

Musing Aloud In Front of Beautiful Girls

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in English at
Concordia University, Quebec, Canada

May 2011

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

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Entitled: Musing Aloud In Front of Beautiful Girls

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (English)

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Abstract

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The following poetry collection features various women, all fragments of a whole figure, whose desired progress from being obscured bodies robbed of agency to being prominent persons successfully engaging in their surrounding environments is constantly interrupted. These interruptions occur as syntactic discord, unexpected emphases, violent or disturbing imagery, and opaque speaking subjects. The reader's attention is constantly diverted from what may seem the central subject of the poem, the women themselves disappearing even as the command to keep eyes upon them is delivered. As the city of these poems envelops and overwhelms its subject, the portraits increasingly come to be of stagnancy and frustration, but an underlying desire to move and to be moved accompanies the intimacy and absurdity. The collection, as an entirety, strives to reflect the female's skewed and changeable perception of herself. Eventually, out of frightening, wounded, and inspiring personae, a self-affirming voice arises.

Within the collection, found poetry interrupts the lyric self. These direct instances of outside text speak in an attempt to locate the female body within their borrowed tonalities. The insertion of found texts—clinical breathing and movement manuals; writing by thinkers and poets; quotations from the Oxford English Dictionary; descriptions produced from photographs; and dialogue taken from films and recordings—produces poems that affect less personalized voices, thus transforming staggered and incomplete experiences into collectively shared histories.

For Éloïse,
who marked the end with an exuberant wail
&
as counterpoint,
the infuriating sense in the voice of one lovely man.

Acknowledgements

Stephanie Bolster, for her constant patience and enthusiasm, has my everlasting admiration and gratitude. She has read every line with awe-inspiring nuance and care, and I am so very thankful.

I resist the temptation to thank every member of Concordia's Department of English individually, but I do thank them as a whole. Special mention must go to: Sina Queyras, who forever changed my perspective on poetry; Andre Furlani, who instilled in me an insatiable desire for further peregrinations; and Bonnie Jean-Campbell, who dedicatedly ensures the students and faculty retain any sanity.

There are also the mad hatters, the beautiful girls and the beautiful boys, who allow me to take such delight in the world.

Table of Contents

“You Won’t Realize I’ve Gone”	1
Mary Plays Hooky	2
What’s Your Poison?	3
Petites Misères de la Vie des Objets	4
Remark, No Pigeons Today	5
Local Politics	6
Disparate Woman	7
Call Now	8
In the Afternoon	9
A Young Woman, A Morning, A Restroom (after Simone de Beauvoir)	10
Averted	11
Image of the Breast (after George Oppen)	12
Anatomy of Breathing	13
Oh Christ, (after Doris Lessing)	14
Digest Headline	15
cherish a caboose	16
Recurring Lesion	17
Keep Eyes Upon Her	18
Soured Afternoon	19
Sweet Has Always Been Her Sister	20
The Place Underneath the Lights	21
The Avenue Exhibitionist	22
Our Account of Her	23

Vomit Only in the Cleanest Stalls.....	24
Less a Liar	25
She Pleased Him Religiously	26
Women’s Boys.....	27
Had I Not Known the Arms.....	28
Only a Small Portion	29
Notes on Moving.....	30
We Have Really No Absent Friends (after Virginia Woolf)	31
Love Letter No. 365.....	32
For Possibility	33
The Time Before (after Wallace Stevens).....	34
Captive Romance	35
To Act Selflessly.....	37
Fugue.....	38
Successfully Engaging in Surrounding Environments.....	40
It’s Enough to Make You Sick.....	41
The Fine Txt	42
Silverfish.....	43
If not her, elsewhere.....	44
Print So Lately	45
Midnight Lapse	46
Seared Vagus Nerve	47
The Deciphered World	50
Perception in a Total Way	51
She Is Afraid of Nightingales	52

Until It Passes	53
Thought of as Lovemaking.....	54
Seen Through the Kitchen Window	55
Seek Water.....	56
Words in a Crowded Room.....	57
To Gather a Mass.....	58
Her Poetry.....	59
Not Moving from One Place	60
Notes	61
Works Consulted.....	63

“You Won’t Realize I’ve Gone”

She keeps a notebook labelled “dREAMS to have,
the lover up to his elbows drowning rabbits in the porcelain sink
and it is bound like a cookbook.

Another labelled “hOURS in which not to eat,
the mushroom sauce unseen on the carpet for the entirety of the lease
and it is spiralling apart, ragged in her hands.

And a third labelled “eMOTIONAL swells.

She once looked up from the white and the insipid,
the handwritten alterations,

and considered the facing wall in which a mirror had fallen
grounded shards contain his bare feet whenever she looks quickly enough.

Against the same wall, the jewelled purse opens to
the difficulty or the banality:

being interested in people, or in the cultivation of persona.

Mary Plays Hooky

Careless in the sunshine of a depraved city, she flirts with car doors.

A white squirrel has its neck broken by a child;
neither one appreciates her shock.

Two young people mourn the absolutism in the blue of the sky
without acknowledging the blue of her eyes.

Spending the afternoon in thought, she is seen by a colleague
in a window's reflection.

Ashtrays clutter the sill.

A white splinter in her gum, she grins,
gnaws the waxen cherry from a stranger's drink.

Wooring the evening in sombre dress,
she is thought by a colleague to be capable of finding her own way.

Ice cubes shrink;
the time passes competitively.

The colleague regards the absent man's complaint,
having learnt she is frigid.

The colleague readjusts and recalls
her gleaming breasts as she arched backward,

coughs softly while she licks a collar bone.

What's Your Poison?

The guests become delirious upon entering her room.
They gather beneath the life-size marquee: 'The Difference is Quality.'

They are adamant not to notice the headiness
of walls dripping with the ecstatic pulse of loneliness.

'Taste is the test for Velvet' dallies against her low swoop
of bared back. 'Smooth Smoking' dots the haze in the silk between her thighs.

'Just what the doctor ordered!'

The guests observe a crotchety figure, his face morose,
'Mildness' the promise in his salamander eyes.

He notices the company, wallows in
her disembodied laughter: 'Satisfy Yourself.'

The others pour champagne over their wrists,
'Light up!', expose flushed necks for a kiss.

Petites Misères de la Vie des Objets

She is in paralytic halt
outside a shop window.

She muses on the sunsets
in absent collar bones.

A haunted bride's dress is on display.

She disavows the missing groom,
but not the anguish in the sewn sleeves.

Her eyes forget the phantasm for the ground
where fallen leaves are falling still,

tittering on about their own abundance,
in knee-high piles of soiled yellows.

She imagines the plush maggots:

the rich bodied lovers that rub bellies
in the underside of the slick sidewalk.

A disturbed air whistles to her inside wrist;
a man dives into the base of a nearby lamp post.

Her hands mimic his bad conscience,

diminish the body's through line,
but not the light, the iron, the relation between.

He straightens, holding a discarded paper cup
full to the brim with coffee sweetly taupe.

He takes a sip. The liquid respite is not his.
The man and his flat feet congeal into statuary.

The curdling reprieve jolts her.
The autumnal fixation exhausted,

she branches past nightfall, into the profane
knocking elbows of dark.

Remark, No Pigeons Today

A cityscape of nonchalant figures flickers.
One building with too few windows

piles its shifting bricks to low clouds
and nudges aside any pretence to dry mouth.

The sidewalk weeps watered bodies flush
with the sheen of muted streetlight.

Rainfall unearths the cigarettes trod into ground,
a singular excess of filters marking hours passed—

tattered remnants of paper made fixtures,
scribbled contact promises, one instant acquaintances—

black matter ebbing from passing
consciousness, living drainage.

Memory of unsweetened satisfaction is long in
the hanging-on torsos empty of scattered seed.

Concrete stains bespeak honest wounds.
Unclean lives are best suited to cool rains.

Local Politics

The city was quick
to accept

A sky born
child

Body assumed
male

His squealing
laughter

Suited the
traffic

Sounds
just fine

Women learned
to wait

Arranging
their hair

When they ducked
inside

Men to no longer
wear their best

Handkerchiefs
in breast

Expecting
his large mouth

To nip
their strands

Thread them
around

Power
lines

Council
encouraged

Attempts
to snare

That pretty
face

The elusive
cherub

rose higher

His sphere
not local

after all

Content was the city
to recount

Her histories beneath
rapid wings

Disparate Woman

She hadn't expected to find a parade—

surprised not to have heard the drum beat,
surprised that these skeletons could find a foothold

on the permanent lake of rainwater
keeping a moat around her home.

She curls her blackened toes on the steps
and sets her haunches low to the concrete,

rocking forward to disturb an algae continent
and extract a grasshopper carcass from the green.

She pitches the insect at a motorized trolley
from which a muffled Bob Dylan recording plays

and in response is stoned by hard red candies
flung from fat palms on serrated wrists.

Her fingers convulse, become too rigid to grasp the offering,
lips contort and pass the cutting sugared ovals

past panting mouth, where they lodge in a raw throat
and hush refusal.

Blue faced children on a pale wood platform
whisper with long wagging tongues,

their eyeballs frighteningly large and wetting
the broken windows of her high rise building.

The final float is simply a steel podium littered
with flames and brass canisters of film.

It approaches slowly,
allows the clamour ahead to wind away.

The angular sculpture sinks as she clicks her jaw,
hums blandly, collects the coming evening's cold.

On the remaining tip, a single square of burnt figures persists,
and nervously she returns behind her unhinged door.

Call Now

“She has about her a terrible aversion to leaving the house—”

Imagine what stereotype you like. Just not of the rosetinted movies in which everyday alcoholism is charming. Nor of the suburbs where everyone has enough money to keep the clamped open mouths of their children full. But of a woman with laugh lines around her eyes and a PIN number for the joint bank account. A woman on the sofa in a terrycloth robe jabbing the dust motes on a dead remote.

She wraps the thick telephone cord around a stairway banister.
The receiver nowhere near her mouth.

Nobody is ever on the other end.

When the doorbell rings, imagine the woman does not answer.

“And that self-loathing, that lethargy—”

Everlasting silence, even though never before has the toilet tank stopped running or the computer overheating or the faucet dripping—

She clears her throat, straining her voice into the empty room.

The woman’s eyes are on the ceiling. A neighbour’s bath has been overflowing for the past hour, and her hair is getting wet.

In the Afternoon

She is searching for examples to parallel pot lids and dresses. To begin with, they will be technical exercises. The resulting disjuncts will possess the space of a caesura.

She is off-balance.

She is kneading the corners of a cigarette package. It is not important whether the package is empty or not. She is anticipating disapproval and she is desperately chasing future phrases.

There are vague gestures. These are occurrences of bizarre concrete images. Green army figures en pointe, or a grotesque jewellery box resting on a whore's bloated stomach, or—

Women feed the sores.

She is coating her cottonmouth with lollipop wrappers. Every Wednesday she substitutes these for fresh cut diamonds, or hay bales. Every Sunday she bleeds gradually less.

Women stay. They dart red clouds from the corners of their eyes. Women swell. They bite the ice cube trays in half and leave their tattered lingerie hanging from the oven fan.

All the while she is waiting for the plastic doll house to lose its roof, and the expensive fish tank to disappear. She is adhering to the structures of compare and contrast.

And she is always surprised when the women leave her to the kitchen fire.

A Young Woman, A Morning, A Restroom (after Simone de Beauvoir)

I recall she looked— a little drunk,
and murmured to herself:

“Adorable.”

The fundamental attitude of all women. A process of alienation.
The self posited as an absolute end.

Circumstances invite the woman more than man to dedicate her love—
to herself.

I recall she returned to the mirror and asked:
“Who am I?”

—Nothing.

“What would I like to be?”

—All.

I could only think to fecundate myself.

This need to be two.

This need for the whole future in a rectangle of light.
This need for the whole universe in a frame.

She began to recount her early years:
“When I was a little girl—

what a funny little girl.”

To be invited, as mere mortal, to the “cult of her art”—
More avidly than anything else, there is sought a witness.

She invented chaos, being a thought,
and I was moved to say:

“Even the less advantaged might sometimes feel they are beautiful,
might sometimes feel they are women.”

Averted

Jaw nestles in a crook of sky until jostled. Bus lurches. The smile of the young man overflowing into her thigh opens,

Sign that she is fading. White bubbling into the skin of finger pads. Colour dying out.

is fed the tumult of wheels, readjusts. Eyes light on the skittish hands. Catapult of separate bodies in the aisle. All eyes widen in

A nail hooks under a shell. Pulls away the fragile casing.

failed attempt to squeeze the world out. Revising the snap and lift of reaction. Palpably nervous in an appropriate show of how it is one acts on public transport. The burden of smiles twitching in the corners of mouths,

Yellow peeks through. From it she hears the hush of all past mornings.

sudden desire for shared disaster. A moment more and voices would join in infinite chorus. Present moment slows. Separate bodies return to losing the unknown. Resumed movement

Fingers scurrying. Remains dotting her straining flesh. Blood impossibly still.

on pavement, in sunlight, the mourning of intimacy.

The soft egg is bare on the plate.

Image of the Breast (after George Oppen)

Nipple spitting nylon sutures
 when the light catches
and is caught in the missing steel blade
against faceless flesh, catching, finally
caught, light pouring
from the idle eyes, she will feel
his fingers lose their compression.

No excellence of compression could grasp
the inclusive force,
narrow and vast,
with all its adequate notions

of resection and tissue—
 If there is someone
beneath this skin,
red and so vulnerable—

Perfect container, incised skin
lifted.

On that flesh
the woman ventures her fingers
and squeezes.

 Let me ask
something important.
How do you feel about fake tits?
Thus far I'm undecided on fake tits.

 He gazes upon her
empty dress, or holds dear
the incision in the breast.

Anatomy of Breathing

The anatomy of our bodies
rarely, if ever,

is intended to help.

We can move in a distorted way.
It takes a refined condition to lie so deeply.

To become more sensitive it is helpful
to have a human body.

It sits in the chest like a parachute,
a glistening bowl-like structure.

The Native American Indians saw it as the horizon between
heaven and earth.

Our heart resides above,
and sex organs below.

Inquiry: The Dance of the Diaphragms

Have wide hips. They prefer to go deep within the body. Feel the
insertion point. Find you spread and broaden outward. Exaggerate the
need to be held.

The unsung heroine does more
than sniff our pleasant and unpleasant aromas.

We might not have much to be worried about.
There have been a number of stunning attacks.

The action described above, if correctly operating,
produces a second heart.

Oh Christ, (after Doris Lessing)

she moans, observing the response,
their clumsy and stupefied readings.

The story had been inside herself.

She, a woman loved by a man, found inside herself:

a woman criticising, and
a woman longing,

a woman in acts of sex,
in acts of betrayal and in acts of revenge.

She, a woman loved by a man, becomes quiet. He carries on in real love.

This story she does not write.

She, over-ready for asylum or refuge, gets the idea from a Canadian.

He is a crude lover. He is over-hungry, intense.

This story she forgets.

She visits her father.

“Your mother was altogether too good for me.”

“Sometimes, now, at night, I think being alone—it’s important.”

Her father stares at her with a look of being astonished at what he sees:

“You’re my daughter.”

She looks inward. The story remains a series of dry sentences in her mind.

This story is of a woman inside herself.

Digest Headline

These eyes had
opened wide,

briefly
wide enough to swallow

AUTHORITIES SEEKING

mother's ravaged face.

These hands had
grasped the quilt.

been too like her own,
Family heirloom swathes,

MISSING YOUNG FEMALE

suffocates.

New born
held

buried, and remains
in borrowed mason jar.

CONSTRUCTION CREW DISCOVERS

New born
became headlines

squeal
neighbours used

UMBILICAL CORD STILL ATTACHED

to swat the flies away.

cherish a caboose

EXCLUDED: the aliens, inflatable girlfriend, insignificant

Magnets on the fridge jostle, collide.

She's cross legged in the kitchen, hands behind her head. Wrist deep in the damp pink tissue of her cerebrum. Wide pupils propelled upon the white front of a refrigerator.

left go are with this
these remind me of you

Her bottom lip sags, a run of fading skin trickling. Two nights ago, a row of sharp male teeth bit. Her middle fingers suddenly meet, finding a pulsing purple vein.

your ideas wanted gene pool
but your IQ had misconceptions

A high unexpected laugh travels from behind a closed door. Into the ignored front hall, tentatively through the open kitchen. She takes it upon herself to freely explore: talking softly of snow to the rubber plant, testing hips against the countertops, running fingers against tea canisters.

ignoring his change just when
I see you stun perfume

An eye lash loosens itself from sheath of eyelid. Is still for a hesitant breath from several floors down. Tumbles, skidding onto slack cheek and curling into abrupt finish.

humiliate yourself again if you
have The first time I

She opens her mouth and tastes the air for copper. Clasps her own hands.

I'll bet you be nicer
when you've set aside myself

The microwave projects green figures. She would close her eyes

since I have disorder must
you I'll leave your mind

She uncrosses her legs

you're dead & stands. Her thumb finds a squirming centipede.

Her black socks seem grey standing solitary on wood floor. She had almost forgotten them that morning beside his bed. always and in it
this

Recurring Lesion

The itch begins
Wednesday afternoon.

Fingers engaged,
fruitful strikes

turning solid keys
to bloom.

Fingers swoop,
her short nails plead, her square teeth tear

beneath surface of ring finger, clotted blood,
drive itch to wrist.

Thursday, fretful sleep, white wine
mouthfuls, chalky pills, littered vanity.

Friday, itch remains, line of wrist,
inside of knees, body built in small of back.

Nails worn to quick, aborted embryos.
Teeth stained, tint of flesh.

Still blood,
thinning, moulting,

matter discarded like ash,
stretched pale, holding the itch.

A body haunted, a body no more,
forgotten gleam and blackened keys.

Keep Eyes Upon Her

Francesca is efficient today,
calculated movements from bed

to standing, eyes remaining closed
until the pillows with grisly remnants

of her dreams are turned over.

Too wary of bread crumbs
to contemplate breakfast,

she purges her shoulders,

and descends arms to cradle
peach receiver of grandmother's

salvaged rotary phone.

Her spotted ring finger treads
distressingly familiar numbers.

The response, a voice with the comfort
only lazy young boys provide,

resonates in the thick apathy
already pooling red in her ears.

And for a moment her spine arcs,
curves into a milky hope—

but a stuttering bottom lip
juts past its scarred black tissue,

mangled by teeth tilling sharp words.

She casts the receiver away from herself,
parades methodically into a new room.

In the kitchen, she can feel small and pure
next to the roast pan, opaque maroon

flecked with pig fat.

Soured Afternoon

Gerald palms his right eyeball and strains, short-sighted, to see beyond the jutting wall dividing kitchenette and sitting room.

Cheryl is in the bedroom, kneeling atop a moulding wardrobe, halfway out a narrow window, mouth straining on the filtered tip of a Du Maurier.

Gerald's left eye is blinking rapidly. A kettle whistle is yet sharp in the air. He dips an index and middle finger into a heat blossomed ceramic mug. Predictably, his body lurches, and yellow skin swells to a red. His left eye snaps open, shut, while palmed right eye traces veins. Fingers stay submerged to find the dampened string, raise a sopping tea bag and deposit the mass into his waiting mouth.

Cheryl's ribcage is pressing into her thighs. Her ankles are drinking the low stone ceiling. She burns a fingertip on the smouldering tip of cigarette and drops the butt into the flower garden below, hastening to draw her body up and pull the outside in, kettle whistle yet sharp as she collides spine with upper window ledge— "Fuck!"

The ceramic mug bounds from countertop and falling shards are deafening, are splintering under Gerald's tender feet bounding to the bedroom. His left eye snaps open, shut, and he is gesturing wildly.

Cheryl is gesturing wildly, and Gerald's right eye drops. In the compressed space some six feet above the floor, her behind is hazy behind a lingering cloud of smoke.

Underneath Cheryl, above Gerald, the intimidating mass gathers its ornate doors, groans in maroon paint peels, and sways. His gaze follows the splintering train. Her gaze gathers its wits. The moulding wardrobe collapses.

From the dust is the saving scenario of precarious female on the sagging shoulders of a one eyed male licking tea leaves from his teeth.

Sweet Has Always Been Her Sister

Dead legs in black stockings on floral carpet
Roots of a tree crawl under house

There is a man and a mole on Kay's neck
where she'd like a finger to be

She believes in serial monogamy
and she believes she is destined to be with Louis

Meanwhile his fiancée murmurs, That's a bit theatrical, isn't it?

A blossom terrifying in this desert heat
The roots unsteady the floorboards

And Kay she just stayed on like how shadows of a fan's blades are also tree
branches overhead and an appointment for sex is mistaken the ex-fiancée murmurs,
mammals don't mate in captivity and Kay is showing a serious lack in response to
something Louis had not meant to be taken seriously at all

No more unusual than before

The sickness these floral sheets
 too many colours for truth

As people in mutual distrust
they murder the tree and hide the evidence

The Place Underneath the Lights

a picture of Jane
she used to be Stan's girl

a siren screaming a traffic accident a prowler a homicide
it looks like she tried to call for help

Stan answers the door tie tucked into belt
bandaged left temple

his business is in intelligence in ambition
Jane was not a waitress but a dancer a cigarette girl

Stan he likes it here he likes Jane better
she wants Fluff to take a gander and to disapprove

Fluff has a rare plant from Venezuela
needing very little water

Several people have been awfully nice to me, Jane says.

That's awfully easy to be, says Stan.

a rare plant from Venezuela
leaves suffering from a nitrate deficiency good conversation

Jane last seen the day before in black, arms wide
lights bare back left kick heel down slide toe hip

Stan told her, Forget everything a kiss a hatbox
button nose straight stare

say Fluff can a fellow get some cigarettes
"My cigarette girl didn't show."

to describe the girl small hazel eyes no brown a nice young thing
sighted with a hamburger and Stan

The Avenue Exhibitionist

His apology is always thick
and the inflection on an exterior source.

They tell me I am distracted— or,
They think of you—

She closes the lingering space below his chins
by nestling her long nose in his throat.

He means to continue,

but her fat little fingers impede the excuse,
in fact jam directly into the gaping mouth.

Her surprisingly fat little fingers.

Dying sunlight, and the uneasy crust
of crumpled bed sheets;

voluptuous layers of man
exploited by her downy limbs.

Eventual moonlight;
he always tries again.

You really must—

Must hide? she interrupts,
sticking those fingers into her ears,

naked, pressing backwards:

the cool glass of a window, and a stream
of gawking pedestrians.

The quivering mouth labours toward her
and a spot of accidental saliva crowns her scalp.

I indulge your—

He reaches past her, jerking a wrist
and drawing canvas curtains shut.

Our Account of Her

Sofa cushions behind the coffee table Ceramic shards inside magazine pages
Her shoulder blades resemble the tea stain on their map of Africa

She has never before been invited into intimacy such as this
The experience is distressing at best Nauseating at worst

In the mornings hands grope empty space between their humid bodies
A siren wails A dancing light sears Her white behind

He sets his teeth into the illumination bites
She squeals her own teeth clenched

The bedroom door is attached by just one hinge On the bookcase Nuts & bolts
In place of Benjamin In place of Rilke

A murmur, You're prettier on the outside

Vomit Only in the Cleanest Stalls

A water glass fell The mattress tipped
Your lips were trout that swam inside Your palms were voids drawing the time

I locked your quizzical 'o' to memory of your iris
the surrounding blue in the night's street light

I knocked my teeth against your rising and falling
breath before it had the courage to graze my neck

I crawled to your mother's pantry for doughnuts
I stole us a plastic chest

Powdered sugar We placated open nerves
Quivering jelly We drew on thick red tears

The sheets were irreparably stained The lamps were kept flicked on
an interruption was needed

I plucked layers on an untuned ukulele You fixed eyes on my unskilled hands
in the reprise a thousand gallant lovers and a thousand sultry women

Girls in high waisted skirts Girls in clever eyeglasses
Kissing boys from bar stools Giving handjobs in taxi cabs

Chewing unnaturally pink gum Vomiting only in the cleanest stalls
Making love or mimicry

Less a Liar

I am wasted by the broken beams
I am wasted by a slope of vertebrae

I waste your rolling eyes with closer flesh

The shape loses its reality.

I keep your face between my legs
Yet there are the dull voices of friends on weeknights

I nip fiercely at your skin
Yet women in owl lenses croon poetry

With you
I am only crude—

I will say,

'Spend these last minutes with me Laugh with me and cry and sweat and pray
and stagger and sing with me.'

Or I will say,

'The shadows on the wall are lilac rather than grey There always seems to be
someone walking past your front door Those sounds are so less alone than we.'

She Pleased Him Religiously

His shaven head
like the graze of concrete on skidding palms.

Our scent,
the same mothballs of his aging mother

as she gazes
at that fixture of the two of us

in her lonely room.

Our knees collide,
my legs are pushing a lone swing

spiralling over gravel paths.

On his silver cross,
my tongue finds the shape

of the crucified son.

Our Women's Boys

Beneath the bed sheets we are not naked but perfect
my body, we say, your body, we say, our bodies
smiling, we say, our boys

In the window I think of you
your kitchen, boiling water, tea

I caress a boy, I think of you
in the window I watch the moving
reflection of a light

I say, my body, you say, your boy in the window
our eyes lowered, our mouths murmuring
our bodies do not belong to our boys

I will touch as you undress
back to me, turning, peak of pink

Your lips, my own lips, our lips moving
speaking endlessly about our boys

Had I Not Known the Arms

Stalking my forfeited body she refers
to large headed males spending sunlight on roadsides

darting thumbs, skidding footsteps
deferring to girls,

those with scarred women in their hearts:
bursting mothers rendered open, rocking grandmothers.

Assuming I neither skid nor rock
but lay flat

(already as an eunuch perhaps),

she castrates,

catches me on my back, ribs trapped white mice
scurrying underneath glare of heaving skin.

The landscape behind the wandering males quickens,
drops like needle pricks.

Laying down arms, she shoves
my smile into the toe of her boot,

crosses thresholds, bites a hungry stranger's lips,
stranger who will take up her arms.

Only a Small Portion

She is involved not with him but with exploring movement

Her nature is improvisational in approach
Sequentially touching each other and then at distance from each other

Without limbs she is unable to carry his desires

Her disorganization is without support for the activity of choosing
Her lack of tone in torso results in uncertainty

Elsewhere she ceased
And it grew quiet in the fertile darkness of unconscious

Notes on Moving

If the female subject is to be touched on but not dwelt on,

She would begin with a friendly, relaxed tone.
But inevitably, she would become angry.

we must not give precedence to nonverbal behaviour
but notice the intrinsic connection between subjective experience and movement.

There will be no meaningful units for study
to be isolated and recorded,

She would complain loudly,
“You don’t understand what I’m saying.”

nor intrinsic meaning in emotion.
We must look to move, or be moved.

If without adequate bliss—

I never saw the anger coming. I cannot explain how I enraged her,
but she felt repeatedly enraged, and helpless.

If only in error,
we will discover vocabulary and grammar.

We Have Really No Absent Friends (after Virginia Woolf)

Every throb of his pulse enclosed her.

Love is the difficult realisation

That solace which two different notes, one high, one low, strike together

that something other than oneself is real.

had been exhausted from their bodies.

The heart may think it knows better:

She returns to the story of the wife,

the senses know that absence blots people out.

but at the turn of a page she stops and hears dully

The rest is silence.

how it came to this:

his coming to her like that,

The male's great fear is of failure,

her being afraid that he might guess.

and the female's is of not being loved.

Every drop of ink ran cold.

She was left with a dismal flatness.

Love Letter No. 365

The letters arrive without any consistency.

Arrive in abundance:

daily spurts, then weekly, then straying
into absence,

then returning in packets richly stuffed.

He reads them over the yellow stove,
one hand shaking salt over bubbling yolk,

reads them from the crumbling steps
broken from the back door and set against a tree stump,

reads them on the jostling bus ride into town
and in the single bleak grocery store where he buys pickled figs.

He never writes back.

Partly because every pen on his writing desk is dried up
and every pencil stub worn down to its absolute quick

partly because he could not hope to match her sweet way
of flourishing words into strikingly separate existences

partly because their conversations had always been one-sided
with she so passionately insisting, as she continues to do,

that she could never love him.

For Possibility

His taut forearm flesh warms the cool back of her hand,
his quick pulse disturbing her chalk skin.

Two figures bent as one with vanity of breathing,
surreal bone white musing. Imagine:

a flight of his hollow jaw,
a swoop of pink beneath her breasts.

Inaudible sigh wets the tentative gasp, elbows snap.

Their foreheads, his broad and hers narrow
(a sheet of ivory) furrow as smeared pencil lines.

His next breath eludes her exhale;
the swoop deflates. Calico pupils collide and smash, separate

the skin touch. Warmth recedes, gaping lips stain blue.
Backs straight as absent window sills.

The Time Before (after Wallace Stevens)

Torments of the disabled afternoon:
she dreams a little, and she feels the dark.

Without sound,
the day is like her straying feet,
dirt roads to meeting-place of blood and feathers.

No mother suckled her.

For years, she moved among us
until our soft organs discerned it.

The sky was much friendlier once we removed her.

We imagine the day she says, "I am content with your sweet restrictions."
Today she says, "I feel the need for bliss."

With inarticulate pang,
she picks at the strings of worn sleeves.

Meanwhile, in orgy of summer, voice by voice,

we are perishing also.

Captive Romance

The photographer suggests you see
the city as it no longer exists.

Morning dew cityscape obscured.
Two figures.

Sunlight such that there is only prelude to colour,
infrequent caress of grey, and blue.

Romance captive by the near touch,
lips apart.

Young man slack jawed.
Innocence beating from the knot of his tie.

Young man earnest his eyes will stay shut.

Noses colliding in the next moment.
This comedy not caught.

He requests an interlude.

Glass pane absent in the warmth.

Unfiltered light casts an idle afternoon
divine beneath her flat wool cap.

Her eyes are demure over the instance

of dropping ash in his glass—
scotch, neat.

His smile particularly pink on olive skin,
the casual fold of a hand below abiding chin.

Of kissing the hand, he says "How quaint."

What is seen?

Just his ear,

impression of a forgotten shave,
or shadow jostling the camera lens.

A column of translucent flesh,
slender hand pulled forward.

Her eyes above the picture frame,
but lips perturbed and betraying

that she is trembling.

He titles this one Young Love.

Drained glasses on the gold tablecloth,
red wine stain below blossom of the open booth.

He is handsome,

torso twisted so that he may
pin a kiss on soft grey blur of cheek.

She is forever in this moment
of shoulder round grazing his suit,

eyelid against the tip of his nose—
barely, sweetly.

To Act Selflessly

Hurt self on wooden surfaces
carrying the weight of unread books.

Mend self on the floor below
with foolscap ruined by pencil shavings.

Careen self into a nook
behind the discarded ideas,

 prominently torn is the disjunct between
 'a destiny to folly—' and 'several young people follow.'

Indulge self in the taste of unripe cherries
absent on present plane

 but suggested in the everywhere else rub of red.

Strangle self with muttered pities
for those ants dragging carcasses of failed queens—

 (Why had perfect bodies left their task so long?)

 Idleness breeds mistaken self.

Fugue

ANTEROGRADE

An immediate forgetting builds decay. Kaleidoscope encouraged by smoke.

Hushed tones of perception curdle. Movement leaves mechanics, spins behind.

Directly, once, these had been eyes.

Hollowed prayers thriving on instinct. Some world shifts (just a mouth, moving on hopeful reflex).

'No, these limbs have never been your own.'

A time-worn facial cue belonging to no one is content,
fleshless and casting green when it nods slowly.

I, I, I begin again—

RETROGRADE

I've forgotten about morning,
being.

Something, *beginneth and singeth,*
just dissolved.

'Figures of rhetoric?' so sinister, she says

'You're the hostess—' and it is surprising no one has left,

pursu'd transverse the resonant:

I am experiencing
*conversation
between elderly market women.*

Can she,
*on flight,
negate*

ask, 'Are you yourself tonight?'

strange excursions, half-recollections

Decades in masked epilepsy,
she discerns

*a glass and some ice
french wines from a grizzled embezzler.*

she suggests
forgetting how to be.

She has a mirror in the palms of her
face,

words apart from this.

Days and pages later,
mostly

'Must I apologize?'

I think I might be
automatic neurotic hysteric repressed (only at night)

Successfully Engaging in Surrounding Environments

I.

"I am unpacking my library. Yes, I am—"

Walter Benjamin on book collecting. On the mild boredom of order. Air saturated with dust and floor covered with torn paper.

Psychology Today hastens to lock a steel door on undergraduates. They are left with a Kafka reading and one neat paper. Arbitrarily rotated penciled lines of a dog in mid bark. More a series of poorly constructed cylinders than dog.

"Well, what's your name?" And that is the end of the conversation.

II.

Benjamin attests there can be nothing more pleasant than to lie on a sofa and read. Meanwhile the automaton plays a winning game of chess. It would rather be enlisted in a theological debate.

Psychology Today disregards the work of one. The undergraduate having opted not to construct x's over the properly rotated shapes. Having opted instead to construct an impeccable likeness of a broken down remnant.

The whole thing can stand upright on two legs. The whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way perfectly finished.

III.

Benjamin on something remote from us. On something that is getting even more distant.

"The art of storytelling— coming to an end," he says. "Less and less frequently— we encounter— people with the ability— tell a tale properly," he says.

The provision of an intelligent meaning to a word.

Presumed lost. Please check your closet.

It's Enough to Make You Sick

Andy Warhol talks to the Chelsea girls.

There is a Polaroid of Bob Dylan Andy cannot see. His rickety voice says, anyway, 'Yeah, well, he's a has-been.' There is a thick answering voice of a woman elongating questions in otherwise straightforward syllables: 'I was at a cowboy party—' As though this excuses her lapse in taste. And, anyway, Bob is 'out of sight' and Bob's 'out of sight.'

She is always repeating herself and Andy is always saying, 'Groovy.'

When she becomes indignant, she has the same sticking sense of a mother. 'They say if you take amphetamine,' he says, 'you lose your mind.'

'—'

The line is silent. 'Maybe you've lost it.'

She bursts out, suddenly, 'Viva sleeps in the same bed as the nurse.'

'The coloured nurse?' This is Andy in a mock of scandalized whisper. 'You mean the coloured nurse sleeps with Viva?' The thick female yes is inflected with laughter. She takes up the game and says 'yes' and says 'yes' again.

'Well, it's so great you've had a baby. Viva,' Andy Warhol talks to the Chelsea girls.

'Well, you didn't call me up—' and like the other she is always repeating herself: 'you didn't call me up.' Andy thinks you lose your mind and Viva says 'Fred didn't call me up—' and she says 'you didn't call me up.' There is a stutter into a hmm-hawing. 'It's been a week and day.' She decides this is wrong. 'It's been eight days.'

'We went to nine butcher shops—' she says, and on a different note: 'Bookshops.'

His offering, anyway, is 'Eat a lot of grapefruit.'

'That's good for you,' he says to both girls when Viva is retreating, but still repeating that the pain 'was worse than the pain of your shooting, I really think so.'

'Grapefruit. That's what you discovered in your agony?'

The Fine Txt

In sun observing line outside Ben & Jerry's, P:
You should write about girls
who fall in love

Before mirror, Z:
you, me, sushi, juiceboxes,
movies – clothing optional.

i'm downstairs.

Fully clothed in bed, S:
And? How was it?

On park bench, cannot find cigarette lighter, P:
Hang in there little engine
who can

Rereading A Room of One's Own, S:
It's almost as if we've been programmed
to write about gender.

I wonder what will be next.
I'm assuming it will include
giraffes in some way.

Last glass of red wine, P:
To higher standards

Head spinning, Z:
would you
like that?

On bus, S:
I don't know how to respond to that.

Pink sunset, P:
I forgot how sad it is

Silverfish

Her city
is a Google Map
grey space, the world's

sole
remaining
mystery.

Her healing springs
taste of
moonshine, the homemade

liquor. She watches
football games
during her summer

in Europe.
She wants
a miniature

Diego Maradona
for her own.
She is very

lovely.
The hand
that failed

to touch her own
in the night, was
sign

the silvering
boy was not
perfect

after all. She had
merely been
on display

for the solitary
creatures
lurking

in their
embraces.

If not her, elsewhere

/ She was only ever wrong. / I've got beauty on my side. I am an artist of life. / She has read too much of Virginia Woolf. / You'll take no note one way or the other. / He cannot help but take note. He only ever takes note. / We are in love. / He does not love her, but knows her. And knowing her, cares for her. Cannot hurt her, and so he says, We are in love. / She obsesses over a kiss, a girl. / He does not know her to be capable of this.

// This story is best left faded. / He fades, but long after she went to two parties / two bodies, two parties / all the more to give / to suspend above pleased mouths / no he in this story could stand she came just as the cavalry went / a horse hoof on clitoris /

Print So Lately

considers the experiment dull. She considers
the experiment distasteful. He considers her

Luckily the print makes comprehension impossible. Luckily s
he believes he considers love when he considers her

Words escape or letters in small parts escape
the violence of the hammer is thrilling: the various misses.

Harder. She is embarrassed by the obvious effort of ribbons &
chimes.

Minorities lose her interest. Charities she never did support.
Print escapes. effect is little to nothing. He effects dis
appearance.

Midnight Lapse

A light bulb, or several, several of our light bulbs, hang in silence, hang so their luminescent chatter catches between our long grey teeth, squares of crooked ridges and salt build-up.

We decide
strange

or strained,

mutants in a city of
pleasured people.

The wide eyes, or the nonchalant warriors and their duct tape shields and their plastic swords, do not belong on the metro or in a Sunday night, compel our endless footfalls and the stifled piquant 'o'.

Prolonged hesitation
in a second

a second

a

Our watches stopped
last Wednesday.

The batteries
could not be replaced.

If a flea said, Jump, we would swallow, and we would follow an arrow in the direction of the dead end, our cankered bodies finally slumping in the margins of the lines, and the warriors collecting the shorted wires.

Seared Vagus Nerve

WANDERER

My back sticking to the mud on beach shores.

Waves undo an ocean,
reveal a littered bottom,

ashen portraits and navy pools.

A lone sailboat drifts,
content.

One lean man catches a leaping fish.

Some child shouts. My mind
is a rising red ball of sun.

CRANIAL

I'm ankles above the squawking seagulls,
throwing pelvic thrusts into empty air,

being chased by that child's shout,
thrown headfirst from bleached sandstone

to sterile walls,
warmth cutting the evening white.

I doubt the validity of the sagging ceiling

and heavy woman's pink jowls
and ecstatic pricks of silver needles.

When my torso contorts, I am
halfway to the island.

Tourists surround, flash pocket cameras,
say "Smile."

VAGUS

Waist deep in colliding rocks,
my movements are torrid.

The tourists are in suspended afternoon,
licking each other's open yellow sores,

digging fingers into lice riddled hair
of their small simple minded children.

My back catapults from granite wave
to hot, heavy world.

White warmth, sagging ceiling,
jowls, needle pricks.

Some horrified version of portraits on ashen,
burnt-to-splinters desk.

(

bodies in hallways listless with prescribed illness
static smiles in waiting burgundy rows

minds sleeping with sympathizing shells
decor abiding to the squares of sunlight in window wires

)

A childish whisper returns
mud, shore.

The Deciphered World

Sam realizes, too late, she is unprepared
for leaving
the ground
for flight.
Her mother's dress billows
and the boys in the school yard
chuckle.
She is wearing ruffled underpants.
One grey goose cocks
its white chin
and her startling cry
writes disturbance against
tail feathers of a larger male.
Sam closes her eyes
and screams wordlessly.

By evening she is seeing
her mother's silhouette
in the trees,
one particular brain
of branches mimicking
carefully arranged hair
and sprouting into
downward falling lips.
Her eyes are missing,
and the surrounding fledglings
are inordinately white.
Her mother, the blackest, as always.

The geese sense
a disturbance
in her weightlessness
and fly low
over matriarch.
Sam's feet skim
snow covered
tree tops
and one
slender
black shoe
becomes lodged in
gleaming ice,
left behind.

Perception in a Total Way

It's plain on her waxen face in her slovenly
choreography

the damage done to the surface of words
the space between desire and expression
the essential body, or memory

he lays her, naked, in the sunlight,
knicks curves with teeth,
holds her by the hair and bears down

"This game we play is one of how easily I'll break."

He murmurs platitudes, maddening declarations of perfection
hovers breath over the small of her back
insists on beauty, and impossibilities

the unfocused vision and its capacity for thought
this room and a duplicate one of images
their weakened experience of time

"Our skin," she exclaims,
"is capable of distinguishing colour."

Her legs in a perpetual state of illusion
her legs permitting no glare
dissatisfaction with sight, or movement

He tastes the tinny sickness, but insists on spatial intent—
pursues his invitation inside

She Is Afraid of Nightingales

Body lying on flesh saturated sheets,
long face obscured by sweet folds.

Shameless voice quelled of its clamouring,
her tongue quivering on the floor.

Skinned red and dripping nose affronts
the whites of dead skin he left.

His ungainly hand had only been able to claw,
and here, the nervous remnants:

scent of black storm and sulphur,
damp marks of his moving flesh,

cluster of three long hairs detached
beneath her deflated heels.

One grey, a second needing question,
but the third undeniably—

(wet slick city relishes in a hurtling wind).

Until It Passes

Refuse any grandiose
philosophizing

Clutch the sickly flesh at
your weakest point

Remember the inside of
a stranger's mouth

His aged and sour taste will always be
just behind your eyes

Cling to the infinite numbers of
bottle shards

Construct a drinking glass

Float ice cubes in
the mottled pink sewage's acidic fizz

Until it passes,

You can blink steadily and
he'll be life-size

Thought of as Lovemaking

Her face behind the hair behind the sleeve before the closed blinds
a gap by her thighs no window but plaster wall

Head down the part in her hair crooked
the ends against the wrinkles in the oversized sweatshirt

His sweatshirt elastic sleeves with cigarette stains
elastic waist littered with flecks of white

Lines of light a car passes in the parking lot outside
a sudden drop against the ceiling

lovemaking the couple upstairs children quiet

Her naked legs
are thin

cold she stands resolutely
In the empty chilled apartment before the closed blinds

Seen Through the Kitchen Window

Having led everyone to believe
her insides are not viscous black viscera

Mother's flushed face a sticky summer landscape of sand
Father's scratching upper lip her shoulder blades across his chest

He's cradling the top of her head tasting the gin soaked skin
a pasty stretch of boy's manhood

haunts the nape of neck thrusts into abdomen
draws continuous cold sweat

Her fingers are crumbling grey blue
nails threading through decimated skin

amidst these horrific pits of insecurities
and damage so well done a line about

the strange dry red of the buds on the branches

Seek Water

Words from the roof of a mouth that is blistered raw:

wet sinews of skin that fall white,
then red

onto the lines between whispers.

The head moves,

as though following a bird in flight
striking high and darting low.

A shadow jumping from a plane,

parachute forgotten,
as a pair of shoes from a power line or as a pair of eyes on a frail man.

A hand, fingers that involuntarily curl,

and one vulnerable tip to soften the rose,

saliva turned scarlet—
its thorns, gnashing teeth

slice the inside of a cheek.

Words in a Crowded Room

One young woman tentatively raises her hand.

A dodgy professor, handlebar moustache masking lewd grin,
obscures the guest speaker's view.

The body belonging to the sweating palm unnoticed.

A solidly built male in the front
stamps feet, flails darkly haired forearms, protests
uppercase G-O-D as logical conclusion.

A facilitator in paisley bowtie, gaze behind wire spectacles,
well-meaning, demands she stands.

There is a murmur as the small body intrudes,
a throaty snicker: her ill-fitting skirt cuts into soft waist,
nylons slouch over unattractive knees, hairs spiral under chin.

The pallid faces of female friends arch away.

'But if we pre-suppose the non-existence
of the socially responsible choice,

what alternative to the extreme tragedy?'

The speaker nestles sharp elbows into the podium,
sides spilling in tailored tweed of which the audience approves.

'Your pseudo-immateriality fails to disguise
your gender politics, my dear.'

To Gather a Mass

Her thoughts dulled,
She thinks her thoughts dull, or she dulled

A hand warped, knuckles the size of hub caps,
and, a wrist enveloped in bandage, a fold where the hand should be

The room's light in a far corner, the walls grey
and white also in spots along the ceiling, the ceiling stucco
in the hair of her extended family members, an aunt in a child's rocking chair

There are not enough seats in the small room

A cheese plate, dry mozzarella and shriveled green grapes,
a niece spits a seed, pats it into dress pocket

A tablecloth less clean than the entryway mat, damp day, winter boots,
fringed ivory cloth, cigarette burns, tomato stains

The coffee has been burning for the past hour

The room's light in a far corner, shadows clustered
in the swollen middle of the moving room, slow slide of boards, uneven ground,
sickly pink curtains drawn and stuffed into the cracks, frozen air

Her saliva in the mouth's corner,
She laughs and somebody's fork clatters to the ground,

a second cousin swallows a fruit fly

Her Poetry

She has trouble living next to her poetry, and so she cannot reasonably expect him to be a constant picture of ease

but he is
perfectly content

with her unmeasured cadences
and her disparate metaphors

with her sudden emotional outbursts
and bleak visual landscape.

Her poetry waters the rose bushes at the end of its mosaic front walk
every second morning

wearing rabbit slippers and a silk robe.
Her poetry smokes clove cigarettes

with young men in the community center parking lot
they listen to Magnetic Fields

and they philosophize about love.
She sits on her bathroom floor with the lights turned out

and cradles the telephone and his voice into her heaving torso.
In his solid utterances the aphrodisiac concern.

Her poetry drives with its eyes closed
and upsizes her Coca Cola at the movie theatre concession stand.

Her poetry's adoring young men
pay for the overpriced popcorn and laugh at her poetry's film appraisals.

Her poetry's adoring young men
forget one line and then another

her poetry's adoring young men
quit smoking and take up heroin.

She severs the pages of her notebook from its binding
and he drops the lit match into the hemorrhaging words.

He holds her hand while she telephones the fire department.

Not Moving from One Place

In her morning state she careens into the bathroom mirror, mid-afternoon, and murmurs to the toothpaste spittle.

She is amazingly still, self-regard in the ceiling tiles, regretful and joyous. The world without her presence is a beautiful place, still, a beautiful place. Sunshine in her fingertips pulling through knotted strands, hair wet and hanging overhead, pants red and pulling over legs, and sunshine in her face. She is amazingly still, stepping past the neighbour washing down the clear front door, and she careens from pillow down to city sidewalk, and she loves. She loves the sun the air the wind, loves love, the spring the men the women. She especially loves the women, but especially loves the man who loves this love. She is amazingly still, careening into the parallel city, the man who is beautiful, still, a beautiful man without her.

She is behind the glass in the coffee shop and she is against the corner burning cigarette tip in the strands of her hair and she is being made into steam by a beautiful boy, the pattern of the milk is of love, and she is entering the building across the street. She is entering the library and musing aloud in front of beautiful girls. “Loves love, she loves love, the men, the women, the red—”

She is also spiralling downward, missed morning in the bottom of a glass, and missing numbers in a lost touch on some street in some melting mass of winter passing. She is also trembling. She is also passing into remorse and regret. She is also joyous and still drawing in on smoke against the corner and pulling on her pants, the red, and catching the high, the low, the whistle of the man crossing the street, and the tap the tap and tap the tap of the woman in glossy boots.

She is still or stillness is. Stillness consumes her, chews her, cuts her with marble teeth, and makes the pieces of her small, rounded, comforted and comforting. She calls without voice the absent man and she carries the response, which is still absent, which is less than feeling or sensation or real, and she carries the thought of the man’s voice against her peaking nipples her hanging mouth her feet crossing streets, and men, and women, and folded in the coffee shop the library the mirror at which she is still.

Notes

1. “What’s Your Poison?” borrows its title and advertising slogans (indicated by quotation marks) from Kirven Blount’s *What’s Your Poison?: Addictive Advertising of the ‘40s-‘60s*.
2. “A Young Woman, A Morning, A Restroom”, except for small substitutions and changes in syntax, consists entirely of text from Simone de Beauvoir’s “The Narcissist” (*The Second Sex*).
3. “Image of the Breast” draws much inspiration, in form and content, from George Oppen’s surprisingly tender “Image of an Engine.” The italicized lines are a piece of dialogue from the third season of the HBO series *The Wire*.
4. “Anatomy of Breathing” consists entirely of text from Donna Fahri’s *The Breathing Book*.
5. “Oh Christ,” except for small substitutions and changes in syntax, consists entirely of text from Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*.
6. “Sweet Has Always Been Her Sister” draws a great deal of inspiration and language from the 1989 Jane Campion film *Sweetie*.
7. “The Place Underneath the Lights” draws a great deal of inspiration and language from the 1951 László Kardos film *The Strip*.
8. “Only A Small Portion” consists entirely of text from Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen’s *Origins of Expression, the Organ System of the Human Body, Sensing, Feeling and Action*.
9. “Notes On Moving” consists entirely of text from Frances LaBarre’s *On Moving and Being Moved: Nonverbal Behavior in Clinical Practice*.

10. “We Have Really No Absent Friends” consists entirely of found text. The lines at the left margin are from Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, while the indented lines are from entries under “Love” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Quotations*.
11. “Captive Romance” describes scenes from Tom Palumbo’s 1962 Paris photographs.
12. “Fugue” consists partially of text from quotations under “Fugue” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
13. “Successfully Engaging In Surrounding Environments” consists partially of text from Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* and Franz Kafka’s “The Cares of a Family Man” (*The Complete Stories*).
14. “It’s Enough To Make You Sick” consists partially of dialogue from recorded telephone conversations between Andy Warhol and the Chelsea Girls. The text in quotation marks was personally transcribed from an mp3 available on UbuWeb.
15. “The Deciphered World” takes its title from a portion of Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*: “and the cunning animals / realize at once / that we aren’t especially / at home / in the deciphered world.”
16. “Perception in a Total Way” consists partially of text from Juhani Pallasmaa’s *The Eyes of the Skin*.

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