

# Swimming with the Words\*

## Narrative Drift in Daphne Marlatt's *Taken*

In her Foreword to *Salvage*, her last solo book of poetry, Daphne Marlatt described the process of writing those poems as “aquatic”:

working with subliminal currents in the movements of language, whose direction as “direction” only became apparent as i went with the drift, no matter how much flotsam seemed at first to be littering the page. (n.p.)

In writing *Salvage*, Marlatt translated herself from reader to writer, returning to poems she had written in the early seventies and re-reading and writing them again “on that edge where a feminist consciousness floods the structures of patriarchal thought” in an attempt “to salvage the wreckage of language so freighted with phallogocentric values it must be subverted and re-shaped, as Virginia Woolf said of the sentence, for a woman’s use” (n.p.).

The reader and writer find themselves in a fluid narrative in the drifting space and time and half-light of Marlatt’s latest novel. In *Taken*, as in much of Marlatt’s writing, one genre interrupts another, the lesbian body swimming with the words of memory and mother against the current, but with the drift that moves language in new directions, and, thus, lives to change. Strands of gender and genre, of the real and the imagined, break and attach, tangling stories and lives with past and place. The tangle, the interruption, the flow, and the drift are ways to write about how closely language and the body are intertwined for, as Marlatt asks in her Preface to *Ghost works*, how can “autobiography be seen as divorced from poetry— . . . or lesbianism divorced from heterosexuality—that haunting family” (viii)? Breaking one script, threads are salvaged to weave another story, and to those salvaged

strands cling still others, the “stories that we invent or refuse to invent ourselves by, all unfinished . . .” (*Taken* 130).

In Marlatt’s porous narrative is her recognition of a permeable body; her awareness of how our sense of ourselves as “isolated, self-contained creatures”<sup>1</sup> is as artificial as the closed construction of a story, and as limiting as language, when it encourages the illusion that we do not form part of an interactive field that extends beyond the human to “another here” (*Taken* 111), where our words do not exist, where the living body is its own language.

Understanding the connection between language and the body, or, as Marlatt calls it in “What Matters,” “the interrelating of bodies/ words” (153), is to understand the relation of touch to tongue. As Lorraine Weir describes it,

language makes us things to each other, puts us in the same relation to other humans as we are to things and, on those rare occasions when a response comes which is not silence but the discovery of place in an/other, makes possible community which is con/text. Relating words to each other as we do things in the world . . . we create a possible world through an act of love. . . . (62-63)

Swimming with the words, Marlatt’s narrative drifts, urges, draws us to consider the relationship of words and things, to feel then and there as ‘another here’, part of us: “not to take but to *fill* place” (“Taking Place” in *Net Work* 97). In *Taken*, Marlatt is reaching “for another kind of story, a story of listening way back in the body” (25), to imagine all that we are. In this paper, I would like to look at how her narrative lets bodies drift beyond human relationships, and language, letting the reader listen through the body, through her body, to what haunts us, and to those who “skim the air . . . swim in the water breathing there” (25), wordless.

Marlatt has said that “writing is about sensing one’s way through the sentence, through (by means of) a medium (language) that has its own currents of meaning, its own drift” (“Reading MAUVE” 27-8).<sup>2</sup> The suggestive texture of *Taken* resists airtight arguments and lines of reasoning; it is difficult to document the experience of transformation.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Marlatt writes against the definitive: “the holes we make in such a definite body leak meaning we splash each other with” (“Between the Lines” 81). In the contradictory currents of *Taken*’s drifting prose are found the twinning of celebration and resistance that Weir has found in Marlatt’s poetry, the “process of invention that gets you *here*, heals lostness, [and] resuscitates memory which is imagination (60). Marlatt’s immersive texts flow, seek openings. Her language, “leafings out and leavings, these passages” (*Taken* 6), is

pulling at the ghosts that haunt us, and branching beyond what limits us from opening to other possible worlds.

In *Ana Historic*, Marlatt was reaching for a different kind of story, too, looking for the women lost in the archives of patriarchal, heterosexual history. The historical research Annie had been doing for her husband turned into the writing of her own story. Annie became the writer, and her reader, Zoe, her lover: the woman writing, the woman reading, “we are, i am . . . swimming, swimming to save herself” (150). As Marlatt explained, the reader enters into “the generation of the work so the last scene represents the author making love to her reader, which is perhaps what all writing is about” (Marlatt 1996). Julie Abraham points out in *are girls necessary?* that tangling lesbian love and the act of writing inextricably together creates

a non-narrative model of the relation of lesbianism to the literary (“love is writing”) that undercuts the heterosexual plot by shifting the focus from narrative . . . If love might be writing, or writing love . . . plot is no longer the repository of value. (15)

In *Ana Historic*, with the use of “the metaphor of the continual turning of the page as the working of desire,” the linear narrative is translated into “the moment of writing” (Marlatt 1996), as transient as conversation, and the inevitability of closure into the anticipation of “the next page, even if it’s not yet written” (Interview 180). Marlatt refuses to “follow . . . the plotline through” (*Ana* 17), interrupting one story with another, with conversations over what she has just written, or what she has never imagined.

The site of the story is not a solid construction built to hold us in, or keep us out, but rather a tidal ebb and flow: it is “out and in. out *and* in” (*AH* 125). In “musing with mothertongue,” Marlatt wondered, “where are the poems that celebrate the soft letting-go the flow of menstrual blood as it leaves her body” (47)? In *Ana Historic*, she writes that flow, Annie Torrent’s story resisting closure, the period/full stop giving way to the period, “bleeding and soft. her on my tongue” (152).

The powerful freedom found in that moment of writing/loving is intoxicating, and full of possibility, the “reach of your desire reading us into the page ahead” (*Ana* n.p.). But *Taken* turns on a different idea of a story; that it is not one’s own, but constrained by other and others’ stories; that desire is complicated by complicity; and that like the past, ‘the page ahead’ is a palimpsest. Against the current of their mothers’ expectations, Suzanne, and Lori, her lover, take “issue with the given” (“musing” 47), breaking “the marriage script . . . the familial ties we each were meant to perpetuate”

(*Taken* 77-78). But in spite of that conscious resistance to the destiny script, both are still susceptible to “the claiming currents of that mother-pull” (47). When Lori leaves, returning to her mother, Suzanne uses words as a talisman, words her mother taught her, to try to “alter the destiny freight” (77), and bring her lover back. One story of family is rejected while another continues, like a “thread of magic litanies running back, uncut, like Ariadne’s to a safe place” (77).

Just as Suzanne had received a destiny script from her mother, Esme, so Esme had been loaded with one by hers. But Suzanne, because “she has had access to so much more thought about women’s position in the world” (Marlatt 1997), is able to deconstruct the script that her own mother was unable to escape. Esme could rarely see “beyond the uncertainty she was intimate with and by which she defined herself” (24). The destiny script works its spell on Esme. When, at a party, her own name and fate are spelled out on her mother’s ouija board, she cannot read that as an example of her mother’s power over her; as a medium, the mother is “colonizing the daughter for the sake of social magic” (Marlatt 1997).

Marlatt is very aware of the inheritance of “scripts (the opposite of gifts)” (*Labyrinth* 3), and their tenacious grip:

I don’t know if we can escape them completely. . . . The fragments are so deeply embedded in us; they have so much emotional resonance for us that it would be a shame to lose them completely. You can’t just throw them out. The task, once you’ve broken them apart into those resonating fragments, is to reconstitute them so that you can write a different story but with the same elements . . . to think in a different way from the thoughts that the scripts represent. (Marlatt 1997)

In her novel, Marlatt ‘reconstitutes’ these scripts in a fluid narrative where time and space leak. Words are broken by hyphens, and sentences fade rather than finish. Ellipses abound, like loose threads. And everywhere is the sound of water: rain dripping from the cedar boughs, torrential tropical storms; splashing pools; waves and waterfalls, the running tap; dew, mist, wet skin.

*Taken* surfaces and fades in the “half-light” (3), that “transition hour just before dawn, when light begins to intimate the differences between things still rooted deep in earth’s shadow” (129-30). The story hesitates, tentative, beginning without words, with listening, “behind the hand over my mouth (my mouth, as if i should not say anything, not yet, now now)” (3). “Ghost leaves,” the threads of stories, are “translating themselves” (3) into hers. These stories, the residual energies of “the ghosts of the psyche, the so-called dead

who haunt us, whose words so easily stir to the surface of memory,"<sup>4</sup> not only arrive in the resonance of words or thoughts, but through the body, through a faint scent carried on a breeze, or a touch.

In her conversation with Janice Williamson, Marlatt talked about the "murmur in the flesh," the "very deep subliminal connection with the mother":

what we first of all remember is this huge body which is our first landscape and which we first remember bodily. We can't consciously remember it, but it's there in our unconscious, it's there in all the repressed babble, the language that just ripples and flows—and it isn't concerned with making sense. It's concerned with the feel: the 'feel' of words has something to do with the feel of that body, of the contours of early memory. (Interview 185)

Suzanne is haunted by her mother's words, her parents' lives, "the ambience . . . what they took for granted, the smell the feel of their time my own beginning intercepted" (*Taken* 25). She remembers Lori's essentialist opposition to the ghostly presence of Suzanne's mother, Esme:

But she's not a ghost, you said once. She's in photos, on film, in letters. You have all these mementos you carry around with every move

Yes, but—*mementos* is not a word i wold have chosen for the evidence i felt compelled to keep . . . Maybe ghosts have something to do with presence and absence, both

But how is that different from memory? (103-04)

Memory holds some of our stories, but there are others, as Marlatt explains:

There's a lot that stands outside of language because it stands outside the systems of thought which allow us to recognize anything. And it's often written in the body, it's kept in the body, in the cells, in the neural sheets of the brain, and it's a kind of residue that language can't reach. . . . Sometimes . . . we begin to recognize what these pieces are so that [they] can be pulled at through language . . . [These] I think of as the ghosts. These are what haunt us, what lies outside the systems of thought that we're trained in. (Marlatt 1997)

As a writer, Marlatt is trying to find "a way of writing that will bring in more of what haunts it, what lies outside the conventionally linear" (Marlatt 1997). Interrupting the habitual modes of daily life, of reading and writing, is one technique. Another is working the shoreline of meaning: "bringing each little piece to the edge it cannot go beyond, and then putting it next to another edge and seeing what happens" (Marlatt 1996). Another is using reading to write, to become aware of meaning, and see beyond the chosen foreground. As Marlatt describes it,

I think reading is a very essential part of writing, and I don't mean reading other work; I mean reading what the words are saying on the page, because language has this incredible facility for saying more than our willful reading of it. And you can see that if you just accidentally misread something; you just transform a letter and the whole word changes or you suddenly hear an echo with another word in a preceding sentence that you've never heard before and you see what the connection is. The unconscious plays a large part of writing and I suppose reading is becoming more aware of that. (Marlatt 1996)

And there is writing as reading. Using words and voices as openings,

the words i've heard, the phrases i seem to remember, part of a background that shaped me, take on a glow of meaning i never sensed. To make this strange composition, fiction and memory, so interlaced it is difficult to tell the difference. (*Taken* 30)

The photograph, too, bears "witness in the imprint of place or person on the 'taker's' imagination."<sup>5</sup> Suzanne sifts through the evidence of photographs and films of her mother and father, and wartime correspondence between them, searching for clues to who they were, who she is. She reads one of her father's letters, filled with restraint and the cautious phrasing of an intelligence officer with much at stake. A letter from Esme follows the prescribed narrative patterns of a dutiful wife's correspondence ("Her duty, as her mother would remind her was to stay here with them and cheer him on from the sidelines" [11]) until in the postscript she writes against that duty, and "against his absence, against fate to bring him close" (13). Reading these letters, Suzanne realizes how much of the story was not written down, how many feelings were left untranslated into words; how the story "involving certain feelings gets passed on in an intonation, a hesitation, a gap between two sentences" (42).

The story is in the connection between things. In a photograph, the story is written in light, and, as Roland Barthes remarks in *Camera Lucida*

[a] sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed. (81)

In "On Distance and Identity: Ten Years Later," Marlatt cites *Camera Lucida*, quoting Barthes' description of the still photograph as "a kind of *Tableau vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and madeup face beneath which we see the dead" (32), the "*that-has-been*" (94). But if the photograph presents the '*that-has-been*', Marlatt recognizes that the poem, or the immersive text of *Taken*, "less presence than presentiment, runs in a sort of controversy

between what can be identified and what remains nameless, what has been said and what is unsayable" ("Distance" 94).

There are many careful descriptions of photographs, as Esme, Charles, and Suzanne, each in their turn, search the images of absent others for clues. Marlatt admits a fascination with the image, even as she writes against it:

The image on the one hand is equivalent to the story in that it is a self-representation. It helps in the construction of our identity. We look at these photographs of ourselves over time, and we say this is me then, this is me now, and each image—I learned this from Robert Minden when we were working on Steveston together—the image is as much the intention of the subject as it is the intention of the person who takes the photo. The subject poses himself or herself in a way they want to be seen. Now what Susanne and Esme do looking at photographs is they try to see through that. (Marlatt 1997)

A photograph seems to be fixed, a frozen image, but that is nothing more than an optical illusion; "the frozen moment is a lie, and in that way it is equivalent to a script" (Marlatt 1997). There is movement in the photograph, connections behind and beyond it. Consider the photograph of Esme, walking with Suzanne's father, Charles, just after a visit to the doctor has confirmed her pregnancy:

There they are . . . The forward motion of their step stilled for a second by some street photographer she is smiling for, having just caught the camera's swivel towards them . . . yes, they are at the turning point of history in this part of the world, though she hadn't known it then. She'd been too thrilled by the turn in their own private history.

He is looking askance, frowning slightly at something he doesn't approve of, or something that worries him, more probably . . . What was he looking at? A newsboy, she thinks now, a headline. Already preoccupied with war, the signs of destiny running ahead of their moment . . .

But she, she was only there in that moment given back to her, the surprise and pleasure of a stranger's snapping them on that day, in that split second. (4-5)

With the knowledge of her pregnancy, the confident delight written across the face of Esme is a look ahead to an imagined future. In capturing that delight, the camera caught the significance of the pregnancy, a 'turn in their own private history', but in the background were also details of the impending war, details that went unnoticed until a later viewing saw the tangle of history and personal stories.

No moment is fixed, no story is free of other stories, no body unconnected with another, and yet so many assumptions are made about the time and

place we live in, about the stories we are told and which we tell ourselves, about what is real and what is fiction. Rituals and scripts contain us, and because they are there when we arrive, we think of them as inevitable, not as constructions that we might change. We are taken by both history and photography. Each deceives

not because it distorts what is out there and presumably real, but because it seems to reproduce it with such an excess of clarity that it leaves us no other option but to believe blindly in it. This is the precondition of all magic; not the suspension of belief, but its exaggeration to a numb certainty in which the repetition of a thing is enough to make it a truth. (Morson 273)

From photograph to home movie, the technology of image-making continues to evolve, so that by the time the Gulf War is taking place in 1991, the media can supply images of war, often digitally processed, of distant, impersonal destruction. On the rainy west coast of Canada, as they watch these mediated images of that war, Suzanne and Lori are “appalled for different reasons, historically accountable and furious at a complicity neither . . . wanted to recognize” (81). Both recognize connections to a war in Southeast Asia. For Lori, “this is another Vietnam, stacked in much the same way” (35). Her anti-war response is unambiguous, her perspective narrow. Suzanne finds herself “caught in the echoes of an earlier war, caught in the meshes of defending brutality to stop brutality” (38). The lovers frustrate each other, and a chasm opens between them.

As war becomes the concern of all the media, Suzanne reads newspaper stories, spun from the rhetoric of politicians, introducing the new vocabulary of this war in the Gulf, and words for the magic charms which will ward off war:

This new obsession with high-tech fighters and tanks: charms against evil, against the threats of a “mad-man” who spent \$50 billion on armaments in the last decade but is not considered mad for that reason. Mad because he takes on the world’s mightiest power, this two-bit dictator invoking “the Mother of Battles.” And our media repeat his rhetoric so they can celebrate the American arsenal (equipped of course with Canadian components—yes Lori, I read that, too). (57)

As a young girl, Suzanne had “half-listened to the names that preoccupied” her mother and the other women waiting for the war to end so their own lives could begin again: “Changi, Burma, Geneva Code, dysentery. She didn’t know these names” (101). Now she hears more words for war. “Operation Desert Storm is underway and our papers are alive with threats



of terrorism. A new vocabulary has taken hold: Tomahawk cruise missiles and Stealth fighters, plague-laden warheads, a holy war" (19). But is this vocabulary new? 'Tomahawks' and 'holy wars' mark the bloody clash of colonial and religious aggression in other times, "this sense of the enemy again" (19).

The Gulf War on "the other (the same?) side of our world" (19) translates the relationship of Suzanne and Lori. Their preoccupation with the images of war on the television screen, edited to threads of the big picture and sound bites, seems to create another gulf between them, makes them feel irresponsible to curl their bodies around each other's and let the days pass without "any consequence. The fatal idea of islands cut off from the main" (16): "the mainland, the mainstream, the main thing" (85). But Suzanne thinks it "is not this war that divides us. . . . It's something further back in our own lives. Still unread" (81).

When Lori leaves to help her mother, and to be part of things that matter, Suzanne writes 'her', reaching for what is not 'here', across time to find Esme, across the world to Lori in 'another here':

Anxiety pushes me out of bed in the dark, to write her, reach her, bring her bodily out of nothing, which is not nothing because she is there, leaning against me on the other side of a thin membrane that separates, so thin we communicate, but not in words. I reach toward her with these half-truths, half-light fading into ordinary time and space. (21)

Esme waited for her husband, waiting for life to resume, but Suzanne's world is not on hold, even as she writes Lori, as imagined dialogues with her lover play in her head. Her body remembers "the murmur, mer-mère" ("Booking Passage" in *Salvage* 117) of mother and child, the "nameless inter-being we began with" (*Taken* 21); the "[k]notting and unknotting" of lovers, ". . . our own foetal curl, soft gone and long gone, impossible to know where each of us ends" (15), the interbeing of mother and infant daughter played out again between lesbian lovers in their exploration of intimate geography. But with Suzanne and Lori, "the permeable bond between mother and daughter [is] being replayed with a whole lot of junk in it" (Marlatt 1997):

Even as i dream you, desire that bliss of total surrender, bliss at the dissolution of blockage—old wounds, the ones we tell over and over as if they were our selves. "You" escape, you other than my dreaming designs. I forget (are we always complicit?) that dreams are drawn to the blurred ideal each of us carries—home, the impossible place, love, the mother our own mothers, amid the urgent particulars of their lives, could never live up to. (96)

There is so much 'junk' that "the loss of Lori feels like the loss of everything" to Suzanne, but her relationship to the "sensual environment is almost as important a relationship for Suzanne as the relationship with Lori" (Marlatt 1997). Her body, the present, her body in the present, can give Suzanne a feeling of home without mental and emotional anxiety. The sensual floats, letting the images of otters who "live here with all the pleasure of beings who belong . . . sliding into water, their dark coats slicked back" (15) lap up against Suzanne while making love: "Knotting and unknotting ourselves by candlelight, i think of them even as we submerge in hunger searching out the soft parts, undoing nipples, lips with tongue talk . . ." (15)

Even as she makes love, Suzanne is thinking. Our propensity to constantly assess, compare, evaluate, and question; "can human beings ever feel at home?" (Marlatt 1997) It is this non-thinking, the envy of beings without words, that lets a narrative drift to find itself, not in the story line, or the rigid constraints of a particular genre, but in a flow of words which lets the body go, a narrative that is feeling its way through what is not known: the aquatic narrative dives and surfaces, replaying the past, surprised by the new in what has been before, letting the ear hear what the eye cannot see, and changing the rhythm of writing into a process at least as sensual as it is cerebral. As Marlatt describes it in "Writing Our Way Through the Labyrinth":

the labyrinth of language . . . requires an inner ear, a sensory organ i feel my way by (sentence, sentire, to feel), keeping my feet by a labyrinthine sense of balance as the currents of various meanings, the unexpected "drift," swirl me along. of course the labyrinth is filled with fluid, as the membranous labyrinth of the inner ear is, women know the slippery feel of language . . . (*Labyrinth* 33)

Words, worlds, lap against each other, and change the way we see them. In writing *Taken*, Marlatt sought to make meaning mobile, "trying to get as many different associations as possible" (Marlatt 1997), letting consonants shift and vowel sounds surprise, and moving words to new meaning by evoking images through different collocations and connotations. 'Taken' is played with, turned over and over, so that all its usages are found in the context of the novel. There is the nebulous meaning of 'taken' in the title<sup>6</sup> and its crucial connections with photography; with capture and seduction; with giving; with the occupation of space; and the success of a seed. No meaning stands alone; the porous relationship between bodies is evident in the relationship of words, as well.

At the same time that she tosses in her useless bed, missing her absent lover, Suzanne is haunted by the images that place human activity in a wider

context: "The image of a greased cormorant struggling to lift itself from oil-thick waters in the Gulf of Bahrain repeats and repeats" (92). Just as the entwined lovers' bodies evoked the slick bodies of otters utterly in their element, Suzanne's thoughts move from the distress of oil-covered birds to ponder the loss of her own place in the arms of Lori: "how could the tenderness that soaked our skin have come to this?" (92)

Marlatt's narrative drift writes the interbeing of women's bodies, in the mother and in the "particular murmur" (Marlatt 1997) of the lesbian lover, as it writes a profound ecological consciousness, for if "dreams are narratives made of those words which arise from the flaming of things within us, their opposite is the poisoned world of the 'exploited earth'" (Weir 61). How does lesbian love and the sensual environment of body and nature make sense of human war? The distinctive construction of Suzanne's questions, "How put it together with the news we are occupied by, preoccupied" (15), and "How put together a narrative" (26), recalls the title/question of Marlatt's *How Hug a Stone*. In her discussion of Marlatt in *Body, Inc.: The Poetics of Translation*, Pamela Banting suggests that that title is a question as to "the possibility of embracing the family of ancestors and of replying to the wild heartbeat," that it asks "how we can deploy our bodies in relation to the physical world of which bodies are a part" (176). These issues seem to aptly apply as well to Suzanne's questions of how to connect writing, somatic memory, heterosexual history and lesbian love in a wholly present narrative.

"Where can we be if we aren't where we are, inside so many levels of connection" (86)? Wrapped in layers of other lives, the desire to be at home with 'where we are' is a thread of connection between the war in the Gulf and Suzanne's life on the island and the memory stored in tissue. Suzanne's yearning for an inner and outer geography of home is like the desire of

[m]igratory birds flying, whole flocks across the oil-slick in that other contested Gulf. Driven by homing desire past fire, through impenetrable smoke. While below them the bombing and the firing go on. (96)

These threads connect the reader with other writing in which Marlatt has posed the question, "[W]hat attaches her to the world?" and brought women's bodies, memory in the tissues, war, and exploited species together. In "Litter. wreckage. salvage" she writes:

. . . What matters, mattered  
once has seeped away. like fluid from a cell, except she  
keeps her walls intact, her tidal pool the small things of  
her concern still swim alive alive-oh-

The salmon homing in this season, spring, the sewer out-falls upstream, oil slick, the deadly freight of acid rain—she reads the list of casualties in the ongoing war outside her door. (Salvage 15-16)

As she digs into the earth, planting lettuce seeds and thinking of the past, of Lori gone—“Lori has become one of her ghosts” (Marlatt 1977)—Suzanne simultaneously thinks of “death again, of burned bodies in desert sand.

Perhaps we don't deserve this place . . .

Perhaps thinking *that* is the problem . . . Perhaps we don't understand where we really are (109).

Too much thinking, and yet not enough. Marlatt is concerned with the thinking that gets in the way of being at home, as she is with the habitualization, the “assumptions the daily is grounded on, housed in” (113):

I think that we spend huge amounts of time in our daily life trying to forget everything except what immediately concerns us, because this is how we construct our inner narrative which allows us to be who we think we are. And we know far more than we think we know, than we allow ourselves to know. We carry all this stuff with us. (Marlatt 1997)

Suzanne cannot remember what was eaten at dinner the night before Lori's departure, and “this seems terribly important, like a sign i haven't read” (52), as a sign lost in the automatic, unconscious response of living every day.

We tend to prioritize our own lives, our individual futures, and to think of the past as finished, over and done with. Marlatt feels “it still present. And the consequences of that keep getting played out.” (Marlatt 1997) Sites of past and ongoing pain exist and affect all of us. The Gulf War; the bombing at Hiroshima; the lime pits and ovens of a concentration camp; the insidious colonization of a Native child in a residential school: these are not “elsewhere so much as another here” (111) that we do not recognize, and “what we cut off from us by cognitive amputation, comes back to haunt us” (113). The nameless narratives of suffering in war camps in the italicized passages within the novel tell us of women, taken, “*yes, but not completely*” (67), acquiring strategies for survival; learning new definitions of time and space, of family: “*your heart swells to hold this ragtag retinue lost somewhere in a mapless world*” (88). These stories of war, of women taken prisoner, are written here, not forgotten. But along with such human suffering, there are the circumstances of “an oil slick on a different gulf drift[ing] toward a herd of breeding sea cows soon to be forgotten, immaterial finally in the human struggle for dominance” (86).

If we cannot recognize the suffering of other human beings in our own

lives, our complicity in the creation of their stories, and theirs in ours—  
 "We *are* complicit, yes" (130)—how difficult it is to imagine lives beyond  
 our human ones. Indeed, how does one species of life understand another?  
 "What do cat and deer make of each other?" (19), and what does either  
 make of the speeding car, "this apocalyptic machine splitting their world for  
 an instant" (19)? There are worlds beyond words, beyond human stories,  
 and to recognize them is to situate one's life in an eco-system, "the largest  
 sense of what we're involved in as living beings" (Marlatt 1997).

Marlatt recalls the profound sense of a system not built on a human scale  
 that she encountered on a visit to Steveston:

First of all, you're standing on an island that's below sea-level so it's an incredibly  
 liminal place between water and earth. But especially if you're standing there in  
 the Spring, with the freshet pouring down the Fraser, you get an incredible sense  
 of the power of that water moving out to the sea. (Marlatt 1997)

In *Steveston* (1974), she was trying to write that, to "imitate the flow of the  
 river in long, long extended sentences,"<sup>7</sup> writing "the motion of fluid  
 space" (118) as Smaro Kamboureli describes it, but she "didn't have any the-  
 ory for it then,"<sup>8</sup> hence the attempt to rewrite those poems again in *Salvage*.  
 Feminist theory familiarized Marlatt with the idea of foregrounding the  
 background, of making present what was absent.

The unspoken of women's experience until recently was the background; it was  
 what never was acknowledged. And now we've been making it the foreground,  
 foregrounding it over and over again, so it's now visible. We can now recognize  
 it. And we have all kinds of language for talking about it. But then what about the  
 area that lies beyond the human? You know, the interdependency of all beings;  
 the eco-system? (Marlatt 1997)

Narrative drift recognizes an ebb and flow in background and foreground,  
 in the oscillating rhythms of reading and writing:

reading our world, we act upon it, are acted upon—inter/read, inter/act—receive  
 the earth's reading of us, are netted in a context which we mime, which we are  
 as, netting ourselves we encounter death. (Weir 62)

Language is mortal, too, Marlatt knows: it "generates itself & it dies, but it's  
 all there in the body" (Interview by Bowering 60).

In *Taken*, Marlatt reaches for the language, for 'how put it together', a story  
 profoundly present, yet pregnant with past and future, and with the inter-  
 dependency of all living beings, of the energy of place. She writes "as an inhab-  
 itant of language, not master, not even mistress" ("musing" 48) of discourse,

letting her attention drift, demonstrating for us a narrative in which, as Sue Ellen Campbell suggests in her essay, "The Land and Language of Desire," "we pay attention not to the way things have meanings for us, but to the way the rest of the world—the nonhuman part—exists apart from us and our languages" (133); that the "systems of meanings that matter are ecosystems" (134).

To open ourselves to answers other than our own, to listen with our bodies and drift beyond cognition to the feeling of home in the skin: "the body being in its place"; to open our minds, and "take in everything around it without getting caught up within analysis" (Marlatt 1997): how does one position oneself to write that? Narrative drift is an immersion in the process of writing/loving. The sensation of a body in water is that of a body aware of its element. The differences Marlatt perceived between writing poetry and transparent prose can be applied to her narrative drift:

It's like the difference between being land animals &—we don't usually experience air, you know. We breathe in & we breathe out without being aware that we're breathing any medium at all . . . Once we get into the water, which is a foreign element to us, we're very aware of the difficulty of moving thru that element . . . You are aware that you are moving in an element, in a medium, & that there is a constant resistance to your moving forward. And that, in fact, any moving forward you make is thanks to that element that you're moving in. So that language . . . writes the story as much as you do. (Interview by Bowering 62)

The medium rubs against the skin, is as tangible as the skin. Immersed, the body/text floats, drifts, aware of the support and the risk of this essential component of our inner and outer worlds. Slowing time down, slowing everything down, there is a rhythm writing against the pace of information. In wet, sensuous writing, 'the interbeing we were born with' is played out (again) in writing the woman reader here:

I want to write you here, translate you, into this fabulous air so drenched with the syllables of birds. I want to pour you into this bowl of misty half-light, everything merged, submerged. . . . (*Taken* 77)

This is writing in the threshold between breaths, where words give way to a sense of being home, in her element.

\* \* \*

\* For my title I have borrowed a phrase from Nicole Brossard who spoke of "a space to swim with the words" to describe her relationship with her translators, her active readers, who share a "network of minds, a connection of consciousness . . . in the way they posture themselves within language and in their relation to the act of writing."

## NOTES

- 1 This quotation is from one of two personal interviews with Daphne Marlatt which took place at her home in Victoria, BC, the first, in April 1996, and the second, from which this quotation is taken, on August 27, 1997. I thank Daphne Marlatt for permission to quote from these interviews. I also gratefully acknowledge the participation of Mitoko Hirabayashi at both interviews. I thank Steve Cornwell for his careful transcriptions.
- 2 I thank Carolyn Guertin for bringing this quotation to my attention.
- 3 Indeed, as Carolyn Guertin so persuasively argues in her paper, "Gesturing Toward the Visual: Virtual Reality, Hypertext and Embodied Feminist Criticism," "Using our bodies to reorganize our thoughts as critics, we need to reinsert our proprioceptive sense and our material awareness of the body. . . . [W]e as critics must plug ourselves back into the territories of the unspeakable that our artists are exploring by using the same narrational and navigational tools."
- 4 From a letter following the 1997 interview, dated September 2, 1997.
- 5 From "On Distance and Identity: Ten Years Later," the afterword to the Longspoon edition of *Steveston*, 92.
- 6 The novel's working title was *Taken By Surprise* but was shortened to increase its mobility, its mutility: "I wanted all those usages of 'taken' to be played out in the context of the novel" (Marlatt 1997).
- 7 From an interview with Ellea Wright, quoted in Smaro Kamboureli's *On the Edge of Genre* 118.
- 8 Marlatt discusses her introduction to theory in her interview with Williamson (Interview 182-3).

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