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SUNFLOWER CANTOS

Concetta Principe

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**

January 1994

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ABSTRACT

Sunflower Cantos

Concetta Principé

In the tradition of Dante's *Comedia* and Pound's *Cantos*, the cantos of this thesis narrate a woman's spiritual descent into, and ascent from, hell. This hell is a product of the post-modern dilemma of artistic expression: once language is stripped of meaning, the final discourse is silence; once the painted image is stripped of form and content, the last painting is a monochrome. An untitled monochrome painting, referred to by the narrator as *Sunflowers*, becomes the metaphor for the protagonist's spiritual journey.

The narrator, Clara, names the protagonist X; X being the woman Clara was before her baptism in the Catholic Church. To resolve her sense of alienation from her past, Clara is compelled to reconstruct X's experiences through hell. X's descent into hell begins with a growing distrust of language which is expressed in her inability to say the word love: because love no longer means the emotion, X no longer understands the emotion. At the gates of hell, X's visual perceptions are questioned: physical reality is superseded by nightmare and fantasy, so that everything she sees is illusion.

Now that language and image have been stripped of meaning, X paints a monochrome of a sunflower. The narrative becomes a dialogue between X and the flower, in which the flower is most articulate and, like Dante's Virgil, leads X through hell. The fifth part is a prayer. Through prayer, X makes the slow ascent from hell to give birth to Clara, and Clara, just born, performs a miracle by writing her way out of the post-modern dilemma.

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BIRTH

Yes. I was born yesterday.

Eyes wide open, seeing and not seeing water, hands, my family in the distance, their four hundred eyes, two hundred expectations, more or less.

Labour was painless. Three times the water broke against this face. The woman, my mother, drowned, already dead. Then I looked up, alive. I didn't cry, I wasn't smacked, but bowed my head for the laying on of hands.

I was born conscious of my mother's choice to have me. Her choice for me was made in full consciousness of Morgentaller, Patriarchy, Newfoundland, and the theatre, my sister calls it: my birth into the Catholic Church.

My mother died and I smiled. She died in ignorance, never knowing it was I, not she, who chose this name. Clara. Pink-ambers of Assisi stone at four o'clock. The little flowers of Santa Clara. I remember this. Lilies, iris, mums. I smelled their memory, just as I was born, new to sin, absolved.

Born to this life, I believe in water, my family, my name, flowers. Infant that I am, I can't forget.

Canto I - Paradox

[i]

Believe. Forget. Doubt. Remember belief. Forget doubt. Remember why you're here. Verbs: my paradox.

I come into this house as a newborn as if I had lived here before, (deja vue.) Just born, I know the word for dust, I see it thick on the floorboards at the corners, on the books someone read. The one who lived, dead. Whose thirty years are in my head. My head, this home, her tomb, my womb: nouns mocking verbs.

Who gave birth to me? My mother, says reason. For an instant my faith wavers. What of Jesus Christ, Mother Mary, the Holy Spirit. What birth is this?

Dear God, help me.

[ii]

Reason prevails. Saints and Angels don't give birth to flesh, they aid, they console. I am flesh, born of flesh. I am the living daughter of a mother's death. Then reason twists, I am the offspring of a woman's prayers.

There is no biological truth to me. But biology is a word: like birth. Born to believe, I have no problem with the way I came into this world. There are other questions like, what do I do now, without a mother to love me?

My mother, whose body is my gift of life, whose house is now mine. Two shelters of memory, which I am stuck with.

My mother was a questionable mother, died to give me life. But mothers are more than wombs, receptacles for a foetus: mothers feed their sick child soup, or sing lullabies to help them sleep.

I needed her last night.

I don't think of her as Mother; my X, who drowns in handfuls of water, and the only sign that she existed is the stuff she left behind.

Did she have to die? I could feel abandoned and betrayed except she sacrificed her body for my life.

I might feel pissed off about the mess she left behind.

[iii]

I believe. Dust reminds me how long it's taken to be born, even knowing she dusted two weeks ago. The number of times she has dusted, infrequently, superficially.

The Rosary, its decades, rubbed by her hands for three years. The angel she drew in a fit of fear. (St. Michael, the Archangel, defend us.)

I remember her thought: How do I dare? What does Divinity look like? The figure is beast-like, even ridiculous. But she had a sense of colour.

Crumbs on the carpet from last night's dinner. Even in her final hour, she ate. She ate.

The paintings on the mantelpiece, portraits of blue women, and the large one, ochre, that no one understands. I do. I remember. Sunflowers. "What flower?" asked her sister. No. Flowers. "But it's one colour!" X should have been forewarned.

My inheritance, because I am the only one who remembers. My responsibility, because I know even more than X. A twisted gift from Christophe. When he left, there was only one colour.

Christophe, who was like her ghost, haunts me. But he is not my father, not in the biological sense, nor in the spiritual sense, like the Holy Ghost. No, there was little paternal, much less spiritual, about him.

[iv]

He would appear then disappear to appear again, and, with or without her, was generally silent.

Conversations with Christophe, she used to say. I laugh. Her bitterness.

He spoke so rarely. When he did it was about Time. Obsessed with time. "Sorry I'm late. Forgot about Spring leap." He was always late. "Time for the birds to start going at it," and he'd look at her. It was spring. Birds mate in Spring. She was half-asleep. He was too late. Ten years ago she might have fallen for this.

Sometime later "Do you think pigeons enjoy begging?" Birds and begging were his hobbies. Intellectual hobbies. He made nice stories in his head. Prejudice, like everyone else, saw the world one way: through his welfare-paid glasses.

Sometimes inspired, he lectured.

People are physically unable to fly, he argued. Innately greedy they invent a machine. What makes them want makes them invent, and then want even more. They want so bad they will beg. God is the ultimate invention. Do you think he gives a shit about all these prayers?

[v]

Dear mother Mary, pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death. Holy Mary, Mother of God, protect me, guide me, pray for me to Our Father. Forgive.

(Forget)

I can't forget. The hour...

How many prayers fill an hour? How long does it take to die? How many deaths did X pray for?

Canto II - Origins

(i)

"Time is an old man without ears, just a long beard where pigeons live."

He fancied himself a poet, though when he wrote she never knew. He fancied many things. That God was time, being old, God was late. Too late. Or he has come and gone, she said. He chuckled, yes, perhaps.

Christophe was old. He was sometimes profound, mostly monosyllabic, dwelling on a word as if it were a mystery.

He was half French, and half Anglo, privileged in his halves. Knowing two languages and strong in one God. He was born to be strong. He could play the field: political cheap shots; virtual reality of addiction; haystacks of love. And still he could scorn time, could afford to be late, to get home late. He was an unemployed Montrealer. A man.

Even so, he had disadvantages: born in France by an Irish mother he never felt proud to be Canadian, and because of his Algerian father, distrusted the nationalism of the Quebecois. Moreover, he had an ex-lover who haunted him.

[ii]

Though Canadian born, X feels an affinity to him being half Irish, and half Italian. What it's like to be divided inside, grow up divided between families, languages. Unlike him, though, she was never baptised. Her parents, intellectuals, agreed with Marx, God was an opiate. They wanted to live free of drugs, addictions.

She has a tendency to addiction, and not having Christophe's advantages she is always early.

Arriving early, alone, there are minutes of being seen, within your control: you decide what face to wear. Then you grab the chair against the wall and disappear into the atmosphere, drinking, smoking, watching.

Arriving early she can see what comes, prepare for her escape. This particular afternoon she smiles. No one's looking, no one cares what's in her head: arriving early she might catch God leaving, the flurry of a beard and feathers.

[iii]

She didn't see Christophe coming, nor hear him; there was no question of escape.

He arrived at the gallery opening long after it had started. The lights had dimmed on the primitive totems so that they quivered, almost alive, beneath the blue Neon-abstracts on the wall.

He wasn't late, just dropping by. Quiet, neon blue, like a ghost standing next to her as she opened her beer. Her shadow watching her.

Uncanny how he could stand so still. Turning she spilled her beer. "God damn it," she said.

"God doesn't give a damn." The first thing he said to her.

Later Natalie asked "So... where have you been hiding him?" What? "Are you fucking him?" No, we just met. And X looks at Natalie not seeing.

How Natalie touches herself, absent-mindedly, three fingers along the lycra dress cut low enough to show some breast, pausing at the collar bone; a Pre-Raphaelite model scanning the crowd as if careless, but really, conscious of the painter, who's her lover. X didn't need to concentrate on what she had seen a thousand times: the promise of unbounded lust.

[iv]

What am I doing with my life? she asks herself, every other day, or at times like this, waiting in a bar. Couples, single people, groups, drinking. Is life this simple? Boreal and peanuts on a Friday afternoon?

Living here in Montreal where she can't speak French, taking a second BA in English with some options. Painting. Drawing. She smiles at the irony: caught between the wrong language, and a static one.

At least she has escaped depression in a small economically depressed town. She's doing something which she wasn't doing while involved in theatre in Peterborough. She's a stranger here (freedom), which feels better than an appendage to an appendage of some malformed notion of marriage in a town full of white picket fences, rotting.

What am I doing here? What is this life? Have I made some awful mistake?

He did say Bobards, didn't he? A moment of panic.

Be still. I am your God.

[v]

Panic subsides when he arrives. Just another lazy afternoon.

"Phone call. Sorry," he says, smiling. She knows he's lying. If not urgent business then the toilet backed up. His excuses were necessary, though.

He looks distracted. "It was her again, wasn't it?" His ex. A woman X knows so little about, but she's always there, in Christophe's thoughts. X can read his thoughts. The phone call was real, when it came she'll never know.

Trying to shell a peanut. "Bitch haunts me. I tell her to fuck off and she loves it. Then I feel guilty and ask her how she's doing..." How is she doing? "Begging me to take her back... do you think pigeons enjoy it?" What? "Begging."

These things happen, she says to console him. Love happens. Love ends. Things happen.

"She had me straight so long..." So long you forgot. "Hm. Ironical." What? You believed in kids and marriage? "Mortgage... Even the bloody white picket fence." She had it ready and waiting for you to plant. "Ya."

Friday afternoon is lazy in the dark bar, dizzying in the five o'clock sun as they wander up into the mountain and make love.

Canto III - God

[i]

Maybe she was looking for Christophe. Maybe she invented him. Or maybe if it wasn't Christophe, it would have been another. Maybe, Christophe is all there is: the diffidence.

What goes around comes around. What did she give the man who did love her? No words (I don't love you) because it might have been a lie. No explanations (this was an affair that should have ended five years ago) because she wasn't sure. Just a vague excuse, "I'm not ready for marriage, yet."

What was marriage anyway? The stereotype: white picket fences and pregnant in the kitchen. The reality: backed up plumbing in shit-hole apartments and pregnant in the Welfare line. Then the sequel: broken homes, custody, the divorce she knew at ten.

Babies sanctioned by God. But her maternal instinct has never been that strong, not like her sister's.

[ii]

X's sister by blood, by soul, like Lena, love.

I am born. She doesn't know what to think of me. Her instinct tells her, I am different. Am I still her sister? Who stole nail polish from a drugstore in New Hampshire at the age of eight; who held her hand the night her parents separated; who has the memories of their childhood she tends to forget?

Or has something changed fundamentally in the name of God? I want to tell her, Of course I'm your sister (how?), born to love you better. But I'm not sure what better is; and despite X's memories in my head, I feel ignorant enough to be her new born niece. (If only X were here... What has she done?)

I didn't choose to be Catholic, to be born, conceived. These things happen. How? Why?

Mother Mary, X said, when anyone asked. Everyone but her sister gaped in disbelief. Who is Mother Mary but a figment of the male imagination? A victim of motherhood?

Her sister didn't have to ask: the influence of their childhood travels through Italy, Assisi. Those teenage years she watched X draw the same pose: mother and child, mother and child. But the child never looked right: Charlie Brown, a blanket which hid something obscene, or lifeless like driftwood. Finally, drawings of mother with an armful of lilies.

{ iii }

Her father calls out of the blue. This is unusual. He's had a dream, he says. She's a baby in his arms, he, a new father. Then he looks down and she's turned into a beast, squirms from his arms. He's terrified and wakes.

Are you ok? Do you need anything? Do you need money? (But I always need money, she says and laughs.)

Father and child. His instinct to be a father is stronger than hers to be his child, or even to have a child. Perhaps her father suspected this: that she knew nothing about giving birth. Perhaps this is why he will ask again and again, why Catholic?

Father and child: that he is committed to teaching her about life, what he knows. "Life is a beast you can't tame," he'll say to her, quiet like a confession, during those days before my birth.

[iv]

X was born knowing God existed, and grew up knowing, despite her father, because of her mother. Her mother, a psychic woman, had to relinquish some Marxist ideals to cope with astral and angelic experiences; when she returned to the church some years after the divorce, no one was surprised.

X grew up learning how to meditate, how not to pray for Barbies but for sunny days (angels), and then, the healing power of prayer (God.)

God was always there. At night when she looked up into the sky and knew she was nothing beneath the trees like overgrown weeds; when she swore into the wind, broke and hungry; when she was overcome with tears for no reason.

But she hadn't questioned the idea of God until she met Christophe. The question was, how did Christophe's God tick.

She looked for God according to Christophe. Then she found his God in the McGill quad, still as stone, covered in pigeons from head to toe, feathers and hunger.

There was no beard. This God had human hands which fed pigeons from a plastic bag of crumbs; crumbs he put on his shoes, in the pockets of his coat, on his shoulders, his hat.

And where was time here, she thought, except in the image, timeless.

[v]

At the cafe Christophe was waiting. She was late this time.

"Sorry. Contemplating God." she said, and smiled. "Your turn, I guess." To be late, that is. He wasn't happy.

"My turn to tell a story," she said, and told him what she thought of his God. "All wrong, my friend.

"If God is time, and time is not gendered, then how does It have a beard? Time is man made. God is timeless, a field of wild-flowers (the house of her childhood where they lived as a family, the forsythia in the front, in the backyard, sunflowers...) No. Forsythia. Acres of Forsythia where pigeons shit, fly, and sleep."

He smiled. "Pigeons scuffle when they mate."

She looked at him. He was too old, maybe. He was quiet, too quiet, had a huge ego, was, perhaps, manipulative. And he would always be late.

She was patient, had been with someone for five years and three days. She wouldn't do that again.

She was tired from the sun. But she felt good about her story. It was spring, classes were ending, summer was coming. Then the fall.

No excuses. No reasons. No explanations. What happens despite time, at any time, like miracles, the way I came to life: she fell in love.

St. Michael, the Archangel, defend us...

LOVE

The definition is never confirmed for X. She believed the emotion was personal: too personal to share with a word. Could you trust that word? Was it a living word? With the people she knew it had been replaced by the F word, which was rampant. In some ways, it had replaced fuck, it was that obscene.

And what she discovered about the emotion, haunts me. X haunts my birth because even now, she would look at me unconvinced. Life is love, I say. But living is death.

I know too much to argue, and as a ghost she makes her point. Being born I owe my life to her. Do I owe her love?

Do I understand any better this thing they call love?

Canto I - Summer

[i]

Four women drinking wine, whining about men, and otherwise being intelligent. Trying to be intelligent about what they hate, like, dislike: defining men, themselves. They're all there: Lena, Natalie, Anna, and X. X doesn't drink much. Hers is a case of love, not men.

One of them had a lover who left a spot of blood on the sheet: one night of sex. Once is enough. What did he lose? What opened once, and for the last time? Do men have hymens? The intelligent women chuckle.

A crazy man is attractive for his huge grey eyes, his incredible lies. He's over the edge, always falling, never landing, and performs true cunnilingus. Serpent's tongue. A little laugh.

Another man manages to walk and fuck at the same time. "He made me come!" Did he chew gum? Ya. I know him. And the table roars with laughter. The world is small and there are only so many men. Everything gets quiet, edging towards love.

Natalie cuts the tension with her sharp tongue about the latest lover she dumped, "And the jerk called it LOVE. Who did he think he was?" Less laughter than guilty sips of wine. If the word is profane, it must still be sacred to make them hush like that, stare into their wine like that.

X doesn't talk at all: only one word wants to be spoken, but it is silent. And even the euphemisms don't work. It would sound stupid, especially now, to say: it is a secret, perfect, a circle, what comes once in a blue moon.

Summer approaches as silently as Christophe vanishes.

[ii]

Silence: shadows vanishing, summer heat. Through her window sun glows, transforms the brick, and everything is Assisi at four o'clock.

X is a teenager: for the first time sunlight has a colour and smells of flowers. The Basilica of St. Francis, his tomb and incense, where women chant the rosary, less than whispers, more than words. St. Francis talking to the birds. How does he do that? Giotto's image is silent.

Listening to her relatives speak Italian. Don't ask me, says her father, learn what you should know. Zio Pino flicks his finger from his thumb below his chin. A profanity she knows. She can laugh with them. Was it the milkman, neighbour, or the gossip down the street? They know.

Silence comes from listening to language's music: a fugue of sound and gesture. To draw that joke, half understood. The proud humour of yellow calloused hands, what has spoken silently for years while his tongue worked.

Distrust of language is grown: an accent cultivated in the country, in the books she reads. Her father who can't pronounce "th"s. To speak french "r"s is not enough. To take an English degree in Montreal is ridiculous.

The books she reads say authors are dead: not just centuries, but even while they wrote. She reads their silent gestures. They say the painted image, the human body, is dead, lives only as apparitions: light in film, dots on television.

And what about the living body? And the word, Love?

[iii]

What begins as a boycott of one word, love, gradually turns into the political question: use. Language is food. Summer is here. It is too hot to eat.

Instead, roam along Ste. Catherine, down St. Denis, the Jazz Festival that's free. Packed this year, the year of record unemployment.

Love is like the economy this summer: don't look and it's not a problem. Montreal knows it is a problem. Montreal and Newfoundland.

Love thin as welfare checks. Greg lives off peanuts and lettuce. And he is the richest of them in their house. Nuts, his affluence.

X eats porridge and chocolate, listening to the roommates in the kitchen, "Lover boy strikes again." And that was a dig, cause he couldn't get the fuck he wanted. Where sex was more necessary than love; and it was better sex was not love.

Food and sex: the smorgasbord laid on by Montreal. Lover boys take what they can get. For X, love was chocolate melting in her mouth, and the prospect of a job impossible; or as possible as holding the heat chimeras above streets.

[iv]

Montreal is quiet this summer, particularly for the English speaking population. X rarely speaks. Love has become entangled in a political issue: an anglo in Montreal.

You don't speak English in Montreal in the summer of 1990, unless you're American with money. X stays at home.

Sun and concrete. Meech, a lake of promises, churning.

The city roars with heat. Saint Jean Baptiste day is reunited with the living: the parade of Quebecois flaunting Separatist flags. Then the death of Meech. How do you kill a lake?

The same way Montreal plays musical chairs on July 1: metropolitan moving day.

Then Oka in the dead heat. A televised standoff. Barbed wire and National police. The issue: to make a golf course of a burial ground.

What is sacred? The language war insinuates itself. Common ground and no discussion.

Army. Natives. Staring like bishop and knight. Checkmate between nations. X has visions of ancient Kings haunting Pawns in golfing shoes. Cleats pulling dirt is all you see, as they run for their lives. X has visions of Christophe. Sometimes he is smiling. Sometimes dead.

And the US is concerned about the oil situation in the middle east.

This Montreal summer was dangerous: death haunted so the living couldn't mourn.

[v]

Anna's pregnant. There are desperate days of questions: X and others drink wine with her, without her, till dawn.

What else can she do? Going to study in France in the fall? Alone, separated a month from her common-law husband of three years. They are on amicable terms, she and her ex-lover. She barely had a choice. The two month foetus would have been a child.

X watched a woman face the facts of her body, of sex, her gender, and future. Wrinkles where joy shrank from her skin, left it dull, dry. Her eyes: windows to the inside. Inside, African violets were dying, dust was gathering, ghosts were roaming, crying.

What else could she do? These were her choices.

The gesture X would draw: a lover leaves his plants which she doesn't water. Violets, a desert plant, are dying.

Canto II - Chocolate

[i]

Roses, peonies, morning-glories, marigolds. The gardens up l'Esplanade growing from wine barrels or large iron bowls, painted mediterranean blues, yellows, pinks. Sometimes so many you can't see the concrete they rest on. Next door, the sunflowers in the backyard.

Next door the child who dresses her cat with ribbons, pink satin for love. On the street grandma plays goal in a game of hockey. Once in a while there is the smell of roasted pig. Once, the vision of a blue angel: a child with fat wings wobbling as she runs to the parade. The Portuguese church has many parades.

Maybe love lives on this street. Is it spoken? Portuguese, English, Greek, or Italian? Christophe lives further east.

In X's house, where she lives with four men, the word is used to be mean, and rarely used to mean the emotion. When it is it has that agonized sound: the garbage truck backing up. The word is garbage, profane. A word for lovers, or children. Sacred to the initiated, or the ignorant.

Through the house the sound of the garbage truck. That is enough to remind them.

At home, or on the streets, they drink. They drink what they can afford. The heat makes the booze go right to their heads. They sweat. When they need to clear their mind, cool off, they go up into the mountain.

X climbs the mountain every other day. Nothing else to do. From there, you can see the city, that the streets mostly end or turn at the Saint Lawrence, and some extend as bridges. An island. Montreal is actually an island.

From the lookout she can almost spot Peel and Ste. Catherine; the day her common-law marriage ended by telephone. The day the Berlin Wall came down. December 1989.

The cold night when she stood there in a foreign city, very alone, looking up past the building (past the Wall). Clouds soft as petals, colour of irises: this was her freedom. It terrified her: that there was only herself to love her, she wasn't sure if she could trust herself with this.

Along Vertigo Path the trees clear, a view south-east, and there's the Data building, below it a little traffic island (like Montreal) where she knows (almost sees) the cornflowers grow. Is this love? Stubborn as a weed? Is this Montreal?

And as the sun sets and lights come on, a golden haze wraps the island in a soft continuum. Traffic moves continuously, and the people she knows move through at their own speed. Their continuity this summer is Heroin. It's cheap. It's everywhere. It's only social.

Montreal is one continuous party through the hot season.

Christophe is at this party. X has heard the gossip. She doesn't want to listen. She wants to be sick. Nausea, and chills in the dead of summer.

She's feeling on edge. Creeped out. Something up. Something sinister about to happen.

[iii]

But nothing happens except Lena goes to Russia and the boys organize a barbecue.

Natalie brings her specialty, "Death by Chocolate" cake, in time for desert, hours late. "Had a friend over for a coffee and just couldn't get rid of him." She glows. Anna smiles, "I'm sure you tried your hardest." Now X smiles.

"You're looking really ravishing tonight," says Natalie to X. And X, embarrassed by the compliment, which is rare for Natalie, says "You know how it is, sometimes you're ovulating, sometimes you're not."

"False modesty is not at all attractive," she says, sips her wine, then asks "So how's Christophe?" "Fine, I guess." X shudders, chills down her spine, a hot flash through her skull. The cake, she thinks, and Natalie's speaking. "... You know, if you wanted you could have any man here."

But almost every man is a room-mate, X wants to say, except Natalie's worked up the Pre-Raphaelite flush already: one hand with her glass of wine, the other roaming across her chest, while her eyes scan the room, looking for a place to rest.

"I can't stay long. The only way I could get rid of the guy was to promise to meet him later for drinks."

[iv]

X barely speaks all night: words are dangerous. The English language in a cafe could get you curdled cream. To tell a man you love him? In these summer days the thought was obscene. And to mention his name to anyone here would have them laughing, or worse, offering advice.

He had vanished, anyway. Didn't return her call. She waited, but he didn't call. Then it seemed too late.

Christophe has disappeared. She pines for him, love. He can speak English. Why can't she say the french word for love?

She pines for want of his touch. Inside she burns. Something smoulders.

"You son of a bitch," she says to the plant and devours Natalie's chocolate.

He's in her head. "What's with you? Say something."

Wine is boring. Barbecues are boring. Then she argues with Christophe about God: the birdman and Saint Francis. Timeless. Christophe. Hunger through the centuries, this is timeless.

She sits at the edge of the party and barely listens with nothing to say. Nothing. Except, quiet in the toilet, she turns to the mirror, feeling vindictive, whispers "Who the fuck do you think you are?"

[v]

If only he hadn't talked about her, his Ex. The faceless woman who caused his cynicism, who's probably with him right now. She would have said something, sometime, before this.

If he hadn't talked about her, X wouldn't think about her. Wouldn't wonder what she looks like. Did she give him hell for being late? X imagines she did.

If she hadn't existed, then X wouldn't spend hours sorting through the little facts, what he told her: Russian, her nightmares, an obsession with pigeons. What he didn't say, her power over him. Does he still love her?

Maybe Christophe would be here now. Right now. She could tell him. (What?) I love you? (Do you? Do you know him from a hole in the wall? Does he know you from another hole? Do you know the word in French?) Yes. (Say it then.) The Ex speaks French.

Her head circles round the accent in the mirror. The circle of love, breaking on the "r", a crack. The Ex shouldn't be there at all. Or maybe it's all in her head, because he's in her head where she can speak, not embarrassed by her accent, not overheard by the others. They've been looking at her, poor girl--

"Yes! I'm poor, Christophe. Impoverished. Hand to mouth on welfare, yes. But I'm as healthy as a horse, better off than with the horse you ride, I have my chocolate. I love my chocolate more than life itself." She knows she's being melodramatic; just the heat, she thinks.

The party ends. For a few days there is peace. She paints.

[vi]

If the body's gone, then so is flesh. What's left?

The flush of violet, rose, petunia. O'Keefe's still lives. Floral essence in tone, hue, tints of light and lack, bursting from the frame.

But she's only a student. She has dues to pay: understanding the body. Proportion, muscle, composition and expression. As a master you can afford to be profound.

She is being extravagant buying oil paint: cadmium red, cobalt blue, titanium white, ochre. She paints women, faceless, without hands, not even feet, just their bodies, the colour violet, swollen breasts and wombs.

A mother's love for her child, rooted in the visceral. Nothing profound about it.

Canto III - Confession

[i]

The Icon of Mother Mary and vodka. Two treasures Lena brings back from her weeks visiting family in the Ukraine.

Vodka nights: frozen alcohol on tongues, steaming. Alcohol evaporates in the moment of capture, euphoria: so goes the conversation, profoundly.

Lena talks with her hands, politics personalized. Her hands, strong long bones that shadow her mind. Tension because she can't articulate sex with a shot glass in her hand; a pause because she can't explain why she loves an asshole except to keep the cigarette burning.

Her hands gesture like a net, wind, and gravity inverts. Smoke is vodka rising from between her fingers. With the Icon propped on the table beside her, this mise-en-scene is radical.

With Lena an intimacy grows through the summer's silence. One summer night on the swings in the park, dark, empty, they pour out their confessions. Moments, clear like Russian vodka, evaporate.

No words, just the remnants of them in sand beneath the swings. And the time it takes to get the memory right, a process traced with toes and heels.

Love might be blind, but love prospers deaf: not what's said, but trusting someone hears.

Mother Mary, hear our prayer.

[ii]

Summer, moving into the fall, recycles spring days, classes again. Lovers circle the block, cycling still, intimate gestures, inside jokes, confessions, arguments. Love: a secret, shared, bonding them.

She feels like a monkey in a game which has no middle, just an outside, teased. Who wants love, anyway? No one speaks it. It doesn't mean anything.

But silent, it burns, a circle of thought, desire: a foreign letter on your tongue. Once in a blue moon.

The moon in October after the deathless summer. It is truly blue, on the sidewalk, the grass even. Where Christophe stands, mulching the grass with his feet, hesitating.

She is blue, graced by moon, and speaking her confession. He's standing there, embarrassed. As if this were foreign. Maybe English has vanished from his head. What is this? It's love, idiot!

Unfortunately, she can't use the word. It doesn't mean what she feels; it's not obscene. What she feels is not vague, but she speaks this way. Obscure references to time and pigeons. He should understand. Lovers have that kind of intimacy.

Already too late. Love turns into the moon, a lunar smile, blue, speechless.

[iii]

Love and pain. A couple that won't divorce though their relationship is plainly destructive, and after all this time just trite. They should know better by now. They should have learned the first time round: all the seconds and tenths are self-indulgent. It's adolescent to indulge.

Keep your indulgence secret.

Love is a secret, the way grapes are fruit. A simple analogy, if strange. But grapes make wine, and mouths go crazy for gossip. Once you start you get hooked. Whoever thought you could get so high on other people's pain and idiocy?

Some love to keep a secret. It hurts to know what others don't. The pleasure of denial. Some prefer the way it teases them, a thing to fondle till they can't anymore. Heavy foreplay.

Some are more altruistic: inform you for your own good. Grapes are fruit and there's no secret to love. Are they moved by love?

Be still. Be still. Dear Angels show me still.

[iv]

"I have a confession," Natalie says, stirring her coffee, that sheepish smile, then she pats her chest as if to scold the Pre-Raphaelite there. "I've been seeing Christophe, off and on since spring..." X would like to absolve her. She knows a blue moon, love. Natalie and Christophe, there's an image of rabbits. "How's it going?" "Oh, he bores the crap out of me." True? Or her way of loosening the knife?

"We talked about you." The knife, that is. What did you say? She wants to know. The craving sickens her. When? Before or after? While you drank and smoked, or in passing, at the depanneur?

"He thinks you're a nice person." Nice? "Likes your company." So, there was no Ex. Christophe's lie. All the time it was just this. The beast.

"Listen. You have a tendency to melodrama. Sometimes it's endearing, but it gets tiring, you know." Is this what you discussed? I bet you didn't need wine to keep you laughing. Discussion or dissection? Was the operation slow or fast? How long before you found the heart was different from a grape? "For your own good, I'm telling you. I care about you. You look so sad these days." Do you love me? Did you love me this summer?

X has to think quickly. The summer according to this confession. Drinking wine and death by chocolate cake. Then she's sick.

Who gives a shit about men! But this! This was a friend.

Glass shattering (love), somewhere outside. Glass of a window? A bottle? A Mirror? Nearby, far away? X can't tell.

MYSTERY

What is knowable? Streetlight, sunlight, moonlight, lamps. Birds fly and mice crawl. Homes shelter bodies, and bodies need food to move. We move in our dreams as bodiless eyes. Mirrors don't lie.

What is knowable? Cause and effect. Glass explodes (shock) and makes a mess. Two months later a forgotten sliver beds in flesh.

What is knowable? Blood from a cut. Living and death. And love? An angio tongue on the french "r": fragile as glass. (Do mirrors lie?)

What is knowable? Summer becomes fall becomes winter. Seasons come in that order, in any language, anywhere, otherwise, nothing to trust. (In our dreams we walk with eyes.)

She becomes obsessed with cracks, when she walks, stepping over cracks. A childhood superstition (break your mother's back) which has also become a sound punctuating revelation. And as winter's shadows lengthen, birds crawl and mice loom, gigantic. Hell beds into her consciousness.

What is knowable? That it is a mystery how X survives what comes; that I will be conceived, much less born at all. Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee...

Canto I - The Body

[i]

Skin of brick, blood of mortar, the body of an apartment housing bodies. The body housing the mind. X, awake before dawn, sits at the window looking onto the street. Reality is solid, she insists, stone, concrete, the triplex over there in streetlight.

But that amber light quivers and shadows thin as knives disappear like smoke into air. She breathes, she can't breathe. Fires are consuming all the oxygen and excreting some disease.

A burning on the skin, in her nostrils, throat, lungs: she feels this and chokes. She must protect her skin, her skin feels too thin. She realizes she has not been breathing. She tries. She heaves.

How do people breathe? she wonders. (How do you forget to breathe?)

The world, cities, apartments; houses within houses of oxygen. Her lungs won't process oxygen. Is it a problem with these homes, or that her lungs are caving in? Unless it's all in the mind.

Disease spreads, breeding in every shadow, crack. The triplex across the street is rotting from the mortar inwards (dreams.) It's dying (eyes.) And it's only 5 am.

[ii]

Solid matter: precarious as electricity in a light switch, or the truth in a confession. What is said, and what remains unspoken. Silence is false: a surface of lies. And then the moments of lucidity come.

By not listening to hunger she has silenced it. By not eating she has shrunk, become vulnerable. She forgets to remember to eat. She remembers: body begins in the mind.

She thinks her problem is the house which is too dark. The basement, damp, gives her chills. Four men, together, are noisy as a school-yard of boys. She becomes hysterical about the stereo level. But she can't speak and oxygen is scarce, scarce enough so that she's smoking less.

Without oxygen she can barely think. How much do they know? They must know. How long have they known about Natalie and Christophe? Knowing and watching X. Now, anything she does or says may be used to fuel gossip: what moves like fire between all these mouths, through telephone wires, wine. Laughter: the excrement.

She prays for peace: a home where there are no ears in the walls straining to know details of idiocy, (love.) She prays for a home full of light, all her own with the air to pray, the space to contemplate the mystery of body, angels, God. Where is God?

How prayers are answered: unknowable.

[iii]

The perfect home. A miracle.

Greg's friend decides to move to England: X takes the chance to sublet his large Jeanne Mance 2 1/2. This apartment is the inversion of the l'Esplanade home: light, bright, third floor, quiet.

She will be alone to contemplate mysteries. The four men she lived with, close as brothers, will become like strangers, already unknowable.

"What you've done can't easily be forgiven." Atone. What have I done that's so criminal? Turned down the stereo? Not laughed at stupid jokes? (How you cringe when John laughs too loud, the way you leave without a word, never smile, hide in your room with the door closed, don't talk, don't eat.)

Maybe they worry for her, but she can look after herself. Maybe they're pissed off, but she has done no wrong, she has nothing to confess.

Within months everyone else she has known will become strangers. Now she crosses the street to avoid saying hi; in two months they will avoid her.

Or maybe they won't recognize her, the way she will have shrunk. Or maybe she's become invisible? Just as well. Only Lena will make the effort to call, then less, then not at all.

Why? asks Lena, in X's dreams, in her mind's eye.

[iv]

Lena's fine strong hands, expressive as features of a face, are, for X, expressions of violence. Fingers pluck the daisy, hardy weed, fondle round the white bloom thoughtfully, then tear each petal (he loves me, he loves me not.) What's left? A bald stalk and scraps of an answer you can't trust.

Ghosts of dead daisies haunt her conversations with Lena. And this is the image of all thought: destruction. Take apart to find the truth. What is the truth? That you can't put it together again?

Though she cares for Lena, (does she love her, has she ever loved?) she can't reconcile those hands. They talk too loud, try too hard. Are harsh.

What can she say? Her lungs feel like drums of petrified flesh. She's fixated on weeds. Talking has become a weed she might kill. So she offers no flowers.

Instead she walks, searching for those weeds that grow in sidewalks, from the cracks.

The mystery of love.

November: month of the dead.

Within days X is moving. It could be spring for the gentle light through mist, like the day she met Christophe, except leaves crowding gutters have that sweetly rotting smell: death.

She reads about genre, and chooses to write an essay on Mystery: **The Name of the Rose**. From her window she contemplates the street and hours disappear.

X's world recedes as a three dimensional Chagall, vivid, dynamic, and complex; stone, flesh, and vegetation. That woman's face contorts with the agony of speech, this couple walks, twin waves after lightning, quivering. The tree is a hand, crippled from disease, in the last fits of death.

How do people wake, day after day? Why do they? On this street Hasidic Jews: here for a century, for centuries elsewhere. Does God live here?

The world is a huge canvas of vulnerability. How can she translate it?

Days, even when it rains, are fine. She is alone, but not lonely. Moonlight and in all the rooms, lamp-light through the nights, because, in this home of inversion, birds crawl and dreams... before dreams, lucidity.

[vi]

Most vulnerable is the head: body, but also mind. The face: what masks (lies) more than it tells (confessed), except the eyes, windows to the inside. If skin is gone, then what's left? The skeleton. No, that's death. (Inversion.) The exoskeleton.

She paints portraits, miniatures. She paints women, faces of bluish glass, their mouths, lips, cheekbones, noses, brows, moulded like stained-glass.

Serene forehead reflecting mauve and azure sunset, below this, eyes stare with contempt.

Storm clouds agonizing left temple to right jaw, above this cobalt sky. The only life, fear in the eyes.

Rain on the brow, in the arched eyebrows, pooling in depressions below the eyes: eyes focused on the unknowable; breathless.

Restless sleep beneath clear blue skies, and cornering the right eye, blood where the glass is cracking.

Canto II - Mind

[i]

(In your dreams you move with eyes.)

She is with Christophe. His face is stone, a mask. (Maybe not him at all.) As he leaves their house (dreams) she screams "So take my heart, see if I care. At least I have my pigeons!" Her hands round his ankles, like a child, (like she used to take her father's as a kid), dragged down the hall, trailing pigeons wrapped with pink ribbons. "Don't leave the pigeons, Christophe. I can't feed them."

He's gone. X is watching the woman, who she was, who she is not. (The nightmare.) A small woman shaking in a corner, in the half dark. Get out! But she can't scream. A smell of dying. Shadows nudge her, she doesn't move. She speaks---

X wakes shaking, sweating, and cold. (Be still.) The smell of pigeons' moulting feathers. (Be still.) Who was she? Christophe's Ex? And she can sense this woman still. (The dead.) What do they want? (The dead.)

Unknowable: Was Christophe's Ex a lie? Without the Ex where was his confusion? Unless there was no confusion. Christophe's ruthless mask of stone. (And Natalie? She can't think of Natalie.)

She begins crying. Why? She doesn't know why.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee... Pray for us sinners. Pray for us. St. Michael, the Archangel...

[ii]

Dreams. Mirror of the id, or the collective unconscious; a metaphorical language for the eyes. Shadows, not real, they say.

Nightmares: when dreams invert. When shadows move in the opposite direction: through your eyes, your body, become body and stink your room, touch you and burn.

What would they say? Freud? Jung? Edgar Cayce, or the mystics?

Goblin in the half light of the room, gibbering at her. Sometimes total strangers who bring her roses, and she is torn between ordering them out, and being loved. Her nights come, invectives through her mind. Terror: a tactile intimacy with the unknowable.

How would they interpret this? The pit beside her, in her bed. Would they believe what she feels? The gaping hole: her sheets absent at the edge of some depth, centuries deep. The turmoil of those depths. The hand from turmoil. It grips hers. The voice. "I will never forgive!"

Hate from the bowels of the earth is a vortex of fire. (Is this the core of Montreal?)

Would they laugh? That in sleep you find that the entrance to a medieval hell is in the basement of your triplex.

Saint Michael, the Archangel, defend us in the night, the battle. Be our safeguard against wickedness... the snares of wicked minds... snares of the night... fight with us.. the power of God...

[iii]

Evil. She knows evil: dark, hating, an unforgiving hand which burns. A voice. In her dream, in her head?
Beside her, in her bed? Who could sleep with this?

Insomnia: and days come dream-like, sounds, mysterious as the night, nightmarish.

The Name of the Rose is a dark book, a labyrinth of books and knowledge. The name of the Rose is a mystery. Death comes from knowledge. Brothers are dying mysteriously. X hears sounds. Their mystery. The plaster inside the wall. But what's that tapping over there? A mouse?

How does evil move? From dreams. Invisible in this book.

It's just a bloody mouse, idiot!

The name lurks, the unsaid. Brothers die. This is the story of the book of a book of a labyrinth of books. Each corpse has ink stained thumbs and tongues. Are words poison? Just a mystery book.

Knowable: white sheets stained with hellish thoughts-- And where is God? Because she asks (you shall receive) she dreams...

[iv]

Dream as gift, the dream of giving.

The eighth room of a 7 1/2: floor cemented granite like a metro, but cracked. From the ragged lines flowers grow, forget-me-nots. Mountain flower, forgotten by Mont Royal. In the dream she knows this. She puts them in a glass box.

Led by a nun named Clara (Saint or wish?) through the city's marrow, ancient and forgotten tunnels beneath Mont Royal: from the Oratory to Parc and Des Pins.

She arrives at a circular space. Just like Victoria metro, she thinks, in her dream. Light from the ceiling echoes like sound, rebounding between walls and floor. She walks into the light, embraced. It takes her hands, the colour in her hands. Then she is blind. For a long time or short, she has no eyes, no body, just unknowable dreams.

She wakes and the glass box is in her hands, untouched, except the flowers are gone.

Dawn when she wakes, singing from the marrow of Montreal: her head must be shining for all the brilliance around her. And she knows the black stuff fades to nothing in the light. Lucidity.

The Name of the Rose remains a mystery, unfinished as the first snow storm descends, confounding eyes, ears, nose, the tongue.

[v]

X has no one to speak with, no language to speak, no comprehension.

She wanders through neighbourhoods. Greek, Portuguese, English, French, Italian: languages indiscernible from bird chatter.

And sound has another dimension. Christmas carols along Mont Royal: not in the streets but in her head (bodiless eyes.) Unless she is not real, but a figment of light on a screen, part of the crowd walking the streets being watched (in our dreams) by a thousand eyes.

Who's watching? What do they see? A mystery film: a film of mystery. The presence in the absence of Christ? If she knew who the stars were she'd follow them. They might lead her to midnight mass: adoration of a mysterious birth.

The audience will leave to put their turkey in the oven, or if they're Italian, like her family, they'll have their dinner tonight. (Christmas eve.) Is it? Days disappeared. How?---

Screech of some giant rodent: far away the cry of birds, crows. She stops, focuses. Not rats, but cars streaming up St. Laurent. A beam of light on her leg. Horns not crows. The bumper of a Honda inches from her knee. Panic. She's crossed the red light. Four days to Christmas.

She's losing it, she thinks. It's the house, she thinks. She decides to move from Jeanne Mance when she gets back from her holidays in Toronto.

Canto III - Mirrors

[i]

By the time she arrives in Toronto for the holidays, she has very little to say, except to her mother who understands. Her mother's concern, "No, you're not going crazy. Come home. Move back to Toronto."

Home. Her father's house, full of memories, as if he were the guardian of her childhood. And he is very happy she's home until she tells him, I failed the course on genre. The quiet that descends used to terrify her as a kid. Now, it's strangely comforting: knowable. Exhausted, she sleeps, black unconscious hours.

Christmas eve with her father, zio, zia, her cousins, Maria and Carla. Father boasts that X's sister got a job with CBC radio. His face shines, proud of one daughter, but the other daughter... he sips cognac quietly, disturbed. Christmas day with her mother, boxing day, another day.

X can't explain. She thinks the dead are out to get her. Or she could say, I have made a painting-- an untouched gessoed canvas, my dream of God. Would he understand? That even a stroke of paint would be an unforgiving hand?

St. Michael, the Archangel... Santa Clara, help us. To discern the shadows in ourselves, in the world. In the hour of our death. Our need. Pray. (Forgive.) For what? (Forgive.) Who? Santa Clara, guide me...

[ii]

... through the labyrinth of memory.

Conscious and unconscious. My memory is hers, her memory of remembering, selective images and those I select of events that have bearing on my birth.

My namesake, Santa Clara, unknowable. The uncorrupted flesh, untouchable. Her body, eight centuries old, lies on a slab of stone behind a wall of glass which the tourists smudge with their breath.

Her father asks, How do you know she is your saint? The nun is positive. He argues, In those times people lost their teeth at thirty. She is adamant, raising her voice. He is laughing while the nun's hands are raised to heaven. She sent the devil back to hell! You believe in the devil? People are staring. This is all happening in Italian. X and her sister, uncomprehending, don't know where to look.

And then siesta when Assisi is most beautiful; pink stone touched by sun. Through the window, scent of flowers, cry of birds, the nuns' songs from the convent below. X sleeps, listening.

Why Catholicism? asks her father, in those days preceding my birth. She can't articulate her dreams of the dead, of evil. She has visions of a raging nun.

Medieval, maybe; archaic, perhaps; regressive and reactionary in his opinion. But like the eighth and forgotten room, flowers bloom in a small medieval town-- lilies, iris, roses, mums you don't see, what you find in your dreams.

[iii]

Medieval darkness and ignorance. Knowledge and fear. Pictures for the peasants; manuscripts for the initiated priests. Even in Italy today the question is asked: how public is a library if you can't go into the stacks? But images are public, a part of daily life.

Stone, mosaics, gesso-painted murals. And light is precious, gold. The middle ages: three dimensions on a flat surface is unknowable. Shadows they couldn't see to paint.

What did they see? Figures outside of time's dimension: the Annunciation. Angels of mystery, an echo of what lives off the canvas, near the face of the earth without a face. A reality you don't have to touch to know is there; a saint you don't have to see to paint.

Renaissance. Paint emulates the human figure: (mirrors must lie.) Da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks*. A woman emerging from the dark, face lifted, half lit. Chiaroscuro. What haunts here? The way illumination (light) resists gravity (dark), life resists the canvas.

Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Botticelli. Fragile strokes of light provoke the eye to see further, feel deeper, mystery of shadow: discerning here from there, now from then.

I am here and X is there, that bitter winter, in the middle distance of the canvas which depicts her life. Above her is a dark cloud, low pressure of some chaos advancing on the moment of my conception. In contrast, sunlight seems brilliant behind her on the faded distance...

[iv]

X is six. August. They are a family, not yet divorced. Somewhere south of Sienna the train is delayed, train tracks black against white gravel.

I see with X's eyes, this memory, the gravel, cracked edges running deep into the memory of a solid mass of rock. This image: the invisible part of her mother's cry when she fell backwards off the train.

Her mother slipped two discs, and cracked them, somewhere south of Sienna. "Dear God!" English words in the still heat of some small Italian town. Father, incoherent between English and Italian. Mother, whimpering like a child.

X runs to her mother's side. Get up, mommy, she wants to say, because mothers don't fall. Her mouth twists, eyes tear, turning to X, a whisper, "They're breaking my back..."

Years later, her mother doesn't remember saying this at all. What she remembers about that trip: "Mother Mary called to me, asked me for my prayers."

Yesterday, before I was born, her mother told X, "I've been praying for you to Mother Mary for twenty years now."

Why Catholicism? Mother Mary, X said, not knowing that without these mothers I would not be here now. And the mystery she'll never know: the moment I am conceived in the silence she approaches.

As 1990 ends X knows only that the new year is unknowable, and if the dead are out to get her, they'll find her wherever she sleeps.

[v]

New Year's day, she wakes in her 2 1/2 to the covers thrown sometime in half sleep. The cold has spread deep inside, and she's forgotten what it's like to feel the sun, to sweat, that there is such a thing as summer.

A season between birth and death, heat. For X these months mirror the image of mother and infant.

August on l'Esplanade (another world.) The backyard next door where the child sat, shaded by the sunflower. Six feet high, at least, a golden face bending in adoration of the child who was oblivious to everything but keeping the cat in her arms.

"I love you my little kitty" she sang. "Love me too. Love me true. So true you are my Jesus, my little baby Jesus. You will never die."

The cat ran away. Got sick of all the ribbons and coddling. Then the sunflower lost petals, like teeth, released seeds, like tears, and turned its face to hide its dying.

Hail Mary... Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death. the hour of our need. our death. need.

SILENT

Her painting of silence is one colour: Ochre, mixed with white so as not to waste extravagance.

The hours of work are not a waste, this giving of herself to the canvas, because she finds herself in it, like a mirror.

Hunger: the careful erosion of want from need. Breathing problems: what curled her strokes, ochre to the very edges. Winter storms: thick coats on the urban surface. And Montreal bitter winds and temperatures, what made the surface crack.

Silence of her work. And the canvas responds, a silence she doesn't hear.

Canto I

[i]

X speaks: Here
Giant bright, Giant light
take this from my brush -

Sunflower responds: If I'd had hands to bust

glass. I'd have freed my raging neighbours too. We, the stars imprisoned in the tower, a prison made of glass. Windows everywhere you looked, wired like a net.

If I'd had those hands... like a Moses...But I'm no prophet no man of God. Somehow, glass just crumbled and wiring fell

somehow. Now I am located somewhere in my waiting, sand of shore or arid plain, far below my constellating neighbours. They mock me.

If I see them now it must be the echo of their death. I was one of them. Did I fall? Am I dead? No, the part of me that matters is alive, the part

which feeds these pigeons my tears. These seven pigeons which followed me here,

hear my prayer

[ii]

Dear flower, my
Giant ochre, my sunflower, dry my tongue
of hunger's rage. Still life, show me still

*I don't forget you, my child, no matter what they tried to do. Not where I found you, not even in the tower
of glass where they kept me. Towers*

*aren't safe. You were young. There were people there to rescue you. When you're older, you might be
alone, with no one to verify, no proof -*

*and they'll decide what's best for you, for your fragile condition. Fragile, like stained-glass, losing pieces,
letting winter in.*

Yes, when you're older, old enough, the only way to leave the tower is to die, or, do as I did...

*To survive in a tower is to listen to stars. Carefully. They sing like sirens, they'll catch you, wedge you
between a bed and a hard place. Don't fall for this...*

*Do as I did, as Odysseus. Hold the chains close against their song. The ocean always moves, takes you on
the waves to other shores*

these towers, rubble where you walk.

Hear me...

[iii]

Breathing in no gravity is easier, my sunflower, my
source of oxygen. Can I live like you
a sun, needing only water, rooted
to the earth?

They wouldn't call me mother in the Tower. I would have believed them, but they didn't know

about you. I would have argued but

*poppies seemed to grow and die in my mouth. I couldn't speak. I wouldn't eat. So they kept me and called
me princess.*

*Eat your peas, at least! Barely heated in the dungeons, and by slow ascent, cooled. Cold peas. As if this
were a treat. Princess, they said, and laughed.*

*I would have laughed with them, if they'd taken the poppy from my mouth. I'd have laughed even without
a heart.*

I never cared for peas. I didn't care how their peas arrived. I had become stars; forgotten hunger.

[iv]

I was starlight when all they could see was Princess, or other things. Because I couldn't speak, cats came to mind.

"No cat's got her tongue. She's the mistress, with those eyes. Eyes of a witch." They said and laughed. If I'd said I'm Jezebel would they have laughed?

Would I have had to explain how the man I loved called me Jezebel? Could I explain this, what I barely understood? That it sounded like my name and I was in love.

What did they know? Virgin? Slut? They said I had no child. Imagination, hysteria. Vaguely I remember I was not well. Very vaguely

winter began to clutch for itself, and bleed into gutters. Summer. I don't remember. Nothing to remember: blackness, the stage between scenes, dreams...

I'm prying open a basement window of a school. My fingers are bleeding, but the pigeon that flew in through an open window is trapped. Bound to die. I had to do something, anything, then

cops are twisting my arms. I'm screaming "help my child." Pigeon, I meant, but I forgot the word. I can understand how it didn't sound so good.

In the tower the first thing they do is shove a poppy in my mouth. When I wake it's dark. I don't know where I am.

[v]

Less is enough, my Giant bright, this skin
my sacrifice, this half of me is you (and winter comes
half-sleep like half the truth, the dark-side
dreamless)

This is where I find you. The tower of Hotel Dieu. Do you remember?

You reach to me, delirious from fever. Oh, how I want to explain. But there's a poppy in my mouth

and inside, beneath my breast, I feel nothing. I figure, they've taken out my heart.

*Your face, your lips, what childhood whispered there, fevered movements of your hand, white knuckles,
fingers and the wrinkled sheets*

like the man I loved. And I knew - you were not my imagination!

"Don't be afraid" I said. Did you hear? Did I speak? Long before I felt it I was loving you.

Don't be afraid.

*Because there was nothing they could do to hurt you. And whatever they might do to me would never
change the truth.*

Canto II

[i]

I woke to the sound of hunger: pigeons at the window.

They had knocked me out, promising all the bad dreams were done, soon I'd be home.

Here was my home. Green walls, a smell of antiseptic urine, shiny metal, and peas cold enough to be re-tinned. Windows everywhere, wired, as if they needed this support. The tower.

I kept silence close. They brought me food I didn't eat. "Ah, don't forget, she's the princess from Hotel Dieu." Give me salt, I would have said,

a grain from each sea, but I had a poppy in my mouth.

I lay there shivering and didn't care. Pigeons cooed at the window. Do you know? I asked silently. Their wings disturbed the glass.

My home where I lived craving water, hording salt. Thirst and thirsting eyes. The tower where I sat and watched where tears might go;

what stained the glass. glistened on a chain, followed the vein of a leaf, a wrist, what would spill, the waste.

[ii]

Take that! You piece of shit, you
dung heap shot with hail, you --- be still!
Forgive me, sunflower, that part was me

*In the distance the cross hovers, electric lights, lake power, water. Thirst. And in the shape, thirsting arms,
a face from a body rooted to the earth and wanting*

*only heaven: stars. I look and find my prison. Cassiopeia of my mind. Their princess, this body in the tower,
is dying.*

*For centuries, sucking poppies, smelling laundered nurses moving like gazelles, hearing how they clucked
when someone pissed their bed. I think they liked me, my*

*silence, what they thought were princess airs. Perhaps they were impressed that a mad woman could have
dignity, like Anastasia maybe.*

*They didn't know about you. That my condition was never hysteria, in fact, was amnesia's antithesis:
memory.*

*For breaking a promise the gods took my child from me then turned me into a basket, an apple-nest, in the
sky, to remember eternally; to be*

eternally visible, and when I'm up-side-down, remembered as the fool...

These were my thoughts as I waited, dying.

[iii]

Let me take it back, erase
carefully, what you need: neck, face, teeth, brain. Too much brain
there's your problem
erase

*I lived as five brilliant suns, that huge. It helped me to think this way. This way days were insignificant.
Hours, nothing more than poppies turning blue.*

*I would have told them, the gazelles, the one gazelle with short dark hair and sad eyes. I think she would
have understood and laughed. How I had a star*

*for a crown, it burned. Two for hands, two for feet, to show me how I didn't move at night. A black hole
where my heart was, ribs caging absence for the princess*

*to die in. The birds lived. With their tails they wrote their hunger on the window. Hunger. It meant nothing
to me But knowing them, I remembered you.*

*I fed them food left at the princess' feet: scraps of Wonder bread for their meal, cold peas for dessert. They
didn't like dessert.*

*And I saved the packets of salt. Seven grains a day to aid hydration. I fed the pigeons when all I wanted
to do was give them tears. But this prison was the vacuum where*

tears evaporated faster than the speed of light.

[iv]

problems breathing in Life Drawing, dear Sunflower.
Picasso's blue took my breath, I stained my hands.
So there, I can only hurt you with these hands.

*I watched strangers dying with me, breathed their stellar dust. Hydra worked her furnace, raging
intermittently through the day and night. Perseus was there, he had*

*seen Medusa. Orion chased the Pleiades, even in his sleep, until they took his weapon and wrapped his belt
round his wrists. Even so, the Pleiades kept their distance,*

a haze of sisterhood whispering amongst themselves, plotting to rescue their sister, wife of Sisyphus.

The stars were generally quiet, sometimes a cry

*for euthanasia. Bears slept, dogs roamed, wild cats peered into your eyes then left, and the gazelles came,
punctual as clock-work, and fast as tiny rays of light*

poppies appeared in my mouth. Purple visions in the hours it took to suck red to blue. Thirsty all the time.

I watched rain drip from leaves, like tears. I could have drooled.

[v]

skin, bruises linked to some forgotten touch... here
let me brush away the accident...let this stroke now
be your memory

*For a while Andromeda is my neighbour. I believe she is you. At first I watch you, how you shift your
chains for comfort, the chains of the bed, the blanket and their corners. Your*

*sweat shines sapphire where the links touch skin. I hear your dreams, cutting and grinding, a cry, like a
star straining from stone.*

*To hold you. To comfort you. Thoughts I stop because I am scared. Scared I've put you there, somehow.
Scared to touch you*

*and feel nothing. So I turn from you, avoid you. And then one day only your chains are there. It wasn't you,
I think with thanks. Or*

maybe no one was ever there.

Then all my five suns rage.

They stuff three poppies in my mouth and wrap me in the softest chains.

Canto III

[i]

here, Giant, the oatmeal muffin is yours, the apple
has a bruise. I'll eat around the bruise. And you'll need
a background to stand against. What is enough?

*Hunger is my childhood: my grandmother's story of tyranny, the tyrant hunger, escape from tyranny and
hunger still, but at least the freedom to pray. Eat,*

says grandma, thousands die. I wouldn't eat. To know hunger.

*My mother's because the dead feel hunger, I think. Mine, because I am her daughter Or, my
grandmother's? I drink tea for dinner*

to still what hurts: memory, my body, the fact I have no mother. Give me back my mother! I pray.

*But as a child I have grandma. She reads the word of God, feeds me food and stories, and then the reading
of the tea. Leaves, tomorrow mapped in my cup. What is true by being said, then proven by what will come.*

*I mimic her, a mirror, watching in the cup of tea, stars. Intently, with difficulty, without irony, I read a
prophecy: to be a mother for God. I cross my heart.*

*Which came first? God's word, or man's shadow? God's plan, or man's map? Tea? Or reading of the tea?
Hope or memory? Mother? Or the child who calls?*

Would you ever call me mother?

[ii]

If only

I could hear Picasso's depth, or touch you with
Van Gogh's passion, or if I could give you dreams
like Chagall. But my fathers don't know you as I do, if I do.

*Once I sewed silk, and sometimes flesh: a seamstress for the stage. There I met your father. My memories
are like fabric, textures, patterns.*

*The Bogart coat he always wore, looking for his Casablanca; the exile where he could be a man. And from
the cuffs, his wrist, his hand.*

He visits me here, in this universe, unable to come to terms with

*the centuries of my sentence. Always in the dusk, when the sun strains behind the mountain, I see his hand
reaching, the purple clouds his sheets of pain. He is*

damp from dreams, stained across his chest, shadow ribs, shallow as his breath: beneath this, dreams

*of a night he wants to forget: his palms gathering red and wordless scripture from his wrist -- What the
doctors edited. Blue veins and black blood where the sutures threaded his flesh. I see*

*the man I can't know, and the number of times he watched Casablanca; and the broken record of his need;
a hunger
he wanted to forget.*

[iii]

Dear giant: my skin without nerves
my still life of childhood
skin stretched on adult bone

*I don't forget you. I worry for you: that you'll go hungry and it will hurt you. I feed the pigeons and hope,
a mother feeds you.*

Remember this. In the tower

they like to wash your brain like sheets, show you, it was just a dream. They thought they knew

But some things you remember. No matter what. Sometimes you can't be sure.

*Sometimes you forget the day as dream. Or live a day like dream, or live memory. Or memory so real, was
just a dream.*

*Some dreams come true. Some dreams, like stars, mock you. And the other dreams: the ones that help you
live.*

*Memory/dream, insubstantial matter, starlight. Behind them the angels move, sometimes reaching through,
touching you. The tower where they couldn't see*

*the chances are so few: to love your mother, to know your father. Remember
what I don't forget.*

[iv]

Dawn. I am awake listening to the birds shuffle, coo, their noises of hunger. I am always awake in the tower. A star doesn't sleep.

When your father wakes beside me, the ghost of him the morning after. It's dust I feel on the poppies on my lips.

his eyes on me. Then he's gone, quietly.

Gone, with the sweat of a wolf. Gone, like an animal, he forgets about Bogart, that Bogart wears a coat. He forgets his coat.

The body, the eyes: this might have been a star mocking me, or Orion in his dreams. Rape happens here, as it does anywhere, if you gain consciousness. If you can...

Except I heard them, him and his friend on the street. Howya doin. Off to work. Where you been? "Just escaped from a witch's den."

They're too far away, laughing. Princess Tower! I want to scream. But who would hear me, here, in this memory like a dream?

[v]

Did I lose all sense of humour? Did I expect too much? Even the tone of the voice which says "the woman I love."

*I loved your father, his silence. He comes through memory like a Moses, parting grass high as his knees
the way he came onto the mountain where I lay, reading stars by moonlight. The living man, towering above
me, putting out the stars. And all he said was Hi.*

*My Moses, whose heart was tuned so keenly, the truth died on his lips. Though he admitted once, he was
ashamed of his accent. The dark, mediterranean man.*

*Your father's childhood: Casablanca days learning how to be American, and nights haunted by a dream
that God was calling him. A priest. A saint. Or even*

*a leader to the promised land, another world where accent and skin colour don't matter. By the time I met
him he was*

*collecting sins to see how much could be forgiven. Laughing, he said, a saint should know these things, if
he is Canadian, today.*

But his accent

*wavered, and he would pause, staring like the windows of a vacant bar. He was scared that I was his Elsa
or his Aaron. Betraying them was what he feared.*

Canto IV

[i]

Sunflower, my still life, you are
my life, my place of still, the centre of my days. You are
my paradise if only I could
find you from here.

*All life begins in darkness, so anticipating death. And darkness, what is it, but like the night waiting for
another day to break.*

*The fatal night I drink a memory of hunger. My thoughts, his silence, spread
through the dingy room to*

the window's cracked pane and touch the humid dusk.

By this window light, diffused, dim, I watch his silences, shadow of a misplaced Bogart on the wall. Jez

he says. Atlantic floods the room, above, a star falls -

plaster from the ceiling cracking longer, because of a leak in the toilet pipes -

my grandmother's premonition on the ship when a star fell behind her daughter's head -

*winded, I look up and read what shows on the top of my head:
stardust of some faulty thinking.*

(ii)

His hand lifts to brush his hair of plaster dust; then to press his forehead, to rub away memory; or recollect something. The coat spills from his wrist. I see it:

where the razor made a fabric of flesh. Then he brings out the bag of courage from his coat.

He doesn't call it courage. It's stuff he breathes to forget. What he says, laughing. Breathe, he says.

I breathe. For an instant the window goes white. The dying light darkens. Then I am myself, almost. What am I with these new lungs, like armour? I feel nothing

but the wind through the cracked pain, beyond that the city cracked with streets and lights. I feel like glass. I feel the glass. Distantly

a voice: a dream.

I turn and see a man whose eyes are completely vacant, after Elsa's left, and the plane is circling back because the camera and action have died,

when there's nothing left but mist, idle hands and

*loose stitches
of his costume.*

[iii]

A touch to bring him back from Casablanca, out of exile, if not for him to see me, then to tell him about the voice. It will give you a new hand. Does he hear?

He reaches to me, touches me, as if I am a figment of light: a film star incarnate, his first and true love in his arms. What Bogart would never do.

The stars showered on us that night and I drank their dust with tea, hungrily.

I dreamed I drank the stars swirling in a deep universal cup, rewriting my simple childhood promise To be a living mother to my child.

So you were conceived, that night, in me.

Here, let me change the outline of your beauty
in my memory: O'Keefe's
wild yellow eye in her New Mexico sky: what
my awkward hand makes trite.

Here,
I'll fill the world with all of you
to the corners, beyond the edge

[iv]

*Here I lie as Cassiopeia, and Perseus mocks me with his eyes, the only thing of him that moves in starlight.
He recognizes me*

*as someone else: Medusa. No, I want to scream, I'm Jezebel. And language is a ruse. The things you say
and how: tone, "Just escaped from a witch's den," tempo,*

*hesitation. Did he know I heard? Did he suspect I refused to speak to reflect him and so torment him? By
the end*

*he had managed to hesitate even in silence. By turns he was restless, tormented, peevish, sullen, then finally,
just scared.*

*He left like a hunting animal, hunted. He left his coat even; in the pocket, courage. Had he had enough of
Bogart's silence? Did he want to give up courage, his cynicism in a bag?*

*He ran, scared God would get him for his disrespect, punish him as God did Moses. Because Moses lost
his temper once*

*too often, and God condemned him never to set foot in the Promised land. But Moses had God and was
loved because of Aaron, and Bogart loved because of Elsa.*

And so he ran, knowing he had betrayed both God and Bogart in me.

[v]

I wear his coat after he leaves. Why? To smell him, his flesh. To know why he wanted to murder himself.

Because he forgets his courage I use it all. Waste is not good, like grandma always said. I live with the stars: movie stars, or just the movies.

Nightmare alleys, a thousand intersecting in one place, or maybe the same alley a thousand times. The place

where I pass out on a bed someone has dumped. Beneath the mattress shivers of glass. As if someone tried to throw away the nightmare and spread it everywhere.

I climb a tower and find peace: a woman in her room, working thread with a tiny hook, tiny as a needle. Her lace spreads, a history of days, from her lap

onto the floor. Flowers blooming, more than that, condensation of angels' breath. Paradise.

**My giant Sun, is this real? I see you bloom and multiply,
the only life in this field of night, SUNS -- a miracle.**

Paradise. Scent of flower and the only sound: thread whispering through her hands. I see a rose withered.

I reach to pluck it. The lace explodes. I run. Pass out on the bed, then wake to a pigeon dancing on the shivered nightmare. In the glass, sun shivers.

And I wake again. I'm bunked by glass: the nightmare's real. Lace is wire and the rose is this poppy, its torn petals on my lips.

*redder than lips, nostalgia of a woman's mouth, mocking
skins of the paradise fruit.*

[vi]

Voices. "Whore! Slut! You seduced him, you tramp! Witch! He was right if only he knew! Deserve what you get. Go to hell." Silence.

What I hear when winter returns, clawing at the windows of this tower, my hell. Winter offers to rescue me but I don't go, remembering. Instead

I scream back: "If I was Jezebel then he was Dracula who bled my name of meaning."

The birds are quiet, stars vacant. Is there nothing to say? Will no one laugh?

I ask "What will you do about the child?" Nearby a pigeon coos, reminding me, there is no child.

Because winter came, ice cold voices through the window into my abdomen. I wasn't a good hostess: no food, no warmth, no interest in their lies, accusations, their lives.

Then I gave birth to them; still born.

Six months. Enough for fingers even. Tiny. Curled. Blue as snow. She came too early, that month when winter rages

weaker: snow clutching for itself.

So I stay in hell. Hear me...

*this is enough, this mirrors
my silence*

Canto V

[i]

*The truth. I'm no star, mocking you, my child. I am a mother mocked by motherhood. So my story goes,
words*

what they disguise. My father never lived to know he was a father.

*I imagined my father loved her, my mother. I imagined, if I had to be a bastard, at least I was made with
love. I imagined.*

*But my mother's mother never said anymore than that he went to war and died, in the Atlantic. For a while
I wanted to go to the coast to find his bones.*

*I prayed. Then I began to doubt. Finally I stopped believing I was a bastard of love, that fathers meant
anything more than a cell of genes, that there was a God in all these things.*

*Because I knew my grandmother -- her voice, how it could bark then soften in mid-thought, her fierce eyes
scolding and laughing, sorrow which quivered*

where her lips met-- because of this I knew my mother loved him. And my mother's mother was

*panic-stricken that all young men going to war would say anything to be remembered And she remembered
the falling star.*

*So the omen finds meaning when my mother dies from a heart complication at my birth. A bad heart,
inherited from her mother, who died from a heart attack*

loving me as her daughter.

Water hourly, salted days, and poppies red to blue to red. So simply do they pass, these centuries in hell.

Hell has windows, wire like mesh, even a smaller pane of glass where I see myself watch myself seeing the world. In hell you see too much, even through the clouds, sheer as curtains.

The curtain shifted. Returns of a presidential assassination, an assassination, a trial. Other murders, fires, a jolly green giant. I saw a man land on the moon.

The curtain. Buildings rise, souffles of the rich and famous, and roads grow wider, stronger, fingernails forever.

Shifts. Revolutionary principles of body, earth. Faces breaking on the blast of terrorism, fingers bleeding off tourism, and the colour purple for spring lips.

I saw a man land on the moon, a shadow, a speck on the glass. Mail box bombs between love stories. The fall. Royal mounted police called to witness

a cultural revolution. State of Emergency

and a head of state hostage in a tower. Wondering about prisons and freedoms, I saw the memory of a flower burst.

and thought, that was hell too. There is no escape. How do we endure this?

[iii]

I endured. Why? There were many ways available. But to be simple, I endured because of you.

Because no matter how they treated the princess, I was Cassiopeia, immovable within the grid of glass, consuming salt and water. I saw

the routine bathing of her brain. How they tried repetitively to find something, not knowing how I hid, and hid you. They kept the princess half-nude, unarmed, as if they feared

she'd turn into a Queen and chop off all their heads. The dark gazelle would have laughed at this, the right way, with sad eyes.

No matter what they tried to do, they never found me nor you, my child.

You, who are not my daughter. You, lying hot and feverish in your sheets, could not compare to the winter-cold foetus I birthed. It is so simple to explain.

You reminded me of what everything was helping me to forget, the truth: I lost the other child, the child I wanted to love.

So I became the cluster they call Cassiopeia, the closest I could get to memory.

[iv]

And we the stars were dreams for those who were trying to survive. Like Sisyphus, who stops running for his rock, looks up at us and wishes he were his wife

with sisters here, free from rocks, sweat, labour. But he couldn't have figured it out: glass was processed rock, and we couldn't move. Sick of this eternal

dying, I turned from all the windows and closed my eyes.

My grandmother. On the porch, turned from me, touching the birch tree, October gold abounding. She is alive, her wide mouth open. She's laughing

when then I was running in stubby fields, sending love on postcards of Shediak lobsters, not calling because she'd hear my voice

choking on her love, old fashioned, grandma,

tea cups, leaves, superstition best left behind, and prophecy unutterable in the language of irony.

I watch how the hope of knowing my mother dies with her, my grandmother. It was then I began to realize I was surviving some kind of lie.

[vi]

I open my eyes. I suck my poppy bluer and ring for another. And water. Burning up with all these suns in me. The constellations shift.

A neighbour, a new one, comes into focus. I watch him putter in the universe, pause, clasp his hands, pass by my galaxies.

He watches at the window, looking in at the world. He asks me what I read I suck my poppy purple, turn a star

coily: I am made of human nerves. This feeling is what tells me, this is different. The first constellation I've heard reaching through space. Ether

is his voice. archaic, soft. Do I believe in mystery, light, or, perhaps, prophecy? I shift,

look at him. White hair springs from his head like a genius', a narrow face where one eye shines, unlike the other. Brilliance.

I watch him sip tea and bite into an apple. The sound of flesh and skin tearing and what trickles down his chin: a tear his tongue saves. I watch him:

my hunger in his mouth.

Giant suns, my flowers, take this apple
and its skin. I don't need it. I
need your oxygen. Call the angels, my giant, tell them
hear my prayer. Ask them,
Is this enough?

Canto VI

[i]

I didn't want to find my father.

*All these years safe without need: those years aching with the absence, prayers unanswered. And he arrives
speaks to me I am your father, Hear... my lamentations.*

*Stop! I want to say. But I am fixed in my galaxy, these planets, moons, and dust, all voiceless. Stop! if only
I could scream I can't How can I?*

*How could I? He was no constellation but a ghost. The ghost of a man who never knew me. Why didn't you
come before, I wanted to scream?*

How can I love you, a dead man and your ether voice? Prove to me you are my father.

And what proof did he give me? None that I could see, maybe

nebulae, radar, invisible impulse, because I listen. Then I am calling to my childhood, listen

*to our father we never knew. The man "who hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath," crying, oh how
solitary the city.*

*suffering and bereft. And God gave us riches and
we wasted them on vanity, and now the time is come. Then my father's tears come, and they are songs of
prayer: God, in all his mercy...*

[ii]

Before prayers my father sings his Song, and after prayers he sings of sorrow.

*And round the changing poppies in my mouth he shows me the stuff there as black matter in the galaxy
between us.*

*Elijah in the desert: an angel's banquet and his victory. And also
ancient things. Jacob's ladder and angels.*

They shadow you, you move them. See this way and you will find them.

*And then this: what I can't translate. Not if I had a thousand suns, not if I could ransom them for God's
gold: what he describes*

*beyond us, these little stars we are, the vaporous veils of Universe, in language of song, one sound a poem
a river spilling from the seams*

of days. I drink, but giant as I am what I drink is greater.

[iii]

They stuffed a poppy in my mouth, and there were things I forgot. When I woke I looked and my father's brilliance was gone. A shiver passed through my spine.

How could the universe have darkened in

days? a day? an hour? I looked for his apple, glass of tea. Nothing. But a smell of dried weeds, a memory of leaves. As if he'd vanished into winter and

winter was inside me.

Then a gazelle came flying by. "Tomorrow we are treating you, princess. We'll loosen that tongue soon enough, and get you right again. Maybe even happy for once, eh?"

She tried to pat me, but starlight side-stepped her fingers.

Now I lay me down to sleep. Giant Sunflower don't
abandon me. If I fall, catch me, call the angels to
protect me. I am yours

[iv]

Though I was slow, then, though my faculties were numb

*I was not dumb. The faint blinking, and even absence
of some stars. I'd seen
the tortured eyes of victims on these beds.*

He passed near as smell, tea Now, he said. He spoke: Enough, now go. I did.

*I escaped their methods of cleaning a princess' brain. Hydro cures
like salt baths.*

*I escaped the Cassiopeia of my mind, knowing the gods were wrong, despite
my guilt. How could they judge a mother when they*

*had no bodies, never fed their offspring with their body,
and what I never knew, childbirth, the infant at my breast.*

*I escaped these cruel gods, their immortality
which was heartless.*

*I escaped knowing I had no child, but as long as I lived
the promise was fulfilled. I could live with this irony
if I had a heart.*

They were too late: I was hungry.

Something... something here....

Canto VII

[i]

The moon, blue as petals on my lips, even shadowed. Through the window wires, like a scrim, the world is blue. Blue moon. Everything feels staged.

Father, help me. Grandma. Give me courage.

"When you left I cried, for years I cried and prayed for you. Silly and old-fashioned, this heart. Like you said, all I ever wanted was to suffer.

This is because I pray. In that silence you hear it all: Leala whose husband died of cancer, Kola, dead at ten because a man drove drunk, or Anna

whose husband goes with call girls. I pray, not for answers or for riches. But for the joy that comes in knowing these tears are heard. Remember this."

If I can't feel my heart, can it feel a prayer?

"You call this life? Devouring poppies picked from fields where people cry for the dead? Where is your heart?"

I hear...

This is not living, is it grandma? This is not enough.

"Enough!" - What. The ochre cracked. What does it mean?

What do you want? No. Need. Is it too late?

Three zucchini. Midnight, fridge to teeth

till one o'clock

The hour

[ii]

The net falls the way escape frees me. It falls over and beds into the land.

*Hydro wires, highways and autumn maples piecing out the fields
where six sisters labour, chained to the soil*

*by their hands. Harvesting salt. Salt
of the earth, of our days, of tears. Where is my heart? I ask.*

*One points to my escape. The man you love.
Sweat beads above my lip. Another reminds me*

*of a daughter's chains. I slip and skin the flesh of my heel.
Blood from a stone, from glass. That blood passed through the heart once.*

Then the first seizure: white fire across the eyes.

*The heart, says an older sister, was made for wounds, and the
salt-dirt made to heal. Another says: Better said as, We are earth.*

*One silent sister. Another: We are ashes of the stars. And the child says,
the heart's untouchable like crying stars.*

*Then they come: seizures from my abdomen, my back, up the back
of my eyes, white to black.*

*I wake on fire, beneath maples, pigeons, stars. I run
bleeding flames into the desert.*

[iii]

Try. Give like you gave to your sunflower.

Why bother, you can survive on this. Try. a piece

Chocolate. Taste it. Chocolate, chocolate - STOP!

I hate chocolate! That's the truth. Loving

was my lie.

Feed me no wanting.

All I ask. Let me rest

in what I know. Let me lie and breathe between these cracks,

behind them, my field of suns: my miracle.

MIRACLE

That I am writing this, my X, and you'll never know.

That in your winter silence, I was conceived. I grew, a new being, inside you, until your death, 1993. Two years you lived dying, and I was a mystery you never knew.

Beware of miracles you said, dying. What you whispered with your last breath. Then I was born. A miracle. Born to believe, knowing only your distrust, and nothing else except my need.

Last night I needed you. I reached to you. I have found you, here, in the darkest hour of prayers: past, present, future fused in words. This is the centre of time. It is still.

I meet you here, in this language of prayer. I speak, though you can't hear me.

My X, I answer you, even as you touch each rosary.

Canto I - Desert

[i]

Your obsession with finding the centre of still. Remember how it began?

The desert you entered when planes flew into Iraq. The desert of silence and of wordless prayers. Where you found a miracle, and heard something you would never understand. Something profound, before sound, like the voice of a miracle. And then the painting cracked.

A Montreal accident, the cracks. Accidents were everywhere; this scared you, scares you even now. (And you will paint only once in these two years.)

O'Keefe's still lives are not accidents; this intimidates you. Calla lilies, stilled by the canvas, but in the curves, shadows; a portrait of life. And more than that, the lily still lives in there, within the long gentle slopes of its life: a landscape.

Landscape of three zucchini. You didn't want to eat. You knew you had to eat. That hour surrounded you like the city: you ate into that hour and tasted how death was as easy as not eating, living the effort to chew.

And your obsession continues even now. The effort to paint is beyond you, like the city sprawling around you: accidents intersecting everywhere.

[ii]

Because you have left Montreal (what do I need with an English degree?) and are now living again in Toronto (what do I need?)

Dupont and Bathurst, summer sun dulled by thick humid air, sometimes the glare off a car, cars and people crawling, tired, while a man screams "The end of the world is here!" And two cars smash, fender to fender, glass. Summer 1991, people lose their jobs like winter mittens.

In your father's house you sleep, try to eat, and watch films, Tarchovsky's **Sacrifice**.

The U.S.S.R. dissolves August 1991, after the attempted assassination of Gorbachev. Miracles are this sudden you think (like accidents?) You pray for a job. "There are no jobs," consoles your mother. You pray, walk the streets and think, If I have little, I have enough: Sunflowers, family.

You try not to dwell on accidents: that sometimes breathing is an accident.

Lack of breath begins as a tingling in the hands, spreads into the head, a buzzing sound, then vision contracts.

You faint. Once on the bus. Twice on the subway. On St. Clair an eighty-year-old woman dies in the record heat, waiting to pick up her pension cheque. What is your fainting to this woman's death? What is your unemployment to families starving on Welfare, or no Welfare?

Remember? How you can't breathe.

[iii]

How do people breathe? You asked again and again. Still breathe? The grace of oxygen (breath of life); flowers' graceful offering (life.) The miracle: to breathe.

For two years your preoccupation; for those first eight months in Toronto, your only occupation. Unemployed in Toronto's jobless landscape, suffocated by Toronto's work ethic, you felt like the walking dead. To breathe was to be alive. Only in stillness could you live.

You learned to breathe, carefully, consciously, the way a child learns to speak. Hail Mary (today is now), Full of Grace (yesterday is when), the Lord is...

And you discovered again and again: days don't end, but circulate like blood through the body, heart, lungs: eternity in each breath. There is no tomorrow. Yes. This is the centre of still: peace.

The miracle: hours you watched the snow fall, breathing.

But what if (accidents)...? Your lungs contract. Panic. Dear Guardian Angels, help me. Dear Holy Spirit, Guide me. Mother Mary...

Eighteen months before my birth, you landed a part-time job; fourteen months before my birth, you began living with your sister. Miracles are sudden, you thought, accidents.

Remember this? How you spent months making prayers of thanks, moving plans, and understanding your boss.

[iv]

Your boss has vision, enough to be paid a high salary, to show everyone the difference between good and Art. She is on a mission (her vision) to navigate the Gallery out of debt.

Near the first of the month it's the Scylla and Charybdis. Debtors. Sweet as sugar she's saying, "We can't, give us a month, please, we had a flood." (A leak, in fact. No Christophe: the ultimate invention, economy.) Generally, tension about government funding, threat of cuts, etc. etc. etc. etc.

Your boss. Above her on the wall a photograph: some old battered fishing boat. The image you have wanted to paint for days: beneath a red bulb, a wooden boat disintegrating, slats splitting, uncurling. Light leaks through the cracks like tons of anaemic blood. Fatigue drowning in its emptiness.

Embarrassed, your boss asked "What are you looking at?" You wanted to ask, How do you wake in the morning? Etc. etc. Cancelling a well known painter's retrospective etc. etc. etc. landscapes are apolitical, trivial, not to mention etc. etc. etc..

After four hours of dangerous waters each day, you go directly home: your sanctuary, except when your sister's friend drops by: an ex-Catholic.

[v]

"What are you looking for? A reason for waking up? A reason to die?"

And then he starts his inquiry into the subject of the day: Newfoundland, homosexuality, patriarchy, the crusades, the Spanish inquisition, invasion of South America, etc..

Even yesterday, his voice laced with contempt, "What do you want? To have the freedom to kill so you can be absolved to kill again, or maybe this time commit adultery?"

What do you want? To be told what to eat when, when to pray how, how to thank who and to live in fear? Or better, to save the world from crime, injustice and stupidity? Etc. etc..

You stopped listening, struck by the image of his soul: an apple, battered, bruised, white flesh from red skin, beside it an iron hammer (questions), covered in the apple's blood. Why?

"Do you really believe Christ rose from the dead? Don't tell me you believe in miracles?" Etc.....

Lack of breath begins... Hail Mary... pray for us sinners, now and in the hour... he concluded, "I'm glad I'm not you." Why? Then came the punch line to his joke, "I'd commit suicide."

(No.) To yourself, Who do you think you are? But you smiled, saying, "Well, you don't have to worry, do you?"

[vi]

Why I found you here, my X, two months before my birth.

Still life: where you die and I grow, in prayer that doesn't know itself to question itself, just is.

Holy Rosary Church. Enter the large, stone-arched silence. Enter prayers. Breathe; this is necessary. Still your thoughts: pray.

Here, offer your heart, a tired flower straining for grace which rains, brilliant, from above. Here, rest your forehead, feel what caresses there: silent whispers, breath of kisses.

Catholic. Because you had the memories (peace) and I had the will to live. Because in the utter stillness, we have heard Mother Mary call, and our heart ached.

The miracle: here, in our heart, there is no question.

No. The questions are in your mind. If some memories have led you to the Church, others wage war against the doctrine. (What is the truth?)

I have the will to live, and no other history. Because of me you persevere, anticipate my birth. Just born I kiss you. All you understand is mortality, immanent death.

Canto II - Beast

[i]

Last fall you began to see death everywhere. Remember...

The second constitution dies, pathetically. Referendum, October 1992: a question no one can answer. You, my X, cross the Yes. In your mind, the image is a still life of Canada's ambivalence: an answer effaced by the X. Understood better if you'd spoiled the ballot.

"Life is a beast you can't tame," confesses your father. And then instruction class when you are told the word of God.

Morgentaller is a murderer brainwashing women to murder. They all get away with it, the way the world is run, the classroom stripped of God. Teachers twist lies to sound like truths. They say murder is ok because God is just a book, etc. etc. etc..

A man whose daughters are old enough to question him and the church, insists, "Abortion is down-right murder." (What about Pro-life who murdered Pro-choice about to enter the clinic?)

"I have a friend... " stopped by the violent beating of your heart, like daisies being torn apart. Beasts. The hand. (Grant us peace.)

And you begin eating. You eat as if you have a thousand mouths (lies) and nothing is enough to silence them. You don't understand it is I who make you eat. The body we share is hungry. Dangerous, you think, appetite, the city, words...

Even this morning: a good life is peace (still.) The beast? You felt the hand...

Beside you, in your bed, chaos, hell. A metaphor for sex?

You know that sex is dangerous but it's not the beast. Foucault's history demystifies how passions have been demystified with words. Sex is dangerous because it is language. More dangerous now, where image sensualises language.

Madonna. A whored saint. A woman's sexual fantasy? Or her appropriation (power?) of male sexual fantasy? Bondage is not gendered, she says waving her whip, and her dancers bow. What is in control here? And who controls abortion? Language and image: victims. And human victims?

Women who bleed to death, who've been raped, who use abortion as contraceptive, who didn't plan for it. And then there's a moment of being and not being: genital hairs split on the word of law: split ends of conservative fashion. Is militancy better? Or ignorance?

And there are men who live as unknown fathers. There are men who, unknowingly, are aborted fathers. And there are those who prefer to be, or those who would be horrified.

What about a living death? Serb, Croat, Muslim, Russians starving, Somalians dying, Cancer, AIDS, natural disasters, mental disorders. Or Jane Doe?

In her dreams the dybbuk loves her, the sibyl seduces her, or a hand wants to marry her to its hell. What is true?

[iii]

The truth: so simple, my X. Sudden knowledge about something that has always been. You can't know what will happen in two days. This is true, what I say and you don't hear, this memory I give you...

Strange, you thought, drinking coffee and watching 'Lena's hands talking, here sits a woman you had alienated slowly, silently. But there was no animosity in her face, no tension in her hands, in fact, graceful with what shone in her eyes. And in her eyes... love? (Yes.)

You told her about your dreams, hell, heaven, and that you were being haunted by the dead. And then, the silent winter, trying to break into a school--

"That's odd" Lena interrupted. "Christophe's Ex was institutionalized for breaking into a school."

His Ex, the nameless Russian woman, was not a lie.

"I heard about her from Pierre," explained Lena. "She and Christophe were living together way back, in the late sixties. She had a miscarriage, started going weird, then the police found her breaking in through a basement window of a school. For years she was in and out of mental institutes. Fucked up, Christophe told Pierre, because of the treatment: drugs, then shock therapy. She died two years ago."

How? "Officially, she committed suicide, but Pierre suspects Christophe's right: they fucked up the treatment, OD." Lena looked at you, as if to ask, what are you thinking? "Bastards," you said. What you will say.

St. Michael, the Archangel... the world here is dangerous.

[iv]

...defend us in the battle.... And for the first time in two years, you paint.

Your thoughts: if angels bring peace then their life is truly still. What is the portrait of peace? The landscape of divinity? And the beast.

(What is the beast?) I ask. The mind, you say. Christophe's need to lie, my own. Whatever tames the wild till there's no life left, what murders living. Yes. Lilies, you think.

(How does an angel hold flowers?) I ask. To help you think, I ask, but you descend into self-loathing. "Divinity is everything I'm not."

I hint it isn't working, this St. Michael who doesn't hover. "I can't do that!" What? Paint what is eternal, above you.

Or in your memory, Michelangelo's heaven on the ceiling of God's home. "But he had the name," you say. I suggest, maybe he hung there painting prayers.

You paint your prayer to the Archangel, my X, featureless to show silence, with broad hands, veined, like a warrior. St. Michael the Angel has wings, holds lilies like torches over the shadow of a beast, on which he stands with army boots, large and black.

Like history, intention blinds. I was as blind as you, my X.

Dream/memory, insubstantial matter.

[v]

Clara. This was your prayer for me. The mystery: it is I who name myself, even now. You hear me, distantly, and will hear me tomorrow, and for weeks, this echo from your future, echoing: Clara, for clarity.

Because I am born, I am here. Because I am here, I can't forget. Beware, you will say, my X. Why?

Dying, you'll discover: miracles offer no peace. Bread today so you can starve tomorrow and know it. So pray.

Michelangelo's prayers: an arm out-stretched to God's out-stretched arm (still.) Torture: two hands straining for all the centuries people have strained their necks to look (still.) Fingertips aching (life) for a moment which will never happen, not till Armageddon when God's heaven falls on us (death.) A miracle.

Which is perhaps why we will watch Tarchovsky's miracle: a man sacrifices his life and the hundred thousand in Hiroshima are saved. A film.

Beware. Why I can't forget. Days before my birth you will look at your miracle, muttering: an untitled canvas of paint, is all! (Forgive.) What's the point? you will say. I believed.

Some dreams, like stars, mock you.

Canto III - Sunflower

[i]

Five days before I am born, your boss studies your paintings, promising to write a reference letter to Art schools. "Quaint" she says. Mostly she says nothing.

You can only think: I've hardly painted at all.

Looking at the Mystery Portraits your boss asks "No titles?", sincerely, underlining mockery. (Do you attract the Natalies of the world? For your own good, your karma?) You don't say a word.

"What's this. Ochre number 10, maybe?" "Sunflowers" you whisper. Does she hear? "Interesting texture, these cracks. Yes..." And to yourself: that's an accident: Montreal winter if she can't smell it.

And the dreams that help you survive.

Finally you see what your boss sees, what your sister has seen all these months on the mantelpiece. A flat, meaningless monochrome.

"This one is interesting." St. Michael. "What an ugly angel! Terrifying, cartoonish," laughing, "yes. I like this one. Imagine. You could develop...etc. etc. etc.." (That's not what she meant!)

To yourself: who do you think you are? O'Keefe? Michelangelo? Tarchovsky? And the love that made Sunflowers grow? Was it love? Did it grow? In your imagination.

(Come, Holy Spirit, come.)

[ii]

Idiot! you think. Two years and you've done nothing but taken too long to die.

Good Friday, my X. You are desperate, melodramatic. I get nervous when you butt a cigarette in your flesh. Take that! (Stop this.) Fuck off. This is to remember this.

Language, full of lies, so go and buy some paints. Idiot! See, this is the idiot who paints life so still it's dead, and an angel so strong it murders! The idiot who paints lies and thinks they're miracles!

What can I say to you? I am not ashamed. You are not me, the one who burns herself to prove her sacrifice was a waste of paint, flesh, friends, and years. (Forgive.)

What's the point? You believed in Sunflowers. You tried to be still. Believe it or not you believed this was life. A lie. How can you come to God with nothing but lies?

(Hail Mary) I say, carefully... And then you face your death. Pray for us sinners now and in the hour... (Breathe.)

Is this death? Choking. Oh dear God. Forgive. Forgive us these lies.

That night we watch **The Sacrifice** on tv. Beware of miracles, you whisper and fall into death's sleep. I stay awake disturbed.

[iii]

It's not enough to believe, my X.

My thoughts last night, just born, three hours old. I lie in your bed, smell the dead stuff of you, skin and hairs, and what I wear, burnt flesh.

Around me, lit by streetlight, your memories, dust, lies. Sunflowers. What happened to the miracle? I ask. Was it a lie? I ask you. What am I? Lost as hell, knowing, it's not enough to believe.

My thoughts last night: I need you here to tell me, was your love a lie? And what am I?...

Last night: with this eye, trained by Tarchovsky, I find you in the darkest hour of prayers, my X.

I come close, an O'Keefe landscape of your face, pores of your skin, cheek. This darkness is a kiss. Michelangelo. Love, I whisper. I catch your tear. You don't understand, you can't hear me.

Remember winter 1991, I say. Mother of all Wars birthing death. Operation Desert Storm obliterating life. Alone and cold. Something warm. Anything warm. A colour even. Sun. And then the surface cracked. That's when I know...

How does oil paint crack, my X? Answer me, I say, please... (you so deep in prayer...) I'm listening... (full of grace)... speak to me...

*I wake in the desert and see a woman clothed
in the sun with a crown of stars. Pray, my mother says, Pray*

*for me. I pray until the tears come, until I've made
an ocean of them in my hands, until a pigeon comes*

*with a sunlit thread of her dress. My ocean ignites,
becomes sun*

and flowers. This

is my heart, silence singing, hungry with the

*passion to live, aid, console. Only this
is enough. Only here am I free, listening*

*in this desert of my mother's heart. Hear me,
remember this. They didn't get this,*

what sings: my heart

which loves you.