

**“this isn’t one to be told in the third person”*:
Social activism in the Poetry and Prose Writing of Bronwen Wallace**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
in the Faculty of Arts and Science**

TRENT UNIVERSITY

Peterborough, Ontario, Canada

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Canadian Heritage and Development Studies M.A. Program

June 2000



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- * Bronwen Wallace, "Intervals," The Stubborn Particulars of Grace (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1987) 65.

ABSTRACT

“this isn’t one to be told in the third person”: Social activism in the Poetry and Prose Writing of Bronwen Wallace

Laura Black

Bronwen Wallace (1945-1989) was a poetry and prose writer from Kingston, Ontario who was an active member of the women’s movement. She was also a firm believer in the need for social change. Her social activism - evident in both her life and her writing - covered many different social issues including women’s rights, physical and sexual violence against women and children, social policy, prejudice, and education through awareness.

A primary focus of Wallace’s poetry and prose writing was violence against women and children. In this thesis I explore the connection between some of Wallace’s poetry (in Common Magic and The Stubborn Particulars of Grace), short fictions (in People You’d Trust Your Life To), and editorial columns (in the Kingston Whig-Standard) and her desire to end women’s oppression in an effort to change the world. Specifically I illustrate the ways in which the writing focusing on violence against women and children is presented to the reader for consideration. It is through an individual’s consideration of the issue of violence that Wallace believed change could occur. In this thesis, I argue that Wallace used her writing as a basic fundamental means of social activism by promoting awareness and change. In her writing Wallace insists that opportunities for change are available at many overlooked levels: in the daily, ordinary, mundane realities of our lives. Wallace’s discussions of the social issues she presents in her writing can be seen as a means of provoking individual discussions amongst members of her reading audience. These individual discussions and our personal consideration of violence against women and children are illustrated by Wallace’s belief that, through this process, we each hold the power to change our lives *and* the world surrounding us.

Acknowledgements

There are many people I would like to thank for their generous and helpful contributions during the writing of this thesis. I would like to begin by thanking Professor Shelagh Wilkinson for taking time from a busy schedule to be my external reader. I owe a great deal of gratitude to my supervisory committee. Thank you to Professor Christl Verduyn, my supervisor, for agreeing to work with me on this project. Your enthusiasm for Canadian women's writing was infectious and I couldn't have imagined writing this thesis without you. I would also like to thank Professor Marg Hobbs and Professor Gordon Johnston for agreeing to be part of this project. I am grateful to each of you for sharing your expertise and enthusiasm. The support of my supervisory committee has been a source of invaluable encouragement. I am grateful for the ways my committee challenged me as well as the many hours and hard work contributed during this past summer.

There are many individuals who generously shared with me their memories of Bronwen Wallace: Jeremy Baxter, Ron Baxter, Lorna Crozier, Maureen Garvie, Darlene George, Deb Greer, Roberta Hamilton, Joanne McAlpine, Erin Mouré, and Larry Scanlan. I would like to individually recognize Joanne Page and Carolyn Smart who were incredibly supportive of my research and offered much more than I ever expected.

I would like to end on a more personal note. A special thanks to my mom and dad for encouraging me to begin - and finish - this program. Their support during the times I lost my way helped me more than I can express. Thank you also to Michelle Spring for providing her home as extra work space and for making me laugh. Finally, I am grateful to Spencer Harrison for his friendship and for helping me to see that this was meant to be.

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List of Abbreviations

The following is a list of abbreviations used, in footnotes only, throughout the thesis.

AWTW - Wallace, Bronwen. Arguments With The World. Ed. Joanne Page. Kingston, ON: Quarry P, 1992.

CM - Wallace, Bronwen. Common Magic. Toronto: Oberon P, 1985.

MIF - Wallace, Bronwen. Marrying Into The Family. Ottawa: Oberon P, 1980.

SFT - Wallace, Bronwen. Signs of the Former Tenant. Toronto: Oberon P, 1983.

SPG - Wallace, Bronwen. The Stubborn Particulars of Grace. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1987.

KWS - Kingston Whig-Standard

Introduction

Bronwen Wallace had come into her own as a writer. She was hitting her stride, developing her territory, giving major voice to her themes. [...] Such writing is a gift -- first to the writer, from whoever gives such gifts, and then from the writer to the reader. Such writing is also a testament to a life lived passionately and with courage and strength and gratitude, right until its end.

**Margaret Atwood,
Bronwen Wallace Memorial Service, Grand Theatre, Kingston,
ON, 31 August, 1989.**

At the time of her death in 1989, Bronwen Wallace had published four collections of poetry. A volume of short stories and a final collection of poems were published posthumously. She had contributed a weekly 'feminist' editorial column to a local newspaper and was an active force behind the women's movement in the southern Ontario community of Kingston. Both for those who knew her well and for those who knew her only through her writing, it was obvious that Wallace's writing career and her remarkable literary voice were cut tragically short when she died from cancer at age forty-four. Despite her outstanding achievements - both literary and other - which span more than two decades, for many people Bronwen Wallace's name remains unfamiliar. Recognized by some as an established Canadian poet and a committed social activist, Bronwen Wallace's fervent efforts to effect social change in the 'everyday' world best shine through in the persistence of her writing. In her poems, stories, and editorial columns, her involvement with different facets of the Kingston community, her relationships with friends and family, her connections with members of literary communities, especially in the ways in which she chose to educate her son, Bronwen Wallace expressed her belief that it is always possible to change ourselves and the world around us. Moreover, Wallace's writing shows her readers that writing and literature have the power to transform.

Bronwen Wallace was born in Kingston, Ontario on May 9, 1945. Wallace's family roots stretched back some two hundred years in the area surrounding Kingston and she openly acknowledged her very strong sense of, and attachment to, place. In 1963 Wallace entered Queen's University to study English literature. She completed her B.A. in 1967, a Master's degree in 1969, and half of her Ph.D. before leaving the program. Wallace lived in

Kingston her entire life with the exception of roughly eight years from the early- to late-1970s. During this time Wallace travelled across Canada before settling in Windsor, Ontario, where she worked as a secretary and became thoroughly involved in the labour politics of that area.¹ The time of Wallace's move to Windsor marked the beginning of her intense political and social activity in an effort to change the world.² Her desire to effect social change remained strong when she returned to Kingston at the end of the 1970s.

Bronwen Wallace's role as writer was integral to each aspect of her identity: mother, partner, friend, feminist, and activist. As Wallace herself insisted, her interests as a feminist and activist within her community shaped and informed her identity as a writer. She firmly believed that social change was possible and worked, in a number of concurrent ways, to make such changes happen. In this thesis I provide a detailed examination of the connection between her poetry³ and prose writing and her interest in effecting social change. My underlying argument is that Bronwen Wallace did not separate her role as activist from that of writer.

¹Paula L. Sarson, "Telling the Stories of Our Lives: Poetics and Politics in the Works of Bronwen Wallace," M.A. thesis, Dalhousie U, 1993, 16.

²Pat Noonan, Bronwen Wallace Memorial Service, Grand Theatre, Kingston, ON, 31 August, 1989.

³Wallace's published collections of poetry - Marrying into the Family (1980), Signs of the Former Tenant (1983), Common Magic (1985), The Stubborn Particulars of Grace (1987), and Keep That Candle Burning Bright and Other Poems (1991) - address a diverse range of issues. Her first two collections have a strong focus on family, place, and memory. While exhibiting many traits of her earlier work, her final collection, on one level, is a tribute to country music. It is within her third and fourth collections that the influences of Bronwen Wallace's social activism are most distinct. For the purposes of this thesis, only some of Wallace's later poetry (1985-87) will be discussed in detail.

Wallace's writing touched upon many different subjects including family and friends, the landscape of the Kingston area, personal relationships, memories, and countless social issues. In my thesis I do not attempt to examine the entire scope of Wallace's work. Instead, I focus on Bronwen Wallace's activism as illustrated in selections from Common Magic, The Stubborn Particulars of Grace, People You'd Trust Your Life To, and "In Other Words," her editorial column for the Kingston Whig-Standard. Wallace's social activism covered many areas, as did her writing. These included women's rights, physical and sexual violence against women and children, social policy, prejudice, and education and awareness. Issues of ethnicity, class, and gender in Canadian society were an integral part of her analysis of women's equality and safety.

In this thesis I argue that, for Wallace, writing was a basic fundamental means of social activism by promoting awareness and change. I do not suggest Wallace was alone in this, either in her writing or in her activism; she herself repeatedly emphasized the importance of community. Moreover, Wallace was aware of the power found in writing in a manner easily accessible to her readers regardless of gender, class, ethnicity, or education. Bronwen Wallace's poetry, short fiction, and editorial columns spoke to different audiences. This is not to suggest that rigid boundaries exist between readers of different 'kinds' of writing. Rather, as Wallace herself recognized, it is not realistic to assume that *all* readers would be familiar with *all* aspects of her writing. In other words, those who read the local newspaper may not necessarily have read the work of a local poet. Wallace's social activism, on the other hand, reached many individuals from each of these audiences as well as many who were unfamiliar with her written work.

Wallace's creative voice was one that was not necessarily unique; rather it was the manner in which she wrote that was, and continues to be, distinctive. Wallace's literary success lies in the style of her written voice, a voice that evokes familiar elements of her readers' own lives. Wallace expressed her ideas and concerns about the ordinary events and details of our daily lives using the same language her readers use. She drew upon familiar images, situations, and circumstances. In this sense, Bronwen Wallace writes *our* realities; when we read her words, we are reading our own.

When I first encountered Bronwen Wallace's written work, I immediately responded to it on a personal level and made a number of connections with her subject matter. I recognized the landscape she focussed on because I lived in Kingston. Having volunteered at Muskoka Interval House and been an active participant in a number of women's groups and organizations, I had some first-hand knowledge of the issues Wallace tackles in her writing. One of the main elements of Wallace's work which drew me more deeply to it - and which continues to do so - was her firm conviction that people can always change and that, with change, a 'better' world is possible. Moreover, Wallace insisted that opportunities for change were available at countless overlooked levels: in the ordinary, everyday, mundane realities of our lives. This sentiment is best expressed in Wallace's own words:

...[C]hanges take place slowly and often invisibly. Sure, there are lobbies and demonstrations, but there are also long hours of talking and arguing, challenging old assumptions, learning to see the world in a new way. This is never an easy process. The journey [...] is a long and painful one in which *each person* changes in some very fundamental way as she looks at herself as a woman in this particular culture.⁴

⁴Bronwen Wallace, "The Politics of Everyday," *AWTW*, 40.

Wallace balances the positive and the negative aspects of change in this particular statement. While the process of change is long and often difficult, changes do occur each and every day even though we may not necessarily be fully aware of them. As Wallace notes, "...[C]hanges [...] go on daily, in kitchens and offices and classrooms and playgrounds and coffee-shops or wherever 'ordinary' people get together to discuss their 'ordinary' lives."⁵

A common theme in Wallace's writing which provides a foundation for my examination of her writing as social activism is her insistence that there is no separation between the 'ordinary' and the 'extraordinary,' between 'us' and 'them.' In all of her writing, Wallace strove to bring to her reader's awareness the fallacy of this distinction. Inherent in our insistence to cling to these beliefs is our shared perception of what is 'normal.' Wallace's writing, particularly with the Whig-Standard, attempts to shatter our image of what is 'normal' and socially accepted. To do this, Wallace illustrated that what is deemed 'extraordinary' can often be found either within the 'ordinary'/'normal' or is actually caused, to some degree, by the 'ordinary'/'normal.'

The content of Wallace's poetry and prose, influenced by her activism, encourages her reader to examine and ponder the subject matter constructively. Wallace's discussions of the social issues she presented in her writing constituted a means of provoking individual discussions amongst members of her reading audience. These individual discussions and our personal consideration of the social issues Wallace presents illustrate her belief that, through this process, we each hold the power to change our lives *and* the world surrounding us. As

⁵Ibid.

Wallace asserted, one of the areas in which we have power to effect change in the everyday world is within our personal lives. An easily accessible means by which to effect change in our lives is through the language we use. Describing her own writing, Wallace elaborated on this notion of our power to change our lives and our society:

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. [...] I believe that when we speak and write of our lives in this way, we also change language, if only because we say things that have never been said before.⁶

For Wallace, change begins with each individual on what may appear to be simplistic levels. When we consider their collective impact, individual changes assume a much greater significance. By individually altering our use of language or by using that language to voice previously unexpressed experience, we begin to have a much larger and more profound impact on society. In a public address, Wallace emphasized her belief in the ‘healing powers’ of language: “I believe in the power of language - of what we say to each other - to change what we have made of our history, to ‘save us’ if you will.”⁷

In her Foreword to Arguments With The World, Joanne Page eloquently emphasizes that there is more to Wallace’s influence as a writer than simply her words themselves. The thoughts behind these words and the ways in which they are used are equally important.

What [Wallace] had to say was always principled, often unexpected. Her finger on a particular situation, she’d explain its complicated social context, and then go on to wonder what would happen if the situation were reversed, if the assumptions were different. She didn’t

⁶Sudden Miracles: Eight Women Poets, ed. Rhea Tregobov (Toronto: Second Story P, 1991) 242.

⁷Bronwen Wallace, “The Cuban Missile Crisis and Me,” AWTW, 31-32.

provide answers. In questioning, she knew, lay the pathway to change.⁸

Wallace discussed each subject with honesty and consistency, achieving this fine balance through her resistance to society's assumptions about 'other people's' lives and the choices they have made. Wallace maintained consistency in her writing through her critical examination of society and her strong conviction that things *can* change and that *we* can change them.

A primary focus of Bronwen Wallace's poetry and prose writing, as I discuss in my thesis, was the topic of violence against women and children. She made a conscious decision to use her writing as a form of activism. In this thesis, writing as social activism is examined in three ways. First, the subject matter and the way it is conveyed must either challenge the reader's consciousness, or create an awareness, about the issue at hand. By presenting an issue in a new light, or perhaps for the first time, Wallace's writing offers an opportunity to form new thoughts, beliefs, and/or opinions on that issue. Second, when discussing an issue, she examines it from a number of different standpoints. This multiple perspective brought an awareness of the intricacies of an issue and an understanding that there are many different ways of looking at and thinking about each issue. In this way, there exists a greater likelihood that the reader can relate to the issue at hand. As a result, her writing style forges a relationship between writer/issue and reader based on a greater understanding of that issue. Finally, through the detailed nature of Wallace's writing, the reader has an opportunity to connect to the people and situations she described. Ultimately, readers recognize the personal implications that social issues and specific situations may have and works to change them in

⁸Joanne Page, Foreword, AWTW, 9-10.

their own lives and in the society in which they live.

To examine Bronwen Wallace's activism as presented in her writing, I adopted the following methodology. First and foremost, I examined Bronwen Wallace's own writing. Wallace's early poetry, collected in Marrying Into The Family (1980) and Signs of the Former Tenant (1983), and her final collection, Keep That Candle Burning Bright and Other Poems (1991), are discussed only briefly. Evidence of Wallace's social activism is not as readily apparent here as it is in her other two collections. Some of the poetry collected in Common Magic (1985) and The Stubborn Particulars of Grace (1987) is examined in detail. This detailed examination allows us to look at some of the poems in Wallace's other collections to discover the ways in which those more subtle discussions connect with the explicit examination of violence in Common Magic and The Stubborn Particulars of Grace. I also examine Wallace's short fiction - collected in People You'd Trust Your Life To (1990) - and her editorial columns published weekly as "In Other Words" in the Kingston Whig-Standard (1987-1989).⁹ A common thread found throughout all of these writings is the way in which Wallace directly addresses the social issues about which she was passionate. Personal experiences left their mark on Wallace both as an individual and as a writer. Throughout her life, Wallace remained active with a number of women's groups and organizations. During the early to mid-1980s, Wallace worked as a counsellor and volunteer at Kingston Interval House, a battered women's shelter. While not the only issue Wallace addressed in her writing, violence and abuse appear time and again.

I also consulted literature available on Bronwen Wallace's poetry and prose writing.

⁹Some of these columns are collected in Arguments With the World (1992).

This consisted mainly of reviews of her published work and a number of published interviews. At the time I wrote this thesis, there was not an abundance of critical literature existing on Bronwen Wallace herself or her creative works. I referred to Wallace's correspondence with fellow poet/activist Erin Mouré published in Two Women Talking: Correspondence 1985-87 Erin Mouré and Bronwen Wallace. Interviews I conducted, where possible, with individuals who knew Wallace personally and/or professionally were very helpful. These conversations provided pertinent information regarding Wallace's activism which complemented the existing literature.

In this thesis I also attempt to contextualize Wallace's writing through a brief examination of the cultural and political environment which both surrounded and inspired Wallace during her career. In Chapter 1 I provide a broader political context in which to situate Wallace's writing and activism. In this thesis I cannot identify and discuss each of Wallace's social concerns; instead I address only some of the major issues Wallace pursued. The subsequent chapters are each comprised of a detailed analysis of Wallace's writing, concentrating on one of her main concerns: physical and sexual violence against women and children. My discussion in Chapter 2 of the poetry collected in Common Magic and The Stubborn Particulars of Grace is framed by an in-depth examination of the 'Bones' poems. Wallace's short fiction collected in People You'd Trust Your Life To is explored in Chapter 3. "Back Pain" and "Tip of My Tongue," the two stories explicitly addressing physical and sexual violence, provide the foundation for this exploration. In Chapter 4 I provide an examination of the subject matter of Wallace's editorial column, "In Other Words," in the Kingston Whig-Standard. The range of Wallace's work is far-reaching in these columns.

Here she sought to change society's oppressive attitudes and atmosphere toward women. The issues Wallace raised for discussion, as reflected in my thesis, were interconnected, multi-layered, and part of a larger social dilemma. Wallace challenged society's notion that *human* experience is synonymous with *male* experience. "In Other Words" worked to broaden the borders of human experience.

My examination of Wallace's poetry and prose writing focuses on the ways in which Wallace attempted to raise awareness of the issues which most concerned her. In this sense, Wallace's belief in change was more than simply pro-active; Wallace set an example to her reading audience not only by promoting her belief in change, but also by acting upon that belief herself and encouraging her readers to do the same. Wallace focussed on diagnosing larger social problems. She revealed a more honest account of the condition of our society and emphasized the act of becoming conscious of the issues she described. In this way, Wallace left it to her reader to act upon the information she presented. As Page noted in her Foreword, Wallace only raised questions; she didn't provide the answers. I place particular emphasis in Chapter 4 on the ways in which Wallace re-conceptualized politics and urged her reader to re-think life, as she did herself. Bronwen Wallace's writing was not a form of activism simply because she was an activist, but rather because she remained consistently conscious of the individual human contexts that shape our collective experiences in society.

My central goal in this thesis is to investigate the connection between Wallace's writing and her activism. In the process, I draw attention to the creative and innovative efforts of a writer and activist whose work deserves more critical attention.

Chapter One
**The Social, Historical, and Political Climate of the Canadian Women's Movement:
the Sixties, Seventies, and Eighties**

She never lost those politics that she got [...] involved in in her activities in Windsor [...]. So she was very much someone who I think was a feminist and saw feminism as a kind of vision, like a movement, but also a vision of how the world could be. So it wasn't just something happening that people joined, 'the feminist movement,' it was like feminism offered a vision of how the world could be a better place for men *and* women.

Joanne McAlpine,
Personal Interview, 24 March, 1999.

In a 1987 column for “In Other Words,” Bronwen Wallace referred to herself as “a strong feminist, an outspoken anti-war activist, a labor organizer”.¹ Like many women, Wallace was deeply influenced by the burgeoning women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Collectively these ‘formative’ years were exciting times for Canadian women. On an individual basis, a woman’s beliefs, opinions, and perspectives could be informed by her personal experiences and history within that movement. In this chapter I highlight the major events, strategies, and theories associated with feminism from the late 1960s to the end of the 1980s in an effort to show the political and social context within which Bronwen Wallace developed her own feminist ideas and practices. Wallace’s actions and the activities of the women’s movement during this time offer insight into the connections between how she lived and what she wrote. I will neither present a complete, comprehensive overview of the Canadian women’s movement during this twenty year span nor will I attempt to recount Wallace’s every interest and action. I begin with the late 1960s when the ‘second wave’ of feminism emerged as a movement with considerable strength and with links to other political movements. Women’s issues began to be recognized publicly and women increasingly were perceived as political forces with the potential to demand, and achieve, change.²

From the vantage point of the late 1990s it may be difficult to remember that women’s

¹Bronwen Wallace, “Kingston’s feminist freedom-fighter who won the right to be ‘unladylike’,” *KWS*, 29 June, 1987. Where columns have been reproduced in Arguments With the World, I have included those details, with the abbreviated title AWTW, in parentheses.

²Preface, Canadian Women’s Issues Volume I: Strong Voices Twenty-Five Years of Women’s Activism in English Canada, eds. Ruth Roach Pierson, et al., (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co. Ltd., 1993) ix.

experiences in the 1960s and 1970s - and even as recently as the 1980s - were different, at times drastically so, from the way women live now. The composition of the 1960s and 1970s feminist movement in Canada was relatively homogeneous in terms of the class, race, and ethnic identities of these early feminists. By the 1980s, it became clear that this homogeneity was beginning to break down, and the Canadian women's movement began to shift from an exclusive, privileged social class or standing to a diverse group with countless differences. Throughout the 1980s, the feminist movement faced many different challenges presented by groups of women who strongly believed they were excluded from or marginalized by, or within, the movement. By the end of this decade it was not assumed so easily that a single, essential 'woman's experience' existed. Feminist theoretical discussions in the 1980s focussed on differences among women, including race, class, and sexual orientation. To a degree, these discussions took place in the writings of both feminist scholars and activists. Bronwen Wallace took part in these discussions, as we will see, and argued there was a place for each. Wallace ultimately found a way in which to bridge these two 'worlds.'

The Sixties: The Re-birth of Feminism

During the late 1960s, Canadian women's activities became increasingly energized by the feminist movement. Some feminists focussed attention on areas where women were 'the same' as men but treated in a different, disadvantageous manner. Specifically, women attempted to highlight areas where we were excluded from men's rights and privileges. In this respect, areas of concern and importance emerged relating to women's specific qualities

and characteristics, ones which women valued but society appreciated insufficiently.³ By the end of the 1960s, women were becoming more and more aware of our desire to remain distinct without being disadvantaged. While it may seem that women's liberation emerged in the 1960s with a 'united front,' distinct strands of feminism were evident from the beginning of the second wave. Then, as now, feminists had different ideas and approaches. The majority of women in the 1960s and early 1970s identified with either the 'equality' (liberal) strand of feminism or the 'difference' (radical) strand. In Canada, tensions between these two strands have been apparent since the beginnings of second wave feminism.⁴ Liberal feminist thought placed emphasis on women's 'sameness' to men, urging cooperation with the state to secure specific political and legal rights for women. Liberal feminism maintained that the main problems women faced were rooted in society's gender divisions, discriminatory laws, and institutional practices. Radical feminist thought, on the other hand, emphasized women's 'difference' from men. Radical feminism located the roots of the inequality between women and men at all points in society. While liberal feminists believed society's established structures and institutions could be reformed to include women on an equal basis with men, radical feminists believed society needed to be completely re-structured in order for women and men to achieve some form of equality. As we will see in her writing, Bronwen Wallace's ideology reveals strong influences from radical feminist thought, although she also came to

³Naomi Black, "The Canadian Women's Movement: the Second Wave," Changing Patterns: Women in Canada, eds. Sandra Burt, Lorraine Code, and Lindsay Dorney (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1988) 81.

⁴For a thorough discussion of the different strands of feminism, see Rosemarie Putnam Tong, Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction, 2nd ed., (Boulder, Colorado: Westview P, 1998).

articulate a class and race analysis that was most strongly associated with socialist feminism. Her experiences at Kingston Interval House in the mid-1980s and, in particular, the content of her non-fiction writing illustrate Wallace's belief that inequalities between women and men exist at all points in our society. Through her writing, Wallace repeatedly challenges us, her reading audience, to make changes in our communities and our lives.

The women's movement initially shared media attention in the late 1960s with the student movement. The radical strand of second wave feminism - 'women's liberation' - emerged from this student movement, known for its radical protests and struggle for equality. Bronwen Wallace was one of these students. She entered Queen's University in 1963 to study English literature and immediately joined a number of left-wing campus groups, quickly becoming a self-identified campus radical.⁵ Many women involved in both the Canadian and American student movements were discouraged by male members' expectations that women would assume a secondary role in all activities. This experience also held true for Wallace. In 1966, when there was talk of changing the world,⁶ she attended a weekend conference of the Student Union for Peace Action (SUPA) at Queen's University. A small group of women left this meeting to discuss women's perspectives generally, and the women's movement, specifically.⁷ Women spoke of their desire to do more than just type pamphlets and make

⁵Bronwen Wallace, "The Cuban Missile Crisis and Me," AWTW, 30.

⁶Bronwen Wallace, "Feminists, like explorers, spend their lives venturing into unknown territory," KWS, 4 May, 1987. (AWTW 107).

⁷Bronwen Wallace, Two Women Talking: Correspondence 1985-87 Erin Mouré and Bronwen Wallace, ed. Susan McMaster (Toronto: the Feminist Caucus of the League of Canadian Poets, 1993) 74.

coffee for male group members;⁸ women wanted to be truly active participants in this drive to change the world. Bronwen Wallace and many other women eventually left the student movement to join the women's movement.⁹

The Canadian student movement and the 'new' women's movement were seen by some as late, muted American imports. Without denying its American influences, the Canadian feminist movement distinguished itself by its issue-oriented and politically diverse nature. It reflected an ideology deeply rooted in the struggles of first wave feminists at the turn of the century; like their predecessors, feminists in the 1960s were limited by the primarily white and middle-class composition of their movement. At the end of this decade, women were beginning to strive publicly for equal pay, access to safe and affordable birth control, the legalization of abortion, the provision of adequate child care, and an end to violence against women.¹⁰

Women's writing also was dramatically influenced by the focus of the 1960s women's movement. Poetry emerging at the beginnings of the second wave dealt expressly with women's search for identity. The second wave sentiment that 'the personal is political' was quickly incorporated into women's writing: women's personal lives and experiences became

⁸Wallace, Two Women Talking: Correspondence 1985-87 Erin Mouré and Bronwen Wallace, 21.

⁹For a discussion of the 1960s women's movement and its connection(s) with student activism, see Myrna Kostash, Long Way From Home: The story of the Sixties generation in Canada, (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1980).

¹⁰Naomi Wall, "Introduction - The Last Ten Years: A Personal/Political View," Still Ain't Satisfied! Canadian Feminism Today, eds. Maureen Fitzgerald, Connie Guberman, Margie Wolfe (Toronto: The Woman's P, 1982) 16.

the substance of their writing and poetry.¹¹ Simultaneously, a number of cultural and political events converged which not only provided Canadian women writers with a more receptive and creative environment in which to write, but also with an audience supportive of that writing.¹² First and foremost, Canadian literature matured into a legitimate field of study and became widely recognized as such. For many Canadians, this signified the ‘discovery’ of countless talented authors. For Bronwen Wallace, an undergraduate during the 1960s, this meant that “I didn’t discover Al Purdy until the early 1970s. One of the main reasons for this was that I was studying English at a university where Canadian Literature had not yet been heard of, let alone been considered fit to scoff at.”¹³ The works of Canadian authors, and the recognition of their writing as legitimate, undoubtedly validated the efforts of up and coming Canadian writers. As Bronwen Wallace stated in an essay years later, Purdy’s “work gave me permission to write about the people I knew, and the landscape I saw, and - most importantly - in the voice I’d heard in my head all my life.”¹⁴

As the women’s movement gained momentum around the mid-1970s, feminist publishing assumed a larger role. This forced mainstream media to address a broad spectrum of ‘women’s’ issues ranging from adequate and accessible day care to violence against

¹¹Robyn Rowland, “Culture and Self-creation through Writing,” Woman Herself: A Transdisciplinary Perspective on Women’s Identity (South Melbourne, Australia: Oxford U P, 1988) 88. See also Margie Wolfe, “Working With Words: Feminist Publishing in Canada,” Still Ain’t Satisfied! Canadian Feminism Today, 256-75; Shelagh Wilkinson, “By and About Women,” Changing Patterns: Women in Canada, 204-36

¹²-Wilkinson, 208.

¹³Bronwen Wallace, “Lilacs in May: A Tribute to Al Purdy,” AWTW, 163.

¹⁴Ibid., 165.

women. 'Mainstream' exposure allowed feminist writers and publishers to expand their audience(s) and sensitize more and more people to the concerns of women's liberation.¹⁵ Feminist publishers provided women a voice while also articulating and advancing the concerns of feminism in print.¹⁶ Feminist publications addressed issues previously marginalized by mainstream media: women's rights, gender discrimination in the workplace, violence against women, and so on. For feminist activists, these publications,¹⁷ along with the opportunities in mainstream media they presented, helped to unify, educate, and inform both those involved in the movement as well as the public at large. In hindsight, print media (including women's poetry and fiction) assumed an integral role in the women's movement during this time; the development and dissemination of women's political ideas largely depended upon it.¹⁸

One of the most significant accomplishments of the women's movement in the 1960s was the establishment of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, beginning

¹⁵Margie Wolfe, "Working With Words: Feminist Publishing in Canada," Still Ain't Satisfied! Canadian Feminism Today, 268.

¹⁶Ibid., 267. The first feminist publishers included The Canadian Women's Educational Press (The Women's Press), the House of Anansi based in Toronto, and Press Gang in Vancouver.

¹⁷For a brief history of feminist publishing and publications, see Margie Wolfe, "Working With Words: Feminist Publishing in Canada," Still Ain't Satisfied! Canadian Feminism Today. Feminist publications began to appear in the early 1970s: The Other Woman (1972), Branching Out (1973), Kinesis (1974), Room of One's Own (1975), Makara (1975), Atlantis (1975), Upstream (1976), Fireweed (1978), and Broadside (1979) among others. Women's writings and writing about women's issues emerged during the mid- to late-1960s in Canadian publications such as Chatelaine.

¹⁸Wolfe, 265.

in 1966. The years from 1967 to 1970 were crucial for the Royal Commission. Its activities during this period increased public awareness of the reality of Canadian women's status and introduced feminism to mainstream Canada, generating substantial public attention on crucial issues such as equal pay, abortion, and women's reproductive rights.¹⁹ While the Royal Commission represented liberal feminist thought in its approach to, and discussion of, women's issues and situation(s) in Canada, many radical feminists also found the Royal Commission's results useful.²⁰ In large part because of the Royal Commission's cross-country activity, the late 1960s and early 1970s experienced a revitalization of traditional women's organizations. Many existing women's associations in Canada adopted feminism to varying degrees.²¹

The Seventies: A Decade of New Beginnings

The 1970s began with a highly charged and widely publicized historical event: the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada tabled its report in 1970. In

¹⁹Ibid., 89.

²⁰On the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, see Naomi Black, "The Canadian Women's Movement: the Second Wave," Changing Patterns: Women in Canada, 80-102; Monique Bégin, "The Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada: Twenty Years Later," Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States, eds. Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty (Montreal and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's U P, 1992) 21-38.

²¹Jill Vickers, "Bending the Iron Law of Oligarchy," Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada, eds. Jeri Dawn Wine and Janice L. Ristock (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1991) 86. Not all women's associations became feminist, nor was feminism warmly embraced by all women. It does seem that, by this point, women's associations were familiar with the feminist movement and were beginning to incorporate some aspects of the movement.

accordance with principles outlined in the Report, Commissioners made 167 recommendations, many with radical implications. For the most part, these recommendations candidly addressed direct and/or indirect discrimination against women.²² Significantly, violence against women was not identified and explored by the Royal Commission as a feminist issue at this time. Reflecting on her personal experience with the Royal Commission, Monique Bégin stated that “[b]rutality, beating, rape, and incest were topics we might not even have heard, had they even been voiced [...]. Of course, we all knew these facts, but they were regarded as social problems, not feminist issues.”²³

A national women’s organization was formed to oversee the implementation of the Commission’s recommendations which, by 1972, had evolved into the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC).²⁴ NAC was meant, in part, to emphasize the importance of ‘ordinary’ women’s experiences in the creation of a political agenda.²⁵ NAC succeeded in bringing together women from countless ‘schools’ of thought and belief during the 1970s.²⁶ This is not to say that all women agreed upon all issues. Instead, women together began to discuss concerns and issues both within their individual contexts and in the larger context of Canadian women as a whole.

²²Black, 95.

²³Monique Bégin, “The Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada: Twenty Years Later,” Challenging Times: The Women’s Movement in Canada and the United States, 31.

²⁴Black, 85.

²⁵Vickers, 87.

²⁶Ibid, 91.

Inequalities in the workplace came to the forefront of the women's movement during the 1970s. Although in 1969 it became illegal under the Human Rights Act to discriminate in the employment of women, in the late 1970s women's limited access to jobs due to systemic barriers²⁷ was still widely recognized.²⁸ Partly due to this growing recognition, the federal government passed the Canadian Human Rights Act establishing the principle of equal pay for work of equal value in 1977.²⁹ This was regarded within the feminist movement as a monumental event. Its effectiveness was limited, however, because the guidelines determining 'equal value' were not clearly written.³⁰

Ten years later Bronwen Wallace took a strong stand on the issue of equal pay for work of equal value in her column for the Kingston Whig-Standard. Wallace firmly identified this issue as one directly affecting women as a group. In a column discussing International Women's Week, 1987, Wallace expressed her personal opinion in no uncertain terms: "As I see it, employers have made huge profits by paying women less than men. For years now,

²⁷Barriers included, but were not exclusive to, the division of labour based on sex, lower pay associated with stereotypical 'women's' jobs, rigid work schedules and job requirements which were insensitive to women's 'work' in the home, and the 'glass ceiling.'

²⁸Sandra Burt, "Legislators, Women, and Public Policy," Changing Patterns: Women in Canada, 141.

²⁹Ibid., 142.

³⁰Written guidelines determining 'equal value' were ambiguous. As a result, 'equal value' was left to individual interpretation; identical jobs performed by a man and a woman could be considered of unequal value while different jobs contributing equally to a final product/process could also be considered of unequal value. Therefore, women often continued to receive lower pay than men for work of equal value.

[....] The demand for equal pay is simply the demand that they pay up. Now.”³¹

While women were struggling to gain control over our ‘public’ lives, a much larger battle was being waged over women’s desire to attain control over our ‘private’ lives. Women continued to strive for legislative changes relating to our sexuality and reproductive rights.³² Long-awaited amendments were made to the Criminal Code in 1969 permitting the sale of contraceptives and legalizing doctor-performed abortions under certain specified conditions. Much like the establishment of the principle of equal pay for work of equal value, these amendments were limited in the extent to which they transformed women’s daily lives. Although the 1969 amendments were seen as a positive step by many feminists, protests continued on a number of issues centring on women’s control over our bodies and sexualities. Wallace was among many women who joined together to protest abortion legislation.³³ In 1970, for example, she “made an impassioned pro-choice speech from among a group of protestors chained to the visitors’ gallery of the House of Commons.”³⁴ Using suffragette tactics, these women applied a first wave form of feminist protest used in Britain to a new

³¹Bronwen Wallace, “Women’s week ‘with courage and vision’,” KWS, 7 March, 1988. (AWTW 111).

³²Ruth Roach Pierson, “The Politics of the Body,” Canadian Women’s Issues Volume I: Strong Voices Twenty-Five Years of Women’s Activism in English Canada, 98.

³³Wallace, Two Women Talking: Correspondence 1985-1987 Bronwen Wallace and Erin Mouré, 75.

³⁴Joanne Page, Foreword, AWTW 8. See also Nancy Adamson, “Feminists, Libbers, Lefties, and Radicals: The Emergence of the Women’s Liberation Movement,” A Diversity of Women: Ontario, 1945-1980, ed. Joy Parr (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1995) 263-64.

time and a new issue.³⁵ The issue of reproductive rights affected all women in the movement. As such, it transcended differences between individuals within the movement and brought together large numbers of women on a united front.

Feminism continued to permeate more and more aspects of Canadian society. During the 1970s, the feminist movement focussed its attention on the 'academy,' largely in two respects: the establishment of Women's Studies as a legitimate field of study and women's treatment by and within academic institutions. Women's Studies courses have been taught in Canadian colleges and universities since the early 1970s as a result of pressure for their introduction. Women's persistence initially led to the acceptance by academic institutions of Women's Studies as a 'special interest' topic; in many cases, though, formalized degree programmes did not exist for some time. Colleges' and universities' reluctance to implement and move forward with Women's Studies may have had roots in the general treatment of female faculty and students within these institutions. Women had long been aware of being disadvantaged in educational institutions, but it was not until 1968 that it became the subject of public discussion.³⁶

The Royal Commission on the Status of Women brought academic women to national

³⁵Ron Baxter, Bronwen Wallace Memorial Service, Grand Theatre, Kingston, ON, 31 August, 1989.

³⁶On the growth of Women's Studies in Canada, see Janice Drakich and Eleanor Maticka-Tyndale, "Feminist Organizing in the Academic Disciplines," Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada, 283-98; Marjorie Griffin Cohen, "The Canadian Women's Movement," Canadian Women's Issues Volume I: Strong Voices Twenty-Five Years of Women's Activism in English Canada, 1-31; Linda Christiansen-Ruffman, "Bridging the Gap Between Activism and Academe," Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada, 258-82.

attention by commissioning the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada to conduct the first-ever study on the status of women in Canadian universities. Not surprisingly, the findings revealed that female faculty were discriminated against in issues such as hiring, promotion, and salary.³⁷ From experience alone, the few women scholars in universities during this decade were well aware of this discrimination; it was clearly reflected both in women's relative absence from the academy and disproportionately high numbers at the 'bottom' of the 'system.'³⁸ Subsequently, educational institutions became a major target of reform for the women's movement. Women argued against discriminatory practices toward young women; we illustrated that curriculum commonly reinforces society's dominant values and attitudes by trivializing and/or distorting the 'nature' of women and our work. Teachers organized Status of Women committees to gather information and lobby against sexism in education.³⁹ Most importantly, feminist academics and activists were beginning, by the mid-1970s, to recognize their interconnectedness and the need to develop the feminist potential resulting from bridging the gap between activism and the academy.⁴⁰

Bronwen Wallace was one of many women in academic institutions who grappled with the gap between activism and the academy. A Ph.D. student in English at Queen's

³⁷Drakich and Maticka-Tyndale, "Feminist Organizing in the Academic Disciplines," Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada, 284.

³⁸Christiansen-Ruffman, "Bridging the Gap Between Activism and Academe," Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada, 266.

³⁹Sari Tudiver, "More Radical With Age: Women and Education," Still Ain't Satisfied: Feminism Today, 280.

⁴⁰Christiansen-Ruffman, 267.

University at the beginning of the 1970s, Wallace struggled to reconcile the differences between these two worlds. Her difficulty was so great that, as she remarked years later,

I dropped out of my Ph.D. program angrily, noisily, with outrageous acts and brave words. At the time, all I was able to articulate clearly was that there was too great a gap between what I was studying and what was happening around me. ...[B]y 1969-70 I could no longer handle the tensions and contradictions that existed between what I was living and what I was reading.⁴¹

The contradiction - the gap - that caused Wallace to abandon this path that ran contrary to her life and her experiences is one that surfaced repeatedly throughout her life. Bronwen Wallace insisted not only on our need for both 'theory' (the academy) and 'action' but also that each had its place. Moreover, she maintained a need for theory to inform our lives, experiences, and actions. In a 1986 letter to Erin Mouré discussing recent feminist texts,⁴² Wallace expressed the importance for connections between these two worlds. An experience with theory, according to Wallace, should be such that "I found what was being talked about affirmed my own experience."⁴³ In her writing and her life, Wallace insisted that theory and action are each necessary in our lives and in society. Further, Wallace emphasized "[w]e must begin with what we are, with what we have already learned, with how we have acted and continue to act in the world, as well as from theory. At least, I must, I feel, if I am to

⁴¹Wallace, "Lilacs in May: A Tribute to Al Purdy," AWTW, 163.

⁴²These included texts by Daphne Marlatt (What Matters), Lorraine Weir, Louise Dupré ("The Doubly Complicit Memory"), Louise Cotnoir ("Writing Ourselves With, In, and Against Language"), Barbara Godard ("Women and Modernism in the Literatures of Canada"), Evelyne Voldeng, and Gail Scott.

⁴³Wallace, Two Women Talking: Correspondence 1985-87 Bronwen Wallace and Erin Mouré, 21.

continue to address the women I know who are acting in the world.”⁴⁴ Clearly Wallace felt a tremendous responsibility both to herself and those around her to bridge these two worlds.

While some women were organizing within the academy, others began organizing around social issues within their own communities. In the mid- to late-1970s, Canadian society witnessed an explosion in the creation and establishment of women’s groups⁴⁵ and organizations which expressed the interests of specific groups of women.⁴⁶ These new groups were unique in two ways. First, they were staffed, administered, and controlled by women. And second, these service organizations were created by feminists to meet the needs of poor, working-, and middle-class women. By the end of this decade, service organizations were campaigning to end violence against women, and working for the creation of rape crisis centres nation-wide. The enthusiastic responses of women to these feminist groups and organizations in communities throughout the country were proof of a rising feminist consciousness amongst Canadian women.⁴⁷ Women-organized, feminist service or cultural groups *for women* continued to emerge as the 1970s drew to a close.⁴⁸ Although many had

⁴⁴Ibid., 24.

⁴⁵These groups included, but were not exclusive to, artists’ collectives; writers’ groups; women’s music and arts centres; women’s magazines, journals, and presses; media groups; skills-sharing centres; feminist information networks; women’s resource centres; feminist therapy collectives; feminist self-help groups; women’s service organizations; women’s health clinics; abortion referral services; transition houses for battered women; hostels for homeless women and teenage mothers; women’s companies; advocacy and research groups; and other educational efforts.

⁴⁶Wall, 20.

⁴⁷Ibid., 21.

⁴⁸Ibid., 84; Tudiver, 284.

short life-spans, it is important to recognize that these groups, services, and organizations were essential to the feminist movement in that they introduced issues such as violence against women into the public domain as 'legitimate' areas of social concern.⁴⁹

Another main area of activity for the women's movement during the 1970s was in efforts to obtain funding for service-oriented, politically outspoken rape crisis centres. It was only after years of hard work that federal and provincial recognition (i.e. through funding) became tangible and centres were established across Canada.⁵⁰ The number of transition houses for battered women was also increasing by the end of this decade.⁵¹ In 1979, the Canadian Association of Rape/Assault Centres was formed. This Association established a network for centre workers from across Canada, including Kingston, which allowed these women to compare experiences and establish common strategies.⁵² While these types of women's organizations still exist in large numbers today, almost twenty-five years later, women continue to struggle to obtain funding - government and other - to keep their doors open.

Further evidence of society's growing recognition of the status of Canadian women can be found in the declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year⁵³ and the renewed

⁴⁹Tudiver, 284.

⁵⁰Barbara James, "Breaking the Hold: Women Against Rape," Still Ain't Satisfied! Canadian Feminism Today, 73.

⁵¹Kingston Interval House was established in 1981.

⁵²Pierson, 116.

⁵³Philinda Masters, "Women, Culture and Communications," Canadian Women's Issues Volume I: Strong Voices Twenty Five Years of Women's Activism in English Canada, 407.

celebration of International Women's Day on March 8, 1978. These events occurred during a time when the media was announcing the 'death' of the women's movement. In reality, the media's representation of the movement was far from accurate. The movement may have appeared fragmented as groups of women began to focus on specific issues to achieve change. This apparent fragmentation was, in fact, evidence that the movement, as a whole, was changing, not dying.

The Eighties: A Decade of Continued Action

During the past thirty years, a dramatic reversal in approach to public policy and social service delivery has occurred. The 1984 federal election proved that social policy objectives were no longer the priority they had been: the federal government began to eliminate the redistributive and universal features of social programs.⁵⁴ A major shift occurred with the Progressive Conservative federal government headed by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. As a direct result of this government's actions, social programs faded over the next ten years. Since 1984, women's groups have been on the defensive due to extensive cuts to federal funding received by women's organizations in particular and service organizations in general. Women have struggled as hard to maintain these programs as they originally did to establish them.⁵⁵ The sense of endless potential from a decade ago began to be replaced by one of cynicism.

⁵⁴Marjorie Griffin Cohen, "Social Policy and Social Services," Canadian Women's Issues Volume I: Strong Voices Twenty-Five Years of Women's Activism in English Canada, 266.

⁵⁵Ibid., 267.

During the 1980s, a great deal of activity was also occurring in the area of women's writing. Bronwen Wallace herself published four collections of poetry in this decade: Marrying Into the Family (1980), Signs of the Former Tenant (1983), Common Magic (1985), and The Stubborn Particulars of Grace (1987). Throughout the 1980s women writers and activists alike⁵⁶ explored feminist theory, language theory, body politics, women's identity, appropriation of voice, and issues of class, race, and ethnicity, among other theoretical issues. Many women believed writing to be a way in which to work toward new ways of thinking about such questions as 'What does writing as a woman mean?,' 'Can language/words change the world?,' 'Who determines power in this society?,' and 'Is there truly a 'universal'?' Women's writing challenged patriarchal norms of language and criticized societal structures. Through the process of writing, many women became aware of the complex relationship between writing (the academy, 'theory') and reality ('action') that Bronwen Wallace confronted. In the mid-1980s, Wallace took direct issue with the relationship between theory and action in a series of personal letters between herself and Erin Mouré.⁵⁷ Throughout these letters, it became apparent that Wallace and Mouré held different opinions on this matter. While Wallace believed that each had its place, she also believed

⁵⁶Canadian women writers taking up issues of feminist theory(s) included, but were not exclusive to Jeannette Armstrong, Margaret Atwood, Himani Bannerji, Roo Borson, Dionne Brand, Di Brandt, Nicole Brossard, June Callwood, Anne Cameron, Lorna Crozier, Mary di Michele, Barbara Godard, Linda Hutcheon, Smaro Kamboureli, Joy Kogawa, Janice Kulyk Keefer, Lee Maracle, Daphne Marlatt, Erin Mouré, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Jane Rule, Gail Scott, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Rhea Tregebov, Aritha van Herk, Bronwen Wallace, and Betsy Warland.

⁵⁷These letters were published in 1993 under the title Two Women Talking: Correspondence 1985-87 Bronwen Wallace and Erin Mouré by The Feminist Caucus of the League of Canadian Poets.

there were strong connections between theory and action. According to Wallace, theory must relate to our life experiences to be significant - or assume significance - in our lives. She worked very hard to break down the perception that theory and action exist in isolation from one another. For Wallace, a danger existed when theory is too far removed from reality.

Much of the feminist theoretical work that has been done in Canada [...] reflects the experience of white, middle-class women. This does not mean that it is “wrong” or valueless. It simply means that it is limited - and that feminists who ignore those limitations have some re-thinking to do.⁵⁸

Mouré, on the other hand, seemed to insist upon a separation between theory and action. Her insistence that action/life cannot - or should not - be brought into a discussion of theory seems to have led to her frustrations with Wallace, who continued to do exactly this. As Mouré once commented in an interview, “poetry *can* start off a kinetic motion inside of readers that makes them think more about themselves. But it’s not gonna change the world.”⁵⁹

In this exchange of letters, Wallace emphasizes the importance of the many women involved in this process of thinking and writing about feminist theory. Moreover, Wallace drew particular attention to the necessity of this work: “I see this as a big choir; everybody has her part; I’m really excited by all the different and valuable ways women are writing.”⁶⁰ Wallace followed these discussions and was capable of taking part in them. She did not

⁵⁸Bronwen Wallace, “The diversity of women’s experience,” *KWS*, 11 April, 1988. (*AWTW* 47).

⁵⁹“my existence whenever I start to think,” Interview with Erin Mouré, *Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers*, 208.

⁶⁰“...I couldn’t separate the landscape from how I see my poems moving,” Interview with Bronwen Wallace, *Sounding Differences: Conversations With Seventeen Canadian Women Writers*, 288.

necessarily see herself as assuming a large role in this ‘work.’ Wallace did, however, stress to Mouré the importance of solidarity amongst all women.

[...] I am with you. I may not be able to do what you will do with language, partly because I don’t want to, but partly because [...] I can’t and that’s that for whatever reason. Of course all this is going to influence my work [...]. Yet what I mainly feel is that I must write from the strengths I know and trust within myself and hope that you will respect me for doing what I can.⁶¹

For Wallace, what an individual was *unable* to do was equally important as what s/he *was* able to do.

The close connections between possibilities and limitations is one that fascinated Wallace. In a column Wallace once referred to writer Flannery O’Connor’s statement that ‘limitation and possibility mean about the same thing’ and elaborated on what this phrase meant to her:

I like what it says about paying attention to our limitations, learning to see them not as restrictions which we must strive to transcend, but as guides to the possibility of what we are. I like how it affirms the importance of paying close attention to who we are, *as we are*.⁶²

For Wallace, limitations should not be inhibiting, but rather enlarge us in some way. This means accepting ourselves *and* others for who we truly are. This acceptance of both our possibilities and our limitations serves as a guidepost in identifying aspects of our lives and of society that need to be changed. In her final public speech, on International Women’s Day 1989, Wallace explained that this also means examining what we feel we are incapable of, our

⁶¹Wallace, Two Women Talking: Correspondence 1985-87 Bronwen Wallace and Erin Mouré, 24-5.

⁶²Bronwen Wallace, “Learning the possibilities in our limitations,” KWS, 30 May, 1988. (AWTW 84).

‘shortcomings,’ and the relationship of these things to other individuals. Wallace commented, in part, that,

We need to look at the *power to*, the power that recognizes a connection between its possibilities and its limitations. By limitations [...] I mean getting a realistic grip on what we are [...] capable of as individuals and in our connections to other human beings. [...] It’s something we need to do as a species, to look at our limitations and our power, our connections to each other, to other animals and to the earth itself.⁶³

As I discuss in this thesis, for Wallace, reading was another way by which individuals could become aware of, and re-think, their personal limitations, as well as the limitations of society, and make changes in their lives.

The 1980s witnessed the growth of different strands of feminist politics within the women’s movement. Although socialist feminism and Marxist feminism began to emerge during the 1970s, both strands grew tremendously during the 1980s. Socialist feminism differed from liberal or radical feminism in that it located the fundamental cause of women’s oppression in the intricate interchange between capitalism and patriarchy.⁶⁴ Socialist feminists maintained that women’s oppression was the product of the political, social and economic structures within which individuals live.⁶⁵ Marxist feminists, on the other hand, identified classism - not sexism - as the ultimate cause of women’s oppression in our society.⁶⁶

⁶³Bronwen Wallace, “Coda: Blueprints for a Larger Life,” AWTW, 222-23.

⁶⁴Rosemarie Putnam Tong, “Marxist and Socialist Feminism,” Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction, 94.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Tong, 94.

Similarities existed between Marxist and socialist feminism during this decade. Marxist feminists maintained the need to analyze the links between the status of women's work and women's self-image in order to understand why women are oppressed in ways that men are not.⁶⁷ It is important to recognize the increasing pressure on feminists from all strands during this decade to acknowledge, and work with, diversity and explore the differences amongst women. In her writing Wallace took up this challenge in her own way. This became particularly apparent in her non-fiction writing where she insisted on examining social issues through the lens of class and race, as well as gender.

One of the distinctive features of present day feminism is its focus on violence against women. Although the second wave began in the 1960s without reference to violence against women and the 1970 Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women failed to make any mention of it,⁶⁸ a characteristic element of 1980s feminism was its emphasis on making the abuse of women visible.⁶⁹ Work around violence against women was carried out during the 1970s mainly by radical feminists; the 1980s' approach centred around educating women - and society - about this issue. In 1980, the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women commissioned a report, by Linda MacLeod, entitled Wife Battering in Canada: The Vicious Circle. Its results represented the first attempt in Canadian history to

⁶⁷Ibid., 95.

⁶⁸The Royal Commission's neglect in discussing violence against women is largely due to the commissioners' liberal feminist emphasis on those inequalities existing between men and women in the public sphere.

⁶⁹Backhouse, 10.

collect information on domestic abuse nation-wide.⁷⁰ The focus on violence against women continued to grow as the 1980s progressed. In 1983 the spousal rape exemption (which essentially condoned rape within marriage) was removed from the Criminal Code.⁷¹ Section 276 (the ‘rape shield’ law), also introduced in 1983 as part of a series of amendments regarding rape and sexual assault, was intended to encourage women to report these crimes. It was thought that this legislation would ease women’s fears of being ‘assaulted’ again, this time by the court’s interrogation of their personal lives and past experiences.⁷² At the time, the new sexual assault legislation was viewed by women’s groups as a step toward one day having legislation adequately protecting women and clearly defining rape as an act of violence.⁷³ A further report was published in 1987 emphasizing that the omission of a clear definition of ‘sexual assault’ in the 1983 amendments resulted in the reality of wide judicial discretion often leading to contradictory decisions on similar charges and cases.⁷⁴

In 1981, Kingston Interval House (K.I.H.), a shelter for battered women and their children, opened its doors to the public. Roughly a year later, Bronwen Wallace was searching for a way to become politically involved in the Kingston community. As she recalled in an interview in March 1986,

I was trying to decide what [...] kind of job I would take next. And I

⁷⁰Pierson, 111.

⁷¹Ibid., 110.

⁷²Paula Bourne, “Women, Law and the Justice System,” Canadian Women’s Issues Volume I: Strong Voices Twenty-Five Years of Women’s Activism in English Canada, 332.

⁷³Ibid., 332.

⁷⁴Ibid., 333.

received a call from a close friend of mine, somebody whom I had always perceived as being *extremely* together, who in fact had been battered [...] so badly that she had almost been killed. And that seemed to me to be a message about what I should do. And so I started volunteering at Kingston Interval House and before long I was working there.⁷⁵

Soon after becoming a volunteer at K.I.H., Wallace assumed a position as a part-time relief counsellor.⁷⁶ She remained in this position until 1985 when she decided to remove herself from front-line work with battered women and children, instead taking on responsibilities as a member of K.I.H.'s Board of Directors. In a 1988 interview Wallace stated she left her paid position at K.I.H. due to personal health reasons; she also hinted at her difficulties writing during this period. This difficulty was articulated more clearly at her memorial service in 1989 by Larry Scanlan, Wallace's colleague at the Whig-Standard.

She told me that working at Interval House [...] had left her so shaken that she was unable to write for a full year. Her faith in human beings had been tested, and tested sorely. Finally the poems came, searing, wrenching poems. But her faith was there in the end, a little brighter even.⁷⁷

The poetry referred to here, the 'Bones' poems in The Stubborn Particulars of Grace, is based on Wallace's experiences as a counsellor at Kingston Interval House.

In her writing, Wallace explored violence as a societal problem. According to Wallace, violence represents a culmination of many factors. It is a dimension of our culture

⁷⁵"Introduction: The Morningside Interviews," AWTW, 22. See also "The Telling of Stories: Bronwen Wallace," Lives and Works: Interviews by Bruce Meyer and Brian O'Riordan (Windsor, ON: Black Moss P, 1992) 102.

⁷⁶Joanne McAlpine, Personal Interview, 23 March, 1999.

⁷⁷Larry Scanlan, Bronwen Wallace Memorial Service, Grand Theatre, Kingston, ON, 31 August, 1989.

that is based on the hierarchical structure of society and constructs of power, society's expectations of female/male relations, concepts of control and 'acceptable' outlets for anger, and women's and men's feelings of self-worth, among other factors. Wallace explored violence as a problem - a limitation - that is simultaneously ordinary *and* extraordinary. Violence, whether or not we acknowledge it as such, is a part of women's ordinary lives. The degree to which violence exists in each of our lives may vary - from depictions of women in media and films, for example, to domestic abuse or sexual assault. Despite the reality that violence is part of our everyday, ordinary lives, we continue to express shock, horror, and surprise/disbelief at its manifestations as though it were something *truly* extraordinary. Wallace used her writing to bring to our awareness many of the ways that our ordinary actions in our daily lives contribute to the existence and prevalence of violence in society. Wallace's writing emphasizes and illustrates that violence in society is clouded by our insistence to maintain an 'acceptable' or 'normal' appearance. We rely on secrecy to hide the 'abnormal' aspects of our lives and often disregard or completely ignore those same features in the lives of others for the sake of appearing 'normal' or 'like' everyone else. Violence itself, Wallace insisted, is problematic because it is difficult to define or separate from our assumptions, and because it lacks statistical norms. In her discussions, Wallace linked violence to countless other societal 'problems.' Wallace remained adamant that we must begin to question all elements of society - including ourselves - in order to begin to effect change.

In 1987 Linda MacLeod conducted another study, Preventing Wife Battery in Canada, for the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. She reported that the number

of shelters for battered women had more than tripled in five years (85 in 1982; 264 in 1987).⁷⁸ While the report was positive in many respects, it also noted the inadequacy of existing shelters: some shelters reported turning away ten women for every one sheltered.⁷⁹ From 1987 to the present date, federal and provincial budget cuts to women's organizations have continued to threaten the survival of battered women's shelters, rape crisis centres, and other women's service organizations across Canada.

In 1985 Queen's University, a traditionally male-dominated institution, taught its first Women's Studies course.⁸⁰ Bronwen Wallace was invited to lecture on women's poetry during its first year where she read from her own works as well as those of other women poets and spoke of the importance of women's 'stories.' During the mid- to late-1980s, Wallace was employed by Queen's University to teach an undergraduate course in creative writing. She taught this course until early 1989 when she was diagnosed with cancer. According to Joanne Page, Bronwen Wallace "brought a new perspective to the English Department's Creative Writing program."⁸¹ Wallace used her position in this program to draw attention to the work being done by other women poets and also to encourage students to write of their own experiences in their own voice. In this way, Wallace shared the valuable 'lesson' she learned from the poetry of Al Purdy.

Many issues faced by the women's movement in past decades remained a challenge

⁷⁶Pierson, 111.

⁷⁹Ibid., 111.

⁸⁰Roberta Hamilton, Personal Interview, 23 March, 1999.

⁸¹Page, 9.

to 1980s feminists. Women's control over our bodies remained an ongoing issue. One of the key elements of this continued debate was access to safe, affordable, and legal abortions. Dr. Henry Morgentaler first came to public attention in the mid-1970s for illegally performing abortions, but he - and the issue he came to represent - remained in the public eye throughout the next decade. In January 1988, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the abortion law stating it denied women's rights to life, liberty, and the security of the person, as guaranteed in section 7 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This monumental decision had a tremendous impact not only on the women's movement, but on society as a whole. While this decision brought the issue of abortion into the public realm, the legalization of abortion has neither slowed nor eliminated protests by both those who support and oppose abortion.

Other important achievements were realized by the end of the 1980s. In the summer of 1989, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that fathers have no rights, on behalf of the fetus or themselves, to prevent a woman from having an abortion.⁶² While this decision was seen as a tremendous achievement for one of the issues the women's movement represented, another event occurred at the end of the 1980s which clearly illustrated how far women had yet to go. Ironically, after a decade of mass-movement in recognition of the need for an end to violence against women, the 1980s closed with an unimaginable act of violence. On December 6, 1989, Marc Lépine murdered fourteen young women at the Engineering School of the University of Montreal (l'École Polytechnique). The actions of Lépine are sadly symbolic of the continued need for the work done by Bronwen Wallace and others

⁶²Bourne, 335.

surrounding violence against women. This tragedy served as a reminder that the struggle for equality is a continuing one. It brought to national attention the ongoing sexism in Canadian schools as well as the acts of “murderous violence of men against women.”⁸³ By 1991, in response to lobbying efforts of women’s groups, the Canadian Federal Government designated December 6th a National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women.⁸⁴ Bronwen Wallace did not live to see this attention and recognition brought to the issue of violence against women; she passed away in August 1989 after a brief illness with cancer.

What is remarkable about the feminist movement is its willingness not only to take chances, but also to change and respond to the voices of women who were not heard in the past. Women have not always listened to one another and are now, at the end of the 1990s, beginning to realize that strength can be developed from a variety of perspectives.⁸⁵ Bronwen Wallace recognized the absolute necessity for women to learn from one another, as she expressed in “In Other Words.”

[...] I cannot always rest with the sometimes-comforting experience of exploring what I share with other white, middle-class feminists. I have a lot to learn yet and to learn it I must enter the harder, more complex

⁸³Pierson, 115.

⁸⁴Ibid., 115.

⁸⁵Marjorie Griffin Cohen, “The Canadian Women’s Movement,” Canadian Women’s Issues Volume I: Strong Voices Twenty-Five Years of Women’s Activism in English Canada, 27.

regions where women's experience begins to diverge and differ. I believe such journeys are necessary in order that that imagined world may become possible and whole - for all of us.⁶

Bronwen Wallace opened herself to many different perspectives, theories, and opinions. In the 1980s, Wallace's own beliefs were reaffirmed by some of the advancements in feminist thought, namely the greater willingness to explore and work with differences between women based on race, class, sexuality, and so on. Her feminist beliefs incorporated some of the 1980s challenges presented by feminists writers (bell hooks, for example). Wallace's published works provide her reader access to her ideas during the 1980s, access that was not available during her earlier years. Unfortunately her death leaves us only to speculate what new directions her thoughts might have taken in the 1990s and beyond. Wallace very clearly drew together many elements from different strands of feminism in her own outlook. This outlook was also strongly informed by her consistent belief that men can also be victims - in a 'faulty' society - and that it is also possible for men to change. Bronwen Wallace herself was proof that women (and feminists) do learn, to some extent, from each other across the differences in their beliefs.

⁶Wallace, "The diversity of women's experience," KWS, 11 April, 1988. (AWTW 48).

Chapter Two
“into the white/where you think the truth is”
The Poetry of Bronwen Wallace

We cannot, her poems seem to insist, ignore the everpresent reality of violence that surrounds us. We dare not, her poems insist, allow ourselves to be desensitized by our familiarity with violence. By this, Wallace is talking not only about the commission of physical violence towards women, towards children, [...] but also of how violence has become the underlying momentum that drives this planet forward, so familiar that we no longer notice it in our daily existence [...].

Brenda Cantar,

“The Life You Save May Be Your Own.” Review of The Stubborn Particulars of Grace (Arc, Spring 1988) 64.

The voice in my poems is [...] very clearly a female voice. In using female anecdote as a metaphor for human experience, I see myself in a simple way assuming that a female view of the world could be a human view of the world. Underneath that is the belief that if we don't listen to this voice, we're not going to be here to have any view of the world.¹

As a poet, Bronwen Wallace was able to convey the experiences of women with stunning clarity. Wallace began writing at an early age but it was not until the 1980s that her poetry was widely published. The content of her five published collections reveals that poetry was a means by which Wallace located herself within different communities and defined herself in relation to the issues she explored. Wallace once expanded on the process of writing poetry, describing it as a journey of discovery or uncovering.

For me, writing a poem is a journey of [...] getting closer to [...] the 'riddle of existence.' And for me, the narrative elements of the poem, the stories, 'what happened,' are part of an extended metaphor for that journey. But the poem as a whole is the voice, discovering.²

Wallace further described the nature of poetry elsewhere, emphasizing her conviction that the writing of poetry is a personal journey and elaborating on her reasoning behind this conviction.

One of my favourite quotes comes from the Irish poet W.B. Yeats: "The argument I have with others I call rhetoric; the argument I have with myself I call poetry." It expresses what I feel about my own writing, about the need for different kinds of "arguments" and the importance of recognizing which sort belongs where. [...] As a political person who writes poetry, I know the need for the

¹"...I couldn't separate the landscape from how I see my poems moving." Interview with Bronwen Wallace, Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers, ed. Janice Williamson (Toronto: University of Toronto P, 1993) 292.

²Bronwen Wallace, "Why I Don't (Always) Write Short Stories," AWTW, 176-77.

intimate, inner argument that is the center of a poem.³

The poet's voice of discovery resounds clearly in her five published collections of poetry. In her first collection, Marrying into the Family (1980), Wallace places herself within the framework of her family, particularly her female ancestors. Some of the poems in this collection represent, perhaps for the first time, the life stories of Wallace's female family members.⁴ As the title of its first section suggests, in Signs of the Former Tenant (1983), Wallace is "Moving Away From the Past." This collection continues to recount life stories, this time of Wallace's friends and acquaintances. Wallace also reflects on her childhood memories, memories influenced at times by her adult perspective. In this sense, Wallace locates herself within her past and amongst friends. Common Magic (1985) marked a turning point for Wallace. Her attention turned to the geographical area in which she was raised. In fact, many of these poems seem to have been written as a response to one question: 'where do I come from?' From this point, Wallace begins the process of examining the larger society in which she lives. The Stubborn Particulars of Grace (1987) starts where Common Magic left off. Wallace's critical examination of society, and women's position in it, explodes with the 'Bones' poems. In this collection, Wallace places herself within a society that often appears uninviting. In Keep That Candle Burning Bright and Other Poems (published posthumously in 1991), Wallace's poetry becomes "much more public and much less

³Bronwen Wallace, "Celebrating the cadence of a particular voice," AWTW, 87-8.

⁴Bronwen Wallace, "An auction at Mother's childhood home," KWS, 20 June, 1988. (AWTW 150).

personal.”⁵ The content of this collection is based on ‘popular’ culture. In an interview six months before her death, Wallace commented on this collection: “The book I’m working on now which I have just barely started is very different than my writing until now [...]”⁶ She also noted that it would contain “a whole series of poems called ‘Everyday Science’ based on ‘scientific’ facts from the tabloids”⁷ as well as “a series of poems for Emmylou Harris about country music.”⁸ Another intended section “has to do with our relationships to other animals.”⁹ The titles and/or subject matter of the sections of poems that do appear in this collection hint at Wallace’s continued preoccupation with the extraordinary that is found in the ordinary. I do not specifically discuss this collection because it remained unfinished at the time of Wallace’s death. In our October 1998 interview, Carolyn Smart noted that Wallace intended the poems now published as Keep That Candle Burning Bright and Other Poems to be only one section of a larger collection. In this sense, I believe that these poems present only a partial view of what Wallace hoped to accomplish in this collection. Within each collection, Wallace’s focus on violence against women was only one aspect of her poetry.

In this chapter I examine Wallace’s focus on violence for a number of reasons. This issue appears in each of Wallace’s published collections but in varying degrees. The

⁵“...I couldn’t separate the landscape from how I see my poems moving,” Interview with Bronwen Wallace, Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers, 292.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., 293.

⁹Ibid.

examinations of violence in her poetry appear to have crystallized as a result of her life experiences. I also examine this focus on violence in her poetry (and, in the remaining chapters of this thesis, her short fiction and editorial columns) because Wallace presents it as both a specific societal problem caused, in part, by women's position in, and treatment by, that society *and* a symptom indicative of countless other problems in the larger society. As I illustrate in this chapter and throughout this thesis, for Wallace, violence against women is a complex issue.

Beginning in 1982, Wallace was involved in both paid and unpaid work at Kingston Interval House (K.I.H.), a shelter for battered women and their children. That Wallace's experiences at K.I.H. had a profound and lasting effect on her as an individual and as a writer is evident in her poetry. Two collections of poems were published in and around Wallace's time as a counsellor at the shelter: Common Magic (1985) and The Stubborn Particulars of Grace (1987). In part, the latter draws upon her experiences as a counsellor and her observations of the women and children at the shelter. In these two collections, Wallace's focus on social issues - in particular, violence against women and children - becomes more refined and her ideas more articulate. The poems addressing this issue illustrate that Wallace attempted to bring social issues of particular importance to women to her readers' awareness.

Wallace's discussion of manifestations of violence in society had roots in her earlier poetry. It also grew into her editorial columns in the Kingston Whig-Standard between 1987 and 1989 (see Chapter 4), and her collection of short fiction, People You'd Trust Your Life To, published posthumously in 1990 (see Chapter 3). Although Wallace's examination of violence is pervasive in the 'Bones' poems in The Stubborn Particulars of Grace, the

development of this subject matter can be traced in her work to this point. The 'Bones' poems mark the first time Wallace explicitly addressed, in her poetry, the widespread acts of violence against women and children in Canadian society.

In this chapter I offer a detailed examination of the 'Bones' poems, particularly "Intervals," to illustrate the ways in which Wallace's poetry - the act of her *writing* that poetry - is a form of social activism. As mentioned earlier, the 'Bones' poems as a whole represent Wallace's most intense focus on violence against women. These poems also offer an opportunity to reflect upon Wallace's poetry published to this point to see the connections that exist throughout her work. Through the 'Bones' poems and others, Wallace brings attention to the reality of violence against women in an effort to improve women's life circumstances and change the world. The act of Wallace writing poetry about violence against women is a form of social activism because she chose to write openly and honestly about an issue that was not commonly discussed and that individuals knew little about. Often the information individuals did have was either false or misleading.

Before examining Wallace's poetry, the question 'how is writing social activism?' must be considered. At first glance, writing that strives to make a change within its reader's life - to educate its reader about a particular societal issue and 'change the world' - can be deemed a form of social activism. The ways in which an author attempts to effect social change are somewhat more complicated. Wallace believed that writing about issues/subjects from a position too far removed from them was dangerous, perhaps even irresponsible on the part of the writer. As a result, she wrote from her own experiences. As a writer, Wallace struggled to find ways to make connections between the world surrounding her and her

writing. By incorporating discussions of violence against women and children into her writing, Wallace found one way to make such a connection. As detailed in the Introduction to this thesis, Wallace's writing can be seen as social activism in three ways. First, Wallace's subject matter - and the way in which she conveyed it - challenges the reader's consciousness, and/or creates awareness, about the issue at hand. By presenting it in a new light, or perhaps for the first time, Wallace offers an opportunity to form new thoughts, beliefs, and/or opinions on an issue. Second, Wallace examines each issue from a number of different perspectives and circumstances. This helps the reader to recognize the intricacies of an issue while also raising awareness that there are many different ways to look at and think about each issue. In this way, there existed a greater likelihood that the reader could reach a more complete understanding of a given issue. In a 1989 interview, when asked how she writes about violence against women, Wallace emphasized that her position is always based on her own perspective: "I can only write about my own experience of it, so I was very careful in the 'Bones' poems to write as a shelter worker. I don't have the right to write as someone who was battered."¹⁰ In her writing Wallace did not speak for other women or exploit their experiences. Rather, she worked to provide her reader with multiple perspectives. The point of view she presents is related to her experience (e.g. observer, parent, friend, worker, and so on) of that subject matter. In the 'Bones' poems, as well as in some of her earlier poetry, Wallace describes the situations and experiences of many different women under a variety of circumstances. In other words, Wallace's readers gain a clearer, more recognizable image

¹⁰ "...I couldn't see the landscape from how I see my poems moving," Interview with Bronwen Wallace, Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers, 289.

of the issue of violence against women as a whole. Finally, through the detailed, familiar (i.e. recognizable) nature of Wallace's writing, the reader is provided an opportunity to draw parallels between the people and situations described and her/his own life experiences. In fact, as she revealed in a 1987 speech, Wallace aimed at such a response.

For myself, I believe that in poetry [...] we create a world which appeals to passion as much as to reason, to the emotions, to our deepest feelings about ourselves and I believe [...] that a passionate response is needed [...].¹¹

Through a recognition of the personal implications these issues and situations may have, Wallace's writing evokes a passionate response. Wallace's writing appeals to her readers' emotions and urges them to take action. This action could range from a change in the way the reader thinks individually to efforts to impress these changes in thought upon the larger community.

As we will see in this chapter, the 'seeds' are discovered in some of Wallace's earlier poetry that, years later, mature into the candid discussion of violence in the 'Bones' poems. In many of these early poems, Wallace draws attention to the condition of women in Canadian society.¹² These more gentle discussions, broaching women's role in, and unfair treatment by, society paved the way for the candid exploration of violence in The Stubborn Particulars of Grace. In this chapter I provide an in-depth examination of the 'Bones' poems, particularly "Intervals," in an effort to illustrate writing as social activism. This allows us to reflect upon

¹¹Bronwen Wallace, "The Cuban Missile Crisis and Me," AWTW, 31.

¹²See, for example, "Grandma Wagar's Double Bind" and "Marrying into the Family" in Marrying into the Family; "The Heroes You Had as a Girl," "All That Uneasy Spring," "Between Words," and "The Woman in this Poem" in Signs of the Former Tenant; and also poems included in this discussion.

Wallace's earlier poetry to see that this focus (violence against women and children) was not unique to this collection. My examination also illustrates that, from the beginning of her career, Wallace attempted to raise awareness about social issues and educate her readers in order to change women's experiences in society. The 'Bones' section of The Stubborn Particulars of Grace comprises five poems: "Intervals," "Neighbours," "Change of Heart," "Burn-Out," and "Bones." Individually, each poem deals with specific aspects of violence against women and children and addresses their implications for society at large. Collectively, the 'Bones' poems explore a more complete spectrum of issues surrounding violence. Based largely on Wallace's experiences as a counsellor at Kingston Interval House, "Intervals" introduces the results of violence inflicted upon particular women and the impact this can have on shelter workers. "Neighbours" begins the process of placing within our society, within the city of Kingston in particular, the individual instances of violence introduced in "Intervals." The focus returns to a personal level in "Change of Heart," a poem describing some of the ways individuals have learned to cope, on a daily basis, with the violence that has become a part of their lives. "Burn-Out," the fourth poem, details how violence within a society is draining for all members; the simple fact, this poem suggests, is that violence is connected to all aspects of our beings. Finally, "Bones" encourages us to find hope in the knowledge that the very body harmed by violence is what ultimately sees an individual's body through that violence.

"Intervals"
I. Entry

As its title suggests, the first section of "Intervals" begins with a slow 'entry' into

Wallace's exploration of violence against women and children. The poem, which opens with 'ordinary' details from 'ordinary' lives, introduces this issue both slowly *and* suddenly. The poem moves quickly from these ordinary details to 'your' encounter with the battered neighbour. In this way, the reader metaphorically comes face to face with violence in a similar way (both slowly *and* suddenly) as women who have been victim to violent attacks. 'Entry' immediately delves into our perceptions of the 'ordinary' - those normal, socially acceptable things that occur in our everyday lives - and the 'extraordinary' - that which is not socially acceptable; what we believe happens *only* to someone else. In fact, through her writing Wallace tried to convey the idea that there really is no separation between these two things. She also illustrated how easily the 'extraordinary' becomes part of the 'ordinary.' In other words, Wallace's writing challenges our insistence that *our* lives cannot be touched by violence; Wallace asserted that our lives have *already* been affected by violence.

All that talk, what was it
 but a need for safety, your life
 running on automatic
 for as long as you let it,
 right up 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.¹³

Clearly the violence has happened to someone else in 'Entry.' Despite this fact, Wallace's

¹³Bronwen Wallace, "Intervals," *SPG*, 59-60.

point is that it has still happened to 'you.' Although we have not been physically harmed, we may be affected emotionally and mentally by another individual's violent attack simply by reading this poem.

The perception that violence happens only to someone else, someone other, appeared in a poem in Signs of the Former Tenant. In "Whether You Expect It or Not," despite our knowledge that someone else has been violently attacked, Wallace directly involves her readers in its occurrence by addressing us as 'you.' By creating this immediate awareness, by making us the ones who 'see,' Wallace implied it may only be a matter of time before our own lives are touched by violence. In fact, for Wallace, this is a certainty:

it will happen
 you will be watching the late-night news
 there will be a knock at the door
 you will open it to the woman up the street
 her face bleeding
 she will tell you her husband is drunk
 and has beaten her
 and she is afraid to go back
 but what about the kids
 you will make tea and suggest
 that she phone the police
 but she says he'll kill her
 [...]
 and you will keep watching the window¹⁴

There is a difference in tone between these two poems. While both deal with similar events, the above poem, written earlier, has a more relaxed, less urgent tone. There is no immediate sense of danger here. The neighbour who takes the battered woman into her home does all the 'right' things. She tries to soothe her and she suggests police involvement. In the later

¹⁴Bronwen Wallace, "Whether You Expect It or Not," SET, 77.

poem, there is a heightened sense of imminent danger. When placed in the larger context of the 'Bones' poems, the altered tone can be accounted for by the poet's desire for us to become aware of the reality of violence against women and children. The earlier "Whether You Expect It or Not" ends in the present moment, leaving the sense that nothing will change to any great extent as a result of this occurrence. The later 'Entry,' on the other hand, offers no sense of closure or clear resolution to the violent attack. Unlike "Whether You Expect It or Not," 'Entry' moves beyond what happened to the woman down the street. 'Entry,' indeed "Intervals" as a whole, is a journey transcending any one particular moment in time. The poetry in The Stubborn Particulars of Grace challenges the reader's consciousness and awareness of violence by bringing it 'close to home' thereby encouraging her/him to continue thinking about it. As a result, the reader incorporates this discussion into her/his consciousness, effectively carrying it beyond the page. By becoming aware that this violence does happen to people involved in our lives, that it *can* happen so close to us, the process of individual change begins.

The 'Bones' poems are, to a degree, meant to promote awareness of issues of violence and, subsequently, to educate the reader. Wallace overrides a traditional definition of education, one which conjures images of a hierarchical relationship between 'teacher' and 'student.' In her writing Wallace rejects the image of writer as expert as well as the role of all-knowing 'teacher.' As Joanne Page notes in her Foreword to Arguments With the World, "[i]t's a measure of her skill and of the respect she had for her readers that we never feel the heavy hand of writerly authority. Instead we hear the comfortable voice of an old friend, one who regularly drops by for coffee and doesn't mind the clattering of dishes in the

background.”¹⁵ Further, “[s]he didn’t provide answers. In questioning, she knew, lay the pathway to change.”¹⁶ Wallace detaches her poetry from expectations. Her thoughts flow freely and boldly, presenting issues grounded in experience. She does not, however, offer official wisdom. Wallace’s method of education, illustrated throughout her writing, was to present information in a way that challenges her readers’ beliefs and/or opinions and encourages us to re-examine the ordinary details of our lives as well as of society.

‘Entry’ closes with Wallace’s insightful view of the city: a shared landscape, forever altered by our knowledge of the pain and violence a man can inflict upon a woman or child.

This city, an edge like any other;
its dark, the border territory between houses
where violence holes up in men’s hands, the shadows
that fall between a woman’s breasts, the kids born
already knowing.¹⁷

This pessimistic view of society is not unlike Wallace’s portrayal elsewhere of women’s experience in Canadian cities. In “To Get To You,” a poem in Common Magic, Wallace prefaces her observations with instructions: “what I want you to notice/are the women.”¹⁸ She followed with a statement regarding the condition of women in society: “We all have the same look somehow.”¹⁹

See: over there by the bank

¹⁵Joanne Page, Foreword, AWTW, 7.

¹⁶Ibid., 10.

¹⁷Wallace, “Intervals,” SPG, 60.

¹⁸Bronwen Wallace, “To Get to You,” CM, 55.

¹⁹Ibid., 55.

how that stout woman lowers her eyes
 when she passes that group of boys,
 how her movement's mimed
 by the blonde, turning her head
 when a car slows down beside her.
 [...] Tuned in
 on my own tightened muscles, jawline or shoulders.
 In fact, you might study the shoulders.
 The line of the backbone too; arms and hips,
 the body carried
 like something the woman's not sure what to do with.²⁰

Wallace's descriptions of the city suggest that while women may have one (safe) outlook on our surroundings, closer examination provides us with an altered experience of that space. In these poems, Wallace offers a different, perhaps new, perspective of our city and women's experiences in it. Wallace began here to draw connections between our ordinary behaviour and existence and the so-called extraordinary problem of violence. She draws attention to the gendered social relations that exist without question. As Wallace detailed in the passage above, we do not fully examine our ordinary actions, thoughts, and beliefs and the impact they have on others. Wallace eloquently illustrates a number of women's ordinary actions which raise questions regarding connections between everyday patriarchal relations and actual occurrences of violence. Further, Wallace implicitly questions whether men view women's bodies - "something [she's] not sure what to do with" - as an invitation or a vulnerability. For Wallace, women's bodies and sexualities are both a burden/responsibility *and* a joy/triumph for each individual woman. In essence, in Canadian society, women's very beings - our bodies and sexualities - become something that must be guarded from everyone and everything in order to survive. Through Wallace's examples, we become aware that violence

²⁰Ibid., 56.

is not necessarily distant and removed from our lives. This awareness shifts our perspective; violence no longer seems to materialize from nowhere. It has roots in our everyday culture where male power over women exists without question or significant challenge.

Wallace's poems often reveal another map of the Canadian city. The poet clarified not only that violence touches us all, but also that we have become *accustomed* to it. In "To Get To You," Wallace's descriptions shift her reader's perspective and offer an opportunity to become aware that something - *anything* - must be done. She insists there is nothing unusual to be found in the descriptions she is about to provide: "I've already told you that this is an ordinary city./There are maps of it and lights to show us/when to walk, where to turn./What I want you to know is that it isn't enough."²¹ This introduction invites the reader to consider what *would* be enough to make a difference in society - what *might* make it safer - as s/he continues reading the next section of this poem.

On a trip to Vancouver once
 I discovered clearer landmarks. Red ones,
 sprayed on sidewalks all over the city.
 They marked the places
 where a woman had been raped,
 so that when I stepped out of a coffee shop
 to find one on the pavement by the laundromat
 geography shifted.
 Brought me to the city I'd always imagined
 happening in dark alleys, deserted parking-lots,
 to somebody else.
 [...]
 How many rapes were enough
 for those women in Vancouver
 before they got stencils and spray paint
 made a word for their rage?
 How many more until even that word

²¹*Ibid.*, 56.

lost its meaning
and the enemy was anything that moved out there.
Anything male, that is.²²

One of the main differences between Wallace's earlier poetry and The Stubborn Particulars of Grace is that, in the latter, she provides vivid, uninhibited descriptions of women and children affected by violence as well as of the issue of violence itself. Wallace's writing in this collection makes it possible for us to see ourselves, or at least recognize familiar elements, in her images and descriptions; in other words, in The Stubborn Particulars of Grace, Wallace allows us to see the extraordinary within the ordinary. The result is a startling one. There is no longer as great a separation between expectations (that it will happen to someone else) and experience (that it is linked to, even caused by, our very own actions and attitudes). As is true of all good poetry, Wallace's descriptions enable us to make a connection between our lives and the issues, individuals, and events described. Wallace's poetry is distinct, though, because it addresses difficult and trying social issues. The issue of violence does not lose meaning through Wallace's words and descriptions; in fact, they make her message more powerful. By raising our awareness of the connections between this issue and our personal experiences, acts of violence become more difficult to set aside; violence no longer happens to someone else, in an alien landscape. In this way, Wallace ensured that the reader's own 'geography shifted.' 'Entry,' in effect, represents a passage into awareness. And Bronwen Wallace believed that one of the first steps toward change on any level was awareness.

"Intervals"
II. Free Speech

²²Ibid., 56-7.

Free speech is defined as a “right of expression.”²³ Although we all share the right to free speech as members of Canadian society, the women and children described in the second section of “Intervals” have likely been unable to enjoy this right. The title of this section signals Wallace’s intent to give voice to their stories. The portraits of women and children in ‘Free Speech’ are intentionally graphic and brutally honest. We are led to visualize these individuals and their situations as we read the words printed on the page. In ‘Free Speech,’ Wallace is able to do what she felt she could not in an earlier poem: her words here expose the reality of violence. Wallace’s descriptions in ‘Free Speech’ and throughout “Intervals” boldly and freely illustrate what violence *looks* like. “Thinking With The Heart,” published in Common Magic, offers a brief glimpse into the horror of violence against women and children; in this poem, however, Wallace wishes she were able to convey an accurate description of the harsh reality of violence against women, as though she knows her words will fall short.

I wish I could show you
 what a man’s anger makes
 of a woman’s face,
 or measure the days it takes
 for her to emerge from a map of bruises
 the colour of death. I wish there were words
 that went deeper than *pain* or *terror*
 for the place that woman’s eyes can take you
 when all you can hear
 is the sound the heart makes
 with what it knows of itself
 and its web of blood.²⁴

²³The Oxford Dictionary of Current English, ed. Della Thompson, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Oxford U P, 1993) 348.

²⁴Bronwen Wallace, “Thinking With The Heart,” CM, 61.

In 'Free Speech,' Wallace found the words to show her reader exactly this. In this section of the poem and in "Intervals" as a whole, Wallace's words make us aware of the results of 'a man's anger.' By reading Wallace's accounts of violence against women, we are placed in a position where we must also confront this issue within our own personal contexts. In a 1986 interview, Wallace addressed society's difficulties in accepting the 'truths' of violence against women; she referred specifically to the ways this surfaced in "Thinking With the Heart."

I think that what we're facing as a society, in a way, is that we don't understand [violence], and it would be really nice to think that it's happening over there to just a few people - you know - that it's not something that we've all created out of the way we've chosen to live. Which is partly, I think, maybe what I was coming - beginning to come to - in that poem: this isn't an anomaly, this isn't something we can have a fixed decision on, you know, this affects us all, we all have to come to terms with it.²⁵

As "Intervals" and the remaining 'Bones' poems continue, Wallace offers an opportunity to see the complexities of this issue. This awareness allows us to consider, or reconsider, our own roles in creating a culture where violence is substantiated, perhaps even nurtured.

'Free Speech' provides tangible evidence of violence against women and children. True to 'real life,' these individuals have names, lives, hopes, dreams, and emotions. Of Stephen, a child at Interval House and the eldest son of a woman named Sylvia, "the little he has to comfort"²⁶ his mother is no different than the little we have to comfort ourselves from the knowledge of what has happened to this family. Presented as a dedication within the

²⁵"Introduction: The Morningside Interviews," AWTW, 21.

²⁶Wallace, "Intervals," SPG, 61.

poem, Sylvia's story recalls images of the women in Wallace's earlier poems.

This is for Sylvia
 who is deaf
 and whose teeth are rotted to the gumline,
 stumps in the foul swamp of her mouth
 where the noises she makes at us
 only her children can understand.²⁷

This powerful description creates an image that is difficult to forget. Sylvia's story is strikingly similar to that of a woman briefly encountered in a poem in Common Magic, "[t]he woman whose husband hit her so hard/he broke her middle ear,/sending the sounds of her own screams back/in a roar of blood."²⁸ The descriptions of women and children and their experiences with violence in some of Wallace's earlier poems were, indeed, only introductions. "Intervals" and the 'Bones' poems revisit these individuals, issues, and events in greater detail and under a variety of different circumstances. In the 'Bones' poems, particularly in "Intervals," Wallace did not want her reader to forget the women and children about whom she has written. She did not want us to quickly or easily set aside the reality that violence occurs again and again on many levels in our society. Our awareness of these occurrences is part of the process of effecting change.

The stories of battered women and children in 'Free Speech' are purposely difficult to bear. They challenge our preconceived notions of violence against women. By challenging us, these descriptions can change us as individuals. Details of another woman's story - Ruth - also echo an earlier poem. I include it in its entirety here because, as Wallace maintained, the

²⁷ Ibid., 60.

²⁸ Bronwen Wallace, "How It Will Happen," CM, 45.

telling of women's stories is extremely important.

This is for Ruth,
 brought in by the police
 from Hotel Dieu emergency
 eyes swollen shut, broken jaw wired
 and eighteen stitches closing one ear. This
 is what a man might do
 if his wife talked during the 6 o'clock news.
 "And I guess I knew better," she tells us softly,
 "I guess I just forgot myself."
 Tomorrow she may go back to him
 ("He didn't mean it, he's a good man
 really"), but tonight she sits up with me
 drinking coffee through a straw.
 "I can't sleep," she apologizes,
 "every time I close my eyes,
 I see his fist coming at me
 through the wall."²⁹

Although neither 'Free Speech' nor "Intervals" as a whole explicitly addresses police involvement in matters of violence against women, Wallace includes the seemingly insignificant detail that Ruth was brought to Interval House by the police. This detail returns the reader to "Thinking With The Heart," a poem addressing, in part, police involvement in matters of domestic abuse. The narrator, presumably a shelter worker, describes the specific complexities of police involvement in instances of violence against women. This poem is also a 'mulling over' of women's and men's different relations to violence and power which critiques masculine logic.

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

²⁹Wallace, "Intervals," *SPG*, 61-2.

He's seen it all before anyway. He knows
 how the law changes, depending on what you think.
 [...]
 [B]ut she has to charge him
 and nine times out of ten
 these women who come in here
 ready to get the bastard
 will be back in a week or so
 wanting to drop the whole thing
 because they're back together[....]
 It drives him crazy, how a woman
 can't make up her mind and stick to it,
 get the guy out once and for all.
 "Charge him," he says, "or we won't help."³⁰

Ruth's story in 'Free Speech' and this passage from "Thinking With The Heart" present the different perspectives of female and male (i.e. the patriarchal perspective linked to the policeman's involvement) logic in matters of domestic abuse. "Thinking With The Heart" is an in-depth discussion of the nature of the difference of opinion between the policeman and the presumably female narrator. Clearly the policeman's limited view of this issue is directly associated with his position (i.e. "man" in a position of authority over all of society) in a society that privileges men *over* women. As Wallace noted in a column for the Kingston Whig-Standard, the policeman's inability - or unwillingness - to move beyond this limited perspective is partly due to the fact that he benefits from his privileged position in society. The male perspective here may not recognize the difficulties involved for a woman based on her knowledge that "the man who beats her/is also the man she loves."³¹ The female perspective in this poem, possibly linked to that of the reader, is aware of the complexities

³⁰Wallace, "Thinking With The Heart," CM, 59-60.

³¹Ibid., 60.

associated with domestic abuse: it cannot be reduced to a simple ‘charge him or we won’t help.’ In ‘Free Speech,’ these differences remain unspoken; instead Wallace emphasizes the importance of women’s stories themselves. It appears that, for Wallace, it was essential for each individual to have the opportunity to reach this understanding and awareness of the issues surrounding a woman’s violent attack. Wallace once referred to this process of individual understanding in an interview.

[...] when I come to think about violence as a poet [...] I have to have discussion or argument or a debate with myself about it. In part, ‘Thinking with the Heart’ is about that. It’s really a mulling-it-over at another level, and then finding a way to put that on the page in a way through the images and the language that I use that will at least begin that process in you, when you read it.³²

In the ‘Bones’ poems, Wallace clearly wants her reader to re-think, or reconsider, the same important social issues that she, herself, contemplated in the writing of these poems.

“Thinking With the Heart” also draws parallels with another poem in Common Magic, “How It Will Happen.” In both poems Wallace emphasizes the dangers of thinking, like the policeman, in a ‘linear’ way. The narrator of “How It Will Happen” is a social worker sorting through her own turmoil, as well as her son’s frustrations, regarding violence against women and other social issues.

But the look
on her son’s face when he says
he wants to be a cop or a prison guard
(though he’s only fourteen and you can’t tell
with boys his age) because he’s sick
of all this wishy-washy bleeding
heart crap. Wants to be a cop
so he can have things cut and dried.

³²“Introduction: The Morningside Interviews,” AWTW, 24.

It's watching him say that,
 knowing he means it.
 Knowing she wants the same thing herself.
 Only differently.³³

In this poem, Wallace conveys a pronounced message: it is dangerous to seek a quick solution to end 'all this wishy-washy bleeding heart crap' surrounding violence in society. Wallace's writing makes us aware that it is impossible for 'things [to be] cut and dried' because it requires the elimination of many crucial details from women's lives. The narrator, the reader, and Wallace each understand that the only way to 'have things cut and dried' is for society to deem it legally and morally unacceptable for violent acts to be committed against a woman or a child and to enforce these standards strictly. In this poem and others, Wallace encourages the examination of problems within their entire context; human beings do not exist in isolation nor do violent acts occur independently. Solutions will only be found, Wallace maintained, if, as members of society, we begin to examine the individual and collective connections between issues, beliefs, and events.

The brief glimpse of Ruth in 'Free Speech' focussed solely on the present moment but the image of one woman consoling another late into the night is evocative of another of Wallace's poems. On one level the reader recalls personal memories regarding one of the roles of women's friendships: to help mend a broken heart. On another level s/he is reminded of an image from "After The Dance," a poem in Signs of the Former Tenant.

it's only now that memory
 surprises you knowing how many nights
 you have sat in some woman's kitchen
 a friend you haven't seen in months

³³Wallace, "How It Will Happen," CM, 47.

who takes you in again gives coffee and Kleenex
 while you cry over another man
 who's hurt you³⁴

The memory of the narrator's past and the naivete of adolescence humbles the reader, especially when contrasted with the image of Ruth in 'Free Speech': the woman who was violently beaten by her husband for speaking during the evening news. Both images point to the same realization: each of our lives and our experiences in society lie on the same continuum in which women are mistreated, often violently, by men. Wallace drew attention to the fact that, at different points in time, we each believed it wrong for a man to hurt a woman, for any one human being to mistreat another. The reminder of this belief alludes to difficult questions: when did we give up this belief and why? What can we do to change things?

Wallace also addresses the children affected by domestic violence in her poetry, particularly in this section of "Intervals." She illustrated that young children are deeply affected not only by violence they may experience or witness themselves, but also by the lingering effects of that violence. To these children too Wallace dedicates her poem: "This is for [...] Steven,/round-shouldered old man of a kid,"³⁵ and "[f]or Marilyn, aged 7,/her arm crushed because she caught it/in a wringer washer, where she was left,/alone like that, for three days."³⁶ Although the children's experiences are reflected upon briefly, in the present moment attention to children's experiences with violence can be found throughout Wallace's

³⁴Bronwen Wallace, "After The Dance," *SFI*, 24.

³⁵Wallace, "Intervals," *SPG*, 61.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 62.

writing. For instance, Wallace speculates on their futures in “Inside Out,” a poem in Signs of the Former Tenant emphasizing that what happens in an individual’s childhood can remain in her/his consciousness for a lifetime. In other words, traumatic experiences are rarely forgotten.

A man I know whose father used to slap him
 on the back of his head
 when he put his elbows on the table
 still knows the explicit taste of that humiliation
 the saltiness of snot and held-back tears
 that sting his tongue sometimes
 when he sits down to dinner

this is not a memory³⁷
 [...]
 haven’t you felt it yourself
 in whatever moment
 chooses you like that
 a moment you thought you’d left forever
 [...]
 haven’t you felt yourself
 surrendered to the starkness of that instant
 when you become the child again
 unique and alone as only children are
 staring out at the world
 from the stubborn depths of it³⁸

Here Wallace again appeals to her readers, urging us to reflect upon childhood memories and, subsequently, to bear in mind that we may carry our past experiences with us into our adult lives. This poem also serves as a reminder that our personal experiences can return to ‘haunt’ us. In this light, Wallace brings to our awareness the very real possibility that the unthinkable acts of violence inflicted upon the children in “Intervals” may re-surface as they age, affecting

³⁷Bronwen Wallace, “Inside Out,” SET, 32.

³⁸Ibid., 34.

them perhaps as profoundly in their futures. As haunting as the notion that these children will always be affected by their pasts is our awareness that there are countless stories that are not heard: “this is for the voices/on the other end I never see,/for all they have time to tell me/before something stops them.”³⁹ Wallace also focusses attention on the disheartening prevalence of domestic abuse in her description of the capacity of Interval House to shelter women and children: “*A house that can accommodate/20 according to regulations, 30 in a pinch, since we don't turn anyone away, 32/if we use the old couch/in the back office, maybe 35 if most of them are children/which they are*”.⁴⁰

After repeated ‘dedications’ to women and children, the narrator addresses herself. At this point, the voice of the narrator is distinctly connected to that of Bronwen Wallace herself, speaking of her experiences as a counsellor and volunteer at Kingston Interval House. In the following ‘dedication,’ Wallace addresses both herself and her reader, describing her own realization of the pervasiveness of violence in our society and alluding to her journey of reconciling this information within her own life.

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

³⁹Wallace, “Intervals,” *SPG*, 63.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 62.

from the eye, from the brain
 going on,
 going on alone
 behind sheets and sheets of anaesthetic.⁴¹

In this dedication, Wallace again challenges the preconceived notion that violence is a mysterious and seemingly unpredictable force in society and our ordinary, everyday lives. She describes violence - 'terror' - as a perpetual force or presence in society, especially in our individual lives, that is interconnected - in much the same way as are the body, brain, and heart - to countless other issues. Wallace suggests that, if we look hard or long enough and are willing to accept what we find, we will discover violence is not as unpredictable as we may have once imagined. This view is also strong in "Like This," another earlier poem. While this poem does not explicitly detail a specific incidence of domestic violence (as we see, for instance, in poems like "Intervals" and "Dreams of Rescue") "Like This" very clearly addresses domestic abuse.

When the man hurls his beer bottle
 at the kitchen wall,
 the explosion of beer and glass
 is almost as surprising
 as the cry that splits his throat
 at the same time.

We half-expected it, of course,
 [...]
 As for the cry
 and where it came from,
 we think we recognize that too,
 but it won't help. Sooner or later
 it'll be our turn. Face up against
 the event in our own lives
 that can't be expiated

⁴¹Ibid., 62-3.

and we'll forget about this man,
 this voice we think we hear so
 clearly now, saying,
Sorry,
 saying, *Look, I've changed.*
 Saying, *Isn't that enough?*

Well?

*Isn't it?*⁴²

The violent act of smashing the beer bottle on the wall as well as this man's quickly intensifying frustrations with his absent wife over something as insignificant as a recipe she may have combine to give the impression that the cause of their separation may have been due to physical abuse. This poem also hints at the difficulties that men, too, have in changing their behaviour and their lives. Many 'warning signs' can be found in the details and events leading up to the explosive outburst at the end of this poem. As Wallace pointed out, 'we half-expected it' to be this way. The phrase 'half-expected it' also speaks directly to Wallace's preoccupation with the ordinary/extraordinary. It relates to those things that are *truly* normal and common in our lives but are kept hidden (e.g. physical and sexual abuse, alcohol or substance abuse, financial difficulties, and so on). Although we claim that these things are not part of *our* lives, we recognize them clearly enough to 'half-expect' and understand them. 'Like This' is one of Wallace's best poems in terms of allowing the reader to observe a realistic violent situation. It may allow a more complete understanding of a situation an abused woman might experience. It also offers insight into the fallacy of the common perception that a woman must have done something to 'deserve' a beating. In this poem, and

⁴²Bronwen Wallace, "Like This," *CM*, 64-5.

likely in many women's lives, violent outbursts materialize from something "so mundane we aren't prepared/to have it open underneath our feet."⁴³

"Intervals"
III. ECU: On the Job

The third section of "Intervals" offers an 'extreme close-up' ('ECU') of a shelter worker, perhaps Wallace herself, 'on the job.' Like 'Free Speech,' 'ECU: On the Job' imparts a direct, first-hand account of the events and issues being described. By detailing a shelter worker's difficulty - possibly Wallace's own difficulty - in coping with the realities of domestic abuse, the poet illustrates the ways in which violence affects more than those directly involved. This section of "Intervals" speaks specifically to the nature of this demanding area of social work: it affects the worker profoundly on all levels of her/his life. In fact, the nature of this work blurs the boundaries between the 'private/personal' and the 'public/professional' to such an extent that it invades the worker's private space.

[...]her bruise
is the only currency between us.
I carry it home like a paycheque,
my fingers smelling of ointment and blood,
and when someone asks me how it went today
it is the bruise that spills from my mouth,
uncontrolled, incurable[....]⁴⁴

This passage offers insight into some of the difficulties associated with holding a job dealing with the direct results of violence against women and children. 'ECU: On the Job' also

⁴³Ibid., 63.

⁴⁴Wallace, "Intervals," SPG, 64.

reveals the emotional turmoil involved for shelter workers: the sadness, regret, and even guilt associated with earning a living from another woman's misfortune ("[...] our daily bread bought with it"⁴⁵). One of Wallace's earlier poems also reflected on this dilemma, challenging society's perception, perhaps the reader's own, of women's 'uncontrollable' emotions. The narrator of "How It Will Happen" is a social worker; the connection between this narrator and the narrator of 'ECU: On the Job' lies in each woman's extreme difficulty (often her inability) to 'leave' her work and its emotional baggage behind at the end of the day.

After eight hours
 she can go home.
 Which is the problem.
 Which is what makes her think
 that maybe they're right,
 the people who say a woman gets too personal
 in a job like this, a problem of hormones maybe,
 something in the size of the breasts,
 the position of the uterus.⁴⁶
 [...]
 At night when she lies down
 a voice drones in her head [...]
It's only a job, the voice tells her,
*only a job.*⁴⁷

Quoting American writer Marya Mannes, Wallace once stated that "[w]omen are repeatedly accused of taking things personally. I cannot see any other honest way of taking them."⁴⁸

⁴⁵Ibid., 65.

⁴⁶Wallace, "How It Will Happen," CM, 44.

⁴⁷Ibid., 47.

⁴⁸Bronwen Wallace, "One More Woman Talking," Two Women Talking: Correspondence 1985-87 Bronwen Wallace and Erin Mouré, ed. Susan McMaster (Toronto: the Feminist Caucus of the League of Canadian Poets, 1993) 74.

This concept continues in the final ‘Bones’ poem. “Bones” focuses on the physical limits of the human body as well as its mental and emotional limitations in the specific context of limits as representative of our possibilities. The narrator of this poem, like Wallace herself, recently “quit working/at the crisis centre, that job/that wrenched me round”.⁴⁹ The narrator candidly identifies one of the reasons why women who work in shelters are often unable to separate themselves from their work: “Everywhere I went, my work experience/drew me through confessions I couldn’t stop,/and I couldn’t stop talking about them”.⁵⁰ Wallace again brings to our awareness the reality that, in shelter work, there is often no separation between one’s private and public lives. In fact, it seems as though these women *become* their work. The narrator of this poem gives some insight into the difficulties Wallace had writing while she worked at Kingston Interval House. As “Bones” continues, the limiting, often draining, mental and emotional experiences of dealing directly with violence against women and children is compared to the physical limitations of a human body. Reemerging from this mentally and emotionally draining experience, the narrator says, is much like recovering from a physical accident. Although it may take years, “the mind, like the body, makes shape/of what’s left, the terrible knowledge/it labours through, slowly regaining itself.”⁵¹ In Wallace’s ‘Bones’ poems, this process of resurfacing from the depths of violence against women occurs as we move through, experience, and become aware of the issues presented in each poem.

⁴⁹Bronwen Wallace, “Bones,” *SPG*, 81.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 81.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 81-2.

**“Intervals”
IV. Short Story**

The fourth section of “Intervals” provides a more intimate description of violence against women. Its title suggests it will be different from the first three sections of this poem. The words ‘short story’ imply that what follows will be something more than brief profiles and descriptions. Wallace does not set ‘Short Story’ within the walls of Interval House. Instead she takes her poem, and its readers, back into society. ‘Short Story’ continues to highlight the ways in which violence has become a part of our shared everyday existence. In other words, it illustrates some of the ways in which the extraordinary (i.e. violence) can be found within our ordinary lives. In the midst of a description of the effects domestic abuse can have on children - the four year old screaming profanities at his mother, presumably learned from his father/father-figure - Wallace offers the essence of this poem in the form of an ironic reminder: “(this story [is] about *them*, about *those people*)”.⁵² The irony of this single line, as Wallace underscores, is that, in reality, there is little, if anything, separating ‘them’ from ‘us.’ This distinction, this distancing, is apparent in Wallace’s earlier work, particularly “The Town Where I Grew Up.”

Them and us.

I used to believe this.
Used to imagine an invisible
border [...]
Now I think it’s merely
a matter of emphasis,
like the *Globe & Mail*
and the *National Enquirer*.

⁵²Wallace, “Intervals,” *SPG*, 67.

They're both the same, really;
 they both line words
 like bars across the pages,
 making you want to squeeze
 between them into the white
 where you think the truth is.⁵³

While their individual contexts differ, both poems emphasize that the *perceived* distinction between 'them and us' is really no more than 'a matter of emphasis.' Wallace offers an opportunity to shift our perspectives and discard any notions of separation or distance amidst her recognition that this sense of separation is very real and structures our relations to the world and to those around us. This theme, prominent in much of Wallace's poetry, is central to the 'Bones' poems. By writing about the 'humanness' of battered women and children in "Intervals," Wallace proved how little distance truly separates 'them' from 'us.' "Intervals" illustrates that what happened to these women and children was nothing more than a matter of circumstance. Violence was not visited upon them because they were not 'good enough' or because they 'deserved' it. "Intervals" highlights the ease by which 'we' can become 'them.'

In 'Short Story' Wallace implies that we must use our new-found awareness from the stories in this poem to educate ourselves, and perhaps others, about violence against women and children. For Wallace, this discussion needed to become personal and explicit in order for an opportunity to truly change women's realities to exist. This is apparent in the opening line of 'Short Story': "This isn't one to be told/in the third person,/though we keep on trying

⁵³Bronwen Wallace, "The Town Where I Grew Up," *CM*, 6.

to.”⁵⁴ This sentiment signals that the story will no longer be about ‘them.’ Wallace’s narrator brings violence much closer to home by talking about her friend and by illustrating a young, innocent child mimicking his parents. Throughout this section of the poem, Wallace takes issue with society’s desire to associate this ‘problem’ with other people. By writing in this manner - allowing us to, on some level, associate ourselves with the text - Wallace encourages us to listen and to learn. To illustrate this point, the narrator again refers to a friend who tried to rationalize, perhaps justify, the ongoing violence she witnesses in her own life.

Like any of us, she’s frightened
by what she doesn’t know
and she tries to explain it
somehow.
[....]
“Or maybe that’s how those people
want to live,” she tells me,
as if they choose a life
like a slice of bread, cut clean
from the loaf and eaten with honey
in a warm kitchen.

As if.⁵⁵

Wallace raises a crucial point here. She brings into the open the reality that most individuals are ‘frightened by what [they don’t] know’. As for attempts to rationalize or justify violence against women and children, Wallace quickly dismisses, with two words, the belief that there is any element of choice - or desire - in leading such a lifestyle: ‘as if.’ It is only through the open discussion of private matters that any change can occur. In her own life, and through

⁵⁴Wallace, “Intervals,” SPG, 65.

⁵⁵Ibid., 66.

her experiences as a counsellor at Kingston Interval House, Wallace came to believe that there was no *need* for women and children to live with violence. Wallace's experiences also taught her a difficult lesson: we must realize women often make choices based on the best they are able to make of *their* circumstances.

**"Intervals"
V. Departure**

The title of the fifth, and final, section of "Intervals" suggests there will be a change of direction in the remaining 'Bones' poems. In 'Departure' the reader is involved in a twofold shift in perspective. First, the narrator begins to look toward the future. In effect, Wallace acknowledged that the writing - and reading - of poems about violence is one way by which to make progress: "Always the same beginning:/words and the cells that make them/all that will carry us/into the future."⁵⁶ Second, Wallace emphasized the importance of the role of personal growth in moving beyond the words - the stories - printed on the page. Unlike other sections of "Intervals," 'Departure' suggests that hope can be found within the tragedy and misfortune presented in the first four sections of this poem. 'Departure' is optimistic in its assertion that, despite terrible hardships, life will carry on, much the same as our bodies do. We each have within ourselves all that is necessary to survive.

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

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

All of it and only that.⁵⁷

Wallace focusses on the body itself and how it (miraculously) continues to function despite what occurs externally to it. 'Departure' reminds the reader, the women and children described, and Wallace herself that time will help heal the wounds recounted in "Intervals." It is ultimately the body that carries us through, and beyond, physically and emotionally wrenching experiences such as those described in the 'Bones' poems.

This reliance upon the body to endure hardship and tragedy is again reminiscent of an earlier poem. Returning to "Thinking With The Heart," Wallace links the body's ability to heal itself with the emotions associated with the harm inflicted upon an individual. In "Thinking With The Heart" Wallace suggests that, to truly heal, we must free ourselves from all things external and turn inward, toward the body and the self. This message becomes especially evident when placed in the context of the 'aftermath' of a violent attack.

Whatever it is you need
 is what you must let go of now
 to enter your own body
 just as you'd enter the room where the woman sat
 after it was all over,
 hugging her knees to her chest,
 holding herself as she'd hold her husband
 or their children, *for dear life*,
 feeling the arm's limit, bone and muscle,
 like the heart's.⁵⁸

In both 'Departure' and "Thinking With The Heart," Wallace celebrated the resilience of our bodies, minds, and hearts, as well as their physical limitations. In her 1986 interview with

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁸ Wallace, "Thinking With The Heart," *CM*, 62.

Peter Gzowski, speaking specifically of “Thinking With The Heart,” Wallace referred to the overall importance of the connections between the brain *and* the heart and the significance of using both in order to change the world.

PG: Where’s the hope? Change?

BW: Yeah. The fact that we have a cerebral cortex and a heart. *(Laughs)*. And we can use them both.⁵⁹

Wallace’s assertion that we all have a brain and a heart and must use each is crucial to her optimism about change. Because we inherently possess the ‘tools’ to change ourselves, our circumstances, and our society, *change is possible*. This theme, this sense of optimism, is revisited in the fifth ‘Bones’ poem.

In “Intervals,” Wallace presents only enough information to convey images of violence against women and children. There are no excessive elaborations or digressions. As such, “Intervals” is a very intense poem. The images and circumstances Wallace offers here were intended to be both accurate and startling. Wallace remains true to the issue of violence against women and children yet she also discusses it both boldly and honestly in an effort to make us pause for a moment to reconsider her descriptions. To a large degree, Wallace offers *just enough* information and detail in “Intervals” to spark her reader’s own consideration of the issue of violence. In this respect, “Intervals” differs from some of Wallace’s earlier poetry, examined in this chapter, where Wallace offered ample information to understand the essence of her discussions of violence. The remaining ‘Bones’ poems, in effect, supplement the information provided in “Intervals.” The stories Wallace recounts become more specific,

⁵⁹“Introduction: The Morningside Interviews,” *AWTW*, 24.

offer more detail, and often occur over a larger period of time.

“Neighbours”

The tone of the second ‘Bones’ poem is strikingly different from that of “Intervals.” In “Neighbours” Wallace assumes a much more personal tone. While the first ‘Bones’ poem largely detailed things that had happened to third parties, in this poem, details from the narrator’s - likely Wallace’s - life are presented specifically relating to the ways in which she has become comfortable living where she does. Despite appearing, at first glance, to be a lighthearted poem about a ‘prison town,’ “Neighbours” offers a more serious discussion of the proximity of violence and danger to our lives. Wallace explores society’s perceptions - often misconceptions - of danger in this poem. Her words reinforce that the danger closest to our lives is not as obvious or distant as the convicted criminals, “a block from here at Kingston Pen.”⁶⁰ In this poem, Wallace alerts us to the unknown, ambiguous dangers that are perpetually present in every corner of our ordinary lives: domestic violence, verbal and emotional abuse, sexism, racism, etcetera. In essence, Wallace again moves from the general to the specific by drawing attention to the personal implications of danger in society. Moreover, Wallace emphasizes that danger reaches into the places where we feel most secure.

A while ago, someone
broke into a friend’s house
and beat her unconscious.
For no reason. She came up
from a deep sleep and he was already
there, his hands at her throat.
[...] Her face, when she speaks,
is calm, repaired now, though I think I can see

⁶⁰Bronwen Wallace, “Neighbours,” *SPG*, 69.

ragged places in the darks of her eyes
that he tore there, for good.⁶¹

“Neighbours” stresses that violence can be found within the walls of a local prison, in our friends’ lives, and even, as we see later by the content of Wallace’s columns, between the pages of a local newspaper. Like the children who are witness to domestic abuse, individuals touched by violence often carry that experience with them for the rest of their lives. In the case of the woman in this poem, while she looks much like she did before the attack, those who know her best, like the narrator, can see there is *something* different about her. This one event has left her forever changed.

There are distinct connections between “Neighbours” and “Change of Heart,” the third ‘Bones’ poem. While the latter revisits the story of the friend in “Neighbours,” both poems emphasize our shared need to discover the methods that work best for us *as individuals* when dealing with violence in our lives or in the lives of friends and family. These perceptions of violence are placed within a recognizable context in each of these poems. Both stress our need to recognize that violence, in much less obvious ways, touches our personal lives - both consciously and unconsciously - on a daily basis.

“Change of Heart”

The personal tone of “Neighbours” and the final sections of “Intervals” continues in “Change of Heart.” The narrator recounts personal events and, this time, speaks of first-hand experience. In resuming her discussion of violence against women in this poem, Wallace

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 70-1.

simultaneously demonstrates the impact that a violent act has on its ‘victim’ and on those close to her. The narrator of this poem implies that complete change is necessary in order to cope with violence. “Change of Heart” stresses that for those affected by violence, both directly and indirectly, to carry on with their lives, internal change (i.e. related to the heart and the mind) is more imperative than any external change. In order to function daily, these individuals have to alter their perspective(s) and adapt and modify their lifestyles to find a new way to be, and to live, with themselves. In effect, they have to change the entire essence of their lives. The woman in “Neighbours” who awoke to a stranger’s hands on her throat reappears in this poem to illustrate this point. In “Change of Heart,” however, the narrator emphasizes how her friend has moved *beyond* the attack.

I have a friend with fair hair
and a way with children.
One night a man broke
into her house and beat her up.
She survived and after the bruises
finished with her, she got up
and went back to work. As she does
every day now, waking every morning
to that silence which surrounds
her life, in which she must decide
again, and for today only,
how she will live with the memory
of his fists.⁶²

Wallace’s reminder earlier of the relative speed and ease by which the body heals is contrasted here with the possibility that the mind and heart may never completely heal. While emphasizing one of the ways in which an act of violence lingers with its survivor, this poem also expresses the difficulty others may have in processing and comprehending an act of

⁶²Bronwen Wallace, “Change of Heart,” *SPG*, 74.

violence as well as an individual's specific response(s) to it. It becomes apparent that the narrator herself has had a difficult time coping with her friend's attack. It is as though, for the narrator, this woman will no longer be considered her 'friend with fair hair/and a way with children.' Rather, she may now be stigmatized by her violent attack. Something as significant as an act of violence, whether by a woman's partner or a complete stranger, shifts many individuals' perspectives. "Change of Heart" places particular emphasis on the narrator's realization not only that everything has changed for her friend, but also that this attack has changed the narrator herself.

The realization that an act of violence can forever alter an individual also surfaces in one of Wallace's earlier poems. "Dreams of Rescue," a poem in Common Magic, details a conversation in which a woman learns her sister has suffered terrible abuse at the hands of her husband. Wallace placed her reader alongside the narrator, listening in on this telephone conversation. This positioning - literally between the lines of the poem, "into the white/where you think the truth is" - created an opportunity to share the narrator's perspective within the poem.

"We're splitting, Carl and I."

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

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

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

*broke my nose...*⁶³
 [...]
 Three thousand miles away
 in a city I barely know
 the man you love
 has beaten you with a hammer
 [...] you'll survive all this
 though we both know you'll never
 get over it. There'll always be a need
 for something tougher: a skin you could wrap
 your heart in, fold it away
 from this grieving that stuns you
 with its news of a death.⁶⁴

In "Dreams of Rescue," as we have seen in a number of her poems, Wallace appeals to our emotions. In this poem, the reader may personally experience the same emotional response as the narrator at the news of her sister's abuse: shock, horror, sorrow, and overwhelming powerlessness. The narrator is speaking of herself, and, on some level, the reader, when she discloses their (the narrator and her sister) shared knowledge that 'you'll never get over' this act of violence. The awareness that such violence exists and happens to women regularly, to someone's little sister, in and of itself confirms our 'need for something tougher'. By appealing to our emotions in the stories we witness, like the one in "Dreams of Rescue," we lose a part of our innocence and sense of personal security. Wallace clarifies that, like the stories she presents in her poems, responses to a violent act in a woman's life are individual and personal. It was Wallace's hope that her readers would use their new-found awareness to make both individual and collective changes.

"Burn-Out"

⁶³Bronwen Wallace, "Dreams of Rescue," *CM*, 50-1.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 52-3.

In “Burn-Out” Wallace revisits the notion that there can be no true separation between private/personal and public/professional aspects of an individual’s life. In her poetry, Wallace repeatedly stresses there is no escape from the reality of the issues and events she presents. This particular poem stems in part from Wallace’s own need to leave her paid position as a counsellor at Kingston Interval House. Here she cautions that burn-out “is what happens/when you work too hard/in one of the *caring professions*/as they’re called these days.”⁶⁵ The narrator’s definition of ‘burn-out’ is very concrete and grounded in personal experience. A vivid description of Interval House’s staff office, for example, is presented which illustrates how these two aspects of life come together and are ultimately inseparable at this place where women practice a ‘caring profession.’

I’m sitting in there now,
 the walls around me plastered
 with kids’ drawings, notices, telephone messages
 and photographs, at a desk littered with coffee mugs
 and matchbooks, ashtrays, a telephone
 and the book you record the calls in, a soother,
 pens, a bottle of shampoo, some cough drops,
 a kid’s mitten and two pairs of earrings.⁶⁶

Evidence of women’s and children’s lives becomes as much a part of the professional aspect of Interval House as paperwork and business calls. While we undeniably compartmentalize - or at least attempt to separate to some degree - different aspects of our lives, Wallace argues that this is essentially an impossible task. Borders and boundaries blur so that, when discussing violence against women, for instance, personal details ultimately become a

⁶⁵Bronwen Wallace, “Burn-Out,” *SPG*, 76.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 76-7.

dominant aspect of that discussion.

This blurring between the private/personal and the public/professional is best illustrated in “A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf,” a poem in Signs of the Former Tenant (1983). This poem, the narrator emphasizes, began as “a salute a gesture of friendship/a psychological debt/paid off”.⁶⁷ The poem itself encapsulates all aspects of the narrator’s personal life. While the narrator becomes mildly frustrated with her inability to keep private/personal details separate from this public/professional forum, the reader remains aware that the final result is a perfect homage to Virginia Woolf.

[...] but that’s what got me
 started I suppose wanting to write
 a gesture of friendship
 for a woman for a woman writer
 for Virginia Woolf
 and thinking I could do it
 easily separating the words
 from the lives they come from
 that’s what a good poem should do
 [...]
 This started out as a simple poem
 for Virginia Woolf
 it wasn’t going to mention history
 or choices or women’s lives
 the complexities of women’s friendships
 or the countless gritty details
 of an ordinary woman’s life
 that never appear in poems at all
 yet even as I write these words
 those ordinary details intervene
 between the poem I meant to write
 and this one where the delicate faces
 of my children faces of friends
 of women I have never even seen
 glow on the blank pages

⁶⁷Bronwen Wallace, “A Simple Poem for Virginia Woolf,” SET, 48.

and deeper than any silence
 press around me
 waiting their turn⁶⁸

In the narrator's struggle to write a 'good' poem, and in "Burn-Out" and "How It Will Happen," the reader is reminded that women, in particular, are encouraged by society to deal with public/professional things in an *impersonal* manner. We are discouraged from 'thinking with the heart' and from allowing emotions to intervene in rational matters to such an extent that, as women, we often believe it wrong to think or act this way. In these three poems, as well as in other poems examined in this chapter, Wallace introduces the perspective that women's lives are complex and multi-layered. Because of this complexity, the details and personal elements of an individual's life should - *must* - always be taken into consideration.

Wallace emphasizes the danger of 'burn-out' when an individual's private/personal and public/professional lives come together or become inseparable. These interconnections between different aspects of our lives are particularly reminiscent of the second wave feminist sentiment that the 'personal is political.' As illustrated in "Burn-Out," this is particularly true in women's caring work. When confronted by her work, the narrator reveals her difficulties in dealing with the women and children at the shelter: "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."⁶⁹ The narrator warns that the ultimate consequence of dealing with the difficult and often unimaginable realities of women's lives is 'burn-out.' The narrator recounts a demanding conversation with one woman, Linda, during a night shift at the shelter. The conversation,

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 50-1.

⁶⁹ Wallace, "Burn-Out," *SPG*, 78.

on a night when the narrator resentfully feels “it’s just my luck/to have to be here”,⁷⁰ quickly becomes confessional as Linda speaks of the birth of a stillborn child that her husband quickly ‘dispose[d] of.’ The narrator compares this complete emotional exhaustion with her prior discovery of a limiting physical condition.

...I still hear
 the doctor, standing over me
 shaking his head, talking of
 “...*chondromalacia...osteoarthritis...*
 due to repeated injury, which
 always burns itself out, so that
 the joints, though stiff of course,
 are ultimately painless,”
 and I reach
 [...]
 for Linda’s shoulder
 in that gesture which,
 from where you are, may appear
 ambiguous, whether it’s for
 comfort or support, though
 believe me, it’s not
 the distance makes it
 seem that way, it’s not
 the distance, at all.⁷¹

We are again reminded of the differences between physical and emotional/mental ‘wounds.’ Physical wounds can either heal or be resolved with oneself relatively easily. Emotional/mental wounds, on the other hand, are more complicated and difficult to resolve quickly. The comparison in this poem cautions that emotional exhaustion can ultimately damage the work carried out in women’s shelters and illustrates the relative ease by which the women who work in shelters can lose perspective of the larger issue of violence against women. At the

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 77.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 78-9.

same time that she emphasizes how difficult and emotionally wrenching this work can often be, Wallace stresses that it is important that women who do this work not lose touch with their emotions.

“Bones”

In the fifth and final ‘Bones’ poem, we re-encounter a description of the limits of the human body. Implicit in this discussion of the physical limitations of a female body, beaten by a man, is the narrator’s knowledge or realization that ultimately the body sees an individual through these physical and emotional misfortunes. In “Bones,” Wallace quickly draws attention to our false sense of security regarding personal safety, as illustrated by the taxi driver who feels safe because she is armed with the steel pin removed from her mother’s thigh. The ending of this poem, however, conveys a sense of optimism:

[...] on an x-ray, even the bones show up
as light, a translucence that belies their strength
or renders it immeasurable,
like the distances we count on them to carry us,
right to the end of our lives and back again,
and again.⁷²

This poem ends optimistically in the sense that Wallace reassures us that we are, in fact, able to carry ourselves through our misfortunes to return to better times. Our lives and experiences are personal and individual. Learning and educating oneself is a cyclical, equally personal process: we discover an issue, begin a slow process of learning, and come full circle as we reach an understanding of that issue and discover a new one. Particularly in the context

⁷²Wallace, “Bones,” *SPG*, 82.

of the 'Bones' poems, this poem's ending reassures us that there is hope despite the tragedy and misfortune addressed in the other 'Bones' poems. This survival theme speaks to Wallace's insistence that women are not just passive victims. Wallace empowers her readers with a more complete awareness of the issue of violence against women and children and our knowledge that we each possess the power to change our own life circumstances *and* the world around us.

The 'Bones' poems, through their specific discussions of violence against women and children, are about change. Not only do the narrator's tone, subject matter, and perspective change throughout these five poems, the reader's position may also shift. S/he is presented with an altered, if not completely new, way in which to discuss the full spectrum of issues surrounding violence against women. Through reading Wallace's poetry, we begin to re-think and/or question our beliefs about, and understanding(s) of, this larger issue. Over the course of the five 'Bones' poems, Wallace examined violence against women in a number of different circumstances. By doing so, she invariably challenged her readers' consciousness by testing or disproving our thoughts, beliefs, and/or opinions on this matter. One of the most important things to remember about Wallace's emphasis on violence, as she stated in a public address, is her belief in our ability to change:

The story of domestic violence against women and children is a story about us [...]. It is also a story we can change. I think that it's important to remember that because these structures - these ways of looking at each other, at the family, at the world - are culturally invented, rather than natural, means that we can change

them.⁷³

⁷³Bronwen Wallace, "Domestic Violence: What Is the Connection between Home and School?," AWTW, 104-5.

Chapter Three
“that harder wisdom/you are rediscovering now”
Bronwen Wallace’s Short Fictions

Her writing was accessible, but it was never simple. What might have seemed like tidy little narratives would reveal -- on second and third readings -- other layers of insight and delight.

Larry Scanlan,
Personal Correspondence, 22 March, 1999.

Bronwen Wallace and the Short Story

Bronwen Wallace completed her first collection of short fiction¹ shortly before her death in 1989. In People You'd Trust Your Life To, published posthumously in 1990, Wallace continued to write about the everyday in the bold and honest manner first exhibited in her collections of poetry. In this respect, Wallace's short fictions maintain a focus on the ordinary details of our everyday lives while also drawing attention to some of the ways in which the so-called extraordinary manifests itself within our 'ordinariness.' These stories, like Wallace's poetry and editorial columns, bring to our awareness some of the unspoken social issues in our society (including violence, sexual assault, and mentally and emotionally abusive relationships) of particular importance to women. Wallace addresses these difficult and, at times, unpleasant issues for a very specific reason: "One of the challenges for me as a writer is to put some of what is missing, some of the messy details by which most of us live our lives, finally, on the page."² Wallace's writing works to explode the 'us/them' (or 'ordinary/extraordinary') dichotomy that many individuals cling to. Many details and occurrences in our lives and in our society, particularly violence, are at once both ordinary and extraordinary. Wallace herself strongly believed that we could make changes in our own lives and in society based on a recognition of these interconnections.

When you get in touch with your damage, recognize and care for it,
you also discover the source of your power. We know that abusers,

¹In our October 1998 interview, Carolyn Smart noted that Wallace had completed these stories and submitted them to publishing companies in early 1989. Unfortunately Wallace did not reveal the chronology of these stories.

²Bronwen Wallace, "The contemplative life: A necessity as well as a limitation for the writer," KWS, 6 July, 1987. (AWTW 198).

men who batter, or anybody who abuses children, have usually been abused themselves and have denied it. It's the denial of our damage, our limitations, our vulnerability, our morality that's got us where we are. The voice I try to speak is speaking to that person.³

In all forms of her writing, Wallace's belief that something as seemingly simple as the act of reading could change an individual's thoughts, opinions, or beliefs is pronounced. In her writing, Wallace is speaking to us as individuals, imploring us to consider, even briefly, the issues about which she writes. In one respect, Bronwen Wallace wrote to expose the realities of women's lives in an effort to end, or at least diminish, women's oppression and change the world.

Wallace referred to herself, particularly with regard to The Stubborn Particulars of Grace, as a narrative poet.⁴ In her essay "Why I Don't (Always) Write Short Stories," Wallace once expanded her thoughts about her narrative poetry, saying it is "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 it used short stories to tell something else."⁵ For Wallace there was a marked difference between poems and short stories.

The poems aren't about what happens but about what's discovered. The narratives in my poems are like guide posts towards a mystery at the center of any story, the mystery of our existence or the mystery of our personality. In the poems, the voice is trying to discover this

³"...I couldn't separate the landscape from how I see my poems moving," Interview with Bronwen Wallace, Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers, ed. Janice Williamson (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993) 294.

⁴Bronwen Wallace, "Why I Don't (Always) Write Short Stories," AWTW, 169, 170.

⁵Ibid., 169-70.

as she moves through the poem.⁶

As discussed in Chapter 2, Wallace considered writing poetry to be an argument with the self, the process of the voice discovering. As she revealed in this interview, narratives - stories - are the means of reaching this process of discovery. While she offered a very precise description about what her narrative poems do, she did not do the same for her short stories. Instead, she referred to an essay by John Berger regarding the 'function' of stories with which she strongly agreed. On the function of stories within a community, Wallace quoted from Berger's essay "The Storyteller": "Very few stories are narrated either to idealize or condemn; rather, they testify to the always slightly surprising range of the possible."⁷ By their content, it is easy to see the ways in which Wallace's short fictions 'testify to the range of the possible.' This speaks directly to Wallace's efforts to illustrate the ways in which things can be at once both ordinary and extraordinary. Wallace's short fictions, and her writing in general, examine how wide this range of the possible is. As Wallace maintains, "[t]he stories we tell ourselves determine a great deal: what we understand of our past, how we view our present, what we think is possible or impossible."⁸

Wallace considered her abilities to write to be a gift. She did not clearly articulate her shift from writing poems to short fictions; rather, she elaborated that, "I write from what I

⁶"...I couldn't separate the landscape from how I see my poems moving," Interview with Bronwen Wallace, Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers, 294.

⁷Wallace, "Why I Don't (Always) Write Short Stories," AWTW, 174.

⁸Bronwen Wallace, "Celebrating the cadence of a particular voice," AWTW, 89.

am given, not from what I decide.”⁹ Because, as Wallace admitted, “[a]ll my life, I have been listening to stories”,¹⁰ it does not seem surprising that she herself began to write stories. In an interview, she explained that, like many other writers, she began writing short fictions to appease the voices of the women ‘talking’ in her head:

Starting to write short stories was literally a gift; 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 [...]. One of the things that makes my poetry strong is a very recognizable voice. In the stories I try to expand that voice.¹¹

While Wallace herself pointed toward some of the similarities between her poetry and her short stories, she also emphasized their differences:

I am, now, writing short stories, but not because I think they are the same as, or even the next logical step after, narrative poems. I am writing short stories right now because that’s what I have been given to write.

Or rather, that’s what I’ve chosen to do with what I’ve been given.¹²

By examining their content, it appears Wallace may have had another motive for writing short fictions. Once again she focussed on the issue of violence against women and children - the subject matter that recurred in her poetry, appearing most prominently in The Stubborn Particulars of Grace, and prose writing. While People You’d Trust Your Life To operates on many levels, on one level these short fictions represent another medium in which Wallace

⁹Wallace, “Why I Don’t (Always) Write Short Stories,” AWTW, 170.

¹⁰Ibid., 173.

¹¹“...I couldn’t separate the landscape from how I see my poems moving,” Interview with Bronwen Wallace, Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers, 294-5.

¹²Wallace, “Why I Don’t (Always) Write Short Stories,” AWTW, 178.

attempted to make her reading audience aware of violence against women and children, and to educate them in the process. The subject matter of certain stories - namely physical and sexual violence - or specific details from others are presented in order to challenge the reader's consciousness, and/or raise awareness, of that issue. By challenging our consciousness - our thoughts, beliefs, and opinions - Wallace's writing offers an opportunity to consider a new perspective. In this way, Wallace's writing works to change our perspective about violence in an effort to end, or diminish, women's oppression and change the world. In many of her short fictions, Wallace examines issues of physical and sexual violence against women and children from a number of different perspectives. She presents various scenarios observed and experienced by a number of different characters. The short story provided Wallace a different opportunity to examine violence. By virtue of the medium itself, Wallace was able to present contexts, perspectives, and the psychologies of her characters and occurrences over a much larger duration of time.

The discussion of violence against women and children appears most strongly in two of the short stories in People You'd Trust Your Life To: "Back Pain" and "Tip of My Tongue." In this chapter, I offer a close examination of these two stories, the content of which demonstrates Wallace's efforts to change our thoughts and perspectives in an effort to end women's oppression. "Back Pain" is an explicit account of a mother's reaction to changes in her daughter's appearance and behaviour, which, as revealed at the end of the story, have been caused by her boyfriend's physical abuse. "Tip of My Tongue" also explores the abuse of a child as remembered by the narrator years later. I examine these two stories in detail as they mark Wallace's most explicit discussion of violence in her short fictions. By

analysing these two stories, we are able to see that small details from other stories in this collection are connected to these explicit discussions of physical and sexual abuse.

Wallace understood that her readers might not be familiar with all of her work. She herself acknowledged that many individuals avoid poetry because they “think they hate it or that they don’t understand it or that poetry is only written (and understood) by strange beings who sit around drinking black coffee and staring moodily at the moon.”¹³ Wallace recognized the readers of her poetry, short fiction, or editorial columns might not be familiar with other aspects of her work. Because of this recognition of different readerships, it appears Wallace used the medium of the short story strategically as both a means of creative expression as well as another way in which to educate a broader body of readers. In other words, Wallace continued to write about the politically and socially charged issue of violence against women and children. The two stories examined in this chapter carry a clear message: we must recognize that violence is widespread and can touch any of our lives. In a column for the Kingston Whig-Standard, Wallace made a powerful observation, based on a quote from American writer Jessamyn West, concerning the opportunity that stories present for making change: “‘fiction reveals truths that reality obscures.’ I think of it as a statement of faith in the power of language, especially the power of the story, to touch and change us.”¹⁴ Wallace uses People You’d Trust Your Life To to present issues that are recognizable in order to ‘touch and change us.’

¹³Bronwen Wallace, “Shyly slipping a poem from the purse,” KWS, 25 July, 1988. (AWTW 187).

¹⁴Bronwen Wallace, “Finding some unsuspected truths in fiction,” KWS, 16 January, 1989. (AWTW 192).

People You'd Trust Your Life To addresses a variety of women's realities. The content of the stories ranges from single mothering and women's mid-life crises to the physical and sexual abuse of women and children. It also illustrates the ways in which any one of these experiences is both ordinary and extraordinary at once. Violence, for instance, is often viewed as extraordinary. Individuals believe it will not happen in their lives because they are 'normal.' Violence can only occur in someone else's life, to someone who is, perhaps, poor or uneducated or doesn't know any better. Women's realities as battered wives, as involved in emotionally or mentally abusive relationships, or as victims of sexual assaults prove these beliefs wrong. In her writing, Wallace works to disprove these misconceptions by illustrating the ways in which instances of violence are, in fact, connected to the ways in which individuals choose to live their lives. Some of these stories deal with less disturbing subject matters. These stories are part of a continuum on which more serious occurrences, such as those in "Back Pain" and "Tip Of My Tongue," also exist. A number of these less intense stories emphasize the successes of women who have faced difficult life circumstances. "Chicken 'n' Ribs," the second story in People You'd Trust Your Life To, is a bitter-sweet account of a woman who seems to be experiencing a mid-life crisis. Lydia Robertson is a successful single mother. After her husband abandoned her, she raised their three small children while also completing her high school and university education. Lydia also pursued, and achieved, a socially respected career as a nurse. In every respect, Lydia defied an all-to-common image of a single mother as poor, uneducated, reliant upon social assistance, and so on. "Chicken 'n' Ribs" challenges society's definition of success and places its costs into a clearer perspective by examining Lydia's 'success' in the context of her

everyday life. Lydia's memories of her life after her husband left are few:

And that's all she can remember. That's it. Everything else is a blur, speeded up, like a video on fast forward, a cartoon jumble of patients, paperwork, cooking, shopping, laundry, cleaning, worrying that one of the kids would get sick when she was working days or that the babysitter would ignore them when she was working nights, trying to save enough to send them to university. Her one and only life, whizzing by her as if, after Ken left, it had no time for her. Her own life.¹⁵

This passage raises two points. First, it is only with hindsight that Lydia can recognize - as Wallace simultaneously clarifies for her reader - that her successes as a single mother have come at a cost. Lydia's sense of loss cannot be ignored. Everything she did in her life was to reach a very specific goal: to make her future, and her children's futures, 'better than' her present circumstances. Reflecting on her life, Lydia recognizes she *had* to sacrifice her present in order to achieve her goals for her future. On another level, Wallace draws attention in this passage to the harsh fact that, in contemporary Canadian society, women's successes are often difficult and generally require sacrifice. Society's notion of success is narrowly defined. While we may view Lydia's achievements as remarkable and perhaps conclude that she has 'beat the odds' - raising three small children alone, completing her education, gaining a respected career - Lydia's past experiences highlight the 'costs' of her success. At one point, she referred to her life as 'a blur,' 'whizzing by her.' What Lydia lost during these years - essentially her freedom - certainly does not compare with what she gained. Rather, Lydia's comments reveal a woman's bitterness at having been forced to sacrifice her youth. Lydia's life as a single parent was stretched. She had little class privilege in a world structured around nuclear families and middle class ideals and relatively few

¹⁵Bronwen Wallace, "Chicken 'n' Ribs," *PTLT*, 29.

supports to live autonomously. Wallace described having similar feelings herself after the birth of her son in a column for the Kingston Whig-Standard: “Weeks rushed together in a blur of alarm clocks, meals, day care, typewriters, errands, trips to the park, bills, groceries, and laundry, laundry, laundry. This is not what I’d thought motherhood would be.”¹⁶ Through these details and others, Wallace challenges her reader’s image of motherhood by presenting it in a realistic - less than idealistic - light. Wallace offers an image of motherhood largely based on a loss of freedom and identity and also included women’s honest (at times unenthusiastic) reactions to this transitional period in their lives. Further, Wallace urges us to become more receptive to, and aware of, the reality that lies beneath the outward appearances of women’s ‘ordinary’ lives.

As the title of another story suggests, “An Easy Life” chronicles the life of a woman who has led just such an existence. While in many ways this story is a light-hearted account of one woman’s reality, “An Easy Life” is also a means by which Wallace pays homage to the countless women who have led more difficult lives. A number of passages in “An Easy Life” hint at the life stories of women that are not told here, women who may not have been as fortunate as Marion Walker, the story’s central character.

For every Marion Walker, married at eighteen and having three kids bang, bang, bang, who ends up cleaning her spacious kitchen in her tasteful house on her tasteful street, [...] there are thousands of others with their teeth rotted and their bodies gone to flab on Kraft Dinner and Wonder Bread, up to their eyeballs in shit. Women whose husbands left them (as, in fact, Marion’s own brother, Jeff, left his first wife, Sandra, with a three year old and a set of twins, with no degree because she’d worked to put him through med school and with support

¹⁶Bronwen Wallace, “The power of a group of mothers getting together ‘just to talk’,” KWS, 18 April, 1988. (AWTW 146).

payments based on his last year as a resident rather than his present salary as a pediatrician), or, worse yet, women whose husbands are still around, taking it out on them, women who are beaten, whose kids end up in jail or ruined by drugs or . . .¹⁷

In this passage, Wallace assumes an extreme stance, suggesting that the number of women who lead lives *less fortunate* than Marion Walker *far exceeds* those who lead similar lives. Women regularly experience a wide range of difficulties - from the ordinary to the extraordinary - in their lives. Wallace's explorations of these difficulties illustrate the connections between what we view as ordinary and extraordinary life occurrences. Women's difficulties - regardless of their nature and/or severity - are often either ignored or recognized insufficiently by society. In her short stories, Wallace presents the difficulties many women experience regularly in their lives, ranging from adulterous husbands and inequitable divorce agreements - generally viewed as part of the ordinary and/or more socially acceptable occurrences - to domestic abuse and sexual violence, which is considered extraordinary, perhaps socially unacceptable, occurrences. Wallace uses these subject matters, to varying degrees, in her short fictions to explode the dichotomy of us/them - or ordinary/extrordinary, normal/abnormal, and so on. In other words, Wallace maintains there is no such split. Women's ordinary difficulties - unfaithful partners, divorce agreements leading to poverty - are generally considered more socially acceptable now than they were in the past. Situations like these may not necessarily be favorable, but women are no longer scorned by society because of them. It is important to remember that the consequences of these difficult life experiences are still generally ignored. What we tend to consider extraordinary life difficulties

¹⁷Bronwen Wallace, "An Easy Life," *PTLT*, 113.

are socially ignored in almost every respect. In fact, most members of society would deny that physical or sexual abuse *could* happen to them. We prefer to believe that these forms of abuse happen to *some* women and children. At the same time, an atmosphere exists in that same society which makes it unacceptable - at the very least, incredibly difficult - for a woman or child to admit that they have been physically or sexually abused. We tend to place the blame for acts of violence on the woman (or child) who is victim of that violence. As a result, individuals are generally reluctant to admit their abuse and seek assistance *because of this social scorn*. These realities may be confirmed by the reader's own experiences in society. Many of Wallace's female readers in particular are familiar with the difficulties and challenges we, as women, face in society on a daily basis.

While many individuals believe in, and perhaps reinforce, a strict division between us and them - ordinary and extraordinary, normal and abnormal - Wallace worked to destroy this dichotomy. In a 1988 column, Wallace challenged what society presents as an ordinary, normal life by discussing two popular television families.

I turn on the TV and watch "The Cosby Show" or "Family Ties." I let myself believe that the "real family" is like that. Certainly, there is no evidence to the contrary. The battered wife does not get to tell her story. Nor does the incest victim. The single mother on welfare is not heard from.¹⁸

In fact, the story of the Keatons' family, or the Cosbys', is the story of the minority. Yet it is their story alone that gets told. Whose interests does its telling serve? And why?¹⁹

In her writing - whether poetry, short fiction, or newspaper columns - Wallace tells the stories

¹⁸Bronwen Wallace, "Women's Week 'with courage and vision'," KWS, 7 March, 1988. (AWTW 110-11).

¹⁹Ibid., 111.

that do not get told. By showing her reader that things like physical and sexual violence can and do happen to 'normal' people, Wallace hoped to bring awareness to the reality that these divisions and distinctions are socially constructed and, most often, completely untrue.

“Back Pain”

The reference to physical abuse in the passage from “An Easy Life” above, although brief, draws attention to the collection’s preceding story, “Back Pain.” The title of this particular story carries a number of connotations that result from this single, mundane, and trivialized (female) complaint. Wallace uses the subtleties of this title with great perception. “Back Pain” is a forthright examination of one facet of physical violence against women. The reader follows Barbara, the story’s central character, from her initial suspicions that “[s]omething is wrong. Something is wrong with her daughter, Kate”²⁰ to her realization at the end of the story that her teenage daughter has been severely beaten by her boyfriend. Through this story, Wallace challenges society’s collective myth that ‘bad things’ happen only to other people. To do so, Wallace makes use of characters her reader could easily identify with: they are regular people, lead ordinary lives, and generally are members of normal families. In other words, they are *not* violent. In addition, the narrative style of “Back Pain,” which places the reader alongside Barbara and allows insight into her consciousness, enables the reader to experience events and occurrences as Barbara does and react to them in similar fashion. This close association may challenge the reader’s consciousness to the point that s/he is ultimately aware - if not fully in agreement - that physical abuse *can* happen to ‘normal’ people. In other words, the characters in this story could be any one of us.

²⁰Bronwen Wallace, “Back Pain,” *PTLT*, 89.

On one level Wallace is commenting on society's emphasis on rational thought and logic *over* emotion and intuition in "Back Pain." From the beginning of the story to its concluding lines, the main character's concern is that something is wrong with her daughter. Barbara's concerns echo throughout the story and are based, for the most part, on her intuition. Barbara senses - intuits - that something is wrong with her daughter but she is unable to fully articulate and explain what it might be.

At first she put it down to Kate's practically killing herself with this school production of *Pygmalion*. But then the name of Danny Saunders kept coming up. Pointedly. [...] It [...] looks to Barbara like he's Kate's first big love. Which would be great, she tells herself. Really. Except.

Except for the way Kate *looks*, somehow. It doesn't seem right.²¹

Wallace offers an internal clue here: Kate and Danny are working on the school production of *Pygmalion*, a play about a man 'turning' a woman into his vision of an ideal, proper lady. In other words, it is a play about manipulating a woman into something she is not. At this point in the story, it is apparent that Barbara knows something is amiss with her daughter. In fact, Barbara is concerned to such an extent that she has gone through the process of discrediting the general stress of being a teenager as well as Kate's intense work on the school play as causes of her change. By eliminating all other probable causes, Barbara is left with only one reason for the marked change in her daughter's appearance and behaviour: the influence of Kate's new boyfriend. But, because she is unable to explain her concerns as anything more than a 'feeling,' Barbara reluctantly dismisses them.

Barbara's impression of Danny Saunders also colours the reader's perception of him.

²¹Ibid., 92.

As with her concerns for Kate, Barbara emphasizes that her unfavourable opinion of this young man is based solely on a feeling. Because Wallace crafted this story in a way which allows the reader to strongly associate and sympathize with Barbara's character, s/he shares her immediate dislike of Danny Saunders.

What it is about that kid, she doesn't know, but Barbara does not like him. [...] A curly-haired, almost baby-faced boy who seemed able to talk in a smooth, reasonable voice until he got what he wanted, always. He was never pushy, but he was never, well, *awkward*, either, the way most kids are [...]. It drove her nuts, though she knew it didn't make any sense. Just like now, when he comes to the house. The way he keeps his arms folded across his chest, his hands stuffed in his armpits. The only sign of nervousness or discomfort he ever displays. Probably nervousness. She knows that. She still doesn't like him.²²

The description Wallace presents of Danny Saunders is meant to sound alarms. In this passage, Wallace provides many of the clues necessary to discover what is - or, perhaps, has been - happening to Kate. In essence, the above description of Danny provides a partial 'profile' of a domineering male, one who could, statistics suggest, be, or become, abusive. The strongest clue that this boy should be avoided is Barbara's intuition, her sense that there is just *something* about him that leaves her feeling uneasy. Barbara, however, attempts to discredit the role of her intuition and her emotions in dealing with this rational matter. In a column for the Kingston Whig-Standard, Wallace raised important questions about the role of emotions and intuition in the process of decision-making: "[H]ow much can we really separate what we 'feel' from what we 'think?' To what extent is our culture's emphasis on rationality the result of a truly *irrational* fear of emotion [...]? What's wrong with emotions

²²Ibid. , 95-6.

being part of decisions anyway?"²³ These are questions the reader may ponder throughout this story.

Barbara's unconscious sense of fear and dread not only in acknowledging what is happening to Kate, but also in facing it, becomes pronounced after this point. Like Barbara, the reader has a heightened consciousness that something 'bad' is happening and likely has been for some time. This story functions by involving the reader in the 'diagnosing' of Kate's problem. "Back Pain" depends upon the reader figuring out, *before* Barbara, the nature of Kate's change. In other words, this is a story about both the reader and the main character coming to consciousness or awareness of the issue of physical abuse. The realization of exactly what is going on remains just below the surface at the mid-point of this story. It is almost as if Barbara and the reader are not quite able to put their finger on this 'thing' as Barbara becomes engrossed in a particular moment's events.

Something is wrong. Something is wrong with Kate, but Barbara doesn't know what. Doesn't know what to ask, that is, or even if. And then what?²⁴

It is unmistakable here that Barbara is aware that her daughter's boyfriend is causing this 'problem.' In hindsight, there seems to be two factors keeping Barbara from reaching this realization. First, when men harm or abuse women in this society, it is not readily discussed. Individuals generally choose to keep it a secret. Because of the silence surrounding abusive relationships, individuals often find themselves without direction when faced with violence

²³Bronwen Wallace, "How wise is it to separate our emotions from the rest of our being?," *KWS*, 11 January, 1988. (*AWTW* 60).

²⁴Wallace, "Back Pain," *PTLI*, 97.

in their own lives. Second, as private individuals, we generally have a difficult time accepting and believing not only that someone close to us could allow these terrible things to happen, but also that we were unable to protect our friends and loved ones. As such, Barbara's fears about acknowledging that what is 'wrong' with Kate temporarily prevent her from discovering the problem. At this point in the story, Barbara's language begins to shift. Previously she had been noting there was something wrong 'with' her daughter. Barbara's recognition shifts slightly as she begins to observe that there is something wrong 'for' her daughter.²⁵ This slight shift in language indicates an acknowledgement of the increased level of danger in this relationship. While the particulars remain unsaid, there appears to be an understanding of both the consequences associated with, and the difficulty of naming, this situation. The physical abuse of women, we maintain, is something that happens to 'other' people and generally not to teenage girls. It is a private matter and should not be openly discussed. Considering these circumstances, it is not surprising that Barbara is hesitant to confront her daughter, especially when the only evidence she has is based on her intuition.

Perhaps due to a subconscious recognition of the difficulties an abusive relationship presents (i.e. to admit what has happened and seek help to recover from the abuse and move on with one's life), Barbara makes a genuine attempt to discredit her suspicions. Denial is a common reaction to learning that a loved one has been harmed. As mentioned earlier, our first reaction or response upon hearing that something extraordinary has happened in our ordinary lives, may be to deny it. Despite her denial that *her* daughter may have been harmed by this boy, Barbara's intuition remains strong. Repeated attempts to convince herself she

²⁵*Ibid.*, 102.

is making 'something' out of 'nothing' do not satisfy Barbara that everything with her daughter is normal. Her observations, such as the following, allow the reader to more fully believe Barbara's intuition.

So maybe she's making too much out of the way her daughter's face seems to be operated by remote control, fading out every once in a while, then coming up again when her eyes flick to Danny's. Maybe that's not what's going on at all. Even when she feels it, right there in the room, when she sees how Kate's face - turned up to hers, laughing in the middle of a funny story - stops suddenly, her whole face, just stops at some movement from Danny's hand she doesn't even notice. Then he turns up the volume on the TV " . . . the Northgrove production of *Pygmalion*," the announcer is saying. The play, of course. [. . .] But that still isn't enough for her to ignore it. What she sees in the way Kate lowers her head slightly like . . . like a small child being scolded, her face collapsing for a moment, as she turns, away from her mother, to the face on the TV.²⁶

Through Barbara's observations, the reader also witnesses the connection between the change in Kate's behaviour - the change in Kate herself - and Danny Saunders. At this time, the reader's suspicions point to a logical conclusion: Kate is being emotionally abused by her boyfriend. This conclusion is plausible for a number of reasons. It explains why Kate has become so withdrawn from her family and has grown so dependent upon Danny. It also clarifies her desire to please him. One thing remains unexplained for Barbara and for readers who have never encountered a situation like this: how could things have spiralled so out of control to have reached this point?

A brief detail in the opening story of People You'd Trust Your Life To can shed light on the dynamics of Kate and Danny's relationship. "Heart of My Heart" briefly contemplates women's at times self-destructive dependence on the men in their lives. Wallace powerfully

²⁶Ibid., 103-4.

summarizes the effect one particular woman believes a man has had on her: “She believed he was totally responsible for the fact that she was now intelligent, articulate, beautiful and able to live alone.”²⁷ Although Wallace does not explicitly discuss it here, many women are now, at the end of the 1990s, aware of the damaging effects of emotional and psychological abuse. In fact, as illustrated in the ‘Bones’ poems, these kinds of abuse may be more difficult to recover from than physical abuse. The absurdity of this character’s unfaltering belief - that this man has ‘made’ her into everything she is - is readily apparent. The nature of emotional abuse, however, makes it next to impossible to convince a woman in this situation otherwise. Many of Wallace’s readers may also be aware that, statistically, physical abuse is often combined with emotional and psychological abuse. In considering this seemingly minor insight, the reader brings new knowledge, perhaps understanding, to the relationship between Kate and Danny in “Back Pain.”

The recognition of a man’s ability to manipulate a woman’s thoughts and beliefs, hinted at in “Heart of My Heart,” underscores the gravity of Kate’s position in this abusive relationship. It is a relief once Barbara finally acknowledges what has been happening to Kate at the hands of her boyfriend. When this ‘problem’ has been brought out into the open, as both Barbara and the reader know, it can finally be dealt with. There is also a sense of relief, a ‘strange reassurance,’ in Barbara’s realization that her fears were not unfounded. While the reader may sympathize with Barbara’s guilt at not having understood sooner and, therefore, being unable to prevent this terrible act of violence, Wallace leaves these concerns unexamined. As in the ‘Bones’ poems, Wallace focusses on the necessity of hearing women’s

²⁷Bronwen Wallace, “Heart of My Heart,” *PTLT*, 10.

stories and dealing with things one by one. The reader follows Barbara's thoughts as she reaches the realization that Danny severely beat her daughter.

Terrified, at first, [...]and, then, strangely reassured. To know that she has no other choice now [...] no other choice but to drive back across town to her own place, kick off her boots and head up the stairs, two at a time, unbuttoning her coat as she goes. Open Kate's door and stride to the bed where her daughter is still huddled under the blankets like a small child. All she can do. To pull off the covers and find what she knew would be there, though not what to expect.

Not any of it. Not the size of the bruise that fills her daughter's cheek and pinches her left eye closed.

Not the way Kate turns to look up at her, her nose caked with blood.

Not how her own voice comes, finally, up from her chest, thinned by the work of pushing through her fear that it might not work at all.

"Did Danny do this to you?"

Her own need, really. To say it.

Kate is already crying. She holds her arms out, stiff and shaking, as if she's afraid of what she might get. As if asking for comfort feels like asking to be forgiven.²⁸

This passage captures the essence of many of Wallace's earlier poems and is particularly reminiscent of the 'Bones' poems in The Stubborn Particulars of Grace. For Wallace, "Back Pain" fulfills two purposes. First, it is a means by which she was able to use her creative skills to recount a story. And second, it is also represented another opportunity to educate a body of readers about a social issue of particular importance to women. Wallace's stories addressing violence against women and children complement the 'Bones' poems and others. In these poems, Wallace presents brief images and explorations of violence as well as the individuals affected by it. "Back Pain" delves deeper into the issue itself. Wallace details the thoughts of her main character as well as Barbara's reaction as she finally faced this problem. In this way, the reader is provided another - different - opportunity to become aware of

²⁸Wallace, "Back Pain," PTLT, 105-6.

violence on a greater level. As in her poetry and editorial columns addressing violence and other issues of particular importance to women, in these short stories, Wallace addresses an aspect of women's lives that is not readily discussed. By doing so, Wallace hoped to bring to her reader's awareness these important issues in an effort to better women's circumstances and change the world.

Some of the issues that appeared in "Back Pain" can also be found in other stories in People You'd Trust Your Life To. In "An Easy Life," Wallace suggests some of the countless possibilities of what could happen to a woman with a potentially abusive partner. The easy life of this story's narrator is contrasted with the hard life of Tracey Harper, the teenage daughter of an alcoholic, neglectful mother. This character is a straightforward illustration of the difficulties associated with a woman's choice to make life-altering changes. In this story, Tracey comes to realize that her current lifestyle - namely her relationship with her boyfriend, Kevin - will prevent her from achieving her goals and dreams: to live her own life differently from her mother's, to 'make something' of herself. Once Tracey has made the decision to change her life circumstances, Wallace emphasizes the difficulties Tracey experiences in bringing her desire to reality. Her most immediate obstacle is directly associated with ending her relationship with Kevin. After their break-up, both Tracey and the reader become aware of this young man's potentially abusive side.

The best Tracey Harper can do right now is to crouch behind the chest of drawers in her bedroom and listen as Kevin bangs and bangs and bangs on the door to the apartment. Before, it was the phone ringing and ringing and ringing. [...]

"All right, bitch. I know you're in there." Kevin gives the door a kick.

Silence.

Then Tracey hears him stomp down the stairs, she hears the outer

door bang shut.²⁹

Wallace emphasizes here not only that Tracey has avoided a life well below her potential, but also that she has quite possibly escaped a future as a battered woman. Despite Tracey's realizations, realizations the reader may share with her, Wallace continues to draw attention to women's difficulties in leaving their lives behind. In fact, Wallace cautions that, for particular people living under particular circumstances, a difficult life may be more appealing than a life defined by uncertainty. In other words, Wallace digs into an understanding that there are many factors both influencing and constraining women's choices. Unlike the policeman in "Thinking With The Heart," a poem in Common Magic, Wallace understands and does not judge women's decisions. She emphasizes that every woman's life process is different.

One of the final images of Tracey Harper in "An Easy Life" again illustrates these challenges. The image of Tracey below is not unlike that of a woman holding herself 'for dear life' in "Thinking With The Heart." This image of Tracey, summarizing her experience in the three weeks after ending her relationship with her boyfriend, brings together many ideas and themes in Wallace's writing. It evokes many of the women Wallace has written about, including the woman in "Thinking With The Heart." "An Easy Life" also invites the reader to look toward the future and speculate how a woman's life might be changed by what Wallace describes.

[Tracey] will look a lot the way she looks now, crouching against the wall of her bedroom, hugging her knees to her chest as if the effort of keeping them from jumping up, running into the hallway and never

²⁹Wallace, "An Easy Life," PTLT, 119-20.

stopping till she finds Kevin, wherever he is, takes everything she's got.
Which it does.³⁰

This powerful image holds many connotations. It is admirable, on one level, that Tracey was able to realize her need to sever all ties with her boyfriend. On another level, Tracey's strength and conviction to completely remove herself from a relationship which, as the reader witnessed, might have led to physical violence, are respected. Moreover, Tracey's situation in this story impresses the fact that, as seen in "Back Pain" and throughout our society, women's experiences frequently reveal that physical violence can escalate to include sexual violence as well.

Wallace also addresses the physical and sexual abuse of children in People You'd Trust Your Life To. She explores this issue in a more aggressive and explicit manner than she did in her poetry. Again, short fiction allows Wallace to delve into greater detail than she did in her poetry. She also develops the characters in her short stories in order to discuss the physical and sexual abuse of women and children more fully. While "Tip Of My Tongue" is an explicit account of the sexual abuse of a young girl, elements of children's mistreatment by adults are also present in other stories. Most notably, the reader is startled by the sudden encounter with the physical abuse a young boy and his mother have experienced in "People You'd Trust Your Life To."

[...] Stephen escaped from the bathroom, giggling, stark naked as he tore towards Myrna, who opened her arms, instinctively, to scoop him up.

"Stephen, get back here!"

But Myrna caught him first, swung him up, laughing, though even as she did so she could feel the child stiffen. That's when she saw the

³⁰Ibid., 120-21.

ring of small, round, white welts, like pockmarks on his buttock, just as Gail reached for him. Their eyes met.

“His father used to do that with a cigarette,” Gail said, “whenever he peed himself.”³¹

This mother and child challenge consciousness by illustrating how a seemingly ‘normal’ family has been touched by violence. At first glance it appears as though this is something that has happened, and remains, in Gail’s and Stephen’s past; as the story continues, however, the true effects of this violence are revealed. As illustrated in some of her poetry, Wallace’s thoughts on child abuse remain clear in these short fictions: abuse lingers, affecting an individual for a lifetime.

It was their backs Myrna saw. Gail’s, and then Stephen’s, just ahead of her. Their skinny necks and shoulders, bone-thin, pinched to identical angles of guilt and defeat.³²

Wallace’s belief that our pasts affect us in our present and future experiences is not limited to this one story. It appears repeatedly in her poetry and in the ‘Bones’ poems in particular. This belief also surfaces throughout the stories in this collection as women reflect upon their past experiences, shedding light upon the ways in which their pasts affected their lives. The women in these stories help us understand that, while undoubtedly a difficult task, it *is* possible to recover from violence. Because experiences of physical and sexual violence and abuse remain at the very centre of our beings, Wallace cautions, we may never truly be able to ‘get over’ them.

“Tip of My Tongue”

³¹Bronwen Wallace, “People You’d Trust Your Life To,” *PTLT*, 167-68.

³²*Ibid.*, 168.

“Tip of My Tongue” focuses entirely on the ways in which traumatic events stay with an individual. In this story, the main character, Lee, reflects upon her childhood and the sexual abuse she experienced during appointments with Dr. Allan, her family’s dentist. While both stories address the specific abuse of a child, the tone of “Tip Of My Tongue” provides a striking contrast to that of “Back Pain.” The hostile, bitter temperament of this story’s narrator is apparent from its opening lines. As a result, the reader shares her uneasiness. There is only one distinction in this story separating the reader’s perspective from that of the narrator: the reader, in a situation similar to “Back Pain,” remains unaware of the true nature of the problem until it is disclosed. As in “Back Pain,” the reader is acutely aware something is wrong from the beginning of the story. This uneasiness is especially apparent in Lee’s description of Dr. Allan.

Dr. Allan’s fingers had a slightly pepperminty taste, and his breath, as he leaned over me, had the same sweet smell. Too sweet. Like medicine, it seemed to me, not candy. Not something you could bite clean through to the centre of. There was a warning in that taste that made my throat close and my stomach heave [...].³³

Clearly something happened to Lee as a child at the dentist’s office. The reader is unaware of exactly what this is until roughly the middle of this story. Unlike “Back Pain,” no clues are provided as to what happened to Lee. Precisely because of this lack of insight the reader may mistakenly presume that Lee’s dislike of dentists is uncomplicated. Further, a connection is drawn between Lee’s father’s insistence that no freezing be used on his child during fillings and her discomfort, as an adult, at visits to the dentist. It is not until Lee blatantly reveals that she was molested by her dentist that we recognize the ways in which “Tip of My Tongue”

³³Bronwen Wallace, “Tip Of My Tongue,” *PTLT*, 130-31.

connects with many of Wallace's other short fictions, poems, and non-fiction writing.

Often in Wallace's writing there comes a moment, as in "Back Pain," when everything is revealed. There are two distinctive features to this moment in "Tip Of My Tongue." First, the sexual abuse is disclosed by the character who experienced it; in other words, the reader is witness to a 'first-hand' account of this experience. And second, the story itself moves beyond the moment of disclosure. As the narrative shifts in time - from past to present and back again - the reader assumes the role of both observer and participant. Throughout this story, the reader maintains distance through her/his knowledge that this is a work of fiction despite being submerged in the narrator's stream of consciousness. The adult's reactions to the events in her childhood are evident as Lee discloses this information.

Jesus [...], do you think I don't remember, is that it? Do you think I don't *know*? I remember all of it. I just don't see the point, is all.

I was probably eleven or twelve the first time. I thought it was just a mistake, that he wasn't used to it or something. It was Miss Hedron's job, after all. But she was on the phone in her little cubbyhole off the waiting room, and when Dr. Allan undid my bib, his fingers brushed my chest. Ever so lightly.

Chest. *Breasts*. He brushed them with his hands, though you could hardly see them under my blouse. His touching them made them seem bigger, somehow. Clumsy, awkward and faintly ridiculous.

[...]I grabbed my coat and headed for the stairs. I wanted to get out of there, I wanted to think, I wanted it to be a mistake.³⁴

Through this revelation, Wallace provides an opportunity to gain insight into the perspectives of both the confused child of the past *and* the angry adult of the present. It also offers a sense of immediacy that is absent from "Back Pain." While Kate had the full support of her mother to cope with her abuse, as a child Lee was isolated from the adults in her life, the very people

³⁴*Ibid.*, 136-37.

who should have protected her, by the nature of her abuse. And unlike the abuse in “Back Pain,” what happened to Lee occurred over a number of years.

Another distinctive element in “Tip Of My Tongue” is Lee’s childhood realization, intensified by the perspective of the adult reflecting, of the potential danger she faces. This sense of danger is not as distinct in the other stories in People You’d Trust Your Life To or in a great deal of Wallace’s poetry as it is here. Lee’s true and total comprehension, as a child, of the seriousness associated with what Dr. Allan is doing to her underscores the seriousness of the issue of child sexual abuse. Recognition of the danger she faces provides the both reader and the main character with an understanding on a completely different level of the events in Lee’s past. Lee’s words, as she looks back, are extremely powerful: “And I realize then, and as if for the first time, the danger I am in. The extent of it [...]”³⁵ In Wallace’s poetry discussing violence against women and children, the reader is often well aware of the danger faced by the individuals described. This awareness often permits serious reflection upon the issues described. The reflection in “Tip of My Tongue,” however, is different from that in the poetry. In some of Wallace’s poetry, the reader is usually aware that danger has somehow been avoided and these individuals were able to move forward with their lives or are now in the process of doing so. Lee’s realization in “Tip of My Tongue” draws attention to the true severity of the circumstances for a physically or sexually abused individual. By this point in the story, both the reader and Lee are aware of two things. First, there may be nothing Lee can do - perhaps, even, there is nothing her parents *will* do - to end this sexual abuse. With Lee’s knowledge comes not only a sense of isolation, but also

³⁵Ibid., 141.

helplessness. Second, as Lee reflects upon her childhood, she becomes acutely aware of all of the things that *could have* happened to her as a child. This concern resurfaces throughout the story.

As in the ‘Bones’ poems, particularly “Neighbours” and “Change of Heart,” the narrator in “Tip of My Tongue” experiences difficulty in coming to terms with the abuse she suffered. This is perhaps best expressed when Wallace details Lee’s wish, as a child, that Dr. Allan’s actions were an accidental, one-time occurrence. Lee’s words, as an adult, convey many of the sentiments of the child, sentiments the reader may find emotionally wrenching. Her words here can only hint at the grief she experienced and the sense of powerlessness she felt when she first realized that Dr. Allan’s actions were intentional.

It was a beginning. Pinches, brushes, light, moist touches. Breasts, buttocks, the dark, scary space between my legs, no matter how tightly I clamped them. Always quick, always without warning, no matter how hard I watched for it.

[....]Always, he touched something darker, something more, more intimate, I want to say.³⁶

Reading this story, the reader has an advantage that was absent from “Back Pain.” Lee recounts experiences from her distant past, events that she has reflected upon throughout her life. In other words, the reader is not presented with the events themselves, but also with some level of interpretation from the narrator. As illustrated in the passage above, Lee’s thoughts are superimposed onto the events she recounts in her narrative. Lee’s conclusion that something ‘more intimate’ than her body had been touched by this man is completely substantiated.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 138.

Lee's adult perspective is also incorporated into the story. This mature viewpoint adds another level of interpretation to Lee's story in many ways. It emphasizes the tragic reality that sexual abuse could happen to a child, perhaps, even, with her parents' knowledge. It also comments on the ways in which an individual can be affected by sexual abuse. Above all, the adult's perspective continues to reinforce the unpredictable element of danger involved in child sexual abuse. In "Tip of My Tongue," Wallace encourages her reader to become aware, and reach an understanding, of the deep-reaching consequences of the nature of violence, both physical and sexual, inflicted upon women and children.

Perhaps what I don't remember is worse, even, than what I do. Perhaps my silence is like taking aspirin to shut off pain. Pain from an unknown source, pain that may be the sign of cancer. Or something else, something they can cure.³⁷

Lee's fears in the passage above illustrate the proximity of physical and sexual abuse to any individual's life. While she cautiously does not conclude that every female has experienced physical or sexual abuse - or one day will - Wallace's writing provides an opportunity to re-think the issue of physical and sexual violence within one's own life precisely because of this element of the unreliability of memory. Wallace clearly offers a warning here: this could be any one of us. Simultaneously, Wallace comments on society's tendency to remain silent about physical and sexual abuse. In "Tip of My Tongue," Wallace explodes our notions of silence. She clearly speculates that, by keeping silent, secrets will destroy us from within.

Elements of many of Wallace's short stories, similar to some of her poetry, speak not only to the discovery of a 'problem' itself but also to the ways in which an individual must

³⁷*Ibid.*, 145.

learn to accept and live with it. As Wallace once commented in a column, “[o]ur denial of [our] ...vulnerability affects us on an emotional and spiritual level [...]. In discussions of serious matters [...] we prefer the simple and the absolute: I’m right, you’re wrong. We want easy answers - we believe there *are* easy answers.”³⁸ In many ways this collection urges us to realize that there are no easy answers. People You’d Trust Your Life To is a lesson about our collective need to find a way to move beyond the tragedy itself while also dealing with our knowledge of it. The narrators’ thoughts in two of these stories may mirror the reader’s own experience with the content of Wallace’s stories. Their thoughts may also shed light on the experience of reading Wallace’s poetry. One passage in particular from “Fashion Accents” illuminates the complexities of carrying profound knowledge throughout one’s life.

It was like I just discovered something, and, at the same time, discovered that I’d known it all along, so that it started to dawn on me that I could never stop knowing it again.³⁹

This realization can be easily adapted to the characters’ experiences of physical and sexual abuse in “Back Pain” and “Tip of My Tongue.” Wallace provides opportunities throughout each of these stories to discover the nature of the problem. By doing so, the reader, like the narrator in “Fashion Accents,” may reach the realization that s/he had diagnosed the problem, on some level of consciousness, long before it was actually clarified, within the story. The reader may also sympathize with the narrator’s inability in each of these stories to ‘stop knowing it.’ We may ourselves understand the implausibility of discarding our knowledge

³⁸Bronwen Wallace, “Thoughts on the vulnerability of humans, prompted by a trip to emergency,” KWS, 16 May, 1988. (AWTW 74).

³⁹Bronwen Wallace, “Fashion Accents,” PTLT, 54.

of unpleasant ‘things,’ details, and events that are difficult to reconcile within our lives. The narrator in “Heart of My Heart” reflected upon this challenge and offered remarkable insight into the way in which an individual can move forward with her/his life with the knowledge of something darker.

I thought [...] I was progressing somehow, getting over it [...].
Now I don’t know. Now, I think maybe you never get over
anything, you just find a way of carrying it as gently as possible.⁴⁰

This insight may ring true for Wallace’s readers. Many individuals are well aware that, rather than ‘getting over’ something and moving beyond it, as individuals, we often find ways to carry on with our lives, one day at a time, despite particular events or occurrences. The truth of this statement lies in our recognition of each individual’s need to retain her/his knowledge in a way that allows that individual to move forward in life. Wallace’s own beliefs - particularly regarding her desire to educate her reader on such intense issues - are reflected in the narrator’s moment of clarity in “Heart of my Heart”: ‘you never get over anything, you just find a way of carrying it as gently as possible.’

⁴⁰Wallace, “Heart of My Heart,” *PTLT*, 13.

Chapter Four
**“the moment when we know ourselves to be unique,
mortal, separate, like everybody else”**
Bronwen Wallace’s ‘Feminist’ Editorial Columns

Politically, I know from the response I get that this column is very important to many women in Kingston. I get a very strong sense that things get said here that don't get said elsewhere. Personally, I enjoy writing it more than I ever thought I would - I like the challenge of having to think through so many issues, and of exploring them, as articulately as possible, in a limited space. I also find the response - positive *and* negative an important and exciting challenge.

Bronwen Wallace,

“Goodbye - and may the writings of other women in the community flow freely,” Kingston Whig-Standard, 12 September, 1988.

In May 1987, Bronwen Wallace began writing a column for the Kingston Whig-Standard. "In Other Words" ran weekly - with the exception of a three and a half month break beginning September 1988 when Wallace was writer in residence at the University of Western Ontario - until February 1989 when she was diagnosed with cancer. The column provided Wallace an opportunity to express many of her beliefs, ideas, and opinions regarding society and change through a medium that spoke immediately to its audience. "In Other Words" discussed countless social issues within their larger contexts. These issues, many of which were present in Wallace's poetry and short fictions, ranged from the role of children in society, the importance of connections between human beings, and an individual's responsibility to the collective society, to the ways each individual's behaviour is linked to the existence of social problems and the ways in which an individual human being can change the world. In her column, Wallace urged us to recognize not only the ways certain issues connect to one another, but also the impact each issue has on our own lives. Societal change, Wallace maintained, occurs slowly, one step at a time.¹

This chapter examines the substance and subject matter of "In Other Words." This examination does not move chronologically through Wallace's columns; rather it moves across the continuum of social issues she explored. By making our way along this continuum, we can see that Wallace often used her column, as she used her poetry and short fictions, to

¹For a similar approach to social change, see Charlotte Bunch, "Not By Degrees: Feminist Theory and Education," Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action - Essays 1968-1986 (New York: St. Martin's P, 1987) 240-253. Bunch develops a model detailing four ways she would like to see 'theory' used: 1) description of problem; 2) analysis of problem; 3) examination of how change is implied by analysis; and 4) suggestions for change resulting from analysis of problem.

challenge the dichotomy of ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary.’ She regularly addressed the widespread oppression of women and children in Canadian society, often focussing on physical and sexual violence. She consistently illustrated the ways in which the extraordinary is actually *part* of the ordinary. For example, in addressing the ‘extraordinary’ physical violence against women that occurs repeatedly in our society, Wallace attempted to illustrate that even something as seemingly insignificant as *one* person’s belief that a woman must have done something to provoke a beating - that she deserved it - can contribute to a larger societal attitude where we often prefer to ‘look the other way’ and continue to allow men to dominate women. This is not to suggest that such a belief is insignificant. Rather, our collective belief that one person’s thoughts could not affect the problem of violence in Canadian society as a whole is misleading. Further, Wallace’s writing *shows* her readers the consequences of thinking this way. Wallace also drew on society’s notions of privacy and the hidden (or shameful, or suppressed). She underscored the ways in which society hides issues relating to the oppression of women, such as societal biases and prejudices including the privileging of boys and men over girls and women, violence, sexual assault, and so on. In her column, Wallace also stressed that each of us needs to become aware of the ways we contribute to the existence of ‘extraordinary’ social problems. In other words, by not actively working to *end* women’s oppression, we allow it to continue. Most importantly, Wallace’s writing stressed that an awareness of issues of particular importance to Canadian women (e.g. the privileging of males over females, the use of women’s bodies and sexualities to sell a product or to entertain, women’s sense of vulnerability and fear in society, the physical and sexual abuse of women and children, etc.) is necessary before change, on either individual or collective

levels, can occur. “In Other Words” presented information about a variety of issues of particular importance to women in an effort to promote awareness of those issues. An examination of these columns illustrates that Wallace hoped her readers’ new-found awareness would prompt them to make changes in their lives. It was Wallace’s belief that these individual changes would also bring about changes in the broader society. Wallace insisted that opportunities to change the world existed at countless overlooked levels: in the daily, ordinary, mundane details of our lives.

“In Other Words”

On May 4, 1987, the Kingston Whig-Standard featured an article announcing the debut of Bronwen Wallace’s “feminist” editorial column. The article commented that Wallace viewed “In Other Words” as an opportunity to fill a very specific void in the Kingston community; she believed the community lacked a discussion of ‘human’ issues from a feminist perspective.

‘I think that there’s a real need for a forum for exploring issues in the world from a feminist perspective and I don’t see that as meaning women’s issues alone. I think that there are issues that concern all of us and that we need to look at them in a fresh way’ [...].²

For Wallace, feminist issues were not separate from the regular ‘stuff’ of life. She held strong to her vision of feminism as a perspective presenting new ways to look at issues affecting *all* members of society: she intended to use her columns as a way “to get across the idea that feminism is a way of looking at the world that benefits us all”.³ Wallace’s writing - her

²“New column by feminist writer starts today,” KWS, 4 May, 1987.

³Ibid.

poetry, short fiction, and non-fiction - urges us to examine each issue 'in a fresh way.' These efforts to create awareness and shift perspective - to change the world - encapsulates what Wallace's writing is about. The title of Wallace's column itself suggested what she would attempt to do. 'In other words' can be understood in a number of different ways: by interpretation, according to this reading, in explanation, to explain. Wallace's column made use of each of these definitions; it interpreted, offered perspectives according to different individuals, and, above all else, it explained. This title also pointed to a number of questions: in words other than what? Or whose? What perspective are we normally presented with? And why? "In Other Words" was also suggestive of writing and thinking - or re-writing and re-thinking - as a continual process. Each week "In Other Words" offered Kingston Whig-Standard readers new ways to 'look at their world' as Wallace addressed issues ranging from sexual assault, child abuse, and domestic violence to language, current local events, and global issues. Wallace offers alternative interpretations and perspectives to create or raise awareness about her subject matter. In the process, she raises questions for readers to consider which provide an opportunity to continue exploring the issue, to stimulate thinking, and, finally, to formulate, or re-formulate, personal opinion.

Wallace's understanding of 'education' was apparent throughout her columns for the Kingston Whig-Standard. As discussed in Chapter 2, Wallace overrode a traditional definition of education. In all forms of her writing, she avoided creating a hierarchical relationship between herself as teacher or expert and her reader as student. As Joanne Page notes in her Foreword to Arguments With The World, Wallace did not provide 'the' answer for her reader. Instead, she relied on an ongoing process of questioning - for both herself and

her readers - to achieve a better understanding of the issue at hand. As in her poetry and short fictions, Wallace's beliefs and opinions throughout "In Other Words" flowed boldly. She continued to present issues grounded in experience and avoided offering official wisdom. Wallace's method of education in her columns, as in her other forms of writing, was to present information in a way that challenged her readers' beliefs and/or opinions. "In Other Words" continued to challenge us to re-examine the ordinary details of our lives and in our society. Wallace's beliefs that education should be a holistic, life-long process encompassing all aspects of our lives and experiences become apparent throughout each of her columns.

Occasionally, Wallace reflected on the process of writing "In Other Words" and the ways in which it helped her learn more about writing poetry. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Wallace referred to writing poems as an 'argument with the self,' while rhetoric (i.e. effective or persuasive writing) was an 'argument with others.'⁴ She also commented specifically on the benefits of writing these columns, her arguments with others: "As a poet who writes rhetorical essays, I appreciate the public voice that that craft requires, a way of articulating a clear position on events and issues."⁵ In another column, Wallace contrasted the distanced, solitary, private process involved in writing poetry with the more immediate and connected process of writing "In Other Words."

Writing this column [...] still requires concentration, quiet and solitude [...] but then, a week or so later, there it is, in print. And there are the people, people who live in the same city I live in, taking the time to tell me what they think of it. My sense of being involved in an

⁴Wallace, "Celebrating the cadence of a particular voice," AWTW 87-8.

⁵Ibid., 88.

extended communal conversation grows weekly [...].⁶

Writing this column has also helped me to appreciate how much my readers' response contributes to my work, how much I use what people tell me about a poem or column in writing the next one. Sometimes this is a matter of looking at a theme or an issue from a new point of view because of what someone else has said. The conversation we are having expands, grows more complex. It could go on for quite a while.⁷

Wallace's comments here suggest not only that the columns *she* produced were often able to change what *others* think, but also that her readers' thoughts on and responses to her writing had a similar effect on her. In this respect, we are able to see the ways in which writing is connected to making changes in our everyday lives. Wallace herself commented on the ways the column made her

[...] feel part of the local community in which I live and the wider community in which I write. [Readers' responses] make my work with words, those difficult, airy things, seem as concrete as the work that goes into producing the food and clothing and furniture we also need to get along.⁸

As Wallace explains here, it is in the reader's response to, and interaction with, her writing that her words, by touching individuals, are able to change the world. Wallace was also involved in this process of change. Her ideas changed and grew in response to conversations and interactions with her readers. Through her writing, we sense that Wallace's readers influenced her as much as she influenced them.

Wallace's belief in our collective need to be active, responsible members of society

⁶Bronwen Wallace, "Reader response makes the 'isolated' writer feel integral to the community," *KWS*, 19 October, 1987. (*AWTW* 200).

⁷*Ibid.* (*AWTW* 201).

⁸*Ibid.* (*AWTW* 200-1).

is evident in her first column, “Feminists, like explorers, spend their lives venturing into unknown territory.” This column is representative of Wallace’s approach throughout “In Other Words”: her questioning manner and her belief in change never falter. In her inaugural column, Wallace raised important concerns for our consideration regarding *what* is discussed by, and recognized in, our society. She highlights a number of critical issues in contemporary Canadian society - particularly the physical and sexual abuse of women and children - and focussed on society’s reluctance to acknowledge these issues as problems. According to Wallace, this reluctance is based largely on our hesitancy to deal with ‘private’ matters in a public forum. Reluctance also stems from our *perception* of what is ordinary, but actually hides what is shameful or suppressed. Wallace’s writing works to expose the reality that society is saturated with images and ideas of what is normal, when, ironically, these images and ideas represent a minority of Canadians. As discussed in Chapter 3, Wallace drew attention to TV families that are presented as normal. Wallace correctly emphasizes that these images reflect the minority; in our society, families most often do not resemble these TV images. ‘Things’ that we hide or suppress or feel ashamed about - divorce, class, physical appearance, race and ethnicity, sexual preference, alcohol or substance abuse, fear for our safety, physical abuse, sexual assault, and so on - are, in reality, key components of the ordinary. Yet we continue to feel as though we cannot discuss or reveal what are, in effect, our commonalities because of a fear of being stigmatized as abnormal. In her column, as well as in her poetry and short fictions, Wallace introduces the ‘messy details’ of the ways in which

we live our lives.⁹ She tells the stories that do not get heard often enough: the story of the battered woman, the incest survivor, the sexual assault victim, and so on. Through a series of questions, Wallace implied that this collective silencing is one of the largest and most complex problems we must address in order to end women's oppression and change the world.

Why has it taken us until this decade to acknowledge that wife-battering exists, on a large scale, let alone recognize that it's a crime? Why this silence about incest, too, and child assault? Why do we go on talking about "the family" as if it always fit our happiest visions and was not, often, the source of violence, fear, and pain?

For each of us, male or female, asking such questions opens new perspectives.¹⁰

Wallace's early columns function in ways similar to 'Entry,' the first section of "Intervals;" they introduce the subject matter that will be addressed in future columns.

In her columns, Wallace often moved from the general to the specific. Her discussions tend to open with the collective, something to which many individuals would immediately be able to relate, before moving to the specifics of a given issue. For Wallace, the collective represents not the "Universal Human Experience," but rather our common experiences as human beings from which our individual experiences stem.¹¹ An early column illustrated this notion of moving toward the heart of an issue as Wallace observed that women's and men's individual experiences in society are reflected in examinations of specific issues.

⁹Bronwen Wallace, "The contemplative life: A necessity as well as a limitation for the writer," *KWS*, 6 July, 1987. (*AWTW* 198).

¹⁰Bronwen Wallace, "Feminists, like explorers, spend their lives venturing into unknown territory," *KWS*, 4 May, 1987. (*AWTW* 108-9).

¹¹Wallace, "Why I Don't (Always) Write Short Stories," *AWTW* 177.

[...] I see my job as a writer as trying to give expression to as much human experience as I can. Since I am a woman, much of this experience will be female and for that reason a lot of it will be previously *unexpressed* experience. [...] I know that a lot of what we have to say is going to be disturbing, frightening, ambiguous and therefore open to many interpretations. But I think we need to be able to say it, so that other women can look at it and decide how it relates to their own lives.¹²

Here Wallace clarifies that what she intended to write about would often be considered controversial because it might not have been openly discussed. It is evident throughout the body of her work that Wallace believed particular social issues (e.g. women's experience in society, violence, sexual assault, even current local events) could only assume significance in her readers' lives when we were made to consider their impact on our own lives. These connections, and the larger awareness they might inspire, are the first step in changing the world. As in her poetry and short fictions, Wallace moves beyond the initial 'shock' of her subject matter to stress that it is only by giving voice to such issues that women - and men¹³ - will be able to accurately assess the implications of these issues and make changes within their own lives.

Wallace also referred to the ways she hoped her readers would interact with her writing. Wallace described how she herself, as a reader, related to an essay she had recently read: "I found myself agreeing, disagreeing, laughing, arguing - all the things I want to do in

¹²Bronwen Wallace, "Pornography and ways of dealing with it," *KWS*, 22 June, 1987. (*AWTW* 71-2).

¹³As discussed in part in this chapter, men's need of and ability to change was one of Wallace's strongest beliefs. In her writing - and even in her work at Kingston Interval House - Wallace emphasized that men, too, are able to change.

any real human relationship.”¹⁴ This is the type of relationship Wallace attempted to create between her columns and her readers. As in her poetry, Wallace regularly refers to her reader personally, addressing her/him as ‘you.’ She urged us to consider each issue within a personal context with comments like ‘this could be you’ or with questions like ‘how would this affect you?’ This encourages self-reflection and provokes response. The content of Wallace’s columns differed from her poems and short fictions in that they represented, in a more complete sense, a communal conversation¹⁵ between writer and readers. By reading Wallace’s columns, each individual becomes part of that communal conversation through agreements, disagreements, and a full range of emotional responses to the writing. These one-on-one conversations, whether a conversation with another person or reading a particular piece of writing, were often the site of an individual’s change of thought or opinion. Wallace herself recognized that even seemingly small or minor changes are a crucial component of effecting social change.

Problems of Language

In an early column, Wallace introduced the argument that language is one of the central causes of the inequalities between women and men in society. Later columns reinforced this assertion, linking language to the prevalence of prejudice and bias in Canadian society. As Wallace explains, “[p]art of the problem is that cultural biases are often so deeply embedded in our language that they are not obvious, though they influence not only how we

¹⁴Bronwen Wallace, “When Jesus becomes more than a word and enters the world of human beings,” *KWS*, 22 August, 1988. (*AWTW* 42).

¹⁵Wallace, “Reader response makes the ‘isolated’ writer feel integral to the community.” (*AWTW* 200-1).

speaking, but also how we interpret the world around us.”¹⁶ In effect, she identifies language as a critical site for the reproduction of power relations. Wallace explores issues like physical violence and sexual assault and their connections to our actions and beliefs from this foundation. An August 1988 column focussed on the specific ways in which language is used in our society. This discussion prompted the question of the effect of our use of language on our position in society as well as on our roles in personal relationships. This question was grounded in a discussion of specific words with concrete realities.

As long as a word means only one thing, as long as we don't have to live with it in the world, we can go on maintaining our assumptions and our prejudices. Lesbian is just a word until your daughter comes out to you. Then you have to live with her as a fellow human being in the world.¹⁷

Wallace insisted on our need to broaden individual perspectives in order to become truly aware of the significance of each of the issues she discusses. This requires discarding our beliefs, assumptions, and prejudices. When Wallace urges us to consider how ‘lesbian’ or ‘cripple’ could become a part of our reality, we begin to recognize the consequences of our words and actions. Wallace subtly reminds us that we have to live with one another ‘as fellow human beings in the world.’ This awareness might prompt change at the most significant level; when an individual alters her/his behaviour (or language, attitude, etc.), this seemingly small change affects every person whom that individual encounters.

In “When Jesus becomes more than a word and enters the world of human beings,”

¹⁶Bronwen Wallace, “Cultural bias has created language for society where females are invisible,” *KWS*, 13 July, 1987.

¹⁷Wallace, “When Jesus becomes more than a word and enters the world of human beings.” (*AWTW* 43).

Wallace also addresses the ‘cultural biases’ that are ‘so deeply embedded’ in the language we use. She raises the issue of the ‘hidden’ element of intent in the ways in which we speak.

Green. Cripple. Lesbian. Jesus Christ. Just words on a page. We can use them to describe. To insult. To include. To exclude. To judge. To discriminate. To praise. To hurt. To heal. But when they enter our world as flesh, then and only then do we have to live with them. Then and only then do we receive that challenge. If we want to accept it, that is.¹⁸

Wallace recognizes the often contrasting ways words can be used - describe/insult, include/exclude, and so on - and emphasized that opportunities exist to accept the challenge of using language *in a respectful way*. Changing our use of language is, in itself, social change because it questions the very site of the reproduction of power relations. Wallace maintains that, as individual human beings, we must learn to live with the realities of the ways we each use language.¹⁹ Through this framework, Wallace moves toward a closer examination of some of the issues that recur (i.e. physical and sexual violence against women and children) in “In Other Words.”

Gender Socialization and Self Image

On many occasions Wallace addressed the roles of girls and boys in Canadian society as well as society’s expectations of them. Wallace was particularly troubled by the implication that “in this culture at least, part of a boy’s growing up involves his becoming

¹⁸Ibid. (AWTW 44).

¹⁹See also Bronwen Wallace, “Away from familiar ground: Two stories of choices made in alien worlds,” KWS, 23 January, 1989. (AWTW 67).

invulnerable. Tough. Able to take it.”²⁰ She lamented the reality that, in this society, boys and men are not ‘allowed’ to express their emotions, ask for help, or admit weakness. Expectations such as these, Wallace insisted, create an atmosphere in which young boys may grow up to become men who may know no way other than violence to express their emotions and frustrations. Young girls’ conditioning by *this same society* is an equally significant contributing factor to situations of domestic abuse, emotional and/or psychological abuse, and a culture in which women are oppressed in countless ways. In a column examining the ‘self-perception of girls,’ Wallace stresses the harshness of young girls’ experiences in this society.

“Girls need to realize and be taught to respect themselves for who and what they are and that they are worth something.”

That statement, by a 13-year-old girl, speaks directly to what girls today do not realize and are not taught by the culture they live in.²¹

Teaching respect in general, let alone self-respect, is a monumental undertaking. It suggests a need for fundamental changes at all levels of our lives and society. Clearly this is no simple task. Yet these changes, Wallace insists, are critical and *must* occur in order to end, or at least diminish, women’s oppression. This particular column stresses our collective responsibility in the matter. Readers cannot easily escape the sense of failure in Wallace’s words: *we have let young girls down*. The accuracy of this young girl’s response is reflected in women’s ‘wishes’ appearing in another column (“‘What do women want?’ - wish lists for Christmas”) where women were asked, if they could have anything, what they would want.

²⁰Bronwen Wallace, “Thoughts on the vulnerability of humans, prompted by a trip to emergency,” *KWS*, 16 May, 1988. (*AWTW* 73).

²¹Bronwen Wallace, “The self-perception of girls: Good social skills but feelings of inadequacy,” *KWS*, 18 January, 1988. (*AWTW* 123).

Their responses are particularly revealing: they illustrate that women's courage to achieve various goals and dreams and women's freedom to function in society without fear are two traits that need to be more widely encouraged in, and assured by, Canadian society. Traits and advantages that are extended to one group in society (men) must also be extended to society's other members (women and children) in order to create a culture in which women and children are safe, valued, and respected. The women's comments in this column speak directly to the ways young girls are failed, or let down, by each of us as members of our society. As Wallace identifies, young girls and women are not properly educated by their families or their society. Wallace's thoughts on the education of children begin to shine through in this column. As she discusses in another column, addressed later in this chapter, Wallace believed that, as a whole, each member of society was responsible - through her/his actions and behaviours - for the education of *all* children.

The notion that society fails women and children is reinforced by Wallace's own wish in response to the question 'if you could have anything, what would you want?' Similar to "Intervals" when the narrator turned the dedication of the poem to herself, Wallace expresses her feelings through her own 'wish,' drawing attention to the sadness related to women's oppression in society.

My own wish [...] grew out of asking other women theirs. I began to see it in their faces when I first asked my question. A look of deep, serious pleasure as they took the question in and considered it, seriously [...].

My own wish, then, is to see that expression on women's faces, hear that laugh in their voices, more often.

Did I say more often? Change that to “all the time.”²²

There is a recognition in Wallace’s wish reflecting the reality that women do not often have the freedom to express and/or achieve their desires; in this society, women seldom feel they *can* have everything they want. Wallace’s wish may appear lighthearted, but it speaks directly to a more serious truth: we live in a society where women feel either unable or incapable of doing, or achieving, everything they want. Within Canadian society, there are women who lack confidence in their abilities and accomplishments which creates a sense of women’s inherent incapability or inability. Further, in a seemingly endless cycle, women’s incapacities materialize in their daughters’ experiences. This connection was reflected in a similar column where women expressed their aspirations for their daughters.

Independence was first on everyone’s list. Integrity, self-esteem, gentleness, “a strong sense of social justice.” Everyone recognized the opportunities that the feminist movement had created [...] and all hoped that their daughters would never be “complacent about the world,” but see themselves as “part of a larger community.”

Statistics indicate that many of their hopes will not be realized [...]. I see it in girls’ faces, sometimes, when I visit the high schools, especially the senior grades. It’s as if they are catching on, slowly.²³

It is clearly a difficult task for a parent to teach a child *how* to realize these aspirations. Although the feminist movement has achieved a great deal for women and for human beings in general, much of this has been, or is, taken for granted by younger generations. Members of these generations are aware that women’s experiences have not always been this way; it

²²Bronwen Wallace, “‘What do women want?’ - wish lists for Christmas,” KWS, 21 December, 1987.

²³Bronwen Wallace, “And what are little girls made of . . . ?,” KWS, 30 November, 1987. (AWTW 118).

is important to remember that it was never *their* reality. There is an acknowledgement in this passage that, on some level, we are all aware that women's experiences will not fundamentally change within a lifetime. An individual's (or a group's) desire for change prompts a drive to promote awareness of a given issue or situation (in this case, women's oppression). Wallace's writing works to raise our awareness - to explain - issues related to that oppression. It is through efforts like Wallace's and an increased awareness of the problems women face that individuals may begin to shift their focus to our collective need to make changes that will end or diminish women's oppression on all levels in society. This is one way by which we are able to change the world.

Children have always been important to Wallace in both her personal life and in her writing. As her career progressed, and as a result of her work at Kingston Interval House, Wallace's focus on the well-being of children intensified. As she noted in an early column, "[I]ike every child, my son represents the future."²⁴ Wallace believed children should be treated with as much respect as adults. She maintained that the responsibility to see that children are treated this way rests with their larger community. In this respect, we share this responsibility as members of society. Although our larger community, our society, is representative of many achievements of the feminist movement, it still negatively influences young boys and girls. In her columns, Wallace brings to our awareness the reality that women's adult experiences are clearly connected to society's expectations of young girls and boys, of women and men. In all aspects of her writing, Wallace demands our recognition that

²⁴Bronwen Wallace, "Before we teach sex to our children let's explore our own feelings," *KWS*, 20 July, 1987. (*AWTW* 129).

society is a strong, influential force in our lives. Further, Wallace's columns insists we recognize the consequences of our individual roles within society and that we realize the importance of our responsibility for the education and development of all children. Wallace illustrated this notion of collective education through the example of her own experience, noting her thoughts about her son in a column entitled "Shaping a young male mind."

As I watched my son [...] I realized that I was entrusting him to a public education system in its widest possible sense. What sort of man he becomes depends not only on his teachers, but also on everyone he meets, on how much they have thought about the roles our culture gives them depending on their sex and on how hard they work at changing those roles. Like every child, my son represents the future, but it's a future that grows out of our present. His limitations or possibilities, the the possibilities for all of us, depend on what we do, now.²⁵

It is overwhelmingly clear in this column that, while individual change is necessary, alone it is often not enough. For change in society to be truly effective, shifts in personal attitudes and actions must occur on a collective level as well. Personal shifts occur through unsettling recognitions of ourselves within particular societal problems and open discussion of these connections. Wallace emphasizes that we belong to larger communities and implied that there are benefits to working together to change the world in order to end women's oppression.

Gender Inequality and Violence Against Women and Children

The inequalities we experience on personal and individual levels - within our families, for instance - are often reflective of the inequalities that exist in society. Within our larger community of educators, workers, and citizens in general, Wallace stressed that young girls

²⁵Bronwen Wallace, "Shaping a young male mind," KWS, 8 September, 1987. (AWTW 129).

continue to be regarded as 'less than' boys. In Canada, 'women's work' is often deemed less important and less valuable than 'men's work.' In a society that considers women to be less important and less valuable than men, we are at risk of harm simply because we are women. Realities such as these work together to teach women that there exists an increased level of danger for us within our own society. This sense of danger, as all too many women know, is not easily forgotten.

The feeling of danger is one that arises again and again. Women talk of being afraid of dimly-lit streets or open spaces that seem more ominous at night. We may *know* that, statistically, we're more likely to be raped at home by someone we know, but that doesn't change how we *feel*. Our sense of vulnerability is increased by the presence of pornography, by billboards where our bodies are displayed, by the likelihood of being yelled or whistled at.²⁶

Rational knowledge and statistical awareness, as Wallace recognizes, are not always commensurate with women's feelings of comfort and safety. These feelings, Wallace emphasizes, are certainly not diminished by the images of women, and the messages they carry, which surround us. Wallace identifies all aspects of Canadian society - from advertising and language to statistical realities of assaults and men's unquestioned power over women - as factors contributing to women's faltering sense of personal safety and our heightened sense of vulnerability in society. By discussing this issue, Wallace brings to her readers' attention - perhaps by presenting a new perspective - the reality that many women never feel completely comfortable within our society. Women's fear of dimly-lit streets at night causes as much apprehension and insecurity, if not more, as the continual 'presence of pornography,' the use of our sexuality in advertising, and men's freedom to yell and whistle at us at their discretion.

²⁶Bronwen Wallace, "Sharing Block D with kids," *KWS*, 11 May, 1987.

This information may heighten readers' awareness of the subtle ways society functions to keep women - consciously or unconsciously - aware of our vulnerability and fearful for our safety.

Women's sense of connectedness and shared experience in Canada, a patriarchal society, also contribute to the existence of women's oppression. Wallace specifically confronted the significance of women's sense of shared experience in a column discussing Kingston's September 1987 "Take Back the Night" march and rally. She observed that "what happens to any one woman affects us all, [...] what joins us together is the fact that, in this culture, *all* women are in danger because we are women."²⁷ Wallace often presented statistics. Statistically, most women can expect to be physically or sexually harmed at some point during their lifetimes. Wallace noted that, in the late 1980s, one in every five women are battered.²⁸ In the United States in 1997, a woman was battered every nine seconds.²⁹ In the 1990s, the number of women who will be sexually assaulted at some point in their lives is projected as high as one in every four women. We know, too, that we could become one of the women murdered each year by their male partners. In Canada in 1989, the year that Wallace died, seventy-six women were killed by their male partners or ex-partners.³⁰ This

²⁷Bronwen Wallace, "Women speak out to women: A heartbreaking record of painful experience," *KWS*, 21 September, 1987. (AWTW 142).

²⁸Bronwen Wallace, "Domestic Violence: What Is the Connection between Home and School?," AWTW 98.

²⁹Vera Anderson, A Woman Like You: The Face of Domestic Violence (Seattle: Seal P, 1997) i.

³⁰www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/981027/d981027.htm#ART2
According to Statistics Canada, women are far more likely to be killed by their partner than

knowledge only intensifies women's feelings of danger. In fact, it is an unspoken recognition amongst women: *we are always unsafe precisely because of who we are*. This information provides an opportunity to recognize the reality of women's experiences in society. Wallace's discussion of women's realities is furthered in another column detailing the life experiences of one woman, Carol, who was sexually abused as a child. As an adult, Carol was battered by her husband. According to Wallace, Carol's story "is also the story of 500,000 other women in Canada."³¹ Statistics, however, are not most important here.

What matters is understanding how we, as a society, have condoned the idea that a man can control his wife, using violence if necessary. We have chosen to regard this violence as a "private family matter" and not a crime. We have ignored women's stories or asked them what they did to provoke the violence, as if it were their fault. Carol's story is a message to all of us to look again at our assumption that all families are happy ones - and ask some hard questions.³²

Wallace presents violence against women here in a new perspective: all members of society share responsibility for its existence. Although many of us do not believe in violence as a means of solving problems, Wallace identifies the ways in which we do nothing to prevent others from resorting to violent behaviour. We share responsibility because of our assumptions, because of our decision that it is 'none of my business,' and, above all, because we silence women with our doubts when they have the courage to speak about their abuse. Our doubts about women's stories stem from the image of the family that society upholds.

by a stranger. In 1997, 73 women were killed by a current or ex-spouse or boyfriend.

³¹Bronwen Wallace, "When sexual abuse scars a girl's life, a marriage of violence often follows," *KWS*, 19 May, 1987.

³²Ibid.

By drawing attention to our need to re-examine our ‘assumption that all families are happy ones,’ Wallace suggests our shared need to discard our assumptions in order to gain a more objective perspective to educate ourselves. As Wallace herself wrote, this can only be done by ‘asking some hard questions.’ When we begin to question our assumptions and beliefs, there is room for change. This process of questioning and learning is, in itself, a process of change. It is also, for Wallace, an important cycle of education. Education in this sense can effect social change on both individual and collective levels.

One of Wallace’s skills as a writer was her ability to shift our perspective from individual to collective issues. In “When sexual abuse scars a girl’s life, a marriage of violence often follows,” Wallace considers the ways individual human beings contribute to the collective societal problem of violence against women. Wallace links individuals’ attitudes and actions to the overall nature (e.g. patriarchal, oppressive, competitive) of the society in which we live. In this column and another appearing shortly after, Wallace identified our inaction as, essentially, condoning a particular behaviour. Again, she moved quickly from the general to the specific.

Most of us would call the police if we saw someone vandalizing our neighbor’s car. How many of us would do something if we saw or heard our neighbor beating his wife? What about either parent hitting their children?

All too often, too many of us do nothing. We *say* this is because we “don’t want to interfere,” but what does “not interfering” *mean*? I think it means that we condone the right of men to use violence to control their wives and of parents to use violence to control their children.³³

³³Bronwen Wallace, “The evil of family violence is perpetuated when we ignore its child victims,” *KWS*, 1 June, 1987. (*AWTW* 135).

These are strong words. This example reinforces the severity of physical violence. We know that physical abuse is just as much a crime as vandalism. Although we may not *promote* the use of violence, by not actively seeking ways to end violence, we are, in fact, condoning this behaviour. Wallace further identifies the ways we allow violence to continue. In this seemingly pessimistic discussion, she insists that change *is* always possible.

Domestic violence is one of the most widespread crimes in our society. [...] It continues because we allow it to continue. That also means that we can change it. We can make sure there is wide public education about domestic violence, especially in the schools, and generous funding for shelters and programs for batterers. But we need to change ourselves too. We need to look at the ways in which we all use violence - or the threat of violence - to resolve conflict and try to change that.³⁴

Wallace detects our blatant double standard. Here she introduces the necessity for each individual to be opposed to violence on all levels of our lives and in all aspects of society. Wallace also raises some very serious and difficult questions regarding the meaning of our actions and intentions. The message behind even seemingly harmless actions - like expressing our frustrations with one another by saying 'I'm going to kill you' - promotes the same acceptance of the use of violence as ignoring signs of domestic or child abuse. In this column, Wallace illustrates a number of ways in which doing nothing is synonymous with approval. She gives voice to our awareness that, in this society, individuals regularly avoid personal difficulty at another's expense. For instance, as suggested in "The evil of family violence is perpetuated when we ignore its child victims," we often find it easier to ignore violence against women children, calling it a 'private matter,' than to question our belief that it is 'none

³⁴ Ibid.

of our business' and actually *do* something about it. One of Wallace's main contentions was that we must discard our stubborn insistence that 'it won't happen to me' or 'it won't happen to someone I know.' Unsettling recognitions - that violence could happen to any one of us - must take place in order for there to be a conscious and concerted effort by society as a whole to make changes that will end, or at least drastically reduce, violence and other forms of women's oppression.

In specific discussions of domestic abuse, Wallace repeatedly draws attention to the children caught up in violent relationships. This was apparent in some aspects of Common Magic, The Stubborn Particulars of Grace, and People You'd Trust Your Life To; this focus also surfaced in "In Other Words." In a June 1987 column, Wallace examined a shift in the focus of Ontario women's shelters, including Kingston Interval House. Many shelters began to employ child support workers in recognition of the unique effects experiencing domestic abuse can often have on children. This shift was significant because it "reflect[ed] a growing recognition that children are often the forgotten victims of family violence. Not only are they frequently yelled at and assaulted, they also learn negative lessons on how to be adults themselves."³⁵ In all aspects of her writing, Wallace works to instill an awareness in her reading audience of the broad-ranging effects of physical abuse. As her career progressed, Wallace's writing, particularly her columns, repeatedly returned to the children involved in the issues she discussed. Within the Kingston community, Wallace's efforts to ensure the well-being of children remain obvious at Interval House today, ten years after her death. A program centring on the care of children is still in place at the House. A Children's Special

³⁵Ibid. (AWTW 133).

Needs Fund also was established, at her request, in Wallace's name shortly after her death. Money from this fund was to be used specifically for the children during their time at Kingston Interval House. For example, coats and shoes could be purchased for children who may have arrived without adequate clothing. Donations to the Children's Special Needs Fund are still accepted in Wallace's memory.³⁶ Through her focus on children, Wallace emphasized the process of *unlearning* these negative behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs.

Secrets and Silence

"In Other Words" cautioned that physical abuse was not the only form of violence children experience in homes across Canada. Wallace repeatedly discussed incest and child sexual abuse. In keeping with the nature of much of her writing, in these discussions, Wallace brings to our attention the reality that tragedies like incest and sexual abuse can happen even to children in 'normal' families. In a column examining incest which followed soon after her discussion of family violence, Wallace recounted events from one woman's incestuous childhood, specifically drawing attention to the outward appearance of her family.

It's important [...] to understand that Sarah's family appeared to be a "normal" one. Her father was considered a "nice man." Like other forms of violence and abuse, incest is widespread and occurs in all kinds of families. Part of the damage done to its victims is that we like to think that it isn't so. When they try to tell us differently, we don't believe them.³⁷

As she does in this passage, Wallace used "In Other Words" to repeatedly challenge the accuracy of appearances. She was especially critical of our tendency, when something (a

³⁶Darlene George, Personal Interview, 1 December, 1998.

³⁷Bronwen Wallace, "A story of incest: Coping with parents' betrayal and surviving the damage," *KWS*, 27 July, 1987. (*AWTW* 136).

family, an individual, a given situation) *looks* 'normal,' to not be sceptical that *perhaps* things may be different than they seem. By doing so, Wallace maintains, we silence victims when they speak out. There is ample evidence that society's doubts and disbelief cause harm to these individuals. In this column, Wallace underscores our reluctance to accept the fact that often appearance and reality do not match. In other words, Wallace again urges us to recognize that 'bad' things *can* - and *do* - happen to 'good' people.

Another column, "Shielding secrets: a moral tale," discussed at length the damaging effects keeping a secret can have on both an individual as well as those close to her/him. By keeping secrets, our collective silence greatly diminishes the opportunity for there to be widespread awareness of, and education about, difficult societal issues. Without awareness promoting education, changes will not occur in society. By Wallace's estimation, our individual silences directly contribute to the gap between appearances and reality. This is not necessarily only an individual issue.

A lot of us put a lot of work into keeping all kinds of secrets about ourselves and our lives and our families. ...[A]ll too often we do it because we're afraid of what might happen if we tell. We're afraid we might reveal that our family is not a happy family or a normal family or an ordinary family - or whatever it is we think those other families are. Those other families, with *their* secrets.

By keeping secrets we maintain the myth of the normal family. By keeping secrets, we maintain the myth that there is Only One Way for a family to be. By keeping secrets, we never have to ask why The Family can only be maintained by keeping secrets.³⁸

Here Wallace underscores the common elements found in, and the collective components of, our 'individualness.' Our individual experiences are not as unique as we may have imagined.

³⁸Bronwen Wallace, "Shielding secrets: A moral tale," *KWS*, 15 August, 1988.

Wallace also challenges our irrational fear of destroying the appearances of things that, ironically, are not worth preserving.

Every day I meet people who are afraid to talk about what goes on at home because it might “destroy the family.” [...] Odd, isn’t it. We are afraid that “the family” will be destroyed if we talk openly and honestly about our fears and our desires as human beings.³⁹

Wallace reassures us with the knowledge that, secrets and all, people have always learned to live with one another. The solution was clear for Wallace: “we have to stop lying to ourselves and to each other. We have to stop keeping secrets. It’s scary, of course, because once the secret is out in the open we have to do something about it. And that means we have to change.”⁴⁰ Although we are each unique individuals, we often have common ‘problems’ with equally common solutions. While she does not explicitly state it in this column, its content suggests, again, that there is a need for unsettling recognitions here. Although we may feel abnormal because we do not mirror the images society upholds for us as women and men, we need to reach the unsettling recognition that we are, essentially, all the same. By keeping secret the things society has deemed abnormal or extraordinary - physical and sexual abuse, alcoholism, substance abuse, homosexuality, economic status, and so on - we further isolate ourselves from one another by the very ‘things’ that connect us. The first step toward ending oppression and changing the world, as Wallace identifies in this column, is to admit to our realities and become aware of the true condition of our society. This process of educating ourselves will allow us to move forward and change our society. Wallace expresses

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

strong opinions regarding child abuse in many of her columns. In one, she placed a great deal of the 'blame' for the existence of child abuse on Canadian society as a whole. Society's views of children, and women for that matter, play a large role in the tragedies that often happen to these individuals. Women and children have significantly less power than men in society; the empowerment of these individuals, by Wallace's standards, is closely linked to education. Education, in this sense, is based on our awareness that abuse exists and our collective acceptance that, in all circumstances, it is wrong. In this way, individuals will slowly begin to feel they can tell their stories *and* be believed. Wallace directly links the sexual abuse of children to their position in society.

One of the reasons sexual assault of children is so prevalent [...] is because children in our society are powerless. ...[A]s a society, we operate on the assumption that adults have rights and privileges which children do not. [...]

...[G]irls are at much greater risk because our culture is one in which women's bodies, women's feelings, our perceptions, ideas, skills, expectations, fears and desires are seen as less valuable than those of men and are treated with less respect.⁴¹

Wallace explicitly details here that our perceptions and assumptions about children and families are two factors contributing to the existence of the sexual abuse of children. Wallace also explores the ways in which individuals try to convince themselves and others that sexual abuse or sexual assault did not really occur. Moreover, Wallace brings attention to the reasons behind our denial of the existence of this problem. Specifically, Wallace discusses what it would mean to listen to these women and children:

...[T]o listen would mean we might have to believe what these stories

⁴¹Bronwen Wallace, "Cutting the lifeline to child-abuse victims," *KWS*, 6 September, 1988.

tell us about men. About our fathers and brothers and husbands and lovers. We might have to look critically at whose stories get told, whose interests are served at school, at work, at play, in the courts and on the streets. And once we listened, we might have to change.

No one likes to change. It's difficult and it's painful. It's especially unpleasant if you happen to benefit by having things just the way they are.⁴²

Wallace strikes at the truth of issues of violence against women and children here: 'to listen would mean we might have to believe.' By identifying the role that denial plays in silencing, Wallace also raises a number of other important and valid questions regarding the structure of Canadian society. Awareness, Wallace contends, may lead to a greater understanding and recognition that, if this can happen to 'me,' the men in our lives may also be capable of violence and abuse. Again, an unsettling recognition. Wallace places into perspective the notion that, as difficult as it may be, we need to reach an understanding that, under all circumstances and despite their consequences, what is wrong is wrong.

Wallace's column also draws attention to the stark differences between *prevention* and *intervention* in matters of sexual abuse. In a column entitled "Cutting the lifeline to child-abuse victims," Wallace stresses that methods of intervention alone are not enough. Clearly programs to care for abused children and women alike are neither reducing nor eliminating the occurrence of physical and sexual violence. Wallace firmly believed in prevention as a way in which to begin to address problems of child sexual abuse. In this column, Wallace refers to a conversation she had with a Sexual Assault Crisis Centre educator about child sexual abuse.

"No matter how much we tell children to protect themselves,"

⁴²*ibid.*

she says, “until we get men to stop sexually abusing children, we’re still going to have a problem.”

I agree with Leona. Although we have done a great deal in the last 10 years to bring child sexual assault into the open, most of that has been around intervention, not prevention.⁴³

Awareness of the sexual abuse of children and the dissemination of knowledge about this issue are closely linked in the prevention work lacking in Canadian society. Whole attitudes need to shift, if not completely change, in order to end child sexual abuse. In other words, broad-reaching educational programs should be established to ensure that abusers, not just ‘victims,’ are aware that sexual abuse under all circumstances is wrong and will not be tolerated by society. Further, ‘victims’ must continue to be educated that sexual abuse is not their fault. In order for this process of education to be successful, society would have to function in a way that emphasizes the teaching of self-respect. In this column, as in so much of her writing, Wallace hints at the amount of work that has yet to be done to ensure these changes occur.

“In Other Words” also explores sexual abuse and assault. These educational discussions were usually quite intense. In an August 1988 column, Wallace revisits the ways in which Canadian society - a culture in which young people are offered contradictory messages regarding sexuality - influences girls’ and boys’ attitudes of what is, and is not, acceptable behaviour. This discussion drew largely on a survey of schoolchildren’s attitudes toward rape. Students in grades six to nine expressed many misconceptions regarding sexual behaviour. In part, students revealed their beliefs that it is acceptable for: a woman to be forced into sex if a man spends money on her; a man to force a woman to kiss him; a man to

⁴³Ibid.

force a woman to have sex if they have been dating for six months. Most startling, though, were students' beliefs that rape is acceptable within marriage.⁴⁴ These statistics add an element of reliability to Wallace's discussion of the problems inherent in society's beliefs about sexual assault and abuse. Although Wallace conceded that statistics have their place, she was more concerned with the actual meaning of those numbers. In the remainder of this column, she reminds her readers to be aware of the context of those statistics.

Every one of those numbers represents a child. My son, your daughter. Every one can be read as a gauge to how they feel about themselves and each other. Every single one is a measure of how much we have failed them.

The results of this survey [...] point to the fact that the idea of male privilege where women's bodies are concerned is so deeply embedded that it seems "natural." Children learn from what they see [...]. And all around them, male privilege with regard to women is solid, unquestioned, supported.⁴⁵

Much like another column addressing sexual abuse, Wallace clarifies here that the 'numbers game' is not most important. The testament to this fact is that Wallace *uses* the numbers to bring her reader to a startling recognition: 'my son, your daughter,' 'a measure of how much we have failed them.' Wallace's comments point to the ways in which the education of our children, both within the school system and their family/home lives, is lacking fundamental components. An ideal education would be reflective of experiences that are *not* based on violence or controlling other human beings. As Wallace notes, in Canada, 'male privilege with regard to women is solid, unquestioned, supported.' Throughout "In Other Words,"

⁴⁴Bronwen Wallace, "Embedding the doctrine of male dominance," *KWS*, 2 August, 1988.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

Wallace develops the view that we need to make observations such as these and question their validity. Why is it that we believe men are 'better than' women and have the right to control us, often by whatever means necessary? We must assume responsibility, as members of society, for our society's condition. As responsible citizens, we must always be aware that children learn from our example and change our behaviour accordingly.

Wallace's discussions also centre on some of the ways we collectively fail our children in both their formal and informal educations. Her beliefs that education should be an all-encompassing, life-long process, drawing connections between different parts of our lives and personal experiences, are clear in a column entitled "Embedding the doctrine of male dominance." Wallace's opinion was most pronounced as she began to question formal methods - and discussions - of sex education in Canadian school systems.

Will such a discussion examine, honestly, the feelings that girls have about themselves and their self-worth, what they "owe" to a boyfriend? Will there be room to talk about the connection between being thought "stupid" in math class and feeling that it's your "fault" if your boyfriend tries to rape you? Will there be room to talk about why girls have trouble taking control of their sexuality - either by saying "no" or by getting and using adequate birth control - when they are not given any adequate role models of powerful women anywhere else in their curriculum?⁴⁶

In this passage Wallace brings forward paradoxical information for consideration. Low self-worth, Wallace acknowledges, may very well be connected to women's feelings of responsibility for sexual assault. Most importantly, Wallace links girls' difficulties in gaining control of their sexuality with the lack of 'any adequate role models of powerful women' in all other aspects of their school curriculum. The issues presented in "In Other Words" as well

⁴⁶Ibid.

as in Wallace's poetry and short fictions are clearly interconnected. Throughout her columns, Wallace emphasizes that, as society currently exists, the model she offers for discussions of sex education is unrealistic. The reader also recognizes this process of education *should* take place as Wallace outlined. The harsh reality is that personal, or individual, experiences are perpetually absent from our discussions and methods of education. By preventing us from seeing ourselves within our education, we do not learn about the true condition of society. It is an awareness of the personal implications that issues have which enables us to make changes within our society.

Wallace typically focusses on the wider social contexts of the issues she describes. Further, she places a great deal of emphasis on the importance of always remaining aware of this context. Only by examining - and questioning - the larger 'picture' and our position in it will we be able to change our society. Considering an issue within its wider social context lends additional understanding to that issue. In another column, Wallace illustrates this point with specific reference to the sexual assaults of women; her observations point to the difficulties inherent in our laws. "Laws, after all, are made in a specific social context and the laws around rape have to do with how women are perceived, how women are heard and whether women are believed."⁴⁷ By challenging the laws surrounding sexual assault, the reader may become aware of some of the ways the larger social context - women's position in society as a whole - influences the issue itself. Inherent in Wallace's observation is her acceptance that change must begin at the very basic, structural levels of society in order for

⁴⁷Bronwen Wallace, "Rape: How the law makes victims guilty," *KWS*, 17 August, 1988. (AWTW 62).

those changes to affect us all.

In this same column Wallace places her readers in a position where they could observe the ways their personal opinions and beliefs can affect more than just themselves as individuals. This prompts an examination of some of the reasons for women's reluctance to report sexual assaults to the police. Again, she offers statistics - that, in 1987, only one in ten sexual assaults were reported to police. She also notes that, when sexually assaulted, women were more likely to seek counselling at crisis centres instead of seeing this matter through the court system.⁴⁸ Wallace offers insight into many women's decisions to avoid legal recourse for their sexual assault.

This is because they are aware of how difficult the process is, because they fear that friends, co-workers and relatives will find out *and because they fear that they will be blamed for what has happened*. This fear is a real one. The hard fact is that women *are* blamed for crimes committed against us. Just as the battered wife is asked what she did to "deserve it" the issue of sexual history assumes that something in the woman's past makes her "fair game" for a rape or at least unworthy of society's protection against it.⁴⁹

Women often turn to social agencies, like crisis centres, that will help them *without question*. Women fear the consequences - both real and perceived - of legal involvement in sexual assault cases. As women, we fear we will not win if we face the courts. We fear our families, friends, and acquaintances will learn of what happened and, consequently, think differently of us. We worry our worst fears will be confirmed: that it was our fault. By describing these realities surrounding the sexual assaults of women in Canada, Wallace makes her readers

⁴⁸**Ibid.**

⁴⁹**Ibid.** (AWTW 63).

aware of women's perspectives about sexual assault, perspectives they may not have previously considered. Wallace articulates the seldom-heard everyday experiences of the far too many women who have been sexually assaulted. She writes openly and honestly about this issue for an audience that might not necessarily have been familiar with the viewpoints she presented. By bringing these perspectives to her readers' awareness, Wallace offers an opportunity to think about the issue of sexual assault, an opportunity that may challenge our individual beliefs and opinions. In this way, Wallace's writing effected change.

Wallace typically draws parallels between issues, events, beliefs, and so on, to illustrate her arguments. This was particularly evident in one column as she attempted to dispel the myth that 'no' means 'yes' and that women enjoy forced sex. The scenario Wallace creates causes the reader to re-examine her/his own beliefs, ideas, and attitudes regarding sexual assault.

We're all familiar with those scenarios in movies and TV shows where a woman starts out protesting a man's sexual advances and ends up liking them. [...]

But what if the scenario were one in which someone protested being hit over the head with a baseball bat and ended up liking it? Unimaginable, right? Rape is no less violent and no less a crime.⁵⁰

Wallace appeals to our sense of reason here by opening with a familiar image leading to our immediate recognition of the implausibility of the scenario where someone is assaulted with a baseball bat. With these examples, Wallace matter-of-factly exposes the absurdity inherent in the belief that 'women end up liking it.' The analogy she offered is successful because it exposes the irrationality of these cultural attitudes. The complexity of this issue, however,

⁵⁰Ibid. (AWTW 64).

is found in the recognition, as discussed earlier, that in this society, *sexual* matters are deemed *private* matters.

Wallace continued her discussion of the notion that sexual matters are private concerns and nothing more. Although many individuals would concur that, in most cases, this statement holds true, Wallace opens up her discussion to include some of the ways these so-called private issues permeate all levels of society. In other words, what appear to be private issues can, in reality, be deemed public and collective concerns. To demonstrate this connection, Wallace refers to the close links between female/male relationships in our society and the existence of countless social problems.

In a society where men hold enormous economic and emotional power over women, “giving in” is often easier than fighting about it or having to say “no” over and over again. [...] In other words, sexual relationships in our society cannot be separated from other aspects of the relationship between men and women.⁵¹

Women live daily with knowledge of the inequalities that exist between women and men in society. Wallace draws attention to the larger context in which these inequalities exist and explicitly discussed the difficulties inherent in working to better balance these relationships. Despite the 1983 amendments to the Criminal Code, Wallace maintained that laws surrounding sexual assault still are not reflective of the true nature of relationships between women and men in society, as discussed in the above passage. In order to change these relationships,

[...] we are going to have to ask a lot of questions about the nature of men’s attitudes toward women. These are [...] political questions, in the widest possible sense. They are questions about how we are

⁵¹ Ibid.

going to create a community where women and men can live together in trust and without fear.⁵²

Implicit in her observations is the difficulty of the task of questioning the men in our society. As Wallace discusses in another column, when we question men's actions in society (i.e. rape, battery), we are also questioning the behaviours and capabilities of the very men in our own lives. This is another unsettling recognition.

“The Politics of Everyday”

Bronwen Wallace's focus returns again and again to the ordinary details of our everyday lives. This, Wallace maintains, is where the most effective and lasting changes occur. Wallace's personal politics were strongly linked to raising individuals' awareness in order to effect social change. Individual changes occur on everyday, ordinary levels and are most important, Wallace insisted, to making changes on the larger, collective level of society. As Wallace reveals, “[t]he politics that matter to me are what I call ‘the politics of everyday.’ By this I mean, basically, that politics involve every aspect of our ‘ordinary’ lives, from the food we eat to the choices we make about education or jobs.”⁵³ It is important to note here that Wallace was always conscious of the element, and role, of choice in our lives. Her writing attempts to raise our awareness of the importance of the choices we make in our lives as well as the impact these choices have on ourselves and others. It is only by incorporating these discussions, like those found in “In Other Words,” on practical and personal levels that society will be able to fundamentally change in order to end women's oppression and change

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Bronwen Wallace, “The politics of everyday,” KWS, 31 August, 1987. (AWTW 38-9).

the world. In making this observation, Wallace remained open and honest about the difficulties involved in changing our society. In fact, she explicitly emphasizes these challenges in a column entitled “The politics of everyday.”

...[C]hanges take place slowly and often invisibly. Sure, there are lobbies and demonstrations, but there are also long hours of talking and arguing, challenging old assumptions, learning to see the world in a new way. This is never an easy process. The journey from a group of women getting together “just to talk” to the creation of shelters for battered women, say, is a long and painful one in which *each person* changes in some very fundamental way as she looks at herself as a woman in this particular culture.

Yet these are the changes that go on, daily, in kitchens and offices and classrooms and playgrounds and coffee-shops or wherever “ordinary” people get together to discuss their “ordinary” lives.⁵⁴

Wallace did not conceal her belief that the most important changes that take place are those that happen to individual human beings. These changes, Wallace emphasizes, often have the most lasting effects. People share their thoughts and beliefs with one another; their conversations - in ‘kitchens, offices, classrooms, playgrounds, coffee-shops,’ and so on - are an extension of this process of awareness, education, and change.

“The politics of everyday” openly discusses the reality that making changes in our individual lives as well as in society as a whole is a slow, arduous, and life-altering experience. This notion also appears in other columns where Wallace stresses the fact that our behaviour is learned; as a result, it can take a life-time to change. The difficulties of this process of change are illustrated in another column with reference to men’s violent behaviour. In “Violence: A one-way street leading nowhere,” Wallace stresses her belief that men are also capable of changing: “Most batterers are not monsters or ‘sickos’; they’re simply men who’ve

⁵⁴Ibid. (AWTW 40).

been brought up in a culture where our expectations of what 'being a man' is all too often leads to violence."⁵⁵ This observation may be difficult to accept initially. Wallace's words challenge our belief that men who batter are somehow fundamentally different from men who do not. This notion is comforting, as Wallace expressed in an undated address,

[...] because it means that the family is really ok except in a few cases. In other words, domestic violence is someone else's story, not ours. The problem I have with these explanations as "reasons" for domestic violence is that they raise more questions than they answer. They don't explain, for example, why all these pressures lead men to act violently only in relation to their wives or why, in fact, violence is a logical reaction to these problems in the first place. They don't explain why violence against women and children has a history as long as the history of the family itself, or why a man's right to beat his wife was until recently enshrined in law.⁵⁶

Here Wallace clearly suggests we each share the responsibility for creating, and maintaining, a society which promotes violent behaviour in men. Our tentativeness to accept this responsibility, Wallace acknowledges, is acceptable because we understand that the most effective changes occur slowly because they occur within individuals' belief systems.

In this column, Wallace details the life experiences of Rick, a 'reformed' batterer employed by a Kingston service organization for men offering group work with other violent men to learn where their anger comes from and how to control it. As she recounts Rick's success, Wallace's belief in humans' ability to change is unfaltering.

Rick's message to other men who are still being violent is: "Give yourself a break." And when he says it, it means so many things. Like

⁵⁵Bronwen Wallace, "Violence: A one-way street leading nowhere," *KWS*, 25 May, 1987. (*AWTW* 143).

⁵⁶Wallace, "Domestic Violence: What Is the Connection between Home and School?" *AWTW* 98.

not buying the roles our culture gives to men and women that cheat and limit us all. Like realizing boys can cry if they need to and that violence is a one-way street leading nowhere.

Like understanding that it's possible, always possible to change.⁵⁷

The emphasis here is certainly reminiscent of Wallace's column "Shaping a young male mind" which explored society's expectations of young boys. In "Violence: A one-way street leading nowhere," Wallace offers alternatives to these expectations. Her emphasis in Rick's story is twofold. First, she places domestic violence in its larger context by referring to the conditioning of young boys and society's expectations of them. Second, she shows her reader, by example of Rick, that *change is always possible*.⁵⁸ Simply acknowledging the possibility that we can each change is a step toward changing society as a whole.

A passage in "A story of incest: Coping with parents' betrayal and surviving the damage" furthers Wallace's scepticism of appearances of 'perfection.' Referring to the individuals she described in her columns, Wallace clarifies that, although it may seem they easily and miraculously solved their problems, these solutions occurred slowly over a period of time. In the passage below, Wallace defends her insistence to always include the 'nitty-gritty' details of the issues she describes.

[...] it also says a great deal about me as a writer, about my desire to give you only superwomen in these essays, women who've worked things out in ways that even my grandmother would approve of. But we all know that Superwoman is as much a myth as the Perfect Mother and the Always-Happy Family. The reality is each of us working through the damage we have suffered as best we can, sharing our stories as openly as possible in the hope that even the smallest details may be

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ See also "Introduction: The Morningside Interviews," AWTW 23.

of use.⁵⁹

As in her short story “Heart of My Heart,” Wallace recognizes that we must learn to carry our misfortunes with us as gently as possible; we must ‘work through our damage as best we can.’ Sharing our stories, ‘even the smallest details,’ Wallace insists, allows us to raise awareness and educate one another. Awareness, in its truest sense, should be based on appearances that *mirror our realities*. To ensure that appearances mirror reality, there is a need for unsettling recognitions and for open discussions of uncomfortable issues and experiences. Quoting British writer Fay Weldon, Wallace asserted that “‘We must lose our good opinion of ourselves if the world is to be changed, and see ourselves in those we most dislike.’”⁶⁰ Through awareness, conversation, and education, we can reach a position where we can choose to move beyond our safe insistence on the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ to reach the conclusion that we are strikingly similar. We exist together in this society and, therefore, must find solutions to our societal problems as a collective whole. Again, Wallace draws attention to the difficulties of this process.

For me, the first step in this healing is to get beyond the blaming and the scapegoating and the need for simple answers. Then, perhaps, we can begin to ask the questions we haven’t even asked yet, explore the responses and choices that might never have occurred to us before.⁶¹

It is only when we begin to take these issues seriously that we can examine the more

⁵⁹Wallace, “A story of incest: Coping with parents’ betrayal and surviving the damage.” (AWTW 139).

⁶⁰Bronwen Wallace, “Sweeping Statements About Life, and other light reading for a summer’s day,” KWS, 10 August, 1987.

⁶¹Bronwen Wallace, “AIDS, the ‘equal opportunity virus,’ challenges society’s most basic ideas,” KWS, 9 November, 1987.

important issues and questions that lie beneath the surface - the things that will lead to solutions, or the paths that will take us there.

“In Other Words” brought forward countless critical social issues for discussion by, and the consideration of, Wallace’s reading audience. Through the examination of “In Other Words” presented in this chapter, Wallace’s efforts to make changes in her own community through her writing can be recognized. Her desire to promote the view that ‘feminism is a way of looking at the world that benefits us all,’ expressed in the article announcing her debut as a columnist, was realized. Wallace used her subject matter each week in a way that not only brought each issue to her readers’ awareness, but also encouraged us to re-consider that issue in a new light and re-examine and/or re-formulate our individual opinions and beliefs. During her eighteen months as the Kingston Whig-Standard’s feminist editorial columnist, Wallace’s enthusiasm that we can ‘change the world’ never faltered. Wallace eloquently summarized her efforts in her column in part of her speech for International Women’s Day 1989:

When we look at what we’re up against in global terms, it sometimes seems impossible that anything can change. And yet one of the reasons we are all here today is that we know, as individual women, in our own particular lives, that change is possible - individual change and collective change. It seems to me that feminism, as a political force in this culture, is one of the main agents for social change at this time, specifically because it connects the individual and the collective, the private and the political. And, for me, it’s important to emphasize both. Individual change is, for me, only one aspect of the process because change for individuals always takes place in a social context. It takes place because of a social context.⁶²

⁶²Bronwen Wallace, “Coda: Blueprints for a larger life,” AWTW 224.

Conclusion

"I see only what we make of ourselves on earth,
how long it takes for us to love what we are"

Bronwen Wallace,

"What It Comes to Mean," Common Magic

Bronwen Wallace's efforts to change the world were evident in all aspects of her life. Her beliefs were strongly reflected in her writing. Through conversations with some of Wallace's family members, friends, and colleagues while researching my thesis, a portrait of Wallace as an ordinary woman began to emerge. While there was definitely a serious side to her personality, as we see in a great deal of her writing, Bronwen Wallace also had a sharp sense of humor and an infectious laugh. She was a strong person who worked for what she believed in. Generous and compassionate, Wallace was fiercely devoted to her vision of a better, safer, more humane world. Hers was a life lived with honesty and her beliefs about women's oppression were held with strength and consistency. These traits are reflected in all forms of her writing. As a reader, I applaud Bronwen Wallace's efforts to bring awareness to countless societal issues that are not readily discussed. I am repeatedly moved by the ways in which her writing worked to educate her reading audience largely through a process of questioning which was intended to spark further thought and consideration of the issues at hand. The world benefits enormously from writers like Wallace. According to those who knew her best, Wallace was one of those rare people who actually acted upon what they said (or, in this case, wrote). As discussed in this thesis, Wallace's beliefs were more than simply theoretical; she did not just state that we should *do something* to end violence against women and children. She herself acted upon this assertion and encouraged her readers to do the same. Wallace tackled many social issues that were not often openly discussed and emphasized the act of becoming aware of the issues she described. As Joanne Page observed, Wallace did not provide answers. Her writing in part was about the process of coming to consciousness about the countless elements contributing to the oppression of women and

children in Canada. Our individual lives are about choosing how we will each act as a result of that consciousness. Although she avoided offering 'the' solution to the problems and issues she addressed, Wallace's ideas themselves occasionally offered direction for change. At times, this direction was more concrete than others. Wallace always shared her belief that our world could become a better place for all human beings, regardless of an individual's sex or gender, age, race or ethnicity, class, and education among others. In this thesis, I have explored some of the more concrete beliefs regarding social change that Wallace advocated, and highlighted the value of the process of questioning that her works stood for.

My admiration of Bronwen Wallace's writing is twofold. First, I find it honorable that she used her gift and talents as a writer not only to express her own nature and feelings but also to take a strong stand on current social issues. Not only did she discuss current events and issues, she tackled many subjects that were not readily or sufficiently addressed by Canadian society: societal biases against women, child abuse, incest, sexual assault, and domestic abuse to name a few. By exploring these issues and others in a thought-provoking manner in her writing, Wallace inspired changes in her reading audience and, consequently, effected change in the world. The second reason I admire Wallace is directly linked to my argument in this thesis: namely her belief that we 'ordinary' human beings each possess the ability to make changes in our world. Wallace moved beyond the notion that only 'big,' readily noticeable changes matter. She focused insightfully on the often overlooked areas where it is also possible to change the world: at the level of ordinary individuals' thoughts, beliefs, and actions. Wallace maintained that the changes which may not be very noticeable (e.g. shifts in language or personal choice) can be as significant as 'larger' and more apparent

changes (e.g. changes to legislation), if not more so. While she did not always provide explicit solutions to the issues she raised, Wallace offered guideposts to help her readers incorporate these changes into their own lives. For Wallace, change in any form was still change; in other words, the cumulative effect of individual changes contributes to the 'larger' changes in our society.

Wallace's writing and the way she lived her life illustrate her tremendous belief in women's strength. Wallace relayed stories of women facing a variety of difficult circumstances, yet she always focused on women's ability to move through and beyond hardship. Although it was not her personal reality, Wallace insisted, and often illustrated through example, that many women *do survive* violence and abuse, even if the process takes a long time. Although some women are murdered as a direct result of the violence they encounter in their lives, countless other women do survive physical or sexual abuse as well as other forms of violence that may be less noticeable but more widespread in Canadian society (e.g. violent pornography, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and so on). By taking up these subjects and others, Wallace enabled her readers to follow the examples she presented in her poetry and prose writing; women are not simply victims, we are survivors who are able to help other human beings by personal example. Wallace's vision of the strength of women's lives acknowledged that women suffer in part because, as women, we are seen as targets. Simultaneously, she emphasized that our lives are significant in and vital to society as a whole. A recurring theme in Wallace's writing is that women's social location(s) and our responses to various issues and circumstances are complex. Her celebration of women's lives and women's life stories in her writing is a celebration of life as power and strength (possibility)

alongside our vulnerabilities (limitations) as human beings.

Possibilities for further research exist in several areas centering on both Wallace's writing and her life. A biography of Bronwen Wallace is long overdue. Although she led an ordinary, uneventful life, Wallace's was an extremely important life, one that not only deserves to be documented but that we could all learn from. A biography could pursue a question that Wallace pondered in her writing: how can something unremarkable (in the case of a biography, Wallace's life) assume such significance? As I discuss in part in this thesis, Wallace herself was conscious of the intricate relationship between the ordinary and the extraordinary. She was able to articulate clearly her thoughts and beliefs on the role this relationship played in the various issues she addressed and sincerely cared for the condition of the world in which she lived. A biography would illustrate Wallace's life as reflective of her art. The unremarkable or ordinary details of her life assume significance and, in essence, become extraordinary in her consciousness and in her writing. As she claimed and demonstrated in her writing, an individual's ordinary life (even her own) has meaning, significance, and influence beyond itself.

Wallace's writing was both multi-layered and multi-faceted. As Larry Scanlan has observed,¹ her writing reveals something new with each reading. Wallace's writing, as I explore in this thesis, speaks directly to a larger question: what is the relationship between politics and literature? Between life and writing? An examination of these questions in Wallace's writing *beyond* her focus on violence against women and children would also prove beneficial. These questions can also be applied to the lives of a writer's reading audience as

¹Larry Scanlan, Personal Correspondence, 22 March, 1999.

well as to the life of the writer. Wallace came to regard her readers' familiarity with the subject matter presented in her work as a crucial feature in effecting social change. Her insistence on the significance of personal experience corresponds to the connections between the life of a writer and the writing that s/he produces. For Wallace, our life stories are offerings to each other which can assist in the necessary process of learning how to love ourselves and each other, including our flaws - or, as Wallace phrased it, our limitations. Even at the end of her life Wallace continued to emphasize our need, as individual human beings, to accept and recognize who we truly are. It is only from this point that we are able to move forward in our lives and make changes and/or succeed in our endeavors on individual and collective levels.

Another possible area of research could explore the accessibility of Wallace's writing. As she acknowledged in an essay, she wrote as a white, working-class, heterosexual woman. She clearly admitted her point of view was limited and drew attention to her extensive precautions to write from her own experiences and to describe women's experiences only from her own position. While the women's stories emerging in her writing are primarily those of white, middle-class, educated women, they can be 'boiled down' to reveal some rather broad truths about Canadian society. For instance, while Wallace wrote about physical and sexual violence against women and children from her own perspective, in Canada women and children (both female and male) are regularly beaten and/or sexually abused *regardless of* their race or ethnicity, class, level of education, sexual orientation, and so on. An examination of the ways in which Wallace's writing speaks to the lives of a variety of women would prove to be both academically interesting and beneficial.

Closer study of aspects of Wallace's poetry beyond the theme of violence constitutes another possible area for further research. While research has focused on the importance of place or politics in Wallace's writing, there are many other elements of her writing that deserve equal attention: for instance, her growing focus on children and her notion of poetry as her own voice discovering the self (e.g. Wallace's early poetry, with its focus on family, friends, and the self, could be examined as her autobiography). Finally, further examination of the interconnections between different elements of Wallace's poetry would be valuable.

One of the most significant questions I am left with after completing this thesis is 'what do we take away from the work that Wallace carried out?' Certainly her readers, as I illustrate, have a heightened awareness of violence against women and children in Canadian society. But Wallace's writing goes further than this. I believe it also brings about a greater awareness of the roles we each play in society as well as of our individual responsibilities to ourselves and to those around us. What we do have as a direct result of Wallace's writing is another concrete example - in the body of my thesis - of the relationship formed between Wallace's writing and her reader. This thesis is a concrete manifestation of the conversation that Bronwen Wallace inspired in me over two years ago. Her work and my thesis also leave behind less concrete realities: the conversations individuals have with themselves and one another, the resulting process of 'thinking things through,' and the affirmations and challenges that are inspired by reading Wallace's words. In spite of her being silenced early by cancer, conversations with Wallace continue with each individual response to her writing.

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