Go Down Singing (Original writing, Poetry).

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UMI
GO DOWN SINGING

by

Bernadette Raffoul

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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”
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 everyone
someone 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

continued
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

continued
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 VinnieSuckMeGently 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

continued
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"
FOR FATHER AND I

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
MAJESTIC CRUSH

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

continued
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
IN DEFENSE OF DISTANCE

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
sends 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
LIFE LEFT BEHIND

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

continued
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
FALLING FOR APPLES

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 tottered 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"
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
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
A GRAVE IN THE AIR

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 Ethiopian", 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
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
THE PORNOGRAPHY OF DESPAIR

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
CONFESSION TO A FRIEND

"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
BREAD INTO STONE

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
shudder flowed into sob flowed into right hand from prickly plumping
thighs to massage, head into won handful of dyed 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 is matter.

Pater Pater if you please
you sacred alabastard 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
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
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
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
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
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
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-
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

Bernadette Raffoul was born in 1975, in Leamington, Ontario. She graduated from Wilfrid Laurier University where she obtained an Honours B.A. in English in 1998. She is currently a candidate for the Master’s degree in English and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor and will graduate in June of 2000.