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Scundings

Karen Elizabeth Massey

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
English

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

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**Canada**

## Abstract

### Soundings

Karen Elizabeth Massey

The following poems represent a series of departure points for characters on the verge of change--a collection of observations and monologues of voices in transition.

Often these characters live on the fringe of society, and each poem is a response, an expression of the (usually female) narrator's attempt to name herself by either confronting or abandoning one of several cultural, spiritual or scientific belief structures. Characters step outside of their movement long enough to locate themselves along a sort of continuum of encounters and observations. The poems attempt to demonstrate this process through a struggle with form and the malleability of language.

The form of the poems is intended to reflect the inner voice or emotional landscape of the narrator, hence the assembled fragments in a poem such as "Evidence" parallel the disjointed inner state of a narrator trying to understand the repercussions of certain experiences and salvaged bits of memories and dreams.

The poems often consider characters who are coming to terms with a difficult or painful past, while simultaneously confronting the inherent difficulties in communicating with others. This is the poetry of people in a state of flux, poetry recognizing that the manipulation of beliefs, reflections and memories--our being able to comprehend the relationship between self and experience--is a necessary starting point for moving ahead to explore further possibilities.

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Forward

Say you're monitoring a satellite  
travelling at the speed of light,  
and there's this star it's approaching,  
whose mass is three times that of our sun:  
well if this star implodes, or burns out as  
stars eventually do,  
it will create a vacuum  
surrounded by a force field of such gravity  
that if the craft approaches too closely,  
it will be drawn in.  
It will disappear into a black hole.

The crux of the process is  
perspective:

from within the hole  
the craft's destruction will be nearly instantaneous;

for an outsider,  
the act inside requires eternity.

**Bearings**

Bearings

i

Each  
north south west east  
particular  
locates a given piece of  
poetry or landscape or  
memory.

Yet sometimes west feels south, it just  
feels south. While the map argues.  
But maps can be wrong.

ii

How accurately your compass  
points to magnetic north  
depends on your proximity  
to large metal objects.  
A bathtub, even your house plumbing  
can become magnetized by the earth, and  
then, the charges of the earth's poles  
have been known to change places.

iii

I wouldn't lie to a stranger.  
If you need make only one statement,  
honesty comes easily.  
It's once an exchange takes place  
that the alignment of information  
changes.

iv

I'm the sort of person  
strangers ask for directions,  
even in cities I'm not familiar with.

At times identity can be shrunk to a simple  
smiling shrug.  
Or the need to drink coffee.  
Or the need to wander endlessly,  
moving out of desire.

Lip Service

While books lie closed, their stories rehearse,  
over and over, keeping punctuation  
fresh, the spacing exact, each word  
bracing proper order.

There's no way to tell the story  
delicately,  
no way to tell the story  
it can't live like this.

Facts survive like bullies,  
page after page, playing their feisty games.  
Some facts are brawny and come home drunk and  
beat their partners.  
They are bad publicity.  
Facts do not care, each has  
an image to defend.

The story doesn't know this,  
living out its life as a framework for facts.  
It reads over and over the same circuitry,  
the same mapping. Fondles its own eager curves,  
shapely, inside the gird of tight paragraphs.

Lesson

I mark my name at the top right corner,  
cautious with margins,  
noting the pressure of the graphite tip  
against the page's pale skin.

It's the first grade.  
We bend over notebooks  
in our neat rows of desks. Learning  
the alphabet, one letter per day,  
the careful array of balls and sticks, strokes  
reaching between blue lines, circles  
between red. I am

not so good at this, I want to print  
smaller letters, not the swollen forms  
the teacher favours. She tells me  
I am trying too hard, I hold my pencil incorrectly.  
But I want to print, so I can learn to write.  
Already I write my name in its fluid form.

We practice the letter I. The capital  
I, remembering to keep his back straight,  
to draw the cross-lines that make his hat and shoes.  
I imagine the letter I dressed  
in black formal attire. He must be like my grandfather;  
my father wears a uniform.

I remember only this one printing class,  
learning this important finger case--  
how I unconsciously avoided it,  
how it wasn't until I was 22  
I could write poetry without inserting myself  
as i.

I still hold a pencil my odd way,  
balanced on the callus on my middle finger.

Initiation Rite

I'm walking a deserted road at night  
and it begins to rain.

I start to run when the rain pelts,  
plashes my skin in uneven blotches.

Suddenly I'm driving an unfamiliar highway,  
windshield wiper blades slashing without avail.  
It's the thick of the downpour,  
no tail lights are visible, no headlights  
from any direction.

I pull over, loosen my control of the road,  
leave the engine idling, the hazard lights flashing.  
There's something peculiar about the rain.

Alphabet chunks drop from the heavens!  
Capitals and minuscule symbols, mis-sent letters  
in pica and elite, even micro pitch.  
Multiple scripts crash down, slash  
the road's slick skin.  
I step onto the pavement to verify,  
feel the stab of this hot rain,  
the letters like bolts hurled  
by Zeus's frantic arm.



Suddenly I'm in a tattoo parlour,  
exposed and stinging beneath bright light,  
the tattooist's steady eye and hand  
zeroing in on me,  
dipping her pin in ink, then  
pricking my pale skin.

What do you want beside the lightning bolt:  
your initials?

Suddenly I'm unsure what initials are,  
what mine would be, why  
the sting on my shoulder  
leaves a mark visible only  
on my tongue.

The  $\equiv$  sign:

the mathematical sign for identity,  
the trigram symbolizing heaven, creation.

Corrected Bearings

i

The act of witnessing:  
horror and celebration.

It is as Blake stated--

To see the world in a grain of sand.

Life's web alive and pulsing there  
complete. Inter-connected. Your presence  
wholly necessary.

ii

It has happened so seldom:  
alone in silence in a darkened room,  
I move my hand quickly, causing  
sparks to fill  
the tunnel of my movement.

iii

The will in the body to change, to grow.  
The body's propensity to heal itself,  
profound power of flesh to rebuild  
cell by cell, by design,  
as though we shall never be pure enough.

iv

All along the continuum--  
the brazen shimmer of life's energy field.  
We singe ourselves continuously  
but keep reaching for the stile,  
climb after the allure  
of raw, invisible power.  
Our living in the body;  
a vessel chock-full  
of life's enduring seeds.

They are so willing,  
they explode when they ripen,  
reach for the rich surface  
of any medium.

**Admissions**

Marlene

That time in the early light, when you spoke about angels--how when we'd be angels, we'd sit at our table, enjoying sweet coffee and talk--well, tonight while walking, there was this taxi in the rain; a panic smear of headlights and brakes that nearly killed me --but I wasn't afraid, because I saw the table, its slick, lemon-oiled wood, and smelled the coffee's taunting pull. I came home and wanted it--had seen the end of the world and it looked really good. I thought hard about that die-to-be-reborn bit: you and I could change our shape in this world. Just like those sculptors; remember what you said about the spirit in the form? You smoothed your hands around my shoulders and whispered I was just like that stone; how the spirit is alive inside, just waiting to be chipped free. Something fancy and filigree, you said, could come out of granite. Like an angel. And it thrilled my breath away, and spoke about beauty so quick I wanted you and me as angels right there. I could feel that spirit raising its lacy wings; I heard its song, its gentle lyric. I felt those precious wings and oh, I wanted those angels--we could be angels. I want to be that angel pouring out coffee for us.

Key

My family was the regular church-on-Sunday sort while we grew up. This little piggy and L'il Black Sambo. Spent three months in a trailer after the house fire. Driven to school by a neighbour during the renovations.

I rarely speak of that neighbour; he walked with too much purpose, pressed his sour face against my developing chest. Reeked of whiskey. Carried knives. Thrilled to the edges ground from 440 stainless.

Before my parents split, there was colour tv and piano lessons, Mom hanging on for dear life to that piano. We all passed grade four Conservatory before the fights started and the china shattered, the crystal swan dove into pieces. Then there were cheap apartments while Mom stayed clear of men. Furniture returned to us slowly--she traded a bottle of gin for the couch, chairs came in from late-night garbage runs. Mom got us mending, even David. I got handy with the blanket stitch, with solitude.

Joan taught about the root of the chord and the importance of triads. Showed me the grace of strings you finger and bow, helped me break away from hammers and ivory.

Mom thought she was losing me when I switched to violin. So convenient, I argued. Too portable, she countered; I'll never see you again. You'll just pick up your little case and be off.

With Carl I first let my body respond, to love his taut muscles and dreamy aspirations. He's the one with the scar on his cheek, he's the heartbeat that first trusted me. But it's hard to go back; he's like a story I used to tell because someone once told me. But he was real and I thought it was forever till he was killed by that transport. He drank so much orange juice!

Waitressing taught me not to judge by tipping, though it's useful. Any bad job is destructive past six months. Relationships chart those same cycles; time to trade when the elbows wear through, when the sheen won't leave your collar crease.

The incident with the cabbie was in the east end, late at night. Some Chev product. Red interior. The burnt crescent moon.

Rings and smiles and words are often just cosmetic. I trust my nose--go by the scent.

Daniel was older and drove that huge, black car, the Bible holding down the rattle on the dash. He taught me about distance, how I can only truly love one person at a time. He lived music and he loved to talk. We never shut up together. Showed me how to tell a car's year by the serial number on the tail light; gave me this silver bracelet.

I love Billie Holiday and I'm not fussy on electronics. My sister gets all these great computer jobs, but we're not put together much the same. David and I connect too well, but now that he's married we don't get together across the miles. Mom circulates our letters--she's big on family gossip. My father has disappeared. Haven't seen him in eleven years.

Jordan hadn't cut his hair because of a bet. Three years together --what happened? Why'd he cut his hair? Why'd I leave? He showed me food's path to the soul; late-night gorging on figs and dates, and how to be ritualistic about books and ink pens. Left little piles of coins around the apartment. Always emptying his pockets.

I meet with Glenda on Sundays to do laundry, pass the time between cycles with cribbage and talk, analyzing other people's laundry. I stayed with her when Jordan and I split.

After that I lived elsewhere. Big gap--nothing I care to remember except for the music. Heavy on Monk.

I have terrible PMS and not so much imagination, but I'm serious on love and want to get back to things like the root of the chord and the best approach. I envy anyone who can sing. I twirl my hair around my finger a lot, and am learning to forgive. I'll always wish I had more time for my violin.

I've broken three chain letters in my life.



Pox

When that cyclic gift of nature bloomed inside my body, the blush swept away, leaving me the school's worst case of acne, my face dreaming of kisses. I felt its source in the ancient history I was learning--I was Sumer; Mesopotamia was my own fertile crescent. Thought my disease a mistake of the gods. Sacrificed myself to its fire.

Nothing stopped the subcutaneous festering. Baby-sitting money buying every unguent from medicated mud to benzoyl peroxide, my skin flaking off in burnt sheets. Perusing medical texts, researching my senior biology paper on mammalian skin, I knew the diagnoses of carbuncles, pustules, herpes zoster and acne, diagrammed them perfectly. Soft hermit crab, dragging my tough shell of medical facts.

Fighting to stay in, to defy the harsh gaze. Acne vulgaris. Genetic curse. Never feeling attractive, feminine wasn't a word I felt privileged for. Akin to the girl once in my older brother's chem class, victim of cruel names: Hairsuit, Five O'Clock Shadow. She had more facial hair than the guys, coarse, dark sprouts spreading cheek to jaw. I cried for this woman, living out this trick on her sex. Mom said those women benefit from electrolysis, electric jolts that kill defiant follicles. I wanted those zaps to cure my pores. Exercise. Balanced meals. Cortisone cream. Cleansing the prescribed way.

Fortunately, I'm learning to enjoy my body, even while struggling to grow into each coded curve of XX skin. I'm supposed to wear it until menopause, my pitted, trickster amulet bestowed by blind gods.

Clare

When Mick flared violent, I grew skilled at going limp, at letting my body flow through his fingers like batter. The pun is unfortunate, though I didn't notice for months, my spirit swiftly translated to a nether realm. It wasn't astral projection so much as a species of animal instinct swooping down to grab the scruff of my neck and carry me away. Safe above the brute, a gentle being, with a voice as soothing as a mother's, handed me a mug of sweet milk and urged me to drink, to forget, to let my fear fly up uncensored. I escaped Mick mentally, and then in fact.

Last night I awoke sharply, feeling scorched, as though I'd woken in a fever dream. In this dream, again, I'm sleeping beside Mick. His life has pulled away from him, as it did when he slept, so he looks fey and helpless. I recognize the ruse that he'd used to taunt me, the guise of helplessness that he would temper out of himself, hammer into me, the bent shadow on the anvil of his anger.

In the dream I'm watching him, breathing when he breathes, so as not to wake him. Suddenly his face begins to change. His brittle skin cracks like ice beneath a shot of whisky, bursts like a window pane fracturing in a house fire, splitting, then giving way, blowing out of its casement. Pieces of his face shatter outward, missing me completely. I'm surprised, then not surprised to see nothing familiar behind his face, but this time I don't scramble for the pieces, I don't try to restore their order, I don't slip even a tiny shard into my mouth as a memento.

William

Life don't scream at me now,  
it just come over on Wednesdays  
for tea.

It don't answer to agitation,  
or a new concern;  
only sets in the chair with its  
feet up, hands folded.

Life don't take milk in its tea  
and no sugar. It don't  
add to conversation, just helps  
fill up the room.

It's like an old hound,  
too worn out to respond,  
lying quiet by the fire,  
following shadows with his eyes.

Some Wednesdays, life don't even show;  
feels like a game, where  
everyone went off to hide,  
and life was "it",  
but life went home.

Didn't say nothing.  
Didn't even start counting.

Vantages

Down here in this teeming field, we rest among colourful wildflowers and weeds, identify Blue Phlox, Butter-and-eggs. A grasshopper escapes your large, cupped hands, staining your palms brown with what as kids we called tobacco spit. Back then we scoured for hours on our knees, picking tiny wild strawberries into an empty honey pail, carrying them home triumphantly to mother, who taught us their delicacy served with the rich froth of cream. But today we're older than our parents were then, we're lolling in sunlight, sitting out the afternoon, humbled by the sight of a dragonfly's iridescent wings. How our gazes mark our differences; my dozy, wandering look bumps over clouds, pans the horizon, while you scrutinize troposphere to exosphere, noting cumulus, strato-cumulus, verified by altitude.

My clouds give me a teapot, high-heeled shoe, a big carrot. Occasionally one crosses above us and we both see it: canoe! Drifting, I listen to you reshape these soft cushions with your hard scientific words, but for me, the sky above this summer field will always be swept by Stephen Daedalus's "day of dappled seaborne clouds," the afternoon will remain this happiness beneath perfect Magritte clouds in a sky-blue sky.

Night Tremens

Walking a different route than usual, we moved north along Cambridge St. Finally, the rain stopped. Breathing the perfect air, I was describing the elderly woman I shared a conversation with today, (how cheerful she was, how misshapen her body had grown)--when something caught us, pinched our bodies between stiff fingers. A long, long, shrill sound--dreadful, other-world scream--broke in a brief pause, then resumed the same brute terror, pause, then vehemence.

By the time we both had it figured, that these wails were human, horror had trickled its fine sand down our throats. The sodden earth fell away; it seemed hours passed before our mouths could accept words. Was I relieved to discover we were standing before a hospital?--that the screaming had originated from within it, had blistered the still air, one spirit striving so desperately to tear open any exit, to rip its way out of the body's tragic weight.

**Phlogiston**

Phlogiston

phlogiston: substance formerly believed to exist in all combustible bodies, and to be released in combustion.

This is my moment; my Wordsworthian spot of time. Last night, my dream sifted like this: the dream hand reaching out to shake that of my new boss. Perspective shift. The dream hand waving goodbye to you, farewell to us, without a fight, clutching its rejection and dissolving into the real hand, limp in the bed beside me.

Later in the dream, I showed up, waiting like Dillinger, or someone fired up to shoot his bullets straight through his own gig--pearl handled revolver, exchanging itself for a rosewood guitar, handed over to me from an unfamiliar man with a tasteful necktie, deep in the cavernous recesses of what seemed a bank vault. Enormous building. Art deco with elevators.

Intense sunlight focused down from a series of skylights; I grew painfully aware and greatly disturbed that my vision was worsening. I stopped in a hallway by a fountain, and while bent over its stream, a peaceful feeling befell me, bearing the sense of a tremendous idea, but I awoke parched and empty, my hand clutching sheets.

This room smells of your perfume. Tired, démodé perfume. The snow outside is heavy and makes it difficult to manoeuver. I'll stay inside. Won't shave. Just sit here, adsorbing light.

The white-hot angle of winter sun, the memory of winter highways, driving on a day like today, our once-poignant talk turning to slush, churning between future and past, past and future, there being no room for the present, no logic, or understanding or much of gravity but the word, the threat of love.

I will be sending you a series of four postcards to explain my new existence. One is of a Rousseau painting, and the others are by Magritte. You've heard me speak of these paintings, but never in this manner. This time is exceptional.

\*

I am speaking to you in a voice well-versed in Newton and Kepler and chemistry. Electron loss and gain. Induction. Scientific objectivity.

Since you left, I've overcome my fear of empty spaces; worked hard to cure my agoraphobia.

I couldn't tell much about you by the sound of your voice--I could never detect a lie. I have to listen for the slant of the words, can never tell if it's the moment or the phrase or habit that makes you speak in italics. Are you always translating from your own language?



\*

There is a man with epilepsy in the story.

A ringing telephone.

A woman in the bath who refuses to answer. We'll call her  
Annette; great-great-granddaughter of Archimedes.

There is a driveway that needs shovelling; a postie who refuses to  
come up the icy walk.

As he closes the window, the sash crashes down, causing the heart  
of the man to splinter and crack. The pane remains, unfeeling, a  
flawless medium between the man and the view.

There is a nauseating chicken fat smell seeping up from the  
downstairs flat.

There is a midnight policeman looking to subpoena a tenant the  
shattered man has never heard of.

Still, there is a woman, unanswering, in the bath.

There is a print of Magritte's Empire of Lights tacked up on the  
wall.

A water glass on the night table.

The man is playing Good King Wenceslas on the piano in the front  
room.

Persuade versus dissuade.

Isn't direction the only difference here?

Resolve versus dissolve.

The shattered man versus the woman in the tub.

I hate to admit it, but now that the whistle has been blown on  
Kepler's fraudulent data, and now that Newton is more or less out  
the window, I've got trouble with balance. My words won't stay  
put; they wander without gravity.

The woman cannot get out of the tub, for fear of dissolving, for fear of displacement.

\*

Okay, the real story goes like this:

The plants died, so it was time to move on. My turning point was here in New York, in the Museum of Modern Art. I felt myself being drawn right into the canvas of Rousseau's The Dream. The uncanny, compelling aspect of the unnerving light in those painted eyes. It took half an hour to avert my gaze, and when I did, I happened to spot a pamphlet on the gallery floor. A travel brochure, with only the words SEE THE WORLD visible.

So I bought myself a valise with enough new clothes to fill it, and a new pair of shoes. Now I'm ready to travel. I sold the furniture. I shipped the piano to my sister. I put all my money into traveller's cheques and a round-the-world airline ticket.

I took back our empties, with the grand plan to buy you those four postcards and attempt an articulate narrative. Combining words with images, I thought I couldn't miss--but I abandoned the plan because the more I think about it, the more I realize you were never concerned with getting the story straight. You always had your own version, which you tried to meld me into. You're good! I'm just a hobbyist.

I'm leaving no forwarding address. No poste restante. Just this final clean-up, then I'm burning my old clothes.

\*

The thing about Annette is she's like a sheer curtain, or a rice paper window shade held before your eyes. Spectre-thin. Like when you look through Magritte's bowler-hatted man--you can never ascertain which is inner and which is outer reality. Simultaneous duality. Talk about the ultimate in sex appeal; how could anyone refuse? Nothing else is visible, except by looking at it through her, seeing it through her eyes. Always the trace elements of distortion. Deception.

The thing is, I used to be like that. Before we collided, I bounded and rebounded--wandered like a flame from fuel to fuel, always conscious of my need for more. But I didn't ignite much--I'd lost my sense of passion from within--just this voracious, consuming appetite. Gnawed carcasses and old addresses tossed off behind me. She was like a retreating glacier. Beautiful and perfect. Yet silently--violently destructive.

Look at this photograph of us--just after we met. Copacetic. Now, look at this one, just before she split. Look at the eyes. Mine are real, but hers--they're like painted eyes--like the eyes of the lion in Rousseau's The Dream. Follow you around from any angle; try it.

That's where still lifes start and stop. She just exists. That's her action, whereas I consume, I react. But it's all like a trance. A dance on a transom. Movement through space, beyond time. You with me?

Here, look at this. She sketched this. What do you make of it-- all those monoliths with laurels. What the hell is that? She said it was us.

That's okay, darling, she said. You'll get over me, Grant. And when I looked at her, me being all fire and horror and disbelief, she said, You'll see. You'll breathe another fragrance, there'll be a gentler fire. And you know something--it was as though at any one given time, always one of us just wasn't there. Like we never existed in the same moments; never co-existed. Where's the gift in that?

\*

Match strike. Up in smoke. Goodbye, farewell, old clothes, old life. There go her perfume and incense and slanted words, swallowed by the hungry flames. The phlogiston of our love swirls upward, escapes during the burning.

\*

Correction. The dream hand releasing, then opening up, blooming into the five fingers of the real hand, palm upward.

**Evidence**

Watchword

The safest snake is the one you see.

The snake you hear is a good bet, too,  
reptile that senses the vibration of footfall  
on sun-baked earth and retreats in dignity,  
shakes its rattle like a shaman.

The trick at the portage is to  
cause sufficient tremors.  
The turtles will forgive you,  
their hard backs pressed against the sun--  
it's snakes you need consider;  
deaf and dozing, hissing consonants,  
warming their blood on hot rocks.  
Your six days on their river  
are trespassing.

But I forget.  
Never wanting to be conspicuous,  
preferring a quiet approach drawing minimal wake,  
the hushed strength of a j-stroke with in-water return.  
My movement, my voice attempt  
the quiet tao, slow wearing of  
water shaping rocks--

Shuddering, even today,  
recalling that deserted stretch of the French River;  
drawing up quietly to the portage,  
slipping out of the canoe--  
the painter in my left hand,  
pulling the bow close as I wade ashore,

then with my right hand,  
bending at the waist, and coming this  
close

to setting the maps down on a rattlesnake  
sunning on a shoreline boulder.

I should remember snakes,  
mark my arrival to the indigènes;  
shake the shore with the gun-shot whack  
of a paddle across gunwales.

Remotes

Our lives are the wide open spaces of  
questions, the last daylight rays of  
sentences wrung into the trees,  
or dropping to unrest,  
unfulfilled. The expounded

dreams of early summers,  
breath of the young girl  
asleep in the tangled field, or

shaded alone beneath a white oak,  
buzzing with flies and humidity,  
acorn rolled between brisk palms.  
Knowing that acorns drop from oak boughs,  
not yet grasping the tree waiting inside  
the seed, ticking, its buried truth.

Sometimes in the smallest darkness,  
a forgotten seed grows restless,  
pounds tight blue fists through  
the thin walls of memory, or one shy cell of a lung.  
Setting up legions. Claiming mute tissue.

Life of such discord,  
we pitch our forks in and out of  
the jungles in our salad bowls,  
wish the battle would end suddenly,  
fold up its bloodied map  
and go home.



We're most alive when in motion,  
our imperfections fluid,  
taking on music  
startled from the air,

not escaping, but simply  
moving.

One foot  
before the next,  
and if not possible,  
considering.

Evidence

"I must assemble."

--Virginia Woolf, Mrs Dalloway

i

Dawn light spills from this  
ravaged corner of November.  
This perfect moment.

Walk alone,  
kick a beer cap across pavement  
into the velvet silence of grass.  
To hold it steady.  
Along with everything else.  
A wallet full of photographs.  
A lifetime spent clicking, kicking.

ii

Couldn't sleep, and so got up  
to chart the houses since childhood.  
Scale floor plans, blue ink on metric graph paper.  
Corresponding to each move around the province,  
detailing the crossings of each life.

iii

People I've loved  
were always breaking knife tips,  
angrily throwing them down to ceramic floors,  
hungrily snapping them off in gristled beef.  
In current dreams their blades  
bounce off my skin.  
Immune.

I hear your voice in my dreams and I waken  
rubbing your memory out of my inner thighs.  
Twice I dreamt fireweed  
pushing brilliant flowers  
from that flesh.

iv

Energy can only change  
form to form.  
Tug on the day,  
tug hard, as though pulling on a familiar boot,  
unconcerned about the corrosive salt in tears.  
Shake them off  
like salt tossed over a superstitious shoulder.  
Kick at my rough road.  
Kick until it's made smooth.

v

Wool socks and old photographs  
keep me warm,  
the softened view from inside memory--  
drifting snow--  
safe behind glass windows.  
Mugs of frothy hot cocoa.  
The occasional sacrifice.

vi

Where?  
4 a.m. The sky a crazy  
scribble of snow, where could a body crave  
to move? There's nothing I need, why leave  
the warmth of my flat, just to  
wander empty streets in this  
new winter jacket and fresh haircut?  
Knowing nothing is moving  
but freight trains, the vans  
that drop off bundles of morning papers--  
is it news I'm after?

vii

Words that stalk  
and reach their targets.  
The body, stuck with its memory  
of both kiss and fist.

Within, that snowfall;  
loud, crashing flakes.

viii

Go away!  
I'm sealed in your refrigerator,  
hugging knees to chest.  
I cannot breathe.  
Memory, you do this to me.

ix

I won't apologize.  
My shadow is all I carry  
and some days it goes missing.

Draw lots,  
try the well again.

x

Dawn sky an untruth,  
the colour of your surreal, painted skies,  
their light a mystery in encaustic.

We loved into that perfection,  
then back through its brutal side.

I'm here  
looking over my reading glasses  
at our photograph;  
we are already x years,  
we are barely y minutes old,  
our wings still gummy and inchoate,  
slicked down our backs.  
Sunlight straining to release us.

xi

In hindsight,  
I sit squarely at the table of our  
conversations, I bring to it  
nothing this time, shake off your ghost  
hand around my knife handle, helping me carve--

I don't eat meat! I implore; you  
never got that part of me, but then I  
trusted your charm, didn't know  
the fusty dungeon of your desire,  
your artist's hands pulling carnations,  
pulling rabbits from hats. You played

Houdini with my heart, could unlock any secret.  
We tore up the roots with each fragrant bloom,  
razed  
where we held  
every pulse, breath  
humming in sympathy.

Now, so remorseful,  
and too late, I look through you,  
your cannibal hands inside me,  
prompting me to speak--

Wrong cue.

I remove your hands from my chest,  
snap ribs back into my sternum.  
Heart starts pumping, dare I say beat?  
My heart beats,  
but all on its own.

There, I said it.

xii

About my ear that kept coming unfastened;  
I fit it back onto my head.  
No longer resonating with the memory of your passion,  
no longer cut by the sound of breaking glass.  
I've got sunshine and tangerines!  
With my clear plastic toothbrush  
I am learning to remove  
traces of your words.

To Speak Love

We're every one of us  
the drunk woman at the party,  
weaving between rooms,  
breathing out the ferment, exhaling the perfume  
of emotion capped, the hours vaulted within--

embracing friends, speaking the word love,  
love that always leaves an unlocked door,  
love that steps back, replaces,  
and offers.

We're each the sad woman,  
excused by being drunk--

Except sometimes it's only late-night doldrums,  
and sometimes it's just a plain room  
with one wooden chair and a bookcase.  
Sometimes there is no party.  
There is no one else. Only  
desire.



Evensong

Evening sneaks away in its coat of many colours,  
a magician's sleight, and in its place  
stars unfold, the moon's a cool sip of water  
for some cosmonaut adrift,  
his country dissolved.

Long past dusk,  
children playing on the narrow street,  
over the hum of the city there is still air space  
for laughter. Praise such music,

the uneven chatter of children,  
the blush memory of your own childhood,  
blunder after epiphany, and so on--

just another of the powers  
we never quite grow to fit,  
like the thump of another heart  
that takes you by your ordinary hand  
and offers starlight.

Behold. The eye is the dangerous beast,  
forever leading you over distance  
just to prove it to you, so you'll  
believe in its vision.

Collisions

I'm so sick of suffering,  
the woman said  
near closing at the Chinese grocery,  
standing at the register,  
our arms heavy with vegetables.

I'm so sick of sad, she sighed,  
the sorrow in her voice  
easily paring through my skin.  
On her hip, a sack of basmati  
cradled like a sleeping infant.

I invent this woman  
my entire walk home;  
the limp in her steps, body  
bending, shifting back and forth  
the weight of her despair.

But then you meet someone  
and the world falls away;  
somehow people come at you,  
their lives ripe  
for the telling of sweet mystery.

Bus Shelter, 2 a.m.

She walks out of the rain, slow-singing some blue country song, its down-home twang sounding not half bad. She tucks into the shelter where I'm standing alone, her clothes stained with weather. Turning to face me with dark eyes, cigarette-smoke scented breath, I see it clearly: blue-green bruise, like the perfect shadow of a hand-slap across her face, its four fingers fanning outward across one cheek. Just like that she says, "I know what you're thinking, but it ain't right." I'm looking down at the platform, scuffing my shoe against the metal floor, casual. "My angel flew too close--brushed a wing against my face," she says, slowly, distinctly. "Even my angel ain't perfect," she tells me, "Must've got confused." Then she starts back humming that tune, and I think I recognize it, blending in so nice with the sad slap of rain on the street.

Intersection

Late evening quiet of Kent and Somerset  
slit by the blade voice of the man

shaking his fist and shoving the woman  
into the gas pumps: YOU STUPID FUCK  
STUPID FUCK!

The woman yelling back, leaning her body  
hard into his accusation:

WHY DON'T YOU DO IT THIS TIME?  
PUT US BOTH OUT OF YOUR MISERY!

And I'm just walking home,  
startled out of thinking my nothings,  
feeling now I should sound the darkness,  
walk less softly,  
look for a patrol car,

still believing I'm safe on this night street,  
it isn't strangers we need fear.

Whining Is No Longer Fashionable

To whine is no longer in vogue,  
it sickens like cholera,  
hammers rusted nails into the flesh.

Flesh has taken a beating lately.  
Flesh of the heart.  
Flesh has been abused.  
The hammer, anvil, stirrup, even these  
smallest bones of the human body  
are sick to death of tapping the Morse alert.

Stop trying to build a better heart attack!  
Forget the military applications, from a  
human perspective,  
all flesh and responding bones  
have had it up to here with the pitiful whine.  
State something useful, quelque chose pratique!  
Now that we've managed

to take everything apart.  
Perfected the technology of fission.

Act. Act of creation.  
Go away with your quarks and neutrinos.  
Give us this day our glorious cells.

**Blood Hunger**

Beast

It isn't difficult to refuse meat--  
denatured muscle on your fork,  
animal with the soft eyes;  
I have felt similarly  
preyed upon and terrorized,  
buying in to cultural ritual.

Sometimes your eyes slice into me  
but there's nothing for you,  
I'm out back, sipping coffee on the stoop,  
buoyed by the sunset,  
or I'm dreaming the grocery store,  
how I'm lost in its price-pointed aisles.  
That food is poison to me now,  
it's all processed and packaged;  
I don't recognize the foodstuffs, recognize only  
their pictures. I charge past the butcher's corner,  
cover my eyes by the dairy case--  
I'm only safe among the cereals,  
inoffensive bags of dried beans.

Naturally, I shop elsewhere.  
It's your blood hunger that sent me there,  
pushing the cart with its stuck wheel,  
another spinning to oblivion--

As If I Needed Further Incentive To Be Vegetarian--

As early as 5 a.m. we smell it sometimes, stench dense as pitch rolling up through the heating ducts, odour seemingly ascending from the underworld's bowels, a stink so thick that if it were a colour, it'd ooze into our apartment, black as bitumen, billowing lava-like over the hardwood. First time it was just past midnight, early in winter when we'd recently moved in. We slammed the vent grates closed so fast, descended with flashlights to the basement, scrabbling open the lock on its outdoor entrance. Fearing something near the furnace had caught fire, gauging by the stench like burning tires. But no flame disturbed the musty darkness.

Next morning another tenant just laughed and laughed at our alarm, assured us the downstairs tenants were cooking food! Likely entrails. She'd had neighbours in Detroit who cooked chitlins, though that never smelled one quarter so hellish because they followed some arcane method of preparation.



Fur Story

Two women in mid-calf length fur coats enter the environmental bookstore where I'm working, two women killing time at lunch hour, wearing the protective camouflage of animals over winter dresses. They pause before the nature photograph collection on the display table, its cliché cover shot: dark seductive eyes, lashes brushed by Arctic sunlight; face of the baby harp seal, posing helpless on an ice floe.

"Isn't it horrible," the one woman asks the other, "what they do to those animals?"

I describe this incident sometimes, and often the listener pauses, expecting a more outrageous punchline. When I told my boss, she said that people in fur coats are in the wrong place, which is how I feel, though I must admit I turn a bit queasy thinking how despite the animals and trees I've spared by refusing meat all of these years, there's this other matter of how I'm still trying to wear out my welcome in these leather shoes.

The Hendersons' Fish

Look quick; they're rainbow slivers, tiny neon tetras firing through green fronds of Amazon sword, finned magic levitating toward the water lily (looks real, but notice its veined white petals blooming underwater, wired stiff against rising air bubbles.) Some of the Hendersons' fish spark like fireflies reflected on the surface of a tiny lake, captivating, captive in the lighted aquarium whose purring black machines supply the very guts and breath of nature. Beautiful, perfectly maintained specimens, why there's even a sitter should the Hendersons absent themselves--though by now you must sense that the Hendersons' other fish are ordinary indigenous Lake Erie perch, their sides not yet softened by mercury. Look how their once-quick, translucent bodies turn murky, clouding as they cook, crackling in hot oil, out of their scales and element, stiffening in the cast-iron skillet shaken by the expert hand of one of the Hendersons.

**Motion**

We Had Met, So Easily, On A Train

I still think of you,  
with a fondness that softens,  
blurs the distinctions of nostalgia,  
plain curiosity. There are  
mirrors I hold up, every so often,  
and you are one of them,

evenings your clawhammer style  
of banjo picking would spike the party,  
nights I want you to unravel my privacy  
over burnt coffee in that dive on the outskirts  
where you taped the drywall during the renovations.  
Selfish, I miss

singing together,  
the race of conversation that could knock me winded,  
or the drift allure of your past slowed down in stories,  
pranks pulled by other kids because of your deaf ear.  
How you'd turn your head,  
lean in close to me, so you could  
listen with the good one--  
all I have

and this delicate chain. Sterling stamped 925,  
your gift from a time long before I worked with silver,  
before I knew malleability or tempering,  
the politics of hallmarks, so many  
changes. Just this

bang-bang memory of a '73 Cadillac,  
philosophy and shared laughter,  
the immutable fact that  
while we came from worlds so disparate,  
we clicked.  
How I stood

distraught,  
listening to your voice through the  
telephone that last time--

I stood on a chair in my sister's kitchen,  
dumbfounded in a room bright with afternoon,

holding your honesty to my ear.  
And because I said No, that was the end of you.

Pressing the dial tone against my ear,  
asking myself

which was your good ear?

Unanswered

Never able to put a finger on you,  
you permit nothing so useful  
as pinching the string  
while someone knots the parcel together.

Why do you never speak details--  
noun, shuffle, verb,  
daily talk is so much grape jelly to you--  
absently smeared on toast, its homemade flavour  
soon forgotten. Why does it take  
a phone call between us  
to fill your silence?  
Or a departure, prefaced by a beer in the bar,  
that talk so insistent, tricking us

into believing we are capable of certainty,  
offering slivers of ourselves. They soon sink  
inside us, too small to hold, to savour,  
no more knowing or unknowing  
than the day before: a far cry,  
the look of one face, as seen by the other  
through the train window.

Or your letter afterward. Stretching all that way,  
your words chewing our rugged geography of absence  
into gravel. Why do I try to read into their centres  
as though they're edible?

Not what I want.

Most of our words are soft and barely serviceable,  
they lisp amongst themselves,  
restless and predictable. They're not like  
strangers on a train  
ladling out whole feasts of lives  
thick with zest and failed intimacy  
to anyone who'll listen. Why  
do you clench,

frightened by even the ability of your hands,  
their eloquent dexterity?

Stub them in pockets, refuse them their piano.

Thrust deep, deny their bleating.

No use to anyone. No longer friends.

Just ten fingers dragged through the slip of each day,  
five bent twigs tied to the stump of each heavy arm.

You cross them over your chest while you lie sleeping.

Hold your heartbeat so tightly,

letting nothing seep through.

Not even embracing the pain twitching there,

refusing its dreamt song sparrows

who simply want to alight and rest a few bars

before taking up those sticks

and giving them flight.

Postscript

You are granite in your distance,  
and yet, up close,  
you are spirit. We are spirit  
travelling against the same sunlight,  
our nights spent stoking the same stars.

I'm not drawn by strength, but by weakness,  
the vulnerable in others--  
that struggle to take on pain, to transform it  
into knowledge or light.

I savour scars  
as some cherish the night sky,  
the bounds of dreams  
transcribed upon its indigo flesh.  
I trace the hieroglyphs of your body,  
even the tick in your left eye, tremble in your voice.  
Sadness is the weight of the body,  
spirit writhing, struggling for release.

When I feel that granite edge in you,  
I long to embrace it,  
sensing it's where your truth lies.  
Some day we'll talk of these things,  
how every night the wind touches our skins  
and we sense another death  
drawn out from within--

Listen--



Memory

Sifting the silt churned up,  
disturbed by the movement  
through your own life,  
the pyrite mixed with precious metals,  
a history of episodes, often linked  
by pain.

What to do with certain memories  
that refuse to fade;  
the time you had them stop the car on Harbord St  
and you bent puking behind what  
your blurred vision saw as a vacant house.  
Where were you going, why do you remember only:  
Saturday. November. You spent the afternoon  
in bed with a migraine.

All the emotional migraines shoot out of you now  
like falling stars, their irate electricity,  
their electronic display.  
Drums alive, your heartbeat skip-  
ping, the colour guard dancing and twirling as  
the insistent songs of memory march alongside;  
no foul weather can hold them back.

You jump up to put your jacket on and  
rush outside to watch;  
your very own parade passes, its brash and  
dizzying array of colour and Sousa marches  
spilling down the street.

Clouds push by, they have their own  
important business,  
gliding through pure, frictionless air.  
The sun races everywhere. Reminding you.

But the sun doesn't care; it has a full day ahead,  
the porch doesn't notice, clutching its blanket of snow;  
it holds the stairs against the house,  
what more do you need?

You walk ice-rutted streets, watch  
sunlight raise the blinds in kitchen windows,  
recall a childhood of early mornings,  
the hardwood cold beneath dawn feet,  
consider how you had to force  
against the storm door  
to enter today;  
kick at the metal door, frozen in its housing,  
the crystalline vapour of your lungs  
saulting ahead of you.

Breath doesn't care. It knows nothing  
of the electric spark of memory,  
has no reason to recollect

the attack by the dog when you were five,  
it doesn't think about the barn fire, or the turnip  
your grandfather cursed, blaming his heart attack  
on the strength in the waxed root,  
blaming his straining to slice into it,  
your life

is not concerned with such reminders,  
it has the future.  
Your life  
doesn't shudder or cry out or  
respond.

You come in from the cold and pour a hot coffee.  
When you set the mug down on the table,  
the table leg falls off. It just falls off.  
And the odd part is,  
that's how you'll remember this morning.

You'll be in a car, driving,  
or cutting vegetables in a kitchen,  
or shivering on a back porch,  
stomping the snow out of your treads.

All you will consider: the thud,  
the leg falling off,  
but the table remaining upright--

balanced.

Migraine

Still not used to this  
repeated need, not practice  
of lying motionless in the dark,  
closing off each section of the day,  
the room, each molecule entering my brain;  
skull cracked open,  
the mind's pink flame  
burned down to a lour glow.

There's no luminosity in my thought,  
no delicate business.  
Pain wedges its surgical blade between my eyes,  
incises all the way to my medulla oblongata,  
wrings out breath with eager hands.  
My nervous system dissects itself,  
overstimulated by senses.

Even dreams cannot help,  
the dream of black, perfect black,  
world without colour, without contrast.  
In darkness, eyes closed,  
pain flashes from within,  
slashes across my cortex  
like sheet lightning, electrical vapour.

Logic evaporates,  
there's only the shimmer  
of murderous sensation.

Motion Sickness

rain on window pane    water touched by the train's motion,  
friction    drawn diagonally, following cohesion, gravity

foreground trees blur by    distant trees immobile, defiant as any  
past    indelible to eyes

rain in the fields    aged wet fences pounded in by mallet blows  
work done with a softered violence, the body behind the mallet  
the mind driven by ancestry, determination

cows foraging washed fields    black and white declaration of dairy  
land; this is cheese country, the land above Quinte    its dark  
soil beckoning, full of rain and history    remembering ploughs  
that crumbled its surface, bodies that felled trees, built fences  
and barns with stone and timber    crow-flight straight laneways to  
homesteads

trees lean south-east    rows of poplars bisect a stream, while the  
day rolls gray for miles    gray above the hushed green of wet land  
accepting dawn    muted light on the fields    grainy, textured,  
cut by the whistle sounding, announcing the danger in this  
speeding train

the grind in my stomach hints this motion might lead to migraine  
stuttered motion along tracks    beginning before dawn, when  
travellers share the day like a secret    echo the Navajo belief  
each dawn bears a new sun

passing warehouses, rail yards salvage stacked and waiting  
 alongside graffiti-sprayed boxcars, jacked-up transport trailers

train stopping at small stations nearby, white-washed silos  
 beside the tracks the diamond pattern of carpeting: orange and  
 brown in coach fares

geography filtered through heather tones the whole sky one  
 colour, is shy blue is steel, depending who you ask accepting  
 gradients of light gradually revealing the biscuit-coloured  
 scrub of land brush and bush and grasses moving toward autumn  
 colours sliced by ditches between fields

sideward rocking dizzying along the curves, listing slightly

in the back of my head that tympanum pulse starts up drumming to  
 click into migraine pulsing arteries stuffed thick after dawn  
 gorging on motion through farmland

dizzy as eyes shift perspective move rapidly within  
 foreground, quick between telegraph poles a few strides from the  
 rails rest on a floating tree distant on the horizon

the sound of the wheels is no lullaby

land draws away from the train, flat and unshadowed for miles  
 before arriving in hills the growing light gives and takes

mist rises from the fields rows of corn blanched of all colour,  
 its cycle near completion season of mists and mellow  
 fruitfulness departures and arrivals convergence points

vertigo nausea witnessed miles melding beyond control moving  
past shapes that hover and quiver the blood hammer in the brain  
picking up odd angles of light gnashing pain forcing outward;  
the retina cannot retain

try to soothe the focus of eyes find a dull detail hold them  
on a fixed object static interior view blood hammer striking  
stare down rest eyes on black slip showing beyond skirt of woman  
sleeping across aisle blood hammer pounding

mallet blows incomprehensible pain behind pounding prickling  
violence click clack over rail ties worlds spinning off single  
compass point daylight insistent through closed eyelids pounding

**Driving Off The Map**



One Account: Newtonian Motion Laws Don't Translate To Emotion

To every action there is  
 an equal and opposite reaction.  
 --Newton's Third Law of Motion

Wake up Newton! Tell him  
 we all shout love, don't  
 necessarily wait  
 for its bodily report.  
 We need the other physic--  
 prescription: how to receive  
 even one brief radioisotope  
 of passion.

Romance us beyond science.  
 Galileo called our Milky Way a vast crowd of stars.  
 Defined, it's a "normal spiral galaxy,"  
 tulle of stars linked by gravity.  
 But what holds us together,  
 lips stitched with spittle,  
 bodies reaching in with souls--  
 Do we follow or shatter  
 all universal laws of harmony?

A kiss is just a kiss. Mute contact. Exchange.  
 Pity the short-lived memory of the body,  
 gasp and gush, healed bruise, mended bone.  
 Resist taxonomy.  
 Dive in headlong  
 beyond these (too-palpable, obeisant) bodies--

immune to constants, forces like gravity.  
 Witness the motion of stars,  
 constant but relative to one another.

To cross all worlds for.  
 To trust in the risk that yields, each self  
 splayed open and vulnerable.  
 Bring down the moon, even one dazzling  
 hoop of Saturn's skirt,  
 or one star, spinning silver earring.

To admit love.  
 Tenderness inside me.  
 Caught bullet carried softly in my mouth.  
 All of these miles.  
 Kiss it out of me.

I will speak shock,  
 act free from ritual. Speak  
 angels and danger: clean incision  
 I demand your love to be.  
 Rip into me!  
 Not with fists, but with  
 your soul's terrifying diamonds.  
 Let my body be convinced of yours.

Or. Surviving the mine field, inch by inch.  
 To bring you angel food with the file baked in.  
 Gorging ourselves on handfuls of eggy cake.  
 The hacking file excising just enough bars.

How option implies possibility. Openings. Relinquishing  
 control is granting access.

Action. Escaping to or from?  
 In which direction do we move?  
 Why, I've forgotten now,  
 still drunk on your scent, your moan,  
 my fingertips addicted to your skin.  
 The breath of each idea.  
 Shared lexicon of fragments.

Versus. Over distance, over time--

Reaction. We forget the simplest beauty,  
 regret the process inside all nouns.  
 Speak love, forget the impetus behind it.  
 X years down the path  
 we look into this unrecognizable face,  
 this unknowable sky and ask  
 questions,  
 unforgiveable questions.

Always, something must be put forward.  
 Pain defines the soul by responding to, with.  
 We offer our lives, or other lies.

My wings have since regenerated.  
 Look at me: I'm nature's freak.  
 Learning to fly. And again.

Oh, Newton and Kepler let me down.  
 Ordinary living sent me crashing from your sky,  
 comet hurtling itself out of orbit.

These are my new wings, not lies.

Driving Off The Map

"We forgive once we give up attachment to our wounds."

--Lewis Hyde, The Gift

Oh, what I could have said to you--  
to consider you, in retrospect,  
so much life has changed hands  
since we clutched at each new day,  
as tough as  
possibility--  
morning lapping yellow petals  
with its bright, wet tongue.

I learned to count  
in order to keep track,  
to be able to extrapolate, count backward, even  
recount--  
like the spider ingesting its broken web,  
I set back to work  
re-spinning my recycled skein--

I offer only empirical details,  
the colour of the electric stove,  
the temperature and scent of these rooms, and so on;  
how the snow outside is dizzy and careless, landing  
everywhere.

I'm tired of ghost faces bobbing out from dreams,  
the same mapped palms, flick of the wrist,  
their talk still enticing  
long after I've sworn off memory,  
renounced addiction.

I walked barefoot over hot coals  
in too many dreamt corridors,  
dogged by old wounds, my endless  
ache and quest for passion,  
body that craves touch and touch and touch--

That ecstasy has been shorn of its fury.

Here is its memory now:

one held breath plotted on the grid,  
one calculated limit purified by time,  
where memory loses the roll and crash, forgets to  
skid off the curve and crumple against the guardrail.

Those moments are like the glint of sunlight  
off the windshield of a passing car.

The open highway.

Or a monarch butterfly, flicked off the grill;  
tumbled from its migrant path  
to dazzle from the road allowance,

innocuous as the taste of summer;  
sunlight's change to scent on skin.

But the sun doesn't come looking for us any more.  
Or when it does, it cannot find us together.

I weep in the privacy  
of my own language,  
the truth arrives months later,  
its cardboard suitcases and steamer trunks  
sent under separate cover.

So much of each life remains unanswered,  
won't rest in image,  
can't recline on emotional graticules.  
So much love unwitnessed,  
locked-out and drinking itself blind  
in the grotty corridors of memory.

The real story, real love  
is seldom spoken;  
it all moves too fast, without bull's-eye,  
too raw for words, for the fluttering heart--  
trust cowers by the back door,  
palm pressed over its mouth  
for fear of saying--

Pardon.

28, nearly 29 years  
before realizing which of the six simple machines  
my heart most resembles in  
application,  
how it flounders, limp muscle,  
then contracts,  
alternating between rest and work,  
between being a wedge driven in

and being a lever,  
capable of strength.

You still don't accept  
that you couldn't contain me.  
Even your loving arms,  
huge with bouquets and distance  
couldn't offer space enough.

The cardiac myth I turned memory into:  
it teaches me nothing.  
I'm no emotional cartographer,  
I'm a cardiac mythographer;  
I plotted us static on the grid.  
To determine the best course  
to progress away from you.  
My repentive atlas won't stay shut;  
panoramic scenery wanes unbeheld,  
waterfalls seep through sodden binding.

I want to live the poetry of airports and change  
and sudden destinations.  
I want to learn.

Knowing the best way to navigate  
is to fold the map away--

**Soundings**



For The Stones In Her Pockets

"This is death, death, death she noted in the margin  
of her mind; when illusion fails."

--Virginia Woolf, Between The Acts

fragile words are the woman  
delicate inside her body  
holding its secret captive over fifty years  
filling her head with the wet sand of madness  
she cannot climb out of its night  
will not turn down the thick blankets of grief

like thrush eggs smooth inside her dress pockets  
she carries brown speckled stones  
to counteract the water's buoyancy  
the stones are growing  
are swelling with her life's heaviness  
soon they burst the pocket seams  
of her underwater skin

Virginia drowning off-stage like Ophelia  
the silent weight of stone  
drawing her down to muddy death  
through decades of brilliant testimony  
caught fluttering in pages

giant stones deliver her

Sounding

"You were dancing, I saw you dancing,  
 throwing your arms toward the sky."  
 --Bruce Cockburn

After all, how does it add up? What can a life  
 circle down to, late-night questions for a few friends to share,  
 a few scraps considered before smashing their glasses down  
 empty on the small round table in the smoky bar--  
 not the delicate ruffle of mystery,  
 more like the shit of the process;  
 the gritty grease, not the ghost in the machine--

How is it that you can take your life across any distance,  
 by stepping inside, journeying inward  
 to the spirit's phosphorescence--  
 beyond the body's fuselage,  
 beyond the fact those bones are busy, living tissue,  
 30 per cent water, the rest all minerals and magic.

The spirit can wing us anywhere.  
 It shoots us beyond the grasp of time,  
 into even the haven of those who remember their conception  
 the way we relive dreams of flight--  
 the hopeful way we inhabit this  
 too-heavy suddenness of the body,  
 moving through each day, always conjuring  
 one perfect stride ahead of each lumbering step.

And what of time,  
how we invented its passage  
just as we invented these contraptions  
to carry us over and through it  
because on its own,  
the spirit in the body  
could never move fast enough.

Not satisfied by process, or the attempt that is  
where beauty lives,  
we succumb, plummet with dream-eyed Icarus,  
or Amelia,  
pioneer who raced hope down the runway,  
and took off out of 1937,  
to enter us.

After all, what can even one life come down to?  
A few specific remnants on a South Pacific isle--  
copper antenna wire, scrap of fuselage, small  
portion of a woman's shoe, circa 1930, size 9,  
her mysterious fate held fast in its tiny stitching.

Doesn't this answer the dream of the finite?  
This sticky future, picnic on the other side--  
body sling-shot out of its past,  
then sailing sunward,  
like Earhart,  
buckled into her Lockheed Electra,  
launched into the timeless.

But now it's proof we crave  
that it's truly Amelia  
assembled in artifacts culled by technology;  
all arms ache to hold her answer  
because it's ours.

Isn't it proof enough they witnessed her leaving,  
raising our earthly cargo skyward  
on the next leg of a flight that endeavoured  
to circle the globe--

propelling herself so far into that new vista  
there was no way to locate home again,  
there being no daily quota of epiphany,  
no sure-ticket to the sublime--

One life.

One pure question, sounding the distance.

Thin line racing straight for the sunset.