

The Invisibility Exhibit

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A Thesis

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The Department

of

English

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Abstract

The Invisibility Exhibit

Sachiko Murakami

The poems of this manuscript circle the issues surrounding the “Missing Women” of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Although women had been going missing from the neighbourhood since the late 1970’s, efforts were not co-ordinated into a full-scale investigation until the issue was given visibility by Lori Culbert, Lindsay Kines and Kim Bolan’s 2001 “Missing Women” series in the *Vancouver Sun*. This media coverage, combined with efforts in political and cultural sectors, resulted in increased investigation efforts which have so far led to the arrest of Robert Pickton, on whose property the remains of twenty seven of the sixty eight listed women were found. Pickton awaits trial in one of the highest-profile criminal cases to take place in BC’s history; yet this is not the focus of the manuscript. As the title suggests, the primary concern of this project is the investigation of the troubled relationship between this specific marginalized neighbourhood and its population and the wealthy, healthy city that surrounds it. These poems interrogate the comfortable distance from which the public consumes the sensationalist news story by turning their focus toward the normative audience, the invisible public. In the speaker’s examination of this subject, assumptions and delineations of community, identity and ultimately citizenship are called into question. Projects such as Lincoln Clarke’s controversial *Heroines* photographic series and subsequent book (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2002), news stories, and even the coming 2010 Vancouver Olympic Winter Games circulate intertextually in this manuscript, while Pickton’s trial is intentionally absent. These poems struggle with and put pressure on the lyric, since the traditional Canadian lyric narrative seems ultimately unfit as their urban setting’s insistent materiality of troubled spaces resists possibilities for the sublime epiphanic moment. Though these are political poems, they are not polemical; they call attention to the unspoken issues that lie under the surface of this story and, through the disorienting effect that poetry has on a reader, encourage the reader to consider his/her own position.

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“Missing,” “Accounting,” “We’ve Seen Little of Her Life and Less of Her Death,” and “Negotiating With the Ferryman” received third place in the 2005 Great Blue Heron poetry contest and appeared in *The Antigonish Review*, no. 143, Autumn 2005.

“Heart” is forthcoming in *The Fiddlehead*.

“Knife Sense” and “Godzilla” appeared in *Headlight Anthology 9*.

For my mother

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MISSING

Waited in the rain with a sputtered candle,
set the percolator on the stove. Didn't drink.

Shriveled in the tepid bath. Turned
the stone over, crushed shells.

Avoided parties and small-talk. Avoided sidewalks.
Stopped washing *and* drying. Drove

to the desert, didn't snap photos.
Tried jogging. Bought a stopwatch.

Threw stones at tree stumps.
Talked to the doctor,

lived in small-talk, tried church.
Looked everywhere I could fathom.

Sent a message in a bottle. Threw out
the dead fern, remodeled.

Skipped stones alone. Picked up the paper.
Couldn't call. Thought of you living

in this midst that passes
so routinely for living.

AGAINST TIME

Her hour lasts as long as a wave.
A diagram cannot express this. Time is not a line
that undulates, can't be held. Even if the ocean reaches shore,
it isn't designed to rest there.

The record keeps time; its instruments keep us
bound to the hour and its decision.
Beneath the surface the crystal's vibrato hits
wheels that gyrate to its song, self-winding, and also
the wrist bone. The system's top-notch,
automatic. Caught without a watch
and you're dependant on strangers.

Losing one's watch is a gateway habit that leads
to social problems, the shattering of time.
Watches can be pawned
for pocket money, that cash traded
for a few minutes peace, enough time
to find another watch.

By chance the photograph caught
her moment. Lined up with the others,
it's her *before*, or *after*. She wouldn't hang
in the gallery otherwise, but now even that exhibit is old news.

I'm on a deadline too. The bomb under the bed
I've muffled with pillows won't stop ticking.
Sometime soon I have to pull a wire,
though I'm not usually the heroic type. Knowing me
the choice will be exactly
random. Calculations prove
unreliable in a pinch. Bones seem silent.

Instead I pass the time circling
my peers, tapping each head in turn. *Duck, duck.*
I always pick the slowest one to be my goose. Is this cruel
or strategic? I stall, ruffle the teacher's hair.
There's no time-limit rule and I'm afraid
of the race proving my calculations false.
Humiliating, that children could be so quick,
know the little tricks to reach home first.
There's only ever one chair
and I'm locked out of the resting place,
prowling its perimeter.

EXHIBIT A

There are some boxes I will leave under the tree.
I am not afraid. Curiosity isn't the cause
of the parents' cruel Christmas joke.

Last night for dinner I ate pasta, the same
as the night before. My lover and I were fighting,
indifferent to the meal
by the time we got down to it.
I don't know how this ended up here
as evidence. See? When you open the box, you get

a lump coal, of wormy dirt. Parents slapping
their knees at our disappointment.

Or in the box, another box, and another, its meaning
packed into a dense black centre.

Some models are more helpful than others.
For instance, Freud. Perhaps we forget
because it's helpful to forget
the overcooked noodles, our regular daily shames:
a voice raised to speak but no one listening;
spare any change; adolescence. Each shitty trick.

In a hospital, the first lit bulb's glare
forces the infant into sight. Boxes
out of boxes, how mysterious.
Open, he thinks, not knowing
the word's shape yet, though he will.

WISHING WELL

My fist holds as many coins
as I can carry. All are stamped with the Queen's effigy;
Elizabeth, D.G. Regina, the resident of pockets,
a woman I've never met though I always know
her whereabouts. Each face pressed
into another person's palm before mine.
The stink of sweat and metal. The waste of it.

I wish for a return, or for justice.
It's safe to do that here. You can throw wishes away
and no one will fish them out
before the park's authority comes to drain the pool
and return the coins to currency.
Maybe I'm buying the future a Coke,
a popsicle, a bag of potato chips, a fix.

Maybe I'm trying to bribe God,
though I'm not the type of person
who would say no to a panhandler,
or yes.

I scatter my spare change
all at once. Each completes its parabolic reach,
falls dead weight. I wish until the ripples still enough
to show my face: and just beyond, lit stars
bright as found dimes.

AT THE MOMENT OF WISHING

The difference between genie and seeker
is a matter of solidity. I hold the lamp,
knowing what to wish for, but I forget
to save a wish to wish away its impossibility.

The fantasy began the day Mother
switched on the vacuum to forget her hunger,
drowned out the endless drip of wishes from our mouths.
If psychokinesis were possible, we'd all be
bending spoons on TV.

Locked in the lamp I know I exist, I hear
your hesitation: after all, monies must be accounted for.
(The ten dollars in my pocket I would rid myself of
wasn't mine to begin with.) The tin lamp glints,

glints. It's difficult to settle on
world peace. But the genie's grin
means good fortune for very few.
The lamp works better as a record of loss.

TWO WOMEN

You imagine her skin as fragile eggshell,
but the fact is more like marble. Like a bough breaking
in a lullaby, her trauma is to you theoretical.
Like fever dissolving into sweat, like a twisted ankle,
like the first sight of blood,
what can prepare you for this?

Open the door into an autumn
working your shoulders towards death.
Open the last of the Christmas presents.
The snowdrops too will open. Lie on the edge
of a rock, listen to the ocean close itself, and open.

On the walk home below cherry blossoms
fallen eggs crack beneath your feet--
sparrows brought to earth before
their time. Snap off a small branch, shake petals
onto the mess, let gather a pink heap.

The other birds chirp songs
your human ear cannot decipher.
Still, you crouch over the sidewalk
clutching a fistful of twigs. Soon the sky
will exhale its final breath and the street too
will empty of sound, with only you to break it.

FENCING LESSON

The rule we first are taught is not to raise
the blade until your partner masks himself,
but Maître's face is exposed, unconcerned.
My gloved and too-small hand is curled about
the grip: a toy-gun trigger. *Follow me,*
step back, step forward, cross the hall. The weight
hangs hard upon my wrist: I rest. *The weight
is in the guard, not the blade.* I sweat,
or weep in my mask's cage; in here, it's hard
to tell. *Again, one-two, stop hit; control!*
*Manipulate your tip and you will win,
or if you lose, at least you lose with grace.*
The lunges are nightmares he wakes me from,
corrects my pose; I feel my body's length
repair itself, from tip to counterweight
of my left hand. Sometimes the point will land
on target: *Like that. Good girl.* We both know
that I am here to win his praise. *Enough.*
The quick salute; at last I can relax.
*We're going to have a party this weekend
at my farm, in Coquitlam. Want to come?*
They grin and lean on blades, increase their flex,
They're laughing at a joke that they all get.
He leads me to the wire, and laughs at me
as I string up, test my tip on the floor.
I bend in the expected pose. We wait:
a judge we cannot see will fling us both
into the fray. *En garde. Vous prêts? Allez.*

ALLUSION

Two girls walk in different stories
towards two words
of satisfaction and the crowd

that would catch the bouquet.
The carriage rolls up to the corner.
In it, the prince's face, shadowed;
we see instead that shoe turned up
as evidence. What else? The parts
that fit into other parts, unearthed
self, her bartered sex. We knew

when her shoe dropped he had found her,
that at the castle they'd unfurl
the carpet's spilt scarlet to protect the Queen's feet.

And the mess of limbs and blood is only a rumour
that happens after; we remember
the real story that was always there, waiting.

NEGOTIATING WITH THE FERRYMAN

I shake the bag of coins. The dead whine. Our standoff
stalls their journey. Heroes scowl
or carry golden boughs as passports. I've a false

face that doesn't fool security. But these dimes
I would press to the roofs of mouths, if only

mouths had been found. In the purse:
dust, newspaper clippings, cropped photographs.

Charon has a point. He cannot bring to rest
images of the dead; they never lived.

I concede and step onto the dock. The true dead
drift away. The boat empties, returns.

The river's ink blackens every shred of paper
I drop into it.

DIRECTIONS

The mass requires your meddling.
Upset its molecules
with your wooden spoon. The others
haven't the time, they eat elsewhere.

The fast you held while you dreamed
yourself into mindfulness breaks
with a meal of dust and water.

Stir constantly to avoid
devotion. Until desire
is consistent.

ACCOUNTING

At Carrall St. she eases into the seat beside me
her bulk of leather and scarves, heavy
with the scent of wet concrete. From her purse's folds
she pulls a pencil and notebook, begin to track

each lurch of metal and flesh, marks the time
against a schedule, tallies passengers, shopping bags,
redheads. There are names that she checks twice
against faces fading into cotton, soaked wool, linen.

She snaps her fingers, licks the eraser tip, but no.
They're all but lost. Her ledger will not balance. The bus turns:
the downtown skyline, visible, and then hidden.

Before we reach Mt. Pleasant and the greener
ascension she reaches her page's end,
packs up, steps down into the streets
and finds her place among them.

STILL MISSING

Rebecca & Wendy & Yvonne &
Sherry & Lillian & Linda &
Sheryl & Laura & Elaine &
Mary & Nancy & Taressa &
Elsie & Ingrid & Catherine &
Elaine & Sherry & Gloria &
Teresa & Catherine & Kathleen
& Leigh & Angela Dorothy
& Stephanie & Jacqueline & Dawn
& Marie & Frances & Ruby &
Olivia & Cindy & Sharon
& Richard & Sheila & Julie
& Marcella & Michelle & Tania
& Tiffany & Sharon & Yvonne

SKIPPING STONES

I fling flat stones into the surf, corral
my anger in the strangely angled pose.
Each beat's concentric blip a sound so odd
it clarifies my brine to mellow blues.
My mother's ex once skimmed his bottle caps
down at the lake; not littering, I thought,
the glinting disc's fourteen discrete hop-hops.
Now I trust black, the solid strength of rock.
My hand must learn the pebble's weight, and know
which chips will change the shape and spoil the trick;
this can't be accurately guessed, and though
some seem to work without my gauging it;
I fling them to new ocean bottom homes,
and some I leave to dry upon the beach. Skip stones.

MONSTER (DEAD DUCK)

The suburb I recognized like
the sound of my mother's footfalls
shifted. *Somewhere*, snickered the city planner.
Homes were ripped down to make room for fields.
In the fields, teenagers, overturned
bicycles. I walked quicker. They had plastic bags full
of legal explosives. For the one who was nearly adult
I carried my share of his shame.

The duck slept despite the bottle rocket
shoved inside, the laughter as they forced
it into flight. Then they sucked their thumbs.
I reached the carcass and thankfully
it was swaddled in a hand towel
printed with tulips. Spring left then.
I flipped up my collar, braced myself.

PORTRAIT OF SUBURBAN HOUSEWIFE AS MISSING WOMAN

Mouth open, she looked as though she was protesting
her inclusion. I brought her to a place
where no one speaks. *There's been a mistake,*
she said with the soft folds
of her tracksuit, the car keys
she held like a set of brass knuckles.
You can't take me anywhere I don't wish to go.
I did have to drive out of town to take this picture.
As evidence, it was the next day's news.
Now it's so obvious, her clavicle's hard line,
the shadow there, a hollow big enough for two thumbs.

BONE

From a quiet, picked-clean carcass
below an eagle's nest, all hid among the salal,
I pulled a vertebra from its uneasy line.
Rot clung to it.

Jam-jarred it in bleach and salt until lichen dropped off.
Dried, it was smooth and white as an unthought concept,
no evidence of the body that wrapped it.
White enough to force myself towards
the crack and splay of gutted flesh,
small routine battle, or worse, in February's last days
lying down once in the snow.

These are my stories. That death,
this history of bone. My pretty thing.

MEAT

At the butcher, the husband
has no hand in the knife
that hits its mark, that slips
flesh from bone.

He swears it has nothing to do with him.
Highway driving, talk radio.

Meal ticket. Retirement fund.

Other men's wives'
girlish flirty titters.
Ten dollars a pound.

NEWS DEVELOPMENT

Sunday, September 18th, 2005

Documents are fresh critics of at least six released promises.

Officials reach a deal, a hotline, a database.

Reliable statistic almost two months after the money, currently on hold, but

the delay was due to the need to develop related delays.

Another two months went by.

Waited round, required review in October. The reviews are necessary.

Responsible for release, she's not moving.

The potential risk of the problem is real. The reaction is not.

The urgency deserved:

chastise liberal statistics:

five times more likely to die violent.

Who knows what common families deserve;

preliminary anecdotal evidence?

Suggest at least five hundred women respond.

Launch its sisters; a major dent.

Six women reported missing that we know of.

Every report and account. Measure Ottawa,
she stressed.

NEWS

Last week's headlines
wrapping fresh meat.
Blood soaking through.
Inked fingers wrapping
the roast he'll feed his family.
Twenty dollars. Sunday dinner.
It has nothing to do with him.

THE PEOPLE FILES

Saturday, October 1, 2005

You never know. So you just keep looking.

*

One disturbing niche –
other hunting. Lost for days or for decades.
Many cases grind, some break –
a handful of play. Mostly innocuous people gone wandering.

She maintained history. She had a cellphone.
People like her fall forward.
Cold plate. Cold time. Cold avenues, dead process.
Cold woods, a grisly collection of west.
The girl, a folded unit.

*

To find out who they are,
reconstruct structures, departments;
find the woman alive and well in Newfoundland,
find a baby with her boyfriend.

*

A missing person, the woman found –
Information / The girl in the woods
/ A database / Everyone in Canada.

The bank remains an impossibility of privacy.
Legislation soldiers on within limits.

I'm not giving up hope. We'll just keep going.

*

Cold present disappears, worked on, move on, retire or die.
In some cases, time is your friend.
Sometimes they stop being afraid
of modern techniques altering the game,
predicting the offender.

*

To release
trade secrets (extremely useful)

Modern database: Canada.
Virtually everything he does is logged.

*

At the moment a dancer went missing,
dozens of women from the farm refused the public.

On the face of it
a smear, a match, a sample.

*

*I need to prove she's dead.
But I can't prove she's dead.*

*

*People need closure.
I'd like to do that before I retire.*

WE HAVE A PROBLEM

We have a home and a home we hardly see. We have our daughters and our daughters' volleyball teams have the cup. We have the documents to prove it. We're out of tomato sauce, lunch meat and ginger, but our supermarket has those. We have eighteen years left on our mortgage. We have dessert after every meal; we *always* have ice cream. Maple-swirl ice cream. We have our little vices. We've been a little down on our luck. We have a few pounds to lose, but who doesn't? We have to pick up the dry cleaning—don't forget! We have moments of weakness. We have all our favourite TV shows on DVD (we have a thing about commercials). We have a thing about McDonald's. We have a thing about litter. We have no one to answer to. We have the best because we're worth it.

MONSTER (GODZILLA)

No one loves Godzilla. At Hollywood parties
he lurks in the kitchen, gulping punch. Isn't witty,
spits sunflower seeds when a pretty girl forces him to speak.
Is absent from tabloids, lacks a classical education,
rides a motorcycle but looks a little silly hunched on it.

When Donne wrote *No man is an island*
Godzilla wasn't real yet, slept in the Pacific
until the bomb shook its little boy's fist
and he wandered into the studio.

We fear most that he might snap,
scoop up virgins and carry them off to Asia
where, unable to secure employment,
they'll be forced into arranged marriages.
After finding diaries with hearts looped
around the letter G, concerned parents
hand their daughters to psychiatrists, who diagnose
Godzillomania. They've pills for it.

Downtown, night. Lightning strikes once or twice
to reveal his bestial face. He'd reflect
on his mission if the script said more than
SCENE 25. STORM. LIGHTNING STRIKES
ONCE OR TWICE. GODZILLA
MELTS GLASS TOWERS WITH
APOPLECTIC BREATH.

And at his feet, a grocery list
rain-stuck to a bus shelter. In it,
virgins huddled and sharing a rosary.

He's suspect to the film's tricks,
forgets sometimes he's larger than life.
Can't tell when the film stops rolling
and accidentally squashes extras.
The studio uses the footage. Audiences gobble it up.
Shot out of scale, next to Godzilla
the victims seem as big as thimbles and as useful.

GIRL TO GORILLA

Sorry to ruin it but you can't turn a girl into a gorilla; it's all down to mirrors and lighting. First she unveils the scalpel and parades while the music swings, shimmies in her silver bikini, Rockettes a bit. Now the first-row darlings start pulling out dollars. The crowd's aroused before the blown kisses, before she gets the outfit off and over with. It begins at her left hand, where she slashes round the wrist-bone, mocks like she's checking her watch, winks, inches the skin off from pinky to thumb, peels the palm off. Needs the other for working the blade up from the stiletto to the sacrum, follows the tribal tattoo's curve back down the hamstring. Man, the girl's got gams! The red lines get the guys, every time; she leans forward for a quick crotch-shot before she whips off the tanned chaps. Oh, it's *Jesse, Jesse* when she gets to the chest, carves stars out that she heel-kicks to some lucky fella. Only does the southern bits on weekends, when the cock-eyed kids come with their fat wallets. She's got the shitface grin down so they don't ever suspect. The neck's the finale, brings boys to their knees. It's the face they can't stand to see gone, can't stop pounding their beer bottles on the benches. When she's got the razor-wire coiled around her throat she tosses each end to a dude, and they lasso till the jugular pops, spurts the front row in the face. They eat it up, cry mercy when she yanks back the scalp. With her back to them she bows, steps into the glass box, and when the lights start to dim the gorilla busts through the glass screaming goddamn murder. Suddenly everyone's a sissy, scattered. No refunds, no come-agains but god what a laugh, what a bloody riot.

PORTRAIT OF HOCKEY PLAYER AS MISSING WOMAN

Done up in drag, he's half-grinning.
Really, he couldn't be expected
to take it seriously; it's all just good PR,
the suspension's aftermath.
His beard shaved for the occasion,
there's a pinprick of dried blood
on his bruised cheek where the punch landed
and the home team's fans cheered.
That's past. Now he's just a man
in a dress on the street,
passers-by on each side,
no Plexiglas. No one asking for autographs.

RIVERVIEW

She balances her weight on the booms
halfway from their point of departure
and the estuary where waters
take cargo elsewhere. These trees

refugees that escaped their intended
civilization. Dangerous pastime,
to reflect on ecology when a misstep
would send her under, draw a quiet curtain
over an emptied landscape.

In the clear-cut they've planted homes
that obscure her view of the aging asylum
and its gates she passed through once, cock-eyed, fierce,
to attend a Halloween party.
Her friends didn't know she'd been before

as a visitor. The guests wore plastic masks,
dancing in a hall where she broke a bottle.
Orderlies told stories of escapees
to spook them, but most of the committed
had long ago been released into the city

where a few became her friends or lovers.
She's since wandered home along the railway tracks.
Lives in a rented suite not far from here, where she comes
to rest on the river's litter as she did as a girl,
drinking with her friends. Still drinking. The lost logs
slick with rot, still buoyant.

WATER, MOTHER

The mother moves in. The mother moves out.
Where her shed skin fell, dust gathers.
It's swept into a bin with other idle scraps.
There's no thirst, and no more water, ever.
Houseplants drop leaves,
no great disaster.

Light filters through lead glass
in the underwater house, in the lake's centre.
It's packed wall-to-wall with mothers.
Some glide by in stilettos with trays of hot muffins.
Others blow bubble-kisses to the sleepy ones.
The mothers wave and wave, half-swimming.
Their routine has a rhythm that slows to stasis.

Packed in the hold for sunless months,
I haven't a mother or a glass of unsalted water.

The petals wash out. The petals wash in,
colourless and dripping with sea-scent.
No one's watching. I came here
without my mother, beaching us both.
She's on some other shore.
The moon tugs the ocean, makes land seem larger
though it was there already. Mother, water,
there are some leaps I can't make alone.
I'd walk halfway if the sand stayed firm
but I'm no swimmer. Beneath our beaches
tectonic pressure is forming.
Even the shore is sure of nothing.

SAME OLD SAME OLD

The door is not a door,
it is a rotted plywood scrap,

and closed: inside, she hides
what she must before she pulls open

the door to her trailer to greet me,
and I am pulled through

into a kiss hello. I inhale
and assess her breath, gauge

the heat of her palms,
feel for sweat at the nape of her neck,

and kiss again hello. Conversation snags:
she holds up the cactus that is older than I am,

and blooming. The cactus that once sat
beneath our living room window,

the bearded patriarch of our houseplants,
is now so close to death, but blooming.

We roll cigarettes and smoke them
while she describes what became of the furniture: lost,

sold, stolen. We're sitting
on my childhood bed, wrapped in afghans

she made in the years when she was a housewife,
smoking the last of her tobacco.

Before the night is over we will drive
to the drugstore. I will buy her cigarettes,

she will ask for cash. I will drive home to the city
while she walks out with ten dollars in her pocket

and I will drive home with the blooming cactus,
the dying cactus blooming in my lap.

HOSPITAL FOOD

You lift your fork to eat small orange cubes
once pulled from wet earth, swollen with rain's memory,
a mineral resonance absent
in these blocks of sponge which to your mouth surrender
defeated, jaundiced fluid.

If you could taste these carrots
you might understand my suspicions.

Some dead animal's overcooked muscle
dresses your gown's lapel,
evidence of a mouthful that missed its mark.
I fuss with spit and tissue
while you for dinner
to its natural conclusion.

The Jell-O is dry from hours of anticipation.
From four to eight, we come to watch you eat.
I scrape the cup clean with your plastic spoon,
blunt like everything else.

We agree the food here is a joke
we've heard before, with the sadness
of airplane food—
mass produced and never hot enough—
but on planes people know
they soon will eat somewhere new.

YOU THINK IT SAFE TO TALK ABOUT THE WEATHER

So we chitchat around your joints
that ache when the clouds come.
The city can't dry out, and you can't
walk six blocks to the church
where they would feed you.

Yes, the atmosphere is an easy problem,
and the habit to complain about raindrops.
They don't stop.

We are given good nouns and verbs that do work for us:
help me. I can't spare any change for bus fare.
I can't say I love you

in a poem. They'll dismiss it. I have to show
I've dug deeper, to the distant heart
we do not call a heart
thrumming on its own,
a chamber that feels
like home. Rain falls there too.
Women go missing while we two
discuss the weather
to avoid old obvious
love, that
troubled subject.

POEM TO STOP THE RECURRING DREAM

The house I've always lived in
has no inward limits. Doors I never noticed
have whole wings behind them.
I can't believe it. It's
predictable.

The end of the dream is already written. An optimist
would say mythic. If everyone knows
what's here, then I'm not solely responsible. I never meant
to neglect these quarters. Always there are boxes. No one knows
what's worth archiving. I can't stop

moving towards the end. The tenants are fucking
in the suite I'll never return to. Let the room be empty.

At the hall's end the room they tried to keep me out of,
where the woman's feet grow into the ground.
Dead for centuries, she can't blink and the hospital gown
hangs open. I could stick her
with a knife. She thinks
this is funny.

It's just a statue that falls towards me and its grey flesh
stinks of mothballs; I move backwards into the room
where the pale woman falls, and every door leads back
to the room where she waits and I run
around the corner to the room that would be emptied
where I hear as before
porcelain hit concrete and the tenants' muted laughter

PORTRAIT OF MY MOTHER AS MISSING WOMAN

Took this one then promised to send her a print. Didn't.
Haven't spoken to her since that day, when I left her
in the hotel with a bagful of Okanagan peaches
I didn't want, wanted her to have. Now the leaves are falling
on the other side of the country
and her nights are some sad unknown story.
See? Once it's closer
the story waltzes in like an alcoholic
you love, hiccupping faux pas.
Can't not love her. Can't look at her.

DESIRE (DRYING OUT)

We know the sweetness
of molecular honey spread
on a synapse. It's neurological,
love. The stranger returns home
just to taste his lover's skin.
A single cell is all he needs to find
equilibrium. It's his now.

Sometimes we call it unearned.
True, it is painful to be in a body
not content to live in itself as it is, alone.
Confusion occurred; hunger equated with other hunger,
other equated with hunger. The volume
distorts the opera, gluts the room
with violent sound. Goodbye means
amputation, pain replacing fingers
where the whole life happened.

Goodbye, love. The self stops at the doorway
it cannot cross, longs to go, begs the world to return.
The world offers advice.
Lock up the house
and wait until wholeness happens.
Do not expect me to return.

This hurts. The inhabitant
only wants to play host. Come feed, she says,
pulling up treacle from her throat's well.

Only one emerges from the wet red chamber,
wiping his chin. The other
gone, not missed.

KNIFE SENSE

Here is your mother peeling apples,
this is the fruit's ribboning circumference,
unclasped Möbius. The weight of the knife
means nothing to her. She could not tell

how she measures the distance
from apple flesh to thumb.
From the naked sphere she sculpts polyhedrons,
the skin's stain a pretty hint
of blood. But this is your afternoon snack;

the real meal is in the making. She acquaints you with the peeler,
a carrot, a potato. Her hands guide yours down
into the basin's depths, where the whittled skin
remains. On your own there are no disasters,

nor perfect rhythms. You bald them
with your inverse blade, then hand them over
to the woman with a knife as long as your forearm.

The knives that hang from a magnetic strip
above the kitchen sink are all just knives now,
sharply cognate, forbidden. Years later
and in your own kitchen, a nick evokes

first the usual curse; then the reflex
lick of iron blood tastes more familiar,
of the day you gain a sense
of metal, ballast in your palm.

LUNCH AT THE BELMONT HOTEL

Now she is too thin from her smaller and smaller suppers.
I can't let her starve, can't have her over for dinner,
but still I want to feed her something real.
The fast-food chain edges around the block
trying to corner the market, bringing more litter
and promises. In the Mission
they pay for their evening meal with a prayer.
I've eaten food bank food:
pudding mix, powdered milk, another
unmarked can like a birthday surprise.
I have to pay a dollar
for an unsprayed peach. I give her a bag of them.
They jostle, lose some juice. It's a small enough distraction.
She's made pea soup, the full bowl I want most
when I'm furthest from it.
She copies her recipe out from the *Joy of Cooking*.
We're both so full we burp, excuse each other.

HEART

It is best kept out of rational debates.
We've determined its place, since no one writes much verse

around tonsils or other uncertain tissue. We coo over
the sweeter meat that melts

into Hephaestic fire. Bless the pump that feeds the river.
It's not quite stationary but stuck. Can't fly on a whim to Hawaii.

In its suit, the king grimaces, justly
suicidal. The real world is not its place.

We say it lies at all centres, ubiquitous. The heart of it.
It's still only a shell. For all its efforts it can't contain the life

that flows through it, though it's fist-shaped. Keeps
trying. Beats out each Mississippi, is perpetually It.

THE EXCHANGE

Knit muscles hold my spine hostage,
all pain erased in the dumb knot that doesn't speak
unless prodded. It's pure luck I'm so blessed
with such small mercies, though I don't know if the will I have
is strong enough to bear any bigger wound.
I'd take your three-day migraines, the leg that snapped
in a corkscrew path, eczema, bruises
you got in a blackout, the exotic
hepatitis, along with all the conditions
you insist exist, but no doctor can find,
if I could live from there, as the crouching tenant
in your body, carrying the weight of each starving,
luminous cell, if it meant a place
we could start from. We could call it home.

HAMARTIA

Inciting Moment.

Woken by a nightmare, a girl slips
through dark, past the closed doors
that lead to private rooms.

Though she knows
the house's contours by heart,
the kitchen seems farther.

Yet how big she is becoming.
Sometime soon she will outgrow this routine.

Enjoy her now:
the keen upward arc of her limbs
to the cupboard to find the smooth glass;

how she believes she is alone as she fumbles
with taps, finds the cool water
waiting in the faucet.

Rising Action.

Scatter her silver on the pavement,
scrape the pieces into the hold of her left hand

while the other flicks the ball
high enough to collect the requisite jacks.

Its weight is a guide she must learn,
find space in its pendulum swing. Dropping it

is a given, but she must not think of this
if she is to win this game of my invention.

I hold her hair back from her face
while the crowd watches, willing her to fail.

Quid Pro Quo.

Her father finds a diary
in a nightstand's recesses, the clever
envelope taped to the drawer's back, along
with two cigarettes, a condom,
twenty American dollars. He finds it because I put it there,

then broke the lamp with the porcelain base
in the shape of an elephant,

left lying around
odd socks, biology homework,
dirty glasses, a small silver key.

Watch him do what is expected:

lock the door, pocket the key,
lumber out to find her in the afternoon streets.

Intermission.

Outside the theatre in a field where bodies lie pressed into mud,
things are getting heavy. I'm sinking under the weight of her being,
faced with a decision to continue with the script unwritten,
or to wake her on the stage, speak for herself.

Peripeteia.

Holds up each prop to the light:
the diary, a handful of jacks,
the glass of water.

Whose details are these?

Imperceptible lift of shoulders.

But this is not
what I meant at all—

LOCK-IN

Someone knocked, knocked, knocked.

Fireworks
on downtown's other side, from here
dull thuds. One half of one glass tower
frames a fractured dandelion.

Beyond, still cranes, a blur
beyond them, blue, grey, the city's
color code. Closer,
the streetlamp. Always orange. Wakes at six,
sleeps at six.

Where's he going? Nobody
answers. Echoes of pigeons trysting,
a voice repeating a motto.

SKID ROW

The name came from here, they say.

A road made from a black clatter of greased logs,

used for dragging timber down from Burrard Inlet
to the sawmill. *On the skids* meant *down and out*,

yet still not a no-go zone until Woodward's closed up
and the shoppers took dollars somewhere else
now called *downtown*. Now we add an addendum,

Eastside. Elsewhere. The place where
a worker's oils sunk into timber and stayed.

SIDE

Our centre's healthier contract
Public-purse heroin cloisters
Outsided smokers

Alley stuccoed with dropped water
Emptied filters
Ensure drinkers

Eastern Starbuck border
Loaded port derrick
BBQ duck window

Rent drop shoulders up
North of Hastings
Rx for resting

Christian outreach stroll
Truth & candy handouts
Plentiful outspoken tellers

IT'S NONE OF MY BUSINESS

if someone says *Heroine*
if it looked less like sacrifice

if the alley were 30% cleaner

if in Cordova's commuting quicksilver
if south of Hastings

if she appeared in a poem or headline

if a fight broke out there
if laughter

PORTRAIT OF IT AS MISSING WOMAN

And now what you've been looking for,
it leaning against the back door of the Victory café.
Stroking its cheek with a dirtier hand.
Head to-toe red and redder where scabs haven't healed,
or would be if the photo weren't so black & white.
Its body emptied of the expected contents,
purse spilled on the road before it.
It did this for money to feed itself.
Look at it. Like it's about to cry
or crack. Don't worry about it.
It can't look up to find your gaze.

HOOK

The bad captain's left hand and his name. Barb. Plastic Velcro half. Worm-impaler, tricky fish killer. Petty thief, angler. The catchy part of song. One who would catch you. Rugby player, he who throws the line out. Theologian, botanist, statistician, guitarist. Former name of Aerosmith. Cricketer. A punch aimed at the liver with knockout power. Coasting vessel. Beloved ship. Measure of whiskey. Where the phone rests. Folk wrestler. Melting glacier.

SETTING: CORNER

A child's backpack stamped with a scrappy dog. Barred windows with heart-shaped details. T-Rex Opens December 18th. Goddamn the pusher. The photographer's flash. One menacing chalk-drawn eye. Art deco embellishments on the unused bank's façade. The window of the Ovaltine café. There will be no sandwiches. Park all day, three dollars. A policeman, a police car. A lock, a deadbolt. Her reflection. The international symbol for woman. A City of Vancouver pothole. Vacancy. This building is under 24 hour surveillance. Illegible Chinese characters. A mosaic that spells Empress. Enter to win, half-ripped. A Ford Focus. A chalked eye, an oversized hand. Open, buy and sell. The rain. Jesus in the alley. The pack of cigarettes he paid her with. Is it nothing to you. Ladies. Men. Another chainlink fence. A community gathering.

POWELL STREET

Now we are the audience to our own claims
of heritage in a park we only come to
on BC Day weekend to stand in line
for takoyaki make the bored children
watch the tea ceremony tap out code
with chopsticks on Styrofoam
beyond the chain link fence
a man sinks to the pavement
while middle aged women bang drums
in the Buddhist church Shiatsu massage
is by donation on the lawn the picnickers are safe
from discarded needles everyone has bought
a raffle ticket for two tickets to Japan
Japantown doesn't exist except on this day
despite the outdated maps
everything we do everywhere go
is Canadian our volunteers ready
to attend to the first victims
of sunstroke

AFTER WOODWARD'S

The squat's since been dusted;
W flickers, privately funded.

We see you now. We buy your neighbour's houses,
hang your portraits in HSBC, deposit hope.

Public opinion turns on a pivot. Go nowhere.
Get out of here.

We clink glasses, say we care.
Hold you harmless.

VISION QUEST 2020

The board members found it breathtaking to stand in the space they spent so long imagining. Gone were the litter and the boarded-up shops. Gone was the street itself, replaced by a new material that squeaked a little as they walked on it. The buildings were monoliths built to match downtown's wet glass: vodka tonic rather than warm-ale brick. And gone, they sighed, were the residents and their uncertain meanderings, save for the few that would be featured on display. *Yes*, they murmured as they were escorted down set paths from *ooh* to *ahh*. Soon suburban families would decant from the escalator of the line's new terminus at Main & Hastings. The ribbons waited to be cut, flapping on front doors like stupid happy faces.

THE INVISIBILITY EXHIBIT

Squats on False Creek where it once had labels pasted onto it: dandelion, daddy longlegs. Now the aging glass distorts the visitors' glances. Inside, the unseen anti-visibility engine purrs confidently. Its effects are drawn in lead at the turnstiles— that old superhero's trick. No magic until you've paid your ticket. Though the staff are always visible; consumers feel safer handing money to a flesh-and-blood body. You step through the revolving door then poof! Your body's suddenly gone, your hat sitting on the air above your collar. After the initial shock you just walk around being more or less invisible. Mirrors down the hallways prove it isn't a psychological trick. Psychologists patrol the hallways, alert to the first signs of panic. The cafeteria's always packed, full of laughter. The only food sold is stuff that looks amusing when eaten: spaghetti, curly fries, tomato soup, juice sucked through straws. What looks impossible, the body allows. Meat was left off the menu since it was too confusing to hand an empty plate to an invisible person, and the invisible flesh, so like our own, is too great a reminder. One exhibit has a snaking line where they let people in one by one. Inside, they allow you to disrobe. You take off your clothes and enter a room lit with a bare bulb. There is a mirror. There is a chair. You can sit in the chair and look through the mirror. You can really feel like you aren't even there.

THE ROOM WITHOUT LOVE: AN EDUCATIONAL EXHIBIT

Having foreseen the unpopularity of a room without love, they offer with it a 2-for-1 ticket to the Invisibility Exhibit. Few people make the connection. The organizers don't mind; they built it into the grant, and so it was built. Metal stairs lead underground into a room large enough for one. The walls are textured rubber, which, once touched, begin inflating inward until the body is encased, the head pops out of a hole in the box into an even smaller unlit box to breathe in. What is seen in there is entirely private. They'll describe instead the structure's pressure, an awareness of the body's surface and the hurt they didn't expect reminding them they had asked to enter, signed a waiver. Once they forget who they are and swear they will they will the box depressurizes and they're dropped into a puddle where they once stood. A voice asks them politely to leave. Each experience is recorded and available to purchase for \$19.95. That's how they get the cash—they tell them it's the only copy, which everyone buys in order to destroy it. No one ever realizes how exactly the same they looked as the person before them.

LONGHOUSE

Pose with Raven. Clap along to piped-in ceremonial songs about Raven. This place is chock-a-block with stories Raven wasn't supposed to tell. Raven coaxed the first men from the clamshell, and now Raven is manning the till. Raven Hour on the CBC. Let Raven entertain you! Then slip Raven a fiver after the show. Buy a stuffed Raven. Eat choco-Ravens. Raven-kebabs. Ravensicles. Black Raven Energy Drink. Let Raven pinch the wife's ass. When you sleep with her tonight, she will lie back with Raven in her belly and think of Raven.

THE MAKESHIFT MUSEUM

The rental tent flaps its slips near the park's exit, half-hidden by the brightly-lit recycling bins. On rainy days people huddle in it waiting for the tour buses to take them back to their downtown hotels. It's low-budget, necessary, hastily designed. Some wander in expecting more magic or technological tricks. But it's empty save for a glass case sitting in the centre. In it, some empty artifacts: Go-go boots, torn stockings, a red dress. Arms suggested by sterling silver cuffs. *Perhaps the prince kissed came and kissed her.* The other displays: newspaper clippings pasted to Bristol board, reproductions of *A Harlot's Progress* taped to one unsteady wall; to another, *Heroines*. The rest torn down by the city's usual rain, a few naughty vandals. The half-told story old enough to pause in front of and finish the last of the mini-doughnuts. *My goodness, my goodness*, they press their consensus to their chests. Sometimes a few women linger, fall briefly in love with a fantasy. Those ones love also Chanel No. 5. The tent stinks of it. Their heels are high enough to keep them out of puddles, low enough to look respectable. They're used to flooring more solidly constructed. Someone takes a famous picture in there: four women on vacation who don't carry a whiff of shame on them, won't ever.

WE'VE SEEN LITTLE OF HER LIFE AND LESS OF HER DEATH

The light plays tricks with toe-scuffed dirt,
forms a woman's profile. The wind lifts my chin;

resettled, she's gone, ruins already.

In a theatre an artist projects
an armless Venus onto a dancer's gown.

Somewhere, sifting through earth, a man finds
a false fingernail, is shocked by the enduring red.

Now the lab is nearly empty.
What gentleness we muster now, to lift DNA

from a microscopic edge, and protect
the whole of the woman contained there.

THE PAGE

Between your sincerity and your sign-off
exists a space for your name,
distorted. Editors are wary of space
that could be sold. This is just
enough. Fill it up with something.
After all, bound blank pages do not make poetry,
though this may be a landscape poem.

The subpoena tells its recipient
of its summons, and nothing else.
In this way, letters are reliable
props for television dramas
in which lawyers explain the case.

Put the letter down. Put the pen down.
It would be bad form
to take notes on an official document.
Use the photocopy for proofing.
We know where its shadows end.

I know where this poem ends.
Even if the line breaks
predictably I trust it to continue.
I trust its integrity.