

Echolalic Shadows: uncovering self in the silence that is the space between the words.

by

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ABSTRACT

An exploration of the lived experience of teacher and students in the textual and communal place of reader response journals in the high school English classroom including a reflection on the process of getting at text, and getting at self through reading, responding, and reflecting.



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Acknowledgment

Jan,
thank you.

The Naming

feathered bones
resonate silence

ancient stories
wish boned flesh

bones weakened
in anger's acid
pickling jars
on summer's shelf

ligaments torn
etching marrow

black boned beaches
echolalic lies.

The heart of my pedagogy in my English classroom lies within the process my students and I use to get at a text. It is the experience of getting at the text, and getting at us, that enables what we do in the classroom to be transformational. And it is in this transformation that my students and I make place with the synthesis of what we and the text become. My essential curriculum question lies within this context for I would like to consider in what ways I can function within the community of my classroom so that the place I make with text as a confident reader, as an adult, as the teacher, is not so large that it crowds out the place that the students and I, together, make with text.

I have always had a very powerful relationship with text. As a little girl I spent hours alone in my room reading. In fact I preferred and became much better at establishing a transformational relationship with text than with people. Somewhere along the line, perhaps because of it or in spite of it, I established a strong connection with myself. Birkerts (1984) suggests that the very process of reading creates the environment for a vertical engagement and that the vertical engagement can only take place "where silence is possible" (p. 76). It is, perhaps, a paradox that the depth of vertical engagement I participated in in my childhood because of my extended interaction with text, fostered a parallel depth of silence. It is from this depth of silence that my voice emerged.

* * * *

"I can't believe that," said Alice.

"Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone.

"Try again; draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said;

"one can't believe impossible things."

"I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen.

"When I was your age I always did it for half an hour a day.

Why sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

(Carroll, 1872, in Green, 1965, p.70, text arrangement mine)

The vertical engagement I have established with text over my life time has become a very powerful one. Reading evolved into a passion for me. And that passion drove me to become an English teacher. My first energies in teaching reading were directed toward implementing reading activities to fire the same spark in my students that I had toward reading. But somehow my instructional activities didn't work even when stoked by the fires of my passion for reading! Oh, those kids who came into the class as readers remained energetic and full of enthusiasm, but I also wanted to win over the ones who hadn't an inkling of the "six impossible things [one could do] before breakfast" (Carroll, p.70) just by reading a book.

I tried to understand those students - the Alices - who could not see the "six impossible things before breakfast". I asked them why they didn't seem to be able to sustain an interest in silent reading when, for the most part, they listened attentively when I read aloud. The Alices replied that they couldn't "hear" the words in their heads in the

same engaging way they were expressed when someone was reading aloud; too, they had no pictures in their minds from the words they read silently. No wonder my interactions with those non-reader students were ineffective; I wasn't even on the same side of the looking glass as they were!

As the confident reader, the adult, and the teacher in the class it was very difficult to not approach the "problem" readers as mere recalcitrants. After all, I thought, "true reading is hard. Unless we are practiced, we do not just crack the covers and slip into an alternate world" (Birkerts, p. 76), and, as teacher, I had done my part for the class by developing what I thought were energizing teaching strategies so that the practice of reading would not be too onerous. Too, the "mere recalcitrants" looked to me like people who could get what I was getting out of reading if they just tried a little harder.

* * * *

Ryan came into my class in September hating English. He did not tell me this, he rarely said a word, but I picked up on it fairly easily through his body language. He did not participate when we did group activities or discussions but sat back with his arms folded across his ample chest, slouched back in his chair, and frequently examined his nails with a look of bored detachment. During the fifteen minutes of silent reading with which I started each class, he spent most of the time looking out the window.

Over Christmas I took home the response journals to catch up on my "conversations" with the kids - I do find that I will turn to these journals first on my stack of marking even if they are the most recent addition to the pile. Ryan's last couple entries were very short - one or two lines, and barely legible. Fortunately the Christmas break gave me time to "count to ten" before responding to Ryan. Shedding my "teacher" voice,

I tried to really listen to those one or two sentences and to respond to what Ryan was saying, not to what I wanted to say to him.

I do think that Ryan expected a written tirade from me about not doing his work again as I can recall that he flinched a little when I returned the journals to the students in January. I had, instead, simply written to him, from my "part-of-the-place-making-community" voice that I was disappointed that he hadn't written much because I really liked to find out what ideas the students had about what we were reading and discussing in class and that I was especially looking forward to reading his ideas as he did not express them aloud. Perhaps he would write more next time.

I got a paragraph on the next journal entry from Ryan, probably the most extended piece of writing he had done in school for several years. Of greater interest to me, as the year progressed and as I continued to interact with Ryan from my "part-of-the-place-making-community" voice, was the overall change in his demeanor. He began to stand taller with his shoulders back, rather than slouching into the room. He held his head up, rather than staring at the floor. Whereas, at the beginning of the year he would avoid eye contact with me in the hallway, around April he began to call out hello to me as we crossed paths.

Eventually, Ryan smiled.

* * * *

Birkerts (1994) suggests that the change [in what reading does for us] comes with adolescence, that biological and psychological free-fire zone during which the profoundest existential questions are not only posed, but lived. Who am I? Why am I doing what I am doing? What *should* I do? What will happen to me? It is in adolescence that

most of us grasp that life - our own life - is a problem to be solved. . . .

Adolescence is the ideal laboratory for the study of reading and self-transformation (p.89).

So, how do I make textual and communal place with adolescents? Very carefully! How gently I must tread around those who see themselves primarily through others' eyes. These teenagers believe they are what is mirrored by those around them. I need to make sure that I am reflecting back who they are, not who I am. I need to work with them so that they can construct their own "personal practical knowledge" (Belenky et al, 1986, p.65). I can do this by allowing the ebb and flow of my voice and silence, of my confidence and gentleness, by having the strength of an adult and the play of a child, by being the teacher and the student.

* * * *

Up on the crest of the rocky cliff that forms this southern most tip of Vancouver Island is a beautiful home. In the dim light of dusk I can see through the plate glass windows to the rich lamplight that warms, what I assume is, the living room of this mansion. And even at that I wonder, living room, it seems like such a pedantic term for such luxury. The ceilings are vaulted and art work - original - is selectively grouped on the champagne-coloured walls. Furniture seems arranged to encourage the gathering of small groups of serious thinkers. A man and a woman stop to chat for a moment at a table by the window, drinks in hand, and then move on without, it seems, turning to look at the incredible view of the sun going down behind the rim of the San Juan islands.

In contrast with the mansion dominating the cliff face, on the beach is a crudely constructed "fort"; a rather loosely-joined wind break really. Fragments of driftwood are

propped unsteadily against a log that must have been jammed into the shoreline one stormy winter. In front of this structure, a few dried grasses have been poked into the sand and are encircled with a row of broken shells; the imaginary garden surrounded by a white picket fence. Inside the fort are the essentials of home; a collection of beach flotsam, a stained and bedraggled pillow, two broken tea cups, a dilapidated toy, and crayons with paper. This children's structure, this creation, this place, has no plate glass window; it is filled with the overwhelming beachness. The beach, an extension of their elegance, is the children's place.

Had I a choice between the house on the cliff and the fort on the beach, I would no doubt take the house. It is a complex and convoluted house, rather than a simple driftwood fort, that I build in my transactions with text. Can I, as confident reader, as adult, as teacher, walk out of my mansion and sit cross-legged in the awkward, yet fresh and living, structures of my students? How can I make sure that I do not overshadow the reality of their tentative but real and beginning places with the trappings of my mansion?

My curriculum questions are not answered, they are lived. My living will continue to be the exploration of the ways I can live the beachness with my students.

* * * *

I am amazed
at how much the work
resembles the project.
I enter into this process
to find out
how to speak the voice
that will allow my students to make their own meaning with text.

In seeking this voice,
I too must make meaning with text.

In seeking this voice,
I find I have to grope my way
through the voices that echo in me
which are other's ways of making meaning
voices that are hollow shells rattling on the beach.



Figure 1: Word 1

Meaning is either in here or out there When it is out there, it belongs to the text and to the teacher, and understanding means that the reader stands under the text, under the gaze of the teacher, and learns to anticipate and repeat the interpretation that is an index of comprehension (Grumet, 1988, p.142).

I understand now that
the way one interrogates text
is the way one
interrogates self.

That
when one
interrogates text
one is
interrogating self.

What a destructive
methodology:
interrogation.

Self strapped down
held hostage
under the glaring light
while critics
in their white lab coats
circle the wooden chair
tearing off shreds
mouthfuls of
skin.

Perhaps we need to find another way
to meet with text
so that we can find
another way
to meet with self.

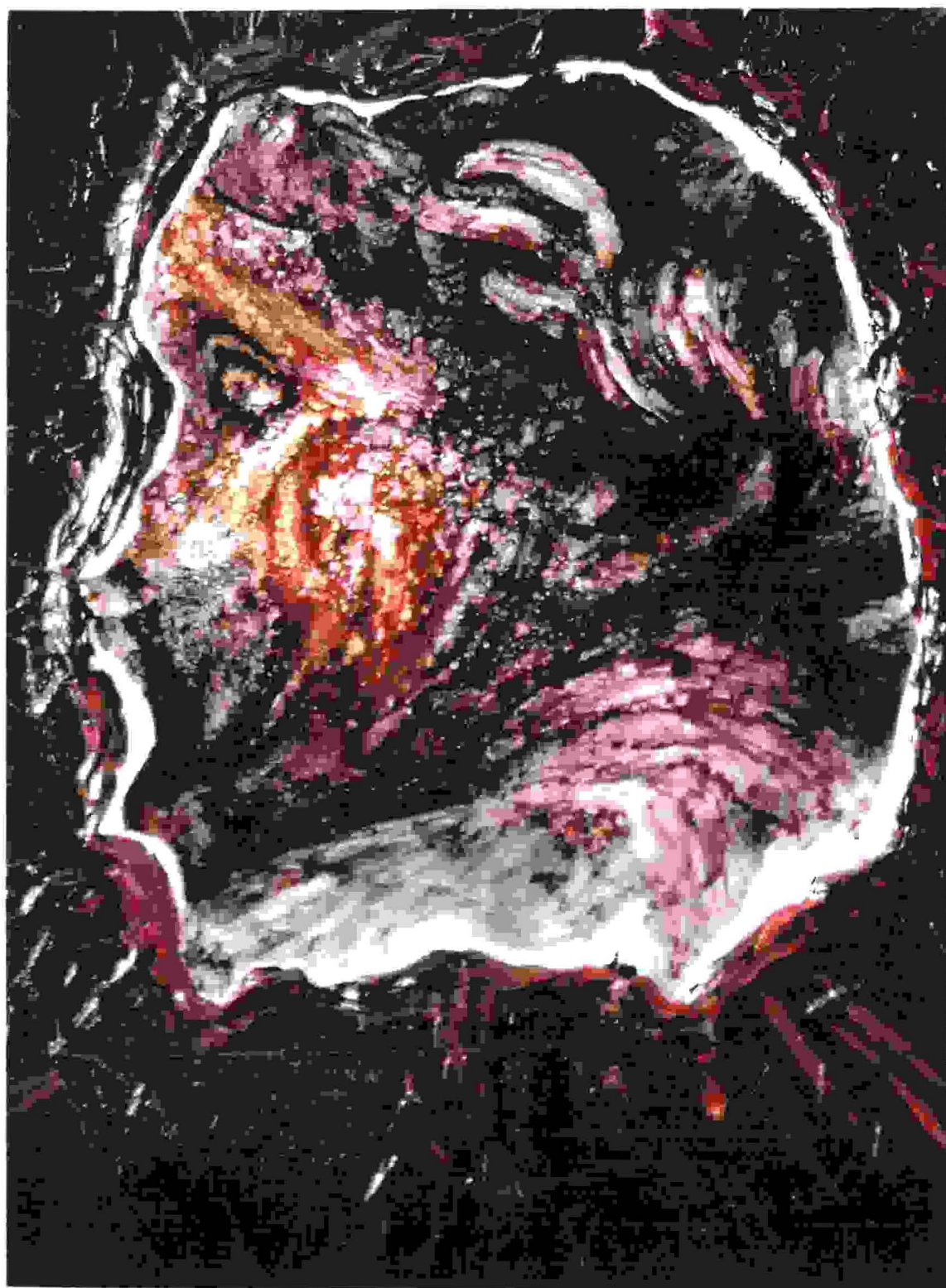


Figure 2: Skin II: below the surface

. . . the flicker and dance of self in the shadows.

" I work to get a handle on what I've been and what I imagine myself to be, so that I can wield this information, rather than it wielding me" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p.ix).



Figure 3: Skin 1: the surface

My mother would suggest that I am being melodramatic with the following; my sister would say, "Well, maybe not melodramatic quite, but cliched certainly." My daughter would just look at me. No matter what, I'll say it. It was June 24, 1959 when my marrow turned to ashes and my body began to eat away at itself.

Imagine. One's own body turning on one. Deliberately producing an unholy immune system. White blood cells multiplying and multiplying and multiplying until they begin to turn on the red cells as if they were trespassers in the system. My own blood, my own marrow eating away at me from the inside out.

Of course I was not aware of what was happening. No one was. But I did recognize that blinding flash of awareness that turned me black inside. It was as if I was suddenly conscious. Suddenly aware. Some people freeze up with shock; I burnt up. My marrow turned to cinders.

I put aside my self when I married my husband. Methodically I folded that self up into layers, folded those layers neatly into piles, and carefully placed those piles into hope chests no longer hopeful. I became the wife he wanted, but on June 24, 1959 I realized that the wife he wanted was not the woman he wanted.

It is as if I have a still from a movie frozen in my mind. It is dark, shadowy, lit only with the early evening light that reaches our second floor hallway. My four year old daughter is poised behind me on the top stair of the flight, having run up to follow me in my laundry rituals. Me, line-dried, folded laundry in hand, silhouetted darkly in the bedroom doorway; an outsider looking in. My husband standing against the far wall of the bedroom, arms crossed precisely and resting on the sill, staring out the window with one of the few honest expressions I have ever seen on his face - lust.

I know who he is staring at. Mrs. Zhukov, my next door neighbour, and I nodded just moments ago from our mutual backyards as I stopped on my way inside with the laundry. She is only three years older than I am, but we still call each other by our married names when we speak, which we must do occasionally as our daughters are the same age and play together daily. She makes me feel uncomfortable in my own skin. Like I am someone who does not belong in this body. So does her husband. Joseph is a short man with thick dark hair that swings greasily over his right eye. He can never, it seems, look at a woman without leering. Valerie is tall and lithe. Next to both of them I feel small and child-like, not just because I am less than five feet tall and lack grace but because, because . . . why, I am not too sure.

I am not the only housewife on the block who feels uncomfortable with the Zhukovs, with Valerie. Norma and Bronwyn and I have coffee around ten a.m. on Tuesdays. On Mondays each of us does laundry; what with stripping the beds and organizing the loads and so on, that is a full day job. But on Tuesdays we have time to relax a bit. Norma, in particular, does not like Valerie. "It's the immigrant thing," Norma has mysteriously stated on occasion. But there are other things that Valerie flaunts that don't fit with who we are, the housewives in our neighbourhood. There are a number of things we do not have to do that our mothers did, because our husbands earn far more money than our fathers did: bake bread, sew clothes for the children and ourselves, tend a vegetable garden in the back yard. My husband would be horrified if I did any of those things as it would suggest to the neighborhood and to his in laws that he wasn't taking care of us, the children and me, properly. Valerie doesn't seem to understand these social mores of ours as she flaunts her bread baking and her clothes sewing and her gardening.

And it is just this, her gardening, that has my husband fascinated. I can understand as I have sometimes glanced out the window and am overwhelmed myself with the sexuality, the sensuality of Valerie in her garden. Her hair is dark brown, almost black and chin length. She does not have it permed but parts it to the side and lets its natural wavy curl spring about her face and ears. Her skin has a tawny tinge that glints with gold somehow, and when I am near her my palms itch to stroke her bare arms. But it is not just that, it is not just her tall liveness, it is that Valerie wears a bright red bikini when she works in her garden. I don't know if I have set the contrast well enough for you to really understand the shock of Valerie next to us. Norma and Bronwyn and I have our hair set at the hairdresser's each week. Our skin is as white as the bread we buy. We wear house dresses, even when or if we'd ever garden. We would not wear bathing suits in our back yards. I am not sure if I can explain it, explain why. I just know that bathing suits are for the beach and even then, when we wear them, our bathing suits are one piece and have little pleated skirts on them.

Sometimes I have watched Joseph chasing Valerie around the yard, finally grabbing her by the waist, crushing and rubbing his furry chest into her back, biting her shoulder until they both rush inside. But tonight Valerie is alone picking bright green pea pods in the cooling evening breeze. She straightens, bends and pulls the peas slowly from the vine often stopping first to stroke the downy pods. Sometimes she holds them to her face to breathe the new pea smell. I've seen her slit open a pod with her fingernail and gently tongue the fresh green peas into her mouth. When her hands are full she backs out of the row of leafy vines to her basket resting on the lawn. She bends to drop the pods into the basket and her breasts roll forward in the bright red bikini. When she straightens from placing the pods in her basket, she stretches, crosses her arms at the

elbows and slides her hands up and down her torso as if she enjoys stroking her own bare skin as much she enjoys running her hands through the pea pods.

And this is why I die inside. The woman I folded up and put away long ago would have run her hands over her own bare skin, would have reveled in her own rolling breasts, would have sucked peas raw from the pod in her own vegetable garden. Instead, I have put away those childish things. I have become the perfectly controlled wife for the perfectly controlled husband. I am processed and prepackaged like the food I feed my family. And that woman I have become is not the woman my husband wants.

* * * *

I have lost my sister whom I loved. She is gone, my older sister.

I sit in the terminal of this airport, waiting and it is hot. The air is still and heavy with the musky prairie smell which is, I think, reminiscent of how the plains must have smelled when the buffalo gathered, moving against one another shuffling and snorting in late spring, some still in heat, some calving. It must be the latent smell of pelts encrusted with mud and pollen and crumbled sage. It is mingled with the odor of blood and the scent of pain.

I am here and I am alive and I am again with child; but my older sister whom I loved is gone.

My sister was 13 years old when I was born. I remember that she seemed to be my real live, fairy-tale princess, going out to school dances wearing dresses that rustled when she walked. I can remember waking to the cold night perfumed smell of her when she came home late. I would drowsily peek out from my warm bed and see the shadowed

outline of her as she undressed in the dark and she would whisper stories to me of the boys she had danced with, and I would imagine that someday I too would look like her, and smell like her, and come in late from dances very quietly so as not to wake our father.

When I was older, I recall, my sister and her husband phoned home to the coast from the prairies to tell us that she was expecting her first child. I cried and laughed along with my mother. My sister was far away in Winnipeg and we were safe at home. But now I live on the prairies with my husband and our first child, our second on the way, waiting for my sister's children. The prairies uprooted both of us from the coast, but my sister could not stay away. The ocean pulled her back again. The ocean pulled her back to die.

Earlier this year my brother-in-law phoned me to say that he needed to send his children to stay with us this summer. These are my sister's children, the ones who made her ill with their whining and arguing and laziness. I sit waiting for their airplane; with one hand I am rhythmically rocking my son back and forth in his stroller while my other hand rests on my pregnant belly. My son is quiet and good; he turns to smile happily at me because he has been watching the workmen renovate the airport and he likes their orange hard hats and the noise they make as they move back and forth in their workboots.

My son fills me with his goldenness. His hair has been burnished by the summer sun and his skin is as richly coloured as the grain that the wind brushes through in the farmer's fields. He is a truly a child of the prairie while I have never grown comfortable here. When I stand on our porch looking out past the fence to the fields beyond, I can see over the edge of the world. If I stare too long at the horizon I begin to sense, with discomfort, the spinning of the earth. Although I love my son completely, I am concerned that my children will be so shaped by this strange and awful environment that I will not know them. Yet, I seem to no longer know who I am myself. The mountains and the ocean did

not welcome me when I returned last November to my parents' home for my sister's funeral; they seemed as baleful as the prairie.

The plane's arrival has been announced on the loudspeaker. My niece and nephew will be here soon. The anger stirs in me; they sapped the life of my sister, my only sister. I have lost an extension of myself. And, although I have closed myself to pain, although I have shuttered up the self that was my sister and me, I shall let rivulets of that pain ooze through. I will let this pain seep quietly through so that my niece and nephew will know what they have done.

I rise when I see them. They do not fit in with the crowd that spills from the plane. Although they are too old to hold onto each other, something about them seems connected. Perhaps it is because they have traveled on the plane alone and they have realized that they have been sent away so that their father can find a replacement for my sister. Perhaps they are aware that they have become separate, no longer a family.

They are gawky, pale and pudgy adolescents, blinking nervously as they shuffle with the other passengers into the florescent glare of the terminal. My niece looks worried. Maybe they wonder if they have arrived at the wrong prairie town, or maybe they just wonder whether I'll really be there to meet them. I do not wave or call to them. I let them wonder for a minute.

But they are pushed forward with the flow of business people who have disembarked from the plane and the terminal is small, so they see me and I push the stroller forward slightly as if I have been moving to greet them all along. They smile uneasily. I speak to them, offering my cheek to be kissed, but my niece does not know how to handle the social mores and awkwardly bumps me with her hand luggage. I back away.

We discuss where to find the rest of their luggage and, when we eventually locate it, I do not offer to help them with it. Let them start looking after themselves for a change. Perhaps if they had done so sooner. . .

My son sings quietly to himself as we walk behind the stroller to the car, but the silence between the three of us becomes oppressive to me and, to relieve my tension, I ask my niece and nephew what they have been doing with themselves since school let out. My niece's face brightens and she answers that they have been painting the garage for their father, but I have already noticed this as she has paint crusting around her chewed off fingernails and I, laughingly, tell her so. She looks at me, startled, self-conscious hurt reflecting in her eyes and I smile inwardly. I have begun to make them know the pain they caused in my sister. I have begun to make them know the pain they have caused in me.

* * * *

It is raining as we wend our way through the streets of Vancouver behind the hearse to the grave site. I don't think I've ever been to a funeral in Vancouver when it's not raining. We are silent for sometime. My grandmother's children sit in the seat in front of me: her son and daughter, my aunt and uncle. My uncle is thin and tall; I can see the back of his head in slight profile as he stares vacantly out the window at the unfamiliar streets of the east end flickering by, neon lights streaked by the water sheeting the window of the car. My aunt, slight and attractive still at forty nine, is turned slightly sideways in her seat, facing in and looking through me out the rear window.

I feel more distraught at losing my grandmother than I should. My aunt and uncle, on the other hand, seem resigned, relieved. Grandma was 88 when she died. In her life she had had both hips replaced. She had lived through previous heart attacks. Twenty odd years before she died she had lost her oldest daughter to leukemia - my mother.

I can't imagine that, losing one's child. I have no children to lose. I am sure that for my grandmother, in losing my mother, she also lost her best friend. It could not have been easy to have married at seventeen to a man who seemed to me to be as cold as stone - my grandfather is, in my mind, eternally an old man frozen into a mottled, worn out, dull red recliner in the corner of the living room, his eyes glued to the World Wrestling Championships on the television with either a frown or a "be quiet" on his lips. It must not have been easy to have had a son the same year and a daughter the next. I have no idea how or why that relationship between my grandparents would have also produced a daughter - my aunt - thirteen years later.

I know that the extent of my grief over my grandmother's death is irrational. She lived a long life; she was in pain; she commented to me once that she felt that she had spent her whole life nursing those who were terminally ill - her mother, then my mother, then her husband. A life spent waiting for the death of an other. I know that my grief is overwhelming because, in losing my grandmother, I am losing my mother all over again. I grieve the fact that my life is now longer than my mother's was. I was fifteen when she died. I had no way to grieve. The young have no bones to drape their sorrow on. In my grandmother's death, I grieve many losses in my life. There are many bones on which to drape that sorrow.

Perhaps by writing this I hope to give voice to the women I have lost. To the women I have never had because I was too young; we were too closed; we were too

frightened; we were too angry. I think I also write this because of the woman I know I have lost in myself.

This is what this story is. It is women losing women. It is women losing themselves.

* * * *



Figure 4: Self & Other (Mirrors)

I sense that
like my mother's marrow turned on her,
stories have turned on me.

Stories that I accepted as reality
became my fictions.

Yet, even now,
as I work the writing and the reading,

I turn to stories seeking truths.

I turn to stories seeking voices.

I turn to stories seeking me.

. . . dirvishistic shadows

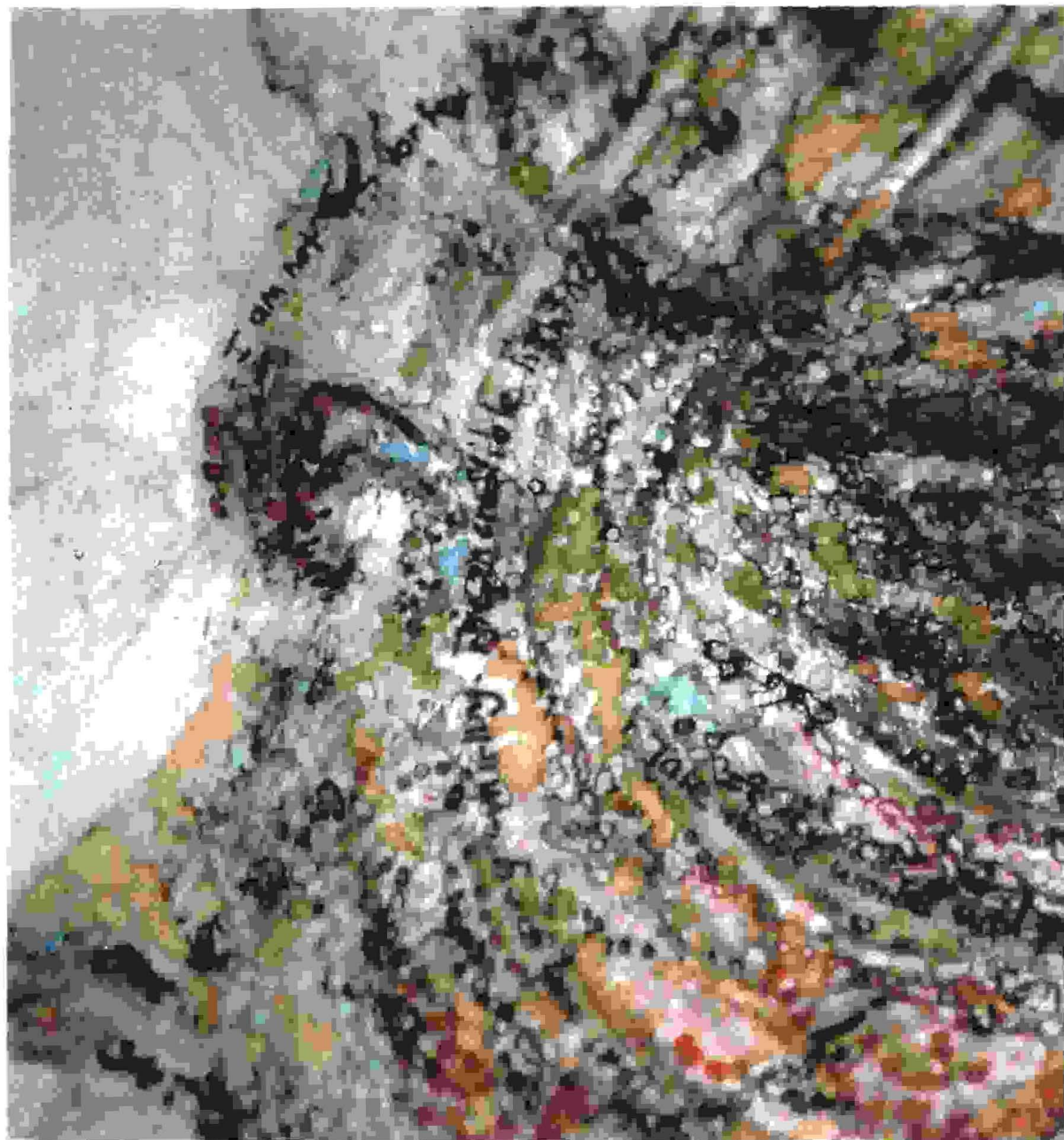


Figure 5: Phantom II: Monkey Mind

Stop that mad, airy whirling,
the incredible lightness of words.

Take those words
and pin them
like specimens on a tray.

Grab them mid-flight
and press them spread eagle on the page
so that
for a moment
in the stillness
they can
I can
be.

I am not the vortex but I create it.
I am a product of my own vertigo.
I am a creation.
Can I recreate who I am through my creating?
Yet, all selves I create are fiction.

Perhaps, if I can just pin down on the page
these dry, rustling words,

I can see who I am clearly
and pick up and remove the words that do not fit.
I can discard the words that are lies.

If we cannot find our selves in the words;
we need to look in the silence
that is the space between the words
I have heard.

If self is found in silence
then it doesn't matter which words are truth
and which are lies.

Unless words can hide in the silence.

The silence is whispering through the pages.

* * * *

There are many skins scattered on these pages.
They are shed from the layers of my personality.

No, I lie.

They are not on the pages.
I am still holding onto them;
they are wrapped around me like cloaks.
These cloaks are flaking and flapping in an existential wind.

Too easily, like Ezekiel's bones,
the words become flesh.
My bones, my words slide in your flesh.
They become the stones thrown into the pool of your
consciousness.

I am conscious of dropping my words into you.
They form and reform who you are in this moment.
I am yang and yin in this process.
I both penetrate and emerge from you.

Perhaps, I think, if I can't find myself in me,
I can find myself in you.
Words might bridge the existential gap.

* * * *

I'm finding that the fiction I want to write
flows in the non-fiction I cannot help but write.
But here is the irony.
All words I write are fiction.

You walk willingly through the pages of my fiction
because then the relating works
the way a story is supposed to work.

The narrative is there.
It has a pattern.
The pattern is manageable and predictable.

But I write the script
hoping you will find some other lines to speak.

I used to think I had to tell a story when I wrote.
And a story would have an audience.
I was conscious of the audience. Now I am only conscious of me.
I am only conscious of the words.

No, I lie. I cannot let go of being conscious of the audience.
Now I know that the story is in the journal.

The journal's writer is its audience.

The story is in the relating.

Those relating are simultaneously the cast and the audience.

The fiction is the story too.

It is in the becoming

that fiction dances between being voice and audience.

Now I write to tell no story.

But those stories still bunt their heads inside my fingertips as I
write.

They are nudging at me to tell them.

They understand that they are only stories, only fiction,
but they still want to be told.

Perhaps they understand that it is in the telling
rather than what is told
that truth lies.

* * * *

I am truly Echo
always looking for a Narcissus.
All I am is words.
And they are not my own.
I am not me;
I am a creation of other me's.

It's not so much a room of my own
but a word of my own that I want.
Like Yaweh, my word will not be written,
will not be spoken,
for it is in the writing and the speaking
that the lie exists.

"It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality" (Woolf, 1945, p.4)

" . . . we must uncover the silence that speech is mixed together with . . . [the silence that is] designed to create some space between the defenses that constitute our personalities, space that will provide the room for new forms of expression . . . silence, runs deep, way below the babble of habitual speech. We need space and time to find it" (Grumet, 1988, p.88).

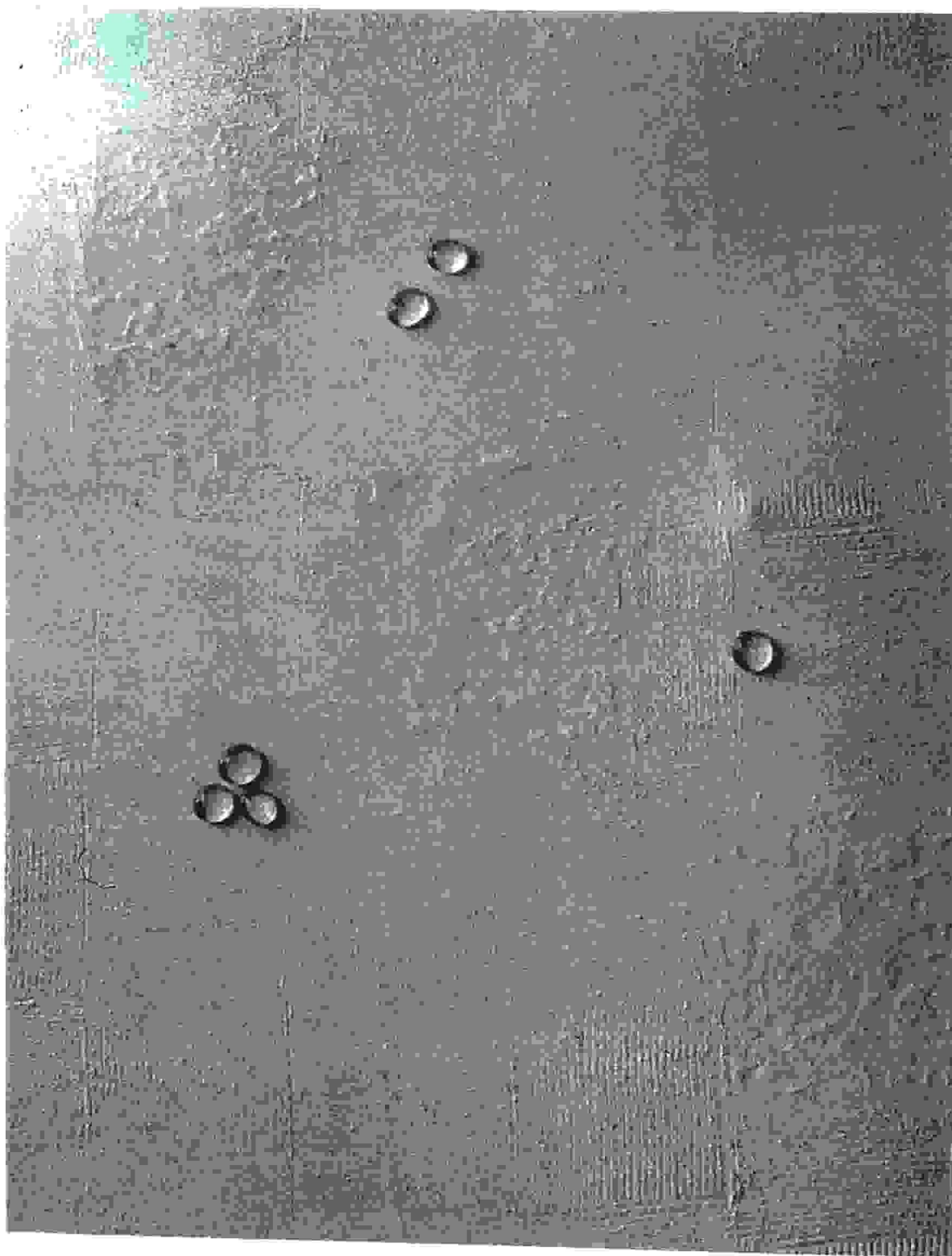


Figure 6: Word III: Zen Field

... sharing the shadows

I imagine my self
as layer
upon layer
upon layer
of story.

All ligaments,
tissues,
all layers of skin,
as story.

Stories masking story,
stories constructing,
reconstructing story.

Selves masking self,
selves constructing,
reconstructing self.

The narrative,
the plot,
the antagonist,
the protagonist
embedded within,
emerging from
story,
from self.



Figure 7: Word II: a woman's way of knowing

I have forgotten the word I intended to say,
and my thought,
unembodied,
returns to the realm of shadows.

(Mandelstam, in Brewster & Ghiselin, Eds., p. 102, text arrangement mine)

* * * *

The watcher sat among the mirrors. The mirrors were firmly wedged, in a surreal fashion, into the barks of living trees so that they protruded like haphazard street signs in the poplar woods. The trees were not noticeably affected by the slashes in their bark into which the mirrors were fastened, perhaps because some silver smith had bracketed each incision with a filigreed holder that supported each mirror and girdled each tree. Frequently, the watcher rose abruptly and seemed to move without much deliberation to gaze into another of the various mirrors. What was she looking for? What did she see? Certainly nothing in the mirrors gave her the answer she was seeking, for no expression of joy crossed her face as she gazed into each of the next; indeed the watcher seemed caught on a poignant edge that allowed her neither the contentment of a search rewarded nor the resignation of a search abandoned.

* * * *

Blue backed flies buzzed around the bottle. It lay on its side rolling slightly with the light wind wash that licked it slowly back and forth by the edge of the pond. The bottle, too, was blue. Lapis lazuli. The philosopher's stone. Some ancient bottle maker, it seemed, had been an artisan, for the stone was as transparent as glass and carved in the round with an intricate pattern resembling intertwining flowers and vines that was all the

more amazing in its complexity because of the diminutive size of the bottle which could have easily been placed in the open palm of a child's hand. One could not really tell what colour the liquid inside was, only that the bottle was indeed filled. The carving on the silver stopper repeated the pattern of the bottle and a fine chain, which may have once linked the bottle to a maid's kirtle, trailed in the water.

In spite of the hypnotic rhythm of the pond's ripples and the immutable whispering of the poplar trees which drew apart in the woods to create the glade, one had the sense that eternity had stopped its mad, dervishistic dance for a fragment of a second, that had somehow been captured in this place and in this instant, so that the continuum of time unfolded repeatedly the same moment, which contained all moments - past and present, in this place in these woods. It was as if, when one stepped closer to the pond, one had always been that close to the pond. If one glanced at the bottle, one had always been glancing at the bottle. If the bottle rolled slightly toward the lip of the pond, it had always rested in that place on the bank. Time was neither slowed in this place nor did it fly, it was merely caught in its entirety in the warm amber light that filled the poplar glade.

A rustling sound rose from the dry grasses that whiskered the south bank of the pond. The grasses parted and a knee emerged and then a hand, an elbow, a man. He shook his head slightly, as one might do to clear the cobwebs of an afternoon nap; yet, the man had an expression on his face that alluded to a sense of humor, a sense, certainly, of the irony of life, of the irony of self. The watcher knew that the man was not, nor would ever be, dulled with sleep, but that he was alert with a wit, an intelligence and an awareness of the place he inhabited in his own skin. He stood and stretched and surveyed the glade casually. The watcher shifted restlessly, it had been many seasons since an other's voice had disturbed the quiet of the glade, or had it been never? Where had this

one come from; how had the watcher missed this follower's arrival? Perhaps it was the trick of this place that the follower had always been there; the watcher always the one arriving. One could not perforate the amber skin of eternity to look behind, nor to look ahead, to say for certain who was or what was truth.

Had the watcher's restlessness alerted the follower? He seemed to turn toward her hiding place in the glade. She shrank back, a green and silver shadow among green and silver foliage. But no, the follower glanced away up to the whispering poplars; perhaps he had been convinced that he had heard nothing other than the sound of the trees for he turned away, walking purposefully toward the edge of the pond. There he crouched and cupped a handful of water in which he bathed his face. The watcher felt a sense of surprise; had he not noticed that the reflection cast by the pond was not his own as had been her experience looking into the pond a hundredfold of times? When the watcher gazed in the pond she saw nothing but the towering poplar trees. Her own reflection had somehow disappeared. She suspected it had something to do with the way the mirrors had subsumed her eons ago when she spent her time in another glade, perhaps this glade, gazing into mirrors that cast nothing back at her but the reflections of others, reflections of the host of others who had made up the watcher, reflections of the host of other's faces that seemed to swirl with mouths agape in silent screams. The watcher's voice, the watcher's reflection had disappeared, long buried, bottled and betrayed by the watcher herself.

Suddenly, the watcher was overcome with the overwhelming desire to hear the follower's voice. How could she make him speak when she had no voice of her own to call out? The bottle. He would speak for the bottle. If only she could draw his attention to it.

Concentrating, meditating, the watcher slid her fingertips down the bark of a poplar. She gathered strength from it; she gathered the breezes that blew through the uppermost branches from its skin and into herself. From the poplar tree, she drew into herself the whispers of all the leaves in the glade. Gently at first, then with increasing strength, she moved the breezes and the whispers of all the poplar leaves through her own limbs, through her own lungs, and out through her own lips. The bottle wavered for a second as she directed the breeze at it. But then it settled back into the same position on the bank of the pond, its silver chain still trailing darkly in the water. The watcher slumped back discouraged; she had so wanted the follower to notice the bottle, to speak. She had wanted to hear his voice. She so needed to hear his voice, his story. Perhaps then . . . The watcher once more gathered in the strength and the voice of the poplar trees. Once more she directed the breeze through her lips at the bottle. But it was futile, she could not draw enough strength to even rock the bottle in hope that the amber light would glint on the silver filigree and catch the follower's eye. The watcher sank back among the leaves in despair.

Softly at first, was it some mistake, but no, the follower's voice slid around the glade. His voice had a timbre such that even the poplar leaves increased their agitation and their immutable whispering became a muffled applause. He had not needed to notice the bottle. The follower had needed only to sense the watcher's unspoken request. It was a moment before the watcher, so long deaf, so long mute, understood that what she was hearing was indeed the voice of an other.

"I know the voice I possess can never unfold the story you want to hear or the history I can make you understand,"¹ he began. "The air around us is filled with whispers and echoes. There is no distinct voice." He bent his head and paused as if listening but the watcher heard no noise other than the beat of her own heart; she still hid, a gray green shadow in gray green foliage. "You ask me by whose authority may I speak?" the follower replied, to whose question? "I speak by my own. Suffice it to say I am a speaker. Noemon. An old name. One used by others. Some say I am alive on all sides through many voices. So many songs." Again the glade was quiet. The follower raised his head and seemingly gazed straight through the watcher's eyes to her soul. "Yet here, this time so many voices. Your voice most of all. You have given up so much. You sit for hours with your face pressed up against the mirrors of others, but you will never find answers there. And I have none for you. I look for my own. You must, as I must, forgive yourself the lapses into prose that is not your own or words that you have heard before. I too am haunted by specters of speeches, bones of soliloquies. But, I have forgotten as much as I remember - and you no longer know your own voice." Once more the follower stopped speaking, his gaze pierced through the foliage, pierced through the heart of the watcher. Still she cowered in her hiding place. Then, it seemed as though the follower turned and strode away; could it be that he had vanished as suddenly as he had arrived? The watcher strained to listen for echoes of his voice; surely she had heard an other speak? She stumbled, crawled from her nest in the underbrush. Frantically she sought shadows of his shape; surely she had see him, seen an other. Alas, the glade was as it had

¹dialogue of the follower copied by permission from an unpublished manuscript of D. C. Mason

always been. A pond. A ring of poplar trees. A gently rocking blue bottle. No sound but that of whispering leaves.

* * * *

The wordsmith laboured over her work. She molded and adjusted the pattern. It must be just so. So small a thing to capture. A word, words. The elixir of Echo and Narcissus. She was an artisan, pouring the molten metal, cooling it, smoothing the rough places, rubbing and polishing it to a warm gleam. Returning again to the pattern set by others. Pouring the words, herself, through her fingertips into some Celtic design of intertwining flowers and vines; eternally running, knotting, and loosing; running, knotting, and loosing; running, knotting, and loosing again. Wordsmith, caught in the web of her own work. Spun along in the very pattern that flowed from her fingertips. Could she not rewrite the story? Rephrase the lines? Why not rerun the myth, replay the scene? To fragment time. To finally send the needle on the vinyl spinning into the next groove, moving from cacophony to symphony.

Instead the life, the work, were merely echoes of each other.

* * * *

The quest in literature is a mirror of the quest in 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 lived remains unclear (Gunnars, 1989, p.146).

* * * *

The individual self

- a self belonging indistinguishably to [writer], reader, and [that which is written/read] -

that is realized by the process of a work . . .

stands for the whole integrated psyche of mankind;

it becomes, for the moment,

an epitome representation

of the human effort toward consciousness.

(Olney, 1972, p. 261, text arrangement mine)

* * * *

It was not at all surprising that he seemed to appear from nowhere.

It was not at all surprising that she, startled, scuttled away from him sideways across the driftwood.

"You keep trying to embroil yourself in my fictions," she tossed over her shoulder as she moved into the shelter she had constructed.

But her voice was lost to the wind which chased white foamed, ash green waves up onto the beach. The agates rolled and rattled as each wave was preceded by another so that the watcher's shelter was constantly filled with the murmur or roar of the eternally shifting beachscape. The voice of fragmentation and erosion plagued her hiding place. This was why she chose to live on the dark edge of the rainforest, the brutal end of the coast. The erosion and fragmentation of eternity were mapped out daily at her feet. No moment, no vista was ever the same. One couldn't recall from one moment to the next what the beach, the forest edge had looked like, sounded like, smelled like last; one only knew, somehow, that it was different. That one had no footing in time here.

Of course he had come. At a time when she was sure she had come to resemble the forest in which she lived. Her hair greyed and tangled and twisted like spanish moss. Cedar skin, reddened and peeling. Dirt, scraps of seaweed, bits of bark, twigs clung to her clothing. She had laboured for days hauling beached logs from at least a mile down the inlet to this place she had chosen behind a wave-built berm of stones. It was quite amazing, she thought, as she rested in the sun that broke through the fog each day, sometime after noon, that she was labouring so diligently, feeling such contentment, such satisfaction, over the aesthetic aspects of this creation which was doomed to be destroyed by the waves that had built the berm in the first place. She imagined, often, as she lay there at night, the time that would come when the grey-green waves would, at first, gently lift the logs and remove them from the lean-to shape she had constructed. She could feel her own body being raised by the waves; hair strewn, limbs pliant she would rise to the crest and then . . .

She was not sure whether she would be in this place when that would happen. When the ocean would destroy her hiding place. In the late afternoon as she lay in her shelter with the sun running its fingers over her hips, her ribs, her breast bone, the hold of the waves, the hold of the water seemed to drain out of her skin. She could imagine that somehow she would always be there in that place, in that moment. That the rush of the waves through the agates would always fill her ears. That the deep, green smell of the cedar would always tickle her nose.

At night she would be careful to keep her fire low, deep within her shelter, as often the lights of fishing boats heading for the open waters would trace across the wide mouth of the entrance of the inlet. She was not worried so much about them - the fishermen - she doubted whether they would even take the time to inspect a beach fire no

matter how odd that might seem to be on this inaccessible point, but she wanted to preserve her existential isolation for as long as she could. She wanted to carry with her the consciousness that she was existing outside the awareness of any other. No one knew where she was. No one knew of her. She did not exist outside her own awareness of her existence, her being. She was free without this distraction of others; without the distraction of being a part of the consciousness of another. In this place she was free to go deep within herself. She could play. She had spent hours holding agates to the sun. Squinting. Peering through them looking at colours, cracks. With others around there were stories. Endless nuances, subplots, character entrances and exits. Here she was alone.

This was why, when she turned to see the follower staring through her, she was startled. It had been so long, it felt, since she had been a part of a story. Since there had been a self and an other. She knew instantly, that scuttling crab like across the driftwood must have appeared foolish. That ducking into the shadows of her shelter was futile. She knew that she had embroiled herself in her own fictions.

* * * *

. . . and cried

And heard another's voice cry: "What! are you here?"

Although we were not. I was still the same,

Knowing myself yet being someone other . . .

(Eliot in Olney, 1972, p. 280)

* * * *

The wordsmith worked on the bones of others. Stories calling deep from within the sleep. Taking and laying bits of this, shards of that. Words rumbling and rolling up

the beach. Words crashing like mighty boulders, uprooted trees. Cracked, crevassed, fragments of time, of place, of person. Words laid on top of one another, removed, rearranged, discarded. Wordsmith, as much the creation as the creator.

* * * *

'An actor making a gesture is both creating for himself out of his deepest need and yet for the other person . . . The actor's work is never for an audience, yet is always for one. The onlooker is a partner who must be forgotten and still constantly kept in mind; a gesture is statement, expression, communication and a private manifestation of loneliness - it is always what Artaud calls a signal through the flames - yet this implies a sharing of experience' (Brook in Skura, 1981, p.31).

* * * *

Who was this solitary other moving along the beach as though a part of it. The wind howled off the foam of the waves. Yelps and cries from far out to sea. Veiled by the fog, the sun pearled the air around him.

He wrestled with the idea of approaching the shelter into which she had disappeared. A tumulus of flotsam, it nonetheless gave off a wisp of smoke whenever she was 'home'. Three days he had watched her, retreating to his cave when she sensed his presence. What would he say to her? What would she think, a man approaching her in this timeless, solitary, windswept ledge on the abyss of the Pacific.

Perhaps he would leave a gift. He thought of the raven's skull he had found the day before and fished it from his shoulder bag. Placing the perfect, dimpled shell of a sea urchin upon its forehead, he placed it on the top of a large stone. Then, stooping to the beach, he collected four clam shells and arranged them at the four cardinal points around the skull.

Then he slipped back into the gloom of the forest to watch the darkness gather.²

* * * *

The self lies not in a locatable scene with characters, however wish-fulfillingly fictional, but in a nonspatial, temporal play between scenes, and even in a changing narrative stance. The exchanges in the psychoanalytic process which lead to the gradual discovery of the patient's self are the same ones the reader entertains as he comes to understand the experience being portrayed - but not mimetically imitated by literature

(Skura, 1981, p. 57).

* * * *

It was all the same, words, no words; another meant dialogue, exchange, subterfuge, negotiation. He may not have spoken a thing, he did not need to; the watcher knew that the webs spun from her throat, from her soul were the fictions that embroiled her, that, perhaps, would embroil him. He was a follower. Perhaps he was a different one, perhaps the same, it did not matter. She knew it would be her own fictions that would tangle him up, ensnare him. She could not stop them, these fictions, these stories.

For all her talk, for all her wisdom, old crone she had once called herself, she could not dwell in that place. The place that allowed for an other; a relating. These things folded in on her. She became the amber rift of eternity herself. All stories emerging from, returning to her. All stories folding in on, closing in on her. The healer who could never herself be healed. All stories evolved from the watcher; stories that had been and stories that would be. All stories returned to her. Once she had said "I write the script hoping you will find some other lines to speak" but she knew it was a lie. There

²response to allegorical text contributed by D. C. Mason

was no hope. There were no other lines. All bones, all words, all stories were hers and hers alone. She was the watcher, the story weaver, the one trapped in her own web.

It was safer with no stories. With no voice. It was safer with no audience. No fellow actors. It had never been the words of Narcissus that Echo had repeated, but her own. Oh, the words may have come from Narcissus' throat, but they were Echo's lines; she wrote them. It was her own words that destroyed them. She was the destroyer. It was the voice of fragmentation and erosion that she reveled in. It was the voice of continuity, of story that choked her, sent her reeling for another place.

She took with her the gift Gaia had left. She had found many treasures Gaia had placed on the beach for her. Each gift was received with the elation of a blessing, symbols of Gaia's acknowledgment, Gaia's celebration of herself: the bleached white shell of a crab; a flat, round stone, so moon-like that it was as if it had fallen from the sky; an amber agate hollowed into a cup on one side - into this she had wedged her paraffin candle; wild abalone and swimming scallop shells - some a both palms wide in their breadth; flaming red and indigo black beach pea flowers; the splayed wing of a raven, feathers intact. Gaia the creator, Gaia the giver. Icons that touched the soul of the watcher. Icons that the watcher in turn created. She took the raven's skull. She took the urchin shell. She took three of the clam shells. The last shell she left for him. It would tell him in which direction she had gone. It would remind him of the promise he had made that he would follow her.

And then she left.

* * * *

Every creative person is a duality or a synthesis of contradictory qualities. On the one side he is a human being with a personal life, while on the other he is an impersonal

creative process. . . . The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him. . . . As an artist he is a "man" in a higher sense - he is a 'collective man', a vehicle and molder of the unconscious psychic life of mankind (Jung, 1954, p. 101).

* * * *

"But the sea is wide, and I can't swim over

Neither have I wings to fly."

(McKennitt, 1985, track 3:24)

* * * *

Fingers of fog groped up the beach, curled around the rotting driftwood, then slid past the berm of stones, finding the edge of the trees and the cedar saplings which seemed to tremble as the mist blindly clutched its way into the forest. Before she was even aware that the perimeters of the tide and the forest edge had been blurred and then swallowed entirely by the fog, the watcher was lost.

In the realm of shadows, on the abyss that separated land and ocean, voices yelped, cried and were abruptly silenced. The watcher turned; was that the muffled fluttering of raven wings or the rustle of beach grasses? Grey light fragmented, eroded into darkness, and then back to a strange opalescent glow in the swirling fog. Shapes rushed in and departed quickly in dervishistic dances. The watcher twisted, turned; which way? Perhaps left, no right, straight ahead? She stumbled, fell, her rucksack torn: agates, moon snails, a blue bottle, the raven's skull spiraled out onto the sand, swirled into the eddying tide. Treasures blackened, stained as the tide licked slowly back and forth across the hand trailing darkly on the sand.

* * * *

By giving . . . shape [to the archetypal image] the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life (Jung, 1968, p. 82)

* * * *

See, now they vanish,

The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,

To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

(Eliot, in Olney, 1972, 26)

* * * *

Deep within the forest, a child cried out.

The elders, circled on the branches high in the cedar trees, shifted restlessly back and forth. Shuffling their bony feet, darkly ruffling their feathers, they communicated their unease. This place was the shadow of the forest. What little light there was, was refracted with an oily sheen on the feathers of the ravens. Red-black eyes blinked, gleamed, heads tilted, beaks bowed. The familiar "tok" of the beach ravens vanquished from this place of the elders: trickster, word-weaver no longer; tongues were silenced.

* * * *

The tap root of my soul withered and died with your refusal to water it with your tears. My own tears, my own grief was not enough. Why did you hide your grief? Why must pain be silenced? I could not turn away from those stories. I have watered them, kept some of them alive, by keeping the pain alive. I have whispered them, chanted them, murmured them to myself, but I could not keep them alive alone. Stories of family do not belong to one. Could you not tell that in losing those stories, I was losing myself?

We hid our faces from each other. Masks became the shroud behind which we

hid our stories, our history. We were not allowed to speak of them, to speak of life before death. Did you not notice how your children brought them to you like gifts, stories that connected us, made us family, and you turned from them. You silenced them. Did you think that by turning away, turning to stone, you could start afresh, create yourself anew? Your renewal was our death.

You watched with eyes averted as the soil, the story that was our family, was broken with hoe, with spade. Did you not understand that it - that story - was the place in which I, in which we, lived? You cannot, I cannot fold up a history which is family and discard it as if it was an object of shame, a story never written. This was my childhood. This was the place I needed to, still need to, return to, to retrace to see who I was, to see who I am. Photos were burned. Childhood reminders boxed and sold. But mostly stories silenced. You stood there in the doorway looking on, and then you walked away, you did not stop the destruction.

Eventually, all three of us - father, son, daughter - walked away. We walked away from each other.

* * * *

"The need for an audience is
partly the need to have someone understand
and respond
to what we are saying."

(Skura, 1981, p.173)

* * * *

It was many days before the follower again emerged from the forest. He had instantly regretted leaving the raven's skull, the urchin shell and the clam shells on the log - this was an offering of his art, his soul; what a fool he was to have given a piece of himself to a stranger. He found himself bitterly regretting and exceptionally distraught with the fact that she had entered his world at all.

He had disappeared with this realization, with this wave of regret; it took several days of simply being in, of simply being the forest before he could again allow himself to think, to allow himself to even be with even the slightest edge of feeling. Several days before it was safe, once again, to be part man. Ironically, though, at the same time he sank into, merged into his forest, his place of protection, his place of solace, at the same time he retreated from his humanity, around the edges of "self" he could sense another part of him that regretted the fact that he had not approached the shelter into which she had disappeared - it was the thought of being with an other, being a "we" that resonated with him again. Although he was not sure he was yet an "I"; sure, in fact, that there were many seasons to go before "I" would spring cleanly from his own roots devoid of the clutter, the chaos of past lives, past "others"; part of him, perhaps the boy/man part, longed to share the forest, to drink in through eyes the peeling bark, the sun through brilliant leaves; to breathe, with someone else, the deep green smell of the forest floor mingling with the sun pressed sap of cedars. It was only then that the cycle would be complete: follower, watcher, forest; man, woman, earth; self "I", other "I", together "we". It was only then that he would be fully "I" and fully "we"; he would be fully forest and fully man.

But the follower was trapped by memories he had of distant others, of the past "we's" which still held scars that would never heal. Scars that he could stroke his fingers

down and instantly recall the fire, the scorching that came with the shaping of others who said he was too much this, too little that. Wounds that came from others who had scorned what he had offered, or, worse, had looked away with the boredom that comes from a lack of recognition of the gifts that come from soul. It was the memory of these wounds, the stroking of these scars that held him back. That held him so long in the shape of forest.

That was why he was not surprised to find, when he finally emerged from the forest, that she had vanished. That was why he was not surprised to find how cold and dark and hollow the shelter was that she had once inhabited. That was why he was not surprised to find that the raven skull he had so tentatively and tenderly arranged for her on the log was gone. That was why he was not surprised to find that the pain he felt as he gazed down the long stretch of empty beach was a mingling of relief and remorse. That was why he failed to see as he turned on his heel to once again seek solace in the forest, rolling in the clear sparkling water that wrapped itself around his feet, the small clam shell that had slipped from the log where he had left it for her, and which she, in turn, had left for him.

* * * *

" Self can, indeed must, be defined in terms of ' other ' "

(Doll, Jr., 1993, p. 123).

* * * *

Wordweaver, wordsmith, watcher, grave robber: these things are synonymous.

* * * *

Still further into the forest, deeper into the shadow, to the place that was most dark, the watcher went. Branches low on trees, dense mosses, thickly bracketed

overgrowth finally drove her to her knees. Where was she going? Why was she here? To what centre, what place, what purpose? Fear was palpable in this place, shadow of the shadows themselves. Silence itself was muffled, padded, only the dull thud of the watcher's heartbeat drove her onward.

* * * *

One follower sank into the shadow of the forest and there he remained. Face hidden in the leaves. Stories silenced. Pain suppressed. Eyes blinded in the dark. He has lived a life that is no life but it is his life. He has lived a life of existential isolation. He has lived a life far beyond the reach of emotion. Leave him to his scars wordweaver.

* * * *

If you want to dig deeply in the shadow place of the forest, let it be your own forest, your own shadow. If you push aside the debris of fallen leaves, sticks; peel back the moss, scrape away the earth, you will find the bones. Yellowed blinding sockets; jawbones lying speechless; marrow pounded dry; earth stained cracks; fragments, shards, and fossils. . . . Bones whose lesions show years of exertion, repression, suppression. Staring back at you, you will find your own gaping skull.

* * * *

Another follower chose a life far from the forest. He moved beyond its reach, beyond, even, the ocean. He chose many selves over no self. He has masks to spare. He kept family but danced arms length around the lost stories. Made new stories in place of old. For many years his eyes have been dead.

* * * *

The wordsmith sat back; it was done. She sat back and listened to the small voices that whispered between the words. Listened to the others who arranged

themselves, uninvited, on the page. The cacophony was there; the symphony too. The pattern was there, set by others, set by self. Stories shaping, shaped. Is that what this story is; to know the self, to know the story? No, this story is for the wordweaver to hear her own voice, and to listen.

* * * *

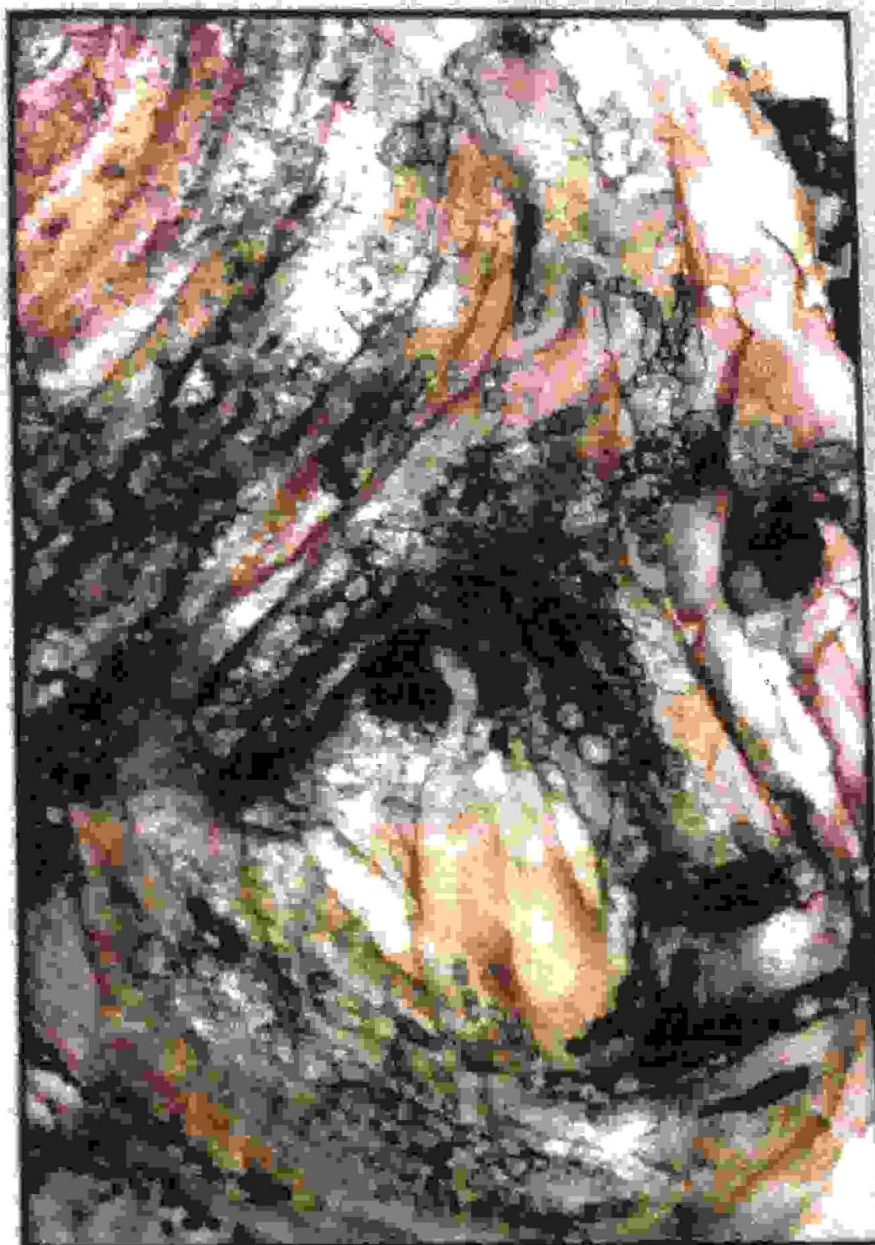


Figure 8: Phantom 1

Hidden in the text

hidden in the sheaves of pages

" I " was there

captured, pinned into a caricature

captured and imprisoned

in words that march

mostly crawl

stealthily weaving through the underbrush

of text.

They existed in words

fools both they were

they tucked themselves carefully into

one dimensional boxes

flat

black and white

bits

carefully incised

shreds of imagery

even in metaphors, allegories

that paraded

masqueraded

as living pulsing flesh

they danced

an impoverished

ritual

but fools neither

how else to rise

from lifetimes

centuries

of myth

than to write it on the page

to decant words with words

to cite, recite the narrative

and thus unfold the text

and thus unfold the life.

I work to find the place of no self.

The place just to be.

The place of the marrow;
the place of the regeneration,
the place of life.

I work to find
the silence
that is

... the space between the words

* * * *

I sign up for a once-a-week six week evening class at the community college. It is called "How to Write and Publish your first novel". I'm interested in the publishing part.

The instructor is a local author; his latest book is on display in the "New Books" case I set up for our school library.

He won't get to the publishing part until the sixth class he tells me.

* * * *

The hallway is long and dark and paneled with mahogany. Triangular shaped, thickly glassed, light fixtures press against the sooty, cream-coloured ceiling in between every second door, and emit a fractured pale yellow halo which glints dully off the edges of the brass numbers. To the left, a mission-style railing guards against the drop to the massive foyer. One expects the daylight from that entryway, as meager as it is, to permeate the hall above, but it does not. I cannot identify the peculiar odor of the building, which does not seem to emanate from any one particular room, but, when I close my eyes and breathe deeply, I catch notes reminiscent of saffron, star anise, and something sweet, like bergamot, I think.

* * * *

I want to construct this place. To provide reasons, explanations. To tell a history. But at the same time I must deconstruct it. Tell no story, tell no lie.

* * * *

He begins. "The novel," he instructs the class, "has a structure. A writer needs to plan the structure. . . . The novel needs a main character . . . The main character must

have a conflict. . . . The external conflict of the character should mirror the internal conflict." He diagrams, and neatly labels, the parts of the novel on the board for us.

I sit in the class taking notes.

I am a closet English teacher.

* * * *

A tiny, rounded oriental woman is the concierge and it is she who is showing me to the room which is to be my living accommodation for the duration of my stay. I follow her through the maze of hallways often finding I have almost lost sight of her in the gloom. As is the custom, she is dressed in loose black cotton trousers and a wrap-around jacket. The soft shuffling of her slippers, the dry rasping of her clothes, and the clicking of her jade bracelets, takes me suddenly back home to the beach and a memory of the taffeta rustle of ravens tapping clam shells open on the rocks. The hallway is monastically silent. The concierge speaks no English, and I speak no Mandarin.

I want to travel beyond this place, to tell why I am here. But I cannot. If you cannot go forward in the narrative, I have heard them say, you must go back.

* * * *

"You must know the end before you begin," he continues, emphasizing, pointedly, with chalk, "the end" on the diagram of the novel he has drawn on the board.

I sit up. "Enough," I think. (An idea for a visual art installation comes to me. It will be titled: Constructing Illusions.)

"And always," he moves away from the chalkboard and closer to the class, "always the story must end with a resolution that satisfies the reader."

A resolution that satisfies the reader.

* * * *

An unidentifiable door is unlocked. A watery, green light leaks out. She stands aside. I enter. Like the building, the flat is peculiarly angled, a rambling structure as if the architect did not know where to end. Or perhaps he did not know where to begin.

I have entered this place before; there are other places I have entered that I must tell about.

The oblique corridor opens into a large common room, the farthest corner of which has two large windows at right angles to each other. It is the light of dusk that is watery and green. Out of the left window I can see the grounds of the building. The landscaped copses of trees have merged into an uneven thicket. A brick wall brackets the shop cluttered street away from the estate. The street appears gaudy and bustling but the sounds do not penetrate the flat.

* * * *

I want to see what happens next but I cannot until I see what happened before.

* * * *

I talk to my Grade 11's about what I learned in my night class. "My fiction does not work the way his does," I tell them, "I do not write the way he says writers write."

We explore the idea of popular culture versus high literature, a dichotomy my night school instructor had used.

I show them his diagram. We talk about the things we agree with, the things that we don't agree with, and the things that we're not sure of.

An ending that satisfies the reader is one of the things we are not sure of.

"Let's write one," I propose, a popular culture short story.

I assign myself the same task.

* * * *

Out of the right window I can see the adjacent wings of the building. They sprawl left and right with balustrades and balconies and long covered walkways. Here the grounds are in turmoil. Excavation is taking place. There are gaping holes, trenches. Great slices have been knifed from the earth. It is a graveyard. A mass exhumation is taking place. Coffins are piled in twos, maybe threes like dominoes stacked in wild juxtaposition, the helter skelter of an abandoned playroom. I look closer. The coffins have been carved in great chunks from the earth. They are blocks of dirt; the shape of the coffins, the molding carved in the wooden lids, is discernible as, like sarcophagus, the layers of earth encase the coffins.

* * * *

What would we do if we did not respond to text from the place of "objective" criticism? Where would we be?

We would be in the place of self.

* * * *

We return to class. I have not done exactly what I assigned the Grade 11's and myself. Neither have most of them. We just, as a group of individuals, cannot write pop culture, at least as that instructor has described it, we conclude.

But we can write.

* * * *

Who is this character that is revealed by the narrative, unraveled by the dream?

* * * *

The concierge has vanished. I leave the flat and go out in the hallway to look for her, for someone. There is no one there. There is no whispering of the cloth of her trousers, no faint shuffle of slippers, no distant clink of dishes or murmur of voices. There

is silence. I turn and look back into the flat. I can see the dull grey-green light of the setting sun in a triangular prism on the floor. I want to go back in but I cannot. I cannot enter this place again. I am not the same. The answer is not there.

* * * *

"So, how is the story supposed to end?" Renee asks me.

Renee wrote a story, she says, in response to my advice regarding her writer's block complaint in an earlier conversation, about a fight she had with her sister, from her sister's point of view. "It was hard," Renee confesses.

"Did it help you understand where your sister was coming from?" I ask.

Renee nods silently at me.

I nod silently back.

And then she asks the question, "So, how is it, the story, supposed to end? What's an ending 'that will satisfy the reader'?"

"I don't know, Renee," I respond, "That's exactly what I struggle with. . . . That's why I'm not sure I can write the sort of stuff we were talking about, the kind of story he, my instructor, outlined."

Renee nods at me again. She is thinking.

"Do you feel that it is finished," I ask, " your piece of writing?"

"I think so," she says.

"Well, then, I think it is ended," I say.

Both Renee and I are caught up in our individual reveries again for a minute.

Then we catch each other's eye.

It is ended.

Renee and I exchange a smile.

Epilogue:

a word of one's own³

" ' Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'

That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the [Cheshire] Cat."

(Carroll, 1865, in Green, Ed., 1965, p. 64).

³unless otherwise noted, the text which is justified to the left margin sans italics is from Virginia Woolf: A Room of One's Own, page references are endnoted as indicated by the subscript numbers

I need not say that what I
 [have]
 described has no existence; . . .

(repressed: suppressed: ex-pressed)

'T is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being.

(surfacing: facing: re-surfacing)

Lies
 [have]
 flown from my lips,
 but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them;
 it is for you to seek out this truth
 and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping.

If not, you will of course
 throw the whole of it into the waste-paper basket and forget all about it.

Here then was I . . .
 That collar . . .
 the need to come to some conclusion on
 [the]
 subject . . .

(Such a conundrum: give substance to that which sought transparency)

bowed my head to the ground . . . 1

Thought . . .

had let its line down into the stream.

It swayed, minute after minute,

hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds,

letting the water lift it and sink it until -

you know the little tug -

the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line:

and then the cautious hauling of it in,

and the careful laying of it out? . . .

I will not trouble you with that thought now,

though if you look carefully you may find it for yourselves

in the course of what I

[have written]. . .

But however small it was,

it had,

nevertheless, the mysterious property of its kind -

put back into the mind,

it became at once very exciting,

and important;

and as it darted and sank,

and flashed hither and thither,

set up such a wash and tumult of ideas

that it was impossible to sit still.

It was thus that I found myself walking with extreme rapidity
across a grass plot.

Instantly a . . . figure rose to intercept me.²

Nor did I at first understand that the gesticulations . . .

were aimed at me . . .

Instinct rather than reason

came to my help;

he was a Beadle; . . .

(friction: diction: fiction)

This was the turf,

there was the path. . . .³

(con-form: de-form: re-form)

But, you may say,

[this is an epilogue to a Master's thesis in Curriculum Studies]

what has

[any of this got to do with that]?

I will try to explain. . . .⁴

(A metaphor is a structure around which many truths can be built.)

And since a novel has . . . correspondence to real life,
its values are to some extent those of real life.

*(Her writing wasn't working
as strongly as I felt
she was capable of, I told her.)*

But it is obvious that the values of
[self]
differ very often from the values [of] . . .
other . . .

(Why? What's missing?)

it is [often] the
[other]
values that prevail. . . .

And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction.

This is an important book,
the critic assumes, because it deals with war.

This is an insignificant book
because it deals with the feelings of a woman in a drawing-room. . . .

(Something of you is missing.

You aren't allowing your self to show through in your writing.)

The whole structure, therefore, of the early nineteenth century novel
 was raised,
 if one was a woman,
 by a mind which was slightly pulled from the straight,
 and made to alter in clear vision in deference to external authority . . . 6

(That's because I'm trying to be objective, she said.

Trying to fit with what I've been taught, with how I've been taught to write.)

But how impossible it must have been for them
 not to budge either to the right or to the left.
 What genius, what integrity it must have required in face of all that criticism,
 in the midst of that purely patriarchal society,
 to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking. . . .

(Where does the subjective fit with the objective?

Where does that which is external fit with that which is internal?

Where is the place of self?)

[instead]

ignoring the perpetual admonitions of the
 eternal pedagogue -

write this, think that . . .

deaf to that persistent voice, now grumbling,

now patronizing,

now domineering,

now grieved,

now shocked,

now angry,

now avuncular,

that voice . . . 7

(Where is the strength of the reading?)

Where is the strength of the writing?)

[Yet]

some collaboration

has to take place in the mind between

[self]

and

[other]

before the art of creation can be accomplished. 8

When I first planned out my inquiry

I neatly set out in a binder

chapter headings:

*(in its first incarnation this thing was Discovering Narratives . . .
 no I can't even write the whole title out at this point; it was so
 clumsy and awkward; so removed from the thing itself)*

(Void: de-void: a-void)

anyway

*I had broken down the chapters into each segment of the title:
 a chapter on discovering
 a chapter on narratives
 and so on
 the last chapter was to have been
 "Who is the teacher in all this?"*

But at second sight the words seemed not so simple.

The title

"Who is the teacher in all this?"

might mean,

and you may have it to mean,

*teachers and who they are,
 or it might mean Donna and who she is,
 or it might mean Donna and her teaching;*

or it might mean
 that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together
 and you wanted me to consider them in that light.
 But when I began to consider the subject in this last way,
 which seemed the most interesting,
 I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback.
 I should never be able to fulfill what is,
 I understand, the first duty of *a graduate student*
 - to hand you after *three years* of

(*'dis course*)

a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks
 and keep on the mantelpiece for ever.

All I could do was to offer you an opinion on one minor point

- a person must have ϑ

a community
and a word of her own
if she is to

(*un-cover: dis-cover: re-cover*)

self.

At any rate, . . .

one cannot hope to tell the truth.

One can only hope to show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold.

One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions

as they observe the limitations,

the prejudices,

the idiosyncrasies

of the [writer].

Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. . . .10

[However,]

the inevitable sequel . . . seemed to be . . .

(Name your label, Mabel: whose camp are you in?)

[that]

(Halt! Who goes there? Friend or Foe?)

one must strain off what was personal and accidental in all these impressions

and so to reach the pure fluid,

the essential oil of truth.11

[One must pointedly acknowledge that]

*(let us know our thinking counts;
our way of being counts for something in your inquiry)*

the reading of these books

(the writing of these lines)

seems to

perform a curious couching operation on the senses;

one sees more intensely afterwards;

the world seems bared of its covering and given an intenser life . . .

seems to

ask you [ask me] to live in the presence of reality,

an invigorating life,

it would appear,

whether one can impart it or not. . . .12

[One must pointedly acknowledge that . . .]

masterpieces are not single and solitary births;
 they are the outcome of many years of
 thinking in common,

(What place am I at now?

*I am at the place of thinking about and planning how I will teach English Literature 12
 next year.*

It feels like the very antithesis of what I did this year:

*allowing my students to choose their own reading material
 and their own responses to what they read*

as I moved with them to help them shape and grow in their reading and writing skills.

Next year, with English Literature 12,

I have a prescribed body of literature to present to the students.

And that prescription is based on yet another prescription:

the canon of English literature.

In 5 months the students and I will move through approximately 2000 years of

predominantly male,

completely Anglo Saxon,

conclusively not post-modern ways of being.

How can I present this literature to my students in such a way as to acknowledge . . .

ac.knowl-edge (ak-nol'j) v. -edged, -
edging. 1> To admit the existence, reality,
or ~~truth~~ of. 2. a. To express recognition of
<acknowledged our presence> b. To
express ~~gratitude~~ for. 3. To report the
receipt of.— (Webber, 1984, p. 8, strike
throughs mine).

well, what? acknowledge what?

How about presenting the literature not in a way that says this is the way to be,

this is the voice to use,

these are the aesthetic values to adopt,

this is what you must aspire to.

I think that is what this is about.

Acknowledging that this canon has been constructed,

is a structure which excludes as well as includes,

has shadow as well as shape.

There is a before.

There have been others.

There are . . .

There is . . .

(In-structing: de-constructing)

*This is what it is about no matter whether it is a canon of English Literature,
a canon of administrative theory,
a canon of curriculum studies.*

It is about acknowledging that there are other ways of being.

Acknowledging structure(s).

Acknowledging that destruction often occurs with/because of construction.

Acknowledging the coming before and the going after

*(not as in pursuing as an ideal but as a building on what has gone before
even if all that remains is the rubble of deconstructed text).*

But above all finding one's own way of being with it.

Finding one's own way of shaping and being shaped.

Finding one's own voice and one's own self.

[One must pointedly acknowledge that]

. . . masterpieces are not single and solitary births;
they are the outcome of many years of
thinking in common,
of thinking by the body of the people,
so that the experience of the mass
is behind the single voice.¹³

*And so I do,
acknowledge
this but
I also
acknowledge
that*

it is much more important to be oneself than anything else.¹⁴

Endnote to Epilogue

1 p. 5

2 p. 6

3 p. 7

4 p. 3

5 p. 95

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7 p. 136

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9 p. 3 - 4

10 p. 4 - 5

11 p. 32

12 p. 144

13 p. 85

14 p. 145

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