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The Body Land

Janet Madsen

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

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

January 1991

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Abstract

The Body Land

Janet Madsen

The Body Land is a poetry collection that explores metaphorical relationships between people and geography. In terms of this underlying metaphor, there is a geography of the individual body as well as of the landscapes people inhabit.

Each of the five sections in the text concentrates on a different aspect of the relationship between people and landscapes. The first poems, in "Pieces of the Root," focus on the construction of individuality through the discovery of language as it is realized in childhood. "Unmarked Islands," the second section, contains poems taking place in an isolated setting which explore the connections between intimacy and artistic creativity.

The third and fourth sections look at families, in terms of creation and destruction. The third section, "The Sharpness of the Bones" is a long poem documenting a single mother's pregnancy, and the fourth section, "Wood House," is a series of poetic monologues which express the dialectic of a family's struggle in the face of the loss of one of its members to cancer. The closing section is "The Elements of Wings." These poems express transitions, ambiguously to be regarded either as endings, farewells, deaths, or as new beginnings.

The poems in The Body Land are united by changing individual awareness. From childhood, when one discovers the body's uniqueness, to the point of death, when one must accept its anonymity in disintegration, what remains important is the relationships of individuals to one another, be they family, lovers, or strangers, and to the surrounding land that forms and influences these relationships.

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The head recalls, but the body remembers.
Each organ, each orifice
is an oracular, unworded, expressive o
in the nucleus of all cells.
Every body remembers, but the head
organizes, shuffles, categorizes each & every
word into logical sense.

Is it impossible
to let the body remember?
Impossible to break through the net
work of words,
circle back to experience,
& let the body be?

Go through the net,
force limbs through the holes
within thick cords of language,
& experience will be freed.

Let the body recall,
& the words will glow
like shining plates of the skull,
formed with lines
as individual as fingerprints.

Pieces of the Root

Memory of a Beetle

(for Peter)

I walk the block to the metal mail box
painted red with stencilled white letters.
Pull the mouth open to me & drop
thin letter into lip, falling open.
I say my name into the box.
The metal belly rumbles
& rounds out the edges of syllables
that sound brittle in my brother's mouth.
(He twangs my name in Pig-Latin,
back first & all edges,
so there's no softness for me.)
Metal lip slams shut,
safe with letters inside,
clangs sound into the clouds
of Sunday morning.

There is a black beetle crawling
the crevice between lawn & curb.
He's as big as my palm,
& climbs the steep curb edge
as confidently as my brother climbs
the huge fir in the front yard,
seeing things all the way down the street.

The beetle starts down,
but suddenly falls on his back,
glossy blue-black shell against cement,
antennae legs flailing.
I touch him gently
with the worn end of a popsicle stick,
willing him to grab hold,
saying beetle beetle beetle.

Suddenly I plunge the popsicle stick
into his belly.
The stink's immediate & pungent.
I pound his guts to white pulp
& attack his head, legs,
& glossy blue shell.
When it's over, I stand
with the popsicle stick wet in my hand,
not wanting to wipe his guts
onto my red bell bottoms.
Wanting to run home to my mother,
& hide in her as if she were a tree.

Elements: This is My Mother

i)

This is my mother opens
an oyster shell left empty on the beach.
She shows me the smooth inner white
& oh so brief bruise of purple
where a creature once clung to shell.
Her fingers find the lips
in each barnacle covered shell,
& open to the bruise, smooth inside.

This is my mother opens
an awkwardly wrapped birthday gift--
cardboard bracelet coloured red & yellow
to match rings still in a drawer
next to powder compacts.

This is mother opens my mouth,
& insists I swallow
red cough syrup,
sticky, thick,
unwanted on my tongue;
searing deep & solid into stomach.

This is my mother
opens a jar of apricot jam
& cradles on one small finger
a drop to her mouth.
Unaware I see.

This is my mother
opens her arms to me.
Belly to belly,
we match. Her head rests
in the curve of my neck.

ii)

This is my mother remembers
not picture-framed parties
or enlarged moments of a Sunday morning,
when the camera was always ready.

This is my mother
remembers the swollen, grotesque arm
fitting wrong my brother's frame,

limb thrust backwards,
& joint raging bruise.
His face opened like a hole,
silent o, as if he waited
for the rest of his body to break as well.

& she tells me she remembers,
as if she had broken too;
the sense of her stomach punched,
then throwing up in thick grass.
This her body remembers, just as
his elbow bears the scar of stitches
where they went in
& righted the bone.

iii)

This is my mother bleeds greened water
to rich glossy leaves
of the climbing philodendron
outside her bedroom door.

This is
my mother bleeds clotted menstrual blood
onto thick white pads
from square cardboard boxes.
(Once I formed a doll's mattress
with the soft pads & whisper fibre fingers;
she slept like a baby.)

This is mother:
bleeding outside
the framed picture
of the tiny newborn,
just taken from the womb.
The newborn's skin is smooth,
but there is a piece of connection
where the umbilical cord has been cut.
The cord is purple in the light
outside the frame of the photo.

She remembers this, & tells me
how her fingers would touch
purple cord turning black
days after birth. Gently,
gently cleaning the navel with alcohol
so it would heal well & become
only a small mark on the belly.

Tomato Land

Bridget rolls in each mound
of cool earth I turn over,
watches me
with an even gold gaze before
turning to gnash her teeth at the birds.
She jumps if I touch her back
as she crouches low to the ground,
eyes fixed on robins.

She rolls among young tomato plants
& turns for a scratch
against the string net built for beans.
Calls in a long, low yowl
that sinks into my scalp.
Kneads holes in the soil,
claiming her ground. I pretend
she's helping me in the garden,
& tell her what a good girl
she is. She blinks
at me in the sun.

Backbone baking in hot afternoons,
I bend over lines of tomato plants.
Their smell haunts me in sleep,
I scratch mosquito bites
with unconscious hands, & further spread
the smell of growing on my skin.

Dutifully tending tomato land
I learn the day by day drawing
of sun into earth, seed into flower,
& flower into fruit.
My skin browns in the sun,
the soles of my feet in earth blacken.
I tell Bridget to climb the net fence,
delighted as the fur of her tummy
swings among the beans & tomatoes
gaining weight on the vine.

I pad down wooden stairs still wet after rain.
The earth smells as if it is all around me
& not just under my soft morning feet.
Feeling wet grass on my ankles,

I suddenly see
Bridget tangled in the net,
her fur wet with rain & stuck close.
Tummy coated in earth
& string twisted about her neck.

As fall licks into the edge of summer
I bury her
in a corner of the yard,
from where she watched
with golden eyes,
cackled to birds,
& kneaded the ground in the garden.

Swimming Pool Balance

Arms held out from her sides,
her body was a telephone pole
against blue sky. I watched her
reflection in the pool's surface
as she walked the thin metal rail
holding tight round the aluminum belly
of that above-ground ocean.
Our snake thin bodies plunged
into cool water. Only the trees were witness
as we paddled, free.

Backs flattened against the fence,
fingers like open flowers
on the cusp of losing petals,
watching, always watching
for parents/cars/other kids
as we smoked forbidden cigarettes
stolen from K's mom.

I eleven & she twelve,
her body beginning to bend
so slightly against the air.
When she smokes, her chest rises,

gulps of smoke fill us, coughing
hidden behind great green fingers of trees.

On my wrist I wear the scar
of a cigarette, branded
the day K's mother walked so close
she could have seen us in hiding,
petal hands covering our faces.
In her fear, K burned me,
a perfect round o of surprise.
For days then, I covered my wrist
so my mother wouldn't see the hole
& see in: thin wires holding
K & I together.

I have the scar, & the image
of her great swimming pool balance--
long feet turned outward as she walked
the rail, hair falling soft
over still child face.
I don't recall the scorch of pain,
skin changed forever.
I remember backyard freedom,
snake bodies in water;
though hers already curved
& thickened around unseen eggs.

Finger Creek

Thin with running,
full of voice echoed through throat.
I shout my name to green leaves
in the ravine where the creek roars through.

In May, sleek skunk cabbage
flowers & stinks in the most wet mud
near the creek's deep belly.
I slap the waists of young trees, grasp branches
& lean out over the creek's glossy face.
My own face changes shape
in the flowing water.

All summer long the creek lures me
to the forbidden ravine,
a place my mother says men might find me.
But there are rituals for escape:
I am owl, I am deer,
I am crow rising black from green trees,
wings echoed in the water.

In the hottest hours of July
I bathe in the pool I've found,
round a bend where the creek
swells with flooding in the spring.
Nobody watches me
in the clear creek's pool.

In August, I begin to collect
the leaves dropping from trees,
& make fans I use to wave to my friends.
Carve the date & my initials
into a tree by the pool. Mine.

By October I don't run to the creek alone.
I have no ritual escape
from the dark blood between my legs
mother says will come monthly.
She has shown me how to wrap the pads--
once, twice, three times, four
circled round in tissue,
then folded into newspaper & tied with string.

I cover myself with thin arms
in the bath, churn the water
with kicking. I am not eager to see
my face changing shape in the water.

The Room of Falling Maps

(for my brother)

Eerie arm of flashlight brilliance,
round glass face rolled up to nylon tent
& casting a beacon for bugs.
They fluttered & gathered in the light.

By day you abandoned me to the sun,
ran half-naked-wild with other boys,
while I was forced to wear shirts
& told to leave the boys alone.
I collected smooth stones
& made paths in the sandbox,
built houses
with empty cottage cheese buckets,
& vowed I'd never forgive you.
But at night when we were sent out
to sleep in the summer air,
we'd lie shoulder to shoulder,
chins propped on hands,
& tell each other stories
as the bugs gathered around the flashlight.

We hunted back creek salamanders,
turning rotten logs in the search,
sometimes ankle deep in fir needles,
our faces slapped by wet leaves.
A salamander body fit in one hand.
We held their tiny hips in two fingers
to ensure gentle capture.
Their back legs beat the skin of our palms,
& taught us the essence of delicacy.
Their thin skin, translucent stomachs,
& hearts beating in the wide open forest
echoed our own fear.

Your bedroom was coated in maps, like shields,
covering the little car wallpaper
you grouched you'd "grown out of."
We planned journeys, & favourite places
became greasy finger spots
trailing tails from Vancouver source.
I was so sure you would travel
to the places you imagined,
return triumphant & new-alive after battles
you told me you'd wage
in the wilds of the Interior.

I created countries for myself
so I might run shirtless
& free.

My fingertips on your face followed
the new stubble's path.
But I would not let you touch me,
deep & hidden.
Like a creek, I followed you
into whiskey sipped from olive jars,
still smelling of the olives
we popped on our tongues.
After dinner we'd sneak out to drink,
then find ourselves waking
on foreign rec room floors,
bodies empty as tents.

& where should I travel
but to a place never imagined,
a province full of winter,
foreign tongue rattling frozen in my mouth,
refuge made home. Montreal.

Away from you, & not wanting to be,
but hidden from the man
whose hands & body
had entered & marked me like a territory.
Moving now by train, going back.
Four years since you drove me
to the bus station,
bought me a coffee, & reminded me
of the room of falling maps;
how now & then the corners drooped
to reveal cars rolling surely underneath.
The stories we imagined we'd tell.
I will tell you now
of the hands that held my hips
to ensure capture, how his eyes
could so surely see my heart beating.

Thick on the Page

Fourteen:

Face flat against the windows of the biology room,
looking through wooden slats that protect the glass
from baseballs. Rain falls grey & dark,
the earth smells of sod.

I'm dissecting a cow's eye,
its milky lens useless now. Twenty others
pick their eyes apart
with scalpels, tweezers, & knives.

One girl faints,
& has to be taken to the medical room
with its awkward bed & woollen blanket.

The silence in the room
is as thick as the silence at home,
where my mother's words
shape my brothers & me:

"No one must know
your father has left the family."

Like a meal I ate too much of, I am full of her silence,
No words no sound no syllables.

Cutting into the cow's eye
is like Drama class,
where the teacher urges us
to take risks, go too far, cut
into feelings. We're all afraid
& awkward, but he says,
"Trust each other."

He offers me scripts to read,
& every night I tear through the scenes
in other peoples' lives, imagining their words
on my tongue. I'll do anything
to erase my mother's thin white face
& hollow eyes.

Fifteen:

When I speak,
I'm aware my tongue cuts
every syllable into nuance,
slitting silence open. I guard this tongue
like an untrustworthy source.

I once spilled everything to a friend:
had to spit up the truth about my dad
& how he doesn't live with us now.
& how my mother said, "No one must know,"
as if it were something to be ashamed of.
Mother keeps to herself
& I now hold my tongue.

So I am someone other
than myself when I speak.
In Drama class I become someone
& he praises me.
This man listens to the words
that fly out when I spill secrets
I shouldn't share.
But he listens to the secrets,

gives sound to my uncertainty
with his answers. He tells me
I'm Something, "A beautiful girl,"
he'll listen to anytime.

Sixteen:

He listens to me all the time,
afternoons spent in rain thick afternoons
of fall, inside his locked office.
The dark earth outside smells rich.
In murky November, I wear flannel shirts
against my skin.

It's late, but
instead of gathering his coat to go,
he circles to my side of the desk
& gathers me in his arms, tight
round my back & enclosing me.
His tongue enters my mouth,
& I'm silenced.

"I need you,"
he tells me. "I love you.
It's only because you're so beautiful."
& he needs me, one hand on my breast,
& the other hand guiding his cock
inside me. "I love you,
I need you, I need you."
Silent under his words.

"My wife must never know. No one must know
what we share. It's because you're so beautiful."
His words lodge tight in my ear, whispered wet.
It is still raining. "I love you,"
he says again, before I walk away
down the earthen ravine.

Tongue locked, weary
with lying six months under him.
I want out.
But I'm trapped
between the sound of "I love you. I need you."
& his hand thick, tight round my wrist.

He clasps my face. Fingers are blinders
focusing me on him.

His moustache scratches my mouth.

I smell him in my sleep,
& waken afraid, sweating.

I put his words on my tongue
& swallow them. "It's because of you."
His hands glide to my lips & close them.
"No one must know."
I believe him.

Seventeen:

I want
to get away from his touch,
his face too close to mine.
Hands travelling my body,
"It's because you're so beautiful,"
lips running over my throat,
"No one must know,"
& his cock entering again & again.
"I love you. I need you."

I smell of him.

I'm afraid to stop going
for what he might do to me,
afraid to keep going
because I can't feel my skin anymore,
I've scrubbed & scrubbed to feel clean.

In June, I think I'm free.

The phone rings, & he whispers
"I love you. I need you,"
too close to my ear. He still wants
me to come fuck in the afternoon.
"I love you. I need you,"
he knows he loves me.
He must know
what love is; I think
this must be It.
I feel his skin on my skin,
weight heavy on my chest.
"It's because you're so beautiful,"
he tells me,
it's my fault he loves me.

Twenty-four:

"Why did you hate high school so much?" she asks
while we are walking up a steep hill
together on a Sunday.

& for so long my lips have been unable
to form words to this woman, my friend
from high school.

I almost shout it at her, the words struggle
so much in my throat.

Afterwards we look at one another
& she cries what I haven't
been able to cry in years.

& with careful questions, she discovers
when she is home for Christmas
there were four others like me,
five that don't speak,
but who've all abandoned
the place they grew up in.

How many hands have travelled
soft-skinned girls,
who like me,
as women must remember
the inescapable cage of arms
locking his scent into her flesh?

How many times did his too many fingers
move from chin, to neck, to collarbone,
to the soft spot at the base of the throat
while his mouth sounded the words
to form silence?

His hand pushed over breasts
& into young bodies.
But my hand holds the pen
to open the silence,
to remember myself moulded by him.

Now I can form myself,
move hands over body,
gently sounding through throat.
& speak with words thick on the page.

Unmarked Islands

Sources

Isolate the limb
as if it's infected, bitten deep
by a strange dog with wild eyes
who jumps from nowhere
& punctures the skin
with every fear you've ever had,
the bite.

Isolate the limb
& drink enough whiskey to anger
with a heated knife:
make neat clean slashes
around the teeth marks,
make the bite obvious.

Anger the limb
so it will fight for its life
separate from the body,
create itself in replica
with the power
to sing the sounds of fear.
Silence betrays
& sound is the weapon that heals.

Soak the limb in salt
water, force the bite into flesh,
the body is bound
to change; don't be afraid
of the screaming.

This is an island,
no one will hear.

The Fear of Going Under

Curl of spine
tattooed with sea kelp filigree
green fingers tapping down vertebrae.
These are reminders
of the body as a whole--
the great sea & its many teeth
marking me
as part of its unknown.

I want to know
every part of me, wide open
like a gutted fish.
I'm afraid of the mystery.
want sources to be light,

& this is the struggle with the sea;
giving in to be small body in waves
& diving through undersurface
reflections of light.
To emerge covered in symbols
of an unknown language
that will, when I sit down to decode
without control, open to the water,
its metaphors.

To bring these elements together
I know I must slide into the ocean,
be engulfed
by the frightening all of it.
Locked on land I dry up
& must return to the sea
like any fish.

& there is my recurring dream
of a seal carcass's
headless hollow body,
skin taut over skeleton.
I plunge my hand inside:
to find the secret
of bodies in this body
I must be immersed
in the hollow of the seal,
ready to accept swimming
with new eyes in the sea.

Lines that Shiver

"This is a scar, & this, & this,"
pointing to short ragged lines.
They shiver across the skin
of her ribs & her waist.
"I was a wild kid," she says,
tracing the thick lip
of a line easing its white tongue
over her stomach, down to hip,
"This was a bedspring breaking through."
I lean on an elbow, survey
skin history, streaks of scar
pulled taut through flesh.
Trace her ankle,
peppered with the tiny blooms
from a fresh razor's bite,
dragged too heavily over bone.

Undertow

Calling round the island
to see you, locked tight
in a rented cabin looking out to sea.
You greet the smallest word with a grunt
& pass judgement on the potato salad I've brought.
"Too many onions," you claim, eyes narrow
as if the light's too bright.

I called to see you,
to touch the small
of your back. (Is it soft
& salty from a swim
in the morning ocean?)
& kiss you,
make across the land
here to there
a gesture with my mouth,
a path you'd see.

You're silent
on that side of the table,
carefully staked out with cutlery & napkins.
It is a long bicycle ride back.
Longer if I think.

I Give You the Power

I give you a look, a wave,
a smile that says
it's your skin
& your skin only
I want to meet with mine,
late night sliding
under that Something
about you.

I give you the power to surround me,
wrap my every footstep with your knowing.
When I trip & fall, I'm sure you see.
When I write, everyone is you,
each bone coaxed from slick clay
carries the angle of you.
Each word from my mouth
is for your ears.

& yet I can cup the back of your head
in my hand, fingers holding steady
the skull trusting my touch.
& you are so small,
just bones & organs
like me.

Virginia

It's as if the sand wants to skin me,
waves tear raw over me this evening.

Evening, yes, & I thought
the gentle after tone of sunset
would make the ocean calm,
that waves would roll & round
over skin, over heart, over bones,
over & over.

But instead of gentleness,
these waves tighten & slap;
challenge, "Come in, come in,
you've tried every other escape."

Virginia Woolf's
relentless, hungry body
urges surrender, urges an inhaled
o of water, urges silence, offers peace.
(Did her lungs blossom underwater
in the stem of her body
as she wrestled with that voice?)

I think of her as I'm close to giving in
to the wide mouth of ocean
that out shouts me.
But staggering ashore, I see
I'm skinned, worn thin like a shell,
& more able to echo
the shape I am.

A Potter's Field of Forms

Dark & cool within the shed
made studio for summer.
I work in a room bare but for naked
forms kept wet under thick towels,
bodies half-emerged from clay.
Hands flutter around each in turn,
touching a hip here,
a shoulder there,
before settling on one section of a woman.

Hands thump on the fragile form,
pull a bone from clay flesh,
push ribcage into bars of pattern,
pull & prod from the wet
slick clay, dripping
grey streams of water;
& following the lines
my hands cradle the face,
form a strong chin,
widen the eyes
slightly.

She is older than I imagined,
but still I want to see
the long lines of a runner
poised for flight at a word.
My picture of her
& what really emerges
are darkly different:
what I get under my hands
is a grotesquerie, a mocking face
framed in wild muck hair,
a face full of its own drooping eyes.

I soften the clay with water, run
my hands over the slick neck,
begin again,
but the eyes always emerge.
This one wants its own.
I give in & follow the lines
of the eyes sloping into face & neck,
shoulders & breasts. I give her
the fleshy arms & belly
she asks for.

At the end of the day I soak the towels
& cover all forms but this one,
which I wheel outside
to the sheltered bench built for drying
pots, cups, bowls, bodies
let loose from my fingers.
Pointing to the grass, she faces
all those glazed bodies I've botched before,
all wrong somehow:
all saddened, defiant,
or reclusive,
but all
somehow having said
through my hands, Yes.

Not A Blue Ocean

Swimming after dark:

hands, knees, heels

lost to the bubbled face

where moon & sea meet.

In the thick of the waves

my head is only a piece of wood

on the surface, & underneath

my mass is a part of the sea.

Whether my arms reach to land

or whether they flow out, out

with the deeper currents of the ocean

I cannot sense.

Duck under, to be

in whole of ocean.

Not a blue ocean,

but a deep mouth

found full of bones

somewhere light in the marrow.

I am afraid, but plunge under

searching blind with hands

for body I bring to surface,

moon reflected on its fingers.

Shifting the Heron

You, caught in summer clothes,
work crisp mornings into
melting afternoons, when the sheen of heat
rises off the road.

I walk almost naked
along the thin lip of sand
that swallows the island whole.

Notice a lone heron
immobile in the shallows.

Notice its silence.

I slow my breathing,
willing the motion of my lungs
to stop, settle.

Yet it knows I'm here,
& wide wings lift it gently away,
further along the beach.

How I wish you were here,
with me, barely breathing,
shifting the heron.

The Far of Your Pain

You & I lie curled,
a foot apart in the heat
& you tell me
the sources of your wounds
because I might write them
down for you, distant
on pieces of paper.

But I want to touch you
where it hurts, I want you
to show me
so I can touch you,
so I can hurt you again
& again, push you to tears,
widen the wound,
my mouth filled
with your o of pain.

So I might
finally be the one to hold you
when you need. I want
to touch that place, & be
part of the healing.

Unmarked Islands

The sea gathers fingers
of salt-softened wood,
sends them to me. My fingers
move over the knuckles, & wrists
of wood drip salt water onto my skin.
Your sleek wet head rises
& falls in the waves.
Tonight I
will lick the salt
from the pockets of your elbows,
kiss gently the bursts
of mosquito bites on your back.

The island appears
not even this big on maps.
It has to be scratched in
with a thumbnail, x
on a sea of blue paper.
Between island & city
there are ferries & hours of travel.
We've come far to be here together,
surrounded by sea & last lilacs
freeing perfume to the air.

It is here we've created
our selves & us. Isolated
from the power of words
that have told us how to be,
we have flowered on the island.
The sea holds back the mainland,
the jobs that dictate our thoughts.
But now I am free
to think of you--body browned
& long hair leaking salt.

Near shore, I float
on my back, & you hold me.
One hand cups
the small of my skull
where bone gives way to neck.
Blazing petals,
your sunburned fingers
have touched me.
When we return to the mainland,
we must take this power of touch
through the sea, into the city
where we live.

The River Back

(for Karen)

We have both bled over a hundred times
since we last saw one another,
body's rhythm red every month. I have swollen
at breast & hip, receded at waist;
a river cutting its watery way
through land to the edge of the sea
& its tides; the pressure of currents
mixed at the mouth. I see you too
have wound your way through unknown territory
with just instinct. Wisdom coats
the curves of your skin.

It's a shock to see you, when such a long time ago,
we left childhood & each other behind
as obstacles in getting to the answers
of where our bodies led us. Distanced
by seven blocks & separate schools,
I missed you when the blood began;
it was you I wanted to call, you
who would understand the intake of breath
before word was spoken. But months had passed,
& the way back to you wasn't clear
so I left you somewhere as source.

To see you here, fold myself into you;
hear the rhythm of your heart
before the pressure of words mixes at the mouth--
I remember you,
& how we pressed cut thumbs together,
would be blood sisters forever.

The Sharpness of the Bones

The Sharpness of the Bones

Discovering Skeletons

i)

He withdraws,
a needle from flesh fevered with other.

The walls seem to wave
with our shouting, words

barked from our lips. I smear
my beginning belly with salt

from my teary hands, cup
the slight swell between my hipbones.

Pulling ligaments apart,
discovering skeletons.

He packs almost everything
he can carry.

ii)

My fingers follow the corners
of walls, hands seek to remember
painted edges & cool papered corners.
This is where I live,
the wall my spine.
I have a circle of cells
spinning in my womb,
I am a small circle of cells.
Both spinning in the womb.

My fingers fumble in the darkness,
find pores in the plaster wall.
Back slap up against it,
legs braced on wood floor,
autumn night smoking
through splinter of space
between window & sill.
I am holding up the wall
so all does not come
crashing down around me.

iii)

Every morning, "sick as a dog"
I tell myself, retching
in fear next to the toilet.
What will happen

to this baby & me,
huddled together like pigeons
perched under grimy awnings?

Learning my unknown
body bending with another,
belly that doesn't belong to me,
didn't belong when I landed
in this Eastern city.
Touching new nipples,
all the way down
to curve over the translucent blisters
of skin on my heels
from so much walking.

This must be me
I touch, who have been touched

by lovers. My body, mine,
though I swell with the shape
of another.

iv)

The sharpness of the bones in his face,
the sharpness of the bones in his face,

I once touched:
fingertips rose & fell
where the skin drew into
his cheeks; the pores
under the pads of my fingers.

In the darkness I remember him
by line of jaw, slope
of eye socket.

Collarbones a stop
to my mouth's wandering
over his body.

The sharpness of the bones in his face, I once touched
now foreign land to my fingertips,

unknown, unwanted.

v)

Sidewalk children sing
taunts, teasing each other.
Their voices seep like shadows
into the room, break the silence,
sound of words breaking down into syllables
played across the tongue. Vibrations,
rhythm underneath my cradling hands. My eyes
register the change in light.
The afternoon rolls over in the singsong voices
& shadows of shadows come alive.

Sidewalk childrens' voices
weave among the strokes of my fingers,
as the walls of the room go dark & push
me out. I breathe the autumn air:

I'm a feather freed
from the body of a bird;

again I emerge from an egg;

I'm a feathered bird

freed from the body.

I'm egg, hidden

at the shore of a reedy lake.

Naked inside a shell

with many invisible pores.

Breathed Distances

i)

With new eyes

I imagine your bones,

as light as a butterfly's.

Through glass, I watch a flight of pigeons

wing up on a wind,

circle back,

disperse.

We breathe on wind,

butterfly in womb.

Wings outspread,

practising flight

in the afternoon.

ii)

Baby, you wear me like winter.
I am a dry prairie, bare,
& harbouring somewhere
this small curl of life.
Before you, my body was an ocean,
roll & swell, & salt on my lips.
You have pirated me,
taken me to prairie,
where dry land goes on forever
to the naked eye.
You move when I am still,
roll in edges I cannot touch,
know me inside.
I am your revolution's walls,
the sac to be broken
the cocoon split to release butterfly.

iii)

Places I have travelled over,
six hours flying
with you in me, both blind
to the lives passed over.

Mama mama mama.

Spaces in me swell,
darkened hollows in my chest
where there was sense before the word.
I know her without words,
small boned face familiar to my hands.

She takes my bag
& claps her hand so softly
over you.

iv)

A walk by the ocean:
here baby listen this
is where I come from.

I'm sure my mother walked
here with me in her,
must have borne me
this salt on her tongue,
I love the ocean so.

I want you to feel
the waves around you,
be held by them,
& remember this beginning
when you are born in another land.

v)

My mother holds me, her baby,
& I am. I ache with you in me.
You move, & I'm different shapes:
crow calling over green snake thin
Capilano Canyon; eagle grasping fish

swooped off shore of Hornby Island,
tiny bat bouncing echoes off the clouds
on a humid summer night in Montreal.

Here & there,
I'm in & out
of mother's arms,
that hold no escape
for baby. The link between
all three of us
is cells, the surge of blood,
eyes seeing & not.

vi)

With this belly I bear my mother's fears
for a safe journey back to Montreal.

My bones rock like a weak ship,
baby bound in me through blood.

Breathing changed, conscious
of two bodies needing air.

Fingerling feet
beat tattoos on my ribs,

& fear surrounds me
like a routine--

your wings inside me
make me fear heights,

the power that takes us
six hours flying from my mother.

Winging over the prairies,
to the dry back of winter.

Ribs Humming Song

i)

(As my mother so bloodily bore me,
lips opening with head
& face of child. Oh the blood,
she said there was so much blood
for such a small baby.
& my own lips opened
as air entered & filled me
with breath of separation.)

ii)

This must be it, forget
the tv show; I don't care
how it ends. My belly
means business this time,
after weeks of shifting
pains, abdomen tightening;
my grimace, clenched teeth in skull.

iii)

one (breathe,
breathe. don't push
yet.) two
(breathe)
three (the nurses say
breathe, don't scream)
four (push
now, push)
five

all of me
tearing open:

six seven
oh, god
eight
pain Oh,
nine
push, yes
baby,
baby laid wet on my belly.

iv)

Womb songs you sang to me,
body in body,
buffered with blood
& flesh. I of you,
& I of me, finally
free
with the clamp
& a cry.

v)

If her first memory is of this:

my eyes magnified by tears.

Anna, Anna

named by the music of her sounding.

She so small against my chest,

Anna,

fingers wrapped into fists,

Anna,

finally here.

If her first memory is of this.

vi)

Oh Anna,

the touch of edges--

your small fingers on mine,

spread & open,

pads of digits imprint on me.

I miss you in me,

my fingers finding you

through touch.

vii)

This tiny baby strapped to me,
mine
from hip-cracking pain Anna born.
"Sweet baby Anna," they say,
but I am just now

aware of her presence only
as an absence from my body.
Oh yes baby, yes
I will feed you
after I have cut myself
a thick slice of bread
& spread it with blackberry jam.

Then, only then,
will I lift you
up to my breast
& let you suckle me.

viii)

Holding Anna with shaky hands,
scared of losing her to the bath.
I sing to her,
lips brush the smoothness
of her skin; sing very small songs
for her alone to hear.
Close to her chest,
air pocketed between
my mouth her skin.

Opening myself to Anna,
her tiny ribs humming with song.

ix)

Her tongue skates to a finish
on my skin--
nipple in small mouth,
falls asleep.

at bathtime she offers me
tastes of her elbow,
gives me her wonder.
I rejoice in this difference
between us, the link between
this whole beautiful hand in mine.

Wood House

(for M.R.)

"Holding hands

was a gift of our landscapes."

Rickie Lee Jones

Wood House

Judy:

Wood house swells in rain, porous body
soaking up sweat of clouds.
Rain feeds the boards & warps the wood.
Inside, I put my hand through a wall,
& Eleanor, my sister, laughs;
says, it's being eaten alive
by termites. No more
can we tack pictures to the walls
& dream of movie stars sweeping in
to carry us away.
When we were children,
we spent summers here,
& when our bodies rounded
with breasts & thighs
it was here
we discovered the blood
coming from inside ourselves.

Wood house steams wet. Sunlight
comes through clouds,
moisture clings to us like sheets.
The floor drums under Eleanor's heels,

El, always barefoot in this house,
never splintering her skin.
I am wary for my soft city feet,
& tread carefully
into the square box room we shared,
curled together in the last weekends
before fall.

Here with El, niece Margaret
(elfin child whose bare legs swing
off the edge of the porch,
sharp face focused on the sea),
& mother, who wordlessly opens her arms
as if I were still a baby.
We gather here,
perhaps to take back the power
of the cancer eating El, inside
out. Wood house,
evening shadow:

El's long frame appears fragile
by the light of the window.
She turns & gathers
the awkward thick of me
in her wiry arms.

Eleanor:

I wait naked on the porch.
You, practical,
clad in nothing but sneakers,
wade through dewy parsley plants
to pick blackberries
from the garden.

One small wren
sings.

Picture skin
against earth,

sun on
your body,

your trembling smile.
You walk towards me,
offer me my choice of berries--
which full blown purple
sphere of cells
I wish to take in my fingers
& lift to mouth.

Eleanor:

You small child Margaret
emerge from the ocean,
hair corded in salty strands
down your back. You drip
welcome water
onto my baked skin

You're hiding something:
when I cup your chin in hand,
you open your mouth.
& on your tongue:
an exclamation of pebble

Indian Summer

Judy:

This heat is wrong,
as it coaxes sweat, pools of moisture
between breasts, in crook of elbow,
drips down upper lip,
wrong. There is something wrong
with this aching sun
falling on crisp yellow leaves
the wind shifts
round the yard.

El & I sit on the porch,
out of synch with the season.
I hold her hand,
which seems to melt to bone
in my fleshy palm.
With each day her skull face emerges,
as if she was returning
to the cartilage beginnings of an embryo,
the soft, vulnerable plates of the head.

The proper coolness of fall would cover more;
we wouldn't see my fuller breasts,
strong shoulders, thick calves
barely wrapped in a shift.
She smokes a cigarette beside me,
because why should she change for me now?

How dare you? I want to ask,
& shake her, shake her
till she shouts back.
We'll fill the air with a fight
& frighten Margaret.
El will win as always,
cutting me down
with a humiliating moment
she's remembered & saved for such a day.
I'd like to forget El
can't shout back now.

It's Indian summer today,
so we sit in the silence
of this wrong, raging day,
holding hands, holding
each other to silence.

Rope Swing

Margaret:

Mom tells me
she climbed the tree to the rope,
to swing out over the waves
of high tide lapping up
under her toes.

I can see her
as me, eight,
hanging over the water,
caught as a black spot
in a picture.

There is one
of me like that.

I wish she could
swing over the waves
& sand. Like that.

At the Bevelled Edge of Dusk

Judy:

At the bevelled edge of dusk
Margaret's face appears boneless,
all angles melting
into curvatures of sunned skin.
Her mother's cotton scarf veils
the sharp cut of jaw.

Waiting for herons, we sit
almost half an hour, measuring the minutes
on her Mickey Mouse watch.
She eases her hand under
the dry layer of sand, & brings up
grey wet grains clinging to skin--
thousands of shell fragments,
abandoned shelters; lives long since
pounded back to ocean.
Melted back to sea.

Her fingers dig
into the broken husks, & her wrist
twists in the shadow of dusk. I see the bone,
small wrist bone, accented by shine of sea.
& pounded into ocean,
as she & I too shall be.

Eleanor:

My hand rests on this plain of skin
once round with life.

From this belly I bore Margaret.
There are pictures of my starfish hands
over expanding skin,
when I was unaware
I would ever be less than her mother.

Now the body, like a starfish left in sun,
dies slowly from the heat.
Yet my belly, my belly
bore her from me,
& my hands can barely hold her
now. Only myself can I hold
& barely that,
hands on hanging skin,
scarcely bearing the emptiness.

Speaking in Tongues

Judy:

Each tongue of rib licks
to the skin's surface
as your body loses all curves,
& the skin itself gently releases
all gathered attention.

I hold you in my lap,
a light doll. You accept
your changing geography,
your shrinking territory.
Yet you open me,
carelessly spill secrets
I would have died for
when we were in our teens.

You talk a stream of lovers,
recall European tongues
skating across your skin.
& Eleanor, oh El

Leaning together in the dusk,
words sound through
sternum & skull against skull.
I rock you in the shadows,
hardly a weight;
& my wooden tongue is heavy,
swollen with the enormity of losing you.

Eleanor:

I want the fire stopped,
want the rain
to slash my body,
wood to be worn
by the hard rain.

Desperate:

wet me through, slice me
through the burning
skin, what muscle's left,
to marrow
cooled
& glowing in the grey.

Eleanor's Wings

Barbara:

Eleanor is the kite
she made as a child:
collarbones form cross piece,
bone point legs trail the ribbon tails
of her tattered slippers,
& her expression has become
as flat as paper.

The wildness of the cancer
wings through her flesh,
thinning her
to paper thickness.
It mocks her,
once round & sturdy,
firmly rooted to ground
as she set her kites free.

This is not my daughter.
I should be talking
her out of this,

bringing awareness to her eyes.

Tell her, I am your mother

I should be dying first.

But she doesn't know

this; doesn't know much

but morphine now. She's as quiet

as the clouds she used to watch.

Pieces of A Name

Judy:

I only know life with her,
the years of us
sounded in my throat.
She taught me to say my name,
crooning over & over, "Ju-dy,"
as if I was her doll.

Her name I learned
from mother's call--
"El-ea-nor," sung syllables
to reach El in her room.
I would say "El!"
& end it fast, so she would hear
& answer me.

How will I know life without her?
She's on the tip of my tongue--
El.

I can't crack the back of her name
with the funeral syllables of Eleanor;
but taste only the piece
I knew her by.
El, El.

The Elements of Wings

Airless Blue House

There were days going home
to the empty gut of our blue house,
when hungry for air
I walked blocks out of my way,
reinventing the route
my mother had shown me
the first day of school.
I followed curves of streets unknown,
imagined myself a tourist in New York:
each wide mouth of asphalt-mending
slashed across a street
became a crosswalk in the big city.
Corner to corner, I'd walk
among many imagined people,
surrounded by highrise cement
& a face/body/heart
behind every window.

Wandering the long way home,
I could be any one of hundreds,
touching arm to elbow, hand to hand.

Once home,
the empty house echoing,
I have a marble in each lung:
breath in
breath out
hampered by small
cold things in my chest.

Sunday Swimming in Winter

Scraping pigeon shit aside,
Bruce cracks the alley's puddle
with the heel of a worn boot.
Squats frog-like
around the pool of cold water,
trailing torn & stinking coat
like tattered wings from a dragonfly.

I can hardly hear him
from the restaurant's back door.
I take a drag of my smoke,
make him the usual offer
of a cigarette or a coffee.
I know he won't
take the food I offer,
but sometimes he'll have a smoke
& tell me about the latest
he's read in the morning's Gazette,
taken from a bus stop garbage can,
& already grubby under his arm.

He plunges his hand into the water,
holds it up to his face,
dry cracked skin now red.
Really seeing me,
he pulls the hand across
salt-dry cement, mumbles
"I used to go
Sunday swimming in winter
cracking the backs of lakes to get in."

Almost Dusk Hummingbirds

Knotted fingers hopefully
softened with hand cream, just so.

"A bird might come & sit
on an old man's hands
if they're soft, you know."

After dinner ritual:
toothpick, toilet at 6:30,
then a tip of the blue capped
lotion into his hands. He'd fuss
if he got too much,
dab some into my palm.
"So they might come to you, too."

Slumped low in his lawn chair,
the flat maps of his feet
lifted to a cotton footstool,
he waits for the whirring
wings, the long beaks poking
into plastic feeder.

Then lifts himself up to count them,
each hummingbird flitting
from feeder to ivy to feeder to
blue delphiniums.

One night he counted seven,
each small bird that arrived
brought a wider smile.
Hands hovered out from his body
as if he would like to hold
one of those birds,
so gently,
just so.

Grandfather's Funeral

Why should that particular body
be ours? Wood box resting
on sturdy church legs.
He is in front of
the body of us, some eyes weeping.

I am stone cold, a marble in the mouth
of the tin lion I owned as a child

He is inside that box
& a minister we've never met
tells us
how wonderful grandfather was.

I have been at times an angel
with wooden wings, possessing form for flight
& sometimes his wordcurrents
to lift me. He said
I was an angel
& held me in
his circle of
wool, coffee, soft
grandfather hair.

Why should I believe
that wood box holds him,
as I have been held, wings & all?
Why does my heart
beat words, meaning, rhythm
into the tin hollow of my chest, so cold,
when his heart has stopped, suddenly
stilled forever wings?

Love Is in the Air

It's a wooden bird with a painted expression,
wings carved close to its body;
light as a breath in my hand.
& this I send to you,
to open a sky between us
where now the air
is full of paths between our eyes,
which are never followed.

(Oh, we try to avoid the air itself, step
around every encounter
as if maps of unknown water
we might fall into,
head to toe immersed
in cool lake water
soaking into pores).
every nerve exposed.

But you stretch the air
for days & weeks
into silence, pulling taut
the wings of words that
might bring us together.

You stop my gesture
when next you see me,
act as if nothing happened,
no bright fragile messenger come to you
with words in the card accompanying it--
"I think you're beautiful."

Where is that bird now?
Where does it sit,
wings tight to its body
& a silly painted expression?

Parting Smile

You watch me
as I lick steamed milk from a spoon,
white foam finely laced with the brown cafe.
Your eyes follow the motion
of my hands ripping a sugar packet into bowl,
& you smile,
lips parting over white teeth.
I want your teeth
on my skin, to remind me
of my flesh loved.

You say I think too much,
but who can help it?
I think of you, mostly;
how your hair smells like the pillow
first thing in the morning. Oh, you have
no idea how much I don't think
of things
when I'm with you.

I was lost on a foreign corner
& you pointed me to a metro.

But what if I hadn't
asked you for a coffee that day;
what if I hadn't ordered cafe au lait;
& licked steamed milk from the spoon,
shared with you
some of my milky thoughts?
You have admitted
that was what got you--
escaping from the middle of a rainstorm,
watching me lick milk from a spoon.
Your lips parted in a smile, asked
"What are you thinking?"
So I told you.

An Impression of It

Your smile spreads wide the room,
wall to wall.

Our landscape: rug, chairs, couch.

Your mouth rounds up the words

I'd let fall in the silence

of coffee cups on Sunday morning

paper; ink bitten prints of my fingers

wings for words let loose to the air.

You've kissed the lines, sucked your version

of the story from my skin,

dissolved to

saliva in silence

across the impression of space.

Not ever spoken, the word:

lost, lyrical, lilting, lonely word.

This is my version of it,

let loose to the air:

your eyes light lakes

darkened with winter ice.

Even from so far away,
I hear the fish call,
your name become word become sound be
come breath on the wind.
& one blue heron flies over the colours of the land--
strokes my face your hand,
my hand your face. A full silence,
like the delicacy
of those long thin legs.

Deep from the Belly of Sunday

Your hands touch all the furniture,
& doorframes & walls. You pace,
& the apartment wears your touch
like tattoos. I wish
I was a wall, strong & holding
your hands on me.

You are in the shadow
of another winter Sunday,
deep in the belly
of half-light. Your eyes are gold
& elsewhere.

I wish I was the place
you go to; free & far
from the structures
of this cement-bound city,
crack of winter cold,
our lives pulled together
by a lease. Once, by love.

That word is not spoken,
& our breathing is loud
in the silence. When you sigh,
a world is set free.

You come curl in me
as if I were a cloud
in your imagined sky.

I want to tell you
there is more than this.
Winter will end, & the city
will disappear if we touch each other,
make our way through
tattooed doorframes & walls.
I want to tell you this.

Leaving A Letter Unwritten

You have a set of wings you keep hidden
by day, but at night, unfold;
like silk scarves set free in spring wind,
the fine edges beat a whispered sound
only I can hear.

The sound of the street rushes uninvited
through the open window. The breeze
fingers through the pages of a letter I'm writing.

You have one black mole on your sternum,
a domino spot on your so white skin.
First found, clarity of it sent shivers through me
from the contact point, mouth, all the way
to the edges of my ragged, bitten fingers.
& you smiled.

& now you smile
at the edges of my ragged fingers
at contact point, my mouth
on your mouth, once
the clarity of it shivering through you.
You reverse rhythm in the tumble of love,
pulling back like this, sounding words.

I don't want to hear
sounds of the street
rushing through the silence
after words between the two of us
sitting at the table.

My hand harbours an angle of you,
memory on palm
of wings in the night.

No Room For Love Poem

The afternoon rain roars in this hour,
rounds all edges licked clean by the wind;
swells & recedes,
then lets up to a steady gallop.
like foal's heels on the metal sheet roof
outside my apartment window.
Lighting one candle from the other,
four in all. Enough
to see by.

Four candles become one light,
as gentle as your hand
once skimmed across my back

(I remember your wavering fingers
as you shyly let fall your hand
to my tensed muscles. You pulled away
as if I'd burned you.
Our laughter rumbled
the stone in my stomach to dust,
then four hands moved.)

The rain & afternoon have become detached
from outside sounds of the street,
& I'm glad they are lost.
For you I lit these candles
a few minutes ago,
but now I realize they're for me;
Because I am here alone
listening to the rain,
& I'm aware that somewhere in this city
your hand skims whatever it finds.

Dream of Air Licking Bone

In the black undertow
of winter nights before snow
lights the streets
with the glow of its bony hand,

I turn you inside out
with my tongue. Lick the glove
skin your heart's enclosed in,
setting free the feather wishes
your blood beats to my ear.

& what do we find
wandering the cold
& empty streets?
I hold your hand, naked to bone,
thick skin abandoned in the blankets
left bloody on the bed.

When will you finally open
(air seep in, disperse
elements of you
to the air around us?)

To me, when will you open?

Africa

& she is going to Africa,
quitting winter, as if it's a job
she can give twenty-four hours notice to,
although it isn't very wise or mature.
She's quitting me like a job too,
as if I will wait
& be here when she returns,
like a restaurant that never closes.
Where she will always find something
even if she wanders in
at three a.m.
I'm afraid she is right.

She closes her bag & another wall
rises between us.
Within hours, she will disappear
into a plane, whose wings
will take her to the heat.
I hope the cold will follow her,
haunt her like a position
she can't get out of. I will haunt her,
because I'm the winter in her eyes.
& so she is going to Africa.

Perspective

From the wooden arch of the cafe doorway
one leaf hangs,
suspended from a spider's thread.

It twists, twists, twists
in the breeze.

I'm a wooden angel
poised on the lip of winter,
waiting for the wind
that will lift me from this cafe
& send me to the sky
like breath from a baby's body,
full of promise & silence.

I sip my espresso
laced with steamed milk
& half a spoon of sugar,
mapping out the day's appointments.
But really, I am waiting for the wind
to suspend me from a cloud,
& turn my head around
to see what I've left behind;
spread out in rented apartments
& packed in cardboard boxes,
a circle of habits we lived in, she & I.

With Winter Wings

Flying is easiest in the winter months,
when breath can take off on its own,
& the feet are so numb
you can't feel them.
It is easy to imagine
air lifting pieces of your body
& swirling them tight round in a circle,
like snow; or blowing bits here & there.
Every city, every edge of town
where I've seen the city spread out under me
from a lookout, spread out like a lover.

It's easy to imagine
flight when the body is numb,
hair flowing behind like a veil.
Is this the way your ashes
flee the urn? Do you see
every place you've ever been,
do you see far enough
to me, here in Montreal?
It's not that I didn't love you,
you must know that.

But I couldn't afford the flight
so far to see you flying
from a bowl. So the cold sinks into me
& I imagine you in the air.

In the Evening of Pigeon

There are angels in pigeon bodies.
Purple breasts mark the entrance
of a spirit to the chest. Oh,
their walking with vacant eyes
is doubtless bird,
but the endless winging up,
whir of grey wings--
could this be something lacking
spirit?

I fight
the force & pull of traffic headlights
to stand still in the glare,
cover myself from the cold
& watch the pigeons strut in packs
of winter ghosts.
Oh, that I
should bear such a bruise
to prove a soul in this body.