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"Loved, invented and endured": Jogging along with Language in Grace Paley's Short Stories

Sylvie Bauer

- 1 A rapid survey of the titles of Grace Paley's short stories¹ is both highly unsettling and uncannily familiar for they may well be illustrations of the "two ears" the author describes in her foreword to the *Collected Stories*: "two ears, one for literature, one for home, are useful for writers" (xiv). The "little disturbances" of everyday life stand out as what one of the ears is listening to; and some of Paley's titles misleadingly encourage the reader to believe that he/she will be on familiar ground. Family life is conjured up in the mention of "pale pink roasts," evocative of meals taken together, of "mothers," "fathers," "playgrounds," "gardens" and "little girls." Yet, the tokens of home life take on a somewhat tragic dimension, displaying loss rather than cohesion, rupture rather than harmony, estrangement more than anything else. The mother is dead ("Mother" 335-37), the father is dying ("A Conversation with my Father" 237-43), "the little girl" was raped and murdered, the "northeast playground" (228) hosts "eleven unwed mothers on relief, only four of [whom are] whores" (228), and the "pale pink roast" (27) refers to the cannibalistic relationships between men and women. As for the garden ("In the Garden" 293-96), it is a place for grieving the absence of two abducted little girls, evocative of the paralysis of a world that cannot be changed, ruled as it is by greed, disease and misplaced hope. Other titles seem to draw the reader toward the other "ear," sometimes because they openly evoke other texts. "The Long-Distance Runner" (242-68), for example, brings to mind Alan Sillitoe's 1959 story, "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner," both in its truncated title which highlights the character's loneliness, and in the central image. Sometimes, they just hint at the very stuff literature is made of, as suggested by the recurrence of the term "story" in the table of contents.² On the whole, the self-reflexive gesture of the titles and the metafictional hints tend to leave the reader off-balance, unsure as he/she is of the direct connection between these titles and the stories themselves.

- 2 This being said, one cannot but acknowledge the artificiality of this attempt at identifying the "two ears" Paley mentions, first because they mingle into one single flow of voices, whether attributable to a specific character or not. But above all because the coexistence of apparently simple titles—just a word or a noun clause—and overtly more elaborate ones—whole sentences—gives the deceptive impression that the table of contents is in a way expository, a promise of the unfolding of what the titles announce. It is almost as though the reader were offered a sort of encyclopaedia of life turned into literature, the encyclopaedic aspect stemming from the use of deictics—"The Pale Pink Roast" (27-34), "The Loudest Voice" (35-41), "The Contest" (42-51), to give but a few examples. The literary ear is solicited by the attention to words, which are singled out in the titles and thus become matter to be shaped by Paley's art. For indeed, what those titles leave the reader with is a sense that language is what the stories are really about, a language both highly and oddly familiar. The sense of familiarity is not only conveyed by words that evoke the concerns that are part of everyday life: debts, wants, politics, friends, but also and mainly by the unusual way intimacy crops up. "Samuel" (199-202), "Lavinia: An Old Story" (307-11), "Ruthy and Edie" (337-45), "Zagrowsky Tells" (359-76) seem to open up glimpses at relationships with clearly designated protagonists: neighbors or relatives to whom, however, the reader is but elliptically introduced. In spite of the recurring characters (Faith, Mrs Raftery, Tonto, Richie) and the frequent first person narratives, the reader is left with a sense of watching things from the outside, of peeping at events from a distance, of intruding silently into a very noisy world from which he/she remains utterly alien though he/she may recognize some of its components.
- 3 Likewise, what keeps the reader at bay from an otherwise recognizable urban landscape is the impression of being led astray by certain words, as if their familiar meaning were being slightly shifted, slightly out of tune, as suggested for example by titles such as "Gloomy Tune," whose homophonic closeness to "Looney Tunes" also known as "Looney Toons" clearly evokes the Warner Bros cartoons, a world of madness and glee at odds with the adjective "gloomy" chosen by Paley. In other words, what happens in the very titles of Paley's stories is a circulation of meaning, a circulation akin to contamination in which words encapsulate a proliferation of sometimes contradictory meanings or, to put it differently, language is shown to be all but transparent, becoming, rather, a foreign tongue, as suggested by the title of yet another story: "In This Country, But in Another Language, My Aunt Refuses to Marry The Men Everyone Wants Her to" (357-58). This foreign language is not due so much to the fact that the stories are often sprinkled with foreign words as to the mixture between familiar words and the proliferation of meaning they create. The shifts, the misunderstandings, the loud voices preclude any form of *understanding* in the stories and emphasize instead the gap between words and the world. What prevails is a sense of rupture, as if the words were almost always parting words, as if the speakers and the listeners were always out of tune. Yet, language also appears as the only substance able to create "Dreamer[s] in a Dead Language" (273-92). So what seems to be at stake in Grace Paley's stories is the issue of shaping reality through a language which escapes speakers and readers alike, yet which both sides engage in with obstinate relish.

- 4 The first impression one gets when reading Paley's stories is one of cacophony and restlessness despite the apparent continuity and stability suggested by the recurring characters. It seems as though the narrators' quasi-monologues were attempts to grasp fleeting moments which, no sooner evoked, vanish into thin air. There are many time markers in Paley's text, which are often easily recognizable as when the Vietnam War is mentioned³ or when Faith's little boys become teenagers, then young adults in the course of the stories.⁴ Yet the fragmentary structure of the collection, and of the stories themselves, tends to disrupt all sense of temporal linearity. Or, to put it differently, the unfolding of time escapes the grasp of the protagonists, a little as when in Don DeLillo's novel, *The Body Artist*, the narrative voice observes that "Time seems to pass. The world happens, unrolling into moments [...]" (7). Paley's various protagonists seem caught in a paradoxical stillness, left with their loss and unable to "understand how time passes" ("Wants" 133).
- 5 The incessant movement at work in the texts is but a sign, a symptom maybe, of the transience of life, and the many vignettes offered to the reader are but reminders and remainders of loss, summed up, perhaps, in what Dolly, the narrator of "Distance," experiences: "Well, O.K. Farewell, certain years" (139). Similarly, in "The Pale Pink Roast," Peter "[dresses] quickly because he [is] obligated by the stories of his life to remind [Anna] of transience" (33). The title of Paley's first story, "Good Bye and Good Luck" (3-13), is emblematic of the movement of rupture and distance that characterizes her work. The fact that the collection opens on a gesture of farewell sets the tone, all the more so since the story itself covers the span of an adult's lifetime, the narrator, Rosie, addressing her niece, Lillie, and telling her about all her "lonesome years" (9), until right "before the end of the story" (13). The words "goodbye, good luck" punctuate the story, giving it a tempo and constituting its backbone. Rosie keeps leaving—her job, her mother, her lover, her niece—which results in a loneliness nonetheless countered by the fact that each parting is also a new beginning.
- 6 Words evoking separation abound in the stories, always linked with the sense of irretrievable moments whose very truthfulness is at times doubtful. Men, for example, keep disappearing, "[...] all of them, all, all, all, each single one of them is gone, far away in heart and body," states the Grandma in "A Woman, Young and Old" (17). They are, just like the children, "going, going, gone" ("The Pale Pink Roast" 30). This statement, pronounced by Peter, Anna's former husband, almost in the form of a nursery rhyme, encapsulates much of what the collection is about. The variations on the verb *go* figure both restlessness and inexorability, the gerund evoking urgency as well as movement, a mixture of comedy (or even cartoonish onomatopoeia) and tragedy. The past participle leaves the reader with nothing but a trace: what is gone is present only in the word that conveys its former presence, and which has become the mark of its very absence. Only the word remains, as the result of the process of "going" whose transformation into a state of fact reveals nothing but absence. All the protagonists—especially the women—are left with "mouth-watering memories of another more gourmet time" (16), with a language that tries to recapture those memories, or at least to revive them. It is no easy task and the multiplication of stories told by the different narrative voices creates a patchwork whose pieces may connect or not, as suggested by the recurring protagonists. Several texts tell the same story from different points of view: Ginny's ("Goodbye and Good Luck") and Mrs Raftery's ("Faith in a Tree"), for example. Far from reconstructing the past, which is what the narrators and the characters in most stories long for, the very

proliferation of bits and pieces of life creates a blurry effect and highlights the characters' lack of control over their own lives. More than anything else, the stories underline the inexorable passing of time, the idea that "change is a fact of God" ("Goodbye and Good Luck" 3), an almighty force men and women cannot master. While trying to re-connect with their lives through the process of memory, the characters fail to create links, as exemplified by the lack of communication and the antagonistic relationships to be found everywhere: children's games turn into violent fights in "A Subject of Childhood" (91-99); most of the texts are, to use Rosie's words, "deafening" ("Good Bye and Good Luck" 5) and, as a consequence, the characters "never listen to anyone else's ideas" ("Gloomy Tune" 165).

- 7 "Wants" displays the chance encounter of a woman and her former husband and the gap between their respective remembrances of things past. The two aspects mentioned earlier—the passing of time and the inability to connect—converge in this text. The two characters' encounter outside the library results in a somewhat absurd text, structured, so to speak, by ellipses and loose connections. As often in Paley's texts, what first strikes the reader is the mixture of past and present through a double process of compression and acceleration of time. The woman, who is also the narrator, "[does not] understand how time passes" (133): she is bringing back to the library books she has owed for eighteen years; she "[has] once been married for twenty-seven years" (133) and she "[sees] that the little sycamores the city had dreamily planted a couple of years before the kids were born [have] come that day to the prime of their lives" (135). Here the passing of time is made visible, but it all happens as in a dream ("dreamily"), as if the narrator/protagonist were but the sleepy witness of a process totally beyond her control. The result is a paradoxical timelessness in which years and seconds are one and the same, and time seems to be compressed in the evocation of the couple's memories—just as Cindy, the character in "An Irrevocable Diameter" (69-83) is described as compressing youth and old age: "All the exaggerated bones of childhood and old age were bedded down in a cozy consistency of girl" (71). Here, as in "Wants," past and future are condensed in an impossible "consistency" which bears no recognizable substance or shape.
- 8 In "Wants," the result of this blurring of past and present leads to exaggeration and aberration. Indeed, while the husband attributes the dissolution of their marriage to a mere detail (to his wife's not inviting the Bertrams to dinner), his wife's answer spans their whole life together: "That's possible, I said. But really, if you remember: first, my father was sick that Friday, then the children were born, then I had those Tuesday night meetings, then the war began. Then we didn't seem to know them anymore. But you're right, I should have had them to dinner" (133). Far from reconstructing any causality or chronology, the succession of family and social events the woman evokes, merely points to specific moments ("*that* Friday," "*the* war," "*those* Tuesday-night meetings") which, though they constitute the very texture of her life, fail to weave into any coherent pattern. Again, the use of deictics, while referring to identifiable and singularized occasions, also points to a gap between the narrator and what she recalls. As Faith observes in the second of the "Two Short Sad Stories from a Long and Happy Life," what prevails is a sense of being "discontinued" (96), which creates a distance akin to that perceptible between the characters. This discontinuity is foregrounded from the outset by the narrator's words: "I saw my *ex-husband* in the street" (133, emphasis mine). The prefix "ex" crosses out, so to speak, the relationship between the man and the woman, and functions as a trace of what was and no longer is. In other words "ex" acts like an ax

which figures, literally, on the page, what separates them. In most of Paley's stories in fact, the characters, whatever their degree of intimacy, remain strangers to one another or are bound to become strangers, as suggested by the last lines of "An Irrevocable Diameter" in which, the moment he marries Cindy, Charley declares: "She will be a marvelous woman in six or seven years. I wish her luck; by then we will be strangers" (83). Parting words again. In a way, the two stories seem to echo each other, as if "Wants" depicted the outcome of "An Irrevocable Diameter," the diameter placing the characters on the same plane or surface but as far as possible from one another with no chance of ever getting together again. Hence the unbridgeable gap between them and their speaking out of sync, the husband taking the words of his wife at face value, unable as he is to understand her. On their meeting, she greets him as follows: "Hello, my life." He replies: "What? What life? No life of mine" (133). The liminary "what?" acts like a disturbance in the man's life, as if he were troubled by the mere sound of his former wife's voice, unsure of what he has heard. Just as *his* "wants" focus on material belongings ("I wanted a sailboat, he said" [134]), his choice of the word "life" betrays his literal use of language. Likewise his question—"What life?"—by replacing a personal pronoun with an impersonal interrogative pronoun, cancels out all remembrance of their life in common. The man's language is frozen in a deadly correspondence between words and reality, while the woman's use of words ("Hello my life") is inclusive, all-embracing, at odds with the sense of negation provided by the man's statement. The word takes on another dimension and widens perspectives not only because it introduces a sense of connection, but also because it mixes different possible meanings into a single word, thereby asserting her own sense of identity and memory, and echoing the statement made by the female narrator of "A Conversation with My Father": "everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life" (237).

- 9 It is through words that the dreaming quality of the stories is achieved, and that the "open destiny of life" comes into being. What the confrontation between the two characters in "Wants" reveals is a sense of the circulation of words which stems from the intermingling of voices in the stories, from the interweaving of past and present, of here and then, as if talking were a driving force in a universe otherwise dominated by death. Even though "talk is cheap" (9) and "every day [is] noisy and full of experience" (38), there is talking going on, words filling the scriptural and sonorous space. While Shirley's booming voice ("The Loudest Voice" 35-41) is at first perceived as a nuisance in the neighborhood, it is nevertheless the very expression of her identity and what prompts life within and around her: "In the grave it will be quiet!" (36), retorts her father to whoever dares to complain. Dizzying as it is, her voice singles her out as a unique speaking subject, unlike the undifferentiated crowd of those willing to hush her: "In that place the whole street groans: Be quiet! Be quiet! But steals from the happy chorus of my inside self not a title or a jot" (35). Her "inside self" is protected from the outside because her voice opposes articulate language to the mere sound of these hostile "groans." In this case, however, *articulate* does not necessarily mean constructed speech, correct syntax and organized thought. What matters more is the "happy chorus" "reaching strictly for the sound barrier" ("A Woman, Young and Old" 15) toward pure language. Capable as she is to shift from trivial matters ("Campbell's Tomato Soup, Campbell's Vegetable Beef Soup, Campbell S-c-oth Broth" [35]), to fervent prayers or to her role in a Christmas play,

the little girl seems to epitomize all the voices in the collection, as well as all the voices that make the world a fertile, boundless place for life, thus ensuring the free circulation of language and meaning, and reaching asymptotically if not toward the truth, at least toward the stuff the real is made of.

- 10 Language circulates in the stories because of its very nature, as ineffable movement. Just as Faith, in "The Long-Distance Runner" (248-68), runs around her old neighborhood, carrying with her the ghosts of the past, yet bringing together different worlds (her family, the new tenants of her childhood neighborhood, other joggers), all the voices in Paley's stories converge to build up collective memory. In that sense, Paley humorously points to the sacred nature of language. In "At That Time, or The History of a Joke" (an ironic variation on the birth of Christ as related in the New Testament) "certain Jews who had observed and suffered the consequence of other virgin births" (327) wander "from town to town in order to say the most ordinary thing to a friend or a relative" (327), thus carrying the word:

In their gossip communications, they whispered the hidden or omitted fact (which some folks had hardly noticed): The Child WAS A Girl, and since word of mouth is sound made in the echo of God (in the beginning there was the Word and it was without form but wide), ear to mouth and mouth to ear it soon became the people's knowledge, outwitting the computerized devices to which most sensible people had not said a private word for decades anyway. (327)

- 11 The impersonal nature of "their gossip communications" conveys much more meaning than the no less impersonal "computerized devices," designating the media and their "giant screens." Two forms of impersonality are opposed here, along with two forms of revelation. While the media advertise an event, perpetuating myth "on the back of technological advancement" (326), the power of the rumor de-constructs the reiteration of the Christian miracle (the "holy news") spreading the detail of "the hidden or omitted fact" and undermining official discourse. A widening chain of meaning is drawn here, as suggested by the concomitant presence of the adjectives "hidden" and "omitted," the first pointing to the fact that "the baby [is] a girl," and the second, perhaps, to its being "black as the night which rests our day-worn eyes" (326). The difference between the screens and the indeterminate rumor is that between a one-dimensional surface inviting a single image and a multi-layered reality opening up space and meaning. Sound precludes representation in so far as it is "without form," that is without a frame likely to make it recognizable and interpretable as a resurgence of old myths. As enacted in the long sentence itself, what takes place here is the word wandering: "word of mouth" becomes sound and circulates "ear to mouth and mouth to ear," constructing knowledge which cannot do away with language. "In the beginning was the Word," re-written here as "the word"—the loss of the capital letter underlining the materiality of language—translates into a renewal of the idea of incarnation. It is perhaps not so much to be perceived as the word of God made flesh as rather the expression of the corporeality of language whose truth is not imposed by a transcendent force—God or the screens—but originates in word of mouth transmission, in the bodies of the speakers and listeners.
- 12 In Paley's stories indeed, language is first and foremost a bodily experience, capable of ensuring the sense of circulation inherent to the creation of meaning. Words are akin to air and body. They become flesh and are a physical experience more than an intellectual one. In "Dreamer in a Dead Language" (273-92), a poem read out by Faith's lover, Philip, reminds her of the vital force of air and induces something akin to sexual ecstasy: "his voice [has] a timbre which [reminds] her of evening, maybe nighttime. She had often

thought of the way wide air lives and moves in a man's chest. Then it's strummed into shape by the short-stringed voice box to become a wonderful secondary sexual characteristic" (274). Senses mingle in the man's voice and the ethereal quality of the air it carries becomes consistent, both substance—it "lives and moves" —and shape, the awkward association between "strummed" and "shape" adding to the materialization of words which become visible on the page when the poem is quoted in the following paragraph, each letter becoming a body shaped by Philip's voice. The reader himself/herself is made to experience this bodily relation with language, the long sonorities of the description combining with alliterations in [s] to instil not only rhythm but also the sensation of air passing, a breathlessness that affects Faith's lover as much as it affects her.

- 13 In a way, words partake of the characters' vital functions, as shown by their constant need of telling. Thus Zagrowsky *tells* and views the act as indispensable. Again, telling is associated with breathing:

"I have to tell the whole story. I'm not a person who keeps things in. Tell! That opens up the congestion a little—the lungs are for breathing, no secrets. My wife never tells, she coughs, coughs. All night. Wakes up. Ai, Iz, open up the window, there's no air. You poor woman, if you want to breathe, you got to tell." (366)

- 14 Once more, the very matter of words—sounds, letters—is made palpable in the text. The poetry of Paley's stories stems both from this physicality of language and from its deliberate "defamiliarization." Variations abound on the same words whose immediate meaning is transmuted into a bodily experience, "each word cut like a special jewel" (8). Words have therefore a special power, disconnected from their meaning, or, rather creative of meaning beyond the limits of syntax and semantics. In "Enormous Changes at the Last Minute" (209-24), Dennis, one of the characters, states: "Any word is good, it's the big word today. [...] It's what you do with the word. The language and the idea, they work it out together" (218). As a song-writer, he enjoys picking out words from the dictionary: "I just flipped the pages and jabbed and the word I hit was *ophidious*. But I did it, because the word does the dreaming for you. The word" (218). The autonomy of language is stressed here and what "ophidious" *means* is not as important as what it *does*. Some sentences would require mental contortions to make sense and yet, by doing the dreaming for the reader, they trigger imagination through weird associations or sounds.
- 15 All this sometimes infuses the text with a peculiar atmosphere as when, for example, a character kicks aside "disappointed acorns" ("The Pale Pink Roast" 27), imbuing lifeless objects with feelings and thus mixing ontological levels. Strange associations may crop up, contributing for example to the eeriness of such a story as "In Time Which Made a Monkey of Us All," in which little boys "[prick up] their ears in tears" (101). The alliterative pattern justifies the association between "ears" and "tears" and highlights the creative power of language, its capacity to conjure up impossibilities. In many instances "sound rushes ahead of sense," to use William Gass's words (43), thus contributing to "delinearize" language and do away with chronological patterns.
- 16 The complexity of thought and language is often suggested by the rambling syntax. In "The Floating Truth," the narrator is reproached with thinking in long sentences: "Anyway, you ought to think in shorter sentences,' he suggested, although I hadn't said a word. Old Richard-the-Liver-Headed, he saw right through the heart of the matter, my syntax" (122). It is not so much the length of her sentences that matters as their meanderings, as if they were an echo of the narrator's rejection of "the absolute line

between two points which I have always despised" ("A Conversation with my Father" 237). What prevails instead is a sense of dissemination, the collision of sounds and words contributing to the creation of a complex reality through language. Descriptions, for example, are never "transparent," as if to insist on the opacity of language, to draw attention to the words, arrest the reader's gaze on them, and create effects of "derealization": "His eyes were pale as the moon. They drove here and yon, hip-flasked, unwatered and unsodaed, uniced and defrosted, looped in one another's consonants. Lack of communication made them appear to be lovers" ("The Floating Truth" 122). The incongruous comparison (eyes "pale as the moon") and the coined adjectives concur in creating a moving, unseizable image in which opposites coexist. Likewise, the characters' erratic driving "here and yon" epitomizes the absence of a straight line which would leave no place for the imagination. This sense of indirection, along with the co-presence of opposites, contributes to the arabesques of meaning and foregrounds the *infinite* power of a language no longer reduced to mere communication and representation.

- 17 Such effects of defamiliarization seem to echo Gilles Deleuze who, in reference to Proust, emphasizes how writing amounts to speaking in a foreign language. What this points to is not so much the use of foreign words, even if the stories are interspersed with words from various idioms: English, Yiddish, Russian, Spanish, French whose mixture sometimes results in puns and partakes of the cacophony mentioned earlier. The texts at times evoke a Tower of Babel, inhabited by people estranged from their own idiom and sharing no common tongue with others. As for the readers, "the English language they know by heart from the beginning" ("The Loudest Voice" 41) sometimes resembles a puzzle, inscribing linguistic disruption within itself, requiring constant attention to words and letters and even calling for translation. Thus in "The Contest" a newspaper title, written from right to left (as in Hebrew), functions as an inverted mirror:

! SNIW NAMRESSAW YTTOD
SREWSNA EHT LLA SWONK LRIG NYLKOORB (48)

- 18 The implausible succession of letters points to the very mystery of language. The reader is encouraged to relinquish his/her reading habits, to experiment other modes of deciphering the text and discover a new tongue comprised within the English idiom. By inverting the letters, the text not only pays tribute to other forms of writing and reading but also participates in the creation of what the narrator of "A Woman, Young and Old" calls "our derivative mother tongue" (17). A tongue, which for all the misunderstandings it bears, also carries a universal value since it is imbued with all the different idioms that compose it: "[...] I do like this language—wheat and chaff—with its widening pool of foreign genes, and since I have never had any occasion to say 'comestible,' it was a pleasure to think it" (349), declares the narrator of "The Story Hearer" upon reflecting on her use of the noun "comestibles" (349). The term "derivative" also signals the capacity of words to deviate from their standard meaning through circulation, contamination and misuse. The "widening pool of foreign genes" might therefore be what characterizes language and its expanding meaning.
- 19 The meaning thus created here is neither given nor linear since, just as the black baby girl undermines founding myths ("At That Time, or the Story of a Joke" 326-28), "a few hot human truthful words are powerful enough [...] to steam all God's chemical mistakes and society's lies out of [...] life" ("Friends" 313). The succession of adjectives, with no commas between them, echoes the "widening pool," conferring to language the capacity to create, invent and become reality, or at least "to fool time and distance" ("Friends"

317). It is therefore through language that knowledge exists, knowledge based more on words than on facts: facts are always questioned, debated, since they depend on voices and viewpoints and vary from one story to another. Words vary too and perhaps this is where knowledge lies, in the fluctuations of a labile language able to "keep people alive for years after death has set in" ("Friends" 216) or to create characters: "The woman lives across the street. She's my knowledge and my invention," says the story-teller in "A Conversation with my Father" (242).

- 20 Language is therefore also a way to try to grasp time when it escapes the protagonists, subjected as they are to the inevitability of decay and death. Again, it seems as though telling and writing stories would allow both to acknowledge time and to keep it at bay, by "[writing] the beautiful letters of the alphabet invented by smart foreigners to fool time and distance" (317). The "long-distance runner," by running and remembering life in her childhood neighborhood, by superimposing her past and her present, and by mixing with the new tenants, acts in a way like the "beautiful letters of the alphabet". These challenge time because they allow the construction of an individual and collective memory made of words which, though coming from "a widening pool of genes," *unite* despite the sense of disconnection. It is also what allows the emergence of a speaking subject, a linguistic one, inventing or being part of a story, being inscribed in the endless flow of words that make up those talkative texts: "It's all stories. It's where we come from, who we are" (340), the only way, perhaps, to start finding an answer to the question asked several times in the stories: "After all, who am I?" ("Goodbye and Good Luck" 9).

- 21 Grace Paley's short fiction may be read as a meditation on the powers of language and story-telling. Not much happens in those stories, or, more accurately, everything happens. No plot is to be found because each story is about life, and life is depicted as anything but "plot, the absolute line between two points" ("A Conversation with my Father" 237). From that perspective, a plot announces an end, contains it within itself. In Paley's stories, on the contrary, it seems as though finality and death were paradoxically kept at a distance, the need for telling and writing participating in a celebration of life. Writing is presented as necessary "in order to save a few lives" (136), to ward off sickness and even to conjure up the dead, "[gliding] to solid invented figures from true remembered wraiths" ("Love" 271). Rather than signs of an end, it seems as though the parting words scattered throughout Paley's stories were the driving force of voices which neither absence nor death can hush, voices and written words that manage to transform the trivialities and tragedies of life into poetic moments of love.

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NOTES

1. "Loved, invented and endured" is a quote from "The Long-Distance Runner" (249).
 2. See for instance "Two Short Sad Stories from a Long and Happy Life" (84-92), "The Immigrant Story (244-47)", "At that Time or the History of a Joke" (326-28), "An Old Man Told me the Story of his Life" (346-47), "The Story-Hearer" (348-56), "This is a Story about my Friend George, the Toy Inventor" (357-58).
 3. See for example "Wants" (133-35)
 4. "Faith in a Tree" (179-98); "The Long-Distance Runner" (248-65).
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ABSTRACTS

Les nouvelles de Grace Paley, tout en s'inscrivant dans l'univers familier d'un quotidien reconnaissable, créent d'emblée un sentiment de déséquilibre, provoqué par l'autonomie et le foisonnement d'une langue qui refuse tout sens figé. Tout se passe comme si les mots, loin de construire un contexte rassurant parce que partagé, devenaient tout aussi étrangers qu'ils sont familiers, tant les effets de prolifération et de contamination mettent à mal tout sens unique et tiennent à distance toute forme de compréhension. Si l'écart entre le monde et les mots se fait visible dans ces nouvelles, la langue reste pourtant la seule substance tangible et capable de forger le monde.

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Sylvie Bauer is Professor of American Literature at the University of Rennes 2. She has written extensively on contemporary American literature (Percival Everett, Grace Paley, Don DeLillo, Philip Roth, Walter Abish, Colson Whitehead, Steve Tomasula...) and is the author of a monograph on Walter Abish (*Walter Abish, l'arpenteur du langage*, Belin, 2003). She is currently working on a book-length essay on the novels of Percival Everett.