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Recovering the Naked Man

Richard Harrison

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
of the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

January 1991

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## ABSTRACT

### Recovering the Naked Man

Richard Harrison  
Concordia University, 1991

The poems begin with the I, outside the world defined as good by feminist criticism; as a man, the I is privileged and oppressive, yet the I of a man is also a subject, aware of its own pain, its own desire for the good. Yet the thesis does not argue that feminist criticism is wrong, nor does it set out to "balance" feminist social observation with the testimony of male sensitivity, though the poems reflect on each of these tendencies, concluding that such a testimony is inadequate to effect the personal and social change that the I desires.

Rather, the poems embark upon an inward search, uncovering the ways in which the I is made man. Using the feminist analyses of power, and the impact of sexual inequality, as the terms of the question, and using the I's familial, sexual, friendship and social experiences as the ground, these poems gradually reveal the relationship between an individual man and the images of

man around him -- images, and men, through which he has made, and now begins to un-make, or, rather, to undress, himself.

The poems are linked not only by reference to those historical events which frame the writing and reflect the investigation -- but also in the later poems' revision of images present in the earlier work. Increasingly, the images of men and male roles which the I has taken into his own identity are seen as costumes, and though the subjective I, the naked man, is never out of the costume of the objective "man," what he can reveal to himself is the relation, not understood before, between the two.

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"Left Out," "Confessions of a Sensitive Post-Feminist Male," and "Men's language for their pain," have appeared in *CV II*; "My father's body" in *More Garden Varieties*; "Leonard vs Hagler" in *Cross-Canada Writers' Quarterly*; and "The Fielder" in *Yak Magazine*.

*For Di*

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To write

To write,  
to be a man writing  
to listen to the body,  
to write in the shape of the body,  
to discover a body distanced  
not by oppression but by privilege,  
to find, in the language of privilege,  
the mask,  
to find in the language of suppression,  
the mask,  
the skin my own and not my own;  
to be a man in public,  
to be shaped phallically,  
to write from the body and in the English  
of my many fathers,  
to translate:  
to understand twice, to ask,  
in mutually incompatible understandings?  
to let go of REASON  
to arise from the skin,

to make love with an erect penis  
that is not a phallus,  
to live in the flesh,  
to hold as lovers the way the mouth  
holds the letter m,  
symmetrical, the lips touching;  
to trace the long, slow w  
of the rib cage;  
to write "m" and "w"  
to determine the limit of the possible  
between us,  
to hope,  
to love my brother,  
to have that which is only masculine,  
to accept the otherness of what is masculine  
and mine alone with men;  
to remain intact,  
to break,  
to begin with the self,  
the self's own needing;  
to write

## Left Out

When women criticise men,  
I take it personally.

I have slept naked beside women  
and never touched them  
just for proof.

My friendship with women  
outlives my love with them.

One day I told a woman  
I wanted the feminists to like me  
and she laughed.

I want to be loved  
around politics,

and if you are a woman,  
I want you to like me, too.

When a woman said  
women feel safe around gay men,  
I hated my own desires.

I am writing this because a woman and I  
are writing poems about men and women  
and the possibility of real speaking  
between us.

Women's writing has more at risk,  
as if it is their last chance to speak.

The man the feminists want  
has not yet been born.

The male voice they are listening for  
has not yet written.

Ever since my last love affair  
I use the word "love"  
to mean either "like" or "desire";  
its independent meaning I save  
for the fantasy she will come back.

I am not comfortable  
thinking of myself as a child,  
though for many years I was my mother's best friend,  
she said.

If a woman mends any of my clothes,  
I like it to be on a cash basis.

I am friends with all my former lovers,  
even the ones I betrayed for other lovers.

That should tell you something.

My friendship with women  
is the way I make things last.

Confessions of a "Sensitive Post-Feminist Male"

I like football helmets  
and body checks,

the way muscular men in the flag-bright  
colours of the team  
divide the world on a playing field, or  
the plane of the rink,  
and struggle out one more game  
in the infinite parade of sport.

I get a charge out of soft porn  
and strippers.

I like Schwarzenegger movies. I'd like  
to cap off a few hundred rounds with a machine gun.

But the women I have loved have known  
the men in their lives these ways:

A father comes into his daughter's  
bedroom, crying. As he sleeps with her  
he clasps her for his life.

He shrinks and shrinks  
till all he is  
is a kind of hold.

Or another, her father's hands  
madden like heavy dogs and chase her  
even to the bottom of her crib;

for another the smell of my sperm  
is the smell of her rape. I'm sorry, she says,  
that's just the way it is.

Men made in the image  
of the agony of others,  
love is not enough.



Yet I wish and I wish  
on the lip of each new passion,

this love is a love  
as deep as violence.

Men's language for their pain

is obsolete,

part tradition,

part sport --

there's the choosing of sides,

the making of victory,

and loss

& effort

the only measure

of the heart.

Most often

men's language for their pain

is anger at something else.

No matter how painful

his life is, a man

can always hail a cab

with a wave of his arm  
in the middle of the night

or fearlessly order a drink  
from any waitress in the bar.

Men have not invented the language  
they desire, the one that delivers  
both power and comfort.

Men know these things.

Ask any man if he dreams  
of someone who understands him  
and all his pain,  
neither of them saying  
a single word.

The disguises of anger

I am angry with women  
and the disguises this anger wears  
are many

like the one  
about my friendship with them,

and the one about feminism

or this poem, now, the  
way it turns into my desire to please.  
If you like it,  
I'll wear it home.

In her despair my mother kept my family together  
with the threat of her death.

In bed after bed I press my face  
into my lover's breasts  
and wait for her to disappear.

Two more disguises:

From afar I love forever.

Up close, I make each lover  
vanish.

The beginning of a story  
is where you need it.

The feminists are right --  
I make my stories around  
what women aren't  
and I want them to be.

I'm angry with people I cannot blame.

My anger with women is this game of faces.  
The more likeable I make them,  
the more we live without the spoken truth.

The whole body

The whole body is rarely present  
though often suggested.

My longing for a whole body love  
hovers behind this page.

When a writer dies, the body of  
work is complete;

I am split  
between the body of my life  
and the body of my actions.

What I think of when I think of being  
loved in the whole body  
is my father holding me as a baby  
along his forearm, my head in his palm  
cresting the line of his life.

Being loved in the whole body  
is being touched with the same use of the hands,  
the way we wash ourselves in the morning.

I am a man and I have been rejected  
just for that,  
my body not whole but joined  
in memory with other men.

I have spent years rejecting  
my body in each of its parts,  
like a player throwing away a racquet  
in disgust.

And I have looked to others to give them back.

As if love were a science, it could be  
understood simpler than it is,

as if the whole body  
could be made.

Drawing me

-- for Joan

This time

you keep me naked

and draw me;

in your hands,

the charcoal on the heavy rivered paper

is the closeness of secret talk,

words felt through the body

the way summer electricity

or a train in the distance is

the sound of the horizon at night.

I wanted to be

and excite by being.

You saw my body

rise into its own pleasure

and it was beautiful in your eyes,

I was beautiful there.

When we first fell

our words reached for escape

from this:

the softness of your breasts full in my hands,



the smell of sweat,  
the mingling tastes of sex,  
but now,  
but now I emerge new from dust,  
you turn the intimate press of my body  
to a figure weighted  
in every detail.

My father's body

I bathed with him as a child,  
his enormous limbs,  
the gentleness of a giant hand,  
his huge cock at rest in the water. My father, naked,  
and I was naked and small  
in his silence.

All the things I knew too late:  
how he slept with my mother,  
how the scars came to his body.

Later, I saw him pale, almost white  
stretched out on the couch,  
his human body as long as furniture, as long as an animal,  
the power to lift me, the world around me  
gone, whitened with the death inside him  
growing;  
my father's body immense even in this quiet  
like the home planet,  
immense with all it had done.

Because he is not my son

-- for Steve

By the time he's 17, he's drunk himself sick on beer,  
paid the traffic tickets he earned himself.

One morning I found him, his girlfriend,  
folded like paper money  
in the pocket of his bed.

He adores the muscles  
of bodybuilders, adventures of Conan,  
his own legs on the soccer pitch,  
the ligament he cracked like old  
electric cord,  
the skin of his foot turning grey-green,  
the colour of a television without power.

The poems he's been in  
as the heart can be seen  
in clear-skinned fish,  
I spoke of him as  
my son,  
my language refracting  
the light from his body.

I applauded him  
sometimes with the envy of a father  
who sees what he regrets  
never doing in his youth;  
there were nights at dinner  
we fought on full stomachs  
like jurors locked in a hotel.

The first time he congratulates me  
he takes my hand surely,  
like something he has always owned,  
kept in the same place;  
our eyes see and are seen,  
mine measuring the distance  
my daredevil word never leapt,  
his the circle of pride  
one man takes another in  
by choice.

Leonard vs Hagler for the Championship of the World

Inside me  
he's there  
his boy face  
and man's will  
his moxy, sass,  
dance,  
his dream --  
to reach back  
and from the best days  
grab one  
even one --  
nothing lost forever.  
Watch him move:  
the dancer  
in my eyes.

And the slugger, he's there, too,  
lashing out with slow and fearsome arms;  
he did as much  
as a man can do  
and it is not enough --

yet his fist is tight  
any minute the last  
and things remain to be fought for.  
He's there  
brooding in his muscle,  
hanging on  
and on.

## The Friendship of Men

It's talk like this -- Al says,  
"Tony had 3 chairs out front and 2 tables in back.  
While he was cutting people's hair, Tank and Fife and me,  
we'd go back and shoot the whole afternoon."  
I know my place. I say, "What'd you play?"  
and Al says, "Backpocket" or "Skittles" or "Golf."  
Then we discuss the great shots they made.  
We compare for the greatest.  
We look for Tank, then Fife,  
the violence surrounding his life  
no matter what he did with it,  
the way new clothes always take the shape of  
your body.

The friendship of men is collecting together,  
like my brother and I getting hockey players  
in a book, having all the teams;  
a complete set or a lined field means  
we can see the borders of everything we want to know or  
do together our whole lives.

Nothing is so comforting as the friendship of men  
when it's working right, the stories  
are shared, you've worked the same job  
or played a while as a team.

The whole evening laughter rises and subsides  
like a furnace drawing oil, holding the house  
against the winter.

But this is not all praise for the friendship of men,  
and every man knows why --  
the day Al killed himself  
in the middle of the working week  
each of our faces became an empty cup.  
We knew that man for years  
and never knew him,  
and it is the same for all the rest.  
The friendship of men is half a love  
loved to the full.  
In our beautiful talk that night,  
our voices raised,  
we spoke only good of the dead.



## The Suicide

You could measure us  
against your disappearance,  
how long it took for each  
to stop looking.  
There's not a lot of forgiveness  
for passion  
making the wrong decision,  
for despair  
breaking promises,  
how small we feel;  
we are supposed to be grown  
and we raise our arms  
like a squalling child  
barely learned to stand;  
we know that love is up  
and somewhere else.  
What topples or does not topple us?  
Could we reach into each other there,  
that much, at last  
that a quiet word together, or  
a night of good sex

or an ad in the newspaper  
saying your name  
could stop you?  
You died in water  
separate from the shared elements.  
We are all selfish somewhere  
and that is hard to forgive.  
You died in water,  
where how you ended  
leaves no mark.

Between us

Like a puppet snake  
in a shadow play  
she jerks her hand  
mimicking the poke  
of my father  
fucking her in the morning.

My mother dry  
as a liar's mouth  
around a stone,  
my father's veins heavy  
like an angry neck.

When my father talks of sex  
it is not with her.  
He dreams passion and duty  
different women altogether;  
he keeps his own faith with each.

She dreams of gentle hands  
like her father's,  
masculine for cover  
like good winter mitts,  
warm without desire,  
a son's hands  
taken between her own.

My mother's breasts

My mother lamented  
her large, pink breasts.

She envied the small women,  
the straightness of their backs,

how their breasts did not swell or cyst  
or tug with the earth, the need  
for relief from the pressing bruise of milk.

In her bath, before  
I felt what I felt as sex, she  
would call me in to scrub her back  
in the afternoon,

she could be taken care of,  
she could fold into the pleasure  
of warm water, unthreatening love  
and forget the pain of her breasts;

she would close her arms  
around them like a prize,  
her head tilted back in the steaming room.

Do not hate me, mother.  
Long after they were denied  
I would have touched them with my face,  
the wet, warm saucer of my hungry mouth.

My mother's hair

I revisit her piece by piece these days.

I do not know her whole body.

When her thoughts appear in mine,

I believe they are my own.

The way I long for a lover,

the sex I deny as if denial was the gift.

Her hair confronts me in its fierce,

thick blackness,

the dusky, secret smell blending with

soap & water -- being lost.

I was born within the body

I washed with a child's mind.

All she wanted, I think now,

in answer to your question,

was to be home again,

unblemished herself.

## Grandpa Howard

As a child, I saw him only twice, but he was  
my mother's deepest love, her father,  
a father only for her, for her  
the measure of men.

In his absence, she told  
stories of his kindness, his humour,  
how life was bearable only under his smile,  
her regret at not seeing him for years.

I do not remember a letter from him;  
months passed between news from Home.

My middle finger is crooked at the knuckle, like his,  
like my mother's. His name fills  
the centre of my own. Richard Howard  
my mother sometimes said,

ending there. He died on my 10th birthday, the very day,  
which is ironic and sad and funny as  
only uninvented life can be.



I never lived up to him.  
I am not more sane or virtuous  
than the world; I could not protect her.

I keep those who love me away --  
I love women by phone, by mail,  
or when they rage at men in general,  
they offer my love something to defeat.

My mother and I have not spoken for years.  
How to get to a better world I do not know.  
Some of my sexiest moments I've been alone.

Grandfather to mother, mother to son;  
love is spent through a family  
like pollen in a hive.

I am easy bait for sharp, sweet,  
need; my mother's face  
in everything I defend,  
looking for her father for help.

My mother attempted the face of her beauty

My mother attempted the face of her beauty  
on two bodies the first was the body of birth  
where I bathed within her like new coral,  
a woman enlarged by a body hers and not hers,  
like a voice on the phone between lovers.  
Her second body was small and thin  
and healthy, the flesh melted away,  
the burden of gravity and demand  
lifted. I got that message, too,  
and see it over and over -- women on  
magazine racks become perfect, thin  
as videotape. I learned the nature of flesh  
its weight its burden how many and  
many are its demands. I remain as thin as  
I possibly can, as soft in the tips of  
my fingers as a cat but that first body,  
that body of flesh and dignity, that  
body I think of as happy because I wanted  
too much and it was given, here is the body  
I look for in every lover; what  
an odd picture this is in my bed,

my insubstantial hands, sinless and light  
reaching for her body, and her discontented  
with any gift, my mother in her beauty  
reaching for me, her two bodies  
crying out for love.

Batman

This is the look of all my heroes:  
a man, sheathed, pure,

poured from the idea of himself  
like a ripple in the fall of cream.

Gone are all the awkward protuberances:  
earless, he hears across the bald drum  
of his cowl,  
without a nose he breathes, we do not know how hard,  
through the triangle of his mask.

He has paved the nature of his hands & feet,  
the uneven growth of his hair.

His cock, also, his testicles,  
lie dormant in his hero suit, bound,  
not painfully, but adequately for his true  
action which is to save

and not to want. He is the man  
women feel safe around, whose touch is powerful,

full of technique, but does not intrude, even to fulfill  
what they might desire together. In short,

there is nothing to make fun of.

There is nothing weak,

and nothing for the weak to fear.

When villains shoot him, they aim for his die-cast chest.  
He says only enough to fill a word balloon.

For doubt, read only the slightest twist  
in his fine musculature. His mind is an inference  
on our part. Our real hero. North America's main man.

His power, the proportion of his struggles,  
his cool escape from the comedy of a man's need for

the messy, fabulous, liquid and mortal passions that burn  
in the darkened buildings the boyish hero watches  
at his distance  
in our night.

The way I love the men I love

I do not dream their bodies set against mine in pleasure,  
yet I see the beauty in their skin,  
the fine, sweet way a man can pour a beer  
with the head just right, or pass his fingers  
over his own face with a question.

I can desire and desire  
an embrace as if by a brother,

my brother to kiss my face when we say  
good-bye or thanks.

How we turn outwards, men,  
and love what is just out of reach and so remains.

Gay love threatens only what it promises --  
that what is loved will not keep its distance.

The way I love men is a desire I think my own.  
This is politics at its most discreet --

the close pack of men in the stadium,  
around the satellite feed at the bar,  
the huddle, the bench, the broken car,  
the dishes after a week --

the feint that keeps me knowing and not knowing  
who the man beside me is;

this is the love I find daily, like balance,  
how a path as narrow as wire  
feels wide and sure underfoot.



Soldiers sleeping in one another's arms

Imagine them, soldiers,  
sleeping in one another's arms, my father

among his men in South-East Asia, the night's surprising cold;  
it had always been beautiful to me, that image:

I could not pervert it in rage or in innocence,  
the way a boy, finding his parents at sex,

sometimes fills with terror and rushes in to break  
their painful coupling, or the love they keep from him.

This was the deepest of desires, animal,  
warmth in the night, the heart uncouneted by winter,  
my father belonging, my father loved.

But all love is divisible, war is the proof; new nations  
killing

with the old one's arms; my father's word given to England,  
he killed the men he soldiered with, his word more sacred than

blood, more sacred with each man dying; his punishments  
make sense to me now; him sleeping  
in the years of our house, his huge hands open.

Catch Me in the Fall of Love

The men in Pamplona --  
after racing the bulls --  
climb the tower at the heart  
of the city. By firelight  
they leap  
one by one  
to the arms of the drinkers  
dancing below.

Catch me.  
I fall through my own mouth  
to you; we talk the night down  
with discovery,  
capture our bed in a kiss,  
our tongues entwined,  
limbs aching like giants.

I want to be caught  
in the fall of love  
like a worshipper  
kneeling

to be raised  
by God.

My eyes are sharp in the flickering light,  
the scent of the body fills me,  
my skin pure anticipation of touch.  
I am falling and you are  
there among the dancers.  
I love you  
before you raise a hand.

Lovers by phone

They stay at home.

They wish they were together  
more often than they are.

They never spend the night.

They never write letters.

Lovers by phone

live in fear of their errors  
of which they have an intense knowledge.

They can take up to an hour Long Distance  
to explain away a single, mis-spoken word.

The despair of telephone lovers  
is sweet in their mouths.

They talk of what love would be  
if it could be

if they lived in different cities  
or if families were closer

or their childhoods weren't so terribly wrong.

Lovers by phone can never be satisfied  
though they try very hard to please.

They speak to faces they cannot see.

They do not believe it will last,  
and somehow this is right.

Far enough away to be  
touched, they wait for the words,  
the whisper of the wire.

## Pornography

sometimes defeats me  
when I write of the body

tempts like a key left in the door

is the subject of a poem  
I am not yet able to write,  
the one that leaves it powerless;

I would like to write the definitive  
male poem about porn;

I would like to say  
I am no longer affected or seduced;  
I never lose sight of its victims;

I do not feel it in me to believe them  
when they defend their jobs  
on talk shows.

I want to believe the smiles are real,

or I want so much I do not care;

it takes a lot of will power  
to make the porn flick sexy,  
to let it into my life, and it is  
will power I have spent.

I would like to say  
I have defeated porn  
in my own heart.

Porn knows me  
when I see it.



Let me love you/with this tongue

Let me love you  
with this tongue:

a red shirt in July,  
a new haircut,

the tongue of sweet auburn wine,  
the tongue of cinnamon coffee.

Let me love you with the tongue of  
huge phone bills just to lick your ear,

the tongue at night that turns in my dreams  
like a gold knife:

it says the word love like a possession,  
it says your name.

Aroused, it desires you at both ends.

Its answer in my own throat is  
m(y) other tongue, the tongue of the lessons of history,  
the taste of paper;

m(y)other tongue, it is sane  
with a catalogue of evils  
between women and men  
like a holy book.

When it says the word love,  
it covers my mouth  
like a little drum.

M(I) other tongue knows enough  
to keep another door open.

## Lies

This far I have got my strength  
by lies,

the idol's power -- to contain  
what it never gives.

That a man can cry, like Achilles  
only when he is a soldier after a battle or  
a running back in a lost game, and  
his crying then is not weak but manly,  
is obscene.

I have been full-throated as a sparrow  
but shown nothing, only to go home  
and tear my book in half.

I have not told the whole story  
for fear of being alone,

and I am alone because no one  
gets enough of me to hold:

it is easy for men to become worshippers  
of their weakest selves;

they pose them in the manner of  
a gallant death, they say,  
I choose between love and art,  
I am a kamikaze,  
I suffer like a castle under siege.

In their decorated chests  
their erotic connection is  
a broken plate

from which they save a piece  
to remember it and burn.

My father's goodbye

Like a man missing in action  
or buried at sea by the wreck  
of his own ship,  
my father's goodbye was nothing.

I want to recall his loves  
as if they were beautiful.

I want to be one of them.

I want to remember one time he and my mother  
kissed knowingly and with passion,

or he nested his cheek  
between her breasts and in their sleep  
they were comforted by the weight  
of their naked bodies:

Father

Mother

I do not want to think of him hurrying

or my mother wishing it was over.

When something happens in silence  
like this, it can be as if it never happened

or it is never finished.

I have family secrets  
in my muscles, the way  
my arms hold a woman,  
my thighs move to hers;

I, too, have broken my word,  
and left saying nothing.

I have been the child  
waiting for the game promised by a grown-up  
who did not arrive.

I have been a man glancing at his watch  
inventing important, stupid things  
to keep himself away.

I wanted to be a soldier

because he is the man my father respects  
without question,  
the man with the weight of killing  
in his judgements,  
and his sorrow is understood  
by no one at school.

Because he loves from behind his enormous guilt,  
his love can never be repaid.  
He can take and take forever from  
his family, and it is never enough;  
it is never his fault.

I wanted to be a soldier  
so my anger with my masked  
and frightened father could be real,  
my father who could never paint darkly  
though he turned on paint and canvasses  
with a knife; he spoke with passion only  
his clutch of favourite quotations and his rage.



I see him in any man  
who looks me in the eye to speak  
his mind  
and I am seduced.  
I need like a toothless mouth.  
I love like he loves,  
and come from a woman's bed  
as ignorant of beauty  
as a pornographer. I believe  
the body will always fail.  
I wanted to be a soldier so I could say that  
what I went through makes my belief the truth.

I wanted to be a soldier  
so I could have seen the worst already,  
so my mother's rape could become pale,  
and her fiery, despairing eyes, her desire  
to die with me in the basement of  
our home would become as nothing,  
so I could be a man made only by men,  
so I could remember the rifle

in my hands when I am whimpering on  
a woman's shoulder *I can't I can't*

*I can't*

After December 6, 1989

It is not his madness that makes him  
the brother for whom we cannot apologize.  
He is the ice in the belly men know

when we stand with his mouth  
on our faces, his nerves  
in our limbs, his eyes  
for our entertainment,  
his script so perfect in our science

that men on TV inside their neckties and degrees  
explain him saying he acted alone

as if army fatigues and the finger on the trigger  
never happen in their own dreams,

as if men never blame their mothers,  
their lovers, their wives  
when other men reject them,  
or they hurt themselves;

as if a boy's hatred of  
the girls in the schoolyard  
is not considered natural;

as if men never ask women to forgive them  
for what they never examine or forgive;

as if men don't pretend to be feminists  
without listening to one word a woman in the same room says;

as if we all don't read the same stories  
that say there will always be blood  
and terror, where  
the hero's lust for endings ends  
in the righteous death of the other,

as if men do not kill women in their own  
rooms and get away with it under the law; no,

every woman has heard his voice,  
looked into his eyes

as they load with blame and fire.

Every woman has jumped at the click of  
the footstep in the abandoned parking lot,  
the receiver crackling with the obscene call,  
the husband drunk still snapping open the bottle.

And every man has been his own hero,  
dressed for action in the shadows, figured it out  
as a raw deal.

Nothing is the same  
after December the 6th, 1989 in Montreal when the  
women, in the middle of engineering school  
were lined up and shot down by this man armed

with the unspeakable, common words of men,  
to the teeth.

After the shooting wars in Romania and Montreal

Here is the conspiracy of the helpless:  
to hold on to their pain,  
to watch the eyes of the master carefully,  
the curl of his lips.

Mother and son, we kept to ourselves  
in the little house,  
rubbed each other to a pearly shine.

Under the sheets I dreamed of  
violence and wedded it to desire.

I made of men either gods in my failure  
or bastards when I won.

I made of women victims in need of  
my comfort, or mother's milk to be  
cried for over and over in her arms.

The world ruptures around us,

yet daily women glance  
quickly at the doors of classrooms,  
refuse

to meet my eyes in the subway.

He is always there,  
his weapons, his own unreachable anguish  
turned inside out --

the longing for spilled blood  
the exposure of skin.

I knew him as a child when  
I learned the power of a man's body,  
and made my way with the secret language  
where I am always the victim.

Men do not understand feminism  
because they believe it is about hatred --

they believe women think of them  
as they would think if they were women;

they remember being little,  
waiting to do back, for the gun

in their hands, the revolution to come  
that everyone cheers.



## Sensitive Men

in private conversation, or  
on TV confess  
they could have been the killer  
holding up their hands as if  
still smelling of the gun.  
Not one of them imagines himself  
killed standing, waiting  
for the man with the gun to reveal  
he can still be talked out of it,  
still appealed to, human heart  
to human heart --  
not one of them imagines  
his own body empty of meaning  
as a woman's body can be in  
the killer's eyes --  
even he sent the men  
from the room, even he  
could not imagine men dying  
as the women were going to die  
just for being women and there.  
You are thinking --

men have died this way,  
but even men who know this  
still dream themselves  
acting to the last,  
and the women in the room  
look at the sensitive men,  
hear their confessions,  
their sincere guilt,  
feel their own breath strangely  
for a moment,  
and wonder, where next?

She said

When I heard about the killings, I  
thought it was you. She was not awake  
in the night worrying about my safety.  
She said she loved me for years.  
She said she knew me.

I have lived in the neighbourhood of  
killers and silent men.  
I have known that pain,  
that madness, how for the most part it  
is trained, normal.

I am seduced by people  
in front of whom I am naked and guilty;  
I have done all I was asked.

I have been the best man on earth.  
I have been the hope for the future.  
I have been part of the graduating class.  
I have been God's Gift To Women (I have the plaque).

I have not found the way to the body through words,  
the way Mouré loves the human forehead,  
the shoulder,  
the way Sexton loves through the back of the knee,  
  
the body of the present tense  
with joy.

## Hysterectomy

When my mother's uterus was  
cut from her body

I did not understand  
or mourn

her skin exposed,  
the cloak of sleep  
on the table.

It was for the best,  
they said,  
the doctors and my father,  
and my mother with her fingers curled,  
her knuckles rubbing,

to take this organ of her flesh  
where I lay in her  
like a pearl  
in abalone. Once

her body was whole,  
she reached with her two long hands

and they were filled with petals,  
green and violet

like the names of her sons.

When I began to unravel  
the lies of my anger

I saw the pains  
they cut her to ease,

their many names:

wife and mother,  
daughter, patient,  
helpmeet and companion,

the bleeding  
she could not stop,

Richard and Tony,

violet and green.

Drawing me from memory

Second, better, mother  
of a second, better man;  
even this is a re-writing  
of the times we were together, and it seems to me,  
even now, happy.

A face in the mind of the artist;  
an entire book spent in the search.  
Face after face emerges under the thick pencil.

When I sucked your breasts that first time,  
when we made love that first time.

We thought we'd go on TV,  
the new wave of relationships, there being no  
hope for men over 40.



You draw me even now,  
an act I used to love, to rise  
like a figure from the sea,

the figure of the man  
we needed most.

My confession is my privilege

How you have seen things, yourself the victim  
of men, their harsh skin even in love.

Now me, as I have confessed  
I would have been. How little I know --  
between what I could do and what I am:  
my confession is my privilege.

I have come to forgiveness and despair  
the same way.

Tony Harrison

looks like the Teddy Bear he gave my lover  
to welcome her to a family of two men;

draws cartoons for a living;

came from my mother's body,  
bathed with me;  
as a child ate only hot dogs for dinner;

lived with me for 15 years at home until I left  
for University and a stepfamily;

disappeared at 23 into his apartment and wouldn't eat;

went out with a girl I wanted to go out with in  
high school, kept his hands lowered when I grabbed his shirt  
in my fists, watched me

collapse at his feet in tears an instant later;

knows the details of my love for superheroes,

took my father's comments about the inevitability  
of his own athletic failure;

is the man I look for in the faces of every class I teach,  
is the love I think I am saving when I defend the "male bond:"

invisibly watches every game with me,  
quizzes me about hockey stats and the Flintstones,

never took my place with my mother when I left;

can charm a woman into bed in 12 hours,  
kisses my face in public without shame or hesitation;

will hate parts of this poem,  
though he is at the heart of many where he is never named;

knows the lies I tell myself;

will not fit here,

is someone I am looking for;  
loves me.

## Spectator Sports With Children

A vision of the little park at the end  
of my street, the rink in summer,  
stone and wood, two teams of boys, heads heavy  
with plastic and wire to protect them from  
their fun; behind this, news of Lebanon,  
the coach's booming, Get back there! Get back!  
news of war, children with full-grown weapons, massacres;  
weapons and sports equipment are that touchy --  
anyone can play. When a bigger boy cross-checks  
a little one to the cement, and he is carried,  
limping, tear-faced, his team-mate throws his  
helmet down, the crowd applauds,  
I hate the offender with a hatred bone deep  
as a brother, as I have hated my own brother  
across the ice, someone screaming  
*Win! Win!*

To let go

1.

Trying to understand what it would be  
to let go in the poem. To let go.

Let go of understanding,  
it has always been your problem, Di said,  
and I trusted her  
but I did not let go. I did not let go  
of trying to understand.

2.

Now, dreaming  
of a language for men:

the players scatter across the field,  
the crowd holding them, its enormous breath;  
they collide, collapse, some are broken.  
A great shout. This is not war, but what  
it would be without a likeness to war is

a needed word in the new language,  
jubilant release.

Dear reader,

-- for Di Brandt

Let me tell you about the time I found my feet  
in the prairie soil.

There is a voice in my letters  
you rarely hear in my poems;

think of it as the voice of those feet,  
what they know about shoes,  
the weight of the body, laughter,  
the long flight of  
bones between us.

I lost my feet when I was twelve  
below ground, in the basement of our little house  
where my mother held my ear to the cavern  
of her chest, the thousands of creatures  
fluttered there against my cheek.

There I learned to love the world  
as if it would break into the long wail  
of her mouth.



And to hate it for that.

There I learned to watch the body from  
a textbook,  
and sports on TV and porn movies.

But you know this part, dear reader,  
you have read this far already.

This is the story of my feet. I saw them  
in the wrinkled black earth, you saw them  
too, soles upwards and lined like a fortunate palm,  
shiny from the rain and wind of the prairie.

You told me you feared airplanes,  
how they took your feet from the ground,  
how like death is it, clearing the earth.

But it is most of what I know.  
And as I floated above my ankles,  
you became grass beside me,

blonde grass, and the line of the sky  
so big each eye must see it twice,

and your feet became thin and white  
and found the water.

I can taste it now, the thick,  
flat taste, like potato, the time

you bent to the ground and pulled my feet up,  
here, you said, here,  
to see my prairie, you must stand.

Others deep inside

To see my mother not in the model of my mother,  
to say, this is your story,  
this is the taste of your own life in  
your mouth;  
to leave the words there, and there,  
to recognize where, in my own limitation,  
the circle both a whole world  
and the rim of a cup,  
she could not choose but  
go on; to see "to be or not to be"  
is not a question you answer alone,  
not a question without others deep inside it;  
to conquer and forgive at the same moment,  
to conquer in order to forgive;  
to be defeated, like the hero who only becomes  
the hero in defeat;  
to begin in the taste of my mouth at rest,  
without the stimulus of food or smell,  
to taste my own words coming, my own  
thin body as my tongue; my lover's brown  
hands around my skin, leaving their salty love;

to write the taboo lines of my sex,  
to bring my complicity into the open,  
to begin to undo the knotted muscles between  
the shoulders, the neck: to turn the head freely.

## Total Recall

the violence as free with the body  
as any object; to step on a bloody corpse  
to step in a mud puddle, it is the same thing  
for a boot. I remain in my chair, I have learned  
the intimacy of flesh. This is more than fiction.  
Arnold is betraying what we both know.  
No matter how many times  
he gets kicked in the groin and walks away from it,  
I do not believe he is that impervious, or I could be;  
he is telling women there is nothing soft, nothing  
they can wound if they need to.  
A woman reveals her breasts just before she is shot.  
This is the world. This is what people want,  
and he gives it to them.  
To be made over, pumped up, wild in gesture,  
a perfect immune system.  
My body sweats its way through the movie with him,  
my same body others are telling stories about,  
stories of its violence, its old love  
for him, for them, the man in fiction, truth.

Bobby Hull

and I are alike,  
even though he is the Greatest  
Player of All Time,  
and I play the tabletop version of his game.  
Sometimes I tell my friends  
I was scouted in the Fall of '76  
to play goal for the Jets,  
Bobby's other team,  
the one I am convinced  
is named after him, The Golden Jet,  
in anticipation of his arrival.  
If I catch an apple rolling off the table,  
I tell people I could have played.  
I pretend the apple  
just came whistling like the stone  
from David's sling off Bobby's stick.  
If you'd seen him play, you'd know:  
the power of his legs as he moved up  
the long left rib of ice,  
the curve of his stick  
somewhere between an amputee's hook

and the hand you use to stroke a cat.

He knew the puck both ways.

Bobby's shot could push a man off his skates  
and back into his own goal, the puck  
still oblong from the velocity.

Believe it.

Yes, I love Bobby, but only the same way  
we all do -- the way we punish him

with unconditional love for what he was,  
the love that turned to rage

when he left Chicago and the Warrior Totem  
and the record books that now ignore him for  
Winnipeg and a million bucks. He says now

it wasn't for money, but I can't forget  
his father said he'd never be good enough,  
and Bobby, in the Sixties, measuring himself  
by property -- Bobby

at the height of his arc, Golden Bobby  
pitching hay, topless for photographers  
on his farm in Pointe Anne, Ontario,

Bobby, risen from the field among his cattle  
in the sun.

Bobby Hull may hold the record  
for literary allusions in the NHL.

This poem may make it  
to the Hall of Fame. And it  
has everything about Bobby but why  
I have begun to write it, why I have wanted it  
for years, why I need him, why  
the stick figure that represents him on my game  
fills me with the dread I will not live up to him,  
yet he has failed me already;  
he is everything that does not live up  
to its promise.



Out of costume

And now there are no models,  
just myself  
naked with you.

All my life I have been praised for  
power I did not exert -- how unlike other men I was  
& I learned the criminal measure of a man's desire.

Love is a man  
not beating his family.

There are no forerunners for how I must touch you  
now, and teach you the best way to hold me  
in our sex, "like this," to say, "like this."

I accuse Shakespeare of making intimacy  
only in war and jokes,  
The Bible of mistaking the necessity of the body  
for faith,

I accuse Thomas of beauty only in solitude,  
and my father I accuse of the violence in his mouth,  
how he taught his real life was found  
in the days he faced down death.

I am left nowhere when what is real  
(and it is real) is  
my skin with me fully inside it  
as it must be when it is (I am)  
exposed and touching you.

I accuse myself: I am never long out of costume,  
I have loved badly,  
a man looking for the worth of himself  
in the arms of comforted victims:

my love has opened like a mouth weakened  
by the news of death.  
It has closed like the jaw of a fighting dog.

## Recovering the Naked Man

In the city (I am)  
we are recovering the naked man

Forget what I have told you,  
he is not the man of arms,  
my father's hero, a man's body folded  
and tightened like a map

In his unusual nakedness  
he is not the man of art, the sculpted man,  
not "The Woman in the Man"  
the "Sensitive Post-Feminist Male"

We spend our time hunting for words,  
the old language dying on our lips

His body, it is the body  
where muscle is least; love is the body  
farthest from the bone.

I feel reversed: I know him whole this time  
but I describe him piece by piece  
filling his beautiful skin.

### The Fielder

Throwing himself off the cliff edge of  
balance, he reaches into  
immediate gravity;  
the ball falls into the tip of  
his glove --  
he cannot hold it,  
it can fall out,  
that moment  
no one knows which.

As he hits the ground,  
you say he loves the game,  
but inside there is no love;

inside there is only the out-  
stretched arm,  
the leather of  
the glove his whole mind rushed into,  
the launch of his body,  
the falling  
the ball