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Three Years from Long Beach

Mark Cochrane

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

April 1991

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ABSTRACT

Three Years from Long Beach

Mark Cochrane

This collection opens with the long prose poem of its title, a retrospection on the suicide of the speaker's close friend. The rest of the book represents attempts to deal with loss and indecision, anxiety and self-destructive behaviors and politics—a fabric of issues held in suspension by the juxtaposition of a suicidal ethic with images of childhood and ideologies of birth. The poems in "Undiscovered Country" and "Dead Letters" situate atrophied relationships, undermined by chronic doubt, against politicized landscapes. The fourth section adapts a similar strategy to investigate reproductive politics and gender roles. These poems remain skeptical of their author and other men who profess feminist sympathies in the face of questions they fear to confront honestly, in their domestic lives, beyond reading theory, beyond declaiming against the sexist man as comfortably "other." An anxiety of influence manifests as well: an impulse to mimic forms, voices, solemnities, then to undercut the parody, falsifying in itself, with a different seriousness, dark and unfunny. Less pessimistic, less cynical, "Seed of a Pulse" traces the decision to parent, to affirm a world and a home with unironic conviction.

*The world dies and the son cannot remain the son. He
becomes the father or blows his brains out.*

— Herman Melville

*But we are still floundering about—with certain exceptions—
in the Old order.*

— Hélène Cixous

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Three Years from Long Beach
for W.J.M., 1964-1987

...Westward, till all are drowned, those Lemmings go.
- John Masefield

1

For days together we were boys again. Now, when I confront your dying on a highway later that summer, I return to what is mine, that moment on the path, chips of cedar in a gentle National-Park curve, and I summon the ghost of a black bear, one city block ahead.

Always the jar of peanuts rattles to a stop in my hands. Our eyes meet his and he springs back, heavy and offended, as if we have witnessed some masturbatory touch.

Don't move, you whisper, but already I understand the ground rules: the sprint to the car is not between us and the bear, but just between us. For if the bear so chooses, the slower man will lose.

Like acrobats we balance a score of careful, backward steps along the spongy, ochre mulch, and so round the bend in his line of sight; but just as we leave his ken the bear minces off the path, each down-step of the great paws into the lush underbrush as delicate as a mime's hands.

On every side the ferns rustle with a commotion of wildlife. We jog to the gravel shoulder of the road, heads swivelling.

Our parked car: I juggle keys at the door. Then from safe inside, the driver's seat, I ogle you through the passenger window, and shrug, and hesitate—as ever—to let you in. You grin. You knock. You mock horror, smear your face into the glass—an agony of compressed features, stretched lips. You duck and vanish in the vapour of a kiss.

Another decade rises from the east and still I am dreaming of bears. In my sleep the devil of your imagination, cones of teeth and a greatcoat like an old Russian, lumbers behind us in the sunbright tunnel of rainforest.

An apparition like this could torment a man into traffic.

In the dream, I fumble with keys. From across the hardtop
you pray for speed of passage. You sweat, chant,
you play
the intoxicate shaman of fear:

*I condemn thee, for I have seen a great evil,
and now all I desire is to die.*

More hallucination: the key snaps off,
an arrowhead in the lock's heart.
The galloping bear overcomes you,

Ford Bronco

mauls you on the Trans-Canada:
indents your forehead, crushes your chest;
unfolds a grizzly length, his head to assess me;
is swallowed by a forest recess.

2

We pass another day, the next, on the beach—lonely in May,
rippled hard as a bodybuilder's tummy. Floating in litres
of *reisling* I read Wilde and bathe in a shallow tidal pool;
probe the fingered sphincters of sticky green anemone.

The sun floats coins on my clean tub of sand. Empty bottle
contains a message. So warm I am, helpless, I exhale into
a pee. *Burning* I yelp and you smirk at my fervour, sucking
your stone of hashish.

All this gay innuendo, an apology for never doing wrong. On
Florenzia Bay, backed by cliffs too steep for bear feet, you
watch as I slide into sleep.

I waken alone, raw with salts: you have receded, a mirage
in a black leather jacket, tracking yourself one mile down
the tide. A squinting profile, stoned and alone, a sliver
of wood perched on a jumble of rocks. Calvary.

But you return and we wade. The frigid Pacific squeezes an
ache into the bones of our calves, then deeper we pogo to
preserve every inch of dry flesh from the rhythmic onslaught
of froth; chatter about scrotums shrunken to snakehide and
cupped in our hands / as we hug
our own chests in our arms.

When I splash, your revenge makes my heart stutter.

When you dive, a perfect arc, you never crack the water:
you fall forever, meteoric.

Laughing, I feel the icy spike in our foreheads, submerged.
But there are no trident-tough or musseled gods under here,
barnacled or kelp-whipped, or phosphorescent as pissy-eyed
cereal-box prizes.

(I could regret not drowning together.

I have wrecked myself three years, despising memory. Since
my unsuccessful wisdom-tooth surgery and your death, I have
lost the power to smile.)

The ache a numbness, numbness lead, I'm cold and unreactive,
sinking with the ebb, my dead-fish arms, blood cold-dense, I
fall from of all sure footing and my lips will not be said—

so I swallow salt
capsuled kelp
to see what vitamins it brings,
or dream I'm drowsing in my pool
tanning under an angel's rings,
till tendrils trickle down my throat
to bleach the driftwood of my lungs,
a searing sting that sings and sings
but still I am

3

not dead. The sea spits me up and we crawl to Tofino.

Back at the cabin, I bathe again, cold marrow that warmth
can never penetrate. Hours later I am still shivering in
waves, Birdy on TV via satellite as you slip that polished
token into my mouth, urging tight pangs to my bronchi
from your perch on the cornice of the tub.

Always you said: Once with a man before I die.

This loam we inhale, homey as oatmeal
cookies, chewy with tar
—but again, on the twin
mattress that is mine
the only ecstasy
I can attain
is sleep.

*

This is my dream of September 14, 1987:

You are washed. Your bad skin porcelain-clear, my Perrault doll. Your pale blue eyes.

We meet naked in the ocean; we say goodbye without speaking. For the first time in a decade I wake up crying, the tang of blood on my tongue, a shooting star in the dawn-grey window.

The mists are huge on Long Beach. One errs to seek Japan in the distance. Just westward of what is actually seen, seals and orcas make pulp of themselves on the crags of an island, small and delectable, its eerie surf music a mythic amalgam.

A bright patch of turf near the maw of a whirlpool, blowhole of the planet: not even light can escape this place.

Fellow of infinite jest, the lemming king amuses a citizenry of sheep with an eternal prank.

Leaping from a cliff's edge
 he lights safe on a high ledge.

His punishment: no gesture is definitive.

4

Next morning we drive cross-Island to Nanaimo. Sour gusts of Port Alberni, milltown on the fjord, waft and wince us back to a motel we sipped four nights ago, the bar where woodworkers in Dayton boots, Macs and black T-shirts rolled up their poor Player's and tattooed the floorboards while an imitation Boss stomped his nothing hours across the stage.

Glory days.

But today we pass on, past the ballsy goats of Coombs, and I hate you now for the songs you never stop singing, the corny homegrown socialism, country ballads that soothe my hot paws on the wheel till the rattle of the ramp subsides and we bob silent in the sooty womb of the Queen of New Westminster.

The engine ticks as it cools.

Blame me for something, bastard.

5

But it is later, the ferry riffling the Strait between real Gulf Islands, the nebula of city lights no illusion, that I situate and fabulize your fair confession:

*I must warn you. Today we are perched on the prow of a ship and the wind drags tears from your eyes. But nothing fills me. Fills me entirely. Understand it is impossible for me to say there is nothing you could have done. A few months from now
in an acid fantasy
I will embrace the high beams
of a prairie night:
my perfect trajectory
like a vaudevillian
from ditch to twin spotlight.*

Understand I will not show the decency to involve or indict you. You will spend time, perhaps, hooking for my pantleg, only to prove that you were causal, that the cold observer changes what he observes, deserves a beast's share of shame.

But simply understand you will be absent.

Chameleon tongue, the landspit of the Tsawwassen dock
withdraws us into the living continent;

and our lights cut a widening swath
through the darkness on the highway ahead.

UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

Godless

Sky forever, the wheat like yellow flagella
and a farmhouse, rhomboid, grey as kindling
and parched of farmers. Pennzoil tins, half
sunk in the powder earth, bob like flotsam
in the footpath; grasshoppers
skitter aside in the forewake of your feet.

Motes, a golden wedge, linger in the doorway.
Droppings dot the floorboards
beneath the iron woodstove, an ash-white coffin
with a periscope through the ceiling.
And upon the handle, dusty whorls.
Everything you touch is guilty
of fingerprints. Open the
oven mouth with a metallic
shriek. Inside, near a cache
of grain gnawed to chaff,
curls a nest of pelts
with orange teeth
and whiskers. And
one of them,
separate

eyes in a black corner
starving.

"Faisons la guerre des graffitis!"

And below that, smaller, in black
 against the back alley brick
 (with an arrow to threaten
 those aerosol signifiers above):
En anglais aussi, SVP!

Nowhere in the New World
 echo cathedrals like these. Mourning time
 like kids kicking buckets
 all across old Hochelaga.
 Behold these gargoyles, that granite:
 this empty sarcophagus is a mystery.

The Anglo iconoclasts have rattled
 and hissed in the night. Along
 temple walls they discovered
 at painted intervals
 101 101 101
 —for the nationalists
 had lighted here first. So the square-heads
 assimilated 1 into N:
 NON NON NON
 at painted intervals. Into the gaping faces
 of zeros
 they have punched swastikas.

A quiet battle shakes our conscience
 Saturday nights. In Westmount, Sunday mornings
 are silent, snowy, crisp. Teenagers, out so late,
 too sleepy for church: sheets over their heads.

Flatcar

This land emaciates in January, the taut carcass
of an Ellesmere Island mammoth, or a farm dog
that roamed too far. In ripples of vertebrae
the Shield erupts from the frostbit
skin of fields. A grit of snow, squeaky
as starch, pools in stony haunches. We are fortunate
to know topsoil at all in this country.

Hills pass by. Fetal, like sleepy vagrants
against the wind, a thousand lives squat
in bungalows. A line of fence vanishes
in perspective with the next, spokes
from an invisible nexus. A party of Rorschach
Holstein, steamy as teakettles, blow rings from their
nostrils in the city of silos.

Our engine rails, an animal hooked to slaughter.
Stiff with ice, my pantlegs knock and sway.
Then a mirage, dissolving like a flashbulb
on the retina: on the groomed face of a pond,
its cattails shorn by skates, a table stands
company with an uneven chair. God as
witness, in this place, we never cheat at solitaire.

Mock Elegy for Mort

Legacy of a Dieppe dad, cousin
 Percy's farmhouse
 sniffs out with lightning
 rod & antennae
 over acres of boggy slough.

It recollects the winter
 of 1949
 when marsh grass & cattail whiskers
 on the frozen pond
 lay shaven short
 by the twin blades
 of Percy's bobsled skates.
 When cow-chip pucks
 scuffed & streaked
 & ice-filled buckets
 curled like stones
 & woolly kids
 rose up like sheep

hooved with skates or boots
 —with mittens clamped
 round bandaged sticks
 or sawed-off witchy brooms.

Recollects that early spring
 when Percy's elder brother Mort
 strayed then fell in splashes
 through that rink of spongy skin—
 translucent grey like Grandpa's
 funereal cheeks.

Gaze downward, Percy, downward
 past your sheet of tears
 to Morty's flattened nose
 & bubble-screaming lips
 beneath a prison floor of ice:

*Mindless of the sleepy frogs
Morty threshes with blades
& tills the mud
for buried footing.
Indeed, he practices push-ups
with numb fingerprints
like Atlas
against a urethane sky.*

Who then will forget
& who would not sing
how a fetus lolled
with a gasping eye
at Percy's feet
—inside its jar
of frosted glass, mute
as Napoleon's
member in the Louvre.

Fireworks over the Ottawa River

Rockets blossom, filaments of stamen
Till anthers droop their heads in embers.
Brown paper husks flutter on to the crowd

Moments later, the scorched petals of Roman
Weaponry, tangled in tendrils of smoke.
Like bombers' propaganda, each fragment

Shucks a message, a flash-pod of deceit
That trickles into the river's darkness:
These seeds that sparkle, a shower of souls.

Hockey, after War

Avonlea's new arena
 never pulsed with freon blood
 beneath its skin.
 Built in '50 to commemorate
 the service of dead
 local boys, its natural ice
 was Scotch-thriftier, but battleship
 grey, weepy in spring
 & quick to dissolve
 its war paint—red circles
 blue slashes & measles
 spots for face-offs.

Mabel Miller, heated
 behind the concession counter,
 spanked burgers
 with her bloody hands
 & jiggling beefy arms.

Chicken-pale winter wives
 peered through wired glass
 at men with tortoise
 shoulders, padded shells,
 sticks, blades, hooks, spears:

Perched in the crow's nest
 on the goal-judge's
 bench, Percy fingers the switch
 in his fluttery pinch.
 His uncle, veteran
 on defense, planes his blades
 to a stop, a spectrum of crystals
 behind our net.

Uncle scouts the zone, a tanked
 commander. He swivels & winks.
 Fatherless, Percy lights up red.

Canadian Poem

From fields of clover
tongues of mustard, spattered
with thistle buds and stretched
from the bristles of a drowned man,
flicker at the sun
until five billion leaves,
engorged, rustle like flame.

Slopes of scored earth
littered with pumpkin heads
roll down toward the shore.

Silver as mercury, the water
is a one-way mirror. Submerged
like mermen with tridents, scientists
observe a carnage.

And across the Lake, in their hazy south—
what mirage is this
that travels and can reach so far?
Is that a factory
or does Rochester lie prostrate
yet disdain a woman's hand?

America the octopus
once groped the hemispheres;
ashamed now, it muddies
a watery retreat.
There, too tall to be a steamer
and invisible
unless I squint—

there, one wavering stack
infuses the sky
with bitter ink.

History over Lunch

A poem for Uranium City, Saskatchewan

Silver spoon of the *deus absconditus*
glints lightning into my pea soup,
vegetable quagmire, steamy aminos—

Where amoebas then precipitate
like popcorn kernels
whose crustaceous shells
burst with kicking feet,
webbed feet of fishes—
fishes who beachcomb
for men o' war
like jelly lungs
with which to breathe drily—
fishes who spew the shallows
with selective eggs
boiled in a genial cream
till reptiles launch from silos in the sand.

Later, the sentient cubes of ham
towel dry on the shore,
stretch tall in their wondering,
saddle bowlegged Gila monsters
and ride far from the bowls of mist—
far across Nevada deserts
of kitchen table
to draw rein on the dusty verge
and hiss awestruck sighs at the Beyond.

Next thing I know my curvy tail falls off
(bump on the linoleum).
Some things are thunk, said, built, loved, fought;
then some wacko Texan shoots out the lights.

But never mind that—my soup is burnt cold,
I got bullets to mold, armor to rivet,
bellows to blow for the smithy below
and the noontide chime strikes in one minute.

When Gravity Shifts to Horizontal

Your Dalis will hang like doormats
 with their molten clocks unbended.
 And won't your picture window make
 a panoramic dance floor?—at least,
 until you shatter its thin ice
 and fall into an endless orbit of death
 or the neighbour's vinyl siding.

Or snag like a bur.
 Dangle like a monkey
 from a fire hydrant.
 Scale with cat claws
 the precipitous turf
 of your front lawn.
 Climb back inside, puffing,
 and sit on the door.

Down your upright street
 cars and mountains
 and kids with kites
 will blow.

(A perpetual, mono-directional
 planetary junk storm:
 all your stuff descends
 across continents and seas..
 Catch it
 when it comes round again.)

But best of all
 brazen Rockefeller
 will suntan
 by swimming pools poured
 into prime
 & precious
 cliff-face
 properties.
 And every careful voyage
 they negotiate

will seem a let-down

or non-stop trans-Atlantic flail.

Mackenzie and the Coat of Arms

"Grandpa, dead at your birth, owned a broadsword.
 In prairie dusks of electric steam
 and barometric earaches, when whirlpool winds
 sucked at cloud creatures, dismembered
 them and crackle-splattered rubies into the dust,

Grandpa planted his rubber boots
 askew the ridge of the farmhouse roof
 to salute the crazy-spinning weathercock;
 billowing a tattered cape of hair, he taunted
 bullets of rain, seduced shards of white noise
 with his magnetic shaft and clashed
 with thunderous deities of the sky

"until

"with a sea-urchin scalp
 and his blade buzz-shimmering
 ozone flame and sparks,
 his teeth conducted blisters
 to a blaspheming tongue.

"Dying he proclaimed, 'Boy, my hide is thick,
 Tempered, black-burnt and tough as jerky beef.
 When to blissful fields I departed am,
 Therefore, skin me. Trim yourself a magic
 Rebel's tunic for combats glorious;
 And wear me when you execute the King.' "

(T) rail Separation:

in which the author tells of a branch line, a black hole, & the end of a Saskatchewan marriage:

Over a bed of arrowheads
oiled cross-ties, tufted wild
with oats & flagellant

fox tails (sticky & flitting
like the tongues of frogs), deliver the bands
of nationhood to Yellowgrass.

Or:

Rusty rails, steely as dimes on top
run tandem into town, elevators & poplar
& converge eventually, Einstein insists.

Or:

An iron-shod buffalo
has trod this fallow in the night.

No:

Conceive instead three pairs of tracks.
You & I, dear, pace the metal rostrum
of a flatcar, unmoving on the center set.

On both sides, infinite trains
of flatcars blur past, contrary & urgent
conveyances: one eastbound & one west.

You say: *We must escape this static stage
prairie on the horizon of event.*

I agree, toe the rusty hitch
with my boot. The sun collapses
its bourne. I lick the sweat
from my lip. Agreed: we are frozen
on the flange of a great dearth,
swallower of light, upturned
bowl of sky & swirl of earth.

Y: *This relationship is dead cold.*
I: *A real nothing, but I love you.*
Y: *A void, sucking time to a stop, but me too.*
I: *Maybe we should see other people.*
Y: *Actually I have someone in mind.*
I: *Actually I have someone in mind.*

With gravity, we link our fingers.

Should we jump?

Yes we should.

Are you ready?

I am ready.

Now!

An uncertain snap at the end of the arm & we twirl
/ like galaxies

vanish in each other's distance

(one eastbound & one west.

DEAD LETTERS

Montréal:
13 IX '89
PQ

Forget that I duck-backed the dream of a future
you trickled down my neck, my cheek
in your lap, flagrant in St. Louis Square.

Forget that I forged the confession
you plucked from that fountain, luminous & blue,
as we hunched on its cool marble ledge

to negotiate, too fluttered to move. Hear that
I am remembered there, by the alcoholic
guitar players, who ask of you, l'autre, &

that place you flew. Know that I join them,
when my wife is away, on the sleep-trodden grass,
to tip bottles in the air, because we do that here,

& to sing

*She has rebuilt her nest on the slopes
of the West, where the leaves never change
by the green-misted sea
and better men feel what they mean.*

Citoyen

Gutted me a wallet yesterday, one hundred sixty-eight bucks. Lucky. Feeling like a citizen. So I'm huddling up old newspapers in my sooty arms today. Peeling pulp from pissy doorways and boarded-up theatres, all along Ste-Catherine Ouest. I crouch, press a sheet to my grinning

knees and stand. Two feet thick already, heavy as a bundle of firewood or stack of pizzas. Feels like work to me. Snuff a butt, walk. Scuse me, Sir, where do you recycle—but *Non, Non* before I can finish. He scowls at the gummy pavement. *No spare change today, Monsieur. Can't you see*

my hands are full of parcels? Then Charles Atlas rocks to a stoplight in his candy-apple Jeep. Arm a chisled joint of meat. Swivels his neck. Cool. There I am, two of me, stickmen in the platinum of his shades. Listen to him rap, rev it up. Wind stirs. I squint. A swirl

of garbage scuffs around the box office. I shuffle behind. Calves itch, spine twangs, there's half a Miller back here, flat as all last night. Such a burden. Top page shows princes shaking hands with all their teeth in. Damn. Lost my pluck. If I lay down this load now I might never get up.

The Wood Louse

sorry about the call i mean
 i never considered myself the type
 you know I'm too selfish
 to ever you know to ever actually
 i mean men have died and worms
 eaten them but never for love right?

well our basement suite
 seethes with silverfish
 muscular spiders my hairy arms
 slugs that ooze
 brown toothpaste
 under doors
 and those lilliputian armadillos
 —segments of armor amour bugs

yea wheresoever
 you may wander
 still i molder lazy
 in carpet mud

the night you vanished
 beetle divisions
 treaded up our bedposts
 infiltrated the sheets
 and slithered you away
 p o w

this is how i figure it

Moving to Different Cities

How seven years end
when lovers, amicable
as siblings, split:
selling the bed, its cartography
of spills, to an old woman
and her son. Two days
before Christmas, they prod
us from our last sleep
with the buzzer. Our knees
will never spoon
like this again. What
the ad in the Gazette
failed to say: we pledged
to this queen a continent
away. What the woman divines
from the footclick and chill
of an empty flat: for weeks
we have cried into boxes
stuffed with effects
tucked in newspaper—every item
the story of a loss.

Alone again, we cross
a rectangle on the hardwood
in swirls of hair, dead skin,
startled dust bunnies
for a hug. Our movers
trundle up the freeway
on thirty-six wheels,
in a rush
and a bluster of snow.

November

The wind rends itself to tatters. So this
dead-letter love, cast from the balcony
in the flutter of an eastern pigeon,
will light upon the skeleton of a larch
north of Superior, perhaps, and pine
there, bleakly on a twig that shivers,
and forget its message without compass
and molt its whispery sense of purpose
and coo nonsense, like the naked beggar
who walks the daymare of these streets
without you. Better to fall among the dead
leaves, and sleep in a brittle confusion,
than to know oneself unselfed, alone.

Please then, understand, when no beak chitters
at the window where you sit, cupping prayers
of coffee with your mother on the prairie,
that my silence speaks of a desperate flight
and storms too heavy for the voice to carry.

I've Decided Not to Leave My

But you said you
 Yes well, I did, then. But people
 Don't give me that. You must have known
 How could I? How can anybody
 You promised it was a matter of
 I never promised. I was young, screwed up
 Confusion is no excuse for
 What's the big deal? It's not like we
 Don't you see I still
 Oh please don't say that. There's no
 Point. God, when did you become so
 You force me. Why won't you listen
 Because you never convince. You vacillate
 And you split everything into incidents. Why can't you just
 Because you always contradict
 How can you generalize? Tell me one time
 Don't you remember? You said your life with
 Careful
 was stifling but that
 I was rationalizing. The real reason

What am I supposed to do? I've lost, alienated
 People forgive these things. It's the way
 You sound completely fake. Can you imagine how
 This is hard for me. Don't think
 Imagine how this would sound. Everyone would
 That's your problem. You always imagine you're being
 Well try it sometime. Maybe then you'd accept some
 I'm sorry. I have to go meet my
 Fine. Perfectly convenient. Can't even spare me
 I've been busy
 Forget it. Goodbye. It's been a
 Why so cynical? We can still...I still
 So you allow me that?
 No, thank-you, just the cheque
 Do you realize you never actually
 But you just said that I did say
 Bastard, I heard it secondhand. You told Dr. Stein and she
 Expressing things has always been difficult for
 I know. I know how you suffer.

Because a Scent is a Memory

Because a scent is a memory
of motels and friends' apartments
and showers on rainy afternoons
this occasional soap, of all things
floral, suds my sense

with paisley. But what an echo
issues from the severance
of a bubble. The electric air
mourns nothing more
than a pocket of magic, disseminated—

a thunderous accusation
of error. For today I received
your postcard from central Java.
Quite a tremor, its coincidence
with the volcanic fortuity

of the soap. For while you swirl,
a pink reflection
on the opal of the Orient,
I foam like our beloved Sylvia
squeezing miracles out of dishcloths

or a glimmer of radiance
from the ribs of a kitchen appliance.
Or wait upon letters, visitations
or news of a death, another suicide
to indict my indolence. How many

friends, not yet so famous,
must wash away
before I consent to a content
of sorts? I die my way through every moment
and am yet stubborn; I persist

in life only to condemn it
to its face. But what of you?
Does froth around the rim
of the South China Sea
sweep bubbles across the sand

at your feet? Does your husband suffer
by comparison
with the silver flicker of fabulation
I transmit daily
to your imagination?

Be consoled, then: you are
best situated. I am too far
gone, dried up and cynical
to lather romantic, even in dirty
Bangkok. Your globe expands

substantively. Mine, tentative,
quavers like a droplet. My touch
annihilates pleasure domes, green and prismatic.
Nothing stirs me, yet it tosses me,
What if, what if, what if we?

Medea

When he kissed the other woman
under Orion's dagger on the beach
his past went nova and burst upon him.

They say it takes four years
for a marriage to expire
once you've thought its ending.

For the brilliancy of a dead star shines
on and on across the placid galaxies
with millenia-old fire, outliving

itself and watchful as a jealous
god, an eye's pinprick upon the waves.
And a posthumous love reflects itself

with an echo of that big beginning:
a false bang, fool's gold, a flying ship
and revenge with the speed of light.

Divers Occasions

Her husband the articling lawyer plays solicitor to his own divorce—solicitor & petitioner both.

From a conference room in the tower at the foot of Burrard, an expansive purview: the glassy Inlet, gas stations for watercraft, seaplanes buzzing insect shadows across Coal Harbour toward the Park, the striped trilobite of a Seabus, the frosted green of North Shore mountains. The scar of The Cut, neon white, sharp as a ski's edge in sunlight.

Flushing embarrassment, a secretary subpoenas us. In this place, we are the most gentile of evildoers. Barb's husband offers me a grapefruit juice and I cold-read my bit part in the bitter script the firm produced:

Since the celebration of the marriage, the Respondent has committed adultery with Mark James Cochrane on various and divers occasions since in or about December 25, 1989, and the Petitioner verily believes that the Respondent and Mark James Cochrane are cohabiting together, in a house across from Hydro Pole 211 on Miller Road, Bowen Island, British Columbia, and have been since in or about February 1, 1990.

Let me explain. We cavort in a lean-to in the ditch, just across from the hydro pole we pirate power from to operate the mechanized sex toys.

We attest to a certain guilt & he buys our lunch.

Men can joke away most anything, for a time. At the bistro in the marbled Marine Building, the ex-to-be and I hold our bellies. On many occasions we partied together, as couples in different partnerships. There is nobody I blame or wish to incriminate.

In a black Italian dress shirt he peppers his second double cap with cinnamon and pops the shrink wrap on a Camel pack. At the end of the crosswalk he shakes Barb's hand, flashing red.

If You Are Suicidal, Marry a Writer

If you are suicidal, marry a writer
 or your pain remains a fleck on the galaxy's arm.
 Etch your screaming oval with a precise hand
 so she may reproduce you from memory
 when you're gone
 and varnish your torment
 with an epic and sepia fame—
 a portrait of suffering as perfect
 as the layout of your desk,
 the quill, the blotter and the note.

Drop portentous phrases; and always foreshadow.
 Betray a fascination with headlights, the wet
 and incendiary eyeballs of Christ. Wake in a sweat
 to rail at her your nightmare of the subway,
 so Freudian she never will foresee
 your literal, head-on demise. Shave with Grandpa's
 straight razor. Suntan on cliffs. Above all,
 dispense with agape. Take care
 instead to pass your decadent affliction on,
 like a fizzling torch
 of champagne, your half-empty eau de vie.
 You are Hamlet, a brilliant hybrid, genial mutant
 too prescient to be viable
 in this harsh world. Wind yourself in sheets
 of logic, contrary passions that bind you
 in a silken bundle, an airless cocoon.
 Make certain your legacy is a guilt
 fertile for morbid
 obsession: cultivate a psyche
 straight enough to yield a good story,
 but inscrutable enough
 that she will break down and till it forever.

Experts will advise you to leave her wondering
 whether you really intended to die. But better yet,
 leave her pregnant with your child.
 This way, you ensure your conceit an audience of
 one: the ideal reader with a trembling mouth,
 toothless and starving on the fiction of itself.

Like

Our marriage glowed for years
 after love had expired, like
 the light of a blighted star
 stretching itself over the silence

of space & divorced from the real
 body; like sprigs of dead forsythia
 in a blooming carafe, a gift
 from a Sister up the lichened bluff;

like a slow postcard from Tel Aviv
 wishing that you, my wife, are well;
 like your yellow letters, budding
 with promise, shuffling in a candy

box; like a dream where the woman
 beside me now / unveils your face
 like a Barnum hoax.

Blossoms split,

sunbright yet clipped
 from the old source. In his casket,
 the Sister boasts, Pere Andre's nails grew
 without a ghost.

Undead Mist

A torn shroud of gauze
spirits the meadow
after a restless night
spent in foxhole hollows;

in despair of December's
frozen sun,
begs evaporation;

sails in uncertain shape
past corporeal sheep,

and hovers with caresses
over a black-water slough.

Mabel Miller

Widowed, spends Sunday morning
hunched in the rising mist of a turkey.
In the afternoon, tends garden.
Her sweet potatoes scorch the pot
inside; her smoke alarm sputters.

Unhearing, shuffles half a block
& posts letters she addresses
to her children or the dead,

none of whom will visit.
Now I, neighbourly, must open her windows,
shoo haze, ghosts from her corridors

& scour the char
from a guestless
cookery.

Every holiday she forgets what
every holiday I explain away.

Liar, she cries
across a linen set for eight.

Evoked Potentials Laboratory

Last Halloween a labtech with grease-
pencilled whiskers & velveteen ears
jellied nodes conducive to my skull
& force-vid me a shuffling checker-
board image on a b/w compu-monitor:
Chocolate suckle iceberg meatus
feta pollen espresso spasm I said.

Good, s/he said, now try these headphones,
their squelch, chirrup and baritone:
Foghorn sledgehammer pumpkin sculpted
eyesbleed ovum spasm etc. I said.

S/he ran a current through my ankles:
my toes crackled. *Blood blood* I said.

S/he ran a current through my wrists:
my fingers snapped, beatnik beat
so I tipped my beret, *scoobitti-wa*.

S/he sank a cold probe into my flank
of calf; I roped in a bovine flexion—

& that's when the stock exchange floor
zitted up with busted heads like watermelons
on the Letterman show / the graph of my impulses
a deathgrip of bulls & bears, serrated
like '29 in eternal return, every second
a greater depression.

Pinched nerve, s/he said
& the electric branches of my system
tore free of my earthly gutted body, my body
finally fell away & my brain, stem, cord
& rootlets thirsty & tender to the air
hovered above us in luminous pulsion,
fibrous & delicate, a saffron nebula
of pain *oh I can feel everything now*
& a black cat burned in my limbs of wire.

Announcement at Bowen

Island dawn and we grow
 into our child selves, contained
 as squinting eyes,
 stretched out and golden as sleep.

You are not the woman I lived with
 just two months ago, for seven years:
 I have not known you forever.

Sunday and my parents ferry over
 for your salad and dal. Mention your husband
 and his firm, that's legal, we are secure
 so I evoke Lisa, that past life, unbitter
 in this channel of transplants. Spinach,
 dark with iron, sharpens the candlelight
 with its vinegar, and foliage cuts the rain
 from the cabin window
 as you ask them the questions
 I never think to. My mom recalls a high
 school dalliance of my dad, whose coy denial
 glints from such a pool of surety
 that I rise at table, vague and
 relentless as a mist:

*Sometimes, mother and father, everything
 must happen at once. This pregnancy without pause
 is a healing, this lover the second lens, the other I
 I lost long ago in the mirror. Look now, shhh...
 We are set close on a bright stage, an ocean of night
 all round. Focused, we behold a third dimension.*

SEED OF A PULSE

With luck,
Trekking stubborn through this season
Of fatigue, I shall
Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur,
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait's begun again,
The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent.

— Sylvia Plath

Bowen Island

See, lover, clover
stipples the suncliff

and thighs
serrated and black

comb sugar
from the leggy white

buds: bee and clover:
sex with the mirror.

—O she hums in the ear.
Tugs and booms

riffle the Sound. Rock,
lichened, leaves

us exposed
as petals, thinner

than clipped nails,
rise to engage

a clutch of bees knees
whose legs / are these?

—A floatplane's shadow:
seen love, clover, the sea.

Killarney Lake

A plate of ice, grey as pewter, pocked
with the rocks they shotput from the shore
road, ripples with an elastic

mew, the quiver of a fiddled saw
or the sheet metal a stage hand shakes
clean of its thunder. These twinges

of sound bend downward into silence.
He pinches a shingle, clear as wet crystal
to whip like a frisbee. Every mosaic

shard syncopates this frictionless
mirror in the mountain's clavicle.
And he touches her face. The simulacra

evaporate. This is like nothing else
—four droplets on her cheek, glacial
in their fingered descent. Where was she

when he was twelve and a boy among boys,
every gesture a vandal's envy
of the cool perfection of glass? He

remembers now what he wanted from them:
this. In other boys a twelve-year-old
seeks lovers, learns desire in the queasy

rush of misdemeanors: to cast handfuls
of gravel at the stillness of things
then kiss on the mouth; to wade in gumbot

icebreakers, silting the pristine,
then kiss on the mouth; to exhilarate,
to get away with it, to conspire

in badness with one you love enough
to fear. Or to shuffle abreast,
a thin sheet beneath you, and to inch

toward some center, some liquid depth,
where every touch is sharp, a lightening
crack that rises quick to the spine.

Glass

I wash your dishes now. The tumblers
chip, I never know when, notches
in the crystal lips, a shudder set
in motion when the tumblers tip:
I am geared to catastrophe
these days, fragile as thin teeth.

At the recycling depot, a sledgehammer
pestles bottles
in the mortar of an oil barrel.
Hands grip the shaft, a man without
goggles, just glasses:
how tempered he has become to the sound
I wince at, the everyday shards
of a failure to cope
with the everyday. This shatter in my ears
is the rustle of flame
to a strawman, on pins & needles
in his own thatched shack.

We drop the hatch
back, & like an act
of forgiveness, the rear window
stays intact.

On the drive home, bugs shuck
their skeletal husks
against the windshield.
So many jars, so much wine
gone: the empties of the past
few months. This cheap cabin
with its round windows
is a bauble now
to our unemployment.

We watch ourselves climb the steps
in the picture window. Our bodies
reflect transparence, Disneyland
ghosts whose indulgences
are due. Within you, poverty bobs
a hot womb, a globe that expands
on the end of a glassblower's tube.

Inside there will be the cautious crush
of money, baby, jobs. We have grown
slippery with each other, as easily dropped
as words in a bucket.

On the deck
I tumble into a kicked-in wicker:
*I want to be sick. I want you to run
your fingers round my wet, cracked lips.*

I want to sing, I want to cry, harmonic.

Work

In the warehouse of the academic press
I unreel and stretch packer's
tape, taut as dressing
down the slits of boxes
and so keep the CFC
popcorn stuffing, forestry texts
and studies of Malcolm Lowry
from bleeding into air-mail
bags en route to Taipei
or the University of Lethbridge.

This is not the life with books
I had imagined.

Locked Out

Just a glimmer, silver as the day
on Snug Cove, black now and protean

as floating oil: beneath the boardwalk
where the ferries dock, a cone

of penlight probes the stones and starfish
for a lost key. This refracted flash

I reach for—a mirage in the nightwater.
Barnacles smack their lips. Mussels

atrophy as the red tide wells
to encircle the studs: the cold sea

severs me at the knee. I grasp nothing.
My feet suck my boots up the beach.

Icarus

You people in the city of signs
never knew me. I played the meek
traveler, the ascetic
unlearned in the local tongue.
You only encountered my head
on a stick.

Now I interpret
the wilderness, stocky among firs,
and my bootprints brim with the seepage
of glaciers. I act the father
to naiades and mountain goats, ballsy
and sootless in the air. Give me
a moment, grant me a year: I will fly.

I will return with the sun's heat
in my muscle, my span a sickle
of shadow that passes: I will bring
harvest to your streets. I am buoyant,
pregnant with the softness of a bee.
A new life rises from the east.

Demographic

In the warehouse of the academic press rockradio inter/texts me, 18-29, gainfully employed but not so, and robotic enough that the metallic grind is no distraction; then traffic from a helicopter, condom, smoke and booze news (beer tax matters to post-Boomers like myself). Then the Psychedelic Lunch of flat and rancid nostalgia, s-somebody else's generation, Baby. In 1968, let me remind you, I was three years old.

The Production Coordinator rides a bicycle to work, dangling a gold loop in his salty business locks. A new anthology of Canadian writing steams through galleys. Vain ass-kisser, I casually relentlessly mention that I have read, corresponded with, been the student of, sublet the cabin of, or downright known most every damn hack in the stack. I kick out bricks, his sense of hierarchy, wrap and ram books into boxes for an hourly wage.

No resplendent conceits for book into box; my phatic head is stuffed with crumpled pop lyrics. "Sign, sign, everywhere a sign." This is semiotics. Any job, not the least cerebral, dulls your edge, ties you off junkie to that gone self, non-wrapper of text. Non-rapper. Woodstock is a cartoon bird I chirp in dittos.

Production Coordinator, unruffled by this upbraiding, writes an entertainment-tabloid feature on Generation X—that's me, not the band.

In this my young employee, whom I'll call Clark, was typical of these sixties-born, mid-eighties college nihilists: bred on a fascistic punk ethic and overwhelmed by the demographic bulge that spewed its waste before them—our scared-straight generation that precedes them in everything, controls media, advertising, FM programming, and more harmfully, monopolizes on employment opportunities, leaving nothing in its wake....

...If the sixties were "anti-establishment"—the phrase must embarrass us now—the eighties splintered and surrendered or waned anti-life: individual existence, the only institution remaining against which to rebel.

I have a dream. In forty years Production Coordinators wane seventysomething, an impossible burden on the medical budget of every social democracy. Geriatric Yups, Michael Steadmen who never got that novel writ, narcissistic moral junk-bonds until the end, demand from their own children healthy organs for prioritized transplant.

Grizzled Boomers, purple-spiked grey hair, co-opted fashion, costly and obnoxious to maintain, outnumber us, X-es, still, but age retires them from politics....Our judicious minority votes to unplug the incontinent messes of them. - "

Euthanasia? What's wrong with the youth in Asia? ~~Be~~ guffaw.

Punks, they—you—exhale, heartless.

Yet still and forever, X is the derivative of Yoa, language-less beyond tired jokes, puns or quips and chirps in dittos: *your pump don't work cause the vandals took the handle; this is the end, beautiful friend, the end. Na na na na, hey hey hey, goodbye.*

The Adventures of Kid Bean

I met you today, my child apparent
for the first time, on a tv screen.
Eight weeks and already in the media—

suspended beneath the great oblong
of her bladder
in the sac of your gestation

like the pilot of a Zeppelin.
Just under an inch
long, the size of a kidney

bean, one throbbing ellipse.
(Forgive me if your present shape
sprouts a talk of spleen, but

embryos are gargoyles to me:
billboards, films, a fundamental
idiocy, the fanatic's prod

into the bellies of all women.)
—Damn the evangelists for rattling
even a silly tribute. Really, damn

them. This technology is benign,
a hurtless eye, beyond sound
and radiation, so you'll outgrow

an unwitting propaganda. This
was supposed to be a playful poem,
coy and fatherly, a trinket pun

on kidney bean, kid bean, get
it? child being? a burlesque
of exploits, amniotic swashbuckling—

you could have written it yourself.
But you are a cipher, pregnant
with significance in a sea

of codes, murky to you and distant
as the dull report
of hammerheads butting the hull

of a bathysphere, at peace
with its own fullness.
Please do not be stirred

by this logos they put me through.
So long embroiled, my hothead
thinks this without me:

You are debatable: you beat,
the seed of a pulse, because your mother
so decrees. In the beginning, always

the speech act: around you, a battle
for authority, women's divinity,
the power to verbalize flesh.

I prefer the talk of women

I prefer the talk of women
when Barb & I at the grown-up birthday
are the only couple whose child is still due.

I prefer this talk of the body, its muddy insistence, hunger
for cheesecake & sleep, talk of dilation, six hours of pain
if you're lucky & We all survived it, Barb, we all survived;

talk of caregiving, an art like dance you cannot bluff with
technique. Of abdominal measurement & the accordion weeks,
heartbeats & gender, underwear broad & rippled as mainsails
& exercises to trim the womb. The way one of them laughs—
wisps of hair, misty tea—& breastfeeds on a bed's haven

or powders the raw crux of her boy's legs
& all the while encourages me, mock shy & she knows it,
awed at this surrender they survive, the inevitable body,
knowledgeable of itself, this resignation

to the blood, its welling & congelation, the tiny fission
within Barb that mushrooms us & everything beyond anything
I can harness, organize, manage like a resource or claim

unmans me, you might say, shears me (shortly) of language
and I listen. I prefer this talk of women about fathers
to the talk of fathers themselves. I prefer this quieter
advice: the reading, classes & the hard terrific ecstasy
of delivery—the way they can laugh about it

now. I prefer this fatalism to the tropic body I cannot
fathom. Mine would never do that to me, never swell up &
force its primordiality. The male body, for its championed
or lamentable force, is modest. It disappears

when I think it away, insubstantial as tissue. My desire
is stillborn within me if I choose, like the appetite for
tobacco, if you go without long enough, or the relish for
aggression, that other talk

in the other room of plastic Uzis for freeway shenanigans
L.A.-style, or rugby trips to New Orleans & being arrested
in the Denver airport, drunk at seven in the morning; or

deceiving customers down at the repair shop with a keychain whose tiny chip feigns the chirp of a laser shot or testing device...or the slide whistle of a falling bomb. These men love their children & their toys,

boats, these warmest excuses to bathe their hands in tubs, slip down into their infant selves, with cellular phones & skipping out on jury duty by pretending hatred for the turbaned Sikhs; or embarrassed for me in my inadequacy to spurt the neck of a pale ale in my fist

until we realize it's not a twist-off. Careering fathers, servants of commerce & city hall—as aloof in their domestic prejudices as I am

in mine. If only I could wear my hair that short & ambivalence were less addictive: any god or iron codpiece

of fascism, if I could believe as they believe & Oh what a nirvanic & monolithic

peace. Yes, I condescend, all right

then, I prefer the talk of women not because I am less heretical to the body than other men but because I ply a shtick of difference:

How much gentler he is...

But if I were M.C., master of their master discourse

what room would I play? This would-be new maleness just another cock fight: I side with pro-feminists who pray for nothing more than a certain largesse—the voice, expert on motherhood, gruff from the plucky neck in sensitive combat with other men

& bigger, bigger

& hang Dale Spender & her stats, something else: I prefer the talk of women when I am only a boy, eye level

in the kitchen & gaping at the denim crotches of adults. I watch. My bowels twist & froth, dishtowels & diapers.

Every poem & politics, a contingency of fears:

I mime a future, dance the linoleum

(rubber pants on my head, you name it)

to engender envy in the other mothers

& utter oaths of involvement from the birthing room ever after; I sing

a gibberish of promise & Barb yawns.

The Adventures of Kid Bean II

I met you today, my child apparent
for the first time, on a tv screen.
Eight weeks, and already luminescent—

electron grey, suspended
from the oblong of her bladder
in the sac of your gestation

like the pilot of a Zeppelin.
Just under an inch
long, the size of a kidney

bean, one bopping ellipse
in a bath of salts
composed as the sea. We long for this

in flotation tanks, worlds
without argument. We rise, swell
into ourselves, suck fists and curl

our toes around drowsing, a perfect
and squirmy peace, rippled
with laughter, alpha/bet waves

that whisper no dispatch. We dream our parents'
palms, soft as lips, their gentle updraft
as we drift, cumuli, gaps

in the light, petals on the checkered
web of fields. We drive ourselves
with quiet inertia. The slightest

tip of the head and we shift
momentum, ripe with a weightless
potential, real and insensible

as helium. Yes, you can guide this vehicle
anywhere now. Harrow the gates
of Lakehurst, New Jersey. This technology

is inert, joyous, afloat over language
in a chill Atlantic sky; not a soul
burns anymore, you glide in mutinous

absolution, and the Fuhrer's jilted voice
crackles on the wireless
into silence. The Bean is out of range

now but I see features, fingers
that threaten no signs, the chartless globe
of a tender head—unbound

and tangerine, the wash of dawn
streaked with vessels, trinket ships
to bob in the tub, our cradle of hands,

your mother's steerage and command.
But rest now, wordless. When you alight
our medium will convey you warmly.

The Song of Kid Bean

bop-bop bop-bop bop-bean-bop
bop

ba-ba-ba bean bop bop
I be da bean
 bop bop

—I be I be I be I be—

I be da bean bop bop
Ba Ba Ba Bean bop bop

bop alpha bean
bop bop

bop beta bean
bop bop

bo mega bean
bop bop

yeah,
bop.

Cabin

In sickness come dreams.
When the fever breaks
you lie with me. After,
spiced meat from the icebox
savours doubly itself.
The deck slats bite
a wedge, chill and dewy, across
the pads of my feet.
The moon, a crisp shape:
I am awake. This is the first
of all memory. A raccoon
turns its shoulder from the tins
on the dark highway. Our
eyes, amber, glimmer
with a kind of morning.
We must leave this place.

Gardening

I

Finally we have landed.
 This soil is ours.
 I have loved you always.
 We have turned this soil twice.
 Each furrow we lay, a tender contour.
 We are planting the seeds
 that have germinated.
 This is the last possible moment.
 These seedlings are beyond readiness.
 You are my blood and vehemence.
 I should have returned sooner.

II

I come with the sound of your breathing
 and you with mine.
 This is irresistible.
 You are wet against my face.
 The clock ticks beside us without malice.
 We have turned this soil always.
 These chimes you gave me for remembrance
 sway in a bedroom, ours.
 This is the last possible sound.
 Soil, wet beneath the window.
 Finally we have landed.

III

We lay a tender moment in furrows.
 This is the last possible vehemence.
 I breath with your breathing.
 A seedling, sooner.
 I return myself to the contours of your body.
 To plant a life, without malice,
 is finally irresistible.
 We have germinated in this soil.
 One blood, beyond readiness.
 The chimes you gave me for remembrance
 sway in the bedroom window.

Home
for Barbara

Four years I imagined this:
 your books, my books, our words
 co-mingled as genes
 in the cells of this house,
 our first. Four years
 to Montréal, hell and back,
 composing myself with a readiness
 that threatened not to come.
 Four years, and now your plates,
 my sofa, wine glasses
 and the way you plan
 that fills me, your relish
 for gardens, curtains, plays
 a wooden boat for the bean
 in your belly, the sea, novels
 and the films I lost interest
 in loving—the will to craft
 each day
 generously enough
 to hold a politics, cooking,
 your stories
 and a child, the salt
 of uncertainty
 we lapped as cheaters
 still on our skin; honest
 now, I love my fear of a desire
 as strong as mine, mine
 that would paint it black, yours
 a thirst for the world
 the antidote I never earned
 and an eye for wallpaper,
 travel, eggplant, praxis:
 crafty with money, no doltish
 bookish pair—your insistence
 to think and make and do,
 not think and pine and die,
 that habit I nearly perfected
 as a castaway, dream certain
 I would never find you
 and determined to choose nothing

[NO VERSE BREAK]

if not this unimaginable
return. I have rippled my chin
like an envious boy, killjoy
to myself foremost. I have
emptied rooms with my manic
combustion. I have wandered
self-consumed, an only child
at large in his parents' tomb.
Physic, you temper my soft hands
with rockers, cassette deck,
moving in, mingling—we are sparsely
furnished, but never so eager
to cruise rummage
sales, junk shops, auctions
and to pick: we will purchase
ourselves with a cradle, a lantern,
a table, three chairs—the eurythmics
of a meal. This time, I want to choose
us, in every cloth and crystal,
spoonful by spoonful, for years.

The Bean is a Girl

Of course I never said otherwise.

But there was my fantasy
of an embryonic hero, swashbuckler—
the very rapiers
and biases of the tongue.

And the ultrasound
technologist
who defaulted to the generic,
that lie of grammar—
"his femur is two inches"—
then denied that *his* meant *boy*
or did not.

Because I am a man
I am expected to wish my child one.

Guys, the other guys even
in the prenatal class,
snigger over a preference
they presume: bear down,
puff themselves
on delivering the Y
and congratulate
boys especially.

But the Bean and I are ambivalent.
She punches my cheeks
on coaxing now, my murmur
at the navel, tongue
along the whispery
cowlick that rides the swell
of her to the pubis. I take
a soft buffeting of limbs, moving
like rollers beneath the skin,
as she flies, arms high
through her mother's coming.

I think uppity, a power word
redeemed by Alice Walker.

I think Earhart.

*

Barbara is due anytime,
her every twinge
a flutter in my gut.
Barb is due, I am due,

I lied: We do not yet know
the sex of our child—

Taut between
the want of a boy
I am taught

and this want of a girl
 (to spite the wants of boys
I teach myself

I am ready for anyone.

Vanilla is a Flavour

Men still have everything to say about their sexuality,
and everything to write. For what they have said so
far, for the most part, stems from the opposition
activity/passivity, from the power relation between
a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to
colonize, and the consequential phantasm of woman as
a "dark continent" to penetrate and to "pacify."

— Hélène Cixous

Orchid petals (dis)clothe
labia / in the jungle
 pods of it dangle
like capsules of see-men
/ runs the r[he)t]oric.

From the Latin: *vagina*:
a sheath. These cowls of etymology
conceal (him) & (s)mother her.

Conflation: the slender boyish bean
(in)visible within its name.

Which is it, vanilla? A probe
or a (she)ath?

(Search me.)

Every poet with a teaspoonful
of theory
waxes parent(hetic)al
these days.

But vanilla is not *regular*
ordinary, natural or plain.
Vanilla is a philosophy
of flavour: bitter potatoes
mushrooms & bleach.

De-doxify, says Hutcheon.
No language is neutral, says Brand.

(Chant de-natural liturgies
& just try not to Apollo-guise.

(Engage with your failures
until you get them right.

{Let me silently explain:
I have hybridized
old binaries
yet figured in a hand
I believed feminist, pro-feminist
or (at least) not un-feminist

of woman as ocean, woman as earth;
woman as vessel, driven by a seed

—then heedful, planted correctives:
hers, her sacred word
agency & command—

I shall be pa(rdo)nned.

New Testament

Labouring with Barbara the medical team
 below her pain clamped round my shoulders
 such an embrace neither of us can see
 the head emerge, white with vernix
 the slick limbs, creamy sleeper
 of grease—I remember
 during the first sex after
 delivery our baby in the midst
 cries out her breasts dribble
 down her belly elastic
 the button deep and full his cry
 a new conditioning
 sweet and sticky between us
 welling over.

Three years ago my friend leapt into a sort of LSD highway
 suicide outside our hometown, but I was absent and another
 friend delivered my contribution to the eulogy by proxy.

In mourning I devalued everything of value
 because Nietzsche so advised, hugging a horse.

I have worn cynicism
 like the oily wetsuit of a Great Lakes swimmer.

Kneeling naked at bedside: three years
 I have summoned the faith to change
 this baby in the middle of lovemaking

—his eyes the elusive
 pewter of ice, his fine-lined fingers
 clutching one of mine, the most
 substantial I have ever been.

This poem gives thanks.

Even the Americans have a litany.

It begins, *I believe*.

Circulation

Radiators pulse & tick, pipes in the walls
a hot matrix. In bed we collect our threefold
flesh. But even here my fear of the body

encloses us like a fist. Suspicious of health
I squander a lover's warmth. Then the rising
midnight's oil, & me a scientist in the kitchen:

the cyclical dailiness of washing, change &
exchange, dirty & clean, an economy of care.
Bottles boil & rattle, steam the windows

& dissolve the spectral fingers of ice
groping from the sills. Even as a solitaire
I never slept before morning, but this year

I am preparing to feed our son. In the yard
the snow adapts its silence to everything,
wrapping each picnic-table slat

in a roundness. Summer sits frozen there.
But see how *this* season circulates its
silver, moonlight & streetlamp, from rooftop

to rooftop. The city invests its pittance
of light in reflection: a whiter world
where nothing is lost, where the value of love,

like housework, lies in currency & repetition.
There is blood in these chambers, all of it living,
as another winter watches us through the night.