Words are loaded with possibilities for those who well attend to them. We may choose to limit our response to them to creating our best simulation of the meaning we intuit its speaker (or writer) wants for them to depart. Or we can play off the visual sounds and oral properties of the word—which so often want to take us places their speaker never intended—and use them to travel elsewhere. Words, though, do not always invite active play. If a word impacts upon us as a blow, if it almost literally has punch, our reaction can be limited to recoil and recuperation. Daphne Marlatt’s “Healing,” with its appropriate one word title, explores how we can use language to respond to the power a single word can have on us to curtail play.

How might you deal with the painful experience of having a lover vulnerable in an operating room, being operated upon by a knife-wielding surgeon? As the form our encapsulation of this experience might take is of an implosion, of a contraction of all the energy, of all the pain and worry funneling into a single moment, a single cut, we might react as the poet/lover of “Healing” does and surround this experience with an evocation of nature to cushion and challenge its impact.

“Healing” begins with soft and softening images of nature. “Petals” (1), “blue irise[s]” (2), “moss” (2), and “dandelions” (2) accumulate into a pastoral image, and the poet is alone resting on a field, unhurried by time. Words, here, seem to relate to each other tenderly; they “kiss [the] middle distance” (1) between themselves. Then we encounter a word, “incision” (4), which interferes with the flow. “Incision” is not so much a word with dramatic impact as it is by itself a drama. More than a word, more than a wound, it is the entire story of emotions that began when two lovers realized the power of the lust and love between them would be challenged—replaced—by the anticipated impact and repercussions of a strange surgeon’s lunge. Nestled, though, amongst a softening scene, the poet uses words to help her anticipate a time when the impact of surgery, of the surgeon, no longer filled the “middle distance” between them.

Our first sense of the play of language transforming and easing trauma is the word sequence, “hours without touch” (3). There is an expression of loss, of absence, here—hours denied touch. But the same vowels we both see and hear in each of these words evoke meaning, too, that of accumulation, addition, growth. “[I]ncision to
“knit” (4) captures what the poet is trying to do: slowly she replaces the invading image of a stranger inflicting a wound on her lover with an image that resonates of intimacy, of the lovers together, of wounds closed and healed. An example of this transformation is “i want to open you like a / butterfly” (11-12), where she resuscitates the image of the surgery, but not only replaces the surgeon with herself, she substitutes a wound’s pain with the butterfly’s beauty. The arena for the operation is also shifting from the hospital (“open you” still brings to mind an operating room) to nature.

The entire second stanza can be imagined as a re-creation of the moment of the surgery and its after-effect(s), but within nature. The eagles, with their talons, with their predatory positioning (surveying from above) over prey, are natures’ substitutes for the knife-wielding surgeon. And their “scream” (13) challenges the impact of the implosion, of the wound, with an explosion that will help heal it. Words help mimic the dispersion of the eagles’ sound across both distance and time. “[G]lee” (14), “glass” (15), “glisten” (15), “glare” (15), glide us through the text, and as if each word modulates the effect of the scream on the poet as much as on ourselves, she reclaims with “(g)listen” (16) the right to act upon a word as much as a word had impacted upon her.

Presented first with “glisten,” she brackets off the “g,” leaving herself with “listen”—surely, to a poet, the most powerful of words. To listen with care is the command a poet makes of her reader. And as we take her direction and attend to this word, we see, hear, and feel both its clear resemblance and its challenge to “incision.” She proves that if we listen to her we will indeed come to know how powerful a physician a poet is. The surgeon has made his mark. “[I]ncision” has had its impact. We know, however, she will “re-knit” her bond to her lover, and that they will begin to know “lust [. . .] all over again” (22).

Work Cited