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LIFESAVING

Frances Mary Maika

A Thesis in

The Department of English,

Creative Writing Option

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

April 1999

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ABSTRACT

Lifesaving

Frances Mary Maika

This thesis is a collection of poetry, prose poetry, short prose reflections, and sudden fiction that examines violence and its repercussions, animal life, and unexpected joy.

In the lined poems, rhythm and syllabic liaison are as important to me as the line. In the prose poetry, phrase and syllable are key to rhythm, and while my choice to use predominantly prose and prose poetry in the thesis is organic to the topics treated, it has also been influenced by my ambivalence toward the line. And so I work primarily with the paragraph, the phrase, the sentence and the syllable. I try to privilege rhythm and sound where possible because I want these words to be felt in the body where love first happens, and where violence from fists and words forces lifesaving to begin.

The thesis is divided into three sections. The first two sections are a journey through infatuation, love, habit, violent confrontation, to an unknown end, and focus on human relationships. The final section is more eclectic and talks about fruit, dogs, deer, illness, municipal politics, and fish who have rhythm. Images from the natural world are common to all three sections, as are animal encounters.

To boys: your mystery makes me listen
To girls: your kinship keeps me whole.

FOR THE ANIMALS:

Wally
Bing
Ginger
Topaz
Jet
Tappen
the squished kitten
Moosie
Pushkin
Panther
Kaspar
Gypsy
cows
Spud
that porcupine
Jenny Perkins
the coyotes
Fred
Barney
Butch
Buzz
Quax
the fish
moose I've eaten
all the deer I spent time with, including those my dad shot and hung in the garage
the bears who ignored me (thank you)
the lynx who lives near Dragon Lake.

FOR THE OTHERS:

Donald. Alpha to my Alpha.

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**A Short Course On
Women's Self-defense**

Doris

got a chair in the head for her trouble. She thought to herself, now I'm that kind of woman and it's not like I was trying to be. What I need is a bus ticket out of here, she said to a stranger. He dropped money in her palm and smiled, his thick fingers nicked knuckles black nails white scuffs showing how often he lied. Now she knows to cover her face so she won't have to see what's coming her way, what's coming to her. What she's got coming to her.

besotted

din of flocks

swarm of love

the language of bees

and sots

Union

Through one eye you stare akimbo. Pupils contract like shutters. Behind clenched teeth our words are fists smiles knives held flat speak mother of pearl sons of bitches. When you strike (thunder seven seconds lightning seven miles), heavenly bodies arc and a blue smudge marks the join.

Together we float above the room, buoyed by swollen air.

Courtship

I love you like a law of physics
honey and religion
so rich you hurt
my teeth

Shame

Again at night through my pores unfurl the petals. A pistil rises out of my throat to speak with the breeze at the open window, pollen already gossip on the scratchy wind. The flowers blossom at time-lapse rate in order to seed by morning. They must find a way to divide and I am halved. Loam in terra cotta on a bedroom ledge.

Brides of Christ

Your best friend has joined the Sisters of the Atonement. You say you hope she won't mind if you think of her calling as a profession. She stops phoning. You wonder if her time is taken up in prayer -- desire zinging through the chapel roof to satellites beyond.

She performs selfless acts like serving soup to hundreds of ragged men on Wednesdays. She tells you about holding the hand of a woman suffering delirium tremens. This woman, she tells you, thought your friend was a serpent, a maggot-ridden corpse with flames for hair. You are envious, the both of you having always admired Joan of Arc. Could be then that your friend has won something.

When you see her on the street she smiles, lightly touching your shoulder with her white fingers. She still wears her street clothes, but already her hair is pushed back from her forehead as if ready for the habit. You wonder if she will wear it like a nurse's cap. Or a tiara.

Her hair is the same: loose curls, black, very Irish. Her hair really sums her up. She is happy and laughs when you tell her about work, about your family. All the while you tell yourself you must not keep her talking -- this is her workplace; she has to be somewhere, to prepare a meal or minister to the drunk. And the Holy Ghost circles between you. But you talk on. You think: He's a selfish bastard. How many souls can He possibly need when you want just this one friend? And again between you the breeze with its Big H bluster: alpha wolf, stallion, Satan, God. Always claiming something; counting pussy. You part with your friend knowing you will not see her again. You turn to walk away and you fear for your soul. A coven in a bus shelter mumbles as you walk by. You friend will pray for you. You want to tear your hair, your clothes, to rub her face in the holy dirt

articulations

1. **ferocity of horses' hooves**
 bites just shy of blood
 sudden, gentle licks
 salt on tongue

2. **deer in the alfalfa**
 powder their musk
 blossoms wink
 anticipate the dew

3. **arm against my cheek**
 skin of doe and petal
 you smell of marijuana
 summer dusk and myrrh

Matador

A stuck bull. He charges, guts enraged. She has no time for knives. She falls. Flesh closes around their wounds. The fight is over. Humility streams from his side in ribbons and he collapses, unable to run. She exits the room on the shoulders of two men. The neighbours celebrate by stomping their heels.

Freight

The man she loves rides freight trains in his dreams, screams drunk and young into the northern wind, cries tears cold as threadbare night sky punched through with light.

His heels drum rhythm to boxcar red wine warm in his chest where his heart stomps flamenco and Ontario winter tempts him to leap.

She lies awake. Her fuel is anger, blackened and opaque with use. Her journey is sober silence. She holds her breath through tunnels, doesn't wail at flattened land or endless coulee undulation.

She will not wake him. Cannot hate him, though he may dream the end of trestles. So she only lies and listens to the warm, unsteady shunting of his breath in the hoodoo air.

She

had great breasts. Each freckled and round under her t-shirt. And she had a good tan, he tells me over breakfast with the detached interest of someone describing a good meal.

I know he has consumed this woman, her light brown mounds, although when I ask he says not then pressed admits he did but was so drunk he remembers nothing.

Nothing but breasts the colour of shredded wheat, making me his morning pal, his child lover who discovers she's not the first by a long shot; not the first to bare her chest between floral sheets in a white apartment, to wish she might bail hay shirtless under the glare of some new prairie brow so she'd have stories to tell at lunch and marks to prove it.

Inside the Prism

The wound has no entry, no exit point. Capillaries harden inside you. When you breathe, shards of glass embed themselves in your chest. This is not the wound. In the morning light, for a moment you are brilliant. A cathedral. Rays shine through your torso into vaulted ceilings, illuminating every recess of bone. A spectrum dances across the walls, except for red and orange, which you absorb. Vessels in your hands and feet are cauterized. Only your wool socks keep blood from going solid. Exposure to any promise now would be risky, even fatal.

All day the wound weeps. You hug your bandages around you and get up to make coffee. Food is ash in your mouth. You return to the window and watch night fall on the yard, erasing the tree stump, changing fruit trees into suggestion. And then you listen. The wound no longer weeps. Although you are still afraid of turning solid. Tomorrow you will try to admire the colours, even the garish. You make a pledge by turning on the lights.

Transmutation (a prisoner's tale)

His wrists are souvenirs of her visit, his arms are souvenirs of days as a bird when he scavenged and didn't know much then evolved to kill only what he recognized.

His eyes got sharper and sharper.

Her neck is the souvenir he never kept and his hands are souvenirs of primitive intentions. She warned him. He could have cut them off.

He envisions their bed, indented where she slept, a trilobite.

They tell him nothing he wants to know here, but when the lights are out, he knows together they remember something ancient. Eyelashes beat rhythm like moths around blackened chimneys. Nature selects wings or cloven hooves for progeny. Already his flayed feet have become hard as rock.

Because every night he dreams of death, he evolves quickly. Chitin hardens around his chest while inside he turns to liquid: the locust preparing for life above ground. He recalls the image of her foot outside the bed sheets – high arch, one toe longer than the others. He will study the mechanics of locomotion, teach himself to walk upright out of here disguised in flesh.

Your Scent

I gather hair from our bed, weave you through my tartan in a rough brown line. I fill sacks with unwashed clothing and sew them shut as hotel pillows stiff under aching necks.

In dreams I roll in your belongings, hold caulk boots to my chest while you practice your healing art: the medicine of snakebites and hollow teeth. All hope of rest diminishes forever to a cut against the sun.

Together we loll, me caught in the imperfect, you at your molecular best.

Once I call out but your name evaporates
dry on my tongue as I wake.

Last Waltz

He begins on narrow base, his arm assigned to guide. He leads, chest north, twists south ahead of toes, slow double quick leg quiet hip. She squares right, anticipates, her torso meets his pivot. Poise backs their steps loop east to west eyes cast past hypotheses to rhythm. Every couple spirographs, black pant legs caught in coloured dress convection. She sees where she's been; he sees where he's going, knows his about to. She, encircled, follows. Now in half-embrace their bodies separate, open wide to face the judges. Her left palm remains in his, right hand vertical beside her as to motion *Stop!* Then the coda and they close again, arms entwined to form a living hinge.

a short course on women's self-defense

Expect the attack. With luck, it does not come to pass. Ripeness is all. My dream attack is one in which I come out alive, and enriched. *You should've seen the other guy*, reads the hackneyed headline. When the attacker runs (and in my fantasy he flees) I want his pockets empty. I want gaps where gold fillings were, missing digits for stolen rings.

Fight with your wits. The attacker has bigger hands, longer arms, and is practiced in the violent arts. *Action: Immediate, unhesitating, unreflective*. This is inscribed below his coat of arms, something I have never worn. But robbing words is easy and he won't know from looking at the metal monster that he's been taken. Ripeness is all.

storyboard: an attack

(mundane, terrifying, comedic)

You face a man in your apartment doorway. You look at him and understand immediately he has planned to damage you in clichéd ways. You are surprised to be a character in this play, and surprised you are surprised, and the someone, the face in the doorway, appears surprised too, but also prepared. In your new role you think: *stay close to your body*, but when you try to move, your arms and legs will not respond, as if you are a marionette and the larger hand of your mind has flopped over like an empty glove. You try to breathe. Your throat is a cricked piece of straw. Only your eyes work for certain.

You are very, very afraid. He knocks you down. Buttons fly off your shirt. You film the events now, take your place behind the camera. Through the viewfinder you see props inflate around you: his clownish shoes, your ridiculous red telephone. An overdub commands you to get into character -- says, *OR ELSE*. You inhale all the air in the room and gasp for more; your lungs are a vacuum and you re-enter your flesh like a genie to its lamp. The desktop phone is paper-light in your hand -- stupid -- and rings when you strike his head. He falls. The frame freezes for the time it takes to cook an egg. He is up again. His eyes drill at your forehead. No one has ever looked more dangerous. Fear alone is why you act. You claw his wrist, gouge skin under your nails like soap! His sweaty hand slips from yours and you have his watch! *Bulova* you read; the still lasts several seconds. Time forward. The room screams in veltriloquy. Shrieks project themselves through windowpanes, throw themselves past doors. Your man, upright, fumbles with the doorknob. You twist his filthy hair around your fingers, pull it from his head in fistfuls, sure you want to scalp him; you beat his neck with rubber knuckles. His head is where the wrong lies. You want his head alone. He contorts to face you, and stuffs his hand in your

mouth; your cheeks sting with bitter nettles; you choke on blood, spit, soap, cigarettes. You gag and fall.

The door swings open. He is gone. Picks, hoes, all your garden violence clatters to the tiles. You are on your knees now trying to breathe or vomit. The air beside the doormat is musky, reassuring. Wedged between the doorjamb and hallway carpet is a shiny dollar. You pick it up.

Wilful Damage

Fire

It's ten o'clock and the sun is an hour gone, darkness a wedge to the east. The boy and girl take turns poking a broken bottle in the fire pit with a willow stick. He says the bottle will be molten by morning. They can come back to look. The girl doesn't ask why melted glass is worth the effort.

The boy is surrounded by empties, number ten punched into the sand between his legs. The girl holds a warm beer on her knees.

Embers radiate against rocks at the edge of the fire pit. Undersides of logs fissure orange and black, pulse flame into the night air, sparks splitting off all ends. The girl is mesmerised by a glowing alder branch. Its twiggy hands curl up in fists then drop into the coals. She leans forward, now compelled to see further inside the fire. Her skin tightens; her hair luffs in the heat. She pulls back, and slides off her log onto damp sand. Her hair is singed and her bare skin prickles. She flops onto her back and gazes at the night sky. A thousand grains of sand tickle her scalp. Stars shimmer under clouds like shot silk; the sky is darker, deeper than even five minutes past, and drapes the girl in a purpling veil. Sparks fly overhead and upward toward nothing. Would fire strip her of clothes before it began to melt her flesh? The girl shudders and the night draws her into its sparkling vastness so she no longer needs to think.

Like a cap gun the fire pops a spark into the air and the girl feels a sting on her chest. She leaps to her feet, dancing to shake the ember free from her t-shirt. She squeals, jumps, whacks her shirt and tap-dances around the log. When the ember has fallen, the girl sits down to catch her breath and the boy hands her his cold beer to press against the welt. She takes it. The boy is laughing, his smile split wide, eyeteeth sharp as a dog. He twists open another bottle and flicks the cap toward the lake. It plops and disappears. The girl watches the boy's adam's apple bob as he swallows. There is a *pock* as he breaks the seal between bottle and lips. The boy yawns, then belches. About two more, the girl thinks, then she will find his keys and drive him unconscious home.

Wilful Damage 1

A popular notion: lovers are halves of the same person. A pile of ashes is found in the upstairs bedroom of a house, or on the kitchen floor; in an alley where two lovers met to exchange keys – atoms of carbon, oxygen, hydrogen separate, recombine to form CO₂ and water. Carbon is buried in the earth to one day become coal, oil, diamonds; gases dissipate in the air to seed clouds for rain.

True enough that some unlucky couples will ignite in exothermic rage, extinguished finally when they can reach no lower state. So. Not halves of a whole, but reactive elements. We are altered violently because of whom we love. We meet and transmogrify; change states; give away, take electrons; release energy; go through unstable half-lives ignobly and unable to help it. Romantics postulate that we each cleave with our Other once we find them: fire kissing water; earth embracing air. But if we leave aside alchemy for geology, we begin to appreciate the force of time. Perhaps we begin whole within the mother bedrock and erode, selves exposed layer by layer, or over the years are pressed one jagged piece into the other, former selves identifiable in lumps but our entire substance now metamorphic. The risk of love lies in not knowing whether our sharpest features will wear smooth or our smoothest edges sharpen against the lover like a blade.

Run

Her blood thumps. She is intact.

A fawn lies so still predators see nothing. Because a fawn smells only of grass and warm earth, coyotes walk by; hunters step right over it. This how the girl hides: half-buried by last autumn's leaves. She breathes thimbleberry, dusky birch, and listens. She listens so hard her head emits a high-pitched whine. Like sonar it bounces off tree trunks, stumps, and the girl is able to make out her surroundings in the darkness.

The boy yells. His voice is a fast current that ripples through the still air and is gone. A truck engine revs and yellow light stabs the dark. The headlights are trained in the girl's direction. The boy yells her name, pauses, swears and kicks the door panel of the truck. He hasn't seen her. Gears grind. The engine winds in a question as the truck reverses. Gravel shoots from tires.

The girl waits a minute, maybe two, for the blank sway of night to return. Then she runs.

She runs with flaming hair, jetting infrared behind her. Branches whip her face, sticks jab her ankles. She runs knee-first into an embankment and trips, burying her hands up to her wrists in gravel. The highway. She scrambles on loose dirt and rocks, sand in her shorts, shoes, down her shirt. Without warning a shadow explodes beside her in the ditch and the girl is sprayed with gravel. She loses her balance and falls chin-first onto the pavement. She lies there, her heart pounding so that with each beat she feels sand grate between the asphalt and her skull.

Dainty shoes click to a stop. The girl looks up to see dish ears swivel on a slender head: a doe. It stands across the highway from her, flicking its tail and watching. In the obscurity, the girl can just make out its eyes, dark sides of moons. Further down the highway a dozen gray shadows stand poised, tuned to her with radar, eyes obsidian. The first doe leans forward, and still watching the girl, begins to lick the pavement. The

others follow. The girl stays where she is, scraped and sore on the highway, warm pavement against her cheek. In the moonless night, she catches her breath and listens to the rasp of tongues licking salt from the centre line.

Lifesaving 1

Sometimes words are best understood as plain sound, our own language a foreign tongue. People in great anguish squawk like crows, gurgle like babies, use syllables to speak something understood first in the body where language is an impediment to sense.

A child dances in the family room chanting, em eye essess eye essess eye pee pee eye. No matter the river whose name she has just learned is a thousand miles away in another country inhabited by people she has only seen on television. The dance protects her against such pedantry. Best she digest all her names early this way, letter by letter, singsong her way through landforms, street signs, history texts, because many of these words will serve later to shut her up. Not just the bitches, cunts, sluts, and whores – commonplaces; every girl learns to duck and pass them on – words that speak of heroes, sons' command, deities, and justice. She must learn to move her body gracefully and with joy so she can swim unassisted among the silent tangles of consonants and hidden meanings; she must know to fold her limbs in tight and sink to the bottom when required. She will understand quickly which currents cannot be opposed and so move with their force diagonally toward a safer shore.

Walk

The girl checks her watch, squints to make out the illuminated digits: three oh five. It's so dark the girl only knows she is at the shoulder of the road because her right foot crunches gravel while her left is near silent on the asphalt. She thinks: the highway at this hour is no-man's land. Safe passage depends upon someone's good will.

The girl is glad to be walking. Walking instead of driving. She has never felt safe in cars. They may as well be bullet casings because she is always ready for impact. And he, as far as she can tell, he is a good driver. Has convinced her his vehicle submits to his will. But she wonders about submission. An unstable setup. Eventually, some kind of equilibrium has to occur, she thinks. When he lets his guard down, when his attention wanders. Then what? The truck goes off the road.

She can make out the ditch now, and the centre line. There is enough light shining from somewhere, maybe the stars, so if she looks, really looks eyes wide open, she can take reasonable steps without tripping. The girl walks and breathes and thinks.

The boy was drunk before she ran from him. And silent, although moments before he had been yelling invective skyward like a roman candle. She knew from his silence that it was time to leave. She felt crosshairs upon her. The boy had begun to measure his words for calibre and take aim. No slurring, no stumbling, just silent focus. Venom had distilled within the boy in such concentration that one clumsy word on her part and all residue of humanity burned away in a blue flash revealing a reptilian core. The girl had no idea what to do. She had tried at first to feign welcome to the boy's aggression: she asked questions, used reason to construct a transparent cage she hoped would protect her, researcher from shark. The boy had only smiled, then lowered his voice. He wrapped his fingers around her wrists and spoke inches from her face; each insult passed through her forehead and blossomed like lead. In drunken rage

the boy was lucid and creative. Anger, the girl now realizes, is his vocation.

The girl turns words over and over in her mind as she walks, and with care she studies their order. He called her bitch, of course; that word is always there, always available. Has always been there with any boy she has known except her father. Other words: ugly, old (absurd because the girl is twenty-one. And now she feels old. Has the boy made her old?). The boy told the girl her breasts were too small. She was just like her mother. *Lesbian*, the boy said. Why didn't she just admit it? Everyone knew she was a lesbian. The girl's head reeled. None of it made sense. The girl can think of nothing she has said or done to warrant the attack, yet the boy attacked all the same. But she has withstood it. She is here.

Behind the girl is a strange noise. Her heart begins to pump in even, swooshing beats; ventricles open and close, chambers fill then empty. Accompanying her heartbeat the girl hears something else -- a faint click. She stops and listens. The sound stops. The girl resumes walking and the sound returns, further outside her body now. The girl strains to see behind her through the grey-black night. Several metres away is a familiar shape: the doe. The girl's quiet spy. The girl feels relief surge between her ribs. She takes three steps and hears *click, click, click* behind her. She quickens to a stride along the double line, and heads toward town, two feet and four hooves tapping point and counterpoint on the dewy asphalt.

Wiful Damage 2

People whose brains are damaged in car accidents, in falls from rooftops, are told by researchers to reach for a spoon and they pick up a fork. Spoon! they say, Spoon! as if not able to tell the difference. But their faces show confusion and conviction at once.

The husband on t.v. repeats, I love my wife, I love my wife, his eyes fixed on a point in the carpet, as if he doesn't know what language he is speaking, what precisely wife and love have to do with him. He stares deep into the intricate loops of broadloom. Maybe he waits for a pattern to reveal itself so he will finally know how rugs are made.

Passenger

Two lights show on the crest of a hill. From this angle a plane appears to be coming in for landing. The girl steps to the side of the road hoping the driver will not slow, or worse, stop -- try to force her into his car. As the vehicle approaches, she recognizes first the round headlights, then the square cab: his truck. It swerves toward her and jerks to a halt. A silhouette lunges toward her and the passenger door flings open. *Get the fuck in*, the girl hears. She can't move. *Get in. Please*, the boy says now, his voice restrained. All at once the girl is exhausted. Her head throbs, her chin stings, she is desperate to sleep. She is too tired to run. She climbs in.

The girl pulls the door shut and fastens her seatbelt. The boy pulls into a U-turn before the girl realizes her door hasn't closed. She watches pavement whiz by while she is pinned against her seatbelt, the engine rattling in her ears. She hears the clang of his seatbelt against the cab. As soon as they are out of the turn she slams the door. The boy says nothing, looks straight ahead. The girl leans her head against the back window and stares into the night. Innumerable flies pass through the headlights like snow, their translucent bodies exploding against the windshield in sticky asters. How long ago did they hatch? Why are they flying at night? The girl thinks they are a sign of dawn.

She knows he is driving too fast, but says nothing because she does not want to divert his attention from the road. The boy reads her thoughts, though, and accelerates; the girl flinches at the sound of gravel. Seconds before the truck is launched toward rocks and trees below the highway, the boy swerves away from the embankment and skids back onto pavement. The curious result is that the girl is now entirely unafraid. She relaxes further into the seat and floats down the highway as if in a warm, dark tank. She hears laughter tinny as a.m. radio. The boy continues to watch the highway intensely, eyes glassy, knuckles white nubs of bone under dry skin, hands gripping the steering wheel like claws. She knows he is drunk, that the road he sees ahead of him is

smearred by alcohol. Yet danger seems to have forced the boy into an odd sobriety, that fictional state beyond inebriation. The girl's limbs vibrate with renewed terror and admiration.

When they arrive in town the boy slows to the speed limit to pass the RCMP detachment. The girl's eyelids are heavy now and she could sleep right there in the truck if only the boy would pull over. They enter the driveway of the apartment block and the boy kills the headlights then cuts the engine. They coast the last few metres and bump to a stop against the curb. The girl climbs out of the truck immediately and up the steps to the second floor. She glances back to see the boy alone in the cab, slumped over the steering wheel like he's been shot.

Inside the front door, shoes are neatly aligned on the rubber mat where the girl left them. Her eyes sting with tears. The girl stumbles to bed, not caring whether she is dressed, naked, covered with dirt. Sleep is instant.

She wakes to someone shaking her shoulder. She tries to open her eyes, to focus. The girl sees her brother holding a bowling pin. Her brother dissolves and there is the boy, standing on the bed with his shoes on. He clutches a bottle by the neck. He is fully clothed, and wears his winter jacket. The girl sits up and can make out two glinting bits of glass that are his eyes. *What do you want?* she asks. The boy shows his teeth and dangles the bottle between middle and forefinger. He has been drinking wine. The girl turns to lay her head back on the pillow but a mallet strikes her cheek; electric shocks run up and down her fillings. She leans forward and spits onto the bed, her whole jaw and temple pulsating, reverberations in her ears. Her mouth fills with saliva and she spits again. Against the light bedcovers the girl's saliva is black, smears across her hand as she tries to wipe it away. The boy has her now by the hair. He yanks the girl to her knees. The girl thinks: this is what it is like to be in the circus, to hang from your ponytail. The boy's voice is hoarse, barely audible: *you fuckin bitch! you fuckin bitch!* the boy whispers in her ear. Fear slips through the girl's veins in a thick syrup displacing blood. The girl shivers. Her teeth chatter. The room washes out like an old photograph and in the distance a rooster crows. Stars surround her then the room is black. The girl floats on a raft, headed for open sea.

Wilful Damage 3

It is not a question of fear. It is not even a question. It has a grammar all its own. Something of the imperative. A program on t.v. depicts a woman whose husband beat her into unconsciousness with a metal office chair before she finally went to the police; another woman explains through her absurdly small, melted mouth how she was doused in alcohol and lit on fire like suet pudding. Air and saliva whistle through the tight "o" of her scarred lips in onomatopœia. She can produce only this minor music.

The two women sit very still during the interviews, their voices flat, drained of emphasis as if blood has been centrifuged from their arteries, wrung from them until their selves are only air and pulp. The first woman says she should have seen it coming, then she frowns, perplexed. The second woman clacks her dental plate and breathes in rasps, nothing more to say.

Atoms

She could phone her sister.

In the mirror the girl sees a swollen blue half-moon on her temple. At the centre, a small split in her skin like a cherry. Around the moon, a faint yellow halo has formed where the girl has already begun to heal. Her chin is scraped and her body scratched and bruised.

A night has passed and the girl is stunned. As if she ran smack into an object bearing down on her from the opposite direction, but saw nothing coming. Looking back now, the girl sees every roadside omen, every pothole along the way clearly foretold the probability of impact. Like a physicist, she should have determined velocity and mass by a trail of absence, by invisibility's effect on visible things. She could have calculated the odds well ahead of time. The girl has always greatly respected odds and can only wonder now what brand of amnesia led her to ignore obvious signs. Her head responds with a sharp ache. A patch of blood has dried in her eyebrow. The girl cannot recall how she got this particular cut.

The boy is out. Gone for coffee or a newspaper. She found him curled up on the kitchen linoleum first thing, still wearing his winter coat. His forehead was swollen and flecked with tiny cuts and every one of the cupboard doors dented and smudged with blood. The boy was very thorough.

The girl had knelt over the boy and placed her hand lightly on his forehead. The boy rolled toward her, eyes closed. She settled on the floor with her back against a cupboard, his head now in her lap. The boy's eyes shimmied like atoms under his lids. Although his body felt heavy, nearly asleep against hers, the boy twitched so violently, sometimes she wondered if he was ever at rest. In bed at night, the boy's legs and arms would flail across the bed to strike her in the head or chest so hard she awoke in pain. The girl would then lie in bed and listen to the boy moan in dreams until she drifted back to sleep, feeling as if every tree around the building posed a danger.

The girl had held the boy this morning for half an hour or more in the same

position. Her legs had prickled from lack of circulation. She wound the boy's dark curls around her fingertips and rocked to and fro, wondering what to do now the storm had passed. The girl had finally had to shift position and the boy awoke abruptly as if from a loud noise. Without speaking, the boy got to his feet, splashed his face with water and left the apartment. Outside, gravel shot against aluminum siding like bullets as the truck accelerated out of the parking lot toward town.

The girl's lip stings when she tries to drink her coffee. She drinks anyway, and looks out the living room window toward the lake. A plume of smoke rises lackadaisically from the woods near the beach. The smoke rises in a larger column now and has begun to drift down the lake. The girl puts down her coffee and rummages through the desk for binoculars. Flames wink at her through the lenses; a tree branch combusts in an excited orange hoorah. A second tree cheers, and a third. Each burns bottom to top in festive silence, black tongues of smoke licking the air above the forest canopy. Still holding the binoculars, the girl reaches for the telephone. She dials and says she has no idea how it started.

Lifesaving 2

Tell your father. Wipe away his tears with a clean, soft cloth. Tell him your stories. Don't leave out the part about your second birth, how you shivered in cold air, slid on your belly through the flat pain of a hospital room, soaked bedclothes with blood while angels fanned your body with their starched wings and cooed like doves. How you dreamed of tenderness, of bathing a traveler's feet, of serving tea to strangers. You believed ardently in Christ once, you watched for unicorns and true love. But when it came time to forsake all ghosts you felt yourself fade from photographs. You tried to get by without air. To survive, your spirit split like a hemlock tree and others feared rot had set into the middle. Men began to look past you, to discuss axes in your presence.

But here in your father's house you have learned to exist. Your spare limbs hang atrophied and shriveled against your body (sometimes you miss their many shadows, so good for scaring others). And you break bread together, soak crusts in one another's wine. You finally understand how to comfort him, all of them, until the pain is shared equally among you. Here you give the saviours what they crave -- your blessing.

Sleep

Wide shoulders. A swimmer's back. The girl's body extends the length of the bed, matte and tan against the blue sheets. She is the erratic in this landscape, the one jutting ridge that reaches into flat, malleable land. She sleeps, inanimate, one arm and leg folded forward, her far side a straight edge. Yet her position implies movement. A tableau: *The Climber; The Castaway*.

The girl stares ahead from behind a second lid, an opaque film that allows her to sleep eyes open. Then she clicks shut, darts left to right under twitching lashes. Perhaps she dreams of being unconscious, her mind turned in on itself like a sock.

The boy's replay of events: a black cat leapt from a ditch to cross her path; became a plastic garbage bag caught in a whorl of air. She swerved her bike into a parked car, knocked her head and lay in the penumbra of a streetlight. She told the boy what she remembered most was the tick, tick, ticking in her ear like a roulette wheel. She woke unable to recognize the numbers on her watch, and, misapprehending pushed her mangled bike to work. It was after midnight. She had left home at six that evening. She called the boy then on the phone and he took her to the hospital, where a doctor said no sleep for the next eight hours. The girl slept anyway, the boy could not stop her, and now the father and the boy sit beside her and wait, their bodies at right angles to her bed so that together they form a cross.

Willful Damage 4

A velvet animal heaves and sighs its last breath, face sharp and alight in the summer dusk.

Prone on the shoulder of a blue road, someone has dumped the body here, left it behind carelessly the way they might a jacket or a wrench. Angles, pieces are askew -- qualities of accident. The face shows only blankness. Death hides nothing: death reveals nothing. The rocks in the ditch are expressive, for they are as alive as ever, and continue to anchor the soil.

The Blue Lounge

mishap (a dream)

The summit is just out of reach. I lose my grip and fall backward down a wide chute, slamming to a stop in a narrow crevasse. My hands are bare and wedge between body and ice, inappropriate as hairless animals. Frozen quills jab my fingertips, blood runs into veins that flow with the alacrity of clocks. Inside the crevasse my view is palatial, oceanic. Chances are I'll die here, frozen within tonnes of glacier, pink flesh titrating into arctic blue and I am suddenly and unspeakably impressed by the paint-store clerk who once understood exactly what colour I had in mind.

Assimilating the orange: notes and an objection
(because sooner or later, an orange)

My interest lies in ripeness and eclipse.

I draw reluctance from the sphere, a shape that says impermeable. Peach clefts are more familiar, but a pit, a core! the root of epistemology and faith! And though I don't doubt that in southern hemispheres the orange sways aplenty, I have never heard it vow autumn; say, *Now summer! Now half way through June!* Yes, the mandarin announces Christmas, but this an agreement among us, no organic challenge to winter.

Recall late summer apprenticeship in your native fruit: stomach cramps, warnings to wash what you eat. Spring tried your patience so you forced your way in at the stem. You stole cherries after dusk, plucked them from the branch with your teeth and flaunted transgression like jewelry. You spoiled what you couldn't keep by pitching it at passing cars. Barbarism. In the orchard you tasted boys.

The white pips now in your hand are the wood the orange depends on. And nothing can come of them here. Cherries go on from tree to bird, from bear to earth. Peaches drop to ants and earwigs; horses intoxicated with apples distribute them around town. But a forgotten orange decomposes in the fridge. And for that, bacteria work around the clock to decipher codes.

In this hemisphere the sun is no citrus fruit, whatever a teacher told you. In autumn a mottled peach; in winter a golden delicious, a Bartlett pear. Go back to when the fruit is green, before sticky sins, the danger of a heavy bough. Through long winter nights, teeth itch and belly aches for the crisp Spartan, lips cold on a sweet red afternoon.

Prairie Strip

Weather and land are grandiose here, drive-in theatre for tourists. Clouds loll their bouffant heads, protrude pink butts and bellies and quarrel openly in the sun. Rapeseed blossoms multiply in purple legions beside the bony highway thrusting west toward milk and honey.

And I, accustomed only to mountains, their toppling conversation, to forest church and hymns for holy peaks, am taken aback by the quiet sin of it all.

Lowland poplars flash each passing motorist. Birch and ash mingle on the bluffs where cottonwoods fluff tiny feather boas. Every nub and hillock waves a ripe come-hither.

I drive and stare
at Persephone undressed.

Haida say, at the beginning of time Raven pried the lid of humanity off a clam on the beach and we writhed from our shell naked to the sand.

Crows

In Vancouver, two deer graze on a freeway meridian near the P.N.E.

At dawn, coyote follows a jogger from quiet distance, stops only to sniff the air and the booty of the day's first garbage truck.

In midday clarity, a cougar traces memory to Victoria. He stalks a child through The Empress parking lot.

A tourist wants to see bears and bald eagles on the Charlottes. A taxi driver takes her to the dump outside of town.

At a Burnaby McDonald's, one bold bird steals a greasy nugget from a parked car's wheel. Slick cousins skip behind and click their beaks, not satisfied until every gritty piece is recovered.

Revision at Cordova and Hamilton

Poetry he said, and stuck out his tongue. Nematodes live inside us, he mouthed to a passer-by. And launched into a rant about yawning pavement now covered over to conceal city guts which loop through tunnels like surgical tubing; heaves in the street where wounds, infected by run-off, cracked open oozing ice. Come spring the scar was massaged by heavy equipment and well-paid hands. Cosmetic surgery, if you will. Impressive, I said. Yes, he replied, but you can always feel the bump where the mend is. Potholes I promise you. Potholes for years to come

first recollection

driftwood

grey worn smooth

light enough to hold

rocks, their shade

small crabs who hide from sun

pincers, wrinkled palms

a whorled and flattened thumb

brothers, shell-collecting friends

their hair, my hair

legs and arms and words

logs I climb to climb

and climb to climb away

my father, my other hand

my very only name

The Soldier and the Angel

(after *le fou et le Venus* by Baudelaire)

A wet day.

The whole square expresses slush; birds interrogate pond-ice, chirp their rhetorical questions. Clouds fluoresce milky light on trees that show humility in branches, trickles of life to closed buds like blood to thawing hands.

In citypark revival there is memory.

At the foot of a statue, a pensioner, involuntary soldier charged with wading through mud and mines in another country, wears a cocked red beret. He stands so upright his cane dangles like a useless limb. He faces the fallen soldier.

Rheumy eyes look inward: men shiver in square-mouthed boats on the English Channel; he sees a bombed-out farmhouse, maggoty bread. Moans of splintered soldiers, a schoolgirl, hot black tea, the noiseless death of a friend. He is not trying to understand. He is old, he is not mad. He says nothing.

He stares at the statue, a bronze angel. With one strong arm she encircles the soldier's waist, with the other she reaches skyward. Together they drip rain, faces intent on treetops, their ascent perpetual.

au vieux port

**grace notes of a seagull
ruffle facts
mottled feather-kin mate
in enemy fortissimo**

**sun a bruised peach
vows autumn
pit a bitter stone
under fuzzy pucker
plush and now mature**

Deer Bed

A depression in the bushes. The lay of a back, spine curved to conserve heat in the night. The deer may have woken to the scent of bear or to the sound of cracking twigs, to a porcupine gnawing a treetop. Rabbits, voles, near-witless rodents, the practical few adept at living within a hair's breadth of death are already at work. Dew beads on webs, while spiders clear bug-husks away like dust from chandeliers.

A human is unlikely to catch an animal in dreams deep as sunken stones, to witness dun legs paddle through treacle sleep while salt crystallizes in follicles, the ocean weeping from within.

The deer is gone before driveway dogs are awake to guard once more against treachery. Before loyalty renewed on car tires, shrubs; before perfidy leads to last night's garbage. What dreams are to deer or dog we cannot know. The empty bed shows how uneasy the truces are.

I sit only long enough to wait out the rain.

Where Poetry

In the crack between bathtub and wall I fold my rag to a knife-edge and force sludge to make way. In the kitchen, chemistry works on my behalf to dissolve a corner of dust on white enamel.

In the quiet blue vein that graces your bicep there is no pulse to parade blood back to the heart. Valves open and shut. Blood goes forward. Finally at the lungs blue is washed red. You are revived a quarter million times a day. Sometimes cleaning inspires.

Visitation

Ill, you of all people.

I sit on a chair beside your bed and take your hand. You are not quite conscious, and I have been told by nurses that you will need morphine when you wake.

A little mechanism hangs from a pin on the front of your hospital gown and connects to an intravenous stand against the wall. If you push this button on your chest, another machine like a digital clock bongs sweetly and releases a precise amount of morphine into your bloodstream through a shunt in your wrist. The idea, doctors tell me, is that you control your own pain.

How you got ill is a mystery, and I think it odd that mystery is a word applicable to decay. I somehow believed before now that the unknown was wondrous in the way constellations and babies are wondrous to shepherds and parents. But this mystery is destructive and hurts you. We are all afraid.

I continue to hold your hand, the same veins, the same small fingers I remember smoothing my hair during November influenzas and February strep throats of twenty years ago; the same fingers that clamped firmly and painfully onto my wrist in shoe store when I yelled for higher heels.

Your hand grips mine now, your bony squeeze forceful and sudden. I watch your eyelids and wait for them to open which they do all at once and there you are my hazel-eyed mother with the blurry, startled look of someone just new to this world.

the windowless room

old guy in the movie says *life is a mustard burp, short tang in the mouth* all the best characters are of course shot and die eyes open hands clenched like they have something there in the fist or maybe I'm missing the point:
the fist is precious

on the drive home I hit an animal, stop beside the highway to see what – a beaver chases me from the ditch I'm almost run over by a truck

that beaver crawled away died somewhere, invisible but scared the hell out of me first:
acid on the tongue every second tasted testing soundness
knuckles aimed at the living

Matinee at the Dolphin

At the Dolphin Theatre one row from the screen credits rise to the sky like bubbles and women big as tuna bump my shoulder with wall-eyed heads.

Weekend slippery children dart from backrow caves and shoot like pips out the padded door hard mouths snapping at blind day.

Perimeters

He finds himself attracted to perimeters: a picture frame in the ditch at kilometre five, no photograph, wood uncracked, slightly chewed. He rides his bike along industrial ribbons cataloguing as he watches for glass:

mattress

fruit crate

empty mickey

armchair

two rusty bearing cups

(possible candlesticks, paperweights; he bungies them to his rack)

Outskirts yield useful things: the railway tie he sawed in half to make bookends, pliers and a screwdriver on highway 99, flanked by slices of rotting bread that from a distance formed a bright white cairn. Among these erratics, a man's wool shirt, size medium, still wrapped in cellophane and left in a warehouse dumpster, a perfect fit.

The War

Your life has been a war
a war on your life
a wife on your own
your own life you said.

To save yourself from the shellings
to dig out the shrapnel
you talk about your father and neurasthenia
his mysterious absence when you were four.

It came back to you on a couch
in a posh office -- the wards you visit
to relive your life
to remember the war
lest you forget and the tombs grow empty
without your having visited them all

North

Intolerant of map and compass, mocks thin coats, thin wills.

A trillion magnetic promises lure needle from the pole.

Here, geese and wolves mate for life, bull moose grow 50lbs of bone every year for love,
and the bear cub dies if while blind it cannot find the teat.

Tourists write home over second cups in the Queen Alex Inn, despairing over scant lines
on dog-eared postcards to loved ones, to anyone who'll listen.

Old loggers smoke and watch me. The waitress ignores calls for coffee. She picks her
bone-white canines with a matchbook instead.

Let the record show (for brothers)

You let the branch whip back
to smack my upper lip when
we took a shortcut to the store
for chips and paid for yours then
sat on the curb and cracked
your coke before I'd finished
paying. You said, *let's go!* when
it was clear I'd eaten only a quarter
of the bag. You dropped your garbage
at my feet and crossed the highway before I
could brush the crumbs from my shirt and
you walked so fast I had to jog
to keep you in sight
through the Indian Burial Ground
and by the shack occupied
by the man who hung cats to die
on hooks. You stopped for a smoke
behind the twisted tree and let me walk
right by.

Town Poems (after Ann Carson)

Town of no one has a job

The spoons in Stanley Baker's are exquisite.

The perfect form is the cup.

**We all take time to appreciate
one another's art.**

Town of small governments

There were no fish to fry.

Many hot skillet.

Town of having known you eleven years

The opportunities to leave were many. I never took any, thinking, maybe one day you'd save my life and I'd have to return the favour.

Doors

She gets up in the night. She enters the bathroom, does her business, then leaves again. Instead of in the hall that leads to her bedroom, she finds herself in a room where her son lies sleeping. Beside him is a woman she doesn't recognize. She passes through a second door, down a hallway to a third and she is again in the bathroom. Then through a fourth door into her son's bedroom where she stops. She watches his chest rise and fall, rise and fall. The room is the colour of wishbones and the unknown woman lies close to her son, this man whose face is pale and slack on the pillow. Who resembles her snoring husband. A nudge from her and he would turn, his snoring become a quiet rattle. The nights she lay awake listening for the soft hum of her baby's breath in the bassinet against the wall; for a child's nightmares; for the maddening pendulum clock; for the first whistle of starlings on the eaves. And the morning, the sudden weight of it on her body and mind; the gravity of daylight. She leaves her son's bedroom and passes through a door into the hall. She enters another door and is again in the bathroom, through a door and again in the bedroom. The hall, the bathroom, the bedroom. She is frightened. Then she remembers: the woman is his wife. Her son is married. Where is the baby? She opens a dresser drawer. Sweaters. Her son and his wife still asleep. The drawer is stuck and she leaves the room. In the hall is one door and no other. She is afraid to enter but forces herself to be calm. Inside, only the bathroom. She folds a towel in quarters and places it on the edge of the tub. She sits down to wait for daylight.

Drive On

Through the invisible hardwood, over pre-Cambrian swamps, across the Yamaska,
I fiddle with the tuner.

Warm at the dashboard we thousands practice our pyromancy, timing fill-ups with
bladder calls and black dots.

The laughable task of a highway traveler. I turn up the music to drown the derision of a
Huron trapper passed 2 K back. Because I avoid moose. Because his breath is rank,
probably from hunger. Because although I have plenty of room, I drive by my
grandmother, delirious with infection after her ninth child's birth. Because I don't
swerve to avoid a squirrel but do for a rabbit. Because I hold 98.4 jacketless, car empty,
pockets full, no hellos. Drive on. Drive on, stereo blaring.

The Broken Forest

Each day I pass through the broken forest: brown fungus, black lichen, teeth marks in wood that lead to a hole pecked deep housing nothing. Jagged limbs jut skyward calling hollow, hollow, hollow. Sticks and twigs tap and rustle; hands tangled in hair. Once a voice said, *abide in the bushes, the residents live in peace*. But underfoot are feathers and blood. The wind warns me off.

Today I saw the trees so black with crows I could think only of the misery of ownership. When to belong is to ask, *How many of us are there?* and the welcome answer deafens.

Wednesday and farmers with bulldozers clear the broken forest to make room for ploughs; for threshers, for cattle, for hamburger outlets. Trees are felled, limbed, and quartered. Branches and stumps are piled for autumn ignition. Now the broken, the passers-by, we no longer stop to admire disrepair. We are awkward, unsure where to carry our supplication.

And the pendulous moon

planetary

orange cuff above the stubble

shadow-plum on winter night

The Blue Lounge

Fish mouth

woe woe woe is me

to the flash of chef percussion

blacksuit, sushi bar professionals

sway to cymbal, snare drum languor

chopstick thrust and parry

saki nip

crooners do love the whole notes

that sliding backbone music

fishtail syncopation

so play your tunes your tuna

eel and octopi

part of the new geometry

water ruling land

jazz scat pollywog

eyepopping b-flat blues

you lie

but your rhythm tastes

whiplash true

Cookie, so long as you feed us

we don't care if you're an honest fishing

fool

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