# present in her absence

## Carolyn Guertin

Tantant d'obtenir une polyphonie, d'offrir une contre-perspective, Carolyn Guertin crée un supplément pour le cycle poétique "The Old and Their Knowing" ("Les vieux et leur savoir") de Robert Bringhurst. Frappée par un véritable manque dans le texte de Bringhurst, Guertin décide de le remplir. Dans sa poésie, une myriade de femmes du monde pré-socratique émerge—quelques-unes sans noms et d'autres, comme Clytemnestre, Électre, Héra et Sappho sont nommées. Mises au premier plan, finalement concrétisées en mots, leur absence laisse place à leur présence.

an excerpt from

caw

caw

# callings

a counterpoint for Robert Bringhurst

Counterpoint. The ability, unique to music, to say 2 things at once comprehensively. The term derives from the expression *punctus contra punctum*, i.e. 'point against point' or 'note against note'. A single 'part' or 'voice' added to another is called 'a counterpoint' to that other, but the more common use of the word is that of the combination of simultaneous parts, each of significance in itself and the whole resulting in a coherent texture. In this sense Counterpoint is the same as Polyphony.

—The Oxford Dictionary of Music

#### Anacrusis

I think that Robert Bringhurst's poetry is breathtaking. On reading his anthology *The Calling* (Toronto: McClelland, 1995), I felt compelled to respond to it as a poet in kind. As a feminist, however, there were many things in Bringhurst's politics and approach, especially in connection with pre-Socratic philosophy and Bringhurst's poetic cycle "The Old and Their Knowing," that did not ring true for me. The beauty of the pre-Socratics—from what we can understand in a post-Aristotilean world—was their inability to conceive of binary oppositions. For them, it seems everything was united in a single whole: art and science, thought and emotion, poetry and philosophy, and maleness and femaleness, and a host of other binarisms. As a feminist, I felt compelled to address the absence of the female in Bringhurst's poetry—an absence that is not echoed in his critical writing.

caw caw callings, my resulting 70-page poetic response, is not to be read as a challenge to Robert Bringhurst, for I will not take him to task for what he did not intend to do. It is instead a supplement, another voice in his chorus, that addresses a resonant absence...

This excerpt entitled "presence in her absence" was exhibited in a slightly different form by Artcite Gallery in Windsor, Ontario as a part of their *Telling Tales, Telling Lies* show for International Women's Day in 1996.

(present in her absence

she is present as a lack

) a void

all the mothers are conspicuous
conspicuously absent
present in absentia voiced in the silence in the gaps
in the mind in the earth
an ellipse of repressed thought

a crescent in the voicelessness

of the dreaming fluid self

The sun may be married to the moon

but he and his words never touch her1

she enters briefly from the wings

crazed murderess

with a phobia for cleanliness and a gift for birthing

she is present in the water

as mother Amazon who is nurtured by her children:

this mother of rivers has thousands of rivers for mothers<sup>2</sup>

but she is no warrior

has no partner

no mate

alone

a ghostly after-

image

a forgotten shadow

in a mysterious world of

stillness

she is in the sky in the fluid crescent and eye

but she is

silent

Is the sound not integral to the vision?
(Is the female not integral to the male?)

Is the vision not heard as well as seen?
It is and vision lies outside language

exists beyond the words which house it and trace it and lead us its contours time and again with our tongues<sup>3</sup> Vision in their sharp loveliness like lovers to follow

but in these callings her tongue is fixed

when she opens her mouth the wings of song

she only speaks when spoken to

her contours

are hidden

behind curtains of

silence

she is underground and neurotically out of sight

but remembered with

gifts on her wedding day

so absent

that she seems

jilted

at the altar of song

(or she him?

too ugly in this fictional world to be allowed a mirror for the journey home into language

she is abandoned

veiled and unknown

## present in her absence · 107

Antigone is agoraphobic in a postscript

as an afterthought

while even cursèd Creon is namelessly remembered

where is electrifying Electra in her murderous rage?

Clytemnestra?

off stage

awaiting the scis

sors of fate

Herakleitos is cursed with a silly daughter

even Zeus-battered Hera

reduced from hurling lightning bolts to frying pans absent

is

and lonely Penelope silently weaves her unending fragments

elsewhere

she is present in dreaming

Greek voices who sing from their fragmentary pages

of that other philosophy of attraction and repulsion

who sing of love through the margins of

silence

listen:

I say that whatever one loves is4

Sappho sings softly from her authoritative magnitude of fragmentary fame sweetly voicing her knowing in this feminine void

this great Presocratic Philosopher of Love is denied a heartbeat of sapphic meter from the margins

not a warble of song

Sappho's surly contemporary serial killer Parmenides (who killed the bird of heart

in his thought)

he too whispered naughty secrets in the goddess' shell-shaped ear

(he gave her credit for

devising and introducing love to the gods in his theogony<sup>5</sup>

he frolicked with the hot-tempered daughters of the sun and played mean volleyball with sun maidens on the scorching sands near Pyres' home

while star-gazing after a hasty midnight embrace it must have been he found the shape of his loves in the shapely sky

Parmenides subsequently proclaimed the earth round and voluptuous and said that all objects were suspended in a seminal fluid lighter than air

he knew

all bodies left to themselves

would fall to the ground impotent<sup>6</sup>

even scorning Demokritos

who never raised his head from his work

of classifying bodies

vowed that the original form made

atoms and the void alone real

believed in the bloody feminine labour

of cosmogony

a literal world-begetting and so shaped his theories on *an embryological model*<sup>7</sup>

blazing Empedokles died in the embrace of his lover Etna he circumscribed a feminine

world in his travels

with his taste for colour and cooking

neatly drew and quartered motherly gaia:

the 123 four elements

he said

interact under the influence of two cosmic powers

Love (who is Aphrodite)

(who is ?8

and engendered the gregarious microscopic universe

for attractive Empedokles

under Love

the elements are dear to and desired by one another it is only *Strife* that makes them grim and hostile...<sup>9</sup>

For this philandering philosopher world formation and world destruction were only possible adrift on the sea of Love where that sacred emotion enacted cosmological creativity

and the schizo

phrenic goddess in the same

orgiastic urge

flaunted

equal and opposite

apocalyptic powers

she is present

but silent

her face covered by care-worn hands

she is

waiting

waiting

for all of the blood shed

(not in acts of creation but in apocalyptic destruction that is the clockwork and machinery of an industrial age waiting for all the blood that has been shed

to stop flow

n g

weaving these fateful silences
these small roots linking fingers to join in being in the fragrant
earth that is heart hearth home
that is her

she is waiting

through

eternity

She is deaf, dumb and blind. But she hears through the soles of her feet, speaks from under her skirt, and sees through the holes in the palms of her hands<sup>10</sup>

like Philomela this blind seer does not speak words

her

silence is her fluid signature

these

spaces

punctuate

her

words

like

sparks

she is i n art i c u late

she is sev

ered

from the well-springs of eloquence  $but\ not\ from\ the\ sources\ of\ meaning^{11}$ 

she is

here

listening

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Bringhurst Calling 216.
- <sup>2</sup> Bringhurst Calling 191.
- <sup>3</sup> Bringhurst Map 107.
- <sup>4</sup> Sappho 41.
- <sup>5</sup> Parmenides 83.
- <sup>6</sup> Lempriere 485.
- <sup>7</sup> Edwards, Volume 4, 448.
- <sup>8</sup> Edwards, Volume 2, 497.
- <sup>9</sup> Edwards, Volume 6, 444.
- <sup>10</sup> Bringhurst Calling 17.
- <sup>11</sup> Bringhurst Map 110.

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