

## **“A Sorrow of Stones”: Death, Burial, and Mourning in the Writing of Anne Wilkinson**

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# “A Sorrow of Stones”: Death, Burial, and Mourning in the Writing of Anne Wilkinson

SARA JAMIESON

**F**OLLOWING HER MOTHER'S ILLNESS and eventual death in 1956, poet Anne Wilkinson entered into a fourteen-month-long period of silence during which she “wrote nothing” (*Tightrope* 143). Finally taking up her pen once more in June of that year, she reflects in her journal on the reasons why her grief had been so protracted and painful: “I have grieved excessively over my mother's illness and death. Consider writing an essay on the mourning customs of different ages and peoples; pointing out that the contemporary western custom of no official mourning, business as usual etc., adds to, rather than lessens, our sense of loss” (*Tightrope* 143-44). According to Joan Coldwell, editor of *The Tightrope Walker: Autobiographical Writings of Anne Wilkinson*, this projected “essay” eventually materialized, in scaled-down form, as the opening paragraph of chapter 6 of Wilkinson's autobiography:

The nineteenth century customs surrounding death and mourning — widows' weeds, stipulated dates for black, for grey, for lilac; writing paper deeply bordered in black that time reduced in orderly degrees until at last the page was white again; the lugubrious hypocrisy — all these made imperative the twentieth-century reaction against a tradition that had degenerated into a habit of sham. Today we suffer its reverse. Good form has changed its face and now requires the mourner to continue exactly as if his grief, and death, were not. There is no ritual to shelter him, no custom that permits him to avoid, for a time, the buzz of acquaintances, all social events unrelated to friendship or love. And in the struggle to hide his grief he grieves the longer. (*Tightrope* 232)

While she seems, originally, to have intended a more comprehensive historical survey, Wilkinson's reflections on mourning customs range no further back than nineteenth-century Canada and practices that persisted into the time of her upper-class Edwardian childhood. Born in

1910, Wilkinson had memories of her mother observing formalities of mourning that became entrenched during the Victorian period, such as the wearing of half-mourning (“moth-like dresses of chiffon, grey or violet”) for her husband two years after his death in 1919 (*Tightrope* 210). Wilkinson’s representation of a mid-twentieth-century culture that has divested itself of the mourning rituals associated with a partly remembered, partly imagined Victorian past is characteristic of her poetry as well as her autobiographical prose. Overall, her writing on death and bereavement articulates a sense of being caught between two different cultures of mourning, each of which has its merits but is ultimately unsatisfactory.

Wilkinson’s sense of living in a society that discouraged the public expression of grief reflects how the years of her life coincided with profound changes in the rules that structured North American emotional culture. Peter N. Stearns argues that the “aversion to . . . presumably anti-social emotions [like grief] formed a major part of the transition from Victorian to twentieth-century culture” and can be traced to a shift in the climate of the workplace that happened between 1920 and 1950, when the growing influence of industrial psychologists and personnel experts mandated the strict control of intense feelings that might disrupt the smooth functioning of the economy, especially its expanding service sector (140). Writing in the 1940s and ’50s, Wilkinson was not alone in her criticism of how this workplace interdiction on grief had come to pervade domestic life, as well, and even extended to such death-associated spaces as the funeral home and the cemetery. Anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, writer Jessica Mitford, and historian Philippe Ariès have all written about this period as one that witnessed pronounced changes in all manner of funerary customs, from rules governing clothing and social interaction to the design of cemeteries and the disposal of human remains. It is often through the representation of particular changes in burial practice that Wilkinson’s poems articulate a sense of being cut off from the culture of mourning available to her forebears and offer a sustained critique of the suppression of grief that characterized her own historical moment.

While Wilkinson may, to some extent, be nostalgic for a Victorian culture of bereavement whose formalized and public rituals enabled the expression and the resolution of sorrow, this is not to say that she calls for a recuperation of the full panoply of nineteenth-century mourn-

ing etiquette, what she calls “the ostentation of black” (*Tightrope* 232). In fact, she is highly critical of the constraints that mourning placed upon women’s lives as part of a domestic ideology that defined them primarily in terms of their familial roles. My discussion will trace the intersection of mourning and domesticity throughout her work and will focus, in particular, on its significance in her writing on the death and burial of infants. This is a form of loss with which Wilkinson herself was acquainted as two of her children died soon after their births in 1937 and 1943 (Coldwell xiii). The twentieth-century denial of grief that Wilkinson criticizes is nowhere more pronounced than in the culture of silence that has surrounded infant death. In her recent study of perinatal loss,<sup>1</sup> Linda Layne shows that it was not until late in the twentieth century that women began to break this silence in systematic ways, often reproducing the kinds of consolatory strategies, such as the circulation and exchange of elegiac poems, used by nineteenth-century women to share their losses at a time when infant death was more openly acknowledged. Wilkinson’s poems show her to have been engaged in a similar project at mid-century since they draw upon the kinds of consolatory tropes common to a nineteenth-century tradition of popular infant elegies. This tradition must have been attractive to a twentieth-century woman like Wilkinson for the way in which it provided a set of conventions that enabled bereaved mothers to communicate their losses; however, she uses these conventions in resistant ways, cognizant of how they participate in the construction of an idealized conception of motherhood as women’s primary social role. Wilkinson’s skepticism toward this ideal registers her own struggle to balance “the demands of motherhood and the demands of art” in a postwar culture that similarly positioned women as naturally and exclusively maternal (Coldwell viii).

By tracing Wilkinson’s imaginative engagement with the practice of mourning in nineteenth-century literature and culture, this paper contributes to recent critical efforts to re-imagine her place within Canadian literary history. Writing in the 1960s, A.J.M. Smith called Wilkinson a poet “much possessed by death,” in a way that put him in mind of seventeenth-century playwright John Webster (xx). More recently, Wilkinson scholars have shown how Smith’s interest in positioning her as a poet in his own high-modernist vein, by emphasizing her indebtedness to the “metaphysical” seventeenth century, has resulted in the

suppression of aspects of her work that do not fit this paradigm.<sup>2</sup> While critics such as Douglas Barbour (and Smith for that matter) have noted her debt to nineteenth-century writers like Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, and Charlotte Brontë, my investigation into Wilkinson's interest in nineteenth-century mourning practices sheds light on her Victorian affiliations in a way that complicates her relationship to literary modernism. Jay Dickson singles out the nineteenth-century culture of bereavement as the "site of almost everything . . . modernists despised about Victorian culture: its nostalgia for the past, its bourgeois accessibility, and, most damnably, its 'feminine' sentimental excesses" (14). Wilkinson's serious engagement with nineteenth-century mourning practices can thus be read as a challenge to the narrative of Canadian modernism as a rejection of all things Victorian, and as a critique of its anti-feminine, anti-sentimental biases.

**"I stand beside an open grave":  
Cemetery History and the Death of Mourning**

The comparison of present and past styles of mourning that characterizes Wilkinson's writing on bereavement is often achieved through the recurrent trope of a woman visiting a grave. The most extended of these scenes appears in her autobiography where she considers the extent to which twentieth-century innovations in burial practice made her grief at her mother's death especially difficult for her to cope with:

It is winter. I stand beside an open grave in a country graveyard . . . I feel nothing. No arms or legs, no belly or head or heart. I am reduced to eyes. They watch the slick, mechanical disposal of mortal remains — even here, in a country church-yard . . . A black-coated grave-technician turns a handle, oiled, like himself to respectful silence, and the coffin sinks slowly down. Foreasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God . . . and the black-coated one steps forth to perform the ritual sprinkling. Yet it is not earth he holds in his hand but some pale powdery substance manufactured and packaged in cellophane for this purpose. Now, on top of the coffin he spreads bright paddygreen grass, stage grass. (*Tightrope* 201; third ellipsis in original)

This passage records the collision of disparate discourses of death and burial resulting from rapid changes in the funeral industry that occurred during Wilkinson's lifetime. The archaic diction of the burial service

from the *Book of Common Prayer* clashes with the newfangled gadgetry of the 1950s funeral director. His accoutrements are singled out for particular scorn, as though what makes this experience so alienating is the intrusion of modernity into a space — a country churchyard — that is supposed to speak reassuringly of the past. Descriptors like “slick” and “mechanical” characterize the whole process as one that is antithetical to the depth of feeling appropriate to the occasion. Indeed, the writer’s distress at being able to “feel nothing” is indicative of the way in which twentieth-century technologies of burial were specifically changing ideas about what kinds of emotions were appropriate when visiting a grave.

Wilkinson’s writings on mourning were produced during a time when North American cemeteries were involved in an ongoing process of trying to reposition themselves within public consciousness by shaping the emotional responses of their visitors. In particular, they sought to distance themselves from the more lugubrious aspects of the Victorian culture of mourning, which had produced the cemetery in the first place, by eliminating the presence of objects and images designed to elicit thoughts of mortality and feelings of sadness. An important step in this process was the introduction of the “memorial park” as a radical revision of what a place of burial was supposed to look like. Depressed by the clutter of tombstones and monuments that characterized the Victorian “rural” cemetery, the architects of memorial parks sought to minimize their visibility.<sup>3</sup> The most famous memorial park, one that had a profound influence on North American cemeteries and churchyards throughout the century, was Forest Lawn, established by Hubert Eaton in Glendale, California, in 1917.<sup>4</sup> At Forest Lawn, Eaton mandated the exclusive use of flat, bronze grave markers flush with the ground, not just to facilitate the use of lawnmowers but also so that visitors could enjoy the expanses of lawn without being troubled by visible reminders of death.<sup>5</sup> Conceived as a cemetery “without gloom,” the memorial park strove to remove all traces of the melancholy atmosphere that the nineteenth-century cemetery had sought to cultivate (Sloane 161).

The memorial-park style of cemetery is thus the spatial corollary of what Wilkinson experienced as the prohibition against the expression of mournful feeling in twentieth-century culture. She was an enthusiastic reader of Evelyn Waugh’s 1948 novel *The Loved One*, which features a memorial park that is a thinly disguised version of Forest Lawn.<sup>6</sup>

Waugh's "Whispering Glades," its gates inscribed with the coercive message "ENTER STRANGER and BE HAPPY," satirizes the denial of grief that the memorial park demanded from its visitors (35). In her poem "Little Men Slip into Death," Wilkinson articulates her own critique of the ideology of the memorial park by contrasting it with a recognizably older style of cemetery:

Little men slip into death  
As the diver slides into water  
With only a ripple  
To tell where he's hidden. (105)

The ripple that is barely visible corresponds to the inconspicuous grave markers that only minimally disrupt the smooth surface of the memorial park lawn. In contrast to the "little men," who seem to have been diminished by the lack of stature characterizing their graves,

Big muscles struggle harder in the grave.  
The earth is slow to settle on their bones,  
Erupting into mounds or sprouting flowers  
Or giving birth to stones. (105)

The energetic and fecund landscape that erupts into mounds recalls the "heav[ing] . . . turf" of Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," perhaps "the most reprinted poem in the nineteenth century" and a key text for the Victorian rural cemetery movement (Robson 499). The rest of Wilkinson's poem goes on to pose practical questions about burial ("how to stand a tombstone?") and about the social codes that govern mourning ("what to say, what not to say?") in a way that suggests that these are lost arts from a more heroic and dynamic past (*Heresies* 105).

"Summer Acres" is another poem that addresses the topic of burial in a way that evinces a similar nostalgia for the atmosphere of the nineteenth-century cemetery as a space conducive to the working through of grief. This poem is usually read as a tribute to Wilkinson's ancestors and to the eighty-acre estate at Roches Point, Ontario, where her family spent its summers:

These acres breathe my family,  
Holiday with seventy summers' history.

My blood lives here,  
 Sunned and veined three generations red  
 Before my bones were formed. (51)

What is less remarked on is that these acres are also a place of burial:

My eyes are wired to the willow  
 That wept for my father,  
 My heart is boughed by the cedar  
 That covers with green limbs the bones of my children. (51)

Willow trees figure very prominently in the nineteenth-century iconography of bereavement; the willow was the tree most often represented on Ontario grave markers between 1810 and 1890 (McKendry 189). Of course, Wilkinson's poem was written in 1950, not 1850, and her use of this particular image foregrounds precisely the connection between landscape and mournful emotion that the memorial parks of her own era tried hard to disavow. The tree as emblem of mortality is an idea that Wilkinson develops as the poem continues:

How tired, how tall grow the trees  
 Where the trees and the family are temples  
 Whose columns will tumble, leaf over root to their ruin.

Here, in my body's home my heart dyes red  
 The last hard maple in their acres. (52)

The reddening autumnal leaves stand in contrast to Hubert Eaton's dictum that there be no trees but evergreens in Forest Lawn, both to allow for ease of maintenance and to preserve the public from the thoughts of death that falling leaves can provoke (McNamara 308). The fallen columns recall the kinds of constructed "ruins" that were often placed in Victorian cemeteries to encourage visitors to ponder the passage of time (McKendry 19). The poet's insistence on seasonal change and the natural process of decay corresponds to the temporal nature of her mourning, not only for her children but also for ancestors long gone:

I was the child of old men heavy with honour;  
 I mourned the half-mast time of their death and sorrowed  
 A season for leaves, shaking their scarlet flags  
 From green virility of trees. (51)



Like her mother's progression from the black habit of full mourning to the grey and lilac of half-mourning, the temporary lowering of flags to half-mast is the kind of public, formal, time-bound mourning practice that Wilkinson associates with the all-but-vanished world of her childhood and that enables the poet to accommodate herself incrementally to loss. The past tense of the verbs "mourned" and "sorrowed" characterizes her grief as a completed action whose pain has receded and been replaced by a consoling assurance of the continuing presence of the dead in a sympathetic natural environment. As a setting that acknowledges mortality, and that both elicits and relieves the poet's mournful emotion, the family estate in "Summer Acres" embodies everything that Wilkinson felt to be missing from the modern cemetery and the twentieth-century North American culture of bereavement.

### **"my body's home": The Cemetery and Domestic Ideology**

Wilkinson's evocations of nineteenth-century cemetery landscapes may register her dissatisfaction with twentieth-century pressures to control and suppress grief, but she does not advocate for an uncritical return to older codes of mourning. In fact, her poems on burial manifest a deep ambivalence toward the Victorian culture of bereavement as part of a domestic ideology that was particularly burdensome to women. From its beginnings in the early 1800s, the cemetery blurred the boundary between burial space and domestic space. The establishment of family plots affirmed the primacy of the family as a social unit, and the care lavished on the graves of dead relatives could rival that of maintaining the family home. As Elizabeth Petrino argues, the early Victorian practice of erecting iron fences around plots contributed to a new sense of the grave as a form of private property, enabling survivors to visit the dead "as if they had homes of their own [and to] console themselves with the thought that they would rejoin loved ones in a domestic setting after death" (321). Like the "proto-suburban" domestic architecture that developed concurrently with the Victorian cemetery (located, like the suburb, outside the city), family plots stressed conformity through the reduplication (with minimal variation) of standardized designs (Douglas 256). This connection persisted into the twentieth century, with Forest Lawn using names like "Sunrise Slope" and "Resthaven" to link its various subdivisions with the ideals of security and serenity associated with suburban living (McNamara 310).<sup>7</sup>

While “Summer Acres” celebrates a more aristocratic ideal, it nonetheless participates in the conflation of home and gravesite that has always been intrinsic to the cemetery, finding comfort in its familiarity but also chafing against its implicit conservatism. Among those mourned in this poem, patriarchs are pre-eminent, and the assurance and generosity with which the poet can “hail [her] fathers” at the end of the poem is counterbalanced by an earlier image suggesting that the role of dutiful daughter is not one that she consistently accepts without question: when she speaks of her eyes as being “wired” to the willow tree that wept for her father, the word temporarily unsettles the consoling pastoral atmosphere and implies that her mourning is not entirely voluntary but is also characterized by an uncomfortable sense of obligation (*Heresies* 51). Wilkinson’s fascination with the nineteenth-century culture of bereavement was tempered by her awareness that its rules concerning dress and behaviour were far more stringent for women than for men and that these were derived from cultural assumptions about women as natural guardians of piety and domestic feeling.<sup>8</sup> Such assumptions would not have been altogether unfamiliar to Wilkinson, writing in the midst of the “postwar cult of domesticity” that sought to re-affirm gender norms disrupted by World War II by privileging women’s roles as wives and mothers, and her poems resist the ways in which the Victorian culture of mourning similarly worked to contain women within a narrowly defined domestic sphere (Mezei 162).

The resistance to the conservative gender politics of the cemetery suggested in “Summer Acres” is more fully developed in the poetic sequence “A Sorrow of Stones.” The sequence opens by evoking the graveyard at Christ Church, Roches Point, where Wilkinson’s mother was buried. The death of her mother was the event that precipitated Wilkinson’s autobiographical meditations on the mourning customs of the Victorian era in which her mother participated; in “A Sorrow of Stones,” writing about her mother’s death similarly leads her to conjure up a noticeably old-fashioned kind of cemetery. The modern mechanization that Wilkinson finds so alienating in her prose description of her mother’s burial makes no appearance in the poem, which instead emphasizes the absence of twentieth-century burial innovations. In contrast to the memorial park’s relentless insistence on happiness, the title, drawn from a country saying for a graveyard, privileges the affect of sorrow. The artisanal stonecutter who appears in the second sec-

tion and “methodically . . . Chips at stone,” together with the finished monuments that he “stands . . . upright on / Grassy roof-top of a tomb,” contrast with the flat, bronze grave markers favoured by the cemeteries of Wilkinson’s time (136). Rather than attempting to erase the presence of death, this graveyard is a space that makes the dead seem physically accessible to the living. This is especially noticeable in the third poem in the sequence, “Penelope,” which depicts an encounter between a widow and her dead husband:

The turf she strokes above his head  
 She spins into his hair and beard;  
 Her fingers sieve the soil and rush  
 With quickening of their common flesh;  
 Stone becomes (her hand on stone)  
 Sweet and pact of marrow bone. (137)

This woman’s extravagantly demonstrative mourning might be said to offer an appealing alternative to what Wilkinson experienced as the twentieth-century pressure to hide her feelings and carry on after a death as though nothing had happened; at the same time, it is also the impetus for her investigation into the complex relationship between women’s mourning and domestic ideology. The frankly erotic aspect of the woman’s mourning draws upon pervasive cultural imaginings of the widow as a transgressive figure whose sexuality, awakened in marriage, is no longer subject to her husband’s control (Gilbert 577). In Wilkinson’s poem, the transgressiveness of the widow’s necrophilic desire is undercut to some extent by the fact that it is directed toward her husband and by the classical associations of the title that position her as the epitome of the faithful wife. Ambivalence toward the widow as a contradictory figure who embodies both the ideal of eternal fidelity and the possibility of free-ranging female desire may have something to do with why the rules circumscribing widows’ comportment in the nineteenth century were particularly complicated and extensive.<sup>9</sup> Such rules become apparent in the next stanza of the poem, where they work to contain the woman’s grief within a social framework that defuses its disturbingly erotic power:

And thus the gay grave-loving nun  
 Whose lenient Lord has bidden her  
 This fitting habit, husband, wear,

Sits beneath the spreading sun  
 And pays no heed, cuckoo, cuckoo  
 To bird or man, so she be true. (137)

Here, the unreservedly sexual nature of the woman's grieving is channelled into something more "fitting" and decorous, and the woman assumes the "habit" of the widow according to the dictates of patriarchal religion and family structures embodied by the "lenient Lord." Her transition from Penelope to a "grave-loving nun" implicates the cemetery and the social practice of grave visitation in a domestic ideology that seeks to control women's sexuality. The woman's continuing faithfulness to her dead husband requires that she pay "no heed" to anything else and is thus predicated upon a drastic, and seemingly permanent, narrowing of the self. In all of these ways, "A Sorrow of Stones" articulates a critique of the constraints imposed on women by the nineteenth-century culture of bereavement at the same time as it registers the poet's attraction to it.

Having read "A Sorrow of Stones" as a poem that explores the relationship between the cemetery and women's domestic roles, I would now like to expand on this analysis by turning from the subject of widowhood to that of motherhood. In her poems on the death and burial of children, Wilkinson's critique of the mourning habits of both the present and the past is especially significant since the subject of infant death is an area where the differences between nineteenth- and twentieth-century burial and bereavement practices appear particularly stark. The death of a baby was a perennial topic of nineteenth-century popular poetry, and Wilkinson's poems invoke the kinds of consolatory strategies often seen in Victorian child elegies as a way of negotiating social taboos surrounding the subject of infant death in her own time. While these poems draw attention to infant death as an occasion that, like no other, exposes the impoverishment of her own culture's resources for responding to loss, they are equally skeptical of the maternal ideology promulgated by the Victorian elegiac tradition that they invoke.

### "giving birth to stones": Wilkinson and the Infant Elegy

Contemporary visitors to Victorian cemeteries are often struck by the high percentage of graves belonging to young children. In Montreal's Mount Royal Cemetery, for example, infants under two years old accounted for one third of all burials carried out in 1859 (Young 45).

While it has been common to interpret such numbers as evidence of high rates of infant mortality during the period, the prevalence of these graves may be less indicative of the rate at which babies died than of the way in which these deaths signified culturally at the time.<sup>10</sup> The segregation of young children to their own section of the cemetery, filled with miniature gravestones in the shapes of lambs, cherubs, and sleeping babies, was part of a Victorian “child death cult” (Petrino 320) that also included memorial objects such as post-mortem photographs and elegiac poems. Eric Haralson interprets the vast popularity of child elegies in the Victorian period as evidence of the “networks of support and nurture” that bereaved parents (particularly mothers) “elaborated to share and absorb their losses” (97).<sup>11</sup> After World War I, several factors contributed to the erosion of these networks and had the effect of isolating mothers whose babies died: a decline in infant mortality, a modernist backlash against the “feminine” nineteenth century that stripped mothers’ voices of much of their cultural authority, as well as the general disapproval of publicly expressed grief that I have already commented on. By the middle decades of the twentieth century, a pervasive belief in progress, fuelled in part by advances in medical technology, led to the creation of a myth of infant death as a thing of the past, and produced “a deeply rooted cultural taboo” that limited the “social acknowledgement and support that bereaved parents [were] given” in the event of a loss (Layne 17). Social science-based studies of bereavement after perinatal death are filled with accounts from women confused and angered by friends and family members who refuse to acknowledge their loss and who behave as though nothing of any importance has happened.<sup>12</sup> The loss of an infant is an occasion that exemplifies, then, in an especially pronounced and painful way, the “business as usual” attitude that Wilkinson sees as the characteristic mid-twentieth-century response to death (*Tightrope* 144).

The pronounced cultural silence that shrouded infant death extended to the dearth of memorial practices available to parents at this time. It was not until the 1980s that North American hospitals began to develop protocols, such as calling in counsellors, making the child’s body available for viewing, and creating keepsakes like footprints and locks of hair. Before that time, it seems to have been a common practice for the hospital to pass the child’s body along to a funeral home, which might arrange for its burial in an unmarked grave or have it cremated and the

ashes discreetly returned to the parents without an official ceremony.<sup>13</sup> At a time when burial was still the dominant means for the disposal of human remains in mainstream North American culture (cremation began to make serious inroads in the interwar years but did not become widespread until late in the century), the reduction of infants' bodies to ashes seems intended to distinguish these deaths from others in a way that implies that they are not legitimate occasions for mourning.<sup>14</sup>

The lack of emphasis on bodies and burial that characterized infant loss in mid-twentieth-century culture constitutes a radical departure from nineteenth-century representations of child death. Petrino's discussion of child elegies by such diverse nineteenth-century American poets as Lydia Sigourney and Emily Dickinson demonstrates that their consolations were directly linked to the burial practices common during that period. Advancements in burial methods, such as embalming and new forms of coffin construction that claimed to aid in the preservation of dead bodies, contributed to a cultural preoccupation with the body of the dead child as a "precious object" (320).<sup>15</sup> Such practices also contributed to the popularity of "the standard nineteenth-century consolatory fiction that death is only a form of sleep," an idea common to many child elegies of the period and one that played an important role in the production of a maternal ideology that posited mothers as "primary caretakers and teachers of their children" (Petrino 324, 320); by figuring the grave as a "dreamless bed" in which the mother laid her child as if putting him to sleep, these poems characterized burial as an extension of maternal care and affirmed the primacy of a mother-child bond so powerful that it could not be disrupted by death (324).<sup>16</sup> The idealization of an inseparable connection between mothers and their infants certainly had not disappeared by Wilkinson's time; her own child elegies, however, suggest the extent to which twentieth-century taboos concerning child death and the preferred new methods for disposing of infants' bodies considerably lessened its consoling power.<sup>17</sup>

In her editorial notes to *The Tigh trope Walker*, Joan Coldwell records that Wilkinson and her close friend Muriel Douglas buried the ashes of Wilkinson's two babies in the garden at Roches Point in the summer of 1949 (252). The poem "Nursery Rhyme," written four years later, addresses the extent to which cremation disrupts established literary and social codes of maternal mourning that depended for their meaning upon the burial of an intact body. The poem is yet another example

of the recurrent trope in Wilkinson's work of a woman's visit to a grave and, at least initially, partakes in the consolations that this ritual traditionally provides:

Under the sky is a tree  
 Under the tree is a stone  
 Under the stone is the grass  
 Under the grass is the earth  
 Under the earth, the small white bones of a child (135)

When this poem is read in the context of developments in cemetery design that took place during Wilkinson's lifetime, it becomes clear that the kind of burial place that it evokes is not the memorial park, which minimizes the impact of graves on the landscape by drawing the eye up toward open vistas and away from any evidence of death. Here, the relentless downward progression through successive layers of the environment focuses the reader's attention on the grave and its contents, and appears to offer the living access to the dead by blurring the boundary between them. The separateness of the dead child who lies "under" the earth is diminished by the layered structure of the poem in which almost everything is "under" something else. Up to this point in the poem, burial appears as a practice that facilitates a sense of commonality and connection between mother and child.

At the same time, the repetitive, incremental structure of the poem has the effect of delaying arrival at the grave until the last line, as though the speaker were reluctant to get there. This is exacerbated in the second stanza through the intrusion of parenthetical asides after each line that further delay the reader's arrival at a final couplet that reveals the significance of the poet's initial inability to acknowledge what the grave actually contains:

Under the sky is a tree  
 (And grown since I was here)  
 That marks the stone  
 (And colder than I remember)  
 That marks the grass  
 (And surrendered to weed)  
 That marks the earth  
 (O mother earth indeed)

That hides the fine white dust  
Of a child whose small white bones are lost. (135)

"Fine white dust" is what is left when a body is cremated, and the two contrasting stanzas of "Nursery Rhyme" register mid-twentieth-century North American anxieties about cremation as a practice that "is felt to get rid of the dead more completely and finally than does burial" (Gorer 39). Indeed, the threefold repetition of the word "marks" indicates a profound concern with being able to find the location of the grave; the poet's apparent worry that the loss of the bones could be compounded by a forgetting of where the ashes are buried reflects the persistence of the attitude (promoted by cemeteries) that burial in its more conventional form is the ultimate expression of familial care. In his history of cremation in the United States, Stephen Prothero argues that initial resistance to the practice was partially founded on the perception that it would corrode familial loyalties supposedly strengthened by frequent visits to the family plot (76). While the mother in "Nursery Rhyme" does have a grave to visit, the fact that it contains nothing but ashes does seem to function as a sign of domestic, specifically maternal, failure: instead of acting as a reassuring reminder of the child buried beneath it, the stone draws attention to lapses in the poet's memory by being colder than she remembers; the tree that has grown since she last saw it suggests that she does not visit as often as she might; in view of the cemetery's construction of care for a gravesite as an expression of familial solicitude, the weeds in the poem are yet another signal of maternal negligence and guilt.

The cultural privileging of a mother-child bond that renders mothers uniquely responsible for their children's wellbeing makes for a particularly difficult environment in which to cope with the loss of a child. In Wilkinson's poem, the anguished apostrophe "O mother earth indeed" can be read as an example of the kind of self-reproach that can be especially pronounced in cases of perinatal death and that was exacerbated by the cultural silence that surrounded these losses in Wilkinson's day. The lack of specific funereal rituals for cases of perinatal loss contributed to a sense that these were neither "real" children nor "real" deaths and could throw into question women's sense of themselves as mothers.<sup>18</sup> Poems that used the trope of burial in order to characterize death as a simulacrum of sleep enabled women to affirm their identity as mothers even though their children had died. By contrast, the ashes of "Nursery



Rhyme” render this consolation untenable: rather than holding the child like a surrogate mother, the earth “hides” its ashes, as though there is something shameful about its death and the manner in which it has been buried. The poem is thus reflective of a cultural pressure not to speak about infant death, and it characterizes cremation as inseparably bound up with a perceived twentieth-century compulsion that mourners “hide [their] grief” (*Tightrope* 232). Moreover, the poem identifies cremation as something that disrupts an established cultural association between the burial of a child’s body and the figuration of death as sleep that provides reassurance of maternal competence in the face of infant death. In “Nursery Rhyme,” the poet’s desolation at the absence of intact bones appears to convey regret at her lack of access to the consolatory fiction that death is a simulacrum of sleep, but there are other poems in which Wilkinson is more critical of the ideal of motherhood upon which such consolation rests.

As its title indicates, “Lullaby” evokes a mother in the act of putting her child to sleep:

You’d sleep? Then come, I’ll tell you where to go —  
 As angel or as eagle to a cloud;  
 Float, barely bruised, new-born, with lulla lulla  
 Rock-a-bye, white is the gull as the star  
 Is white and the snow. (74)

While this poem is not ostensibly addressed to a dead child, it nonetheless draws attention to the threat of violence and death implicit in the most familiar of lullabies. The refrain “lulla lulla” makes one of its earliest appearances in the fifteenth-century “Coventry Carol,” which addresses itself to the infant Christ and contains a verse about the slaughter of the innocents; “rock-a-bye” similarly underscores the vulnerability of babies by raising associations of breaking boughs and falling cradles. This vulnerability is compounded by the child’s own awareness, “of it” as indicated by its fretful response, “But if I smother, / Breathe a feather / As a shroud?” (*Heresies* 74). The poet responds to the threat of infant death by drawing upon one of the most common consolatory tropes of nineteenth-century child elegies: the series of comparisons involving the colour white, repeated with variation at the end of each stanza, echoes the Victorian consolatory convention of insisting on the purity and innocence of the child, a poetic practice

that corresponds to the burial of infants beneath white marble stones in children-only sections of cemeteries (Young 51).<sup>19</sup> Wilkinson's evocation of the white objects and substances (such as lambs and snow) common to the Victorian cult of child death is yet another example of her fascination with a nineteenth-century vocabulary of mourning that enabled bereaved mothers to represent their loss in a form that others could readily decode and understand. "Lullaby" also references this tradition by blurring the boundary between death and sleep but ultimately retreats from the ideological implications that accompanied this comparison in nineteenth-century child elegies. Rather than celebrating an ideal of maternal competence so complete that if it can't actually prevent the child's death, it can at least convert that death into sleep, Wilkinson writes a resistant lullaby that, by the third stanza, makes the child cry and welcomes its tears as a sign of its human mortality and vulnerability to pain:

You cry? A king! Awake to guide the dream!  
 In sleep the crown's awash, unwound the grief —  
 Come, cradle on your feet, with lulla lulla  
 Rock-a-bye, white is the dawn and the spray  
 Is white on the reef. (74)

Through its depiction of a fallible mother in dialogue with a child who repeatedly questions her actions, "Lullaby" interrogates the tradition of child elegy that posits children as passive and innocent, and mothers as naturally suited to be their primary caregivers and uniquely responsible for their welfare.

Unlike "Lullaby," an earlier poem called "I Am So Tired" explicitly addresses the role of burial in enabling a comparison between death and sleep that contributes to the production of maternal ideology. Here, the death that the mother anticipates is not her child's but her own, and she is specific about the manner in which her body should be buried:

I am so tired I do not think  
 Sleep in death can rest me  
  
 So line my two eternal yards  
 With softest moss  
 Then lengths of bone won't splinter  
 As they toss  
 Or pierce their wooden box  
 To winter (102)

This unquiet grave unsettles the association of death with peaceful sleep, just as the mother's admission of exhaustion departs from the ideal of omniscient, endlessly nurturing motherhood. This poem reproduces yet another situation common to nineteenth-century poems of maternal bereavement: that of a dying or dead mother taking leave of her children and issuing instructions for their continued care.<sup>20</sup> Instead of celebrating a maternal care so powerful that it extends beyond the grave, however, the poet's admonition "Do not let the children / pass my way alone" lest they be frightened by her "shaking bones," characterizes her posthumous connection to them as a continuation of the maternal burden that put her in the grave in the first place (*Heresies* 102). In a culture that defines women as primary caregivers to their children, the poem suggests, motherhood becomes a task so overwhelmingly demanding that the poet cannot find respite from it even in death.

While this poem is critical of the ways in which the practice of burying bodies has been used to bolster the ideology of domesticity, it nonetheless insists on the visitation of graves as an important cultural practice that can play a crucial role in the psychological process of mourning. The mother in the poem does not prohibit her children from visiting her grave; she instead asks that they not be made to do this alone. In an era when children were increasingly shielded from any knowledge of death, she requests that they be included in visits to her grave as part of a process of collective mourning.<sup>21</sup> In its admission that having to deal with loss without the support of such communal practices is "frighten[ing]," the poem contributes to the critique of the mid-twentieth-century culture of death denial that comes across so vehemently in Wilkinson's autobiographical writing. Wilkinson's poems on death and children offer valuable insight into that critique since they make especially clear the ways in which it comes into conflict with her interrogation of women's domestic roles. By reproducing some of the most common conventions of nineteenth-century child elegies, Wilkinson's poems suggest that this tradition held certain attractions for a woman living in a twentieth-century culture that tended to respond to such deaths with silence and denial, yet at the same time they register her skepticism toward the idealized and constraining conception of motherhood upon which the Victorian cult of child death was founded. These poems thus articulate a sense of being caught between two different cultures of mourning, neither of which is satisfactory.

The way out of this impasse, Wilkinson suggests, does not lie in recuperating the materialistic excesses of the Victorian culture of bereavement, but rather in fostering a “respect for proper grief,” abandoning the compulsion that the bereaved behave as though nothing unusual has happened and supporting them in their need to withdraw temporarily from their usual social obligations (*Tightrope* 232). Wilkinson felt herself to be out of step with a twentieth-century emotional style of “plastic cheer” fostered in part by the corporate culture of a post-industrial economy increasingly geared toward service (Stearns 125); her conviction that the compulsion to hide grief actually prolongs it and makes it more difficult to overcome, however, is consonant with clinical approaches to bereavement dominant in twentieth-century psychoanalysis (Ariès 580). This view is founded upon an interpretation of Freud’s influential categorization of mourning as a normal and healthy process involving the gradual withdrawal of libidinal investment in the lost object and its eventual displacement onto a substitute (see Freud 249). This he contrasts with melancholia, a state in which the “free libido [is] not displaced onto another object [but] withdrawn into the ego,” resulting in a protracted and unresolved grief accompanied by a range of pathological symptoms (249). In its emphasis on the desire for mourning that characterizes Wilkinson’s writing on bereavement, this paper participates in a recent move to revisit the possibilities of mourning following twenty years or so of critical efforts to privilege melancholia as a more ethical response to loss than mourning, whose substitutive logic can be seen to serve the interests of dominant ideologies. In his essay “Against Melancholia”, Greg Forter usefully summarizes the recent critical celebration of melancholia as a strategy that enables the ongoing maintenance of deeply politicized attachments to those — gay men and African Americans, for example — whose lives and deaths the dominant culture would prefer to forget.<sup>22</sup> While attempts to privilege melancholia are often persuasive within the specific critical contexts in which they were developed, Forter warns against the reductive misreading of any and all acts of mourning as tantamount to “*forgetting* or ceasing to care” about the dead (241).

As my reading of “Summer Acres” shows, Wilkinson’s completion of the work of mourning for her forbears does not preclude an awareness of their ongoing presence in her life. Of course, one could argue that the immanence of ancestors in this poem is simply a function of

private property since their presence is discernable to the poet on the grounds of the estate that she has inherited from them and continues to occupy. As Michael Moon has observed, Freud's conception of mourning as "work" for which one is compensated by a return to normalcy is "constructed under the signs of compulsory labour and the cash nexus" and is thus heavily inflected by capitalist ideology (234). Even bearing this in mind, I don't think it would be fair to dismiss Anne Wilkinson's desire for mourning as simply an expression of her privileged social status. As Forter points out, criticism that champions melancholia as politically liberating often seems curiously blind to the intensely painful nature of melancholia as an affect.<sup>23</sup> This pain was something that Wilkinson knew all too well: her journal records both her own and her husband's struggles with depression, which contributed to the breakup of their marriage and led eventually, in his case, to suicide (Coldwell xiv). As a practice that might help her to manage and overcome the pain of loss, it is mourning, not melancholia, that for Wilkinson is potentially empowering. If the substitutive process of mourning *can* in some contexts appear callous, equally callous is the suppression of mourning that Wilkinson protests. In the 1960s, Geoffrey Gorer predicted that the public denial of mourning would produce an increase in public indifference to loss since to deny one's own grief makes it all the easier to deny the grief of others (113). Wilkinson's desire to see open mourning reintroduced to mainstream Canadian culture, therefore, need not be understood as politically suspect but as a call for the reinstatement of a humane and necessary social practice.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Perinatal mortality" is a term that has been in use since the 1940s and includes both late fetal deaths and early infant deaths; definitions vary, but the term can include deaths that occur between twenty weeks' gestation and up to twenty-eight days after birth (Layne 10). Anne Wilkinson's autobiographical writing on the loss of her children does not specify exactly when and why they died (see journal entry for 14 March 1949 in *The Tightrope Walker*). Joan Coldwell's introduction indicates that the babies died "soon after birth" (xiii).

<sup>2</sup> Joan Coldwell, Kathy Mezei, and Dean Irvine have all demonstrated how critics such as Smith, Kildare Dobbs, John Sutherland, and Earle Birney constructed Wilkinson as a "metaphysical, cosmopolitan poet" by dismissing her interest in the domestic and by suppressing her "leftist, socialist, anti-McCarthy, and anti-religious views" (Mezei 163).

<sup>3</sup> The “rural cemetery” was a nineteenth-century invention, so named because of public health legislation that mandated the removal of burial grounds to areas outside city limits.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the retreat from what had come to be seen as the morbid sentimentality of the rural cemetery began in the nineteenth century with the development of the “lawn plan” cemetery, which prioritized park-like expanses of lawn over the dramatic landscape of the rural cemetery (Sloane 103). The memorial park is in many ways the culmination of changes in cemetery design that the lawn-plan cemetery introduced.

<sup>5</sup> Eaton’s innovations in the design and materials of grave markers at Forest Lawn had a strong influence on cemeteries throughout the U.S. and Canada. In 1923, for example, the superintendent of Mount Royal Cemetery in Montreal discussed the possibility of constructing a “memorial road” for soldiers of World War I, where families could install flat bronze grave markers flush with the ground (Young 150). Christ Church cemetery in Roches Point, where Wilkinson and her mother are buried, now mandates that only flat or pillow-type grave markers may be used. See [www.netrover.com/rochespt/home.html](http://www.netrover.com/rochespt/home.html).

<sup>6</sup> In her journal entry for 10 March 1948, Wilkinson describes *The Loved One* as “the brightest flame among contemporary novels” (*Tightrope* 9).

<sup>7</sup> The eerie similarity of cemetery and subdivision was not lost on Wilkinson whose poem “Notes on Suburbia” compares the latter to a “treeless field” where “row on row / Burgeons the ranch-style bungalow” (*Heresies* 191). The echo of the World War I military cemetery of John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields” characterizes middle-class domestic life as one of enforced conformity that demands the sacrifice of one’s identity in exchange for the rewards of material acquisition.

<sup>8</sup> On the inequities between men and women in matters of mourning etiquette, see Morley, chapter 6.

<sup>9</sup> On the rigour of Victorian rules concerning the mourning observances of widows, see Jalland, 300.

<sup>10</sup> In *Centuries of Solace*, Wendy Simonds and Barbara Katz Rothman advise us to hesitate before drawing conclusions about infant mortality rates from the treatment of child death in Victorian culture since such conclusions are demographically difficult to support. Not only were rates of infant mortality not consistent across classes and ethnic groups, they were not in fact systematically collected until the turn of the twentieth century.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of poetry on maternal grief appearing in American popular magazines between 1830 and 1900, see Simonds and Rothman. American poet Lydia Sigourney (1791-1865) was the most prolific and influential practitioner of this type of poem. Petrino’s discussion shows how Emily Dickinson’s poems on child death interrogate some of the assumptions about motherhood implicit in Sigourney’s work. For a brief overview of a nineteenth-century Canadian tradition of infant elegies, including poems by Susanna Moodie, Mary and Sarah Herbert, Rosanna Leprohon, Susie Frances Harrison, Agnes Maule Machar, and Pamela Vining Yule, see Robbins.

<sup>12</sup> See Layne, chapter 4.

<sup>13</sup> In her stillbirth memoir *Shadow Child*, Beth Powning describes her shock at receiving the ashes of her child in the mail from a funeral home in 1975 (106). She also recounts that hospital staff advised that she not have a funeral for the child (98).

<sup>14</sup> On the history of cremation in America since its inception in 1874, see Prothero.

<sup>15</sup> Simonds and Rothman also comment on the frequency with which nineteenth-century infant elegies treat the bodies of dead children as “fetishized symbols of loss” (54).

<sup>16</sup> The figuration of the grave as a “dreamless bed” occurs in Sigourney’s poem “To A Dying Infant” (qtd. in Petrino 324). The connection between death and sleep is implicit in the word “cemetery,” derived from the Greek word for “sleeping chamber.”

<sup>17</sup> In *Mass Hysteria*, Rebecca Kukla argues convincingly that the idealization of bodily proximity between mothers and infants has dominated Western conceptions of motherhood from the Enlightenment to the present day.

<sup>18</sup> On the “realness problem” arising from perinatal death, see Layne, chapter 6 (104).

<sup>19</sup> Simonds and Rothman comment on the prevalence and significance of the colour white in nineteenth-century infant elegies. See 54-55.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Rosanna Leprohon’s “Voices of the Death Chamber.” Petrino notes numerous poems by Sigourney in which mothers address their children from beyond the grave (323).

<sup>21</sup> On shielding children from knowledge of death in mid-twentieth century culture, see Gorer 23-29.

<sup>22</sup> Forter’s discussion mentions Jahan Ramazani, Philip Novak, Michael Moon, and José Muñoz as critics who champion melancholia for its aesthetic and political value. While she does not use the term “melancholia,” Celeste Schenck similarly sees women poets as protesting their exclusion from the canonical elegiac tradition by means of an unresolved mourning that refuses consolation.

<sup>23</sup> According to Freud, melancholia is characterized by a “lowering of . . . self-regarding feelings,” the “delusional expectation of punishment,” and a “tendency to suicide” (“Mourning and Melancholia” 244, 252).

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