

# ‘Incomprehensible wonder’: Elegiac Expression in Dorothy Porter’s *Wild Surmise*

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## Introduction

In *The Elegiac Mode* (1967) Abbie Findlay Potts considers the elegiac writer to be an ‘imaginative thinker whose intellectual eye ranges rebelliously through universal darkness toward some new scintilla of light from a world of yet undiscovered meaning and value’ (Potts 38). Potts’s description evokes the cosmic imagery poetically explored in Dorothy Porter’s verse novel *Wild Surmise* (2002). The narrative of *Wild Surmise* is told through the interchanging perspectives of Alex, an astrobiologist, and her husband Daniel, a literary academic. Together, Alex and Daniel’s narrations create a duet of unfulfilled desire and mourning. When read within the context of an elegiac framework, focus may be placed on these unfulfilled desires and the ways in which characters pursue consolations for their mourning. However Porter’s poetry does not intend to console but rather to rupture and to explore metaphysical uncertainties within these ambivalences; grief remains apparent in the closing of *Wild Surmise*. Although critics such as David McCooney and Felicity Plunkett have previously written on the elegiac and the role of mourning within Porter’s poetry, there is no dedicated reading of the elegiac expression within *Wild Surmise*. In order to read *Wild Surmise* as an elegiac work this article will predominantly draw from studies of modern and postmodern Anglophone elegies. This approach will allow for a literary-historical account of how the elegiac mode stems from the elegy genre and will reveal how a discussion of elegy conventions may expand upon an understanding of the elegiac mode.

The opening poem of *Wild Surmise* transports the reader ‘three hundred and ninety million miles’ from earth to one of Jupiter’s four Galilean moons, Europa (3). The eponymously titled poem, ‘Europa,’ addresses the reader with a concentration of uncanny imagery and allows Porter to present the overarching themes of desire, belatedness, and loss, as a frame through which to read the verse novel:

You’re standing on a raft  
of thick alien ice,  
but you’re moving—  
floating like a berg  
on the deepest ocean  
in the unknown world. (3)

Although the ‘raft’ is a structure that signifies support, being composed of the ‘thick alien ice’ complicates this image. This is a space of unfamiliarity. The eeriness of this image is intensified when the reader learns of the depths upon which the raft floats, acting as ‘the roof, the shield / of a black liquid world, / where you may one day / drop like a warm stone’ (4). These contrasting extremes of temperature allow Porter to introduce the paradoxes associated with discovery: in melting through the ice, only to plunge into ‘[a] new world / where you might learn / colder lessons / than nothing’ (4). As Rose Lucas observes, Porter’s writing has always been engaged with ‘a paradoxical poetry’ exploring both the thrills and the

consequences that can result from such risks (38). It is through Porter's paralleled exploration of the 'incomprehensible wonder' (Porter 17) offered by outer space, alongside the familiarities of domestic life that allow *Wild Surmise* to explore the grief attached to desire and loss.

### **Elegiac Outer Space: Towards a Framework**

In its broadest sense, the elegy may be defined as a poetic work mourning death or loss. However, the elegy dates back to the classical period whereby the subject matter and form of the elegy have altered over centuries. Edward Engelberg notes that while classical elegies mainly offered 'lamentations about death,' during the Renaissance era 'elegies were also written for other occasions, especially those celebrating various states of love; some elegies were merely expressions of nostalgia' (Engelberg 2). Studies of the elegy have commented on the mutability of the genre, many citing Alastair Fowler's assertion that during the nineteenth century a 'more diffuse elegiac tradition spread' (137). This spreading of elegiac themes, which Potts refers to as 'love, transience, disillusionment, death' (319), allows for an understanding of how elegiac themes may have become instilled within subsequent literary works, including postmodern works such as *Wild Surmise*.

In writing about the concept of poetic genre, Jahan Ramazani argues that 'definitions of genre are inherently unsettled by their porous, shifting, and uncertain boundaries' ("To Get the News from Poems" 4). It is with these 'uncertain boundaries' the elegiac mode may be accounted for. As David Kennedy explains, 'there has always been a blurring of elegy and elegiac poetry, of mode and mood' (6). Similarly, in the introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* (2012) Karen Weisman argues that '[t]here is little scholarly consensus about what constitutes an elegy, or how to distinguish between elegy and the broader category of elegiac literature' (2). In fact, the elegy and the elegiac have a long history of being discussed alongside each other. Potts explains that in the nineteenth century William Wordsworth and his contemporaries employed terminologies of both the elegy and the elegiac with reference to poetry offering 'meditation about death and personal loss, transience, and unfortunate love' (235). As McCooey elucidates, elegiac poetry may be understood as 'broadly meditative poetry on human mortality and the transience of things humans value' ('Leisure and Grief' 332). Therefore, the elegiac is concerned with themes such as death, loss, desire, and ephemerality and it is with these themes in mind that this article turns towards an understanding of elegiac fiction.

Much of the scholarship on elegy has discussed the loss being mourned as an actual loss as opposed to a fictionalised loss or loss as represented in fiction. Nevertheless, it is important to discuss the treatment of loss in fictional narratives in order to establish the ways in which elegiac tropes may be identified within them. Karen E. Smythe argues that twentieth century 'narrative experimentation with elegiac tropes and forms' initiated 'features of elegy specifically identifiable in the fiction produced' (4). How these elegiac features are identified within fiction varies according to critics. In a study devoted to elegiac fiction, Engelberg asserts that there are many examples of modern elegiac fiction that contain a 'special kind of sadness that validates the belief that one's life has been a series of missed opportunities' (2). Engelberg terms this element within elegiac fiction as the motif of 'the un-lived life' (3). Throughout his study, Engelberg explains that fiction by modernist writers including Franz Kafka, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf contains an 'elegiac mood,' a 'grieving for the past accompanied by an increased anxiety about the future,' or for 'what *might* have been' (3, emphasis in the original). However, Smythe argues that Engelberg's 'thematic definition

disregards the formal and linguistic characteristics of fiction written within an elegiac framework' (5). Indeed, while Engelberg's motif of 'the unlived life' may be traced within *Wild Surmise*, it is necessary to follow Smythe's understanding of elegiac fiction in order to understand the ways in which Porter engages with elegiac conventions within the verse novel. Smythe identifies these 'formal and linguistic characteristics' in elegiac fiction as those related to representations of mourning and consolation. As Smythe explains, 'whether explicitly or implicitly present or explicitly denied, consolation is the driving force and the shaping concept of elegy' (8). In following this contention, then, an analysis of *Wild Surmise* will demonstrate also the ways in which characters seek out and eventually fail at achieving a consolation for their belatedness of experiences and eventual losses.

A critical understanding of the representations of mourning and consolation in *Wild Surmise* also allows for a discussion of the ways in which the role of mourning and the presence or absence of consolation have been portrayed and interpreted differently depending on the era in question. Morton W. Bloomfield posits that the elegiac poem 'reflects a psychological state rather than a social or historical occasion' (156), but while focus is most certainly placed on the psychic features of grief, Bloomfield's assertion does not account for the politics of mourning within the elegiac. As Claire Buck explains, twentieth century elegiac scholarship has determined that 'who we mourn and how we mourn are part of the production and reproduction of structures of gender, class, sexuality, and nationalism' (431). Among others, Buck is referring to Ramazani's influential study of modernist elegies, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (1994), which allows for a reconsideration of the ways in which mourning and consolation are depicted and examined.

Following on from Peter Sack's study of English elegies (1985), Ramazani draws his psychoanalytical considerations from Freud's theorisation of mourning and melancholia (1917). Ramazani argues that the modernist elegy combines 'the elegiac with the anti-elegiac, at once appropriating and resisting the traditional psychology, structure, and imagery of the genre' (*Poetry of Mourning* 1). According to Ramazani, unlike the elegies of the nineteenth century, the 'modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss' (*Poetry of Mourning* xi). Tammy Clewell (2009) develops Ramazani's argument for the purposes of analysing the role of mourning and consolation in postmodern fiction. Clewell argues that, like their modernist predecessors, 'postmodern writers exhibit hostility toward consolation and its therapeutic imperative to finish the work of mourning' (3). Like Ramazani, Clewell argues that this 'hostility' towards consolation has social-political implications, specifically regarding sexuality and gender, and the way that consolation may be read as a form of conservatism, disallowing alternative expressions of identities. *Wild Surmise* enacts Clewell's description by resisting a traditional elegiac framework: desires remain unfulfilled and there is a breakdown of conventions, such the marriage between Alex and Daniel, yet all the while there is an expression of grief that remains indifferent to consolation. In following on with Clewell's terminology, there is 'ongoing mourning' (3) depicted throughout the poetic images and narrative of *Wild Surmise*, which Clewell would describe as being 'sustained rather than severed attachments to loss' (3).

### **'Dark Matter': The Elegiac in *Wild Surmise***

Porter's emphasis on outer space exploration, as well as other astrobiological references in *Wild Surmise*, allow for an elegiac consideration of desire and sexuality. McCooey explains that the space exploration occurring in *Wild Surmise* 'is imaginary, and intellectual discovery

parallels sexual discovery' ('Always Disappearing' 77). This idea of 'intellectual discovery' is strongly linked with the elegiac due to its association with desire and longing, the desire to know and to understand. John B. Vickery notes that the modern elegy exhibits a 'probing of intellectual boundaries' (2), which is integral when considering a work like *Wild Surmise*—Porter links the elements of desire, discovery and loss directly with one of Jupiter's moons, Europa, figuring it as the subject of Alex's astrobiological study, as well as the intergalactic symbol of her desire. Alex is so enthralled by her desires that she has lost awareness of when they first began, asking: 'when / did this latest infatuation / get a grip?' (7). Exhilarated and haunted by 'Europa's freezing / toxic silence' (3), Alex's quest to discover extraterrestrial life on Europa has become an obsession, reaching far beyond the realm of professional expectation. As in much of Porter's poetry, there is the teasing of boundaries, which evokes Dennis Kay's suggestion that the elegy, and therefore elegiac literature, is 'a form without frontiers' (7). It is through Alex's imaginary space explorations that Porter navigates between the limits set within social boundaries, and the emotional consequences of a limitless exploration in search of fulfilment and consolation for mourning.

The introductory imagery of Europa, epic and celestial by nature, is sharply contrasted with that of Alex's computer screen, where she waits to discover a scientific breakthrough: 'Life / as she doesn't know it / calls and calls / like a parching hunt' (5). These lines convey Alex's frustration and Porter's use of hyperbolic similes allow for Alex's unsatisfied desire to be expressed with notable lament:

Why am I,  
a happily childless woman,  
now waiting  
for Life  
like a junkie waits  
for a fix? (7)

The capitalisation of the word 'Life' suggests expectation, and, when paired with Alex's statement of being 'a happily childless woman,' explicitly aligns Alex's femaleness with biological expectation. However, this 'Life' that Alex yearns for is not related to the maternal, and the expression of her desire is associated with the 'highs' of a socially unacceptable drug addiction, which alludes to the deviancy of Alex's eventual infidelity in her marriage. The poem ends with a sense of urgency, Alex desiring to discover: 'Life. / Gloriously elsewhere. / Life. / Brazenly everywhere' (8). Porter denotes Alex's desire with the thirst for water: 'Where there's water / there's a chance, / a sniff, / a hope of life' (11). In the poem 'Water' (13), Alex retreats to her garden in an attempt to seek respite from her desire, but this relief is only momentary and focus on Alex's 'lemon tree glow[ing] / like a quenched prayer' (13) is replaced with an incantatory appeal to the moon Europa:

Oh, Europa, please trust  
and take me in.

Let me be the divining rod  
quivering  
over your deep treasure  
of water. (13)

Alex's craving for her body to act as a 'divining rod' in search of water disrupts the potential consolatory environment of the garden and the 'deep treasure / of water' may be interpreted as a representation of the fluidity associated with female sexuality. That Alex's desire interrupts a source of relief indicates its power and potentialities, and introduces the elegiac connection between desire and mourning as a consequence to it being unfulfilled.

As Henry Staten asserts in *Eros in Mourning: Homer to Lacan* (1995), '[t]he dialectic of mourning begins with the process of attachment to, or cathexis of, an object, without which mourning would never arise' (xi). Staten's assertion relates to the way in which Alex's character is introduced simultaneously with her desires, which allow Alex's desires to act as a reference point for the narrative. Similarly, Kennedy suggests that writers of elegy have 'always had to answer the question of what to do about desire' (64). Kennedy draws this point from Kate Lilley's scholarship on elegy, Lilley suggesting that the elegist participates 'in the service of desire, and the articulation of desire' (qtd. in Kennedy 23). These connections between desire and mourning within the elegiac also allow for an understanding of how Alex's desire for 'Life,' and her expression of this desire, drives the narrative of *Wild Surmise*, emphasising the significance that desire plays within the text. Alex's longing for discovery, both intellectually and sexually, permeates all elements of her life, so much so that the charge of her desire interrupts her sleep: Alex 'prickle[s] awake at four a.m. / in the desert dark / dreaming of water' (34). Porter's employment of these oceanic mediations invokes the notion of metaphor and its ability to represent and provide an expression for desire: 'O for a solo passage / across the impossible / Venusian Sea!' (34). Alex's desires are aligned with the motif of water and in this context, the oceanic imagery suggests the dichotomy of water being both a source of life and one of death. Metaphorically, there is a signalling towards the potentiality of drowning and being engulfed by one's own desire.

Alex's desire to discover life on Europa is one that can only be matched by her desire for the character of Phoebe, an astrophysicist, who re-enters Alex's life. Phoebe is figured as the centre of Alex's universe. A photograph first announces her presence: a '[f]ull colour spread / of the Universe whirling about her . . . [h]er image thriving and multiplying / in Alex's capitulating cells' (38–39). Alex first began her affair with Phoebe several years earlier on a research expedition on the island of Hawaii, raised high 'at nine thousand feet' (40) at the Mauna Kea Observatories. Porter establishes this 'dizzying' (40) space as one removed from heteronormative expectations and social responsibilities, as the following narration demonstrates: 'later / Alex would say / at nine thousand feet / no one has any judgement' (40). While Alex is raised high above her heteronormative social altitude as wife to Daniel, she is able to experience life 'in the present tense' (42), and embark on a sexual awakening with Phoebe. This is the space in which Alex's desire can be realised and 'she would never let it go // some insistent part of her // would guzzle the dizzying oxygen / at nine thousand feet / with a phantom Phoebe forever' (40). Therefore, back in her own reality, at regular altitude, Alex mourns the loss of this space in which she was able to explore her passions and desires.

Although initially it appears that Alex's desires may be satiated with Phoebe returning into her life, the desire Alex has for Phoebe is contrasted with the mourning that it also inflicts. If, as Sacks suggests, '[t]he movement from loss to consolation . . . requires a deflection of desire' (7), Alex's ongoing desire for Phoebe diminishes any signs of achieving consolation. Alex admits that 'over the years / it had been / a lot easier for Alex / to hate Phoebe / than forget her' (55). Alex refuses consolation over her longing for Phoebe and resists calling Phoebe 'an old flame' (56), rather, Alex describes her as 'an old wound / a dribbling smoulder / a humiliating confusion' (56). This representation of Phoebe as an oozing lesion is an abject

reference to the female body, and may also be read within an elegiac context for the way that it compares Phoebe with the haunting elements of a ghost. Alex confesses: 'I still shiver / in the icy gaze / of her pale clever eyes' (59). These introductory descriptions of Phoebe also elicit Freud's suggestion that '[t]he complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound' (253). Phoebe is the open 'wound' within Alex's consciousness due to her resistance to consolation.

Melissa F. Zeiger explains that, '[g]hosts upset boundary lines—of life and death, of time and space—and once one boundary line has been transgressed, all the others show as frangible' (45–46). As previously discussed, these shifting boundaries also relate to Porter's association of the intellectual with the sexual, by using the imagery of outer space to represent Alex's desire and the unreachability of its fulfilment. Both Europa and Phoebe are now the bodies, or 'objects,' of Alex's desire, representing a troubling inaccessibility that Alex craves. The poem 'Adultery' (59) aligns the elements of Alex's intellectual wonderings with her sexual desire for Phoebe:

And my old desire wakes up  
like a desiccated Martian  
flood plain  
sniffing a huge fresh flood.

What new germs  
will her lightning strikes  
spark  
in my parched thin soil? (59)

Phoebe's presence provides the 'water' Alex has been craving in the preceding poems and also represents an element of the life that Alex searches for on Europa, the life that 'calls and calls' (5). It is with Phoebe that Alex is able to express her sexual desires, falling into a 'fever / that makes [her] fret and sweat // while [her] heart divides / and procreates' (60). This 'fever' signals towards the paradoxes of discovery and its connection to loss that Porter explores later in the narrative.

It is only after the rekindling of her lesbian affair with Phoebe that Alex is permitted to embark on a course towards ontological discoveries, which Porter contrasts with the consequences of loss. As Rose Lucas suggests, the 'motif of discovery—and of an ultimate failure of translation and connection—is echoed in Alex's sexual obsession with the unattainable Phoebe' (37). It is established early on in the narrative that Phoebe refuses to let her intellectual pursuits be disrupted by her relationship with Alex:

'I've got a life, a life  
I never dreamed I'd have,  
a life  
of such mental freedom  
no woman scientist alive  
would risk,  
risk for anything  
no matter how lovely  
no matter how tempting.' (41–42)

Phoebe's understanding and equation of 'Life' with scientific discovery is one that needs to be protected from heteronormative conventions, including those of relationships. Phoebe must turn her emotions 'cold,' like the moon Europa, and Alex is left once again to mourn the absence of Phoebe in her life.

The relationship between Phoebe and Alex dissolves in an anticlimactic way, creating a lack of closure for Alex to console herself with. Porter's narrative states: 'There was nothing exceptional / about the last time / Alex saw Phoebe' (178). This lack of an ending to their relationship prohibits any potential consolation for Alex, as the narration reveals in the poem, 'Cracks' (179):

But the cracks. the cracks.  
 cracked like crazy  
     cracked like checking her e-mail  
         three hundred times a day  
             allowing Phoebe to be her Io  
                 polluting her peace. (179)

The gradually increasing indentations at the beginning of each line, accompanied by the repetition of the word 'cracks' indicates the process of Alex's emotional rupturing, her mourning the loss of Phoebe. In the poem 'The red shifting lover' (181), Alex describes the discomfort of losing not only her relationship with Phoebe, but also the loss of the ritual involved in ending their relationship:

Phoebe won't give me  
 the drama  
     or the grace  
 of a break-up scene  
  
 it's like perpetual  
 cold coffee  
     a horrible cheat  
 and nothing  
     to burn my mouth on  
  
 but the scorching freeze  
 of her answering machine. (181)

Porter associates Alex's grief with the coldness that characterises both Europa and Phoebe: 'It was like a fiendish flu. / A flu with the grip / of an anaconda. // Nothing / was giving Alex / relief, reprieve / or pleasure' (182). Porter's continuing alignment between what is desired and what is mourned further emphasises the connection between desire, loss and mourning throughout *Wild Surmise*.

In the same poem, Porter directly articulates Alex's inconsolable grief over the loss of her relationship with Phoebe:

. . . it was her body's  
 loss  
 that was truly

torturing her.

It refused to ache  
quietly.  
mutely mourning  
to its hurt self.

It raked at her.  
It screeched, howled  
and screamed.

For Phoebe.  
For Phoebe's raging return.

At any cost. (183)

This expression demonstrates the lament and 'ongoing mourning' proposed by Clewell. Alex refuses to surrender her feelings for Phoebe and desires for their relationship to continue no matter the 'cost.' Alex's lamentations conjure Lilley's assertion that there is an 'elegiac currency' of 'words, tears, sighs' (qtd. in Kennedy 23), and because of her sustained desire for Phoebe, Alex is prepared to continue spending this 'elegiac currency.'

After Daniel's discovery of Alex's infidelity, the last section of *Wild Surmise* is devoted to his mourning of the loss of his marriage and to tracing his terminal decline to cancer. For Vickery, while death 'continues to play a central role in the elegiac imagination' loss has since been extended to include 'changes and concomitant losses in personal relations such as romantic love and marriage' (1). Alex and Phoebe's affair signals the death of her marriage to Daniel and even prior to this loss, Daniel mourns the lack of intimacy in his marriage. The poem 'Daniel's Song' (89) demonstrates his yearnings for Alex's attention:

My heart signals to her  
like a colossal rapacious  
alien  
flashing frantically  
from an overlooked moon.

*oh darling oh my love*  
*find me find me.* (89, emphasis in the original)

In an attempt to seek solace as his marriage fails, Daniel turns towards both his garden and his poetry. This is shown most evidently in the poem 'a green Thought in a green Shade' (90) where Daniel refers to the metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell, alluding to his poem 'The Garden' (1681) and when recalling the poem, contemplates his own isolation: 'We're all alone. // Perhaps it's the only way / to really feel / your own pulse / of green poetry' (91). Daniel's desire to seek comfort from nature and poetry again illustrates elegiac conventions whereby the mourner turns towards the natural world and elegies themselves in order to make sense of grief.

As Kennedy explains, the reference to previously written accounts of grief in elegiac literature highlights the issue that, in some cases, loss 'is too painful to be confronted directly and can



only be approached through the words of others, through pre-existent stories' (15). Kennedy's observation is extremely relevant for Daniel's character, as most of his understanding is derived from the reading of poetry, and most poets he refers to are renowned for their elegiac style. In addition to intertextual references to poets such as Alfred Lord Tennyson (67), Rainer Maria Rilke (208), and Anna Akhmatova (247), Porter also includes throughout the narrative a list of the poetry Daniel reads, 'Daniel's Poetry Reading List' (291). This 'reading list' contains the works of 24 poets including Sappho, W.H. Auden, Sylvia Plath, Philip Larkin, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Most significantly, Coleridge is the poet who wrote the widely cited observation that the elegiac writer 'feel[s] regret for the past or desire for the future, so sorrow and love become the principal themes of the elegy' (qtd. in Kennedy, 4). Although the understanding of the elegiac has been modified and expanded since this interpretation offered by Coleridge, there remains an emphasis on the elements of mourning and desire. Additionally, one of the two epigraphs of *Wild Surmise* is an excerpt from John Keats's widely celebrated sonnet, 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' (1816). This association with Homer's ancient epic, *The Odyssey* (c. 700 B.C.), and Porter's naming of *Wild Surmise* after Keats's sonnet, also denotes further elegiac expression, particularly for how the sonnet explores the desire for discovery and the belatedness of experiences.

Yet, for all of the emphasis placed on the importance of poetry within *Wild Surmise*, Daniel's desire to seek comfort from poetry ends unsuccessfully, exposing the contradictory element of the elegiac. Among the poets referred to by Daniel, he directs most of his attention to the reading of Dante Alighieri's epic poem, *Divine Comedy* (c. 1308–1321), which creates an irony as Daniel confronts his own mortality. The poem 'Resistance' (155) explores Daniel's helplessness with his grief: 'I don't ask my doctor / how long have I got? / I don't ask Alex / who are you seeing?' (155). Daniel's name may perhaps be read here as representing his action of 'denial' and his inability to confront the issues surrounding his marriage to Alex and his cancer diagnosis. Reading poetry does not offer him consolation when he requires it most: 'I stroke a page of Dante / and wish it were his / palpable living poet's / face // because tonight / I'm not feeling anything' (246). Poems such as 'Ride a Macbeth' (249) and 'Help! Another Day!' (251) also explore what Weisman describes as being 'the limits of our expressive resources,' the elegy having a tradition of highlighting 'the inefficacy of language precisely when we need it most' (2). In the poem 'poetry makes nothing happen' (185) Daniel meditates on Auden's famously quoted line contained in the elegy 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' (1939), Daniel grieves:

no poem will water my garden  
or  
make my wife fancy me  
or  
thread health's good oil  
through my grinding gears  
nothing is happening. (185)

As Weisman explains, 'the limits of poetic utterance have surfaced as recurrent motifs in elegy throughout its history' (2), and Daniel, a character who longs to be 'ravished' (19) by poetry is now entering into Dante's 'hell' (230) in which poetry cannot offer him solace.

After Daniel's death, Porter focuses on the remorse Alex feels over her infidelity. Despite the initial pleasure provided by Alex's relationship with Phoebe, Alex is punctured with guilt, connected to the dominant ideologies as upheld by the conventions of marriage. Alex

renounces her feelings for Phoebe and claims that her heterosexual love, a presumably purer form of love, will triumph over her feelings for Phoebe. Addressing the dead Daniel, Alex laments:

I never loved Phoebe  
as I loved you.

Not at the beginning.

Not at  
the end.

Like Europa she was a mystery  
I wanted to conquer  
and crack.

And like Europa  
she had the last numbing  
word. (282)

The regret Alex asserts may be contextualised within the elegiac with Clewell's assertion that '[g]rief frequently gives rise to a sense of regret on the mourner's part, regret for both unfulfilled aspirations and misdeeds' (40). However, the poem ends with Alex stating that Phoebe 'had the last numbing / word' (282) and alludes to Alex's inability, in a Freudian sense, to successfully mourn the loss of Phoebe. This emotional unresponsiveness signifies the continuation of Alex's mourning for Phoebe, complicating it further with the loss of Daniel.

## Conclusion

Although in the closing poems of the narrative it is established that Daniel will not 'haunt' Alex (258), *Wild Surmise* ends on an ambivalent note and an absence of consolation for Alex and her desires. Alex describes herself as being '[s]uspended in frigid blackness' (267) and longs for it to rain, returning to her thirst for water, and she is described as 'living through a taunting / drought' (273). Alex is also troubled by the garden in which she and Daniel both attempted to seek solace, believing that an unripened lemon in the tree once 'adored' by Daniel (284) was 'slowing her own life down, / her own fatal ripening' (286). In the final poem, 'Giant Squid' (288), there is a subdued, yet haunting tone, as Alex recalls a dream in which her body 'lay naked / at the bottom / of a soft black sea / in the many loving arms / of a giant squid' (288). This 'black sea' may be interpreted as being the ocean of Europa, echoing the opening poem of *Wild Surmise*. In this dream Alex experiences the 'terrific tranquillity / in just lying still / and not proving anything' (289). The emphasis on Alex's stillness gestures towards her own mortality, and the absence of consolation achieved by Alex and the other characters in *Wild Surmise*.

As Vickery explains, 'the modern elegiac temper has modified the traditional elegy's basic triad of lamentation–confrontation–consolation' (2). Vickery's observation may also be applied to a postmodern elegiac work like *Wild Surmise*, especially in regards to its ending. That the verse novel concludes with a poem of ambivalence, a dreamt erotic embrace between Alex and a squid, symbolises the complexities of desire and suggests representations that

deviate from the norm. As Clewell explains, by refusing the traditional ending of consolation, postmodern elegiac works have the potential to create ‘new constellations for identity and culture’ (4). In following Clewell’s assertion, *Wild Surmise* resists a traditional elegiac framework, and achieves a breakdown of conventions, as seen in the marriage of Alex and Daniel. By drawing from a literary-historical account of the elegiac, this article has allowed for a greater understanding of the ways in which Porter poetically explores unfulfilled desire, loss and mourning within *Wild Surmise*.

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