

ACTS OF OBSERVANCE:

Mending the Broken Spirit,  
Nurturing the Unrepentant Heart

by

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## Abstract

Herein is contained:

An acknowledgment of that illusive, illusory and illuminating (some say skittish) expectation which I designate "impossible hope," and its usefulness in rendering the unbearableness of life bearable, the untenable tenable and the unthinkable permissible.

An account of the author's physical, intellectual, semiotic, semantic and emotional struggles and those of several of her friends.

An examination of the confessional as an inherent aspect of autobiography; yet, not inhibitory of creative, contradictory, farcical and fantastical potentialities.

A collection of prose poems of the author's own making which seek to write sound, breath and body into autobiographical narrative.

An argument in favour of recognizing the physicality of writing and of thinking vs. the myth of the disembodied scholar.

A discussion of the objectification of the female sex and of female desire, and the increasingly ambiguous manner in which those whelped by and weaned from more traditional and conservative feminist theory, interpret these two.

A plea for the incorporation of critically subjective autobiography not only into the curriculum, but into the personal praxis of pedagogues.

An account of writing as a potential site for reclamation; a process whereby we might better survive the inevitability of loss.

An explanation of the author's writing process, particularly as it regards experiential prose-poetry.

A further and generally loving tribute to "impossible hope" and the sisyphian nature of living and writing.

*"You may depend upon my bare word, reader, without any further security, that I could wish this offspring of my brain were as ingenious, sprightly, and accomplished as yourself could desire; but the mischief of it is, nature will have its course: every production must resemble its author . . ." (Cervantes, 1605, p. 17)*

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Gareth Morley, who helped me wrestle the text into the accepted format.

## **Impossible Hope: (No) Escape from Tartarus and the Fifty-Headed (Non) Solution**

One morning K. felt much fresher and more resilient than usual. Thoughts of the Court hardly intruded at all; or when they did, it seemed as if it would be easy enough to get a purchase on this immeasurably vast organism by means of some hidden lever which admittedly he would first have to grope for in the dark; but that then it would be child's play to grasp it, uproot the whole thing, and shatter it. (Kafka, 1937, p.310)

This work is born of impossible hope. It lies somewhere at the bottom of my being. It exists even though, or perhaps only because, it is entirely impossible. Impossible hope gives me a reason to live, to continue to seek an illusion to live by, without which living itself would become impossible. Rare mornings I too believe in a hidden lever, a key. Most, I doggedly pursue it, not believing even for a moment that it is there, yet needing the illusion (and the illusion recognized as such), in order to be willing to live that morning at all.

This work is born of ambivalence and the pain of that ambivalence. *This* morning, I woke mired more deeply than usual in that particular wilderness. I regretted. I regretted *everything*. It seems I have chosen a stereotypical and vaguely humiliating profession (teaching), am studying in the most facile of disciplines (education), and have chosen to write within an area (autobiography) which makes me fear my reputation for cynicism may be replaced with one more synonymous with pop-psych aficionado - read "flake".

This work is born of despair, a despair which leaves me dry eyed; which may as well be put to some use.

I now acknowledge that hope, despair and ambivalence inform my intellectual pursuits. You will notice that these three describe emotional states; I am a woman after all.

## The Quality of (My) Despair

When ghosts descend to Tartarus, the main entrance to which lies in a grove of black poplars beside the Ocean stream, each is supplied by pious relatives with a coin laid under the tongue of its corpse. They are thus able to pay Charon, the miser who ferries them in a crazy boat across the Styx. This hateful river bounds Tartarus on the western side, and has for its tributaries Acheron, Phlegethon, Cocytus, Aornis and Lethe. Penniless ghosts must wait for ever on the near bank; unless they have evaded Hermes, their conductor, and crept down by a back entrance . . . (Graves, 1955, p.120)

I arrived in the usual manner. Yet the necessary liaison which preceded me was both unusual and unforgivable. I was a skeleton in several closets even before I was born. I was not granted a coin. My tongue has always flapped uncontrollably, missing that foundation, that golden touchstone - the essential bribe by which life is made more bearable. I wait, but not patiently. I explore each tributary, each possibility. I delude myself. I see the dog Cerberus, one hundred eyes, waiting on the other side and know he waits for me. If I (ever) reach that far side, he will most certainly devour me.

Styx ("hated") . . . the waters of which were supposed to be deadly poison. . . Acheron ("stream of woe") and Cocytus ("wailing") . . . fanciful names to describe the misery of death. Aornis ("birdless") . . . Lethe means "forgetfulness;" . . . Phlegethon ("burning") refers to the custom of cremation but also, perhaps, to the theory that sinners were burned in streams of lava. (Graves, 1955, p. 124)

**Acheron** is a stream which requires tight-lipped, putty-faced forbearance. It is the despair on which repression feeds and depression depends. Acheron is quiet and slow-moving, its current strong and composed. Along with Aornis, it is the stream stoics find most companionable.

## Achiron

the door is open the boat is gone the child is ill somewhere in the  
 backbreaking tipsiness a sedate building a pebble of calm determination  
 meadow root joy piglet of the cosmos dash your head against the cobblestones  
 dance the jig of the dying laugh with the angels the aftermath is dung feces  
 high manure tea bluenose redemption you have something to say whisper it

### the pale holler rebounds

is it possible that the zoroastrian baby is more pliable less spotted than the christ child  
 purple with the cold of a pagan equinox the burning dung comforts quiets pre-supposes  
 latitude that only exists within the manger of solipsism its orange glowing moment  
 faint transitory fallen star follow it to the bowels of the earth magma glows there the  
 hell source essential incinerator of all that is furred monsters of burr-ridden solitude of  
 general incompetence of large green eyes and cocked brows whistle with the time before  
 sight and suggest nothing missed or gained useless appendages shallow graves victorian  
 horror so properly missed repress the white enamel of domesticity unplug the car  
 swallow the clocks tick sallow films splattered with polyester and gore never let the  
 rockinghorse escape the painted dish oozes roses generous pink rivers its inner circle as  
 pale as the corpse that yesterday investigators found to be lacking

the deadpan moment when the dross is scraped from the bottom of the petri dish when  
 the clean meadow exudes sun and your intake of meadow air takes your breath away  
 ground earth tilth sod peruse the fishes damage the corners of my mind's eye gelatinous  
 friendship built on the fluids of our minutes together scratch my back and take your  
 time the calendar scoops up days and wrestles with hefty weeks reduce reduce reduce  
 whose baby dares whimper at the threat of intellectual impotence shadow of  
 manslaughter dream of days aftermath of killing sadly over beneath sandy blankets  
 lakeside artifacts plastic dolls of inhuman proportions hurry the day has begun although  
 the night lurks on its edge and whispers purple numbers seconds of dawn and all

teutonic pabulum apricot dream of gender of appetite of judgment whipped pies salad  
 oil lubricants what life what hell what heaven dare we suggest that for all its beauty  
 it's hardly worth the detritus the tomorrow the toothless grin of absolution pale grey  
 rain wrinkles the face of my love snake bites its tail chicken eats offal its slaughtered  
 children dog chases its own in the green spring afternoon before sadness browns the  
 landscape and sharpens the lines with its wit

shield of vision antagonish absence of permanent sound violet cantilever frailty of mice  
 colour of wound deep almost fresh satin makeshift blank pocket of sky disaster checkered  
 light nasty as the fare the wells within a mounting conspiratorial moment jackhammer  
 black flies blue bottles schedules of deaths and near missis cross eyed lovers damp with  
 old white and smell seek fate angrily deem yesterday godless mannerless genderless  
 palms stretch coldly broken limbs jubilation of child if green wept aloud yelped like a dog  
 cried like rabbit grendel lest we forget how much anger can a body house deciduous  
 moment barren now sudden leaves narrow dancing squirrels on a green hill dung straw  
 huts liquid blue of high sky cerebral omissions droop eyes embrace rest tomorrow a new  
 delicacy today totems of need symbols geriatric memory loss ten thousand dying blind  
 men hands shake

douse it with quiet light procession promenade suggestion of curfew jealous moment  
 twitch melody testicles where science meets intrepid specimen host sugary jug of  
 precarious stuffing leaks sucking sounds dirtied feet silhouette yesterday's porch legs of  
 plumpest orange no one dares tear wings off flies now

**the song of quiet falling**

dawn of a new ache tractor trailer icy mountain road crow city seagull barely breathed  
 the windy tunnel carries absences and palms green eyes wrong-sided philodendron aralia  
 fades into white walls winter driftwood with its curves gift in the midst of questions  
 bones of a sparrow collapsed by the breeze wanders colours the moment topaz that small  
 hope curled in a trembling finger tip grey womb turned in upon itself slate of heaven  
 marionettes ludicrous mouthings smirk at the divided fur in the blind circle follow  
 exorcise yellow knots and tangles the ear aches uncharted territory maps locus  
 parchment stretches to never promise of nothing left unsaid

i am tired of your surreptitious jingle your bugle of duplicity your electric ear the anti-  
 virus of equanimity it will never develop its viral counterpart nor any semblance of  
 predictability for the viral night is long and the viral kiss is binding sorrow not as those  
 who have no rope swaying from some high place almost gone the pang of regret sweet  
 intense gone now deliver us from our enemies ash blackens my eyes blood fills every  
 orifice dries plugs deadens nightmare begins again again even in the midst of the  
 mildewed twilight nonsense formaldehyde

swell drops tender muscle bulge hollow ventilate orchids huge and lilac coloured breathe  
 from the tops of columns inhale whatever passes smother in plum blossoms vine  
 entangled ankles raven hair morning glory enmeshed in bodies minerals several dotted  
 lines proceed toward the yellow mark things almost alive perch there dwelling place of  
 heavy ochre air grey greens rabbit glassy eyed huge aged teeth motionless ominous grasses  
 withered standing still fields of abuse neglect stasis encrusted marsh of no hope walk  
 your sad circle lay down your head wish for closed eyes lily of the valley peered at  
 sallow

at my wondering age before creosote before creaking mind before hard edged generosity  
 beaches of diamonds end of the eighth world speckled brown stubborn desire rising tide  
 shadow incense the great disguise marked master piece peace please leave silence comes  
 down in oily droplets rainbow in the halting sun dubious resentment press board picket  
 fence coveted driveway summer ends

for whom the bell of diggety dig down the rabbit hole into the church of integral knock  
 knees various disturbances emulate laughter days of know not the ilk the bulk the  
 destitute hulk fleshy red snake emitting several poisons burst like bubbles on the carpet  
 dawn ambiance plasticity and gush thy kingdom come brokenhearted mutants of  
 proximity the vial has arrived the true wood about to fall on yesterday's ministry glitz  
 of blue pennant face of elvis shuffling americana over the throb neighboring televisions  
 sigh every day has its dog reluctant sailor cherry eyed beginning to droop

curious on line monstrosity masquerades salvages huge cones of insignificance crumples  
 its brow silent the purple beads recommence banks of the north saskatchewan clap the  
 chunk flatten and devour mumble incantations cucumber cloth devoid of white water of  
 indeterminate origins astro turf blue-toed feet and syllables disembodied head egg halved  
 and beaten down the promise forgotten dung couch grass brown with muá no virgins  
 anywhere song with a full mouth long spitting floor of ancient wood stories yellow  
 stove chest blind follower clay tablet covered in memory

emeritus treat us to thy divine blessing six-pack fivestar generous wealth of the worried  
 nebulosity nullity sordid facts walrus tusk finned ancestor sun comes into thorny  
 measures ridiculous means sally forth windmills await tribulation degradation fear of  
 white night solidarity compassion glands large boulders compete scientific analysis  
 knows no meaning cubed sugar coffee measured in

silvery light shadow of cigarette softly falls allure of the feathered head compassion  
 where all hate has failed black like the question mark in the latrine your comrade  
 hemorrhages chatters like a broken dick falsifies swaths of brown wood grace a thousand  
 shedding cats drift on the breeze lazy slow down pour fractions visions slow eatery of  
 the mind break it down leave no trace rose of salt cat sings celebrate yellow ribbon  
 frolics shiva treadmill agendas roll grey is thick soft heavy too long anywhere

the green leatherette smells of piss but no vinegar the smirk devoid of teeth and meaning  
 oily fringe of yellow eyes distant blue and dead a tooth for my lady who now has  
 twenty-nine of my own yellowing stumps in an olive box from the old whose country is  
 it anyway and whose teeth chatter independent of a head i hear the whistle of denial  
 spring to the chapped lips of resignation the hedge has been butchered three wishes and  
 your life is over

path of freya unique in her discomfiture dangled by fruit cake absence of golliwogs  
 signature of worms devolution ricepaper cornplant gestural differences subtleties of  
 mimicry articulation mere cleverness revised saturanal saturation point of no return  
 light weeks sandwiched between side steps jonquil narcissi the blue moon of battery  
 roaring conch shells rush at tossed sand seeping through moon's beams and frightened by  
 mounds mediocrity shallow sands frenetic whispers change promised not the change you  
 get silverado backstage shenanigans deliver us from rheum kiss of the toad ludicrous  
 those quiet moments that pitch like storm basement of days your mind a factory apron

splay of plastic peccadilloes feet webbed expectant tolerating nothing colour of heavy  
 lilac night burdened by boiling greens weighted down black smudge of resistance shackles  
 stick legs embossed blue insignia suffering jesus norton's page is airy and bright space  
 wrangling with inky puzzles thick smudge of tremble so small strident bent with the  
 sorrow of exactitude lord a' mercy the eider's downed riddles in the plucking of a left  
 hand on adjacent strings

greener than grey suffer the little monsters roll shrinking mind anniversary cake residue  
 green chalice split by blue life colour of hanging end of all pale and rusty tentacles  
 paddle prod trail empty lake lies lonely and relieved fresh sky whispers backlash breaks  
 its what you see at that last moment sucking on the remnants of your ebbing

**the ilk the bulk the destitute hulk**

stark out of gas again the same attempt two hundred miles of security foiled gone gritty  
 hunched trudge gloved hand over mouth around neck thick air no sunlight breath like a  
 host

this mantle of irritation the itch which can't be scratched flesh flummoxed raw with  
 dissatisfaction stippled to the disc of ugliness painted patented necessity as commodity  
 deprived monolith your greeks huge misogynists temples fading with each moment of  
 light or rain practice the song of quiet falling dismiss the grown sons of thunder's  
 destiny raisins crustaceans gardens dreamers with attachments devious mountain want  
 amongst plenitude paranoia bride groom and why not the stolen mango the lopped off  
 hand the tree in the wind of no mercy the wasp on the winds of change

noncommittal dominoes daguerreotypes lilac musings no not one it is the fundamental  
 but not the chosen pretend idiot lions unleashed lime golden moments of reparation the  
 cow jumped over the three thousand grandmothers name calling truncated foreshortened  
 shall we forestall the foreground gowns of tired mint suits of dusty gossamer bleak skies  
 black trees swelling brown abrasive potential foliage self justification of ongoing green

eyes open language modified twice straight straightened jealously guarded deciduous  
 fruit somnambulist denouement lichtenstein pop boom demons lovelorn tulips orange as  
 tangerine smell of malt swirling soft bowl of river clay dot simulacrum simplicity  
 burrows ill lit concrete faux brick decidedly uniform the eye that winked the black ship  
 navy's blue and yellow's light blotches of ochre red in the ale minutes desperate plight of  
 lilacs violets shrink cease to be mayapples blossom call distant voice over lines

despite gravity despite the sky's dome shaken drawn quartered plasticized despite  
 frowzy hills needle in the haystack hell screen daughter in flames ever before me the  
 wisdom we lose in the pursuit gold teeth glimmer vastness of a room mimics sky  
 moonlight faded pitted danced upon with flags space junk the pale holler rebounds run  
 from the reflection tin panel thunders an act written in concentric spirals backs gaze  
 into eyes do not see them nestled there

designate a number meaningless enough for your solitude chair of less how much loss  
 supersedes occult flowers retribution genealogy usurped thuggable return mushroom blue  
 those white tips roads of small rock curve collect demystify liar man wild with  
 inconstancy stupid with years energy profligacy return retract who bridges footpaths  
 narrowed to a perfect impossibility green juice leaves of wondering dismiss the georgics  
 display the deeds of a thoughtless vegetarian dance with pale bodies discuss fine points  
 huge swath of noise and callous discontent overturn the blue cup of morning green glass  
 of desire catapult whitethings rolling rollicking electrifying damaged goods transmission  
 fluids replete with dehydrant retardant huddle watch the world designify shrivel go  
 strong and numerous transform incontinence violin days over processed night

let this cup pass but nothing passes wrapped leaving on your own the past a  
 cheerless envelope seized sized warranted the sore patch the scabby one that  
 itches into the night the feminine hygiene aisle cinnamon and almond  
 spectral knowledge labeled pigeon-holed noticed away the walls of zion close in  
 homeless twice thick salt shift jerusalem beloved violence like the thin slice of  
 viola splayed spelunking for the bisexual center the squall's destiny bitter  
 spider the beaches are in disarray so much sickness and breath

## Colour Me Grey

I believe in grey, infinite shades of it. I believe in the evocative, that which cannot be named without being diminished. A concept caged in black and in white, a museum of truth, lives preserved, pickled, displayed, these do not move me. Because of this, the so-called fictional aspects of autobiography have never troubled me. It is impossible to erase the imprint of a self from a work regardless of the label attached to it. We are our "fictions" (our fantasies, delusions, sensations and stories), as much (or as little) as we are our "facts" (bodies, names, dates and points in time).

The traditional view of autobiography is that it represents a factual account of the life of the author. My (unexamined) definition of autobiography was that it was a very selective form of truth telling based on the author/subject's interpretation not only of events, but of their various emotional and intellectual states, actions and motives, as well those of the people that figured prominently in their lives. Autobiography as such, held limited interest to me as a reader, but none as a writer.

Autobiography as an art form open-ended enough to encompass fantasy, delusion, duplicity, the literal, partially literal, and the utterly non-literal was something I took for granted as implicit in other media. Yet I did not initially consider it a possibility in "autobiographical" writing. I do not think this oversight is based solely on personal stupidity. Western culture has traditionally looked at the written word as evidence, as truth, as legally binding. Both Judaism and Christianity have text as their foundation. Jehovah could have instructed Moses in a sacred dance, the movements of which symbolized the necessary shalls and shall-nots for Hebraic society. Instead, he gave Moses the ten commandments which Moses dutifully carved into two stone tablets. Jesus spoke, but once again his followers *wrote* down his words (or their mixture of remembered stories, wishful thinking and cultural interpretations and understanding of them). In fact, one of the most extreme statements regarding language and the belief in its power was written by a follower of Christ: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." (Jn. 1:1)

The standards by which most people judge autobiography is linked to our belief in the power of written language. Even within artistic and writing circles this standard prevails. It is the author's responsibility to attempt to be accurate and truthful and to be willing to defend their autobiographical and biographical writing on those grounds. This is not something demanded of other artists or of writers of poetry and fiction. Autobiography is judged almost solely by its content. An alteration in form arouses suspicion of a concomitant altering of reality and the truth supposedly contained in that reality, but the most heretical act remains to tamper with content(s).

This heresy was precisely what Gertrude Stein indulged in in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. First of all, Stein wrote about Alice as if she *were* Alice. But what produced the most negative reaction in her "subjects" was the way in which she played fast and loose with authenticity. She wrote about the many people she knew and had associated with during the years she spent in Paris. The book's critics, including many people she had written about, complained that she had misrepresented not only events, personalities and conversations, but their intellectual and artistic pretensions and development as well.

Jeanette Winterson, cites one such declamation published in the literary magazine *Transition* in 1935, one year after *The Autobiography* was published. She takes her essay title "Testimony Against Gertrude Stein" from the original "Testimony" . . . in *Transition*. It claimed, among other things, that,

. . . the book often lacks accuracy. . . she had no understanding of what really was happening around her. . . that the mutation of ideas beneath the surface of the more obvious contacts and clashes of personalities during that period escaped her entirely. . . and, as M. Matisse states, she has presented the epoch "without taste and without relation to reality." (Jolas cited in Winterson, 1995, p. 46)

The irony of this, of course, was that many of Stein's detractors were artists who championed various reinterpretations of reality in their own work. The Post Impressionists, for instance, in no way strove to create visual facsimiles of their subjects or subject matter. As Winterson points out,

Had anyone said to Matisse "I don't like that." or "Your painting is not a proper record of that house/fruit bowl/guitar," Matisse would have laughed in his face. Why then is Matisse complaining that Gertrude has not made a proper record of him? (1995, p. 51)

In *The Portrait of Alice B. Toklas*, Gertrude Stein used the "truth" interchangeably with partial truths and with convincing fictional depictions of the truth. This was not a case of bias, of showing oneself in a more favorable light; it was a conscious break from the tyranny of the literal and the illustrative in autobiography. It was a refusal "to accept that real people needed to be treated really." (Winterson, 1995, pp. 50, 51)

Most artists and writers are granted, what is agreed to be, an essential freedom; it is the freedom to journey below the surface, to examine and grapple with concepts, memory, emotion, aesthetics and creativity on many levels. A portrait artist is considered less an artist if their work is "simply" illustrative. It is not accurate, it is derivative, technically adept whilst spiritually bankrupt; it is a cosmetic treatment concerned only with appearances rather than the "essence" of the person. Why the double standard? Is a written biography or autobiography incapable of mystery, profundity and complexity? Need an "actual" life (vs. a fictional one) or a life lived (vs. a conceptualism) be restricted to surface treatment only?

## Casting the First Stone

"Confessional work completely embarrasses me," he said with another little laugh, a tic adopted during interviews, which inevitably make him nervous. "I've always been attracted to works . . . that allowed me to make art without what I felt was a burden of self-confession." (David Craven in interview with Simon Houpt, *Globe and Mail*, April Fool's, 2000)

The interview with (expatriate) Canadian painter, David Craven was published the beginning of April, 2000. I kept it because I felt he had expressed sentiments which echoed my own when it came to the confessional aspects of autobiography. It is now mid-June, 2000. In the past two and a half months I have attempted to take an honest look at so-called confessional autobiography. Could it be that in the midst of angst and schmalz there is something of value? Is it necessary for confessional autobiography to be cliché-ridden and sensationalist? Does it offend more than my sense of "good" taste and decency? Does it unnerve me and why?

I have never doubted that my personal imprint is on everything I do, yet although I never doubted it, I still spent almost a decade trying to erase the self from my work. I grew tired of the sound of my own voice and the obligation I felt to *use* my experiences to further my writing or visual work. It felt far too narrow and confining. Besides, I wanted to *live* my life; I wanted my life to be more than fodder for some obligatory art-beast of my own making.

Without my "self," I found I had nothing to say. After a few slight, purely aesthetic utterances, I spent seven years mute, silently (and with great frustration) seeking a method of speaking by which I did not speak. Having found no such method, I have begun to examine not only my motives for banishing my self while somehow trying to live (oh so quietly) within it, but to try to understand the many ways in which self and the unavoidable disclosure of self (which includes the disclosure of silence and absence) are made manifest in my writing. I have come to the conclusion that the "confessional" is inherent to any

work regardless of whether it is overtly autobiographical or not. It is only a matter of style and degree.

I do not think that my particular brand of silence is specific to me alone. Most people have grave doubts about the validity and value of their lives, ideas, imaginings and experiences. There is always an idea more brilliant, a need more desperate, a life more courageously led. We judge ourselves against an impossible hierarchy, in which only the extremes are valued. In trying to understand how I might dare speak (having less need and less right and less eloquence than others), I wrote the following . . .

first, ashamed to be born in sin, a woman, a white woman, then, ashamed to be human at all now, having resigned myself to my sin, my sex, my whiteness and humanness, knowing sin has many faces, it is no longer a crime for me to live (most of the time) as long as my eyes remain downcast, as long as i speak only of an other's need i struggle with some strange hierarchy there is always something sharper penetrating someone somewhere else how dare i speak of myself pity petty me this code of superlative crushes me

It has been necessary for me to do the obvious and acknowledge my "self" as a positive and vital element of my writing. Having said this, I do not define or confine that self to the literal and the quantifiable. My illusions, sensation, idiotic tendencies, aesthetic preferences and countless unspeakables and unfathomables are also the self that speaks. Because I have had very little difficulty embracing those aspects of self, I feel compelled to also explore (both intellectually and creatively), the (literal) personal element in my writing. I have come to the conclusion that an unwillingness to be honest (even if I feel that honesty is a rather slippery and relative thing) about my life and who I am, is to disallow myself a degree of personal vulnerability which says as much about my unwillingness to live life outside the safe compounds of my own making, as it does about modesty or the absence of narcissism.

This entire work could and may be labeled as an exercise in extreme self-indulgence. An examination of (my) "self" by my self (including a large portion of my own creative writing) is undeniably *self* centered. And what's wrong with self indulgence? Everything.

At least everything I have ever been taught. "Common decency" is based upon (at the very least) giving the illusion of self-denial. I have never developed the tools to defend my own selfishness.

I am the "adulteress." There is no doubt, I am guilty, caught in flagrante delicto. I am afraid. I wait for the stones to beat me senseless, silent, deep into the netherworld of scholarly ridicule, failure and obscurity. I stand alone. I speak alone. Yet out of my mouth come borrowed words, the words of an other woman's savior, "(S)he who has not sinned, let her cast the first stone."

To drink from **Lethe** is to drink the waters of forgetting. It is a numbness so extreme that the black hole of the past and the uniform grey of the present become opaque, solids tempered by the waters. With each drink the petrification process deepens, spreads. Lethe is surrounded by stones and stones becoming.

## Lethie

last month of last rub the belly that aches ruptures who sings in the crib of  
containment reconfigured by a knife long pale series of lines body becoming  
would i could hang my head pandas brand names jingles wide spheres  
luminous plastic eyes may your gew gaws be those that do not breathe

### **the blue light of heaven dissipates**

lop sided right angled sheep in the pasture rabbit hutch arthritic dog wood whittling  
solitude distiller of stereotypes dampner of wit tick tock of alpine clock desdama  
bingo daubers nailed hand blue cellophane smile hear it see it stretch and hold bone  
diary dream of pergolesi divas rags to wretches stratosphere of knives bladed destiny  
whirring motorized moment silent fumes clutch your throat descend pitter patter pat

outside musing crackers jack off mount like trojan hordes hard touched by life golom  
rears head power without conscience blood trails white serial tracts agony dependency  
who says the fridge is white white light settles like snow like scalp on kneecaps bony  
shoulder blades shadow puppets dance window pain low slopes blue evening tainted deep  
aqua colour of despair leafless austere the pink egg carton is filled with jewels i am  
hungry for earth

death by fibroid silvester shuddering sneeze of a feline dazzled fading sarcophagus ivory  
tale cool solidity takes you holds you momentarily say it gryphon literary theatre of  
swine dance to the gash may the redness enhance your song forget the nation state the  
sweating millions ant crawls across feathered arm make way bow politely forest flower  
eyes not quite and soft jitterbug sniper salvadore signature of ice fades now unholy  
frame

bobbing back saddle sore nettles and an empty sky wasps nests clean drained an orange  
 swallow that glistens oxalis hederax saxifraga defunctus i had a garden bells rang  
 eternally pink bees danced air colours of kelp magnificence sea dung splash of anger tear  
 drops in an ocean of circumstance hide the fowler will ensnare you hunter will blow  
 your brains predator will stalk maul and dismember you daily

bubbling hermaphroditic disc staples of pain itch not scream curse darlingest away  
 desperate dark weak secret squeeze back tears scuff a toe in the grit of pain's eye ear of  
 inequity legend of light roster of generosity shame of mothers morons too moves across  
 this cheap page ringworm rose bottom floater purple lanterns rosy lids did the  
 newfoundland that loved you haunt you dignify your dreams traffic whines saturday's  
 incompetents loose

the black syrup that pools in the gut and travels through the bloodstream bitterer than  
 bile it will not be my birth day on which the frosted cake is sacrificed somewhere in the  
 black a felon waits a dealmaker expires a virgin conspires and the blue light of heaven  
 dissipates

the sad sequestered monster mumbles on his arched and buckled back writhing with  
 inverted spikes and deliberately purple hangover the heels were too high and pointed but  
 the weapon met its mark he crumpled doubled up rolling amongst the almost solitude of  
 the streets fist of iron rusted now neon fogged windows scurrilous cats thin and  
 resourceful situate yourselves amongst us no hard and fast rules salamander slithering  
 wobbly suffering unchecked what would a body be emptied of its flesh on one side

dangling synonyms of lime light jargon of hopeful and heartless twelves satisfactory  
 dwindling circus of fright blank in its pink tomato cloud unicycled recycled odoriferous  
 sanctity inspired geraniums islands of mercy green and spreading sponge tragedians  
 mopping the ocean of innocence sultans of satirical splendour head of aches tongue of  
 cheeks the lord giveth the gaming table bless regress shoulder the tournament of minions  
 colossal pillar salt blinkered by god

twigging nixies dance of elves furlongs sandalled feet fawn dust callouses twiddle dee  
 dee dum gestured moments freak of oblivion saucer eyes i drink at the behest of royalty  
 again and again the human form the ivory gown translucence each black moment shiny  
 with sweat immerse me in grandeur thin green line swims away corridor grey with  
 recrimination air thick with tickle fear that sustains a neck grown thin

clear light of winter streaked and caked ignorance on the glass of knowing lime stalwart  
 purple spotted lion shakes hoary delimbed unspoken nominal germinal dust in sunlight  
 woodgrain dance of dimness shriveled fantasy yesterday's mushroom cloud lemon above  
 the bed froth and gold auricles clavicle shattered grandeur and ruin melon refrigerator  
 flee through the aquamarine door

nectar of yawning clematis ficus shrivels jaundiced brassica hissing tangle of compassion  
 forget azaleas fading seed heads bursting slow creep of brown willows weep wave  
 farewell piece of blue precise to cruel sun rises branches bend embrace replace dying flesh  
 wood grain messengers a different voice an adaptation

## bone diary

genevieve scarlet dresses bestower of tabloid autocracy lungs fill piece by piece sloughed  
 off slowly moistly shutting down giving up contractions expel the vile leaves limbless  
 organless shaking jelly twitch not long for release son of distress censorious gaol of your  
 own signified synopsis summarize ramble repeat redundancies watch yourself jalopy  
 jealousy immune to naught light curving slowly away red dot flashing yoo-hoo yahoo be  
 praised taxing emerald circumstances electric blue banana yellow cluster of glow the  
 murk resonates behind two tries for a quarter take the long dusty trip base and barren  
 plains of want

retrospective diseases challenging links of tinker toy real no its not aspidistras not  
 flying here past tense of passed is the soil's wound a refuge scope scope scope range the  
 hull of an intestine linked to love realm of the sovereign a coin a ruler a sole who's to  
 say jay fifty ways to leave jammering stab her race putrid light sing soft glow silent  
 pain dances on the head of stasis keeps you breaking but not

justice for none heaving pain and deprivation valuing lost articles of mundanity giggles  
 of jug seth nothing unusual permanent wobble refuses to stick tubes fears nothingness  
 chaperoned on a north star jasper sparkles new like nunavut like hope drain and  
 seething slush of life face over enormity and dungness chaparral texas south sun hot  
 density monstrosity i tire i beg the end of days baby one moment at home with the cat

doodle doodle abracadabra surely the fumes will envelop me the refuse hide my soul in its depths verily merrily stroll along windowless room of yesteryear shame degradation never complete toss the mediterranean dissolution disillusionment daredevil in pink tulle prepare ye the way of the sword the Ford torrid affair of the fart gestation whose fault green fingernails ragged mince barn door red with slaughter intrusion of sentiment hurrah the twitch is fed the cat dances a slow tortuous death thickens at the base of my gut must be expelled as if this morning with its blue glass were not and sun rather than pain takes my breath throws it away gives me moment suspended in sharpness

jimmy jive jelly-eating genesis jasper always jasper silver threads among the bold let us be precious together huddle in dark herds smell of skank antibiotics analgesics narcotics the white world closes in clock watching belly watching finger crossing morphine dreams palmer polanski northern town roots of teeth sugared neon stumps black oozing yesterday a handsome face a dinner plate grease of monkeys yikes dikes a new morning of women

lopsided heres and theres justifying nothing nobility of savagery beauty of contemporary superior yesteryears giant sunblossom of blessing something beyond sensed anonymous nonentity justify pyrite dreams land of traffic and addiction wheeled in a chair of nourishment blandishment baptized in a sea of swine sorely missed pettiness crocodile tears call of the rectum sex and shit together unclean uncleanable child of cheeks lover of rocks and toothy miracles plaster paint pressboard and nothing treading on the toes of a nightmare

tied and twisted ligated loss of rite of passage stunned look in your small eye hearts piled and cracked mountain of red where is clarice morphine help us satisfied mint green cannibals trapped in rows trapped in white coats the remains of seven elephants live in a mass grave flesh deceived primeless significant boot pile sale of the universe

love and fishers shadows multiply cock crows guilty dance white light spectral noise  
 roseanna dreamed of obstacles pin forest chattering wax wings slithering garters scolding  
 jays symbol of want beam of liquid narcissus privileged to behold a hoax bedizened  
 octogenarian applause rushing breeze of almost daring besotted angel of deserving alibi  
 lullaby fortuitous error birth of the dangerous liaison hum crackle left of a concept  
 linguistic oddity oblong abyss spring up retaliate be

cables of restraint nightbirds romp jasmine creosote sinks like honey like vinegar ingenue  
 smile of christendom cry of those in flight from the samsonite box astigmatism tattooed  
 on the lime back of destiny sore moments fleshy head

doubt baby amongst rushes excess of pedestrians saffron air greco-roman  
 kneecaps come hither dithering landmine the dugout is chock full of guppies  
 the new earth is brown and smells of nonsense disappears through yesterdays  
 shadow into alice's beaming right eye glistens the neighbor whispers sweet and  
 low i am thine get away my beloved scat riposte strife chants mossy inert  
 ritual without longing chastise movable stasis prevails its all too goddamn  
 fast perish dance of longing behold turbulent curls whose depths lie unchecked  
 suspended sound fleeing water terror of ages moon in a jar silent globule  
 dreams of impregnation chin up sow bug curls ground beetle glistens hungry  
 slug stretches forest floor is quieter than any moment before or since freeway  
 whisper asphalt opens the roots of angels buried beneath its surface

### The Value of Valuable Experience

I had ulcerative colitis from 1991 to 1999. In 1997, while I was pregnant with my daughter, Leda, my condition took a great leap backward and I was placed on massive doses of steroids. By late 1998, the steroids were no longer controlling the ulcerative colitis and the side effects were so severe, that I was doubly ill. In the spring of 1999, I underwent the first of two surgeries.

Ulcerative colitis can be "cured" but only by completely removing the large intestine or colon. I was "cured" last spring. A second surgery in the fall ensured that my digestive system *appears* to function normally. I will always be on some form of medication. The "cure" is fraught with many potential difficulties and possible "complications." I live daily with constant and literal/corporeal reminders of this as well as the heightened awareness (and fear) that comes with a recognition that life is at this very moment fragile, unpredictable and fleeting. Many of the prose poems in *Lethe* were written during the latter part of my illness.

At any other time in history (not to mention, if I lived somewhere other than in the West) I would not be alive and neither would my daughter. Is it a gift? Is it a crime against nature? Is it chance alone, oblivious and resistant to meaning or value? I admit, I do not know.

The following are alternating excerpts, first, from a pamphlet recruiting volunteers for the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of Canada and, secondly, from a booklet titled "A Patient Handbook for the Ileoanal Reservoir Procedure," which I was given prior to surgery. I was struck by the cheerful boosterism of the former and the wording of the latter which was resolutely clinical and utterly lacking in emotive language, including the language of compassion. The two were juxtaposed in an effort to underline both the utter barrenness of the medical jargon and the vapid chin-up-isms used to inform and encourage the "tens of thousands of Canadian adults *fighting* IBD every day ." ("Volunteer - Join Our Team," 1999)

## VOLUNTEER

## JOIN OUR TEAM

Thousands of dedicated volunteers across Canada raise funds to invest in Canadian inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) research, and provide education and awareness programs in their communities.

*It is important to remember that digestion and absorption of nutrients takes place in the small bowel. Therefore, if there is a need for the removal of the large bowel because of disease, the normal digestive process is essentially unchanged.*

**Benefits of Volunteering. . .**

Meet new people and build friendships in your community.

*An ileostomy is an opening in the small bowel that is brought out to the skin as a stoma (a Greek word meaning "mouth"). Therefore when you look at your stoma you are actually seeing the inside of your bowel and because it has a good blood supply, it is red in color. The bowel is lined with mucous membrane and so the stoma is moist and shiny.*

**Have fun!!**

*Even though you knew from the beginning that you would have an ileostomy, it takes time to adjust to the presence of a stoma, and your altered bowel function and body image. It is normal to feel apprehensive about wearing an external pouch . . .*

**Cultivate business contacts.**

### *Changing The Appliance*

#### *Considerations:*

1. *Choose a time when the ileostomy is least active e.g.: before breakfast.*
2. *Choose a quiet, convenient place with good light and a mirror.*
3. *Collect and assemble all necessary equipment before removing the soiled pouch.  
The longer time spent without a pouch in place, the more likely that the ileostomy will start to function and pass stool.*

Provide hope to the tens of thousands of Canadian children and adults fighting IBD every day.

#### *Procedure:*

##### *To Change an Entire Appliance*

1. *Assemble all equipment;*
  - *Skin barrier wafer (ConvaTec Sur-Fit, or Durahesive with or without Convex-Fit if required)*
  - *Stoma measuring guide*
  - *Open end pouch and clamp (Sur-Fit)*
  - *Skin protective paste (Stomahesive)*
  - *Skin protective powder (Stomahesive)*
  - *Skin protective wipe (Alkare)*
  - *Adhesive remover wipe (Alkare)*
  - *Non-oily soap (Peri Wash II)*
  - *Garbage bag with twist tie*
  - *Scissors or seam ripper*
  - *Q-tips*

Contribute your knowledge and skills to Canada's largest IBD research investor.

2. *After emptying, remove the appliance by gently pressing the skin away from the appliance, starting at the top and using adhesive remover wipe if needed. Take the clamp from the bottom of the pouch before placing it in the garbage bag.*
3. *Inspect skin and stoma for signs of irritation and trauma. Minute amounts of bleeding are normal.*
4. *Measure the stoma carefully and trace shape on paper backing of the wafer.*
5. *Cut hole in wafer, add insert if needed for convexity and remove protective paper. Add paste to back of wafer if needed and set aside.*
6. *Shower or bathe. Wash the skin around stoma well. Rinse well and dry.*

Have fun!!

7. *Paint skin protective wipe on the skin for extra protection and let dry.*
8. *Remove remainder of paper backing from wafer - center over the stoma and press firmly onto skin, especially inside plastic ring with Q-tip. Add powder to any exposed skin.*
9. *Snap pouch on (plastic ring on wafer and plastic ring on pouch fit together).*
10. *Apply clamp to bottom of pouch.*
11. *Add cleaning cloths and soiled Q-tips to pouch in garbage bag and close with twist tie. Dispose of in covered garbage can.*

Add valuable experience to your resume.

*This final operation is the takedown or closure of the ileostomy. . . The two ends of the bowel, one leading from the stomach and one leading to the ileoanal pouch, are rejoined so that the stool will pass through the small bowel, the pouch, and out through the anus . . . the former stoma site is closed.*

Enjoy a sense of accomplishment from setting and meeting goals.

## **The Body and The Word: The Beginning**

in the beginning was the body and the body was with god but the body was not god the word was also in the beginning with god all things were made by body but without word was not anything made that was made in the body AND the word were life and the life was the light of (wo)men

(As a woman), I have come late to my body; to an appreciation of its wisdom, its pleasure, its knowing. I am learning that it has much to say if only I will listen. It was physical pain and physical suffering which finally brought me to the place of listening. Why wasn't it physical pleasure? Very early, I learned to despise my body, to limit its pleasure, to ignore its voice lest it lead me to "ruin." The double message of presenting my body (which never measured up) as a sight of an other's desire and the requisite extinguishing of my own desire (which would otherwise be my "undoing") made me long to be body-less. I forsook my body, even while simultaneously inhabiting it, and took (a sometimes dubious) refuge in my mind. I have lived in a world of words and ideas and abstractions and have loved them and continue to love them. But at times I have asked too much of words. I have been disappointed, bitter and mute. I have felt betrayed by language. All this time my body was speaking. I would not listen.

My body's voice has grown louder. I have dealt with illness for a decade. I confront bodily pain daily. I stop to listen, having little choice. I have come to love this hurt and broken body and in the midst of that coming to love, have rediscovered the body that feels pleasure, that feels at ease. I listen and I find I now have something to say. That something includes my body rather than precludes it.

Helene Cixous discusses the connection between language and the body as a concrete reality. It is not a metaphor. It is physiological. "Language is a translation. It speaks through the body. Each time we translate what we are in the process of thinking, it necessarily passes through our bodies." (1988, pp. 151,152)

I choose to work on the texts that "touch" me. I use the word deliberately because I believe there is a bodily relationship between reader and text. We work very close to the text, as close to the body of the text as possible; we work phonically, listening to the text, as well as graphically and typographically. (Helene Cixous, 1988, p. 148)

Cynthia Chambers writes:

Why is speaking from the flesh, and writing from the body, critical to my teaching? Because my memories are in my body. Because it is in and through my body that I remember and experience violence and pleasure. Because life is really lived with the body, perhaps more so than the mind. Because the body and mind are really one-being, not split at all. (1998a, p.24)

There are times when I wonder to what extent my own physical illness is linked to the way in which I have dealt with my own anguish. I have spent most of my life silent (not speaking what is most true and most vital).

i am a woman who has spoken too much, yet has been mute, while speaking too much and too long who is learning lessons (the hard way) at thirty-five, the same lessons she learned (the hard way) at eighteen i am a woman whose anger has never found a home who looks to the future who fears being turned into a pillar of salt otherwise i am a woman whose body bears the scars of her silence

The following is a poem by Gillian Patrick, a poet from New Westminster, B.C. Gillian has ulcerative colitis.

### Transformation

I  
 A city of signs, my body now,  
 A 24-hour gambling town  
 Whose concrete tension electrifies  
 In the grip of insidious light.  
 Cold and buzzing neon stamps,  
 Infused with yellow fingersnaps,  
 Of energy, do sneak and snarl, and mesmerize  
 My arteries, injecting blight, a rattling  
 Rush of illness to my collarbones.  
 Oh punisher. I am seized and flung by my own  
 Intestinal tissue, my furious bellowing  
 Cells offended, and sick of polite  
 Suppression. The rebels carry torches  
 Thick with twisted flames enormous  
 In the corrugated confines of my belly,  
 Scorching my animate walls, flattening  
 Me to sheets of narcotized sleep. I drift  
 Into regions of features consumed and kissed  
 In a struggle of mutual sacrifice, swallowing  
 Each other whole. Shards of lost  
 Nobility stick in my gut. My side  
 Is pierced, the bombast of my gassy pipe  
 A stench, unholy waters welling.

II  
 Comes the traitor. A swirl, a stain,  
 A Rorschach blot of black outspread  
 Propels my dreamy self from bed  
 To face the faceless stabber of the back.  
 A windmill, I, full tilt across  
 The inauthentic distance, my rage a stiff  
 And tumbling weapon. Intemperance lifts  
 Me paradoxically to peace. I float insensate,  
 Blank and doubled over, my name  
 Irrelevant. I never want to speak  
 Again. There is nothing to say, I keep  
 Saying unsaid, my silence an attack.  
 The paperiness of me, scudding along  
 My city streets, whipped to heights  
 By dusty gusts, to passing flights  
 That slip and curl beneath the weight  
 Of gravity, of serious opposition. I recognize  
 The pavement now. My slenderness, so new  
 And true, has pressurized me into view,  
 And concrete cannot miss me. Sighted  
 And determined, I know where I belong. (Unpublished manuscript, 1996)

Gillian:

### On Transformation

This poem was written after I left my husband Hank in February of 1996. The day following our separation, the colitis flared in the worst bout I have ever experienced. Though I had had several bouts before, and have had one since, none compares in intensity with that time. Similarly, nothing in my life compares with the difficulty of my decision to leave Hank, and the repercussions over the next year.

I've often thought about the possible connection between physical illness and emotional distress. The easy popular assumption nowadays seems to be that "stress" (loosely defined) "causes" illness. I haven't noticed enough consistency in my own experience for this observation to be strictly true. Perhaps, however, illness can be used as a way of disclosing about the self. Whatever are its true connections to the emotional life, sickness can be viewed metaphorically, as a launching pad for intimacy and disclosure. In other words, it's as though I'm being asked, "What do you see in this illness that is significant to you, that can illustrate about you?"

Colitis has certain distinctive characteristics. First of all, it's mysterious. No one fully understands it, and there's no cure (other than the removal of the colon). It's believed to be an autoimmune disease, meaning it belongs to the family of diseases in which the body attacks itself. The body can't distinguish an external enemy, but defines its own tissue (its own self) as enemy.

Another distinctive characteristic is that this warring goes on beneath the surface. For the most part, a person with chronic colitis can look healthy. I present a serene face to the world, and my body can appear undisturbed.

In full flare-up, however, colitis is all about the faulty process of filth. Food is ingested, but its breakdown founders at the intestinal tract. A form of starvation follows: Nutrients are not passed through the walls of the colon as they should be, but are held back with the waste and passed quickly out of the body. There is no longer discrimination between what is necessary and unnecessary, beneficial and harmful, useful and useless. All are jumbled together and considered as one.

It's a dirty illness. There is nothing remotely romantic about it, as the most basic of human protocols are violated. Gasses build up in the colon; they smell foul, and they're noisy - they disturb polite conversation. Diarrhea is central to a description of colitis, and at its worst, this diarrhea is so explosive that a person is virtually incontinent. I'm reduced to an infantile dependency: I soil myself; I'm weak and lie in bed a lot; my sleep is irregular through the night - I cry; my mother feeds me. I become smaller, more like a child, as I lose weight.

Everything leaks out of me silently, including water and blood: the circulatory fluids of life. Dehydration and anemia are other side effects of colitis. There is physical pain and a deterioration of energy; I am unable to work. Unproductive, non-contributing, dependent - it gradually becomes evident that I do suffer, and that attention must be paid.  
(Unpublished manuscript, 2000)

**Phlegethon**, river of perpetual burning. We receive our first baptism by fire in your rosy depths at adolescence. If we escape, we escape the pyre for the rotisserie, a slow dance on the live coals that line your banks. No matter how carefully, how slowly we dance, there are moments (perpetual moments) when we slip and are reimmersed.

## Phlegethon

in the midst of the cattle carrier in the sky the sons of pioneers bark and  
 howl for shade from the spreading tree before them inky oasis denial of all  
 circumstance sacrifice the doll's head for the beauty of her fleshy limbs  
 young cannibalistic fleet of foot in mouth delectable jaundiced nepotism  
 swimming boys old idiot drooling and groping in the turquoise square  
 creature of the deep baskers slick thick images curved pastel shapes shine in  
 their excess dominate capitulate shelter from the storm thin skin imprint of  
 blood backroom brawl lilt of a morning whistle wee count the red squares  
 count the blue

### between the moon and st. anthony

genevieve sequestered in yesterday's nook silent stream ridden conscience bubbles hope  
 whispers from behind the boil rancour chokes acrid breath staggers yellow rose of  
 tomorrow nettle today shark surfaces balks jump of the jolly neon beseech it bow before  
 the glow span of days furrowed musing night sky green of ah foam drips silent feet  
 world within worlds without end

jangling jehosaphat jasper always scintillating softer than a butter pat warm skin on  
 flesh place of distance object of devotion disciplined lover of tokens blackboard school of  
 black houses flesh walls blithe moments gravel shot in the dark kidneys fail and are  
 astonished homicidal loss beloved bone and ash in opaque swirling can dresser of dreams  
 child of dream and flesh scream

naked comes the preposition puff blue halfmoon of sleep chill moose maple leaf turtle  
 crawls to ecstasy burning beating trembling little bee feather light large end of the bottle  
 where thunder sports with the deep tangled head silken threads from fine ears shallow  
 decrepit hat deep black funnels between blond paws light speed of light accompanies the  
 too small door suspicion lime of yesterday frantically whispers well well chartreuse  
 pajamas tobacco trim

six months of sundays grey blue soaked in the tears of a thousand mother-in-laws i used to wonder just whose ego bruised emerald and saffron traveled in the purple ship the pea green sea is bile the daft green oysters of yesterday have blushed pink with despair surely the night will pass grey rocks boulders piled against the sea a beach of thimbles sky of richest did you mention the burning brick to the woman with the cleaners cap as she stood on the cusp of tomorrow with a billowing sunset perched on her shoulder

lime kiwi juice of orange larch poplar protestation the factory the red alert band saw sirens orange glow soothed into bitter dandelion cold of mount vernon lemon seeds rise percolate disinhabit east coterie of tropicals confined northern house sandalwood monkshood unsung geriatric singleness of mind overness elsewhere the tops of pine motionless spruce

we drank strong coffee ideas from the belly of the whale hail jonah a man with common sense shake it out the wake began in a yellow haze gamboling wraiths dancing on pinheads traveling thirdclass for the fun of it grey hovel used to house a black shape so deep it swallowed itself abandoned its home under the bridge where iron meets water and rust saturates abandon me not though i shrink before your eyes and shrivel to nothingness in your presence for the spirit is strong though the flesh be dandelions terracotta sun grit amplitude shadow of a long day hovers chartreuse banks river suffers me not will not quench thirst of the skinned one ever burning

silver shades of narcissus globules dangerous eagles running blue corridor of promise happy lane shield me from beyond detritus desire broken log shaft blight mildew sky quakes jump cuts somewhere furred monster whispers low subterranean quake quiver deliver

blessed be the idiot for she shall remain oblivious the back that bends and aches the eyes  
 that burn the smile that trembles on the edge of mist of madness deliver me from this  
 maelstrom this abyss where i have nested where i have roamed the savage rebuttal  
 denied jagged oaths on lollie's pop dream without end be gone foul nostril verdant  
 proboscis suffer the little dragoons to come unto me your heat rash will be expelled like  
 milkweed

jaguar nurse in a coma may the mixmaster be blessed gibberish smooth as batter the  
 virgin unbaked moon dogs baying at gethsemane packing rifles through the corridor of  
 flowers vinegar kiss wounds salted peppered gently braised three eagles flew taut with  
 urban excitement shasta daisies sense collide juggernaut gentile fleeces hung to dry shout  
 the essence of a postasy classrooms of seagulls fronds of palm goat

blue tendrils of fingers touch shamrock curl barbituric dreams of euripides cold steel  
 deliver me cave of longing whet my tongue watery life in my dismay i fled buried deep  
 the trees refuse to bend the breeze does not receive them anemones bog of misery thick  
 crescent of day through hanging trees

i am tired of life my bones cry out my tongue rots within me how insignificant the  
 corpses of sand beetles the minds of men the dance of the african honey bee apiarist  
 lemon sucker tweezers below the step is the red dog smelling of orange and of loneliness  
 worlds collide collusion of lost bowls shiny in the harsh fluorescent light another  
 dastardly day the pirate don dirk the pig and the poke the bun and the oven's yawning  
 mouth calling for sylvia and the nights cool breath on tomorrow's outing

**quake quiver deliver**

yellow jaybird flits between the moon and st. anthony sideburns love breath of maude  
 precious scud of louisa suffer me despise ruin ravish bricks of sand legless bayonets  
 penetrate the cliques of the unrighteous rest there smile lemon drop salvation speaks  
 through haberdashery through nylon socks through festering wounds through head in  
 hands exhaustion she lies peacefully wakes laughing here where the green table shrinks  
 and menaces

engulfed cavewomb abyss gentle silence draped on clean windows pearls lemons venus  
 elongated rejected crucified for the sake of prudence jurisprudence fiery hued hula  
 elephants unspeakable acts love verisimilitude jasper-hung trees deep avenue of  
 precarious slate unspoken need new improved lifted pressed gravity denied pissed sun  
 measures the width of a bare head

opalescent life of other that undulating bath that world bigger than worlds in every  
 sun-hued rain lonely covenant she sleeps dry eyed and mossy browed green lexicon wood  
 the shades of wooded years twice abandoned by the light night-worthiness heavenly  
 bricks of gold ink stains imminent death nothing and knowing not

shadow of delicacy mirrored in tin reversing moth moves blocks out sun final rays  
 shaggy dog an idea goes rain rain puddles spongy pristine frost bitten in every window  
 parking lot sinks slowly asphalt swallows and is swallowed flora turns on its own  
 rootedness lillith reigns the owl in the tree the woman in the wood hunters trudge  
 mutter venom breathings leaden crevices shoulder the go madonna winces and winks in  
 desperation

gasp of happiness floats barrage of kitchen brooms away out back again on the breath of a  
 funk cast your head upon the fathers it will return to your body washed refurbished  
 filled justify the letter on the side of the tawny bomb shelter it could be any harness the  
 wind you break shout for boy trample the twisted bodies of the living dead the ragged  
 rose the yellow banner the gilded horse mud mahound mornings the solemn oath  
 freeways cadillacs fingers that refuse marching drums walk away take the chartreuse  
 linen from the hall closet

generation of vipers those who think to thunder marble jets poinsettias mauve balcony  
 quiet rain circumstance blessed trees redeemers let the earth cover me muddied by sap  
 and showers tangle me in the roots of cedar hide me in the hollows of your magnificence  
 cover my head with living things mother arbutus cradle me in your twisted limbs  
 comfort me with your mute solidity terrify me with storms i am small i am needy let  
 the earth take me for i am earth readily without question acquiesce to touch frail  
 bounty

holly tree sways beckons with its thorns tender leaves divine clamouring over the aging  
 trellis oblivious roses pear tree leans pavement softens petunias shout too late the  
 hybrids perish lawn sickens returns to dust foundation quivers creak of the bedroom  
 window pieces sirens cannot compete walls huddle silence solace rubble

generations whistle whisper seeds of difficulty winds of saffron light deciduous dreams  
 obscurity hour of flame solace lashed by wind paralysis and the ache benign slop finds  
 its progeny rash white light of turtles aged and open coins drop seldom hollowly inside  
 the inside a child cries widgets small black secrets charred with anonymity carpet of  
 diamonds woven by twisted hands

deep sea of longed for never enough beware forced contagion play pleasure seeker  
monsters companions crooked style rushing breeze how to fundamentally is it years  
turmoil behind the green door dust settles is stirred foment liquid a dream but not only  
salvage the moment dawn rises misty rose extraneous primal twilight with its dimming  
sigh of resignation blue enamel smooth shapes

grapes cold and slightly off lean heavily on the silence of bound frogs whose  
only question remains mine whither why where the hell are you white pine  
green spectacle of chilly hope need to can't ripe for exploitation rush of words  
i weep pretend inscrutability while pink geese saunter and hilly fields swell  
with the sweat of the sky it never really fither and yon moan green wraith  
shiver weeping willow weep for me aye the tuba the double bass the saxophone  
will not hide me polished floor of bone will not echo smell of what is missing

## The Male Gaze, Gazing Back and Gazing With Awareness

I do not think that acknowledging the interrelationships between the body, intellect, emotions and spirit need be a search for some lost edenic state. Nor do I think it is, or should be, a distinctly feminine preoccupation. My writing voice is many things. One of those things is "woman." There is no need for me to present myself as virtuous or morally superior in order to say and say proudly that I write as a woman. It is a fact. It is a fragment. It is vital. It is beside the point. It is, and that is good.

I don't believe a man and woman are identical. The fact that men and women have the whole of humanity in common and that at the same time there is something slightly different, I consider a benediction. Our differences have to do with the way we experience pleasure, with our bodily experiences, which are not the same. Our different experiences necessarily leave different marks, different memories. The way we make love - because it isn't the same - produces different sensations and recollections. And these are transmitted through the text. I don't understand what people mean when they tell me these differences don't exist. I consider their belief censorious, repressive, deadly. **These differences are simply a small part or the entirety of a human being . . . I am only a woman, which is already a great deal.** (Helene Cixous, emphasis mine, 1988, p.151)

*And the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:12)*

### **Notes on Lingerie**

The Word made silk, the flesh  
made Word; deliriously  
to embellish and nourish what is  
after all so simple, the breast

And thigh, flat belly with frilled  
garter, delirious anguish of pink feet  
laced and laced in black: to frame  
and fire into mighty abstraction

The strength of spill of hair over strap,  
when it is after all so simple

Only flesh nourished in silk elaboration,  
pale eyes kohl-embellished, forty buttons  
enroute to a simple sweet thigh, even a cry  
delirious in the depth of flesh

As one hard-wired corset hits the floor,  
lost frame of a straight pale back,  
and diaphanous gauze goes wherever  
anguish goes, as a lipsticked mouth

Crushed among the sheets cries out, it is  
simple, too simple, give me the Word made silk (1998, p. 13)

*Notes on Lingerie*, was written by Vancouver poet, Lyle Neff. When I first read this poem, I was dismayed to find that it contained many of the stereotypical accessories of male sexual fantasy - the frilled garter, the (hard-wired) corset, diaphanous gauze, the lipsticked mouth etc. As a woman and a feminist I have reacted against the ubiquitous trappings of this fantasy, seeing them as disempowering women, forcing them into a trivialized, idealized, two-dimensional role. Yet I must also admit that I have seen many strong and confident women choose to sometimes share this fantasy and to walk in and out of stereotypical roles at will. This has led me to consider the possibility that an awareness of stereotypes and their implications, might just change those implications.

I have always believed that feminism is fundamentally about increased choices, about a richer, more varied, more thoughtful and dynamic life, not simply about a reversal of sexual symbols and roles which demand stasis and adherence to an anti-role. Can one write (as a man or as a woman) using the language of sexual cliché, and write intelligently and in ways that widen the range of choice and expression rather than continue to perpetuate the infantilization and diminution of women? Writing with awareness means that you are more, rather than less, responsible for what you write. At the same time, it opens up a space for play, for irony, for pointed and sometimes impolite questions.

Many writers in their twenties and thirties have a theoretical background which includes some understanding of feminism and feminist tenets. When they write using sexual and sensual clichés, they are aware that they are doing it. This awareness gives a whole new level of complexity to their work. They have a very different concept of sexual choice, one that is broader, richer and more ambiguous. It may include those stereotypes that many of us have fought to escape. It would seem that the need to be able to choose those stereotypes (amongst other things), use them and play with them, is now seen as a freedom more necessary than the necessity of escape and ideological reversal. I think we need to read their work within its contemporary context. I think that we need to read it differently and consider and strive to understand the spirit in which it is written. We need to be careful not to judge the presence, absence or level of oppression manifested in a work, based on a check-list approach, a surface inventory of a work's contents that reduces to black and white symbols which have become, or which are now perceived as, far less obvious, solid and irrevocable than they once were.

After reading *Notes on Lingerie* with some of these things in mind, I realized that the stereotype was cosmetic, a device not indicative of the essence of the poem. The poem was, in many ways, about the connections between body and language that I have been thinking about ("The Word made silk, the flesh made Word . . .") During the second reading, I noticed the almost painful tenderness of the poem, the loving celebration of the female body. This was not the body of an abstract Muse. Yes, the female body was a

conduit for desire and emotion, but it was a real body, a real woman and one who was beloved. After all, does being a "conduit" necessarily mean being a *mere* conduit? Do we not think of our lovers, female or male, as symbols of what we long for, as answers to *our* needs as well as their own? Do we not use our selves, and an image of ourselves in a similar way when we write autobiographically? I believe in language. I believe in desire. Women have had to fight for recognition that female desire even exists. Is it necessary to now deny the existence of positive and healthy male desire? Is this not a meaningless extension of a suffering we as women know only too well?

I readily acknowledge the struggles which women face socially and socio-economically. Yet, to become intellectually and creatively rigid, while perhaps an understandable response, is no solution to these struggles. My first twenty years were spent within a fundamentalist sect of Christianity - impossibly narrow, unreflective and intolerant of deviation. My intellectual and creative freedom are precious to me. I believe in the necessity of exercising them even when they (thought fully) transgress the current or established tenets of feminism. I am a feminist. This freedom to question (and "transgress") is integral to my view of feminism.

The evocative (vs. the literal) has always spoken most clearly and honestly to me. Poetry, in particular, has a great capacity to evoke. This evocative potential in poetry depends on symbols, archetypes, myths and abstraction. Perhaps there are symbols which need to be rediscovered, archetypes which need to be unearthed once more, myths that need to be reborn and abstractions that desperately need an additional interpretation, a feminine one. There are other aspects and tools of language which deserve recognition. Yet that does not render the evocative and symbolic unforgivably patriarchal and therefore unusable. These may be applied in specifically "masculine" ways as in *Notes on Lingerie*, yet this does not render them bereft of tenderness, complexity and intelligence. We should challenge one another continuously - as writers and thinkers as well as as women and men. Yet in our desperation to define and to consolidate our arguments, let us not be afraid to listen as well as to speak. Let us not forget to explore the remainder of our humanness

wherein which, although we may use different words and ways, we may find that we still speak the same language of the heart.

### **Photographing Me**

Take my picture. Preserve me.  
 Ignore my working parts -  
 My broad, bad-mannered feet,  
 Their balls asprawl like cowboys  
 In a bar; my monkey paws,  
 So occupied and ancient, poised  
 In mid-nitpick - and focus  
 On my idle rich, my  
 Eighteenth century mistress  
 Of a torso. Look, I say,  
 Examine me - and grab you  
 By your vacancies to stay you  
 By my side. I am ruthless  
 In my vanity. My  
 Waist, I say, my fluted  
 Spine, my shoulder blades like wings  
 Beneath which crouch the downy,  
 Duckling muscles; my bonbon skin,  
 So lingering; my navel  
 Like a drop of olive  
 Oil. Your glance must cradle  
 Me, must hold me tight against  
 Disintegration. Only  
 In the image am I safe, fenced  
 In by everlastingness.  
 My beauty is assured.  
 For death will come, fastening  
 Its grip in the long, slow squeeze  
 That pleats me like a folded  
 Fan whose splendour no one sees.  
 I will not again enchant.  
 Now I gleam in the dark;  
 Now I curl like a plant  
 Of white proportions. Have me  
 Snapped and tucked in your pocket  
 Now. I must know that you can see. (Unpublished manuscript, 1996)

Gillian Patrick has written a poem about being "watched" (or photographed), at her insistence, by her lover. Is this simply the writing of a woman socialized into seeing herself as an object of male desire? Does objectification and visual enticement necessarily exclude the woman, the human being? Does it always denigrate her? Is the eye and the primacy of the visual in Western culture exclusive of value? To re-examine and re-evaluate prevailing ways of being/seeing is healthy, necessary and valuable. Yet can we not see differently, see more clearly, more comprehensively but still allow our selves the look which titillates? In fact, perhaps allowing ourselves as women to see the seeing, to encourage or discourage it, to look back while being watched and to watch as well, is a way in which we might re-make the male gaze into a human one. This is Gillian's perspective:

### **On Photographing Me**

When I was younger - and this lasted into my twenties - I used to fear disappearing if I spoke too much. I had an image in my mind of words moving out of my mouth, above my head, and taking my essence with them. I think I felt (and I mean *felt* because this was obviously not a rational perception) that there were only so many words in me, only so much that I had to say, and if I said it all, that would be the end of me. There would be no more.

This poem, for reasons I'm not sure of, reminds me of that fear, as though it were written to counter it. I wanted someone I loved to establish an endlessness for me, to ensure that I wouldn't disappear. The glance of my lover, his observation of me, reinforced my own reality to me. If you are seen, you must be there.

Obviously a photograph is the glance frozen. But I don't understand it as objectifying. I see it as commemorative. The photograph holds me forever in one place as I was at that time, endows me with a certain immortality.

In some respects, what I wanted was simple. I wanted to be beautiful - or no, even more vain than that: I wanted whatever beauty I had to be noticed. I was afraid of dying unrecognized in this, my unseen beauty gone and no record of it. Physical beauty, the freshness of it, passes and - writing now - I feel again the sadness of that. I feel it often, and often want to hold onto it: I think this must be very common. The desire to record - to hold in time - is what makes me write.

I suppose my absorption with the physical and having others bestow meaning on me might be seen as a passive stance, and yet I don't experience it that way. Writing the poem, I felt aggressive in my demands - desperate yes, but yet with some power. The photograph-taking is entirely the opposite of objectification: not an attempt to put distance between the observed and the observer, but to unite them privately.

In a review of a group show at the Art Gallery of Ontario - *Girl as Covergirl*, Gillian MacKay describes the work of (Singapore born) American artist Su-en Wong. . .

Miniaturized, isolated and thrust into high relief against a theatrical backdrop of empty space, the figure strikes coy poses as if trying them out in front of a mirror. The public presentation of this type of private role-playing is immediately arresting. More unsettling is what appears at first glance to be the artist's complicity in acting out soft core pedophilic fantasies. In *Bright Yellow Painting with Squatting Girl*, 1999, she's a naked, vulnerable, pubescent figure in white ankle socks. . . in *Big Dark Painting with Girl in White Skate Gear*, 1999, she's a budding coquette in a short, flouncy skirt. These are not exactly rousing anthems of feminine agency, yet they don't succumb to objectification either. The artist stares out boldly from *Squatting Girl* and from *Buttercup-yellow Painting with Supergirl*, 1999, with an unmistakable air of irony and authorship. (*Globe and Mail*, June 24, 2000)

This bold stare, this awareness (hence irony) and confidence in her own authorship make it clear that Su-en Wong is manipulating stereotypes rather than being manipulated by them, or is she? The reviewer remains ambivalent. . . "I'm not sure what a psychotherapist would make of a woman who maintains that she's nobody's baby while acting like one. Still . . ." (June 24, 2000)

It is vital to go on questioning, questioning our selves and ourselves as women. This may be a truism, but it contains a *truth* which we forget over and over again with each collapse into a new form of orthodoxy. An attempt to go beyond the (hard fought and valuable) tenets of feminism need not be regressive. It need not undo the good that has been done. The work of Su-en Wong would seem to present a challenge to both patriarchy and mainstream feminism alike. Hers is a particular type of autobiographical technique, confrontational, naked, yet fully covered, vulnerable, yet fully in control, questioning

everyone, believing no one. I call it the "fuck you" school of autobiography. It is one of which I am particularly fond. It is true that to go beyond complacency and orthodoxy (no matter how progressive) may sometimes lead us in wrong-headed, dangerous and damaging directions. Yet it is essential to do so. There is no safety in safe thinking. Creativity demands a willingness to court healthy (and sometimes unhealthy) disorientation, a willingness to go beyond not only the smug confines of the status quo but also the current interests and priorities of the intelligentsia and the avant-garde.

It is important to remember that many of us in our twenties and thirties came of age (so to speak) fully conscious (theoretically speaking at least) of the objectification of women, the male gaze, the extreme emphasis on the visual in our culture, etc. It has affected the way we see and think about seeing. But we cannot stop looking now. I include another poem by Lyle Neff.

#### **Apostrophe to J. During Her Photo Shoot**

Why do so many women look like lions? And others  
Like knives, infants cruise liners, cameras? This lens,  
Lover, demands you don't look back, or look back  
Like it's not there, or look like you don't care

When that shutter snaps and the brightness flashes.  
Your's swept over by vision's river, the wash of it  
Is glacial and volcanic - loved object, rich subject,  
Did this male stare evolve so, slovenly-paced

Like an iceberg wandering, or did it erupt  
With a wild tech, conquering this eye, king  
Of the jungle of the senses? This devising of mirrors  
And magnetic film has fiercely enlarged man's eye;

Birtherd a chthonic pool with arms of metal and glass  
Can you see a cyborg virtue in it, a painless graft of halves?  
For the full height of vision takes a tall eyeball, lover,  
And a man looking close can't make himself small. (1998, p. 6)

Like *Photographing Me* by Gillian Patrick and the art of Su-en Wong (both produced with an intense awareness of the stereotypes they play with and their implications) a poem written by a young male poet also aware of the "male stare," female objectification ("loved object rich subject") and the role of culture and media in propagating this ("Why do so

many women look like lions. . .this eye, king of the jungle of the senses . . .") is a work of art that plays with cliché and stereotype knowingly. I would argue that this awareness gives the work of these artists, and many of their generation, an irony that lifts it far above accusations of capitulation to a female ideal, voluntary subjection to male ideals or, honest-hearted but wrong-headed misogyny. The level of sophistication and ambivalence at play (or work ) here is not regressive. It goes beyond the black and white conclusions of early feminism. I would argue that this is an important and necessary step toward complexity and depth - a social/artistic maturation process which offers much in the way of living, breathing insight, that builds on the past yet refuses to be in bondage to it.

## The Meaning of X

My grandmother wrote me a letter dated September 18, 1972. I have carried the letter with me through numerous moves. My grandmother left school in grade six. When she wrote the letter she was about seventy years old. If I evaluated her letter as a teacher I would probably point out that she does not practise the conventions of capitalization, spelling and punctuation (the only punctuation in the two-page letter is a dash), sentence structure, and paragraph development. Her penmanship is at times illegible. The letter rambles with references to family and weather and television and meals and the pet dog. If I were to evaluate my grandmother's letter with my teacher's red pencil, I might throw up my arms in dismay, but I treasure the letter because it sings with my grandmother's voice, even now more than a decade after her death, even as it sang the first time I read it . . . I hear my grandmother's voice in her letter, even now as I first heard it in 1972. I feel my grandmother's love in her letter, even now as I felt it in 1972. Writing with desire, not correct usage, fires good writing. My grandmother was a good writer. (Carl Leggo, "Tangled Lines: Nurturing Writers and Writing," Unpublished manuscript)

## The Meaning of X

Corner Brook  
September 18 1972

well Carl my son

I had to write ye a few lines its in the night now I am bad enough in the day I suppose ye are getting settled away by now we had a lovely day here today how is poor Kathy Wendy got her jacket come it is some nice she loves the school not a bit strange ye think she was going all the time she takes her dinner ye know what she takes tin of drink pack of chips cheesies bar comes home filled right up she bars herself in her room to learn her lessons you know theres nothing undone the only thing she dont stay up so long in the night I suppose poor Paul is all dried up by now I dont know if I told you that Jerry is going to St Johns Friday on the bus there is two or three of them going poor fellow Effie said she didnt like to keep him from everything he is coming back on Sunday I dont know what time he well get in but one of them got a sister there but he well be right up with ye and Willie your mother told him to go in and stay there on till ye comes he well see Sandy when he gets there first I guess she will go with him to show him where ye are to Fanny said she didnt see ye when she was away I guess that ye were out somewhere your mother and father was some glad when they got their letter and ye know your grandmother wasnt sad Ringo stays in where Wendy is learning her lesson in her room it wont be too long please God before ye will be home for a little while some good remember me to poor Kathy your mother takes her little walk same as usual so long

Nan xxxx (1999, p. 86)

*The Meaning of X* is a poem in B.C. poet, Carl Leggo's, second collection of poetry, *View From My Mother's House*. Based on a letter from his Nan (or grandmother), it is a fine example of how the autobiographical is replete with cultural meaning. "X" signifies many things. It is most obviously a mark of affection, a kiss delivered via the text. Yet it is also the mark of a woman who lived and wrote gossipy, loving letters to her grandson. In its incarnation as a poem, it has become the mark of the poet, of his personal history, family connections and his tender shaping of autobiography into art. Finally, "X" is the mark of a rich culture and cultural heritage. The language and pacing communicate with remarkable

alacrity a sense of time and tempo and the feel of a distinct community, its language, social habits and social ties.

This combination of personal, familial and social recognition is part of the reason autobiography needs to be valued as part of any educational curriculum. We have a tendency to view autobiographical work as being only about the self. Yet our selves do not develop in isolation. We are deeply affected by the culture and cultural memories and traditions which frame our experiences. Autobiography, leaving our mark, has the potential to be transformative not only on a personal level, but on a social level as well. Cynthia Chambers discusses the transformative aspect of autobiography for both pedagogues and learners in her article, *On Taking My Own (Love) Medicine: Memory Work in Writing and Pedagogy*.

Making the connections between the concrete events of one's own life and the shared cultural memories within which those events exist, and are eventually interpreted, is part of the transformative possibility of autobiographical writing for teachers. It enables us to examine our life writings as text, to see our lives part of something much larger than our private "selves," to connect in a deep way with communities and histories from which we may have always felt apart (of), or consciously have tried to remain apart (from). The self is a (kind of) history . . . (1998b, p.14)

Jerome Bruner in, *Self-Making and World-Making*, suggests that autobiography allows us not only to connect with our selves and our culture, but to construct them.

It becomes plain, as one observes this process of self-formation, that it is probably a mistake to conceive of Self as solo, as locked up inside one person's subjectivity, as hermetically sealed off. Rather, Self seems also to be intersubjective or "distributed" in the same way that one's knowledge is distributed beyond one's head to include the friends and colleagues to whom one has access, the notes one has filed, the books one has on one's shelves . . . autobiography (like the novel) involves not only the construction of self, but also a construction of one's culture . . . (1991, pp. 76, 77)

If one views individuals as "empty vessels" to be "filled," and education as the process of repudiating emptiness, the incorporation of autobiographical work into the curriculum is problematic. Learners should be discouraged from leaving any trace of their presence, an

unwelcome "X" marring the smooth exterior of hegemonic education and educational standards. *They* are to be marked by learning, and not learning by them.

Autobiography, the enscribing of the "X" into the faceless surface of "learning," is an act of procreation which begets much of what education has traditionally tried to diminish. Autobiography gives birth to a multiplicity of persons, voices, views, meanings and truths. It asks unanswerable questions. It is speculative. It begins from a place of subjectivity. Yet this place of subjectivity need not be the "impotent 'subjectivity'" (p. 123) discussed by David Jardine. "We become banished to a debilitating and immobilizing form of episodic 'individualism' as the last vestige of the Word. ('This is my opinion, this is my experience, but then, who is to say who is right? Each of us has his own perspective')." (1992, p.123)

Subjectivity can be a healthy, potent and critical method of seeking awareness and understanding. It can be a point from which we find ways to live within life and with it. It is not necessary, nor necessarily expedient, to colonize, control and conquer it. If one takes the view that curriculum is a living and dynamic entity, that its place is not outside of living, but an inseparable component of it, then autobiography is quite naturally the stuff of curriculum. And so is the body . . .

Those of us who have spent any time in the classrooms, or in families for that matter, are reminded that life is lived with the body. Classrooms and schools are filled with the noise, odor and perpetual movement of children's bodies - breathing, sweating, wiggling, bleeding bodies . . . Bodies are not absent in university classrooms either. Student bodies may be hungover, sleepy and angry, in desperate need of mating, but they are present. They may be deprived of motion and rest, activity and play, but they are well-enough schooled to sit for the lessons, we deliver. They may be seeking, leaking, signifying much of what is not spoken or even understood . . . (Chambers, 1998a, p. 23)

The inanity of ghettoizing the body, of limiting the recognition of its presence to physical education classes and biology texts while treating the mind as a disembodied entity, the empty vessel waiting to be filled is being questioned. There has been increasing attention to the body and bodily narrative in feminist texts. The male body, regardless of physical difference and cultural interpretation(s), is equally vital to the male experience. The body, in short, is an obvious and integral part of the human experience on both mundane and

sublime levels. Keeping this in mind, can we not de-compartmentalize curriculum and open a holistic space for the body and mind together? Autobiography is one way in which this can be done.

When I first began writing again, after years of silence, it was body I wrote of, and I wrote from a body, over seven months pregnant - so startlingly different that the transformation encompassed my world and the world of language in which I began to re-find my voice(s). I include then, my first poem, written during my pregnancy, a poem never entirely finished and polished to my satisfaction. I include it because of its sheer physicality, because it speaks so directly from the body, but also from a place of existential despair and spiritual longing.

the forest is thick and distant  
on the edge staggered  
but still is a woman

her desire a memory from a dark and fecund  
vein an unbroken line to an ooze before  
beginning her body shackled to the thing  
acquiesces and repeats a primordial litany  
with each milky droplet which issues unbidden  
from her corridor of want

the blue of the pond where she kneels  
in which she buries her tongue sticky  
with need is incandescent it enflames her  
she cradles herself in her own arms and rocks  
her way into her waiting womb she thinks  
of the forest thick and distant and longs  
to become that far darkness a womb of vast  
proportions engulfing her a million trees  
to sate her torrent of sap to cool  
her throbbing tongue

her desire both cloaks and strips  
her bare the fallow grasses whose  
fondle soothed her now hurl sharp seeds which  
pierce her she is driven out febrile  
hungry the woman weeps the woman sings  
as the breath of life ruts with death's rattle

*There are stories that the body remembers even when the rest of us forgets. (Chambers, 1998a, p. 24)*

We cannot separate our body from our living and learning. Neither should we as pedagogues separate our philosophy of teaching and curriculum from personal practice. I reached a point as a teacher of writing when I could not in good conscience refuse to return the openness, the sharing of a more complete self, which I was asking for and receiving from students. I could not present myself as the objective voice of reason and proper technique, the maintainer of standards, kind but officious, patient but impenetrable. How could I continue to suggest that students attempt to do what I was completely unwilling to attempt myself? When does a pedagogue become a hypocrite and a voyeur?

Cynthia Chambers in *On Taking My Own (Love) Medicine: Memory Work in Writing and Pedagogy*, explains how she came to the point of believing and acting on the belief that "the practitioner begins with practice on herself." (1998b, p. 17)

. . . through my desire to help and please others I had unwittingly unleashed powers and effects I was ill-prepared to deal with in myself or others . . . Over the next few years, I continued to be haunted by the letters and words of former students on whom I or my pedagogy had had an effect, as well as by the question of my pedagogic responsibility, if any, to them and their lives . . . I had set in motion events which would eventually force me to begin the difficult work facing the/my self in acts of remembering, of (re-)creating a pedagogy where the practitioner begins with the practice on her self. (1998b, pp. 16, 17)

I have never been able to successfully compartmentalize my life - to cultivate a work persona which I can turn off and on at will, to nurture a scholarly persona which rises above day to day mundanities and bodily needs, to be a mother, a daughter or a lover and to build a moat of distance and safety between them. Although I accept and honour other ways of living, I cannot live or teach outside my own vision - chaotic, fragmented but somehow made whole by an intangible which I cannot describe.

I believe that language, like curriculum, is alive. It mutates in response to cultural and personal influences and needs. We need to think deeply about language, to value it, to try to understand the changes within it and to also question them. For I am not advocating change for its own sake. Yet there is no reason why writing cannot be a process of creative discovery and innovation, both in regards to "acceptable" form and "acceptable" content. So often it has been reduced to an elaborate version of fill-in-the-blanks. The tools and traditions of writing have their place. They can be immensely useful, but as an end in themselves, and a dead end at that, they can become a source of deprivation, a series of rules and methods by which diverse and interesting people churn out homogeneous, thoroughly dull and predictable slop.

In teaching and in teaching education, we often leave the world and our astonishment and difficulty with it, our imagination and memory, our bodies and our hearts, outside the classroom door. Yet, writing offers a way for me to bring my life and my students' lives - as well as the world that sustains all of our lives - into the classroom. Writing is one way to find, articulate and create a curriculum about which we are passionate and, yet remain composed in our passion. Writing offers a way to open up to the question of how we can live well together so that life can go on - not just for us but for all living things. Writing is a way, and not necessarily the only way, to open up the word and the world, and our lives within that world for attention, discussion, understanding, re-imagining and re-creating, as well as for a profound acceptance of what is. It is true that there is much about life that is both unteachable and ineffable, And yet composition is one way we can both compose our lives and gain composure as we are living those lives - right now - in this place - with others. (Chambers, 1998a, p. 26)

My struggle with autobiography and writing and its relation to pedagogy has a very direct connection with my experiences in school. I remember that feeling of dread when we were asked to write (actually to regurgitate), to answer endless and didactic questions about stories and novels which transformed living texts into instruments of measurement and intellectual closure. I remember being asked to write about what I wanted to 'be,' as if I did not yet exist. I began getting "sick" in about the sixth grade. In fact, I was physically ill, but what I failed to recognize was that I was in some way also ill with dread and boredom. By the time I reached high school, I was missing days and sometimes weeks of school. This was not entirely the fault of the education system, but it was partly

to blame. I found no respite there. I resented the institutional mutilation of language and literature, two things I loved deeply, and I fought with my silence and my absence to keep that love intact. I vowed never to take post-secondary English, and foolishly or not, kept that vow. I limped, no crawled, toward graduation and was only able to enter university as a mature student.

As an instructor of English in the Adult Basic Education department of a local college, I have often seen that dread, that frustration, defiance and defeat reflected in the faces of students. Many come with a broken spirit, they present themselves to be marked by education. They have given up. "Give me my mark, so that society will recognize me and reward me. I will be whatever I must be and say whatever I must say, in whatever way I must say it, to 'succeed.'" Most do not understand that their hope lies in making *their* mark, placing their "X" in the places and moments of their choosing and then valuing its presence and thereby their own.

Autobiographical writing/marking, in all its literal and non-literal manifestations, has the potential as curriculum to allow us to be engaged and engage one another in diverse and living dialogue, one in which the heart still beats. As a pedagogue, I have a responsibility to make "The Meaning of X," (the necessity of leaving a mark, rather than simply being marked) a definite and acknowledged part of my praxis. I need to open a window to desire so that what truly matters can enter and enliven writing, mine as well as that of (other) learners. As Cynthia Chambers so eloquently puts it . . .

The disciplined practice of writing, the work of putting one word after the other onto the page is another way of discovering what really matters. In teaching, my challenge is to weave these matters into the curriculum of my classes, to make them part of what matters as a whole - personally and collectively - for students and teachers, for us all. I must remember always that the curriculum is the world and that teaching is about making sense of the world and learning to live well in it, with it and on it, and remember to let the world be - and ourselves be together in it. (1998a, p. 27)

## The Catch in the Throat of Longing

The inevitability of loss does not in any way prepare us for the violence of it. Writing of loss is a way of reclaiming one's life, of coming to grips with deep and sudden and excruciating absences. It is a powerful method by which we can reincorporate the naturalness, necessity and rhythm of both psychological and physical deaths into our living.

In the past few years, I have experienced loss on many levels. This includes the permanent loss (or deaths) of three I love dearly. We are primed for happiness and gain, pointed to it, told to use it as our guiding star, to chart our course by it. We are not told of the mute paralysis that accompanies our deepest losses, of the long periods of rebuilding, the moments of insight, healing, hope and utter despair. We see happiness as something which should be constant and ever-present and bereavement and privation as temporary and exceptional. We are not prepared for the inevitable reoccurrences of loss.

Gillian Patrick has written a poem, *Five to Midnight*, which discusses "original" loss, an inevitable rite of passage in which for the first time grief is internalized. She writes of her nephew, "Unhappiness never smelled so pure," until, "A curious adult grief aligned his face . . . his silence - The bitter squeeze of resignation." This "certainty of sadness," the necessity of living with irrevocable loss is something we come to at a very early age, we recognize it in the eyes of children, sometimes we remember when it began within us. Yet, we live our lives as if losses were dirty secrets, or worse, fodder for tabloid television. We cannot value them. Someone else has always suffered more spectacularly. We refuse to recognize them as our selves.

## Five to Midnight

After my nephew was born,  
 He slept where the piano is now.  
 His father hung kites on the wall,  
 Draping their tails in flightful curves, and,  
 Above the crib, mobiles sworn  
 To secrecy. For weeks, the sound of  
 The baby's cry would wake us all  
 At five to midnight. His unformed words  
 Infused the house like the scent  
 Of heavy lilies. Unhappiness  
 Never smelled so pure. Just hunger.  
 Maybe wetness or a painful gas.  
 Jokingly, we said, "We can't  
 Imagine how he knows, napping as  
 He is, the time." What he longed for  
 Was so regular. We couldn't ask  
 Him to explain, so our call  
 At five to midnight always puzzled  
 Us. I could not be serious  
 With his sorrow - not till he was three.  
 He left us then. In the small,  
 Grey car, he murmured, "No new house," and  
 Yet submitted. A curious,  
 Adult grief realigned his face. We  
 Saw that he had tears unlike  
 A child's, and I was pierced to witness  
 Their arrival, and his silence -  
 The bitter squeeze of resignation.  
*Accustom thyself. The kite  
 That flew above your bed didn't, as  
 You thought, leap and make alliance  
 With the wind. Your initiation  
 Rite is old.* I remembered  
 Mine, a story told to me, of love  
 Removed when I was in the crib -  
 Unwillingly removed, but so slight  
 A consolation tempers  
 Nothing. I knew the certainty of  
 Sadness, and did, as others did,  
 My crying, somewhere close to midnight. (Unpublished manuscript, 1996)

I remember this moment. It happened when Leda first saw me in hospital - a mess of  
 bloodied flesh, stitched and bruised together, tubing attached and protruding from every  
 natural and newly created orifice, drugged, disoriented and in pain. I saw her eyes change  
 from those of a baby to those of a child. She was not even halfway through her second  
 year of living.

Carl Leggo is a poet from Richmond, B.C. as well as a professor in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at U.B.C. In *Rosalie Pollett*, he writes a poem of losses. It is based on the life and death of a childhood neighbor (Rosalie Pollett). Rosalie lived the losses of a lifetime in twenty-two years. This is a poem that refuses to avert its eyes from that tragedy. It refuses to sensationalize or to depersonalize. Rosalie comes to us clothed in compassion, but real, imperfect, victimized by chance and circumstance but not simply a victim.

### **Rosalie Pollett**

Rosalie Pollett crawled out  
 her bedroom window to grass  
 with Jed and Frank and Pikey,  
 and sometimes Jed let  
 Cec, Frazer, Macky, my brother  
 and me sit nearby and listen  
 to Rosalie moaning in the alders  
 like a spring northeast breeze,  
 and at fourteen Rosalie had  
 what Carrie called a moonlight child  
 which the Salvation Army took away  
 since Rosalie was a child too,  
 and her mother was dying  
 in the sanatorium with tuberculosis  
 and her father dressed daily  
 in a navy three-piece suit  
 like a banker, not a bank's janitor,  
 and at eighteen Rosalie married  
 Gerald in the Canadian Armed Forces  
 and everyone on Lynch's Lane  
 got drunk with joy for Rosalie  
 going to Germany with Gerald,  
 but Rosalie hadn't realized  
 how big the world really is  
 and at twenty disappeared  
 while Gerald wrote letters  
 all over the world searching  
 and at twenty-one Rosalie came back,  
 a changed woman, saved and cleansed,  
 in the blood of Jesus, she said,  
 and at twenty-two Rosalie returned  
 with Gerald to Lynch's Lane,  
 and everyone got drunk with joy  
 and we were still celebrating  
 when Rosalie crossing Humber Road  
 on her way to Lockyer's Store  
 was run over by an ESSO truck (1999, p. 66)

Our experiences of loss are innumerable. There is no hierarchy. We suffer. That suffering is real. That is all.

**Aornis** is a place of unnatural quiet. Its water is stagnant, undrinkable. There is no birdsong. There are no birds. It is a place of waiting, of decomposition. Therein (in rotting and its spawn) lies its slow hope, slower than immobile water, but sure.

## Aornis

beyond the lucy gates the jasper sparkles as promised dawn breaks  
 irreparably vines whisper and twine yellow sage withers its flowering time  
 past spotted moth meditates scent of kelp old boulders ganja dying lover  
 tangled broken thin as a spirit thick air twinkle in the living eye swollen  
 belly dazed in and out of the splotched chaotic realm middle of the ages  
 halfway and nowhere the bowl breaks the tea glass shatters construct of  
 time ticks intermittently paint dries ancient fan of broom blossomless smell  
 of thyme rosemary mind sea air purer than holiness feeding the ebbing stain  
 brown eyes deep closed smile hiding the secret of your dying cedar saps and  
 oozes morning

### **the solitary temple rebukes me**

december is the cruelest perhaps the nightingale has been throttled make no mistake her  
 song was an irritant the poet weeps as usual dies a nightingale's death and for good  
 reason how much of the past can you erase plenty and the symbols go deep crimson and  
 the wail of crisis stomp on it make it stop terrify the inhabitants silence the dissenters  
 be brave god is stern but just regrets muck of mission justify your existence away away  
 away

delicacies tendencies inflamed with petty tragedy sky like water in sun delineation  
 stoic shivering under hearts balloons polka dots azalea buds alstromeria nuthatch stellar  
 jay hawk flybye internal airplane the new millenium creeps imbued with meaning star  
 of wonder star of blight lead us to thy perfect might is right is white lover of insects  
 young deer stripped chocolate matilda curved vine comfort me green

the nutcase with the sausage curls rolls and unrolls her tongue her cross-eyed whisper  
 venomous delirious come passion inflames her punches her voodoo doll ignites  
 photographs with the poison on the tip of her tongue begone and the soft face and love  
 grey with roses gethsemane where have they gone in the echoes the quiet in the  
 multitude i longed for death but it was denied me buy one less beer and photograph the  
 girl you claim to love who cares for you at your peril the green arborite excites you  
 embrace it then so i can flee it was only yesterday that the yellow refrigerator gleamed  
 glorious progress sunbeam blade of gas darkened door chastise me not the pinegreen  
 wiggle of the slippered foot the sleeved hand the hatted brow the nose that turns rattle  
 of plastic the hero sags drunk with no destiny an appetite in which playthings self-  
 destruct your spanish lacks precision drop the pot in the soil and sing the lullaby of self  
 sacrifice oh veil of tears oh voice of horror shallow wail of personal despair can we not  
 have compassion for one another the blue step is sinking surely yesterday is a dream and  
 you are a vision and i am thankfully alone i look upon the face of love amen yet the  
 grape is frozen to the roof of the stairwell the smile has shrunk to the size of an i dotted  
 with the tip of nowhere is the stencil more inaccurate than the mouth of tweedledum  
 kalamazoo strange remnant of childhood disturbed and troubled what is the colour of  
 windswept yesterday and notions surprizes and loving concern blue monsters my  
 daughter sleeps the sleep of quietude yesterday she dreamed it away into chaos solitude  
 aqua the solitary temple rebukes me and refuses my remembrance

i dreamed a split end frayed immovable i dreamt a sprig of rosemary against a yellow  
 wall pine tree spruce gum valley of the shadows celebrity rabbit of liquid blue lamb  
 unspotted we've all been there and back again if only the moments would last build a  
 bridge of pure thought table of generations grain of infinite variety i want i will i can  
 without asking whale tortoise shell cat what matters now wholeness drastic hats dross  
 of everyday we refuse to see and then gasping watch it there

cannibals cannibals cannibals taste my mind twist it artfully in your gullet before  
 swallowing like ice to glide upon scratched and powdered philistines greying sun angels  
 winter windmills shadow of iocasta even in death gathering saints

**the grey composed of all extremes**

the quiet bruise inside the unquiet mind which frantically administers platitudes to the  
 purpled moment and recoils into blackness and silence festers under the guise of healing  
 brandishing its yellow cloak scarlet chin wagging each green boot walking away from  
 the other in the velour stretch of corridor called brown

twelfth night and yesteryear foes night toads corpus christi chastened fireflies  
 extinguish thyself jackal buds of evening birds of dawn prairie night ouch mouse that  
 prehistoric room shrunk weave rusticate batter the gate pale wheat geronimo speaks from  
 frozen streets despised again and nightly whose tears fill the gutters whose cheeks  
 pocked and blistered what is this moment soothes the daily ache the gut insignificant  
 harrow hide fields of long accept my offering i am earth that i might give

insouciant smile dangles residue of philodendron pot crackles snake swallows frog  
 swallows fly swallows microscopic delectations surely shirley just last spring and now  
 your thin form disintegrates ocean roars threatens to embrace you fully beloved world of  
 profound and huddled fantasies your furred back motionless your fine form rigid who  
 will rise to the anchor and loose its hold on the head it crushes

jeremiah weeping prophet wail now for all is lost the lemons have rolled to the dusty  
 corners fine dust of bones fills the air there is a grape scented zero stalking the  
 refrigerator anemones droop petals separate distance themselves shudder like a current  
 muscle vertigo again aurora borealis nature's sprites rudbeckia forgotten displace oxalis  
 fiefdom of most invasive vetch apis mellifera finger puppet on darkened wood limp face  
 broken tooth glassy for the fairy melanoma body panting subsidy subsidiary year of the  
 open grave

when the bug bears don't forget nobodies lurking on the edge of the mediterranean don't forget sanctity bones of an egocentric talisman eye the fatted calf cleanliness godliness the cliff saltiness from whence we came return antibodies friends of odd stripes and times consecrate the remnants nights rioting jasmine urinal of omnipotence hooded eyes lacklustre deeper than a convent quieter than the sound of sparrows chewing

furnace opens its gassy jaws blows you away grief and its petty counterparts death then lunch this quiet november month of birthing and dying dark delphinium moments of deepest blue the willow curls only alstromeria droplets of blood veins coursed split the volume the scream in my ears of that quiet groan and gurgle shame let it be insight or longing tarpaper in the wind a world recycled red glow circling red scarlet tot black to green so cold how can a hand be so cold a forehead like ice who changed your chin and doubled it tied your necktie with too much precision husha husha the fallen circle murmur comfort one another talk incessantly of a future illusion judge not and having been judged hot embalmed dreams with no swallow no devouring

long line of chrysalides poplars fermenting the thin blueness of winter air that pure streak of connection the familiar the small intractables the sky's first smirk of spring i cannot forget your dying no manners death but dignity thirty five years small in the palm of my hand my face my belly crossed with scars the grey speckled stone has grown larger than my head almost as smooth it threatens flesh with immovability the grey composed of all extremes

## **My Lifetime Still Breathing**

that longing for ochre to be anointed to be let go of to let go if it was enough simply to exist to exist to struggle to desist to sacrifice hope the opening of the womb the giving of birth does not we cannot save one another from ourselves if i should die before i wake i see an abyss it is in front of me always the abyss and the stifle i've been at this impasse before blocked it out almost killed me alive between the stifle and the abyss i see the gaunt and stooping figure of myself and that is all words my horror my apocalypse my armageddon will be with words i gave my heart to them and they spurned me was bedded by the alphabet all twenty-six letters in a single night twenty-six inky miscarriages nothing to term i have been betrayed by my lovers and cannot forgive even one of them

The prose poems included here mark the beginning of a new process, method and style of writing for me. I cannot remember exactly how it began, although I was taking a writing class with Carl Leggo at the time and suspect it was triggered by one of the techniques we used to stop us self-censoring and start us writing.

I had almost given up on the hope of ever writing creatively again when, during my pregnancy with my daughter, Leda, I began very tentatively to write. I do not think that the correspondence between my writing again and my undergoing radical bodily "change" is insignificant. We are bodies and minds together. The changes in me were deep in every way (instinctually, physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually). This fracturing of my (total) sense of self created a crack, a ray of light rupturing both the unconscious and the carefully constructed darkness and paralysis from which I seemed unable to escape. Physical illness may also cause this shift and for the same reasons. By the sixth month of my pregnancy I was very ill as well as very pregnant.

Since I had been writing poetry since the age of about ten, my seeming inability to write had been devastating to me. Yet I had second-guessed and doubted myself into a very tight and unforgiving corner. After a cautious beginning-to-write, and with nine month

old Leda in tow, I began Carl's class knowing that the expectation would be that I would write, and write creatively. Sometime during that semester I began to write prose poems. I have continued writing them for the past two years through mothering, illness, surgery, recovery, more surgery, death, personal, financial and emotional loss, grief, anger, despair, hope, continued mothering and deep loving.

The method of writing which I have adopted and the style in which I write prose poetry is a matter of necessity as well as inclination. I am a single parent with, first, a baby, now a young daughter, and my health has been poor. My goal is to fill one page with words. I try not to censor myself, I try not to pause for too long. That is all. I put the writing away for a time, sometimes a long time. I take it out. I edit, by which I mean I subtract material, occasionally modify a word or phrase and very rarely add something. It was difficult for me to value this writing at first. It took time for me to understand that I was drawing on the insights, sensations, memories, education and understanding of a lifetime, that the complexity, corporeality, paradox, humour and ambiguity were all contained in my thoughts and thought processes and that these prose poems were that - my lifetime still breathing.

This writing as "breathing," writing entirely in the present (even while drawing on the past), writing with my body and senses as well as my intellect and imagination, is an uncertain and disorderly process which privileges the serendipitous and the tangential. It has produced ambiguous work, densely written and difficult to read. This difficulty, is to me, a direct reflection, not only of the impossible complexity of thought sensation and imagination but also of my own ongoing struggle with the beauty, the utterly frustrating limits and the potentiality, sensuality and power of language. It is a hermeneutic inquiry into the nature of meaning and meaning making, and one which does not seek to deduce but rather seeks to be aware.

David Jardine in *Reflections on Education, Hermeneutics, and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics as a Restoring of Life to Its Original Difficulty* writes that,

. . . hermeneutic inquiry has as its goal to educe understanding, to bring forth the presuppositions in which we already live. Its task, therefore, is not to methodically achieve a relationship to some matter and to secure understanding in such a method. Rather, its task is to recollect the contours and textures of the life we are already living, a life that is not secured by the methods we can wield to render such a life our object. (1992, p. 116)

The returning of life to its original difficulty is a returning of the possibility of the living Word. It is a return to the essential generativity of human life, a sense of life in which there is always something left to say, with all the difficulty, risk and ambiguity that such generativity entails. Hermeneutic inquiry is thus concerned with the ambiguous nature of life itself. It does not desire to render such ambiguity objectively presentable (as if the ambiguity of life were something to dispel, some "error in the system" that needed correction) but rather to attend to it, to give it a voice. (1992, p.119)

I have had a long struggle with language, particularly written language. Prose poems have become a way for me to tell that struggle in the midst of a continued, embodied living through it. The prose poems are autobiographical, but not always in obvious ways. Their ludic aspect, the play of and with language, the unwillingness to produce closure, to punctuate, the writing for the ear for breath for the body as well as the eye and the intellect, all these are indicative of my discovery and rediscovery of language, the search to make it mean and not mean on a level which goes far deeper than semantics, which is physiological and spiritual and impossible. It is the embodiment of impossible hope, lusting after legend and the golden grail, the literary and the bodily narrative in a mountain of (quick) sand.

## The Lord is My Rock

*Sorrow not even as others which have no hope . . . (1 Thes. 4:13)*

It may have been because he had injured Salmoneus, or because he had betrayed Zeus's secret, or because he had always lived by robbery and often murdered unsuspecting travellers . . . - at any rate, Sisyphus was given an exemplary punishment. The Judges of the Dead showed him a huge block of stone . . . and ordered him to roll it up the brow of a hill and topple it down the farther slope. He has never yet succeeded in doing so. As soon as he has almost reached the summit, he is forced back by the weight of the shameless stone, which bounces to the very bottom once more; where he wearily retrieves it and must begin all over again, though sweat bathes his limbs, and a cloud of dust rises above his head. (Graves, 1955, p. 218)

Kafka's lever remains hidden. Impossible hope propels me, aids me in my sisyphian task, to live, to seek. It compels me to tumble down that dusty hill again and again, to cradle the rock which has betrayed me (betrayed me each time without exception), that rock which feeds me. The Lord is my rock, Sisyphus my mentor. I enter the waters of Cocytus, my mouth open wide in protest . . .

This place, **Cocytus**, is my place, such as it is. I stand in this river, in this time. I wail because I am still alive and fighting to be. Daily I struggle toward the shore, nightly I am washed back to the center. I wail not only with grief and with longing, I wail with the inspiration of a love born of dubious parentage; an impossible burden and an impossible hope.

## Cocytus

who touched the sky like milkweed and why does the lichen hang from clouds like mist shuffling in the ruins of introspection i will be the kneeling woman feel her ravagement as my own love beyond it for there is earth whose rich essence fills my nostrils with peace and my mind with ambition green things know and are all rocks cast their offspring into my soul there are places i have never been that know me what anguish who will shelter my ears from the shriek of an arctic wind which sings of hemlock and of hunger and of a time before the wooden boats of progress washed ashore penis wave bible thump traveling medicine show stopper oh what bastard child commits this act of kindness who dares be soft amen

### fat dust of generations

generous discourse silvered anemone hazy blister of sanctification josiah shotgun salute skin of the priest minions mandibles green things leafy syndrome behold the lame the loose foot that dangles dance in infinitum belittled wizened bedizened she wakes in slow measured lines crest of a blue collar blood blue psychedelic spinsters formidable apples cardboard trees unhuggable wrapped mache' hills slick with glue caught in hope long golden tendrils hang tie you to the land which is not jaundiced child murmurs the color of banana's shadow

search your soul and tell me the meaning of the lie that waits to pounce when all seems right and isn't patchwork of memory be selective for me reinvent the past whose snowy winters sabotaged all attempts at grains of silica silica storms information who needs more yabba dabba the night is quiet and insignificant the forecast is beyond me on a flat high image of green with gold in the sky like teeth in ovens my daughter cries and thinks i do not fit tra la tra la the menstruating bitch is lathered in sweat fleeing a pack who threaten a gang bang on the streets of madrid

numbness stuffed pictures of the asylum orange glow over red torso the cod is fished  
 tarry not in your overcoat of minute proportions your rags gelatinous patches dank  
 breath i am besieged by nightingales all doubting vanishing green aura basil carpeted  
 foyer windows yellow with exhaustion the air mutates heavily silvered substitute moth  
 dares not paralyzed red riding hood severed head juggler of many-coloured bassinets jazz  
 speak to me of harshness raw blues everything

skiff of time rain drum sodden slate cold feet numb icicles peak of hours water plunges  
 senseless almost this daily trek wellspring of remembrance justifiably tra la tra la the  
 lines are too close the print is too small the ache in my left ankle misleads me the cool  
 paper like a bed sheet woos and transfixes me leaves me longing the time has come to  
 close the book to wake the sleeping household and flee forthwith to the dripping streets  
 and the chill to stand patiently or not until the tubular growling appears and tastes of  
 some

despair has depths not mine it's as shallow as a junebug toss the safety line perish the  
 twat sing a song of sick pence january is the month of moons ecoterrorists ram the ship  
 of state rise high the banner i'm just a gigolo root of all evil morality damn the virtuous  
 no right but joy no wrong but destitution journey through alleys city of sand each grain  
 a yesterday vanity generations of exiles in a homeland that is theirs

delight of admiring besotted still behind the brown wheel stammering the windows fog  
 admirably so far into the pink thirst of noontime rushing tachometer whistles the cat is  
 splayed wrestle with doutangs of vast proportions weep in the back of the family wagon  
 seagulls scavenge whileness in the glistening

### **lady of shall not**

the reports were disquieting nana madeleine linden flower tea the breeze whispered kelp  
 mischief great cities clustered on one small rock hanging innocuous delight do not  
 forsake me treetops swoon ambush lurks geriatrics rule souvenir lingers day is  
 extinguished orange glow waking lion banyen flowers of blood bludgeons bleak holes fat  
 dust of generations oppressed by safety sad-eyed cat visits hour the colour of eggplant  
 oyster mussel skeleton cramp and its ache amen

din and circumstance check-mate stone to the head scene set for frenzy glass eye same  
 sex conundrum blue dispenser glistens bulbed light of yearning retreat from significance  
 obtuse angel weak with circuitry dark with passions dream of a golden hol-e-o she's  
 given up sex for pure pain appaloosa silver city of tin stars jelly mold salad spews into  
 the waiting nostrils of summer's extended family gesturing weeping green viscosity  
 purple vitriol in an almond haze of repugnance gathered together to abide to abhor to  
 hammer nails in coffins dance with me near the caragana hedge teach me the language  
 of drooping forgive my dissatisfaction who will abide me by me taste the earth its  
 fingered visage march not turn the drum wisteria salamanders amaranth violence hair  
 of preservation mary mother you have suffered much pears and cream heavy gold  
 perishable moment sovereignty silver bells

saw white feathers like snow the turquoise lake the hand on the hilt of the sword the  
 smile that broke the camel's back soft essence of sex red of innards day before yesterday  
 why have i forsaken you the child that sleeps beneath my bed has grown old the legs  
 have gone missing the truncated monster whispers curses his beard like mouldering  
 cornsilk his eyes a hiss i tried the salty darkness of the green pool the wooden man on  
 the shore gaunt and keen-eyed paralyzed surreptitiously guided by a pointed light with  
 a violet beyond jaguar's repose

gorgon's head pandora air red snapper dances a nightmare there that moment just before  
 when all light turns an angel who wakes periodically and sings of venison touch your  
 toes tug your blanket chew the fat wrinkle the doctrine in your plump fingers drool spit  
 it out in juicy chunks and let it lie there what's this anne and andy raggedy why not  
 slow compassion sleep sleep my love tuck your several chins upon your chest and wax  
 silent birds won't wake you felines protect you yellow chair will nestle you in its stiff  
 and forgiving arms crumbs book of the dead everywhere never read

shackled by multitudes challenged by gigolos crushed by facsimile broad warm back  
 dream of frustration interruptus diddle heroin-white children lavender rose sob curly  
 headed kitten tumble beyond breathe chocolate steeple pierces neoprene heart futuristic  
 monologues emanate silicone breast touchable squeezable penetrates jump shout for joy  
 the neck is laced with needles the wrist with knives

killing tree dilapidated dances reeds exploding tendrils of bone martin fiddleheads  
 bobbing ships cardboard sea a brief consensus brown deep brown soggy exuberance  
 triangles of light shards of elizabeth grandma's spats gang of wives stern men brimstone  
 a woman's life a dog's life her toothless presence bedraggled angry in her room of  
 simplicity

xaliman painted column of nutritionists dreams fresh crisp unadulterated satisfy the  
 dull thud heart beat pools round feet of blue child of spice cease to move but yes know  
 longing prince of decrepitude essential backbreaking futility of days cherubbed  
 anaxagorous the sound of numbers that appeal rubber parts swollen bars of crow bait  
 rate roots of prairie disaster trains outing each moment with disparate moan(s) wail of  
 motorhorn vacuum of rural night

cold day hell freezes nothing like prairie lopsides you tapeworms wriggle newly sprung  
 their cozy tonsil doggy-style multiply overreplenished minute zero sing the song of the  
 beloved in mourning and labour shallow grave ruffled by a tiny hand even as it fills

**the pink thirst of noontime**

cobblestones tractors jesuits the lamp is lit the pole has vaulted the jasper sparkles  
 under otherworldly sun genetic destiny instinct abandoned jade pile looms cavern black  
 ominous shelter me murk of a thousand disappointments bury my soul under the weight  
 of tragedy's sludge sing a song of prisonhood tender bars of keeping silence of the womb  
 re-embrace the fetal form cradle it in expectancy nullified hysterified saddened short  
 breath of maybe turquoise of days

iris ear naughty daffodil in a tuck flesh muck of body salient dropsy whimsical fiction  
 abscess clogged saturnal limpkin gaze at the heavy moon on mother sea's horizon green  
 cheese salty sweating snow tumbles into retrospective soft and silent fuselage verbiage  
 misconception mauve bird on cabled walk past tense cohenesque born of rain smell of sea  
 street of small town dreams suckled on glossies weaned on want legs like columns raised  
 high and slender all-pervasive elusive colossus cats cry cradle swap nausea doom watered  
 eyes incontinence forbearer of long absent existence wounded child sing repeats seven  
 stanzas of renewal each day like the first

tadum tadum ironic gaze of bystander gopher without a cause no prairie no dialect no  
 pause just when the curtain is dancing spangled liquid emerald mauve lights cheap  
 glitter on its crumbling backside avoid sun's hopping moon's glide no know that i am  
 thine the deal is done shattered woozy yellow lawn of death defying grasses

dance of rhododendrons shallow grave fluorescent tombstones general lee nether world of  
 whiskey chins who's to say the dolphin sang for him alone sand dune head first  
 suffocating willingly shall we gather at the river sharp mountains pierce the sky peaks  
 stigmata curdled lifeblood the pot boils a thousand years of turmoil the underside of the  
 underside the black side of the black the nether of nether rest straw-filled stranger alone  
 in a field of turmeric crop of marigolds toward-leaning lassitude a fool's fate

formica nights alexander nevsky roam and reel selected angels portents river doom bleak  
 stroll under the influence plead for mercy for immortality dance with the minions of  
 chainstore monopolies concrete shadows ancients stained with the sky's pissing damn  
 them stinking of fish algae covered slippery and unstoppable crumple the fool at the top  
 of the tower put out the homing beacon sail away on a floating door paddle with  
 yesterday's cenotaph

on the backs of furred insects who fly heavily wetly onward the moon is a sliver in a  
 heavy mauve sky saint john agatha trudging behind her heavy platter of flesh lucy eyes  
 surrounded by petals flowering oedipus redeemed enters the sleeping mind corrupted  
 ruinous thumbs battered willy whispers sweet and long meadows wilt violets scent of  
 lavender may the nag fertilize your bayberry bush sigh persistently with relief  
 thumbelina flees her fate

jaundiced eye echo of primrose tousled letter commingle origify justify cloak of elocution  
 genetics providence spleen jelly mold thrust of faceless genitalia source of lemon heavy  
 foot fall slither back cool water fishy divine canker of necessity sybarite janus-headed  
 infertility lady of shall not golden tresses hacked cup sinks closes tumbles in blue light  
 rust resists penetration moon lingers world tosses and turns in its bed of dissolving

glass cherries in a granite bowl on silver the issue of many bodies plattered and paraded  
 for our delectation sugared and glittering autumn harvest suffocates but cannot die ran  
 off with the victim in knee-highs her limbs rosy with cold and delight young boys  
 scratching their balls in expectation her wrinkles invisible in the soft closeness of  
 evening musty breath fermenting thighs overripe and abandoned fertility and the circle  
 jerk squandered floundering the stones of a thousand princes petrified here

there was no midnight sun no aurora borealis only the cold and dark of the final winter before frightened rodents danced with the night birds and were eaten at dawn the circle of moonlight filled with spectators the owl and the pussycat ms. muffet newly liberated and so the low murmur settled with an undertone of dark and no hint of sun-up the brothers grimm rewrote the lot and sucked the life out of silver frogs who once cha-cha'd on the edge of a point of sulphur and mint my my my return to emptiness the hippo in polka dots that graced so many saturday mornings has never ceased to appall me now i am a stranger to a quiet that feeds me

stiff night generous to a fault capitulate rose coloured glasses shrivel jackson pollock child in mourning purple flag of discomfiture answer me the tide is coming in squabbling figtrees wrath of samson angels of dust not knot prey pray the night falls samson calls catcher fowler net of iniquity axioms maxims new eyes for a world of moments don't dabble in my dogs breakfast circle the wagons hey ho

**jack be nimble water spout blessed shadow of disablement unholy sacrament receive the battered bread sweat of a thousand brows bitter may your bowed head be lifted pass me not touch the hem of the garment salvation threatens night dreams taut shadow of indiscretion fear suffocation shall we clasp the ebony vines brass knob gilded cherub ruby destiny the chicken hearted lover limps with a broken back purpose served shiver me timbers the end is nigh and i live**

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