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# **GO DOWN SINGING**

by

**Bernadette Raffoul**

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

**Windsor, Ontario, Canada**

**2000**

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## ABSTRACT

"Go Down Singing" is a collection of poetry that is by parts beatific, confessional, and rich in Catholicism, and the Judaism of the Old Testament. The poems in this work range from melodrama and hyperbole to the depressing and serious yet even the latter are not immune to flights of decadence, shock, exhibitionism, and fiction. The speaker in almost all of the poems is an "I" which in the dramatic lyrics and the narrative poems implies an intended listener. These poems invite the reader to discover the inconsistent temperament of the "I" or voice and to follow the evolution of the speaker's observation, memories, and thought toward the recognition and *occasional* resolution of an emotional problem.

A few of the poems are epigrams that end with a surprising turn of thought. For the most part though, the pieces are narrative and lyrical. The inclusion of religious allusions serves to hi-lite the persona's spirituality, which ranges from the steadfast to the fickle, satirical, doubting, and despairing in "Go Down Singing"; sometimes the whole range of tones can be traced in a single poem. The subject matter of clinical depression, madness, alienation, racism, religion, writing, sexual and familial relationships, disillusionment, and hope are all treated with particularity, candour, and sensuous, archaic, and biblical diction; abstraction is used selectively when the situation or area of reference calls for it.

"Go Down Singing" could be seen as an extended expression of a complex evolution of the mind, as portrayed in the poems. Nevertheless, the process of observation, thought, memory, and feeling have been organized, ordered and shaped in a way that is conducive to the desired artistic effect. Perception, on the part of the speaker in the poems, is by turns brief and sustained. Art here, is not so much a religion of beauty, as Flaubert once put it, but rather a life force, as integral to the poet's survival as the image of blood, which runs rampant through these poems.

## **Acknowledgements**

**My very special thanks to Di Brandt and to Louis K. MacKendrick and Dean Serravalle for their honest comments about various poems in this work.**

**Many of these poems were inspired by both the Old and the New Testament (New Revised Standard Version); "PANIC" is after Sylvia Plath's journals and "DREAMBURSTING" was influenced by Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl".**

**"REQUIEM FOR THE LIVING" is for Amira and Youssef. "SUMMER 1985" is for Joey.**



# Go Down Singing

“They lock me in this chair at eight a.m.  
and there are no signs to tell the way,  
just the radio beating to itself  
and the song that remembers  
more than I. Oh, la la la,  
this music swims back to me.  
The night I came I danced a circle  
and was not afraid.”

ANNE SEXTON  
“MUSIC SWIMS BACK TO ME”

## DREAMBURSTING

2

A howl out of a girl's mouth  
unexpected fur on the cheeks  
and chin and breasts  
vulgar like the collection of grime  
my fingernail took up in Latin:  
Labia Majora  
Labia Minora  
and a Greek Klitoris I believe  
that what my mouth needed  
was some hot pepper or soap  
after flossing my teeth  
with every bit of excrement I fell in  
at five on the way to the store  
a taller boy  
a grass-stained shirt  
and me crying home to dad  
later policeman (in my very own home)  
Why does it make me happy to know  
Ginsberg didn't get laid till 23?

The red slash my virgin mouth  
let out on the mattress  
was a mistake to put it in  
put it in  
put it in your hands  
too steady for comfort the stain spread  
with each lie I told I love you  
to myself I could never love myself

I am on my rag of an altar cloth  
hallucinating  
after taking a paper wafer  
under my tongue I see Jesus in a bubble  
cartoon cameo on Fat Albert  
they are all playing hooky  
but Jesus rhymes it with cookie  
to trick the big breasted mother of someone  
thinking poor white trash christboy  
is not quite right in the head

I have never had a nose bleed in my life

continued

This newly enlarged hole I dug for myself  
in the mental institution I will visit after you say  
Ciao Bela  
Lugosi's dead  
is heavy-handed symbolism  
with jissom from jerking off  
to no Kleenex to run to  
Baby  
don't forget about the call  
Oh Baby, Oh Baby  
don't forget to hold down  
the edge of your dress  
Marilyn, you are as overrated as the fucks I keep eating  
bad chocolate out of a box  
hoping for a good one and once they're done  
we are done, love, my love  
Our love is like a red, red machine -  
when it's broken, you'll go in for blue  
roses, blue roses  
Laura's glass menagerie  
smashing  
and smashing  
like an automaton  
everything worth living for is Catholic  
and therefore universal and taken  
by everyonesomeone else

I want smaller, neater, heavenly breasts  
I want my smaller, neater, heavenly breasts  
to flush red at my will  
I want a man who will suffer endlessly at my will  
and forget the pain like the people who travel  
in that Star Trek machine  
allowing their bodies to be ripped apart  
over and over again  
without hope of ever being canonized  
I want a man with a battery operated mouth  
between my legs  
I want a man who will suffer endlessly  
I want a man who will suffer like me

I think that I am in for one helluva ride  
thru hell this time no guide, no Dante  
no Mohammedan theatre of doom  
to keep me on the edge of my seat  
plumping buttocks perched upward in expectation  
I earned a ring for lust  
and now gluttony is looking pretty good  
if I can fit it over my chubby little finger  
short, and stout, just like a baby machine  
bleeding every month since 12, without fail  
a perfect candidate for rhythm, rhythm  
concentration  
concentration  
concentration  
a holocaust of angels  
host, host, I mean host  
and camp

This is the age of iron  
the age when hope, love and charity  
are given hard-ons for communion  
and confirmation gifts around the neck  
in ball and chain, like an albatross  
and everyone around all of you and me  
is dying like a mysterious bloody bead of pearl  
on a rosary  
Say Mary, Say Martha, Say Peter, Say Paul  
Say Pontius, Say Judas, Say Margaret, Say Saul  
Now Say Jesus Christ is ashamed of us all  
mourning over an anonymous suicide  
abandoned on his back in a hotel  
under a blanket of 40 watt shards  
strewn with wounds like fetuses  
or poppies still in bloom

"I keep saying never again.  
It always happens over and over."

Georgette

The ink on this page  
pressed off my black tongue  
like charcoal or tar  
on each tooth and finger  
stained masturbatory to touch  
or bite or claw  
blue snowflake gown  
into incomprehensible strands  
of hair in my fists  
or accidental blood drops  
on bathroom tile

"How much did you take him?"  
My claw became an open palm  
or maybe two  
as sweater and bra were pulled off  
the cold breasts of a sleepy child  
with a rosary for a tongue  
and a prayer on each bead  
that mom and dad not be called

Form 72  
You sent me up three days

I knelt in front of the crucifix in the emergency room  
I knelt in front of the orderly who walked in with breakfast  
and called me up off my knees  
and up off the floor  
to go up into bed  
And shame in front of his dark blond hair  
on a ringed finger I longed to take into my mouth  
And shame at the plastic bracelet on my wrist  
And shame again at the absence of mourners  
from six to eight I dined alone  
inside four walls and tried a dull cry  
played bounce the ball with my bleached hand  
and took my queue among the mad

it's all been very necessary

effexor 37.5  
you hold the crybaby and the  
come inside  
and how do we really do do  
do no birth pang  
no pang of death  
just a tapping reminder  
to take a deep breath

I knock on Christ's rood

venlafaxine hydrochloride  
it's all been very necessary

time is the wound  
that gets scabbed with an axe  
time is the stepsister  
who will stitch up your dress  
and fatten the belly inside  
I forsook my skinny-legged youth  
as they read me my rights  
nausea nervousness and  
potential  
weight gain  
I wait the wait  
I flatulate

just a tap on the cross

tip tippitty toe  
it's all been very necessary

Lady in a fur coat  
this ride  
it's all been very necessary

Georgette your comb and your lice  
it's all been very necessary

Herr Doktor  
Cher Doktor  
Doctor of the Merde

will you pen me in a paper  
slit me open on a desk  
piss some Dora in these eyes  
so I'll see  
really see  
it takes a good man  
to cure the blind  
and a chemical thrill  
I set that cross on fire  
when I took my first pill

it's working  
    the chorus cried  
dragging my heart  
like a b-movie credit roll  
    for so long  
    for so wide  
I paid to see  
really see  
it empty and dead

it was a real shit movie

    shit movies are necessary

rosary for a bit  
    for a bit      in the mouth  
    it's all been very necessary  
fastening my sex down  
with an open-backed gown

    it's all been very necessary  
psycho man ejaculate  
we hopscotched in the shower  
    it's all been very necessary

Mother Mary dropping me out  
of the crippling bower -

*She sent me an Anglican nun  
close and fair  
enough*

it's all been very necessary

time is a wound  
that heals best with salt  
memory is the judge of the living  
she reads us our faults  
in sickness of hell

I tried to die  
fixing my limbs on the rocks  
*every time a bell rings*

*an angel  
an angel ...*

bitch of the poor  
Lady of the Sea  
it was my own face in the water  
that messianic pedophile  
who beckoned me home



I once heard an Arab woman  
stifled her baby to death  
while running from some men  
accidentally  
in OAC English class  
when I was an eh-rab  
but looked eye-talion  
and eh-man  
what the fuck did that teacher know  
who said ~~1984~~ was published in 1984  
and looked at me funny  
the day after the prom  
I did not go to  
because not every good girl  
plays piano  
rides in fast cars  
and giggles with girlfriends  
about purple bruised obsessions  
like the size of her hole tits and ass  
or bump fuck, hump fuck  
so nobody can really talk

alcohol out of a Coke bottle at a high school dance  
and *hey I luv luv luv you*  
*luv to really get to know you*  
just one request  
Diana, Starr, Carla, Spring  
easy lay chicks  
and VinnieSuckMcGently scrawled on school concrete  
oh ain't it funny when girls like me don't know these things  
and boys they laugh, god I'm so impressed  
wet myself clear stringy with thoughts of all of you  
tastes pretty damn good too  
and John Hughes won't come to the rescue  
but I still listen to Morrissey:  
*How Soon Is Now?*  
*You Just Haven't Earned It Yet Baby*  
*Sing Me To Sleep*: I'm a girl in a coma  
and all of this is really serious

enuf with the British shit that carried me through  
gothic suicide rock  
I put my trust in you, in you, in you, in you  
I was supposed to do such great things  
and Vinnie's mom thinks I'm pretty  
jeezus Kristy sometimes this life can get you down  
but you gotta look at the brighter side  
and why, Renee asked me  
while my foot banged against the restraint on the floor  
would I hurt myself  
cause I got so many people countin' on me  
she talks American and tells me Wendy's stepdad  
stuck a curling iron somewhere he shouldn't have  
and Wendy can't stop slashing her wrists  
and Renee asks Wendy about boyfriends  
and Wendy says they stay away from her  
and I think, like me  
but I'm weak without iron  
and god sometimes this life can get you down  
for nogood reason I brought myself down  
for nogood reason the greatest gift of all  
I can't accept for nogood reason  
I bobbed back up the greatest gift is all memories  
and mine are bad  
I can't accept tears on sidewalks  
or in classrooms for no real reason can't get out of bed  
for no real reason don't always want to bathe  
for no real reason sometimes I don't give a shit  
about my face don't smile at me today  
for no real reason crazycomelightly raw  
pretentious alphabet Tower of Babylon  
where baby's up  
cause baby's on

the trees outside this train window  
are staged on ice  
close to me they are rocking  
on the roots of their feet  
grasping  
like a mother who has just learned  
that her young son has drowned himself  
and I am so far from God  
on this train  
far from the leap of faith that binds  
my mind like a white nymph  
writhing on the tracks  
or a phantom child  
waving  
goodbye from below

# **Falling For Apples**

**"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by  
madness, starving hysterical naked"**

**ALLEN GINSBERG**  
**"HOWL: For Carl Solomon"**

Whether I saw Teresa Benedicta, extra strength,  
in a Tylenol bottle  
and two bottles of water  
from a laughing brilliant child on Wyandotte  
I will never know  
But I am sure of your violin  
and dark suit  
on a lawn chair,  
a virgin bride  
who had never been kissed  
and half of your right index finger  
floating down the line at Omstead's

And I am sure that I will never marry  
a boy who asks me  
what my parents do  
and thinks a Catholic girl  
a rare commodity,  
a chaste girl probably,  
to impress Mum and Pop with  
after giving fifty others their fill

And I am also sure of my red coat  
with barrettes for buttons  
that I couldn't put in my short dark hair  
Wanted so much to look like a girl  
and to laugh like you and mom  
honeymooning in Niagara Falls  
before you couldn't stay in a room  
because people suffocated you

And, yes, I am sure that I am just like you

The pills aren't the same  
there are twenty years between us  
and a broken window pane  
that I swept under my bed  
But you saw the door  
I left in the living room  
after ripping it off its hinges  
in my sleep

*continued.*

It was you who hugged me  
and promised not to tell anybody  
because you knew  
that business about seeds is true

The passports  
in the cigar box  
are just a delusion  
that you're free  
and that your thoughts arise from clarity  
and not tears on the living room floor  
or phone calls to the doctor  
and our shared desire to take a drive  
into a wall  
a lake  
or a tree  
depending on where there's nobody

Nine months on Paxil  
your Simon of Cyrene  
and you thought you'd left it in a tomb  
But, Dad, you forgot about the woman  
who discovers everything,  
the girl who's last-picked  
    who will be  
    and will see

How I once knelt in awe  
of your majestic frame  
and learned that your sex  
was the softer one  
with a pilgrim's stroke  
and an honest mouth  
'my little acorn tip'  
is what I said before  
the sun came through  
and whitened the bed sheets  
as clean as cancer

It was sweet meat you gave me  
to have and to hold  
to pull at and take up  
to draw in and suck  
under your confectioner's glaze  
my jaw grew weary  
and my teeth fell out  
stunned into my right palm  
swirling in saints' milk and bloodless  
I thought you envied my affliction  
the way you scrubbed your face  
and wore the mechanics of your fast  
but my eyes had already been gouged  
I was hasty in my beatitude  
I was a stain you wanted put out

Out, Out then  
my bastard prince  
it was base all this time, wasn't it  
one year and seven months  
spent balancing my humours  
as if a few leeches  
could starve me into submission  
turn my madness into obedience  
send my sickness into remission

I refuse  
to be healed  
let me be ruined  
run naked  
laugh hysterical  
Forget the trip on the knees  
to the shrine I made of you  
Forget the odorous incense  
drifting from your balls  
Forget the corruptible bed  
I am too heavy and hard  
for your altar  
too fat for your fasting  
too weak for your Roman head  
to bear when there is no need  
to transubstantiate  
I am already living  
go pound your own image  
into a thin wafer  
and melt it in one thousand mouths  
my faith is too pure for such rites  
and imperatives  
batter and bruise your own heaven's body

Let us be done with the mathematics  
and the exorcise  
I was never any good at  
you saw how hard I tried to divide  
but you were never satisfied with the root one  
so make love to your three-personed god  
cling to the remainder  
the myrrh and the mirth  
while I fill this siphoning void of you  
and take away the taste of death



you glide into me  
slippery slick  
like a live fish  
through a slumbering fist  
and you say that it is good

you push and kneel into me  
labouring thick inches  
half through  
like a single staple  
atop five hundred sheets  
and you say that it is good

where then  
is the promised spring  
and torrent  
that I cut this opening for?

remove this yoke from my neck  
and do as the prophet Ezekiel once did  
eat and fill your stomach  
with the sheets that you marry  
and the words that you bury  
make me sink and fall  
and lay still at your feet  
while honey runs out of your mouth  
and into my legs

we were then beyond separation  
which was odd  
with five years between us  
so maybe I lie to say  
we were then beyond  
but Joey did think it  
my only sibling  
even at four  
his lashes extended  
like the spider legs I gleefully plucked off  
and stared at  
rapt  
as the orphaned limbs twitched on the driveway  
recently paved and a highway to me  
that summer  
how I wished the copy cat in him  
would just die  
and leave me alone  
the way he clutched  
so giddy for his sister  
who took the share of sweets  
he readily gave up without complaint  
so where did I get the idea  
to pull off those legs  
to punch him in the mouth  
with a closed fist  
to steal his candy  
and then to jump from an eight foot ledge  
with the image of Joey waiting  
for me to turn around  
and watch him follow

There is one degree of separation between us  
as small and precise as a pea  
as hard as a fairytale memory  
under the mattress  
left to suffocate with wallpaper women  
stripped, primed, and whitewashed  
for their balancing act  
on a toilet seat  
right leg on the back  
wrapped, slung, or spread  
for illusory support  
against a slip  
I feel their sticky fists  
beating a tattoo of hieroglyphs  
along my spine  
with black ink  
from the bulbs of my hair  
into a token carving of me  
riding a faded blue-jean leg  
right there  
and there  
yes there  
waiting for god oh  
waiting for god  
spank me daddy  
who's your daddy  
I'm your daddy  
and thank you daddy  
for the one degree of separation  
a call for a last dance  
at the stroke of thirteen  
I let down my long hair  
for the Giant's seduction  
it was either that  
or Jack's tiny prick  
trying for a vein again  
over and over  
in front of the mirror-mirror on the wall  
I'm the best lay of 'em all

*continued*

says Jack who's forced a beanstalk  
between many a snow white thigh  
like a swollen foot in a narrow shoe  
but I think blisters will turn braille  
at this loss of sense between you and me  
that one degree of separation will prove

*Lord I will go with you  
walking by your side  
learning eagerly  
Only let me hear you say those words again:  
"Come and follow me"  
Only let me hear you say those words again:  
"Come and follow me"  
excerpt from the Catholic Book of Worship*

Like a fool I followed you  
into that room our first night  
and fell on a table  
cold hard and bare  
lips quaking in time with Shakespearean rain  
murmured fallacies against my ear  
and the spontaneous drop of one black shoe  
I made you hear

Good shepherd think of me  
I thought  
love me  
move inside of me  
save me  
because I'm oh so cold  
with this skin as drifted snow  
that I toil to warm  
positioned in birth before your form

In a dream I always made sure to moan

I made belief that only I held the sword  
to draw water and blood from your side  
to dice that purple cloak  
to shreds I made believe you so good  
I forgot the royal lie  
I made believe you so hard  
I rose you on high  
do not think yourself just any Jesus Christ

I defaced the dream in links  
your arm in mine  
two thorns strained  
on a single forehead entwined  
and soon  
no blood running

It does not serve me well  
to remember  
the fishing net  
still drying on the shore  
in Galilee  
beside ten thousand wooden boats  
where I girded my loins at twenty-four  
to become a fisher of you  
man

I have spent my whole life falling  
and falling  
and falling for apples  
with my head fully immersed  
trying to steer the fish-gaping mouth  
that betrayed me more  
than my first blood ever could

It overrode my decision to forget the air  
and claim the party prize  
a fifty cent plastic green serpent  
wrapped in waxed paper and complete  
with the pedophilic smile of a red and blue clown  
whose pants were two sizes too big  
and suspect to me  
immaculate always in Buster Brown  
and any other fashion that two factory cheques could buy  
a bright doll totted around  
to incite envy of her owners  
who equated baggy clothing with hand-me-downs  
and the poverty they left behind  
or, at least, perpetually denied  
like scraps of ham that just fell into eggs  
with pita bread for extra fill

Nothing less than Canadian sugar and spice  
to candy their little girl bright  
red, round, and shiny  
who snagged her sweaters  
accidentally on the torn table cloth  
where she laboured to bring forth perfection  
out of each homework assignment  
to be god-like with knowledge  
a private school the doctor had suggested  
but I grew to curse my appetite  
the fifty cent serpent  
the supper that I stole  
when all Christ could do was hang on the wall  
with his head tilted to one side in disbelief  
at how I cupped my hands at each communion  
to offer thanks but no thanks really

*continued*

Too young  
too young to have already begun  
falling and falling  
and falling for apples  
that sank like dead weight at the touch of my teeth



I am better than you  
coward  
who would slit your own throat  
in battle  
with a violin bow

Your invitation to trust  
is as vulgar  
as the catch of a hangnail  
at a genital opening  
the angry upward push  
of your voice  
the bob and sway of your apple  
I want to cut your throat  
I could eat it out and swallow it in-  
the one act you always refused

I am culpable and capable

There is fear in your crotch  
that cannot stand straight  
always leaning left  
it drifts weakness in the air  
I smell it on the crumpled tissue  
by your bedside  
the remains of love made convenient  
and common like corpses  
dragged from the stomach  
of an inexhaustible lake  
the grimace on your face  
is an obscenity  
that even time of death and motive  
were not made to touch

# **A Grave In The Air**

**“Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening  
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night  
we drink and we drink  
we shovel a grave in the air there you won’t lie too cramped”**

**PAUL CELAN**  
**“Todesfuge/ Death Fugue”**

"In affliction and thanksgiving"

mine is the day  
and mine is the night  
under this strange god  
I have seen dross become silver  
and water, wine  
I have suffered bruises, sores  
and bleeding wounds  
and have softened them  
with my own melodies  
sackcloth and sanctity have fallen  
upon my back

why then  
do I spurn the new moon  
when I see it  
and the calling of convocation  
when I hear it  
soon  
the tongue of the sea  
will cease to call me  
and will cease to quench me  
already, I labour to create new songs  
and yet, how lightly I gad about  
changing my ways

I feel as spent as an olive tree  
after it is beaten and as useless  
as the two or three olives  
that remain  
like an insolent child  
atop the highest bough

I feel as spent as a temple whore  
after she is beaten and as useless  
as the aging prostitute  
who must take a harp about the city  
making sweet melody  
and singing many songs  
so that she may be remembered

You say my eye buries you  
meaning I have your heart  
an arabic term of endearment  
setting you up for the kill  
and me for the killer  
but I cannot say that  
I am very fond of burials  
having only been to one  
a young grandmother  
who died christmas day beside her bed  
her eldest daughter drew tears from me  
with screams about the cold underground  
and hate for you who made me bear witness  
to a grown woman's refusal to accept a compliment  
her only duty  
it all seemed so cathartic really  
you and I straining against a screen of black cloth  
or the sacrament of reconciliation and our forced  
confession  
that my eyes too will balk and lose faith  
when your heart pushes these hands away  
like a helium balloon  
resisting the pulse  
beneath the wrist of a child

**ON JOSEPH CONRAD'S STEVIE:**  
A SECONDARY CHARACTER in The Secret Agent

29

Stevie, Stevie  
staining circles on a crumpled sheet  
tracing over and over  
the same dull spot  
like a frenzied masturbator

to the Professor you were  
pure anarchy  
a pocket-sized detonator  
to bring a God-fearing people down  
to their fecal knees

*My name is Stevie  
This is the way  
to bring me back home*

Stevie, Stevie  
idiot spy  
dropped the Greenwich bomb  
on his own two feet  
Stevie, Stevie  
idiot saint  
first Christian martyr  
at a Paulinian feast  
Stevie, Saint Stephen  
is it too late to warn you  
that you are the guest  
and the funeral treat  
each palmer is here  
for a piece of your shroud  
a curl from your head  
and your stigmatized meat

tender like a kid  
you always were

*My name is Stevie  
This is the way  
to bring me back home*

continued

the world is hard Stevie  
the world is mean  
men whip horses for no real reason  
women toss deformed babies  
out on the street  
nothing is shocking  
or sacred  
or afraid  
we take bread out of troughs  
and wine out of craters  
all stomach and genitals  
we lie with our daughters and feel no shame  
as they dance for severed heads  
served up on silver platters  
and then drag their sawed-off bodies

*My name is Stevie  
This is the way  
to bring me back home*

the coachman is bad Stevie  
the mother is bad  
the wine and bread were never blessed Stevie  
the priest's hands idled during mass  
your name and address were stitched in your coat  
but only the obit was read

*My name is Stevie  
This is the way  
to bring me back home*

I am  
I am a disciple of death  
I eat ashes like bread

my throat  
my throat is an open grave  
the cord of my womb  
it keeps me enslaved

my flesh  
my flesh burns faster than grass  
swept over  
oh over  
by the good lord's staff

my feet  
my feet are bathed in blood  
my voice  
my voice will break the lord's cup  
should he come to anoint me  
memento mori

my mouth  
my mouth will close over me  
I will fall like any prince  
I will sink into sleep

A shame you were unable to strip down  
your alabaster body  
for the lustful pagan masses -  
they would have fallen under your foot, I'm sure  
Instead, Saint Margaret, I was made to take part in your fight  
in that prison cell  
and marveled to see you slay a dragon  
with just one sign of the cross  
But Saint Margaret, fair lady,  
as I trembled in a corner, immobilized by awe,  
you came after me:  
"A figure as black as an Ethiop", you screamed  
"A figure as innocent as an Arab", I protested  
to a saint who carried Christ beneath her pale flesh;  
in blue marble strains He swam  
so I believed  
unable to see those veins inside of me  
as I cried aloud for mercy  
to Saint Margaret, a fair lady,  
who pinned me down  
rallied on by light  
and the comfort of angels  
I would never be given  
when the torture machines came crowding in



**PANIC:**  
**ON SYLVIA PLATH**

33

She slipped in her own blood  
all over the kitchen floor  
brown and beige linoleum  
bounced back her seminal cry  
clumsier than a gesture with a knife  
yet somehow inevitable

She found life through an anchor  
in daily toast and eggs  
leaves and linen  
and a dark-skinned man on a narrow bed  
too small for a racking act of love  
too large for a covert call on death  
against the clashing cymbals  
for other girls everywhere  
bells and telephones  
balls and roses

So she cried mercy and backed away  
taking care to cover the frozen death-spot  
that grew paler each day on her knee  
She fed the stranger love and body  
in the mirth she clutched at awkwardly  
like a stolen necklace broken in the fist  
at a cocktail party  
where so much depends upon  
a gay toss of the head  
planting smiles and curls  
in just the places  
for a mass of vampires  
fresh blood on their faces

When the death-spot took over her knee  
she met her two jaundiced eyes in the bathroom mirror  
and pressed fingers to glass  
colder than the moon  
recalling her birth abreast a coffin  
and the vaginal gaping of her daddy's mouth  
needing to swallow her whole  
hair, skin, and bones off  
into the grave

I have heard but never felt  
men who only eat  
their women shaved  
like skinned animals  
like little girls  
made to run naked  
through green garden hoses  
for the camera  
by mom and dad  
I was once a little girl  
filling photo albums  
filled by snakes  
running naked green  
and hairless  
I was always eating  
men were chased away  
like brutal animals

I have heard but never felt  
men who skin women  
with the back of a hand  
with a black trouser belt  
with a hot frying pan  
and place inside  
a shaved animal  
in front of young daughters  
who eat men but never feel

I have heard but never felt  
men who only eat  
little girls naked  
for the camera  
they fill what is hairless  
they fill it with animals  
beneath the skin  
I have heard but never felt  
beneath the skin I shave  
under green garden hoses

**“I am sure you know that you are lovely”,  
you said to me  
over coffee and uncertain hands  
and I  
trickster  
fraud  
charlatan  
coquette  
and oh yes artiste  
in a black garter belt on a dusty roadside  
laughed as if to say  
I am told this every day  
by every man  
but looked away  
for the show of modesty  
that disguises quackery  
and the truth that it is I  
alone  
who swallows pills and writes words  
that no one in their right mind would buy**

If this cross is a bit in my teeth  
then this chain is a beaded strap  
I could split my flesh open with  
if a turn failed around my neck

And if these hands keep folding under bankruptcy  
of the body and not the spirit  
then my prayers could be seen as curses  
against the man I invoked to redeem me  
I cry to carry these blisters on my feet  
that left lonely prints in middle eastern sand  
I walked barefoot all the way in pantomime  
and at each station I screamed aloud  
as I thought of Veronica I wiped my brow  
as smooth as a canon ball from my thighs  
as dark as the back of my mouth

Did I hallucinate that black birth  
the apparition hung wet on a Phoenician bough?  
I've forgotten my own baby  
the dead limbs, the plucked petals  
the vacancy pumped between her legs  
from which my eyes followed a pool of ruby  
to the ground where my memories are kept  
hard enough for a crown my baby escapes me in time  
one karat for each hour of every day  
that I sift like sand through my blank toes  
while I curse my pain and walk alone

# Coming Into Decadence

“...it was the diaper that I wore  
and the dirt thereof and my  
mother hating me for it and me  
loving me for it but the hate  
won didn't it yes the distaste  
won the disgust won and because  
of this I am a hoarder of words  
I hold them in though they are  
dung oh God”

**ANNE SEXTON**  
“THE HOARDER”

there have been  
heads on pikes and rope  
heads battered between hands  
heads smothered  
face down on a bed  
heads reared back with poison  
pierced by bullets and brick  
heads weighed down with water  
madness and gas  
heads sent through windshields  
crushed on concrete  
countless heads  
heads  
heads  
but a guillotined head is most blessed  
one clean swipe  
through baby fat and cries  
two separate caskets to house the proof  
we all remember how Marie-Antoinette died  
because she gave us head  
perhaps the French are best  
allow me to challenge that  
with my head on the guillotine  
sent rolling through urine and feces  
down medieval streets  
staining sidewalks, splashing sheets  
crucified dry white in open backyard air  
under wooden pegs and green tight rope  
my comrades, come, forsake the flesh  
let us grant ourselves immortality  
with a flash of steel and peasant spit  
we'll sell our poetry

I don't write love poems often  
but this is for you  
who uprooted my heart  
like a stubborn hair on the chin  
of a Victorian spinster -  
similes can be crude  
but critics can be murdered  
so let me tell you  
that your voice in my ear  
is like a dozen tiny pills with ridges  
in a bottle I can't stop sucking back  
against my pouting lips  
I'm crazy for risk  
What if I sucked the wrong way  
and the tickling fell into my mouth  
from the outside?  
Guess I'm proposing marriage  
strapped to a bed  
on the top floor of an asylum  
We could order out for Chinese every night  
and piss off the dietician  
with love moans behind a shower curtain  
partitioned from the celibate rest  
because I think you fit the type  
who would have been a Loony Tunes fan  
and my sense of humour is sick like you said  
when I held your keys with one hand  
and your wrist with the other  
taking your words one step too far  
as usual  
god knows you tempt me  
on my back with a phone cord in my mouth  
and my eyes closed  
and my cheek grazing hollow plastic  
wishing you were here in my arms  
pretending friendship  
while I crumble like honeyed filo dough  
beneath a crown of pistachio  
too sweet and strange for you to taste

Eye felon face without cushioning bruised areolas and token pill  
oh with open slobbering mouth as  
shudderflowedintosobflowedinto right hand from prickly plumping  
thighs to massage: headinto won handfulove died curls between  
cookie tinned sewing scissors and overflow of bedroom garbage  
pale

I fell on face without cushioning  
bruised areolas  
and took in pillow  
with open slobbering mouth  
as shudder flowed into sob flowed into  
right hand from prickly  
plumping thighs to massage  
head into one  
handful of dyed  
curls between cookie-  
tinned sewing scissors  
and overflow of bedroom  
garbage pail



To think I thought to scream your name  
in a twenty storey leap  
To think I thought you'd weep to see  
black clothes surrounding me  
To think I thought of your bare fists  
on the noose around my neck  
To think I bought myself flowers  
in memory of my death

hope you gave me    nothing  
more than a fickle noose

a dangling modifier  
from                    a basement ceiling

          I tried to kick  
away the laundered chair  
          but kept on  
kneeling and hope  
you did not even make the act  
worth repeating

*Pitter patter pitter patter  
someone's gut is getting fatter  
Who cares. What does it matter.*

Pater Pater if you please  
you sacred alabaster heart  
is bleeding twelve inches  
against the knees  
It's stuffing me with sticky sweets  
Maybe I'm all holes by definition  
but all my holes are filling  
In God's eyes  
have I lost my meaning?

I've got bull testicles down the throat  
fleshy bull testicles between the breasts  
heavy bull testicles that foul and oppress  
and remind me to pray  
Sur mes genoux I cross myself  
no standing room in this eglise

Pater damn it  
you just press harder  
screwing my face up with pain  
seems to suit your priestly routine  
You burn incense to cover the sex  
I quake at your name  
and I hear it in the bell that you ring  
I am naughty haughty girl  
for repeating such things  
between the Hail Mary  
Our Father Glory Be  
and the Apostle's Creed  
I'm just here to find a boy to marry  
I'm damaged goods  
and you can't say a thing  
O shame shameful Pater  
who delights in damaging

## OPENING FRAGMENT

Poetry, or Kinder Murders

44

Am I a creator  
of worthwhile words to be read?  
I ask myself  
this simple question  
because I cannot conceive  
the why of this suffering  
the internal crucifixion  
of each flashing thought  
seeming so brilliant at the time  
and then  
Madam-I-Know-Not-Seems comes  
tearing through each green birth  
like a student of Grey's *Anatomy*

Little bloody abortions!  
I dare to name you  
before you are born  
when all I have are the tell-tale stains  
on the old bridal sheet  
to toss around  
the medieval banquet hall

I'm sick of the stench  
again and again  
I bury your bodies  
I trace your descent  
all the good poets around me rise  
they feel the earth  
with their feet  
they wipe the dirt  
from their hands  
I stay seated  
stupefied by the miracle  
dumb at their ascent  
they have learned how to live  
they have learned how to die  
who am I to be saved  
who am I to be saved

## FRAGMENT 1

Faith and Despair

45

Her hand ruffled the curtain  
reminded by the breeze  
to rest her weariness on the pane  
her madness on the ledge  
above the fingered head and spit of pornography  
she once smeared these all over her face  
in rattled epileptic clink and fall  
weighed down on a mattress by the eyes of men  
contemplating death at the bathroom sink  
but only when she stopped to stress  
with crooked arm at stomach and breast  
pregnant with silver and expecting  
any day now  
some soft look  
and flowers maybe

## **FRAGMENT 2**

Henriette and Antoine

46

Henriette lost her way  
from some Montreal train tracks  
forgot Antoine's words  
of peace after death  
and love after sin  
Into his hands he took his breath  
and Henriette's forgiveness  
Henriette  
who could only touch herself  
but never anyone else  
Henriette  
who walked with Antoine  
Antoine  
who fell on the tracks  
It was a suicide pact  
they promised each other at age fifteen  
Antoine and Henriette who laid down on the tracks  
Henriette  
who ran away

### FRAGMENT 3

In Late Bloom

47

there is a faint erotic script  
I am writing for you  
in the accidental moan  
that escapes my mouth  
post-yawn  
that arches back  
undulates  
right hand presses small  
left behind neck.  
automatic push of hair strand  
and then thoughtless biting of thumb nail  
that rests on bottom lip and grazes top  
under a held gaze  
that betrays my inexperience  
how I never learned to wink  
or keep secrets  
like my study of your face

## **FRAGMENT 4**

A Child's Plea

48

peasant soap out of glycerin  
shaved legs in a pail  
a borrowed ring

mom and dad  
I promise if you read  
I'll write you in everything



## FRAGMENT 5

Suicide Wish

49

for so long  
every minute was penetration  
of needle and thread  
under the skin  
I sailed about cluttered rooms  
dizzy in shadow  
drunk on song  
wanting quietly and painlessly  
to pull it all out  
without any mess  
once I wore a dusty white dress  
in preparation  
and did my own singing  
the notes sucked me to sleep  
and kept my life-

## **CLOSING FRAGMENT**

An Explication

50

the odour of isolation is more didactic  
than it is obscene  
more telling in the friction of forefinger and thumb  
to remove the stench  
than the stench itself

## **Vita Auctoris**

**51**

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