my throat from the unhappy silence. (21)

Clearly, we are to understand by this that the narrator's desire for her beloved -- and his for her -- comprehends all levels of sexual metamorphosis, and that all such transactions take place on the symbolic level of language and metaphor.

The psychic entanglement of lover and beloved -- whether this includes gender transformation or not -- is a not uncommon figure in amorous discourse. More significant is the slippage between the narrator and her lover's lover; in other words, the wife of her lover. In the following passage from Part One, we are

presented with a series of indeterminate, non-specific pronouns that, by their very frequency, attract our attention:

> How can I speak to *her*? How can I comfort *her*? How can I explain to *her* any more than I can to the flowers that I crush with my foot when I walk in the field. *He* also is bent towards *her* in an attitude of solicitude. Can *he* hear *his* own heart while *he* listens for the tenderness of *her* sensibilities? (24 my emphasis)

The repetition of the ambiguous word "her" and the less ambiguous -- since there is only one male figure in the triangle -- but no less specific pronoun "he," is ubiquitous in this text. Significantly, the act that directly follows the passage quoted above is the almost elided sexual transaction between the narrator and her lover under the waterfall. At the moment of, arguably, greatest sexual tension in this text, the narrator chooses to conflate her identity with that of the woman she is about to betray.

As we shall see, however, it is an identification that has existed from the first. At the moment that she presents herself "standing on a corner in Monterey" (17), which is how the poem opens, the "face" that disembarks from the bus does not belong to the expected "he" but to "her," the woman at whose trusting gaze the narrator declares herself "happy to forgo my future, and postpone indefinitely the miracle hanging fire" (17). For a second the narrator even wonders who the true object of her desire is: "was it for her, after all, for her whom I had never expected nor imagined, that there had been compounded such ruses of coincidence?" (17). The moment of hesitation, of slippage between the woman who disembarks and the man who follows, presents itself as a kind of textual stammer that is repeated throughout the narrative. This, in turn, casts a slight

shadow upon the real object of desire towards whom the narrator writes so exhaustively. In her compulsive effort to identify with the other woman -- significantly, it is the narrator who would traditionally have earned this designation -- because both love the same man, the narrator obliquely casts herself as the lover of the other woman, the one for whose "peace of mind" (18) she will renounce "him."

The trace of the homo-erotic love story that is resisted in this narrative, can be tracked through the frequency and clumsiness of the pronouns used and the refusal to name characters otherwise designated as "he," "her," or "she":

> If I am suffering, think what she suffered -- a hundred times more and without hope ...
>
> But it is not for her my heart opens and breaks: I die again and again only for myself. For her moving image prevents even my cry to him for help. For even if he loves me, he is in her arms.
>
> O the fact, the unalterable fact: it is she he is with: he is with her: he is not with me because he is sleeping with her. (85-86)

In this passage -- and it is one amongst many[13] -- the narrator begins by acknowledging the suffering of the other woman, proceeds to describe her own suffering which is predicated on the fact that "he" is with "her," and concludes by repeating this formula obsessively and ungrammatically: "it is she he is with: he is with her" (86). In this compulsive and often clumsy repetition of the love triangle narrative, the other woman functions as both impetus and impediment to the passion that exists between the narrator and her lover, as well as providing a repressed narrative of the potential passion that is resisted in the homo-erotic relation between the two women. The much repeated and chronically imprecise

word "her," functions as a linguistic hinge to refer to both the wife and the narrator, whose desires are each directed toward the husband/lover, the "he."

The slippage of pronouns that we observed in Kristeva's reading of the *Song of Songs*, functions, in *By Grand Central Station*, to identify the two women with each other rather than to separate them. As well, the narrator's habit of referring to herself in the third person renders certain referents ambiguous:

> Eons have been evolving and planets disintegrating and forming to compel these two together. If this enormous conspiracy of your watching fates fails, don't you see how I will be blamed? (69)

It is not entirely clear in this passage whether the narrator is referring to herself or to the other woman in a phrase like "these two together," and it is never clear who the "you" is that she so habitually addresses throughout the course of the poem. While she indulges in the convention of a listening presence, we are never sure whether that listener is the lover, the reader, or the deity to whom the Psalms are addressed.

One thing alone is perhaps clear: the narrator does not exist within a stable and coherent subjectivity but overlaps her narrative on all sides. Her amorous identity generously partakes of the lover whom she explicitly addresses at times, as well as of his wife whom she seems to implicitly address at other times. I intend to explore some of these identifications in order to relate them to what I have earlier described as the narrator's pronounced tendency toward metaphoric transformation.

3.5 Beautiful as Allegory

> What is love?, dissecting it in my most pedantic words, assuring myself that all that blood was spilt to make me a philosopher. (95)

The narrative of *By Grand Central Station* is constructed as the tale of a conventional love triangle composed of the narrator (designated alternately by "I am" and "her"), her lover (designated by the pronoun "him"), and his wife (designated by the somewhat more equivocal pronoun "her"). Within these normative categories however, each subject within the triangle is transformed *via* figurative language into a variety of symbolic or mythological characters, and it is through a reading of metaphor and metamorphosis in the context of these transformations that we may best be able to understand Smart's use of excess as a poetic figure.

The narrator's lover's wife -- because no one in this narrative is named, characters exist solely in terms of their relation to each other -- is figured in a variety of conventional metaphors that emphasize her blamelessness and asexuality. She has "the gentle outline of a young girl" (22), her breasts are "like Virgin shrines that have been robbed" (24), and she looks out at the world through "madonna eyes, soft as the newly-born, trusting as the untempted" (17). The proud possessor of a "nymphlike ... slenderness" (23), she is described frequently as a martyr (31), a perfect sacrifice (108), and an innocent "who is always the offering" (24). In fact, she has no resonance save in her role as an

empty screen or blank slate upon which the narrator can proceed to project her own oddly distorted longings.

The narrator's lover is favoured with even fewer terms of comparison. He is an hermaphrodite (20), and a centaur (22) but, as the narrator inadvertently points out, he is "also all things," so that what Auden would call his "individual beauty"[14] is burnt away by the reflection of sunlight on the water of the swimming pool, and dispersed through comparison with the tall poinsettias and the birds in the pepper-tree (42). When the narrator attempts to describe him or the effect of his "beauty" upon her, her similes are disappointingly imprecise, as in this generalized description: "He is beautiful as allegory. He is beautiful as the legend the imagination washes up on the sand" (108-109). Although he is the ostensible addressee of this long outpouring of love, he, even more than his wife, is conceived as a textual blank, a figment who is quoted, dreamed, apostrophized and fêted, but who never signifies except as white noise or reflected light:

> My love, are you feeling better?
> He can't talk, he can only mutter.
> ... After a while I got out into the open air, and his face was the moon hanging in the snowy branches. (76)

Significantly, the final lines of the poem refer to the lover's inability or unwillingness, at any rate his *failure*, to reply. "My dear, my darling, do you hear me where you sleep?" (112) the narrator asks, at which point we realize, if we have not done so before, that this lover has not yet spoken and now never will.

The construction of the narrator's listening but unresponsive lover follows the convention of confession or prayer, since it is addressed to an omniscient

deity who hears but whose "reply" is not necessarily comprehensible to mortal ears. Through this conceit the narrator frequently represents herself as a medieval mystic able to pour her "overflowing benevolence" over "even the tight-mouthed look" (44). The synaesthetic imprecision of this last comparison hints at an excess that begins with language but soon permeates every narrative level:

> When I saw a horde of cats gathering at a railway terminus to feed on a fish-head thrown near the tracks, I felt, It is the lavishness of my feelings that feeds even the waifs and strays. There are not too many bereaved or wounded but I can comfort them .... (43)

At times the narrator engages in a kind of biblical sophistry in which she reflects upon her own emotional poverty and begs the lover-as-God to take pity on her,[15] but more often she indulges in a quasi-mystical outpouring of emotion in which love is constructed as a wound, an exquisite affliction on the basis of which it is possible to speak of love:

> Let me lie on the cold stones! Let me lift weights too heavy for me! Let me cry More! to pain, with a white face shaping through fire, with whips of endurance, with cords of the invulnerable ascetic, into the badge of the possible saint! (95)

The narrator's overwrought, highly metaphorical discourse circulates around the abject, suffering body of the lover, which, if we are to define this term as designating the one who loves, is herself. Her speech, apparently directed outward toward the Other, is really self-directed; she is the subject and object of her passionate language, the one to whom the lover's discourse is addressed as question and returns as answer.

In *Speculum of the Other Woman,* Luce Irigaray defines the mystic's discourse as one in which the ecstatic vision of the Other translates into a fluidity

of language that dissolves differences, and so contributes to the disappearance of her own object/subject opposition within the Divine experience. The mystic's ecstasy, her burning vision is its own reward and, like the mystic herself, exceeds all representation. Her loss of subject-hood, her abjection before the Divine is the source of her image-laden narrative, rather than -- as it purports to be -- the reflection of God in all His glory. Irigaray points out that it is in this way that the mystic's self-representation escapes a patriarchal, specular logic, her abject surrender paradoxically becomes the moment of her liberation. Smart's narrator bears a startling resemblance to Irigaray's mystic. Both seem committed to an excessive, image-laden narrative in which the writing subject's *jouissance* unfolds in direct relation to her abject surrender to what, in the case of Irigaray's mystic, may be called *agape* and, in the case of Smart's narrator, *eros*.

I do not mean to imply that the narrator of *By Grand Central Station* represents herself solely as mystic. Smart's narrator is nothing if not inventive in her self-constructions, and protean in the forms by which she chooses to serve love. A subject who can "metamorphose at will" (42), she appears surprisingly often in the guise of male figures of heroic legend: Macbeth (18), Oedipus (22), Al Capone (51), Antaeus (56), and Saint Christopher (76). Yet if she is Saint Christopher she is also Saint Catherine (109), Leda (25), one of the Sirens (51), Helen of Troy (81), Sheherezade (84), and Lot's wife (89). Perhaps because she is writing, perhaps because she is "in love," the narrator represents herself as a compulsively shape-changing figure, transforming rapidly into cobra (22), colossus (68), devourer (68), hermit, saint, and martyr (95), light-house keeper

(95), derelict (105), the green "leprechaun of legends" (62), and "a careening limousine without brakes" (104). As for love itself, it is the transformative medium *par excellence*, and in the course of her poem, Smart's narrator, although frequently asserting that, "in all states of being, in all worlds, this is all there is" (65), as frequently resists the univocality of this definition by comparing love to all manner of things, from octopi (22) to landmines (79).

While longing for a love that is "huge and simple," with "nothing more to be said" (26), the narrator alternately figures love as doom-laden (27) and restorative (86), wounding (50) and curative (87), love is a "refugee sailed in the last ship" (34) and it is an overflow that "turns the world to water" (39). Love is at once infusion, a baptism "claiming its birth at last" (40), and crucifixion (107), a phoenix, "bright as a totem pole" (36), or a workman "setting out on a job" (36). The metaphors used are by turns banal and intense, adept and inept, over-wrought, histrionic, and performative, and they build upon each other to excess.

It is difficult to separate events in this text, since narrative occurs, as Jean Mallinson puts it, "at the intersection of the figures of speech" (110). Place is merely a correlative to the narrator's internal state, and, as Alice Van Wart points out, although the journey is an actual one from Southern California to Arizona, Ottawa, and New York, the real journey is "of the heart" (39). Characters are not named and exist *vis-à-vis* one another, at the mercy of the apostrophes by which their relationships to the narrator are defined, as in phrases that indicate possession, like "my lover" or "my lover's wife." In fact, even these limited referents are frequently omitted from the text of *By Grand Central Station* where

characters, as I have earlier indicated, are merely identified as "her," "him," and "I." The anonymous narrator loves a man without a name, face or history,[16] a man who never comes to life in the narrative despite the transformative power of love that is frequently demonstrated.[17] Allusion is used pervasively as a structural element,[18] while the imagistic language gives the effect of hyperbolic and exaggerated utterance, often in the absence of any referent. All the while, a highly subjective, anguished, and disembodied "voice" speaks to us rhapsodically, passionately, and seemingly without irony, of the effects of love, faith, and betrayal.[19]

By Grand Central Station is a poem that, like most love poems, is written after the affair and precipitated by the narrator's desire for an absent beloved. Desire which has traditionally been marked by a lack or *manque*[20] in Western thought is enormously, even excessively, productive in Elizabeth Smart's poem. Productive, that is, of metaphor, metamorphosis, and all the devices of language within a social field invested with desire. As such, Smart's poetics come close to what Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* call productive desire. In this context, desire is a primary force rather than a secondary function, desire is production, not acquisition or lack, but an unbounded, free-floating energy that Freud called libido and Nietzsche called will to power. In Deleuze and Guattari's figuration of text, desire is nomadic and traversive, and it is with this formulation of desire-as-plenitude that I would like to leave my discussion of Smart's drenched and overflowing, perpetually dissolving narrative.

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[1] There is, of course, substantial critical debate over the categorization of *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* [henceforth to be referred to as *By Grand Central Station*]. David

Lobdell writes that what has most bewildered critics is whether the work should be considered a novel or a poem, citing its "apparent formlessness" (66). Like Brigid Brophy, Michael Brian Oliver argues that it is "an extensive and very special poem" (108). Lorraine McMullen reads Smart's work in the context of a feminist adultery novel, while Jean Mallinson calls it "a romance in the lyric mode" (109). Dee Horne traces the origins of *By Grand Central Station* to Smart's journals, arguing that Smart's early drafts of the poem in her journal initiated a new kind of literary form, the "novel-journal" (129). In the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, Rosemary Sullivan describes it definitively as a "rhapsodic prose-poem" (762), a phrase that Alice Van Wart picks up in her article "The Novel as Poem," in which she asserts that *By Grand Central Station*, "extends the dimensions of lyrical poetry to the novel and harmoniously integrates narrative intentions and poetic conventions to create a paradigmatic poem-novel" (51). Such critical distress over the inability to successfully categorize this work bespeaks a certain anxiety that, I would argue, is not alien to this poem's subject matter -- the love story as a kind of secular Stations of the Cross.

[2] Of course, Smart's placement of this phrase is ambiguous. It can be as easily applied to the approaching lover whose shadow, like his significance for the narrator, flickers against the window pane as well as her consciousness. In choosing to read the "continually vibrating I" as a function of the narrator's self-construction I do not mean to cancel out this other, and I believe equally valid reading.

[3] At one point the narrator speaks of her lover's wife's "mangledness" and goes on to offer us one of the most violently mixed metaphors in the poem:

> On her mangledness I am spreading my amorous sheets, but who will have any pride in the wedding red, seeping up between the thighs of love which rise like a colossus, but whose issue is only the cold semen of grief? (31-32)

[4] I use this word to locate the relation between suffering and language that Freud (in *Studies on Hysteria*) and later Lacan (in *Feminine Sexuality)* in different ways inscribe. Of course this reading does not erase the importance of resistance that French feminists like Cixous and Clément (in *The Newly Born Woman*) perceive as an integral function of the figure of hysteria.

[5] One of Blanchot's commentators, Steven Shaviro, writes that the event cannot be stated in the present tense because it does not coincide with its concept, with any concept: "Its obscure otherness cannot be adequated to any subject; it is a residue or surplus in relation to any possible meaning" (19).

[6] In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva both acknowledges and criticizes the work of Mary Douglas, a British anthropologist whose text *Purity and Danger* provides the framework for an interdisciplinary study of pollution and taboo.

[7] I shall discuss the similarity of the narrator's discourse with what has been called mystic writing later in this chapter.

[8] In his unpublished essay "The Remains of Metaphor," Mark Libin points out that while the metaphor traditionally moves "a name" from one linguistic event to another in order to signify, what is named in this transaction often fails to signify: "But what is named in this 'name,' and what is transported? What is the vehicle by which this enigmatic cargo is consigned from one port to the next, and what borders must be crossed in this journey?" (1).
Lacan makes a similar point in *Écrits* when he writes of the "flash" of the metaphor: "The creative spark of the metaphor does not spring from the presentation of two images, that is, of two signifiers equally actualized. It flashes between two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present through its (metonymic) connexion with the rest of the chain (157).

[9] Plath's "Metaphors" is in her *Collected Poems* edited by Ted Hughes. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.

[10] Kristeva's question, how did a literally erotic text become sacred, leads her to conclude that love in *Song of Songs* is a radically new experience in Western subjectivity in which "a legitimation of the impossible, an impossibility set up as amatory law," takes place (97). In *By Grand Central Station*, Smart is equally concerned with the erotic/sacred binary, a problem that

in her work is most frequently solved by the transposition of all other forms of discourse – sacred, lyrical, metaphorical – into the service of erotic and amorous language.

[11] In this context it is interesting to note that the conversation that takes place between the narrator and the border guards is itself replicated *via* shorthand and carbon copies: "It is all written down. There are fourteen sheets and six copies of each" (49).

[12] A similar moment occurs when the narrator remembers the night when her lover turned, "into an Assyrian girl, casting down his lashes under a blossoming turban" (82).

[13] See, for example, a passage that occurs toward the end of the poem in which pronouns and possessives like "my," "his," and "her" throng in a similarly confused but compulsive manner:

> *My* love is crucified on a floating cross, and cries out hoarsely *my* name in the night. *His* wife hears and *her* eyes burn holes in the darkness across the room. *My* love has a bandage like a bowel of pain around *his* neck, where lately *he* cut *his* throat. (107 my emphasis)

[14] The phrase is from W.H. Auden's "Lullaby":

> Lay your sleeping head, my love,
> Human on my faithless arm;
> Time and fevers burn away
> Individual beauty from
> Thoughtful children ...

[15] One example of this philosophical stance occurs in Part Six, after the narrator's return to Canada where she addresses this monologue to her absent lover:

> But if you do me the wrong of thinking I am beautiful, that I have a million rescuers from despair, and therefore I can take calamity better than anyone else, remember, truly, it is only you who bestow even these gifts upon me. Therefore, how much greater my loss must be which takes away even what appears to be mine by nature, my power to endure and resist. (67)

[16] This is not an isolated instance, in Gunnars' *The Prowler*, a similar relationship occurs between an unnamed narrator and her nameless, faceless lover. Although the lover in *The Prowler* is the product of a complex political history, this history is only referred to elliptically and briefly.

[17] "It is almost," says David Lobdell ingenuously, "as if she were in love, not with a human being, but with the notion of love, with love itself" (61).

[18] Jean Mallinson, in isolating this trope, points out that it is called "metalepsis" (108).

[19] Of course, while the narrator does not ironize love she is satirical towards its detractors. Brian Michael Oliver calls the section in which the narrator quotes allusions from the *Song of Songs* as an intertext to the border guard's interrogatives, one of the comic masterpieces of black humour (110).

[20] In *The Symposium* Plato constructs desire as the void in a subject that is filled by the acquisition of an object, and Western philosophy and psychology have persisted in treating desire as lack. Jacque Lacan's idea of *manque* (lack, need) for example, defines desire as an insupportable lack that emerges between need and demand, and which proliferates in language through endless substitutions in the chain of signifiers (*Écrits* 156).

In Between: Dionne Brand's Poetics of Love and Resistance

4.1 Bread Out of Stone

> Exasperated after hours of my crying for sweet water, opening her mouth wide, my mother would say to me, 'Look inside! Aaah! You see anything in here? You want me to make bread out of stone?'
> *Bread Out of Stone* (21)

In the title essay of her 1994 collection *Bread Out of Stone,* Dionne Brand begins by questioning the efficacy of writing in a world whose injustices demand action, rather than rhetoric:

> I'm here [Playas del Este, Cuba] because I've decided that writing is not enough. Black liberation needs more than that. How, I ask myself, can writing help in the revolution? You need your bare hands for this. I drink my beer over my open diary and face this dilemma. (12)

The problem of making something nourishing out of nothing much -- bread out of stone, revolution out of writing -- haunts Brand's earlier poetry collection *No Language is Neutral* (1990) much as it does her political manifesto. As a Black[1] lesbian feminist, as a self-proclaimed immigrant (a position she explores in *Winter Epigrams* 1983, and *Land To Light On* 1996), as a politically charged writer, Brand is multiply displaced from white patriarchal heterosexual discourse, from what she calls a "secret and cowardly language of normalcy and affirmation" (*Bread* 23). In the same essay she proclaims the need for writing that is "significant, honest, necessary," a preoccupation that certainly does not preclude the impulse to inscribe the personal within the context of politics, social reform and cultural revolution.[2] Any effort to read Brand's "love poetry," any attempt to situate her writing as a discourse of passion, must take into account the larger project of social and political reform in which she is constantly engaged.

In *Sister Outsider,* Audre Lorde writes passionately about the dangers of raising Black children in a racist and sexist society: "If they cannot love and resist at the same time, they will probably not survive" (74). Brand's ongoing project of resistance certainly does not exclude the necessity to love, and in at least two of her poetic cycles, *Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defense of Claudia* (1983), and *No Language is Neutral* (1990), she iterates the necessity to articulate love within a discourse of passion and resistance. Yet any reading of these narratives as amorous discourse must be performed in the context of Brand's highly politicized ambivalence about the efficacy of writing. The final essay in *Bread Out of Stone* is entitled "On Poetry" and begins with an avowal of failure:

> Every word turns on itself, every word falls after it is said. None of the answers that I've given over the years is the truth. Those answers have all been given like a guerrilla with her face in a handkerchief, her eyes still. (181)

"I've had moments when the life of my people has been so overwhelming to bear that poetry seemed useless," Brand confesses in this essay (182), and she considers any attempt to divide her writing into generic categories like "love poetry" or "revolutionary poetics" an implicitly racist enterprise since it imposes a further distinction between the personal and the political. In what follows I do not want to trace the thematics of love poetry in her work, so much as to explore these performative figures of passion and resistance as they are inscribed in her writing.

4.2 In Defense of Claudia

> Heading for a revolution is heading for your true self.
> (*Bread* 141)

The epigrams in Brand's *Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defense of Claudia*[3] were written in reaction to poetry by the Nicaraguan poet-priest Ernesto Cardenal in his book *Apocalypse and Other Poems,* from which I quote:

> Of all these movies, Claudia, of these parties,
> of these horse races,
> nothing will be left for posterity
> except the verses of Ernesto Cardenal to Claudia
> (if even that)
> and Claudia's name that I put in these verses
> and the names of my rivals, in case I decide to snatch them
> from oblivion and to include them also in my verses

to make fun of them.

Cardenal presumes to imply that Claudia's only claim to immortality resides in the poet's elevation of her in his verses. Brand responds by writing Claudia out of Cardinal's verse and into her own.

Epigrams consists of 54 short poems in which Claudia speaks in the first person of love and revolution, and is transformed, as Roger McTair's introduction puts it, from "the flighty bourgeois that has enthralled Cardenal" (4) to a conscious feminist poet:

> Have you ever noticed
> that when men write love poems
> they're always about virgins or whores
> or earth mothers?
> How feint-hearted. (29)

Neither faint-hearted nor willing to be constructed as virgin-whore-earth-mother, Brand's Claudia offers her epigrams as feints towards/against the convention of love poetry in which the woman is enshrined as object of desire *via* a Romantic tradition, or packaged as commodity in the context of materialist politics: "some Claudias are sold to companies, / some Claudias sell to street corners" (25).

Yet it is, perhaps, too easy to perceive a strictly oppositional relationship between Cardenal as male writer and Brand's Claudia as female rebel. As activists and poets, Brand and Cardenal share what McTair has called "a dialectic of hatred and tenderness" (*Epigrams* 5), and it is both her allegiance to and resistance against Cardenal that provides Brand's Claudia with the impetus to construct herself as writing lover. The poem cycle begins with an epigram that represents the writing subject as already the object of a militaristic surveillance:

I've handed out leaflets at subway stations
crying death to the murdering policemen,
I'm sure the RCMP has my name, my picture,
my letters and now my poems.
You don't even return my calls! (21)

Deceptively passive in this opening epigram, Claudia represents herself through the leaflets that she hands out and through the texts (name, picture, letters, poems) that have been seized by the police. She appears to construct herself as a waiting woman chastising her lover for his tardiness.

This position is quickly overturned in the second epigram, however, where Claudia declares herself both lover and writer:

These verses are for you Ernesto,
not for all my lovers
whom I bad mouth in these lines,
poor things, they were smaller than these epigrams,
but a poet's ego needs entire pages. (21)

The Claudia who writes these lines clearly distinguishes herself from the conventional waiting woman to whom love poetry is traditionally addressed.[4] No Penelope, Brand's Claudia has many lovers, and has resolved to use her writing to expose their pettiness. Indeed, she declares, her ego is so expansive that it will need many pages in which to satisfy itself. Claudia's lovers are "smaller than these epigrams," but she herself is big enough to fill books. In reversing the duality between men who habitually take up space, and women who do not feel entitled to space, Claudia seizes agency at the same time that she appropriates the epigram -- a characteristically masculine form -- for a feminist agenda.

The epigram, traditionally associated with funereal eulogy, evolved into a literary form first practiced by Classical Greek and Roman aphorists such as

Martial and Catullus, and was later used from the Renaissance to the Eighteenth Century by satirists such as Matthew Prior and Alexander Pope. In her *Epigrams*, Dionne Brand combines the traditional aspects of the epigram -- irony, wit, satire, and brevity -- with contemporary political and social commentary to produce writing, as Edward Brathwaite suggests, that is "closer to the nerve, to the bone, to the clear wide integrated circuits of her meaning" (18).[5]

Brand's epigrams deconstruct the romantic ideal; in epigram 20, for example, "beauty" is neither an adjective to describe the beloved nor a commentary on the experience of love, instead it is, "a hot meal / or a cold meal or any meal at all" (26). Indeed, as she confides to the absent Ernesto in epigram 31, beauty is what plagues women, makes them coquettish and hypocritical: it is only the "old and haggard" who remain true to themselves (29). In a world charged with political and social injustice, a world in which "the night smells of rotten fruit" (33),[6] romantic love is an empty enterprise. Claudia ironically asks:

> How do I know that this is love
> and not legitimation of capitalist relations of production
> in advanced patriarchy? (24)

In epigram 29 Claudia again parodies romantic love, recalling "that red hot arrow / in my ribs / that feeling of turning to water" (28), and in epigram 15 she plots the betrayals of her romantic life by the political events of the early seventies: "then there was Chile and Mylai, / all the Panthers were killed, / Angela was sent to jail" (24). In contrast, Ernesto Cardenal, the male lover to whom these epigrams are addressed, is accused of neglecting the political for the personal at

the same time that he is accused of patronizing the woman to whom he has just declared his love:

> so I'm the only thing you care about?
> well what about the incursions into Angola,
> what about the cia in Jamaica,
> what about El Salvador,
> what about the multi-national paramilitaries
> in South Africa,
> and what do you mean by 'thing' anyway? (26)

Even in the context of social action, the lover apparently still sees his beloved as ornamental, trivial, an entertainment, as we may conclude when Claudia replies in the negative to a somewhat dubious request, "no I can't tap dance / at the International Women's Day rally" (35).

More serious for Claudia, however, appears to be the charge that love poetry has been a masculine tradition that seeks to idealize the woman by denying her speech. In one of the few titled epigrams, "Ars Hominis / the manly arts," Claudia rails against her entrapment in a subjectivity that has not previously allowed the woman to look, speak, write or love:

> Since you've left me no descriptions
> having used them all to describe me
> or someone else I hardly recognize
> I have no way of telling you
> how long and wonderful your legs were;
> since you've covetously hoarded all the words
> such as 'slender' and 'sensuous' and 'like a
> young gazelle.' (28)

When the love affair takes place in a patriarchal context, the woman is silenced, the words taken out of her mouth, her body displaced by the compliments she no longer recognizes since her desire is merely a reflection of his. Claudia responds

by attempting to appropriate a masculine discourse of violence and possessiveness, what she calls a "bloodletting of paternal epithets" (29). When this tactic fails to satisfy, she writes herself out of the love affair and the poem, concluding simply, "I cannot write you this epigram" (29).

One of the most duplicitous claims of amorous discourse is its claim to speechlessness or unrepresentability, of being unable to write what, in the process of this denial, is offered as writing. As a woman, Claudia travels "incognito;" hers is "a case of mistaken identity" (36), and one of the ways Brand's persona positions herself is precisely through this performance of duplicity. In epigrams 9 and 18 she represents herself in the third person, a deliberate displacement from her habitual first person narrative position:

> poorest Claudia,
> to the barrio
> to bare feet
> to a boy's sweaty hand
> to lipstick from america. (23)

The epigram may be read as a list of colonial imports unavailable to the "poorest," from banks and "the hilton hotel," to electricity shortages and "the carnivorous neon signs" (23).

The commodification of Claudia in this context is a significant effect of the third person narrative position. Brand seems to be making the point that those spoken or written by a dominant and colonizing culture forgo their agency and are in danger of falling prey to bourgeois dreams of ownership. In epigram 48, for instance:

> Claudia dreams birthday cakes
> and mauve bougainvillea

Claudia dreams high heeled shoes
orchid bouquets, french perfume
[...]
and men civilized by white shirts. (36)

In this epigram the colour white "civilizes," and Claudia is represented as something of a prom queen. Not unexpectedly, the passivity of this image is subverted in the final epigram where Claudia returns to the first person and addresses her lover directly with the "truth" of her love:

Cardenal, the truth is that
even though you are not a country
or my grandmother
or coconut ice cream
[...]
I love you for the same things. (37)

The materialist preoccupation with capitalist imports -- such as American lipstick and French perfume -- that have informed this narrative give way in the final epigram to an entirely different list, one dominated only by an individual taste for "cuban music / or brazillian movies" (37), for people and places, favourite tastes and beloved memories.

It is significant that the only explicit declaration of love that occurs in these love poems does so in the context of Claudia's list of idiosyncratic desires. It is not that Claudia returns to some uncontaminated arena of non-political involvement in order to declare her love at last, but that Brand makes clear that even personal choices are informed by a politics of desire that equates the signifier of "the lover" with the taste of coconut or the memory of a grandmother. In *Apocalypse and Other Poems*, the historical Ernesto Cardenal, addressing a fictional Claudia, writes:

They told me you were in love with another man
and then I went off to my room
and I wrote that article against the government
that landed me in jail.

In Brand's *Epigrams*, Claudia, refusing her fictionalized status and any responsibility for Cardenal's romantic excesses, writes her own love story in the context of revolution, cuban music, political action, mauve bougainvillea, resistance, love, and coconut ice cream.

4.3 In Between

I could return to the fold by saying that it was an innocuous story not meant to sheer the seamlessness, not meant to offend and not meant to have fun, just so, by itself.
(*Bread* 31)

In *Epigrams*, Brand refuses to privilege the love story of Ernesto Cardenal and Claudia by assigning it a place separate from the social and political context. In her later collection, *No Language is Neutral*,[7] she continues to address the problem of language and partisanship while writing a different love story. A story, she maintains, that has been disallowed in patriarchal discourse:

this is you girl, this is the poem no woman
ever write for a woman because she 'fraid to touch
this river boiling like a woman in she sleep
that smell of fresh thighs and warm sweat. (7)

In resolving to write the lesbian love poems that have not yet been written, Brand de-familiarizes language, charging it with political and social force.

While Claudia addressed the figure of the male poet-priest Ernesto Cardenal in *Epigrams*, the narrator in *No Language is Neutral* directs some of her poems to female revolutionaries, martyrs, and activists such as Phyllis Coard, who is the subject of "Phyllis" (11), Jacqueline Creft of "Jackie" (14), and the ex-slave Mammy Prater in "Blues Spiritual for Mammy Prater" (17). In these pieces, particularly the last, Brand's poetry seems to be searching for a subject to address, a way of replacing, with language, the space left open by the absent female body.[8] In her essay "This Body for Itself" in *Bread Out of Stone*, Brand theorizes this need to recover history *via* a feminist subjectivity, "I think we catch a glimpse, we apprehend a gesture. We remember despite the conditioning we receive as women not to remember other women, or to be ashamed of that memory or to think it immature" (33).

In a long, untitled poem addressed to her fore-mother Liney, Brand's narrator mourns a life without autobiography:

> As if your life could never hear
> itself as still some years, god, ages, have passed
> without your autobiography now between my stories
> and the time I have to remember and the passages
> that I too take out of liking, between me and history
> we have made a patch of it, a verse still missing you
> at the subject, a chapter yellowed and moth eaten at
> the end. (26)

The poem begins with the invocation, "in between, Liney, in between" (26), and it is *in between* that best describes the position of the Black female poet, slipped like "a cactus leaf between / pages" (26).

Her language defies neutrality for any number of reasons, beginning with slavery, "a backbone bending and / unbending without a word" (23), continuing through dispossession and displacement, "not a single / word drops from my lips for twenty years about living / here" (31), and ending with:

> the walk each
> night across the dark school yard, biting my tongue
> on new english, reading biology, stumbling over
> unworded white faces. (32)

The displaced narrator of these poems is divided by a split tongue, an unequal allegiance between two cultural positions, where language "seemed to split in two, one branch fell silent, the other / argued hotly for going home" (31).

As the survivor of a history of slavery, political oppression, racial prejudice, and sexual inequality, the narrator must take into account the women who have preceded her and whose bodies she tries so poignantly to locate "in between" the pages of history, geography, and, finally, poetry:

> Liney, no one is interested in telling the
> truth. History will only hear you if you give birth to a
> woman who smoothes starched linen in the wardrobe
> drawer, trembles when she walks and who gives birth
> to another woman who cries near a river and
> vanishes and who gives birth to a woman who is a
> poet, and, even then. (26)

Brand's narrator appropriates the language of biblical genealogy to account for her own lineage as a love poet. Yet, in the context of this painstaking accrual of communal event and historical experience, in this account of the lives and loves of the women who "begat" her, and in her acknowledgment of their stories along with her own, it becomes increasingly difficult to "hear" the narrator's own love

story in the way most readers have been taught to read the love story -- as singular, unique, and indivisible.

Why does a revolutionary woman choose to write love poetry? Or, what is the relevance of love poetry to the revolutionary enterprise? In *No Language is Neutral*, Brand's reply is that sometimes love itself is a revolutionary enterprise, constituting as it does a radical politics that works against the exclusion of feminine sexuality and lesbian erotics from the traditional arena of love poetry:

> What I say in any language is told in faultless
> knowledge of skin, in drunkenness and weeping,
> told as a woman without matches and tinder, not in
> words and in words and in words learned by heart,
> told in secret and not in secret, and listen, does not
> burn out or waste and is plenty and pitiless and loves. (34)

Like any practitioner of love, Brand is aware of the tendency for language to foreclose upon the subject usually deemed most inscrutable, most unrepresentable, "and look, love, there are no poems to this only / triangles, scraps, prisons of purpled cloth" (39).

Precisely because this love has been historically and legally constructed as forbidden, there is a need to write it into history, into literature, "this / sudden silence needs words instead of whispering" (39). Yet Brand is equally aware that in privileging the experience of love as transcendent there is a danger of neglecting the social context from which love arises, that in foregrounding the idea of the couple, the lovers could turn away from a community that may, in fairness, demand similar allegiance:

> listen, just because I've spent these
> few verses fingering this register of the heart,
> clapping life, as a woman on a noisy beach,

calling blood into veins dry as sand,
do not think that things escape me. (42)

What the narrator cannot escape is the landscape of injustice, violence, and poverty that surrounds the lovers: the "drawn skin of hunger," the unkindness of strangers, "the police bullet glistening / through a black woman's spine in November" (42). The similarity with Adrienne Rich's "Twenty One Love Poems" is unmistakable. In this sequence, Rich explores the efforts of two women to love and work together in a world that is hostile both to women and to love.[9] In Rich's poems the awareness of history and culture as what Alicia Ostriker calls "chronicles of oppression" (*Stealing the Language* 176) drains the lovers of their ability to love so that, in the end, "two women together is a work / nothing in civilization has made simple." There is a corresponding moment toward the end of Brand's poem in the section entitled "hard against the soul." The poem that begins, "then it is this simple. I felt the ordinary romance of / women who love women for the first time," ends with an image of the lover imprinted against a violent and chaotic city, the dream of ordinary romance abruptly foreclosed:

I suddenly sensed you
at the end of my room waiting. I saw your back arched
against this city we inhabit like guerillas, I brushed my
hand, conscious, against your soft belly, waking up. (46)

4.4 Waking Up, Going Back

You cannot meet yourself without being shaken, taken
apart.
(*Bread* 55)

In her essay "Ignoring Poetry" printed in a recent issue of *Open Letter* devoted to race, sexuality, and the body, M. Nourbese Philip writes about the problem of writing from the "always already" designated position of exclusion:

> *How does one write poetry from the twin realities of being Black and female in the last quarter of the twentieth century? How does one write poetry from a place such as Canada, whose reality for poets such as myself is, more often than not, structured by its absence? How does one write from the perspective of one who has 'mastered' a foreign language, yet has never had a mother tongue?* (123 Philip's emphasis)

Like Philip's relationship to language, Brand's is informed by her position as a Black woman in which the medium that may be used to articulate a compromised freedom is precisely the medium that has historically been used to delimit that freedom: "We are all nervous, the Black women nervous at what we will hear; some part of us knows that in the moment of telling we will be betrayed as much as we will be free" (*Bread* 15).

No Language is Neutral is divided into four distinct sections. The first, "hard against the soul" consists of a single poem that introduces the figures of return and self-confrontation into the narrative:

> this is you girl, something never waning or forgetting
> something hard against the soul
> this is where you make sense. (7)

The return to writing as a makeshift home allows the reader to enter the poems that follow with a sense of the constructedness of words such as "home," "here," and "return." Indeed, the second section is entitled "Return," and contains a series of poems in which the anxiety of location is poignantly foregrounded.[10] "So

the street is still there" (10), the narrator finds, but the women (like "Phyllis" and "Jackie") who have been imprisoned or killed in the interim, are only "quite here" (11). The narrator has returned to a physical home place and reconstructs, in writing, the contradictory terms of her arrivals and departures since then:

> From here you can see Venezuela,
> that is not Venezuela, girl, that is Pointe Galeote
> right around the corner, is not away. (15)

The third title section "no language is neutral," is either one long poem or a sequence of untitled prose poems that slide easily between one another, giving the effect of an uninterrupted meditation on memory and its approximations, "some damn memory half-eaten / and half hungry" (23). In Brand's poetry, however, memory is not a privileged possession of the individual psyche but a cultural community of freely circulating images. Memories of slavery, history, and language alternate, along with the memory of a woman called Liney whom the narrator only "knows" through the deeply partisan remembrances of others. Liney is the woman who can only be encountered "in a recollection" (24) and her indeterminacy mimes the narrator's sense of dispossession and homelessness:

> In between, Liney, in between, as if your life could
> never see itself, blooded and coarsened on this
> island as mine, driven over places too hard to know
> in their easy terror. (26)

Liney, who sees visions, flies "skinless," and turns into a river fish (25). Liney is as real as memory allows her to be but she is also part of the *Line* -- both textual and historical -- that links the narrator with her oscillating (because always on the edge of leaving or returning) and "steady trembling" self (29).

In this section, the narrator's subjectivity, what she calls her "wilderness self" (29), is splintered and dispersed:

> is shards, shards, shards,
> shards of raw glass, a debris of people you pick your way
> through returning to your worse self, you the thin
> mixture of just come and don't exist. (29)

The narrator is unnamed, and the poems in the third section have no titles, perhaps because the women in this landscape are un-entitled, without entitlement. Brand makes it clear that return is as effective and lyrical an impetus as departure, and the subjective position that is constituted between these two extremes is vibrant with the energy of accumulated leavings ("leaving" implying both flight away from, and imprint upon, as in trace or remainder). In *Bread Out of Stone*, Brand ends one of her essays with words that recall the cumulative trace of many and various leavings: "A long time ago I think I fled this place because flight is as strong as return; the same, often. One is not the end of the other or the beginning of the next, and often when we go back all we can think of is flight ... The closer we get to home the more we disappear" (65).

The final section, like the first section, is entitled "hard against the soul" and consists of a series of numbered love poems, the first of which appears to be placed at the beginning of the book. The opening poem, "hard against the soul," is also the first in a sequence of love poems, so the textual structure creates an arc within which the poems of loss, flight, and return are bracketed by and held within the love poems. In this way the figures of loss, longing and abandonment

that are so much a part of amorous discourse are structurally foregrounded in the design and placement of the poems.

The subject in these final numbered love poems is plural and profligate; the woman refuses to position herself outside a discourse that has excluded her (as woman, as lesbian, as Caribbean, as lover). Instead she disseminates her sexual identity through a heterogeneity of discourses that results in surplus, proliferation, excess:

> It was as if another life exploded in my
> face, brightening, so easily the brow of a wing
> touching the surf, so easily I saw my own body, that
> is, my eyes followed me to myself, touched myself
> as a place, another life, terra. They say this place
> does not exist, then, my tongue is mythic. I was here
> before. (51)

Like the discourses that fail to name her, the body of the woman in these last poems resists the singular case and multiplies in excess of the poem's ability to situate her. Brand's long poem ends with a series of possible positions for women -- both as lover and beloved -- that are not so much definitive as endlessly possible, and in which position as a stationary category is itself mockingly glossed.

4.5 Getting Here From There

> If I can take a second. Shaking the gravel from my shoes.
> Poetry is here, just *here*.
>
> (*Bread* 183)

In an early essay in *Bread Out of Stone* in which Brand explores the inconsistencies of migrancy and return ("I think that I am always travelling back" 51), she laments the trajectory of the verbs that have been used to situate her, "brought, arrived, came, was carried, was there, here" (52), and concludes with a wish to eliminate verbs from language:

> The verb is such an intrusive part of speech, like travelling, suggesting all the time invasion or intention not to leave things alone, so insistent you want to have a sentence without a verb, you want to banish a verb. (53)

To some extent, the poems in *No Language is Neutral* repeat this longing for a verb-less language since the narrator's concern seems to be not so much how to get there from here, but where and what "here" could mean in the context of numberless departures.

The subject who is defined between two incomplete verbs, "you the thin / mixture of just come and don't exist" (29), survives only within a piecemeal past, "some damn memory half-eaten / and half hungry" (23). That the narrator clearly feels enormous anxiety about where "here" is, is evident in her highly ambiguous descriptions of place in which what is asserted is immediately erased: "Here was beauty / and here was nowhere" (22). In the narrator's childhood memory of the beach at Guaya, two rivers cross the sand, rivers whose swift undertow prevents "little girls" from crossing "except on the tied / up dress hips of big women" (22). In this memory "the taste of leaving" is already on her tongue for she knows that even being born is temporary, is neither here nor there -- that birth itself fails to situate the subject in a landscape made legible by desire:

I learned to read this from a

> woman whose hand trembled at the past, then even
> being born to her was temporary, wet and thrown half
> dressed among the dozens of brown legs itching to
> run. It was as if a signal burning like a fer de lance's
> sting turned my eyes against the water even as love
> for this nigger beach became resolute. (22)

Later (later both in terms of memory and in the chronology of the poems), on another beach, the narrator apologizes to her lover for once again having left without a trace:

> look, I know you went searching on the beach
> for my body last night and maybe you will find it
> there, one day, but I'll tell you now, it will be on this
> beach, or a beach such as this. (45)

The beach as the makeshift signifier of home is also the physical site of loss and desire, of the place once crossed upon the mother's hips now no longer traversible except through memory and language. In *Bread Out of Stone*, Brand defines home as, "the first place you look for even if you are running from it, you are nevertheless always running toward it, not the same spot but a spot you're sure that you'll know" (67).

Frequently in these poems, Brand's narrator invokes the beach as the infinite vanishing point towards and away from which she is compelled to run. The beach is a boundary from which the figures of departure and return are performed repeatedly:

> Pilate was that river I never crossed as a child. A
> woman, my mother, was weeping on its banks,
> ...
> and this gushing river had already swallowed most of
> her, the little girls drowned on its indifferent bank
> ... Pilate was
> that river I ran from leaving that woman, my mother,

standing over its brutal green meaning. (27)

The prevalence of adjectives such as "this" and "that," as in "that woman" or "this gushing river," seem to coerce the physical world into partisanship, a fitting relation since, as the title insists, "no language is neutral," the implication being that neither language nor landscape is impartial, noncommittal, or unbiased.

Yet the contiguity of woman with landscape goes beyond the narrator's sense of spurious ownership. There is a frequent conflation of the female body with river, beach and tree-line that seems odd in a poetry that consciously resists such patriarchal assumptions of gender stereotyping. The first poem in the book, for example, begins:

> this is you girl, this cut of road up
> blanchicheuse, this every turn a piece
> of blue and earth carrying on, beating, rock and
> ocean. (6)

Every subsequent stanza -- there are six -- begins with the phrase "this is you girl" and the comparisons that follow are highly lyrical and fairly conventional, from, "this sea breeze shaped forest of sand and lanky palm" (6) to, "this river boiling like a woman in she sleep / that smell of fresh thighs and warm sweat" (7). In the poem entitled "return" the sea is described as "swelling like a big belly woman" (15), and in an untitled poem, almond leaves on the beach are pictured "fat / as women" (22).

The lyrical yet apparently unquestioned comparison of the woman's body with a feminized construction of nature is, I would argue, less a case of romantic stereotyping than a measure of the narrator's homelessness in landscape as in

language. Disheartened, dispossessed, the narrator of "hard against the soul" looks for the one she calls "you girl" just as, in later poems she will look in vain for "Phyllis," "Jackie," and "Mammy Prater." Addressed as it is to a second person "you," the subject of "hard against the soul" seems to slip uneasily between the first and third person pronouns so that while we may suspect that the narrator is addressing herself as other (as child, as memory) we can never be entirely sure.

The problem of location -- of locating the subject in a landscape, no less than of repossessing a subjectivity "in shards" -- continues to be a concern throughout the book. It is as if, having once left the first home, the narrator can find no other but only places "like home" (30). Locatives such as "here" and "there" resonate throughout these poems, as do connectives such as "that" and "this." These words appear to take possession of the world through the prior claims of ownership that it is clear the disenfranchised narrator does not feel. In the relatively short poem "return I," for instance, the word "still" -- a word that anxiously tries to keep the world in place -- is repeated fourteen times between the opening sentence, in which the word stands in the place of the subject who has left, "so the street is still there, still melting with sun" (10), and the final lines in which landscape contracts inwards to reflect the faces of women and the interiority of history:

> so the road, that stretch of sand and
> pitch struggling up, glimpses sea, village, earth
> bare-footed hot, women worried, still the faces,
> masked in sweat and sweetness, still the eyes
> watery, ancient, still the hard, distinct, brittle smell of
> slavery. (10)

But, as we learn in "return II," right around the corner, "is not away" (15) and leaving is "only running away from something that breaks the / heart open and nowhere to live" (28).

Of course the narrator's anxiety of dis/location is never entirely satisfied by the words she uses to place herself temporally and spatially. In "Phyllis," the phrase "quite here" (11) is used instead of the more habitual and direct "here," and the final poem in the third section begins "in another place, not here" (34).[11] In "VIII" the poem begins "but here," and goes on to recall the past -- the narrator is examining artifacts in a museum -- in order to arrive at a lived and contradictory present when she sees, " the woman sitting at / the door black and historic saying to herself this is / only white history" (44). Like the woman who enters the museum and believes, mistakenly, that "at this spot, all I see is the past" (44), Brand's narrator crosses beaches, cities, seas, by foot, in subways, and on airplanes, to get to the "here" that is itself traversed by all three tenses at any one moment.

4.6 Into Line

> There is a curiously "civilizing" discourse in all this -- pulling the Black female body into line. Perhaps the great big mother appears in all our texts, bursting the seams and out of control in order to remind us.
> (*Bread* 48-49)

The narrator's anxiety of location, represented by her increasing physical displacement, is intensified by a temporal disconnection which makes access to the past piecemeal at best:

> When Liney reach here is up to the time I hear about.
> Why I always have to go back to that old woman who
> wasn't even from here but from another barracoon, I
> never understand but deeply as if something that
> have no end. (24)

The nostalgia she feels for her fore-mother Liney – who has left her a life "like a brown stone to see" (24) – is indissoluble and heavy, but it is this that precipitates the love poetry of the final section, as a narrative that "bursts the seams" of what Brand has called the "civilizing discourse," pulling the Black female body finally and splendidly out of line.

The "voice" the narrator hears in her ear, Liney's voice, is repeated in the numbered love poems of the fourth section, most notably in "IV":

> you can hardly hear my voice now, woman,
> but I heard you in my ear for many years to come
> the pink tongue of a great shell murmuring and
> yawning, muttering tea, wood, bread, she, blue,
> stroking these simple names of habit. (38)

Here the voice of the fore-mother is both erotic and comforting, filtering down to the narrator through the countless years when language had been repressed and the body disallowed.

In her essay "This Body for Itself" (*Bread* 25-49), Brand speaks of a similar experience while attending the First Caribbean Women Writers Conference. I quote this extract in full because it repeats the frequent trope, in Brand's poetry, of the "voice in the ear," a voice spoken by a woman and heard by a woman, a

voice that awakens the speaker to a new awareness of what is missing in language and landscape:[12]

> For several days I listen and listen, and then it is my turn and then it comes to me and then I know what I have not heard, what has not been said. Then I know what the eyes have not read passing over that earth and river and swamp and dust, more accurately, what the eyes demur, what is missing: the sexual body. (*Bread* 27)

Brand explicitly names this missing body as "the lesbian body confessing all the desire and fascination for itself" (*Bread* 46). In so doing she overturns the last bastion of power in a heterosexual, patriarchal world -- the male-defined, feminized sexual body.[13]

The love poems in the final section of *No Language is Neutral* provide an alternative to the absence of this "missing" body. As such, the love story is doubly inscribed as unspeakable, first because it *is* a love narrative, and second because there are no poems for this love, "only / triangles, scraps, prisons of purpled cloth" (39). In the context of "this love," the "map to coming home," a reference to the homecoming that has traditionally represented the heterosexual love narrative, is merely another obstacle in the "tough geography / of trenches, quarrels, placards, barricades" (40).

In consequence, the narrator of these love poems refuses to take up the position of spectatorship *vis-à-vis* the female body. As a female, as a lover, she is implicated in the poems she narrates, so that there is little or no distinction made between subject and object, context and content, and finally, between body and gaze. In this way Brand's narrator fractures her own and the reader's constructed unity by refusing to take up a position based on preposition: of / against / in /

beyond the text. Instead she refuses all such significations so that the writing subject is collapsed within the body of the text. The narrator makes clear that there is no "outside" to this language, the "inside" is always the fold of a pre-supposed outside and writing is constructed as a process of enfolding. Since there is no position possible for the writing subject to take that is beyond discourse, the binary as structural device is replaced in these poems by what I call the fold.

4.7 The Fold

> The lesbian *double entendre* has just dawned on some.
> (*Bread* 30)

I have borrowed the idea of the "fold" from Derrida's use of the image of the *pli*, most notably in *The Post Card*, from the Latin root *plicate* from which we get the verb *compliquer*, to complicate or to fold together. In Derrida's text *pli* implies both the folded paper containing a message (an envelope) and the message itself. Another writer who uses this structure to idiosyncratic ends is Gilles Deleuze. In *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Deleuze reads "the Baroque" through the figure of the fold as a history of art, science, lyric, philosophy and, more interestingly, as a mathematics of pleat and surface, drapery, fabric, architecture, costume, and the dermal surfaces of the body. In his foreword, Tom Conley includes the following in the category of things folded:

> architecture that bends upper and lower levels together while floating

> in the cosmos; novels that invaginate their narratives or develop infinite possibilities of serial form; philosophies that resolve Cartesian distinctions of mind and body through physical means grasped as foldings; styles and iconographies of painting that [...] lead the eye to confuse different orders of space and surface. (xi-xii)

I quote this extract at some length because it gives a sense of the play and by-play that this folded figure conceals, as well as some of the disciplines to which it may be applied. In his radical enterprise of *plier, déplier, replier,*[14] Deleuze offers a possible means of broaching the erotics of lesbian politics *via* Brand's poetics of passion and resistance.[15]

"To dream about a woman, even an old woman, is dangerous," declares Brand in her opening essay in *Bread Out of Stone*. She continues:

> to dream about a Black woman, even an old Black woman, is dangerous even in a Black dream, an old dream, a Black woman's dream, even in a dream where you are the dreamer. Even in a Black dream, where I, too, am a dreamer, a lesbian is suspect; a woman is suspect even to other women, especially if she dreams of women. (14)

Brand's construction of the dreamer, the dream, and its consequences, provides a model of the reading act and a contemporary example of *le pli,* or the fold as structural device. The images that proliferate in these love poems are of the passionate body folded in upon itself, upon the body of the other, the lover, and are at once excessive and inadequate: "It is not sufficient here to mark the skin's water or fold / the back soft, the neck secret, the lips purpled" (41). The insufficiency of what the lover has elsewhere called "the reflexes of your / flesh" (37) is redressed by the final line in which the body of the beloved is resurrected as plenitude, "her boundless black self rising, / honeying" (41).

Elsewhere in Brand, the fold is prefigured both visually and conceptually as anatomy, as hands arrested in the scene of the gesture (37), of a woman's tongue "so like a culture" (36), as well as all the spatial configurations of the desiring body: "I want to wrap myself around you here in this line" (36). Indeed the geometric iconography of the fold is apparent both in the ecstatic private body, "breasts to breast mute prose we arc a leaping" (40), and in the public posture of rebellion, "I saw your back arched / against this city we inhabit like guerillas" (46).

The collapse of the body positioned in terms of inside/outside metaphors *vis-à-vis* the text results in what I have earlier called an anxiety of location, a subjectivity constructed at the intersection of the hidden and the revealed. Poems VI through IX begin with locutionary words and phrases that appear to situate the subject: "listen" (42), "still I must say something here" (43), "but, here, at this spot" (44), and finally:

> look, I know you went searching on the beach
> for my body last night and maybe you will find it
> there, one day. (45)

Yet the body that seems, at first, to be *placed*, brought into the arena of confession, is in effect merely re-placed by these words. In being constrained to lead a discursive existence, in being obliged to be translated into words, the body, in the end, eludes the reader. The woman who finally finds her lover on the beach is eroded by the gerunds that metonymically displace her as subject:

> it will be like how we walked
> from Marazul to Boca Ciega climbing over the sand
> covering the road and after I spend three days

showing you mimosa running and you finally see it. (45)

The fold as discursive strategy also functions acoustically in Brand's text:

you can hardly hear my voice now, woman,
but I heard you in my ear for many years to come
the pink tongue of a great shell murmuring. (38)

The image of the ear as it is compared to the rim of a shell is a further instance of the furrow that is both history and body in this text, in much the same way that the women of Pointe Galeote whisper in their children's ears, "away! far from here!" (15). Brand's writing constructs the female body as a site of performance, whether of the gaze or of the voice, the body constructed by language, the writing body as contaminated by her position in language, since there is no *outside* of power, no pure place outside the desire of the text. What Derrida has called the "supplement" of the text can be neither read nor erased (*Writing and Difference* 278). This excess or overflow, the residue of the text, the *jouissance* of the writing act, cannot be finally named or represented. Only in our forgetting to name it, in our repression of the text, in our reading of the silences of the confessional, may we seek the effaced, dispersed, supplementary body in the places where meaning fails.

One of the places where, it seems, meaning "fails" in these poems, is in the figure of the old woman. When Brand asserts that "to dream about a woman, even an old woman, is dangerous" (*Bread* 14), she is not merely introducing a rhetorical device. The image of the old woman is resonant in *No Language is Neutral*, particularly in the love poems where she is introduced, initially, as an archetypal mother-lover:[16]

I had it in mind that I
would be an old woman with you. But perhaps I
always had it in mind simply to be an old woman,
darkening, somewhere with another old woman. (46)

Later in the poem, the old woman is recognized as an image of self, an image at once separate and self-referential:

I saw this woman once in another poem, sitting,
throwing water over her head on the rind of a country
beach as she turned toward her century. Seeing her
no part of me was comfortable with itself. I envied her,
so old and set aside, a certain habit washed from her
eyes. I must have recognized her. (47)

The effect of the self-referential gaze is problematized by the subject's refusal to participate in her own confinement in language, while simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of knowing the body other than textually:

Old woman, that was the fragment that I caught in
your eye, that was the look I fell in love with, the piece
of you that you kept, the piece of you left. (50)

The woman in this frame is continuous with the woman outside it, both gaze and are gazed upon, their glance an exchange of mirrors: "I have become myself. A woman who looks/ at a woman and says, here, I have found you,/ in this" (51).[17]

Or, to put it another way, the eye that looks and the eye that is seen, are identical:

Instead you sat and I
saw your look and pursued one eye until it came to
the end of itself and then I saw the other,
the blazing fragment. (50)

Because of this blurring of distinctions between the body of the viewer and the specular body, there is a similar conflation of lover with beloved. Predictably, the metaphor that functions to disengage them, is that of the tear:

> You ripped the world open for me
> ...
> I know since that an old woman, darkening,
> cuts herself away limb from limb, sucks herself white,
> running, skin torn and raw like a ball of bright light,
> flying into old woman. I only know now that my
> longing for this old woman was longing to leave the
> prisoned gaze of men. (48)

The "old woman" who is initially figured as refuge, "and she was a place to go, believe me, / against gales of masculinity" (47), is recognized finally as another "missing body," a fold of meaning upon the textual surface, hiding, "something missing like a wing, some / fragment of your real self" (49).

In this final love poem Brand distinguishes clearly between a lesbian erotics stereotypically constructed as narcissism, between those who "caress their sex in mirrors" (51), and pleasures given and received, moving like grace upon the waters, "the brow of a wing / touching the surf" (51). In this last image, the subject who has for so long been missing, the absent, evasive, erased subject of many locutions, is finally recognized for who she is, as self folded within self, as improvisatory body in a place called "here":

> so easily I saw my own body, that
> is, my eyes followed me to myself, touched myself
> as a place, another life, terra. They say this place
> does not exist, then, my tongue is mythic. I was here
> before. (51)[18]

4.8 Looking Back

> The eye is a curious thing: it is not passive, not merely a piece of physiology, practical and utilitarian; it is not just a hunk of living matter, gristle, tendon, blood. It sees.
>
> (*Bread* 169)

In her essay "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger," Audre Lorde makes explicit the connections for women of colour between self-hatred, anger and vision: "We cannot continue to evade each other on the deepest levels because we fear each other's angers, nor continue to believe that respect means never looking directly nor with openness into another Black woman's eyes" (153). Lorde's point is that in internalizing the hatred of a racist society, the Black woman cannot meet the needs of her sisters, let alone their gaze: "Why don't we meet each other's eyes? Do we expect betrayal in each other's gaze, or recognition?" (155). Yet the gaze that Lorde defines as a marker of self-recognition or recognition of the Other is neither innocent nor unselective.

Brand's essay, "Seeing," asserts that the eye "has citizenship and possessions," the eye has experience, knowledge, fancies, purpose and skills, and has "cut out territories " (Br*ead* 169) from a world of increasingly repressive specularities. In the opening poem of "no language is neutral," the narrator isolates history as the discipline that has "taught my eyes to / look for escape" (22), and it is not surprising when a little later she undergoes in symbolic form the

traditional punishment of those who have seen too much -- her eyes are burnt out against the "fer de lance's / sting" (22).

Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* eloquently writes of the destructive potential of the gaze when it is leveled at an uncivilized, because unrecognized, Other: "the glances of the Other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye [...] This 'look,' from -- so to speak -- the place of the Other, fixes us, not only in its violence, hostility and aggression, but in the ambivalence of its desire" (112).

Later in the century, in an essay on "The Oppositional Gaze" and Black female spectators, theorist bell hooks speculates about the "traumatic relationship to the gaze" that has informed Black spectatorship (115). For hooks, the "oppositional gaze" is a site of resistance, the place from which the repressed gaze of the disenfranchised can be unleashed, the critical space from which reality itself can be restructured. In attempting to answer the question "Is there a Black female gaze?" first posed by Jacqui Roach and Petal Felix in their essay wryly entitled "Black Looks" (1989), hooks suggests that it is the practice of "looking and looking back," that allows Black women to construct themselves not outside but within representation (131).[19]

Yet the oppositional gaze cannot be perceived in isolation from what has constructed it, the dual and apparently contradictory position of invisibility and "exoticism" to which the Black woman is relegated and by which she is recognized in the specular field of the white viewer. In an essay on race and identity in *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha asks: "What is the secret of

invisibleness that enables the woman migrant to look without being seen?" (47). What he refers to as the "elision of the eye" results in the viewer's inability to look without seeing and thereby imposing an inscription of "the sign of resemblance" (49) upon the subject viewed. In this transaction, the Black woman simultaneously sees without being seen, yet is seen to be dispossessed of the ability to return the glance, to look back. For Bhabha, this position destabilizes cultural difference insofar as it can be measured by and maintained in a visible object, an *image*: "The image is at once a metaphoric substitution, an illusion of presence, and by that same token a metonym, a sign of its absence and loss" (51). If this is true of the image, how much more so is it true of that simulacrum, that image of the image, the photograph?

In Brand's poem "Blues Spiritual for Mammy Prater," the photograph is the signifier of the absent body of Mammy Prater, the archetypal "old woman" of Brand's narrative -- an ex-slave, the notes tell us, who was 115 years old when she posed for this photograph:

> she waited for her century to turn
> she waited until she was one hundred and fifteen
> years old to take a photograph
> to take a photograph and to put those eyes in it. (17)

Mammy Prater has waited, "not always silently, not always patiently, / for this self portrait" (18), yet she has perfected the passive position, the posture of waiting:

> she knew that if she had the patience,
> to avoid killing a white man
> that I would see this photograph
> she waited until it suited her
> to take this photograph and to put those eyes in it. (17)

The "portrait" is doubly inscribed, once as photograph and once as writing, and the image by which we receive Mammy Prater is both serendipitous and carefully plotted. The narrator confides that she has come to the image through idly "turning the leaves of a book / noticing, her eyes" (19), in much the same way that we – as second readers – may confront her gaze as we turn the pages of this present book. Diana Brydon calls this moment a "self-conscious re-enactment of the scene of reading" (81), a meeting of the glance that seems deliberate, intended: "she knew that it would be me who would find / her will, her meticulous account, her eyes" (19). More than this, Mammy Prater has apparently waited out her century precisely in order to best showcase the depth and durability of her "black look," waiting:

> until the science of photography passed tin and
> talbotype for a surface sensitive enough
> to hold her eyes. (19)

What is the function of this profound, overdetermined, oppositional gaze and to whom is it addressed? Mammy Prater gazes at the viewer/reader from the fold of history and biology, from the binary of object and subject, from "in between" the pages and beyond the "blood-stained blind of race and sex" (27). Like the lover in "III" she is a woman "whose eyes came fresh" and whose hands "will not arrest / in the middle of gazing" (37). In the opening poem the narrator, addressing both herself and the other, exhorts "this is you girl, even though you never see it" (6), and Mammy Prater with her steadfast eyes addresses this and every other sideways glance, deflected gaze, and blank stare in the narrative. Her eyes address the daughter of Liney who admits, "sidelong looks are my specialty"

(26), and "every eye looking out of its black face" (15) on Pointe Galeote and beyond, losing their sight in "night's black pause" (40). Like the Claudia who writes *back* to Ernesto Cardenal in the *Epigrams,* Brand has constructed, in the figure of Mammy Prater, a woman who forgoes the backward glance of history for the simple pleasure of looking back in the present tense.

Yet despite the wide variety of questions that the photograph of Mammy Prater seems to address and the many possible spectators and readers who, because of the structure of this narrative become the objects of her gaze, the poem is quite specific as to who is literally intended as the receiver of "those eyes." It is the narrator who has been waiting, like Mammy Prater it may be inferred, "not always silently, not always patiently," for the return of a glance that until this moment has remained unanswered. In this poem a black woman looks at a black woman. In the absence of the male gaze or normative assumptions of "whiteness" the transaction remains outside the frame of patriarchal reference.[20]

In the essay "Seeing," in *Bread Out of Stone*, Brand, who is also a film maker,[21]writes about an argument she had with the camera man while filming a woman reading a love poem. I quote the extract in full despite its length because of how vividly it reveals the eye's agenda:

> In the shot Leleti is reading a poem to a woman out of the frame. She is angled off-camera left. You cannot see Leleti's eyes, but the woman the love poem is sent to can. I angle the shot this way and try to angle most of the film to include the possessing eyes, eyes which are beyond the eye that usually possesses. In this poem there are so many possessions beyond this one, so the body directly facing the camera would be capitulation to the eye that always possesses. The head of camera relays the message that he does not feel that the woman reading the lesbian poem is reading to him. No kidding, I relay to him. This is the eye that always looks and needs to be looked at. (171)

Through this anecdote Brand demonstrates the effect of the encroaching, colonizing, assuming male eye, the eye that takes itself as sole referent, the eye that "looks and needs to be looked at." In many ways the image of a woman reading love poems is a kind of *mise-en-abyme* for Brand's enterprise (not to say my own) and what she has to say about "the eye that always possesses" has direct relevance to her arrangement of the frame in "Blues Spiritual for Mammy Prater."

In another poem about an "old woman," included in "no language is neutral," Brand returns to her preoccupation with women and landscape but in this poem the glance of the woman and the intensity of her gaze is so powerful that it reverses the usual subject/object binary in that the landscape grows eyes, focuses itself, looks back:

> This time Liney done see vision in this green guava
> season, fly skinless and turn into river fish, dream
> sheself, praise god ... (25)

In this fantasy of her fore-mother, the narrator chooses to position Liney, like the woman to whom Leleti is reading, "angled off-camera left." She is the beloved whose presence transforms the natural world and whose glance angles the physical landscape. In her visionary flight she redeems the fold of history by transforming the backward glance -- the glance traditionally accorded to dowagers and bestowed upon monuments -- into a trope of exchange and return, a looking *back*.

[1] *In Rivers Have Sources, Trees Have Roots,* Brand writes the word Black with a capital "B" not merely to describe Black people's status, but to accentuate their cultural heritage and to emphasize a common heritage, "a cultural and personal identity proudly claimed by Black people" (iii). Since whites in this society do not claim their colour as a distinctive heritage I have chosen to indicate the word with a lower case "w," as "white."

[2] In her essay "This Body for Itself," included in *Bread Out of Stone,* Brand mocks the traditional division between writing and revolution, aligning herself with militant feminists for whom the personal is political:

> It is probably not even necessary to say 'poetry and politics' as if those words are distinct, but I've become so used to explaining and explaining their dependency on each other to Canadian reviewers and audiences. (25)

[3] Both *Winter Epigrams* and *Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defense of Claudia* were published in one volume by Wiliams-Wallace in 1983. It is the latter poem cycle that I discuss here, which I have abbreviated as *Epigrams.*

[4] In epigram 27, Claudia again mockingly takes up this passive position by parodying the language and form of a letter to an advice columnist, and in so doing deconstructs the bourgeois ideal of monogamy:

> Dear Ernesto,
> I have terrible problems convincing
> people that these are love poems.
> Apparently I am not allowed to love
> more than a single person at a time.
> Can I not love anyone but you?
> signed,
> 'Desperate.' (27)

[5] Like Martial, one of the earliest epigrammists, Brand uses the epigram to point out social injustices and hypocrisies, as these examples testify:

> You drink the best, yet serve us third rate wine,
> I'd rather sniff your cup than swill from mine.
>
> Martial, *The Epigrams.*

> so we spent hours and hours
> learning Marx,
> so we picketted embassies and stood
> at rallies,
> so it's been 13 years agitating
> for the liberation of Africa,
> so they still think I should be in charge
> of the refreshments.
>
> Brand, *Epigrams.*

[6] Brand's phrase recalls Marcellus's observation that, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (*Hamlet* I iv 90). In Shakespeare's play, as in Brand's epigram, the word "rotten" is the marker of political double-dealing and social hypocricy.

[7] The title "No Language is Neutral" is a quote from Derek Walcott's *Midsummer Lii.* As in *Epigrams,* Brand takes impetus from her resistance to and admiration for, another male poet. As Susan Gingell points out in her essay "Returning to Come Forward: Dionne Brand Confronts Derek Walcott" the debt to a literary mentor is always complex.

[8] According to the notes in italics at the beginning and end of these three poems, Phyllis Coard was imprisoned at Richmond Hill Prison in Grenada for her role in a coup, Jacqueline Creft was killed in 1983 during a coup in Grenada, and Mammy Prater is represented only by the photograph the narrator has of her when she was 115 years old.
[9] There is another poem by Adrienne Rich that I would like to quote in this context. "Frame," which, like the "Twenty One Love Poems" can be found in *The Fact of a Doorframe, Poems Selected and New, 1950-1984,* is the narrative of a young Black female student's violent arrest by police observed from "outside the frame" by the narrator:

> *what I am telling you*
> *is told by a white woman who they will say*
> *was never there. I say I am there* (Rich's emphasis).

Rich's concluding statement of non/involvement and her narrator's highly ambivalent position *vis-a-vis* the act she witnesses, is resonant for me because of my own necessarily compromised perspective (as a white woman) on Brand's poetics of resistance and love.
[10] Brand's most recent collection, *Land To Light On* (1997), extends and develops this concern with place and displacement. In one of the opening poems in this collection, Brand takes as her context a northern country in which, once again, language freezes at the root:

> Where is this. Your tongue, gone cold, gone
> heavy in this winter light. (14)

[11] This last phrase seems to have been the harbinger of another study of place and displacement, Brand's first novel published in 1996 is entitled *In another place, not here* (Toronto, Knopf Canada).
[12] At the same time I am aware of the intentional fallacy implicit in the assumption that a writer's theoretical essays provide a key to that writer's fictional or poetic writing. In the case of Dionne Brand however, I feel more justified in reading her essays alongside her poetry since she has been vocal in questioning the boundary between the personal and the political, the "theoretical" and the creative. However, my reading strategy is determinedly parallel rather than convergent. In reading *Bread Out of Stone* in tandem with the poems from *No Language is Neutral* I do not mean to imply that the former can "unlock" the meaning of the latter, but only that both explore narratives of love as part of a strategy to reveal and question the social structure.
[13] In a later essay, "Water more than Flour," Brand, quoting Barbara Smith, makes this point explicitly: "Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege; maintaining "straightness" is our last resort" (*Bread* 130). Yet predictably, it is a position that holds no temptation for Brand, "I am a woman, Black and lesbian," she declares in her opening essay, continuing, "the evidence of this is inescapable and interesting" (*Bread* 20).
[14] In other words, the business of "folding, unfolding, refolding" (137) which is the final clause with which Deleuze ends his treatise.
[15]Although I have explicated "the Baroque" through the works of two male theorists, the category also lends itself to a feminist rethinking of this aesthetic of incongruity, impurity, metamorphosis, and passion. A recent call for papers from the feminist journal *Tessera* takes up this question of women's relationship to the Baroque. Forthcoming, *Tessera* 24 (1998).

[16] In representing an "old woman" in the context of a love poem where she is at once object of desire and harbinger of the future, Brand radically transforms the idea of love as a privileged territory of the young. This eroticization of age is similar to what Dorothy Livesay performs in "The Unquiet Bed," a sequence of poems in *The Self Completing Tree*, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

[17] In his seminar "God and the *Jouissance* of The Woman. A Love Letter," Jacques Lacan reads "the woman," Bernini's St. Teresa of Avila, as a female orgasm constituted by the male gaze. The text is in this sense a scene, a theatre that em-bodies the spectacle of desire. Here the male viewer is in possession of the signifying organ, not the phallus but the eye, the scopic field. As for the woman, she does not have it. Seeing, the metaphor of the male gaze, is in this sense nothing but an acknowledgement of the position that she has nothing to see.

In a rhetoric that is arrogant, manipulative, by turns seductive and pejorative, Lacan, in the assumed position of the subject who is supposed to know, tells the woman what she knows: that she doesn't know / come / speak / see. The female, played by *jouissance*, the woman who is supplementary to the phallic funtion, comes without knowing it; like the mystics, her testimony is a double scandal. Lacan, in the position of Bernini's patrons, watches the female mystic while performing his own anxiety with regard to the *jouissance* of the woman.

I emphasize Lacan's positioning of the male gaze in this seminar as a contrast to Brand's female narrator in the final poems of this sequence.

[18] In *Bread Out of Stone*, Brand warns that such self-recognition is not without consequence in the context of successive departures and returns: "We learn that you cannot come upon yourself so suddenly, so roughly, so matter of factly. You cannot simply go to a place, to visit friends, to pick mangoes on your way to the beach and count on that being all. You cannot meet yourself without being shaken, taken apart" (54-55).

[19] Another wryly ironic title, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (eds. Hull, Scott, Smith) addresses the double marginality of Black women and texts by Black women writers.

[20] At the same time it must be acknowledged that women habitually look at women via the male gaze and that, according to Lorde's idea of internalization, the subject cannot necessarily escape the racist gaze simply because the viewer is Black. The women's exchange of glances in "Blues Spiritual for Mammy Prater" is, however, unmediated by the male viewer, in contrast to an exchange between Ben and the grandaughter of Liney in which the relationship is explicitly mediated through resemblance, and the memory of one woman is dependant – literally – on the eyes of her son:

> So is there I meet
> she in a recollection through Ben, son, now ninety,
> ex-saga boy and image, perhaps eyes of my mama,
> Liney daughter. I beg him to recall something of my
> mama, something of his mama. The ninety year old
> water of his eyes swell like the river he remember. (24)

[21] Brand works as a director and writer of documentary film. She has worked on *Older, Stronger, Wiser*, about older Black women in Canada, and *Sisters in the Struggle*, a documentary about contemporary Black women activists in Canada. *Long Time Comin'* looks at the art and politics of Faith Nolan and Grace Channer, and she has recently completed a film made together with Adrienne Rich.

Love Letters From an Unmade Bed: Dorothy Livesay's Poetics of Disquiet

5.1 Love Letters

Respice ad Finem
Livesay family motto[1]

If absence is the first premise of desire, then the love letter is the most perfect motive of its expression because it is the form of writing that transforms the beloved's absence into what Barthes has called "an ordeal of abandonment" (*A Lover's Discourse* 13) through an episode of language. Caught between the two locutions of presence and absence, the lover/writer addresses her beloved, absent to her as object, at the moment that s/he is most present to her as referent.

To speak of love is itself *a jouissance,* says Lacan (*Feminine Sexuality* 142), and the love letter addresses this absence of the absent body. Insofar as writing prolongs desire, all writing then is the writing of a love letter. For what is awaited is that plenitude, signaled by Lacan as jubilance. What is awaited is the festival of the other's presence. In order to make the other speak, in order that is, to make absence *signify*, the lover creates meaning out of absence. The presence of the beloved within the text is inscribed then as decoy, as the desire of the writer who fantasizes, by way of language, the plenitude of the Other.

In the following two chapters I propose to read three sets of "love letters," each written at the close of a romance and each offering up a different model of completion. The poem sequences are not strictly constructed as love letters and I use the term loosely to designate their trace element, that being the form of writing they approximate, in which the beloved's absence is rescued and redeemed by the very writing that announces this absence in the first place.

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle muses upon the way in which the lovesick take pleasure in talking, writing, or composing verses about the beloved, and concludes that it is because "all this recollection makes the object of their affection perceptible" (27). In a somewhat more recent text on the subject, Linda Kauffman, writing about the transformation of the Woman who Waits into the Woman who Writes, makes the point that the "love letter" is a consciously staged utterance, "addressed to the absent beloved; yet (paradoxically), it simultaneously dramatizes his silence, the heroine's alienation, and the metonymic displacement of desire" (*Discourses of Desire* 25).[2] In a similar vein, Mary Jacobus suggests

that it is in the moment of desire that the writer "most clearly installs herself in her writing" (*Women Writing* 17).

The three poem sequences[3] that I read in this chapter and the next -- Dorothy Livesay's "The Unquiet Bed," Kristjana Gunnars' *Carnival of Longing* and Nicole Markotic's "No Goodbye, Just:" -- each take as their starting point the end of a love affair, and each, in widely different ways, use writing to construct an ending where no such ending has necessarily taken place. These self-conscious accounts of the end of the affair release the lover/narrator from the burden of a love affair constructed in the past tense, since their poems function as love letters within which meaning is never depleted, never requited.

For what is the love letter but an unrequited text, the letter for which there is no adequate response but silence? The letters are another way of mourning by invoking absence through writing. Because the love letter is framed as apostrophe, an "I-love-you" that has no propriety of tense or tone, no appropriate reply and no surcease, that has no exchange value, is offered not as gift or theft, as debt or demand -- for all these reasons, the love letter waits for only one thing: an answer. Without a reply, the love letter replicates, and since there is no way to deplete our reading of it, the love letter is infinitely replicable. It is only in the presence of a reply that the love letter forecloses on its indefinite, indefinable promises.

5.2 The Critical Frame

In an article on the love poetry of Dorothy Livesay, Peter Stevens notes that her poetry in the late sixties was located, "deep in some underworld of darkness from which she struggles to be born anew" (38). Stevens is not alone among critics who persisted, at this time, in charting Livesay's release into, "a larger, more basic and elemental self" (38). Such language emphasizes the romantic stature of a poet's "new blossoming," as Fiona Sparrow writes, after her sojourn in a land of "myth and primitive strength" (29). In fact, critics are often surprisingly uncritical of the impetus behind the publication of *The Unquiet Bed* in 1967,[4] taking Livesay at her word in her essay "Song and Dance," when she maintains that the book was written after her return from Africa and under the influence of extreme emotion:

> The next year I fell deeply in love and poems "sprang from my loins" as it were. All the yearning to sing and dance revived again; but this time I did so with more confidence. This time I spoke out of immediate experience. I disguised nothing. The result was the book *The Unquiet Bed.* (47)

I am not suggesting, of course, that Livesay is being disingenuous in this account, or even inaccurate, but only pointing out that the intentional fallacy is a notoriously weak tool of critical exegesis.

Certain critics have taken it for granted that Livesay's exposure to "the oral culture of Africa" resulted in her finding a voice "to speak the language of freedom" (Sparrow 25).[5] Sparrow's assertion that "writing Africa out of her system resulted in her discovery of a new voice to celebrate her own freedom" (25) is typical of Colonialist assumptions as to the supposed pre-verbal, non-literary influence of "Africa," a continent of rhythm, "song and dance."[6] The essentialism

of this position is similar to that of the corresponding viewpoint -- that Livesay developed as a writer because she was in love. Prem Varma writes: "As we trace the development of her love poetry we can see how coyness gives way to frankness, and romantic love becomes more physical and sexual. Her poetry becomes not only franker, but more and more feminine in its approach" (17). The supposition that falling in love results in more sincere, more authentic poetic expression calls into question neo-Romantic constructions of writing, not to mention Varma's implicit essentializing of femininity.

In addition to expressing surprise that the sexually frank poems in *The Unquiet Bed* were written by a woman, critics have also registered a certain amount of shock that they were written by a "mature" woman. Desmond Pacey, for example, remarks that the title, *The Unquiet Bed,* is an apt one since the poems are written by a woman who refused to lie down, "or at least to lie down for any but amatory purposes" (142). "If one did not know her better," Pacey continues, "one would take this to be a book by a woman in her early twenties" (142). The assumption implicit in this statement, that only a young woman could be capable either of experiencing or writing these passionate poems, is characteristic of Livesay's reception by critics unwilling to consider her poems except in the context of biological and biographical considerations of age and gender.[7]

In approaching what critics agree is Livesay's departure from the more rigid formal structure of earlier poems into the uninhibited content of *The Unquiet Bed,*[8] by far the most interesting approach seems to be an analysis of the

dichotomy between "public" and "private" poetry in her *oeuvre*, thematic designations that correspond roughly to the forms of the documentary and the lyric.[9] Dennis Cooley's subtle distinction between Livesay's "radical poetry" and her lyric voice is helpful here. In *The Vernacular Muse* Cooley analyzes her pre-1930's poetry, contrasting the narrative voice in these poems with the more radical or socially committed poems written after her political conversion to Socialism.

Cooley analyzes "Green Rain," for example, an early poem in which the poet-narrator takes the lyric stance in a post-Romantic construction of the first-person narrative position. This is a voice that talks to itself, a "recollecting, assessing I" that serves as the measure of all things (*The Vernacular Muse* 230). The poem achieves sincerity by pretending that the enunciating "I" is identical with the enunciated "I," that the poet who wrote the poem and the persona who speaks it are the same. As in Elizabeth Smart's use of the ontological verb construction in *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, Livesay's use of "I am" in these early poems is a mark of sincere and authentic feeling.

After Livesay's political conversion in the thirties, Cooley argues, she loses faith in the singular coherence of the subject and begins to doubt the unquestioned alignment of words and their meaning. The romantic lyric becomes inadequate for her purposes because it would have the reader believe that truth precedes writing and is resistant to change. Her political poetry discovers an "I" of collective awareness, and a speaking subject who seems to recognize that truth follows from writing and is constructed by it, that the world is not received but

produced in discourse. In the context of this analysis of Livesay's first person narrative position, I would argue a further change in her poetry of the late sixties, a poetry that for the first time takes as its subject the form and function of passion, and which combines the lyrical quality of her early poetry with the social commentary of her political writing. Poetry, moreover, in which the first person, singular pronoun is used throughout but is subtly displaced to allow the reader to witness the dissolution of subjectivity that is characteristic of the lover.

Critical opinion is divided as to what has created this effect of displacement in the love poetry of *The Unquiet Bed*. Ed Jewinski, for example, sees a progression of affect, arguing that "each poem represents a series of deferrals of self thereby deflecting the speaker" (139). Through her subordination to an abstract ideal of love, the speaker prevents herself from finding the fulfillment she longs for. Other critics have commented upon the newly fluid form that Livesay has chosen to use in these poems.[10] The mature love poems of *The Unquiet Bed* are largely presented as free verse (rather than in stanzaic form) in which the structure is further opened.

In an essay on Livesay's "houses," Susan Zimmerman demonstrates how women, in Livesay's poetry, are "housed" or enclosed (32).[11] Cooley points out that in the middle love poems (pre-1967, presumably), Livesay moves her female lovers out into "a world of ferocious light and wind, where they act more confidently, and where they connect intensely with their lovers, with the wind sweeping upon them and within them" (*The Vernacular Muse* 107). The poems, most particularly in the third section of *The Unquiet Bed*,[12] all seem to take place

within the confines of a narrow bed, the bed in which the lovers sleep, make love, and in which, finally, the narrator convalesces and shakily rises after a poem entitled "The Operation." In contrast to this insistence on physical confinement -- insofar as a bed confines -- the poems evidence a new formal openness at the same time that their (for the most part) short lines and compressed size seem to replicate the narrowness of the lover's placement in their amorous and "unquiet" bed.

While these poems still seem to rely on a singular voice located in a privileged present, while they lay claim to the epiphanic and transformative moment of passion which would seem to locate their Romantic antecedents, they also present these sentiments in a newly fluid form. Flexible phrasing, irregular lines, and phonic density, break with the rigidity and self-enclosure of her earlier poems. A "snapped off syntax,"[13] and the use of the line as a breath unit, as well as a new reliance, for Livesay, on typography as a guide to speech, seems to herald the beginning of a more personal vulnerability. The opening of space within lines and the partial release of the justified left margin creates a flexible form for the poems as well as a breathlessness in their vocalization. Indeed, many critics have pointed out the "orality" of this writing, and Livesay herself has made frequent connections with the rhythms of song and dance. In what follows, I intend to read these poems as love letters to an absent beloved in which the lover produces images, disorders syntax, and discovers a means of expressing her mourning, not only for the end of the love affair, but for the erasure of language within representation.

5.3 The Unquiet Bed

In the introduction to the sequence of poems "The Unquiet Bed: Fire and Frost" collected in her volume of selected poems, *The Self-Completing Tree,* Dorothy Livesay records that these poems were written on her return from Africa and were "fired by an intense love affair with a younger man" (115). "Behind the passion," she continues, "there is a growing sense of the polarities that exist between a man's nature and a woman's." In framing the subject of her poems in this way, Livesay foregrounds certain preoccupations for her reader. Words like "fire" and "passion" signal the intensity of feeling that has engendered the writing, while binaries like age and youth, male and female, seem designed to impose order on passionate extremity.

Most evident is the emphasis that this has been an affair of unequals -- a young man with an older woman -- although it is uncertain at this point who has more power. Livesay goes on to comment:

> Culture versus nature is what an earlier poem, "Bartok and the Geranium," is all about. Poems may or may not follow classical patterns -- they explode out of every day experience. (115)

More interesting than Livesay's instructions on how to read the earlier poem or the present one is the reader's uncertainty as to who is giving this information. If the poems that follow are constructed *via* a persona called the narrator, then who is peering over the shoulder of the narrator and what is the reader to make of her directions for reading pleasure? The epigraph/information panel is inserted on a

separate page between the title page and the beginning of the poem sequence.[14] As such, it exists both inside and outside the frame of the poems, occupying an indeterminate space that has important consequences for understanding the narrator/writer.

In these poems, it would seem that not only is the subject not herself, she is also not the writer. When reading Livesay's explanatory epigraph followed by her poem sequence, it seems apparent that the place of the writer is a parenthetical space. She is the bracketed subject occupying a phenomenological arena that signifies only insofar as it expresses the contingencies of her usurped position.[15] The writing-lover is in all things plural. The use of the first person subject as an interrogation of the first person object is another way of constructing the triangle within which the love relation unfolds. The woman in this frame (narrator) is continuous with the woman outside it (writer): both gaze and are gazed upon, their glance an exchange of mirrors. It is not so much a case of the lover saying "I am not myself," as "I am both myself and the other." As writer and narrator, the speaking subject of these poems enters into a complicity with the reader where it is the beloved who is *de trop*.

Since Livesay-the-writer has taken such pains to speak over the shoulder of Livesay-the-narrator, the reader should take care to mark her words. What she seems to want the reader to notice, from the first sentence, is that these are the poems of an older woman:

> My breasts are withered gourds
> my skin all over stiffens
> shrinks -- the pubic hair

bristles to an itch (125)

Yet unlike Dionne Brand's old women, for whom age itself is transformative, Livesay's narrator requires the power of "his" love in order for her to be transformed, "from scarecrow into girl again" (125).

In a title poem that seems to owe much to the rhyme schemes of Emily Dickinson,[16] the narrator extends the cliché that love is blind by asserting that it is only true love that reveals beyond what is "seen":

> The woman I am
> is not what you see
> I'm not just bones
> and crockery (117)

In the final lines of this poem, "move over love / make room for me," Livesay's narrator asserts her right to be loved, yet it is a right that is always carefully undercut by mockery and a return to the dilemmas of age, as in "Because We Want Each Other" :

> But since we can't go back
> nor I be twenty-two again, with you
> put me on ice, and then
> at century's end
> set me on fire! (142)

For Livesay's narrator, love is transformative and euphoric, capable of moving the "unearthly" spheres and causing "the whole body" to flower (131). In this scheme the seat of love is "the unquiet bed" and the couple seldom move far from what Donne in another century has named "this bed my centre."[17] The first poem, "At Dawn," opens with a stanza that connects bed with body, and it is a pairing that the narrator rarely varies:

> The going

and the coming of our love
holds me
in bed unable
to move over from
your folded bones (116)

Later, in "Moving Out," the lover confesses, "without the body of your house / I'd have no home" (129), and the final poems find her rising from a sick bed after an unspecified operation.

Livesay's love poetry is centred on the sexual act, going so far as to define "the hard core of love" as "only muscle, thrust / to an intensity / of lust" (137).[18] Yet the images that accumulate in this sequence are often highly conventional, romanticized visions of love as fateful ("But long before / our bodies met / the bargain was / established, set" 118), transcendent, and "part of some mystery" (124). The narrator confesses, "*I am the quivering needle to your north*" (120 Livesay's emphasis), drawing heavily on the Metaphysical poets for inspiration. In "Four Songs," love is constructed as a fire that attracts both moth and murderer (118), and, as may be expected, images of frost and fire proliferate throughout the sequence. In the third song the lover lies under the knife, an image that will be repeated in the virtuosity of "The Operation." Here the body is "blunt":

needing the knife
the forked light
ning of tongues

your blow
eased me so
I lay quiet
longer (119)

It is possible to read these "Songs" as an extended masochistic fantasy of submission. The image of the knife, for example, is repeated in a poem like "I Sought to Cut You From Me," where the lover tries to slice herself from the presence of the beloved with imagery that is similarly violent:

> I sought with scalpel, cunningly
> to amputate where love had set its seal:
> you hold to life in darkness –
> bright wound that will not heal. (143)

While this stanza appears to represent a fairly conventional construction of love as wound/the lover as wounded, the "you" that is addressed is ambiguous, in turn casting doubt on the referent of the "bright wound that will not heal."

The question is, whose body is at stake here? Whose is the body from which the Other has been torn and upon which the wound has formed? Although the narrator wields the knife it is not clear in this final stanza whether she is determined to cut herself or the Other, and considerably less clear, therefore, who is wounded. The problem of where love has "set its seal" again begs the question of reference. The image implied seems to be of two bodies torn apart so that the wound is located at the ragged edges of one body torn from another. The wound does not so much separate as seal the edges together, as it does again at the end of "Now it is Done":

> There is between us
> only this
> astonishing surprise
> secret and sealed:
> one body and one bliss
> together healed (146)

Similarly, it is too easy to misread the "Songs" as a woman's submission to the power and violence of love without taking into account the social context of patriarchy announced in the first lines:

> People will say
> I did it for delight
> you – for compassion (*Song i* 118)

In the punitive context of what "people will say," the love affair between a mature woman and a younger man is already encoded as pitiful on her side, patronizing on his. As such, Livesay's narrator performs her submission to love (if not to the man in question) as perverse resistance. The lover is hungry and thirsty for the body of her beloved, she longs for "cool / cool water / the gesture of your hands' / white fountains" (*Song iii* 119), yet, ironically, it is only his words that can satisfy:

> I drink now
> no fiery stuff
> burning the mouth
> I drink the liquid flow
> of words and taste
> song in the mouth (*Song iv* 119)

Yet it is equally possible that the "liquid flow / of words" referred to here are the narrator's own, that it is her love poetry that slakes desire, and that the body of the lover is merely the conduit for her words in the "Songs," and in the collection as a whole.

5.4 Be Woman

In her book on Dorothy Livesay, *Poetics of Desire,* Nadine McInnis questions what she calls the "hermeneutic intimidation" of Livesay's mid-life love poems by male critics who fail to question cultural assumptions about female sexuality.[19] Such criticism, in her reading, resists images of the writing/speaking narrator who situates herself ambiguously in the poem, occupying as she does the positions both of lover and of writer. One such poem is "The Touching," written in three parts. The poem begins:

> Caress me
> shelter me now
> from the shiver
> of dawn
> 'the coldest hour'
>
> pierce me again
> gently
> so the penis completing
> me
> rests in the opening
> throbs
> and its steady pulse
> down there
> is my second heart
> beating (123)

Desmond Pacey reads this poem as one in which Livesay "harps again on women's desire and the fulfillment that only sexual union can give" (25), while Lee Briscoe Thompson cites the poem as an example of "radiant joy" (97). Such readings erase the writing subject from the equation of lover and beloved and in so doing fail to do justice to Livesay's poetry.

The figure of one body finding completion in the other is not an unusual one in these poems. Frequently the narrator mistakes her hand for his or, as in

"Mistakenly," feels his heartbeat at her wrist bone (132). In "The Cave," his dream awakes her (120), and in "The Search for Wholes," she compares their two bodies to halves of the same fruit (133). In "Aubade," the lover is "a stranger who's at home / inside my eyes" (131), and the title and opening line of "You are my mirror" repeats the conceit of body-sharing that appears to be integral to the experience of love for Livesay's narrator. Also integral is the extended metaphor of Siamese twins in part four of "The Notations of Love":

> our minds are twins
> they circle and unite
> my left arm is your right arm
> bound even in flight (127)

Yet this poem goes on, in part five, to imagine a more fundamental completion, and one that has direct relevance to "The Touching." I quote part five of "The Notations of Love" in full:

> My legs stretched two ways disparate
> until you came
> and joined them
> (lying down between)
> now, even when we separate
> my legs coil close
> and feet unite:
> they form a pedestal
> whereon I turn, in sleep
> circling, serene--
> no longer desperate (127-8)

The idea of a woman believing herself to be completed by the penis/phallus is an uneasy one for contemporary feminists, and the image of the pedestal is similarly disturbing since it so patently evokes the angel/whore binary. Yet this is not a poem that easily yields its complexities. In "The Notations of Love," Livesay's

narrator reverses the patriarchal order by playing creator to her lover whose sole confession to her is, *"I was naked / and you clothed / me"* (128 Livesay's emphasis). She, in turn, is unclothed by him, "undressed to the bone" (126), yet able, in the final lines, to turn her naked déshabille into a position of strength:

> but day or night, I
> am undressed
>
> dance
> differently (128)

The word "dance" in these poems, as in Livesay's entire *oeuvre*, is highly overdetermined, and may be glossed in this case, as the act of writing by which the lover-narrator repudiates the opening lines of this poem, "You left me nothing, when / you bared me to the light" (126).

Indeed, in the stanza that follows, the narrator presents the binaries of nothing / something, word / body by which the female subject is judged and found wanting in the context of a Freudian-based logocentrism where what a woman wants is merely an admission that she is wanting, the subject of lack:

> you left me nothing, yet
> softly I melted down
> into the earthy green
> grass grew between my thighs
>
> and when a flower shot
> out of my unclenched teeth
> you left me nothing but
> a tongue to say it with (126)

These opening stanzas may, in turn, be read as an admission of feminine weakness and passivity *via* such words as "nothing," "softly," "melted," and "unclenched." Yet what is lost in this reading is the acknowledgment that the

narrator is neither naked nor defenseless since she is in possession of words and "a tongue to say it with." Having opened her poem with a declaration of loss, the narrator goes on to prove this statement false by producing a poem in six parts by which to render love as "notation," and something from that "nothing."

To return to "The Touching," I find there is a similar reversal at work. The poem that begins with a highly suspect declaration of sexual fulfillment through the loss of identity ("the penis completing / me") concludes by repeating this trope with a different emphasis:

> each time
> I drown
> in your identity
> I am not I
> but root
> shell
> fire
> each time you come
> I tear through the womb's room
> give birth
> and yet alone
> deep in the dark
> earth
> I am the one wrestling
> the element re-born (124)

The narrator frequently foregrounds the act of penetration as the prelude to a birth,[20] and in this poem the dissolution of identity gives way to a birthing of the self.

Ironically, in a poem that declares the "drowning" of identity, the first person pronoun is repeated almost obsessively, at once destabilizing the "I" that speaks and the "I" that declares herself "not I." The collapse of identity in this poem results in a curiously evasive subject, a tentative subjectivity constructed at

the intersection of the hidden and the revealed. Such a confluence is perhaps the result of a dual impetus in these love poems: the need to surrender to a grand passion subverted by the equally powerful need to narrate this passion from the position of a coherent, consistent speaking/writing subject.

A similar predicament occurs in a poem that has received much misguided critical attention, "The Taming." The poem is an account of a woman's submission to her male lover, along the lines of Petruchio's dominance over Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*. I quote the poem in its entirety:

> The Taming
>
> Be woman. You did say me, be
> woman. I did not know
> the measure of the words
>
> until a black man
> as I prepared him chicken
> made me listen:
> --No, dammit.
> Not so much salt.
> Do what I say, woman:
> just that
> and nothing more.
>
> Be woman. I did not know
> the measure of the words
> until that night
> when you denied me darkness,
> even the right
> to turn in my own light.
>
> Do as I say, I heard you faintly
> over me fainting:
> be woman. (121)

In his essay on Livesay's love poetry, Peter Stevens's interpretation of "The Taming" is both essentialist and perverse. He suggests that the sexual

experience allows the woman to "face her essential self, her womanhood with both its submissive qualities and its strength" (34). Yet, as Nadine McInnis points out, the poem clearly links domestic service with sexual service since both demand a woman's silence and submission (69). The opening command "Be woman," is repeated four times, each time as a reminder that gender is at once determined by anatomy and is a requirement for "correct" social interaction. One not only "becomes a woman,"[21] but it becomes one to be womanly. And "being womanly" refers to an abstract and, one would assume, highly diverse range of behaviors that in this case extends from making chicken to making love.

The word woman in this poem, "the measure of the word," is obliquely situated as biological category and social construction and, as such, uniquely questions the essentialist enterprise. For the predominantly male critics who seem to want to constrain Livesay's poetics by defining her as "the original earth-mother of modern Canadian poetry" (Marshall 51), the word reiterates the "womanly" functions of cooking, fainting, obeying orders, and making love. Yet Livesay's placement of the word and the pressure she exerts upon it in the course of the poem seems to resist this framework.

The colon after "woman" in the second stanza questions that this is indeed a designation of "just that / and nothing more," and the phrase "be woman" always exists under the erasure of implied quotation marks. It is what is said about her, what she – the narrator – is called, rather than what she calls herself. As such, the word as it is (over)used by the narrator undercuts its status as essence, or what Diana Fuss has called essence as privileged signifier.[22] In

addition, the word exists to mark the binaries of old woman and young man (who knows women enough to tell her how to be one), and of white woman and Black man and the cultural assumptions about women that construct their conversation.

Since there is no woman in this poem, apart that is from the injunction to "be" one, the chicken, prepared and salted, stands in for the body of the nearly-woman. Like the "tamed" speaker, the chicken has been domesticated and is here presented for consumption. Yet the body that seems, however totemically, to be brought into the arena of confession is, in effect merely replaced by a word. In being constrained to lead a discursive existence, in being obliged to be translated into language, the woman, once again eludes us.[23]

Livesay's reversal of essentialist categories in her failure to represent "the woman" despite every appearance of doing so, is no less accomplished when it comes to her representation of "the man." In "When I Got Home," for instance, the body of the male lover is metonymically replaced by a variety of objects that partially and parenthetically displace him:

When I Got Home

When I got home
there was a boot on my table--
under the chair
I found a sock suspended--
flung on the floor
        a man's jacket--
trousers leaped
        from the china cupboard

When I got home
I had no private ground:
the clothes whirred together
and you were in them
whirling me round (138)

The metaphor of bodiless clothing whirling in space is a menacing one, particularly when taken in conjunction with the opening image of a boot on the table. The image recalls the fascist "boot in the face" of Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy," as well as the chicken-for-woman metonym of "The Taming."

The whirl of socks, man's jacket, and trousers leaping from the china cupboard -- privileged place of "fragile" femininity -- stands for "the man," the lover whom she has erased in retaliation for his encroaching and colonizing presence. In contrast to the narrative of "A Book of Charms,"[24] where the female lover reads the woman's body between "the leaves / love's book," the female narrator in "When I Got Home" reads the detritus of the sexual act -- the shed clothes -- as subliminal evidence of his defection from the scene.

5.5 The Male Muse

In "Towards a Love Poem" first published in her last collection *Feeling the Worlds* (1984),[25] Livesay's narrator, addressing an unnamed lover/reader, begins, "Because you elected to know me / after reading my poems," a phrase that resonates through her love poetry where reading and being read is invariably experienced as a deeply erotic pact between writer/lover and reader. In "The Severance, Being Willed," the end of the love affair is constructed *via* a pre-existing grammatical structure that has been "read" and recognized by both lovers:

the sentences we found

created their own structures
out of bliss (147)

And, in a slightly earlier poem, "Twice, Twice I Let You Go," the metaphor of the sentence expresses the lover's resistance to this same ending:

For you returned each time
more longing than the last
and sealed my eyes
and fevered my lids down
with burning sentences (145)

The image of the female lover as writer, exposing her body/text to her male lover/reader is an inversion of a long tradition of love poetry where the male poet fantasizes his lover as silent muse and passive inspiration. In "The Male Muse," a poem about the creativity generated in the wake of a love affair, this structure is emphatically reversed:

The Male Muse

Thank god I waited till you came!
How many false purveyors of the truth
of poetry
knocked at my door
declared the holy name

But you said nothing:
acted, only
demanded entrance
at the side door
of love

Now
sonnets brush through the cracks of the floor
music fans our fire (130)

In this poem, although the "you" is constructed as a man of action rather than words, he is positioned as silent muse and inspiration, a designation traditionally reserved for the passive female-as-object. But the poem does not only pay homage to the lover whose presence has engendered "the truth / of poetry," it also slyly alludes to those male poets who have passed on "the holy name" to the narrator. The opening sentence borrows its immediacy and devout tone from the metaphysical poets, notably John Donne, while the lover's demanding entrance "at the side door / of love" is an oblique allusion to Crazy Jane's admonition that "love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement" in W.B. Yeats's "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop."[26] The male muse referred to in the title is not merely the lover but an entire tradition of writers of love poetry whose "sonnets brush through the cracks of the floor" whenever the female narrator sits down to write.

In an even more compelling repetition of the problem, the poem "This Page My Book" writes the male body as erotic text while at the same time defending the narrator from the encroachment of his words. The poem is a fascinating enactment of spatial erotics in part because the female-as-object / male-as-subject positions are reversed, but also because Livesay uses the page as a performative space in which the right hand margin is alternately defended and defeated. The poem begins:

> My life is on the right
> track! I cry
> to the margins pushing me over and over
> squeezing me out–
> In the margins are all the notations
> scribbled

sniffs of sun, sand
ribs of your bony structure
strands of your colourless hair
these beckon curl and wind
words to the edge of the page
fly out all over
spill
from enchanted mouths
words, your words
appear on the magic slate
my body rubs them out
and I try again
to defend the right hand
side
of the paper
to leave myself room for breathing (136)

The combination of the ragged right hand margin, the use of space as punctuation, the indentation of phrases, and the foregrounding of single words, all make this poem appear much more fluid and less self-contained than other more conventional, stanzaic poems in the collection.

In "This Page my Book," on the page she has at last claimed for her own, the narrator flexes her words, resisting the "right / track," or the margins that seem to squeeze her out. And in this construction, it is the beloved who is confined to marginalia, the male body that is "scribbled" as notation and whose words are erased from the magic slate by the narrator's defensive body. The binary thus established between masculine words and the female body is not, in itself, unexpected. More radical is the narrator's vigorous defense of "the right hand / side / of the paper," a maneuver that necessitates the silencing of his words with her body.

Yet in the poem, "The Record of All Our Nights," Livesay's narrator realizes that "no bleach can take from linen / what the body wrote" (137), a conclusion that is vividly applied to the last lines of "This Page my Book:"

> Try to compete with wind?
> How?
> Your avalanche of talk
> rains
> stains me over again
> and the margins are taken over
> invaded
> by this sweet
> hot sweat
> the notations of love (136)

The conjunction of body with page is buried by the lover's "avalanche of talk" which is in turn compared to rain, and the "hot sweat" of their love-making.

It is interesting that one of the poems that closes the section entitled "The Unquiet Bed" in *The Self-Completing Tree*, the collection that Livesay confesses she would most like to be remembered by (3), resurrects these issues of body / breath, page / inscription. "The Operation" is written in four parts and is, in many ways, Livesay's strongest statement about the ambiguity of love and its misalliances. In this poem, the surgeon and the lover are both implicated in a patriarchal order where healing may be read as another way of ensuring that the woman / patient conforms to a socially accepted construction of health. That this ideal may negate the experience of love -- expressed in this poem as sickness -- is a question the poem leaves unanswered.

Part one is an account of an unspecified operation that has been performed on the narrator, the "victim" who is "grateful to be saved" by a God-

doctor engaged in creating "from bone and flesh / a new woman" (148). The poem opens with the narrator gasping audibly for breath, trying to make her own inscription -- not on the body, but upon the blank wall that threatens to obliterate her consciousness:

> And I too
> after the blaze of being alive
> faced the wall
> over which breath must be thrown
>
> faced the wall
> scratched by the graffiti of trying
> and made there
> my trembling mark (148)

The poem that follows, like Plath's "Tulips," is an attempt at facing the wall, of making her "trembling mark" upon the "silent white precision" that stands for the surgeon's threatening uniform as well as for the even more dire threat of being obliterated by a medical and patriarchal order that refuses to recognize the particularities of the woman's body.

The surgeon is an ominous figure not least because he is silent, often unrecognizable, and identified with the lover, "the needle shot into my arm / and I was his" (148). Between the woman who calls herself a "victim" and her doctor there exists "that intimate flashing bond" that dissolves when he "pronounces health" (149) and she is free to walk out of his office still fighting for breath:

> outside pale
> the autumn smog the foul
> snarl of commuting cars
> the pavement's glare:
> I have to breathe deep here
> to be alive again (149)

The indrawn breath in the space between "deep" and "here" is a function of being "outside," literally outside in that she has left the doctor's office, but also outside the noise and smog of the scene she has -- ironically -- entered, and outside, for the brief respite of these lines, considerations of life and death, health and sickness.

Part two begins by retrieving her from this "outside" position in an image that realigns doctor with lover, and patient with breathless woman:

> You pulled me back
> into life
> your very penis forging
> pulling
> me back
> refrain refrain
> *love me again*
> and when once
> was all I gasped for
> (still in pain)
> you demanded more:
> *love me again!* (149)

In her address to the lover, the narrator's habitual "gasping for air" (149) is explained first by pain then by passion as he hovers over her like a "lord," alternately cutting her open again and healing her with "gentle breath and tongue" (150).

The God-doctor has become a Christ-like lover taking her pain into his side, yet in the third section, love itself is figured as sickness:

> (a kind of disease between us
> love was
> indulged in as excuse
> for going to bed
> we transmitted kisses
> and I caught between my thighs

the antibody) (150)

The parenthetical construction of love as disease and antidote is further problematized in the next lines in which the narrator watches from "inside" as the lover walks down the street:

> From my convalescent window
> I see you cured
> jay-walking on robson street
> a well man
> free of opposites (150)

From behind the window -- privileged place of all waiting women from Penelope to Marianne -- she watches him "cured" and walking, moreover, against the traffic. Unlike her, he is not only a "well man," but a man who can disobey the law, convention, even the flow of traffic and the dictates of the right hand margin, while she who can free herself neither from opposites nor opposition must remain behind the "distorted / mirrors" of the window pane (151) until she decides to complete the operation by tearing herself apart, "into four quarters" (151) and scattering the pieces.

This last resolution is not an uncreative one. In the process of scattering herself she learns to contain her adoration of "him" and extend the boundaries of her own territory. While the last sight of him is apparently the vision of a vigorous man, cured and relaxed, her poetic containment of this sight through indentation and parentheses allows this image to be read differently:

> (green Christmas and your lean body
> lounging along the shore
> your lunging arms
> flung against boulders) (151)

The narrator, on the other hand, finds herself:

> arching up stretching out daily
> dazedly
> into uncoiling
> animal sun–
> another kingdom (151)

Once again the space between words is indicative of deep breaths being drawn, as opposed to the breathlessness and "gasping" of earlier sections, while verbals such as "arching up," "stretching out," and "uncoiling" connote a new sense of extension and pliancy in space.

By the fourth and final section, the narrator has resolved to live neither by the oppression of the "inside" nor through the idealized "outside," but on the threshold of both. "Until I'd found a doorway / I could stand in," she confides, "I did not know how shrunk / I had become" (151). In the final poem of "The Unquiet Bed" entitled "The Step Beyond," Livesay's narrator leaves her sewing "in a confined room" (152) and reaches out for a "luminous" doorway where she is eventually able to stand "unswaying" (152). Similarly, the fourth section of "The Operation" ends with a resolution to confront the damaging identifications with "the *he*, the *you*" in order to find a measure of the self (151). The final elegiac lines express the vertical aspirations of the woman for whom the horizontal positions of patient or lover are neither relevant nor acceptable:

> O let me grow
> and push
> upright!
> ever aware of height
> and the cry
> to reach a dazzled strangeness
> sun-pierced sky (151)

5.6 Signature: How to End a Love Letter

Because desire is not prior to patriarchal law but constructed by it, sexuality must be seen as a transfer point for relations of power in which the incitement to discourse is a major strategy in the production of knowledge. This is represented, in Livesay's love poetry, by the position of the narrator who reveals herself to the reader through the confessional mode. In this construction of the first person, the "I" is never fully representable, and so a misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) invariably occurs since the amorous discourse necessitates a transgression of the subject's boundaries.

Livesay's narrator appears to "speak" clearly and distinctly to the reader without undue artifice or ingenuity, of her passionate mid-life love affair. Yet the ambiguities and shifts that her "I" undergoes in the process of the narrative reveals her desire to be present in the present tense as well as giving evidence of a contradictory need to reconstruct herself in retrospect. It is open to question whether the lover's discourse, located as it is somewhere between memory and desire, can be constructed in the present tense at all. Yet within the confessional tradition, Livesay's narrator constructs herself as a literate and sexual subject, while her body is the site of an unmediated articulation of eroticism uneasily represented -- and frequently misread by critics -- through the confluence of sexual and textual metaphors.

Through a conflation of the structures of body and confession, Livesay's narrator produces the "truth" her reader requires. "The woman I am," she confesses, "is not what you see" (117), but her contradictory efforts to sign, re-assign and resign this woman mask her effort to recuperate an originary language in which love may be spoken or declared. The lover, in her desire to be loved, opens her body to the beloved, reads him as the reader reads the text. In this trope the body/text requires the response of confession, both as a means of closure and an incitement to dis-closure.

As Foucault has made clear in *The History of Sexuality* (Volume One) sexuality is the privileged theme of confession. As such, the eroticized body is expressed as the fundamental secret to be brought into discourse painstakingly and through the production of truth as a system of knowledge (56). The ritual of confession is a figure of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of discourse, and in which the truth is proven by the resistances it overcomes in order to be articulated. Livesay's poems in "The Unquiet Bed" conform to this model of confession since in them sexuality is figured as a heterogeneous site, a history of the instances and transformations of the discursive production of passion and knowledge, not least of which is the internal monologue of the confessing subject located neither inside nor outside the text, but implicated in its structure as fold.

What is this fold finally, but the locus of the lover, indistinguishable from content and context, neither within nor without the text, both subject of and subject to a discourse that simultaneously precedes and preempts her? She is

the confessing subject who forces us -- as readers, as interlocutors in the presence of the confessional -- to acknowledge the value we have assigned to resistance, the passion and resentment with which we insist on our own repression. For in implicating herself both as lover and as writer, Livesay's narrator surprises her reader with the signature of the writing subject in possession of a discursively based subjectivity and a textually mediated, eroticized body.

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[1]Translated as "Look to the End," this motto is quoted in Thompson (100) as a commentary on the poems of a "mature" poet. I use the phrase, however, to indicate Livesay's interest in endings, and her concern, in the poems that make up "The Unquiet Bed," to configure the end of the love affair in writing.

[2] Of course, this emphasis on the absent lover is a little misleading. In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes parenthetically asks, "(But isn't desire always the same, whether the object is present or absent? Isn't the object *always* absent?)" (15).

[3] I use the term poem sequence rather than long poem because the three works under discussion are not necessarily defined as one long poem by their authors. While Gunnars' *Carnival of Longing* is perhaps the most conventional example of a long poem, since the entire book is devoted to the exegesis and extension of her subject, both "The Unquiet Bed" and "No Goodbye, Just:" are parts of a larger work. The former is a series of self-contained poems in Dorothy Livesay's Selected Poems, *The Self-Completing Tree*, and the latter is one of a series of mid-length poems in Nicole Markotic's first book of poetry *Connect the Dots*.

[4] Peter Stevens, for example, in his biography of Livesay, *Patterns in a Poetic Life,* writes that the main preoccupation of *The Unquiet Bed* is a new one for Livesay, "it is sexuality -- the reader is given an honest account of the poet's love affair with the younger man" (66). Stevens does not, at any time, question the gap between the writer of the poems and the narrator within them, seeming to assume that the poems from *The Unquiet Bed* issue from the mouth of a consistent, stable narrator who coincides exactly with the writer of the text.

In a more subtly skewed repetition of this problem, Lee Briscoe Thompson in a critical chronology of Livesay's career, gives an account of Livesay reading the poem "The Unquiet Bed" in front of a Vancouver audience:

> The small grandmotherly figure stands with feet demurely together and delivers the lines in her quietest voice. She warns her audience that she is "not what you see," but frequently then disarms them by a self-mocking gesture to her dentures

in asserting that "I'm not just bones / and crockery." (96)

Once again, while Thompson is impressed by Livesay's performance, the critic does not question the slippage between enunciator and enunciated, between the subject who performs and the subject of the poems. That Livesay, in her reading gestures, seems to encourage this erasure of the distance between writer and persona, is not the point, although the poet's apparent complicity in this matter does make the point harder not to miss.

[5] Somewhat more convincing is the claim that Livesay's new freedom of form resulted from her exposure to a Vancouver literary scene newly influenced by the Black Mountain Poets (Denham). In this argument I am not denying that Africa influenced Livesay any more or less than Vancouver in the sixties, but only trying to examine the language in which these claims are made.

[6] William New is more subtle in his analysis of this trope. In writing about the reactions of Dorothy Livesay and Margaret Laurence to Africa, he notes that in spite of their liberal sympathies, they both quickly became aware of their separateness from the cultures they were watching (18). It is, perhaps, in coming to terms with this position as watcher/outsider that Laurence and Livesay may be said to have developed as writers.

[7] One of the few feminist analyses of Livesay's love poetry is by Pamela Banting in "Dorothy Livesay's Notations of Love and the ~~Stance~~-Dance of the Female Poet in Relation to Language." Banting reads the poetry as a return to a "semiotic" language, in so doing she emphasizes the connections and mis-connections between the loving body and amorous discourse.

[8] For example, Jean Gibbs argues that Livesay's vision has been sharpened by two contradictory impulses -- a Thoreauvian transcendentalism and a Lawrencian desire to connect with nature through the energy of sexuality. In *The Unquiet Bed* Gibbs claims the "Lawrentian impulse" is foregrounded.

[9] In her influential essay "The Documentary Poem: a Canadian Genre," Livesay argues that the Canadian long poem is typically a "Documentary poem" based on historical or topical information but structured by descriptive, lyrical, and didactic elements. Paul Denham defines the "documentary" as a poem of social commitment in which social responsibility may make room for private experience (89).

In her book on the contemporary Canadian long poem, *On the Edge of Genre*, Smaro Kamboureli questions Livesay's discovery of a "new genre" peculiar to Canadian literature among other things, since Livesay's construction seems to suggest that Canadian culture is an ideological institution that is amenable to the production of the long poem as genre.

[10] For an excellent analysis of how these poems deviate from an earlier, more condensed, closed form see Cooley's essay "House / Sun / Earth: Livesay's Changing Selves" in *A Public and Private Voice: Essays on the Life and Work of Dorothy Livesay.*

[11] Debbie Foulks puts the case even more strongly, claiming that the woman is both victim and "passive recipient" of masculine power in these poems (64). And Robert Weaver, in an early essay on the subject, argues that, "the person in these poems, once invaded, often resisted successfully, or fled" (18).

[12] Lee Briscoe Thompson asserts that sections 1,2, and 4, of *The Unquiet Bed* form a frame and context for section 3. In what follows, I intend to focus almost entirely on section 3, the sequence entitled "Fire and Frost" and anthologized in *The Self Completing Tree.*

[13] Cooley uses this phrase to describe Livesay's new interest in line-breaks as opposed to the "proper" sentence ("House / Sun / Earth" 121).

[14] The *Self-CompletingTree* consists of seven sections, each one structured in the same way as "The Unquiet Bed: Fire and Frost," with a title page, followed by an epigraph or information panel in which the writer contextualizes the poems to follow, often drawing the reader's attention to a particular aspect. A photograph from Livesay's personal file invariably faces the epigraph. In the case of "The Unquiet Bed" section, it is a photograph of a tree along a country road in what was then Northern Rhodesia.

[15] In his essay, "Identity and Patterns of Repetition in the Poetry of Dorothy Livesay," Ed Jewinski notes that the speaker of a Livesay poem almost always presents herself as a clear and comprehensible "I" voice who declares a definite or direct view of herself. At the same time, the love poems are "riddled with so many rhetorical devices" that the reader is displaced by the voice that speaks (129). He concludes that in Livesay's writing, identity and love exceed their definitions, and "being" always exists one step beyond language.

[16] See Lorraine M. York in "'A Thankful Music': Dorothy Livesay's Experiments with Feeling and Poetic Form" for an account of Livesay's "Dickinsonian phase."

[17] The reference is to John Donne's poem "The Sunne Rising."

[18] The poem does end with a stanza that seems to deflect the physical intensity of the quoted extract:

> I seek more
> than skin, flesh, blood
> I seek the coursing
> heaving heart
> for my soul's food. (137)

However, words such as "skin," "flesh," and "blood," not to mention "heaving heart" seem to overpower the somewhat weakened spiritual yearning represented in the phrase "soul's food." Although in this poem the narrator announces her longing for "more / than," the words with which she expresses this yearning are resolutely physical, experiential, and essential.

[19] McInnis cites Elaine Showalter's reading of Terry Eagleton's reading of *Clarrisa* in "Critical Cross-Dressing," *Men in Feminism*.

[20] In "The Woman," for example, the sexual act is, "the breaking of a shell / a shattering birth" (122), and in "The Operation," the lover pointedly declares:

> you pulled me back
> into life
> your very penis forging
> pulling (149)

[21] This is a reference to Simone de Beauvoir's well known aphorism in *The Second Sex* that one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman.

[22] In *Essentially Speaking*, Fuss vividly rethinks the essentialist / constructionist opposition by demonstrating how each term relies on and is implicated by the other. Her point that some feminists have refused attempts to naturalize gender while evidencing interest in the possibilities and potential usages of essential terms both to legitimate and resist such categories as "woman," "lesbian," or "black," has significant implications for my interpretation of Livesay's poetics.

[23] In his seminar "God and the Jouissance of ~~The~~ Woman. A Love Letter," Lacan crosses out the definite article in order to de-essentialize the noun and to draw attention

to the problem of naming (*Feminine Sexuality* 137). Kristeva, too, refuses to define "woman" since she recognizes that a woman cannot *be* but can only exist negatively. In an interview in *Tel Quel* in 1974 she says, "I therefore understand by 'woman' that which cannot be represented, that which is not spoken, that which remains outside naming and ideologies" (" La femme" cited in Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* 163).
Perhaps the most convenient manner of speaking about "woman" while acknowledging that no such textual construct exists is by way of Teresa de Lauretis's distinction in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. De Lauretis distinguishes between "woman," a fictional construct, the product of diverse but congruent discourses in Western culture and "women" by which she means, "the real historical beings who cannot as yet be defined outside those discursive formations, but whose material existence is nonetheless certain" (5).
[24] "A Book of Charms" is not included in the selection from *The Self-Completing Tree* but can be found in Livesay's *Collected Poems* (296).
[25] After the love poems in *The Unquiet Bed* (1967), *Plainsongs* (1971), and *The Phases of Love* (1983), this poem in Livesay's last self-contained collection is titled, significantly, "Towards a Love Poem," the unaccustomed tentativeness in the preposition "towards" testifying, perhaps, to the difficulty of writing love poems, the impossibility of the amatory discourse, and the impetus to begin again to redefine the process even after three collections devoted to the subject.
[26] The final stanza of "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" reads:

> 'A woman can be proud and stiff
> when on love intent;
> But love has pitched his mansion in
> The place of excrement;
> For nothing can be sole or whole
> That has not been rent.'

The frequent images of shattering that proliferate in Livesay's poetry testify to her identification with this vision.

On the Line: Revenge as a Confessional Strategy in Kristjana Gunnars' *Carnival of Longing* and Nicole Markotic's "No Goodbye, Just:"

The narrative of the love story is characteristically structured as an ordeal of abandonment prolonged by the promise of return and resolved only in metaphors of seduction, the configurations of language that release the particular from its burden of meaning. In the love story, narration follows abandonment. The story is already over when Heloise writes her first letter to Abelard, or in a more contemporary example, when the narrator of "The Tennessee Waltz" begins his song. As Linda Kauffman makes clear, "the heroine transforms the ordeal of abandonment into a passionate vocation that might be called the vocation of iterative narrative" (*Discourses of Desire* 25).

If narrative follows abandonment, then every attempt at writing is an attempt at persuading the lover to return. Every writing of the love story would then be an attempt at coercion and an opportunity for confession. It is this latter category that interests me as an entry into the two texts discussed in this chapter, Kristjana Gunnars' long poem *Carnival of Longing*, and Nicole Markotic's prose poem "No Goodbye, Just:"[1]

In an early work on the confessional in literature, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960), Roy Pascal bases his argument on the central assumption that the genre is imaginative as well as "truthful." Twenty years later, in *The Forms of Autobiography* (1980), William Spengemann puts the matter even more forcefully, cataloguing "historical self-explanation, philosophical self-scrutiny and poetic self-invention" as the only procedures available to autobiographers (xvi). It is, by now, an accepted convention that, as David Williams succinctly remarks in *Confessional Fictions* (1991) the confession is, from the outset, "an artistic pose as well as a biographical fiction" (14). Where confession may, at one time, have implied a revelation of the self involving acts of self-knowledge in the process of which the true meaning of one's life is discovered, such words as "truth," "meaning," and "self" are irretrievably destabilized in an age that has come to be called postmodern.

The confessional model of discourse received from Augustine, where a unitary subject plots a coherent trajectory of itself, is no longer possible in a post-Foucauldian age where sexuality is invariably presented as a problem of truth even if it is a truth that must be masked. I refer here, of course, to Foucault's

genealogy of confession in *The History of Sexuality* (Volume One) where, in his interrogation of the deployment of "sexuality" as it is inserted into truth / history / discourse, he demonstrates how the writing subject fractures his own and the reader's constructed unity.[2] In *The History of Sexuality,* Foucault presents the hypocrisy of the discourse he is describing, in which society speaks at great length and with eloquence of the particularities of its own silence, details the things it will not name, denounces the powers it exercises, and promises to liberate itself from the necessity of its own laws.

In his questioning of the repressive hypothesis, Foucault performs a deliberate *méconnaissance* by constructing an argument that is later shown to be fallacious. In this way, his discourse mimes the predicament of a sexuality that for centuries could not be spoken of except through an interplay of self-referential prohibitions, through a discursive explosion within a restrictive economy in which areas of tact and discretion were established while, at the same time, there occurred a steady proliferation of discourses which caused "it" to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail: "What distinguished these last three centuries is the variety, the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak" (34).

In bringing the body (surely the "it" referred to) to discourse through an intersection of silence and confession, permission and prohibition, Foucault performs, within the parameters of his own rhetoric, a drama of the perverse body incited to discourse in the manner in which it is spoken of as problem and

exploited as secret. In abandoning the hypothesis that modern society ushered in an age of sexual repression, by pointing out the number of sites where the intensity of pleasure and the persistency of power interact, Foucault presents an inherently duplicitous text. Foucault's "History" renounces the depth model of textuality. Instead, it presents a surface that is at all times plurivalent, a text both aware of and opposed to itself, writing that simultaneously addresses and redresses its own presumption.

Of course, *The History of Sexuality* is not the only place where Foucault questions the status of the writing subject. In "What is an Author?" he interrogates the conditions under which "something like a subject" might appear in the order of discourse (274). In writing, he maintains in this essay, the point is not to entrap a subject within language, it is rather a question of "creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears" (264). Foucault's disappearance of the writing subject, like Roland Barthes' "death of the author,"[3] is hardly news, yet there is perhaps a need to reassert the idea of multiple author-functions as opposed to singular authority in the context of the confessional genre in which, all too often, the speaking subject, by virtue of the "truth" that s/he speaks, is perceived as knowing, disingenuous, and, above all, truthful.

The assumption of the unified self -- what James Clifford calls the myth of personal coherence (44) -- is a particularly pernicious one in the context of confessional poetry or autobiographical fiction. While I read the poems by Gunnars and Markotic as confessional, I do not mean to imply in any way that they are autobiographical. In an essay on the immigrant writer Laura Goodman

Salverson, Kristjana Gunnars makes a useful distinction between confession and autobiography: "While autobiography is often an attempt at constructing a self out of the bits and pieces of a life seen from the inside, a confession is an opposite attempt at *dismantling* the self that has been created from without, by others (148).[4] As such, the confession is not the unstructured outpouring of guilt or grief that it is often presented as being, but a self-conscious act by an autobiographer "who knows she is undressing" (150).[5] It is the confession's writer, Gunnars' continues, "who probes perhaps most deeply into the question of whether a 'self' exists or not, and if so, to what extent it is coherent" (151).

The narrators of *Carnival of Longing* and "No Goodbye, Just:" both present themselves as confessing subjects in the process of telling their versions of the love affair, and particularly of the end of that affair. The confluence of amorous discourse and the confessing subject is interesting in these two narratives since both discourses -- the amorous and the confessional -- seem to encourage the apparent dissolution of subjectivity. Cultural critic Jeremy Tambling defines the "confessing personality" as reactive, focused on guilt, weakness, and the need for reparation. He goes so far as to call this personality type one that is productive of "the death of the speaking subject" (*Confession* 6).[6] Such a claim of silencing seems inappropriate in the context of long poems and poem sequences devoted to the subject. In what follows, I hope to encourage a different reading of the confessional subject in the context of love poetry, and one that takes into account the strategies of self-consciousness and self-invention by which these subjects construct themselves.

6.1 An Immigrant Daughter

In her essay on Laura G. Salverson's *Confessions of an Immigrant Daughter,* Kristjana Gunnars asserts that Salverson's confession is written "out of a wounded self, in an attempt to cure that wound [...] to cure a self that is not whole; to unify a divided self" (150). Ultimately, she maintains, the attempt is unsuccessful and the narrator ends up having displayed a wound she sought to hide with no relief except in the act of covering it up. Unlike Salverson's immigrant daughter, the narrator of *Carnival of Longing* is wholly self-conscious about the wounds she chooses to display and reveal in the course of her narrative, conforming instead to Aritha van Herk's construction of the immigrant daughter as one obliged to fashion her own fiction and then "live it out" (*In Visible Ink* 174). Before discussing this poem in detail, however, I would like to contextualize some of Gunnars' earlier poetry and her absorbing poetic interest in the immigrant self and its relation to the community.

In an interview in *Prairie Fire* in 1984, Gunnars explicitly aligns the immigrant experience, or what she calls "the uprooting of yourself from one culture to the other," with a "death of the self" (Demchuk 35). Critics invariably take their cue from such statements and she has consistently been identified as a poet of loss and longing. M. Travis Lane defines her earlier work as having "the scenic thickness of a realized geography, and the social thickness of a realized community" (66), while Judith Owens observes that her focus on dislocation and

estrangement inform "a vision of wholeness, containment, and community" (64). While I am not willing to ascribe quite such redemptive qualities to her vision of community, Gunnars' poetic writing, like that of Dionne Brand, represents a sustained examination of the experience of trauma and loss from the immigrant's point of view, what Paul Hjartarson has called "the loss of a way of life, a world, and with it, of one's identity" (123).

In many ways, Gunnars' poetic *oeuvre* has developed through her reliance on and resistance to the experience of immigration. *One-Eyed Moon Maps* (1980) is a poem cycle that takes its impetus from Norse mythology and the mystery of runes, while the two volumes of *Settlement Poems,* published in the same year, offer a polyphony of voices attributed to Icelanders who settled in Manitoba at the turn of the century.[7] *Wake-Pick Poems* (1981) seems to present this subject's struggle to escape the ancestral voices and to reach a "new world" of self-assurance and identity, while *The Night Workers of Ragnarök* (1985) presents a further series of poetic meditations on estrangement, homelessness and leave takings. Her most recent volume of poetry, *Among You Exiles* (1996) is a more personal exploration of absence and displacement, yet the poems continue to swing, as one reviewer puts it, "like a metronome in an uneasy and impermanent migration between Iceland and Canada" (Libin 118). Of course, this is a chronological reading of a poet's *oeuvre* to date and consequently flawed by single-mindedness, but I think it is useful in a limited sense to chart Gunnars' poetic reworking of the subject of loss in the context of a reading of *Carnival of*

Longing (1989), in which such concerns are harnessed to her mythic underpinning of the love story.

6.2 What Cannot be Said Without You

Kristjana Gunnars' long poem *Carnival of Longing* is divided into five sections, and is located in a variety of distinctive places, such as the ship *Gullfoss*, a cabin on the Cheekeye Reserve, and the home place in Reykjavik. As well, each section occupies a separate season. "Dimmalimm" takes place in the July heat of summer and "Gullfoss" occurs during a "winter without winter" (27), a spiritual desert of the heart. The section entitled "III" is a time of rain and spring thaw "when all texts soak into the grass" (45), and "Sunlamp," having been written in summer, is conceived of in retrospect during the prolonged darkness of a Greenland winter. The poem sequence ends with "Cheekeye," a fall into an autumn of suspended time in which the poet-lover enters into a new and less linear contract with time:

> as if there really were a backwards and forwards
> to the lives we lead
> as if time had a direction
> a tightrope we could walk at will. (82)

In his essay on the contemporary Canadian long poem, "For Play and Entrance," Robert Kroetsch speaks of the abandonment of an inherited grammar, the failure of system, and the preservation of that failure in the structure of the long poem (118). Gunnars' long poem, *Carnival of Longing,* begins after the love

story has ended. As such, it contains within it as structure, the trajectory of the love story (always already) experienced as a grand narrative against which this present and particular love story may be told. In what Frank Davey has called its "announcement of futurity" (*Surviving the Paraphrase* 183), the long poem struggles to represent itself as an authentic departure from narrative inevitability, while the love story, particularly the unhappy love story, is nothing if not a chronology of this return.[8]

Gunnars' *Carnival of Longing* begins after the love story has ended. In the place of the absent lover, words alternate with silences, each aspiring only to their relative levels of unrepresentability. In the beloved's absence the narrator can neither write, "my head full of words that will / not be written, cannot be written," nor speak, since her longing is "silenced" as love "that must not be voiced," a scar that must not be displayed (3).

The third poem of this sequence returns to the originary place of desire, the house of "my father who loved me" in an effort to articulate the minutiae of love available only through the unspoken: the red sweater her mother knitted, the black rubber boots she wore while her father "spoke with the men / always speaking with the men" (5). The narrative proclaims itself as a clarification of that silence or absence, "what cannot be said without you" (8). The poet awakes alone "in my private study" and resolves to transform this absence into an amphitheatre in which to construct "a carnival of my longing" (13). At the same time she is acutely aware of the paradox of attempting to represent the singularity

of absence in the medium of language that is, by its nature, parodic, overdetermined and self-referential:

> I do not want to write
> what there is to write
> words are ironic
> they speak of themselves
> and say what I had not intended. (17)

Words having failed her, the lover turns to "non-writing" (11), an imageless language, a poem without content or metaphor, a poem of "mere words" (8), in order to say "what cannot be said of desire / with desire" (11).

The deprivation of presence without image ("there is no picture of you," mourns the lover 18) forces her into a Lear-like confrontation with language, "nothing I can say / will make words of nothing" (27), in which the desire to speak is equivalent with the desire to be silent. In consequence, she resolves to use a "matte language, without / reverberation, a flat language" (19), since "every verbal construct is just / words on paper" (68). The lover knows that her poem will not move "snow to melt or grass to sprout;" nevertheless she writes as "a form of breathing / a form of longing" (34). With the analogies of writing as instinct and love as breath, the reader is in danger of being cajoled into a romanticized landscape in which, characteristically, words are incompetent to represent the many-splendoured thing.

In the "Gullfoss" cycle, however, the narrator indulges in a revenge fantasy that reverses this configuration so that, far from words being represented as the empty ciphers of desire, they suddenly take on potent and malign attributes:

> I have written words to you
> and I imagine they have become knives

that my words injure

you find them on your floor in the mornings
you stumble over them in your bedroom
at night when the lights are out. (31)

In the previous poem the narrator speaks of collecting "guilt instead of coins / or stamps or serviettes" (30). In the poem quoted above, her words hide her guilt, have already hardened into objects, turned into knives, so that the beloved ages "under the continuous needles / of poems that are of no use" (32). A later poem in this cycle again recognizes the false position of a language that proclaims its own inadequacy in the guise of monstrous revenge fantasies: "I do not want my words to grow / and become important monsters / I no longer recognize" (37). Instead the poet wants her stories to be small enough to fit into "castaway bottles / their contents drained" (37). At the same time, she reiterates her primary concern that, "no story can describe / what it is to love uncertainly / there are no words for those shadows" (37).

The reduction from words as monsters to words drained of their importance so as to shrink to the size of castaway bottles -- while it reduces language quantitatively -- does not adequately drain words of their significance. Instead, in the place of the absence of meaning that she confesses to desire, the poet constructs an image, neither unambiguous nor univocal, but which nevertheless mitigates against this imageless language she claims to privilege. Indeed the image of the narrator standing on the deck of a ship "knowing forms are swimming below / the surface of sleep" (37), is appropriately and deliberately vague, conflating as it does the surface of the sea with the edges of

consciousness. What remains, what always remains, is the vestige of the image that her words, however reluctantly, have traced upon sea, upon sleep, upon the surface of the page.

A similar reversal is enacted in the final cycle of poems entitled "Cheekeye." In the sixth of these poems, the poet reads books in a cabin "all day behind closed doors" (72). When she is not reading the bag full of books she has bought at the Hudson's Bay store, she collects pebbles on the Cheekeye riverbank: "I brought the pebbles into the cabin with me / thinking perhaps the river would follow" (72). A complex system of resemblances between books and pebbles is set up that is further contextualized in the poem that follows:

> all those words, letters, phone calls
> even the words in your arms
> and the ones lying beside you in the bed
> the whispered, hesitant words
>
> have fallen in crumbs on the floor. (73)

Later, when she wakes and walks barefoot on the floor, careful not to wake him, the word-crumbs attach themselves to her feet, "clinging to me, frightened children" (73). She enters the kitchen, the word-crumb-children that are pressed between foot and floor, tell her things she never imagined:

> that nothing we say can move us
> that in love words are like the birds
> that smash themselves onto the window
> and fall down dazed on the ground. (73)

One of the many fairy-tale narratives present in this long poem sequence begins with this conjugation of pebbles, words, crumbs, children and birds. The story of children lost in the wood and finding their way home *via* crumbs and then

pebbles, is also the story of writing as home-coming *via* the evasive body of the beloved:

> yet I collect your words
>
> what you say is gathered in pebbles
> deposited along the riverbank. (74)

6.3 Improbable Fictions

Thus far I have succeeded in proving only that words cannot not mean – that the amatory discourse, while initially constructing itself about a lack insofar as the body of the lover is absent, cannot be entirely empty of image. I would like to use the fairy-tale narrative earlier referred to as a starting point in order to show that the poet is aware of these paradoxes and that, far from falling prey to their rhetoric, she incorporates them in *Carnival of Longing* precisely in order to provide a limit that her narrator can then resist and transgress.

The first poetic sequence, "Dimmalimm," is named after a fairy-tale cycle of the same name, involving a princess and a swan. The narrator gains access to this tale through the water colours that have been painted by her melodramatic ancestor, Muggur:

> Muggur was the first to go abroad and leave a trail of
> broken hearts behind him. he died young. he could
> paint, act, sing. he wrote Dimmalimm. in Norway he
> was arrested by a woman in love and imprisoned in
> the mountains. in Denmark he acted in movies. (15)

While he roams the world trailing broken hearts, she sits in her room and knits (10), an unlikely combination of Penelope and Madame Defarge. But what Gunnars calls in a later poem "that unsophisticated and powerless person that was / me" (81) soon proves, in poem after poem, her determination to resist traditional constructions of courtly love: "if I said I was weeping I would say / it is Romantic, belongs / to another age" (6).

In the seventh poem of the "Dimmalimm" cycle, the narrator imagines the night as "a slow lover," while the moon is a voyeur "staring in through the window." Yet these traditionally romantic metaphors do not stand up to her "triumph of reason" when she realizes that "the moon is only moon" (9). And while this observation successfully deflates the romantic cliché, it also draws attention to the system of correspondences upon which amatory discourse relies. Through metaphor and metonymy, the evasive body of the lover is captured, bound, and preserved in the very language that mourns his absence. If "moon is only moon," the narrator may proceed inductively to declare, as she does at the end of this poem, then "he is not you" (9). That he, in other words, has no correspondence, no image, no trace in language other than the fiction of eternal return and recuperation, in a variety of images and semblances that, by their very number, defeat authenticity.

In another poem in this sequence, the narrator composes a list of "improbable" fictions: an onion peeling in layers, an orange in wedges, and a bowl of rice:

> in the story of you and me
> likewise fiction, improbable

segments fall off at a touch
I find myself in pieces. (16)

In order to make love *mean,* in order to resist the ubiquitous romantic tradition, in order, that is, to avoid "suddenly writing about butterflies" (22), the narrator must refine "the banality of such / statements, the commonality / of such sentiments of desire" (44).

Gunnars' narrator takes on this challenge initially through parody, resisting theory in the same way that she earlier resists the romantic canon:

all my words may speak another story
depending on the reading
a Freudian story, Jungian
Lacanian, Barthesian, auto
biographical story
when I had not intended to tell
any story. (19)

Silence, she points out, is not poetic, indeed it "destroys the aesthetic" (8). Yet in the same poem in which she so scornfully names the readings she has rejected, Gunnars' narrator continues dramatically to re-enact the absence of the beloved in language that is suspiciously "full," charged one might even say, with the metaphors that prove silence aesthetic, or at least poetic. Directly after invoking the need for a "matte language," a discourse empty of significance, the narrator admits her desire for:

the absent one, and am
therefore inundated with words
I am the air charged
with electricity, that weight
before a thunderstorm
a Prairie deluge. (19)

The subject who loves, it is implied, can never be entirely emptied of significance. On the contrary, her presence invites metaphoric configurations of language. Like air, she is charged with electricity, her subjectivity undergoing a transformation from the weight before a thunderstorm to a Prairie deluge. Indeed, almost every statement that proclaims the end of writing, in this long poem, is followed by a series of inflated and extended metaphors that transform words into objects, language into breath:

> the sense of your absence
> that words cannot fill
> without flesh, without touch
> these words are pebbles. (27)

Again:

> I have heard of the end of writing
>
> an animal that attacks the fleas
> in its fur, bites irritably
> lies down on the steps, watching
>
> when all texts soak into the grass. (45)

And again:

> I have found this end
> where the ink I spend is useless
> the page fills for no reason
>
> an animal with closed eyes
> voicing itself in empty space
> where hearing has ceased. (45)

Words, rejected as image, become pebbles, turn animal. The lover-narrator seems capable only of proliferating meanings in the place where meaning has failed:

> I am propelled by my sense of loss

the morning sun does not succeed
in comforting me, the fresh smell
of prairie grasses refuses to reach me. (61)

Through negative reiterations, the morning sun, the fresh smell of prairie grass, reaches the reader. It is hardly surprising that language has once again claimed speechlessness through a flood of images, since the amatory subject progresses *via* a process of denial and retrieval in which limits are constantly reinscribed so as to be newly susceptible to transgression. The subject who discovers "there are no degrees of love," who claims herself incapable of categorization, who frames her declaration as negation, as "love is not," nevertheless, and at every moment, produces images and words that are inherently transgressive since they counter the claim to speechlessness that is the unimpeachable condition of the lover:

it has no measure, it cannot be
surveyed, counted, marked
with signs, numbers, arrows

love is not a mountain we climb
or a cavern in which we descend
it is not a hall of mirrors or a carousel. (55)

What love is can hardly be more prolific, more *seductive*, than this catalogue of exclusions.

The second poem in Gunnars' *Carnival of Longing* is only four lines long but is important insofar as it connects language and body through the metaphor of a huge processing plant and the cracks in the structure through which the spirit escapes:

the words that are gathered in my body

the great hydroelectric plant that is my language
the dam that contains them, the spirit
you have cracked, there are leaks. (4)

The ensuing carnival of passion and desire, it is implied, constitutes these leaks in an elusive yet regenerate "spirit" whose connection to the body is always dissociated, detached: "it is not me who weeps / it is my body / a thing apart" (6). Yet at other times the body is disturbingly present, metaphorical, transformed as matter. The narrator complains, "my body is an illness/ is a guilty animal/ seeking cure, absolution" (17). In this context, I would like to explore a reading of Gunnars' *Carnival* as a text in which passion is inscribed as abjection and suffering; in which, moreover, the liberation of the body as meaning intersects with its annihilation as matter. In other words, she (the poet/lover/narrator) is only experienced as body if she is a suffering, confessing body.

6.4 Misfortune of Origin

As a generator of language, the body in Gunnars' *Carnival* must be controlled. More particularly, the borders of the body must be strictly regulated. But since this is a suffering body, a body at once amorously disposed and at variance with itself, such regulation is not possible. Indeed, the image of the beloved overflows its boundaries so that the lover fails in her efforts to keep "the persistent / influx of you / out of my thoughts" (11). In this way the traditional and by now clichéd position of the bereft lover is subtly transformed into a condition of shame. The lover calls herself "a thief, a fool, an incestuous wrong-doer" (23).

She confesses, "I was a beggar for love" (21), and the intensity of her shame marks this as the repetition of a primal scene in which, as a small child, she hovered on the threshold of a room in which her mother and father fought:

> then always, in the end, I opened the door, something
> like a beggar in the doorway, asking them not to argue.
> the beginning of a beggar's life. (7)

Then as now, this threshold place reinscribes the limit so that it can be transgressed again, so that the transgression can, like the shame, be repeated, prolonged in writing.

As for the sin, it is nothing less than a sin against identity. Long ago, the narrator realizes, "I was not what I was supposed to be," so she leaves home, "walked off, humiliated by / myself" (14). Writing itself is contaminated, "poetry is a humiliated child / leaving home in the night" (17), impotent to appease the parent, or to persuade the lover to return. Having "left herself" in this way, the lover is left also without reflection or resemblance; her face is not her own but that of the Other who returns her glance:

> when you are not you
> but I in another form
> a shadow of what is forgotten
> when your face is my face
>
> looking back at me. (28)

The problem of the abject subject, however, is that in relinquishing boundaries she has absented herself from an imaginary ground of semblances in which lovers are not divided by the glance. Far from the romantic predicament in which

the lover recognizes herself nowhere but in the eyes of the beloved, this lover cannot find herself at all:

> I claim to be where I am
>
> and I am not
> I am not where you are either
> I am not remembered
>
> all I am is my love for you
> humiliated. (44)

As I have argued in earlier chapters, Kristeva's category of abjection provides a discursive site peculiarly applicable to the amorous subject, within which passion is positioned, not as a quality in itself, but as that which relates to a boundary, more particularly, to the margin that represents the subject as it is jettisoned from that boundary. A closer look at one of the sequences in Gunnars' *Carnival* may better serve to define the construction of abjection in the lover's discourse.

The sequence entitled "Sunlamp" tells the story of a childhood illness that the narrator suffered and which manifested itself as "blotched skin," "an unknown rash" not unlike the leprosy that was once epidemic in northern lands. The doctor advises her to expose her skin to sunlight and so she waits to be healed, but the clouds do not break. Instead she is introduced, by this means, to the lover's discourse, "a condition of waiting for what never showed" (49). In order "to be normal again" (50), the child must lie naked in a dark room for some hours each day before the glow of a sunlamp. Not surprisingly, she sees this as a sinister contract with an object that masquerades as the sun, before which she must

prostrate herself "bony and naked": "I knew it was somehow a replica of / life to react to danger by taking the clothes off and lying / down beside it" (50).

Shielded by dark glasses, isolated by "a light by which I could not see" (53), the narrator watches the atoms that float in the air between herself and the lamp, experiencing them as "small points of hard metal" that threaten to invade her body, "to lodge there for life, to / harden me inside" (51). Time passes "as heavily as if it were made of iron" and no one dares to enter the room, "not even my mother, who / only knocked on the door and called to me it was time / to turn the other side" (53). Shunned, abandoned to the shame of a disease she cannot name, an illness that, like the sunlamp, is "without illumination" (53), the narrator experiences herself in one of two positions. She is either prostrate, prone naked before the scrutiny of the sunlamp, or she kneels before it, a penitent: "defective, crouching behind her knees / covering her face and eyes / from the glare of the dangerous rays" (57).

Although the narrator is eventually cured, the defect to which everyone but she is blind receding like "high tide over the stones in the shore" (56), the condition of her skin seems to persist, creeps to her face where she "could no longer pretend it was not there" (63). What she suffers from, the reader is asked to believe, in the absence of symptoms, is love illuminated by the sunlamp as a condition of pure, wordless longing. Love, before which one is prostrate, naked, leprous, before which one blunders, "unable to hide from [the lover's] intense eyes" (57). Love, before which, speechless and defective, one waits.

What she waits for, of course, is the end of the love story, prolonged, deferred by writing. The poem that begins "I have heard of the end of writing," ends with the image of the beloved hopelessly enmeshed in the body of the lover, "how at this end I am still / writing, writing you / through my bones" (45). Significantly, the last poem in this cycle begins with the words "I do not want to write words / about ultimate ends," and ends with a tentative gesture toward disassociation: "an uncertain knowledge/ that if you are not/ this can no longer be me" (85). In her realization that she and the lover no longer occupy one body, the narrator cancels out her own body as a mere "misfortune of origin" (84).

An alternative to these images of the abject, suffering body in Gunnars' long poem is the possibility of a Bakhtinian reading of the carnivalesque as suggested by the title. The term *carnival* is first used systematically and critically by Bakhtin to develop his theory of laughter in *Rabelais and His World*. Yet Bakhtin's "boundless world of humourous forms" (14), focused on the bawdy, unregenerate body seems, at first, to be unrelated to Gunnars' images of the repressed body. At the same time Bakhtin, as Linda Hutcheon points out, offers a privileged reading of all parodic discourse as "the paradox of its authorized transgression of norms" (*A Theory of Parody* 75). In her refusal to locate her narrative of love within any fixed allocation of authority, Gunnars parodies the critical framework that, at times, threatens to overwhelm her lover.

Gunnars' narrator, while not necessarily a humourless subject, cannot by any stretch of the imagination be said to partake of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, or to deploy laughter as a strategy of resistance. In fact, she may more accurately

be described as a melancholic, and as such her narrative is more suited to a reading of depression such as that offered in Kristeva's *Black Sun,* which analyzes the semiotics of melancholy as the underside of -- among other things -- amorous discourse. Kristeva calls melancholia the "somber lining of amatory passion" (5) and the melancholy woman is "the dead one that has always been abandoned within herself" (30). Gunnars' narrator, in her complicity with illness and her refusal of catharsis or recovery, offers us the carnival as a celebration of sadness and melancholy rather than of laughter.

The body of the narrator-lover in Gunnars' *Carnival* is only ever presented under sufferance, and it is significant that the moment when the body becomes present as suffering body is also the moment of confession. In the penultimate poem the narrator finally confesses to her terror of confession, discovering in the process, that her position *vis-à-vis* the amorous discourse is always as object: "you have made me face that face / that has been hiding behind my back" (84). Having stared down the reader hanging over her shoulder,[9] Gunnars' lover is able to complete her story knowing that in doing so she has finally resisted the end of the love story.

6.5 Telephone Love

Nicole Markotic's poem "No Goodbye, Just:" -- like Gunnars' *Carnival* -- is a confessional narrative about the end of a love affair. Both poems employ irony as a distancing device by means of which the grief associated with confessional

discourse is somewhat ameliorated. And both poems contrive to provide an ending, in the case of Markotic's piece, to manufacture an ending for the love affair in the absence of any other recourse to completion.

The title "No Goodbye, Just:" with its expectant colon and incomplete phrasing refers to the narrator's bewilderment in the face of her lover's defection: "the last thing you said to me was *click* on the phone. no goodbye, *I* just *click*. not even an *I love you, but*" (19). The poem goes on to sketch the narrator's journey to a city dump in order to locate furniture and other evidence of a shared life that she believes her lover to have jettisoned after the final "click." In order to fill in the silence after that last acoustic non-ending, in order to occupy the space of his unresolved absence, the narrator travels to the dump in search of her old couch, and, more importantly, in search of the end of the story that will somehow prove her love affair real.

The poem that begins with a telephone conversation ends with an answering machine that the wheels of the narrator's retreating car have just crushed:

> the car crunches over the dregs of dump and I do not notice the
> answering machine someone has discarded. because it
> kept the wrong message, the false hope, the voice that
> didn't call. a perfectly good answering machine that, had
> I noticed at all, I would have picked up and carried home
> with me: triumph of my outing. (25)

The poem that stretches itself between these two points -- between the end of one telephone conversation and the trace of another -- is an extended monologue on the part of the narrator to her silent, absent lover in which she attempts to re-

open the flow of dialogue closed off by his emphatic, final "click." The narrator's oblique angle in this passage -- she has not noticed the answering machine despite her apparent knowledge as to what message the machine contains and why it has been discarded -- alerts us to her sustained narrative duplicity and the figurative nature of her fiction.

By this, I am not casting doubt on her sincerity so much as suggesting that in organizing this poem sequence about an array of vocal interventions and acoustic clicks, Markotic provides a series of exits and entrances for her narrator by means of which the reader can interrogate this text. And since this is a text that offers itself as confession, the reader is called, or "hailed," to use Tambling's word, to provide some semblance of a reply. In the absence of the recalcitrant lover, it is the reader who provides the listening ear, the confidentiality of the confessional. It is the reader, in the end, who must answer the phone.

Markotic's sustained interest in the ways and means by which mechanical discourses conspire to erase the body has direct relevance to this "telephone" love poem. Her first novel, *Yellow Pages,* is a fictional account of Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone.[10] In this novel, Markotic critiques the phallocentric narrative of technological advancement in which male inventions and inventors conspire to silence female voices and the voices of disabled citizens. Markotic emphasizes the little-known fact that Bell's wife was born deaf, and that in advocating orality rather than sign language as a system of communication for her and other hearing-disabled people, Bell set back the cause of the deaf community.

Markotic is not always critical of mechanical discourse as opposed to the oral exchange of language, but she is consistently inspired by the clash of these two systems of communication. In an article published in *Canadian Poetry* and significantly titled "Telephone Dance," she proceeds to read Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* as a mechanical critique of human desire: "The binary opposition of the physical body and its mechanical expression represents instability in the text, an instability that sparks energy, creates impetus, and maintains textual momentum" (32). In the context of "No Goodbye, Just:" the telephone is the nodal point (switchboard?) of an array of discourses and discursive fields in which subjectivity is at once confronted and deferred since one "can't hang up on a person in person" (19).

The poem sequence under discussion, "No Goodbye, Just:" is by no means the only "telephone" poem in Markotic's book. The opening sequence in *Connect the Dots* is a prose poem called "Stand There, Talking" which details the "urgent summons of voice" (9) that a family receives *via* the telephone. The poem begins:

> the telephone. rings we all run. I'll get it. no, I'll get it. me.
> me. not Dad who never runs who has no need to reach the
> ringing first. and always, the calling always for him. (9)

The final poem in *Connect the Dots* ends with the bright image of a telephone lighting up as the narrator dials an unspecified number:

> I own a
> see-through telephone, the plastic numbers light up when I dial
>
> except: in the morning, driving away from me, I speed all the
> way. (89)

Once again, a narrative that begins with a telephone ringing ends with the narrator dialing out, and the question of who she hopes to reach (the lover, the father, the reader) lingers as a final trope of (dis)connection.

The telephone functions in this poem, as well as in the book as a whole, as an overdetermined knot of significance. The telephone is the means by which the narrator connects with herself, her family and friends, but it is also the instrument which allows the lover to disconnect himself from her. It is a physical object that breaks down, is repaired, recycled, or junked -- yet the telephone also functions, in these poems, as the metaphysical carrier of voice and absence. Both imagist and acoustic, the telephone offers the perfect opportunity to confess.

6.6 Recycled Desires

Perhaps the most significant binary in this poem is that constructed between prudent living and wastefulness, between those like the narrator who preserve, recycle and repair broken objects and bodies, and those like the lover who discard things, consume "stuff," and waste energy. When the narrator imagines breaking up with her lover her thoughts turn immediately to a division of the spoils:

> I arranged our break-up the way most people do weddings: if it comes down to it, you get the tv, the vcr, I'll take the stereo. you take your new car, I'll keep the old. (19)

The lover is a man who only values what is new, unused and technological, he throws out shirts when they lose their buttons (21), acquires new clothes and a

new haircut (22), patronizes shopping malls, fast-food restaurants, designer clothing stores (23), and proceeds to discard the couch they once shared and which is the object of the narrator's journey to the dumping ground:

> at the dump today I saw you everywhere. this is not meant as insulting joke. there were bits and pieces of you strewn all around. clothes too good to throw away, thrown away. furniture that must have meant a past not waste. plastic bags galore. a box of colouring books. a baby buggy. dumps are good places to see people. on another heap a man is taking stuff away, making it new again. I avoid him. (20)

The lover is a man who "discard[s] easily" (21), who is incapable of preserving a couch, a shirt or, it is implied, a relationship.[11]

As punishment for his faithlessness, the narrator symbolically tears him to pieces. She is in earnest ("this is not meant as / insulting joke") when she finds "bits and pieces" of him strewn across the dump. Yet, ironically, it is her own loss she reads in the debris. The colouring books and baby buggy symbolize -- as the child born to her sister later does -- the children she has not conceived with this man, further evidence of his wastefulness. Unlike the unnamed man at the dump, the lover is incapable of preserving the old, of "making it new again." With this phrase the narrator indicates that the love story, like the modernist enterprise, requires a new ending.

When Jean-Francois Lyotard defines the post-modern as initiating an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (*The Postmodern Condition* xxiv) he means that it is no longer possible to find deep grand narrative truths connecting parts of a text into a unified whole. The narrator's journey to the dump in search of the

shared couch, her lover's trace, or a reasonable ending, is therefore a search for the "metanarrative" truth that her "incredulous" text refuses to provide. The narrator has already imbued the couch with a past and a future. It is the piece of furniture first given to the couple by her sister when they owned nothing, and it is the first thing, besides herself, the lover has discarded.

The "couch" in this equation is the signifier of the "couple," and the narrator's urgent need to find it indicates, not surprisingly, her desire to reunite with her absconded lover and so reconnect the circuit of family, memories, and love, with her newly (un)made self:

> so that's why I'm here at the dump, my love, searching for our couch. the burgundy one you liked because it was so solid, your back didn't sink into. the only couch you could lie on for hours and it didn't hurt your back. the ugly old burgundy couch we both liked because it didn't match the apartment, didn't match anything we owned. the couch I named after a magazine. the couch you threw away because keeping it meant keeping the colour, meant seeing the us that belonged there lying. the couch that was too big to throw back so you threw it away. and here I am, my own true love: looking for burgundy. (21)

The narrator who, unlike the lover, has "never learned how to discard easily" (22), must discover a new language of indeterminacy, beginning with the split meaning in the verb "to lie."

What she finds at the dumping ground is a vision of plenty, the smell of gulls and ocean (22), a dump filled "with good stuff" (23), recyclable objects which, if properly harvested, would allow the user to "build new stories out of old" (23). The narrator, who is a devout recycler -- "it must have been too hard," she muses, "to live with one who / separates her papers and plastics, has a bin for

used tin / cans, complains each time we ate fast-food" (19) -- experiences the dumping ground as the site where multiple and contradictory narratives meet and intersect. The dump is the place she visits in order to salvage meaning from the echo of the final click:

> this dump is the first site I have been to that I know you've visited. that you couldn't possibly avoid. you chose to make it exist as a part of the us. this is the first place we have that can be put into the ending. except for the certainty of that *click*, you haven't given me ending. (21)

Yet what she finds at the dump is the resolution within herself to discard his version of the ending and replace it with her own: "out with the old, out with the you" (23), she exclaims at one point, in a rewording of the Modernist ethic.

At the dump the narrator does not meet her lover; instead she meets "the scavenger man" (24) with whom she identifies since in the eyes of the grounds attendant she is a scavenger woman, "because I have arrived in a tattered and *empty* / car. in a car begging to be filled" (24). Unlike the lover, this man "makes sense" to her (25). Not surprisingly, her trip to the dump does not conjure the elusive couch from the "unnecessary / waste" (25), since such an "ending" would be the stuff of which grand narratives are composed:

> but: I expected large objects to float above the junk. for that to be the system of dumps. My sister's couch could be beneath any one of these inconsequential pilings. dirt indiscriminate. I am still looking for burgundy, for influence of colour, for existings. (24)

The couch that belongs to the narrator's sister remains indeterminately buried beneath the rubble or hovers out of sight elsewhere, since the reader cannot be sure it has ended up at the dumping ground to begin with. Like her sister's baby

that has "a made-up name" and an initial that "only stands for itself" (24), the couch stands for what is improvisatory, provisional, and self-referential, for what, in this textual dumping ground, refuses signification.

On her way out of the grounds, not having found the symbol of his presence that she seeks, the narrator finds herself stumbling over the detritus of a tradition once called "grand":

> on my way back to the car I step over dead bodies. one of them
> is you, my love, you have left too many pieces behind.
> and I refuse. (24)

The last line with its double pressure on the word "refuse" and its incompletion, signifies the narrator's contradictory impulse: to jettison the cargo of her love affair or to defer closure infinitely in writing. But she realizes that "walking on / top of used up stuff is too depressing" (25), and leaves the dumping ground to return to her apartment "with its rows of recycle bags" (25). "Was it good for your soul, my love, to witness this?" she asks as she drives off (25), and the ironic endearment, not to mention the parodic "soul," indicates her determination to recover her incredulity rapidly in the face of life's lack of grand narratives.

6.7 Over the Line

The lover is at once penurious and wasteful; he withholds both his words and his love from the narrator, while squandering his possessions on garbage dumps and his money in shopping malls. This strangely doubled play of meanness and excess, marks him as the absent Other, the one to whom -- as in

Carnival of Longing -- the love letter is addressed as the perfect motive for his silence:

> you don't call and you don't call and you don't call. I pretend this doesn't matter, is part of the pattern. certainly I don't expect punctuality. I practice saying, right on time, you're only two months late, three months, six, for when the ringing announces you on the line, your voice on the other end
>
> you make me believe words that are pointless: who cares, what's the difference, doesn't matter. you make me believe in the story you're still in, even when I'm not. you make me believe in the you that doesn't believe in
>
> goodbye: click (22)

The opening lament, the narrator's paean to her lover's silence is at once excessive and inadequate. In the wake of his cumulative silence she produces writing, in the face of his throwaway words -- "you make me believe words that are pointless" -- she proceeds to horde every last "click."

In "No Goodbye, Just:" the voice announced "on the line" is under erasure, and the voice "on the other end" is evaded, lost, substituted by metaphor, deferred through metonymy. The voice fails as textuality, as figure of speech, because it cannot carry the burden of representation, or indeed, the significance of the experience of love. In the poem desire exceeds representation, the only moment of articulate love exists as the unspeakable utterance, the "goodbye: click" with which this excerpt ends.

The lover refuses to speak, his silence is insistent, aggressive. His silence elicits a reply in the form of the poem that begins with a reported telephone conversation and ends with a ghostly answering machine message. In the

absence of a human interlocutor or listener, Markotic's auditory narrative starts to doubt its own "hearing," a process observable in the way in which pronouns begin to unhinge:

> the us deteriorated so quickly I only had time to breathe, to suck
> in breath against your awayness. the unexpected
> unplannedness of *click* you said *click click click*. and that, as
> they say, was that. (19)

In a later poem in *Connect the Dots* entitled "Tracking the Game," Markotic's narrator tries again to define this deteriorating "us" through the use of square brackets:

> the [we] is [he] and [me]
> before the risk of the you
> that place in time
> where expectation still exists. (73)

The shared pronoun "we" is no longer available to the narrator and splits off into the separate, singular pronouns "he" and "me."[12]

Later, after the narrator fails to recognize a photo of the lover, she asks, "who am I to know you?"(22). She answers this question by rendering the ontological verb negative: "I am not, " she confesses, "allowed to change into / you, must continue myself" (23). In the absence of stable pronouns, in this arena of fluctuating referents, it is no longer possible to posit a one-to-one correspondence between speaker and listener, between sender and receiver, or between confessor and the one who confesses.

Throughout this narrative of auditory cues and acoustics, the lover never speaks. Instead he is quoted, or rather the one significant sound he has made is permitted into the text as quotation, as "the unexpected, unplannedness of *click*

you said *click click click*" (19). He is constructed spatially as the absence following this "click" whether it is of his photograph, "taken after the *click*" (22), that the narrator does not recognize, or his physical presence that fails to materialize in the doorway where the narrator waits for a sight of him:

> my sister holds her baby holds her
> husband's hand. I hold the sight of you not standing there,
> definitely not standing there. (23)

Because of this glaring absence of the lover in the specular field and the frequency of the auditory cues by which his absence is communicated, Markotic's text privileges the voice. "No Goodbye, Just:" may be read as a poem largely concerned with voice, sound, breath, and speech. This is emphasized by the relative absence of metaphor and imagistic language in Markotic's prose poem, her use of colloquial speech patterns, and run-on sentences rather than end-stopped lines, the frequency of idiomatic expressions, and the use of spaces between words to indicate indrawn breaths.

"No Goodbye, Just:" is strung like a precarious telephone line between the acoustic click at the end of one conversation and the voice as trace, "the voice that didn't call" (25), on the answering machine that the narrator does not fail to confess that she fails to notice, at the end. The break-up the narrator has determined to arrange, "the way most people do weddings" (19) is, in fact, her rearrangement of the lover's abrupt and precipitate closure of the narrative. In her version of the story, it is she who will administer the final click even as she resists any intimation of closure in the last line of her story:

> the gate clicks shut behind me. but I refuse to hear (25)

6.8 Click

While acknowledging that, as Tambling maintains, there are only various confessional practices rather than any essential form of words or actions called "confession" by which the subject may be constituted,[13] such confessional practices are an important way of reading amorous discourse since both forms of writing rely on the value the subject places upon her past and her ability to resurrect this past in the present tense. Linda Kauffman, for example, defines the underlying impulse of amorous discourse as the ability, "to make the past present without ceasing to cherish it as memory" (*Discourses of Desire* 114).

In addition, both confessional practice and amorous discourse are concerned with the subject's dissolution in language, and the breakdown of defensive borders between the lover/confessor and the world. In Gunnars' *Carnival of Longing,* these boundaries are negotiated *via* the performance of abjection, while Markotic's narrator in "No Goodbye, Just:" resists any such "breakdown" through her revisionist solution to his story. Yet both poems "confess," both narrators "speak," and it is the search to find an appropriate location for this speech act -- the letters, words, texts in *Carnival,* the telephone in "No Goodbye, Just:" -- that impels these poems towards a feminist narrative of resistance.

[1] "No Goodbye, Just:" is one of the sections in Markotic's first book of poems *Connect the Dots* 1994, in which she experiments with the form and function of the prose poem. Her interest in this prose / poetic hybrid is evidenced in her second book, *Minotaurs and Other Alphabets* (Wolsak and Wynn, 1998) in which she continues to engage with the genre of prose-poetry, this time in the context of so-called language poetry.

[2] In his attempt to negotiate judgments about Western systems of power and knowledge without placing himself outside their jurisdiction, Foucault constructs the writing subject within a power of relationships whose existence depends on multiple points of resistance. Since he has discarded the repressive hypothesis with its drama of radical ruptures in the texture of history, he constitutes the subject within a plurality of resistances that include language and power relations.

[3] I refer here to Barthes' essay, "The Death of the Author" in *Image Music Text* in which Barthes announces "the birth of the reader" at the cost of the death of the author (148).

[4] While I do not attempt to read Gunnars' poetry *via* her criticism, I think it interesting to note her continued interest in and articulation of the structures of autobiography and confession in this essay as in others. For example, in "The Hypothetical Text: Stephan G. Stephansson's Autobiography" she reads the autobiography of the Icelandic Canadian poet as an act of resistance. The writing, she maintains, "is never confessional, not passionate, not poetic" (109), and therefore striking in its unselfconsciousness, "it is a text that will not give up its real story, *will not reflect on itself*" (110 Gunnars' emphasis).

[5] In an interview in Williamson's *Sounding the Differences,* Gunnars explicitly addresses the question as to why *Carnival of Longing* is not confessional poetry: "[A]ll these poems acknowledge that there may not be anything to confess. Traditional confessional poetry is I've got a secret [...] but the whole milieu where *Carnival* is coming from, theoretically and creatively, supposes that the confession itself is another lie (107).

[6] Tambling speaks of the history of confession as one in which the powerful interrogator at the centre induces people at the margins to internalize what is said about them, "to accept that discourse and to live it, and thereby to live their oppression" (6).

[7] The *Settlement Poems* are characteristic of Gunnars' poetic sensibility at this time because they look inwards to describe old world traditions – cures, remedies, love potions, and midwifery – rather than, as in Atwood's *Journals of Susanna Moodie,* presenting the immigrant subject as she looks outward to a new land and prepares to claim it as her own.

[8] The separate and possibly distinct claims of the love story and the long poem, as genre and structure, are not the subject of this chapter.

[9] The reader is figured as the interpolator in a confessional discourse in the sense that Tambling defines "interpolation" as being "hailed, singled out by name" (*Confession* 2). As such, the reader, at the end of this long poem, is hailed as the receiver of the love poem, the one to whom it is intended, rather than the lover to whom it is, apparently, addressed.

A similar moment occurs in Robert Kroetsch's love poem "Letters to Salonika." The narrator of this poem self-consciously constructs himself as lover, in the process emerging as writer, the one who inscribes within himself as discursive site the body of the absent, silent, other. And since the letters are no longer private devotions but, in the context of the book, public declarations, he implicates the reader in this transaction, inserting him/her as third term in a lover's discourse structured as triangle.

The reader's position in these love letters is one of complicity, she is the other towards whom (as much as the beloved) these letters are addressed, and as such the reading act is one of interrogation. As Other, the reader is constructed variously as confidant and interlocutor, the one both to whom and against whom the lover confesses in his writing of the beloved. The reader in Kroetsch's "Letters to Salonika" occupies an ambiguous and intriguing position. She is the one to whom the lover addresses himself but she is also the Other, the third term in a triangular relation, the one in the presence of whom the lover's discourse is enacted. In the self-conscious transformation of these letters from private to public artifacts, she may even ask if it is possible to construct the lover at all except in the scopic field of the observing other, the reader, the witness in the presence of whom love is at once artificial and articulate. She is, in short, the other woman.

[10] *Yellow Pages* (1995) was published the year after her book of poetry, *Connect the Dots* (1994). "No Goodbye, Just:" is included in this poetry collection.

[11]The lover ends the relationship by packing the narrator's possessions and having them waiting at the door for her (20). He proceeds to "divide the city" (21) into sections, she gets all the old places in the same way that she drives the old car. The lover's ability to compartmentalize his life in the way that he divides up a city or a love affair is contrasted with the narrator's tendency to overflow the boundaries of her narrative at the same time that she packages her garbage for recycling.

[12]Similarly, in the long poem sequence "He & [He]" in *Connect the Dots*, Markotic plays with the idea of identity and naming in the way she uses square brackets to simultaneously enclose and uncover the pronoun "he." As a result of this formalized [He] she can avoid using the lover's name, his proper noun, and so avoid "hailing" him as confessor.

Both "Tracking the Game" and "He & [He]" were initially published as chapbooks by *disOrientation Press* and *dog ear press* respectively, while "No Goodbye, Just:" first appeared in a Second Wednesday chapbook anthology.

[13]Tambling criticizes Foucault's use of "confessional practices" in *The History of Sexuality*. He points out that Foucault's concept of confession runs the risk of essentialism, implying that confession is a- or trans-historical, as though people are constituted by their willingness to confess (2).

Speaking in Tongues: Marlatt's Answering Touch or How to Sign a Love Letter

> Why not just assume that these love poems were written without designs on the reader, with no external agenda, that they are merely bathed, drenched, in the light of the lover? Love is notorious for its transformative effect on perception.
>
> Stan Dragland
> *The Bees of the Invisible*

7.1 Tissue and Text

> Given the whole cloth, the truth of ourselves is so large it is almost impossible to write. It is full of holes, pulled threads, multiple lines, figures indistinct from ground.
>
> Daphne Marlatt
> "Self-Representation and Fictionalysis"

The words "tissue" and "text" come from the same root, Marlatt points out in the essay cited above in which she at once fictionalizes autobiography and locates self-representation in the context of "a living tissue we live together with / in" (205). Critics have responded to Marlatt's textual tissue by emphasizing its "intricate networks" and "labyrinthean structures" (Godard 481), by locating her narratives as a "textual field" intersected by various trajectories (Butling 167), and by demonstrating her resistance to the grammatical sentence which demands linearity and closure in favour of "radiating meaning" (Green and LeBihan 440). Marlatt herself perceives her writing as palimpsest, a structure that she favours, according to an early interview in *Open Letter*, because it presents "all the layers *at once*, all the levels at once" (43).[1]

The three dimensionality of the metaphors by which Marlatt's writing is defined -- as woven cloth, labyrinth, textual field -- and by which she describes her own poetics, indicates a revisionism that begins at the level of the sentence. In a recent interview[2] in *West Coast Line,* Marlatt begins by defining the sentence in the negative as, "*not* a container ... not a quantity of thought or a quantity of rhythm," and concludes that it is the sentence's ability to "break apart into pure immediacy" that best characterizes it as a transformative device (Castricano 50). Her critical writing, in essays such as "musing with mothertongue," frequently refuses metaphors of containment, or the image of the womb as vessel in favour of a dual representation of the female body within landscape and a play of languages.[3] Janice Williamson calls this effect one of "erotic synaesthesia" (179) in which long prose lines of polysemic linguistic associations recover multiple

related meanings in a writing strategy that avoids the one-track end-of-the-line trajectory for the slippage and play of reading between the lines, while Stan Dragland likens Marlatt's line to a divining rod since it sensitively slips between tenses and layers of time (156).

In her poem "Month of Hungry Ghosts" Marlatt begins by asking, "what language, or what *structures* of language can carry this being here?" (82) and it seems clear that the long supple "breath-lines"[4] that she develops in poems such as *How Hug a Stone* and *Touch to My Tongue,* are one element of the structure that carries being. Another is her construction of a female subjectivity that inscribes itself within what Barbara Godard has called "a poetics of excess of signification" ("Body I" 481), in which Marlatt's writing transgresses boundaries, overflows linguistic space and overwhelms limits like those imposed by the binaries of surface/depth, body/writing, and reader/writer.

Since meaning is rooted in current usage which is, in turn, freighted with patriarchal values, Marlatt uses word play to undermine singular meaning, inventing new words and using etymology as a variant on meaning. Marlatt self-consciously writes from the margins, claiming them as what Brenda Carr calls a "wild zone" where the differences between women and other oppressed groups resonate (105). In an interview with Carr, Marlatt has herself claimed this no-place-space as one in which a woman speaks out of her "hitherto absent body, absent desire, and muted voice within a public context" (106).

In my earlier discussion of Kristeva's essay *Tales of Love*, particularly her self-conscious problematizing of language and signification in "Stabat Mater," I

address the problems, since taken up by the Québec school of *écriture feminine,*[5] of writing the female body. Such writing tries to imagine the plenitude of the female voice, body, writing, desire, outside patriarchal reference. When Marlatt, in "musing with mothertongue," describes a "largely unverbalized, pre-syntactic, postlexical field" (48), she invokes the Kristevan *chora,* the place of maternal pleasure. Yet the *chora* that many critics of Kristeva have perceived as self-enclosed and womb-like, is, in Marlatt's reading, an open-ended network of associations and language frequencies. In her essay "Writing Our Way Through the Labyrinth," for example, her central metaphor of the labyrinth is not envisioned as an imprisoning enclosure but as a space that may be traversed, a folding and enfolding that nevertheless "moves forward":

> later as i began to write (compose) poetry, i learned that writing involves reading or hearing all the language is saying that i am "lost" in and writing my way through. as if the labyrinth were itself an inner ear, a sensory
> organ
> i feel my way by (sentence, *sentire*, to feel), keeping my feet by a
> labyrinthine
> sense of balance as the currents of various meaning, the "drift," swirl me along. of course the labyrinth is filled with fluid, as the membranous
> labyrinth
> of the inner ear is. (44-45)

Marlatt's conceit of the labyrinth as inner ear, her astonishing yoking together of the written, the walked, and the heard, resoundingly demonstrates her ability to imagine many and various versions on the theme of *chora.*

As the above excerpt makes clear, one reads Marlatt in a state of expectancy, of surprise, a state that Marjorie Perloff in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* has characterized as belonging to the poetry of undecidability,

where meaning is perpetually imminent (11). Marlatt's unraveling texture of words at play, subjects (and subjectivity) in motion, and frames shifting to recontextualize meaning is a result, in part, of her delight in the porousness of boundaries. What Dragland has called her "muse of indefiniteness and undependability" (164) plays the borders between fiction, poetry, criticism and autobiography,[6] between life sentence and life-writing, between sentence as structure and sentence as verdict. Much of the tension and torque in her longer poems comes from her choice of the prose poem form, which combines what Pauline Butling has called "the horizontal impetus of prose" with the spatial range of the poetic word ("From Radical" 172). At the same time, Marlatt is interested in a poetics of translation rather than representation, in which meaning emerges in the synapses between texts (between her own texts and the writing of others) as a consequence of what language brings into play beyond origin or intention.[7]

7.2 Conversations

> Two minds turning around each other, two (at least) perspectives, two (various) entries into language turning over the words, testing them, trying them on for size in a mutual exchange that wanders from room to room, takes breaks, remakes the linguistic bed, stirs diversion into analysis.
>
> Daphne Marlatt
> "In Conversation"

In frequent interviews and in her critical writing, Marlatt has emphasized the exploratory nature of conversation, a "mutual listening and questioning," as a

tool of exegesis and a strategy for life writing ("In Conversation" 7). As one of the founding editors of the feminist collective *Tessera*, she writes in the introduction to the 1994 special issue, edited by Barbara Godard, of the "conversational matrix" of *Tessera's* inception, and refers to the way in which the journal is an ongoing conversation between contributors, editors, and readers (*Collaboration in the Feminine* 13). Her own work has actively engaged the conversational both in its discursive style and in the manner in which her texts interact with other feminist writing. More recently, the poems in *Touch to My Tongue* (1984), written "for Betsy," are a reply to and are replied to in the poems in Betsy Warland's book *Open is Broken*, published the same year and inscribed "for Daphne."

In *Double Negative*, a book of poetry published four years later (1988), Warland and Marlatt continue their conversational love affair in a cross-genre collaboration that challenges the singular subject, the idea of author, and the authority of the book. *Double Negative*, jointly written by Marlatt and Warland during a train journey through the Australian desert, consists of a series of unsigned entries, a middle section in which the two writers discuss their desire to break the frame of the lyric poem, and a final prose poetry section, in which the writers quote from each other's work, using words and phrases from one textual body as an entry into the next. In this last section, as in the first, the work is "unsigned." In other words, while the reader knows that this is writing produced by Marlatt and Warland, she cannot be sure which writer is the "author" of which particular poem. In an interview, Warland describes this as a process of writing "beyond our own endings" (*Sounding the Differences* 196) since her writing does

not end with the end of the book but spirals out in conversational orbit with Marlatt's writing. Their collaborative work resists the patriarchal concept of ownership which is called into question by these shared, unsigned texts.[8]

Such conversationally engendered writing questions the publishing conventions of the literary institution since these texts overflow the borders of the page and the sequence of the book, and consciously break the frame. The publication of *Touch to My Tongue* and *Open is Broken* was accompanied by public reading events by Marlatt and Warland across Canada, and the two books were invariably reviewed together in feminist magazines and periodicals such as *Angles, Rites, Herizons, Broadside, Fuse,* and *Body Politic.*[9] In addition, the two were frequently interviewed together about their ongoing conversation or shared poetics. Recent critical practice has explored this interchange of ideas and language, encouraging the notion that words lead to words and that subjectivity is not singular, but composed of many voices, many languages and registers of discourse.[10]

In her essay on Marlatt's poetics, "Body I," Barbara Godard catalogues this polyphony of creative and critical voices, using the signature as a metaphor:

> While many women poets use condensation, the paring away of self to give space to the other, Marlatt attempts to give birth to an extended self immersed in something vaster than the individual. For some poets, implied silence unfixes the power of the signature. For Marlatt, the presence of more than one signature has the same unsettling function. (481)

In resisting the closure and enclosure of fixed meaning by deliberately opening her texts to other women, other writers, and other readers, Marlatt invites

manifold interpretations of, and in, her texts. In a writing that seeks to question hierarchy, the symbolic order, and patriarchal discourse, the reader is cajoled as collaborator, a co-creator of meaning(s).[11]

Touch to My Tongue not only invites dialogue with contemporaneous texts but, in its struggle to articulate lesbian desire, it also refers to a tradition of lesbian love poetry such as Phyllis Webb's *Naked Poems* and Adrienne Rich's "Twenty-one Love Poems." Williamson points out that the title *Touch to My Tongue* refers the reader to Luce Irigaray's discussion of feminine sexuality in the essay "When Our Lips Speak Together" in *This Sex Which Is Not One* ("It gives me" 174), while Godard, appropriating the term from Roland Barthes, calls the poem a "text of bliss." In Godard's reading, however, Marlatt's poem partakes of a femininely inscribed bliss, not "two edges in sharp contact" but "a female sext, an infinite circulation of desire from one (textual) body to another" ("Body I" 484). In alluding to, recalling, and invoking other poems, different critical voices, and disparate language acts, Marlatt's *Touch to My Tongue* "converses" with and circulates among a wide variety of texts and textual bodies, provoking acts of self-representation in varied and multiple readings.

7.3 Coinciding

> As if there were a self that existed beyond representation as some sort of isolatable entity. And then, for company's sake, your self-representation, your self and your self-representation sitting side by side or better yet, coinciding.
>
> Daphne Marlatt

Touch to My Tongue consists of the text of Marlatt's fourteen love poems inserted amongst a series of treated photographs by Cheryl Sourkes, Marlatt's lyrical essay on poetics, "musing with mothertongue," a glossary to the poems, and an artist's statement by Sourkes. The volume explores different modes of representation and signals to the reader that each text is not separate but circulates amongst a variety of texts that, in turn, attempt to articulate the problem of desire, and more specifically, the problematics of lesbian desire.

In his biographical study of Marlatt and her work, Douglas Barbour makes a statement that, at first, appears to be rhetorical but which, when examined, offers tangential clues to the difficulties that many critics have had with her work. "Marlatt has always been able to create works," Barbour asserts, "which outstrip the capacity of any critic to encapsulate her" (249). Since Marlatt's work challenges the cultural and textual representations of women, and since the poems in *Touch to My Tongue* explicitly address what has been erased or excluded from literature -- women's desire expressed in the language of presence -- Barbour's difficulties in "encapsulating" Marlatt are neither surprising nor singular.

Male critics typically express their diffidence in reading Marlatt's poetry,[12] while some female critics have expressed their sensitivity to identity politics by defining themselves as not-lesbian. "But how do I, a heterosexual reader, read these poems?" asks Pauline Butling, going on carefully to voice her anxieties with

regard to appropriation: "If I conflate lesbian desire with any female desire (and thereby identify with the "i" of the poem) do I then appropriate the lesbian experience? If I resist the identification, do I erase that experience?" ("From Radical" 169). In *Touch to My Tongue*, Marlatt provides a space for the lesbian lover to write, and in our reading, our reply -- even as male critics or heterosexual women -- we may provide an answering touch, a tonguing, that affirms relationships between women as mothers and daughters, as lovers, as writers and as readers.

In an essay significantly entitled "What Has Never Been," Bonnie Zimmerman speaks of the "unspeakable" lesbian experience, defining the lesbian text as "the creation of language out of silence" (208). Brenda Carr similarly portrays the artifacts of lesbian culture as a way of speaking "out of the unspeakable" (105), and Bertha Harris defines "lesbianism" itself as "that which has been unspeakable about women" (7). The inability to speak the experience of lesbian desire allies itself to a more generalized inability, and one I addressed earlier -- that of the inexpressibility of amorous discourse.

Nevertheless, any reading of *Touch* must take into account the particularities of lesbian desire, since to erase difference -- to equate the relationship between mother and child, for example, with that between female lovers -- is problematic to say the least. Like most of her writing, from the early birth poems in *Rings* (1971) to the ambivalent fictive mother in *Ana Historic* (1988) and the mother-quest of *How Hug a Stone* (1983), Marlatt's concern has been with writing the absent mother story. *Touch to My Tongue* is no exception,

encoding as it does resonances of this narrative in the Demeter-Persephone subtext, but it is important to differentiate between mothers and lovers in *Touch,* since not to do so would imply that lesbian desire is at once infantile and essential.

The problem of erasing difference in a reading of this text is far reaching and fraught. Many critics have celebrated Marlatt's writing for its "holistic blurring of boundaries" (Godard 481), yet, as Sarah Harasym points out, such criticism fails to question the way in which certain feminist practices may be marked by the materiality of the Other, so that there is a tendency, in Harasym's words, to "erase the problem of representation . . . into a unified notion of the web or text" (111).[13] In refusing notions of linearity and closure, in evading the singularity of unified discourse through the creation of textual networks or webs, it seems Marlatt cannot entirely evade charges of imperialism leveled at the very structures she creates to evade these charges.

Touch to My Tongue explores the tidal movements of lesbian desire in writing that undertakes an inquiry into the roots of the English language *via* Old Norse, French, and Indo-European etymology. In a double narrative of love and longing, the mythological separation of Demeter and Persephone echoes the lover's journeys, partings, and reunions, as they travel toward and away from each other between the Prairies and the West Coast. Textual allusions to voice, stories, mythological narratives and etymology create a polyphonic texture, while the borders between past and present, mother and daughter, mothers and lovers, absence and presence, are constantly reconfigured.

Marlatt's supple, sinuous sentences are composed as rhythmic units of dislocated syntax and pliant metonymic associations. Lines carry over into lines or fold together over punctuation that alternately (simultaneously?) resists and revitalizes the flow of words. Her use of parentheses and ellipses disrupts the paradigmatic relation between subject, object, and verb, so that verbs, for example, are alternately detached from nouns and indistinguishable from them. The breakdown of grammar, language, and syntax in Marlatt's love poetry is not, however, symptomatic of the merging of identities as is often the case in conventional love poetry, but of the overflow -- exuberance, jubilance, *jouissance* -- of the loving, beloved bodies in *Touch to My Tongue*.

7.4 Terra Incognita

> Looking back, i think that most of my writing has been a vehicle
> for entry into what was for me the new place, the new world.
>
> Daphne Marlatt
> "Entering In: The Immigrant Imagination"

Touch to My Tongue opens with the lovers meeting at a place carefully balanced between ancestry and antecedent, a place, as the title indicates, that is "full of contradiction" (19) and defined, at first, by a double negative, "a confusion of times if not of place, though you understood when i said no not the / Danish Tearoom -- the Indonesian or Indian" (19). In "that place of warm walls" (19), the lovers meet both accidentally and intentionally. There is "co-incidence being

together" (19) yet their meeting is flush with foreknowledge, "you know, you knew, it was the one place / i meant" (19). Place, in these poems, is a floating and indeterminate signifier that indicates both the lover's mirroring one another, "i see / your face because i don't see mine" (19), and the fatefulness of their encounters: "we meet in these far places we find in each other, it's Sappho i said, on the radio, / always we meet original, blind of direction, astonished" (19).

The poem "houseless" anticipates the lover's separation, the condition of being houseless, in a place where "there are no walls" (20) -- in contrast to the "warm walls" of the first poem -- as an experience both of fear and of love. The narrator is alone in her house, "my cave," while the lover is "on the other side of the country, our / country of sea with the wind blowing" (20). The claustrophobic space of the cave-like house opens abruptly with the lover's separation into an expanse of blowing reeds and grasses under an "unfathomed / sky" (20). From this point the lovers are unhoused, "houseless." They occupy an intensely feminized landscape of "unnamed female folds of hill, soft / sage" (25), a *terra incognita* of "hidden ground," which, like the poem that takes this name, presages both separation and reunion:

> everything in me longs to turn
> around, go back to you, to (that gap), afraid i'm lost, afraid i've driven out
> of our territory
> we found (we inhabit together), not *terra firma*, not dry land, owned, along
> the highway,
> cleared for use, but that other, lowlying, moist and undefined, hidden
> ground, wild and
> running everywhere along the outer edges. (27)

The movement of separation and return that the lovers enact is explored both in the mythic invocation of Demeter and Persephone in this sequence, and in the image of the child "provoked, invoked" (27) in this poem: the child who is "lost daughter, other mother and lover" (27).

The poems in *Touch to My Tongue* eschew metaphor with its one-way direction, its tendency to promote one-to-one correspondence drawing like to like, for the multi-directional flow of metonymic associations. In "houseless," the narrator's final lines are densely woven strands of allusion:

> i can only be, no vessel but a movement running, out
> in the open, out in the dark and rising tide, in risk, knowing who i am
> with you
> creatures of ecstasy, we have risen drenched from our wet grasses,
> reeds, sea.
> turned out, turned inside out, beside ourselves, we are the tide swelling,
> we are the
> continent draining, deep and forever into each other. (20)

The lines resonate with the narrator's refusal to be housed, her resistance to the repertoire of conventional love imagery where woman is figured as vessel, and her celebration of a reciprocal and eroticized lesbian union of like selves. A union in which neither lover is "vessel" to the other, instead both are "turned out, turned inside out," in a reversal that refuses the patriarchal model of sexuality as penetration for a version of sexuality as play of surface and structure.

The narrator's response to her lover, "a movement running, out / in the open" is also an instruction for the reading of this prose poem as a series of interconnected strands or webs of word play, association, run-on lines, and metonymic images that weave across the surface, criss-crossing at moments of

pleasure or pain. While a depth model of reading-as-penetration is not entirely abandoned -- as evidenced by Marlatt's joy in etymology -- readers are warned against "standing athwart" this text, since such possessiveness is "obstructive" and "perverse," an "encroachment" that, like the husband's wedding ring, does not allow the writer to "retain this small open space that was mine" (21).

The most characteristic motion in *Touch to My Tongue* is this "movement running" (20) toward the lover through the impediments that the world creates. In "coming to you" the narrator struggles through a traffic jam, "honking and off-course, direction veering" (22), to the lover whose place is indeterminate, "you in that place i never know, you alone / with yourself there" (22). The many constructions of verbs as gerunds in this poem -- as well as in the sequence as a whole -- indicate the headlong rush of the continuous present as lover hastens towards lover, "coming," "honking," "veering," "peering," and "bending" (22).

In "kore," the poem that follows, the narrator once again reverses the inside / outside arrangement of the quotidian world as she rushes towards her lover whose yellow clothes are only the comparatively weak signifier of her transformative light:

> no one wears yellow like you excessive and radiant storehouse of sun,
> skin smooth as
> fruit but thin, leaking light. (i am climbing toward you out of the hidden.) no
> one shines
> like you, so that even your lashes flicker light, amber over blue (*amba,*
> amorous Demeter,
> you with the fire in your hand, i am coming to you) (23)

Marlatt's writing, from *Steveston* on, has been concerned with figures of travel and placement. Laurie Ricou describes her poetry as a variation on the

travel journal form (209) while Smaro Kamboureli, referring to the long poem *Steveston*, defines her as the "poet as pedestrian" (122). In *Touch to My Tongue* Marlatt continues to articulate her fascination with landscape as alternately a foreground and background for the body which, in turn, is grounded in a language of geography.

In "climbing the canyon even as" which is a poem of parting, a poem that carries parting in its veins, the lover's separation is negotiated by the Fraser river, the forward trajectory of the car, and the narrator's oscillating thoughts as she moves away from her stationary lover:

> the Fraser rushes out to sea and you, where you are i am, muddy with heartland silt
> beside the river's outward push my car climbs steadily away from and toward -- where
> we were -- each step we took, what you said, what i saw (sun in your hair on the rim of
> your look), smell of love on our skin as we rushed with the river's push out, to the
> mouth taking everything with us / and away, as i leave you there (where i am still) (25)

Although the rivers run in both directions and the road carries vehicles both toward and away from the home place, the narrator has enveloped the lover in her thoughts, "carrying you with me" (25).

While "unhoused," the poems in this collection are also constructed as wayward and provisional habitats, "just one of / the houses we pass through in the endless constellation of our being, close, and away / from each other, torn and apart" (30). As in Dionne Brand's poems, the landscape is the "terra

incognita" that separates the lovers, but in whose embrace they occasionally find surcease, as in the final lines of "in the dark of the coast":

> but i knew your eyes, blue, as soon as you came
> around the small hill, knew your tongue. come, you said, we slid together
> in the spring,
> blue, of a place we'd been, terra incognita known, *geysa,* gush, upwelling
> in the hidden
> Norse we found, we feel it thrust as waters part for us, hot, through fern,
> frost, volcanic
> thrust. it's all there, love, we part each other coming to, geyser, spouting
> pool, hidden
> in and under separate skin we make for each other through. (30)

In this poem, the lovers meet after absence, and their reunion resonates with the mythological parting of Demeter and Persephone, and the Biblical separation of water and earth. Both landscape -- in the form of an eroticized geography of geysa and gush -- and language -- *via* the "hidden" Norse -- participate in their torrential love-making, while Marlatt's use of wordplay, punning, and etymology seem intended to split (separate, part) word from meaning only to realign them in ever increasing, if fractured, proximity.

At the same time, Marlatt does not naively make use of landscape as a fecund and feminized approximation of lesbian desire or the female body, an identification that would encourage essentialist and binaried readings of nature / culture. In an earlier poem, "down the season's avenue," the precisely marked times of sunrise and sunset divide the landscape into the days by which the lovers must measure their separation:

> sunrise 7:18, sunset 7:23: we are approaching that point when the pivot of
> dawn and
> the pivot of night balance the narrowing day. you in it far off on the coast
> climbing
> what tree over the sea to gaze east? everywhere i see light lean along a

curved plain. (29)

In this landscape there are "no intimate clefts of earth" (29) within which the lover can find some configured image of her beloved or of the intricacies of their desire. Instead the land is a flat plain running beneath "the eye of horizon, / that boundary you are on the other side of" (29). The word "plain" that, at first, marks their separation through geographical feature and textual figure, "that boundary you are on the other side of," becomes, in the final line, an air*plane*, the vehicle that hastens their reunion, delivering the absent beloved to her waiting lover, "clear / as that point when the plane comes in and you will be standing there. i'm coming home" (29).

The transformation of "plain" (flat, stationary, geographical) into "plane" (angled, mobile, mechanical) is characteristic of Marlatt's translation poetics where meaning is not representative and linear, but peripatetic and synaptic, leaping across words and phrases, etymology and its roots, and forming in the "clefts" between. In "coming up from the underground," a poem in which the lover's recovery from sickness takes on the resonance of Persephone's bright and fertile regeneration, the eye itself becomes the porous membrane through which the world both filters and is filtered, in this way taking on the attributes of Marlatt's highly associative, supple language. I quote the poem in full:

> out of the shadows of your being, so sick and still a shade under it, your
> eye looks out
> at me, grave and light at once, smiling recognition. draw close, i am so
> glad to see you,
> bleak colour of your iris gone blue, that blue of a clear sky, *belo*, bright,
> Beltane, "bright-
> fire." draw me in, light a new flame after your sudden descent into the
> dark, draw me

close so i see only light your eye a full moon rides, *bleikr* in the old
tongue, shining,
white, ascent above horizon fringed with black reed, horsetail, primitive
flicker on the
rim of eons ascending this white channel we wander in, a plain of "wild
beestes" felt
at the periphery of vision, fear and paranoia ready to spring -- beyond the
mind or out
of it they say, though "defended ... with apparent logic." in this landscape
we are
undefended in the white path of our being, lunar and pulled beyond
reason. *bleikr,*
shining white, radiant healing in various bright colours, *blanda*, to mingle
and blend:
the blaze of light we are, spiralling. (31)

As in William Carlos Williams' "Red Wheelbarrow," so much depends on the eye that sees the world arranged before it as a play of light and shadow. In Marlatt's poem, the lover's recovering eye (any allusion to the first person pronoun is, of course, purely intentional) is blue as the clear sky, bright as a new flame, and light as a full moon. Such a diverse range of associations does not cancel out meaning but accumulates resonance in much the same way that the Old Norse word "*bleikr*" stands for both the bleakness of white colour and the shining, flashing, burning of "various bright colours." The vision of "horizon fringed with black reed" combines an image of what the eye sees, with an image of the eye seen, fringed by lashes and flickering across the rim of sight, the "periphery of vision." At the same time, the "white channel" that the lovers wander upon as if on a "plain of 'wild beestes'" is both the eye turned outward to a predatory landscape, and the eye turned inward to the fear and paranoia "beyond the mind or out / of it."

In a sequence of poems that have concentrated on the dynamics of touch and taste, that have demanded an "answering touch to [the] tongue" (30), this poem invites the reciprocal glance. As women in the landscape (or in language) the lovers are "undefended," and "pulled beyond reason." It is the recovering eye, the eye recovering from the dullness of ill-health, that in turn, recovers a "radiant" landscape, a language arrayed in "bright colours," and the "blaze of light" the lovers come to inhabit in their "spiralling."

"healing," the poem that follows, the final poem in the sequence, provides the reader with yet another way of coming, traveling, traversing landscape, this time through the alliterative repetition of sound. In "healing" the beloved is recovering from an operation and the lover lives through "hours without touch," while "waiting for the two lips of your incision to knit, waiting for our mouths to close lip to / other lip" (32).

This image of the mouth as wound or vaginal opening prepares the reader for language constructed in this poem, both as violent utterance and healing balm. In much the same manner, the word "gall," which Marlatt traces in her "Notes" to its Indo-European, Teutonic, and Old English roots, means both bile, connoting, as it does, melancholy, and gladness, bitterness and glee. What follows is a shining glaze of "g" sounds -- "glee," "glass," "glisten," "glare," "glazing" -- what the narrator describes as "bits of sound shining" (32). These words, these "lucid and articulate" sparks (32), spike her sentences, providing the reader with yet another way of traversing the landscape of the prose-poem

through alliteration and tone-leading, the assonance of like sounds, and the meanings that accumulate at the borders of sound and sense.

7.5 Double You

> in a time when language has been appropriated by the Freudians as intrinsically phallic, it seems crucial to reclaim it through what we know of ourselves in relation to writing. writing can scarcely be for women the act of the phallic signifier, its claim to singularity, the mark of the capital I (was here).
>
> Daphne Marlatt
> "Writing Our Way Through the Labyrinth"

In her study of pronoun structures in the work of Phyllis Webb, Pauline Butling demonstrates how contemporary poets -- such as Webb and Marlatt -- have reconfigured power relations through shifting the traditional I/you grid of the lyric (*Seeing In the Dark* 75). Butling points out that since the Romantics, poetry has centred around the sovereign "I" / receptive "you" structure, but that this grid has been challenged by writers who shift the dynamic to a collaborative I/we configuration or a we/they identification of the individual with a group. While Marlatt has certainly been an active pronoun shifter,[14] *Touch to My Tongue* is a love poem addressed, at times, to an absent other, and so negotiates the contrary demands of the I/you configuration in the context of a feminist, woman-identified subjectivity. This is an intricate process and one that must take into account what Marlatt in "hidden ground" has called, "that tongue our / bodies utter, woman tongue, speaking in and of and for each other" (27).

The phrase, "where you are i am" from the poem "climbing the canyon even as" resonates through Marlatt's prose poems, urging the reader to imagine an alliance of equals figured in the structure of her pronouns. In "kore" the narrator defines herself as other, as lover, in the comparative safety afforded by parentheses "(here I am / you)," yet the pronoun "you" is taken up in a jubilant ululation, a cry of "excess" and "fruiting" (23), as the Indo-European word "*yu*!" becomes second person pronoun, outcry of joy, and, in the poem that follows, an affirmative, a "yes" that goes down as easy as the kiwi fruit the narrator is eating, her tongue "extended with desire for you and you in me" (24). This last phrase combines linguistic play with sexual playfulness and the lines that follow continue to weave pronouns such as "us," "we," "ourselves," "you" and "yourself" in a poem from which the sovereign "I" is noticeably absent (24).

Perhaps the most direct use of plural pronoun usage occurs in the poem "where we went." In this marriage poem in which "heaven and earth" are joined "in a tropic embrace" (28), the lovers choose rings with which to symbolize their union:

> i didn't even catch your eye as we stepped through and she brought out
> the rings for us
> to look at, silver, moon metal engraved in the shape of wild eyes by
> kwakiutl and haida
> hands, raven and wolf and whale and unknown birds not seen in the light
> city. creatures
> of unorganized territory we become, a *physical impulse* moving from me
> to you (the
> poem is), us *dancing in animal skins* in the unmapped part of our world.
> (28)

Although these lines begin with the first person pronoun (written with a small letter, since Marlatt seeks to avoid the colonizing, patriarchal "I" of *I was here*) it swiftly dissolves into the collective "us" and "we" of the raven, wolf, whale, unknown birds, and the lovers themselves, creatures of "unorganized territory." Since their union is neither possessive nor territorial, the lovers inhabit a poem in which the movement from "me" to "you" is an oscillating "physical impulse," a variant pulse, a vibration that is at once evocative of dancing and writing. In the "Notes" to this poem, Marlatt quotes from the poet Alexandra Grilikhes to the effect that poetry is a physical impulse and the performance of poetry, presumably the writing or the speaking of the poem, *is* the poem (36).

Far from being addressed by a sovereign "I" to a receptive "you," this poem facilitates a progressive deconstruction of the "I" that speaks and the "eye" that sees. The "stars" at the sea's edge give way to the "stares" of the "city that houses eyes" (28). Although the lovers avoid each other's eyes as they choose their rings, the rings themselves mimic "the shape of wild eyes," of creatures who are hidden and invisible, "not seen in the light city," and in the last lines the narrator imagines her lover's approach: "i wear wolf and dream of your lean breast descending, warm / and slow the fur that grows between your eyes" (28).

At the same time there is a corresponding dissemination of the first person pronoun into a series of impulses between "you" and "me," into, in fact, "the warmth / of you, double you" (28). The "double you" that can be read as a twinned consciousness or as the letter "w," winds through the poem in a veritable waterfall of "w" sounds, from the alliterative title "where we went" to "wolf," "wild,"

"water," and "whale," to "waterglaze," "walrus," "warmth," and "wood," and to the "world" by way of words, women, and writing.

7.6 Listening

> And memory seems to operate like this, like a murmur in the flesh
> one suddenly hears years later.
>
> Daphne Marlatt
> "When we change language"

In "musing with mothertongue," the essay included in the volume of poems, photographs and "essaying"[15] that make up *Touch to My Tongue*, Marlatt writes of language as a living body of sounds the subject enters at birth and which continues to sustain her. In many ways, the prose poems in this volume provide an "answering touch" that, like the skin of the lover, is "fondant, font, found, all that melts, pours" (30). As well, the poems, circulating as they do within a network of textual, intertextual and extra-textual conversations, provide an "answering" that can be heard in the variety of poetic devices utilizing sound: assonance, alliteration, tone-leading, internal rhyme, punning and association. "Sound will initiate thought by a process of association," Marlatt muses in "mothertongue," continuing, "words call each other up, evoke each other, provoke each other, nudge each other into utterance" (45).

Touch to My Tongue is a sequence of auditory or sound sensitive poems, poems that listen for an answering, straining to be heard, to hear, and to be

registered as acoustic, as heard text. In homage to Marlatt's fondness for synaesthesia, I want to end with an image of these listening words. In the poem "coming to you," the narrator strains through the noise of traffic and her own frantic thoughts to where the lover sits, not waiting for her but enclosed -- "rapt" and wrapped -- in a world of her own listening. Through this image of the lover "with headphones on," the narrator learns what her readers must learn:

> you in that place i never know, you alone
> with yourself there, one leg on your knee, you with boots, with
> headphones on, grave,
> rapt with inaudible music. the day surrounds you: you point where
> everything listens.
> and i slow down, learning how to enter -- implicate and unspoken (still)
> heart-of-the-world. (22)

---

[1]In an interview in *CVII* two years earlier, Marlatt explores her abandonment of the short poetic line in lyric poetry such as that of her 1969 chapbook *leaf leaf/s* for the long, supple prose line of her later work:

> I felt too confined by the short line and by absolute attention at every step to the word, so I decided to open up the line deliberately and to use that extended line which looks like prose -- left margin to right margin on the page ... I wanted to move in larger units, in paragraphs, and I wanted larger rhythms than those very short lines would allow. (Arnason 29)

[2]I use the word "interview" for convenience, but in fact, Marlatt seldom gives conventional interviews since, I would assume, the structure of the question and answer form is too restrictive and authoritarian for her. In fact, the *West Coast Line* "interview" is presented as a "conversation" between two of the magazine's editors, Marlatt, and Nicole Brossard. In a Special Issue of *Tessera*, entitled "dialogue conversation *une écriture a deux,*" the idea of dialogue and conversation between women writers and critics is explored. In a section significantly entitled "In Conversation" Marlatt speaks with four other women about the appeal the word "conversation" has for her as a writer and a woman:

> On the other hand, conversation elicits her participation, creates an opening for her to speak: to beg the question if she so desires, to reword it, return it, transformed by her own perspective. (7)

[3]In "musing with mothertongue," Marlatt asks: "how can the standard sentence structure of English with its linear authority, subject through verb to object, convey the wisdom of endlessly repeating and not exactly repeated cycles her body knows?" (47). Marlatt argues *via* Kristeva in this essay, who has maintained, since *Revolution in Poetic*

Language, that desire is encoded in language at a pre-symbolic level in the tissue, texture, and rhythms of language, rather than in its meanings (*Revolution* 79).

[4] Marlatt's influence by the Black Mountain school of poets, including Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Charles Olson, and her involvement with the *Tish* collective, resulted in what Fred Wah calls her "proprioceptive prosody" (374), an interest in the bio-feedback of the body in the act of composition. Marlatt's use of the breath-line as a reflexive action in which the movement of syntax reflects the movement of consciousness developed from these influences.

[5] This is not, strictly speaking, a "school" but a group of influential women writers and theorists, including Nicole Brossard, Gail Scott, Louky Bersianik, Louise Cotnoir, Louise Dupré, and France Théoret, who have influenced a generation of feminist writers.

[6] In her essay "Self-Representation and Fictionalysis" Marlatt makes the case for cross-genre writing, as follows:

> Autobiography is not separable from poetry for me on this ground i would call fictionalysis:a self-analysis that plays fictively with the primary images of one's life, a fiction that uncovers analytically that territory where fact and fiction coincide. (204)

[7] In an essay in *Tessera* (special issue on "Translating Women") Marlatt discusses the difficulties of translating a poem by Nicole Brossard:

> Even though i begin with a text that is another's, how i read that text or what that text seems to me to be saying will occur in an indeterminate space between its author's vision and my own: this is not the text i would have written but it is the text that i am reading and, in a dubious sense, rewriting. (27)

Pamela Banting has detailed Marlatt's theories of translation, both in her essay "Translation A to Z: Notes on Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic*," and in her critical work on translation poetics, *Body Inc.* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1995).

[8] Marlatt and Warland continued to produce collaborative pieces, which include "Reading and Writing between the Lines" *Tessera* 5 (1988), and *Words With You* (1993).

[9] See reviews by Janice Williamson in *Fuse* (1985), Ellea Wright in *Broadside* (1985), Betsy Nuse in *Angles* (1988), and *Broadside* (1984), Joy Parks in *Body Politic* (1985), *Rites* (1985), and *Herizons* (1985), and Brenda Carr in *Tessera* (1990).

[10] The 1986 collection of essays on Canadian women's writing, *A Mazing Space* (eds. Neuman and Kamboureli) includes a number of cross-genre essays that creatively address the question of author/authority. Carolyn Hlus, for example, reads *Touch to My Tongue* in tandem with *Open is Broken* as well as the works of Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, and Lola Lemire Tostevin.

[11] For a performative account of the reader's entry into the writer's conversation, see Sherry Simon's analysis of Suzanne Lamy's *d'elles*, a text that discusses gossip as interaction between two female writers (*Tessera* 1988). What follows is a quotation from Simon's text:

> The dyad of dialogue is broken; now there are three. The reader insinuates herself into the space between the speakers, absorbed in the back and forth movement between the two. Her fascination is slightly tinted with the curiosity of the voyeur. She watches thought in the process of coming to life and wonders how she will in turn begin her own dialogue with new readers. (43)

[12] Stan Dragland, for example, in an essay on *Touch to My Tongue* in *The Bees of the Invisible*, presents his writing as the revision of an earlier review of the poem, and expresses a certain amount of masculine anxiety, defining himself as "the marginalizer

on edge" (157). While Laurie Ricou subtitles his essay on Marlatt's writing, "Journal entries from a capitalist bourgeois patriarchal anglo-saxon mainstream critic" (204).

[13] In her essay "Each Move Made Here (me) Moves There (you)," Harasym addresses some of the problematic and colonizing representations of "First" and "Third" World women within the writings and the critical reception of Marlatt. She criticizes Godard, among others, for failing to question in what way the materiality of the "Third World" woman as Other could mark the limits of Marlatt's feminist poetics. Harasym's argument works particularly well in the context of "travel" texts such as *Zócalo* and "Month of Hungry Ghosts" and her evaluation of this critical absence in much of the writing by and about Marlatt is astute.

For a somewhat more positive evaluation of Marlatt's implicit colonialism see *Body Inc.*, in which Pamela Banting details the ways in which Marlatt's postcolonial writing incorporates "the phantom limb of the colonial past" (181).

[14] Butling cites *Salvages* (1991) as an example of the way in which Marlatt establishes a lesbian identity by shifting from a solitary "I" to a group-identified lesbian "we" based on collaboration rather than domination.

[15] In the contents page to this volume, Marlatt bills "musing with mothertongue" as an "essaying," in this way punning on the French verb *essayer*, meaning to attempt or to venture.

> My involuntary relation to these texts is one of love, of passion and obsession, of paranoid delusion, perhaps; but certainly not one of mastery, of knowledge, of comprehension.
>
> Steven Shaviro (183)

> What draws these writers together is not their similarity but my having fallen in love with their work.
>
> Stan Dragland (9)

I began obliquely and can end no less so. Discourses of desire, maintains Kauffman, are always a *tissu de greffes,*[1] a fabric of grafts in which "something is always added on, borrowed from something else, embroidered" (304). Or alternately lost, left behind, eroded, avoided, evaded, substituted by metaphor, deferred through metonymy. What we are left with is the event of love, an impossible, inescapable and absolutely ambiguous event which exceeds all

categories of expression and signification while, at the same time, attempting ceaselessly, recklessly, repeatedly, to articulate itself.

The desire that suffuses these texts is not fulfilled or surfeited, yet neither can it be simplistically defined as a lack that awaits fulfillment or a production machine that exceeds it. The gap between the desiring subject and the object of desire is impossible and therefore unrepresentable. The relationship between the two falters between consumption and the failure of consumption. And while psychoanalysis opens us to this failure, there is no closure, since desire approaches but can never meet its object. Desire desires its own impossibility, its failure to close the gap between lover and beloved, its refusal to unite itself with what it desires. And while, as Blanchot has made clear, it is the very violence of sensation and passion *apropos* "the event" that allows us to think beyond the canons of coherence and truth, the event itself escapes representation, exists only as a past tense recapitulation, a trace or fragment, a *relic* offered in the place of what cannot be represented or perhaps even remembered (*The Writing of the Disaster* 3).

It is for this reason that it is not possible to narrate a history of passion, to trace its genealogy in linear time. Instead, what I have attempted in these achronological *essais* is a series of excursions into the various moments of jubilance, melancholy, plenitude, and abjection that surround the event and which are, in turn, translated into amorous discourse. In this case desire neither transcends nor unifies the text, but exists as a rupture, as a constellation of

discrete points of disturbance in which the lover experiences but never contains, curtails, or inhabits the fullness of the beloved's presence.

In their writings, Derrida and Blanchot admit to having betrayed passion to the extent that they transform it into a project capable of fulfillment. My own project is no less fraught with the contradictory impulses to define, illuminate, and exhaust the subject, and the equally imperative need to allow the subject to gracefully escape the passionless contrivances of the reader. It has been my intention to present myself as unrequited reader and writing subject, yet I am forced to wonder to what extent I have offered my critical narrative as *fait accompli,* to what extent I have betrayed these highly self-conscious love poems with my own failures of self-knowledge and rhetoric? "In the end," says Bataille, "the articulate man confesses his own impotence" (*Erotism* 276). Can the articulate woman do any less?

Barthes points out that no modern system of thought accounts for love. The Judeo-Christian ethic exhorts the lover to repress and sublimate, psychoanalysis commits him to give up the beloved as lost, while Marxist and Socialist discourse remains stoically silent on the subject. The lover emerges as a figure of philosophical solitude (*A Lover's Discourse* 245). How much more "solitude" then, surrounds the female lover for whom representation is always a precarious enterprise? At times in the history of representation, the female lover seems not to exist except as a fantasy of the courtly or the mystic tradition, an object of desire rather than a desiring subject. In this "history," desire is the desire

of the subject, and the subject is, traditionally, male, the body represented almost always as female.

At these times, in these texts,[2] female subjectivity is expressed as a desire for representation without the corresponding power to represent. The question arises: is woman then pure representation? As I have tried to show, theorists such as Kristeva write eloquently and creatively of the impossibility of representation *per se*, and, in "Stabat Mater" for example, of the possibility of writing about maternal love and female representation that takes into account both identification and difference. In this narrative, the woman refuses to take the place she has been assigned, the place of the Other. Her subjectivity exists as a fold in the text, the place where the reading and the writing subjects intersect. As for desire, the very word, as George Bowering comments, seems to implicate "the disappearance of the patriarch" in contemporary texts, since it names yet fails to embrace its object (*Imaginary Hand* 108).

As difficult as "desire" has been to define and position in the poetic texts I have read, words such as passion, melancholy, and abjection -- words used repeatedly in the critical texts examined and referred to in the poems -- provide no easy entry into the subject. Nevertheless such words and the meaning they have accumulated in my readings have been helpful as what Lacan calls *tesserae* (*Speech and Language* 13). Melancholy as textual remnant, as the trace of something lost, as what is left over when the symbol no longer consoles, provides a focus for the *ennui* and despair of Gunnars' *The Prowler,* where the narrator proceeds (prowls) through the narrative *via* intervals of despair where there is no

recourse to symbolization. Smart's *By Grand Central Station* explicitly offers the reader the problem of abjection, an emotion, like love, which presents itself as a state that can only be performed, not described.[3] And, like love, abjection involves considerations of structure; the abject only exists in relation to something above it, the abject subject, like the lover, looks up to the Other.

As for passion, I have chosen in these readings to consider it as an adjective in the absence of a noun, an immoderate modifier that does not quantify or qualify its substrate but which is nevertheless free-floating and transformative. Neither expression nor action, passion is writing, writing that does not admit of articulation or resolution and in which the subject -- love, the loved body, the beloved -- transgresses the limits of textual decorum.

In choosing to consider passion as a question of structure I set myself the problem of considering a diversity of poetic forms, from the shuffle-text of *The Prowler,* through Smart's rhapsodic experiments with form, Brand's epigrams, Livesay's lyric poems, Gunnars' long poem, Markotic's prose poems, and Marlatt's long-lined woven strands. Although I maintain that passion is a structural category, there is clearly no particular form to which it inheres and consequently no form from which it can be excluded. In the end, a discourse becomes a discourse of love when it is addressed to an Other.

The problem with my last statement is, of course, its tendency to generalization. If any discourse addressed to another is amatory, then the boundaries of the lover's discourse have been significantly extended, and texts -- all texts -- are merely the mirrors in which we as readers find our own image as in

the eyes of the beloved. In the same way, the problems of representation -- as I have found in the process of writing, are not confined to the lover's discourse but to religious, erotic, and passionate texts in general, and the idea of "unrepresentability" that first caught my imagination in Kristeva's *Tales of Love* equally well describes the abject state, the emotion of melancholy, or the passionate body. In such a reading, such diverse constructs as Lacanian *jouissance*, Kristevan abjection, the Lyotardian sublime, and even the Freudian unconscious, seem dangerously comparable in that all involve notions of unrepresentability and the breakdown of borders.[4] In my reading of the poetic texts, I have privileged love as the unrepresentable affect *par excellence,* but it seems necessary at this moment to admit to a concise if entirely idiosyncratic passion for the subject on my part. It is as if, to be permitted an analogy, desire circulates in these texts like the unopened letter in Poe's short story, "The Purloined Letter."

In a passionate discourse, analogies do not break down. Instead they replicate, recreate themselves, reproduce. Love is a glove, a garden, a galaxy. Love is. In order to write herself out of the lover's discourse, out of love and her nostalgia for metaphysical presence, the lover must evade the particularities of metaphor by partaking in all metaphorical systems, including all discursive sites. The predicament of love is that everything means something else, every gaze is a deflection. Love effaces the meaning of the object: the lover's body, the writer's body no longer exist. Both are obscured by the body of the reader.

There is, in these amatory texts, a frantic attempt to find adequate external symbols for the life within, to find an objective correlative, a landscape that matches an unrepresentable desire, that cures an originary wound. There is the desire, nowhere more apparent than in the lover's discourse, to maintain a limit so that it can be transgressed and retransgressed. The necessity constantly to reinscribe limits in order to exceed them perpetually exists because the beloved is "unclassifiable," of a "ceaselessly unforeseen originality" (*A Lover's Discourse* 34). The place from which she speaks is without site, yet the narrator-lover, to provide perhaps the illusion of agency, must find a familiar discursive site or metaphorical system from which to speak the beloved. What the lover learns in this process is that it is she who is unique, exclusive, chosen, it is *she* who is the object of the gaze.

I want to return to Poe's story where desire circulates like an unopened letter between the lovers inside the text and the lovers outside -- the reader, the writer. Like Poe's letter, love is a means of situating the subject in the signifying chain. In writing of the signifier that has been diverted from its course, the letter "under sufferance," Lacan names the letter as the true subject of the tale, as that which -- like love -- prolongs discourse in its circulation between subjects within and without the text (64). In addressing her poems to an Other, the lover, or the reader, these writers -- Barthes, Brand, Derrida, Gunnars, Kristeva, Livesay, Markotic, Marlatt, Smart -- have put into circulation (mailed) their love letters.

And since, as Lacan has made clear, a letter always reaches its destination, my reply has been couched in the form of a love letter which, of

necessity, recapitulates the amatory structure and the limits of its representation in language. Like the adored and invented body of the lover, my passion for these poems, for this writing, is unrepresentable except through allusion, metaphor, analogy, and the promise of a secret that opens up the word to the desire of signifiers.

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[1] This phrase is appropriated from Derrida's use of it in *Dissemination*. Again, in *Positions*, Derrida speaks of a "tissue of differences" (33), a textuality composed of weavings and unravelings, a text that is both texture and textile.

[2] I am being purposely vague here, because the representation of the female subject is not merely a problem of pre-twentieth century texts or a product of a chronological reading of "body history." Many contemporary readings/writings of the female body fail to take into account the problems and limitations of representation, not only of the female subject but of subjectivity as a category. Such narratives, by failing to be self-conscious in their constructions of subjectivity and representation, perpetuate the norms they perhaps intend to overthrow.

[3] Interestingly, in *Powers of Horror,* Kristeva teases the reader with the possibilities of defining abjection while carefully avoiding doing so.

[4] In his consideration of memory and history in *Heidegger and "the jews"* Lyotard writes of what he has elsewhere named *le differend,* as excess and remnant, that which suffers from the wrong of not being articulated (5). In his consideration of what it means to write so that linearity loses its privilege, so that writing exceeds representation, Lyotard asserts that it is always both too soon and too late to grasp presentation.

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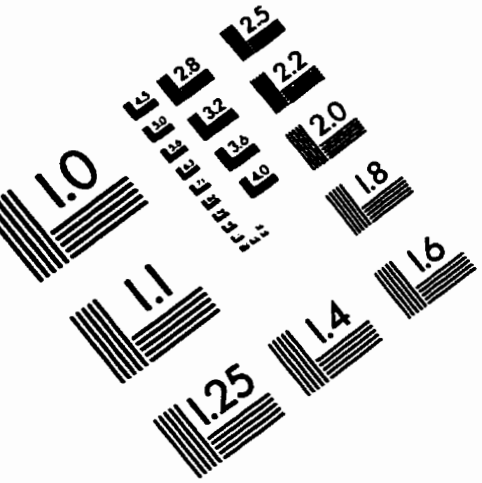

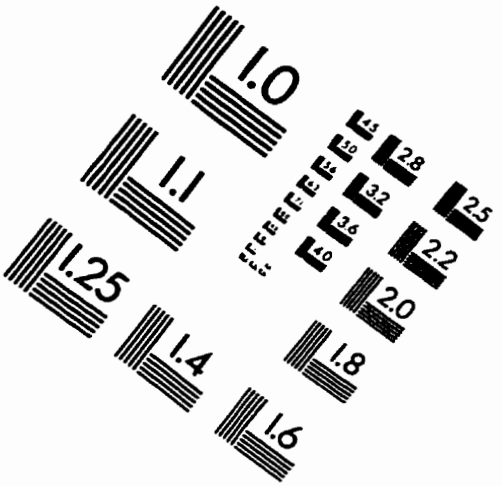

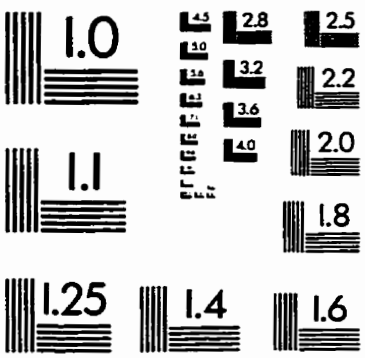

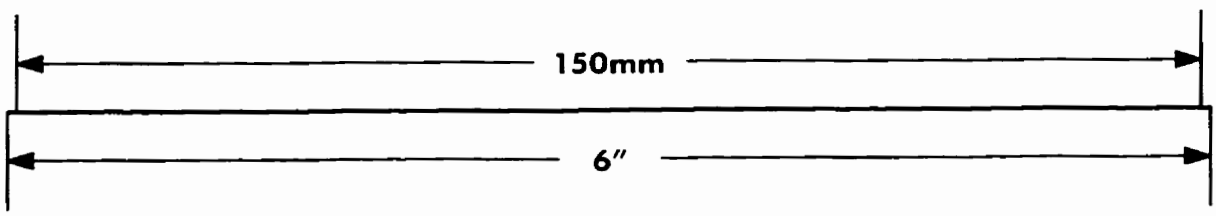

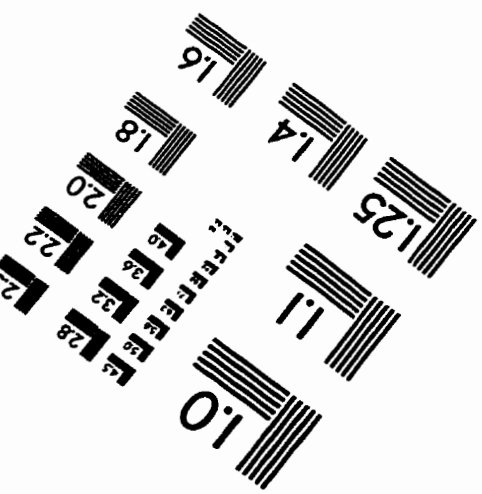

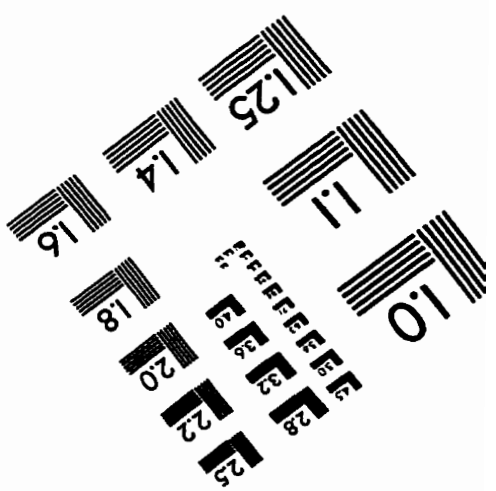

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