

Hearts of Stone: Quarrying the Canadian Shield in Recent Canadian Women's Writing

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Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
William Butler Yeats, "Easter 1916"

Take away our hearts o' stone, and give us hearts o' flesh!
Sean O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*

Recent Canadian women writers quarry the human heart, but find stone where flesh should be. The Canadian Shield—a Precambrian rock formation that composes nearly half the Canadian landmass, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean through the prairie provinces and from the Arctic Ocean to the United States and beyond—provides a literal landscape and a rich lode of metaphor for writers to mine. Canadian women novelists employ stone as a central symbol of psychic ossification, emotive memorializing, or narrative symbolism. From the ancient Rosetta stone to the fabulous philosopher's stone, rock has been man's method of inscribing his story—like fossils embedded in limestone, history's shorthand. Roseann Runte argues, in "Reading Stones: Travels to and in Canada," that writers want to "interpret the rocks themselves, to read their own oracular messages in the land."¹ Limestone, so rich with fossils—the traces of prehistoric plants and animals embedded in the sedimentary rock—provides symbols for writers like Carol Shields in her *Stone Diaries*. Thus, fossils have become a metaphor for fiction, as novelists have become paleontologists.

Isabel Huggan views stones as stories: "Dry in the sand, the stones were silent as old bones, but wet, they told stories."² Huggan sees fossils as fictions: "Like fossils set in limestone, words impress themselves on paper, syllables shrinking history into a legible construct. Real fossils are time's shorthand, abbreviated geology" (25).

Jane Urquhart employs fossils as a symbol of history in her 1993 novel *Away*, for the very stones underfoot are "filled with etched memories of previous life

¹ Roseann Runte, "Reading Stones: Travels to and in Canada," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 65.3 (1996): 528.

² Isabel Huggan, "Saving Stones," *Belonging: Home Away from Home* (Toronto: Knopf, 2003) 23.

forms.”³ As Anne Compton states, “In any landscape, the narratives of the lives lived there are fossilized in the landscape.”⁴ Urquhart frames her narrative with the rock quarry that will engulf Esther O’Malley Robertson’s family home at Loughbreeze Beach on the shores of the Great Lakes. At the beginning, “Esther thinks of the million-year-old fossils that decorate these stones and how the limestone record of their extermination has brought about the demise of her own landscape, the enormous hole in the earth” (20–21). At the conclusion, “the fossilized narratives of ancient migrations are crushed into powder” (356) by machines that fragment the land and carry away its history in the form of stone.

In Urquhart’s 2001 novel, *The Stone Carvers*, artisan Klara Becker, disguised as a man, assists Canadian sculptor Walter Allward in carving the names of the fallen, including her lost lover, Eamon, into the Canadian First World War Monument at Vimy, France, like fossils in the rock. Urquhart quotes Walter Allward’s statement as an epigraph to *The Stone Carvers*: “I have been eating and sleeping stone for so long it has become an obsession with me.”⁵ The marble monument, “a memorial to grief ... and a prayer for peace” (377), is “surmounted by an enormous stone woman who is hooded and draped in the manner of a medieval mourner” (1), recalling Margaret Laurence’s stone angel.

Joy Kogawa, in her 1981 novel *Obasan*, dedicated to the Issei, the first generation of Japanese immigrants to Canada, employs this quotation from Revelations as her epigraph: “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna and will give him a white stone and in the stone a new name written...” (2:17).⁶ In her poetic prologue, the sound of silence is symbolized by stone. “In the beginning was the word,” it is written in Genesis, but the narrator writes, “The word is stone.... I hate the stone.... Unless the stone bursts with telling ... there is in my life no living word.” In the concluding chapter, however, Naomi Nakane accepts the long silence of her mother: “My loved ones, rest in your world of stone” (246). Nature, too, seems redeemed: When Naomi revisits the coulee, she discovers “the moon is a pure white stone. The reflection is rippling in the river—water and stone dancing” (247), as rock and river harmonize. Yeats wrote, in “Easter 1916,” of hearts “Enchanted to a stone / To trouble the living stream,” but now, for Naomi, the stone no longer troubles the stream, but sings and dances with it. As Gayle Fujita concludes, “In this redemptive context, the loved ones in their ‘world of stone’ and the moon as ‘a pure white stone’ suggest that Naomi has indeed found ‘a new name written,’

³ Jane Urquhart, *Away* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993) 267.

⁴ Anne Compton, “Romancing the Landscape: Jane Urquhart’s Fiction,” *Literature of Region and Nation*, vol. 2, ed. Winnifred M. Bogaards (Saint John, N.B.: University of New Brunswick, 1998) 224.

⁵ Jane Urquhart, *The Stone Carvers* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2001) 376.

⁶ Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (Toronto: Penguin, 1983).

has discovered that 'the stone bursts with telling'.⁷ And Laurie Kruk, in her article "Voices of Stone," concludes that "'the white stone' also heralds and harbours the 'new name,' a promise of spiritual rebirth."⁸

Numerous novels by Canadian women writers, from Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* to Jane Urquhart's *Away*, employ stone as a central symbol. I propose to excavate the metaphor of rock so dear to the hearts of some of Canada's most revered women writers, who make up a kind of metaphorical, or literary, Canadian Shield. Three prairie writers are remarkable for their use of this metaphor. First, Margaret Laurence establishes the stone symbolism in the marble monument in *The Stone Angel*; then Carol Shields refines it in the Goodwill Tower in *The Stone Diaries*; and finally Gloria Sawai redeems it in *A Song for Nettie Johnson*. Let us explore the ways in which these three prairie writers employ this trope to quarry a metaphorical Canadian Shield and reveal a stone at the core of the human heart.

MARGARET LAURENCE'S MARBLE MONUMENT. *The Stone Angel* is the perfect title for Laurence's novel, for, as Laurence observes, the monument "dominate[s] the book like an imposing symbol."⁹ The stone angel frames the novel, like the quarry in Urquhart's *Away*. In the first sentence, Hagar recalls, "Above the town on the hill brow the stone angel used to stand. I wonder if she stands there yet, in memory of her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one, my mother's angel that my father bought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty for ever and a day" (3).¹⁰ When Hagar leaves Manawaka, the last thing she sees is the monument: "I could see on the hill brow the marble angel, sightlessly guarding the gardens of snow, the empty places and the deep-lying dead" (142). Hagar has consigned her "lost men" (6), her husband Bram and son John, to the angel's guardianship: "Dead by your own hands or by mine" (292), she asks. Finally, on her deathbed, Hagar recalls her last visit to the cemetery: "The angel was still standing there, but winters or lack of care had altered her. The earth had heaved with frost around her, and she stood askew and tilted.... Someday she'll topple, and no one will bother to set her upright again" (305).

Clearly, Hagar Currie Shipley is the stone angel of the title: she is "stone blind" (58), just as the marble angel is "doubly blind—not only stone but

⁷ Gayle K. Fujita, "To Attend the Sound of Stone: The Sensibility of Silence in *Obasan*," *MELUS* 12.3 (1985): 37.

⁸ Laurie Kruk, "Voices of Stone: The Power of Poetry in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*," *ARIEL* 30.4 (1999): 78. Kruk considers the biblical, Christian, Japanese Buddhist, and Jungian symbolism of stone in *Obasan*.

⁹ In Michel Fabre, "From *The Stone Angel* to *The Diviners*: An Interview with Margaret Laurence," *A Place to Stand On: Essays by and About Margaret Laurence*, ed. George Woodcock (Edmonton: NeWest, 1983): 199.

¹⁰ Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964) 3. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

unendowed with even a pretense of sight. Whoever carved her had left the eyeballs blank" (3). George Woodcock states that the stone angel is "hewn out of the earth and blind as creatures that live in earth, and as such is an appropriate symbol for Hagar Shipley, the choleric earthy mother who inhabits *The Stone Angel*."¹¹ Hagar turns to stone the night her son John dies: "The night my son died I was transformed to stone and never wept at all" (243). "Rigid as marble" (146), Hagar is literally petrified. She feels angry—"at God, perhaps, for giving us eyes but almost never sight" (173). You cannot get blood, or tears, from a stone. But this mother of marble must weep and bleed: Hagar must come to life, become flesh and blood, before she can die. As Juno Boyle prays in Sean O'Casey's 1922 play *Juno and the Paycock*, "Sacred Heart o' Jesus, take away our hearts o' stone, and give us hearts o' flesh! (72)"¹²

The stone angel is a brilliant symbol, spanning, as it does, the spectrum of creation, from inanimate matter to pure spirit in two words. The "great chain of being" stretched from rock through vegetation and animal life to human beings and ultimately to the pure spirit of the angels who sit at the throne of God, for, as the Psalm states, "thou hast made [man] a little lower than the angels" (8:5). Hagar must climb this cosmic ladder from earth to angel before she can be redeemed. As E. M. W. Tillyard explains, "The chain of being is educative both in the marvels of its static self and in its implications of ascent."¹³ This earth angel may have feet of clay, but she will ultimately transcend the "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" of death to emerge as pure spirit when she gives up the ghost. Thus, the titular symbol provides a cryptic paradox that condenses God's whole creation and the novel's entire action into two little words.

The stone angel is not native to Canada, however, not hewn from the Canadian Shield. Rather, it is made of Italian marble, carved by "the cynical descendants of Bernini [for] fledgling pharaohs in an uncouth land" (3). The monument symbolizes the pretensions of Hagar's father, the patriarchal Jason Currie, in contrast to Hagar's husband, the earthy farmer Brampton Shipley, who resembles "the hot rush of disrespectful wind" (5) that blows from the prairie through the cultivated gardens of Manawaka's cemetery, ruffling the prissy petunias. In a gesture of atonement to her husband or defiance of her father, Hagar has Bram buried in the Currie plot, "close by his father and close by mine, under the double-named stone where the marble angel crookedly stood" (243), and she has his name carved into the red marble name stone next to the stone angel, "so the stone said *Currie* on one side and *Shipley* on the other" (184). Laurence's own ashes are buried beneath a stone in Neepawa's Riverside Cemetery that reads "Wemyss," her family name, on one side and "Laurence,"

¹¹ George Woodcock, "The Human Elements: Margaret Laurence's Fiction," *The World of Canadian Writing* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980) 56.

¹² Sean O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*. *Sean O'Casey: Three Plays* (London: St. Martin's Library, 1957) 72.

¹³ E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943) 28.

her husband's name, on the other, like the Currie-Shipley stone. But the "Currie-Shipley stone" (306) is ironic, because it memorializes Hagar and Bram's marriage in rock, appropriate for Hagar, the stone angel in the flesh. It may also echo the idea in *The Rainbow* by D. H. Lawrence that "an Angel is the soul of man and woman in one: they rise united at the Judgment Day as one Angel" (138).¹⁴

This angel oversees all the crises of Hagar's life. When Hagar returns to her husband, Bram, as he lies dying, she visits the Manawaka cemetery to see the Currie memorial and discovers "The marble angel lay toppled over on her face" (178), symbolizing her own fall from grace, perhaps. Horrified, Hagar commands her son John to erect the fallen statue, as he complains, "That would be great, to break your back because a bloody marble angel fell on you" (179). Hagar confesses, "I wished he could have looked like Jacob then, wrestling with the angel and besting it, wringing a blessing from it with his might. But no" (179). After he rights the statue, Hagar is appalled to see that "Someone had painted the pouting mouth and cheeks with lipstick" (179)—probably John expressing his contempt for the sanctimonious Currie clan or for his pretentious mother, whom he calls "Angel" (172).

For Hagar is the fallen angel—"proud as Lucifer" (191), in her words. On her deathbed, however, she realizes that it is her elder son, Marvin, who wrestles with Hagar, the angel: "Now it seems to me that he is truly Jacob, gripping with all his strength and bargaining. *I will not let thee go unless thou bless me.* And I see I am thus strangely cast, and perhaps have been so from the beginning, and can only release myself by releasing him" (304). Hagar sheds her feet of clay and ascends the chain of being from rock to angel when she blesses Marvin with her loving lie: "You've been good to me always. A better son than John" (304). Dying, Hagar, the "holy terror" (304), asks, "Can angels faint?" (307).

CAROL SHIELDS'S FOSSILIZED LIMESTONE. Carol Shields develops Laurence's metaphor in *The Stone Diaries*.¹⁵ Her title suggests a debt to Laurence's novel, as well as to Pat Lowther's 1977 collection of poetry, *A Stone Diary*. As Lowther declares in her title poem, "I was madly in love / with stone."¹⁶ Shields, too, is in love with rock in *The Stone Diaries*, as stones dominate her narrative. She opens the novel with the stone that weights down the flowered plate covering the Malvern pudding that Mercy, surnamed Stone, like all the other inmates of the Stonewall Orphans Home, prepares for her husband just before she unexpectedly gives birth to her daughter Daisy, the

¹⁴ D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1949) 138.

¹⁵ Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries* (Toronto: Vintage, 1993). Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁶ Pat Lowther, "A Stone Diary," *A Stone Diary* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977) 9.

narrator/protagonist, and departs this world forever. "This, then, is Daisy's birthright: stone, both literal and metaphorical," as Leona Gom affirms.¹⁷

Mercy's widower, Cuyler Goodwill, a stonecutter by trade from Stonewall, Manitoba, after finding God in a rainbow while kneeling by Mercy's gravestone on the Quarry Road (56) creates the "Goodwill Tower," built of Tyndall limestone as a monument to lost love. He inscribes the stones with ciphers and images from his illustrated Bible or *Farmer's Almanac*—a bird, a mermaid, an angel—until the memorial is "a museum of writhing forms" (64), because he believes stone to be "the signature of the spiritual" (63).

Although Cuyler Goodwill was always as silent as the gravestones he carved, his love for Mercy dislodged "the stone in his throat" (84), endowing him with a "silver tongue" (83). He gives a lecture titled "A Heritage in Stone" (86) to celebrate Daisy's graduation. He rhapsodizes about the miracle of Salem limestone, a "miraculous freestone material" (116) that has no bias and can thus be split in either direction. He "approaches stone not as an aesthete ... but as a moralist" (115), telling the students that they are "stone carver[s]" (116) who can create their own lives out of the raw material symbolized by this limestone. Recalling his "Salem stone angel supporting the central pillar of the Iowa State Capitol" (114), he exudes, "The miracle of stone ... is that a rigid inert mass can be lifted out of the ground and given wings" (114)—Shields's tribute to Laurence's stone angel, perhaps.

Countering the angel, Daisy's father carves a grotesque grinning garden gnome from Indiana limestone as a wedding present for his daughter, signaling his "baroque period" and the exhaustion of his "gift of speech" (115), as the imp presides puckishly over her life.

Later, Cuyler Goodwill, age seventy, decides to build a pyramid around a time capsule. Inspired by his visit to Egypt, he plans to create a miniature replica of the Great Pyramid, which was built with two million limestone blocks, each weighing two and a half tons. He plans to use stones from around the world, from Manitoban Tyndall limestone to Hawaiian lava stone. In the exact center he will deposit his time capsule, including a stamp, a pressed maple leaf, a newspaper headline, and Mercy's wedding ring, making "his pyramid, dense, heavy, complex, full of secrets, a sort of [time] machine. His statement of finality" (183). Ultimately, he hates his "Great Pyramid," viewing it as an "eyesore" and a "folly" (276). Moreover, this memorial proves as mutable as the monument in Shelley's "Ozymandias."

Shields explains her fascination with limestone and fossils in a 1998 interview: "I am drawn to limestone because it is an inorganic material but one

¹⁷ Leona Gom, "Stones and Flowers," *Prairie Fire* 16.2 (1996): 22.

made of organic matter, the trillions of seashells ground to powder and cemented over time. There's something about the metamorphic exchange that enchants me. I also love the fact that something as rigid as stone can be taken from the earth and carved into objects of great delicacy."¹⁸ Shields develops the fossil metaphor in *The Stone Diaries*: she includes a disquisition on Tyndall stone, a dolomitic limestone, describing the fossils—"gastropods, brachiopods, trilobites, corals and snails"—that give it its lacy look, inspiring the name "tapestry stone" (25). Like the novelist, the stone tells its own stories inscribed in the fossils. Even the stone Mercy used contains three fossils that have never yet been properly classified (25). Isabel Huggan writes, "Stones piled upon stones, and stories wherever there are stones."¹⁹

Characters are symbolized by stone in Shields's novel: When Daisy travels to the Orkney Islands to visit her father-in-law, Magnus Flett, a stonecutter, she thinks, "Unyieldingness is the reputation he left behind. Narrowness. Stone" (299). Men, it seems, turn to stone when they harden their hearts. Staying at the "Grey Stones Hotel" (292), she discovers the isle is full of fossils (292). The fossil is a metaphor for Daisy herself, child of Mercy and Cuyler, the baby whose birth, like Hagar's, caused her mother's death, for the aging Daisy is petrified by life. She lives a fossilized existence—"Life turned to stone" (301)—a fossil in the flesh. When Abram Skutari blessed newborn Daisy next to her dead mother, placing an ancient old-world coin on her forehead, "he felt as though he were blessing a stone" (260). As William Butler Yeats writes in "Easter 1916": "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart."²⁰ Daisy's life has been a long history of self-sacrifice, and her life story resembles a fossil, for life, as she observes, "leaves behind no fossils, except perhaps in fiction" (148). The epigraph to *The Stone Diaries* declares, "her life / could be called a monument," recalling Cuyler's Goodwill Tower. Daisy feels hollowed out by her childhood illness and rendered empty, like Cuyler's hollow monument. "The illness she suffers is orphanhood" (189) or, really, motherlessness. She explains how isolation and silence, "all these pressed down on me, on young Daisy Goodwill and emptied her out" (75; emphasis mine), until she is "erased from the record of her own existence" (76). Daisy "lives outside her story as well as inside," Shields writes, so that "she's able to disappear, you might say, from her own life. She has a talent for self-obliteration" (124–25). The narrator notes, "Biography, even autobiography, is full of systemic error, of holes that connect like a tangle of underground streams" (196), and "Her autobiography, if such a thing were imaginable, would be, if such a thing were ever to be written, an assemblage of gaps and voids" (76).

The Stone Diaries, of course, purports to be precisely that—Daisy's autobiography rendered in a metabiographical narrative combining first and

¹⁸ Diana Hollenberg, "An Interview with Carol Shields," *Contemporary Literature* 39.3 (1998): 348.

¹⁹ Huggan, *Saving Stones* 26.

²⁰ William Butler Yeats, "Easter 1916," *Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1961) 202–05.

third person, past and present tense—a monument to an unfulfilled life. Like *The Stone Angel*, *The Stone Diaries* ends with the death of the protagonist-narrator. Shields remarked to me on her own deathbed that she regretted ending *The Stone Diaries* on such a negative note—not because Daisy dies, but because she dies so unfulfilled: “Daisy’s final (unspoken) words” are “I am not at peace” (361). Daisy elects “To Lie Alone in Death” (347) like a classical statue: “Stone is how she finally sees herself” (358), for “her stone self” (359) resembles an ancient effigy. As Leona Gom affirms, the images of gravestones, of Daisy lying on a slab with a stone pillow, “of Daisy even becoming stone, are unquestionably sad, even tragic.”²¹ Daisy appears to be a fossilized limestone angel, but, unlike Hagar, Daisy dies unredeemed.²²

GLORIA SAWAI’S SASKATCHEWAN HALLELUJAH. In *A Song for Nettie Johnson*,²³ the central symbol of stone, recalling Laurence’s *Stone Angel* and Shields’ *Stone Diaries*, is emphasized by Gloria Sawai’s epigraph from Isaiah 51.1: “Look to the rock from which you were hewn, the quarry from which you were dug.” In Sawai’s title story, the eponymous character “Crazy Nettie” (69) draws attention to language by the blue book she cradles on her lap and her habit of controlling words by spelling them. Stone is the dominant word for Nettie, binding her to the quarry. Her lover, Eli, calls her “My Lady of the Word” (4). She makes love to Eli by “spell[ing] to him, crooning the alphabet into his ear, the letters of love” (19).

But Eli also calls her “My Lady of the Quarry” (4), for she lives on the lip of the hole in the ground from which the rock has been dug. When she tries to leave the quarry, “She thinks of the pit. Deep. It can pull you down to the bottom just like that. And it’s always watching you, waiting for you to take one wrong step, spell one word wrong” (70). Nettie cannot spell “bird” (37), and so she cannot take flight and leave this barren landscape. Stones are her playmates, and insects are her interlocutors. She cradles a stone from the quarry in her lap, “like a baby in its basket” (7), crooning, “I can spell” (7).

But Nettie’s vision is focused on the ground, because she cannot look up at the sky. The cover design for *Song for Nettie Johnson*, “Woman Dancing in Meadow” by Gary Isaacs, portrays a woman rooted to the earth but reaching to the sky—an apt symbol for Nettie. The blurb on the back cover compares Sawai to Laurence—perhaps because her fictional town of Stone Creek, Saskatchewan, recalls Laurence’s mythical microcosm of Manawaka. The children of Stone

²¹ Gom 22.

²² David Williams suggests that the ninth chapter of Shields’s novel “offers an extended parody of the sort of story of redemption which is found in *The Stone Angel*.” See Williams. “Re-imagining a Stone Angel: The Absent Autobiographer of *The Stone Diaries*,” *O Canada: Essays on Canadian Literature and Culture*, ed. Jorn Carlsen (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1995) 139.

²³ Gloria Sawai, *A Song for Nettie Johnson* (Regina: Coteau, 2001). Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

Creek think Nettie is a witch who “casts spells” (27). But it is Nettie who is under a spell, the spell of “S-t-o-n-e.... Stone” (2).

Nettie tells Eli, “And that’s where he did it. That’s where my daddy always did it to me after Mama died. Down there on the stones” (47). Staring down into the pit, she recalls, “You said I was your new bride!” (73). She hurls a stone into the hole, crying, “This is for you, Daddy!” (73). This victim of paternal abuse is bound by the quarry where her father raped her regularly—a metaphor for men like her father who have a hole full of stones where a heart should be. Nettie speculates, “I guess what happened is your heart turned to dust one day and spilled out and blew away. Past Winnipeg. And then there was a hole there” (74). Speaking of Stone Creek, where teenage girls taunted the adolescent Nettie, she declares, “Over there they do not have a heart” (49), but a hole “where the heart’s supposed to go” (49). Eli responds, “Everybody’s got a hole somewhere inside of them. And everybody fills it up the best way they know how” (50). Eli fills his inner void with music, just as Nettie solaces herself with the song of her dead mother, now an angel.

Nettie imagines her beloved mother, in a blue dress, sitting on a cloud playing a harp: “Her mother is an angel of light. She is slim and golden and wears a pale blue dress and plays a harp. She holds the silver harp on her lap, and her thin fingers slide over the strings, and the music lifts the stars” (2). And later, “In the golden chair above the sky, her angel mother in a pale blue dress moves her fingers over the harp strings and the melody falls down like rain” (7–8). “And Nettie gathers the song in her arms and folds it against her heart and holds it there” (8) as she sings, “*My bonny lies over the ocean ... Oh, bring back my bonny to me*” (8). The bird, or angel, from whose viewpoint we watch Nettie and Eli’s love blossom, sighs, “Poor Nettie,” before flying away to the United States—“because some things are too hard for angels to endure, too human and incomprehensible” (13). Sawai shows us that there are angels in Canada as well as in America.

Sawai’s central stone symbol is echoed in other stories, such as “Mother’s Day,” in which pubescent Norma Hagen, horrified when the stray kitten burrows into her budding breasts for warmth like an infant with its mother, flings it by its tail and stones it until it is dead. Its red blood staining the white snow symbolizes her bizarre coming-of-age ritual on Mother’s Day. Sawai said she originally intended the girl to set the kitten on a rock and hammer it with a stone, but decided that that would be too brutal. So “Song for Nettie Johnson” is not the only story in Sawai’s collection to have stone as a central metaphor.

But Sawai includes two epigraphs: the rocky biblical metaphor so well suited to the flinty side of Sawai’s stories is answered by her second, more opti-

mistic, epigraph from George Bernanos—"Grace is everywhere"²⁴—countering the first, just as Sawai's story will redeem the father's stony heart with a vision of grace. The Governor General's Jury, in awarding Sawai the prize for English fiction for *Song for Nettie Johnson* in 2002, said, "The power of grace illuminates her world." As Gordon Neufeld writes in his review of *A Song for Nettie Johnson*, "The stories are warm, elegant and full of grace—a grace that is both aesthetic and theological [as] Sawai's work is completely infused with her Christian faith, and with the belief that God's love is available to all."²⁵ Curtis Gillespie writes that *A Song for Nettie Johnson* demonstrates characters flawed and blessed, dramatizes "faith and grace," and offers "a deeper understanding of commitment, of faith, of simple human togetherness."²⁶ In the story "Oh Wild Flock, Oh Crimson Sky," Elizabeth Lund, daughter of the minister, the girl from whose perspective the title story is also recounted, rises to the challenge to debate Ivan Lippoway, the school atheist: "Resolved: that there is no God" (172). Questioning ways to prove the existence of God, she settles on the beauty of poetry as the ultimate proof.

Sawai's original name for the title story, previously in play form, was *Saskatchewan Hallelujah*. Ultimately, the dust to dust and ashes to ashes of death and its black hole are redeemed. The Stone Creek minister prays with Eli, "But thou oh Lord shalt arise and have mercy upon Zion, for thy servants take pleasure in her stones and favour the dust thereof" (19). His prayer recalls David's Psalm, "The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner" (Psalm 118: 22), repeated by Peter: "This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner" (Acts 4:11). When a Stone Creek girl dies and is buried "at the bottom of a frozen hole" (60), the priest exhorts, "Let us go forth as light bearers to meet the Christ who cometh forth from the grave as a Bridegroom" (60). The minister's daughter explains to a friend, "She marries Jesus" (60), and so she is "the bride of Christ" (60). Eli Nelson rescues Nettie Johnson from her role as Stone Creek's damaged whore and himself from his role as town drunk by marrying her: "Eli, aging, sick, homeless, and Nettie, outcast, damaged in mind and spirit, joined in holy matrimony" (53). But he also redeems her through music. Eli, Stone Creek derelict, directs Handel's *Messiah*: "And the king of glory shall come in" (65).

Sawai counterpoints Nettie's meditations on stone with lines from *The Messiah*: from "Darkness shall cover the earth" (25) through "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, / And be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors / And the king of glory shall

²⁴ This is the last sentence in George Bernanos's book *The Diary of a Country Priest* (London: Catholic Book Club, 1937).

²⁵ K. Gordon Neufeld, "Award-Winning Graceful Collection. Review of *A Song for Nettie Johnson*," *Books in Canada: The Canadian Review of Books* 32.1 (2003): 3.

²⁶ Curtis Gillespie, "Spiritual Comedy and Terrible Truth. Review of *A Song for Nettie Johnson*," *The Edmonton Journal*, 10 February 2002, Section B 11.

come in!" (65) to "The glory of the Lord is risen upon thee" (82). Thus, Sawai interweaves pain and joy in this poignant saga of redemption as the narrative alternates between Nettie's approach to the church and Eli's direction of the chorus. The counterpointed narrative threads climax in an epiphanic finale when Nettie, just as the choir triumphantly sings the Halleluiahs chorus, finally succeeds in spelling the word "bird" (89). In that word she captures her image of her dead mother as an angel playing her harp in the clouds, and the maternal vision redeems the paternal rape.

In the final story of *A Song for Nettie Johnson*, "The Day I Sat with Jesus on the Sundeck and a Wind Came Up and Blew My Kimono Open and He Saw My Breasts," Jesus approaches from the stone quarry, emerging from the rocks on a sunny Monday morning in the city of Moose Jaw, as the narrator wonders "if I really had been saved by grace alone" (281). The narrator's name is "Gloria Johnson" (282), echoing the Christian name of the author, Gloria Ostrem Sawai, and the surname of the eponymous character of the title story, Nettie Johnson, knitting this collection of nine separate stories into a fragile framework. In this last story, Gloria Johnson quotes Handel's *Messiah*—"King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (283)—and thinks, "Hallelujah" (283), echoing the original name of the title story, *Saskatchewan Hallelujah*. Although the whimsical tone of this story, which flirts with an aura of magic realism, is very different from the poignant and poetic tone of the title story, the lightness of this final entry redeems the darkness of the opening tale. The bird from Nettie Johnson's story and the rock that floats up from the quarry both land on Jesus' chest and magically melt into his skin (289). Gloria Johnson recalls the hymn, "Jesus lover of my soul / Let me to thy bosom fly" (291). Jesus, as he departs for Winnipeg, kisses her on the mouth and flicks her nipple with his finger. As Michael Trussler writes so eloquently, "the story's autobiographical style recalls medieval women's visionary texts, such as Julian of Norwich's *The Revelation of Love*," while its "lack of self-consciousness in blending the numinous with the mundane suggests that one could categorize it as a Canadian instance of 'magic realism.'"²⁷

Thus, recent Canadian women writers, beginning with Laurence and continuing with Shields, quarry the Canadian Shield, and Gloria Sawai mines that field of stone in her title story, "A Song for Nettie Johnson," and then redeems it in an epiphanic vision of grace.

²⁷ Michael Trussler, "The Short Story as Miniature: Barry Callaghan's 'The Black Queen' and Gloria Sawai's 'The Day I Sat with Jesus on the Sundeck and a Wind Came Up and Blew My Kimono Open and He Saw My Breasts,'" *University of Toronto Quarterly* 69.4 (2000): 6.