Lengthen and Realign

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Abstract

Lengthen and Realign

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The poems contained in this series constitute meditations on family and inherited family stories. The speaker of these pieces is often ambivalent about the possibility of obtaining any access to the past, given her family's revisionist tendency to tell only partial stories. In light of this intentional inaccessibility, the speaker begins to piece together those shreds of narrative that she does know. Through a process of projection, imagination, and often repudiation, the speaker weaves new life into old 'acceptable' stories. In this process, the speaker seeks understanding of, and integration into, the world that forms her.

For Lew and Cath, who always ask.

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1.

I was overawed, and going through the family
Bible. There was no family text other, so the words
lay faintly on my entire life. Since then I have read

other things: science, cosmology, evolution. I have
learned how to parse all the things my elders said.

— *Robert Allen,* "Sonnet 35"

Table Pose

The table is set with restricted stories,
half-confidences, rhyming couplets
and inherited silver.

Stretch from crown through tailbone,
the floor adheres to the table's feet,
there is weight to breathless bodies.

Align shoulders with hands, knees with hips, lengthen spine,
a skeleton held together like family,
secure as the secrets they keep.

Breathe deep. The point of departure and transition,
the family stories that stick are all carnivorous,
ninety-centimeter fish, stolen sheep, first loves.

Our equine postures keep these dishes warm,
while the rest (and what interests me)
is half-digested roughage.

I am not fastened to this mischief
of place cards and heads of table,
groomed relations.

I will not let these corners soften
(tables are new compared to rocks
plowed round by glaciers and kicked ashore)

for the families sitting here,
hold for six deep breaths,
are full of lies.

Make-Believe

Bim (short for Arthur)
was a technician on a submarine
during the Second World War.
Agnes, his eldest and favourite of five sisters,
pressed her hand on the arm of his dark wool uniform
as he prepared to leave, *By the end of this,*
you'll have more than you can imagine.

Patrolling the waters along the coast,
he was told he must be prepared
to engage enemy ships.
But he was never frightened,
for he could compartmentalize,
and his reality
became the tenuous quarters
he closed with men,
some jumpy and stunned
as rabbits.

He met Nan (short for Elizabeth) at a dance
while stationed briefly in Newcastle.
Her friend Joan had persuaded her
to meet the men off the ships.
She hadn't been right since Bill died. She needed to have fun.
Nan, the Audrey Hepburn of the ball,
diminutive to the eyes, trusting,
was approached by Bim and his friend, Alfred.
Arthur and Alfred,
in double-breasted barathea.
Her eyes froze on his gold cuffs.
They danced to Vera Lynn,
Nan wearing her wartime beige suit,
unembellished by any trimmings,
unnecessary buttons,
form fitting pleats or tucks,
the Marxist values of rationing,
at once expressed in her patriotic fashion
and defied by her flashing blue eyes.
They waltzed,
Bim not sure how close to hold her.
Gradually, all the men and women in hall
joined the chorus, *Don't know where, don't know when,*
gripping each other's shoulders,
hoping that gazing into another's eyes,
might freeze time.
Bim whispered in her ear
as the song drew to a close,
We'll certainly meet again.

Just three weeks later,
Bim's sub returned north to Newcastle.
Believing Churchill when he said,
If we open a quarrel
between the past and the present,
we shall find that we have lost the future,
he took leave to visit Nan,
his mother's engagement ring
weightless in his pocket,
his uniform without a speck of lint,
his face straight-shaved by a Newcastle barber.

He approached Nan's father first:
a Colvin,
and not right since the First War,
Nan's father asked, *Marry who?*
Her mother, a Ballantyne,
and manly in her command of language and business,
intervened, *I see, Arthur,*
that you come here with dignity and respect.
Know that my daughter has already suffered
the loss of one fiancé to this war.
It would be terrible to lose another.
Drawing himself up with a deep breath,
for he had learned patience and rhetoric
living amongst men half-crazy with confinement,
Bim said, *Your daughter bears*
her loss with incredible strength.
I believe that my promise to her
will relieve some of that burden.
And, I can assure you madam,
this war will not destroy me.
Nan's mother glanced at her husband,
in whose defeated posture war was daily reproduced.
She clapped her hands and stood,
as though they had reached an agreement.
Opening her arms to the young man,
still so bright,
so optimistic, she whispered,
In that case, welcome.

And Nan said yes.

2.

Over sepia photographs,
where the night sky wool
of the soldiers' uniforms has turned brown,
and the four smile stiff into the camera,
my grandmother tells me
Bim was very handsome.

You wouldn't know this is a wedding picture.
In the photo, she wears a light suit,
the military style of the early 40's.
But her pinned hair,
her lipstick,
her Mona Lisa smile,
all convey some mixture
of intent and misgiving.
In those days,
many people still associated
the white wedding dress with Queen Victoria.
And Nanna, though God-fearing,
was not naïve,
The white dress has always brought to my mind,
the fabric of Christening gowns,
like the ones I sewed for you and your brother when you were babies.
It is such a pity you're both Protestants though—
you won't find God in your homes of worship.
We both laugh, but for different reasons.

I am in my early twenties,
have had my heart broken,
and am hoping to find patterns,
karma, fate, predestination,
so I ask if she loved him.
She answers,
What was most incredible was that we had a wedding cake.
One neighbour supplied a cup of sugar, another flour, even an egg.
She reminds me, *things were rationed then.*

There is so much to which I am denied access.
My grandfather was impatient when I knew him.
When his youngest sister, Wendy,
(whose body I knew as a revulsion of skin and peculiar hairs)
locked herself in Nanna's sewing room for forty-nine hours
to sulk away the ongoing rejection
of siblings, nieces, great-nieces, dead parents,
(the family still wonders how she powdered her nose)
my grandfather finally broke in the door with a cricket-bat,
and snarled, *Grow up for Christ's sake.*
My grandmother says again and again,
We were the luckiest people alive.

There are still many photos for us to rediscover
before my flight back to Canada.
Photos in unlabeled boxes
stock-piled in the guest room
of this, her last home.
The earliest is of Nan as a child
on her shell-shocked father's lap.
He seems able to carry her.

Photography had yet to become an act of surprise;
it was a formal, scheduled event.
Their stiff portraiture postures speak
of the nascent imaging of a proud,
working class.

My grandmother's gnarled fingers,
like the exposed roots of the *preah khan* trees
clamboring over the crumbling sandstone at *Angkor,*
trail over the inebriated faces at Grandpa's retirement party.
A sprawling cake, iced in the image of Grandpa's garden.
Nanna speaks now dreamy-slow with sherry,
Oh. Norman. Drove a Mini. He's dead now.
And his wife Ivy. Dead too.
And John.
Spent Sunday afternoons at the Dead Poet's Inn
over countless pints of bitter.
She always trusted him to drive her home.
His was bowel cancer, in the end.

Then there is one photo I glimpse only for a moment—
an unknown man in uniform,
his eyes lost behind the spit-polished peak of his cap,
with cheeks boyish-bare,
and a thin frame swimming in heavy khaki.
A man who looks nothing like my Grandpa.
I think I see his hand resting on the back of my Nanna's neck,
her baby-fat face, her dark curly hair,
her giant ocean eyes.
I want to see this gesture of intimacy up close,
but I haven't the time to ask,
for she flips this anomaly over,
and slips it into a box we've already mined.
It is as though some fifteen years,
years of puberty, of first love,
of crisis, of undependability,
have become unmentionable.
And then, we come to the photos of children.
Children are documented.
They are the best we do,
so we hope.

Bathe

I lift my pelvis from the floor of the tub,
the suds roll and part around my whale belly.
I consider the night my mother left her first husband Phil,
a young Byronist with no bald spot and very feminine hands.

I imagine she was wearing the Chanel #5
purchased by her mother at the Duty Free
on her way to see her witlessly emigrated daughter
in Canada, *that big empty space*, for the first time.
It is a scent my mother has never cared for,
and still Nanna sends her a new vial each Christmas.
A platoon of square glass soldiers
collect dust under the sink.
Mum hasn't the heart to tell her mother,
she's fabricated that. Chanel's okay,
The perfume she really loves is Oscar de la Renta.
But that night, the night she left her first husband Phil,
she actually wore the perfume.
A disguise for an ambush.

During The War
(my belly sounds, my shoulders surface)
Nanna worked at the perfume counter
of a chemist's shop in Newcastle
and remembers waiting and waiting for a trolley
the day the city was bombed.
I was quite distinguished, see, as women were at that time,
a buyer of luxury smell in a time of rations.
She waited until she heard the blasts.
When she finally arrived where the chemist shop had been,
she was disoriented a moment, as though in a foreign country,
until she passed the chemist,
creeping along the cake-crumbled pavement
(I sink my head beneath the surface)
reeking of Chanel.

I wonder if Phil thinks of my mother,
if his own walking is slowed
at The Bay's perfume counter
as he smells some vague memory he's long kept buried.
The water level falls as I stand.

Tree Pose

I drink gin and tonics to keep me cool,
malaria-free,
and closer to my grandmother

who is still British,
after all this time.
Crossing the bridge from Church,

my father snapped a shot of her
wearing her leopard skin hat and scarf,
parting gifts from her "houseboys"

the day she quit
my grandfather's naval post
in Ceylon.

For balance,
stare at one point on the floor,
how the fur is better preserved than her skin,

bend the right leg, shift all weight into left,
"You could wear it now.
No one would think it was real."

Keyhole

On this visit to England, alone,
Nanna tells me about my mother as a girl.
She was a stubborn child.
I once looked through her keyhole
to her reflection in the mirror.
She was clenching and unclenching her eyes,
making herself cry.
Although my grandmother is proud,
there is dismissal in her voice,
Oh yes, she was top of her class.
Oh yes, she is a wonderful teacher,
(but she should have been an artist,
she has such steady hands).

Once, my grandmother dreamed she was flying
amongst the Canadian geese
that nested in the park near her home.
There is nothing unusual here.
Nor is it that odd that the day after her dream
she went to the park, pointed her blue eyes,
her gamine curls, up to the sky,
teetering on tiptoes, believing she could take off.

Perhaps too,
there is nothing unusual
in her telling me this,
several times,
whenever I visit.

But the story makes my mother angry.
Are my grandmother's beliefs so simplistic?
(Your grandmother,
and you should see this as well as any,
she's fabricated all of that.
She remembers me making myself cry
because that's how she's told the story,
every time, all these years.)

All these years.
The gulf separating mother and daughter has grown,
and now the Atlantic yawns between them,
and perhaps the closest Nanna ever comes to Mum
is that child's reflection in a mirror
possibly glimpsed through a keyhole.

Porky Pies

My brother comes back from England with stories I've never been told.
Did I know that my Grandfather's sub was torpedoed,
that he'd jumped over-board and swum like hell from the blast,
that he spent three days floating south of Norway
on on on the backs of corpses?
With some morbid satisfaction, my brother asks,
She never told you that?

In fact, my Nanna told me that my grandfather never once met fire.
She also told me the story of her first love, Bill.
He proposed to her the day he joined the 606 Squadron to fly;
she was only twenty.
She tells me that proposing is what soldiers did before they left,
to have a world to come back to at the end of it.
Nanna woke in the middle of the night
several days before receiving that awful telegram,
his A-20 Havoc shot down north of Dover.

The night he died she woke,
her body awash with sweat,
went to the kitchen
and reorganized each of her cupboards.
She tells me she knew beyond words he was dead.

The Grandfather I remember kept a sweeping English garden,
with levels and bridges and heavy-headed rose vines
climbing up the south side of the house.
The Parkinson's ruined his mobility first,
and later his mind.
The garden became a sad emblem
of the man he once was,
and I remember the garden better than the man.
Nanna would remark on the gardener's work
after Bim was moved into hospice,
it's not what it was when my grandfather was up to it.
The rose vines became sparse
and exposed the filed bricks of the house.

I do not understand why my brother gets to hear
this story of Bim's heroism,
surviving days of riding corpses like rafts
until pulled like a sedated tomcat from the water.
My Nanna says she doesn't know anything about that.
My mother says it never happened.

As we set sail upriver
my brother pulls in the anchor,
arctic water drizzling from the rope.

I believe my mother
but will never say as much,
for to do so would be disloyal.

Nanna lied.
Maybe to show him the strength in his blood, the hero he's inherited,
or maybe to convince herself she married the right man.

Fish Pose

On your back, bend elbows
to arch spine. Old women
hear only the best in people.

Nanna loses all taste for gossip,
and we have nothing left to talk about.
But there are decks of trivia

and there's faith. *No weight should be on the head.*
We would discuss the men
but her father was shell-shocked,

and her husband was "difficult".
She bites her lip. Appears tired.
There's nothing else to say.

So I remind Nanna that, as a child,
she woke up in the night
to find her mother,

that sepia matriarch of my mind,
stretched sideways from a ladder
painting the kitchen yellow hours before dawn.

What I Know of My Grandmother's Time Spent in Ceylon

1) She sat out nights with her new naval husband in the safe of mosquito nets and oversized teak chairs. They both smoked. They played cribbage.
2) Smoking was okay in those days. She gave birth to her first in Ceylon. With ashtrays at her bedside in the hospital, she smoked herself through childbirth.
3) Her fondest memory is the journey there by boat to meet her husband. He'd sailed some weeks earlier. She remembers three weeks of dancing. She remembers being popular. (Does she keep secret that she dreaded her arrival?)
4) She had pictures taken of snake charmers. And of her new son.
5) She had yeast and flour carried in cargo ships from Europe, and showed the houseboys how to make bread.
6) The houseboys, all five of them, slept on the floor outside her bedroom those nights Bim was away.
7) The houseboys lured ants from the kitchen with bowls of sugar-water strategically placed on the veranda. They became upset if Nanna swept them up, or crushed them.
8) There were many fruits in the garden: papaya, rambutan, mangosteen, apricots, mangos. The houseboys taught Nanna how to make chutney.
9) The houseboys fawned over the baby. They put a string of *ba-di* in his cradle and often sang to him.
10) The young Tamil always had to walk behind the other houseboys. The Sinhalese walked behind Nanna, and called her *Sudda*, meaning "white one".
11) Bim gave her a revolver for the nights he would be on guard. She couldn't sleep with the firearm at her bedside, so she gave it to her favourite houseboy, the young Tamil. He was accused of stealing the revolver. He was badly beaten.
12) The Sinhalese boys took over the gun and warned her that the Tamil could not be trusted with her property.
13) My mother was conceived somewhere on the Red Sea journeying home.
14) They were in Ceylon the three years between the end of the war and Ceylon's independence. They were sent there because my grandfather was in the navy. Beyond that, I am told nothing of his work.
15) My grandmother never uses the words "plantation", "indentured labourer", or "coal port". When she speaks of the colonies, she is not ashamed.

Inheritance

The dining room is carpet-quiet
while my grandmother fills in the crossword.
She gets stuck on the anagrams
(orchestra reinvented as a beast of burden)
and reads her horoscope, which tells her to take her time.
She reminds herself, we don't believe in that, do we?
even though Scorpios are often fiscally responsible.

All her objects have names on their undersides:
the twin canary wingbacks, the V&A period china,
the silver fish platter perfect for serving salmon.
The Turkman runner damaged by cat claws
has a sticky-note pinned under one corner
announcing my mother's name in her decisive blue fountain pen.
What about the fearless lace bras and panties
Nanna wore under pleated skirts and light grey cardigans?

Words are like coins,
and my grandmother spends all she has left
improving her offspring,
whom she'll never admit disappointed her with divorces,
condominiums, unphotographable bastards.
But early evenings over desert-dry martinis in a gallery's lounge,
patting her smoke-thin Charleston hair,
she might mention donating that one really valuable piece,
the mahogany roll-top desk,
the teak dining table,
the Ming monkey figurines,
to whichever charity
will write off
all the bitch
that's still inside her.

Engles Hanged in a Closet

Rationing of Clothing, Cloth and Footwear

From June, 1941

Rationing has been introduced not to deprive you of your real needs, but to make more certain that you get your share of the country's goods - to get fair shares with everybody else.

As a teen, my mother wanted store-bought dresses,
but Bim thought this a waste.
Your grandpa, he loved her.
He gave her a first edition copy of Marx and Engles
before she emigrated.

Nanna sewed her the highest fashions for her high school dances.
She dismantled her own clothes,
and restructured English wools into sixties A-line dresses,
floppy gawdy patterns,
sleeveless,
and beads,
once thought frivolous,
retrieved from the deep potpourried drawers
of Nanna's sewing table
and embroidered along increasingly scandalous hems.

My mother shakes her head,
Where's that first edition now?
If he gave it to me,
where is it now?

My Nanna shakes her head,
Your mother was ungrateful,
but no one would have thought
those dresses sewn by an amateur.

4 AM Patient

The residual rock face of her body,
jagged with arthritic protrusions
beneath the grey withering of her skin,
is prone lengthwise across the bed.

She cannot see, has declared herself terminal.

And still she waits,
recalling matinees on grey Saturday afternoons
in the time before her husband saw *Easy Rider*
and permanently boycotted contemporary film.
Then, for thirty years, they watched nothing but John Wayne.

She has not eaten lobster in about as long,
and is inoculated against frostbite with gin.
She shifts like a tectonic plate
in cool white sheets.
She tastes cardamom in her sinuses
where she suspects memories are filed.

Fog swaggers in through the windows.
The shutters are a metronome racket.

Eagle Pose

Flight with earthbound eyes,
near omniscience
in the slow quiet of sky.

Wrap right arm under left,
the sensation of nose-diving is zero-gravity:
to fall is to be finally weightless.

Cross left leg over right knee,
meanwhile, the climb to the moon
doubles earth's gravity,

lead blanketing body.
Wrap left toes behind right ankle,
clasp hands high above head.

Eagles, like memory,
are predators.
Balanced on a line of flight,

the eagle is no nomad,
for wandering is walking spread thin
and the eagle concentrates his journey

on the pinprick center of the disc below,
calculates the slope of his narrowing gyre,
and nosedives to the beginning.

2.

We are tables,
We are shelves,
We are meek,
We are edible.

— *Sylvia Plath* , "Mushroom"

Full Lotus I

My meditation is western—
the story of a man
weltering in love with Aphrodite,

who climbed the cleft to her temple,
ejaculated on her granite
Praxitelian lap,

then, with knowledge of shame and euphoria,
swung himself, more lucid now than ever,
over a cliff into the sea.

Hold as long as comfortable.
You may not be able to hold a long time.
I am not able. *Deep breath.*

The Play Consists of Forming Interlocking Words
"Rules for Playing." Scrabble® Brand Crossword Game, New York: Selchow & Righter Co., 1974.

1. "At the end of the game... each player's score is reduced by the sum of his unplayed letters."

> The man who would one day become my father
> dropped RIVER on the triple word score.
> The second R modified my mother-to-be's BLUE: BLUER.
> Her BLUE cross-sectioned her then-husband's EXILE.
> He—Phil—would become nothing to me.
> A footnote, a whimsical allusion,
> Thanksgiving gossip.

So I was almost never born.
You were born.
I could have been someone else.
Then you wouldn't have been you.

My mother is a spiritual woman for three reasons.

The first is a speech she delivers to my father and me
as we drive along Jean-Talon
in search of a restaurant that won't sabotage
my father's sensitive digestive track:
We need stories. Stories about Fathers and Sons and Forgiveness.
We could never understand anything without them.

The second is a question she asks me
after hydroplaning on a cement overpass,
about her father who had finally died:
What becomes of the space he occupied?

The third is a sentence fragment she trails off as she irons.
I have watched her iron my father's shirts so many times,
her spider hand smoothing pinstriped cotton:
When you just consider the unlikelihood of having ever been born.

I love my mother.
An easy thing to say
but these moments
of her abandonment,
her fragility are rare.
Most of the time she is the woman who tells me,
You are a wastrel.
I waste.

2. "A player may use his turn to exchange all, or some, or none of his letters."

Poor Phil.
He was washing dishes when my father played RIVER.
There are stories about the premonition of loss.
Seconds before a young soldier was shot dead on the front,
his wife began folding their baby's cloth diapers
in a way she'd never tried before.
One father cut himself with strange precision
just before his son vanished from a suburban sidewalk.
But, as I see it, Phil didn't reorganize the cupboards,
he didn't meticulously fold the dishtowels,
he didn't stare out the window long enough to observe
the quiet snow sailing past the streetlight.

Phil, like my grandfather,
was good at shoveling. Snowdrifts in Winnipeg,
rose gardens in Derbyshire.
One morning when my grandfather was terrible
with Parkinson's, an embarrassment of tremors
and diapers, he sat at the dining room table
with an open bottle of gin, holding my hand
for he thought me his daughter of twenty-five years ago,
and I sat and I sat and I held
his loose skin over his kindling bones
and I was disgusted.

How did you know Phil was the wrong man?
I made him feel inadequate.

As a child, Mum uprooted a patch of her father's roses
for no reason that she can remember,
and he chased her lopsided up the stairs
wielding his ridiculous left slipper.
She slammed her door and jammed a chair under the knob.
She loved her father. An easy thing to say.

Years later, after her first wedding,
she took a boat across the Atlantic.
Phil liked the way salt dried on his forearms
when he leaned over the bow.
She liked all the water behind her.
She was seasick most of the way,
prayed at night she wasn't pregnant.
She said *a man's reach should exceed his grasp.*
He said *Browning's an asshole.*

3. "If the word challenged is unacceptable, the player takes back his tiles and loses his turn."

RIVER. Two three four, eight nine, times three is twenty-seven,
twenty-eight twenty-nine thirty, thirty-one, thirty-four,

leaning over the board
she tapped the tiles with a pencil
as she counted the points.

My grandmother believes that when she dies
she will float to heaven serenaded
by Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte.*
When she woke to a selection playing on the radio,
she lay very still looking into the darkness,
happy, weightless, ready to be admitted,
until the outlines of the lamp and the dresser
appeared through the dark
and she was ripped from the sky,
the crescendo of Derby's December rain
drowning the piano angel.

My father smelled her hair as she leaned over the game:
not lilacs, pillows.
As though he had done it before and before and before
he reached his hand around the back of her neck
and locked her lips with his own.
It was the old yoke of treachery and romance.
What?
What? He paused. *We need to tell Phil.*
No. Not yet.
We need to tell Phil.
No. This means something. We will.

But why did you really emigrate?
Because of Phil. Really.
But you didn't even love him.
...

Nanna got up early the day her daughter was to be married
(for the first time).
She walked through the fog to the Church
and prayed that her daughter's divorce wouldn't be too painful.
Her decision to walk, the timing of it, the weather,
this was her premonition of loss.
In England, everyone says winter's damp
sinks all the way down to the bones.

4. "Any player who plays all seven of his tiles in a single turn, scores a premium of 50 points in addition to his regular score for the play."

A drop of red wine had spangled and dried
on the white counter top.
Phil wiped the tiles clean.

Phil. It's your turn.
My parents averted their eyes from each other by watching him.

Discovering a home for his word,
and building two past tenses with a single D
at the end of EXILE,
Phil spelled QUESTED
one cautious letter at a time,
the Q resting smug on the triple-letter score.
I do not believe he noticed
how the room's intimacy had changed.

The day Mum left for Canada,
my grandparents sat on the chilled finality
of their daughter's ironed linen and cried.
Your Grandpa cried his heart out.

Tomb

The small provocation
of entering their bedroom
unsettles dust from the curtains.

Her yellow dressing gown
crumples under itself
as it falls from a hook to the floor.

They are only on holiday,
but there's always a chance
they'll never come back.

The bed has stood reserved for weeks,
the stiffened air,
the old new smell of skin and bleach.

At my mother's dressing table
hairbrushes are lined
like Egyptian mummies.

Here is my reflection in my mother's mirror.
I know about metaphor,
that I am not enough for this one.

All her shoes, half a size too big,
and impossibly heeled
are more accurate clichés.

It is a smell I remember from some childhood chamber,
skin and bleach, the puffed smell of containment,
the light perfume of her absence.

Fat Cat

Is there much to learn from the fat my mother shed
in the ten years after she emigrated?
I am watering their plants while they are on holiday.

My mother has bought orchids in flower from a local nursery.
The white ones in the den are upside-down teacups.
Bone china is made of bone.
My mother's lingering accent appears when she says words like 'plant'.
Plawnt.
These flowers look artificial, and are in vogue because of the movies.
I pick one bearded purple belle, and drop it in my cocktail.
I am drinking my father's gin.

He told me his father, born in Port Hope, Ontario,
was one of the great anglophiles.
He loved monarchy.
The idea of it.
Sometimes I fear that I've inherited his infatuation with that sponge of a country.
I find a carrousel of slides stacked sideways on the bookcase.
The label reads, "Winnipeg, Tadoussac, Derby, 1975".
I hold them up to the window, one at a time.
I've inherited my grandfather's misshapen eyes and squint.

First there is Tadoussac.
This is my father's side.
Mountains, said to be the oldest in the world, rounded and sheared by glaciers.
My mother is on a boat.
It is not just her hair that had more body.
The woman I married was not a thin woman.
A reader, those oversized tortoiseshell frames, those hips.
Those breasts.
I try to trace the fashion of thin as far as it will go.
It predates my mother's arrival on this continent by at least five years.
Les Hornby weighed ninety pounds in 1967 when she was 'discovered'.

The slides of Winnipeg are most alien.
My mother, fat, on the sidewalk,
posing in front of their first home together.
A brick building.
A basement apartment.
These are city pictures—that grit of cityscape.
No dark pines and blue sky and deep blackened water.
My mother's pageboy haircut. A lamppost. Her fat face.

I come to the slides of Derby.
My father sitting on the stone walls
that wind through England's East Midlands.
His long legs stretched out in front of him.
His beard matching her ruddy coat.

She slouches in these pictures,
does not look directly into the camera.
Perhaps her father was not speaking to her
for she never saw things through.

She had a way of murdering cats.
As a child, she snipped Bustopher Jones' whiskers
with a pair of sewing scissors.
Lady Chatterley sucked on the tip of her tail,
until Mum taped it up with electrical tape.
Both cats went walk-about,
never to be heard from again.
Then there was dear Lear,
who lived twenty-two years.
Mum just deserted him.
Packed up and moved to the New World,
while her Communist Catholic parents pinched their lips shut.
The orchid in my drink has shrunken with wet.
I pick it out and pour the gin down the sink.

Threading the Needle

From the Table, fit left hand
between right shoulder and left knee.
Adjust the posture until you feel the deepest stretch.

Hold it there. My parents become less and less
recognizable. They are agents of my stories,
secret handshakes and non-disclosure agreements,

filed with glances. I have stopped asking questions
about their youth, for I have long heard all they'll ever tell me.
I am learning to inhale deeply,

I am learning to breathe.
My mother refused to ride the boat,
her feet deep in the sand. She later mocked

my father's tales of overcoming a perfect storm.
Nor did she believe that her father had spent
three days floating after his sub was torpedoed.

She is at home on land, with prime numbers,
pot roasts, the speed limit
and no more than two glasses of wine.

We will, we will, we will not
inherit the earth.
We will tighten the lines of your sail.

Repeated Heads

Weltering under the causeway
my mother and I abrogate men,
oh by all men we don't all men mean,
we have become stone *apsaras* in the now-permanent click of our heels,
and through once-haptic water I harangue her
for forgiving life (and by life I mean
death) so easily.

She ducks her head right under.
She so rarely got her hair wet when she was alive.

Rusted water, we both
stroke slow from the groping shadows
of the cavetto, *des raconteuses de vie*,
vying with each other's corpse,
villi in the still
brown of the canal.

Homily (pl. –lies)

My father is fatalistic about marriage. His parents' relationship followed a pattern of elevens. They first noticed each other at a bonfire in Tadoussac. My eleven year old grandmother busied herself with a piece of driftwood, tapping the orange fagots with a child's jazzy disregard for conventional rhythm, sparks sailing into the interrupted night sky. My grandfather, Lewis, kept close eye on the fire too. He, twenty-two, and not yet easy with women, who made him ache with awareness of his alopecia, was glad to collect driftwood. It allowed him to adjust his wig. He was wonderful with men, though. The best sailor and carpenter amongst the Prices, the Molsons, and Betty's family, the Rhodes. A daredevil, he'd sail right up alongside the great passenger steamers in the small dinghy he'd spent a summer affixing with sail. He'd cut the boom and the mast from pine, and had spent long hours treating the long wood. Betty watched him add sticks to the tent of fire. They were married eleven years later, in 1944. She was twenty-two, he was thirty-three. Their first child (a girl) was conceived on Remembrance Day a year after the war —when those remembering actually remembered. No one asks what took them two years, but ski-injury prevented my grandfather enlisting, and I'm told he never forgave himself this. He longed to be in the company of men fighting against tyranny. I remember my grandmother listing the elevens in the same house they were given by her father in 1955. She held my hand, and explained that the pattern of elevens was significant. Her love was meant to be. She told me that love is written in the stars. God is love. Her proof was in the elevens. He died at 77. She held out a year too long, and died at 67. A prime number.

Boat Pose

Our Father built our home from a boat,
lamps on levers, carved whale mobiles,
red port and green starboard ends of the kitchen.

The *Bonne Chance's* boom is suspended
from nooses fixed to the ceiling—
the spruce spine of an aging house.

The yawl's ribs, loosed of their keel, are piled up
from the basement, *interlace fingers at the small of the back,*
a staircase for the light and agile.

Tonight
my paddle legs outlined beneath the blankets,
it rains.

The sail's cords tighten,
water pours down the porthole window,
I hold my breath to know sinking,

press pelvic bone into the floor,
I close my eyes to know depth,
reach out through fingers, toes, the crown of the head.

It rained so hard on the Saguenay,
we found new shards of dish, rubber dog toys,
erupted walls of houses.

Women's Matters

My father is the emotional one.
For over pork chops—my least favourite meal,
the night after my brother moved to Peterborough for college,
my mother asked me leading questions,
Where might you go to university?
What might you study?
Your time will come.

After supper, in the cool of our basement,
my father turned off the television and read
Wordsworth's "Michael" to me.
An envious and lazy adolescent,
I half-listened,
concerned about the poem's length
and missing *Friends.* At some point,
my father removed his glasses,
wiped his eyes with a handkerchief,
and as he read, *the Old man sobb'd aloud.*
I said, *"Nay do not take it so—I see*
That these are things of which I need not speak,"
appalled by this display of deeply felt emotion.

Finally, a graduate student in Literature,
I read the poem again, searching the
Language and the narrative
For the moment my father had cried.
There I found his *woman's gentle hand*
That had caressed my face so often as a child.
I wondered if he feared my brother
Would *slacken in his duty,*
Exile himself to a *hiding-place beyond the seas,*
Or if it was himself he feared,
Growing old, growing old,
Wordsworth's arthritic bitch panting at his feet,
The work unfinished when he died.

New Mail

My uncle,
without any premonition of the end,
begins hoarding photos.

To save our lives,
he scans old slides,
and emails them to each of us.

Those are violins my father hears
deep in the heart
of his deaf ear.

The children look like no one I know,
and their parents
like the adults those children will grow into.

Some images are so familiar, the *Bonne Chance* anchored
at Anse-à-la-Barque, her sail glowing against the up-river storm,
watercolors I never thought rooted in photography.

New children scroll through near-ancient histories,
the rainbow sprouting from a garden hose sixty years ago,
occasionally screaming over the songs that we're singing,

"Don't TOUCH me," reminding us all
how glad we are
our lifespan is limited.

Jingle

A man played organ
in Anglican chapels for half his life,
all ten toes and all ten fingers working

(one) God's music
into the left hemisphere
of non-believers' brains.

Then he suffered chronic dementia,
depriving him of his memories:
Where was he born, to whom?

The filing cabinets of his mind,
exploded into a New Year's
waste of confetti.

But in his shambling dotage,
he remembers every jingle he ever heard:
Pepsi Cola hits the spot,

twelve full ounces, that's a lot.
They rattle about like snakes through cans,
in a hospital room watering nothing but cut flowers.

He gazes at a plastic dish of sliced apple,
quartered tuna sandwiches,
and a stranger reminds him to eat.

Mountain Pose

Lift toes, spread wide,
set feet shoulder-width apart.
The Mountain grounds you,

its towering familiarity
shadows the worshippers,
groveling green pines that thrive in its daily microclimates.

Father's Father's stories
remind me that what we see now
is not so different from what Champlain first saw.

Blandished in flag, wood, and metal,
first saw conquest, dazzling supply,
Press sternum forward,

first saw when the world was still
is still.
Father's Father's stories

honour this dark cleft,
rocks like breasts,
glacial water's scar.

Those easy,
unambiguous
ideas of wilderness.

3.

The effect of water
on light is a distortion,

but if you look long enough,
eventually
you will be able to see me.

—*Margaret Atwood,* "This Is A Photograph Of Me"

Child Pose

Exhale: rest forehead against floor,
unclasp hands along folded body.
We see the world upside-down.

The pineal gland,
that ancient pyramid eye,
uprights our vision,

it counts circadian rhythm,
gives contour and motion
to cerebral steel plates

corroded by memory.
I blanch panels as I lift
photos of myself from family albums,

but the gaps
remind me
I was there.

Seas are still mornings after shipwreck,
resolution is a thing you can hear,
the suspended chord, wet, waiting, union with its major.

The child wakens with daylight, naps with the curtains drawn,
speaks with sailboat hands to helicopter seeds,
scopes their haecceity with sillion soil.

Tones, digests, eliminates,
preverbal reptile play,
nests, hoards and hibernates.

Words Come Halting: Stars

From Sir Philip Sydney's *Astrophel and Stella:* "Sonnet 1"

Show me love in fourteen lines, metric feet,
pained end-rhymes, the sonnet verse's *Hustler.*
Know constellation lips, soundless half-words,
obtaining the grace of flash-thin body.
Woe-soaking men sport gold aviators
entertained by the liquid lock and key
flow from my hips to these sea-salting lips,
brained by the burning flesh-glossy pages.
Stay on the love-seat. Lips part. Say Mother.
Blow. "Maw—" Halt. Click. Show us the real you. The
way you were. Here (flip). And here (flip). And here.
Throw off your voice, it washes flat as sand,
spiteful or truant model, beat back your
right rebel tongue. Click. Look. Click. Fool. Click. Me.

Sense in Hospital

The nurse draws Nanna's blood.
It thins down labeled vials.

Lazerus was risen.
She was just resuscitated.

She prays, one finger hovering
over the incarnadine vial.

She sees generous chalices of wine
cast apocryphal light on her sheet.

The bodies, fraying sections of a frond,
the ward's numinous breathing.

Friendly Fire

1.

There is a photograph I've lost now,
taken the last time my grandmother
was fit enough to fly to Canada.
It is of the three generations of women,
Nan, Mum, me,
standing in front of Montmorency Falls.
We must have picnicked there on our way to Tadoussac.
I am fourteen, stringy from hair to limb,
and tallest of us three.
My mother's dark brown hair is still cut short,
the worry lines between her eyebrows
appear even when she smiles.
She does not look directly into the camera,
but to the side, vaguely puzzled by something
like a dog run off her leash.
In this picture, Mum does not resemble me at all—
but one of her ex-students remarks many years later,
When you look over the rim of your glasses like that,
you look exactly like her.

My grandmother at 4"8
must have shrunk with time,
and stands in front.
As I remember the picture,
we are right behind Nan
so close she seems to be leaning back,
like a trust exercise.
But she isn't. She is free-standing,
and everything she's wearing,
the tailored coat, the pleated skirt,
even the bodice underneath the silk blouse,
she sewed herself.
Her first love died a war hero,
and she married the next man who asked.
I wonder if her entire married life
was a misinterpretation of her feelings.

2.

If you look at me from other angles,
maybe we'll be meant-to-be.
You want me to know the difference
between sarcasm and irony.
Sarcasm is the opposite.
Irony is the same.
Your proof is from our arrival in Bangkok:

asked if you were carrying any food,
you thought it strange,
Any cheese? Plants? Oranges?
The irony was,
I did have an orange,
right there in my hand luggage.

But riding in a *tuk tuk* to Bangkok's *Wat Arun,*
I am not interested in semantics.
We, insipid anthropoids dropping through space
laugh about English-the-new-Christianity,
learn to use rice-cookers,
ride uptown on weekends for quiche at *Starbucks*™
where we're solicited to make commercials for *Milo*™ and *Orange*™,
sipping espresso instead of tea.

You want me to know that you fished saltwater salmon
with some old man blanched dry with salt
who told you that communism and fascism
are not opposites: They are on a spectrum.
Unable to tell if you expect me to laugh,
I half laugh. Shift.
Tuk tuks are slippery and stifling in thick traffic.
Like colours.

You tell me things I already know,
and somehow, I have nothing to say.
Of course you met a moose while you were tree-planting.
Of course you watch *The Littlest Hobo.*
Of course you're a backseat driver.
It's sunset when we finally get to the temple.
Low, the sun trickles orange highlights on the city's smog,
orange ripples on her *Chao Phraya,*
orange spotlights on a dragon procession of long boats.

And then you don't want to do *this* anymore.
Because, Kiddo,
we're both "B" characters,
in each other's stories.
Is this love or rejection I am feeling?

3.

The week after my mother left Phil
she felt so guilty she telephoned him,
asking to be taken back.
Phil refused. Told her she was mistaken.
That was the only time my mother ever respected him.
Grief, guilt, love,
is it only circumstance that dictates which one we are feeling?

After you leave me, I sleep all the time.
I never work Mondays.
I call in sick. Or just don't show.
I get migraines that fill my vision with static
and make me vomit the color of green tea.
I sleep and sleep and sleep,
and dream of cold lakes and snow.
Travel far, meet new neighbours.

I hope the last time I speak to Nanna
I don't interrupt her.
I'll mention the fruit—the mangos,
rambutan, litchis,
she'll remember them all from Ceylon,
we'll find that we both actually like durian.

When my mother says on the phone,
"You're grandmother's fallen. She died,"
I laugh. It is some misfire in my brain.
Recovering in an instant,
I open and close my eyes,
making myself cry.

Techne

1.

I am in love
and write out my beloved's name
almost involuntarily.
It makes me feel better,
oozing ink from my pen,
defacing yellow memos
with so much unsolicited affection.
When she first married,
my mother legally changed her name to Jarvais.
But when Winnipeg community colleges
called about her resume,
they asked for a woman named Carter.
Her husband,
the only man to have ever offered
to take her away from England,
presumed this too was part of the New World.
But really, as she composed her resume,
with slow deliberation,
it was her maiden name she pecked out on the typewriter.
She was giddy with spurning her husband this way.
She began depositing "Carter" across the continent,
on magazine subscriptions, in hospitals and pharmacies.
In gift shops. On restaurant reservations.

2.

I am sick, and want only the name,
it makes me feel better.
Gastroenteritis.
Cerebrospinal meningitis.
Hypoesthesia. Schizophrenia.
When she was a child, my mother thought "Syphilis"
would be the perfect name for her daughter.
She'd savour the name
as she christened a doll, "Syf-fe-lysss."
Then she learned other words,
like 'venereal'.
It became a nudgey bit of family lore,
this failure of form and function.

Full Lotus II

Be kind to your body
do not force it beyond its means.
In the dark behind my eyes,

roots press deep through soil words.
This lateral growth,
sprouts like living hair,

breathes brown and
bathes in subterranean cool,
a constant temperature

beneath the earth's surface.
Waiting in a casket with a toothpick
and a dictionary,

these compartments dissolve,
I hear words like pistols,
and flounder helpless,

full prying into static,
I have thrown myself overboard
and now I swim

with even breast strokes. *Deep breath.*
My legs a swirling rhizome
that will not surface.

Hood

Your canvas is deaf to the approaching monsoon,
your paint:
anonymous, preposterous, absent.

Turpentine, headlines, paintbrushes.
What I see is a man in a Yankees jersey
with a whetstone hooked to his belt,

and hundreds of hooded women
aiming their guns.
I announce that it signifies,

pearl-diving for covert agendas.
You say you're fucked
if looking must be sequacious.

You open the soda bottle with a lighter.
The cap fires like a gun.
The monsoon bursts through the sky.

You tell me vision is pleasure,
but I do not have primordial eyes,
so I consider the language of pleasure.

The rain makes us raise our voices
to the pitches of panic and arrogance.
We fail to smell the wet city.

Then, perhaps enraged by my insistence on context,
you take a roller to the canvas,
and wash it coral. I gasp.

As the clouds lighten
so does the canvas.
Uncertain, we listen to the last drops of rain.

Lines Transcribed at Sukhumvit, Soi 3, Bangkok, July 2003

"The Lucifer was hot. The bed bounced like a trampoline. I flooded the linen. A puddle. A fucking lake."

"You can drink my frappuccino but only for a C-note."

"She said sh. She said stop. She said fuck you, but she meant fuck me... please."

"I couldn't get out of my head the face of a priest and so many bourgeois moms. We snort enough to mutate a body like a Chernobyl earthworm. And these women are praying? *Praying*? They're the fiercest earthworms *alive*."

"I am a boy. You are a girl. It's antediluvian. No one taught you how. It's the snake. It's the devil in me. The devil in you. It's sadness. It's a cloud."

"We are violent pacifists. We are misanthropic Samaritans. Just read the shitter stall."

"Ever snort a line of coke off a mastectomied chest? It's fucked."

"I hate my sister. I hate my whole family. I'm fucking losing it. A fucking giraffe on rollerskates. My blood kin. I hate them all."

"Don't ever go back. It's all gone on without you."

"I fuck only chicks who bleach their assholes."

"*Je ne veux pas m'amuser. Je ne veux pas savoir.*"

"Myopic nightmares. Wake up. Take what you can get, *ti rak.* Take it now."

I would like to say, with *absolute clarity*, unifying diction and logic, subject executing object with a single verb, a sentence parsed and balanced, in the active voice, I would like to say—

Debriefed

For Mary

Petals–
my hand throbs in the heat as
I wrap my pink hand around the coarse
slice stem–

wipe dripping red on white dress now ruined.
Crumple dress in heap in shrub
invisible.

Squeeze ripe skin around slash
reeling bloody zigzags all over my

Garden.

So Contribute Ruins

You can't float on poetry; it's not a life preserver. It won't help you remember where you left your keys. It won't get your bills paid. It might get you laid, but it won't create sustainable agriculture. You can't drive poetry to work. It's not worth smoking. It won't even make your breasts any bigger.

You can still read poetry, but never mind if you don't.

Poetry may have ruined:
sunsets
sheep
blush
roses
weaving
thorns
crowns
snow
warblers
trains
mirrors
fires
leaves
beats
windows
footpaths
sailboats
tears
floods
tides
migrations
moons
curtains
hemlock
and winter for all of us.

If the tide sweeps all the pages
clean (which I suspect its plan has
always been), you'll find me on the
littered beach, combing for words
to make jewelry.

Grace

My uncles are both there for Thanksgiving.
Tommy takes two wheat stalks
and holds them behind my head.

Alan, the priest says,
"Devil child".
My brother snaps a shot.

I am a thief and a liar.
But it's easier to confess
in the third person.

Her father showed her the wad
of twenties he was collecting
for his wife's fiftieth birthday.

Fifty bills,
clasped in a silver
money clip.

She stole six bills
in four months.
Kept track of the number as if she'd return them.

The last time she found a note instead of the wad.
"HANDS OFF,
THIEF!"

She had stolen before—
She forged her father's signature
on failed tests in grade school.
She went on to steal people's jokes,
their insights, words,
their stories.

She's dying
to steal
someone's heart,
but I'm too opaque,
I won't refract the world's generosity,
not even for a night or two.

Upward Facing Dog

Bitches squatting by hydrants.
Hydra's weltering heads
leaking all manner of mucus and saline.

Bodies becoming puddles
entered and lifted,
spray hanging between force

and gravity long enough
to be captured on film,
drop hips to the floor, bitch.

These stories are not,
are not ours.
I am little more than instinct,

fight or flight, happening
across my old signature,
a statement of all my disgusting habits,

I cannot *lengthen and realign.* I leave
the evidence to capsize with the ship,
and mark my boundaries with my smell.

Trading Places

The puffy-cheeked,
bare-chested child
waist-deep in a paddle pool
looks nothing like me.
Her blond hair is not streaked brown
with so many winters and unwashed days.
Her blue eyes, clean as the Marguerite,
and rose-smooth skin, announce
only one word: *wholesome.*
And such white teeth,
unstained by tar and vomit.
A smile yet to betray insecurity,
infatuation,
humiliation.

As cells regenerate every seven years,
the girl in that picture hardly exists at all.
Though some cells don't—
those in the inner ear
are formed before birth,
and never again.
Once damaged
they cannot transform sound waves
into nerve discharges.

The more conscious I become,
the less I can perceive.
Meanwhile the gleaming girl in this picture
has no words for lukewarm water,
or an undeveloped chest photographed without perversity.
She has a world crowded with sounds.

Blades of grass stretch as their vagabond dew evaporates.
Feathers tap the river as their geese take flight.

Five-Pointed Star

Tuck the tailbone up,
feel legs strong and solid
rooted to the floor.

I bring the boat with me when I leave.
The idea, the vessel that separates
water from air, collection from memory.

My father's skilled hands
let out the mainsail,
one eye on a storm pressing up the fjord.

In this place, we sail for pleasure.
The black water swells in jagged peaks,
a puff ripples ahead, the yawl heels hard.

No one falls out, but the fierce sail chips
and my father barks
that we're too far to harbour.

I hide from the cursive crescendos above.
Drowning may be
the quietest death.

My knees still feel like water,
the unsoured aftertaste
of our last journey.

Relatives turn over leaves,
denying the accuracy of every last word.
In some muddy future

they see only the house and no boat dismantled.
The sail—a drawn curtain,
the stories anchored on land.

Demolition

"I think that if any one would show them how to live, and teach them to till the ground, and other matters, they would learn very well; for I assure you that plenty of them have good judgment ... They have one evil quality in them, which is, that they are given to revenge, and are great liars..."

–Samuel de Champlain, *Des Sauvages*

The boathouse changes after my grandparents die.
First sofas are reupholstered with patterns
that clash with everyone's clothes.
The yellow floor is painted brown
and Granny's collection of sea urchin skeletons
are stealthily discarded when no grandchildren are looking.
The dismantled boat becomes firewood,
the yawl's ribs are replaced with a steel ladder,
amateur watercolours of boats at anchor
are moved from the mantle to guest rooms and replaced
with thick acrylics of land looming over water.

My grandfather's books,
vanity publications about a ship-hand
aboard Champlain's *Pontgrave,*
become parting gifts when cottagers lose at charades.
Bigged by my new vocabulary,
I call his book "a ship-hand's memoir"
and praise it for its democracy:
Its protagonist, Jean-Christophe,
an adolescent boy with arms like a woman's,
is an unlikely traitor to Champlain's piracy,
and emaciated, gums bleeding with scurvy,
he dies before the French
seek refuge with the *Innu.*

Oh, Champlain was hero
to great-untold spaces,
charitable to the last degree.

We crouch beneath the shadows of mammary mountains,
still building sand damns against the in-coming tide,
shouting our hollow Anglo orders for barricades
flying buttresses, the draw-bridge, the keep,
over the crashing surf of melted glaciers.
Then, armed with bombs of wet clay,
we rain all holy terror down on our sand civilization.
One cousin, too young to understand the joy
of building up to tear down,
erects a lop-sided cross in the rubble of our war

Vibration

How can a cemetery
invoke anything
but other cemeteries?

The receiver becomes a thing in your hand.

Can you resuscitate space?
Dead air
held taut by a dial tone,
flatlining her.

"Invention of the lesser gods"
–Lorna Crozier

For Rob

He knew what was desirable in poetry.
He invited the overwrought iconography
of gardens and snakes into his home.
Go there now and find the artifacts of a dead genius:
half empty bottles of scotch, clipped headlines,
an unmade bed.
Once, the place was full of the cricket scratch of his pen,
but there is little time left for writing—
no time for metaphors or shedding skins,
no time for his unprotected memories.
There is time for atheism,
not sex—
the best he can do is smell the young and old women
who will one day describe
the nights he faced the lion,
the nights he vomited in his sink.
Is to build biography from his poems
now that he is dead,
to own him?

He preferred analogue.
When you lean against the pine wall of his house
it sinks under your weight. Go there, through the walls
he once raised around himself,
the swampy compartments of his thoughts.
the Florida Keys, the RCMP,
sarsaparilla, the curve of women's stomachs.
He made poets out of his libido.

The camera zooms out from the man hunched dead over a keyboard,
to the loft of the flooded pine house, above the roof,
over the canopy of trees, higher into the clouds
until the house looks like part of the wet earth,
and there you float past flying turtles,
tap dancers in tuxedos, celebrity body parts,
and hear the clink of snifters
and feel the burn of whiskey.

Pigeon Pose

Open heart, roll shoulders back
lean home through chest
dropping breadcrumbs and counting steps.

Homing with my magnet beak
to the boat house that carries our tall-tales
of storms and sails.

Lengthen and realign:
I do not *cross a bridge into town.*
The town crosses into me.

Home now,
our granite faces hang like drapes,
mated for life in a boat that wants the sea.

Versions of childhood braced between finger and thumb,
brown negatives opening forests against light.
"Home": tease "oh" from my hollow mouth,

gather "mm" from my fastened lips,
fray the phoneme into oblivious sound.
"Home" is a place I can't leave.