A Human Conversation about Goodness: Carol Shields's *Unless*

Margaret Steffler

> But I do feel this sense of goodness is part of our human conversation — the biggest part of it.
>
> — Carol Shields (Johnston 51)

The temporary loss of a child has been the focus of two recent Canadian novels intent on conveying emotions of sadness, fear, and helplessness. When explaining the subject matter of *Helpless* (2008), Barbara Gowdy said, "I started asking myself big questions in order to come up with an idea, and I asked myself, 'What's the worst thing that could happen to a person?' And the answer I came up with was losing a child" (Whyte 18). Gowdy explores Celia Fox's devastating loss of her daughter, Rachel, but becomes fascinated by the mind and motives of the kidnapper, Ron, and the impact of Ron's actions on his girlfriend, Nancy. Of Reta Winters in *Unless* (2002), Carol Shields said, "I knew I wanted her to be a writer. . . . I wanted her to be about 40 years old. I wanted her to live in a certain house. And I wanted something terrible to happen to her" (Grossman). The "something terrible" took shape, according to Shields, when "someone once asked me what was the worst thing that had ever happened to me. . . . And I realized that the worst thing had never happened. The worst thing would be to lose a child through death or separation. That would be the hardest thing to bear" (Wachtel 162). The fictional Reta Winters, when asked the same question faced by Gowdy and Shields, provides a similar response: "I couldn't think of the worst thing. I told him that whatever it was, it hadn't happened yet. I knew, though, at that moment, what the nature of the 'worst thing' would be, that it would be socketed somehow into the lives of my children" (113). Carol Shields bases *Unless* on this "worst thing" that could happen — the "loss" of nineteen-year-old Norah Winters to her family and particularly to her mother, Reta.

The circumstances surrounding the loss of Norah are puzzling and mysterious. The key fragment, the missing piece of the narrative, is the scene caught on Honest Ed's security videotape, recording Norah's attempt to "save" the "young Muslim woman (or so it would appear from her dress)" (314). Reta relates the event by piecing together information from various sources:

> She had walked over to Honest Ed's to buy a plastic dish rack, which she was holding in her hand when the self-immolation began. (Why a plastic dish rack? — this flimsy object — its purchase can only have evolved from some fleeting scrap of domestic encouragement.) Without thinking, and before the news team arrived, Norah had rushed forward to stifle the flames. The dish rack became a second fire, and it and the plastic bag in which it was carried burned themselves to Norah's flesh. She pulled back. Stop, she screamed, or something to that effect, and then her fingers sank into the woman's melting flesh — the woman was never identified — her arms, her lungs, and abdomen. These pieces gave way. The smoke, the smell, was terrible. (315)

In this paper, I argue that the vague encounter between Norah and the "other" woman cannot be pushed to the margins by the reader as it is by the society in which it occurs, by the media reporting on it, and by the characters themselves once they are aware of its occurrence. It is up to the reader to take this fragment and consider it beyond the limited possibilities and probabilities assigned to it in the novel itself. The characters' impositions of interpretive and judgmental views on unknown actions and intentions constitute a questionable "reading" of the event, which calls for a more open, responsible, and active reading on the part of the reader.

Norah, apparently traumatized by what she has witnessed and scarred by what she has done, somehow makes an inexplicable leap from her attempt to intervene in the "self-immolation" (117) of the "Muslim woman" to an embodiment and demonstration of "goodness." She spends her days sitting "cross-legged with a begging bowl in her lap" (11) on a street corner in Toronto, the word "GOODNESS" (12) written on a cardboard sign hanging around her neck. "Goodness" is reproduced in Reta's mind and on the page of the novel as it appears on the sign, thus stressing its material physicality and the word's need for a relationship with small words, such as "unless" and the "little chips of

grammar" (313) that hold together narratives and lives.[1] Daughter and sign are permanent fixtures in their disturbing spot on the pavement at the corner of Bloor and Bathurst. The unexpected manifestation of goodness in this strange form reflects its mystery and emphasizes its elusiveness in the face of human attempts to understand and articulate its properties. Characters and readers depend on Norah's sign and Honest Ed's recorded image to fill in the gaps so they can attempt to probe the origin, nature, and effect of the goodness that is now being so blatantly and troublingly exposed. The reader, more distanced from the situation than Reta, will not necessarily accept Reta's maternal and feminist interpretations or the explanations of others. Reading the "signs" involves a careful examination of not only the signs themselves but also the social context and literary text in which they are embedded. The participatory reader is the ultimate detective and philosopher, using the speculative theories of the fictional characters to engage with the fragmented narrative of the encounter between Norah and the "young Muslim woman" in a fuller and more inclusive manner than does the text itself.

Reviewers and critics of *Unless* have tended to minimize the details of the actual interaction between Norah and the "young Muslim woman," largely because of Shields's own minimalist treatment. Catherine Lockerbie, for example, noting that the "full reasons for Norah's withdrawal … are almost glossed over," points out that "Reta's response to this family crisis is far more moving and involving than the crisis itself, which is resolved with almost unseemly speed." Lockerbie speculates that "this may be seen as a minor flaw in the structure of the book or a deliberate avoidance of any more grandiose denouement" (H8). The "crisis" is not "resolved" in any sense of the word, but rather than a structural flaw, the lack of attention accorded to the incident deliberately demands the reader's engagement. The delayed relation of the incident of the burning woman is heavily invested with assumed significance because it is withheld for so long; however, its actual substance is never revealed, despite the apparent "answers" it provides about Norah's behaviour. Neither Reta nor Shields pauses for very long in the description of the moment when Norah touches the "other" woman, but the encounter is crucial precisely *because* of its brevity. If Shields writes about "the hidden, the unsaid" (Hughes 138) by concentrating particularly on gaps and silences,[2] it is safe to assume that the mysterious uncertainty surrounding Norah's act is important. Although the meaning of the

moment may be elusive, it calls for its own pursuit. In fact, it is difficult or even impossible to ignore the strange vagueness that hints at so much but tells so little. Shields talks about the way in which readers are often left "tugging after the narrative thread" in order to speculate about what is missing or unrevealed ("Narrative" 20), and there is no doubt here that the reader is compelled to tug and work at the thread connecting Norah's intervention to her subsequent display of "goodness" on the very street corner where she touched the "other."

Nora Foster Stovel notes the lack of commentary concerning "the cause of the woman's self-immolation or the relevance of her religion," pointing out that Shields concentrates instead on "the effects of witnessing the death on Norah Winters, presumably her despair at this shocking symbol of the powerlessness of women to make their voices heard" (69n19). Besides the interest in Norah, Shields also raises our curiosity and even concern about the unknown woman. Wendy Roy's examination of the continued relationship between Norah and the woman concentrates on the meaning of Norah's gestures: "Norah's silent vigil on this particular street corner is revealed as honouring another woman who, through self-immolation, put her silencing and invisibility to literal, permanent, and drastic effect. Shields's book thus turns on itself in a powerful exploration of apparently voluntary silencing that is in fact enforced by cross-cultural gender codes" (131-32). Stovel's and Roy's emphasis on women's silence and lack of power is central to Reta's understanding of women's lives, and much of Reta's understanding comes from her mentor, writer Danielle Westerman. Even though this view of the condition of women is fairly clear, the anonymity of the individual dead woman haunts the text, primarily because she is unidentified and unidentifiable both before and after the burning. The bracketed qualification, "(or so it would appear from her dress)" (314), precariously situates "her" as young, female, and Muslim, and is deliberately provocative. Who makes this bracketed comment? Is it Reta's observation based on her viewing of the security videotape, or is she quoting the firemen and others who witnessed the aftermath? The anonymous "she" *must* be more than simply the figure through whom Norah Winters is diagnosed; otherwise, the novel risks the criticism levelled at Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* by Chinua Achebe, who objects to the "preposterous and perverse arrogance" of "reducing Africa" and Africans "to the role of props for the break-up

of one petty European mind" (12). The depiction and treatment of the "young Muslim woman" definitely falls into the stereotypes identified by Edward Said's epigraph from Karl Marx in *Orientalism* — she is unable to "represent [her]self; [she] must be represented" (xiii).[3] This lack of self-representation depends on the essentialized quality of voicelessness imposed on the unidentified woman by the characters in the novel based on the little they know and the assumptions they hold. The crux of the novel for me lies in determining the source from which such essentialisms emanate — from where and/or whom comes the persistence of the "enduring Western essence, which observes the Orient from afar and from, so to speak, above" (Said 333)? And what does the reader do with this persistence?

Is the "othering" of the "young Muslim woman" limited to the characters, or do the author and narrative also participate in cultural and gendered stereotyping? Does the novel adopt an Orientalist perspective of the woman in order to promote its own feminist agenda, or is the overt "otherness" meant to subvert the well-intentioned neoliberal concerns of Reta, along with those of her friends and family, who deal in abstract theories with a shocking disregard for the real woman who has died? In Reta's circle, the "young Muslim woman" is reduced to a touchstone in attempts to understand and "save" Norah; the dead woman is relevant and valuable merely to the extent that she provides the most promising clue to Norah's condition. It is only by parting company early on with Reta, her family, and her friends that the reader can avoid falling into the role of "solving" and "saving," a process that exploits, stereotypes, and erases the "young Muslim woman." The voicelessness of both the "other" woman and Norah pervades the text and provides the most urgent and valuable clue of all.

Because of public awareness that Shields wrote *Unless* while undergoing treatment for breast cancer, readings of the novel often take into account her comments about the impact of cancer on the writing of this final work. Shields explained that the emphasis on suffering and loss in *Unless* allowed her to describe, in an indirect manner, the shock, sadness, and grief she experienced during her diagnosis and treatment. In an interview with Maria Russo, Shields said that she "didn't feel that just because it would be my last book, it had to be a 'big' book." Russo comments that Shields "also quickly jettisoned the idea of making it about breast cancer — an 'illness' book. Yet she wanted the book to

approach, in some way, the situation in which she found herself . . . when her placid, fortunate life cleaved into a 'before' and an 'after'" (F34).[4] In speaking about her illness, Shields said she felt "comforted that at least it wasn't happening to one of her daughters" (Ellen). The much worse imaginary suffering and loss of a daughter made the actual suffering and loss of self more manageable, while simultaneously providing the "cleaved" life required by the novel. *Unless* also delves into the concept of "goodness," which Shields said she was "inundated with" during her illness (Johnston 51).[5] In the novel, the abstract quality of goodness is grounded in the concrete and raised to the "exceptional" (51), the word Shields applied to the type of goodness that was "flowing toward [her] in [her] illness" (51).

Despite my reluctance to consider biographical details, I find myself strongly drawn to them in my reading of *Unless,* prompted to some extent by the author. Although it is not an autobiographical or "illness" novel, *Unless* undergoes a powerful expansion rather than a reduction when the conditions of its composition are taken into account. The reader's awareness of the author's imaginary transfer of suffering to a daughter in order to create a more unbearable situation than the one that actually existed, accompanied by the knowledge of the overwhelming goodness that surrounded the author during the writing process, profoundly grounds the text's experiential affect. And yet the emotions conveyed by the novel are controlled and almost detached — the result of an observed and examined life. Shields's depiction of a life "cleaved" into a "before" and an "after" is at first glance Reta's life, but this obviously applies to Norah as well. Such a cleaving is, however, tragically irrelevant to the "young Muslim woman," whose life is restricted to the period of "before." Shields, I believe, wants the reader to wrestle with the lack of attention given to the absence of an "after" for the "young Muslim woman."

When Reta relates the details of Norah's intervention, she concentrates on the melting of the recently purchased dish rack and its plastic bag, cheap and even pathetic items of domestic drudgery and consumerism that injure Norah in the destruction that burns the "other" woman into unrecognizable pieces. The adhesion of the burning plastic to Norah's hands and the subsequent sinking of her fingers into the "other" woman's melting skin constitute a graphic and warlike image of horrific connection at the level of human flesh — flesh that is specifically

identified as domestic and female. In the context of the warlike imagery, the appearance of the woman as "other" compared with Norah is similar to the otherness of soldiers or combatants "marked" through dress or uniform. But it is, of course, the interpretation of those distanced from the event that "others" the unknown woman; the characters and reader have no way of knowing what Norah is thinking and feeling when her fingers sink into the melting skin. The emphasis on the surface of the body evokes Michel Serres's concept of the skin as a "milieu," explained and translated by Steven Connor in *The Book of Skin* as "a place of minglings, a mingling of places" (26).[6] As Connor points out, "Serres rejects the predominating metaphor of the skin as a surface, membrane or interface," viewing it instead as "an entire environment" (28). In his discussion of how the skin functions with respect to the body, Serres claims, "Je n'aime pas dire milieu pour le lieu où mon corps habite, je préfère dire que les choses se mêlent entre elles et que je ne fais pas exception à cela, je me mélange au monde qui se mélange à moi. La peau intervient entre plusieurs choses du monde et les fait se mêler." For Serres, "Contingence veut dire tangence commune: monde et corps se coupent en elle, en elle se caressent" (*Les cinq sens* 82).[7] The penetration of the "other" woman's body by Norah's fingers transforms the touch into a merging; the violent and unexpected breaking of the skin's surface allows Norah to "feel" the "other" world, which falls apart at her touch even as it burns her. In her study of skin, Claudia Benthien explains how "the female skin is understood as a concealing veil" (86) and the female body as a vessel or container (89). Both veil and container are violated and shattered in this incident. The extreme conditions of the meeting suggest the difficulty of Norah "mingling" with "the things of the world" (Serres's "plusieurs choses du monde") that fall outside her own realm, despite her desire to experience the unfamiliar. Her vague feeling that she needs to explore tides, continents, and existence (128-29) is shockingly solidified and particularized in the reaching out of her hand to the "young Muslim woman."

Norah's gloved hands, which hide the burns, sores, scars, and rashes that mark her skin, draw attention to that skin as the mediator between her body and the world. According to Connor, "the most important feature of skin markings is that they are both mute and blatant" in the sense that they "'speak' while pretending to be mute" and "blurt out what the tongue might prefer to keep decently veiled"

(96). Connor explains that the word *blatant* "has come to be used of an offence or enormity that flames into view, flaunting itself glaringly to vision without need of words, but also, and more importantly, without confessing itself in words" (96). Norah hides the signs of her act in her gloves, and that allows her to temporarily retain her markings as private and mute, masking their blatant qualities. The "self-immolation" of the "young Muslim woman," on the other hand, is a public "enormity" of the blatancy described by Connor. When revealed, Norah's markings uncover some of her story; however, the blatant narrative of the "other" woman remains mute, in part because her lack of skin and body provides no clues but also because there is a lack of public will to discover and know.[8] The mingling of the women's skins initiates the shocking meeting of many different worlds, including those of private and public, domestic and political, and "western" and "eastern." The simplistic distinction of static identities such as "Orient" and "Occident" is not articulated by the characters, but it is implied in the reactions of Reta and her family and friends. They seem unaware of the possibility that "human reality is constantly being made and unmade, and that anything like a stable essence is constantly under threat" (Said 333). Although the marks on Norah's skin supposedly tell a story, she, like the "other" woman, is silent. After her intervention, Norah's voice disappears from the novel. None of the words she apparently utters appear on the page; her words are unknown to the reader.

The gloves provide clues about Norah even as they hide evidence. Comments about Norah's hands concentrate on their size and vulnerability, rendering her childlike. For example, Tessa, who "discovers" Norah, remembers that she was "wearing a pair of old gardening gloves, far too big for her small hands" (41). Reta's heart is gladdened during cold weather to see that Norah is wearing "warm mittens" (26). Eventually, Reta glimpses the "scabs . . . on Norah's wrists . . . in that half inch between her mittens and her coat sleeve" (261). Physician Tom Winters, Norah's father, diagnoses chilblains, eliminating Reta's fear of razor blades, and he leaves cortisone cream on the pavement along with "a huge pair of sheepskin gloves that will come up to her elbows if she has the sense to put them on" (262-63). The attempt to protect and heal Norah involves the provision of a buffer between the skin of her hands and "the things of the world." For Serres, the hand is "not an organ, it is a faculty, a capacity for doing," in the sense that "we live by bare

hands" (*Genesis* 34).[9] Connor writes that, according to Serres, "the hand is not a mere part of the body; rather it represents the body as such, like a homunculus; for it is the body's capacity to reach out beyond itself, as well as transformingly towards itself." Connor concludes that "the hand is the body's possibility" (140), "an alternative body, a second skin . . . the body reshaped" (141). Norah's outstretched hands, even though marked and wounded, are whole and functional and thus contrast with the severed hands of the "other" woman. Although the impulse of Tom and Reta to salve, heal, and protect Norah's damaged hands and wrists is heart-wrenchingly understandable, healing these markings facilitates the vanishing of the hands, skin, and body of the unidentifiable woman. Unlike Reta and Danielle Westerman, who, according to Reta, reach "out blindly with a grasping hand but not knowing how to ask for what we don't even know we want" (98), Norah knows how to hold out an open hand. The gloves prevent the naked and bare "living by the hands" referred to by Serres, but the reaching out is steady and calm rather than blind and grasping. The signs and clues provided by Shields for the reader must be touched and caressed as the skin touches and caresses the things of the world. As Hilde Staels remarks, "Carol Shields presumably wishes to make clear that there is more to the surface structure of her text(s) than meets the eye, and that a careful reading process is as much an exerting creative act as artistic creation" (130).

The tentative and theoretical nature of the conversation among Reta and her friends in the Orange Blossom Tea Room is disturbingly distanced from the event itself. They discuss the "self-immolation" of the "young Muslim woman" before its connection to Norah is known, and like the description of the event itself when it is finally disclosed, their discussion touches on and then dismisses questions about the woman's identity:

> "She was a Saudi woman, wearing one of those big black veil things. Self-immolation."
>
> "Was she a Saudi? Was that established?"
>
> "A Muslim woman anyway. In traditional dress. They never found out who she was."
>
> "A chador, isn't it?" Annette supplied. "The veil."
>
> "Or a burka." (117-18)

The inability of the Orangetown women to be sure about the name of "those big black veil things" emphasizes their insularity and their

exclusion of those outside their own world. When Reta tells Norah that "the world often seems to be withholding something from us" (131), she expresses a puzzled concern about the isolation imposed on women, but she does not consider her own acts of exclusion. Rather than falling apart in the face of such perceived withholding, or succumbing to it, as Danielle Westerman's theory and Reta's interpretation of Norah's actions imply, Norah actually moves into parts of the world that are not readily accessible to her. Her acts serve as forays into the unknown rather than retreats from the familiar. In this sense, she is trying on the role of street person in order "to place [her] own stories beside those of others: to compare, weigh, judge, forgive, and to find an angle of vision that renews [her] image of where [she is] in the world" (Shields, "Narrative" 21). Or, more bravely, she attempts to disturb, shake up, and alter that vision. Has Norah "dropped out" (130) of the University of Toronto and her family, or has she opted in elsewhere? Reta tries different labels in her attempt to understand, diagnose, and categorize Norah. Reta describes her as a "vagabond" (167), "lost" (133), "dropped out" (165), and an "outcast" (215); all these labels stress her daughter's absence from home. Norah's performance of homelessness collides in a jarring manner with the settled permanency of Orangetown and stresses her vagrancy in the face of the supposed stability of her upbringing and family.[10] In her analysis of *Unless*, Christiane Struth sees the abandoned or self-abandoned woman as one who "threatens the continuation of central norms and values in a given society" (207); according to Struth, She takes on what Linda Hutcheon calls the ex-centric's power "to change the perspective of the centre" (103). Self-abandoned Norah can be seen as wielding such power. Struth correctly questions whether Norah is in fact passive and withdrawn, as others claim.

Norah moves and is moved to go beyond the familiarity of her childhood and adolescence. Her actions are not necessarily submissive or despairing; they are so only when judged from the "norm" of the centre. John Mullan argues that Norah's actions constitute an "inexplicable withdrawal from family, society, even life itself" ("Writing"), but as she withdraws from one lifestyle, she enters another to the extent of sharing her earnings with the street community. Reta sees Norah in her role as street person as someone who "embodies invisibility" (12). But Norah is anything but invisible; she functions more as an affront than an absence to those who walk by and cannot make her vanish, despite

their efforts. Norah ventures where Reta Winters, Danielle Westerman, and others have not gone. Of her own childhood and adolescence in Oak Park, Illinois, Shields said, "there wasn't enough. It was all very good but it wasn't enough" (Ellen), and she retained a "critical awareness of that world's limitations" (Eden 4), which she applies here to Orangetown. Maria Russo comments that "Shields puts Reta into an unhappy, bewildering situation" (F34), and the same can be said of Reta with respect to Norah. The unhappiness and bewilderment are experienced by those from Orangetown who watch and think about Norah in Toronto rather than by Norah herself, whose emotions and thoughts are unknown. Furthermore, the street people who benefit from Norah's actions are presumably not bewildered by those actions. Reta admits her own projections and construction of Norah when she confesses: "I don't dare get close enough to see her face clearly, but what I imagine is a passive despair, a mingling of contempt and indifference" (179). Staels disagrees with Reta's assumption that Norah has fallen apart; Staels bases her argument on Reta's projection of herself onto Norah as she attempts to interpret what has happened. Focusing on the novel's "*mise en abyme* structure," her argument explores "the characters' doubling or projecting" (127). Staels also argues that Reta "wrongly 'translates' her daughter's ecstatic utterances in terms of her own frustration" rather than seeing that "this ecstasy is the other side of despair and terror" (129). This argument persuasively rejects Reta's interpretations of her daughter's actions but agrees with the theory proposed by Tom, who maintains that Norah experienced something terrible and that, as a result, "she is suffering post-traumatic shock" (263). Tom's theory appears to be corroborated when the traumatic event is finally uncovered. What is missing, however, is the voice of Norah herself, which would supposedly provide more than theoretical possibilities imposed from the outside with limited information. Nobody's theory, not even Tom's, is inclusive enough when the gaping silences of Norah and the "young Muslim woman" are taken into account.

Without spoken words from Norah, nothing can be assumed, no matter how clear the situation looks when some of the gaps are filled in. Norah does not actually "answer, 'Yes'" (Stovel 69) to Reta when she wakes up in her bedroom in Orangetown; rather, "her mouth made the shape of a word: 'Yes.'" (305), providing the form but not the substance of language. Norah's words, alluded to in the final paragraph

of the novel (320-21), are not present on the page and do not exist in any form. Her words are merely implied through the thoughts of Reta, who may be continuing to persuade herself by putting words in Norah's mouth and ideas in Norah's head. There is no way of knowing if Norah has actually spoken at all. A great deal about Norah is unknown, and what is known is conveyed through Reta's point of view. Just as it is impossible to identify the "other" woman, so it is impossible to name and describe Norah's "affliction," if indeed it is an affliction at all. Unless the other person's point of view is known, there is no way to understand her actions. Roy introduces this crux as one of the problems posed by the novel: "Unless one person knows the details of another person's day-to-day struggles and life-changing events, she or he cannot understand that other person's life trajectory" (125).[11] As Edward Eden points out, Shields, in her essay "Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard," "clearly articulates the idea that it is impossible to know the Other, or even to know the self" (9). The absence of Norah's and the "other" woman's point of view is disturbing in a narrative in which everyone else — characters, readers, and critics — uses language to interpret and theorize the two women's actions. Staels, for example, claims that Norah is "unable to feel for others" (127), but there is no way of knowing this. There is no place to go but to Norah's sign and begging bowl — preferably with receptiveness to all possibilities and scepticism about theories.

Norah's response to the burning woman may assert itself as a feminist act of heroism, but it develops into much more than this. Her modelling of goodness from the position of a street person takes her far outside her middle-class Toronto 905 region. Norah is both a victim and witness of the "other" woman's act; she refuses passivity or spectatorship as she responds ("without thinking," according to Reta's assessment (315), but how does Reta know?) in order to perform the risky and complex role of sympathizer and potential saviour. Her first act outside Honest Ed's occurs at the intersection of circumstance and choice. Norah's second act as a street person might be the result of post-traumatic stress disorder, but it could also be a deliberate choice to be someone other than the Norah Winters known to her family, friends, and community. As act two of two acts, whether through trauma or choice, Norah sitting on the pavement is clearly both the result of and response to the earlier act that shook her out of the complacency of what had been, up to that point,

a very ordinary life. Having been dissatisfied with the mediocrity of her existence for some time, she is open to other possibilities and ready to be shocked into change. Norah begging on the street, apparently unaware of the world (according to the various theories that abound), is unaware of the world only as it is understood by those theorists. In terms of a different world, a larger world, or other worlds, Norah could be much more aware than she ever was as a resident of Orangetown or as a student at the University of Toronto.

Shields related how the birth of her first child woke her up from complacency: "This state of being awake spread to the rest of my life and, I believe, made me more alert, more perceptive, more aware of the shades of feeling, of the large and small collisions of personality. I felt, I suppose, that I was breathing with the whole of my lung capacity for the first time" (Jackson 7). Another moment of waking up, in this case "to politics, to feminism, to writing," occurred when her family was grown (Ellen), and still another awakening took place when Shields was diagnosed with cancer. "Cancer makes one serious, and awake," she said (Johnston 49). Christl Verduyn has noted that "the notion of being awake to the world is a theme that recurs in Shields's writing" (69) and "is a topic worth exploring further" (76n26). It appears that the shock experienced by Norah has put her to sleep rather than invigorated her, but Norah's sleeping and waking require careful attention. As she wakes up to the Orangetown world, certain parts of her are numbed, pushed aside, or repressed — most significantly, her encounter with the "young Muslim woman," who is in danger of being reduced to a memory or an "episode."

The moment of connection between Norah and the "young Muslim woman" has ramifications far beyond the singular event and its superficial treatment by Norah's family and society. The hurried desire of everyone but Norah to move beyond the incident and vanish the "other" woman in the process reveals a fear of what could be exposed if the event were probed instead of forgotten. Reta is relieved to return to "normalcy," particularly insofar as her family is concerned, but Norah's experience and the introduction of "goodness" have disrupted all that was considered "normal." The conversation in the Orange Blossom Tea Room about how to respond to global disasters and need hinges on the question, "Did we transform our shock into goodness?" (117). The question separates the intellectual interest of the tea room from the acts

performed by Norah on the pavement of the city. Norah's position on the Toronto street corner is not necessarily passive. Nor is she giving up on a world that does not open itself to her. Instead she tries on the world from a different perspective than the one into which she was born, and, in the process, enlarges what she can reach, touch, and experience from where she sits. Struth sees Norah's position as "an act of commemoration" (214), arguing that her "abandonment is not caused by a realization of her own speechlessness but by that of other women" and that she is thus acquainted with "the largely anonymous and collective experiences of female oppression and marginalization" (215). Struth also addresses Shields's interest in the intersection of private and public by arguing that "what Shields aims at is not only the incorporation of female achievements into public discourse but also the integration of female 'traumatic' experiences" (215). However, Struth's concentration on the acts as strictly feminist detracts from their participation in a more inclusive social and human justice. Although Struth's analysis is limited by her dependence on Reta's interpretations, her view of Norah as one who attempts to promote the commemoration and inscription of an event recognizes Norah's agency and counteracts Reta's view that Norah has withdrawn. In Struth's analysis, the event and the memory are not things to recover from or move beyond; they must be embraced rather than buried. Struth interprets Reta's offer to Norah — "We'll remember it for you" (316) — as the family taking on the individual memory in order to support Norah through the group's collective memory (Struth 215). But Struth's faith in the ability of Reta and her family to embrace this event is overly optimistic. Reta's main motivation in offering a collective memory is more likely based on the naive hope that if others take on the burden, Norah will be normalized and healed. The push to heal Norah means that the "other" woman risks not only a lack of commemoration but also continued erasure in a narrative that hinges on her but allows her only a secondary and subservient role with Norah as the centralized norm

In her essay "Institutional Genealogies in the Global Net of Fundamentalisms, Families, and Fantasies," Julia Emberley advises a move beyond the "postmodern dilemma" through a study of "current notions of the 'familial'" (157) and specifically the "global competitive discourse on the family" (154). Norah Winters takes up this call by continuing beyond her parents' absent marriage, already slightly out-

side the norm, to consider other familial formations, such as those of the unknown woman and the "families" of the Promise Hostel and the Toronto street. If, as Shields suggested, "there is a way in which every novel is about finding this place we call home" (Wachtel 167), then Norah is expanding the parameters of family and home by attempting relationships with "'every little trail running off every hidden dirt road branching off from every major trade route'" (129). Exchanging filial bonds for the looser bonds of affiliation, Norah is exploring her place not only in a different family but also in a less rigid system of familial denotation. Shifting away from the "grand enlightenment project of social change," entails, according to Emberley, "moving beyond incredulity and bewilderment in the struggle for social change by refusing to locate ourselves in fixed binary oppositions, and, instead, working toward establishing strategically mobile social positions across particular geopolitical and economic contexts." Challenging binary oppositions and hierarchies includes, says Emberley, coming up with innovative ways of thinking "across the division between public and domestic or private spheres" (157). By becoming the one in need, middle-class Norah publicizes and reverses the roles of giver and recipient. She also reverses the formula of tithing by giving away nine-tenths of what she "earns" and keeping one-tenth for herself.

In these intensely concentrated private/public moments in the novel — the intervention with the burning woman and begging on the street — Carol Shields provides a source for connections by focusing on female, familial, domestic, and communal conditions. The coming together of Norah and the "other" woman draws attention to the Shieldsian gap or space described by Ellen Levy as "both infinitesimal and infinite . . . the chaotic but productive chasms from which we extract meaning and order" on "the threshold that carries us between knowledge and innocence, ephemera and substance" (200). Norah riskily disturbs the liminal space, but in the process she provides no extraction of meaning and no "clear answers to the question of 'goodness'" (Tuhkunen 112). Shields said of *Unless,* "I wanted to address the inequalities between men and women that I think are central to all our problems in the world — but I didn't feel I had to solve them" (Russo F35). Mullan claims that "the novel ends with a solution," but that the "dénouement is awkward" ("Untying"). There is, however, no solution or dénouement. Shields works with malleable and unarticulated emo-

tions rather than intellectually recognizable systems of morality or what Emberley identifies as "theistic" "tropes of compassion and empathy" (169). The shock of the violent and yet intimate connection between Norah and the burning woman challenges grand humanistic schemes of destruction and repair based on hierarchical partnerships of victim and saviour, hero and martyr that are themselves based on chronologies of cause and effect, beginnings and conclusions.

Burning flesh brings together the bodies of two different women, and the act eventually brings together a mother and a daughter. Like Norah, Reta becomes "other" in the sense that, as a writer, she "wears" her character "Alicia's skin" (111), but she also becomes "other" when she inhabits her daughter: "For a minute I was Norah. Norah the anchorite, Norah the outcast" (215). Obviously, Norah can only be judged as an outcast if a centralized norm is deemed to exist. For this brief moment, Reta moves from the perceived centre to the margin Norah inhabits, just as Norah once moved to the margin of the burning woman. Staels points out that Reta is afraid of Norah because she is threatening as an outcast, an "other," a double (128). This fear definitely directs Reta's actions, so the fact that she identifies as Norah, even momentarily, is significant because it takes place in the face of her resistance. Through Norah, Reta enters one of those worlds outside her own which she has always perceived as being withheld from her, and she is thereby provided with the fleeting realization that her positioning of herself as centre and norm is the source of barriers that separate and withhold. The fluidity of Norah's identity initiates more liquid family dynamics that separate all of the family members from the complacency they had taken for granted — a complacency that depended on the maintenance of barriers. Through Norah's disregard of barriers in her rush "forward to stifle the flames" (315), Reta is connected to the pieces of the burning woman and thus to suffering. She cannot undo that connection, but she finds the impulse to heal Norah more compelling than the call to respond to *all* of the fragments of the event. The most devastating fragments are the literal fragments of the "other" woman's body.

Danielle Westerman's emphasis on the powerless female position, taken up by Reta, is the source *and* symptom of systemic problems in a society based on adversarial oppositions. What seems to concern Shields here is the type of thinking that continues to depend on competitive exclusivity. Roy discusses Reta's belief that she is "rewriting the modern-

ist tradition" (127), which "has set the individual, the conflicted self, up against the world" (*Unless* 121). Roy also examines Reta's resistance of demands for "'the universal' — a universal that, of course, encodes primarily male experience" (129). Goodness itself has been devalued in such universal narratives, and, even worse, it has been manipulated in order to control and silence those who practice it. *Unless* foregrounds "goodness" over "greatness" in a desire for a world that is based on connection and community rather than competition and individual heroism. The solution is not for goodness to compete with or replace greatness in a binary either/or paradigm or for goodness to be incorporated into the standard of greatness, which by definition depends on the measurability of time, size, number, importance, or significance.[12] Instead, goodness, in its most personal version and in its moral and collective sense of "the good," must be highlighted and valued. Shields is concerned with "goodness" as it manifests itself in relationships between people; such goodness is defined as "kindly feeling; kindness, generosity, clemency; the manifestation of this" (def 2a, *OED online*). Yi-Fu Tuan's 2008 study *Human Goodness* explores the nature of such goodness by examining the intimacy of "individuals and individual acts" (xi). He notes that "good people . . . are alike with their unconcern with the self, not only the physical self (the body), which they are willing to endanger or sacrifice for a cause, but also the image of self" (25). Tuan also argues that those who practice goodness are "the least infected by the deadly virus of 'us' and 'them'" (199). Although Norah may not have deliberately chosen to perform a good act, her intervention in the self-immolation of the "young Muslim woman" fulfills many of the characteristics of such an act as identified by Tuan: it displays an "openness to the world," a "readiness to respond without prejudice" (203), and offers a "generosity to total strangers" (211). Judith Jarvis Thomson's discussion of goodness considers "injustice and miserliness" as "ways of being bad" and "justice and generosity" as "ways of being good" (72). Norah's initial and continued acts on the Toronto pavement partake of this generosity and pursue the justice that characterizes goodness, according to Tuan and Thomson. What distresses Norah's family and friends are precisely these markers of goodness — her lack of egocentric identity and her crossing of numerous barriers separating us from them.

Goodness is not passive by nature, but has been bullied into this position. Stovel remarks that "goodness versus greatness raises the issue

of morality versus power" (63). Greatness and power are more easily identified and recognized than morality and goodness. In Shields's and Reta's novels, goodness is forced to manifest itself perversely in attitudes of self-sacrifice embodied by female characters, including the burning woman (although it is important to remember that the woman's motivation is uncertain). The phenomenon of goodness, and the fact that it does not simply disappear in the face of greatness but continues to make its presence known, proves its resilience. But unless competitive and exclusionary binary oppositions based on gender are changed, the goodness taken up by Norah and the goodness that Carol Shields said was "flowing toward [her] in [her] illness" and "kept [her] alive" (Johnston 51) will continue to be disregarded because society valorizes measurable, tougher, and more masculine greatness. Significantly, Reta first uses the word *virtue* as an alternative to *goodness* while conversing with physicist Colin Glass about the theory of relativity. Reta asks Colin if it isn't possible "to think that goodness, or virtue if you like, could be a wave or particle of energy." Her qualifier "if you like" reflects flexibility in her understanding that Colin may be uncomfortable with the softer word *goodness* and prefer the more stringent *virtue*. Colin's arrogant response, "No, it is not possible" (22), not only cuts off conversation but also emphasizes his and others' limited views and understanding of the rich possibilities of goodness.

When asked whether she believed in God, Shields answered, "No. Human goodness is the only thing I believe in"; "this sense of goodness is part of our human conversation — the biggest part of it" (Johnston 51). The "divisiveness of human society" stressed by "the realistic tradition" has, according to Shields, "shrugged at that rich, potent, endlessly replenished cement that binds us together" ("Narrative" 34). Such divisiveness has also fed on argument rather than conversation. In "Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard," Shields muses about connection:

> The notion of conflict in fictional narrative may also need reassessment. We may find that conflict is centred not in the fibre of human arrangements but in the interstices of human thought. How well or how poorly can we connect with another human consciousness? "Only connect," E.M. Forster said, but did he mean in life or in literature? It might be a project for the narratives of the next millennium, asking why the rub of disunity strikes larger sparks

> than the reward of accommodation, and how we've come to record what separates us rather than what brings us together. (33)

In *Unless*, Shields uses Norah's acts to draw attention to "that rich, potent, endlessly replenished cement that binds us together" ("Narrative" 34). Christopher Lehmann-Haupt of the *New York Times* misquotes Carol Shields when he refers to her comments about goodness. He writes that Shields said that "goodness is part of our human condition — the biggest part of it" (C11), but of course Shields said that it was part of our human *conversation* not condition (Johnston 51). It is the back and forth, the give and take of the all-important conversation that is central to Shields's view of the world. Shields said that having "lots of conversations with lots of people" was "very important — connecting and having conversations, that's a huge part of my life" (Wachtel 179). A good way to remember Carol Shields is by concentrating on fluid conversations rather than static conditions. When the reader converses with the fragmented Norah and fragments of the "other" woman, there is a fluidity that expands beyond the limited views of the characters and the feminist stance insisted on by Reta. Shields is fervently interested in inequalities between men and women, but the silences and gaps in *Unless*, although grounded in women's lives, resonate beyond specifically feminist concerns as they engage in conversation with the generosity and goodness of the human spirit.

Notes

[1] Reta provides a sampling of these words: "*therefore*, *else*, *other*, *also*, *thereof*, *theretofore*, *instead*, *otherwise*, *despite*, *already*, and *not yet"* (313). Shields said to Eleanor Wachtel that these little words "situate us in space, they situate us in a narrative, they call upon other parts of the language. I think they should be kept in a little box all by themselves over in a corner of the tool box, and when you need one of them, you just reach for it" (Wachtel 149).

[2] Shields said, "I guess I've always believed that much of the world goes on in silence, is never verbalized, is never written down; it's a commonality that we all know and agree upon, and we know we know it" (Wachtel 176).

[3] The epigraph to *Orientalism* from Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* is "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Said xiii).

[4] Shields explained to Ann Downsett Johnston that she got off "on the wrong foot" when she actually began the book by "writing about breast cancer" (49). Johnston comments that "cancer is the thread Shields dropped in writing this novel, one she replaced with the estrangement of Norah" (50). Nora Foster Stovel concentrates on the physicality of the bodily loss caused by breast cancer when she says that Shields "transformed her grief over

the loss of her breast into mourning for a lost child" and that *Unless* as "a millennial novel, a study of before and after tragedy" is "a tragedy as real to Reta as the loss of her breast to Shields" (58). Wendy Roy stresses sadness, viewing the process as one of translation rather than transformation; Shields, she says, "translated her unhappiness about her experience with breast cancer into Reta's sorrow about her daughter (which Reta in turn translates into Alicia's unhappiness regarding her relationship)" (130).

[5] See Wachtel 153-56 for Shields and Wachtel's conversation about goodness.

[6] Connor's work drew my attention to Serres's theories. Connor states in his "Note on Editions and Translations" that "where no indication of translation is given, translations are my own" (6), which is the case with Connor's use of Serres's *Les cinq sens* and *Genèse (Genesis).* To facilitate accessibility I have used some of Connor's eloquent and perceptive translations and paraphrases but have also consulted Serres's original work in French in the case of *Les cinq sens* and in an English translation in the case of *Genèse.*

[7] In *The Book of Skin*, Connor provides the following translation of these passages from Serres's *Les cinq sens*: "I do not like to speak of the place where my body exists as a milieu, preferring rather to say that things mingle among themselves, and that I am no exception to this, that I mingle with the world which mingles itself in me. The skin intervenes in the things of the world and brings about their mingling" (29). "Contingency means mutual touching: world and body meet and caress in the skin" (28).

[8] Christiane Struth discusses the media's indifference to the event (215).

[9] Nicki Pardo's photograph of the hands on the Random House Canadian editions stresses the openness and receptivity of bare hands. Fourth Estate editions (HarperCollins) in the UK and the USA feature figures of a girl on their covers.

[10] In Zygmunt Bauman's terms, Norah's movement is seen by Reta as the discontented movement of the vagabond or vagrant, as opposed to the more content nomad, pilgrim, or tourist. See Bauman's "Tourists and Vagabonds," and "An Overview: The End is the Beginning".

[11] Roy goes on to say that the more fundamental problem posed by the book is "Unless women are perceived of as fully human, they will continue to be forced to choose a life of what one of the characters in the novel describes as 'goodness but not greatness' (115)" (126). For me the problem is lodged in the denigration of goodness, which renders it being perceived as less than or inferior to greatness.

[12] The use of the term *greatness* in this novel denotes a quality that can be measured and proven as in "the attribute of being great in size, extent or degree" (def 2, *OED online*).

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.*" *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays.* New York: First Anchor, 1988. 1-20.

Bauman, Zygmunt. "An Overview: In the End is the Beginning." *Postmodern Ethics.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1993. 223-50.

—. "Tourists and Vagabonds." *Globalization: The Human Consequences.* New York: Columbia UP, 1998. 77-102.

Benthien, Claudia. *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and the World.* Trans. Thomas Dunlap. New York: Columbia UP, 2002.

Connor, Steven. *The Book of Skin*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004.

Dvořák, Marta, and Manina Jones, eds. *Carol Shields and the Extra-Ordinary*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2007.

Eden, Edward. "Introduction." *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction.* Eds. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003. 3-15.

Ellen, Barbara. "Human Shields." *Guardian.* 28 April 2002. 15 Dec. 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/apr/28fiction.carolshields>.

Emberley, Julia. "Institutional Geneologies in the Global Net of Fundamentalisms, Families, and Fantasies." *Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature*. Ed. Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2007. 153-72.

Gowdy, Barbara. *Helpless.* Toronto: Harper, 2008.

Grossman, Lev. "Turning over the last page." *Time* 27 May 2002: 61.

Hughes, Lesley. "The Shields Diaries." *Chatelaine* April 1996: 110-15 and 138.

Hutcheon, Linda. *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988.

Jackson, Jennifer. "'Soft-Spoken Subversive:' Doing What She Loves." *Kingston Whig-Standard.* 17 March 2001: 7.

Johnston, Ann Dowsett. "Her Time to Roar." *Maclean's* 15 Apr. 2002: 49-51.

Lehmann-Haupt, Christopher. "Carol Shields Dies at 68; Wrote *The Stone Diaries*." *New York Times*. 18 July 2003: C11.

Levy, Ellen. "'Artefact Out of Absence': Reflection and Convergence in the Fiction of Carol Shields." Dvořák and Jones 191-204.

Lockerbie, Catherine. "For Goodness' Sake." *New York Times*. 12 May 2002: H8.

Mullan, John. "Untying the Knot." *Guardian.* 12 July 2003. 15 Dec. 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/jul/12/carolshields>.

—. "Writing about a Writer Writing." *Guardian*. 5 July 2003. 15 Dec. 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/jul/05/carolshields>.

Oxford English Dictionary Online (*OED*). Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. <http://www.oed.com/>.

Roy, Wendy. "*Unless* the World Changes: Carol Shields on Women's Silencing in Contemporary Culture." *Carol Shields: The Arts of a Writing Life*. Ed. Neil K. Besner. Winnipeg: *Prairie Fire*, 2003. 125-32.

Russo, Maria. "Final Chapter." *New York Times Magazine.* 14 Apr. 2002: F32-35.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism.* 1978. 25th Anniversary Edition. New York: Vintage, 2003.

Serres, Michel. *Les cinq sens*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1985.

—. *Genesis*. Trans. Geneviève James and James Nielson. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995.

Shields, Carol. "Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard." *Carol Shields*: *Narrative Hunger and the Possibilities of Fiction.* Ed. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003. 19-36.

—. *Unless*. Toronto: Random, 2002.

Staels, Hilde. "Verbalisation of Loss in Carol Shields'; *The Stone Diaries* and *Unless.*" *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien*. 24.2 (2004): 118-31.

Stovel, Nora Foster. "'Because She's a Woman': Myth and Metafiction in Carol Shields's *Unless.*" *English Studies in Canada.* 32.4 (2006): 51-73.

Struth, Christiane. "Speaking From the Margins: Abandoned Women and Magic(al) Realism in Carol Shields's *Various Miracles* and *Unless. Ahornblätter: Marburger Beiträge zur Kanada-Forschung.* 19 (2007): 207-31.

Thomson, Judith Jarvis. *Goodness and Advice.* Ed. Amy Gutmann. Commentators Philip Fisher, Martha C. Nussbaum, J.B. Schneewind, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Human Goodness.* Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2008.

Tuhkunen, Taïna. "Carol Shields's *The Republic of Love*, or How to Ravish a Genre." Dvořák and Jones. 97-114.

Verduyn, Christl. "(Es)Saying It Her Way: Carol Shields as Essayist." Dvořák and Jones. 59-79.

Wachtel, Eleanor. "Ideas of Goodness." *Random Illuminations: Conversations with Carol Shields: .* Fredericton: Goose Lane, 2007. 147-80.

Whyte, Kenneth. "Barbara Gowdy Talks to Kenneth Whyte About the Line Between Sexualizing Children and Pedophilia, and Her New Book *Helpless*." *Maclean's.* 3 May 2007: 16-18.