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Forsaken Objects, Haunted Houses, Female Bodies, and “the squalor of tragedy in ordinary life”: Reading *Dance of the Happy Shades* with Later Stories

Relying on Michel de Certeau's analyses in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, this essay considers the functions of small, trivial or discarded objects and jumble to be found in ordinary houses that pepper Munro's fiction and, more specifically, their connection to story telling and writing. The essay links them to patterns, and their metatextual dimensions. Thirdly, taking into account the attention paid to female bodies and their flaws, such as lumps, the essay considers how Munro explores connections between body and text. The corpus under consideration comprises several stories from her debut collection; “The Beggar Maid,” from Munro's second story cycle; “Meneseung” from *Friend of My Youth*; “Family Furnishings” (2001) and two stories from her 2009 collection: “Child's Play” and “Free Radicals.”

Munro's interest in what is hidden, unsuspected and disregarded, is nothing new. As she describes ordinary people's ordinary houses, she foregrounds small, disregarded, if not discarded, objects. They can be found in refuse dumps, in half empty houses, and family homes. Munro has often claimed she felt the need to mention her characters' surroundings in detail, thus in a 2005 interview with Mariella Frostrup, she explained, “my stories, they don't follow the rules of short stories, they have a lot of stuff that by strict standards are unnecessary in them”. Munro's need to put in so many details should not be mistaken for realism. Analyses of the stories will show that she endows these seemingly unremarkable objects with several functions, among which, to act as (sometimes ironic) commentaries at the level of the diegesis. They also reveal Munro's own version of what Michel de Certeau has called “l'invention du quotidien,” or “the practice of everyday life”. His study proposes we see ordinary objects and houses in connection with stories and one's past: ordinary objects, he claims, have “hollow places in which a past sleeps” while ordinary places where people live are always haunted “by many different spirits hidden there in silence” (108). De Certeau's analysis and his contention that places are “symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body” (108) are particularly relevant to Munro's fiction. Another characteristic of Munro's fiction is the attention paid to female bodies and their visible and invisible flaws, such as lumps. As a story such as “Meneseung” shows, it is necessary to trace connections between the flawed bodies that are foregrounded in her fiction and her own art of playing with the rules of the genre. I will also consider how Munro, in “Family Furnishings,” proposes a reflection on her choice of material, uniting the squalor of tragedy in ordinary people's lives and world literature.

Forsaken Objects and Haunted Houses

Attention is often explicitly drawn to trivial objects. One technique is for the narrator to refer to unusual colors and sources of light; for instance, in “Thanks for the Ride,” the adjective “glossy” which describes a worn sofa turns it into a bright surface, setting off a Niagara Falls and a To Mother cushion on it (*Dance* 49). The cushions that epitomize working class Canadian bad taste are seen through the judgemental eyes of the middle-class narrator, whose prejudices are revealed. One of the best examples of how Munro

uses light to draw attention to an object that epitomizes social class is to be found in a passage from “The Beggar Maid” which describes a young college girl’s visit home. As the family are said to eat “directly under the tube of fluorescent light,” the neon light, like a spotlight, illumines the (new) centerpiece: “a plastic swan, lime green in color, with slits in the wings, in which were stuck folded, colored paper napkins” (*The Beggar Maid* 89). The plastic swan reveals the family’s poverty, and their attempts at sophistication (the napkins), but more importantly, the close-up on the illuminated, lurid plastic swan enables Munro to show Rose’s plight – her double vision. Rose’s home is both familiar and defamiliarized. Rose becomes aware of her upper middle class fiancé’s judgemental eyes on her family, as she now sees them “through Patrick’s eyes” (90) but she also understands her family’s efforts. Such objects are neither simply part of the décor nor instances of social realism; they play a central part in Munro’s attempts to convey her characters’ ambivalent feelings towards their home.

One of the most frequent means to draw attention to objects is punctuation, see for instance the dash in “Boys and Girls” which draws attention to the objects that have been discarded, on the other side of the square hole in the middle of the floor, in the room where the little girl and her (younger) brother sleep:

on the other side of the stairwell were the things that nobody had any use for anymore – a soldiery roll of linoleum, standing on end, a wicker baby carriage, a fern basket, china jugs and basins with cracks in them, a picture of the battle of Balaclava, very sad to look at. (*Dance* 112)

The dash both sets aside the discarded objects and brings the reader’s eyes to them. Although they are clearly dismissed as discards since the narrator points out that nobody “had any use for [them] anymore,” they have several narrative functions. They echo several themes in the story – the wicker baby carriage may serve to evoke the birth of the brother which modified relationships inside the family since the narrator suggests she is her father’s favorite child. Later stories by Munro that use discards and wrecks as projections of a character’s unspeakable fears¹ suggest that as discards the objects may serve to reveal the narrator’s fear of being replaced by her brother as her father’s favorite. The “soldieri” roll of linoleum and the painting echo the representation of family relationships as battles. The narrator’s little brother is gaining power over her, threatening to replace her as the father’s helper, and the narrator resists her mother and grandmother’s attempts to turn her into a girl. The painting that concludes the list of discarded objects may, however, have another function. It is not described, but its relevance is suggested by the narrator’s comment concerning its effects on her. It is said to be of *The Battle of Balaclava* – a reference to its depiction of the Charge of the Light Brigade, a semisuicidal charge in which over 300 horses were killed. As the high point of the story is the narrator’s rebellion, her opening the gate wide enough for the old female horse to escape, Munro uses the reference to foreshadow the narrator’s self-destructive gesture, a gesture which will move her father to say that she is “only” a girl (*Dance* 108). Munro thus subverts a historical reference with her female protagonist, rewriting history with a little girl as the heroic figure. The linoleum also connects with the other main theme of

1. In “Floating Bridge,” a woman who has cancer sees wrecks and discards wherever she looks (*Hateship* 67, 70) and eventually, as Héliane Ventura shows, equates herself with a piece of wreckage (“Secret Ort” 262). In “Five Points,” attention is drawn to the fact that a man who lost his job after an accident keeps thinking about the discarded machines that have been buried in a dead-end passage in the mine (*Friend* 47).

the story, turning the house into a prison that entraps the narrator, since, as Catherine Lanone argues: "there is always a sense in Munro in which the roll or square of linoleum may contain its own uncanny double, the space of domesticity may become reversible, home turn into a trap" (Bigot and Lanone 75).

The objects upstairs also serve as the background or setting for the stories the narrator invents and tells herself, imagining an escaped convict hiding behind the linoleum, (113) suggesting a connection with storytelling. The connection is further demonstrated in "The Shining Houses," also from *Dance of the Happy Shades*. The narrator concludes a paragraph that relies heavily on enumeration by the mention of discarded objects that lie on a *back* porch, and are therefore hidden out of sight. The narrator, throughout the paragraph describing an old woman's garden and derelict house, is emphasizing abundance, in order to assert the right of the house to stand there: "The place had become fixed, impregnable, all its accumulations necessary, until it seemed that even the washtubs, mops, couch springs and stacks of old police magazines on the back porch were there to stay" (*Dance* 22). The objects on the porch of Mrs. Fullerton's house illustrate Michel de Certeau's observations in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, that "the places that people live in are like the presences of diverse absences," (108) and that ordinary objects in such houses "have *hollow* places in which a past sleeps" (108, emphasis added). The stress on the "accumulations" being "necessary" confirms the absolute value of what is apparently discarded. Mrs. Fullerton's husband had been missing for some time (the tale of his disappearance almost opens the story), so it is possible to imagine that Mr. Fullerton was the one who used to read the police magazines; in other words, they might be traces of his presence, or, in de Certeau's words, the presence of his absence.

Furthermore, the last item in the list introduces an ironic twist if one considers the story of this man who left the house, never to come back. As police magazines, they point to the central mystery no-one knows why Mr. Fullerton left, whether he is alive or dead, or whether he is likely to come back. The tale within the tale is like a gaping hole, through which the man fled. Considering people's connections to houses and objects, Michel de Certeau suggests a connection with stories, which Munro's short stories often illustrate: de Certeau posits that "places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but *like stories* held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state" (108, emphasis added). Memory, de Certeau argues, is "a sort of anti-museum" and "fragments of it come out in legends" (108) – quite strikingly, de Certeau uses words such as "relics," "debris" and "leftovers" to describe haunted places and legends (107). In many stories by Munro, jumble plays a central role. For instance, "White Dump" is built on the opposition between the fashionable "calculated jumble" (*The Progress* 276) the narrator's stepmother displays and the countless unmatched, broken objects that the narrator remembers – the objects that used to be found in the house when her grandmother lived there: "the Scrabble set with the Y and one of the U's missing [...] the unmatched plates, the cracked saucers" (279). The list shows that Munro, for all her supposed realism, is a "recorder of discontinuities."² Her objects often have cracks in them and they, like her old houses, conjure up stories held in reserve, that remain to be told.

2. I have borrowed the phrase from Joseph Ward's analysis of Edward Hopper's paintings (177).

A paradoxical tension is often found between presence and absence and loss and permanence. Items such as the incomplete scrabble game or the mismatched plates in the family home in “White Dump” are meant to evoke the presence of the absent objects: the missing letters or the plates that have probably been broken. These relics systematically evoke lives that are gone and stories that are only partially known. In Munro’s fiction, discarded objects are always both remainders and “reminders” of people’s lives (*Bigot Silences* 140-1). For instance, faded dresses and a picnic hamper with a silver flask in “Oh, What Avails” are “reminders” of the family’s more glorious past that is long gone (*Friend* 183). In “The Peace of Utrecht,” Maddy, the daughter who stayed home and cared for her sick mother, evokes her mother’s futile efforts to sort “all sort of things”: “Greeting cards. Buttons and yarn. Sorting them and putting them into little piles” (*Dance* 202). Maddy obviously sees this as evidence of their mother’s state of health (advanced Parkinson’s) and as pathetic attempts to regain control over her life by introducing order. However, the objects poignantly evoke her lost social life – visits that used to be made and returned, good dresses she wore when she went out, or even a mother’s routine chores such as sewing clothes for her family. The final item, yarn, is particularly interesting as “yarn” also means a narrative or tale. It is tempting to suppose that Munro is probably suggesting here that stories can be made and told and would often necessarily be stories about what is no more and has been lost.

For Michel de Certeau, “there is no place that is not haunted by different spirits hidden there in silence” (108) and “haunted places are the only ones people can live in” (108), two ideas often demonstrated in Munro’s fiction. In “The Shining Houses,” Mrs. Fullerton’s house is haunted by the presence/absence of Mr. Fullerton, and by the story that springs from it. The family home in “Oh, What Avails,” is a haunted house since there is a smell in the house that “comes from the plaster and wallpaper” (*Friend* 183). Another key house is, of course, the family house that the narrator of “The Progress of Love” revisits as an adult (*The Progress* 25-7). There, she recalls various versions of her family’s stories as she peels at the wallpaper, finding layer after layer of wallpaper (27) – the metafictional intent is quite clear. Munro’s houses *are* like stories held in reserve.

Patterns

A more recent story, “Child’s Play,” offers an interesting instance of how Munro can use an apparently trivial item of clothing, here, a little girl’s bathing cap, to expose several layers of truth in the narrative and to draw the reader in, encouraging her to read between the lines of her narrative. In the murder scene, which serves as the narrator’s confession, the material out of which the cap is made (rubber) is foregrounded, as if to insist on its insignificance:

Verna’s head did not break the surface, though she was not inert, but turning in an leisurely way, light as a jellyfish in the water. Charlene and I had our hands on her, on her rubber cap. [...]

We might have lost our grip on the rubber head, the rubber cap, were it not for the raised pattern that made it less slippery. I can recall the colour perfectly, the pale insipid blue, but I never deciphered the pattern – a fish, a mermaid, a flower – whose ridges pushed into my palms (*Too Much Happiness* 221; 222)

From the moment she mentions the cap, the narrator strives to dehumanize Verna, using appositions such as “the rubber head, the rubber cap,” that assimilate the girl

to her rubber cap. At first there is no verb of action, the phrase "had our hands on her, on her rubber cap" describes the result, as if the hands found themselves there, without any action on the girls' part. Not only is Verna twice reduced to her bathing cap, but the repetition of "rubber" further serves to transform the girl into a lifeless, insensible, impassive object. The narrator then simultaneously evokes Verna's efforts to remain alive (using "rise" and "raise") and the futility of her efforts to do so, given the other girls' refusal to perceive her as a human being, which yet another comparison reveals: "The head of Verna tried to rise up to the surface of the water. Her head was determined to rise, like a dumpling in a stew" (221). The structure "the head of Verna" reads as an effort to place the emphasis on the body part rather than the girl, and Verna then gradually disappears as a person; she becomes "the rubber head" then "it". In the next sentence, the remark on the color and pattern of the cap shows that she has been replaced by the rubber cap. Its color is said to be "insipid," underscoring the insignificance of the cap, and, so by metonymy, of the head, and of the girl. At the end of the passage, Verna is no more, she is turned into an *object*: "when the rubber object under our palms ceased to have a life of its own" (222). Thus, the narrator's claims that she felt neither regret nor guilt seem to hold true.

Yet the function of the rubber cap is precisely to suggest otherwise. As a mere material object, the rubber cap can leave no permanent trace, but the mention of its raised pattern, pushing into the palms of the narrator gives it the power to brand the murderers, leaving a stigma that evokes stigmata, in other words, the indelible trace of the crime – and guilt. It is no coincidence that the narrator indicates that she never deciphered the pattern. Self-deception is at the core of the narrative. Foregrounding her incapacity to decipher the pattern, she clearly signals its significance and encourages her readers to do the deciphering themselves. They will then work out the significance of the three possibilities, and realize that the flower refers to Verna, since her name evokes spring, the fish to Marlene, as her nickname is the Marlin, and the mermaid to Charlene, whose seducing voice has been commented upon earlier on. The three little girls, the two murderesses and the victim, seem forever trapped together in the pattern, as shown by the punctuation in "– a fish, a mermaid, a flower –" and the pair of dashes that entraps them.

In Munro's fiction, patterns can be a source of endless fascination as well as delusion, as in "Runaway," the title story of the 2004 collection. Carla, who lives in a trailer home with a frayed carpet, looks at its patterns, which she sometimes finds hard to see. Munro plays on intertextuality – the nod to James's short story is unmistakable – replacing James's image with an actual frayed carpet on which the pattern of squiggles seem to multiply endlessly:

it was divided into small brown squares, each with a pattern of darker brown and rust and tan squiggles and shapes. For a long time she thought these were the same squiggles and shapes [...] then [...] she decided that there were four patterns joined together to make identical larger squares. Sometimes she could pick out the arrangement easily and sometimes she had to work to see it. (*Runaway* 8-9)

Since the word "squiggles" denotes hastily drawn lines or illegible scrawling, the theme of resistance to elucidation is reinforced. Carla's episodic inability to see the pattern foreshadows the end of the story when she seems to be on the verge of inferring and admitting to herself what her husband has done (he killed their pet goat) and, there-

fore, the danger she is probably facing. Munro shifts from the level of the diegesis to a more metafictional dimension when she points to patterns that narrators or protagonists fail to decipher or recognize. As convincingly argued by Sabrina Francesconi in "Alice Munro and the Poetics of the Linoleum," Munro offered an earlier version of the metatextual pattern in "Royal Beatings," where Flo, Rose's stepmother, has composed a patchwork of multishaped patterns of linoleum ("The kitchen floor has five or six patterns of linoleum on it" (*The Beggar Maid* [16]): Flo "has achieved a creative composition. It is a text, made of several units Flo got for nothing, useless fragments, small, short patterns, like short stories" (Francesconi 94).

Flawed Female Bodies

In "Red Dress – 1946," which clearly uses the motif of the sewing pattern to epitomize the difficult mother-daughter relationships, the narrator describes the various dresses her mother has made *for* her over the years. A central scene, a trying fitting session where the daughter tries on the dress, which the mother attempts to fix, encapsulates another central theme, that of exposure. The narrator draws attention to her mother's body, and to her own. Munro's fiction, as Helen Hoy has it, is a "fiction of admission," (7) and there is no denying that "the uninhibited discussion of bodily realities" illustrates her strategy of inclusion" (Hoy 7). As the mother tries to fix her daughter's dress, she exposes *her* bare lumpy legs in the process ("her legs were marked with lumps of blue-green veins" [*Dance* 148]), a sight that provokes feelings of repulsion in the girl. She finds her mother's position both "obscene and shameless," which suggests that the girl feels the shame herself. The narrator is painfully aware that her well-dressed friend Lonnie is watching them, since she tries to take Lonnie's attention away from her mother's legs. The lumps *and* the mother's bare legs encapsulate the daughter's humiliation. However, the next passage reveals that "the psychological nakedness of personal and social exposure" (Carrington 22) can paradoxically occur when one is dressed: "My head was muffled in velvet, my body *exposed*, in an old cotton school slip. I felt like a great *raw* lump, clumsy and goose-pimpled" (148, emphasis added). The girl feels that the old slip she is wearing exposes her social inadequacy and her body. Psychological and social exposure is conveyed through the image of the "raw lump," a striking simile that suggests psychological pain as the word "raw" normally refers to bodily pain as well as exposure.

Feelings, including those involving shame or complex attitudes toward home, are often conveyed through images relating to the body: in "The Beggar Maid," the narrator notes that for Rose, the college girl who left home, "there was always [...] the raw knowledge of home, an indigestible lump" (*The Beggar Maid* 70). The words "raw" and "lump" are once more placed in close proximity, suggesting that feelings for home are so painful they might choke the character – we may think of "Executioners" whose narrator notes that "shame could choke you" (*Something* 143). Munro plays with the cliché "a lump in one's throat," but places the lump inside the body.³ The feelings can never leave Rose, nor can they be processed.

The image of the lump also illustrates Michel de Certeau's idea that to those who know them, "places are [...] symbolizations *encysted* in the pain and pleasure of the

3. See also "Executioners" and the images of "greasy shame" and "indigestible bad secrets" (*Something* 143).

body” (108, emphasis added). When the narrator describes the changes in Rose’s feelings after the visit home with Patrick, the image of the lump is implicit. As Patrick dismisses Rose’s home as a dump, consoling himself with the thought that Billy and Flo are not her real parents (*The Beggar Maid* 90), Rose is startled to feel that “a layer of loyalty and protectiveness was hardening around every memory she had, around the store and the town, the flat, somewhat scrubby, unremarkable countryside” (91). This she opposes to Patrick’s *views* of mountains and oceans. He looks at vistas and landscape, but she feels her home as something that is part of her body. The passage also suggests, through the word “hardening,” that home and the conflicting feelings it arouses are the foundations of Munro’s fiction.

In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del Jordan’s depiction of her Aunt Moira’s body draws attention to visible and invisible flaws:

“S”he was a woman I would now recognize as a likely sufferer from varicose veins, hemorrhoids, a dropped womb, cysted ovaries, inflammations, discharges, lumps and stones in various places, one of those heavy, cautiously moving, wrecked survivors of the female life, *with stories to tell*. (*Lives* 40, emphasis added)

The depiction is built on the principle of the list or catalogue (as Munro’s evocation of objects in a house often is), which enables her to suggest, as Marjorie Garson puts it, that plenitude is depicted as excess (53) since this body has swollen parts that seem to grow out of control and to keep expanding. Marjorie Garson argues that the list reveals the body’s vulnerability since it “foretells dissolution as the swollen or overgrown parts turn cancerously against the whole” (53). The paragraph, however, ends on the phrase “with stories to tell,” with the structure of the sentence suggesting that the female bodies the female bodies are waiting to be narrativized.

Women do share stories about their ailments, as the kitchen scene in “Family Furnishings” suggests: “the aunts would tell about who had a tumor, a septic throat, a bad mess of boils” (*Hateship* 91). Many stories foreground bodily ills, and among the stories that depict sick women, several have protagonists who have or may have cancer.⁴ As suggested by Del Jordan’s allusion to women’s “cysted ovaries” (*Lives* 40) such stories are about death and life. As Héliane Ventura points out, the lump in the narrator’s body that is given such prominence in “What Do You Want to Know For?” is also one of the means through which Munro reverses fear of death into a desire for life: Munro “overturms deadly signifiers to highlight a signifying chain built around life-enhancing paronomasiae,” as in the quasi-homophony between lump and lamp, and lump and clump (Ventura “Lump” n.p.).

A more recent story, “Free Radicals,” whose main protagonist is dying of cancer, offers another example how Munro may suggest desire for life amidst fear of death. The phrase “free radicals” would have attracted Munro for its inner contradiction – the fact that by putting these two “positive” words together, a new word denoting something harmful – an atom that can damage a body’s healthy cells – can be created. A free radical is dangerous, yet the association of these two words retains something dynamic, which the other meaning of the phrase suggests – an electron that is not magnetically paired up with another electron. Thus, “free radical” can be used to refer to someone who is

4. “Oranges and Apples” (*Friend*), “What Do You Want to Know For?” (*The View*), “Floating Bridge” (*Hateship*) and “Free Radicals” (*Too Much Happiness*).

independent. Nita, who has cancer, finds herself in an unusual position when she is held hostage by a young murderer. She realizes that her cancer actually frees her from danger (*Too Much Happiness* 127). Both Nita and the young man deserve to be called free radicals: Nita is a childless widow, and we may argue that the boy's barbaric act has freed him the "deal" his father wanted to force on him (looking after his sick sister for the rest of his or her life). Both turn out to be killers too, at least in Nita's tale, since she tells the young man that she killed her husband's first wife. Free radicals, as Ulrica Skagert notes, usually provoke chain reactions (22), which is illustrated by the chain of events that starts with the love affair between a man and a secretary, leading to a divorce and remarriage, and ultimately to the intruder's death. "Free Radicals" is one of Munro's most radical versions of a chance encounter that "creates an impairment in the crust of someone's existence," (Skagert 37) and ultimately introduces renewed interest in life in the midst of death. There is no possibility for Nita's life to be any different, her cancer has not gone away, but the meeting with the young man who might have killed her has somehow reconfigured her hopeless life into a life she tries to save.

Munro's attempts to write in and through a language that is grounded in the body has attracted attention, as Smaro Kamboureli's analysis of *Lives of Girls and Women* shows (32), but "Meneseteung" (from *Friend of My Youth*) is equally remarkable. Its narrator imagines the life of Almeda Roth, a nineteenth-century poetess but concludes the story by admitting "I may have got it wrong" (*Friend* 73). The metafictional dimension of the story is also suggested by the penultimate paragraph, in which the narrator evokes people who might be just like her, people who are "driven to find things out, even *trivial* things" (73, emphasis added), who go to libraries and cemeteries, "in the hope of making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish" (73). The narrator points to the relevance of trivial things while disclaiming narrative authority, pointing to what she does not know.

Almeda Roth, as the narrator imagines her, wrote poetry by carefully neglecting and omitting unsightly scenes in her surroundings: "some things must be *disregarded*. Manure piles, of course, and boggy fields full of high, charred stumps" (61, emphasis added). The back of Almeda's house faces a disreputable street, called Pearl Street, which, as the narrator notes, "is another story" (55) and lies at the edge of a boghole called the Pearl Street Swamp, which is full of refuse (55). Almeda Roth will decide on a radical change after an encounter with a dead-drunk woman there. Although Almeda is awakened by the noise in the street at the back of her house, she does not leave the house but the next day, as she looks out of the window she sees that "[d]own against her fence there is a pale lump pressed – a body" (64). The body is lying against *her* fence, which is an intimation that her carefully organized and controlled world has been challenged by the quasi intrusion of this body. It seems that there is no getting rid of that lump, that body that has been thrown against the fence and abandoned there. As a "lump pressed," the body simultaneously evokes clay and the world of print, since the word "press" can also refer to a printing press. The image of this woman's body is the first instance of several connections between women's bodies and the world of print and stories that "Meneseteung" offers. That body, which a man has touched and abused, intrudes upon the poetess's world, but this intrusion also marks the moment when "the body marked, imprinted by desire enter[s] narrative" (Brooks 25). What is at stake in this story is what Brooks calls the process of imprinting and inscription of the body (22). Almeda will

eventually go down and look at the body in the street, back at home, she will experience “the pain and fullness in her lower body,” (68) due to her period that is about to start and she will notice that the pattern of familiar objects has started to move, flow and alter. As “this glowing and swelling begins to suggest words,” (69) the “flow of words” (69) is directly connected to “her flow” which then starts (69-70). Almeda Roth then decides to try and write “one great poem that will contain everything,” from the obscene body in the street, to the polished shoe of the man who courts her and the woman’s battered body, to the detail of her blue-black bruise. The refuse heap and the back street are central places in “Meneseuteung,” an idea which Dermot McCarthy underscores when he argues that the encounter in Pearl Street “leads Almeda to a breakthrough [...] because the marginal world of Pearl Street, with its apogee of exclusion, the swamp [...] is not periphery but alternate centre” (14).

If “Meneseuteung” brings together body and text, with the flow of words and the flow of blood, “Differently” (also from *Friend of My Youth*) suggests the same connection, albeit from the opposite perspective. The main protagonist has taken a creative writing class and written a story, but is criticized by the (male) instructor for having put “too many things” in her story (216). The instructor likes her second attempt whereas she does not, so she makes “a long list of all the things that ha[ve] been left out and hand[s] it in as an appendix to the story” (216). The word “appendix” serves to reinforce the connection between text and body. The passage, which opens the story, also sheds light on the title – “Differently” may also refer to a desire to write stories differently from other writers. It indirectly echoes the lumps that proliferate in other stories, challenging the perfect shape of the classic short story – Del’s catalogue of growths concludes, one recalls, with the phrase “with stories to tell.” It is no coincidence that in “Meneseuteung,” which emphasizes the connection between bodies and writing, patterns, when the main protagonist looks at them, “seem ready to move, flow and alter, or possibly to explode” (*Friend* 69). In her interview with Mariella Frostrup Munro explained that her stories did not follow the rules of the short story genre because they had “an awful lot of stuff” that, “by strict standard,” were unnecessary to them but were necessary to her; interestingly, she then went on to cite the carpet in Carla’s trailer in “Runaway.” The picturesque jumble of objects on Mrs. Fullerton’s back porch, as Michael Toolan argues, can be compared to the structures of Munro’s stories (11) since the narrator remarks, “here was no open or straightforward plan, not order than an outsider might understand” (*Dance* 22).

Conclusion: The Squalor of Tragedy in Ordinary Life

Munro has repeatedly used stories from home and foregrounded reflections on what it means to use home as material – memories, people, and stories. The story that best epitomizes this is probably “Family Furnishings” (*Hateship*), a story about a woman who becomes a writer. The story shows that the narrator needs to leave home to become who she wants to be, but also shows the need to listen to stories from home. As she is about to get married and leave her home region, the narrator pays her cousin a visit. The cousin starts telling her a well-known, often-told family story, which the narrator hates and she is relieved that her fiancé will be spared the story (he has not come with her):

A good thing that he didn’t have to hear about Alfrida’s mother, on top of finding out about my mother and my family’s relative or maybe considerable poverty. He admired

opera and Laurence Oliver's *Hamlet*, but he had no time for tragedy – for the squalor of tragedy – in ordinary life. (*Hateship* 110)

Interestingly, the mother's illness, Parkinson's, poverty and tragedies that strike ordinary people are associated, probably reflecting the fiancé's views. The fiancé is said to have "no time" for such aspects of life: he dislikes hearing about them, and has literally no time for them (he did not take the time to accompany her on this visit). As the reference to the opera and *Hamlet* indicates, the passage in "Family Furnishings" is about defining literary material, which the narrator makes clear as she explains she is planning to become a writer. Munro is clearly being ironical, all the more so as the fiancé is said to admire not Shakespeare's *Hamlet* but a celluloid version of the play. The phrase that is set off by the pair of dashes reads as a comment on Munro's choice of topics too – squalid tragedies such as the many deaths that Flo tells Patrick about in "The Beggar Maid," the (accidental?) death of the little boy in "The Time of Death," or the death of Lois's father's in "Thanks for the Ride" (which the narrator, a middle-class boy seems very reluctant to listen to). At first sight, it seems to read like an ironic comment on Munro's own choice of material, as if "Family Furnishings" "looked back" on Munro's writing and choice of material. Yet there is no irony, rather, "Family Furnishings" is explicitly concerned about what material a writer can use.

First, the narrator seems to somehow share her fiancé's doubts. So far, the family story has been a story that she could not stand listening to, as her mother and her aunts told it: the narrator's feeling that her mother and her aunt's voices were "obscene" (*Hateship* 110) is conveyed by a striking image that conjures up the body: "their voices were like worms slithering in my insides" (110). Alfrida, however, will tell her story and as the narrator listens to her, one sentence catches her attention: "And the minute I heard it, something happened. It was as if a trap had snapped shut, to hold these words in my head" (112). The moment is epiphanic, it is the moment when she understands how the sort of stories and real life tragedies her fiancé despises can provide her with *her* material, as the repetition of the pronoun "me" shows: "I only knew how they jolted me and released me, right away, to breathe a different kind of air available only to myself" (112). "Family Furnishings" clearly suggests that the narrator has to find her own voice by claiming these stories as her material and incorporating them in her own writings (Bigot "Voices" 31). The exploding lamp may have killed the cousin, but it offers the would-be writer a moment of clarity when she sees that one can become a writer by using material from home, which, as the rest of the story points out, is no easy thing: "there was a danger whenever I was on home ground. It was the danger of seeing my life through other eyes than my own" ("Family Furnishings" 114).

The narrator claims a family story, and the stories that circulate in her kitchen about her relatives' digestions, kidneys, tumors, sceptic throats, and boils (91). However, as the title of the story suggests, the narrator also claims her parents' *books* as her family heritage, books that had been relegated to the bookcase but were, to the little girl, "like presences in the house just as the trees outside the windows were not plants but presences rooted in the ground" (101). Quite strikingly, she brings together books and trees rooted in the ground, suggesting that her surroundings, her home ground, are part of her heritage. As the narrator indicates that these books, among which she cites *The Mill on the Floss* or Walter Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian*, still bear her mother's maiden name in her "beautiful lost handwriting," (101) she shows that they are her own "family

furnishings” as much as the family story is. Ultimately, the story aims to show that there can be no separation between “the classics” and tragedies in ordinary people’s lives, and demonstrates that Munro’s stories are rooted in world literature as well as in family stories.

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