

Betsy Warland & Daphne Marlatt  
SUBJECT TO CHANGE:  
A COLLABORATION

## SUBJECT TO CHANGE: ON THE PROCESS

we first began collaborating in our writing in 1982 when we became lovers - what else would two poets do? this is our fourth collaboration and we have moved from writing long distance love poems to each other, to sitting at the same table writing alternate lines or groups of lines on the same page.

the plan was (does anything ever go completely to plan?) to write for a half-hour stretch each morning for five days, then shift to alternating sentences in a joint paragraph, and end with alternate, individually-authored paragraphs. as we began the first phase, b.w. suggested that in addition to the poem we keep notes on the side of the page documenting everything marginal to the text (what we said to each other, our actions, etc.) the difference in language was startling, and most days our notes far exceeded our lines in the space they took up.

we have edited these marginal notes considerably. keeping everything in seemed too digressive, nor was everything recorded, so a certain amount of selectivity was there from the beginning. the rest of the collaboration has been edited very little.

on march 7th, a heated argument closed that day's poetic entry. this argument was partly occasioned by discomfort with the documenting, partly by issues of communication, and largely by our very different writing processes. d.m. suggested we each write down what we were feeling and saying about our collaboration and these statements (plus a collaborative "afterthoughts") have been included in the marginal notes. on march 9th, we wrote our final passage of the poem together.

we then decided to skip phase two and, on march 11th, went on to phase three, alternating individual entries of two or more prose paragraphs each. these gave us the opportunity to comment on the experience of collaboration, while still responding to each other in language-focussed texts.

issues of merging, loss of identity, the ownership of words (problematic in itself) surface in the decision about whether to identify our individual entries or not. our last two collaborations were unidentified and numerous people told us how they tried to establish authorship. because the poem in this one seems so much a dialogue between two voices, we decided to use regular typeface and italics to distinguish individual entries, without identifying authorship. this has been carried over into the marginal notes and later prose paragraphs. for those to whom authorship is important, it is possible to figure out who says/writes what. for those to whom authorship is less important than the text as a whole, there are no obvious identifying indicators.

march 20, 1991

# SUBJECT TO CHANGE: A COLLABORATION

March 4, 1991  
9:15 AM

“toss [origin obscure]”

*pre/occupation with*  
*what precedes* - its profound effect

we agree  
to precede  
          each  
              other

*occupied by sun, the day, the time*  
*mutually*

          circling around it  
                          - it?

          the loon or the Queen  
          keeping face or  
                          taking the dive below

- *two sides of the same coin*

why then the toss?

*to pretend*  
*there is difference? reed shine*  
*on the lake: hair shine on your*  
          *wet leg*

March 4

i want to edit this after & just write freely now

*you know how hard it is to edit a collaboration - you can't rewrite what you say  
without affecting what i say in response*

\*

you can't look

why?

you know how i feel about being watched

\*

i have this desire to draw a line and write down everything we say

*let's try it*

\*

what's this?

*reed.*

r-e-a-d?

*r-e-e-d*

\*

[the waiting, restlessness of your clothes shifting on your body]

*it's been half an hour by the way*

March 5  
11:00 AM

*not that precedence is everything*

we are always in response to

*light on the table, these drooping  
tulips,  
open onto death*

illuminated feathers

drifting down

*the dance of talons, hopping  
wing spread*  
always in response to

our hunger  
fear  
desire

*hawk takes precedence, makes off  
with thought*  
thinks only present

*(worry tingles  
elsewhere...the cat?)*

while early this morning...

your taste  
*position makes the difference*

*hawk licker - crow licked  
dying for the  
rapture*

March 5

there's an immature eagle on that tree, defeathering its catch

[chair falls over as D. gets up to see]

you'd be great at bird watching!

*wonder what it's got?*

a bird - probably a duck, i first noticed the feathers flying

\*

*so far, this isn't a very lesbian poem*

\*

*that's the end!*

no, I don't agree - we haven't done half an hour

*otherwise we'll say too much - that makes a nice shape right there*

i don't feel finished

\*

*it just flew off*

it hasn't got a duck, it's a crow

it's landed on that tree, it looks to me like a hawk - a red-tailed hawk,  
that's the one i grew up with

\*

i can still smell you

\*

i'm not into sex & death

*but the fear is a bit like that - rapture [looking it up in  
the dictionary]*

*you know they all relate - a hawk is a raptor, then there's the rapture, rapt,  
seized by enchantment*

March 6  
10:52 AM

the lesbian writer's hands  
*form a procession thought em/bodies*

lead to one another

*leading words leading lips*

fingers 'round  
pencil or mound  
*penis still?*

no.

lead to one another -

*shake a lead or get it  
out*

*how the legs shake*

at each other's  
epicenter

epic

*in the act her story*

*binds woman to goddess  
with/in*

divine rupture



March 6

*is that leap?*

no, lead [lěd]

*oh, i thought it was leap or lead [lěd]*

\*

*i think that's the last word - sounds a bit pathological!*

March 7  
12:55 PM

*breaking out, you said*  
muscles working together in  
*leading you on*

*- more that than precedence*

a kind of birthing  
*womb the body's largest muscle*  
*making room in the language*

with the heart  
the next

*where's mind?*

where's mine?

*quack, quack retort of ducks nesting*

saving our queens?

*face cards close to*  
*your heart?*

struggle?  
re-enactment?

we do not birth ourselves

*under the micro*  
*scope insects*  
*writhe*

in sects

you've left

March 7

*do you want me to add another line? i've got one -*

do

\*

*you're not going to take off on "language"?*

you can do it

[repeated searching through dictionary]

\*

*i don't know what the fucking queens are doing in there*

are you stuck?

*well, this poem seems to be going in two opposite directions and i can't figure out how to re-unite them. I was really excited about something up here and we just keep getting further away from it*

\*

what are you doing?

*i'm making notes of what i was trying to get to*

March 7

the cat purred, walked all over the page, lay down on it. we stroked him. he purred (silky fur) then began to bite. us too. fight. your feeling it isn't a poem - just "blather," and that i wasn't picking up on what you were writing. my feeling your frustration, anger, and wanting to be true to the reader and our struggle for "mine." beginning too late in the day part of the problem - our minds needing their own idiosyncratic directions. the quotidian's power, even on our "day off."

missing each other's signals. my thinking your impatience is partly due to your anger at not having time to do your **own** writing (your novel) but having to respond to other deadlines (like this one). i felt betrayed as your impatience increased. felt it as early as when i wrote "where's mine?" why i wrote it. and then felt angry when you began writing, on another page. you left. i accuse you of wanting a "perfect poem," and of not wanting to make yourself vulnerable to the reader. you say it "isn't working." it's "blather."

i say it's being true to the process. i don't only want to present the reader with "perfect poems" but also the back & forth. the struggle for mine **and** the relaxing into, moving with each other into, something more than mine. that intoxicating doubling of anticipation and revelation. i didn't only intend "mine" as a possessive but also in the sense of mining. mining the mind throughout our whole bodies.

you say it's not poetry. i'm ok with that. don't want to feel controlled by form. "But people will look at lines on the page and expect poetry." i suggest we could write about this, these short lines, these unpredictable spaces - our riding the currents of one another's associative and symbolic thought. for me - that's what we're doing, and sometimes - not doing. both are equally of interest. both have the potential for meaning.

March 7

*where's mind?  
where's mine?*

*territory — & the terror at the edges of losing our way  
in the mind-direction of the other.*

*we talk angrily. you accuse me of leaving the collaboration because it isn't  
going the way i want it to. i accuse you of judgement when you say i'm  
getting too theoretical.*

*"where's mine?" the axe-split in the poem.*

*i want to follow the drift evolving through earlier entries, words, thoughts  
we nudge up to in various ways. the same and different, changing as they  
recur. i have a sense of something moving into focus in & through the  
drift & when we approach it i get excited, connections leap, though there's  
always the strain of contiguity — how much more that is disparate can  
touch on what's already there & nudge it forward?*

*you want to document the struggle our wandering, our mind-blather makes  
along with the flights when we soar together. for you, resistance to flying  
together is as important as flying together. all a part of the process —  
nothing insignificant. although you still use the word "significant" when  
you talk about the actions, the body-shifts you choose to record in the mar-  
gin. you say i want to write a perfect poem. we have a different under-  
standing of form & process — form is more organic for you, what happens.  
for me form is something we make in collaboration with the poem, a 3rd  
entity which develops its own process as we continue. for you the poem is  
the trace of our collaboration, the record of our ins & outs. for me the poem  
is something we collaborate in collaborating with. it doesn't have to be a  
poem you say, just because it's in lines on the page — form isn't holy. form  
is holy, in the sense that it is what gets revealed — and what it tells us  
then.*

*we didn't talk about this before we started. i thought we were writing a poem together with documentary asides in the margin. you thought we were documenting our writing together. the question of which takes precedence — & can we agree? or do we have to?*

March 7

afterthoughts

*up til now when we've collaborated we've each had individual control of our individual pieces so we could shape them according to our own sense of form. it's not surprising that we should have difficulty collaborating on such a microscopic level - it's the 1st time our senses of form have collided with each other and we've had to give up individual control.*

our forms like our fingerprints? the bodies we live in. even more indelible in their idiosyncracies than our words?

*giving each other the gears we are still engaged*

March 9  
9:40 AM

timing

*& the chiming words do  
lead us on*

beyond our intentions

*tending inwards, vortical -*

*let's give it a whirl*

how to keep our centres  
in each other's motion?

*mouths?*

all of them

*a flight of lips*

that balance  
not top or bottom heavy  
*leading somewhere?*

currents aren't maps

but they **move**

sometimes barely -

eagle floating almost still  
in high sky

*seeing the duck  
will plummet rapidly*

stillness sharpening vision

*tai chi: intention behind each  
movement turning circles*

red

tulip's drooping head against the table  
breast of House Finch  
have we read

*what?*  
?

- *whether there's an object to the verb* -

subject  
to change



March 9

are we not writing in the margin anymore? we have up until now —

*do we have to be consistent?*

well, i fell intimidated about it not

*i feel intimidated by you - you were writing **everything** down*

i wasn't writing everything down

*let's not do it this time*

but then we need to indicate why we're not

*we can add a note, besides, we might not even use it*

we don't know that yet

*well, let's write this down*

March 11

collaboration on this micro-creative level is a meditation. it insists on our sustained presence to the page and each other. when we did break away and write our own statements, our writing kept us in close contact, pulled us back to the same meditative page once again.

this process exposed our collaboration to also be a form of mediation "...an intervention between two disputing parties in order to effect a peaceful settlement or compromise through the benevolent intervention of *a neutral power*." but as lesbians and feminists, we know form and language are not neutral, and when up against the wall - they vie even more fiercely than we. there is no neutral, benevolent mediator - we must also assume this role. after fear and fight, there is our love. there is our paired flight.

March 12

*first there is not we but i + i. starting off on different sides (of the same coin), tossing our idiosyncratic perceptions into the ring (sand, circle, performance space, these various animals - read birds - the smell of fear and applause). these perceptions that perform almost arbitrarily it seems (will she see what i mean?) (does it matter if it means something else to her?) meaning the elusive bird, dies into dust only to rise again in a further line, aflame with connections.*

*connections: (we): breathtaking, when thought leaps the gap between two idiosyncratic fields of association two lives have accumulated in their separate dialects, diverse cultural origins, private value systems, unconscious dream hordes. we still argue about the pronunciation of certain words — not the same as mis-reading **reed** or **lead**. and is **mis**-reading the word? everything entered subject to change, subject to transformation in the reader's imaginary, the reader being she, after all, who constructs meaning.*

*so i fears being misread, the flagrant will (raptor) wants her field day, takes off on the wing to pursue **her** meaning. and we desires connection, (rapt) lead away, to wider horizons of each other's making, beyond limits (that first take) taken apart and given to possibility. this does not mean death, though i fears it, fears losing her way.*

March 13

yes, i + i. i for an i and i to i. my handwritten i looking very much like a semicolon, "... punctuation indicating a degree of separation intermediate in value between the comma and the period." **ii** - the Roman numeral for 2 or **;;** a double semicolon, where the separation between the comma and the period is amplified. double ambiguity. doubled possibility.

changing the subject - our feminist project. yet, the subject is always subject to change. from one perspective, we saw an eagle and duck. from the other, we saw a red-tailed hawk and crow. the difference a hundred feet makes.

how we sleep deep in trust. one side then the other, fetal fit  
'round each other like quotation marks

“ ”

“ ”

book-ending one another's *unconscious dream hordes*. buttressing  
each other's night-floating i.

the relief, delight of i being only part of (i)t all. the very real difference in this from how we are absented by the dominators. letting go of the notion of misreading is dependent upon our knowing the difference. “collaborare, com-, together + labōrāre, to work.” i abandons her introductory clause for a being between comma and illusory period. she needs their double jeopardy of discovery more than her differentiating declarations, but she knows old habits die hard.

March 15

yours reads in the shape of a sandwich (toasted), the soft intimate part in the middle “egg shelley” actually what we had for lunch in the cafe yesterday. our day off together a gap in the text. intimate, to intimate, a movement inwards from publish. though i don't know that our bodies bookend the hordes which ride on regardless.

unlimited scope for mayhem watching her body move. egg Shelley. maybe a-hem, without hemming in the fertile urge fiction is, re-reading everything...

*dreamwork: (to work) reality.*

*so that the object transforms into subject and back again. **i being part of (i)t** — the delight as you say, lighting up as perspective shifts, illuminating. the quicksilver way connection leaps the gap between subject and object in desire. she broke the thermometer; we are degrees of thumb and forefinger pooling of liquidities. a figure of telling,*

*egg shelley actually the name in play,*

*yours,*

March 16 & 17

a telling figure, the seduction of - she(')ll!

intimate/intimate. (p)art of each other. y - ours? generative power of our intimacy - this too must have a life on the page. degrees of desire - what we hold in our fingertips! yet, not to idealize. something in between lesbian pulp romance and politically correct silence (each puritanical in impulse). the reader needs more. we read these words with a double voraciousness. coming out

of our shells. the writer lesbian, the reader lesbian shell shocked?  
sexing the page lesbian. in our profound plurality.

“i, yōdh, hand.” this is a gamble. (the roll of...) possibly a do or  
die. egging one another on — sandwiches originated so gamblers  
could stay at the table

doubling the stakes at our tables of chance. “obsession, obsidere,  
to sit down before” each other’s writing presence is to risk each  
other’s inherent chaos — for here the erotic is endlessly born.

you/r bet

March 19

*so, letters (safe on the other side). you write downstairs on your computer. i  
type upstairs. we pass the pages back and forth in the kitchen. not the  
same as sitting at the same table, writing on the one page. we are not the  
same, not one, sitting side by side, **sam**, together. not is where desire  
enters...*

*knotting it together, as something different (to collaborate) in a body (of  
work), seductive, and resistant. currents at play. combatting old habits,  
shifting ground where we meet, quick tongue, sweet wit, cl- : not closing it.*

*each the other to each in our reach together. oxymoronic no doubt, in  
excess. yet, yes.*