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**The Maps of Our Bodies and the Borders  
We Have Agreed Upon**

**W. Taien Ng**

**A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
English**

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

**April 1998**

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0-612-39424-7

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **The Maps of Our Bodies and the Borders We Have Agreed Upon**

**W. Taien Ng**

**These linked poems and prose poems deal thematically with cartography: the mapping of territories, relationships, bodies, self. They are maps and meditations on traversing space, both physically and emotionally. The narrator, in exploring desires, relationships, bodies, and acts of travel (as opposed to places travelled), foregrounds the ongoing need to map things, both spatially and metaphorically -- lines, words, dots to show us where we've been and where we're going.**

(to A.D., Amy Chan, and Baba G.)

*Longing, we say, because desire is full  
of endless distances.*

*-- Robert Hass*

treaties: the maps of our bodies and the borders we have agreed upon

(i)

in the beginning  
it was enough  
to look to the ground  
beneath my feet  
and say  
*i am here*

then i learned to draw  
the lines of *here*  
on the palms  
of my hands,  
trace outlines  
into the dust,  
into earth and rock  
plaster and bone

soon i was etching onto my skin,  
and the skins of trees, and the walls  
of each house where i lived  
patterns which said  
*i am here i am here i am here*

these were my first maps.

( ii )

for a long time, the maps consisted  
only of me.

where you are now

was blank, not even blue ocean

falling off the paper

names and animals and histories

not scrawled over the spaces

just clear, quiet hope

here

and here

and here

when i did not know you,  
i could not picture the terrain of your body  
but imagined in pencil stroke sketches  
how to draw the world



( iii )

the first border is a sinuous thread woven between our bodies, between  
the air we hold shieldlike to ourselves and what we don't know about each other,  
which is everything

because of this border, i hold in  
the aching of my cartographer fingers to trace  
the supple give of your form, the contours of your  
breath and being, to etch you into places  
where before, only hope existed

this ache is worse than hope. ah, no  
this ache *is* hope  
brought closer, made larger, drawn in ink  
instead of pencil, indelible  
from this fragile sheet

hope, i remember, was the small shadow  
lying at the bottom of an open box

(iv)

the first time our eyes noticed

the small sign of      yes

between recognition      (yes) and acknowledgement

in that open moment, the world was newly drawn:

here, touch tentative with greeting

and here, fingers twine briefly

and here, knees under the table touch

accidentally, but do not move away

distance means a lot now.

every distance matters where you are in the room matters the space between  
hands and elbows and limbs

i keep surveying the distance between  
my mouth and the back of your neck

( v )

we are lying comfortable amongst the rumpled sheets,  
and you are reading to me a line from Ondaatje:

*The War Between Men and Women.*

always the battle and never the war, i say to you, half  
jokingly, though i know the war is far from over.

there are so many small battles, daily battles,  
and the most important of these  
is over the drawing of lines.

these are the lines we are concerned with:

the positioning of bodies and words, my hands  
the tender ache of doubt, your lips the push of moist  
against the want of skin and sleep and who  
am i to you

but these lines which we demand to be immutable,  
which we plot down to say *you are like this*,  
*i know you to be this* (landmarks  
so we can find our way) are as inconstant as  
yes, the boundaries of countries engaged in war

( vi )

after we put hope back into the box and shut it tight,  
lock it, leave it to grow  
dust on the bookshelf

after we hold negotiations, silent across the coffeeshop table

after we divide our property, draw and redraw the boundaries,  
close all border crossings

the maps are finished. a wall  
has sprung up thick between us, supple  
but strong as any concrete or brick  
and as impenetrable.

this last map clearly defines  
our separate spaces: what is yours and  
what is mine

(but somewhere between the first and the last map

there is a page vivid with colour

where we first fell together onto the kitchen floor cold linoleum on my bare back your  
lips warm on my mouth lick your shoulders wet tongue below my belly hot your  
thighs and hips and, we

might have mingled into one

because i swear

there were no

borders anywhere

not here

*where the lines have blurred into air*

nor here

*i can't tell whose hands, whose limbs, are mine*

nor here,

*no place where i begin and you end*

we could have

become a new continent, pushed up new mountains, melded  
completely into one

another

if not for the tenacity of our bodies to cling

to the old borders

if not for the stubborn resistance

of our skin)

## *The Cartography of Desire*

*it could be days or years before i find my way back*

*without these lines to show me where i've been*

a map at the beginning of time (meditation)

*There are moments when the body is as numinous / as words, days that are the good  
flesh continuing. / Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings, / saying  
blackberry, blackberry, blackberry. --Robert Hass*

It began at the corner of Davie and Granville, waiting under the dirty hotel awning for  
the bus, my mittened hand brushing your face with an impulse

the longing felt clear as the sound of cars passing endlessly, a river rushing by of wet  
wheels on pavement, both of us hearing it roar

we didn't sleep all that night, lying on the bed with all our clothes still on, all our  
words making sense to each other, or perhaps it was just the sounds of the words

snow falling throughout the night, the words *snow fall* becoming a light of sorts, a  
signal of something more than what the words could signify, the way we murmur  
*snow fall* to each other, *the snow is falling*

with your hand in my hair, i felt that violent wonder at your presence, a thirst, like i  
was holding my breath, waiting for the world to begin

so finally, the blue light of morning

this crazy electricity  
i can't hear anything  
but blood pumped loud  
through my  
body  
this crazy  
electricity oh  
is mine  
is you shorting  
my senses  
out

like heat my thighs burning  
the city down

and people rush out into the snowfilled  
streets now  
melting  
oh  
they cry  
the spring

yes all this is for you

and the trees come into bloom



## heat

the cat's in heat again, yowling  
at the bottom of the stairs like a hungry child and stretching her loins out,  
rubbing against anyone. she does a rolling dance on the floor and the cats outside  
howl back, surrounding our house, trying to get in through every window.  
when we open the door to get the mail or buy a loaf of bread, there are cats  
everywhere, trying to slip in around our legs, our cat trying to slip out.  
birds, too, have gone wild with song; in the park the thin squirrels are out  
busking for food; and people on the bus are starting to look each other in the eye  
again. so i think it must finally be spring, real spring, not just a thaw  
that gets our hopes up, not just a warm spell to make us crazy for  
bare legs feeling the breeze, for green grass and evening sunshine,  
and walking through the streets today the warmth seeping into my bones  
a growing lightness spreading upwards, the sudden urge, hot, to kiss  
the nape of your neck and your nipples on the way down  
to your penis, then hold it between my thighs,  
thinking about this quickens my heartbeat and i can almost  
not bear the heat of this fire spreading quick through my limbs,  
so i'm hoping when i get home that you're there waiting,  
because i'm yowling for you to quench the burn

Sahm-tung (heart-ache)

i dream that i hear sobbing. the results of a late meal, i think, turning over. we had gone to bed late last night after a fabulous dinner, you had made fettucine, and we drank a bottle of wine, then collapsed into bed with full stomachs, happy as clams, or cats, or clouds. it is 5:30 a.m., light just breaking over the trees on Mont Royal, and someone below on the early morning street is wailing *oh, how my heart aches*, in cantonese! over and over. and then i am fully awake, amazed to catch words of my own long unspoken tongue, in this city where every day, languages float through my net. i lie next to you, warm in my bed, i listen. ten, fifteen minutes go by, you turn over, mumbling, and still the sobbing, the cry, *oh, how my heart aches!* i think of a woman weeping over a treacherous love, and drying tears with her long black hair. i imagine other sleepers tossing in their beds, not understanding the cries, and cursing the phantom mourner.

the beauty and sorrow of those words, the clarity of grief! pain, solid as broken bone. i get up to open the window, then look down to see a school boy, knapsack on his back, with his arms wrapped around a young tree, howling. *oh, my heart aches!* i want to call down to him, to tell him wise old sayings about time and healing, how the heart might bruise but does not break so easily; but there are no words to match his, so i can only watch as he stumbles off down the street. if only my understanding were a blanket, a bandage, a bond. i turn to tell you this, but you are still asleep.

## How to Build a Perpetual Motion Machine

(blueprints)

matter can neither be created, nor destroyed.

each particle in our bodies has seen the beginning and end of the universe; we hold all knowledge within our bodies

and with this knowledge comes the yearning of each minute particle, each atom to wander free from its orbit and into some unknown chaos

sometimes you can feel this yearning flashing through you, so intense, it is as if all of space and time had been compacted into a lightning bolt which jolts you into motion

(fuel)

the trick is knowing exactly what you want.  
you have to sense it clearly and precisely, even  
if you have no words for it, no picture  
in your head. it could be anything, yet it has to be  
something just beyond the next horizon,  
or maybe just around the next corner, something  
you almost have but never quite.  
sometimes i wake up with it in my grasp,  
only to feel it dissipate as sleep falls away,  
evaporating as i open my eyes

**(assemblage)**

**Buddhists call it Samsara, the wheel of desire, the eternal up and down of life and death and life and death and life**

**it's a twisting spiralling thing, seductive with its brightness, a cyclone pulling you up into the whirl of motion and away from the stillness inside**

**keeps you moving, keeps you coming back, keeps you wanting more**

desiderata

Once upon a time there was a strange little girl named Mouse who was going to school one day when suddenly a huge hole opened up in front of her and a box fell out and then the hole was gone again.

Did Mouse open the box? Well of course she did, anyone would have.

But Mouse wasn't a stupid little girl, she knew that all sorts of things might have been in that box, a big Jack-in-the-box ready to jump out and grab her, or a rough and wild beast of the sort that you see only in picturebooks and never in any zoos, or maybe there was nothing. Of course, while knowing there might be all these things, you never *really* think there will be. You picture the most pleasant of surprises, because really, a box falling out of a hole that isn't there is already the most pleasant of surprises. And so, Mouse was thinking all of these things when she carefully opened the box for a peep, and a rough wild beastie with long white whiskers jumped out and ate her up in one gulp.

how men got their nipples...

Have you ever wondered why men have nipples? Well (best beloved), as the saying goes, once upon a time, God was lonely. So out of the red clay of the earth God molded a being, and this being was in the likeness of God, and God breathed upon it with holy breath. Behold! The small clay being breathed also. Now this being, being in the likeness of God, was lonely also. It had a penis, like God, and testicles, and also breasts and a vagina, like God, but unlike God, could not create out of the dust. So God divided the being into two, so that it could create and have company. And long time ago, it was the being called man that had breasts, and fed the tiny new beings that woman created. But man was tired, and complained. He hounded God in the garden, harassed God while walking in the cool of the shade, until finally God said Alright! Just leave me alone. And God gave man's breasts to the woman. Now all man has left to show are two tiny nipples, useless, dry, and shriveled; now no one remembers what these were for, long time ago. But many men, deep down, regret that first man's bargain with God. They are always staring at women's breasts whenever they can, in envy.

this is a story my friend Sari told me. she said:

did i ever tell you about the seagull

i was driving down macleod trail and this seagull comes swooping at me

there was a noise loud, beak and bone and wings hitting glass and the seagull dead

it was caught somehow a wing caught in the windshield wipers

feathers splayed out and i'm driving down macleod trail

where there's nowhere to pull over

all the other drivers i could see were looking at me like i was nuts

like i had purposefully put a dead seagull on my windshield

i kept switching the wiper blades on and off

but the dead seagull wasn't going anywhere

back and forth the windshield wipers tried to clean

the glass but there was a dead seagull in the way

i kept screaming but no sound came out

i kept pumping on the brakes at every red light

hoping to stop short hoping the seagull would fly off by inertia

well i made it into a parking lot near chinook centre

didn't want to get out didn't want to touch the dead seagull

so i tried to shake it off i drove real fast almost hit a metal divider

stopped real hard did it again

why did that seagull fly into my windshield?

was it a kamikaze suicide mission

was it karma something i had done

the chicken sandwich i had had for lunch



after ten or eleven tries of driving fast stopping hard  
the dead seagull fell off finally  
and i drove over it trying to get away

a speedbump of feathers still warm

a brief history of cartography

everywhere i go  
reminds me of somewhere  
i've been.

only by leaving does a place become real,  
the way memory is more real  
than the present

so i leave here  
wherever here is  
again and

again

postcards

i send you words on the backs of photographs:  
the museum, town hall, train station;  
but though these places are real, the postcards  
are not of these things. they are constructed  
illusions full of the brightness of travel,  
suspended in time; they are a longing for  
somewhere else, anywhere not called home.

what the postcards leave out is more important:  
the everyday mundane of being in motion,  
the stillness in the spaces between  
destinations and disappointments and desires

*(wish you were here)*

wherever you are, tell me of the spaces you've found,  
send me a postcard too

touch the beavers

I'm writing this to you from in front of the Beaver Fountain in Memorial Park, St. John, while admiring the way the water mists up around the bright, shiny beavers. Memorial Park is a cemetery and I'm surrounded by the worn out tombstones of long dead Loyalists. It's a warm June day and a family is out for a stroll on the well-kept grass, a small boy and his puppy playing around the tombstones. How frightfully symbolically sentimental it looks! Youth and Death. If life were a movie I'd be complaining about how cliché it is, how obvious and overwrought, but my travel alarm clock has broken -- the plastic cover has fallen off -- and I'm preoccupied trying to fix it. The gurgling bubbling sound of the smooth glassy fountain water is hypnotic, and too much time passes before I notice that it's time to catch my bus across the street. Nature has conspired to warn me of my tardiness, filling the sky over the bus station with dark clouds, but the sun is still shining brightly on my left. What a day of co-existing extremes! And now a couple sits down on the other side of the fountain, wholly absorbed in their kiss, while I sit alone with my grapefruit juice, thinking about you.

### Digby ferry

We're crossing the Bay of Fundy by ferry, waiting on the top deck, 8 minutes before the 10:00 a.m. sailing and the smell of french fry grease in the air. The sun is hot but I have my jacket and a sweater on, plus my raincoat. I know the wind will be cold once the ferry sails, but it's hot now, I have to take the raincoat off and maybe my jacket too.

The deckhands are winding in the rope now, and then we're sailing off, the seagulls chasing after us, racing the boat, following the smell of french fry grease streaming out from the cafeteria. I'm hungry, Leslie says, so we go there and order tea and "home-made shepherd's pie." In French, it's called *pâté chinois* and I have no idea why. Leslie tells me that he heard somewhere about the Chinese workers on the railroad who were in charge of the kitchen, and used all the leftovers to make some sort of casserole and the Québécois workers called it *pâté chinois*, but I say Shepherd's Pie is English! Isn't it? That's just what I heard, says Leslie, but it makes no sense to me. The boat rocks gently to and fro, the sounds of electronic blackjack bleeping in the corner. We sit at a corner table, our tepid tea spilling onto paper napkins. Walking is done in zigzags. Every man in the room has a baseball cap on and as we walk by I feel the curious eyes glancing. Sari told me once that though she had grown up in Newfoundland, and her family had lived there for 17 years, they were always *from away*. We feel it here, and though I know Leslie doesn't care a whit, I feel for a moment that I might take my nosering out. But that would be stupid, wouldn't it, because it's not really the nosering that they're looking at.

photo opportunity

One time Leslie and I drove up the coastline of Nova Scotia, the Evangeline trail they call it on the tourist maps. All along the road there were ice-cream shacks with signs like “chez Amie, glace-molle, pizza, rappie pie.” Leslie turned off onto a dirt road suddenly, and then we got out of the car and walked along the cliffs at Cap-Sainte-Marie, through fields of spring mud and cranberries and thorny bushes. There was a herd of cows just past the fields near the lighthouse and when they saw us, they all started to run *at* us, full speed, the whole herd of them. I nearly fainted with terror. But then they all stopped at the thin wire fence, just as suddenly as they had started, and then stood there, all of them facing the same way and staring as though they’d never seen a person before. Maybe they’ve never seen brown people before, said Leslie. By the time I thought of getting out my camera, we were already too far away, and one can’t go *back* to a moment like that. Going back would have somehow cheapened the memory of it, the way the cows galloped (if you can say that cows gallop) at us, the brief instant of terror that makes you feel so alive.

## too orange

we were talking about oranges. he said, did you know that oranges aren't really orange? don't be ridiculous, i said, of course they are. no, he said, if you've ever seen them when they come off the trees in Florida, you'll notice they're more yellow than orange — the ones in the grocery stores are dyed to look more orange than they really are. i was thinking about this today, how oranges are dyed orange, and meat is dyed red, and god knows what else, and how this beautiful fruit in front of me i was saving for breakfast, was going to eat with bare hands messily orange film-stained, was going to suck juice sweet lingering on my tongue to slide smooth down my sore throat, rind and pith under my nails, fingers sticky, how the sound of the word oranges, oranges oranges oranges, is summer-filled and cool. i am reminded of a story where a small boy, thirsty with fever, asks his mother for oranges and she has nothing but river water to give him, and a statue sees this and cries. i look at this orange in front of me which has suddenly become plastic and manufactured, a little too orange. maybe it's not true that oranges are dyed orange, but it's sad that i can believe it, and this is not the way i want to see the world.

## Dover's white cliffs

when we were in England last summer, i wanted to take the train to Dover. i wanted to stand on the white cliffs, shout *ah love, let us be true*, i wanted to feel the wind rush over the plains, watch the receding sea. is it true that the sea is receding? there are so many people, i've heard about them and know a few as well, who believe in things we can barely imagine. i think we might have been among them once. but the summer ended and we came home, flying over all the water in the Atlantic Ocean. i remember now that *Dover Beach* wasn't about love at all, and that we were tired of each other by then, that i had only five pounds in my pocket and two days left on my train pass, and that the week we spent in London was wet. we came home separately. i left from Gatwick, and you went on to Paris. you saw the white cliffs of Dover on your way across the channel, and took a picture, said they were much smaller than you thought they would be.

now i'm left with the feeling that maybe the sea has gone. i dream about looking for it, my toes buried in the dry sand, waiting for the tide. i believe in so little, and yet, i don't *not believe*.

when you came back, you told me you missed me. *i'm such a fool*, you said, and then we went for dinner. maybe you are, i said, but who isn't? there are times still when i don't know anything, though that is not the same at all.

let's take the car, i want you to say to me, and drive to the coast. we'll find a cliff and climb it, where at the top, breathing hard and hearing the crashing of waves, i'll shout, look, my love, the sea.



## stones

i gather stones, rocks, pebbles, from every edge of water i have been to since i was fifteen. look, here is pink feldspar and black mica, mingled into a strange bird's egg from a lake in Northern Ontario glimpsed through the thin barely leafy trees *blue green blue green blue* where i stopped after driving for days across the country (a province a day, i thought, but Ontario goes on forever) with everything i owned in the back of my car, black coffee in a styrofoam cup, and the voice of the road whispering to me under the hum of the wheels

and finally found myself at the Atlantic Ocean, a thousand miles past my destination, sitting on the tremendous craggy rocks between Lunenburg and Halifax, a piece of jagged gray granite in my jacket pocket to keep myself from falling off

here is a perfectly round disc of sandstone from the shoreline edge of the Pacific where i slept once, illegally and uneasily in the summer night chill, my heart pounding from the roar of waves and fear of being discovered. look, the middle holds a small dark oval, a yoni, life waiting to burst out if you kissed it. the sand grains feel soft in my hands, as if the stone could crumble apart any moment, i could twist it apart and find the beginning of the world inside, or spring

this is bloodstone from the Olympic Peninsula in Washington where a whistling sea-demon with two heads howls for your soul at night, and this is flat gray shale, gathered from a mountain beside the Upper Kananaskis glacial water cold Lake. and here, a tiny rose-white quartz from English Bay, the soft rustling lap of the tide, i could walk there at night and watch the quiet bowl of the bay filled brimming, the whole world in this cup

i have rocks and pebbles on every windowsill, holding me to earth. they are dull now, but i remember the finding of each one. stones need water to sing. sometimes when i forget that there is magic in this world, i put them into a glass, and i listen.

*Moon Howling in the Middle of Winter (A Travelogue)*

Part 1: Terra (Summer)

landmarks

blue quilt, dark wood of bookshelf, your hair in tangled sleep  
cracks in the paint on walls, sound of cat chasing midnight roaches, dustballs  
under radiators

things familiar to me as my body

blackened pans on the stove, the drip-drip of kitchen faucet, peeling linoleum tiles  
a jar of pebbles on the windowsill, a brown-leafed geranium, crooked doorframe and  
door  
that will not close

at night i find my way by these things,  
i roam restless as a traveller kept  
in one place for too long

waiting for the nextrain

count the paces from bedroom to kitchen,  
and back again, this is too  
familiar, the needing of things

unfamiliar, six seven eight

nine ten eleven

cut adrift

space, not air.

it is space where things are not: an empty box, an upturned hand,  
an uninhabited room, an open window.

it is openness that binds us together.

and when there are too many things in the space between us,  
there is no air

all winter we have been living in the same air,  
windows iced over. we notice it everytime we come home, fresh  
from the frost outside. it stinks in here. it smells of stale  
cigarette smoke, moldy wood, something else we can't quite name  
which we blame on the cat.

the first warm day, i opened the window for air

and after a long night of unsleep, you turned to me and told me you needed  
some space.

*i haven't had my own space for so long, you said. it might  
do us some good.*

a spring monsoon

your words

opened up the storerooms where all the things between us had collected  
opened up the windows, blew everything out.

for days, i was numb from the shock. and then, i was resolute.

*yes, i said, i will give you space, this whole city will be your space*

now i'm driving

east and east and further east. the road is quiet and soft, and i can see  
the rains that i navigate into, miles away, and high in the prairie sky. Saskatchewan  
looks like i always knew it would, wheatfield after wheatfield and a vast expanse  
of sunlight and stormclouds,

but i never thought it would be this

beautiful (*small bird painted*

*above the mustard patchwork fields,*

*perfect)*

everything goes on forever here. the road the sky the fields and i

...all day the sun  
moves in and out of  
stormclouds leftover  
from yesterday's  
thundershower

and all day i drive  
in and out of  
the dark...

on the transcanada

it is at night that i like driving on the highway the best. the wheels turn faster than i can think, the headlights showing me only the road ahead and the trees at the side, maybe a tiny blaze of red taillights in the distance. every now and again a string of lights appears on the other side of the highway, rushing towards what i am leaving, and sometimes i can trace the patterns of stars behind the windshield. i breathe the thickness of the soft black night, which parts as i speed on through, and closes behind me again. the almost silence of my life in motion. it haunts me, long after i have stopped driving and am lying awake in some roadside motel, and long after i have gotten to where i am going.

a map of the night sky

with no clouds

there is a star tracing to there

where another

appears

follow these lines

there the Great Bear

lumbering

across the

sky

spray of starcloud no clouds clear

and here

north star our center, dip the lines around spin of earth, solar light  
reflecting

There! and There! and There!

pins poke their yellow heads on paper

a

slow

exploding

spraycan's

crazy

painting

pullfocus

sky

vertigosings

sings

(i am center or i am nowhere)



sixteen hours from calgary clear to winnipeg, it can be done, i can do it. i just want to drive. i want to feel the hum of wheels under my hands, my thighs, my cunt, my liver heart and lungs, i want to skim over the land like in a glass-bottomed hovercraft so i can watch the fish fly by beneath me, easy like the slide of summer into fall when you first notice the turning leaves, like falling free

eight hours to regina gone and i was in no mood to stop. i pull into a station and fill up, sandwiches, large black coffee, gas. the sandwiches are squishy white bread over wilted lettuce soggy tomatoes processed cheese food slice. they taste great. and i'm back in the seat, wishing for a second that i had driving gloves, a better car, a tape deck at least. but who cares, there's a whole country to be crossed, and it's really really big.

road dreams of cars passing by

in the middle of night, i feel the caress  
rolling down my spine, soft rubber  
tires smooth tar into undulating  
waves across the hills, i lie skin-stretched  
through these fields, and you, driving  
with eyes closed, have no lines on map  
to guide you, no highway lights,  
just my edges the rumble  
when you swerve  
of gravel lets you know  
my borders

and  
jolts you  
(eyes  
snapping  
wide, hands  
wrenching  
wheel  
hard left)

and  
jolts me

awake

the dark of sky  
begins to glow just beyond the road's horizon, black becoming  
clear blue becoming orange burn. i can't take my eyes off  
the cumulo-nimbus clouds, bright-edged  
but dark-hearted, backlit into spectacle. then i'm rounding a slight  
curve in the highway and braking into an adrenaline rush, as  
i screech a full stop into a family of  
deer. there are five of them  
startling and two race off, but then they stop  
to look back. the other three  
trot calmly to the side of the road  
to let me pass.

it is a full minute  
before i can put my foot down on the gas pedal again.

## continental drift

1.

(Pangaea)

if all the land in the world  
began as one, the weight  
must have been too massive to hold  
together. the oceans were still heaving up  
blood lava pumped hot from the earth's still raging  
core, tectonic plates wrenching to explore new parts of the earth,  
continents too new to know the shape of themselves. So Pangaea  
gave in to the pull of its separation,

and couldn't stop, drifting into  
pieces

about to collide

2.

(geography)

only after three days on the road do i realize just how big this country really is, and  
how far i am from you now.

for the first time since i left, i think of that morning when i packed everything into my car.  
you had to go to work, so i walked you down to the street corner and we kissed goodbye.  
*goodbye take care.* And then you were gone, running for the bus.

(i replay that scene in my head, over and over in slow motion fast forward,  
zooming in each time. the tracking lines flow slow up the screen)

*rewind, zoom in*

i start packing the car, and what i thought would be a 1 hour job  
ends up being 3, so that it is noon by the time i finally leave Vancouver.  
the geography of packing takes up all the time, the necessary space-saving  
arrangements  
of boxes and suitcases fitting neat into one another, like a jigsaw puzzle, or spoons,  
or the coasts of Africa and South America when they were Gondwanaland.  
and before you left for work, you helped me lug my stuff down to the car. we  
walked down to the corner and you, trying to be funny, said *Call me when you get to  
Hope*. And then we kissed goodbye.

*rewind, zoom in*

i walked you down to the street corner and said  
*goodbye take care*

then you had to go so we kissed  
and that kiss was you and me trying to grab everything we still were to each other and  
pack it into ourselves, taste its color and fill our stomachs with enough  
for all the times ahead that we would be apart. i could hear the seagulls  
crying overhead. And then

you were gone,  
running for the bus.

3.

**(Hope)**

*...message at the sound of the beep. Beeeep!*

hi, it's me, i'm in Hope now.

it's around two o'clock, and there's a clear blue sky  
all the way to Calgary...

the trees start again in Manitoba. thin,  
scraggly trees, nothing like  
the tall evergreens of the Rockies  
or the West Coast. the trees here live  
in patches, timid  
but gradually gathering amongst themselves  
the strength  
to turn prairie  
into Canadian Shield.

portage avenue

the phone rings

and for a moment i'm back in our tiny west end apartment, lying on a lumpy futon.  
and i'm reaching over to you, to my left side where you should be, and i'm reaching  
over to the phone and picking it up, expecting simultaneously your body under mine  
and your voice on the other end of the line

but it's not our futon, it's a big motel bed with only my small body in it, and it's not  
your voice on the line, it's a stupid computerized voice saying *hello, this is your  
morning wakeup call*. and i say *hello, hello?* but after that there's only silence. i hang  
up with the biggest knot in my guts that i've ever had and a big space where i think  
my lungs used to be. it must be my lungs because i can't breathe, or there's no air in  
the room, or –

maybe i was wrong. but now i'm 3 provinces away from you and it's too late to turn  
back and anyway, when i turn on the light

fuck i don't know right now. i'm just so tired and all i want is to shut off my brain  
and sleep



from winnipeg to thunder bay  
the driving which has been so easy turns  
hard through the rocks and thin trees, swamplike claustrophobic and  
suddenly i'm so bored, i'm so tired of mile after mile of thin trees sticking out  
of greenish-brown water, i'm tired of mile after mile after mile, and all the  
fucking little towns look the same.

### scenic route

the green dots on the map tell me this is a scenic route, so because i want to see the scenery, i'm trying to get to sault ste. marie before it gets too dark. but already it's too late for that, night falling fast and hard on the road which begins to twist through the trees through the hills through the fog

through the fog, i can't see anything beyond my headlamps.

there's just black beneath the two cones of outward searching light, then an opaque, swirling white. i've slowed to 50 kilometres and i'm trying to keep what i can see of the yellow line on my left. the last luminescence of daylight has faded out now, and i've still got a hundred and fifty kilometres left to go. if i had any brains i would stop, but i don't. i just keep driving like a ship sails on through a storm, searching for a beacon that will guide it to safety.

i don't remember

the car stopping, but it must have, because here i am standing  
at the side of the road. trying to *rewind, rewind*, but there is not even snow-static.  
finally i get a disorientating jump cut, then a fast montage of road shots spliced together:  
glare of headlights bodies motion, yellow line splitting black asphalt, white borders, gravel  
just beyond, dark shape of trees looming out from the slowly dissipating fog,  
my dashboard brightly lit and telling me i have half a tank of gas left. then

slo-mo frame by frame head flying forward eager to meet and shard glass, only to be  
thrown back against the seat by the belt grabbing my left shoulder, my hips. suddenly  
something i learned in driver's ed. years ago springs to mind, that the seatbelt  
should go around the hips, not the belly, because broken bones mend  
but organs do not. the film breaks there

and when the picture comes back on, it is out of focus, and i'm down on the car floor,  
groping for my glasses.

i don't remember

getting out of the car, but i must have, because here i am standing  
at the side of the road. my front fender is dented badly, but the engine seems alright.  
the windshield has splintered on the passenger's side. there is blood. and  
there is the deer. i'm trying to wake up, trying to wake up, trying to

nausea

i wake up

feeling like i haven't slept for days, or maybe i've never slept, ever. i can't recall or even imagine the outside of this room, which, with its old television set, its starched white bedsheets, its musty orange polyester bedspread and curtains, could be anywhere, could be calgary winnipeg thunder bay, except that the furniture here is made of oak. i look on the oak desk to find a phonebook, which tells me i'm in northern ontario.

then the wave, which comes in slowly, starting from just above the stomach and curling up through my throat. rising. if i try to breathe deeply and rhythmically, i can manage to keep it down.

i need coffee, so i go out to the restaurant, and the man behind the desk last night turns out to be the cook as well. he says, *good thing we had a last-minute cancellation last night. there ain't another motel 'til you nearly hit Sault Ste. Marie.* an older couple come in. they look american, somehow. the cook turns to them and tells them that the restaurant is for motel guests only. they begin to protest but he is gruff and has tattooed, muscular arms. after the couple leaves, he returns to my table and tells me about how the owner makes all the furniture here himself, the heavy oak tables and chairs that don't seem to have any nails. *they sell real well*, he says. *Lotta tourists who stay here, they buy them. whole sets, too.*

*I made you the special, by the way. fried eggs and black forest ham. That's where the owner's from, you know. the black forest. germany.*

i just want some toast but he's back already with a huge plate, so i try to eat. i try to swallow it all down, try to keep it all down, but the minute i get back to my room there's another wave, tidal, and it's pulling my guts up through my mouth

on automatic

if i'm three time zones ahead of you,  
you must still be asleep right now, you must be  
lying curled under the blue quilt, the cat  
prowling in the early morning gray light, the sound  
of kitchen tapwater dripping into your dreams. if i  
were there right now –

if i were not here right now, and if the road curved in some other direction, or if there  
were no roads at all, and the sun could roll uphill towards the east, and my hands  
weren't shaking so badly. i'm driving so slow that RVs pull into the left lane to pass.  
finally when the highway stretches clear and straight again, i manage  
to do the speed limit. not thinking not looking behind just staring at the grass trees rocks  
fences trees grass rocks fences fences fences

at the edge of lake superior

deep in water, fish are moving towards each other  
soundless

the gray the fading out of light deeper underneath the shadows of boats moving across the  
water's surface like clouds rippling, falling underneath, moving

slow

towards the fish

towards the rocky bottom of the lake where there is no light

i call you from a roadside cafe in sault ste. marie, and i have to shout above the sound of trucks. *I SHOULD BE IN MONTREAL BY NIGHTFALL.*

i don't tell you about the deer.

before we hang up, there is a pause, several hundred words lurking below the surface of murky water and then  
*be careful driving, you say.*

for the next three hundred miles, i can hear your words echo, radar soundings deep in the bowels of the ocean and bouncing back to the bottom of the car

*be careful driving be careful driving be careful driving be careful driving be careful driving just keep driving be careful driving be careful driving be careful driving be careful*

imagine running out of road.

it was so easy to just keep driving, ignoring the road signs, ignoring all the signs, just going the four or five hours it takes to empty a full tank of gas, then filling up and doing it all over again. watching the light, the landscape turn. for the longest time there were trees, and then there were fields too vivid in the hard shadows of late afternoon. when i reached the st. lawrence, the river was disappearing into night, montreal a blur passing on my right. after that there was just the road stretching forward into black and the voice underneath the turning wheels.

my trajectory traces a map of the transcanada, eastbound:

sudbury north bay deep river petawawa pembroke hull montréal trois-rivières  
québec city montmagny rivière-du-loup edmundston grand sault woodstock  
fredericton sussex riverview moncton dieppe sackville amherst springhill truro  
halifax dartmouth lunenburg

countless towns in between i remember only as glances toward my fuel indicator, milli-second readings to gauge whether or not i needed to fill up. the bigger towns were split-second decisions as to whether i needed food. by the time i turned away from the river and into new brunswick, daylight was seeping into the dark sky, vague outlines of trees and buildings emerging from the gray like images in a polaroid photo. the further i drove, the clearer the images became. and so, rest didn't really enter my mind until i hit the ocean, and then i realized how far i'd gone.



deer signs:

in alberta, the deer are calm, suspended in mid-jump over invisible fences. saskatchewan has frightened deer racing across the highway. manitoba has prancing deer, up on their hind legs, dancing. there are moose in northern ontario, angry and charging at you with red eyes. warning: night dangers. and in quebec, the deer are curiously stretched out, looking as though they're jumping over the moon.

## **lunenburg blue**

**you're sitting on the rocky crags between halifax and lunenburg, hearing waves  
crash thunderous upon the edge of the earth. the landscape  
is the strange surface of some moon: there are boulders here bigger  
than cars or small houses; the brilliant green of grass punctuates  
all that endless blue-gray of sky and sea and rock**

**you fall into the water and get dragged under the currents  
to the ocean floor where you become blind from ages of dark,  
you begin to glow luminous from the inside  
a lantern swimming through the deeps**

**until one day a storm wind catches you,  
washes you ashore and turns you homeward.  
and now you must learn to breathe air again  
through your watersodden lungs.**

Part 2: Luna (Winter)

a map of the maria (seas of the moon)

everything in the dark is shadow.  
reduced to outline, no relief, what makes a thing  
particular is erased, each only as strong  
as its shape. i drift from shadow  
to shadow, no borders, i blend in to

the drift, there the kitchen  
table, a lampshade, there  
some tranquil ghost, i mark  
a passage between  
sleep, wake

i gather words like white pebbles  
and spit them from my mouth,  
a gleaming trail:  
*imbrium nubium crisium*

but no reflecting light.  
i can no longer say  
*i am here*  
the luminosity of here

eclipsed

mare nectaris

honey nectar

is the memory of you

i drink in with my lips dry,  
so sweet i can't bear to swallow

the taste a film on my tongue, my teeth and gums  
leaves me parched for water

and you are  
the desert's memory of water

the shifting sand dunes always looking  
to recreate the curves of your skin

quantum physics

there is such space in every  
seemingly solid thing,  
such enormous distances  
both between each atom  
and within. it is as if  
the universe was formed  
simply to contain its emptiness  
and we are nothing but the borders  
which hold the emptiness in.

in the same way, the phone lines stretching  
across the spaces of this country  
are the borders that hold us together.  
without them, we would be simply  
distance, nothing to define you and me  
as *us*, though after months of being apart,  
we are on the border of not existing  
anyway. perhaps something as fragile as this  
ought not to exist. but in sleep, distance  
is no matter. sometimes i wake  
with the sound of your dreaming in my ears,  
the warmth of your body pressed into  
the space next to mine. is this why  
we dream: so that the infinite spaces  
between atoms and universes  
can be crossed, the distances  
between everything made  
less far apart?

mare nubium

today the sun burns a pale silver orb  
and the sky is coming down into the snow.  
there is only the movement of my limbs,  
just one step in front of another,  
soft squeak and crunch  
as my feet search the snow for pavement.  
the sad swish of wind  
moves through the skeletons of trees  
showing brown boned through the mist  
thick as cold cotton, eerie to the touch,  
a dull edgeless chill burning lonesome  
onto exposed flesh

driving through the city in the middle of night with no particular place to go, just following the random patterns of desire

the rush up a wide tree-lined boulevard faster than the limit and round into the quiet residential streets, prowling slow and envious of the houses fast asleep, turn right here into a long narrow alleyway lined with garbage cans and fenced-off yards, then a left turn out onto the main avenue, empty and resting for the night, where the only things awake and noticing my presence are the luminous eyes of the traffic lights which still turn their 24 hour chimes of green and yellow and red and green again. the crunch of snow under the wheels fills my head like white noise, like radio static between towns, or Atlantic tide crashing down. there is so much between where you are and where i am and i have forgotten why this is, why this should or shouldn't be so. i drive around the streets for hours, looking for reasons, thinking that maybe just around the next corner i might find one. for a while i try to take only the streets with names of saints: *St. Joseph, St. Denis, St. Laurent, St. Dominique, St. Viateur, St. Urbain, St. Hubert, St. Zotique*. the rhythm of the street names is the sound of a prayerwheel, and i drive around listening to its chant until the darkness begins to lift and the morning rush hour begins its hum, begins to fill the hushed streets with the sound of hurry, with the sound of motion which is also in my bones, and i need to drive it out



**Bld. St. Laurent**

**a river of asphalt looks the wrong way for the sea  
taking with it all the shiny metal boats gliding by on rubber  
wheels, the sound of swiftcurrent rusting in its rhythmic  
hum and throb, bob and glide, now the red lights  
damming the flow, and now  
the green lights letting it go**

the length of a northern winter's day

*3 a.m.*

sleep is a stranger passing by outside  
where the cold morning is just beginning.  
here, on the undefined border between night  
and day, the air settles thick,  
moves muckish dead. silence  
shrouds each dust particle,  
sinks it closer to the bottom.  
the floor stone cold.

\*

a northern winter's day is only as short  
as a breath held until face turns blue. but the night  
is as long as the string wound up in a ball of yarn,  
unwinding.

\*

all day long, the light  
crawls in through dirty windows, creeps  
across the floor, the bed, the wall, steady  
as a tide, then turns sepia-toned in the afterglow  
of disappearing noon

then after the colours fade out, night  
settles in, airless and heavy.  
the horizon swallows me up.  
the objects in the room, though inanimate  
at the edges, start breathing on the inside.

listen.

\*

*5 a.m.*

i've been inside  
far too long  
but there is no  
where else  
to go

\*

the longitude of winter is the longing for sleep,  
but i cannot sleep when the time comes.  
winter is the weight  
which bears each waking  
moment

down

\*

there are many methods to finding the length  
of a northern winter's day. there is the number of paces  
between the dawn and the dusk, the sum total of glances  
at the hands of a clock, triangulation using  
the noonday sun and the shadow of a snowbank.

the important thing to remember  
is that the days themselves will lengthen.

mare crisium

blackout. i light two candles against the dark chill  
but the light flickers the dark into life.

outside with no orange streetlight glare, i can see  
a blue-violet light sleeping under the roof of the sky

then weightless, a tide of objects  
comes crashing in, colliding in the magnified spaces  
between things; the glue holding the universe together  
is coming unstuck

i am becoming negative matter

turning into dust

*five p.m.*

the sky grows dark for another day i wake  
shaking sleep from my eyes not knowing quite  
where i am which province which city which room  
headache reverberating through my bones these words  
hang in my head amongst the charts of stars i've spent  
hours trying to see their changing patterns that  
is all i am neon-billboards and a planetarium  
curving inside my skull the moon a sliver of glass  
falling through a kaleidoscope when i close my eyes

how to grow a compass rose

your map. it is useless to you anyway,  
all maps are useless when  
you have lost direction.

tear it into tiny shreds, slowly and carefully.  
tear it first in half, then the halves  
into half again. keep tearing

until each piece is the size of the nail  
on your little finger. these are  
your seeds. be careful with them.

put them in a safe place  
until the new moon. then,  
being careful not to chew,

swallow the seeds and tell them to grow.  
you have to really want them to grow, so that  
when you tell them to, they will.

they will sprout their leaves, and their vines  
will creep into your veins and hold you up  
from the inside. when it rains, they will flower

and you will know your compass rose has bloomed  
when one day you wake up, and you know exactly  
the direction in which you must go.

Lethe

driving toward sudbury toward sault ste marie the landscape the surface of the moon  
i'm watching for deersigns and looking for the river

i'm looking for the river i said at the gas station, they nodded and pointed towards  
a dirt road heading west.

*are you planning to cross? you need to book ahead. the ferry is always full  
this time of year.*

i shake my head, no, i tell them,  
i only want to find a stone from the riverbanks  
to put on my windowsill,  
a souvenir



learning to breathe

i have forgotten how to breathe.  
it happens sometimes when  
the days fall into a hypnotic  
rhythm of dull light, dull pain,  
first i forget to notice  
my in-hale, ex-  
hale, in-breath,  
out-breath, days  
when i don't notice  
what it is like  
to be alive. this  
is like sleepwalking, no  
memory of what i  
had done yesterday,  
the day before, what  
i had for dinner, how  
the time passes. then  
i forget how to breathe entirely,  
and i find myself lost in some kind of lacking,  
i find myself lost and gasping for air. but the body  
does not let go so easily, trained from the first  
sputtering intake at birth  
to draw air automatically, patiently.  
it is as if, falling unconscious,  
my body takes over, begins  
again the task of teaching me  
to inhale, exhale, not just breath

but the watching of it, in-breath, out-  
breath, the watching of it as essential  
as the breathing, as necessary to living  
as the oxygen in the air is to life.

mare imbrium

today i pulled an old notebook out of the bookshelf and found a picture of you nestled within the pages, you are standing in Cathedral Grove, your tall frame impossibly small against the Douglas firs, and the smell of needle resin and damp soil drifts out, the rustling green noises of the Island sweeping past, and i remember how it rained that day we drove from Long Beach to Nanaimo to catch the ferry, wind and raindrops blowing through the open window of the car, the brightness of everything green standing out against the gray. there was no distance between you and me then, no distance greater than the length of our bodies or the quarrels about where to eat or what to do. but nothing was made to stand still, not even this photograph. looking at it now, i can see where the distance crept in and how it took root. now the space between us is concrete and measurable in miles, and i think i know the reasons why. being apart was the only way we would not wind up full of resentment towards each other, and right now i could even write you an essay on the logic of it. you would hate me for that. you might hate me now, though i know you miss me when you think of tall trees.

the intense pull of the moon on bodies of water

is pure thirst, parched desire condensed  
into gravity's wrenching grasp  
on ocean tides and currents of blood, and we are all  
celestial bodies caught in orbit, the perpetual motion  
of life whirlwinding around the stillness inside

but look! tonight, there is snow  
falling gentle on the mountains of the moon  
and filling up the long-empty seas,  
each crystalline flake drifting warm  
into drifts, then floating up again into the airless air.  
the footprints of astronauts are obscured, all the litter  
of earth buried under the swirling, muffling white  
and the moon's pull is for one moment  
hushed into still life

epiphany

the days have been constructed like cardboard  
boxes holding nothing, and i inhabit  
the corrugated paper  
of waking, eating, sleeping:  
all there is.

but tonight i feel myself move  
timid within my own skin,  
longing to live there.  
the yearning of blood to  
sing, rushing through veins,  
and the clicking together of bones,

as if my soul were settling  
back into my body, familiar  
as my kitchen, weary  
as a traveller saying, yes,  
this is my home.

my strong hands lift  
the tea kettle  
to pour the water  
steaming