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Water Street

Angela Hibbs

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT

Water Street

Angela Hibbs

Water Street is a collection of poems exploring the significance of family, belonging, legitimacy and home. The poems focus on Sydney's relationship with her family, the importance of which she renegotiates in solitude after leaving home to go to school. The poems which range from dramatic monologue to lyric to narrative explore her anxiety about her relationships weakening as she changed in her new environment. The manuscript is divided into three sections: first, "Dramatis Personae," in which the main characters are introduced, sometimes in Sydney's voice, sometimes in the characters' own voices. Second, "Departure" in which Sydney questions what it means to be at home, resists adjusting to her new town and is nostalgic. Finally, in "Gathering me, you gather Yourself", Sydney tries to define the lines between herself and her loved ones and get a sense of who her loved ones are in order to get a sense of who she is. Sydney longs for her childhood home but reminds herself that it is not what it once was, she longs for a different kind of father than she had, and for her granddad, who died before she was born. The poems constitute an exploration of self, place, family and a journey towards adjusting to the circumstances of one's life and letting go of a fear of loss.

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**“What I mean is I wanted to live my life
but I didn’t want to do what I had to do
to go on, which was: to go back.”**

Mary Oliver

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Baptism

I was baptized with only a few drops.

I wish they'd submerged me.

Grey, the water

like walking through stone;

the sky is low

the only sound: water;

the only sound: in the name of the father, son + holy ghost

You have to be a sinner to be saved.

Fiona Ash 1970

House: white. Shutters: black: Granddad Reg's.
White walls, three beds:
girls', boys', parents'.
Inherited table wobbled, she'd wad paper under one leg,
another'd start; she gave up
steadying. Dishes stretched
for ages: a path; woodstove
blistered elbows weekly,
bubbled dishwater daily,
took over teacup temperature.

*Reg should've been
home by now.* A white teacup
she wanted to break—an egg in her palm.
Wedding photo, Nanny wrapped
in Reg's arms, wound
in white; the band I now wear
is there, on her finger.

Daily dishes washed,
yearly children born.
Granddad gone fishing.

*Reg should've been
home by now.* Thighs no bigger than calves;
her foot kept the house's time.
Ribs clinched 'round
his lungs, Ross's
cry disturbed the warm
catch of polyester rubbing. *Reg should've been
home by now.* Blouse buttons pulled, seams creaked. Viscous air slowed
her from chair, the baby screamed, twenty-two steps,
friction of hand on wall; she watched white paint
fragments fall, float, orbit her
ankle. Ross screamed.
Nanny sat on the stair. *Reg should've
been home by now.*

Hydrology
for Joëlle

There's only one photograph of my granddad,
Reginald, blurred, as if he's already
under the water.

I don't have it with me here.

uniformity

We rode the ferry to Sydney, Cape Breton;
our mother sat anxious inside, wishing
for a seatbelt. She was thirteen when granddad drowned.

Ashley & I told ghost stories
based on the shapes of clouds & imagined
desert island lives; we kept away
from the fence that separated deck
from water. The same water splashed our faces. The salt
on her mouth was the salt
on my mouth. She is water. I am salt.
Since she was conceived, I've known her.

hydrophobia

At ten, my uncle Thom pointed strangers to the Atlantic:
'my daddy is in there.'

Water wore away granddad's features: bone
scrubbed like the edges of beach glass. If I have a son
his name will be Reg's.

Even now, at 37, my uncle Thom's afraid of water.
He bathes himself with a sponge.
Careful over bathroom sink,
door and window open;
I pretended not to see
his soldier hands turn timid.
(Our most admired relative).

gephyrophobia

My fear of water & bridges, granddad's
watery body. Palm sweat.
Torso clenches. Clutch my locked door.
Breaths, like fishhooks,
caught on themselves.

essential for plant & animal life

Water from my baby bottle
is in me. Still.
Smelly water from Stephenville;
I nursed bubble bath beards
like Santa or Colonel Sanders.
Jumping naked on my bed, watching
the mirror, the reflection, the body that moved
like mine.

transparency

Cold river water,
brown.
My feet feared broken glass.
I thought I should be allowed inside everyone's house,
to look at their photos & clippings.
I still do. In dreams,
strangers' walls are upright streams.
I roam through foreign rooms,
water plants; the hair on my arms:
dry, blond down.

"Most men being in sensual pleasures drowned"—Sir John Davies

I am crystallized sea
salt, white & almost
transparent. The model
I have been painting
says I am beautiful,
she doesn't know the Atlantic,
swims only pools.

to quench thirst

Water screamed from the spring, not asking
why or when. My uncle filled square
bottles, made water
finite: four litres.
The square bottles: hard
plastic & cold on
summer calves.
I shivered in my sweat,
the van dark & musty. No seatbelts—
against the rules.

My cousin already had breasts,
got her period that day;
I tried to convince her I had mine.
She overheard my mom say I wore boys' jeans,
my legs too long for girls'.

saliva

I will know my mother is dead.
I will stand up from bed or desk,
go to the phone,
not know how to dial,
my mouth dry.

Newfoundland Bridge

My mother and granddad built a bridge together
with fallen birch trunks: long
strong necks, stripped
of branches. Tree-strained
light, glowing
dust particles. He warned
of piranhas. There,
my child mother, stringy
brown hair, protected her father
from piranhas. She straddled
a trunk, crossed
tentatively; she strained
to reach him. He rustled leaves
with his feet, released
their fresh, wet smell. Her feet clenched shoes,
upper lip cold and wet, her palms
splintered with effort.

Two Ways of Looking at Water

Seventeenth century cartographers warn of sea monsters
off the coast of Newfoundland.

Mom's husband grabbed her by the shoulders,
shook her out like a bath mat
over the side of the balcony
again. She covered handprints with long sleeves
again. She kept our doors and blinds closed.

We drove out to the beach; each wave—a body
slapping and crashing; unstoppable—tongues
rolling around the drowned.

Mom watched; the tide
ravaged the shore, colliding shells.

Each breath was a wave.
My hips looser,
falling deeper in love.
I rarely crossed my legs; they poured
out of hip sockets;
I was always wet.
I watched; the tide turned faithfully.

Vision

I am still living with my mother
and her husband;
he is a garbage man,
he goes through the garbage
for dog crap & rotten tomatoes
for his Sunday goulash,
'Steve's Scotch Surprise'.
Dirty pots on hot plates.
Nobody believes me
when I expose what he's doing.
The evidence is right under our feet.
It is his Private Space; nobody will look.
I am chastised for defaming him;
I am forced to eat a bowlful of teeth.

Steve Takes Sydney's Picture

Slip & snivel,
spine & knees; scabs
abound like knots
in wood. Sydney nibbled
her scabs. Smooth skin,
even on feet & elbows.
Smell her skin.
Drying between her toes
after a bath, her milk teeth
standing at attention all along
her laughter. Her teeth,
eyes, eyebrows and hair
white, her body blue black, a negative
of herself.

Quick heart
scurries, her small
feet strike the stairs.

Felled; a pencil tip
stabbed into her palm, right angles & bisections;
her hand fills the frame.
I popped it out & patted her hair
'til her sniffing stopped. A decimal of lead remained.

The sap of her,
spills, sticky,
wets the yellow hair on her legs.
Young trees bend before breaking.

Steve's House
for M.A.T.

Inside my pink bed;
inside my pink walls;
throat snares breath,
my feet a foot apart,
cold air on thighs;
lying on my pink bed,
a wall of porcelain dolls,
lips hand-painted, mute and sensual,
cold, inert fingers, needlepoint princes
court corseted Elizabethan women
on my cushions.

Girl skin is a traitor.
Inside pink walls;
inside pink bed,
sleeplessness burns eyes,
thighs cold.

Vision

My wisdom teeth
keep plowing through,
over and over. My
mouth always bleeding.
Pain, my familiar, the
hum of an aquarium.
Oh you. The teeth keep
being extracted, my
mouth becomes more
and more flexible,
spreading wider and
wider. The dentist
flips my head open like
a hood. His gleeful
arm trembles. Wisdom
teeth jab through my
central left incisor then
through my eyelid,
calf and belly.

Our Father Who Art in Heaven

I want a dad with a gravel voice,
a Tom-Waits-after-five-or-six-too-many voice,
to call me a good girl
and chuckle when I get detentions.
With a full beard
and soft brown hair,
a white woolen sweater
that smells of slightly burned toast.
A carpenter with a love of the outdoors
to buy me Hagen Daazs.

I want a father with a silken voice
to match his suit and tie,
to call me a good girl
and pat my too short hair, smooth as a horse's.
With a ruby in the Harvard class ring
on his bi-weekly manicured hands.
A father of espresso and single malt scotch
to call me "pretty mouth" when I curse.

DEPARTURE

I Never Was One Of Those Who Won't Cry In Public

stalled in the bus
bathroom, a mess of mucus
& tears. I want my family tree
to erupt between my legs.
Roots shooting down
binding me fast
like the death packets spiders strap
their prey in.

My children's faces
plentiful as spiderlings;
a web of umbilical cords
binding me here.

“Post-Partum Document”-1973-9 Mary Kelly
6 sections, 135 frames, mixed media

My mother used to wish she could put me in the dryer
and shrink me so we could stay mother and child forever.

I descended into her arms,
her woozy consciousness,
my long fingers and too-dark hair,
the shock of placenta. Her kidneys
my first neighbours; inside
out of her body, I was
an interior voice made visible.

This story I had her tell me over and over—
the thicker the accent the better—
the story and her voice vied
for my attention.

Vision:
outside: black ice; scrape and slide
this child out of me. The salt machines
screech; labour turns amphibian to mammal.

23 hours of labour, my hand
in my mother's becoming a mother's. I am
mother and child. For this my mother
was seventeen & alone. This mother
not mine. Me.

Still Life with Can Opener

I wilt against the green stove
with my cold metal can opener;
it is smoother than any skin.
My lips won't stop trembling,

my body— a long green stem.
I've lived here for a week today, at noon.
Made in China, my dollar store can opener
will not serve its purpose.

I doubt they make exchanges.
61541 00200: I envy the bar code's certainty;
numbers that have to be together.
The kitchen: a place of objects that know what they are made for,

are thrown out when they break.
Punch Line: Brides wear white because all appliances are white.
I put the can opener in my mouth,
a chorus of mothers warns,

"You don't know where that's been."
My mouth, open to air,
vulnerable to bacteria.
I want someone to rub my teeth,

soothing fingers on small bones.
"You don't know where that's been."
Pitch black at 5. Get me
to the equator

for sweat,
pina coladas with pink umbrellas
and maraschino cherries.

New Home

She goes without speaking; her only sound
is a low hum lilting under vinyl Nico
all daylong. Cat food rings into saucer,

high-pitched and tinny in the empty apartment; cigarette burns
toward her mouth; her thighs
peel off the couch; two-inch heels click against
hardwood floor, one-room apartment.

Bare bedroom walls, her pale lips almost matched.
She and the homecoming queen, a hyper
puff of cotton candy, hated each other,

obediently. Now and then, Sydney could count her friends
on an unlucky woodworker's hand. She smoked
alone by the ditch at field's
end at lunch, brushing

stray ashes from her
gray polyester blouse,
her smell gathered in the seams;

she crushed butts under
two-inch black pumps.
She bought them especially
to show the cleavage

between her big and second toes.
Rumour had it she got them off a cremated body.
She peers out from thick mascara, sticky eyeliner, through
bus windows reflecting San Francisco lights.

Groceries for the week: tinned soup, eggs, powdered milk.
The four-litre vats of oil make
her gag; she wants to buy toilet paper by
the single roll, hates people knowing

what she eats. Blood recedes from her lips.
She preserves her energy.
Backstage girls laugh, shout.
She draws in her elbows, shoulders, knees,

a shrinking trick from the change-
room at school. She retracts her breathing, her scent.
Her body squints.
She washes her face only before re-applying it for school.

The make-up smears and runs all week,
marking her white pillow.
In her apartment, she covers all reflective surfaces with rags.

Wish

With my social insurance number

I scrape off my windshield,
I can barely see through it.
I cut my own hair. I run out of peanut butter.

Your letters offer statistics: in Finland
there are many lakes, it's twenty-seven degrees Celsius.
Is your hair lightening in the sun?

I wait for the letter carrier to descend the stairs.
The envelope is thick,
your letter is a note

with photographs
of Mon Repos, *My rest*, Russia,
the Corellian Peninsula,

the land so many Finns and Russians died for
in so many battles you know the names of.
A neo-classical mansion

viewed across the Bay of Vyborg.
Like a good postcard recipient,
I wish I were there,

imagine moving in.
The water coyly reflects
only some of the edifice back to itself,

in another photo my mansion is revealed
as a model in plaster & paint.

Dear Maria Callas, née Kallageropolous,

With your birth name, I invoke you.
Listening to you sing *la mamma morta*,
the recording sounds like it always has.
Your mother said she wouldn't give you
the lice off her head. With a note you could
break all the windows in the hall. You
could throb your heart at a frequency that
would explode mine, like glass. Though it
is not.

Good Housekeeping

She cannot speak
if there is cat hair on the floor.
Clatter of TV
remote set on tile coffee table;
sunflower seeds squeak in her teeth,
her feet tucked under her.
Bleach on the counter, Swiffer, Bounce spray,
Summer Meadow scented dishwashing liquid,
Cheer, Sunlight, Ajax, Mr. Clean, Vim
man the hallway.
The tub muddied with sunrise;
the dishes greased every five hours.
Enameled plate, as smooth
as she wants to be, as sensate.

Weeks

without hot water, my hair is greasy. I watch borrowed Kurosawa over and over through a well-kept cloud of smoke. His carefully framed shots. In one scene, a field of white flowers obscures the subtitles. My tongue is foreign.

California Oranges
for G.B.

The trees in my backyard:
one grows oranges—
jugs of fresh squeezed juice
included in the rent.
The beach sky is a diamond enclosure;
car radio—a soothing song.
I share the trees
with my three neighbours. I have not
seen my neighbours; in the yard
I intrude. The oranges
are juiceless. I stare out at them,
their thick, hard skin.

Plumbing

I had been eating a litre of ice cream every day.
I ordered the pain au chocolat and millefeuille,
the sugar invigorating morning
mouth; sandwiches *prêt a manger* wrapped in plastic;
coffee sizes in Italian; pastries in French; bone China.

I ducked under a pipe
to get to the washroom, the tiles were cracked
as if they had been there longer than the rest of the café;
smelled bleach; no window.

I kept wondering if there was another bathroom
one they hadn't mentioned,
one reserved for better clients.

White

The door moves with the fan:
curtain exhales; door slams;

screen sucks curtain in, door opens.
My body is whitewashed walls;

my body is an empty shop window.
My mouth clogged, overflows

with doctor's gauze; wheeled through
the hospital; kept cool

to prevent the spread of germs.
Post-op, I was starving,

stopped up with blood and bandages,
soaking with each beat

of druggy heart.
A red nailed nurse explains,

the doctor removed your home.
It'll not bother you

anymore, sloshes it
in it's jar of formaldehyde.

A white pigeon on white roof,
sky overcast.

Vision

I was sewn together,
I keep the seams hidden.

Somebody lined my skin up,
irregular red scar tissue
grins at the top of my pubic hair,
joins right arm and shoulder unevenly.
My foot jammed together
with my ankle.

No continuous lines
on my body,
bifurcated and traversed by patches of skin
from strangers. My nanny's nose,
my father's eyebrows. Carelessly sewn together,
with fishing line, with spider silk.

I sense beneath this layer, more seams,
my veins sewn into place, hamstring
stitched to femur, the hem
in my solar plexus. Stitches like icing
enclose left breast. Collarbone
stapled to ribcage, scraps.
I want to touch these scars as if I made them,
this body to be familiar to me,
my parts to be original or not at all.

**“Gathering Me, You Gather
Your Self”**

ROBERT DUNCAN, THE TORSO.

Outsider

The cartographer of my vagina
uses his fingers and tongue. His filthy
nails; he can envision the topography
of my internal body during board
meetings and working lunches. He throws a
handful of diamonds at me. Blood frames their
dispersal across my face and shoulders.
Rough to touch. To stop the infection I'd
have to have the diamonds removed. The doctor
would keep them. I am splattered across the bed,
I glitter.

Splattered pigeon: a red dispersal. Reversed
internal for external. The bloody
chunks of feathers: an ode to casual
slaughter, like the top stories of the hour.
If killed crossing the street, at least I would
make page six. With the pigeon, I stopped
breathing. I wanted to pick it up.
Bury it. I remembered my mother—
stay away from that. Germs.

Comments on tenth station of the cross:
*Part of the indignity is to be
crucified naked. The wounds on Jesus'
back are torn open again.* My teacher
said Jesus had to suffer because we
are all sinners. Described his welts, the dis-
persal of blood, his dark chunks of flesh,
chastised me for crying. That day, at recess,
I waded through thick heat alone, seeing
nails driven through feet and hands. Washing
Jesus' feet with my hair: down on my knees,
in front of him; my breasts falling out of
my dress. Pain is valuable.

New Body
for R. W.

I covet my time.
I unplug
the phone.
Arrange the pink pillows

artfully on couch and bed,
cashmere sweater
& velvet
panties,

paint toenails red,
check spine visibility
in the wall mirror,
stare at the digital time display,

stand on feet
then head,
feel the blood
move. I am a Chevette

in a Cadillac body; I
stumble around
a hotel suite
in a town where I have

an apartment; I
sip vodka through ice.
Nobody impresses me.
I draw straight lines

with magazine spines
to guide me.
There is a lot to be done
by Wednesday.

The days are not long
enough for all I have
to say to myself.

Dear Sydney,

When they found out I was pregnant with you,
the nuns suggested I not come to school.
I was sent to a home for unwed mothers
in Toronto. My first time away from
Newfoundland. The familiarity
of crucifixes on every wall, Morning
Prayer and quiet time among plants, where
I'd plot how to get your father back.

I dug my nails into my leg whenever
I thought of him. I planned to name you after
him (I didn't know he already had
a child named after him)

If you were a girl I thought I'd name you Grace.
In my mind, I told Grace about Daddy's
handsome face, the black turtleneck that brought
out his eyes. He only saw you once; I
was taking you for a walk. He said you
looked like a Carpenter. And that was that.
You do not. He didn't even ask to
hold you. Everybody knows you take after
the Ashes.

I wished for some fabric to make a quilt,
anything to keep my mind off him.

*Our Lady Of Fatima Home for Unwed
Mothers:* long narrow halls, by the ninth month
the girls squeezed down them like ice cubes swallowed
whole. On Bowling Fridays, glassy eyed, the
pregnant pins haloed in radiant white
from the 'relaxing vitamins' they force-fed us.

I kept dreaming the corridors flooded,
walking through a river to save dad from
drowning. The ice cold water almost made
me pee the bed.

I used to pretend to be asleep, lie
there remembering the pleasant smell of
David's skin. I felt like a young girl and

a grown up woman all at once.

Even if he didn't love me back, I
was happy I was able to love him,
I thought your mother should love your father.

He moved away from me as quickly as
he moved in to me. Damp grass, my flushed back.
I wanted to forget everything in
the rushed attention of his thrust in and
out of me. Adjusting in a parking
spot. We were outside ourselves. He didn't
see my body. He only saw that he
was fucking. My body: generic; the
blank face and triangle skirt on women's
bathroom doors he could never open. I
was pressed between his body and the
body of the earth; he crushed my body
with his.

 Until there was no breath in me,
but yours.

Epithalamium

*“Never trust a guy whose eyes are green,
he’ll kiss you once then treat you mean”*

The snow was three feet deep; everybody was waiting for the plows.
Your father called me for the first time
since I’d told him I was pregnant. He knew I couldn’t
hitch a ride; even a truck would have gotten stuck.
The snow resisted every step: the twenty-minute walk
took three hours. My jeans heavy and frozen, my legs soaked.

He was unmoved by my triumphant arrival—
there were fresh carnations on the table;

winter blossoms; to welcome his daughter;
my arms around him.
The mother of his other child came in disheveled,
in dry clothes.

They returned to his bedroom. I sat,
my pants no longer cold, just wet.

**Never Trust A Guy Whose Eyes Are Blue,
He'll Kiss You Once Then Want To Screw**

When Mom told David she didn't feel
right having sex with someone she had
known for only a week
he told her she was such a tight
bourgeois bitch.

She imagined David's face transposed
onto Jesus' in one of the many
portraits of him at her school.

David was so handsome,
way more handsome than Jesus.
How can I be bourgeois? My family's on welfare.

**Never Trust A Guy Whose Eyes Are Brown,
He'll Kiss You Once Then Let You Down**

The first time David kissed her,
my mom near suffocated.
He briefed her
that nose breathing was protocol.

She asked David to go to the Doctor
with her to get The Pill.
His eyebrows came together
at the middle and up on the ends;

*sex has to be spontaneous,
you know, like having the munchies
and finding a whole turkey dinner
in the kitchen just waiting for you.*

Landscape With Julie Ash

She remembers
 leaving the hospital
 like a kidnapper,

she senses onlookers figuring:
 babysitter
 or slut?

Human dollop:
 whose foot has pushed into her ribs,
 hipbones—

dense, constant
 pain swallowed
 hard against.

*A teenaged mother
 is bad enough
 without breastfeeding.*

Gossips said she was a horrible person
 to gallivant off to school,
 leaving me home with my aunts.

Frozen pellets like needles on her face
 her jacket too thin, spring jacket.
 Working on her grade twelve equivalency.

“Unique Forms of Continuity in Space” – 1913 Boccioni
oil on canvas

Hail Mary

Great Grandmother Mebdh’s Mary, life-sized
with open palms, fingers lined up, her wise face
and blue uniform. Mary crushes the serpent
with bare feet. Mebdh prayed to her
every day on her knees
beside her bed; while stoking
the fire; in the small yellow kitchen
where she kneaded the dough.
Mary mopping the floor, beside her,
her robe tied up around her knees;
glory like soap suds
bubbled around her.

Full of Grace

Against the town’s better judgement,
Mebdh took my mother and I in. Said
God does not make mistakes.
Hung my bastard diapers
out on the line.
If pride was not a sin
she could have used it
in place of pins.

The Lord is With Thee

Mebdh’s husband was a blacksmith
and a well-digger;
hammer to anvil, iron flecks
embedded in his skin.
Mebdh said she would’ve liked to try
well-digging;
she said once in a while she would’ve liked
to sleep in.

Mebdh and I sing “Ave Maria,”
our voices big and round, the filtered light of daydreams,
and Mary brings us vanilla ice creams
in cones that open out like tiger lilies.

We dig a well. Mary tells us dirty jokes;
we laugh as hard as the sun beats down;
my eyelashes translucent rainbows when I squint.
Mary's so different from what Father McLean thinks she is.

Blessed Art Thou Amongst Women

I go on a date with Mary. Dry vodka
martinis. A glaze of ice
on the glasses. Double olive. Nobody recognizes
her without her uniform.

And Blessed Is The Fruit Of Thy Womb, Jesus

The fruit of Mebdh's womb took up two whole pews.
The kids slept on piles of old clothes,
runny noses in each other's
hair. Jackets piled
on top of them for blankets.
Nanny says Mebdh called girls split arses.

Mebdh often called out more than half
of her sixteen kids' names before
she said the one she meant.

Holy Mary,

Mebdh baked bread every morning she was a wife;
the art called need.

Mother Of God

Mebdh moved in her body the same way
I do, the strong stride, the broad shoulders,
and narrow hips. I fit her old clothes
perfectly, her perpetually re-washed blue housedresses. I squint

for long hours in a foggy mirror
at my body filling her dress.
Sometimes I feel her white hair
caress my shoulders.

Pray For Us Sinners Now and at the Hour of Our Deaths

Nanny Fiona married at eighteen, just like Mebdh,
in the same wedding dress,
had seven kids to Mebdh's sixteen.

Mebdh's sons gone to school, Fiona
warmed water on the woodstove, eighteen
plates to wash. The crackle of wood. Her skinny frame,
tail and collar bones protruding, polyester dress.
Pine smell on her long, dark hair,
the crescendo of her angry breath.
Mary: the split arse Mebdh prayed to.

Since heaven is my home, call for me there.
I will be lounging on a big white bed
Mary will be stroking my hair.

Saint Joan
for M.A.T.

statue in California. Joan
makes intricate lattices with delicate fibres.
Her fingers move cautiously as if she were disabling a bomb.
She wants to make a name
for herself. Her skirt
so short, you can trace the run up the back right leg
to where the sheer stockings darken. She laces
20 hole boots almost to the top.
She eats only apple pastries bought by the dozen;
they leave sticky white coating on her fingertips
for licking later.
She wants to climb into the huge open mouth
painted on the wall
and disappear.

Jars And Jars Of Water

Jars and jars of water,
long thin transparent glass
blue bellied, the round bottle,
broken glass on the floor,
small puddles. Liquid glass
in a bath; slowly going cold.
Water in a bath.
Clear. Weight on chest. Water.
Silhouette: Reg's body
divided perfectly
dark from light, warm from cold.
Water in a bath.

A drunk girl, her hands hollowed
out, she was determined
to keep her body empty. She'd a drunk's
ability to chat with anybody,
agree with anything. Heaving, her sinuses scorched.
My mother took care of her six siblings.

Pressing weight.
Ease. *I can't float.* Room a white flash.
A child's drawing:
Nanny could make out the clunk of solid blue lake,
solid green lawn,
no blades,
no breeze.

Fingers throb with blood,
bones whisper from the interior
of seven stick figures
each with three soft fingers
far too weak, not quite straight,
thicker than the arms. *I won't float.*
Don't you dare put me in that water.
Huge eyes, whites show—triangular torsos,
smiles make no lines on their pale skin,
the white of light reflected off the sea.
She pushes the drawing away.

sun recoils from the earth
leaves cannot choose red or yellow

days shrivel. Eyelids heave—

fill with grey mauve light.
jars of water filter sun
through glass and water.

When Mom Was Away

I was five, eyes like ink stains
in the wedding dress of my skin;
summer legs sticking to the brown vinyl chair
& scraping on the tears where the stuffing crept out.
Nanny said she did not believe in hell,
except on earth, where Satan
skulks like cigarette smoke.
Nanny slurred; I stacked the deck against her.
Rummy was the game; Atavan was the forgetfulness,
the lull that made Nanny's Newfoundland vaguely Blanche Dubois.
Nanny flicked her dentures out; I laughed,
asked to put my fingers in the holes in her skull.
The ground beneath, another apartment above.
Mold coughed up from under the linoleum when it rained.

How Bread Is Made

I read about a culture where the dead
cannot be spoken of until a child is born
to take on their name. Not long after I was born Nanny stopped drinking.

She'd pour yeast into warm water
to let it grow. It had been waiting in a yellow envelope.
Sometimes the yeast was lazy; she had to start over, pouring

the bad yeast down the sink. She never made bread
until I was born. Flour and more water and a bit of sugar, always a bit of sugar
without measuring.

Almost translucent, the thin skin of her face
slack; her black hair. Remember. Her kneading
was not frenzied slapping or impatient

punching. Around Nanny's
window paint chipped and sweated—
outside the window, abandoned cars rusted.

Table dusted with flour, her wedding band
encrusted with dough.

Heels of her hands leaned into dough and her hips
into the heels of her hands, her fingers hard, her shoulders
moving in, her body focused, her back
and forth. Learn by heart

her skinny hands—nails bitten to quicks—
the slow-nervous way she tapped her cigarette
on the brown table after rolling it—always four times.

Not that she wouldn't chat or tell a joke while she rocked,
Lord knows a joke never hurt a batch of bread,
but that a quietness came over her.
Back and forth,
forth and back.

Willing to rise early,
willing to lean into dough, willing
to wait hours for dough to rise, willing
dough to rise.

Nanny kept her dough wrapped in blankets.
Some put dough by a source of heat, a false rising.
She did not fret while the dough was rising, did not make people tiptoe around the house.
She did not time it; when it felt like it was time
she'd remove the blanket.
If you run your hand over a loaf, it feels like skin.

She would give me a lump of dough to shape
I would toss it into the air
poke pink candies into it
throw it on the floor.
She did not force me to be a baker before I was ready.

The Art of Truce

Mom, you say I have always been you
turned inside out: an inside out mirror; I am your
familiar. Only recently have I gotten the courage
to curse in front of you. I still don't
feel old enough to call adults by their first names.

I said firefighters are heroes:
huge and sexy and saving lives.
 You asked, what about soldiers?
I said, soldiers kill; they are not heroes.
 They risk their lives.
For the government.

I am a dependent of a soldier: my mother.
My lips rest on teeth the military straightened.

You Used To Say

You used to say that when I had a child,
I would learn how much you loved me. Old enough
to home-it alone after school, my key
knotted around my neck, I watched the window
for you, willing you into your vacant
chair; electric warmth in winterhouse.

Imagining your brown bunned hair licking your shoulders,
your arrows aimed to save me from flesh-hungry piranhas.

You entered: fresh breath. De-snowed boots, bemoaned
extravagant light, asked if I thought you
were talking to your hat, turned left the thermostat.
From the living room carpet I watched you
drop keys, hat, the boxed chicken you *slaved all day*
over. I was your crumpled mouth girl; my eyes
saucered to take in more of you. I watched you
stare from my carpeted perch, my legs still
strange to razors; once I started, you warned,
I'd not be able to stop. Bad habits:
I had just given up chewing my toenails;
you: cigarettes. I drew near you, unlaced
your boots, so many eyes to empty from knee
to ankle, pull the boot, free your foot.
Mom: the word whose seed is you.

Return

Home from basic training
six weeks and your uniform obscured you,
a gold check mark for each arm.

I continued my game of go-fish,
shrugged off your hug.

I wore the shoes
you'd sent home for me,
glossy blue leather,
good for my feet & too big.

You went upstairs, a stranger,
heard me call your mom, *Mommy*.
Heard me go uncorrected.

When you changed into the blue wool sweater
you used to warm my hands inside; I knew you.

A Better Life

*If that mockingbird don't sing
Momma's gonna buy you a diamond ring;
if that diamond ring don't shine
you'll still be the prettiest little girl of mine*

The military paid you
while they trained you.
The military got us
out of Newfoundland.

I was the only kid on our street
whose Mom went away,
who got Smarties everyday.

You didn't care what other kids did:
I was *your* child.

Your roof, our first place
outside of Newfoundland,
was on a military base.

A priest gave us a box
with plates and cutlery,
a brown blanket
I wore out.
Wrapped round my legs.
A sheet sewn on to cover the holes.

Dear Sydney,

se þe meregrundas mengan scolde
secan sundgebland since geweorðad

These drowned words are haunted. Nothing wants to die. Whenever I read Anglo-Saxon aloud, I feel like it's the language for talking to your grandfather, a dead language, with some surviving bits; something about the sounds of the words, about speaking a language that was almost lost.

There are many ways to leave your wife; at that time working on the telegraph lines was one of them, and that's what dad did. When I joined the service I chose communications; I figured him doing it was my introduction, it could be the family trade. When I got pregnant, nobody could believe I wanted to join the military. They all said I had it made; I could collect welfare for the rest of my life.

My father was always quiet, still, with a practical joke up his sleeve; in Anglo-Saxon: *anhoga* (solitary one). I've never known other words for hermit. It's weird to think of all the different words there are for the same thing. Or does the different name make the thing different? Would you be a different person if you had a different name? The sounds people use to make sense of the world. Your uncle Ross also took the hermit's path.

When I was pregnant with you, I used to talk to dad all the time, ask him for advice; I still do, but not as much. You can talk to somebody even if they're not in the world. I knew he was happy you were in my life. "You are the reason I was born", I used to always listen to that Supertramp song when I was pregnant with you. To be honest, I think I imagine dad, more than remember him.

When I had to jump off the diving board in basic training, ten meters down and swim two lengths in full combats, I know it sounds silly but... he was with me. He told me his death was by water, not mine. The word water is one of the few that didn't change from Anglo-Saxon to contemporary English, *wæter*. We kept saying *water*; the French word, *eau*, did not overwrite our own name for it. Maybe it couldn't have. We were sure we had the right name for it... I thought your name was Grace, but then I named you after Sydney, Cape Breton, so every time I said your name, I'd remember we had to get out of Newfoundland.

In Anglo-Saxon, the word for survivor is the same as the word for remnant: *wealaf*. For a lot of years after dad died, we were both.

Ways of Drowning

Happy, I smell Nanny's bread baking, sweet as vanilla.
Quiet mornings, groggy in the kitchen for hours, light
pouring in through huge streaked windows—smell of soil,
tall dry grass out back..

Her children remember the decade she was drowning;
not having been there, I gather eavesdrops:

Nanny was always sticking her head in the toilet,
falling asleep in the bathtub; threatening,
“a man can drown in a teaspoon of water”.
There were strange men in her house
sousing her so they could fuck her.

I understood the crazy woman in Rochester's attic.
I knew she must have felt somebody had done her wrong.
That's how she could set the house on fire.

The Law of Contradiction or “Nothing can both be and not be”

Some of Rodin’s sculptures were cast from his moulds after his death.

After my granddad died, Nanny conceived one of his sons.

He died in 70 and Jacob was born in 72. A miracle.

Dispersal

wading sound is water
of the father ghost
saving sinners' gray names.
wager is water. boiling water
or bathing water.

gray the water, like wading through
stone. the only sound is water,
the father, only sound: in the name of
ghost. only sinners + holy
be saved. grey that water:
rain through stone.

the holy stone saves face. water's
only name is Father.

Life As A Telegraph Pole

Slacks blue & shirt,
rough fabric granddad
made soft while planting
telegraph poles down
by the tracks.

Secondhand store aisles:
I search the men's slacks
for his old pair; grey, brown, black, itchy,
fibrous, stiff with dead skin cells, sweat
and thinking of something else,
the bitter smell scrapes
my nostrils. I must invoke
him. Men don't know what
to make of me.

Nothing tells me which pair
is his. I imagine rolled cuffs; lie
on the dusty tiles under the rack;
feel cuffs adjust to accommodate
my prostrate body, the thin pressure of them:
a shroud.

Now his poles are used for phone lines, fiber
optic cables: those veins.

His end of day exhaustion, morning exhaustion, afternoon
exhaustion; cups and cups of tea struck
like wet matches.

Seven children in as many years.

Potatoes and turnips in his garden: underground heads,
pale in his stony hands.

His muscular hands, callused.
I have become a disciple
of hands, a pair
like his must be somewhere.
I encourage strange carpenters to caress me.

Elegy

The wood stove chanted
in its language. Granddad's short
body, barrel-chested. His
strong arms and rounded shoulders. He
cut the boys' hair
once every couple months, his callused
hands— seaweed
in the waves of
their hair—honouring their ears, red
with the passage of light through them.

Thom,
the only blond, his hair: dandelion
chaff on the cold floor. Peter's wildness eased
in the presence of his father's hands
(my mother's accent strengthens when she
says *Dad*, the diphthong,
Daed.)

It would have been nice for my mom to be
a boy too, to make gentle
her father's hands over
her head. Nanny always pulled
at her hair, tore the tangles out. The girls
would *ow you're hurting me* and Nanny would
for the love of Jesus
quit your whining.

After my granddad drowned,
the boys' hair reached their shoulders, the house
he built was lost. Potatoes
went to seed.

His garden: potatoes,
turnips: underground heads,
pale in his stony hands.

Home on the Web

o'er the world of waters, blue and wide

-Charlotte Smith, "Far on the Sands" 1748

Web page says: "W're assuming you are entering our grand province via Port-Aux-Basques."

"Silver Sands Restaurant: great food, nice atmosphere, bar." "Hynes' Chicken Villa: the best [*only*] fast food in town, my son."

Railroad shares river's breath.

Years away from Newfoundland,
my accent is the forgotten flavour
of a once favourite food; a bottom-dweller
dormant in twenty-sixers of rum.

Web page says: "The Walking Trail is now being operated with *great* pride, by the Downey an' Keeping families, with this aim in mind: 'To serve people an' protect nature.' Why not enjoy a stroll with nature? Don't forget your camera." One crow for sorrow, mom taught me to divine, two for joy; three: a letter; four: a boy; five: a tale of truth we can never know.

O'er the world of waters, blue and wide,
unabashed houses; soaked foundations,
rectangle frames that shelter the residents
of dreams. Between Port-aux-Basques
and Rose Blanche: brutal shore.
Nanny's mountain pictured on the
world wide web, smaller than my palm.

Here and There

*

So sweet
bitter. Picked
them, fingers
careful not to squish, always
a berry or two in my mouth.
Ground the seeds between front teeth.
Body entirely a mouth. All ripe.
Sun on back, hair warmsmooth.
Hum of bees *they won't bother you
if you don't bother them, my darling.*

You could pick as many as you wanted. Wild
raspberries. Brought home a four-litre ice cream pail.
Nanny was so happy, as if I had made the berries myself,

as if there were no such thing as berries except those my hands brought.
She reached out her hands for the pail. Her yellow fingernails.
Sit down pet lamb; Nanny gives you a bowl with cream and sugar

Nanny put half
the berries in a pot for jam.
Uncle Jake sat at my side,

our eating was the only sound. Closed eyes.

**

Grocery store out here, I am
bumped and pushed
out of the way. Pears rock hard.
Greying tomatoes. The raspberries
are in a small plastic box four inches by four
and one deep. \$4.⁹⁹
Pale. Cold.

Here and There

My neighbour fixed my training wheels, Jimmy Young;
his weak yellow teeth, corpulent accent.
I used to read him my *Heidi* book, his favourite,
for the great bowls of goats milk that Clara drank
in the country; she never had an appetite in the city. Her delicate constitution.
Two servants carried her in a chair up to Heidi's cottage.

My first friend here does not know her neighbours, who have
been there since Jimmy taught me to ride a bike. She says she likes
the anonymity of the city.

Jaime reads the paper; I have brought *Franny and Zooey*
to show that I remember that she does not speak at breakfast. I do not read;
the bounty of toast she puts at the center of the table startles me, the French jam,
olive oil margarine, the organic almond butter, the pâté, the brie.

Nanny asked what I wanted for lunch; I said nothing,
well, we got cupboards full of that, my darling.
She sliced homemade loaves thin, like bologna.
I used to beg God for a belly that was never hungry.

The last time I was home, Jimmy Young had been born-again.
Growing up, he was the only grown-up
I could call by his Christian name, not Mr. Young;
he was Jimmy. Now he is James.

Vision

I call out my mother's name in my sleep. The tingle of space heaters coming to; Jaime says I bore her, I am too *Dutch*, all I do is complain of scalp pain and set rabbit traps. With boiled spoons, I brand her. She chases me with a huge shiny cork screw. I lock myself in the bathroom. She calls her warty maid by my name.

Music pours into the living room, alters the blank white tiles.

That's Enough Change
9 frames, mixed media

for a loaf of white bread,
the kind that can be
squished into a baseball

& a blue carton of milk
that can last us
four days

or
a packet of tobacco

to roll in pharmacy flyers

butts saved in a baggie

for the end of day two

savoured
on the concrete stoop,
on the brown vinyl chair
at the kitchen table

spirits, seraphs, sylphs,
a disappearing art form,

smoke rising in rivulets
from her too red mouth, a diamond
for mom's pencil thin fingers.

Playing Tigers

Dry yellow grass. Long, bent to our slick bodies, no extra scrap of flesh on us.
I played tigers with the neighbour—an excuse to paw each other, & eat our meat
pies off the ground.

Trees, those gangly bodies,
bent to wind.

*“Say you’re the mom tiger and you can’t find me
and you’re worried and then you find me and then
you’re mad at me for not telling you where I was at”*

My 3-dollar white canvas shoes, sockless.
Say I’m Vanna White in my navy blue one piece,
say my ribcage is a glorious bosom,
juts out like sunshine,
diamond collarbone, designer smile.

Egyptology

*“for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Called him soft name in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath”*—John Keats

A discreet incision near the hipbone,
for evisceration, replacing

only the dehydrated heart; they liquefied
the brain with palm wine, poured it out.

Unearthed, a mummy’s skin,
slightly orange
perfectly intact.

My mother announces
cremation is not for her; she speaks

now for a time when she will have no more say.
She says she may need her body
in the afterlife.
I put dibs on her birthstone ring.

When my uncle Thom died
the mortician put so much make-up
on him, he left this life a stranger,

I thought we were in the wrong room.
I wiped some of the paint off
with a Kleenex; he was perfumed.

I must mummify my mother:
touch each organ.

Palm wine to wash the stomach cavity,
aromatic plants to dry,
fill with myrrh or perfumed sawdust. Carefully
replace her heart.

Rules

Granddad, I feel you
in the house
with me.
I hear you in the pipes,

gulping water,
in the dryer's soothing, rhythmic
spin. Fat long wool
wound together,

like spiral strands
of DNA that make up the blue cardigan
I wear: it looks like something

you would've worn.
You died
without glamour or prayer;
Claire heard elegies have
rules; I doubt you'd care.

A Defense of Frivolity

Audrey Hepburn
in the Sunday Times
thousands of
millions of
people discarding
her. I've boxes of
pages of
images of
women, distant as vacations of
fashion mags like laudanum of
drugstores of
elixirs of
sickening shelves of
selection, & of
frozen newsstands of
muddled men of
many eyes, & of
brimming mega marts of
synthetics too cheap to be edible, & of
shaky handed desperation, of
searching for something good, of
the month, the year, after love
quarrels & love
endings & of
everyone in the way of
my path, the pleasure of
the flipping through of
the ripping of
the dismissing of
the collecting of
these images glued to spines of
my necessary mags, above
books on my shelf of
remedies.

Matins

My early body
heavy in the kitchen.

Leaving dreams
behind & embarking:
disoriented, safe.

The dependable blue kettle,
the blue flame beneath it:
stable miracles.

Coffee nestles
into the spaces between
hydrogens and oxygens.
Today will happen.

Property

The collector often makes a ritual of
disinfecting the used object,
of signing his own name into a used book,
more boldly than the previous owners'.
He marks his name
alongside the author's
as if he somehow helped
in the creation.

The collector may also document
the date of acquisition.

Removed from public
circulation, the book is transformed: private
property.

I open my door, write
my name in the hall.

Getting Out Of The House

I like to go to soup kitchens,
imagine curling up, fetal, in one
of the huge pots
to nap, read.

I like watching the pots empty,
it doesn't happen all at once. It happens
gradually, like getting used to a new space.
Empty is relative.

Nurture

I came from below ground,
past the sewn together patches
of green grocery & yellow pharmacy
up the red stairwell to my pale
blue apartment.

On the balcony, a tomato
ripe on the vine; I picked it,
unlocked the door,
through the hall, into the kitchen,
the tomato at my nose
the fresh smell after an eternity of canned,
the firmsmooth flesh—
a hoped-for beauty.
I'd bought seeds at the farmer's market,
a stalk grew, a strong, straight
spine—reaching for sun and water.

I poured water
morning and night
from a round jug.
 If there is belonging,
I belong to this.

Reflection

You have to be a sinner to be saved
the only sound: in the name of the father, the son + holy ghost
the only sound: water
the sky is low
like walking through stone
gray, the water
I wish they'd submerged me.
I was baptized with only a few drops.

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