This essay reads the books of Diane Duane's *Young Wizards* series as novels of sexual and gender metamorphosis, looking particularly at magic within Duane's work as a linguistic instrument for sculpting bodies. It argues that YA novels in particular represent adolescent turmoil through narratives of wizardry and marvellous transformation, with Duane's work occupying a significantly feminist position.

"I am the molten heart of the world": Language and Metamorphosis in Diane Duane's *Young Wizards* Series

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I am the trees that drink the light; I am the air of the green things' breathing; I am the stone that the trees break asunder; I am the molten heart of the world.
—from Life's "I Am," Diane Duane, So You Want to Be a Wizard

This essay examines the relationship of speech and metamorphosis within the work of Diane Duane. In Duane's *Young Wizards* books, magic is constructed through language, and her central protagonists—two sisters, Nita and Dairine—undergo a variety of amazing transformations as a result of their linguistic (and ethical) choices. Language, in fact, becomes the purest expression of their ethics, as they strive to encounter their others (both cosmic and contingent) in that crucial meeting of faith that Levinas describes as the very core of ethical life. I want to argue that, just as magic and shapeshifting often represent the violent transitions of adolescence within children's literature, physical transformation in Duane's work is also an expression of gender transgression and sexual rebellion. The Speech, the language of wizards, both human

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and non, remains the key to these transformations, and language itself becomes the battlefield upon which Duane's characters fight for control of their own identities.

The *Young Wizards* series, which began in 1983 with *So You Want to Be a Wizard,* includes seven books with an eighth in development. The first three books were reissued in 2003 as a twentieth anniversary printing, and the series has won multiple awards: both *Hornbook* and *Locus* have consistently praised it. Despite this, Duane's work has received almost no critical attention, and she is frequently compared to canonical authors such as Ursula K. Leguin and Marion Zimmer Bradley, rather than being examined closely in her own right. My focus concerns the first three books in Duane's series—*So You Want to Be a Wizard, Deep Wizardry,* and *High Wizardry*—which pay particular attention to the sibling relationship between Nita and Dairine. Although the later books also deserve attention, these primary books represent a compelling ambiguity in terms of genre. They are often billed as being "darker" than Duane's later work, and her storytelling style definitely changes between the third book (*High Wizardry*) and the fourth (*A Wizard Abroad*). Although the fourth book is actually the first to address young romance, the "pre-romantic" books have far more disturbing content, including suicide, genocide, and even apocalypse.

Duane writes about female characters whose agency lies in their ability to speak beyond masculine constraint, to make themselves emotionally accessible and therefore vulnerable, and to cite their own corporeality rather than avoiding the audience's gaze upon their bodies through the use of prosthetics—such as swords, wands, and magic—in the way that most male heroes protect themselves from being looked at. While celebrated heroes like Taran, Frodo, and Harry Potter all have an array of weapons at their disposal (including swords, daggers, wands, and even broomsticks), Nita and Dairine are often left only with their words. Language becomes their primary defense, and its intimate contours place them within a space of dangerous disclosure. In order to defeat the powers that work in opposition to life (never "evil," in Duane's universe, but simply belonging to a different principle), Nita and Dairine have to put their lives and hearts on the line.

Language is the "molten heart" of Duane's universe, and what I want to approach in this essay is how "the Speech," as the ultimate Austinian "speech-act," also creates a flexible space of physical and psychic metamorphosis for both sisters. Just as Nita and Dairine are able to re-alter the universe through language-driven magic, they are also able to reconfigure their own bodies, to extend and transform their own experiences of gender, sexuality, and desire. They literally speak themselves into being, and their spells become J.L. Austin's "felicitous performative," the speech act that both conveys information and *creates* reality at the same time. His famous example of the bride's "I

do" in *How to Do Things with Words,* the speech act that literally renders her as "bride," is echoed and reconfigured by Duane's "I Am," the soliloquy of the earth itself whose insistent truth is able to drive back the forces of entropy and decay. By participating in this ancient language chain, Nita and Dairine go impossibly beyond their preadolescent bodies, while at the same time claiming a place for those bodies within the ontology of the world.

Leguin is Duane's most obvious literary influence, and her wizards' mastery of a particular language—the "Old Speech"—mirrors Nita's own exploration of the wizardly Speech that can alter the universe. Within the fantasy tradition, magic has always been governed by speech and ritual: Merlin uses secret words and gestures to transform Uther (in order to aid his own dreams of sexual conquest); Gandalf calls upon mystical signs and names in *The Lord of the Rings,* even magically binding the Balrog by addressing it properly as the "Flame of Udûn" (Tolkien, *Lord* 1.322); Harry Potter must master spells and charms at Hogwarts, and the deadliest spell known by Rowling's wizards is actually an explosive utterance—"*Avada Kedavra*"—that kills instantly. Shows like *Buffy, Angel,* and *Charmed* employ liberal uses of Latin and Ancient Greek as the substance of magical spells, although characters like Willow often move beyond the need for language, and can simply *will* things to happen. For Willow, magic becomes "a unity of sexual and elemental power that is every bit as primal as the Slayer's strength [. . .] [it] is not merely conflated with sexuality in the show, but contiguous with it" (Battis 36). Speech seems to be a crucial ingress into the world of magic, but also something that can (occasionally) be transcended by desire and emotion.

Although a wealth of criticism exists on notions of "the fantastic" and "the Uncanny," very little of it actually discusses the role of magic as a linguistic force within contemporary fantasy. Todorov, in *The Fantastic,* locates magic as a function of "the marvelous," which is a much more concise genre than the fantastic. Marvelous elements have their own rules and laws, they can be seen and accepted by a reader, whereas the fantastic is actually "the hesitation between genres" (31), and "is not situated within the work but in the reader's individual experience" (34). The reader, in effect, creates the fantastic by agnosis, by not understanding whether it is real or not. Magic, however, which is an effect of the more structured marvellous genre, "is born of language, it is both its consequence and its proof; not only do the devil and vampires exist only in words, but language alone enables us to conceive what is always absent" (82). Rosemary Jackson describes fantasy as a genre that "traces the unseen and the unsaid of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" (4). However, her critical text, *Fantasy, the Literature of Subversion,* devotes very little discussion to magic in particular, or to contemporary writing in

general. She criticizes Tolkien for creating characters that are inhuman symbols, but only allocates a small portion of one chapter to even discussing *The Lord of the Rings.*

Laura Comoletti sees an important connection between wizards and priests in Leguin's *Earthsea* novels, describing magic-users as "celibate males, trained in a textualized lore managed in a central location [. . .] most significant, wizards and priests alike are able to perform speech-acts by which they can change not only social reality but the physical world as well" (15). A wizard can transform a feather into a falcon, just as a priest, through the speech-act of the Eucharist, can transform wine into blood, bread into flesh. Until the arrival of Arha (or Tenar) in *The Tombs of Atuan,* magic remains a masculine power in Leguin's world, and Perry Nodelman in particular has criticized Leguin for writing largely within the patriarchal constraints of the fantasy genre, only to attempt to "undo" this in the fourth and final *Earthsea* book, *Tehanu*. I would argue that, not only does Ged himself embody a kind of transitional gender that goes beyond masculine celibacy, but his homosocial relationships with other male characters (specifically Arren) create a space for queer desire that disrupts patriarchy as well.

The primary difference between Leguin's work and Duane's is that Leguin's "Old Speech" is the Name of the Father, handed down by a masculine Namer and dictated by male sorcerers, whereas Duane's Speech is a globally (and dimensionally) shared language, always subject to mutation and change, that can be wielded just as formidably by an eleven-year-old girl (as opposed to a centuries-old Archmage). Characters like Willow Rosenberg (*Buffy*) and Hermione Granger (*Harry Potter*) are able to memorize vast quantities of spell-information, to recite charms and enchantments verbatim in order to change the physical world, but Nita and Dairine actually attempt to transform the language of magic itself. Dairine halts entropy in the universe by combining magic with computer technology, and Nita alters the physical surface of *The Book of Night with Moon,* creating an exit-strategy of sorts for the Lone Power instead of simply repeating the ritual that is supposed to bind It. Just as Ged comes to understand, crucially, that we are all "but a shadow and a name" (Leguin, *Farthest* 180), Nita and Dairine are courageous enough to flood the shadowy world of signifiers with light, to change the linguistic relations that govern the universe, in order to create a space for hope.

There are three instances of language-driven transformation in Duane's novels that I will examine in detail. The first is Life's "I Am," a magical performative with very real consequences, and the triumphant speech-act that allows Nita Callahan to reexamine her world as a place of both fragile wizardries and surprisingly durable humanities. The second instance is Nita's transformation in *Deep Wizardry,* when,

through the power of imagination alone, she metamorphoses into a whale. My final example will be Dairine's transformation in *High Wizardry,* her miraculous leap from shy and withdrawn techno-geek (and she was a techno-geek long before Willow Rosenberg arrived on *Buffy*) to a near-beatific defender of life in the universe. All three of these shapeshifting events occur within the relations of gender and genre—they cannot escape the literary constraints of children's literature as a marketed mode of writing, but they also provide spaces of unique defiance and revision. Dairine and Nita become "more" than ten- and twelve-year-old girls, respectively, but they also prove how formidable, and how dangerous, ten- and twelve-year-old girls can be. Within literature, film, and folklore, shapeshifting has historically taken place along a sexual continuum, and preserved a relationship to erotic desire. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is full of transformations, as its name implies, and nearly all of them are a result of erotic love, or the punishment for a transgression against love. Zeus commits numerous acts of rape while wearing different forms—a bull, an eagle, a ram, even a shower of golden rain. Nymphs and Naiads are transmuted into laurels, oaks, and willows because they refuse to submit to masculine lust, and women catch fire, turn to stone, or crumble into salt because of their perceived infidelities and romantic mistakes. So, what happens when this act of transformation, always sexualized, is applied to child characters? Furthermore, what happens when these various transformations are consensual rather than coerced, the result of magical agency rather than divine retribution or caprice?

In Duane's work, transformation hinges upon language, and a wizard's carefully chosen speech-acts define who or what she will become. The Speech is an *ur*-language that everything in the universe comprehends (and, indeed, *wants* to listen to). Nita's own wizard's manual, which she discovers in the children's section of her local library, states that "wizards' [. . .] ability to convince a piece of the world—a tree, say, or a stone—that it's not what it thinks it is, that it's something else, is the heart of wizardry" (*So* 10). Magic, then, rests in the speaking subject's ability to maintain a delicate equilibrium between lying (that is, convincing something that it's something else) and, conversely, describing *truly* (invoking something's essence, its *thingness*, in order to safeguard it against forces that want to erase it from existence). Wizards begin by communicating verbally in the Speech, but, as they grow more proficient, are able merely to think in it. They learn how to change properties of the physical universe by carefully ordering their thoughts within the infinitely complex (and wildly dangerous) vocabulary of the Speech, which contains everything from words for forces that cannot be described in "terrestrial" languages, to specific tenses for creating whole universes.

When Nita first discovers her wizard's manual, she is battered and bruised—having just suffered a particularly vicious beating at the hands of an older girl, Joanne, and

her gang of thugs. This is not an isolated moment of violence, but rather the latest event in a long series of beatings and ambushes. Joanne, we understand, comes from an upper-middle-class household—they are wealthy enough to afford name-brand clothes and brand new bikes while living in an expensive New York suburb, while Nita's family is stretched to its financial limit, with both her mother and father having to take extra shifts at work and struggling to make ends meet. Duane adds subtle but pointed touches here, describing Nita's old jeans, Kit's cheap windbreaker, and the "Admiral Akbar" t-shirt that Dairine refuses to part with, despite the fact that it is falling apart. Through magic, Nita attempts to transcend her economic circumstances as well as her metaphysical frustrations, travelling to far-flung galaxies and involving herself in cosmic intrigue. Yet she always returns to her cramped suburban household, which only becomes emptier once her mother dies (in *Wizard's Dilemma*).

Her first act as a wizard turns out to be a binding performative, the Wizard's Oath, which actually transforms her. This will prepare her later for Life's "I Am," which uses her body as a lightning rod to reinvoke the slumbering consciousness of the Earth itself. Much as the "Goblet of Fire" in *Harry Potter* represents, in the words of Albus Dumbledore, "a binding magical contract," which even demands the death of one of its young contractors, the Wizard's Oath catapults Nita into a world of peril and uncertainty, a universe populated by forces that would think nothing of snuffing out her life. The oldest and most fearsome of these, the Lone One, is quite literally called "the Starsnuffer," the architect of death and entropy in the universe. Nita does not quite realize what she's getting into when she takes the oath, and yet, on some level, Duane demonstrates that she has always been aware of a global tendency towards chaos and destruction. She is heedless, perhaps, but not *ignorant*. This echoes Perry Nodelman's observation that child characters are awake and plugged into the world, despite the attempts of parents (and book selection committees comprised of parents) who attempt to construct a childhood "agnosis." This deferral is a violation, the result of "[parents] not wanting *children* to know. Even more chillingly, [it] might emerge from adults not wanting to know [. . .] what children *already* know" (102).

The Wizard's Oath places Nita within "the service of Life," and threatens the removal of her powers should she deviate from the Oath's prescripts in any significant way. As she learns in *Deep Wizardry,* the removal of one's wizardly powers is tantamount to living death, and this prospect so terrifies her that she chooses *actual* death rather than continued life as a "regular" teenager. In taking the oath, Nita pledges (perhaps unwittingly) to "use the Art for nothing but the service of that Life. I will guard growth and ease pain. I will fight to preserve what grows and lives well in its own way; and I will change no object or creature unless its growth or life [. . .] [is] threatened [. . .] till Universe's end" (34).

Nita takes a similar oath in *Deep Wizardry* when she agrees to play the role of the Silent Lord in the celebrants' performance, the character who is fated to be sacrificed so that "Life" and "Art" might continue to flourish. Although children's literature presents us with a number of powerful child-wizards, none of them take such a binding oath. Harry Potter inherits his power partly as a result of his mother's love, and partly due to a prophecy—both being circumstances completely beyond his control. Eilonwy, the young enchantress in Lloyd Alexander's *Prydain* series, learns magic under the tutelage of an evil sorceress, and gives little thought to the spells that she crafts (although she does become an ethical force within the novels, and an important educator of young Taran). As a child, Ged (who will become the great wizard Sparhawk) learns magic by imitating the crafts of an old witch, and nearly gets himself killed in the process. Sabriel, the heroine of Garth Nix's *Abhorsen* novels, inherits her necromantic powers from her father, and would gladly be rid of them if she could. And Vanyel Ashkevron, the queer teenage sorcerer in Mercedes Lackey's *Last Herald Mage* books, becomes an instrument of prophecy—he is never able to choose his powers, and never promises to use them solely for the sake of order and good.

So You Want to Be a Wizard ends not with a climactic battle, but with a speech-act: Life's "I Am." Nor should it come as a surprise that this book revolves metacritically around another book, *The Book of Night with Moon,* which the Lone One has stolen in an attempt to reverse the cycle of Life. As fascist editor, the Lone One wants to use his own book, the entropic manifesto and antithesis of life and creation, to overwrite every universe in every dimension. While the creative book has many names in many languages (Fred, the white hole, calls it "The Naming of the Lights"), the Lone One's book is a nameless text whose letters burn against the page. The battle between Nita, her partner Kit, and the Lone One does occur in a material sense—they fight in Central Park, with the statues coming to life to serve the Lone One, and the trees fighting on Nita's side—but the more significant battle occurs *within* text and speech, through Nita's voice and through the words of the Book: "I am the trees that drink the light; I am the air of the green things' breathing; I am the stone that the trees break asunder; I am the molten heart of the world. Where will you go? To what place will you wander? In vale or on hilltop, still I am there [. . .] will you kindle the nova, or kill the starlight? In fire or in deathcold, still I am there" (344).

Life's "I Am" is an invocation, an epic proem, but also a performative injunction—the world has no choice but to "be," and the Lone One has no choice but to repeat his doomed role within the cycle of the cosmos—he is the player who abandoned the play. But Nita theorizes a new script for the Lone One. Unlike anyone else who has come before her, Nita spies a fragile space where the Lone One and the rest

of the universe can coexist. She is spurred on, most fittingly, by the words of a talking Parrot—Tom and Carl's macaw, Pichu, who happens to be one of the Powers That Be (although we do not find this out until *High Wizardry*). Pichu, in a moment of rare prophecy, tells Nita: "Don't be afraid to make corrections" (112). This bit of editorial advice becomes, for Nita, a realm of ethical possibility—a choice that seems never to have occurred to anyone else, despite the fact that, deep down, she understands it to be a choice made daily, by everyone—and so she does the unthinkable: she alters the text of the Book: "She knew what to do. While Kit was still on the first part of the name she pulled out her pen, her best pen that Fred had saved and changed [. . .]. Nita bent quickly over the *Book* and, with the pen, in lines of light, drew from that final circle an arrow pointing upward, the way out, the symbol that said change could happen—if, only if—and together they finished the Starsnuffer's name in the speech, said the last new syllable, made it real" (349). Even *The Book of Night With Moon* is subject to contingency, *iterability,* the originary textual (and biological) contagion that Derrida describes as "the possibility for every mark to be repeated and still to function as a meaningful mark in new contexts that are cut off entirely from the original context [. . .] it leaves us no choice but to mean (to say) something that is (already, always, also) other than what we mean" (62; 78). We talk and talk because there is always something else to say, because language never quite gets it right, and because the signifier can never leap the gap, can never be the signified. Derrida's point in *Limited Inc.* is to obliterate the myth of origins, either graphematic or ontological, to show how everything has a prior signification, everything is "iterable," even the primary Word of genesis, even *The Book of Night With Moon*. There is always another signifier, and always a way out—or in.

Nita alters the text of the Lone One, the very texture of the universe itself, in order to create the possibility of hope—"if, only if—." And all beneath the fading star-trail left behind by Fred, her beloved friend (and white hole), who sacrifices himself in order to become pure luminance—a lamp to read by. Transformation, like sacrifice, emerges from language, and to be a part of speech always entails an ontological loss, just as speaking bravely and truly requires multiple sacrifices. In transforming the Lone One, she also undergoes a transformation of her own, for she becomes the space of that possibility, the living site of alterity and compassion. Life's "I Am" applies to her, and *is* her; it is a fierce declaration of self-awareness, even as it is the acknowledgement of cosmic interdependence and community. Nita makes this choice without Kit's knowledge, without even his understanding. She is alone in her decision to alter the universe, but she is also filled to the point of glorious rupture with a thousand supernovas, the very alphabet of creation that allows her to be anyone or anything.

This is not an unexpected transformation from passive agent to powerful avatar—rather, it is the sudden blossoming of awareness that she has always been this powerful, that she has always possessed the capacity to participate in, and change, all of creation.

In speaking against the confines of her own body, as well as the metaphysical confines that restrict the Lone One as a devolutionary force, Nita is engaged here in an act of unique interpellation. She is hailing the Lone One, offering him a new "call," and he must decide whether he will answer or not. Both are labouring beneath ideologies, but, for this one moment—"if, only if"—they attempt to reverse what Butler calls the "offensive call," the originary stereotype applied to the Lone One. Like Sauron, Lucifer, Arawn, Voldemort—and the list could go on—the Lone One has spoken his own fate into existence, but has also been "said" by the universe itself.

"To be injured by speech," says Butler in *Excitable Speech,* "is to suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are [. . .] exposed at the moment of such a shattering is precisely the volubility of one's 'place' within the community of speakers; one can be 'put in one's place' by such speech, but such a place may be no place" (4). Every adolescent knows what it feels like to inhabit "no place," and every Dark Lord knows the same thing, since their place is outside of the order of creation. If interpellation—the continual speech-event through which, in Althusser's terms, "individuals are always-already subjects" (164)—creates identity, then it also creates a space, a where, a place. Through the process of interpellation—the call of the other that we respond to, the hail on the street that reminds us who we are—speech creates the subject. But "there are no subjects except by and for their subjection" (169), and so speech exacts a heavy price. Life's "I Am" produces a space where the earth itself can rise up to defy the destructive impulses of the Lone One, using Nita as the conduit for doing so. Through the act of being spoken into being, life *is.* This performative speech-act recreates and reanimates the world, just as it recreates Nita's gendered humanity, rendering her far beyond the limits of her body.

While this transformation occurs on a cosmic level, the second example that I want to address is more local—Nita's shapeshifting into the form of a whale in *Deep Wizardry.* Like its prequel, this volume ends with a song rather than a battle, an emphatic declaration rather than a sword-stroke. In order to help a group of whale-wizards, Nita and Kit both agree to participate in a magical song meant to pacify the Lone One (who has many forms and incarnations). She takes the role of the Silent Lord, since she herself fears speech, but this turns out to be the crucial player—the necessary sacrifice upon which the entire performance hinges. At the song's climactic moment, the Master Shark—who is the closest thing to marine royalty imaginable—must tear her apart with his own teeth, using her blood as a mystical seal to neutralize the Lone One's power for another few centuries.

When Nita originally transforms into a whale, it is purely through the power of her imagination. The whale-wizard S'reee tells her that "past the change itself, the chief skill in unassisted shapechanging lies in not pretending so hard that you can't get back again" (*Deep* 63). Transformation is no simple matter here, and the very act of speaking (or thinking) oneself into another shape can actually produce a permanent shift in text—a permanent revision. Kit is unable to shapechange without the aid of a magical artifact, called a "whalesark," which contains the neural essence of a departed whale. But Nita manages it all on her own: "To be a whale, she thought. To float like this all the time, to be weightless, like an astronaut. But space is green, and wet, and warm, and there are voices in it, and things growing. Freedom: no walls, no doors. And the songs in the water—" (65).

As a whale, Nita finds a new love and appreciation for her body. She is physically intimate with Kit, rubbing fins with him, playing coy games, where before she kept a friendly (human) distance. She retains her human consciousness, but that consciousness is expanded to take in a whale's world: sonar and echolocation, minute and beautiful changes in pitch, timbre, and song, the dark but oddly warm embrace of the water, and the feeling of absolute freedom that comes from swimming. But this transformation carries a price, for, as the Silent Lord, Nita must sacrifice herself in order to save millions of lives. When she asks Carl if there is any way out of it, she is told what her contractual failure will do—the song corrupted, lives lost, her powers vanished, her memories altered. In short, a life that she cannot imagine living.

The Master Shark, in an odd way, acts as Nita's educator in the modes of sacrifice. He is an ultimately selfish being who, by the novel's end, performs the most powerful act of self-negation by giving up his own life. His teasing, suggestions, and challenges, his nickname for her ("Sprat"), are undeniably sexual, and his status as a much older, much more powerful masculine force only serves to reinforce this erotic tension. Perhaps this is a reflection of the tension between Nita and Kit, but I read it as simply the embodiment of desire within all magic, the erotic within the supernatural. Just as Nita's transformation is dizzingly sensual and charged with pleasure, her relationships with other mystical powers, like the Master Shark, are erotically inscribed. When she confesses to "Ed" (her name for the Master Shark) that she thought the song was "just sort of a play," Ed's reply—"indeed not"—is the cold response of an experienced player to an untried neophyte. Ed is the sexualized immortal here, and Nita is the virgin, about to give up her life for a song—a speech act—that she does not even fully understand.

When Nita agrees to the sacrifice, Ed's reply is enigmatic. "It is well said," he tells her, "and we will cause it to be well made, this Sacrifice. You, young and never loving;

I, old and never loved [. . .] such a Song the Sea will never have seen" (212). But when the moment arrives, Ed takes Nita's place. He quite literally rams her out of the way, out of the Lone One's path, and usurps her place in the song. His words, the words of the Silent Lord, take on a strange and haunting cast when they emerge from the mouth of the Master Shark, the "never loved." This is the heart of the abject, speaking defiantly both into and against the order of the universe, abandoning its placelessness and claiming a space for itself—even if that is a space of ultimate sacrifice:

> Lone Power, I accept your Gift!
> But take my Gift of equal worth:
> I take Death with me, out of time,
> And make of it a path, a birth!
>
> Let the teeth come! As they tear me,
> They tear your ancient hate for aye—
> So rage, proud power! Fail again,
> And see my blood teach Death to die! (260)

It is Ed's speech, not Nita's, that makes the song truly performative—his blood binds the Lone One beneath the deep, and his voice "fills the entire Sea." But this is also a moment of dialogic cooperation, because Nita and Ed, after a fashion, both sing this song together. Neither could have gotten to this place without the other, and what truly compels Ed to sacrifice himself is Nita's own conviction—although she does not die, she is ready to, and the possibility of a twelve-year-old girl deciding that she is ready to die remains both a space of theoretical contention and a terrifying real-world commonplace. As Nodelman reminds us, "when people speak of the innocence of childhood, they forget about the 40 million children in the world who live on the streets, without homes or parents or enough food" (90). Nita is ready to die, just as she is ready to transform into a whale, just as she is ready to take the Wizard's Oath. This decisiveness emerges not from youthful caprice, but from ethical understanding. As she tells Ed, "I'll do what I said I'd do." To Nita, all ethical speech is binding, and every performative is a magical contract.

The final example of transformation that I want to discuss occurs in *High Wizardry,* the third book in Duane's *Young Wizards* series—and the only book to incorporate Dairine substantially as a focus of consciousness. The opening line informs readers that "the first sound Nita heard that morning was her sister's shrieking" (*High* 335). Dairine begins what is arguably her "story" with a speech-act, and continues to speak throughout the novel—in many cases as a practice of resistance against those

who would silence her, and also as a foil to her own sister, Nita, who cannot always articulate her desires in the powerfully incisive manner that Dairine has.

Upon this particular morning, Nita describes her younger sister as "a little red-haired eleven-year-old stick of a thing in an Admiral Ackbar T-shirt" (336). This is immediately after Nita has cast a spell (in an attempt to silence Dairine's "shrieking"), only to reverse the spell because it also silences the noise of the outside world, which she appreciates. That *High Wizardry*—arguably a novel about Dairine's inability to keep quiet—begins with Dairine's own *sister* attempting to shut her up, should alert the reader to two things: that the story to follow will be preoccupied with the idea of transgressive language, and that the power of speech—in the mouth of Dairine—is a potentially dangerous agency.

Unlike Nita's wizardry, which is grounded in research and textuality, Dairine's wizardry fuses technology with magic. Her "manual" is actually a computer, and its arrival seems to coincide with Dairine's own conviction that she "[is] beating her fists against the walls of life, knowing there's more, more, but she can't figure out what it is, then finding out that someone knows the secret. Wizardry. And it doesn't come fast enough, it never comes fast enough, nothing ever does" (456). This desperation at the slowness of knowledge, this anxiety of an eleven-year-old "stick of a thing" who wishes angrily, immediately for what she construes to be the logical and ordering powers of an adult, becomes a site of repetition throughout *High Wizardry.* Dairine, who has always thirsted for the fantastic powers of Luke Skywalker—who wants to rewrite her own life in an epic, even intergalactic, vein—is the prototypical young hero wishing for agency through adulthood. But she also defies this formula, and it is ultimately her emotion, her brashness, and her irresponsibility—all stereotypical markers of childhood behaviour—that allow her to defeat the Lone One. As I have already stated, fantasy literature in general, and children's fantasy fiction in particular, is not without strong female wizards. Eilonwy is a princess as well as an enchantress, and her careful attention to Taran's development is partly what allows him to become a successful hero. Although Leguin's *Earthsea* novels focus primarily on Ged, a male protagonist, *The Tombs of Atuan* is almost wholly about the young priestess Arha, whose psychological (and sexual) development forms the heart of the text. Sabriel, who I have also mentioned previously, is a powerful necromancer who makes her way confidently through the world of Garth Nix's *Abhorsen* books. Then, of course, there is Hermione Granger, described by Sirius Black as the brightest witch of her age in *The Prisoner of Azkaban.* Where would Harry Potter be without her arcane knowledge, scholastic perseverance, and keen deductive skills?

What makes Duane's characters different is not their reliance upon language, but

their willingness and drive to *alter* language, to adapt and even destroy traditions. These young girls speak their own destinies into being, and it is their linguistic choices that decide the outcome of entire universes. Dairine's transformation in *High Wizardry* is rooted in loss and mourning—it is an acceptance of physical and emotional violability, but also a deepening of personal strength, a fierce "I Am" that further subjectifies her beneath the gaze of the universe (even as it returns that gaze by looking back, defiant). In order to lend her creations, the Mobiles, the power to resist the Lone One, Dairine must offer up her life to them—she must throw open the gates of her body, her psyche, and allow the Mobiles to "absorb" her subjectivity, to digitize her. She is rendered as data, lumen, a miraculous algorithm whose emotional complexity is, however impossibly, for a moment, both numeric and incalculable:

> The motherboard had vast knowledge now, endless riches of data about wizardry and the worlds. What it did not have was first-hand experience of emotion, or the effects of entropy [. . .] or the way the world looked to slowlife [humans]. [. . .] Take it. Take it all. Please take it! They have to choose, and they don't have the data, and I don't know how to give it to them, and if they make the wrong choice they'll all die! Take it! And the motherboard took— (455).

Dairine is then forced to relive all of her memories, even memories she was not aware of, from conception until the present moment. Trapped in a wild sensorium, Dairine "tasted for the first time the thumb it took her parents five years to get out of her mouth [. . .] found out about words, especially *No!*" (456). Her experience straddles the border between language and feeling, the semiotic and the symbolic, the warm security of her thumb along with the delighted explosion of her first *no!* This sacrificial transformation, a kind of *ekphrasis,* allows Dairine to move *through* (rather than conveniently beyond, or around) the classic experience of abjection, down into her most organic and maternal experience of preconsciousness. Although wizardry is rooted in language and speech, we see now that it also emerges, simultaneously, from a prelinguistic intimacy, an amniotic suspension of lapping fluids, soft whispers, tender chambers and atria, susurrous gestures and sacred murmurs. This is the semiotic ground of symbolic language, sometimes called the *chora,* that Julia Kristeva defines as "the archaism of [the] pre-objectal relationship" (10), a world without symbolic relations (and, hence, without loss).

Kristeva adapts the work of Lacan on "the Symbolic" (the language matrix within and upon which all human relations are recorded) in order to explore the states of prelinguistic consciousness particular to early infancy—the thread that connects

mother and child, and that is also a kind of intuitive language-before-language. "The mother," says Kristeva, "is my first object, both desiring and signifiable" (10) and the process of signification, the act of entering into the legal and paternalistic frame of language, is above all "[the] immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (35). We build walls (banks, houses, cars, even relationships) against this "pre-objectal" reality, this world without objects (without commodities, without things), expelling it through the process of abjection—that is, the disavowal of anything having to do with bodily and prelinguistic relations (serology, gynecology, blood, lymph, spoor, semen)—and pretending that it does not exist, that it is not a part of us, that we are, in fact, "clean," discrete, and bounded bodily realities. The abject and its operations are of particular importance to children's literature, since, as Karen Coats explains, "many preadolescent characters [. . .] operate in the queer space of openness and fluidity, adopting an antinormative and anti-identitarian stance toward the structures of authority they confound and confront" (118).

To enter into symbolic currency with the outside world, to enter into the logic of global capital, is to suffer a loss while gaining a "subject." As Marx explains in *Capital,* the process of capitalism is really the process of human relations—the fetishization of the commodity serves to conceal the fact that "every commodity [. . .] is only the material envelope of the human labor spent on it" (56), thus the structure of commodification and material exchange is, at its core, a mirror image of human relations and emotional exchange. To get to economics, we must first move through language as our ingress into symbolic relations, but this entrance—indeed, this condition of being human, of *counting* as "human"—involves multiple sacrifices, most importantly the loss of the semiotic, the presymbolic consciousness. In *Excitable Speech,* Judith Butler describes the process of subjectification as an entrance into "speakability," as well as the experience of being "spoken for," even "spoken over": "Although the subject enters the normativity of language, the subject exists only as a grammatical fiction prior to that very entrance. Moreover [. . .] that entrance into language comes at a price: the norms that govern the implication of the speaking subject differentiate the subject from the unspeakable, that is, *produce an unspeakability* as the condition of subject formation" (135).

Dairine's final transformation, her "reversion" to the semiotic, is also an evolution of the subject—a metamorphosis that allows her, through language, to journey to the very kernel of language's interior, its molten heart. I include it last because it is, I think, the most powerful and most transgressive example of shapeshifting, even if it does not result in an epic performative like Life's "I Am," or a mystical performance-

song capable of binding the Lone One beneath the waves. Dairine actually empathizes with the Lone One, reaches out to him, and does so by reaching *into* her own subjectivity, into the "endless riches of data" where her subject-before-language, the melancholic shadow of her life-before-speaking, can be recovered. In doing so, she also recovers the Lone One; whereas Nita causes a linguistic shift (her glimmering arrow, like an Apollonian missile blazing in the starry firmament, the "way out") in the Lone One's spectral ontology, Dairine causes an emotional tremor within his very substance—her touch is subcutaneous, reaching beneath the layers of this strange character who, after all, is not just an idea (like Sauron, or Voldemort), but a body, a towering shadow, a pillar of fire—"the Lightbringer."

I have used "metamorphosis" as a signifier in this discussion in order to illustrate the transgressive power of language within Duane's work. Her characters use language in order to transform their bodies and psyches, but they are also able to move past (and prior to) linguistic expression, mining the corridors of their preconscious experiences in order to reconnect with that intimate and maternal space of the semiotic. Transformation, always sexualized in fantasy narratives, becomes particularly evocative in children's writing when its power is seized by young narrators—for, in changing their bodies, they are also changing their drives and desires, acknowledging their fluid position within a symbolic economy that can never wholly dominate them. Although their subject depends upon crucial relations and unfoldings of power—to be a subject is also to be subjected—Nita and Dairine are able to harness transformative magic in order to cause a rupture within this symbolic chain. Dairine reverses Lacan's mirror stage, undoing what he calls the "armor of the subject" and travelling back to the naked uncertainty of a song before language, a claim to identity that accepts no foreclosure.

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