

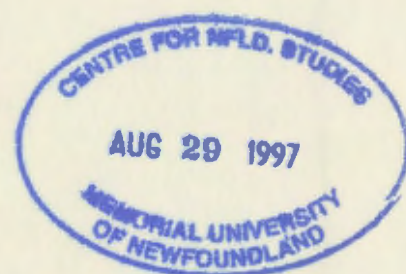
FEMINIST NOSTALGIA FOR HEALING AND STRENGTH:
MNEMONIC SITES AND SIGNS IN BRONWEN WALLACE'S
POETRY AND PROSE

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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Feminist Nostalgia for Healing and Strength:
Mnemonic Sites and Signs in Bronwen Wallace's Poetry and Prose

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A thesis submitted to the
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Abstract

From her earliest published poems in the early 1980's to her final posthumous works of short stories and prose poems in the early 1990's, the remembered past is a constant undercurrent throughout Bronwen Wallace's work. While some might criticize Wallace for including nostalgic sentiments in her lyrical, mnemonic constructions of history, Wallace recovers and reconstructs a home of and for women precisely from her decidedly feminist nostalgia. Nostalgic reminiscence is also the key to the door of the subconscious, allowing Wallace to explore the complex remembered past as a means towards understanding identity. As Wallace finds when constructing an historical home in her earlier work, subjectivity is built upon similarly tenuous ground in her later work.

Mnemonically rich sites or signs often prompt one to recall the past. Wallace uses photographic imagery as a powerful site for nostalgic sentiments. Photographs at once invite recollection and ensure regret. The time and place presented in a photograph discloses as much as it conceals, by presenting a sanctioned, picture-worthy version of the past that does not always coincide with Wallace's memories or reveal the information she needs to recover a personally valid, female ancestry. As well, the photograph functions as a potent sign for defining subjectivity, as the self can always be explained and proven by the tenuous testimony photographs provide.

Finally, the scar surfaces as site for nostalgia in Wallace's later writing. As a totem from the past, a scar ensures memory; as a site of injury and healing, it also ensures regret. As such, Wallace's use of scar imagery speaks clearly to a regret

particularly enjoined upon women who have survived domestic violence. Bronwen Wallace uses the scar as an emblem for recovery and strength upon a damaged, physical site. Thus, Wallace's feminist nostalgia does not function as a prescription for the future, but rather as a means towards change and possibility, where once only limitation prevailed.

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	ii
Dedications	v
Introduction Bronwen Wallace's Nostalgic Expression	1
Chapter 1 There's No Place Like Home: Bronwen Wallace's Historical Return in <u>Marrying Into The Family</u>	12
Chapter 2 Moving Away From the Past: Bronwen Wallace's Mnemonic Return in <u>Signs of the Former Tenant</u>	37
Chapter 3 Photographic Memory: The Photo as Nostalgic Site in <u>Marrying Into The Family</u> and "The Scuba Diver in Repose"	63
Chapter 4 Body Braille: The Scar as Nostalgic Site in <u>People You'd Trust Your Life To</u>	99
Conclusion Ghost Story: Bronwen Wallace's Haunted Nostalgia	118
Works Cited	126

For my grandmother, Anne (Kisluk) Sniderman, 1914- .

In memory of my grandmother, Betty “Basha” (Boleslawsky) Cohen, 1911-1991.

In memory of Bronwen Wallace, 1945-1989.

INTRODUCTION:

Bronwen Wallace's Nostalgic Expression

The trick is to keep looking towards the future thus cancelling out nostalgia.
Gail Scott. Heroine. (84)

NOSTALGIA IS A WEAPON

Douglas Coupland. Generation X: Tales For an Accelerated Culture. (151)

How else to catch sight of the future without first making peace with the past?
Diane Schoemperlen. In the Language of Love. (334)

In a 1988 interview, Canadian writer Bronwen Wallace expresses her concerns about "being viewed as this single-minded narrative poet who just tells nice stories about her past" (4). She does not tell "just nice stories" about the past, for her nostalgic impulse leads her to an enigmatic historical context--a home comprising an ever-expanding sense of community--not towards desire for an idealized past. For Wallace, nostalgia is not a weapon which the powerful (or once powerful) wield to maintain (or recover) strength. In Wallace's writing, nostalgia is a tool for the displaced (those lacking a well-defined history and therefore home) with which to dig.

Bronwen Wallace was a poet, a short story writer, a columnist for The Kingston Whig-Standard and a documentary film maker. She was on the editorial board of Quarry, a Kingston based literary journal, edited Coming Attractions: 1989, an annual publication of new Canadian fiction, with Maggie Helwig and taught creative writing at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Wallace died in August 1989, at the age of forty-four, leaving behind her partner, Chris Whynot, her child, Jeremy, many friends

and a substantial body of work, including four posthumous publications. Bronwen Wallace died from cancer of the mouth, a macabre reminder that her literary voice has literally been silenced. That her work explores the individual discovering meaning through the unfolding multi-layered voice in language ironically colours that reminder.

As “an archeologist [sic] of the emotions” (Geddes 1988, 565), Wallace visits and revisits the past. Memory is crucial to Wallace’s archaeological scavenging. Nostalgia ceases to imply a glorious past, worthy of regret, sorrowful longing or wistful memory. Its strength does not apply to upholding power over certain conditions or individuals; for Wallace, nostalgia is useful in achieving autonomous strength and validity through the insight and re-evaluation it supports. Memory is useful to Wallace because it provides mortar for the ever-growing construction of the self. When there is something to recover and discover from the past, a fully-formed and rigidly fixed identity is impossible to assume.

Within a feminist context nostalgic sentiments in literature are problematic, as expressed by Doane and Hodges, in their Nostalgia and Sexual Difference (1987). They argue that “nostalgic writers construct their visions of a golden past to authenticate woman’s traditional place and to challenge the outspoken feminist criticisms of it” (3). Doane and Hodges express a concern that many feminist literary scholars might have when studying fiction that explores memory. What can women gain from remembering the past? A history in which women have had little voice and scant autonomous validity might not be worthy of reminiscent celebration. One may wonder what exactly there

is to be nostalgic about. In Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (1991), Susan Faludi gives a comprehensive and detailed account of the forces working against women's progress and feminism during what Faludi calls the "nostalgia-drenched epoch" of the nineteen-eighties (460). "The backlash decade produced one long, painful, and unrelenting campaign to thwart women's progress," states Faludi (454). The nostalgic backlash of the nineteen-eighties espoused a renunciation of the advances women made towards autonomy and equality during the nineteen-seventies, and harkened back to the nineteen fifties. During the post-war era of the nineteen-fifties fewer women worked outside the home, the nuclear family was a sanctified unit and "father knew best." The more progressive attitudes towards women, emphasizing their value beyond traditional roles that were established during the war were, to a great extent, silenced. In Heroine (1987), Canadian novelist Gail Scott's central character voices one way the backlash recycles old material: "For this is the 80s, but there is a terrible nostalgia for the past. People are buying those 50s lacquered tables with round corners for their kitchens" (25). The kitchen tables of the fifties, while quaint or kitschy, might symbolize a time when women seemed to hold less autonomy than they do now and were represented in more limited and limiting roles; Harriet Nelson, June Cleaver and Betty Crocker were the media's answer to what a woman's role in society was during that time. These paragons of wifely/motherly femininity were no more than caricatures of societal ideals then; now they are clearly unacceptable role models for many women. Scott, Faludi, Doane and Hodges take offence at nostalgic rhetorical

practice in contemporary culture and literature and are understandably wary of its distorted, sentimental and uncritical analysis of the past.

The Oxford English Dictionary lists the following definitions of nostalgia: severe homesickness, regretful or wistful memory or recall of an earlier time; from the Greek derivatives "return home" plus "pain." The nostalgic impulse for women might involve the realization that any return to an earlier time--a home, of sorts--is painful insofar as it reveals no history in which to recognize representations of validity or strength in their precursors. This is the case with Wallace's expression of nostalgia, particularly in Marrying Into The Family (1980), her first published volume of poetry. Women were active in the past, but their role and their way of understanding it has been constructed and documented through a system of male-governed formal education. In The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History (1979) and The Creation of Feminist Consciousness (1993), American historian Gerda Lerner maintains that women have always played a major role in history but traditionally have had limited access to education and information, so that understanding their role and its importance has been substantially limited. Women have not been denied a history; women have been denied knowledge of their history--the formal, constructed interpretation of their past. Lerner describes women's need for formal knowledge about their history:

Women had to use their energy to reinvent the wheel, over and over again, generation after generation. Men argued with the giants that preceded them; women argued against the oppressive weight of millennia of patriarchal thought,

which denied them authority, even humanity, and when they had to argue they argued with the 'great men of the past,' deprived of the empowerment, strength and knowledge women of the past could have offered them. (1993, 166)

Lerner relates the difficulty women, and particularly feminists, might have with nostalgia: why bother remembering or sentimentalizing a constant battle just to "make it to first base?"

In "A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf," from her second publication, Signs of the Former Tenant (1983), Wallace provides a clear example of how references to the past provide her with information for understanding the present and facing the future. Wallace makes "a gesture of friendship / a psychological debt / paid off" (48) to Virginia Woolf, and thus connects herself to an important literary precursor. The poem is also "a debt / paid off" to Jane Austen, one among many women writers in the past, who did not have "a room of her own" (to borrow Woolf's most famous phrase) in which to work, and whose novels were "tangled in / with her knitting her embroidery / whatever it was she hid them under" (49). Similarly, Wallace's intended simple poem becomes entangled with her own (fictional) domestic life, to become a gesture of friendship towards a friend who was in intensive care, and to whom she was denied access because "[she] was just her friend / and the friendship of women / wasn't mentioned / in hospital policy" (49). Wallace's intended tribute to her literary forebears becomes a meandering series of connections, in which she celebrates the friendships that women cultivate. Wallace accepts and honours the improbability of separating

women's writing from women's lives, whether the life be her own, made up of children, bacon grease and snagged zippers, or that of her literary precursors, Woolf and Austen. She weaves a poem out of

the complexities of women's friendships
or the countless gritty details
of an ordinary woman's life
that never appear in poems at all
yet even as I write these words
those ordinary details intervene
between the poem I meant to write
and this one where the delicate faces
of my children faces of friends
of women I have never even seen
glow on the blank pages
and deeper than any silence
press around me
waiting their turn (481)

In "A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf," friends, children, Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen and the ghostly presence of other women await their turn to influence the moment of the poem. Wallace models this poem, as she does others, as if a conversation were taking place: hers "is only one voice in a huge community," as she tells Janice Williamson in a 1989 interview. "It's important to remember that this community includes the dead as well as the living . . . I'm trying to bring as many voices into the conversation as I possibly can" (33). Past and present meet as if in conversation; the present moment and its antecedents illuminate one another.

Introducing The Newly Born Woman (1986), Sandra M. Gilbert asserts that when "returning, a sorceress and a hysteric--that is, a displaced person-everywoman

must inevitably find that she has no home, no *where*” (xvi). In paying her psychological debt and extending her pen in friendship to other women and other women writers, Bronwen Wallace is also extending herself towards a past community--a home--from which to garner strength and support. Wallace, by evoking the lives of Woolf and Austen, conjures for herself necessary female literary ancestors. Lerner points out that “in the 19th century women writers began to acknowledge women as their muses and their role models” (231); Wallace picks up this tradition from where she also garners literary historical authority. As a sorceress of words, she writes against the imposed displacement and exile from a valid and valued female past: she is not “reinventing the wheel” of what it means to be a woman writer but acknowledging the women who made her own writing possible and acceptable. “Much of my literary heart,” states Wallace, “is in the nineteenth century” (1993, 24); she, hence, identifies Austen and Charlotte Brontë as literary influences in a letter to Mouré (1993, 17). Thus, for Bronwen Wallace, nostalgic writing might function less as a sentimental commemoration of the past than as a means towards discovering a historical home out of the fragmented or absent formal History traditionally available to women. Wallace establishes an historical context to encourage progressive movement forward. Nostalgia for Wallace, and other Canadian writers, such as Gail Scott, Alice Munro or Joy Kogawa, is a painful mnemonic return precisely because it is the recovery, reconstruction and subsequent validation of women’s history which is conventionally absent from traditional historical and literary discourse.

One is able to find mnemonic expressions throughout most of Bronwen Wallace's work: from her first book of poems to her last, she recounts memories of her childhood, recollections of old friends, and evokes the lives of the dead. Her expression of nostalgia is particularly prevalent in her first publications, Marrying Into The Family and Signs of the Former Tenant. Chapter one is a study of the specifically female home Wallace constructs in Marrying Into The Family, where she delves into her family history, looking for valid female ancestors, and finds only unanswered questions, stray memories, and (un)revealing photographs. Because she focuses on reconstructing the past of her female forebears, Wallace is left with a necessarily fragmented sense of her historical home with which to conduct her own passage into the future. However, the fragmented past ensures that history will never become prescriptive, since Wallace's continuing search and subsequent narratives will always permit new information into their constructions.

Chapter two is an examination of Wallace's second publication, Signs of the Former Tenant, in which she concerns herself more with the effect of memory and nostalgia upon subjectivity. Here, Wallace establishes a decidedly feminist nostalgia, as the past, present and possible future intermingle and contribute to her sense of identity. In the face of constant re-interpretation, subjectivity can never be stabilized, but precisely because of this perpetually fluctuating sense of self, the past, as in Marrying, does not function as a prescription for the future. Of particular significance,

the first part of Signs is entitled “Moving Away From The Past,” and it is upon this series of poems that I will place the greatest emphasis.

Often certain objects or places evoke memory. Bronwen Wallace presents various sites and signs throughout her work that provoke mnemonic and nostalgic impulses; the narrators of her poems and the characters in her short stories “re-read” the past from songs, personal effects, photographs or scars that remind them of particularly significant moments or are the only remains of forgotten or repressed instances. Chapter three is a study of the photographic imagery of Marrying Into The Family, where photography is most prevalent, and the photograph functions as a highly conflicted tool for Wallace’s nostalgic project. Traditionally, women have been the keepers of the family album and have carried the responsibility of maintaining it; in Marrying, Wallace takes on this traditional role for more subversive purposes--to recover a personally relevant history. As potent visual documentation of how the family wishes to be remembered, photographs are nostalgic fixatives. That Wallace chooses photographic imagery to reconstruct an alternative sense of ancestry for herself (alternative to the traditionally male-defined one) is interesting, for her “gaze cannot penetrate to the reality ‘behind’ the image” any more than the language of recollections or family stories (Savoy 93). In “The Scuba Diver in Repose” (171-92), from People You’d Trust Your Life To (1990), Wallace offers us photographic imagery and a photographer--the narrator, Jill. Photographs ensure nostalgic sentiment in the future by capturing special moments within their frames; they also invest moments with meaning, by virtue of

being caught. Through her photography, Jill finds a language for stabilizing subjectivity but cannot reconcile her fixed recognitions with the instability of reality. Thus, Wallace engages in a more sophisticated examination of the nostalgia provoked by photography, for in the character of Jill, she offers us a reader, creator and destroyer of nostalgic, photographic texts.

Chapter four will conclude my examination of Wallace's feminist nostalgia by looking at perhaps her most potent site of memory, the scar. In the short stories "Heart of My Heart" (1-14), "Chicken 'n' Ribs" (15-33), "For Puzzled in Wisconsin" (75-88) and "People You'd Trust Your Life To" (149-70), the characters' memories are often evoked by the intrusion of physical scars as sites of memory into their present lives. While a photograph inscribes the past as images on paper, a scar inscribes an unsanctioned, yet haunting past upon the body. A photograph changes over time, mellowing into the sepia tones of sentimentality; a scar similarly recedes into the skin, while maintaining a visual presence and mnemonic impact upon those so inscribed. In a photograph, Wallace finds a visual clue of the past; in a scar, on the other hand, she finds a clue of the flesh, demarcating a past wound. In the scar, Wallace finds a site of nostalgia that is particularly insightful; the scar imagery in People You'd Trust Your Life To speaks clearly to the pain of the past and particularly to the pain inscribed upon women.

Throughout her writing, Bronwen Wallace's nostalgic expression confronts issues of women's survival, women's healing and women's ability to transcend even the most

painful history. Her early poetry uses historical narrative to look back to, reconstruct and establish her historical home as a means towards envisioning a future. In her later work, she is more concerned with the impact memory has upon subjectivity, and on nostalgia's role in fashioning and refashioning identity. Clearly, Bronwen Wallace does not "just tell nice stories about her past." She tells stories about the past that express hopes for a better future.

CHAPTER 1

There's No Place Like Home:

Bronwen Wallace's Historical Return in Marrying Into The Family

history is built on a groundwork of fact, Richard states. Richard is a good historian

Daphne Marlatt. Anal historic. (134)

The history that matters is the history we can use.

Bronwen Wallace. "If This Is Love." People You'd Trust Your Life To. (57)

The term "nostalgia" was coined in the late seventeenth century to describe the acute homesickness experienced by soldiers longing for their homeland; it was then considered a debilitating disease. Gradually, however, the term experienced a semantic shift, so that now it retains little of these early medical and military connotations. Now nostalgia tends to mean sentimental and wistful longing for a remembered past. In Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia (1979), sociologist Fred Davis points out that one explanation for this semantic change in nostalgia's meaning has to do with what "home" actually means in the twentieth century. Feelings of security and comfort one associates with and attributes to home are now considered the result of more complicated systems that span wider distances (Davis 5-6). Families are often spread across the world, or divided by separate interests and goals, so that "*home* is no longer where the hearth is" (6). Nostalgic sentiments are now often expressed toward the places, people or events of our past that instill all the warmth or security that a home once implied.

Bronwen Wallace admits that her early poetry is autobiographical and confessional, and for this reason, one can assume that--particularly in Marrying Into The Family (1980) and Signs of the Former Tenant (1983)--she lays claim to a past that holds personal consequences for her own life and the choices available to her. Dennis Lee describes Wallace as a poet of her own place and gender because her work concentrates on the lives of women in and around the area of Ontario she called home. "She was a poet of nesting, of dwelling. No matter how private or diffuse the details, her poems became rituals of claiming her habitation. That's what the stories are for--to uncover, in her own place, the lineaments of home" (Lee C18). And nowhere are Wallace's attempts to lay claim to her female lineage more apparent than in Marrying Into The Family, the title of which is clearly significant, for in marrying into a family, a woman creates an alliance with that family. In her first volume of poetry, Wallace attempts to forage into the history of her own, personally relevant affiliation with her family home.

In Marrying, the poet often experiences a conflict between documented historical fact and memory, making her female forebears' past difficult to recover. Wallace questions assumptions about ancestry and ownership in these early poems by writing of her fractured knowledge about the women in her family history. Memory and history often collide in these poems, where history has left no record of female ancestry and memory is uncertain; nostalgia is rendered literally "home sick." By remembering, and therefore reconstructing a historical home for herself, Wallace's expression of nostalgia

in Marrying does not represent melancholic longing for the past. Instead, Wallace encourages the formal knowledge of a past in which women's accomplishments and strengths are validated.

In Marrying Into The Family's first poem, "Marriages" (47-8), Wallace describes the events of a woman's life after her wedding and relates the way in which she is able (and unable) to establish a home. "After the wedding in the parlour / where her sisters were married / and her father's sisters before them," the woman described in the poem moves to her new husband's family farm. In this way, Wallace describes a female tradition within the marriage ritual, where women are embraced by the places and families into which they marry. But this embrace is also considerably oppressive: the woman is placed in unfamiliar surroundings, takes on an unfamiliar name, and lives with a family not her own. Wallace also describes another marital tradition when detailing how the woman comes

to the kitchen with its woodstove
 where his mother cooked
 to the polished table in the dining-room
 and the cupboard where she stores
 her mother's crystal
 her grandmother's china

she will put the quilt
 her aunt made on the bed upstairs
 where her husband was born
 where she will give birth
 and one day her daughter will take
 her china and her linens
 to the beds and tables
 of women she is not related to

except by marriage (47)

In relating these female rites of claiming space after marriage, Wallace recounts the rituals with which women create a home for themselves and their families, despite their unsettled status within. For Wallace, a woman's home is dependent upon the objects--the crystal, the china, the quilts and the linens--that she brings to her adopted environment. Women relate themselves to one another "by the using of the things [their mothers-in-law and female ancestors] used" (47). They create relationships with one another and establish a community that includes female ancestors by using inherited objects that are bestowed and remembered by women.

Traditionally, a family's name and property are identified and traceable through a paternal route because, traditionally, men have owned family property. Wallace describes it thus: "the men move in their own lines / fences and ploughed fields the same farm / all of their lives father to son" (48). As the woman accumulates useful objects and leaves them to her daughters, the man inherits both name and property which he can pass down to his sons. The male line of ancestral ownership is easily traced, since the name and the land remain intact from father to son. "[B]ut what the women own / they carry with them," making the female line of ancestral ownership nearly impossible to trace (48). As the woman marries, her possessions change location and title in this undocumented and historically silenced systematic denial of her formal right to ownership. The question is not whether women own things or not (which they clearly do and have done); the question is one of acknowledgement. In "Marriages,"

Wallace acknowledges the rites of marriage that make the historical knowledge of women's property unlikely. As described by Wallace in "Marriages," women carry their possessions to their husbands' homes, and thereby create their own ceremonial rites of place, ownership and home. "Home is where the heart(h) is," despite Fred Davis' thoughts otherwise, and thus, Wallace plays with the common myth that women are responsible for maintaining both the heart and hearth of home in "Marriages," when she relates the process through which women become subsumed by their husbands' families and homes. A woman's place is in the home, or so the saying goes. But just who owns that place? How are women able to lay any claim within or gain any historical knowledge of their home given their transient status within the marriage contract?

Wallace provides the answer, when she writes that women

perform this marriage
of things touched and shared
woman to woman
back and forth across a county
they weave beyond blood lines
the stubborn pattern of their own
particular ceremonies (48)

For Wallace, nostalgia (specifically, when defined as the return home) is a mnemonic reconstruction of ceremonial objects; women can understand and claim their past by tracing the relationships these things cultivate. While men descend in the documented historical lines names and fences provide, female descendants weave across land and time in a more complex pattern of remembered ancestry. Memories, and the stories they provoke, revolve around the objects Wallace describes in "Marriages," so that not only

do women share the china and linen over a period of time, but they also share the history these inherited objects represent.

The disparity between women's access and men's access to the history of property is clear. Using the adage, "give me the child at seven and I will give you the man [sic]," as his premise, director Michael Apted returns to the same group of British children every seven years in 35Up (1993). His series of interviews illuminates a great deal about the sentimentality of nostalgia; the scene of the subjects as young children playing in a playground together is an obvious way with which to ensure their wistful sentimentality for that time. Relevant to my discussion of "Marriages," however, are the sentiments expressed by one of the film's subjects, John:

Well, I think everyone needs to have a feeling that they belong somewhere, and that there's a plot of land or somewhere where they hale from and their roots are. Within the last month a new agricultural law has been passed returning land to its former proprietors. We [John and his wife] think that some part, at any rate, of this property [in Bulgaria] will come back to us. And I for one am very excited at that prospect. It belonged to my grandfather, his brother, and they farmed it--the whole estate--in partnership with my great-grandfather.

There is no denying that a sense of roots is important for gaining any sense of home, and belonging usually involves belonging *somewhere*--some home. However, at the age of thirty-five, John expresses what Wallace might consider a decidedly male way of understanding home and history, predicated on the security of property. Wallace's

understanding of women is that they do not hale from any one validated, autonomous home, but migrate from one mode of dependency to another, in an inversion of the traditional mythology of women and their place in the home. John makes the connection between name and property, above, perpetuating the exact historical, hegemonic system that denies women a fixed sense of home, independent of patriarchal law and ownership. He makes no mention of a grandmother or great-grandmother. Even the term "estate" implies the status of property and the male legacy it sustains. As an antidote to this (and closer to home), Canadian poet/novelist Daphne Marlatt relates the difficulty a woman, Ana, has in recovering her sense of ancestry, in the novel Ana! Historic (1988). Describing her grandmother, Ina, Ana details one of the only rights of ownership a woman is allowed:

rehearsing your will in the imagination of us fully grown, retelling the history of each piece, endowing us with its continuance, grandmother to mother to daughter, the female line of inheritance--'these will be yours when i'm gone,' because that was all you had to give [sic]. (57)

Unlike Marlatt, Wallace does not place as much emphasis upon the male-determined syntax of language, and chooses to tell the stories of women's lives in a more familiar, narrative form. But like Marlatt, Wallace is aware of the female line of inheritance which, for her represents a web of continuing relationships that are traceable only by telling the story of handled things. Marlatt describes the mnemonic-nostalgic nature of this process through Ana: "now i'm remembering, not dis- but re-membering, putting

things back together again, the things that have been split off, set aside [sic]" (51). The things that have been split off--the objects or (hi)stories that travel from one place to the next--are recovered and connected when remembered and retold. In "Marriages" and throughout the body of Marrying Into The Family, Wallace recovers and reconstructs the history of a female home by nostalgically recovering women's lives, and telling their stories in her writing.

In her third volume of poetry, Common Magic (1985), Wallace returns to the complicated territory of home in the poem "Place of Origin" (11-13), meriting a slight detour from Marrying Into The Family. The way women know and understand their home is dependent upon criteria different from that for men, as discussed above. But in "Place of Origin," a sense of home becomes something more intrinsically connected to geography, and the different ways of understanding one's geographical and familial roots are drawn upon lines of gender. As exemplified by John in Apted's film, or by Ana/Ina in Marlatt's novel, the right to own land and property has tended, in the past, to be an exclusively male privilege. Thus, what men know about their environment is often drawn from what portion of it they can possess. Wallace recognizes women's capacity to inhabit their space in different, more subversive ways, spanning the greater territory that their relationships can cover. In "Place of Origin" she reworks ideas from her earlier work in Marrying:

For most places, there are two kinds of geography
and it's no different here.
The men know land and weather,

who owns it and for how long,
 what to prepare for when you can.
 Being men, they have access to maps
 and country records, almanacs.
 Their wives know it differently.
 Not just who married who
 but what it was like and why,
 how the kids turned out in the end.
 This may be gossip,
 but that doesn't make it unimportant. (12)

Women do not necessarily understand the world differently, but rather, understand that their position of power within it is different. Women's understanding of place and home involves a network of relationships, and acknowledging this is one manner in which Wallace establishes their sense of belonging, here and in Marrying. "Gossip," an archaic word for woman, came to mean godmother, connoting respect for "mother" or "grandmother." Now considered pejorative, gossip refers to old wives' tales, implying that women's understanding of place (their stories of their community) is somehow unworthy of consideration (Walker 350). On that note, in a 1986 letter to Erin Mouré, dated March 12, Wallace describes her mother and grandmother:

These women lived very much within the patriarchal world, they were powerful women and they were "under their husband's law" as well. They were definitely not marginal, either in their own eyes or in the world around them. . . . And when they talked! They used gossip, confession, anecdote, jokes--but they used them to tell their experience of the world, to create a world in which the female was the metaphor for the universal. When my grandmother demanded to know

the last name of any of my friends . . . she was celebrating a network of relationships which constituted her world and in which she was comforted, helped and celebrated. (1993, 31)

Wallace understands that a traditional patriarchal view of power excludes women in certain, often valued ways. In Marrying Into The Family, she explores and celebrates a form of power to which women are admitted, and the form her exploration takes is narrative poetry. Wallace's poems read as if being spoken, the stories that comprise women's gossip express Wallace's poetic history of her family of women. Despite history's determination to fix the past with the evidence of documented name and property, Wallace unfixes this past, and validates gossip, a particular ilk of testimony, thereby subverting a more traditional sense of historical home.

Wallace continues to explore her conflicted relationship to home in Marrying, where one explanation for these difficulties is the problematised relationship between history and memory for women. In "Connecting" (51-52), as in "Marriages," Wallace writes of an object passed on, accompanied by a good story about her great-grandmother. But here Wallace recognizes the problem of a history made up of the history of things:

That's about it.
Not enough for a poem really
even with the fruit bowl
which is delicate and well-made
but both of them just kind of
sit there refuse to relinquish
the appropriate metaphors (51)

The concrete component of Wallace's nostalgic return home is not reinforced by the oral tradition, for her mother remembers little with which to furnish it further. Reconciling the good story about her great-grandmother walking into a bar and embarrassing her husband with the later image of her as a grandmother sitting by a wood stove proves to be difficult, except for something that begins to emerge from the comparison and contrast of these two memories/images. Somewhere between "the little flares of light falling / to a glow around her" as an old woman in the kitchen, watching her granddaughter (the poet's mother) light the lamps, and "the triumphant flicker of a smile" when walking home from the bar after humiliating her husband, the poet achieves a moment of reconciliation (52). "Not much to build a poem on," Wallace repeats, for it is too tenuous and fragile, "like the china bowl filled with fruit / glowing in the centre / of my kitchen table" (52). In "Connecting," the point of recognition is no more than a flare or flicker, where even the one concrete object, the fruit bowl, is a delicate, glowing thing, revealing little, perhaps, because some objects are more historically privileged than others. In his essay, "The Antecedents of It: A Poetics of Absence," Eric Savoy concludes that "Wallace's ultimate acknowledgement . . . is that the connections between words and things . . . are tentative sites of particular recognition rather than moments of recovery" (98). While he is not referring to "Connecting" specifically, apparently one reason recovery is impossible is because memories and history fail to provide enough information for a proper poem/story, and women's possessions do not establish a home in any way beyond the nomadic means

of their stories and rituals. But what exactly is a proper poem? Wallace, mimicking what she has learned elsewhere, would have us believe that a proper poem comprises a proper history. Clearly this is not the case, as "Connecting" illustrates, where a fragmented memory and history provide enough for what I can only assume is an "inappropriate" poem, insofar as the history it describes is not of the traditional, textbook variety. A transgressive history can provide transgressive poetry, and in Wallace's case, does so successfully.

In another poem, "Grandma Wagar's Double Bind" (61), Wallace further considers the problematic relationship between home and women's lack of autonomy in rural, southeastern Ontario in the generations before her: "In those days of course / a woman stayed home / until `she married," so that Wallace's grandmother had no savings after ten years of teaching, "because she gave all her salary / to her father." Leaving her father's home did little to alleviate this, for after marrying a man who was a poor farmer and losing everything in 1927, Grandma Wagar "took in mending / because in those days of course / a woman stayed home / after she'd married." Whether functioning as an unmarried, wage-earning member of her father's home, or as the matron of her husband's home, the woman's role within her community was clearly limited; her place was in the home, no matter to whom it belonged. The bind is twofold, for not only was a woman's place in the home, before and after marriage, but her status as a wage-earner became no different after gaining independence from her paternal home; whether married or not, a woman was financially in debt to, or

dependent upon, her father or husband. Here, Bronwen Wallace pays a psychological debt, as she does in "A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf"¹; instead of recalling the works of past women writers, however, she moves closer to home, to acknowledge her maternal grandmother's limited possibilities as a precursor to her more considerable options.

In the volume's title poem, "Marrying Into The Family" (69-70), we are again invited into a woman's world of conjugal obligation. In becoming a wife and mother, the woman ironically loses any sense of familial connection, and is almost a trespasser in her own, albeit adopted, home. A woman defined by marriage is a woman ill-defined. She functions as the perpetual outsider, apologetic for her differences; she is "only related by marriage." Framed within family portraits,

flanked by his beautiful sisters
she smiles apologetically
for small breasts
thin hair
Even the wedding portrait
is diffident (69)

Despite the attractive gown she wears, we are parenthetically informed that "(his mother wore a mink)" (69). Described by Wallace, the married woman is a foreigner in her own home, where even her children fail to instill any sense of belonging; to them "she denied any resemblance," and "they believed they had / only one grandfather / and were not present at her father's funeral" (69). Any ancestors, even her paternal ones, are

¹Discussed in the introduction.

deferred to those of her husband's family, and holidays are spent "with his people," who never really become her own. Unlike her children, who were "of course included / in the family photograph / [s]he held the camera" (69), becoming the mirror by which the family is reflected and defined, until a subsequent sister-in-law marries into the family.

The final photograph Wallace describes in the poem is a fiftieth anniversary portrait, in which the woman wears his mother's mink stole (the same one her mother-in-law wore at her wedding?). Surrounded by her husband's family, she wears a hand-me-down that her body rejects: "(she always was / allergic to fur)" (70). Once more, Wallace presents an inherited object and invests it with meaning and narrative. In this instance, however, the narratives and the memories invested in the heirloom represent the types of relationships women are encouraged to cultivate. A woman marries into a family, but for fifty years remains the apologetic, allergic outsider who denies her own family. Women are not encouraged to cultivate a lasting relationship with one familial name and place. Marrying into the family is the treacherous act which denies the woman her roots, and urges her to give up her name, her family, and ultimately any sense of home. How is she able to trace her ancestry when her past and family are constantly deferred to that of the family into which she marries? Wallace implies this question in the title poem of the volume and also provides some answers within the body of Marrying Into The Family. One way Wallace and her female ancestors are/were able to establish a sense of home is through the subversive form their "hand-

me-down-narrative” takes by embracing continual reinterpretation and emphasizing the narrator’s inscribement into the historical thread.

Another answer lies in the recovery and examination of particular female ancestors. Wallace’s spinster aunts provide a clearly subversive female ancestry, eschewing either familial or social obligations, while representing the only viable forbears with whom to identify herself. As a route to a historical home, however, the old maid aunts prove especially problematic, since their value within the family is determined by the family’s codes of behaviour. Wallace clearly understands the enigmatic relationship women have to familial and social obligation, but in her maiden aunts she recognizes that when failing to perpetuate the family, women are also left in a precarious domestic, social and historical position; unmarried sisters do not ‘add’ anything to a family in the form of children, and are hence more easily forgotten.

In “The Family Saints and the Dining-Room Table” (53-54) Wallace describes various different female ancestors, and their levels of acceptance within the family, as illustrated through the memories they evoke in family myth:

Everyone remembers how beautiful they were
the ones who spent most of their adult life
dying of consumption

.....

They love to tell about the great-aunt
who died of strep-throat on her honeymoon

.....

and the only thing anyone remembers
 about the second cousin with the goitre
 is that when the country doctor tried to remove it
 he sliced the jugular vein instead (53)

These women are remembered and discussed; they waste away, die in childbirth or perish in freakish accidents. These saintly, sacrificial women are a family's unrealized potential, and are worthy of remembrance--because they suffer and because they add colour to a story. Their deaths become the subject of family lore, through an oral tradition they are cherished for their martyrdom. "Family saints" may have had unusual circumstances, but above all else, they do not challenge any sense of propriety within the family's structure or collective historical identity, which explains their canonization within the family's collective memory.

In contrast to these family saints, Wallace presents the women about whom nobody talks, who are present within a family's mythology only through their blatant exclusion from family remembrances. If "they love to talk about" certain sacrificial female ancestors,

no-one talks at all
 about great-grandmother who refused
 to go to hospital for the tumour
 and had two doctors come in
 to remove it while she lay chloroformed
 on her own dining-room table (54)

Note the distinction made here between those whom everyone openly remembers and those whom no-one *talks* about: to be historically relevant to the family, memory must go beyond internal thoughtfulness. Memory can only function when expressed through

language. When Wallace tells us that “they remember how her son’s wife / wouldn’t have the table in the house / said it made her sick to eat off it” (54), we understand that this fact is not merely remembered, but insured against obsolescence by an oral tradition: they remember and discuss the woman who, in the family’s eyes, conducted herself appropriately, by denying the table’s entrance into her own home.

But the story of the dining-room table comes full-circle, as Wallace reveals its location, and considers its situation in contrast to the family saints:

so they gave it to the aunt
 who was an old maid
 and she kept it
 which everyone said just proved
 how queer she was for why
 any decent woman would want
 a thing like that in the house
 they couldn’t understand (54)

The table, an object of disgust, manages to insinuate itself into family myth, despite its relegation to an inappropriate person. Nobody in the family, except for Wallace in writing this poem, speaks of the great-grandmother’s role in creating the table’s potency as a historical and memorable object. Clearly, and due, in part, to the great-grandmother’s inappropriate and stubborn behaviour, this dining room table is not a cherished family heirloom. Unlike the china and linens Wallace’s women pass from mother to daughter, as described in “Marriages” and “Connecting,” this dining-room table is not an acceptable token of women’s past experience. Not only is the woman who passes it down unacceptable within the family, but the woman who accepts the

table into her home, the spinster aunt, is, as well, of dubious standing within the family structure. Already considered “queer,” her acceptance of the table further proves her assumed indecency, and unlike the unmentionable great-grandmother, the old maid aunt is worthy of remembrance, for she provides an example of how a woman should not function within a family. The aunt is relevant and is a subject for discussion because she acts as a warning against spinsterhood; should a woman choose to remain unmarried and childless, we assume she will receive similar treatment in the future. In bearing no children, the old maid aunt denies the family’s continuance, and therefore denies its continued history. Within the family code, the spinster, therefore, challenges the family’s sense of propriety, their continuance into the future, and ultimately, their collective historical identity. The spinster aunt represents another aspect of women’s renegade history within the home, accepting what other family members consider indecent, embracing a stubbornness of character thought unspeakable, and ignoring the familial push to leave something behind, which marriage and children allow. The aunt, like Wallace, is also a reader of transgressive historical objects, for in accepting the table, she is accepting that which the family refuses to “read” (tell) into their sanctioned collective remembrance. Wallace remembers, and poetically tells her aunt into family history, weaving her into the mnemonic tapestry of their woman’s home. Precisely because the unmarried woman resists enacting a traditional role for a familial community, Wallace acts as the poetic restorer of a dormant history and memory. “The Family Saints and the Dining-Room Table” is Wallace’s next step in uncovering a

subversive women's history: where the first step was to recover a woman's way of tracing and telling her past into existence, this second step is to remember and reconstruct a more viable model from the past (one who does not enact "Grandma Wagar's double bind") with whom to identify herself.

In "The Maiden Aunts" (55-6), Wallace elaborates on the renegade history unmarried women represent, showing more persuasively how they defy a family's sense of acceptable historical memory. Whether these women "fade into the pages" of a Victorian novel, "with a discreet hint of lavender," or take on the more modern incarnation of "robust well-tailored," shrill-voiced importance in an office or hospital,

something about them requires still
a certain delicacy
shadowy tales of jiltings grand renunciations
in the name of religion or family loyalty (55)

The maiden aunts are loyal to the family, although they never function as the matriarchs in homes independent from their parents. The common myth that woman's place is in the home is dependent, in part, on her role as mother. The maiden aunt might very well live in her own home, but her status as the matriarch therein is denied, forcing her to place familial loyalties toward parents, married siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews. The unmarried women in the family, according to Wallace, seem to be valued less (as the story of the dining-room table implies), and arrange themselves around the more traditional, married family members

. . . on the edges of snapshots
like the sprays of green around

the florist roses the anniversary couple
or the newly christened nephew

they are small talk
for the other relatives anecdotes
slipped by-the-by . . . (55)

into the news of more important familial events. A slip is an error, an oversight, and this is exactly what these women are within the family: "The maiden aunts have no claim / to their father," despite keeping his name (56). Nor do they lay claim to family property, which goes to their brothers. "[W]hile their mother claims / the married sisters / who wear her wifely postures," the unmarried women in the family remain unclaimed and are unclaiming (56).

Even the features the maiden aunts inherit are somehow incongruous, like the photographs which are tossed aside in deference to "poses more appropriate / for gilt-edged albums" (56). Families frame themselves in specific ways, and as described by Wallace, maiden aunts do not fit into the frame; they are slipped into the picture or story. Like an inappropriate photograph, an unmarried aunt is "placed in some unused drawer" (56) of the family's collective memory, recalled (reviewed) on holidays or included as an afterthought. However, despite their marginalized position within the family structure, the incongruity of the maiden aunts allows them to be

released from family obligations
their unguarded gestures
seem to open to the dark
like renegade flowers (56)

The maiden aunts are not merely the baby's breath around the bouquet, the marginalia of the photograph or the anecdote to the story. Wallace reframes her spinster aunts, placing them within her own sense of family, thereby revising their status as transgressions. These female ancestors have no right to family property, and do not pass objects on to daughters or daughters-in-law, but they avoid becoming family property, presenting Wallace with a possible, alternative example of female ancestry. Conjugal obligations, as made evident in "Marriages" and "Marrying Into The Family," often subjugate women. By being released from wifely duties, such as maintaining hearth and home, deferring to her husband's family or bearing children for the family's continuance into the future, the unmarried aunt might not make it into the family lore, portraiture or future gene pool, but she gains a certain degree of personal independence. Wallace observes this freedom, and thereby recovers an ancestry, a history and a home with which she can further identify herself. By resurrecting these "renegade flowers" through memory, the poet finds additional ancestors and valid female forerunners, previously denied by the code of familial duty.

"Finding My Real Ancestors" (57-58) further presents Wallace's bind in attempting to recover valid women forerunners. It is difficult to locate some female ancestors, since their names change upon marriage. Spinster aunts, however, provide an easily traced ancestral path, as well as offer renegade models to whom Wallace can identify herself. The maiden aunts, however, present Wallace with something of a problem: they do not add to family history's insistence on leaving children behind. What

fixes them historically--their unchanging maiden name--also tears them away from a family's sense of historical stability through continuance. The aunts might be Wallace's more authentic personal ancestors, in that she is able to embrace their transgressive nature, but within the family this quality is not valued. Attempting to locate other female ancestors, ones authenticated by blood-ties, proves difficult for Wallace:

. . . stepmothers
insinuate themselves
like characters
from the Brothers Grimm
blocking my way
to the real ancestors
whom no-one now remembers (57)

As described earlier, Wallace believes that men understand the world differently from women. When stepmothers usurp the women preceding them, and take on the duties of wife and mother within their husband's home, Wallace's ancestral tracking through the family tree reveals and confirms that women's names, and therefore women's lives, mean little and are easily lost. Family space is traditionally defined in patriarchal terms, so that even upon death, familial space is male-defined. "I've seen family plots," writes Wallace, "one big patriarchal stone / surrounded by smaller female ones" (57). The history Wallace finds in trying to locate her real ancestors is one of dates, names, but no answers. Instead of a narrative of ongoing relationships or accumulated meanings, she finds facts, and memories are unreliable:

even in my grandmother's stories
her stepmother's arrival
when she was three was

just another detail

 and her diary's mostly dates
 the births of her children
 weddings funerals
 then on a separate page for
 April 1920 (she'd be
 35 or so)
 her one memory
 of her real mother (57-58)

Here, more clearly than anywhere else in these early poems, Wallace considers the difficulties of her dependence on a remembered past for her nostalgic, historical return home.

Her use of memory and nostalgia is a means towards a historical path, but she clearly differentiates between historical fact and detailed remembrance. As the title implies, real ancestors--the ancestors that matter in her search for home--are those described through women's memories, not through bare fact, which was often determined for women by men. That her grandmother's diary comprises mostly dates of pivotal events is another important factor to consider in Wallace's inability to garner any useful history out of the family tree or documents available to her; these models of historical documentation fail to narrate a story, and one event (a funeral) is given as much weight as another (a wedding). Only by subjectively narrating a remembered history is Wallace able to discover and place relevance upon factual events, for the chronological journal of events is inconclusive insofar as it fails to illuminate the memories and feelings of her female ancestors. Since Wallace's project is to allow an

ever-growing symphony of women's voices into the conversation of her writing, the absence of a narrative thread in empty facts is crucial.

In The Content of the Form (1987), historian Hayden White examines the nature of narrative as a means towards shaping reality, with a particular focus on how we shape the past with our natural tendency to tell it. "It is because real events do *not* offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult" (4). The gap between the possible and the actual--the story and the object or event--is where the difficulty lies, and Wallace articulates this in "Finding My Real Ancestors," when she differentiates between the dates and events of the diary entries and the one memory her grandmother divulges, the one thought invested with meaning for Wallace's narrative, historical search. Events, unlike stories, do not necessarily lend themselves to conclusions. Although Wallace's sense of history lends itself to revision and constant variation, the narrative form her poetry takes implies resolution; her poem's end insinuates unanswered questions, but connects events and memories into something cohesive, if only for her own sense of a female-centred home and history. The moment of slight recovery in "Finding My Real Ancestors" is likened to a key opening an old trunk, with "the questions / I never thought to ask / spilling into the room" (58). Memory is the only key with which Wallace is able to shape her narrative; here and in her later work, stories of the past connect to moments of the present and subsequent meanings are fashioned. However, memory only provides one ingredient to the narrative of history, and since the facts--the names and dates--of the women Wallace looks for in the family

tree are rendered mute without the explanatory narratives, she is left with a necessarily fragmented sense of ancestry and home that is always open to new information and new interpretation. The conversational voice Wallace situates her poetry within is always open to new voices, whether from the past or present, and her nostalgic return home is, therefore, always mindful of future nostalgic, mnemonic journeys to come.

CHAPTER 2

Moving Away From the Past:

Bronwen Wallace's Mnemonic Return in Signs of the Former Tenant

They say that loss of memory is not to know who you are. Then I suppose, it has to follow that we *are* what we remember.

Timothy Findley. Inside Memory. (5)

In Marrying Into The Family (1980), her first volume of poetry, Bronwen Wallace examines her historical sense of home: she delves into her family's past and reconstructs the lives of her female ancestors out of the detritus they left behind. She is nostalgic insofar as she embarks upon a painful return home, and, as discussed in chapter one, her return is painful because her female forbears are excluded from traditional historical discourse. In Marrying Wallace recovers a personally meaningful, although conflicted, sense of ancestry and determines the antecedents of her home, which was created by women, maintained by women and filled with objects owned by women. Wallace operates as a link in the chain of her home's continuance by engaging in a historical and archaeological quest.

In her following work, however, Wallace is more concerned with the nature or psychology of memory than with its role in reconstructing history. Her second publication, Signs of the Former Tenant (1983), marks a movement away from delving into her historical past and towards searching through her more complicated, mnemonic one. For Wallace, memory--personal, testimonial and made present through language--is a self-(re)constructive tool, and Signs marks a significant shift in emphasis for Wallace: while in Marrying she attempts to reconstruct her historical home, in Signs identity is

her primary subject matter. In both texts, however, Wallace uses mnemonic processes and her constructions--whether an historical past or a perceived subjectivity--are necessarily tentative and fragmented.

In a 1988 interview, Bruce Meyer and Brian O'Riordan ask Wallace to explain the mnemonic style of her poetry.² Wallace explains that there is an immanent mystery to every experience, and that the answer to this mystery can be found in the details of the event itself. But this answer lies on unstable ground, because our perception and explanation of life are entangled with how we explain and perceive ourselves. "I think that we are constantly inventing and reinventing ourselves," she explains, "and that has to do with the fact that our job here has to do with figuring out the mystery of our personality" (3). To engage in this life-long project of self-invention is to engage in a constant re-contextualizing of our past, and to cast new light upon any sense of identity we might have. Recovering the past, as she does in Marrying Into The Family, is only the first step in Wallace's nostalgic project; the second step is the perpetual re-evaluation or reinvention of the self through memory, as exemplified in Signs of the Former Tenant. According to Wallace, we come to understand our identities and the events that shape our lives as the significance of the past changes: "[t]he meaning of our lives and the meaning of each memory unfolds as we go along. . . . Memory is our past and we are continually reliving it all the time" (3). Mnemonic and nostalgic

²Wallace's short stories had not yet been published.

reflection--like their substance--fluctuate in this never-ending pursuit for the meaning of the past and any sense of identity we derive from it.

Nostalgia, according to sociologist Fred Davis in Yearning For Yesterday (1979), functions as "one of the more readily accessible psychological lenses . . . we employ in the never ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities" (31). People use nostalgia in specific ways for ongoing self-actualization, one of which is the commonly criticized tendency of nostalgic sentimentality to "tint" what Davis refers to as the "psychological lens" with rose-coloured glass. We tend to impose positive feelings upon events or objects that might not have been so wonderful at the time. One's ability to see this tendency in oneself Davis calls "Reflexive Nostalgia." In the following realization made about old-style milk bottles by one of his interview subjects, the subject catches herself romanticizing the past: *"I remembered how nice it was to have the pop-neck bottle delivered at the door by the milkman, but forgot about how awful the milk tasted"* (23). The idea of this nostalgic, selective memory is, however, far from innovative. In "Psychopathology of Everyday Life," written in 1899, Freud recognizes that a large part of his patients' memories are "concealing memories," or superficial recollections, resulting in little more than indifferent emotions (62). A concealing memory serves as a substitute for recollecting a more painful event; there is no awareness of repressed unpleasantness behind the indifferent memory (63). Using himself as a subject in a later study, Freud concludes that *"[t]he forgetting in all cases is proved to be founded on a motive of displeasure"* (96). To avoid pain, we

conveniently forget past annoyances or difficulties and veil them with conscious remembrances. Nostalgia functions thus, subsuming “the bad taste” of the past, and making the present and future more palatable. If the mystery of our personalities, or our unconscious, is the source of our identities (or neuroses), as Wallace, Davis and Freud argue, our awareness of the common impulse to remember the past nostalgically, in the best possible light, is an important clue in solving this mystery. Selective memory is a necessary aspect to the “psychological lens” that constitutes nostalgia, for “at one and the same time we quiet our fears of the abyss while bestowing an endearing lustre on past selves that may not have seemed all that lustrous at the time” (Davis 41). In order to move into the future as strong, bright, capable people, we construct our past selves out of the moments when we were able to act out these qualities and relegate the rest to a mysterious, screened unconscious.

The title of the first series of poems in Signs of the Former Tenant, “Moving Away From the Past,” suggests Wallace’s divergence from her historical, nostalgic quest in Marrying. However, in Signs, and particularly in the poems of the first section, the shift is only momentary, presenting a paradox. With increasing temporal distance from certain events, one assumes a certain “movement” away from the past. Distance affords the perspective needed to derive meaning from seemingly unconnected events. As we temporally move away from the past, we also psychologically close in on it. For Wallace, this means that the past can be narrated and fixed to a greater extent than the present; in “I Like to Believe My Life” (38-40), she explains:

I like to believe my life
 is slowly tidying itself
 finishing things up
 like a good novel
 that's what I think I like
 about the past
 the way it seems to smooth itself around me

.....

meanwhile the present
 muddles around me

 the present's always sighing
 and vaguely dissatisfied while I
 keep trying to patch it up (38)

Wallace also moves away from the past temporally when she shifts her focus in historical content from a past that pre-dates her to her own memories and their psychic function. The past is always the conscious material of nostalgia, but in the poems following Marrying Into The Family, Wallace allows her personal, mnemonic past to function towards a more complex understanding of identity and diverse meanings. Memory illuminates the cracks in conscious knowledge, and Wallace “believed in the mysteriousness of the commonplace--in other words, that nothing is ordinary, if you take the time to examine it tenderly” (Geddes 1990, 391). Memories, for Wallace, often serve as the “small invasions . . . that crack open the shells of our ordinary lives” (Rudy Dorseht and Savoy, 5), exhuming the extraordinary.

Wallace's two epigraphs to Signs of the Former Tenant speak to the issues of identity and the unconscious and are important to an understanding of how memory

opens the door to the extraordinary. The first passage, by Ursula K. LeGuin, is as follows:

"Things you use; things you possess, and are possessed by; things you build with--bricks, words. You build houses with them, and towns, and causeways. But the buildings fall, the causeways cannot go all the way. There is an abyss, a gap, a last step to be taken" (np)

In her first volume of poetry, Wallace locates a female historical home from the objects women use and the relationships amongst women these objects cultivate; women "possess and are possessed by" these things, as LeGuin suggests above. Bricks build the concrete home, but words construct the figurative home. Neither structures are without cracks; as mortar fills the cracks between bricks, so silence fills the space between words. Conscious speech can only partially fill the abysmal silence of the unconscious that fails to explain the subject. In "Blackflies" (Common Magic 72-75) Wallace acknowledges the dishonesty of language as a tool for self-actualization and conscious explanation. She writes that there is "a caution / that comes from knowing words and scientific theories / are the tricks we have / for making the world fit / our view of it" (72). Wallace emphasizes that knowledge is based on our inadequate language which "tricks" our consciousness; the mystery of identity lies within the failure of language. The only link to silence's meaning is the unconscious; the only path to understanding the mystery of unspoken, unconscious identity is, for Wallace, the dream-like, mnemonic route.

Wallace's second epigraph to Signs is from photographer Diane Arbus' opening statement in Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph (1972): "*Nothing is ever the same as they said it was. It's what I've never seen before that I recognize*" (np). In this description of the experience of photographing, Arbus characterizes the manner in which repressed or untapped memories might resurface. Recognition derives from an unconscious mnemonic impulse or dream and is rendered flesh in the conscious world we are able to articulate and evoke through particularly inscribed objects. As I will discuss in the following chapters, Wallace establishes certain signs/sites as mnemonically rich totems, evocatively significant for the subject even as they yield inadequate conscious explanations. Totems and talismans often "speak" to the unconscious and bridge the gap of silence that speech cannot. For Wallace, these objects are the things women use, or, as I will discuss in the following chapter, the photographs that document the past.

Strengthening the link between memory and the unconscious, Wallace draws a similarity between dream and memory in "Red Light, Green Light" (7-9), the first poem of Signs of the Former Tenant. Wallace describes the childhood game, "Red Light, Green Light" and the effect of its recollection on her daily existence. "Something about playing outdoors / in the long summer evenings after supper," and "the particular quality of the light then," shape the poet's present recollections.

so that the memory of those games
--the grace of our bodies emerging from the awkward
tangle of an ordinary growing up

into the fluid movement of our play--
 has the glow of a painting
 by Christopher Pratt an adult's dream
 of a lost time (7)

As well, "[s]omething about the way that light / was easing the day so slowly away / from us," made the familiar world of bedtime stories, toothbrushes and parents' homes improbable (8). And "[s]omething about that game and the particular / receding light drawing our voices / away with it," invade the poet's current stroll on a summer evening.

making me turn and stop
 and stand there half surprised
 to find myself alone
 no other children poised in mid-step
 leaning toward me (9)

Wallace acknowledges there is "something about the light" of her remembered past that renders it dreamlike, but she is unable to pin-point what that "something" is. There is also something about the light on a current summer's evening that surprises the poet into subconsciously surrendering to the memory of those past evenings. Why else would she instinctively expect the children of her past to be poised around her, engaged in a game of "Red Light, Green Light"? For Wallace, memory is something other than merely the means to a historical past; memory can be, as it is here, a signal from the unconscious to mobilize conscious acts of recognition.

In "Red Light, Green Light," memory is revealed as "a kind of moving a trick / of knowing when to turn and how," similar to the game Wallace recalls (9).³ As discussed above, memory is selective, or "tricky"; remembrances are surprising but also dependent upon a certain personal need. According to J.M. Kertzer in "Bronwen Wallace: 'The Stubborn Arguments of the Particular,'" a method of selection is required to repossess the past. Wallace examines "how meanings evaporated--grow diffuse as they lose their ground in reality--and must be renewed through rituals of memory and return" (71). The trick of memory is the trick of knowing when the real or the concrete is not stable enough to sustain mnemonic significance. As Kertzer continues, "[t]o remember absolutely everything would be to relive it in its original confusion. To be efficacious, memory must also make use of a strategic forgetting. . . . When it turns back, it also turns away from the past" (82). Wallace at once moves toward and away from the past, by a strategic, though not necessarily conscious, process. Wallace recognizes that a certain quality to the midsummer evening light of her childhood repeats itself at present, but she also understands that other, perhaps common aspects between the past and present go unnoticed or are forgotten. Like the game of "Red Light, Green Light," memory involves a delicate balance; it is both movement and stillness, commotion and silence.

³In Red Light, Green Light, the person who is "it" stands with her/his back turned to the other players, chanting "green light . . . green light" as they move slowly toward her/him. At the "red light" command, "it" turns and looks for any movement in the other players. If s/he spots movement, the person caught is out. If someone reaches "it" before being caught, s/he becomes "it."

A memory, like a dream, cracks into the poet's everyday conscious life. In "Freud's Mnemonic: Women, Screen Memories and Feminist Nostalgia," Mary Jacobus considers American poet Adrienne Rich's work in relation to a feminist reading of memory and nostalgia. Wallace, like Rich, takes as her subject matter events in women's lives, such as marriage, childbearing, and the friendship of other women, and she, too, writes with a recognizably female voice. It is clear that Wallace was influenced by Rich: to Erin Mouré she cites Rich's Of Woman Born (1976) as one text that articulated her own feelings about early motherhood and incited her establishment of "the infamous Mothers' Group in Windsor" (1993, 22). In an interview with Janice Williamson, Wallace mentions "a great line in an Adrienne Rich poem about knowing that her wound came from the same place as her power" (1991, 32). Wallace also quotes Rich in People You'd Trust Your Life To (1991). Her epigraph to this, her only volume of short stories, is from Rich's poem "Integrity," and reads as follows: "Anger and tenderness: my selves. / And now I can believe they breathe in me / as angels, not polarities" (np). Jacobus provocatively reports that "the past ceases to be the proper referent of memory; rather memories 'refer' . . . to the unconscious," because they always revise or reinscribe an irretrievable past (118-119). In "Red Light, Green Light," the dream-like quality--the something about the light--of Wallace's childhood game is the indescribable memory; Wallace is unable to describe *what* that something is, yet, as by a dream, she is affected nonetheless. "Just as a dream represents the fulfilment of a repressed wish," states Jacobus, "a memory represents a contradictory desire--not

the wish to remember, but the wish to forget" (119). The act of remembering is the act by which the past is denied, because it is revised into something useful for current significance. Every mnemonic act forces the past further and further away, while seeming to bring it into closer range. Thus memory and nostalgic reflection touch upon a more complex understanding of self-definition/creation and can no longer be considered merely as a component of Wallace's historical inquiry.

Nostalgia implies regret, and taking Freud and Lacan as her guides, Jacobus considers nostalgia "a powerful symptom . . . peculiarly enjoined on women" (135) who might have particularly strong feelings of loss or regret when attempting to develop a personal sense of home or identity. In Lacanian terms, the subject verbalizes/enacts past experiences in an attempt to stabilize a sense of identity. The individual is constituted "as being the one who thus has been" (47), by expressing an ever-changing pastiche of self-proclaimed important events, depending on the circumstances, the audience, or the effect desired. However, the subject might also become alienated from her/his past (and therefore any sense of identity) with the realization that some events are inexpressible or forgotten. Despite selective memory, forgotten or unconscious events are significant to the subject's identity. An individual is constituted by all of what has occurred up to the present moment. The unanalysed dream (unconscious desire) is as significant to the subject as his or her narrativized history. For women, whose lives have conventionally and formally been "spoken" by men, this sense of loss or regret for the past is understandably more profound. Wallace clearly has a past she would like to acquaint

herself with, but she, like many women, is alienated from it; the past exists, but the forum in which, and the language with which, to describe it is one the poet attempts to discover through her poetry. In a letter to Wallace, dated March 23, 1986, Erin Mouré tells her friend that “there are things in me I know exist that haven’t been spoken. This is why I know there are leaks, there are ways out, and I think one can find those gaps somehow, and that to articulate them one has to budge the system of expression” (1993, 42). Wallace, instead of “budging the system of expression,”--for her poetic style tends to maintain a traditional narrative form--articulates the gaps in her work by telling the story around these gaps. Mouré recognizes this in her friend’s writing: in a later correspondence (April 4, 1987) she admits that the effect of feminist theory on many writers has been “a rejection of the narrative line, saying that is an attempt to mirror or represent reality, and language cannot represent (purely) the world” (1993, 89). To Mouré, Wallace’s work opens up narrative form into something considerably less prescriptive:

. . . in the telling, you are looking for that hidden something behind the story (a power, a kind of grave, a force, mental connection, synaptic leap . . .), using those neural connections of straight story to break through and make new connections. This is NOT representation, but something else, then. *Bronwen*,

what is it. [sic] Think about and articulate this! Go ahead! i double dare you!
(1993, 89)¹

As Mouré clearly recognizes, there is a difference between straight, dogmatic representation, which fails to convey women's experience, and the representational, narrative style Wallace adopts to reacquaint herself with an alienated past.

An example of Wallace's estrangement from her past is the poem "In My Mother's Favourite Story" (10-13), in which she describes a forgotten event from her childhood. At the age of three, the poet ventures away from home on a quest for the "pink ice cream" of the western sunset clouds. This story happens to be her mother's favourite,

and always her telling of it weaves
around me like a net of hopes
her sinewy expectations it explains
me somehow (11)

This account of the poet as a child justifies her later choices in life, explains her imaginative drawings, and is a precursor to her current vocation. It is a mythical story, wherein Wallace as a child strides through the hazards of the familiar streets of her hometown and, "like Alice and Dorothy and so many others"(12), discovers the object of her desires (strawberry ice cream) "right in her own backyard." But the poet's inability to recall the event her mother cherishes poses a problem:

¹An upcoming conference instigated this lengthy, epistolary discussion on gender and language, so any response Wallace may have had to her friend's dare was made through the conference rather than within their letters.

so what can I tell her now seeing the way
 she has woven the story so well and kept its
 charm around me for so long
 how can I say that I remember nothing of the incident (12)

The story that defines her is no more than a narrative--a story with a beginning, middle and end, and clearly defined characters--from which Wallace is presently alienated. She realizes that this forgotten adventure is important nonetheless, for

. . . deep within my brain somewhere
 the real event repeats itself in my cells
 again and again the young child moves
 through dangerous familiar streets
 is rescued and returned (13)

As in "Red Light, Green Light," an "adult's dream of a lost time" jolts Wallace into a moment of recognition. Here, the dream is repossessed as her mother's story--an adult's narrative--that fixes the past in a form to answer only her mother's questions. Wallace recognizes that the story her mother tells speaks to her mother's anxiety; it explains her insofar as her mother is able to understand the poet out of the answers her own constructions provide. Once again, the unknown past forces Wallace into a moment of regretful longing: regret for the heroic child she cannot remember herself to be, and a past that she cannot admit into her own consciousness. Wallace, therefore, makes a leap from the story as an explanation for her present lifestyle--a narrative representation of herself--to the actual event as an example of the world she perceives around her. She would have her mother know that

all streets are treacherous and even the best
 loved children forget the rules

about crossing with the light
 but perhaps she knows this anyway
 it's her story after all and she always
 puts herself in alone in the house
 her hand on the telephone
 and her eyes on the scattered toys
 so easily abandoned
 on the empty porch (13)

Wallace experiences regret for a past she cannot remember and is simultaneously haunted by her comprehension of the event itself. Mrs. Wallace's often-told story is an antidote for a past that never existed and perhaps the only manner in which she can reconcile herself with the past loss and recovery of her young daughter, or explain Wallace's untraditional lifestyle.

Nostalgic storytelling, whether the story is Wallace's or her mother's, can speak into the abyss of silence and bridge the gap between unconscious and conscious subjectivity. According to Lacan, however, one cannot express one's desires within language when they reside within the incomprehensible void of silence; it is natural to speak into the failure of silence when attempting to fill that gap and fulfill desires (40). Words are the only "bricks" with which to build understanding, but without their mortar--the incomprehensible, inarticulate silence--language also succeeds in alienating us from more profound understandings of subjectivity, resulting in melancholic, unsatisfied desire. According to Jacobus, alienation and regret are heightened for women, who consequently experience nostalgia twofold: returning to Freud and Lacan, Jacobus reminds us that woman's penis envy--regretful desire for the "lost" penis she

never had--is matched by male fear with the threat of castration. "Memory (of what has never been lost) is constitutive of nostalgia" (136), and penis-envy in women is, thus, the definitive nostalgic expression. The subsequent feminist theoretical explanation for female regret, as described by Jacobus, "prefers to see this retrospective perception of loss as mourning for the lost mother" (137). Another offshoot of Jacobus' argument is exemplified by Wallace's work and is therefore more applicable: Jacobus posits that women might experience deep regret for a past (historical or mnemonic) because women were not allowed a role of proclaimed vital importance within patriarchal society. The "alienated need" (137) women experience *vis à vis* history--described by Freud as penis-envy, and by Lacan as exile from the phallic symbolic order--arises out of an unsatisfied desire for a personally valid ancestral home. One does not have to accept the penis as woman's object of regret or the phallus as the symbol of power from which women are denied; neither does one have to accept the womb as the homeland and source of woman's longing. Despite these often criticized, essentialist aspects of psychoanalytical theory, Freud and Lacan have provided useful models for understanding alienation. "For Lacan," states Jacobus, "desire itself is always the offshoot of a need that 'finds itself alienated' [Gallop 149]--always a state of melancholy or unsatisfied desire This alienated need is the nostalgia of feminism" (137). The "nostalgia of feminism" is clearly prevalent in Wallace's writing, where the gap between what she searches for and what she is able to contribute to this search alienates her from mnemonic and historical truths. This alienated need also forces

Wallace to continue speaking into the void of her desires and estrangement. In telling her poetic stories, Wallace speaks to the alienated past that is crucial to her sense of identity, whether or not she would agree with a psychoanalytical reading of the language of the past. In fact, Wallace does not believe patriarchy is a monolith, as she articulates in the following statement in her address, "One More Woman Talking"⁴:

When I talk of disrupting or changing history, I begin with the assumption that people can change, that we are not totally determined by, bespoken by, the culture in which we live. I begin, always, with the power of the personal, the private, the unique in each of us, which resists, survives, and can change the power that our culture has over us. (79)

Women, and Wallace, might not be totally bespoken by a predominantly patriarchal culture. But if it is not partially determined by socio-cultural forces, then where exactly does the alienation in language arise from? The unique power of the individual, if not bespoken by a patriarchal society, might then be "spoken" by the silence encasing our conscious words. That Wallace is unable to always articulate her past experiences is plain; that she attributes her estrangement from the past to a phallic symbolic order or to a dominating social structure is less clear.

Given the futility of language to successfully fill in the gaps of understanding, why then should Wallace trust speech at all? Lacan provides an answer, albeit a

⁴She was preparing this address and included it in a letter to Mouré, dated February 27, 1987.

problematic one: "Even if [speaking] communicates nothing, the discourse represents the existence of communication; even if it denies the evidence, it affirms that speech constitutes truth; even if it is intended to deceive, the discourse speculates on faith in testimony" (43). Language is problematic because it implies the possibility of communication's truth which it can only partially deliver. While Lacan specifically describes the function of discourse in analysis, the same can be said for language in general, particularly in cases of remembered events when one's faith in testimony is constantly tested or questioned. Spoken recollections of the past bring "us up against the reality of what is neither true nor false," states Lacan (47). In articulating moments from her/his past, the subject's self-proclaimed history is not measured by criteria established on a true/false matrix. "For it is present speech that bears witness to the truth of this revelation in present reality, and which grounds it in the name of that reality" (47). For Wallace, this means that even if she is unable to remember the event, or describe it correctly, she is capable of evoking and communicating a necessary truth from her recollections, as they hold relevance for the present or future. She reconciles moments of the past with the present, and in articulating the past through her narrative of poetic discovery, her nostalgic project moves beyond regret for the past, and towards a future of possible meanings and greater understanding of self.

In "The Heroes You Had as a Girl" (21-22), Wallace makes one such realization. Here, her recollection is not a lost dream of childhood. Instead, the memory that insinuates itself into her present identity teaches her that perhaps the past as a chaotic

mystery is preferable to the conscious explanation she is inclined to make retrospectively. As Wallace finds in this case, the past is best left behind when its confusion is translated into order, and thereby altered. She celebrates her youthful admiration for the older boys who worked on their cars on Saturdays, raced on Sundays and were the objects to fire her adolescent sexual awakening:

The heroes you had as a girl
 were always three grades ahead of you
 taller than the boys in your own class
 taller even than your brothers
 and the layers of muscle ripening
 under their thin shirts and jeans
 made your palms itch
 for something you didn't know how to explain
 but wanted to . . . (21)

The heroes she had as a girl were dangerous and evoked delicious, unexplainable feelings, so that now, as an adult, "twenty years later the hero / who drove that car returns as unexpectedly / as the memory and just as out of place" (22). Wallace does not approach her former hero. The memories of spinning wheels, burning rubber, an arch of flaming crates and the sound of her own voice screeching amongst the other girls are irreconcilable with herself now and the man presently studying bathroom fixtures in a store window, who has grown fat and bald. But "that's not what stops you now / though something does" (22). The poet is immobilized by her entrancing memories:

you can feel the dry grass biting
 the backs of your legs the uncomfortable
 angle of your knees as you sat just so

practising your own dangerous manoeuvres
not being noticed . . .

.....
you think you could explain it now
and that's what stops you
knowing you want nothing less
than for him to turn
peel off his shirt to show you
burn scars on his chest
and the sullen landscape of his eyes
you want the faces of those girls
your own among them burning
brighter than any fire (22)

Her desire is impossible; her desire is for adolescent passion and innocence. In "I Like to Believe My Life" the past is characterized as explicable and therefore tidier than the present. In "Red Light, Green Light," in "In My Mother's Favourite Story," and especially in "The Heroes You Had as a Girl," Wallace's nostalgic desire is for the innocence and frantic disorder she experienced during childhood and adolescence. Wallace's adolescence is literally lost to her because it is an adult's dream of childhood--a time when meanings were diffuse and everyday "magic" was more readily available to her. However, since the Lacanian subject is always "one who has thus been," it follows that Wallace carries within her the possibility of innocence, the possibility of passion, or the possibility of magic with every recollection. The "real" events replay themselves out in her body: the childhood game, the event of her mother's favourite story, and the sensations of adolescent turmoil repeat themselves at every mnemonic turn. The way Wallace evokes a rediscovery of her lost times is by relating the physical sensations--the body memories, if you will--provoked by memory.

For example, the poem "Inside Out" (32-4) relates the purely physical manifestation a memory might take: "A man I know whose father used to slap him / on the back of his head / . . . / still knows the explicit taste of that humiliation" (32), writes Wallace. She further qualifies that "this is not a memory" because these memories are not narrative in form; they resurface only as chaotic spasms of pain and/or pleasure:

it's not the recounting of childhood
I'm telling you about the versions of it
handed out to friends when we return
like condescending ghosts who peer in
on the antics of the living
with futile "if only I had knowns" on their lips
not that at all . . . (32-33)

To Wallace, these anti-memories are the taste of humiliation, "the saltiness of snot and held-back tears" (32), what "a woman / feels as ice in the pit of her stomach" (32), or "the immediate / cramping in my stomach / . . . / that private mingling of shame and anger / tightening the cords in my neck / and strangling my tongue" when an incident from grade-three involuntarily resurfaces (33). These moments are, however, sometimes induced by narrative, as when a drunken man tells about when he was thirteen and tried to fend off a bear. In telling his story, he is once again brought back to the time when he brandished a knife outside his tent in the woods:

. . . his voice cracks and the hand
with the jack-knife in it flails above his head
as if the process of the body's changing
every seven years had suddenly reversed and speeded up

the cells returning to him that
 pure fearlessness pure terror

haven't you felt it yourself
 in whatever moment
 chooses you like that
 a moment you thought you'd left forever
 carrying the person you were then
 like a half-tamed animal tenderly in your arms
 haven't you felt yourself
 surrendered to the starkness of that instant
 when you become the child again (34)

Wallace is not describing remembering the child you once were but becoming the same fearless, childlike person you once were, with all the fury and passion of the remembered moment. The moment chooses you; you choose the narrative that explains it--a narrative that will never fully articulate the event. As in "In My Mother's Favourite Story" and "The Heroes You Had as a Girl," the moments that explain the poet and her identity are not necessarily the neat, narrated remembered ones but rather the surprising, physical involuntary ones. The explanations of the self are necessarily within the chaotic, unchosen instances that rest within the gaps between explanatory words. In "Inside Out," Wallace echoes Lacan's thoughts on truth in language, cited above, because "only speech bears witness to that portion of the powers of the past that has been thrust aside at each crossroads where the event has made its choice" (47). The conscious surrenders to the physical, as the unconscious enacts what is forgotten and unspoken, where unmet desire and alienation might be most prevalent. For Wallace, the past insinuates itself into the subject's life with persistent, surprising, and unmediated

force above and beyond any language of memory available to her, yet, only with language is she able to articulate even the partial truth of the event that “has made its choice.”

From these poems in Signs of the Former Tenant it is clear that Wallace is a nostalgic poet, and that her musings on the past are far from retrograde. She may long for her childhood or experience regret for a past that never existed, but she simultaneously paves the way for future recollection, understanding and self-awareness by unfixing the seemingly neat past. The impulse to read Freud and Lacan into Wallace’s nostalgic writing, as I have done, is open to challenge, however, considering Wallace’s own thoughts on psychoanalytical theory as a means towards understanding feminist poetics. In a letter to Erin Mouré, dated March 12, 1986, Wallace expresses her concerns about psychoanalytical theory:

The real problem I have, you see, is that I don’t trust the first premises [of Freudian and Lacanian theory]. . . . Are we then not making the same mistake Freud makes in talking about an historical, culturally conditioned process as a naturally inherent thing? And while we’re on the subject, why make Lacan and Freud the basis of our attempts to define women’s language at all? This puts us in the position of still accepting their definition of woman (as lack, as outside, as repressed, as libido, as silence) even as we contest it. And why assume that the symbolic order is phallically based to begin with? Or even sexually based? (1993, 32-33)

I do not read Wallace's work as an expression of longing for the phallus, or for the impossible phallic mother, nor am I suggesting that we should accept any definition of women as lack or other, which is based on primarily male criteria. However, despite Wallace's essentialist understanding of Freud and Lacan, above, it is they who have most provocatively articulated a language-based model of alienation, and it is they who have recognized the authority and the deficiencies of language for enunciating subjectivity. Perhaps Wallace is not bespoken by an overwhelming, patriarchal hegemony, but she just might be "bespoken" by an always alienating language. Wallace's poems (and in particular, the autobiographical poems of Marrying Into The Family and Signs of the Former Tenant) articulate a previously unspoken, alienated desire. Whether voicing her desire to break the silence about her female forebears' lives, or regretting the loss of a true voice with which to articulate her adolescent passions, Wallace's work articulates a decidedly female and feminist nostalgia. Thus, psychoanalytical theory, which explains the subject's alienation, proves useful for an understanding of her feminist, nostalgic project.

Jacobus, in describing the poetry of Adrienne Rich, describes women's acts of memory. Of "Transcendental Étude," from Rich's The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977 (1978), Jacobus writes that

[w]alking away from the argument [the simile that Rich opens her poem with] means, here, patiently turning over the personal detritus of memory which compose a woman's life ('bits of yarn, calico and velvet scraps,' shells, skeins

of milkweed, petunia petals, seaweed, cats' whiskers, bird feathers . . .). These are 'the finest findings'--the mnemonics or *objets trouvés*--in which a woman 'finds herself' where she is not. Memory is less 'found' than fabricated. Consciousness is a patchwork rather than a seamless web. 'Such a composition has nothing to do with eternity' or wholeness; it has to do with temporality and fragmentation. (138)

Temporality and fragmentation, whether present as the mnemonic objects of Wallace's historical quest as in Marrying Into The Family or within the moments from the past that resurface involuntarily and in negotiation with the present, are the conditions under which the subject--and particularly a female subject--is able to find the self. Lacan explains the trust (however misplaced) we have in language as a means to define our subjectivity as a system which balances the scales between history and the future because "the effect of full speech is to reorder past contingences by conferring on them the sense of necessities to come, such as they are constituted by the little freedom through which the subject makes them present" (48). By speaking our past selves into existence, we ensure the possibility of future self-hood. As Jacobus states, "the text of memory is a mnemonic for remaking, or making over, the past . . . in which, as women, we both find and lose our forgotten selves" (138). Wallace's nostalgic writing is not retrograde because, as in the writing of Adrienne Rich, she looks back and always longs with the will to change. She makes, discards and re-makes the past. "Feminist nostalgia looks back," allows Jacobus, but "not only to what feminism desires but to what it

desires different, now” (138). Bronwen Wallace, in searching for the mystery of her personality, finds the answers within the voiced discovery of the ever-changing past but always with a glance towards the future. The past is not prescriptive. As Wallace permits new moments to resurface, she allows newly found objects into her construction, and discovers different, unspoken desires waiting to be fulfilled.

CHAPTER 3

Photographic Memory:

The Photo as Nostalgic Site in Marrying Into The Family and "The Scuba Diver in Repose"

A paradox: the same century invented History and Photography.

Roland Barthes Camera Lucida, (93)

but when you're so framed, caught in the act, the (f) stop of act, fact--
what recourse? Step inside the picture and open it up.

Daphne Marlatt Ana Historic, (56)

In her first collection of poems, Marrying Into The Family (1980), Bronwen Wallace searches for a historical narrative with which to identify herself--a history that includes female ancestors exercising control over their lives. Memory plays an integral role in her search despite its ambiguous relationship with the stabilizing nature of historical narration. In "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," Pierre Nora considers modern memory dependent upon the material trace: "[t]he less memory is experienced from the inside," Nora points out, "the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs--hence the obsession with the archive that marks our age" (13). One particularly potent memory prompt and an archival staple is the photograph. Not surprisingly, Wallace often evokes the history and memory of her female forebears in Marrying Into The Family by studying photographs of them. However, the photograph, like a narrative, yields only partial mnemonic or historical truths. "[T]he photograph is *not* significantly more transparent than the language of family stories," states Eric Savoy in "The Antecedents of It: A Poetics of Absence." "[D]espite its status as a concrete object, a 'piece' of a lost world . . . the gaze cannot

penetrate to the reality 'behind' the image" (93). Thus, Wallace's photographic imagery operates as a sign of the ambiguous knowledge she has of the past when attempting her historic, mnemonic return home. As Patricia Holland points out in "History, Memory and the Family Album," her introduction to Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography (1991), "[d]reams of home and a need for belonging come up against the conflicts and fragmentations of family history" (1). Photographs might present a past worthy of remembrance while at the same time evoking contradictory memories to the images they present. For Wallace, this is certainly the case.

Traditionally, women have been responsible for maintaining the home and perpetuating it through narratives of family history. When recounting the history of her female forbears through her use of photographic imagery, Wallace maintains this tradition while re-visioning and re-fashioning the past to include a personally valid women's history. Holland asserts that the family album "underlines the ways in which home remains [women's] particular sphere" (9). Women experience autonomy within this sphere, since "it is largely they who have become the historians, the guardians of memory, selecting and preserving the family archive. The continuity of women's stories has always been harder to reconstruct, but here, the affirmation of the everyday can itself reassert the coherence of women's memories" (9). Within the same volume, Claire Grey and Jeremy Seabrook confirm women's traditional role in photographic family history: In "Theories of Relativity," Grey states that women are the keepers of family history. As Grey and her female cousin trace their lineage through their older female

relatives, they find that women “look after the photo albums, birthday books, family Bibles, jewellery, newspaper cuttings, letters, pieces of china: they write on the backs of photographs; they know the stories” (107). Similarly, in “My Life Is In That Box,” Seabrook considers the photo an “amplification” of the biography or story: “[t]he narratives nearly always fall within the competence of women. Even when the family photographs ceased to be professional and studio-bound, and became a do-it-yourself activity, it was the men who took the pictures, while the women remained custodians of the feelings” (172). As discussed in the previous chapters, Wallace celebrates women’s capacity to elicit change or exercise control within the larger, patriarchal social structure. One way of doing so is through maintaining the images the family chooses to present of itself and ordering them for future reference. In other words, women play an integral role in preserving the family structure despite their limited position within the family. For example, in Greek mythology, Odysseus’ wife, Penelope, remained at home during his ten-year odyssey, seemingly powerless to help him. However, his charmed existence is often attributed to the never-broken thread she used to weave and unweave her tapestry. Thus, she maintained a spell over Odysseus to bring him safely home, literally never allowing his home-tie to break. For Wallace, the safe return home is the unbroken thread of the stories women--herself included--tell. Their continuation is perpetuated by the photographs she maintains, cherishes and reinvests with narrative. However, unlike Holland’s assertion that photographs reaffirm women’s memories, Wallace finds that the history they maintain is not always congruous with the memories

she is trying to evoke. As Annette Kuhn points out in “Remembrance” (Family Snaps), photos “evoke memories which might have little or nothing to do with what is actually in the picture. The photograph is a prop, a prompt, a pre-text: it sets the scene for recollection. But if a photograph is somewhat contingent in the process of memory-production, what is the status of the memories actually produced?” (18). The memories that photos attempt to capture are carefully chosen, and their status is, therefore, circumspect. The manner in which the photograph frames and contextualizes the past is exclusionary. Photographs offer a doorway into retrieving a past, though the sanctioned picture is even more controlled than the sanctioned memory or story. To emphasise her own narrative control over her historical home, Wallace looks to and “behind the photograph” (as one poem is aptly titled). As Kertzer points out in “Bronwen Wallace: ‘The Stubborn Arguments of the Particular,’” photos “preserve but also frame the past in order to render it intelligible” (82). What makes them useful for fixing the past also makes them useful for Wallace to unfix it when she questions the past they represent. In Marrying Into the Family, she explores the complexities of the interplay between photos’ paradox. Photographs are potent sites for nostalgic recall because Wallace is able to invest them with the contradictions of history and memory; they at once promote nostalgia and deny her entry into a valid female ancestry.

In poems such as “Old Photographs” (49), “Dark Fields” (59), “Behind the Photograph” (62-64), and “Getting Down to It” (75-76) Wallace continues to negotiate her historical home, as revealed or denied by family photographs. In “Profile” (67-68),

"On a Country Road" (78), and "Family Portrait" (80), she looks at a more recent familial history and her role in its continuance through the production and preservation of photographic images. If picture-taking defines and frames the subject, family portraiture is especially useful in defining the family and, consequently, the home. Holland argues that family photos, such as wedding pictures, formal portraits, and those taken during festive holidays, embrace certain conventions and "give enormous pleasure, partly because their familiar structure is able to contain the tension between the longed-for ideal and the ambivalence of lived experience" (4). Family albums "construct their own versions of family history, in negotiation with the ideal." The realities of sickness, abuse, divorce or nonconforming family members "are suppressed, if only for the split second that the shutter is open" (7). As Susan Sontag points out in On Photography (1973), "photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, [and] help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure" (9). Wallace possesses a pictorial, but conflicted, family where memory, narrative and photographic proof fail to illuminate a comprehensive truth. Anyone who poses a threat to the already insecure group identity is not included within the family frame(work) or is shown to be contradictory to Wallace's memory. In Marrying, as discussed in chapter one, great aunts, timid wives or unsavoury characters are arranged on the edges of the family, visually and figuratively. Because family photos "readily lend themselves to a licensed nostalgia" (Seabrook 179), they do not lend themselves easily to Wallace's poetic revision of her historical home. They often prove a past that she can neither

remember nor celebrate. They present their own sanctioned and highly selective version of a specific reality that is deemed worthy of remembrance. Where the archivist-poet is called upon to order and preserve the pictorial past and reveal its cohesive story, the reality behind those facts becomes lost narrative. In the photograph, Wallace finds a way to enact the tension between sanctioned history and its contradictory mnemonic testimony; when cracking into the literal and figurative darkness of the photographic past, she cracks into the fissures of history and memory.

In “Old Photographs” (49) Wallace begins her exploration of photographic memory in Marrying with the realization that family space (and subsequent family history) is often defined by the inexplicable photographs left for future generations. “I’m told the effect is merely technical / something to do with shutter speeds / and the size of the lens,” she gives as explanation for the starchy stance of the children and the stiff poses of the adults in old photographs. The primitive technology of photography, however,

. . . does not explain the eyes
how the calm there is repeated
in the sure tilt of a chin
in the way hands lie
loosely folded in the lap
until each figure emerges
as if carved from the furniture
and rounded by the room
where these photographs take place

The poet has no accompanying narrative with which to resolve the disparity between the formality of the photograph and the serenity of the family captured. Instead,

Wallace must read and write her own narratives into the images, of which "Old Photographs" is merely the first example, to understand her precursors. Here, the story she fabricates is both a temporal reframing and a reframing of designated spatial boundaries. The room is not a mere setting for the portrait; it also provides an internal framework for the family. The room where the photographs are taken houses weddings, holidays and wakes, but it also houses, and therefore frames, acceptable photographic versions of the family itself, since "family portraits / line the walls and cluster on little tables." This family room reflects accepted people and memories back into itself, with "each generation stiffening / for the obligatory photograph." Ancestors are placed within a series of spacio-temporal frames that mirror an acceptable, but not necessarily true, pictorial history. Wallace's family portraiture displays an idealization of the family and functions as a distorted mirror with which the family defines its space.

Kuhn observes that photographs allow the family to actively create itself (23). Photos construct a visual site for family memories when they "capture all those moments we will someday want to treasure, call to mind, tell stories about" (25). The present is, therefore, co-opted as the "past-in-the-future," or "nostalgia-in-prospect," producing answers to our "desires hingeing [sic] on a particular kind of story--a family story with its own forms of plenitude" (25). In "Old Photographs," the families of Wallace's past stiffly and formally organize themselves for future onlookers, presenting a happy front, a brave face and a proper past for future generations to long for and emulate. Family photographs hook into desires for a time and a place that never existed

but can nonetheless be proven and possessed. Thus, photos act as powerful sites for nostalgia; they ensure necessarily regretful longing.

Wallace's nostalgia is not superficial, however, and in "Old Photographs" she questions the proof these slices of the past provide:

was it the slow closing of the shutter
that held them
staring beyond the camera
did they notice its blink
or was it the room itself
that pressed into their limbs
gathered itself
behind the calm and open eyes

The family is held, fixed and possessed by both spatial and temporal networks that seemingly deny any re-working or re-reading of family history. But her attempts to settle upon a personally valid past or situate herself within an already anchored version provide Wallace with only unanswered questions. Her predecessors stiffened out of obligation to the future; they were bound by duty to the family whose designated space carves them into shape or presses into their limbs. The (trans)fixed family or past, like the fenced-in land owned by her forefathers, does not speak to Wallace of the relationships woven through them. The photograph, whether of a family or not, is a piece of the past that alters the future viewing and memory of the past. Sontag holds that "[l]ife is not about significant details, illuminated a flash [sic], fixed forever. Photographs are" (81). That we look for the past in pictorial archives is the paradox of

historical method; Wallace's antidote to the paradox is her insistent re-visioning and re-imagining of the past, using photographs as her mnemonic prompt.

The photograph (as Marlatt says in the epigraph to this chapter) is the (f) stop--the fact stop, the fixed act, the (f)act. Wallace unfixes the photograph by animating it with her narrative, and "Old Photographs" asks the question that begins this process in her writing: was it the closing shutter or the family room that led to the calmness in the eyes of her ancestors? The artificial stance of the family snapshot is undercut by the inexplicable. Wallace re-activates the past and constructs meanings from the photographic sites where sanctioned family narrative and nostalgia traditionally render it motionless. In Camera Lucida (1981), Roland Barthes divides photographs into two components: the *studium* represents the nameable meanings of a picture, which are constructed from socially and culturally determined criteria. In Wallace's photographic imagery, an example is the repetition of poses from one generation to the next or the incongruity between the photo and the memory undercutting it. The *studium* may be subtle, ironic or unintentional, but nonetheless, it speaks to an audience. Barthes' second component is the *punctum*, which he describes as "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (27). Unlike the *studium*, the *punctum* is only personally relevant and is less likely to arise from all photographs. For Wallace, whose project is to discover personally valid, female ancestry, the *punctum* of family portraiture instigates questions about her familial past, allowing her to construct an authentic family of female forebears out of the fragmented, partial answers she

fabricates. Wallace's *punctum* in "Old Photographs" is the quality of her ancestors' eyes for which she has no explanation. In exploring the boundaries and allowances of familial photographic space, Wallace explores the boundaries and allowances of family history.

In chapter one, I discussed Wallace's historical return home through the mnemonic reconstruction of her great aunts. For her photographic, mnemonic narrative, she looks to her grandmother for answers in "Dark Fields" (59) and "Behind the Photograph" (62-4). In the photos of her grandmother Wallace looks into cracks and recesses of memory and into the darkness of the photograph for the reality behind the sanctioned proof of her grandmother's life. Thus, she realizes moments of recognition within the boundaries of family images that would not lie obviously within the accepted (picture) frame. When viewing pictures of her grandmother, Wallace is brought up against the contradictions of memory, family legend and photographic fact, and she buttresses her return home with the larger picture she envisions from these seemingly disparate fragments.

In "Dark Fields" Wallace looks at the photo of her grandmother, sitting in a straight chair,

her skirts stiffening the crippled leg
which I never see although
it is always there
after the accident with the horse
who never appears at all
is legendary
like my grandmother's skill with him

The poet knows of the crippled leg only through memory and legend; this leg is not photographed and is present only by its flagrant absence. The photo of the heavy woman in a chair is in direct conflict with the legend of the woman's horsemanship. The absence of pictorial reminders of the horse or the woman's skill with him implies their inappropriate status within the family. Wallace, however, resurrects her grandmother's legendary status out of the only photographic, mnemonic with which she is provided. Despite the exclusion of certain people or events from family photographs, Wallace takes on the traditional role of "memory keeper," by remembering what is not apparent at first glance.

Her grandmother is similarly conflicted in "Behind the Photograph":

There's this photo of my grandmother at 25
in an elaborate hat of creamy satin
with a great dark feather that lifts
almost as proudly as the profile beneath it
the tilted chin and sweep of rich black hair (62)

While more detailed, this description is comparable to that in "Dark Fields," depicting a similarly formal pose. Wallace's memories of her grandmother are likewise contradictory to the image photographed:

all that I know of this woman
her famous skill with horses
her grace as a dancer distills here
in what could be
the cover for a novel (62)

The recollection or narrative is distilled into an image--a portrait that sends the appropriate face into the future, yet it is inappropriate for Wallace's nostalgic project.

Finally, Wallace finds a further contradiction, for instead of the proud formality of her grandmother at twenty-five, she sees “the fat old woman / of the last photographs / defeated eyes turned / from the man beside her [her husband]” (63). This, too, has little relation to the stories Wallace has heard, for the oppressive husband her grandmother averts her eyes from in the pictures “began their marriage spending / all the wedding money on an opal ring” (62), in a romantic gesture of love.

In both “Dark Fields” and “Behind the Photograph” Wallace infers a reality that her mnemonic narrative insinuates into the pictures of her grandmother. The “dark fields” of the so-entitled poem are the expanses of black space within the photographic negatives. She cannot see the legend in the photo,

but I keep holding the negatives
at different angles to the light
squinting my eyes
for a glimpse of our white figures
galloping toward each other
over the dark fields (59)

Only within the negative--the literal negative and the narrative dark--can Wallace find an independent, defiant, galloping grandmother. Furthering her identification with this particular legend, Wallace also places herself within the negative, galloping toward the version of the woman she visually constructs, contrary to what is actually, visibly available to her. The two women, separated by two generations, rush toward one another, as Wallace attempts to lay claim to a traditionally ignored history. Her grandmother's skills are figuratively in darkness because they are undocumented and

unphotographed, which explains Wallace's success in locating her within the shadows of the negative. Paradoxically, her positive example of female ancestry is located in her fabrication of the contrasting, negative of permissible family images.

Wallace draws a similar route towards recognition in "Behind the Photograph," in which she attempts to reconcile the photograph with the story. Again, the poet finds her point of reconciliation within the shadows of the story and image, but here Wallace identifies with her grandmother in a moment of defeat, not triumph. Shifting away from the photo of the older woman, Wallace recalls a trip to the beach with her father,

where beneath the dunes
he told me a hotel was buried
and all day I spent
digging expectant that any moment
my shovel would strike stone (63)

The poet as a child digs in a childish attempt to uncover the truth behind the legend.

Similarly,

lights of green and amber
glow like secrets in the opal
my grandmother left
well-kept promises that keep me
sifting the stories
the photographs for something
I'm supposed to find (63)

The six-year old archaeologist makes way for the adult truth-seeker, for Wallace looks beneath the surface of the sand, or into the glowing secrets of the important opal wedding ring--symbol of love and, later, of stubbornness--searching the past for clues to a truth only hinted at from memory, and absent from any photo. As Kertzer observes,

“the key to [Wallace’s] truth is figured by the crutch that the pictures [either in “Dark Fields” or here] systematically fail to record” (82):

in every photograph its absence
 a statement like the straight set
 of the shoulders the almost careless way
 the hands are folded
 gestures that move
 out from behind the photograph
 to frame it another way
 like the gestures I leave out
 in my memory of wet sand
 tears and my father calling me home (64)

Kertzer continues that “the complexity of [Wallace’s] feelings is expressed, not just by what the photo includes and not just by what it excludes, but by the interplay of the two: by the forceful exclusion of what Wallace’s own memory insinuates back into the picture” (82). Kertzer also characterizes the grandmother as one of many “self-effacing” women in Wallace’s poetry (the maiden aunts among them), whose crutch is “an ambiguous sign of self-reliance, of reliance on others, and of failure to find support” (83). Kertzer considers the absent presence of the crutch a sign of Wallace’s fragile position as granddaughter and poet, since she herself repeats the process of looking for answers where they cannot lie: as a child, a legend invites her to search for a hotel that doesn’t exist; as an adult, the photograph “invites her into, yet bars her from, a community of women.” Kertzer continues:

Finding the truth is not just a matter of passively examining an image, or of actively writing down what had been repressed. The shift in imagery from fixed

photo to 'wet sand' suggests the plasticity of the 'what' and the 'where' of truth. Whether the medium of understanding is photography, memory or poetry, it is a necessary but flawed agent. The problem is not that Wallace fails to comprehend everything, but that every act of memory is a reframing ('to frame it in another way'). Memory retrieves what had been repressed, but only by resituating the frame in a new configuration that must again 'leave out' details. (83)

Clearly Wallace's search into her family history through photographic imagery sets her up against the very pitfalls of memory and against nostalgic reminiscences in particular. The photo, like the recollection, is determined by the social and cultural framework surrounding it; the photo, like memory, is about exclusion as much as inclusion. The constant interplay between what is present and what is absent reveals more than anything else; where the photograph discloses and simultaneously suppresses various versions of the truth, a clearer understanding of the "whole picture" might be possible, and the invitation to future interpretation is always open. Furthermore, the photo might be considered a potent example of what Nora refers to as a *lieu de memoire*--a site or sign which exists only through the interplay between history and memory: the photograph documents history, but evokes memory, neither of which can be truly fixed. *Lieux de memoire* are dependent upon the will to remember, and are therefore invested with all the contradictions history and memory struggle against. They can exist "because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an

unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications” (19). Wallace’s pictorial history clearly functions in such a capacity, forcing her to remember people and events contrary to their left-over images, and constantly to reconsider the past it represents. *Lieux de Mémoire* escape from history, since their meanings are in perpetual flux and dependent upon the socio-cultural backdrop in which they are viewed. Thus the photograph, as a site of memory, “is double: a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations” (Nora 24). For Wallace, the photo’s simultaneous invitation and denial into the past creates its over determination as a site of nostalgia, and a powerful sign of the regretful nostalgia particularly experienced by women.

Kertzer situates Wallace within infirmity and considers her work a repetition of her grandmother’s accession to male authority. Kertzer suggests that “[p]erhaps her pen is her crutch, since it sustains her yet is also the instrument inscribing her infirmity” (83). However, if this is the case, Wallace continues to support herself with it, and she continues to rely upon photographic imagery and the partial truths they provide in her mnemonic archaeological delving throughout *Marrying*. In “Getting Down To It” (75-6), she returns again to the yellowing photographs of aunts, cousins and grandmothers: “I search their faces / for clues messages / find only my own face anticipated” (75). The pictures are silent and do not disclose the truth Wallace looks for from her ancestors, for the photos

are not their gifts
 they did not choose these postures
 these angles of sunlight
 did not even imagine me here
 waiting behind the photographer (75)

For Wallace, the pictures reveal little of her forebears' lives; they are opaque remnants of a frozen, purposeful moment. The accidental detritus, the "things tossed up / from the daily clutter," such as jewellery, china or recipes are more useful for her purposes (75). These objects evoke old stories and instigate new ones, or sometimes they remain without continuous narrative, with "each repetition shaping them / to other people's memories / so that only the things remain / arbitrary . . ." (76). In "Old Photographs," "Dark Fields" and "Behind the Photograph," Wallace realizes moments of truth where she imposes her own meanings onto the images from the past. Here, however, the photograph evokes similar emptiness to the stray objects.

without story or memory
 to round them out
 flat as the blank faces
 the arranged poses
 as silent as the bones
 I can't see in the photographs
 though they remain somewhere and
 this cup a great-grandmother used
 the jars of plum jam in my cellar
 remain
 all I have
 to go by (76)

For every memory or story conjured up by a photographic image of the past, there are many more that remain immersed beneath the vacant, sepia-toned eyes. Perhaps this

accounts for Kertzer's pessimistic view of Wallace's mnemonic, archaeological project. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, Wallace's nostalgia inspires future change. If Wallace is unable to recover the lives of her female ancestors from the objects, stories and photographs handed down to her, the outcome is far from defeated complacency. Even Kertzer admits that "[t]he word that best sums up [Wallace's] moral attitude is 'stubborn,' a tough determination that recurs in her work and is usually associated with women and the past" (86). Marrying Into The Family is merely Wallace's first venture into the recovery of an often wounded, woman-centred home, and she invests photographs with the problems of such an endeavour.

Wallace cannot find what she believes she is supposed to find in the photographs or narratives available to her; instead she discovers accidental truths and inexplicable mnemonic, narrative fragments. Perhaps within the silence, the absence and the shadows she recognizes what she is *not supposed* to find, namely the hidden truth behind her grandmother's life. If silence offers answers to the question of subjectivity in discourse, negative dark space provides meaning within the photograph. More importantly, however, is the interplay between the two, where language and silence interact, or where light and shadow meet. Similarly, in a drug-induced revelation, Gail Scott's central figure concludes that a woman's survival is similar to the negative of a photo, where she "*just has to pick the place in it where night (her deepest self) and day (reality) are combined in the right synthesis of light and dark for her. Even if it's not quite (I started laughing) socially acceptable*" (Heroine 177). For a more

comprehensive and truthful image of the past, Wallace must account for its negative--its hidden pictures--and only then is she able to discern the "right synthesis" of a personally relevant past and a picture-perfect, sanctioned history.

When embarking on any historical inquiry, one is bound to find that the past is, in many ways, irretrievably lost. Wallace animates the past with her mnemonic, historical narrative but is still unable to recover fully that which is dead. The photograph, as a site/sign of a regretful past, is thus invested with all the pathos of mortality. Roland Barthes characterizes "the melancholy of Photography itself" in Camera Lucida (1981), when he relates its intrinsic connection to the mortality of its subject. Always referring to a reality that has been, "the photograph suggests that [the photographic subject] is already dead" (Barthes 79). In On Photography (1973), Susan Sontag takes photography's melancholic quality one step further:

It is a nostalgic time right now, and photographs actively promote nostalgia. Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos. . . . All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt. (15)

Sontag does not, however, consider the basis of photography's nostalgic tendencies purely in terms of its status as an elegiac art, for the photo "is also an invitation to sentimentality." She continues to argue that photos "turn the past into an object of

tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgments by the generalized pathos of looking at time past" (71). Some of the problems Wallace might have when looking to the pictured past of the photographs in Marrying Into The Family arise because photos, by nature, defy critical analysis by representing a sentimental, elegiac version of the past.

In her last three "photograph" poems Wallace invests her family photographs with some of the pathos Barthes and Sontag describe. In "Profile" (67-68) she divides pictures between those of the living and those of the dead. The dead, asserts Wallace, "move differently" in their photographs, despite their fixed poses (67). "The living swim through their photographs / like fish," and are not as contained by the stabilizing images of them, but

. . . the dead
retreat behind their frozen attitudes
and the yellowing surfaces cloud
with their wishes
their unfinished business (67)

Here, the poet relates the hazards of the photo archive for her nostalgic project. The fixed status of a photo, and particularly one of the unremembered or unspoken-of deceased, denies entry into the past, as shown in previously discussed poems. However, in "Profile" the forgotten moment is Wallace's impetus for animating the picture. When studying pictures of the dead, the unanswerable question or unmet desires--the regretful pathos--they imply signify the repressed, perhaps darker, memories only hinted at. We study them

till we become like the man
 who sorts through photographs
 of someone he once loved
 and is held not by the ones
 that catch her full-faced to the camera
 but the tentative profile
 where the pattern
 of shadows on her face and the way
 her hair falls through them
 imply a movement so hesitant
 he cannot remember
 which way she turned
 when the shutter
 reopened (67-68)

For Wallace, the mystery of the past is once again located within the shadows of the photograph. The tentative profile of the photographed subject signifies the hesitant movement of the actual moment captured and also something more difficult to fix: the memory, the identity, and necessarily, the subjectivity of the person pictured. The subject of photography is no more fixed than the subject defined through discourse, when language merely fills the empty space of silence. If the mystery of personality lies within the interaction between the conscious and the unconscious, the mystery of the photographed subject lies within the ambiguity between illuminated and shadowed space: if language attests to the possibility of communicating one's identity, photography suggests the possibility of capturing it. There always remains the actual inability of photography to secure subjectivity, however, and thus, the inherent regret of photography is revealed. The melancholic mortality of the photographic site invests any photograph with nostalgia; the regretful longing implied by pictures of the deceased

(whether from their flat, staring eyes or from our own imposition of pathos upon them) ensures Wallace's nostalgic enterprise will be an ongoing negotiation with the past.

Her own compliance with and resistance to the "nostalgia-in-the future" photographs promote is apparent in the poems "On a Country Road" (78) and "Family Portrait" (80). In the former, Wallace describes the objectification she experiences from being photographed and fixed into place. The immediacy of the moment when her child and husband run ahead of her on a country road is captured in the blurred finality of a photograph: "A camera clicks us / into place," separates the action from the captured image of it and "transforms our gestures" into something almost unrecognizable. An instantaneous, joyful, and active moment of the present becomes fixed and thus separated from lived experience:

and ten seconds later
we emerge
attitudes on 3 x 3
In the foreground
slightly blurred
a small boy smiling
atop a man's slim shoulders
behind them
the figure of a woman
face shaded
by the outstretched arms

If the action and its stabilization are separated by the two line stanza of the camera clicking her into place, her subjectivity and objectivity are as well. *Her* triumphant son, riding on *his* father's shoulders are captured only as *a* small boy riding on the shoulders of *a* man. And Wallace's own cries of caution to her husband and child are

photographically fixed as merely the blurry shape of *a* woman, whose face is shadowed by *the* reaching arms before her.

In “Family Portrait” (80), Wallace recognizes a similar risk in the photograph’s ability to objectify its subjects: “It begins with my brother’s gift / of an old picture frame,” that instigates a formal family portrait. Her husband is “suddenly unsmiling,” she smooths “the folds of [her] long skirt” and grows “dreamy under the brim of an elaborate hat,” and her son “tugs at the wide bow / scratching under his chin.” The photograph is not a candid shot of the family in their everyday clothes, acting “natural.” Instead, Wallace herself conforms to the tradition of family portraiture and plays her role in the family’s photographic continuance into the future:

we stiffen and recede into sepia
 appear again above our fireplace
 among the other ancestral photographs
 yellowing on the mantle
 staring down on our present selves

As discussed, in “Old Photographs,” Wallace describes the family room where the family assembles for important events and where acceptable photographic images of themselves reflect back into the room. In “Family Portrait,” she describes her own participation in this ritual and tints it with the sepia-toned melancholy of mortality. She and her family “stiffen,” “recede,” and are akin to the yellowing pictures of the already deceased upon the mantle place.

However, in describing her own objectification by the camera lens, she also implies the force by which her ancestors have been fixed and shaped by the process that claims to capture a moment in time:

daily we grow less familiar
our faces vaguely reminiscent
of faces we think we remember
but assumed were dead
faces we have never seen
emerging at last
from the bone camera
behind our eyes

Wallace suggests the mortality of the photo with the image of “the bone camera” behind the eyes, which is present in both the photos of her ancestors and in those of herself and her family. Photographs are often attributed with stealing a little piece of the person so captured; they are a slice of reality. Sontag characterizes the photograph as “a trace, something directly stenciled [sic] off the real, like a footprint or a death mask” (154). Barthes echoes this when he considers photography “a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead” (32). The faces Wallace sees emerging from the photographs (of herself and her ancestors) are the faces of the dead; they can only hint at their lives, their regrets and their desires out of the “bone camera” behind their eyes. They are guarantors of time’s passing, of the instability of the subject and of the photograph’s potency as a nostalgic tool.

Wallace continues to use photographic imagery throughout her work after Marrying Into The Family. In Signs of the Former Tenant, she invites us to envision a kitchen as a still-shot from a film in the poem "Freeze Frame" (45-47). In Common Magic (1985) her son recreates the past through photographs in "My Son is Learning to Invent" (17-19). In "Jeremy at Ten" (82-84), Wallace reconsiders her own subjectivity from a photo of herself and her son, echoing her findings in Marrying's "On a Country Road": "Disguised as mother and son / we could be anybody's," she discovers. "[T]hat's what photographs do, / they deliver us from ourselves / from the darkness their images depend upon" (82). And in the last volume of poetry published before her death, The Stubborn Particulars of Grace (1987), Wallace entitles Part III of the poem "Intervals" (59-68) "ECU: On the Job." ECU, or Extreme Close Up, is a cinematographer's term. Photographic imagery clearly plays an ongoing role in Wallace's writing, but nowhere after Marrying Into The Family is it as integral to the story as it is in "The Scuba Diver in Repose" (171-92), the final story of People You'd Trust Your Life To (1991), where Wallace draws the mortality of the subject and the power of the photographic, nostalgic site together to facilitate a conclusion that reaches towards the future and not to the past.

In "The Scuba Diver in Repose" Wallace enacts what Mary Jacobus might consider a decidedly feminist nostalgia, for Jill, the story's narrator, shifts from telling the story of her painful past to describing her present condition. The immediacy with which Jill tells her final visions into being makes way for the future as she shifts from

regret for the past to a future of possibility. Jill narrates her own (hi)story, but she also photographs it. Thus, she is not only a reader and teller of history, but also a reader and creator of the photographic proof of that history. Finally, Jill destroys photographs and the history they represent to make way for new creations and readings in the future. Roland Barthes considers the photograph “a certain but fugitive testimony” of the past (93) that attests to history while simultaneously being torn from temporal movement. The photo is one of Nora’s double-encoded *lieux de mémoire*: it is a slice of past reality that holds significance in the present; it is a site for recollection that often proves contradictory to the past; it confirms the subject’s existence while investing her/him with the pathos of mortality. In “The Scuba Diver in Repose,” Wallace presents these contradictory traits of photography. Jill, as a creator, reader and destroyer of pictures, is a fugitive historian. Through the act of photographing she learns to pay attention to and envision the world around her in a new way--with immediacy, urgency, and therefore always towards the possibility of change in the future. Jill journeys from her nostalgic regret to a state of conscious, present awareness through the recovery of photography as her medium for narration, but only by first working through photographic nostalgia--and nostalgia of photography--to reach such a point.

“Jimmie had been dead about six months when I ripped up all the photos,” Jill begins her story (171), explaining that she “wanted to obliterate everything, all the evidence” (172). After destroying all photographic proof and divesting herself of all of Jimmie’s possessions, she “felt great for a while. Several weeks, in fact. But Jimmie

was still dead" (173). Wallace sets the story up with the interconnected relationship between photos and mortality by introducing Jimmie's death. Jill's relationship to capturing and seeing the world through the camera lens and her severance of that relationship. In "Ghost Narratives: a Haunting," Aritha Van Herk notes that when Jimmie dies, "the ghost of his death becomes the presence that [Jill] does not want to record or recognize because once she does she will have to efface herself in order never to see it" (69). Instead of effacing herself, Jill destroys the photos.

Importantly, Jill's story is framed as a series of recollections, her act of destruction was six months after Jimmie's death but prior to her present narration, and as her story unfolds, Jill moves nostalgically further back before she is able to move narratively towards the present and future. Thus, after her initial recollection of ripping up the photos, her story continues with when she and her sister, Lee, were little: "I was the 'easy-going' one, she was 'high-strung' . . . I'm supposed to pull through because I'm placid, flexible" (173). But Jill considers herself a drifter without any direction or purpose in life. She travelled in Europe after school, which initiated her hobby of photography: "Pretty soon I was taking pictures whenever I had time, living in a dump and spending everything I could on equipment and film" (174). She also looked at other people's photographs. "Everything and anything. Steiglitz, Arbus, Strand, Bourke-White. I knew all the big names, but I loved people's family snapshots, too, slides of my uncle's umpteenth trip to Key West" (174). Not only was Jill interested in showing her views of the world, she was also interested in how other photographers captured their

visions. The camera provided Jill with the lens to order her world: the photograph proved its existence.

After five years of working as a bank teller and taking pictures at every available moment, Jill met Jimmie. A scuba diver whenever possible, Jimmie influenced Jill through his own example, for in his scuba diving Jill finds a metaphor for her own ability to see herself in new ways: "'You have to learn to use your eyes all over again,' he said. 'It's a whole new world. That's what I like about it'" (175). Jimmie's relationship to the alternative world he sees underwater functions as the instigation for Jill to see herself, the world framed by her camera lens and the world she photographically constructs more clearly. As well, Jimmie's altered, underwater vision involves a different relationship to time and space--as does photographic vision--because gravity and movement decelerate while immersed. Time does not stop when the camera's shutter opens, but is seemingly frozen; underwater the illusion of slow-motion lets one actually take the time to see what is going on.

Jimmie's understanding of his presence in the world is directly related to his visual sense. His favourite published photograph, by Jacques-Henri Lartigue, was taken when the photographer was a young boy. The photo is one "in which, in a huge crowd of people, Lartigue has caught two men eyeing a beautiful woman. . . . [Jimmy] said to get a shot like that you would have to be able to look at the world the way a kid does--as if it were all just happening for the first time. . . . Jimmie was always going on about how we learn to not look at things as we grow up" (175). Another example

of the immediacy and wonder with which Jimmie preferred to see the world is in Jill's retelling of his favourite moon-walk story:

He used to say that the only astronaut he respected was Ed White, the guy who freaked out on his space walk and became so euphoric about it that he refused to get back into the capsule. When he did get back, he said it was the saddest moment of his life. As far as Jimmie was concerned, White was the only one of them who *really saw* where he was and what he was doing. The others could have been in a shopping mall, he said, for all they let on. (175-176)

Again, Jimmie's relationship to space and time was most important when lack of gravity allowed him (or those he respected) the time to see their surroundings. The photos, images and stories that echo his own experience of the world--his own way of seeing--show someone paying attention to their surroundings and learning to see with fresh eyes. "Whenever I was with Jimmie," Jill says, "I knew, really knew, what I was doing. . . . Mostly I was just paying attention for the first time in my life" (176). Through Jimmie's example, Jill is able to "slow down" and pay attention to herself.

With more personal awareness, Jill embarked upon a purposeful, artistic project: "it was this--Jimmie's *presence*. I guess you'd call it--that I *decided*, yes decided, that I wanted to photograph" (176). Unlike her earlier work, which had little direction and seemed almost accidental in what she managed to reveal, Jill's photograph of Jimmie finally arose after great deliberation, and surprisingly, "it didn't look like him at all"

(176). In the photo that captured his “essence,” Jimmie looked shorter than he was and was in profile from behind as he leaned forward in a window to see something outside:

There was a stillness to it all that was more like movement, if you know what I mean. I don’t think he knew I was taking the picture at the time, but that doesn’t matter because whatever he was looking at was what mattered to him, *all* that mattered to him right then, and somehow I’d managed to get that in the picture. (176-177)

What Jill captured, and later tried to repeat in a series of photographs, was something “essential” about the subject. As someone who respects the immediacy of visionary awareness, Jill captured this quality in him. For Jill it is a question of recognition, and the project of capturing the people she thought she knew well took her two years. The purposefulness of her project was, however, matched by the arbitrariness of their points of recognition: “It was also a surprise, every time, what came up. And I began to see that very often people were most themselves when they didn’t look it, when they were unrecognizable in all the usual ways” (177), or partially hidden from view, as in Jimmie’s shadowed profile. As a historian/photographer, Jill’s job was to “narrate” her pictorial story into a cohesive series, and her gallery exhibit elicited embarrassment and anger from her friends and family. “I began to think that maybe I’d made a big mistake, gone too far or something, exposed people, people I loved to, to . . . I didn’t know what,” Jill states. But Jimmie thrived on this sort of honest exposure:

"You've shown up all our secret and difficult and hard-to-get-at places. And then," he came towards me, talking excitedly, waving his arms the way he did, until you thought they might come loose, "and then--and this is the really exciting part--you've put us all together so that we have to see that each of us is like that. As different in ourselves as we are from each other." He nodded to the walls again. "And that's hard to take." (178-179)

Jill's power was that of the storyteller/historian/photographer, the power to capture, fix and "tell" the story of the photographed subject, and Jill believes in this power when she believes in her ability to capture the essence of her subjects' personalities. Jill's power as a photographer is echoed by photographer Diane Arbus, who states that "there's a kind of power about the camera. I mean everyone knows you've got some edge. You're carrying some slight magic which does something to them. It fixes them in a way" (13). Jill fixed the people she captured on film in ways that were contrary to their usual selves; she not only fixed them, but she altered (fixed) any perceptions they, or others, might have had of them. By paying attention to her life for the first time, Jill was not only able to alter her vision of herself and the world but also through photography to alter other people's visions of themselves. Jimmie, whose presence seemed so stable, facilitated Jill's growing sense of purpose and her sense of identity; as a photographer, she was the "author" of others' identities on film.

But Jimmie's illness and subsequent death forced their visions to take different turns; as he moved closer towards death "it took every ounce of strength [he] had to see

just exactly what it was" (191). The mortality of photography--the immediacy of the moment coupled with "time's relentless melt" (Sontag 15)--was reflected by Jimmie's own mortality, of which the photographs of him would always remind Jill. His ability to capture and see each moment clearly while moving closer and closer to death was matched by Jill's own inability to keep up: she "wanted to get a grip on everything," but was unable to (181).

As it turned out, things didn't go at all the way I thought they would.
And yet it was all familiar, somehow, even at the time.

"It's what I've never seen before that I recognize." Diane Arbus says that, in the preface to one of her collections.

And Jimmie's dying was just like that. (182)

Again, recognition resides in the most unlikely places, as Wallace cites Arbus' statement.⁶

During Jimmie's illness Jill felt displaced, describing her status with family snapshot jargon, saying she felt like "someone you don't care about, whether they're in the frame or not" (183). When viewing Jimmie within the context of all his relationships with others, Jill saw the larger picture of his life and her limited role in it. She spent hours outside taking pictures of Jimmie's parents' garden, which they assumed helped to take her mind off things. "Actually, I was trying to get my mind *on*

⁶This statement by Arbus also functioned as one of two epigraphs to Signs of the Former Tenant, as discussed in the previous chapter.

things, on Jimmie. I was trying to focus,” Jill explains. “But everything kept shifting, fading away” (185). Actually, Jimmie was the only one fading away, and in trying to focus on something--on anything--Jill attempted to capture the moment in the only way she knew how, photographically. The certainty of the photographic moment, however, is juxtaposed with the instability of Jimmie’s health: as Jimmie’s example of focused, attentive energy deteriorates into his own inevitable death, Jill’s ability to pay attention is also greatly diminished. Within the photographs of Jimmie, Jill would always have a reminder of not only Jimmie’s mortality, but the mortality of the moment. Jimmie’s description of dying, retold by Jill here, is similar to his understanding of scuba diving:

He said that dying was a lot like being underwater--drifting, watching everything drift. He said it was like learning to breathe the first time you dived, how you had to trust the equipment, not be afraid of being underwater. That way you could *pay attention* to everything around you, he said. He said the floaty feeling was the same, too, he could feel parts of himself sort of going away, feel himself letting go of them. He said he had to *pay attention*, to say goodbye to the use of his legs, his stomach, whole parts of his brain, memories. He kept listing stuff like that, trying to get me to understand. *See* what it was like. (186)

Jill was unable to see what it was like, and her only recourse was to photograph the flowers in the garden or focus on small things that made the whirlwind of the experience tolerable.

When Jimmie died, he heaved three sighs. "That was it," Jill recalls. "I waited, holding my breath, but there wasn't anymore. . . . everything else started moving again. Except for Jimmie. And for me. I've been holding my breath, one way or another it seems, for a long, long time" (187). Jill stops moving forward, metaphorically speaking, and remains trapped in the past, thereby exemplifying a particularly problematic form of nostalgia. Prescriptive, caught and wistfully melancholic, Jill loses her focus on the world around her. Her destruction of all photographic images and of all her camera equipment poses a twofold problem: Jill destroys that which prompts painful memory, but she also destroys that which allows her to see clearly and control others' visions. The medium upon which a substantial portion of Jill's identity rests--photography--is also the medium she utilizes to fix the identity of others. She is no longer willing to participate in constructing the vision and seeing of things. "After I ripped up the photographs I thought it was going to be different. Better. Clearer, maybe," Jill admits (189). But this was not the case, and instead she reverts to her old, drifting lifestyle, that precludes clarity.

"Until today, that is," Jill admits (190). "Today" is a few days after her birthday, and in the mail she receives birthday cards from Jimmie's son and parents, who send her an old photograph of Jimmie:

He looks to be about five here. It's his birthday party and he's just about to blow out the candles, leaning forward, his face partially hidden by the other kids, partially blurred by his own movement, intent on *that*.

“It’s what I’ve never seen before that I recognize.” (191)

The similarity between this photograph and the one described earlier that Jill herself took is clear; both capture Jimmie’s presence and echo his movement away from life toward death: “You weren’t paying attention. To us. Anymore.” understands Jill, finally. “You’d already moved on to check out something else, over there, you were already moving through it . . . ” (191). The photograph of Jimmie as a child, the only photograph Jill has in the world now, is the only photograph she needs to start “breathing” again. Thus a photograph, an assurance of nostalgia, functions as Jill’s reminder to pay attention to her life and continue into the future, where change is always possible. “And in the end,” states Van Herk, “the destroyed photographs (impossible to replicate in narrative) become the story’s ghosts: absent and present: both extant and destroyed” (69)

Transcending her past, but never forgetting it, Jill uses nostalgia to enact change, and not to dictate her present or future actions. For when Tina Pringle, Jill’s neighbour, knocks on the door to see if Jill wants to go out for a pizza, Jill begins to see clearly again, as her description of Tina signifies:

[t]hat crescent of freckles, those beautiful bones. Right now, I can see them perfectly. Maybe not from now on, but right now, I can see them, perfectly. It hurts my eyes. Just as I know it will hurt my hand a little, the first time I touch her. The first time I take that face in my hands to tilt it, just so, into the light. (192)

By telling her story about the past, Jill re-focuses on her present and makes provisions for the future. It *will* hurt her hand when she makes that first tentative movement toward physical and emotional contact and towards consciously, actively seeing and capturing her visions again. It is unclear if Jill will tilt Tina's face into the light in order to photograph her, but the possibility is implied. Jill travels from nostalgic inertia into a potential future that includes her awareness of and participation in controlling what she sees. Her nostalgia for the past, as represented through her photography, finally enables Jill to maintain the immediacy of the moment without forgetting the events which led up to it, and to envision a future of possibility.

CHAPTER 4

Body Braille:

The Scar as Nostalgic Site in People You'd Trust Your Life To

We remember the time around scars,
they freeze irrelevant emotions
and divide us from present friends.

Michael Ondaatje. "The Time Around Scars." There's a Trick With a Knife I'm Learning to Do: Poems 1963-1978. (19)

what good is it
to be the lime burner's daughter
left with no trace
as if not spoken to in the act of love
as if wounded without the pleasure of a scar.

Michael Ondaatje. "The Cinnamon Peeler." Secular Love.
(89)

As discussed in the previous chapter, photographic imagery is integral to "The Scuba Diver in Repose," Bronwen Wallace's final story in People You'd Trust Your Life To (1990). However, throughout the body of People scar imagery plays a more prevalent role. Like a photograph, a scar activates memory, evoking recollections about the time of its creation. As with a photograph, a scar is a site upon which we impose memory or importance, making it another example of what Pierre Nora considers a *lieu de mémoire*--a double-encoded symbol--relevant both for what it reveals about the past and for what it discloses about any present interpretations we might have about that history. Finally, the scar is similar to the photograph in that it, too, changes over time and fades into the skin much like the photograph fades into sepia. Unlike the photograph, however, the scar serves as the site of healing. Despite its integration with the skin surrounding it, scar tissue is stronger than the skin it replaces. The pleasure of

the wound, described by Ondaatje in the second epigraph above, is the emblem left in its wake, a reminder of a painful *but survivable* past. Flannery O'Connor's following statement is the epigraph to Wallace's fourth volume of poetry, The Stubborn Particulars of Grace (1987): "Possibility and limitation mean about the same thing" (np). In the scar, Wallace recognizes a symbol for the crossroads where the seemingly polarized limitation and possibility meet: stronger scar tissue is contradictory to the frail flesh it replaces, and the restriction of a painful past is matched by the equally persistent potential to surmount that past into a hopeful future. As a site invested with the pathos of nostalgia, the scar in People You'd Trust Your Life To speaks persuasively to the purpose of Wallace's nostalgic project. The scar provides Wallace with a powerful sign for what Mary Jacobus considers feminist nostalgia. In "Freud's Mnemonic: Women, Screen Memories, and Feminist Nostalgia" Jacobus concludes that feminist nostalgia is the impetus for change because it is mindful of the ever-shifting face of desire (138). A scar speaks of a damaged past, but attests to survival; a scar symbolizes a violent past that is worthy of regret and full of unmet desires, while simultaneously functioning as a badge of endurance into a potential future of change.

In a 1989 interview with Janice Williamson, Wallace describes her writing and illustrates how the scar--an emblem of change--is relevant to her work:

I'm writing to the wounded part of each person, men as well as women. The power of feminism is the power of the victim who has recognized a way to use her damage. There's a great line in an Adrienne Rich poem about knowing that

her wound came from the same place as her power. When you get in touch with your damage, recognize and care for it, you also discover the source of your power. (32)

Wallace represents the wounded part of each person with the physically manifest scar. As a mnemonic site, the scar proves the body's limitation while confirming the strength these limitations provoke. A scar is, literally, the tougher skin we develop out of past frailty and injury, and embodies the possibility of deriving strength at the site of damage. The scar is, thus, a potent corporeal sign for emotional recovery.

If scar imagery is prevalent in Wallace's volume of short stories, images of scars' precursors--violence--become increasingly predominant throughout her earlier work. In Signs of the Former Tenant (1983) Wallace introduces images of child abuse and domestic violence in "Isolated Incident" (65-66) and "Whether you Expect it or Not" (77-78), respectively. She continues to explore images of domestic violence in the longer narrative poems "Dreams of Rescue" (48-54) and "Thinking with the Heart" (59-62) from Common Magic (1985). Finally, after two years of working in a shelter for battered women, during which she was unable to write, she produced The Stubborn Particulars of Grace. Wallace's last published volume before her death has an entire section, "Bones," that is saturated with images of violence and its aftermath. The five-part poem, "Intervals" (59-68), chronicles Wallace's experience at Interval House, a crisis centre for battered women in Kingston, Ontario. Part one, "Entry," describes the poet's transition from comfortable innocence to

. . . that night (exactly like any other,
 you think now, exactly) when a neighbour
 knocked on your door, some figure
 from a backyard painting of blue arms,
 white squares on a clothesline
 suddenly there, a woman, coming to you
 her face full of blood, the night
 spilling out from her hair
 to the street, the man, light glinting
 off the metal in his hand
 as you pulled her inside. (60)

Wallace dedicates part two of the poem, "Free Speech," to Sylvia, Steven, Ruth and Marilyn, who have survived the violent acts she describes, and who found shelter at Interval House. In "E.C.U: On the Job," Wallace details the difficulty of training herself to deal "professionally" with bruises and blood on a daily basis. "Short Story," part four of "Intervals" "isn't one to be told / in the third person," according to the poet, "though we keep on trying to" (65). Wallace reflects on the social impact of domestic violence and tells a story of its passing from generation to generation. Finally in "Departure," Wallace explains her own departure from Interval House, where "violence taken in / like oxygen becomes the skin / we wear" (68), so that leaving is her only recourse. In "Burn-out" (76-9), the poet/shelter-worker details her own ambivalence about her work, where a twelve-hour shift at the house is often more than she can handle: "all I know / is that it's just my luck / to have to be here," listening to Linda, "as her mouth forces the words / out from some hidden place," to describe her husband's cruelty, "into this room, where they become / a job I'm not quite / up to, not tonight . . ." (77).

And again, I wish I could tell you
 how I handled this in a
 professional manner except that
 I, personally, don't think there
 is one. . . . (78)

To handle violence "in a professional manner," is to consider it normal: to consider it normal is to desensitise oneself to brutality; to desensitise oneself to brutality is inhumane.

References to witnessing the aftermath of raw violence in her poetry make way for reflections on scar imagery in Wallace's short stories. Similarly, the narrative lyricism of her early work--where *telling* the story is as important as the story's content--transforms into the prose of her short stories. This transition, however "natural" it might seem, was not one that Wallace herself viewed as a necessary progression. In "Why I Don't (Always) Write Short Stories" (1992, 169-79) Wallace points out that

just because I'm a narrative poet, people are always asking me why I don't write short stories and how I thought narrative poetry (at least, the narrative poetry that I was trying to write) was not (as some people seem to think) a failed short story, a short story in disguise, an excuse for a short story or anything, really, like a short story except in the way that it used stories to tell something else. (169-70)

Despite these assertions, the self-described poet began writing stories that drew from her earlier work, much like the scar draws from previous injury. "I should have learned," Wallace writes, "that I write from what I am given, not from what I decide"

(170). In the case of her poetry, “the narrative elements of the poem, the stories, ‘what happened,’ are part of an extended metaphor for [the journey of discovering the ‘riddle of existence’]. But the poem as a whole is the voice, discovering” (176-7). Wallace echoes this sentiment in her interview with Janice Williamson, when she states that “[t]he poems aren’t about what happens but about what’s discovered” (1991, 32). The stories came to her as a “gift,” an alternate means of narrating a different type of discovery:

I was standing in a line-up at Swiss Chalet and a woman started talking to me in my head. I wrote that story and once she told me her story then a number of other women did and I became interested in expanding character. One of the things that makes my poetry strong is a very recognizable voice. In the stories I try to expand that voice. (1991, 32)⁷

Her poetry draws upon a community of women, past and present, to influence the discovering and immediate voice. In her prose, Wallace creates a community of women who people and narrate her interweaving stories.

Wallace asserts that “the sense of immediate testimony, of prayer . . . is inherent in poetry. . . . [but] [p]rose allows for something else . . .” (1992, 178). Prose, for one thing, allows for a wider audience and greater mass appeal than poetry does. People You’d Trust Your Life To became “A NATIONAL BEST-SELLER” according to its

⁷The woman talking in Wallace’s head at Swiss Chalet becomes Lydia, the primary character of “Chicken’n’Ribs,” discussed further in the chapter.

front cover. Unlike her first volume of poetry, Wallace's first collection of short stories was widely and positively received: Joyce Wayne describes the collection as "a testament to the writer's spirit, to her courage, depth, and remarkable life" (29). Christine Overall considers Wallace a "brilliant spinner of the tales of women" (484). Janice Kulyk Keefer confesses her difficulty in reviewing the stories, writing that "[p]erhaps not all of the stories in People You'd Trust Your Life To are as memorable as Wallace's best poems. Knowing that these are the only stories she has left us, one feels compelled, however, to make the most of each one" (40). Bronwen Wallace's ten short stories may not represent her finest work, but they do indicate her willingness to experiment with alternatives to poetry. Her introductory prose work also paves the way for her later posthumous publications, Keep That Candle Burning Bright and Other Poems (1991), a volume of prose poems; Arguments With The World: Essays by Bronwen Wallace (1992); and a short collection of letters between Wallace and Erin Mouré, Two Women Talking: Correspondence 1985-87 (1993). Like a scar that one carries into the future as a mnemonic prompt for the past, People You'd Trust Your Life To marks Wallace's literary life: it is a reminder of the narrative lyricism in her poetry, and it is the first sign of her expanding sense of narrative.

Throughout the stories in People You'd Trust Your Life To Wallace writes of women cherishing the strength they have derived from the fragility of their past, and often this is signalled by the observance and care with which they treat the scars that serve as their mnemonic totems. For instance, In "Heart of My Heart" (1-14), Katherine

recalls that her childhood friend Linda returned after many years of separation, admitting to multiple suicide attempts and brandishing wrists “covered with Band-Aids that had been stuck on any old way, dirty and puckered, so that beneath them [Katherine] could see the masses of crude, ineffectual cuts and scabs. Some of these were red, crusted with yellow pus” (9). These fresh wounds, while not scars at the time of their meeting, were the impetus for the two women to change Linda’s life. Katherine was able to help her friend and wonders at her efficiency: “[a]t the time, though, it seemed perfectly normal and I felt in charge. I suppose that’s how I got through it, as I got through so much that happened then. All that stuff I refer to when I say ‘those days are over,’ thinking I can mean by that that I’m finished with them” (11). Linda does not rid herself completely of her past psychoses--her girlhood obsession with Elvis Presley, or her preoccupation with a married man prior to her suicide attempts--but redirects them into more appropriate behaviour. In her latest Christmas card to Katherine, years after her suicide attempts, Linda writes of her and her boyfriend’s decision to have a baby: “[i]f we have a boy . . . I’ll call him Elvis, of course” (12). Presumably Linda still carries the scars on her wrists of her ineffectual suicide attempt, as she similarly carries her past obsession with Elvis. “Those days” are clearly not finished, and Linda is just one of Katherine’s examples of this.

Katherine finds another example when she reflects upon her boyfriend Mike, and upon her own personal progression (or lack thereof) since “those days” that are supposedly over:

His hands were the first thing I noticed about him, their fine, almost-womanly shape, their movement. He has a thin scar on his right middle finger where his sister closed the car door on it when he was eight. I remember how I liked him at first because he was dark and sort of skittery in all the ways that David [her ex-husband] was blond and solid and comfortable. I thought this meant I was progressing somehow, getting over it, over the divorce. (13)

The skepticism with which Katherine viewed the settlement of Linda's past parallels her understanding the limitations of her own progression. Instead of assuming that her shift from the "blond and solid and comfortable" David to the "dark and sort of skittery" Mike signals a significant finale to her past, Katherine admits that "maybe you never get over anything, you just find a way of carrying it as gently as possible" (13). Similarly caught between his history and his present, Mike has a painful past he hopes does not overwhelmingly control his present situation: he is a widower, whose wife, also named Katherine, was killed in a car accident. Mike's choices relate to his past, as do Linda's and Katherine's, whether exemplified through the patterns they choose to repeat or through those they choose to break. Mike admits that his initial attraction to Katherine was because of her name. "And it's still there," he concedes, "but different" (4). Like a scar left over from a wound, Linda's, Katherine's and Mike's pasts are "still there, but different." The scar is a dominant emblem for Wallace's continuing "conversation" with the past, here, and throughout the body of People You'd Trust Your Life To. The continual negotiation with the past in which she and her characters engage

is often signalled by this flesh reminder, and the gentle strength derived in the wake of even the most violent or painful history is often represented by tenderly touching the site of healing.

In "Chicken'n'Ribs" (15-33), a scar comes to signify Lydia's own healing, although the scar in question is not her own. While dining at the Swiss Chalet with her three children, she considers her waitress' hands: "there's a burn blister on the back, [and] a red bracelet of smaller marks dotted around her wrist" (24-25). Her reaction to these marks, however, surprises her, for "suddenly, without warning," she is overwhelmed by an unsuitable urge "to kiss those burn marks, slowly, one by one. She wants to hold that hand between her two and rub it as she used to rub the pain from her children's fingers when they played outside too long in the snow, their hands numb beneath woollen mittens" (25). Throughout her dinner at Swiss Chalet Lydia is haunted by such urges, but quells them with pragmatic cynicism: "*Jesus, Lydia, get a grip. Who the hell do you think you are anyway, Mother Theresa?*" she asks herself (25). She embarrasses her children, and internally reproaches herself with "*idiot*," while her daughter articulates her teenage horror with a loud "Mother!" (16). Her internal dialogue continues throughout the story: "*Oh, sure, Lydia, that's really convincing*," she thinks after telling her children she's enjoying herself (18). Surrounded by other diners, she feels overwhelmed by "a sudden gush of love for the people around her," and thinks, "*/g/ood god, Lydia, you could write the frigging commercials. The food is*

overpriced, overspiced, the waitresses are overworked. This is a fast-food franchise you're in here; one step, barely, up from McDonald's, for chrissake" (19).

But if her exterior self is haunted by her interior dialogue, Lydia's life is similarly haunted by the likewise italicized, hidden narrative of when her husband, Ken, left her with three small children and a lunch box full of marijuana, one thousand dollars, and the following note:

Dear Liddie,

Look, I'm sorry, but I can't take anymore of this. I've got to get out while I can. I hope what's inside will get you through the worst of it. You can tell the kids whatever you want. I won't be back. Don't try to find me. Please.

love, Ken (21).

Since then, Lydia's life has been a blur of work, school and children. She could not "tell the kids whatever she wanted." What Lydia wanted to say when they questioned Ken's absence was that he left them *"because he's a no-good, chicken-shit, asshole, that's why"* (23), but this, like her other interior comments, remains unspoken. Now, sitting in the restaurant with her children fifteen years after Ken's abandonment, "she wants to stand up in front of everyone, tap her coffee cup with her spoon, make an announcement," and tell the unspoken story that haunts her (30):

"I'm Lydia Robertson. These are my two eldest children, Richard, who plans to become a mechanical engineer; and Karen, my only daughter, who will study marine biology. Save the whales, maybe, or the whole ocean. I have raised these

two, along with their younger brother, Tony, on my own for the past fifteen years, while at the same time finishing my high school education and becoming a nurse. I am now a supervisor of nursing in the OB unit at the General. I want you to know that I have accomplished all this, alone, with minimal help from my family and without any assistance, other than the obvious and easily performed biological one, from my husband, Ken, a no-good bastard who, who . . ." (30-31)

Lydia cannot finish her unspoken story. All that she articulates aloud is the thrice repeated "Ken," the only required invocation for her "automatic-pilot," internal reaction.

This one word representation of Lydia's hidden narrative provokes her into action, however, for afterward she enacts one of her urges: she goes into the small flower shop next door and buys every single flower for the unusual wedding reception being held at the next table in the Swiss Chalet. "As she steps inside, her arms extended, filled with irises, mauve freesia, daffodils, pink daisies, red tulips, blue carnations and yellow roses, laughing and laughing as she enters the small pause where everyone seems to be waiting for her" (33). Perhaps the pause is Lydia's own. Instead of filling it with the italicized, unsanctioned inner dialogue of her past she allows herself the strength to act--inappropriately or otherwise--and to animate her narrative into possibilities for the future. The image of the waitress' scar is momentary, but Lydia's need to caress this totem of past weakness in someone else is paralleled by her need to acknowledge the value of her own past strength in the face of adversity. In

"Ghost Narratives: a Haunting" Aritha Van Herk considers Lydia's "uncontainable inappropriateness . . . the ghost of Lydia's story speaking for itself" (62). Her final act of joyous generosity "is a ghost made flesh: her own story come to life: escaping the plot she has always been limited by and walking through an open door: into a story she can trust her life to" (63). A scar provides Lydia with the flesh reminder of her haunted past; a scar, too, is "a ghost made flesh."

In "People You'd Trust Your Life To" (149-169), the volume's title story, the ghost story recalled from a scar is that of the particular violence and pain inflicted upon women when in abusive relationships. At their "Good Girls Gobble and Gossip Group" Myrna, Gail, Selena and Nina discuss their lives--past and present--and reflect upon the importance of their friendship. These women would trust their lives to one another, and are connected by a history of intertwining relationships and unconditional support that has spanned almost twenty years, during which they have married, had children, taken lovers and divorced. Myrna watches Gail mixing the drinks at the beginning of the story--the beginning of the friends' monthly dinner together--and notices her friend's hands:

How small they are, fine-boned and efficient, like every movement they make, so neat and predictable that Myrna almost believes she knows what they will do next. Even the scar on the back of Gail's right hand is part of what she is to Myrna now, an emblem of what has brought them together, a landmark in familiar country. (150)

We learn later about the importance of Gail's scar, and of the significance of her bartending duties. We learn that the two women met when Gail moved into Myrna's apartment building, and that Myrna babysat Gail's two young children so that the latter could take a bartending course. We learn also that Myrna and Gail's friendship was initiated by the scar on Gail's hand. One night, fifteen years ago, Myrna inadvertently discovered a "ring of small, round, white welts, like pockmarks on [Gail's child, Stephen's] buttock" (168), the remnants of the cigarette burns his father punished him with for urinating in his pants as an infant. On that night Myrna also discovered what she now considers "a landmark" of the friendship she and Gail have built together, the familiar territory demarcated on Gail's hand: "[t]he raised white scar ripped across it from the base of her thumb to the base of her ring finger," and was, then, a freshly drawn reminder of her husband's violence when he closed the door on her hand the first time Gail tried to leave him (168). Now, the scar has faded over time, representing fifteen years of Gail's freedom from violence as much as her previous marriage to it. The scars on Gail and Stephen, emblems of their frailty and defeat, kindled Gail and Myrna's friendship, for on that night, Myrna gave Gail--barely more than an acquaintance--a quick hug and sent her to her bartending course. "'That's when you saved my life,' Gail told her, years later" (168). The people you trust your life to are constant, and this is affirmed now when "Gail suddenly leans forward, cradles her head in her arms on the table and begins to sob," and her friends quickly, soundlessly

surround her in unquestioning support (168-169). The people you trust your life to are the people you entrust with the damaged, scarred and healed person you are.

In "Heart of My Heart," "Chicken'n'Ribs" and "People You'd Trust Your Life To" Wallace features scars that incite various memories and perpetuate different (re)actions. Whether accidental or intended, recent or mellowed by time, the scars, like the past they symbolize, cannot be completely erased but may, to echo Katherine in "Heart," be carried "as gently as possible" into the future. Importantly, in these stories, all of the scars described lie upon the hands or wrists of those so blemished--all the better to carry them gently with. In a letter to Erin Mouré dated March 12, 1986, Wallace writes that her work is a direct result of her life experience. "I write the way I do . . . because everything I have learned of value, I have learned from or through women and because I believe that gentleness is in the hands, regardless of gender" (36). To repeat her sentiments in her 1989 interview with Janice Williamson, Wallace's characters "get in touch with their damage" when they acknowledge--and touch--their scarred hands. The characters in Wallace's story use their damage when they use the sites of their past weakness--the scars--to garner strength and provoke change. If, as Wallace considers, the power of feminism is the power of the victim to use damage as a means toward a stronger future, the scarred hand as a potent sign of this power is clear. Wallace invests the once wounded hand with gentleness and strength, with weakness and power, and thereby uses the scarred hand as a sign for "the power of feminism."

As Van Herk points out, scars in Wallace's writing represent "their own shadow stories: idiosyncratic ghost spirits of the past invading the dominant narrative" (67). In "Heart of My Heart," Linda's obsession with Elvis; in "Chicken'n'Ribs," Lydia's abandonment; and in "People You'd Trust Your Life To," Gail's abusive marriage all function as the hidden narratives to their sanctioned external lives. In all three short stories, as well, scars serve as the reminder of the unspeakable (and unspoken) violence and pain of the suppressed "shadow story." Van Herk continues, the "ghost story" haunts the master narrative's textuality while scars mar the skin's "texturality" to "speak their own mystery of what has been done to the whole and perfect skin of narrative: they speak interruption to the body's story, its capacity to accept inscribement" (67). Scars signal "perhaps stories that can only be read with braille," and not with the language of oral tradition (68). If the people you'd trust your life to are the "people you'd trust your life (story) to," as Van Herk insinuates with her prose-poetic epigraph (61), then the all-important "ghost" of the life story is entrusted to touch. "The trust required of touch becomes an emblem of narrative and memory: touch its own ghost whispering past the guidelines of expectation [sic]" (68).

In "For Puzzled in Wisconsin" (75-87) Wallace uses scar imagery to a greater extent, and the story a scar tells is one such inarticulate "ghost narrative." For Anna, the narrator, her memories of the past--and particularly her recollection of a scar--tell more than one story. The new insights she brings to old memories prove the double-encoded significance of a scar, a site for memory and a sign of hidden "ghostly"

narrative, Anna repeats an often-told story from her early adulthood about the summer she spent working as a waitress in Muskoka, and of the night during that summer she learned to drink bourbon. Anna retells her story in response to a letter she has read in an advice column, "Dear Allie": a woman asked Allie the best way to plan the preservation of her husband's tattoo when he dies. Allie provides what Anna considers an unthoughtful response. In unfolding the story of her summer in Muskoka, Anna discovers what she considers an acceptable, although inarticulable answer to Puzzled in Wisconsin's dilemma.

Anna tells of the summer she was eighteen and worked at the Bangor Lodge in Muskoka. There she met Gwen, whose boyfriend, Chuck, lived in Toronto, as did Anna's boyfriend, Jeff. The girls' unlikely friendship grew out of the double dates all four went on every week-end, after the two boys drove from the city in Chuck's broken-down car. That summer Gwen got pregnant and decided to marry Chuck. Anna decided against following Jeff to Queens in order to pursue her own academic interests. Anna has not seen Jeff, Gwen or Chuck since that summer. Now she is married to Peter, an archivist, who, upon reading Puzzled in Wisconsin's question in "Dear Allie," cannot imagine wanting to save any part of his wife's body. Anna asked him once if he ever made up stories out of the archival material he works with, but he insisted he would never get any work done. "His job is to organize the known world, after all," Anna admits. "It's up to someone else to explore the rest" (83). Sitting on the porch, drinking bourbon after Peter has fallen asleep, Anna recalls the particular night she first drank

bourbon--the night it rained so hard that she, Jeff, Gwen and Chuck drove to Chuck's parents, Roy and Joan's home. In remembering that night, and re-telling its story, Anna explores "the rest" of the narrative which rests beneath and beyond the organized "known world."

On that night, Anna recalls that Roy surprised her by lifting up his shirt to brandish the scar left from a wound he suffered as a prison guard, which she describes in gory detail:

Across his middle, from his belt line to just below his left nipple was a wide, jagged, white scar. He had a lot of hair, but it hadn't grown back over the scar, which was thicker in some places than others. It glistened and bulged in the yellow kitchen light, stretched taut over his gut as if the skin couldn't take much more. (85)

The story of Anna's summer in Muskoka, including the details of Roy's scar, used to be about her first sip of bourbon, about staying up all night and working the next day, about Gwen and Chuck's foolishness and about Anna's transition from childhood into adulthood. The story, up until now, was a sentimental, nostalgic one, that ended with "Gwen and [Anna] working all day Sunday, no sleep, hung-over and never giving it a thought. That's how the story ends when [she's] told it lately. How you can do it when you're young" (86). But now, as Anna drifts off to sleep, she sees something in the story--it's ghostly undercurrent--that explains for her Puzzled In Wisconsin's need to preserve her husband's tattoo:

a close-up of Joan's hand, reaching out to Roy's bare gut, caressing it so intimately I can't believe she's doing it in front of us. And then, with the tip of her index finger, gently, very gently, she traces the scar, every turn and bulge, from Roy's nipple to his waist, as if to show us exactly what it's like.

As if his belly were a map, almost, and the scar was this road she was pointing out, wanting us to see where he'd been. And where she'd been too. (87)

Roy's scar is, like Gail's in "People," an emblem of the familiar territory Joan and Roy have travelled together. Anna's story changes in accordance with her need for the narrative to mean something new. Roy's scar is no longer an anecdotal aside, slipped into the greater tale. Only now does Anna remember the tenderness with which Joan touched her husband's scar; and only now does she comprehend it symbolized the route their life took after its inscription upon Roy's torso. Anna can only understand Puzzled in Wisconsin's dilemma with this momentary vision from her past. "But it's what I would want to tell you, Puzzled in Wisconsin," Anna answers, "if I ever had the chance, or knew how" (87).

CONCLUSION

Ghost Story:

Bronwen Wallace's Haunted Nostalgia

In the tabs, being dead is the same as being alive, only the other way around, like a negative, where people's faces are hard to make out, but have this light around them, like the faces of angels.

Bronwen Wallace, "News of the Dead." Keep That Candle Burning Bright and Other Poems, (49)

The memory of Joan lovingly touching Roy's scar in "For Puzzled in Wisconsin" (1990, 75-87) haunts Anna many years later, and imposes an inarticulable, ghostly answer to a question posed by a woman she doesn't even know. As if in a dream, Anna finds this answer at the junction between sleep and consciousness, and constructs a bond amongst the most unlikely people. Puzzled, Joan, Roy, Chuck, Given and Anna embody a community that Anna can only comprehend through her mnemonic spacio-temporal leaps, so that the most tenuous connections comprise the core of her answer. At the same time, the answer lies close to home, in a place as familiar as her local newspaper, a summer spent in Muskoka when she was eighteen, or the bottle of bourbon that prods her understanding of her memories to take new directions. The mystery at the root of every story leads Wallace to the interweaving, tangled roots of home and place. Bronwen Wallace's nostalgia is, thus, both a painful return to the foundation of home and an attempt to recover an identity out from under the rubble that foundation has become.

Wallace's expression of nostalgia is a way for her to fabricate meaning from the scraps about her female ancestors available to her. Like Dorothy⁸, Wallace finds that her answer originates out of her sense of home, only discernable after a dreamy, often unconscious trip "down memory lane." In Dorothy's case, the trip to Oz and down the yellow brick road, as portrayed in the MGM classic from 1939, lead her to realize "that if I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own back yard. Because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with." In fact, Dorothy's heart's desire and Wallace's answer to the mystery of personality both lie in the place/dream of Oz/memory. Wallace's early allusion to Dorothy is, therefore, apt, for when Dorothy maintains that "it wasn't a dream, it was a place," to where the twister carried her, home becomes the place of dreams, where even mundane farm hands can be repossessed--remembered--as fantastical creatures who satisfy her desires when real people cannot. Dorothy's assertions that the farm help were all in Oz with her are followed by her self-doubting, "but you couldn't have been, could you?" People and places can only be possessed as ghostly, dream-like memories of a magical, unsure time and place. Similarly, Wallace's memory-laden writing is always suffused with the question, "is that how it happened?" so that owning the past as a source of identity and/or strength becomes increasingly complex. Phantoms of the past haunt her consciousness, as the technicolour spectres of Dorothy's journey haunt her black and

⁸Wallace evokes Dorothy from The Wizard of Oz in "In My Mother's Favourite Story" from Signs of the Former Tenant, as discussed in chapter 2.

white, Kansas existence. For example, in Wallace's final poem from her last published volume of poetry, Keep That Candle Burning Bright, "Miracles" (53-57), one such ghost appears:

I still can't keep to myself
 what happened to me once: on the anniversary,
 to the day, of a friend's death, she appeared,
 in the laundromat where I was folding underwear,
 by the dryer, putting in a load of towels.
 I didn't know what to do. I kept
 staring and she kept being there.
 Until she turned, of course, and
 turned into someone else . . . (56)

Ghosts from the past return, like whispery memories, to insist their presence upon even the most mundane events, and ensure that fixing the past will never be possible.

Any fear that Bronwen Wallace wrote merely "nice stories about her past" is dispelled when examining the actual function of memory and nostalgia in her work. The women whose life stories Wallace tells are often survivors of a painful or violent past, and, therefore, wistful or regretful recollection would seem improbable. The remembered past does not harken back in exaltation to women's past subordination; recollections do not articulate women's limited traditional roles; nostalgia does not function as a saccharin-flavoured prescription for the present or future. Instead, Wallace uses the constantly fluctuating remembered past to dis/re-cover an historical home and (re)construct an identity. Repossessing the past, for Wallace, entails a reconstruction built from the tenuous threads memory provides.

In her first publication, Marrying Into The Family (1980), Wallace's nostalgic journey leads to a female-centred historical context. Nostalgia is represented by Wallace's literal "painful return home" (painful because it is hampered by the master narrative of a male-defined history). Her search for valid female forebears is aided by the detritus they left behind, but also remains incomplete because these objects fail to disclose the necessary narrative for the poet's historical return home. Perhaps the greatest discovery Wallace makes is that the fragmented historical narrative she constructs provides for future development. The past is never fully realized as a complete (and completed) story, therefore, its narrative can never become prescriptive dogma.

The fragmented female ancestry Bronwen Wallace discovers in her earlier work makes way for a fragmented sense of identity in her later work, where the poet's (fictional) personal memories play a larger role. In Signs of the Former Tenant (1983), Wallace's insights into her past, and subsequently into her present self, are hindered by the language she must use to describe it. Remembrances are likened to dreams which "speak" to the unconscious in an indecipherable language of signs and physical sensations. Regret for the past is revealed as the alienated desire Wallace experiences when denied the appropriate language with which to express her past (and present) experience. Wallace's nostalgia--the nostalgia of feminism--is suffused with the intrinsic regret enjoined upon women who use their unspoken and unmet desires as the impetus for change.

One of Wallace's most prevalent and potent signs for nostalgia is the photograph, which she uses in Marrying Into The Family to facilitate her nostalgic return home. Photographs promote nostalgia by capturing certain, valued moments that fit into the master narrative they determine to authenticate. They represent a lost world--the past--that can only be possessed as flashes of illuminated moments. Photographs also ensure regret, for the lost world they represent was, more often than not, created for the sole purpose of photography. Photographs, therefore, evoke feelings of regret for a time and place which never really existed, except during the second the shutter opened and closed. When searching for her female ancestors, Wallace sifts through the family photographs for clues to something she is meant to recognize about her foremothers that is absent from traditional family history. The paradox: what she needs to find for her nostalgic project is most likely that which is absent from the family photography available to her. Thus, Wallace recognizes her personally valid female ancestors only in the shadows of the photos, or in her examination of the photographic negatives. Photographic imagery provides Wallace with a powerful sign for her nostalgic return to her foremothers, for the photograph at once proves her family history and denies her access to little beyond the accepted past they represent.

Photography also provides Wallace the imagery with which to represent a powerful system that seemingly fixes subjectivity. In "The Scuba Diver in Repose" (1990, 171-192), Jill has a great deal invested in her ability to "capture" the personalities of others on film, and thereby define them for herself and her audience.

Jill's own identity is, therefore, defined by the camera and the power she believes she can wield, however unstable that power is, over others. Ultimately, the recognitions Jill discovers through her photography are based on the same faulty structures that define the subject. Nonetheless, Jill's own nostalgic inertia begins when she destroys the photographs that prove her understanding of and ability to (falsely) capture subjectivity. Jill can participate in defining herself and the world around her only after re-engaging herself with the vision of things at the story's conclusion.

If the photograph provides Wallace with an entrance into her family's accepted past, the raised inscription of a scar leads her to a more secretive, untold narrative--that of physical violence. In People You'd Trust Your Life To, Wallace uses scar imagery in many stories to signal the untold stories "written" upon the body; the stories of frailty and weakness that one might want to forget. In Wallace's short stories, women are particularly prone to such inscription, and yet, they manage to garner strength from these totems of survival and healing. Wallace has said that to "discover the source of your power," you must "get in touch with your damage" (Open Letter Interview, 32). The scar is such a site of damage and power, and speaks particularly to the regrets women might have, to the injuries they have survived, and to the power they realize in transcending their damage. Scars act as constant yet changing--fading but never disappearing--reminders of a haunting and haunted past.

Memories of the past constantly haunt Wallace's writing, and her nostalgic expression is ever-watchful for hopes and possibilities of the future. Knowledge of

Wallace's life (and death) haunts any reading of her work: During the ten years prior to her death at the age of forty-four, Wallace taught creative writing in workshops and at post-secondary level. She produced two short documentary films with her partner, Chris Whynot; gave numerous public addresses; worked in a shelter for battered women and children; and raised a son. She was politically active within Marxist, anti-war and feminist groups as a young adult. Bronwen Wallace died of mouth cancer. Clearly Wallace's writing is suffused with her life experience, and, finally, the ordeal of her illness and impending death permeate her final creative works. Aritha Van Herk contends that mortality haunts "The Scuba Diver in Repose," for example, and provides a subversive "ghost narrative" to Wallace's story. She continues that

even more complex and moving, the death of Wallace (extra-narratively) herself [sic]. It is as if she is writing from beyond the margin of death: as if her own dying haunts the presence of absence in these stories she wrote just before she died. . . . Truly the reader / witness is haunted here by haunted story. (69)

Every reading of Wallace's work--particularly her later work--is influenced by the knowledge of her death, so that her memory--her own ghostly imprint--marks every page and haunts every allusion to the remembered past.

In Keep That Candle Burning Bright (1992), her last collection of poems, Wallace's death "glints out . . . with an ambush and poignancy that go right through you," according to Dennis Lee on the volume's back cover. In one poem, "News of the Dead" (49-52), Wallace points out that in tabloid magazines the dead receive as much

attention as the living: they continue to *be* and *do*. In the tabloids, Wallace writes, the dead still have the power to influence, whereas in the daily papers they warrant little beyond an obituary notice:

Meanwhile the tabs will continue providing the only significant news of the dead and I will continue reading it. The dead themselves will continue granting interviews and giving advice. They will show up in the oddest places. The residue from their bodies will continue shining from our windows at night and firing the rockets that send us off into outer space. (1992, 51)

Bronwen Wallace is now among them, “granting interviews and giving advice” through her considerable body of work.

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