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BODY AND BLOOD
POEMS

Meaghan Strimas

A Thesis

In

The Department

Of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in English: Creative Writing Option
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Montreal, Quebec, Canada

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ABSTRACT
BODY AND BLOOD: POEMS
Meaghan Strimas

In general, this collection of lyric and narrative poetry is concerned with the implications of loss: how it emerges in, and how it impacts upon the living of our lives. Several poems explore the categories of *mourning and celebration*, *lost and found*, attempting to both construct and deconstruct our notions of these binaries.

Many narrative pieces reveal portraits of family life and often grapple with the intensity of familial bonds. Within these pieces, events are revealed in a fragmentary manner, providing snippets of storyline, resisting the expected progression of a beginning, middle and end. Additionally, characters, aside from the narrator, are given “speaking parts” and a polyphony of voices, and thus, perspectives are meant to demonstrate the speaker’s inability to control an entire narrative. These formal strategies reflect the act of remembering and are indicative of the nature of history and storytelling – suggesting that a story often becomes a mutation of its original self and is reconfigured as it passes from one generation to the next.

Other poems in this project are interested in the border between public and private spheres. These poems, many situated in urban landscapes, provide a site for an investigation and inquiry into the nature of human relations within the cityscape. For example, where does the individual, after emerging from the intimacy of family life, situate himself? How is the gap between reality and longing – that is, the alienation one experiences in the city and the desire to belong – bridged in an urban centre? And finally, what responsibility, if any, do we have towards our neighbour?

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BODY AND BLOOD

COMMUNION

*

Amen is what we mumbled, marking morning, noon and right before the home bell:
Class, let's recite a prayer. Palms pressed together, one more, *Amen*.

Mrs. Watson refused Hayley, a *Presbyterian*, a place in our Communion –
And at the start of every session ushered her to the back
Where she sat, deafened by the drone of the Listening Centre 'phones.
Never stroked by Hands or Holy Water – exiled from every lesson:

*On the night before he died,
Jesus shared a special meal with his friends.*

Inside her desk, beneath gold stars, pencils, protractors, red pens,
Mrs. Watson kept the coveted list: Who will carry bread? Who will walk with water? With wine?
Those boys who kept the Altar said it wasn't a big deal, but us girls, we had our visions:
The white dress, baby's breath woven 'round crown, the golden Chalice pressed against the heart.
To be leader of the procession... What careful steps we would take.

*

At recess, instead of swings or soccer, we played Jesus,
Took turns nailing each other's wrists to the bars of the jungle gym.
Tap, Tap, Tap. One girl hammered.
Jesus suffered on the cross. Another narrated.
Ouch. Eyes Skyward. *Why God? Why have you forsaken me?*
Then, our customary cries: *Boo-Hoo-Poor-Jesus-Boo-Hoo-Hoo-Hoo.*
Until Jesus picked her Judas – *You. You, betrayed me.* – And that girl was sent away.

*

Through First Friday, we observed our teacher's perfect printing,
Read the Commandments One through Ten,
As she kept time, tap-tapping the blackboard with her metre stick.

In the background, Hayley –
Bing of a button popping, the tape had come to its end,
The whirl of rewind, the murmur of play.

*

The Host she held was round and white; anxious, we repeated the daily lesson
In unison – *Happy are those who enter the holy city: No more tears, No more pain, No more death* –
She waved the wafer like a fan, peered over its rounded edge, and bade us repeat our lesson.

*

And how will you respond?

(The time had come.)

Amen. We sat up straight

Mrs. Watson explained: *You will walk forward, left palm over right.*

In eating Christ, you are asking to be cleansed.

Then, she broke into pieces, The Body of Christ,

And asked who'd be brave enough to take the first bite.

*

I would be the first to know. The moment, strung out like beads on a chain,
My method, a solemn heel to toe.

Before the class, Mrs. Watson and I stood nose to nose.

Body of Christ? Held high above her head.

From her chair in the back, Hayley joined in, mouthed the answer as I spoke it: *Amen.*

BUS

snow pants brushing
swish whisper *I'm here*

early morning, turn the corner
my sisters and I trailing our father
towards the bus shelter

along this hallway of road
little black sambo
perched on every cement porch
his legs dangling over the edge, still-fishing
hook buried beneath snow

*come on girls. single file, now.
I'll block the wind.*

my father's coat unbuttoned
tie loose, flapping over his shoulder, a kite thrashing
caught, hungry for more string

*come on girls,
it'll leave without you.*

the bus door closes
flattens like a cheated accordion

we sit on the waxy green seats
I stare at a cheese slice sandwich
smeared by boot, trodden into the corrugated ridge of floor

at school I stand before my easel
swirl my brush on hard pucks of paint and create
people like cheerful potatoes
branch-like limbs sprouting from their bodies
the feet of birds

I do not paint my father as he is
after he leaves the stop and marches towards the office
his brown suit spotted with slush
one hand deep in a pant pocket, the other
clutching his bag lunch

I am economical,
like my mother at the counter
who digs eyes from rubbery potatoes

starch forms a cloudy ring around the sink wall
dries like the salt on my boots

DEVIL'S POINT

None of us kids knew for certain why the point
Had been named for the Devil, though we all had our ideas.

The point – at least we believed, then – was the escarpment's highest peak.
From there, you could learn the city from a different angle. From the point we'd take turns
picking
And naming what we thought were the roofs of our houses. *"My roof's black..."*
"See, that one's mine. The biggest one."
"Is not."
"Is so."

You could reach the peak, first by crossing Little Park. Then, it was the custom –
We'd race up the wooded hill until one of us reached the cool rock-face – you could tell, even
With your eyes closed, if you'd come close: the air changed, grew basement-cool
And the ground became spongy with peat bog, and sometimes it smelled like a toad's wet belly.

*

Robbie, from down-road, said the Devil came to the peak to drink –

At the rock's base, before scaling up, we collected brown, long-necked bottles,
Mimicked our father's Friday night ritual – taking pretend swigs, we stumbled,
Buckled our knees, tripped over ankles, while shouting: *I'm Drinky. You're Drunky.*
Drinky and Drunky.

Robbie said the Devil came every night, slithered on his belly, a twelve-pack strapped to his back.
I said maybe so, but my ma had told me the story of Corey Thompson,
How she got in trouble with the West Hill Boys. That's why the Devil's all around us.

Then Robbie and I would scale, first smashing a stick of chalk and rubbing it on our palms,
A trick we'd seen the older kids do – I always went first – I wasn't much afraid of dying then.
Up on top, we'd search for those long, translucent balloons which we'd try to inflate,
twist and tie wiener-dog-style.

*

It wasn't until later that we found the real reason for the Point's name –

Some girl was found. Four months along. *A jumper*, they said.
But Robbie and I knew different. We suspected the Devil. Thought maybe he had paid her a visit.
Maybe he'd been plastered; maybe she'd been drunk, too.
Intoxicated, they danced over the ridge edge. Of course the Devil lived.

*

Robbie and I borrowed his mom's Chihuahua, Miss Francis. We snuck her out the back door
And led her to the ridge. (She'd be our protection.)
Before we could climb, Robbie tucked his t-shirt in, and I dropped Miss Francis through the neck.
We scrambled up the ridge. We looked over the cliff, scanned the crevices for clues,
Peering through our paper-towel roll telescope. It was going well until Miss Francis yelped.
When I looked up, Robbie was doing a jig: *Miss Francis, oh, oh.*
Miss Fran-cis has gone over the edge.

At first we laughed: Robbie held his belly, I drooled. Miss Francis whimpered with us.
Then, when we peered over the rock edge, Robbie flopped to his belly.
Miss Francis dragged her body along, propelled by her two front paws.

Miss Francis twitched. Miss Francis squirmed.

*

Robbie returned a half-hour later. His mom, his dad, some neighbours.
Mrs. Buckley howled, insisted, she must see Miss Francis: *My poor baby. My poor baby.*
The neighbourhood men pushed – hands cupped beneath her ample behind – and heaved, until,
somehow she made it.

It's no good, Mr. Buckley said. The whole thing went fast.
We were told to stand back.
Mrs. Buckley repeated: *no, no, no* like my piano teacher striking the middle C.
With his hunting rifle, Mr. Buckley aimed.
Miss Francis jerked; her blood and bone dashed against the rocks.

*

The next day we returned, both our behinds bruised.
I showed Robbie my father's perfect print and he pointed to the spot where his mother's
Remote had hit. We sat crossed legged, maybe for an hour, or two.
The whole city spread before us.
With the laces from our shoes and twigs collected from the ground,
We fashioned crosses, uprooted islands of moss and plunged each into pockets of dark earth,
Where they stood like Christ's rood.

THAT DAY FISHING AT THE CREEK

an old red mill, his hand on my back
cars rattling by, dust and dirt settled on
our high, black rubber boots

those cattails, brown bobbing bodies
an audience waking, whispers
intimacy spreading like a ripple

we are baiting our hooks

for crying – why'd you pick them so damn scrawny

the weight of stones in my stomach
frogs dropping into water, escaping their skins
plunk, another sharply plucked string

but he made me

and how could I tell my father
about the bearded man selling bait
the refrigerator-sized shop, where he stood
high above me, wiggling his finger
a shadow on the wall, hissing *you like 'em little. don't you.*
that's it. yeah.

and oh, at the counter, how he made me jump
high, higher, dad's change jingling in his hand

while waiting for a bite, dad told me
I could not have a puppy, we could not *afford* it

he did not look as I crushed a worm between my fingers
and stretched it like an elastic until it split in two

to think, so much could happen, all within the same day

I caught one rainbow slick with life
suspended on a string, scales catching light
not the usual catch, he told me
the hook swallowed, shank, bend and point
had to be torn
from the inside, out came
heart, liver, spleen a mess of innards
jiggling *she's messier than most*

the small, hollow body followed me home
for days, she drifted about in her bowl, the water turning oily, sour
and I would not leave her, until he said *enough*

DRINK YOUR MILK

eventually he stopped
lifting his head
opening his beak and swallowing

the yolk we fed
ran down his neck
dried sticky on your fingers
delicate fuzz lacquered, stiff
the dropper flooding his body

you would not stop
he was yours first, so I let you
lift him from the box filled
with grass and rock
the formula we used for every captive
because all animals eat grass
find their homes in stone

*

mom washing the kitchen floor
on her hands and knees, humming
(smells like a swimming pool)
she will not look up, submerged until
we ask her to

I am prepared for anything

this:

*oh, for god sakes, get that bird out of here
it's dead. already dead*

and for what comes next

*you: it's not my fault.
with the hands that once cupped like a nest
whipped its body against the cupboard door*

*

cold even in the sun
where I place the baby to roast, where flies dance
switch partners, to and fro
until the neighbour cat comes calling
rolling the bird once, twice
as though to say, *you dead?*
or what?

that night quiet except
be good. drink your milk

BIKE

1

the night before last, he said
saturday morning.

this means: saturday morning you will get a new bike.

last night, dad said *tomorrow will be your lucky day.*

a brand new bike.

2

on sunday dad wears his good coat
oval patches on the elbows
the Lord is with you (shake hands, say peace)
and also with you.
please, send me a new bike. I love You.

3

today is the day because my stomach is sick; mom says *take her.* we drive past the stores, past the town sign, we cross the white line and go 'round cars. *bluehair*, he says *them damn bluehairs should be shot.* then, the orchards, trees – pointing in all directions – I can tell they are lost (keep your windows rolled-up) then, he says *I know a good place.* the gas station sells ice and bait, bikes too. *out of the car.*

4

I am standing in the back of a white cargo van
spotted with scabs of rust
seven bicycles leaning
handlebars caught in spokes, tape hanging in ringlets
careful when I turn, so my t-shirt
is not snagged by the teeth of ring, soiled by the grease of chain

outside, procession of discarded goods
a pop can rolls, sheets of newspaper flutter by
like empty wings, past the feet of my father
and the station men who stand in a circle
the black in their styrofoam cups steaming

through tinted windows, the lot looks the colour of sleep

a piece of foolscap paper, black ink, block letters
"pay ten and choose one, pay twenty, take three"
at the top: "BUY-CYCLES"

take your time.

5

(bike
say something
to me)

I press a spongy seat which looks
like the head of large black dog

hot, dad asks.

(no, I think.)

hot?
you know, s - t - o - l - e - n.

(stupid, stupid.)

I wiggle, with the tip of tongue, my latest loose tooth
flick, it clicks inside my head
clickclickclick (practice makes perfect)

when it falls, I'll get a nickel.

6

when we get home, dad says *pop the trunk*
out comes bike
next, a towel and he polishes the frame fast, as though it were a shoe
rips tape with teeth and patches the seat,

now, go play.

what's the matter with you? hurry up. hop on.

on the bike, riding towards Robbie's
knockknockringring---can Robbie come out to play?

today is
your lucky day.

Robbie has paper money
and he gives me a shiny silver
I double him; he is always the same
ketchup chips and an orange pop, please.
his fingers stained, pink-red
an orange moustache that stays with him overnight

Robbie lives with his mother because his dad ran away
the same as my cat.

7

double-back

robbie sits, his legs swinging, his shoes scuff the road
this bike sure is noisy.

I stand, legs pumping, my muscles flexing with each push

robbie grabs my waist, he thinks he might fall,

the whole ride is squeak until stop the chain hangs like a broken jaw

we walk home, Robbie whining: *wait-up, wait-for-me*

I walk faster, gripping the bars, rushing towards, away from something

OUR DUCKS IN A ROW

for my grandfather

wet yellow leaves stick to the soles of our shoes as
we circle the pond, stepping left foot, right

when we stop, it is you who finally decides
yes. yes. this is the right spot.

already, I have opened my bag of bread, bought
this morning, half-a-dollar, a day old loaf

the Canada geese honk, impatient
a swan spreads her wings, lowers, stretches her neck
and charges, but there is nothing to rage against
except for the cool, rigid chain-link of fence

before we can feed them,
you require organization, bumble about, muttering
now, let's see. let me get my hat on straight.
approach decision the same way you descend a flight of stairs
hesitant, side-stepping, clutching the banister

the mallards with their paddle-feet pedalling
what could they be hiding down there
perched upon unicycles
wheels dragging the pond's thick bottom
as they twirl, face this way, that

now, let me get my ducks in a row.

as you begin to tear bread, toss over the fence
the birds nibble at those uneven pieces which land
before them, like a plate served at dinner, set just so
I roll chunks between my palms
until the dough turns a punished grey, a tight, round ball

I play spot the loser, the duck with a mangled foot
the duck with a featherless crown, the duck who wants to fly
rises, falls, his flight feathers clipped
and so I throw for the bird which hangs back
while you lure the strongest, closer

your hand – between the flurry of throwing –
touches my back, pats my head, you say *good aim*
all of this, because you know
my bag almost empty, yours too, the mallards once huddled
disperse, ruffling the stale green water
and so, we walk away

WHAT STANDS BETWEEN

chair and all, my grandfather is carried
up the porch steps

wheels turning like a ferris wheel ride
close to its end –
the jumpy start-stop, until the final halt
release, the cage lifts as though rising
from a bow, the belt is unbuckled –

hat in lap, a blanket tucked beneath his legs
an afternoon away
from the nurse who whispers
now, upsy-daisy
and don't you be getting all
topsy-turvy

my father is tense,
like wet hands tightening around frosty metal
he pushes the chair, stops at the end of the porch

his father fumbles
turning his felt-brown hat
over and over, as if it were a good idea
sipping from his rye and water
drink being
as good as talk
sometimes better

their words centred between silence
bookends around their talk

they drink

fill 'er up
here, let me get you another
ah, that's the ticket
one more...

and talk of drink
until neither one can think to spit
or remember what it was to stand

GETTING THERE

the bus ride home
five hours
beside a man
bouncing to polka
every time my eyes
rolled, he winked

the first people I see
my grandmother, small
beside my grandfather
shrouded in hospital white
gasping at life

say goodbye she directs
tell him to go
but she will stay
they must be together

for a long time
I have tried to figure love
and now I think
it is simple
love means not leaving

minnow . small fish

my grandmother says
you're sick
when I tell her
it sounds like snorkelling
his mouthful of tube
each breath falling farther
behind the next

it is hardest
to think of before
him, maybe lifting a gate
strong, mowing the lawn

and chasing after minnows
with the net he made me
from hose and hanger
feet thrashing in sunlit water

I only ever caught
the dead ones
and he would laugh
at those small fish
hurling from my hands
gills gaping like two
flushed smiles

I was looking after the living

BODY AND BLOOD

not sure if you're still alive, but willing yourself to feel as though,
you slip from the clinic.
behind you, the receptionist is still snug
in her glass case, restful as a mummy. the doctor is working on
another body now. his nurse, so conscientious, cleans the mess.

*

red, yellow – you are waiting for the light to change – green
pixels illuminate *man in his own image*. in other words: WALK.

a late-comer speeds around the corner, smell that burning rubber
giver' gunner, they'd squeal –
where you grew up – like pigs

GO, heel hits street, sharp cry and flap of scavenger overhead
bounce of hammer on nail, echo, escaping the nearby
construction site. you've been told – *in this city, there are two seasons:*
winter and construction.
crew boys in their faded jeans spit and nod
you expect at least one to be chewing a long blade of grass

your white shirt sticking to skin – binding – the mixing of flour and water
WALK. the orange hand urging, throbbing like a fresh burn – *hurry up, please* – proceed
your arms swinging against hips, rubbing your wrists raw
you count each step as if it were your last: *This is my body. This is my blood.*
the voice in your head – yours, not yours – shrill as the eyes of a bird
come home to find her emptied nest:
To be given up for you.

sitting curb side, a woman swollen as a puffball – her skirt fanned
her palms cupped to her mouth
she is threatening to blow a handful of her spores your way
impregnate you with the stink of unwashed parts

you are convinced; it must still be inside of you.
a scratching. that sound: when your mother showed you
how to hollow pumpkin with a spoon.
the rounded lip scraping pulp; freeing seed.

Who is it? – you call and answer – *It's me.*
Who is it? – you ask – *To whom do you belong?*

standing in the crowded subway car – going home –
holding your breath as the man beside you leans hard, the lump in his pants
sniffing like a nose is inconsequential:

Where are you body? Where are you blood?

GETTING PICKLED WITH MY BROTHER

it's blood that brings us here
(bound within the cage of this bar)
our blood thicker than, liquor thinning our blood

we are tied at the hip to a mother; a father shaking an empty bottle as if a threatening fist

the familiar wall of beer greets us
dusty rows – bottles – *one buck fiddy*
longnecks, stubbys, brown glass, green, their backs against the wall

we don't waste time.
can't talk until that first swallow

we belong
with the boys who pass each day
destroying drink
(their livers – shrunk, withered as prunes – sputter:
that's it. we're givin' up.)

you order: *two double rye, one sidecar of water.*

I drag two long-legged stools to the bar,
still sticky with last night's spillage

flicking ash into an empty
a butt discarded, sizzles in the wet-bottom of a bottle
smoke rises like a genie, levitates above a circle of gleaming heads
greasy after a good night's sleep

raising our glasses: *to us.*

the first sip taken, I'm soon distracted, already looking for my next drink

the barmaid reaches into a jar of cloudy brine,
scattering a mass of pickled eggs

reminding me of an experiment we conducted:

two kids, slinking towards the fridge
place one egg in one cup vinegar, now, tighten the lid
wait until the shell dissolves – without trace
and what's left – a tough-skinned rubbery sac

with this, a game of catch
toss the egg, take one step back,

our hands jittery; the right corner of my mouth twitching
we waited to see in whose hand it might break

GO FISH

FISH STORY

With experience, the average fish owner,
At a glance, can tell when her pet is dying.

(You see it, and so, you should describe it. Here is the dying fish:
_____ . Okay?)

In the next room, she is cleaning. The vacuum is about to gag,
a hair is caught in its throat.

That is the boy. He belongs to the woman in this picture.

When he takes the fish from its bowl,
He must wait.

The fish believes it is caught in a current;
It is twisting about in the boy's hand.
"Stop being so tough," that boy hisses.
A string of shit is wrapped around his finger. It is like a ring.

Stomp – "Got You"

Is the boy's exclamation – wrecker of fish. The fish slips from beneath
The boy's bare foot and ricochets against the baseboard. It's like playing pool.

Later, same day

"Imagine that," she says. "My little fish has jumped the bowl. Exploded, in fact."

(She presumes.)

Earlier that morning, she had noticed:

His body, an arrow, fins closed, flat against his sides;
eyes bulging from sockets, the colour of tin can;
that fish, rocking, a small boat.

DON'T GIVE A RAT'S ASS

- *
after years of rattling the rat has managed
to chew his way and leave behind his stinking sawdust corner
– a day of wearing the wire snap
didn't quite crack his back as the package promised –

when I entered the pantry and flicked the switch

that sudden light, it had him dancing
head hammering, trap clacking against the tiled floor

and well, he's dead now

- *
all this effort, it got me thinking

about the woman I live with and our fighting, say,
over a spot on the dirty brown couch

and the kitchen floor, try walking to the fridge
socks sticking, a fly-tape tongue collecting hair, honey,
crumbs from the bread we break

whose turn is it?
(you change that friggin' ashtray)

and do I smell a rat? you bet.

have we started sinking, yet?

- *
then yesterday, a chickadee, flirting with his little friend
chicka-dee-dee came, dinged the picture window

his beak splintered like a green branch torn from a tree
and see, there's his smudge across the pane of glass
you can still see it through our prints

and, well, so what?

- *
a dying bird blinking at the base of our backyard window means life
why? because I said so.

ORDERLY

I come in like the cleaners.

(has the party ended?
almost.)

stay awake, alert, keep those nails short
and it's simple – what I do – guard the dying, sit bed-side, an extenuating visit

death? don't mention it

life slipping like the top layer of a wedding cake
(didn't your ma tell you: *don't use a butter icing in the summer*)

when feeding
if the oatmeal clings to the spoon, distract
so, where did you grow up? is that a picture of you?
(never ask, *might you prefer potatoes?*)
don't stop until the bowl is empty
open wide, swallow
feed – scrape the glutinous oats from chin
waste not, want not – the body needs nourishment

but make it snappy, ten more to feed after this one

important: leave your history
– bag it at the door –
you are guilty as a thief entering a store

and remember, a name called in the dark (no matter whose) means help

when she awakens, she may claim that, before the cancer caught
(before she began to dream of her lungs – pierced by skewer,
roasting over fire, bubbly like the skin of a charred marshmallow –
before the desire to slip from skin, strip-out of this cancer)

it was aerobics three times a week
just to prove, she might recite: *one, two, lift, heel, toe and grapevine to the right*

no,
she's not yet dead
like I am not quite here

and be careful you know how to lift and carry,
the body can be as brittle as hardcandy
those eyes might goad – go ahead, drop me, I'll break into a thousand pieces –
then you'll really have a time getting me up and off this floor.

THE JUNK MAN RE-COLLECTIONS

Corner of the Sacred and Profane, Toronto, Ontario

INTRODUCTIONS

Person, Place and Thing – let me warn you, before we begin – Junk Man is all Three.

I met Junk Man the day I moved in, my two-story, red-brick
kitty-corner to his.

It happened like this:

First, a creak, his screen door swung open – thrust the stench
Of decaying matter (rodent, I think) into the street. I caught a whiff
(let's compare it to – the poison caught
– the scratching inside kitchen walls, stopped
– nest of flesh and bone, mice-a-rot)

He – his stink trailing – crossed the street.
I popped the trunk and took one box. He offered a hand:

Lemme help you with them boxes. A girl like you shouldn't be lifting –

No thanks, I said, watching

As he ran one finger along my kitchen strainer, exposed,
Fumbled over his lines, quickly took control.

*Well, I noticed. No –
It's just that every girl has needs,
And I was thinking, well, what I'm thinking is,
She needs a television in her home. Yes, that's right, you do.
Doesn't have to be new. Can always be used.
Used is just as good, but I imagine you...*

He took one step back,
flipped a coin up in the air:

Used will do the trick and you'll save yourself one pretty penny...
(Wink, Wink.)

I noticed the sidewalk, slick with garbage-water.

The sewer grate, a plugged artery – one hardboiled egg, its bald head,
Covered in grit – I imagined eating this, cringed as he joked.

(Sand squeaked in my teeth.)

Made my first big bucks in this business...

He pointed to his house. The place across the road,

The yard, a mess,

Handwritten signs:

“Your Used Electronics and Repair.”

“The Normal Things – For Sale.”

“No Trust-Passing.”

Swing by my shop and I'll swing you a deal.

At my feet, half a popsicle melted in the sun. Its stick, a thin man's coffin,

Swallowed-up by lime puddle, was surrounded by syrupy footprints –
X marks the spot – the kid who cried when it dropped.

PRESENTATION IS EVERYTHING

+

While I carry box after box up two flights,

Junk Man sets-up shop. The quick conversion of front yard into showroom:
Turn-dial televisions, transistor radios, ghetto blasters, a toaster oven crushing one stiletto pump,
Its orange strap splayed; the silver buckle turned to rust. Skates, toques, tires,
Plush rabbits, bears, strewn and stacked about the yard. The lawn is alive with Junk.

Junk (a man) grunting, squatting above a nest of electrical cord.
His calloused fingers unravelling the kinks, knotted, like a tat in a girl's windblown hair.

One pair of pin-striped pyjamas hanging from the line (lonely as a bachelor seated at the bar)
Jiggling above Junk Man's caged raccoon, her hindquarters rubbed bare, patches of pink skin
Scratched raw. She's mashing kernels of corn, playing typewriter with a cob of peaches and cream.

The Windex handle squeaks as I pump,
Misting my front window, framing Junk Man and his Junk.

His shirt is wet, ringed with sweat,
seeping like oil through tissue.

Now, on his knees, Junk fidgets with antenna, button, knob.
Static is a spit riddled Keeeeeeeeee, Keeeeeeeeee. Rabbit ears arranged like flowers in a vase.

A row of televisions, each tuned to a different channel:

A ball game deep in the seventh. A homerun hit.
Close-up – JM's index fingering remote controls –
Now begins the lament of afternoon love:
Rich and Channing's affair. Brook and Chandler's illicit child.

Junk Man unfolds a lawn chair, crosses his knees.

I open the window, cup a hand to my ear like a glass to the wall.
Above the ruckus, Junk Man's tune, a humming, familiar:

Dreaming, I was only Dreaming...

THE GOLD STAR GIRLS

+

Rumour has it – Gold Star Donuts (a front, of course) just up
On the corner of Bloor and Margueritta – has shut down.

Years of hard work, specializing in *Girls, Girls, Girls*: maple dip,
Chocolate sprinkle, apple fritter, boston crème.
Blue Bristol board bleached to dust by sun, “*Don’t Sell Your Drugs Here,*” removed.

Junk Man, angel in disguise, took two Gold Star Girls in,

Marched them right down our street, one on either arm, shouted:

Ah, bugger off. What are looking at?
Mind your own business. Leave ‘em alone.

JM

had a threesome in his backyard

(Mrs. Simaro swears, she witnessed

the chaise longue collapsed just as Junk Man –
licking the tip of his finger and touching one nipple
howled – then came, his stomach shaking
like her famous jelly-mallow salad

The very dish she made when neighbours

Still had parties, picnics, potlucks. Knew each other by name.)

Viewed the whole thing from her bathroom window: “*I was minding my own business,*
wiping the vanity, when...

(fetching my binoculars) I just couldn’t
believe my eyes.”

+

She had seen those girls dragging their bags. (More than a night’s worth of belongings.)

Knew trouble would be-a-brewing: the gimp of their walk. Leg gone lazy

From the strain of needle, collapsed wall of vein.

Tucked into their stockings: the cheap smack, the smoke, the stink of pain.

HOUSE WARMING

+

JM's best buddy, Codger, has been paroled.
This is explained to me as I hurry home, grocery bags in tow.
JM insists, he will help me carry: *Gimme your heavy tins.*

Next, He's on my porch He's on my stairs He's in
And walking around, admiring the clock, *it ticks*, the carpet, the paint,
The picture window which looks onto our street. (His yard.)

There he is, that's him. That's Codger.
Junk Man and I, side by side, his nails tapping, rattling the pane.

Codger wheelies his ten speed through the winter storm – *Look, no hands! No Hands!* –

Cursing the kids who laugh as he skids sideways into the bank.

+

As he travels my home, exploring like a dog,
I follow. A game of call; response.
With his hands, Junk Man covers his eyes, then reveals:
Peek-a-Boo, Peek-a-Boo.

After he leaves, I straighten the pillows (though he's never touched)
I scrub the counters, water the plants, spray the window, wiping his prints away.

THE CITY HAS A STORM

+

The whole street is lift and throw, push and pile.

Junk man opens his door, lets the raccoon out to play,
Hacks a hole in a bag of salt and pitches three fistfuls, windmill style.

He clears his throat, lights a Player's Special.
In Junk Man's Mind, is there a different landscape growing, clinging like a tendril?

(No need to waste time: push and pile.
Those men and women, afraid; how fast things grow.)

The nose of a neighbour's shovel hits pavement and Junk shudders,
Exhales: His bank will not be ravished by the hungry snout of shovel, bulldozer.
He will protect his bank as if he were its roosting cock
And it, his harem of egg-producing hens.

His snow will rise and surround
his fortress, his *fool's paradise*.

Winding-up for a second pitch, Junk Man offers this:

Yaa-Hooey!

Echoes in the street.

DREAMING, I WAS ONLY DREAMING

+

First, I dream of damage and decay, of girls strung-up in burlap bags.
(The neighbours have been spinning awful tales.)

It's true, one Gold Star Girl, dead. An overdose. The other packed her clothes and moved away.
The Cops spun around our block. Junk Man stayed inside, cooped-up for three days straight.

Codger chained his bike up in the lane, spent five hours fashioning a crooked kindling cross,
Now, at the centre of their yard.

When I roll over in bed, the scene is quick to change:

Junk and I sitting on the curb. (Cut.)

Okay, Junk Man driving and I'm riding in his car.

He's taking me towards the City Dump. We cannot figure which is East, which way – West?

We laugh as JM signs the holy cross, repeats: *North East South West, Never Eat Shredded...*

(Blackout.)

+

JM holds my hand, shows me through his place:

The Dump! (arms stretched above his head) *Here, man must stake his claim!*

He passes me a kitchen strainer – *Take this.* – I know enough, place it on my head.

We scale a hill of trash, rip greasy sacs with our hands and teeth.

I take my time, taste each object –
a cracked lens, a syringe, scraps of yellow lace
– my tongue dragging, a net pulled along the ocean floor.

Junk Man whistles, as if a pretty girl has passed,
Spit-shines his findings, examines a gob of something green:

In fine condition.

He offers me the tarnished box.

Pried-open, I discover two home-rolled cigarettes.

(A pause. My helmet wobbles as I wait.)

*This, he swallows hard, is a gift,
can't kick a gift horse in the mouth.*

+

(*Now, cast the shadow.*)

Junk Man's Codger, disguised as an aged gull, flaps above our heads,
His beating wings, a pair of garbage bags.

Junk Man shouts: *Run, run, we've been discovered* and tumbles down the hill.

I am struck, stilled by bird-man:
The smell of singed feathers.
His beak, burnt orange,
A jagged hook pierced with a golden ring.
His limbs, quite human.

He dips, wraps his legs around my waist.
Carries me high above the dump, a bird's eye view.

+

When I wake,

Codger's tearing up and down the street,
Five bunny-hops followed by a smooth catwalk.
Poppa wheelie, he screeches, slams on the brakes.
A safety light pinned to his jacket, flashes of red in the morning light.

And Junk Man, what's he up to?

(This, I cannot see.)

Does he sigh: *what's playing on the boob tube?*

No. He's sleeping, mourning in his sleep.

GET 'EM WHILE THEY'RE HOT

+

Nothing too big, too small for JM:

GET 'EM WHILE THEY'RE HOT!

An April afternoon: Junk Man's hanging his new sign: *Hot Dogs - \$2 Even.*
Codger's playing a pair of spoons, singing an old Kenny Rogers tune:
Never count your money when your sitting at the table...

Junk Man explains his latest venture, his good luck:
The hot-dog vending stand he bought for twenty bucks.

This is it, my big shot.

Buttered buns, a pack of jumbo wieners. Tongs, a poker.
Tips of his fingers,
Blackened, the porous charcoal stacked.

They won't call me namby-pamby when I'm rich.

Mrs. Simaro sloshes water over her steps. Scrubs,
Keeps one eye on us.

He's scraping the grill, biting his lip,
A flame burns blue,
Flecks of black float up, speckle his sweaty face.

How you spell charbroiled?

A puff of heat hits my body.

Junk Man is looking at me: *I ain't no fly-by-night.*

THE BALL ROLLED

+

True, it wasn't their first time
Causing mischief.
Codger and Junk, drunk on sweet vermouth.
The sky, tucked behind a hazy wash of exhaust: starless.
Someone (who knows who)
Saw potential in the sidewalk –
Lined the empty bottles up
Like pins at the end of an alley
And found a slack basketball.

Junk Man raised the volume of his radio,
Codger blew into his hands, rubbed them together.
The ball rolled –
The bottles toppled, clanged, tumbled off the walk,
Across the street.
Codger's skinny legs performed a scissor kick in the air:
Strike! Strike! You see that.
That's dy-ne-mite. Dy-ne-mite.

As JM fired the barbecue,
His fingers sticky with suicide sauce,
A neighbour dialled: police.
(Later, no one would fess up.)

(Maybe they shouldn't have.)

Still, they were surprised when the siren squealed up.

Codger hopped his bike, sped away.

(Junk Man had ordered him: *Go. Hurry the hell outta here. Now.*

Codger was still on parole.)

Junk Man stayed

Belligerent, I guess.

+

I had been at a club that night, dancing with a boy I liked.

When the car stopped and I stepped onto the street,

I walked on to another dance floor: the cherry lights

Whirled. Uniformed men moved to a frantic tune.

I kicked a green glass bottle with my foot, watched

It trespass, roll across the dividing line, the black and yellow tape.

I'm sure I heard the zip of the zipper

As the teeth joined the split in the body bag.

And maybe I saw his face too: swollen, startled.

+

Something had taken hold of them.

It's like we were puppets, they said.

Strings, yes, strings yanked a leg, an arm.

The batons came down hard.

Again. Again.

Someone said it sounded like an animal crying.

That's why they ignored it, kept indoors and out of sight.

Had someone realized. Shouting: *Stop. We better stop*

As blood trickled from his mouth,

Slipped across a rainbow of transmission oil.

+

I know one thing for certain:

Codger came back.

Raccoon, long gone. Escaped? Released?

And still on the barbeque grill, remnants of the wings

They were to eat that night, the skin burned, cracked.

Codger drew the lid down, slow –

ENOUGH ROPE

~ SWING

there is a giant maple which protects our house.
its branches tickle the tin roof,
and some nights when the wind is out,
our tree reminds us that he is alive, growing:
rap, rap, he goes, like a knuckle striking the front door.

a swing hangs from the lowest branch – when light dapples the sturdy bough,
it looks glossy, worn smooth by the rope's rubbing –
if I sit long enough, my feet pushing against the dirt, circling clockwise,
the ropes twist into one long braid, so that, when I lift my feet,
I spin as the rope uncoils itself. I close my eyes, imagine:

it is my father who turns me in these circles.
his hands grip my ankles and as we whirl, my body gravitates
sky, then earth,
sometimes a blade of grass brushes my chin.

dizzied, he pulls me to my feet,
then dips me like a dancer might his partner,
my back arching a rainbow.

my feet strike the ground and the swing stops.
from the tree, I can see my father
standing far-side of the empty pasture.
his clothes are dull, dusty,
the colour of the driftwood fence he leans against.
I watch as he unties his boot, kicks it loose, exposes a sock-less foot.

there is music coming from the house, and inside there's dancing.

(this isn't my imagination.)

when the music slows, mom holds my uncle close. when it's quick, jittery,
he tugs her arm, roughly, as if she were a rusty pull-toy.
the fine china, mismatched and cracked, rattles as the dancers stomp.

my father raises his foot. I am careful,
I don't get too close. his big toe is swollen, crusty with blood, dried black.
Ingrown, he says, then spits.
a blister bubbling from the nail is swollen as a fish's swim bladder,
a long blonde hair has been snared, like a line hooked in a fish.

Pop it, he urges.

No way. You should go to the doctor's.

(Hah. Hah.) Come on. What's the matter with you?

Don't want to.

Yes-You-Do.

No. I don't. Do it yourself. Get mom to.

one boot missing, he limps unevenly

towards the tree: Hah. Hah. Catch me if you can.

~ **BONE AND MARROW**

squatting in the lilac fort, I'm busy licking (after too much picking)
the scab which has blossomed beneath my nose

my brother, Jacky, is prancing, pretending horse
slapping his behind *whack-whack*

knees high, a trot, a gallop
spinning about the yard *giddy up, faster*

he hurdles a line of overturned milking pails

the lawn is weak-yellow, packed bare dirt

our dog, tied to chain
wraps circles around his stake

That's a good little filly, Jacky tugs the invisible bridle
says *whoa*, dismounts mid-air and pulls two
scanty carrots from his pocket, leafy-tops limp and tangled

(best to take from the garden, early morning
– mom making racket in the kitchen – sun on his back
he had loosened each carrot from earth as if turning a screw)

Jacky closes his eyes, kisses his invisible mare and kissing the air
he pictures her: brown with a white diamond
her lips kneading his fingers, searching carrots

Jacky smiles, asks me to play

Come on, Louise.

from the bush, I break a grape-like cluster of lilac,
recall the clip-clop of hooves:

*Stop make-believing, Jacky.
You know dad sold the horses.*

scraps of marrow and bone boiled, melted for glue.

Jacky stops mid-straddle
picks a rusting-nail from his pocket, cleans beneath his nails
dirt, thin as a shaving whittled from wood, curls first, then falls away

~ **A FULL DECK**

dad is silent as the barn
after a cow has birthed
the silence which rides-up in disguise, the aftermath of something large

come fall, dad spends most days on the couch.
mom insists he sleep in the living room now, although,
occasionally, I have seen him climb the stairs

he dresses, each day, in a white undershirt,
grey flannel pants spotted: spilt-milk, smear of butter.
his stink heats our house, hangs, like the smell of a new litter

~

hay is over, bails stacked beneath the long black tarps.
I trick Jacky, make him look out the bedroom window,
tell him the mounds are giants come to sleep in our field

corn has turned the texture of wood. kernels sucked dry,
fallen like the centre of mom's golden cakes.
the only thing left growing – a few green tomatoes
she has left to ripen on the vine

~

on our way out, we stop by the couch
where dad shuffles a deck – game of solitaire –
or, licking his fingers, he leafs through yesterday's paper,
ignoring us, too busy reading old news

once, he smiled: *pick a card, any card.*
Jacky skipped, thought old dad was back

four of diamonds slipped from the deck
laid on the table face-up

here, the trick ended.

he went back to shuffling

~

we said nothing, though I knew,

there was plenty of wood for dad to split,

and mom's tongue grew sharper than an axe –

He's a nuisance. See, that's what you get.

(beating a bowlful of batter)

Give a man enough rope. What does he do with it?

I lick the spoon and because I think it is safe, ask:

what's wrong with dad?

No use. No changing that man.

(muscles in her arm tensing, working as if lashing a whip)

headache, she tells me. he's a bad headache, that's what.

~ GAMES

this one like a teeter-totter
up down up down bump bump stop
this one is about me and Jacky

you can follow,
lick your thumb, index and over
drag that finger down the page
each string of words more
than a row of stacked black lines
stretching like a tarred road
spilling from my mouth
spanning over white distance

~

two kids circling the pond.
stalks of mint torn from earth, caught
in the spokes of our turning tricycle tires

Jacky's feet barely reaching the pedals,
toes pointed like a dancer's.
counting frogs out loud and biting his tongue
in between

it's about who can race the fastest
until the pedals are pushing legs up, up
knees hitting handles

plop – *ribbit* – belly heavy
I spy with my little eye one fat frog
plop – sound of meat hitting board
ground kissing frog's cool belly
is white as my underclothes
frog hopping towards
slippery-sludge bank, islands of lilies

next, two bikes ramming like bulls, clamour of hands like horns
get lost, get away from me
leave it alone!

until, I find clear-way
sear my tire across frog's back
his skin bursting like an uncut, overcooked squash
shocked by cool air

my bike drops – clang –

I march, circle you like a soldier
collect my fresh kill, then
spin those organs like a celebratory noisemaker

~ **ENOUGH ROPE**

the one about my father
the part about his feet in the barn
and the birds in the rafters, flitting
from beam to beam, wings
flat against their bodies, a game of dare
the smattering of dung, crusty and dry
building in peaks like my mother's salty meringue

the bit about his socks, grey and red wool
fallen around his heels
the toes long and empty, careless and dangling
my father, who bent when mom snipped: *pull up your socks*

the knot of rope, fraying as they sawed
men balancing
milking stools sturdy under their feet

I was surprised, if only for a moment
that the whole barn did not collapse with him
his cattle, tails swaying, a flick, a touch
gentle, their heat rising, yet all so still

inside the house, my mother
put water on for tea, said *typical, him, out there*
hanging in the barn.

later that same woman busy busy
packed his belongings
forced shirts, pants, into boxes
as if he were late for some trip
nothing moved
until his socks, I used for snakes, puppets
sitting on the hardwood floor
the buttons of his best suit jacket
sewn to sock with loose red thread, the shiniest eyes
and the mouths I made, tight rows of XXX, black stitching
the kind that says, one snake turning to the other:

I belong to no one.

What?

Oh, nothing.

Now, you say it.

No. Stop it.

Don't. Don't worry. We won't say a thing.

~ **THERE'S A HOLE**

the barn is overrun with cats; last week a brindled tabby, let-go, gave birth to four
mom – demonstrating what all good farmers do – took one, blind.

we watched as she dropped the kitten into a barrel-full of rain.
she pushed its bobbing head, made sure it couldn't take one breath.
not long, another plop – I felt it cold – drops rolled down my leg

the way mom was, you'd think she'd been playing a favourite game,
like Jacky turning rocks – *Bingo!* – salamanders caught, enough for days

~
I kneel beneath Cow-Bossy, her udder lined, a map of swollen veins,
if I could, I'd row myself away

I milk cow after cow, wait for the steam to rise, moisture mizzling my face

I listen as Jacky rustles through the hay: *Get on now, momma cat.*
I just wanna see your babies.
Scat, now won't you.
Ouch. You little beggar. Out of my way.

his arm extended, he holds the first up by the scruff,
its tail flicks, skims the surface, sprinkles Jacky with rain

~
I keep Jacky's tally,
lines which make-up five:

four short lines, one long line through
etched in a rafter, a rusty nail, our tool.
we count, five ten fifteen...
the total: seventeen kittens down,

and how many left to go?

~

when mom goes in, we romp the barn, swinging pails like a picnic lunch,
sing *there's a hole in my bucket*

in the far corner, where dad's couch is stored,
we climb, bounce. the springs squeaking.
but we are cautious: *Don't jump too high.*
because underneath – one full litter, stowaways,
which mom might miss – won't find to count

Jacky sings: *there's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza.*
I jump, spin, clap my hands until they sting: *well, fix it, dear Henry...*
and with what shall I fix it... we know it, lines front to back

~ **RIDING**

dad says: *we have to stop, my knees, they're sore,*
but I beg for one more ride and he gives in

he winnies as I mount
I clench my legs, hold on for life

today I call him Prince; his mane is white

he rears up, muscles rolling beneath my burning skin
his ears, I pull as reigns,

shout *giddy-up* and whirl a skipping rope lasso

~
his body buckles, a bridge collapsed
me, still clinging to his back
he's panting like our dog after a fight

Now horsey, I say, I'll feed you a bucket full of oats.

~
bucket empty –
my silly head remembers
– I've been chewing something tin

my horse, he's gone away.

~ HARDCANDY

we watch as mom closes the lid of dad's casket,
then, brushes her palms together: *well, that's that.*

~

at home, dad's deck of cards still on the table
and mom in the kitchen-heat
pearls strung around her neck
walls perspiring
a pan of sauce on the go, simmer on low
scent of charred butter, golden sugar
the stovetop speckled like a quail's egg

every chair in the house pushed into the parlour
crammed with roosting aunts and uncles,
serious as hens

What a lovely funeral

Great Aunt Iris nods
before biting into a butter tart square,
.Amen.

~

Jacky and I slip out back
where we roll and roll, push clear paths through snow
pack into balls and stack three-high, again and again
our yard is soon spotted with snowmen

we tromp to the woods, pick up sticks
snap branches, spear the snow bodies, make twig-arms
then shape mouths into the shallow curve of a bow

we circle their bodies as if skating the figure eight
when we have tired, we lie, look up
safe in our city of men

~

mom calls *hardcandy*, the back door slams
slippers slapping down the porch steps

she tosses syrup from the pot, onto the bank, where it stiffens
hard strands glistening like cedar-sap
which Jacky and I tug, war over
as if it were the Christmas wish-bone

mom says: *Take your time, kids.*
It's not everyday you get hard candy.

we pick, then chew the brittle pieces stuck to our mitts

~ CROSSES

Jacky and I dress each other in itchy wool suits,
still damp and smelling from the day before

laughter

you are a wet dog in disguise

like a door opening

on the hill, we are joined by the others.

we take turns strapping the broken planks of wood
on our feet – makeshift – we call it skiing.

our nimble fingers greasy with the smuggled lard
we smear onto the wood,

the whole ride is slip-slippery

at the top, we stand in a row and from a distance,

you'd think *trees? no, crosses.*

our arms outstretched, bodies straight, stiff and then off,

down the hill, arms flailing like wild resurrected scarecrows.
in these moments, we are going, far *Goodbye cows.*

See you, pigs.

the farm, seen from above

white field the cardboard cut-out barn
a tin roof *See, here.*

This is where we lived.

HERE AND GONE

NOT IT

for Lois, vanished

that night
was it cream you wore or white
late eighties' fashion
red plastic bangles
clinking as you danced

next day, in our car passing
we wondered
why you still had not opened
the sign in your window
closed

it took twenty-four-hours to believe
you were missing
and by then you must have been
twenty-four-hours away
in some basement, on some road

since then, mom's concluded:

your webbed toes are a Godsend
the middle ones, the two you tried to sever
as a girl, butter knife clenched in your childish fist

how we'll identify her, there will be no mix-ups, the toes will tell us, prove all

on more hopeful days, she asks:

*do you think she's eating all right?
I wonder, is she still keeping her hair that funny blonde?*

in a field searching
surrounded by wood
the whole world
has become a hiding place

counting to ten
a game of hide and seek
I want to bring you racing
towards the trees
your lungs heaving between each
not it, not it

the police say *please, quiet, let's be realistic, dear.*

and the newspaper reports:
the newspaper reports:

after dance / community
apartment / alone
cup of tea / the kettle / electric
boiling / pink housecoat
bed / turned down
clue / less than

night, and I imagine you sliding your garments, down
step away, your toes curl, fluff the front of your hair, so like you
it is clear, you were alive

death comes creeping from
maybe a closet, a door
stumbling like a drunkard
death, death undresses itself in the dark

MY FATHER'S HEAD, US LEAVING

mom wasn't helping
she'd given up

grown used to his losses:
he's lost it before, he'll find it again

not a word for hours
from him
misplaced his head
a long night of carlsberg and gin

I searched the basement, the bathroom, the back
yard, shed – doors sewn shut by vines, rust, rain water

the fireplace, its chimney
a logical approach, other bodies, heads
being found here before, only with fur and feathers

my mother abrupt in the kitchen:
getting the hell out of here and you're coming with me whether you like it or not

just then my father's head hanging, falling far from the ceiling
flitting about the room, hard to catch like a canary
us hunting afraid of hurting yet wanting to
in need of a towel, a toss-over, a net to contain

now
my father's head in a grocer's bag, flipping, flop like a fish
caught me
not understanding the need for his breathing
my mother pointing out, *he needs a hole*

while, never the guts to finish a job
my mother shrugs, towel wrapped around her shoulders
that's it wipes the blue from her eyes

now
my father's head caught in a bucket, swimming
body writhing beneath like a crippled worm, all jelly
and mom runs that bucket like a ferris wheel, her great
arm whirling, spinning as I scream, watching his eyes come up
and around, head up, head down and not a drop, drop
to save the living

not knowing enough
to leave behind the things which destroy

my father's head
my mother's anger, a humming as common as the refrigerator's

you're coming with me I am

the cabby's cigarette lit, feet stomping pedals, taking us
the bucket, secure on the car floor, between my two feet
I squeeze tighter

MISSING PARTS

.
bent over and digging

missing she asks what is missing?

a spade drops
dirt underneath
insects crawl
between her toes

*where is she,
my little
girl?*

she fixates, listens
for
the sound of a swing creaking
the circling of squeaky pedals
a game, maybe
no, you be the – let's pretend we're orphans

the popsicle man comes fast
around the corner
his legs pumping, bells ring
ringing in her ears

earth grows hot beneath
her feet
words swim, sink in it

where is she? my

. .
at the creek
girl and boy go
fishing, having severed
two birch twigs
and fastened
white string to
the ends

he expects *big ones*
sooner or later
only she knows
they can not catch
without hooks

...

talk on the street
this time
when they find her below the surface
down
when they find her below the surface
steeping
below the river bank

one says: *the poor dear*

a shiny face gleaming beneath an orange visor:
well, really, the mother?

....

the spade drops

only she knows
 they cannot catch
 without hooks

an insect scuttles over foot

far off
 some
 thing
 is
missing

HERE AND GONE

*Are you alive, or not?
Is there nothing in your head.*

- T.S. Eliot

do you remember how we were taught to mark water on a map?
those even strokes of blue against the land
the sharp point of a coloured pencil, rounded down, blue dust blown from a page

this is about our beginning, two girls growing it goes like this:
who, what, where, when
why, I will be the journalist and you the geographer

Why is a record skipping. Repeat after me

you and I, we
like skipping; it's fun. the rope goes whoosh as it skims the puddle
our pink rope turning, turning – turns a shade of graphite – a mutation

(this is long before the tide changed, before you started to colour outside the lines)

boundaries, these are real
how far can we go, how much closer to the edge?

hypothesis: is the girl – the you of this poem – suffering a chemical imbalance?

yes, says the doctor.
(he is late for the gym)

he (slow now) says:
you are a sandcastle on the beach, you have been built too close to the water, and
every time the tide comes in, it steals another grain of your sandcastle body, your sandcastle mind

this – because you refuse medication – this, if you do not change your mind.

and see, that's her, down by the river, wandering the bank's edge
watch, as she passes the fisherman who pisses the arc of a rainbow.

do you remember anything at all?
of who we thought we might become?

as you flare up like a newspaper story
the headlines read: more blood in the bath, another nick in the wrist

you are here, you are there
so, why is it, I still follow?

SOUP ALONE

*

spokes in the wheel, broken

the neighbours don't seem to notice
(not like I hear it)

the squeaking of the stroller as I push along the streets.

Your baby, my, she is beautiful, but

don't you think she might be cold?

I pull up my hood, yank the drawstrings tight. (Inside, I am a living shadow.)

*

in the kitchen, I open a tin,

eat soup alone (it will not do)

after every swallow, I repeat his name.

please, understand the rules:

how to eat soup properly

(spoon away from yourself,
not towards)

how to cook meat properly.

if you look through the greasy oven window,
you'll see a broiling duck stuffed with bread and thyme.

I monitor like a mother should (I do)

her five-pound baby,

the roasting pan, a sturdy incubator.

and who, you ask, who do I expect?

*

because I wound up making myself over
into one-big-mistake
is that why he left?

me, with a baby bouncing in her crib.

because mary k. couldn't do a thing,
my skin orange with foundation.

meanwhile, he renovated my insides

changed; a dilapidated house.

yet, I'm still accounted for: *head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes...*

eyes, ears, mouth and nose

*

upstairs, the baby is upstairs

and this is what I would say (if only he would answer the phone)

listen, I've eaten two blueberry yogourt today, the laundry is drying on the line
the baby is on our bed

why won't he just come home?

cry baby, cry baby I could tell him *it cries, our baby. it cries,* I would say.

my finger pointing at

her face, hot, a blister ready to burst

I'd tell him, I can't make her stop

not alone.

*

look what I've gone, done:

her hands jutting from beneath the pillow, clenched like pincers; skin the shade of lobster-blue.

*

soup alone,
never seems enough.

and who's left? (will you sit with me at this table?)

husband left for a better woman
now he eats her cooking, cleans her bones

not
the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker

even you can't say it:
caution, that one is best left alone.

AT NIGHT, WHEN IT'S OVER

I stack our dishes in the sink
you sit with a bottle of wine
between your thighs, pulling,
the cork pops,
you pour until each glass is full

we might finish two tonight, three
lately, it is all that keeps us

like a broken cloud, the wine moves in
mottles your face

if I painted you one solid colour
would you then disappear
into our walls like a ghost?

at night, there is no such thing as sleep
I ask *will you trade me sides?* I am sick
of being against and every time my eyes
close

it begins:

I see my life displayed like the contents
of a rummage sale –

I'll take it for a nickel. That's not worth a dime. –

what's worth keeping?

then, the opening of drawers,
shuffling of papers (*are these my hands?*)
searching for addresses, names
anything which might lead to something else

night and you roll towards me
in a bed smelling of sour feet, stale booze

bed where we can do little more
than struggle
our bodies diminished
two leaking drains

comes a time in a house
when nothing belongs: *is that yours, mine?*
a book, a brush
all lost
and no way of knowing if
things might turn up

THE ARBITRARY

he's gone leapt the building
instantly the impact and nothing nothing

my body falls heavy on the floor - like a marionette - whose strings have been cut

my smallest sister six pats my head we are in the living room
my face itches against the carpet it smells of dog the paw of

already I am prepared this showcase of body this funeral for which
I will paint my lips red his will be stitched thin black thread to keep
his mouth from gaping mid-procession an embalmer acts on our behalf
and a priest in his game show host tone will shout for red-faced forgiveness

he's dead I tell her
she bends down *don't cry* she says

I have learned that only the most arbitrary of acts can heal us.

her eyes
she struggles for importance resorts to

- *it's snowing outside*
 that means soon
 we can make
 a snowman -