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Breathing Under Water: A Ficto-Critical Response to Gail Jones's "The House of Breathing"

Aritha van Herk

- 1 This ficto-critical response to "The House of Breathing" comprises an exploration of the hyphen between one world and another, and a reading of one writer's fictional reincarnation of the forever sunken Titanic juxtaposed with my own writerly reading of drowning and its concomitant presence in transatlantic discourse, brought together by the narrative of haunting itself. Australian writer Gail Jones's short story incites this analysis but also demands that as a Canadian critic/writer investigating Jones's story, I must provide an inter-textual narrative that takes up the necessity of reincarnating an individual crossing and its private reverberation within the larger metanarrative of immigration. This is not a conventional paper, but a recuperation of haunting, and a re-haunting of migration's intricate outcome. This ficto-critique partakes of a crossing and hyphenated crossover, and in the process, unpacks how fictions of modernity have learned to breathe under water instead of drowning.
- 2 Over a lifetime of writing stories about the seductions and configurations of landscape on the Canadian prairie, I find myself writing, over and over again, about drowning. This trope surprises me each time it reappears, for drowning is a means of death entirely remote from my world, except perhaps for the farms that drowned in dust in the 1930s. I live on the high plains of western Canada, and although rivers curl through the foreland thrust sheets (the official designation of foothills) of the Rocky Mountains—and yes, with heavy rains and spring melt those rivers occasionally even flood—we are far from the sea. I know of course the fundamentals of drowning; this death results from asphyxia when water enters the lungs and causes suffocation. And yes, it is true that, as a result of growing up on the prairies, I cannot swim. The prairie teems with non-swimmers. There must have been lessons available in some form, but swimming pools were rare, and trained instructors even rarer and so, true to my origins, I cannot swim a stroke.

- 3 The new world is haunted, despite its physical distance, by the specter of the transatlantic crossing, the water that buoyed the immigrants who came to North America in the early half of the 20th century. The crossing becomes ghostly, transformative, an apparition that transubstantiates the reincarnation of migration itself, that holds the gestures of that phenomenological voyage as ghostly recrudescence. Derrida's contention that the ghost is there by virtue of not being there is absolutely key to my analysis. While he refers to use-value and commodity forms, his discussion of the wooden table in all its forward and historical dictates fits the performance of the migratory gesture perfectly. The journey then haunts its performative journey before that journey begins, haunts its own embarkation, and will later haunt its passage, its accomplished journey. "To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. This is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration" (161). Australian writer Gail Jones's short story, "The House of Breathing," is haunted by the marvelous and doomed beauty of the Titanic, the ghostly ship that shadows every transatlantic crossing. In the story, the wondrously splendid trappings of the ship boast a version of vault, "a church-sized dome of glass and steel" (Jones 1992, 150). The "sunlight refracted through the faceted glass" (150) makes it seem a "fantastic jewel" (153), Derrida's "apparitional subject" (Derrida, 37). Here is the cathedral of haunting to come, spun above the grand staircase which served as the demarcation (the hyphen, connection and separation) between class and privilege or lack thereof. That dome of glass is a quintessential transatlantic spillway, for it captures and manipulates the sunlight (150), the very essence of the light of the sky as trans-historical category. It conjures also the darkness that will later haunt that same glass dome.
- 4 Derrida's enunciation of haunting persuades me that I should not be surprised at my bone-deep fascination with watery depths. My father always wanted to go to sea, and said so often. I cannot decipher the reason for his desire. He was a farm-boy, from an agricultural world that had no connection to seafaring or to sailing. Why he dreamed of sailing is a mystery, and a riddle that I cannot ask him about now. But he was born and grew up in the Netherlands, a country that has slowly increased its size by wresting, hand over hand, inch by inch, land from water. It is a drowned and drowning country, famous for its citizens' combative relationship with the sea, whether as sailors or traders or dike-builders. Fronting the cold Atlantic, it proposes a symbiosis especially extraordinary given the long antagonism between man and water. And Dutchmen have navigated from their shores throughout the world, a migrancy of commerce, art and industry. Historically, the Holland America line, a shipping company founded in 1873, carried more than 850,000 people, between the late 1800s and the mid-1900s, from the old world to the new ("Holland"), such crossings often the only extended travel those migrants would experience in their lifetimes. Travel by ship is a signature of transatlantic migration but signals also the lacunae between departure and arrival. The ocean was, before the advent of instant communication, a version of chasm, a gap or suspension, and in terms of relocation, an interruption separating theory and practice. Crossing became an opportunity to anticipate discovery and to recite memory. It stretched between the two ports as navigational thread, a thin membrane linking expectancy and loss.

- 5 Of all transatlantic transactions, the voyage of the immigrant serves as an endlessly robust metanarrative in the telegraphed codes between Europe and America. This voyage is mythic, disquieting, replete with the combined terror and anticipation of those who would gamble on a fresh beginning, those in the process of inventing for themselves a new narrative. The aperture of the journey effects a hiatus that enables the migrant to figure a surrogate identity, to dream an alternate outcome to the life left behind. It is that moment of hesitation between abandonment and becoming, between leave-taking and entrance. If migrancy and potential exile, as Edward Said points out, involve a "discontinuous state of being" (177), the transition zone is that uneasy gap where change must be both imagined and negotiated. The space of the journey then becomes a metaphor for hope and anticipation, but in fact rehearses a hugely truant ignorance. Migrants seldom know what they are going to encounter. They know what they have left, but they cannot anticipate what they will be faced with at the farther linkage of the expedition.
- 6 And so the voyage commands its own vision, a vision refracted through an unusual lens in "The House of Breathing." In this short story, a narrator who lives in a "desert-bound mining town, surrounded by thousands of sea-less kilometres of red dirt" (Jones 1992, 149) revisits her grandmother's journey on the most infamous ship of all time, the Titanic. Traumatized by the experience, her grandmother re-tells, over and over, her memories of the Titanic, which "sailed, collided and sank in slow motion again and again throughout my childhood" (149). For all its inflected reputation as a luxury liner, the Titanic too carried migrants, clusters of families intent on reaching the new world and the lodestar of America, on the voyage "dreaming wonderful dreams of skyscrapers and dollars" (152). The thorough research behind the *Encyclopedia Titanica* meticulously identifies the places of origin of those passengers: Poles and Croatians, Finns and Lebanese, Bulgarians and Swedes and Belgians. We can easily imagine, in the shell of that great vessel, an extraordinary Babel, itself a transatlantic confabulation rich with ambiguity. They were chauffeurs and miners and butcher's assistants, teachers and housekeepers and carpenters and farmers. And over that crucible hung the dreaming cosmology of migration, with its eager dispersion, its anticipatory pigment.
- 7 I do not belong to the category of Titanic fetishists who seem compelled to sieve the details of that maritime disaster. In fact, I resist the story, over-told and obvious and even sentimental, and I found the James Cameron movie—in the romantic-disaster genre—almost revolting. The surrounding voyeurism of the Titanic's sinking has been mauled and memorialized so much that it begins to wear itself thin. But we can, in Gail Jones's words, think of its continued resonance as a version of "strategic discourse" (Jones 2006, 16) determined to haunt its own haunting. Like every journey that effects profound displacement, the Titanic's foundering does exactly that, and serves besides as a parable about hubris. Iain Chambers's analysis of how the journey toward a new life eclipses referentiality is particularly relevant, for the grandmother obsessively recounts a "vision" of her particular Titanic, "always stunningly well-lit and remarkable as much for its bright procession as its famous immensity" (Jones 1992, 149). Chambers identifies the painful initiation of this catalytic odyssey: "Such a journey acquires the form of a restless interrogation, undoing its very terms of reference as the point of departure is lost along the way. If exile presumes an initial home and the eventual promise of a return, the questions met with *en route* consistently breach the boundaries of such an itinerary. The possibilities of continuing

to identify with such premises weaken and fall away. This memory of primary loss, persistently inscribed in the uncertain becoming of the outward journey, has made of exile a suggestive symbol of our times" (Chambers 2). And an interrupted journey, a drowned journey, an epically punctuated journey, where hundreds drown, becomes even more suggestive and symbolic.

- 8 The Titanic is surely the ultimate transatlantic symbolism bucket: a beautiful, expensive vessel designed for luxury even more than for its actual purpose of carrying people, setting out on its "maiden" voyage determined to shine, and shining all the more brightly for its implacable extinguishment in the dark and icy Atlantic. Throughout "The House of Breathing," light and darkness model a rich chiaroscuro that builds the layers of the story toward the cataclysmic embrace of ultimate silence. The vision of the Titanic, "sailing through darkness, slow and magisterial, with all lights blazing" (Jones 1992, 148), becomes the shared dream/nightmare of the narrator and her grandmother, who are collaborators in the obsessive retelling of Bridget's spectral memory, their ritual of loss and finding, danger replaced by safety. The critic Lyn Jacobs has written about Jones's use of "light writing," with respect to her employment of photography and the processes of light (Jacobs 192); in this story light and the darkness are less technical than emotional, rendered in a language that travels between terror and comfort. But "the residue and writing of light" (Cadava 5) is the subject here underlining the "intimations of closure" (Jones 1992, 156) that are this story's destination. The threnody behind all transatlantic narrative is grief, an ineffable grief that rides between the interstitial fissures of passage. This grief is recorded by light and darkness, but rather than delineate them as binary, dual and separate, Jones's story proposes grief as movement, so that distortion and reconciliation proxy the real transatlantic transportation.
- 9 Perhaps my father dreamed of running away to sea because he enjoyed so much the voyage from Le Havre, France, to Halifax, Canada in that furious March of 1949. My parents, with my elder siblings, packed their belongings into a massive *kist*, said goodbye to their families, and took the train from their village of Wierden, Overijssel, to Le Havre. I know very little about this pivotal moment because I was neither conceived nor born, although of course I inherited the vision of their decision to immigrate to Canada, and I am haunted by the mythology of their choosing to leave and to arrive elsewhere, my contribution to the master narrative of migration. I heard the repeated stories about the horrific war years under German occupation, the starvation and death of the Hunger Winter of 1945, the miraculous advent of enormous and healthy and kind Canadian soldiers as liberators, who dispensed chocolate bars and advice, advice which consisted of a three-word sentence: "Emigrate to Canada." Given what I have managed to decipher about my parents, they couldn't wait to start over, to invent an alternative future. One family photograph documents a farewell gathering, aunts and cousins crowded around my parents, who are dressed in travelling clothes, tailored suits. My older siblings stand between adult legs, young and dandelion-headed. Years later one of my cousins told me about seeing my grandfather that day, behind the shed, leaning into its wooden wall and sobbing, convinced that he would never see my father again. But nothing would stop my parents. In Le Havre they boarded the SS Samaria, a vessel in the Cunard line, a single funnel, oil turbine driven, twin-screw ship that pretended to offer luxury, but on a smaller scale than the grand three and four funnel liners of the prewar era. The Samaria had been built as a passenger ship in the 1920s, converted to a troop ship during World War II and returned to service as a

passenger ship after the war. My mother said it was somewhat the worse for wear, and after the world's conflagration, luxury was relative. She had opinions about that ship, although she saw very little of it. The moment that France disappeared below the horizon she was violently seasick and passed the crossing miserable and nauseous. The doctor, when called, diagnosed her with exactly that malaise and promised her that the moment she sighted land at the other end of the voyage, she would feel fine. His prediction proved to be true. When she saw the rocky coast of Canada, she was cured, although never of the memory. My father, on the other hand, loved being at sea and roamed the ship from end to end. It was perhaps his last and only real holiday, although with my mother so ill he had to mind three small children over what must have seemed a long five days. The Samaria was broken up in 1956, so there is no rusting hulk or historical shell to attend to, no memorializing of that solid and trustworthy tub. Mementoes kept by Canadian immigrants of their transatlantic crossings are mostly postcards and that paper shadow is all that remains of my parents' un-Titanic voyage.

- 10 The historical balance between the public story and its fragmented private after-effect as witnessed in the personal story is key to Jones's approach to the transatlantic moment captured by the submergence of the Titanic. In her essay, "A Dreaming, A Sauntering: Re-imagining Critical Paradigms," Jones addresses "cultural meaning-making" (Jones 2006, 11) by making reference to Blanchot, who describes writing as "fidelity to the work's demands, the demands of grief" (Blanchot 75). Jones considers carefully "death, corporeality and remembrance, as well as transgressions between the private experience" (Jacobs 192) and its public recording. As Jacobs argues, Jones's focus is on "the changing technologies of sharing perception" (Jacobs 191) and how that affects any cataloguing of the past in conjunction with the present. Roland Barthes observes that "[t]he age of photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private" (Barthes 98). That uncomfortable revelation is the crux of modernity and the drowning of all Edwardian notions of privacy, physically enacted by the transatlantic crossing and its repeated performance.
- 11 The public and the private collide irrevocably in the story of the Titanic. That the calamity occurs mid-ocean, between embarkation and destination, makes that protean space even more usefully conceptual. When the ultimate transatlantic voyage becomes a transatlantic drowning, the loss of imagined hope, any fleeting brush with love, and the terrible burden of survival all conspire to serve an overwhelming analogy. If cultural images "operate in a dense network of relationship with other forms of representation, textual, visual and psychic" (Connor 106), those images also overwrite the traces of the Titanic as transatlantic metaphor. This historical moment was photographed to a very limited extent, but it has been since "illustrated" in art, movies, music and of course, endless accounts, both oral and written. Its historically factual dimension and its private sorrow and loss are now covered with layers of interpretation and exposition, multiple re-visitings that make of the Titanic an endlessly malleable site, able to take on almost every kind of colour and for that reason relentless public. The palimpsest can absorb a *mélange* of affects. Against that overwhelming collage of associations, Jones's story seeks to shed light on the private aftermath of the epic voyage and engulfment, as it has registered on one character, Bridget, the grandmother to the story's narrator.

- 12 The time, years and years later, when Bridget is an old woman, and the place of the story, "a desert-bound mining town" (Jones 1992, 149) in Australia are so far from the Titanic as to be impossibly remote. Yet, that very distance makes more effective the transatlantic shock of the Titanic's sinking, for Jones presents the two as connected, in a "transcendence of fixed positions via incandescent insight" (Jacobs 191). The story uses light and darkness as key tools for Bridget's "monodrama" (Jones 1992, 149), her private re-inscription of her time on the Titanic, and for the granddaughter's obsessive absorbing and recreation of her "vision." Light especially serves as "a medium of discovery and a link between people and generations" (Jacobs 195); it demands "a necessary, relational 'darkness'" (Jacobs 195), effected in the story by the father's work underground in a gold mine.
- 13 There is very little shadow in the new world, the world that my parents migrated to and that I know so intimately. The light on the Canadian prairies is relentless, so brilliant and intense that we who live there catch ourselves squinting perpetually, a constant almost-frown that creases the forehead and crinkles the eyes. The rain seldom brings a grey overcast but falls through a gauze of sunlight, virtually absorbed before it comes to ground. Darkness is never completely absolute. Even in the thick of winter, with the temperature hovering at death-like degrees, an incandescent scintillation stains the horizon. Perhaps the reflection of snow, or an earth memory of summer's long days, engenders this afterglow, this strange radiance. It is light that enables our prairie hybridity, that makes us hyphenated Canadians feel that we belong. It is light that embraces us first, for without ever raising its voice, it answers back to a transatlantic darkness that surely follows those who made that migratory journey, who travelled the water's impenetrable depths in search of a vision. A translational urgency sets in motion the transatlantic pilgrimage and its subsequent story, the voyage from the side of desire and expectation to experience. Homi Bhabha argues that our culture is actively and inescapably translational: "immigration, diaspora, displacement, relocation" (438) all insist that we must understand the world we know as a construction of our own passage from one side of an ocean to another. "The great, though unsettling, advantage of this position is that it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition" (438). We invent the visions and traditions that invented us, and when we are confronted with this destination and its implacable demands, we invent too our refuge. One could argue for this accommodation as a version of Perec's "fictive memory" (129), a way of connecting stories that are not ours to our own reading and hearing of them as acts of participation. These memories that might have belonged to us become ours by virtue of our practice of their presence, our holding them close when we need comforting, despite their inability to offer comfort.
- 14 The granddaughter in Jones's "The House of Breathing" is able to visualize the transatlantic crossing that her grandmother experienced, is able to share her grandmother's Titanic haunting so completely that she is also able to comfort her. Knowing what makes her grandmother sleepwalk, and knowing that she roams the lost Titanic in her sleep makes the granddaughter both accessory and audience. In fact, she accompanies the grandmother on her transatlantic sailing, by her connection becoming hyphen to the dreamed and re-lived experience.
- Every now and then she would rise up from her bed and roam the Titanic that existed in her head. Through shallow pools of moonlight and spilling shadows she mimed the climbing of stairways and gawking at the dome. She moved from third

to second and first-class, into smoking rooms and gymnasiums, and sought out the young man or waited on the deck. She paused at the entrance to the Turkish Bath, precluded even in dreaming, and continued on, with dreamy slowness, through each and every spectral and memorised level. (Jones 1992, 157)

- 15 In the ultimate translational moment, the narrator dons both her grandmother's knowledge and powerlessness (an inversion of Yeats's "Leda and the Swan") and thus can perform an echo of the original act of rescue. The grandmother, Bridget, the story tells us, sails on the Titanic as a junior maid to two wealthy women travelling to Boston to meet their "American relatives" (Jones 1992, 149). Both women boast hyphenated names; and Bridget later names them "the two hyphens" (151). The deliberate marking of the hyphen is a translational gesture, the hyphen, which serves to break words into parts or to join separate words, a migrant sign. From the lifeboat, safely installed with the two hyphens, Bridget watches the sinking of the Titanic remotely, witnesses the lights extinguished by the water's dark without realizing the broader scope of the story. "Because she was young and unknowing, because she was on an adventure, and dazzled, bewitched by spectacle and allayed by sweet music, she did not really believe that the Titanic would sink [...] Only later did she learn of the fifteen hundred lost souls, of the crew, of the band" (155) and those who drowned. When the darkness is complete and the ship utterly sunk, "Mrs. Armstrong-Colman, who had managed to bring her mink, placed both her fur-covered arms around Bridget, encircled her with a powerful scent of lavender water and must, and wept" (155), while the waves "made a noise like whispers: sshh! sshh!" (155). In the same way, when her grandmother, reliving the nightmare, begins to cry, does the granddaughter know that she must "put my arms around her, encircle her completely, and whisper in my own voice sshh!, sshh!" (157). This reprise of the earlier ordeal and its resolution becomes then the connective hyphen between past and present, the transatlantic division that the grandmother cannot forget. The granddaughter's "habit of listening to the waves of my own breathing: inhalation, exhalation; inhalation, exhalation" (157) is her talismanic ritual of survival, her guarantee of safety and refuge from drowning, there in Australia on the farthest side of the world.
- 16 No one in my family ever drowned, or least not that I knew about. The relatives who kept themselves on the other side of the Atlantic suffered various interesting deaths, but they were transatlantic cancellations and I could not quite envision either their lives or their passings. They were names and ciphers but not real characters in life's drama.
- 17 The cattail sloughs and muddy little rivers of my prairie world made drowning a challenge. I did know of three deaths by drowning, though, one a girl in the class ahead of me, who fell in the water unnoticed at a lake party and drowned quite readily. The next morning, the men of the community dredged the lake until she was found, her body gently covered with canvas and taken ashore. They had decency, those people, trying to make traditions in a raw and unscripted world. There were whispers about "drinking," but this was the relatively puritanical prairie still trying to get over prohibition, and "drinking" could have meant soda pop.
- 18 And I almost drowned. Like the girl at the lake party, I got in over my head. Once a year, a line of yellow school buses took us dry-land children on a school outing and picnic to a large body of water called Buffalo Lake, so named because from the air its shape resembled that of a prairie bison. That was the kind of world we lived in, where "field-trips" to water were considered rare treats and attempts were made, once in a

while, to entertain us wholesomely. I remember that I had borrowed my sister's bathing suit, which was too big for me and thus a great source of anxiety, for I feared it would slide up or down. I remember that the water was thick and gelid, and cold too, for June is barely on nodding acquaintance with summer on the Canadian prairie. We were leggy teenagers, goose-pimpled and intense and filled with the rage of winter's long incarceration. We'd been on board the ship of high school for so long we yearned for an iceberg, a collision. We wanted something to happen.

- 19 We scampered into that water like a flailing tangle of insects, not porpoises or graceful animals but screaming and wild, and in that process tipped ourselves into its new environment without regard for safety or good sense. The lake was deep and the bottom uneven, and probably only a few of my classmates actually knew how to swim. And in the roughhousing and the dunking, I stepped into a deep hole and drowned. I sank not like the proverbial stone but without direction, and I became, like Jones's young man, "sea-changed and vague" (Jones 1992, 156), for what seemed like eternity hanging suspended with the currents and the ripples and the lake weeds. Did I cry out? I do not know. Somehow, somewhere, hands pulled me upright, set me on my feet and held my head above the level of the water. I coughed and took deep choking breaths, and even now I remember the sweet tang of air as an eternal beneficence.
- 20 And when I was drowning? Yes, the tales are true; your life does pass before your eyes. Although mine had been a short life up until then, I know that I processed all the memory of blood and bone that had brought me to that moment, and strangely, I stood on the deck of the Samaria with my father as the green trees and rocks of Canada's east coast rose slowly out of the week-long voyage and its relentless water.
- 21 Remember, I had not been born. I was born on those dry and drowning Canadian prairies five years after my parents settled there, five years after my parents completed their transatlantic immigrant crossing. I had missed the trip across the ocean entirely, a person neither imagined nor anticipated.
- 22 The Titanic, like most such ships of that time, was making a transatlantic crossing in aid of a waxing zeitgeist related to America's sense of Manifest Destiny, the urge to go westward leaving no room for hesitation or caution. Adventurous young men and women, without much hope of a future, responded to the aggressive charisma of the new world, holding its arms open to incoming migrants whose hands brought with them the work that would make these "colonies" flourish.
- 23 The Titanic is an emblem of symbolic knowing for modernity. It collected passengers and their belongings and their histories, and then it dispersed them altogether, their stories interrupted with a spectral certainty that some could not escape. Remaining was flotsam and jetsam, the survivors more fragmented and dislocated than those who were drowned. The Titanic offers a symbolic way of encountering the "oceanic oblivion of history" (Jones 2002, 22) by offering fragments that together encapsulate the transatlantic gesture, the movement from modernity to melancholy, the hyperactivity of awareness that characterizes this relentlessly detailed world. The Titanic enabled grief, the grief of disruption, and it declared the grieving to come, the wars hovering on the horizon, the crossings that would always now be fraught with the phantom of failed crossing. The drowned Titanic signals not only the "decorative vocabulary of specters and phantoms" (Jones 2002,16), but its loss and endless re-discovery inscribe a transatlantic crossing that is always and never accomplished. Here is the journey interrupted, the journey toward modernism usurped and in that usurpation eternally

illuminative. It is the lacuna at the heart of modernity. It is the absence that cannot be avoided. This ship, this Titanic, is the liminal zone between the "wealthy young men in decadent poses—legs crossed, heads thrown back, and arms draped in languid extension over the plush backs of armchairs" (Jones 1992, 151) and their ultimate destination, the graves of the western front, which hovers just outside the frame of the story as it unfolds its telling.

- 24 In its vivid envisioning (we are all Bridget, the junior maid with the Irish accent who becomes the narrator's grandmother), we take on, paratactically, the gaps proposed by this shattered and incomplete passage. It is, in Jones's story, a hymn to absence and disintegration. It is Benjamin's "profane relic," which insists that we experience "practical and material forms of remembrance" (Jones 2002, 14) as a form of crossing.
- 25 I saw my father on water only a few times. In a rowboat, pretending to fish out on Dried Meat Lake, that murky pond that lay a few kilometers north of our farm, a place where we dissimulated summer recreation. That lake, unlike the lake I drowned in, was weedy, its inhospitable water impossible to swim in, and additionally cursed by the strange magnetism of the Canadian prairies, prone to attracting sudden lightning storms.
- 26 I do know that one of my father's most treasured journeys was when he took the British Columbia ferry up the Inside Passage. It is a regular ferry service, which still runs between settlements on the west coast of Canada, from Port Hardy to Prince Rupert. Then it was an overnight trip, leaving late in the day and arriving the next morning. Now the Northern Expedition leaves early in the morning and arrives late at night, and in the summer when it stops at Bella Bella, it arrives even later. That was the kind of voyage my father loved, full of rugged landscape and scenery and its remarkable promise of wilderness and adventure. The dome of the sky above him and the choppy water that broke from the bow gave him a remarkable energy. A curious light would break on his usually thoughtful face at those times, and I knew that he was, for a time at least, separated from responsibilities, and alive with hope. All transatlantic crossings begin so.
- 27 Fragmented stories surprise their own lacunae. "The House of Breathing" is so utterly trained on the spectacle of the Titanic that we readers too are riveted, and thus pay little attention to the missing sections of the story. How does Bridget, with her lovely Irish accent and her "cap and frilly apron" (Jones 1992, 153) get from the lifeboat where the hyphenated Mrs. Armstrong-Colman wraps her fur-encased arms around her, to the sere outback of an Australian mining town? That particular part of the voyage is undocumented by the story, although its very absence declares the importance of its absence. The stories that are kept and those that are ignored waltz together in the diffuse and deceptive remnants of memory and mythology.
- 28 The narrator's father, who hovers on the story's outskirts, is named but absent, working underground, in the bowels of the new world's engine room, it seems, a miner with "his lamp upon his head" (Jones 1992, 149). His mine seems to have infected the story's version of the Titanic, for the narrator tells us that the ship "was something like an underground mine, with its confusing depths and levels, but also nothing like a mine; it was so strictly partitioned, its inner areas demarcated by style and admission" (Jones 1992, 153). The father is a stand-in for the drowned young man that the grandmother mourns, and the father's drowning in darkness echoes the young man's burial and absence, his being lost at sea.

- 29 We get from the story no details about the grandmother's continued migration to Australia, and we get from the story only the information that the narrator's mother—is that the grandmother's daughter, or is the narrator's father her son?—died, "suddenly and unimaginably" (Jones 1992, 156). Only then does the narrator yoke "the young-man-and-his-kiss" (Jones 1992, 156) with death, with drowning. That she can visualize in detail his "sea-changed and vague" (156) form, that she can read his "consequentiality" (156) as opposed to her own dead mother's absence, speaks to the power of this transatlantic vision, its ability to overwhelm completely her actual life and its context. Her disappeared mother and the contrasting setting of the story are utterly effaced by the brilliance of the Titanic. "The shingly earth and the saltbush country, blazing in the sunshine, were dim by comparison with [the] light-bulbed ship and its golden dome" (Jones 1992, 156). To protect herself from drowning, she invents a safe and private space, her own bedroom, calling it "'the house of breathing', so that [her] safety was guaranteed" (Jones 1992, 157). And when her grandmother seems utterly lost, distressed and certain that she is trapped in the bowels of the doomed ship, the narrator becomes refuge from the mesmerizing vision and the modern meta-narrative of doom. "I would guide her gently to my own bed and place her there to sleep beside me, keeping her very safe, utterly safe, in the house of breathing, where, despite everything, one remained alive during the night" (Jones 1992, 157). The grandmother repeats the disorientation that she faced on board the Titanic, where she was often lost, while the narrator comes to understand that she herself, an Australian result of migration, has never been lost, knows absolutely where she is and where she belongs. She is one of the new generation, a child of those immigrants who made their way toward an optimistic future, an escape and metamorphosis.
- 30 The only way to read a short story is to unread it. The only way to read a short story is to travel the length and the breadth of its journey as it recites destination and embarkation. It is no longer possible to read a story and to address merely its construction or referentiality. The narrative has become a travelling, a present participle that negotiates destination and departure. The story migrates toward a destination that is hardly able to detect its own origins. It turns on its arrival and suggests another departure. It is transatlantic in some profound lexicographical way that only a story can persuade, and it articulates a journey, the unrecovered body of a crossing.
- 31 Here is painted too the differentiation of the age and its demands, with only faint apologies to Ezra Pound and Hugh Selwyn Mauberly, for of course in 1912 the world did not yet imagine the coming cataclysm, and the myriad deaths to come, so busy was it with its optimism and its interest in unusual beauty, *recherché* innovations and the dazzling languor of an era pretending to stand still and hurtle onwards at the same time. Nothing was yet disillusioned, not yet, all was poised on the verge of a promenade that would invent its own steps.
- 32 Decadence and pessimism, exorbitance and trespass. That is the underlying tone of this story's regret, the maid, Bridget, seeing around her the concrete emblems of opulence, a contrast to her own invisibility, her "smiling effacement" (Jones 1992, 151) as a servant enabling her to move through first-class areas because she can always pretend that she is in search of her mistress, whose hyphenated name gestures toward the duplicity and duality of the age. And the duplicity of an age where there is no telling

who will keep custody of the visions, who will transport the foundational voyage and its point of departure to another understanding.

- 33 So, "The House of Breathing" instructs us to begin with the Titanic, its only too obvious image of modernity, its tawdry trappings and over-hyperbolized metaphors the expression of an age that we puzzle over in our contemporary attention. And yet, there it is, the door creaking open on modernity and its increasingly incredulous horrors, its modest luxuries, its imaginary Turkish baths. Parables are difficult to find, but here is one, the demarcation point between an old and ordered world and a new world, where women vote and men must help with laundry.
- 34 And while commemoration is a strange impulse for a story, these huge events declare occasions for story with a vengeance because they offer fragments that can be knit together, imagined, envisioned, and disbelieved. Even a nuanced story cannot escape the magnetism of mythology. And there is no larger transatlantic mythology than the Titanic, the real Titanic, the sinking Titanic, the aftermath of the Titanic, the ghostly wreck on the ocean floor become the spellbinding Titanic with its musicals and movies and memorabilia. As audience, we now read the Titanic as a closure of modernity, a departure from the elegant manners of the Edwardian age with its dreams of progress and its insistence on the old world. The ship's drowning signals the ultimate transatlantic crossing and the ultimate transatlantic voyage, the moment when history began to understand that it could and would stop breathing.
- 35 Immigrants now are encouraged to take swimming lessons as one way to effect their transmigration. Having crossed many waters, they practice navigating across an artificial concrete pool to cement their own particular crossing and arrival. The successful migrant is one who learns how to breathe under water.

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ABSTRACTS

Cet article se propose d'utiliser la nouvelle de l'écrivaine australienne Gail Jones "The House of Breathing" (1992), publiée dans le volume du même nom, comme point de départ pour une méditation sur le voyage transatlantique. Il se livre, de façon parallèle, à une évocation de souvenirs plus personnels. Le naufrage désastreux du Titanic tel qu'il est présenté par cette nouvelle est envisagé comme le moment clé qui hante le modernisme. Cet article s'empare de ce moment pour amplifier sa hantise par l'intermédiaire d'une exploration ficto-critique des voyages en bateau et de la noyade. En d'autres termes, il allie la critique à la fiction créative pour mettre en lumière l'échange que perpétue toute migration et il double la fiction d'une autre fiction qui la hante comme par un effet d'écho et d'anticipation.

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