

Touch and Affect in Alice Munro's "Nettles"; or, Redefining Intimacy

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Abstract

The skin, and the sense of touch it is linked with, is often an essential way to approach the world in Munro's stories, and brings the focus onto affects. This study focuses on touch and the skin in "Nettles" (*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, 2001), a particularly luminous instance of story in which skin and affect together play a key role in creating a sense of intimacy.

Résumé

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La peau, et le sens du toucher auquel elle est liée, est souvent un moyen essentiel d'aborder le monde dans les histoires de Munro, et met l'accent sur les affects. Cette étude porte sur le toucher et la peau dans « Nettles » (*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, 2001), exemple particulièrement lumineux d'une histoire dans laquelle la peau et l'affect jouent un rôle clé dans la création d'un sentiment d'intimité.

I think of being an old maid, in another generation. There were plenty of old maids in my family. I come of straitened people, madly secretive, tenacious, economical. Like them, I could make a little go a long way. A piece of Chinese silk folded in a drawer, worn by the touch of fingers in the dark. Or the one letter, hidden under maidenly garments, never needing to be opened or read because every word is known by heart, and a touch communicates the whole. Perhaps nothing so tangible, nothing but the memory of an ambiguous word, an intimate, casual tone of voice, a hard, helpless look. That could do.

-Alice Munro, "Bardon Bus," *The Moons of Jupiter*

The fiction of Alice Munro is largely devoted to examining women protagonists' emotions, and how they make decisions and life choices. What prompts a character to respond to a situation in a certain way rather than another? Analysis of emotions is often retrospective and in the first person, which brings in another, or several layers of complexity, as a narrator's perspective changes over time, sometimes several times, and individual memory is not entirely reliable. Munro's fiction is also characterized by silence and reticence, while palpable or remembered evidence of emotions is often scanty and elusive. Facts are hard to verify, emotions evolve, analysis is unstable, and interpretation, always tentative (see, for instance, Howells 1998; Cox 2004; Bigot 2014). In this context of uncertainty, the sense of touch paradoxically plays a central role, as the skin, the pivotal element to that sense, links together sensation, emotions, memory, as well as the sense of self, of one's relation to the world and to others. The skin, and the sense of touch it is linked with, is often an essential way to approach the world in Munro's stories, and brings the focus onto affects.

In *Ethics*, Baruch Spinoza (2002) defines affect as follows: "By emotion [*affectus*] I understand the affections of the body by which the body's power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or

checked, together with the ideas of these affections” (278). Through skin and affects, a character will situate herself, analyze her relation to others in sensuous and emotional terms, opening the way to ethical reflection on the body’s and the self’s inclinations. The sense of touch thus becomes essential to a definition of the sense of self and of one’s relation to others, of the relationship of body and mind (Hardt 2007, x). Dilia Narduzzi (2013) has explored this notion, which is central to Munro’s work, by showing in her study of “Child’s Play” how touch leads to reactions of disgust in Marlene and Charlene in relation to Verna, a disabled girl their age. She argues that aversion to disability partly results from repeated gestures that reinforce social norms and conventions (Ahmed 2006a, 253-55), and removes the possibility of intimacy with disabled people.

This article focuses on touch and the skin in “Nettles” (*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, 2001), a story in which touch is performed in codified ways so that it brings a man and a woman closer together—up to the point when touch reveals something more secret and vulnerable about them. The story ends in a form of aporia, the relationship stops and desire (and affect) is later on transferred onto a different subject, another man. Skin is determining in the experience and (re)definition of intimacy, which may be described here, along with Lauren Berlant (1998), as “an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way” (1). But, as Berlant also points out, “no one knows how to do intimacy,” and yet “the demand for the traditional promise of intimate happiness to be fulfilled in everyone’s everyday life” is huge (2). How is this paradox addressed by the female first-person narrator in “Nettles”? To a certain extent, her predicament is representative of women who went through the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s, wanting more genuine physical and sexual sensations in their intimate relationships with men, while having been brought up with traditional patterns of gender roles and men-women relations.

In the epigraph to this essay, which is the opening of “Bardon Bus” (*The Moons of Jupiter*, 1982), the narrator of the story imagines herself as an old maid in the old days, free of the risks that a love life presents, but not deprived of the sensations that love triggers, as they can be imagined by simple touch with a significant

object, or even from memory of a scene, a word, or someone’s expression. There is no direct interaction with another embodied human being here, and the economy of emotions is a closed circuit that is self-sufficient, provided it can rely on a few external objects or memories that act as the signs of past possibilities, lives not followed; by contrast, with these emotions, affects, with the emphasis on the link between body and mind, would have prompted some sort of action. In “Bardon Bus,” the contemporary narrator herself is at a low point after the end of a love affair, and is reflecting on her misery while hoping to get over it and bounce back. The effect of her projection into the past in the opening of the story is to enhance the range of personal choices, and the range of risks that women of her generation are facing by contrast with their much more restrained settler ancestors. It is also a sign of her feeling of vulnerability when experimenting these choices. “Nettles” is mainly set in the same period as “Bardon Bus”; the temporal focus is 1979, when the unnamed protagonist meets Mike McCallum, a man she knew and played with as a child. There is a flashback to that period of their lives, and the story is told years after the central event of their encounter as adults. But the focus is on their meeting again in middle age at a common friend’s place in the Ontario countryside, when the woman narrator is freshly separated from her husband, living on her own in Toronto; a single person simultaneously wanting to be independent and longing for intimacy. The story hinges on the moment when what seemed like a possible physical passion turns into compassion, the memory of love, and longing again.

The skin is the most basic means of communication with others, as psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu (1985, 62) reminds us. It is also one of the sites of affect; to quote Sara Ahmed and Judith Stacey (2001), “[s]kin opens our bodies to other bodies: through touch, the separation of self and other is undermined in the very intimacy or proximity of the encounter” (5-6). What kind of power (Spinoza 2002) may women derive from it, if any? Or is the fact that skin, like self, is more exposed and available, a source of vulnerability? What kind of impact does this evolution have on women’s ethical behaviour? How does it redefine a woman’s place in the world as subject, in an ethical economy where individual (including sexual) differences are constantly negotiated (Shildrick 2001, 171)? These are some of the

questions I will study in “Nettles,” by examining how skin may be considered alternately in its primary function as what enables the sense of touch and therefore affect and intimacy; in its links with psychic life, through a dynamic of surface and depth; and in its role as a key figure of speech that extends to the larger world and conditions its perception, yielding a poetics of its own.

The skin is closely linked to the notion of intimacy: as Anzieu (1985) argues, the skin is first that of the mother that bears the baby; second, it is the border between inside and outside, that protects the being; it is also a means of communication with others; and last, it is a surface where the marks of significant relations will be left (62). In “Nettles,” there are strong ties between the role of the skin in the definition of intimacy in childhood, and then later in adult life, as if the woman protagonist were trying to revive her idyllic relation with Mike in childhood by establishing an intimate relation with him in adulthood. The narrative accordingly shifts in time, emphasizing the adult woman’s longing for intimacy by linking it to a childhood experience. After unexpectedly seeing Mike McCallum in the kitchen of her friend Sunny’s country house, the narrator first remembers that period of her childhood when they played together on and around her parents’ farm, developing a tender friendship, until Mike disappeared one day without warning, after his father, a well driller, had finished his work in the area and moved on elsewhere. She then describes her current situation at the time she saw Mike again: recently separated from her husband, she moved to Toronto. It was a time when she was facing the new pleasures and hardships of being single again, and of wanting to be in a relationship; after seeing Mike in Sunny’s kitchen, she is sexually attracted to him, and has a night of restless sleep. But the following morning, having realized how unreasonable her desire is, she shares a quieter kind of intimacy with him. In these three sequences of the narration, corresponding with different states of mind, skin plays a crucial role.

As an eight-year-old child, the narrator still largely experiences the world physically rather than in a logical, rational way. The same applies to Mike, who is nine, although his perspective is to do with action—jumping, climbing and leaping—while the girl’s is more contemplative and attentive to what holds power for her around the farm. The children’s play is strongly

characterized by gender roles, especially when they play war with other children; then the girl ends up being Mike’s help, nursing when needed: “When Mike was wounded he never opened his eyes, he lay limp and still while I pressed the slimy large leaves to his forehead and throat and—pulling out his shirt—to his pale, tender stomach, with its sweet and vulnerable belly button” (Munro 2001, 163). The description of Mike’s skin evokes the body of a child, and the focus on the navel is a reminder of the not-so-distant link of his skin to that of the mother who bore him, when he was safely protected by her skin in the womb. Yet, although Mike appears as a child, there is also an underlying sense of pre-sexuality to the scene, as the hired man who teases the girl about her boyfriend and having to get married to him suggests. Her mother denies it, arguing that they are “[l]ike brother and sister” (164), but the adult narrator retrospectively examines her feelings, her perception of a given situation as linked to physical sensation, in more complex terms, contrasting the feelings of shame and disgust she has previously experienced during the “showings and rubbings and guilty intimacies” (164) she shared with a boy cousin and other girls, and which she is ready to deny even to herself, with her feelings for Mike:

Such escapades could never have been considered, with anybody for whom I felt any fondness or respect—only with people who disgusted me, as those randy abhorrent itches disgusted me with myself. In my feelings for Mike the localized demon was transformed into a diffuse excitement and tenderness spread everywhere under the skin, a pleasure of the eyes and ears and a tingling contentment, in the presence of the other person. (164-165)

These are indeed two very different kinds of affects, alternately experienced as guilty itches, on the one hand, and a pleasant tingling under the skin, on the other; some sort of lust and some sort of love, all depicted in pre-adolescent, non-verbalized mode: “I don’t think I knew the word ‘sex’” (164). Even as an eight-year-old girl, the narrator has a strong sense of what is fulfilling for her and what is not, of what is a source of shame and what of well-being. She is keenly aware of certain ugly feelings (Ngai 2005) that she wants to avoid, and of good feelings that are desirable.

When the narrator meets Mike in adulthood, his presence is an instant trigger of sexual desire, envisioned as touching that becomes gradually more intimate. She is craving to make skin contact with him to let him know how she feels, as they and Sunny's family are watching the stars at night:

Mike was standing a little ahead of me and to one side. He was actually closer to Sunny than he was to me. Nobody was behind us, and I wanted to brush against him—just lightly and accidentally against his arm or shoulder. Then if he didn't stir away—out of courtesy, taking my touch for a genuine accident?—I wanted to lay a finger against his bare neck. (Munro 2001, 176)

These imagined gestures towards Mike remain unperformed, as the narrator quickly realizes that there are too many obstacles for them to have an affair, starting with the family's presence in the house, and also the fact that he is married, and probably a scrupulous man. She has to reluctantly abandon the idea, her desire is thwarted, and she starts the following day with the prospect of enjoying Mike's presence as they go together to a golf course, while "Lust that had given me shooting pains in the night was all chastened and trimmed back now into a tidy pilot flame, attentive, wifely" (180). A range of various kinds of intimacy are reviewed here, starting with the narrator's lust and powerful sexual desire after seeing Mike. This liberating type of love that would challenge the institution of the family is thwarted by the presence of her host's family in the house. The morning after, the narrator's feelings shift to a pacified desire of the marital type, which has to do with care. She and Mike are performing a readily identifiable cast, based on conventional gender roles, but she knows that this is an illusion. At this stage especially, the story becomes part of the intricate "economies of affection" that Amelia DeFalco (2012) has studied, in which women who act as caregivers and compassionate beings both give and take, becoming part of "patterns of self-interested exchange" (381; see also DeFalco 2016). The woman's feelings on that day are dictated by her wish for a certain kind of happiness, of a good life, that she knows can only be fantasy (Berlant 2011, 2). So she feels caught in an impasse, to use a term that Berlant (2011) uses to designate "a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present

and enigmatic" (4). The intensity of that moment is crystallized in the rainstorm that takes place.

When she and Mike are both walking around the golf course and are caught in a rainstorm, the narrator's skin is the first sensor of what is happening around her: "[R]ain and wind hit us, all together, and my hair was lifted and fanned out above my head. I felt as if my skin might do that next" (Munro 2001, 182). The rain is heavy, the elements are in turmoil, and the moment is dramatic; Mike and the woman take refuge among bushes. When the rain starts abating, there is relief: "Then we kissed and pressed together briefly. This was more of a ritual, a recognition of survival rather than of our bodies' inclinations" (182). The narrator's sense of survival after the rainstorm is reinforced when Mike confesses to her, shortly after they kiss, that his youngest son died a few months earlier in an accident, when Mike backed up with his car and fatally hit the child. The scene thus shifts from dramatic to tragic, and the mention of the child's death has an anticlimactic effect on the woman's expectations. The introduction of Mike's grief into the relationship causes the woman's feelings to once again shift to another kind of love, that of compassion.

When she and Mike are back at the house from their adventurous outing, they reveal their rashes: "While we were driving back, Mike and I had both noticed, and spoken about, a prickling, an itch or burning, on our bare forearms, the backs of our hands, and around our ankles...I remembered the nettles" (185). As the narrator herself comments, they get a lot of attention for "an adventure that left its evidence on our bodies" (186). Their bodies bear the evidence of one adventure, but the real event of that adventure, the revelation of Mike's son's death, remains secret to the others in the house. The skin tells the anecdotal story of their being caught in the storm, but there is more to the meadow and its nettles than meets the eye; the real story is the tragic one of Mike's son's death. The foregrounding of the skin motif in the narrative thus establishes a dialectic of surface and depth, whereby the skin acts as the surface layer of the characters' deepest emotions and psyche, which may remain hidden and secret, or lend themselves to interpretations and comments by others that are erroneous or partial.

If skin at first can be considered as the external part of the body, it is also evidently part of the human

psyche, the two being linked. The surface of the skin and the depth of the inner being are connected, in a way that calls to mind the image of the shell and the kernel, first evoked by Freud and then taken up by other psychoanalysts. Nicolas Abraham (1968) thus considers that the shell, which is linked to the skin and the senses that enable consciousness, is capable of objectifying the relations between the self and external objects. Such objects, and the intentional experiences related to them, are part of the phenomenological field. By contrast, the kernel is the unconscious; it is related to the field of psychoanalysis (209, 221; see also Anzieu 1994, 64). The skin thus becomes a way into examining the links between the body and the psyche, the classic mind-body conundrum of Western philosophy, also known as the “mind-body problem” to the feminists of the 1970s and 80s for whom it has everything to do with motherhood (see Gallop 1988). Yet the focus here is not on the female body in its reproductive and mothering function, but on its sexual, sensual and affective dimension, in the context of a heterosexual relationship. In Ahmed and Stacey’s (2001) edited collection *Thinking through the Skin*, the borders between bodies are seen both as “the site from which thinking takes place” and “the object of thought” (3), while the skin is perceived as an unstable border, “a border that feels,” yet one that “does not reflect the truth of the inner self” (6).

This dialectic between body and mind, object and concept, feelings and the core of the self, is explored in “Nettles” through a whole network of images to do with Mike’s father’s trade, which is that of well driller. In Mike’s presence, the practical task of drilling a hole in the ground to find water acquires a poetic dimension in the girl’s imagination:

One day the well driller arrived with impressive equipment, and the hole was extended down, down, deep into the earth until it found the water in the rock...There was a tin mug hanging on the pump, and when I drank from it on a burning day, I thought of black rocks where the water ran sparkling like diamonds. (Munro 2001, 157)

The mysterious depths where the precious fresh water comes from is a place of darkness and glinting mystery. It is also the source of life for the people on the farm. But the water coming to the surface, gushing out, marks the abrupt end of the girl’s intimacy with Mike, when

his father leaves. It is as if that water had to remain underground and secret for things to continue as they were.

The image of the underground water, which leads to powerful poetic images for the child (who as an adult becomes a writer), instantly reappears after Mike tells the narrator the story of his son’s death, through the expression “to hit rock bottom” which comes to her mind, implicitly echoing the image of the underground water of her childhood:

I knew now that he was a person who had hit rock bottom. A person who knew—as I did not know, did not come near knowing—exactly what rock bottom was like. He and his wife knew that together and it bound them, as something like that would either break you apart or bind you, for life. Not that they would live at rock bottom. But they would share a knowledge of it—that cool, empty, locked and central space. (184)

The black rock with sparkling diamonds of the girl’s childhood has become rock bottom for Mike, after the occurrence of the child’s death—a dark place for grieving, a space for mourning the child. The narrator had prepared herself to say something to Mike about her feelings for him, just before he confided to her about his son’s death. Although thoughts are racing through her mind, she finds it hard to find what to say, and finally simply says: “It isn’t fair” (184), meaning both that fate is cruel, and that it is unfair that this tragedy should stand between them. Her comment is neutral in the sense that Roland Barthes (2002) attributes to that word: by saying these words, she avoids the conflict of being torn between her desire for Mike and her respect for his grief, of having to choose between two conflicting options. And yet her neutral comment is also full of her emotions, a protest against the coexistence of love and death, of Eros and Thanatos, which is found here. Her neutrality does not mean that she gives up desiring Mike, but she lets her desire float away from her will to act accordingly (Barthes 2002, 31, 40-41). One can see that her feelings for Mike evolve towards some sort of compassion, with its mix of pleasure and pain, since sharing another person’s pain “carries with it a certain occluded eroticism” (Garber 2004, 20). This is the feeling that will stay with her, of “love that [is] not usable” (Munro 2001, 186). It is remembered, in the same way

as emotions were preserved by old maids in the old days, but not embodied any further than the one kiss in the rain that precedes Mike's confidence, and it leads to no more action or initiative on the woman's part.

Mike tells the woman of his loss in few words and does not elaborate because he knows she understands. He relies on their old intimacy to impart the facts to her, on their ability "to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures" (Berlant 1998, 1), but it is a kind of thwarted intimacy that will not develop into the narrative of an affair or a love story, as he does not expose his feelings. Although intimacy here involves some sort of implicit sharing of emotions, it is also a way of avoiding both verbal communication and any further commitment. Both Mike and the woman speak little during this scene, and yet their reticence has different meanings: his is one of acceptance, while hers is one of protest.

Mike is a reticent man in general (see Bigot 2009), who often says "well" instead of fully formulating his thoughts, for instance when wondering where the driver of the only other car on the parking lot was during the rainstorm:

"Mystery," he said. And again, "Well."

That was a word that I used to hear fairly often, said in that same tone of voice, when I was a child. A bridge between one thing and another, or a conclusion, or a way of saying something that couldn't be any more fully said, or thought.

"A well is a hole in the ground." That was the joking answer. (Munro 2001, 185)

Mike's phrase is used allusively by the narrator in her conclusion to the story and to their weekend meeting. Here the word "well" sounds like an echo to Mike's, in an attempt to express what he means to her: "Well. It would be the same old thing, if we ever met again. Or if we didn't. Love that was not usable, that knew its place...Not risking a thing yet staying alive as a sweet trickle, an underground resource. With the weight of this new stillness on it, this seal" (186-187). The image of an underground, secret love recalls that of the wells Mike's father used to drill, and which nurtured the girl's imagination. Love to Spinoza (2002) is "merely pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause" (286), but it is striking that here the cause that accompanies love remains internal and secret, and turns out therefore

to be of little help because it cannot be experienced physically, it is "not usable" (Munro 2001, 186), although it will carry on nurturing the narrator as an adult. The "sweet trickle" of love is that of compassion, of suffering understood and shared, though not experienced together. It erases the ready-made gender roles they instinctively adopted as children, and which they readily follow as adults, almost ironically. The intimacy they shared as children contributes to creating a space where they can share emotions as adults. It is also the case that because she has children who live away from her and whom she misses, the narrator can easily glimpse the dark rock bottom that Mike reached when his child died.

The rainstorm has brought them close together physically again, in a seemingly non-sexual way, as a matter of him protecting her through physical strength, which is useless from a practical viewpoint (they both struggle against the wind and get soaked), but continues to cast them in predefined gender roles and effectively brings them physically closer. Through their pressing together and kissing like survivors, it is possible for them to communicate in the most elemental sense, that is to say to attain a kind of harmonious resonance, a vibration that is outside words (Anzieu 1985, 73). But the fact of the child's death cancels that. Skin contact opens up a whole new psychic space for Mike, the dark well that would otherwise have remained closed and unseen. The kind of intimacy they then share defines him as a human being who has undergone the suffering of loss, and her as one who is capable of empathy. It also finds extensions in the outdoor surroundings, through images related to human skin as part of an organic whole that underpin the poetics of skin which pervades the story.

The dialectic of surface and depth that starts from the skin in the individual's contact with the outside world is echoed in the network of images related to the deep well, the core of the being, the kernel, the secret self, and the water—or love—it taps into, and the imagined diamonds that sparkle when love is there. Skin thus enables introverted reflection on self and the inner being. But skin is also the individual's zone of contact with the bigger outside world; skin is also "surface, encounter and site, in which more than one body is always implicated" (Ahmed and Stacey 2001, 14). This starts early on, when, together with the other

senses, of sight and smell in particular, touch is how the child first discovers the world around her. The child is aware that the world too, like the self, is full of mystery, and she endeavours to take it in:

Our farm was small—nine acres. It was small enough for me to have explored every part of it, and every part had a particular look and character, which I could not have put into words. ... [My way of seeing these things] was by its very nature incommunicable, so that it had to stay secret. (Munro 2001, 158-159)

The girl's inability to share her "way of seeing" the things around the farm, that is to say the way they affect her, means that words are not an adequate way of communicating with others. The ordinary things around her—the whitish stone, the trees, the gravel pits on the river flats—have poetic meaning to her, which she cannot phrase. To paraphrase Abraham (1968), these "things," from a semantic viewpoint, acquire the status of psychic representatives, poetic symbols that convey mysterious messages addressed to no one in particular, the contents of which remains impossible to formulate (212). The awareness of mysterious messages to be deciphered becomes a conscious concern for the adult narrator; as a young mother, when she was friends with Sunny in Vancouver, the two of them liked to read Jung "and tried to keep track of [their] dreams" (Munro 2001, 169). Their husbands were not interested in the least in their literary or philosophical queries, but talking about books is what the two women most like doing together, even when they meet again years later. "[T]alking about books instead of life" (173) is a way for them, figuratively, to step out of their lives, and out of their bodies, to be in the realm of ideas during the duration of their conversation, and to "bec[o]me friends again" (173), to reconnect emotionally. This aspect of their friendship is unique, as if only another woman could understand the need to create that space where they can discuss ideas; it seems harder to achieve with men. When the narrator left her marriage, it was "in the hope of making a life that could be lived without hypocrisy" (168), and her lifelong quest as an individual and as a writer is for truth and genuine love.

After Mike has spent time on the farm, the familiar surroundings are linked to him, or rather, after his departure, to his absence which is keenly felt by the

narrator, who discovers:

How all my own territory would be altered, as if a landslide had gone through it and skimmed off all meaning except loss of Mike. I could never again look at the white stone in the gangway without thinking of him, and so I got a feeling of aversion towards it. I had that feeling also about the *limb* of the maple tree, and when my father cut it off because it was too near the house, I had it about the *scar* that was left. (166, my emphasis)

Through loss, after Mike's departure, the surrounding things, the poetic symbols, her familiar space as a whole, take on a different meaning, and her feelings are inverted, from appreciation to aversion, because they are markers or reminders of Mike's absence. As Ahmed (2006a) puts it about "the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places," "spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body" (8, 9). The "maple next to the house, with the branch that you could crawl out on, so as to drop yourself onto the verandah roof" (Munro 2001, 159), is tied with her play with Mike and with his way of viewing the world. The "limb," or big branch, and then the "scar" of the maple, through the choice of words related to the human body, indicate a form of organic symbiosis between the girl and her environment, whereby the landscape feels as if it were part of her self, of her body and skin.

The type of description of the environment where the narrator played as a child with Mike is echoed in the sequence when they are on the golf course. The surroundings there are described with comparable attention to details, as the narrator seems to have found again the same freedom and happy energy as when she was with Mike as a child. Comparable bearings are identified in the landscape—the river, the meadow, the various plants and trees—and these enable her to feel the connection that exists between herself and Mike, and which she feels serves to provide "a reassuring sense of human padding around his solitude" (180). Her eye and her memory of that moment are sharp, and plants are named specifically:

Between [the river] and us there was a meadow of weeds, all of it seemed in bloom. Goldenrod, jewel-weed with its red and yellow bells, and what I thought were flowering

nettles with pinkish-purple clusters, and wild asters. Grapevine, too, grabbing and wrapping whatever it could find, and tangling underfoot. (181)

When the rainstorm starts, the couple becomes prey to the elements, which they struggle against physically:

Stooping, butting his head through the weeds and against the wind, Mike got around in front of me, all the time holding on to my arm. Then he faced me, with his body between me and the storm. That made as much difference as a toothpick might have done...He pulled me down...—so that we were crouched close to the ground. So close together that we could not look at each other—we could only look down, at the miniature rivers already breaking up the earth around our feet, and the crushed plants and our soaked shoes. And even this had to be seen through the waterfall that was running down our faces. (182)

In this struggle, they are reminded of their mortality, as they seem to make one with the earth. They are incorporated into it, their feet like mountains separating rivers, their faces like the rock of a waterfall. The storm could have been fatal and brought them to their end, “earth to earth”: “Big tree branches had been hurled all over the golf course. I did not think until later that any one of them could have killed us. We walked in the open, detouring around the fallen limbs” (183). The anthropomorphic description of the maple tree from the narrator’s childhood is echoed in the description of the trees after the storm, but this time she feels like a survivor, not one who is grieving loss. She may feel stronger for having reconnected with Mike during the storm through a kiss, although this will quickly be subject to re-interpretation, to reorientation (Ahmed 2006a, 19) when he tells her about his child’s death. This is when an established way of touching between men and women leads into an unexpected direction.

The post-storm landscape is conducive to the confidential intimacy during which Mike tells the woman about his dead son, as the storm has reminded them of their vulnerability. The storm also reveals a form of naivety in the narrator, in believing that happiness is within reach simply by reaching out and making contact with a man she knew intimately as a child. This sense of naivety is heralded when she describes her current relationship with her lover in Toronto and readily acknowledges: “all I really wanted

was to entice him to have sex with me, because I thought the high enthusiasm of sex fused people’s best selves. I was stupid about these matters, in a way that was very risky, particularly for a woman of my age” (Munro 2001, 171). When she sits by Mike’s side in the car, she enjoys the proximity: “I liked riding beside him, in the wife’s seat. I felt a pleasure in the idea of us as a couple—a pleasure that I knew was light-headed as an adolescent girl’s” (178). The bucolic scene of the couple on the golf course prior to the rainstorm ends in a different kind of intimacy after Mike has disclosed his secret. The woman feels that fate has been unfair; not only to Mike and his family, but to the two of them, as possible lovers. Her saying “It isn’t fair” (184) thus has a double meaning which she reflects on, seeing these words as “A protest so brutal that it seems almost innocent, coming out of such a raw core of self” (184). This “raw core” is her kernel, the unconscious part of her psyche that means she is drawn to Mike, yet she knows they cannot be together.

The woman’s mistake about finding love through sexual intimacy is echoed in her erroneous identification of plants. The final paragraph of the story reads as a post-scriptum correction to a previous factual statement, but it really casts a different light on the whole story:

Those plants with the big pinkish-purple flowers are not nettles. I have discovered that they are called joe-pye weed. The stinging nettles that we must have got into are more insignificant plants, with a paler purple flower, and stalks wickedly outfitted with fine, fierce, skin-piercing and inflaming spines. Those would be present too, unnoticed, in all the flourishing of the waste meadow. (187)

The waste meadow has its mix of enchantments and misfortunes. The nettles (the real ones) go unnoticed but are viciously noxious, while the joe-pye weed, which looks more beautiful, is not harmful. The narrator doubts the accuracy of words in relation to the plants they refer to, for instance when she was trying to remember “water plants whose names I can’t recall or never knew (wild parsnip, water hemlock?)” (160). Or the “tall trees with feathery tops and slender trunks, whose name I was not sure of—acacia?” (179). The nettles are wrongly labelled, and the healing plant that could perhaps soothe nettle rash is equally hard to identify: “there was a plant whose leaves made the best poultice you could have,

for nettle rash ... The name of the plant was something like calf's foot. Coldfoot?" (186). The confusion or uncertainty about plants' names reflects the difficulty for the narrator of deciphering the signs around her, and of deciding on a way to follow. As Ajay Heble (1994) has observed, Munro's "discourse questions the relationship between language and meaning in a new way: it forces us to recognize the extent to which meaning itself depends on and is determined by traces of absent and potential levels of signification" (7). Yet, by the end of the story, the narrator realizes that Mike's loss puts an end to the possibility of a love affair between them. She pictures their love as "an underground resource," and never asks for nor gets any news of him. The "promise of happiness" (Ahmed 2010) that she sees in him at the thought of rekindling an old intimacy when they meet again has vanished; however, we presume from the beginning of the story that she eventually found a fulfilling kind of intimacy with her second husband, so that this story reads as a retelling of her experience of being forced to reimagine intimacy in different ways.

The narrator in "Nettles" is a woman attentive to her emotions and sensations, with a poetic, imaginative mind, and a desire to become a writer. The overall course of the narrative also shows her, around the time of her encounter with Mike, in the process of redefining the way she relates to men in terms of the kind of sexual and affective intimacy she can imagine sharing with them. That process implies tension between some of the ready-made gender roles and attitudes that she unconsciously inherited and embodied as a child, and the deeper intimacy that she wants to experience. The revelation about Mike's child's death towards the end of the story introduces dramatic tension, signals a turning point in the plot, and triggers what appears as an epiphany, marked by the strong, unpleasant feeling of unfairness. This scene is followed by the nettles incident, which shifts the course of events to family comedy by foregrounding the uncontrollability of bodily reaction to external elements, the return to sociability (with no sign of "real misdoing" [Munro 2001, 184] between Mike and the narrator), and easy ways of relieving pain (in the form of basins of water and thick cloth). The very final paragraph, which is detached from the rest of the text and is written in hindsight, is also seemingly detached emotionally. It reads as a coda on the semantic distinction between

nettles and the inoffensive plants that look like them, emphasizing the narrator's error of judgement at the time, and suggesting the need to learn to distinguish, among "the flourishing of the waste meadow" (185), what stings and what does not, in other words what hurts profoundly in life and what is apparent vivid pain that can be overcome. Touch and affect as experienced that day thus resonate deeply in the narrator's life by forcibly reshaping her sense of intimacy, that is to say her idea of "a narrative about something shared" (Berlant 1998, 1), and her view of how her story about herself and a man should turn out.

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