

HOLDING THE DARK

BY

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Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English  
University of Manitoba  
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**Between Dream and Open Eyelid**

It happened like this.

Darkness borrowed her eyes  
those months when she had bandages  
like a tight fist jammed  
into each eyesocket. The dark  
kept pieces of her eyes, and left  
itself behind, little drops of darkness, scattered  
across her retinas like black stars.

It explains why  
she never stops touching him with her eyes  
closed, why she walks around her rooms alone with her eyes  
closed, why she wishes she could write it down with her eyes  
closed, why she knows there's darkness  
inside her.

Wherever it goes, the darkness takes her  
dark eyes with it,

she moves inside it

to Asia when the sun's above her roof,  
to the bottom of the sea,  
swims through hidden caves,  
she rides under the feathers  
of a drifting raven, slips  
along the sidewalk in shadows,  
sneaks through your pupils  
and into your skull,  
dives into an inkwell and comes back up,  
darkness dripping from her body  
in black script.

You can go so many places, come back  
with so many things, if  
you keep your closed eyes open in the dark,  
twin moons in the sky of your head.





The darkness is a handshake.  
Some kind of agreement  
between  
nothing and nothing.

The darkness is that space inside  
a fist, that space between open  
fists, it is the skin  
around skin.

I could agree  
to reach out my hand in the dark  
to the darkness  
of your skin, clasp  
the darkness between us, give it  
a place to rest for a moment

or keep it, contained  
in a deal  
to see  
everything by daylight.

Or I could reach out my hand  
to some mystery, make a bet,  
give my eyes away, see  
nothing, if that mystery makes everything  
whole as a foggy night.

I could be shaking hands with some  
-thing that has a mind  
and a body made of darkness.

The darkness is  
the inside  
of a woman's body.  
See what you can't see, her womb  
as a ball of glass, cold  
at her centre, like January swallowed  
by July.

One steamy word, a name  
damp against the roof of her mouth, a fragment  
of a dream that stayed  
warm in her gut, never found  
its way to her head at night, tongues  
of breeze licking  
her ankles, sucked  
inside as she uncrosses, recrosses  
her thighs, the moisture  
a man releases into the dark.

I might have been floating  
in that ball of glass, lingering  
inside her for a long long time,  
and on the coldest day of January, I began  
to appear  
on the walls of her,  
like fingerprints of frost.

I sit across from a man  
who tells me we all came  
from the stars. And the light  
against his teeth as he kneads his lip,  
and the heat  
in his hands when he touches my palm,  
and the refraction  
of ourselves as we pass through  
each other is so bright, hot,  
echoed,  
has fallen  
from somewhere so far away,  
and smoulders, burns itself  
out, here in this room,  
a slow, torturous, beautiful  
dying, that you know,  
I think I believe him.

The energy of a dying  
star, just a few sparks, some dust,  
floating in this ball of glass  
inside this woman's body.

If I can be in her body  
then anything can be in mine.  
If I can grow in her,  
a whole skin out of darkness,  
something you can touch and taste,  
you can touch and taste me,  
just think  
what floats in you  
but never gets bones.

If you watch a man  
suck the skin  
of a waterdrum, blow  
air from his lungs through its pores, creating  
the precise balance, the perfect resonance,  
you will understand

how things suck at you,  
blow through you, and stay  
perfectly balanced  
in the darkness inside.

You will understand that knowing  
the darkness is feeling a resonance  
emerge from the balance,  
is believing in something  
just on the other side  
of what you strike,  
of yourself,  
is entering that place  
that everyone sings out to.

Bow to the dark

if you're willing  
to sit in stillness  
through this ceremony,

like the moon,  
a great glowing head, always  
bowed at night, watching, holding  
what she sees, holding us,  
in her mind, I see her  
face from different angles as she turns  
her black night-body,

like purple flowers,  
their petals, veils, wrapped around faces  
so intent on praising the dark  
earth they weave their roots through,  
they need only  
one unshifting eye,

like the river,  
tumbling over itself, falling  
prostrate on low land, kissing dark  
beds and banks, unceasing,

like me  
above you, then you above me, worshipping  
the dark that separates us, by fighting  
it, squeezing  
our skins together, determined  
to press the darkness out  
from between us.

Are you afraid of the darkness, of falling  
with nowhere  
to land? Are you  
afraid of how the darkness holds you,

not

bobbing in a lattice of boughs and twigs, rubbing  
gently against the skin of an October sky, not  
cocooned in a web in a boarded-up attic where  
no one can find you, and the spider's dead, not  
relaxed in a fisherman's net, a steady swinging  
hammock, sunk into the cool belly of the sea,

but

in the spaces  
between wood,  
silk,  
rope. Are you

afraid of how you hold the dark  
in the spaces between  
marrow and bone,  
blood and vein,  
dream and open eyelid. Are you

afraid of how you dripped  
from a wound in black air, collected  
here for a while, and that

it's only for a while, it's only for  
now.

I dreamt two small heads  
and thick black hair  
with waves like the curl  
of ribbon teased against a scissor blade.  
We passed them around the circle  
face down, and feeling the faces,  
we had to guess which one was you.

I didn't need my eyes,  
just my fingers to follow  
the line of your jaw, your nose, the shape  
of your mind, the weight  
of you in my palms,  
and that hair soaked  
with darkness.

I just needed the darkness  
and every time the heads came around  
the circle, I knew  
which one was you.

This man who tells me about the stars  
tells me other stories, sometimes  
with his eyes his brow his cheeks, sometimes  
with his breath his lips his tongue.

One day he tells me I will never lose  
my sight because I see everything  
in my dreams. And again,  
I think I believe him.

Why not believe  
when, since  
sitting with him in the dark,  
I have started to dream  
something bigger than this place  
in the single image of his face.

I didn't know it would go like this, I didn't know  
I would find you in the dark.

When I lie  
    against you  
        with my eyes  
            closed,  
            I bring your body  
            with me,  
into the darkness,  
    I bring your whole  
            body inside  
                    me. And in that  
            darkness I know you  
so much better than hands  
            and mouth  
                    can know, I know  
    you, as though you were  
the darkness inside me.



And the darkness is a room.  
Feel how we lie together there,  
feel how the walls push out forever,  
there are words painted  
on the walls, but we don't have to see them  
to know what they say. Everything speaks  
for itself, in the dark.

Remember how you once told me,  
as we lay together in darkness,  
that I was in a forest  
in your head in the room, I was  
lying on the ground  
making love to the earth.

How am I doing that? I asked.  
You are kissing it, tasting it, moving  
against it, writhing, you are  
loving yourself.

And there I was,  
in that forest in your head in the room  
in the dark,  
and I was writhing, loving  
all of it at once.

There is nothing  
to fear. You are

growing from this dark  
ground, lithe poplar, swaying in wind. You are  
dropping your leaves, rotting  
back into dark  
earth, nourishing  
yourself. You are

swaying in the wind  
on the edge of this bank  
and even when the night comes

my arms are tangled  
in, I've got my thousand arms tangled in  
to you, like branches coming alive in Spring.

It doesn't matter that the grass grows  
entangled and  
thick as hair on the body  
of some resting animal,  
wild as an old-growth forest,  
everything in outrageous balance,  
confused as nerves along the edge of a wound,  
firing into the air.

It doesn't matter that I can't touch  
each hair each tree each nerve, the body  
of each animal, forest, wound.

It doesn't matter that I can't touch  
each blade of grass, growing  
thick and wild and confused.

What matters is  
the grass,  
is us, growing  
confused, wild, thick, and  
entangled in the dark.

She you he I it they we are  
the same thing, words  
you shift against each other  
as the earth shifts along a fault-line, one  
body divided in two, two  
bodies moving, we are  
moving against ourselves when we move  
against each other. I

divide you like a macadamia shell,  
fracture your bones trying to get what's inside, I

divide you like a galaxy into constellations,  
wanting to see the pictures you make, I

divide you like so many personalities and  
all of them, none of them, are  
mine. I

divide you like something I could name,  
like the mountains and rivers in Jasper, Banff,

I can name every part of you,  
point you out to yourself on the map, as though

the water didn't run into itself,  
didn't run out of the clouds, melt  
and run  
down the sides  
of mountains, as though the mountains didn't run  
into each other, didn't lie  
like the bodies of women and men, tangled  
together, everywhere,  
a knee  
is someone's elbow, a hipbone is a chin, as though  
you could divide the mountains as we divide

people,  
as we divide the days  
of the week, we know

exactly where everything starts  
and ends.

Looking up through the branches of a tree,  
too many layers to count, and the blue sky beyond,  
whose layers I can't begin to make sense of.

Just give me one long, wide strip of grass  
laid flat, just give me that one layer  
and I will dance  
across it, I will dance.

## **A Spoonful of Rain**

Stars are hiding  
in the light  
of the city at night.  
People have gone to bed and left  
the lights burning  
in the streets.

The girl lies  
on the balcony  
on her back. She stares  
up through the lights  
toward stars she can't see.

The maple leaves  
hang like hands  
in the light, in the dark  
around her. They hang  
upside-down, like her, upside-down  
on her back.

The leaves turn  
at the wrist  
in the breeze  
in the dark and the light, raise  
a soft applause  
for the stars hidden  
backstage, for the people  
sleeping in the wings.

A soft applause, while  
the girl  
lies on her back on the balcony,  
before the lights go out, before  
the light comes up,  
before another day

begins and the girl, watching  
from the balcony, moves  
through the door  
into the waking house,  
walks down the hall  
to her bed and falls  
through dreams  
into the hands of the maple.

The girl is walking  
down a street lined  
with trees, their branches  
the skin of a sea  
overhead, the waves  
of light brushing tides  
on the sidewalk, and leaving  
foam on her curious brow.  
She stops  
her walking through watery  
leaves and light and turns  
her head to the side, as though some current  
has changed and caught her  
by the chin, but she is just turning  
away from the sound of traffic  
and toward a choir  
of nesting birds,  
or she stops  
and collapses  
to her knees, as though the tide  
had taken her  
down with its weight, smoothed  
itself along her frame, but she is just bending  
away from the height of strolling neighbours  
and searching for the company  
of smaller, gentler bodies, emerging  
from grass blades  
in the boulevard,  
or she stops  
and lets her hand float  
out, as though a wave  
had buoyed it  
along on its crest, but she is just reaching  
away from the air  
and toward the watery sea  
she finds reflected around her  
in the skin of leaves.



In the forest, the girl can't help but remember  
how everything fights  
to reach its arms up  
to the sky, how everything stands, waiting  
for the sky to reach down like a parent,  
pick it up, take it away, how  
the parent never comes.

In the forest, the girl remembers  
how everything lies down  
when it gives  
up, how bodies topple to make space  
for others, how bodies topple to make space  
for nothing,  
how no one can explain why  
bodies tire and dry.

In the forest, she remembers  
how everything speaks, leaves  
a constant chatter  
in the cold  
wind, a constant warm whisper  
in the heat, branches creaking  
like bones, a skeletal voice,  
a voice from deep inside.

How everything shelters something beneath  
itself, how no one stands  
with no one under its arms.

How seeds fall  
from everything, how without the girl  
being aware, things blossom  
up, she plants  
herself wherever she stands.

How could she not  
remember, in the forest, how could she stand  
beneath so many trees, saplings  
at her knees, seeds  
under her heels, how  
could she stand there and not remember  
her arms are branches  
her toes are roots  
her hair is leaves  
her skin, bark  
her thoughts are sap rising, rising through her

This prairie fits the girl  
as the sky fits the horizon,  
covers it with its body, all  
day, all night and never  
lets go. You see exactly  
how they lie, press, together.

When the birds wake, they fill  
the sky with their songs, trails  
of bubbles, crossing, floating  
away. You can't  
catch them. And sometimes,  
when the birds sing  
all at once, the sky fills  
with coloured ribbons, loosely  
entangled, rippling.  
They cannot be drawn  
straight or apart.

This prairie fits the girl  
as the sky fits the morning  
songs of birds, shows her  
the trick of itself, land  
and air, one  
long line she can trace with her finger.

The girl watches a sparrow  
stand  
at the end of a dry stick, the stick  
dip  
slow and smooth with the sparrow's weight,  
and the sparrow  
flit  
up just as the stick  
breaks and  
falls.

The girl watches white butterflies  
dive  
and cross  
paths, hover  
three feet apart,  
dive  
and cross again  
and again, until the wind brushes them away.

The girl watches a bank of purple hyacinths  
sway  
their bodies toward her like a line of dancers,  
lean  
their bodies away, graceful, perfect,  
all afternoon they dance and do not tire.

The girl is trying to think of a language.  
It sounds like air  
the tongue shapes  
against the roof of the mouth,  
against the inside  
of the cheeks, the lips. It sounds  
like mouths and cheeks and lips  
of the wind, blowing through the tall grass, blowing  
through her head.

The scratch of a woodchuck's nails  
on the dry logs in the woodpile.

Two of them now  
sitting on the woodpile,  
scratching.

The girl is watching. The girl can  
watch and move however she wants, so long  
as she doesn't make sounds  
she already knows.

The scratch of the woodchuck's nails, it  
comes to her like  
the lips of the wind  
up the hill, through the grass.

The girl's mouth is a  
magnet, an  
undertow, the  
pupil of an eye drawing  
everything through itself.

When the girl opens her mouth  
to ask, dark O,  
she is saying,  
there is a space in here  
which needs to be filled. She  
steadies the magnet,  
begins the motion of the undertow,  
opens her eyelids, says,  
everything  
I look at rushes into me, says,  
whenever I open my mouth to ask,  
any sound  
left hanging in air  
will find its way to my belly.

And the girl's mouth must move  
through and around all words,  
must gently kiss  
itself, lick the insides of its own  
body if the words are to come out,  
how intimate, this kissing,  
how private. No wonder she  
speaks so softly.

Ophelia's mouth, open slightly  
forever, no longer  
needs words, the girl's  
lips coax  
flower petals in,  
a spoonful of rain,  
drop in notes of a bird song one by one.

Ophelia, hanging  
silent, under glass,  
the girl watches your mouth.  
When she says your name,  
she kisses you.

The girl holds wonder  
in her body, she does  
not let it move  
to her head, it would  
get harder and harder, like a skull.

Wonder can only preserve  
itself  
in the suppleness  
of skin.

She holds it,  
immediate  
in everything she touches, in  
    Ophelia's mouth,  
    a raven's wing,  
    the dye from oyster shells,  
        in a muddy boot,  
        gusts of breeze,  
        a heartbeat under her hand,  
    the things that are new  
    and things already familiar, the girl's skin  
falls  
into wonder every time  
she touches, if  
she holds it there, if  
she keeps everything  
she loves in her body.

They say Ophelia sang  
as she drowned. As though she didn't know  
opening your mouth underwater  
lets death in. She traded  
a few mournful notes, quivering in air, for a mouthful  
of something she could swallow.

Ophelia, what if the girl threw away  
the spoon, forgot about filling you  
with water from the sky, what if she reached  
past your lips and pulled those colourful petals  
from your tongue like a mother  
clearing her baby's throat  
of something she could choke on, what if  
the girl kept all the notes of that birdsong  
cupped in her hand.

What would you say  
to her then, Ophelia. What could you  
say, but, Water, but,  
Swallow what you drown in.



Imagine

Australia, floating  
in the bodies of oceans and seas, so many  
arms holding her up  
for breath,  
watery fingers tapping rhythms  
on her sandy knees, in measure  
with crashing swirling songs,  
backs of hands held  
to her forehead,  
taking her temperature,  
wringing water onto her burning skin.

Jungles, pushing  
up from the core of the earth,  
explosions, slamming  
the soil up inch by inch into trees,  
fallout spraying into the air as leaves,  
flowers opening, fierce drops of lava,  
coloured birds and their rising songs escaping  
like heat.

Red dust in your eyes and air  
you can't breathe, hanging  
beyond Pluto, a scattered expanse  
of suspended desert, circling,  
a planet we refuse to name.

And imagine

the Assiniboine breaking  
on the rocks, and the girl  
on the bank, watching  
herself move toward the water,  
naked, finally entering  
the river she walks beside each day.

## Purple Flowers

And the mountains are dead, but still  
they know that the earth is warmer, more alive  
than the sun. Look

at their foreheads, their shoulders, look  
at the snow that will not melt, though they reach  
closer to the sun than we let our thoughts go, look  
how they warm their feet in the earth.

The spruce, the pines try to cover this death  
with life, try to make something of it,  
as we do, as I cover the dead  
with poems, as I lay pages over dead bodies  
in sheets, in shrouds. As though we could

miss it, as though we could pretend  
it was something else, all around us, sucking  
at the earth, filling the sky, like mountains,  
mountains reaching for heat they can't find.

There is nothing more sad than letting go  
of ghosts. It is  
sadder than the first time, letting go  
of bodies.

The body, so immediate, you get used to it  
against your own, you get used to how it  
touches you, how it moves, speaks. And

the body's great trick, the body's great happiness:  
when another's body leaves,  
you can always believe it's coming back, even  
when it goes to the other side  
of the country, the other side of the world,  
even when it goes under the ground,  
you can always expect it.

But when the ghosts leave, there is no  
coming back, everything's  
gone, even the shadow passing through the wall,  
the flicker of the candle flame,  
the momentary smell of familiar skin  
where the body hasn't been for years,

even the hope of a presence, your presence  
staying with me, through the night.

Watching, listening, being  
with them, as they sit side by side, it's as though  
he carries years and lives and  
masterpieces within himself, he is haunted  
by things beautiful and old and true  
and she can't see them, there are  
these ghosts of him  
that only I see.

And it is a nightmare, not the ghosts, I have  
seen them many times, I have walked beside them  
afternoons, I have slept with them  
nestled into me through the night.

The nightmare is how our ghosts know  
each other, women and men who promised  
to meet again in future lives,  
artists and artworks that  
never could be separated, except by space.

The nightmare is, I hear them calling  
as she leads you away with her hand in yours,  
and she doesn't see you, she doesn't even hear  
the desperate and relentless screams of our ghosts,  
losing each other all over again  
when they'd come so close, when  
they'd finally brushed skins in this place.

Let me tell you how you were  
desired. You were desired  
as the sketches in your book,  
the canvas on your easel,  
the frames propped and hanging on your walls.

I wanted to be in your mind like that,  
I desired you  
to turn me around in your mind,  
to see every surface, texture,  
how the light falls  
through me.

I desired your mind  
to know me as though you had shaped me,  
to carry me around,  
secret, mysterious,  
enchancing as the dots and lines in your notebook.

I desired you  
to paint all the tones of my body,  
to brush me, complete,  
through your fingertips onto canvas,  
to paint me with your mouth, your skin.

You were desired  
as a painting desires its painter,  
  
as the painter desires the muse.  
As you, I, desired the muse.

You were desired  
as something inside,  
an unborn child.  
An adopted child,  
a child who died long ago.

You were desired  
as something far away,  
the first footfalls on the moon.

As something possible,  
but elusive, a cure  
for disease.

Something simple, but unlikely,  
the rain, desired  
by wanderers in the desert.

You were desired  
as the sky  
by trees, holding their arms up  
to its light.

As the night  
by stars.

Like the desiring stars,  
I was desperate for you to see me  
and I was desperate not  
to fall.

They say it takes seven years  
to get over losing  
someone you love.

And I say, it is taking me  
seven years to get over the day  
I found you, seven years  
to learn that love

does not come in a casket  
like loss, love  
has no shape you can recognize.

Please forgive me  
for not recognizing  
you, as you lie beside me  
sleeping, as I cross your arms  
over your chest  
and fold your hands together.



Warm summer nights, I will miss  
warm summer nights on the screened-in balcony,  
air blowing gently through, jazz  
blowing gently through, and an old lava lamp  
in constant motion, slow  
sensuous writhing and rippling, the postures  
we move through, but can't see.

In the morning, you will call, tell me  
of purple flowers that opened in the dark,  
we were surrounded  
by their silent blooming, as though  
this gentle celebration of a balcony,  
of wine and jazz and life's contortions,  
was just what they were  
waiting for, those purple flowers.

Walking home,  
everything in halves, you walk me half-way  
at half-light, birds half in song,  
half a bottle of wine in each of our stomachs,  
half a face of the moon watching down.

I wonder at all these halves,  
such a full night, so full with life,  
and me so filled with you.

When he goes to Thailand  
she will give him thick new socks, so that  
when he walks down the roads, disturbs  
scorpions sleeping in the ruts,  
nothing will crawl in  
the holes his big-toes cut, nothing will harm him  
cruelly as the sting of the scorpion, nothing will  
poison his skin, his blood.

She will give him socks when he goes to Thailand  
because she wants him to walk  
down those dusty roads, walk  
between fields at night, rice growing  
the colour of the moon, she wants him  
to carry pails of water, swinging  
from the ends of a stick he balances  
across his shoulders like a long straight promise.

She wants him to walk behind the carts  
bumping their way to the market, fruits and vegetables,  
fabric and tin, piled high inside, she wants him  
to walk behind and pick up a bamboo fan  
that jostles out, wave it above his wet chest  
when the sun is farthest away  
from this country he left behind, and think  
of her body still resting here, in the dark.

These are the things my mouth does in  
the dark, these months without  
your body. My mouth

sips at breeze, gusting  
through the screen,  
like mouthfuls of cool wine  
you tip to my lips, my mouth

swallows silence down into my belly, you not here  
to kiss my sleeping lips closed, my mouth

hums quiet tunes, breathing  
in, the melody, breathing out, the harmony, my mouth

sings a song for you, La dee daaa, dee daaa, dee daaa,  
I laa-ve you, my mouth

laughs across the pillow, notes and  
shadows where your hair should be, my mouth

screams, red, splitting the dark  
into your absent outstretched arms, my mouth

sucks on my skin, wanting it  
to be yours, my mouth

talks to itself, says, not much longer till  
you taste him,

whispers,  
this is what I'm doing, these months  
without your body, whispers,  
this is how I survive  
without you, in the dark.

You could love me from a distance, as you love  
time, never with her, but  
always expecting her,  
half-past eight, quarter to midnight,

always calling her  
different names for her different faces,  
moods, ways she moves  
her body in the light  
and the dark, through seasons.

Just when you think you know her, she  
slips from around your wrist.  
You turn a corner, find her  
watching from the shadows. Look behind,  
she disappears over a hill.

You kiss her open mouth,  
but she won't kiss back, her lips  
like air, you touch her skin,  
but you can't tell  
her age, her shape, her body  
is water under your hands.

You call her up, and believe  
you hear her  
singing on the line, through static.  
You mail her letters, and they come back  
sealed, though you think  
you smell her  
when you open them.

You wake in the night, feel her  
trailing her fingertips up your chest,  
swinging her hair down into your face,  
but she is just after  
your heartbeat, your breath.

Do not love me  
from a distance  
as you love time.  
When you say,  
always,  
expect my name  
unchanging in your mouth,  
my presence real as your voice.

He plugs the ears  
of their relationship  
so he can hear it from inside.

He listens to her voice,  
like clay pressed  
through the receiver.

He listens to her whispers,  
soft sounds that might just be  
the wind blowing through her hair,  
bedsheets rustling on the clothesline,  
fingers leafing through a stack of mail.

He listens to her  
skin breathing, hears  
the silence  
lying between  
the whimper of the mole on her thigh and  
the hush of the freckle on her breast.

He listens and listens  
but thinks he can't hear  
how they sound from inside,  
for the noise  
of her scratching pen.

Beyond wishing, she wishes  
you could feel her, like the poem  
she is. If you could  
feel her that way, she would  
have so many syllables, rhymes,  
a beautiful sound on your tongue, a  
rhythm, you would always know  
where she's moving next, but  
never know just how  
she'd take you  
there. She would  
wrap herself around you,  
like the poem she is. You would rest  
inside her, like breath.

To come back from an afternoon  
walk along the Assiniboine,

wash my hair  
with marigold flowers and thyme,

put on a clean white cotton T-shirt,

eat a plum,  
skin the colour of dark wine, flesh  
the colour of grapefruit,  
but sweeter,

to watch the sun fade from the street,

to sit with my sketchbook's blank page  
and a sharpened pencil,

to feel Brahms' clarinet, cello, piano  
moving through bars  
of notes, leaving,  
returning to each other  
as three parts of my self,

to know that somewhere you move  
as a fourth part of me, the part  
that saves me from these words...

What else? What else can there be  
in this moment? What else can there be,  
but the silence surrounding it all?

What a

surprise to find  
you, like finding myself standing  
inside the foundation of an abandoned house  
after I'd left the paths at the park,  
scrub and earth keeping the blank pages  
of concrete between them  
like a secret, a

surprise,  
the stairs that used to lead to a door  
show me an empty frame filled  
with the sky and stepping  
up is like stepping toward  
you,  
and what a

surprise, finding  
these words in my head,  
like more doors opening onto the sky,  
like more stairs  
barely visible, sudden shifts of light,  
carrying me up to other rooms, and  
layered voices calling down  
from landings and hallways,  
beckoning me away  
for a while, summoning me  
to a lost afternoon,

then leading me back  
to you.



I love you  
furiously. I love you  
like the dancer spinning  
in an empty room,  
leaping                   collapsing  
on an oak floor,  
in a path of sunlight.

I love you  
like the sculptor moving her hands  
over marble, knowing  
of a centre she will never carve, so  
heavy    cold    silent.

I love you  
like the gardener  
with dirt on her knees,  
purple flowers in her hair,  
creeping-thyme tucked under her tongue,

like the carpenter sanding pine,  
fragrance of wood on her skin all day,

like the potter warming clay  
with the heat of her palms,

like the musician in a rainstorm.

I love you  
in so many layers, in so much space,  
in skies of white paper,  
I love you  
off land, past stars,  
like the poet who takes you with her.

I would walk with you  
through the afternoon, wait  
with you, would surround  
you with my body.

When the peaceful dark came down  
like a mother returning,  
I would let you go, gently  
into the night.

I've been holding you like this  
for hundreds of years. We are old  
together, like the sky and the moon.

**The Daughters of Silence**

Let me  
disturb you. Let's do it  
like this. I'll tell you

about the cat in heat  
who came home  
limping, the skin on her nose  
scraped off, her body leaking blood  
and semen. I'll tell you  
that's what it is to be fucked  
if you're a cat, I'll ask you  
aren't we animals? Aren't we animals  
too? I'll tell you

about the father in heat  
who came home with a fresh lemon loaf, he  
fed it to his family, asked them how they liked it, he  
didn't poison them, if that's what you're thinking, unless,  
let me ask you, is it poison, eating the baking  
of a lover you didn't know he had? I'll tell you

what you thought I might tell you. I'll tell you  
about the bus, driving way too fast  
down highways in Colombia, I'll tell you  
how a man said from the backseat,  
that guy's gonna kill someone, and  
not ten miles later we looked out the window, saw her  
lying facedown, just like they say, a bag of rags, her  
long grey hair, spread like a fan, her  
basket of vegetables, scattered like colourful petals by wind,  
the night too dark to see how the blood flowed, to tell you  
what it looked like, maybe a brown bedspread, maybe  
the woman's sticky shadow. I'll tell you

about the three by four by six foot box  
sitting at the side of the road in the steam of the  
gutter, that when I passed one morning, they kept  
coming out and coming out, this house for  
a family of five. You think it's funny, this was  
not a circus trick, and it's not  
magic that their mother keeps her husband  
alive with milk from her breasts. Any  
new mother could do it. I'll tell you

about arriving to do CPR, and finding the victim has  
no head, about

a little girl, so well-trained she  
hikes down her diapers so  
daddy can touch, about

the child in the playground, yelling  
from the top of the slide that  
all the other kids are going  
to hell, about

the father, who whispers, moments before death,  
I was a good parent, your mom and I raised two good kids,  
about his daughter looking down into his eyes, mouthing,  
You were a shit. A selfish, deceitful shit,  
turning, walking out the door. I'll tell you

this, I'll tell you so much more, and  
then  
I'll ask, what  
do you see what  
do you hear what  
do you smell, do you taste,  
I'll ask you,  
what, tell me, what,  
tell me.

How does it go  
in those hot, hot countries, in those hot  
languages, syllables flaring off the tongue, fiery  
as Aguardiente,  
as the hips of Salsa dancers, colourful  
as Guatemalan traje.

Where do you find the dark  
with all that fire, with all that colour  
burning your skin.

With bullets burning  
everyone's ears,  
hunger burning  
the insides of stomachs,  
wet feet burning  
paths into concrete, and  
lies lies lies  
hanging  
from buildings,  
overpasses,  
busracks,  
and burning  
like my white skin, in effigy.

I am a white  
ragdoll passing through.  
I have diamonds  
for eyes and straw  
for understanding.  
I have a dove  
for a heart,  
but it doesn't know where to land,  
I want  
the dark, but in those countries, I'm  
white white white.

Let's be honest about the dark, let's not  
pretend the moon only shines  
on some parts of the earth, that  
North Americans carry stars  
in their pockets, that these  
fingers are rays of the sun.

No matter

how the steel wraps around  
you and the glass you sit behind, how  
these frame the night outside, or  
what name is printed on the sign  
at the nearest corner  
in this grid of concrete and lights  
that control when you move,  
when you stand  
still, when you curse,

no matter

what lines your pocket, silk, suede,  
or what's trapped inside that expensive  
hunting sack, plastic cards that make money  
spit from tight-lipped mouths, silver  
keys, pierced  
through the feet and bound  
together, slaves that open  
doors to houses, offices, cottages, hotel rooms,  
cars, spa lockers, and safety  
deposit boxes,

no matter

what encircles your fingers,  
tiny shackles  
of hammered gold, glossy  
paints hardening on your nails  
like the blood of the poor, alluring  
scents you rub into your wrists,

no matter

what ensnares you  
on the ground, every sky  
is the sky I'm looking at now.

...What's between  
the sky and the dark  
space inside....

These layers of entrapment  
we can point at and hold  
out in front of us like warning flags, or  
flags of surrender, and

these intangible layered words,  
dressings made out of words, and me

not knowing  
how to peel them back  
like the white skin from my bones,  
how to pry my own bones open.



I once rocked children  
--los vegetales, they called them, the vegetables--  
in a hospital  
in Antigua, Guatemala.  
They would reach out their arms  
when I arrived in the mornings,  
shout to me  
in Spanish  
in Quiché  
in Cakchiquel  
in all the languages  
that God has forgotten.  
They would stink of shit and amoebas,  
their matching green pyjamas soaked  
with urine, and they would be rolling  
their heads, their eyes,  
away from the wall toward the sun.  
I would talk in broken words  
in a broken voice,  
I would lean on their chairs,  
push them around the courtyard,  
I would lift them out of straps  
and stumble  
where they pointed, so they could look  
into rooms they had never seen.  
The blind one couldn't see, of course,  
but I let him play with a camera,  
and I have the picture.

I wonder how they are.  
I wonder if they've grown too big  
to be lifted.  
I try to stay small,  
to remember their  
small arms, rocking  
me.

The little soldier carries a gun,  
he is in the square, surrounded  
by flowers and children.

He is dressed in coarse green,  
a grassy fabric,  
the colour of things that grow.

Among flowers and children,  
the little soldier carries a gun  
and they all gather 'round.

Little girl with the rubber boots  
half-way to your knees, I first  
see you, peeking out from behind  
your mother's skirt, making  
little-girl faces at me. You are  
a flashback, a memory  
of fourteen years ago,  
    of dark hair swinging in a pony-tail,  
        of shiny brown eyes scrunching  
        and rolling around, grabbing  
        other people's eyes and dropping  
        them, childishly, with one blink,  
            of a belief in games of pretend  
            and in myself,  
I watch you, trying to remember  
how I would have hopped  
from log to thick puddle, would have thrown  
stones at chickens and chased  
after them, wanting to show everyone  
how fast I could run, how carefree.

Little girl with the rubber boots  
half-way to your knees, I last  
see you, sitting on an old pila,  
knees tucked up, away  
from sewage water that seeps  
through your cardboard walls.  
You won't smile at me, won't  
play anymore, as I wave, as I  
pull away in the van.

You could speak to me  
in any other language, and  
I would not cry, but

Spanish, so fluid,  
it rushes right to the centre,  
it lets the darkness out,

a flood. And  
everything floats  
by, Caesar's guitar,

Rosa's buñuelos,  
Mareceli's long black hair,  
Carlos' soccer ball,

Marco Tulio's shifty stride and  
two year-old Juan Camilo,  
flexing his muscles and showing off

his red underwear.  
Luzdy, you float by,  
and Martha, you

float by, and Penson, you float, standing  
on a table waving your arms, reading me  
Spanish poetry in the office.

The boy sketching faces for money,  
and the woman with scars covering her skin,  
and the man who followed me when I was alone.

The Puddle Girl floats by at the end  
of the flood. She wouldn't then, but now  
she waves goodbye forever.

In my dreams, when they speak Spanish,  
I always put my head down and cry.

I want to sit in the cathedral  
of El Peten jungle,

I want the toucan, the quetzal,  
decorated saints,

I want the Usumacinta river before me,  
its never-ending grace, I want

every leaf on every jacaranda hanging  
like promises from the light.

And I want all the scorpions  
dead as Good Friday, never rising up again.

Who will rise up  
for more than the lifetime it takes to make  
all the mud dry  
under the Puddle Girl's feet?

I put my head down, I am  
crying in the mud.

The Mayan city in Tikal  
still stands.  
They drained their daughters' blood to keep  
the sun from dying.  
They wear its darkness in their skin.

And me here,  
building cities

out of white

paper that crumples  
like a ball of wind, that melts  
in rain like soft bone,

a dead dove in my heart,  
collapsing.

Am I  
sacrificing  
the daughters of silence for nothing?

Juan Manuel, I come back from your country  
with threads the colours of Guatemalan traje,  
woven through my thoughts.  
My Guatemala, scattered  
blocks, quickly sewn together  
by the calloused hands of black-haired women.

And now, my head all stitched through  
with bits of Guatemala, not  
making any sense against a background  
of North American fabrics, I  
cry at the faintest pin-prick.

Many North Americans have told me,  
It's not your fault.  
This is how the world is.  
You have to get on with your life.

But I needed words  
from a dark mouth  
that marries B's and V's,  
that makes everything happen  
clean at the front,  
that can't swallow the real  
words, or  
hide them inside  
behind lies.

You tell me,  
It's not your fault.  
The world was like this before you were born.  
Do what you can where you are.

And you tell me  
there is always sadness  
in my eyes,  
even when I smile.

Maybe it's that all my life I've woken up  
in the dark. It has managed to squeeze  
in, and the bright Guatemalan colours, embroidered  
dancers, flowers, quetzals, they  
don't fool me, there is something far  
more  
sinister holding  
our continents together.

Juan Manuel, you say  
you were a painter in your past life,  
that no one paid attention to your work,  
and now you have another chance to make  
them see, or maybe  
they loved you,  
you were very famous  
then, and now you must struggle,  
it's part of your work this time around.

I say,  
is it part of your work, this time, to watch  
your friends disappear,  
is it part of your work to see how they turn  
up dead? Is it your work to find  
you are next on the list, that they  
have a spot marked out for you,  
in a rose garden like Romero,  
you can lie there forever, face  
down in petals, feeding your dark  
blood to the roots.

And is it part of your work, Juan,  
to hold a wife who can barely hold herself  
in, remembering  
how they raped her, remembering her son  
ripped open, left  
alone, fading into some other place,  
his already useless blood darkening  
the concrete.

Juan, in paint, you see  
how things can change. You show me

a candle whose flame becomes a dove, escaping  
barbed wire, a tree whose leaves  
become quetzals, rising  
from the jungle, a woman whose long back  
becomes the flux of the sea, shifting  
sleepily against a sheet  
of sand, a girl whose almond-eyes  
are butterfly-wings, as she flies  
she stares  
at me.

Despair,  
    in Latin America,  
    is no secret.

    It's only in countries like this  
that everyone's supposed to be easy  
all the time,  
    countries like this  
where comfort  
    is hoarding all you can for a future need,  
where beauty  
    is a matching purse and shoes, a change of wallpaper,  
where peace  
    is the children staying with grandma for the weekend,  
and where power  
    is something to celebrate.  
    In this country,  
despair  
    is a secret,  
    so well-kept, we don't even know what it means.

I'll tell you what I know about despair  
    in this country. It is  
screaming and screaming and screaming for something  
that has no name.

    It is  
that woman lying face-down-dead in the street.  
And everyone passes by,  
whistling.

    It is  
singing and singing and singing a tune  
that has no melody.

    It is  
the quetzal rising from a bush,  
red roses growing out of concrete.  
And no one notices,  
they are trimming their hedges, edging the lawn.

We don't want words from under the ground  
or words from a far-away sky.

    In this country,  
we just want words that will blow the dust around.



Convince me.

Convince me that you didn't mean to  
rip our insides out, that you didn't know  
you had our tendons and nerves  
wound around your fingers, our intestines  
slipping from your hands, knotted, swollen, bruised  
like worms drowned after a rain, or dying slowly  
after someone steps on half their body, convince me  
you didn't taste our blood  
in your mouth as you spit out our skin,  
didn't notice our hair still  
caught in your teeth.  
Convince me that all this ripped  
up flesh, this blood and vomiting  
and screaming that will not end,  
convince me, that you committed  
this massacre in all innocence.

Or did you think there was a doctor?  
Did you think there was a surgeon  
who could figure out  
which parts belonged to whom, sort them  
into piles, stitch everyone back together,  
an intricate operation, with so many  
stretchers, with needles  
and suture thread filling the air,  
like a net cast into the empty sky.

I was murdered,  
I was murdered in that life.

They buried me.  
They scrubbed their hands clean.

This is the one who strangled  
my mother. I found him  
with his hands around her throat, her face  
turning purple, when I ran  
from the shower, towel clutched  
around me, suds in my hair, not  
to see what was happening, not  
even to help, I just ran  
when I heard her desperate sucking-for-air, his  
dizzy rage, and the bed  
slamming and slamming against the floor, the wall,  
I don't know  
just him slamming her body again and again  
onto the bed, I ran  
from the shower to their room, just because  
that's where my feet took me. Just as  
now my feet have taken me  
out of that house of screaming and silence,  
but my feet cannot take me  
out of this house of my head, my body, what they remember.  
This one was strangling my mother  
with his hands, the hands he loves  
to tell me held my naked bum  
when I was born, a little bum  
small enough to fit in one of those hugely  
venomous hands. He carries me.  
He carries me still.

A woman crying and crying, a voice echoing  
off the surface of a place  
inside her, a place  
I haven't heard from for a long long time.  
I remember this voice from the years

when her bones went missing.  
She couldn't stand, couldn't sit, her body  
was jelly inside soft skin, so heavy and slippery

I couldn't hold her up alone.

And there was this voice  
from someplace far away, wailing, wailing  
the same pitch, like a bow gliding forever

across the A-string of a violin and,  
at rhythmic intervals, maybe to the count  
of her fading pulse,

she screamed

I just want to die  
(die, trailing down and down,  
back to where it came from far inside)  
I just want to die,

her teeth chattering, keeping a staccato time.

This terrifying  
impromptu was my mother, her face streaked  
with tears, like so many mourning  
notes sliding from the black mouth  
of an oboe...

I am listening, mom, I am listening,  
but there is no baton  
I can raise to make this stop.

Mom, the tiny blue flowers I picked  
to send you, they will never be missed  
from the carpets of blue their sisters have

laid across the floor of the park  
where I walk beside the river, they will never be  
missed from the blankets the sister-flowers lay

across the cool feet of the trees.  
I see the flowers, blue women, pushed  
silently up, bent quietly down, delicate

throats, voices muffled in the ground, and immediately,  
I miss you, almost as much as I imagine you  
may have missed yourself, these thirty years.

We could always make you raise your voice  
if we tried to touch your hair, and  
I creep into the blanket of flowers,

pull two out of the ground, like flowers  
growing from your skin,  
but this time, you do not shoo me away,

you raise your voice to sing out clear and  
blue as the faces of flowers. I  
put your singing voice carefully

in my pocket, those two blue flowers,  
their petals a handful of musical notes  
in my palm. The flowers lie

on my table now, waiting  
to be mailed, and you are singing to me,  
all afternoon. You'll open the envelope, find

two dried flowers, I will send to you, two  
silhouettes of the voice  
you have left me.

A boy I knew could see another world  
in the dark, and he was going to play this world  
open. That boy,

master of the cello at 16, and master of  
mathematical mysteries, he composed  
a piece so harmonious, complete, physics so true,  
when he played it, strings and wood and rosin, the world

was going to crack open, the world  
was going to turn up out of itself, he was going  
to rise on out of here, transform as he rose  
through the dark, and those who took  
care as he scribbled the principals  
onto bar serviettes, those who believed  
were going with him.

Sean, I didn't believe,  
I couldn't go with you, you left us all behind  
when, your body filled with vibration,  
the last note dissolved, and  
you opened your eyes to the same  
glaring world, you

found another way  
to transform, you left  
this place in one  
confident leap,  
one exhilarating fall  
through darkness.

And then, I do believe,  
I'm certain it made sense,  
the way a poem makes sense, the way a poem

cracks the world open,  
and doesn't, when I write.

I believe you, Sean,  
I'm here desperately  
composing my own  
transformation. I'm falling,  
Sean, I'm falling, but

the world won't close, won't  
open.

What can be so heavy inside  
that it holds you  
back from the things you love,  
like a paperweight, keeping the sheets  
of yourself from flying  
free when the wind comes by to collect them.

What can be so heavy  
that you drag it with you  
like a ball chained  
to your kidneys, your liver, like an anchor  
that keeps you docked, that will not  
let you sail out to the open sea.

What can be so heavy  
that your arms tire with carrying it,  
a dictionary, a set of encyclopedias,  
you want to write it out of you,  
but you are hanging  
on to each word you've learned.

What can be so heavy  
that it feels like the night  
on your shoulders, you stagger  
under a dark sky, pressing you  
deeper and deeper into the ground  
as you try to walk, to run,  
as you try to simply stand.

What can be so heavy  
as screaming,  
just screaming,  
this screaming that will not end.

You say you've never seen anger  
light as the floating hand  
of a drowned woman, you've never seen it pale  
as a dead woman's face, or empty  
as her open mouth, anger  
empty as the mouths of the dead,  
and you've never seen eyes so blind  
with anger, they do not move, do not  
blink. You see

how it concentrates  
in her hips, sinks  
them to the floor  
of the brook, her waist held  
between thighs  
of rock and encircled  
by the fine arms of algae.

But her chest rises  
up, Ophelia's chest rises up, up  
and out of the water.

A vulture  
might sweep a swath of sky  
clean with its wings and tear  
a scrap from her dress, pluck  
the nipple from her breast, dig  
for an artery, a ventricle,  
for death. The vulture might  
become a dove, might  
carry a piece of her  
in its beak, fly her  
back to the boat still docked in the harbour

and sing  
I have found it, there  
is dry land  
in this body, there is something  
not sunk, there is  
hope.

These flowers float, a final  
stretching open,  
a final celebration, final  
wilt and decay. They drift  
around Ophelia's blind  
fingertips,

    some purple as a woman's untouched  
    desire,

        some blue as her babies  
        never born.

            Some yellow as the coat  
            of guilt inside her cheeks, words  
            spooned in and sucked on, rotting.

                Some pink as moments  
                of distraction.

                    Red as loss,

                        orange as racing  
                        nightmares, and

                            white  
                            as everything  
                            forgotten.

Ophelia and I whisper  
to each other, don't forget  
green, pushing up  
from the ground and drawing down  
the sun. Remember green, the growing,  
urgent and audacious as seasons surely  
numbed and overtaken.



**About David**

In this dark, the sky faded  
away, I remember  
how my young body loved  
the ground. The younger  
my body, the more it loved the ground,  
the more it needed earth  
under its nails, on its knees  
and palms, needed earth's scent,  
like the scent of its mother.  
When it's young, the body remembers  
best where it came from.  
And my young body knew  
that mystery lives in the ground,  
that wonder, joy, imagination ooze  
up as you dig  
through dark  
earth to find it. The young body  
remembers where it came from, and isn't  
afraid to go back.

David wasn't afraid to go back.

How we like to keep everything  
alive, how we do  
anything to keep things, keep  
people, then their memories, alive.

How they wanted to keep you alive, David.

Was I the only one? Was I  
the only one whispering to you  
for the hour it took  
to get there, whispering  
already toward the sky, not  
to any body on this ground,  
to let go, if you had to. Hang on  
if you could, fight  
to hang on, but let go  
if you had to,  
let yourself go, falling  
soft, into the hard  
dark.

Was I the only one you heard? Did I  
whisper too loud? Did I  
give the wrong advice,  
did I release you?

Your mother wouldn't  
let you go, she rubbed  
your feet, all night.

Your father wouldn't  
let you go, you were locked  
in his face, the two of you together  
too much for one man's features,  
you were in his lips, twisted  
as though two minds pulled them different ways,  
you were in his eyes, too full  
to keep in the tears.

Elizabeth, your older sister, coming down  
the hall, her eyes  
expecting you. Any other  
afternoon she might have found you  
riding your bike along the sidewalk,  
she might have called you  
home. Elizabeth finding  
us, instead, saying  
that you had disappeared,  
that no one knew how to bring you back.

I stayed with Daniel and Thomas  
at the hotel through the night,  
while the others stayed  
at the hospital with your body.  
But you were in that hotel room,  
as much as on that stretcher.  
Some part of you slept with your brothers, three  
squirming boys in one bed. Two,  
squirming with fear. One  
squirming free of a body, learning  
to run to us without legs,  
learning to hold his brothers without arms.

In the morning, Daniel thought we should get you  
a muffin, maybe  
you'd be better now, and you liked  
blueberry. How do you say,  
he's never getting better,  
how do you say, he was dead before  
the ambulance got there, how  
do you say, hang on, to the living  
ones, how do you say any of that.  
I put my hands on their thin shoulders,  
and we order one blueberry muffin,  
just in case. Just in case this is the last chance  
they have to bring you a gift, to look forward  
to you.

I was the one who didn't cry,  
until the end, I was the one  
they must have thought didn't care.

David, how could I care about your body?  
How could I  
rub your feet or stroke your hair?  
I needed to stand  
back, where I could see  
you, hanging thick and  
invisible, smiling  
down into the room, from the air.  
We stood  
in you like a cloud.  
A cloud lifting.

And now where have you gone?

Thomas tried to show us, drawing you  
on the chalkboard in the room where we gathered.  
He could see you smiling too, it was there  
in your chalky face. And Thomas, the youngest,  
could already smell the earth. He was drawing  
a field of grass, he was drawing you in it  
surrounded by flowers, the sun you no longer needed,  
small and white and far away in the corner.

I remember carrying you through Granny's garden,  
your wide eyes dark as your hair was bright.  
How you made us laugh  
then. You  
the only cousin with eyes of earth,  
hair of sun.  
We should have known,  
you, small enough  
to carry through the garden,  
you'd be the first we'd put into the ground,  
first to slip off into the sky.



**Floating O ...**

Ophelia, there was a time when I looked  
in a mirror  
to find  
a drowning woman. There was a time  
when I threw myself  
down on its glass and opened my hands.  
A time when everything floated  
from me like loosed flowers on a current  
I couldn't catch  
up to, it was me, heavy  
pressed into a reflection  
of someone I might have been, and every day  
I'd missed as I lay, immersed  
in surfaces  
of night, though I could hear  
night's deeper body  
calling. Now I look  
at you, open  
and opening  
on the wall before me, an entire  
garden giving its body  
over to the ecstasy of pushing, spreading, unfolding. Today  
it is late June, but I know it is  
Spring and you are only beginning,  
my feet under this desk, as roots planted  
in rich soil, you are only beginning to speak  
to me across this garden  
we share, wafting words if I  
don't forget to breathe deep, only  
beginning, definite, illusive,  
the scent  
of pansy, scent of sage.

And there is no glass.  
There is no glass between us.

Be fooled, be

round and open as a fool's double O, be

an eight adding yourself to everything, be

balance scales, both sides resting on the ground, be

the breasts of a young woman nursing her child, be

the double O of the eyes in your head. Be

the holes in a wooden flute, sets of double O's singing, be

the arms-O and legs-O of a koala holding its mother, be

a double Okay sign, one on each hand, be

a snowman, all body, melting.

letter O  
moon  
base of a wigwam  
dance of interlacing feet  
rings on the lake  
after you plunge in  
taste of chokecherry  
song of the robin  
cedar and sweetgrass  
as I sit beside the creek,  
fragrances that  
open and open from inside  
themselves, full  
and round

How life keeps curving around itself.  
The mystery of things that are round.

egg  
eye  
singing mouth  
mouth kissing a baby's skin  
smoke rings as the pipe is passed,  
your arms around me, and

the mystery of the single bead.

How you know about round things, how  
the bead always reminds you, turning  
hundreds of small earths between your fingers  
each day, stitching them together.

You tell me learning the beads  
is like learning mystery and healing, is like  
learning a language  
you speak to yourself.

You are a woman of round things, in  
your arms I am a bead, in your arms  
I am the mystery of everything round, everything  
healed. In your arms,  
I speak to you without words.

How you know the language of round things,  
how you reach out a round place for me to enter,  
how you return  
to me the memory of what it's like to be round.

How time circles back,  
how we are two girls  
again, and instead of me

holding you, you  
hold me. How you

touch me  
see me  
sing me  
kiss me  
breathe me

round.

How you teach me that, in everything  
we do, we must complete the circle,  
how even thoughts are round in your head.

How your thoughts are a circle around you.

I keep making little circles little circles little circles, but

there's this one great circle opening, how  
when I'm with you, you  
fill what's incomplete,  
bring everything 'round.

How I can't write enough O's on the page  
to show you how round you are to me, how  
all I can do is wait for the next circle  
we'll make, how all I can do is hold how you make me  
round and the circles of

O  
moon  
base of a wigwam  
dance of interlacing feet  
rings on the lake  
after you plunge in  
taste of chokecherry  
song of the robin  
cedar and sweetgrass  
as I sit beside the creek  
egg  
eye  
singing mouth  
mouth kissing a baby's skin  
smoke rings as the pipe is passed  
the single bead  
your arms around me

yes

A woman carries me  
with her as she dives  
head-first  
into a bed  
of blue sheets,  
wrapping around her face and shoulders,  
rippling as she falls and falls,  
she could fall forever,  
never ground her  
skin in silt or sand.  
She brushes past fish, slivers of the moon  
scattered and swimming in oceans and seas,  
past kelp, Medusa's hair,  
a thousand snaky-tongues smelling  
whoever comes near,  
this kelp can freeze you,  
tangle you in as you pass  
and hold you underwater,  
turn your curious body  
to stone.  
The woman who dives into water  
returns to me on the shore,  
drops of lake a fine sweat on her skin,  
slivers of the moon caught in her teeth,  
strands of kelp wound dangerously around her wrists.  
She tells me she thought of me while she swam.

She learned to surrender to the water  
way before she learned

to surrender to herself.  
She gives herself to the water and

it takes her away  
in pieces, gives her back, whole.

She has taken  
to imagining

women that always go to the water  
together. They stand

naked, under waterfalls.  
Together they give themselves

over, then I  
come back

to you, I come back to you,  
dripping wet, I surrender.

I am certain the women went to the lake  
to birth their babies, I am certain  
they entered the water to their chests,  
that each knew how the rocks lay,  
knew how to lay themselves on the rocks  
in the water.

I am certain of the water,  
how I lay myself in it to birth  
anything, how the water eases  
everything out of me, how  
everywhere I go, I take myself  
down to the water.

I can birth many things, I can  
birth myself into a city, enter the streets  
quietly from the east, when the lights are off  
and everyone's asleep. I can

birth words onto the page, whole poems  
wet and dripping, crying for me  
to show them how to live  
in a dry and shattered world. I can

birth you, against my thighs, I am  
the beach laid down and spread  
beneath you, you are the tide, I can  
send you back out to yourself in new rhythms.

I can birth fear and anger and grief and pain, all those  
burning states, those things we keep  
sticking our arms through, things we can't  
wrestle down once and for all, I can  
take them from you, swallow them  
into my chest, I can  
birth them through me, not  
down to the ground, or into the air, I can  
birth them away,  
they are gone.

Every day, I go to the lake, I go  
to rivers and seashores and waterfalls. Every day  
I go with the women to the birthing waters, and  
the world passes through me.



Like a mermaid, they say,  
Ophelia's shimmering dress, silver  
scales and no feet.  
Haven't they heard  
how bud turns to blossom and worm  
to butterfly. Haven't they heard  
even mermaids grow legs.  
But instead of learning to walk  
on the land, this one will fly, will dangle  
her toes free in the air, and the voice  
that lured love to its end in the sea  
will call love out of its many bodies  
and up to the sky, she will sing stronger and louder  
as she flies, contralto  
luring love out  
to itself, luring love back  
to its beginning.

Sitting on this bank  
on this Island  
summer after summer  
since I was a little girl,  
sitting here  
since before I was  
born, swimming  
in my mother's belly,  
I feel every June July August  
that has passed for 26 years.

A place so familiar,  
just sitting brings back  
years indecipherable  
as reeds standing together in the silt,  
crows calling from the leafy branches,  
ripples in the creek where the water breaks  
over the stones.

This bank, so familiar,  
Lake Huron runs through my veins,  
sandy earth settles around my pupils, and  
the crabgrass and wild flowers of every colour  
fall from my mouth.

Leaving everything to hang open,  
as the edge of the world  
hangs open, she has to watch  
where she walks or she might step off.

She is stepping off the edge  
of the world, there  
across the North Channel, just over  
the other side of the mountains  
that lie asleep on their backs, tired  
as the settlers moving rock after rock  
to clear the land,  
tired as the dark ones  
who first paddled through,  
who paddle away and away.

Across the North Channel, on the other side  
of the mountains, don't be surprised  
if you find the tired ones sleeping.  
Mindemoya, the Old Woman, sleeps  
above Grandpa's grave, she sleeps  
in the heart  
of this Island.

Mindemoya is tired, she rises  
from the centre, moves  
to the edge. Mindemoya  
steps over the hills to the north  
of the channel, she  
steps off the edge  
of the world and I go with her.

You are dark  
and your dark hair falls  
to weave itself with grass blades,  
your feet move across the ground  
like mothers' hands  
patting the backs of babies.  
You know fire so carefully  
it sparks from your fingernails  
and jumps to the birch bark you peel  
back with your heat.  
The drum softens  
and warms when you rub  
its skin before you start  
to hit, gives  
the pulse of your fingers back  
to the air, where  
everyone can feel you.  
Your parents came to this Island  
years ago, more than anyone  
can count, more than the number  
of sticks I could line up  
in crossed-out fives  
after a day  
of gathering and breaking.  
What were their names, and  
how do you pronounce them,  
how did you fit your mouth around  
the clean Ojibwa syllables?  
How did you throw your voice  
across a deep laugh  
that fell from your open  
mouth into the hands of strangers  
who did not understand? My relatives  
came to this Island, they  
have blue eyes, the tops of thin pools,  
and hair lighter than  
my skin. But ----- (I don't  
know your name,  
though I'm calling you),  
I am dark. I  
am the night,  
like you, we are dark  
selves who can draw each other  
into thinking, holding,  
resting, and other thick acts.  
We can hear blue pools,  
without having to carry them  
in our eyes. And I have  
angled bones, like you,  
only shamefully softer, diluted  
by European cells.

You pull me out of opaque dusk,  
out of my half-dark night, and  
into the air that's so still  
I forget the morning will come waving  
its arms through the trees.  
You feel what it's like to stand  
beside me, then look  
at my face and say, doctor.  
You feel what it's like to stand  
with the stars and the colours,  
the animals, the sand, syllables  
that fit like zipper-teeth, and they seep  
into me when I lock  
up my words, when I follow  
your eyes, let the wind blow  
through my ears. You whisper  
the histories thin  
pool-eyes can't pour  
down, the quiet secrets tucked  
behind and beneath. You show  
me how to let my blood run out  
of my feet and into the ground,  
you play nasal music, charm  
my hair to twist around yours,  
like Island paintings,  
our blood, our hair, runs, twists  
through black sand that ground  
itself out of rock, layers  
below flowers that rise and sway  
from earth that has never felt  
the sun, that's dark  
like us.

The sunset is  
a woman, dressed  
in her purple skin. Always  
between light and dark, she is  
there, reminding you  
that you too move between light  
and dark. That's where you find  
yourself, brilliant, fading.

I don't ask  
that you break the sky open, show me  
the floating cave  
where the purple woman lives.

I don't ask  
that you grab her by the hair, by the toes, pull her  
down, unconscious, so I can see her close up, so I can  
put my mouth to hers and learn  
who will resuscitate whom.

I don't ask  
that you paint your body  
with the juice of African violets,  
with the dye Lydia made from oyster shells,  
that you grow your hair long, or speak  
in a voice high as clouds.

I don't ask  
anything of you, except  
that you know where I am,  
that you know I'd fall  
like purple rain from the sky  
if you broke it open,  
if I asked you to break me open.  
My body is the cave where she lives.

Everyone thinks Ophelia's dead.  
Forget the woman

who stood on the edge  
of a steep bank, lassoed  
in vines and garlands, arms

filled with flowers  
she loved and broke  
at the throat because she needed them to speak  
as her last breath, held  
out to the world.

Sometimes a woman knows  
her only chance is to hold  
her own voice, wrap  
the speaking world around her  
and lie floating in its arms.



So forget the woman who stood at the edge  
of a steep bank and  
threw  
her body into the world's speaking arms, forget  
the one who died as the world held her, rocked her  
in the current  
    of a brook  
in the shade  
    of a willow,  
forget that  
woman everyone thinks is dead.

Open your eyes  
wider  
and see  
the one who hangs  
above the girl's desk

is alive as one

who reaches out  
as colour through a pane of glass.

Ophelia is getting up, leaving  
the soaked heavy dress behind  
like a useless skin, she flies  
naked and free, up from the canvas.

I see her pale toes dangling, disappearing  
as she crosses out of the frame,  
I see the stems of the flowers  
she has gathered back together  
in her strong, sure fist, they raise her  
into the sky, like a bouquet  
of balloons, and

there is a shower of bright petals  
blowing across my desk, they look like  
poems, but believe me, they are  
the petals of wild flowers.

When she opens her hands and holds  
her palms up, anything can happen.

Rain can begin to fall from the sky  
for the first time in weeks, thirsty  
for the earth, desperate  
to soak itself into another body.

Lightning can shock down, singe her  
there, in the centre of the palm, burning  
a target for some pounder of nails.

The air can begin to spin  
if she moves her open hands in a circle.  
She can make a tornado, blow  
everything up and around and around  
and away.

Sparrows and orioles can land,  
weave nests, fasten them  
to her fingers, leave  
their eggs to hatch in her warmth.

Children swinging from branches can dip  
their toes down, smear dirt  
and crumbs of bark on the heels  
of her palms, so she won't  
forget them.

Ghosts can sprinkle  
words, drop thousands of them, wet  
and black, their images drying,  
on her skin, even after  
the wind blows the words away.

A purple-bodied woman can reach  
her tongue out of the sky, lick  
her palms until she's clean, easy, until  
all her fingerprints are smoothed and gone.

And, if you watch carefully,  
when she opens her hands and holds them up,  
things can fly out. Soft sounds, bright colours,  
leave the veins in her wrists and fingertips  
and enter the air like a cloud of butterflies.

She is filled with everything  
she has seen, touched,  
and these things, they are  
flowing out. See  
what it is now, the  
shell of an insect crumbling to dust,  
the purple sunset  
soaking into the ground, a white  
dandelion puff. You  
breathe on me, and I  
disconnect at the centre, float  
away. Who knows where  
or how we flower  
again,

except there will be  
water and dark earth and sun,  
there will be sky.

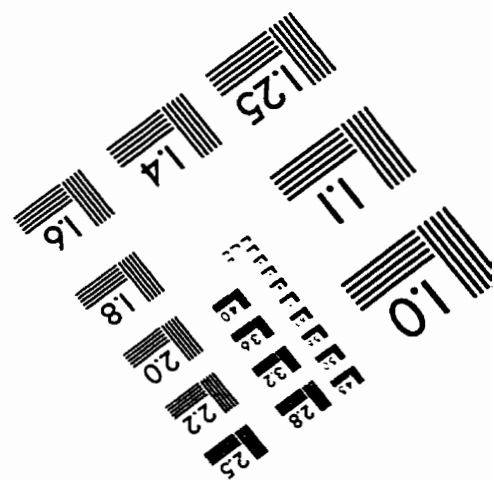
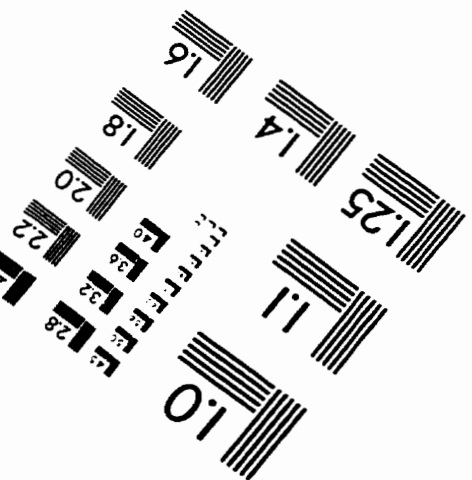
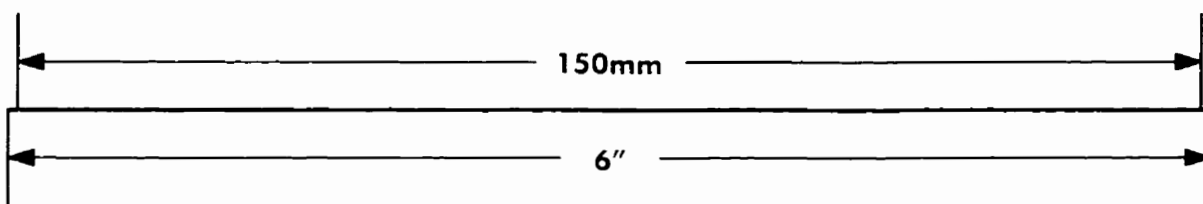
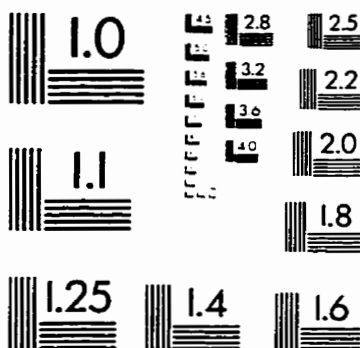
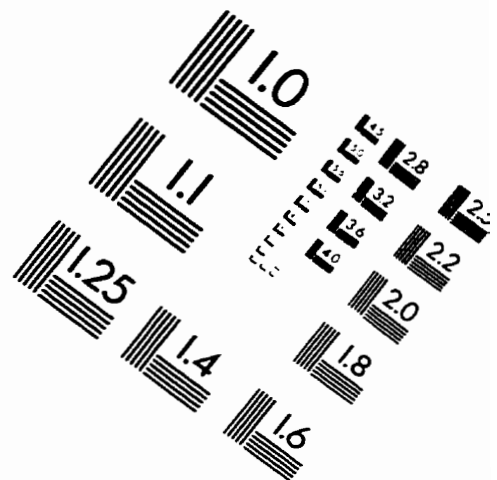
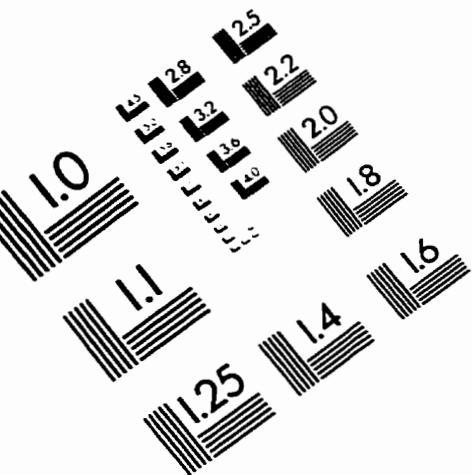
It's like that river flowing past. It didn't ask  
to leave the mountains,  
to pour into the sea. It didn't ask  
for us to walk beside it, creating  
a second river  
of dust, to trace it  
with ink onto maps, to build  
walls against it, to fall  
in love with its constant motion, its changing  
personalities. It didn't ask

to understand better than we ever will  
how to flow through this place, how to  
accept its own motion, its freedom  
from drowning in itself.

It didn't ask for anything.

I am slowly learning, sometimes  
returning to where I started and beginning  
to learn again,  
not to ask,  
but to lay my body down, like a river.

# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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