Kathryn Harrison’s memoir *The Kiss* and Alison Townsend’s poetry collection *Persephone in America* both employ elements of fairy tale and mythology as a template for biographical and autobiographical narratives. *The Kiss* covertsly reinvents the myths of Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella as creatures of the underworld through the use of blood imagery and metaphorical forbidden fruit as well as the inversion of the womb as a place of death—an underworld within the female body. Townsend adopts similar imagery while addressing issues of consciousness, mental illness, linguistic and emotional manipulation, and entrapment. Her poetry invokes Persephone as muse while also comparing and contrasting Demeter’s daughter to herself and women she has known. For both texts, the underworld is a realm of psychic transformation and healing, a fertile environment for the development of the narrative self. I investigate both how the myths and fairy tales chosen affect the narrative’s meaning and how one might create original, autobiographical works using similar motifs from fairy tales and mythology for inspiration.

Secondary source material to further illuminate mythic and fairy tale references from the aforementioned primary works include the Homeric “Hymn to Demeter;” Dante’s *Divine Comedy;* Giambattista Basile’s “Sole Lune e Talia” from his collected Italian folktales, *Il Pentamerone,* or *The Story of Stories;* French author Charles Perrault’s “La belle au bois dormant” or “The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood”; several works collected by the Brothers Grimm, including “All-Fur”; John Milton’s *Paradise Lost;* and, more recently, magical realist Angela Carter’s 1979 short story anthology “The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories.” Additional scholarly sources relating to autobiography, feminist storytelling, menstruation and other topics of interest will be included, as well.

The theme of abduction to the underworld resonates with many life experiences shared by both authors, including emotional trauma and sexual assault. Persephone’s mythology therefore offers a very useful template with which to consider the process of recovery through creativity. Violent fairy tales such as “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Sleeping Beauty,” and “Cinderella” variants similarly map out a narrative for healing from the theft of one’s innocence. As both a reader of fairy tales and a creative writer, I learned a great deal from both primary texts through researching their mythical and fairy tale allusions and through piecing together my own creative works adapting similar imagery and subject matter. Romanticized versions of the above myths and fairy tales already pervade popular culture; therefore, they are powerful talismans when infused with the depth and gravitas from their original source texts and contextualized in a contemporary, autobiographical or biographical setting.
UNDERWORLD JOURNEYS IN KATHRYN HARRISON’S THE KISS AND ALISON TOWNSEND’S PERSEPHONE IN AMERICA

By

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A Thesis Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Arts-English

at

The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
Oshkosh WI 54901-8621

June 2011

COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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6/23/2011  Date Approved

6/23/2011  Date Approved

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7/5/11  Date Approved

FORMAT APPROVAL

6/15/11  Date Approved

Member
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A. Introduction and the “Moral of the Story”

Allusions to folk tales, fairy tales, and Greek mythology in Kathryn Harrison’s memoir *The Kiss* and Alison Townsend’s poetry collection *Persephone in America* direct readers toward the place within oneself where fairy tale magic resides, where stories are spun, and where infinite discoveries of the self and the world become possible. Specifically, like the fairy tales and myths they emulate, both writers combine tangible, symbolic details like pomegranate seeds and magic mirrors with real-life characters wearing the guises of archetypal figures such as the naïve maiden, the evil stepmother, the predatory father, and the trickster wolf. Harrison and Townsend both take real-life material and layer it with mythic and fairy tale imagery to create the sort of adventure plot which resolves the dilemma of women’s “storylessness” as articulated by Katha Pollitt in the foreword to Carolyn G. Heilbrun’s *Writing a Woman’s Life* (xvi).

Pollitt notes the “erotic narrative” typically confining fictional women not only negates the possibility of female ambition but also “puts the plotline in the hands of others, the men who do or do not admire, love, offer marriage, and make full female adulthood possible” (Heilbrun xvi). Restricting women’s narratives to nothing more than a race toward the marriage altar and, later, the birthing bed, suggests women have no other stories to share, that marriage and childbirth are their only proper goals. Perilous adventures are then left to boys and men. Women merely assist and facilitate. “Questing,” however, “is what makes a woman the heroine of her own life” (xvi). A woman whose sought-after holy grail is an independent identity rather than a wedding ring may choose whether or not to marry, but she retains a vibrancy and vitality of her own regardless of her decision. Moreover, as Pollitt elaborates, the romantic plot “cannot possibly accommodate our multiple selves and layered experiences. The quest plot suits us far better: it goes on a lot longer, with many more twists and turns, and with a much better chance of a happy ending too” (xvii). The questing woman might one day become a wife and mother, but she has
the freedom to take on so many additional roles, as well: the slayer of emotional dragons, the
healer of old wounds, the keeper of fairy tales and archetypal wisdom, and the author of her own
life story.

Whereas Laura Mulvey identifies the typical quest plot as inherently masculine, what she
calls the “proairetic code” within narrative, the sort of quest Pollitt envisions sounds closer to
Mulvey’s “hermeneutic code.” Instead of an action-oriented story plotted along a “single, linear
temporal level,” Pollitt seems to favor hermeneutic code’s capacity to “[fold] back upon the past”
and effectively contain more than one level of temporality (Mulvey 186). A hermeneutic inquiry
into the nature of the self becomes the primary quest with a renewed sense of empowered
selfhood as the reward. Such a conclusion contrasts starkly with the modernized versions of fairy
tales like the Disney film interpretations of popular culture, which frequently end with the prince
and princess living “happily ever after;” however, their historical counterparts relate life-and-
death struggles and brutal suffering, like a sort of trial by fire one must survive before reaching
the “happily ever after” stage, making the eventual marriage of prince and princess something of
an afterthought. The graphic brutality of such stories makes them ideally suited as models or
templates for a memoir or narrative poem concerning the issues with which Harrison and
Townsend grapple: incest, rape, and mental illness among them.

Consider also scholar Maria Tatar’s assessments of the Brothers Grimm and their
contributions to the fairy tale genre. “Sex and violence: these are the major thematic concerns of
tales in the Grimms’ collection, at least in their unedited forms. But more important, sex and
violence in that body of stories frequently takes the form of incest and child abuse, for the nuclear
family furnishes the fairy tale’s main cast of characters just as the family constitutes its most
common subject” (369). One can scarcely imagine anything less conventionally romantic than
child abuse and incest. Sexual assault or abuse of any kind isn’t a necessary condition for a quest
plot, but surviving the abuse one endures and becoming all the stronger for it certainly sounds like a quest worthy of any hero or heroine. Survivor-heroines may begin their textual lives as prey to the desires of others. By the end of the fairy tale, however, they possess independent, dynamic desires and have both the will and the means to satisfy them. The dramatic shift from victim to survivor one often discovers in the older incarnations of fairy tales reveals it’s only their romanticized, contemporary counterparts which are suitable for children’s bedtime stories but lacking the depth and complexity to satisfy the intellect of adult readers. Also, fairy tales were typically told aloud, constantly evolving through each retelling, therefore epitomizing the sort of flexible, open-ended narrative Pollitt envisions. Though many of the elements are predetermined by the myth one chooses, such as the red cape or the glass coffin, one can reinterpret their general context to address any number of subjects relating to the psyche, female sexual initiation, sexual predators, mental illness, and many more. Armed with highly adaptive motifs and imagery of the fairy tale and story as spoken performance, writers like Harrison and Townsend can create a multi-layered work of self-reflective subjectivity, transposing an oral tradition onto the page.

*The Kiss and Persephone in America* are both steeped in oral culture, as are the originating stories which inspire their imagery. Greek myths, European folk tales, and fairy tales all have their roots in oral traditions or spoken/sung performances, though written versions of many of the stories persist to present day. The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is the oldest written record documenting the mythos of Persephone’s abduction, recently reinterpreted by Townsend and others; I will also consider Ovid’s selections on Persephone’s Roman equivalent, Proserpina, from his work *Metamorphoses*, particularly in light of Townsend’s references to both the Greek and Roman myths. The search for a “primary” written source for characters like Snow White, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, and Sleeping Beauty is more complicated, as several countries have a version of each story, all of which have evolved over time. In most cases, I will
stress the oldest known variant of the tale unless the latter variation bears the closest resemblance to Harrison’s usage of the “original.” Both Harrison and Townsend grapple with morally complex issues, including incest, sexuality, abduction, self-silencing, and depression, which necessitate a brief discussion of the role of the so-called “moral of the story.”

Some versions of folk or fairy tales have a “moral” embedded within the text, such as Charles Perrault’s “La belle au bois dormant” or “Sleeping Beauty” as translated and republished in 1891 by Andrew Lang in his collection The Blue Fairy Book. Perrault’s poetic “moral” concludes as follows: “Though philosophers may prate/ How much wiser ‘tis to wait,/ Maids will be a sighing still --/ Young blood must when young blood will” (Lang 54). As authoritative and witty as Perrault’s moral sounds, however, it is neither the first nor the last word on the “meaning” of sleeping beauty. As fairy tale and folk tale scholar Maria Tatar notes in her edition of “Briar Rose” in The Annotated Brothers Grimm, “The earliest recorded version of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ appears as ‘Troylus and Zellandine’ in a fourteenth-century prose narrative called Perceforest. The Grimms’ story of Sleeping Beauty is considered a truncated version of Giambattista Basile’s ‘Sun, Moon and Talia’ (1636) and Charles Perrault’s ‘Sleeping Beauty in the Wood’ (1697)” (233).

In this collection as well as in the Norton Critical Edition of The Classic Fairy Tales also edited by Maria Tatar, scholars note contradictions of both content and meaning between one version of a myth and another; morals such as Perrault’s were superimposed upon older, preexisting texts to make them more appropriate for the intended readership. Fairy tales are multifaceted and paradoxical, much like the sorts of human experiences reflected within the work of Harrison and Townsend. As such, the fairy tales, folk tales and mythologies discussed will not be considered to have any intrinsic moral outlook, though the moral dilemmas with which they grapple will be discussed in full. These stories will be used as secondary source material both to
illuminate the references in Harrison’s memoir and Townsend’s poetry and to recreate the creative pathways that lead both writers and their readers to the awe-inspiring, otherworldly realm of “once upon a time.”

Following the discussion of each motif, I have added poetic impressions of my own, incorporating similar imagery. The inclusion of my personal creative work tangibly illustrates how the mythic framework of both texts might inspire the writer/reader. Also, the pieces speak directly to the memoir and the poetry collection in ways that analytical discussion alone cannot. In writing them, I achieved a deeper understanding and appreciation for the works of both authors. Whereas Harrison’s text grapples primarily with paternal incest and Townsend’s poems frequently address issues of aging and mental illness, one can argue both works relate to storylessness, or the co-opting of one’s identity or life story by a manipulative parent, and the power of time and emotional imbalance to disrupt a story already in progress. My poems similarly address the state of storylessness and the fear of losing one’s identity. Topics addressed include the dissolution of a hoped-for romantic relationship, the threat of potential mental illness, and the ongoing search for a stable sense of self independent of my maternal and academic/professional responsibilities.

Although my own poems seem to address a variety of experiences, they all refer back to incidents that occurred within a singular timeframe during the construction of the thesis. Over the course of several months, I suffered the end of a very tumultuous affair, the loss of a job, a very painful bacterial skin infection, and a three-day stay in a mental health facility due to a possible bipolar relapse. On top of the physical and emotional trauma above, I realized the completion of my thesis meant I would soon no longer be a student. Without any concrete hopes for a teaching position, I wasn’t yet a teacher, either. The severity of both my short-lived breakdown and the skin infection, moreover, led me to realize I wasn’t yet able to move out of Green Bay to pursue
my PhD, as I had originally intended. That meant I would have to further postpone my dreams of teaching at a four-year university. I originally imagined staying in Green Bay would at least allow me to continue my romantic involvement. He lives in Colorado but is originally from Wisconsin and visits friends and family here; however, he’s currently avoiding both me and all of Wisconsin indefinitely. Whether or not he ever returns, I need to create a strong enough sense of closure on my own to allow me to once again be fully emotionally functional rather than simply going through the motions of living while feeling at least partially dead inside.

The above subject matter itself resonates in part with emotional dilemmas presented in both texts; the primary goal, however, is to borrow the mythic and fairy tale imagery used by Harrison and Townsend to examine its potential for recuperative creativity in greater depth. The act of writing about one’s pain tangibly initiates a process of emotional healing and creates closure on the page where none exists in real life, freeing the writer from a sense of storylessness and offering completion and order for disparate and chaotic events. As Harrison comments in an email she sent me, “For me, the act of writing and publishing the book was my only way to return to a world I’d exited with my father. The only thing that could free me from the prison of secrecy that incest demands was speaking out. It was necessary for me as a human being, and a wife and mother, as well as a writer, to come clean…” (1). I hope my poetry will similarly help me rediscover the sense of passion and wonder I once had before my lover betrayed me, abandoning me to a ravenous sorrow.

This is not to suggest that a break-up is the emotional equivalent of an incestuous relationship or that the completion of a handful of poems requires as much effort and hard work as the publication of a finished memoir and a collection of thematically unified poems; however, lest the reader believe what I lost was simply the allure of a passionate, exciting, beautiful man, I will elaborate upon how the experience brought me to a deeper understanding of the primary texts
considered herein. When we first met, I felt an almost instant familiarity and ease with him, as though I’d been looking for him or waiting for him my entire life and had never realized it until that moment. He looked at me, and I felt his gaze like a palpable embrace, warm and protective. The longer we spoke, the more I came to see him at least in part as a masculine reflection of myself, in some ways identical to me and in others, complementary.

We both came from a familial background of addiction-related dysfunction. Growing up, we both developed rather similar idiosyncratic ways of masking our own emotions to hide our vulnerability and protect ourselves from the manipulative or abusive intentions of other people. I also discovered surprising emotional similarities between my hoped-for partner and both of my parents. Like my father, he was extremely emotionally sensitive and very insightful regarding the motivations of others but seemingly incapable of seeing into his own actions with the same clarity. He seemed more at ease around animals and children than with other adults, who often times made him anxious and painfully self-conscious. Like my mother, he would retreat into an icy silence without any provocation or warning of any kind, only to return as though nothing had happened. His sudden reappearance in my life was often marked by apologetic gestures and a general sense of kindness, emotional openness, and generosity. Very seldom, however, did he verbally apologize for ignoring me for weeks, sometimes months, at a time. An outright apology is an admission of a problem, and he wasn’t yet ready to address it as such.

Once he left, my internal familial dramas no longer felt completed, the various narratives of dysfunctionality unraveling once more inside me. I found myself open, exposed, and vulnerable without any of my former defenses and with no one watching my back. My poetry doesn’t directly address parental loss or distance as does Harrison’s memoir or Townsend’s poetry collection; however, the relationship which forms its primary subject matter was motivated by the emotional absences and losses from childhood which I had hoped to heal. Like Harrison, I
have turned to mythology and fairy tales in seeking explanations for the darkness in human nature, and I hope it will once again serve me well as I navigate through this most recent loss.

Harrison combines character traits from Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood, and Persephone to lend a mythical poetic to the narrating voice of The Kiss. One wouldn’t ordinarily inter-associate these figures; however, The Kiss selectively highlights Sleeping Beauty’s torporific state and Snow White’s bewitched slumber within the glass coffin. Like the prince who declares to the seven dwarves, “Make me a present of [the glass coffin], for I can’t live without seeing Snow White. I will honor and cherish her as if she were my beloved,” (Tatar 89), Harrison’s father wishes to preserve her inanimately for his own pleasure. Whereas a fortunate misstep on the part of the prince dislodges the piece of poisoned apple from her throat and frees Snow White, however, the desires of Harrison’s father never initiate the process of awakening typical of coming-of-age fairy tales and narratives but rather plunge her deeper into unconsciousness. Again, the outcome of the fairy tale is inverted; Harrison’s father then embodies the demon-lover variety of Prince Charming.

His kiss is the forbidden fruit which freezes her in time, induces unhealthy spells of unconsciousness, paralyzes her with fear, captures her image, steals her voice, and threatens to destroy her sanity. Whereas Sleeping Beauty awakens with a kiss, Harrison inverts the myth to explore what might have happened if her enchanted slumber had instead been caused by a poisoned kiss. Similarly, both Harrison and Townsend minimize the importance of Demeter’s role in rescuing Persephone, making Persephone more dynamic and giving her a larger part to play in her own salvation. Mythical Demeter leverages her power over the harvest and the fate of humanity to bring Zeus to a compromise, and most of the Homeric “Hymn to Demeter” depicts her quest to find and rescue her daughter. Harrison’s mother is often absent either literally or emotionally and frequently seems powerless to protect her own daughter whereas Townsend’s
mother died of cancer when she was only 9 years old. Even poems like “Demeter Faces Facts” which consider Demeter’s perspective focus on the loss of filial intimacy as her daughter becomes more independent.

Harrison’s adaptation of the above fairy tales also eliminates positive, secondary maternal characters like the fairy godmother, though one could argue her mother represents an adversarial mother like the wicked witch in “Snow White.” The six aforementioned mythic heroines intertwine within the memoir through Harrison’s use of the following motifs: hair/fur, an inversion of the womb as a tomb within the body, blood imagery, glass enclosures, unconsciousness/sleep, the forbidden kiss, shame, starvation as a means of self-silencing, and death by photographic exposure. Ironically, the two weapons Harrison’s father uses against her, fear of shaming by exposure and finely-pointed, well-honed words, become her primary means of self-defense through the retelling of her story. These larger issues will be discussed in greater detail after a consideration of each one of the other textual components in relation to Harrison’s source text and its mythical predecessors.

Poet Alison Townsend’s collection *Persephone in America* also derives deeper archetypal truth about her mortal muses through mythological references. Whereas Harrison employs several folk and fairy tales to clarify one narrative, Townsend maintains one myth throughout in relation to several biographical and autobiographical narrative poems. In the title poem, she writes, “I pick her up, like Midge or Barbie,/ and say, Listen, I know you’re a goddess./ But those white robes won’t cut it” (12-14). Persephone is to the adult feminine psyche what Barbie once was to the hypothetical female child, a toy with which to explore the limits and possibilities of what it means to be a woman. Like the overly idealized plastic doll with its genetically impossible proportions, the Persephone myth is fraught with misogyny, mainly Zeus’s divine sanctioning of Persephone’s abduction and rape perpetrated by her uncle Hades. Even the sexism
built into the myth becomes a source of inspiration, however, as Townsend compares and contrasts it to a contemporary understanding of the mythos built into the landscape of the female body.

Her work overlaps with Harrison’s in terms of both subject matter: incest, sexuality, abduction, self-silencing, storylessness, motherlessness, and depression; and imagery: the sexual potency of a woman’s hair, death as a place within oneself, ritualistic bloodshed, mirrors and glass enclosures, enchanted slumber, paternal incest, shame, silence, and portraiture or mapping. Although Harrison plucks the imagery from the fairy tales she incorporates, Townsend adapts the Persephone myth to make room for all of the above elements. Each of the themes above will be discussed first in reference to Harrison then second as they relate to Townsend. Following the analysis is my original poetry. General discussions of the creative process and the events portrayed within the poems are presented in first person whereas any line-by-line analysis of specific works is written in third person with the aim of greater objectivity.
B. The Erotic Mythos of Hair

1) Harrison

Harrison’s memoir contains numerous descriptions of her hair. Her father’s emotional attachment to her hair furthermore helps incite his destructive attraction to her. The choice to emphasize her hair isn’t just idiosyncratic, however, as it relates directly to the thematic use of hair in alternative versions of “Cinderella,” one of the many fairy tales the memoir adapts. In her article “The Daughter’s Disenchantment: Incest as Pedagogy in Fairy Tales and Kathryn Harrison’s The Kiss,” Elizabeth Marshall notes an incest motif relating to hair and/or fur, both of which elements are vital components to several variants of Cinderella she discusses. These works include French fairy tale writer Charles Perrault’s “Peau d’Ane” or “Donkeyskin;” The Brothers’ Grimm story “Allerleirauh” or “All-Fur;” the 1989 variant of “All-Fur” entitled “Princess Furball;” “Catskin;” “Cap o’ Rushes;” and the life history of Saint Dympna whose narrative appeared within the author’s treasured volume Lives of the Saints. In “Donkeyskin,” a dying mother tells her husband, “Promise me that if, when I am gone, you find a woman wiser and more beautiful than I, you will marry her and so provide an heir for throne” (Perrault). The only woman equal to her beauty, of course, is their only daughter. “Donkeyskin” is nearly identical to “All-Fur” with the exception of the fairy godmother character in “Donkeyskin” whose appearance is the impetus for the daughter’s evasion and escape from her domineering father. As such, Marshall devotes the bulk of her academic attentions to “All-Fur” and its most direct variants.

Before examining the “All-Fur” references in full, however, it is worth noting that it isn’t the only “Cinderella” variant concerning paternal incest. Both “Catskin” and “Cap O’ Rushes” (King Lear) respectively depict “a runaway daughter…pursued by an incestuous father” and a father who “demands a pledge of filial love” (Marshall 407); additionally, Saint Dympna is a “seventh-century Irish princess” who “escapes her pagan father’s incestuous demands by fleeing
with her confessor, Gerbernus, across the Irish Sea,” the pair of them eventually living as hermits in Belgium, hidden deep within a forest in a hut built from branches. Her pursuing father “finds her and beheads her” (405). Marshall doesn’t delve into the significance of the young woman’s beheading; however, it is useful to note that for the crime of refusing to surrender her sex or “fur” to her father, she loses not only her hair, a notable marker of her femininity, but also her head, or the seat of intellect and self-expression. Had she chosen to consent out of fear, she still would have sacrificed her autonomy and selfhood. Her body might have remained whole, but it would remain the property of her father. Her choice, then, is no choice at all. Even the narratives of Christianity, like the story of Saint Dympna, foreground tolerance if not brazenly-outright poeticizing of paternal incest- or so her memoir states. The prevalence of incest in the “Cinderella” tales is well-suited to the work of the memoir in crafting an authentic textual self. Although the relationship with her father began during her adulthood, a traumatic childhood left her in many ways emotionally underdeveloped and somewhat childlike. Issues of Harrison’s culpability as an adult and not a minor will be considered in full, as well, following the analysis of the author’s underworld motifs and the role of shame in the narrative’s construction.

Kathryn Harrison describes her father’s first perception of her as a young woman in terms of her hair, again suggesting her hair is a vital component of his predatory desires, as noted in the discussion of “All-Fur” above. “The girl my father sees has blond hair that falls past her waist, past her hips; it falls to the point at which her fingertips would brush her thighs if her arms were not crossed before her chest” (Harrison 52). Harrison’s diction highlights her status as an image or object, “the girl” her father “sees.” Next, consider which details the father selectively “sees” via Harrison’s narration: hair, waist, hips, thighs, arms crossed over her breasts. Marshall argues, Harrison’s hair is “ambiguous” in that it “represents both her potential sexuality and her attempt to hide her female body so that she may remain a girl” (417). She crosses her arms over her
breasts to disguise her womanhood but cannot erase the sweeping lines of her waist, hips, and thighs— at least not without starving herself, which is a strategy she employs elsewhere in the text. The words are the author’s own, but the description comes straight from the hungry eyes of her predatory father whose gaze marks her and sexes her as female. This highly eroticized description of her hair colored by her father’s impressions marks Harrison as a contemporary “All-Fur,” down to the detail of the absent mother.

Like “Donkeyskin,” The Brothers Grimm edition of “All-Fur” from the final edition of Children’s and Household Tales, as quoted by Marshall, begins with the death of the queen who tells her king just before her passing, “If you desire to marry again after my death, I’d like you to take someone who is as beautiful as I am and who has golden hair like mine. Promise me that you will do this” (Marshall 408). Within the context of The Kiss, Harrison’s mother eventually passes. Before her death, however, she is frozen in an enchanted slumber and lacks the clarity and foresight to protect her daughter from the advances of her father. Although Harrison’s father has already remarried and has children with his new wife, only Harrison possesses the beauty, or “golden hair,” of his first wife. All-Fur’s father orders court messengers to scour the kingdom for a woman equal in beauty to his late wife, all to no avail, until he sees his daughter newly-minted as a menstruating, reproductive young woman.

Marshall quotes, “Now, the king had a daughter who was just as beautiful as her dead mother, and she also had the same golden hair. When she was grown-up, the king looked at her one day and realized her features were exactly the same as those of his dead wife” (409). The king tells his counselors immediately, “I’m going to marry my daughter, for she is the living image of my dead wife” (409). Though Marshall doesn’t consider the specific diction in this passage, note that the daughter is a “living image,” not a woman in her own right. Her father’s desire robs her of selfhood before he even touches her. All-Fur responds by using her wit, the
only weapon at her disposal. Lacking a fairy godmother, All-Fur sets three seemingly-impossible challenges before her father which must be completed to her satisfaction before she will give herself to him. He must fashion and gift her with three dresses: “one as golden as the sun, one as silvery as the moon, and one as bright as the stars” (409). The dresses mark her as feminine, and their unusual celestial descriptions literally elevate her to the status of heavenly body, something beautiful and desirable but also lofty and untouchable. She also requests a cloak “made up of a thousand kinds of pelts and furs, and each animal in your kingdom must contribute a piece of its skin to it” (409). The cut skins remind one of the Biblical sacrifices of foreskin made to God in the Old Testament (Genesis 17: 12-14) whereas the “pelts and furs” themselves evoke the hair of the daughter’s matured genitalia as well as the lustrous blond hair on her head. Whereas the dresses might lend her an air of otherworldliness, the fur cloak’s appearance has the opposite effect, making her look more animal than human. One might interpret the two categories of garments as representing opposing elements of human nature. The celestial dresses suit the intellect or the soul whereas the cape fits the carnal appetites of the sensual, physical self.

Unfortunately, her father succeeds, and All-Fur packs the dresses into a nutshell, “blackens her face and hands with soot,” and escapes to the forest wearing only the cloak of all-furs. Huntsmen from “a neighboring kingdom” find her and take her to the castle where she meets her future husband, the prince (Marshall 409). As Marshall notes, All-Fur conceals herself because she takes on the shame for her father’s desires. “The Lesson here revolves around the menstruating daughter’s knowledge of her sexuality. Since she ‘knows’ about sex, she is now culpable if her father violates her” (409). The coat of furs marks her not only as woman but also as “wanton” (409). The moral of the fairy tale recalls some of the critical reception of Harrison’s memoir: “Was her dad worse? Of course. Was she vulnerable? Apparently. But at 20 years old, Harrison was old enough to know the act was immoral…Is this what America can expect in the
spate of copycat adult incest tales sure to follow? Ambivalence. As if the women are not held to
the same moral standards sure to pinion their pervert fathers?” (Fischer 100).

As the adult daughter of a married minister with whom she conducts an affair, is Kathryn
Harrison to blame for her incestuous relationship with her father? Like All-Fur, she was not
emotionally prepared to defend herself against her father’s unwanted and unwelcome advances.
Although Harrison didn’t need to blacken her hands and face, she did starve herself (see latter
section on starvation) and refused to speak publicly of the matter until the publication of the
memoir. She confesses to her boyfriend then recants in fear to avoid the consequences of telling
her story. “‘Something weird happened at the airport,’ I say. We’re in his car, parked in the
driveway of the little house he rents off campus. ‘At least I think it was weird. Maybe it wasn’t,’
I finish hopefully” (Harrison 73). Even her confession sounds shameful and halting, as if she
fears she did something wrong to make her father kiss her. “Well, my father was saying goodbye.
We were saying good-bye in the airport. And he…Well, when he kissed me he sort of put his
tongue in my mouth. Do you think that’s weird?” (73); what she’s really asking here, which the
boyfriend fails to understand, is “Am I to blame for this?” Of course, he is outraged and angry.

“Are you fucking kidding!” he yells. “I can’t believe that! Yes it’s weird! Of course it’s
weird! It’s wrong! Did you tell your mother?” (73). Telling her mother would risk not only the
chance to receive some form of paternal love but would also shatter the one tenuous parental
relationship which has sustained her throughout her life. Like All-Fur with the soot, Harrison
shakes her head no and covers her face with her hands (73). To the reader, she admits, “My
boyfriend’s outrage forces me farther into secrecy” (73). Only once her mother has died and she
has reached an age of greater emotional maturity can she begin to unburden her soul, first through
fiction then ultimately through memoir. Nancy L. Fischer’s article “Oedipus Wrecked? The
Moral Boundaries of Incest” surveys 28 responses to *The Kiss*. Of interest are the 8 critics who feel Harrison was morally implicated and fully culpable, proven guilty by her own story.

One of these critics is cited above. Another wrote the following: “The problem is Harrison presents herself as a complete victim: she wasn’t awake enough to make moral choices, and thus is not responsible for what she has done. There is no price to pay for incest, not even shame” (Fischer 100). Surveyed and quoted by Fischer, the above excerpt comes from Trudy Bush’s article “Putting a life in order” which appeared in *Christian Century* in 1997; somehow, Bush failed to notice the pervasive tone of shame and self-recrimination resounding through the entire narrative. Even the opening suggests Harrison is ashamed of herself: “We meet at airports. We meet in cities where we’ve never been before. We meet where no one will recognize us” (3). The airports in particular not only suggest shame and anonymity but are also the sort of “in between” or liminal places where fairy tale magic occurs.

In these transitional locations, one’s identity functions temporarily without creating a permanent context. The self thereby straddles opposing categories of here/there, domestic/exotic, or even masculine/feminine. Harrison’s characterization of her childhood and young womanhood still aligns, however, with the feminine half of Cixous’s gendered binary from her article “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays.” As she categorizes in the book *The Newly Born Woman* co-authored with Catherine Clément, “Passive, moon, night, matter, concave, Woman” are all coded as feminine (63). The aggressive, masculine act of writing the memoir therefore ends the cycle of victimization. For all its archetypal and mythic resonance, however, Harrison’s story is not wholly fiction. As Elizabeth Marshall remarks, “This is not to suggest that Harrison’s memoir is in any way a make-believe story. *The Kiss* is first and foremost a story of sexual trauma and emotional betrayal” (414). Transplanting her autobiography into the context of fairy tale, Harrison turns her brutal memories into a mythic quest narrative. Through the memoir, she
tries on the guises of several fairy tale heroines in her search for an identity forged through but
independent from her childhood and her incestuous affair.

As editor Maria Tartar observes in the collection *The Classic Fairy Tales: A Norton Critical Edition*, however, even stories as brazenly-titled as a variation from India called “The Father Who Wanted to Marry His Daughter” offer hope for the persecuted heroine in question. “What these stories demonstrate, perhaps more forcefully than anything else, is the way in which the path to happy heterosexual unions depends on a successful transfer of filial love and devotion from a father to a ‘prince,’ on a move from a false ‘perfect fit’ to a true ‘perfect fit’ (105). This perspective still privileges the heterosexual coupling above any other variety and also assumes a coupling of any kind is the most natural state for a woman. What of the woman who enjoys the physical act of mating but resists the pull of interpersonal romantic relationships? *The Kiss* doesn’t address this possibility directly as its author does eventually marry and have children of her own. The conclusion of her affair with her father, however, offers a glimpse of what the lover-less wild woman might resemble and how she might behave.

The All-Fur element within *The Kiss* concludes as Harrison sacrifices her hair upon her mother’s deathbed. “Long hair is an obvious symbol of sexuality, and for me it was the safeguard of my femaleness when I’d given up my breasts and my period. By cutting my hair off, I tell my mother that my sexual life is severed as well. Discarding it, I promise her that she can die knowing the affair between her husband and her daughter is finished” (Harrison 196). Years later Harrison sees a statue of Saint Dymphna in Gheel, Belgium and notes its similarity to her own appearance, excepting “I don’t let my father have that hair, or my life” (196). His response? “‘My God,’ he says, ‘Dear God’” (197). Harrison elaborates, “He grieves over the hair as he does not over my telling him I’ve been accepted in graduate school, that I’ll be moving away in the next few months. ‘How could you take it from me!’ he cries” (197).
Having “severed” her sexual life, she is free to move on toward her own ambitions, to channel all the energy her father previously consumed into something productive and self-serving. Cutting her hair frees her from her father’s sexuality, but the retelling of her story frees her from her internal shame and fear. Feminist storyteller Clarissa Pinkola Estés’s *Women Who Run with the Wolves* argues stories are healing medicine for the emotionally wounded and scarred. According to her personal beliefs and creative practices, myths and fairy tales are “teaching stories” which “provide initiatory maps so even work which has hit a snag can be completed” (46). Stories can heal through creative retelling when recited with love, as suggested by the tone of Harrison’s memoir. This dimension of psychic rebuilding pervades all the fairytale imagery present in the memoir, beginning with the prevalence of hair imagery and continuing into all the other elements yet to be discussed. Alison Townsend’s poetry similarly suggests the healing potential in storytelling through her narrative poems, several of which also examine the connection between hair and womanhood.

2) Townsend

Several of Townsend’s poems consider the mythic potency of hair and blood as markers of female sexuality in a manner thematically akin to Harrison’s text. “Beauty Lesson” devotes itself to the ritual of nightly hair-brushing. “*One hundred strokes a day was what my mother/ demanded…*” it begins (1-2). Throughout the poem, parenthesized and italicized phrases number off the strokes progressing from one to ninety-nine such that each line of the poem takes on the tugging and smoothing rhythm of the brush. Although braided tightly by day, at night her hair is “loosed” around her body “in a drifting/ silken veil she worked with her boar bristle brush” (10-11). Even the detail of the boar bristle brush sounds folkloric and old-fashioned. The drifting silken veil is at once suggestive of innocence or virginity, like a bridal veil, and yet also sensuous.
Languorous diction and tone, “my eyes half-shut, hypnotized by the motion/ of her hands, anchored in the rhythm the brush made,” again evokes unconsciousness and a sort of dream-state. Ceremonially repeating her mother’s gestures as an adult, she recalls “stars of blue static crackling” around her “like the Milky Way” (39-40) and invokes the memory of the mother she lost to cancer. Although the hair imagery itself doesn’t relate directly to the Persephone myth, the importance of the mother-daughter bond evokes the myth’s themes of maternal love lost and recovered. Also, the journey back into memories from the time before her mother’s death feels like a crossing into the underworld to visit with the spirit of a departed loved one.

Like a soul ferried by Chiron across the River Styx, Townsend feels like she’s floating atop mysterious waters. The room becomes “a small boat on an ocean where everything/ rocked and swayed, where she told me what she knew/ about being a woman (ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine)” (42-44). Female beauty and sexuality is encoded within the treatment and description of a woman’s hair. The beautifying ritual also serves to strengthen the mother-daughter bond by affording the opportunity for the handing down of feminine wisdom and beauty lore. Unlike Harrison, Townsend doesn’t have to sacrifice her hair to free herself. But she does observe her mother’s hair “blonde going gray from cancer” (32). The absence of the final one-hundredth stroke from the last line, moreover, highlights the absence of her mother in present day. At once mournful and renewing, the poem epitomizes the life/death/life cycle reflected in the Persephone myth.

“Trichotillomania,” alternately, takes a mythologized fixation on hair to the extreme of repeatedly pulling out one’s hair. A facet of mental illness, she imagines it as a mechanism in her brain—the “…neural twitch/ that tripped the switch” (12-13). Ritualized repetitive behavior here damages not only the hair but also the psyche. Her condition becomes a “visible wound” (39) which “…turns your body/ into a force you must resist…” (41-42). Rather than enjoying the
sensual experiences of the body to inspire and enrich the self, she cannot trust her own responses and impulses and looks toward another source of female power to compensate for her lack of selfhood. In lieu of a loving mother, the poetic voice here imagines another woman standing behind her, “balanced on anxiety’s saw-toothed edge, her fingers tangled in your hair/ like a lover’s...” (44-47). Regardless of the poem’s self-destructive subject matter, hair retains its erotic potency. The woman, like an evil witch or wicked stepmother of fairy tale, thumbs the strands “...like a connoisseur of silk, caressing it a little/ before she tears it out/ at the thick black root” (49-52). In spite of her efforts, the hair grows back, “...stubborn/ as the imperfections/ she believes are rooted/ so deeply within you” (53-56). As in the Harrison memoir, loss of hair equates with the loss or sacrifice of sexual life. Diminished erotic allure undermines the poetic voice’s sense of self. The theft of her hair at the cruel hands of a mythically-personified mental illness evokes the sort of helplessness Persephone experienced at the hands of her abductor. Trichotillomania effectively severs all ties between the self and the sense of one’s femaleness or femininity just as Hades tears Persephone away from the realm of maternal love and procreation and plunges her into death.

3) Hair Imagery Poem: Persephone Shedding

Every time you leave me
I scramble and squirm out of
girl-skin last loved. Peel artwork
from the walls, leaving paper
piles of glittering iridescent scales.
Paint my hair Cherry Pop Red, Lusty
Lavender, Starry Night Black
and Chocolate Velvet. Trim it back,
cutting out and coloring over the
molecular traces of you. Gold Pewter
Gun Metal lining my eyes, Chai
Latte blended around brow bone,
outer corner crease and lid as directed,
my gaze greener than the one you
remember, looking over the newest
crop of sacrificial men who spill
their seed in homage to your absence
without ever knowing your name.

Like Harrison, the narrative voice in this poem cuts her hair to sever ties to a former lover. A new hairstyle isn’t enough to satisfy the urge for visible signs of change, however; she instead resorts to repeatedly re-coloring her hair, stripping the walls of decoration, and using new cosmetics to change the color of her eyes. She hopes to transform herself so completely as to erase the familiarity between them. In his absence, she begins a new phase of her life as an artist and a woman, taking on new lovers briefly and adding more chapters to her personal erotic mythology and creating fresh works of art with which to illustrate her life story. If and when he returns, her altered appearance and demeanor pique his interest once more. Simultaneously, her new façade shields her from a smothering sense of closeness and emotional intimacy since she may not be immediately recognizable as the woman from his most recent memories and fantasies. Since he can physically leave and she cannot, her physical transformations are her way of taking
her leave from the relationship to free herself from its psychologically isolating effects. It’s an emotional survival mechanism, like a lizard shedding its tail to escape from a predator then later re-growing it in full. Each time he returns, they relearn one another until he departs again, at which point the process repeats itself. The relationship described above taught me that it’s possible to love someone so deeply that no amount of inner growth or outer alteration affects the bond between you, regardless of whether or not you stay together.

I would further argue instead that all relationships are permanently life-altering in one way or another. As for myself, I found the ability to camouflage my own emotional shifts useful but short-lived. After a time, the process became overwhelmingly exhausting. I have since resigned myself to a version of my natural hair color and only the occasional use of cosmetics. I still create art and change the pictures on the wall whenever I become bored with looking at the same view. My redecorating efforts are, however, much less aggressive than the process described in the poem. I cannot be an infinite variety of possible women as I am only one person, with my own unique strengths and limitations. I grieve for the loss of both the relationship and my former chameleon-like, idealized identity. His absence is like a slow, ongoing funeral procession passing before me every day, extending so far in both directions that I can’t see if or when it will end, and I fear I will carry that death inside me for life. Giving up on the false power of superficial changes and instead settling more comfortably into my own skin, on the other hand, seems to suggest I’m becoming more confident with the reality of myself and less prone to project falsely perfected fantasy images tailored to the desires of others. The title invokes Persephone’s forced redefinitions of self, from cherished daughter to abducted maiden to co-ruler of the underworld. The poem also suggests a reversal of the Persephone myth since it is the departure of the unexpected lover which causes her despair rather than his arrival. Though the relationship the poem describes was completely consensual, I was neither prepared for or initially
open to the extensive and painful series of transformations it catalyzed. I also felt blind-sided by his coercive wooing, which changed me from a willfully-single woman looking for a strictly physical relationship into an unwittingly-attached lover desperate for some sign of mutual affection.
C. Internalized Death

1) Harrison

Persephone’s journey into the underworld becomes a metaphorical process within Harrison’s memoir, signifying the emotional descent she suffers during her affair with her father. One facet of this descent is her identification with the underworld or death as something she carries within herself. Tissues which one ordinarily associates with fertility become deadly as the psychological toxicity of her father’s sexualized attention redefines Harrison’s relationship with her own body. She drops out of college to attend to her father’s needs and uses “the refunded money to rent an apartment, a basement room with squat windows forced up to the low ceiling and plumbing tangled like entrails overhead” (77). The image of a basement room alone with nearly no view of outside is claustrophobic enough, but the addition of entrails tangled overhead reminds one of disembowelment and other forms of violence to the lower regions of the body like rape or abortion. Moreover, the imagery becomes even darker as the passage continues. “The pipes sweat and seep, filling the dark space with a uterine warmth” (77). Sweating, seeping pipes are obviously phallic, but the “uterine warmth” suggests something else, a regression to a childlike state or the desire to re-enter the maternal womb. As such regression is neither healthy nor wholly possible, the results of her efforts are a twisted perversion of fertility in which “bagworms infest the oaks on campus; and the mothers’ eggs fill silvery webbed pouches that hang from the branches outside my window” wherein “[s]tray strands of silk twist in the breeze” (78).

One might visualize this “uterine” darkness occasionally disturbed by random rays of sunlight from the tiny windows; Harrison informs readers otherwise. “The sky is invisible from my room,” she states. Only “busy feet walk or run by” the windows (77). Whether or not the reference is intentional, feet were a common Hebrew euphemism for genitalia in the Old
Testament (Wigram 1157). Even if the similarity is accidental, Harrison is still literally watching life pass her by through tiny basement windows. Like Persephone trapped in the underworld or Snow White in the glass coffin, she is imprisoned within a cell of her own making, purchased with the money she should have spent on school, because her father wills it so. “Everyone will have to understand that for now I am your school. I am what you have to learn” (81). It’s a short leap from this statement to the cliché of “knowing in the Biblical sense.” Like one of the daughters of Lot, she lies down with her father believing she has no alternative course to take because, in popular parlance, “blood is thicker than water.” Much like Harrison’s evocation of the womb corrupted into a place of death, Townsend’s poem “What I Never Told You About the Abortion” describes a violent disconnection with one’s own fertility and sexuality. In terms of the Persephone myth, the womb-as-tomb analogy recalls Persephone’s transition from youthful maiden to lover of a sort of personified death, Demeter’s temporary loss of her daughter, and the fields grown fallow through Demeter’s grief.

3) Townsend

Few events in a woman’s life create the sense of carrying death inside herself as intensely as an abortion or miscarriage. Townsend unravels the layers of physical and emotional trauma involved in the loss of a child in her poem “What I Never Told You About the Abortion.” “That it hurt, despite the anesthetic,/ which they administered with a long needle, shot straight into the womb” (Townsend 1-2), she begins. The phallic needle here destroys life rather than creating it. Furthermore, its forcible penetration into the Womb’s interior suggests the deepest possible sort of rape. Just as Persephone was unable to prevent Hades from plundering her maidenhead, so Townsend seemingly cannot prevent the intrusion of the death-bringing medical instruments. “That they hit the vagus nerve the first time and I fell down when I tried to stand./ That after the
second shot my legs snapped shut—/ instinctively as any wild mother protecting chick, kit, cub…” The botched attempt to numb her and her efforts to stand, presumably to run away from the scene, create a sense of panic or instinctual fight-or-flight further supported by the imagery of her legs closing as though to create a physical barrier between her “cub” and an incoming predator. Juxtaposing the “crude” male doctor (9) and his invasive needle, a female young Hispanic nurse holds her hand, weeps with her, and says, “You know, hon, you don’t have to go through with this” (7).

The gendered dichotomy here resembles the arguments about abortion counseling from feminist scholars Rika Alper, Pris Hoffnung, and Barbara Solomon in their article “I eat your flesh plus I drink your blood (the double features of the abortion business).” Although the article was published in 1972, its perspective still resonates with the experience documented in Townsend’s poetry. They argue, “All [the doctor] has to do is the operation itself- he never has to relate to the woman’s feelings or even explain what he’s going to do to her” (Alper, Hoffnung, and Solomon 1). A female counselor or, in Townsend’s case, a female nurse, “…does all the hard work of understanding and supporting the woman’s feelings” (1). This division of power, furthermore, “…reinforces the woman’s feelings that there must be something wrong with her”(2). As the authors astutely note, no one questions a woman about to give birth or tells her she doesn’t need to go through with keeping and raising her child “…because we’re brought up to believe that childbearing is a woman’s function” (2). One might speculate about the effects of upbringing on her desire to bring the pregnancy to term; however, within the context of the poem, Townsend surprisingly describes more pressure to terminate the pregnancy rather than give birth.

This aspect of the poem reminds readers of those who remind Demeter that as Persephone’s father, it is his prerogative to find a worthy mate for their daughter and that, after all, her uncle Hades is a viable candidate. As the son of Hyperion advises, “But, Goddess, give
up for good your great lamentation./ You must not nurse in vain insatiable anger./ Among the gods [Hades] is not an unsuitable bridegroom./ Commander-to-Many and Zeus’s own brother of the same stock” (Foley 82-85). The rationalizations Townsend lists have the same sort of placating tone: “you in grad school,/ no health insurance, me the one with a job” (31-32). It sounds as though she is trying to explain away her own emotions, lulling herself into believing she has no right to be upset. The pressures upon her to submit to both the doctor and her partner’s wishes are so strong, it takes her twenty years to find the courage to write it (51).

Her partner’s lack of enthusiasm about her pregnancy and the psychological climate at Planned Parenthood actually naturalize the abortion rather than motherhood, leading her to observe “…mothers both create and take life…” (13). The logical practicality of the “surgical and neat” (27) “procedure” (19), the cold table (33), and the ridiculous poster of a dangling kitten which reads “Hang in there, baby”(34) diminish the importance of Townsend’s emotional response or even her physical comfort. The poster in particular, though intended to offer comfort, is ironic and cruel since the precise intent of the abortion is to make sure the baby can’t “hang in there.” Opposing the clinical deadness of the doctor and, to a lesser extent, of her partner and future husband, are the Hispanic nurse, later described like an underworld goddess, a “…twentieth century,/ Southern Californian fate, midwife to death/ in her uniform printed with flowers,” and Townsend’s description of her budding relationship with unborn child (38-40). The fertility suggested by the flowers supplies a hint of bitter irony while also recalling the Flowers which tempted Persephone into the meadow before her abduction. Imagery describing the mother’s breasts also simultaneously suggests fertility and the Persephone myth.

While still pregnant, she gazes at her breasts, swelling “like some fruit I’d never seen,” subtly invoking the forbidden fruit of the underworld both due to the fruit’s mysterious nature and in the overall context within a poetry collection about Persephone (21). The duality of the fruit as
a symbol both of death and new life suggests potential fertility literally lost to the
underworld. Whether or not one perceives terminating a pregnancy as the death of a child, it is
the end of a life that could have been. Underscoring this point elsewhere in the poem, the poetic
voice feels “inhabited,” “…the cells of my skin glowing, bright and scared” (23-24). The
vibrancy of the life force growing inside her and the energetic link they share contrasts starkly
with the cold and clinical environment of the clinic, which is an underworld unto itself. Further
strengthening her bond with her unborn child, she gives the embryo names like “Caitlin, Phoebe,
Rebecca, Siobhan” (37) and nicknames such as “shrimp, peanut, little bud wanting-to-open” (43).
Naming and nicknaming not only reveals her affection for her child but also implies she has
already bestowed upon it a host of possible identities. In her mind, the embryo is as fully
alive as herself. The naming, however, threatens the logic and rationality that led her to her
“objective” decision, hence her declaration, “… not baby, never baby” (44). This initial denial,
later contradicted in the act of the poem’s construction, is similar to Demeter’s initial response to
conceal her divine identity and briefly take on the role of humble nursemaid, delaying the full
expression of her grief as though to lessen its intensity.

3) The Human Body as Underworld Within Poem: The Boy in a Box

There’s a boy in a box that I hold
inside me, the bluish-white petals
of his skin a closed bud of a fist
never to open, dry and crumbling,
an unwanted gift unclaimed,
sparrow-like bones reed-thin and
hollow, at once an absence
and a presence, abscessed too

deepl;y beneath the skin to ever

be fully excised, caged tight

behind the housing of my ribs,

nudging my pulsating heart.

Prior to a recent hospitalization, I experienced a series of complex delusions I believe to have been brought on by a combination of tremendous stress, sleep deprivation due to stress-related insomnia, extreme pain from the treatment of an infected abscess, and a delayed response to the prescription and over-the-counter medications used to treat all of the above. One of the many ideas upon which I became fixated was that of a lost male child, either a close sibling or an infant son. At times he was an infant, though I also imagined him as an adolescent or young adult. In some variations, he was murdered or buried alive, though I also recall driving aimlessly around the city believing I had a chance to find him and save him. I aborted a pregnancy from rape several years ago and had some intuitive sense the fetus may have been male; my daughter’s father forcibly impregnated me less than a year after she was born, hoping to reestablish his iron-fisted control over my life by further isolating me from my family, since my mother had told me she wouldn’t help if he got me pregnant again. Perversely, the abortion was the only time I physically felt the amniotic sac burst between my legs like a tide meant to safely deliver the baby out of my womb and into my arms.

I presently believe, however, that the “boy in a box” isn’t just a representation of that lost child but also a dormant masculine aspect of my own personality which was somehow brought closer to the surface of my consciousness by the recent traumatic events summarized briefly above. Whereas Harrison visualizes herself on a more embryonic scale trapped within a killing womb, my body/self was the tomb cradling this dead or unborn masculine element as though
Harrison’s imagery had been turned inside out. In both cases, however, the deepest aspect of the self leeches vitality from one’s day-to-day persona, like an infant in-utero feeding from the mother via the blood travelling through the umbilical cord. The mournful and maternal tone of the poem above recalls both Townsend’s poem about abortion and Demeter’s suffering over the loss of her daughter, who she perhaps wishes had lived perpetually in utero where Demeter might keep her held close and safe. Once Persephone has been recovered, she is no longer the same child she once was, having forever lost the childhood innocence she possessed prior to her abduction. Also, Persephone’s powerlessness before the will of first Zeus then Hades (and perhaps Demeter as well) suggests any ambitions she may have had for herself independent of her roles as lover and daughter were forcibly displaced, severed from her life-force and left to wither and rot within her.
D. Ritualistic Bloodshed, Literal and Metaphorical

1) Harrison

Blood imagery takes on all new meaning within Harrison’s work not only as a symbol of her gender, sexuality, and trauma but also because the damage was inflicted upon her literally by her own blood—her father and, to a lesser degree, her mother, and Harrison’s maternal grandparents who take on elements of the “wicked stepparents” during Harrison’s childhood. These passages also serve to further illuminate the text’s fairy tale and mythic connections since the color red and the element of blood are a key feature in several of the stories which Harrison’s memoir adapts. Harrison’s earliest references to literal and metaphorical bloodshed are those associated with photography and her grandmother, who “snips the offender” out of family photographs “with untidy haste, using her manicure scissors” (5). People, not just fingernails, must be cut down to size or else eradicated from visual memory. Harrison’s father “is an absence, a hole like one of those” her grandmother “cuts out of the family photographs” (5). The only remaining images of him, saved and hidden by Harrison’s mother, portray him as “a tiny figure in a suit and glasses” (6). These passages are shortly followed by descriptions of barbaric surgery, further highlighting the metaphorical violence caused by the scissor snips; moreover, the father’s diminutive stature in the quotation above likens him to the miniature girl-in-glass or Snow White, represented by Harrison later in the text. The glass he wears is over his eyes however, “the better to see her with,” to borrow a line from the Big Bad Wolf. The grandmother has a prominent role in “Little Red Riding Hood,” as well, as the protector of the girl whose literal “maidenhood” is in jeopardy. Note the ensuing description of Harrison’s grandmother, who screamed from behind her closed bedroom door whenever Harrison’s mother had a date.

“My grandmother has a talent for screaming. Her screams are not human. They tear through the veil of ordinary life…” (6); the tearing of the veil here not only refers to the veil
between worlds but also the tearing of the hymen and the loss of one’s virginity. As the
grandmother screams, “…in rushes every black, bleak and barbarous thing: animals with legs
captured in traps, surgery in the days that precede anesthesia, the shriek of a scalded infant, the cry
of a young woman raped in the woods, the long howl of the werewolf who catches her scent, who
finds and devours what’s left of her” (6-7). The grandmother’s indignation takes on a mythic
quality. She is able to summon or create violence and suffering by simply screaming. Voicing
grief and suffering through memoir or other creative outlets speeds healing, but the above
description reveals that voice also has the power to inflict harm. Juxtaposing a screaming
grandmother with a trapped animal, torturous surgery, a scalded infant, a rape victim, and a
devouring werewolf, Harrison mimics the cluster of images found in multiple versions of “Little
Red Riding Hood.”

As the Brothers Grimm relay the tale, Little Red Riding Hood’s mother said, ““Little Red
Riding Hood, here are some cakes and a bottle of wine. Take them to your grandmother. She’s
ill and feels weak, and they will make her strong…when you’re out in the woods, look straight
ahead like a good little girl and don’t stray from the path. Otherwise you’ll break the bottle, and
then there’ll be nothing left for Grandmother”” (Tatar 143). Editor Maria Tatar mentions in her
annotations of the Brothers Grimm version of “Little Red Riding Hood” that the cakes and wine
are generally interpreted as the body and blood of Christ. The edict to remain on the path,
however, was added by the Brothers Grimm. “Acutely aware that their collection would model
behavior for children, they looked for opportunities to encode the stories with morals, messages,
and lessons in etiquette” (143). Their added warning to Little Red Riding Hood also seems at
odds with the source-material as she doesn’t suffer any lasting consequence for failing to listen to
her mother. Instead, the fairy tale punishes the wolf for interrupting the journey of a well
intentioned, seemingly-innocent young girl; however, had she remained on the path and not
listened to the wolf’s suggestions, Little Red Riding Hood wouldn’t have suffered at all. One then wonders why her mother didn’t think to warn her about the wolf, instead, or why her mother sent her out into the woods alone in the first place. Tatar’s introduction to several variations on “Little Red Riding Hood” in The Classic Fairy Tales: A Norton Critical Edition considers the paradox of the Grimms’ amended moral prescription. “The lecture on manners embedded in the narrative is not only alien to the spirit of fairy tales…but also misfires in its lack of logic” (5).

Although the morality of the path was added later, the Grimm version of the story still predates Harrison’s memoir and dominates popular culture’s understandings of the myth’s meanings and purpose. The religious imagery of the communion cakes and wine only strengthens the argument that Harrison adapted material from fairy tales, mythology, and religious iconography in the spinning of her tale. As in the Grimm version of this fairy tale and in Dante’s epic poem The Purgatorio, the maiden who disobeys becomes unclean and must be purged of sin. Harrison, however, already had a wolf for a grandmother by her own archetypal descriptions of her grandmother’s neurotic howling (Harrison 6-7); moreover, as the biological and emotional product of two emotionally-absent parents who seem hypersexualized even in the presence of their daughter, Harrison was born with “Venus’s poison in her blood” (Alighieri 132). The memoir itself becomes the song she sings while burning in the flames. Also, the path of appropriate behavior she learned from her parents, especially from her father, was the path toward her own destruction. To create an alternate map for how to live her life, Harrison had to blaze her own trail through the forbidden forest for lack of reliable role models and guidance.

Harrison first enters into this dynamic as a four-year-old child, therefore initially aligning herself more with the trapped animals, scalded infant, and the patient on the table. This last image subtly evokes T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock:” “Let us go then, you and I/ When the evening is spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherised upon a
table” (1-3); in the reality of Harrison’s memoir, however, there is no ether to be had. The evening may still be “spread out against the sky,” but it’s about to be forcibly cut open with a pair of dainty manicuring scissors. Recalling her terrors as a child, Harrison writes, “I am four, and when I hear my grandmother scream I fall to my knees and crawl to safety, either under a table or, if I can get that far, into the linen closet or the wood bin” (7). The detail of the wood bin additionally recalls the woodsman whose axe kills the wolf in some variations of “Little Red Riding Hood.”

An earlier version of “Little Red Riding Hood” thought to have originated in Great Britain and entitled “The Story of Grandmother” actually bears a closer resemblance to the above passages than more contemporary versions of the classic fairy tale. Collected by French folklorist Paul Delarue in 1885 though purportedly older than “Little Red Riding Hood,” “The Story of Grandmother” concerns a “Gallic heroine” who encounters a wolf at her grandmother’s house. She “escapes falling victim to the wolf and instead joins the ranks of trickster figures. After arriving at grandmother’s house and unwittingly eating ‘meat’ and drinking ‘wine’ that turns out to be the flesh and blood of her grandmother, she performs a striptease for the wolf, gets into bed with him, and escapes by pleading with the wolf for a chance to go outdoors and relieve herself” (Tartar 3). Like the Gallic heroine, Kathryn Harrison is raised in her grandmother’s household. From a young age, she feeds unwittingly upon the poisonous sweetmeats of her mother’s casual affairs and her grandmother’s bitter hostility. Images of cutting or of being casually cut off or cut out of the family persist throughout the text.

The theme of figurative violence through words and the manipulation of photographic memories reaches its climax by the end of the second section as Harrison announces, “I’m six when my mother moves out and leaves me. She is gone, but her room remains as it was” (13). Details need no longer be edited out now that Harrison’s mother and her love life are no longer
directly part of the maternal household. Instead, her daughter sneaks into the room which was formerly hers, now a morbid kind of shrine to the memory of her presence, and stands among her dresses “of all colors: red, blue, pink, green…I duck under the skirt of one and let it fall around me like a yellow tent, a tent the color of the sun and smelling of flowers” (13-14). Not only is the yellow dress “a hundred times lovelier than any other thing in this house” (14); it also takes on a symbolic meaning, indicating for Harrison her failure to please her mother or to achieve recognition in her mother’s eyes. “If a dress like this was not worth taking, how could I have hoped to be?” (14). Maternal abandonment and resignation to her “predatory grandmother” (14) thereby leave Harrison love-starved and desperate—so much so that she begins an affair with her father.

From this point forward, Harrison relates more directly with her mother, seeking to take on the maternal role to fulfill her own emotional needs and lack of maternal affection. “Years after her death, I cut her page from the [yearbook’s] binding. I keep it framed in my study, and sometimes I take it and hold it in my hands. I look carefully at the photograph and at the [inscription] I know by heart” (17). The cutting of her mother’s photograph from her mother’s high school yearbook echoes the grandmother’s scissoring incisions, though the intent here seems preservation rather than destruction. Here, as well, Harrison and her grandmother occupy opposite ends of the spectrum, using both their voices and a pair of scissors in similar ways though to very different ends. Whereas her grandmother’s voice and manicuring scissors excise anything undesirable to deny the existence of unfortunate events, Harrison preserves the markers of her pain, turning them into something akin to roadside memorials representing all the parts of herself she has lost along the way. Harrison even keeps the inscription fully intact within the frame: “She enjoys reading and attending concerts, and hopes someday to become a dramatic
actress” (16). The photograph and inscription remind her of the absence of her mother and give her a tangible focal point for her loss and grief.

Images, language, and a bloody shade of red further coalesce in the set of “dark-red” Encyclopedia Britannica books on her grandparents’ shelf, evidence of her father’s earliest efforts to support himself, his teenage bride, and their daughter. “How many times during my childhood do I take down one of these heavy volumes, use it for a school project or just to satisfy my own curiosity? How many times do I hold one of those books in my arms not knowing who sold them to my grandparents?” (18); the red volumes therefore reinforce the sense that she is her father’s pupil, literally the apple of his eye. Mythically, red is the color of the poisoned apple, Snow White’s lips, the drop of blood from the pin-prick which causes Beauty’s enchanted sleep, and the pomegranate seeds which condemn Persephone to life in the underworld for a portion of every year. The red encyclopedias also suggest a strong connection between bloodshed and language which resounds throughout not only Harrison’s memoir but also Townsend’s poetry. The Kiss is metaphorically inked in the blood of Harrison’s tattered innocence.

As writer Margaret Atwood additionally informs readers in her work Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing, blood is the sacrificial food desired by the dead to ensure safe passage through their realm (164). A journey back in time toward one’s former self is a journey through the land of the dead, as well, particularly for Harrison since her mother dies during the chronology covered by the text. Clarissa Pinkola Estes’ Women Who Run With the Wolves mentions blood in terms of a journey through “la salva subterranea,” a term which combines subterranean with “saved, proved, corrected,” though “salva” can also refer to the tasting of meat before presenting it to royalty or rashly proving oneself innocent by running a great risk (http://www.spanishdict.com/). The essence of one’s selfhood must be tested for metaphorical poison or corruption as it is offered up sacrificially at great risk to the participant’s well-being.
Through writing her memoir, Harrison purges herself of the poisons in her blood by spilling them across the page for her readers’ consideration and examination. Her past therefore becomes their food. Estes writes that red marks the “sacrificial stage” in the journey (447). In this stage, blood must be shed to facilitate the shedding of the false self and the regeneration of identity.

Harrison’s blood imagery further recalls the red songbook Patricia Hampl invents when crafting a short memoir piece for the chapter “Memory and Imagination” within her book *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*. Blood is “the small red door leading straight into the dark room of… childhood longing and disappointment” (Hampl 31). Although the red songbook wasn’t actually present at the piano lesson Hampl’s memoir story describes, it suggests the immense power of both symbolism and imagination in relation to memory and storytelling. Red also connotes the transition out of childhood and into womanhood through literal or figurative loss of virginity and the “longing and disappointment” associated with maturation. The innocence one sacrifices in transition also recalls the red of the lambs’ blood marking the threshold of Biblical believers to protect them from God’s wrath (Exodus 12:7 *Today’s New International Version*). Harrison’s metaphorically blood-soaked memoir is, then, itself a sacrificial offering with all the talismanic power of the blood of the lamb or the blood she lost as a young woman when her hymen was forcibly torn.

The ritualistic deflowering in Harrison’s text occurs at the gynecologist’s office when her mother insists she be fitted with a diaphragm before leaving for college. Readers infer her mother hopes her daughter can thus avoid making the same mistakes she made as a young woman—an inference supported by Harrison’s mother’s inability to comprehend her daughter as an entity independent of her own ego. One might then reread this passage as another attempt to rewrite the past or symbolically erase Harrison’s memoir-self, returning her back to the moment before conception when she was undifferentiated cellular material and still well within her mother’s
biological and emotional domain. Even without reading quite so deeply into the scene, however, one senses the superimposition of the mother’s will over that of her virginal daughter. Again, there is a twist to the deflowering/awakening mythos typical of Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and Cinderella, unless one reads the mother here as the evil sorceress/stepmother or giver of poisoned apples.

The diaphragm won’t fit unless the hymen has been broken. Logically, the hymen’s existence alone suggests the diaphragm might not even be necessary; however, her mother insists the doctor tear through her maidenhead to ensure her daughter remains protected. The gynecologist employs a “series of graduated green plastic penises” (42). “Their green is a green that exists nowhere in nature but that colors surgeons’ scrubs and emesis basins and other dire instruments I associate with illness and death” (42). The process wasn’t a brief one, either, because it is only the second-to-last phallus that “comes out smeared with blood” (42-43). The reader’s horror only intensifies as we learn this same man is also an obstetrician, in fact the very obstetrician who oversaw Harrison’s delivery (43). The only sexual act referenced before this event is an anecdotal footnote in her life’s story: a brief reference to an inexperienced boy with whom she had one sexual experience at the age of 17 because that was the age at which her parents had first had intercourse (16).

Forced to sacrifice her hymen at her mother’s insistence, Harrison like Persephone “has, in effect, been initiated by a rape, a pattern found in a number of male-centered, misogynistically inclined cultures, and strongly suggested in numerous Greek myths” (Lincoln 228). Reappropriating misogynistic narratives to rewrite her initiation, Harrison endows herself with mythic status. Elsewhere in his article “The Rape of Persephone: A Greek Scenario of Women’s Initiation,” Bruce Lincoln writes, “…the underworld is thought to be a less well-defined place than the land of the living-- dark, hazy, or murky-- and thus perfectly suited to a person whose
place and status in society is equally ill-defined” (228). Fairy tale or mythological imagery therefore also allows the reader a tangible sense of Harrison’s loss of identity and boundary-definition. In Harrison’s memoir, the image of bright red maidenhead blood against the medicinal green of the plastic phallus becomes even more disturbing for the stark contrast not only of red and green but also of the romantic versus the horrific, both elements of classical fairy tales.

Harrison’s references to blood in the memoir’s latter chapters recall this scene and the narrator’s lost symbol of virginity. At the age of six, Harrison is hit by a car. “Blood was pouring down my mouth and chin,” she writes (103). Her mother arrives as if by fate, wearing a dress with a “tight bodice and a full crimson skirt embroidered all over with music notes” which makes her appear “angelic” or “magical” to the child-narrator. Her mother then takes her to the doctor, leaving her unattended at the doctor’s office so she can get to work. Terrified that she’s being abandoned by her mother once again, the child has to be sedated before the doctors can suture her jaw. She wakes up screaming and cannot be placated until her mother brings her to a Christian faith healer (103-104). The transcendent experience she shares with the faith healer sets a pattern for emotional or spiritual catharsis achieved through bodily mortification. She now believes “that spirit could conquer matter, and that therefore I could overcome whatever obstacles prevented my mother’s loving me. I could overcome myself” (106). This realization spurs a wealth of self-destructive behaviors justified as self-sacrifice toward the goal of receiving maternal affection.

In emulation of martyred Christian saints, she places her fingers in a vise and presses a chunk of dry ice to her tongue. “I looked in the mirror at the blood coming out of my mouth, at the same magic flow that had once summoned my mother from the impossibly wide world of grown-ups and traffic and delivered her to my side” (111). The bloody mouth not only emulates
the aperture of the deflowered or menstruating vagina; it also evokes the metaphor of blood consumption and creates an association between blood sacrifice and voice as it is with the tongue that one speaks. This, then, relates back to the denial of voice/self, the initial recanting of truth which festers into muteness. Through her incestuous romance with her father, Harrison mortifies both her body and her spirit, effacing the selfhood her mother has repeatedly rejected. When she meets her father at the Grand Canyon, she remarks that as the sun rises and sets over the canyon every day, it becomes filled with “shadows the color of blood” (106).

During another rendezvous with her father, the narrator notes, that the lobby of the hotel is “carpeted in red, as if to allow for a more discreet spilling of blood” (158-159). Whatever tattered remains of her selfhood have been carried over into adolescence and early adulthood are torn away by the brutal actions of her father. Harrison’s memoir-self bears a bloody mark of Cain or metaphorical Scarlet Letter for her part in keeping up the pretense of the incestuous romance. In the words of feminist Lara Owen, author of *Her Blood is Gold: Celebrating the Power of Menstruation*, Harrison’s brow is marked by blood, like that of the Hindu woman denoting her third eye with a red dot to access the “magic of the blood opens the sixth chakra (the energy associated with spiritual and psychic vision)” (Owen 146); ironically, however, Harrison’s sexual awakening is at times as blinding as it is revealing in regards to her self-perceptions and ability to effectively communicate her deepest self with those around her. The most fruitful context within which to consider Harrison’s use of blood imagery, then, is a folkloric one. All the fairy tales which Harrison’s work implicitly adapts involve blood or the color red to some degree; however, Angela Carter’s more contemporary short story “The Bloody Chamber” shares the most thematic common ground with Harrison’s dramatic presentation of incestual romance.

The title story of Angela Carter’s 1979 work *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* similarly uses what scholar Sarah SCEATS calls “vampire tropes” to “examine gendered behavior
and heterosexual power relations (108). In her article “Oral Sex: Vampiric Transgression and the Writing of Angela Carter,” Sceats identifies a number of vampiric elements in Carter’s fiction which strongly resemble the above blood imagery from Harrison’s memoir. Although Sceats discusses several of Carter’s fictional pieces, for the sake of this paper, the primary story of interest is “The Bloody Chamber” as it relates the actions of “the Bluebeard figure of the cannibalistic Marquis” whose “lips are repeatedly described as red and often as wet” (109). In Harrison’s memoir, it is she who bears the ruby-red lips, but her father literally and metaphorically “feeds” her and encourages her to feed upon herself, literally driving her to greater acts of starvation and self-silencing; furthermore, the relationship between the relatively sexually-inexperienced Harrison and her hypocritically-religious, predatory father has a nuptial quality insofar as she replaces the lost ex-wife she resembles. This bizarre triangular interrelationship readily aligns with the pairing of an innocent virgin and the Marquis in “The Bloody Chamber.”

The engagement ring the Marquis presents to the maiden would have been an equally appropriate gift within the context of The Kiss. “He had the ring ready in a leather box lined with crimson velvet, a fire opal the size of a pigeon’s egg set in a complicated circle of dark antique gold. My old nurse, who still lived with my mother and me, squinted at the ring askance: opals are bad luck, she said” (9). Carter’s narrator doesn’t dispute this point, instead noting the opal “had been his own mother’s ring, and his grandmother’s, and her mother’s before that, given to an ancestor by Catherine de Medici…every bride that came to the castle wore it, time out of mind” (9). Even her arguments in favor of accepting the token ring sound like a warning. While the ring represents opulence and tradition, it could also carry a family curse. Why is there only ever one bride in the castle? Why didn’t his mother survive to see her son wed? Why haven’t any of his former wives insisted on retaining the jewel? The narrator’s nursemaid senses these
niggling uncertainties and asks her charge, “And did he give it to his other wives and have it back from them?” (9).

His wedding gifts grow only more bizarre as time passes. At the opera, his bride-to-be wears “a Poiret dress” newly purchased by the Marquis, who insisted on buying his fiancée an entirely new wardrobe or “trousseau” (11). She describes her celebration garment as such: “So, for the opera, I wore a sinuous shift of white muslin tied with a silk string under the breasts. And everyone stared at me. And at his wedding gift. His wedding gift, clasped round my throat. A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat” (11). The ribbon and décolletage presents her bosom like the “crystallized fruit” of her wedding dress packaging (7) whereas the ruby necklace foreshadows the exquisite terror of their fully-consummated union. The narrator elaborates the Marquis’ grandmother enjoyed the defiant custom of wearing a red ribbon about the neck to symbolize the blood which might have been spilled had she not escaped the guillotine. She had her ribbon “made up in rubies” (11). “That night at the opera comes back to me even now…the white dress; the frail child within it; and the flashing crimson jewels round her throat, bright as arterial blood” (11).

The blood of the hymen alone isn’t enough to satiate the appetites of the ravenous Marquis. No, he must have every last drop of life-blood from the women he claims to adore. Similarly, while Harrison’s father claims to be motivated by filial love, the reality of his actions more closely resembles forcible possession and total domination. Tellingly, Sceats considers two complementary possibilities for the psychological ramifications or motivations behind the vampiric behavior of Carter’s characters, both of which might be applied to the narrative voice of Harrison’s fairy-tale memoir. First, she describes an alternative female vampire or “Countess” from the short story “The Lady of the House of Love.” “If [she] is the embodiment of insatiable longing, the focus of this longing her mouth and the satisfaction of her desire achieved through
sucking, then a psychoanalytic account of her (and other vampires) being ‘stuck’ in the oral stage becomes only too obvious” (112). The emphasis on various oral activities throughout The Kiss, including kissing, speaking, eating, and orally bleeding, supports Sceats’s reading quite efficiently. Most notably, while staying overnight at his mother’s house with his daughter, Harrison’s father engages her in oral sex.

Harrison imagines he feels ashamed of his stepfather’s prior behavior and speech and thinks he is about to lie down beside her in apology. “Instead, he lifts the hem of my nightgown. He doesn’t speak, and neither do I. Nor do I make any attempt to stay his hands. Beneath the nightgown I am wearing no underpants, and he opens my legs and puts his tongue between them” (Harrison 128). She describes the physical sensations as “neither good nor bad. It effects so complete a separation between mind and body that I don’t know what I feel. Across this divide, deep and unbridgeable, my body responds independently from my mind. My heart, somewhere between them, plunges” (128). Additional imagery within this passage recalls the “narcotic” kiss: “The scene is as silent, as dark and dreamlike as if it proceeded from a fever or a drug” (128). Her greatest horror isn’t the act itself but the setting in which her father chooses to enact it: “His mother’s house! His mother’s house!” (128). Harrison concludes, “He needs to do it at his mother’s house. He needs the power granted by her presence, and he needs to thwart that power” (128). By pleasuring his daughter with his mouth, Harrison’s father thwarts the power of the bond between himself and his mother, begun during his infantile socialization with his mother’s breasts, in Freudian psychoanalytic terms. There is an alternate psychoanalytic interpretation to both The Kiss and “The Bloody Chamber,” however, via another aspect of Freudian psychology.

Sceats also references paternal obsessions, citing Jon Cook’s view of romances in light of Freud’s Totem and Taboo and Moses and Monotheism. “…Cook maintains that the strong, masculine, capitalistic lovers of these romances are a manifestation of the ‘fictional fathers’ that
have been created and recreated ever since the primal sin of patricide” (113). The Marquis then becomes a substitute father-figure, therefore having nearly absolute power over his young and innocent wife. Although Harrison’s lover literally is her father, his near-total absence in her early childhood (minus letters and phone calls) as well as the emotional distance between herself and her mother psychologically primes her to look for the substitute father. Had he been a real presence in her life all along, neither her longing for him nor the amount of pain she is willing to suffer to keep him in her life would be so great. She suffers the violent effects of the equally taboo impulses of sexualized filial love and the opposing patricidal desire to end the relationship for good in order to save her own life. Consider the reality of what the Marquis and Harrison’s father offer their proposed lover/victims. Is it love, or is it instead something deadly masquerading as a romantic fairy tale, ensconced inside a pretty dress?

Sceats’ emphasis on psychoanalytic interpretations, furthermore, reminds one of feminist Laura Mulvey’s psychoanalytic approach, particularly her article “The Oedipus Myth: Beyond the Riddles of the Sphinx” from her book Visual and other Pleasures. Within the Oedipus Myth, Mulvey identifies two plot lines or codes: the Proairetic or action-based code and the Hermeneutic code which she describes as the “unraveling of the enigma” (190). The myth of Persephone is a mirror-image of The Oedipus Myth. As Oedipus’s narrative focuses on men and incorporates women as secondary facilitators of masculine action, the Homeric “Hymn to Demeter” portrays Zeus and Hades facilitating a transformation in Persephone’s social status and in the power dynamic between Persephone and Demeter. One might imagine Persephone or even Harrison, herself, quoting Oedipus’s speech. “Don’t reject me as you look into the horror/of my face…/ I come as someone sacred, someone filled/ with piety and power” (Mulvey 200). What greater enigma than oneself might any writer wish to unravel? Situating a story within the underworld at once gives Harrison access to what writer Margaret Atwood calls the “matrix of all
possible narratives” (180) while also affording her the mythic status of the uninitiated maiden through the retrospective power of storytelling.

Like Harrison, Carter begins her tale in flashback as the bride recalls her initial mixture of excitement and trepidation and the cautious words of her mother. “Are you sure, she’d said when they delivered the gigantic box that held the wedding dress he’d bought me, wrapped up in tissue paper and red ribbon like a Christmas gift of crystallized fruit. Are you sure you love him?” (Carter 7). The dress and tissue paper are presumably white, but the ribbon binding her wedding garment is red. A symbolic spilling of blood (from the hymen) will seal the pact of her marriage to the Marquis. The “fruit” he offers her isn’t red, however, unlike the aforementioned poisoned apple and pomegranate seeds from Snow White and the Homeric “Hymn to Demeter.” No, the Marquis bears crystallized fruit, signaling his intentions to freeze, capture, and destroy his bride as the fruit is frozen into crystalline form, glittering and sweet but no longer living. The crystallized fruit therefore also recalls the theme of glass enclosures in The Kiss.

2) Townsend

Blood symbolism carries a unique significance for female writers such as Kathryn Harrison and Alison Townsend as the essence of fertility, a marker of sexual difference, and a font of creativity linking them to the rhythms of life and death. “From her very flesh and blood and from the constant cycles of filling and emptying of the red vase in her belly, a woman understands physically, emotionally, and spiritually that zeniths fade and expire, and what is left is reborn in unexpected ways and by inspired means, only to fall back to nothing, and yet be reconceived again in full glory” (Estés 171-172). The preceding quotation from Clarissa Pinkola Estés might also be applied to the thematic importance of menstruation within the work of Alison
Townsend. A passage within “Ode to the Pomegranate” considers the eroticism and fertility of blood as an end in itself.

Initially, Townsend relates the spilled juice of the pomegranate to the blood of a broken hymen (7). She later reflects on the pomegranate’s irresistibility, the desire to be “…marked with such red/ the way I am marked when my husband kisses me/ during blood time, then works his way back up,/ my white skin printed with roses, the iron taste/ of my own blood there between our lips…” (49-53). Like the syrupy juice of forbidden fruit, the blood becomes an aphrodisiac, heightening the poetic voice’s sensual pleasure. “Red Words” suggests the creation of poetry or creativity, itself, as analogous to menstruation through its rich use of color symbolism and through direct reference. A desired state of inspiration becomes “Something like menstrual/ blood that begins/ fresh and arterial,/ before darkening / to a shade I barely/ recognize as mine” (14-19). That which comes from somewhere within, transitions into something distinct from the self with which the artist herself cannot as readily identify. The ongoing cycles of menstruation and creativity keep the artist flourishing through such times of loss and renewal, each fresh word like an autumn leaf of fading scarlet reborn again the next fall. For a woman so attuned to her own fertility cycles, menopause becomes problematic. Will she still have a sense of herself within the rhythms of nature and creativity or as feel herself as much a woman without the monthly ritual?

Scholar Johanna Foster’s article “Menstrual Time: The Sociocognitive Mapping of ‘The Menstrual Cycle’” considers the psychological and emotional impact of viewing menstruation as a cyclical construct. She argues “the conceptualization of ‘menstrual’ time as akin to a spinning wheel traveling along the road of a woman’s fertile life is the one that carries the most currency in popular and medical discourse in the West. Yet there is nothing inevitable about conceptualizing ‘menstrual’ time in precisely this way. Rather, this time is better understood as a social
invention, a result of similar processes of ‘making time’ that have produced the ‘hour’ and the ‘week’” (525). Even if a woman distances herself cognitively from the psychological momentum of the “cycle” image, however, its pervasiveness in popular culture strengthens its emotional impact. Since menopause isn’t typically considered a portion of this formulaic cycle, a post-menopausal female can no longer use it as a model of the passage of time in rhythm with her body. What alternative models of time acting upon the body might she create to replace the loss of the menstrual clock, and how might these models affect the creative works such a woman brings to life?

“Forty-five This Spring” and “Blood Elegy: Persephone at Midlife” address this dilemma. “All this year I have secretly been growing old,/ the ovaries spilling their last burgundy stain...,” begins the first. Moreover, the remembered blood stains are “dark as wild blackberries I plunged my hands into/ twenty summers ago, heedless of scratches” (3-4). Menstrual blood connotes youthfulness, fertility, and liveliness, the sort of boundless joie de vivre that inspires one to grab fistfuls of scratchy wild berries. By midlife, however, the tone shifts: “…while I plotted the possibility of a child/ at mid-life, estrogen’s gunpowder line disappearing/ fast as dust in rain...” (6-8); estrogen, itself, literally shoots down her dreams of motherhood as it recedes. Still childless, Townsend seems to feel she’s been double crossed by her own body, which “…still fits, even betrayed by the moon” (11). She comes to know the crone phase of the moon, relating it to death rather than fertility cycles or new beginnings.

Townsend’s lunar imagery resembles Rachel Zucker’s description of Persephone from her collection *Eating in the Underworld*. The first poem titled “Diary [Underworld]” finds Persephone newly arrived in the underworld, wishing someone had seen what happened to her. “Not even the moon saw me withdraw” (Zucker 1). For Townsend, however, it’s more like the moon deserted her. “Dark veils slide across her farthest silver reaches/ like mirrors in a house
where death sits down/ and visits for a long time before leaving” (Townsend 12-14). The loss of fecundity hovers around her like the shadow of death. Her view of the moon is no longer clear but rather shrouded in dark veils of mystery, cloaking the house of mirrors wherein death waits patiently. She invokes the spirit of the moon to ask her why youthfulness must come to an end. “Oh moon! Oh Hecate, gate-keeper, cave-dweller,/ one-who-knows-her-way-in-the-dark, goddess/ of crossroads and young things, why must it end?” (15-17). Not only is Hecate an underworld goddess. According to the “Homeric Hymn to Demeter,” she also assisted Demeter in her quest to regain her daughter Persephone.

“But when the tenth Dawn came shining down upon [Demeter], / Hekate met with her, holding a torch in her hands, to give her a message” (Foley 51-53). Hekate (or Hecate) tells her she heard a voice but did not see the man, immortal or otherwise, who stole Persephone. Hekate’s account lacks sufficient concrete clues to lead Demeter to her daughter’s captor; however, it does break the cycle of Demeter’s mournful wanderings. Prior to Hekate’s appearance, Demeter “…roamed all over the earth, / holding torches ablaze in her hands; in her grief she did not once taste ambrosia/ or nectar sweet-to-drink, nor bathed her skin” (47-50). Hekate’s words give her hope and motivate her to continue her search.

For the poetic voice of Townsend’s poem, however, the message Hecate bears relates instead to the certainty of mortality. Like the “everything green” folded away in “Persephone Remembers: The Bed,” the poet here writes, “I fold up names of children inside me--/ Erin, Elizabeth, Beatrice, Shihreen--/ the way my sister and I once folded antique/ baby clothes we found in a trunk in the barn..,” (Townsend 18-21). The melancholic tone of the poem’s conclusion suggests permanent storage rather than temporary safe-keeping. Her dreams of raising a daughter by any name will remain forever unfulfilled, adding to the irony of her invocation of Hecate. While Hecate tells Demeter her daughter is still alive, she tells Townsend
her daughter is not to be. Like sad spirits mourning their own disembodiment, the names themselves haunt the poetic voice. “…Their syllables follow me/ like small ghosts; they cling to every thorn” (23-24). Absence takes on a tangible presence, as it must have for Demeter in her grief. Might imitating Persephone assist the poetic voice during the loss of her own fertility more so than her fruitless efforts to maintain the fertility of Demeter? “Blood Elegy” meditates upon this possibility through its ritualistic reenactment of Persephone eating the pomegranate.

The subject of “Blood Elegy” persistently and “always” (1) eats the rinds of pomegranates “…the way Inuit women/ chew sealskin to make something/ so soft it can be wrapped/ around every secret known by the body” (5-8). Whereas Persephone resisted the temptation of the pomegranate and had to be tricked into eating the blood-rich, pulpy seeds, the protagonist here revels in the forbidden fruit. Sewing the gummed scraps together, she fashions herself a red dress, “…though her estrogen level sputters and falls,/ inevitable as the gas gauge going down…” (14-46); menopause then signals a loss of energy or a depletion, not only of one’s reproductive capabilities but also potentially of one’s emotional fertility. The red dress made of pomegranate rinds rebels against the inevitable transformations of the body and the psychic self, enlivening the self.

“Still she moves, forward motion/ the only possible elegy/ for all the blood she has shed…” (23-25); paradoxically, mourning and loss are expressed through forward motion, something typically associated with progress, growth, and renewal. Blood spilled during menstruation makes this paradox not only appropriate but perhaps inevitable, however, since it epitomizes the constant interplay between life and death. Each drop signals the loss of another potential new life, but the monthly repetition creates its own forward momentum regardless of whether or not one ever has children. Even menopause is another natural spoke in the same cycle. “…[T]he body/ dreaming itself into red” (29-30) remembers its place within the rhythms
of life and death. Recalling the “cardinals of her childhood” (32) and the moment she “put her hands out then/ to the flame-colored birds/ as if they could warm her,” (36-38) she repeats the gesture from her youth “though there is no one but herself to see…” (40-41). Although unwitnessed, this ceremonial repetition reasserts her place within the universe in spite of the inevitable arrival of the winter of her years.

“Snow falls in great sheets inside her body,” she laments (44). Externally, however, the “red dress” made from scraps of pomegranate skin “shimmers and clings, bright/ as the blood-stained hands of Inuit women” (45-46). The pale white of the snow contrasts with the shimmering red dress, recalling the striking color symbolism of mythical figures like Snow White and imbuing the protagonist with liminal qualities as something of both winter/death and spring/fertility. Marking herself with a red dress also suggests she is communicating her liveliness to the outside world, signaling to all that she remains a creative force with which to be reckoned. Her dress evokes the symbolic clothing and actions of taboo menstruants in various tribal societies discussed in feminist poet and scholar Judy Grahn’s *Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World*.

These women used a “brightly colored scarf, face paint, a special apron or ring, or even a smoking pipe clenched between the teeth” to indicate they were bleeding (Grahn 78). “Though the flesh continues its/ slow fall away from the fruit of the body” (Townsend 50-51), the pomegranate-skin dress’s “satin lining” nuzzles against “each mortal curve and cleft of her” (47-48), ensuring she is “…still/ the world’s mistress and queen” (48-49). Onward she travels, coming ever closer to the “moment when she is nearly bone” (57) when the ruse of the red dress may fail, revealing “the red dress her life was nothing/ but scraps of bitter skin” (59-60). Regardless of her age, however, the poetic voice finds a fearsome, untamed strength in her current state, having learned “red and the shape of this wildness” (62). She has “become this
tough, sinewy meat/ that lopes alone toward the end,/ looking for the pack it has lost,/ refusing to lie down anywhere/ near my fire and find comfort” (63-67). Her mournful wanderings recall the travels of Demeter, at times aimless and bitter. Unlike Demeter, however, she isn’t lessened by grief over her own mortality but rather emboldened and strengthened by the many losses she has suffered. The blood imagery within “Blood Elegy” appropriately takes the reader full cycle: from the end of maidenhood; the disillusionment regarding her dreams of motherhood; the onset of post-menopausal crone-hood and all its wisdom; and lastly, the realization of the vast reserves of the inner strength which not only carried her through all the preceding phases of her life but will also preserve eternally through the immortality of literature.

One of Townsend’s poems, however, adapts blood imagery in a radically different context which bears a stronger resemblance to Harrison’s textual use of blood as a symbol of violent sacrifice. True, one can imagine menstruation as “a ritual, like a sacrifice, like a virgin thrown to the gods” as does Cynthia M. Zelman in her article “Our Menstruation” (1). The end result of the metaphorical sacrifice Zelman discusses, however, is a procreative one. “We gave something up to get something back: blood for womanhood” (1). One also notes a sacrificial tone to the red imagery in “Persephone Remembers: The Bed” as Townsend evokes blood offerings in relation to the loss of virginity. “The Cutter,” however, treats blood sacrifice much more explicitly. The poem reads like a transcript of a conversation between the poetic voice and her subject matter, a young woman who cuts herself. The cutter of the poem’s title begins by describing the varying sensations and effects of several of her favorite cutting tools in the sort of tone one might use to blissfully recount the impressive attributes of past lovers. “Razors are like silk, she tells me./ They slice the skin so smoothly you hardly/ feel them going in” (1-3). Her seductive description also highlights the lack of any perceived pain, a common element in the testimony of self-mutilators.
Ariel Glucklich’s article “Self and Sacrifice: A Phenomenological Psychology of Sacred Pain” quotes an anonymous internet author making a similar statement. “The slicing through flesh never hurt, although it never even occurred to me that it should” (482). Strangely, for all their self-reflection and depth, the descriptions in “The Cutter” also omit any direct references to pain, except as something vague remembered and oblique like the “ghost” of scar tissue (19).

Townsend’s poem continues, elaborating on the pros and cons of various sharp edges. The serrated bread knife leaves “time to think what it does, chewing at you,/ the ragged fringes of skin peeled back/ like something left by a shark” (6-8). The imagery here recalls Harrison’s sense of being literally consumed by her father. The knife doesn’t just slice inward but rather permanently alters the surface of the skin, creating the appearance that a piece of flesh has been taken like the proverbial Shakespearian “pound of flesh” (Merchant of Venice 4. 1. 304-307). One wonders if the girl cuts herself to make her outsides match her insides, to replicate the feelings of consumption and loss in tangible, physical form. Glucklich quotes another cutter named Jane as stating, “If somebody else is hurting me or making me bleed, then I take the instrument away and I make me bleed. It says: ‘You can’t hurt me anymore. I’m in charge of that’” (482). The poetic voice of Townsend’s poem certainly does take charge of her own pain by cutting herself though her ulterior motives aren’t discussed outright.

The next weapon Townsend’s cutter discusses also mars the surface of the skin, but in a way that sounds less consumptive and more de-feminizing. “Broken glass…has its own/ atonal music, the wound it leaves jagged/ as a badly lipsticked mouth…” (9-11); the “atonal” quality of the wound suggests a disruption of natural rhythms, something off-kilter and off-key. One might blithely remark any act of self-injury is “off-kilter and off-key,” but the idealized description of the razor is a stark contrast to that of the wound left by a piece of broken glass. Imagine having one’s face permanently marred by poorly-applied, garish red lipstick. That’s the sort of wound
she’s talking about here. Though the injury is hidden under her clothing, anyone who sees her unclad, like a potential or future lover, will see she is quite literally and noticeably damaged. The implied failure to successfully fulfill societal expectations of her femininity by presenting a proper feminine front complete with skillfully-applied cosmetics suggests cutting herself makes her less feminine and therefore less desirable to a future partner. Further complicating matters, her mother refuses to have the wound stitched to minimize the jaggedness of the scar tissue: “…she wanted her daughter to remember/ what hurting herself looked like” (15-16).

Frighteningly enough, her mother sounds more concerned with the outer appearance of her daughter’s well-being than the reality of the underlying emotional pain that’s causing her behavior. Notice also, once again, that preventing her daughter from reaching an idealized state of physical appearance is the greatest punishment her mother can bestow upon her.

The lines immediately following the preceding image draw on the motif of silence, suggesting something within the young woman isn’t being voiced. Cutting herself becomes a way of physically speaking the pain that’s otherwise denied. She states scar tissue “…can only whisper,/ its tight, white mouth pulled shut, grimacing/ around the ghost of pain…” (17-19). The image of a mouth “pulled” shut reminds one of the archaic tradition of sewing shut the mouths of the dead, as though the young woman or at least her emotional self is already deceased, hence the reason her pain is a “ghost.” Ironically, however, she observes that even the ghostly quality of her sensations “reminds her she is alive, is breathing,/ is what cutting is really all about” (20-21). The numbing half-life of her feeling-self affirms her corporeal existence through contrasting with the persistence of consensual reality. Again failing to find a resolution to the contradictory impulses toward life and self-destruction, as is the case in Townsend’s poem “The Addict,” “The Cutter” similarly concludes with the image of “…the pen/ as scalpel, salve or bandage, words/ blooming like blood on the page” (29). One also recalls the imagery of “Red Words:” “…red
words/ from a red place/ on my red tongue...,” (66-68). Perhaps one needn’t suffer to create art. Certainly one need not literally draw blood in order to write better poetry. Since some degree of suffering is inevitable for any living being, however, it seems a worthy task to at least create something out of the devastation and destruction. The cutter’s creativity isn’t therefore the precise equivalent of menstruation as blood sacrifice, but Townsend’s imagery of blood as ink on the page places the two polarities in close proximity regardless.

3) Blood Imagery Poem: Zen and the Art of Menstruation

Initial scarlet imprint upon the stark white cotton pad
Like the pressed bud of a New Guinea impatiens hawkeri,
a pulpy dab of cherry lacquer splashed haphazardly and accented by one flourishing red tendril, curled like the top half of a question mark ironically missing its period, the (end?) of our affair only partially punctuated by the ripeness of womb-blood, the only fruit harvested between us.

This poem adapts blood imagery like that used by Harrison but with a more aesthetic rather than thematic tone. The intention here is akin to impressionist painting, to capture a single moment in vivid, colorful detail. Though playfully-titled, it does suggest menstruation as a suitable subject for aesthetic appreciation and meditation. Additionally, if menstruation is an art form, then every menstruating woman is an artist. As feminist author Inga Muscio notes in her book *Cunt: a declaration of independence*, menstruation, like art, is a messy process. “Fingerpaints in kindergarten messy…By the simple act of not wearing panties I can stand in the middle of my kitchen and change the way it looks. Without moving a muscle, a pool of blood appears between my feet. Like magic” (47). Muscio’s witty observations and the poem both
create an alternative blood symbolism apart from objectifying images of sacrifice and victimization.

In spite of its humor, however, the shape of the “…question mark missing its period” in particular (5) becomes tragic in light of the poem’s conclusion. The only positive in the end of her love relationship is the certainty that she isn’t pregnant. Emotionally, the break-up feels as incomplete as a sentence improperly punctuated, stopping suddenly without proper closure. While the blood on the pad and the knowledge she isn’t pregnant fill her with a sense of Zen-like gratitude and awe, the situation as a whole is more like a festering hang-nail, neither fully a part of her nor fully numb and needing to be cut from the body. The process of severing her ties to her lover will be slow and painful, much like the gradual sloughing of menstruation, but every month will bring her closer to a renewed sense of freedom and self-empowerment. Her blood therefore becomes an art form not only as an end in itself but also as a representation for the process of recreating herself anew as a woman independent of and separate from her lost lover. The visually stark image of red blood on white cotton additionally evokes “Snow White” or its alternate version “Snow White and Rose Red.” Both in fairy tale and contemporary fiction or poetry, blood is a powerfully-loaded inspirational symbol of passion, sacrifice, fertility, and mortality.
E. Glass Enclosures and Mirrors

1) Harrison

Mirror images and glass enclosures take on mythic significance within *The Kiss* through its evocation of “Snow White” and other fairy tales. Harrison considers the kiss a physical barrier separating her from the rest of the world, like the glass coffin that enclosed Snow White while she slept. “It is like a vast, glittering wall between me and everything else, a surface offering no purchase, nor any sign by which to understand it,” she writes. She can see through the glass to the life she once had but, “mysteriously, the kiss separates me from that life” (71). Harrison’s narrative voice also recalls a cockroach she’d trapped under a water glass, “how it circled slowly at first and then faster, faster” (71). The glass imagery here recalls the “thick wall of glass” at the airport (69), first noted just after the kiss occurs. The reoccurring glass motif thereby strengthens the impression of the narrator as frozen within the moment of the kiss, suspended in time. As she states at the memoirs outset in relation to their illicit trysts, “these nowheres and no times are the only home we have” (4). Moreover, the roach’s increasing momentum becomes the template for the pacing of the memoir, itself, as Harrison circles round and round the subject matter with increasing anxiety.

Maria Tatar notes of the glass coffin and mirror-image motifs from Snow White, “The mirror image and the glass coffin, not surprisingly, have become the privileged sites for feminist interpretive projects” (77); however, not every version of the myth uses a coffin made of glass: “in other versions that coffin is made of gold, silver, or lead or is jewel-encrusted” (74). For Harrison’s purposes, however, and the intertextual and self-reflexive mythic voice she creates, the glass coffin functions very effectively on both the symbolic and literal levels due to glass’s transparency, frailty, and its reflective qualities. Tartar goes on to consider varying interpretations of the glass coffin and the magic mirror, all of which one might adapt as views of
the glass enclosures and mirroring physical similarities between Harrison and her mother.

“For Gilbert and Gubar, the magic looking glass and the enchanted glass coffin are ‘the tools Patriarchy suggests that women use to kill themselves into art, the two women literally try to kill each other with art” (77). Beyond the conflict between Harrison and her mother or Harrison and her father, there is also the underlying conflict occurring within Harrison’s psyche between the false image-self and the authentic self. “Beauty,” Tartar continues, “as reflected in the glass and seen through the coffin, may be attractive, but its seductions have a sinister, lethal side” (77). One can become so mired or entrenched within the reflective walls of the mirror/coffin that one forgets which self is “true.” Only with the death of the mirror-self can the authentic self emerge. The memoir’s construction serves to shatter the walls of the mirror-self and bring a newer, more authentic textual self into the light.

2) Townsend

Alison Townsend’s poetry also contains numerous references to glass enclosures and reflective surfaces in pieces such as “Persephone at the Mall,” “Blue Willow,” “Persephone Under,” “If I Called You River,” “In the Luray Caverns: Persephone Writes Home,” “Beauty Lesson,” “Mother-Daughter Portrait,” “Forty-Five This Spring,” “Blood Elegy: Persephone at Midlife,” and “Each Spring the Bloodroot.” Some of the poems to be discussed below are treated in full elsewhere within the body of my argument, mostly within the section relating to portraiture; however, I have decided to isolate the passages involving mirrors and reflective enclosures both to have material with which to compare and contrast Harrison’s usage of a similar motif and to determine if one might find a broader connotative or symbolic meaning to the mirror throughout Townsend’s collection. The prior elements of hair, internalized death or the underworld within, and blood all occupy places of poetic importance within the *Hymn to Demeter*. The Hymn frequently refers to the beauty of Demeter’s hair, beginning, “Demeter I
begin to sing, the fair-tressed awesome goddess” (Foley 1). Upon learning of her daughter’s disappearance, Demeter furthermore tears the veil “on her ambrosial hair” (Foley 41); one can extrapolate the murkiness of the underworld at least in part as a symbolic representation of her grief and of Persephone’s rite of passage from young maiden into woman. Indeed, Persephone’s annual journey to the underworld parallels the monthly tides of a mortal woman’s menstrual cycle and the life/death/life patterns of the body. Blood takes on a greater significance in the *Hymn*, however, as the forbidden fruit of the land of the dead. The pomegranate seeds Hades slips under Persephone’s tongue might as well have been actual drops of blood so close are they in resemblance. But though there are several bodies of water within the underworld, mirror-like reflections don’t occupy a place of mythic importance in the *Hymn to Demeter*.

Townsend’s repeated use of mirrors and, to a lesser extent, reflective enclosures, instead evokes elements of fairy tale, like the infamous “mirror, mirror on the wall.” In his *A Dictionary of Symbols*, scholar J.E. Cirlot further associates the mirror with moon symbolism, imagination, consciousness, a doorway into another world, twins, and truth (211-212). Mirrors reflect the objects before them as the moon reflects the light from the sun. Their similarity to reflective watery surfaces such as lakes links them archetypally to imagery relating to consciousness and imagination, both of which are frequently associated with fluidity as in the phrase “stream of consciousness. The illusion of depth within a mirror’s reflection creates the impression of a mirror-image world held within it. Its literal twinning effects account for the association with twins and dualities, and its capacity to grant the beholder a clear view of him- or herself, explains its association with truth. Consciousness and dimensional doorways align rather readily with the archetypes of underworld mythology; the other aspects of his definition, on the other hand, while not explicitly related to the underworld, are apt descriptions for Townsend’s use of the mirror and reflective enclosures in the works listed above. One also finds a brief reference to a mirror in
lines 57-58 of “Jane Morris Poses for Rossetti’s *Prosperine* (1874);” however, I discuss the mirror imagery in that poem as another sort of formalized portrait like the painting, itself, and will therefore reserve it for the portion of the treatise relating to portraiture and mapping.

“Persephone at the Mall” concerns a young woman whom Townsend considers a younger version of herself, much as she does the young woman in “Persephone at the Crosswalk.” The overt comparison creates a sense of twinning even before she introduces mirror imagery toward the end of the poem. Like a witch or stepmother in a fairy tale, the poetic voice is “scrying in the soot-blackened/ glass of the mirror…” (44-45) before herself, “staring through the window/ into you she has become…” (46-47). The dichotomy of the young woman and the observing poetic voice bears close similarity to feminist scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s descriptions of Snow White and the wicked stepmother: “the one fair, young, pale, the other just as fair, but older, fiercer; the one a daughter, the other a mother; the one sweet, ignorant, passive, the other both artful and active; the one a sort of angel, the other an undeniable witch” (Tatar 291-292).

Given the young Persephone isn’t literally her daughter, but the poem casts Townsend’s poetic voice in the role of Demeter, regretting her daughter’s helplessness but unable to prevent her from losing her innocence. Gazing upon the young woman through the scrying mirror, moreover, is an act akin to witchcraft. Her privileged point of view affords her not only insights into the young woman’s character but also the crystal-clarity of hindsight in regards to her own life. The alchemical process allows her to fleetingly relive or recapture a sense of youth caught within the mirror, framed by the window. But the frozen moment of youth and beauty represented by the Persephone she sees at the mall isn’t at all a desirable one. She is Sleeping Beauty already enchanted or Snow White entombed in glass, sleepwalking through her life, unaware of the predatory gazes alighting on her skin like so many palpable, unwanted caresses.
Her lack of self-awareness allows the men watching her to take advantage with their eyes. Townsend here recalls the naïveté of her own youth in this poetic cautionary tale.

“Blue Willow: Persephone Falling” uses the theme of a symbolic glass enclosure, as do “Persephone Under” and “If I Called You River.” The first poem relates the glass coffin of Snow White’s bewitchment to a “…glass door sliding shut/ between you and the world…” much like the glass imagery in Harrison’s memoir. Depression forms a literal barrier between the poetic voice and the outside world. She can see through it to the world outside but can neither interact with anything outside of her own suffering nor escape the sense of confinement within herself. Strangely, however, the other two poems adopt glass enclosure imagery in a positive, even romantic light. In “Persephone Under,” Townsend rhapsodizes about the poetics of winter, trying to imagine it as she falls asleep, “…the doorway/ into dreams wavery as old glass…” (6-7). Here, the enclosure allows for passage from one side to the other. It is at once solid and liquid, paradoxical attributes well-suited to the realm of dream.

Similarly, “If I Called You River” ponders, “If even in winter we kept moving together,/ meeting in secret beneath our glassy quilt…” (33-34). The contrast between the glass imagery in the first poem versus the latter two suggests depression traps and swallows its victims whole through coercion and trickery whereas sleeping, dreaming, and lovemaking involve a willful, consenting passage into realms of altered consciousness. As Townsend writes of “If I Called You River,” “I wrote the poem in the late 90s for my second husband, Tom, and read it at our wedding in 2000. Its imagery was inspired by the Mary’s River, a tributary of the Willamette, in Western Oregon, where I had the good fortune to live in the late 1980s and which I carry in my soul, like a kind of psychic map of a place where I felt at home. It’s my spiritual landscape and one that, I suppose, falling in love again summoned” (email). She further states that as the final poem in the
collection, the piece “suggests the kind of happy, whole, consensual relationship with the beloved I wanted at the end of the book” (email).

“In the Luray Caverns: Persephone Writes Home” also addresses in part the motif of enclosure though without reference to glass. Its heroine isn’t trapped inside a glass coffin or mirror, but she does describe herself as “caught in the dark throat of the caverns, falling like those drops of cold water into forever. A stone girl dripped into a woman who only sometimes breaks away, reemerging each April into crushed purple petals, the joy of sun on my skin” (9-12). One might imagine the caverns as full of reflecting pools, but they house instead “the underground river where blind fish swim with no need to see their way in the darkness” (3-4). There is a similar sense of twinning here, however, as in “Persephone in the Mall.” The poetic voice finds herself trapped in the caverns because she, like Harrison, played Prince Charming to her mother after the moment of her mother’s death. “But because I kissed your cold forehead as you lay in your coffin, because I stepped forward when my siblings pulled back, because I was the oldest and dutiful daughter, I am the one caught…” she explains (7-9). Embracing her mother’s mortality, she confronts the ghostly image of her own death reflected in her mother’s features. The image of a stone girl dripped into a woman furthermore suggests a split self, the innocent maidenhood left behind when her mother died and the hastily-adopted role of womanhood. Even if she doesn’t bear children herself, this young woman in effect becomes her own mother, raising herself into an adult.

The twinning of mother and daughter take on greater meaning within “Beauty Lesson” as her mother instructs her how to care for her hair, literally telling her that the ritual of 100 hairbrush strokes a day is what a woman does if she wants to have beautiful hair. One senses the ritualistic hair brushing has been passed down from mother to daughter for generations as another rite of passage into womanhood. The daughter occupies what was once her mother’s place.
“before the mirrored Victorian dresser” (20). After her mother’s death, the act of brushing her hair reminds the author of these moments, “…how she pulled my young life/ against her dying body, holding me close, binding/ and releasing my hair…” (37-38). The sense of binding and releasing captured by the braiding and unbraiding of her hair mirrors the cycles of emotional bonding between a mother and daughter, drawing one another closer then letting go little by little. It also reflects the maternal cycles within the Persephone myth as mother and daughter are ripped asunder then reunited every year in accordance with divine ritual.

Mirrors offer a gateway connecting Townsend to her mother in “Mother-Daughter Portrait,” as well. When presented with side-by-side photographs of Townsend as a child and her departed mother, readers commented upon the striking resemblance between mother and daughter. “It was something I’d wanted to hear my whole/ life, as I’d stared into mirrors, trying to see beneath/ their silvery surface and through the ghost-body I seemed/ to inhabit into who was really there, and what an “I” was anyway without a mother to guide her…” (6-10). The image in the mirror seems more real to her than her own body. It possesses a depth and degree of truth she perceives herself to lack in some way. Finding her mother within her own reflection both comforts and discomforts her, connecting her not only to her mother’s memory but also to something from the realm of the dead as though she were the one already departed, inhabiting a “ghost-body” but not truly living. This foreshadows the device of the mirror as a symbol for mortality in “Forty-Five This Spring,” “Blood Elegy: Persephone at Midlife,” and “Each Spring the Bloodroot.”

The three aforementioned poems were discussed in detail above within the section of the argument concerning blood symbolism. They merit revisiting, however, considering that all three also involve mirror symbolism. The female voice in “Forty-Five This Spring” mourns the moon’s betrayal as it no longer brings forth the rich tides of menstruation every month. She sees
the moon now in darkness, in the guise of crone-goddess. “Dark veils slide across her farthest silver reaches/ like mirrors in a house where death sits down/ and visits for a long time without leaving” (12-14). Although these lines were analyzed above, consider them again from the perspective of mirror imagery. The juxtaposition of mirrors and dark veils suggests the traditional covering of the mirrors within a household where a death has recently occurred, both to spare the mourners from having to see themselves distraught and to ward off the spirit of the recently deceased from using the mirrors as a gateway back into the realm of the living. These mirrors once held the reflection of the newly-dead man or woman, after all, and as Cirlot further explains in his entry on mirror symbolism, some cultures believe anything a mirror has ever reflected might be summoned once again within it (211-212). The veils in Townsend’s poem, then, prevent her from conjuring her younger self back to life through the mirror’s reflection. Even the immortalizing power of poetry cannot fully recapture the years she has lost.

The poetic voice in “Blood Elegy: Persephone at Midlife” similarly attempts to invoke a reflective image of her lost youth and fails, seeing only the “…mirror of her own face/ vanishing beneath a continent of years” (21-22). Here, the face itself is the mirror, alluding to a perceived absence of self similar to the ghost-body in the poem “Mother-Daughter Portrait.” In “Blood Elegy,” however, Townsend brackets the imagery of the disappearing reflection with a blizzard so intense it creates “a tundra white-out” (21). She describes the road before her as “a blank page” (20). The passage of time, like the changing of seasons which precipitated the snow storm, has erased her sense of her own story. Her future is blank and unwritten, and nothing from her past can assist her in deciphering the emptiness. Moreover, the combined elements of snow, blood, and a mirror evoke Snow White as well as Persephone. One might read the poetic self as both Snow White and the evil queen/crone or, alternately, the self as an aging Snow White
ravaged by nature personified in the form of the queen who wishes to steal Snow White’s beauty for herself.

The sense of beauty stolen or abducted resonates within the opening stanzas of “Each Spring the Bloodroot” wherein Hades rushes out “with all his black horses,” extinguishing the sun in his wake (9-11) and dragging her down “to the lowest level/ of the world/ with his body” (14-16). Hades doesn’t just penetrate her, however. He permanently embeds himself within her, a “coal star, obsidian knife/ broken pieces of a mirror/ shrouded in black silk…” (19-21). The fragment of his dark nature burns dark as a coal star and slices into her with the precision of a chiseled obsidian dagger or a shard of broken glass. Again, the glass is shrouded in black, marking the death which has occurred. Here, mortality itself is a metaphor for the countless deaths of the soul. The violence of her abduction kills something within her not just once but every day as the dagger twists a little deeper. The consensual lovemaking with her partner cannot chase away Hades’ shade. Even while holding her beloved, she notices “…a dark figure/ lay briefly between us,/ and the girl buried/ in the earth of the body/ that is my body called out” (40-44). Helpless as the earth broken open “with the shining tip of a shovel,” (48-19) she declares she is “…nothing then, nothing,/ my mouth a slit opening/ and closing on air” (50-52).

Note the visual similarity between the light-reflecting properties of the shining shovel’s tip and the fragment of broken mirror. That which reflects the self also has the power to wound or split the self, creating the illusion of a tangible division between the object-self and the reflected self suspended in the looking glass, as though the physical self has no power over its own reflection. This division of the self effectively steals her voice. She cries out silently but cannot audibly protest, her mouth reduced to no more than a slit which can only swallow air. Her lover calls her home to herself once more with the tenderness of his touch, however, returning her spirit back safely within her body as though planting a flower firmly into the soil (58-67). The
sensual reality of the body shatters the illusion of the captured reflection and restores her livelihood and the active voice which presumably later wrote the poem.

Viewed alongside the complex use of mirror imagery discussed above, the anecdotal reference to a light-reflecting mirror in lines 57-58 of Townsend’s poem “Jane Morris Poses for Rossetti’s Prosperine (1874)” might seem incidental or ornamental; however, consider the importance of the gaze within the piece, and the mirror takes on greater meaning, suggesting Morris initially played the role of metaphorical mirror for Rossetti, reflecting the desires of his ego. He initially seems more smitten with her image than her flesh-and-blood reality, as was the case with Harrison’s father and his objectifying obsession with his daughter. This relates to the image-self vs. real self issue as also seen in Harrison’s memoir. Rossetti uses his canvas as Harrison’s father uses his camera. As Rossetti is supplanted by Morris’s gaze, Harrison’s father loses power through his daughter’s capacity for self-awareness and self-reflection. Writing her memoir is the equivalent of returning his gaze, portraying him as he portrayed her.

3) Glass Enclosure/Mirror Poem: The Futility of Making Love in the Underworld

We could wade into the waters of the River Lethe, doubled like twins by the river’s dark, fragmented reflections, enfolded within one another while the currents, thick and viscous with collected memories, lap at the heat rising from our skin as the river drinks in the salt we shed, remembering together the delicate and difficult art of letting go without regret. There and only there could you love me, knowing the moment
would be washed away, trapped forever within the rippling liquid mirror, when you emerged blameless and empty.

During the process of writing my thesis, I had a dream in which I saw myself as though I were hovering ghost-like outside of my body. My body didn’t seem to have any difficulties whatsoever, though, navigating through the dream-world without me. The portion of my psyche witnessing the dream from a safe distance was aware of the presence of my absent lover hovering or lurking somewhere outside of the peripheral vision of my mind’s eye. Within the context of the dream, however, my dream-body self didn’t seem aware that he was watching, that he had arrived first and was waiting for her all along. My dream-self was somewhere elevated. I imagined it as a rooftop overlooking a large city though there weren’t any edges in sight. The rooftop or whatever it was seemed to extend almost infinitely in every direction but one, the direction from which I had arrived, I believe by elevator. That part of the dream is a bit blurry in my memory. The flat stone surface before me was a uniform gray, but it was crisscrossed by several intermingling streams of flowing water.

I knew somehow that the water washed away human emotion, and that the streams were intended for healing purposes, to lift the burden of old emotions and refresh the spirit. My dream-body undressed beside the stream. I watched her from a distance and sensed my lover watching her (me), as well. Once she stepped into one of the streams, he approached her, and they made love underwater. The part of me witnessing the dream was very angry that he’d chosen this of all places for his seduction. I imagined him later claiming the lovemaking had meant nothing, knowing he wasn’t really lying since the depth of his emotions would be washed away by the water. I’m not sure now if the dream warranted such a cynical and embittered interpretation. It was later suggested to me that the streams may have had a healing effect on
both of us. Maybe it was my purpose within the context of the relationship to lure him toward accepting inner healing. In either case, I recalled the geography of the underworld and the river within it that cleanses the soul of all memories of mortal life, the River Lethe. Given the similarities between the topic of my thesis project and the underworld-like imagery from the dream, I decided it was an ideal subject for poetry. I still haven’t settled on a single interpretation of the dream, itself. Perhaps both views are equally true, and he used what was intended for healing as an excuse to leave.
F. Enchanted Slumber

1) Harrison

Like the enchanted Sleeping Beauty, both Harrison and her mother experience periods of entrapment within literal and metaphorical unconsciousness. “My mother sleeps,” she writes. “For as long as she lives with us, in her parents’ house, she sleeps whenever she can… I never understand that she has fled into sleep, that she seeks comfort in sleep, that sleep is where she hides. I know only that I can’t bear to let her do it” (Harrison 7). Unlike Persephone or Sleeping Beauty, Harrison’s mother is a willing participant in unconscious escapism and was never forcibly enchanted into slumber. Her absence is mourned not by a mother-goddess or a kingdom but rather by her own child. Unequipped to barter with Zeus and Hades or to take on the role of Price Charming and wake her mother with a kiss, the daughter fades into the background, unacknowledged and unseen. Moreover, if Harrison does wake her mother, “…she doesn’t talk to me. She stalks around her room as if enraged, a wild and astonished look on her face” (8).

Beyond closed eyes and the veil of sleep, layers of masks obscure her mother’s ability to see her daughter truly. “Her eyes are closed and hidden behind her satin sleep mask, her face as flat and white as the mask is flat and black: this terrifies me. Sleep makes my mother’s face itself a mask, one mask under another” (7-8). Literal sleep masks a metaphorical sleep in which her mother fails to see her daughter as an independent being operating outside the boundaries of maternal selfhood but nonetheless needing maternal affection. “If I dare, I reach forward and gently touch the smooth sheen of her black mask. It looks illicit, almost perverse, bordered by a narrow ruffle of black lace, the kind I already associate with the underwear she puts on before a date. Outside, I hear birds, awake as I have been for hours; their calls sound shrill and pitiless” (8). Her mother’s body belongs only to itself and, in passing, to eroticism. But to the desperately-wakeful child, it is a cold, unwelcoming thing.
In this sense, Harrison’s narrative voice recalls the lamentation of the prince in “The Ninth Captain’s Tale” from *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* as translated first into literal French by J.C. Mardus and then rendered into English by Powys Mathers in 1964: “He entered the pavilion and began to weep by the ivory bed, recalling verses in praise of so much beauty” (391). Harrison similarly describes her mother’s beauty with a poetic and mournful longing similar to that of the hero from “The Ninth Captain’s Tale.” Appropriately, most of the sleeping maidens in the “Sleeping Beauty” variants, “The Ninth Captain’s Tale” included, reach the age of 15 or so before falling into an enchanted slumber. Though Harrison’s mother would have been older by this point since she was 17 when she first became intimate with Harrison’s biological father, she was still a teen mother. The pressures of parenting and the unusual psychological dynamics within her parents’ household conspire to freeze her in a protracted adolescence.

Sleep is a temporary escape, but oversleeping leaves one frozen both literally and emotionally. Harrison’s mother’s unconsciousness leaves her daughter vulnerable to the verbal attacks of the grandmother/“wicked stepmother” who, in the “Sleeping Beauty” tales, at least, is often characterized as an ogress or a cannibal. Several of the tale’s variants feature literal and figurative consumption. For example, upon discovering her stepson’s romantic indiscretions and his lover Talia’s offspring, the Queen in Giambattista Basile’s Italian story “Sole, Luna, y Talia” or “Sun, Moon, and Talia” commands “the cook to kill them, and serve them up in various ways for her wretched stepson to eat” (Basile). This follows an earlier passage in which the King’s love for Talia and the children sired by another suitor moves him to repeat their names over and over again. “When the King went back to his own kingdom he was forever repeating the names of Talia and the little ones, insomuch that, when he was eating he had Talia in his mouth, and Sun
and Moon (for so he named the children); nay, even when he went to rest he did not leave off calling on them, first one and then the other” (Basile).

The King’s desire to literally “eat” Talia and her children is, in turn, foreshadowed through the method by which Talia overcomes the enchanted slumber caused by the sliver of flax under her fingernail. One of her children bites her finger and awakens her (Basile). The passage earlier discussed in which Harrison considers the dark magic of her grandmother’s screams certainly befits a woman bent on metaphorically consuming her grandchild. Her screams, after all, echo those of a werewolf devouring the remains of the young woman raped in the woods (Harrison 6-7). The oral imagery associated with her incestuous affair as well as her literal consumption of her own body through starvation therefore further highlight the memoir’s similarities to several versions of “Sleeping Beauty.”

Ironically, however, the “Sleeping Beauty” stories typically begin with a king and queen pining for lack of a child to love whereas Harrison’s mother seems to mourn the existence of the child she didn’t intend to have. Charles Perrault writes in a A.E. Johnson’s English translation of “La belle au bois dormant” or “Sleeping Beauty in the Wood,” “Once upon a time there lived a king and queen who were grieved, more grieved than words can tell, because they had no children” (Ashliman). Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s 1812 variation, “Dornroschen” literally “Little Thorn-Rose” or, more commonly, “Little Brier-Rose,” originally features a young maiden pricked by a rose thorn who falls into an enchanted slumber and wakes as she is being raped. The children of unknown paternal origin in the Basile Italian fairy tale were products of rape later explained away through magic and creatively-reinterpreted translations of the original source-text. Although translations or reinterpretations aren’t an issue within Harrison’s memoir, the historical trend of sanitizing and moralizing fairy tales suggests some stories are more forbidden
than others and must be hidden or edited away; indeed, some of the more scandalized readers surveyed by Nancy L. Fischer made similar statements about Harrison’s work.

Fairy tale scholar Maria Tatar summarizes Basile’s story in her introduction to the Brothers’ Grimm story “Briar Rose.” “The king who discovers Talia in an abandoned castle is already married, but he is so overcome with desire for her that he ‘plucks from her the fruits of love’ while she is still asleep. Talia is awakened from her deep sleep when one of the two infants to which she gives birth, exactly nine months after the king’s visit, sucks the piece of flax from her finger” (233). The version of Basile’s story most accessible to the general public, alternately, omits any reference of sex let alone rape between the king and the princess. “Meanwhile, two little twins, one a boy and the other a girl, who looked like two little jewels, wandered, from I know not where, into the palace and found Talia in a trance” (Basile). Within the online version of the story, the birth of the twins occurs after the King’s initial visit to her bedchambers but before his eventual return to formally ask for her hand in marriage. These intertwined themes of sexual assault, childlessness, and illegitimate or inappropriate couplings leading to children actually apply more readily to Harrison’s affair with her father and the Sleeping Beauty/Persephone-like imagery with which she describes it.

“In years to come, I’ll think of the kiss as a kind of transforming sting, like that of a scorpion: a narcotic that spreads from my mouth to my brain. The kiss is the point at which I begin, slowly, inexorably, to fall asleep, to surrender volition, to become paralyzed. It’s the drug my father administers in order that he might consume me. That I might desire to be consumed” (Harrison 70). Harrison as memoir narrator falls into various levels of unconsciousness (both literal and metaphorical) and must struggle to free herself. This is her underworld journey, complete with an abduction perpetrated by an older male. From the moment her father kisses her inappropriately, she is violently cast out of her former life and barred from ever returning.
“Everything takes more energy than I have. I realize I’m in a kind of shock; a cold, sinking torpor that gives it away-- a sensation I recognize from a few years before, when I was hit by a car while riding my bike” (75). Later, she adds, “On the few occasions that I see someone approach through my squat windows or heart footfalls in the long corridor outside my door, I don’t answer the bell. Instead, I crouch on the floor between my bed and the wall until whoever it is leaves. Sometimes I fall asleep there, my arms around my knees, my body curled tight” (116). Prince Charming thus becomes the God of the Underworld.

Having tasted the forbidden fruit of incestuous passion, she is condemned to a subterranean darkness. Like Persephone’s seasonal visits to the Underworld, Harrison’s experience is a self-perpetuating cycle as she gradually desires her father’s “consumption” of her flesh. She faints or passes out repeatedly, drops out of school, and reaches a state “near paralysis” (77). Like her mother, she has fallen under a dark spell which entraps her in a deathly state of unconsciousness which threatens to destroy her selfhood rather than peaceably enrich it, as is the case with healthy sleep and dreaming. For both the mother but even more so for the daughter, the erotic associations surrounding the sleep imagery (the lingerie-like sleep mask, the forbidden, poisonous kiss) links them both to Persephone and her abduction to the underworld.

2) Townsend

The themes of sleep and unconsciousness appear in several of Townsend’s poems, adding a new dimension to her interpretation of the myth of Persephone’s abduction while also recalling the mythos of Sleeping Beauty. “Persephone at the Mall” concerns a young teen who is “sleepwalking”--a word repeated time and again throughout the poem and set off in italics like the phrase “something happened in the bed” and variations on it in the poem analyzed above. Here, sleep is entirely metaphorical, however, the sleep of the uninitiated virgin who is blissfully unaware of the potential consequences of inviting and toying with the male gaze. She is
Persephone in the field of flowers, just prior to abduction. Townsend writes, “…she’s sleepwalking, trying on the allure/ of the body…” (4-5). Subtle word play here suggests the female body as commodity, something to be taken off the shelf and tried on like any other garment. Further imagery posits the body as landscape, “her body a new/ continent she is exploring” (9-10). Following these lines, Townsend delineates the curves of the young girl’s body, mapping them through poetry. Like highlighted tourist attractions on a map, the poem stresses “her breasts taut under the black/ burnt-out velvet shirt,/ her legs endless columns of light/ spilling from short-shorts/ purchased at the Gap…” (11-15); these poetic observations replicate the palpable sweep of the male gaze over her breasts and legs.

The imagery changes abruptly, making the body something mythic. The young girl is “…entranced/ with the spell /of the body…” (16-18) and unwittingly carries “the book of myths/ open between her legs,/ though she does not/ know the story in the book” (24-27). At first glance, this imagery sounds the most empowering. Unfortunately, however, the girl lacks the self-awareness necessary to use this magic to her own advantage. Not only is she unable to read the story into which she has been written; literally and metaphorically, “…she does not/ see herself, does not notice/ how men’s glances/ strip her of being…” (30-32). The closest source of reflection or self-understanding available is the poetic voice, presumably Townsend, standing in the mall and seeing the young woman as a reflection of her younger self when she converted a “good-girl skirt into a micro-mini” (40).

Townsend’s observing poetic voice and her younger alter ego stand together at the brink of the young woman’s initiation into womanhood, though the poet remains unobserved. She compares the mall to “a meadow where bees hum,/ where every nameless flower/ anoints her with pollen” (53-55), again strengthening the comparison to Persephone who was picking flowers with a group of maidens prior to her abduction. The poetic voice enters in as an unobtrusive
observer, watching her through magical means like the witch spying on Snow White, “…scrying in the soot-blackened/ glass of the mirror…” (44-45); in spite of the potent magic contained within the girl’s own body and the wisdom of the poem’s observations, however, “…there is nothing,/ not one thing/ you can do or say/ to wake her” (49-52).

Here, poetic language fails to save the young girl from her own storylessness or the naïveté which sets the stage for potential victimhood. Townsend’s words can only preserve her innocence on paper, like a fly suspended in a drop of amber. The tone of the poem’s conclusion recalls that of “The Addict” in which Townsend mourns the inability of language, hers or that of the young student who is the poem’s subject, to heal a crippling drug addiction. The girl “…slips through the blue fingers/ of the world,/ all the things you cannot do/ to save her piled up inside, useless/ as the words you will later use to describe them” (48-51). Her relationship to the drug also reminds one of the sleep walker: “…the drug like a lover/ who wants her helpless on the bed…” (23-24). Even the female student’s own poetic voice isn’t strong enough to protect her from the lulling false promises of narcotic oblivion. Her “unblinking poems” (34) are “lifelines that fall just short” (35). Both of the two preceding poems mourn for the young women but cannot redeem them, a startling contrast from the conclusion to “Persephone Remembers: The Bed” in which words offer bitter medicine and, potentially, new life.

3) Sleep Poem: Dreamcatcher

Shivering silver strands of spider silk
stretch taut across the thousand miles
between us as we dream, weaving a
shimmering web that trembles
with your every breath, sending
ripples of movement toward me.
I can still feel you even in my sleep,
as I turn toward the empty side of
the bed pooled with cool shadows
then turn again facing westward,
the direction of the setting sun,
the element of Earth, the body, and
the nagual-self. Fittingly, the direction
you travelled as you walked away
from me, my earthen-eyed warrior.
I wake to the reedy rustling of the
bamboo curtain hanging in the open
window, the strands chiming at the
touch of a soft wind which might’ve
swept through the tangles of your
coyote fur-colored hair. And the
dream catcher suspended
above the bed, diamond mirrors
and purple feathers, rotates slowly
as though touched by an unseen
hand or the soft breath exhaled
toward the ceiling as I say goodbye
to the dream once again.
While considering possible sources of inspiration for a poem about sleep and dreams, I literally walked into a strand of spider webbing. This reminded me of the spider web-like pattern of a dream catcher. I imagined an astral dream catcher stretching across the stars, interconnecting two former lovers while they dreamed, feeding the connection between them no matter how strongly one or the other might deny it during waking hours. The image suited the scenario ideally because my former lover is part Native American. I thought about that sometimes when sleep eluded me, and I watched the decorative dream catcher above my bed spinning in the minutest of air currents as though a spirit had swept past it. The dream catcher witnessed all the romantic moments between us, and I wondered if some intangible essence of him or my feelings for him remained entwined within its strands, gathering at the center and dripping down the dangling feathers and onto my third eye while I slept. I don’t dream of him all that often, but I sometimes find myself thinking about him while dreaming. Once, I framed a statement in my mind as though planning a rebuttal to an argument he and I hadn’t even had yet. To my surprise, I heard him answer in my head, the thoughts distinctly not my own.
G. The Forbidden Kiss/ Paternal Incest

1) Harrison

From the erotic consumption of the pomegranate seeds to the kiss which restores life to Sleeping Beauty, a kiss is a very powerful thing both in myth or fairy tale and in Harrison’s memoir. Her description of her father’s first kiss, moreover, bears a striking resemblance to the moment when the pulpy red seed first touches Persephone’s lips. When questioned by her mother as to how Hades tricked her into eating food in the underworld, Persephone replies, “…he stealthily/ put in my mouth a food honey-sweet, a pomegranate seed, / and compelled me against my will and by force to taste it” (Foley 411-413). Hades and Harrison’s father both resort to cunning and trickery to ensnare their respective females. Persephone’s father Zeus gives his brother Hades permission to abduct his daughter and take her for a wife whereas Harrison’s father justifies his erotic possession of his daughter through his own warped misunderstandings of Christianity, claiming Harrison is his property by God to do with as he wishes. The passage describing their first kiss at the airport, moreover, sounds very similar to Persephone’s reply to her mother. “With his hand under my chin, my father draws my face toward his own. He touches his lips to mine. I stiffen” (Harrison 67).

At this moment, Harrison recalls feeling uncomfortable but not yet suspicious. Soon enough, however, the mood of the passage and the message of the kiss both darken, as though penetrated by the “misty dark” of Hades (Foley 446). “A voice over the public-address system announces the final boarding call for my father’s flight. As I pull away, feeling the resistance of his hand behind my head, how tightly he holds me to him, the kiss changes. It is no longer a chaste, closed-lipped kiss” (68). While Harrison retreats, he strikes out against her, denying her right to self-sufficiency and taking possession of her body against her will. “My father pushes his tongue deep into my mouth: wet, insistent, exploring, then withdrawn. He picks up his camera
case, and, smiling brightly, he joins the end of the line of passengers disappearing into the airplane” (68). The implicit connection between the kiss and the phallic camera case/camera will be explored in detail in relation to the fear of exposure (both literal and metaphorical). For now, however, consider how one might inappropriately kiss one’s own daughter in a crowded airline terminal then smile “brightly” and step into line as though nothing of consequence has happened.

His total lack of urgency, self-consciousness, or shame proves he has absolutely no remorse whatsoever for what has just transpired. Harrison, on the other hand, lingers dumbfounded at the gate while the plane taxies away, no longer sure who she is or how she is supposed to function in this new reality wherein her father kisses her like a lover. She notes the thick wall of glass separating her from the rest of the terminal, as discussed elsewhere, and watches the plane carry her father away. “I watch it take off, the thrust that lifts its heavy, shining belly into the clouds” (69). Even her description of the plane is sexualized. Her father has so thoroughly destroyed her emotional boundaries and so completely disrupted the father/daughter bond between them that all further contact between them and all of her ensuing perceptions of his character carry a sexual charge. Like the predatory father in Italian folklorist Giambattista Basile’s “The She-Bear,” Harrison’s father, “by asking for what was unseemly from his daughter, caused her to run away at the peril of her life and honor” (Tatar 106).

The chapter containing the kiss ends with a bold, if fearful, admission. “I am frightened by the kiss. I know it is wrong, and its wrongness is what lets me know, too, that it is a secret” (69). The pressure of keeping this secret drives her to great acts of self-denial, including starvation and self-silencing. Her actions are not so unlike the response of the grieving Demeter who questions the gods then dons the appearance of an old mortal woman and seeks shelter among mortals, first refusing food or water then later threatening to destroy humankind by turning all the farm fields fallow. Since none of her family members manage to successfully
intervene on her behalf, Harrison eventually becomes her own Demeter even as she still embodies the abducted Persephone, starving and silencing herself as Demeter did while mourning the loss of her daughter. The mythical tone of the text thereby lends greater depth and resonance to the memoir by incorporating the tribulations of several heroines into its story arc. Alison Townsend similarly combines elements of Persephone’s journey with bits and pieces of her own life and the lives of women and young women she has met. Of all her narrative poems, however, “Persephone Remembers: The Bed” shares the most common ground with Harrison’s memoir both in terms of topic and fantastical themes.

2) Townsend

“Persephone Remembers: The Bed” specifically addresses paternal incest in the context of underworld mythology. Not only does it connect directly to Harrison’s narrative. It also encapsulates many of the motifs already discussed, including blood imagery and unconsciousness. “It happens in the dark./ If it were light would she be able to stand it?—,” Townsend writes (1-2). Readers surmise the taboo nature of her subject material from these two lines alone. Although the darkness here is a literal thing, it also evokes the shadows of the underworld. Was the rape of Persephone more palatable because it occurred far below the earth’s surface in the realm of the dead and not in broad daylight in the field full of flowers from which he abducted her? Townsend continues, “her father’s bed a cave she crawls into/ when she wakes, forgetting, then remembering,/ the scab sleep weaves over the raw place torn open” (3-5). Note the similarity between the image of the “raw place torn open” and the language of the yawning earth from the Homeric “Hymn to Demeter” (Foley 16) or the place “where earth was cracked” from a passage in Ovid’s Metamorphoses devoted to Persephone’s Roman equivalent, Proserpina (406). As the earth yawns open and cracks at the will of Hades, the so-called “Host-to-Many” in
the Homeric Hymn to Demeter (Foley 8), so must Persephone open to receive him. The girl in Townsend’s poem has just as little recourse.

Whereas Persephone’s mother was unaware of her daughter’s abduction and arrived too late to save her, the heroine of Townsend’s poem lacks a mother to defend her. “Her mother is dead/ and everything green has been folded away,” (7-8). The loss of her mother creates an eternal winter within her, where everything green, everything vibrant and alive, lies dormant.

One recalls the distance between Harrison and her mother and the fierce appetite for love and acceptance that drove her affair with her father. Here, the emotional void created by the mother’s absence means “…there is no one between/ the girl and the sparks of her father’s/ sadness, loss a bright red wound he circles/ like a bear before sleep, the cave walls/ flickering with the prints of his hands” (30-34). The bed and the girl are both part of the geography of the “cave,” the den he marks with his hand prints as he circles around the painful loss of his wife, creating fresh wounds in the flesh and spirit of his own daughter.

Her father isn’t the only threat she faces, however. She also needs not to forget in spite of the lulling promises of denial. Sleep threatens her ability to remember what has happened in the bed as the surreal perspective of dreaming takes over. The land of dream is an underworld unto itself, a place in which one loses the contexts from one’s wakeful day-to-day life which shape both meaning and identity. It is a place where anything can happen. For the young girl in the poem, the darkness that gathers about her bed every night shatters the boundaries and proprieties that exist by day, transforming her father into a sexual predator and herself into a passive pleasure object. After he leaves the room, she begins to question what has happened, believing instead that “…what she remembers is a dream” (40). The unraveling of her incest narrative also signals the unraveling of her connection to her own body and her own identity, “…girl moving like a ghost,/ just a glimpse of something/ that happened to that girl in green/
cotton pajamas; she is that girl/ in the bed with her father…” (41-45); the poetic heroine struggles to remember even as the passive language of “something that happened” indicates a distancing from the sensory details.

Sleep, denial, and trauma conspire to rob her of her painful story. She recovers it in fragments, however, “back in her own bed again, where the pictures/ run together into something wet on her leg” (46-47). Even then, though, the narrative “blurs, it is red, and she is her mother,/ which must mean she is dead too…” (49-50). The piece reconstructs a fragmented incest narrative, thereby becoming the red, raw wound of mourning both for the departed mother and for the girl, herself, literally her torn hymen and metaphorically her lost innocence. While the creation of the poem cannot restore what her father destroyed, it reinforces the validity of her personal narrative and recasts her as the heroine rather than the victim. Although she believes herself to be dead, she still “…tastes/ the dirt from which each green word springs,/ bitter as medicine at the back of her mouth” (53-55). The dirt under which her mother and her child-self are buried become a fertile site for new language, new autobiographical projects. Whereas before everything green was “folded away” (8), now fresh words spring up from the earth. For all their unpleasant bitterness, their medicinal flavor suggests they may yet prove healing.

3) Forbidden Kiss Poem: Persephone Intersected

At crossroads’ moonlight you lay me
In midnight winter you slay me
Ruby red your poisoned kiss
Death and sex upon your lips
Neither one taste impassioned haste
My forbidden brother/lover
More delectable than the other.

Placing a doomed romance at the scene of a crossroads emphasizes the theme of opposing dualities intersecting. This confrontation of polar opposites occurs in the dark of winter at the witching hour of midnight, heightening the occult overtones already present due to the importance of the crossroads as a potent magical symbol in voodoo and American folklore. Red lips recall both the description of Snow White and the taboo of blood consumption. Here, death cannot be separated from Eros. To court this lover is to court death, itself. Ironically, the poetic voice finds death and sex taste much the same, neither one more appealing to the senses than the other. Self-destruction becomes its own kind of lure, further entrancing the spellbound lover. The “forbidden brother/lover” recalls the incestuous themes of Harrison’s memoir although in the context of polar opposition, one might read the brother/lover as having soul-kinship to the poetic voice. The “forbidden” aspect of the relationship might then relate more to his primal connection to the darker side of her psyche. Moreover, the image of someone lying down at a crossroads suggests the limbs are positioned in a sort of ironic crucifixion wherein suffering for its own sake replaces redemption through martyrdom.

Persephone’s abduction and resurrection directly relate to the juxtaposition of polar opposites: light and darkness, fertility and death, abundance and starvation, or maternity and virginity. Her cyclical journey represents its own kind of crossroads. Similarly, the “nowheres and no-times” wherein Harrison and her father conduct their affair remind one of the luminal qualities of the symbolic crossroads. Additionally, Harrison courts death erotically, as well. She writes, “I am my own lover. At night I go to bed naked, and in the dark I touch my body until I know by heart the map of my hunger”(41). Her starving body becomes the crossroads at which her father makes unholy bargains for her flesh.
H. Shame

1) Harrison

Harrison’s references to the lives of saints like Saint Dympna and imagery incorporating aspects of fairy tale operate in a similar fashion to the repentant songs of the lustful souls in purgatory. The prevalent themes of a premature loss of innocence, however, negate the possibility of regaining chastity which still remains possible for the souls seeking salvation. Instead, Harrison’s text praises the heroines who struggled against the destruction of their innocence and/or the loss of their virginity by sexual assault or trickery. By aligning the work and her textual self with Snow White, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, and Sleeping Beauty, Harrison becomes the heroine of her own life’s story. She cannot literally rewrite the past in such a way as to actually change or undo painful events; however, she can recontextualize her own story to make herself its primary subject rather than a desired object. One definition of heroine, after all is the “principal female character in a poem, story, or play; the woman in whom the interest of the piece centers” (OED). While engaged in the relationship with her father, she is a minor character within the destructive dramas he creates.

Harrison also fulfills the conditions of two alternate definitions of heroine by the memoir’s conclusion: “A woman distinguished by exalted courage, fortitude, or noble achievements” and, in ancient mythology, “a female intermediate between a woman and a goddess; a demi-goddess” (OED). Publishing her memoir took a great deal of courage and fortitude, and the work itself is a noble artistic achievement. Furthermore, like Townsend, Harrison intercedes between her physical self, her textual self, and the personas of fairy tale figures and the mythic Persephone as she recreates her life in fairy tale form. The act of such creative re-envisioning of one’s own past involves confrontation with personal shame and is further complicated by issues of subjectivity, memory, and representation. All of these elements
shape the narrative during its conception and publication as well as during its consumption by subjective readers.

Themes of sin and shame as well as the memoir’s mythic or folkloric tone situate *The Kiss* within an ongoing dialectic relating not only to Greco-Roman mythology and European folk tales but also to epic poetry of underworld travels such as Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and the wanderings of Virgil in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, particularly certain passages in *Purgatorio*. The latter work is quoted briefly above. Harrison’s father petitions her for love, arguing, “God gave you to me” (108). Harrison responds, “When the preacher in my father speaks, I lose what’s left of my power to defend myself. The words that might send most people running are the very words to trap me” (108). Similarly, Milton’s Adam tells Eve, “I from the influence of thy looks receive/ Access in every virtue—in thy sight/ More wise, more watchful, stronger if need were/ Of outward strength…” (Book IX: 309-312). The power of her gaze makes him a better man; though “shame” looks on (312), he asks her, why shouldn’t she feel the same since he is the “…best witness of thy virtue tried?” (317). In *The Kiss*, however, the lover/father isn’t only the “Adam” figure but also the devil/Hades, embodying Harrison’s pathway to “Forbidden knowledge by forbidden means” (Book XII: 279). Harrison’s father, while arguing possessively with her about her moods, her appearance, and her thoughts, mentions *Paradise Lost* and engages a debate regarding the great classic. “We fight over whether *Paradise Lost* is the greatest work ever written and whether its completion was worth the enslavement of the blind poet’s daughters” (Harrison 145-146).

Harrison thus expresses her fears of becoming an enslaved daughter to a metaphorically or morally blind but intellectually gifted father figure while also suggesting the memoir is her *Paradise Lost*, a mournful cry for maternal and paternal love unknown. Personified Shame looks on over the actions of Milton’s Eve just as shame follows Harrison both on and off the page like a
stalking predator or a big bad wolf. Janet Mason Ellerby’s *Intimate Reading: The Contemporary Women’s Memoir* devotes an entire chapter to what she terms the “Secret Histories of Shame.” As Ellerby writes, “Amid the most ordinary daily tasks lay traps that could transform my perception of myself…into someone with a contemptible past, an imposter hiding behind a mask of respectability. Negative charges lay in wait for me, their jarring intensity capable of leaving my identity in baffling disarray” (43).

In spite of Ellerby’s eloquence, critics might argue her case is overstated. How destructive can negative criticism really be, after all? Aren’t words merely words? Consider again, however, the critical responses to Harrison’s work which blamed her as much as her father for their incestuous affair and found great fault with her as a human being for writing let alone publishing something best kept as a silent, shameful secret within the family. Also, in large part, it was the power of language which initially seduced Harrison into the deadly affair and later freed her from its clutches. Ellerby further cites writer Robert Karen’s pronouncement that “(p)utting shame into words appears to be a critical first step in freeing oneself of its damning logic” (43).

Like Elliot’s “hyacinth girl,” Harrison risks losing the love of her family by speaking up about her painful past. Her words threaten to shatter the “beautiful countenance” which won her father’s affections and cast out the “false self” upon which she was formerly fixated (Miller 49). As noted in Alice Miller’s *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self*, the false self must die before one can one begin to investigate feelings of “impotence, shame, envy, jealousy, confusion, and mourning” which are, after all, the feelings which “make [one] really alive, deepen [one’s] existence” (49). As Thomas Larson writes in Chapter 15 of *The Memoir and the Memoirist*, however, there is a definite benefit to enduring the process of killing the false self through the creation of a memoir. “Working to undelude the self, or at least working to
become less deluded, is the memoir’s payoff, a change that we feel in the teller because of the story’s action” (Larsen 179). For the memoirist or the autobiographical poet, total objectivity and self-honesty remain ultimately unattainable due to the subjective nature of human consciousness, the fallibility of memory, and the creative demands of the writing process and the artist’s chosen form; however, one can strive, like Ellerby, to create “the most genuine subjectivity” one can construct (Ellerby 44). One may never become fully “undeluded,” but a genuine narrative self at least offers greater self-knowledge than one might discover without it.

2) Townsend

Many of the poems in Townsend’s collection create the sense of shameful secrets long kept buried like an underground river unexpectedly brought to light on the page, something from the underworld transplanted into the land of the living. The young girl in “The Favorite” brings her an essay about a real-life moment of sexual victimization from when she was 14, unknowingly dredging up similar memories from her teacher’s childhood, as well. The student’s story, as well that of Townsend’s girlhood friend, had once been enfolded in shameful silence, “…the secret of it clamped/ deep inside like a terrible pearl. Until this week/ when she sat in her dorm and typed/ what you read now aloud” (59-61). Though Townsend’s friend never spoke of what happened, her student’s essay and the poem Townsend creates both give voice to unspoken pain, “…terror a blue vowel that kisses/ the hurt” (67-68). The poem therefore speaks not only for her student and herself but also for her friend who was shamed into silence years ago. Speaking or writing the terror, unleashing it like a keening lament, brings comfort and healing to both the student and her teacher. Like the young girl in “Persephone Remembers: The Bed,” both women find bitter medicine and renewal in the act of self-expression. “Splinter” addresses shame, as well, in relation to both sexual assault and underworld imagery. “Not down. Not underground. And not
abducted, exactly,/ since he calls her up and asks if she wants to come along,” it begins, suggesting the girl should’ve known what might happen and therefore cannot claim the role of passive victim (1-2). She’s sadly internalized her aggressor’s perspective enough to believe, to some degree, that she had it coming all along. The day begins with “safety in numbers, her best/ girlfriend along, though the friend will abandon her later” (4-5).

Like Persephone offered up to Hades by her father Zeus, the young girl has no allies, no rescuers at hand. Her only hope was a fickle friend who left, presumably to save herself. “Not down. And not through darkness into some underworld/ of the body. But up, the ladder to the hayloft creaking/ beneath their feet, the hay itself glowing, as sun breaks/ through one dusty window” (6-9). Golden, glowing sunlight and honey colored hay create an impression of positivity and beauty only mildly disrupted by the dusty window. The hay is “soft gold that smells like last summer’s fields” (11), just like they’re still outside. The false sense of safety and security of the diction here underscores the young girl’s naïve assumption that she’s completely safe just because he called her and because they aren’t going anywhere dark or underground; however, the illusion of safety was created intentionally to lure her into the trap of the hayloft and into the arms of the “popular boy” (27). She watches him climb up to the hayloft so intently “she hardly feels the needle of wood pierce her palm” (16).

The splinter here serves the same function as the spindle which pricked Sleeping Beauty’s finger and bewitched her into an enchanted slumber. As Kathryn Harrison writes of the myths which inspired her memoir, “I wasn’t interested in [incest myths] as much as I was in\ stories of falling asleep, as the result of a spindle prick (sexual assault) or the poisoned tines of a comb (again, sexual assault)” (email). Like the poetic voice of the poem, Sleeping Beauty or Briar Rose climbs upward to meet her fate. The golden hay in the loft also evokes the flax the wise woman spins before Briar Rose, luring her closer through the girl’s natural curiosity (Tatar
In her annotated edition of the Grimm Brother’s version of the tale, Maria Tatar notes, “Briar Rose’s curiosity—her desire to see what is behind the door and her fascination with the spindle—gets her into trouble” (235-236).

One might say the same for the girl in “Splinter” whose innocent curiosity drives her to ascend to the hayloft. Tatar continues, “By contrast, the prince is rewarded for his curiosity, which takes the form of the desire to see the fabled castle in which Briar Rose slumbers. Many critics have commented on the plethora of sexual symbols that follow the opening of the door: the curse, the spindle that jumps about, and the pricking of the finger” (235-236). The protagonist of the narrative poem “Splinter” doesn’t anticipate “these dry kisses, this/ hurried push and grab, her underpants tearing,/ something that shoves and hurts, the smallest/ happiness fading” (23-26) anymore than Briar Rose anticipates the dangers of the spindle. Like the prince in a fairy tale, the boy in “Splinter” later wraps “his arm over her shoulder, his black London Fog draped/ around her, cloth that blots out the light of the world” (30-31). A seemingly protective gesture effectively wraps her in darkness, revealing an element of the underworld is at play after all in spite of the fragrant sunlit hay.

3) Shame Poem: The Departed

The throbbing pulse of your heart
echoes through my throat with
the taste of smoke and salt
not unlike the flavor of
the tears shed through a nicotine
haze after you departed.

Too many times I took you inside
and swallowed you whole.

I’ve developed a taste for you
that nothing else will ever satisfy.

Even the lingering taint of
sorrow that lies heavy on my tongue
evokes the acrid, musky tang of
your skin and I hate it as I crave it
as I hate myself, a little, for lacking
the power to let you die inside me.

The poetic voice above is ashamed of her perceived submission to her lover and her failure to entice him into staying by her side. All the time and effort she wasted on pleasuring him seems to have done little more than addict her to his body. Now that he’s gone, she’s left alone, no longer capable of finding complete satisfaction on her own or with anyone else. He’s effectively poisoned her with passion, and she cannot find the cure. Even the taste of her own tears combined with the aftertaste of a borrowed cigarette reminds her of the smoky and salty flavor of him, like he’s still in her mouth. Nothing chases away the sensory ghost of his presence. If he never returns, she might never again know the fullest extent of pleasure. He’s departed in the most literal sense, but she wishes the memories had died along with the relationship. She literally feels as though she’s swallowed a piece of his heart and can neither remove it nor consume it. Instead, it beats a steady pulse within her, determined to survive in spite of her pain and regret.
I. Silence and Starvation as Self-Silencing

1) Harrison

One of Harrison’s initial responses to her traumatic childhood is to silence the disquiet of her emotional self through physical starvation. Harrison’s lifelong love/hate affair with bulimia reportedly begins with her failure to learn proper French (which her mother and grandmother spoke fluently at home). In second grade, Harrison cheats on a French test to win her mother’s affections. “My mother’s excitement over my perfect score is devastating… my mother’s love for me (like her mother’s for her) depends on my capitulation. She will accept, acknowledge, see me only in as much as I will make myself the child who pleases her” (20). Harrison’s conscience prompts her to confess, an act which strips her of her mother’s affections completely. As to what might motivate this sort of behavior, Nancy Chodorow offers some compelling insights in her article “Family Structure and Feminine Personality.” “Various kinds of evidence suggest that separation from the mother, the breaking of dependence, and the establishment and maintenance of a consistently individuated sense of self remain difficult psychological issues for Western middle-class women…” she asserts (257).

Leaving off the statistics of her “various kinds” of evidence, one can at least agree these issues are problematic for Harrison as she portrays herself in her memoir and for the female role-models in her life (primarily her mother and grandmother). Among other symptoms of psychological difficulty, Chodorow delineates the following emotional responses: “boundary confusion or equation of self and other…guilt and self-blame for the other’s unhappiness; shame and embarrassment at the other’s actions…mothers’ not completely conscious reactions to their daughters’ bodies as their own …and so on” (257). Harrison’s mother places undue importance upon her child’s expected mastery of French to compensate for insecurities about her own education and the extent to which her unexpected pregnancy derailed her academic career in
progress. Likewise, Harrison takes on guilt and self-blame for her mother’s anxieties, both of which emotions manifest as a physical ailment once she receives her “punishment” as described in detail below.

Whereas some parents might scold the child for cheating but reward the honesty of coming clean, Harrison’s mother does nothing but punish. “The next day she takes me to the teacher, and with her hand tight around the back of my neck I confess. Then she drives me home to my grandparents.’… ‘Get out,’ she says. I do, and she leaves” (20). This emotional abandonment coupled with her mother’s prior devastating departures literally eats away at the young Harrison. “That night, I come down with an illness no one can define or cure…It does on for weeks, until the day I overhear the pediatrician tell my grandmother that I’m so dehydrated I’ll have to be hospitalized, and then it does stop, as suddenly as it began” (21-22). From the sparse description offered, readers gather the illness is psychosomatic. Harrison here resembles an inversion of Demeter.

“For a long time she sat voiceless with grief on the stool/ and responded to no one with word or gesture./ Unsmiling, tasting neither food nor drink,/ she sat wasting with desire for her deep-girt daughter…” (Foley 198-201). Notice, as well, the Homeric connection between silence, grief, and the refusal of food. All of these activities are interrelated and motivated by Demeter’s loss of Persephone. For Harrison, the object of grief is the mother forever just out of reach. Like Persephone, Harrison is the “silent hyacinth girl” of T.S. Elliot’s “The Wasteland,” as noted by Carolyn G. Heilbrun in Writing a Woman’s Life. Only she “is acceptable, neither loathsome nor destructive, and it is her silence” the writer treasures (Heilbrun 40). For lack of maternal love and acceptance, she can neither speak her grief nor accept sustenance, so “wasting with desire” is she for her mother. “It begins like the stomach flu,” writes Harrison, “but it doesn’t stop” (21) until Harrison faces hospitalization, at which point the physical symptoms disappear; however,
she appears radically transformed by the experience when she returns to school. These self-silencing, self-destructive behaviors continue and play out within her affair with her father, as well, who adores her silent, voiceless image and submissive beauty above all else. The transition from a strongly verbal child to a silent one is so pronounced her teachers and principal remark upon it immediately.

“I return to school not just thinner but seemingly smaller than I was before I left, pale, and with my hair cut very short to keep it clean while I was sick” (22). Several teachers and the principal all notice “Why, this isn’t the same child!” (22); her rebellion against learning proper French reaches a resolution point, as well. “I learn French, never with the ease of other subjects and never with pleasure, but I learn it well enough so that I can still read a French novel. Very occasionally, I dream in French, and on those mornings I wake up ill: I vomit” (21). Harrison’s ensuing eating disorder is a taboo act of self-consumption, prompted in part by the cannibalistic emotional habits she learned as a child, that it is a fitting and proper thing for adults to feed upon the emotional body of a child. Fear of being consumed in such fashion, then, prompts further oral difficulties that starve the soul as well as the body through an inability to self-express.

“My mouth, so uncooperative. At swimming school it opens under the surface of the pool and water rushes in, choking me. In front of the tape recorder, it closes on my tongue, refuses to surrender even one word” (31). The completion of the memoir, however, itself suggests a solution to the dual dilemmas of silence and starvation. “Someday a sentence will come to me, a magic sentence that will undo all that is wrong and make everything right. But until that sentence comes, I say nothing” (31). Whether or not one believes the memoir contains such magical sentences or if it is even possible for words to right the wrongs done to one’s former self, the act of finally saying something defies the urge to close one’s mouth and swallow one’s own pain in deadly silence. A similar tone permeates Alison Townsend’s poem “What I Never
Told You About the Abortion” in which words of pain and mourning are brought into being after a painful, protracted silence.

2) Townsend

Silence for Townsend as well as for Harrison frequently relates to shame and victimization. In “What I Never Told You About the Abortion,” Townsend writes “…it has taken me twenty years to find words for this story,” drawing the reader’s attention to the twenty years she spent actively refusing to retell the events with any emotional authenticity (51). Similarly, the female student in “The Favorite” admits she’s “afraid” to write about her sexual assault at the age of 14 (16). Once Persephone begins to speak, however, her words carry great power. Phebe Davidson’s poem “Tell, Persephone” asks Persephone to confess that her “thighs wept all that day” (9). “Tell how you wanted his cold hands/ and how you would not stay/ and say how your fingers trailed/ desolate in the roots of the windflowers” (10-13).

Davidson’s repetition of the word “tell” suggests Persephone’s desire has been kept secret up until the moment of the poem’s creation. By creating an actively desiring Persephone, Davidson shatters the image of Persephone as object or victim and creates something new. This version of Persephone bears strong resemblance to the Persephone of Townsend’s “Demeter Faces Facts.” Townsend’s more willful Persephone no longer catches her mother’s eye before crossing the street (27-28). Still, Demeter reenacts the familiar ritual of hair-braiding, reinforcing her weakening grasp on her daughter and “…brushing out the night you know/ she’s taken inside her” (13-14), Demeter’s fingers “catching on the knots of all she hasn’t said” (16). In a reversal of the storylessness or lack of self-awareness seen in the preceding poems like “Persephone at the Mall,” this incarnation of Persephone has stories literally clinging to her hair but refuses to share them with her mother.
Her silence comes from a strong-willed need for privacy as an adult woman rather than fear or shame of her mother’s disapproval or rejection. Persephone’s lips are “sealed” against her mother, “no matter how tempered your greeting or sweet your kiss” (17-18). Maternal affection is no longer adequate to fulfilling all of Persephone’s needs. Moreover, it seems she doesn’t need it at all. Certainly Demeter needs Persephone much more desperately than her daughter needs her. Before Demeter’s eyes, Persephone becomes a stranger (24). The ritualistic braiding and unbraiding of Persephone’s hair no longer functions as “…a rope by which you could hold her, tethering her to your body/ as she was once anchored and fed, your blood hers…” (25-26). Adult Persephone no longer requires the sustenance of her mother’s blood, both literally and metaphorically. The vitality of her own life’s blood, the essence of her own adventures and desires, nurture her as effectively as any womb. She is held and protected within the silken walls of her own body, within her own uterus, and has become mother to herself through the alchemical power of erotic desire.

3) Silence Imagery Poem: The Taste of Silence

His silence tastes like the deep kiss of midwinter,
an icy caress of windblown snow against her
moon-shaped face, melting upon her lips as
she licks them, swallowing the frozen darkness.
The pain lodges deep, a drop of cold polished onyx
locked inside her throat like a lie, her lips the loveliest
shade of pale blue as she chokes on the memory of his kiss.
I had a great deal of difficulty personally relating to the themes of self-starving and self-silencing. If anything, I tend more toward emotional eating and nervous speech. Instead, I decided to reflect on the pain of silence from a loved one. The abstract nature of the subject matter was also quite challenging. I couldn’t figure out how to make silence something tangible enough for poetic imagery. The recent snowstorms we’ve had and the muffling effect of snowfall inspired me, however, as did the paranormal romance paperback I had just started reading, entitled *Deep Kiss of Winter*. Winter also compelled my former love interest to take the train back home to Colorado. During our first winter apart, I fell in love with the snow, thinking it would bring me closer to him to appreciate it the way he did. This winter, after months of silence, he told me he wouldn’t be back in this area, and that I should just forget about him. For all these reasons, winter equates stark, empty silence and the palpable chill of neglect.
J. Death by (Photographic) Exposure and Portraiture/Mapping

1) Harrison

Harrison’s father pursues her not only through a cunning use of language but also by consumption of her visual image through amateur photography. One of the earliest references to his photography within the memoir catalogs the day he took pictures of first Harrison’s mother (his former wife), Harrison, and lastly, the two of them together. Harrison comments in a preceding passage, “I’m a replica of my mother, but my head resembles his. The line of his jaw is echoed in mine, as are his cheekbones, his ears, his brow” (54). Photographing the two of them side by side effectively records their similarities and their differences for his eventual perusal. Also, as the photographer, he “poses and records” (54) them both, as though he were playing God with not only their appearance and arrangement but also with their relationships to him and to one another. His authoritative and possessive attitude toward her reminds one of the mythical actions of both Zeus and Hades in the Persephone myth, deciding amongst themselves to whom Persephone belongs without consulting Persephone or her mother.

Furthermore, the cliché of using a camera to “capture” an image evokes the theme of abduction, as well. In another story, a mother/daughter portrait might be harmless, but here, it is an implied comparison of how the daughter might measure up to his impassioned memories of her mother. One might conclude Harrison’s telltale jaw line is a flaw insofar as it differentiates her from her mother; on the contrary, however, from his warped point of view, such similarities prove beyond all measure that Harrison belongs to him in any and every way possible. Harrison’s description of the photos of herself and her mother enhances the disturbingly erotic foreshadowing element of the scene.

The images created by her father’s camera are the very last pictures she has of herself and her mother, and they are “overexposed” (55). In photography terms, there is an overabundance of
light in the pictures, and the shadows are underdeveloped and not fully black. Within the context of the memoir, too much is shown of Harrison and her mother. Her father, his camera, and the light sources in the room have conspired together to take away any “shadow” within which either woman might take comfort or seek privacy. Additionally, both women are kept in miniature, the same size as on the negatives, since the images are never made into individual prints though they appear on “proof sheets” (55). This intentional miniaturization further suggests Harrison’s father is keeping them both for his private collection, not just the images but the women, themselves.

Also, on another level, the lack of “individual prints” hints at the lack of individuality within the mother-father-daughter love triangle. Regarding her mother and herself, Harrison describes the effects of the fireplace behind them upon the imagery of the photographs in terms both erotic and destructive.

Though both women have their “heads inclined,” their bodies to not touch. Behind them appear “tongues of flame from the gas log” recalling religious artwork depicting the Holy Spirit as tongues of flame as well as the erotic implications of fire and tongues, the destructive power of burning, and the superstition that photographs capture the soul. The framing and juxtaposition of the photograph recreates a hellish or underworld-like backdrop against which he poses his daughter and former wife. Moreover, in *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Spanish symbologist J.E. Cirlot describes fire in part as follows: “The alchemists retained in particular the Heraclitean notion of fire as ‘the agent of transformation,’ since all things derive from, and return to, fire. It is the seed which is reproduced in each successive life (and is thereby linked with the libido and fecundity)” (105). The context of fire’s appearance in Harrison’s memoir isn’t particularly alchemical in nature; nonetheless, the memoir’s mythical qualities and her father’s excessive religiosity suggest the alchemical reading of fire symbolism is not only plausible but also quite
insightful. A subsequent passage from Harrison’s memoir, however, examines the destructive aspects of fire.

“In certain of the poses the fire looks as if it comes from our clothes themselves, as if the anguished expression we each wear is not the smile we intended but the first rictus of pain. As if what my father caught with his camera was the moment when suddenly we knew we’d begun to burn” (56). In the context of a photo session, this sort of fire imagery enhances the reader’s sense that Harrison’s father is literally consuming his wife and child through the act of taking their photographs. Given the religious metaphors elsewhere and the father’s status as a preacher, destructive fire also connotes the fires of hell or the consuming fires of purgatory. The lustful souls in Dante’s *The Purgatorio* dwell inside a “furnace” (XXV: 122) as “spirits moving through the flames” (XXV: 124) singing hymns of praise to the chaste until the fires of Purgatory burn them clean. “…Diana kept to the wood,/ and drove Helicé from her when that nymph/ had felt Venus’s poison in her blood” (XXV: 130-132). The forbidden forest motif in Dante’s epic poem also recalls Harrison’s wolf-like imagery and Little Red Riding Hood, whose mother forbade her from straying from the path when walking through the woods. Though missing the frantic anxiety regarding visual exposure found in Harrison’s text, Alison Townsend’s poems also utilize the motifs of portraiture and mapping as a means of uncovering, preserving, or creating identity and meaning.

2) Townsend

The practice of mapping or creating portraits, both painted and photographic, takes on very idiosyncratic and nuanced meaning within the poetry of Alison Townsend. Images and maps have the power to both create and preserve meaning, much like poetic language. As Townsend states, “…for me, the map represents an attempt to know, to understand, to mark out in
some way different kinds of knowledge and understanding, whether it is knowing what it means to be a woman… or understanding my own past. I had the feeling, while working on the book, that I was actually trying to create a new psychic map of the myth” (email). The title poem asserts, “Because the body is a map/ and because the map I know best/ is the one of this country, I pluck her/ from the pages of the book of myth/ and paste her down here…” (1-5). If a map is a two-dimensional representation of landscape and geography, what does the human body represent besides itself? Can one relate to the terrain of one’s own body as a map, or do the bodies of others help us map out our notions of who we are and where we belong in the world? Portraiture and mapping imagery elsewhere in the text addresses these issues.

“Blood Elegy: Persephone at Midlife” describes the lines on the palms of a woman’s hands as a “…tree in each palm,/ its bare branches maps of a country/ where the soul will always land” (41-43). The soul, then, will always land back in one’s own hands, like material for sculpting a fresh image of oneself. Instead of the sort of heavy clay which one might imagine represents the body, however, the soul-image would be comprised of something luminous and warm, weighing scarcely more than a breath, like pneuma, literally the material of “inspiration.” What then of the alternative mapping images Townsend evokes? How to they compare to the sense of holding your own soul in your hands?

Consider “A Bottle of Jean Naté” in which Townsend looks upon her mother while bathing, “…studying/ the map of who I might become” (16-17). Here, then, the body of another comprises a map of meanings and demarcations meant to be interpreted from an outsider’s perspective. Appropriately, this poem also mentions luminosity similar to the above description of the soul. Her mother recalls the 60’s ad campaign slogans: “…tingle at the touch of Jean Naté/ and ‘glow from head to toe’” (8-9). Townsend recalls, “She did glow then, the way the living do..,” (10). The life force of her own physical vitality and vivacious spirit lend a healthy
glow to her body as she bathes. The loss of her mother at a young age only enhances her mother’s radiance in memory: “…no cancer yet, her small/ blue-veined breasts high and firm,/ covered shyly with a washcloth/ when she saw me looking, studying/ the map of who I might become,/ so I could understand what it meant”(13-18).

Also note the connotative connection between mature womanhood and breasts that are “high and firm” in contrast not only to the breast cancer that later claimed her mother’s life but also to the implied image of a woman with sagging breasts who is either older or who has not maintained her appearance conscientiously enough to successfully sustain the illusion of youth and fertility. Breasts are clearly paramount geographical features on the landscaping of the female body, to extend the mapping metaphor. The maternal body in particular here seizes the attention of the poetic voice as the epitome of all things female or feminine. An obsolete extended usage of the word “map” coincides nicely with Townsend’s poem: “An embodiment or incarnation of a quality, characteristic, etc; the very picture or image of something” (OED). The poem itself, however, also maintains an internal dialogue with the mapping imagery.

As Townsend writes in stanza three, she sits on the closed toilet lid, “…playing with the black/ velvet ribbon around the bottle’s neck,/ sneaking glances at the mysterious/ world of her body…” (20-22). Her eyes play across the surface of her mother’s body as her fingers play with the ribbon. The image of the ribbon furthermore suggests a decadent black velvet choker worn about the neck. The bottle therefore becomes a talisman-like representation of the body, conjuring the “mysterious world” in miniature. The “cool, green scent” (30) of the after bath splash forever reminds her of this moment and of her mother’s mystery and beauty, “rising around us in a cloud—tingling,/ glowing, the body’s private story/ hidden but not quite gone” (31-33).

Mapping is an activity akin to narration or the writing of poetry, then, as the body
possesses both its own geography and a “private story.” As Margaret Atwood comments in Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing, “A book is another country. You enter it, but then you must leave: like the Underworld, you can’t live there” (173). The maternal body similarly represents a foreign country for Townsend, one she inhabited in utero, gazed upon fondly as a child, and now revisits only in memory. As Atwood also remarks, “dead people persist in the minds of the living” (159). The images of her mother she has mapped out in her mind and on the page grant her a sort of second life permanently “situated outside of time” (159) as though preserved in amber. The image is a fitting one given the “lemony amber” quality of the body splash (Townsend 4).

The next usage of mapping imagery within the text is far more literal. “Finding Hell on a Map” muses upon the human tendency to make hell “…something real/ or geographical, a landscape we can point to on a map” (Townsend 2-3). Among the locales she considers are the “…San Andreas Fault, the Lurray Caverns,/ or that spot in the Hudson River the Dutch called/ World’s End, because the currents there pull you/ down in every direction…” (4-6). None of these locations are accurate, however, as suggested by the opening line. “It is easy to imagine hell in the wrong place,” the poem begins (1). Where exactly then is Hell? Townsend comments, “Who wouldn’t want/ to place it outside the body?” (7-8), seemingly arguing in favor that, like the Miltonic Satan, we carry our own hell within us.

“Horror and doubt distract/ His troubled thoughts and from the bottom stir/ the Hell within him; for within him Hell/ He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell/ One step, no more than from himself, can fly/ By change of place…” (IV: 20-23). Hell is a state of mind, then, not simply a location. Townsend takes this transformation one step further, imagining Hell as something living, a parasitic embryo. Whereas Harrison’s uterine internalized underworld was occupied only by herself, here hell/the underworld has a deadly energy all its own. “Who
wouldn’t flinch/ from conceiving of it as something carried inside./ weird baby everyone births
men and women/ both—swaddled in an indigo scarf, slung/ just beneath the heart…” (7-12).

Although she doesn’t explicitly compare the body to a map or a geographical location
here, the shift from faults, caverns, and deadly tides to a cavity within the body “just beneath the
heart” again suggests the human body is the most primary of maps, although oft taken for granted
as such, and that it is the body against which we measure both our geographical surroundings
and their narrative meanings. Why else measure close proximities in terms of “feet?” As an
active, living being, however, hell here refuses to locate itself in a fixed place relative to the self
and remain there but rather travels inside the body as needed. Townsend writes, “…when the
baby is lonely—for hell is the loneliest place—it crawls/ inside the heart, prying open the red
shells/ and curling up./ Like a pearl, or a parasite,/ or a monster torn from a medieval drawing”
(13-17). Paradoxically, then, hell is both a place and a creature with its own unique emotions,
harbored at times within the heart. Here, the boundaries between self and hell dissolve as
hell occupies the heart or psychic essence of the self, suggesting its “raw need” is actually our
own (21). The poem thereby becomes a portrait in words of both “hell” and human nature.
Although portraiture or imaging isn’t a component of the original Persephone myth, the motif
adapts itself most readily to descriptions of the underworld in Townsend’s work as in Harrison’s.

Painted and photographic portraits also occupy positions of creative importance within
“Seeing the Virgin Mary at the University of Wisconsin Library Mall,” “Mother-Daughter
Portrait,” and “Jane Morris Poses for Rossetti’s Prosperine (1874).” Townsend literally runs into
a chalk pastel image of the Virgin Mary on a large square of concrete while enroute to a panel
discussion of writing and healing. She actually swerves “…to avoid/ stepping on her hair…” (4
-5). The image disrupts her not only physically but also emotionally, triggering memories of her
mother, also named Mary. “…I couldn’t help but mix up/ the Queen of Heaven and my mom,
whose name means salt and bitter, and who became a kind of saint in our family because she died so young, her faults smudged pretty by memory’s thumb”(11-15). The process of remembering a loved one is much like the creation of a portrait. The external image of Mary recalls Townsend’s internal images of her mother, the “muse of poetry” she clutches inside her “manila folder” (9). Her mother also drew with pastels, thus lending greater emotional resonance to the image on the concrete (16). For a moment, the picture resembles a weeping Guadalupe (19) until the poet realizes “…she’s just a girl/ whose clear, surprisingly hazel eyes catch mine/ and look back as if she sees the world inside me” (20-22).

The transition from sacred image to mundane portraiture suggests the disillusioning which leads one to realize Mother isn’t an all-powerful, all-knowing goddess after all but rather a woman with passions and grief all her own, apart from her role as a parent. This disillusioning recalls Persephone’s transition from protected daughter to co-ruler of the underworld. It’s a difficult transition, particularly in this poem, as the images of Heavenly Mother and the poet’s own mother overlap time and again. Further descriptions start out universal. “She could be Afghan or Spanish, Irish or half/ black...” (23-24). As Townsend elaborates upon her skin tone, however, the imagery becomes specific and personal: “…her skin soft and gold as the apricots/ that grew in my California yard…” (25). The totemic every-woman recalls a color from the poet’s childhood, bringing her closer to her memories of her mother once more. Furthermore, she wears “…the barest/ suggestion of a mantle” which floats around her,“...blue/ as creek water, blue as loss, blue as my mother’s eyes” (25-27). The mantle also reminds the poet of a close female friend and the deep peace felt by all those around her as she sang.

“Years ago, a friend sang La mer/ est ma mere, is my mother, is me, her sheared/ velvet voice spreading a cloak of comfort around us,/ as Mary is said to do, protecting the world/ from God’s cold judgment” (35-39). Maternal comfort can be found not only in one’s spirituality but
also in the loving actions of other women like the songstress or the artist who created the image of the Virgin. Impermanent as a Tibetan mandala (45), temporal as any human being, the pastel Mary nevertheless conjures a sense of family in the poet (42); she reminds her not only of her own mother’s luminosity but also of “…how many places the light lands, even/ as we leave, or how many ways there are to believe…” (51-52). An image or portrait has the power to rekindle memories of loved ones long gone and to renew one’s faith in oneself and one’s place in the universe.

“Mother-Daughter Portrait,” alternately, finds more questions than answers regarding the poetic voice’s place in the universe. It concerns a published anthology of pieces written by women who lost their mothers at a young age. A black and white childhood photograph of the author and one of her mother accompanies each work, naturally inviting comparisons between them. Townsend finds the influx of comments regarding her similarities to her mother somewhat disquieting rather than reassuring, however, contrary to the response she expected from herself. “It was something I’d wanted to hear my whole/ life, as I’d stared into mirrors, trying to see beneath/ their silvery surface and through the ghost-body I seemed/ to inhabit into who was really there, and what an ‘I’ was/ anyway without a mother to guide her” (6-10).

As she explains in her own words, “My mother died of breast cancer when I was nine years old, so death and the presence of death entered my life early and have been abiding themes in my life and work. In many ways I felt that my mother’s death had not only abducted her but that that part of my own spirit had also been abducted by death” (email). Her mother’s death made as much a ghost of Townsend as of her mother, leaving her both literally and metaphorically haunted. Townsend continues, stating “Persephone provided a very tangible way to meditate on these losses and to better understand my own psychology” (email).

Mirror images are themselves a sort of fluid portraiture of our world and ourselves seen
in reverse or “through the looking glass.” Townsend consults the mirror like the witch in Snow White or the “scrying” persona in “Persephone at the Mall” searching for trace elements of her mother within the image of herself, hoping her mother lives on within her somehow. Yet when presented with evidence confirming her hopes, she disavows all similarities, noting, “She was already/ dying when that picture was taken; you should have seen her/ when she was young” (16-18) or adding details the photograph obscures like the threads of grey in her mother’s hair, the loss of both breasts due to cancer, or the fact that the dress she wears in the picture is the same one she wears at her burial (19-21). Instead of the shape or appearance of things preserved either by photograph or memory, Townsend here relates instead to “…the shape things make/ disappearing…” (26-27), seeing at last within her own photograph the picture of who she became without her (37). Like Kathryn Harrison, Alison Townsend finds renewal and growth in redefining and clarifying the boundaries that separate her from her mother. This recalls a line from Rachel Zucker’s first “Diary [Underworld]” entry: “I stepped in. Away from where the body/ of my mother is everywhere” (15-16).

“Jane Morris Poses for Rossetti’s Prosperine (1874)” shares common thematic ground with Harrison’s memoir, as well, recalling the objectifying quality of the photographs of Harrison taken by her father. The painted portrait was motivated largely by erotic longing. “He wanted to paint me/ Though I was married to his best friend,/ I felt his eyes follow me everywhere,/ his gaze like a sable brush on my skin” (Townsend 1-4). The palpable caress of the artist’s eye recalls Hades’s seizure of Persephone. Recreating Morris in the image of his own desire gives Rossetti god-like power over her, or so he believes. As the artist, he can treat her like a doll, dressing and undressing her and posing her in whatever position he fancies. “He undressed me, though it wasn’t me/ he wanted at first, but the way my body/ arranged itself under my clothes, my bones/ and muscles the struts for the teal velvet/ drapery he wrapped me in” (5-9). Her body becomes a
series of architectural features, a constructed topography to support the persona in which Rossetti clothes her. The theme of hair as a marker for female sexuality reoccurs here, as well. Morris’s hair takes on an ethereal aspect, rendering her more fitting for the setting of the underworld as the loosened strands begin to resemble a “cloud” (10) floating around her “like opium smoke” (12). Like the Hades to her Persephone, Rossetti is “godlike” and “stern” as he moves her “like a doll” (14-15).

The body of the poem elaborates on the powerful sensuality emanating from Morris as she takes on the role of smoldering, otherworldly goddess. She declares, “It was even/ my idea to press my mouth to the seeds, staining/ it red, the tart juice puckering my lips/ into that downward pout he loved/ because it was sensual and sullen” (28-32). While her compliance with his fantasy seems on the surface to give him even more power and control, in reality, she is using her sexuality to undermine his masculine authority. Townsend pointedly refers to her returning the intensity of his gaze not once or twice but rather three times. First, in the fourth stanza, Townsend-as-Morris states, “I stared back at him from beneath downcast/ lashes as he painted, my eyes the color/ of my robes, knowing he wanted me before he did” (33-35). Her downcast stare reflects a feigned modesty, an act she later drops completely by the next stanza wherein Townsend writes, “I stared/ at him as he stared into me, pulling/ out a sulky darkness I hadn’t known/ I owned…” (40-43). The “sulky darkness” she describes suggests there’s something of Persephone in every woman, particularly in reference to eros and seduction.

Morris’s hair becomes increasingly potent, as well, “…that auburn hair I’d later/ drag across his body merging/ with the shadows of the other/ world looming there behind me” (50-53). Her very presence summons the underworld, itself, to drape itself around her, its mysterious shadows mingling with the strands of her hair in an unearthly caress. Rossetti paints on, unaware that his sensual muse now holds all the power in her delicate hands. As she states, “…though I
may have seemed his prop or plaything, some object he arranged, like the sticky fruit bought fresh each day, the footed brass dish or the mirror behind me, reflecting light from the world above, we both knew I was Prosperine…” (54-59). Contrary to the artist’s hopes to master his subject by transforming her into the ultimate otherworldly fantasy object, Morris actually gains power and authority as she poses for him.

Note also the mirror and reflected light, suggesting a portrait-within-a-portrait and the heavenly implications of light descending “from the world above” contrasting with the underworld shadows enveloping her hair. Rossetti’s model possesses an endless spectrum of reflections and depth. Between the poem about the painting, the painting itself, and the mirror used to reflect the light (presumably also reflecting an image of Morris, herself), her image replicates infinitely. The final reference to Morris’s gaze inverts the typical Hades-Persephone dynamic, making her the abductor, her eyes “on his/…their teal green gone almost black/ and taking him down, pulling him under/ into the sensual muck, everything about/ the underworld different than what he’d expected” (62-66). Even the willingly-seduced Persephone of Phebe Davidson’s poem “Tell, Persephone” whose “thighs wept all that day” (9) from wanting Hades’s cold hands on her skin pales in comparison to Townsend’s depiction of Morris and her clever power-play.

3) Photographic Poem: Exposure

The shutter snaps shut
like a mechanical eyelid
opening and closing, like
one of the many eyes
on the wings of the lady
Vanthy, divine Etruscan
guide to the underworld.

Like the feathery-lashed
eyes of Vanth, the camera
opens and closes its sight
on death, each moment
recorded already gone,
the image like a snake scale
peeled from a length of skin
already shed. Frozen smiles
and unblinking eyes reflecting
bright white lunar catchlights
trapped under glass, framed
and mounted, catalogued
and collected like Buckeye
butterflies, Vanth’s messengers
here on earth, with their amber
and black markings like eyes
spotting outstretched
wings forever looking back
unseeing. And yet the
photograph has a longer
half-life than any human
being, outlasting the memories
it holds imprinted upon its
glossy surface like a two-
dimensional artifact of a
civilization long gone. Which is
why I didn’t record any of
our time together on film.
This way, without any visual
evidence, it’s easier to begin
to forget. Besides, even without
an interceding mechanized eye,
we stood together before the
outstretched winged eyes of Vanth
in pale and shivering exposure.

While reflecting on the technical similarities between the human eye and the internal mechanisms of a camera, I remembered having read about Vanth and her wings which are sometimes pictured covered in eyes opening and closing with every death that occurs on earth.
That brought to mind the Buckeye butterfly with its protective eye-like markings designed to trick and intimidate would-be predators. Like photographs, the Buckeye’s markings are deceptive, definitively there and not-there at the same time. Something about the idea of eyes as camouflage combined with the image of deathly-pale wings with a sprinkling of long-lashed eyes appealed to me and reminded me of the temporality and possible deception of human affection. Between one blink and the next, something that once looked like tangible, touchable love becomes a flat, two-dimensional thing or disappears altogether.
I didn’t take any photographs of the lover who left because I strongly suspected he wouldn’t become a permanent fixture in my life, and I knew once he left, I wouldn’t want any painful reminders of what had once been. He took a few pictures of me, though, and I almost wish I could steal them back, as though they prove or cement his hold on me. It’s a superstitious belief like the fear of the camera stealing a piece of your soul, but remembering how much blind affection I’d had in my eyes while looking up at him as he took the shot, the superstition makes a great deal of sense. I like to believe, though, that there were moments when we were both soft and vulnerable before the all-seeing eyes of Vanth.
K. Conclusion

Harrison’s narrative self spends much of the memoir’s duration unconscious and unaware. She is one of the many who, in Hélène Cixous’s words, “walk around in a stolen country as if they had the eyes of their souls put out” (70). The telling of her story or the metaphorical reaching out to touch the glass enclosure barring her from freedom is an act of growing awareness, of gradual awakening. “To waken from superstition-- be it religious or literary, cultural or personal-- is the goal of human inquiry as well as the memoir’s reason for being,” argues Thomas Larson (191). Harrison voices her personal and cultural superstitions about her family, her incestuous past, and her histrionic views on fairy tale, mythology, and religious iconography in order to wake herself.

Promisingly, the memoir concludes with a dream about her mother. “In this dream, I feel that at last she knows me, and I her. I feel us stop hoping for a different daughter and a different mother” (Harrison 207). Earlier, she recalls kissing her mother goodbye after she had died. “I kiss her forehead and her fingertips; I lay my warm cheek against her cold one; and, as I do, something drops away from me: that slick, invisible, impenetrable wall” (199). Kissing her mother proves an anecdote to the poisonous effects of the kiss received from her father. Harrison recasts herself as both Sleeping Beauty and Prince or Princess Charming. As she stated in an email to me, “…it wasn't merely kissing my dead mother that woke me [though] my waking up happened when I was communing with my dead mother. I felt as changed by that experience (of being with her corpse) as I had been by the kiss from my father. I felt my release from the triangle binding me to my parents, so it made sense to use that kiss as a kind of bookend to the earlier one, using it to represent the communion I had with my dead mother…” (email).

Like Persephone and Demeter, Harrison and her mother are reunited through the memoir’s own mythmaking, their differences finally resolved, at least on the symbolic level. The
dream signals the conclusion of Harrison’s mythic journey through the internal Purgatory of her own memory and the reclamation of the authentic self. Harrison’s consistent fairy tale allusions illuminate the emotional and archetypal content of her experiences, thereby benefiting the author and her readership. Regarding her decision to incorporate fairy tale elements, Harrison writes, “…many of the narrative choices I make are more intuitive than they are cerebral. In the case of The Kiss, I didn’t settle on fairy tale mythology because I thought it offered a narrative strategy or opportunity but because fairy tales offered me a way to understand my own experience… I was fractured by the kiss, and imprisoned by it. For me it was tantamount to rape. And I sleepwalked through the years that followed” (email). She adds that fairy tales were her primary resource for shedding light on human behavior throughout her childhood, thereby making the choice natural and inevitable (email).

For creative writers or memoirists equally interested in fairy tales, however, The Kiss maps out a tangible strategy for transforming oneself into a mythic hero or heroine by combining elements of myth with aspects of one’s own experiences. This creative process requires heroic courage and great fortitude. It re-centers the universe of the internal self by boldly declaring one’s own feelings and desires rather than merely accepting and submitting to the desires of others. Harrison intercedes with fairy tale figures, Saint Dymphna, and Persephone on her own behalf, finding enough common ground between herself and These courageous figures to prove herself worthy of the term “heroine.”

Alison Townsend’s appropriations of Persephone similarly adapt to fit not only her own persona but also those of many women she’s known: her mother, her students, or young women she’s witnessed in passing. Her tone and diction alternately highlight both the surreal and sublime versus the commonplace elements of female and human experience. Adapting mythical imagery gives her the flexibility to view her subjects archetypally in relation both to Persephone
and to one another without losing any of the small specifics that make them individuals.

Maintaining one myth versus toying with several fairy tales creates a sense of fullness and singularity that also suggests women share common threads of personal narrative experience simply by all being women. Although not the only element of this shared experience or story of the body, menstruation is a very important aspect.

Blood-red and bursting with pulpy red seeds, Persephone’s pomegranate makes a fitting symbol for fertility and the uterus’s monthly bloodletting ritual. Bloodshed also intertwines with the process of creativity in “Red Words” and “The Cutter,” suggesting the wounds women suffer throughout life might later become fertile material for story-making. The creation of something tangible from a source of traumatic loss is a healing one, like the “medicine” the heroine in “Persephone Remembers: The Bed” finally tastes at the back of her throat (55). The erotic significance of hair as a symbol of femininity, health, and beauty also plays a vital role in the female narrative, as seen in Townsend’s work as well as in Harrison’s memoir in relation to “All-Fur” and other “Cinderella” variations. Lastly, women can gain or lose power through representation via photography or portraiture in any form. Harrison’s father literally stalks her through the lens of his camera whereas Townsend’s Jane Morris transcends typical male-female power relations by posing for Rossetti. The larger works, themselves, also act as representations, restoring power which was stolen or misused and making former victims into heroines.

Archetypal figures like Persephone and the heroines of popular fairy tales continue to inspire contemporary storytellers.

The poems and poetic impressions I created in conjunction with the academic analysis above not only afforded me the chance to engage in creative dialogue with both Harrison’s memoir and Townsend’s poetry collection. They also created a context within which I could consider my own life in light of Persephone’s journeys and the struggles of the numerous fairy
tale heroines Harrison discusses. In an unfortunate bit of synchronicity, I found myself feeling out of context and storyless as I set out to create my thesis. Beginning the project means I’m coming upon the ending of my time as a graduate student. Excited as I am to be done, I’m a little sad to let go. I also as yet have no idea where life will take me once my studies are complete, and that’s a scary feeling, as well. More dramatically, however, during the process of writing my thesis, I had a severely infected abscess that necessitated cutting four centimeters into my skin and leaving the wound open so it could drain. Nurses came to my home and packed it with gauze for about a week. Even after taking the prescription pain medication, the wound-packing process was excruciatingly painful. Shortly after the wound healed and potentially in response to general stress, extreme pain, and/or the medication, I had a minor breakdown and was hospitalized for three days. Following my release from the hospital, the unofficial significant other who said he wanted to be with me in October, told me in January that I should just forget about him. After his announcement, I later learned I would be out of a job in the spring.

Through all of these struggles and other difficulties unnamed, the mythos of Persephone, Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella gave me a way to literally plot out all the loss and pain I had experienced and make it meaningful. The poems also offer direct, concrete evidence to support my argument that fairy tales and mythology, particularly the Persephone myth, ideally suit the needs of a woman seeking to create her own story and reinvent her identity. Possessing a narrative to call one’s own might not prevent one from being dragged off screaming into the “misty gloom” of the underworld (Foley 81), but it can help one to retrace the path that led there and begin to find a way back into the light. Although the poem below doesn’t conveniently fit into the motif categories which organize the structure of the paper, it nevertheless incorporates aspects of several of them: internalized death, blood symbolism, the forbidden kiss, shame, and a fear of exposure. Slicing into the thick skin of a pomegranate is as
difficult as splitting oneself open upon the page in search of truth. The violence required to uncover the pomegranate seeds also embodies the ruthlessness of figuratively cutting into another human being to consume that which he or she conceals within.

Forbidden Fruit

So much bitter meat
to cut through.
A serrated edge
works best, chewing
up the red leathery
skin til it splits, emitting
glistening ruby fruits
like the plenty of
an egg sac bursting
with juice the too-red
hue of fresh-spilt blood.
Like the human heart-
the thick and bitter
casing hiding
delicious carnage.
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<http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/pentamerone/29sunmoontalia1911.html>


