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This All Works Well Up to a Point

Susan Kernohan

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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for the Degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT

This All Works Well Up to a Point

Susan Kernohan

This All Works Well Up to a Point is a long poem about the accidental death of a brother and the experience of grief. The poem examines how family relationships are complicated by the accident and how the speaker initially retreats from and then confronts the changes death brings to her family. The poem's five sections explore the untrustworthy nature of memory, a family's history of accidental deaths, and the rich geological history of the landscape the speaker's family has inhabited for several generations. It is her meditation upon these subjects that provides a broad context in which to understand and accept the death. The long poem consists of lyric poems, prose blocks, lists, song lyrics, and dialogue presented in a non-chronological sequence.

Paleoecology is largely based on the principle of uniformitarianism, which has many geological applications. In brief it suggests that the present is the key to the past, and by applying our knowledge of the present geological and biological processes to evidence locked in rock strata we can interpret the past. This all works well up to a point.

Pellant and Phillips, *Rocks, Minerals and Fossils of the World*

You remember too much,
my mother said to me recently.

Why hold on to all that? And I said,
where can I put it down?
She shifted to a question about airports.

Anne Carson, "The Glass Essay"

Collision

The Act of Union was signed in 1841,
the name for an American crow:
Corvus brachyrhynchos, and
my first kiss beside a dumpster.
Brasilia, a city developed in the middle
of a jungle. Magellan was the first

*it would seem to me that I remember
every single fucking thing I know*

Set off a non-restrictive clause

with *Tea*:

a drink with jam and bread.

Archduke Ferdinand *I'm lost*
in the supermarket Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman Every Good Boy Run

cold water on blood stains *do not go gentle*
to God, the Queen and my country

Be a Pepper rage rage

Venus is the brightest

Steve's arm careless around
my shoulders. His shoelace snakes
across my white sandal. Knees bent
eyes intent on distance, he's ready
to leap from the frame, knock
over the potted geranium.

The front step. A breath we took together
for our mother, for the sake of the winking
shutter. A small square of 1970's time
smeared green at the edges.

There's been an accident.

I'll make him a get well card
with a sketch of us all in a row.

I'll visit every day. Bring
the *Autotrader* and cookies.

I'll do kind things
without being asked.

I'm too old for childish
bargains. But what else?

There's been an accident.
Go to Strathroy General.

Count red-tailed hawks. Count exits on the 402.
Ditches stitched chicory blue, goldenrod yellow.

Birds shook out brief shadows
quick heartbeats on the windshield.

Are we there yet? my mother asked me.

Always. I am safe in the crook
of the maple tree. On the lawn
everyone fusses over funeral plans.

I see him first and yell,
I told you he's not dead!
He's coming on his bike!

He's Luke Skywalker golden. Legs pump
the clean smell of oil. Glasses reflect orange sunset.

I leap to the ground, open-armed.
The only one who kept faith. I am full
of relief the way a peach is full of juice.

*

Nights I tore myself
upright to call out. Good news
turned to paste in my throat, I'd wake.

Eight years of that dream,
that retrieval. I wanted:

his breathless arrival full of apologies, sorry
he'd forgotten to say he was going on a trip;

the time before I'd ever lost anything.

The dream has stopped: I'm sure
of nothing. He has left even my sleeping brain.

Show any group of people a dinner plate containing

a maple key
a purple ribbon
a plastic knife
a twist tie
a finishing nail
a silver bracelet
a walnut
a black pebble

When asked to recall
they'll swear they saw a snail shell, a house key.

Our canvas tent-trailer sat beside a rectangle of soil worked in straight rows. *Don't walk through the garden*, my mother said. I was six, solemn and round-faced. *Here, you hold the bag while I dig up the potatoes*. That summer we lived in our trailer, which smelled faintly of mould; we drank Tang from plastic cups. To get to the beach we had to walk past an old cemetery. There were crumbling headstones there for the few people who had settled beside the lake and for unknown sailors killed in Lake Huron storms. The lake itself was shallow and warm near the shore, and its bottom was thick clay that oozed between my fingers when I squeezed it. Steve and I would dawdle our way to the beach, dirty from fooling in the garden. He said a crazy man lived in the tar-paper shack beside the cemetery. He said dead sailors would rise from the grave and grab me by the ankles. I believed him because he was ten. He tossed me into the lake, a screaming beach ball; I sputtered to the surface and threw a fistful of clay at his head.

My answers are thinning.
Run my hands over them so often,
they unravel into lies.

He could touch his nose with the tip of his tongue.
He made the wooden cutting board I use.
His fingers were always tapping, his temper short.
He got up first on Christmas morning
to take the best loot from my stocking.
When we had Neapolitan ice cream, he liked vanilla best.
We never got along. Well, sometimes.
I heard him cry to my mother, say he was lonely.
He never rinsed his dishes.
This is his plaid shirt I'm wearing.

Small for his age, he learned to fight
teeth and fists faster, meaner. Insult
everywhere, he sensed it,
fermented sharp and sour.

He took a sweater I'd borrowed from a friend
cut holes in it, hid it in his closet. For a year.

*Just ignore him
and he'll go away, my mother said.*

I learned the speed of his anger
its red crawl up his neck.
He'd watch me smile

as I shook the last of the Shreddies into my bowl.
Sorry--none for you! Guess you'll have to open the puffed wheat!

It could happen for no reason.
Lying on my bed, phone to my ear:
I don't think she's mad at you, she talked to you in gym.

Steve a menace on the stairs. December air
the cold rattle he brought to my room.
Slush hit my cheek as he drove his
boot into the night stand.
You cunt! Splintered, gaped.
Another kick. Phone pulled from my hand
cord puddled on the floor. *You fucking cunt!*

All our arguments so one-sided now.
I want to ask, what did I do to you?
What happened next?

I am older now than he ever was.
As I stare out my kitchen window

dark glass, a black mirror
startles back my reflection

I see his eyes
are mine, our chin.

Steve framed houses one summer.
Calloused hands, a few pitchers
at lunch on Fridays.

He fell once. His buddy said
he bounced when he hit the ground.
Got up laughing
before he felt the blood
where a spike had grazed his ribs.

A good drinking story.

Lean yellow bones rising,
the house grew corners, squares.
Below him, men in silent exertion
pounded hammers against squeaking pine.
A metallic shine on the toes of his boots;
leather worn from steel by kicking wood into place.
Astride the new ridgepole, he swung his feet,
heavy sun on his back. Over roof tops
he saw Lake Huron's pound and kick.

When he leans too far back, loses
balance, the hollow frame is like a child's
drawing. A ghost body inside drops down
through straight-edged shadow.
The lake, a long hush, encloses his fall.

He might have broken his neck.

Or when he was born--
four pounds, unfinished lungs.

Sun through dusty windows after recess
warms wet boots and crayons. The smell.
They could have stayed there forever
chewing yellow paint off their pencils
writing poems for their smiling teacher.

*Yes, Stephen, high-coo.
Five seven five. You need one more line.*

Holds hand obediently beneath chin, counts
syllables as they jump from his humming throat.
He sees yesterday's puddles out the window
worms crisping on the tarmac.

What else do you know about blue skies?

Steve had a keg party when he finished high school. Sometime after midnight, I went looking for him in the drunken tangle of bodies and lawn chairs. While I tripped through the crowd, the radio gave a steady blare of Non-Stop Classic Rock. Someone found him stretched beside the canoe, eyes rolled back in his head—the whites gone beery yellow. When we carried him to bed he was rigid, but his friends said he'd be fine, he'd sleep it off. I sat with him, listened to someone out back play "Hotel California" over and over. Steve slept, didn't move a muscle. The next morning I watched as he took a few aspirin and sat down to a plate piled with bacon and eggs. *You were pretty wasted last night, eh?* My voice somewhere between concern and disgust. He frowned at his plate and forked some yolk into his mouth. *Yeah, I guess so.*

*The sky is so blue.
Birds are singing pretty now.
Too bad it won't stay.*

There's been an accident.

There must be some mistake.

The doctor who told us had a wispy moustache like the guys in movies who always turn out to be liars. My mother's hand squeezed mine, sent prickles of heat up my arm. The doctor handed me Steve's watch and wallet, and they were heavy, somehow obscene. I put them on the chair beside me and stood up on legs that still knew, miraculously, how to move. I had to move. Down the hallway I came to a physiotherapy room, windowless and crowded with dim machinery. I stopped in front of a metal vat filled with something liquid, but thick like mucilage. My mother's tight voice was cracking somewhere behind me. I stuck my index finger into the vat and found the liquid hot. Wax. I stuck in all my splayed out fingers and held still until the heat changed from searing to comfortable. When I pulled my hand out, wax rolled in fat drops down each finger and dried at the tips. I plunged my hand in again, pulled it out. New skin.

He drove onto the highway

natural drift into the tranced
space between parallel lines

one hand on the wheel
one skinny arm out the window
driving thoughtless
pure in orange-lit dusk

a glance down to change the station
a speeding blur out the open window

the startled swerve

Awkward behind Steve
on his motorcycle. April afternoon chill.
And eager. 18th birthday money in his wallet.
What rare goodwill made him invite me? I went.

We shot through traffic for the sake
of shooting, arrowed over concrete.

I didn't notice until we leaned
into a sudden turn and swooped
inches from the red car's onrushing hood.
Saliva ran sick into my mouth. I held Steve
and wished I knew how to hold him.

Dead air, they call it in radio.

Must talk.

Interrupt my mother's thoughts
like the doorbell ringing just as supper starts,

distract like June lilacs, purple and sweet.
Sunrise. Nuthatch at the feeder. Sunset.

She sat straight-backed beside me
in the driver's seat. Ears stopped, hands

delicate on the steering wheel
as though it might fall to pieces.

(I've never heard a neck break.

Maybe like pulling apart a chicken leg

tendons resist, then

a sucking pop)

Think,
my talk urged her. Think of anything else.

My welling throat

told the plot of a play I'd seen
the candles on stage the drumming storm scene

told the house on the lake where I'd been babysitting
the sunken living room the heated towel racks the ceramic tile

told my new English teacher's lisp
reading Thakethpeare prepareth you for real life

told words any words I wanted to
plaster her over with words
Cocoon.

All the way home from the hospital, her eyes
read the stuttering yellow line.

Memory Gardens is on The Golden Mile, a stretch of donut stores, bingo halls and cheap motels outside of town where there used to be farmers' fields, and—before that—forest. It isn't really a garden; more like a golf course groomed green and flat. When we went to choose a plot, the receptionist, Patty, sat at her desk eating a ham sandwich. She brushed crumbs off her polyester slacks, told us a young man she knew had been in a car accident, but walked away with only a broken arm. The director was nervous and somehow greasy. He told us the Gardens were divided into sections: Heaven's Little Angels, Sweet Repose. I don't remember which we picked; I remember the relentless fly against the window screen. I remember us laughing in the parking lot about Patty. Big gulping laughs that burned.

★

The most astonishing thing was going to the grocery store to buy more kleenex and the National Enquirer was still there. And shoppers in sweat suits buying hot Italian sausages and cream cheese.

I found concrete proof on the front page at Mac's Milk.

One column inch:

Sarnia man, 20, dies in car collision

I snuck the paper into the house, hid it
behind the lining in a jewellery box.

Turned the tiny key and hid that too.

Parts of jokes I wish I could remember:

This guy with an octopus under his arm walks into a bar . . .

Don't lay no Rookie Wookie on the King of Rocks that Roll

So the third guy says, to hell with it, and throws the bomb out the window.

You know, for a superhero you sure can be an asshole, Superman.

*

Things people said at the funeral:

Be good to your mom, she'll need you.

My name's Tracey. I met him last month at Calhoun's.

You're the strong one.

I haven't seen you since you were this high.

I was in love with him.

Sorry I'm wearing running shoes.

The land had to roll and shift itself
like an old woman in a hard chair. Settle
into this particular incline and curve.

Crews thinking of their coffee break, of last night's slo-pitch
had to survey roads and scoop out dirt. Two roads
had to meet so a tow-truck could swing blind into his car.

On the couch between her sister-in-law
and her best friend, my mother talked
about giving birth. *Remember how they shaved you?*
All of them clutched at their crotches, screaming with laughter.
I've never been so itchy in my life!

It was after the funeral.
They'd had some drinks.

*

My grandmother came to our house wearing a neat burgundy blouse with small covered buttons. I counted them as she folded her hands and told us to look for the silver lining. One. Two. Three. Goodness knows enough of her friends had died lately. But it doesn't help to dwell on bad things, on things that aren't nice. We smiled stiffly over coffee cups filled with straight rye. Four. Five. Six.

Someone should find comfort
in leaves falling, dissolving into soil.
Maybe my mother could smile
over a pot of daffodils
and fade out fade out.

Or I could
squat in the bathroom
and find a rusty splotch
on my underwear.

Some bird should show up with a twig in its beak.

I want to hold his bones
between my finger and thumb.

I would

tap out a ragged, scraped-
knee song

of gasoline
socket wrench
grease

that lined the palms
of his hard hands.

Give him such a shake.

We let strangers burn his bones
pour the ashes into a dark wooden box
that looked like my grandmother's silver chest.
I watched them lower it into the ground; swore
I'd never come back looking for him.

A bird in the house. Incredible.
Sleek-feathered messenger beats
frantic wings in our kitchen.

The sky has closed in,
square with dark corners.
The soul's final chance.

Last minute words
urgent in the air. Steve's tiny
scrawled handwriting. Indecipherable.

How like him to leave me
confused by a parting comment.

The last time I saw him, he called out
something I didn't hear. Flung it over his shoulder
as he sped away honking the horn. He was already lost
in a radio song. Its beat in his chest.

Not Mourning

Schoolyard

Tether ball chains rattle, ring out metallic tears
wind on chains tapping rusted poles

I've come to my old schoolyard
keep-the-kettle-boilin missalink yer-oot

skipping songs rise up, are these my hands?
muddy yellow cigarette fingers; I smoke

dry-eyed til I puke, crouched on the tarmac
my heart, this is my heart just the same

missalink yer-oot heart beats
click clank click clank last night I was stupid

drunk in the cemetery leapfrogging headstones
wind shakes the chains, this same heart

these hands. And the sky as ever.

Unceremonious

Drinking vodka punch from a bowl. I discover a talent
for squirting it between my teeth. Sticky arch
in the air. Ants cluster where it hits the ground.

I'm with people I've just met, dancing shaky,
not quite in time anymore to the snaky song on the radio.
They found me funny at first, exuberant.

Even if someone would listen,
I don't know how to tell the story.
The radio voice wraps tight around my head:

*promise me promise me
if they bury me
some place I don't wanna be
you'll dig me up and transport me
unceremoniously*

Why I Didn't Continue Counselling

You've written some interesting things here on your information sheet. You . . . ah . . . have a good grasp on your situation. You seem like a smart girl.

Thanks.

Do you mind if we start off by talking about the changes you've noticed in your behaviour and feelings?

Okay.

You mention problems sleeping and eating. I want you to know that those kinds of disruptions are entirely natural after a sudden shock. You may want to see your family doctor about medication if the insomnia continues for too long, but these things usually right themselves as time passes. We'll keep an eye on that together, okay?

All right.

Now. Your . . . concern . . . when you watch people you know get into cars. Do you know why that troubles you?

Yeah, I'd say it's pretty obvious.

Yes, yes. Good. Would you like to tell me more about it?

Not really.

All right. Maybe another time. Now, the incident you mention. With the cigarette? Do you mind if we talk about that?

Okay.

Do I understand correctly that you put out a cigarette on your own hand?

Yes.

Do you know why you did that?

Not really. I was a bit drunk. Maybe curious.

Curious. Okay. Were you alone? When you did it?

I was at a sort of party. Some of us were on the back deck smoking because we couldn't smoke in the house. When I finished my cigarette, I just squeezed it until it went out.

Did it hurt?

Of course it hurt.

All right. Okay. You say you were drunk. Were you sober enough to know the cigarette would burn you?

Yeah. You'd have to be pretty out of it to forget that, don't you think?

Yes.

Afterthought

A cherry on my palm, to one side
of my life line. Let's say I did it for the scar.

An experiment: One day I'll glance
idly at the mark and wonder how I got it.

Better: to realize,
suddenly, after the appropriate passage
of time, it's gone.

One Year Anniversary Blues

Sun-washed knee-high grass, milkweed
and wild juniper. A bleat of blood behind
my eyes. Flies hover in this washed-out sunfield.
Fist balled in my pocket. Smoking

a joint where we used to grow vegetables.
Smoking with purpose into an evening
that will not be calm or long or cool,
just a loosening of the shrink-wrapped sky.

If I paid attention I'd hear the lake shush,
see blue-edged stars light above the wood. Instead,
I dare anything now to ever come to any good.

Return

Surrounded by undated photographs,
my mother sat cross-legged, bent
her head. Humming the bloodless
song of determination, she laid out our past
birthday cake by birthday cake
on the living room floor.

Filled photo albums
with names, dates, places.

Used all of his names
Stevie Stephen Steve

Firm black ink, hand steady. I envied her
the retreat of raw-edged grief, her return.

She brought me a handful
of Christmas morning shots
she couldn't put in order:
Take a look. You always remember.

Every year the same tree, same dog. Recycled
wrapping paper in heaps. Our haircuts
didn't change. My smiling mother with tinsel
in her unbrushed hair. Finally, I dated them
by the colour of my bathrobe and slippers.

Winter, Lake Huron

Invisible horizon. White on white as far as
I can comprehend. Edge of winter. Bleached

sky unbounded. Creak and heave.
Wind hollows ice into caves along the shore;

I fit into these caves. Colourless cold.
It's not wrong to feel numb here, to listen.

The Ambulance

Sitting up to my waist in lake water, drinking
a milkshake with a friend. Red sun drops
down through haze, leaves a thin orange trail
across water. A tern points and dives.

Then an ambulance splits everything
open. Gulls surge upwards, a circling shriek.
In my clenched heart, guilty life knocks hard.

This also happens when I see his shoulders
beneath a stranger's neck or hear
a motorcycle roar down a quiet street.

Is that really what his shoulders looked like?
The ambulance likely didn't bother to use its siren for him.
Was his motorcycle a Shadow or a Nighthawk?

Gulls settle on the river. Ambulance soars
past to someone else's disaster.
It's been years; the weight unchanged.

Sedimentary

Grief accumulates heavy layers
on chest and lungs. A sediment bitter
and chalky like aspirin dissolving.

Too much to carry, I say.
Let's skip ahead to the part
where I'm changed by all this
tough and steady in my bones.

Give me a heart that beats
without asking questions.
Let me read the newspaper
and chew my toast, unthinking.

A riddle:
Though I've lost something,
I carry more than I did before.

The Land

Hungry Hollow

(i)

After Steve died, my mother took sleeping pills. I never left her alone except to go to school. I looked dumbly at *King Lear* and microscopic invertebrates. So many ways for the world to make sense. My biology teacher promised the class that studying biology would change our lives.

Any time I might hear her sobs shake their way down the heating vent from her bedroom to my math homework at the kitchen table.

On good days she might be dressed and doing the crossword when I got home. Or she'd say, *Let's go eat on the beach tonight*. She'd drive; I'd buy us thick deli sandwiches wrapped in cellophane. The crooked stone steps at the beach were adrift with sand, and orange, honey-combed snow fence was already straggling along the line where long grass met the smooth beach. We'd sit side by side in the sand and watch freighters head out into the lake from the St. Clair River.

Algoma Queen

Manitoulin

I read the names so she didn't have to put on her glasses.

(ii)

We took long drives in the country to the places she'd always known.

This is the route my school bus took. The old Hungry Hollow bridge was a rickety affair. You just held your breath and went along. Look down when we go over. The cliffs are full of fossils.

My Great Aunt Mattie and Uncle John lived in that house. She was your great-grandfather's sister. She went sort of funny after Uncle John died. I remember your grandma telling a story of Aunt Mattie wearing her best summer hat and dress for a Christmas visit and asking to see the flowers in the garden.

Once we drove out the old Lakeshore Road after a November ice storm. Tree branches were suspended in ice and surprisingly supple under the weight. In the car we had hot coffee in paper cups and could say the bent trees were beautiful.

My mother doesn't remember these drives now. They are part of a past she has discarded the way she would a pair of pants worn through at the knee. *They've served their purpose. Why hang on to them and add to the clutter?*

Summer, Lake Huron

I scratch some words into sand, glad
water will dissolve the letters.

When I'm in it, the lake is a heavy pleasure
pressing shut my mouth and eyes. Trust

each wave's offer and withdrawal.
Waves make no pretence; here, then gone.

Feet in the surf, scree scree killdeer
darting brown stripes overhead.

I learn the art of standing upright
while the ground is sucked from under me.

Rock Glen: Part One

We went to Rock Glen one afternoon in October about a month after Steve's funeral. My mother wore a blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up and pointed out the yellow leaves on road-side trees. I brought a sketch book and pencils. The wooden steps down the bank were muffled by moss; the air in the gorge humid with the waterfall's spray. We rolled up our pants and stepped from rock to rock along the creek. Sometimes we'd lift layers of damp shale from the mud to find fossil impressions or rake our hands across the creek bottom looking for butterfly stones. We followed the creek til it swirled out to join the Ausable, deeper and brown.

(Steve and I used to wade here as kids, look for the same fossils and scoop up handfuls of water to catch tadpoles. When he was eleven he slipped on the rocks and cut his foot badly; I watched the swirl of blood in the river, amazed it was so small and disappeared so fast. My mother wrapped my yellow beach towel around Steve's foot and drove us to Strathroy General. He got stitches and a tetanus shot. I was only seven and believed for a long time that rocks themselves could give you lockjaw.)

There was an old cedar that leaned out from the bank, its trunk running parallel to the creek surface before curving abruptly towards the sky. I sat down and tried to draw the curve, the turning away. I thought if I looked carefully enough, I would capture it. How the tree trunk was split with the effort, bark worn away. I tried to draw my mother too as she crouched on the opposite bank studying fossils she held in her palm. I ended up taking a photo instead. I stood in the creek, camera ready, and called to her. She looked up surprised, or afraid. It's hard to tell from the photo who she expected to see.

Kettle Point

(i)

My mother took us once to see the kettles at Kettle Point. Perfect stone spheres too big for my arms to span. Some sat partially embedded in layers of crumbling blue shale on shore. We waded out to others and ran our wet hands over their eerie smoothness. *I just can't fathom how they came to be*, my mother said. Brushed glittering bits of sand from her bathing suit.

The kettles scared me. I think now it was because they were so self-contained. No convolutions, no handles, no way to peer inside them. They seemed like sullen animals pried from their rightful homes. They should have stayed hidden in the shale beds, inviolate.

(ii)

A nodular concentration of sedimentary rock, formed by the localized deposition of material about a central nucleus. Harder than surrounding rock.

Think of the human stories that follow that same pattern: stubborn particles cohere around a common centre to protect a necessary core. With years and accumulation, they grow hard. Soft outer layers enfold their central secret. The habit of protecting that secret becomes more important than the secret itself.

Fossil Hunter

I had a beach friend one summer named Ellen. We used to spend afternoons throwing hockey pucks into the lake and diving for them. One would dive and the other would throw the puck and time the diver. The timing was very important. We always counted slowly to five after the splash of the puck entering the lake, just to give it time to sink into the sludge on the bottom. I dove with my eyes open and looked for the cloud where the puck had stirred up sediment and sand. Ellen counted overhead: Onemississippi Twomississippi Threemississippi Fourmississippi. . . Holding my breath tight, I ran my hands through the mucky bottom, knowing I'd forfeit my turn if I went up for air without the puck. It may sound easy, but we often lost pucks. The lake water could be soupy and impossible to see through, and puck-shaped rocks always tricked us.

When I learned how fossils are formed, I thought of the murky bottom of Lake Huron and the lost hockey pucks. How they must have settled into the lake bottom sludge and been covered and forgotten. The area is known for limestone and shale deposits that hold millions of fossils from the Devonian era. Trilobites. Brachiopods. Horn coral. Crinoid bits. All of them in suspension. Most of them snapped or somehow damaged in the process, but almost themselves.

Fossil Hunter's Dream

Suppose you lose something. And to recover
it you must use a hammer. A brutal, necessary tool.

Tap gently gently where time and mineral accumulation
have made a calcified ghost. You thought

you could remember everything, but this hammering
this transformation of limestone into dust before your eyes.

The yield, in spite of your delicacy with the hammer,
disappoints. A broken fragment, incomplete in your palm.

Follow the jagged edges with your finger tip,
try to give the missing pieces shape, breath.

You smell the inky tang of newspapers, taste
vanilla ice cream, almost see a face take form.

Gone so long, compressed and splintered. Debris
you barely recognize as your own.

Rock Glen: Part Two

Ausable runs metallic in April. Copper
foam against rocks. River river river
beating back the banks.
At the waterfall the plunge is

unhesitating. I stand beneath the falls.
Hair streams, skin scraped by
pumice water. Cold, harsh and in a hurry.
My shocked breath steams. I'm crying.

Seen from under hissing
spray, the limestone cliffs
shimmer. Insubstantial.
Such a rush of water.
Such a rush of water.

Such erasure.

Slow gnawing of stone: erosive power
peculiar to moving waters.

Family History: Accidents

Alice's Funeral

My grandmother's funeral was not gloomy. She had wanted to die for several years and people called her death a blessing.

The lunch in the church basement after the service was quietly festive and brought together people who hadn't seen each other in years. We stood eating egg salad sandwiches with the crusts cut off and had our choice of tea or coffee. My mother introduced me to cousins of hers who'd all come from out of town. One of them, another Stephen, had driven for two days straight to make the funeral. During the service I'd seen his wife nudge him with her elbow whenever his head fell sleepily forward. These cousins were strangers to me. Strangers, though, who could recite our list of common ancestors with the same baffled wonder I felt when I thought of the long dead Thomases and Roberts who had come to Canada to farm. It was oddly elating to know that these cousins had also sat over photographs and blurry copies of parish records tiring their eyes and getting kinks in their necks. What did any of us hope to find?

Genealogy

Where there's a river, a dam appears. Then, a mill.
Where there were trees, a house. Where there were trees, cattle.
A road. A school. A general store. A railway. A cemetery.
Their lives mean building:

"The first house occupied by the family was made with rough boards, fresh from a water wheel driven saw mill located on the AuSable River. These boards were nailed to four trees that grew in an approximate square space near where the permanent home was planned to be."

Their grandchildren, great-grand children
will be born in this house. All will retain reverence
for feats of engineering and solid architecture:
their travel snapshots faithfully document
provincial legislatures, hydroelectric dams.

Everything I have inherited from these people—

three quilts; flowered milk jug with striped handle; ceramic angel
praying; tea towels embroidered with cheeky kittens wearing
aprons; lime green, gilt-edged tea cup and saucer; black-paged photo
albums; tin garbage can; egg beater; scrap books of birth, marriage and
death announcements; black woven shawl; loaf pans

—is innocuous.

Ausable

Where they picnicked in her girlhood—
my mother's straw hair tortured into bows.
Her crisp knee socks, Sunday glossy feet.
Men in their shirt sleeves, but hats still on,
stern-angled over thick brows.

A generation of farmers in first cars
driving to the river with families,
strawberries, cold cuts. They kept clear
of murky clay, away from reeds
and sharp-toothed sedges.

The spring before my mother's birth:
the river's flood swallows Sylvan Bridge.
Fields in every hollow too wet for seed
and everyone quiet. Wide-eyed

to the river's edge, they watch it suck
at saplings, froth winter's ice in channels.
Beside horses and cars, they hold hands
and rock back on their heels.

Vigilant: Nellie and Tom

Nellie's family wavers
in sepia. Her mother's blurred
angles, father's dwindling moustache.
Each brother and sister looks as prosperous
as freshly pressed shirt fronts allow.
Nellie leans slightly forward, head tilted:
is someone at the door? was that glass breaking?
Large eyes nervous, she listens

to her newborn daughter scream, perhaps
in the arms of the photographer's wife in the next room.

To let up vigilance for even a minute, smile
into the camera unconcerned, enjoy the pressure
of sister Hettie leaning against her knees
to ease into the heat of her long familiar
family, weight of her best skirt
sleek knot Hettie has made of her hair
to smile particularly into the photographer's dark eyes
in spite of her new husband and newer daughter
as the cold flash fills the close studio,

even a moment's inattention
could strangle her baby
stop her husband's heart
could empty her careless hands.
Smile gone foolish.

Tractor: Alice and Clayton

Accidents come out of a nowhere so full of precise detail,
that it must be an intricately functioning somewhere.

(i)

Hens fed. Potatoes peeled. Water on the boil. Plates unblinking on the table.
Must change the paper in that drawer. White sauce for the peas. Cold left-over
ham. Steam. *Where is he?* Her small hands this way and that rattle lids on pots.
There's the leaves to burn soon. Get the sunflowers cut down. Brisk steps
across the kitchen. *Peas'll be mush—what's keeping him?* The pear tree out the
window leans against the yellow sky. *Was he in the east field this afternoon?*
Takes her coat from its hook, pulls on her rubber boots. *Clayton?*

My grandmother's bird-like feet have long waxy toes
good for picking up fallen pencils, knitting needles.
Her feet in rubber boots in the east field.
She came to say, "You're late for supper."
And at her feet at her feet at

Her feet
carried her back past the pear tree.
The fruit this year too hard for eating.

(ii)

My mother says:

My dad, he got caught somehow in his tractor's wheel and it ran over him. Your grandma found him out in the field when he didn't come in for his supper. Her hair turned white. She sold the farm and moved into town not long after that.

Once my mother's story focuses on rushing back from her job in the city without decent shoes to wear to her father's funeral. She tried to hide her feet under tables and chairs while friends and relatives clasped her hands and murmured. In that story, my grandmother's hair falls out and my mother has to take her shopping for wigs in London.

The Woods: Nellie and Tom

Nellie beside her rose trellis
on a kitchen chair, legs spread
as she sends peas pinging
into an enamel bowl. Last of the season,
she thinks, these shrivelled peas.

Today she finally unfolded the pinwheel quilt
she and Hettie made before the wedding, when spring
peepers ran their song into the whirl of triangles
spinning giddy under the sisters' hands.
Salvaged red and gold from aprons and summer dresses
stitched in dizzy hilarity, a real celebration.

She laid the quilt over her sleeping husband,
long lump of him stretched in the bed
they used to share; took the worn quilts
away and washed them for another
ordinary sick bed, an ordinary sickness.

Stubborn is not the word for his face
if she ever says *Doctor?* while she dabs
here and there his shrunken skin, gives
him a rose-water smile.

When they brought him limping home from the woods,
blood dark down the inseam of his pants, the men only said
Tom took a bad fall, Nellie. They were sheepishly there
one minute, then gone, the way mist can cover early morning
but by the time you've got the breakfast dishes washed
and look out the window again, the sun has burned
through, left the fields naked and too bright to look at.

She made him heavy cream soups, kept the kids quiet.
Allow him this rest, she thought, we'll manage. The men
came back on their own to cut the hay. Hettie wrote
that she could spare a day or two. After seeing him,
she just stayed. Her voice a hard new edge in the whispering kitchen:
*Don't blush Nellie—you're as bad as he is. Get the doctor,
or you'll be paying the price of his foolishness for the rest of your life.*

At night Nellie lies still with her eyes closed.
Up before dawn, her head cobwebbed not with sleep
but a night of waking dreams, her sister's urgent voice
repeating: *The rest of your life.*

After three weeks, his veins stand in relief
on paper skin mottled yellow, brown.
He is the maple leaves raked into a pile
to be burned behind the cattle barn.

After six weeks, she looks up
from darning a sock, and he is gone.

Catalogue

Adapted from The Meadd Family Tree compiled by Eleanor Augusteijn

THOMAS MEADD; b. June 24 1858; m. Jan. 12, 1883 Mary Eleanor (Nellie) Dawson; d. 10 Apr. 1893; bur. Parkhill Cemetery.

The youngest of his five children was still a baby when Tom had an accident in the woods, the result of a foolish prank. Tom, balancing on one log was in the act of stepping over another, when two young fellows, for a joke, pulled the log from beneath him, causing him to fall straddled on a lower spiked branch. It crushed his testicles.

In this day of openness we cannot imagine the depth then of Victorian modesty. Although in fearful pain, he would not allow his wife to call the doctor, or even tell her sister Hettie, who was helping, what was the trouble. When finally forced to agree to have the doctor, it was too late. Blood poisoning had spread throughout his whole system, and it was long before antibiotics.

CLAYTON MEADD DIXON; b. 25 June, 1907; m. 12 Sept. 1934 Alice Louise Nicholson (b. 12 Sept. 1905) d. 26 Sept. 1962; bur. Sylvan Cemetery.

Eldest of Thomas Meadd's grandchildren. An excellent farmer who after marrying Alice Nicholson, bought and operated the Nicholson family farm (Sylvan Lodge). A respected and responsible man, active in community and church affairs, his death, was a shock to everyone. Though he was extremely safety conscious, he died in a farm accident.

STEPHEN CLAYTON KERNOHAN—was born in Sarnia 11 April, 1969. Stephen was going to Fanshawe College studying Construction Engineering but was killed in a car accident 11 September, 1989, just after paying a birthday visit to his grandmother, Alice Dixon, in Parkhill.

Eight Years After: A Visit

Getting There

I always choose a lake-side seat and the saddest
stranger always chooses me. *Turns out*

I was at the wrong end of the country, he'll say.
Another woman, she'll say. Factories buzz past outside.

Functioning. I have the right face for train travel.
Guileless like a boiled fish. I gaze into backyards,

lives hung on clotheslines and hidden behind
sheds. *He met her at a Legion dance, she'll say.*

Bare dirt where grass won't grow and wild spots
where it luxuriates against fences. *Cancer, he'll say.*

Can I buy you a coffee? After Kingston the window pastes
a square of Great Lakes blue over my eyes. Soon

we'll enter a wet heat that bends the sky over corn fields.
Visiting my mother, I'll say. A kingfisher dives into the low lying

water of my prehistory. By Lake Huron, in a place too small
to be on maps. Sipping strong coffee, filled with ordinary life.

If I'd got the message sooner, he'll say.
He never took me dancing once, she'll say.

New House

My mother's new house stark
against the brittle night sky
where our tent trailer used to lean

like a broken-winged bird. Pine beams
brick fireplace; built to look seasoned.
A sudden house, newcomer's ingratiating

grin. How can it hold our stories?
Steve was supposed to frame it, his hammer
would make it ours. The past doesn't fit

inside its walls. I want to step through the door.
Say: I've stopped having the dream where Steve
comes back. I think it's a sign. What do you think

of all this silent time, our different griefs we wade through,
dogged and guessing? Does grief give the necessary
prick to remind you you're alive? What do you dream?

But I'll walk in and she'll hand me a dust rag
a cardboard box of dishes to unpack. *I hope you're not
hungry. I haven't got much in the way of food.*

I'll put together a make-do supper. I'll have to coax her
to stop working and eat. All through the meal, her eyes
will roam the walls, get caught in the future.

This Never Happened

Steve would have entered the new house
as if it were his own. I'm sorry this never happened.
No eyes meeting across the kitchen table
when our mother was endearingly obtuse
or said a word like "geek" or "wuss"
that she didn't quite understand.
Our smiles simultaneous, clear.
I filled your glass with milk
when I saw it was empty.

Later we went to the beer store. Hot night
pressing in, your motorcycle loud and my arms
in an easy circle around your waist.
We hit all the green lights. Leapt past
guys in muscle cars, their music b-o-o-med
faded behind us.

Sat up that night with beers. Cement porch
still holding afternoon sun. Simple silence

or sometimes we talked about all
the building going on down the river and
who the hell has four hundred thousand bucks
to blow on a house, but there'll be money in it for you
and I'm glad and you know without me saying.
A night like that could have counted as forgiveness.

Listen, it would have happened one day.
I was making carrot sticks for you
when the news came, trying to remember a joke
that would be sure to make you laugh.

In the Car

My mother's hands tight on the wheel. A sigh escapes. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. She's been growing her hair and it suits her.

This is the first time I've driven by here since Steve was killed.

Eight years. She has been like me. Superstitious. Or simply afraid.

When I was a little girl there was a store at this cross-roads, and the man would hitch up a team to his wagon. The wagon was full of—oh—staples like flour and nails, but he had candy and fabric too. He'd rattle from house to house and I remember when he came to our house I was so in awe. I'd never seen so many things at once. I had no idea there could be so many things.

Summer Storm

*Who can secure the condition of rest?
Let movement go on and the condition
of rest will gradually arise.
Lao Tzu*

Evening wind from the beach still tastes
like scorched poplar and AM radio.
Summer burns down to the ground
in August. Even the sun is brown.

My mother and I
head for the lake road that runs
flat out across the top of the county.
Cars out here are metallic-backed beetles
bedazzled by heat, bewildered by dust.

My arm out the window
for the cool air that collects
in ditches. Flat fields rub up against
our dirt road; we can see forever.
This used to be lake bottom,
she says. Houses and barns drift
in gentling waves of wheat.

North of us, clouds heave over the lake. A lake
squeezed from tubes: grey and green
scraped onto canvas. Hurried artist hoping
to get the colours right before the rain begins.

When we sit with sweaty glasses
of iced tea, silent on the back step,
it will happen. Rain tentative, then sure.