

Ragtime for Beginners

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The Department

of

English

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## ABSTRACT

Ragtime for Beginners

Moberley Luger

*Ragtime for Beginners* is a collection of poems concerned with questions of space – the space that not only separates people (through distance or time), but also divides the self. It examines what separates a husband and wife married twenty-five years, and conversely, what brings together a woman and the Jehovah’s Witness at her door; and it explores the seismic shifts of the self, how we assemble and disassemble our own lives.

The collection pivots around questions of perspective; it considers the difference between something and the *image* of that thing. It seeks to understand the value of fiction and metaphor in the face of loss; it attempts to distinguish a pomegranate, for example, from a picture of a pomegranate. The five “diptychs,” approach their subject matter from two directions – from two voices, two places, or two moments in time.

Many of the poems are concerned with memory. They ask, what does one *do* with a memory? Can the past be made concrete, saved, held in one’s hand? In “The Velvet Jewelry Box,” the speaker attempts to “unpack those memories like stones, build a road . . .” In “What Days Remind You Of,” the speaker wants to “gather them . . . like sheets billowing on a clothesline.”

The collection oscillates between prose (with its enjambment and speed) and lineation (even, at times, metred couplets or quatrains). In every instance, these are self-conscious poems. Like Anna H., in the collection’s long poem, they examine the language available to them, searching out similes, questioning images.

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DIPTYCH OF THE WHOLE WORLD

*“Longing, we say, because desire is full  
of endless distances”  
—Robert Hass*



## CRANE STORY

Her cheek rests on his chest, rises  
with his breath, and falls. He reaches

over her to the night-stand, chooses  
a slip of red paper, places it on her belly.

She cradles the square in her hands, creases  
the middle, folds in quarters, and again,

makes two symmetrical wings,  
a pointed mouth, hollow-lantern centre.

She makes the shape of a baby  
crane, pulls the folded paper to her lips,

blows air through the tiny hole.  
Its middle inflates, wings spread:

a child, my sister, is born.

.  
The parents, older now, sit silently against  
the wooden headboard. She reaches

to the night-stand, finds the origami papers,  
nudges them into his hands.

He chooses a piece from the top of the pile:  
yellow, fainter than a lemon seed.

She folds the paper in half, then quarters,  
and again, makes two symmetrical wings,

a pointed mouth, hollow-lantern centre.  
She pulls the second crane to her lips, sighs –

I cry my first breath.

Soon after, the parents start leaving  
the window open. Small, square

papers drift from the night-stand; no one  
gathers or saves them, covers them with a paperweight.

My unborn sisters are gone like balloons let off their strings.

The parents no longer share a bed.  
The rise and fall of breath echoes

from different corners of the house.  
I bury my head under my wing,

looking for what went wrong.  
I unfold my tail, collapse my tiny mouth,

I want to find the misplaced creases, disobediences,  
the careless folds made too late

at night. I untuck and unfurl, flatten  
my pointed edges. I lie, a crumpled yellow, worn

paper where my wings had been, and dream  
I have a folded paper boat to carry me back

and forth between their separate sighs.

## MORNING DIPTYCH

### I.

The newspaper is stacked in front of him,  
sections folded like fresh laundry.

It used to be:

front page clamped under his wife's coffee,  
his daughter reciting the weather.

Lowering his head to his cup, he hears  
echoes: *pick up a lemon and a lime,*  
*and for once, please leave the work at work,*  
hears the girl studying for her morning test,  
reciting the contents of her lunch in French:  
*Une pomme. Un sandwich. Du jus d'oranges.*

He looks across the empty table,  
peels dead skin off his bottom lip until  
a bead of blood trickles down his chin.

## II.

This is how bad novels start, she thinks.  
This is how sadness is – when you can't  
even gut your own grapefruit.  
She fingers the serrated edge of the spoon,  
feels the sway of her earrings on her neck.  
The waiter brings a plate of eggs  
(later she wonders if their fingers touched).  
He clears the barely-eaten grapefruit –  
*pamplemousse*, she says, *that's French*.  
She wants him to listen. To stay and stay.  
To sit, reach out his hands, push them  
through the tangles of her morning hair.  
Wants his bacon-y fingers cupped  
around her face, holding those dangling  
sapphires, grabbing them, the way he might  
grab, might still, a swinging metronome.

*"The way is watercolour to the station,  
the stop is limbo."*

–P.K. Page

## ON THE TRAIN

she wears no shoes, feels the tracks  
smooth beneath her feet.

A closed book rests on her lap;  
a finger, pressed between pages, holds her place.

Her temple pulses, cold, against the window  
as the snow-covered fields grunt by.

She sees: a man shoveling a path,  
leaning in, heaving up, with every muscle in his body.

She sees: his young son chasing circles  
around him, as if in a rush to get somewhere.

Back arched, arms crossed, she assumes  
the required posture for feeling alone.

She is in between places like a half read novel,  
her finger the bookmark staving off

a destination. There is a certain stillness  
on this lurching, forward-moving train.

It is the opposite of treading water –  
where you paddle with every part of your body

just to stay in the same position.

## RIFT VALLEY

You are seated by the window of the Rift Valley Chinese and Canadian Restaurant. Co-workers, running club, old friends from highschool, a group. Thick white cups are filled with tea; a picture of a newborn baby spins on the table's lazy susan. The menu offers chicken noodle and wonton soup – a conversation starts about Canada's diversity. You order ginger beef, white rice, run your hands over the words Rift Valley as though they were written in braille. Chopsticks clack, food is served, spilled, sopped up by thin paper napkins. You laugh in the right places; as a child you did not sing in choir, only moved your lips. You want to say you're thinking of moving: you've packed a warm sweater, left the alarm clock. The place, its roads are flat and cracked, dry like a face leathered by the sun, so quiet you can hear a berry fall from a bush. And there, which is far from here, you will be safe, from that feeling of drowning that comes when water does not surge, but merely rests, divided, among a circle of half empty cups.

## DIPTYCH OF THE WHOLE WORLD

### I.

Crossing the street, I dodge  
cars, pigeons, a stranger who calls out –  
and I try to dodge him too. He's holding a package,  
perhaps, flowers? *They're for Irene*, he says,  
coming closer, *in the beauty shop*.  
*Will you bring them to her?*

I fuss, but not with words. At last,  
grab the gift (inside I am shaking  
my head, a mother disapproving, resigned).  
Hurrying toward the salon, I crinkle the paper,  
inspect. Perhaps, not flowers. I feel  
for sharp edges, hear a faint ticking –  
No. This is a trial: I will not  
turn my back on love.  
But my pace is fast, my arms extended  
as far from my body as possible.

## II.

Six o'clock, a woman locks up  
the salon. A bouquet hangs  
upside down from her fist,  
roses flopped, heavy, at her ankles.  
She cannot put her hand in her pocket.  
Her coat flaps in the wind, strands of hair  
fall from her french twist.

She moves as though walking on scales,  
must peer down as she crosses,  
with every step, from one to the next.



## OFFERING

At two pounds one ounce, the baby  
is going to die. She knows this

but asks it like a question  
to rest in the space before he answers.

To comfort her he tells a story:  
*In Russia, at the turn of the last century*

*nurses warmed premature babies  
in circles of hot bricks.*

He squints, hands in pockets – this is how he tells a story,  
as if the pieces are in there waiting to be rummaged out.

She imagines he is sifting through stones  
and wants one, the singularity of it,

the way it has traveled from the infinite.  
She opens her palm, ready to receive

the small, cold weight.

## THREE MOVEMENTS

i.

From the old piano, left too many years near an open window,  
notes take full minutes to clear the room. The songs escape  
sideways from the cracks in the wood.

Pianos are mines of potential energy. When dropped  
ten stories, the sound reverberates for miles.

ii.

I am here in the thrall of silence. Coffee is poured, swallowed,  
chocolate cake is divided. Finally, someone speaks:

tells how her son found himself one day with a knife  
and then with slit wrists. Luckily, the blood ran so far – down  
his hands, along the kitchen tile, out the back door, into the neighbour's yard –  
they could trace the trail in time.

iii.

Late night, driving home, police cars swarm, crowding us  
toward the nearest exit. We wait on the overpass, planning our new route,  
cursing the strained necks all around.

Below us a body spreads on the highway, as if it had not jumped  
but been poured from above. The pavement is too dense;  
like hands in a lap, too quiet.

## THE COUNTRY YOU ARE CALLING

A woman offers tea to the Jehovah's Witness at her door.  
He accepts, removes his shoes; they spend all afternoon  
eating clean a plate of cookies. He, the long chocolate sandwiches,  
she, the round ones with cherry centers.

She tells him her brother bought a Chia Pet  
shaped like a human head when mourning their father's death.  
The Jehovah's Witness does not laugh, feels a word –  
“healing” – rise in his throat like mercury. There's a voice,

he says, that won't come out of his head. After the planes hit,  
he tried calling New York City, wanted to talk to his sister,  
but there were only busy signals and a recorded voice:  
*the country you are calling is in a state of emergency.*

The honey-toned ones are called voice artists, the woman says,  
unscrewing her cookie to lick out the icing. The guest nods,  
asks his host if, perhaps, she's seen the ads for those new black maxi-pads.  
She has not, but they discuss the beauty, versatility of black.

Women are disgusted by their own blood, she tells him,  
this way it soaks into darkness. But black is elegant, he replies,  
like the velvet padding in ring boxes. She sighs –  
I don't know what to tell you. Tell me anything, he says.

We pull up at the house, the driver assuming someone will come out. Look at the new paint job, you say. And that car parked in the drive. There's the window to my bedroom. Remember the blue flowered wallpaper? When we left this house, we drove slowly, watched as it got smaller in the distance – small until big again, when our memory of it solidified, plunked down where the house itself had been. The trade was quick: a magician's sleight of hand. We could not have imagined this moment then. That we would be back here, in a taxi to hide from the rain, stomachs full from dinner. The expectant look on the driver's face. We were waiting for something too.

## RAILWAY STATION

The next stop is a town I used to live in.  
I know its station well – the pop machine's  
broken Coke button, blue plastic  
bowl chairs, how the sun shines  
on the tracks, leaves the parking lot,  
where the goodbyes happen, in shade.

I liked the platform: people spilling  
from the train's fold-down staircases in mid-conversation.  
Silently, I matched pairs, as if those arriving  
and those waiting were tiles from my "memory" game.  
I shifted weight from hip to hip,  
fished gum from my purse – it was too big  
(from the dress-up box, perhaps) – but I took it on trips  
to do exactly this: feel weight on my shoulder,  
search for gum and tissues.

When the conductor announces the stop,  
I mouth the words too: Kitchener Station.  
I sit straighter, get up on my knees,  
hang over the top of my seat, press my face.

I want this town like a diorama. I do not want  
to *take it* like a photograph, but really to *hold it*,  
for keeps, my arms around all four shoebox walls.

## PALIMPSESTS

## WHAT DAYS REMIND YOU OF

Once, there was enough  
patchwork to cover a whole body.  
Red-checked cloth with words stitched in:  
    *baby, song, bedtime.*  
And if some letters came undone,  
more were stitched:  
    *pencil, radio, five.*

A palimpsest of thread.

Years later, ripped red checks  
    poke out of drawers, the night stand.  
Some have a *d* or *m* left over  
    (Older now, you are reminded of a  
    neon sign with bulbs burnt out).  
Memories unravel, scraps rip  
    into smaller –

You can't hold  
these scraps, these words  
    you learned to read on,  
pictures so inside you  
    they're what days remind you of.  
You can only reach  
    for them, gather them in your hands  
    like sheets billowing on a clothesline,  
    that won't be taken in,

won't fall gently in the basket.

## DIPTYCH: FIRST RECITAL

### I. (Right Hand)

Lavender's Blue: the perfect choice.  
She has practised every day,  
tapped this song out everywhere –  
the backseat of the car, her lap,  
every book in school.  
She must relax: the piano  
will tell if she shakes, give away  
her secret in its vibrato. She must not  
look at the white blouses, neckties,  
rows of folding chairs, fidgeting  
children, the wisps of hair  
that cover her eyes. There is  
no podium, no strange piano,  
or mispronunciation of her name,  
no long table of refreshments  
where she ate too many little sandwiches,  
spilled her styrofoam cup of tea  
onto the white paper table cloth.



## II. (Left Hand)

Listen. Don't be afraid to sink your fingers into the keys.

Take your time. Listen. To the story of the song, not the stories that made you cover your ears last night as you hid under the blankets singing over and over *when I am king dilly dilly you shall be queen . . . .*

Play gently, piano, pianissimo, lift your head high, like the woman in the ghost story whose head was held to her body by a green silk scarf, so that when her lover unwound it, her head fell into his hands, the scarf falling, brushing past his wrist – don't be afraid of the silence in a rest.

THE STORY OF ANNA H.

Dear Dr.

My (very unusual) problem  
in one sentence, and in non-medical terms, is:

I can't read. I can't read  
music, or anything else.

I would be ever so happy and grateful  
if you could find the time to see me.

Sincerely yours.

Lately in my dreams I see long sentences,  
Bear's fingers twisted through my hair  
so tight

I can't roll away from him  
words tumbling across a page, connected  
without sense  
as if by lego, the jut of one  
locked into the hole of the next.

I read the words in spurts  
*like cuneiform or hieroglyphics.*  
Every third or fourth, I think, makes sense –  
the others, I can't see, yet  
they're words. I know it

the way I know the skin is hard  
on the worn pads of Bear's fingertips.

\*

He came to me as Bernard,  
always folding me up in his long, furred arms –  
"Bear" seemed more like it:  
those wrinkled eyes,  
dry cracking elbows.  
It's my job to remind him with lotion,  
take his tea bags out.  
In bed, I turn off the light.

But if not for him, I am a girl without  
a key to her own house.  
I'm thinking specifically:

Years ago my keys fell down the sewer grate;  
Bear ran inside for his wading galoshes, grate came off,  
he went down, emerged with the keys, proud as a child.

I was happy for them back, but mostly for the sound  
of his shoulders under the shower, the shine  
of the found keys soaking in vinegar.

\*

My favorite sound of all  
was us at the end of the day.

Our five o'clock song:

I was the right hand, the melody –  
my fingers rushing  
to finish the day's  
last notes.

He was the left. First, the crack of his knees as he crouched  
to untie his boots, two thuds as each shoe hit  
the ground, then his steady steps down the hall.

Our finé: hungry, he'd find me,  
lean on the lid of the piano. Finished,  
I'd lift my hands from the keys,  
fold them in my lap.

\*

That first time – how to describe –  
I want a simile.  
To look but not to see is like.

When you've sat at the piano long as I have, you forget  
how careful your back, how arched your hands.

I do not read notes anymore:  
they assemble inside me.

That first time – I sat as always, yet  
suddenly  
I can hear every whisper and creak of the crowd.  
I feel the length of my neck,  
my hair heavy on my shoulders,  
bobby pins pulling  
too tight.

The notes      now      are dots, stains  
a wet painting   dripping puddles  
smudges   ha   I can't – *I used to be*  
yes   *a fantastic sight reader, easily able*  
*to play a Mozart concerto by sight.*  
*And now*

I must need new glasses.

I play on. Know this song by heart.  
No one notices. I never need the music,  
always take it with me.  
It is the father  
holding the back of my bicycle.

Relying on memory is like

pushing off,  
feet on the pedals,

alone.

\*

Made last night's cake with salt instead of sugar.  
Each darn bite like a swallow of sea water.

Bear was silent, but I heard his plate slide across the table.

\*

*The doctors all say,*  
*“Posterior cortical atrophy*  
*of the left hemisphere,*  
*very atypical,”*  
*and then they smile apologetically, but*  
*there's nothing they can do.*

\*

Oh, I know those words, sugar and salt,  
will write them over and over,  
cover the teacher's blackboard.

I had written Bear the list: sugar, eggs, milk.  
A little poem. Like with letters and cards –  
I write them, he just reads them back.  
I know he doesn't tell me  
when I've missed a word, gone off the page.

His printing's an old mess, but that comforts me.  
As if writing, like dusting, is just one of my jobs  
and reading, like the lawn, one of his.

\*

There are good days.  
This is what I tell the neighbours  
when they lean over the fence.

I love working in the garden –  
fingers drenched in soil  
(no gardening gloves here!)  
knees stained from the grass,  
sun on the back of my neck.  
I can bury these seeds in the ground  
  
with my eyes closed.

\*

Lately it seems – lucky me! –  
Bear's always close by.

He used to just pass through the kitchen,

snatch a crouton from the salad;  
I'd slap his hand, he'd crook his brow, be gone.

Now, our game is long.  
He lays out ingredients, while I must  
grope and guess. *Is it  
a cousin of an onion? Is it  
edible? Paper?*

He reveals a leek, ah!  
clucks his tongue, the sound he used to hear  
when shooed from the kitchen,  
  
my sound.

\*

He holds a pink square in front of me.

*Better than sugar*, I say, reaching  
to feel the small, malleable packet.

He tells me – close – it's Sweet 'n' Low. Laughs.

I have this nightmare. Bear holding up objects  
for me to name. I can't do it fast enough.

Bells go off, buzzers. A hellish game show.

I can't see what he's holding. I have to touch  
what I cannot see. I'm scared. I can't. Scared –  
he could hold up a cockroach, a hot dish from the oven.  
I won't know, and I'll reach to touch it and –

\*

Things can be very hard – the grocery store, for instance.  
This is what I told Bear. *Now, if I want to buy the same things,  
I have to ask people. There were many moments when I had to ask.  
How could I be so silly?*

I did not tell him that I asked a display of bananas  
where the cereal aisle was, that someone had to tell me  
I was talking to a stack of fruit – they thought I was crazy.  
That I spent three hours in the grocery store and truth be told  
I hated every goddamn minute of it, that I never want to go back.  
The colours loom at me, and run together and I'd rather be  
blind then this, rather be in a wheelchair asking young shining girls  
to reach things for me. But what? Should I stay at home, staring  
at the patterns on the wallpaper. The mush that I see when I look  
at music, at recipes, at my own hands on the ends of my arms.  
Of course I'll go back tomorrow, because if I don't  
                  what will I do tomorrow?      What will I do tomorrow?

*It's not a blur, I tell him, it's mush.*

\*

I have put the music books away  
since I no longer know  
if they are right side up.

\*

It used to be, I played to give  
life to written music.  
Now, I think, it is the opposite:  
I play, hoping if the notes are right,  
I'll see them – small quarters and halves,  
                  slotted quietly back on the staff.

\*

Once, when I gave a concert far from home,  
                  Bear and I sent letters.  
                  He wrote: "I miss you more than words can say."  
I thought: how dull!  
                  What is this missing really like?



Here is your chance to describe it.

Take the words you're feeling, string them up  
together. Is it the crinkles by my eyes you miss  
or the discordant tone our laughter makes?  
Is it my chicken sandwiches?

    Crinkle, discordant, sandwich.  
I want to wear your popcorn chain of words.

Years later I know  
    what it feels like to miss,  
but I cannot recognize  
    the shape of the word  
        how smooth it is, how compact –  
    those four small letters.

\*

*It is not getting better.  
The eyes are very bad.*

I know, it's no matter of my eyes. There is no  
pair of glasses, no wizard ophthalmologist, no  
amount of resting, or wetting or squeezing – I know.

Let me have this metonymy.

\*

All day he carries me  
    as if on his hip.

Only some nights, scent of lavender lotion,  
nightgown brushing at my ankles,  
    scapegoat eyes closed,

do I feel my age. Yet

the closer I move to the edge of the bed,

the more I think of rope

as our blanket pulls, grows taut  
in the space between us.

\*

Outside our bedroom window, cherry blossoms  
overflow their branches  
with pink, heart-shaped petals.

I want to save those words: Can I  
hold "cherry" in the back of my throat,  
keep "blossom" in my pocket?

And if next year I cannot name  
that flower, will I know  
it is my favorite, the one whose bloom  
I wait for all winter?

\*

*My memory is no longer fed.*  
I play only by heart, fearful. To forget  
just a handful of notes is to lose  
a whole piece.

\*

I have never used the word, "irony."

That's what the whisperers say, I'm sure.  
"She was such a good sight reader, how ironic."  
"Ironic, isn't it? How much she loved photographs."

This disease is like falling.  
I cannot get up every day.

I cannot cry.

I never want to hear Bear say  
"there's you in your wedding dress."

"There's you," he'll say,  
and I will have to take his word.

\*

*My little story is not very promising.  
A dead end. I have a good sense of humor.  
And that's it, in a nutshell.*

*But I have many good days and years ahead.*

*I am a very resilient person.*

\*

One night, Bear taught me  
a cure for nightmares:  
the stairs were dark, but we climbed down.  
I wrote the dream, and he lit the stove  
so I could throw my scribbled story  
into the flame.

Now I fear to keep a written log.  
I no longer need a stove  
my eyes are flames –

I could end my life this way.

\*

Sometimes, Bear turns pages for me.  
He sits beside, counts along,  
reaches a big arm over me.  
I play eyes closed, see:

A picture of me  
at two or three years old, reading  
my mother's cookbook  
to a doll  
like a story  
– the book is upside down  
and I never turn the page –  
I pat her straw-blond hair, make up the words.

**CHOPSTICKS: THE PLANO POEMS**

## THEY GAVE ME THEIR PIANO

because they were tired from dividing up the bedroom furniture. But I can't play. Not even "Chopsticks." Instead, I keep jackets and sweaters on the bench, scarves and purses straight on the keys. Also raincoats, winter hats, my favourite scarf, an umbrella I always forget. The empty casserole dish my mother left behind last time she came to dinner. So long ago I barely remember what kind of casserole she made. I do remember that the frozen peas were still cold, and that when I complained she got up from the table saying, *I don't need to be told that nothing's ever good enough. I spent twenty years learning that lesson already.* I could hear the piano play the sounds of her leaving as she fished her keys out from between E and F, and dragged her coat along the lowest notes before she shut the door. The night my father finally left he only took one box, resting it against the piano to give my mother a hug: they played a sharp, crowded scale. Then he pulled the box back into his arms where my mother had just been, and closed the door. My father always said that I made more noise leaning on that piano than playing it. *You can't even play "Chopsticks,"* he'd tell me. *I don't need to be reminded that nothing's ever good enough,* I want to tell him now, as a chord crumbles under my weight, the only song I know, footsteps growing fainter down the stairs.

## THE GREEN BASEBALL HAT

reminds me of David, my first love. David, the first time I felt a dizziness between my legs, first secret I kept from my mother. David with the voice that cracked and slurred like his mouth was full of Cracker Jacks. At night, while my parents watched TV, I called David from their queen-size bed, draping myself over the fluffy pillows and smoothing my legs with my mother's perfumed lotions. We talked for hours. Once I called him from the bath but said I was sitting at the kitchen table; I dragged my fingertips along the surface of the water like the ripples were lines on his forehead. *Do you have lines on your forehead?* I asked him. *What?* he answered. Once I called from this piano's bench and we played a phone duet: *Heart and Soul, I fell in love with you . . .* We rarely spoke face to face, avoided each other at school, smiled with our mouths closed. I have his hat only because he left it behind on the last day of the year, and I kept it only because, well, because.

My piano wears it well. I adjust the rim so it just hangs off the top, and I can almost imagine my grand instrument – my excellent coat rack – as a beer-swilling, cap-wearing guy at the bar; a grown-up David, a dangerous face to hold between my hands. Always there, sturdy and loud, telling me I look beautiful tonight. Waiting to wrap his stranger arms around whatever I unload: my coat, my song, or my whole, silent body.

## THE VELVET JEWELRY BOX

has a lid that doesn't quite fit. Old letters spill out, newspaper clippings, the button eye of a forgotten doll, a lullaby transcribed. My mother always scolded me for holding on to such things. She throws out everything. Playbills barely make their way in from the car, chipped cups are wrapped swiftly in paper, thrown out before the hot water that cracked them has cooled. *The tea won't come out the spout, she says, if there's a hole in the bottom of the pot.* This is a motto for forgetting. Her stories are strewn across the city: strangers wear the clothes she's thrown away, streets are littered with ideas she's written down, her empty perfume bottles. I want to scour the city for her, retrieve these things from the corners the wind has blown them into. *The past is the wrong direction, she says, as if she knows I might appear one day at the door, arms full of her old things.* But the knot in the road is so far back; I need that velvet box toppling in the corner of my eye, need to know that if I ever wanted I could unpack my memories like stones, lay a path in the wrong direction, walk so far from this piano its white keys would be scraps of paper blowing behind me in the wind.



## THE WHITE TEACUP

with a red apple painted on one side, belonged to a set of eight, lived in a cupboard I wasn't allowed to open. There were dinner and dessert plates, shallow bowls for soup; each piece was painted with that round, red apple. I hated to cover the perfect shape with food, traced my finger around and around it. I wanted to eat the china, to suck on its pieces like mints. My father broke a teacup between his fingers once, said his hands were *too big for this stupid stuff*, said *a man needs a man-sized mug, you know*. He let the pieces fall from his fingers, and my mother threw down the plate she was drying to make an even bigger pile of dishes on the floor. I was busy imagining a mug the size of my dad, didn't notice that with every word, every broken piece of china, a jagged line was forming. The lightening bolt that divides events in comic strips. The white teacup,

with a red apple painted on one side, sits on the lid of my piano. I do not hide it in a cupboard, drink from it, press it between my hands, or trace its apple pattern with my fingers. Even those movements are too violent for an orphaned teacup. Instead, it works like a metronome; when I press the keys on my piano hard, the cup keeps time – shivers in its saucer.

## YES, MY OLD BICYCLE HELMET

is up there, upside down, a bowl filled with spare keys and unpaid bills. It never fit right, but my father was so excited – *it was just being thrown out*, he said, forcing it over my ponytail. We heard this a lot. Fifteenth birthday: a new desk! Sweet sixteen: a knitted shawl (*just throw it in the wash*). *It's perfectly good! And think of the story*. He thought that if he scrubbed, that old wooden desk would clear its throat, tell him of the places it had seen. I learned to ride my bike in those alleys – I'd glide, and slip, glide and slip, and dad would look for treasures. Riding home, an old stool or lamp strapped on the back, the pedals were heavy but his hand steadied the weight. We were mother birds, every find a twig to fill dark corners of the house. My mother's response, always the same: *please, not more junk*. I'd rest my bike against the house, sling the helmet over the handlebars while my father went inside, offering to bleach, to paint, to sand. *Don't worry*, he'd say, *I'll fix it*.

## THE RECIPE FOR LEMON CHEESECAKE

is printed carefully in my eleven year old hand: one-third of a cup brown sugar, three eggs, a dash of fresh lemon juice . . . . A recipe is something whole come undone. My grandmother used to make this one, and I would lie on the floor of the kitchen, forcing her to step over me for every ingredient, imagining baking all on my own:

It would be for my husband because he had a long day at work, because this morning over cereal that was the plan we'd made: lamb and roast potatoes, he'd pick up a loaf of bread, and I would make his favourite cheesecake, because, as he said, tucking the paper under his arm, kissing me with his minty, coffee-stained breath: *I love your lemon pie, Honey.*

I like breakfast and dessert, the day opening and closing like a circle.

These days, I wait for that scrap of paper to come down, to become flimsy with its want of lemons, brush so lightly over the keys no sound at all is heard.

## THE ONE MUSIC BOOK

is open to "Blues Etude" because I want to appear as someone who can play. To appear as though, at any moment, I just might break into song. To appear preoccupied, like I'm not listening to the sound of the footsteps. To appear as someone who does not twine her fingers through the piano's vibrating strings to warm her hands. To appear as though I do not ever "practice the blues." To appear sure, as if I could exhale rows of musical notes like smoke rings. To appear sturdy with love. To appear warm, even hot. And if not. I want to disappear. To climb inside the piano, where it is dark, and smells like old wood, and is deafeningly loud.

## THE PLUM COLOURED SCARF

used to belong to my mother; she left it behind after she shed my father. It used to be that when my mother got up in the morning she hid in layers of shawls and sweaters, wraps and scarves, as if she were a secret. At least that's what my father said: *Are you hiding a secret something in your dress? Come on, are you really that freezing cold?* She was a present and I wanted to unwrap her – to slowly relieve her, layer by layer, touch the creases in her neck, or hold the tip of her elbow in my palm. To unfurl the hands that held her sweaters closed, tightened the plum bow around her neck. I was sure that if I only just tugged at that tight knot everything else – her shawl and sweater, her hair that hung like a curtain over her face, every harsh word my father ever clothed her in, would fall away to the floor. I use that old scarf now to clean between the piano's keys, jam dusty notes together, slide my bare elbows over octaves at a time.

## THE CASSEROLE DISH

glares at me. The last time I saw my father, we stood in the doorway – the requisite exchange. He'd found some old piano music, and I handed back borrowed books. I wanted to give him that casserole dish, say *Mom left this here, take it*. Home. Back to when she washed, you dried; she drove, you slept. When I loved the morning, hearing over breakfast what had been planned in your bed the night before. I know he saw the dish: a round, red memory. When my grandmother died, we discovered under each plate and bowl a strip of masking tape with a printed name. The roll-call of our family. I got a salad and dessert plate, my father two mugs, my mother the bright red casserole. After the funeral, everyone had something to take home, my uncle joking that *if you wanted a matching set, you'd to have us all for dinner!* This was her plan, I'm sure. In thousands of years, this is how they'll know us, by searching cupboards, collecting each piece.

## THE NEW MUSIC BOOK

my father dropped off is opened over the old one. "Ragtime for Beginners." I can't read the notes, but they're strung so close together I know they must be fast, so I sing the words, parade my fingers – stomp them and jump from black to white. The piano holds its ground. I rise off the bench, standing up on the pedals to go faster. I can't keep this up: body raised, marionette hands. The only way to play faster will soon be not to play at all.

As a child, I used to climb in bed between my parents, lie on my back so I wouldn't ignore one by facing the other. I was paralysed there, my eyes on the ceiling, waiting for them to wake up.

WHEN YOU LOOK AT THE PICTURE YOU DO NOT SEE

*“Is this what love is, he wonders, this substance that lies so pressingly between them, so neutral in color yet so palpable it need never be mentioned? Or is love something less, something slippery and odorless, a transparent gas riding through the world on the back of a breeze, or else – and this is what he more and more believes – just a word trying to remember another word.”*

*–Carol Shields*



## WHEN YOU LOOK AT THE PICTURE YOU DO NOT SEE

the grass beneath the rhinoceros' feet;  
instead it stands on grainy swells  
from Albrecht Dürer's woodcut.

Germany 1515: an acquaintance sends  
Dürer a sketch. He has never before seen  
such a majestic beast, is suddenly compelled

to forgo all social commitments, take down  
every wrinkle, the shade of each long tusk;  
he only rises to adjust the drapes for light.

Finished, this drawing of a drawing  
has more texture than the animal's own skin.  
It is catalogued, copied too

by others who, like Dürer, draw  
with one hand twined in the knots of their hair.  
There are those who have said, after seeing this drawing,

they have known the great rhinoceros.  
Hands in the air they wave, unable  
with the span of their arms, to articulate its enormity.

## A POEM ABOUT THE VIEW

A snow covered mountain, white as paper, and a black road winding to the top; cars and trucks make their way up, drawn messily all over. They are fast and still at once.

The couple stares hard at the road, as if they've been asked to describe it. She accelerates up the mountain, yells until she breaks him, makes him say, *It feels like a nightmare*. His voice is a heat that fills the car. Chase over, she eases the gas.

He bites the nails on his left hand, spits small pieces into his right palm. He looks at her, balancing a pile of white flecks.

## DIPTYCH OF TWO DAUGHTERS

### I.

Driving to the dock, he realizes –  
slapping the wheel, swearing –  
the oil tank is bubbling over, its cap gone.  
They pull in to a convenience store,  
measure the hole with their hands,  
wander up and down the aisles  
looking for something to clog the open pipe.  
She offers: bottlecap, peanut butter lid. He finds  
a wet rag, goes to stuff it in the hole, while  
she's still by the coolers, yelling –  
yoghurt container? wine cork?

## II.

At the edge of the pier,  
a man is gutting his catch.  
He is quick with his knife,  
a west coast samurai.  
His daughter stands above him,  
receiving fish parts – head, scales, liver,  
strings of blood. She goes to the edge,  
drops these in the ocean, walks back;  
he fills her hands again.

MOTHER (I)

First, you'll notice her smart blue blouse.  
It is there to distract you. She knows

every picture has a focal point.

Note her smile. Look up and you'll see it  
on her daughter's face as well. Those same lips.

Her good hand rests – cold fingers tucked  
inside the warmth of her granddaughter's turtleneck.

The girl, arms folded across her chest,  
does not mind; she has grown up

knowing this: also wet kisses, green beans.  
The grandmother knows once the picture's

been taken, the girl will squirm away:  
head under the coffee table,

bored fingers tracing  
the pattern of the tile floor.

## MOTHER (II)

The photograph was her idea.  
She wants this image forever:

three generations of women.  
She wants these links in thread

(her hand on her mother's shoulder,  
daughter at her feet).

The camera is the needle, sewing tighter  
stitches, knotting each of her fingers

into her mother's blouse. Once together,  
they could be conjoined, solid.

Still, she thinks, someone will break  
the pose. Yes, she knows,

*something has to give –*

### MOTHER (III)

She remembers posing, everyone saying  
*hold still, hold still*. Grandmother's hand.

She had been busy playing dolls –  
always a baby under her arm,

a blanket, comb, small pillow  
in her clutch. It is no surprise then,

that, though you know it is not there, you see

a fourth daughter, a baby,  
held in the girl's folded arms.

Her grandmother died in the night.  
They were prepared. But hours before,

as they were leaving, the girl yelled,  
*Wait!* ran back down the hall, alone,

slowed as she approached the bed.  
Looking down she saw a small,

wrinkled face. Slowly, slowly, she lowered  
her head to give her grandmother a kiss.

## BALLET LESSON

One hand on the bar,  
the students prepare:  
first position, breath,  
second position.

To a count of eight,  
they push a pointed  
toe forward, drag back  
a slow semi-circle.

The day weighs heavy  
on their outstretched arms.

Ah, the teacher says,  
*une petite histoire.*



## DIPTYCH OF TWO UNMOVING TRAINS

### I.

The museum is damp, rain  
blown in with every tourist.  
We climb inside the model train,  
close the door. It's still in here,  
no coffee sloshes, spilling over  
to a gaining rhythm. It's quiet,  
time's button pressed on the chugging  
and the wheezing and the "all aboard."  
The air, too, is empty: no manure  
tracked in by a girl walking three long  
miles along a gravel road to catch  
this train into the city – her first  
weekend adventure, she stared so hard  
out the window, left a fog  
where her mouth had been.

No, no girl. Only now and damp.  
The wet is your umbrella  
dripping at my feet, the tickle is the  
velvet seat against my back, skin exposed  
where my shirt has crumpled up.

## II.

At the Toronto airport, departures,  
fast food is served inside a train car facade.

We are stoic, fists holding  
dripping hamburgers. We exchange  
stories of lost luggage; a magazine  
pokes from your bag, my car keys  
splay on the table.

Authenticity comes through metaphor:  
we know it is time to say goodbye  
because we sit, staring, in a faux  
unmoving train car.

## FIVE SEVEN FIVE

Do not say what it is like, say  
what it is. Do not describe  
the rain as a wet pitter-patter.  
It is rain; everyone will know  
how wet, how pitter-patter.

Do not ask me to see  
what I cannot. I do not want  
the moon as a white plate;  
I want the moon, and  
I want the white plate.  
Sit here for a moment,  
I will show you how –

take the word Love. I will not  
stretch my arms to show how much  
(I have not caught a fish). I will not  
describe the planets, flowers. These things  
are measurable, you see, comparable.

## A POMEGRANATE IS A PICTURE OF A POMEGRANATE

There will never be a time  
when you lean back in your chair, full  
from the riches of this fruit.

Still, when you see it – each shade of red  
glistening, as if chosen by Cézanne himself –  
you may want to make a few approaches.

First, cut the pomegranate in half;  
take one piece in each hand and squeeze  
as if you want to make a fist  
and would, if not for this mortal weight.

Then, use your fingertips  
to pluck out each seed,  
suck the small bursts of juice, spit  
whitened pits into a paper towel.

Finally, tear the membrane from the skin  
until the white shell, like bones,  
lies on the plate: a record of fruit.

You see? A pomegranate is not  
a paper towel filled with dry sucked seeds.  
You cannot push it, whole, down your hollow throat.  
This fruit tastes like hunger,  
like a person getting farther away.

## Notes

“Diptych of the Whole World”: The opening quotation of this section is from “Meditation at Lagunitas” in Hass, Robert. *Praise*. New York: Ecco, 1979.

“On the Train”: The opening quotation is from “Journey” in Page, P.K.. *Planet Earth*. Erin, Ontario: The Porcupine’s Quill, 2002.

“The Story of Anna H”: The speaker in the poem suffers from a rare combination of neurological disorders including forms of alexia and anomia. She can write but cannot read what she has written; she can identify letters and colours, but not words and objects. A professional pianist, she lost the ability to read music, but was able to rearrange music in her head and play many songs by heart. Dr. Oliver Sacks chronicled her case in an article in *The New Yorker* (October 7, 2002), “The Case of Anna H..” All italics in the poem are her words, as recorded by Dr. Sacks. I have taken liberties with every other aspect of her story; all of the character details and events and emotions are my own invention. The first line of the poem is after the first line of the 14<sup>th</sup> sonnet in “Contradictions: Tracking Poems” from Rich, Adrienne. *Your Native Land Your Life*. New York: Norton, 1986.

“When You Look at the Picture You do Not See”: The opening quotation of this section is from Shields, Carol. *The Stone Diaries*. Toronto: Random House, 1993.

“When You Look at the Picture You do Not See”: Though he had never laid eyes on the great beast, Albrecht Durer’s drawing, “The Rhinoceros,” was the definitive diagram of the rhinoceros in 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany. The drawing now hangs in the British Museum.