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Canada

**The Dream is Woman
A Collection of Poetry**

Margaret Webb

**A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Masters of English (Option IV) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

February 1994

*** Margaret Webb, 1994**



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ABSTRACT

The Dream is Woman A Collection of Poetry

Margaret Webb

In the writing of this collection, I initially posited the "dream" as a potentially "pure" site from which to (re)visualize "woman" or myself. I had conceptualized the dream as a prelinguistic or extratextual "wild zone" in Elaine Showalter's notion of the term. However, when I explored and analyzed my own dreamscape with the second perspective of feminist literary theory, what I discovered was not myself -- my difference from men and other women -- so much as myself enmeshed in this term woman as already written, as other/space/absence/nurturer/passive object that is constructed in support of male subjectivity. The act of writing my dreamscape became an act of resistance to the construction of interior self by patriarchal ideology.

This new "dream consciousness" placed my writing/dreaming subject in contradiction in terms of being both within and without the dream, within dream discourse but conscious of its ideology. This contradiction is expressed in formal terms in the clash of structures and discourses within poems. For example, the rhythm of long prose lines is upset with foreshortened lyric lines; sentences are pushed

together, forcing the line to be read forward and back -- with different meanings erupting; prose and dramatic genres are introduced into the "poem"; political discourse undercuts dream discourse. Such heteroglossia is introduced in order to expose and explore the borders of hegemonic discourse, to reveal its construction of woman as dream/fantasy and, finally, to destabilize that centre, allowing another vision of myself as a woman to emerge.

What emerges is, in Teresa de Lauretis's words, a "view from elsewhere" (Technologies of Gender, 25). The dream as site of male desire and fantasy is re-appropriated, written over "in lesbian" as a site of female subjectivity and desire. "Woman" is no longer merely object of "the dream" -- desired and pursued by men -- but subject of her dreams, desiring. The collection closes with a reconsideration of his-story and subjectivity. It stresses the importance of affirming and representing this new space, this lesbian identity and perspective, but even this subject position is undercut by contradiction, for "lesbian" risks becoming an imposed term, a static metaphor, as are the terms "man" and "woman". What I argue for is a radical rethinking of subjectivity, of subjectivity as a process of re-appropriation. Rather than being written -- male, female, queer -- subjectivity is conceptualized as a space of re-writing the self into a thousand possibilities, a million, so that our sexes might equal rather than divide our number.

THE DREAM IS WOMAN

Margaret Webb
Montreal
1994

"By the cord, the art of the cord, there is always
everywhere in this space, as in a city, the art of the cord"

Erin Moure, WSW

THE DREAM IS WOMAN

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The Dream is Woman

No, the buzzer is not dreamt
but the dream is woman
getting up to answer the door
to a stranger naked to her skin
she lets him in...

confesses
trying on sixteen dresses during
her lunch hour without any panties on
she wanted to see which ones showed
pubic hair just a hint
of dark shadow she said

confessing
that she never left the office that day
wouldn't even try on new underwear
without first covering the crotch
with Saran Wrap she had
six carrot sticks, celery,
one percent cottage cheese on
melba toast and spent the rest
of her lunch hour applying
nail polish to the run
in her stocking to stop
stop stop talking
she thinks touch me
why don't you touch me
if you could lick here
you could put a finger there
the point where he's fading
faster she talks faster
can't hold him in
says what is the matter
you're not a cunt man?
yells fag fag as he flees
down the hallway
leading out of her dream
which isn't anymore
but the buzzer still is

reaching for the alarm
she says open the fucking door
-- to herself

Memories of Beef

"The female sex organs are the blind spot."

-- Jane Gallop

"I think where I am not, therefore I am where I think not."

-- Jacques Lacan

1.

seven o'clock and the vet wants to go
home to his steak and his wife but
he's got his arm to his shoulder up the ass
of a cow yanking the calf
out by its hind legs already 100
pounds too big to walk even jerkily the way new calves
do and blind

steam from the manure
steam from the afterbirth
steam from the uterus that's come out
with the calf

2.

in Montreal, where memory is
occurring, metaphor leaps over whole
decades of my life with slant regard
to metonymy, what simmers beneath
the surface and connects me

oh, I buy The Gazette, get groceries, go to the bank
but what I'm saying is
I don't go out in the city

3.

when I'm 12 and watching this cow
having been fed to make beef
too fat to have calves
its calf too big to stand
my father says
go to the house already
an hour ago

the cow never getting up the next day
becomes string-wrapped
packages in our freezer

in the summer it's my job
to wash the grey liquid oozing
from the blind calf's eyes
to keep flies off

4.

I don't know why I'm having this memory of beef
I stopped eating it months ago
maybe I'm anemic; I sleep too much
last night I went to bed at 11 woke up
at 3 went back to sleep
at 6 got up at 10
face of the clock ticking a kind of metonymy
relating what passes
for days, lying
in the heat watching flies
mate on the ceiling
too lazy to get up
to close the screen

you think I'm depressed
on account of the sleep
on account of not going out in the city
on account of watching the flies

my father scraped the uterus up with a shovel

not that I want a connection
between that uterus and my
not going out in the city
I'm not trying to make one
I'm trying to make a poem

what the flies are doing here I don't know

5.

I am writing the poem because I believe a poem can

- a) soak up the excess of metaphor
- b) supply memory with its own metonymy
- c) release me from trying to bend not just lines but the whole of my being into its absurd connections and
- d) give me my life back

when I think in metaphor there is
a certain rhythm which does not let me change
direction seemingly changes
of its own volition leaping
over logic to create another kind
of logic which makes street
corners hazardous keeping
me indoors and dreaming
a fatted farmer birthing an anorexic
calf and a fence I'm trying to jump over
which is too

high or a man and a woman who have invited me to dinner when
I would still go out in the city but they discover that I
have these memories of beef and then pretend not to have
invited me to dinner, saying there is no roast in the oven
and the table is set for their inlaws who I wouldn't like
any more than the beef

6.

it was after dinner that I dreamt
the fatted farmer giving birth to the anorexic
calf though it came out
the other way around

there might be a connection
in the breech
if you don't fill in the other

connections, it was Freud who said you need
the blind spots to see

how the flies squeeze black body to black body
over the face of the blind calf
to drink the liquid from the blind calf's eyes

and the calf not having a mother

7.

that relation being another kind of metonymy
the umbilical cord of metonymy
that is cut

turning the mother into a free-floating signifier
or three-quarter-inch
steaks in the deep freeze

turning metaphor into a schizophrenic leaping
on young calf's legs

8.

in the city that I don't go out in
there's a bar that I don't go into
riding my bicycle one day
(in a time I used to go out)
it caught my attention
that bar being a lesbian bar I lost
sight of the straightness
of the road I hit the curb I flew forward
and jammed my pelvis
when I hit the curb

it wasn't that my uterus had to be
scraped up off the street
only that it felt that way

9.

my other cow memory is of selling that calf at the end of the summer I got \$100 for wiping the goo off its face for three months I got new clothes for school in the fall it went to the slaughterhouse

Bad Egg

strange goings on at the neighbour's place, a riderless
horse tells me

they're taking in strays, cats and dogs even homeless people
too the barn's got beds and 100 boxes of eggs to grade
before we get through the door to sleep

but the eggs are human I tell you

throwing one against the wall strands of hair and tendons
like cooked spaghetti stick in the white

piss on your human eggs they say you're going to grade them
for sale

and who am I to say what's not chicken?

my mother wears high heel shoes strapped to her cowboy boots
and my accountant father would seduce me except I ran when
he tattooed his bald head blue

and my mother is leading the riderless horse up the lane
down

doesn't yet know her daughter's bought it behind the barn
sniffing glue

Night Time

I have the world
the stars, the sun and the moon
in the smiling face
of my wrist watch

and last night I had
my brother's head
between my legs

points of stars swelling
until

our mother came
to the foot of the bed
watching

we are 14 and 15 and don't know anything
except

we'd have fucked each other
dead

until the tiny moon
on my watch
went down
and the sun came up

Haying

running across fresh-cut hay like colts bucking at the scent
in late afternoon air

sun melting

towards evening my daddy tames us into the V of his
squatting legs says accident in the adult voice that barely
makes lips move and stop laughing

we stop laughing

look around and see our family in one piece after haying at
uncle's farm the adults easing dusted throats with the sweet
chill of beers on his breath he says three kids got drowned
in a pond down the county road

think they were in your school, he says

I work my hand inside his to unpry the bottle from his grip

and the grown-up voices at the barbecue talking low about
the ambulances and fire trucks that all got there too late
how the rubber boots Jason wore filled up sucked him down
when he went in to save Penny, Charles already gone under

and how it was all so still when you'd expect screams

try as I might I can't push back summer, fill in the blank
spaces at school

feel anything but the bullet hole a swig of cold beer makes
in my head on a hot day

how it makes the field tilt

we eat burgers off the grill

escape arms at our shoulders, fingers pulling back hair from
the sweat on our faces, race you, catch me! make for the
uncut hayfield back of the barr, stamp fox-and-goose paths
in clover up to there chasing each other around and around
on hands and knees through maze of twisting and trying to
get home each path leading home, except dead ends

laughing so hard our guts ache

it gets so dark we see shadows of foxes lurking long after
the game slips into silence

the scratches up the soft backsides of our arms start
bleeding

and we sit cross-legged quiet under the breeze stroking the
surface of the clover with the first cool hush of night,
linking arms, shhh

pretend we're those kids under the surface of the pond
waiting for the adults to find us

Water Level

if I need air

I can push the rock back
from the opening
of the underwater cave
until it rolls back
it rolls back

I'm not eager to get out
I'm not trying to get out

of the cave where the other
woman is dialling 911
cord of the telephone wrapped
three times around her neck how
can she get through?

air when you least expect it
I discover exploring
boundaries of this closure
badly soldered seams contain
what my tongue finds licking
pregnant rise of rust
bubbles of air I bite into
rip off steel sheath
of skin

and breathe

*

imagine
floating between moments of air
feeling out the next by tongue
holding back until you can't
you can't and biting in
oh, soft spill of
and bursting sweet

*

I dream the moment of entry
into the lungs
is wonderful

*

I don't think about the woman calling out
I don't think about escape
I don't think I am consumed
by my constant consumption

perhaps by some weird warp in time
this is still Chappaquiddick
a woman trapped, in a car, underwater
while Ted has gotten out to run for
president

*

my need for air is constant
and the water level in the poem is up to here

Self Portrait in Red
& Black

on the first day of snowfall I caught just a shard
glimpse of her a turn of coat red an unforgiven

want in her eyes sorrow in a dream

falling in snowflakes mantle around her furtive
warmth a cape concealing

la femme du manteau I woke with that
thought on black ice trembling then insisting

do something do something do something

the soldiers marching at the border, stamping passports
with the butt end of rifles

and she retreating from that line

like a politeness in poetry

into black

black

Saturday Night Talking

and the man downstairs has been yelling at his wife for two hours shouting, "don't do it again" again and again the only English he speaks or that I can make out, that

and the bang, smashing

of her?

and the young couple next door arguing in a language I do understand, she says over and over, "don't you get it? don't you get it?" and he says, "shut up, shut up, shut the fuck up" in monotone, deadening, until she screams, "you don't get it, do you?" and he yells, "get this, get this you fucking bitch"

and the smack

last week in therapy, a major breakthrough. I said, under my breath, I respect men. "What? What?" the therapist said smiling, "can you say that louder? Louder? I can't believe my ears" and I shouted, "I respect men!" and we both laughed and laughed

somewhere inside it was good for a moment, salve for a deep wound closing, somehow healing

tonight I sit here thinking I made a mistake, a huge mistake -- using the inclusive. I should have said I respect men except those who beat wives and lovers, except those whose brilliant left brains can divide the whole of humankind into men/womanwiveswhoresloversbangobjects

but can't add two and two and figure what psychosis that equals

in him, in me

what I should have said, I should have said, I met a man whom I might respect

Saturday night talking and I can't stop listening, can't stop hating him before he arrives

kiss at the door is a search for concealed weapons

Walking With My Husband One Night...

then we were walking home and he jumped out of
the bushes and tried to drag me off

you hung on to one arm while he pulled on the other

then we were at the bus stop and he leapt out of
the shelter and tried to rape me

you hung on to one arm while he pulled on the other

then we were turning down our street and he tried to
grab my purse

you said, let it go, it's not worth risking your life over
my one arm being free, I swung and knocked him out

After Words

This is the point at which he stops existing --

at Bar G Sharp listening to blues and his leg a half inch
from mine I could move my leg slightly brush against
his casually put my hand on his thigh as I make some
point some gesture I could touch

I could speak to him through the language of my body
I think about his leg call it object
about the act of touching his leg call it verb
-- but my hand won't speak the sentence

and then the set is over, house lights up and last warm
swallows in glasses lingering finally spilling into three
a.m. wind rushing us into awkward attempts to align our
bodies against the grammar of time and space at my door I'm
not thinking about all the times I've fantasized about such
silent space between us I'm filling it up with words talking
about Woolf and having only one good story to write and he's
talking about Salinger and writing several stories badly and
Eros has thrown her hands up on the scene and Logos won't
let him fall into the sin of a run-on sentence...

and then he is leaving. then he is gone

in the after silence, I touch I touch
Virginia and I write stories

Big Apple Oracle

down fifth avenue
it rises up

from the sea Yellow
Cab the colour

of sun rousing
in the east veering

west and on
the roof a penis

ten hands high
erect, radiant

as sun glint on skyscraper
winking vacant

sign I am
delivered

Spring Summer Fall

1.

We were making love in the wading pool at Parc Lafontaine
and you were so far inside me I wondered
what power you possessed
to keep going

and then it broke off

your penis like stone from the statue of a Greek god
or missing appendage on a Ken doll

surprised more than alarmed, the shock
nothingness gave us, the self
consciousness of your hand
drifting over your absence

but I became Venus eager for that eel of delight squirting
from our grasping hands, splashing in the pond and laughing
like it was some love game still --

but I was thinking if I got it for myself would I
then need you?

and you sensed the leaves had changed the surface of the
pond was red and gold clouding over with feathers from
migrating geese and ducks alighting

it wasn't summer anymore

and the cold made your teeth chatter so hard your eyes went
blank and your hair hung in thick rope strands making you
forlorn as a statue in a park that birds land on

2.

though I had found your penis

I couldn't bring myself to tell you

or give it back

I was so hungry

3.

I bought popcorn

I fed it to the birds

Jackie Oh!

This is a movie in three scenes but
because of budget cutbacks I
can't show you
the connecting links
the

close-up shot of our heroine sitting
on the park bench looking
at the bad guy in black
crew neck and dark glasses so
we just know if the camera
would go inside her head
we could see she was
wishing he was the good guy
who could make her forget
the husband, the suburbs,
the two kids playing on the swings

we can see it in the
way the camera plays on her lips, the
way her legs drift apart, the
way she says "Oh!"

close-up shot of our heroine in the bank line up
eyeing the good guy who has blond hair,
blue eyes, the suit, the tie
and we just know his is the image
she will trust so shouldn't
because he will be the one who
lures our suburban housewife
to a motel with the wicked
promise of oral sex

and without a wardrobe change to black
crew neck, he will look truly
pathetic when he bites off
her clitoris

close-up shot of our heroine in the shower
scene enjoying the warm lather
of soap on skin, hands on
breasts (her own) but
the mirror steamed blank because
the camera won't go inside
her head to see which
hero she lures
to the door which hero
she lets in...

because that's the climax
of the movie and because
of budget cutbacks this is
poetry in four scenes
(so) I can't give you the
connecting links, the
sex scene or the
ending or
it won't make sense

Scene One: In the bank line up

rolls with a high camera shot of a bank, robbery in progress, everyone belly down on the floor, hands over their heads as if that could stop a bullet

our heroine's eyes closed so tight she sees Christmas lights breaking instead of school pictures of her kids on top of the TV

there are men and women on the floor, though mostly women, and our heroine knows there will be no heroes (good or bad) among the men

because in the movies there is room for only one hero and he is behind the gun

but we don't see him

we don't see the gun

instead we see our heroine huddled under a brown lump of a coat cringing on the edge of the wide-angle shot

given this scene, we can deduce that

a) because she is on the floor, she knows there is an assassin in the scene

b) because her eyes are closed, she doesn't know who the assassin is

c) because her hands are over her head, she wants to be saved and

d) because she's never been belly down on the floor before, she's learned this position from the movies

Scene Two: Out of the bank line up

flashes forward, or maybe back (hard to tell with the connecting links cut out) to a slow-motion sequence of our heroine scaling walls, she is beautiful

she wears silver form-fitting coveralls, a black crew neck, carries a shot-gun strapped across her back, just like the hero

who could be James Bond
or The Terminator

then cuts to a series of juxtaposed shots: his uniform, her uniform, identical; his wind-tossed hair, hers, identical; his set jaw, hers, identical; his backward glance, her reflecting gaze, identical

what makes our crotches slick: every time he looks back, she grows more radiant

what this scene makes us believe: she is his mirror

what this scene makes us forget: in movies, mirrors can be perfect but in reality even perfect mirrors crack

then a fading shot of the metaphor as action resumes and, hand over hand, our heroine pulls herself up the rope, stretches her leg to a Hollywood angle over the wall and

snap

close-up shot of the hero's hand on her wrist, pulling her over the top and

freeze frame: she is at the gun-end of a high-camera shot of the bank, finger on the trigger

in her sights: the brown lump of coat

Scene Three: His getaway scene

police sirens scream then fade as the hero escapes from the scene to become the president of the United States

or perhaps he's in the movies and he's only acting the presidential role (hard to tell with the connecting links cut out)

what we see: close-up shot of the hero in a motorcade somewhere in Dallas, waving to adoring crowds

he wears the suit, the tie

what we don't see:

Scene Four: Her getaway scene

police sirens scream after a rusted heap of van which our heroine drives recklessly through a school zone

gone is the silver suit

the look

she wears a blue terry-cloth bathrobe tucked under a brown lump of coat

she eats donuts

what we see: close-up shot of a woman's face puffed red with anger

as if she'd just waited twenty minutes in a bank line up to find the joint account closed

what we don't see: her husband driving east with a woman in a silver suit

then cuts to a series of juxtaposed shots:

the kids' pictures on top of the TV; the van screeching through the school zone

the woman's left hand, her wedding ring; her index finger on the trigger of a gun

Jack in the motorcade; the van lurching to a stop at an overpass

and the film budget breaks here

why?

because this is our heroine's getaway scene and we know what fantasy the movies won't let her get away with: shooting the president while wearing a bathrobe

and so in the end, no ending
no movie; in the end, we are
left with a script that is pure
poetry, a dress rehearsal

when the woman in the brown coat pulls the trigger
Jack's brain matter is not splattered
all over Jackie's dress

The Men of My Dreams

I have to stop blowing
men
up
in my dreams

it's hard
to make
love
to the fragments

Leaving

The poem starts with the woman dead.
The only possible place to start.

The scene: a highrise condominium. Her bedroom. Floor to ceiling windows. View of a large body of water. November. The water grey.

The juxtaposition: her husband getting ready for work.

Visually, the scene could be stunning with the morning sun breaking through the clouds, reflecting off the grey sheet of water.

The implacable grey. The white bed sheets.

The woman's arm hanging over the edge of the bed.

Her husband at the mirror. Knotting his tie.

A red tie.

If the poem had started earlier.

Her husband in the kitchen mixing drinks. She in the living room, wandering between groups. Offering drinks. Wearing a black velvet jacket, black silk slacks.

A strand of white pearls. Floor to ceiling windows. View of the city skyline.

A large living room. But many people. Pressed close. Holding drinks. Talking. She cannot.

Concentrate on the conversation. The distance between her and the people in the room. Between her and her husband in the kitchen mixing drinks. Though it is only New Year's.

The Christmas lights having been taken down from the windows across the street. The city falling into blackness. After the polyphony of light. It is snowing. Lightly.

In the room. Bright splashes of clothing. Green dresses. Navy jackets. Red ties. Threaded as if into a cord. The distance measured between each knot of colour. Her husband in the kitchen mixing drinks. Conversation.

Muted: business, film, the news. It could be eliminated. From this scene.

Leaving the space.

What the woman feels.

At this point, or now. The poem regresses. Or it could be that. In the intervening time. It has proceeded with an absence. But it is now. The next morning. Then.

The man on his side of the room. The woman on hers. Suitcases on the bed. Packing.

The morning after the party. Many months later.

Permutations. Imagined. Or have happened. Difficult to locate. But disturbing. The surface.

Her husband's lover in the bedroom, but helping her pack. When the sexes ally. Her husband on the edge of the scene. Uncomfortable with the distance. Comforted by the distance. His silence says. Well, now then. Which means.

Her husband confessing that he has taken a lover. A male lover. Affecting the distance. She asks how long. He replies ever since. Her leaving was inevitable. He says. See how I could never have loved you.

Her husband's red tie. Knotted. At his throat. Stepping back. From the mirror. The room. The November sky. The white sheets. Her arm hanging lifelessly beyond the white sheets. The absolute distance. Voiceless. She is voiceless. A voice in his head. She asks, should I stay or should I go. He looks at his watch. He leaves for work.

When her suitcase is packed.

She walks into the noon sun. Brilliant. The sky clear. Blue. High. A shock after the room. The distance in it. Then. Now. The distance between her and the sky. One small suitcase. She thinks. I have left everything behind. She thinks. I have left nothing behind.

She gets into her car. She drives.

If My Poem Were A Bottle of Red Wine

while other girls wore tight jeans to school dances and
stuffed kleenex into bras because the fashion then was to
have breasts I was writing poetry and dreaming about meeting
Leonard Cohen in a Montreal coffee house

my intentions were

not all pure

poetry being as good a container for desire as tight jeans
so I thought then by the time I looked up from my notebook I
was 18 and still virginal

despite my professional aspirations

I gave up poetry

tried marriage anxious for a decent interval of
contraceptive sex but my biological clock started ticking it
was a manicured fingernail tapping against a bottle of red
wine

a single key clacking on an old Underwood typewriter

n n n n

we slept as two fertile souls for two weeks before I managed
to strike

ow

popping the cork I honestly expected red wine to come
gushing out

not my soul

which my legalized lover found sticky preferring containers
that shape words into oh-so-nice form like lips smacking
around a bottle but

my mind pours over which is not good for marriage

or the suburbs

when I moved to Montreal I swear it was the poetics of coincidence that I managed to squeeze seven `I's' into this sentence on the same day I discovered my new place was one block from Len's but secretly I thought the grammar of my fate had been genetically encoded though I don't believe that kind of confidence becomes a female poet

sometimes I see Len sitting on his front step when he's not licking red wine off Suzanne's back or downing caffeine at the Bagel Cafe

to ease into a rhythmic mood

I write poetry my editor says he can psycho-analyze

take it to my shrink thinking I might save some money but she says she can't psychoanalyze poetry though maybe she's just not good with poetic device actually asks what that sticky pathetic fallacy is doing

poking out at odd angles

and did it have something to do with the humidity in Montreal?

or envy

that I have divorced my body's obedience to conjugal
convention lets me have a casual lover now

in the stink hot of July nights we sit in the park in front
of Len's house fantasizing about the words he might be
tracing in the sweat of Suzanne's back

I don't tell my lover I write poetry

he might expect a dedication

want me to move down to the river drip desire over his body
lick it off all night long write ballads that would
uncasualize my love he doesn't understand the slavery of
sentences like Len does I have a sentence of humour to
maintain on top of strict form that keeps my sentences from
breaking out of control shit like this the critics say women
writers have no control over our sentences give us an inch
of white space and we charge off like a bunch of lesbians
forgetting who invented the line that proper restraint would
keep our looser halves from violating poetry with repetitive
multiple orgasms repetitive multiple orgasms taste sweet as
spilled wine to my lips but

perhaps a little exhausting for critics or tongues of lovers
of poets who write personally not writing about him is the
only way I can keep the whole affair from getting too sticky

because he wouldn't like my poetry then

meanwhile the sentences of my poems get longer and longer
trying to wrap their syntax around big concepts like
universality and narrative construct that push my sticky
emotion and confessional lust to the very margin

to make room for Suzanne?

meanwhile the sentences of my poems get longer and longer
trying to mop up the spillage

I have tried to make my poem into the shape of a bottle of
red wine

maybe if I go back to the girls in the tight jeans
alternating sucks on a bottle of red wine with their
boyfriends

teasing the shape of their tissued breasts

it would seem more finished that way

I Dream Your Hand

suddenly aware of the skin
between souls
after late-night
conversation blurring
a question
of

another glass of red wine or
the fire dying
down or if I dream
your hand
reaches in to
pull me from bed
and I take you
in like this is
what you wanted
lip on breast sucking
nipple tongue there
there awake
you are
in the next
room and
know nothing
of my dream

or do
you

stop where
do friends stop
being and skin
begin --

When All She Intended Was Blue Sky

13 and I am

kissing a girl in the backseat of my father's car
either I am pretending she is a guy or I am a guy
either way

it's not lesbian

because of the pretending

*

the first time I met him I seduced him

or at least if we looked back and had to say

who seduced whom

we would have to say it was me because I kissed him first
and then he kissed me

and then we were just tongues inside each other's mouths

*

he being an Arab Jew

is what I like about him

that he doesn't fit inside

any borders

he has parties

inviting his Jewish friends and his Arab friends and I end up fighting with them in the kitchen about which part of him they don't like

defending the other part at the same time not liking the part of him I am fighting with at that moment

we argue like this for hours not giving a single thought to how many fights like this occur in kitchens

*

after she gets to know him

the she being me

I am talking

in the third person because it seems more appropriate

at this moment

the girl from the back seat showing up in my life at the oddest of moments

*

I have been turned down for a part in a play but I have the
lines so I say them anyway

and she is the only person in the audience

or a lump has been removed from my breast

I am lying in a hospital bed and she is lying beside me

she has also had a lump removed from her breast

the doctor says our lumps are benign

but they are missing to us anyway

*

standing in a bookstore on Sunday afternoon she pulls down
every new release of poetry

and realizes she hates poetry

after writing poetry for twenty years suddenly every bright
flip of metaphor grates on her nerves like sunshine outside
when she's inside writing

wanting to be outside

drinking wine at the cafe across the street

a glass of white wine

a cool glass of dry white wine

*

when you realize there is a rhythm in poetry

stress, repetition, cadence

careful-

ly measured out so

you can't break out

you can argue about it in the kitchen

strain against it even as it inserts

a child into your life

a house with a backyard

when all you intended was blue sky

*

another time the girl from the back seat and I are sitting
with a group of girls under a tree in a meadow

we are older so the thickening of skin on our chests
is thicker

and some of us are pretending to be guys and the rest of us
are pretending to be girls

either way

because of the pretending

it's not lesbian

*

after this she grew up

after this she fell in love with her Arab-Jewish boyfriend
and got married

after this she started running into the girl from the back
seat of the car at the oddest of moments

*

sometimes she can't stop
writing about herself
in the third person

*

she thinks if she were the writer of the poetry she is
reading she could simply stop writing and go to the cafe
across the street for a glass of wine

no one should have to tell someone else how good and cool a
glass of wine would taste

*

if she writes about herself in the second person she would
have to tell herself things she does not want to hear

*

when you make love with your husband you fantasize that you
are with the girl from the backseat of the car

you being second person plural

so there is no question that you are making love

and not masturbating

*

you go to a play with your husband and discover it was
written by the girl from the back seat of the car

the girl being a woman now

the play having occurred before the lumps were removed from
your breasts

the you being second-person plural

in the play two women are lying in bed dying and the doctor
says they are dying so the audience knows they are dying and
your husband leans over and whispers, "Christ, they are
dying"

even though the two women are in bed, lying together,
clinging together

there is no question the scene is not lesbian

because of the dying

*

it is a play in which the actors forget one or two of the
lines

after the author says, "whole chunks of text went missing"

but the play closes in around the space and the audience
does not notice the space

after a while the author doesn't notice either

*

even without constructing a story this is what happens

*

after I decide that I hate poetry I find myself in the
kitchen at a party talking to someone who says poetry is
like wallpaper

I spend the whole party in the kitchen arguing the merits
of poetry

arguing with him even as he is leaving

all the way down the hallway and into the elevator

until I can see he is afraid that I will follow him home

*

you have to be pulled out of the elevator by your Arab-
Jewish husband who wants to be friends with everyone

*

I am not able to dissect which part of me is Arab and which part is Jewish

my psychiatrist says that my being Canadian and WASP makes it an interesting theoretical question, but how could you know anyway?

*

after the play I have a reunion with the playwright who used to be the girl from the back seat of the car

we hug to say hello then we hug to say goodbye

in between we get each other glasses of wine because it is opening night and there is free wine

after we walk each other to the door because the reception is over

and in that space she says

I have always been attracted to you

and I say

I have always been attracted to you

and then we say goodbye because the reception is over

the front door of the theatre closing over these two lines of text

*

being in the second-person makes you wonder

why did the author simply not create a character who would
run back into the theatre and retrieve those two lines?

*

if you went running back and she wasn't there

where would the story be then

*

her Arab-Jewish husband touches her arm and opens the door
of the taxi

moments before he had raised his arm and hailed the taxi

she wonders how many times he has come running after her

how certain he must be of her reality

*

she has walked past the theatre many times since

and it has always been there

*

considering the reality of the poem, it becomes impossible
to analyze

the Arab-Jewishness of her husband

the girl from the back seat of a car

a woman named by pronouns

you wonder if what will appear is a house with a backyard

when all she intended was blue sky

*

you wonder if she can go back to that moment with the girl
in the back seat of the car

without pretending

this time

you wonder if her life is pretending now and if that
pretending then was the only thing real

the present having closed over the past where she was not
acting but pretending

the past acting to become present acting to become future

you could pretend that none of this is happening to you

*

in the bookstore you turn the page of the book you are
reading when you come to the very last word on the page

*

I wasn't conscious at all of speaking missing lines
we had been practising all our lives
to say this
and to say this

*

sitting in the cafe
drinking a glass of wine
the taste of letting go, into

*

the strain of holding the girl from the back seat of the car
all my life
at a distance
making my life in that distance
if you finish the poem you could make the girl from the back
seat of the car and the woman in the bookstore meet
in a theatre, a poem, a cafe

*

when we stand outside theatres

my Arab-Jewish husband orders us taxis and taxis continue
to respond

so that I can hardly doubt our reality here

the comfortable parts of our lives filling in like props

the house, the backyard, the children

to make props lie flat on the stage you must cut off
their ragged bottoms

who is he ordering taxis for

*

when I imagine a life with this girl from the back seat of
the car

shopping lists are left on scraps of paper on the
fridge door

which seems more real than the note I leave her after the
first night we spend together:

I slept with
slept with a woman
a woman I love
her breast
warm
in my mouth

girl
girl

and after

the way the morning sun makes a pattern on the floor

I'm not sure how she'll read it

whether she'll interpret it as a sign to bring groceries
back from the store

or whether I'll be there when she gets back

whether she is

or I am

and this is

tentative

I imagine

we will start leaving notes like this

Net

under my skin last night...

the trying to write one word that could capture the daydream
fantasies of you fluttering free in the sunlight breezes
breathing dusk into the meadow where I ran after sparks,
rubbed butt ends of fireflies onto my skin until dust of
light fell everywhere and, exhausted, I lay back into blank
page of night sky that eased me into a boat and I rowed and
rowed from that place of wild grass to a house teetering on
morning's edge where the word became net in my hands and
madly we played our game of chase in the backyard like
children laughing and laughing I chased you over the edge
into thin air...

as if I could grow wings in this moment
as if I could fly

Arrival Time

She arrived on the 3:30 bus from Dorval. I watched her get off, empty handed. She was a half hour late. She shrugged her shoulders and laughed. I laughed. We hugged. She said she parted company with her luggage but it would be on the 5:00 flight. With luck. I suggested we head straight to a cafe.

We walked up St. Denis and crossed Carre St. Louis to The Main. We arrived at the Phoenix Cafe at 4. By 4:15 she had told me that she no longer thought she was a lesbian and that she had fallen back in love with her boyfriend. By 4:25 I had told her that I was relieved.

We're 21 and confused, she said and I said, I wanted to go back to being just friends.

At 4:30 we finished our coffee and split the bill. We walked back to my apartment, feeling odd because it was not yet five, and it was already dark, because she was here for the weekend and had no luggage, because it was Friday night and we were on The Main, walking so free.

We got back to my apartment at 5:10 and called the airline. They said they had her bag and would deliver it in the morning. We looked at each other and laughed. She stroked my cheek with the back of her hand. I held her hand to my lips and kissed it. 5:15. She had not been here, yet, two hours.

The Visit

when I stepped into the doctor's office, she was old and I
was young but she had a head full of red curls

red wonderful curls

I had a woman's problem

I had desire
for a woman

she put her stethoscope on the heart of the problem, the
lethargy of skin grown thick over my soul

and in the light of that knowing she grew younger

and younger

the wrinkles on her face melting into skin so smooth

so smooth I could just reach out and touch those curls if I
could just reach out and touch my desire roused to the white
wonder of two firm breasts at mouth level talking to me

a tongue depress in her hand

she said open your mouth and I did and I did close it over a
nipple then the whole of her breast pressing to the back of
my throat

I said ahhhh

she seemed satisfied

The I Becomes Capital

lesbian
i had that
word
in my mouth
rising
like vomit
to tell
i had to tell
i thought i would tell
the bus driver on St. Laurent

then in words
and not in words
space that i enter

in the brass cafe telling you
it seemed so natural
that word
not just woman or feminist or gay but
lesbian
like two women shopping on their lunch hour admiring
the same outfit before
checking the label
-- it was Armani
I tried it on

you said I had nice eyes

Matisse in Lesbian Pastiche

"There are always flowers for those who want to see them."
Henri Matisse, Jazz

1.

"It looks like rain," she says
"Let's stop for coffee," says the other
"Christ these bags are heavy"
"Let's stop for coffee"

the two speakers are women

one woman is moved by an urge
to spend all of her time in New York
shopping for shirts for her husband

the other woman is in love
with her and can't say
anything except
"let's stop for coffee"

making "coffee" like Stein's "cow"

readers grazing the poem
for meaning will know
that this is what artists must do

if the landscape is to change at all

2.

future lines in the poem will occur

in which the poem exudes
a strange asexuality --

the narrator writing subjects onto a stage only
to have the subjects wander off, wordless, leaving
the narrator naked here

talking about structure

talking about reality

talking about the reference to reality

the texture of two women

(By the time she looks up from the page and out to the
street, the two women are gone)

belated by explanation

(Now rushing to catch up with her subjects laughing as they
shop for souvenirs on Fifth Avenue)

or an emotional resistance to

the next moment:

("I could not bear another cup of coffee")

3.

handily, the Matisse exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art
appears on the horizon as if
a plausible reference to a reality
two female tourists to New York might move in

actually they have tickets

and the narrator is only pretending to be
in the present tense
w he reader

watching the two women read
the guidebook which says
Matisse's lifelong struggle
was between colour and form

knowing already a slippage
in referent will occur
in which the two women will struggle
in a gap between form
and the colour of her own desire

which is not meant as a slight to Matisse
or the Museum of Modern Art
or even to reality

the narrator pays to get in
on credit

4.

the two women stand in front of "La Desserte,
Harmonie Rouge"

the woman who is loved says:
"see how his subjects refuse to recede"

points to the woman holding red
foreground, red background, concurrent
in the present
stress of her dress

and a window framing perspective
that is escape

"On one plane, she cannot recede," she says

"On one plane, she cannot proceed," says the other

who, standing close to her, desiring in the public space of
the poem, tries to create a psychic frame with her skin

"But it is not for the subject to proceed," she says,
"but the artist. It is not the woman, but the painting of
the woman itself that becomes present"

and rushes on to look at "La Danse"

leaving the form of the other left behind pulled
in ways violent to description

"can't you recede gently," says the other

then louder:

"they called him a beast"

5.

the narrator realizes she could save herself
some pain, write stanza eight and
call it a day

but she is obsessed with something real
what occurs outside the frame
and wanting to make the frame
conform to that outside
and not vice versa

she is obsessed with making desire
of one woman for another woman appear
in the present stress
of Matisse's desire for women

where is the window?

one difficulty with reality:

moving through the background of the poem are people who
actually paid 15 American bucks to see the show

some not that well off

having to see on credit

6.

either one woman will seize the textual moment
turn to the other
and kiss her
or sentences will grow unbearably long

the narrator's deference to convention
to the smooth passage
of crowds through a museum corridor
wreaking havoc on the surface
of her poem

perhaps another woman, glancing at her Cartier so as not to
elicit undue sympathy from the reader or attention in the
background, could wander by the two women staring
at "La Danse"

could notice the orange spiral of desire struggling to free
itself from a blue frame, turn to her husband and, in just
such a tone as to indicate radical displacement of referent,
say, "it is beastly, isn't it"

7.

desire having its way with structure
eventually
the narrator (even without
the problematic kiss)
will admit her desire
to be just like Matisse

that she wants a public space for her desire

(even wants people to pay 15 American bucks to read it)

which will involve concessions
to museum conventions
to the reality of museum conventions
to our reverence of reality

concession: an act or instance of conceding

inside a concession: hot dog vendors cash in

8.

should the narrator's desire not conform exactly
to such structure, she might
slip her subject out of form into
something a little more
colourful

claiming the blue-green in Matisse's canvas as her blue-
green, the blue-green she associates with the depth of a
northern Ontario lake of her youth, which has become her
depth too

she claims her right to this colour, to give her excess of
it to the desiring woman in the poem so that the blue-green
becomes the colour of the first woman's desire and the
orange-red (metonymically linked to the hair of the desired
woman) the subject of her desire

what is left of narrative frames the orange-red inside the
blue-green, an erotic landscape:

the woman with the orange sheen of red hair, brown eyes,
fawn-like, fauvian, wanders into a new sense of that blue-
green, nostrils quivering in drink of it, pink tongue
thirsting, swirling, stirring the surface like stones
skipped like heart beats like waves emanating out

sentient in the mornings after the narrator will write and
rewrite that line bending it in circles ever back and
rushing to the tip of that pink in that blue-green until she
can not bear to think that line (slipping in a comma here)
one moment (another comma) longer

9.

in the museum, the woman with the Cartier glances back at
"La Danse," notices the blue-green, the red fire

missing

the two women gone

in the place where the sentient was, she feels November
outside, Monday morning, the museum pressing a heaviness
into the line above her brow

her husband, touching her elbow, feels her flinch, reads
a space into the line which he had not read before

10.

months later, at Shakespeare & Co., the woman with the
Cartier will sneak a glance at Lesbian Pastiche cached
inside a collection of Lawrence

will think back to the two women

"La Danse"

knowing it now as the frame of her astonishment

she will buy the Pastiche

a poem about two women going for coffee

A Night of Text

or

On Parole in The Prison House of Language

"The danger of straight women is their disguise. They look like women." -- CLIT paper

oh brother games that I played: cowboys and indians, cops and robbers or fox and goose

variations on the binary theme; I was

the cowboy, the cop, the fox learning

already the fact of boys liking to be oppressed

in games or pretending

oppression to break the law

and getting their way

*

years later I'm thinking

fox goose

whose goose got cooked

when my brothers played for real

whose real?

the meadow of my brothers' games or the blue
sky, a possibility, a continuum, subtle
shades that don't start and don't stop exactly, but

somehow cut up, sexed in-

to identifying wedges: XX XY

then wedged in-

to our disparate bodies

-- "Heads!"

they're boys, not me

growing girl-like and awkward, no thread

unravelling from a blue sky but

knotted in language

games that are outside our

selves luring us to a mirror that is said

to reflect rather than inflect

or inflict

because of the wedge

-- "Tails.

we attempt to speak some coherence

-- I...

and make the inside conform

-- lose."

*

and we laughed and laughed because we were two women
standing in the rain outside the Metro Berri
asking her to a lecture
and after the lecture asking her to coffee
and after coffee asking her for a date
struggling to speak this new and sudden sky
how saying the word "date" made the word ridiculous
or ourselves ridiculous
either way I walked home that night
feeling so free

*

standing before the mirror, the lesbian sees herself splayed
and sexed into some essence, some reticence, and feeling
her, oh, excess of that, thinks of wo-man as the sign of her
self split off from the whole

for s/textual abuse

*

the Law says fathers are not suppose to touch their daughters there

the Law says fathers are not suppose to fondle their daughters there

the Law says fathers are not suppose to put their penises into their daughter's there

the Law says not there, not there, not there

the father says not there, not there, not there

my daughter is not there

*

the wedge of woman which has cut deepest, pinned us clean through our wings, better read up close and, still, to see how beautiful a butterfly is and, listen, hear how an other's heart flutters

know how this noun preserves us

but say gender is genre and genre is just one type of fiction we limit ourselves to at any one moment and a mirror can pin nothing down; its subject moves freely before it and say she speaks into the mirror and tells it here's the fairest way of all and does not ask for her reflection at all at all. mirror, mirror, I tell you this

perhaps then she can write herself a different story

*

we began by addressing each other in the third person

she calls me Elle and I call her She

"She -- touch me like this," I would say

"Elle -- are you getting up to make toast," She would say

speaking the language of two solitudes, so that others might
tell us apart

should we tell them our story

I prefer the un-translation, She says

the sound of two shes in bed making love

*

if what we desire in the mirror is our appearance

truly we might dislodge the wedge of genre from
our frontal lobes

and write beyond genre too

*

Sitting on the back step, Elle's father rose slowly, the length of day in his back. It was dusk. He motioned to Elle, and they began the long walk down to the pond behind their house, the dread of knowing already what they would discover heavy in their steps.

Her father had brought four mallards with clipped wings home to the pond. The ducks were beautiful, stirring up the surface of the water at dusk, their wings the blue-green shimmer of a peacock's fan, their eyes two black beads of unconcern. The clipped wings meant they could never fly away. The clipped wings meant they were easy prey, for the muskrat or wild mink that lived in the pond.

Elle's father said he felt sick at what was happening. After that night, he stopped going down to the pond. Even before the last duck was dead.

*

"What interests me about my sexual identity is not having one." -- Jill Johnston

*

the story of Elle and She is jarred by disruptive asides
like toast

which would seem to make reference to a kitchen which would
seem to make reference to a mother and because mother,
father, which could seem to make no reference to a lesbian
in the scene at all

her nightly forays into the kitchen break a vertical hold on
the domestic picture:

Elle takes two pieces of whole-wheat toast out of the
heterosexual signifying economy and places them

into the toaster

what's the matter with the vertical hold?

as if it were inconceivable: lesbians being

hungry at night

*

the text is not sex but the excess of my nerve ends,
speaking the skin, the sense of the way Elle thinks about
the blue sky, fixes her toast, or how Elle kisses and whom
(the way they play the game) set into motion, into e-motion,
a fired and leaping into space by synapse, into the space
between our bodies by syntax

oh reader that leaping off the page as you take me into
translation, texting me into another shade of blue, a
thousand shades of blue. writing me

body to text to body to text, the ki-ne-tics by which our
desire circulates

par la langue

*

from the bank of the river I saw, Elle says

at the edge of the meadow I saw you, She says

from that soft warm space in the curve of Elle's arm She
squirms down over pulls Elle around down over into that soft
warm space in the curve of She's arm

oh, for some line that might bend to embrace

how Elle touches She fluid and slipping into another
position where She touches Elle runs her finger over each
word She says aloud don't stop and don't go Elle lingering
in the space between those two words She squirms beneath
Elle's tongue seeking more and more space She whispers more
and more words holding Elle to that place flowing She
sliding in and out of articles rushing into position Elle on
the tip of She's tongue saying Elle saying She touches me
here in the rush of this sentence is She and Elle and Elle
and She with punctuation. coming eventually they imagine

*

I think, She says, that Elle has become good at being a woman

I think, Elle says, that She says that to keep me here

*

"Hold still, we're going to do your portrait, so that you can begin looking like it right away." -- Helene Cixous

*

in a gap, on a cool day, on a sunny day, Elle performs the textual act, throwing into the blue sky her arms, her impatience and as many surrounding discourses as possible and furiously, though catching at least some of them in recognizable signifying patterns so the audience sees the text but feels the gap, reads the connection but perceives its tenuous edge too, should a sentence fall upon her. upon you. so you yell "bravo" and " juggler" and do not hiss her off the stage

*

our wings are clipped, She says
but we are beautiful, says Elle

*

the problem with sex is that it divides rather than equals
our number

*

the problem with the body as site of s/textual revolution is
that by the time it realizes its counterfeit, the body is
already con scripted, erotic surfaces in scribed and liking
to be touched in certain ways, but not finished, not closed,
though shy to perform, having thought itself in the soul's
shadow for so much of philosophy

*

(Stage lights come up in the poem to reveal a dimly lit bedroom. She is in bed with Elle, a version of true and untrue so that the image of woman is like a stutter now, in disguise of the same, in revise of the same. They sit up in a Victorian bed with a canopy, the covers pulled up to their waists. They are madly taking notes and highlighting passages from books. The bed is strewn with books and papers. There is a manuscript, which they pass back and forth between them, writing in it at a furious pace. Then the activity stops. Elle is reading a passage in a book but appears not to understand. She stops writing at the same time, apparently paralyzed by Elle's lack of understanding. Elle shows the passage to She, who takes the book, but shakes her head.)

Elle: What does it mean?

She: I don't know.

Elle: I can't believe it. We've made so much progress. I mean look, we're at chapter four. We have only a few more to go.

She: We can't go on until we figure out this passage.

Elle: Oh surely not. We can leave it. We can leave it and come back to it. (Elle picks up a pen and tries to write, but cannot. Elle throws down the manuscript.) We can't go on until we figure it out.

She: I'm feeling faint.

Elle: Me too. Sick to my stomach...

She: My head aches...

Elle: Cramps. I'm sweating. Hot. I'm hot...

She: Oh God, I'm burning up...

Elle: Sweating, I can't stand it...

She: Hot.

(A doctor, wearing a dark suit and carrying a doctor's bag, enters the bedroom. His hair is jet-black and combed straight back, glistening with oil. His face has a deathly grey pallor, with dark circles under his eyes. He is

extremely thin and appears far more ill than the two women in bed.)

Doctor: What seems to be the matter ladies?

Elle: We were working and all of a sudden, weak. We were getting so weak.

Doctor: Uh huh. (He pulls down the covers and asks them to take off their night clothes. They are uncomfortable but do as he asks. He takes a stethoscope out of his bag and puts it on, but instead of using it, he starts to examine their breasts with his hands. His hands are cold. Elle and She flinch, but let him continue his examination.) You are obviously feverish. And you were attempting to get out of bed?

Elle: We were writing the history of women. Not the history exactly, but the future history of the history of women. And we were halfway through chapter four and we came to this passage. We couldn't figure it out. And we couldn't go on until we figured it out. (She shows the passage in the book to the doctor. He looks at it once, quickly, and sets it aside.)

Doctor: Well it's perfectly clear.

Elle: What does it mean?

She: Please! What does it mean?

Doctor: It's quite simple. It means that every hundred years woman is annihilated.

Elle and She: No!

Doctor: Yes. See, it says right here. (He shows them the passage, and they appear to understand now.) It is perfectly clear. What we don't know yet is whether this phenomenon is genetic, or whether it is caused by something in the environment. That's what we're trying to understand.

Elle: Surely it is not all women...

She: ...not complete annihilation...

Elle: ...surely it is something gradual...

She: ...that there are a few survivors...

Elle: ...for reproduction at least. To replenish the population.

Doctor: No. It is every single woman. The passage in that book cites the proof that there is this pattern in your history. See (showing them his watch), it is 1998, and you are getting weaker.

(The doctor leaves. Elle and She stare into the black of the poem where the audience is, absolutely quiet, then look at each other, terrified. They sweep all the medical and history books off the bed and get up. They are naked. They stand in front of a full-length mirror, staring at their reflections. Then they turn to each other. Elle puts her hands on She's breasts. She puts her hands on Elle's breasts. They trace the outline of each other's bodies, then embrace, kissing each other passionately. The lights fade into words.)

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in the morning a breakfast table comes into the fiction,
putting Elle and She into a continuous present with two cups
of coffee and toast

at the mention of toast, the line in the poem wavers but
holds

the two women hold hands fast across the table