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The Inner City Exhibits

Lazer Lederhendler

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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

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ABSTRACT

The Inner City Exhibits

Lazer Lederhendler

The text is a poetic investigation of the city that inhabits a man. Insofar as it is a many-layered city, much of which lies deep within the man's body, the poems function as excavations. In opposition to nostalgia, however, this archaeology is not a glorification of the past but a bringing to light. Its concern is not with exhibitionism but with exhibiting.

The point of departure is pornography, in its protean manifestations, embedded at the intersection of the inner city and the City--the patriarchal civilization of which the man is both a particle and a protagonist. Indeed, the cultural codes are so deeply inscribed in him that the border between his body and the City is blurred. Yet, paradoxically, he must rely on the body's remembrance of experience and emotion in order to locate the relationships--son, father, friend, lover, husband--that have shaped his inner city most profoundly.

As a writing/reading subject, the man strives not only to locate those relationships, but also to reconstruct their meaning. To this end, however, the only tools available are the very codes--language in particular--which, through prohibition, uphold the City's exclusive claim to represent Reality. A number of poems address this dilemma. Moreover, by constantly testing its own syntactical, lexical and formal limits, the whole text asks to what extent Standard English and the conventions of Genre constrain rather than enable the reconstructive enterprise.

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that spurred me on at an early stage;**

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nourished me;**

to Pierrette and David, for their support and patience.

Pour mon amie Pierrot et pour Dav, mon chum

To have one's existence affirmed by others. Or, put oneself at risk forever (a panic at the cell's edge).

E. Mouré, Furious

the inner city exhibits

legend

montreal, 1991. a man one day walked out the door and down the street. the sidewalk was lined with aspen trees. it occurred to him that the line of aspens stretching to the corner was actually the same tree, transposed. this notion pleased the man; it reminded him of marcel duchamp's 1912 painting, "nude descending a staircase." in the painting the successive phases of the nude's descent are all represented simultaneously. what's more, the nude's gender is

uncertain, something the man once would have found unsettling. now, however, having studied feminism and other contemporary philosophies, he found every representation, in fact, every word, unsettling.

along the way, the man observed how the aspen leaves danced incessantly, as though unwilling to dissociate themselves from the air they moved in. he decided that upon his return he would write

a poem describing the leaves as tireless or irrepressible. the leaves would become sequins in his poem, and the parade of fluttering aspens would become the conversation of women walking hand in hand, barefoot, brilliant, subversive. (being an atheist, the man often found comfort in such utopian metaphors, knowing that they were as close as he could ever come to grace or communion.) for the moment, however, he was content to compare himself to the trees, unsure of where the comparison or his feet were taking him.

the row of trees came to an abrupt end at the

corner where the street intersected with a busy commercial avenue. the man had turned this corner hundreds perhaps thousands of times before; its every detail had become familiar and unremarkable. yet, just then, the whole panorama was enveloped in strangeness and meaning. to the north-east there was a bank, to the north-west, a church. a sex shop occupied the south-east corner, while a fruit store sat directly opposite. the man now stood in front of the fruit store, momentarily frozen by the perception of the nearness of death. death, not as a menace or a destination, but as something profoundly present, like

an intimate though distant
memory.

the man had
intended to buy milk,
cheese, tomatoes, apples, and
a few other things for supper
and for lunch the next day. but
(like a light gas yielding to a
heavier one) his intention was
now displaced by an emotion
made up of intense sadness
and vast desire. he began to
cross over to the corner where
the red neon word "amour"
winked in the shop window
and below it, three x's.

while he made his
way, bewildered, amid the cars
and passersby, the man, a
devout movie-goer, had a

vision of himself as a
character in a film. he had the
distinct impression that if he
turned around he would see
the credits and the title of the
film rolling up just behind him.
(actually, to say he was a
character is inaccurate, since a
film character represents a
unified personality. whereas)
in this film the man became no
more than an outline, an
opening shaped like the body
of a man. all that could be
seen at first in the body-
shaped opening was the very
intersection that the man was
negotiating: the fruit store, the
bank, the church, the sex
shop, the crowd, the traffic.
then the details of the street
scene began to recede, as if

the camera, perched at a great height, were slowly zooming out to a bird's-eye view. the urban grid, the endlessly repeated intersection of horizontals and verticals, gradually emerged like a photographic image floating in its bath of developer.

entranced by this cinematic daydream, the man was surprised to find the door handle of the sex-shop pressed between his palm and fingers. the cold sensation of corrugated steel made him again conscious of his body's solidity. yet the man's inner spectacle was not interrupted but only altered. as he leaned against the glass door, his

vision of the city's grid faded and gave way to what looked like the cross section of a tree trunk, still bounded by the outline of the man's body. the tree's annual rings came into sharp focus. in each ring the man perceived, alive and jostling for more room, more exposure, fragments of his own past: lines from a folk song, a vase of midnight blue glass, a white, round-shouldered refrigerator on which sat a round-shouldered radio that played "fascination," a storage shed full of dark woolen coats, a back alley flecked with leaves and small puddles of brown water.

the glass and

steel door swung open.
(despite the fact that the man had always been a non-believer, there was a time when the phrase "may god forgive me for what i'm about to see" might have run through his mind at this point. later he was more likely to turn his thoughts of guilt and atonement to the women that he knew. still later, he read an article by a feminist scholar who defined the consumers of porn as members of a sexual minority. she referred to them as pornophiles. the man adopted her analysis and, thus, came to terms with a troublesome part of himself. at least, for a time.)

the glass and steel door swung open. the man felt as though he had been cut open with a scalpel. the fluorescent light fixtures buzzed overhead; he had the impression of being a slice of flesh under a microscope. from just inside the threshold he could see the rows of magazines and video tapes, their shiny covers strewn with buttocks, thighs, lips, breasts, vaginas, penises. he stood watching the other men in the shop. most were hunched over these images, their eyes unfocussed, turned inward, as if in prayer. the man was again overwhelmed by distant memories: the small boy he once was, standing naked with

his back to an open window, a lilac tree rubbing against a tall wooden fence, the touch of someone's upper arm, a woman's neck, the smell of sweat, of urine and tears, voices talking softly on the far side of a door.

unwittingly, the man had been staring at a customer. in a loud whisper, the customer asked him what the fuck he was looking at. before the man could apologize, the manager came up and asked was there something in particular he was looking for. all the man could do, by way of reply, was to mumble indistinctly. he turned and stepped back out into the

glare of the late afternoon. he hurried across to the bank, where he made a withdrawal from the automatic teller, then over to the fruit store. not that he was running late, but he wanted to get home quickly. while the questions were still sharp in his mind.

town planning

as i walked out in the streets of laredo
as i walked out in laredo one day
i spied a young cowboy all wrapped in white linen
all wrapped in white linen and cold as the clay

un a void able

cor(o)ner

'mgoin'downt'meetcha

meetyou meet you me-

et vous

et moi et toi

eyes fall

asymptotic into (h)ours of sympathy

when nerves meet never

to touch your hair

-lines the site we must ex it

entrance meaning

the verb

in finitive case

you turn the corner of a

century

i mean en-

trance (*it was fascination*

you know) white line(n)s

drawn around your fever to sing...

the city's design:

a bank's two faces west

& south telling their own time

the bank's

the teller's

a sign reading

Sanctuaire d'Adoration

du Très-Saint-Sacrament-de-Notre-Dame-du-Sacré-Coeur

(translate a misfit jew bearing the double ex-)

poses the lipshaped

heart pried open

a window's red pulse

AMOUR AMOUR AMOUR

erects the triple-x that can't be said

alone displays me here

where o you've always found me

wanting...

close-up

close up

everything hinged on the hand

tight with doorhandle

whorled kiss of skin

to steel, the cold articulate

fingers: where a man is said

to carry his design in ten thousand

forensic slices, the body's lasting

impression. a bar-code

enters the light that reads it

the plain manipulations too lightly taken

to picture daily the place where he is

barred for life

the glass and the fur

there's the glass door in a look and the distance

it opens like ice

yielding as eyes under their own glare are

conned by each invisible woman i've assembled and prayed

to the shining tits the golden ass the jewelled cunt

and yes the polished cock

so solemnly borne

but there's the distance covered as by fur

bearing creatures and a boy's small face

buried in my father's unwashed workshirt

forehead against linoleum

smooth & cool as the slope of my mother's neck

his bum held high to catch the first caress

of an april window's openness

(be)holding the pose

these the beats a door wants

to glass the chaos of my body between

traffic in weightless glare

and fluorescent hummmmmmmmmms

the frozen particles of light men bend

each thinking

his alone can't be-

hold

the pose

no the face implodes like overheated celluloid

gape of the decomposed

the door

aloof as a penknife unfolding

slices (elle tranche)

inside

i'm one molecule thick on a glass

slide my meaning magnified



☒ graphic ☒



the magazines riffle their pungent gloss

tree line

sequins of leaves laughing

the aspens pull up roots like words

that women spring. shoeless &

sidewalk they dance, aloud. allowed

to grow far from the line the same

one a man learns to wood the spiral

riot his cellulose rings...

rustling in solitary visiting

hours uproot the words for

a loss i am at

coat line

so comes a tree at one point

smuggling under a coat (the counterfeit colour of bark)

my thousand rings

the point a man wants to reach

each time he enters agaze

the silence a door holds in

like a breath

bottled in midnight blue glass

less to dissolve in pornography's glaze

than to remember

singing

(oh sing me

sing how you *never knew how much i loved*

you) how a small boy's feet inside the coat's lining

carry me to a closet

& woollen coats big with mown

grass breezes like the breath of sleeping

lovers graze gently the genitals

deep within my skull

the shed

not closet. no. shed we called it. because winter coats were shed there,
anything in the final days of april that needed shadow, like outcast
members of the family. it was their presence i sought in the dust that
rained through slow bands of sunlight. solar suspension. i dreamed
overcoats into inmates & a sad lane of freedom i could refuse for their
dirty hair smell, their weight, their woolen weight. the bodies they
intimated sang no words in the kitchen: white, close by, close. the smooth
round enamel of time...

lexicon of the shed

shed: a room deep in dream-rime escapes you

winter coats: womb-smell, wool's remembrance of

your mother's dirty, oh, wet and

dirty hair: close, closer, closer still

(still: amazing morpheme pluperfect)

dust rained slow: red cell shadows, their rhythm out

of time, singing: whalecalls, the wavelength of flesh

dreamed inmates: i's dream of not-i, the subject confused

lane of freedom: the afterbirth

sad: modifier, as parts of speech all are

syntax of the shed

**as parts of speech all are
a matter of exclusion. parts the
author cuts away body parts passages
too dark for words allowed: the passage
from shed to lane a wooden staircase
spiral organism (what he thinks of as)
me moving through its scent--humus
dangerous humus. below, a lane-full of
sky the whole weight of its blueness
pressed against where the light leaks
in like desire: the dark moist door he
was afraid (so am i) to call
my mother's cunt...**

first correspondence from the shed

dear one who went before me,

you said there is no unconscious. now tell me, do you recall the shed? the lane? what do you call them? and the staircase? and the door? what happens to whatever we don't say aloud? whose death are we waiting for?

i love you

brother

second correspondence from the shed

a mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh.
and consequently a division of language--and it has always been so.

julia kristeva

to a carrier of the south-west light,

has a phrase ever come or a gesture or the way you articulate certain things, come as if from behind, and you, just the place it was passing through then? i am a tattooed body, you think, and these colours aren't mine, though you can't say whose or the meaning of mine. let me tell you, your words apprehended me. made my poem admit, *i, too, am about 'to be born'* and recognize the plot of my symbols: glass of a porn-shop door, glossy pages turning like doors, pictures of a woman glazed like a door (like a mirror-door), shed full of overcoats (wool, not fur), wooden stairs spiralling through smells of a forest-floor to the border of light shaped like a door. how in all the rooms that women adorn as icons of their own humiliation men congregate to restlessly adore what they must never allow (and so they despise), never name, my mother's cunt, the door disguised in o's and x's: o examine, o exalt, o excess, o exclude, o excise...the door? what is forbidden? cunt-thing? cunt-word? cunt-thing/[slash]word, the slash that signifies a door ajar, indefeasible but not

the same? or, since the law is mostly possession, is the subject forbidden,
her possessive case?

carrier of the south-west light, perhaps you shied away at first from all
(and nothing) that's been made of it, the blunt *graphein* that takes women
into traffic. or was it a light thing, a kiss, to steal back from pornography
the precise, spontaneous explosion of a daughter's love for daughters?

(context: who speaks, the son

the text, "my mother's cunt"

who listens, the you)

oh weigh it weigh it. turn it over gingerly like a tender limb a groan the
irreplaceable failure of...to recall and not dismember my mother's sturdy
sweet body whole and (only) once my own, to know she'll never forgive
me. will you?

did yours?

yours truly,

X-cess text

tom waits the singer at a mid-
 western movie house with X X X X X
 X X marked on the marquis asking
 what can you expect seven X's to
 show, girls without skin? X-ray/ed
 exponential vision to the power of
 penetrating knowledge the will to
 know driving me over the ledge
 where worlds are stripped to bare-
 boned truths unknowable since not
 one or the other invisible since
 black. in camera: obscure filmstrips
 looped like a möbius multiply X-pose
 the searing vision the one that
 h(a)unts intoxicated double seers
 down to their melting point, origin. O
 ring. ring-ring ring a bell? wring my
 body un(that's one)divided
 unbeholding to one another
 unbeheld as the viole(n)t diffuse

amnesia swells my mother's red sea
tale the sp(l)itting image of amniotic
waters where i am no-thing, by itself.
and soon to be biting her tongue
with every suck the ammoniac gurgle
of piss & shit under whatever words
the tongue learns to utter nonsense.
heaps of severed yearnings like
yiddish re-remembering pain the
absent red milk which O can't say
much less enclose, an ecstatic Y lost
as an empty oyster recalling the
taste its oytser pearled into oytserl
kindeleh pitseleh the minor strains of
tongue & palate, prayers to the
nameless flower that fed the aleph
perfume still the angry ruins of beth

r e a d i n g (t h e) r o o m

**no telling at five what words
fold into the flesh. stories that hold
true for life emerge at forty laughing so
it hurts (the tragic potential
that comedy needs) from the cells
where a body is made
literate. your son's skin closes
around your voice, how it reverberates
the syntax of his secretions. the secret
grammars of porcelain and plumbing
he learns by heart. first the fine yellow
fall of piss on the bathroom tiles
neat as lines of type.
then your sentence like the sea:
your penis is not a pencil! you pronounce
the line where civilization begins, and, no,
he can't see the difference or why
you're laughing. only the ceramic room
grown strange and far, so mercilessly**

far from what his dark wailing
will ever touch again

second reading

the room dense with Freud and

Milton and a million volumes

line the walls like a panic

press like the trees where Adam

crouched with Eve in brand new clothes

waiting to study the first machine:

they called it shame

third reading

know this room, son, how it folds into another (every other) room the way our lives fold into one another, into a small boy i call *me with lead pencil*. he sits at a table in a third-floor flat. through the window he can see the back yard, the dingy lane, the backsides of the houses across the lane. the tall wooden fence surrounding the yard is overhung on one side by the branches of the neighbour's lilac tree. the tree is in bloom. the boy is seven. in his right hand he holds a pencil (faber hb): a shaft of lead sheathed in a yellow hexagonal tube of wood with, at one end, an eraser set in a small band of metal. (a boy holds on to the symbols of his parts.) there's a sheet of onion paper on the table and a department store catalogue opened at *foundations*. the boy has traced the shape of a woman's body. except for the features of the face, he has left the figure unclothed and blank. he draws in the breasts, large U's on either side of the chest. for the navel, he draws a cipher. he doesn't know what to draw where the woman's thighs meet--they just do. though his brother sits opposite him, reading, the boy is hardly aware of his brother's presence. he is wholly absorbed in his drawing, in the act of it, in making a nakedness for which he has no name except the drawing itself and the breath he draws from it, burning-sweet like the taste at the end of crying. the boy doesn't notice that his mother has entered the room. she

asks what he's drawn. the question slaps the boy on both cheeks. beside himself, the boy takes refuge in a large closet close by (inside every room, always another room, like russian babushkas). when his mother opens the closet door, the sheet of onion paper in her hand, the boy is crouched behind the overcoats, hugging his knees, his forehead pressed against his knees. he wails that he'll never come out that she thinks he's filthy that she'll tell his father that the whole world will know he's a filthy pig. it's alright, she tells him, it's natural, not filthy, the body isn't filthy. she takes his head in both hands. take my word, she says, i know i know i know. and maybe she did. that this is what the boy's yellow pencil first committed to the page: not a mother's lost body drawn into silence, but the distance from one heartbeat to the next

epilogue, yellow lead

**pencil. a man's soft core soft corps soft coeur soft curve of time to a point
of NO TRESPAS=SING the first sign to equate transgress/transport to
trace like kubrick's monolith wrapped in yellow wood the storyline of...**

a fiction

mother catches boy drawing naked women with a yellow pencil. boy is caught a year later stealing a yellow pencil in a bargain store (tells mother the pencil entranced him). at school, boy sticks the point of a yellow pencil into the dazzling white back of the child sitting ahead of him (tells mother he wanted to see what would happen). grade five, the pencil becomes a pen and in high-school, a pen-knife, which eventually lands in his friend's right foot (an accident, they both agree to tell their mothers). the end?

dear reader, please choose one of the following:

- a. boy embarks on a career of violent crime and is gunned down before reaching the age of 25**
- b. boy, having achieved success in the fashion industry, dies from an overdose of analgesics**
- c. boy borrows \$1500 from his mother to buy a word processor**

harry and jonas in january

(fragments of a film script)

1.

midday in a large city. snow is falling. the camera picks out two men striding down a crowded commercial artery. they wear heavy overcoats and carry leather satchels. backs to the camera, the two figures appear as silhouettes bathed in a hard white light, but there are prismatic rays of colour on the margins of the scene. for a long time their breath, the rhythmic crunch of their steps, and a vague, muted churning, like an engine or a heart, are all that can be heard.

female narrator (voice-over) --

the first word ever spoken was embrace. the second word was embarrassed. because, the first thing people did was to embrace, then they were embarrassed. or was it the other way round? first they wanted to, and one of them said, i'm so embarrassed. then they embraced. okay, but what if they were french? in addition to embarrasser and embracer, they'd have to deal with embraser, meaning to burn, to set ablaze. as in abel and cain....then again, they may have been spanish. the spanish word embarazada means pregnant. which might seem self-explanatory,

except that back then they still hadn't invented a way to tell languages apart. or even words. so maybe the first people who ever embraced, or wanted to, just sat there for a while looking at the fire, their mouths closed around their tongues, as if pregnant with the same word for trust & fear, and embarrassed by its frailty.

as the credits begin to roll the two men enter a café. in a white disc painted at eye-level on the door, the café's name is inscribed in bold graffiti-style letters: "ta gueule."

2.

interior. the lunchtime crowd has begun to thin out. only one waitress is on duty. here and there a cluttered table waits to be cleared. a few phrases from an early bob dylan song drift down from the loudspeakers:

i don't want to fake you out,

take, or shake or forsake....

3.

harry sits near the window with his back to the wall, scanning the café and the sidewalk while he wolfs down his lunch--lamb chops, spinach salad and red wine.

jonas --

sorry i was late. i didn't know you were that hungry. i wouldn't have insisted on going such a long way.

by way of response harry makes a brushing gesture with his hands and shakes his head, his mouth full of spinach leaves. focus on the art poster just behind him: jean-paul ricopelle's "centre blanc." fade to white.

4.

overhead shot of the table littered with remnants of the meal. tight shot of harry's coffee cup cradled in both hands and faintly reflected in the tabletop, a slab of marble with veins and arteries like a topographer's map. the background music is gradually drowned out by the narration of a television documentary.

male t.v. narrator (voice-over) --

before going any further, they stop to eat and check their gear...

(cut to the t.v. behind the café counter: two men on a cliff.)

...an overhang half-way up the face. close enough to the rock to hear it

breathe, they scale past their fears into a light so solid, so tender, they trust it to hold their weight no matter what.

the narrator's voice gives way to jonas' (voice-over) --

sometimes, at the edge of a table, the air gets so rarified that some words ring true. trust: what we name our fascination with heights. you rush to put your trust in someone, then you end up flapping in mid-air over a loony-toons ravine. and you fall. you fall like a boy believing in the gravity of his father's voice. so we say he's falling asleep falling for falling short falling out falling apart

how deeply we must need to fall.

5.

harry's voice breaks into jonas' interior monologue. tight shot of harry's face. he speaks with a wistful, axiomatic cadence, as though pronouncing the last word on the subject.

harry --

never trust anyone too much.

the camera swivels slowly around, while harry's words are echoed and distorted until they sound like a chant at a high school football game:

never trust too much

never trust too much

much too trust never much

never too much trust

never too much...

jonas (voice-over) --

i never could get the story right.

6.

flashback, in slow-motion: two boys playing chicken. an army surplus bayonet pierces the canvas upper of a running-shoe, a cotton sock, the instep of a left foot, the blood blooming like a poppy.

harry (voice-over) --

like a crucifixion.

jonas (voice-over) --

and the bayonet? like a crude "imitation of desire"? which boy did you play?

harry (voice-over) --

which did you?

harry and jonas in unison (voice-over) --

does it matter? isn't every tale the one about a wounded limb? a foot. still weightless, held still by the brief remembrance of miracles. to store in that moment of extreme tension how you'll stride, the pace of your voice through the streets of another city. of another. does never trust always mean the same thing as trust me trust me?

7.

exterior. harry and jonas stand facing each other on the same commercial artery, now in the midst of a snow storm and almost deserted.

female narrator (voice-over) --

take the expression "to take leave": what you do when you don't want to leave just yet, but need to. the courage it takes to leave. the absence of courage.

closing shot.

the subdued light makes it hard to distinguish between the two men. they exchange a handshake, a pat on the shoulder. one man turns away, turns his back on the look he knows his back holds steadily, begins to turn back but holds back, burying his hands in his coat pockets. the cool slope of his back recedes among small whirls of snow that snake up the sidewalk, and scraps of paper, twisting, as though wanting to be read, afraid to be...

a kiss on each cheek

straight men don't come

together, we converge. the way we're

always verging on a con: conversation, confidence

the two of us

and a chair--bottle-green, empty--our

eyes-con-verge (three syllables

stuck in the evening's throat) the speaker

speculates in other words:

con, the cunt, verge, the prick, night-

stick that rubs out the i of la vierge,

o the empty green periphery

we had in mind

swallow swallow

swallow swallow swallow

a word caught in the rib cage

escapes us. it goes without saying

where

beer, chips, hockey, the failings of other men--

order them, our friendship
rises like suds in a slender glass

televise our lines of sight
déjà vu, the v's our eyes crisscross
a woman with
a thousand times before
we ever meet

(what we gave away when we traded smiles)

her absence, her presence, the silences both
understood. and a kiss on each cheek
should she enter

i p r o n o u n s i n g y o u

the history of thou

second person singular, the familiar

too. address for a child or other

subordinate, a loved one and the loved one

-ness, god. extinguished between the mid-

17th and the mid-19th century, a time of

invention and achievement:

the african slave trade

the export of smallpox to the american indians

the bank of england

the gold standard

the poor laws

the steam engine spinning jenny cotton gin power loom water frame flying

shuttle

the factory system

the rolling mill

the locomotive

the machine-gun

the pursuit of happiness

the wealth of nations

the census

liberty, equality, fraternity

reality

the inalienable right to bear arms

the right to vote

the rights of man

the regulation of a woman's body by the state

the extinction of thou

the pronouncing of

thou, a sacrifice to one pronounced dead. how you

becomes you the second person plural un-

familiar with the rules of proper english

the vagrant loved one i pronounced you man

& wife where you went i will follow

alone

we may yearn for thou

the line of descent

is uncertain. hypothesis: thou the dinosaur, pornography the dragon. the appeal? nostalgia. nostalgia and fear.

you don't drive up to montreal from kingston, but down. downstream, that is. puisque le saint-laurent still sounds better than the 401. so much so that on moonless two-o'clock-at-nights in the rain, the highway tries hard to be the river. and would pass, except for one thing: the white line running ahead like a towline, not behind like a wake. we talked to keep whoever was driving awake, talked and talked. non-stop. afraid of sleep, of too much silence--we were almost strangers. afraid of the honda's one good headlamp giving out and us thrown to whatever prehistoric creatures lay outside that pencil-thin shaft of light. (you can't trust a one-eyed bandit in the dark, i joked) afraid to want to be thrown. it was me driving. so absorbed in the drone of the motor, the low back-beat of the radio, the white line, that for a brief autistic moment i was ready to be any of us and trust the car to its own devices

but for your voice, the restless cadence of a woman questioning

the white line

the colour line

the line a man hands you when

he steps out of line
the thin line a woman walks at night
where to draw the line
the lines she's not supposed to cross
now just hold the line
what line are you in
putting words on the line?
so where are you in all these lines
what's your line your point your thesis
will you lay it down
or just toe the line
when will you grow up
and put your body on the line

the lines of a song on the radio (*hey joe i heard
you shot your woman down*)

the headline:

a man beats his wife to death then puts a bullet through his head

why a man who drowns destroys what he most wants to have,
the fear bursting from his deep-sea diving bell his air-line a vacuum of

power she's cut loose her body no longer afloat at the surface nothing left
to mark his submersion but the lines he's learned (from a dragon? a
dinosaur? a popular song?) he knows them by heart: don't leave can't live
without you won't let you go

driving down from kingston in a car that almost foundered and the reason
a man kills what he yearns for most. by the time the road turned into
montreal there was that and the distance between us

v e r s i o n s (o f y o u)**(0)****this poem has a table at its heart****a kitchen table****the hardest things are said at kitchen tables****hard as glass****full of holes, the silence each word****travels in. the woman opposite****may not be you, her silence sounds****the same. the shooting****of rubber wheels over slush, the whimper of****pigeons in their sleep, waves****of sunlight on the table. she allows--****he was my lover****i wanted him****dead. not killed: ended****like a dangerous pregnancy****a heartbeat about to drown****out my own. the wanting****his death rose like sonar.**

she asks am i
a coward. the table at the heart
of this poem is an operating
table. a woman under the green
sheet dreams she's a gutted armchair
her husband weeps out
of fear and relief. the woman
is you, it's an ordinary

dream. at the heart
of the poem stands a table, any kind:
a bed a street a hill an altar
they stand for each other,
telling you
what i meant

(1)

on the verge

'Elle est malade de la maladie des autres.'

France Théoret, "Noeud"

there's la côte des neiges the cloth
 so very white italian bread & pasta
 laden tables and you, turned
 pale. bright-pale, your collapse:
 arc of the head's incandescence
 descending. drawn, your eyes are
 rollerblinds against the light of...

(no, wait.

wait) there's ice in the street the pizza
 a perfect wedge but the half-
 moon your mouth has left
 behind, all of it too jagged
 white for the table's shadow, its velvet
 ellipse. there, only your lips (i never
 kissed any thinner than) could

part. the veil of saliva (a rainbow)...

and the hospital (where i was
born) the man's teeth & smock how white they are
emerging, the curtain, drawn: her eyes
doctor, the lashes like moth-wings, the foaming
at the mouth, is it chronic? sir, she's been
blacking out, her seventeenth
birthday (or mine) was today the first
time, i couldn't

tell. the bed my father's house
and sheets, how ritual white
we clenched our skins like nylon against
each other's naked winter
the jaw shoulders pelvis
chaos encased in simple forms, a body's
the background was white
your silence, a storm

(2)

once a sky like chagall

one week. a street i have
to name milton, the part of town
students (though they can't afford it)
still call the ghetto. the week
we made better love than the one
we wrote. between your breasts the window-
framed rooftops and a sky like chagall
where we vanished. you were
a poland in my heart. filled
with wild horses, pianos
and all of us passing strangers

(3)

in future, things

collapse

the hill of snows

italian restaurants near rented flats

the place i was born in

tablecloths bedsheets window frames

a sky to invent

whatever can't be recalled

call it

the future

go ahead

call it

a beach on spanish banks

ocean crests rhyming with west coast

mountains draped around your room

translucently. slope your back to

smooth division in the hand-

made bed. or lillooet

call it lillooet

a bunch of kids high and
white-skinned, the darkest
moon i ever saw, you & me half-
buried in pine
needles and each of us, pregnant
enough with the other to come
clean



❖ transparency: cutaway diagram of the act of procreation ❖



darkness so clean
i can see your breath
dissolve to black. the end: first
light rising vaguely
nauseous, let down.
not to know exactly what dying is called?
no. that there is no word for
what i want. on the keyboard
hands the shape of your back

(4)

le lit la toile le goût de la mer

the independent-pocket-coil

mattress. even for an arm and a leg

it was a good buy. if only to reach

the point a painter reaches through

the canvas. where her colours have

drawn her.

nose to ear

mouth to mouth

cheekbone to eye socket

the skulls tender tectonics

enclosing what can't be

held. without restraint

or name sweat and salivate, to reach

the nature of sweat & saliva

to more than come: over

come. the long inhalation of

an inland reach of sea

mud and salt. my body molded
between your back and the bed, nothing to tell

us apart. arms reaching across your belly, i part
your lips like a swimmer who swallows
the air is swallowed, lost
his mind, a tiny bubble
for each word uttered,
whose liquid flesh....

chair la connaître découverte si au départ
comment départager le lit la toile
le goût de la mer

(5)

when the time comes

le moment venu aura

dimanche un parc world-

beat d'la bière à deux

pias' mon coeur-

accordéon reel my

sacred heart in change

of tempos & ritual beer

back to coke or who-

knows-what was holy

water when your tongue

was out a sight

accordéons bellow the

country & have-a-nagilah

me drown me in fake

island drums a boy like

horsehair playing the

swing's untuned fiddle

the frisbees & fungo

hitters & akisacs will talk

talk talk keeping time
the minute talk our
hands will work to
sustain & trees going
shush shush now a
jetliner's lancing the sky
oh ciel-cicatrice des
arbres nous feront
bye

(6)

transpose

brunante embrasures s'embrassent aucune perspective tes yeux d'une
pièce à l'autre train bleu de coltrain tourne l'angle équerre aux anges tes
écarts de langage circule l'air brille le soir tombé

[doorways dusk embracing no perspective your eyes roam one room to
another blue coltrain the angels blow right angles out of true how words
your tongue bends round an air of night fall shining]

(7)

to connect

the woman out of place is my mother's
sister close to death to me her lips
are winded curtains: open-close open-
close. the night in her mouth. maw
mama mameh mimeh how she'll talk
her way out of a semi-private room the half-
circle of too many relatives around
her bed. her bed raised high. six o'clock
weather and news (early snow, my birthday)
television's mute light plays on
everything but a crone's belaboured body
pushing herself hard hard as ever
the solar eclipse of her eyes her hands
working the wrinkles out of her
white cotton nightshirt, the sweaty sheets as if
to pass more cleanly into all that
matters now the taste in her mouth
the window framing a wall she knows
hides the gibbous moon

the inventions of the city

first invention: the symbol

In 1642 a young hunter was among the Iroquois of Hochelaga who witnessed the ceremony performed by de Maisonneuve and his comrades atop the mountain which the French were to name Mont-Royal. As he walked back to his village he contemplated the day's events and how he would relate them to his beloved.

today i saw the city invented and the machine they used: a pair of timbers crossed like the frame that keeps the scarecrow upright in the cornfield. the vertical, carved to a point at one end, they drove deep into the mountain's side, and in the bloodshot eyes of some, the warriors and traders among them, i saw a great brown bear impaled (though one man's look reflected no more than a mark for his triangulation of the land--the surveyor, a cold man with strong, ugly hands). i saw newhouse (who had hauled the cross on his back) kneel while the priest chanted his litany. founder, they called him. a man of vision. he knelt, he did not bend. in his eyes i saw the cross roll end over end like the spokes of a tremendous wheel, roll down to the waters and in its wake, a grid of crosses, their endless ranks and files tattooed across the island's entire breadth, that the river would not wash away or the grass overgrow. my sister, my

spouse, my soul's beloved, this day i was afraid.

second invention: the litany

o seigneur, cette montagne est tienne
notre roi, ce mont vous appartient
elle est royale, mont réel
down your slopes we reel
out our design. our tongues reel
off your names, our hands unreel
the streets like the celluloid our eyes
forever web the breathing
bodies of our lovers in, invisible
though naked
o city, you leave us
reeling. dazed,
we call you real

third invention: the love song

the watchmen that go about the city found
me: to whom I said, saw ye him whom my
soul loveth? It was but a little that I
passed from them, but I found him whom my
soul loveth: I held him, and would not
let him go, until I had brought him
into my mother's house, and into the
chamber of her that conceived me.

song of solomon

*way past midnight
& the blues hung around my bed.
(yes) it was way past midnight;
the blues all round my bed.
but when I called out your name, babe,
(you know) an echo answered me instead.*

sleep-drought. the night hails my bed like a cab. do you know...can you
take...where is...far...the fare the fare the fare the fare go about the city in
the streets and the broad ways boulevard the main thoroughfare go slow
the avenue a vu venir a face i need [the right word] dries up like water.
watch for it driver, (radio: *but when i called out your name...*) radio the
drivers all to watch the way men saving face watch for what they want
coincidence to find them--magazine stor(i)es enmagasinées ad nauseam:
A FACIAL RECONSTRUCTION SO PERFECT YOU...never coincide with
what takes place inside a woman. driver, on the neon river of
l'avenue du parc an italicized "pizza" floats in quotation marks, they're
hoisted like sails, o driver my driver let your meter run i hunger for

quotation marks large & all-dressed. enough to dress my beloved. enough to set the whole damned city adrift....my love thou art fair fair fair fair how "dangerously your sex wears the light my eyes have spun you. a skin film, existential." as streets are to the city. your breasts shine like the storefronts on rue saint-denis, your buttocks: hills of richness westmount & outremont, your belly warm as a brick wall in the blood-red summer. why is your face nowhere to be seen? my love come take me like a sister to my mother's house in mile-end the perfumed walls where she conceived me tell the pigeons not to coo the squirrels to let us sleep. why must your face be indescribable? driver, tell me again how the sculptor (rue laval was the address) made friends with her model on the studio couch studied closely the small sutured bones of the skull her fingers like snails across the ridge of eyebrows cheekbones the ear's meandering chasm the long slope of the nose, and the lips mobile mobile always mobile. how when her lover had gone she worked the clay from what her hands alone remembered, held and would not let go while we, driver, negotiate at every turn: where is...how far...how much is the fare. her face must be nowhere to be seen. i am safe here. she doesn't read poetry she rides the bus beyond recognition like a camel driver saddlebags sneakers heavy overcoat a thousand coloured scarfs to wrap her face oh leave them oh pull them back, my sister, my spouse, i'm so afraid you'll spare me the pain or layer by layer strip the skin from my chest strip it down to where

laughing and crying are unborn twins. can you see them swim together?
don't you want to look? then if not your face my darling give me your
hands, hide the gap below my eyelids, here, at the blue edge of sleep
where dreams leak in at dawn with the smell of after-rain & exhaust. give
me your word (for love). and the reason that nothing feels more like home
than this city, still

fourth invention: the pavement

taut skin of asphalt

interlocutor, my soles

stroke tenderly

the city's back to betray the underground

movement: languorous languished language of

smooth muscle cells

a ripple, the power

lines fail to comprehend