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Hollow Grass

Carolyn Marie Souaid

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

May 1995

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## ABSTRACT

Hollow Grass

Carolyn Marie Souaid

This collection of poetry challenges the conventional, body-centred definition of motherhood, which subtly privileges women who have undergone the actual, physical process of birthing a child, and marginalizes those who cannot fulfill the biological requirements. It is the story of one alternative -- adoption -- but ultimately, it is the quest for a broadening of the parameters of motherhood, one which locates the primary experience within mind and spirit, above all.

Part I features the struggle of an infertile narrator. It maps her myopically-personal world -- the world of the "dysfunctional" reproductive system -- as well as the broader, socio-political macrocosm which contains her. Parts II and III trace her journey to Lebanon to adopt a child, and then back home again to her experience of mothering "sans sang" or "sans biologie".

Together, the poems work as a narrative progression, with all poems linked thematically by the quest for motherhood. Rather than restricting the series to one particular poetic form, I have allowed the content of individual poems to determine their shape. The longer-lined poems advance the narrative while the shorter, imagistic poems focus on single, reflective moments along the journey. This structural irregularity serves to re-emphasize the theme: The universe is not static, but random and duplicitous. Creative alternatives are always available. In the end, motherhood can be whatever we want it to be.

**The "childless woman" and the "mother" are a false polarity...**

Adrienne Rich

**Our genes, ever sentimental, abhor singularity.**

Susan Gluckman

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I



## Composite

There are shapes my body will never make --  
the perfect O, for instance, a woman forms  
to expel the gleaming apricot head of a newborn

part of her own flesh & her lover's  
part of her mother & father & generations  
before her, swimming into the light

the whole universe from beginning to end  
falling through her  
like the sweet green rain.

## Telling My Mother

Bending, she scrapes her chair  
along the kitchen floor, a chalky screech  
my mother, stoop-shouldered  
bending from a dish of toast crumbs  
groping the tile for glass  
pale hair draining  
into the floor.

Me, eyeing minutiae --  
small surge of her wrists  
exposed goosebumps at the neck  
her upturned palm, skin pulled taut across the bone  
a vessel for the scattered shards.

## Romper Room & JFK

My first memories  
happened at three, drama of death  
in the striated bone of his cheek  
someone spooning ice cubes onto his tongue.  
I kissed my grandfather goodbye  
in the stuffy room, chorus of relatives  
in bosomy black dresses.

After he died, Mom pestered the TV station  
until they made me a guest on Romper Room  
bought me a blue plastic purse  
to match the ribbons in my hair. How I performed  
for the camera, a regular Jackie Kennedy  
until that shattering moment  
when the clasp broke & my pennies ricocheted  
off chairs & across the stage  
sent me clamoring for the broken pieces  
of my purse.

Outside, the sky released an applause  
of crows.

We drove to my grandfather's grave  
flags half-mast, highway a blur.

Slow dark cars & then a rash of trees  
like pall-bearers saluting the avenue.

Nothing fixed but the gestalt  
of epic moments, like home-movies  
coded in the child, celluloid strands of DNA  
speeding up, winding down  
always just a hair  
out of focus.

## Photograph of My Grandfather

Somehow, in the middle of the Turkish War  
he found time to pose for the camera  
eyes staring squarely into the lens  
bullets criss-crossing his lean chest.

He is a young man  
kefaya draped in elegant folds around his head  
rifle locked in his arm, feet slightly apart, waiting  
for the rest of his life.

Though he doesn't know it, he carries generations  
in the sepia cleft of his rib, my mother, my aunts & uncles  
my cousins, the lot of us like liquid generals charging  
into infinity.

I knew him as a quiet man who boiled eggs for lunch  
& wore long-johns to bed. The *Jiddo* who taught me checkers  
in his noisy den off Spadina. I loved the smell of that room  
the blue tins of Edgeworth tobacco. I loved the way  
his long, hairless finger tapped the rosewood pipe

the way his sharp blue eye  
never left the game.

## Rites

1.

In grade 5, the seasons changed her  
chest pushing up her tunic  
like newly-turned earth.

She joined the Leona-crowd  
wore a brown-pronged comb  
in her hair & lipstick

floating through the cloakroom  
like a long-stemmed rose

said I could join  
if I smoked cigarettes &  
kissed boys

thorny laughter  
leaving a blood-red trail  
of petals.

2.

The period before lunch  
the nurse showed films of ultra-thin girls giggling  
at the seashore, flow-charts & arrows  
navigating eggs through the heady waters  
of their private parts.

She passed around a sanitary napkin, crisp white wing  
pleated in flight & I might've smelled a salt breeze  
were it not for the soup wafting in from the cafeteria.

Heather threw up while I tossed in my seat  
golden peach hair between my legs shifting  
like sand

certain it would never happen  
to me.

3.

He always picked a Barbie or Cathy, someone blond & built  
& flunking out of school, the rest of us pictured the marriage  
of gin & Juicy Fruit as they necked in some backseat  
on a fertile spring night.

Plain, pimpled girls we walked home alone  
soda-fantasies still reeling on the dance floor  
nipples ripening our sensible blouses while the bulb of his cock  
gave it to us through a stiff pair of jeans.

Ask anyone  
we aced every assignment, every class test  
except the one with the humid gym  
& the young, green bodies of boys feeling their way  
in the dark.

## **Bible Camp**

13, they shiver in cold flannel, lamplight  
faces blazing the pine-dark

crawl into sleeping bags, bodies touching  
like two small embers on the sprawling earth floor.  
All night, the girl watches him sleep

kindling her future  
in the pale, boy-opening of his shirt.  
All night long, she follows  
the fiery climb of his breath  
to the metal-cold moon  
& back.



### Three Sentences

1.

Suppose you are 15 & a virgin  
you are behind the barn  
suppose he holds your face between his large square fingers  
flaked with tobacco & black earth  
& his thumb crayons your lip  
suppose for a split-second you like it, the warm ripe pear  
nudge it with your tongue  
tiny goosebumps tickle your breasts, suppose  
he tells you unzipping his jeans  
he needs to get close to you, past your mouth  
to someplace his cunt of a wife won't go  
suppose the only sound is wheat  
shuddering in a spool of wind, your eye catches  
the rake falling slow  
motion from his hip, you wait  
for the thud of the wood pole but metal teeth  
are already smiling at you from the hay  
suppose you want to say God you want to say  
mouth torn  
you want to say stop but  
now his farm sweat is behind you shoving  
into your naked parts as you struggle  
liquor-red sun thumping through the rafters  
your throat is somewhere  
in the sky whispering from a cloud  
thin & faraway.

2.

The week the day the hour the second the  
champagne flutes the black garter the thermometer the  
Virgin Mary above the bed

premeditated  
sex

the three of us lie  
in the white gum  
he & I &  
the body, limp fruit  
knifed & slit

I roll the dead thing onto its back  
to contain the ocean inside  
thighs lined up with the planets  
while he disappears  
behind a scissor of light to pee.

3.

Sterile

the small Asian doctor chants it like a poem --  
broken  
English or approximate rhyme

furtive  
eyes / ice  
he wants jello for the petri dish  
slow-motion the long metal prod  
shatters deep  
into the once-blue

pond, cauldron of stones  
splintered fish

tiny black sun.

## Baby Tech

The tests don't matter, not the icy probe  
of his finger, not the flood of purple dye into  
the beaten bag of my womb, nothing but the  
would-be fetus, fragile as the wobbling foal  
in barnlight.

In his lab, bits of women  
float in flasks like grains of Aspirin  
in a chaos of Gingerale. The one bitter pill  
of their lives.

They line up at his door --  
their shaman, their priest, God, whatever --  
thumbing magazines, eyeing one another, eyeing  
his diplomas, like glittering icons on the wall  
waiting to see who won, who failed  
whose experiment took, whose didn't  
they'll all be back next month for more tests  
more consultations, they'll lean across his desk  
opening their bodies to him  
in confession  
praying for mercy.

## Visit to the Specialist

The eye opens & closes, opens & closes  
opens & closes over my file

shiny, phosphorescent bead  
swivelling under lizard-lids

his jaded backward gaze  
over millennia --

the scalding ball of wax & oceans  
unfurled

lush  
palm fronds

dinosaurs on the beach floor  
clattering in the cold snap.

His look is timed, small hourglass  
brain measuring the detail of me.

Outside, a bird rubs against the sky  
trying to leave an impressior.

One blink  
extinguishes everything.

## Elemental

Even weeks after the doctor said it, I couldn't look a mug of coffee  
in the eye without dredging up all that brown muck  
again.

Whoever said spring was pretty, was full of it. Spring is brown.  
Snow is yellow or shit-brown, depending. Brown rivers fart  
from the bowels of the sewer.

I watch a beetle on my window sill flail upside-down  
on its silvery-black shell. The fridge hums its lonely hum.

Brick after grey brick wall. Nobody knows a damn thing.

A bungled chromosome. The hormone pumped into chicken.  
Fall-out from a hydro tower. Bad karma.

Me & some awkward boy whose name has slipped away.  
Quick snip of hymen & a raspberry blotch widening  
on the basement couch while my parents doze  
in white laundered sheets.

A seering hit  
of acid.

The night my Inuit lover wrapped me in his parka &  
carried me to the nurse, my womb-blood pattering  
wine-dark tracks into the snow.

Jeff, whose cold blue eye looked down on me  
from his tripod, while I posed open-legged for him  
on the blond wood floor of his studio.

Some privy star  
winking from the necklace of Orion.

### The Girl at Water's Edge

The world shimmers in its own rain  
daffodils in a splash of grass, pregnant women  
& their fluid strides, calves gleaming  
like quarter-moons.

A secretary waves her diamond ring. Sundays swell  
with new moms wheeling prams.

Storms of them  
& me

like the girl at water's edge  
skirt billowing at her knees, envious  
of the fish in their naked swim

their undulating trails  
of light.

## Shadow Play

Sheets hot on my back  
I grip the planks of his hair  
waiting for the warm, white fizz  
to spill us into a champagne world. Again I flounder  
eyes drifting to the shadows on the wall  
skewed bodies fighting for every last stab  
of air. An arm, a leg jutting out her back  
as though his erect penis were boring  
a hole through the keel of her spine  
the whole carcass sinking  
on a thin raft of light.



## Burial

1.

We picnicked in the woods behind the Esso station  
on a day brown & drier than a twig, stomachs cool  
in the mud, we tickled frogs with a branch  
leaned on our elbows, giggling about sex  
wondering

how everything fit  
together

I couldn't stop her

or myself

wondering

heat gathering in the folds  
of our skin

jigsaw  
of cloud overhead

& that restless, pink stone  
jailed in the sweat of her palm.

2.

The thing about trying to make a baby  
is that you tend to focus on the abstraction  
& ignore the moment

the dying mandarin sun, bananas freckling in a bowl  
strands of his freshly-shampooed hair falling  
across your cheek.

Specialists & test-tubes & thermometers  
have dulled all senses

left my anatomy splayed in a V  
no sparkling June watermelon  
bleeding in a dish, no blue-red embryo

no Victory

only a small parched mouth  
between my thighs

& the senselessness of it all.

3.

Some memories  
you bury --

the bare humidity  
on your apricot vagina.

You pretend you were on a picnic  
or that you never masturbated as a kid  
but the past is still there, lurking

nerve ends fingered to ecstasy  
the forbidden touch, stolen  
glances at one another

the distortion of our faces & mouths  
as the pink stone disappeared inside, cool marble  
on the ball of our sex

panties buried by a tree-trunk  
in the bluish mud.

## Family Tree

Years from now, I'll be a stranger  
in the family tree, footnote yellowing  
in the back pages of an album  
along with the rest --

wives pencilled in, girls who crossed fences  
into white-steepled towns  
diluting the blood, guests  
to the ancestral home  
mismatched linens & china patterns  
clashing with the furniture

stick-figured children who died of consumption  
ropey phlegm killing off entire branches  
of the tree, long lines of men  
who might have sprouted at their hand  
shadowy profiles planting the soil  
in the shape of their memories.

## Poem for the Dead

Michel weeps under a bare lightbulb  
brooding in the worm-glow  
of his parents, two pale slugs in the ground

dreams the walls of their hearts, the reassuring steam  
of blood, their warm human sounds.

He reaches for the old house  
gentle tug of their faces  
like porch lanterns on a January night.

Yesterday, when the furnace went  
we boarded up windows  
trying to stave off the cold bone-structure  
of winter.

In my dream, a kid shivered by the stove  
the collapsed house around him.

## Late Afternoon

Winter's thrown me off kilter  
the way new neighbours  
change the feel of a place, their havoc  
of mittens & scarves along a porch railing  
chipped toys junking the yard, one flashy red toboggan  
& an entire street lit with new meaning.

A house like that moves in its own time.

I gaze at their Christmas world, winking  
red & green lights, the intricate link  
of mother & son on opposite arms of a sofa  
lifting a bright paper chain to the window.

He, leaving oily thumbprints  
she, clapping at the stove  
boiling cocoa & marshmallows.

The sun visits me briefly now

a pale nod of light  
across the snow.

## Two Women

*for Margaret Webb*

Maggie left her husband & job to agonize  
over poetry in Montreal

peopling her apartment  
with books & theory

says it is enough  
just being

on a lawn chair  
with a litre of red wine & her journal  
boundless  
blue sky clapping above.

2.

You wonder if life  
means something messier  
than a bungalow in the suburbs

something more in line  
with bug spray & scaly turquoise paint.

You drift blank-eyed into space  
picturing how good it would feel to walk barefoot  
across her pine-planked floors  
clay mug of coffee in hand, books in hectic piles  
on the bed

alone & dizzy with poetry  
long black T-shirt hanging  
free.



3.

3 o'clock & neither of us has gotten up once to pee  
smoking at a lopsided card-table by the balcony  
nothing moving outside but the wavy August heat  
above the curb.

She opens another bottle & we drink  
some more, glass after glass of warm red wine.

She's radiant about some lesbian  
theory she discovered in a book, a dream  
she had last night & she's hammering out a new poem

talks with her hands, her whole body  
flying, those weird thumps  
from next door might be the blood rushing  
in her veins or her fingers pounding the keyboard.

Meanwhile I'm thinking it's years since I've had a dream  
I can remember & I'm half-listening, half-falling

down a thin glass tube  
of ether, into sweet-jesus blue  
nothing.

## The Underworld

On the count of ten, you, spread-eagle on the table. Technician swabbing an iodine-brown sun onto your belly. At eight the room grey, pebbly. A voice, finally catching the ear. Breaking as it hits. The whitest wafer of light closing in on itself to black. The hiss as it goes, an earthquake rocking the body. Last quiver up the spine.

Stuff of the room going watery. You, slipping. Arms & legs scissored apart, falling deeper & deeper into the dark vault. Grooves of the body ballooning & distorting with water. Blue bits of sky blinking light-years above the hemispheres of the brain. Body emptying itself of itself dissolving into the clammy black air. Bare threads of you drifting like old pink kleenex at the bottom of a sewer.

Part of you here, part of you there.

The long black rat when I was ten & playing behind a factory. Fur gummed back & glinting in the sun. The garbage lid I whacked it with until the bones were good & crushed. As if that wasn't enough. The small grey mice I hid downstairs in the laundry room for a school project. Starving & poking them until their rabid snouts finally turned on one other.

## Driving Home From the Hospital

I breathe & he breathes, he asks if I'm chilled  
fiddles with the dash, the radio  
jogs the vents, I am exhausted watching him.  
A frail snowflake trembles at the windshield  
dissolves under the eyelash  
of a long black wiper.

Just when I thought I could count on him, he arrived  
with my release papers & a long-stemmed rose  
tender folds like the inner regions  
of a woman. How he had the audacity --  
this reminder of loss, this small death.

*On peut toujours adopter*, he says  
turning up the driveway, words awakening in him  
like a final burst of summer. I can't share his energy, his enthusiasm  
drawn, instead, to the grey-brown scraggle in our garden  
the pocked terrain, recalling the cosmos  
before they withered into nothing.  
Tall, hardy, dancing  
in the wind.

**Parallel Thoughts: driving home from the hospital**

Ali McGraw & Ryan O'Neal  
in their famous poster-clutch.  
The vinyl bean-bag chair & pink record-player.  
Crackly 45's, those old summer hits. *Spinning Wheel*.  
Spines of forbidden books turned inward on the shelf.  
*Love Story. Summer of 42.*

My own secret novels  
tucked in a drawer under rolls of socks.  
A tentative *fuck* or two for splash. Written in code  
in case Mum ever found them. Parts of the word  
left blank.

That collision of F & K, the sour wince in your throat  
rising like vomit, the beefy groan. Dry shock of  
the penis. Your father's  
stash of *Playboy* magazines. What men did  
to women. That word.

Just thinking all this, warm lips  
of rain passing the window.

Your closed bedroom door, the slow creep of hair  
at your neck. Legs midair, panties a thin ring at your ankles  
dropping the pen first & then the book  
fingers working the whole  
unbroken yolk, that small cry from within, the fear  
of entry, of things you are & are not  
capable of.

Ambivalence. That song.

Enough to last a lifetime.

## Under This Moon

I know by the bloat of the moon, I've got my period again.  
The way the warm wind carries my blood  
back to me, as the clay-red earth sends  
its own menstrual odor back in spring.

Under this moon, under this black, dimensionless sky  
where you want connections between this & that  
solid reasons for things --

the dull, brown river pulling through me  
eggs in a downward spin  
like the yolk of dead corpses  
on the six o'clock news.

Under this moon, where one sideways glance  
opens our bodies to every new sore on the planet --

the pain, for instance, of the child across the street  
knees hugged into her chest  
tears of the moon falling into the small cup  
of her body.

Shaking your fist, you're actually thinking -- God  
damn it, give me one, just one good reason  
why I can't have a baby & you're literally screaming  
bloody murder

which is why you find yourself desperate  
for a connection  
between the girl in the thin cotton dress & the ivy  
worming up the trellis like a cancer, nailing its shadow  
to the crumbling mortar of the house.

Or the girl & her father  
caught in a slur of kitchen light  
stumbling back & forth into an avocado  
green stove, core of his body  
pitted with darkness.

A simple connection

like the one between the rasping  
wind & the stir of new blossoms  
mouthing for air.

## Prognosis

1.

We drive  
from the surgeon's office, spotless  
cubicle where my spidery X-ray flickered  
on a thin white screen, where he delivered  
the bite, cool & clipped  
as a weather report---

*Your chances are less than 5%*

Driving, neither of us speaks  
slow pupils drifting like dull black zeroes.  
The tarry summer heat swims off the road.  
Every angle of concrete hisses  
under the sun, blanched.

At the Wellington Tunnel, traffic stalls  
& cars creep in the humid dark  
like the lesions in my fallopian tubes  
the doctor sliced away.

2.

Nothing registers but every wrong rub against me  
the fibrous weave of the car seat  
crawling up the backs of my thighs  
every knife & intrusive hack at my body  
my husband's hand bumping mine  
hot & real as the ash on a burning cigarette  
one pulls away from  
that shooting nerve  
of pain.

Intuition tells me  
the lumps & scars will root again  
raggy tentacles spreading in profusion, baby heads  
of cabbage, tender & green, multiplying  
in the warm trench of my womb.

Eyes averted, we listen to the radio  
& wait.



## Scars

An old love affair  
lingers, untamed

catches your skin every autumn  
like the jagged edges of a leaf

paws your hair  
& scatters you to the wind

the raw pulsating thing  
where your heart should be, meat  
of it lifting to the music of the moon.

How we glittered in our animal pockets  
of water, doing it to Mahler & Stan Getz & every one of the  
Brandenburg Concertos.

Another year gone  
& that feline madness again

jazz on a street corner  
a small rooming house on Marie-Anne

the roar  
of a yellow leaf.

## Nightmare

Partying at jennifers cigarettes & wine & suddenly a telephone  
balloons in my hand, treble voice shrieking about a friend  
getting hit by the Metro

a million thoughts rush thru my mind, his house, his car, his bank account  
his girlfriend, his live voice on the answering machine

can you take the Metro home right away? she asks, the voice an old  
family neighbour whose husband once pestored me all the way  
to my dorm room, phone ringing & ringing off the hook until  
I unplugged it, the crecpsy lecherous *brrring* of it, zapped him  
into thin air with all the other insects, later his rotten seed converged  
in the baby they made, a sick kid with a sick little mind

can you take the Metro home? cn you tke the Metro home?  
Tk th Metro hm Metro Metro Metro  
she c'viously wants me dead, this woman

psychoanalyzing the crazy mixed-up pieces, replaying it  
scene by scene, the message, the voice, peeling it back to the bare nerve  
waiting for a severed black hand to reach around  
the bathroom door when I least expect it

Can YOU take the Metro  
& then dead air.

## Mister Falafel

I smoke by the January window  
reflection & I

dark rinse of traffic  
outside

leaning umbra  
of a coffee mug

grey mushroom  
wall

ashtray, a crumpled foil heart  
on the table.

I smoke the cigarette, filling a small chair  
with myself.

## Another Nightmare

It's taking forever to peel an orange  
fingers jammed in time  
though, far as I know  
I'm not dead yet.

Reds & plaids are bleeding over me  
I want 'em all, flying specks of anything  
every decimal of colour  
& negative space.

Conversation's on a hellward bend  
multiplying exponentially  
like the white, painted lines on a highway  
never-ending.

We're hanging by the bare thread  
of a window, & this fucking orange  
is way too big  
for any of us.

## **Foreshadowing**

When I finally let go  
of science, I remembered the story of Moses  
how his own mother defied the Pharaoh  
& wove her baby into a nest of bulrushes

how she let him go  
as one lets go of consciousness in sleep  
she, alone at the riverbed, a pinpoint  
against the darkening sky  
cool dry breeze emptying  
the heat from her body

& I thought of the Pharaoh's daughter who found him  
curled on his side like a small animal  
limbs tucked under his body  
twitching lightly

nameless, motherless  
drifting into the wide-open  
hands of God.

## The Palmist

*for Rhonda*

The moon chases the dark  
for its other half.

My hands in clammy leather, the black highway  
splash of cars as I wait for a bus, wait for her

to trace the fault lines  
in my palm

blue TV light in a corner  
of the room, soft noise

of her touch re-aligning the planets  
birthing a child.

A fine dream of snow passes the window  
& we are laughing now

huddled by the stove, fingers warming  
thin china cups.

Waiting for the bus home, the top-heavy sky  
lifts away. Even the crazy metal of cars  
holds new meaning.

II

### **Khamseen\***

Passengers jostle on the tarmac  
throats dry as cumin.

The plane landed  
like a small typhoon.

We board the mushroom darkness of a bus  
raw wind bending around us

where nothing moves  
but the odd molecule & Assaad's face  
lifting from a dry scrap of paper.

The Syrian President  
eyes us from every parched wall  
of Customs. He is in every russet uniform  
every cocked rifle, every broom-thick moustache  
every red coal of every cigarette.

His earth-cracked lips heave & harden  
under the volcano of words.

Somewhere in the desert  
the small spine of a cactus  
shivers.

---

\* an extremely dry, stifling, sand-laden wind which originates in the North African Sahara, and lasts for approximately 50 days.



## The Fertile Crescent

Bedouin women  
in a cobbler's doorway  
crosslegged with their baskets  
of eggs & vine leaves

eyewhites, a dull glaze

babies in their laps  
like steaming loaves of bread.

Death is a distant country to them  
a great, green curve of land  
where ancestors wait

unburdened

mosaic of upturned faces  
like golden plates of fruit  
in the sun.

**Peasant in a Doorway I**

At first glance it is nothing more than a ghost town  
of mortar & withered car parts  
a nothing blink of the eye  
but somewhere under the dead ochre sky  
below the stump of a broken building  
a human hand appears  
like the first stir of grass.

A small man under a burrow  
of light sells figs & fava beans  
from a bright red cart. He is whistling.

Beirut has begun to thaw.

## Second Look

*photograph of Lebanon, 1982*

Skeletal remains on the fringe  
of town. Cracked walls & live wires  
shivering in the wind. The greys of the shack  
are muted, shades of devastation  
too subtle for the lens

an image easily forgotten, unremarkable  
as the peasant headed for the rubble  
long black veils vanishing in the air. Her hand  
clutches a transparent white bag through which  
we make out the bare bones  
of groceries, figs & a shoulder of lamb

but follow her gaze beyond the fragments  
to the junipers & cypress trees twisted into the shapes  
of corpses. Take a good hard look  
at the boy tagging barefoot alongside her  
& note the fight in her eye  
like the last grove of cedars  
surviving in the mountains.

## The Survivors

Lebanese bear their lives  
even in death  
Syrians stomping all over them  
swatting commands.

Once a deaf man got it  
from behind, cornered animal  
like a decimal on the leaden horizon

pressure building inside the hollow drum of his ear  
long, lean haunches gobbling up  
the forward-moving pavement  
until the explosion came

small click in his ear  
like the last sputter of radio, silvery sound  
waves thinning into the primordial base  
of his brain.

Neighbours dragged the dead weight of his body  
up a steep flight & into a limestone house  
head bobbing sideways from its stem.

No one acknowledged the wound  
until they laid out the huge flank of him  
& noticed a halo of blood  
soaking into the Persian knots of the rug.

No one saw death come  
floating into his mouth, only the big dark ant  
that crawled along his blank eye  
& onto his faltering tongue

the last speck of life  
he took in.

## Peasant in a Doorway II

Something moves me about him  
old tawny fingers scattering the worry  
along his rosary, beads blunt & smooth as bullets.  
He never cried when they shelled his house  
not even when he lifted his son's head  
by its twisted nape & carried him out of the fire.

He rests under the tired hood  
of his eye. This is God's will  
it seems to say.

I pity him. Shorn white head, the way his reverent  
toes curl under the frayed hemp of his sandals.

Around him the street is levelled. Chances are  
he won't live to see the new world rise up  
from the rubble, brassy cafés  
with bold awnings & gilt-edged tables  
where men in fine suits will smoke & haggle  
over cobalt-blue thimbles of Arabic coffee  
afternoon clouds rearranging the sky.

I memorize the scene  
like my mantra.

This making & unmaking of the world.

## Origins

1.

In another version  
a paranoid Joseph  
exiles Mary to the desert  
to escape her tyrant father  
who might slaughter them both.

She wanders among the Bedouins  
veiled & anonymous  
across the shifting dunes.

On a clear night  
the camels form a mystic circle around her  
while she coughs the bloodwet child  
through a slit in her body

names him Fady  
like Jesus in Hebrew  
bundles him in goat-hair & leaves him  
on a barren woman's doorstep  
limp & wrinkled, perfect animal  
of her womb

begs a star in the East  
to light her way back.

2.

Miral gives birth during a ceasefire  
weaves the infant in egg-shell blue  
& chances the mountain  
sky bright as brass.

Suddenly  
war splits the air

random specks & flying shapes  
catching the windshield, heads tossed back  
mouths agape

dust & wind in all directions  
like confetti. She gropes for the pieces  
of the car floor, sheltering the boy  
in the large tent of her body

& fanfare  
scatters the knoll.

## La Place des Martyrs

1991

They gather here  
as though a party were about to break, anarchy  
of card tables & broken lawn chairs  
soda pop & cigarettes.

Or perhaps the party is over & the rubble  
is really the aftermath of a good time, champagne toss  
of peanut shells & confetti on New Year's Eve.

A man licks an ice-cream cone  
another shuffles randomly, wondering what to sweep  
leftover kids straddle the chipped wings of a statue.

16 years of war  
200,000 dead.

Everyone moves cautiously in his skin  
waiting for the hangover to set in.



## House in the Bekaa

The links are tenuous. This is no holiday town.

Empty sky & one house  
bleached as a Greek villa.

Travelogue shock  
of white & Aegean blue.

Rungs connecting the ramshackle frame of a ladder  
ladder connecting the lizard ground  
to a flat mud roof

where children might sit throwing stones  
legs swung over the edge  
or a sunburnt pilgrim might pause  
for a brown jug of water  
on his misguided journey  
to heaven.

## Crèche Saint-Vincent-de-Paul

for Soeur Bassoul

The nun wipes her forehead  
with the knobby back of her hand  
leads us beyond the garden wall  
where lemons the size of grapefruits  
hang thick in their skins  
against a mirror of blue

childhood summers surfacing  
in each spike of light.

Dandelions lifting their yellow skirts  
in the breeze. Warm waft of citronelle  
as I peddle Dixie cups from a red wagon  
bumping along the sidewalk  
with my clinking tin of nickels

money for a new doll  
to lay in the shining grass.

## **Resurrection**

For a moment, there is nothing  
in the air but a dumb gaze  
like that instant after a relative dies  
when you kneel in the half-light  
by the ashen corpse, breathless

then a faint stir as the soul lifts  
& crosses out of the darkness.

We wait on the cool green marble  
sun angling down from a tall window  
moment filled with coughs & echoes of coughs  
& the long bar of light streaming in & then  
a nun in her blue habit  
materializes at the door.

In that first breath we take together  
I have already memorized  
every detail of you, every nuance, the fine weave  
of your hair, each nutmeg-brown stitch  
the pale pink braid of your skin.

Deep inside my body  
the first pulse of you.

## Heading for the Canadian Embassy in Damascus

Pawns on a board  
we wait for his hand to move us  
into safe terrain, George Asslan  
the poker-faced driver with a smile  
crooked as the dealers at the Souk  
their golden teeth glinting  
like bullets.

He does it for the money  
sneaks people in & out of Syria  
long, dark sedan smoking Beirut at 4 A.M.  
greeting the Bekaa  
at the first clang of day.

He knows the game  
gaze like a snake's-eye toss of the dice  
barters with large, flat coins of bread & Marlboro cigarettes  
smuggled inside passports.

Nothing fazes him -- not the bulging eyes of the guard  
like pure black weapons  
not the scarf-headed Moslem women  
& their swayback mules  
pacing in the caged light  
of dawn.

## rue Hamra

Slit-eyed in shadeless West Beirut  
combing maps for a sign  
a landmark, any point of reference  
the day, a haze  
of dust & coriander.

The driver circles & circles for parking  
wiping oil from his forehead, drops  
us somewhere to pick through  
olive-grey boards & fallen plaster  
baby gathered into my breasts, into the very nucleus  
of my being, the pressure of his weight  
entering me, every rosy particle of matter  
the sunny planet of his face.

Soon the world begins  
to fall away from us, spinning on its own congested axis  
as though we no longer need it  
the noise, the traffic, the silvery-white light  
as though we can finally be everything  
to each other

the sun, the moon, the stars.

III

## **The Meeting Place**

Nights I dream a rambling vineyard  
with pendulous purple grapes & the Arabian horse  
my grandmother rode to singlehandedly  
drive the Turks from her father's land.  
I see her youthful hair catching the wind  
the old stone house in Zahle where she lived  
with seven sisters, the family womb  
& its vast spiral of blood. I see fish spawning  
in the river, the rippling effect. I see my boy  
like a dormant seed in her path  
waiting for its moment of sun.

## Birth Poem

1.

Kitchen window.  
Egglight.

Woman / half-woman  
imagines a story

throbbing sky  
in her wet, wide-open cunt

nipples dark, enlarged. Raisins  
in their swollen bowls of milk.

Pictures an infant --

thrusting head  
like a new seed

splitting  
the earth.



2.

A narrative --

The nun releases  
her long, silken braid

strokes my breast  
bringing a flood of milk.

Jesus smiles  
from the cross.

We come together  
on the small cot, trembling.

3.

Land of bloodied buildings  
& hollow grass. The moon  
a green gash  
in the sky.

Birth-mother drifts  
along the beach  
hugging the wounded stem  
of her body

thin, stockinged feet  
roaming the shoreline  
contour of a ribcage  
poking through her pale  
white dress

random prints in the sand  
starting nowhere, ending  
nowhere.

## The Little Things

Infant in my arms  
blissful angel in the dust of sleep  
fingers laced with mine  
white gauze curtains  
gentling over us.

A breeze

from the open window  
ruffles his hair, honeyed  
in the moonlight.

We fill the room like lovers  
in their rumpled bed  
languid & content.

## Root

How I saved your umbilical cord  
in a Birks box, wrapped in tissue  
with your first shoes & a lock of hair

how when my mother bathed you it fell away  
& she delivered it on a tuft of Kleenex  
part of the tree from which you hung like amber fruit  
in another woman's womb

how my mother's shining eyes met mine

how she handed it to me the way a neighbour  
shares a clipping from her garden  
praying it will take root.

**Woman Whose Baby  
Died of S.I.D.S.**

I wonder how often she replays it in her mind --  
the clumsy warnings of the day, screeching brakes  
on a highway, fitful shift of sky.

The new mother, sensing an odd configuration  
bolts from a deep grunt of sleep & fumbles  
to the crib, racing the lime-green stitch of digits  
around the clock-radio, only her feet are already  
carrying her backwards by then

as though Earth were suddenly running  
out of time & stars were unravelling  
like spools of thread, slipping  
through the dark, empty knot of space  
random bits of her life recurring  
in a dull loop, cheating on a physics test  
the guy she stole from her best friend  
crazed interface of the universe  
weaving in & out of her path

pressure cooker screaming  
in the kitchen.

## Mothers

They said the woman who stuffed her newborn into a bus-station locker  
sealed him like a piece of meat inside a freezer bag.  
Nobody got why someone with a clipped lawn  
& perfect life could do such a thing.

Picture the cloistered nun  
who, as a child, mothered all her siblings  
& then whimsically flung the maternal bones from the shrine  
of her body.

Or the girl in the abortion clinic  
barely a woman yet  
having the jello yanked from her womb.  
She's heard too much of the bad stuff, the factory lives  
whole neighbourhoods bred & rebred with each other  
until everyone comes out looking the same --

large, domed foreheads  
freakish bodies  
wide, hammock grins.

She wouldn't be caught dead.

Picture the frazzled one in the grocery line  
placating her cranky kid with Sweet Tarts & chips  
secretly praying the next one is dead when it's pulled  
white as an uncooked goose from the stove of her belly.

A woman leaves sanity behind  
the way she leaves an old umbrella on the bus  
excess baggage weighing her down

steps off the bright rod of light into a dark neighborhood  
a smudge of time around midnight  
when Monday becomes Tuesday  
because of a mere cosmic shift, a momentary blur  
when all she can see are gardens & their off-centre flowers  
& the moon swinging upside-down from the trees.

## The Way It Is

When you ask me  
who built the sky  
I'll say this ---

*Some engineer with a  
designer mug, car phone  
& blueprint his boss drafted  
with a gold pen  
on a plane ride to Cayman.*

All I know is  
order sneaks up on us  
conformity  
what you can & cannot get away with.

We spend our afternoons together  
on the Oriental rug  
me piling pink blocks  
one by one, patterns  
of letters & numbers  
for your balled fist to swat

grey winter days stacked  
against you.



## Hafeeza

*for my grandmother*

My boy, balanced on a knee  
when the phone call comes. ShriII, final, one ring.  
He convulses in my arms, pink pelting screams  
for a feeding or diaper change. The stroke put her in a coma  
they finally pulled the plug. I tend to my son  
spooning formula into water, gentling his mouth  
over the small, porous nipple.

Sickness was her life. This doctor & that.  
Mornings, from bed to the overheated den  
with her loud television & fifty pill bottles  
rattling on the couch. Waist shrinking  
until her robe hung loose as bunting  
over the brittle porcelain  
of her bones.

After the funeral, I prop Alex on an apple-branch  
observing the boy at my hand, the contradictions  
every hearty cell of his body, his fragility  
like the pale lilac on the verge of a moment  
ready to enter this world completely  
ready to leave it anytime.

## Baptism

We gather in Byzantine light  
chant of rain through tall, stained windows.  
The priest circles a brass font of water  
baby raised in his arms like a chalice.  
He is dipped & delivered to me  
in wool & soft boughs  
of cedar, cleansed  
protected.

On the street, amber headlights  
illuminate the pagan wind, the broken lives  
in our path --

boozer in a doorway speaking in tongues  
bag-lady carting her muddled possessions  
through the spattering rain.

They stumble in the dark  
jittering bodies misinterpreting space  
as though somewhere along the line  
they missed a step.

The air rushes its cool prayer through me  
as I bundle Alex for the walk home, breath-tight  
holy oil gleaming from his forehead  
like a burnished weapon  
against the world.

**Alex at 2**

He uses his lips as small bayonets  
beating the air, firing nouns & verbs  
like heavy artillery.

The feminine stuff -- articles & prepositions  
-- lay low in the trench of his mouth  
a muddle of sound.

He wields a stick, the biggest & longest  
drags it clicking along the sidewalk  
leaving mud trails behind  
his own small mark  
on the world.

At the sandbox, he stakes his claim  
one tough little jean jacket shrugging off the sun  
a surrender of girls by the swings.

*Me!* he shouts, *Me!*  
bold as a brass jet  
of baby pee.

## Connecting

He is learning my language, I am learning  
his. I read *Hop on Pop*. Simple words, easy  
for a kid.

He vomits after dinner, gags  
on milk & mashed potatoes.

I mop the spoiled  
hieroglyphs.

He is upset, jumpy, unable to sit  
for a quiet moment, body wired to its own  
grammar of space & time.

He darts around the den, runs  
for a power cord, then another, makes a B-line for the stereo  
testing every button, every switch. At bathtime he devised a  
popcorn machine, a furnace out of old yogurt containers & plastic lids  
wonders how fast he can dump the Lego blocks  
how much racket  
he can make.

Finally, his rhythm slows. He curls up  
beside me like a comma.

*Mami.*

For a breath  
we connect.

### Alex's Leaf

The leaf he finds is ugly, bleached white  
like a hand starved with detergent, burnt at the tips  
its mottled underside the brown of liverspots or  
old tea stains.

I twirl it, wondering what he loves about this dead  
thing, wondering why he didn't choose the one beside it  
scarlet & teeming with energy

its own spun planet of rain & mown grass.

Instead, he picked the corpse in its airtight grave  
every stiff cell clenched with sleep

embracing it, unconditionally  
for what it is.

## Coastal Maine (Higgins Beach)

1.

In twenty years it hasn't changed  
same smells, same  
hump in the beach road  
before that first blue jag of water &  
the sun jumping like sequins off the sand

the cool, fishy breeze that runs  
goosebumps down our arms at sunset  
as we stand at the lip of the marsh  
watching Alex in soggy runners  
seaweed looped in olive bracelets  
around his small, centipede fingers.

2.

As a kid I never trusted  
the beach --

surf in random time  
each speck of sand  
an erosion.

My mother combed the finny slate  
to keep us in arts & crafts all winter  
shells & salmon stones to paint  
bunched heather & blackened twists of driftwood  
for Christmas decorations. She saw possibilities  
in everything --

damp, springy sand  
the potent healing salt  
of the ocean

a cottage's splintered  
beauty.

## **Taking the Fall**

Alex has begun to build. He fingers  
the Lego blocks, wondrous at their  
solid, plastic strength. Unaware  
of pattern & form, unaware of probability, he piles them  
in pure random order, a naive Masterpiece.

The tower is dangerously lopsided.

There's a lever for the furnace, a chimney  
for the smoke to come out. His trusting eyes gleam, his  
cheeks puff like dough on a cookie sheet, as he lets go  
& claps for his monstrosity. In that split second  
I catch it all --  
the bad report card, the girl who leaves him  
by an open door, vanishing point  
in a bleak, oblong of space

the plummeting structure I can't catch  
fast enough.



## Her

I can tell by your face that  
she is beautiful  
full red lips, spirited laugh  
someone you will search all your life for  
with the same energy  
you dig the earth in our garden  
lashes starred with mud

peering into your dark empty hole  
the way you hunt for the perfect twig  
or the missing piece  
of a puzzle

curious back of your head trailing  
unknown streets & unknown people  
the absent one  
as she slowly takes shape  
in your eye.

### **This Poem**

How can I let this poem  
get in the way of my kissing him good-night  
mere words -- after all -- nothing as earth-shattering  
as his story about the yellow digger at the construction-site  
prolific, steel arm hauling mounds of dirt & concrete  
through the sky. Somewhere on the edge of my pen  
his thin voice is rising & falling  
getting in the way  
of words

nothing in my book but a vague impression  
of him huddled with Pooh Bear  
in his flannel bed, yawning in the dark  
& his pale, pink lids surrendering to the moths  
in the apple light of a place  
far, far away.