

# “LEARNING TO FLY UNDER WATER”

>> DAPHNE MARLATT

*as two white wrestlers  
standing for a match*

H.D.

in the white loft, aloft, of cotton momentarily in air, on air as if on fire, sun blaze whitening windows, linen pooling the floor where two older women stand arms up as if in prayer, sheet aloft, hands anchoring two of its corners. simply turning the sheet bottom-top the easiest way for one with a sore back, the other with a sore elbow. making the bed they will lie in when low-ceiling night has darkened their windows. pain a condition to inhabit, movement a must.

so in the loft, aloft, as the sheet floats free of hands, momentarily—

*loft of the morning*, one woman thinks, and swifts. sky's upper gallery out there, means bird loft surely, sky throats choring that blue blued pure as new wash. while we?

age distracts.

this one is my favourite, the other insists, a familiar refrain. it's big enough to cover my back when you wrap up in it.

i do? false innocence. she knows they both hug the sheet they wallow in when the cat weighs heavy, or the dog does, co-sleepers in their queen. what are refrains if not re-inscriptions of the real?

it feels so soft, she says. that loft again, tiny filaments lifting the air. stroke, caress.

...

in another loft, above a floor where walking occurs, i come and go in a rush, intent on what needs to be done within what constraints, that is, between the day's rapid numbers flicking up, while in the whiteness of not going, aloft, we could be lying, belying that train of requisites, hands under head, mine or yours (but that elbow), or cradling your skull that holds brain's synapses firing clutches of pain from your spine's disintegration—but the neck angle for your back, but the too fat pillow—we grow old on but's.

...

*because you elected to love me*

that *elect*, its shadow sense of choosing through select, oh to pick, you picked me out, standing teacup in hand on an earlier floor, a small crowd, sun pouring in through lakefront window chatter of poems and travel, words circling an inexpressible complex of prior reading, present curiosity, eyes that registered a certain quality of attention or perhaps intensity, and then that sudden flag we raised—*weightless*.

*because you elected*—the strictness of choice inherent in what could easily be read as uncharacteristic submissiveness—in *spite of my years*. sureness after long wait.

earlier, a younger woman writes: *so my mind hesitates...*

some sixty years between them, two women with very different minds but a tongue for language and its song-lure for lift, the momentary loft and then collapse of thought. duplicates but not, twinning but not—a clash of women couples circling the arousal point of female take/talk to make the poem's give.

...

it comes in waves, *sound surging upon sound* as word turns upon word dives under, in or on the crowding of a page.

kind, gracious, or friendly

favouring the one

with sexual privilege

or partiality

say a party/parting hat for each

aspect or appearance (gone)

communication (gone)

to the advantage of

one or the other

resembling or selecting from

this one or this

‘u’

not missing from

...

in a white aloft, flake on flake, *I know not what to do, choice unravels  
as the Pleiades shake/white light on whiter water*, so each piece dissolves in air,  
restraint increasing light's last shake of winter's globe: the oncoming image tears  
apart as pieces of a life unsettled settle.

so we will not wear our jeans rolled though we walk where bodies addle in the sun  
of crack highs. and though volcanic rains plunge gutters down the neon green of  
leaves' luxuriant reach, the empty hands of passers-by,

and oil clouds plume deep water, dark on dark, what's under surfaces, a black rain  
boiling up inside our common sea,

and though we walk stooped, somehow under-dressed, into a hall where soft  
young things in thin-strap dresses, filmy voile, and diamantined, lift pink buds to  
the kiss of cameras, smiling on a world they will inherit

in the allure of will, choice: banners of selfhood, as if wrestling the other to ground  
in the all too human struggle to be seen as, somehow, *someone*.

...

this is my favourite, she insists each time the sheet settles into place on the bed  
they inhabit, its strata of smell, the separate molds their bodies make. memory  
foam.

as if not to re-inscribe were to let it evaporate along with everything else they will  
eventually need to give away.

...

top to bottom or bottom to top?

it's this way, seam out.

seam or hem?

it depends.

on what?

...

two women stand in a cabin kitchen sip by sip tasting each other's story of prior love's anguish, tap dripping the minutes, wine lips, rain-slick leaves brush the window, stay, stay, as if minute by second strokes as they delay, tasting what is between them, not snow flake by flake on a sizzling burner, but this wave building its salt weight to sweep them, with some trepidation, up the stairs --

lift off a page. swift as syntax unspooling sudden curves, drops, l'anguishing without resolution, the resolution of things so resolutely themselves – gone in wing flares, trying to hold on,

desire's over-reaching—

it's not a duvet, you said. (down or drowned, their feathers.) they call it a quilt-in-two. see? they button together for winter. new white, blanched. your face in the light of its falling.

how not to read what will button two bodies together? not button, not that ready-made and all it takes to make it. (downed.) we want the lift, throw

one step, and the pause before...

(oiled and stuck together  
minus flight

two women share the task of making a bed they will lie in as light pools their usual, pivotal,

...

as HD's lift, *I know not what to do*, a turn through mind's convolutions, body deceptive, *I would seem at rest*, yet electric in an old dilemma of thresholds, the other's skin blind to touch beside her *now sleep has pressed/ night on your eyelids*, distant as those Sappho sang into centuries of quote, a skin of inner song pulling where the anguish of indecision finds no rest, so poised between the rage that burns to turn the other's silence into likefire, or to turn (away) to lift this *wave-line* of not-yet across a page...

paging Dee's quiet after-assurance *O early morning listener / lover ...*

so to listen in on...

(over-reaching. body's ache and arch. for the once-clear that was.)

...

two women smoothe the lines of a sheet they will lie on together, hand touching hand, casual, absorbed in the feel of cotton (bomull, Baumwolle, balm wool for fractured backs. and where from? and whose hands?) lines from everywhere. picked bleached spun for skin's tactile imaginings.

it's definitely softer than the other one, she says. it can't be only cotton.

it's not as white or as smooth either. (eider, or how can a bird fly? across these choices we inscribe, inhabit. self-perpetuating, favouring—)

well, what does the label say?

cotton. it's cotton all right.

does cotton have a loft? (a turn, like flight... plucking the word out of underwater currents we merely paddle.)

aloft? again?

let's—if only to watch how it settles.