

Near Here

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of

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**Canada**

## ABSTRACT

Near Here

Beth Côté

Near Here is a collection of narrative and lyric poems that probe the speakers' familial relationships. In the poems of the first section, the speakers range from reflective to desperate in their attempts to reconcile the past with the present. These poems give way to the narrative long poem that chronicles a young woman's effort to grapple with the death of a past lover. A short series of dream poems echoes the sense of uneasiness in the previous two sections and prefaces the profound sadness that the speaker of the final long poem, "Near north", faces. The speaker in this final long poem is confronted with the harsh and mesmerizing setting of Saskatchewan's north; she is compelled to project her own sense of futility and anxiety onto the daunting natural landscape of her new, temporary home. Through the changing seasons of this foreign environment, this final poem recognizes the renewal that could not be gleaned from the details of memory.

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The poems “Finger”, “Climbing tree”, “At the playground” and sections of “First elegy” appeared previously in a chapbook published by Delerium Press in 2004. Thanks to Kate and Heather for that beautiful hand-sewn book.

for

Laura, Kate and Dan

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**Finger**

I come home to the empty house, no note.  
Evidence of something, can't be pieced together,

blood droplets on the floor from the garage door  
to the downstairs bathroom sink, then

upstairs and out the front entrance. The minivan is gone.  
As my head grows too heavy for my neck, the phone rings.

It's nothing. Just a father's finger caught in the door  
squished and split, the tip pinched off but

stitched back together. Not the finger I remember.  
I am afraid to see. It's not about me.

**Photograph, 1980**

-after Patricia Young's "Photograph, 1958"

I sit on my father's orange chair,  
legs reaching for the cushion edge.  
He leans beside me. His open face  
in profile. I am almost two, my mouth  
open, chubby fingers splayed in  
descriptive gesture. He listens,  
an expression of complete absorption.  
What am I telling him?  
I no longer know  
the story that holds his interest.  
My father wears his light blue work shirt  
open to the third button. His moustache dark  
against a tanned summer face.  
I'm in a sleeper and have wet hair.  
These are details.  
Past the flower-papered wall  
are two bedrooms, a bathroom, kitchen,  
three steps down to the back door,  
more down to the vacant basement suite.  
Years later,  
we will own a house of our own  
near the airport in a different town. My father  
will cease to speak for two days  
because of me. My mother will try  
to intervene with little success.  
In this photograph,  
my father looks intently into my shining face.  
I babble on and I would gladly  
tell that story a thousand times more  
to avoid the pointed silence  
that will one day take hold.



**Kitten**

My sister let me watch her kitten for a month.  
First thing he did was scratch my foot. He waited  
two days, for the right moment in the night,

to rest his careful weight on my pillow.  
I kept my eyes squeezed shut. When she returned,  
he lingered between us. I scooped him up,

to hand him over. She was in town a few weeks  
then off again. This time her cat stayed with a friend.  
And I read again about the little girl whose curiosity

led her to a tangled garden. I saw her outside  
that empty house hacking away years of weeds.  
It was the boy in the wheelchair who frightened me most.

## Highway

It was not quite summer when we got the call.  
You lost control of the car. Mother said,

“I’ve had enough now, it’s time she came home.”  
Afterward, you were more afraid

of the sound than the consequence.  
There were pictures of your Cavalier,

but I saw that beige Buick from years earlier,  
crushed in the ditch halfway out to the Circle 6 drive-in;

me in a Mustang with the teenaged boy behind the wheel  
who laughed when I said we should stop.

## Earthworms

You can't save all the earthworms.  
Some will get cut by the spade,  
drowned in a puddle, scorched  
on the back deck, squished underfoot.

Sometimes the pressure of your fingers  
pinches them in two. Each half would become  
a new worm, but that's a myth. As a child,  
I kept garden worms in a bucket

until Mother'd finished tilling, then returned  
them to their fresh-turned earth. But sometimes  
I forgot. There was so much else to think about.  
One spring, the mud was so soft,

I stuck my boot in up to the lip, pulled out  
only a sock. By late summer, silver aspen  
shoots had grown in from next door. Mother  
had to pull the young ones up by the roots.

**Proximity**

Our back lane smells  
like grease, wet  
dust, motor-oil  
and barbecue.

I want a Hibachi  
more than anything,  
spend all afternoon tiling  
a ply-wood table

to hold it. By the time  
I can afford to go, the store is out  
of summer merchandise.  
I buy a plastic Jack-o-lantern

on a whim. The woman  
across the alley lights  
Tiki torches that burn  
thick and oily. Our rooms

reek of citrus smoke. Time  
and time again, I forget.  
Check the elements, sniff  
the radiators. Fear

I've missed something,  
go to bed worried:  
the smoke detector, back  
door, a settling in the walls.

**Encounter**

A cicada sneaked  
into the foyer today,  
made a home in the toe

of your worn grey loafer  
until the live-wire call  
of her mates lured her back

to the humid afternoon.  
Later, when you slipped it on,  
it still felt like the same old shoe.

## House fire

Shingles and the ash of fallen rafters,  
jagged gap in the floorboards, marked with tape:  
*Danger: do not enter.* A photograph  
album, charred pages stuck together,

treasures. The half-packed suitcase, an empty  
vodka bottle in the rubble. You  
are not the boss of me, here, no matter  
what our horoscopes say. *Make peace, this week,*

*for your own sake.* I will not let you take  
anything. This mess belongs  
to me now, time forged it for me.

If I'd been born a boy, my name would be  
Matthew, yours too. But we were born girls,  
so close together you don't remember  
life before me. The truth is in the slides,

melted in the crawl-space tomb. I was here  
first. I decide what is fit to be kept.  
I am a tiny yellow flower  
budding in the wood sorrel. Tentative,

naked, dangling, and you  
become the seed pod, full with tiny, black  
promises. Your paper skin about to burst  
wide open before I am fully formed.

**Skinny-dip**

Hours after midnight, beer in our bellies,  
we trip down to the shore, strip off, slip  
below the water, quick, before the ranger's headlights

reach the trees. This lake: crisp and clean,  
moonlight polish on silver waves persuade our bodies  
to hazard more. Climb up the jagged face of rock and leap

into the murk below. Eyes closed, rush of cold, nose, mouth,  
naked flesh exposed. Knotted roots below the shallow flow  
tear at softened skin, draw blood. I am stung.

I drag my weary body from the stinking slough:  
the frigid morning, clothes, damp and rough.

## Grasshopper pie

We first tasted grasshopper pie together.  
A perfect mix: mint and chocolate;  
gross and delicious. I don't know why  
it was called grasshopper. A boy at school

ripped a leg off of a grasshopper.  
It hopped in circles until he stepped on it.  
We didn't laugh. Our father told us  
he once caught another boy

swinging a cat around by the tail.  
It was the only fist fight he ever got into.  
You called tonight to tell me you felt the child  
flutter inside you. Last summer

the prairies had such a grasshopper problem  
that they ruined fields of crops, got into everything,  
clung to your skin, always hungry. Even from here  
it was sad to see all that waste. Father's heart is weaker

than any of us knew. He's getting better now,  
older too. The baby is nearly ready to arrive  
and I haven't even seen your belly. I can only imagine.  
Now the longer I wait is simply longer.



**Climbing tree**

We are not children, now.  
Not young ladies  
but women, twenty-somethings.  
Thirty waits impatiently and still  
I dream us in our bunk-beds  
or whispering in the branches of the climbing tree.  
I see our mother younger,  
her long limbs reflected in my own. Time defied  
in that likeness. But you and I have no daughters  
to recall our childhood pleasures by.

### **At the playground**

Katie knelt down in the snow  
to show me:

“and this is where they will mine  
their crystals and this is another  
little bed for them to sleep in  
and I made this for...”

She said the fairies from Mexico  
pass through Montréal every winter  
so she had prepared  
this crystal quarry with beds  
for them to rest.  
It’s a long way from Mexico  
to Montréal.

She prattled on and I craved  
her ice-and-snow retreat.  
My teeth turned to water with want.

I crouched there  
until her sister’s voice shrilled to me  
from the top of the metal slide:

“Watch me, I’m going down headfirst.”

So I watched.

**First elegy**

Saturday afternoon at work,  
four friends to see me  
outside. "C'mon guys, why not here?"

They tell me  
you died last night in Winnipeg. Fell  
five floors from your hotel balcony.  
Outside, my legs limp, the pavement.

The sun shines so bright, can't keep my eyes open,  
can't catch my breath. "How? When?  
Where was the fucking railing?"

\*

Like swimming in gravy.  
We stay at your house until late, open gifts  
meant for you, play *Scrabble*. A wake.  
My eyes burn late into the night in my dry bed,

hot and scratchy. I curl up, unfurl,  
tense and release. No tears yet.  
Morning sunlight and traffic. Two more shopping days.  
My head is stuffed with weeds.

\*

*July, 1997*

Mid-summer we drove the straight flat road to Winnipeg.  
Like adults, we sat driver and passenger, talked late  
into the evening, slept in your father's double guest-bed,

no questions asked. I basked in being half  
a couple, disclosed more  
than I should have in your little black hatchback.

You, I remember, stared straight ahead,  
demanded to know exactly what I meant by  
cheating. Why would I bring it up? what was I hiding? It was the first time

you called me a slut to my face and I was silent. I knew by then  
how your grudge would pass, how you'd pull over and ask me to jump  
into the backseat. I held my breath.

\*

All I've eaten are clementines, in protest  
of Christmas, a hunger strike until you return.  
My bowels churn; acid stings my gums. I strip the skin

from another orange and separate the sections,  
revel in physical reactions, refuse to be coaxed.  
Chocolate is wrong and I don't eat turkey. I never did,

too gamy, too ugly strolling around a farmyard, waddle-wagging,  
head like a face turned inside out. It is your body  
that disturbs me. The thought of it hitting the pavement

so hard that its bones shatter, skull caves in. Bruises,  
I can understand. A hospital bed, bandages, bleeding:  
these things are real. I fantasized about

illness and me at your side, waiting for your eyes to flutter  
open, romanticized nursing you out of danger,  
you, grateful and obliged, promising to be faithful from now on.

Your body breaks my boundaries of order.  
Hadn't planned for this.  
My mind fills up with empty womb.

\*

*August, 1997*

The drum set your father no longer wanted was up for grabs. You never told me you played. On the long drive home, the kit packed into the hatchback, I entertained your plan to get a band together, play like your dad used to do.

Your dad left his first wife for the road and the band.  
My most jealous bone itched, infected the rest one by one.  
The first time I heard you, alone in your attic room,  
pounding out a steady beat, I said nothing.

\*

I am dreaming. At a crowded house party,  
I tell people about the accident (a car accident now). You arrive,  
sorry to be late. My feelings are mixed as the party falls away

to just us. You, in my arms, turn soft as moist earth,  
your skin is cold, green-tinged. *Careful what you wish for.* You are here  
but not alive and I am stuck with you,

guilty for wanting you back where you came from, hating  
to drag you around with me. You beg me to act natural, to help you hide  
your ugly secret. They can't see you are dead, but the smell.

My secret is you and I carry it deep in my throat like a seed, swallow past it,  
gag on it when I speak, careful it doesn't burst open.  
At night, it forces its way up and past my lips to rest on my pillow.

\*



*September, 1997*

You admitted it without provocation. You rolled over and got it off  
your chest. She was a groupie and you screwed up, weren't even sorry.  
I was caught suddenly naked, ashamed. Into my clothes and down the stairs,

before you had the chance to explain. My car in the rain. Your palms  
on the driver's side window. Your drenched figure in the rear-view mirror and me  
with nowhere to go, just driving north until the T-intersection and turning west.

\*

Christmas day. I stay in my pyjamas, open gifts,  
stockings, a clementine in the toe (like always). I don't eat  
the orange this time and opt for toast with eggs.

It's past noon when I notice the snow. An afternoon nap  
brings more dreams. You return after a journey  
of self-discovery. I pretend not to have noticed you were gone.

New friends surround you, ones I don't know. She is there now,  
holding your shrivelled carnations. I wake to long shadows  
that stretch across the room like oak roots and grab at my throat.

\*

*September, 1997*

You went five days without calling. I heard your band had played a small gig, opened for Bluebeard at The Exchange. I phoned to say congratulations, and see if you had time for a coffee. I wanted to talk, wanted to know:

how many times? were you drunk? where did you meet? did you still see her? who else knew? I took all the details, lugged them home by myself, buried them in the backyard and lit a cigarette. You hated smokers.

\*

An evening viewing for friends and extended family.  
I shake so hard, can barely walk, snow on the ground.  
A stranger in a black suit meets me at the door, knows my name,

is so very sorry for my loss. I see  
your father here. First time in months. He hugs me,  
first time ever. People everywhere, forgotten people,

high school acquaintances, teachers. Then you, in a suit,  
resting awkward in a flower jungle. I can't look.  
Your face (not your face), your brother at my elbow, my head

full of blood. I nearly touch you but lose my nerve. Instead,  
I touch your grade-twelve school photo on top of the casket.

\*

*December, 1997*

The last time I saw you, we crossed paths in The Pit,  
last day of classes. You leaned on an elbow,  
said, "Hey," then, "see you in the new year?" I said, "Maybe, maybe not,"

angry, still. Earlier that week I even pushed your groupie  
at the Lazy Owl in the middle of the afternoon, was escorted out  
by you in spite of yourself. You drove me home and helped me up the stairs,

undressed me for bed. You stayed and watched me into the night, just to be sure.  
I was sick and was sorry, then. But the last time I saw you, that very last time,  
I just said "maybe not".

\*

In the hours after the funeral, I sit in your room, sort  
your private things with your mother and grandmother. We three women  
giggle at the things you've saved, pardon your collection of *Penthouse*,

decide what to keep and what to give away. I claim a sweatshirt,  
your *Scrabble* board. It is a rational day of arranging – real work.  
We find your stash of writing. Notebooks and ruffled pages

turned over to me for safe-keeping. The weight of them  
in my arms. This poem begins in the wake of you.

You called me your muse, said I gave you inspiration,

and now I have it back, a bundle pressed tight  
against my belly. Too large for your bedroom,  
too large for your mother's house,

I want to break it open, let it spill out onto the street. Take root  
in patches of urban soil, cracks in city sidewalks. Then tend the seedlings  
until they can tend themselves. Heart's ease and trembling aspen,  
purslane and giant oak.

\*\*\*

**Parakeet dream**

A friend on the phone tells me your sister is dead.  
No big deal, just an accident.  
In the empty room, organize my words. How will I explain  
calling you out of class for this mundane event?

As the room stretches out, the far wall falls away  
to grassy lawn, a large maple.  
I must stop the parakeets from feasting on the sap but  
they already know I am here and are prepared for attack.

The phone in hand, your number dialed, I can't shake the wary stares  
of those fierce and discontented birds.

**Dream with cab driver**

I've left the baby behind,  
gone out across a rush-hour bridge.  
The cab driver asks what the hurry is,  
turns off his engine to wait in the long line for the ferry.  
I invent a story about a neighbour  
watching my daughter, my being out of milk.

I fear for her, left alone in the apartment,  
for myself, getting caught in a lie  
by this cabbie who grills me all the boat-ride home.



### **Napping dream with pillows**

I live in a house I can't navigate, filled  
with hidden hallways and abandoned wings.  
The house is no stranger, spells trouble  
if I remember correctly.

A late-night feather documentary,  
broadcast in every room, keeps me distracted.

It must go on, the search for the baby,  
left somewhere on a precarious pile of  
pillows, for safe-keeping.

Perch on the couch in crowded lounge,  
pretend to watch the film, nod when they nod,  
*Curious things, feathers.*  
How to hunt without inspiring suspicion,  
hide my treacherous hands?

**Piñata dream**

My hair grows faster than you can cut it and I am growing  
fond of all the itchy clippings. I keep them  
locked inside my pillow case, the key  
deep in my throat, suspended by a braid of yarn  
from my left eye-tooth. I won't let you break  
the piñata until our cat comes home but  
she has been wandering for weeks now.  
My milk has dried up so I have nothing to entice her.  
I know she will die alone.  
She won't be convinced with goat's milk, chokes,  
spits up a ball of my hair too large to swallow.

**Knife-sharpener dream**

The knife-sharpening man has you  
by the neck. When I heard his cow bell,  
I should never have let him in.  
We have too many knives in the house;  
I can't scramble them together  
quickly enough. That knife man  
wants something for his efforts.  
I offer foreign change from before the Euro,  
but what he wants is more precious.

You are choking on melon chunks  
and I instruct the knife man to slap your back.  
I can see your red eyes. I can see your panic.  
You just keep reaching for me,  
reaching and trying to breathe.

**Secret potion dream**

The doors lock in twenty minutes,  
after that, no one in or out. Everyone inside must drink  
three liquids in a prescribed order. Our heads will detach  
from our bodies; we can choose what we want  
to replace them. Women usually pick stuffed animals.

I hold my infant son tight  
to my chest and beg to be let out before the drinks arrive.  
Outside, I drink the liquids backwards. A parade of skeletons erupts  
as I troll side streets on a tandem bicycle, alone.

**Shop window dream**

Again, I've lost my daughter.  
found her clothing in a heap as though she'd vanished.  
Her face on milk cartons doesn't look like her.  
Police say they can't fix it,

my daughter is no longer a child and missing persons  
searches only start after 24 hours.  
It has been twelve.

Days pass and I see her in a shop window  
playing at staying very, very still. Only I know she is real.  
My reflection overlaps her tiny body on display.  
I try to shift to the side but my legs are tethered.

She looks so much like me that I try to move her limbs  
with my mind. I manage a twitch and realize  
that I am the one who was stolen.

**Childhood dream of witches**

At night, my sister dreamed of flying witches come to take her away.  
They offered no apples or disguise. Hands, quick and grabby.  
Here and gone before Mom could leap from bed,  
find her oldest stolen, the window open.  
I remember that dream as if it were my own. My dream was

fire, trapped inside, smoke, flames like tall grass that covered the bedroom floor.  
I wished the dream were true so I wouldn't have to worry about it  
coming true anymore.

**Near North**

Still three hours off and only a half-tank of gas.  
At the last station before town,  
fill up in the August chill. Back out  
on the broken asphalt. Walls of jack pine,  
birch, poplar line either side of the only paved road,  
break for a burn, three years old. The setting sun in my eyes,  
filtered through the last of the standing jack and fledgling tamaracks,  
static on the radio. Greta waiting,  
out in the garden, not to waste the day,  
one eye on the fading light. Her lips,  
pressed tight, yield a high and tuneless hum.

\*

Trees grow taller up here, close like fireplace matches in a pack,  
thin as sticks. Quiet slips into my room at night,  
presses my chest until I gasp awake to look out the fogged window;  
dark filled with wild too deep to penetrate.

The water heater hiss above the worn futon. I strain to hear  
a sound (any sound), outside the guest room. A log shifts  
in the potbelly stove, far off but near and real enough.

Two more hours and Greta will rise to her morning routine,  
raspberry leaf tea and rice pudding, all she can stomach.

Nausea, a good sign: means it's a boy; it'll have hair;  
means it's more likely to survive.

\*



Perch, white fish, walleye, jack, even arctic grayling,  
anything if it's a catch. My line is long and loose.  
A sudden tug and the rod bows low. I pull back to set the hook,  
snap the line, losing catch, lure and leader. A four pound jack  
is worth two meals of winter stock. Greta says,  
"enough to eat, nothing to brag about."

\*

It'll take days to winter the garden,  
more if I do it alone. My hands unused to shovels  
and thistle-stems. I didn't ask for this harvest. Greta did  
all the planting. No rows, a mixed jungle of carrot tops,  
turnips and leafy greens. Which are weeds,  
annuals, perennials, self-seeders? I'm expected  
to go on descriptions and memories of the childhood  
garden I never set foot in.

\*

I collect wild raspberry leaves,  
the tips of my thumb and index finger raw  
with pinching bristled stalks.  
A figure across the bay bends low in the brush,  
straightens, walks on, bends again.  
Rabbit traps, blueberries, Labrador tea? His head turns.  
Is he looking at me watching him? I duck behind the woodpile  
as the last of the pelicans, thumb-sized,  
stir up and settle across the water.

\*

Dandelions thrive in Greta's garden as if by inherent right,  
same spiraled leaves as their prairie cousins, same tenacious hold. Greta  
slices the taproots with a spade, digs what's left over with her fingers. Raw,  
the roots are too bitter. "Edible, boiled with a little butter," she suggests.  
"I don't eat weeds." My tone so close to Mother's, I dart inside  
before Greta can compose her response.

\*

Out in the middle, the lake like an ocean, no land  
as far as I can see. Whitecaps  
raise the bow of the small inboard motorboat,  
bring it crashing back down.  
I'm careful not to go too far alone, afraid  
to travel ever-widening circles in search of familiar curves of shore.  
Rarely, an island appears, just like each one before,  
rocky with jack to birch so tight the sunlight can't break through.

\*

Mink still live wild on the islands,  
free from their wooden cages, chicken wire. Hunters  
native to these waters, trap these land tufts for rabbits,  
arrive by skiff and sleep weeks in the bush. I can't get too close  
to those rocks, my inboard prop too deep,  
my knowledge incomplete. I've broken enough propellers  
(more than I'll tell), paddled my slow way home.

\*

The jack is the sloughshark of the northern lakes, freshwater hunter.  
That fish hits so hard I've been afraid to reel it in,  
wrench a hook from its razormouth, split open the thick belly  
on a gutting block. Slide the filleting knife along  
beside the spine, separate flesh from bone.  
I once found a baby jack inside and yelped.  
Greta laughed, "Damn jack'll eat anything."

\*

No-see-um welts keep me wildly awake. I scratch  
my way to the kitchen, find Greta making tea.  
Still dusk at midnight, we sit in the pale light  
our cups untouched between us. We remember  
details: the slanted front porch, the dying elm,  
the blue of Mother's rain coat, spicy smell of her skin.

\*



I take an air tour of the narrows and area,  
hitch a ride from the fire cache; Greta asked  
a friend for a favour. They chopper me into the deep bush,  
and leave me here to wait.  
My feet sink into muskeg, skin itching with imagined mosquitoes,  
mouth shut tight against air smoked and sweet.  
A firefighter there, barely eighteen,  
coming out of two weeks holding back a late season burn,  
watches the sky for his turn to return to town.  
In that deep quiet, I make conversation, I'm up for the winter  
staying with my sister, going to be an aunt.  
He's been down south once before to Regina, all concrete and glass,  
always getting lost, he says, every building looks the same.

\*

On the way back, I see a beach so long and white  
I want to wade out as far as the water will take me,  
let the cold collect in my marrow, pool itself inside my ribcage  
pushing out any life left over.

\*

Pelicans flock to the gutting block, scooping up  
whatever I leave behind. With every catch,  
I move my watch-post closer, bring in less,  
leaving more to test the boldness  
of each furtive raid. I cannot stay  
their fall retreat to warmer breeding grounds.

\*

Midday, the canoe takes me west  
instead of out into the open lake.  
Oars sluggish with soggy weeds, dredged up  
in too shallow water. Bulldog flies swarm  
my head, wrists, the only parts exposed.  
Bulging brown movement in the reeds  
catches the corner of my eye, startles  
a mallard from her restful glide.

\*

We haul a cord of scorched jack pine back in the pick-up,  
buck it up with the chainsaw before lunch. Steaming celery soup  
and dry biscuits in our boots and open parkas.  
Back out quick to catch the daylight.  
Needles, stiff and sharp, poke through my woolen mittens.  
Greta wears suede ones halfway to her elbows.  
I race to set the logs on blocks like some childish game  
as she swings the maul high over her head, brings it down.

\*

Cold toast at the kitchen table, four more hours until noon.  
Another log in the stove and a stroll in the wintered garden,  
snowed over rows of hacked down stalks. Spindly remnants  
of a tomato plant or squash draw circles in the snow, turn in the wind,  
a navigation needle pointing first this way then that.  
A muskrat, fat for winter, trundles up, bears its yellowed fangs.  
I scurry back, watch snow mount up against the woodpile, school kids  
like random colour pixels on the other side of the bay.

\*

Greta doesn't have real memories of our old house. Mother told them into her head with stories of the early years. She told me too. The stove in the corner, Mother hated that thing, its griddle never clean. "You may know," I tell her, "but I remember." Greta's face is odd anger. My memories are a dry cold. Mother's hands at the kitchen table, parched and lined with labour.

\*

It's my job now to collect kindling, start roadside,  
dead birch limbs stark white against pine, against sky  
darkened already in late afternoon. Trees here are more vulnerable,  
the bark beetle feasts. Outer sheets hang loose  
from the blackened inner rot. I try not to touch  
decay, even with mittens. Bronze-armoured adults  
waiting in darkness, plump larvae below the paper layers.  
I breathe in fresh earth in the November forest  
but underneath: that musty stench.

\*



After sunset, we bundle to cut across the frozen water,  
to a wake at the Friendship Centre, two days long, the whole town wide.  
Greta barely knew the woman, taught her great-grandkids, so we go.  
There is coffee warming, tea, cold cuts and crudités.  
An array of gifts for the family around the open casket  
in the corner. We sit to chat with students Greta knows by name,  
some of the boys I've seen before.  
They ask me how I'm liking it here,  
how long I'll stay. We wait for immediate family,  
then go. The smells of old wood and roast beef,  
lilies and sweat invade our hair and clothes, follow us home,  
tuck themselves in beside our shivering frames.

\*

On a bush-sheltered dune by a lunchtime fire,  
my pocketknife snaps on a knot. The half-whittled stick,  
skewer and fork for my meal of wieners and quartered potatoes.  
Greta grows heavy with another life, takes over  
our shared spaces. Morning and afternoon naps.  
I am left to my own devices.

\*

Water's cheapest at the Snack Shack. Two men help me heave it:  
“How's your sister? Baby come yet?” Not yet. I return  
to Greta napping in her nightgown like a child  
compelled to stay up far too late. Only her breathing  
disturbs the solitude of snow-muted night.

\*

Evening in the living room, her stool pulled up to the glow,  
Greta thumbs a calendar, crosses off days with deliberate strokes.  
She says the child can hear us now: our intermittent syllables  
draw frequent flutters. My body is a lump of coal:  
too thick and tired to remember how it arrived here  
or how to conceive of its need to return.

\*

White birch stand bone-dense.  
If I enter that thick, I'll lose my way in a hundred feet.  
In two hundred, I'll be a part of the stand.  
By three, my limbs will whiten and peel,  
rooted among the others, oozing sap like ancient amber.

\*

Out alone, a short list in my pocket,  
my toes numb as stones.  
Step after snow-squeak step takes me nearer  
to the Northern, then back to the house.  
Parkaed teens gather on the Friendship Centre steps,  
puffing smoke and bursts of laughter. They drain the final days  
of Christmas break. We are all that much closer,  
the shortest day is past. Greta, warm inside waiting  
with carrot soup for my return.

\*

After the dinner dishes, laundry and tea,  
Greta is in bed long before me. Settled by the picture window,  
in the dim horizon glow, my evening sentry. The odd feral dog  
lopes across the yard, bound to the pack by howls. Every hour,  
the fire needs stoking. I like to watch each rigid log  
finally yield, turning black then white and light as fluff.

\*

Tamaracks line the burn, gold-orange needles in the black and green.  
*Hackmatack* (pine but not) strong and straight. First to return  
after a fire. First to take hold in the disturbed earth. Seeds fall nearby,  
don't travel far by wind or in the belly of a black bear, feeding in low brush,  
wild blueberry and bog birch. Later, the jack pine  
will rise above, throw shade and choke it out.  
In the dead branches, the osprey will nest.

\*



Greta in the hospital room at Ile a la Crosse,  
me between the instant coffee  
and her bedside. A paper spool records the heartbeat,  
low and quick with frantic newness,  
an unexpected journey. And I am here, waiting.  
Greta's hair, sweat-slicked.  
Her animal groans, low and guttural. And he arrives.  
Something new and blue, pinking up before our eyes.

\*\*\*