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Canada

Renovations in the Ghetto

by Esther Ross

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**

September 1991

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Abstract

The title of my thesis is Renovations in the Ghetto. It is a collection of poems that represents a long meditation on a central existential problem. The question I am trying to answer in the work is how to live in a world where both the holocaust and human love exist, and are equally real, a world where two of the stock characters are the S.S. soldier and the bodhisattva. The work is both a spiritual and concrete attempt to transcend feelings of horror, hatred and despair.

The collection of poems is loosely divided into three sections. In the first part, the roots of my preoccupation with the holocaust are examined. The poems are about my parents, both holocaust survivors, and my childhood which was saturated with half-spoken memories. In the second section are the love poems, which represent an antidote to cruelty. The personal relationship becomes a search for salvation, a kind of salvage operation, or a kind of salve. The third section, which is the culmination and resolution of the work, is the series of poems which describe another kind of love, agapé. These poems are about my work with children in a residential treatment centre.

Esther Ross

1991

Table of Contents

Two Versions of World War Two	1
The house is making sounds	2
Mother is gone	3
My mother tells me	4
Stories I can never forget	5
Stories I can never forget	6
Stories I can never forget	7
Stories I can never forget	8
Dreams	9
enjoying hunger	15
Renovations in the Ghetto	16
Lecture	18
My Real Life	19
You Are Coming To Dinner	20
Train kills two on its last journey	21
I slept naked and alone	22
Happy New Year	23
A morning with the cats	24
I end up in a puddle of cats	25
A bed of flowers	26
What I miss	27
Ice-World	28
The Garden	29
Having Fun	30
It was the eve	31
Rideau River (I)	32
Rideau River (II)	33
Eating Strawberries	36
It is not difficult	37

A Bad Poem	38
Two Voices	39
Agi	40
Play/ground	41
Photograph	42
Whore with a heart	43
Experiments	44
Birthday Poem	45
What to put inside the glass box	46
Reply to Baudelaire	48
Tarot Reading	49
Poems About the Fire	50
Pretty Poem	57
White Night	58
I dreamt the edges	59
Turning Forty	60
Blood Type	61

Two Versions of World War Two

My father loved at least once
After the holocaust
In his uniform he looked normal,
handsome, Russian.
The bullet-hole in his back
did not deter him from hunger
He still likes meat and potatoes
and good strong cheese.

My mother loved at least once
After the war
For years she was hidden in barns
and in outhouses
Later, hiding behind her blue eyes,
Disguised as one of the living
She would ask blond soldiers
to carry contraband suitcases
onto ordinary trains.
What did she have in those suitcases?
Weapons? Silk stockings? Documents?

Please sir, they're so heavy.
Thank you, comrade.

(Between the please
and the thank you
imagine a man and a woman
lifting a mysterious burden)

My parents loved at least once
after the slaughter

The house is making sounds

The house is making sounds
the floorboards do not creak
they snap, the slap of
a raindrop on the windowsill,
the whine of a machine
behind the wall,
All tell me:
Something needs to be repaired.
The tread on the stair is unsteady
The wrong key grinds the wrong tumblers
The wrong door opens and then slams.
Click clack, all messages and portents
reveal: this house is not haunted
enough

Mother is gone

Mother is gone, she's gone. she asked me to wash the curtains, take them down and hang them up again, she says the pins pierce her hands, she says the muscles in her hands are wasting away, arthritis, or too much medicine, remember that miscarriage I had when you were six, she says with a small smile, yes, white mound of belly under the blanket, my jealous tears, what do you need another daughter for? Aren't I enough? And then the belly disappeared and you never explained. I didn't know that words are not magic, that no-one dies just because of a few words. I didn't know about the merciful space between word and deed, or that rage is not always lethal I didn't know how much I would want a sister, someone 6 years younger, and I wonder if we would be friends now, or if she would be willing to help you take down those fine white curtains, and wash them, and hang them up again, being very careful with those sharp, sharp pins.

My mother tells me

My mother tells me that it's too quiet on the third floor, that she likes the two young men who live next door, because they make music, a flute she said, but the other neighbours have complained, and now those two boys are moving out, just when she was beginning to get used to them. and then she says that since some teenagers attacked her with a knife on the staircase, she doesn't go out walking so much anymore, and there have also been more break-ins, and she'd like to move to Dollard, because it's safer there, but the apartment she saw is too close to the highway, who knows what might be driving by, and the world isn't safe anymore, she's afraid all the time, and maybe it will be better in the summer.

Stories I can never forget

My mother is sitting at the bottom of the cupboard, coats brushing the top of her head, she is sitting in a fetal position, hunched over herself, fists clenched, and she is punching herself in the face, and crying. I am standing a few feet away from her, near the door of the bedroom, half-smiling, half-terrified, I can't tell whether it's a joke or not. With each blow to her face, my mother utters some words, curses, entreaties. "Hitler!" Whack. "Nazi!" Whack. "Why did I ever bring him to Canada?" Whack. With this last blow she hits herself so hard that some of the tears fly off her face, into the room, into the air.

My father is in the kitchen, standing by the table, a strange smile on his face, like mine. I ask him why is mummy doing that. He answers: she's not feeling good. He says: Leave her alone.

Stories I can never forget

High school sk'-trip. Bus full of enemies, class-mates, girls, boys. I sit on a boy's lap, I feel drunk, I am fifteen, I can feel something hardening between his legs. I shift around, trying to feel more of it, trying to pretend I'm not aware of it. The other kids in the bus are whispering, teasing the boy and me, I am appalled by what I am doing. What am I doing?

On the second night I go skating at 2:00 in the morning, on the lake. It's March. Part of the ice is solid, part of it is cracked, thin, covered with a layer of water. I go right to the middle of the lake, feeling my way carefully. What am I doing? I keep hearing the ice creaking, new cracks appear on the surface, under my skates, water seeping to the surface. When I get to the middle of the lake, I hear a loud crack that tells me I've gone far enough. No-one knows where I am. If the ice breaks, no-one will hear me. The sky is tremendously dark, tremendously full of light. So many stars.

The next morning I knock on my favourite teacher's door, the one I have a crush on. He is one of the chaperones. I say sir, do you want a cup of coffee. He opens the door. He asks me to come in.

Stories I can never forget

My friend, who is already in grade one, is teaching me how to write my name, each letter on a separate piece of coloured paper. The crayons smell good. My whole name.

My friend and I are carrying a large basket of laundry, a basket made of woven wicker. She has one handle, I have the other. We are skipping down the hill, swinging the basket, and singing.

They throw me into the deep end to teach me how to swim. I go under once, twice, three times. Each time my head breaks the surface, I gulp for air, call for help, I am whimpering, begging them to do something. They are crouched on the dock, smiling, shouting encouragement. Finally, my arms start moving, I start an awkward dog paddle, I am keeping my head above water. I get back to the dock by myself, without help. I am half-enraged, half-pleased. I have learned something. How cruel people can be. How strong I am. I can swim. I scream at my counsellors, threaten to tell on them. They begin to look frightened, guilty. I have learned something.

The first time I saw a man naked. That large piece of flesh between his legs, pink, full of blood. I said out loud: It's not so ugly after all. Then I started laughing. I didn't know then what to teach him. He knew everything. I knew nothing, nothing.

Stories I can never forget

I am on the back balcony. Smell of rusted black iron. The lane is quiet. Flies buzz in angry circles, land on the railing, fly up again. Their bodies are shiny emerald and sapphire. Are they beautiful or disgusting? I close my eyes. The sun is on my chest, hot, so hot. The heat of the sun is sinking deeper into my chest, through the skin. I begin only to feel.

I tell him that what I wished for all those years was for someone to tell me that it was all right, then to open his arms and say: Welcome. His eyes light up, he looks holy, blessed. He says: It's all right. Then he opens his arms, he says: Welcome.

The first time a man gave me pleasure. His hand on my back, just stroking my back, his gentle whisper, telling me to have sweet dreams.

Dreams

1.

"I've tried to please everyone and I've ended up pleasing no-one, least of all myself"...this is the sentence I heard pronounced so clearly in my dream. I was outside, and my friend Arlene was walking across the garden, carrying a very large baby, it was smiling the way only babies can smile, that total stupidity, that singleness of vision...it was happy and placid in her arms, big bald head, dressed in a white garment of some sort...then it vanished, and Arlene and I were going to "her" place even though I wanted to go to my place, but she needed to get some nameless things, and I just tagged along (why?) feeling angry then feeling angry and lost, because we were entering a strange neighbourhood, and we were in her place and there were a lot of things there, and a big winding staircase, and I kept asking her: "Why are we here?" and she said she had to get something, and it was a huge bag of garbage, a brown plastic bag, overflowing with garbage, lying on its side, some crumpled pieces and loose sheets of paper spilling out onto the floor, and then I walked away, my face red with anger, and I asked her: "Where do I live? Where do I live, that's what I want to know."

2.

Oh, how I would love to suck on something sweet and pure, something that could never leave a rusty metallic taste on my tongue, something that would go down like mother's milk, but then again I have never tasted mother's milk, only the rubber nipple of lukewarm formula, the pabulum that is mass-manufactured, the stuff that is packaged in glass and then cardboard, transported, sold, unwrapped by harried parents, shoved grudgingly into some kid's totally stupid sad or happy mouth.

A totally stupid mouth. A mouth that is intelligent. Comes to the same thing in the end, I suppose.

3.

Maybe I should make the character someone other than "me". Is it fair to make her 37 years old, a heavy smoker, a liar, someone with a long and inaccurate memory? Someone with a tendency to exaggerate. I think, that in the interest of fairness and alienation, that the central character of this dream should be a man, of an indeterminate age, (you choose, I'm tired of choosing) and that he should be either an artist, or a scientist, or a social worker or a business man or a farmer or a chef, or whatever. I hope he had a happy childhood. I hope his first experience with a woman left him feeling gloriously happy, and potent. I wish him well.

The only problem is that I don't know how they think or feel, or what their bellies are like, deep inside. What do they see when they walk into a room? What does he see? What does he fail to notice? Because, after all, they aren't all the same, no sir. Not by a long shot. But what kind of words could I possibly cram into his mouth, into his brain? What does it feel like to have shoulders three feet wide, to be the tallest animal in the room? To play football?

Why am I asking these questions?

4.

At supper-time, when we are all seated in the dining-room, at the long table, elbow to elbow, there is a silence. The table cloth is ripped plastic, with a pattern like a grid, lines in red, yellow blue, some going this way, and some going that way, forming perfect squares, except in the torn places where the wood shows through. We devour the pork chops, the rice, the peas, the lettuce and tomato salad, the homemade cookies with little dots of purple jam and red jam.

These are some of the words we use to describe food: gross pukey, tasteless, crappy. We are never at ease around the dinner table, there is always a dull silence, or some forced conversation, an uneasy laugh or a sudden quarrel. We all want to leave the room.

There is one monster called a sea wolf, I wanted to be her. She has the body of a seal, slippery and sleek, but the face and teeth of a wolf, and her expression is fierce and unapologetic, totally inhuman. I really like that gaping jaw. When I look at the drawing I can hear sounds pouring from her throat.

5.

When my father and I meet for lunch, he tells me stories. Last week it was Siberia, during the war, always the war. He says that the earth there remains frozen, even in summer, except that in summer the top foot or so of earth thaws, and in this thin layer they grow melons, tomatoes, cucumbers, but not fruit trees, no trees. We are sitting in the Harvey's Hamburger on St. Lawrence Street, above Pine Avenue. The light of the afternoon sun etches his face with sharp contrasts of brightness and shadow. I am listening to his words about the time he was a soldier, when he slept in snow and 200 grams of bread a day was his ration, and, at the same time I am gazing, spellbound, at his eyelid, a fine and delicate line, where the skin folds over, like a birdwing, curved. He stops talking for a moment and looks at me, smiling, blushing, and says: "Why are you looking at me?" He is pleased.

6.

The dream I had this afternoon: I am in a house with my father, he's sleeping in the next room, I go to wake him, but he doesn't want to wake up, he's having a nightmare, tossing and turning under the blanket...I turn away, his hand reaches out and grabs my leg, around the ankle and I shout: "NO!".

...then suddenly, my stepmother is there, she is much younger, the way she looked in the sixties, red hair, lipstick, a peach-coloured dress, sexy, she's standing in the room, and she has a cruel smile on her face, she's smirking, and she says: "Your mother was bragging about you..." and I'm very surprised, and I say incredulously: "My mother was bragging about me?" And my stepmother replies: "Yes, she said you never gave her any trouble..."

How many characters are there in this dream? Four characters meagerly sketched, mere gesture drawing, the kind you have to make when the model is moving quickly, shifting positions, perhaps you are in the park, in summer, and the passing strangers are unaware that you have to produce a hundred quick drawings by next week, it is an assignment you have been given, and your pencil (4B) is moving very fast on the rough surface of the paper, making marks, capturing the swing of an arm, the outline of a hip. Scratch, scratch, scratch.

enjoying hunger

I am beginning to enjoy this hunger
because I am a beloved child

I am beginning to enjoy this hunger
because I am a hunter
Across the room my mother is singing
hush, hush, my breasts are full,
it won't be long now

If I go into the forest
I will find whatever hides there.
I am beginning to enjoy this hunger
because all I have to do is cry and smile
because my spear is freshly sharpened
and my muscles are hard

Renovations in the Ghetto

Charles, who lives in rooming-houses,
and who used to hang around in Rosie's
allnight cigar-and-candy store
with a smile on his face and a "hello"
for me, and a pat on the head,
until I asked him to stop patting me on the head
three years ago,
is now walking around in La Cite
with a gas mask on his face telling everyone
that aliens are trying to poison him.
When I quavered a scared "hello" at him
the other day, he answered: "Yeah".

Now, my psychology prof. would say
that considering his pre-morbid
condition
the man is off-his-rocker.
But I know better
The man is not lying.

Maybe when Rosie's closed down it wasn't a
disaster for you, or for me, (she and Alec
had a beautiful Persian cat, and the T.V. was
always on, and you could watch a whole program
if you wanted to, or a whole evening of programs.
and they gave credit, and they had five or six
wooden chairs in the store where people could
sit down for awhile, and on their 40th wedding
anniversary he bought her a bouquet of huge real
roses from a greenhouse outside of town, and
it was on the counter when you walked in, and
they had that huge-real-rose-perfume)

So here you have the aetiology for one poor
"paranoid schizophrenic"
who knows where it's really at.
It's time to start listening to madmen again
because there are aliens trying to poison us
aliens trying to poison us
everywhere.

Now, my psychology prof. would say
that what this man needs
is a good dose of halperidol.

But I know better, the man is not lying.
Rosie and Alec got too old for renovations,
too old to sit behind the counter half-asleep
at 2:00 A.M. and always asking:
"How are you, dear?"
And always listening to the answer.
Rosie's is a brand new shoe store now,
a window-full of leather boots,
closed at 6:00 or 9:00 P.M.,
And even I, who have plans for the future,
silently, secretly, mourn.

Lecture

The eminent professor, recently retired, gives a lecture on women in India. He says that the Vedas are ambiguous, that women are responsible for loneliness, but also for temptation, that women are responsible for love and for the cooking. That some women are permitted to be celibate and to study the mysteries, that others may fulfill their destinies and bring a child into the world. He says that the Vedas prohibit the killing of women, no matter how severe their crimes, that women should never be abandoned, no matter how serious the provocation. During the question period someone asks for statistics on Sati - the widow adorned in her best sari, wearing her gold and her jewels, the voluntary ecstatic immolation. Life is not worth living without you, my darling, therefore do I happily join you in death. Another member of the audience asks about the burning of brides. You have failed to please me, therefore you will burn. A small accident in the kitchen. A chance for a new life.

My Real Life

I am waiting for my real life to begin
the one with the man and the garden.
In the mornings we will linger for hours
awake and dreaming the same dream.
When the flooding sun has disappeared from the window
we will follow the light into the garden.
There we will bend and straighten our bodies
in unison, or in counterpoint.
Each weed will pull up from the ground with just
the right tension, an easy letting go.
We will grow nothing that is not satisfying
or pleasing to the eye. We will work in silence,
except when we speak.
He will tell me how I am like a flower
and I will tell him how good he tastes
like something young, and sweet, and green.

You Are Coming To Dinner

You are coming to dinner and I find myself acting like a T.V. commercial, wiping unsightly spots off your drinking glass, polishing silverware. I check the plates, the floor, the walls, my face, and decide that this is what is here, my house. The five clay masks on the wooden table, all in a row, all with their mouths open, a series I called "sin exists", - until my teacher turned to me and said: If sin exists, then, surely, God exists. Now I call those open mouths "the singers" and they are saying it is possible to make something out of anything, pain, death, shame, hunger.

The first night you were here we worked with clay, smoothed our hands in that cool mud. I showed you the stones I use to polish the surface, the thin blue agate, and my tools: the marble wheel, the wood and metal implements. You said you always wanted to work with clay and that you were going to learn a lot from me. You are coming to dinner and I find myself wishing that I was a silent singing mouth.

Some of the other things my teacher told me:

Cinquants petits coups c'est mieux qu'un grand coup

The clay will crack if you bend and unbend it too many times

Never use water to soften the clay, use only the intelligence of your fingers

Train kills two on its last journey

The night we died we were hurtling through dark space,
pine trees, snow,
piercing
ly
cold air,
the country
the moon in a dark blue sky
the noise of the wheels a lullaby
the turn of the wheel is a lullaby
and there's nowhere
that I'd rather be
than on the sea of showers
up there on the moon with you
or the train that kills two
on its last journey

I slept naked and alone

I slept naked and alone in my bed last night, under my little-girl blanket, covered in pink flowers. And I remembered how your long dark arm reached over me to silence the alarm on the night-table. And how you let the weight and heat of your arm fall on my body. And the flowers you brought back later that day, one tall strong red rose, half-open, and a smaller rose, pink, in full bloom, opened wide.

Happy New Year

Come come come come, you made me come
with your biting teeth and your smiles
cmon baby, cmon, you said, and
I don't leave marks, you said
and come come come come you made me come
until I stopped counting
with your white teeth and your hand on my shoulder
and I said: The wine's getting to you, ey? and you said, no
and that's when I knew all those gentle touches, like a friend,
and those deep deep kisses, and those marks you eventually left
on both my shoulders, red and purple and blue, like flowers,
and on my neck, cmon baby cmon you said, and I came to you, I did

My whole body gathered itself around you into
a two-fisted embrace
and you stopped and held us very still,
waiting for me to finish my holding,
waiting until I loosened, let go, and then
you began again the slow entering and leaving
and your mouth kissing

A morning with the cats

cats like black furry roses
strewn on the bed, languid, gazing,
then a voice, or a radio, or the explosion
of an engine, and flick, heads up, long slim muscles
jump under the skin.
O.K., O.K., it's O.K., I murmur, but
they do not trust my assurances, they know
what their ears hear, what their eyes see.
And the sound passes, they relax, a tongue
licks. The one lying on my chest like a sphinx
remembers I've been scratching his soft black belly, lolls
back into the crook of my arm again, purrs.

I end up in a puddle of cats

I end up in a puddle of cats on the kitchen floor, my fingers engaged in fur, while the empty page stares. The cat's cry is human: look at me, touch me, feed me. She hisses at intruders. Licks her paws. I am lonely when he is asleep she says, so I make small hopeful noises. I leap impossible distances, hide on the bookshelf, between the stapler and the whiteout. I know how to move among fragile objects without breaking anything.

A bed of flowers

A bed of flowers, a round
white centre, and then spirals of pink, deeper
pink, orange, pale pink, almost white pink,
a perfect circle, ordered, my hands
opened the earth, it was deliberate.

The small boxes of flowers, cut
into squares. I was sweating, serious,
even though a thin gentle mist filled the air.
The earth was wet, like it is tonight,
I was alone in the garden, like I am tonight,
my lover was not here.

He said that my garden is an explosion of joy.
It is not joy, that perfect spiralling, careful, lovely
bed. It's just a way of singing, without breaking
glass.

What I miss

I miss your body wrapped around mine warm as a mother
(I do not miss the time you brandished the carving knife)

What I long for are the times you left love-notes
scattered through the house like rose-petals

(I feel no affection for the dishes you swept off the table
in a rage)

What I need is the way you interpreted my body
like a skillful translator sensitive to nuances

willing to transform one subtle thing into another

(what I do not need is to be told I am a bitch,
just because I cry sometimes, just because I scream)

Ice-World

More than food, more than drink, more than love, I need this silence, this order. This empty white space and these empty white walls, this delicate balance. Today I saw an expanse of snow, crusted with a smooth cover of ice, a quarter of an inch thick, half an inch in places. I stood on it and kicked holes into its closed and sealed perfection with my heels, like a child. All through the shining field I saw places where the ice had been cracked by other feet. The sun was pure gold on the shoulders of the ice, on the smooth curves, the small hills. I was on a mountain, the highest one, looking down on a landscape, the hills, valleys, craters, cracks, boulders, earthquakes, upheav. plains, peaks, all white, all gold, all shining and frozen and contained.

Right next to a path of beaten snow, carved out by footsteps, were the remnants of ice sculptures, leftovers of a winter carnival. They looked like old glass, pale green, silvery, square blocks, edges rounded and smoothed, markers of some lost civilization, some ancient joyous ceremony. There were no tiny figures in that empty world, no sensitive movement of anyone's mouth or anyone's eyes, no muscles contracting subtly or expanding suddenly under the skin.

The Garden

You went wild with impatience, she said
when she saw the garden, all those flowers
rioting in their orderly beds.
So much love, and twelve bags of new earth
spread like butter on bread.
Then, blue crystals from a jar,
and flat after flat of seedlings,
a hundred plants into the ground, fingers
pressing the roots into wet blackness.
Plant them in a spiral, a circle, she once told me.
There were flowers like those in a temple, I remember.
Oh what a lovely garden, they all say now.
Even the cats
yowling their pleasure, even
the cats.

Having fun

You're having fun playing with these shiny slivers of glass, the small drops of blood, the labyrinth, the mirrors. Everyday you watch the weather for a shift in tone, grey into blue, white into gold. The black cat on the metal stairway opens and closes his eyes. And in the garden, the earth is seduced into softness by one warm day.

I think I'm pregnant. But I'd better start bleeding soon. I'm wearing that beauty on my face again, that shine on my skin, that gleam in my eye. My belly's a basketball, hard, swollen, round. I'm feeling distracted. Today I took out a bag full of laundry and left it on the sidewalk next to a bag full of garbage: is this love or spring? Or worry. Maybe in the morning I'll wake up bleeding. I'm a day late. I pray for blood. It had better come soon, or this is the end of romance.

It was the eve

It was the eve of a new year
We were drunk with the smells and
colours of rain suddenly
there was an apple we
ate it together each
taking turns taking bites until
our mouths merged and
we were eating the apple and
each other's lips tasted
good and then the fruit
fell to the ground we
fell to the ground we
found his mouth
was so
good, his skin.

Rideau River (I)

I would want my life on that river,
the birds flying and calling, the white beak dipping below the surface, the treasure
caught and carried to the bank, the gesture casual but practised, the hundredth or
thousandth dive

We are sailing down a river, our muscles moving with every
subtle shift of wind, there is no deliberate choice except
the first one, the choice to set sail, the slow careful movement from land to water,
one tentative foot stepping
from solid wooden dock to the surface of the deck which dances, causing the body
to dance

the seagulls, wheeling and circling just above the water,
without striving or seeking. Flying, floating, diving,
tearing apart the bodies of sea-creatures, calling their crying calls, drying their
feathers in the sunlight, basking on rocks, smiling their curved smiles

Rideau River (II)

These are some of the things I saw on the banks of the Rideau River: I saw a woman sitting under a birch tree, hiding from the hot sun, gazing from a sheltered place at the low rapids, water rushing over round stones, and I felt her being moved and I heard her say to herself: "I was so moved" (imagining a conversation between friends, in winter, the glint of artificial light on green glass and on brown glass) a story already forming in her mind

I saw a man walking along the bank at a distance and my body stiffened, and I thought: I will go elsewhere, and I thought: no, I will stay here and I kept very still, like a small forest animal, trying to make herself invisible, and I felt his body displacing the air at my back, and after he passed I turned my head and saw an old man, out for a solitary walk, a lonely man, looking for some beauty, and when he returned he held a sprig of bright red berries in his hand which he twirled and twirled again between his fingers

I saw two young men with carved brown faces walking in the water, natives, original, bending to harvest something from the river below me, bending, feeling their way, their hands delicately searching under the rocks, and coming up with nothing, and again, intently probing the mud by the bank, not speaking, in unison, not finding what they sought, stepping over some more rocks, familiar with the place, bending

and searching again, a little farther on, travelling slowly but thoroughly,...I wanted to ask them what they were looking for: frogs, perhaps, or crayfish, or something I cannot imagine

I saw a whole flock of children, light-haired and dark-haired, with small sturdy limbs, following their tall teachers. One woman shouted repeatedly: "Don't go on the rocks, stay on the grass", the fear and anger and love in her voice, an insistent engine. Another teacher put his hand on the head of a dark boy who was frowning at the shrill sound, who was frowning at the "How many times have I told you". And the children were being children. Her voice went over them like a wave of wind and they swayed their small bodies like flowers. Except for the bold boy, who kept his left foot on the grass verge and his right foot perched on a slab of rock, like a revolutionary flag planted by a secret army, and his whole body said, his proud neck said: see? And then the voice of the teacher called: "It's time to walk back" and the children picked some last white and yellow flowers, "Hurry, hurry" she said, and they milled and moved, dancing atoms, stirred into a walking file, and two or three children handed their teachers some flowers

And these are some of the things that I saw on the banks of the Rideau River, while I waited for a meeting, while I stopped waiting and started watching, immersed in the river, inside the body of a bird, while I turned to water and stone, while I was teacher and child, while I felt the burning sun climb higher and higher, while I

turned into a fluttering leaf, while I became both the seagull and a frog caught in the seagull's beak. my body torn, my body smooth and white and whole and diving through the wind, my body pierced, while I stopped waiting and continued watching. these are some of the things that I saw on the banks of the Rideau River: another solitary woman on the opposite bank, in the sun, perfectly still and happy ..

Eating Strawberries

I write what I write because I want to write it when I write it because there's something on my mind, or something's hurting, or something's beautiful, and there it is, just out the back door, a pale blue sky, late at night, or the way the flesh of my belly is soft and round, or the cats meowing because there is meat roasting in the oven, or some bittersweet strawberries in a clear glass bowl, or a pair of green silk pants I didn't buy today, or an itch in my ear, or the white wire brush the doctor inserted into the opening of my uterus, to scrape away some cells, so that the lab could tell me if I'm safe from death for another year.

I write what I write because for a long time I have felt lonely and ashamed, and when I sit here, fingers flying, my thoughts turning into black marks, I feel as if I am speaking to a lover who thinks my body is beautiful.

I write what I write because it fills up the time, gives me something to do, and I have enough to say, because the world hurts, and it needs a kiss to make it feel better. And I sit here eating strawberries and drinking tea, and I am dressed in a turquoise leotard which makes my breasts hard and beautiful. I write what I write because there has to be some way of redeeming the world.

It is not difficult

It is not difficult

it happens when it wants to,

the sun rises, the rain falls.

It is not at all difficult.

It will not be seduced

It will not be cajoled

by my wiles or smiles or sexy clothes

by a home-cooked meal or the look in my eye

it will not be moved by silent prayers or

any amount of meditation, jogging, yoga, good works.

It doesn't need money.

it comes, like a lover comes,

it calls, like a lover calls, it wants to,

like the sun rises, like the cloud that's waiting

like the whirling burning sun helplessly

rising. It is not difficult.

A Bad Poem

A bad poem stays out all night
searching the streets for companions
a bad poem wants to couple with a stranger
in some dark doorway
and walk away happy

A bad poem always asks for much more
than spare change,
longs to be accused
of breaking and entering

A bad poem wants to dance
in the Palace of Justice
naked and screaming:
Retribution, Compensation, Mercy!

A bad poem enters the chambers of your heart
and starts tacking up posters
of saints and of sinners

A bad poem wants the worshippers
on all the disco dancefloors
to pray even harder
for the end may be near

A bad poem wants to take down the cross
from the top of Mount Royal
and leave an empty space
that three-year-olds can colour in with crayons

A bad poem is
just begging for a bolt of lightning
just aching to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Two Voices

Now that you're gone the words are coming back
white and black, the tapping sounds
the clear high voice like a wind
my own hand cupping my own breast
the burning candles, the book of changes
the searching of the tarot for hidden meanings
the long walks when I cry at the sight of trees
the unplugged telephone just in case
your voice licks my ear like a rough
tongue again

Agi

Sweet Agi who touches my hair
and touches hands and reaches out for scarves
Agi who smiles and translates languages
who finds walls inside and looks for gates
Agi, who, once when she was abandoned
scratched the skin off her face
sat alone in front of the hateful mirror and found
love-letters from a cold to a warm country
Agi who wooed her lover back with the power of the word
the right translation, the face in the mirror

Play/ground

see-saw, I see the teeter-totter
merry-go-round, the swing, the slide
the hanging from the jungle-gym
the fear of falling, the dizzy ricochet
from up to down, from air to rock
the menacing playground, the child's
game, the bruised knee, the broken skin

see-saw, I see you smiling at the other end of the balance
I know it is your weight at the other end of this plank
that keeps me from falling, you will never make the sudden fatal leap
that leaves me lurching, sickened, through the air, that leaves my
body shattered, no, you will say the magic word and in perfect rhythm
we will swing our bodies to the ground, both feet touching safe sand
at the same time, and then, hand in hand, we will laugh at the grace
and solidity of trees, the sunlight on the water, constantly changing
but forever true

Photograph

The people of Kau haunt me. Are they really happy? I cannot stop thinking of that dancing naked woman, her leg thrown over the warrior's shoulder as he sits bent silently. She approaches, her body shining with sweat and oil, she lifts her foot and places it on his shoulder, she stands, naked and shining and sweating before him. her body, the very centre of her body a few inches from his face.

He is not allowed to move, to look up. But, in the photograph, there is a faint smile on his face. His posture is one of surrender, this brave warrior flashing knives. He is one of the victors, the first to be chosen.

She looks like she is surrendering, too. But there she stands above his bowed head, her body open in triumph - she has chosen her warrior. She knows that the very centre of her body is beautiful to him, the scent of her is lovely. It must feel good to be alive at this moment. The one sitting with his head bowed and smiling, the other standing open and triumphant and desired.

Whore with a Heart

Whore with a heart of gold I
love you will you be mine ex-
clusively? I will do anything
pay anything I want to suck
your flesh into my flesh so
that I too can become a whore
with a heart of gold and hear
I love you will you be mine
I will do anything pay anything
I want to suck your bones into my
bones so that I too can become a
whore with a heart of gold
and hear I love you

Experiments

I'm going to start
a poetry of nerves
pulsing in glass dishes
jolted into dancing
long after the white throat's
been slashed and discarded

My lover does experiments:
imagine him killing white rabbits
and rushing to plunge
one puny string of flesh
into some sort of solution

I'm going to start a long slow
poetry of nerves
raw nerves flashing, open,
watching us wielding the scalpel
that travels far deeper than science
watching him, watching me, yield.

Birthday Poem

I want to be with the wordless one
The one who is all gestures
sighs and glances, who
in pantomime, in a hundred
small movements
talks to me
and listens
I want to be with the one who
embraces, in silence, in sleep,
by the reaching of warm speechless
arms with nothing to
explain
I want to rest with the dark one
who has no past to tell me
and no present to share
but the wordless cry of this moment
the unveiled laugh

What to put inside the glass box

Write me a poem or a list of images that I could put inside the glass box, I'll work with you that way, or I'll work with you any way you want me to. I heard him say early in the morning on the way from the metro station clean-shaven he was. fresh and new in a blue shirt and some nice pants after the shower. his face full of what. nicotine withdrawal, pain, the crankiness of the morning, and what was my face full of, jesus, godawful pain, because I knew that once I got on the metro that was it. no more his grumpy face, his ac/dc words, electric switch on/off, yes/no. calling me his woman one minute, telling me to have no expectations the next, what does that mean? It means your skin is like a flower after you make love so let's have as our first artifact a flower in a glass case, a flower carved out of what material. oh, whatever material you want, whatever material is most like the petals of a flower. perhaps some very smooth very pink stone.

So, we need to put a stone into that glass box, in the shape of a very well-behaved flower. And we can put another stone inside, in a contrasting colour, say jade green, or lapis lazuli blue. It lies there, sparkling a bit, but otherwise self-contained. And we need something made of plastic, a trinket, or statue of Jesus, but whatever it is it's got to be made of plastic and absolutely has to have a plug so that we can plug it in. The light comes on. It glows in the dark. Yes, two stone flowers, and a replica, in plastic of our Lord and Saviour, glowing in the gloom, the gloom in the room.

Reply to Baudelaire

Dear sir it seems to me that your error, oh master musician, oh painter unequalled,
oh you^u who saved my life once with your lonely clouds, when I had no lover and you
pointed out to me that you had no lover either, but that there were always the
clouds, always

It seems to me dear sir that you were looking at statues, at goddesses, at women made
of stone, instead of the real thing.

Tarot Reading

The six of cups is pleasure, six cups of light on a steady sea.

The two dog-faced gods on the moon card stand in black towers, eyeing each other

The five bent swords are intellect weakened by sentiment.

The five of wands is a burning angel.

The ace of cups is a white explosion.

The knight of wands is riding his horse through fire. He looks happy.

The ten of swords is the ruin of delusion, they are tearing apart a small heart

The last three cards are destiny, as real as this table.

The two of cups is love, two coral fish intertwined,

water is pouring out of their mouths.

The sun card, two children dancing.

The fortune card: creatures clinging to a wheel,

or lolling,

one has the face of a woman, the body of a cat,

she is holding a sword in her paws. She looks serene.

(or perhaps it is the stem of a flower, and the hands are gentle)

Two children dancing.

Poems About the Fire

1.

There's a lot of work to do in heaven. There are the crying children and I also have to wash my hair, the flowers need arranging and re-arranging, there's the model airplane that I have to glue together, before the fumes get too strong. My friend's cat is dying, the one she thought would live for a long time, the cat has a heart murmur, and is losing weight, and my friend has black rings around her eyes. She wanted to go to Vancouver and watch the cats play in the yard, and another friend is trying to get a job in a hospital, teaching children to make music, and she needs a letter of recommendation, and my mother just called to ask me if I ever put a child in the isolation room, and exactly how many times I did that in my illustrious career, and I patiently explained that it was only when the child was acting dangerous, hitting someone, or banging her head against the furniture, or throwing fire extinguishers through plate glass windows, or screaming too loudly swear words swear words not allowed.

So you see, I barely have time to see you or talk to you on the phone or let your hand touch mine.

2.

The four girls who died in the fire were dancing last Sunday. They needed to dance. They needed that formal energy. There was a false alarm that day, a kind of dress rehearsal. One of the girls calmly set fire to her room. Three fires, carefully built. When the bell started shrieking I ran to the corridor of locked rooms. The hall was filled with smoke. All I could see through the window in her door was the cupboard in flames. For a second, I stood there. Then I reached for my keys to stop the sound of pounding fists behind other doors. The girls were calling. I had the wrong set of keys. My hands were shaking. I called to the other two grown-ups to open the doors, open the doors. The girls were so frightened.

The next thing I knew I had my coat on and I was telling the girls to get their coats on, to be ready. I herded them into the kitchen, where the air was clear. They looked out the window and saw her running, running, free at last. They clawed at the glass, wanting to kill her. They rushed towards the door wanting to kill her. I gathered them into my arms and said: Stay here. Let her go.

After Robert put out the fire and Loretta called the authorities, after the firemen came with their fan to blow away the smoke, after the police came and told us not to touch her room, told us it was evidence, told us it needed to be photographed, so they could build up a case.

After we lied to the girls and told them they were safe now, after we got the girls calm, after we had supper, after we had a meeting, after the girls did their chores, the girls danced. They created costumes out of t-shirts and leotards, they took special care with their make-up. They created an elaborate choreography. The song they chose was "Back to Life, Back to Reality". Smiling shyly, they asked us to watch.

They were so pretty. They danced so well.

(he emptied two extinguishers)

(she did everything she was supposed to, she did everything she could)

(he took them outside onto the balcony, into the snow, into the fresh air)

(she used a blanket to smother some of the flames, she called the authorities)

(later that night the girls each asked for a glass of water. They needed to know we could hear them. They knocked many times.)

3.

Everyone is walking through the world saying bless me father for I have sinned
Well, I'm looking for that blessing, in your face, in your hands, in your voice, in my
face, in my hands, in my voice, I'm just walking through the world, looking for that
blessing.

Everyone is walking through the fire, singing bless me father for I have sinned,
everyone is dancing on thin ice, crying bless me father for I have sinned, everyone
is marching to the tune, shouting bless me, bless me

Oh everyone's a victim in need of comfort, oh everyone's a fountain of pure water,
oh everyone's an angel spreading its wings, oh everyone's a prison guard and also a
prisoner, oh everyone's trying to light a match and everyone's trying to blow it out,
and everyone's walking through the world saying bless me, bless me

4.

What kind of scream was it?
was it a burning butterfly
was it the wind at night
was it a motherless child
was it behind locked doors
was it a fire that purifies
was it a bonfire
was it a burnt offering
was it a slice of burnt toast
was it just some more material
was it a clear message
was it the scream of the crowd
in the arena
was it the scream of an eagle
descending
was it the scream of kids
on a roller-coaster
be careful when you use the toaster
it has to be watched
or it spews smoke

5.

My father is a tailor, he sews things up, makes things fit. He repairs the torn seam, he changes the shape of your clothes so you can wear them again, like new, in comfort. Whether you have gained weight or grown thinner, the garment will look beautiful.

My mother is a keeper of paper. She has her whole life hidden in cupboards. At night she piles up the furniture in front of her door, just in case the nazis come, just in case she's been betrayed again.

And I am paid to watch children, to record their moods, their movements, their progress. Through the veil before my eye, through the voices in my ear, I watch, I listen. And I am paid to speak to children, in a voice that should always be gentle. But when I speak sharply, (voice like a needle, words like a gunshot) they understand.

My father wants to go to Sweden, 1946, after the war, after the army released him, when he was a young man, in a new country, learning a foreign language.

My mother wants to move to the suburbs, where it's safer and there are no strangers

And I don't want to move anywhere but here, always here, more here.

Beneath the rage, the sorrow

Beneath the sorrow, the longing

Beneath the longing, the adoration

The adoration and the blessing

Pretty Poem

I have been asked to write a pretty poem about four girls who died of unclear causes, veiled in smoke, breathing smoke. They died of smoke and smutty jokes, and the eyes of strangers staring at their bodies in bars, in big cities and in small towns where people gather to watch the sexiest girls dancing at your table. They were innocent until a certain age and what age was that, 5, 6, 10, when did they know the world was not a pretty place, like 17 magazine full of lipstick and sports cars, but a saturday night date was gonna turn into cash, it's O.K., there's always a little blow, pass me a beer, pass me a cigarette, give me a light.

A few days before they died they danced for us. "However do you want me, however do you need me," was the chorus that repeated in their faces, they were serious, formal, even the girl who thought she was still in a nightclub and ground her hips, however do you want me, however do you need me, a 13-year-old seeking approval. I wanted to tell her to stop, but I didn't want to hurt her feelings. No-one had ever sent her to ballet lessons, taught her the proper alignment of hip and thigh. And I don't know why those girls had to be used so young, or who was in the audience, and I'm trying to find some love in this story, the moral of the story, but I have to go now, to meet my father, and I have to go now, to meet my lover, and I have to, just have to, remember.

White Night

The night you ran away from the institution where I cared for you, my eyes scanned the highways for the shape of your body, all the way home. All I could see through the windshield were the black whips of branches, the lonely lights of country towns. a moving screen of brightness and shadows

At home I dreamt that I was paralysed and mute, trying to scream but only growling, until I broke free and floated away, lost in a whirling fog and howling

And you were on the road at 4 in the morning, hitching a ride with two ex-prisoners, they had crosses tatoed on the soft flesh of their thumbs, they had dragons and eagles carved into their skin. They had a black cadillac, you sat in the back, you laughed and thanked them for letting you in

And I was in my room flying to find you, and trying to get back inside my own body, and then I woke up, and prowled through the house, a knife in my hand, and I opened all the lights. You weren't in any of the cupboards, there were no shadows in the corners, the walls were perfectly white

I dreamt the edges

I dreamt the edges of jagged bottles were carving country roads into your arms, new raw bloody scars tearing across the old meaty scars, and I am too late and also afraid that you are dead, or what's worse dying, and I am waiting for a sign, ebbing hope, call me outside the frame of official procedures, I'm not sure I can help you but I don't want your body to be wasted, I don't want your body to turn into a new high rise condo development, so much sludge for the ones who have jackhammers, and I don't want my body to be wasted, up in smoke, all shrivelled and chopped and burned, curled and dying and still full, dripping like blood down the abattoir drain, and I dreamt that the jagged courageous edge of a smashed glass bottle was making new rivers of blood stream down the territory of your arms, and I don't want your body to be wasted...

Turning Forty

This is the only cure, the shaping
and reshaping of the body.

The model lying on the table is a
series of curves. An old woman. Her thighs are
young and smooth, her breasts are
sixty. Fallen. Hanging by a thread.
She says: Keeping still is like yoga.

The teacher says: Vous avez un relation
avec elle. Let your eyes touch her,
Let your hands understand only
three things: weight, angle and
direction.

My fingers and palms are on cold, wet
clay, my eyes divided between her body
and the sculpture. The teacher says:
Change places. And all the students circle
for a new view.

I twist her torso, take a lump of clay off
her face, add it to the knee. Define the knee,
the teacher says. I can't get the breasts right,
another student moans. I reply: How many years
have you been trying?

Blood Type

O. O positive. O full of possibility.
O that swells my belly
O that appeared in little drops on my earlobes
when I pierced my flesh for the sake of adornment
O that runs through the veins on the back of my hand
two blue rivers,
O delicate branches at my wrists,
O drum in my throat,

O small red lines in the skin, under the eyelid,
a flush
a blush
a measurable pressure
a liquid full of secrets
a small glass vial that says yes or no.