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Through the blue and yellow doors

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Through the blue and yellow doors

by

Joan G. Stewart

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Katharine Whitcomb, Co-Major Professor
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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Joan G. Stewart

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Co-Major Professor

Co-Major Professor

Kathryn Hickox

For the Major Program
to my daughter Angie, who always believed
Table of Contents

Introduction: Through the blue and yellow doors 1

Impermanence 11
Traveling back to Saturday Night, 1953 12
Sunday Morning 13
Laying the Body Down 14
What the Body Knows 15
Queen Mary Road, Ottawa, Ontario 1955 16
How I Came to Love Travel 17
Mornings in Molyvos 18
Impermanence 19

Love Like Snow 20
In the kitchen with my future father-in-law, mother-in-law 21
To St. Anthony, Patron Saint of Lost and Stolen Things 22
Shenango Canyon 24
Variation on 1918 Sediment 25
Away 26
Notes to My Daughter's Lover 28
Nelson to Salmo, B.C. 30
After the Storm 31
Double Dutch 32
March Wind 33
This Could Be Where Desire Ends 34
In Booth Bay 35
In the absence of light we see the stars 36
Desire Returns in Istanbul 37
He moves toward her 38
The Wish 40
Celibate 41

Crossing the Border 43
Paradise 44
Salamanders 45
James Bay, Early Morning Walk 46
Crossing the Border 47
Woman in a Dorm 48
The Countries Inside of Us 49
Snowstorm in Iowa 50
Discovery 51
One Bare Foot on a Cold Floor 51
What the Body Knows ii 54
Laying the Body Down ii 55
Iowa Fall 62

Acknowledgements 63

Biographical Sketch 64
Introduction: Through the blue and yellow doors

"There is only one real reason to read [and write] a poem, and that is to find your way to a larger life than would otherwise be yours to live." Poetry is "an instrument of discovery and transformation" (Hirshfield 14). This collection of poems is presented as three sections of a woman's journey of discovery and transformation. The first section travels through loss and change, beginning with my father's death, and ending with my child leaving home. The second section reflects on relationships--love in as many variations as snow. As a woman, I find myself as a solitary being in the world, and come to understand love as communion--with people, place, landscape, the creatures of the natural world--with all of life. In the third section, I leave my work and home of twenty years to study in Iowa. I set out on a new journey of travel and writing, towards a "larger life" I am hoping for.

On Loss and Change

Time is place. And the time of Glasgow, Scotland where my life began exists nowhere but in my memory. My mother's family home still exists, but her parents, brother, and sister are dead. My cousins are scattered from England to Wales, to Spain. I have one paternal aunt remaining in Methyl, Fife outside of Edinburgh. I haven't been back to Scotland since I was in my twenties. My sister, who returned recently, says the corner "chippies" where we went for fish and chips wrapped in newspaper "pokes," are curry takeouts now.

On my last visit, my aunt (father's sister) and uncle took me by motor car into the highlands. We didn't have time to travel as far north as Lossiemouth, where my grandfather begged them to take me. That village where my paternal grandfather once fished appears in "Traveling Back to Saturday Night." I plan to go there in the not-too-distant future to draw on that landscape for my writing.

When my father returned from the war it was difficult to find work and affordable housing. My mother says we lived in council flats, destined to become slums, and had to line up daily for rations of fresh food. Some of my parents' friends, who had already immigrated to Canada, wrote of work there and my parents decided to immigrate to Rockland, Ontario in Canada. Although I became a Canadian citizen by naturalization, I'm still a citizen of Great Britain. That split sense of identity has always been a part of me. My
longing for that place and time appears in "Travelling back to Saturday Night" and in "One Bare Foot on a Cold Floor."

In 1952 we left family and 'the old country,' and flew across the Atlantic. Two years later, on August 28, 1954, my father died in a car accident driving home from a stag party. My grandparents called my mother home, but her brother wrote and told her to stay; he and his family would come and join us. We moved to the city of Ottawa, where my mother found work in a department store. I often wonder how my life would be different if we had returned home

Two years after my father's death, my mother met and married my second father, a first generation German-Canadian whose parents emigrated from Germany, to Russia, to North Dakota, and finally settled on the prairies in Saskatchewan to farm under the Homestead Act. Although he lived out west, he was sent to Ottawa to train as a nurse for the army's medical corps where he met my mother at a dance. I haven't written about my stepfather in this manuscript. I only allude to his entry into our lives in "Queen Mary Road, 1955."

With my stepfather, we were transferred almost every year, and in eastern Canada we moved from Ottawa to Camp Borden, back to Ottawa, and to Kingston. Then we traveled across Canada by train to live in Calgary, where I spent grades four and five. Once more, we crossed the Atlantic, this time by ocean liner, to live for three years in Germany. While there, we were able to visit our family in Scotland on a regular basis.

My father's final posting brought us back to the prairies, to Calgary in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, where I spent grade nine and my high school years.

On relationship with people, place

My first husband and I met when I was thirteen. We married when I was nineteen, and moved to Regina, Saskatchewan where he played bass in a rock band for two years. After the band folded, we moved to Vancouver, B.C. on the West Coast where my daughter was born. The lifestyle of a rock musician no longer suited me, and when she was three months old, I left and moved to Nelson, B.C. The prose poem that opens the second section, "In the kitchen," presents a brief vignette of a scene with my first husband's parents, who I continued to visit after my marriage ended. The poem was written after a call from the family to tell me that John had died. That moment was the passing of my youth, and youthful love.
Located in the West Kootenays, in the southern interior of B.C., Nelson is a small jeweled crown of a city that curves around Kootenay Lake and rises up the mountainside. The Kootenays is rich with lush green forests, mountains, rivers and lakes. In Nelson, I met and married a man who grew up there and shared my love of the land. Although I didn’t remain with him, he became father to my daughter. I left when she was eight years old, and moved to Victoria, B.C. on the West Coast. Although I stayed on the coast for close to twenty years, the longest I ever lived in one place, my love affair with the beauty of the interior of B.C. never ended. I often return there in summers and consider it one of my physical, spiritual, and emotional homes. Deer and bears are abundant in the region. Huckleberries, a favorite berry of people and bears, ripen in August in the forest. Everyone has a favorite picking spot they claim has the largest, ripest berries. But people pick carefully, with one eye out for bears. Three of my poems take place within the environment of the Kootenays: “Shenango Canyon,” “Nelson to Salmo, B.C.,” and “In the absence of light we see the stars.”

It is through writing and reflection in the natural world that I make meaning for myself. May Sarton says that “if one looks long enough at almost anything, looks with absolute attention at a flower, a stone, the bark of a tree, grass, snow, a cloud, something like revelation takes place. Something is "given," and perhaps that something is always a reality outside the self. We are aware of God only when we cease to be aware of ourselves, not in the negative sense of denying the self, but in the sense of losing self in admiration and joy” (99). I attempt to capture that awe and revelation in the poem, “In Booth Bay,” where a woman understands her growing need for solitude by watching the birds. In “Shenango Canyon” the woman returns and meets the husband that she left. Her spirit and body linger with the land, which gives her a deeper understanding of love: “Her hair is snagged in a rock in the river. Her mouth purple with berries bargains with bears. Her white skin hangs from cedar boughs. Her breast, her womb, push up through the mushy roomy earth.”

Often I sit and watch the trees, or walk among them in the woods. They are always there to inspire and comfort, no matter what country, what region I live. They have been with me since my childhood. They inspire “What the Body Knows” and “Iowa Fall,” and appear consistently in my poems. In “Traveling Back to Saturday Night” and “What the Body Knows ii,” they act as portals to the spirit world.
In the natural world I feel a part of the universe, one of its creatures. I go out and return beloved. When I neglect to ‘return home’ to this great energy and beauty, I feel lost and alone in the world.

On Solitude

I left both my marriages, vowing never to share my life with another again until I understood myself....and since that vow in 1981, twenty years have passed. Sometimes I think that the woman I have become, could not bear to live within the conventions of marriage now. I shared my life with my child, but couldn’t fathom how I’d fit in the time I’d need outside of work and parenting to enter into relationship. What time I had to myself I wanted to spend reading and writing.

I have lived alone since my daughter began her own life in 1992. But I didn’t really understand true solitude until I quit my job in 2000, and for one year struggled with my next step, before deciding to leave and study in Iowa to pursue writing as a vocation. In the third section of this manuscript my dissatisfaction with my work and my eventual “leap” away from it appears in “Paradise” and “The Salamander.” My commitment to writing assured me in its focus, its endless capacity for learning. The year I left work, I began an uninterrupted journey into the inner world, reading deeply from Rilke, Rumi, and Thomas Merton. I developed a writing schedule. I learned how to navigate between solitude and social time, and the self-discipline required to sustain a writing life.

One of my favorite British authors, Anita Brookner, explores solitude and loneliness through many of her characters. At the end of Falling Slowly her character discovers the price of liberty: “at last she realized that that was how life was designed. Outside agencies might until now have directed her movements....A great secret had been revealed to her, and she was free. Resisting the conventional life, a woman disobeys “the call of duty” but learns that “eternal vigilance [is] the price of liberty.”

“Impermanence” is both a celebration and a warning. The woman must be careful not to “drift away through simple inattention.” “He Moves Toward Her” has an underlying sense of loss for the aging woman who is beginning to understand that she may be solitary for the rest of her years. What is unsaid in both these poems is that she has no witnesses. She must be vigilant to be alone. She must keep “spinning” her life. She “steps out” into the world, even when it’s raining. “Celibate” also explores the fear and joy of being alone.
Mother Tongue

Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim’rous beastie,
O, what panic’s in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,
Wi’ bickering brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an’ chase thee,
Wi’ murd’ring pattie!

from “To a Mouse,” Robert Burns

My mother never lost her Scottish accent, and my own speech, inflections, rhythms, diction differed from my Canadian peers. In my youth, my mother sang along to her records, traditional Scottish songs. She recited the verses of Robbie Burns, and the verse above is one she repeated often. Studying poetic meter and form in undergraduate school, I learned that Burns was the master of “tail-rhyme [rime couée]” (Fussell 142). Of his many variations on that form, “To a Mouse” is “a six-lined stanza containing two dimeter “bobs” or “tails,” one following a triplet of iambic tetrameters and one following a final iambic tetrameter (Fussell 143). The rhyme scheme is aabab.

My voice, its rhythms and sounds, rises out of a mixture of family tongues and sensibilities: my mother’s “ma wee waine,” or “oh, och, aye;” and my step-father’s rural prairie “large Jesus jarge,” and “if the good Lord’s willing and the creek don’t rise.”

Both have their own rhythms, pitch and measure. In the first, each syllable is sung; six different notes rise and fall. In the second, the hard syllabic weight creates its own music in my mind. Moving about, I heard a broad range of mostly working-class dialects outside the home: Italian, French-Canadian, German, Dutch, and Native First Nations’ people. And though I often couldn’t understand what was spoken, the music of those languages remains with me. My voice, as well as my being, arises from these many places. But the inner rhythm and music that informs me is the Scottish tongue, and those first poems and ballads of Robbie Burns. I think my mother tongue creates an internal rhythm that is a driving force in my poems.

On Learning the Craft of Poetry

I began writing and listening to poetry as a teenager. It was an outlet for my passion and emotions. Over the years, I saved enough poetry to fill a binder, and saved boxes of notebooks and journals. I never considered “becoming” a poet, however.
It was providence that I met and worked with my first poet mentor, Lorna Crozier. One day I pulled a book off the shelf in a bookstore, opened it and after reading one page, immediately bought it. Two years later I entered university and discovered Lorna had left Saskatchewan and was now teaching at the University of Victoria in the writing program. I entered school for the luxury of reading, studying, and learning. I explored a broad range of courses in liberal arts and the humanities, and entered a writing class with Lorna in my second year. By my third year, I was committed to writing and graduated with a B.F.A. and a major in poetry.

Lorna is a gifted lyric, sometimes narrative, poet who explores the inner world and relationships through the natural world, a combination of Sharon Olds and Mary Oliver. One of my favorite books, her tenth collection of poetry, “Saving Grace,” explores the persona of Mrs. Bentley, a character from the depression years on the prairies, who had haunted Lorna ever since her school days when she read Sinclair Ross’s classic, As for Me and My House. Lorna also remembered the stories of women who had lived on farms during the depression, the dustbowl of the “dirty thirties,” women who boarded at her mother’s house. In this book Lorna writes in “Dust”: “Rags stuffed under the doors, around the windows/as if they were wounds that needed staunching” (13). “In the mornings when we rise,” she says, “the shape of our heads/remains on the pillow slips/as if we leave behind the part of us/that keeps on dreaming” (14).

Lorna’s most recent work, The Apocrypha of Light, evolved during a sabbatical year when she worked with the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Victoria, to re-imagine, re-claim and re-write women’s stories from the Bible which--like history--are recorded by men. Like the poems of Emily Dickinson, many of Lorna’s poems begin with earthly particulars and end in the vast realms of spirit, universe. Lorna taught me how to leap. In “The Sacrifice of Isaac” (33) Isaac’s mother follows Abraham and her child. The poem ends:

I wait by a thicket, tufts of ram’s wool on the brambles, knife cold against my thigh, until the altar’s built, Isaac asking, Father, where’s the lamb? then I step into the open, fists on fire, above my swinging arm the bare throat of my husband’s Lord opening in a flood of crimson light.
At the University of Victoria I studied with Lorna and her partner Patrick Lane. Both come from a working class background. Lorna has her Master’s Degree, while Patrick, an autodidact who is well-traveled and read, has published 27 books of poetry. In their classes I was exposed to Canadian and International poets through anthologies and course packs, from Blake and Shakespeare to contemporary poets. Every class brought a two page recommended reading list, and we were expected to read full-length works of the poets we were drawn to if we wanted to become “serious” writers.

From the poetry I read deeply, I was drawn to Leonard Cohen, Gwendolyn McEwen, Michael Ondaatje, Al Purdy and Bronwyn Wallace in Canada, and to Bukowski, Hass, Dunn, Dobyns, Hugo, Kinnell, Olds, and Oliver in America. Internationally, my favorites were Neruda and Vallejo, Rumi, Rilke, Heaney and Paul Durcan. I loved the classic Haiku, and read women’s classic poetry from Japan, China, Korea. I was also drawn to the work of contemporary Native American (Erdrich, Welch) and Canada’s First Nations writers, such as Jeannette Armstrong, Lee Maracle and Alice Lee.

I think what draws me to all of these poets is their ability to speak of the natural world in ways that bind them to the truths of the inner heart, the soul. Gwendolyn McEwen (1941-1987), in “Dark Pines Under Water” (1969) says:

Explorer, you tell yourself this is not what you came for
Although it is good here, and green;
You had meant to move with a kind of largeness,
You had planned a heavy grace, an anguished dream.

But the dark pines of your mind dip deeper
And you are sinking, sinking, sleeper
In an elementary world;
There is something down there and you want it told.

In her poem, “Discovery,” her last stanza reads: “when you see the land naked, look again/(burn your maps, that is not what I mean),/I mean the moment when it seems most plain/is the moment when you must begin again.” This line invites you back into the poem.

In directed study with Lorna, I explored the beginnings of everyday speech in poetry. I read prose poems from Germany and France, tracking the late arrival of the form to (puritan) America and Canada. I was drawn to Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Robert Bly’s imagist prose poems inspired by Francis Ponge, the experimental prose poems of Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein and more contemporary works of Russell Edson. I loved the prose poems which some categorized as “short, short stories” or “flash fiction”--the
poems of Canadian Terrance Heath and American Jim Heynen. In this collection I tell a few stories through prose poems that blur the boundaries of genre: "First Love," "Shenango Canyon," "In the Absence of Light We See the Stars," "Woman in a Dorm," and "Crossing Borders."

In Contemporary Canadian Poetry and in Women in Film, I learned how feminists were (re)claiming language as their own. I try not to use the language of war and patriarchy. I do not compartmentalize my life as child, girl, daughter, woman, employee, mother, and poet. Nor can I separate Scottish from Canadian, human from animal, earthly from spiritual. These identities interconnect and need to be drawn together, expressed as an organic whole.

When I graduated in 1998, I told Lorna that she had passed on enough information to last me through a decade of learning. I had been exposed to far more than I could integrate. I understood that in my lifetime, I would never learn all I wanted to know about poetry, which was exciting. I realized I had to begin now step by step, writing from what I knew.

In 2001 I entered poetry workshops once again at Iowa State University. Here, Mary Swander taught me to ground my reader in place and time. She expanded my knowledge of the use of metaphor, as tenor and vehicle. Deb Marquart guided me to the heart of my poems, particularly the ones circling my father's death. She encouraged me to take emotional risks and recommended I read "The Work of Mourning," to help me write about my father's death. Sheryl St. Germain pushed me to journal, reflect and explore to go deeper, to stay longer inside my poems. In this last semester, Katharine Whitcomb introduced new works by contemporary poets, which served as models for the class. Katharine led me to establish and sustain voice, to work on lineation, stanza formation, consistency in form, and to push beyond my tendency to rely on imagery to relay inner emotions---to just come right out and say it: "Readers want you to talk to us, include us." She suggested I re-read Jack Gilbert's Great Fires and Anne Carson's Glass and God. I am beginning to articulate my thoughts and feelings in my poems, to speak out loud. "Iowa Fall" in the third section is the beginning of that work.

Important to my current project was the poetry collection, "Some Ether," written by poet and essayist Nick Flynn, whose mother committed suicide. In Flynn's book I recognized an emotional resonance, but also some similar language used to relay those feelings. Where I say, "a chorus floating in her head, something missing," and "a song it will take [my] life to learn," Flynn speaks of "a song without a body" (16). He speaks of his sudden
abandonment: "how overnight we could be orphaned/& the world become a bell we'd crawl inside/& the ringing all we'd eat" (18). This echoed my feelings in "Sunday Morning" in "the silence of bells." Flynn's discussion of suicide and death could be heavy, but his subject is lifted up by imaginative language and surprise. And that fascinates.

There are a few important things I want to learn from Flynn. One is his use of white space, the silent moments that allow the reader to reflect on what he says. The other is the way he binds the sections of his work with repetition, metaphor, images and details that reappear and echo forward and back, "the way waves space themselves/until they stop" (56). I began to see how my own poems could work together. In revision, my poems began to open, breathe more air and space.

I became inspired by Flynn to dive into the "ether," and return with fragments of the "wreck" to make shape. I had written about my father's death in "Traveling Back to Saturday Night" and "Sunday Morning," and (re)constructed the rituals of mourning in two versions of "Laying the Body Down." But Flynn helped me to see how they could act as underpinnings to a collection. I explore loss and love, but emerge with a love of the natural world and my place inside of it, a place that sustains both woman and writer.

Through the blue and yellow doors

It took a great journey to arrive where I am today. I am emerging from that journey as a writer, not only to share my stories, but to discover where I belong. I feel a kinship with humanitarians, environmentalists, naturalists, people who care deeply, go out in the world with all their senses, and reflect their experience back as writers, dancers, artists, filmmakers, activists, thinkers.

I want to continue to learn how to speak and shape language. As in oral tradition, I hope that someone will feel less alone, or that something familiar may be seen in a new way to bring personal meaning, to recognize a place we feel that we already know. Kafka says that literature is an axe that breaks open the frozen sea inside us....to know the full dimensions of who we are, as individuals and as a culture. I want to speak of the doors of experience presented to us in life and death as individuals, as a culture. When we walk through those doors, what do we discover? Who do we become through our experience?
Work Cited


Impermanence

What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the winter time. It is as the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.

Chief Crowfoot, Blackfoot Crossing, 25 April 1890
Traveling back to Saturday Night, 1953

Through the black portals of night, come to a yellow glow, pellucid eye to a smoke-filled room. Hear the steady clink of bottles, laughter roaring out its innocence.

Outside, a song of wing on wing, of green balloon, night's string and cello criers call. Above, one constellation shimmers in a milky spill: torso, head, haunch and hoof.

O that you could use those hooves, glint of fire to light your father's way, silver saddle moon across your back to carry him home. The weary mouth of evening shuts.

Your father stumbles from the house, thick hands fumbling keys. *All the bare fields silent as eternity.* Your mother turns, restless in her bed, the empty place beside her growing cold. Sing to him now before the wheels roll, from dust to pitch, winding road. Before silence, that siren, lulls him into dreams, night's bleary drink swallows him down to the North Sea, where he's fishing with his father back in Lossiemouth. Hand over hand, hauling nets, silver scales flashing as his car leaves the road. Into the tree he flies, an oak, its cracked portal closing like a startled throat. Sing to him now, the first note of a song it will take your life to learn.
Sunday Morning

Church bells rouse the town, though no one in this house will dress for church today.

The man who bears the news, a family friend, stands at the kitchen doorway, his head bowed.

He turns and turns his cap, a prayer wheel in his hands, as if prayer could turn back time.

Delivered to the door by the men, our father would have arrived -- a little drunk perhaps, a little late, to kiss his girls goodnight, tuck the blankets around their shoulders, folded like tiny wings against the shuddering dawn -- slipped into his bed, careful not to wake his wife.

She sits dry-eyed at the table, her face hard-set against the wailing of the bairns, the panic of birds.

In the silence of bells, cotter pin loose, the wheels slip and slide, cogs stop pathways lead nowhere.

---

When Bells stop ringing
--- Church ---begins ---
When Cogs --- stop ---
That's Circumference ---
The Ultimate --- of Wheels.

Emily Dickinson
Laying the Body Down

i

how her body sings
seat of emotion in the visceral
she learns its language slowly
seat of the soul in the tongue
singing the world into existence

ii

She dreams her father plunging
from a bridge. Beneath the surface
of water, his car
drifts slowly
down,
a dandelion seed;
his eyes are closed
as if he is listening to music.

iii

she grows gill a fishy tail
swims down to join him
on the ocean floor

to see the pearls
that had been
his bright blue eyes.

iv

What she missed as a child she wants,
she re-enacts: the small rituals of song,
words of praise, a solemn slow procession
to his grave, the closed casket sinking
into earth, a clump of dirt from her fist,
definitive thump.

And after:
the sugared taste of cakes and milky tea,
soothing voices of adult talk, scent of
cigarettes smoke swirling, rising up.
What the Body Knows

There’s one moment I remember when I am walking with my father, my small hand cupped inside of his.

He looks down at me. My eyes shine, my heart explodes. Before "I", before imagination, memory is pieced together out of fragments, like Isis pieced the scattered flesh of Osiris back, a mere reflection of his likeness.

Between zero and three, says Steiner, the spirit is still adjusting to the material world. I’ll trust what my body knows, its cargo carried forward in my cells, all I knew at three before my father died. Through a split shell, that twisted, peeled-back bark of me, a woman’s shape emerging; but hold my hand inside your hand. Feel that shining.
Queen Mary Road, Ottawa, Ontario 1955

After one more fight with my sister,
the day my mother flew from the kitchen,
fly swatter raised, heels like hammers
chasing us round and round

the dining room table, we bolted
for our room, scrambled up the ladder
to the top bunk, pressed small
as flies against the wall.

The moment that red-rubber swung,
barely stinging our jack-knifed knees,
our terror threatening to rise up as laughter,
she left and cried behind her bedroom door.

When our mother got a sitter, wore her flared dress
and high-heel shoes, stained our cheeks with lipstick
kisses, our sitter said she was sure to get married again.

We wanted her to marry the Dutch man who brought
chocolates and took us to the circus. We wanted her
to marry the vet who put a cast on our ginger cat’s leg.

Instead, she married an army nurse, a man she met
at a dance, who came one Sunday, pumped water
from our flooding basement, and stayed for dinner.

We wore our Sunday suits, hats and shoes, carried
hankies in our tiny purses. Later in our living room,
we ate triangle sandwiches with the crusts cut off,

while adults laughed and talked, taking pictures
of the bride and groom holding the knife to cut
their wedding cake. Later they drove away

on their honeymoon in his blue Studebaker.
Our mother turned and smiled, while we waved
and waved our small white handkerchiefs.
How I Came to Love Travel

My mother and father on their knees strip old wax with steel wool, scrub old dirt with brush and soap, rub new paste, thick and golden from a can, buff it 'til the floors are shining. They scrub walls, cupboards, windows last, squeaky-vinegar clean, the whole ritual repeated twice, moving out and in, eighteen times, nine houses from grade one to nine. They had moving down to an art, never complained.

What I loved was private berths on trains and ocean steamers, the tiny reading lights and curtains that closed you in, the silver and linen service, boxed meals on aeroplanes, summer road trips and motel rooms where we snooped in every corner, dad frying something easy, like a holiday. Wherever we arrived, there were new fields and forests to explore. And when the teacher introduced you, someone always claimed the new girl for their own. In Junior High in Germany, there were caves and creeks and cafés, plugging phennigs in the juke box, and Friday teentown in the school gym, where we jived to hits on Radio Luxembourg, and no one left you sitting for the last dance.

Oh, those years when we belonged to boys and girls who had always been outsiders. I thought ours was the flight of feathers waving goodbye, before I knew the weight our parents carried for us. It was easy come easy go army brat.
Mornings in Molyvos

begin with the measured clatter of hooves on cobblestone, ring of harness bells, a song from the man who works his way up our lane. Each day he greets me with a grin, raising his hat over his horses, a fresh-cut flower tucked behind their ears, their braided harnesses embroidered by the sun. Even the bins of hammered tin hanging down their flanks--painted turquoise, red and gold--shine. Doves repeat themselves, a steady staccato insistent as those black girls backing Mick in Sympathy for the Devil. I lean out my window like a kid waking to first light, to resurrection of travel, to packing my bags as soon as the latch clicked in place behind my daughter leaving home -- leaning in to my solo journey. Each morning I repeat this ritual: coffee, books, pen in hand before my window. What more could I ask for? I've come for long-awaited solitude, for light against the bone white walls, for blue and yellow doors against the hard stone. I've come for old folks riding sideways on their donkeys, for nets beneath the olive trees, for goats tethered in wild red poppies. I've come to see this gypsy man collecting garbage, who shows me how it's done: how to enter each day solo--a perfectly small parade.
every creative act makes a plan for a new existence
Berdyaer

Impermanence

Tonight I shall bathe in lavender oil
by candlelight alone, as time passes
like a comet. And all that holds me here

is gravity. Those years it took
to raise my child, the years it took
to age me: gone, one stroke

of a broom through a spider's web.
I could drift away through simple
inattention. I could blindfold

the mirrors, court the spirits
that numb and dull, old attitudes
outliving their usefulness.

To seek the precise resonance
of immutable self, to begin again
and again to embrace the subtle

impermanence of here and now
and this is it. A light that can’t
be named as anything but love

keeps me spinning here, inventing
my life
one more time.
Love Like Snow

Fare-thee-weel, thou first and fairest!
Fare-thee-weel, thou best and dearest!
Thine be like a joy and treasure,
Peace, Enjoyment, Love and Pleasure!
Ae fond kiss, and then we sever!
Ae farewell, alas, for ever!
Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge thee,
Warring sighs and groans I'll wage thee.

_Ae Fond Kiss_, Robert Burns, 1791
In the kitchen with my future father-in-law, mother-in-law

_to Ellie St. Goddard in memory of her husband John_

John holds court at the kitchen table, fresh from the shower, his smooth face shaved, thick hair combed back, a lingering smell of peppermints, aftershave, Canadian rye. Ellie roasts the duck he shot and cleaned for Thanksgiving dinner, while he tells us how he sweet-talked her at that dance near Portage la Prairie out Manitoba way. _Huh!_ she says, squinting her eyes, _I wouldn't marry you now if you were hanging upside down from the rafters and your teeth were full of gold_—and he's grinning and winking at us kids across the table.
To St. Anthony, Patron Saint of Lost and Stolen Things

I hear you keep track of lost things, articles
that disappear in whirling pools where I have
lost track myself, all the mismatched socks
and earrings that break up a pair.

Today it was my sister’s wedding gift.
I can’t remember where that sideboard went,
the one I loved for its rich swirls, ocher
grains, sandy wood. Which got me thinking
about that old station wagon I bought
for $200 bucks, learned to drive it
through back alleys. Then I packed my stuff
and left my first marriage, the driver’s door
held shut by a bungy cord, the cat reciting
the first verse of howl. I remember
the cross wind that threatened to sweep me
off the road, the cop pulling me over,
looking in at my paltry possessions, faulty
mechanics of my life. I was bolting away
to freedom, wherever that is, driving off
from prairie to mountain to coast,
with nothing but what would fit in those
old cars that ran and ran for years.

And the time I left that marriage for good,
with the only thing I thought I needed then,
the light of my daughter’s eyes framed
in the rearview mirror. St. Anthony, here I am
beneath a prairie sky again—all that light
reflecting on snow and small things come
to mind: the fur coat my mother-in-law
passed on thirty years ago to stave away
the bitter cold that swept across the bare back
of Saskatchewan. I could use it now, my bones
growing thin as cold sheets, something more than just these scraps of fading memory.
When the lover goes, the vow though broken remains...
Galway Kinnell

Shenango Canyon

She'd forgotten who the night belongs to here, how the stars like silver rivets hold the black above the towering larch, ponderosa pine, the whiz and blur of bats. She wakes at dawn before their wedding stage, where the band once played and they danced, drank too much tequila. The cedar planks are covered in moss.

She came here to be alone, retreat from the city. When he arrives to clean the cabin they're both surprised, both polite. They sweep and scrub the debris of winter, work side by side like they'd never been apart. She tells him how her watch disappeared last night as she slept by the fire. Packrats, he says. She remembers the first time she sat in his canoe, a city girl facing the wrong way. That night the moon trails a path between them through the window.

In the morning they bathe in the river. She can measure time by the way his skin, once taut, hangs like the skin on her arms, her belly. Slowly he coaxes her out to the middle, where he knows she is afraid to go. He holds her hand as she lies down in the current, then lets her go. She screams as her body flies down the rapids to land in the still pool below. It is this moment that reminds her why she loved this man.

They know this isn't where she belongs. How sad she was, how lonely they were together. Yet, pieces of her linger here. Her hair is snagged in the rocks in the river. Her mouth, purple with berries, bargains with bears. Her white skin hangs from cedar boughs. Her breasts, her womb, push up through the mushroomy earth. I'll be back, she says, if I don't go first and you're dying alone.
Variation on 1918 Sediment

to Cesar Vallejo

Cesar, that afternoon it rained like never before
you had no desire for life, that afternoon
dressed in grace and sorrow, dressed
by a woman. That afternoon it rained
like never before, poppies bent their heads
to the earth like her sad response
to the black flowers you pinned upon
her dress, your taunts, your glacial distance.

Cesar, that afternoon it rained like never before,
you recalled her dignity, her silence that wrote
in burning oil: the end. Did those other women
who passed take away a piece of her, her mute lips,
her burnt eyes, her footsteps fading in the earth,
beneath the rain, the implacable rain?
Away

to three spirits who arrived

i

Three months you grew in my womb
before the bloody spots appeared,
black stains of rain on thin earth.
I lay in bed, coddled you,
until I birthed a piece of placenta
as large as the liver of a deer.

My fingers probed its purple flesh,
searching for some part of you.

That night I lost so much blood,
they scraped you away.

ii

Some nights a child appears in my dreams.
She is standing outside and some danger
is lurking there. I am screened in
on a summer porch. There is no door.

My hands push and push, my fists pound,
but I cannot break free to reach her.

It must be she I’m dreaming of,
the one who made her presence known

that morning I woke alone, my breasts tight
with knowing. I sensed a stirring, as bright

as the light in the leaves outside my window.
And all that day I wept before the call I made,

as if she were an error scratched in pencil,
and I could erase her away.
And you who came bearing the birth mark of your father, my face, my mother's eyes,

how long, how far did you journey to fall like Icarus into the sea?

The moment you splashed from my womb, you drew me into a light I was a stranger to.

You came to me, wet and furled to unfold from my arms, so fast it seems now,

from infant, to child, to girl, to woman. Love that knows no end you flew away,

radiant and sparkling your wings.
Notes to My Daughter’s Lover

i

Winters I bathed her indoors
in a hammered-steel tub,
summers in creeks and rivers
beneath the spinning silver
disks of light in trees,
hers father splitting
kindling, frying trout.

ii

She brings me flowers,
purple iris with gold-streaked
tongues, drawing stories from
my bones, water that seeps
through clay, through stone.

She leans back against
my chair, closes her eyes:
brush my hair, mum,
she says.

iii

If you soothe her feet with peppermint oil,
your fingers will rest upon the burnt umber
skin, soft as lips beneath her ankle—
the same mark that spreads beneath
her father’s knee.

iv

Quench her thirst
with tangerines.

Bring small gifts
to make her laugh.

Tell her what you want
and need.

Give her room.
Give her time.

v
If you brush her hair
you'll see the red bloom
of poppy beneath the hairline
at the nape of her neck.

'Veave it into a braid.
It falls thick and heavy
as rope down her back:
bell clapper, iron tongue.

If you sift beneath her footprints in the sand:
you'll find the horned hoof of a mountain goat,
      fin of a brook trout,
      wing of an osprey,
      tail of a dragon fly.
Nelson to Salmo, B.C.

I love to drive this winding road at night. How the stars spin and pull like magnets, the mountains hold you closer in the dark.

The moon appears, half-hidden like an iridescent nipple rising up to the black open mouth of sky,

its milky light spilling down across the trees into a clearing where I see him slowly raise and turn his head, antlers lit like silver moss.

My car slows and we gaze across the distance, like two creatures grazing on the night. O, Kootenay home of the buck, the deer.

Lay me down in this lush green bed, where I still draw the breath of God as I know it.
I record everything with the doggedness of the tamarisk trees, with the memory of heavy stones, to keep what is left from blowing away in this endless, anonymous wind.

Andreas Karavis, Saracen Island

After the Storm

I emerge, a groundhog, through the glass door, searching for my shadow in the hum and glow of lamps. Below my deck, naked trees, streets black and slick as frogs. Voices drift across the harbour, faint buzz of tourists escaping damp hotels like winter flies.

This stillness like a summer night, like summer love, like fool's gold, a wild iridescence in the veins, promise of sweet spring riding in on the coattails of a winter that wouldn't stop beating us down.
Double Dutch

see that man across the room
the beauty of his hands those veins that protrude
blue pulse that rivers fingers defined
by holding pens and books a curve of muscle
down his forearm like a long dark wound
we have a knowing

I tuck and fold

away washed and ironed that man
like crisp linen
softens over time
has had every woman

in this room once I was skipping with him
like a girl again inside the slap-slap slap-slap
of double dutch two girls at either end

twirling the ropes. I could hear their whirring sound
feel the wind as they whipped the air
so close to my ears so sure

of the rhythm that led me in
how I loved to enter and exit again
no part of myself getting stung or caught in the ropes.
March Wind

Today wind sweeps the clouds
and light arrives to draw me
to this window where I write.

Beyond the oak a scented cedar
sways. Its branches lift like full
skirts in swing, then fall.

The firs begin to bend across
the road, their long backs curving,
faces flushed, tilting skyward.

Today the wind charms:
a fickle fellow whirling
from partner to partner.

a child in a playground
rushing breathless from swing
to slide to merry-go-round,

a butterfly on a zig zag
path, its furry coil unraveling
to taste each taste of nectar.

Tomorrow clouds will bring
the dark rain and I will sink
into my chair to read,

and the trees will just be trees,
and wind, wind: petulant, cold,
all of its charms forgotten.
This Could Be Where Desire Ends

All I want now
is my neighbours’
dogs to quit barking,
some time to write,
to walk in the woods,
to sleep in the
healing heat of sun.
In Booth Bay

the gulls and crows fight
for feeding grounds. A flurry
of wings, sharp screams ignite.

A heron beats its leather wings
lands in slow-motion flight.
Not a flock bird, the heron stands
alone with its ancient secrets.
Two white swans drift by
like ferry barges.

Then he arrives at my side,
too eager—his ex-wife
has a lover, he wants to know
he can still catch fish.
He would draw the flesh
clean from my bones,

come to hate me like
he hates his wife.
I've seen it before,

what happens when a man
is in a panic to fill a gap.
I gaze out at the ocean
from my wood slat chair,
      now  the heron,
      now  the crone.
In the absence of light we see the stars
to R.

The first time we talked, your lover slept in the shadows beyond kerosene glow of lamp. I was a nighthawk in my jazz phase. We drank tea, smoked homegrown and cigarettes, Coltrane transporting us to who-knows-where. Outside, the sky danced in a black-sequin dress, the mountains pressed against her, hummed. It was years before our paths crossed, chance meetings between lovers. Now the gaps between significant others seem endless. You’re a regular long-distance call. I call you trying to name these things: history, a love of good food and music, a little honest sex that gives and takes and talks. I call you brother with a twist, a light that calls me in from the cold, a winter star that shimmers, hears me humming in the dark.
Desire Returns in Istanbul

In the sultry heat
of a summer night,

a bowl of fruit between us
on a table,

you place a cherry
between your teeth,

lean over and touch
your lips to my lips,

bite gently down,
breaking the skin

of the fruit, its cool juice
trickling across my tongue,

breath and blood rushing
to the source.

You slip the cherry into
my mouth and I bite,

swallow the sweet, slip
the fruit back to your mouth,

a belly dance
of lip and tongue

until the seed is bared
of fruit, as my own is bared,

mind and flesh, resistance
replaced by holy prayer:

and next you pick
a purple plum.
He moves toward her

Day steps out
in gumboots,
yellow slicker,

cool rain splashes
on her face,
mouth open

to benediction,
to the spark and taste
of what is wet

to the man
who came to her
last night

in a dream
and lingers here
inside of her.

So rare
she thinks of
carnal love,

night is one long breath
she has forgotten
to take

and she feels
a passing
mourning

for the young
woman,
soft skin

and pearl
inside the delicate
folds, petals

of spring.
She's come to
autumn, brown

withered fruit
that sags
and falls

beauty
in another
c oat

that covers
the core
bruised ripe

but what does
the body matter
in terms of

vanity?
It comes
to dust.

This man
is sure,
as clear

as rain
as he moves
toward her.
The Wish

I remember dreaming in my youth, everyone I wanted to be important to, weeping at my grave, my coffin white as the wild horse that appeared like magic when I closed my birthday eyes and blew the candleshine out.

In that vanity of dreaming myself dying to be loved, heart sweet as spun sugar sticking to my mouth, I imagined the miles friends would travel, songs they'd write to play at my wake, jamming all night like they used to in our basement, my first husband, a clef curled over his bass. Bottom line, no one writes anymore.

These days of careful what you wish for, it's all down to business, planning the body recycled, burned, ashes corked. In truth, my death would bring my sisters, a few close friends to gather round my daughter. Perhaps it's she I dream-wished into existence, how as a child she always raced ahead, my eyes like two bare hands clamped tight on her mane, that shock of white spun hair I used to find her in a crowd, the one who would carry me out to the light, release me to the wind.
Whoever has no house now will never have one.  
Whoever is alone will stay alone  
*Autumn Day*, Rainer Maria Rilke

Celibate

It begins with turning the light to your own life,  
with long hours of work,  
with raising a child alone,  
with nothing left over when the bills are paid.  

Twenty years slip by.  
Tough to believe you are meant to be with anyone now.  
At home in your silence, surrounded by books.  

Sometimes you're afraid of being alone when you are old and vulnerable. In your wildest fears you'll be homeless, cold wandering the streets.  
More likely you'll be stuck hearing neighbors' arguments, their bass thumping through walls so thin you hear them piss.  

Still, it's hard to change your mind, watching people disappear inside each other, no time to think of what they wanted. Still, they're supposed to be the lucky ones in love.  
Solo women seen as odd, or frightened, selfish. Consider the bees. The social bees who live in hives (honey bees, bumble bees)
are 1 out of 100. The other 99
are solitary bees.
They mate, then nest
alone underground.
Not that you don’t dream
of having your own home,
of having a companion. But
you have never thrived
in the hive. And how can you
alter the light turning
on a solitary flower,
a solitary bee.
Crossing the Border

I saw a beggar leaning on his wooden crutch. He called to me, "Don't ask for so much."
And a woman leaning in her darkened door, She cried out, "Hey, why not ask for more?"

*Bird on a Wire*, Leonard Cohen
We all live in an age in which we are camped like bewildered travelers in a garish, unrestful hotel.

Joseph Conrad

Paradise

Maybe this is the closest we will get: a gust of wind sweeps the trees, and in a brilliant burst of yellow, a swarm of leaves flutters to the earth.

Last week I stood in a grocery line browsing through a magazine and came across some photographs: a man beaten, a woman raped.

A soldier holds a gun to their heads. A pack of skinny dogs feasts on a heap of human flesh. This is mid-day, somewhere in Africa.

Where do we turn our eyes? Here in the relative safety of home, I read the news. A young boy leaps from a bridge to escape the hate he endures every day at school for his gender. A young girl’s rage kicks another girl to death. Where do we find heart?

Here in my every day, the small politics of work I grow tired of talking about. I dance the two-step. Weekends I wade into the forest where light and shadows play, where wind turns leaves to silver fish, where deer step cautious into a clearing to lick the dew.

Listen. An arrow of geese shot from a bow in a clear blue sky, so close you can hear their wings beat the air.
Salamanders

Spring has passed, the wild lilies retreated. Indian Paint Brush sparks its fire in green fern. Iridescent moss climbs the firs that reach up to a point too far to see. We're hiking across the Juan de Fuca Ridge. We wind down a steep incline to the coastline, follow a path that juts from a cliff, one body width, step cautious over the gaps formed by roots, an easy exit to the surf crashing below,

where sea lions bask before their rookery. On our final descent we cling to ropes tied to trees. When we arrive, we'll picnic on the rocks, outside the white sound of phones and endless talk, outside fluorescent lights and airless rooms, where we perform our tasks five days a week together. After a steep climb back up, we stop at a pond, long enough to see the blue incandescent sacs, clinging to twigs beneath the surface, dozens of salamander eggs suspended in a gelatinous mass. I imagine the ones that will hatch, their strange transformation from gill to lung, the first rush of air, sensation of earth beneath their feet, of cinnabar, green, the location of blue. Soon, I too will emerge, release my grip from work, feel that rush of breath, running headlong into the wilderness, surprised by the smoke escaping from my lungs.
James Bay, Early Morning Walk

Goodbye to the Little Gem, the last of our corner grocers, where on slow days, the owner sits behind his counter reading Shakespeare in Chinese.

Goodbye to his wife under the striped awning, arranging rows of cut flowers in white buckets, colours bursting like children on their first day of school.

Goodbye to Dallas Road, the wide-open mouth of sea, where wind clears its foul-fish morning breath, and its early enough to catch the open-market clamor of birds.

Goodbye to the screeching gulls flinging mussels, urchins down on rocks to spring the hinge, bust the shell, expose the grey flesh of morning's feast.

Goodbye to the baby seal washed upon the beach, a spotted casket rolling, its tiny fins flapping back and forth, its bulging eyes, round and black as licked stones.

Goodbye to the end of a season, tide's deliverance, a knot I work to loosen, a fist I blow my breath against, coaxing it open to peer at the strange gray matter inside.

Goodbye to Simcoe Street, to the old man searching from room to room for something he forgot; to the woman who bangs on our doors late at night, desperate for drink.

Goodbye to the children playing hopscotch in the courtyard, to neighbours playing music every summer under blue tarps, eating food on closet doors held up by sawhorses.

Goodbye to CBC, to Cross-Country talk, to Mad Dog Café, to Sunday-cooking to Wachtel, Writers and Co. drifting like steam from my open windows.

Goodbye to my stuff on the sidewalk marked free; to empty bookshelves, toothless mouths gaping open; to walls bared, empty spaces left behind, clean and smooth as knuckle bones.
Crossing the Border: variation on a glosa

Some people, I thought, will never know how pleasant it is to be distant in a clean rain, the driving rain of a summer storm. It's not like you'd expect, nothing like you'd expect.

James Welch, Winter in the Blood

At Sweetgrass I leave Alberta and enter Montana. Signs appear outside of Havre. Throw your maps away. I follow the Nez Perce Trail to the Bear Paw battle site. Stars and stripes snap in an empty parking lot. I read about the Nee-me-poo led here by Chief Joseph. Imagine 800 people trekking 1600 miles by horse and foot from Oregon, arriving here in winter, the army on your tail. Milk River to freedom in Canada, lies 40 miles north. My feet welcome the soft give of earth, step into open prairie. Prickly rose, milkweed, sage, gay feather, golden rod. A sign tells me I've entered C'aynim ‘Alikinwaaaspa, resting place of fire, buffalo chips. At high-noon, mid-August, no tourist herds, no bray of inane chatter. I'm pleased to walk alone. Some people, I thought, will never know how pleasant it is to be distant.

I enter the camps of Joseph, Looking Glass, Husishusis Kute, White Bird and Toohoolhoolsote. The sign says the army scattered their horses. At the place of siege, women, children, old men, dig shelter in the wet, frozen ground with tools for cooking, digging roots, knives and bare hands. I climb up to Death Point. On the battle site, I can see in four directions. The earth begins to shake. Horses thunder toward the bluff. Rifles crack. Inside pits carved in the earth, warriors hold the army back in twenty-four hour shifts. Their names are carved in stone, fenced by silver spears. Cotton bundles, t-shirts, bandanas, are tied around the iron bars. Inside each knot: tobacco, feathers, twigs. Each knot a prayer of whoever stood before me in a clean rain, the driving rain of a summer storm.

Wind speeds across the prairie, a tidal wave through yellow grass. Beneath a glaring sky, I am stripped naked. I stand inside one heart that beats across the plain. I stay until the wind subsides, sweat pours, stings my eyes. Once again, I feel the burning heat. As if released, I turn and follow a path down to dry bed, to snake creek, to the site of surrender, to Chief Joseph’s speech. October 7, 1877: “Tonight the ones who could escaped, though they may freeze to death. It is cold and we have no blankets. Hear me, my chiefs. I am tired. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever.” I will fight no more forever. What brings us to these places where the land speaks? My grief here, my tears, are a blessed healing. It's not like you'd expect.

Beneath the glassed-in-case-protected speech, a small mound at my feet brings me to my knees: braided sweet grass and sage, a child’s turquoise doll, a pink guitar pick, a hawk’s feather, copper pennies, a cats-eye marble, a zig-zag painted rubber ball, a neon-green plastic train tied to a weathered piece of string. I add tobacco to the pile and pray. I pray for all of us. I pray a child’s prayer, a woman’s prayer. I pray to hear our leaders speak those words: My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever. Chief Joseph, one hundred and twenty-five years have passed. And still we wait. Today, I crossed the border at Sweetgrass. It’s the first day of my journey to the Heartland, my first day in the U.S. It's not like you'd expect, it's nothing like you'd expect.
Woman in a Dorm

Their shouting draws her from study to the window—a group of boys on the lawn four floors below, all wearing red shirts. One boy holds something oblong, black, like a small truncheon. Two circle a tree. A hare bolts into the open. With a swift throw, the boy hits a bulls-eye on his running target. The hare drops. The boys cheer. Another runs and like a punter swings his leg, his foot landing a swift kick to the belly. The hare flies through the air, then drops again. Another cheer.

The woman flies too, down four flights, hits the pavement running. Yells at their retreating backs. She follows, a mad woman in slippers. Their red shirts are like capes, moving targets. She’s thinking of how she learned ‘America’ through books and films: *To Kill a Mockingbird, Of Mice and Men, Deliverance, Mississippi Burning.* Or one of those old sheriff shows, like *Gunsmoke,* where the bullies ride in and shoot up the town (always the cowards, always picking on the little guys), the leader of the bad-apple-pack of cowhands saying, *them boys just havin’ themself a little fun.* Matt always putting a stop to it.

The boys disappear into a fraternity house. More red shirts pull up, pour from the back of a shiny black truck. They holler a greeting. A victory cry. As if this world belongs to them. And maybe it does.

The woman departs and re-appears, spoils slung in the *Daily.* She lays the doe down on their steps, a string of ruby beads glistening now beneath its belly, its startled eyes stretched wide to greet them when they open the door.
The Countries Inside of Us

Last night, I watched the State of the Union on TV, slid exhausted from despair to bed.

I thought I owed it to my students to try and understand this country they grew inside of.

This morning I woke from sleep wanting more, as if sleep was a brief affair, dusting its hands of the finished business of lust. Brooding over coffee, all I see in my mind is the shine in the President's narrow eyes, men standing firm behind his shoulder, congress rising up before him on its hind legs, clapping like bears dancing on a short leash.

The camera spans the crowd, zooms in on the President's father, wife, their eyes shining back at him with pride. Why, he's just a little boy, I think, all swollen up with approval, as if he had pressed the right button on his toy, recited each prompted word perfectly, his picture of missiles and bombs hanging on the classroom wall. Oh brothers, when you beat your sticks and drums of war, I long for a country we've never known, a country I enter in sleep, crossing borders to where my old mother calls, come home.
Snowstorm in Iowa

At a red light, I see Alberta plates, people used to driving in snow, used to the straight stretch of prairie highway. I want to blow my horn, jump out before the light turns green, make them roll down their window, point a thumb back to my Beautiful B.C. license plates, say, "Hi, I went to high school in Alberta, I have sisters in Calgary, in Edmonton," just because they’re Canadian, even though they’re strangers, even though the locals curse them every summer back in B.C., stuck behind their trucks and campers on a winding road, even though we can’t pass and they brake on every curve.
Discovery

a friend asks me, when did you first
discover your intelligence, like asking
when I first discovered my sex

the way a fuchsia globe opens in summer heat
revealing its purple skirts, slender tongue
the deep stain of licked grape popsicles

like stripping away the prickly leaves
of artichokes to reach the heart
of what you really think and need to say

like when you stand up on the playground
swing pump your sturdy legs
until it rises up
One Bare Foot on a Cold Floor

i

I roll out of bed in Iowa, stand up in grandma’s house in Glasgow.
My sisters have left the bed we share, the bed my mother shared with her sister, sometimes a girlfriend squeezed in after a night at a dance or the pictures, or waiting it out in a bomb shelter.

My bottom flinches on the toilet seat.
I can see my breath. Spring light strains through frosted glass onto white tiles where grandma stores her pint of milk.
I can hear her singing in the kitchen, sliding shillings into a metre slot, chunk, chunk, to light the gas, boil the kettle for tea.

She places china, jam pot, silver on a tray and carries it out to the sitting room where my mother drapes our clothes over a fire screen.
The clock chime reminds me of the garden shed out back, of grandfather’s empty boots.
The last time I saw him, I was three and he was waving goodbye. Any minute now I’ll rush out to that room, pull warm clothes over my head and feet and sit before the fire, drinking sweet milky tea, my body glowing in the heat I feel now, sitting on a toilet seat in Iowa, slowly coming to, one of granny’s Scottish songs looping round and round in my head.

ii

I roll out of bed in Iowa, stand up in Nelson, B.C., stamp my cold feet before the wood stove, feeding kindling into its greedy mouth. I light a match under crumpled news, hold my hands close while cedar flames lick the split larch. Satisfied, I clamp the iron door and shuffle to my daughter’s room.

She stands in fuzzy-foot pajamas, yellow as Easter chicks, her two-teeth
morning grin sliding open, her arms reaching out, wanting up. We kiss like Eskimos before I lift her down and she springs forward into her day of puzzles, crayons, walks.

I sit her on her tiny pot, pass her picture book, goosebumps rising on her naked body, as mine do now. I calculate the time change, the hours before I can call, just to hear her adult voice say, *mum!*
What the Body Knows ii

in memory of Silver Bear

Leaning into a stretch, I hear my teacher’s words: be gentle with your body. It will remember

and, next time, open more for you. I remember a ‘shaman’ journey I took long ago, a trance induced

by turtle rattles, tiny stones swishing steady as rain against the shells, a rhythm that drew me down into

a tree well to the underworld. I landed in a forest, passed a puma in a tree. A snake crossed my path

and then the wolves appeared. I can’t explain how they took me forward on their backs. I remember

their fur between my fingers, the shallow river we crossed and stopped to drink, glint of sun

leaping, hurting my eyes where light broke through. I remember its glacial taste cooling my tongue,

my throat, the sound as it traveled through river bed, over stone. Then the rattles stopped, shook twice,

choosh, choosh, called me back, the way the shaman said they would. The next time, I ran beside the wolves,
crossed the river and drank again from its cooling waters. Each time we traveled further on the path that led us

deeper into the woods, dense and dark, light filtering through the canopy of trees. The last time, we came
to a clearing beside a lake, smooth as first snow, a mountain range beyond. There I sat, flanked by wolves

on either side, until the rattles shook twice, choosh, choosh. When I met the shaman again, he asked about

my journey, said: remember this, how it feels to sit inside the center of the universe. Re-create it any time you wish.

I do not speak of what I’ve learned, discovered through my body with my eyes closed, that ancient brain.
Laying the Body Down ii

i

Lately my blood spills, capillaries split
brittle as hair. Skin, fine as dust,
fails from turned-out socks.

Hormones break me down.
I weep over words, the smallest acts
of kindness, all the flotsam breaking loose.
Yoga replaces the work of hands, drawing flesh from bone, blood through rivered veins.

Behind closed eyes, all I see is blue and yellow lights bursting in a black sky, a wild cereus blooming.
This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
iv

Today the blue bells appeared in rain's mist. Coo of mourning dove dreams me through the blue doors, softens the rusty metal, squeak of spring, yellow eyes of grackle in these Iowa pines.
I feel a stranger here, in exile.
Cicadas rattle like snakes,
thrum like electric wires,
pulse through the heat
that cracks the sky.

Days I avoid tactics of wind,
search shadowed leaves
for songs I do not recognize.
I thirst for water, trace the waves
of geese heading south,

drive through oceans of
grass, its startling beauty
rushing out to meet the sky.
I long to hear the spoken word
of river, song of sea.
This wind blows north to where my father's bones lie like empty rattling pods, nothing over him but earth's dark indifference. No stone sings his name out when I call. I mean to travel there, plant a living thing to mark his grave, something to survive the snow, thrive on spring dew and summer rain, roots stretching down like hands to stroke his bones, succulent blooms pouring scent over the desert of his memory.
I mean to lay my father's body down
before my mother departs.

Light is seeping from the shutters
of her eyes, closing fast.

How I want to brush her silver hair,
fine as feathers now, soothe her

parched skin with a wet sponge,
bathe the small bird

of her humming bone.
Iowa Fall

I wake to the bustle of my roommate and her girls getting ready for school and groan--another day of inadequate sleep. Dragging my bones from bed

I dare a look in the mirror, see puffer fish, eyes dead flat beneath the bloated skin. I brush the foul taste from my mouth, begin to work the rubber tip,

slow the pace of receding gums, of long in the tooth. Mornings like this, I think I'm mad, leaving home for study, makeshift quarters.

At fifty-three I'm tired of leaping through hoops. I want to give in like I used to when my sister pinned my wrists, pulled my arm

like a timepiece up my back. This morning a merciful sun beats down. First fall of snow disappears. I carry coffee, pen, books outside,

but all I can do is stare at maple leaves falling red, heavy with sugar. At home, west coast rain will be pelting down, sound of a clapping crowd, people tilted headfirst into sea-storm winds, useless umbrellas sucked back to skeletal blooms. What makes some bear up

while others collapse? All morning I'm thinking collapse, the whole internal structure caving in. I think of trestles holding trains

across an abyss, engineers doing the math, choosing a truss to bear the weight evenly. I was always slow at math, though I'd stick it out,

stubborn, until I got it. My sister still reminds me on the phone, you always go too far. Today I want to let go free fall

into the plumb-lead weight pulling me down. Once I stepped off a cliff, landed feet first walked off surprised even in my dream to be alive. Sometimes on the highway, I get a flash, a strange urge to turn the wheel into oncoming traffic. Some part of me who did it, is behind me spinning, flipping over, causing a huge wreck, while I speed forward along the white line reel me in to my destination

like a stunned fish. Sometimes a shiver passes through me like the dead and these words slip like mercury from my mouth....I love my life.
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Biographical Sketch

Joan G. Stewart was born on December 19, 1949 in Glasgow, Scotland. Her family emigrated to Canada in 1952 where she was raised. She has also lived in Germany. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Writing (with distinction) in Canada at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, in 1998. She was awarded the F.E. Chapman Achievement Award from the University of Victoria in 1997, and the B.C. Arts Council Senior Scholarship Award for Creative Writing in 1998. She received her Master of Arts Degree (with a focus in creative writing) at Iowa State University in 2003. Her poetry has appeared in the following Canadian Publications: CV2: Contemporary Verse, 2001, Vintage Anthology '97'98, League of Canadian Poets, 1998, Saltwater Annual, 1997, and the Inner Harbour Review3, 1996.