SHE’S POETRY IN MOTION: METAPHORS OF MOVEMENT IN SOME CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMEN’S POETRY

by

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Approval

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Abstract

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Being able to move, and being constrained from moving, have always been important poetic metaphors for female writers. Thus it comes as no surprise that motion is a recurring theme in women's poetry in the 20th and 21st centuries. The ability to move is not taken for granted by women; one must be free in order to move, and women have often found their range of physical motion limited by familial and societal constraints. When contemporary American women poets use metaphors of motion, then, freedom lies at the heart of their work.

There are many different metaphors of motion found within the writing of American women. Whether that motion is walking, driving a car, riding a bicycle, or dancing, the very fact that the speaker of the poem is able to perform the action is testament to her ability to control her own life. Women have always sought a life of movement that is unrestrained, a life open to the joys of physical, intellectual and emotional freedom, and this quest is reflected in their writing. This dissertation examines how some contemporary American women poets use metaphors of motion in their work, and what that motion – or the lack of it – says about the lives of women as experienced within their poetry.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Women walk, and women wander. Women traipse through their neighborhoods, drive across country, and dance in their backyards. Women move, and from their movements come metaphors rich with woman's quotidian experience and full of the woman's work that informs that experience. "Life is a verb" (201), wrote Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1904's Human Work, for Gilman lived in an era when women in America were constrained in many ways, not the least of which was through restrictions on their physical motion. Gilman, like so many other women of her time, sought a life of movement that was unrestrained, a life open to the joys of physical, intellectual and emotional freedom, and this quest is reflected in women's writing of the period. These fetters upon women's physical freedom were not limited to the turn of the last century, however. Indeed, being able to move and being constrained from moving have always been important metaphors to female authors in America. Thus it comes as no surprise that motion is a recurring theme in women's poetry in the 20th and 21st centuries. In this work, She's Poetry in Motion, I examine how some contemporary American women poets use metaphors of motion in their poetry and what that motion – or the lack of it – says about the lives of women as experienced within their poems.

She's Poetry in Motion focuses on contemporary American women poets but, as the quotation from Gilman illustrates, movement is not merely a contemporary theme, nor is it exclusively American; we can trace this theme back through the work of many women writers in England and the United States in the 1800s. In her verse novel Aurora Leigh, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, an Englishwoman, brought to the forefront many of the issues surrounding a woman's ability to move freely through the world.

And while Aurora's struggle for independence, freedom of movement, and artistic freedom is based in England (and Italy), the themes with which Barrett Browning was grappling in this work resonated strongly with American women poets, including Emily Dickinson. By telling Aurora's story in an epic, rather than in lyric verse, Barrett Browning was making a statement regarding women and their ability to move within social, political and artistic spheres. "Genre norms for the epic have established it as the preeminent poetic genre of action in the public domain" (Friedman 204), action that was, until Aurora Leigh, performed by men.

In the early part of the 20th century, the American expatriate poet H.D. took up Barrett Browning's mantle as epic poet and wrote Helen in Egypt, continuing to bring into question the established roles of man as the one who does (movement) and woman as the one who is (motionlessness). This societal difference is echoed in poetry, because "the dichotomy of Doing and Being that underlies the concepts of masculine and feminine in western tradition permeates the basic division between epic and lyric" (Friedman 205). In Aurora Leigh and Helen in Egypt, "both Barrett Browning and H.D. reversed the conventions of the epic by moving woman from the symbolic margins of the epic to its very center of action. . . .[T]he transformation of woman from Being to Doing, from object to subject was a radical re-vision of epic convention" (Friedman 217).

Well before H.D., and well before the poets in this study were born, Emily Dickinson was writing about motion, often using movement and immobility in juxtaposition within the same poem. Best known as *the poet who stayed home*, Dickinson wrote verse that showed her to possess a brilliant, inquisitive mind that was

always in motion – always questioning, always examining the world around her both inside and outside her Amherst home. In "Could I but ride indefinite," for example, Dickinson envisions the ability of the "meadow-bee" to "dwell a little everywhere, / Or better, run away" (7-8) as the representation of the desire for freedom that is felt by those "Who tight in dungeons are" (18). The speaker of the poem imagines that, in running away, she is able "To get away from you" (12) to "marry whom I may" (6), thus placing this longing for movement within a context of women's attempts to escape from constraints, or from circumscribed lives.

Dickinson may have been at the forefront of the American tradition of women's poetic examination of the role movement plays in their lives, but this tradition would continue and, indeed, increase throughout the 20th century (and now into the 21st). For example, in the 1960s women poets would begin to react against the immobility they felt controlled their lives, writing poems that not only question the ways in which women were constrained by society, but which also insist that the physical freedom achieved by movement is a woman's birthright. Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, among others, became what Maxine Kumin calls "the underground river" of women's poetry that "was already flowing" well "[b]efore there was a Women's Movement" ("Introduction" xxxiii). The work of these poets forced women to examine their own existence with an eye toward moving – moving away from lives of immobility, constraint, or even entrapment. In "Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound," which originally appeared in The New Yorker in 1961 (Sexton Complete), Anne Sexton merges the ferry ride with the speaker's own motion away from her lover: "Now I am going back / and I have ripped my hand / from your hand as

I said I would / and I have made it this far / as I said I would" (3-7). This is a hard-won freedom, and the speaker is not at all sure she will be able to escape completely, but she continues her onward motion, "holding," as she says, "my wallet, my cigarettes / and my car keys" (9-10), symbols of her autonomy and her ability to continue to move away from her lover even after she disembarks from the ferry.

One must be free in order to move, and whether that motion is walking, riding a bicycle, or dancing, the very fact that the speaker of the poem is able to perform the action is testament to her ability to control her own life. One illustration of this freedom is Marilyn Hacker's 1990 poem "Two Cities" (River). Hacker is a poet who often works in received form (and who occasionally is criticized for doing so by those who believe form represents "masculine" language and thus should be rejected by women poets), and walking – with its dichotomies of structure and freedom – is a metaphor that fits well within her poetics. In "Two Cities," the poem's speaker walks "up the deserted Rue des Deux-Ponts" (I:3), passing "two boy drunks" (I: 5) and a "group // of tramps" (I: 9-10) on her way "from desk to bed" (I: 23), and it is through her movement across Paris and among these Parisians that she (an American caught between "Two Cities") claims this one city as her own. Marie Ponsot[1] performs a similar act in "Real Estate: Kripplebush, New York" (from Springing: New and Collected Poems, published in 2002) through purchasing and then exploring a piece of property. In "Real Estate," Ponsot describes how, after lawyers "decree" that the property "belongs to me" (5) the

[1] Winner of the National Book Critics Award for her collection The Bird Catcher, the poet and translator Ponsot is a formalist who uses her piercing wit and astute observational abilities to confound a reader's expectations: a villanelle's stately progression turns toward the odd or the unusual; a love sonnet becomes a cynical exploration of human experience. Ponsot is not as well known as she should be; her age (she was born in 1921) and her comparatively small output of poetry collections (five to date) work against the traditional publicity goals of publishing houses.

true title search begins. As the poem's speaker declares, "I wake to walk here, / walk to learn my bounds" (13), and in this way she makes what could be constraining (the boundary of her property line) into something to be celebrated.

Each of the poets discussed in this work, then, is descended from a long line of women who wrote on the theme of movement. There is a bond among these 20th century American women and their poetic foremothers which is "a source of personal identity, self-confirmation, and creative power" (Erkkila "Influence" 544). Far from being a bond that constrains, the connection between these poets and their foremothers, and the connection among the poets discussed herein, form a bond that liberates and which can be traced to the metaphors of motion within their poetry.

There are, of course, many types of movement found within the writing of American women, and each type can mean different things to different poets. There are times when movement becomes the impetus for poetry itself. Marianne Boruch suggests that giving oneself over to the act of driving may be "where poetry begins, in that deep, expansive privacy where we go blank, believing something will happen in the forward motion. Maybe it's just pure kinetics, the mystery of the body moving however it can through time and space. And no doubt there's a history to that in poetry, back to prehistory, definitely pre-machinery" (523). Of course, in that time of "pre-machinery," particularly in the era of the Romantics, walking was the type of motion that propelled the poet forward, allowing him (for the lyric voice was predominantly male at that time) to experience the world as not only the space around him, but also as something that lay over the horizon as well. (*Cf.* Gilbert, Walks in the World. Although the feminine

voice is all but nonexistent in this book, Gilbert does discuss the “walk poems” of Elizabeth Bishop.)

For some poets, movement (particularly walking) is a political act, a means of protest and resistance. In “The Stranger,” a poem in her 1973 collection Diving Into the Wreck, Adrienne Rich writes of “walking the rivers of the avenues” (3) as a means of escape, as a way to leave behind that which is constraining and limiting in her life. She is trying to out-walk her boundaries as a woman and a poet, the boundaries imposed upon her by a patriarchal society and its language. She is attempting to articulate the unsaid, that which is unspeakable in the “dead language” of men, and this attempt at articulation is both a poetic and a political act against male-dominated society. This is an ongoing battle for the poem’s speaker, who describes herself as “walking as I’ve walked before / like a man, like a woman” (6-7), telling us that in her life and in her art she is trying to overcome gendered constraints in order to find her way to a new language, a language which will allow her to speak the unspeakable. She walks to separate herself from those around her; she walks to establish her identity as person, as “androgyne,” against the men who control society; and she walks to define herself in her own terms, using her own language. A new language is necessary to supplant the “dead language” of men, for in that dead language the speaker is “the living mind you fail to describe” (16). She falls between the spaces of men’s words; she is “the lost noun, the verb surviving / only in the infinitive” (18-19), and must find a new language in which to articulate who she is.

While "The Stranger" illustrates walking as a means of political escape, Nikki Giovanni's[2] "Walking Down Park" describes walking as an active means of confrontation, in this case with America's history as a land that oppresses some of the people who live within her borders. Giovanni's opening lines are confrontational: "walking down park / amsterdam / or columbus do you ever stop / to think what it looked like / before it was an avenue" (1-5). Here Giovanni has established a space – a political and social space – between the "you" addressed in the poem and the "we" who embody the experience of African-American people both in New York specifically and the United States in general. She goes on to contrast Central Park as it is, with its "syphilitic dogs" walked by "their two-legged tubercular / masters" (20-21), with "what grass was like before / they rolled it / into a ball" (15-17) that became the Park. Walking down these avenues in New York becomes a political act of resistance and remembrance, a means by which the walker – looking at the ways in which the city has oppressed both nature ("tall Birch trees with sycamores / touching hands" (31-32)) and those who lived in nature rather than in opposition to it ("the Iroquois, Algonquin / and Mohicans who could caress / the earth" (49-51)) – can begin to question the oppression inherent in American society.

Nature itself sometimes provides the impetus, the means or the metaphor for movement within women's lives, as in the Native American poet E. K. (Kim) Caldwell's[3] "Moonlight" (in 1997's Reinventing the Enemy's Language), where the

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[2] Influential in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, Giovanni is known for both scathing political verse and lyric love poetry.

[3] Caldwell, of Tsalagi, Creek and Shawnee descent, was active in the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers; in addition to writing poetry she was a working journalist and the author of children's stories and a narrative ballet titled "When the Animals Danced" (Jordan S. Dill, E. K. Caldwell, 1997, First Nations: Issues of Consequence, Available: http://www.dickshovel.com/ek.html, 4 October 2008.).

speaker wakes to "wander through the house in the wee hours / like my aunties still do" (1-2), to "wander to the window / looking for the moon" (8-9). It is the "singing moon" that has woken the speaker, "calling granddaughters awake / from restless sleep / pulling them to her / bringing needed nourishment" (19-22). There is a connection between the moon and the women in the poem, and that connection is both feminine and natural:

> thousands of miles away
>   in another zone of time
>   my aunties will wander
>   in different houses
>   each at her window
>   looking for the moon
>
> no one talks about it much
>   it is our natural rhythm. . . (23-30)

That connection is also characterized by motion, by a walking impelled by moonsong. Caldwell's "family of women" (37) wakes and walks to "stand in winter windows / purified in moonlight" (38-39), and here we find the age-old connection between the moon (symbol of the feminine, of menstruation, and of tides) and women's experience, even their very bodies. These women are compelled to walk by not only the moon's light, but its song, its call to motion, its pull upon the women's "natural rhythm." Indoors, late at night, the speaker and her aunties (and, by implication, her mother and grandmother as well) find themselves drawn toward the outside where the moon shines brightly.

This contrast between indoors and outdoors, between domesticity and nature, is also present in "White Bear" from Joy Harjo's 1983 collection <u>She Had Some Horses</u>:

She begins to board the flight
to Albuquerque. Late night.
But stops in the corrugated tunnel,
a space between leaving and staying,
where the night sky catches

her whole life

she has felt like a woman
balanced on a wooden nickel heart. . . (1-8)

The woman in the poem stands at the threshold, the liminal space between inside and outside – more specifically, between technological society and nature. But while this distinction is quite clear while the woman is on the ground, the movement of the airplane (with her inside of it) complicates this separation between human beings and the natural world, for as she moves across and above the landscape she "watches the yellow lights / of towns below the airplane flicker, / fade and fall backwards" (20-22). In this instance, she has ridden the plane away from the domesticity on the ground and found herself up in the night sky itself. Once she has moved into the sky, she is able to dream "there is a white bear / moving down from the north" (23-24), a white bear which, in the poem's final stanza, becomes "the white / bear moon" (30-31) moving across the night sky; the woman's movement in the airplane mimics the moon's movement, both of them traveling across "the clear black nights / like her daughter's eyes" (29-30).

Sometimes it is nature itself doing the moving, as is the case in Louise Glück's[4] "Parable of the Trellis" (in her 1996 collection Meadowlands). In this poem, we are told how a "clematis grew at the foot of a great trellis" (1), a trellis that, "[d]espite being

[4] Glück, who received the Pulitzer Prize for her 1992 collection Wild Iris, was named as the 12th Poet Laureate of the United States in 2003, and was awarded the Wallace Stevens Award for mastery in the art of poetry in 2008.

/ modeled on a tree. . . / was a human invention" (2-4) and served as constraint and support for the flowering vine. In the poem's second stanza, however, we find that this idea of taming nature's movements is a "ruse." In a direct address to the reader, Glück writes, "We both know / how the vine grows without / the trellis, how it sneaks / along the ground" (10-13), and here we see that the clematis is a metaphor for the speaker's own life. Just as "to the vine, the trellis / was never an image of confinement" (17-18), so the speaker finds that while she may have felt there were pressures acting to constrain her in some ways, these pressures also provided a means (albeit unconventional) out of lonely darkness:

> The vine has a dream of light:
> what is life in the dirt
> with its dark freedoms
> compared to supported ascent? (21-24)

The clematis grows toward freedom every summer, providing a metaphor for the movement the speaker makes within her own life.

While the clematis is nature tamed, the horse in "Percheron Nambe Morning" by Allison Adelle Hedge Coke[5] (published in Glancy and Nowak's 1999 Visit Teepee Town) is nature freed. In short, staccato lines (many with caesurae which mimic the way a horse swings and turns while running in the wild) Coke recreates through the motion of the poem upon the page the movement of the dust and leaves swirled up by a passing car. The poem then segues into the Percheron running alongside the road with its

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[5] Hedge Coke, a poet of mixed descent who identifies herself most closely with her Native American ancestors (Cherokee, Creek and Huron), holds the Reynolds Endowed Chair in English at the University of Nebraska, Kearney (Allison Hedge Coke, 2008, University of Nebraska Kearney, Available: http://www.unk.edu/acad/english/faculty/index.php?id=27130, 3 October 2008.).

. . . . . gold

mane   that red Percheron
on the right
the north side.   (16-19)

The horse is free to move as she pleases, while the people driving across the landscape in their cars are constrained, "distressed by ice / and Pueblo patrol cars" (25-26). The Percheron represents motion at its most uninhibited, and there is a compelling beauty to her movements: "she steals the scenery easily / with her laughter and turn / pitching hoof and tail / in mockery. . . " (66-69). Here is nature unbound, the Percheron a metaphor for the escape from stasis, from *standing still*, that the human beings driving their cars "through Nambe / Pojoaque" (37-38) can only long for.

Escape from standing still – a way to leave behind that which is constraining and limiting in a woman's life – is one of the things movement offers within women's poetry. The constraints may be societal, or familial. They may be physical or psychological, or even things that exist only in the mind of the poem's speaker. But no matter what the cause, the restraint is the same, and the means of escape from this stasis is motion, choosing to *move away* rather than stand still. This type of motion is typified by the act of driving within women's poetry, but escape can be achieved through other types of uninhibited movement. A poem's speaker can be set free through dancing, through walking, or through riding, for example, and it is that moment of uninhibited movement that sets her free. Sometimes this escape comes through the observation of free things, such as the moon or a wild horse. Other times, escape can be achieved by the speaker of the poem herself, an ecstatic freedom won through uninhibited

movement. In Naomi Shihab Nye's[6] "The Rider," from 1998's Fuel, the speaker longs to break free of the stasis of loneliness by moving through the world quickly. "A boy told me," Nye writes, "if he roller-skated fast enough / his loneliness couldn't catch up to him" (1-3), and the poem's speaker tells us that

> What I wonder tonight
> pedaling hard down King William Street
> is if it translates to bicycles. (6-8)

The possibility that the speaker may escapes her loneliness through the ecstatic motion of propelling her bike as quickly as she can is signaled by the poem's last stanza:

> A victory! To leave your loneliness
> panting behind you on some street corner
> while you float free into a cloud of sudden azaleas,
> pink petals that have never felt loneliness,
> no matter how slowly they fell. (9-13)

Here the speaker sees that while nature itself is always free (no matter how quickly or slowly it moves), she must give herself over to fast movement, to pedaling her bicycle so quickly she escapes the stasis of her loneliness and floats free.

Often, as in Nye's poem, uncontrolled motion is represented as being part of childhood. In "Animal Spirits," a poem from her 1999 collection This Great Unknowing: Last Poems, Denise Levertov describes how at five "pent-up desire for the unknown built" up "a head of steam" (3-4) that could only be released by running wildly through the house. At six, the speaker channels her energy into a "better means" of escape, no longer running within her house's safe domesticity but using her swing as a means to take flight, pumping "to the highest arc" where she would "let go" and fly "clear over the lawn." In the final stanza, the speaker begins by describing how

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[6] A poet of Arab-American descent, Nye writes in a colloquial, engaging style about love and loss, her Palestinian/American heritage, and the possibility for peace in a world seemingly engaged in endless warfare.

> The need passed as I grew;
> the mind took over, devising
> paths for that force in me. . . (32-34)

yet even now, with the speaker grown up and "sedentary," the need to find escape in ecstatic motion still manifests itself:

> save once in a while, when it demanded
> to leap about or to whirl – or later still
> to walk swiftly in wind and rain
> long and far and into the dusk,
> wanting some absolute, some exhaustion. (36-40)

For Levertov, then, ecstatic movement is not the exclusive domain of childhood. The bodily need to move may have diminished over time, but the poem's adult speaker still desired the release of moving whether that motion take place inside or, "later still," in the dark and rain of the outdoors.

Like Levertov, Lucille Clifton presents an older (in this case, much older) women-in-motion in her poem "hag riding" (in her 2000 collection Blessing the Boats). In "hag riding," age has not diminished the speaker's need for movement any more than it did for the speaker in Levertov's poem, but here there is no diminution in the motion itself. An old woman now (signaled by her calling herself a hag), the speaker finds there is still a compulsion to give herself over to ecstatic movement:

> something hopeful rises in me
> rises and runs me out into the road
> and i lob my fierce thigh high
> over the rump of the day and honey
> i ride i ride. (8-12)

This motion, this riding toward freedom, which is linked with both sexuality ("thigh" and "rump"), and, of course, horse riding, provides not only a means of escape but also a method of moving through the landscape of the speaker's life.

Riding a horse toward freedom is just what Ana Castillo's[7] 2000 poem "La Wild Woman" (from I Ask the Impossible) does. Questions of love and gender and the freedom to move come together in "La Wild Woman" where, driven by "a book which impressed her very much" (1), the Wild Woman left her family and "went wailing through the night" (4), where she met a Wild Man. The "wild couple" go to a wedding fiesta where, after dancing "like Rita Hayworth in a movie" (12) and becoming "drunk / on the bride who sat aloof and so sublime" (25-26), the Wild Woman can stand it no longer. Like the speaker of "Moonlight," the Wild Woman finds that the moon is compelling her to action: "The waxing moon rose higher and higher, driving la Wild Woman to the cliff of her imaginings" (30-31) until she breaks out in ecstatic movement, stealing a horse and grabbing up la Bride "with a swish and a grunt" (39). The Wild Woman has used ecstatic movement – dervish-like dancing, swift riding – to break society's conventions, first leaving her family and then, in the ultimate journey away from proper domesticity, snatching la Bride from the wedding feast and riding off with her. For La Wild Woman and la Bride, this ecstatic motion precipitates a journey charged with both sexual and emotional ambiguity.

Often, as in "La Wild Woman," a journey begins with ecstatic movement, but this is not always the case. Indeed, other journeys are undertaken sedately, even mournfully. They can be journeys of physical liberation or journeys through memory; there are poetic journeys of hope and of hardship, of moving away, of sorrow and peril and pain; and there are journeys of joy and jubilation, journeys to re-examine the familiar and journeys to discover new and exciting worlds. Sometimes the journey acts

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[7] Co-founder of the literary magazine Third Woman, winner of the Carl Sandburg Award, and one of the foremost Chicana voices in American poetry today, Castillo examines what it means to be a woman, a mother, and an Hispanic in her poems, essays and stories.

as a method to liberate a poet's creative spirit, as Steven Axelrod suggests was the case with Elizabeth Bishop when he says, "Her physical journey south [to Brazil] initiated a parallel aesthetic journey north" (279) within her poetry. In other words, physically separating herself from Nova Scotia and New England liberated Bishop in a way that allowed her to write about her life in the Northern Hemisphere. Whether the journey is undertaken within the poem, or by the poet herself as she moves physically through the world, the result is a reexamination of emotion and experience, a movement through space and time which acts as a means to bring the reader to an understanding of something important, perhaps something even transcendent, in the poem on the page.

Two poems about journeys, "Winter" from Ruth Stone's 1991 collection <u>Second-Hand Coat</u> and Jorie Graham's "Jackpot" (<u>The Dream of the Unified Field</u>, 1995), take the reader along with them, albeit on slightly different paths. "Winter" (like many of Stone's other poems, this one refers to her husband's suicide), follows the speaker as she waits for, and then boards, the "ten o'clock train to New York" (1). More than a train trip, however, the journey in this poem is a journey through memory, a movement back along familiar, painful rails to revisit the memory of a "you" with a sharp profile and "heavy-lidded eyes" (7) – a memory, the speaker tells us, that manages even now to "slip under the seal of my widowhood" (7). In the poem's "raw winter," the speaker finds no joy in these memories of the long-gone "you" – "It is a drab misery that urges me to remember you" (10).

Life in Graham's "Jackpot" is more ambiguously tinted than in "Winter"; there is hope here as well as hardship, as the speaker listens to a radio station in Illinois give away jackpots. "Luck in this landscape lies flat / as if to enter the ground and add to it

as well" (4-5), but luck does not permeate that landscape. It is apparent "in traces," everyday sights like "milkweed caught in the fences" and "the sheen on new grass" (6-7). Driving through this countryside, the speaker looks at what is outside her window, the flat Illinois landscape, and says, "I believe now that sorrow / is our presence in this by default" (12-13), and both joy and jackpots are hard won. Hard won they may be, but they do represent a kind of liberation for Graham's speaker, a liberation that Stone's poem neither hints at nor, ultimately, believes is possible.

Thus, as we see with Stone's "Winter," not all journeys end in liberation, joyful or otherwise. In many poetic journeys, there exist a letting go *and* a moving away, both of which are laced with sorrow and peril. In Sharon Olds's[8] "Relinquishment" (from The Dead & the Living), it is the speaker who stays still and her daughter who moves. The speaker relates how her daughter asked to be wrapped up "in something," and when the mother complies by swaddling the child completely she realizes that her daughter is poised at the beginning of a journey away from her:

> she is getting away – an Egyptian child
> bound in gauze, set in a boat
> on a black night in early March
> and pushed out on the water. . . (12-15)

In her sadness at watching her daughter move away from her (grow up), the speaker realizes she can no longer protect her daughter from "the gods of the next world / who will find her / or not find her" (16-18).

In "Relinquishment," the daughter is eager to begin her journey and the mother who will remain behind is sorrowful, but sometimes the sadness is on the part of the

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[8] New York State poet from 1998 to 2000, Olds received the National Book Critics Circle Award for her 1983 collection The Dead & the Living and was that year's Lamont Poetry Selection. Many of her poems examine the daily lives of women, using quotidian details to bring those lives into poetry's spotlight.

person leaving and not the person left behind. The Native American poet Chrystos is, like Nikki Giovanni, a powerful poet of both politics and love. It is in this second area, love, that we find Chrystos's poem "As I Leave You" (in Harjo et al., Reinventing the Enemy's Language, 1997). Chrystos begins with the striking image "doors of dead roses close" (1) as she describes the death of love, the death of a season when the speaker, "dreaming / believed we rode the same pony" (5-6). The poem describes a woman shutting down, moving away from the person who betrayed her more than once, the person who "held me drying my tears / over this same story / with different women" (26-28). This time, however, the speaker is the one leaving, moving away from "the home we built" and away from the person she once loved. The nature of this movement is ambiguous, however. Through much of the poem we have the impression that the speaker is preparing to walk away, to begin a new life, but the ending of the poem throws that assumption into question:

> A crow comes for me this evening to take me
> where your telephone pleas
> begging forgiveness cannot ring
> Here is your treason my darling
> in our small fragile country
> clasp her close
> for I am gone in silence
> will not return. (29-36)

The crow, a death symbol, indicates that the movement this woman is about to make is not just away from her home, but toward death, a place from which she "will not return," a journey that ends in a permanent separation of the lover and the beloved.

Even if a movement away is only temporary, the possibility exists that the person who walks will return to find things irrevocably changed. Jane Kenyon's "Walking Alone in Late Winter" (published in 1986), speaks of just such a danger. A

long winter is ending, pond ice breaking "into huge planes," the grass in the fields "matted / and gray" (3-4). The speaker is walking through the still-wintry landscape, and the images she relates as she walks build to the revelation that the winter through which she has just passed has been emotional as well as physical, a time when her husband has been trying to decide whether to leave her or to stay, "days of anger and remorse" (17) when he toyed with his wedding band, "sliding it off, then jabbing it on again" (19). Although that long winter is ending, the speaker is still fearful, still unsure whether her marriage will stay together. "The wind is keen coming over the ice," she says,

> it carries the sound of breaking glass.
> And the sun, bright but not warm,
> has gone behind the hill. Chill, or the fear
> of chill, sends me home. (20-24)

She has escaped the grief that accompanies loss, but realizes that her escape was narrow and may not be complete. (See Chapter 5 for a more in-depth discussion of this poem.)

Moving away may provide an escape, but that escape is often not absolute. For example, an attempt to move away from grief and the accompanying immobility that grief induces may prove to be impossible, or temporary; a grieving speaker may be caught, unable to move at all no matter how hard she tries. This type of motionlessness is unavoidable in Rita Dove's[9] "The Peach Orchard" (On the Bus With Rosa Parks, 1999). In this poem, the speaker moves, but does so in order to bear her grief. "I walk about, no longer human – " (3), she tells us, "something shameful, something / that can't move at all" (4-5). Unable to escape, she can only move about within the

[9] Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993 to 1995, Dove received the Pulitzer Prize in 1987 for her collection Thomas and Beulah. A lyric poet of grace and beauty, Dove often uses received form to examine topics ranging from American slavery to politically-motivated murder, from her own forays into ballroom dancing to the history and heritage of her family.

constrained landscape of the orchard, can only "step lightly / along the path between / the blossoming trees" (13-15) and "cradle the ache" (9) inside her. Yet the woman of "The Peach Orchard" still has some type of movement available to her, is still able to move within the confines of her own world; there are other poems in which women are caught in complete stasis, unable to move at all. Anne Carson's "Western Motel" (part of her "Hopper: *Confessions*" series in 2000's Men in the Off Hours) gives us a picture of such a woman. The repeated refrain, "Two suitcases watch you like dogs" (5), punctuates Carson's description of the woman in Edward Hopper's painting and the room in which the woman sits. Carson makes it very clear that this woman will not be leaving the motel. "Glass is for getaway," she writes. "Hot is out there. / You seem to know / the road ends here" (11-14). Like the art work upon which it is based, Carson's poem paints a picture of a woman caught in hopeless stasis, a woman who, despite the suitcases, will be staying where she is.

Of course, grief is not the only cause of immobility in contemporary American women's poetry. Fear can hold a woman immobile, or there may be a sexual bond keeping her in place; she may be unable to leave her children behind, or may find herself without the resources to move away from the life in which she finds herself trapped. While we do not know the genesis of the woman's motionlessness in Carson's "Western Motel," we know very well what is holding the speaker in "Why Can't I Leave You?," from Ai's[10] 1973 collection Cruelty (published 1973). Like many of the poet's other works, "Why Can't I Leave You?" is a dramatic monologue. In it, the speaker examines the thrall in which she is held by the man in her life. Seeing him, in

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[10] Ai teaches at Oklahoma State University, and is the winner of a Guggenheim Foundation Award as well as the Lamont Poetry Award of the Academy of American Poets.

his sweat-stained shirt, standing “behind the old black mare” (1) when he should be sowing the fields, the speaker says, “I pick up my suitcase and set it down, / as I try to leave you again” (6-7). In that simple motion, the picking up and setting down of a suitcase, the reader knows that the speaker will not be leaving. There is a strong connection between this man and this woman, an intensely sexual connection, but also a recognition by the woman that with the man’s “laziness and the drought, too” he will “be needing my help more than ever” (9-10). She mothers him (“I smooth the hair back from your forehead” (8)), she wants to please him (“I. . .put on my white lace slip / for you to take off, because you like that” (14-15)), yet she realizes that, caught as they both are in the stasis of their relationship, they “can’t give each other any more / or any less than what we have” (18-19).

A different kind of motionlessness holds the speaker in Linda Williamson’s “Diary of a Mac Housewife,” published in the 1998 collection From Both Sides Now: The Poetry of the Vietnam War and its Aftermath. Williamson was a young wife left behind when her husband went to Vietnam, and like the wife in this poem spent her time suspended in a stasis of waiting for him to return. The only movement the speaker allows herself is domestic, going to lunch before she “[w]alked the stores awhile, bought you some sox” (4). The speaker has no control over her life – her motion is constrained by the uncertainty of her husband’s existence, and she finds she has nothing to do but wait, either for his return or for word of his death. She is motionless, and “[t]he hope of headlights brings me nothing” (14) because while they may signal her husband’s return, they may also be the lights of the car bringing an Army notification team to tell her that her husband will not be returning home alive. In this poem,

movement and stasis co-exist; the speaker moves through her domestic world, but can never go far because she is waiting for her husband's return. She can escape neither the immobility of her worry nor the everyday details of the life of a woman left behind.

Sometimes, rather than representing escape, motion is a means of moving toward something – knowledge, understanding, acceptance or forgiveness, even the unknown. Often, the poem's movement represents the speaker's life, and as the end approaches – as it does for all natural things – she finds herself still able to appreciate the path she is on. In Maxine Kumin's "Distance" (Nurture 1989), the poet uses the motion of a lawn mower (a "Tuff-Cut") as a metaphor for the journey she has taken through her life. As she ages, the mowing woman finds that "[w]e are growing into one sex" (11), with men and women looking more and more alike the older they get, with all of them "beleaguered / with cancer or clogged arteries" (15-16). Rather than rejecting this natural occurrence, however, the woman finds herself able to "take courage" from the natural world that still surrounds her, the "coydogs who howl" (23), an owl, a moose, "the bears / that drop their spoor studded with cherry pits in our swales" (25-26).

Deciding to stay in one's life, to remain in place, does not preclude all movement. Motion becomes something that calls the poet forward, brings her to her feet and onto a path not *away* from her life but *toward* it, even *through* it. In these cases, walking is, once again, a common theme. For some, walking is a way of establishing themselves within their own lives, of anchoring themselves in the world. "Whenever I surface I reinvent / some version of the Daily Walk to Town" (1-2), writes Marilyn Hacker in her 1990 poem "April Interval" (River). An "orphaned spinster"

who moves from “Dyer Country Road” to “Rua Visconde de Pirajá,” the woman in this poem uses walking as a way to secure her position within her own life. Walking is a constant in a world that has few, and just as it can help a woman establish herself within the space through which she moves (like the speaker in Hacker’s “April Interval”), it can also help a woman *re-establish* herself after something has gone wrong. In “Walking Our Boundaries,” (The Black Unicorn 1995) Audre Lorde uses the theme of walking one’s property to represent the way a couple is just beginning to see the end of a long, terrible argument. “This first bright day has broken / the back of winter,” the poem begins, and

> We rise from war
> to walk across the earth
> around our house
> both stunned that sun can shine so brightly
> after all our pain.
> Cautiously we inspect our joint holding. (1-8)

The women find, if not hope, then at least the promise of hope in knowing that it is “our house” and “our joint holding” that they walk out to inspect. Walking their property reminds the women of what they have, of how

> our footsteps hold this place
> together
> as our place
> our joint decisions make the possible
> whole (44-48)

and while things are not back to normal yet (“our voices / seem too loud for this small yard / too tentative for women / so in love” (39-42)), there is the promise of something better in the women’s movement together across the yard.

The walk in Lorde’s poem is out of the ordinary, something used to bring the speaker and her lover back to normality; there are also walks that are domestic

journeys, undertaken with regularity, which represent movement *within* a poet's life rather than *outside* of it. The speakers of these poems do not walk away from anything, they do not seek to escape from the lives they have built, or their everyday experiences. Indeed, these walks are a part of these everyday experiences, undertaken out of both habit and desire. Grace Schulman's 1994 poem "Crossing the Square" (in the collection For That Day Only) depicts such a journey:

> Squinting through eye-slits in our balaclavas,
> we lurch across Washington Square Park
> hunched against the wind, two hooded figures
> caught in the monochrome, carrying sacks
>
> of fruit, as we've done for years. . . .   (1-5)

In this poem, movement and stillness join to describe two lives entwined within the confines of the journey that is the poet's life. This couple remains in place, walking near the "musical fountain" and the snow-coated sycamores that they know well, yet this is not the stasis of someone trapped. It is the peace that can be found when one is able to move through a life made familiar by repetition, tradition and familiarity. There is a comfort to be found when, "in a world / where fretted houses with façades are leveled / for condominiums, not much has altered // here" (18-21), and that comfort is made possible by a joining of motion and motionlessness (often by constraint) within the speaker's life.

It is constraint, or at least the possibility of it (whether implied or explicit), that lies behind the power and potency of metaphors of motion in contemporary American women's poetry. These writers are not taking the ability to move for granted; the "limitations that have traditionally existed for women" (Pope 1) – limitations on their physical and emotional selves – show up in women's poetry in many guises, with

movement (and being restrained from moving) one of the most prominent ones. Physical movement in poetry written by women often provides metaphors of motion that are different from those found in poetry written by men, because men's movement throughout the world is not, and has never been, limited in the ways women's has been. Even the simple act of walking is different for men than it is for women. As Philip Lopate points out, "the literature of walking around has been, until recently, almost exclusively a masculine genre. The main reason is that women have not been made to feel the streets and other public spaces belong to them nearly as much as they do to men" (1). Men (unless they are disabled, or in prison) move into and through the world when and how they please, and men's poetry reflects that freedom; women have traditionally been constrained within a limited sphere of motion, which has led to physical movement in their poetry taking on added significance. It is that significance that this work examines.

The poets in this study developed engaging, individual voices which come through clearly in their work, and each uses metaphors of motion in her poetry. Some of these poets have received considerable academic attention, while others have not, but none has been studied exclusively in terms of the use of physical movement within her poetry. Some critics, such as Jeffrey Gray, have opened up areas of inquiry regarding the effect travel has had on the development of American poetics, but work such as Gray's tends to examine subjectivity in general rather than the emergence of feminine voices in particular. Other writers, such as Kim Fortuny, see travel and journey poems as political in nature and seek to examine how form follows this political and social function of poetry. Perhaps the most common modality used when discussing women

poets in America is "position," which is a way for critics to locate various feminine voices as somehow "outside" traditional American poetics, which is still exemplified for many by masculine voices. For Deborah Pope, women writers are positioned outside of male language, while Philip McGowan locates what he calls Anne Sexton's "geographies of grief" fully within "female forms and female voices" (2). Indeed, for critics such as Carol Muske, the positioning of some type of feminine self is central to the ways in which we read women's poetry. This positioning, however, does not generally include the possibility of movement further "into" masculine American voices; it is, rather a definition of the space – separate and feminine – occupied by women writers.

In all these assessments and evaluations, little is mentioned in terms of physical motion, although some feminist critics have recognized the role movement can play in women's artistic and emotional development. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," for example, Hélène Cixous discusses how women have been "driven away" from writing "as violently as from their bodies," and there is only one way to remedy this: "Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" (347).

Putting themselves into the text through movement: this is what women poets accomplish through metaphors of motion such as driving, flying and riding a bicycle. This is what Hacker and Ponsot (and Rich, and Giovanni) have done in their poems about walking. These types of "walk poems," in particular, are often examined in terms of the poet's gender. Lopate, as noted above, recognizes that the "literature of walking around," while once masculine, has begun to see its share of American women poets

writing in the genre. Yet we still find blind spots in the literature. For example, Roger Gilbert poses this question about the walk poem: "Why is the genre one that women seem to write around, or on the edges of?" and then answers it by saying that the universal nature of the walk poem makes it difficult for women and others "belonging to highly marked ethnic groups" who "do not tend to assume such universality as readily as white men" to write a walk poem which "tends to move toward a sense of the world as a totality, rather than as a field of differences" (Walks 21). Gilbert's idea of women's walk poems being different from men's would seem to support my own hypothesis regarding the use of motion in women's poetry; however, it soon becomes clear that, while women do write poems that are about walking, to Gilbert these poems cannot be elevated to the plane of "Walk Poems" because their subject matter and point of view are different from those of men who write poems about walking. This casting aside of the feminine walk poem, whether it is a willful disregard for women's experience or merely a mis-categorization, is typical of how many critics (both male and female) marginalize women's experience expressed within women's poetry. As Alicia Ostriker writes, for many of these literary theorists, "Male poets engage in quests; women poets run errands" (Stealing 5). In other words, men will walk by Tintern Abbey but they won't walk to Wal-Mart.

In the following work, I show that physical motion – whether in the service of an experience as everyday as running errands, or as life-altering as escaping an abusive relationship – is a rich and vibrant poetic metaphor. As metaphors of motion, walking, riding and standing still are powerful themes in women's poetry. Whether movement

represents escape or freedom, constraint or contentment, the traditions of motion and stillness form a foundation for the work of contemporary American women poets.

Women poets write about motion and its power. They write of their demands to be able to relocate their lives. They write about the ways in which they move through nature. They write about the freedom of walking down a sidewalk, driving a car along a country road, or dancing in their backyards. They may write to dislocate themselves from the lives they are living, or to allocate meaning to their lives through the journeys that they undertake. Women want to move, and they find poetry in motion. Reading contemporary women's poetry, we find that the metaphors of motion have come to embody much more than escape. Movement is, of course, still a rich and powerful metaphor for wanting to change one's life, to break free of those things that are holding one back. But motion can also be a movement *toward*, a means by which women are able to journey toward knowledge, understanding, even forgiveness. Women move through their lives, and record that movement in their poetry. Whether they journey far from home or walk around their neighborhoods, women incorporate movement into their lives and into their poems. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman suggests, for these writers life really is a verb.

Chapter Two: Journeys

The metaphor of moving through a landscape, walking or riding or sailing from one place to another, signals a poem of *discovery through experience*; in other words, the journey poem. The journey poem, while firmly rooted in specific spatial and temporal planes, is more than a travelogue. Since the days of Homer's Odysseus, the tribulations of the wanderer, the journeyer, the traveler have been the means through which a poet can portray the ways physically moving through a specific landscape helps bring about a process of coming-into-knowledge. This process, while present in journey poems by both men and women, can differ significantly, making the question of gender an important one. For while "it is sometimes argued that women's poetry does not exist in a category by itself" and that "there are simply good, bad and mediocre poems, whose writer's gender is as little relevant to her quality as her colour or class" this argument "is a disingenuous, or, at best, misleading" one, because all these "factors are exceedingly relevant to what is *considered* quality, or even legitimacy" by literary theorists and critics (Montefiore 1-2). In other words, because the everyday experiences of women have been devalued by (mostly male) critics and theorists, poems about women's everyday journeys become devalued as well. Here we find another example of Ostriker's dichotomy, the "quests" of male poets versus the "errands" of female ones. The "narrow, nineteenth-century romantic/lyric tradition of women's verse" which saw many "experiences. . .considered off-limits for women writers" (Daniels 224-5) can still be seen in criticism today, and it is a sword which cuts both ways: not only are women poets who write about off-limits experiences viewed with suspicion, but women who write about traditionally female experiences run the risk of

being judged as lightweight and inconsequential. It is vitally important to understand how these types of categorization of the feminine as slight or insignificant, and the ways in which "women's experience of oppression" is "central" to women's poetry (Montefiore 3), affect the manner in which women's poetry is read, categorized, interpreted and analyzed. Just as Roger Gilbert placed poems about walking written by women outside his categorization of "walk poems," so too journey poems written by women are in danger of being positioned outside the epic "journey poems" of male writers. To critics who take this view, any poem which involves the feminine quotidian cannot be classified as a journey poem. Patriarchy defines what is epic and important, and that definition does not include the everyday experience of women. This is a long-standing and seemingly intractable problem for women poets. "Patriarchy's greatest psychological weapon is simply its universality and longevity. A referent scarcely exists with which it might by contrasted or by which it might be refuted. While the same might be said of class, patriarchy has a still more tenacious or powerful hold through its successful habit of passing itself off as nature" (Millett 58). Because poetry written by men has been classified by critics and readers as the norm, women's poetry is relegated to a lower, less important position. By its very definition, then (as works written by female poets), women's poetry can suffer the fate of being considered "not male" – and thus not important – by critics and readers who devalue female quotidian experience.

An examination of women's journey poems, however, shows them to be just as important, or epic if you will, as journey poems written by men. As a depiction of the search for the self, or a voyage of discovery, women's journey poems examine not only

the experience of moving from one place to another, but also what the very fact of being able to undertake such a passage means to the writers and to their own identities as women and poets. The journey within a poem does not have to be of epic length to be important; indeed, some of the strongest and most interesting poems take their significance from their *every-day-ness*, from their depiction of an ordinary woman's experience traversing a space she knows well.

Linda Gregg[1], in her poem "The Secret Life of New York," (which first appeared in the February 27, 2006 issue of The New Yorker) gives us a solitary walker in the City. The poem opens with the line, "She decided to walk there," signaling that the reader is about to go on a journey with the "she" of the poem. As with other poets who write about New York City (such as Grace Schulman and Marie Ponsot), Gregg gives us concrete image after concrete image. The woman who walks in the poem goes "down two flights, through / two doors, and up three steps to the street" (3-4) before she can set off. She moves through the poem as she moves through the walk she is taking. First, she stops at a liquidation store for biscuits and "bath granules." Then, as she is walking toward her destination, she sees "Four Asian women" who "raced by to see an Asian man / in a silver convertible" (18-20). As she crosses Houston, the woman who walks sees "two old women" selling kidney beans and boxes of macaroni and cheese. Finally, she ends up "[a]t the bookstore," where "she sat outside and changed / into a good jacket and the heels. / Then went into the party / at the back of the store" (27-31) Here the poem ends.

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[1] Currently a professor at Princeton University, Gregg is a poet of both everyday events and the extraordinary experiences of one who travels. A Guggenheim Fellow, Gregg won the Sara Teasdale Award and the PEN/Voelcker Award for Poetry.

Gregg gives us a straightforward narration in simple, declarative sentences. The woman who walks in the poem shops, notices some of the people and what they are doing along her route, and ends up at a bookstore where a party is going on. Nothing could be more everyday than that. Yet is it just that simplicity, just that every-day-ness, that Gregg wants us to take note of. We could perhaps try to read into the poem whether the woman is lonely or not, whether she is meeting someone at the bookstore or not, whether she is looking forward to the party or not. But that would be defeating Gregg's purpose. What is important to the poem is not how the woman may be feeling, but what she is doing. Her actions carry the poem's significance, and those actions are common, ordinary ones. The woman who undertakes the journey in Gregg's poem has the freedom to decide where she is going, how she will get there, and what she will do along the way. The "secret life" of New York is lived out in plain sight every day by women just like the one in Gregg's poem. It is secret because it is so obvious, because the significance of women's lives has been buried beneath the label "women's work," with all its untidiness and disarray. As Nina Auerbach writes, "My own work and that of the women I admire gives its allegiance to the messiness of experience" (152). Through this journey poem, Gregg makes this secret, untidy life visible.

Obviously, women do not write journey poems only about their everyday excursions. There are poems about long sea voyages, train trips, and cross-country flights. There are also poems about shorter, although no less important, once-in-a-lifetime experiences of moving from one place to another. These types of journey poems depict a *coming-into-knowledge* on the part of the poem's speaker. Elizabeth Bishop's "The Moose" and Grace Schulman's "For That Day Only" provide excellent

examples of this type of journey-of-discovery poem. Both Bishop and Schulman were mentored by the poet Marianne Moore, and while there are differences between the work of the two younger poets, Bishop and Schulman share (with Moore) a similar poetics and certain stylistic mannerisms. While Bishop is associated with travel and the acute observations she made on her journeys, Schulman is best known as a poet of New York, and for the artist's eye she turns upon her city subjects.

Elizabeth Bishop is arguably the best-known poetic female traveler. "The struggle to find a language willing to accommodate the traveler's fluid, trope-empowered knowledge. . .defines Bishop's career" (Doreski 11), and "The Moose" is a major example of this traveler's language. Based upon a trip Bishop did, in fact, take, the poem describes the route of a bus throughout the Northeast as it drives from Nova Scotia to Boston. This contrasts nicely with Schulman's "For That Day Only," which recounts a funeral procession, undertaken on foot, by a young Jewish woman and her family in 1883. As different as they are, both of these works are in the best tradition of the journey poem, and both use metaphors of motion as a means of representing something much more profound than transporting oneself from one place to another.

"The Moose" is, at heart, a ballad. It tells a story, it uses vernacular language, and it has a rhyme scheme (albeit unconventional). There is, then, a rich tradition behind the form Bishop has chosen, a tradition that helps *in-form* "The Moose" with both a familiarity and an expectation of what type of "story" we may encounter within the poem, and by doing so helps universalize the experience Bishop is relating. "Because she [Bishop] inflects a poem that falls within the subgenre of post-eighteenth-century personal narratives with the markers of a ballad, her story's claim to

universality rests as much on her generic pre-text as on her individual vision" (Blasing 270). This pre-textuality is evidenced in "For That Day Only" as well; the poem is written in an unrhymed version of terza rima stanzas, evoking Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Moreover, like the *Divine Comedy*, both poems are, in essence, journey poems, a familiar trope because each of us is, in one way or another, enacting a journey of our own through the world. It is this familiarity with the experience of movement, and with the ways in which we all process this experience, that helps us recognize and relate to the ways in which Bishop's "lone traveller"[2] and the "oldest daughter" in Schulman's poem find themselves moving through landscapes that will both inform and alter them by the time they reach their journeys' end. "Experience never comes to us in a raw form," Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones write in "Thinking for Ourselves: An Introduction to Feminist Theorising." "In everyday life, we constantly work over, interpret, make sense of our experiences. . ." (8). It is this work of interpretation that we recognize in these two poems.

There are a number of similarities in the techniques used by Bishop and Schulman. One is narrative: both poems follow a complicated temporal structure. Both are written in the present tense, allowing us as readers to experience the narrative as unfolding before us, and to see the movement of the bus through the countryside and the family through New York as immediate and important; this is a delicate balance, requiring a feeling of imminence, even of inevitability, to come forth from the narrative. "'Here' and 'now' demands an open composition for a fine adjustment of the changing elements of the poem to grasp a reality always coming into existence. Here the object is

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[2] In this essay I will, following general practice, gender Bishop's traveller as female. It should be noted, however, that nowhere in the poem is any indication made of whether the traveller is a man or a woman.

imminent event. . ." ("Denise Levertov"). Yet within that present tense, the poets move their narration back and forth, from past to future, all the while encompassing what is happening in the present, performing what Schulman herself describes as "the power of art to reveal a continuous present and to cut through the limiting divisions of days, hours, and years" ("Create" 299). In "The Moose," we begin with a description of Nova Scotia in *the now*, with its cycle of high and low tides, its setting sun and its churches "bleached, ridged as clamshells" (23). The bus Bishop's "lone traveller" will board is making its westward journey in the present of the poem, and we remain in the traveller's present until she begins to doze. As she dozes, she begins a "dreamy divagation" which is, in essence, a movement back into her past. Within this movement back, we "hear" her grandparents' voices talking about things that happened even further back in time, and are thus drawn deeper into the past, deeper into the history of the traveller's family. Yet there are parts of that history which remain as unknowable as the moose (which will appear later in the poem). These parts of history are signified by the unintelligible section of the grandparents' conversation: "the year he remarried; the year (something) happened" (104-105). "For Bishop, history is a palimpsest, a densely laminated, opaque artifact that cannot be fully untangled and decoded. . ." (R. Gilbert "Framing" 154), but there is something within history that calls out to Bishop, and to which she responds by calling forth "her" female moose, the ineffable, unknowable emblem of the feminine sublime that, even in its *unknowable-ness*, provokes both awe and pleasure in the observer. In the end, the moose (like history itself) must be left behind, and while we may crane backward to catch a glimpse of it, it remains steadfastly behind us, unknown and – ultimately – unknowable.

There is even more of a back-and-forth movement across time to be found in "For That Day Only." We begin very much in the present of the "oldest daughter" as she joins her family's walk toward the cemetery, but within four stanzas we are taken back to the past when she "rocked beside the stove and read" (12) to her now-dead brother, then to the more immediate past (the night before) when the little boy died. After moving backwards through the daughter's memory, Schulman uses "And now" (25) to signal a return to the present, and this present is filled with the wonders of the city beyond the daughter's neighborhood: tulips at a house "for just one family" (41), flags, shops, a bronze statue. All these images are concrete and immediate, holding us firmly in the poem's present until, in the work's final two stanzas, we are shown what the daughter's life will be like in the future: she will be carrying her grief with her for "the next day and the next one and the next" (75) and this is the line that ends the poem, a line that serves to project the daughter, the poem's poetic consciousness, into the future.

While Cynthia Zarin has commented that Bishop is "perhaps the only poet to have learned from Moore lessons about content rather than style" (Zarin 79), I believe we can see Moore-ish content in Schulman's work as well. Just as with Moore, both Bishop and Schulman allow their imagery to accrete in order to present us with a *true* picture of the world within each particular poem, in effect a roadmap for the journey each speaker is undertaking. In Bishop, as in Moore, we find lists of images:

> . . . . .cabbage roses
> and lupins like apostles;
>
> the sweet peas cling
> to their wet white string
> on the whitewashed fences;
> bumblebees creep
> inside the foxgloves (47-53)

images that work toward giving us a clear understanding of the world outside the bus's window. Bishop gives us a concrete image of a woman who "shakes a tablecloth / out after supper" (59-60); she gives us a very particular portrait of another woman, "brisk, freckled, elderly" (75) who boards the bus, speaks to the driver and "regards us amicably" (78). All of these images build one upon the other so that, when the moose finally makes her appearance, we are firmly situated within the world of the poem. Throughout Schulman's poem we are also given image after image as a way to build up a picture of the world through which the daughter moves. In addition to the imagery mentioned previously, Schulman gives us a "yellow ball," coaches with "creaky wheels," a "white hoop," a "brass-star policeman" (37-39, 41), and a bronze statue that is "green-going black, with a beckoning, / historical hand, creased at its great wrist" (52-53).

Within these detailed observations there is also a very definite poetic stance taken by both Bishop and Schulman, and that is the stance of the observer (Emerson's "transparent eyeball"). Seamus Heaney described Bishop's stance as embodying "a reticence which gave her work its attractive steadiness" (167) and Corinne Blackmer observed that "Bishop teaches the reader, through the example of her famous 'eye,' lessons in the art of *not* fusing the self with the object one sees but rather in relinquishing claims of ownership and retaining a restraint that respects and preserves

autonomy and difference as intrinsically valuable" (150); an examination of Schulman's work shows that these two descriptions can be applied to Schulman as well. Both Bishop and Schulman *see* the objects they write about and *see* the worlds through which their speakers move and are, at the same time, able to hold a distance from those objects and those worlds; they maintain this distance in order to make the objects a part of the worlds within the poems they write *without* engendering a joining of the object with the observer. Bishop and Schulman achieve this separation through astute and detailed observation while not allowing their imagery to degrade into nothing more than clinical observation. They do this through the details of their poems, in the way the daughter in "For That Day Only" sat and "sang to the baby's pillow" (23) after he had died; in the way Bishop's traveller says goodbye to her "seven relatives" while "a collie supervises" (35-36); they achieve it in the unflinching attention both poets bring to everyday life (in its beauty and its ugliness) that gives a humanity to their detailed, concrete observations. There is a "daylight clarity" to their poetry that makes "[t]hings as they are seem to be even more themselves" (Heaney 168) after Bishop and Schulman write them into being. And while there is a necessary distance that must be maintained to make these observations clear and *true*, in the end, however, this distance is not a result of the poet holding back – the work of both poets "continually manages to go out to greet what is there. . . .At its most ardent, it wants to give itself entirely to what it discovers" (Heaney 172).

Bishop and Schulman also understand that poetry is a crucible, a place where language is burned down to its essence in order to bear the weight of meaning, to convey the "expansiveness in such small containers" (Wright 266) that is poetry itself.

As such, poetry must pay as much attention to what joins its imagery together as it does to the imagery itself. "[A]s one composes a poem there is a sense of seeing farther than usual into the connections of things, and then of bringing intense pressure to bear on those connections, until they rise into full consciousness for oneself and others" (Cooper). Jane Cooper wrote this about Muriel Rukeyser's poetics, but it holds just as true for Bishop and Schulman. It is the connections between the tide and the river, between the sugar maples and the farmhouse, between the traveller and the moose that are just as important to Bishop as the images themselves. Only when we begin to sense the connectedness of Bishop's images, and the way the traveller is connected to her grandparents, can we begin to work toward an understanding of just what the moose might mean as she appears from the woods along the side of the road. In "For That Day Only," it is the connection between the way the girl's father cradles his dead son against his chest and the way her mother handed the boy's body to her husband, the connection between the woman with "red real hair" and the Brooklyn Bridge, and the connection between the girl's march to the cemetery with her family and her future of walking alone through "her new city" (73) that carry the full weight of the poem's meaning. In both poems, these connections serve to propel the work forward so the reader will experience the same type of forward motion undertaken by the women in the poems.

Within the language of "The Moose" and "For That Day Only" the poets make reference to the work of poetry itself. The more overt reference is found in Schulman's poem, where she describes the work of Homer as made up of

. . . . .images

a storyteller scooped out of a basket
that pierced the morning fog, then disappeared,
like a cat's firecoal eyes – alive, but never

as real as asphalt on this long day. (15-19)

Poetry, then, can seem "real" during the time one is reading it, poetry can even do important work (pierce the fog that obscures the *true* image), but it can never be as real, as important as the death of a baby, as the grief the daughter's family feels, as the asphalt beneath their feet as they walk the boy's body to the cemetery. In "For That Day Only," poetry can only approach emotion, the truth of people's lives, through the storyteller's tricks "scooped out of a basket" like a rabbit is pulled out of a magician's hat. The examination of the work of poetry within "The Moose" finds its referent in the bus the traveller takes from Nova Scotia to Boston. Bishop's "narrative of transportation and the metaphor of transport" (Blasing 281) acts as a symbol of the work of poetry itself, the *carrying across* of images in order to represent experience and emotion; this carrying across is performed in the connections between images and in the pressure put upon those images by the attention paid to them by the poet. In other words, the work of metaphor is performed within poetic language itself, and that work involves a forward motion not unlike that of the "lone traveller" and "oldest daughter."

Both Bishop and Schulman open their poems with variations on a Whitmanesque "imperial periodic sentence that travels" (Blasing 276). Bishop begins "The Moose" with a sweeping description of the Nova Scotia countryside, seeming to signal another of "Bishop's typically wry, elegant landscape poems, full of painterly touches and metaphorically resonant details" (R. Gilbert "Framing" 149). As we travel

the length of that opening sentence, however, we find that our focus is gradually narrowed, tightened from the ocean's "long tides" (3) and the bay to the river to the mud flats to a road lined with sugar maples, to the buildings at the side of the road, to a bus that is traveling westward along that road. Yet arriving at the bus, which one might expect would signal the end of the poem's first sentence, leads that sentence on to yet another narrowing of focus, down to a "lone traveller" saying goodbye to her family and their dog. Only here, with the introduction of the single consciousness that will be the focus for the remainder of the poem, does Bishop allow the sentence to come to a full stop.

In "For That Day Only," Schulman's first sentence is much shorter, but the physical and emotional distances it travels sweep us along in the same way as Bishop's much longer opening:

> Daybreak, and she left her poppyseed roll
> to follow them as they walked through the city
> carrying the dead child, her fourth brother
>
> born in their new world. . . (1-4)

We are immediately located within this young woman's world. Through this first sentence, taken in conjunction with the date that places the poem in New York in 1883, and with subsequent descriptions in the poem's following lines, we learn that the girl is Jewish, that she is still relatively young, that she is walking through New York (most probably with her family), and that she is grieving; this "oldest daughter" is introduced to us as the single consciousness which, like Bishop's traveller, will be the focus of the poem. In "For That Day Only," then, Schulman, like Bishop, "abjures 'I,' for the self that is the subject of the poem is not the 'I' writing it" (Blasing 274). And it is this self

within the poem, not the poet standing slightly outside of the experience, that helps the writers give shape to the journey that will become the heart of each poem.

Every journey begins with a step across a threshold, and the journeys undertaken by the traveller and the daughter are no exception. This liminal space of *beginning* can be located in many different ways (temporally, physically, or emotionally, to name three), but whenever/whatever it is, a threshold always marks a beginning of sorts. "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura. . ."[3] Dante writes at the opening of his *Inferno*, and his journey begins with his movement across the threshold between Florence and the wood, between the earthly world and hell, between waking and dreaming. Eliot begins "The Waste Land" with "April is the cruelest month" before moving on to drink coffee in the Hofgarten. And Odysseus "was driven / far journeys, after he had sacked Troy's sacred citadel" (Homer). In both "The Moose" and "For That Day Only," the threshold, the liminal space, lies at the juncture of light and dark. "Daybreak," Schulman begins, and we balance on the moment when the world of the poem begins to brighten, when the darkness begins to retreat and the girl's family stands revealed. Her father, mother, and Uncle Ben are illuminated in their grief. "And now, how bright they were. How, well – how *visible*. . ." (25) compared to earlier, "[j]ust before dawn" when she saw only their "forms" (22-23), when they were nothing more than shadows, grieving shades dark against the night's darkness. Yet it is not only her family that is revealed, it is the city of New York itself, for the "same light / that warmed them" also illuminates the skyline and its "gray towers" (26-27).

[3] "Halfway through the journey of our life / I woke to find myself in a dark wood. . ."

The liminal space of “The Moose” is set exactly opposite that of “For That Day Only,” in the moment of twilight where the day is beginning to fade into darkness. We move with the bus that travels west “through late afternoon” (25) and watch along with the traveller as the light fades beyond the bus’s windows. Bishop signals twilight’s arrival when the “light / grows richer” (39-40) and the fog, which often accompanies the fading angle of the afternoon sun, “comes closing in” (42). In fact, the fog mimics the darkness as its “cold, round crystals / form and slide and settle” (43-44) into the landscape with its wildflowers and homely vegetables, and when the passage that mingles light and fog ends with a simple “and evening commences” (54), we have crossed the threshold from day into night, from light into dark. Here, then, we see that while Schulman’s “oldest daughter” moves through a sunlit city landscape, Bishop’s “lone traveller” undertakes her journey through fading – and then disappeared – light.

Both Bishop and Schulman use darkness and light as ways of illustrating how each poem’s conscious female self perceives the world through which she moves. For the daughter in “For That Day Only,” the rising sun illuminates what lies ahead of her, “her first view of the city beyond the neighborhood, / beyond the block” (28-29). In this poem, movement engenders an *opening up* of the world before the journeyer, and throughout the poem a *looking outward* is performed. For the first time, this Orthodox Jewish girl has moved beyond her own block, and the lure of the unknown is felt almost immediately. “Seeing everything, / trying to see nothing at either side, // she almost smiled at trees, jerked back her head, / remembering herself. . .” (29-32). Despite her grief, the girl finds herself drawn to the outside world, yet even as she is drawn she is

reminded of the dangers inherent in that large, bustling, secular city beyond her neighborhood, for she sees

> . . . . a woman speed a bicycle
>
> as though to rise up over the pavement
> like a streetcar's horses that, though ponderous,
> might break into a gallop in the wind. . . .   (33-36)

This is truly a world unknown to the girl, for no woman she knows would be riding a bicycle. Even with the implied danger (of, we assume, both the bicycle and the fact that a woman is riding it), however, for the girl there is a certain appeal to the image of the woman on the bike. Later, the girl is again drawn to the figure of a woman, this time "a hatless woman with red real hair" (55) who, contrasted with the image of the girl's mother, "a hawklike woman / in a stiff wig" (5-6), serves – like the bicyclist – to open up this daughter's perception of the world (and women's roles within it) beyond her insulated Orthodox neighborhood.

In "The Moose" we find that Bishop uses nightfall to continue the narrowing of perception that characterizes her opening sentence. Once it is dark, the traveller's focus when she looks out the window of the bus is, of necessity, considerably tighter than it was before the sun set. Before, there were elms and farms, lupin and fences. Now, "[o]n the left, a red light / swims through the dark: / a ship's port lantern. / Two rubber boots show, / illuminated, solemn" (67-71). The traveller can see only those images able to swim up from the dark long enough to register on her retina, and none of these images is whole-within-itself; they are only pieces, representations of what lies beyond, unseeable in the darkness. In the woods of New Brunswick there is "moonlight and mist" but by this time the passengers, including the traveller, have begun to *focus*

inward as drowsiness overtakes them. Some have already fallen asleep, but the "lone traveller" finds herself suspended in a "dreamy divagation," a reverie where "an old conversation" becomes "recognizable, somewhere, / back in the bus" (94-95). These are "Grandparents' voices" talking of things "not concerning us," and the conversation is a spiral down which the traveller's consciousness moves in a type of meditation. She hears them speak of "deaths, deaths and sicknesses; / the year he remarried; / the year (something) happened" (103-105). She hears a familiar feminine "'Yes. . .' that peculiar / affirmative. 'Yes. . .' / A sharp, indrawn breath, / half groan, half acceptance" (115-118) that brings her back to her childhood (note the play on half-grown).[4]

The female poetic self in both Bishop and Schulman has been brought to a moment of revelation by her journey. In "The Moose," the revelation is figured along the Romantic tradition of the sublime. The "lone traveller," after listening to the hypnotic voices coming from the back of the bus, is transported back to a time when her grandparents "talked / in the old featherbed, / peacefully, on and on" (121-123) and she listened, safe and sleepy, in her own bed. At the very moment when she feels that "it's all right now / even to fall asleep / just as on all those nights / — Suddenly" (and note the abruptness of the dash that separates this line from the sleepy safety of the ones that precede it) "the bus driver / stops with a jolt" (127-131) and the traveller is shaken from her reverie. "A moose has come out of / the impenetrable wood / and stands there, looms, rather, / in the middle of the road" (133-136). Here, appearing at the moment

[4] This is a very particular autobiographical reference by Bishop. In a letter to James Merrill in October 1972, Bishop describes being at a tea party in Nova Scotia where ". . .there were five ladies, with my aunt, cousin and me. They ALL, except me, did that queer thing with the indrawn breath, saying 'ye-e-es' to show sympathetic understanding. I wish I could imitate it better – it is almost an assenting *groan,*" in Elizabeth Bishop, One Art: Elizabeth Bishop Letters, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: The Noonday Press, 1994) 573.

when the traveller balances in the liminal space between wakefulness and sleep, is the feminine unknowable, coming from a place into which the traveller's consciousness cannot enter ("the impenetrable wood"). The passengers are awed by the moose; they "exclaim in whispers, / childishly, softly" (146-147) as the moose sniffs the bus's hood, "looks the bus over, / grand, otherworldly" (152-153). Bishop then begins to elevate the experience from the particular (the individual responses of the passengers) to the universal – "Why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?" (154-156) she asks – in language that points towards the way in which Romantic poets described their encounters with the sublime.[5] The traveller's encounter ends – as all encounters with the sublime must – with a moving away; in this case, it is when the driver puts the bus in gear and drives on, away from the moose still standing "on the moonlit macadam," but there is a yearning on the part of the traveller to remain behind, for she finds that "[f]or a moment longer, / by craning backward, / the moose can be seen" (162-164). Seen, but not known, never known, for although attempts were made to domesticate the wild moose by describing her as "high as a church, / homely as a house / (or, safe as houses)" (140-142), there is still no way of ever really knowing anything about the moose other than what can be sensed of her exterior ("a dim / smell of moose"). There is no getting *inside* this otherworldly creature.

The revelation afforded to the daughter in "For That Day Only" unfolds more gradually than does the traveller's encounter with the moose. The daughter has walked from the home of the living (Manhattan) across the Brooklyn Bridge to a cemetery in Brooklyn, the home of the dead. During this walk, she has watched her father, "the bearded man in front of her" (61), as "he held their grief to his chest" (65), all the while

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[5] *Cf.* Wordsworth's *Prelude*.

fearing that “the tiny boy would grow as heavy // as a bag of stones by the time their journey ended” (63-64). She has followed her father and mother, joined her grief to theirs as they walked from their Pitt Street neighborhood to the cemetery. But with the “[s]un growing higher” the daughter comes to the realization that her father will bear the family’s grief “for that day only” (66), and that her mother had already begun to release the burden of grief when, “moments after sunrise, / [she] had raised white arms and yielded up / the shapeless sack” (66-68). Only the daughter would continue to carry the family’s grief; she “would haul that ragged body even after / the procession ended” (70-71) and continue to haul it with her for the rest of her life. That life, however, will be very different from the one she lives now, for even though her family “returned / by gaslight to their dim rooms” (71-72) at the end of the burial procession, she has already begun to turn away from her Orthodox roots and the constraints her religion places upon women. Schulman signals this *turning away* when, to fight off exhaustion, the daughter begins to chant “lines of the Psalms to secular tunes / that moved her” as she ascended “the new / Brooklyn Bridge” (57-60); the daughter begins to mix the holy with the everyday while ascending one of the 19th century’s most famous symbols of modernity. The final signifier of this *turning away* is the daughter’s realization that she would carry the body of her brother (the grief of her family) with her “whenever she walked alone in her new city” (73). A strictly observant Orthodox woman would never walk alone. Thus, there will come a time when, as the daughter moves into the secular city, although she carries the weight of her heritage with her (her grief), she will have left her faith behind. She will *walk away from* that Orthodox faith to make her way, to journey though “brick-hard and vast, but never unredeeming” (74) New York. Yet even here,

there is hope that a new faith can be found in the "redeeming" city, a faith that is not Orthodox but does offer, even if only in a secular fashion, salvation.

Many journey poems unfold experience linearly, with a clearly defined beginning and end, but both Bishop and Schulman have chosen to complicate this structure and add a cyclical pattern. In other words, both journeys are, in one way or another, round trips, albeit of two different kinds. Bishop signals her cyclical pattern at the beginning of her poem, describing provinces "where the bay leaves the sea / twice a day and takes / the herrings long rides" (4-6), and harbors where the river might meet "the bay coming in / the bay not at home" (11-12), but when she introduces the bus that "journeys west" into the pink of the setting sun it would appear that she is abandoning the elemental metaphor of the ocean's rise and ebb for a linear movement "down hollows, up rises" (31) all the way to Boston. Bishop's traveller says, "Goodbye to the elms, / to the farm, to the dog" (37-38) as her journey begins, and there is a definite leave-taking to the detailed observations of the world outside the window of the bus. And yet, a bus does not travel a one-way route; the bus in which the traveller rides is bound to return to Nova Scotia, and this leaves open the possibility that the traveller herself may return as well. Thus, we can begin to read the traveller's immersion in her past (through the remembered voices of her grandparents) as a way in which she can effect this return within the confines of language and memory. She begins this process even as she continues physically to move away from her past (i.e. Nova Scotia) and into her future (Boston). At the poem's end, when the moose is being left behind as the bus continues its forward motion, there is yet another cyclical moment when "there's a dim / smell of moose, an acrid / smell of gasoline" (166-168). "The gasoline that has

brought Bishop to this encounter now takes her away" (Blasing 283), yes, but it also holds out the promise that it may, some day bring her back. And it is this *promise* of a return, rather than a return itself, that marks this journey by Bishop's "lone traveller" as a round trip; ultimately, it is – or at least embodies the possibility of being – a closed circle.

In "For That Day Only," the cyclical nature of the daughter's journey is inherent in the physical journey itself. The family walks "from Pitt Street to the Brooklyn cemetery" (10) in order to bury the dead boy-child, but they will not stay in Brooklyn; when the funeral is over, they will walk back, returning to the insulated/isolated life in their neighborhood. Yet this movement-out-and-back is not the closed circle it would first appear. In this round trip, there lies the possibility of an *opening up* of the daughter's encircled life; the outside world begins to intrude upon her consciousness the moment the daughter leaves her block, and continues to lure her attention from her family throughout their journey to Brooklyn and back. By the time she returns to Pitt Street, she will have seen that her future will involve a life where she will walk alone on the streets of New York, and the final line – "the next day and the next one and the next" – indicates not only the continuing grief (and possibly guilt) she will carry as she leaves her Orthodox faith behind, but also the promise of infinity's vanishing distances and its endless possibilities when a circle is opened.

In both "The Moose" and "For That Day Only," these two "immense voyages into the unknowable" (Wright 265), we find a feminine self emerging in the poem which is not the poet herself. The journey this poetic self takes is, of course, ultimately through the very language of the poem, and for both Bishop and Schulman poetic

language is, of necessity, an imagistic language. Poetry, "being the springtime of speech, shows us how language calls forth images," as well as how "the image calls for language" (Dufrenne 64), and Bishop and Schulman answer both these calls through the concrete images they use in service of the poetic self moving through their work. In "The Moose" and "For That Day Only," however, this poetic self is more complex than simply an *actor* within the poem – this poetic self is *itself* a journey through time and space, and this journey is a journey through language. Thus, the circle of language and journey is completed, with Bishop's "lone traveller" and Schulman's "oldest daughter" both enacting and embodying a woman's journey as they move through the poems that frame and define them, finding the balance that allows them the freedom to move toward self-discovery.

Balance in any of its connotations – physical, mental or emotional – is not a word usually associated with the work of Anne Sexton. To many readers the epitome of the-madwoman-as-poet, Sexton was writing poetry classified as confessional while a debate raged in literary circles about the value and worth of confessional work – particularly when that work dealt with extremely personal autobiographical details many critics believed were best left private. There was, however, another factor in the criticism Sexton experienced, for she found herself criticized not only for the mode in which she expressed herself but also for the very *feminine* nature of her work. There is no doubt that the "I" of Sexton's poetry is a woman – "Sexton always led with her femaleness, as if unable or unwilling to do anything else" (Hedley) – and unlike male poets (such as Robert Lowell) who also wrote confessional poetry, the "woman who confesses is. . .frequently read as testifying only to her own *anguish* and her own

'weakness'. . . .In speaking what she believes to be a personal truth she is making a spectacle of herself, throwing an already precarious subjectivity into a heightened state of prominence and vulnerability" (Rees-Jones 285). Thus, Sexton's confessional poetry dealing with subjects such as suicide, sex and – perhaps most damningly of all – madness meant that the poet herself, and not only her poems, ran the risk of being *read* as unstable and unreliable. "The figure of Anne Sexton constitutes the site not only of an unruly woman who is perceived as lacking academic taste but of one who embodies the despised and feared aspects of female subjectivity – madness, anxiety, and an unruly body that cannot be contained, cured or consoled by normative prescriptions" (Salvio 643). Her 1974 suicide only served to reinforce the image of Sexton as "Mad Anne," uncontainable and unstable: "[H]er suicidal tendencies drove her, and ultimately claimed her, and stopped her mouth with death" (Long 40).

Yet close attention to Sexton's writing reveals that "balance" is the very characteristic that marks her most successful poetry. She was able to channel her experiences and observations into poems that were close to the bone; "it was through her own creative hand that she took her own life. Yet, in the whirlwind of those years, when she bled herself onto the pages of her manuscripts, seeking to keep her haunting delusions at bay by mastering and designing the images behind them, she made her madness into a craft" (Kavaler 105). Sexton, then, "was not a 'mad poet' but a poet of madness" (Alkalay-Gut 139), and walking that thin line required a willingness both to take risks and to allow "[h]er own life and the lives of her family" to become "transparent for the sake of her poetry" (Reich 560). Transparency should not be mistaken for *truth*, however. "Many of her poems touch on events in her own life, her

stays in mental institutions, her problems with her parents, her relationships with friends, daughters, lovers; yet as she points out, even the most personal poems distort the events of her life to yield greater poetic power and truth" (Ameter 81). This means that readers must be careful not to read Sexton's poems as *the story of her life* for, autobiographical details aside, "poetry is a lying art" (Fields 256), and "confessional poetry hovers in a kind of no man's land between documentary experience on the one hand, and fiction on the other, establishing itself as a mode which ostensibly unites the borders of the relationship between the 'I' who speaks and the 'I' who was spoken about. Yet as James Merrill has pointed out: 'Confessional poetry . . .is a literary convention like any other, the problem is to make it *sound* as if it were true'" (Rees-Jones 283). Sexton was able to negotiate that no man's land so successfully that the reader often conflates the "Anne Sexton" of the poem with Anne Sexton the poet. Sexton, however, always knew the difference; she would alter the truth to fit the poem, and while Sexton's "best poems contain the autobiographical 'I'" they are also "strategically manipulated" to fit the emotional context of the work (Schulman "True").

From the first, Sexton recognized that she needed to establish a precarious balance, to delineate the "separation between a kind of woman (mad) and a kind of poet (a woman with magic craft)" who would write about the mad woman (Middlebrook "Sexton" 17) – in other words, the separation between the "Anne Sexton" of the poem and Anne Sexton the poet. This is always a difficult balance to achieve; it is even more difficult to maintain when writing, as Sexton does, from a personal, bodily perspective. Sexton "has reported more than anyone else – anyone else who has set out to write poems – has ever cared or dared" (Howard 517), and this has put her in constant danger

of being *mis-read*, in danger of losing her hard-won balance. In "Her Kind," published in 1960 in her first collection To Bedlam and Part Way Back, Sexton describes this balance in finely wrought detail, and it is a balance that is experienced through motion.

"I have gone out," the poem begins, signaling from the start that whatever experiences the speaker of the poem – the "I" – has in common with the woman she is observing, those experiences are now past. The line in its entirety reads, "I have gone out, a possessed witch," and here Sexton introduces the overriding trope of the poem, that of woman as witch; not just woman as witch, however, but woman as a witch who is moving. This experience of the body is central to Sexton, as it is to many women poets. "When defining a personal identity, women tend to begin with their bodies" (Ostriker Stealing 11), and in "Her Kind" it is a body in motion. As Sexton herself has noted, "I talk of the life-death cycle of the body. Well, women tell time by the body. They are like clocks. They are always fastened to the earth, listening for its small animal noises" (Kevles 335).

This witch, we are told, is "out of mind" (5), taken over ("possessed") by madness, "haunting the black air" (2). Just like the possessed witch she is observing, the speaker once flew "over the plain houses, light by light" (4), existing both above and separated from the normal domesticity represented by the houses below. The possessed witch is a "lonely thing, twelve-fingered" (5), that is to say, unnatural, a view reinforced by the line that follows: "A woman like that is not a woman, quite" (6). The stanza ends with the line that will become the poem's refrain, "I have been her kind" (7). Here again, the "have been" signals that the speaker is no longer possessed by her madness; this enables her to become an observer, a poet *possessed* of both

psychological clarity and an ability to empathize with the witch she is observing. Sexton also places in the past all the movements the speaker has in common with the witch: “I have gone. . .I have done. . .I have been. . .I have found.” The poem’s stanzaic construction, with its rhyme scheme and lines of generally the same length except for the shorter repeated “I have been her kind,” serves to focus attention on the refrain, emphasizing the witch’s motion and increasing the impact on the reader, yet keeping all the movement safely within the confines of the poem’s rhythm. Thus the madness (and the movement that characterizes it) is constrained, as Sexton “impos[es] upon the stuff of her experience the boundary and counterpoint of intense poetic control” (Kammer 29).

In the second stanza, the speaker describes how, separated as she was from the “plain houses” of the first stanza, she “found the warm caves in the woods” (8), looking within nature for the shelter she could not find in town. Here, though, she is driven to attempt a type of misshapen feminine domesticity, filling the caves with “skillets, carvings, shelves, / closets, silks, innumerable goods” (9-10) in a parody of housewifery that comes undone when we learn she has “fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves” (11), the first creatures associated with death and decay, the second creatures outside the human realm altogether. At one time the speaker, like the witch, traveled from the ordinary, everyday world and moved into a space of madness and loss. Unlike the witch, however, the speaker no longer journeys among the trees; the implication of the second stanza is that the speaker has returned to a life lived among the “plain houses” and no longer moves out into the woods.

The third stanza returns the witch to the human world. Torn from her shelter in the caves, she is riding the death cart. "I have ridden in your cart, driver, / waved my nude arms at villages going by" (15-16) she says, and through this direct address she delineates the complicity of the driver, and of the people in the villages through which she passes, in her coming execution. They have "misunderstood" her, have feared not only the evil she dreamed and her unnaturalness but also her feminine sexuality (her "nude arms"), and now they will punish her for frightening them. Whether burned at the stake "where your flames still bite my thigh" (18), or put to trial on the wheel ("my ribs crack where your wheels wind" (19), she will not be broken, for "A woman like that is not ashamed to die" (20). In fact, she welcomes death, "learning the last bright routes" (17) from the villages to her place of execution, a line which implies that, if reprieved from her death sentence, she might move to follow those routes herself, journeying back to a death she will embrace enthusiastically. "I have been her kind," ends the poem, and here again is the point of separation between the speaker and the "possessed witch," for while the witch "is not ashamed to die" and, indeed, is ready to embrace death, the speaker is no longer ready to do so. No longer caught up in the motion of the mad, no longer so suicidal that she is searching for the "bright route" she might follow to her death, the speaker can look upon the "possessed witch" she once was with empathy and sorrow, remaining balanced on the edge of memory without tipping over into madness.

This poem would be important to Sexton throughout her career. She would open all her readings with "Her Kind"; it "was the way Sexton stepped from person to persona" (Middlebrook <u>Biography</u> 115), the threshold she crossed from the private to

the public Anne, from the woman who lived her life to the woman who wrote about that life. This is a liminal space she would cross many times in her poems, most interestingly in “Flee On Your Donkey,” published in Live or Die (1966). While “Her Kind” was Sexton’s public declaration and definition of “Anne Sexton,” and perhaps the most-analyzed of her many works, I believe “Flee On Your Donkey” was much more important to the private poet Anne Sexton. She talked about the poem in interviews, discussing how she refused to put it aside: “I rewrote [‘Flee on Your Donkey’] for four years. I hung onto it and revised it every six months. Everyone said it was a useless poem; even my best friend said, ‘It embarrasses me,’ and Cal Lowell said it was better to be a short story. I fussed with it and played with it and I worked with it” (Packard and Victor 19). The title comes from Rimbaud (“Ma faim, Anne, Anne, / Fuis sur ton âne. . .”) and it is obvious that Sexton felt the poem spoke directly to her: “One day I was reading a quote from Rimbaud that said, ‘Anne, Anne, flee on your donkey,’ and I typed it out because it had my name in it and because I wanted to flee. I put it in my wallet, went to see my doctor, and at that point was committed to a hospital for about the seventh or eighth time. In the hospital, I started to write the poem, ‘Flee on Your Donkey,’ as though the message had come to me at just the right moment” (Kevles 322-23).

In “Flee on Your Donkey,” the woman who observes has returned to the asylum, and her observations must, perforce, be done from the *inside* of the world of the mad rather than the *outside*. She herself has gone mad yet again, and finds herself – willingly – “recommitted,” but the experience is different this time. Now, she has chosen to move away from her own madness, which has cornered her, leaving her with

"no other place / to flee to" (1-3). This movement away from madness is, ironically, a movement toward the madhouse, but she realizes that this her only option. She also realizes that, in order to get well, she must leave behind everything that is holding her in place, both material things and her own rationalizations, so she arrives "without luggage or defenses" (6). While in her poem of liberation, "Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound," the speaker carried her three symbols of freedom,[6] in "Flee on Your Donkey" she must relinquish these, "giving up my car keys and my cash, / keeping only a pack of Salem cigarettes / the way a child holds on to a toy" (7-9). The keys and cash are true symbols of freedom; the cigarettes act merely as a security blanket, a means for her to remind herself of the outside world and the independence it represents. This, then, is a journey poem quite different from "The Moose" and "For That Day Only." While those two poems detailed the movement of women throughout an external landscape, "Flee on Your Donkey" depicts an inner journey, the struggle of a women trying to move from madness toward sanity while restrained within the walls of a mental hospital.

Sexton uses lines and stanzas of varying lengths, as well as subtle and complicated rhyme structures, to *open up* a poem set within an extremely confined space. The repetition of the sound "Dinn, Dinn, Dinn!" – in the asylum, in the wail of an ambulance siren and, finally, "in this hierarchy of death / where the earth and the stones go / Dinn! Dinn! Dinn!" (217-19) – ties together the world inside the asylum, the world outside of it, and the world inside the speaker's mind. Here, in "Flee On Your Donkey," the speaker finds there is no excitement in being committed, "for this is a mental hospital, / not a child's game" (12-13). Her previous flirtation ("I would have

[6] See Chapter One.

winked and begged for dope" (16)) with the glamour of it all – the rush to the hospital, the attention from the doctors and nurses – has been dulled by the realization that she is not getting better. "I have come back," she says, "but disorder is not what it was. / I have lost the trick of it! / The innocence of it!" (190-93). Indeed, rather than bantering with the intern as she has in the past, "Today I am terribly patient" (17), constrained to near-immobility by her situation. She compares herself with "a prisoner / who was so poor / he fell in love with jail" (200-202), and here we see that not only does she realize she has not been getting well, she realizes that she may never be well. The redemption promised her by her psychiatrist ("But you, my doctor, my enthusiast, / were better than Christ; / you promised me another world / to tell me who / I was" (84-88)) has not come, and she has dropped back into the hospital's routine.

The speaker despairs of the time she has lost to madness. "Six years of such small preoccupations! / Six years of shuttling in and out of this place!" (54-55) she laments, realizing that the only real movement she has accomplished during that time has been a futile back-and-forth motion between the outside world and the asylum. Everything that she might have accomplished in those six years has been nullified by her madness, by her having to join "the same old crowd, / the same ruined scene" (62-63) in the asylum rather than being able to live her life on the outside. This same crowd has been held still within the madhouse, unable to move, as if caught in amber. And while she has been in and out of the asylum, the speaker realizes that she has been just as captive, held still by her obsessions ("O my hunger! My hunger!" (56)) and prevented from achieving anything of note. Were it not for her hunger, she "could have gone around the world twice / or had new children – all boys" (57-58); instead, her

madness constrained her in terms of both time and place, allowing her only "a long trip with little days in it / and no new places" (59-60).

Yet even now there is hope. The speaker's muse, unlike everyone else, has not abandoned her, although the question of who abandoned whom is left open. When the speaker says, "Everyone has left me / except my muse," it could be that everyone has moved away from her, but it is much more likely that they stayed behind while her madness took her away from them. Her muse, however, remains, "stays in my hand, / a mild white mouse" even as the speaker is committed to the asylum. Early in the poem, then, Sexton indicates that poetry ("*that good nurse*" (22)) will be the speaker's guide through her journey from madness to sanity, just as Virgil was Dante's guide throughout the *Divine Comedy*. Poetry will provide a doorway between the asylum and the outside world, if the speaker can only find a way to cross the threshold.

This will not be easy, for in the madhouse nature itself can become caught in stasis. Hornets gather at the screen, "hover outside" (33) in a moment of nature stopped still at the borders of the asylum. Even the curtains, "lazy and delicate" (25), move in the breeze only to fall still again; they "flutter out / and slump against the bars" (176-177) as if resigned to being locked within the hospital. And just as the hornets wait on the outside of the screen, so too the speaker waits on the inside. "I stand at this old window / complaining of the soup, / examining the grounds, / allowing myself the wasted life" (203-206), the speaker says and, just like the curtains, she may flutter a bit but then she will droop and sag, still caught within the walls of the asylum. This is not a small matter, for those who allow themselves to stay too long may never be able to leave, like the girl who "curls like a snail" (42), immobile to the point of catatonia, or

the teenage boy who “pads up and down / the hall in his white tennis socks” (49-50), a back-and-forth motion that leads nowhere and accomplishes nothing. Only the doctor making rounds moves with a purpose; everyone else, all the patients, are stuck in place, for the “permanent guests have done nothing new” (67) and are stock still.

There is, of course, one way to escape the motionlessness of madness, and that is through death. In the middle of describing her return to the asylum, the speaker turns to the deaths of her mother and father, how “they carried out my mother” (71), how her father, his motion stopped by “crooked feet and useless hands” (77), eventually “went out on. . .rotten blood” (71) when he died. Through these descriptions the speaker is re-enacting within her memory the final movement any of us take in this world, that of the dead being transported by the living. Later in the poem, the speaker describes her own suicidal attempts to move away from madness through death, and how the motion of the ambulance, which “ran like a hearse” (185) yet refused to allow her to die, “kept insisting on life / all the way through the traffic lights” (188-189). Sexton has said that “Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem” (Kevles 319), and the ambulance, by moving her from death to life, has also transported her from suicide to poetry, a means to escape her insanity.

Therapy offers another possible way to escape madness, but the speaker has spent years with her “bachelor analyst” (100) to no avail. She is still mad; indeed, it seems as if her therapy, which includes hypnotic trances and dream analysis, has done more to keep her madness flourishing than it has to cure her. Therapy renders her motionless within her own mind, trapped within “that little hut” (91) as she regresses into childhood, and her madness is comfortable there. The speaker recounts how, when

trying to leave the therapist's office, she "collapsed in the old-fashioned swoon" (126) and had to be carried back into the building by her doctor and his secretary. "My shoes," she says, "were lost in the snowbank / as if I planned never to walk again" (142, 144-145), and here the symbolism is clear: her madness, her "hunger," wants to stop her from leaving her therapist, wants her "never to walk" away from the therapist again, because leaving therapy might be the first step in the journey away from insanity and toward freedom of motion.

The trances induced by her doctor, the dreams she recounted to him, the "old-fashioned swoon" she suffered on the street, the death of her parents, all of these memories play within the speaker's mind and, with the help of her muse, will become part of her art. But that will happen only if she is able to break free of her madness, for while she is still mad she is unable to write. The balance that Anne Sexton the poet worked so hard to achieve is unavailable to the "Anne Sexton" committed to an asylum in "Flee On Your Donkey." Her madness has helped her dredge up images from her subconscious but it also prevents her from achieving the balance she needs to use those images in her poetry.

Finally, the speaker realizes that in order to create, in order to become a poet once again, she must cease allowing her illness to control her life. She must complete her journey and travel away from the madhouse in order to find the freedom to move (and to write). "Turn, my hungers!" she commands. "For once make a deliberate decision" (222-223), and thus begins her journey away from madness and toward control of her own motion. She must no longer be a "possessed witch." She must control her madness, take possession of it and no longer allow it to possess her, for if

she does not break free of her controlling madness, she risks losing everything, including her mind: "There are brains that rot here / like black bananas. / Hearts have grown as flat as dinner plates" (224-226). She must bring her mind and body together[7] and find the balance that will allow her to write again. In the stanza that is the heart of the poem, and which I believe speaks directly to the poet's own fears and desires, Sexton writes:

> Anne, Anne,
> flee on your donkey,
> flee this sad hotel,
> ride out on some hairy beast,
> gallop backward pressing
> your buttocks to his withers,
> sit to his clumsy gait somehow.
> Ride out
> any old way you please! (227-235)

There is no glamour in madness. Those who are mad possess no gift, are granted no insights into great mysteries. They, like the speaker, suffer from nothing more than "the fool's disease." The hunger, the obsession, must turn away from the madhouse and move toward the balance of poetry.

In order to achieve the balance necessary for Anne Sexton the poet to write about "Anne Sexton" in the asylum, however, the escape on the donkey must be done while the speaker is riding backwards. In other words, she cannot turn her face completely away from her experience of madness; rather, she must work to achieve an equilibrium between the mad woman and the poet. She must harness the excess of madness and use it in her art. The journey she undertook at the start of the poem, when she entered the madhouse and relinquished the symbols of her autonomy and freedom, is only complete when she is able to look back at her time in the asylum, that place

[7] *Cf*. St. Francis of Assisi, who referred to his body as "Brother Ass."

where "everyone talks to his own mouth" (236), and then write about her experiences there. Only when the journey is complete, and she has regained the freedom of motion that allows her to move away from madness, can she finally write about what she lived through in the asylum.

The poets discussed in this chapter – Linda Gregg, Elizabeth Bishop, Grace Schulman and Anne Sexton – have each written a different type of journey poem. Gregg's "The Secret Life of New York" focuses on the small, quotidian experiences of a woman walking a familiar path through the City. "The Moose" and "For That Day Only," by Bishop and Schulman respectively, are journey-of-discovery poems which, while following the more traditional notions of the epic journey poem, still bring a female sensibility to the experiences depicted within the works, "[f]or writers necessarily articulate gendered experience just as they necessarily articulate the spirit of a nationality, an age, a language" (Ostriker Stealing 9). Finally, Sexton's "Flee on Your Donkey" depicts an interior journey undertaken by a women determined to overcome madness and come into her *self* once again. Four very different poems, yet each uses movement as a metaphor for discovery. These are women writing about the ways in which women move across a landscape, whether exterior or interior, and how those journeys change those who experience them. In the next chapter, I will discuss two other ways of moving through the world, two metaphors of motion that help women poets examine the truths and experiences of their everyday lives.

Chapter Three: Flying/Driving

One must be free in order to be able to move. When contemporary American women poets use motion in their poetry, freedom lies at the heart of their work, and there is no better metaphor for freedom than a body in flight (whether real or imaginary). Originally published in The Hang-Glider's Daughter: New Selected Poems in 1991, Marilyn Hacker's "The Hang-Glider's Daughter" (Selected), begins with the line "My forty-year-old father learned to fly." The poem's speaker, a girl on the cusp of becoming a young woman, contrasts the way in which her father "walks off a sheer / shaved cliff into the morning" (3-4) with the everyday, earthbound life she experiences as she and her sister, Liane, "wash up, clear / the kitchen mess" (6-7) and get their two younger brothers fed in anticipation of being picked up by their father. "On Sunday / mornings he comes for us," (4-5), she says, and the reader has an image of this man who has soared through the air in the previous lines suddenly brought back to earth, to the messiness of being a divorced father coming to pick up his daughters from the house where they live with their "Maman" and Joseph. As the father drives his daughters back up the hill, Liane sits up front with him as the speaker finds she "can stretch out on the back seat" (19) and give herself over to the passive motion of riding in a car as someone else drives. In this dreamy state, she lets her thoughts ramble, following them the way a child will follow a puppy as it weaves its way across a lawn. The sight of "olive terraces" that look like stairs for giants leads to the observation that "[m]y hiking shoes look giant on my feet" (22). From this, she thinks about how her mother says she is "a missed boy" (23), then to what the English would be for that phrase, then to how she has forgotten all her English, then to the question of whether she would remember

English if she were hypnotized. Far from disjointed thoughts, however, this reverie becomes a means of engaging with the very question of the speaker's identity (including, in that "missed boy," her gender as well as her sex). The speaker moves through her thoughts and memories the ways she might move through a landscape, with the one difference being that this motion is passive, performed completely within her own head as she sits in the back of the car. Her dreamy thoughts, and her passivity, are brought up short when the "bright road twists up" and they shift gears "bumpily" and "breathe deep" (30-31), but after this momentary interruption the speaker falls back immediately to thinking about what makes her who she is. What if she were to forget her French? "[W]ho would I be inside my head?" she asks (35). She is more sure of her hands, of how they "remember better" (36) how to perform a number of small, everyday activities such as "how to hold / my penknife to strip branches, where to crack / eggs on a bowl rim" (36-38) and "how to pile a block / tower. . .high as my nose" (38-39) (notice here how two of the three examples can be gendered male, while the other – cracking eggs – would be gendered female).

Her near-trance is ended when her body imposes itself upon her thoughts: "My knee's cramped," she thinks, and then immediately, "I wish that I could walk to Dad's house, or that I was up front, talk- // ing to him" (41, 42-43). She longs for motion, or better still, a real moment of connection with her father. She wonders how hang-gliding makes him feel. "I'd be scared" (45) she thinks, "I'd be so scared I can't think it" (46). She fears flight's release, the freedom from everyday, earthbound things. She would rather stay connected with the earth, climbing up the hill behind her father's house. "Climbing / isn't scary: no time" (47-48), she thinks, remembering how connected she

feels to her own body when she is finished climbing: "My calves ache, after, ribs sting, / but I'm good for something" (50-51). She finds her purpose, then, in her own earthbound motion, and feels safe as she moves because her feet do not leave the ground.

At the poem's end, however, we find that perhaps flight – in this case, imaginary flight – is something to be desired after all, something that, to this woman-child, represents not just release from the earth but a coming-of-age. She thinks, "I smell myself, / sweaty from climbing, but it's a woman's sweat" (65-66), then, immediately:

> I had one of the moon dreams again.
> I stood on the flyover facing purple
> sea, head up, while a house-huge full moon hurtled
> toward me; then it was me flying, feet still
> on the road. We're here, on top of the hill. (66-70)

Here, then, is the crux of the metaphor of flight as it pertains to this girl, this "missed boy," who is growing into womanhood. (And we now see that the cramp she experiences in her knee is a foreshadowing of the cramps she will experience as a woman.) She is afraid of flying, afraid of "levering onto air / currents like a thinking hawk" (44-45), yet in her dreams she does fly, albeit in her own way. She does not step off a cliff as her father does; she stands still, watching the moon (long a symbol of womanhood, menstruation, and female power) flying toward her. Rather than standing there helplessly as maturity hurtles toward her, however, the speaker finds that she is flying (under her own terms) to meet the moon. She is flying, yet her feet are earthbound, still on the ground. She will become a woman, will achieve the freedom inherent in flying, but she will do so without losing touch with the girl she was by constructing her own freedom through the possibility of flight.

Flying is an example of the freedom inherent in physical motion. The person who flies a plane, for example, finds herself "[b]uoyant with speed," for "the airborne subject experienced the rush of lifting into (an illusory) immateriality" (Smith 77). If this is how pilots feel, it is no wonder that, of all forms of flight in contemporary poetry, the one that best represents the joys of unfettered movement is imaginary: it is when a woman's body flies through the air without any external, mechanical aid. Both Elizabeth Bishop and Anne Sexton have used imaginary flight in poems. Sexton is, of course, best known for her "confessional" poetry in which no topic is taboo and even the most uncomfortable situations are discussed in great, seemingly personal, detail. Bishop is a paradigm of poetic constraint, using her mastery of language and imagery to avoid painful or personal revelation as much as to illuminate her subjects. These differences in the two writers' poetics and style, coupled with their use of imaginary flight in their work, serve to reinforce the effectiveness of movement as a metaphor for freedom in the work of women poets, in this case the metaphor of flight.

In "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore" (Bishop Collected 82), a poem Lorrie Goldensohn calls "an invitation to come closer" (136), Bishop invites her mentor to fly from Brooklyn to Manhattan to visit her. Bishop's "playfully teasing" (Robinson 104) poem is a delightful celebration of both Moore's personal idiosyncrasies and her poetics. There are some who find the poem (originally published in the 1955 collection A Cold Spring) "deeply ambivalent" (Diehl 50), hostile (Erkkila Wicked 134) or even "mean" – an assertion that Bishop herself "found rather upsetting because it wasn't meant to be" (Bishop Art 160) – but I believe it is apparent that Bishop means this to be a "delightful" (Keller 424), mostly lighthearted, even mischievous tribute to Moore. As

Bonnie Costello notes, "Moore delighted in the piece and undoubtedly recognized herself in its flourish of detail (August 24, 1948): 'Your magic poem – every word a living wonder – with an enfoldment that does not ever go back of itself, and the colors!'" (Costello 146). The joy both women – Bishop and Moore – took in the sweep and flow of the poem's language mirrors the delight represented by the fantasy of flight Bishop confers upon Moore in her "Invitation."

The gracefully playful tone is set by Bishop in the poem's opening lines: "From Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning, / please come flying" (1-2). With that "over the Brooklyn Bridge," Bishop sets up an initial expectation – the image of Moore walking or driving across the bridge – only to turn that expectation completely around with what will become the poem's incantatory refrain, "please come flying." Suddenly, Moore is set loose from earthbound modes of passage which "attach the traveler bodily to the ground" (Smith 31) and is freed into surprising flight. The poem's first stanza introduces the primary images – the color blue, and bright light – which will suffuse Bishop's "Invitation" and help its reader experience vicariously the joyful freedom of flying – for what would flight be full of, if not blueness and light? In the opening lines, these images set a scene almost militaristic in nature, with "the rapid rolling of thousands of small blue drums" (5) – its alliteration reinforcing the cadenced drum rolls (and perhaps, along with later alliterative phrases, echoing the alliteration of the very name "Miss Marianne Moore") – and "the glittering grandstand of harbor-water" evoking a fanciful, even childish image of a military parade. This is the grand welcome that awaits Moore if she allows herself to answer Bishop's "invocation" (Costello 146) – or, as I read the poem, her *incantation*, the spell cast by the repeated

"please come flying" indented for emphasis at the end of each paragraph. "Invocation" implies that Moore already possesses the capacity for flight on her own; I choose "incantation" because Bishop is herself bestowing the gift of flight upon Moore through the power of the poet's words.

In this poem, all is in motion except the speaker. She waits in Manhattan to see whether or not Miss Marianne Moore will accept her invitation to cross the river and visit. Indeed, this poem takes to the extreme the tendency of Bishop – unlike Whitman, Lowell and others – to not "thump the incessant drum of 'myself.' The 'I,' when it comes into her poems, is a little surprise. . ." (Spivak 500), and here there is no "I" at all, only "we," a pronoun linking the two women through the attention to detail common to each. Both Bishop and Moore were "alert to the remarkable in even the most commonplace sights and experiences" (Keller 408), and in "Invitation" Bishop acknowledges this unity in their poetics by finding the beauty and grace in New York's gritty waterfront, a space full of motion and light. "Whistles, pennants and smoke are blowing" (9), writes Bishop, and here are three types of movement being described by the one word, "blowing." Whistles blow (or, more accurately, are being blown); anchored on masts, pennants flutter in the wind but cannot move from their places; and smoke is freed by the wind to go anywhere it can, flying over the harbor in much the same way Bishop imagines Moore would fly if she accepts the invitation.

Down on the water, all is orderly motion: "The ships / are signaling cordially with multitudes of flags / rising and falling like birds all over the harbor" (9-11). Here, with the word "cordially," Bishop alleviates the militaristic images of the first stanza and opens another theme of the poem, that of the linking of man-made objects with

natural ones through types of motion they have in common. The ships are "rising and falling like birds" and, like birds bobbing on the waves, they may suddenly whirl and fly/sail away, echoing in their joyful freedom Moore's flight over the river. The description of the ships is followed by the tidy image of "pellucid jellies," "cut-glass epergnes" being borne "gracefully" along by two rivers (12-14). All of these images – ships as birds, jellyfish as epergnes – lead up to the stanza's penultimate line, "The waves are running in verses this fine morning" (16), which presents motion within both nature and poetry as controlled and orderly and, more importantly, presents the waves/verses as the liminal space between Moore's Brooklyn and Bishop's Manhattan, a threshold which Moore must fly over before arriving in the City. These orderly verses are a lighthearted version of an image Bishop returned to again and again in her work. "Bishop habitually imagined the sea as lines of verse and, conversely, imagined verse as a kind of liquid contained by walls" (Samuels 312); here in "An Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore," Bishop presents this image of tidy, delightful motion, and uses it to paint a world which is, "like Moore's own poetic universe, cordial, decorous, safe, and artistically ordered" (Erkkila Wicked 133).

Once Bishop establishes the safe, brightly lit Manhattan waterfront, she turns to the figure of Marianne Moore herself. Here again are the imagery of blue and light, joined now in the "sapphire highlight" which trails "the pointed toe of each black shoe" (19, 18) Moore is wearing in Bishop's imagination. There is levity, even a touch of silliness, in this stanza where fanciful imagery abounds. Bishop uses the depiction of Moore in "a black capeful of butterfly wings and bon-mots" (20) and carrying "heaven knows how many angels. . . / on the broad black brim of your hat" (21-22) to reinforce

the notion that this imagined flight is one of joyful freedom. Bishop alleviates the severity of Moore's black clothing (her sartorial trademark[1]) with whimsical butterflies (or at least the most colorful parts of them, their wings) and angels, but these images serve a deeper, more important purpose: both can fly, and do so on their own. That they are carried along by Moore shows that, if Bishop's invocation is successful, Moore will embody – literally and figuratively – the types of splendidly unassisted flight represented by both natural and imaginary (even divine) creatures.

Up to this point in her "Invitation," Bishop has described the landscape over which Moore would travel, and the physical aspects which Moore herself would exhibit should Bishop's incantation work. In the fourth stanza, Bishop combines the cityscape and the embodiment of flight which is her imaginary Moore with a third component of the poem, that of Moore's poetry. Bishop imagines Moore carrying a "musical inaudible abacus" (24), a phrase which both links silliness with seriousness (something musical which is also inaudible) and represents "Moore's syllabic method" (Costello 147), the rhythm and rhyme of her poetry. In addition to her abacus, Moore will bear "a slight censorious frown and blue ribbons" (25), and the blue of the ribbons connects the blue of the previous stanzas (the blue which represents the freedom of flying into a clear, azure sky) with the blue ribbons which are awarded to first-place winners, a reference to the acclaim and awards Moore's poetry received. Here, then, is where Bishop first links within this poem the freedom of flying with the freedom of writing. When one flies, one attains the glory of the blue sky; when one writes, if one does it

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[1] "I remember seeing [Marianne Moore] walking on The Promenade in Brooklyn Heights some time in 1960 or 1961. She looked fierce, independent, admirable, wind-ruffled, and somewhat resentful – possibly because I was staring at her." Joanna Russ, How to Suppress Women's Writing (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983) 103.

well, one attains the glory of recognition and awards – or at least the satisfaction of having written well, a satisfaction which brings with it its own form of freedom.

The stanza continues:

> Facts and skyscrapers glint in the tide: Manhattan
> is all awash with morals this fine morning
> so please come flying. (27-29)

Just as she linked butterfly wings with bon-mots in the previous stanza, Bishop continues to join the concrete (skyscrapers) with the ephemeral (facts), this time presenting them not as images to be seen directly, but as reflected in the water. This linkage serves to connect the morals which fill the city with both the water (that very liquid "awash") and the light of the previous stanzas, and the stanza as a whole completes a picture of Moore in the unfettered motion of flight.

It is this unfettered motion that keeps Moore both physically and metaphorically above – and thus unsullied by – a cityscape of "accidents," "malignant movies," and "taxicabs and injustices at large" (31-32). "Mounting the sky with natural heroism" (30), Moore is, in her un-mediated flight, a force of nature, albeit one tied to the sights and sounds of the Manhattan spread out beneath her feet. In the city below, "horns are resounding" in Moore's "beautiful ears" which, while still hearing the city's cacophony, "simultaneously listen to / a soft uninvented music, fit for the musk deer" (33-34). Rather than continue to link the man-made with the natural, as she did with the boats and birds, Bishop now begins to separate the two categories, drawing a distinction between the ugly sounds of the city and the glorious "uninvented music" which Moore hears during her flight.

As a force of nature descending into Bishop's Manhattan, Moore would possess the power to make inanimate objects behave as animals do – a continuation/extension of the magic necessary for Moore's flight across the bridge. By imagining how "the grim museums will behave / like courteous male bower-birds" (37-38), Bishop does more than just present an image of the Metropolitan Museum of Art opening its doors welcomingly. She links the architectural habits of the bower bird (who gathers shiny, colorful objects with which to decorate his nest) with Moore's poetic practice of bricolage, the gathering of bits and pieces of text and imagery with which she constructs and "decorates" her poetry. Museums are spaces in which the intellect and imagination can flourish, making them the perfect poetic meeting ground for Bishop and Moore, who "had in common unusual tastes and interests, and shared the assumption that intellectual curiosity and imagination are inseparable" (Keller 410). The next few lines of the stanza introduce the lion statues which grace the front steps of the New York Public Library, a building which was literally the first meeting ground for Bishop and Moore. While the museums behave like birds, the library's lions actually come to life in Bishop's poem. They "lie in wait" as lions do in the wild, but not to pounce upon their prey; no, here they wait for the arrival of Miss Moore, for they are "eager to rise and follow [Moore] through the doors / up into the reading rooms" (41-42). Bishop leaves the reader with a clear image of the force of nature which is Moore sweeping past the carved lions, who leap from their pedestals to bound up the steps behind the poet. All comes alive and begins to move when the magical Miss Moore passes by.

The remainder of the stanza comprises the most problematic lines of the poem. After giving us the fanciful images of the very concrete and stone foundations of New York being brought to life by Moore's magic, Bishop writes:

> We can sit down and weep; we can go shopping,
> or play at a game of constantly being wrong
> with a priceless set of vocabularies,
> or we can bravely deplore, but please
> please come flying. (44-48)

Bonnie Costello suggests that these lines might be "Bishop's reminder about the limits of art," "entertainments" offered to Moore by Bishop that "seem incommensurate with the pleasure of her [Moore's] company" (Costello 147). For Costello, the choices "describe the sadness of the world, its consumerism, but also the pleasure Moore takes in picking and choosing. They describe Moore's relentless accuracy. . ., and they describe Moore's courage" (Costello 147). In a poem in which the imagery is "alive with thought and moral awareness" (Travisano 98), however, it would seem that something more personal, and ultimately more important, is going on. For a poet whose "most fundamental issue in all of her poetry" is "seeing the ways nothing about living in the human world is or can ever be simple" (Schwartz 30), this list of possible entertainments Bishop offers Moore carries a terrific weight. Even if, as George S. Lensing suggests, Bishop's poetry offers a "resistance of ultimate pessimism and despair" (57), in these lines we find Bishop recognizing the folly and bleakness of the human condition – particularly as it pertains to the art (poetry) she and Moore have chosen to pursue. There is deliberate shock value to those words, "We can sit down and weep," placed as they are directly after the image of the lions coming to life. It is the first appearance of Bishop within the work, and it serves to bring the poem down to

earth, to the Manhattan of “malignant movies” and “injustices at large.” This is where Bishop lives, and she has summoned Moore here deliberately. Bishop modifies the image of weeping women by next suggesting shopping (an activity which, like weeping, is socially gendered as quintessentially female), but then she turns to what is at the heart of her “Invitation,” the suggestion that she and Moore could “play at a game of constantly being wrong / with a priceless set of vocabularies.” By describing poetry in this manner, Bishop is signaling to Moore that she is struggling with (and doubting) her art, and is asking for Moore’s help. This is reinforced by the repeated “please” at the end of this stanza, turning the whimsical incantation of “please come flying” into a plaintive request for her mentor’s assistance.

In the next stanza, by describing Moore’s poetics, Bishop details exactly how Moore can help her. Bishop begins with the lines, “With dynasties of negative constructions / darkening and dying around you” (49-50). Costello and Keller read these dynasties as representing Moore’s writing style, her “double negatives which render positives and those ironic reversals” (Costello 147) , but the text does not support that reading. As Moore flies through the air, those dynasties are “darkening and dying around” her – clearly, Bishop meant to signal here that Moore’s poetry, with its bright light and beautiful blueness, killed off the “negative constructions” of earlier (perhaps male) forms. The next lines reinforce this reading, for they describe how Moore would come to Bishop “with grammar that suddenly turns and shines / like flocks of sandpipers flying” (51-52), juxtaposing the shining light of Moore’s poetry with the “darkening and dying” poetics of those who came before. Here again, Bishop links Moore’s language, her poetry, with nature – this time with a natural creature that flies.

Thus, Moore's imaginary flight becomes linked with her poetry's ability to "fly" like the flock of sandpipers.

In the final stanza, Bishop returns to her incantatory phrasing, this time repeating the request/command "come" in the first two lines, "Come like a light in the white mackerel sky, / come like a daytime comet" (54-55). Here, Moore herself is the source of light, a daytime comet "with a long unnebulous train of words" (56); in other words, Moore's poetry is clear and concrete, not hazy and full of negative constructions.[2] Bishop gives us Moore in full flight again in the poem's final lines, circling back to her opening invitation to Moore to fly "over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning" (57), asking the poet to bring with her all the joy and freedom of the flight which is her poetry.

A different type of flight is imagined by Anne Sexton in her "Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound" (Complete). While nothing in the text ever explicitly states who is being left by the speaker, and to what (or whom) she is returning, the impression the reader gets from the beginning is that the speaker is leaving her lover. "Now I am going back" (3), she says, which implies that she belongs somewhere other than where she has been. The next four lines paint a picture of her farewell from her lover, a farewell that was neither desired nor easy:

> . . .I have ripped my hand
> from your hand as I said I would
> and I have made it this far
> as I said I would. (4-7)

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[2] Bonnie Costello mis-reads this line, stating that "Moore's poetry generates something indeed 'unnebulous' (not yet obvious). . ." Bonnie Costello. "Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop: Friendship and Influence." Twentieth Century Literature 30.2/3 (Summer-Autumn 1984): 147. Something unnebulous is not, as Costello says, "not yet obvious" but is, instead, not hazy; in other words, clear.

He was reluctant to let her go, holding tightly to her hand. By her motion of "ripping" her hand from his, she has torn the two asunder, separating not just their hands but their bodies as well. She had warned him this act was coming (note the repetition of "as I said I would"), but the phrase "I have made it this far" indicates that this may not be the first time she has tried to leave, and that she is not at all certain that this separation will be permanent. The next few lines make a gesture, however, toward her belief that freedom from her lover is, indeed, possible. "I am on the top deck now" (8), she says, and the implied image of the open ocean spread out at her feet represents the freedom from her lover that she is hoping to achieve. The stanza continues, with the speaker describing how she is carrying the symbols of her autonomy (the wallet, cigarettes and car keys discussed in earlier chapters). All three are hers, and hers alone; she is holding them and they remain with her, unlike her lover who is now separate from her. The wallet and car keys are especially important, for they represent her ability to continue to travel, continue to move away from her lover, after she disembarks the ferry.

Sexton herself originally dismissed the poem as "too sentimental" in a letter to Anthony Hecht, but then went on to wonder if that were really so. "But perhaps I'm wrong," she continued. "Perhaps I ought to allow my female heart more room," she wondered, before saying, "I'm going to harden up soon I promise myself . . .stop all the emoting around and get down to facts and objects" [ellipses Sexton's] (Sexton and Ames 127). This vacillation between her "female heart" and the hardness of "facts and object" is, indeed, played out in the poem itself, which in just the first three stanzas moves from the hardened heart of the speaker through her addressing her lover as "Dearest" (13), then back to the realization that she must follow through with her leave-

taking. “Oh, all right, I say, / I’ll save myself” (32-33), she declares, and while she is speaking about her reaction to the “KEEP OFF” sign hanging by the lifeboat (28-31), she is also speaking about her resignation to the necessity of leaving her lover.

After deciding that she will save herself, the speaker notices four nuns “[o]ver my right shoulder” (34). Note that she does not look directly at them at first – she sees them obliquely, off to the side (in fact, nearly behind her). As they sit in a square facing inward, “like a bridge club” (36), the nuns’ habits are blown by the wind. “Without discrimination / the wind pulls the skirts / of their arms,” and we have a clear image of the four nuns sitting like kites, waiting to be lifted up by the persistent breeze on the ferry’s top deck. Notice that it is the “skirts of their arms” that are being tugged by the wind, not the true skirts of their habits, for that would imply a certain sexuality that would not fit with Sexton’s image of the nuns “as good as good babies who / have sunk into their carriages” (39-40). Constrained by their habits while earthbound, the nuns provide a parallel to the speaker’s own confinement, her inability to “escape” her lover.

On seeing these four women bound to the deck of the ferry yet pulled tantalizingly by the wind, the speaker offers up a prayer:

> Oh God,
> although I am very sad,
> could you please
> let these four nuns
> loosen from their leather boots
> and their wooden chairs
> to rise out
> over this greasy deck,
> out over this iron rail. (49-57)

While Bishop sang an incantation to bring Marianne Moore to her, Sexton raises an invocation to God to send the four nuns away from her, away from the ferry upon which

they are riding and up into the sky toward paradise. She asks this for the nuns and not for herself, even though she is "very sad" and very much in need of the release offered by flight, for she sees the nuns as envoys, or better yet, heralds, who would fly on ahead of her and other women. That it is women she is thinking of is clear when she asks that God allow the nuns to be released from the world of leather, wood, grease and iron, all masculine things that the nuns will escape through flight. Sexton reinforces the masculine/feminine dichotomy here by describing how the nuns are "nodding their pink heads to one side" (58) as they rise, juxtaposing the dark male iron and wood with the pink femininity of the nuns' faces peeking through their wimples.

Then, suddenly, the nuns are not just rising, they are "flying four abreast / in the old-fashioned side stroke" (59-60); they are moving with purpose, and moving as one. They are "singing without sound" (83), singing hymns of praise or songs of freedom or silent psalms, no longer heard by those who remain below. The speaker then addresses her absent lover again but, because he is not with her, her speech is as silent as the singing of the nuns. She does speak to him, however, describing how "my dark girls sally forth," that is, they move quickly, even eagerly in their flight "over the passing lighthouse of Plum Gut" (67) and here is where Sexton draws a connection between the nuns' motion and that of the speaker, for it is the "passing lighthouse" the nuns fly above just as the speaker rides by the same lighthouse on the ferry. The speaker effects her own escape in passing the lighthouse, which is located on an island just off the tip of Long Island's North Shore, while the nuns move over the last earthbound point of reference they will see before they fly away. The nuns pass "out over the little lighthouse / that warns me of drowning winds" (72-73), but while the speaker is

warned, her "dark girls" are not, for they are now part of the destructive winds. Part of those winds or not, the nuns are still in danger from them, for they are

> winds that will take the toes
> or the ears of the rider
> or the lover. (76-78)

These are cold winds, dangerous winds, which can bring freedom to those who ride them (the nuns) or those who pass through them (the speaker), but which may also claim trophies, such as toes or ears lost to frostbite.

The next stanza leaves fear behind to return to the nuns' flight. Just as the speaker is hoping to use the movement of the ferry to help complete her separation from her lover, she hopes that the flight she imagines for the nuns will lead them upward toward salvation, a salvation not available to them on the earth-bound "wooden chairs" and "greasy deck." The nuns are now "lighter than flying dogs / or the breath of dolphins" (82-83), their "dresses" (no longer habits) "puff / in the leeward air" (80-81), and they drink in the freedom of flight as "each mouth opens gratefully, / wider than a milk cup" (84-85). Freedom is nourishment, taken "gratefully" by these women now set free into the air. "My dark girls sing for this" (86), either calling out for it – flight's freedom – or crying out in ecstasy because of it, and then, suddenly, "[t]hey are going up" (87) and flight become ascension, and the dark girls who "rise / on black wings" (88-89) have suddenly become dark angels "without smiles / or hands / or shoes" (90-92), all corporealness left behind except for their dark wings.

This headlong rush is then interrupted in the poem's final lines:

> They call back to us
> from the gauzy edge of paradise,
> *good news, good news*. (93-95)

and now the nuns, the dark girls, the black angels, can finally be heard calling down to the speaker that there is "good news," freedom can be achieved, and that motion makes that freedom possible; in the speaker's case, her salvation lies in her ability to move away – and stay away – from her lover. Here, as in Bishop's "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore," the speaker's prayer bestows freedom – in the metaphor of flight – upon someone other than herself, but the outcome of the flight is a type of freedom (or at least its promise) for the speaker herself. In Bishop's case, it is the connection of motion and poetry (Moore's "grammar that suddenly turns and shines") that will help give Bishop the freedom to write. In Sexton's poem, the promise is of a physical and emotional freedom, a freedom from a relationship that has become constraining.

That bodily flight represents the ultimate freedom in women's writing is no surprise. There has always been a strong connection between the body and the text in women's work, a "nexus of genre and gender. . .the secret intersections of sexuality and textuality" (S. M. Gilbert 35) where women's writing takes place. This sexuality is not necessarily erotic in nature, but manifests itself as a bodily presence within the lines of the text. In both poems discussed above, that bodily presence is displaced upon another woman (or women), and it is these surrogates whose bodies take flight and in doing so confer upon the speaker of the poem a sense of the possibility of freedom in motion.

There are times when this possibility of freedom is expressed when the female body is not moving under its own power, but is being mechanically conveyed. While it is tempting to read mechanized modes of transportation as somehow completely dissociating the physical bodies they carry from any type of corporeal experience, this would be a mistake. "The self is always somewhere, always located in some sense in

some place, and cannot be totally unhoused. New technologies appear to promise ever-increasing degrees of disembodiment or detachment, yet they are as embedded in material relations as any other practices" (Kaplan 34). Thus, American women riding in – or driving – mechanical modes of transport do not become disconnected or estranged from their corporeal selves; they process and understand the experience through their bodies. "Women have always been in motion . . . and their traveling has always been gendered and embodied traveling" (Smith xiii). The woman who drives is "the self safely wrapped back inside its body, / which is your own, driving a car, yours" (Zeiger 28-29).

This gendered, embodied traveling takes place particularly in the automobile, where there is a blending of body and machine, for "automobility fosters an intimate relationship of traveler to technology of motion. . . .Nestled inside the cab, the automobilist thus experiences an insular, autonomous individuality and an exhilarating freedom of movement" (Smith 170). Indeed, this physicality of experience was perceived as a problem when women first began to drive automobiles. There was a fear that "women's emotional constitution" was such that they "would become excited, in the sexual sense, by driving the new machine, or use it as an extension of their sexuality" (Berger 60). In all modes of mechanized travel, and most especially in the car, women "became identified with sexual display, technological power, and pleasurable excess" (Smith 173).

Of all types of locomotion, the automobile is the one most clearly associated with America. To be American is, by definition, to be a driver. "An American without a car is a sick creature, a snail that has lost its shell" (Codrescu 3), and while in the early

days of automobility this would have been true mainly for men, it became apparent fairly quickly that women, too, would take to the road as drivers, and not just to get from one place to another. "Many early accounts of women drivers made it clear that ladies often specifically sought out the excitement associated with motoring, a type of excitement formerly reserved for men because only they were thought capable of controlling it" (Berger 60). Until the 20th century, women were constrained from traveling alone by a sense of propriety and, in some cases, by fear of what would happen to a woman moving by herself. "For centuries, it was frowned upon for women to travel without escort, chaperone, or husband. To journey was to put one at risk not only physically but morally. A little freedom could be a dangerous thing" (Morris 25). The automobile eventually changed all this, giving women a protected yet terribly powerful method of travel, a method they could control themselves. Women found in the automobile "a machine that produces power on demand – real, immediate, physical power, tangible in all the senses. You could almost call it a machine specifically designed to enhance women's growing exploration of the possibilities for freedom and control of their own lives" (Hazelton 43).

Contemporary American women poets have written extensively about the automobile, and about "what it meant to live in America, which is to say: to drive a car here" (Boruch 529). For some writers, driving is a part of the poetic process, "a peculiarly ironic and American way of meditation, our sitting, our za-zen requiring movement through space at incredible speeds. With danger. And brute force" (Boruch 523). The automobile becomes a place to think, to dream, to imagine. "As the most favored – and problematic – offspring of that particularly American union of space,

romance, and technology, the automobile occupies a central place in our fantasies as well as in our daily lives" (Dettelbach 5). Yet American women's relationship with their cars is problematized by the connection of *man* and machine, and by the "*intrinsic* relationship between masculinity and travel" (Wolff 230) [italics in original]. In the United States, automobiles "offer convenience, comfort, and, above all, power. But in our culture they seem to offer such qualities primarily to men" (Clarke 1). Like a boy and his dog, a man and his car have a near-archetypal resonance in the American psyche. "Popular myth associates cars with masculinity, and automobile advertising continues to link the car to the female body, promising men control over speed and women" (Clarke 1). Women in cars find exhilaration and liberation, yes, but unlike men they may also find danger. "To climb into the driver's seat, for a young boy, has been to get an identity as manly and desirable. To get into an auto, for a young girl, has often been to get into trouble" (Smith 186). Rape, violence, domestic abuse – all take place within the privacy of the American automobile, as Maggie Anderson[3] understands. She captures the dangers and attractions of driving in "Holding the Family Together":

> Near midnight, driving a sliver of backcountry road
> between two steel cities, I remember the article
> I read last week about the awful things that happen
> to women out after dark in cars. . . . (1-4)

Consensual sex in the confines of the backseat can lead to pregnancy or disease. And girls who get into cars are often the kinds of girls who end up with bad reputations. "The shadow the automobile casts is a masculine one" (Clarke 1), and women writing about cars are always moving about within that shadow. "To be American is to have a

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[3] A poetry professor at Kent State University, Anderson was born in New York City but has become best known as a poet of Appalachia.

stake in automobility. But to be an American woman is to be both car and driver, both object and subject of automotive culture" (Clarke 2). Thus, the relationship that contemporary American women poets have with their automobiles is both meaningful and complex. Just as there is no one "feminine voice," there is no emblematic relationship of woman to car which symbolizes a single female experience with automobility. The following discussion will examine a small part of the myriad experiences of women who drive (or ride in) cars.

In "Keys" (Our Lady of Let's All Sing, 2007) by the Maine poet (and practicing attorney) Nancy A. Henry, the very title is a symbol of the freedom the speaker feels when she drives (*cf.* the car keys in the discussion of Sexton's poem above), and while the word "keys" appears nowhere in the poem, its use as the work's title is a signal of the author's use of driving as a means of escape:

> When things got hard
> I used to drive and keep on driving –
> once to North Carolina
> once to Arizona –
> I'm through with all that now, I hope.
> The last time was years ago. (1-6)

Implied in these first lines is the idea that, while the speaker would escape from her life by driving away, she would always return to that life when things had calmed down. She is speaking now from a secure, settled position, although the phrase "I hope" tempers her seeming serenity by showing that her belief in the stability of her life is not altogether certain – and, by extension, that she is keeping those keys close to hand in case she may need them.

Driving, however, was not just a way for the speaker to escape whatever problems were oppressing her. "But oh, how I would drive / and keep on driving!" (7-

8), Henry writes, and here we see how it was not just escape, but also freedom and exhilaration the speaker was looking for when she grabbed her keys and drove away. She was also seeking a way in which she could be in command of her life:

> The universe around me
> all well in my control;
> anything I wanted on the radio,
> the air blasting hot or cold;
> sobbing as loudly as I cared to sob,
> screaming as loudly as I needed to scream. (9-14)

She misses the dominion she was able to exercise over her small kingdom within the car. She held sway over the elements ("the air blasting hot or cold"), even over her emotions, for it is clear that she has power over how long and how loudly she cries and screams. In the insularity of her car, what Robert Bly called "[t]his solitude covered with iron" (45), separated from those who might judge her, she gives vent to her emotions while always keeping them strictly within her own control.

Her last drive, the longest one, is a journey from Maine to Arizona, and it is also a journey from not-quite-frenzy to tranquility:

> By New York state,
> I stopped screaming;
> by Tulsa
> I stopped sobbing;
> by the time I pulled into Flagstaff
> I was thinking
> about the Canyon,
> I was so empty.
> Thinking about the canyon
> I was. (20-29)

Here, the repetition and line structure mimic not only the sound of tires on the road but also the way the speaker's headlong rush West gradually slows, winding down from desperate motion to a calm stillness. She has finally stopped driving, and left her car:

"I sat on the rim at dawn / let all the colors fill me" (30-31), and now it is the sun that is moving, rising over the canyon, while she is a picture of serenity. "It was cold. I saw my breath / like steam from a soup pot" (32-33), Henry writes, and with this introduction of the domestic (through an image of nourishment) signals that the speaker is ready to contemplate returning home. The final image of the poem is the speaker's realization of "how much darkness / could be swept out / by the sun" (36-38), ensuring that the final image of movement is of the sun, while the speaker remains still. We know that she did move again, making the return drive from Arizona to Maine, going back home. But that motion is outside the poem; it is the stillness in the final lines that is important, its contrast with the headlong rush of the speaker's original East to West drive and its implication that she no longer needs to use driving as a means of escape as she once did.

Escape – the possibility, if not the actuality – is a main theme in Dorianne Laux's[4] driving poems. Her "What Could Happen" (from her 1994 collection What We Carry) is a poem about a woman deciding whether or not she will leave the small, dying town in which she lives. It is significant that this woman is making this decision while driving in circles through the town, for the promise and possibility of escape exist in the automobile which she is driving – it is the method by which she would leave if she decided to. This car is not the fleet, flashy chariot of many escape fantasies, however. It is old, "the back end / all jingle and rivet, one headlight // taped in place, the hood held down with greasy rope" (15-17). If, as Deborah Clarke says, "[n]othing announces

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[4] Laux was born in Maine, and her heritage is part European and part Algonquin Indian. After a series of "unconventional" jobs, she moved to Berkeley, California and published her first book of poetry in 1990.

– and defines – one's presence more than an automobile" (1), then Laux's "woman on the edge of forty" (14) has some mileage on her, and tough miles at that.

Whether this woman stays or leaves (and the reader is never told her decision), her car will remain part of who she is and what she does. She could stay and "drive up and down the same street / all day" (19-20), she and her car moving together through the town, or she could leave, drive away and escape. Either way, she will remain in her car. This is not to say that she has become one of Donna Haraway's cyborgs, with the "imprecise" nature of its "boundary between physical and non-physical" (153); no this woman is very much embodied. Laux never lets the reader forget that what this automobile "moves is a body – in particular, a female body" (Clarke 112), and it is a body which exhibits a mature woman's sexuality. In the poem's pivot point, the moment when the woman is caught in the moment of decision, Laux describes how the driver "could pull in at the corner store for a soda" (15) and, before opening it, "roll it under her palm down the length of her neck / then slip it beneath the V of her blouse // and let it rest there, where she's hottest" (31-33), and here she gives us a clear picture of this woman's *bottled*-up sexuality (the place between her breasts which is the "hottest" part of her body), a sexuality which will remain repressed if she stays where she is, aimlessly driving in circles through the noonday heat of a "stale Saturday" in a small town which still retains memories of what it was like "before it began to go under, began / to fade into a likeness of itself" (1, 26-27). If she decides to drive away, however, her escape offers not just the open road, but the possibility of *uncapping* her sexuality the way she would open the bottle of soda. If she so chooses, "she could pass the turn / and keep going, the cold soda / wedged between her legs, the bass notes [of

the music on the radio] / throbbing like a vein" (42-45); here Laux offers the possibility of a return to active female sexuality, with the pop bottle "wedged" in the driver's crotch and the "throbbing" of the music signaling the relief of sexual release. The woman could drive "past the closed shops / and squat houses, the church / with its bland white arch" (45-47), leaving behind the stale repressiveness of the town, its people, and its "bland" religion, and head out "toward the hills, / beyond that shadowy nest of red madrones" (47-48). Out there, past the trees with their red bark and evergreen leaves, is the promise of escape, if she can just manage to drive beyond the grove that marks the edge of town. If she does manage this, she may have the opportunity to bloom the way the madrones do, a way she could not if she stayed where she was.

A different kind of blossoming occurs in Laux's "Singing Back the World" (also from What We Carry). Here, the speaker is a passenger in a car full of women who are singing as they travel. They are singing with abandon, "[o]ff key. / Not even a semblance of harmony" (10-11). Even though they are "[d]riving home in a blue Comet" (12), they are in essence escaping all that is wrong with home by singing; they are "[n]othing but three throats / beating back the world" (35-36). Through their singing, they are

> . . .Forgetting
> the rent, the kids, the men,
> the other woman. The sad goodbye.
> The whole of childhood. Forgetting
> the lost dog. Polio. The grey planes
> pregnant with bombs. Fields
> of white headstones. All of it gone
> as we struggle to remember
> the words. . . . (23-31)

They blossom as they sing, these women who are "straining" their "middle aged voices / trying to reach impossible notes" (18-19); they are young again, healthy again, forgetting "Laurie's / radiation treatments" and the "scars / on Christina's arms" (36-37).

Singing alone could not accomplish this act of forgetting, however; it must be combined with the movement of the automobile in which they ride in order to free the women, however briefly, from all that waits for them at home. Within the "small world of the car" (Bly), in the company of others with whom they feel safe, these women are – for the time it takes to drive home – safe from what waits for them when they leave the automobile and enter their houses. The poem reaches its crescendo, not with the music that leads to these women "[f]orgetting our bodies / their pitiful limbs, their heaviness" (33-34), but with the swift whoosh of the car as it brings them along for the ride:

> Singing to the telephone poles
> skimming by. Stoplights
> blooming green. The road,
> a glassy black river edged
> with brilliant gilded weeds. The car
> an immense boat cutting the air
> into blue angelic plumes. (40-46)

Their momentary escape is effected by a combination of motion and music, by the exhilaration of hurtling down the road while singing with unselfconscious joy.

Not all rides are joyful, of course, and there are times when the escape one seeks cannot be found. In "Even Music" (from her 2000 collection Smoke), Laux again writes about a woman, a car and songs but, unlike "Singing Back the World," this poem presents music and motion as expressions of grief, not of release. The poem begins with a command, "Drive toward the Juan de Fuca Strait. / Listen to 'Moondog

Matinee'" (1-2), but the speaker understands that no music, not even this album by The Band, can express the grief she is feeling: "No song ever written gets close to it; // how it feels to go on after the body / you love has been put into the ground / for eternity" (3-6). The speaker can move, can drive, can listen to music but her dead lover lies still, unable to stir, caught there beneath the ground forever.

Nothing in the world through which the speaker drives offers any comfort. "Cross bridge after bridge," the speaker commands, "through ten kinds of rain" (6-7), and there is no hope here, just a downpour that is as unrelenting as a mourner's tears. Go "past / abandoned fireworks booths, / their closed flaps streaked with soot" (7-9) and see how something that offers beauty and joy during its rightful season will, when its time has passed, leave nothing behind but soot, like the ashes remaining in a crematorium. Not even religion offers any hope:

> Gash on the flank of a red barn:
> *Jesus Loves You. 5 $ a Fish.*
> He's dead. Where's your miracle? (10-12)

Christ, able to feed multitudes with a handful of loaves and fishes, able to raise the dead Lazarus, cannot help her in this world. Her love is dead, and will not return.

Changing the music she is listening to, just like driving through a changing landscape, does no good, either. What provided such consolation in "Singing Back the World" – the voices of women singing – does no such thing here:

> Load a tape into the deck so a woman
>
> can wear out a love song. Keep moving,
> keep listening to the awful noise
>
> the living make.
> Even the saxophone, its blind,
> unearthly moan. (13-18)

The poem ends in lamentation, in the “awful noise” of the woman singing her love song, and in the sorrowful moan of the saxophone, echoing the speaker’s grief, a grief assuaged by neither motion nor music.

Music, driving and grief come together in Laux’s “Abschied Symphony” as well. With its opening line – “Someone I love is dying” – this poem (also from Smoke) announces that, more than just a “farewell” (Abschied), this work is about loss and grief. The speaker turns on her car in an underground parking lot and “the radio comes on, sudden and loud, / something by Haydn” (3-4). She drives toward the exit, “maneuvering through / dimly lit tunnels, under low ceilings” (7-8) and she associates this motion with the journey the dying man is taking: “I think of him, / moving slowly through the last / hard days of his life” (9-10). The music merges with the speaker’s passage through the garage, and both merge with the journey (or, in musical terms, movement) of her lover towards death, and this is why, she explains, she leaves the music on and why “I can’t stop crying” (12). She pays her toll to the attendant, a poor substitute for Charon in “his blue smock” (16), and suddenly she is driving “into the blinding midday light” (19).

Here is where her drive, which has paralleled her lover’s death journey to this point, diverges from his story and becomes a narrative about her own navigation of grief – both the heartache she is experiencing now and the anguish she knows will come

when her lover finally dies. “Everything is hideously symbolic” (20), she explains, from an oil truck to a dumpster with its “sprung lid / pressed down on dead wedding bouquets” (24-25). She is overwhelmed with the things of this world, so much so that her “eyes glaze over, ache in their sockets” (28). She is driving home from the hospital (one assumes), grieving in the privacy of the front seat of her car, paying close attention to everything around her as she navigates the streets, but it is all too much for her:

> For months now all I’ve wanted is the blessing
> of inattention, to move carefully from room to room
> in my small house, numb with forgetfulness. (29-31)

She does not want to be making this drive. She does not want to think about the tumors that are destroying the body she once made love with. An Abschied Symphony should not be sweeping and loud like the Haydn she is listening to. “Death is not romantic. He is dying. That fact / is stark and one-dimensional, a black note / on an empty staff” (44-46). A true Abschied is one note, one long and mournful note, echoing like the saxophone’s “unearthly moan” in “Even Music” and giving no comfort to the living. And, like the speaker in “Even Music,” the woman in “Abschied Symphony” finds no comfort in her car’s “small world.” She is overwhelmed by the music, by the motion, by her memories and grief:

> . . .I hate this music
> that floods the cramped insides
> of my car, my head, slowing the world down
> with its lurid majesty, transforming
> everything I see into stained memorials
> to life. . . (47-52)

These “stained memorials” offer no comfort, no hope, for each becomes, in its own way, an emblem of death. An “old Ford” still running even though “its battered rear end” is “thinned to scallops of rust” (52-32) is a parody of motion as life, for it is

"pumping grim shrouds of exhaust / into the shimmering air" (54-55); the shrouds signal death and decay, turning the anticipation of a metaphor for the tenacity of life (an old car, battered yet still moving) into the realization that the Ford is a symbol of mortality. "[E]ven the tenacious / nasturtiums" which, because they generally symbolize conquest or victory, might be expected here to represent triumph over death, become "stained memorials" as well. While "clinging to a fence" the nasturtiums, "stem and bloom / of the insignificant," have "music spooling from their open faces" (56-58), "spilling upward, past / the last rim of blue and into the black pool / of another galaxy" (58-60). This image of flowers with their faces turned heavenward, another symbol of hope, is undercut by Laux in the poem's final lines:

> . . . As if all that emptiness
> were a place of benevolence, a destination,
> a peace we could rise to. (60-62)

As in "Even Music," not even religion can offer any comfort. The hope of heaven, that "place of benevolence," that "destination" toward which a person of faith might hope her loved one will rise, is nothing more than the "emptiness" of a galaxy beyond our own, a "black pool" toward which the flowers' music moves, but where that motion ends in the music being swallowed up by the nothingness of space. For the speaker of "Abschied Symphony," neither motion nor music offers any hope at all.

Of course, not all hopeless drives begin that way. Sometimes, hope is thwarted, taken away by time or circumstance. In Anne Sexton's "Flight," from her 1962 collection All My Pretty Ones, the speaker is driving toward Boston's Logan Airport in the hopes of taking a plane to her lover. The impression is that this is a whim, a last-minute decision: "Thinking that I would find you, / thinking that I would make the

plane / that goes hourly out of Boston / I drove into the city" (1-4). She has no reservations, no luggage, just her coat and gloves as she drives along the river toward the airport. This drive is represented rhythmically in the first two stanzas through repetition of "I drove into the city" three times in 17 lines. Thus, we have, "I drove into the city. . . .I drove into the city. . . . as I drove through the mist into the city" (4, 10, 20). These repeated lines give us both the sound of the car's tires on the road, and the way the speaker feels as she rushes happily toward the airport and what she believes will be a flight to her lover. This flight can do nothing but set her world right, for the night holds out a promise that all will be well. Or, at least, the speaker believes it does so:

> Thinking that on such a night
> every thirsty man would have his jug
> and that the Negro women would lie down
> on pale sheets and even the river into town
> would stretch out naturally on its couch,
> I drive into the city. (5-10)

Notice that this image of how all with be well, all will be at peace, is prefaced by the speaker *thinking* that it will be so. These images are not of things as they are, but as she imagines they should be.

Her imagining is fueled by the exhilaration of her drive. "Foot on the gas," she says, "I sang aloud to the front seat" (14-15), linking (as does Laux) the joy of driving (with its combination of forward motion and implied speed) and music – in this case, the driver's singing. She does not sing just to her front seat, however. She sings "to the clumps of women in cotton dresses, / to the patches of fog crusting the banks, / and to the sailboats swinging on their expensive hooks" (16-18), and here Sexton gives us a foreshadowing of how the poem will end, for everything to which the speaker sings

(except the interior of her own car) is at a standstill. Women in clumps are not moving anywhere. The fog isn't billowing or wafting, it is "crusting" the banks the way barnacles crust a boat's keel. And the sailboats, those representations of freedom and joyous motion, are not out on the water but are, instead, swinging in place on their moorings. The driving woman is the only thing moving in this landscape as she maneuvers "through the mist into the city" (20). Until this point in the poem, despite the foreshadowing, the speaker is still hopeful and looking forward to her tryst. "I was full of letters I hadn't sent you" (21), she explains, giving us an image of a woman about to burst from all the things that have remained unsaid between herself and the man she is rushing to meet. She is driving with "a red coat over my shoulders / and new white gloves in my lap" (22-23), contrasting these bright colors with the muted "rose and violet on the river" (19) outside her car windows. The image of the woman behind the wheel is vibrant, alive, nearly thrumming with anticipation.

Then she reaches Boston. "I dropped through the city / as the river does, / rumbling over and under, as indicated" (24-26), and with that word "dropped" Sexton helps the reader feel the roller-coaster aspect of the drive, how the "over and under" build the driver's anticipation as the nears the Sumner Tunnel, which will take her to the airport. As she drives through that tunnel, "trunk by trunk through its sulphurous walls, / tile by tile like a men's urinal" (30-31), she feels that she is "slipping through / like somebody else's package" (32-33). This is her last hurdle, and as visually unpleasant as it is, it also helps lend excitement and intrigue to her drive, as if she has somehow fooled the tunnel into letting her pass by making it think she is someone other than herself, "somebody else's package."

Once she passes through the tunnel, her drive abruptly ends, but her forward motion continues:

> Parked, at last,
> on a dime that would never last,
> I ran through the airport.
> Wild for love, I ran through the airport,
> stockings and skirts and dollars. (34-38)

Here the speaker is moving in a giddy, headlong rush that matches her drive through Boston (note the repeated "I ran through the airport"), nothing more than flashing legs and flying skirts and money clutched in her hand in anticipation of purchasing her ticket, but suddenly she is met with the indifference of a clerk who "yawned all night at the public, / his mind on tomorrow's wages" (39-40). Her forward motion stops with a thud: "All flights were grounded" (41). Nothing that flies, either man-made or natural, is moving. "The planes sat and the gulls, sat, / heavy and rigid in a pool of glue" (42-43); all flight is at a standstill because of the weather.

Hope thwarted, there is nothing for the speaker to do but drive back the way she came: "Knowing I would never find you / I drove out of the city" (44-45). Where at the beginning of the poem Sexton gave us the figure of an airport which "would sputter with planes / like ticker-tape" (12-13), a place full of motion and possibility, now the airport becomes an image of immobility, a place where "one thousand cripples / sat nursing a sore foot" (46-47). "There was more fog / and the rain came down when it thought of it" (48-49), Sexton writes, showing the reader that, like the night clerk, nature itself is indifferent to the speaker's disappointment and stalled forward motion. The grounding of the planes comes about because of action that is an afterthought; there is no malevolence to the weather, just unconcern bordering on coldness. In the poem's

final image, that indifference and unconcern is mirrored by the city of Boston itself, where "along Storrow Drive the streetlights / sucked in all the insects who / had nowhere else to go" (53-54). Like the insects, the speaker of Sexton's poem finds her own "Flight" interrupted when she is drawn back home because she – like they – has "nowhere else to go."

While "nowhere else to go" signals defeat in Sexton's "Flight," having nowhere to go at all can give the woman who drives unprecedented freedom. She is unbound, able to travel without any destination in mind, to break free from ties of home and family – not necessarily in anger, as in Henry's "Keys," or battling the desperation and grief found in the Laux poems discussed above, but perhaps merely from the desire for the exhilaration and momentary escape being in command of a car on the road will give her. In these driving poems, the woman behind the wheel does not want to leave her life completely. She is, rather, looking for a momentary escape, a mode of motion over which she has complete control and which will, eventually, return her to her domestic life. These escapes are round trips, not complete breaks from home and family. This is a woman who drives away only to return, but in her case the fact of her return was never in question. She could be experimental "Outrider" poet Anne Waldman's "She's-Driving-A-Car-On-A-Saturday" (Waldman 15), who is "moving down the incline" (17) with the other trucks and cars on the highway, and while she may be "smaller than the rest of the dinosaurs" (18), she is reveling in the freedom of moving across the sun-drenched landscape. She may be a small dinosaur, but she still wields the power of her automobile, "its calm and possible violence, euphoria and grief, closeness and distance, routine and adventure" (Boruch 523). Even if the woman who drives started out with

an objective in mind, the freedom and power offered to her by the car give her the ability to change her mind. "Not confined by schedules, tracks, and prepackaged destinations, the traveler, with hands on the wheel, can change the course, speed, and rhythm of encounter and perspective" (Smith 170).

In "Every Spring on Certain Nights" (How to Make a Terrarium, 1987) Colorado poet Veronica Patterson gives a picture of just such a woman who escapes with every intention of returning home when she has had her fill of driving:

> every spring on certain nights
> when the moon shone persistently
> on her ritual lifting of spirits
> my mother took to the road
> wheels on gravel. . . (1-5)

Here Patterson captures the mother's exhilaration, the way her mood lifts with the coming of the spring moon, and how that exhilaration translates into a need to move, to drive the night roads. Patterson conveys both the mother's elation and the headlong rush of her drive by using no periods and by capitalizing only the word "I." Just as the mother "careened down twisting roads" (13), the poem careens down the page, pulling the reader along in the rush and rumble of those "wheels on gravel." Traditionally, when leaving for these night drives, the mother left her husband and daughter behind, where they "watched each other with orphan eyes / asking nothing" (8-9). They do not dare voice their worry, implied in the phrase "orphan eyes," that the woman who drove away will not return this time, will leave them alone and orphaned.

One spring, however, the mother takes her daughter along for the ride, and at first the girl is frightened by how her mother "drove mid-road, watched for nothing" (11). This is startling to both the daughter and the reader, that a women with her child

in the car would drive recklessly and not look out for "the shocking statues of deer" or the "wolfing farm dogs" (12) which pose a danger if they dart in front of the car. The clue to the mother's behavior is found in those very dogs, symbols of the domestic gone wild for at least one night. Just like the dogs, the mother no longer heeds her training; just like the dogs, she has allowed the feral side of her nature to take over. She is not like the deer, standing stock-still, made prey by their very nature which, while not domesticated, is calm and placid. She is the wolfing dog, running through the night, reveling in the moonlight and the freedom of motion.

As the drive continues, the daughter finds herself caught up in her mother's exhilaration, in the joy of driving through the night without destination, without a pre-planned route:

> somewhere I jettisoned my fear
> of police, being lost,
> accident, death, her,
> released the door handle, swayed
> to each curve. . . (15-19)

This domesticated daughter has been released from all of civilization's fears (of authority, of being out of place, of being injured or killed, of the woman who is out of control) and gives in to her mother's "ritual lifting of spirits." She does so both spiritually and bodily, getting rid of her fears and allowing her body to become one with the motion of the car. Unlike the speaker of Hacker's "The Hang-Glider's Daughter," who is lulled to sleep while riding in her father's car, this daughter gives herself over to the ecstasy of the automobile's speed and power – speed and power which are under the control of female hands. Everything they pass, domesticated or wild, nourishes the mother and daughter, feeds into the headlong rush of their drive. They were

> . . . riding night, sucking life
> from the quiet breathing of cows, unlit farm houses
> rustling ditch weeds
> and the rocking road and the wind of us. (22-25)

All drives must end, however, and this one does so abruptly when "the dark, sure figure" (26) of the mother leaves that "rocking road" and turns "between the still wagonwheels of the driveway" (27). Just as the wilding dogs were symbols of the domestic gone wild, these wagonwheels, dislocated from their vehicles and buried in the ground, are symbols of the wild which has been domesticated. Once representing the pioneer spirit of families pushing Westward across America, these wheels are now caught in stasis, nothing more than decoration for a family home. As she passes between these wheels, the mother has symbolically come home, agreeing once again to don the mantle of domesticity and motherhood. She leaves a legacy for her daughter, however, a legacy the girl carries into adulthood:

> now each high-mooned spring night
> I stand at the window and see my face
> with the moon through it. . . (28-30)

Unlike her mother, the speaker does not take to the night roads, does not drive "down whispering ditches" (32), but that does not mean she has forgotten her mother's exhilaration on those "certain nights." "I have my own ways of leaving / and returning, my own orbit" (33-34), she says, and we see that she has continued her mother's tradition of making a solitary round trip in celebration of life and freedom each spring.

There are, of course, nearly as many ways of experiencing driving as there are women writing about it. Just as there is no single feminine poetic voice, there is no one voice for women writing about automobility. Driving women – and the women who write about driving – are "employing the multiple possibilities of the automobile" and,

in the process, are "[giving] new meaning to the notion of 'woman's place'" (Scharff 164). If, as Sidonie Smith writes, "identities in America are car-born and car-generated" (186), then American women who write poetry about cars and driving are exploring those automotive identities, and the freedom they embody, in myriad remarkable ways.

Freedom, then – the ability to move, to make choices, to go or stay as one desires – does indeed lie at the heart of the metaphors of motion women use in their poetry. Whether imaginary or mechanical, the movement of women in contemporary American women's poetry represents freedom in one form or another. This may be freedom wished for, or experienced briefly, or as an expression of grief or fear or sadness. Whatever form it takes, the freedom to move without constraints, to determine one's own path in life, is the cornerstone of poetry written using the metaphors of motion.

Where the possibility of moving exists, however, there can also be found the possibility of motionlessness, stillness, even stasis. In the next chapter, I discuss some of the aspects of *staying still* that are found in contemporary American women's poetry.

Chapter Four: Motionlessness/Grief/Immobility

The freedom American women poets seek through movement is not always attainable; not all motion is successful, not all journeys begun can be completed. There are myriad ways in which movement can be halted, and myriad ways women react to being constrained.

The Appalachian women in Kathryn Stripling Byer's[1] work are constrained in numerous ways: by geography, by lack of education, by abuse, by poverty. Each seeks to find her own way through the world, and while at times this means a woman must leave the mountains, more often than not it means she must stay and learn to live with her circumstances. There is an old-fashioned quality to life in Byer's mountains; perhaps timelessness is a better description, for this is a world of wash basins, shawls, gingham skirts and fiddle music. These are old-fashioned lives, and old-fashioned stories played out in the Appalachia of today. "The late John Gardner once said that there are only two plots in all of literature: you go on a journey or the stranger comes to town. Since women have for so many years been denied the journey, we were left with only one plot to our lives – to await the coming of the stranger to town. Women's literature from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf is mostly a literature about waiting, and usually waiting for love" (Morris 25). Many of the women in Byer's poetry are waiting for love, or living with the results of having thought they found it. The poems discussed here are all from Byer's 1998 collection, Black Shawl.

In "Snow Breath" the repeated refrain of "Snow on the mountains" symbolizes the bleak coldness of the speaker's world. Wrapped in her shawl, she stands and listens,

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[1] Byer grew up in Georgia and is Western Carolina University's poet-in-residence. She is a poet of Appalachia, and her 1992 collection Wildwood Flower was that year's Lamont Poetry Selection (awarded by The Academy of American Poets).

wondering "Where did the wind go?" (2). All is white, frozen silence except for the "holly-pip red as a blood blister" (5) with its "thorns reaching out to me" (6). Note that it is not the bright berry that beckons, but the sharp thorns which would pierce the speaker's flesh should she reach out and touch them; the thing that appeals is also the thing that can harm. There is an appeal to the cold wildness the speaker sees laid out before her as well. "Don't beg me to come back inside / lest I catch my death" (8-9), she says, and there are two ways to read that line. The first is that she is asking her man to leave her alone for a while, to allow her to stand and gaze in silence at the snowy mountains; the second, that she is warning him that she is very close to leaving, and any command from him may push her from him and away from their mountain home. That she is thinking of leaving is clear in the next stanza, where she describes the river as "a hard road to travel" (11); the implication is that she *could* travel it, following its turns until she reached somewhere else, somewhere other than the snowy mountains. Wherever that somewhere is, it will be warm. "Gone south, I will say when you shout / from the riverbank" (14-15), the speaker says, and it is her man's fault that she is drawn south, for "Against my ear you held a conch shell once, / asking *What do you hear?*" (17-18); whatever it was that she heard stayed with her, calling her down off her mountain towards milder climes.

In the end, the speaker decides to stay on the mountain:

> So much snow on the mountains,
> I hitched up my dress and ran home.
> How could I tell you then,
>
> hearing snow on the mountains
> refuse to melt, that after so long,
> a woman's soul searching

through snow on the mountains
will sink, out of breath, in the silence
of nothing more, nothing less.
(19-27)

For the first six stanzas of the poem, the lines are curt and declarative Each tercet begins with the line "Snow on the mountains" and contains one complete thought. Once the speaker decides to return, however, the stanzas lead one into the next, mimicking the speaker's headlong rush toward home. That this home is not a sanctuary is made clear by her asking "How could I tell you" – the man waiting for her to return cannot begin to understand how, "after so long" on the mountain, the speaker's life has begun to disappear into the obdurate, non-melting snow; how it is not just her body but her soul, the essence of who she is, the repository of her hopes and dreams, that "will sink" not just in the snow, but "in the silence" of the snow-covered landscape, "the silence / of nothing more, nothing less." We have learned much about the poem's speaker, but know nothing of the man in "Snow Breath," nothing of why the speaker decides at the end not to follow the frozen river south. Byer gives us only the woman's thoughts and the bleak mountain terrain, nothing of the home to which she runs or the man who waits for her there. In other poems, however, Byer makes explicit the ways in which women are held motionless upon the Appalachian mountainside by the men in their lives.

One of these poems is "Storm," which tells the story of a woman trapped by abuse. The poem opens with a picture of domesticity:

At the loom she sat braiding
her sister's hair. Hitching it tight
with a warping string. "There,

she said, "There!". . . (1-4)

There is a rough affection in the way she pulls the braid tightly and repeats the word "There." Note that she does not tie off the braid with ribbon or ordinary twine, but uses instead a "warping string" from the loom, binding her sister's hair with a symbol of domesticity. This domestic scene is not a happy one, however, for the woman herself is as tightly bound as her sister's hair, captive within her mountain home. After finishing the braid, she

> . . . turned back
> to her silent walk. Kitchen to bedroom to washbasin,
> grinding her fist into palm
>
> like a spade against rock. (4-7)

The woman paces like a caged animal, walking a circumscribed route within the small house, trying to manage her pent-up frustration though tightly-controlled motion. Suddenly, she is "startled out of her pantomime" (11) by a strong wind and growing thunderclouds, which are described as being

> black as the bruises he'd left on her arms
> when he found her too far down the footpath
>
> and drove her back home wiping blood
> from her mouth with the hem
> of her calicoes. . . . (14-18)

and here, in the center of the poem, we find the reason for the woman's captivity. Physically punished when she strayed "too far," she is now trapped on the mountainside.

Her fear of punishment does not mean she still does not yearn for freedom. As the storm rages outside, she stands with her "hand at the dead bolt" (20), "afraid if she opened / the door, she'd have no other choice but to go / where the wind took her" (22-

24). As the lightning strikes and the wind howls, the woman is tempted by the wild motion of the raging storm. Despite its dangers, the storm could be no worse than what she endures at home, for

> . . .lightning snaked down
> like the whip he made dance
> round her running feet when he got drunk. (25-27)

Indeed, in the final lines of the poem, the storm's destructive lighting has merged with her abuser's whip: "she wanted to scream / at him, 'Go ahead, / strike me. I dare you!'" (29-30). One can be struck with a whip; one can also be struck by lightening. Her home life has become conflated with the storm: the abuse she suffers is akin to the lighting bolts striking the mountain, while the rage and helplessness she feels are like the furious wind "sweeping fast down the ridge" (8). And just as that wind "made the house tremble" (9), so would her voice if she were ever able to release the scream pent up inside of her.

"Storm" is one poem in a cycle at the center of the collection Black Shawl, and while that poem never makes clear whether the abuser is the woman's husband, lover or father, the remainder of the cycle implies that he is her father, and that she lives with him and her sisters on the mountainside. The cycle, titled "Blood Mountain," tells the story of a woman who is described in the first poem "Bone" as being "[b]lood-tied / the whole length of Beggarman's Trace. Was there nobody she was not kin to?" (1-2). This kinship is neither boon nor comfort; it is warped by cruelty and incestuous sexual assault. "She dared not walk out of a night by herself" (4), and the daytime was no better, for "she stayed close to the house / or else scuttled through low-lying snags / like

a creature her cousins' dogs hunted" (5-8). In fact, she is hunted, not by her cousins' dogs, but by her cousins themselves (and, by implication, other male relatives):

> She learned how to fight her way
>
> free when she could. When she could
> not, to play dead. To let them make always
> the same boast: *That little gal's not going anywhere*. (8-11)

Literally pinned beneath the bodies of her kinsmen, the woman takes motionlessness to its extreme, playing dead so as not to give her rapists the pleasure of her struggle. These rapists know that she truly is "not going anywhere," for there is nowhere upon the mountain where she can go. "What good to run away into some dark night // where every lamp signified kinsmen?" (12-13) is the question, and the answer is that it will do no good at all. She is as trapped within the ties of kin as she is beneath her cousins' bodies, and her hopelessness is brought home by the poem's final lines, for the lamps signify not only kinsmen but also

> . . .kinswomen who would not look up, not once,
> from the snarls in their warp chains, or carding wool
> bunched in their laps, to say anything. (14-16)

As in "Storm," the small symbols of distaff domesticity – in this case a loom's warp chains and wool being carded – represent not only "woman's work" but also the ties that bind these women to their mountain homes, for these things are snarled and bunched up, tangled together to represent the way in which all the kinswomen are entangled in their Appalachian blood ties. These women are, by implication, as abused and abased as the woman at the center of the poem, and just as their domestic work has become unnaturally tangled, so too have their sense of compassion and their natural inclination to help someone in need. This woman was trapped in Beggarman's Trace

long before her father dragged her back home after finding her "too far down the footpath"; she was trapped by poverty, ignorance and abuse, and the first two poems of the cycle bring her despair to a crescendo matched by the howling wind of the storm outside her cabin.

The cycle then shifts abruptly from the stifled scream of "Go ahead, strike me. I dare you!" that ends the second poem to a lyrical, sensual love poem that begins with the word "Gently." In this poem, "Phacelia," it is clear that the hunted, haunted woman of "Storm" has found a lover; her long-awaited stranger has finally ridden into town. "Gently" refers to how she "scrubs / stains left from // where they lay down / in the grass" (2-5), and we know immediately that she has made love with this man, not suffered rape and abuse at his hands. The long lines and harsh language of "Bone" and "Storm" have here given way to shorter lines and a lyricism befitting a love poem. As the woman washes the grass stains from her clothes,

> . . .She remembers
> her fingers plunged deep
>
> into crushed green, the odor
> of light rain, the moldering
> leaves going up in a fever
>
> of white flowers. . . (5-10)

flowers which come from the Phacelia (or fiddleneck) of the poem's title. Here, she is not pinned, motionless and helpless, playing dead in the hopes that the act will soon be over. She is alive, "babbling" with

> her mouth
>
> like a dovecote of syllables
>
> forced open so she can
> taste every sweet
> nothing melting away
> into silence. . . (14-19)

Being "forced open" here is not like it is in "Bone." Pleasure and passion have opened her mouth, and rather than lying still and silent the woman finds herself spilling over with words until even those melt away. When the act is done, "she lay / beneath him like trampled / earth already trying // to cover itself with a veil" (19-22), but this is not the abused and injured woman pinned beneath her captors; this woman is sated with pleasure, "like" the trampled earth but not trampled herself. The poem ends with a description of the earth's veil of Phacelia becoming a veil which is

> of such snowy white
> as what a bride calls (oh
>
> why can't she hear
> what she says?) *Sheer*
> *Illusion*. (23-27)

Thus the white flowers of the fiddleneck plant become the woman's bridal veil, the whitest and sheerest veil which is called "Sheer Illusion." In the name "Sheer Illusion," however (and in the woman's inability to "hear / what she says"), is the hint that perhaps this love story will not end well, that the woman's happiness with her lover is her own personal illusion, and that their interlude will prove brief.

In "Sisters," the fourth poem of the cycle, we find that the illusion (if that is what it is) continues. We learn that

> The last thing she did
>
> before she disappeared was cut
> warp threads and leave them
> to gather the handful
>
> of blue yarn scraps
> next morning. Then she was
> over and done with. (1-7)

The woman no longer waits motionless for a stranger to arrive; she has taken on the role of the person who moves, the one who goes on a journey. It is telling that she cuts the warp threads, the symbol of her kinswomen's constraints, before she disappears. And disappear she does, leaving

> Not even a note
>
> though they looked on the floor.
> In the grass. Called her name
> down the trace. . . . (8-11)

The woman has, however, left the equivalent of a note for her sisters by cutting the warp threads on her loom, severing those incestuous ties that bound her to Beggarman's Trace, and by leaving open the house's back door, an invitation to her younger sisters not only to follow her example but, literally, to follow her out the door, down the trace, and away from the mountain's poverty, violence and abuse. These sisters cannot really understand why she left, for

> . . .They were too young
> to doubt she has been stolen
> away into that gypsy
>
> ballad she must have been
> singing, her last
> weaving flung like a lie
> round her shoulders. (14-20)

Here is a suggestion of "Sheer Illusion" once again, for the young girls left behind imagine their sister caught up a "gypsy ballad," swept up into the romance of a lovers' escape (*cf.* the discussion of Ana Castillo's "The Wild Woman" in Chapter One), able to break free of their abusive home. By turning this escape into a romantic ballad, however, the sisters fail to recognize the courage and strength it took for the woman to leave home, and the danger she faced in doing so. She left nearly empty-handed, taking with her only "some two-day-old cornbread" (12) and her last piece of woman's work, a shawl that she wears "like a lie." There are at least two ways to read this lie, the poem's last illusion (but by no means the cycle's last). One is that her sisters imagine that the woman took the shawl as a remembrance, a token of her Appalachian home, something to help her remember those she left behind, while in reality she wore it because it was all she had to keep her warm and that the last thing she wants is a memento from the mountain. The other is that, even as she worked on this "last weaving," this task of distaff domesticity, the woman was planning her escape, thus turning the entire act of weaving (and its end result) into the physical manifestation of the lie she was enacting by pretending to be as tied to her loom as all her kinswomen are to theirs. She is not, or at least is no longer, the type of woman who lives on the mountain and wears a shawl she wove herself. By leaving with that shawl she shows that her cousins' belief that "*That little gal's not going anywhere*" has been a lie all along.

The illusion of the ballad continues in the cycle's next poem, "Gypsy," which depicts the (imagined?) moment of escape. The lover's "stallion tears / clean through the limp fog that lays / itself down along Beggarman's Trace" (2-4), but this is not a sweepingly romantic moment in a love story, for the lover pulls up his horse "at the

Jump-Off / to guzzle more whiskey" (5-6), and here the reader realizes that this "gypsy" lover is more like the woman's drunken, abusive father than any romantic hero who will sweep her away to some happily ever after. When he turns in the saddle to face her, "his breath / in her face smells like death // or close to it" (7-9), the "close to it" being the poverty-stricken existence full of emotional and physical violence that she has ostensibly escaped. Once again, as in "Bones," lamps signify the houses of kinfolk,

> . . .where she should know women
> are already telling how she's become nothing
> but wind they hear mouthing
>
> temptation: *Let Go*. . . . (10-13)

She is now an outcast – more than that, in her escape, her purposeful movement away from the mountain and her people, she has become the personification of temptation, of the devil who whispers in women's ears and makes them discontent with their domestic motionlessness. The women have disowned her: "Now she's / no longer neighbor, they'll let her be / damned to a shallow grave" (13-15). Worse, her kinswomen want an even more violent end to her escape. The poem concludes with the image of these women who

> . . .try
> to listen as far as they can for the cry
>
> of the bobcat their men will be out
> tracking all night. They want it brought
> down by its throat or else, goodness knows,
> what's running wild might come too close. (15-20)

Byer has brought us back to the hunted, violated young woman of "Bone" who was chased through the wooded mountainside by her kinsmen. Here, that woman has become a bobcat, a wild animal these women want "their men" (and notice how, with

that possessive, Byer shows the women's willing link with the men's violence against the runaway) to kill, and kill brutally. They are afraid of a woman "running wild," afraid not just that she "might come too close," but that in coming close she might whisper temptation in their ears, temptation they might not be able to resist. In running away, in choosing motion over motionlessness, the woman has severed all ties with her kinswomen who remain tied to their looms and wool cards.

In the cycle's penultimate poem, "Ash," the preceding escape narrative is thrown into question, reinforcing the "Sheer Illusion" of a romantic gypsy stranger who sweeps up a young, abused woman and rescues her from a motionless life of abuse and poverty. From the poem's opening lines, the woman's escape becomes more fairy tale than real:

> Maple leaves pool
> in a gully
> where could be she
>
> slept. . . . (1-4)

Two little words, "could be," turn the gypsy ballad into something else, something lacking the hope of escape and redemption offered by the (illusion?) of the two lovers fleeing on horseback. Here, we discover that this is not the first time the woman's kinsmen have scoured the mountain looking for her. "How long did they search / for her this time" (10-11), Byer asks, and with "this time," the wild romance is gone and we are left with the image of a young woman desperately trying to break free in any way she can. This image is reinforced by the description of her kinsmen throwing

> . . . ropes
> over ledges to thorny
> beds, dragging the deep
> river bottoms. . . . (13-16)

Suddenly another, much more horrible means of escape is presented, not the gypsy ballad imagined by the woman's young sisters, but suicide, a final, desperate movement toward ultimate stillness and escape. She is "hunted downwind" by her kinfolk, "by the balladeers / hot on the scent // of a good story" (19-21) but not the story told in romantic ballads and lyric poetry. No, this is a story "everyone knows / ends with blood" (23-24), with the wild bobcat of "Gypsy" lying motionless upon the ground with her slender throat torn open. Whether she is brought down by her pursuers or her lover, or her wild flight is ended by her own hand, the young woman remains, in the end, blood-tied to her Appalachian home. Or does she? "Ash" ends on an ambiguous note, leaving more questions than answers:

> And if anyone asks
> who she really was,
> let's say a woman
>
> who made her escape
> from this mountain come dawn.
> Or else didn't. (25-30)

"Ash" ends with the reader imagining two possibilities: either the woman was able to leave the mountain (either alone or with her lover), or she is dead, with her body lying on a ledge or floating at the bottom of the river. The next, and final, poem in the series, however, offers a third possibility. In answer to "Or else didn't" at the end of "Ash," this poem's title declares, "Let's Say" and then continues with "she didn't" as its first line. For a moment, death remains the only other possibility, but then Byer presents a third:

Let's say he left her behind

not at all dead
but calmly addressing a wrenched ankle,
muttering what she remembered of some silly
granny-chant: *Hucklebone, hucklebone*. (2-6)

Neither fled nor dead, merely "left behind" when she could no longer keep up, the woman who wore her shawl "like a lie" reverts to her Appalachian upbringing, trying to heal her ankle with a "silly," superstitious incantation. Her purposeful motion down the mountain is halted; she is brought up short and returns to her life of motionlessness. From the moment she returns this life is, as predicted in "Bone," full of blood, menstrual blood being the most predominant:

Let's say she hobbled back home
and proceeded to live out her days
either waiting for blood
or else scrubbing its tracks
from her bedsheets and shifts,
not to mention the manifold bandages
torn from old petticoats.
Soaked every month in a boiling pot,
they bubbled thinner and thinner
till nothing was left
but her blood in the water
she stirred to a rising tide. (7-18)

As illustrated in this longer excerpt, "Let's Say," unlike the other poems in the cycle, is not divided into stanzas. It is one long, continuous tale, starting not with the poem's first line but with its title, and running an entire page in length. As such, it leaves the reader with the impression that it is more narrative than poem, more truth than artistic speculation and therefore the "real" story of what happened to the woman who tried to escape the mountain. Rather than effecting that escape, the woman comes back to her blood-ties, and goes on to perpetuate them herself:

> Nights she could hear it,
> the same as had washed from her body at childbirth
> and now welled and oozed from the cut thumbs
> and first-cloven lips of her children. (19-22)

She is awash in blood, not just hers and her children's but also that which

> . . .puddled
> the floor when she gutted wild game
> on her chopping block, what brimmed
> her hands when she raided the hanging pig's
> ripped belly, what dripped
> and dripped from the pig's snout. . . . (23-28)

Here the woman's blood (from menstruation and childbirth) becomes the blood from the "ripped belly" of the pig, while the blood from her children's thumbs and lips becomes the blood that comes from the pig's snout. Like the pig, the woman and her children are no more than animals, chattel to be used (and, perhaps, slaughtered) at the whim of the male head of the household. Blood is blood, and "[t]he pails / she could fill with it!" (28-29); blood marks everything on the mountainside, and the poem ends with seeming buckets of it:

> Old blood and first
> blood and bad blood and cold blood and blue
> blood and blood in her mouth
> from a bit tongue
> whenever she heard round
> the quilt circle tales of another girl
> gone down the mountain in the dead
> of night, leaving
> no more than a fiction
> of snapped twigs to follow. (30-39)

Not only has the woman returned to her blood-ties, she has returned to the distaff ties of yarn and thread and quilting squares that make up the woman's work of the mountain. She is as tied to the mountain by her needlework and weaving as her kinswomen are by the "snarls in their warp chains" and the "carding wool / bunched in their laps" ("Bone"

15-16). Once a girl who had "gone down the mountain in the dead / of night," she now has to (literally and figuratively) bite her tongue whenever her kinswomen talk about "another girl" who fled. The poem ends with one more "Sheer Illusion," however, for the other girl left "no more than a fiction / of snapped twigs to follow." Like so many other images in Byer's poetry, the fiction of the twigs can be read two ways. The first is that the girl left a false trail, hoping that her pursuers would follow its obviously "snapped twigs" rather than follow her. The second is that the girl was, in the end, as unable to escape the Appalachian motionlessness as the woman in the poem cycle was. Just as the woman's shawl was a lie "around her shoulders," the tracks this girl left that seem to point toward her having "gone down" to freedom tell a false story of escape – follow them back up the mountain and you will find the girl returned home, as blood-tied to the land as any of her kinswomen. In Byer's "Blood Mountain" cycle, no woman is truly able to escape the immobility that life on the mountain imposes upon her.

This immobility that life imposes upon women is not unique to a particular place and time; it cuts across generations and cultures. Constrained by geography, by family, by societal expectations, women find themselves trapped, caught in their lives the way an insect can become caught in amber. It is tempting to posit a paradigm where it is the men in a woman's life who shackle and encumber her but – as Byer shows in her "Blood Mountain" poems – it can also be other women who hinder her escape.

In "Donna Laura" (from her 2003 collection *Italian Women in Black Dresses*), the Italian-American feminist poet Maria Mazziotti Gillan[2] paints a picture of her grandmother back in the old country. Like Byer's unnamed mountain woman, Gillan's Donna Laura is defined by woman's work, in her case needlepoint. Neighbors would see Donna Laura "sitting in the doorway, sewing / delicate tablecloths and linens, hours of sewing / bent over the cloth, an occupation for a lady" (2-4). No clack and rattle of an Appalachian loom here in the Italian countryside; for Donna Laura, the work of a lady means hour upon hour of close sewing.

This sewing may be "occupation for a lady," but it is not enough to keep "her big house" from "falling to ruins around her head" (5-6), for Laura's husband had abandoned the family decades ago, "left for Argentina when she was 24" (8). He "left her with seven children and no money" (9), left her to fend for herself and her family as best she could, left her to her doorway and her needlework and the watchful judgment of her female neighbors. Any thought of escape, of finding another way of making a living, of finding a loving and caring new husband, was stymied by the presence of "the old ladies" who "watched her / from their window. She could not have / taken a breath without everyone knowing" (11-13). Unlike the female kinsfolk in Byer's Beggarman's Trace who never look up from their weaving and carding to acknowledge what is happening, the women in this Italian village keep a constant, disapproving eye on everything that goes on around them, particularly when it comes to the young grass

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[2] Gillan, the winner of the 2001 Firman Houghton Poetry Award from the Poetry Club of New England, is founder and director of New Jersey's Passaic County Community College's Poetry Center in Paterson. She writes extensively about her family, including her husband, who suffers from Parkinson's Disease, and she is known for not holding back even the most uncomfortable and unpleasant aspects of life. Indeed, one interviewer called Gillan "the poet laureate of awful truths" (Carrie Stetler, <u>I Am New Jersey: Maria Mazziotti Gillan</u>, 2007, The Star Ledger, Available: blog.nj.com/lamnj/2007/06/maria_gillan_sp.html, 10 February 2008.)

widow with the "long auburn hair" (18). A woman alone, single or otherwise, poses a threat to the collective order. She is perceived as being somehow more available both sexually and emotionally. Whether this is truly the case does not matter; what matters is that she holds out the possibility of a rent in the social fabric of the town. Donna Laura's case is even more complex, however, for she is married; even though her husband abandoned her, the strict Catholicism of her village precludes her ever being able to make a life with another man. Thus, the old women who watch her so carefully are *looking* to prevent Laura from breaking her marriage vows, be it with one of their husbands (thus compounding the adultery) or with any other man. Their gaze keeps Laura immobilized, trapped in her doorway with her house crumbling around her.

While watching to make sure Laura stayed chaste, the women of the town could not help but see the family's situation. "Everyone in the village knew // my grandmother's fine needlework / could not support seven children" (22-24), yet the only support the villagers gave her was to pretend not to know that Donna Laura "relied on the kindness / of the priest's 'housekeeper' / to provide food for her family" (19-21). By putting the word housekeeper in quotation marks, Gillan points out the rank hypocrisy of the townspeople. In this way she signals that the relationship between the priest and the woman who tends to him is more than just that of employer and employee; they are involved both physically and emotionally. The old ladies who watched Donna Laura so carefully from their windows turn a blind eye to the priest – a man supposedly celibate by sacred vow – and his lover, but maintain an everlasting vigil against any sign that Laura might wish to live a sexually and emotionally fulfilled life with a man other than her husband.

Donna Laura herself is unable to forget or forgive the husband who abandoned her. "[E]ach day" she "sucked / on the bitter seed / of her husband's failure / to send money and to remember / her long auburn hair" (14-18). Donna Laura is angry, hurt and resentful, and it is these emotions, as much as her poverty and her disapproving neighbors, that keep her motionless in the doorway of her mountain home. "When she was 90" (26), sixty-six years after her husband abandoned her, Donna Laura "still lived in that mountain house" (27). Trapped by both societal expectations and her own anger and grief at being abandoned, she stayed in the mountains. Donna Laura is never able to muster the will to try and escape the way Byer's Appalachian woman does, leaving Laura's granddaughter to wonder, "Was her heart a bitter raisin, / her anger so deep it could have cut / a road through the mountain?" (28-30). And if the answer to this is yes, then why didn't Donna Laura follow her bitter heart through the mountain and away from the constraints of her village home?

Yet something of Donna Laura does escape:

> I touch the tablecloth she made,
>
> the delicate scrollwork,
> try to reach back to Donna Laura,
> feel her life shaping itself into laced patterns
> and scalloped edges from all those years between
> her young womanhood and old age. (31-36)

Donna Laura's needlework has survived, and made the escape from the mountain that its creator did not – could not – make herself. Laura's woman's work has melded with her woman's life, "shaping itself" to the contours of the linens she sewed sitting immobile in her doorway for hours on end.

> Only this cloth remains,
>
> old and perfect still, turning her bitterness into art
> to teach her granddaughters and great granddaughters
> how to spin sorrow into gold. (37-40)

Just as Byer's mountain woman rejoined the quilting circle at the end of the "Blood Mountain" cycle, Donna Laura turns her own artful woman's work to the tasks at hand, leaving as her legacy a lesson for her female descendents on how to survive even while trapped within the confines of an unhappy life.

Constraint is not merely something imposed upon a woman from outside. Like Gillan's Donna Laura, whose bitterness held her in place as solidly as did the gaze of her neighbors, many women depicted in contemporary American women's poetry are trapped by their own emotions as much as by any exterior force. Anger, depression and fear can powerfully hinder a woman's attempt to break free from immobility and move toward a new life. After her second husband's suicide in 1959, the poet Ruth Stone battled depression and grief for decades. Even today, Stone, born in 1915, returns again and again to her husband's self-destructive act and the effect that act had upon the rest of Stone's life. He is as much a part of her world now as he was when he was alive; indeed, she calls her poems for her husband "love poems, all written to a dead man" (Seiferle).[3]

In "Loss," first published in her 1975 collection Cheap: New Poems and Ballads, Stone gives the reader a very short, yet very powerful, description of a woman held motionless within the narrow world of her own grief. "I hid sometimes in the

[3] These love poems, with all their anger, guilt and sorrow, helped Stone win the Wallace Stevens Award in 2002, the Bess Hokin award (from *Poetry* magazine), and the National Book Award, among many other honors.

closet among my own clothes" (1), Stone writes, but "[i]t was no use. The pain would wake me / Or like a needle it would stitch its way into my dreams" (2-3). The closet is, of course, a metaphor for her own mind, and the clothes represent the grief within which she continued to hide. Thus, moving within the limited boundaries of her home offers no relief, for she is unable to translate that physical motion into an emotional movement out of her grieving self. Indeed, not even moving from her home into the outside world brings any relief, for "Wherever I turned / I saw its [grief's] eyes looking out of the eyes of strangers" (4-5). Grief follows the speaker wherever she goes because, of course, it is a part of her and she is, however inadvertently, carrying it along with her as she moves. Back home, the speaker "would walk from room to room slowly / Like an old person in a convalescent home" (6-7), or like a zoo animal pacing within the confines of its cage. This motion-for-motion's sake offers no respite, for her surroundings were comfortless and "dull" (8). "It was objects in space without any aura" (11) that the speaker saw as she moved around her house. "No meaning attached" (11) to anything she gazed upon. Not only did the things within her rooms offer no comfort, but, as the speaker explains,"[t]heir very existence was a burden to me" (12). The physical manifestation of her life – a life she once shared with her husband and which she now lives alone – weighs so heavily upon her that the speaker cannot even begin to move beyond her grief and toward a new, healing existence. The poem ends with the speaker surrendering once again to her grief: "And I would go back to my bed whimpering" (13).

In "Habit," another short poem from the same collection, Stone succinctly depicts the Ouroborus-like nature of grief, and the almost-sensual pleasure to be derived

from giving oneself over completely to mourning the loved dead. "Every day I dig you up / And wipe off the rime / And look at you" (1-3), the speaker begins, signaling to the reader the compulsive, obsessive nature of her grief with that simple "every day." The most important word in this opening sequence is "rime," for it represents not only the encrustation of dirt, mold and humus which would be found on a dead body dug up from its grave, but also the accumulation of grief in a crust around the speaker and the body she mourns, a capsule of bereavement which nonetheless also offers the speaker some sort of pleasure in her continued closeness with the dead. Finally, of course, it is a play on words, linking the "rime" around the body with the *rhyme* the poet produces in mourning that body. This is made apparent by the poem's next two lines: "You are my joke, / My poem" (4-5). The "rime" is a joke, the body is a poem, poetry and death (with all their pleasures and pains) are now intimately connected in the putrefied body the speaker holds. They are encrusted, motionless, held together in spite of (or perhaps even by) death and decay.

That the body is putrefying there is no doubt. "Your eyelids pull back from their sockets" (6), the speaker says, "[y]our mouth mildews in scallops" (7), and when she pulls the body from the grave its "good suit" is sprouting "[w]orm filaments. . .from the pockets" (9, 8). The speaker does not just dig up the body to look at it; she digs it up to embrace it, to hold it close, despite its worsening condition: "I hold your sleeves in my arms; / Your waist drops a little putrid flesh" (10-11), reads the poem's penultimate sentence, but even this image of a lover's embrace between the quick and the dead does not prepare the reader for the poem's final line: "I show you my old shy breasts" (12). Here then is the ultimate, horrifying representation of the immobility in which grief can

trap a woman: not only is she unable to move out of her emotional state of mourning, she is unable to tear herself away from the physical, sexual relationship she once had with the dead man. She is trapped in both missing him emotionally and craving him physically, and these feelings manifests themselves in the poem's final, horrible (and horribly sad) image.

The grief in Stone's poems is inextricably linked with guilt and anger, and it is this combination of emotions that keeps her speakers immobile, unable to remove their widow's weeds and move toward acceptance and, perhaps, some type of peace. For Stone, of course, the fact that her husband committed suicide makes it difficult – perhaps impossible – for her grief to run what some might call a "natural" course and bring, in the end, resolution. In Maria Mazziotti Gillan's poems "Breathing" and "Sometimes I Forget That You're Dead" (both from Italian Women in Black Dresses), we find that more natural course of grief playing out in two elegies, one for her mother and one for her father. Unlike Stone's husband's untimely death, Gillan's parents' deaths are, while sad, to be expected in the natural order of things. This does not mean that the losses were easy to bear; only that there was not the shock of the unexpected accompanying the natural grief and sorrow.

In "Breathing," Gillan speaks directly to her dead mother. She remembers how her mother was always moving, how "even after the evening meal was cooked and the dishes / washed and the kitchen cleaned, after the final chores // of the day were finished" (3-5), "you couldn't sit idle" (2). She remembers how her mother would settle in next to her father, watching television and "crocheting at amazing / speed, turning out so many afghans that all the children // and the grandchildren have two or three apiece"

(7-9). Her mother's life was full of motion, of chores and duties and, at the end of the day, the woman's work of crocheting. Unlike Byer's weaving and Donna Laura's needlepoint, however, this yarn work is done for pleasure, to produce something beautiful and practical, and to keep idle hands busy in the evening. It also is a means of turning waste into something worthwhile, for the yarn used in the crocheting came from "the big bin behind the Bunker Hill rug factory" where "discarded rolls of yarn" could be had for the taking (10-11).

For Gillan's mother, motion was all, and she moved through her days until death finally put a halt to her activities and forced her into stillness. This is a stillness that Gillan finds difficult – almost impossible – to accept. "I never visit you // because I cannot think of you closed in that steel cabinet, closed away from the earth you loved" (16-18). The thought of her mother "boxed. . .up / in the mausoleum drawer" (15-16) causes almost as much grief as the loss itself. "I cannot think of you, who were always moving, / forced to lie in that one narrow space" (20-21). She must, instead, imagine her mother unconstrained, not "stuck in that drawer at Holy Angels Cemetery, but instead // in that heaven of light, walking those paths with your mother / and sisters" (27-29). Heaven, then, is where motion is unimpeded and women are always able to move. That this movement might including coming back to visit living loved ones is something the speaker wishes could be true. "You told me," she says, "that your mother always visited you in the night to bring / you news" (12-14) and she hopes that her mother will do the same thing, as improbable as it sounds. Perhaps this woman who was always moving will find some way to travel back to the daughter she left behind, the daughter who has "waited for you, / hoped to feel your weight at the edge of my

bed, hoped // to see you standing in the doorway coming toward me" (31-33). In the end, of course, that movement between the world of the dead and the world of the living is impossible, yet in the poem's final line there is the promise of a type of visitation for, as the speaker says, "when I hear your words in my mouth, I know you are with me" (34). Crossing the veil, then, is metaphorical for Gillan's speaker; her mother does come visit her, but only in her mind (and her speech). Her mother's final gift to her is the gift of language, of words, and of memories. And, perhaps, of a legacy of motion, movement to be enjoyed and cherished as long as possible.

In the elegy for her father, "Sometimes I Forget That You're Dead," it is the poem's speaker, not the object of her grief, who is moving. "Papa," the poem begins, "sometimes I forget that you're dead. / I start to drive toward your house, and remember" (1-2). Here, as in "Breathing," it is the woman who is in motion and the man who is still: in the first poem, the speaker's mother moves as her father sits "in his recliner" (6); in this poem, the father is dead and the child who mourns him is in motion.

It is not just death that has immobilized the speaker's father. He was motionless for many years before he was buried. "Before you died, you wanted your life to be over, // caught as you were in the world bounded by your bed / and wheelchair, all your friends long since dead, / only me to visit you each day" (18-21). Here again, the man is motionless, "caught" in the stasis of illness, while the woman, his daughter, comes and goes, moves into his world and then out of it every day. He continues to fade, until "[y]ou decided enough, / you turned over and stopped breathing" (25-26). What little motion he had left is now stilled and he is dead, his "house emptied and sold" (27-28),

with nothing left for his daughter-in-motion but memories – and these memories are unreliable because she keeps forgetting her father is dead. The image of him alive is stronger than her memory of his death, and she finds that she is compelled to continue her motion towards her father's house, a motion that is only checked when she remembers that her father is no longer there.

As she does in "Breathing," Gillan gives us an image of her dead parent in heaven, but this image is different in each poem. While her mother is back in motion, walking through heaven with female relatives, her father is now still, "sitting / under some grape arbor, your friends // around you" (31-33), perhaps playing cards with the deck she "tucked. . .in your coffin // because I know how you'd missed the endless card games / you played with your friends" (28-30). As her mother walks the paths in the "heaven of light," her father sits bathed in his own light, "every day a perfect fall day, the sun warm as my hand on your face" (33-34). The light, the warmth, the presence of loved ones in both poems are the daughter's benediction for her parents, her blessing upon their deaths and her gratitude for the lives they led on earth. She ends "Sometimes. . ." with an image of a child bereft, left alone, standing still for just a moment as she remembers her loving parent: "I who am here, thinking of you" (35). That moment of motionlessness is her tribute to her father, the parent whose stillness provided a counterpoint for her mother's female motion.

Not all female motion is as benign as what is presented in Gillan's poems. The California poet Kay Ryan,[4] whose brief, compact poems combine concrete imagery with universal truths, turns her attention to a woman's repetitive motion in "Things

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[4] Ryan, winner of The Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize and three Pushcart Prizes, was named the 16th Poet Laureate of the United States in 2008.

Shouldn't Be So Hard" (from her 2005 collection <u>The Niagara River</u>). In this short, deceptively simple poem, Ryan recounts the way one woman moved through her domestic life, and insists that life "should leave / deep tracks" (1-2) as testimony to the woman's existence. A life should leave

> ruts where she
> went out and back
> to get the mail
> or move the hose
> around the yard. (3-7)

"Her things should keep her marks" (19). There should be "a worn-out place" (10) to indicate where she stood at the sink, whose "china knobs" should be "rubbed down to white pastilles" (12, 13-14) where she used them every day. The way a woman moves through the world should be recorded in some permanent fashion upon that world. "The passage / of a life should show; / it should abrade" (21-23), yet for all too many women their woman's work leaves no mark, makes no impression upon the things of their world (or, indeed upon the other people who live in that world). The motion of women in their everyday lives is unnoticed, unappreciated at best, devalued at worst. "Things Shouldn't Be So Hard" indeed: not the things a woman touches, not the work that she does, not the way she moves through the world, and certainly not the very life she lives within that motion. "And when life stops" Ryan argues, "a certain space – , / however small – / should be left scarred / by the grand and damaging parade" (24-29). The unnoticed and unappreciated motion of women's quotidian lives should leave a permanent mark, a testimony to their perseverance in the face of far too many "hard" things. Like the unnamed woman in Byer's "Storm" who took "her silent walk" from "[k]itchen to bedroom to washbasin" (5), this unnamed woman in Ryan's poem moved

through the constraints of her domestic life – from her mailbox to her yard to her kitchen sink – while having little control over what that life entailed. In motion within her domestic sphere, she is *motion-less* in terms of any sort of shift from that domestic sphere to the larger, outside world (where, presumably, things may not be so hard and her life's passage could be recorded in some permanent and significant way).

The domestic sphere need not be a space of constraint and imposed motionlessness, however. What Lesley Wheeler calls "the poetics of enclosure" can be as much "shelter" as "prison" for some contemporary American women poets, who "employ images of enclosure in order to engage" traditional and "powerful definitions of female identity" (6, 7). Indeed, as Jennie-Rebecca Falcetta argues, the very act of writing a poem is an "act of containment," of "confining" things "through syllabification inside the 'box' of the stanza" (124). Thus, staying still – and its connotations of constraint – need not always signify something negative. For Dorianne Laux, staying still is not the same as being trapped, because she has control over whether she stays or goes. As we saw in the earlier discussion of Laux's poem "What Could Happen," there are times when the final decision is the least important part of the speaker's story – indeed, in that poem the reader never learns whether the decision is to remain or to head out of town. It is the moment of decision – and the fact that the power to make that decision lies entirely with the speaker – that is important.

Deciding to remain, to forgo a journey or to constrain her motion within a domestic sphere, can signal a woman's coming to peace with her life, accepting the role of mother, lover or daughter and all the things that go with that role, including the need

to stay in one place. Laux's "On the Back Porch" (Awake 1990), tells the story of one such woman.

The poem opens with the image of domesticated nature, a cat who "calls for her dinner" (1) and is content to stay close to home and the people who feed and care for her. That the animal has been truly tamed is shown as Laux describes putting "brown soy stars into her bowl" (3), indicating that the cat has been so domesticated as to no longer eat meat, or even milk. Yet there are compensations in the cat's life: she is well fed, and affectionately cared for by a woman who will "stroke her dark fur" (4) when she comes up on to the porch to be fed.

That the speaker is on the porch herself is important, for a porch is a liminal space bridging the inside and the outside of a house. When she is on the porch, the speaker must eventually decide whether to step off into the world or turn and go back inside the confines of her home. "It's not quite night" (5) there on the porch, and this is, of course, another indication of liminality, this one of time. The speaker is suspended between the temporal intervals of day and night, and the spatial environments of inside and outside her house. She is poised on the brink of a decision, and everything around her (even the cat) reminds her that she will soon have to choose.

The woman on the porch contrasts what is out there in front of her, the "[p]inpricks of light in the eastern sky / . . .a transparent / moon, a pink rag of cloud" (6-8) with what is behind her: "Inside my house are those who love me" (9), her daughter and her lover, both of whom fit snugly into their own domestic roles:

> My daughter dusts biscuit dough.
> And there's a man who will lift my hair
> in his hands, brush it
> until it throws sparks. (10-13)

There is nourishment to be found inside the house, not only for her body (biscuits) but for her soul, in the form of a man who will care for her and whose ministrations to her body will eventually lead to sparks being thrown (literally from her long hair, figuratively when they make love). Compared to the lure of the stars, moon and pink clouds, her description of her domestic, quotidian life appears more appealing, more concrete and certain than anything she might find out there. That this is where her decision is tending, a movement back into the house rather than away into the coming darkness, is reinforced by the poem's next few lines:

> Everything is just as I've left it.
> Dinner simmers on the stove.
> Glass bowls wait to be filled
> with gold broth. Sprigs of parsley
> on the cutting board. (14-18)

A sense of anticipation, of longing, builds throughout this description. Yes, things are just as she left them, but that is not necessarily bad; change can be good, but there is comfort and ease to be taken in everyday, ordinary, repetitive events that build into a lifetime. And suddenly, her decision is made:

> I want to smell this rich soup, the air
> around me going dark, as stars press
> their simple shapes into the sky.
> I want to stay on the back porch
> while the world tilts
> toward sleep, until what I love
> misses me, and calls me in. (19-25)

She has been called out on to the porch by the cat's cries, and she wishes to remain there for a few moments longer to enjoy the beauty and stillness of the liminal space she now inhabits, but she does not want to stay there forever. She will wait on the porch until her daughter and lover realize she is still outside and, missing her, call out; thus,

she will be brought inside by the voices of those she loves just as she was brought outside by the cat's call.

She is content with staying within her life and all its quotidian rhythms. She stays because she wants to, and she wants to stay because she has the power to choose to leave. She is choosing to move not away from something, but toward it. She is choosing to move through her quiet, domestic life and to find herself within the journey she undertakes inside that life, rather than searching for something out where the stars and moon and clouds hold sway in the twilight. Unlike Laux's "What Could Happen," where we do not know whether the speaker decides to stay or go, in this poem we can well imagine the woman turning and walking back into her home, stepping over the threshold between inside and outside.

Just as Laux's speaker walks back into the house to re-enter quotidian domesticity, many women move through their lives on foot. Walking may well be the quintessential metaphor of motion in poetry, and in the next chapter I will discuss some of the ways in which contemporary American women poets use walking in their work.

Chapter Five: Walking Women

A natural affinity exists between walking and poetry. Male poets walk, female poets walk, and both genders write about the walks they take. Yet when a woman walks, her literary project is viewed through a different lens than those of men. For Roger Gilbert, a woman's very nature places her poems about walking outside the realm of the "Walk Poem" as practiced by Robert Frost, Theodore Roethke and others. Indeed, in his study of walk poems, Gilbert discusses only one woman poet, Elizabeth Bishop, and in doing so he goes to great lengths to point out that Bishop "is famous for her cool, detached observation of fine details, her *sad restraint*, her *lack of stridency*" (Walks 162) [emphasis mine]. Note the gendered language, and the implication that by being restrained and refraining from stridency, Bishop somehow fits the "male" paradigm of the walk poem better than those women poets who are not restrained. Indeed, Gilbert signals early on his belief that the poems women write about walking are somehow different from the "Walk Poems" of men: "Why is the genre one that women seem to write around, or on the edges of?" he asks. Because, he answers, "most women poets do not seem to use the walk the way men do, as a means of connecting disparate kinds of experience, preferring instead to build their poems around a single experiential center" (Walks 21). For Gilbert, then, women write from their own experience, and it is the nature (singular rather than "disparate") of the experiences they choose to write about that makes their walking poems somehow different from those of men. "It may be that the dialectic of mind and world which the walk poem starts from has to presuppose an essentially *universal* consciousness – universal in the sense of basic, normative, not specially marked or distinguished" (Walks 21) [italics Gilbert's].

Leaving aside the validity of Gilbert's assertions about universality and experience, one can see that for this critic – as for many others – the (feminine) nature of the experience in women's walk poems makes those poems suspect, places them outside the paradigm of the male "Walk Poem" found in the work of Frost, Roethke and others, and therefore relegates the validity of the women's linguistic projects to a lesser status. As I said earlier, men will walk by Tintern Abbey but they won't walk to Wal-Mart.

That, of course, is a generalization as well. Numerous male poets write about single moments from their personal, everyday experience, just as many female poets write walk poems "as a means of connecting disparate kinds of experience." However, many of those women poets who write walk poems from personal experience (with the exception of Elizabeth Bishop, for example) do, in general, find their work relegated to second-class status precisely because of that personal, "feminine" aspect of the experience about which they are writing. In this chapter, I will discuss a number of walk poems by women who have taken moments from their quotidian lives and fashioned them into poems that address not only the poet's individual, personal experience but also something genuinely human and universal as well.

Dorianne Laux, for example, uses motion (both walking and driving) to represent a journey toward coming to terms with her past in "Water Street Bridge" (from her 1990 collection Awake). The speaker begins by driving past the hospital where she was born and imagining how her mother felt as she "lay, / braced for the small head to crown / slowly between her thighs" (5-7). By presenting her mother to us in this vulnerable position, Laux elicits sympathy (both ours and hers) for the fear her mother must have felt. This fear manifests itself as physical discomfort: "She must

have been cold" (12), Laux writes of her mother, "her knuckles / white on the handrails" (12-13), and here the poet uses white knuckles to symbolize not only the strain of labor but the fear of the laboring mother as well, a fear with which Laux sympathizes.

In some ways, Laux is moving toward this fear as she drives the "turnpike to Augusta" (1), heading toward her own origins, her own beginning:

> Thirty-five years later
> I drive over this bridge and wonder
> which room was hers.
> I want to stop and go in, touch
> the bed where she slept, find
> what my eyes first opened and closed on
> in this foreign light. (15-21)

In this particular journey, however, it is not enough for Laux that she drive to the city in which she was born. She must leave her car and walk in her mother's footsteps, look through her mother's eyes, in order to come to terms with her past:

> I've walked to the edge of the Kennebec River
> to see what she must have seen. (22-23)

She imagines how her mother walked to the river alone, "[m]y body / so new in her arms" (24-25), and in this picture of a tentative, fearful mother and her tiny daughter Laux foreshadows the complicated, fraught relationship that would develop over the years between those two beings who stood together at the edge of the river. Standing there now alone, Laux finally sees what her mother saw decades earlier:

> . . .There are the reeds
> stabbed up through the silver
> skin of the river, the bridge
> criss-crossed with steel ropes,
> a lone truck with mud on its tires
> threading its way to Hollowell. (25-30)

Laux's walk, then, has led her here, to the banks of the Kennebec, and everything that she sees – the reeds, the bridge, the truck – represents motion or escape. The reeds push up through the ice, reaching for open air. The bridge, of course, is that liminal space arching above the water, the means by which someone would move from one riverbank to another. And the truck is the embodiment of motion itself, moving away from Augusta toward another town. Notice also how grim and tough each of these things is. The reeds *stab*, the bridge is made of *steel*, and the tires are coated with *mud*. Like Sexton with her nuns in "Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound," Laux imagines a masculine world (all hard surfaces and rough edges) from which a woman – in this case, her mother – should escape. Unlike Sexton, who asks God to bestow the gift of flight upon the group of nuns so they may escape the world of leather, grease and iron that is the ferry, Laux sees that her mother would have had to overcome her fears and escape by herself, with no outside intervention. She would have had to gather her infant daughter in her arms, walk past the reeds, walk over the bridge, and keep on walking toward Hollowell and beyond. That Laux is standing where she is implies that her mother was not able to walk away and escape; she stayed trapped and, by extension, brought her daughter into the trap with her. Yet there is forgiveness in the lines of this poem, as well as love. Laux sees how tired, how vulnerable, and how alone her mother was, and is able, through walking a while in her mother's footsteps, to come to a better understanding of what her mother faced standing on the bank of the Kennebec.

Laux's poem gives us a traditional journey, one that moves her toward both understanding and forgiveness. But what of the other types of walk poems, those that

Gilbert characterizes as being on the "edge" of the traditional masculine walk poem? One of the richest types of walking poems written by women is the one that depicts walking as a domestic journey. This is not to say that the women who walk in these poems do so only within the confines of their homes. What I mean by domestic journey is the type of walking women do in the course of their everyday lives, alone or in the company of their lovers, spouses or children. These are the walks undertaken with regularity which represent movement *within* a poet's life rather than *outside* of it; these are the poems which present a moment in which the walk with all its *everyday-ness* is made significant and special.

In the poetry of domestic walks, the quotidian nature of women's lives takes on significance through the poetic process. The Manhattan neighborhood Marie Ponsot depicts in "Pleasant Avenue" (one of the uncollected poems published in Springing in 2002) is noteworthy precisely because of its everyday-ness, and is recognized as special only by the people who experience its day-to-day workings and through that experience come to understand the neighborhood's hidden significance. The avenue "[i]s in Manhattan / As only those who live there know" (1-2), and a large portion of it is Italian. The poem gives the reader a picture of what we all imagine a neighborhood in "The City" to be. We see a "paper-store man" (3), the driver who delivers *The Daily News*, the men who work in the hardware store, the "bodega lady" (51) and "the knife-eyed gang- / Boys" (54-55). By day, Pleasant Avenue is the enclave of working people, mothers, children and shopkeepers; by night, "Men of power gather" (18) in the paper store, but their doings pose no threat to Ponsot and her children: "My life is so small I feel no fear of them" (19). When Ponsot walks on Pleasant Avenue, her concerns are

everyday ones, such as what she will feed her family for dinner, and remembering to pick up “cement nails” (44) at the hardware store.

On Pleasant Avenue, the grocer and his “glowing” (21) wife “[s]ell no potatoes” (23) because potatoes are associated with Irish neighborhoods. Instead, they “stand beside a sea / Of kinds of greens” (23-24), a staple of Italian cuisine. Ponsot does not merely buy produce at this grocery; her experience in the store is nearly religious: the grocer offers her escarole, “[c]enter part up from among its shaggy green / To show me” and “Ecce, I behold” (27-28), she writes. Because her babies “[l]ove the very smell” of the grocer’s wife, the grocer not only accepts Ponsot into the store but allows her to participate in the ritual, the near-religious rite, of choosing fruit for herself: “nervous, he lets me choose / Pears one by one after I sniff at each bottom / Blossom-end to see if they’re sweet yet” (32-33). Ponsot knows that the grocer’s acceptance of her is conditional to her understanding of, and compliance with, the definition of where she fits in the rhythm and flow of the neighborhood. She is company, a visitor, and must behave as such: “in his store / Insofar as I am correct, I am permissible” (35-356). Implied in these lines is the threat that, should she ever become incorrect, she will no longer be welcome in the grocery; indeed, perhaps not on Pleasant Avenue at all.

The walk that Ponsot and her children take moves them down the block from the paper store to the grocery, then “East five blocks” (37) to the hardware store which lies “outside the invisible / Italian enclave” (38-39), then next door to the bodega. Within the time frame of the poem, the speaker never stays far from Pleasant Avenue, yet she does not give the impression of a confined, restrained life that she wishes to escape. Just the opposite, in fact: she finds the walk she takes around the neighborhood

comforting. She is not afraid, not even of the gang-boys: "I have nothing to fear from them / Being I guess afraid only of the loss of love / And of hurting children. And so here / I have nothing to fear" (59-62). There is a vibrancy to the neighborhood and its people, and her domestic walk allows Ponsot's speaker to become a part of all that; this idea of neighborhood – with its connotations of safety, familiarity and comfort – is vitally important to women's daily lives.

A safe neighborhood is not necessarily a good neighborhood, at least for the politically and economically disenfranchised. In Audre Lorde's[1] "Soho Cinema" (The Collected Poems) the speaker questions the ethics of living a life of privilege and safety while so many others are in danger from poverty and violence. In this poem (originally published in her 1986 collection, Our Dead Behind Us), Lorde questions the world through which the "woman who lives at 830 Broadway" (1) moves. This woman "walks her infant at twilight / through the neighborhood streets" which are "warehoused" and "fashionably ugly" (2-4). The woman and her baby are insulated by their neighborhood, a place of "200-dollar silk blouses where hammers once hung," a place where gentrification has driven out the original residents and people like the woman who lives at 830 have moved in. Lorde uses telling details to paint a portrait of a woman who has both money and security, who walks though the street pushing "her child in the tattersall pram / with an anti-nuclear sticker" (8-9) while the child "takes it all in as possible / in an urban parlor" (10-11). When this woman leaves the safe streets of her neighborhood and goes home, goes up the "26 stories" (15) to her apartment to

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[1] Lorde, a co-founder of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, was New York's Poet Laureate (1991-1992) and a professor of English at John Jay College until her death from breast cancer in 1992. Her work deals frankly with politics, sexuality and race, as well as her struggle against the cancer that would eventually kill her.

watch the news with her daughter, Lorde wonders whether the woman is affected at all by what she sees. Does she identify with the woman whose son was "bayoneted to the door in Santiago de Chile" (25), does she imagine "a corolla of tsetse flies crusting her daughter's nose," can she envision "army hippos" who "fire into the mourners / across Bleecker Street" (27-28)? "[W]hen the six o'clock news is over / does she weep for what she has seen" (34-35)? Or has she so circumscribed her life, has she spent all her time walking through streets of privilege and money, that she can neither weep nor help the people she sees on the news? Does she break out of her insulated neighborhood and help people?

> Or does she will her orange rebozo
> with the Soho magenta fringe
> to a Vieques campesina
> six children and no land left
> after the mortars
> and the Navy
> sailing into the sunset. (36-42)

Lorde's unspoken answer to the question is that the woman is so isolated from violence and poverty, so circumscribed by the streets she walks in Soho and by her 26th floor apartment, that she will not be able to help anyone – worse yet, she will think she is helping when she makes a ridiculously inappropriate attempt at charity.

Nikki Giovanni offers the obvious remedy for this isolation in "Walking Down Park" (originally published in Re: Creation, 1970). As discussed in Chapter One, Giovanni presents walking as a political act of resistance and remembrance. Unlike the woman in Lorde's poem, whose walk around her neighborhood is something to be ridiculed, the walk proposed by Giovanni is desirable, even necessary. Giovanni wants the reader to look – really look – at what she sees while walking in the city. The poem

asks the walker to turn her gaze toward the cityscape and imagine what came before; then, through this imagining, to begin to truly *see* the world through which she moves. If "on a clear day" you can look "and not see / time's squares but see / tall Birch trees with sycamores / touching hands" (29-32), a world of new possibilities has opened before you. What Giovanni offers is a solution to the problem posed by Lorde:

> ever, did you ever, sit down
> and wonder about what freedom's freedom
> would bring
> it's so easy to be free
> you start by loving yourself
> then those who look like you
> all else will come naturally. (37-44)

Walking through the city, for Giovanni, is the remedy for isolation. If the woman who lives at 830 Broadway were ever able to walk outside her neighborhood, if she were able to "wonder / what grass was like before / they rolled it / into a ball and called / it central park" (14-18), if she could "see gazelles running playfully after the lions" (33-34), she might then begin the process Giovanni describes: she would learn to love herself, then others who look like her, and then, finally, her love and compassion would expand to include all those she sees on the nightly news. This is not a simple solution, and people (like those who rolled the grass up into a ball) will oppose it, but Giovanni believes the walk she proposes is indispensable if we are to change our perceptions of the world and the people in it.

Lorde's and Giovanni's poems illustrate how easily the daily lives of women can entwine the personal and the political. For the remainder of this chapter, I would like to return to the idea of the purely domestic walk – the everyday moments (both ordinary and extraordinary) of a woman's life which are represented within her poetry.

The poems I will discuss illustrate women's lives that are neither isolated nor insular. These works are not denying the existence of the outside world; indeed, that world often intrudes into the poet's daily experience. But the focus of the poetry is upon individual experiences drawn from the poets' lives, experiences which, through poetic expression, come to represent something larger than just the lived events of the individual writers. These are women who walk, and who write about the rich and vibrant moments drawn from those walks. These poems are, indeed, "Walk Poems."

From the title poem of her first collection, From Room to Room (1978), to the work in the posthumously published Otherwise: New and Selected Poems (1996) and A Hundred White Daffodils (1999), Jane Kenyon[2] was a poet who walked. A poet of both nature and domesticity, Kenyon uses spare, seemingly simple language to bring forth the emotional depth and breadth of life's experiences, including her own battle with depression. As Joyce Peseroff explains in her introduction to Simply Lasting: Writers on Jane Kenyon, "Jane enjoyed the things of this world, but there's a terrifying longing for the void in her poems. . . ." (xiii-xiv). Often, the speaker in Kenyon's poem battled that longing through movement, walking in particular.

Originally published in the 1996 collection Otherwise, the poem "Prognosis," written about Kenyon's leukemia (the disease which would eventually kill her), begins with the line, "I walked alone in the chill of dawn," a typical situation in a Kenyon walk poem; more often than not, the speaker is walking either by herself or, in a few cases, with her dog. In "Prognosis," she walked because her mind was unsettled; it "leapt, as the teachers // of detachment say, like a drunken / monkey" (2-4). Kenyon presents the

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[2] Kenyon was married to the poet Donald Hall, and much of her work revolves around the details of their life together in their farmhouse in New Hampshire (she was that state's poet laureate when she died in 1995).

image of a frightened woman whose motion – walking – belies the terrible things her mind is contemplating as it jumps from one possibility to another. The tension of the moment was broken by “a gray shape, an owl,” that “passed overhead” (4, 5). Compared to the drunken monkey of the speaker’s mind, the owl glided silently, “not / like a crow” which “makes convivial // chuckings as it flies” (5, 6-7) but quietly, gracefully. A symbol of knowledge and wisdom, the owl “flew well beyond me // before I heard it coming, and when it / settled, the bough did not sway” (8-10). The majestic sweep of the owl contrasts with the speaker’s emotions. The owl’s wisdom and detachment are, quite literally, “beyond” the speaker; she was – and quite possibly still is – unable to find the composure she needs to settle her mind’s erratic, awkward leaps. The poem ends with the image of the bough that “did not sway” when the owl settled gracefully upon it, inviting the reader to imagine how the bough would swing crazily if the speaker’s drunken monkey of a mind were to leap on it.

“Prognosis” demonstrates the traditional structure of a walk poem. The speaker moves out into nature where (like the “lone traveller” in Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Moose”) she suddenly finds herself in an encounter with the sublime, the unknowable that here takes the form of the owl which is “well beyond” her. Like the Romantic poets (and others such as Bishop and Robert Frost), Kenyon fashions the appearance of the sublime as abrupt, an interruption of the speaker’s internal thoughts and emotions. In “The Moose,” the sublime appears at the moment the traveller is poised in the liminal space between sleep and wakefulness; in “Prognosis,” the walking woman is situated in the ultimate liminality, that which bridges the space between life and death. Kenyon’s speaker, like Bishop’s traveller, focuses inward in a state close to meditation. Yes, her

mind leaps, but it circles around a single idea, the terrifying suggestion that she might die soon, and this becomes the focus of all her thoughts. At the height of her looking inward, the sublime appears, unknown and unknowable, and it will remain that way even after the poem ends. There is always a sense of moving away at the end of an encounter with the sublime. Sometimes, as with Bishop's traveller, the speaker of the poem moves; at other times, as in "Prognosis," movement is embodied in the fact that the sublime is itself out of reach (the owl the speaker cannot hear coming, and that flies far ahead of her).

Obviously, a diagnosis of cancer is an extraordinary event, one which Kenyon deals with the way she has dealt with much in her life, by walking. Often, she walks outside, but there are occasions when she must move within a confined space. One example of this type of motion is found in "From Room to Room," which originally appeared in her 1978 collection, From Room to Room. Here, the domestic walk is an all-too-familiar one: the speaker is moving through the house of someone who has died, and uses concrete details to both situate herself and define her relationship with the dead. Laban Hill says that Kenyon's "evocatively descriptive language attempted to map her relationship to her surroundings" (113) and that poems such as "From Room to Room" "seem to highlight the permanence of what is already there in contrast to her own unrootedness" (122). Kenyon's use of imagery and her command of description are the means by which she not only "locates the reader in [the poem's] world with meticulous particularity" (Timmerman 146) but is also the way in which she locates herself in that world as well.

> Here in this house, among photographs
> of your ancestors, their hymnbooks and old
> shoes. . .
>
> I move from room to room,
> a little dazed, like the fly. I watch it
> bump against each window. (1-6, ellipses author's)

That phrase "your ancestors" signals, of course, that the speaker is in the home of someone not related to her. Nothing helps situate her in this space, no things, no blood-ties. The things that are there, the deceased's ancestors' "hymnbooks and old shoes," represent both heaven and earth, the sacred and the secular; it is these types of things that hold a person to the world and give it continuity. Here, though, that continuity is gone because the person for whom those things held meaning is gone, and the speaker moves in a daze "from room to room." The lack of blood relation does not mean the speaker is not grieving, however. She is caught in the stasis of grief, her motion confined to the house's interior, just as the fly finds itself trapped inside as it bumps against each window trying to get out.

Like the fly, the speaker does not belong in the house; it is not her space. "I am clumsy here" (7) she says, "thrusting / slabs of maple into the stove" (7-8), and even this most human of actions, feeding fuel into a fire to keep warm, is presented as something she finds awkward to perform ("thrusting" and "slabs" are graceless words). Immediately following the image of the speaker pushing hunks of wood into the stove, she imagines herself:

> Out of my body for a while,
> weightless in space. . .
>
> Sometimes
> the wind against the clapboard
> sounds like a car driving up to the house. (9-13)

The speaker is set loose, unmoored, floating like an astronaut on a spacewalk, only to be brought back to herself by the sound of a clapboard moving in the wind. Without her own "hymnbooks and old shoes" around her, the speaker has nothing to tie her to the space (the house) in which she is walking, so she finds herself floating in space (the starry void) where she is no longer awkward and out of place.

Brought back to herself by the sound of the clapboard, the speaker continues to describe feeling out-of-place. "My people are not here, my mother / and father, my brother. I talk / to the cats about weather" (14-16). She contrasts her people with the "your ancestors" of the poem's opening lines, continuing to use the idea of blood-ties as an indication of belonging within a particular place at a particular time. The only creatures she has to talk to are the cats. Notice that she speaks to them "about weather," not about *the* weather. Unable to walk out of the house herself, the speaker brings the outside (nature) inside by talking about weather in general. However, she does so through the unnatural act of talking to cats – not her own cats, but the cats that belong to the house through which she moves so awkwardly.

The penultimate stanza begins with a quotation from a hymn:

> "Blessed be the tie that binds. . ."
> we sing in the church down the road.
> And how does it go from there? The tie. . .
>
> the tether, the hose carrying
> oxygen to the astronaut,
> turning, turning outside the hatch,
> taking a look around. (17-23, ellipses author's)

Here again, as with the "hymnbooks and old shoes," we have metaphors for the sacred and the secular (heaven and earth) in the *hymn* and the *road*. The poem has returned to

the idea, first alluded to in the opening stanza, of heaven and earth and the things that connect those two disparate places. The speaker cannot remember the next line of the hymn ("Our hearts in Christian love") but instead begins to connect the word *tie* found in the song to the tether that links the imaginary astronaut to her capsule.

With this connection, just as suddenly as in "Prognosis," we have the speaker's encounter with the sublime. No longer just imagining herself as being out of her body, the speaker *is* the astronaut, floating in the liminal space between heaven and earth. As an astronaut, the speaker is finally able to move outside of the house (the space capsule) yet remains tied to the inside (and its grief) by the tether. More than a tether, this connection is also a hose, which provides the oxygen the astronaut needs to stay alive and, by extension, provides a link to the speaker's memories of the person who has died. As she floats, "turning, turning" beside her capsule, the astronaut takes "a look around" and is able to see that there is something beyond grief, something beyond the confines of the house through which she has been walking "from room to room" unable to escape. That this something – the great void of outer space – is unknown and, ultimately, unknowable, makes it the sublime. The reader is again reminded of Elizabeth Bishop's "The Moose," where the sight of the moose leads the speaker to ask, "Why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?" (154-156). Kenyon does not specifically mention joy, of course, but this poem has a similar feeling of opening up, of release, to that which is found in Bishop's poem. The release is not complete, of course, because the sublime is always and ultimately unreachable. The astronaut must remain tethered to the capsule; the oxygen hose is necessary for life. The speaker will never completely forget the person who died; the grief, eased over

time, will remain in her memory, but grief and memories, too, are necessary for life. This glimpse of the vastness of space, of what lies outside of the house of grief, does, however, offer the speaker the possibility of finding something greater than herself and, in the process, finding a place to which she can be rooted by things as sacred and secular as hymnbooks and old shoes.

Of course, the strongest roots take hold, not in things, but in places. This is evident in much of Jane Kenyon's work; the place she found was the New Hampshire farmhouse she shared with her husband, and some of her most moving walk poems are situated within the natural landscape that surrounds that house. "Walking Alone in Late Winter" (from 1986's The Boat of Quiet Hours) is one such poem.

It is winter at the start of the poem, and the season appears to be motionless, never ending. "How long the winter has lasted – like a Mahler / symphony, or an hour in the dentist's chair" (1-2), and while the first comparison is to something of beauty, the second better conveys the speaker's feelings – she builds up to the image of a person held immobile, at the mercy of someone else for an hour (which seems like an eternity). She can see the grass "matted / and gray" (3-4) in the fields, and in order to escape for a brief moment the wintery world around her, she thinks of how those fields will look in the early summer as the "hay / and vetch burgeon in the heat, and warm rain / swells the globed buds of the peony" (4-6). Note the fecund imagery of spring renewal, the motion of life returning once again to the landscape. In the speaker's imagination, the hay and vetch flourish, and the peony's buds mimic the swollen belly of a pregnant woman.

This reverie does not last long, for the next line begins with the word "Ice," bringing the reader (and the speaker) back to the reality of the cold world of the poem. Here, it is still winter, although the first hints of spring can be found. "Ice on the pond breaks into huge planes. One / sticks like a barge gone awry at the neck / of the bridge" (7-9). The ice out – precursor to the spring thaw – has begun, with the still-frozen sheets breaking loose and starting to move, although one large piece of ice is stalled, stuck in place, mirroring the speaker's own feelings of immobility in the late-winter landscape. Spring, with its resultant loosening of the frozen landscape (and, by extension, of the speaker's motionlessness), is coming, however, for "[t]he reeds / and shrubby brush along the shore / gleam with ice that shatters when the breeze / moves them" (9-12). Once, solidly-frozen ice held the reeds and brush immobile, but it has softened now; it is not yet melted, but very little is needed to shatter the weakened ice along the shoreline. Note that it is a breeze, which we associate more with spring than winter, that moves the reeds, and not a frigid wind; and it is not just at the pond where the landscape is beginning to thaw: "From beyond the bog / the sound of water rushing over trees / felled by the zealous beavers" (12-14) can be heard. The ice in the river has melted as well, enough so that the speaker, although she cannot see "beyond the bog," can hear the freely-flowing water. The stanza ends with the beavers, "who bring them [the trees] crashing down. . . .Sometimes / it seems they do it just for fun" (15-16). Here, the creature most often linked metaphorically with hard work is instead depicted as building its dam not because of industriousness, but because of a sense of mischief and enjoyment. Spring fever, it seems, may touch the animal kingdom as well as the human. Throughout this second stanza, Kenyon has described a landscape in motion, a

natural world being released slowly from immobility, from its frozen state, into one in which the air, the water and the animals are beginning to shake off their winter-induced lethargy in preparation for the upcoming cycle of birth and renewal.

Like the turn that occurs when the peony of the first stanza gives way to the ice of the second, the movement between the second and third stanzas is surprising. The images Kenyon built up throughout the second stanza would appear to be leading toward an opening up of emotion, a springtime of hope and expectation. Instead, they build to the revelation that the winter through which the speaker has just passed is emotional as well as physical, a time when her husband has been deciding whether or not he was going to leave her:

> Those days of anger and remorse
> come back to me; you fidgeting with your ring,
> sliding it off, then jabbing it on again. (17-19)

The stanza's brevity (in total, the above three lines) sets it off from the longer stanzas of the rest of the poem, which serves to make it the focal point of the work. The reader moves from the expansiveness of the long second stanza – full of the motion of ice, reeds, breeze, running water, falling trees and beavers – to the short, shocking "days of anger and remorse" where the only motion is that of the speaker's husband taking his ring off, then putting it back on (note the violence implied in "jabbing"). This, then, is the real long winter, the husband holding her immobile within his anger the way a dentist holds a patient immobile within his chair. Unlike the metaphor of the dentist at the start of the poem, which is alleviated by thoughts of a soon-to-be summer, here nothing mitigates the memory of the man fidgeting with his ring, acting out in physical movement his conflicted inner emotions. By ending the stanza with the image of him

"jabbing" the ring back on his finger, Kenyon signals to the reader that, although the husband's decision may have been to stay, it was made in "anger and remorse," not relief and joy.

Neither is it a decision that the speaker is sure will endure. From the third stanza, the poem moves to its final lines:

> The wind is keen coming over the ice;
> it carries the sound of breaking glass.
> And the sun, bright but not warm,
> has gone behind the hill. Chill, or the fear
> of chill, sends me hurrying home. (20-24)

Suddenly, it is winter again. The sun has disappeared and the breeze, that harbinger of spring, has become a wind. It no longer brings the sound of "water rushing over trees" but, instead, "carries the sound of breaking glass," and here, the hopeful, spring-like shattering of the shoreline ice turns into something unpleasant, even ominous. Winter's reappearance spurs on the speaker's fear that her marriage will return to its "frozen" state as well, and she rushes home, afraid that the "chill" of the past few months will once again come back into her marriage.

All around the speaker, nature moves. In her memory, her husband's hands move. But only the poem's title, and its final line (that "hurrying home"), give any image of the speaker moving within the poem. As she walks through the winter/spring/winter landscape, she does not depict her own forward momentum; what is important to her (and to us as readers) is the world through which she moves. That world, and the marriage for which it is a metaphor, hold the speaker immobile – it is not that she does not move, it is that her motion is restrained within certain boundaries (the "anger and remorse" within her marriage; the topography of the space through which

she walks). Those boundaries define her relationship with her husband and, by extension, with the world around her.

Of course, boundaries do not merely constrain; they also define. In Audre Lorde's "Walking Our Boundaries" (The Black Unicorn, 1978), the poem's speaker takes comfort from her property lines.[3] Like the opening of "Walking Alone in Late Winter," Lorde's poem begins with the season – the same one as Kenyon's poem, but with a difference. While Kenyon's winter is ongoing, and the possibility of spring only appears in the second stanza, Lorde establishes at the start that winter is fading: "This first bright day has broken / the back of winter" (1-2). Thus, even though her next line depicts a relationship in crisis ("We rise from war" (3)), Lorde signals in the poem's opening that there exists for the speaker and her partner the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. They get out of bed "to walk across the earth / around our house / both stunned that sun can shine so brightly / after all our pain / Cautiously we inspect our joint holding" (4-7). Still hurt and angry, the women move outside to become literally *grounded* as they move about their property. There is hope here in the new day, and in knowing it is "our house" and "our joint holding" that the women walk out to inspect.

While Kenyon's speaker moves out into a wilder landscape, Lorde's sticks close to home. Rather than ice-covered reeds and bushes, the speaker in "Walking Our Boundaries" finds that "part of last year's garden still stands / bracken / one tough missed okra pod clings to the vine / a parody of fruit cold-hard and swollen" (9-12). This is not the imagined fertility of summer in "Walking Alone in Late Winter"; it is a

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[3] I am grateful to the students in my Spring 2008 Contemporary Women's Poetry course at St. Francis College for their discussion of Kenyon's and Lorde's poems.

clear-eyed view of a winter-killed garden. While Kenyon's imaginary peony bud was plump and rounded with life, Lorde's okra pod is "a parody of fruit," bursting not with imminent growth but dead and "swollen" because it first rotted and then froze. This is not to say that Lorde is pessimistic about what is to come, for she ends the stanza thusly: "underfoot / one rotting shingle / is becoming loam" (13-15). Here, rot is a good thing, turning something man-made that does not belong in a garden (a wooden shingle from the house) into loam, rich soil that will nourish plantings come springtime.

It is not just the earth that is beginning to thaw. The second stanza begins, "I take your hand beside the compost heap / glad to be alive and still / with you" (16-18). The speaker has reached out to her partner (note that she does so next to another example of "good rot," a compost heap that will, like the fallen shingle, fertilize the garden later in the year). She has moved to bridge the gap that their argument has opened between them. Unlike the husband in Kenyon's poem, whose decision to stay is made in anger and resentment, Lorde's speaker is "glad" that she and her partner are still together. They "talk of ordinary articles / with relief" that the fight seems to be over, yet they are still tentative, afraid that too much damage might have been done. They turn toward a natural object, an apple tree, as a harbinger of what lies ahead:

> . . . we peer upward
> each half-afraid
> there will be no tight buds started
> on our ancient apple tree
> so badly damaged by last winter's storm. (21-25)

Just as Kenyon's speaker saw her own motionlessness reflected in the stuck ice sheet, Lorde's women see the future of their relationship within the branches of the apple tree.

They do so

> knowing
> it does not pay to cherish symbols
> when the substance
> lies so close at hand. (26-29)

The speaker's partner touches the tree, then her hand

> falls off the apple bark
> like casual fire
> along my back
> my shoulders are dead leaves
> waiting to be burned
> to life. (32-37)

The woman moves her hand – and her attention – away from the symbol of the tree and places it upon the speaker, kindling both hope and passion within her. Like the dead leaves, the speaker is ready to burst into flames, into life, into the passion and joy of the relationship she had with her partner before their problems began.

This re-kindling will not happen yet, however, for too much still exists between the two women. The sun, shining brightly, is "watery warm" (38) – it has not disappeared, as it does in Kenyon's poem, but it is not at full strength yet, either. The lovers are still trying to find their way back to each other:

> our voices
> seem too loud for this small yard
> too tentative for women
> so in love
> the siding has come loose in spots
> our footsteps hold this place
> together
> as our place
> our joint decisions make the possible
> whole (39-48)

The quick jump from the women in love to the loose siding on the house becomes clear as the speaker explains how it is the women's footsteps, the ways in which they walk

their boundaries, that make “this place” “our place.” It is the “joint decisions” that make the “whole,” that make the relationship work (contrast this with Kenyon’s poem, where the decision as to whether the marriage will end or continue very obviously lies with the husband alone).

These boundaries are not just property lines, however. They are emotional lines as well. How far is too far? How will they define their relationship in the future? Are they safe within their boundaries? The answers to these questions will come later. For now, it is enough that the two women are together, that spring is coming, and that they continue to share responsibility for their house and home.

> I do not know when
> we shall laugh again
> but next week
> we will spade up another plot
> for this spring’s seeding. (49-53)

Domestic walks that explore boundaries do not necessarily have to occur in the countryside. As we have seen with Linda Gregg and Marie Ponsot, many women poets write about walking in the city as well as in nature; one such poet is Grace Schulman.

In Schulman’s “Steps” (Days) the speaker and her husband are walking up the staircase to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan as a mother and her child are descending. “‘And down and down and down,’ / the toddler’s mother sings as he clears every ledge. // Midway we cross their path” (1-3). This is an inversion of the expected metaphor, where the child and his mother would be ascending the stairs (an act signifying the long life ahead of them) while the older speaker and her husband would be coming down, the descent representing their oncoming death. Here, the ascent is made treacherous by age and agility (or, rather, the lack of it). To the speaker and her

husband, “In rain, the museum’s steps / loom like the Giant’s Stairway // to Guardi’s Ducal Palace” (5-7). This walk, then, will be vertical rather than horizontal, physically bounded not by property lines or iced-over ponds, but by handrails and cement steps, and with emotional boundaries set not by anger and conflict but by infirmity and the restrictions that growing old places upon the human body. The speaker recognizes these restrictions as she and her husband ascend: “‘And up and up and up’ / is what I do not say // as you stagger for balance” (8-10). Ascending to the museum is not an easy walk for either of them; it requires careful negotiation of the rain-slicked steps. This was not always the case, however:

> Once I’d scaled that summit,
> hunted over the crowd,
>
> and saw you below, holding
> two hot dogs and white roses;
> you vaulted, took the steps
> two at a time, then three,
> and leaped to where we met. (11-17)

The boundaries of age and landscape seemed nearly nonexistent then, the speaker and her husband taking for granted their youth and physical abilities. It is different for them now, but that does not mean that everything was better in the past, for after the speaker remembers the image of her husband taking the museum steps in great bounds, she says, “Your smile is broader now. // You see more” (18-19). With age, then, come compensations – psychological and intellectual abilities that increase as physical abilities decrease.

Even with those decreased abilities, as they ascend the museum’s steep staircase “[o]n this day / of wavering” (19-20) the physical effort is worthwhile, for the walk up the rain-slicked steps leads the speaker and her husband to a place where

> . . . we hear
> a Triton blow the horn
>
> where Giotto's Magi open
> hands that rise in air:
> up, and up, and up. (20-24)

This walk, then, leads to an epiphany, both emotional and Biblical (in the form of Giotto's painting). Rather than ending with an encounter with the unknown and unknowable sublime, Schulman's "Steps" ends with a moment of revelation, a lifting of the emotions brought about not just by the art inside the museum, but also by the extreme physical effort it took to walk up the steps to bring about this encounter with beauty.

The difficulty of moving in "Steps" is due to the physical labor required of the speaker and her husband to ascend to the museum. A different type of labor informs a walk in Marjorie Saiser's[4] "Walking the Baby." The first words of Saiser's poem are "My mother" which, combined with the poem's title, set up certain expectations for the reader. These expectations are immediately changed, however, by the poem's first line in its entirety: "My mother picked up a little piece of clotted blood" (1). "Walking the Baby," then, does not refer to a mother pacing the floor with a fussy infant. Saiser has complicated that image by writing a poem about a woman in labor walking the hospital floor (walking the baby who rests inside her womb) and about the mother of that laboring woman who follows along behind her daughter to make sure she is all right (in other words, walking her grown-up baby through the hospital halls). The image of the

[4] A Nebraskan poet, Saiser has won the Vreelands Award and the Nebraska Book Award. Her poems reflect the wide-open landscape of her home state, dealing with not just the land itself but also the lives lived upon that land, particularly those of Saiser's family.

soon-to-grandmother in its entirety shows a capable woman doing what little she can to help:

> My mother picked up a little piece of clotted blood,
> wiped it from the floor with a Kleenex like a piece of jelly,
> a motion of stooping down and scooping up. (1-3)

This stooping and scooping is such an everyday motion for women, a movement the speaker would have seen her mother make a thousand times. This time, however, is different, for the simple motion stands for everything the mother wishes she could do for the speaker but can't (take the pain away, hurry the birth along, guarantee that everything will be all right). "Her purse under her arm" (4), she follows her daughter, who "walked the hall / because the nurse thought walking might help" (12-13). From the back, the mother sees her daughter move in "that hobbling holding groaning posture of motherhood" (15) and tries to watch over her laboring child as best she can. The speaker recognizes that this "posture of motherhood" is only the beginning, for

> . . . motherhood [is] also following it around
> whatever hall it's in, mopping up its spill and its trail,
> its red stain, its red pain,
> and holding on while the doctor
> goes home for Sunday dinner (16-20)

Motherhood means cleaning up your child's messes, both literal and metaphorical. Motherhood means "holding on" when everyone else has gone, acting as witness to your daughter's pain, doing what you can to make things easier for her even if that is only following her around as she walks the halls. All of this is motherhood, but motherhood is more than all of this. Motherhood is

> . . . pain in regular increments
>
> because we've started something here that must be
> stayed with, must be traced after in its wobbly circles,
> its keening cry followed,
> until it can lie carefully and heavily down and deliver.
> (21-25)

"Walking the Baby," then, is something a mother can expect to do for the rest her life. The "pain in regular increments" refers not only to labor pains, but also to the grief and worry a mother experiences on behalf of her child; the "something" that was started there in the hospital is motherhood in its entirety, and being a mother means following your child's "keening cry" as she moves through the world (and her life) in "wobbly circles."

One of those wobbly circles is the path a child takes when she begins to break away from her parents, a fearful, anxiety-ridden, exhilarating time as a daughter starts to differentiate between the type of child she has been and the type of woman she may become. A large part of that *becoming* involves a movement away from the comfort and constraints of her relationship with her mother. Very often, the first manifestation of this necessary separation is walking – the young woman moving away from the safety of home and walking out into the (sometimes dangerous) world beyond her family. What makes that trip a wobbly circle is that, of course, the girl is not parting from her parents for good; this is just a rehearsal for a leave-taking that will occur in the future, a safe round-trip out into the world and back before anything truly bad can happen.

Naomi Shihab Nye captures this out-and-back movement of adolescence in "Clearing," a poem in her 2005 collection <u>You & Yours</u>. She begins the poem as a

mother speaking about her son who gave her "a fat pink eraser for Christmas" (2) last year; an eraser that sits, unused, on her desk. "This year," the speaker explains,

> . . .he handed over
> fifteen plump pink erasers
> encased in plastic
> sealed with a snap.
> And didn't laugh.
> It's been harder and harder
> having a bossy mom around. (5-11)

Unlike the young boy he once was (for whom his mother was his whole world), and unlike the speaker in "Walking the Baby" (who takes comfort from her mother's solid, loving presence), this teenager is at the stage where he longs to separate from his mother (and has no sense of humor about the process).

This occasion of the erasers leads the speaker to remember her own youth, where separation was characterized by walking away from her family, walking out into the world.

> O yes I remember
> walking down by the drainage ditch
> when I was a teen,
> needing to erase something. (12-15)

The something she needed to erase was her "parents' arguing and blame" (16) and their insistence that "they knew me / better than I did" (17-18), "knew which friends / were bad for me" (20-21). The speaker realizes that these problems arise, not out of hatred, but "because they loved me, / of course they loved me" (22-23), which, in some ways, makes the attempt to get out from under her parents' control more difficult; if they hated her, rebellion would come easily.

Instead, she finds herself giving up on the argument and escaping from the house:

> With a single word – *Enough!*
> or – *Okay!* – I would rise
> and step outside
> into a pink sky that
> softened painlessly into
> radiant stripes.
> And I would walk under it,
> and own it,
> past the small sad houses,
> down the hill lined with trees,
> away from my family. (24-34)

The speaker may have felt powerless when arguing with her parents, but by walking out into the sunset she could "own" the very sky under which she walked. She could pass by the "small sad houses" (which represent her parents' life as she sees it) and take for herself – through walking – the power to move away from her family and out into the world. She walked, "[f]eeling closer to birds / than any person, // longing for another nest / clearing the language that fed me / clean from my mind" (35-39), indulging, as many adolescents do, in a fantasy of leaving home and finding some place better, some place where she could put behind her parents' influence (that "language that fed" her) and establish herself as a person separate from her family. Walking gave her the freedom to indulge in these fantasies, but temporarily, for all her thoughts of a new nest and a different language are "just for a time. / Just for a short time" (40-41). These final lines signal that the speaker's adolescent self recognized that her leave-taking, her walking out, was just a rehearsal, a safe way to navigate that wobbly circle that leads away from – and then eventually back to – her parents. In time, these rehearsals will lead to the speaker's decision about which path to walk through life, and when she is ready to start out on that path alone.

Whomever the walking woman may be in a poem, she will find that her life becomes, in some way, represented by the path she chooses to walk. There are times when walking becomes a way for women to establish themselves within their own lives; rather than an escape, or a trial, a walk for these women is a pleasure, an extension of who each woman is and the role she plays in the world.

One poem that describes just this type of walking is Marilyn Hacker's "April Interval" (River). This 30-line poem is not a sonnet, yet it is divided into three quatrains that follow the Sicilian sonnet form (iambic pentameter, with an abba, cddc rhyme scheme) and one sestet that echoes, but does not follow, the Sicilian form. The structure and the rhythm of the poem mirror the regular, rhythmic footsteps of a woman walking – both language and footfalls have an even pace, and a cadence that keeps up a regular tempo (something Hacker acknowledges in the poem when she says that "perhaps irregularities, slow stops, / burst-starts of footfall echo feats of verse" (11-12)).

For the speaker in Hacker's poem, walking defines her life. "Wherever I surface I reinvent / some version of the Daily Walk to Town: / two miles rewarded with an hour's browse round / the market square or its equivalent" (1-4). She establishes herself through these daily walks, her way of making herself feel at home wherever she happens to be at the moment. This is a solitary pursuit, and one that must be accomplished on foot: "Company is as unwanted as a car" (7). Driving, or walking with a companion, would somehow cut the speaker off from her experience of the world around her, place a barrier between her walk and her life, thus severing the one from the necessary other. She acknowledges a number of possible reasons for this walking: the

connection between footfalls and verse, or "escaping Nurse Conscience to look for Mother in the shops" (9-10).

> Perhaps it's just that I procrastinate
> incorrigibly, as I've always done,
> justified by a footpath splashed with sun.
> Precipitation is precipitate. (13-16)

Whatever the reason for her walks, they have become entwined with the rest of her life. "Now I'm an orphaned spinster with a home" (17), she explains, "where spoils of these diurnal expeditions / can be displayed in prominent positions" (18-19). A "crazy quilt" will be hung in the "front room" (20),

> its unembarrassedly polychrome
> velvet rhomboids and uneven satin
> patches lined with fancywork, no pattern
> twice. She painted flowers and leaves on some
> a hundred years ago. I know it's "she." (21-25)

This piece of woman's work, this carefully sewn riot of shapes and patterns, has found a home with a modern walking woman, connecting the "she" who walks with the "she" who sews in a way both tangible and touching. It is a thing of chaos and beauty, found during one of the speaker's daily walks, and it will hang in the front room as testimony to the artistry of women's work. It will also serve to make the speaker's world a little better. "'The life,' at my age, will only be 'sweet' / as I make it" (26-27), and one way she can do so it to gather her "spoils" – her lovely, homely, woman's things – around her wherever she happens to "surface." Another way she can do so is to continue walking.

> . . .I can't guarantee
> myself a Boston marriage or more money,
> but I can be outdoors and on my feet
> as long as I'm still sound, and it's still sunny. (27-30)

The speaker doesn't know whether she will ever find a woman to share her world, or if she will become successful in the traditional consumer-culture sense of the word, but she does know that being "outdoors" and "on my feet" will serve quite well as a way of life for her.

Walking, then, provides a (literally) down-to-earth way for a woman to move through her life. With her feet touching the ground, the walking woman experiences quotidian details directly; she sees, hears, smells and touches what is around her. Her bodily motion becomes her way of connecting to her world, and this connection is one of the things that make women's walk poems so powerful an expression of female experience. In the next and final chapter, I will discuss the ways in which this female bodily experience, coupled with women poet's metaphors of motion, can lead not only to an encounter with the sublime but to a moment – albeit it brief – of poetic transcendence.

Chapter Six – Transcendence

Women wander, and women walk. They dance, they drive, they even fly. Women move through the world, and in doing so make their mark upon it – and the world makes its mark upon them.

The work of female poets reflects the quotidian realities of this moving-through-the-world and transforms it, *moving it* from the everyday to the universal, taking the subjectivity of a particular body progressing through a particular landscape of space and time and turning the experience into metaphors of motion that express collective aspects of human experience. Women journey through their poetry, and while that journey is often represented as down-to-earth and experiential, many times it ends in something much larger and more universal. "Poems are not just *about* journeys, of course, they *are* journeys – surreptitiously, silently, staying in one place the way plants do" (Wright 260). The poem itself – the way it moves down the page, the way the words lead one into the other – is part of the speaker's quest.

This is not to say that the speakers of the poems discussed in this work are somehow epic heroes undertaking an odyssey (in its original meaning of a journey that begins and ends in the same place). The women in these poems all experience some sort of change, no matter how small. As Mary Ann Caws explains, contrasting what she calls women's "epilyric" poetry with Susan Stewart's definition of the epic hero (in Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation), "[U]nlike the epic hero, the heroine or narrator of the poem. . ., the person speaking whom I am calling the epilyric author or heroine is very much not the same at the closure of the poem as at the beginning of the narration or meditation. She has put it all together, quested, learned,

and – in her own epilyric way, triumphed. She has nothing of the sacred text about her, or of the Logos, as in Word done in caps, but she is rather very much a character both of speech, of voice, of contingency, and of the moment as well as of the home, the study, and the street." The home, the study and the street. These are the places through which women move, and these are the locations in which they set their poetry. Women poets walk through their neighborhoods seeking fresh fruit and vegetables, they drive cross-country looking for a place to stop and reflect, they fly above the landscape (in reality or in their imaginations) trying to locate a space of safety and peace. Women in motion seek many things, and in the best of their poetry, what the poet, and the reader, find at the end of the quest (and the poem) is not just the object of this search, but also a moment of transcendence.

Transcendence takes many forms in women's poetry of motion. There are times when transcendence represents the Kantian and Aristotelian ideal of moving beyond the material to the divine. In the context of this discussion, however, transcendence can also mean that moment when the epilyric heroine moves beyond (*transcends*) her own limitations, her own bodily experience, and opens herself up to the world. Transcendence can be achieved when a poem's speaker realizes that, instead of moving away from her life, she wishes to stay within it. Transcendence can also occur when the epilyric heroine realizes that she is trapped, motionless, unable to move: the moment when resignation can become something else, something that transcends – moves beyond – helplessness and despair and becomes understanding (even, in some cases, acceptance). Whether this moment is ultimately successful or not, it is always – as Caws suggests – a triumph, for the speaker has learned something from her journey,

from her movement through the world, and the poet has taken what she learned and transformed it into language, into words on the page.

This moment of transformation, of transcending one's own experience, is the point in space and time toward which the woman-in-motion is progressing, the whole *point*, if you will, of the poem itself. As Charles Wright said, "I think it's what's at road's end that is important, that where the road leads is where the meaning is: it's not the telling of the story that's important, it's what the story has to tell. The telling is interesting, but the point is what's transcendent." Each journey ends where it must end, just as each poem does. "[M]eaning is meaning, and. . .journey's end is the end of the journey, not some intermediate point" (259-60). Each of the poems discussed in this work ends where it should, with the moment of transcendence that marks the completion of the speaker's journey, the speaker's quest.

That quest may be the search for God, or it may be something much smaller and more personal, as is the case with Diane Lockward's[1] "Seventh-Grade Science Project." Lockward begins her poem (published in the Harvard Review in 2008) with the line, "I ran in a field of wildflowers," conjuring the image of free and easy movement. But her metaphor of motion – that of a child catching butterflies – is much more complicated, for the child's father, "by summertime. . . / had already left with his / beautiful mistress" (6-8). Her mother "stayed inside and loafed" (9) while the child collected butterflies for a science project. The poem itself moves back and forth across the page, which at first glance would seem to be merely a way of mimicking the child running around in a field. But as the reader's eye moves down the page, she discovers that the motion of the lines

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[1] Lockward is a New Jersey poet whose collection What Feeds Us won the Quentin R. Howard Poetry Prize.

(like the motion of the child) is regimented and methodical. Far from joyful freedom, the grim back-and-forth movements of the child's search for butterflies (echoed in the back-and-forth of the poem's lines on the page) represents her emotional need for both order and control at a time when her life lacks both those things.

Lockward's poem, like Bishop's "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore" (see Chapter 3), is full of color, with "day lilies aflame in orange // and red, buttercups, purple / clover, and wild roses" (12-14), but the hues of Lockward's wildflowers are far from Bishop's playful profusion of blues. They are a catalog, a list, controlled like the butterflies captured in the child's homemade net and then identified and arranged for display. Indeed, in both these works the poets use the image of butterflies, but where Bishop's represent flight and freedom, Lockward's "swallowtail, / monarch, fritillary and mourning / cloak" are caught, killed, and mounted on a display board. Like the speaker's mother, who is pinned within the house by her grief, Lockward's once-free butterflies are literally pinned when the child "stuck a straight pin // precisely into the center / of the thorax and eased / the wings apart" (30-33).

Catching and mounting her specimens comes at a cost to the child, however, for she endures "pin-pricked fingers, wasp // stings, and blood on my arms" (39-40) from the thorns of the wild roses. Nothing about this process – running through the wildflowers, the way the child "learned / how to sneak up on a butterfly" (18-19) and then "dropped each / hostage onto a wad of Clorox- / soaked cotton inside the kill jar" (23-25) – is pleasurable or fun. She is grimly determined to commit what her mother calls her "tiny murders" and somehow, some way, put her life back into some sort of order.

Like “The Hang-Glider’s Daughter” by Marilyn Hacker (see Chapter 3), “Seventh-Grade Science Project” ends with a young girl experiencing a moment of transcendence, but unlike the speaker in Hacker’s poem, who constructs her own freedom by embracing oncoming adulthood under terms she dictates, Lockward’s child appears to be neither free nor in command of her life. Her father is physically absent, her mother emotionally so, and her need for order and control manifests itself in her motion through the fields. At the poem’s moment of transcendence, however, there is a transformation of the young girl’s desperate need to catch and catalog the butterflies. In defiance of the methodical movement of the poem, at the end the speaker says, “All that summer // I ran like something wild and left / my multi-colored fingerprints / on everything I touched” (42-45). There is still no joy here, for her wildness was as much a manifestation of her desperation as of her motion, but the moment of transcendence does arrive, carried along by the image of a young girl, fingers covered in the dust from butterflies’ wings, making her mark upon the world through which she moves.

Not every poem depicts a woman leaving her mark upon the world. Sometimes, a work’s moment of transcendence comes at the point when the world leaves its mark upon the woman. May Swenson, for example, experiences transcendence in that most mundane of places, the subway, in her poem “Riding the A,” originally published in <u>To Mix With Time</u> in 1963. Like Lockward’s poem, Swenson’s work uses the way the words are laid out upon the page to mimic the speaker’s experience of riding the subway. Unlike Lockward, this metaphor of motion, of “a lit / corridor that races / through a dark / one” (15-18), is joyfully sexual. The short-short lines, and the irregular rhyme scheme, reproduce upon the page the rollicking experience Swenson’s speaker

has riding the A train (literally) and having sex (metaphorically). She has no control over her movements whatsoever, feeling “like a ball- / bearing in a roller skate” (4-5) as she rocks back and forth in the subway car. All around the speaker is gray: her raincoat, the “hollow / of the car” (8-9), “the slate / window” (12-13), but the monotone adds to the excitement rather than detracting from it. Everything builds to a moment of ecstatic transcendence:

> Wheels
> and rails
> in their prime
> collide,
> make love in a glide
> of slickness
> and friction.
> It is an elation
> I wish to pro-
> long. (27-36)

but just as the peak (climax) is nearly achieved, “The station / is reached / too soon” (37-39). The metaphor of motion Swenson uses is that of a ride in a subway car representing sexual intercourse which ends “too soon” for the poem’s speaker – *transcendence interruptus*, one might say. Swenson’s speaker does at least glimpse the moment of transcendence in the elation she desires to “prolong,” and this brief instant was brought on by the motion of the train in which she rides, representing the motion of her partner in the act of making love. Swenson’s is a profane transcendence, profoundly bodily in nature; it has nothing to do with the metaphysical, and everything to do with earthly experience.

Although it does not occur in Swenson's poem, earthly experience can lead to metaphysical transcendence in women's poetry of motion, as in Jean Garrigue's[2] "Moondial" (originally published in 1973's posthumous Studies for an Actress and Other Poems). With "a voice at once formal, compassionate and concise" (Sampson), Garrigue sought the metaphysical moment, the coming together of experience and emotion and the possibility of transcendence. As her editor at Macmillan, Arthur Gregor, remembered, "In much of her poetry Jean strove for the intoxication of the unity of being of which her intense romantic spirit and her metaphysical vision were entirely capable" (Shea et al. 21). Nowhere is this unity of being better illustrated than in her poem "Moondial" (Selected).

From the time Garrigue was a child, explained her sister Marjorie Garrigue Smith, the "moon especially intrigued her" (Shea et al. 4), and the poet puts this fascination to good use in "Moondial." "Forests, so often places of claustrophobia and limitation in the poet's early work, are sculpted by moonlight and as such rendered beneficent and artfully shaped through female power" (Upton 81). Garrigue's metaphor of motion in "Moondial" is a walk through the woods, and "her poem is organized around the action of walking," with "illusion and movement, especially vertical movement, dominat[ing] the poem" (Upton 81). Yet there is more to "Moondial" than the walk in the forest upon which most critics and theorists focus, for Garrigue begins

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[2] A Guggenheim Fellow and National Book Award nominee for her 1964 collection Country Without Maps, Jean Garrigue was born Gertrude Louis Garrigus in Evansville, Indiana and changed her name when she moved to Greenwich Village in New York. A formalist whose elaborately crafted lines often require multiple readings, Garrigue was well known in the 1950s and 60s; she was not a writer who adapted to the looser, more experimental styles of poetry coming into favor in the 60s and 70s, however, and after her death from Hodgkin's Disease in 1972 her poems became less and less popular. The publication of her Selected Poems in 1992 helped introduce her to a new generation of readers, and while she has not enjoyed the popularity of contemporaries such as Elizabeth Bishop and Anne Sexton, Garrigue is being read and studied more today than she was twenty years ago.

not in moon-washed beauty but in a heat-stunned landscape of "flaming fields / Filled to the brim with scorch, tasting of singe / And bake and brown" (2-3). This is Lockward's field of wildflowers in the worst of the "last of summer" (16), with "a tangle of long-legged flowers, / Their faces put askew upon their stalks" (4-5) and butterflies no longer flitting from nectar-filled flower to nectar-filled flower, but who instead must "test what flowers are left, / Riding them down from prong to prong" (11-12). The air is filled "with this thin harsh and hacksaw whirr / Of insects" (13-14) and "Sahara flames / Upon the tracked and rutted, bare-bit ground / Where feet have trod it to a kingdom come" (25-26). All is harsh and unforgiving, the heat relentless and the sound of insects, "these small stringsmen of the grass / Who pluck the long high C" (34-35), nearly overwhelming. This is where the poem's speaker is walking at the moment, and as she walks she *remembers* a walk she once took with her lover in the moonlit woods:

> Into this parched land I come, to the long
> Starvation by skies, while in my heart's
> A counter point – (27-29)

Thus, Upton is correct when she says that the speaker "makes, through a bodily poetics of movement, the outward design of her desires" (81), but it is important to keep in mind that the poem is describing a walk that has already taken place. Thus, the speaker's desire acts on two levels: she wants the "counter point" of the moonlit walk, and she wants the moment of transcendent unity she and her lover achieved while on that walk.

The speaker wishes to return to "the road so splashed by shade / And then so trodden white where the moon fell in" (30-31), contrasting the gentleness of the moonlight's presence on the road with the "bare-bit ground" of the summer over which

she currently moves. “I would cross,” she says, “by battling stones / Those streams we did of fumy mist” (38-39), and here we see how, with the “splashed” road and the rushing streams, Garrigue’s epilyric heroine points out the vast difference between the sere, parched summer landscape through which she walks alone and the fertile, water-filled forest she and her lover moved through in her remembered past. The “female power” of the moon (and of the poet) alluded to by Upton is no longer a part of the speaker’s journey; she walks alone across “Earth ribbed to a near extreme” (7) and the lush “Tier upon tier of rich, broad-plated leaves” (52) have given way to “gasping trees, some dying / At the top” (3-4). Nothing in the world where she now walks ties her to the lush, female-ness of the forest of the past.

The speaker and her companion “walked in moonstuff, lawn and tissue of it” (49). All around them, moonlight, “Fey governor of the insubstantial” (59), lay “heaped” in the meadows and “browsed” in the pastures and spread the “supernatural substance of [its] light” (82) throughout the woods through which they journeyed; this is a “moon that stared us blind / Or me” (36-37). The moon, like the two walking women, moves throughout the forest (and throughout the poem), and when they finally step into her presence the speaker and her companion are nearly overcome:

> And thus she [the moon] ascends, descends,
> Making her acres everywhere
> When from the press of shadows we come out
> Into the full untutored dazzle lying bare,
> Hills rounded on hills, cobweb sewn. (88-92)

The moonlight is female, fertile, and full of contradictions: “Myth-making mist and resurrecting light / How still and calm and yet the vapors toil / Up flank and crest to erect their castles there” (93-95). The moonlight has taken possession of the entire

landscape, blazing over hill and valley, but the speaker feels no fear: "Nothing of this will burn us. It is wet" (96).

The walking women now stand still, bathed in moonglow and part of the natural landscape: "We were animals of the moon" (105) and its light was everywhere, "Its tumult trilled the vein of every thing / And dressed the trees. / Perfect they stood and were the more perfected" (109-111). The speaker and her companion give thanks to the light "for falling as it did / To show their [the trees'] every tangle in the whole / Of wildest, most cross-flowing intricacy" (112-114). This intricacy, the way the moonlight weaves within the leaves at the same time that it bathes the women standing rapt in its glow, signals the onset of the poem's moment of transcendence. "Such wildness asked for ceremony. / We rose and then we danced a formal tread" (115-116) and the women are roused into motion again, they are swept up in the power of the moonlight, and the poem is swept along to its moment of metaphysical climax:

> We drank the air that drank of moon,
> Deceptions that it practised – or were they
> Intensifyings of the way things were,
> Crazings to the blind who see they see
> Or think they do? It flows upon them,
> They are washed in curd,
> Original essence they say they've fallen on
> It is too fair, it bewilders them,
> Their senses thrash, they behold, they die
> Into one another, into grass, the wanderer airs,
> Dying would not ask to be reborn.
> There is a moment on the moondial. It has come. (120-131)

This wonderful blend of sexual ecstasy, spiritual awakening, and near-religious epiphany is exactly what Gregor described when he said that Garrigue, "strove for the intoxication of the unity of being." Here the moonlight, the grass, the women, even the

air that the women breath, become as one, joined in a unity both physical and metaphysical.

The poem does not end here, however, for this is a *remembered* moment of transcendence. The speaker has moved to another place, at a different time, stranded alone in a "Balding of grasses burnt and white with dust, the lank weed bitten with zest" (8-9), with no one for company except the "ill-trained grasshopper" (10) and those hungry butterflies. She has come into a parched land, and questions the inevitability of her lonely journey. "And must the moon thin and the light grow dull / And all that dazzling sunlight of the dark / Be strained through gauze for nothing?" (132-134), she asks?

> And must the dawn wear the world away
> Of mystifying touch in twining light
> When by a window flows the night
> Die to the mind as the light goes out
> And the wings open of day and you perceive
> A slaughter of innocents –
> Some long antennae or a gossamer thigh –
> Fragments of the ephemeras. (139-146)

Is this all that she can hope for, a solitary (perhaps hopeless) journey through a barren landscape? "Must I beg to be washed of the moon dust / As I soothe the enfevered flowers of fissured earth?" (149-150).

One thing can help sustain this epilyric heroine as she travels alone in the late-summer heat: the memory of that "moment on the moondial," that ephemeral transcendence she experienced in the forest:

I raise again these moon-splashed fields,
Like half-remembered legends I recount
How apparitions skeined us in a coil
Where wholly given, wholly found,
Our beings' threads were wound.
Secessions, then, by sun!
But not from the One.

This "One" is not a divine being for Garrigue. Hers is a pagan metaphysics, based in a physicality similar to May Swenson's in "Riding the A," but while for Swenson sexual climax is the purpose of the ride, for Garrigue the journey ends not with mere physical release but with a *coming together* (in both the crude and the polite meanings of the phrase). The transcendent unity she and her companion experienced in the moonlit clearing is something to be wished for, something to be sought out, something not just to remember but to "raise again" like Lazarus from the dead. This metaphysical moment can not only sustain the speaker, but help her as she journeys through a world made barren by the summer sun, a world where innocents are still slaughtered and unity can only be hoped for.

While Garrigue's poem ends with an elusive transcendence based firmly in the physical world, Anne Sexton's posthumously published collection, The Awful Rowing Toward God, depicts a woman's journey as she searches for a beneficent and loving God, a transcendent divine being very much present in the speaker's poetic world. The poems in this collection are fiercely personal and intensely emotional, surrealistic in their imagery and plaintive in their faith. Rowing met with censure and disapproval from a number of literary scholars and critics at the time it was published, and is today still held up as evidence that Sexton's powers as a poet were weakening over time, or somehow debased by her "madness" and suicide attempts. I believe, however, that the

poems in this collection are some of Sexton's most powerful and remarkable work; the poems cut to the bone, exposing the inner working of not only Sexton's poetics but her idiosyncratic faith as well.

Sexton could not write otherwise. As Erica Jong said in her New York Times remembrance of the poet, Sexton "sometimes seemed like a woman without skin. She felt everything so intensely, had so little capacity to filter out pain that everyday events often seemed unbearable to her. Paradoxically it is also that skinlessness which makes a poet. One must have the gift of language, of course, but even a great gift is useless without the other curse: the eyes that see so sharply they often want to close" (169).

That ability to both see sharply and feel deeply helped Sexton create, in The Awful Rowing Toward God, a work that compels the reader to experience the world as the poet does, in all its bleakness and despair, yes, but also as a place in which hope – and the possibility of redemption – do still exist. Sexton takes the reader along with her as she moves through the collection, beginning and ending the work with an epilyric heroine who is rowing a boat, moving through dangerous water in search of transcendence. Far from being inferior, the work in this collection is luminous and compelling in its imagery, language and subject matter, and stands as an example of the ways in which Sexton's work was maturing at the time of her death.

That Sexton's poetry was personal is undeniable. As Alicia Ostriker describes her in an April 2008 posting on the WOM-PO Listserv, Sexton is "a poet of the body, of passion and desire, of laughter and anguish, she is a genius with similes, she is an acute social critic, and she is a poet of spiritual quest comparable to Hopkins" ("Sexton"). It is Sexton's *embodied* spiritual quest with which I am concerned. Ostriker rightly

compares Sexton's work with Hopkins; I – like Frances Bixler – would take the connection even further back, to the metaphysical poets such as Donne and Herbert. Sexton's longing for God's love is as impassioned and physical as Donne's Holy Sonnet 14, which beseeched the Almighty to "Batter my heart, three person'd God." Like Donne and Herbert, and Hopkins after them, Sexton calls out to her God even as she moves toward him, seeking a connection at once physical and metaphysical with the distant (capital-F) Father.

This "calling out" to an unreachable male figure is present in Sexton's poems from the beginning, but in her earlier work Sexton's speakers were motionless, caught in the stasis of madness, waiting for the unreachable man to move toward her. Just a few examples from her first collection To Bedlam and Part Way Back include her addressing her distant psychiatrist in "You, Doctor Martin," speaking to the "Kind Sir" in the woods and, in "Music Swims Back to Me," and requesting that an unnamed man "Wait Mister" (Bedlam). By the time she writes the poems in The Awful Rowing, Sexton has found the ultimate, unreachable, unattainable male figure, and has undertaken what Diane Hume George characterizes as "a ceaseless search for a God she could believe in" (169). This is an important distinction – like Sexton's poetry, her theology was personal and idiosyncratic. Her religious poetry details her attempt to reconcile the God Sexton feared (the fiery, vengeful God of the Old Testament) with the God she longed to find (the loving, forgiving God of the New Testament).

Part of her difficulty with believing in a loving God was her ambivalence about the divinity of Christ. As she wrote to Brian Sweeney in October 1969, "Oh, I really believe in God – it's Christ that boggles the mind" (Sexton Letters 346). And again to

Sweeney in November 1970, Sexton writes, "Yes, it is time to think about Christ again. I keep putting it off. If he is the God/man, I would feel a hell of a lot better" (Sexton Letters 368). This is more than just semantics for Sexton – if Christ was not divine, then the New Testament is a sham. And if the New Testament is a deception, then so is the loving, forgiving God Sexton so longed to believe in. That there is a God, Sexton sometimes doubted ("for some reason I love faith, but have none" (Sexton Letters 137, to Brother Dennis Farrell)) and sometimes believed, although her belief is often cloaked in bravado: in 1966 she wrote, "I have told no one of this fact in my town, including all ministers and priests, but I am pretty God Damn religious if you want to look at it. Once I thought God didn't want me up there in the sky. Now I am convinced he does. And you, too, and why not? There's lots of room up there" (Sexton Letters 285, to Claire S. Degener).

This forgiving God is the cornerstone of Sexton's theological quest. Alicia Ostriker describes how "[m]any of Sexton's letters depict an intense need for faith undermined by solid skepticism" (Writing 73) but this is not skepticism about the existence of God as much as it is about the ability of that God to forgive Sexton herself. For Sexton did not believe that she had merely sinned. As Bixler says, Sexton "saw her gravest problem as being full of personal, internalized evil. . . . Though Sexton's inability to believe in Christ's divinity caused her much frustration, her sense of being evil was her greatest source of anguish. . . .Sins are acts committed against God or other persons. Evil, however, is a state of being" (205). As an evil creature, Sexton believed she might be beyond redemption, beyond hope.

During the final years of her life, Sexton chronicled her search for God most explicitly in The Death Notebooks and The Awful Rowing Toward God. Feeling abandoned by those who loved her, and nearing the finalization of her divorce from her husband, Kayto, Sexton wrote the poems for The Awful Rowing in a white heat. On the folder containing the first draft of the collection, she wrote, “these poems were started 1/10th/73 and finished 1/30th73 (with two days out for despair, and three days out in a mental hospital). I explain this so you will understand they are raw, unworked poems, all first drafts, written in a frenzy of despair and hope. To get out the *meaning* was the primary thing – while I had it, while the muse was with me. I apologize for the inadequate words. As I said in one of the poems, ‘I fly like an eagle, but with the wings of a wren’ (1/31/73)” (Letters 390-91). Despite this disclaimer, Sexton would perform few substantive revisions of the poems before their publication. She seemed to regard the work as inspired, “It’s a bit ‘odd’ but after all, *I* didn’t do it, the typewriter did it” (Sexton Letters 403, to Claire Degener). Here, most particularly in Rowing, Sexton was able to meld poetics and theology, and in doing so, in the words of Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, “succeeded in creating her own private God – perhaps He would never leave her” (Sexton Letters 390).

The first line of the first poem in the collection, “Rowing,” is, “A story, a story!” This line serves a number of purposes. First, “A story, a story!” is the “tell me a story” demand of a child eager to hear a new tale; second, it sets up the story-teller persona of the speaker, a woman chronicling how she was born and how she grew into adulthood. Finally, it serves as an annunciation, signaling to the reader that everything that follows

– not just in this poem but in the entire collection – should be read as part of the same story-teller's tale.

"A story, a story!" is followed by the parenthetical exhortations, "Let it go. Let it come" (2). These commands serve as directions to the storyteller – let go of your fear, let go of your story, let the story out, let the tale be told – and they also mimic, in their coming and going, the motion of the tide, the movement of the ocean the speaker will find herself on by the end of the poem.

The early part of "Rowing" chronicles the speaker's coming of age, her childhood in "the crib / with its glacial bars" (5-6), and her learning proper gender roles through "dolls / and the devotion to their plastic mouths" (7-8). She was forced into conformity in the school with its "little straight rows of chairs" (10), a conformity to which she cannot adapt, for she is awkward and uncomfortable, "undersea all the time, / a stranger whose elbows wouldn't work" (12-13). Yet, despite her inability to move gracefully and properly through the world, the speaker continued to move through her childhood: "I grew" (18), she says. She grew, "and God was there like an island I had not rowed to, / still ignorant of Him, my arms and my legs worked, / and I grew, I grew" (24-26). With this line, approximately halfway through the poem, Sexton introduces the idea of an unknown God, an island yet undiscovered by the speaker, a God whose importance is still hidden from her because her ignorance of Him does not appear to impede her in any way – she can still walk, she can use her arms, and she is still growing. For all her *moving-in-place*, however, she has yet to understand that the great journey of her life, the quest that will take up her final years, is yet to come.

While still growing, and still young, the speaker "wore rubies and bought tomatoes" (27), both bright red symbols of blood and female fertility, but now she is "in my middle age" (28) and looking for something more than the sensuous pleasures of what Ostriker would call "the tactile, the expensive and the devourable" (Writing 70). She is looking, in other words, for the unknown island, for God. "I am rowing, I am rowing / though the oarlocks stick and are rusty" (30-31), the speaker says, and here is the beginning of Sexton's religious quest. She is alone, in a small rowboat, trying to learn how to practice a faith which has become rusty and nearly immobile through disuse. "I am rowing, I am rowing, / though the wind pushes me back" (34-35), Sexton writes, giving us the image of a woman struggling mightily against her own skepticism and shaky belief, a woman who is all alone in a rowboat on the ocean. Thus, The Awful Rowing begins with Sexton seeking an unmediated God, heading out into the ocean herself instead of seeking salvation through Christ. "I know," she says, "that that island will not be perfect, it will have the flaws of life, / the absurdities of the dinner table" (36-38), and in these images Sexton presents us with her own private God, bearing the flaws and imperfections of the everyday human world, but perhaps these flaws are what will help Him understand and forgive not just the speaker's sin, but the evil that lives within her, "the rat inside of me," she calls it, "the gnawing pestilential rat" (41-42). Her dream, her wish, her prayer is that "God will take it" [the rat] "with his two hands / and embrace it" (43-44) once she reaches the island, once she finds her faith. And notice that God does not destroy the rat, the evil that lives inside the speaker, for if he killed the rat he would kill a part of Sexton herself. Instead, God embraces it, granting the rat – and Sexton – absolution and redemption instead of death.

This moment of forgiveness, this union/re-union with her own loving God, is yet to come, however, for the poem's final line reads, "This story ends with me still rowing" (49). The speaker still battles the wind and waves all alone, still searching for an unmediated God, still hoping to find that God without relying upon the intervention and sacrifice of Christ, a figure whose divinity is questionable in Sexton's mind.

The poems that follow "Rowing" and make up the first half of the collection are poems of despair and longing, hope and heartache. In the next poem in the sequence, "The Civil War," the speaker is "torn in two" (1) but will "pry out the broken / pieces of God in me. / Just like a jigsaw puzzle, / I will put Him together again /with the patience of a chess player" (7-11). The ability to create God, then, lies within the poet herself. As Ostriker writes, "only by an unremitting effort to create a God coextensive with her own imagination can the poet hope to be saved" (Writing 79), and we see that possibility of salvation at the poem's end, when the speaker vows that she will "build a new soul, / dress it with skin / and then put on my shirt / and sing an anthem, / a song of myself" (26-30 – referring, of course, to Walt Whitman) Directly following this hopefulness, however, is "The Children," with its images of children "dying in their pens" (18) and "swallowing their monster hearts" (24). "Listen," commands the speaker, "We must all stop dying in the little ways, / in the craters of hate, / in the potholes of indifference – / a murder in the temple" (26-30). She wants to "turn inward into the plague of my soul" (37) and, in the end, find love and salvation "in the private holiness / of my hands" (45-46).

Image builds upon image as the poet tries to come to terms with the loneliness, apathy and cruelty she sees in the world around her. As the reader progresses through

the collection, she comes to realize that the entire work depicts Sexton's movement toward the transcendent divine. The poems mimic her rowing through a pitiless world, a world depicted in the opening poem as the unforgiving ocean but which becomes, over the course of the reader's journey through The Awful Rowing, many different aspects of the human world. Here are "the starving windows" (25) and the telephone with "two flowers taking root in its crotch" (18) of the Surrealist "The Room of My Life," a room where "the objects keep changing" (3) and the speaker finds that she herself, "by all the words in my hands / and the sea that bangs in my throat" (34-35), is causing things to transform before her. Here is the power and the danger of poetry, the changing objects an illustration of the poet's alchemy, her ability to use language to not only alter one's perception of reality but to alter reality itself. This power is purely transformation, not yet transcendence, for these disturbing changes are not to be wished for and cannot be controlled.

The danger of poetry is made more explicit in "The Witch's Life." Here the speaker is "shoveling the children out, scoop after scoop. / Only my books anoint me" (15-17); the speaker must decide whether she will be a poet or a mother to her children. As Margaret Scarborough writes, "A woman cannot be both an artist and a mother, and to choose the life of an artist is to abandon good and to take up with evil, to aspire beyond proper limits" (191). That the speaker chooses poetry is signified by the definitive "Yes" near the poem's end, a "yes" that leads to "It is the witch's life, / climbing the primordial climb, / a dream within a dream, then sitting here / holding a basket of fire" (31-35). Yet this troubles Sexton, because if choosing poetry is choosing evil, is she rejecting the possibility of reaching God at the end of her long journey? By

desiring to perform that "primordial climb," a movement that is perpendicular rather than the horizontal motion of a woman rowing a small boat, is Sexton condemning herself to what she called "the absurdity of the poet reaching for God" (Sexton Letters 398, to Diane Vreuls Friebert)? If she chooses the life of poet, rather than that of wife and mother, will she lose her chance to experience transcendence? The answer to this would seem to be yes, for in "The Fish That Walked," when the poet says, "I long for your country, fish" (33), she is told, "You must be a poet, / a lady of evil luck / desiring to be what you are not, / longing to be / what you can only visit" (35-39). It is not hard to imagine, with the image of the small boat being rowed toward God-the-island still in mind, that "longing to be what you can only visit" refers not just to the salty ocean that is home to the fish, but to God Himself, for what is poetry but a making, a creating? And isn't creation the purview of God?

Sexton's questioning, her despair, grow throughout poems such as "After Auschwitz" and "The Evil Eye." At the center of the collection, however, there is a dramatic turn in "The Sickness Unto Death." The poem begins with the speaker in misery, "God went out of me" she says, "My body became a side of mutton / and despair roamed the slaughterhouse" (1, 6-7). She cannot eat an offered orange, she receives no comfort from the priest, the birds had left. "I saw only the little white dish of my faith / breaking in the crater. / I kept saying: / I've got to have something to hold on to" (20-23). The epilyric heroine is motionless, becalmed in her search for the island/God. Finally, unable to do anything else, the poet explains that "I ate myself, / bite by bite" (31-32), an image of both annihilation and holy communion. And when there is nothing left, the speaker finds that "Jesus stood over me looking down / and He

laughed to find me gone, / and put His mouth to mine / and gave me His air" (36-39). Here, then, at the depth of the poet's despair, she is able to open herself to the – literal – *in-spiration* of Christ. He breathed His air, the Holy Ghost, into her and she lived again. "My kindred, my brother, I said / and gave the yellow daisy / to the crazy woman in the next bed" (40-42). Sexton's search for God is no longer unmediated, for she has "accepted" Christ. This is not a "come to Jesus" moment for Sexton, nor is it an abandonment of her own idiosyncratic faith. Instead, it is an acceptance of the God of the New Testament, the kind and loving and, most importantly, forgiving God for whom she has been searching. She is motionless no more.

The poems that follow "The Sickness Unto Death" signify the poet's slow progress in rowing toward the island-that-is-God. In "Locked Doors" the speaker wishes she could "hold each fallen one in my arms" (31) and allow touch to begin healing their spiritual illness. In "The Wall" she advises the reader to "take off the wall / that separates you from God" (41-42). And "Welcome Morning" is nothing more or less than a psalm of thanksgiving, a brightly lit, joyful celebration of the God "right here in my pea-green house" (18).

The collection ends with "The Rowing Endeth," companion piece to the poem "Rowing" with which Sexton opens the book. "I'm mooring my rowboat / at the dock of the island called God," she writes, a dock "made in the shape of a fish" (a symbol of Christ) "and there are many boats moored at many different docks" (1-5), boats representing fellow travelers-toward-God of many different faiths. Once on "the flesh of The Island" (13), the poet and God "squat on the rocks by the sea" (15) and play a game of poker. The poet wins because she has a straight royal flush. And God wins

because He holds five aces. Some critics read this as Sexton saying that we cannot win because God cheats, others as the poet's embrace of a patriarchal, overbearing God. Some even see the image of God laughing so hard that the laughter is "rolling like a hoop out of His mouth / and into mine," laughing so hard He "doubles right over me" (28-29, 30) as implying rape. To me, however, it is clear that Sexton wants us to rejoice with her, to be happy that her spiritual quest has ended with a loving, forgiving, mirthful God. As Sexton says in "Welcome Morning," "let me paint a thank-you on my palm / for this God, this laughter of the morning, lest it go unspoken. // The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard, / dies young" (28-32). In "The Rowing Endeth," Sexton wants to share her joy at finding a God, her "Dearest dealer" (35), whom she could love so much, love for His forgiveness and acceptance and understanding, love for His "untamable, eternal, gut-driven *ha-ha* / and lucky love" (38-39). This is Sexton's moment of transcendence, there in the company of the divine being, a moment of both laughter *and* love, a moment that signifies that this epilyric heroine has, indeed, reached the end of her journey.

"Every journey is the same journey, and every journey is different. . . . One goes where one is called" (Wright 267). Women experience many different calls to motion. The quotidian details of a life lived as a woman include moving through the world, and this motion becomes a part of the poetry that women write. As Joyce Carol Oates said, "Walking and driving a car are part of my life as a writer, really. I can't imagine myself apart from these activities" (Phillips 432). Women walk, drive, ride, dance and fly through their poetry, and these kinds of motion provide rich metaphors for writers who are exploring the everyday experience of being women in a world of motion.

I do not claim that all women use metaphors of movement in the same way. For every poet discussed in this work, there are dozens more who view motion differently. Just as there is no single feminine voice, there is no single meaning which can be ascribed to movement within women's poetry. For some, being able to move represents political activism; for others, it signifies a breaking away from societal traditions. For still others, the freedom of motion can only be imagined and immobility comes to define a particular poem. Indeed, metaphors of motion can mean different things to the same poet at different times in her life. As with any study of a broad literary topic, this work cannot hope to encompass all the ways in which the metaphors of motion are used by women writers; what it does provide is an overview of the use of movement in some contemporary poets' work, and suggestions as to the ways we might examine motion in other women's writing.

How a poem's subject moves is as important as the fact *that* she moves. Elizabeth Bishop's lone traveller takes a bus from Nova Scotia to Boston, and along the way a moose appears from the woods. The hang-glider's daughter in Marilyn Hacker's poem sprawls in the backseat of her father's car, motionless herself yet relaxing into the movement of the automobile. In both these cases, the rocking of a vehicle leads the poem's subject to a state of meditation: the traveller's "dreamy divagation" that is interrupted by the driver putting on the bus's brakes, and the daughter's seemingly-scattered rumination on her shoes, the olive terraces she sees from the car and, ultimately, the very nature of herself as a human being. This passive *stillness-within-movement* of a passenger is quite different from the experiences of the women who drive in Dorianne Laux's poems, or the women who walk in the poetry of Grace

Schulman, Audre Lorde and Marie Ponsot. Indeed, the woman who drives in Laux's "What Could Happen" has an entirely different experience of motion than does the driver/speaker in Laux's "Abschied Symphony" – the former sees the possibility of escape embodied in her battered old car, while the latter is caught within a cycle of grief symbolized by her drive home from the hospital. The experience of moving through the world, then, is mitigated by the means used to achieve this motion, and by the purpose behind that motion.

In many of these poems, the woman-in-motion is performing "woman's work" that requires her to walk to the store, drive home from the hospital, or help a loved one up slippery stairs. Indeed, woman's work itself often embodies motion: the back-and-forth of the shuttle through the loom, or of the embroidery needle through fine linen. A woman's daily chores require repetitive motion, such as going out for the mail, or moving between stove and sink as she prepares dinner. By taking everyday woman's work and making it the subject of poetry, contemporary American women writers give this work significance, take it from what appears to be a personal, domestic sphere and make it representational of human experience. Far from focusing on what Roger Gilbert sees as a "single experiential center" at the expense of "connecting disparate kinds of experience" into a (masculine) universal whole (*cf.* my discussion of walk poems in Chapter 5), women who use metaphors of motion in their poetry are asking their readers to examine just what it means to be human in the world today. That their experience is gendered female rather than male does not make the experiences any less legitimate or important (nor, of course, does the gendering make it more important). While we can hope that the overt misogyny of articles such as Hayden Carruth's

untitled 1965 discussion of Jean Garrigue, where he complains about her "mannerisms of fashionable femineity" (Carruth 134), are a thing of the past, the tendency still exists among some (mostly, but not all, male) critics and reviewers to be dismissive of the subjects women poets use in their work.

Just as men write from their experiences of the world, women write that way as well. That the experiences of men and women differ is obvious, of course, and the area in which this difference is most striking is in the poet's ability to move through his or her world. Men are granted a freedom of motion that, even today, is withheld from many women. Thus, when women poets use metaphors of motion, freedom lies at the heart of their work. Fetters upon women's physical freedom are not a thing of the past; being able to move, and being restrained from moving, are still important to women (whether those women write or not). Sometimes, as in the work of Kathryn Stripling Byer, familial and societal pressures hold a woman immobile. Whether the cause of a woman's immobility is external, or pressure she puts upon herself, it can hold her in place just as firmly as a butterfly pinned to a display board. How she deals with the stasis in which she is caught can make for interesting, often compelling, poetry.

As Charlotte Perkins Gilman suggests, life *is* a verb, and women poets who use metaphors of motion understand this. They deal with issues of power, questions of freedom, and the possibility of having the space and time (and money) to move through the world as they choose. "Spaciousness. . .means being free; freedom implies space. It means having the power and enough room in which to act. It means having the ability to transcend the present condition, and that transition implies, quite simply, the power to move" (Fryer 50).

When Virginia Woolf wrote, in 1929, about the need a woman writer has for a room of her own, she was thinking about the need for a place in which a woman author could write, a place that was hers alone. Now, as we enter the 21st century, we find that contemporary American women poets are redefining the word "room," expanding it to mean not just *a* room in a house, but *the* room to move about in the world, a spatial and temporal plane of existence for women, a physical spaciousness in which creativity, experience and language come together and merge into powerful metaphors of motion that represent both the particularity of "fashionable femineity" and the universals of human experience.

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