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**De die in diem:  
A Grieving Process**

by

**Edith Newell-Beattie**

**A Creative Writing Project  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
through English Literature and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts in English Literature and Creative Writing at the  
University of Windsor**

**Windsor, Ontario, Canada**

**2003**

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**Canada**

## About the Title

While filling out forms for the office of Graduate Studies I got hung-up on the ever important question of what the title for my project would be. I had wanted something that would reflect the grieving process. I was considering using “How Do I Do This?” not because I really liked the title; rather it was just the question that boggled me. I couldn’t seem to get past it.

“How do I do this?”—from pant-leg tugging tot to phone-line mother of teens, it has been Dad who would hear my questions and advise me over and over again over the years. Death did not allow him to retire from my questioning.

I was flipping through a book of phrases and fables one day—don’t remember why—and my eye stopped on *De die in diem*, which is Latin and means, “From day to day continuously, until the business is complete.” I recognized the phrase as my title.

I was taken by it. Surely Dad was responsible. I’m not saying that he was titling my project for me but it certainly felt like he was guiding me to an answer for the prevalent question.

*De die in diem*, such a poetic phrase, I felt the comfort of my father as I said it over to myself. *De die in diem*, it felt consoling, spiritual, honest, and it certainly seemed to reflect the process. So from the spiritual guidance of my poet/mechanic/auto-body/woodworking/clock-making, grade six educated Dad came *De die in diem*.

**Happy Thoughts**

by: Herb Newell

I like to think of happy thoughts  
As life goes passing by  
Thoughts of kindness and of love  
That never seem to die

I think of happy birds and bees  
How joyously they sing  
And young hearts drawn to love  
In marry months of spring

I like to think of sunshine  
As days may come and go  
Of flowers and their beauty  
When they are out in bloom

How happy most folks seem to be  
When summer's in its prime  
They think of warmth and sunshine  
Not of the winter time

But I do like the wintertime  
When snow is on the ground  
Because it comes from up above  
To where I'm homeward bound  
(Spring 1944)

### **Dedication**

I leaned forward to kiss him goodbye  
not forever  
just for the evening  
a spiral of a curl fell along-side my face  
he reached his soft but still oversized hand  
held the curl caressed the curl with his crooked fingers  
his eyes lost to it mouth agape  
he caressed the curl

and I kissed him again  
“I’m not leaving I’ll see you tomorrow Dad”

**(J. H. Newell, Aug 1, 1924—May 26, 2002)**

## Acknowledgements

### My committee:

I would like to extend a special thanks to **Dr. Di Brandt** (director/first reader) who, in the earliest stages of this project, met with me weekly—sometimes twice, thrice, weekly and extended experience and support beyond the process of writing.

Without the early encouragement of **Dr. John Ditsky** (director/first reader) I am convinced that I may not have achieved an HBA, let alone tackle an MA in Creative Writing. He is valued and is more influential than he would ever realize. I extend a warm thank you—I'm indebted.

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**Dr Sylvia Voelker** (external reader) was the name that came to mind when it finally struck me that I would have to defend this sensitive material. I thank her for agreeing to enter into my creative and very real experience.

I am highly thankful to **Dr Katherine Quinsey** (chair) who has been promoting my efforts from first year onward. She has been an inspiration in my academic studies and I am pleased and honoured to have her share in this creative experience. Thank you.

### Beyond my committee:

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I extend a thank you to my **Creative-Writing classmates**—the group who became my friends throughout our undergraduate experience as well as the group of Master's students. I also thank **classmates** and **staff members** outside creative writing who are not mentioned by name (only because I have to save pages for poetry) but who have been there through smiles & tears.

**Beyond academia:**

**Jim Beattie** married a naïve young woman and ended up with me—surprise! I thank him for joining in, holding back and pushing forward, and for his never ending support through and through and through...

I would like to acknowledge **Charlie Beattie** and **Bobby Beattie** both of whom have suffered numerous “late slips” on my account, have endured me at stressed-best, and had to learn how to wash their own socks early in life. You guys are wonderful.

To **Craig Pittman**, who has been reading my writing since I was in grade school, I extend a sunny-warm thank you, for being a wonderful part of the whole process.

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### **News-flash**

The phone rang and a shotgun went off  
inside my chest and my gut  
must have been a shotgun  
i heard the ring  
felt the impact that threw me back  
against a brick wall  
felt the ripping  
still feel the holes riveting  
and i want to die but i can't die  
and i think that you are alive  
and i am dead  
and i'd rather relive  
my childhood in its entirety  
re-take the trials that turned  
the spirited child  
docile

## Upheaval

Dad  
can you still hear me?  
did you hear me last night?  
i called you  
from my living room  
floor  
where i was found  
bathed  
in the blood of Christ  
after i had slipped  
in red wine vomit  
they say i lay there  
in a pool of red  
crying calling you

## Attempted robbery

My dad is dead

and you put your fingers on my back i feel them in my back crawling under my skin i  
squirm my arms clamp—vise my head as if it could split and your fingers are parasites

i feel your poverty your uselessness your need for me to stand compose be strong  
you need me to be who i was yesterday when I had a dad to comfort—to comfort me

your fingers slither my skin searching seeking something you press them into my skin  
try to get them into the knots so you can grip and pull draw the pain my pain away

my head swings curls fly wild and hands swipe try to strike your fingers out of reach

Stop it! i demand this is between me and my dad all that's left i push you away keep  
you at arms length

and you think me nuts you want to take me away to hospital you say it's too much  
for me i can't handle it i can't take it my dad dead

you can't take it

## **Mourning mission**

i don't fear  
for you

—your dad wasn't only  
the most popular  
man in Tillsonburg—

don't doubt  
you are free

—he was the most liked  
the kindest  
most honest man around—

don't feel a need  
to guide you anywhere  
through meditation  
or prayer

—don't cry  
he's with God now—

what's left?

## **Struck dumb**

I'm sorry  
I don't know what to say  
they say  
and go away

no one knows what to say  
    what to say  
    say nothing

there is  
    nothing

who can  
    sit in nothing?  
    take the lack of human voice?  
    face the unsmiling?

**Life goes**

**—1—**

Faces  
of flowers  
stare at me  
daisies dyed  
burgundy  
for you  
speaking  
sympathy  
for me  
on this first day  
of life goes



oak clock ticks  
steady rhythm  
the clock your hands  
constructed and hung  
level on my living  
room wall when you  
showed me how to adjust  
brass pendulum  
for time accuracy

now you're outside  
time and my clock  
ticks to your setting  
and i am struck  
stuck

textured fabric  
of the couch  
against exposed  
skin and myself  
sinking  
into the fibers  
wishing to fuse  
with the couch  
blend  
into the pale  
floral print  
become one  
with its weave  
never leave  
because it is  
real

i see myself  
eyes staring  
straight ahead  
as the scene  
inches into  
view

you

i place  
one foot  
in front  
of the other  
foot in front  
of the other  
foot in front  
of the other

damned to  
time's slivers  
stuck in  
moments  
bearing  
the life-altering aisle  
aided by the man  
you walked me to

—5—

husband gone to work  
sons at school because life

goes

life goes

life goes

on

everything is  
telling me  
life goes  
on

while i wonder  
where you are  
beyond time  
i am without  
ways

i don't know  
how to do this  
have to learn  
how to do this  
how do i do this  
Dad?

*De die in deim*

## Doing dishes

Standing at the kitchen sink i wash dishes because dishes still have to be dirtied and cleaned and dirtied and i think about you on my mantelpiece

you

wrapped in brown paper addressed to Ostrander's Funeral Home on Bidwell in Tillsonburg placed into—entrusted to—my hands

when i am at home left alone the first chance i get i work fingers over brown paper remove tape careful not to tear not a tear

a certificate of authenticity

*These are the remains of...*

how do i know? what do i know? i believe take up faith this is you what is left?

i open the box gray bits of white bone quickly close the box re-wrap the box and you live in my head you thin frail hooked to oxygen eyes closed head back mouth agape

and me

knowing you're dying not knowing you are dying afraid to ask go on not knowing just go on along

i go back to wiping dishes because dishes still have to be cleaned and dirtied and cleaned again and i hate

I hate that about dishes and I want to throw dishes through the window and I want to scream so the whole world can hear me and I don't want you on my mantelpiece and i want you on my mantelpiece and i have an impulse so strong i feel myself move away

i move away from wiping dishes rip brown paper savagely destroy the box tear through plastic I am on my knees in a cloud of powder a cloud of ashes your ashes entrusted to my hands in my hands I rub your ashes all over my body scrape my skin with your bits of bone wash my face with you scrub you into my hair the curls you loved selfishly greedily I scour you into my pores through my sores so you'll be with me stay with me—because i don't have enough of you—haven't had enough of you—will never have enough of you

**“Happy thoughts”**

“I like to think of springtime  
as days may come and go  
of flowers and their beauty  
when they are out in bloom”

and the gardens are still growing  
sun shining birds singing  
and spring is turning into summer  
“summer’s in its prime”  
children are running laughing playing  
couples are making vows of love  
and people have places to go  
must have places to be  
i keep hearing traffic  
always hear traffic  
traffic never stops  
nothing stops

## No reprieve

I never said it out loud I wrote it and wrote it and I wrote I think my dad is dying and I feel nothing

i tried to comfort—rubbed his back held hot cloths to his wrenching belly sooth pain  
i sat with him studied him lying sleeping thin frail a leash around his head hooked  
into his nose—oxygen still handsome skin soft gentle folds one blemish over left  
temple distinct jaw line blue-gray eyes open and close open and close and open again

without raising his head his hand extended as if guided by a magnetic force his hand  
hovered over blankets smoothly it moved to mine

he held my hand “This is my little girl” he said caressing words i hardly remember  
hearing before in our house of restraint where love was unspoken and pride damning

“This is my little girl” he said face relaxed and eyes brilliant and the words were  
energy that makes the world okay

he hugged my hand in his hand warmed my spirit with his smile his eyes and my little-  
girl-self rolled around in his esteem splashed the sin of pride on my face I felt it roll  
over my shoulders down my back I bathed

he slept i sat and listened while he spoke to his dead mother dead brother and sister  
whose name i carry i watched i listened and wondered never accepting thoughts

“I keep dreamin’ I’m somewhere else but I wake up an’ I’m still here” he said

i imagined a reunion at a family farm in a spiritual world but didn’t ask about that  
couldn’t ask about that i just felt sorry for him i felt bad for him poor Dad not even  
allowed to die



*At least he's not suffering anymore*

"I never wanted you t' see me like this Eed"

i want to be here but i will leave if you want me to i said not knowing how i could leave  
how i could stay away and you took my hand and i took your hand and i stayed

stayed until you stopped responding to my smiles stopped hunching your shoulders with  
your chin up and lips stretched to that oversized smile i stayed until your face became so  
serious that i had to turn my face away blink back tears hide pangs

then i left you for a party you left me when the party was over and it wasn't supposed  
to happen like that not like that we had the whole summer we were going to sit in the  
garden look at the flowers birds I was supposed to hold your hand help you feed  
you wipe your mouth wash you clean your bed-pan

I was supposed to take care of you until you felt like a burden to me until I wished you  
would just die and make it end so I could say *at least he's not suffering anymore* when i  
would really mean *at least I'm not suffering any more*

## Click

A black and white photograph taken in 1966

a winged car in front of a rounded porch  
our car our house

a little girl sits on the hood  
me no more than three  
blond curls frame a Shirley Temple face  
saddle shoes one crossed over the other

the little girl leans  
I lean toward  
daddy  
leans onto his car  
to his little girl  
he leans to me  
his face shows in profile  
his eyes look to me  
I look to the camera

a black and white photograph  
was taken in 1966  
for him to hold on to

the day remains  
imprinted in my head  
Dad took me for a walk  
hand in hand  
we walked  
he talked  
i don't remember words  
i only remember sense  
walking with my dad  
wanting only to walk  
with my dad

i hold a black and white photograph  
taken in 1966 for him to hold on to

### **Then again**

I'm drawn back. I'm two, three-years-old again and I'm with my dad and my brother, Stevie. I've missed my dad. My brother and I had to stay with Dad's friends, Marvin and Betty, for a long time because Court had to decide if we could live with Dad. Marvin was nice. I didn't think so at first but Betty was nice too. I just wanted my Daddy. I cried a lot and made it known that I was mad at Court—whose Court—I demanded—Court's not my daddy, just tell Court I want my daddy—and I didn't understand why Court got to decide if I could be with my dad. But I forgave Court, forgot about him, when Betty started packing my things and my brother's things in suitcases because Daddy was coming to take us home.

I'm in a trailer and it's summertime and my world is perfect with my dad and my big brother, who is only a year older than me, but that one year makes a difference, I look up to him. When we waited for Court Stevie didn't cry and he said I shouldn't cry because Daddy would make Court give us back, and he said it hurts Daddy's feelings when I cry, and it hurts his feelings when I cry. And I cared but I cried anyway. And when Daddy's supertime visits had to end, Stevie stayed, he lay beside me, behind me, with an arm over me, and I cried.

The trailer is filled with music. I think the music is a part of my dad because there's always music when he's around just like there's always that fresh spicy smell that would come into Marvin and Betty's house with him, and would linger, adding to my loneliness after he'd leave. But he never has to leave ever again so I think the music and the fresh spicy smell will be forever, and I am happy, happy. The whole world is alive in my Daddy's trailer.

I'm all dressed up in a white sundress, frilly ankle-socks and I have shiny black shoes on. My shoes click when I tap them on the floor. I like the tapping. The tapping shoes make me feel pretty and so does the new dress Dad bought for me. I'm standing in front of my dad, who's fussing over my brother, and I'm singing for Dad to look at me.

Am I like a dancing girl, Daddy? I chant and clicked my feet. I am a child, smooth dancer. Dad gives me the tick of his tongue and I know I'm a good dancer.

"By golly, I think yea got 'er, Speedy. You're a dancin, girl alright." And his shoulders dance with me while his hands tie my brother's shoe.

Stevie is wearing a white tee-shirt top, with a set of three stripes that run across the chest—red in the middle of blue. He has blue shorts on. His shoes don't click like mine because boys wear soft, cloth-shoes with rubber bottoms so they can run fast because that's what boys like to do, and that's what Stevie likes too. His blond hair is short it doesn't need combing. Stevie's all finished and wants to play outside but our dad says no. He asks Stevie to wait. He has to do my hair and then he says that he needs to talk to us about something important.

Dad is brushing my hair. I am standing with my hands, one on each of his knees, as he brushes through my fine, blond curls. I don't fuss. I watch Stevie who's making two dinky-cars crash into each other. Stevie likes cars and he wants to know when we're going back to our own town, to our own house at the wrecking-yard: he wants to know if Dad is getting any more *new-old cars* soon.

Dad brushes my hair with kind, soft strokes, lets me pick the barrettes for the day, and his big callused, fingers work around the tiny clips and fine hair. I don't flinch. And I'm all ready.

It's a sunny day and Stevie and I want to play outside but Dad says no, he wants to talk to us, "Remember, there's somethin' important we need t' talk about."

Dad is telling us that we are going to meet a nice lady who bakes cookies, has a big house with a swing-set in the backyard and a son we can play with. As he speaks my belly starts fluttering, my dancing spirit stops dancing, and the sun shining in through the windows and screen door seems less bright, less inviting.

“She wants to be your new mom,” Dad says.

I don’t want to go to meet the ‘nice lady’ and my brother doesn’t want to go either. We both start crying. I cry because I only want to be with my dad. I don’t think about a mom—I have no memory of a mom, I just don’t like moms. And I don’t want one. But my brother does remember our mom and he wants her back and perhaps that’s why he cries.

When we were at Marvin and Betty’s he would tell me stories about the nice lady our mother was. She went away but she’s coming back, he told me, she promised—she’s coming back. He doesn’t know where she went or when she’s coming back. I don’t remember her. I only remember my brother remembering; telling me, she wears dresses, she’s pretty, she’s nice, and she’s coming back. He didn’t cry, he just kept talking about her and sitting by the window. Stevie never stops watching for her, waiting for her, but she doesn’t come back.

I don’t care about moms.

“She’s a nice lady and she wants to be your new mom,” Dad says and we cry more.

I tell him that we don’t need a mom—don’t want a mom. My brother and I are both on Dad’s lap. I’m standing on his lap, my arms around his neck—I just want you Daddy, don’t want a mommy—don’t need one.

“But daddys have to go to work an’ kids need a mommy to take care of ‘em,” he says. “She’s been baking cookies for you so we’re goin’ t’ visit. She’s a nice lady.”

I'm in the middle of the front bench-seat of the car because my brother likes the window and I can't see out of it anyway. Dad's plaid, wool blanket covers the seat so my dress doesn't get dirty. The blanket is picky on my bare legs. I put my hands between the blanket and my legs but my hands are too small to protect my legs from the picks, so I put my feet on the blanket, knees up, and sit on my hands. I would like to stand up but my brother and I do not stand up in a moving car. Dad says bunnies often run on the road and if we are standing up he can't stop fast enough to save the bunny because we would get badly hurt. My brother and I don't want to kill bunnies so we don't ever stand up in the car when it's moving.

I think about the promise of cookies baking but I'm not convinced. *Skip-a-rope* comes on the radio. Dad winks at me and makes the sound louder. He is driving and singing, "Listen to the children while they play, ain't it kinda funny what the children say, skip-a-rope." I know he's singing because I like the song about dads and little girls skipping and having fun, but I don't care about songs right now.

Stevie's body is stretched as tall as it can stretch. He's looking out the window so I watch the puffs of white clouds against blue sky and I know that I don't want a mom, and I have a brother to play with, and I like the swings at the park Dad takes us to, and I like the date cookies he buys at the store.

Dad announces, "this'd be it," as he pulls into the drive.

I stand on the seat and see a green house with a round porch. A dark-haired boy is sitting on a chair and his mother comes out of the house. Dad starts getting out of the car and I scurry to him before he can close the door. When he bends toward me my arms

lock around his neck, my legs wrap to his waist and I press my nose into his fresh spicy smell.

Dad is wearing me like a vest as he walks around the car to let my brother out through the passenger door. The lady, whom I don't want or need, comes over to us singing words of high praise.

Her voice has a piercing pitch as she coos—what a doll, what a beautiful little girl; oh she's so lovely, Herb.

She puts her hands out to take me. I squeeze onto my dad but her big hands are already too tight around my waist. I'm scared. I don't like her coos and her big hands. I cling tight to my dad and she tightens her too-tight grip and she pulls my waist telling Dad that I am fine when I am not fine at all.

She is mean—I feel her meanness—I hear it in her cooing voice. And I know that she doesn't really like me at all, and I know that I don't like her. But she's squeezing me in her arms now.

You're upsetting your brother, her nice voice says, but her voice reminds me of those big black birds that were squawking, hitting each other with their wings, trying to peck a bird that was hurt on the road in front of our house before Dad shooed them away and brought the little bird into the barn until it could fly.

You don't want to upset your brother, her voice says as her cruel fingers pinch my leg.

My crying changes pitch. Dad comes to me. I reach my arms to him, for him to take me back. He is reaching toward me.

It's okay Herb, she says—I pinched her, she tells him—an accident, she insists. She takes my face in her hand, makes me look at her, and says, see what you brought on yourself?—all that fussing, hard to hold.

I see her eyes.

Stevie is clinging to Dad and I'm stretching out arms—reaching, wet-faced, Dad's careful brushing gone to muddle, hair is stuck to my face, stuck to tears. I'm stretching my body toward Dad—he extends an arm to take me—I am reduced to sniffles of hope that I'm going to get back to my daddy. My daddy is strong. He always carries Stevie and me at the same time. But the woman cuts any hope sharp. She denies us.

As if the authority on children she says, Your arms are full, Herb. She's fine. I can take her.

And she did. She took me.



## Blowing kisses

Your new wife taught me to blow kisses I stood on the oak staircase that bent up around to the landing that led to my new white on white bedroom I stood on the step in a linen nightgown blond curls framed baby-fat cheeks

I was blowing kisses down to you were blowing kisses up to me you smiled I cried not because I didn't want to go to bed I cried because I couldn't feel kisses in a wind of breath

your new wife stood over me cooed how cute as she ordered distance teaching me to blow kisses I'd never heard of such silliness before blowing kisses I wanted wrap my little self to you and be kissed I cried because we were blowing ——

## A walk in the park

People jogging biking roller-blading sweat-wet clothes streaking past life to prolong  
life returning home to count calories carbs protein potassium rhyacine niacine  
glucose

and i wonder what it is everyone is working so hard to hold on to  
the familiar? this existence? this race to pay bills on time? credit relayed in sums?

and i think of you relieved and i know you are there somewhere i feel you i hear  
you still advising i still see you

in my garden this morning when i was uprooting plants moving them from front to  
back splitting them away from parent making them stand alone on their own i began  
to worry that the new ground was too hard the roots might strangle in clay "dig in-  
ground flower pots" you said so my peat moss and bag of soil would serve

i know you are somewhere and i want to be there too with you where i imagine  
numbers to be obsolete where people in the park are not sweat-wet not streaking past  
i want to be with you where people are

not gasping grasping

## Another night

Two thirty  
three four a.m.  
eyes sting words blur  
can't read another string  
close the book shut the light

i hug my waist  
squeeze belly  
hold it together  
or it will spill  
wide open  
splatter queasy  
anguish all over  
sheets cocoon  
my fetal body  
hold me together  
quiet quivering

i close my eyes  
and you live  
your face  
my belly's  
knotted pain  
your heaving dryness  
my mourning

i open my eyes  
to the open window  
to the upper branches  
of the back-lit tree  
frame outside in

and there is nothing else  
just you and me  
and the back-lit tree  
and the sounds of nature  
crickets tree beetles  
and my unquiet mind  
one

## Small i

i feel very small  
like a child  
abandoned  
turned orphan

but i am not a child  
not abandoned  
you have died  
and i've become

a balloon

strings

cut

away

floating

through

space

place

sensing

prickles

prickles

**“Happy thoughts”**

**II**

Summer's prime is past  
children with book bags  
dressed crisp  
race off playful laughing  
excited in spite of their belief  
in a dislike for school

the gardens are growing  
chrysanthemums display  
fall's finally

trees start the autumn fall  
squirrel scurry for nuts  
birds sing jays  
and cardinals nest  
to stay others in a vee  
fly away

and people have fallen in love  
people are still falling in  
every one and every thing  
is into swing

i waver

## **Little changes**

Hearing the laughter  
of children  
i look out back  
they've piled leaves  
enticed a dog  
to a chase  
they run  
he follows  
they jump  
leaves fly  
float down  
children laugh  
in the fall  
little changes

*De die in diem*

*De die in diem de die in diem* i go on pushing  
myself up steep slopes though i keep sliding back  
to wards where sickly fathers sleep i push up slope  
do all I would do if you didn't died but you are dead  
breathe went out of my doings  
became flat lines

but i go on along *from day to day* and another day  
flows into another night and night to day today still  
with a thousand needles in my feet flashing flaring  
through nerves i push along up slopes so steep without  
sleep i push *continuous until the business is complete*  
the process never ending

another day pricks and stabs into another day to night  
to day day night day

De die in diem time is no friend too fast too slow slow  
fast can't get the flow right and what is this?  
this business this trick of time and place that folds lives  
one into the other just to tear the bond away and say  
time heals?

## **Friendly advice**

I toss my cigarette  
watch it  
roll and burn  
and see her  
morning-fresh make-up face  
telling me  
my dad wouldn't want me  
like this  
can't ruin my life  
she says

stale  
stench  
alcoholic  
words



## Your mother muse

I didn't know you wrote  
until I was a young teen on closet-cleaning assignment  
snooping through boxes I had no business in and found a paper aged yellow

there in the closet body curled like a fetus page unfolded I held your "Happy  
Thoughts" in my hands felt something open in my chest while I read your words

I read them and read them again looking away and looking back until I knew every  
word until your poem became part of me and like a spy I returned the folds replaced  
the yellow page precisely so no one would know

my theft was silent  
until I was twenty and painted your poem on yellow cloth as a gift because I didn't have  
money to do any better

"By golly you done that?" you said admiring the garden-flower-border that dwindled  
down to snow your words mimicked in paint "wrote that when I was 'bout your age  
wrote for my mother" you said

I thought about how you stayed on the farm for your mother cured needs and  
farmyard deeds and how she left

and now i am left  
with your words and an image of how you held her in your arms as her lungs deflated  
you lost your poetry sat there silent held her lifeless body to your chest rocked her  
cried for her and lost your words  
never wrote again

## The undertow

"...a man's life dies as a commotion  
in a still pool dies, in little waves,  
spreading and growing back to stillness."  
(John Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*)

—1—

Came the splash  
the pour swirls  
whirls of water  
a boulder plummeted  
through a crystal pool  
of calm

as if forced by gravity  
you were pulled  
to murky underside  
a shadowy existence  
beyond this place  
space

and I tied to you  
am tossed around  
dizzy  
in an undertow  
twirled whirled  
and ordered forward  
on with life

recent past  
mixed mingled  
in muddy water  
a present  
undefined  
our history lost  
to a quiet sickbed  
and an old man  
posed as you

—2—

breaking the surface  
I look for your hands  
try to bring them back  
hold them  
to memory

**“What can yea do?”**

My dad was Ellis Henry's Volkswagon Dealership by day and he was Herb's Auto-Body & Repair by night everybody brought their car to Dad they said he was reasonable and he was “man don't have money what can yea do?” I'd hear him say to my stepmother “didn't cost me a thing but a bit a time guy needs his car in workin' order t' make money what can yea do?”

it's not a wonder I have high blood pressure not a wonder my stepmother would shout her arms flailing arms always flailing

for a long time I didn't know what high blood pressure was but she kept saying it and saying something about nerves which I understood even less but I did figure out what high blood pressure meant of course I reasoned that it must be what happens when her arms would start flailing and all of her blood right from the tips of her toes would get pumped up into her face just before she'd start to shout the house rattling damning Bill John Ed Fred Chuck Bruce Al Sal Sole by God

and the constant ringing in my ears to this day could be from her needle-sharp-pitch-of-a-voice over all of the years of Dad humming “well what can yea do?”

## In the mud-room

I was thieving time standing in the mud-room with my dad it was one of the times we were alone there weren't many and I don't know how it happened where my stepmother was it was peculiar she was always around always there even when I didn't know it she'd just appear break the clear quiet sometimes I'd feel the smack across my ear before I'd even hear her presence as heavy as she was

she was always everywhere knew everything every leaf of thought that curled through my brain she knew she had eyes in back of her head powerful eyes that could see through the net that hugged her head and held artificial curls in place and guilty I could have used such eyes as I stood by stealing time wondering from where she'd pop order and strike

Dad had a small motor in his hands it was seized I looked to his working hands—the only hard thing about him watched them pry at gears try to work the motor free it up I looked to the softness of his face and had to have something to map the stolen treasure of time tuck it away for safe keeping that day at school I was called on to read my story aloud no marks off for spelling perhaps this once I thought I could get a 'B'

my voice didn't heighten with excitement didn't sing as many may it was the quiet voice of a thief and there was nothing my stepmother hated more than a *goddamned thief* or if there was it was a *goddamned liar* quietly I told my dad about my story told him I did good mine was the best story

I had his attention "yea done good did yea?" yeah dad I done real good my teacher said I done good too "that's good Speedy" he said cause that's what he called me "Speedy Edie" or in a playful mood he'd call me "that Speeder Eeder Kid" said I was a hard one to keep up with said he was always chasing after me when I was little he said I "was a spirited one all right" but being "spirited" was not a part of my memory when I was in—I don't remember which first or second year—grade three and stealing moments hoping my stepmother wouldn't spring from the nowhere and order me in to potato-peeling dish-washing diaper-changing or some other useful skill training

"glad yea done good" dad said his voice soft as the skin on his face and I was sure I saw diamond light flash in his eyes and it was the sight not the story that lifted me from the mud-room floor "but be sure to remember" he said "pride is a man's downfall" and I was only in first or second year grade three but I knew 'man' meant me

## A lesson

In grade school it was grade three when they sat us all down and taught us about something called "communism"

they brainwash people they said and I sat there in all of my ignorance and imagined these monstrous people with flag-wrapped arms cutting people's heads removing their brain and with a stiff brush and hot hot water that turns your skin red they scrubbed the way my mother—who's not really my mother—did to my body after the thing that happened to me happened

the people are not allowed to own a Bible or praise God they told us and I thought about my dad who didn't want to praise God anymore because his father who was his father but was a Brother of Christ preacher first—whatever that meant—made him read the Bible behind a locked door everyday I didn't have to read the Bible because Dad said "judge not" and he said to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" were the lines to remember and always to practice and he said I could pray any time any place

they said that the people didn't know freedom like we do and I didn't know what kind of freedom they knew but I thought of the mother—who wasn't my mother—and how she would scream that life is not a white picket fence with a swing-set in the back yard there are no guarantees just taxes and death nothing is free I might as well learn it right now

I failed grade three

## A haunting

—1—

My dad was never good enough  
    in his own mind  
mistakes shadow goodness  
    “drank too much”

he was a mechanic by day  
    did auto-body by night  
he was a wood-worker  
    a workaholic

he couldn't imagine  
his daughter's cries  
locked little rag-doll  
quiet by threats  
    lost will  
to legs

    pried  
    penetrated  
    pumped  
    repeatedly  
in daytime home  
attic  
familiar silhouette  
    but whose?  
        lost

re-memory  
toys mind  
cries  
sound in years  
of motherhood  
when fear  
sets to panic  
for children born to her  
arms too weak

she breaks silence  
anxiously sorts visions  
seeks answers  
locked in mind's vault

but the child-mother suffers  
as trouble-maker  
self-centered  
attention seeking  
indignant crotch talker  
willing to drag any one through the mud  
stepmother demands silence



Dad learned late  
    after he retired from cars  
he took up the hobby  
    of clock making

i learned late  
    as i sat in hospital  
    before his death  
“questioned every one” he said  
he never stopped prying  
spent fifteen years probing  
people who knew  
pre-school me

it haunted him  
    i haunted him

### Conversation with self

Self you're like one of those old cars before they found their way into Dad's hands

temperamental starter would-be driver prays turns key in ignition gets friction rumbles  
of resistance chock hold release pump pedal repeat caress dashboard slow to go

or bad battery turn the key and get click juice low flag down another clamp onto  
posts turn key give gas let run lent charge sparks when boosting along on borrowed  
energy mustn't stop

timing belt crossings of strings meshed in rubber band crankshaft to distributor  
clocked sequence of motor worn thin sluggish car bucks jolts alone rough ride it spits  
backfires threatens stall out

sighing motor moody some days runs reasonable the next whines grinds leaves  
operator in appeals constant dashboard caressing hold hard to hope pleads get me to  
work get me home from work make it through this day and another day to payday  
sputter along

but you're not one of those old cars you're out of Dad's hands  
of Dad's hands

## Yellow

"You are my sunshine" still I hear you back there singing "my only sunshine" your singing voice made my little-girl-self feel sunny warm "you make me happy" when I closed my eyes at night I saw yellow "when skys are gray" as if my face were turned up to a mid-day sky in July "you never know dear" and I am sure I shone Dad

and I still hear your singing voice back there telling me to "keep on the sunny side" and I have tried "always on the sunny side" as a schoolgirl I took great care to walk on the sunny side of the street and I have smiled bright in spite of childhood hell so bright that no one had a clue not even you and I have embraced yellow

you sang me yellow I still hear you singing and I am still trying still smiling still embracing yellow

## A tapestry of life after life

—1—

When you die do you get to see  
the whole work of art  
every little thread and weave  
that is your life done  
up in a brilliant tapestry?

see your father there?  
are all of the threads dark and dull?  
do they twist twirl  
knot and intertwine  
to make him?

are you absolved from hitting your father?  
absolved from the closed fist snap  
when you were a boy  
ordered into the rays  
of morning light that seep  
through barn-board cracks  
embroidered cracks slashed  
black when your father's  
horse-whip cut through  
and into you when he made  
your sister watch

are you absolved for stretching  
the wood ladder up to the yellow  
lamp light of your sister's  
bedroom window so she could  
slip out in silk stocking and home-  
spun dress into star lit  
night to walk the dirt road  
to join a young man in a dance?

is your father absolved?

are all the answers portrayed  
displayed for understanding?  
does the stone-face man  
still stand tall at embroidered  
pulpit  
still dressed in black casting  
preacher shadows over scenes  
beyond years of life that are his?

do you understand your preacher  
father? do you understand his faith?  
his love for a God  
who did not supply  
enough love for a son?

am i absolved? for getting excited  
for being glad you hit him  
for telling you you shouldn't feel  
bad because i would have hit him too  
because i still wanted to hit him  
for scarring you beyond your skin  
scarring me beyond mine

see all the threads that are me  
shades of yellow pink and blue  
baby-fine threads that make  
the curly-haired chubby-cheeked  
wide-eyed little girl  
the *handful-of-a-child* who  
had a *mind-of-her-own* who  
curled away into her mind  
at the pushing slapping hands  
at the violent mouth  
of your wife

see the many faces  
of your wife? the face  
that cooed in front of you  
the smiling kissing faces  
and then faces of coarse  
cord you've never seen  
before? pinched to scowl  
flat brown eyes the face  
that threatened the child  
who could and would take  
a beating but could not manage  
the black phone-in-hand-  
threat of being sent  
away to Children's Aid...  
never see daddy again?

see how I cried?  
fell on my knees  
begged?  
see how scary-good  
I became?

and on your busy canvas  
amongst the scenes do you  
see fine silk stitching of  
the little daddy-girl white heart?  
see it sewn on my chest?  
a heart with reaching  
reaching little hands  
that get cut  
off

the little white heart  
never stops reaching  
doesn't sling mud  
because workaholic  
eyes didn't  
see  
counselor's piercing eyes  
that try to gaze through  
and my DNA mother  
knitting denial darting blame  
prying at the heart  
with rusty words  
try to bend it taunt it to  
anger your own face is there  
telling me you lack  
as a father and still the little  
hands never stop  
reaching

and somewhere in all of the shades  
of light and shadow and bright  
and dark through all of the years'  
stitching and weavings see  
my little Bobby? "the spittin'  
image of his mother"  
at two running across black  
and white check floor cutting  
through conversation?  
see him challenge head up  
small hands to waist spouting  
off tunes of what he knows to be?

see my kid-gloves?  
soft wool  
uneven stitches  
stretched out shape

am I sewn in a glow  
struck with understanding  
after your streaks of words  
wipe away blurs when you asked  
if I believe "spare the rod  
spoil the child" and I bolt out  
no the rod rots the child  
and you told me about your  
father in the barn  
told me you believed  
thought he was right  
and you were weak  
you who hit him  
who couldn't  
hit me

my face in profile forever rests  
to your chest brown threads spin  
mature curls that caress your  
face you who were responsible  
who taught me to be mindful

as the scene swirls along  
see how the shades that make  
me fade to pale disappointment  
when I couldn't draw the picture



sketch the difference when you  
wouldn't let me smooth  
curves of turns that you  
drew heavy black and rigid  
you refused to view the image  
of you I carry

do you see it now?

## Check

This morning I sat on a front bench-seat—usually I sit at the back but in the newer buses those seats are higher and they cut-off circulation in the legs of shorter people like myself. So this morning I sat on a front bench seat—my back to the window.

At a main stop downtown a group of people, depending on their mood or their purpose, scurried or moseyed aboard the bus; some of the former annoyed by the latter. A large man, one of the latter, shuffling his weight in dirty, tattered jeans and a jacket that resembled something a security guard might wear, caused some commotion. People sighed in complaint but the man went no faster. As he boarded he talked to an unknown person. Perhaps that was part of the disturbance. The greasiness of his brown hair made it appear darker than it probably was, it was shaggy and had taken on bangs that fell heavy in front of his pockmarked face, which was also concealed by five o'clock shadow. He sat down beside me.

The man continued to talk and because no one accompanied him I wondered if he was responding to a voice that only existed inside of his head. But that wasn't the case. He spoke to the people around him. Once seated he spoke to those who sat across the way. The persons spoken to did not acknowledge that the lonely man speaks.

He turned his attention to me and said, I'm goin' ta the nursin' home but then I'm goin' back downtown. Just goin' ta get my cheque first.

I smiled and nodded as to not disregard him completely but then I too had tried to look blank. I stared straight ahead.

They have ta give it to me, don't they?

I looked at advertisements, which seemed to be there for the purpose of tuning out others. I questioned why I tried to close the man off.

They do, right? They have ta give me my money.

In my mind I questioned people's ability to ignore the man. *How do they do it? why can I not? and why do I want to?* I thought of my father who would claim to be better than no man—he'd never let a man speak to the side of his head?

Can't keep it, can they? It's a government cheque.

I turned my head and faced the man. His dark eyes conveyed no threat. Just confusion. He said, It's my cheque—government cheque. They can't keep it, can they?

I smiled still thinking of my father. I don't know, I said.

It's my cheque, he said.

Then I don't think they can. I still smiled but wondered what his situation was, what he thought I represented, what importance he would place in my words and how it was possible that I could make his situation worse if I choose the wrong ones. I wondered if that was why the people stayed silent.

I'm movin' out-a-there in December anyway, you know that? I'm movin' out, he said.

I didn't affirm nor encourage, Are you? I said.

Yep, he said, be out of there the first of December—can't keep my cheque, can they?

I don't know how it works, I said as I pictured myself telling him that they can't keep his check and him going to the nursing home making demands because the nice lady with the leather case said—

Are you on disability? he said.

No, I said realizing how far-fetched my vision was.

How would you like to live in a nursin' home? How would you like that? he said.

No, I said, not wanting to lie, I don't think I'd like that.

You wouldn't like that? he said with a heightened tone and inquisitive eyes.

No. I don't think I would, I said.

No. You wouldn't like that, he said.

Then there was a brief silence in which a plan came to his mind and suddenly out of his mouth, I could go ta Toronto! They issue them there—can't go ta London—could go ta Toronto if they don't give me my cheque.

I only smiled and thought how sad it seemed. I pegged the man to be in his fifties.

Could go ta Toronto, can't I? he said.

I'm not sure. I said, as I thought of his means. *How could he get to Toronto and back?* I thought of my own visits to Toronto—the people sleeping on Yonge Street with large pieces of cardboard or dirty blankets to serve as their shelter. *Had they also been seeking a cheque?*

Well, if they don't give me my cheque I could call the law—the law will make them give me my cheque. Right? The man's dark eyes went bright as if he'd found his answer. The law. They'll do it. Right?

I don't know about that, I said. I pictured a scene of him making demands, his frustration mounting and feelings of betrayal being the outcome.

The man, so sure that his idea was good, asked the people who sat across the way. One by one he asked, but stone faces possessed blank eyes and said nothing.

Finely—a man down the line said, I guess they would? And I looked at the man who had spoken—his smile was bright against dark skin. I smiled too.

Then the man beside me, with a controlled, jerky laugh said, I'm funny, hey?—funny-funny-funny, hey?

I didn't know how to answer with words. If I had said no he might have been insulted. Perhaps he liked being funny. If I said yes he might have thought we were laughing at him. I only acknowledged that I'd heard his words and said nothing.

Can't do anything when you're broke, can you? he said, quickly losing the humor.

Very little, I said, reconsidering my own sense of what it was to be broke. And I felt a pang as I projected my idea of quality life onto the man who, it seemed, would never have more.

It's the law. They have ta give me my cheque—it's a government cheque. Don't they?

The bell rang. It was my stop. Good luck, I said. I stepped off of the bus with other students. We walked to the curb and awaited the stoplight. A girl to my left giggled. I figured she giggled because she saw the irony.

You better keep that one, she said, He's a winner—a real sweetie.

A girl to my right said, That's nothing—that's just one of *them*.

Our light turned green.

## Albert

Albert smoked cigarette butts drank Vermouth wore a captain's hat and slept on park benches he prized a shopping cart borrowed from A&P and all day he'd walk collecting broken taillights tailpipes works of wood discarded appliances thrown away

he'd push his cart to London street show Dad his wares and Dad would buy the wooden pieces to recycle into new buy old appliances "for parts," he'd tell his wife and she would sneer and call him fool buying garbage

Albert's face began to swell "abscess?" it grew bullfrog-like Dad coaxed him into car and to hospital made Albert family by fall cared for his appointments his meds and his vermouth because "there ain't no sense denying him now" Dad would say and the nurse agreed

Albert left our house in the spring captain's hat on his chest an orchid on his coffin

## **An enquiry**

He took a pause  
after my questioning  
sat in driver's seat  
scratching his head  
his elastic face contracting  
expanding contrasting  
a cartoon image  
the way he'd do  
to mask dismay

"you seen too much  
for your years  
I'm sorry 'bout that"  
he said to me 11/  
12 sitting perplexed  
in passenger seat asking

doesn't Jay love Debbie any more?  
he doesn't seem to and if he does  
why was he in the tent with Betty?  
I like Betty but I like Debbie too  
don't think I like Jay anymore  
he leaves Debbie and drinks beer  
with Betty and I don't  
understand if you're married  
you're not suppose to  
if you don't love the person  
anymore you're not suppose to stay  
married are you dad?

## Hands measure meant

Jim was the first man  
to call me *lady*  
strong body  
arms hug the world away  
eyes blue bright

I brought him home  
my eighteenth summer  
love 'n' bubbles

"nice enough fellow alright"  
but not for me  
Dad said

excitement  
drained  
from face

shoulders  
dropped

my belly became  
an unlatched trapdoor  
that could fall open  
spill contents

"hands too soft"  
he said

my face turned  
eyes fixed  
to his hands  
flat palms  
long gone  
scarred maps  
thick aged-leather  
stained tools  
over used  
rough hands that  
tousled curls  
from carefree blond  
to troubled brown  
that avoids tangles



his hands  
employed meaning

no man could meet the measure  
not one could be good enough  
not for his daughter  
not for me

I hugged him  
kissed his cheek  
I love you too Dad  
and was gone  
on with life

## **Yellow fades**

Sun is in the trees  
shades of yellow  
sway autumn breeze  
carpet ground soft  
yellow fades away  
to brown crunch  
crumble under  
feet reduced  
to runners  
and decay

## **An Indian summer day**

Baby sleeping  
in crib another  
cradled in belly  
I sat on the porch  
breathing spirits  
filled my lungs  
with fresh air  
loving life  
I wrote the day  
recorded it dropped  
it into mail passed  
it on along to Aunt  
Edie never knowing  
it would mark the last  
of our lives shared

### **My son said**

You know what really sucks Mom?  
I have to go through this someday  
too don't know what I'd do  
if anything happened to you  
what would I do?

## **The question remains**

I expressed  
the empty-bowl  
for a belly forecast  
of-losing-him-feeling  
years ago fearing  
the day he wouldn't be

"shouldn't fear  
be happy for me  
you've Irish blood  
party celebrate"

he talked of death  
as a relation  
"life's sister sad  
she's named dark  
sound of dread sets  
yea t' fear her"

he talked of death  
as life extended  
free soul  
unrestrained

Irish blood thick  
heavy in my head  
yet to party  
still pulsing  
selfish grief

## Christmas sixteen years past

He doesn't appear in the Christmas morning photograph taken in his house  
at arch from living room to kitchen where my husband leans on one knee arm around  
our son then two wearing new sleepers red and blue a hockey boy crest at chest

my husband's gift—a triple-dot Bringham pipe bends over lower lip Dad's fedora on his  
head our son in toddler mimic grandpa's pipe in his mouth fedoras on his head tinny  
white teeth hold pipe that dips over lower lip stretched up smile stuffs cheeks to puff  
under eyes that shine in blue bright mischief

he doesn't appear in the Christmas morning photograph taken in his house yet he  
appears in the moment snapped frozen on gloss

**Christmas presence:  
Minnie (Gee) Newell (1885-1956)**

My dad didn't talk about his childhood, "Weren't much t' talk about," so the stories are few and the details sparse. But after gifts are wrapped and stockings stuffed, and I'm sitting back with a drink, holding this Christmas ornament in my hand, tracing its letters with my finger, still anticipating the excitement of my kids—who aren't really kids anymore but are young men—I'm draw back to that first Christmas Eve as a mother.

We were still at my dad's—had been there since October because I wasn't going to have this baby hundreds of miles away in Thunderbay with no family around, without my dad—so there we were, in Tillsonburg on through 'baby's first Christmas.'

Little Charlie slept, content in his bassinet by the Christmas tree and I was sitting in my dad's chair still rocking as if the baby lay to my breast. My face must have told on me, as it often did and maybe does, because when Dad came into the room responses to thoughts that were in my head came out of his mouth.

"Feedin' int' it, are yea?" he said, "Yea think little Charlie cares what's under that there tree."

And Dad was right. I knew Baby Charlie didn't know what Christmas was. But I did. And I was wanting something spectacular, bells and banners, because this was 'baby's first' and it wasn't just any baby, it was the most beautiful, most precious baby to ever come along—and that wasn't because it was my baby, it was just so—and however it happened that this wonder-of-life was born to me, was beyond me; but he was born to me so I was going to be the best mother ever—prove I deserved such perfection and wasn't I failing fast if I couldn't produce bells 'n' banners for 'baby's first Christmas'? I

didn't say all of that to my dad though. I didn't understand how he knew me so well, but I didn't have to say anything.

"It don't make yea a bad mother yea know. There's too much good stuff in yea t' be a bad mother." And he didn't even sit down. After working all day and into the evening he stood there and told me about the secret Christmas of his boyhood.

It wasn't a long story. Dad couldn't afford a long telling. But the story has lived in my head for eighteen years and joined with other snippets, which serve to fill in the holes of the telling.

My grandfather, George, was a Minister of an iron-fisted religion called Brethren of Christ. Christmas was against the faith and so was card playing, and dancing and singing and anything that could possibly be thought of as an indulgence. Making eye contact with anyone from outside of the faith was also prohibited. It was okay to talk to outsiders on a superficial basis; after all, a certain amount of communication was necessary for subsistence. It just wasn't okay to look at the people—who were supplying the flour to make the bread—in the face, the eyes. It was as if the believer would be tainted, tempted beyond salvation, by what might be seen when they looked to the soulful windows of the other.

For a long time I had a problem looking people in the face. When I grew up we didn't practice the religion that was George's but we were a look-away family. The rule had lived on without awareness. But I did make the connection and I remember questioning the integrity of such a rule. It seemed unfair; my grandfather had an unequal advantage—he had a glass eye.



Before George became a husband, father, farmer, and a preacher, he was an accountant. In his early thirties he took a job in a local pitchfork factory. That's where he met Minnie. She was a year his senior and was the factory secretary. What the money-man was doing in the back—in the working area of the factory—is beyond what I know of the story. But he was back there at the vats of hot pitch when it splattered up and dove to his eye. It was burned beyond repair. George only had vision in his right eye from then on. Perhaps the no-eye-contact-rule was a part of his attraction to the faith.

Most living was against the faith, which would explain why family photos were blemishes of stone faces. When I first saw my grandparents' wedding picture I thought they must have always been old. I questioned if they were sad because they were always old. I was answered with a general comment of no and something about the people back then being very serious.

It seemed the faith was serious business so my preacher grandfather did not tolerate much living at all. It was a wrathful God that he worked for. He didn't have a problem interpreting The Word or judging and prosecuting trespassers of the faith, with the heaviest sentences reserved for members of his-own household.

For my grandmother, it seems Christmas was a bit of upper Eden. She spent lone-hours knitting hats, scarves, mittens, and socks—three pairs each; she stashed luxuries like oranges, cinnamon sticks and liquorice whips, and would sneak three bottles of soda pop, one at a time, into her burlap grocery bag, into the house, and up the attic stairs. And in keeping with what she knew of the holiday, she would stuff the goodies in the socks, hats and mittens that would become well worn as the winter season passed.

On Christmas morning, while her husband was out milking cows, Minnie would tip-toe three children to the attic and watch them indulge in flavours of the season. My dad was her baby and he ate candy and drank soda pop once a year until Minnie got caught and Christmas became too much of a threat to her children. At that time she stopped the indulgence, stopped defying her husband until after he was dead.

But while it lasted Grandma Minnie would divert Grandpa George's attention by pointing out something that would spark his musing, required his preaching or his prayers—so she could slip a bottle of soda-pop through the check-out and into her grocery bag. I can easily imagine Minnie's small stature, bundled in a long, gray coat, moseying on past George—likely passing on his left—and proceeding to the horse-and-carriage undetected. She would sit there with prayers dancing in her head, whirling between asking God's forgiveness for her deception and His help for the man caught in George's attention—the poor soul who would never know how he aided Minnie in supplying three children with Christmas.

Minnie would sit in the carriage with her home-sewn bag bundled on her lap, not like a treasure, but nonchalantly—the way she held it all year long just so it would be seen as routine during this wonderful, treasonable time of the year. The soda-pop smuggler would sit cool and patiently while waiting for her husband who tended God's ever-important work, as any preacher's wife would. And behind the eyes that had learned to reveal nothing, Minnie would fantasize about the Christmas morning excitement of her children. She would envision their smiling eyes and lips that only narrowed long enough to take another bite of candy or sip of soda-pop and she would

almost smile while envisioning how their little noses would wrinkle, tickled by soda-pop fizz.

I've come to think how Grandma Minnie might have thought of the indulgence as hers because the children's quiet excitement was such a gift to her. And with everything that went on behind her blue eyes, she would sit stern and narrow-lipped while waiting for her preacher husband.

I've never met Minnie but I'm sure I saw her in my dad many times, but her presence was most vivid that night when he gave me the story and the hand-painted ornament that reads, *1984, Mother's First Christmas*.

**A germination of thought**

miss      the living  
            the dead  
live

## Walking

I wonder about  
the space  
where you are

sometimes  
I think you are right there  
just beyond my fingertips  
when I stretch arms up

so I fling arm  
over my head  
stretch out hands  
extend fingertips  
as if to touch you

beyond

my chest becomes light  
seems to open like the sky  
as clouds clear for sun

warmth  
comfort

I think it's you

smiling

in my chest

### Thinning Irish blood

I found my singing voice  
I dance and sing *Daddy Frank*  
with friends  
we point beer-bottles to the sky  
clap them  
and friends who have never known you  
all know you  
well  
their feet are in Tom-Stoppin' time  
singing songs they'd never play  
they live the best of my girlhood  
when you and I danced country  
star bright sky firelight night balm  
dew grass and yeeeh-haaaw  
I am  
forever your daughter  
crowned the fedora queen  
self appointed  
assume position  
arms swing body sways  
feet stomp in tune  
I dance with bottled sunshine  
and friends  
dance for your life  
and mine

**Winter wonders  
spring thoughts**

**—1—**

Ice-sickles  
hang on  
front porch  
glisten in sun  
light drips  
fall away  
becomes one  
with what  
lays beyond  
as if never there  
ever

—2—

under autumn's blanket  
& winter's plush duvet  
beds lay waiting  
through frost  
for thaw

garden's death  
an illusion  
deep roots  
hold life  
promise  
colours  
return



**My father's never spoken words  
borrowed from a Cree daughter\***

I am taken back to hospital white to the last meal of his life  
as he tried to force food back I hear his gagging

*I lived for you*  
a Cree woman said to her daughter

and I am drawn to his hands

*I lived for you*

I am before his Irish eyes that would speak when  
his shoulders rise and hunch to hug the whole space between us

*It's O.K. my girl*  
a Cree woman said to her daughter

his hand embraced my hand

*It's O.K. my girl*

and I hear the tick of his tongue as his eye winks and head nods right to left  
communicating the unspeakable word that could be every man's downfall

*I lived for you*  
a Cree woman said  
*It's O.K. my girl*

I am back there sitting on his bed in the quiet when a nurse walks in and he speaks  
“Did I tell yea this here's my daughter—goes to the university there in Windsor  
gonna be one of those big-name writers someday”

live my daughter

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\* Inspired by the words of Marilyn Dumont.

## **Time**

Ticks tricks  
pushes pulls  
taunts haunts  
    twists  
    turns  
    us  
into fools  
who cry

## From caterpillars to cocoons

i feel like crying because Dr. Whitney had said "Good cannot come from evil because if good could come from evil it would negate the existence of evil and it is a fact evil does exist"

and I had to believe opposite I had to believe good could come from evil because if good couldn't come from evil I have endured too much meaningless experience too much that goes nowhere does nothing it would mean I was just born to be penetrated by evil fucked when I didn't want to be when I didn't have choice long before I even knew the word it would mean I could do nothing but carry the pain

fester

rot in it

in all due respect I argued against Dr. Whitney I said that when a butterfly emerges from a cocoon the materialization of the butterfly does not negate the fact that the caterpillar exists any more than the emergence of good would negate the existence of evil

and Dr Whitney liked my argument

but now i want to cry because sometime we don't see a butterfly emerge sometimes the cocoon brings forth a moth and it eats holes in our sweater our most favourite sweater maybe our only sweater and it leaves us cold through the winter and i hadn't thought about that

i hadn't thought about that

i didn't want to think about that

i couldn't

### **When i was a child**

I could get on a swing push  
pull chains with my arms pump  
air aim my little big toe  
poke holes in the clouds  
open the sky

I could fly

out of my body bond  
my little self to the ceiling  
to attic beams I could hide  
in the seam of existence  
experience no evil

I could soar

through the streets  
while my body would sleep  
visit spirits old kind and wise  
lay my mind dormant  
for seasons of life

I was skilled

but that is then  
when i was a child  
not yet five and all just  
was without words  
beyond reason

**What i could hardly tell myself  
(written for Jim)**

My dad is here i told you i don't know how couples can be intimate with parent flying  
around spirit free from body roaming unseen and seeing  
i ask you not to touch me respectful of mourning you abstain but remain at my reach  
  
still i hear my dad

"could 'ave been Jay" he said "you never did like 'im I questioned every one but Jay  
he moved away went West" it wasn't Jay "Don't think so?" it wasn't Dad but don't  
worry I'm okay now I said because I was warmed we were walking together

another time

you touch my skin with your eyes soft blue penetrates lures me within reach I want  
to melt time go beyond flesh you guide I rise rise to peak and crash to vision  
childhood home attic black silhouette from rafter gray view i push you away you  
remain at my reach

it recurs again and again and again

i walk behind sons Dad dead behind me leaving him forever i am broken i crumble  
i'm falling and am caught by an uncle soothed i move along put greeting arms out to  
another as if my arms were live wires of two hundred and twenty volts snaking at him  
he jolts jumps back wide eyed "questioned everyone" i heard Dad say and dirty i  
walk away

months ago and now

you at my reach reach for me touch my skin your eyes soft blue penetrates  
beyond time i rise rise to peak crash to visions of baby girl in baby dolls white  
sheets mattress on floor lights and cameras wide-eyed step-uncle jumped back jolts  
me gray before i leave for rafter view and return to stepmother scorning me *nothin' but  
a goddamned tramp* as she scours baby girl skin and scrubs baby doll blood

you reach for me beyond reach speech

### **Dad bearing child's cries**

You took from my hands  
what my young-mother-self  
couldn't carry

you carried my burden  
in silence  
placing the pieces back  
into my hands in little bits  
gently building up my arms  
so I hardly noticed

you place the last pieces  
into my hands only now  
that you've advanced in  
your position of guidance  
to a parent divine  
whose child is never alone  
you give me strength

my arms bulge  
with the load  
but my chest  
caves for you

you lived the terror of my life  
fearing I'd learn that a child  
of mine has been clutched  
damned to experience  
haunted by encounters  
that kept me  
weak

I can't imagine  
your grief  
may i never live  
your torment

## **Resolve for justice**

On a Sunday morning when police

break silence hung-over

step-uncle will be bowed at table  
coffee not quite ready tempting  
aroma lingering day's first cigarette

smoke billowing

rubbing his forehead he won't move  
his wife will open door to search

order

for little girl not yet five

peace warranted

and for Dad who learned  
late and questioned to death

### **A living will**

From mother's womb  
to mother in the earth  
where your poetry  
begins I will part  
with your ashes  
knowing there is no end  
to "songs of kindness  
and love" from son  
to mother and daughter  
to dad all you were  
and all I am will be  
passed along in life  
to sons as best  
I can I vow I will  
live as you will  
and not die before death  
I will stand up for  
you who stood for me  
and for sons I will  
live whole because I am  
of your hands I hold  
strong because I am

I will  
find rest



### **Vita Auctoris**

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