

FRANGLAIS

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

May 2019

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
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For my father

ABSTRACT

This poetry collection follows a speaker who stands in between binaries of language and gender identity. Weaving together English and French, these poems seek to ask what it means to contain a plurality of identities. The overarching narrative of this collection is of a speaker struggling with their gender identity, as well as the death of their Quebecois father. The collection works with several forms, primarily free verse with the use of slashes (/). I have chosen to use slashes in my work as both a visual way to represent binaries (either/or), and to encourage the reader to read the poems as music. Other forms included in the collection include sonnets, glosas, and list forms. “Franglais” is an exploration of trans identity, bilingualism, family, and what we inherit from our families.

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I lie the best in French

Je suis entièrement content d'être ici / I've been here 8 years and it's okay

Je suis bilingue parce que je suis fière de ma famille / I need to get a job

L'esprit de mon père m'accompagne partout à Montréal / My father's voice tells me I am not enough

J'aime / I can't

Je suis fière de mon sang Québécois / What is the French word for 'apathetic'?

J'aimerais toujours vivre ici / The rent is cheap

Bon matin

He wakes up early, 6am,
reuses yesterday's coffee grounds,
on the phone by 7 and I'm awake -
sounds of how was your weekend/
salut pierre/ we need to talk about the sale
and I'm brushing my teeth
up down blood sink towel spit.
His office next to my room,
walls too thin on weekends when
he still wakes up at 6, and I,
pillow over head, like a cave
and his voice a Peanuts adult,
like a gargling through
the walls that separate us,
and salut bonjour pierre almost feels
far away,
until the knock on my door,
to be a person, fais quelque chose avec
ta journée, and inevitably my groggy
GO AWAY
which, I guess, he did.

Il/Elle

La table / le chat / la porte / le sac / la mer / se plaire

la personne / but which me? / l'humain / person / pleasure / door

I am not a girl / ni garçon / the word for that /

the space / l'espace / but still on earth / in between / hand in pants /

le vagin! Donc t'est une fille, n'est-ce-pas? No, sir, m'am, and everyone else,

in the language that has let me down / la langue / but not the tongue /

we have tongues / female / male / and me

We have fingers / les doigts / sans droits / d'exister /

I want the X / on my passport / I want my chest / smaller/

the chest / le coffret / hiding the word I'm trying to say/

bonjour mon nom est / I am they / I am they

IL FAIT BEAU DANS LE MÉTRO

after the commercial of the same name

Everyone is happy and white. Everyone is in bell bottoms and turtlenecks, dancing to the tune, swinging from poles, men to one side & women to the other. Movement on movement in 1976.

Cosmopolitan Montreal is workers, businessmen, students, carted back and forth from stations with names of ancient men whose greatest accomplishments were nothing compared to the accomplishment of being francophone.

Who gets to move, and whose movement matters? Men to men, whites to whites, vive le Québec libre, now free to cart around and spread themselves east/west. Take stock of the bodies in the metro, female & male & white & black & brown & when will this city understand itself? Every winter, snow. We rest our heads on plastic windows.

The commercial itself is a dream. In rush hour we press together, all contact save for our eyes. I smell aftershave and perfumes, feel fur coats and backpacks. I hold my breath between stops to see how long I could survive. In the dead of winter, the metro is hotter than July. It rests between seasons. A middle place – as if to say We Are All Here. No one wins in the metro except those already losing (the old, the broken, the burdened).

I can only remember stories of death. The girl who fell between two cars because she dropped her phone. The woman whose scarf got stuck in an escalator at Guy-Concordia, strangling her to death. The man who was stabbed outside Lionel-Groulx, who waited 20 whole minutes to report it. The woman who killed a pigeon and skinned it in public on the orange line. Il fait beau dans le métro, il fait beau dans le métro.

Three years ago at Vendome I passed out from not eating. A woman found me on the ground and cupped my face in her hand. She wasn't real in the traditional sense. Firemen spoke to me in French and I understood but could not speak it back. Said something about breakfast being important. The woman held my hand the whole time and I remember wanting to touch her hair. Remember thinking how good it was that I was young and seemed female, lucky that no one walked by me thinking I was just drunk.

Lately I take the metro and I keep my mouth shut. The doors open to the first three notes of “Lucy In the Sky with Diamonds”. I want to laugh because it is an English song, so who fucked up? Eyes closed, I listen for the words around me. A hundred textures in my ear. Like this, you could be anywhere. The only thing that gives it away is the smell of salt and wet mittens.

indoors

My first room in Montreal was a “baby’s room”, though the lady before me used it to store newspapers. It fit a twin bed and a plant. In the morning, a thumbprint of sun on my duvet and I was alone in the loveliest way. At night my roommate’s

cat would hide under the bed and cry, something between a child’s whine and a widow’s weeping after hearing the news. With the door closed, I was just another sweater living in a glorified closet, chipping cat litter out of the floorboards.

A closet is good for the following: watching movies, eating dry cereal from the box, listening for car horns outside and deciphering the drivers’ cryptic honking of Morse code. Closets are good for figuring out what thoughts are yours,

and which ones your mother gave you at 8 years old. Do you like asparagus or have you just been convinced, are you happy with your name though you didn’t choose it, is Orion’s belt actually important to you? Remember when

you were little, your father pointed up at those stars and said That is the belt of an impossible god & you need to chase the things you want. I wanted a home so I hunted for a week, found myself a closet to live in, where I can watch movies

and think of no one else. In a closet room no one is looking at me, I don’t perform boyhood for a thousand small stages, I don’t pretend to know what the professor is talking about. I practice essentialism, which is to say that I let the room

happen to me. You look down at your body and see it is floorboard & sheet. The space is nothing without you & you never need to buy a mirror, because it was you the cat under the bed, the staccato of cars, the warmth on the duvet.

sonnet for being AFAB

I am asked to make a choice every time I go outside,
where I am seen by men and women who don't see me.

This is what contains me, just the skin that surrounds
me. I am opaque where I want to be glass stained blue.

I am asked to make a choice when I'm naked with a boy
who only sees with his fingers and not with my eyes.

In the dark I am the movement from the wideness
of my hips to the raised skin of my ribs, my collarbones.

My body answers questions I've already been asked,
the absence of a cleavage, cleaving me. It marks the choices

I've already made, the food I haven't eaten, the curves I have erased.

I go outside and choose to be a woman, easy to digest. I dream
of a boy who will look at me and see himself reflected, my boy
heart in his hand. Dreaming too becomes a choice, a quiet fight.

wisdom from strangers

Seems like everyone is gay these days
seems like everyone is loud and proud,
spilling rainbow blood & glitter tears
Seems everyone is coming out and getting married
kissing people with sharp jaws and thick eyeliner
You turn on the TV and everyone is falling
in love in bars and clubs, go outside and women
are practically making love in the streets
the way they hold hands and eat in restaurants
forks delicately interrupting the smiles
they give one another, as if to say How happy we are,
we're queer and we're here, seems like everyone
is giving up on gender women wearing pants
men doing their nails, can't even say woman anymore, or man
because those words don't exist the way they did before
Soon it will be illegal to name a baby girl to put flowers in her hair
Guess you're really are getting what you want
How cool it is to be gay How bad it is otherwise, a bad time to be a straight man
Who will think of them alone Who will tell their story Don't you think
this is enough You've got what you asked for The world is not a weight on you
Cause everyone is gay these days so why are you complaining

conservatory

for distraction you are taken
to the butterfly conservatory in Niagara Falls,
papillon / pupil / pupae / poupée
singing to their many antennae,
plates of mango browned between trees,
eyeball at the back of a butterfly's wing
a beautiful thing telling you to fuck off

a week before you hadn't known loss
& the butterflies don't understand it
douleur / si doux / soft hurt / transform
two week lifespan too short to grieve,
not sixty years / of life / to mourn

cupping a moth in your palm
papillon de nuit / depuis / help me
tickling your fingers with its feet, too small
in a glass dome with four thousand eyes,
quiet language, unwashed hair
ne me regardez pas / mon chère

03/2012

You died in March.

The last shirt you wore was the colour of dijon,
like a spill on the kitchen floor when you fell.

Your heart gave up on you, like your maman,
bitter in her fate, francophone in Mississauga.

The same shirt you wore when you took her to I-KEE-AY
for furniture or to the drug store for *doh-ve* soap and *shockolates*.

When I was alone with her, how she'd speak of you.

Richard, qui fait jamais assez pour moi, Richard avec cette femme
anglophone, Richard qui travaille trop et visite rarement.

And now - Richard qui m'abandonne dans la mort.

And I cheer, because it is true that death has freed you.

I eat her devilled eggs and cheese soufflé, later choke
on a gun of fingers down my throat, as if in your honour.

overheard, 2008

I'm not worried about your sister.

I'm not worried about your sister.

I'm not

worried

about your sister. Worried about your sister I am not.

But I am *worried*

about / you.

105 (thursday september 6th, 2:35pm)

je n'ai pas d'argent / no money / pô d'abris

cow goes moo / cat goes meow / no hon / too loud

prochain arrêt / stop man hey / *ambulance passing*

I'm not coming in today / you're always killing plants

he didn't tell me he passed / 明日に帰ります

listen to the violin closely / don't call me back / (*from outside*) shit!

it's kind of like black mirror / faut que j'appelle ma mère

excuse me / merci / but I never meant to hurt you

\$\$\$

Let me tell you about the things I've bought at 3 am after a few beers / when my wallet is most vulnerable / and a pair of shoes seems like salvation / Let me tell you about the binder I found on eBay / that crushes my ribs together / in the name of trans / gender / Let me tell you about the debt I pay to the bank / to my lover in the other room / who wonders why I can't go out to eat / Let me tell you about the money I make when I smile to older women / who call me girlie / coffee lady / forget to tip and leave me / with my dimples sore from thank you have a nice day / Let me tell you about my purse / what it cost / in hours / two hundred dollars I could have given my mother / who calls every day / says she loves me / tells me I am her son / asks am I working too much / Let me tell you about the things I've bought / the pieces of me I've sold / asking how I've changed / my mother tells me at my birth / I was so small / my father counted my toes / cradled them in his hand / she says / honey / you'd think each one was worth its weight in gold

things my depression has killed

lavender
basil
african violets
my sex drive
miscellaneous succulents
three hamsters
two budgies
glass display case from IKEA
ten thousand dollars in savings
Dell laptop (downloading 6 seasons of *Glee*)
pink paper rose from an ex
unframed copy of a bachelor's degree
my big toes
my neck
ability to text back phrases like "i'd love to!"
my beach body
frequency of calls to my mother
my menstrual cycle
carton of mr. christie's swiss cheese crackers
my womanhood / my manhood
AA batteries

instagram

It's not enough.
I need rousing abstractions of myself,
the mirror is a failure,
and small hearts can't touch mine.

-“Instagram”, Katherine Leyton

i.
Remember when followers
suggested religion? It meant
a cult, perhaps, blood spilled
or consumed, blood of the savior,
blood red like a valentine's
heart. Like my pic, I'm cute n tuff.
Jesus only had twelve followers.
My phone is a semblance of God.
Heart my selfie, don't be rough
Heart me, heart me, it's not enough.

ii.
I've filtered my condition for you.
I have ceased wanting, I've transcended
my body. The person sitting in front of you
is skin but not content. The content
is what's on my blog. Was that pimple
ever really there? Compare me to yourself.
I'll comment on ur pic if u comment on mine,
I'll reach for engagement on a higher shelf
I need rousing abstractions of myself.

iii.

I'm kidding, I cannot want enough.
I need love the way a stranger connects
to the aesthetics of latte art. I need a quilt
of photos that seem like me but aren't.
Internet God, I'm what I want you to see,
loud as an emoji or soft and demure
I buy my clothing for the 'gram, I wear
myself the way the like button wears me.
Got to keep myself fresh, the aesthetic pure,
cause what I see in the mirror is failure.

iv.

Let's make a pod. We'll be like two peas.
I'll DM you secrets about the birth mark on my hip
if you mention me in every post you make.
Love isn't real until you've said so online.
My thumbs hurt from hundreds of thumbs up,
the ways my bedroom says "wreck" but profile says "fine",
how can one person stand in for three thousand?
Your love must be big to reach me, bigger
than all my followers combined. My phone's
getting cold and small hearts can't touch mine.

father & child

If he is my father and I am his son
and he is my père and I am his fils
his fille
his daughter girl princess honey his sport
his champ kid buddy son, and if he is my
dad daddy father sir wish you'd leave me alone,
and I am his you make me so proud and his
do the dishes get a job, don't tell me how to talk
to your mother, and if he is my
stop talking to me
and my you make mom sad, and my I want to be
someone you can love, and if I am his son his daughter
his little girl big boy flat chest hairy legged soft cheeked
blushing baby long fingered make me proud child,
fillette beau garçon his self son, son esprit
living on / then where do I / draw the line

breakup letter to my breasts

It was fun. I had fun. I will remember you fondled.

We were not the right fit. You would stare me in the mirror,

and I would hate the flesh on the inside of a plum.

Grasping at you like I would avocados at the supermarket.

It seemed right at the time, but that was then.

You were always hanging from me, a weight on my spine.

Strangers saw us together and felt they understood me.

Softness worn in front of my lungs.

You were too sensitive, sore, moody in winter. I related too much to you.

I wanted warmth like a hurt sparrow, you wanted heat like quick hands.

When you are gone others will mourn you as flesh that once was me.

I will love the lines beneath you, the raised tissue, tender days of healing.

canal

water road that guides you

lachine / I mean / vitrine / of glass

best not to swim its highway

murky / pour qui / the tang of sewers

historic site / shipping product

industrie / from the sea / sault-st-louis

now bicycles and sandwiches / puppies / sweat

hard to imagine / people died for less

website says the french dream / a stream

of money / & men / les colonies / don't follow me

into the slick / wet / pathway of our mistakes

a canal is just a river / if you look at it / from under

barrier

My daughter's really come into her own. Lives there by herself.
Speaks fluently. Listen, she'll say something for you now:

OSTI de caLISSE de MARDE.

Aye, ayaille, dégueulasse et maganée. Réception de calisse
de sacrée amour d'éviter les amis de passer par la fenêtre.

Tristesse. Manque d'intérêt des raisons pour traduction livraison
chanter comme la cerise de lumière les animaux des exceptions.

En bref, je n'en peut plus. Taaaaaaaabarrrrrnakkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk.

It has such a musicality. Rolls off your tongue. “La langue
maman, c'est la langue.” That's what she tells me. The language
of romance, isn't it, honey? Wait, don't speak now, I'm tired.
It sounds so beautiful but half the time I don't understand her.

sleepaway camp

Suddenly, girls. Every summer, camp with three hundred
of us & cabins on hills. Grounds like a crescent moon

around the lake, we all run in except when bleeding and shy.
I refuse the following: tampons, card games, potato chips.

We partition our beds with hanging blankets, hold meetings
at dusk. I accept lessons on blow jobs & how to wear crop tops.

In day time, wild turkeys ruffle their feathers at us, hidden
in the tall grass. Every so often, a baby bear is spotted, lost

& we hide in our cabins for fear of a mother. I learn about
fears: one girl afraid lightning will strike our cabin and set it alight,

another that the camp cooks will sneak into our beds at night.
I am afraid they will catch me looking at the older girls swimming

with something like desire. Things that do happen: two counselors fired
for spooning in a sailboat. A week of thunderstorms. Sheet lightning

above us like a flickering lamp. This kind doesn't strike, I tell the cabin.
You could climb the tallest tree in an empty valley, and still it cannot

touch you. On the last day we melt rope with lighters and let it
harden around our wrists. I learn what it feels like to let a girl hurt me.

I don't cut it off for months, not wanting to forget the heat, the sting
of wax. The pain is a different kind of lesson, teaches what is wrong

in me. Her hand spooning my wrist, making me wish I were palm sized.
Fearing nothing except too much sweat, her thumbprint branded on my torso.

questions

what's your gender / what genre are you gendering / genre, t'es quoi exactement?
be precise / I will only take precision / what did the doctor say / your mother / the teacher,
precisely?
I need to know / I've never needed to know / with such urgency / so I ask

we need to talk about / your pants / the pockets & the brand / the feel under your hand
what are you hiding ? / stop hiding / you can't hide / your hide / stretched thin from pretending
claiming your pretense / tensed up / the pants as costume / let me see underneath

there's the issue of your name / your real name / the one your mother gave you / what's in a name
by any other sound would be deceit / formerly you were yourself / presently / you're besides the
point
the point is / who has loved you ? / who will ? / & who could / without these fine dissections

lionel-groulx

so then I told her, and she was three seats away from me on the metro so I yelled, I told her tu tire vraiment le jus with your talking always but calisse she didn't understand

hello sir my class is planning a trip to the zoo and to raise funds I am selling these pencils for two dollars each sir would you like to buy a pencil

pis tu sais comment elle est, avec ses million d'amies, and she's in trouble at work because she wouldn't speak French to the francophone people that come in to order a coffee, even though they don't speak English, like c'est QUOI ton problème,

it's not that I don't want to go man but I have so much school shit to catch up on, and this prof is like busting my ass, it's so unfair. But have fun tonight man

so I'm telling her on the metro that our stop is coming up soon, but she's texting and not looking at me, aucun respect pour moi, quoi le fuck, but je ne care pas, I'm so over it, but i'm yelling away, and we're almost at our stop, and you know I never really liked her anyway,

yes. No. no. no, I know. Yes. But we need to talk about Matt, his speech therapist says he's behind on hi- yes. Yes, I know, but it's confusing enough for him as it is. I want him to be bilingual, but if it's just slowing him down, I – yes I KNOW, honey, you're not listening to me

she was always bailing on me, tu sais de quoi je parle, et finalement j'ai quitté le metro et elle n'a même pas bouger, même pas un peu,

pour vrai, tu devrais écouter le nouveau album de Drake, c'est tellement fucking bon. Il vient au Centre Bell le mois prochain mais j'ai pas assez d'argent pis ma mère pense que Drake promouvois la violence entre les jeunes, je ne sais même pas

she just sat there on her phone like I wasn't walking away, like I wasn't yelling, and the metro left without me

bonjour monsieur ma classe est en train de planifier un jour au zoo et je vend des crayons a mine pour deux dollars pour qu'on puissent y aller est-ce que vous voulez un crayon a mine monsieur

les enfants des francophones

To never have had a language the way that mating birds do.
Sounds made bring no worms. In an old apartment speaking
a new French, a tango of English against *genre* and *par contre*
and *mettons que*. The French of an older generation, the French
of our grandfathers writing love letters from Dieppe, now a French
distilled to ordering fries and thanking the bus driver. Tongues sore
from contorting into stranger sounds, É and Euh and U, like ew,
like disgust at the way we project.

But we aren't gone, yet. We are in the schools and the movie theatres and the highways to
Kingston.

We hear a song on the radio and say *I can understand French but I cannot speak it, not the way
my parents did when we lived in Quebec*. Our French is clawing up our throats, fighting to get
out. It is a single cough in an empty room, heard by no one but the moths.

picky

Your favourite dish to make: the white meal.
The name was our joke, but it also spoke truth.

Before us: unseasoned chicken breast, steamed cauliflower, white rice.
We were the example of the saying “white people hate spice”.

You never liked to cook, so you never really tried. Your meals
passionless, served with spite. Distaste for your duties,

for the clothes you had to wash, the lunches packed. I’d throw
them out at school (brown banana, crushed sandwich). I didn’t want

the bitterness you’d patented as love. Perhaps if you’d
had joy in cooking, we would have been happy. I told myself this.

Still, there was care in the way you’d heat me up a Lean Cuisine.
Paté chinois from a box is reason enough to sit together in silence.

Sometimes, my father’s fist on marble gave unexpected
flavour. Your tears salted our fish and our butter.

I have you to thank for my endless need to season. In spring I left
your home to make my own, where I grow basil on the balcony.

When you visit, you never finish what I put before you.
You always tell me it's the best thing you've ever had.

high school

My BFF & I / we meet in the bathrooms during class / her mouth on my forehead
a protection against the dusty crucifixes / in every room

We are fifteen & do not know anything beyond this / I stop wearing skirts
because it feels like the thing to do / A girl has placed her mouth on me,
Jesus is watching and the other kids are making power point presentations
titled Why Abortion Is Evil / I have no place here

in sex ed class where we learn / about syphilis but not about girls
who kiss girls in bathrooms / girls who are boys / who want to stop existing
because their bodies are a burden and they aren't strong enough to carry them
I drag myself here / every day / pulled down by my waist / that widens
to accommodate babies one day / but I cannot accommodate myself / cannot

let her feel for my binder under my shirt / clasps like metal spine
Cannot meet her like this / for more than five minutes / for fear of a need
beyond foreheads / and hand holding / I am her bff / boyfriend forever
until we go back to class / two girls / looking up at christ

highway

décarie / the concrete sea / tellement jolie
the thousand cars / faut que je parte
the music of their engines / restez sanguine

side by side / the metro tracks / rue st jacques
jamais plat / oranged men / here til the last
nothing to see / murs de graffiti / absence of tree

break open / your window / oh qu'il fait beau
nothing quite like light / off the hood of a honda
respirez l'air / et l'essence / d'un endroit hors de là

maple

I watch strangers' instagram stories and pretend I am them
On an old IKEA couch fisting a jar of olives I watch boys with chest scars
smiling with girlfriends with beautiful shoulders living out the trans romance I'm told exists

The only question between them who loves harder who cries more (moving tears, not sad ones) the crying of people who've seen past a tree's bark the mystery of what will emerge thick as sap made sweet by time & heat

I'm cold fingers damp with brine against an iPhone screen swiping through pictures of boys with names like skylar & chase & elliott & axel we'd all have names so perfect if we chose them ourselves and had lovers who whispered them to us their hands in the branches of our hair

Intimacy is saying I See You and want your body for what you've made of it: your name because you said so Not Girl because you said so. I'm told "I need validation through other people" I shut down when I change in front of a boy ask him to look away and he says oh don't worry I'm gay

I'd want to press his hand against my chest pectoral muscles under fat a breast is just a breast
ask if he can feel past it the change that's yet to show & the desire he's yet to feel

But he'd recoil like I'm Not Into That, Man his words tapping into me & the stories I've collected about a love I'm told exists would slowly drip out with no one to collect them

tongue

Ma langue maternelle is English,
doesn't connote first or better language,

means not of the father,
words from father to me.
Maternelle, from the mother,
a word meaning kindergarten, staying quiet
because you don't have the words to ask
for things and you're not allowed to say
in English. Where teachers tell you
il faut pratiquer pour apprendre.
Madame, I want rest, je veux sleep.

A father tongue is no space for rest.
You cannot be comfortable with it.
You'll always have an accent in your father tongue,
in the muscle itself, the fastest healing part of the body,

even though it hurts still. Father tongue in Google translate
gives you langue maternelle. Maternelle like kindergarten
like maternal like motherly like womanly like silence.

Fatherly is paternel, a word in French
that cannot be ascribed to language, meaning langue.
Langue like tongue like a mother cat licking her young

to keep them alive, tongue like the movements that make words,
only the mother cat not the tom; father tongue

can only mean the grip on your shoulder, not the sounds
attached to it. Can only mean the fist on a table, the engine
of his car driving away, the quiet at the dinner table like pea soup.

gender neutral clothes shopping : a guide

1. Enter the store with a heightened awareness of yourself. You're built small - the women's section makes sense. The clothing here is softer, brighter. You'll stand out. Your fitted clothes will say I Am She. You're not sure how to feel.
2. In the changing room, look at yourself. Consider pants and how they hug your knees. Can knees be feminine, you ask no one. Your knees are looking feminine. Your knees are getting paid less. You decide to try the men's section.
3. Consider the men's section. It stands in a corner, tucked away on the second floor. Here are slate gray fabrics on disembodied torsos like a small, tidy graveyard. Here, you face collared shirts that will engulf you. You are a parody of masculinity.
4. Reminisce. The men's section reminds you of being ten years old and wearing your father's shirts. Back then, hues of forest green / mustard yellow / gravestone grey were intriguing. A break from La Senza Girl and GAP Kids, where your mother spent too much money and you never thanked her for it.
5. Observe yourself. In men's clothing you're just another queer kid whose legal name suggests female. You're reminded that *male* is *male*, not an in-between. The absence of a skirt does not cure you. A skirt was only ever supposed to be fun.
6. Enter the changing room again with only red clothing. Red is bold, is male confidence. What makes cars stop, makes a bull spear you. Red is also blood, life, fertility. Red is The Handmaid's Tale on HBO. Decide which red you are.
7. Decide on an energy. Decide on highlighting your shape or your jaw. Decide on deciding.
8. Take everything off and look at yourself, multiplied through mirrors. This is all there is, woman (you) man (you) and you (you).

westmount park (from underground)

bleu du metro / how will I know / assis-toi comme il faut
above so far / the parks / les canards / brouillard
quality of air / ducks don't care / bread lust / palm trust

serre en vitrine / serre-moi la main / main attraction
les baobabs / bark can feel / ces trois syllabes
not a pest / feuilles modestes / in sun they rest

pigeon song / mother's coo / tapping glass / voulez-vous
les jeunes qui s'embrassent / in a minute / it's past
train must go / au revoir bouleaux / from us / below

milord, i'm bored

“Regardez-moi, Milord
Vous ne m'avez jamais vue
Mais vous pleurez, Milord
Ça, je l'aurais jamais cru .”

-Edith Piaf, 1959.

i.
eyes are no good, too conditional.
clin d'oeil / cercueil / son accueil
too much at stake upon the iris,
Edith trouve un homme sur la piste,
asks him to put his feet on her
son âme / étant femme / toujours une fleur
she walks the docks at night, she says,
ombre de nuit / une petite vie
woman with a house she can't afford
see me / regardez-moi / milord

ii.
she heals men who've healed nothing,
from nothing / rien de rien / tout est bien
makes notes on them / leur foulards de soie
l'hauteur de leur toits / you're just a whore / who, moi?
in the real world this isn't true,
here she is our little sparrow / eyebrows immortalized
infantalized / l'air d'une enfant fille / voix qui trille
discovered over & again / notre chère comedienne
every grandmaman's memory / son amour et son abus
« I loved her when I was young” / mais je l'ai jamais vu

iii.

Still, it's not enough to lay your eyes
on something, too much like tossing
your watch on the bedside table,
oublié / not today / la femme qui paye /
poumons épuisées / She washes his feet,
fills his stomach with bread,
he condescends to pat her head.
My fair lady, from nothing
to something / ne pleurez pas, milord /
frankly, Edith, I'm bored.

iv.

How long would she have lived, invisible?
No Grandmamans to sing along, tired
“chanson de ma jeunesse / hymne de ma tristesse.”
Chanson for a language not a people. Icitte
on connaît Edith. Don't feed the pupil that only
knows what you look like. Sparrow woman,
don't settle for the crust. Could they love you
with their ears / ou simplement tes photos?
She's singing to hear her own voice. Je
l'aurai jamais cru / as if she ever had a choice.

storm

“Sisterhood and brotherhood is a condition people have to work at.”
— Maya Angelou

the rainstorm of june 1998 never left our basement carpet,
spongelike to walk on it, the imprints of our feet lingered like stamps.
in rubber boots we lay down towels in front of the super nintendo,
my brother & I. until supper we control small people on screens, my avatar
dying, his avatar reviving me. on & on until supper, or until my tantrums,
storming out of the room – why do you always have to win, bro?

Luigi always comes second to Mario, the second boy, second loved. only true
for us in video games. in life, my brother doesn't get to the final boss.
textbooks lay covered in dust in his basement bedroom, plans made then forgotten.
each day is the “New First Day of his Life”, and they are all the same.

our father sitting upstairs where floods never reach, it is a challenge to climb
up to him, to his office where my brother is lectured and degrees are left unfinished.
the loyal child, I spurn my sibling & level up to a life apart from him, get the
degree the Big Boss wanted from me. I overhear them through the door:
Be more like your sister, less like you. Get a job, make me proud, justify my love for you.

but the boss does die, and we storm the castle. carefully we squeeze out the shame
within us. we learn what it means to live without expectation. my brother keeps breathing,
stops playing games. what doesn't change: the storm between us, the memory of betrayal.
this brotherhood we share like a condition we haven't treated, that no rainwater could cure.

insomnia

(Leelah Alcorn, 1997-2014)

lull me to sleep, sweet russian woman,
grow your nails long so that I may rest.

call me sweetie like you know me,
like I'm not another lonely queer boy in bed by 8PM.

no one hurt me today & that is what's wrong.
the news tells me I could be next but I'm not

topless enough, not easy to spot. my queerness
hides under my shirt and behind my eyelids.

I'm exhausted, sweet russian lady, & youtube
pays you to appease me. unburden the sleepless,

who lie awake thinking about what they should
have said to their coworkers (cold) and their fathers (dead).

it used to be finger painting, or a warm
body next to me, counting metaphysical sheep.

now only your touch on camera that I cannot feel.
the world's tiny rituals, the minute blood sacrifice.

the deaths under the mattress, pushing up. remember
leelah alcorn, because I saw her blog back then & could only

grieve into my phone. I am guilty of being alive
& needing you, sweet russian lady. how does sleep

happen? how do I bear this life I haven't earned,
the days of leftovers and scrolling? it has come down

to binaural whispers. left ear (why are you)
& right ear (here). left ear (who are you) & right ear

(inspiring to live). the answer is no one. sleep
necessitates awake. in sleep my body is exempt.

in this sleep you give me, sweet russian lady,
no one has to die. we just keep going.

ripley's aquarium

Consider the shape that doesn't know grief.
Limbs regrow. The pain is only momentary.
Étoiles de mer, qui ont toujours l'affaire.
Giving birth to themselves again & so forth.

I press my hand against the glass at the
aquarium to learn from them. Learn how to
grow my own skin without leaving any scars.
Their shifting colours keep predators

away. When I walk outside, I wear
a trench coat to hide the shape of my legs.
The human condition is that we do not live

in glass but in ourselves and if we break, well -
kaput. If I lose myself, I don't want to grieve.

[Ma'am, the aquarium is closed. Looks like you'll need to leave.]

cityspeak

Turonno / Tuarannah / TOR / on / Toe
second T silent / high rent / proper say
Churanno / Trawna / Tomato / Dorado
pronounce it like you're supposed to / get outta my way

Tkaronto / the Good / Hogtown / the 'Hood
silent second T / say the name like you should
the 6 / the sticks / Mississaugas / without pause
apartment to tongue / the hundred little laws

queer eye

I've never fought the government or thrown a rock through a window.
I've never stood on a milk crate with my middle fingers in the air.

On a Friday night, I'm microwaving chili from a can
& watching five gay men redecorate straight people's homes.

The show suggests these men have eyes different from most,
but when I look in the mirror all I see is an iris. Jonathan sees a new
you under those bad highlights, I see hate behind strangers on the metro.

When I speak, people's brows meet in an arch of misunderstanding.
A man at my work says: When I look at you, I am looking at a small girl.

Internet says I'm not queer enough because I haven't seen blood,
but what does blood matter when my brother dismisses me as his own.

On my breast he'll see violence where I'll see something honest.
To him my body is a rock thrown through windows, stirring unrest.

Antoni says things like "believe in who you are" and "we are paid
a lot of money to be on hit Netflix special *Queer Eye*". I say things

like "notice me for who I really am". I'm not queer enough to set
a table or cook baked ziti, not enough to match colours and cuts.

My eyes are nothing special, blue. Blue eyes most likely to blind.
Queer makes better, changes someone else, but I need to change myself.
Through these eyes, the world is a milk crate. I'm a small revolution.

sex (i)

If you want to have me / then keep your eyes closed
I am open enough / for you / picture what I am inside
Beyond the labia / & the womb / a concept : my intestines / pinkish grey
How warm my lungs / expanding with / your air & my air / agender
& warm / your body containing / my queer energy /

you are pregnant / with the experience / of touching me
I am erect / in a place hidden from you / With your palms /
large / dry / you see more / my elbows / my feet / tip of my chin
like an adam's apple / the image of this / clearer in flux
for a moment / falling still / on your round belly / & rough cheek

hereditary

I'm ashamed of my body / the shame is in my blood / written into me / like a regrettable postcard
/ *I'm sorry but / at ten years old you'll learn to decipher the numbers / on the side of a juice
carton / you'll go to the zoo and decide the giraffe is elegant / for its tall body / & you will give
up bread*

I have inherited the way / my mother holds a glass of wine / counts Triscuits in her hand / pushes
food around her plate / as if to confirm it's dead / My mother compacts herself / becomes more
palatable / her love is enormous / her body / not

Our shame is hereditary / but no one took us to the hospital / put us under the knife / to extract
the wrong / like thick bags of wet sand / tucked between our ribs / the insides of our thighs /
Doctors call us small / it's genetics / we're predisposed to loathe / what keeps us breathing

When my mother is asleep / I write letters / into the air around her / ask her to be bigger / than
herself / undo the braille running down her back / the xylo of her torso / against knuckles / I ask
question after question / so a part of her can know / what it's like to be full

And I retreat into my hunger / for a different set of teeth / and nails / Texting her at 3am /
Ur body doesn't define u / Her reply: / Ok but what else do i have

momento

In the sole video I have of my father, you can only hear him.
He's filming my mother in Cuba emerging from the water.
Wind blowing into the camera, his voice a half yell.
When's your next movie? Smile for the camera, honey!
Zooms the camera onto her ass. Knows how much
she'll hate that when later she watches it from the hotel.
We can't always love the things left to remember.

down

If you put me in a box and never opened it,
would you know deep down that I am there?

I exist because Laverne Cox said so,
because Caitlyn Jenner said so.

I exist online behind an avatar, a boy's
name. I exist when the rest of me is hidden.

Caitlyn Jenner says deep down she is a woman,
but which direction is the deep down? Can you point

to it, describe it? My deep down is tender, ripe. Internet advice
about gender identity: follow your gut, your gut will steer you.

My gut aches for everyday trans women beaten in the streets.
Their bruises are a thousand colors, a cheerless flag.

I'm called a lost dyke, but I know
where I am and water breaches

me every day, salt on cheek. Deep down
my transness lives & I will choose to let it surface.

A bruise is blood surfacing,
a refusal to be hidden.

complex

Grieving was never my style. Softness
only ever useful in butter. Make way, instead,

for becoming. No one really dies. [You didn't
cry for your father & do you feel no shame?]

Were he here – and he is here – he would tell me -
he does tell me. Trans meaning transform. Meaning

transgress. Lines delineating alive & not, the binary
I eschew. In life I am me & I am him. My male energy

is father energy. I tell my mother to stop
crying, I tell my brother to grow up.

Father complex meaning daddy issues meaning
you're a girl with a dead dad meaning So you

wanna fuck older men? No - there is nothing complex about
that. I'll never be a daddy's girl. Dauphins can't grieve their fathers,

too busy becoming king. Practicing the art of slamming doors,
building moats. I never transitioned into manhood, but it happened

to me anyway. In limbo I hear my father, he calls me
son & daughter. We don't get to choose the stories we inherit.

when boys cry

“Maybe I'm just too demanding
Maybe I'm just like my father, too bold
Maybe you're just like my mother
She's never satisfied.”

Prince, “When Doves Cry”, 1984

i.

You're dead but I'm not & what does that give?
You were a matador, blue sky, a count, leather daddy,
smoky eyes and a half stache. You danced to guitars
played by women with shoulders twice as wide as yours.
Looked like you could disappear if we weren't careful.
You were sex and everything outside of sex.
You happened to me and I didn't mean it.
I wanted it all, even the garbage thrown in the beginning.
Intimate without touch, Prince without a crown.
Pink house on a street uptown. Maybe I'm just too demanding.

ii.

You're dead but I'm not & what does that give?
I want to switch places. I want to do this switch when
I'm in the doctor's office, where the nurse tells me
where I will be cut open and why there is a risk. You knew
risk in the softness of your lashes. I am the dash
on the form at the doctor's office that reads M / F.
You said people would never understand but I do.
I want to switch places because you left a legacy
and all I'll leave is testimonies about my sickness.
She was too bold, they'll say. She was like her father.

iii.

You're dead but I'm not & what if we changed places?
You were a wet dream. I am the kind of dream that
makes your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth.
I pretend to be you when I'm in the bath taking selfies,
my naked collarbone begging to be seen. No one gives
me hydrangeas, full & blue. I put bubbles on my lip
to make it through. People saw you as a surface,
I saw a vessel. You contained a mother. Mixed
my crying with bathwater and called it a cocktail.
Held my shoulders close. Said boys can be sad too.

iv.

You're dead but I'm not & could we ever meet?
I don't miss my doctor's appointment, and at night
I scrub my body clean. I sing in bars so people
can hear me call you from the afterlife.
I accept the world's garbage, its hurt & desire.
I will contain the shards of women & men,
build my skin thick and blinding. Naked I embody
you, softly commanding. Satisfied I will never
be crowned. I won't mourn you, blood pumping
through my head. I sing because you aren't dead.

BTW

For the record, I know what I look like.
For the record, my breasts show under my shirt.
Let us say, for the record, that my shape is hourglass.
I count down the time I have left to transform.

For the record, I'm recording every *she* and *her* I get,
each one like a collar I didn't ask for, meow.
I'm aware how this looks, for your information. Tiny girl
trying to stand out, special snowflake every season of the year.

Let it be known – for the record – that my French is pretty good.
Mon papa taught it to me and I omit my extra Es on purpose.
If language makes us who we are, it makes me seem confusing.
For the record, when francophones correct me, I say vous avez raison.

I will admit, for the integrity of the record, that in interviews I laugh
out the highest notes and cross my ankles just so. When asked if I'd
walk around topless after surgery, I'll admit my answer is no.
For the record, I just want to be liked by everyone I've ever met.

words my father mispronounced

i.

The first words to my mother's friends. I will take her out for the chicken and the veg-jet-a-buhls. West island girls giggling. The drive to a restaurant on Ste-Catherine Street, German folk music scratching on a record player, a table with only one chair, my mother sitting on his lap. Spooning carrots into his mouth. *Ceci est une carotte.*

ii.

Room like rum. Go to your rum, I got us a hotel rum in Quebec, grandmaman is sleeping in her rum, this is my hospital rum, clean your rum. Nothing golden or caramel about it. Dad, no one speaks French in Toronto so get over yourself. Say it properly, say it like you're supposed to.

iii.

That's when I knew I would marry him, he worked at the SAQ and I saw him and he saw me and I remember thinking his accent was funny cause you know back then everyone in Beaconsfield was anglophone and then my father (your grandpa) showed up and everyone gets introduced and as we leave the SAQ, well your father he looks at us and yells Happy Heaster and how we laughed and for a minute I loved him.

iv.

Car window rolled back an inch. Wind slipping in, glass whistling to the radio. My mother's hair blowing into the back seat, tickling my cheeks, my father wearing sunglasses, baseball cap on backwards. Hours of Elvis/Rolling Stones/Herman's Hermits/Paul McCartney. The best group of all time, The Bee-AY-tles, the White Album. (Your father used to sing I Want to Hold Your Ham. Didn't know any better.)

v.

Night time, blinds shut, knife of light from the bathroom poking through the door. Did you brush your teeth? Yes. Did you set your alarm? Yes. *Est-ce que tu m'aimes? Oui, papa. Je t'adore.* (read: Shut the door. The light is hurting my mouth.)

they said, they said

It's not grammatically correct.

It's plural, but you're not.

(I'm more plural than you'll ever be, Karen.)

Use it in a sentence. Can you use it?

It's racist. You can't expect people
who barely speak English to use odd pronouns.

(So you admit these are pronouns.)

Think of all the pioneers that died
for being gay. You're a transtrender.

How would they feel about your made up gender?

(Everything is made up. Shakespeare invented "unreal".)

It doesn't mean anything if no one uses it,
you can't bend the rules of language.

(In this gender I am exultant. In this gender nothing hurts.)