

Tending Ice Gardens

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The Department

of

English

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## ABSTRACT

### Tending Ice Gardens

Gillian Sze

*Tending Ice Gardens* is a collection of poetry based on visual art from a range of cultures (European, Canadian, Asian, and Aboriginal) and time periods. Unlike the traditional take on ekphrastic poetry, I approached this project in the modern mode and refrained from merely describing the piece, but also interpreted, confronted and spoke to the art-object. The selection process for the artwork was primarily aleatoric. The works of art and artefact acted as catalysts, providing the imaginative setting, figures or circumstance for my own imagination to work off. These poems “spin off” visual art, moving beyond the artwork to explore imaginative and emotional possibilities.

What holds the poems together in *Tending Ice Gardens* are themes of love, loss and hope which thread their way throughout the collection. The poems explore emotional experiences: for example, the suffocating affection of a dying aunt and the impossible love between a woman and her married, female lover. The poems include narrative, lyrical and imagistic elements.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"I count myself in nothing else so happy  
As in a soul remembering my good friends;"  
-William Shakespeare, *Richard II*

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Finally, I'd like to thank my entire family for their support. I wish to thank my parents, Tina and Henry, my brothers, Edmond and Edwin, and both my grandmothers. To them I dedicate this thesis.

Gillian Sze  
Montreal, Quebec  
April 15, 2008

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## How to be Dead

The morning after you died,  
I almost got hit  
crossing the street by my home;  
so near an escape  
that after,  
I thought maybe I was a ghost  
walking unseen,  
continuing down the street  
on garbage day,

past shapeless black masses,  
broken table legs,  
a denim covered mattress,  
past a girl crying and wearing big headphones,  
past the usual man on the corner  
who didn't ask me for change  
for the first time,

and I wished that anyone  
would meet my eyes,  
to offer me a paper,  
or hold the door a moment longer,

because what would I have to do,  
if not light myself in flames  
and sing any song off-key

but I'd find the good in it,  
like the Egyptians  
with their book of the dead,  
and learn how to pass you again  
to make it right –

all this was pathetic,  
(to be alive and know it –  
just because an old lady  
accepted my seat on the bus)  
and the next day I woke up feeling gritty,  
so I took my sheets to the balcony,  
and thrashed out all the sand,  
even if only imaginary.

## Even the Maid Never Came

I

Somehow,  
it has become a favourite memory,  
the white sheets assaulted by my skin,  
by the inside of my body  
as I wept.

The pillow, unslept on,  
the ashtray unsoiled,  
I put the plastic door hanger outside,  
crossed off *Privacy Please*  
and wrote:  
*Maid, come in.*  
*Clean these sheets.*  
*The company could be nice.*  
*I would even help you.*

I waited three days,  
stared at the blue floral trimming,  
its monotony was unrelenting,  
like it was trying to tell me something  
I didn't know,  
or maybe something I did already.

## II

When I hung up on you,  
the sun at the foot of the bed  
flipped the shadows backwards  
behind me.

The carvings of the night table  
made ghosts  
shaped like medicine bottles  
against the walls –  
the dark is mocking  
in conversation.

Cradling the phone,  
I pressed my face against  
the rotary dial.

The glare  
off the uneven wallpaper  
made two bright spots.  
I let the spy stay in my wall.

### III

A twin bed,  
I would've made space for you.

I would've given you my pillow.  
I would've smoked with you.

We would've scratch out God's name in this bible,  
written over it our own,  
we would've ordered everything on the drink menu,  
cavorted in a pile of bottles and corks.

And we could've cut the cord to this red phone,  
climbed the roof,  
pitched it from above our heads,  
and when I heard the last piece settle,

I would've forgiven you.

## Beauty of an Eastern Dancer

The man I'm with likes to bite my hands,  
leave little red dashes on my knuckles  
and along the bones.

He pinches my breasts,  
says they're so soft he only does it  
to see if they're real.

Afterwards, he asks me if it hurts  
if it makes me suffer.

He's adorned me in gold,  
twined lilies of the valley in my headpiece,  
knotted little cymbals to my fingertips.

At night,  
he unties the red strings from my thumbs  
like he's trying to unravel me open,

but in the mirror  
I've seen my dark eyebrows arch  
like two halves of a bird,

and my hair  
can hold a single, thick braid  
on its own.

## Remembering Lot's Wife

I

From the hill,  
I stared down at the  
broken limbs  
of the city.

It wilted,  
a flower in a sun too strong,  
what it was before,  
smouldering  
and already forgotten.

The sky was bleeding,  
sizzling where it touched ground.  
Outside the city,  
the unscorched land was mirrored  
in the dancing flames,  
lit by sun  
and bordered by shadows.

The birds were gliding in ash clouds,  
their silhouettes difficult to distinguish  
whether they were flying  
away or returning.

## II

Our last night,  
our hair,  
a long tangle between us.  
When we lay side by side  
the quiet made me ill,  
and I rolled on top of you,  
your breasts supple,  
shaping themselves against mine.

I whispered,  
*I am scared you will evaporate.*

So I stayed there,  
aligning our curves  
(the protrusions of our breasts  
between our weight,  
our hips, empty of the unborn,  
now hugging only each other),  
and pressed closer,

a sheathe  
for what was left of you.

### III

I saw white streaks in the blaze.  
I saw a man with his arms outstretched  
and a face wet and sooty.  
I saw a cow seared,  
its bones remaining for crows.  
I saw a couple hovering in a cave,  
their trunk, the only thing left.  
I saw the distance, blue and peaceful.  
I saw the sun's face in the ground.

And then I saw you,  
your hair loose,  
the heel of each step  
a dirty departure,  
before you slowed,  
the figures of your children  
diminishing,

and then you turned.

I watched you crumble,  
your sweetness turning into salt,  
your name dissolved on my tongue,  
tasting like you dropped from my eyes.

## The Kiss

mouths gulp, gorge in slick struggle,  
breaths swallow full,

eyelashes strain to meet.

## Coffee Talk

We left your mother's,  
cut through the schoolyard  
where boys in black hoodies congregated,  
looking innocent,  
staring at their feet in the snow.

Last night's fight echoed  
in the morning bareness:  
    the cold stone table,  
    two bicycles abandoned against the fence,  
    a black garbage bag whipped by the wind,  
    the road stencilled with tire tracks,  
    a target spray-painted on the concrete wall.

In the middle of the street I peeked over at you,  
my sight fitting only the brim of your blue wool cap,  
my hands in little-kid gloves cupping my half-empty coffee.  
My only dialogue – a request for sugar and cream –  
collected in a Styrofoam cup.

Reaching the other curb,  
I offered you a sip,  
my coffee, an olive branch –  
only learning then  
that words can run out  
so early in the morning.

## The Last Time I Saw You

I

When we were close enough  
to confuse ourselves,  
I mistook your nether region for hands.

## II

Someone once wrote,  
*The earth moved.*

Embracing you,  
we rocked a boat  
and the waves rushed upwards  
past our heads,  
reached the sky,  
turned our hair into water.

And that clear heat –  
even seaweed melted away  
and found solace  
at the edges of our bodies.

### III

I wondered,  
*Can we make it as innocent as we'd like,*  
and suddenly we were naked,  
pulled together by some trick law,  
our bodies abiding to a new set of rules:

my legs forgot their joints,  
you became four-fingered, three-toed,  
and your hand matched the colour of your eyes,  
matched the colour of mine,  
our noses,  
the shape of our skulls –  
all sister copies,  
even our lips pointed in the same direction.

Now tell me where I've put my foot,  
and how the tide has gotten so high.

#### IV

The edge of your face,  
a sliver of a silver dish.

The mole on the left side of your loins,  
a landmark.

## V

Tears,  
miraculous,  
perfect in their fallen arrangement.

Autumn-coloured,  
my tears bore the same shade as me,  
and for a second,  
I knew I was losing my border,  
(my strokes once bold, unhesitant)  
and you were made of pencil smudges –  
unformed and consuming –  
a proper place to deny distinction.

## VI

How calm it looked behind you,  
stormless and temperate.

How foolish of me  
to even try to define a horizon.

## Forget-Me-Not

His wife has returned  
from her trip to Peru,  
and he is flipping through photos  
listening to her shuffle around the kitchen  
her voice excited and practiced,  
the sights already told  
over and over again.

He is looking at stelae,  
ceramic portraits,  
panpipes,  
and stops at the figurine  
with a head like a half-set sun  
baked flat,  
eyebrows spreading ear to ear,  
its arms made of two knobs.

He doesn't hear his wife  
carry on about Machu Picchu,  
or the helicopter rides,

he can only remember  
being seventeen  
standing on his front porch  
with the girl,  
her stomach flat and defiant,  
blowing smoke between her words  
saying, *Even if I stopped taking them,*  
*it'd come out dumb and limbless –*  
and watched her  
grind the lit end against the railing.

Only now  
does he discover  
that the possibility to forget  
is as brief as his reflection  
on the window of a closing door.

## She has a Lovely Face

*And as the boat-head wound along  
The willowy hills and fields among,  
They heard her singing her last song,  
The Lady of Shalott*

-from *The Lady of Shalott* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

### I. The Tower

The afternoon was cutting  
like ripe citrus.

In the heat,  
I thought you romantic,  
that someone who still scythed  
must have also kept chickens.

Up the road,  
your hair shone dark as blackcurrants.  
I confused the barley you shook out  
for strips of sun.

Behind the heap of sheaves,  
we kneeled and you flipped the card:  
a tower burned by lightning,  
two figures falling to the ground.

*Change, you said. Revelation.*  
You told me what I already knew;  
our naked fever  
still cooling amidst the reaping.

Is love not the change  
by which our days are reconditioned?  
From my woven tower,  
I was the figure, white-clad and falling.

You were standing at the bottom,  
head back,  
face traced by flames,  
a simple spectator.

## II. Seven of Cups

I wove by day,  
breaking to lift the hair  
off the back of my neck,  
to make space for wishful thoughts.

Did you doubt me  
when I said we were dreamers –  
who else but those too-edged with hope,  
sing conversations by moonlight?

You heard me in the rye,  
I heard you at the loom.  
In the cups, I repeated your face  
in stitches seven times.

And when that sun-pierced shadow  
passed so close, trilling a song,  
I rose to search for you  
in that crowded bend.

No one blamed Orpheus  
for looking back, except himself.

### III. The Chariot

You told me of the paintings,  
the variations of the same scene,  
how someone finally told you the secret  
of how to find me:

*Just look for the rower.*

Before lining myself in the boat,  
I ripped my work from the loom,  
the chariot unfinished,  
its rider pulled by two sphinxes

each with my face.  
From my window I dropped it,  
and its images stretched in the air,  
flitted away.

You never said if you saw it,  
fraying and catching light,  
if you even paused in those long fields,  
to wonder what it was.

## The Shepherd's Wife's Song

You have gone again  
to meet the moon,  
its form orbed  
and pouched with wait.

In this light,  
the dog is mistaken  
for a patch of grass,  
the sheep's heads  
aglow and saintly.

From this distance,  
the mauve-blue hills  
and silent hay bales  
would seem irenic  
in the fog,

but nearby  
the washerwoman moans,  
her love-cries  
scattering dandelions,

and above,  
the moon is a yellow concussion,  
the sky in protest,  
its colour turning peach,  
pink,  
the inside of your hands.

And you have gone again  
to the end of the meadow  
where the hills are darkest,  
with my blue scarf  
tucked in your sleeve,  
your face dusky  
like the underside of the moon.

**I'll Make the Drinks Tonight**

**I**

My current lover –  
she is nothing like you.

## II

Your house:

an old slanted duplex in Little Italy,  
your doors were held open with hooks,  
we watched dropped olives roll  
to the back of the kitchen,  
and morning greeted me with  
a fall into the facing wall,  
a slumber-drunk tip,  
the sound of my banging shoulder.

Cat hairs were swept to corners,  
a basement smelling like cat shit and mould –  
this was where your ex-husband left you,  
dressed in your black cotton dress  
and tan boots,  
a cocktail in one hand,  
unsuspecting.

### III

Your bed:  
princess-style  
and three feet off the ground,  
a duvet  
feather-flush and packed with air  
and pillows pillows pillows.

A white lagoon  
where we dipped  
when our legs wobbled with drink,  
your fallen frame,  
all bones and hips and elbows,  
the perfect placement of your knees between mine.

We were born together a thousand times  
when the music from your antique gramophone  
broke over our naked limbs.

#### IV

My current lover is simple  
with an unremarkable history  
she has effortlessly set free.

She never mixes her alcohol,  
never eats anything off the floor,  
she is Reason  
in a pair of ironed jeans,  
remembering what I wore  
the first time she saw me,

and she is *she*,  
an impossibility  
for her to take your place  
as *you*.

V

One night the rain broke in  
through the forgotten window.  
Pills lined up beside burnt candles.  
My paintings were framed  
but still on your floor.

You said,  
*No one speaks Hazel.*  
Your name,  
a language even you were only half-fluent in,  
pink lips practicing the shapes of sounds.  
Before you passed out  
you told me,  
*Well, they do.*  
*But only for a little while.*  
*Then they forget the words.*

That night  
your disappointment chaperoned sleep and me,  
keeping us at arm's distance.  
Your quiet gulps marked the hours,  
and I watched you toss  
and then finally stand up,  
languid and feline.

I tell my lover this over dinner  
while the lady seated behind us  
in her Brooklyn accent  
argues with her husband about change.

And in the broken language of my name,  
my lover tells me,  
*Well, I am glad she had that bed.*  
*I would cry if she didn't.*

## VI

Through the crack in the bathroom door,  
you stretched;  
your eyes closed as your face  
tipped up to the light.  
Beauty thrown back,  
you shrugged it off,  
discarding it as easily as underwear.

You were perched,  
with your back to the mirror,  
your weight in the heels of your hands  
at the edge of the sink,  
down the curve of your calf;  
your pointed toes  
were all that touched the floor.

And then I knew,  
never again  
would I know anything so recognizable  
as the blunt end of your chin,  
pointed to the ceiling.

## Animal Tracks

My sister has left her new condo,  
found home in our parents' old cottage,  
a small dwelling in the mountains  
with not enough windows.

At the beginning  
it was just a sweaty Tuesday night  
when I watched her scribble a note to herself  
to call the hospital  
make an appointment  
solve what the nurse meant  
when she said,  
*There are atypical cells  
in your test results.*

Now I visit her for the first time  
and she has on a ragged shawl  
her roots are showing,  
all making her look  
inappropriate.

We hike out to our log  
in the middle of the brush,  
she has come to sound like our father  
pointing out a small path crossing ours  
telling me that it's an animal trail.  
When I ask what animal,  
she says, *We'd have to study its tracks,  
take a look at its shit –*

*isn't that how it goes for everything?*

Her laugh is a crippled cry  
and I feel like I did that night  
when she returned from the hospital  
armed with two bottles of wine.  
My courage suddenly laughable  
like a child yelping to the other,  
*Make it go away, make it go away,*  
but I stayed quiet  
even then  
when she reached across the table  
to refill her cup,  
her hand trembling  
between the lit candle  
and my full glass of wine.

### At the Picnic Barbecue

You were mistreating words again,  
courting my eyes  
with moonstruck descriptions,  
calling them *puce*,  
*silver spoons*,  
*sun-streaked glass*.

In the crowd,  
your voice became muted,  
receding into the backdrop,  
the occasional thwack  
like the wash,  
tumbling in the dryer.

I overheard you say,  
*She looks sad –*  
*it's in her face.*

The truth is,  
I looked up  
when they called out, *Ready!*  
and I finished my third glass of sangria,  
because I was hungry,  
and it was time to eat.

## On Fleeing Satyrs

Your legs need to pump so fast  
your feet barely touch ground,  
and ribbons will come undone  
and your skirt will ignite.

You will lose feeling  
except for the hot blood in your legs,  
the wind skimming the back of your hands  
lacing through fingers.

Ignore the flowers  
and their bodies contrapposto,  
heads twisted on their necks;  
their singed petals cool as they drop.

This is a race, don't look back.  
To satyrs, you are a smudge of colour  
spreading thin beneath  
the wavering heat from your clothes.

Run. Ignore their arms raised  
in premature triumph.  
Let not even your shadow  
try to keep up.

## The Jailer's Daughter

She is everywhere,  
this lady,  
made of sticks  
and thick black strokes.

She is in mid-air,  
about to complete a cartwheel,  
she is reclining backwards  
on a chaise lounge,  
she has her left foot  
on the seat of a stool,  
leaning over her raised knee  
so her backside whips out,  
she is pin-up posed,  
kneeling at the foot of the bed,  
she is leaping,  
one leg far back it touches her head,  
she is singing,  
*I dreamed I was a jailer's daughter*  
in capital letters,

and isn't her face so delightful,  
how could anybody not notice her?

## To John Lyman and the Portrait of his Father

### I

I meant to write something that said,  
*Yes, I know what you mean.*

Your father sitting there, dark and broad,  
like the old rock at the riverfront by my house.  
The deliberate crossing of his legs,  
his spectacles balanced on a hard bridge,  
a left elbow digging into the cushioned arm.

He's been keeping a shadow in his shirt pocket.

Your painting:  
I think chiselled stone.  
I think a firm *no*.  
I think of my father's straight gaze  
out the living room window,  
cutting off the breath of the boy  
talking with me at the end of the driveway.

The metal rim of glasses.  
The worn edges of our kitchen chairs.

Your father sat there reading when you painted him.  
My father stopped when he was only two pages in.

## II

Did they both sigh, I wonder,  
when they found out who their children really were?

### III

A river is cold in the prairies.  
The water moves north.  
The current is crimson,  
strong, a dictator  
moving along lost mittens, shoes,  
stirring stories of how the river got so red,  
collecting the spit of kids leaning over the bridge railing.

A river works in tradition.

I left carrying my father's prediction  
of me, grown up and malnourished.  
Spending days on the street corner,  
ignored by passers  
and begging to sketch their portraits.

#### IV

I meant to write something that said,  
*Yes, I know. Someone had blundered and it wasn't me.*

V

Yesterday I learned about my grandfather.  
How he crossed a bay into Malaysia to marry again,  
abandoning his first family in China as a false start.

And my own dad, fourteen,  
going over to search for a missing person.

This is where a sigh is born –  
on the shores of a strange country  
and nurtured in water;  
practiced as an immigrant,  
natural as a middle-aged man  
and making up most of what I remember.

## VI

The river is loud. It is a long moan.  
This isn't what I meant to write.  
The river lifted it and deposited the dregs elsewhere.

Somewhere back there a man birthed an unspeakable name.  
Somewhere a man grows old and resembles a boulder from childhood.  
Somewhere I hear of a river being blamed for draining a lake.

Now the current has moved me down the river line.  
The rock by my home has gone from sight.

## Sailing

The sky  
a milk opal,  
shines through the window;

light falls pensive  
against modest-brown hair,  
seeps down the back of her shirt.

All the sailboats have left the dock,  
their bows in the same direction,

the sunless sky  
hedged by echoic white slices.

## Playing Fish Bones

### I

The open mouth of the cup  
is a flattened moon.

Tea is poured  
and the cup returns  
as just an ordinary teacup,  
small and chaste,  
its porcelain exterior decorated  
with a woman snuggling a rabbit,  
her hand up and declining a man  
whose outstretched arm  
offers a flower.

## II

Talk is polishing the phone lines,  
the same news worn down between relatives.

When I visit,  
my mother's sister is dressed,  
her hair ink-black at sixty.  
She is still pushing plums on me,  
nectarines,  
the watermelon she's already sliced into cubes.

A prickled impatience:  
I am nine again, tied to a piano,  
my fingers working the scales,  
hours before my parents return from work.

Her movements fluid,  
I forget the muted exchanges:  
*...she only travels to find a doctor overseas...*  
*...her bowels...an operation...*

She leaves the kitchen  
only to yell after her grandchildren to wear jackets,  
the summer sun baking their backs as they pedal away  
from where she leans against the doorframe.

### III

A brown rim has set.  
My tea slowly half-finished.

From her pocket,  
my aunt pulls out a bracelet.

She has collected the round bones of salmon,  
plucked and saved from at least eight dinners;  
she cleaned them,  
picked marrow from the crevices with a toothpick,  
dried them in the sun before another wash  
then strung them together with red thread  
and placed it here beside uneaten fruit.

#### IV

The tea is cold.  
In silence I finish it off,  
fake apathy.

The bracelet keeps a perfect ring  
so I fix my gaze on my cup,  
tilting its hollow space towards me.  
The same figures  
painted smaller to fit at the bottom  
suddenly look more amiable;  
the span between refusal and acceptance  
shrinking in an instant  
and differing by only a fraction.

## Our Heads: A Study

The shape of our crowns,  
a figure eight,  
a peach split open.

You:  
a drop of rain on concrete.

Me:  
the bead that glanced off  
when you landed,  
fallen alongside,  
fallen lucky,  
just missing the sidewalk crack.

And today,  
yesterday's geometry  
is the cast of two eggs –  
their absence  
barely touching.

## Child's Play

Recollections have rippled,  
awakened by a heavy breath.

He is winding himself through  
the bottom ends of reflections,  
the fragments of objects overlapping.

In this broken pond  
is his childhood:  
the barn in that corner,  
the apple orchards in the other,  
her homemade dress, cherry red.  
In the middle is hay, newly baled,  
a piece of azure sky at the bottom  
tells him the time of day.

That morning,  
past the netted blueberry bushes,  
and between the rows of corn,  
the girl from the next house  
down the road,  
bent down  
and pulled up her skirts.

He stared into the stream  
before testing his fingers,  
catching the trickle  
in the cup of his hand,  
the scent fierce and engulfing –

the moment ceased,  
her skirt fell back down to her knees  
and he felt the sun, hot on his head.

## I Still Think So

I was nine  
when I discovered  
that I looked prettier  
in photographs  
when they were turned  
upside down.

## The Shaman's Dance

### I

Outside my kitchen window,  
someone's left a stroller in the alleyway,  
a man pulls flattened cardboard boxes out of a dumpster,  
the trees' bareness opens to the sky's scalp.

Winter skims the streets,  
hides beneath stoops and by fire escapes,  
whips the leaves off the pavement.  
It cools the mug between my hands.

Now the world is changing –  
when void-eyed strangers search,  
turn to God,  
to their morning black coffee,  
to the consistency of missing socks.

## II

Tonight I came home to a blinking light,  
your recorded voice flooded the room,  
telling me that you've left.

You were calling from a train heading west to Toronto,  
and it will be dark when you pass the Great Lake,  
the sun setting earlier now at four o'clock –

That is the little joy I can find,  
the only good reason to have been left behind.

### III

Columbia is the world's kidnapping capital.  
As I get older, I come closer to passing it,  
a part of me snatched by men,  
myself compromised:

standing at the end of a soccer field,  
in an elevator going down,  
at my desk,  
while smoking my last cigarette on the balcony,  
when I am within earshot of them as they put on their shoes,  
or pay the tab  
or not pay at all.

I am sampled,  
a bit of me stuffed in the shaman's hollow bone  
and capped with bark  
then pocketed,  
fastened to their house key,  
pressed between pages of a borrowed book.

#### IV

In the middle of the night,  
I leave my tiny apartment with my jacket open  
blowing back.

The meagre leaves above me glow red in streetlight,  
ahead of me is a woman with short hair,  
arms linked with a man –

she is propped against him,  
but they turn to each other at the same time,  
smile,  
their eyebrows spring together in secret,

and she raises a hand to stroke his beard,  
the motion regular,  
soothing,  
painful to watch.

## Tending Ice Gardens

Memory is monochrome,  
white-hoofed,  
playing film stills  
on his bare erection.

Spotting me,  
he is the opposite of blushing.  
Earth becomes spongy,  
a mire beneath his feet sprouting buds  
like halves of cracked eggshells.

I suppose if I had to colour it,  
I'd make it white, too.

Her short silver locks,  
cheeks like coconut pulp,  
the white tips of her nails  
prodding past your undershirt,  
the pale polka-dots on her skirt,  
the stucco wall a stage set for your felony.

In the small lustre at the upper curve of your ear,  
I spied clean white feet,  
bare undersides,  
alabaster sheets,  
the milk in a dandelion,  
the scar on your chin  
the innocent flick of a light switch.

How I never thought  
an iceberg could sprout inside me,  
eight-ninths immersed inside my ribcage

and how wicked Memory plays the tip,  
melting pastey-grins,  
shell shock white,  
so furious and suffocating.

## Bird Watching

At the back of the art gallery  
where no one ventures,  
a spotlight kindles the air,  
lights up a pair of birds.

Here in this part of the room,  
their presence is reticent  
and I suddenly feel accountable,  
a trespasser  
where the sticker on the wall  
(a hand crossed out)  
implies more than forbidding touch.

*Love on a pedestal,*  
you had said when we first saw the birds.  
Your voice broke the unerring quiet,

broke the same way when months later,  
you told me that you were sorry  
to have fallen in love with another woman.

*Sorry.*

Like the same word  
fit for a stranger to use  
for getting in your way

could be as amending,  
your displaced love rendered fixable.

The august curves of their necks  
 bear down on a chest amalgamated.  
 Thin staff-limbs join into one stump.  
 Where their beaks barely touch are they distinct:  
 an opening  
 fit for an arrowhead,  
 a forked heart.

Their tails match in blunted curves,  
 each wooden wing painfully split,  
 proof that Time cracks vertically,  
 the eroded wood's up-and-down splintering  
 like how a heart is broken:  
 down the center  
 and through one half of you.

## **I Told Them that I Got to Keep the House**

The kids have moved out now,  
I've repainted the bathroom,  
bought a new bed,  
equipped the kitchen with a blender,  
reupholstered the love seat

but your clothes are still in the closet,

and every year  
when the weather changes  
and I put away the season's clothes,  
I take the time  
to pull out your white shirt for one night,  
iron and hang it for you on the back of the door  
and pretend that by morning  
I'll wake up to find it gone.

## Can You Hear Me Now?

In the summer  
you heard me on your radio,  
my voice unaware that it could seep  
out of that old brown box,  
and fill your small kitchen  
from the floor to the ceiling.

By winter,  
my voice had trickled into all the crevices:  
down the drain below your tub,  
the cracks of your bedroom floor,  
the gaps between your walls and the picture frames –

it settled

in the hollow gong of morning church bells,  
in our clothes rumped on respective bedsides,  
in the dips behind your knees.

And sometimes when I laughed  
it'd come out in a fit of crooked breaths  
because there was nothing left  
except the static of a dial  
searching for a signal.

## Unaccompanied

I

August again

and the only letter in my mailbox  
is a cautionary piece  
about lead in my drinking water.

## II

August brings bottles of wine  
sipped in solitude,  
and the familiar bends of your name  
in unfamiliar places.

It brings dreams,  
mundane, like us in a car  
or talking on the phone.

In one dream,  
you have a new tattoo  
of a worm dangling in front of a fish.

You called it *waiting*.

And for the rest of that day,  
all I could think of  
was how easy you were to love  
when you were folding a bed sheet,  
your arms spread full-span.

### III

Someone once said  
when two people are in love  
they create a third being

and that when it's over and done,  
the third is left to wander.

#### IV

She is an offprint of me,  
separate  
yet close enough to cry for,  
with the same face,  
a shared expectation  
we shadow on ourselves.

I wonder how we will break,  
the end of our dance as we sever;  
how from afar,  
our melded shape  
looks like the silhouette of coral,  
a horse's head,  
the bottom half of a man's face.

I wonder what it is  
that makes us grasp significance  
in objects and dates.

A bright, cloudless Sunday,  
a bouquet of sunflowers,  
a bed frame,  
a broken shell.

The light is real,  
hitting her back  
smooth  
in strains and spine.

She is my third:  
haunting,  
crying into the clean pillow beside me  
and keeping me up at night.

V

I filter my water now –  
twice before I drink it.

In the paper,  
I read about a woman in New York  
who dropped a spoon in her kitchen.

When she bent down,  
her house exploded,  
and amidst the debris of fate and luck,  
she crawled out safely  
from beneath her kitchen counter.

I should make use of this,  
to let go of the spoon  
and save myself in some small way,  
but it is nearing the end of August,  
and it is quiet  
except for the heave of a passing truck,  
and it is the sort of night  
where I will try to sleep  
with good intentions for myself,  
starting in the morning.

## APPENDIX

### "Animal Tracks"

*Above the Trees*

1939

Emily Carr

Oil on wove paper

Vancouver Art Gallery (42.3.83)

Emily Carr Trust

*Emily Carr: New Perspectives Exhibit*

Musee des Beaux-Arts, Montreal, QC

### "At the Picnic Barbecue"

*Portrait of a Young Woman*

1665

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn

Oil on Canvas

Mrs. R. MacD. Paterson Bequest

1959.1006

Musee des Beaux-Arts, Montreal, QC

### "Beauty of an Eastern Dancer"

*Almée, a Young Egyptian*

1869

Charles-Émile-Hippolyte Lecomte-Vernet

Oil on Canvas

Loan, estate of Dr. Max Stern

647.2006

Musee Des Beaux Arts, Montreal, QC

### "Bird Watching"

*Memorial Ibis Figure*

19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> c.

Eroded wood

Madagascar, Eastern Coast

Sakalava, Menabe Kingdom

Collection of Cirque du Soleil

Inv. PR 07.002

Musee Des Beaux Arts, Montreal, QC

### "Can You Hear Me Now?"

*Table Radio*

(Model 67X)

Bakelite, plastic

Produced by Motorola Inc., Chicago

Designer Unknown

Designed about 1935 – 40

Musee Des Beaux Arts, Montreal, QC

"Child's Play"

*La Carnaval des objets délaissés*

[The Carnival of Forsaken Objects]

1949

Paul-Émile Borduas

Oil on Canvas

Gift of the National Museums of Canada

D 73 65 P 1

Collection Musée d'art Contemporain de Montreal

"Coffee Talk"

*Part (9) from Parts Série*

2003

Nikki S. Lee

C-print mounted on aluminium

76.2 x 72.39cm

Courtesy of the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York

The Power Plant, Toronto, ON

"Even the Maid Never Came"

*Exquisite Pain (Day 77) from After Unhappiness*

2000

Sophie Calle

2 embroidery text panels, each: 128.9 x 57.2cm

2 photo panels, each: 47 x 59.1cm

Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

The Power Plant, Toronto, ON

"Forget-Me-Not"

*Standing Female Figure*

Incised pottery

Peru, Central Coast

Late Intermediate Period

(1000-1476)

Purchase, Horsley and Annie Townsend Bequest

1975.Ac.4

Musee Des Beaux Arts, Montreal, QC

"How to be Dead"

*For the Good of Mankind, Everybody Sing!*

Summer 2006

John Lurie

Watercolour, oil pastel, pencil on paper

*The Erotic Poetry of Hoog Exhibit*

Musee Des Beaux Arts, Montreal, QC

"I'll Make the Drinks Tonight"

*Sirène*

Janusz Migacz

Huile sur toile

Yves LaRoche Galerie d'Art, Montreal, QC

"I Still Think So"

*I Want to Dig a Hole*

1990

Naomi London

Graphite, gesso and acrylic on paper

Gift

D 98 111 D 1

Collection Musée d'art Contemporain de Montreal

"I Told Them that I Got to Keep the House"

*"The White Shirt" from "Pictures of Wire"*

1994-1997

Vik Muniz

Toned Gelatin Silver Print

Courtesy of the Artist

Collection Musée d'art Contemporain de Montreal

"The Jailer's Daughter"

*Painting*

1947-48

Jean-Paul Riopelle

Oil on Canvas

Gift of Bruno M. and Ruby Cormier

1982.28

Musee Des Beaux Arts, Montreal, QC

"The Kiss"

*Male Couple*

1950's

Andy Warhol

Ballpoint ink on manila paper

Collection of the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh

Founding Collection, contribution The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts Inc.

1998.1.1701

The Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, MB

"The Last Time I Saw You"

*Embrace*

1971

Pablo Picasso

Oil on Canvas

Gift of Jacqueline Picasso

1985.5  
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Montreal, QC

"On Fleeing Satyrs"

*Women Pursued by Satyrs*  
1850 (with later additions by the artist)  
Honoré Daumier  
Oil on Canvas  
Adaline Van Horne Bequest  
1945.880  
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Montreal, QC

"Our Heads: A Study:

*Working Model for Oval with Points*  
1968-69  
Henry Moore  
Original plaster  
Bronze cast in a public collection  
Ulster Museum, Belfast  
Gift of Henry Moore, 1974  
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON

"Playing Fish Bones"

*Tea Bowl and Saucer*  
~1700  
Porcelain, underglazed blue painted decoration  
China, Jianxi Province, Jingdezhen  
Qing Dynasty (1662-1722)  
Anonymous Gift  
1995 (1944?)  
Musée Des Beaux Arts, Montreal, QC

"Remembering Lot's Wife"

*The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah*  
~mid 16<sup>th</sup> C.  
Herri met de Bles  
Oil on Panel  
Purchase, Horsley and Annie Townsend Bequest  
1963.1414  
Musée Des Beaux Arts, Montreal, QC

"Sailing"

*Seated Woman, Back Turned to the Open Window*  
~1922  
Henri Matisse  
Oil on Canvas  
Purchase, John W. Tempest Fund  
1949.1015

Musee des Beaux-Arts, Montreal, QC

"The Shaman's Dance"

*Soul Catcher*

Northwest Coast, British Columbia

Tsimshiam

19<sup>th</sup> century

Gift of F. Cleveland Morgan

1950.51Ab.1

Musee Des Beaux Arts, Montreal, QC

"She has a Lovely Face"

*"I am half sick of shadows,' said The Lady of Shalott"* (Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott*, Pt. II)

1915

John William Waterhouse

Oil on Canvas

Gift of Mrs. Philip B. Jackson, 1971

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON

"The Shepherd's Wife's Song"

*Moonrise at Auvers or Return of the Flock*

1877

Charles Francois Daubigny

Oil on Canvas

Gift of Lady Drummond in memory of her husband, Sir George A. Drummond

1919.36

Musee des Beaux-Arts, Montreal, QC

"Tending Ice Gardens"

*(Steps) December*

1968-69

Charles Gagnon

Oil on Canvas

Purchase, Saidye and Samuel Bronfman Collection of Art

1969.1623

Musee des Beaux-Arts, Montreal, QC

"To John Lyman and the Portrait of his Father"

*The Artist's Father*

1922

John Lyman

Oil on Canvas

Purchase, Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Corbeil Fund

1964.1449

Musee des Beaux-Arts, Montreal, QC

**"Unaccompanied"**

*The Sirens*

~1887-88

Auguste Rodin

Marble

Gift of the Huntly Redpath Drummond Family

1958.1192

Musee Des Beaux Arts, Montreal, QC