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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

In *the man with seven toes*, Michael Ondaatje takes the bare fragments of a myth sustained on gossip and only marginal to orthodox "history" to create a raw landscape of bodies blurred between unity and disunity, strung strenuously across the gap between what Dennis Lee refers to as "earth" and "world." Ondaatje juxtaposes unlike images and ideas and fragments language, forcing both his characters and his readers to immerse themselves in a disjointed world that defies simple categorization. Neither the myth nor the manner in which Ondaatje manipulates that myth allows for reader complacency.

Myth-manipulation through Dismemberment in Michael Ondaatje's *the man with seven toes*

TANYA LEWIS

MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S ELABORATION and betrayal of marginal myths are constant processes in his work. The most obvious examples of myth-manipulation are books such as *Coming Through Slaughter*, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, and of course, *the man with seven toes*. Even in the case of familial "myths," such as those revealed and refashioned in *Running in the Family*, however, Ondaatje works on the admitted premise that "a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts" (176), and more accurately, that "truth disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end nothing of personal relationships" (42). In *the man with seven toes*, Ondaatje takes the bare fragments of a myth sustained on gossip and only marginal to orthodox "history" to create a raw landscape of bodies blurred between unity and disunity, strung strenuously across the gap between what Dennis Lee refers to as "earth" and "world" (4), more traditionally known as "nature" and "civilization." Throughout *the man with seven toes*, Ondaatje juxtaposes unlike images and ideas and fragments language, forcing both his characters and his readers to immerse themselves in a disjointed world that defies simple categorization. There is a naming of parts, in bodies as well as in acts, but no part carries the intrinsic definition for which we long. Neither the myth nor the manner in which Ondaatje manipulates that myth allows for reader complacency.

The myth from which *the man with seven toes* draws its vision is as complicated and contradictory as Ondaatje's realization of it. He was not the first to distort fact in the story of Mrs. Fraser's 1835/36 shipwreck on an island off the coast of Queensland (Alexander 16). Indeed, it seems Mrs. Fraser may have fiddled fact into fiction herself. According to Michael Alexander's 1971 book, *Mrs. Fraser on the Fatal Shore*, the title figure was the object of an organized and successful search effort: "Docu-

ments, official and unofficial, show beyond reasonable doubt that the convict Graham rescued Mrs. Fraser and others from the *Stirling Castle* and fairly earned his reward and release" (118). Nevertheless, this "official" history, "for all its convincing circumstances, does not tell the whole story and ... Mrs. Fraser's salvation involved another convict, living with the aborigines at the time, named Bracefell" (118). This second version of Mrs. Fraser's rescue comes to us in the form of Henry Stuart Russell's 1888 memoirs, the gist of which forms the basis of Sidney Nolan's series of paintings on Mrs. Fraser and Bracefell. Obviously, if there is an essential truth to the tale, it is well hidden. Mrs. Fraser, who often altered her story to suit syndication, may have had reasons to avoid the truth. She may have had a relationship with Bracefell, who, as a convict, caused her shame (Alexander 131). Furthermore, her version of events is suspect due to her blatantly dishonest and opportunistic behaviour after her rescue. She and her second husband, Captain Greene, capitalized on and likely embellished her dramatic tale, collecting subscriptions in Australia, as well as in London, on the false grounds of destitution. She even hoodwinked the Lord Mayor of London, Mr. Kelly, into soliciting funds on her behalf, failing to reveal either her second marriage or her wealth — a situation which caused the mayor no end of public embarrassment when the more astute Commissioner of Police, Mr. M.M.G. Dowling, revealed the truth. All versions of the story, however, do concur with Ondaatje's ending, which he attributes to Colin MacInnes (*man* 43): Mrs. Fraser-Greene did wind up exhibiting herself in Hyde Park for a price a peek, though even the exact price is a matter of dispute.

This introductory background, curious as it is, was largely unknown to Ondaatje when he wrote *the man with seven toes*. According to Solecki, "the story as summarized by Colin MacInnes and painted by Sidney Nolan in his Mrs. Fraser series (1947-1957) is the only account with which he was familiar at the time of the writing of his poem" (137). Thus, beginning with the mere fragment of a myth, Ondaatje further dismembers the story, picking up those pieces which interest him and adding parts from his imagination to create an eclectic and incomplete whole. Significantly, Mrs. Fraser loses her name, a crucial part of her self. In fact, the entire poem concerns itself almost obsessively with parts. In an earlier poem published first in the *Dainty Monsters* collection, and then in *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do*, Ondaatje speaks of his absent appendix, and cries his fear of dispersed self: "O world, I shall be buried all over Ontario" (*Knife* 9). In *the man with seven toes*, most of the characters will be lucky to be buried at all. In the third poem of the series we encounter, through

the woman's eyes, "One, whose right eye had disappeared" (11). The loss is a mystery, gently spoken, yet disturbing. We are in a world where body parts drift away — where the self can slide to dust in bits and pieces. The image is apt, however: the woman loses and recreates herself throughout the course of the poem as she blends into or is consumed by "earth" and then re-emerges. Her losses are not all abstract, either: "hot fingers in [her] mouth, pulled/ silver fillings out," and someone

spat love in [her] ear
bit the lobe off,
ate it, that a wedding band
in his stomach growing there (14)

She is forcibly scattered amongst new people and/or "earth" and — shocking to both Victorian sensibilities and our own — steadily loses ownership of herself. The theme of dismemberment continues in the killing of a goat, which she identifies with her rape:

open like purple cunts under ribs, then tear
like to you a knife down their pit, a hand in the warm
the hot the dark boiling belly and rip
open and blood spraying out like dynamite

...
and the men rip flesh tearing, the muscles
nerves green and red still jumping
stringing them out, like you (16)

She is strung out and torn to pieces, making it more and more difficult for either her or us to understand her inner self as intact. With her body exposed beyond her control, the illusion of self-sufficient solidity becomes more obviously an illusion. We are an assemblage of parts, hardly distinguishable from the parts that constitute "earth" all around us. Ondaatje continues to articulate the brutal yet here life-sustaining force of dismemberment further down the page:

and put their heads in
and catch quick quick come on
COME ON! the heart still beating
shocked into death, and catch the heart still running
in their hard quiet lips and eat it alive

alive still in their mouths throats still beating Bang
still! BANG in their stomachs (16)

The absence of punctuation makes the poetry urgent, and the flow of words imitates the flow of life blood pumping from one creature's heart into another's stomach. They "put their heads in" "the purple cunts under ribs" in a reversal of the birth process. Life in *the man with seven toes*, then, is no more neatly linear than it is neatly anything else. The processes of time occur in fragmentary ways so that even such a momentous event as birth may recur and reverse.

Life and death can also be simultaneously contradictory. "Bang" is a comic-book word anachronistic to this poem and generally associated with death, as in "Bang — You're dead." Here, however, "bang" is life itself in an essential part — the heart. Two hearts beat in one body. Do we see this scene through the woman's eyes, the poet's, or our own? The bang in the stomach could be the self-destruction involved in the consumption of a living creature whom we have come to identify as an extension of the woman's self. According to Douglas Barbour, in *the man with seven toes* "Ondaatje eschews interpretation entirely, especially postcolonial political interpretation of the theme of betrayal" (Barbour 34). There is more to this disturbing image than political, apolitical, or consumptive interpretation, however: it is a wry joke in the midst of horror, as if Ondaatje is saying, "Eat your heart out."

Dismemberment is not only a horror realised on the woman; it is a power she wields, as well. Victorians would likely have seen her as a pure sufferer at the hands of the "aborigines," and then at the hands of Brace-fell, renamed "Potter" in *the man with seven toes*. Some today would cast her as a pure female victim of male aggression, forgetting the probable participation of women in her original stripping and in much of her subsequent dismemberment. I believe, however, that the woman is also destructive. Her physicality is a weapon, even as it is an object. With Potter, "she tensed body / like a tourniquet to him" (21). A tourniquet is a double-edged device. It has preservative powers, but more generally causes the loss of limbs as it cuts blood and life from the affected area. The woman therefore cuts Potter apart, even as he does the same to her. More concretely, she causes him to lose his toes, "the stumps sheer / as from ideal knives" (22). If it were not for her, he would not be wallowing in a swamp with piranhas. Of course, she does not have the physical power to force his aid, but she certainly does not display any great gratitude for his sacrifice — for his willing dismemberment on her part. "[G]od has saved me" (39) she cries. Well, god may have had a hand in her rescue, but what about Potter?

Not only people, but inanimate objects we generally associate with

western civilization and dissociate from rough nature contain, though passively, the power to impale:

found a tin of SIBER'S oranges
 next to a mountain.
 Burnt hands touching it.
 Coiled round it for two hours.
 Cooled it in shadow.
 At noon, bit with teeth
 ripped off a lip orange stung
 black scars thickening instantly up to my nose.

Found brown water. (36)

Potter and the woman expect good things of their former world, the world to which they are attempting to return. They cherish this tin with patience and near-reverence, and are betrayed. Potter (I presume) loses his lip to it, and their reward is brown water. What is the lesson? The packaging is nice, but the contents betray and even “world” wounds. Ondaatje thus makes it clear that nowhere are we safe from violence and the reduction to parts. This section of the poem also foreshadows a more obvious, if unspoken betrayal. Although Ondaatje does not articulate the woman’s turn on her temporary helpmate at the end, his inclusion of the Colin MacInnes version of the myth of Mrs. Fraser as a kind of fill-in-the-blanks epilogue gives us the interpretation of his choice.

The theme of destruction as part of survival continues throughout *the man with seven toes*. Potter wins their dinner by “thumbing its eyes” (29). Even those innocent of will destroy, as if by instinct:

Slept away from trees
 ... where
 birds fell off asleep and hit
 and tore your face with waking. (31)

The automatic reaction of the birds is malevolence. In the vague world of *the man with seven toes*, as in the desert worlds of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *The English Patient*, even such otherwise benevolent forces as sun and heat are weapons of “earth” wielded against those of the world. The figures in this early work burned their flesh purple and brown so that it “split in streaks, / dress and skin stank and flapped, / fell” (33). Again, the woman is losing her self, as her body evolves to physically blur the boundary between nature and civilization. One can hardly tell

anymore where her dress ends and her body begins. Both are red, bloody, and flowing from the self as if in reluctant, mingling flight, and the brutal sun is the reason Potter must mine “her throat sweat, like coconut” (35) even as the natives earlier mined her mouth for its fillings. She is becoming earth, her self and her story ever more malleable.

Even as the woman blurs across the artificial divide between earth and world, she articulates a like ambiguity in her surroundings. The aborigines taunt her for her distinctions:

stripped clothes off like a husk
and watched my white
...
and laughed,
 then threw
the red dress back at me. (12)

The natives recognize the fallacy of her difference. The woman depends on her red dress as a flimsy armour against earth. As long as her parts are covered, she cannot be taken apart, or dismembered. She can pretend she is whole. The aborigines in their exposure, though, have “elbows sharp as beaks” (13) and are easier to see as savage, although she, too, soon has her “elbows out for balance, bent / half staggering like a crow” (18). She thinks that to them she is “like a like a / drum, a drum” (14) as they violate her, making her sound as an inanimate object in an environment where she otherwise has no voice. She then watches them dance to a real drum transforming themselves into birds, which then transform into sea, so that at a third remove, they, too, are not themselves, but elements of nature (15). The difference between these transformations is that while the aborigines accept, and even seek, transgression of boundaries, the woman thinks of her body as a possession and a product of world, and is unable or unwilling to accept the earth revealed in her. All of nature blends, while she sees herself apart. The cocks of goats are “like birds flying to you” (16) and blood aligns itself with world in the same section, when described as “dynamite.” She sees the “sky raw and wounded” (17), as if it is human, or animal, and the wind that once “beat her knees” (9) now invades her, and “shakes in [her] head” (17). Later, she says the sky “was a wrecked black boot” (32), so that earth is world — something with which she can identify and an object for which she longs, not realizing that her own observation contradicts her goal. She blurs boundaries, herself, even as she is blurred against her will.

Ondaatje found inspiration for this ‘blurring of myth through dis-

memberment' theme in the work *Mrs. Fraser*, painted in 1947 by Sidney Nolan (Barbour 33). In it, a mane of dark hair obscures the subject's face, just as Ondaatje obscures the woman's identity by refusing to name her. To name is to civilize, which is neither the intention of the painting nor of the poem. She is a creature reduced to all fours — naked, reaching, and animalistic. Her hands and feet are merely suggested, so that it looks as though they have been chopped off, and her limbs are strangely proportioned, so that her arms look longer than her legs. Her buttocks are painted in an almost flat tone, which makes them look more like a lame lion's haunches than part of a woman. Her breasts blend into her elongated torso, as if removed, or hidden in shadow. The geography around this figure is similarly vague, desolate, and unrefined, as is the literary landscape in *the man with seven toes*. Indistinct strokes of green tangle, suggesting jungle brush, and end at an abrupt horizon over which three pole-like trees loom. The creature's head is down, however, so she cannot see the open space of sky above her, just as Ondaatje's woman can only seem to focus on the dirt and confusion of her situation. The clearing in which she crawls is crisscrossed with rough, brown strokes of paint, which may have given Ondaatje the idea of abandoning her on railroad tracks. In effect, both Nolan and Ondaatje strip the history of Mrs. Fraser to an impersonal and psychological essence.

Another painting by Sidney Nolan, entitled *Royal Hotel* (1948) (Krimmel 9), figures in *the man with seven toes* in its final section, although it appears nowhere in either the collective myth, or the "official" history concerning Mrs. Fraser. The image is of an outpost of civilization in a landscape utterly barren of vegetation, and the building itself, with its crooked doors, roughly painted walls, and delicate supports, seems hardly sound enough to support its inhabitants. It is a symbol of what we think we need to survive, but which also signifies destruction. It is unnatural to its environment. In *the man with seven toes*, the woman lies in a bed in the "heart" of the Royal Hotel "sensing herself like a map" (41), which aligns her with the natives who have "maps on the soles of their feet" (13). She is nature now, but in the heart of a construct ironically articulated in biological terms, and a final scene of dismemberment:

In the morning she found pieces of a bird
chopped and scattered by the fan

blood sprayed onto the mosquito net,
its body leaving paths on the walls
like red snails that drifted down in lumps.

She could imagine the feathers
 while she had slept
 falling around her
 like slow rain. (41)

She once more finds protection in civilization; the mosquito net shields her from the violent war waged between earth and world, but the marks remain, as will her scars. One could also read the end as a wry revenge on the birds which have added to her disorientation and dismemberment throughout the poem, and heaped insult to the point of comedy on her rape, by “peeing from the branches” (32), ensuring her violation is both internal (perpetrated in her mouth, her vagina, and her eroded self) and external (she’s coated in shit). In the Royal Hotel, the bird falls on her, destroyed, and its blood is like rain. Boundaries are adapted, or reconstructed, and the war of “savage fields” continues.

If the works of Sidney Nolan inspired *the man with seven toes*, it is only natural that we ask why one of his paintings or photographs does not decorate the cover of the poem. Certainly, any one of several would have suited the purpose. Yet, “The cover is a black & white reproduction of *Man and Dog*, 1959 by Jack Chambers” (*man* 45). Ondaatje’s almost obsessive inclusion of dogs in his work aside, there is a valid reason for this choice. To use *Mrs. Fraser* (Clark 92) would be to give her a form that would contradict the indistinct and fragmentary nature of her physical description in the poem as a whole. It would also serve to name her, which the poem adamantly avoids. Finally, it would give her a centrality that the poem on its own leaves in question. History could not pin her down, so why should Nolan and Ondaatje? To use the *Royal Hotel* (Krimmel 9) painting, on the other hand, would be to give “world” prominence over the wild animals and jungle that otherwise dominate the woman and the convict’s experiences, thus contradicting the narrative. The poem is full of violence and life; the painting exhibits near death in its stillness and detachment from nature. The final painting by Sidney Nolan which begs nomination as a cover or frontispiece is *Mrs. Fraser and Convict* (Clark 140). It, however, indicates none of the animal imagery Ondaatje so fully develops. Furthermore, it betrays the essential dismemberment of the tale, focusing so obviously on unity, and again transgresses Ondaatje’s tacit stipulation of the woman’s anonymity. Even so, why does Ondaatje choose *Man and Dog* as the first impression in *the man with seven toes*? The man’s body is hunched over in obvious distress — an emotion consistent with Potter’s experience, and the experience of many readers — and

consists of a jigsaw of distinct shapes, as if you could pluck biceps, hamstring, or finger from the whole. The dog looks almost like a wolf, its fur as jagged as ferns, and its nearness to man expressed in the direction of its gaze. Also, the two figures almost blot out the landscape, so that there can be no contradiction of Ondaatje's descriptions. Most importantly, this painting maintains the woman's marginality. She begins and ends the poem alone, and we never know who she is but indirectly, while Potter receives specific identification, and thus the sort of focus that can safely place him on the cover. *Man and Dog* may not have inspired Ondaatje's work, but it is certainly in keeping with his tale and his technique.

Ondaatje's deconstruction in *the man with seven toes* does not limit itself to myth material or physical bodies but affects language as well. Narrators are inferred rather than announced, and as Leslie Mundwiler points out, "Ondaatje's solution to the narrative problem in *the man with seven toes* was to truncate exposition, wherever it became necessary to have it, and to rely on a program note to give background and to tie up certain loose ends. ...and [the poem] suggests, by its very combination of vividness and incompleteness, the shock, exhaustion and suffering of the protagonist" (Mundwiler 38-39). The emotional effect of this is true as early as the third stanza: "The train shuddered, then wheeled away from her. / She was too tired even to call. / Though, come back, she murmured to herself" (9). The train rolls across the boundary between animate and inanimate by shuddering — a distinctly human action — yet the motion also represents the woman's slow abandonment by "civilization" as the trail wheels away. Oddly enough, this opening poem is the most grammatically coherent of all except for historical-type explanations until the end of the work. Most of the poems are series of sentence fragments, or dismembered sentences: "Sat for an hour" (10), "not lithe, they move" (13), "tongued me" (14), "goats black goats, balls bushed in the centre" (16), "in grey swamp" (22), "sun disappears" (23), "into the plain; passed a body" (26), "to lock her head between knees" (35). These are all examples of Ondaatje using a fragmentary method of composition to reflect the fragmentary nature of his specific theme, and of myths in general. All of these phrases are initial lines. Subjects are stripped. Articles are often absent. The language is as bare as the landscape and comes to the reader in flashes and parts. Tongues, toes, eyelids, knees, mouths, fingers, bellies, balls, hearts, flesh, ankles, ominous and unidentified "shapes" (24), hands, and simply "pieces" (41) dominate the text. Parts are not merely combined to make humans, but separable from humans and pervasive in the landscape. Animal parts become human, and vice versa, until Mrs. Fraser

finally exhibits her combined parts “at 6d a showing in Hyde Park” (43). As Solecki notes, “The woman has entered a physical and psychological landscape or wilderness her reaction to which is caught in the violently beautiful imagery and dismembered rhythms of successive lyrics” (Solecki 141). The general effect is of unity through the very consistency of *disunity*. Thus, the form of the poem mirrors its central concern — the mutual and fragmentary nature of opposing concepts.

Ondaatje dismembers *the man with seven toes* not only through word choice, or incomplete grammar, but also through abrupt changes of form. Each poem varies in number of lines, as well as in internal line length. There are also several “out-excerpts,” or sections that take us out of the personal narration of the story to give supposedly “historical” perspectives. The first of these occurs on page 20, where Ondaatje gives us a quick summary of Potter’s identity in popular ballad form:

Potter was a convict
brought in on the GLITTER DAN
 they landed him in Adelaide
 in a week the bugger ran

The bounty men they came for him
 they looked for sixty weeks
 but Potter lived on wolves and birds
 down in Cooper’s Creek

We can take this as a nursery rhyme or song of the day, but in fact, it is no such thing. Potter, the bounty men, and even Cooper’s Creek, are all products of Ondaatje’s imagination. He is toying with us, and with the folksong form, to add depth to his myth-manipulation. We see a new typeface and read it as we read the italics on page 42 — as evidence of Victorian folk-culture’s engagement with the story of Mrs. Fraser. This latter example does indeed begin with the lyrics to an authentic Scottish ballad, but after the first stanza it becomes Ondaatje’s own creation. Ondaatje thus builds with fragments of form, as well as fragments of story, in order to create a narrative appropriate to “the truth of fiction.” *the man with seven toes* is, in fact, merely an initial foray into a style and source-blurring genre of Ondaatje’s own making. Later works such as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Running in the Family*, and *Coming through Slaughter* all exhibit similar techniques.

Unlike the works cited above, however, *the man with seven toes* takes place in an anonymous landscape. If we follow the myth of Mrs. Fraser, the poem should describe Queensland, where her ship wrecked, but

Ondaatje clearly alters the myth in that he substitutes train for ship, removes her name, and renames Bracefell. He, like Sidney Nolan, relies on vagueness to keep the myth afloat, dreamlike in its imprecision. From the very first poem of the series, Ondaatje removes the certainty of location from his story. "She looked away but everything around her was empty" (10), just as the landscape in Nolan's *Mrs. Fraser and Convict* is empty, void of identifiers. The people she meets give no name, or she fails to mention one, so that the aborigines are simply "they" (12). To name them would be to locate them in both history and geography, whereas Ondaatje uses them as human and transitory geography, with "maps on the soles of their feet" (13). Potter and the woman later spend "three days in swamp" (25), but we do not know which swamp, and without an article, either definite or indefinite, it is as though "swamp" is a living entity without boundaries, or a city unto itself. They then move "into the plain" (26), as if there is only one plain and its name is unnecessary. Neither is "the river" (28) named, or "a mountain" (36), and she says "we came from there to there" (38), as if the exact path of their travel is unimportant. Only the emotional and physical truth of their journey as revealed through their wretched bodies matters. In fact, the only geographic specific Ondaatje gives directly is the Royal Hotel, though he does not locate it in an exact setting, and only describes parts of the woman's room, and not the structure itself. He forbids the comfort of context, removing us from understood geography so that we are lost to the world, just as Mrs. Fraser is.

As I suggested in the introduction, nothing about *the man with seven toes* is simple. The natives who brought "food on a leaf" (11) sustain the woman, even as she feels they destroy her. They seem savage, their

faces scarred with decoration
feathers, bones, paint from clay
pasted, skewered to their skin.
Fanatically thin,
black ropes of muscle. (11)

Why does Ondaatje have the woman shrink from the people she herself dismembers through piecemeal perception? What do they do that we do not? Western women still scar their faces with lasers, wear feathers and bones (in the forms of feather boas, pearls, and ribbing, for example), paint themselves with clay and chemicals, and skewer their skin to wear ornaments. We make ourselves thin through either sadness or resolve, and many strive at Fitness World for muscles lean as ropes. In short, her hor-

ror is a parody, and one which should alert the contemporary reader. The reduction of people to parts is not simply a clever device Ondaatje uses to distinguish his poem from other works, but one which fits the society *for* which he writes as well as the society *of* which he writes.

Even more complex than the woman's relationship with the natives is her relationship with Potter. His rape of her seems unforgivable, yet they form a community in misery that has as much companionship in it as animosity. In the painting *Mrs. Fraser and Convict* (1962) (Clark 140), Sidney Nolan creates a sort of Adam and Eve. Lonely and naked they stand, cast into a world of hardship and desolation, wearily recalling Eden (Krimmel 24). They support each other almost tenderly on the edge of a canvas otherwise occupied by an indistinct and lonely landscape. The convict's prison stripes seem a part of his skin, and his penis hangs, a vague phantom, as if it is an idea, and not a physical appendage. The woman's breasts are likewise blurred, a mere suggestion of her physical self. The boundary between their bodies is non-existent, and her shoulder and chest melt into his, as if they are one. When these two characters first meet in *the man with seven toes* the woman tries to reclaim her body, saying twice, "don't you touch me.... Don't you touch me" (19). She wants control of her parts. He responds (reassuringly? urgently? ominously?), "I'll take you. ...I'll take you" (19). They are careful. They are defining boundaries. They examine each other, like animals circling in their minds: he — her red dress between her thighs, so obviously woman, and she — his chipped snake hand and striped shirt, both threatening and wild. Soon, however, they are a community. By the end of page 23 they are an "us." "We," "us," and "our" become the norm. There are "things against us" (25). "Things came at us and hit us" (38). They are together against the world. Standards have changed from what they were, and in spite of her rape, she describes his

Body brown as a bruise.
All but his shirt
striped and fabulous
like beast skin in greenery. (33)

He was the beast who wounded her, but he is also brilliant, and has also suffered. Furthermore, he continues to care for her. He

carried her round the hook of knees
her face wrapped in his shirt
breathing in the cool dark
Bathed her face with spittle.

Would lick her wrists, back
of her neck, the locked eyelids. (34)

All that is most vulnerable in her is his to protect. They are intimate in his gentleness and her passivity — even if only for a short time — and he goes to great length and physical effort to preserve her. Yet she still cannot share, or instinctively won't, so that he must “hold open teeth” to “drink her throat sweat, like coconut” (35), continuing violation.

Ondaatje also links Potter and the woman through the similarities of their bizarre experiences. During her time with the aborigines, the woman is showered by the sperm of goats, “white leaping like fountains in your hair / your head and mouth till it dries / and tightens on your face like a scar” (16). Later, when Potter attacks a wolf for them to eat, he comes to her “with his mouth and his striped shirt bright and red / almost dry already from the sun” (29). The colour of liquid is different, but the experience of being covered and scarred by the hot liquid of an animal body is common to both Potter and the woman. Earth marks them in its chosen colors. They then share a meal of “pale green eggs” (30), repeating their previously discrete experiences in a common context. She says, “we sucked the half flesh out / salt liquid spilling / drying white on our shoulders,” (30), so that this time they share “the pleasure of a scar,” an idea which Ondaatje goes on to link to love in his poem “The Cinnamon Peeler” in *Running in the Family* (78-79).

There is, however, an occasional sense of play and happiness mingled with their desperation. Their meal of “pale green eggs” (30) suggests delicate domesticity, and when the man kills a wolf with his teeth and thumbs he comes “...jumping up, waving, / running to [her], carrying it, smiling / with his mouth and his striped shirt bright and red” (29). There is a perverse joy in such violence, and he runs to her like a lover with a special treat. He is not despicable here, but more like the convict in Nolan's painting who allows Mrs. Fraser to lean on him so that they meld in their marginal survival. He, like her (and like us), is amazed and almost overcome by both world and earth and their ability to shock, and then to numb. He articulates the maddening nature of these conflicting elements and the dismemberment they cause in *the man with seven toes* most simply when he says, “Sometimes I don't believe what's going on” (27).

Many of us may not wish to accept the isolation and chaos Ondaatje evokes through myth-manipulation in *the man with seven toes* and may refuse to believe that it speaks to our own society, but I believe that it does. Such reluctance is understandable, however. The poem is shocking, after all, in its inclusion of beauty and complexity in violence, as well as

in its insistence on dismemberment as both a literary tool and a unifying theme. That Ondaatje examines a world raw and elemental where truth is malleable makes us uncomfortable, perhaps because we recognize such manipulations in ourselves and our stories. We, too, are an assemblage of parts strung out across the divide between earth and world, and like Potter and the woman, may be buried in bits, or not buried at all.

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