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**Cadences of Voice, Conversations of Change:
The Poetry of Bronwen Wallace**

**A Thesis
presented to the
Department of English
Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario**

**In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts**

**by
Debb Hurlock ©
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for Bradley and Derek Hurlock

I have a lot to learn yet and to learn it I must enter the harder, more complex regions where women's experience begins to diverge and differ. I believe such journeys are necessary in order that that imagined world may become possible and whole—for all of us.

Bronwen Wallace, Arguments With The World

...and the bit of changed air
between the palms goes free
to become the glitter
on some common thing that inexplicably shines

Galway Kinnell, Selected Poems

Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	iii
Introduction	
"Because I am a poet I want to begin with the voice"	1
Chapter 1	
"The unexpected rituals that grow out of ordinary life"	13
Chapter 2	
"The stubborn argument of the particular"	49
Chapter 3	
"Other conversations eager to begin"	85
Conclusion	
"The last word between us"	124
Works Cited	128

Abstract

The primary objective of the thesis is to examine three fundamental elements of Bronwen Wallace's narrative poetry: stories, conversations and voice. Wallace employs these methods to probe the moral, personal and political conditions of women and in doing this, offers readers the untold stories of women's lives. This grounds her poetry within the particulars of everyday life, offering readers insight into the mundane yet magical lives of women.

I explore these three fundamental elements to illustrate how Wallace records the daily particulars of women's lives with the intent to liberate women further. She offers readers a different perception of women's lives, different in that it detracts from the patriarchally defined perceptions of women. This mitigation of patriarchy begins in chapter one with the examination of inverted perception in Wallace's second collection of poetry, Signs of the Former Tenant. Fundamentally, Wallace sees limitation and possibility as one and the same. She invites the reader to be part of the conversations of women who have taken the limitations of their lives (often imposed by patriarchy) and created possibilities.

Argument, a progeny of conversation, is the heart of Common Magic, the third collection of poetry. The form of argument becomes a vehicle for conveying different perspectives of violence within women's lives. I examine this violence in chapter two and show how the conventional perception of battered women as 'victims' is inverted to women as survivors. This inversion leads into the reworking of the conventional male-defined elegy. The elegy is redefined to include the celebration of women's friendships: a celebration of the earthly and ordinary texture of women's lives and relationships.

I use this paradigm of the redefined elegy in chapter three to explore particular poems in The Stubborn Particulars of Grace that record the intimate conversations of friends. In this fourth and final collection of poetry, conversation functions as a foundation from which a choir of women's voices emerges. I explore this polyphony of women's voices that will consequently transcribe, in literature, through the poetry of Bronwen Wallace, the untold stories of their lives. The individual voices of writers, friends, photographers, and battered women become a choir of women's voices that orate the raw and radiant truth of women's lives. Each individual voice becomes a testimony of the fortitude of women.

By studying Wallace's poetry, the social and political conditions of women are questioned, challenged and renamed. Ultimately, for Wallace, this is the way to evoke change and this becomes the hope for a more interconnected and gender-balanced society.

Acknowledgments

With reverence I wish to thank my parents, the first poets of my life who have always afforded me the opportunity to write. I thank them for their love and support that always comes to me bare of expectations and doubts.

I also wish to thank Dr. Jeanette Lynes, an advisor who transcended this role, providing this study and my ideas with undivided and acute attention. I am grateful for her shared enthusiasm, her poetic intuitions and particularly for her sensitive guidance.

I am also thankful to Bronwen Wallace for the poetry she wrote, and to my friends who constantly contribute 'common magic' to my life.

Key to Abbreviations

Signs of the Former Tenant: SFT

Common Magic: CM

The Stubborn Particulars of Grace: SPG

Arguments With The World: AWW

Introduction:
"Because I am a poet I want to begin with the voice"

But why are there so few women poets before this century? Why are there almost no women writers who wrote and raised families as well? Why do women writers, and women only, have to choose? This means I have very few models to learn from. There are no maps here; each poem is an entrance into an uncharted territory. For you as a reader, it means lots of poems and stories about battles, but very few about raising children. Half of the story of what we are as a species is missing.¹

-Bronwen Wallace

The other "half" of the story begins here and now. It begins with the "uncharted" poetry of Bronwen Wallace that guides us into this missing half of the ordinary lives of women. Wallace's excavation of their unknown territory transforms the mundane particulars of women's lives into rituals. Because of her extensive involvement in the women's movement, Wallace was acutely aware of the conditions of women. She employs the method of narrative poetry to probe their moral, personal and political conditions. In her three books of poetry that will be included in this study, Signs of the Former Tenant (1983), Common Magic (1985), and The Stubborn Particulars of Grace (1987), I will explore how Wallace identifies and elevates the particulars of women's lives and the daily rituals that occur within them.

Wallace's poetry is an ongoing transcript of these rituals, the daily doings, the ordinary conversations that grow and mend among women. Her poetry allows us in Signs of the Former Tenant (SFT) and Common Magic (CM) to join in the conversation, to be part of a ceremonious exchange. In The Stubborn Particulars of Grace (SPG), we withdraw our participation in the conversation and become active listeners. We become intent listeners to Wallace's confessions that are filled with

morality and insight, that offer us friendly advice on how to dismantle patriarchy and shape this world into a more gender neutral and compassionate one.

At the heart of Wallace's poetics are the stories she listened to all her life. She offers us stories about the lives of women that are testimonies to unaccounted aspects of their lives. Wallace's poetry begins to fill in the other half of women's lives, hence shedding 'grace' upon the raw, ragged and honest details of their lives as we witness the common particulars of women's lives unfolding into what Wallace calls "common magic."

The writing of Bronwen Wallace has been described as the "comfortable voice of an old friend" (Page 7). Wallace, like other feminist writers, is giving voice to women's experience. She is sounding out what has traditionally been silent. The focus of her narrative poetry is voice, beginning with the conversations of women of all shapes and forms: battered women, women isolated within domestic roles, women as mothers, women facing death and women as friends. Wallace writes

in fact the essence of my narrative style—has come from these women's lives and the stories they told. What I try to do is to recreate their voices, their view of things, their way of telling a story. When I do this I am "facing the question of language" and am looking at the language politically.
("Erin Mouré and Bronwen Wallace" 46)

The female voices in SFT share their stories through earnest and impassioned conversations and in doing so create an alliance among each other that becomes their defence against and retreat from a patriarchal world. The sharing of their experiences connects us to them, showing that we are interconnected.

Much of Wallace's poetry bears a confessional tone and autobiographical essence. These two qualities, for Wallace, are different. The confessional tone of Wallace's poetry, she states in Arguments With The World (AWW), is a "particular stance vis-a-vis the reader, a tone of private conversation. When we tell the stories

of our lives, we're confessing to each other" (213). This confessional aspect of Wallace's poetry is what invites the reader into her writing and into conversation. This style illuminates the respect Wallace maintains for her readers. She places herself on equal ground with her readers, a position which defies hierarchal structure and mitigates any authoritative, or dogmatic quality from her work.

Wallace explains this process of writing:

When I think of the reader, she or he is not on this side of the poem while I'm on the other side. The reader stands beside me and we're reading the same poem...the image of two people looking in the same direction does not necessarily mean that they're seeing the same thing. We can be in solidarity and not have the same experience of the world. (AWW 213)

Hence, the confessional tone of Wallace's poetry brings us not only into her poetry, but also into her life as she allows us to participate in conversations between herself and those within her life. Yet, her poetry is also a photo album that pastes together snapshots of not only her life but also of a variety of women's lives. Images are formed from the memories of their childhood, their own years of motherhood, and the intimate conversations between friends that signify both the celebration and sadness of their lives.

In order to fully comprehend the autobiographical essence of Wallace's poetry it is critical to survey her own life. Born in Kingston, Ontario in 1945, and meeting an untimely death from cancer in 1989, Wallace managed to live a very rounded life, for the most part in Kingston. Wallace was a writer, feminist, activist, mother, daughter, friend, and lover. She attended Queen's University in Kingston and completed her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1967 and Master of Arts degree in 1969.

Marrying Into the Family (1980), her first volume of poetry, was a joint publication with Wallace and Mary di Michele. The work was published as a double book: Bread and Chocolate and Marrying Into the Family. Three years later,

Wallace published a second book, *SFT*, which would be the first of a close succession of published poetry. Between 1983 and 1987 Wallace would find her place in writing with the publication of *SFT* (1983), *CM* (1985) and her final volume of poetry, *SPG* (1987). It is because of the close affinity among these books that I chose to work with these three books only for this study. From each of these books I have chosen a group of poems that exemplify the predominant themes of that book. *Bread and Chocolate and Marrying Into the Family* will not be discussed in this study for although it represents Wallace's first appearance as a poet, it not an independent appearance as the book is a collaboration with Mary di Michele. Wallace's next book, *SFT* is her first independent book of poetry. It is the first of her work to be published on its own which is why I chose to begin my study with *SFT*. By concentrating solely on these three books and certain poems that best represent the whole of each book, I am able to focus on and examine the predominant themes of Wallace's poetry.

The themes that I will explore in Wallace's work assume a significant shape in *SFT*. It is in this book that her supple poems begin to challenge traditional ideas of motherhood and the role of domesticity through marriage, while simultaneously elevating and celebrating the diverse energy and empowerment of friendships among women. The suppleness of *SFT* transforms into an increasingly intensified political voice in the next book, *CM*, which is concerned with the politics of the everyday. Wallace grapples with the issues of body and the political, physical and emotional ramifications of battered women. Wallace's somewhat pliant voice that details the lives of battered women in *CM* develops into a poignant and powerful 'choir of voices' in her final volume of poetry, *SPG*. It is in this book that Wallace amalgamates and refines issues from *SFT* and *CM* to create a coherent and confident book of poetry that explores the power of voice and the essentiality of change in

order to caution against future social decay. SPG offers an ultimate vision of harmony within society and how to achieve it. Wallace looks to the everyday for questions and answers and in her long and pivotal poem "Intervals," Wallace intimately traces the diverse landscapes of battered women and then moves out to a larger framework of how people and society are also affected by violence. These prime concerns of Wallace are best represented in selected poems from SFT, CM, and SPG.

Wallace is also the recipient of a National Magazine Award, the Pat Lowther award, and the Du Maurier Award for Poetry. In 1989 she was also named Regional Winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in the U.K. After her death in 1989, two more works were published posthumously: her first collection of short stories, People You'd Trust Your Life To (1990) and a small collection of anecdotal poetry, titled Keep That Candle Burning Bright (1991). In 1970 Wallace first received national attention because of an impassioned pro-choice speech that she delivered from the visitors gallery at the House of Commons where she chained herself in protest. Before she published her first book of poetry at the age of thirty-five Wallace co-founded a woman's bookstore in Windsor, Ontario, established self-help infrastructures for families of blue collar workers and Mother's Groups for women where they could share their experiences of motherhood. But, perhaps Wallace's most instrumental experience that underlies much of her poetry was her two year employment as a front line counselor at the Kingston Interval House. This experience of working with battered women and their children affected Wallace so profoundly that it "temporarily dried up her writing [two years], and crystalized her feminist politics" (Page 9). By listening to the women at the Interval House, Wallace learned that every person is capable of change. Change, for Wallace, becomes the hope in all her poetry; no matter how ominous the subject of her

poem, the hope for change eclipses the inauspiciousness.

In each book of poetry explored within this thesis a 'what if' motif is presented. Wallace's poetry avoids assuming a dogmatic attitude; rather, her implications are presented through probing. Her poetry in SFT begins with the presentation of women living within patriarchy. Wallace presents us with the lives of various women all somehow snared within patriarchy, yet at the same time, managing to weave a web of defence against it. The women establish a system of networking and community amongst themselves through conversations held in houses and gardens. Always beginning her poems with a story, Wallace is picking up the oral tradition that evolved from the suppression of women and their inability to access the written word. In order to survive and to keep their language alive, women talked. They shared stories, experiences, gossip, and jokes. Most of these conversations in SFT occur in the kitchen, which, conventionally perceived as an oppressive symbol of space, is now a stimulating space for women. Wallace's poetry is like a kitchen conversation; it's intimate, daily, and evolves around the "stubborn particulars" of the everyday. What these women are doing is taking what are perceived as limitations within patriarchy and working from them to create possibilities. This inverted perception of limitations as possibilities frames much of Wallace's poetry.

Wallace, in each book of poetry, uses stories as a forum that allows various women's voices to be heard. Yet within these stories, the women themselves tell their own stories to one another; they confess, they joke, they gossip and in turn they strengthen the bonds between them that will ideally cause the extinction of patriarchy. SFT identifies the destructive consequences of women trapped in the patriarchally defined roles of mother, wife and friend while at the same time redefining possibilities within these roles. Society's perceptions of women are

questioned. This questioning of women's daily rituals is performed by presenting them in an unconventionally celebratory manner. Wallace's poetry proposes that we see women's lives in a different way. What if what has conventionally oppressed women— domestic responsibilities, roles of wife and mother as well as violence against women— are seen through a different lens, possibly a matriarchal, more humane lens? Could the mundane, ordinary lives of women become magical and mysterious, perhaps become the "stubborn particulars of grace?" Joanne Page remarks that Wallace wrote the way she spoke and her ideas were often unexpected: "her finger on a particular situation, she'd explain its complicated social context, and then go on to wonder what would happen if the situation were reversed, if the assumptions were different. She did not provide answers. In questioning, she knew, lay the pathway to change" (9).

This paradoxical element of Wallace's poetry, that her answers lie within questions, weaves throughout all three books of poetry. Wallace accepts the inexplicable elements of life. She sees the common life as magical and all its particulars as inextricably connected. Wallace resigns herself and her writing to the midst of uncertainty. She often leaves her poems in an enigmatic state, open-ended and without resolution. This open-ended style is also the foundation of her conversational poetry. Wallace wants to leave the poem open-ended like a conversation. She wants the reader to carry on the conversation that she began in her poetry.

Another facet of the conversational poetry begins to unfold in chapter two of this study with the exploration of poetry from CM. Wallace enters the form of the argument, which does not infer conflict, but rather is an opportunity to exchange views, to look at something together while maintaining different views. Wallace confesses her "need for the intimate, inner argument that is the center of a poem"

(AWW 88). Argument becomes the center of her poems, and from this, different perspectives of violence against women emerge, particularly in the poems "Thinking With The Heart" and "Dreams of Rescue" that are analysed in chapter two of this study. Also, the theory of reversing images and inverting perceptions extends from chapter one into chapter two. Chapter two explores the inverted perception of the battered woman not as a 'victim' but as a survivor.

This inverted perception, in chapter two, becomes more pliable with the redefining of the traditional elegy. The poems discussed in chapter one of this study that celebrate women's friendships continue in chapter two; yet in chapter two the celebration transforms into a meditation upon the death of an intimate friend. In "What It Comes To Mean" Wallace struggles to make sense of loss within her life, and as suggested in chapter two of this study, this takes the form of an elegy. In this re-working of conventions the personal and political are combined. Wallace is writing with the hope for social transformation and she attempts this through questioning and re-naming. Adrienne Rich notes:

Moreover, if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming. (On Lies Secrets and Silence 43)

Wallace's elegiac poems are remolded and rather than the traditional male lamenting the loss of a male friend or fellow poet, her elegies concern a woman who is beginning to accept the loss of a friend. The friendship is celebrated rather than lamented. Juxtaposed with the traditional elegy, an attempt is not made to transcend the world, rather Wallace grounds herself in earthly existence and feelings. Here, in the midst of an ordinary life, she continues to celebrate friendship among women.

The celebration of women's friendships extends into chapter three of this study with the exploration of poems that celebrate friends living and dead. Also, in this chapter, the essentiality of voice is explored. In SPG Wallace employs multitudes of women's voices, past and present, to create a polygon of vocality. In chapter one we will examine Wallace's request of our presence as readers through her inviting use of pronouns, to participate in the conversations held by various women's voices. In chapter two, Wallace's invitational style yields into the shape of an argument and we are challenged to an argument; we are challenged to see the situation of battered women through a different lens. In the analysis of SPG, we come full circle as we are asked to be active listeners to Wallace's confessions. Wallace ingested multitudes of women's voices beginning with her mother, grandmothers and friends, and then the women she worked with at the Interval House. She uses the stories told through these voices, allowing their wisdom and pain to heal herself and to form her own voice that will enable her to become a story-teller. The final chapter of this study also illustrates how Wallace becomes the ultimate story-teller who represents a collection of women's voices, past and present, and we become her listener. Wallace undoubtedly hopes we will continue the conversations she started.

This ritual of story-telling records the power of women's voices in Wallace's poetry, consequently establishing the untold half of women's lives in literature. From their conversations, to their stories, their shared gossip and their shared tragedies, Wallace records a realistic depiction of women's lives. SPG emphatically reminds us, that as human beings, we are all interconnected and capable of change. Change becomes our source of hope for changing a world consumed by violence. Wallace's poetry becomes a tool in deconstructing the effects of patriarchal domination in society. Her poetry offers us the questions that will lead us to a more

humane and compassionate existence.

Bronwen Wallace's writing could once have been considered as residing in the shade of more accomplished, more critically acclaimed poets. However, her work is moving out from this shade and is increasingly receiving the critical attention it deserves. Her writing is profoundly poetic; her subtle use of literary devices is an art in itself. Like Wallace the person, her writing is sincere, earnest, compassionate and naked in truth. Her writing is unpretentious and though full of morality, is never dogmatic. Wallace notes that she only offers us what she has, which is a wealth of wisdom and poetics:

I write from what I am given. Not just images, words, sounds, voices. But a particular life, as a woman, in a particular family and community, at this time in history. I can explain how I write...by telling you some of the story of my life. But I can't explain all of it. I do not believe that any story or any theory can. There is always that mystery—that "slightly surprising range of the possible"—to which I can simply gesture. Testify. And that, for me as a writer—and as a reader—is, for now at least, enough. (AWW 178-179)

Her poetry could potentially be one of the most significant contributions to Canadian women's poetry and feminist theory. Her depictions of women are profoundly accurate. There is no doubt that Wallace has provided us with the missing half of the lives of women. Wallace's testimony of their lives urges us into action. Concerning this link between words and action, Adrienne Rich writes: "I felt more and more urgently the dynamic between poetry as language and poetry as a kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self" (Blood, Bread and Poetry 181). Wallace's poetry becomes "a kind of action" as she urges her readers into conversations that may consequently implement action.

Wallace left us before her time, yet her short time with us could also be the reason for such an explosion of insightful, courageous and necessary writing.

Wallace's poetry presents us with and challenges us to see and understand an entirely different perception of women's lives. Wallace does not decorate their positions, but rather photographically captures the ordinary grace of their lives that for centuries has not been recognized in literature. The most ordinary things of women's lives are chosen to carry the most radiance in Wallace's poems. She gives ordinary and common women reasons to celebrate. Yet she also gives human beings reasons to reevaluate the givens of our society: the violence and the gender roles we often accept. Wallace felt it was her job to write about the justices and injustices of humanity, with particular reference to women. Margaret Atwood once wrote that "[t]here are few poems that convince you...that they had to be written." There are few poets that convince us that their poetry is "necessary for the reader, but also one feels, for the writers" (209). Bronwen Wallace is one of these poets.

Introduction**Notes**

¹Bronwen Wallace, Arguments With the World, ed. Joanne Page
(Kingston: Quarry Press, 1992) 108.

Chapter One

"The unexpected rituals that grow out of ordinary life"

*Possibility and limitation mean about the same thing.*¹

-Flannery O'Connor

And I don't think it's just about writing, either. I like what it says about paying attention to our limitations, learning to see them not as restrictions which we must strive to transcend, but as guides to the possibility of what we are. I like how it affirms the importance of paying close attention to who we are, as we are. And if I had to sum up my credo for living in one sentence, I think I'd choose that one . 2

-Bronwen Wallace

According to Susan Rudy Dorscht, Wallace's poems open alternative "ways of seeing... to recognize what we have never seen before. We become the subjects of feminism, [b]eginning with the representations of women, motherhood, family, death and women's friendships" (104). Wallace's way of seeing women's lives in Signs of the Former Tenant (SFT) is visionary, recording the reality of these lives in narrative poetry while simultaneously questioning the stereotyped roles of women. Wallace was a visionary in the root sense of vision: "We might call this the Politics of Seeing. It means that the 'givens' of our culture are so deeply rooted that we accept them without question. We might see the world through the eyes of our culture, without question" (Wallace AWW 40).

Wallace questions and rewrites what she sees. She has a talent of looking to the past, of recognizing the limitations of women and taking these limitations and re-visioning them, showing that limitation and possibility are one and the same. Wallace was a visionary in the most original form as she had an acute eye for the particulars of everyday life. She was a visionary "attached to the waking experience of the 'real,' to what truly exists" (Waggoner 9). Wallace herself remarks that "I write from what I am given. Not just images, words, sounds, voices. But a particular life, as a woman, in a particular family and community, at this time in history" (AWW 178).

Wallace's poetry in SFT identifies roles and relationships of women who have been shaped by patriarchy. She traces the lives of women as mothers, wives and friends. The poems are strategically placed in a method of evolution that moves from a woman's silence to the significant sounds of women's conversation. She begins with the shrouded silence of a woman's life in the first section "Moving Away From the Past." In the second section "Between Words," she extends this silence to the isolation and the stifling of a woman's domestic responsibilities and then moves into the possibilities by depicting women's vivacious and empowering conversations held in kitchens. In her final section, "The Cancer Poems," Wallace affirms the necessity and significance of relationships among women. She chronicles her best friend's journey towards death, beginning with the diagnosis of cancer through to her actual death. Through this journey, Wallace illuminates the essential significance of women's friendships in a society that has not acknowledged their importance. Her view of death also begins to surface in this section as she struggles with the phallogentric institutions of medicine and her own belief in a feminist way of dying that denies the institution and trusts the body.

In her narrative poetry Wallace takes the reader on a journey through the lives of women, discovering the limitations and the possibilities: "For me, writing a poem is a journey of discovering...the poem as a whole is the voice, discovering" (AWW 176-177). In doing this, Wallace is identifying the destructive consequences of women trapped in patriarchally defined roles of mother, wife and friend while at the same time redefining possibilities within these roles. Through her poetic survey of the landscape of women's lives, Wallace is beginning to remap and transform women's lives: "Where women write strongly as women, it is clear that their intention is to subvert and transform the life and literature they inherit" (Ostricker 211). Through this re-vision, Wallace's poetry offers a practical vision of empowerment for women: "It's power we [women] can feel, power that comes from within, from using the damage and suffering we have experienced to make ourselves present to those who have tried to silence us" (219).

In SFT there are forty-one poems and I have chosen five to explore in this chapter. An affinity exists among these five poems that maps the development and expression of the themes of motherhood, marital domesticity and women's friendships. The poems I will be discussing from SFT are "Toward Morning," "A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf," "Woman Sitting," "All That Uneasy Spring," "Treatment," and "A Stubborn Grace." There is a kinship, a sisterhood, existing within this group of poems. Each deals with the particulars of a woman's life from her isolation as a wife and mother to the strong bond of women friends, which is dismissed in hospital policies. In these poems an evolution takes place in which Wallace shows the reader how it is possible to invert a situation that is perceived as a limitation. The women in these poems move from a woman sitting alone in the darkness of her home to women gathering with energy and spirit to colourfully decorate their gardens and each other's lives with conversation. By writing about

women's lives she pays tribute to women's lives.

The poem "Toward Morning" from the first section, "Moving Away From the Past" reflects this position. The poem is rather ambiguous in its intention as the reader is to infer the character of this woman based on the description Wallace provides. This poem, placed early in the book, acts as a foreshadowing for the stronger voiced poems that follow in the remaining sections. In this poem, references are made to the woman isolated in her home while her male partner chooses to be somewhere else, following his own dreams. The woman is left to the silence of her home that embodies the silent passivity within herself. This poem begins to introduce us to the isolation, the despair of a woman resigning herself to the role that a patriarchal society has assigned to her.

"Toward Morning" illustrates how the home is a symbol of both limitation and possibility as the symbols that traditionally invoke entrapment and isolation of women are inverted. The women in some of the poems are trapped within the home and their domestic responsibilities; however, possibility is inferred within the home (which appears in her second section) by perceiving the home as a gathering place for women, a place to share stories and ideas, thus re-visioning the home as a space of possibility.

The first stanza of "Toward Morning" begins with a dream. The woman wakes from a dream, which as the dream is described, appears to reflect a nightmare more than a dream. Dream in this sense immediately denotes dual connotations: "I wake from the recurring dream/ a woman crying"; this dream is a literal dream that the woman has wakened from because it is a recurring dream of a woman who has the "knowledge of her own death" (Wallace SFT 35). Secondly, this dream implies that there is no separation between nightmare and reality. Because her conscious dream of fulfilment is shrouded in silence, it wears the guise of a nightmare. This

woman, now awake, moves downstairs, yet she is “moving through the darkness” (35). The house is now referred to as “the dreaming house” yet it is a house filled with dark and silent images, a stark contrast to the bright associations of dream.

The woman moves downstairs to engage in her daily particular event: to “make tea/ and drink it in [her] favourite chair” (35). It is here that the woman moves from her particular routine action to a state of meditation. Wallace’s poems “dramatize the mind moving outward from a core of silent stillness” (Bennett 60). Yet this outward movement of meditation is not a “transcendent generalization” but is Wallace’s method of showing the reality of this woman trapped within a role that was previously defined for her:

...the speaker begins with her thoughts focused on a...specific moment, or a memory of a past event or person, then lets her awareness expand outward as she discovers ever larger, and often unforeseen, significance in her original subject...It is in her social poems that Wallace works closest to the structure of traditional meditation. They move from the individual experience to a realization that experience typifies society. (Bennett 59-60)

These poems typify the devastating effects of the male-defined roles of mother and wife. This meditative state is stimulated by the woman’s recognition of the passing of time, her realization that the particular moments of life are moving on; she recognizes her own mortality, her limitations in life.

The dreams of the woman in this book never manifest; in most instances they never leave the boundaries of the woman’s imagination. In the first stanza of “Toward Morning” the “dream hesitates/ along the curve of lamplight/ sinks to the corners of the room” (35). The light, like the woman’s dream, is sodden and suppressed by the home and the domestic responsibilities that she was allotted without choice. The home was to be the only work of women. Adrienne Rich, in her book Of Woman Born, explores the Western idea(l) of home and identifies the

home and motherhood as an institution created by male-dominated society.

Through socialization, women were streamed into the home to nurture the family and to hone their “natural” maternal instincts:

The nineteenth and twentieth-century ideal of the mother and children immures together in the home, the specialization of motherhood for women, the separation of the home from the ‘man’s world’ of wage-earning, struggle, ambition, aggression, power, of the ‘domestic’ from the ‘public’ or the ‘political.’ (Rich 46)

In the second stanza a contrast of the prescribed role of the woman is set against the independent growing of her plants and son. The woman thinks about the plants “growing their own way/ through the night” and her son who, sleeping upstairs, “steps earnestly through dreams” (35). The son and the plants grow their own way, resilient despite society’s roles.

In this stanza, the woman shifts her thoughts to the man she loves who is “in his house in another part of the city” (35). He sits alone listening to his stereo and he too is dreaming. Yet Wallace draws a distinction between the dreams of this man and woman who are both alone “but his eyes have the look of someone/ who dreams himself far away” (35). “But” in this line implies that despite his solitude he maintains the ability to dream, something the woman can no longer do. Dreams are central to Wallace’s work. They give her characters purpose, they often cause her characters grief: a meaninglessness from resigning themselves to socially assigned gender roles. They live a painful reality of knowing that their patriarchal assigned roles are exactly what they do not want.

The fourth stanza begins with hands, a particular and ordinary body part that resonates into a larger, profound notion. The woman looks at her hands, and the “dumb memories visible/ in the palmlines” (36). The hands hold the landscape of a woman’s life. They are an integral part of the body and this image of hands

evolves throughout her poetry. But here, one finger of this hand is marked with a scar, a scar that causes the woman to remember the "childhood incident" that caused it. But this incident, "is gone now/ cannot be recalled" (36). This reminds her of her mortal limitations and that time is constantly passing. Yet the woman trusts her body, its instinct and intuition: "already and without my willing it/ my hands prepare for the future/ the flesh around my knuckles loosens/ the veins on the backs grow sinewy/ as an old woman's/ all changing is a kind of dying" (36). This woman is accepting the limitations of her mortality, and rather than fight time, she accepts it. To deny this limitation is a closing off and because this woman accepts her limitations she is opening herself, creating possibilities; she is accepting her mortality in a "feminist" way, a theory that emerges more prevalently in the third section of this book. The woman does not want to wage a war with time. She gracefully accepts her aging and trusts her body: "there's so much power in the body. If we would learn to attend to the power, we would learn not to fear what our bodies do" (Wallace A W W 208).

The woman shifts her attention next to her friends and how she recognizes time's effect on them and how their bodies age "with such an adult grace" (36). She sees the "fine lines around their mouths/ grey hair at the temples/ women my own age who seem to inhabit their bodies" (36). Her friends' physical signs of aging emphasize her own mortality, yet they all accept their mortality/limitation and in doing so create the possibility of aging with grace and trust. The woman is amazed at her body's intuitive ability, "amazed at how my body slides/ so easily away/ from what I think I am the young girl/ stretching within me still" (36).

The poem, in a circular fashion, returns to the image of the tea cup in the final stanza. The woman rinses her tea cup and leaves it on the counter for "it will be here tomorrow" (37). The cup takes on a larger symbol of the regularity of life, the

daily particulars of life that Wallace so acutely recognizes. For the first time in the poem, the woman refers to herself objectively, outside of herself: “as even now the woman who places it here/ turns casually away and gliding beyond me/ starts toward morning/ through the still/ sleeping rooms” (37). The woman separates herself, the one who casually turns away and glides into morning seems to do so without intent or without purpose but rather through habit. Life has become a passing of days, and time is weathering the woman physically and mentally. Yet the woman accepts her mortality and trusts her body to “prepare for the future” and continues to strive “toward morning.”

“Toward Morning” provides a foundation for the remaining poems that I will be exploring in SFT. The poem evokes a variety of themes that evolve into lucid and central themes in the remaining poems.

“A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf” is Wallace’s most revealing poem about the realities of a woman’s daily life and how the roles of wife and mother impede her writing. Wallace states that this:

is a poem how whenever a woman, I think, starts trying to do her own kind of work, this work gets tangled up in domestic life around her. And it’s a poem that’s dedicated to Virginia Woolf, because Virginia Woolf said that all we needed was a room of our own—although I’ve come to think it’s a little more complicated than that. (AWW 11)

In 1928, Virginia Woolf, in A Room of One’s Own, bravely offered women the notion that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write...and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved” (2). Wallace, in her poem, captures all the reasons why a woman needs a room of her own while simultaneously challenging Woolf that a separate room will not liberate a woman writer from the responsibilities that exist outside it. A woman’s responsibilities are

socialized into her nature, into her role as mother. "A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf" employs an ironic undertone. Wallace writes in dedication to Woolf, whose theories were essential to the liberation of the woman writer, yet Wallace also challenges their plausibility. Wallace is "paying tribute to the tradition of women writers and to the gift of autonomy that is intrinsic to the act of writing. But in doing so, she is also describing for us the paralysing frustrations a mother experiences responding to the needs of small children" (Wilkinson 349).

The title itself bears an ironic slant: "A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf" when in fact there is nothing simple at all about this poem. The writing is buried in the daily responsibilities of the woman as mother and wife, and no room, no space and no solitude is going to erase the tangible reality of "the smell/ of bacon grease and dirty frying-pans/" that constantly seeps into the woman's life (48). The poem begins with earnest intention: "This started out as a simple poem/ for Virginia Woolf you know the kind/ we women writers write these days/ in our own rooms/ on our own time" (48). Wallace is lightly satirizing Woolf's claim that women only need a room of their own to write. Wallace includes herself in this poem as she states "we women writers," yet these women writers are not writing poems "these days" in their own rooms, on their own time; they do not have their own time and the physical separation of a woman in a room does not sever her emotional and social responsibilities with her family. Wallace restates early in the poem that she "wanted it simple/ and perfectly round" and consistent with her style of moving from the particular to the common, Wallace begins with an egg. The intent of the poem was to be like an egg, round and simple, yet it is complicated and jaded by domestic responsibilities. Rather than the poem being round and simple it enters into a digression of the daily particulars of a mother and wife. This begins a sequential stream of consciousness centred around her motherly duties.

Wallace somewhat reluctantly justifies her mind's shift from literature to breakfast dishes: "I couldn't help it/ I wanted the poem to be carefree and easy" and her mind only centres on writing for one line and this "carefree" and "easy" style of the poem reminds her of the "children playing in the snow," which then opens into the particulars of everyday life as a mother and wife that impede her writing:

I didn't mean to mention
 the price of snowsuits or
 how even the most expensive ones
 the zippers always snag
 just when you're late for work
 and trying to get the children off to school on time
 a straightforward poem
 for Virginia Woolf that's all
 I wanted really.
 (49)

Wallace continues comparing her domestic life to that of another literary foremother, Jane Austen. Wallace did not want to hide her writing or separate it from the daily particulars of life; rather, she incorporated them into her poem. She did not want to sever her writing and bury it beneath domestic responsibilities like "Jane Austen's novels tangled/ with her knitting her embroidery/ whatever it was she hid them under" (49).

The tone in which Wallace pays tribute to Austen is the same tone she used to address Woolf. She is acknowledging their presence and value as literary foremothers, yet she seems slightly critical of Austen also. She is recognizing the novels Austen wrote, yet the fact that they were "tangled" with her "knitting" seems quite minimal in relation to the wide range of domestic responsibilities that tangle Wallace's writing and other contemporary women writers. Wallace also minimizes Austen's responsibility by referring to it as "whatever it was she hid them under." Wallace is not devaluing the literary foremothers' contribution to

writing such as Woolf and Austen's; however, she is re-evaluating or re-visioning how realistic their theories of writing are, considering that they did not consider the common woman whose writing is tangled in domestic responsibilities.

Because women writers like Woolf and Austen are considered literary foremothers, Wallace is questioning the idea of mother, "the search for the mother and what she means" (Wallace AWW 152). Wallace is also questioning the role of literary foremothers who had no children and domestic duties to tend to for they did not encounter what current women writers do. Wallace remembers her time functioning as writer and mother: "Weeks rushed together in a blur of alarm clocks, meals, day care, typewriters, errands, trips to the park, bills, groceries, and laundry, laundry, laundry" (146). The writing of contemporary women is buried beneath domestic duties. Creativity and expression are obstructed by these responsibilities which, leads back to a male-defined society that assigns domestic responsibilities to women.

Wallace is re-visioning the idea of mother as she offers a realistic and literal depiction of being a mother. She is exploiting the oppressive domestic responsibilities that are issued to women without choice. The influence of Adrienne Rich's book Of Woman Born that explores the ideas of motherhood and the home as institution is very apparent in Wallace's poetry. She refers to Rich's book as "powerful and important" (AWW 154). In "A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf," Wallace is beginning to explore this idea of motherhood and the home as an institution created by a phallogentric society. "Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than creation of self" (Rich 42). Society has created only an ideal, a myth that motherhood is the ultimate fulfillment for a woman, giving her life wholeness. This is unrealistic, and Wallace, through

her poetry, re-visions this image of motherhood and incorporates the realistic feelings and responsibilities of it. In this poem she is also touching on the isolation of the home, a feeling that is often concurrent with motherhood. Wallace remembers her own time of motherhood:

When I think back to my first months of motherhood, the feeling that I recall most clearly is one of isolation. Physical isolation, certainly, at home alone with a small child, cut off from the rest of the world. Emotional isolation, too, feeling that no other mother was ever as scared or as inadequate or as tired as I was. I know that those feelings are common to many mothers, that they 'come with the job' in many ways. (AWW 147-148)

Wallace is working towards re-visioning the role of the mother because the role that society created misled women and did not prepare them for the reality of mothering responsibilities. There was a silence that shrouded the natural feelings of anger towards children. These feelings did not fit with the idealized role of the mother: "Mother-love is supposed to be continuous, unconditional. Love and anger cannot coexist. Female anger threatens the institution of motherhood" (Rich 46). Wallace describes the tumult of her feelings about motherhood:

This was not what I'd thought motherhood would be. None of the books I'd read prepared me for the nitty-gritty day-to day of it, any more than they prepared me for the new emotions I was experiencing. How could I feel this angry, sometimes this frustrated, with someone I loved this much? How could I feel so helpless and afraid? Was I always going to be this tired? Any feminist perspective I'd had seemed to collapse with my ability to utter more than a few coherent sentences at any one time. And since I was one of the first women in my group of friends to have a baby, I felt even more isolated and alone. I began to think I was a complete failure. I was falling apart. (AWW 46)

Wallace questions earnestly any woman who writes: "everytime I read a good poem/ by a woman writer I'm always peeking/ behind it trying to see/ if she's still married/ or has a lover at least/ wanting to know what she did/ with her kids while she wrote it" (49).

What Wallace has done within this poem, "A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf," is to combine the possibility within the limitation. She has shown the limitations of writing by actually writing a poem about the limitations of writing. In an essay from AWW Wallace admires this very form in "A Poem about Rape" by Libby Scheier, yet this is exactly what Wallace also does in "A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf." Wallace writes:

What I like about the poem is the way it uses the limitation imposed on it—the impossibility of writing a poem about rape—to in fact, write a poem about rape. And to write a poem that is more than 'simply' a description of the crime, a poem that speaks to the way in which women's suffering is silenced in this culture. (AWW 218)

This is similar to "A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf" because Wallace writes about the impossibility of writing freely because of the domestic responsibilities, yet she manages to write a poem. By re-visioning the idea/role of motherhood, Wallace is showing that polarities can exist within a woman. She provides a vision of motherhood that is reality based, that a woman can feel anger and love and that these polarities are not to be viewed as limitations or hindrances but rather possibilities. Adrienne Rich also depicts this possibility:

Love and anger *can* exist concurrently; anger at the conditions of motherhood can become translated into anger at the child, along with the fear that we are not 'loving'; grief at all we cannot do for our children in a society so inadequate to meet human needs becomes translated into guilt and self-laceration...Whatever the known facts, it is still assumed that the mother is 'with the child.' It is she, finally, who is held accountable for her children's health, the clothes they wear, their behaviour at school, their intelligence and general development. (Of Woman Born 52-53)

In addition to the issues of domestic responsibility and motherhood, Wallace begins to explore an issue that becomes quite prevalent in the third section of this book and also in CM and SPG. Wallace establishes the importance of relationships among women and how a patriarchal society has subdued and devalued them.

Mary di Michele, in an interview with Barbara Godard, discusses this issue:

For her, [Wallace] it wasn't just the writing community, but the death of her friend, Pat Logan. There's an early poem, about Pat when she was dying of cancer, in which Bronwen writes about the hospital regulations not recognizing the importance of friends. She was a female friend, and at a crucial moment of emergency, there was no recognition of the importance of this bond, and so I think she ran into major obstacles very early. She wanted to establish the importance of relationships among women, whether they were writers or not. (41)

Wallace's view of hospitals as phallogentric institutions is another theme that resurfaces in her section "The Cancer Poems." Yet in this poem she introduces this theme quite unobtrusively and maintains the focus of the importance of women's relationships:

and I certainly wasn't going
to tell you about the time
my best friend was sick in intensive care
and I went to see her
but they wouldn't let me in
because I wasn't her husband
or her father her mother
I wasn't family
I was just her friend
and the friendship of women
wasn't mentioned
in hospital policy.
(49)

Wallace is re-visioning the essential significance and value of relationships among women by simply recognizing and writing about them. These relationships are a valid source of empowerment for women. Janice Raymond, in A Passion for Friends remarks that "women affect, move, stir, and arouse each other to full power. One task of feminism has been to show that the 'personal is political.' Female friendship gives integrity to that claim" (9). Through their friendships, women begin to gather, converse and share stories about their lives and from this,

ideas for change and betterment of those lives. “Wallace includes our friendships as an integral part of our lives—more as a motivating force for our writing...The whole poem is a testimony to the transformative power of relationships without denying the pain and the cost of living inclusively (Wilkinson 349). As this poem moves towards its close, Wallace identifies that it is the importance of friendship among women that spurred her to write it:

but that’s what got me
 started I suppose wanting to write
 a gesture of friendship
 for a woman writer
 for Virginia Woolf
 and thinking I could do it
 easily separating the words
 from the lives they come from
 that’s what a good poem should do
 after all and I wasn’t going to make excuses
 for being a woman blaming years of silence
 for leaving us so much to say.
 (50)

Again Wallace has taken the limitations of women’s lives, the silence that has subdued them and has spoken from that very silence, creating a possibility from the limitation. This poem has moved from particular daily events outward into issues that are central to women’s lives. She has managed to identify the limitations of women’s lives as a friend and writer and she has re-visioned them through example; by writing about it she has inverted the limitations into possibilities, and has broken the silence with voice:

This started out as a simple poem
 for Virginia Woolf
 it wasn’t going to mention history
 or choices or women’s lives
 the complexities of women’s friendships
 or the countless gritty details
 of an ordinary woman’s life
 that never appear in poems at all

yet even as I write these words
 those ordinary details intervene
 between the poem I meant to write
 and this one.
 (50-51)

“Woman Sitting,” also from the section “Between Words,” translates many of the same issues as “A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf.” “Woman Sitting” shares the same images and ideas of “Toward Morning;” however, they are now in a stronger and more vivid form. “Woman Sitting” deals explicitly with compromise. The dream in this poem symbolizes both the compromised dreams of the woman as well as the forced role(s) she assumes in a male-defined society. The home in this poem becomes a figure of an institution in which the woman is trapped and isolated.

Similar to the first stanza of “Toward Morning,” “Woman Sitting” opens with the particulars as the woman in this poem is sitting in her home with “her hand shaking a little around/the coffee cup the cigarette/ a dream comes back to her” (52). “The intense loneliness of women’s silence is rendered again...in which the subject is caught ‘on the rim’ between nightmare and waking, in which she is terrorized by the ‘empty/spaces left by/ her children growing/ and in the thicker silences/ that sometimes clench like fists/ beneath her husband’s words” (Savoy 97).

Immediate contrasts are made between the passivity of the woman’s life and her family as they leave, brushing “past her into the day/intent on their own plans/and she sits there” (52). This passivity is intensified further by the fact that the woman “sits in the silence of her kitchen” (52). The kitchen for Wallace represents a space of energy, a place for women to gather and share ideas and stories:

The atmosphere of those kitchens was always, as I remember it, electric. A sense of subversion was clearly palpable. And this had to do, not only with the events of the story, but with how the telling moved

through it, picking up the diversions and interruptions, comments and digressions, as it went along. *That* is what I hear when I am writing my poems. And that is how I try to write them. (AWW 175)

Yet the kitchen here is silent and the woman is sitting alone. In her essay "Why I Don't (Always) Write Short Stories," Wallace continues to describe the importance of the space of a kitchen in her life and poetry. The kitchen becomes a major symbol throughout Wallace's work:

One of the things I remember from those Sundays are the stories that were not told at the dinner table, but in the kitchen by my grandmother and her daughters and daughters-in-law, as they prepared food or did the dishes. Even as a child I recognized that these stories were different. For one thing, they were exclusively about women. Women's lives and women's bodies. (175)

The form of Wallace's poetry parallels her memory of kitchen conversations. Her poems often involve a particular thing or task, just as the women in the kitchen are attending to a task. The thing in the poem, just as the task in the kitchen, is surrounded with conversation, moral philosophies and political thoughts. These larger areas of life arise from the particular things of everyday life and this is identical to the form of Wallace's poetry. Wallace remembers the stories within the kitchen; her observations concerning her mother and grandmother's kitchen conversations can be applied to her poetry:

The stories moved differently, too. Around *things* and tasks. Was the turkey done? Do you think I should add more salt to these peas? Could you go out to the garden and get some tomatoes, ripe ones now, pay attention to what you're picking. The story's [insert poem's] ability to move through *and use* these diversions was a testimony to the power of the teller [insert writer] as well as that of the listener [insert reader]. It is a power I witness, still, among women talking together—whether over coffee, with children running around or at a meeting where *how* an issue is decided is as important as the issue itself. (AWW 175)

The kitchen in "Woman Sitting" is always still and silent, emphasizing the woman's isolation and emptiness. The woman in this poem has no female friends,

which, for Wallace, is an essential aspect of a woman's life. Companionship among women is the fundamental base for creating a collective spirit for further empowerment. Janice Raymond notes that "[t]he empowering of female friendship can create the conditions for a new feminist politics in which the personal is most passionately political" (9). Sadly and realistically, the woman in this poem is alone even with her family as they are "intent on their own plans" (52). The home becomes a symbol of isolation for this mother. Adrienne Rich remarks that for a mother, "the privatization of the home has meant not only an increase in powerlessness, but a desperate loneliness" (Of Woman Born 53).

In the second stanza, the woman sits now "in the comfortable dark/of her own living-room" (52). Here her imagination begins to open and "she finds she can/move things with her eyes it's fun at first." She continues to rearrange the furniture with her imagination, which also implies that through her imagination she would like to rearrange her life. In her imagination, the darkness of the home (and her life) "splits wide/ open walls and ceilings." The home, the structure that has trapped and isolated her, is being torn apart by her imagination. Her dream is imploding within the home. This force of imagination is so strong "she can't stop/the liquid shift." Yet there is a stronger force that can consume this and that is her domestic responsibilities: "but just/ as she feels herself about/ to plunge she touches/ on the rim of waking/ shrill voices of her children/ demanding breakfast/clean underwear" (52). This woman is bound by her socialized role of mother. She cannot escape this, not even through her imagination. Adrienne Rich identifies this confinement: "now, to be maternally with small children all day in the old way, to be with a man in the old way of marriage, requires a holding-back, a putting-aside of that imaginative activity, and demands instead a kind of conservatism" (43).

The poem shifts in movement back to the kitchen where the woman sits "in the quiet kitchen/ in the silence of her family's leaving" (53). Again, while sitting in the kitchen, amidst the emptiness of her life "she feels again/ that moment of the dream/ shifting away from her." The woman feels the dream "as something present/ in the house" yet the dream is locked within the home and her responsibilities within it. The dream is "concealed/ somewhere and the house/ hardening against her." Her dream shifting away from her is intensified in her "children's growing" and moving away from her. The children here represent the polarities of anger and tenderness as the children are contributing to the stifling of the woman's dreams, yet she also loves them and in their growing she is losing all that she has. The silence of her lost dream becomes even "thicker" in the silence "that sometimes clench like fists/ beneath her husband's words." Though we do not know what her husband's words are, one can assume that because they send her dreams into a deeper silence they are oppressive words. The woman in this poem is without language. Wallace is attempting "to define the solitude of these women's confinement in a life without the power of language...the silence 'between the words' is an absence that is difficult to displace or fill in" (Savoy 98). The image of the clenched fists also denotes violence, the violence of a language stolen from women.

As the poem moves to a close, the woman maintains that through all these obstructions she can still feel and hear "that moment of the dream/ shifting away from her." She hears it "closing on the sounds of her day/ the way grey earth in a dry season/ soaks up the light thin rain." The "grey earth in a dry season" represents the dehydrated state of the woman's dream. The silence of her life is absorbing "the light thin rain" of her dreams. She is a woman who is "sitting in that kind of silence/ with sunlight falling/ through the dirty windowpane/ to spill

itself like smoke/around her." This woman cannot see her possibilities in life, represented by the sunlight because the sunlight falls and is sifted through "the dirty windowpane" of the home. The home again is the barrier, the institution that filters the light into grey smoke. The sunlit possibilities of her dream are stained by patriarchy and her dreams become like the darkness of the home. She feels only the dejection of a life overwhelmed by the role of mother and wife. Because this woman is "a woman/ sitting in that kind of silence," she represents all the women in society who are also trapped like her. Wallace begins "with what seems to be one version of reality, [and] she multiplies that into parallel but unified realities, and then replaces these with other possibilities" (Bennett 67).

Though "Woman Sitting" may seem lacking in possibilities, Wallace is in fact moving beyond the limitations of the woman by participating "in a politics of the powerless by articulating silences, by reading for absences through uncanny juxtaposition and subtle, self-conscious analysis of the discourses in which they are spoken" (Dorscht 110). Wallace is portraying the life of a woman in an urgent and realistic light. "The woman subject of Wallace's poems writes to make us hear and acknowledge the language within which what we are given is spoken. She speaks at the interval where the ordinary 'common' details of 'particular' women's lives are significant, where the words are not separated 'from the lives they come from'" (Dorscht 110).

The order in which the three poems discussed above appear in Wallace's book is very significant to the increasing expression of the silence created by the institutionalized roles of wife and mother. In "All that Uneasy Spring," a poem also from the second section, "Between Words," Wallace begins to implement possibilities within the poem: "it's a credo I think about, always, at this time of year when all of my available time is spent in my garden. Besides teaching me patience,

gardening has taught me how important it is to see one's limitations as possibilities (as well, of course, as the other way around)" (Wallace AWW 84). The garden becomes a symbol of hope and a foundation on which women can grow and share. The agricultural transformations that the women create in the garden symbolize their own hope for social transformation. Wallace explores the power of language in conversation and how it can fill the silence of women's lives.

"All That Uneasy Spring" begins with a colourful array of garden images and the eagerness of women to work "[a]s soon as the earth was warm" (55). Their garden sculptures were a variety of "onions and peas/ impatiens in the shade of our hedges/ and marigolds in fiery rows along the walks" (55). The women in the neighbourhood worked excitedly and diligently, "each of [them] looking up occasionally/ to see the other women/ in their yards a series of mirrored reflections" until a crucial break occurs in their work as "someone would wave from the kitchen/ and we'd stop for coffee/ leaving our mudcaked shoes/ on the steps outside" (55). Again, Wallace is employing the kitchen as a symbol of space for women to gather and the power of the conversation that is shared in the momentum of women talking and sharing: "It is a power I witness, still, among women talking together—whether over coffee, with children running around or at a meeting where *how* an issue is decided is as important as the issue itself" (A W W 175). In giving a voice and a language to these women, Wallace is exploring the power issued through language. Mari di Michele recognizes this in Wallace's work:

That is her major analysis of power, of silence and speaking. And perhaps that's because those are our primary struggles, to speak, to be heard right now historically for women. When we change the discourse, then we may look at power, because the speaking in silence is also very much about identity and having the self because without the ability to speak, woman is not allowed a self or a name. It's the first and maybe the utmost in terms of power, to be given a self, otherwise we are domestic

slaves. I thought it was very interesting, I discovered the word family, comes from the Latin word *familia*, the word for household slaves and that's where women have been historically. (56)

Hence, the chronicling of these women's conversations establishes their voices and stories within literature.

In the second stanza Wallace allows the reader to eavesdrop on the conversations held among the women:

and all that uneasy spring
our gossip came in whispers
divorces and custody disputes
how Anne's husband had kidnapped
her children from school
and Sharon had simply
left one afternoon and not come back
not even called.
(55)

The gathering of these women in the kitchen is a stark contrast against the silence of the woman's kitchen in "Toward Morning" and "Woman Sitting." The women within this poem are now beginning to articulate their silences with language and in doing so, their conversation becomes their source of empowerment, discovering and ingrafting a language that is shared among women. "Gossip" in this poem moves beyond trivial discussion and assumes a meaning of greater importance for these women. Gossip becomes an oral tradition, a way of discovering themselves and each other:

Gossip, I suppose, that word used so often to denigrate women's conversation. I prefer to see it as the oral tradition by which women explore our collective lives. I like to think that it was gossip—those few precious minutes in the kitchen, while the men talked politics in the front room—that kept my foremothers strong and sane. Like any oral tradition, gossip is necessary when you can't read about yourself in the books your society produces. (AWW 110)

Not only is Wallace recognizing the importance of women gathering; she is also

recognizing the importance of relationships among women, an issue she identified in "A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf." Women's friendships are central to the implementation of women's conversation which, leads to an informal system of networking. This networking allows for ideas to be shared, empathetic feelings that erase women's isolation and help them work towards erasing the silence between women and their words. Wallace remembers the strength in her grandmother's conversations: "They used gossip, confession, anecdote, jokes—but they used them to tell their experience of the world, to create a world in which the female was the metaphor for the universal" ("Erin Mouré and Bronwen Wallace" 46). Women's talk in this poem has become a method of Wallace's re-visioning, constituting an "alternative discourse and a strategy of resistance" (Freiwald 121). Wallace "sees in women's talk a crucial survival strategy, a form of resistance, and a way of circumventing a dominant idiom that subjects and subjugates" (Freiwald 121).

In the third stanza of "All That Uneasy Spring," a contrast to the spirited conversation of the women in the kitchen is employed as the women apathetically finish their domestic duties of washing, repainting and preparing dinner and themselves perfectly for "when [their] husbands pulled in the drive" (56). The silence within the women begins to resurface and consume their life as they all "lay in the dark/ under crisp fresh sheets/ the things we couldn't say/ licked like flames/ behind our eyes" (56). The women's words and dreams ignite into an urgency and heat of flames that make it unbearable for the women to remain in silence. The emerging flames of silence were burning down their houses, destroying the form that was suppressing them. Their "children/ screamed and sometimes our own voices/ woke us surfacing through layers/ of smoke to where our fingers touched/ our husbands' bodies cool/ and confident beside us" (56). Similar to "Woman Sitting," the suffocating smoke here represents the thick, grey reality of women's

lives. The husband, the image of the "cool" and "confident" male, contrasts the heated and powerless woman whose flames of silence burn within her.

As the poem draws to a close, it bursts with hopefulness and possibility as the women remember the glory of their diverse kitchen conversations and the joy of their gardening: "we would remember/our morning conversations the sounds/ of our voices coming back to us/ suddenly precious even the smallest details/ dirt-stained fingernails" (57). The women have realized that they and the gardens that reflect them are part of a larger whole of womanly power. Their meetings in the kitchen have become "the groping for adequate language, by which 'particular ceremonies' become discourse in the women's community of southeastern Ontario" (Savoy 89). The women are learning to take what is imposed on them and use it constructively as they have done with their minimal garden space:

This is most particularly true in city gardens. And given that humans have been living in cities for several thousand years now, it's not surprising that the possibilities we have found for growing everything from cucumbers and watermelons to bonsai trees in incredibly small spaces are almost endless and always surprising...Gradually our gardens intermingle too; someone is always giving a root or a cutting to someone else. (A W W 84)

The garden embodies women's hope for change, of moving beyond the silence and the roles of mother and wife to being individual women who can choose their own direction and responsibilities. Each time one of the women is reminded of this day they will see "each other/ standing in those hopeful gardens/ while at our feet/ the plants burst/ dreamlike/ from the slow dark ground" (57).

The third and 'terminal' section of SFT is "The Cancer Poems." In the same vein as "A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf," this section is a tribute to Wallace's best friend, who was diagnosed with cancer. Yet these poems also extend from the

focus of friendship to explore Wallace's struggle between her belief in a feminist way of dying versus medicine as an offspring of a "technological nightmare." This section contains twelve poems as Wallace records Pat Logan's process of dying from her diagnosis of cancer to her death. Two poems from this section "Treatment" and "A Stubborn Grace" are particularly exemplary of Wallace's dualistic vision that is employed through the past two sections.

Emerging from this section are two major themes—a feminist way of dying and the language of the body—that will evolve through her next two books of poetry. In an interview with Janice Williamson, Wallace offers further insight into Pat Logan's death and her (Wallace's) development and belief in a "Feminist Way of dying:"

Seven years ago a woman who had been my closest friend for a number of years died of cancer at 33. She was sick for five years before she died and left four very, very, small children. We spent all of the available time we could together, and I took care of her during the last three weeks of her life. I learned an awful lot about living from her, **but I also learned what I could call a feminist way of dying.** One of the things I really notice as I get older is how much more I need the feminist community and how important it is to develop a feminist understanding of death and dying in the face of the denial and **technological nightmare that the medical profession is built on—denial of the body. There's so much power in the body.** If we could learn to attend to the power, we could learn not to fear what our bodies do. It's connected to how we see the body of the earth; by denying that we're part of the body of the earth, we're going to kill it. (AWW 208) [Emphasis mine.]

This first major theme mirrors her paradoxical credo, borrowed from Flannery O'Conner, that limitation and possibility are synonymous. Through her poetry, Wallace articulates the notion of healing from the wound: "there's a great line in an Adrienne Rich poem about knowing that her wound came from the same place as her power. When you get in touch with your damage, recognize and care for it, you

also discover the source of your power" (A W W 210). This idea can be applied to death in that the recognition and acceptance that our own mortality gives us a power for life, a light of grace that illuminates daily doings and practicalities of life. We learn to live from the death that chooses us. This gives us the power for life.

In the poem "Treatment" from the middle of this section, the technology and the patriarchal element of the medical profession are portrayed through the imposed mechanics of advancement treatment. Wallace elaborates further in AWW concerning this male view of medicine:

...And because male experience has dominated our idea of what *human* is, our view of ourselves as a culture often includes this idea that we have to be vulnerable, that we have to "win." Such a cultural self-image expresses itself in many ways. In the way we talk about disease for example—"beating cancer," "overcoming" heart disease, "fighting" the common cold. Such a language gives little space to talk about the fact that we are relatively fragile organisms, that we have to take care of ourselves, that we are mortal. Instead, we put the emphasis only on finding cures, while those with terminal illnesses are shunted away, out of sight. (74) [Emphasis Wallace.]

A contrast is established between the power of the body as a way of healing and the inane process of healing through technology. The poem opens with similarities drawn between doctors and the military, denoting medicine as a very militant and patriarchal profession. The doctors view cancer as an enemy against which they wage a war as they focus their attention on the disease rather than on the body of the patient: "For the doctors it seemed/ simple as an old war/" (90). The patient is perceived as a passive victim relying on the aid of doctors who are forcing the horrific painful "exorcises" to destroy the cancer. Even the drug they use is "mechlorethamine/ a derivative/ of mustard gas" (90).

Wallace furthers patriarchy's opposition of a feminist form of healing by drawing analogies between the cancer patient and witchery from the Middle Ages.

By insinuating that the cancer patient is the witch, the medical doctors become the oppressors of the Middle Ages who violently reject the healing woman's empiricist methods. The healing woman believed in the power of the body's intuition, relying on her senses. She trusted the body's ability to work with the 'dis-ease.' These women were considered witches and were burned alive for their 'superstitious' beliefs and from this the "elitist male medical profession...emerged out of the suppression of women healers during the centuries of witch-hunting, persecution, and murder" (Rich 135). The woman in this poem, the cancer patient, lies "arms outstretched/ the chemical burning into her/ an older ritual/ given a new name/ demons to be exorcised/ a witch in need of cleansing/" (90). The doctors in this poem are treating the cancer, the dis-ease, as a "demon" which they can destroy, yet Wallace intends the opposite, implying that there is a need to trust the body and the choices it makes and to concentrate on living rather than resigning the self to a technological cure.

The poem moves from the institutional space of a clinic to the home, drawing parallels between the home and the clinic. The symbol of the kitchen appears in this poem as a negative and institutional symbol. It is not the place of solidarity and peace that it was associated with in "All that Uneasy Spring;" rather, it assumes the connotations that were employed in "Towards Morning" and "Woman Sitting." Wallace compares the clinic to Pat Logan's childhood home: "...the clinic/ not unlike the kitchen/ where her mother stood/ and the doctors' voices/ reminiscent *easy now/ there's a good girl no tears/now big girls don't cry/ or yell*" (90). The little girl is treated in a condescending way, urged to suppress her emotions, and consequently to deny her body. When we deny the body's power and vulnerability, Wallace states, "It's the denial of our damage, our limitations, our vulnerability, our mortality that's got us where we are. The voice I try to speak is speaking to that

person" (A W W 210). Wallace is attempting to re-vision the objectification of the body and reestablish its function as a whole entity (mind and body) as well as its connection to the earth.

The image of the little girl shifts to the grown woman with cancer and again the clinic is "not unlike" the kitchen and the demanding responsibilities of mother and wife that occur within it. The clinic and her mother's kitchen were:

not unlike her own kitchen
 smells of breakfast and
 her hands clenched around
 her coffee cup
 as the voices of her children
 husband pulled at her
 claws against her skin
 till she shaped herself to the good mother
 the perfect wife rising
 to find mittens neckties
 her smile stitched across
 whatever rose in her throat
 and the coffee in her cup
 thickened.
 (91)

The woman has a selfless obligation to nurture those around her, consequently denying herself. Responsibilities (dressing her husband and children) are being forced upon her under the guise of a "smile" forcefully "stitched" across her face, paralleling the same images of the doctor forcing his militant treatment upon her. The woman is trapped and is a victim of the societal forces surrounding her. The images of suffocation heighten as the children pull and claw "against her skin" yet she allows them to do this until she is "shaped" into the ideal image of the mother and "the perfect wife" who denies herself in order to attend to the minuscule activity of finding mittens and neckties. She is socialized to ignore the flame of life behind her eyes. She must suppress her needs and dreams even though they

begin to rise "in her throat" (91).

In the final stanza, the woman shapes herself from the "good mother" and the "perfect wife" "to the size of snail" through a dream. Her dream becomes a source of escapism from reality. Here within her body she "journeyed the warm seas/of her blood found her womb/ fragrant with moss and ferns" (91). On this journey her body is being reconnected to the naturalness of the earth. The life-giving image of the womb is now filled with natural, soothing and healing images. Also, the fern and the moss are both flowerless plants, indicating that her body is in a process of dying. Her state of living is without perpetual blooming and flowering. The woman also journeys "in her chest beyond/ the place where her heart/ shone like a blue jewel/ something dark/ and colder than silence/ unfolded its deathscents/ mingling with the smell/of ferns" (91). The body has chosen its own death and the plant imagery and the blueness of heart present death as a very natural part of life.

By exploring her body and moving from without to within, the woman recognizes that she is dying. In this recognition she "rushed out/ through her mouth and/ forced it shut" as she has now returned to an existence outside of her body. This externality and objectification of the body is furthered with the immediate comparison to the doctors. The distinction between a feminist way of healing, a form of healing that accepts the body's chosen path and trusts the power of the body is contrasted to the doctor's technological form of healing that only increases the decay of the body: "while the doctors talked/ of healing her flesh/ loosened and her hair/ came away/ in handfuls" (92). Wallace is using the limitation of the body, its mortality, as a way of opening possibilities. To recognize one's own mortality sheds a luminous, glittering light on all the mundane particularities of life. This makes the smallest, most insignificant detail seem significant.

Wallace is re-visioning the body in order to place the focus of growing, healing and dying upon the body. By allowing doctors to wage a war with something our body has chosen is militant and destructive to the body. By engaging in the "technological nightmare," the body is further denied and objectified. Wallace describes the medical profession as something that attempts to control the body rather than to work with it, and in doing this, the power of the body is ignored. Wallace remembers her best friend's death and how from this limitation she has acquired the vision of possibilities:

...and on my friend Pat, the last years of her life and how much I learned of the power of the female understanding of the body as a limit we can love...how doctors inevitably talk of healing in terms of military victories (cancer can be beaten, etc.) and how our only hero in these terms is Terry Fox, the guy who tries to outrun death by denying it. What about the other side, the woman who accepts her death and in doing so enriches her life? The whole idea that the body must be transcended—both the human body and the planet's—and where has that got us?

So. Reading all this made me remember very much all of this and how much it has formed how I lived my life and how all of the major insights, strengths, etc. have come from women and our tremendous power. ("Erin Mouré and Bronwen Wallace" 38)

The final poem, "A Stubborn Grace," from the section, "The Cancer Poems" is a four-part poem that depicts the intimate and daily interaction between Bronwen Wallace and Pat Logan. Wallace's belief in a feminist way of dying is embodied in this poem. She also moves beyond this, exploring the silence between women; however, this is a silence of feelings that are so profound there are no words to define them. Instead, the only expression for these feelings is the body, in particular the hands. The hands are a frequent image in this poem and they assume a larger role as the only medium of expression when feelings cut as deep as the bone and words are no longer of use. The hands are the witnesses of life, the markings of a

person's past and future. They hold the "dumb memories visible/ in the palmlines" the scar of a "childhood incident" yet while holding the past, hands also "prepare for the future" ("Toward Morning" 36). The hands also express the trembling silence within the woman in "Woman Sitting" as "her hands shaking" are wrapped around the coffee cup or how the anger from the silence of her life clenches "like fists." The hands in "All That Uneasy Spring" become the women's symbol of community and strength, for the precious details of their day of gardening and conversation are symbolized by their "dirt-stained fingernails/the tiny lines that crinkled/ white in sunburned skin" (57).

The hands of Bronwen Wallace and Pat Logan in this final poem of SFT will be their only way to express the sincerity and depth of their relationship with one another. By trusting the hands, Wallace is trusting the body. Pat Logan trusts her body to choose her death in this poem and from this Wallace learns the empowerment of accepting our chosen deaths, our inevitable mortality.

"The body chooses its own death' you told me once," an insight Pat Logan shared with Bronwen while the two worked together in the "dark earth of the garden" (103). By opening the poem with the garden imagery, Wallace is emphasizing the body's connection to the earth as well as the essentiality of women's companionship that was inferred by gardening in "All That Uneasy Spring." The poem shifts with Wallace's narrative style to the room where Pat Logan is dying. Now, the meaning of a body choosing its own death is "taking root" as Wallace is drawn by her friend's eyes to her bedside as her "warm hands" grow into Wallace's hands. Again, the continuity of the physical images is centring on the body, rather than denying the body and in doing this Wallace is re-visioning an acceptance of the body.

Wallace continues to meditate on the diversity of life that Pat Logan's hands have lived, hands that embody the life she loved:

hands I have watched so often stubborn
 grace of them lifting a child or reaching
 for food at your crowded table
 shaping the pots you made and miming
 that crazy house you lived in on the coast.
 (103)

The hands that could once perform such tasks with graceful ease are not the same hands that must struggle just to wipe her own face:

stubborn grace of them now insistent
 fingers trembling with the effort
 to wipe your own face administer
 the medicines that keep your mind
 above the pain like a swimmer
 swimming alone in a steady current.
 (104)

Her hands that once represented the vitality of her life, her strength to lift, shape and mime are now deteriorating with death. The body chooses the death and the "hands attend the choice" (104). The hands become the medium of expression for the body. Grace in this context is not a grace of religious divinity but is rather the grace

that opens up a narrow life. This grace, which allows us to create and to care for—and know when to release—each other and ourselves; is not derived from the limited experiences of the individual but from the convergence of one life with others, both in the present and arising out of the history that touches us, a convergence not only for the writer but for the reader as well. (Bennett 70)

A distinction between conscious choosing and fate is made. Pat Logan is not choosing to die from a desire to die, but is rather accepting the limitations of her body and accepting that the body as a form of fate has chosen its own death. From her acceptance Wallace asks "What do they [people dying of cancer or handicapped]

have to teach us about accepting limitation, learning to live with what cannot be changed or denied? We deny ourselves the opportunity of learning from the dying a great deal about how to live" (A W W 74). Pat was "unable to explain what [she] meant" by stating that a body chooses its own death for it is a process that unfolds from within:

your body chooses its own death
and the meaning of it opens slowly
from within like any change
stubborn as your hands their bones
like the bones of the earth
when they thrust the snow aside
with the coming of a different season.
(104)

Hence, the body and the earth are joined together through the bones.

In section two of SFT, Wallace confesses that she believed death to be an external force, something outside the body rather than within. She believed it to be "crisp and "abrupt as the telegram the late-night/ phone-call" (105). Yet, she is realizing that dying is within the body, within life and that "dying weaves/ through the muddle of our days/ a single thread/ in the cloth of another colour" (105).

Wallace is beginning to recognize and accept that death is one of the particulars of living and that it is informal and common. Wallace refers to Pat Logan's dying as entering her own body "like the song a friend might sing/ in the last moments of a party washing quietly through laughter whispered/ conversations gradually gathering us up" (106). Wallace has managed to place even death into the particulars of the every day, as common and natural as a song sung by a friend at a party. In doing this, she is placing death in a context of mortality, that like all the particulars of life, can be a limitation or a possibility, depending on how it is perceived.

In the third section, the grief of Pat Logan's family is beginning to spread throughout the house like a hunger that cannot be filled. Pat's mother is in the kitchen creating noise through "the clattering pots/ in the kitchen and the house is stuffed/ with food/ we heap our plates/ as if this sadness were an empty/ stomach we could satisfy/" (106). Wallace longs for a language, for the words shared between her and Pat; she is "greedy for [her] words." Their language was a power that bound them together as women. Yet Pat is preparing for another language in another country, "the country of [her] dying." Wallace extends this exploration of words into the fourth and final section of the poem. Words become meaningless at this point, for not even words can reach the depth of grief and sometimes "words are not/ enough they don't even matter" (108). Grief becomes a place where Wallace lives now and reality becomes "this other world" "where people come and go/ with confident expressions on their faces/ as if their plans for the day were solid" (108). Yet Wallace knows and has experienced the impermanence of this life and the extremity of mortality.

The poem, in a circular motion, returns to the image of hands as it moves to a close. Wallace compares the vitality of her own hands to the "paleness" of Pat's hands. The hands can now only express what is being felt:

but in the end it was our hands
 that mattered obdurate fact
 of them their colour like the last
 word between us
 that the touch
 yours gave before it was withdrawn
 leaving mine still curved
 all any of us have perhaps
 the shapes a hand makes
 when words are no longer enough
 and the depth of what can't be said
 reaches
 to the bone.
 (109)

Like the unnamed silence between the words of women in the section "Between Words," there are no words to name this moment. Only the hands can convey the understanding of the depth of what is being felt. The feeling is beyond a language, suspended in time such that it cannot be defined; it becomes a riddle of existence. Because the power of this moment is beyond words it is speaking of the power of the relationship between these two women and its essentiality to life. Yet these are the same two women, the same relationship that "wasn't mentioned in hospital policy" (49).

Wallace has given voice to the unnameable power of women's friendship by writing a poem grounded in the depth of women's friendships. She has also demonstrated a feminist way of dying, of a woman's trust in her body; even when the body chooses its death, she still maintains her trust in the body and lives fully despite the death it has chosen. This poem is not about the finality of death, but rather about the life that forms from it, by taking what may be perceived as a limitation and transforming it into a possibility, a life made stronger and more glorious through the recognition of one's own mortality. She has demonstrated conversation through words and through hands and how both mediums are a type of healing from the wound: "when you get in touch with your damage, recognize and care for it, you also discover the source of your power" (A W W 210).

Chapter One

Notes

¹ Flannery O' Connor, Mystery and Manners, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962) 170.

² Bronwen Wallace, Arguments With the World, ed. Joanne Page (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1992) 84.

Chapter Two

"The stubborn argument of the particular"

Feminism has done many good things for women writers, but surely the most important has been the permission to say the unsaid, to encourage women to claim their full humanity, which means acknowledging the shadows as well as the light.¹

-Margaret Atwood

What all this means to me is that as a culture we have come to accept a very limited view of what it means to be a human being. We accept that men can and should do certain things and that women can and should do certain things...When there are problems, we assume that people aren't doing what they "should," rather than there's something wrong with the expectations we have for them.²

-Bronwen Wallace

Vision to imagine another sort of world. And courage, courage to make this vision happen, no matter what.³

-Bronwen Wallace

In her third book of poetry, Common Magic (CM), Wallace's use of personal pronouns and her use of the second person contribute to what Bina Freiwald identifies as "feminist confessional writing" (129). Wallace's writing style in SFT and CM is intensely confessional and autobiographical. The style of confessional writing in CM bears a "tone of private conversation" (Wallace AWW 213). Her confessional and conversational style in this book is a method of healing: "it's another way of opening yourself up to the other person" and realizing that we are

all inextricably linked (AWW 213). In doing this, Wallace is assuming a particular stand point, speaking always from a female voice, yet because the center of her poems is actually an inner argument with herself, various perspectives are expressed. This diversity reflects Wallace's "exploration of women's positioning and actively [engaging] in the process of constituting alternative subject positions" (Freiwald 130). Wallace's arguments with herself in poetry extend into "Arguments With The World" that, for the reader, open up various ways of seeing.

In the first chapter of this study, new ways of seeing were opened by challenging the limited perceptions of men and women. Conventional perceptions of women as inferior were inverted to reproduce a vision that sees women as powerful and strong, even under the rule of patriarchy or an abusive husband. This theory of inverted insight continues in chapter two of this study with the exploration of different predicaments of women. Wallace's writing presents "a different point of view. [Her poetry] recognizes that the perceptions of women, the way women order their lives is not only very different from the way men order and experience theirs, but also powerful because of those differences, because of their situation as women" (Wallace "Women's Lives: Alice Munro" 53). Through these perceptions Wallace will invite the reader to see the battered woman who is not a victim, but rather a strong survivor. The mind-body theme from chapter one is also extended into chapter two, yet in this chapter the poems explored reveal the destructive consequences of patriarchy upon the mind and body. And finally, an entirely new way of seeing will be opened by examining Wallace's reworking of a conventionally male-defined elegy. Wallace reworks this genre of literature to include women, extending the definition of elegy to include the celebration of women's friendships. All of these themes we witnessed in chapter one; in chapter two of this study they fuse to become a medium of writing that is Wallace's contribution to the

deconstruction of patriarchy. This chapter is a powerful presentation of various women's experiences and Wallace's perceptions of them.

From the twenty-five poems that appear in CM, I have chosen four that explore the politics of gender and the emotional and physical ramifications of domestic abuse. The poems represent the "shadows" and "lights" of women's lives; they are Wallace's contribution to the current feminist efforts of deconstructing patriarchy. Although the poems in this book are not arranged into sections there is the common thread of Wallace's arguments to elevate the position of women into humanity in order to absolve the violence within women's lives. In the poem, "Thinking With the Heart," the politics of the body and mind are explored in order to reveal how certain characteristics are gender constructed. This alerts us to the fact that this is a form of stereotyping that perpetuates the existence of socially assigned roles attributed by patriarchy. Wallace shows us the importance and the power of the human body and our need to trust the mind and body equally and to not place them in a hierarchal form of mind over body. By using the mind to control the body, one is acting in an extension of a patriarchal structure; this desire to have power over something rather than a wholistic power that comes from within. "Thinking With The Heart" is grounded in the narrative story of a woman violently abused by her male partner. The poem is framed within an argumentative form as Wallace constructed the poem as an inner argument with herself:

One of my favourite quotes comes from the Irish poet W.B. Yeats: 'The argument I have with others I call rhetoric; the argument I have with myself I call poetry.' It expresses what I feel about my own writing, about the need for different kinds of 'arguments' and the importance of recognising which sort belongs where. As a poet who writes rhetorical essays, I appreciate the public voice that that craft requires, a way of articulating a clear position on events and issues. As a political person who writes poetry, I know the need for the intimate, inner argument that is the center of the poem. (Wallace AWW 88)

This style invites the reader into the poem and into a conversation with Wallace. This allows the reader to experience a variety of perspectives concerning a particular situation and to leave the poem with new ways of seeing.

The next poem, "Learning From the Hands," is an emphatic encore to "Thinking With The Heart." The poem is the last one of the book as Wallace dismisses the hierarchy of mind over body and emphasizes her theory of the power of the body as a wholistic entity through her familiar symbol of the hand. This issue of domestic violence in "Thinking With the Heart" connects to Wallace's long poem, "Dreams of Rescue" in which Wallace, through a narrative "stream-of-conversation" (Bennett 71) and confessional style, opens issues of anger and helplessness inherent in domestic violence. Functioning in the background of this poem is the recurrent theme of the importance of friendships among women: a form of sisterhood that becomes a source of support and empowerment. The importance of sisterhood amongst women connects to the fourth and final poem to be discussed, "What It Comes To Mean." This poem functions as an elegy for her friend Pat Logan as Wallace meditates on her friend's death and what she has learned from her absence.

These poems are rooted in a more intense political terrain than the poems in SFT. In CM we see the growing articulation of Wallace's political and personal voice. Donna Bennett remarks that Wallace "took as her subject the everyday life of the people around her, and recorded not only the social concerns of her generation but their links with their past, their hopes for the future, and their confrontations with a present filled with trauma and morality" (58-59). In CM, the stories within Wallace's poems open into a forum of arguments that allow the reader to take part. Wallace's use of argument does not imply conflicting positions

but is a medium to share and explore ideas, to exchange views.

“Thinking With The Heart” is a poem that does not inspire passivity in the reader but rather invites the reader into an argument that is “the center of the poem.” Wallace’s poems and this poem in particular stimulate the reader to imagine the possibilities of seeing things in an alternative light, envisioning the possibility for change. This possibility for change leaves the reader and Wallace’s poems with a feeling of ‘grace,’ a celebration of the most cursed situations in life. “Thinking With The Heart” is a poem that does this. Wallace’s arguments with herself are the center of this poem. In an interview with Peter Gzowski Wallace explained this further:

When I was working on this book [CM] I had a little quotation from Yeats above my desk. I know I’ll misquote it, but it’s something like ‘the argument I have with others I call rhetoric. The argument I have with myself is poetry.’ And it seems to me that if I am going to be on a panel on domestic violence, I can make these sort of statements, but when I come to think about violence as a poet, then I have to go into it in a much different way. Because I have to have a discussion or argument or a debate with myself about it. In part, “Thinking With The Heart” is about that. It’s really a mulling-it-over at another level, and then finding a way to put that on the page in a way through the images and the language that I use that will at least begin that process in you, when you read it. (AWW 24)

Wallace’s argument is a particular perspective as she writes from what she is given.

Wallace remarked that she writes from:

a particular life, as a woman, in a particular family and community, at this time in history...The voice in my poems is tremendously important, it’s always very clearly a female voice. In using female anecdote as a metaphor for human experience, I see myself in a simple way assuming that a female view of the world could be a human view of the world. (AWW 178, 208)

By taking what Nancy Harstock terms as “feminist standpoint,” Wallace is examining the effects of patriarchy through a female perspective. By taking this

standpoint in "Thinking With The Heart" she allows the reader "to understand patriarchal institutions and ideologies as perverse inversions of more humane social relations" (159).

"Thinking With The Heart" is a narrative poem in which the story is formed through arguments from a policeman's perspective and an abused woman's perspective. The poem begins with two epigraphs, one from a photographer and the other from a policeman:

I work from awkwardness. By that I mean I don't like to arrange things. If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself--Diane Arbus

The problem with you women is, you think with your hearts
--Policeman. (59)

The title "Thinking With the Heart" infers that the foundation of this poem is Wallace's belief in the power of the body; for Wallace, thinking with the heart is a noble way of thinking. Yet for the policeman, thinking with the heart is a female and emotional way of thinking. Wallace begins this poem by informally inviting the reader to be a part of the conversation, a moral argument: "How else to say it/ except that the body is a limit/ I must learn to love" (59). Immediately Wallace introduces her theory of limitation and possibility. In order to create possibilities in life, one must first accept the limitations of the body and from this, possibilities will emerge. Like the awkwardness Diane Arbus works from, the limitations of the body are something we must live from. Wallace testifies that "we must begin with what we are" ("Erin Mouré and Bronwen Wallace" 40) and that as a writer she "write[s] from what [she] is given" (AWW 178). By accepting our limitations and loving them, possibilities will emerge as Wallace states in AWW, "Each of us then, by our physical presence, represents both possibility and limitation" (216). Wallace is establishing, in the opening of this first stanza, the power of the body and the

importance of trusting the body.

In the first stanza Wallace also states her argument: "that thought is no different from flesh/ or the blue pulse that rivers my hands" (59). She follows this with a re-articulation of her theory of limitation and possibility through seasonal imagery, beginning again with "How else:"

How else, except to permit myself
this heart and its seasons,
like the cycles of the moon
which never seem to get me anywhere
but back again, not out. (59)

Wallace is recognizing that her body and mind are unified as "seasons." The cyclical and circular form of seasons represents the wholistic form of the body. The body, an entity of heart and thought is limited yet circular. She never "seems to get..anywhere/ but back again, not out." J.M. Kertzer remarks that " Thought must nourish the body and its life, but the life or spirit of the body is thought. The two oppose yet embrace each other" (71-72). The use of cyclical imagery implies a wholeness of the body that will contrast the linear thoughts of the policeman introduced in the second stanza.

A second argument begins in the second stanza. The policeman's linear thinking stands in stark contrast to the wholistic function of the mind and body in the first stanza:

Thought should be linear.
That's what the policeman means
when I bring the woman to him,
what he has to offer for her bruises, the cut
over her eye: *charge him or we can't help you.*
(59)

The policeman's thoughts are linear because he uses only his mind, rather than his heart and mind to survey and understand a situation. He definitely does not think

with his heart; rather, in a hierarchal structure, his mind oppresses his body and feelings. He is dismissing the power of the body. In essence he is controlling his body with his mind. This structure of mind having power over the body forms a hierarchy that is a result of patriarchal socialization. This becomes a level of patriarchy that operates within the policeman as he uses the power of his mind to control his body, rather than having a power that emerges from his mind and body as one. This 'one sided' way of thinking, of using only the mind, becomes a linear method of thinking, rendering him incapable of understanding the physical trauma imposed on the woman's body. Because he suppresses the emotions of his body, he cannot appreciate or emphasize with the woman's bodily damage. All he offers in consolation to her "bruises" and "cuts" is "*charge him or we can't help you.*"

Wallace begins to assume a subtle satirical voice as she remarks how the "law" is based upon what people think and that "It [the law] used to be a man could beat his wife/ if he had to; now, sometimes he can't" (59). If the law is a reflection of what people think and the law allows for male spouses to abuse their wives, then this law reflects an existing patriarchal society, a linear-thinking society: "Laws, after all, are made in a specific social context" (Wallace AWW 62). The policeman seems to rationally reduce the complexity of the situation to a simplistic resolution: to charge the abuser. The policeman is frustrated because

these women who come in here
ready to get the bastard
will be back in a week or so
wanting to drop the whole thing
because they' re back together,
which means a lot of paperwork
and running around for nothing.
(60)

The fact that the policeman considers his efforts to be "for nothing" implies a lack of importance attached to this woman's situation. Yet the law, based on phallogocentric

thought, is linear, and the policeman is a product of the law and has continued the practice of linear thought:

It drives him crazy, how a woman
can't make up her mind and stick to it,
get the guy out once and for all.
"Charge him," he says "or we won't help."
(60)

The policeman cannot imagine what this woman is enduring and why she cannot make what appears to be a simple choice. His inability to imagine a different perspective, to see another possibility stems from his own inability to accept the limitations of his body and the power of his body. In an interview between Wallace and Peter Gzowski, Gzowski, in reference to Wallace's treatment of the policeman, admits that he "didn't think [Wallace was] being too hard on him" (AWW 21). Gzowski continued to admit that he himself did not understand the bruises and cuts that Wallace describes. Wallace responded to this, emphasizing the importance and the responsibility of people in this society to "come to terms with" the violence in society:

I think that what we're facing as a society, in a way, is that we don't understand it, and it would be really nice to think that it's happening over there to just a few people—you know—that it's not something that we've created out of the way we've chosen to live. Which is partly, I think, maybe what I was coming—beginning to come to—in that poem: this isn't an anomaly, this isn't something we can have a fixed decision on, you know, this affects us all, we all have to come to terms with it.
(AWW 21)

In the opening line of the third stanza, "Thinking With The Heart," Wallace, in a rather satirical voice, shows the results of a woman charging her male spouse. She provides a type of summation that simplifies the grand implications of the charges: "Out of her bed then, her house, her life,/ but not her head, no, nor her children,/ out from under her skin" (60). For a woman to charge her abuser seems so simple

and lucid from a linear perspective yet the ramifications of a woman being forced to make a decision to stop something that was wrongly imposed upon her life and body are anything but simple. She will have to be the one to give up her life, her bed and her house; she will have to sacrifice her own space because it has been wrongly invaded. In an essay in which Wallace creates a hypothetical "Female Affirmative Action Bill" she addresses this method of women being removed from their homes in domestic violent situations:

Instead of only providing shelters for battered women, every community in Canada must now provide a halfway house for men who batter. When police are summoned to a situation of domestic violence, they will take the man to a halfway house, where he will stay (with provision for passes to work etc) until assurance can be offered that he is no longer a danger to his family...After all, for years now, women and children have had to leave their homes because of the violence caused by the man. Doesn't it make more sense for him to leave? (AWW 55-56)

The fact that Wallace wrote this essay on April 1 and that it is a fictional essay substantiates that although Wallace's solution above is plausible and logical, it is still unrealistic and idealistic in a patriarchal culture. Rather, it is more logical (and linear) for the battered woman to leave her own life and space in a patriarchal culture. The woman may leave her space, but she cannot leave her body. She can get "Out of her bed" but "Not out of her heart, which goes on/ in its slow, dark way" (60).

In the fourth stanza, Wallace appeals to the reader. Her use of pronouns invites the reader deeper into the poem: "I wish I could show you/ what a man's anger makes/ of a woman's face" (61). Wallace is evoking the reader's mind and body by using fleshly language, appealing to our own bodies to imagine this woman's torment. Wallace also wishes that she could show:

...the days it takes
for her to emerge from a map of bruises
the colour of death. I wish there were words

that went deeper than *pain* or *terror*
 for the place a woman's eyes can take you
 when all you can hear
 is the sound the heart makes with what it knows of itself
 and its web of blood. (61)

Evoking the body, for Wallace, becomes another language. It becomes the only language that can convey the profound effect of violence in this woman's life. In order to understand this woman's wounds we have to read the language of her body and in order to do this we must be able to read and understand the power of our own body.

Wallace continues her inner argument by moving from the abused woman's perspective to the policeman's perspective. The fifth stanza begins with the argumentative marker "But," and opens with the policeman still waiting for the woman to make her decision of whether or not to charge her abusive spouse:

But right now, the policeman's waiting
 for the woman to decide.
 that's how he thinks of it; *choice*
 or how you can always get what you want
 if you want it badly enough. (61)

It seems so simple and clear; all the woman has to do is place the charge and leave the violent situation. Yet Wallace realizes that this is not a simple situation and that a woman's actions in this situation are survival strategies. Wallace explains how she learned that the choice of this woman is not simple:

By listening. By listening very carefully to the women at the House, [Interval House] and by realizing that a lot of what I had always interpreted as 'excuses,' in terms of the arguments they would make for going back, or choices they had made about why they stayed—were in fact survival strategies. That they weren't totally victims and they weren't totally passive. That they *were* trying to work their way through this situation, but that they had to do it *their way*. And that it *wasn't* a black and white issue. And just hearing stories over and over again and seeing people make different choices and seeing them *wanting* to make one choice and being *forced* to make another because something as

simple as the mother's allowance check didn't come on time. Or one of the kids got sick so they had to go back. Or they didn't get the apartment they had hoped. And just seeing that there are so many factors in even the SMALLEST choice that it isn't easy. (AWW 22-23)
[Emphasis Wallace.]

The policeman focuses only on the single choice the woman needs to make: whether or not to place charges. Just as he ignores his own body and its instincts, he ignores the issues surrounding the woman's choice. He ignores what Wallace acknowledges above.

In the fifth stanza of "Thinking With the Heart," the policeman acknowledges the choice to place charges, yet:

Everything else he ignores,
like the grip of his own heart's red
persistent warning that he too is fragile.
He thinks he thinks with his brain
as if it were safe up there
in its helmet of bone
away from all that messy business
of his stomach or his lungs.
And when he thinks like that
he loses himself forever. (61)

Wallace is demonstrating here the tragic consequences of a mind-body split that has derived from a patriarchal world. The policeman thinks only with his brain, dismissing the language of his body, its instinct and intuition even though his heart reminds him that he is human and that he too can be "fragile." By suppressing his own intuition he is unable to recognize his intuitive connection to another human being, particularly to this woman. D.H. Lawrence commented that this mind-body split within people is destructive and obstructs any understanding among people:

We have become ideal beings, creatures that exist in idea, to one another, rather than flesh-and-blood kin. And with the collapse of the feeling of physical...kinship, and the substitution of our ideal, social or political oneness, came the falling of our intuitive awareness...We are afraid of

the instincts. We are afraid of the intuition within us...We suppress the instincts, and we cut off our intuitional awareness from one another and from the world. (555-56) [Emphasis mine.]

The policeman 'thinks' he is safe, that he is only thinking with his mind, that he and his mind are "safe up there/ in its helmet of bone." He thinks that he is separate from the intuition of the body, of thinking with the heart "away" from all the "messy business/ of his stomach and lungs." J.M. Kertzer remarks that Wallace "shows that the policeman is mistaken about himself. His authority, rationality and will are illusionary, undermined by his own instincts" (81).

In the final stanza, Wallace appeals to the reader again: "But perhaps you think I'm being hard on him,/ he's only doing his job after all" (61). In a mocking style, she wonders if she is "making too much of the heart." Like the policeman, she reduces it to a biological function in the body, "pear-shaped and muscular, a pump really" (61). In argumentative fashion, Wallace challenges her own point with the same line that opened the poem: "But how else can I say it?" (62). Wallace returns to the theory of the body and urges the reader to let go of the need for "an explanation or a reason" (61). Instead, she suggests the reader "enter [his/her] own body" in order to embrace empathy. Understand and accept the power and limitations of your own body and then move outward from your own understanding to imagine what this woman's body feels. Wallace asks the reader to enter his/her own body just as we would enter the room where the woman sat:

after it was all over,
 hugging her knees to her chest,
 holding herself as she'd hold her husband
 or their children, *for dear life*,
 feeling the arm's limit, bone and muscle,
 like the hearts.
 Whatever you hear then
 crying through your own four rooms,
 what you must name for yourself
 before you can love anything at all. (62)

J.M. Kertzer remarks that in "Thinking with the Heart," "male and female sensibilities collide...men and women inhabit the same world. They have different illusions about themselves and are subject to different cultural constrictions, but they share a physical world to which women are more closely attuned. They share a need to make sense of the messy business of living" (81). Wallace analyzes the space between men and women that has been created by socialized gender roles. She also explores the root of this socialization, looking to patriarchy's need for power and how this infectiously spreads into the individual, insinuating the body and the male's need to have power/control over their body. In "Thinking With The Heart" Wallace is implementing:

...a woman poet's indignation at male power [and how it] is deepened by its rationale of rationality—by the assumption that masculinity represents the superiority of mind and reason, logical objectivity and civilization over mere female emotionality, subjectivity and corporeality. (Ostricker 132-133)

This denial of corporeal intelligence inhibits the policeman's relationship with others, obstructing his ability to recognize human kinship, the ability to intuitively understand the hurt of another's body. For Wallace, recognizing our interconnection as humans is essential for a compassionate and gender-neutral society. Adrienne Rich remarked that "[i]n order to live a fully human life...we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence" (40).

Yet this behaviour and character in which men are an "[e]nemy of the flesh and its sensations, avatar of control..professional and ordered" is a result of socialization, a phallogocentric society that assigns certain characteristics and roles to men and women (Ostricker 133). This assignment only distances men and women, making them an "other" to one another, rather than connected human beings. In an essay

titled "How Wise Is It to Separate Our Emotions from the Rest of Our being?"

Wallace states:

studies of violent, abusive men, for example, show that they are often incapable of recognizing and expressing such feelings as fear, sadness, or vulnerability. But that does not mean these feelings are "under control;" rather, it means that they often get expressed as anger...and how much can we really separate what we "feel" from what we "think?" To what extent is our culture's emphasis on rationality the result of truly irrational fear of emotion and its place in my decision making process? What's wrong with emotions being part of decisions anyway?
(AWW 60)

Yet the hope that Wallace provides within this poem is the hope for change and the possibility for it. Wallace demonstrates the essentiality of recognizing and accepting the importance and the power of the body. Without this, men and women will continue to live in separate spheres, unable to understand each other. Ostricker shares this view and remarks that "We must assume that the discoveries women poets are making about bodily experience, and the verbal strategies employed to name their discoveries will enter common usage and become readily available to men as well as women" (121). For Wallace, this is the hope of her poetry: that it is possible to change and as human beings we have the choice to make the necessary changes to create a more humane society:

And I think one starts with the premise that people can change. And that if a woman has a choice to leave, a man has a choice to find another way besides violence to deal with conflict. And once a person realizes that they can change, then it's talking about how to change your behavior, basically. Because I think that men who batter also have problems themselves, in terms of choosing violence as a way of controlling people, feeling that they have to be in control all the time. They tend to have pretty stereotyped ideas about men's and women's roles...I think the main message is that we're not totally victims of our society or the victims of our past or the victims of our biology or anything else. That we can choose, that we can make changes...The fact that we have a cerebral cortex and a heart. And we can use them both. And we're not victims. We can still choose. We're still here.
(AWW 23-24)

Another poem that expresses Wallace's theory of the importance of the body is the final poem in CM, "Learning From The Hands." In this poem, "Learning From The Hands" Wallace refrains from her typical conversational use of "I" and "you" and provides panoramic glimpses of how humans' lives are essentially entwined by hands. Hands become a symbol of the wholistic knowledge of the body and mind. J.M. Kertzer comments that Wallace's use of the fleshly language is stressed "in many symbolic allusions to hands and their power of grasping, physically, emotionally and intellectually. Physical intimacy suffuses feeling and thought" (72). Hands in SFT, particularly in the poem "A Stubborn Grace," become the only medium capable of expression between Wallace and her dying friend. Hands become another language that is used when words cannot describe or reach a place so deep. The hands contain both the knowledge of the mind and the body; they become the pillar of one's life. As Wallace states in "A Stubborn Grace:" "but in the end it was our hands/ that mattered...the shapes a hand makes/ when words are no longer enough" (SFT 109). In "Learning From the Hands" Wallace employs the symbol of the hand to show how instrumental our bodies are in all facets of life and what we can learn from hands, or the body's ability to understand elements of life.

Just as the hand is essential to the human body, the thumb is essential to the hand. Without the thumb the hand's functioning is impaired and limited: "They say it's in the opposition of the thumbs" (85). This sentence opens "Learning From The Hands." In this first stanza Wallace reminds us of our primitive nature, that we are in fact animals and Wallace compares human beings to "whales" who can sing in "five-act plays" but cannot "write them down" (85). This is what separates human beings from animals: rational ability, ability to use the mind and the body simultaneously to perform such tasks as writing. Wallace continues the

comparison to animals as a warning to remember that humans have evolved from animals and should not deny their primitive instinctual nature. Humans have evolved: "In a few million years—our wings slimming into arms/ or paws flexing to fingers—we've made great strides/ in the animal kingdom, most of it on our hands" (85). Instinct or intuition is the language of the body and denying it only creates a mind-body split.

Wallace explores the importance of hands and their diverse abilities and she reveals how, as humans, we are interconnected, that our lives are literally held within someone else's hands: "We deliver ourselves to the hands of doctors/ and carpenters, engineers, pilots, dentists, cab-drivers,/ some guy tightening bolts on an assembly line somewhere" (86). Wallace is demonstrating how humans are connected through hands (and body) and that each individual's hands will in some way affect other human beings. For the man "tightening bolts on an assembly-line somewhere...we trust him/ with our lives every time we start the car" (86).

A shift is made to the fourth stanza, identifying how people decontextualize the body, minimalizing it to a "machine." This exemplifies the linear type of thinking encountered in "Thinking With The Heart;" the body is ignored, its intuition is suppressed. The people who do this, Wallace labels as "thugs/ who think a hand is just a weapon, like the body, a machine for following orders" (86). This separation between the body and the mind is unhealthy and severs a person's ability to fully comprehend another person, just as the policeman is unable to understand the battered woman in "Thinking With The Heart." To understand and accept the body, and hands as part of the body, is to understand and accept life for:

We each carry our life in our hands—
 the palm's cartography unfolded
 for the fortune-teller,
 (87)

Just as the body in SFT predicted and “attended” to Pat Logan’s death, the hands hold the lines of a person’s past, present and future.

Hands embody the polarities of life, representing harshness and tenderness. Hands have the strength to “gouge a mountain,” and the precision and gentleness to “put an eye back in its socket” (87). Hands complete thoughts; hands can feel, and understand through intuition and instinct. Hands “are the needles thought needs to piece/ the world together, the brain’s light/ threaded through the thumb;” (87). They are natural and authentic. What they feel is natural and devoid of socialization: “they mean what they can do” (87). Wallace closes this poem similar to the opening, reminding readers that hands are formed through evolution, the evolution of animals into human beings and that hands are human beings’ means of survival and destination: “our hands/ what we have instead of wings, / the closest we can come to flight” (87).

Similar to the conversational style of “Thinking With The Heart,” the poem, “Dreams Of Rescue” expresses the violence of a woman’s life through a conversation between two sisters. This conversation frames Wallace’s “inner argument” as the reader is party to the perspective of the abused woman and her supportive sister. Through both women’s voices, the reader experiences different perspectives on a particular situation. By recording, through language and symbols, the conversation between women, Wallace is providing a voice in literature for women’s experiences that traditionally remain silent. She declares that she sees her “job as a writer as trying to give expression to as much human experience as [she] can. Since [she is] a woman, much of this experience will be female and for that reason a lot of it will be previously *unexpressed* experience” (AWW 71) [Wallace’s emphasis.] Wallace’s poems concerning violence against women are unique because of her forthright, graphic depictions of the physical abuse. She grounds her

writing in the realistic and particular effects of abuse. Her use of fleshly language in the poem "Dreams of Rescue" is intended to evoke the bodies of the readers. A second intent is to not display the abused woman in the poem as a victim, but as a woman who has a choice, a choice to make changes. Also, the violence a woman endures speaks as testament to her strength and will power. Susan Rudy Dorscht observes that:

Wallace's poems too want us to notice the women, not just that we 'manage it,' manage to survive, but 'that we make it look so easy'...making words for rage is what Wallace's poems ask us to do. They give us 'clearer landmarks' of that 'ancient, immediate war' we call patriarchal ideology. (109)

Wallace's vision for change removes the cursed weight of this poem. She affirmed this intent in an interview with Peter Gzowski, explaining,, "because that's what I was trying to do. I really do believe that in recognizing them [poems], in really looking at them, they become part of our experience and then we can decide what we're going to do about them" (AWW 24).

"Dreams of Rescue" opens with the image of a dream which seems to be a nightmare. The first line of the first stanza begins with "In the dream" yet proceeds to a violent description of a dog killed by a car: "guts spilling on the side of the road" (48). The second stanza is similar, beginning with, "In the dream" and again the stanza is filled with violent images of suffocation and blood. This dream is characteristic of a nightmare, reminiscent of the dreams of the lonely woman from "Woman Sitting" in SFT whose dreams were actually nightmares because they reflected the tragedy of her real life situation. This dream in "Dreams of Rescue" functions as a foreshadowing of the helplessness Wallace feels while listening to the stories of her sister's abuse.

In the second stanza the dream invokes images of entrapment and the impurity of abuse:

In the dream
the children's voices
crying *do something do something*
are a list I grope through, fingers thick
as my tongue with the smell of dust and blood. (48)

The children in this poem symbolize the abused sister, whose human innocence is eroded by her husband's violent hands. Children are innocent, and at times are rather defenceless like the abused woman who is physically defenceless against the violent anger of a man. Caught between the agony of her sister's injustice and knowing that her sister will need to make her own choice, Wallace is at a stalemate. She recognizes her sister's need to make her own choice within this situation for choice is the source of empowerment. Wallace listens, but cannot act, paralysed by fingers as thick as her tongue and smothered with the smell of dust and blood.

Wallace is wakened from this dream/nightmare by a telephone call as it is her sister's "voice/ coming at [her] from the coast" (48). The poem at this point becomes grounded in a conversational style with the narration of both Wallace and her sister. The sister speaks through the phone: "*pour yourself a drink, you say, / 'I'm paying'*" (48). The conversation between the two sisters becomes an "intimacy shared by the 'I' and 'you'...recollected intimacies [that] in turn illuminates yet another intimacy, that between speaker and reader" (Freiwald 117). This style of poetry represents Wallace's belief in the power of confessions, the conversation between women that interconnects them and empowers them. Mary Di Michele comments on this style:

...she wanted a line that was closer to the ordinary human voice. Not in the third person, but in conversation, another way of talking, that's what she was looking for, another way of talking that...would bring the way women talk into the literary. (45)

In doing this Wallace is also erasing any sort of hierarchy of subject or position within the poem. She is trusting the reader to be involved enough to assume his/her own position. Wallace's use of the "I" and "You" in this poem establishes a comfortable conversational exchange between the reader and writer. Bina Freiwald remarks that this type of narrative poem is

framed by the personal, dialogic narrative which brings together writer and reader, 'I' and 'you', narrative and experience...This narrative device has the effect of moving the narrative in a way which works to undo the hierarchy dichotomy of subject and object, teller and tale, speaker and listener. (125)

This use of conversation involving the younger sister confessing her violent experiences to Wallace, the older sister, becomes the young sister's empowerment. It's a way of using her pain to heal as she is speaking from her wound, but it is this speaking, this confession, that will give her strength. She is working from a limitation to create a possibility. Wallace remarks that:

Confessional poetry does not simply bear the actual autobiographical details of our lives but it can be a particular stance vis-a-vis the reader, a tone of private conversation. When we tell the stories of our lives, we're confessing to each other...when we tell people intimate things about ourselves we are in some way asking, if not for absolution, at least support, inclusion, something, a healing gesture from the other person. That's why we confess. And so I see it's a part of what I was saying about wounds and damage—it's another way of opening yourself up to the other person. This goes far beyond the confessional as we've understood it in autobiography...For me it's a request placed on the reader to stand in a certain relation to the speaker. (AWW 213)

Wallace's use of a confessional style poem to depict the violent reality of an abused woman is an inversion of the common perception of the abused woman as the 'victim.' In an essay from AWW, Wallace writes about an incest survivor and her refusal to identify this woman as a victim. Wallace writes: "Sarah is an incest

survivor. The word 'survivor' rather than 'victim' is important here, for though Sarah has been damaged, a large part of her story is about how she survived, how she fought back" (136). Wallace is perceiving a woman whose insurmountable strength provides her with the ability to survive in what appears to be a war against her body and mind. The woman in "Dreams of Rescue" is able to recognize her situation, to make choices, to consider the details of her choices, while just trying to stay alive. In an essay on Alice Munro, Wallace observes the power of women who suffer in Munro's work, yet this very idea also applies to Wallace's poetry:

Men and Women inhabit different worlds; they grant and withhold power, they struggle and cause each other pain. In exploring male-female relationships, Munro does not deny that women suffer, that women are vulnerable, but her women have as well a sense of strength and power that has to do directly with the fact that they do not deny any part of their experience or reject any part of themselves.
(Wallace "Women's Lives: Alice Munro" 58)

Wallace parallels the strong-spirited women who function within abusive situations to the women in SFT who continue to press on through the isolation and desolation of their socialized roles. Yet Wallace does not perceive this as a weakness; she states that "An acceptance of limits, a coming to terms with them, is not necessarily a weakness" (59).

As the sisters begin their conversation, immediately they are interconnected, woven into one another as if there was no distance between them, as if their distance was only another room in a house:

and somehow the scotch I pour
cuts through time-zones and Prairie winters
until night and distance
are another room in this house
we are learning to build: two women sitting up late, sharing our days
with the whisky and the cigarettes.
(49)

This conversation is the foundation of what these two sisters are building. This echoes Wallace's memories of her mother and grandmothers in the kitchen, building a history and a future for women through their conversations of the details of their life, empowering one another with thought and with sharing. In a letter to Erin Mouré, Wallace remembers the strength of her grandmothers who lived within a patriarchal society, like her younger sister in this poem "Dreams of Rescue:"

These women [Wallace's grandmothers'] lived very much within the patriarchal world, they were *powerful* women *and* they were 'under their husband's law' as well. They were definitely not marginal, either in their own eyes or in the world around them. At least not all the time. They were both subject and object, powerful and powerless. And when they talked! They used gossip, confession, anecdote, jokes—but they used them to tell their experience of the world, to create a world in which the female was the metaphor for the universal. (45-46)

For Wallace, her grandmothers represented both limitation and possibility. Through her poetry Wallace is challenging readers and society to change their perception of people and situations, to challenge compulsory perceptions that have been ingrained by a patriarchal society. Wallace is appealing to readers and society to challenge the "politics of seeing," the "givens" of our culture that are so deeply rooted that they are accepted without question. Wallace is challenging the image of the victim. She is removing the abused woman from the victim persona created for her through patriarchy and placing her in a context of strength and courage. Like the policeman in "Thinking With The Heart," she is asking us to imagine ourselves as the abused woman, or to try and to imagine how her body physically feels. Above all, Wallace is appealing to us to recognize that we are interconnected. Her predominant use of fleshly language is intended to do this. Wallace explains her appeal:

Green. Cripple. Lesbian. Jesus Christ. Just words on a page. We can use them to describe. To insult. To include. To exclude. To judge. To discriminate. To praise. To hurt. To heal. But when they enter our world as flesh, then and only then do we have to live with them. Then and only then do we receive that challenge. If we want to accept it, that is. (AWW 44)

Wallace is bringing people like the abused woman into our lives through her realistic, particular everyday poetry.

As the poem continues, Wallace realizes a change in her sister, a certain inexplicable gentleness: "Something has happened to you./ In your voice it's a kind of tenderness/ that hovers over your words" (49). The younger sister is learning to work from her anger and wound. She is accepting the limitation of her wound and growing from it: "this gentleness we learn/ from what we can't heal" (77). Wallace recognizes this as the power of feminism as she recalls the writing of Adrienne Rich: "the power of feminism is the power of the victim who has recognized a way to use her damage. There's a great line in an Adrienne Rich poem about knowing that her wound came from the same place as her power" (AWW 210). Adrienne Rich writes:

anger and tenderness: my selves.
and now I can believe they breathe in me
as angels, not polarities.
Anger and tenderness: the spider's genius
to spin and weave in the same action
from her own body, anywhere—
even from a broken web.
(A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far 9)

A transition occurs in "Dreams of Rescue" when Wallace remembers an incident in the past when her sister was only three years old. Staying at their summer cottage Wallace watched her sister with a persistent eye until "turning my back and turning again/ to find you face down in the water" (49). Wallace is

combining past and present, paralleling the situation of her sister as a child in a near fatal accident, to the close fatality of her current abusive situation:

I wouldn't call it love that pulled you
 up by the arm and thumped you on the back
 so hard your head snapped,
 shook you till your face streamed snot
 and tears, till you screamed, till you promised
 never to tell, till I couldn't see you for the sun
 and the sound of my own crying, fist
 in the guts that taught me for the first time
 how words like that are just a clumsy warning
 scrawled at the border of a terrifying country.
 (50)

This image of the past, of seeing her sister as a child, echoes Wallace's dream that opened the poem, of the children representing her sister and Wallace being unable to help her. The stanza moves out from an older sister violently saving a younger sister. This situation also parallels the actions of an abusive husband. Wallace states that she "wouldn't call it love" that made her pull her sister up by the arm and "thump" her on the back until her "head snapped." She then "shook" her sister until her face "streamed" tears and snot. This was "the first time" Wallace heard the language of her body by listening to her own "fist in the guts." This stanza is draped in violent words and images as Wallace depicts what her sister endures as an adult. Yet, she reminds readers that she would not call this love, arguing that violence is not a form of love.

Wallace moves into the present again and confesses to her "little sister" that "it's only lately we've become/ like any women/ starting from scraps of the past/ and the rest of our lives/ trying to find the words that fit" (50). Wallace is trying to find her position in society as a woman and she is trying to find words that accurately depict a woman's life. She is just "learning to build" from all the scraps of her past, trying to remap a new language and position for women in society. The poem shifts back

to the younger sister's voice:

"we're splitting, Carl and I."

*"A Lot of things. He he tried
to beat me up, hit me with his fists
at first, we got a marriage counsellor
but*

*(First, he hit you with his fists.
First, he hit you.)*

*"but then he he came at me
with a hammer tore my shoulder
broke my nose..."*

*"I've been in one of those houses
you know for battered women..."*

*"pretty good met some women here
it's all right I'm okay
now I...
(50-51)*

By using graphically violent images (fleshly language) of the damage imposed on her younger sister's body Wallace is trying to evoke the bodies of the reader.

Ostricker discusses the effect of this fleshly language:

Like an effective fiction, it seizes the revealing gesture, the incriminating scrap of dialogue, to create a sense of documented authenticity. Often it is antiliterary...At the same time, the best of these poems function as a critique of language, revealing the connections between acts of domination and the rhetoric of domination of which we are usually unconscious. (130-131)

In doing this, "we are never far from the persistent reality of their physical bodies" (Wallace "Women's Lives: Alice Munro" 56). This "persistent reality" of the body emphasizes again Wallace's belief in the mind and body as a wholistic element. Wallace then interjects an afterthought by using parenthesis as a break to the younger sister's voice, hence dramatizing the effect: "(First, he hit you with his

fists. First, he hit you)." For Wallace, there is no evolution in violence; violence is violence and the initial hit is violent—one hit is too many. There is nothing minimal in violence.

In the next stanza Wallace meshes images of her dream/nightmare in the first stanza with how she feels because of what her sister has confessed. Wallace feels a "stab of pain" through her hand that holds the telephone. She states that she could shake her sister again the "way a mother will shake a child/ who has run beyond her into a scream/ of brakes, as if she could shake her/ into safety and herself free/ of her own fierce helplessness" (51). Wallace feels trapped in a stalemate, just as she felt helpless in her dream. Just as her sister represents the children she cannot help in the second stanza, her sister represents a child again caught in front of a car as the mother watches, unable to help. This screaming of brakes echoes the screaming brakes that opened this poem.

Following the young sister's confession of abuse she begins to cry and this sound reaches Wallace "through the distances/ your husband's hands have forced/ between us; between what we must live/ and what we can tell" (52). Wallace's symbolic allusion to the hand here represents patriarchy; how the husband's control and dominance has severed the sisters, leaving an absence in their life, an imposed silence. Wallace then thinks of "all those proverbs/ only a woman would use," their grandmother's oxymoronic "cold comfort": "*Marry in haste, repent at leisure./ You've made your bed. Now you must lie in it*" (52). Wallace refers to this as the "Wisdom of women/ whose only choice/ was to choose someone else/ and a lifetime at the halted limit/ of that reaching./ All those dreams of rescue/ we dreamed we'd put aside" (52). This wisdom is a very limited wisdom of women who only knew one way of life: to leave a home under a father's rule for a home under a husband's rule. Any dreams of a life filled with other options were

unfathomable, and “put aside.” The younger sister’s voice is “against all that,” the grandmother’s tradition of remaining loyal to a situation despite the despondent consequences. Yet the sister must defy her grandmother’s “proverbs” so that she does not live a “lifetime at the halted limit,” proving once again that she will not resign herself to being a victim.

The counsel of women shifts now from the grandmother’s “cold comfort” to the women who work in the shelter. The gentleness and the solace of the woman’s hands in the shelter are compared to the harsh hands of the husband:

In the house that sheltered you
 a woman’s hands have rubbed your shoulders,
 brought you tea and the names of lawyers,
 the titles of books might help.
 And when you couldn’t stand it,
 when terror was a muffled weight
 on your chest, thick as fur
 over your mouth,
 there was always a woman there
 to hold you.
 (53)

For Wallace, this sharing, this support of women to women is essential, like the conversations in the kitchens of SFT, to the intimate conversations between a woman suffering from violence and a woman to support her; this type of sharing and empowering will bring, for Wallace, a more matriarchal and humane existence for women within the world. The unity of women is essential, as Wallace remarks “what happens to any one woman affects us all, that what joins us together is the fact that, in this culture, *all* women are in danger because we are women” (AWW 142). The comfort and support offered by the women at the shelter is an indication that Wallace’s sister will “survive all this/ though we both know [she’ll] never/ get over it” (53).

The recognition of women's friendships is an important theme subtly woven throughout this poem. This relationship between Wallace and her younger sister, and the younger sister and the women at the shelter will help the battered sister survive. As the poem draws to a close the younger sister affirms her need for Wallace: "*I only needed to hear your voice,*" you tell me./ "*Just for a while. It's better now. Goodnight*" (53). Wallace returns to her sleep, anxiously anticipating the morning "*for the brief light that delivers us/ into its own kind of certainty*" (54). She enters her sleep perplexed by the message her dreams, that opened the poem, have come to mean. The dreams, like Wallace's poetry, are a mystery and a journey of discovery, "*getting closer to—the 'riddle of existence'*" (Wallace AWW 176). Yet Wallace realizes, that despite the love for her sister, that her "little sister" must learn to heal from her own wound, that she "*must dream her own rescue/ from whatever scraps and fragments of it/ she finds, wrecked there*" for this will become her strength as her sister resembles nothing of a victim and is closer to a heroine. (54).

The conversational style of this poem allows the reader to share with Wallace the violence within a woman's life. For Wallace, this method of conversation allows different ways of seeing: it involves "*a negotiation of needs and interests in a life-enhancing context*" (Freiwald 122). In reference to her son's education, Wallace writes: "*I hope he learns that 'conversation' carries with it the meaning of exploring ideas together, rather than mounting a debate in which only one point of view can 'win'*" (AWW 128). Conversation becomes empowerment in any situation, whether it is women gathering in a kitchen in "*All That Uneasy Spring*" (SFT) or the profound conversation between Wallace and her dying friend in "*A Stubborn Grace*" (SFT) or the support network among women to help women to deal with violence. All forms of conversation serve as a foundation for constantly

expanding and empowering the lives of women. Wallace has monumentally preserved this position for women in her poetry, their battles and their victories:

Poems, regardless of outcome, cross the battlefields, tending the wounded, listening to the wild monologues of the triumphant or the fearful. They bring a kind of peace. Not by anaesthesia or easy reassurance, but by recognition and the promise that what has been experienced cannot disappear as if it had never been. Yet the promise is not of a monument. The promise is that language has acknowledged, has given shelter to the experience which demanded, which cried out. (AWW 177)

The subtle theme of 'sisterhood' in "Dreams of Rescue" becomes the focus of the poem "What It Comes To Mean." The term sisterhood is not restricted to sibling relations but includes a spectrum of support and allegiance between women. It is a level of political solidarity that exists to resist the imposing elements of patriarchy. "What It Comes To Mean" is an elegiac poem for Wallace's friend Pat Logan. We have already witnessed the importance of this friendship in SFT, particularly in the poems "Treatment" and "A Stubborn Grace." This poem, "What It Comes To Mean," maintains a threefold purpose: reworking the conventional literary elegy, recognizing the importance of women's friendships and exploring what Wallace has learned from the death of her friend.

Wallace's form of the elegy in this poem is framed within the sisterhood of two friends. This poem maintains a traditional elegiac pulse for it is a lament of a loved one that ends in consolation. Yet Wallace reworks the elegy: "which is most rooted in masculine tradition, because the tradition of Greek elegy is that of an erotic male pastoral. It's a poem by one male poet to another male poet where the second poet makes his place in literary history, through his transcendence over the other lost poet" (Godard 47-48). Wallace's elegy differs from the conventional elegy in that it is a woman poet meditating on the death of a woman friend. Perhaps the most fundamental difference is that Wallace does not attempt to "transcend" her friend

but rather grounds herself in earthly existence. Rather than achieving transcendence, Wallace resides within the uncertainty and inexplicability of the bond between people. In a conversation between Mary di Michele and Barbara Godard concerning the elegy, Godard notes that “[t]here is this elegiac impulse in Bronwen’s concern of lost people, lost things, those lost ancestors that she tried to find, the mourning over the lost” (48).

Wallace’s elegy is framed within the context of the importance of women’s friendships. The elegy abolishes any hierarchal form (reflective of patriarchy) of teacher and taught and concentrates on the equal relationship of two women. Wallace is creating a new form of the elegy that is a tribute to the friendships among women. Barbara Godard explains that Wallace is “turning [the elegy] into a forum that in fact suggests the possibilities for this new community, suggest[ing] both a reality and the possibilities through language for creating a space for women’s friendships” (50).

In A Room Of One’s Own, Virginia Woolf expresses her concern about the lack of representation of women’s friendships in literature:

All these relationships between women, I thought, rapidly recalling the splendid gallery of fictitious women, are too simple. So much has been left out, unattempted. And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends. (133)

Representation of women’s friendships and the complexity of them are realistically depicted in Wallace’s poetry. In “What It Comes To Mean,” Wallace meditates on the absence of Pat and their friendship and what Wallace has learned from Pat’s death; how their friendship, even in its absence, forms a presence. Wallace begins the poem with a combination of themes encountered in SFT and CM: “That we take so long to trust/ even the most necessary facts,/ our lack of power, for one thing,/ or the body’s patience in teaching us to die” (76). Wallace is recognizing her

limitations as a human being framed by gender, class and race. She is also recognizing her lesson in the importance of trusting the body as Pat learned in "The Cancer Poems" from SFT. Pat's body chose her death and she trusted and accepted the choices her body made, accepting her limitations. Wallace has learned to trust the body and becomes a student to "the body's patience in teaching us to die" (76).

In the second stanza Wallace combines past with present. She remembers a time when she attempted to obstruct any chaos or darkness from entering her life:

The summer before Pat died
 there was a night at my place
 when a bat got in on us. It wouldn't stop
 swooping round and round the room.
 I had to kill it. (76)

Wallace frantically destroys what seems an unnatural predatory invasion of a bat into her home. The bat, a nocturnal creature, becomes a symbol of darkness or chaos. After she kills the bat she appears slightly paranoid, needing to stop "every crack in the building" as she tried to "patch out chaos" (76). This bat represents more than an estranged creature invading her house; rather it seems that she is trying to protect Pat and herself from impending death and any other chaotic elements in life. Pat, who has accepted the life and death her body has chosen, sits at ease knowing that Wallace cannot stop the "chaos" within life. Pat remains "on the couch refusing to help,/ already knowing that it wouldn't" (76).

This lesson is difficult for Wallace; her "reckoning" becomes a "private, ragged thing/ that rises, in the season of its need" (77). This expression echoes Wallace's own advice to her younger sister in "Dreams of Rescue" of learning how to extract a healing power from the wound. This notion fits perfectly into life for Wallace, as perfect as "Pat's breathing, on her last night,/ tearing from the air the only silence/ that would fit her, perfect/ as her face, which I will never see again" (77).

This paradoxical idea of healing from the wound becomes a therapeutic form of cleansing for Wallace. She accepts the pain and sorrow of her life and how it plays a positive role in healing: "Sorrow wears itself a hollow, cleans me out with its crying, like that weather our bones warn us about" (77). Again, the body becomes an intuitive reader of the future, and can warn the person about the stormy "weather" of life. Wallace has come to realize that it takes patience to learn to accept pain and how to extract power from it. She has trusted time and begins to realize that the hollow within her carved by sorrow is being filled by her new understanding of what Pat's death has come to mean. Galway Kinnell in his poem "Wait" expresses a similar paradoxical notion: "that enormous emptiness/ carved out of such tiny beings as we are/ asks to be filled; the need/ for the new love is faithfulness to the old" (127). Initially, Wallace believed that her pain was "malevolent" but now she realizes that the pain becomes "the light that washes in/ and brings me my body back, an opening/ that finds the people I love, still here" (77).

Wallace is mystified by this and how the day "shrugs" on "by our need for each other" (77). This inexplicable need for one another is ironically a resolution for Wallace. Ronald B. Hatch comments that "The delight of Wallace's poetry lies in her linking of all parts of human experience. Mystery never becomes an excuse for inaction" (35). Wallace never feels the need to transcend the mystery of human experience but rather roots herself and her poetry within it; within the earthy particulars of everyday, the commonplace becomes mysterious and magical. Wallace is writing within what John Keats termed as "Negative Capability, that is when man [and woman] is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (1209).

Wallace exemplifies the need between people by the way another friend

...Carolyn takes my hand in the middle of a walk,
laughing, as if it were nothing,
this gentleness we learn
from what we can't heal.
(77)

Wallace is creating a community of women within her life that provides a network of strength, support and empowerment. By writing about women's friendships and the profound learning experiences that arise from them, Wallace is fulfilling what Virginia Woolf hoped for: an accurate and sensitive representation of the essentiality of women's friendships. Ironically, this elegiac poem is a celebration of the relationships between women, rather than a mourning of the death of Wallace's friend. Wallace has continued to implement her vision for change by reworking the traditional elegy. Her vision of change includes the continuous erosion of patriarchy:

But feminism also has an agenda for change, whether it's replacing it with something else, at least it's a changing to something else, and not total negation. Difference as critique not as lack. It seems to me that this is one of the things that is critically foregrounded in Bronwen's work, the whole tension between the desire for change and the continuities of rites, of forms. But what ultimately is one of the ironies of her work is that the elegy becomes somewhat really celebratory. That is there is a sense that the loss and mourning, and separation which initiates the impulse to write, the gap which writing attempts to fill, the wonderful stretching ligaments of language, ultimately, is not emptiness and loss, but fullness, and possibility. (Godard 56)

In the final stanza, Wallace leaves the poem in an enigmatic state. She grounds the poem in the inexplicable complex bond between people and particularly women:

If I had a god,
I'd say we were holy and didn't know it,
but I see only what we make of ourselves on earth,
how long it takes for us to love what we are,
what we offer to each other only in our best moments,
(78)

J.M Kertzer recognizes that Wallace's "poems frequently end at moments of relapse into the midst of things because the midst is where she joins with other people. Instead of transcendence, she returns to earth and reaffirms her complex bonds with others" (85). The irony of Wallace's poetry in this book is that it is grounded in uncertainty. This inexplicable bond between women becomes the "common magic" that pervades the particulars of everyday life.

Chapter Two

Notes

¹Margaret Atwood, "If You Can't Say Something Nice, Don't Say Anything At All," Language In Her Eye, ed. Libby Scheier et al. (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990) 15-25.

²Bronwen Wallace, Arguments With the World, ed. Joanne Page (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1992) 104.

³Bronwen Wallace, Arguments With the World, ed. Joanne Page (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1992) 109.

Chapter Three

"other conversations eager to begin"

Each voice is both the expression of what is unique in the speaker and the evocation of what is shared with others...In each voice, many other voices speak. ¹

-Bronwen Wallace

What matters to me in this whole language issue is that we remember that artists and intellectuals are not the only people who are going to change the language and that it is very important that we listen to and use the language of all sorts of people.²

-Bronwen Wallace

I also worked for a while as a counsellor at Kingston Interval House. Why has it taken us until this decade to acknowledge that wife battering exists, on a larger scale, let alone recognize that it's a crime? ...Why do we go on talking about the "family" as if it always fit our happiest visions and was not, often, the source of violence, fear, and pain?

For each of us, male or female, asking such questions opens new perspectives. In that sense, feminism is a relocation; you take up a new place in the world. ³

-Bronwen Wallace

As demonstrated in the preceding chapters, voice for Wallace is vital to her poetry. Bina Freiwald identifies this essential connection for Wallace between words and life: "For Wallace, words are both the shapers and shaped substance of life, and their power comes from the vitality of narrative and conversational exchange" (127). Wallace listened to voices all her life—voices that told stories, particularly the voices of her mother and grandmothers. For this chapter I have chosen to explore three out of twenty-seven poems from Wallace's final collection

of poetry, The Stubborn Particulars of Grace (SPG) that particularly exemplify the amalgamation of diverse voices; the voices of friends and women she worked with at the Kingston Interval House become the centre of this book. The voices in Wallace's narrative poetry in SFT and CM represent a "somewhat collective" experience. Her poems speak from a particularity with her recurrent use of "I," yet her use of second person "you" acts as a "witness to the (particular and representative) anger" and the other experiences of women that we have witnessed throughout chapters one and two of this study. Wallace explains further this idea of the "you" as both particular and collective:

...the voice of the narrative poem—as I hear and try to write it—is somewhat collective. I say *somewhat* collective, because I recognize that it is also private, specific to a particular person in a particular place, at a particular time. I say *collective* because I want to convey that it is most emphatically not "universal," in the sense of Universal Human Experience. Such experience does not really exist; what our culture often refers to as such has historically been white, male and upper-class. But we do have a collective experience—collective as in choir or political movement—in which the whole grows from, but does not transcend, its separate parts. (AWW 178)

Although this is what Wallace employs in SFT and CM, in SPG, the use of the second person becomes "bolder and more particularizing in the articulation of the person(s) which the 'you' contains" and from this emerges the particular/collective dichotomy (Freiwald 130).

This dichotomy is exemplary in the first two poems from SPG that I will be discussing in this chapter, "Joseph MacLeod Daffodils" and "Anniversary." Both poems are addressed to a particular woman. In "Joseph MacLeod Daffodils" the poem is addressed and dedicated to a friend and fellow poet, Isabel Huggan. In "Anniversary," the poem is addressed to Wallace's deceased friend Pat Logan. The dedication of these poems to women establishes a community, a network of

women. Barbara Godard suggests that this "sense of belonging to a community of women writing extends beyond the immediate moment of sustenance of friendships, to move back to encompass a tradition" (41-42). Yet a dichotomy of particular and collective also emerges within these poems. Although the poems are framed by Wallace addressing a single person, the poems contain multitudes of voices as Wallace, the story teller, weaves stories throughout the poems that allow a variety of women's voices to be heard. This polyphony of women's voices is the predominant element of this final chapter.

The final poem to be discussed in this chapter is Wallace's long narrative poem "Intervals." It too is framed within the particular-collective dichotomy as a variety of women speak about particular experiences. The voices are those of battered women to whom Wallace listened while working at the Interval House. Wallace then asks us to listen and to live like these women who live "[w]ith courage and vision. [Women] whose persistent small acts together change history. The single voices that together become loud enough to fill up the silences where women have been absent" (AWW 113). "Intervals" consists of five sections and in each of these sections Wallace often addresses a particular woman. The culmination of this style amounts to a poem that addresses a particular person in a particular space at a particular time while simultaneously creating a choir of women's voices.

SPG, Wallace's final collection of poetry, brings us full circle to end where we began in chapter one. In chapter one we began to explore the essence of women's conversation; we became a part of their conversations with Wallace's inviting use of pronouns. Now, in SPG, we become listeners to women's voices and their stories as Wallace reminds us in her poem "Intervals" about the necessity of listening. Alice Walker also identifies this importance of recording women's voices:

Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's [and grandmother's] stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother's [and grandmother's] stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories—like her life—must be recorded. (In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens 240)

The power of the women's voices, as recorded by Wallace, writes women into a literary existence. From their conversations, to their stories, their shared gossip and their shared tragedies, Wallace records a realistic depiction of women's lives. And "in the midst" of these voices Wallace continues to remind us through poetic speech that as human beings we are all interconnected and capable of change, and in this lies the hope for the end of violence in society.

"Joseph MacLeod Daffodils" is the final poem of the first section of SPG also titled "Joseph MacLeod Daffodils." The "you" in "Joseph MacLeod Daffodils" is fellow Ontario writer Isabel Huggan, to whom Wallace dedicates and addresses this poem. This differs from Wallace's previous poem in which the you often included the reader, inviting the reader into the poem and in essence, into the conversation. The first lines of the poem are spoken by Huggan, as Wallace begins to construct her choir of women's voices: "'I'm planting perennials this year,' you tell me,/ 'because I'm scared and it's the only way I know/ to tell myself I'm going to be here,/ years from now, watching them come up'" (31). This poem opens with the planting of flowers. This ritual is performed to give Wallace and Huggan an assurance of their future as the flowers elude the fear of death. Huggan is planting perennials, known for their longevity as she needs to have a mark, something to refer to as time passes. Having something to look forward to and watch growing mitigates the fear of death. Wallace responds to Huggan and immediately a dialogic style forms in this poem. Wallace empathizes with Huggan and suggests, "Maybe it's a phase" since Wallace

is also planting flowers, "lily of the valley," to affirm her existence and future.

As this poem opens directly into a dialogue between two women, two voices are offered. This poem exemplifies what Donna Bennett terms "stream-of-conversation." She explains this term and how the conversations in this book of poems differ from the conversational poems in SFT and CM:

Unlike the earlier conversation poem, the stream-of-conversation poem does not widen in predictable fashion to a more general truth but moves back and forth from one subject to another, whether specific or abstract. While the links in such a poem are close to those of stream of consciousness writing, the conventions and courtesies that are part of the ordinary conversations they dramatize keep these poems from making extremely arbitrary shifts and give them a unity that grows out of the conversational weave. (AWW 71)

This "conversational weave" begins between Wallace and Huggan as they discuss something as particular as the planting of flowers and what this form of gardening represents to them. Planting lily of the valley for Wallace gives her a reference point for the future by comparing what she will be doing in her own life to the stage of the flowers:

...lily of the valley,
under the back hedge, thinking *when Jeremy*
is old enough to drive, I'll have to divide these,
put some under the cedars there; by the time
he leaves home, they'll be thick as grass.
(31)

At this point the poem moves into an intense use of the particular by including the name of Wallace's son, Jeremy. This increases the reality of this situation and conversation. Donna Bennett states that "the mention of the name of Wallace's son, contained in this address is directed toward a real person, keep[ing] us from hearing the voice as distant or anonymous" which grounds the reader in the particulars of Wallace's daily life. (71)

Following this, Wallace jokes self-inferentially, comically stating that she and Huggan are “parodies of [them]selves” as they are still “sixties children, still counting on flowers...to get [them] through” (31). In conversational style the poem turns and opens further, turning the subject to George Eliot: “...the wisdom/ of George Eliot’s observation that/ ‘a difference of taste in jokes/ is a great strain on the affections’” (31). By including this quote from Eliot, another voice is added to the growing choir. According to Wallace this addition of different voices is “a way of deepening the poem for me and a way of evoking other voices. We do this in conversation. We say, I was reading so-and-so...I’m trying to bring as many voices into the conversation as I possibly can” (AWW 211). Wallace then playfully and informally writes that this was “another thing” she and Huggan shared: a “delight/ in quotations like that” (31).

This inclusion of Eliot’s voice is Wallace “turning this poem into an expanded conversation, involving dead speakers with living ones” (Bennett 72). For Wallace, this is a very essential aspect of her poetry and rhetoric: to include the lives of deceased women. Wallace hopes to evoke the lives of women alive and dead with her writing. She writes: “And I want also to evoke the bodies of women long dead, whose lives left no trace, and whose history is the history of a silence so vast that it seems impossible that there will ever be enough anecdotes and letters and songs and shouts and cries and stories and poems to fill it” (AWW 217). The inclusion of George Eliot in this poem is a tribute to women writers and the literary foremothers who refused to be silenced. Wallace’s use of Eliot’s voice in this poem is an effective medium for presenting a vitality and diversity of women’s voices.

Huggan and Wallace’s shared delight in this quotation is “exactly what you’d expect/ from girls who grew up wearing glasses/ into women who read everything” (31). Wallace is digressing here into “small generalizations” (Bennett 72) as she

continues to write how bathrooms reveal much about a person since Wallace and Huggan have a “huge bin of books by the toilet” (31). At this point, the voice of Diane Arbus, a photographer, is added. We have encountered Diane Arbus in Wallace’s earlier poetry, particularly Arbus’ epigram that is quoted in “Thinking With The Heart” (CM). In “Joseph MacLeod Daffodils” “‘The contents of somebody’s bathroom,’ / Diane Arbus said, ‘is like reading their biography...’” (931). This digression shifts in topic as Wallace quickly realizes that by reading the language of Huggan’s hands that she is still not distracted from her larger meditation of the future and the inevitability of death:

This doesn’t help much, does it?
 You’re laughing, but your hands stay
 clenched in your lap, still forcing
 the tight, dumb bulbs into the ground
 as if you could force your life
 to a pattern as serene as theirs,
 a calm that flourishes in darkness
 to the pull of the sun. (32)

Wallace is recognizing that her nostalgic anecdotes are not providing the source of solace that Huggan needs compared to what she is receiving through gardening. This need for gardening echoes Wallace’s use of gardening in “All That Uneasy Spring” from SFT. In “All That Uneasy Spring” the garden and the act of gardening become a symbol of hope for the women who felt alone and isolated in their domestic roles. The women in this poem are like Huggan as they worked eagerly and intently in their gardens. For these women it was the remnants of the garden, their dirt-stained fingernails that brought them pleasure and fulfilment as they would always remember “standing in those hopeful gardens/ while at our feet/ the plants burst dreamlike/ from the slow dark ground” (SFT 57). Like Huggan trying to find a form to her life like the form she gives her bulbs, Wallace wishes she too

could manage "the planet the way [she] manages [her] garden" (AWW 85).

Gardening and the planting of flowers embody hope for Huggan.

Wallace acknowledges that her stories do not help to find a "serene" pattern for Huggan, stating: "still, I keep on talking./ It's the only wisdom that I've got" (32).

Thus she offers another story about how yellow daffodils became known as Joseph MacLeods. The flowers were named after a radio announcer named Joseph MacLeod, who delivered the news of "the Allied victory, against Rommel" (32).

This same day the first daffodil bloomed in a greenhouse and the man who planted this flower was listening to the radio announcement and decided to name the daffodils, Joseph MacLeod daffodils. Wallace admires this "sense of history/ [she] can appreciate" (32). The naming of the daffodils was not glorified or decorative with names like "*El Alamein Glorias* or/ *Allied Victory Blooms*" (32). Wallace appreciates this naming of history that is precise and accurate, much like her own naming/creation of women's history within her poetry. Wallace is also attempting to name the experiences of women, to provide a "sense of history" that is separate from patriarchal ideology and degradation. Thus, it is not surprising that Wallace would sincerely appreciate the earnest and accurate naming of the Joseph MacLeod daffodils. This story leads into another story directly related to mortality as Wallace talks of her mother preparing to give birth to her on V-E day. These stories of naming and birth, beginning life with an identity take Wallace into the next stanza.

Wallace begins the stanza stating: "What I love/ is how these stories try to explain/ the fit of things" (32). Stories for Wallace have become her way of discovering and exploring the "riddle of existence" (AWW 176). Wallace has a "need to begin [her] poems always in conversation, the stories women tell and have always told each other, in the cadence of the voice discovering itself through the story" (Wallace "Erin Mouré and Bronwen Wallace" 40). Again Wallace realizes

that this will not satisfy Huggan as Wallace "can see/ your mood's for something more sinister" (32). This mood reminds Wallace again of Diane Arbus. Wallace compares Huggan's need for something more sinister to the "reason Diane Arbus gave/ for photographing freaks, maybe?/ 'Aristocrats,' she called them,/ 'they've already passed their test in life'" (32). Wallace then contrasts herself and Huggan to "freaks" and how freaks are born with "their" trauma, "while the rest of us must sit around, dreading it" (32). Wallace, in a satirical manner, considers herself and Huggan as "Normal" (32). Wallace is satirizing what "normal" is in terms of what is accepted by society and not questioned. For Wallace, the freaks are wealthy with wisdom and are truly the "aristocrats" of society. In this poem, to be "normal" is to be

practically wizened with worry, hunched
 over coffee cups, whispering of cancer and divorce,
 something happening to one of the kids, our lives
 spread between us like those articles you read
 about Mid-Life Crisis or Identity anxiety,
 Conflict of Role expectations in Modern Marriages,
 the kind that tell you you can fix all that
 with less red meat and more exercise,
 (33)

These media proverbs, like the articles about "Mid-Life Crisis or Identity anxiety," are the "failed stories" (Bennett 73) offered to women by culture. Wallace is satirizing what has become the 'normal' perception of women's lives and how "[r]ole expectations" in marriages are reduced to being fixed with "more exercise" and "less red meat" (33). In an interview with Janice Williamson, Wallace discusses this aspect of "Joseph MacLeod Daffodils:"

JW: ...And the poem goes on to address aging, and the conundrum of the middle-aged woman. I'm edging towards forty and that very strange location where we shift between a pre-written cultural text and the possibilities we imagine for ourselves. Can you talk about that?

BW: For me, the contradiction is that this is the time in my life when I feel the most powerful and the most together and the most on top of things, and it's a time when I'm also most aware of how incredibly misogynous this culture is, even in terms of how this culture treats aging women. (AWW 207)

After Wallace explores this pre-assigned cultural text for aging women and offers solutions to deal with their "crisis" or "anxieties" she offers her own solution, that "what it all comes down to, every time,/ is making do," coming to rely on the particulars of life, the everyday rituals, "the smaller stratagems" of life. (32). Yet these "stratagems resolve into aphorisms" (Bennett 73) that finish this stanza. These aphorisms translate into proverbs that are no more reassuring than the media proverbs. Wallace is dealing with morality and aging women, which are not issues that demand a solution. Yet these pulp fiction proverbs indicate that they offer solutions: "'Be sincere and don't fuss./ 'Noble deeds and hot baths/ are the best cure for depression'" (33). J.M. Kertzer notes that, for Wallace, "it is never a matter of endorsing the neat lessons of the proverbs she loves to quote...These sayings convey a frame of mind that an older generation, like her grandmother's, used in faith or in desperation to quell the instability of their lives" (84). This use of what can be perceived as "grandmother's proverbs" we witnessed in "Dreams of Rescue" as the grandmother offered proverbs as solutions to an unhappy marriage: "*Marry in haste, repent at leisure./ You've made your bed. Now you must lie in it*" (CM 52). This use of proverbs that act as solutions to the "mysteries" in life contrasts the essence of Wallace's poetry. For Wallace, resolution lies within the ability to accept the inexplicable. Resolving mortality would be to accept it and to continue to "live decently and alertly in the midst of instability" (Kertzer 84). These unexplained mysteries become the 'common magic' of life and it seems rather unjust to try to categorize them with neat and tiny proverbs.

The next stanza closes this poem as it opened, with a direct address to Huggan as Wallace offers the mystery of secrets in contrast to the revealing neatness of proverbs. Wallace imagines Huggan in a photograph, offering again the voice of Diane Arbus:

I love your grin from the end of my sidewalk
as you head for home, posed like a photograph.
"Perfectly Ordinary Woman on Suburban Street."

"A secret about a secret," Arbus called this kind,
"the more it tells you,
the less you know."
(33)

Wallace leaves the poem in an enigmatic state and without resolution. This open-ended style of ending is Wallace's way of leaving a conversation open, to be continued by her readers. For Wallace this is the answer. As she and Huggan try to plant flowers to assure themselves a future, "as if the future's/ something you decide about" Wallace knows that there is no resolution in mortality, only acceptance. Yet Wallace also questions what people have come to accept as "normal" in terms of aging women and how misogynistic the cultural script for them is. All of this is accomplished through Wallace's stream of conversation and employment of stories, as Wallace incorporates five different voices in this poem to create a choir of women speaking about the very particular things in life.

Wallace's contemplation of mortality and death extends from "Joseph MacLeod Daffodils" into the next poem to be discussed, "Anniversary." "Anniversary" is also the final poem of "Testimonies," the second section of SPG. Similar to Joseph MacLeod Daffodils," the frame of the poem "Anniversary" is that it is addressed to a particular woman. The woman is Pat Logan, who is the focus of poems that were explored in chapters one and two of this study. Yet this poem is different because the reader becomes a listener as Wallace speaks intimately to her deceased friend.

This poem is a memorial in which, through conversation and stories, Wallace evokes the memory of Pat. Like "What It Comes To Mean," from CM, "Anniversary" is a poem that resembles Wallace's form of the elegy as it is a celebration of women's friendship, and the celebration of what a woman's life and death have brought to Wallace's life.

The poem begins in the midst of Wallace's journey to Pat Logan's burial site on the anniversary of her death. Immediately the poem becomes personal and particular as Wallace explicitly refers to the space and to Pat as "Your grave. You" (54). The surroundings outside of the cemetery are described and reference is made to the order of nature, recalling the image of Huggan ordering the bulbs in "Joseph MacLeod Daffodils." In "Anniversary," Wallace refers to the "reforestation" of the "government plants, the pines/ grow taller in their narrow columns/ as if to show me how there can be order/ in returning what we owe" (54). This ordering of nature acts as a foil to the disorderly details of humans' lives. The fact that the pines grow taller in narrow spaces reflects Wallace's theory of possibility emerging from limitation, as the trees grow higher in limited space. This idea also echoes Wallace's perception of city gardens representing both limitation and possibility, how people have managed to grow the most exquisite and earnest forms of vegetation in limited space:

...it's not surprising that the possibilities we have found for growing everything from cucumbers and watermelons to bonsai trees in incredibly small spaces are almost endless and always surprising. Most of them from the simple ones, like growing potatoes in a barrel to the most stunningly beautiful and complex Japanese gardens—have to do with *using* the limitations that small spaces impose. (AWW 85)

The idea of "returning what we owe" implies dual connotations. Not only does it represent possibility and limitation but it also represents what Wallace has learned from Pat's death or what Pat's death has allowed in her. Like the government that

owes the forest new trees, death owes Wallace something. Wallace's new knowledge and understanding of life that has been gained from Pat's death places an "order" back into Wallace's life that was lost in her grief. From her thoughts on "reforestation" Wallace then shifts the subject to a story "of a woman whose husband took her ashes,/ as she'd asked him to, and with their children/ travelled for a year to scatter them/ all over the world" (54). This woman's wish becomes what death owed her and how death paradoxically opens up new understandings and gestures of life: "a gesture / that tries to say what death allows/ in each of us, no matter how we meet it" (54).

This "it," this new understanding of death, inspires Wallace to "want to tell" Pat "everything" (54). What Wallace wants to tell her about are the stubborn particulars of life, the day to day common occurrences that become magic, that become the grace of life. We first witnessed this type of "stubborn grace" in the section of poems concerning Pat in SFT, as Wallace watched the "stubborn grace" of Pat's hand lift, shape and create the particulars in life (SFT 103). Now, in "Anniversary," Wallace wants to tell Pat "what [she] ate for breakfast,/ [her] son's French teacher's name, how [her] basil's doing this year" (54). This cataloguing of particulars leads Wallace to another story about "the deal [she] got on this Lincoln rocker" (54). Wallace's need to "want" to tell Pat about 'things' has transformed into Wallace confessing a story to Pat. She is now holding a conversation between the living and the dead as she is "evoking" the body of Pat Logan. In an interview with Wallace, Janice Williamson asked Wallace why she liked to "evoke the memory of people who aren't here any longer" and Wallace responded: "I feel very strongly that my voice is only one voice in a huge community. It's important to remember that this community includes the dead as well as the living so every time I read I start with a poem by someone who is dead" (AWW 211).

This form of conversation is also a testament to the power of conversation in Wallace's poetry for it is not restricted by boundaries or conventions within the living, but reaches into the past to converse with women who might have otherwise remained in silence. Thus, Wallace seems to be taking one incident of what could be perceived as a spiritual matter and placing it in a political context. Wallace writes:

This is how I really see the world. *The Stubborn Particulars of Grace* is an attempt to begin to talk about spiritual matters in a political context and to say that if we're going to live in a state of grace, if we're going to live with wholeness or integrity in the world, we have to pay attention to the particulars and politics of where we are. (AWW 205)

This poem, "Anniversary," resembles Wallace's elegy, "What It Comes to Mean" (CM) as Wallace does not try to transcend this moment at the graveyard nor does she turn to God for understanding. Rather, she grounds herself in earthly existence, in the particulars of the everyday and begins a conversation with Pat that starts with a story about a farmer.

Wallace tells the story of a farmer who started an antique business, informally adding "the man there—you'd like/ him, Pat—who told me how he farmed/ for years and years and then risked everything/ on something else he loved" (54). Wallace appreciates this, just as she appreciated the historical account of the naming of the Joseph MacLeod daffodils. As a farmer, the man embodies the essence of this poem; he is spiritual and practical. Wallace recognizes that the relationship among a farmer, his land and animals "is a spiritual as well as a practical one" (AWW 82). Yet the farmer risks his farm "on something else he loved," which is to build furniture. The farmer uses his hands in a delicate and spiritual way, to carve the furniture, "just as they've bumped the right curve/ of a cow's belly, learning the season/ of the calf within, listening to the wood now,/ what to bring forth/ from

layers of decisions made by strangers, for their own good reasons" (54-55). The hands of the farmer are an important symbol as they are the ultimate expression of attending to what the farmer, in mind and body, loved to do. Just as the "hands attend the choice" of Pat's death in "A Stubborn Grace" from SFT, the hands here too attend the fate of the farmer creating furniture.

In the next stanza, Wallace moves into the past to recollect a conversation she had with Pat. The incident that she remembers parallels an incident from "What It Comes To Mean" when Wallace remembered a time before Pat died when a bat was loose in the house. In "Anniversary," Wallace remembers a time when Pat taught her to look for four-leaf clovers: "Don't try so hard," you kept saying, / 'just peek from the corner of your eye, / like this,'" (55). This echoes Pat's actions in "What It Comes To Mean" as she refused to help Wallace frantically try to patch out "chaos" following the bat's intrusion. Pat "already" knew it would not help; she accepted the limitations, just as in "Anniversary" she does not try to look for four-leaf clovers but rather runs her fingers "through a patch and coming up with one / every time," (54). But Wallace, "with no more faith" continues to reach into the patch, "that gesture / which belongs to any gamble, / no matter how crazy, the movement / by which a life gets changed / for keeps, a reach / for what we only hope / is there" (54). This is pivotal for Wallace, to keep reaching and to (her signature saying) to "keep on keeping on" (Wallace AWW 113). In doing this, possibilities for change emerge and the species progresses "because of the small acts of people" (AWW 112).

Wallace then begins the fourth and final stanza by comparing reaching into the clover patch to the way "this yearly journey reaches / deeper into what I only thought / I understood: your death / is final" (55). This annual visit to the cemetery becomes an annual journey deeper into Wallace's understanding of her acceptance

of Pat's death. This journey now exudes a serenity and an inexplicable understanding of life and death. Compared to her first poem/journey concerning Pat's death, Wallace resigned herself to grief, as it became a place she lived in (SFT). Yet her journey slowly unfolded through SFT and CM as we witnessed Wallace's deepening understanding and acceptance of Pat's death and how it has opened possibilities in her own life.

The finality of Pat's death now "brings out the colours—certain/ as the grain in oak or cherry—/ of a wider life that grows/ through the small demands the present makes" (55). Like the farmer who "stroked" the wood of his furniture that contained the innate and colorful grains of wood, Wallace reaches within herself and "strokes" the innate and colorful finality of Pat's death. Wallace has reached within herself and discovered her own "four-leaf clover." In doing this she has come to recognize, " a wider life that grows;" the possibilities that emerge from the acceptance of our limitations. Yet Wallace also returns to the origins of the "wider" things in life which are the small particulars, the "small stratagems," "the small demands." Hence, the wider life (possibility) grows from the small particulars of life (limitations). These possibilities and limitations draw Wallace back into her car "for the ride home" (55).

Just as the poem opens in the midst of a journey to Pat's burial site with the image of the road, Wallace returns us to the highway to finish the poem and to begin our own journeys. She returns as she did in "Joseph MacLeod Daffodils" to the particulars in life, the stubborn graces of the everyday. Paradoxically, she begins another story to end this poem, leaving the reader once again, in an enigmatic state, in the midst of things, just as she opened the poem. She begins (and ends) with the "common courtesies" that begin a conversation and she leaves us with the hope that we will continue the conversation she started:

already planning the sandwich [she'll] get
 at the truck stop on the highway; empty now,
 the woman who runs it taking the time
 to put her feet up, sink back
 into the knowledge that will hold her
 until I arrive; my wave, her smile
 what we'll begin with, the common
 courtesies, as if they were nothing
 to be surprised by. (55)

In these two poems, "Joseph MacLeod Daffodils" and "Anniversary," Wallace has managed to incorporate six women's voices. Wallace continues her exploration of voice in her long poem "Intervals" from "Bones," the third section of SPG. This is the longest poem throughout all of Wallace's collections of poetry. The poem consists of five sections in which Wallace incorporates the voices of five women, all of whom are living with violence. The voices are distributed through different mediums, either by first person narrative or third person narrative. This poem is written through a very particular perspective, yet it involves several different stories and voices, hence the particular/collective dichotomy is established. We first encountered Wallace writing about violence against women rather subtly in SFT and then more prominently in CM, particularly in her poems "Thinking With The Heart" and "Dreams of Rescue." This poem, "Intervals," is her pivotal poem concerning violence against women and how it becomes indicative of the prevalence of violence in society. Wallace describes how she writes about violence against women:

I can only write about my own experience of it so I was very careful in the "Bones" poems to write as a shelter worker. I don't have the right to write as someone who was battered. I don't think we should kid ourselves. As it becomes more socially respectable to be a social worker who works with abused women, the language is starting to change. Now social workers talk about 'conflictive' families or 'spousal abuse' and, once again, feminist language is going to get co-opted. Just telling the stories is essential—one novel is not enough. (AWW 204-205)

And Wallace accomplishes the necessity of telling stories in this poem.

“Intervals” encompasses all that we have witnessed in her previous poems: conversation, story-telling and voice. The texture of this poem is ragged and ‘graced’ with and grounded in the mundane particulars of the everyday. Wallace also continues to employ her style of fleshly language that was introduced in CM. Her “extreme close ups” of these women’s lives reveal the torments they endured and how to take these wounds and heal from them. Wallace is alerting and warning readers of the violence in society and how violence against women is only a part of it. Wallace appeals to the reader to listen, just as she listened to the battered women at the shelter, recognizing that their stories are *our* stories too.

“Intervals” maintains an inherent power that

connects the personal experience of individual women to the political context in which it happens. Instead of party experts (or party candidates) telling us what the issues are, each woman speaks from her own pain and is believed by those who hear her. In speaking out, we discover what we share. And in discovering what we share, we discover the power to heal our pain, by working together to change the society that causes it.
(Wallace AWW 142)

Empowerment among women is established through conversation in chapters one and two of this study, yet in this chapter, empowerment is established through listening. By listening to the stories and the voices of women, perhaps we will recognize and understand how close we are to violence. In an interview with Peter Gzowski Wallace explained how, through listening, she learned:

By listening. By listening very carefully to the women at the House, and by realizing that a lot of what I had always interpreted as ‘excuses,’ in terms of the arguments they would make for going back, or choices that they had made about why they stayed—were in fact survival strategies ...And just hearing stories over and over again. (AWW 22)

By listening, Wallace learned to re-enter “the country of her own damage/ from a

new direction" ("Bones" 81). This listening was an active listening for Wallace and she used what she heard to confess these stories to other people. She provided voices and stories for an issue that has remained in silence. Now, through the poem "Intervals," Wallace uses what she has learned through listening to share with her readers. Now we become the active listeners, listening to Wallace who confesses that: "Everywhere I went, my work experience/ drew me through confessions I couldn't stop,/ and I couldn't stop talking about them/ so you had to listen" ("Bones" 81).

The first section of the poem "Intervals," is "Entry." This section 'enters' violence into an environment that has become "comfortable" and 'normal.' The poem opens with a rather naive perception of the city, a naivete that stems from becoming too comfortable:

Enough people tell you how comfortable it is
and you come to believe it,
this city opening up like the map it hands out to tourists,
the parks and the reasonably priced restaurants
enclosed in circles, innocent and reassuring
as the arrows leading you back out to the 401,
the songs on the radio tracing
the same old terrain, love's body
where the prince and the princess live
happily ever after. (59)

The tangible, anonymous city is not much different than its sheltered and safe representation on the maps. People become comfortable in their worlds, accepting without questioning the "arrows" that lead them. They are insulated from the violence, "enclosed," and "innocent" of violence. Yet Wallace will enter violence into these lives through her poetry, shattering the image of their comfortable space and bringing their attention to the reality of violence and how close they are to it. Susan Rudy Dorscht notes that "Intervals challenges the ideology of what the poem

calls “love’s body/ where the prince and the princess live/ happily ever after.”

The poem itself will become an “interval that opens up the possibility of meaning for women by re-reading ‘what we have been given’” (103).

The opening of this poem stands in stark contrast to the remaining content of the poem. Wallace uses imagery of the assuring directions of maps and fairy tale allusions to suggest how some people exist by false pretences and how they continue to live by false ideologies. Wallace enhances the falsity of such an environment by incorporating the image of television and media as a factor in desensitizing people and decontextualizing human events. Wallace suggests how random violence can be “where anything/ can happen any minute” (59). Yet when something does happen it has no effect upon the people of the city because

there’s always someone there
between you and the damage, a voice
over the shots of bodies, letting you look
up from the screen
to the square of street outside,
and back to the weather
which will be fine, tomorrow rising
as it always has, with those
who are never asked. (59)

The television represents a violent culture, but it also distances people from it, desensitizing people so that violence does not affect them. The people can turn away from violence as easily as looking “up from the screen” into a city that is “fine” because, like the battered women, the city is never questioned or “asked.” Television violence, for Wallace, means an increased acceptance and perhaps desensitization to violence: “another way to look at it is to see the incidence of TV violence as an *expression* of a culture which increasingly accepts violence in one form or another as an acceptable means of resolving conflict. It’s harder to look at it this way, of course because ‘a culture’ means us” (AWW 108).

In the second stanza the violence begins its entry into the city and into the lives of those who naively inhabit the city, how they are “running on automatic” up until “that night (exactly like any other,/ you think now, exactly)” (60). Yet one night becomes different when someone as close as the “neighbour” knocks on your door and with the opening of the door comes the entry of violence. Violence enters in the shape of

a woman, coming to you
her face full of blood, the night
spilling out from her hair
to the street, the man, light glinting
off the metal in his hand
as you pulled her inside. (60)

Violence has now fully infiltrated “inside” this person’s life and this changes the person’s life forever.

The third stanza closes this section and it marks the progress of transformation of a naive and comfortable city and its people to the “entry” of violence into their lives. Even the children born now into this city are “kids born / already knowing” (60). The epitome of innocence and purity is a young child, yet these children are born experienced; the effect of violence reaches them in their state of birth and destroys their innocence. The city has now transformed from “circles” in the first stanza to a city with an “edge” and a “border:” “Where that night’s taken you since./ The city, an edge like any other;/ its dark, the border territory between houses/ where violence holes up in men’s hands” (60). Barbara Godard discusses this aspect of “borders” in this poem: “The sense of dealing with a world where borders, emotions, lines are shifting and the need for connections, as there were within the family...This is desperate, dark, dangerous work, but absolutely critical” (45). Wallace is dealing with a growing awareness of violence and how it affects a person’s perceptions of life after violence has entered into it.

This stanza closes with television imagery again acting as a decontextualizing medium as it separates people and becomes a convoluted eye to the world for people. Wallace writes that the

..houses
wired to the world, the hum you hear
when you pass, the TV's blue light
spreading into the street and inside
the people, frozen by it,
just sitting there,
waiting. (60)

Like Wallace's preceding quotation concerning the effects of television, it has dual tragic consequences in this poem. Television is an advocate of violence as it "spreads into the street," yet the people who watch mechanically on the inside are "frozen" by it. This desensitization leaves the people in an automaton state as they sit, "waiting" for the point in time in which violence will destroy their lives. In this section of the poem Wallace has successfully revealed how close each one of us is to violence. This poem is an alarm to people who exist in a "comfortable" and naive state of existence. The reader is invited to recognize the violence that is everywhere; to pull it out of the "shadows" that lurk between the neighbours' houses, to name the violence and to converse about the realistic consequences of violence.

The second section of "Intervals" is titled "Free Speech." This title is ironic for the section is dedicated to and about a variety of women who are silenced by their abusive partners. The women are denied a language of words that would enable them to speak. Language is further investigated by framing this section with juxtaposed definitions of interval scattered throughout.

Wallace dedicates this section to a particular woman, just as she did with "Joseph MacLeod Daffodils" and "Anniversary." We learn about this woman, but not through her own voice, for violence has incapacitated her ability to speak.

Wallace's descriptive narrative tells the woman's story. The first line of the poem inducts another woman into Wallace's choir of voices, and it also functions as a tribute to the woman's valor because of the torment she endured:

This is for Sylvia
 who is deaf
 and whose teeth are rotted to the gumline,
 stumps in the foul swamp of her mouth
 where the noises she makes at us
 only her children can understand. (60)

In chapters one and two, a different medium of language was explored through the language of the body. Now, a third language is introduced: the fragmented sounds of a language deeply rooted in silence. Only Sylvia's children can understand and decipher this language. The abuse inflicted on Sylvia has consequences that extend beyond herself. Wallace shows us the domino effect of violence as Sylvia's oldest boy is fourteen yet, "is smaller/ than an eight year old, his wrists/ thin as the pencil he's using" (60). The boy is trying to record "the days/ their father left them alone, locked/ in their cabin forty miles north of here" (61). The children were left for twelve days "with a bag of flour/ and a box of powdered milk" (61). The children within this section, and remaining sections of this poem function as indicators of the future. They will carry their learned violence into their own lives and into others'.

Wallace then dedicates the poem to one of Sylvia's children: "this is for him too, for Steven,/ round-shouldered old man of a kid" (61). The effect of violence, the entry of violence into this family's life has eroded the sacred innocence of a child. Steven, paradoxically, is an "old man of a kid." His innocence and the purity of the beginning stages of life have been destroyed by violence, paralleling the image of the children born "already knowing" in the first section of this poem (60). Steven, like his older brother, communicates through sign language, another

medium of language. He tries to comfort his mother with sign language, yet the extremity of this situation is beyond any language as Steven signs “to his mother/ the little he has to comfort her/ in any language” (61). This section maintains elements of ‘free speech’ in that there is a freedom of choice in the expression of language as we have witnessed two mediums of language. The woman accesses free speech by being excluded from the use of a speaking language, and her need to find an alternative to speaking. Yet, there is also a silencing that is occurring, in that the woman, through a life with violence, has been denied the ability to articulate words. Ultimately, an attempt to silence her has been made, yet this woman survives and keeps on by employing another medium of language. This perception validates Wallace’s writing as an attempt to invert the woman as victim to a woman of courage. Sylvia exemplifies this image of courage by her ability to find another language.

This examination of language extends now into the scattering of different definitions of interval in ‘intervals’ throughout the poem. This intervention begins in section two with the dictionary definition of the word interval. This formal definition is contrasted with a descriptive scene from the Interval House which will serve as a modified (or re-worked) definition of interval. Susan Rudy Dorscht remarks that “the dictionary definitions are juxtaposed to the word ‘interval’ in the poem” (101). Similar to Wallace’s re-working of conventional perceptions and the elegy, she traces a certain aspect of language to its roots and then extends from this to re-work a new definition of the word interval. Patriarchal ideology identifies the Interval House as an intervention for women, a place for them to heal and move on. Ideally, it seems that in order to dismantle this ideology the name of the House should also be changed. Yet, ironically this becomes women’s only place of rest in which they can feel safe. For the women there, this is

not a place or position of being in between, it is the sole place to be. This was the only space in which women could feel safe and were amongst a community of women they could share themselves with. Wallace writes that "one of the things about the House was that the women who came there were guaranteed that it was safe" (23 AWW). Susan Rudy Dorscht notes that "The poem is also highly self-conscious about the meaning it attempts to construct and includes an extended consideration of the word 'interval'" (101).

For this first interval, Wallace offers the dictionary definition of interval:

*Interval: originally
from the Latin inter vallum,
the space between ramparts,
walls, between two events,
two parts of an action, a period
of cessation, a pause. (61)*

The next stanza contrasts this definition. This stanza begins again with a dedication to another woman at the house, which follows with Wallace's graphic depiction of injuries: "This is for Ruth,/...eyes swollen shut, broken jaw wired/ and eighteen stitches closing one ear. This/ is what a man might do/ if his wife talked during the 6 o'clock news./ 'And I knew better," she tells us softly,/ 'I guess I just forgot myself'" (61). Like Sylvia, this woman is being silenced in this ironically titled section, "Free Speech." Ruth had "talked" during the News and for this received a violent penalty from her husband. Ruth, like Sylvia, has literally been silenced. Yet, at the Interval House she is allowed free speech as "she sits up with me/ drinking coffee through a straw./ 'I can't sleep,' she apologizes,/ 'every time I close my eyes,/ I see his fist coming at me/ through the wall" (61-62). Perhaps the most difficult aspect of these abusive situations is for these women to tell their stories. In an essay from AWW, Wallace writes about a group of battered women who gathered to share their stories. These women and their experiences are synonymous with the women at

the Interval House and in this poem. Both the silence and the voice of these women are powerful. Wallace writes:

None of these stories comes easily. There are long silences in which the women struggle with their tears or search for words. But though the silences are tense and uncomfortable, they also carry within them a kind of power. It is as if every woman in the room recognizes that this is not the kind of silence which has defeated and separated us for so long. This is not a silence which denies our stories, but one which gives us time to gather the strength to continue telling them. (AWW 141-142)

Wallace's ability to perceive silence in a new way is a testament to her continuous efforts to see conventionally defined notions in a different way. Much like the presentation of the battered woman as survivor rather than victim, Wallace now offers us silence not as an emblem of oppression but of power.

In the next stanza another definition of interval is offered, a definition of the Interval House:

*A house that can accommodate
20 according to regulations,
30 in a pinch, since we don't
turn away, 32
if we use the old couch
in the back office, maybe 35
if most of them are children
which they are.
(62)*

This definition of the Interval House is constantly expanding, depending on the needs of the House. The definition is flexible in contrast to the stringent dictionary definition of interval. Following this definition is a brief stanza dedicated to a young child affected by violence: "For Marilyn, aged 7,/her arm crushed because she caught it/ in a wringer washer, where she was left,/ alone like that, for three days" (62). This is then contrasted by the dictionary definition of interval as a period, a fragment, "an open space lying/ between two things" (62). This scattering of

varying definitions of interval, Susan Rudy Dorscht remarks, is Wallace's method of challenging patriarchal ideology:

As the attention to the meanings of Interval House make it possible for us to see, the words Interval and House, when spoken together, open up a gap, a contradiction, in patriarchal ideology. Interval House is a place that is not a place because women are out of their places there. It is a house where women are not, according to traditional ideology, at home. (102)

The next stanza begins with Wallace's dedication to herself and her own horror in the recognition of the growing violence:

this is for all the time
 it's taken me to learn
 that terror is not always
 sudden, as I thought it was,
 the fist or the bomb
 ripping the sky open;
 that often it is slow
 and duller as August stupefies a city,
 that glazed season we come to
 out of helplessness.
 (62)

Because the recognition and the understanding of the violence is not sudden, the violence penetrates further into society unrecognized, and the terror for Wallace is finally recognizing how prevalent it is and how close we are to a society completely contaminated by violence. This stanza is then juxtaposed with a final dictionary definition of interval as the distance between things and persons. This is effective here because the idea of distance reminds readers again how close we actually are to violence. The definition of interval as "a gap" is immediately contrasted to the definition of Interval House as "a 24-hour crisis line" (63). This asserts the permanency of the House as it is available all the time; even through the telephone, someone is always available to listen. With this image of the telephone Wallace returns to the idea of voice for the closing stanza: "this is for the voices/ on

the other end I never see,/ for all they have time to tell me/ before something stops them" (63). The final dedication in this section is to all the voices of women. Wallace also emphasizes her position as the listener, actively listening to all they have to "tell [her]." As listeners we begin to comprehend that "this is our story too, that what happens to any one woman affects us all, that what joins us together is the fact that, in this culture, *all* women are in danger because we are women" (Wallace AWW 142). Yet, like Sylvia and Ruth, the voices of these women are silenced. Their telling is obstructed by "something." Wallace does not infer what that something is, yet after Wallace's articulation of the experiences of the women at the Interval House, the "something" may be traced to patriarchy.

The third section of "Intervals" is titled "ECU: On The Job." ECU is a cinematographer's term and means extreme close up. In this third section Wallace employs a cinematographic form in her writing that provides an extreme close up of the detailed physical injuries of one of the women at the Interval House. Immediately Wallace 'zooms' in on the severe wounds that cover the woman's face. Wallace figuratively surveys this damage sensitively with the use of her hand in order to emphasize the large wounds: "If I were to place my hand on the side/ of her head, the bruise at her left temple/ would exactly fit the palm, the heel/ curving over the left eye, where the rim/ of the heel of her husband's shoe has left/ a gash marked out by the doctor's stitches" (63). Wallace "follow[s] now" by applying ointment to her "stretched/ and healing skin" (63). This leads to Wallace's belief in the amalgamation of mind and body as the woman simultaneously feels the physical pain of her lacerations and bruises, yet her mind pushes forward, frantically thinking about her children, rent and hydro.

Wallace is reminding readers how complex the lives of these women actually are. The woman's body continues to press on concurrently with her mind:

the work
 of her lungs as they empty
 and fill themselves, the noise
 her children are making upstairs
 and what will happen to them now;
 the brain is adding hydro to food
 to first and last month's rent, phone bills
 and cough medicine, trying to make ends meet
 while it keeps the heart
 pumping the blood to her wound. (64)

The recognition of the complexity surrounding this woman's life was fundamental to Wallace's changed perception of battered women. Wallace once believed she

...thought like most people thought, which was that the people who got involved in that were sick people, that it wasn't very widespread, that it just happened to, you know, maybe to women on welfare or to people who drank, or something like that. And that it was cut and dried: that anybody who stayed in that situation was an idiot. (AWW 22)

This perception changed for Wallace by listening to the women, and the various factors to consider in their situation. Wallace writes that some women wanted to make one choice, yet were "forced to make another because something as simple as the mother's allowance check didn't come on time. Or one of the kids got sick so they had to go back. Or they didn't get the apartments they had hoped. And just seeing that there are so many factors in even the SMALLEST choice that it isn't easy" (AWW 22-23). This perception of battered women is one of strength, for what the women endure in an abusive situation is a testament to their courage and will power as women. And their perseverance to survive, to "push slowly into the future" and to leave the situation is also testament to their courage (SPG 63). This perception eclipses the 'victim' persona and attempts to reconstruct a different way of seeing battered women, rather than the socially defined victim perceptions.

As this woman pushes "slowly into the future" her body heals yet her emotions do not: "the bruise already yellowing at its edges,/ though her husband's still there"

(63). The hasty recovery of the body is contrasted to the irreconcilable emotional damage instilled by her husband. Between her and her husband there is “nothing left between them but the days/ exactly alike, each one bought/ at the same cost”

(63). This monetary image of cost connects to the following image in which the woman’s bruise “is the only currency between” Wallace and the woman. Wallace is focusing now on the interconnectedness between people. This woman is connected to Wallace’s life like the pay cheques Wallace receives. Yet the very fact that Wallace is paid to help these women reflects how ‘normal’ and ‘comfortable’ violence has become in our lives. Jobs and careers stem from the need to assist people affected by violence. The monetary image is incorporated to express, just like money, how Wallace not only brings the paycheque home with her, but also her experiences with these women:

I carry it home like a paycheque,
my fingers smelling of ointment and blood,
and when someone asks me how it went today
it is the bruise that spills from my mouth,
uncontrollable, incurable, it stains my son’s cheek
and grows in secret on my breast and thighs. (63)

In the next stanza Wallace confesses that “maybe it can’t be helped. / Maybe it’s only what any job/ on this planet makes of us” (63). This idea foreshadows a later poem from this section “Bones” entitled “Burn-Out” in which Wallace explores the burn-out that occurs from working “in one of the caring professions” (“Burn-Out” 76). Complacency seems to evolve from the monotony of a job. The wearisome and unvaried environment of jobs causes elements, like violence, to become ‘normal:’ “How we’ve made it seem normal,/ when I open the door at 3 a.m./ and the cops are there with another one,/ three kids in pyjamas, a few clothes/ in a green garbage bag, how this/ is just part of their night’s work,/ as the blood on her cheekbone there/ is mine, our daily bread bought with it” (64-65). These intrusions

of violence become a way of life as we become apathetic to the increasing violence in society. After showing the reader various “snapshots” and close ups of battered women, Wallace begins to warn readers that this increasing violence is destroying our society. Even though “we can be made to endure” all the vices of society, each day human beings become less human and move toward a hollow existence, for even touch becomes something “grotesque” that is even recognized in the innocent state of children: “the babies/ I see each day, flinch/ when I try to pick them up;/ so that that gesture, that grotesque/ twisting from another’s touch/ embodies a future/ which includes us all” (65). Wallace is appealing to the human race to recognize that we are all “inextricably connected as long as we’re human beings on this earth” (Wallace AWW 214). Our responsibilities to one another as human beings are eroding as we are now fearing each other and are withdrawing our connections and our touch.

In the final two stanzas of this section “ECU: On the Job,” Wallace closes this poem with a style of writing that is daringly “didactic and moralistic” (Bennett 78). Wallace warns us of the impending violence. Wallace’s photographic images of battered women and the darkness that inhabits the world of violence become her “principal subject.” Yet, Donna Bennett writes that “as we move to its conclusion, we begin to understand that these battered women are only one aspect of the human capacity for violence” (61-62). Wallace concludes this section with her warning of this “human capacity for violence:”

Our future. Though it may be no more
 than the last few years of this century
 already so full of horrors
 that perhaps it can’t be helped,
 this bruise, no bigger
 than the palm of my hand
 and beneath it, a woman’s brain
 still urging her forward.

Something as small as that.
The time we have left
to see it. (65)

Something as small as this woman's bruise comes to represent the violence of "[o]ur future." It is this close, and the time we have left to "see it" is fading quickly.

In the fourth section of this poem Wallace shows signs of moving into another genre. This section is titled "Short Story" and it focuses on the necessity to close the gap between the battered women and the people that perceive these women as "others." By using the voice of women in her poetry, Wallace is not only adding to her polyphony of female voices in this poem, she is also establishing a form of voice for women within literature. In conversation, Mary di Michele and Barbara Godard discuss this aspect of "Short Story:"

BG: Again the sense she's moving on to another genre. The fourth section called "Short Story" deals with this. "This isn't one to be told/ in the third person,/ though we keep trying to" (65). The question of narrative. Because you spoke earlier about the limitations of the...lyric...

MM: I think she [Wallace] found it constraining and moved very quickly out of that form because she wanted a line that was closer to the ordinary human voice. Not in the third person, but in conversation, another way of talking, that's what she was looking for, another way of talking that...would bring the way women talk into the literary.

BG: Well that's certainly happening here, because what this poem does compared with the ones in the first volumes, is to stage others' voices. There's a whole polyphony of the voices of the women who have come into this house. And it's "intervals" in the plural. (45)

This section "Short Story" narrates a friend telling Wallace of a battered woman who lives in the upstairs apartment. This is a story of an abused woman told in the third person depicting how the battered woman's own voice emerges briefly through the story. This section begins with the immediate recognition that this story "isn't one to be told/ in the third person,/ though we keep on trying to" (65).

Hence, Wallace's friend describes to her " what happens/ with the couple upstairs in her building...the thin, unsteady rise/ of a woman's anger, and a man's/ trying to make her keep it down" (66). Wallace likens this story to "an old movie" and "What happens next/ could come from westerns or The Three Stooges,/ all the slaps and punches" (66). The use of television imagery has been woven throughout the poem, as we witnessed in the first section "Entry." In this section, the comparison of exaggerated violence on television is paralleled to the violence within this small apartment. Though television seems to exaggerate violence, it also reflects the violence in society. Just as in the first section "Entry," television violence is separate from its audience; the people who watch are not affected by it because the violence is no more than an image to them. But when the violence enters their world as a human shape and form, the perspective of violence changes. Wallace's friend had heard all these "slaps and punches..and high pitched-clatter" in movies and television before, "but when it falls/ from her own ceiling/ it's as if she's never heard it before/ like the softer thud that blossoms, finally,/ in the darkness nearest to her face" (66). This violence has "finally" entered very intimately into Wallace's friend's life. This frightens her, the entry of violence is horrifying and "like any of us, she's frightened/ by what she doesn't know/ and she tries to explain it/ somehow" (66). This friend was much like Wallace before she worked at the Interval House, in terms of not understanding the situation of battered women.

In a quotation previously stated, Wallace believed violence only happened to "other" women, only to "women on welfare or to people who drank, or something like that" (AWW 22). This friend in "Short Story" tries to explain the violence similarly "By the bottles that come out/ with their garbage every week/ or the dirty children/ clogging the front porch" (66). This short story exemplifies the

stereotyped perception of battered women and the lives they lead. They need to tell their own story in the first person in order to shatter this stereotypical perception. Consequently, we as active listeners will change our perception, much like Wallace who changed hers by listening to the women who were battered. In a letter to Erin Mouré, Wallace writes about the essentiality of listening:

Anyway, what happened again and again at the House was that if we listened carefully, women very often articulated a moral situation to their problem that just didn't fit with what was available—all that the patriarchy offers is an adversarial legal system in which the “solution” to domestic assault is to jail the guy. Now, very often, what the women wanted was some sort of situation where there would be counselling for the husbands, their children and themselves both singly and together. In other words, they saw the situation as a network of relationships and wanted the solution to come through that...What seems to me to have to happen (and has in fact been borne out in areas where there is a self- help group for batterers) is that we *begin* with what the women themselves are saying and develop our ideas from there, rather than with some political theory about what *should* happen. (41)

In “Intervals” Wallace is beginning with these women’s voices. As an active listener to these women, she has now transformed what she has learned from listening into a confessional voice that provides readers with a graphically close depiction of the women at the Interval House.

Wallace’s friend in “Short Story” offers another third person explanation for the battered woman's’ situation:

‘Or maybe that’s how those people
want to live,’ she tells me,
as if they choose a life
like a slice of bread, cut clean
from the loaf and eaten with honey
in a warm kitchen.

As if.
(66)

Wallace sardonically responds to her friend's explanation by criticizing her friend's perception of an abusive situation as being a choice, a choice made as simply as we choose a slice of bread in the pleasant environment of a warm kitchen. But Wallace demonstrates, as I have suggested in this chapter and chapter two, that the battered woman's life is not a matter of simple choice, as Wallace emphatically states in the above quotation, "As if" (66).

This section of the poem then shifts to the life of the battered woman again as her "four-year-old stands in a doorway/ "screaming profanities at his mother" (66). The violence that lies within his words are "like the life he's been given, a genetic code/ forcing him forward, a blunt weapon/ forcing the story on that way" (66). This boy's violent environment only perpetuates violence, for what he has learned through his father's actions will force him forward in life and become the weapon he uses to inflict violence. This boy and all the other children in this poem are indicative of a future steeped in violence. Yet sadly, Wallace recognizes that these children are also 'the forgotten victims:'

This change [increase of violence] reflects a growing recognition that children are often the forgotten victims of family violence. Not only are they frequently yelled at and assaulted, they also learn very negative lessons on how to be adults...So children remain the victims with the fewest options—and we all help to guarantee [by not helping to stop the violence] that the violence they learn will be continued through another generation. (Wallace AWW 133-134)

This four year old boy's actions in "Short Story" also provide reasons for others to tell the story: "(this story about *them*, about *those* people)" (66). Wallace's use of italics here emphasizes the perception of these people as "others" and that they will remain separate if we continue to tell their stories in the third person, "so that we who hear it can forget/ how little is ever really possible/ for any of us botched/ failed things to whom it may only come once" (67).

All of us, as we move closer to a society contaminated by violence, will be “botched” in some way, touched by violence and in “that moment/ when the voice that tries to sing/ through all our stories rises, briefly, first person singular, cries *yes* and *now* and help/help me” (67). Like the previous section “ECU: On the Job” Wallace is appealing for help, to help see how close we are to violence and the necessity to speak about violence in the first person, to erase this safe distance between us and the people living with violence. She is also establishing the interconnectedness between people and the need to help fellow human beings. As long as people living with violence remain in the third person as “those people,” our perspective of violence will not change as we continue to deny our connections to one another. Yet by having voices speak in first person about violence and having the people affected by it speak in their own voice, possibly the future can be saved from the destruction of violence.

As the section “Entry” opened “Intervals” it is fitting that the fifth and final section is “Departure.” This section is Wallace’s last appeal to recognize the violence in society, and how as human beings we are all interconnected, hence all close to violence. “Departure” shifts from violence against women, outward, to the prevalent violence in Argentina. The conditions of Argentina are used as a model to show how close we are, as fragile human beings, to these conditions. If we do not recognize and attempt to heal the violence, Canadian society will evolve into Argentina. Donna Bennett notes that this poem “shifts out from domestic violence to the death squads of Argentina and then outward ever more, to the fragility of all human beings” (62).

The section begins with the fragility or rather the limitations of human beings for they are only equipped with “words and the cells that make them/ all that will carry us/ into the future” (67). The violence permeates everything, even “language

capitulates and love/ is something to be beaten out of another's body/ or in" (67).

In stanza two of "Departure" Wallace describes the effects of violence:

violence taken in
like oxygen becomes the skin
we wear, the atmosphere the planet
turns through, its orbit shrunk
to the will of those
for whom our bodies
are obstacles and nothing more.
(68)

Violence, like "oxygen," is becoming a necessity, essential to the perpetuation of existence. The interconnectedness between people is tragically lost, for people are merely obstacles to one another "and nothing more."

The image of bodies extends into the third stanza as the focus is now Argentina and "a group of scientists/ sifts through the mass graves/ the death squads planted/ cataloguing scattered bones and teeth" (68). Wallace fears that this is the direction we are moving in. Following this stanza Wallace reminds us that "We are that close" (68). The example of Argentina as a comparison to violence in Canada may seem an exaggeration, but is it? Wallace's use of a severely militant and combative country is effective because the startling violence of Argentina is universally recognized. By using such an extreme comparison, Wallace is intending to provoke her readers to show how close we are to becoming like Argentina.

In the closing lines of this section, Wallace returns to the physical images of human beings and "calls upon us to recognize the interconnectedness of all these events and take action" (Bennett 62):

Each of us, who are only
the work of our lungs as they empty
and fill themselves,
the back, the arms
the cells' need, the brain
where all this happens all the time.
All of it and only that.

We are that close.
 The time we have left
 to do it.
 (68)

The repetition of "We are that close" throughout the last three sections of the poem functions, similar to the entire poem, as a reminder and warning of the violence within society. We are also reminded of our limitations as human beings, for we are "only/ the work of our lungs" and our "brain." As human beings responsible to ourselves and to others, it is urgent that our limitations be recognized now, before violence destroys us all. Wallace remarks: "As a species, our situation is already critical. If we don't start accepting our limitations, our vulnerability, our denial, will kill us all. Literally. 'It's as 'simple' as that" (AWW 76). Just as Wallace emphatically states that it is fundamentally "simple" to accept our limitations, she also states in this poem that "we are that close."

In "Intervals" Wallace shared with us memories and experiences from her two years in which she was a counsellor at the Interval House. The poem is a polyphony of the voices of women who once lived at the Interval House. Wallace is indirectly asking us to listen to the voices of these women as they valiantly fill gaps of silence. In doing this Wallace has offered diverse perspectives of battered women while simultaneously establishing women's voices in poetry. Just as Wallace once listened to these voices, she asks us to. She asks us to listen to her and the voices within the poem that prophesize a future world of violence. Listening, therefore, is instrumental in this poem. In Wallace's dedications that appear at the end of SPG, she thanks "all the women at Kingston Interval House for continuing to teach me how much it is possible to change" (112). For Wallace, listening inspires compassion and induces change. Just as in her other poems, change is the hope for a more peaceful, equal and compassionate society.

Chapter Three

Notes

¹Bronwen Wallace, Arguments With the World, ed. Joanne Page (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1992) 88.

²Bronwen Wallace, "Erin Mouré and Bronwen Wallace," Quarry 42:2 (1993): 41.

³Bronwen Wallace, Arguments With the World, ed. Joanne Page (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1992) 108-109.

Conclusion

"the last word between us"

Through the poetry of Bronwen Wallace we become witnesses to the uncharted territory of women's lives. Stories of the everyday are woven throughout all of the poetry examined, as "we come back again and again to the opportunity for women to tell their stories" (Wallace AWW 72).

Wallace's poetry is a medium that affords various women's voices the opportunity to speak; from the voice of the isolated woman, to the voice of the battered woman, to the choir of women's voices who gathered in a kitchen and the Interval House. Ultimately, what is offered is a polyphony of women's voices that enunciate ordinary truths, particular pleasures and common pains. Each voice utters a story that becomes a tool in questioning and challenging society's perceptions of women. Wallace's poetry illuminates and ritualizes the mundane particulars of women's daily lives. Her poetry becomes a common thread woven through both the reader and writer's lives as she records "the messy details by which most of us live our lives, finally, on the page" (Wallace AWW 198).

The evolution of Wallace's writing can be identified by tracing the position of the reader in relation to the poems. In SFT her poetry begins with invitations into various women's conversations which are recast into confessions and arguments in CM. These confessions transfer into intimate conversations, in SPG, between Wallace and various women. These intimate conversations allow Wallace to confess what she had learned from listening to women's stories, conversations and voices. It is at this point that we are shifted from conversation to become active listeners to the intimate conversations recorded in the poems. By listening, Wallace hopes that we too, will begin our own conversations. Hence, we use what

is learned from listening to the voices of women in Wallace's poetry to generate other conversations.

Chapter one of this study began with "explor[ing in women's lives] what our culture has previously silenced" (Wallace AWW 72). Through Wallace's conversational language we were introduced to women alone and desolate, feeling trapped within their domestic responsibilities of wife and mother. Initially, this subject seemed ominous, yet Wallace's poetry continued to probe deeper into these women's lives, discovering a communal strength among them. The women recognized their limitations enforced through patriarchy and from this they developed possibilities. Women gathered within their homes, kitchens and gardens. These once perceived symbols of oppression were now spaces of communal and individual empowerment. The women assembled predominantly in the kitchens, insatiably gossiping, sharing stories, confessions and experiences. This strengthened their voices and established a connection among them that began to dissolve their isolation and desolation.

These women shared a common language. Yet language moved beyond words to form other mediums of expression. There were moments and experiences that occurred in "[b]etween [w]ords" (SFT 58) that could not relay the intensity of feelings and emotions that were felt. The women began to read each other's body language, particularly the language of the hands. When words failed, hands expressed the sincerity and depth of emotions and thoughts. The body expressed a level of language that words could not contain. This reliance upon the body as a medium of language connected to the examination in this study of our need to trust the intuition of the body. The recognition of this need underscores the importance of a wholistic mind-body relationship. The acceptance of the body's limitations and the reliance on the mind and body as a whole ultimately defies the innate hierarchal

structure of a patriarchal society.

The importance of mind and body in chapter one, extended into chapter two of this study. An interconnectedness was established between women in SFT and in the next book, CM, this notion of interconnection was extended to all of humanity, reminding us that as human beings we are interconnected. Hence, chapter two began with the study of hands and how they not only represent another language but also embody the knowledge and the ability to “piece the world together” (CM 87). Everything is interconnected: the mind and body, men and women and humans and animals.

In CM, these connections became more particular as confessional poetry was employed to illuminate the bonds among women. This connection became even more particular by examining the re-working of the traditional elegy. The non-patriarchal, re-worked elegy included a celebration of friendship between two women. Rather than lamenting the death of a friend, Wallace’s elegiac poem celebrated the friendship and what a friend’s death had taught her. This re-naming of a conventionally male-defined elegy reflects the political intent of Wallace’s poetry as she continuously questions language. The examination of language continued by analysing how language contributed to the gender roles that categorize and confine men and women. Wallace’s poetry challenges us to question this gender construction.

In chapter three of this study, Wallace’s use of voice was analysed. Just as this study opened with stories, it also closes with them. In examining the conversational poetry in SFT we became a part of the conversations and stories shared. However, in the final chapter of this study we were transformed into active listeners, digesting the confessions and stories of women’s voices in SPG that would generate our own conversations. We witnessed and heard several single voices of

women, each telling a different story that became the 'filling in' of the other half of women's lives. By listening to the voices of battered women we became connected to their experience, emphasizing the interconnection amongst human beings. Wallace has succeeded in identifying the particular details in the lives of women while simultaneously creating a polyphony of voices that ultimately record, in literature, the mundane yet magical particulars of their lives.

The intent of Wallace's poetry is ultimately social transformation—that by listening to other voices we recognize that the possibilities in life lie within change. Change begins with questioning and challenging the 'givens' of our culture. For Wallace, these 'givens' are the violence and oppressive gender constructions produced by patriarchy. In this study, we have witnessed Wallace's commitment to challenging our socialized ways of seeing. This ongoing challenge, for Wallace, is the closest we can come to resolution:

as the same old rhythms rise
and change and relocate themselves,
keeping it up, keeping on
for as long as I do.
(SFT 109)

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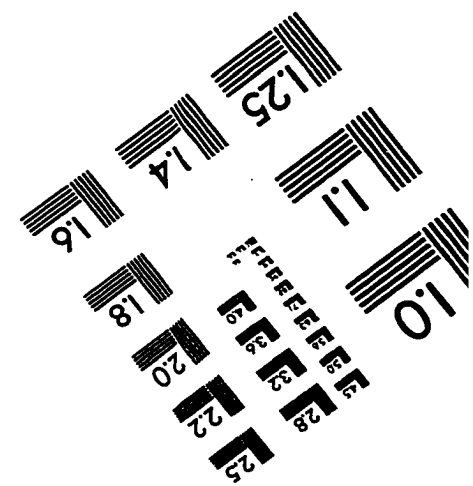
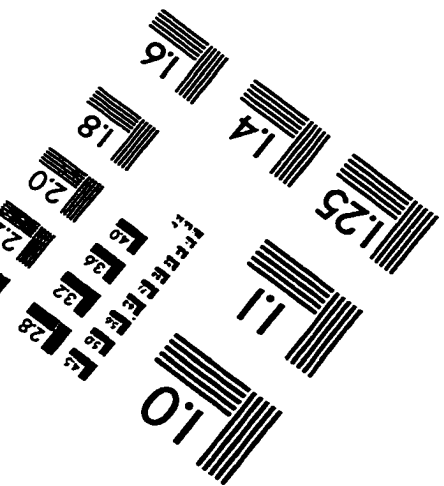
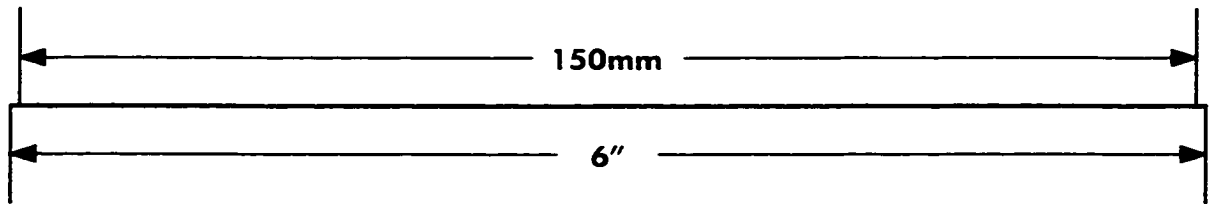
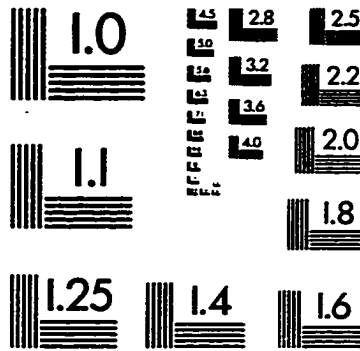
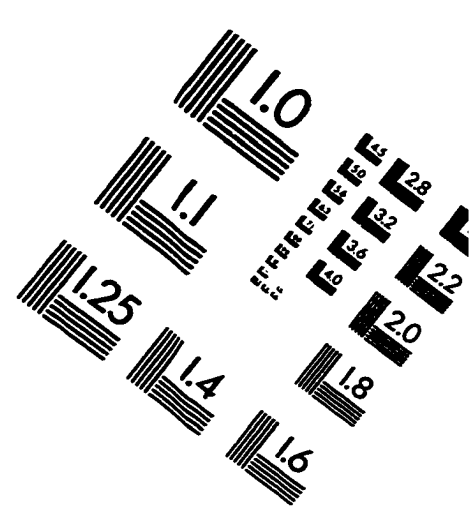
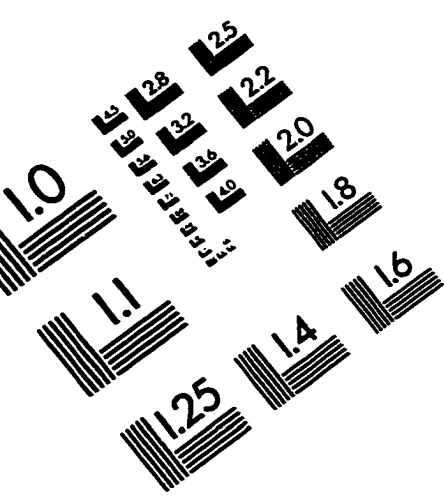
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