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In The Galleria Of Missing Persons

Christopher Banks

**A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

June 1996

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0-612-39915-X

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Abstract

In The Galleria Of Missing Persons

Christopher Banks

The title of my thesis is *In The Galleria Of Missing Persons*. It is a collection of prose, narrative, and lyrical poems based on themes of identity and memory. Using memory as the primary lens for exploration, my intent was to focus on how 'identity' is multiplied or made *other* by major shifts in geographical place and chronological time. The structure of the thesis is divided into three numbered sections.

Formally, the poems are organized into free verse stanzas and prose blocks, and employ repetition, alliteration, rhythms of the speaking voice, and narrative in their construction. As the thesis progresses through its three sections, the poems openly engage my personal memories, ranging from early childhood recollections to more painful recent ones, and attempt to establish a link between memory and self-image. Essentially, the thesis is concerned with the fundamental paradox of memory retrieval, where memory is both artifact and artifice, and what effect this paradox has on the construction of identity.

Most of the poems are autobiographical, in nature, although some fictional narratives and meditations are also included within the work. When I began this project, I viewed my own memories as a clutter of past lives lived by other people. *In The Galleria of Missing Persons* is my own personal attempt to reclaim some of these abstracted, past lives and so, hopefully, come to a larger understanding of the many, conflicting personalities and unresolved voices still thrashing about inside me.

It is possible that he is dead, and not discovered.
It is possible that he can be found some place
in a narrow closet, like the corpse in a detective story,
standing, his eyes staring, and ready to fall on his face.
It is also possible that he is alive
and amnesiac, or mad, or in retired disgrace,
or beyond recognition lost in love.

-from A.M. Klein's "Portrait Of The Poet As Landscape"

Poetry has got nothing to do with *poetry*.
Poetry is how the earth goes green before thunder,
is the sound you make when you come, and
why you live and how you bleed, and

The sound you make or don't make when you die.

-from Gwendolyn MacEwen's "You Can Study It If You Want"

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In The Galleria Of Missing Persons

-An Invocation

*You who are brightness and mirage,
tumult and idiocy.*

*You who are the sum of my voice
and its singing.*

*You who are a hall of mirrors,
a frieze of sad memories.*

*You who are my here, my now,
my then, and thee.*

You who writes this all down.

One



The House Of Memory

Welcome to the house of memory.
The attic is full of vanity mirrors,
the rooms full of old photographs.
There are matches in the kitchen.
Do not go digging in the basement,
it is full of worm casings and skeletons.
Visit often or perhaps even stay.
No one will bother you.

No one lives here but the lost ones.
Those trying to find a way home.

The Looking Glass

I.

here is the faded portrait of an infant
with scrubbed blue eyes

notice the red hair crooked elbows
wrists tucked under arms
imagine the hands the nubbed skin
fleshy buds growing into fingers
beneath the posed limbs

(the child's body lily-white
lies shimmering below
the surface of the photograph

like a thrown stone a wish
you can never have back)

*I have come from afar
I have travelled nine long months
a seasoned time-traveller incanting
magical spells of growth*

*I was lured here by the promise
of sound, food, appearances*

*little by little I am calculating
the circumference of this planet
the clarity of this blue sky
threshing light*

II.

The infant sits bundled
in the high-chair. His eyes
like my own, ultra-marine.
A bright, deep blue.

Remnants of a digestive
cookie, half-eaten,
fall like grain between
his curbed fingers.

Christopher, age one,
first cookie, is scribbled
in my mother's hand-
writing on the back.

Staring at the photograph,
its light diffuse, the child
emerges, like a poem,
the memory gleaming.

The Changeling

**I make and unmake my body
as wind and rain
make and unmake the land.**

**I am learning to shape sound,
ineffable words.
I am learning to walk, talk,
care for my bowels.**

**My hair changes colour as does the season.
My furless coat burns brightly in pure sunlight.
I am learning the ways of this place
I have landed, I explore.**

Shadow

Each day I wake and see
your rumpled silhouette
crouched against
my bedroom walls.

All morning you sit
rocking polished, black heels
in a corner of my room.

Child-killer, bogey-man,
from my bed I imagine you
picking your terrible, monster teeth,
coveting my soft,
pea-sized toes.

Upon hearing my mother's voice
calling my name, calling me
downstairs

I test my padded foot
on the floor, your shining darkness
reaching for me
in the shape of a claw,

A human hand.

Bees, Bees, Bees

Light roars through the green canopy
and accompanying forest chatter. The
chilled air holds the scent of damp leaves.
Bleak woods exhale slowly, intimate
signs of life. It is late morning.

My four-year-old body scampers up
a low hill, down charred ravines,
blunders along the overgrown path.
I hear the swish-crackle of large boots
slicing through wet leaves, dead brush.
Stumbling aimlessly, my feet uncover
the papyrus roof of a bee's nest.

Vibrant, yellow-felt bodies erupt like hot sparks,
catch quickly at my feet and hands.
Barbed-tails dagger my unsheathed extremities.
Only the wind of my lungs fills my ears,
my voice filtering through the static of bees
rattling the atmosphere.

Soon afterwards, my father rescues me.
A minute later, I'm rolled onto the kitchen floor.
My skin on fire, my face streaming tears.
My mother's hands running a soapy cloth, a cold compress
over the little bumps, the swelling medallions
adorning my flesh.

Outside, the forest is quiet again.
Except for the bees flinging themselves
against the glass panes of the back door.
A sound like electricity, transformers
buzzing at a distance.

Under the porch

of my grand-parent's cottage I am hiding lost among the splayed cords of fire-wood and scurrying mice *my grandfather is singing my name* birds are skirting white whorls of wild clouds summer is clad in bright dizzying hues of sunlight the airborne scents of flowers petunias purple and pink weigh heavily in the atmosphere *my grandfather is singing my name* I am hiding his voice skips three times across the honeyed surface of the lake I hear my name sinking in a corner of the bay the green air transmits this silence now feet are scrambling down the mossy stairs voices fill up the yard each voice scatters my name in a different direction I am hiding not among the humming-birds or the cowled heads of the garden flowers but under the porch my father is now shouting I can see his legs scissoring over the slate-grey rocks waves are nudging the careless shoreline he is shouting I am hiding my uncle dives off the battered dock his body jack-knives splitting the blue vault of the lake I am not among the fishes or lost lures I am not sleeping under the deep architecture of water and light I am hiding my mother is crying *my grandfather is singing my name* my name is gathering my voice is trapped lost in the labyrinth of my lungs I hear it calling *I'm here I'm here I'm here*

Speech Lessons

Memory keeps me wary, keeps me hurt.
-Judith Thompson

In grade one, at the age of six,
I was locked in a tobacco brown cell,
my principal's office, surrounded by
the dead scents of mints.
The raw-hide of old, cracked leather chairs.

I was given speech lessons for my voice.
How it guttered then. A flame-spire.
How it spattered the wild canvas of air.

I remember my lungs carving
hard sounds, soft sounds,
vowels and consonants weighed
duly on the tongue.

I remember reciting muscular, athletic words,
words full of duelling syllables,
words like
apple, fire-truck, television.

I remember my jaws balking,
taut springs in my throat coiling
and uncoiling. My larynx
plying and sawing dry sounds
day after day.

I remember that pain.

I lock it deep down, amongst
my other memories,
behind these heavy-lidded eyes,
this imperfect tongue.

Barbarella And The Flying Dream

Flinging on my handy life-preserver, the orange one, my favorite colour and after attaching the rope I call out to Barbarella over the unassailable child-proof fences into her yard. She gives a jerk and suddenly my feet lift away from the dandelion moons and crabgrass and there I am all of six years old and master of my world. I'm floating embryonic in the great belly of the sky. Soon, however, I'm growing too aware of the receding brick houses sitting like match-boxes miles below my feet and though I'm quite high up I can actually see Barbarella Coffey laughing at me. She is playing me purposefully into clouds so my face becomes webbed in sky vapour and even as I'm gesticulating, calling out for her to reign me back in, she just laughs and keeps letting out more slack and makes me do loop to loops and death-drops for hundreds of feet while I clutch desperately to my life jacket, my eyes glued shut, yelling "Hey...don't!". When finally she spots me, crying and terror-stricken, my tears seeding the crinkled surfaces of the clouds, she hauls me out of the sky and brings me down only a few feet away from her, near the broken swing-set with green and orange giraffes painted on its sides, and says "I wasn't gonna let go, y'know. You're still my friend. You're a boy, sure, but you're still my friend."

I dream the flood

catches my father totally off guard napping in the easy chair water seeping in from outside over the doormat that reads Welcome and my mother's voice hitting the ceiling moves like a mad propeller searching for God in the kitchen while we children lie huddled in a corner I dream my father is Jonah adrift in his arm-chair fighting the giant whale knocking at our door with wet newspapers and damp magazines bailing heroically with an antique spittoon until the water is too much and we are made to flee through a back window I dream my father standing waist-deep yelling obscenities against the sway his legs straddling the front doorway the harpoon of a mop raised chin-level eyes daring the water to creep further

Memories

At eight years of age,
I taped pictures of man-eating sharks
to my bedroom ceiling.

Countless nights,
my body culling sleep,
I'd dream of razor-edged,
quick-silver fins.

Black sheaths.
Dark shapes circling.

My Brother's Keeper

Don't hurt me!, your sad voice
cries out mercilessly for half an hour.
It sounds so full of promises and regrets.
Outside the locked truck, I smile wickedly.
My enflamed cheeks glow fierce
with sweat and fatigue.

Childhood rules for settling scores
are explicit—pain for pain.
The bruise the tattoo of a fist pools
green-black under my left eye.

Lurching against the truck-door,
rolling my slender-boned fingers
into mallet-sized bulges,
I thread my words, artfully,
sinking them into you:

*Give it up
there's no place for you to go
I've got you*

The voice you hear is a cruel one.
It sounds distant and detached. Unrecognizable.
It is not the voice of an older brother.
It is not my voice. It is the voice of an enemy,
someone who would love to thrash you pummel you
pound your bones to a fine chalk.

Looking through the glass wind-shield
into the stranger's face,
staring into the flames candled through his eyes,
he smiles threatening to scatter your teeth
like grass-seed across the wide lawn.

The Fox

**"There's a fox", I said, enthralled
by the red wisp of a creature emerging
from a ridge of green woods, my father
steering onto the road's gravel shoulder,
the truck idling, his big hands carefully
lifting the rifle's dead-eye.**

**The gun-shot deafening, the furred carcass
excreting shit, spilling a bloody plume
all over my new boots.**

Remembering The Sioux

On the far edge of a Northern town,
I recognize a shambling, thin-shouldered youth.
All day he pulls out jack-fish for
startled, pie-eyed tourists.

He's done this so many times
he believes he need only close his eyes
to see those sun-flecked bellies
flitting thru brass coloured weeds,
sunken oil-barrels.

He traces the fishes' blurred movements
thru the lustreless waters
anticipating where the green snouts of the pike
will next snap and strike.

Words drift near the surface of his mind
but don't so much as ripple, bop,
make a splash.

A light wind carries across the bay
to where the boy stands
casting his line into the brackish,
reed-clogged waters.

Overhead planes sputter by
carrying businessmen from Thunder Bay
vacationers from hidden reserves
islanded deeper
in the northern interior.

What the boy is thinking
I can only guess.
Hush.

Something about the rod bending there.
Elemental, inchoate.
The motions of a living thing
telegraph down the line.

Adolescence

So terrible
how anger comes to us
late at night

filling our mood
how smoke from a faulty oven
fills a room.

See, you let it rest
on your tongue a moment
and then the next

You're spitting it out
at everyone who happens
to be nearby

Astonished, you apologize
with the heart-felt candour
of a small child caught
in a lie, or stealing a cookie.

*It wasn't really me.
I didn't do it.
I couldn't have done that.*

Knowing it really was.
Knowing you're not a child.
Knowing it's already too late
to kiss the wound,

Make it better.

Rainy Day

The afternoon comfortless without sun.
I stand shadowy under the umbrella shape
of a fruit tree, its branches full of blossoms.
A ceaseless rain, falling without reprieve,
subsides, but my eyes, big as planets,
continue drizzling large, wet tears.

If I pause and listen a moment,
the Earth stops grinding on its axis.

Expired cherry blossoms stipple the lawn.
They lie mouldering, so many little pink bodies
stilled corpses. My heart, glistening, wet,
a red and tattered shape fallen among them.

Toads

My dog Shamus stoops in a corner
of the yard, noses a squat, brown toad
where it drowzes lazily, half-buried,
in my mother's flower-bed. Its skin
full of small, benign tumours.

Shamus wags his tail, whines, crouches,
barks twice. The toad, feigning indifference,
sits comfortably silent in its own truth.
I stand, hesitant, amused, off to one side
watching the dog's red mouth gently
collect the little specimen smelling of
flowers, mulched grass, loam.

Then comes the dog's sickening whine.
His body surrenders a quick shudder.
His bronze-coloured eyes, sluicing,
roll up, stunned in their sockets.

Alarmed, Shamus drops his prey
and moves off to the yard's far side,
the toad's piss threading his jowls,
the untrimmed grass, murmuring
softly, beneath his treading feet.

Bomb poem #1

when I came over last night I had to make my way past the police
barricades and hoards of screaming neighbours crying "she's crazy, she'll
blow up the whole block" and when I came inside you were sitting in
space a jumble of wires and explosives and me not knowing whether to
cross yellow wire with white or white wire with blue and your
imperceptible breath counted down the minutes while I coached you on
some dream safari where you stalked big cats and tamed them at your feet
and me hoping I was doing the right thing by placing my hands over your
heart waiting for an impact that never came and when we finally spoke
and when we walked outside with hands clasped together the people walked
back into ornamental green yards leaving us to contend with broken
barricades the silence of an empty street

Bomb poem #2

In our worst moments bombs become us so many morning conversations interrupted by a passing word or phrase setting the timer on our hearts ticking exhausted questions like *where were you?* pulling the pin on love's grenade that we've grown tired of each other is certain of long hours spent phoning in explosive threats to friends and relatives of long nights beneath muslin sheets smouldering like lit fuses tired of bodies slowly detonating over time tired of the wounded animals we carry in our chests the way they spill blood all over tired of looking for a quiet place to die where the carrion those who feed on injured things won't find us

Auto-biographia

Once I buried
a grey-brown moth
in a tobacco tin
and lost my voice.

I cried for days
until I heard its frantic calls,
beating breath.

The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner

Life without you is like running ten thousand miles
in a pair of running shoes, a half size too small.
The body's long stalk wilting like a garden flower

Scythed by an early frost. When standing still,
the pain lessens, subsides, dulls to a weak throbbing.
A keen ache. Yet who of us can afford to stand still?

When blind fears, sudden desires keep our lives
on the fast track, everything rushing ahead of us,
the finish line always just out of reach.

Year in, year out, all of us running
private marathons in bloody shoes.

Origami

After mid-night
we practice folding ourselves
into one another

Credo

**Poetry is the land of me
Poetry is the land
Poetry is
Poetry**

Night Corridors

L

Moving back towards the house
away from the morse-light of the ongoing stars,
I walk, softly, gathering sounds
from the cool, evening air.

Wind shakes the dilapidated greenness
out of the breathing trees.
Insects chime in the dew-locked grasses.
Worms drive invisible ploughs
thru layers of black earth.

They pass beneath my feet.

Thin, ruddy bodies sifting thru darkness
like fingers searching for lost hands.
They move causing the ground to heave,
to pulse like a gigantic heart.

I hear it beating, rhythmically, underground.
Away in the distance, someone is staring out
thru the white cataract of the moon.

2.

Breathing night in the green grass,
sprawled motionless in the back-yard,
listening to the dark's surround
as if it were a kind of music,

A song more sound than movement,
like wind rattling through a pipe,
or the muted static of a shell
adumbrating in the human ear.

Three

Landfall

-this is the loneliest country in the world
-Gwendolyn MacEwen

startled to find myself sitting in a Boeing 737
cruising at an altitude of 33,000 feet
heading north to the baffin
having successfully navigated my way
thru pre-flight boarding
without the luxury of alcohol
although 3 gravol tablets
spread warmly thru my blood
acting as a calmativ

two hours ago I was on a plane to Ottawa
turbulence swatting at the metal hull
like a broom hitting a moth
orange juice spilling all over my newspaper
the stewardess pouring it
falling ass-over-tea-kettle into the adjoining seat
saying *everything is fine, sir*
as my nerves raced at incalculable speeds
my fear of flying winking in and out
of the dark of my mind
like fire-works

it's now two hours later and
although my eyes are clenched shut
I'm certain the whole map of the world
is sprawled somewhere beneath my feet
air travel is safer than travelling by car
rises out of the gravol-induced fog in my head
as if God placed these words there on purpose
so I repeat them a thousand times over
a kind of penance for all the wrongs
I've perpetuated against others

abruptly the intercom crackles
my heart pitches against my ribs
the captain's disembodied voice
sputters in the conditioned air
telling us we're 10 minutes
out of the Baffin

immediately the thrum of
the engines grows louder
the cabin pressure builds
making me swallow hard
old fears tinge my mind

I feel that rapt terror
actors feel in those awful
television melodramas
everything or nothing
hinging on this moment

landfall

the landing gear is down
the tarmac magically there
inviting as a warm hearth
a stone plain in a land of stone
the plane setting down
more easily than
pen to paper

*Iqaluit, N.W.T.
May 1995.*

Night Light

to wait out the day here
would carry a stiff penalty
a lifetime of sleeplessness
so you must learn to forget
night skies banked with light
when the body desires sleep

even though you may still hear
the audible cries of little children
from your bed after midnight
celebrating the simple magic of play
or the snuffling sounds of roving dogs
taking over the streets

the night is the colour of dawn

this message echoes thru your head
until nothing else enters
not even sleep and so pulling on clothes
you walk the short distance to the bay
passing a few other somnambulists
coming back from the bar

the view from where the bay
meets the river is marvellous
land jutting out in all directions
expanding so wide you believe
you have come to the crossroads
where day and night meet discreetly
to kiss or maybe just hold hands

strange light flares dully at your feet
and you notice how it illuminates
the distant craters like dark glass
propped along the horizon

looking back at the sombre houses
sheltering those who found sleep tonight
you hear yourself thinking

we are ghosts on an alien moon

while something else inside you
propels your legs into motion up
the ascending dirt road towards home
the cold anaesthesia of arctic air
pumping thru your lungs
making you work harder
than you're used to

after entering the house
you move towards your room
where the most sacred of night's rituals
begins with a dream of trees
and star-light and prows
of exotic ships

drifting thru
the backwaters of sleep

Iqaluit, Summer 1995

Silences

*I would respond like the zombie I had become.
The weather of depression is unmodulated.
Its light a brown-out.*

-William Styron

1.

Sometimes late at night
thru my apartment walls,
I hear my neighbour,

Barb from down the hall,
half-singing, half-crying
Somewhere, over the rainbow...

She's a painter, a schizophrenic,
a middle-aged Joan of Arc
who hears voices, although,

Sadly, not the heavenly kind.
Barb tells me, on occasion,
she can't drink alcohol

2.

Or "presto, instant suicide".
A thought which gives me
pause on a night like this,

When I hear her singing,
crying into the phone,
her voice railing away

At timid, elderly parents
who never visit (thinking
cards on birthdays enough).

And me, solemn, listening
to her in my apartment,
finding the timbre, ache,

3.

In her voice frightening,
sympatico with my own
inner pain, black thoughts.

Nights like this, when
Barb stays up clinging to
her own private terror,

I have to remind myself
it's not only the communicable
diseases killing people

It's the incommunicable ones,
too. *Depression, loneliness,*
whispering thru the walls

4.

Of our bodies--the flesh,
the bones which separate
each man, woman,

From the other. Despair
ringing loudly in the dark,
murmuring *All is lost*,

You are dying. Only
some of us, pretending,
not to listen. Or care.

Psalm

I want to sleep the whole night
on a sea of fallen stars, a tinselled
mattress of cut jewels and shards of
polished glass. I want to cast my
spineless heart blood-red and heaving
into the lanternless sky. I want to
perform a cruel pantomime on the shores
of the world's greatest ocean, Darkness,
dipping my hands into something more
sinister than star-light, maybe you.

The Dark

A voice, immutable as the coming dawn.
Night like a shield you lie beneath.
Strange words filling up empty spaces.
God calls out, more lonely than a frigate bird
circling at sea in search of land.

At such moments of uncertainty,
pray someone really is talking there
in the sweet soundless dark.

Blue-print for drowning

find yourself a small lake and ask whether it accepts human bones if it answers yes attach a length of rope to your belly-button adjoin the other end to a smooth round stone next holding your breath heave anchor into the green womb of mother earth trust the umbilicus to guide your descent accept all fish as your brothers be sure to count backwards from one hundred be sure to hold your knees tightly against you fight the urge to resurface let your secret name sing through parted lips ask the lake for forgiveness trace her a map of your tears make her understand why you had to come and when you feel the short tug of life's end let go

Hide And Seek

I.

I remember a colossal oak tree,
behind my house when I was three.
I would stand beneath its massive girth,
arms full of wet, curling leaves,
wholly in love with the cumulous
windfalls of Autumn.

I recall a secret hollow, too, in the trunk.
A crawl-space just wide enough for
a small child. Games of hide and seek
filled my first afternoons.

II.

I remember swimming lessons
at age two. A Mom'N'Tots class
at the local pool. I still hear
the babble of infants laughing,
water churning the pool's edge,
my own protestations.

I've never forgiven my mother
for this mild humiliation
and regrettably I've dreamt of
drowning ever since.

III.

Somewhere in my mind's house,
my recent memories have slipped out,
stepped out for a smoke,
gone out the back-door.

They're hiding in the back yard
in the hollow of an old broken
down tree, a memory tree,

Awaiting the right moment,
the right time to say *we're here.*
olly olly home come free, Chris.
We're ready to stay inside;
to live with you under
the same fallible roof.

Meditations on the Human Heart

1.

A pound of flesh, maybe two.
A plague ship swimming a crimson sea.
A covenant of fire. An empty drawer.
A gold tabernacle filled with angels.
A blood potato, tubers rooted in different earth.
Eyes straining to see.

A way of seeing.

2.

People fear letting go
of the human heart
imagining it'll float away
like a weather balloon.

Amelia Earhardt.
Heart of Air.

She held onto her heart
too tightly
and flew off with it.

3.

None of us trade hearts
for fear they'll be stolen.

We play hearts more
like trump cards, always
waiting to see

if the other person
throws down a few spades
along the way.

4.

Children draw red-crayon hearts
on greeting cards because
the real ones keep turning
black as coal, keep
falling apart.

5.

The human heart is....

A cool rain falling on acres of dry tinder.
The burn-out acreage where the forest once stood.
The new growth, the berry briars coming
back within the first year.

Small, frail, ugly things but sweet
and always just enough.

6.

A red barn on fire.
A crucible filled with molten lava.
A stone tower with no costume of ivy.
A collapsed diamond-mine.
A broken plough-share.
A moonstone. A star pulsing,
lonely in the dark.

Mother

When you feel terrible,
when your face is rinsed with tears,
& your heart congested
with the sudden fears or earthly burdens
of a hundred other people,

Enter this little poem & stay awhile.
It is cozy, heartening, unassuming.
Do not leave it until you feel better.

My Father Wanted To Be A Cowboy

1.

My father wanted to be a cowboy,
anxiously ploughed out of the house on Saturdays,
spare change rattling so loudly in his pockets
you'd think an alarm was sounding.

At the movies, he'd sit in the dark, cocooned for hours,
inhabiting the short-lived lives of singing cowboys,
masked gunmen, renegade cow-pokes, and bounty hunters.
Tight-lipped men in unwashed mackinaws,
drifting stealthily, like ghosts, across the flitting screen.

All worries guttered from the secret chambers of his heart
and were replaced, if only for that afternoon, with the names of
cowboys, the names of horses too, perhaps
the honorary Indian name he chose himself- *Lone Eagle*-
and his fast gun, his best lassoing trick.

2.

My father wanted to be a cowboy
so left home at age eighteen. Imagine him
riding off into the sunset on his trusty bicycle,
away from his parents, the half-drunk bottles,
the leather belt hanging on the kitchen wall.
He delivered groceries for two interminable years
before meeting my mother. He waited 'til
they had exchanged a few, unremarkable pleasantries
before declaring "I wanna be a cowboy.
Let's get hitched". She just laughed.

3.

My father, wanting to be a cowboy,
campaigned in earnest. His lithe, skinny frame
donned the immense uniform of a policeman.
He won occasional awards for sharp shooting,
public merit. Sometimes his parents would call up
wanting money for the Hydro, the gas bill,
back payments on the house, whatever,

but my father was always too quick on the draw
to be taken so unawares. He'd wait patiently
on the other end of the line, throat constricting,
brown, raw-hide eyes reddening, mouth tightening
slightly as he breathed out "No.....I just can't".
The surface of his voice flowing like slow water.
It's true what they say about a cowboy's life
being like a poor hand of solitaire.

4.

The cowboy's life was hard on my mother,
the constant moving, the loss of friends.
Her heart, my heart, scored with saddle-sores.
We never got used to the ambushes,
the sudden gun-fights with the assassins of
Happiness. They who always found us,
better than any Pinkerton,
with our backs turned.

5.

Cowboys and sons:

How they suffer each other
like stroke patients,
how they cause one another's
mental collapses.

I was fourteen the day
my father caught sight
of the silver hoop laced
through my left ear-

His accusing look
made every cell in
my white, porous skin
turn a shade paler.

His face shone black
like sun on tarred roofing.
His awful silence
stilled my tongue.

6.

My father wanted to be a cowboy.

His love is for John Wayne-
the cowboy incarnate, Louis
L'amour paperbacks, and
thankfully my mother.

Although he doesn't wear a ten gallon hat,
periodically, for old time's sake,
he'll sidle up to someone
drawing "Get out of my town!!!"

His fingers automatically
feeling for the tin badge,
touching the absent place
where it should be burning
over his heart, thinking:

*If only I had a horse,
if only I could sing.....*

Angels would play steel-petal guitar
as you kicked up your heels, rode out of town,
the whole earth aglow from the sparks of
your silver spurs

Fizzling in the dying, amber sun.