

Minor Arcana

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The Department

of

English

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Canada

ABSTRACT

Minor Arcana

Susan Briscoe

This collection of poetry is divided into two parts. The first contains two narrative sequences. The first sequence is a biography of a woman killed by her husband, prefaced by several poems about her granddaughter's attempt to come to terms with this aspect of the family history as well as found poems excerpted from newspaper articles about the murderer. The second sequence follows the granddaughter's pregnancy and the birth of a child abandoned by its father, all within a framework of tarot mysticism. The second part is comprised of lyric poems indirectly exploring this legacy of violence and abandonment, eventually opening to the possibility of new love. The final long poem, composed of nine lyrics of five couplets, reflects the speaker's ambivalence about marriage in her contemplation of nature.

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In Quebec, he is wanted on charges that he drowned his first wife in a lake near their summer cottage. No one got suspicious for more than 14 years, until he was charged with strangling his second wife, leaving her unconscious on a sidewalk.

In the United States, he led the wandering life of a fugitive, stealing the identity of a born-again Christian broadcaster in Texas and driving the man into bankruptcy.

This strange odyssey has now ended in a Florida hospital where the elderly Quebecker is a ward of the state, suffering from dementia and Alzheimer's disease. A court hearing is to begin reviewing whether he will be extradited to Canada.

"I was shocked and surprised. He seemed like such a sweet little old man," a hospital spokeswoman said of the friendly, soft-spoken patient who claimed he was a fashion designer.

Dredging

Bass

While other children splashed through summer, bodies flashing
with the gulls and full lungs yelling liberation to the lake,

I stood in the shallows, toes curled around pebbles, and peered
into shadows to see the mute weeds bow to the passing bass.

Of course they forced me with lessons and laps. They said
Nanny never learned and she drowned. But I was loyal

to my fear of water: it was Nanny, just buried at my birth,
who showed me how the cold bass lurks with its white belly.

As the kids at the lake turned to furtive thrusting and spraying
and smashing of bottles to cool their heat, I determined

to catch the bass, to make its fish eye see mine. I waded
and waited all summer until I held it, pulsing in my hand:

knew I could slit the fat belly, slide my thumb inside its length,
let the guts spill out.

Monsters

When I was summer-lean and brown
with monsters still under the bed,
my sister, lipglossed, fifteen,
and sassy enough to get her face smacked,
whispered to me one night in our room:

Nanny didn't drown, you know.

I lay very still, listening, not wanting to hear.

Grandpa murdered her.

Of course I didn't believe her.
Grandpa had just been here for a barbecue.
Our parents would never invite a murderer
to eat hamburgers and potato chips on folding lawnchairs.

My sister liked to tease me with impossible information:
foetal pigs pinned open in Biology,
the gym coach who touched girls *down there*...

I didn't believe her.
But I lay a long time that night,
eyes open against the dark.

Dredging

My mother wants no ripples to mar the pool's quiet face
as I dredge, delicately but deeper, for her watery memories.

Half-drowned images bubble slowly to the surface
and she shuts her eyes against each one as it bursts into air.

Details have decayed and fallen away leaving
swollen, distorted forms floating in green-lit depths.

But we are startled too by intact limbs illuminated suddenly
and an unblurred eye, round as a fish's, that peers into mine.

I pocket the eye and we pick through remains quietly,
over coffee. Unhealed wounds gape like fish mouths—

the bandages won't stick anymore so we examine the bodies
like coroners: the red sting of slaps, the blue of bruise;

rape, accident, murder. Now our cups are empty and
she wants her ghosts to sink again, the surface to be still.

The Man in the Picture

There he is again
smiling away near the girl with the cake, 4 candles.

Flip the page, find him
in the row on the couch, Christmas '72.

Back on the church steps,
arm hooked in a bride's.

Next: his invisible trick,
such a success, disappeared for years.

Once his head floats onto the evening news
then nothing for so long we think maybe

he isn't there at all.
Until we open the morning paper

see that face, the grin
fading in, fading out.

He would sadly recount to her the story of his first wife's drowning death. He said she had been walking in a shallow stream when she tripped and fell, hitting her head on the rocky bottom. He said he ran to help her, but fell himself, and when he came to, his wife had drowned in 15 centimetres of water.

At the time he testified that he was suntanning on a beach near the couple's summer cottage when his wife struck him on the head with a rock, knocking him out. He said when he regained consciousness, his wife was floating in the lake. He dove into the water and tried to save her, he told the inquiry, but he panicked and abandoned the rescue effort. He said his wife was suicidal and suffered from depression.

Testifying in March, 1981, he said his wife had approached him as he cooled off in a stream near their cottage and struck him on the head with a rock, knocking him out. He said that when he regained consciousness, his wife was standing in a metre of water, bent over and trying to drown herself. He testified he rushed to help her but as he approached her he noticed blood from the wound she had inflicted and became enraged. Instead of saving her, he said, he plunged her head beneath the surface and she drowned.

Silence

I listen
for the ghosts of sounds:

the cadence of her prayer
in the curve of water
over stones;

the sigh of her last breath
in the sparrow lifting
from the sand.

I listen.
The echoes widen.

Jeanne
(1920-1966)

The Wind in Mont Joli, 1932

She opens her bedroom window;
white curtains billow in
with the lilac breeze.

The first warm day, her brothers
gone swimming but papa said
ce n'est pas pour les filles.

At the back of the yard a gate
to the creek where the wind,
up from the great river,

invites the willows to dance.
They curtsy in their new green
dresses, extend graceful arms,

and she falls in love—imagines
a lover reaching for her hand,
a dance, the swirl of her skirts.

But the wind moves on to the birch:
the willows were too dumb to waltz
down the creek bed to the river

so wide you can't see the other side.
It is the wind, she decides,
not the willow, that she loves.

Brother Armand's Visit

From her open window she watches
for the long black robe, the lilting gait
that bounces the cross upon his chest.

In the monastery since fourteen
(their parents' salvation thus assured),
he is still a young man, only twenty,

but their father receives this son
in the reverent quiet of the parlour
for a long audience and prayers.

After, she drags her brother to the kitchen
where maman and the others wait.
Armand scolds only gently

when she sets his cross in a wide-swinging arc.
This time he stops her childish hands, tells her
she could have her own cross to wear—

can she hear the Virgin calling her?
Evenings she kneels by her window, listening.
The creak and bang of the outhouse door,

the blacksmith's dog sounding for a pack,
Mme Duchesne's cough from across the lane.
And the breeze that comes off the river

to tease the serious elm and scratch
at her window, hoping to caress her hair.
Until one night the wind goes beyond flirting:

it throws a tantrum, bullying the clouds
across the night sky like a wolf chasing sheep.
Then it is grieving, a high keening sound

far above, while below all is still.
She shivers, closes the window.
Fingers her rosary, forgets to pray.

Perhaps this is the Virgin's voice, calling,
lamenting her lost soul. The next visit
she whispers to Armand: she has heard.

Matins (Summer Solstice)

She must not turn her head
to see the Passion illuminated
by the just risen sun, can only
look at its projections distorted,
absorbed by the black backs of nuns.
The true colours would be sapphire-pure,
the red clearer, even, than wine.

But she is allowed to raise her eyes, linger
on the tautness of a tricep extended,
the hollow below his ribs. A scrap
of cloth slipping off thin hips.
The sun reaches, bends its rays
to touch him, and his plaster flesh warms;
her tongue quivers, salivates for communion.

Missed Call

Her father sighs: if only her sister Isabelle had lived;
good families give and a son and a daughter to God.

For days Jeanne traces concentric circles
on the chenille bedspread with the little pompons.
Would have sobbed romantically into her pillow
if there'd been a movie house in Mont Joli—
though papa forbade even novels:

ça met des idées dans la tête.

She writes lists of options: nurse, teacher,
secretary, shop girl. Spinster, prostitute, saint.
Imagines Jeanne d'Arc shearing her own head,
a dainty suit of armour and an army of men
at her back. Burned at the stake. She checks
to see if her hair, cut off by Soeur Évangeline,
has grown long enough for pin curls.

Then one morning the wind touches her bare head,
and her scalp tingles. She can smell the river.

Air Force Base Dance, 1941

How bold to glance first at his mobile mouth,
eyes too darkly lashed but she knows he was looking,
is crossing the floor. She tells herself it is a duty
to dance, to encourage the troops. Sets her own mouth
in a closed smile but suddenly he is there, has taken her,
whirling through the chaos of couplings,
the surprise of wet, hot, his breath on her face,
his hold firm on her waist, her hand.
It will be years before she thinks, how random
those pairs, those uniformed men.

Marriage

The night before, October 1943,
her mother in the girls' bedroom strewn with clothes:
the wedding suit in dark wool, a nightgown –hand-stitched–
stockings, hat. A small suitcase open on the bed.
Germaine sent to finish the pies. Her mother closing
the door, smoothing a place to sit on the bedspread.
Her mother smoothing her apron, smoothing her hair.
But the furrows between her brows not smoothed.
It is time for her to explain a wife's duties
and a husband's rights: one mustn't complain, she says;
and, it will be over quickly, by way of comfort;
there is pride too in a well-kept house, a happy husband;
then children, who were sometimes a consolation.

The Honeymoon

is brief:

He unlocks the door, holds it for her.

She tries not to look at the double bed.

Then the prickly wool of his uniform on her face,
his hands busy at her waist, undoing.

But it's not bedtime yet—what's he doing?

What about her new nightgown?

She thought it would be dark at least, the light off.

But her mother is right: it is over quickly.

Worse is the shame of bending to pick up
her clothes, walking naked to the bathroom.

Housework, 1945

Supper is boiled potatoes, pork chops
fried grey, the can of peas, pea-green, opened,
warmed. She hates to cook, is never hungry.

But the laundry is different.
She washes diapers by hand:
soak, bleach, boil and scrub;
rinse and rinse and rinse again;
bluing for whiter than white
and one more rinse. The water
as hot as her hands can bear.
A banner of rectangles across the yard.
The correct way to fold,
the perfect stack on the shelf.

Yes, there is pride, and consolation, in this.

André

Her life is a litany of losses
that could be named, but how to know
what she held on to, when she let go?

She is ironing, watching her children
from the window, playing ball.
André is two. The ball bounces
into the street. A streetcar.

Fourteen months of leaning
on the rail of a hospital crib,
of penance and prayers.
But He won't listen,
grows a new child within her instead.
She doesn't want to eat but
her stomach has no soul.
André lies still – the tiniest breath –
but the new one tumbles and twirls,
even hiccups, irreverent, in her belly.

Then kicks her way out,
hating her mother's grief.

Appraisal

He'd always known the value was set too high;
life was cheaper, indeed, by far.
He was never bothered by the war
and its dismembered thousands,
nor the rattling breath of his father's slow,
tubercular expiration.
Once he found a beggar, turned
from their door (the younger half
of his widowed mother's ten
already sent to the orphanage),
dead in the lane. He watched the flies
at the open eyes until an idea:
went through every pocket—most in shreds
that would hold nothing. The only find
a medallion of the Sacred Heart,
possibly silver but probably tin,
pinned to the shirt pocket, and
a small photograph, unglued
from a frame and wrapped in a rag,
a pale woman with pale hair. Straight
to the pawnshop with the medallion.

Domestic Bliss

He comes home for supper,
waits while she brings his plate.
She chews small mouthfuls,
must concentrate to swallow.
He sets his fork down
if the children aren't quiet.
Then bedtime, and she lingers
over the goriest tales
of monsters or *le diable*,
teaches them prayers to say
if he should get them before they wake.
The eldest at eight imagines
the baby Jesus crucified,
and Jeanne soothes them
with admonishments to goodness,
stays with them in the dark.
She hopes he will be too tired.

Holiday

Just birthdays aren't enough.
She invents occasions to celebrate,
decorate. Bakes Betty Crocker cakes,
sings Happy Half-Birthday to You.

She curls their hair, ties ribbons
into bows. Shows them how to spin
their party dresses until the crinolines peak out
and rooms turn from square to round.

Valentine's Day a froth of lace and pink.
Easter, a parade of hats like baskets.
Le St-Jean Baptiste, Dominion Day, even
the Fourth of July without discrimination.

For Halloween

She sews sequins onto curtains,
glues fairy wings to coat hangers.
Lipstick smiles on hopeful faces.
Round her own neck strings of beads,
a veil or gypsy kerchief, miscellany of skirts.
And into the night they flee. Make demands
of strangers, door-to-door. But this
is their only trick, and they never get away.
Straggle home with smeary faces,
console themselves with toffees.

Fairy Tales, 1950

Afternoons while the fourth baby naps, Jeanne
and her daughters build forts: hang their bedding
over tables, push the couch from the wall.

They crawl through chair mazes with invitations
to balls, assign scouts to the watch. Sometimes,
they whisper of rescuing knights, dark and tall.

But at five o'clock the fortress falls.
They collapse the walls, stand the furniture in place.
The girls drag the blankets up the stairs

with a sweep like Cinderella's skirts. Count
not Snow White's seven but five plates to the table
and ask: how long to grow a rope of hair?

Uneasy Reprieve

Going to buy some cigarettes.
The welcome slam of the door.

Supper prepared, his place set, not cleared. Hours
swell with listening for the rasp of the latch.
Days. Waiting, nervous as sparrows.

Return

He comes back as if he's been gone an hour,
asks what's for supper, reads the evening paper.
After, he calls Christiane to his lap, pulls a lollipop
from a pocket. Two more for the others.
The baby's too young, Jeanne says,
not so loudly that he could hear.
Christiane holds the stick while the baby licks.

Bailiffs

They don't hurry.
Room by room, everything.
The suitcase once packed for her honeymoon,
the clothes she sewed by hand.
Tell her to take the baby out of the crib.
Stove, table, chairs: the girls wailing,
"How will we eat? Where will we sleep?"
They leave only outlines in dust on the floor,
the marks of their heavy boots.

She stands, holding the baby. Nowhere to put him down.

Her Daughter Lost Again

She rushes up aisles, calls
Christiane! Christiane!
Parts racks of coats, peers
under dresses, behind stacks.
Frantic. *Christiane!* Louder.
The baby in her arms wakes up,
howling. Shoppers staring.
Raymonde, the good one,
trying to keep up.

And then she stops:
Christiane's yellow curls
bouncing towards her,
a lollipop stick in a sticky mouth.
Then her hand, faster than a thought,
across the little face. The lollipop
flies out, skids across the floor,
disappears under a display of nylons.
When Christiane cries,
it is for the lost lollipop.

Recovery

When the blizzard finally stops,
she looks out to see trees languid in late summer leaf.
They are taller. He takes her from the hospital
and the ministering hands of its nuns
to a house she doesn't recognise.
He looks well, not a lonely man.
They make the rounds of foster homes,
the orphanage, to collect their children.
They have grown too.
Christiane has stories of unkind nuns
but Raymonde doesn't want to upset her mother,
and the baby, already three, won't talk.

Bridge, 1960

A job at Eaton's, Ladies' Accessories.
The morning bus across the bridge,
the river shining its promises.

A bridge might lead anywhere. She thinks
of Victor from Men's Apparel, socks his specialty,
and smiles—that time at the lunch counter,

the coffee and pie he contrived to pay for
with an awkward wink at the waitress,
his difficulty in keeping his left hand hidden.

But the evening bridge leads only home
and the river, she sees, flows backwards:
Montreal, Quebec, Mont-Joli.

Jeanne, undressed

Girdle peeled, brassiere un-
hooked with the end of the day,
Jeanne's body folds in on itself,
collapses, an S.
Her breasts are withered things.
The belly sighs out, remembering.

Vacation, Summer '65

Hers is a body of stone,
sinking through pale columns of light.
Above, the dark rectangle of raft,

the bright limbs of her children,
swimming limbs that kick
with the mysterious ability to stay afloat.

She has prayed to the Virgin
but buoyancy is a blessing withheld from her.
Would Venus have been more generous?

She watches her daughter, a teenager,
(and what new gods does she pray to?)
swim down, hair a slow golden swirl, a halo,

searching for her, a woman who cannot float.
The girl reaches among tenuous pillars
in this strange temple to pull her up,

back into the air, to the raft
where the light is bright and clear
and a breeze sidles up to lick her skin dry.

A Cottage

She doesn't know where he got the money.
Said Chanel wanted him to do a new line,
separates for fall. Now here on Soles Road

a small white bungalow, aluminum siding.
All around old farms, some fields gone feral,
and mountains bringing the horizon near.

Just below the house a wide brook
meandering through pasture, into woods.
They walk down, the heels of her pumps

sinking into the soft loam of the slope,
then scraping against the rocky beach.
Raspberry brambles catch at her stockings.

He skips a stone into the stream: See,
not deep enough to drown—a joke, he laughs.
He says they'll sunbathe here, invite friends.

She smiles, nods: another house to clean,
and extra cooking; she hates to cook. Plans
cheez whiz on crackers, sliced olive on top.

She watches the scraggly poplars, the scrub
like a crouched forest creeping across the field.
Air so still the dangling leaves barely move.

In the car she checks the runs in her nylons,
the gouges in her shoes. She'll need sneakers
and slacks, flip-flops. A new bikini, he decides.

Suspicion

Once, he sees her lips soften,
a half-smile, not shared.
Grabs her by the arm, swings
her around for a hand, hard, across the face.
Pushes her to the floor and yanks up her skirt.
The rip of a blouse she had sewn,
her small, even stitches.

Her face turned away.

Whore, he says, and leaves the house.

Jeanne in the Confessional, 1966

Her flesh blooms darkly
in purple and blue, in sick green;

a foul lily scent
fills the unlit box.

Her words are a bird panicked,
crashing – too loud – against this cage:

he is patient as a cat,
switching its tail in wait.

But the priest insists:
there are always sacrifices to be made.

Martyrology

Her daughter has her own daughters now,
and another on the way.

There are doctor's appointments,
afternoons at Nanny's for the girls.

When she picks them up the eldest says:
Mommy, Grandpa pushed Nanny down the stairs.

She begs her mother to come stay with them,
leave him finally. But no, Jeanne says.
There is nothing to be done.

Smoke Rings

Driving to the cottage in a big new blue car,
heat shimmering over the road. Her dress stuck
to her back, sweat dripping between her breasts.
But he blows blue smoke from his nose in an even stream,

and halfway there he is singing, Frank Sinatra favourites,
generous vibrato, pausing for deep hauls,
a pack on the dash. He knows all the words.
She stays silent. He has told her she has no voice.

In the evening he is still singing, dancing too,
crème de menthe on ice in one hand, menthol cigarette
in the other. Aznavour. He is velvety smooth.
Perfect rings of smoke expand around his head.

With a free hand between cigarettes,
he summons her to dance, tinkling the ice in his glass.
She turns her face away. Come Jeannie, he says,
dance with me one last time.

Accounting

In the morning he goes over the details:
He has to make a payment on the cottage,
maybe take the bank manager out for another drink.
A few utility bills too. The car is okay,
it would be a fluke if they found him.

The \$3000 from the new life insurance policy
would cover all that, with spending money to spare.
Maybe a little trip to Maine with Chantal
in the new car; he can't bring her here yet.
A grieving man can go away though.
Nobody would think anything of that.
Christiane can look after the boy well enough.

August 6, 1966

Quiet in the kitchen,
Jeanne waits for the percolator.

Already the sun is high and hot, pulsing;
through the window she can see the stream

shining hard. The crescendo of the cicada,
its thrum filling her head. Not a breath of wind.

She has dressed in her bathing suit;
he has gathered the beach towels,

the folding chairs by the door.
He hums.

The Act

It is harder than he thought
to hold her head down. Her skin
is wet and slippery with suntan lotion,
and she's fighting him, trying to get away,
moving every limb at once like a caught cat.
He loses his footing, falls, head on a rock.
The shock of pain, blood from his forehead—the bitch:
a knee in her back, arms pinned, face
down in the stream. Holds her like that,
breathing steady until her body goes slack.
Waits a little longer to make sure.
Finally he rises, wades towards the beach.
Stops to rinse the blood from his face.
His forehead throbs, a nasty bump.
How to explain that. He looks around; nobody.
She is still, the current turning her body,
moving it slowly downstream.
Now he must run to the neighbours for help.

Falling Arc

And so she was given
that last moment of summer—
a rising arc of prisms, sun refracted
in the spray fanning out, expanding,
a thousand explosions of light
filling her vision, rising,
while close by a great quiet waited,
waited for the arc to fall away.

Then the river, gathering its waters again,
resumed its gentle flow.

Eclipse

In that half-dark between worlds,
our ears and mouths full of water,
she called my name in a rush
of sibilants, tried to warn me.

When the sun and the moon shifted,
her body went limp in his arms,
and I turned in her daughter's womb,
caught her name like a small sinking stone.

Arcana

Wheel of Fortune

She shuffles the cards,
they flutter like wings against her hands,
a bird caught
then stilled,
laid before me

I am to turn
just one

it spins,
won't stop

Wands: Pregnancy Test

i

small plastic stick
in not-yet-gendered white,
its blank-faced head seeing far into the future,
reducing the most complex possibilities
to a simple plus or minus

ii

a magic wand in miniature
that, with a flourish, a splash,
and a count of three minutes,
twists the world's kaleidoscope of colours
into a rainbow never before seen

iii

or the bad trip lollipop of Romper Room
spiralling psychedically into some child's face
will it see Katy or Jonathan, Amanda or Kyle –
and always the fear that it might malfunction,
reveal a death mask or monster

And now we have these months to wait,
to see.

Seven of Cups

So I have swallowed the bitter pit.
It has rooted, sits hard and huge now
in my belly. White root fingers jab
at bladder, twine round intestines.
Relentless as weeds in cement,
they can crack bones, unhinge me.
The stem pushes up past lungs,
a trunk in my throat, gagging,
choking me mute
while each leaf of possibility
unfurls inside my skull.

When I open my mouth two plums,
whole and purple and dusky blue,
roll off my tongue and I catch them,
cradle one in each palm, careful,
for the thumbs may bruise.

Seven of Discs

It is August
and the fruit hangs heavy
from branch and vine and bramble.

I too am heavy,
lolling like a summer melon
in the uncertain shade of the poplar.

I thought
I'd sit placid as a plum,
grow plump and rosy as a peach.

But the fruit oozes
and the wasps swarm.
You have gone

and the house is full
of your absence,
full of damp laundry and dust.

The children whine, fret
and I wait, wait
through this swelling, sweltering month.

Magician

You practice your disappearing act
before it is perfected, permanent.

The first time you simply don't come home
and I consider the possibilities:

a)
You who disdains helmets
hurtling through midnight streets –
a streak of headlights, the blurred pavement
stilled to a magnified mosaic of pebbles;
your skull cracked
as delicately as a hard-cooked egg.

b)
Or, happy at last with your banjo
and bottle in the basement tavern,
otherworldly as an aquarium
when once I peered in the window
to find you, blinking blurry-
eyed and dumb as a lumpfish.

c)
Or in the bed of that unpregnant woman
who sang to your strumming
and laughed as you stumbled, arm-in-arm.

If I could choose, it would be the egg.

Hierophant

I wake exhausted, unsure what to feel.
Skin so thin it is translucent. I try on
different emotions; righteous indignation
is more comfortable, I decide, than rage or despair,

and I practice a fine speech to go with it.
Mid-afternoon you saunter in, loudly
clanging the gate, toss a scant *hi*. But this bravado
is a meagre disguise masking what—

fear? Ha! I strike my moral pose with hands
on hips, bullying you with my belly.
I am not far into my speech when you contract,
contrite, begging forgiveness, avowing love.

How easy to pull your hips against me, touch
my tongue to your salty neck, but I calculate
that I must not give up my grievance too soon:
there are unknowns in this equation.

Five of Swords

Trapped in a pentangle
drawn of swords, hilt to tip

yellow jacket panic and sting,
interlocked blades turned in

pull one sword
but the trap holds fast

pull another,
it's still closed tight

pick three of the five to open it:
baby-kids-man-house-work

No Priestess of Discs

The children cling limply to the gate
but I am too tired for the park
with its screaming splash pool,
its hurtling swings and slides.
I give them popsicles instead
and they are happy, briefly.
I lay myself on the lawn cot,
a heaviness of body and lightness of mind
like cream and sugar stirred
into the warmth of stolen sleep.
I try to stay awake—but the afternoon buzzes
with hot-tempered traffic. The drone
lures me over the chasm of sleep
where I dream of light and shifting things,
nothing so solid as this body weighted
with water and womb. But soon
the kids have sucked to the sticks
and grab at me with sticky hands.

The Emperor

We walk through the old ghetto, gentrified,
windows aproned with pink impatiens,
doors painted correct colours and closed.

From a parlour window, piano music
waltzes its practiced steps down the walk
while gentlemen trees stand straight and nod.

Then *FWAP!* Right before us a pigeon
plunges to the pavement and stunned, staggers
its broken body, dying too slowly.

And there another, dead already. And another.
All around, the trees with their deaf old heads,
the matronly homes, doors tight as pursed lips.

Shaman of Wands: Jesus on Clark Street

There is work to be done.

He strides by on the sidewalk, cross
shouldered, sturdy as builder's lumber.
In the back pocket of jeans, blueprints
folded. Headed straight for the site.

I am cross this morning. Consider
jeering from the doorway, calling
out dumb but mean curses, too lazy
to go to the gate and throw stones.

Empress, reversed

I had imagined many things,
none of them this.

Resting in a bower of childless bliss,
every ache massaged away,
the kitchen clean and laundry done—

Riding a carousel of caresses and kisses
like a queen or minor goddess
dripping sweet juices—

Receiving dishes full of proteins,
salads full of vitamins, offerings
from your devoted hands—

Such a fool with my round-as-a-gooseberry belly!
But faith in love can be a tenacious thing,
like a bad case of leaf scale, resistant to any treatment.

Shaman of Cups

You have changed all the numbers:
flipped twos into fives, reversed values

and signs. In your altered algebra
the integers are unintelligible, spilled

cups are full. You stir the cauldron counter-
clockwise, count in circles instead of straight;

the odds are even now.

Turned Lovers

Before, you were always near, never kept
to your side of the bed. Always ready.
As my belly grows you diminish,
recede and blur at the edges,
not completely here. You make love to me
in the dark, quick like a whisky to dull
some vague pain. Unnecessary errands,
keeping the kids too long at the park,
leaving earlier for work. At home
extra chores in remote corners, unplanned
naps. Slowly, perhaps slyly, removing
yourself from our lives. Soon nothing
may be left but a sigh, a stirring of dust
under the bed, this mysterious bulge.

Seven of Swords

In the days of your absence
my hearing filters all noise
for the sound of the gate,
the only sound that matters.

Death

At the corner, caught
in a sudden whirlwind
of debris, a latex glove,
a ghost-hand, rises,
floats in slow circles.

The Hanged One

I look up at the glowing green
of sunlight through leaves,
see the veins that connect
dark, wet earth to sun and breeze

*She is suspended,
the serpent twines around the tree,
holds her fast by one foot;
hanging upside down,
hands dangling in the river*

imagine unborn eyes opening
to the glow of red,
the pulsing paths,
placenta, umbilicus.

Devil Upside Down

Noiselessly, you have jumped the gate,
a jig hidden in your step.

You are back, and with a flourish throw off
the heavy cloak of penitence.

A swish of your tail pulls the slack
from the chains around this dismal flat

and a kick of your heels
trumpets the extent of the disaster.

Son of Wands

You appear and disappear
like a Cheshire cat—no, moodier:
a tomcat and skittish,
you slip through my arms.
We haven't made love in weeks;
you say you are tired.
Seem blurred,
almost not there at all.

In my longing for you
my womb begins its slow opening.

Ten of Cups

When I wake I know it is the day of the birth.
You go to work anyway, two hours early.
My joints won't bend in the heat.
Fill the plastic pool on the front pavement,
dabble our feet, unsatisfied.
Snap at the kids. Swat at the flies.
My body demands sleep but they could drown,
even in a few inches.

The neighbour brings bunches of grapes,
the surplus from her inner city vines.
The kids devour them like little Bacchi.
The things that grow in this neighbourhood:
down the street apples red enough to tempt
any evil stepdaughter, on the next block
pears so perfect
the tree might lodge a partridge.

But today I need fresh lemonade. Out
to buy lemons but none anywhere.
The children follow, dusty and desultory
from store to store, stopping for insistent contractions.
Two blocks up Clark to feed them but it's closed;
pizza slices instead, orange juice from concentrate.
Their evening bath in the wading pool,
drain the suds in the gutter.

Ten of Discs

The baby will come to this: a flat
with paint two tenants old, bathroom grout
black with mildew, and an infestation
of ants so big I hear them click
across the floor at night. Garbage
bags of baby clothes still unsorted.
It will gaze into our eyes as newborns do,
see that we glance away from each other.
There are so many things still undone:
we agree that you should do the dishes,
disagree about the linens. I want
to bathe, to wash my hair, for at least me
to be clean. But the midwife knows,
says there isn't time.

Son of Swords

It is not the pretty little girl I had,
unreasonably, expected. No.
It is a miniature of you,
everything exactly the same
except red, and new.

Justice, righted

It was a girl, I am sure,
that we did uproot.
Grabbed by the cotyledon
—that tiny green flag on a fragile white stem—
a small but firm tug pulled her from the earth
and she was tossed aside.

Only, it was not like that.

I asked for a cup to hold her
and took her to a forest, dug with my fingers
in soil clean and fragrant with decay,
planted her there.

Now when I visit the woods I listen for her, wonder
if she is blue jay or bull moose, trillium or birch.

Two of Discs

The fly lands, settles wings, assesses
epidermal terrain, tracking
the sweet smell of milk.

Deliberately, it approaches nipple, lips;
in maternal effusion I want
to feed it too, release streams of milk
into hungry stomachs everywhere.

Priestess of Swords

I turn, wake in a wet twist of sheet and know:
you are not here. You will never be here.

The knowing creeps down my throat
like a cold toad and sits.

I get up, walk shivering through rooms
lit by streetlights, full of new shadows.

There is nothing to wait for anymore.
I will smooth the sheets, lie beside your absence.

Magician, again

In the photo the midwife took
you are partly cut off, scared and blurred;
the baby invisible in blankets
but for one red foot thrust out.

Now there is no mistaking the hungry furrow
of your brow, the possessive suckling.
I recognise the curve of your buttock,
the penis erect, perfect: one and a half inches.

The neighbours look confused when they see
you in my arms. How to explain?
This is not a funny joke, I tell you sternly.
I catch myself holding my breath, waiting

for a puff of smoke, your vanishing act
magically resolved, restored to your original size.
But a month passes and you gain two pounds.
This trick has gone terribly wrong.

Ace of Discs

Amazingly strong and agile,
you pull yourself early to standing,
rattle the gate and laugh.

Star

One star.
That's all I can see
in this lurid city sky.

But it shines on me
its small, insistent light,

slips through the celestial nets
and falls, a straight line

to my open mouth.
I swallow and hold it,
feel it shine.

Epilogue: Justice

We have waited long for this thaw,
for this shy spring and my awkward digging
in soil still full of stones.

This winter has lasted three years,
your afterbirth frozen in a yogurt container
like the spaghetti sauce. He wrote PLACENTA
on masking tape across the lid.

Thawed, it looks exactly the same
as the night of your birth: raw, purple-red,
glistening with blood and taut membranes;
the twist of cord coiled, cut.
It is hard to look at.
I want to bury it quickly;
ask you to hold the sapling straight
while I push in the earth,
tamp it firmly down.

II

Recreation

Fox

She runs across the yard,
across the street and another yard,
defiant of our definitions.

Once this was a farmhouse, greying
matron seated on the hilltop,
spreading her skirt of fields.
The fox was patient then,
and wary, watching
for the unguarded moment,
the careless chicken
and the farmer's turned back.
Before that this was Forest
where the Fox and the Hare
played civilised games
and listened to the tales of the Crow.
But now the widows and retired folk
have crept up the hill like turtles
in their modest bungalows.
And the forest where the hunted
coyote and deer lie hidden—
the forest crouches behind the fence,
waits to advance in the dark.

This fox doesn't wait or hide.
She is tired after the long winter,
tired and hungry
and a little shabby in her red furs.
But it doesn't matter:
she whisks her tail
and tosses her head,
running with the sun
across the spring snow.
She is on fire -- so alive!
Every tip of fur alive.

Recreation

I stand in the sea to my hips
floating two thin boys the colour of sand.
Our game is this:

Just as the swells peak behind us,
I release them so the crested waves
crash over their heads,
pulling them under, tumbling
their untethered bodies in a wash
of coral-stone and saltwater.

I count the seconds that they are gone.
One, two, three, four, five, six —
nothing but me and the sky

until the sea spews them out:
limp-limbed forms rolled onto the beach,
a moment on the wavering edge
before they scramble to their feet like crabs,
spluttering sand and salt—
while I wait for the gasps
of their first breaths,
to see if they will laugh or cry.

Now they whoop triumphant,
wading back to me
so I can let them go again
and again.

Weekend

The Sun lobs great gobs
of sunshine, huge fistfuls
aimed at the good dads throwing
baseballs, tossing babies,
chasing bikes and strollers,

the weekend wheels whirling,
spinning through Saturday, Sunday;
the Sun, the dads with little satellites
hurling yellow all around,
blinding us, knocking us down.

The Storm at Springhill Farm

I had dreamt three times of the end of the world.
At the farm you fall from the bed and I awake
to your cry. Before I had always caught you,
sensing your danger, reaching—faster

than gravity—before your opening mouth
released its sound. Always you sleep next to me,
the only safe place. But this night you fall,
and we awake to the storm crashing to get in,

ripping up trees and tearing down wires.
The non-stop strobe nauseates, disorients.
We all huddle pyjama-clad in the kitchen, holding
the children. We cannot walk or see or hear

in a roar so loud there is no telling
the pounding of thunder, wind, and rain
from the crashing of the world around us.
Our quick electric switches are nothing

but cheap magic tricks, the dark hidden
under a hat. But this fear is not of darkness
but of darkness illuminated,
the interrogation lights of the gods.

Border Crossing

I am driving south,
the road ahead clear, straight.
How easy to keep going,

to not turn back, to drive even faster
towards the border so carelessly
undefended. It is close

and easily crossed with any fib.
They would not ask what I left behind:
children, house, laundry, mortgage;

me, that woman with that name,
those stories unfinished.
Just a little further.

Satellites

Only the satellites—graceless tin cans
flung from the earth like litter from a car
or rocks from sling shots—
move in the wrong directions.

Always I mistake them for shooting stars
—meteoric messengers of luck or love—
and believe, so briefly, that I have been chosen
and blessed—until they continue past my upturned face,

unmoved in their magicless motion.
They wind round the earth: a ball of yarn
with so many ways to come undone,
but they are senseless of the dangers
of tangle and strangle and runaway unravel.

Broken Fences

I am seeing them everywhere—

boards splintered like snapped bones,
chain link crumpled, kicked in the gut,
and posts, looking to rest, that lean against nothing.

Then a horse running crazy—
gate smashed behind it,
no witness to its breach.
I was running the stony road
when we startled each other,
caught ourselves in a thin snare of sight.

I stepped towards the horse
thinking what—
swing to its back, ride it away
like a fairytale steed?
Or subdue it with a trainer's assurance,
lead it in to stable and stall, a hook on the wall?
Wild-eyed it wheeled from me,
ran unsure, fences again beyond.
I too turned and ran.

Last Day of August

A day of headache,
an attempt to sleep in.

A day when nothing will get done
but a listless shifting between tasks,

a book opened but turned over.
A day when I will not look

at the dulling green
and muted blue of the hills.

but might set an easel, paint
instead a bowl or vase,

something to catch and hold
something from this last day.

At Monk's Pond

I am as thin and dry as these autumn leaves,
 an empty husk to be crunched under the foot
 of this god who strides through the woods,
 his head, humming, above the clouds.

I lie on the dock that slants into Monk's Pond,
 stretching my hollow bones on this crooked altar,
 wishing that it would tilt, slide my body
 into water that would close, be still.

The leaves float down to me but the wind
 whisks them away as they reach to touch.
 I have been here too long. The monk's ghosts
 are here too and I want them to say no,

you do not belong in this holding pond: you
 are of the forest floor, layer upon layer of death
 pregnant already with next year's spring. But still
 the leaves skim over me though I beg to have just one

linger lightly like a hand on my belly,
 my thigh, pausing in the desire to be just there.
 How easily the leaves release their hold.
 When it is time, they simply let go and fall

into a sky as blue as the chapel ceiling.
 Now the wind whips up, yanks
 a flurry of leaves from their branches.
 The air is filled with their swirling tumbles

like the snow to come, the snow which will tuck
 all stirrings of life tight under its sterile sheet.
 And then heaven will lie upon that bed,
 pressing its weight.

They are there for a long time, the leaves,
 some current of wind pushing them up
 above the trees, into the sky, holding them there
 like a child lifted to see over a fence. So high

they catch the light of the descending sun,
ignite in bright yellow, a last burst
of joy, careless, as if gravity were a choice,
dancing as if death were a celebration.

Geography Lessons

For years I've driven over the unmapped roads,
remembering landmarks I can't find,
fields overgrown with birch as thick as weeds.

Where is the little river and the old mill
at the crossroads where the water pools and falls?
And the cottage, the path to the pebbled beach?

We learned how meandering rivers
straighten their curves over time, lopping off loops
in the interest of renewed efficiency.

But in another generation they will slow,
move around stones and accumulated silt,
take the long way around again. Sometimes

they even dry up, disappear completely.
Around here people want ponds: excavate
until water seeps up from below, or dam streams.

But sometimes the dams don't hold, the ponds
don't fill, and it takes years before the weeds
will grow again in that sterile, scraped-out dirt.

Perhaps the river I will find is not
the stream I remember, its edges shifting
every season, mounds of sand building

or washing away with the spring floods,
each summer to find anew the deep part
where the current slowed, the smoothest beach.

Slipping Stars

I have left the house for the yard
to sleep under a sky of lost summers,

the earth pressed against me
like an old lover at quiet.

The moon rises in the east,
the stars shift to the west,

the whole world slips sideways.
Suddenly everything is in its place

and I can close my eyes on this night
and know rest.

Flood

Flood

A night full of dreams,
dreams flooding my sleep,
tumbling their dark waters

as if finally a dam broke.
You have been pulling
the stones for months—

thought I wouldn't notice
(the pick behind your back)
but I knew, waited

for the slow crash
and the rush to wash me
away or wash me clean.

New Love

I've not pockets enough
for all this.

Grown used to a frugal life:

taken only slim dimes,
hard-won or stolen,
slipped into a click-shut purse;

kept notes of promise,
worn thin as lint.

But now I will go to the kitchen,
pull out every pot and bowl
and fill them all full, this sudden abundance
spilling into them, glistening,
overflowing.

Surfaces

Tables and floors, horizontal planes
intervening against gravity, ready
to accept anything.

Vertical blanks preferring solitude—
only a nail could force them to take
another close.

The curve of a bowl holding,
unwilling to release its object
unless upset.

Yesterday you were the bowl;
today I am the table and you
are the wall.

Handfasting

Not only the moon but the stars too.

The first a promise pulled from the sky
and tied to my hand like a balloon—
a lovelorn ghost, luminous and round.

The second a circle of workaday vows
plucked from a universe of needs and fixed
for the ordinary orbit of years.

Yours a band like the milky way wrapped
around a finger, its even gleam my reminder:
I am the one thing you have to love you.

Now our hands idle of work for a week,
we measure segments from knuckle to knuckle,
press each pink pad against another.

Test the weight of our rings. You hold my fist
until it opens. I turn your hand, cupped, full.

Winter into Spring

Frozen mist, no mountains this morning—
the world is a smaller circle.

Look nearer: ribbons
of deer tracks strung across the snow

and three shrivelled apples
that never fell.

Spring in the subtlest colours of winter:
the faint pink of maple, golden tinge of birch,

but spruce almost black
against the whitest greys.

So cold the house is cracking—
up before dawn, wood for the stove.

Deer in the moonlight, huddled
at the cedar; they must eat

or freeze. Seems impossible
that their small bodies keep warm,

that their cloven hooves don't draw the ice
up into their bones, still their hearts.

How do I not find chickadees, frozen
little feathered lumps, scattered on the snow?

Last night in the moonlight,
the shadow of smoke on the snow,

and coyotes, nearer this time,
yipping and howling.

If I am very careful,
I can trace the arc of a thing

across the sky,
know its beginning and end.

I watch the moon set, turn,
wait for the sun to rise.

A music,
variations in repetition,

each tree
against the outline of hills.

You have laid traps
all along the edges.

This morning, a field mouse,
soft brown fur and clean white belly.

I could skin the whole family,
stitch pretty mittens.

Kitchen tulips too red,
daffodils too yellow

in the horizontal light of winter.
A dream of our fine blue crystal

shattering at my touch.
Dry air snaps with static,

dissatisfaction. I try to watch
the angle of light shift

but can only measure the movement
in intervals of attention.

The crows are a nuisance at this hour.
I am coming to know their caws,

their serious dramas. The one
with the broken voice box,

their common outrage at the cat.
Proprietary swoops across the yard.

They are not peripheral creatures
like the deer who linger quietly, waiting.

You have been wary.
I cut my hair one strand at a time.

A drawing exercise: negative shapes.
What is left unsaid

becomes the affirmation.
I breathe

the spaces between lines,
widen the margins.

Between inhalation and
exhalation, I can change direction.

And see,
so much of the sky is clear.

The clouds have wrapped themselves
around the shoulders of the mountain.

I contemplate the woodpile
and its promise of warmth.

While you sleep I hold my hand near
to feel your heat.

The snow melts first
at the base of things;

large stones and trees,
even fence posts, radiate.

Erik Satie's black lines on white,
songs like winter forms.

I draw a self-portrait like all the others,
a scribble in orange crayon,

and a drawing of you,
your light, graceful lines.

A small snow shrinks the landscape;
its falling fills minutes.

It has been cold, but here,
a petite ouverture à danser.