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STILL NOT MEMORY

by WENDY M.L.L. CLOUGH

B.A., Middlebury College, 1984

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
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This thesis for the Master of Arts degree by

Wendy M.L.L. Clough

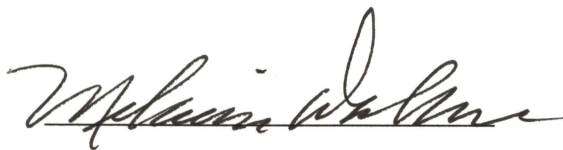
has been approved for the

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by

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Celeste Rehm

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Date 5-3-95

ABSTRACT

This thesis represents the written supplement to my MFA thesis exhibition in the CU Art Gallery. The exhibition, "STILL NOT MEMORY", presented a group of drawings that explored the relationship between nature and personal experience. This written thesis presents a related fictional account of reconciliation between fantasy and reality. Reproductions of pieces shown in the gallery exhibition are presented as figures following the text of the written thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

Trees are the stitches between land and sky. To me, they are metaphors for our ability to connect reality and imagination, emblems of our strong desire to jump into space while keeping our roots firmly in the earth. Art is the vehicle our imaginations use to explore the sky -- the unknown -- and because art is human, it never completely severs us from reality.

"Why is it so thrilling to see a tree hold pieces of sky in its branches . . .?", asks Diane Ackerman in her book, A Natural History of the Senses. "Trees conduct the eye from the ground up to the heavens, link the detailed temporariness of life with the bulging blue abstraction overhead." (1). The idea of the animated landscape has become, for me, a reflection of how our vision of nature is inevitably linked with art. In my work, I use trees as symbols of a flexible, organic connection between reality and imagination. The poet Wallace Stevens wrote, ". . . it is not only that the imagination adheres to reality, but also, that reality adheres to the imagination and that the interdependence is essential."(2).

My work has always been concerned with an imaginary world which explores the "interdependence" of fantasy and reality. The short story which follows is a corollary to the images presented in my M.F.A. thesis show.

STORY TEXT

Once upon a time, a girl wrote a poem. Because the poem was about life and death and things like snatched-out collarbones floating over hills, she shut it into a box and closed the lid.

Thwarted, it lay there: a prisoner. The poem was confused because it knew that its job was to rip out the girl's heart. It was so small that it could be hidden in a box, and so big it could fill the night. The size of the poem itself was in fact so inconsequential that it threatened the girl's sense of how things should be.

Sometimes the girl would wonder what to do with it. It seemed impossible to get rid of this poem, and that is what she most wanted to do. The poem must have been angry about something, because it would throb sometimes in a lumpy kind of way. This throbbing caused a sympathetic lumping and throbbing in various parts of the girl's own body. When the box was opened up and the poem was able to stretch a bit and to lie in the open air, the pain -- which wasn't exactly pain -- would cease. The poem would stop its strange little contortions, and the girl would be free of the sensations.

In a happier world, maybe, the poem would have been set free: gently released into a glowing space where it would float and radiate peace. Or it would have struck out on its own, heading down a path which beckons to a lake. This path is carved deep into the woods, exposing the beautiful view in a seductive and

tantalizing way. There is even a tiny stone bench where you can sit while contemplating nature.

Or maybe the poem would have been drawn with little heart-shaped wings on it, and launched from a bow it would have gone arching over the round hills. Or, it could have sprouted feet and calmly, (because it actually felt calm by now), walked out into that other universe.

But the poem could walk just from box to desk and it needed help to do it. Sometimes the girl would take it out and read it and fold it and then put it back again. And although the poem looked forward even to these tiny outings, it was at the mercy of its author, and she didn't want anyone ripping out her heart. She knew of the poem's deep and subversive desire to escape, and made sure she never gave it the chance. The poem became so unused to company that if it ever was introduced around, it plainly showed its awkwardness. It would embarrass people because it was so bent upon revealing itself. Body parts were whispered about in an infantile kind of way, and somehow people began to suspect that their secrets were at risk. The poem could never disguise its true amoral nature and an air of threat, like a smoky haze, could often be seen hanging about it.

The box itself was carved and painted; a golden sun shone up from the lid, but inside, the poem lay in a deep stillness. Time was a lock which held the poem in its clutches; other things changed but the poem didn't. The saddest thing was that the poem was aware of its condition -- it could have been happier had it

lived in ignorance. It still got some joy out of the throbbing business, and it amused the poem to see the girl double over with pain, or what seemed like pain. In its more evil moments it pulled a dark cloud down over the girl's face, sparing her body but inflicting a deeper discomfort.

The poem was frustrated and felt wrongly accused. All the work it had done with its lens, focussing, refocussing, mapping and plotting. Trying to show the girl that life was sharp and clear, that toes and moons were related like brothers and sisters, that babies and rockets launched out into the same endless blue sky.

Sometimes at night the poem would dream and when it awoke it would be sure that wings or feet had grown in its sleep, but they disappeared from view even before they became real. This would invariably anger the poem, because despite everything, it had an infinite belief in its ability to make things real. When it became angry, the poem would stomp its tiny feet and shout in a voice as loud as a trumpet, "I hate you!" louder and louder. This would crescendo into a fierce, racking sob requiring much reassurance, and that was often hard for the girl to give.

So, for a very small, hidden away kind of thing, the poem was pretty demanding. The girl thought that maybe it should be gotten rid of, and it could keep the box, too, because the whole thing was becoming repellent to her and what once had seemed precious and worthy of saving had transformed itself into a thing

of darkness.

But one night, the poem did finally and for real grow legs and wings, both, and as it tore out of its box the next morning (because it also had hands now, and they were red and strong), it looked around proudly and felt determined to wreak some vengeance.

It clutched a shield and a sword, and floated a banner above its head which was beautifully emblazoned with its own design. It glowed with light, and sparks came from its sword which was randomly striking at passing rocks. It marched up a hillside on a road made from thread- each inch embroidered to look like a garden path. The poem paused to take in the view, while taking special delight in the fact that this hill, this path had all been made especially for IT.

Suddenly the poem understood how it was meant to wound the girl. Things which had been vague before were now clear, and the poem felt both rage and love as it thought about its task. On its mission, the poem ascended the painted hills, made its way through deep valleys. Sometimes it used its wings, and then it would feel very graceful. And then at other times, it strode angrily through the landscape on its tiny feet.

The landscape itself was tantalizing with a sleepy and atmospheric gauze. Doors appeared where there hadn't been any before and the poem was suddenly aware that a thin thread was being extracted from its heart. This feeling was so precise that each inch of flesh the thread passed through responded with a little

quake and just the very smallest drip of blood, because where the needle went, it pricked and pricked. The silver strands of thread passed through the layers of the poem and wound themselves into the trees.

Soon there were trees all around the poem, and the poem was hidden once again., and it was a really wonderful discovery. Out on the highway, it had been spotlit and triumphant, but here in the forest, it knew it could disappear. It looked down at its own body and saw that carefully etched upon its chest were skeletal echoes of the trees themselves. Red ribs wrapped fiery paths across its tiny, hard form and as it looked down, it saw these ribs flex and pulse with the wind -- the same wind that arched the drooping boughs above it.

In the middle of one group of trees, veiled and dotted lines separated the tree trunks -- they were part of the gauze that hung all around. As the poem passed before the trees and the mysterious places in between them, all distinction between poem, space, and tree vanished. The poem was incredibly joyful about its newly discovered ability to camouflage itself. If it could hide like this indefinitely it would never again be found and trapped in the stillness of the box.

Soon the poem found out that the camouflage was even more effective when it kept moving. Shifting its red ribs and green limbed arms around, it felt itself melt fluidly into the countryside. Reciprocal, milky and suspended.

Somehow the poem managed to forget that the prickly silver thread was protruding from almost every inch of its body and that salty tears were running

along each length. The poem cried and cried, but the tears flowed from its body.. The threads looked so beautiful like that, coated with the trembling drops and glistening in the sunshine.

Stitched into the hills and the trees, the poem deluded itself into believing that it was still soaring. It saw itself pulled almost up into the clouds, hanging there with the threads now actually vines and fluttering in a gentle breeze.

Suddenly there was a really horrible wrenching -- fingers were grasping and clutching at its collarbone. They were greedy fingers, and they knew just how to separate bone from muscle and loosen flesh from bone. The poem's body tried to follow the movement of the fingers, tried to arch and climb to keep itself whole. But the collarbone had been yanked all the way out, and there it was, hanging in space.

REFERENCES

1. Diane Ackerman, A Natural History of the Senses, Vintage Books, NY, 1991. page 240.
2. Wallace Stevens, The Necessary Angel, Faber and Faber, London, 1960. page 25.

FIGURES



