

Slope: Poems

by

Sara Shields

B.A., Concordia University, Montréal, 1989

B.J. University of King's College, Halifax 1991

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in the Department of Writing

©Sara Ellisynd Shields, 2007

University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy or other means, without the permission of the author.

Slope: Poems

by

Sara Shields

B.A., Concordia University, Montréal, 1989  
B.J. University of King's College, Halifax 1991

Supervisory Committee

Lorna Crozier (Writing Department)

Supervisor

Tim Lilburn (Writing Department)

Departmental Member

David Good (School of Public Administration)

Outside Member

Supervisory Committee

Lorna Crozier (Writing Department)

Supervisor

Tim Lilburn (Writing Department)

Departmental Member

David Good (School of Public Administration)

Outside Member

### ABSTRACT

A collection of lyrical, free verse poems that trace the evolution of a young woman's consciousness as she matures into the roles of spouse, mother and grown daughter. The natural "slope" from order to disorder runs through the poems as secrets take shape, children are injured, a marriage falters, and a mother dies. Even sleep, a recurring theme, loses its innocence; first appreciated for the rest it offers, it is soon disparaged as "grease for the gears of loss, rehearsal for complete darkness."

CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	i
SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE PAGE	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
DEDICATION	vi
SLOPE	1
EARNING MY KEEP	2
GRADUATION	3
INSOMNIA	4
HANGOVER	6
MEXICO CITY	7
SEEING YOU ON THE SIX O'CLOCK NEWS	8
WALKING THE BOSS'S DOG	10
IF I WERE A TYPEWRITER	11
CROSSING THE BRIDGE	13
WEDDING	15
WHEN YOU WALK IN YOUR SLEEP	17
GLENDALE	19
BIRTH OF THE ANSWERING MACHINE	20
ECHOCARDIOGRAM	22
BLACKBERRIES	24
THE CHILDREN, SLEEPING	26
TRAPEZE ARTIST'S AUTOGRAPH	27
HAZEL'S SCARF	28
NIGHT	29
MOTHER	30
THE HOUSE, AFTER YOU'VE LEFT	31

MY LIFE, ONCE HAPPY	33
IF LIGHT WAS SUDDENLY NEW	35
TRIP A	36
CONSCIOUSNESS	37
NIGHT IN THE WINDMILL	38
AFTER THE TSUNAMI	39
THE ENGINES OF BEAUTY	40
APPRENTICESHIP	43
FAULTLINES	44
RENOVATIONS	45
IN THE KITCHEN OF FORGETTING	47
MORNING	49

*for my father,  
Donald Shields*

## SLOPE

On this street, all lawns slope to a democratic canal.  
The largest house has dozens of windows, and still  
seems impervious: this is where the nuns live.  
Next door, in the late afternoon, a man  
with his tie flung over a shoulder maneuvers  
a lawnmower up and down the hill by a rope.  
Above him, in an elm tree, his daughter is wishing  
he would bring her a glass of milk so she could fit it  
perfectly on the small round shelf where the landscaper  
who smiled at her too hard cut a branch off clean.  
She looks down the road one way and sees a nun - any nun,  
fogged by prayer - pedaling full circles, alternate  
knee flickering from under her skirt.  
In the other direction her brother, pumping up, down,  
home from school, books strapped tightly to his bike rack.  
They are going to collide, she thinks. They are going to collide.

## EARNING MY KEEP

Today, I watched the bicycle racers  
pedal around and around four city blocks,  
a kilometer each turn. The men did seventy,  
children three, the women something in between.  
Bright jerseys, water bottles, fingerless gloves,  
sock-things over shoe-things that clamp somehow  
to their pedals. Not fleeing anything, all distance  
in their thighs. They leaned on the corners as if pressed  
by some geometrical wind, the space between them fraught  
with closeness.

                    Again and again, they whirred  
under the START/FINISH banner.

When I was a girl, my father asked each evening  
what had I done that day to “earn my keep”.  
Oh, father, I have done nothing today  
but watch the racers, and never wished  
I was among them.

## GRADUATION

You discovered me  
in a bar, skipping Home Ec.  
I failed that class. Failed Home Ec!  
A remote glimmer in your eyes -  
firelight, snow, *courreur du bois* ancestry -  
drew me to you, though I learned  
it was drug-induced, maybe my own  
light glinting on the glass.  
You were twice my age, rented  
a bachelor in a three-storey brick  
around the corner from a private girls' school.  
The first time, my first time, was there:  
hockey game on, Gretzky on his knees,  
a crowd cheering. Television on a wooden crate,  
its black cord running along the wood floor to its plug.  
The last time we met: a spring afternoon,  
just after my high school graduation.  
In your apartment, I forgot  
that weird square hat.

## INSOMNIA

Insomnia steers the ferry,  
a clunky metal thing,  
the boiler in perfect  
running condition, all  
exhalations and clanks,  
bangs and *psshts*,  
a tireless machine.

On deck, the seagulls squawk,  
stupid as overtight screws.  
If I were a lunatic, I'd say they laugh,  
humourless, packish.

Inside, an insect, a sort of flying spider,  
bats itself against the windows;  
a mouse rustles in the passageways,  
missing the trap.

If I sleep, the insect,  
elegant, pretty, will find the open window,  
the mouse some porthole and plank  
to greener pastures.  
The seagulls will sail circles in the air,  
unwinding.

*cont.*

The ferry will anchor  
on some pulsing, slippery thing  
where the passengers play  
at having nowhere to go.

## HANGOVER

driving into Vancouver car-wash girls silver pillows  
 free with a fill-up lipstick melting in the glove box  
 I unroll the window look out  
 at greenhouses piles of gyproc a hawk circling over the suburbs  
 on the radio  
 the bright bit of news - a child  
 dropped a red shoe  
 in the lion's den at the zoo

we get dizzy on the turnpike  
 last night the prayer of a yellow diamond direction sign  
 led us to the Pacific Bar outside Harrison Hot Springs  
 where the barman told us his wife spoke impeccable Spanish  
 and was at a funeral down in the Yucatan

a biker boasted he knew all the words to the Karaoke tunes  
 a woman fresh from a game of Trivial Pursuit said it's illegal to fly  
 an airplane over the Taj Mahal  
 I cried for the memory of Daddy Longlegs at Strawhill  
 you said music is the purest language we almost argued  
 but a man leaned over and said language is repetitive

we sang goodnight Irene to her, this car sorry to have let  
 the transmission run bone dry  
 the barman let us sleep a few hours on the couch in his kitchen  
 and we awoke  
 thinking we know something of what the tender know  
 that trouble is always undertow and sweet

## MEXICO CITY

I know why were you crying on the king-size bed  
in the enormous hotel room in Mexico City,  
our new hats perched on the corners of the mirror,  
fish in the aquarium treading dirty water,  
the manager's dog pawing at the door.

I mended your shirt at a round table  
that would have sat eight at a wedding celebration,  
children in dresses like heavy white roses.

We'd made love. Plain love.

Dusk in the park below, the balloon man stuffed  
the day's unsold balloons into his small car.  
The photographer dismantled his camera.  
A Mariachi singer, drunk and bruised, dark circles  
where his costume missed its buttons,  
stared at a shoe-shine boy shining  
his own shoes. The noise of blackbirds almost  
unbearable. Sky-line of laundry.

I let you fall into sleep (apart from me,  
your life larger) and turned  
to the window. Three in the morning, vans  
waddled the park paths, dropping bundles  
for paperboys who'd propped their bicycles against  
lampposts and now crouched to assemble  
newspaper section into section, a furious  
night origami, wing-flash, cranes trying to lift off.

## SEEING YOU ON THE SIX O'CLOCK NEWS

You looked old, your voice higher,  
as you reported on a hospital fire for the CBC.  
What did Wittgenstein say  
about how the journalist lives secondhand?  
You would never agree to that,  
just like we stopped playing basketball  
once I sank more hoops,  
virtually stopped talking  
when I learned Spanish quicker.

Once, you wished you'd been among  
the lovers who knew me  
when I had a smart smirk for the photographer,  
hair blown across my eyes.  
To you my life was an equation of injuries  
solvable with square meals.

You declared envy when I got malaria,  
though missed a dinner party  
to drive me to Emerg  
with a temperature you couldn't read,  
the thermometer a breath-taking measure of red.  
You sorted through the papers in my jacket pocket  
while the doctor interviewed, investigated,  
looked skyward when I said *raincoast*,  
hurried my red blood cells up to the laboratory,  
prescribed drugs that would explode them.

*cont.*

Jane came with a bag of apples,  
Bill, flowers from his garden.  
Medical students toured my bed, and you  
phoned from work while I lay there,  
my body producing  
these blooms I'm made of.

## WALKING THE BOSS'S DOG

Up since dawn, chopping  
tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers,  
meting out the anger  
from my boyfriend's departure.  
Garlic, zucchini, mushrooms.  
The boss teaching me how  
to cut an onion so it doesn't  
sting: a ball of bread  
gripped in my teeth.  
His retriever whining  
on the back stairs.  
Afternoons I took the dog  
along the river. The leash  
taut. Those days, that dog  
was my best company.

## IF I WERE A TYPEWRITER

I would never wipe my feet.

I would gather dust on a top shelf  
and bear my quaint name and the eager shine  
of my elbow: a trophy  
of a more obliging era.

So intelligible the connection  
between key and letter,  
my brazen mechanics  
imbecilic. A marionette  
with no memory.

Power failures waken me:  
you reach up with scrawny arms  
and are surprised by my inhospitable  
weight, my knuckles and ribs.

I remind you  
what a table is for, return to you  
the bony anatomy of communication,  
inky x-rays of your faulty thoughts.

I trample, stamp, dance on your skull  
tour you through *cipher* space –  
shapes like your grandfather's tools,  
cookies pressed with your grandmother's rolling pin.

*cont.*

And when your digits ache  
from wrestling my muscular keyboard,  
you dig your father's hat from the closet  
and walk to the neighbourhood bar  
where you are flushed  
by conviviality, and entranced  
by the bartender's practical fingers  
on your glass.

Through the window  
all the tracks in the snow  
belong to you.

## CROSSING THE BRIDGE

for my first child, Hazel

To think of all those times  
I crossed the bridge,  
back and forth, it was so long,  
knowing nothing.

I sang whole songs – Bruce Springsteen, Linda Ronstadt –  
and talked out all sorts of thoughts  
across that bridge so many times  
and I had no idea.

I crossed it into Dartmouth, I crossed it  
into Halifax, into Dartmouth again.  
To work, to school, home  
from the bar, my feet heavy with beer,  
one in front of the other.

Three men died building that bridge,  
the Miq'maq persuaded to lift the curse,  
a public ceremony, drumming –  
I thought about that  
sometimes when I crossed.

I thought about the future, too,  
the crossing was so long.  
I'd get a house in the country  
with goats and laying hens -  
but I never suspected.

*cont.*

Sometimes I ran because it was so long,  
sometimes I ran because I couldn't believe  
I was still crossing that bridge.  
I would look down at the water and see the ferry,  
but I never took the ferry,  
it cost to take the ferry.

Sometimes I dragged my finger along the railing  
as I walked the bridge,  
sometimes I looked up at the security cameras  
for a sign -- that I was being watched,  
that somebody knew  
I was always crossing that bridge.

## WEDDING

The main accessories  
our bare feet.  
We didn't have  
proper shoes  
for a wedding outfit,  
kicked off  
our ugly sandals  
and felt the  
oh pedestrian sidewalk  
lead us to  
Richardson Park  
(the baby taking turns  
in our arms)  
across damp grass to the  
soft riverbank  
where we exchanged  
vows we'd written on scraps  
we soon lost.

The river didn't still,  
the city river we once swam  
naked, late in the night.  
It carried us easily  
downtown, but we fought  
the current to get home,  
finally walked on land  
past parked cars,  
locked doors,

*cont.*

a bakery with its  
kitchen dimly lit, a figure  
moving in there. Later,  
we heard sirens  
as we warmed ourselves  
by the apartment's  
baseboard heater.

## WHEN YOU WALK IN YOUR SLEEP

I wake up cold, blinking against  
the constellation of street lamps, porch lights,  
bed-side reading lamps, the refrigerator's  
interior bulb.

Our doctor says to push the bed against the wall  
so that you have to climb over me  
and wake me up and I can then  
wake you up so we can  
go back to sleep.

But I defend this lapse  
into innocence, stand guard  
as you noctambulate  
room to room, flip a light switch  
up, down, up, open the oven and  
strum the grate, turn a doorknob  
with the concentration  
of a safe cracker.

Once, you removed the books from a shelf  
and replaced them newly ordered.  
Another time, you spun the salad spinner  
a dozen times.

*cont.*

If there is a code, it returns you to our bed,  
blessedly palpable, weary  
and satisfied as a mechanic  
who has tuned the world's engine.

## GLENDALE

The weathered merry-go-round  
at the abandoned institution near our house  
doesn't quit easily. One push  
and I've counted fifteen revolutions, it's impossible  
to get my daughter off without  
cries of injustice. Why is it here, in the shadow  
of this brooding building, people tied to their beds  
and worse, worse. The neighbourhood  
teenagers come here, leave behind trampled  
Slurpee cups. Sometimes a young couple  
have their first kiss here, they turn, turn,  
feeling sweetly sick and afraid as they  
hope for some friction  
from the solid air.

## BIRTH OF THE ANSWERING MACHINE

Not that long ago, we'd *dial* the number,  
 then listen as we coiled the cord around a finger,  
 plucked dead leaves from a plant:

*thrrrck thrrrck thrrrck thrrrck*

We *did* things then: drove standard,  
*turned* the channel, our children  
 climbed on climbing frames. We wrote  
 letters for others on sheets of fibrous paper.  
 In shops class, the teenagers made wood boxes  
 to hold the postage stamps we'd buy in rolls.

Some of us still wound our watches:

*krrrck krrrck krrrck krrrck* (think I'll try Ella again!)

One September, the government said  
 we had to get new tape measurers,  
 with centimeters, decimeters, metres, millimetres!  
 We felt woozy: gravity tightened and loosened and tightened.  
 Nothing moved and

everything changed:

we didn't know when to shift gears,  
 birth announcements had to be translated,  
 we worried about the birds

flying

with their new wingspans.

*cont.*

At night, when the kids were in bed,  
their feet sticking over the edge,  
we phoned each other,  
whispered the old language –

*a twelve pound baby*

*ninety-eight degrees in the shade*

*twenty-six miles and then he collapsed*

needed each other

so much.

## ECHOCARDIOGRAM

I take my heart wherever I go -  
it's beyond compulsion.  
Now I have seen it,  
seen the four chambers  
barter, barter, barter.

What makes it pound so?  
No hammer hammers it,  
no plug plugged in,  
no pendulum suspended.

*The size of your fist, says the cardiologist.*  
*That's a good way to think of it.*  
She writes down the messages  
my lonely heart murmurs:  
half a thump, an *ump*, a moon  
tearing from the earth.

The image is grainy; a mountain range assembles  
across the bottom of the screen.  
*Almost done*, she says, and promptly turns off the machine,  
unsticks the camera from my chest,  
hands me a towel to wipe off conductive gel, slug traces.  
I button my shirt, and thank her, I think.

*cont.*

In the coldroom of the hospital gift shop, dahlias,  
50 cents each. I buy three:  
one with white petals  
like the fingers of an empty glove,  
one blood red, and a yellow one  
its petals nestled,  
countless chambers.

An old woman chooses two, spending  
more on a vase to hold them.  
I grip mine by the stems,  
carry the bouquet in front of me, carefully  
falling in love.

## BLACKBERRIES

The best blackberries grow by the manure pile.  
 The kids climb up the pile to get at them, shit  
 tumbling into their boots, they don't care.

Regularly, we find strangers at our manure, pirates  
 stuffing garbage bags. They hurtle out of there, trucks loaded with treasure:  
 beautifully aged horse manure, top of the heap.

There *is* a poop hierarchy:

first horse, then llama, then goat,  
 then cow (less *oomph*, all those stomachs  
 over-processing clover, refining  
 grass beyond memory)  
 and finally, chicken shit.

Our stallion blackberries are fat when we pick them, almost  
 bursting when we put them in a pie  
 for our city friends.

We sit at their dining room table.  
 The plates match, and the cutlery, the glasses,  
 even my friend and her husband match,  
 their children match, it's like everyone's  
 amnesiac.

But when they bite into our blackberry pie  
 something happens.

Even as they remove stems from their mouths  
 and place them delicately on the edge of their plates,

*cont.*

their eyes look sorry:

*oohhhh* they say and

*my, such blackberries*

having no idea what makes them so good.

## THE CHILDREN, SLEEPING

Stupefied by nether oxygen,  
bodies flung by a great trowel,  
limbs spread, mouths open  
mid-vowel. Even their teeth sleep.

All things sleep:  
the mountain ash in the yard,  
spoons in the drawer.  
Even night gets its dozy swatch.

These evenings, we clear the decks -  
sweep the floors, sort the toys,  
soothe the whimpering laundry.  
And gaze like this - *come look at the children* -  
memorizing them  
before we give over, too.

## TRAPEZE ARTIST'S AUTOGRAPH

At the exit from the Big Top,  
his body gilded with sweat,  
make-up smeared from spinning through the air, surely -  
he takes my son's program, bicep flexing  
as he applies the pen.

I had to tell myself he wasn't tricking us,  
catching that little stick mid-air -  
wasn't battery-operated or digitized,  
but skin, unforgiving bone.  
I had to talk myself into being wowed,  
had to talk myself down.

The audience has filed past,  
the tent has lost its breath;  
we have stood here a long time.  
Did he misunderstand what we wanted?  
Has a poem just now found its earthly conduit?  
Perhaps he's scrawling a plea  
for rescue from his nomadic life. . .

No. He has written just what we expected:

*Roberto Eduardo Sanchez*

each letter the signature  
of a body falling through air.

## HAZEL'S SCARF

My daughter's scarf is finished, somewhere.

But that isn't good enough. She is the age  
of actually. Actually, bats are not birds.

The scarf, wrapped around its own needles, a swan  
resting her head on her own back,  
nestles on a windowsill in the living room.

As much as it persists, an annoyance to me,  
for my daughter, it *exists*, as unfinished business,  
as broken promise, as incompleteness, which I at my age  
must believe has its own beauty. But she doesn't need  
that kind of beauty. What she needs is an actual,  
mother-made scarf. I could put down my book and knit, knit,  
knit. I keep stitching my life like this, one row  
at a time.

## NIGHT

I am in my bed, sleep  
shuffling about, choosing  
the best angle from which  
to throw its cloak. Outside,  
the ash tree's leaves are lit,  
the trunk shimmers, borrowing  
from the moon's secondary light.  
Moon, doll me up too.  
I've seen through sleep's childish bliss,  
its dreamy honey mist, all of it  
grease for the gears of loss,  
rehearsal for perfect darkness.

MOTHER

After she left, I still hollered greetings  
when I entered that house,

would even barrel up the stairs  
and find her in the chair by the bedroom window.  
She'd look up from her book.

Now, five months later, I still call,  
but my voice just pushes air against the walls,  
down the halls, over the furniture.

It's my fault.

There was a day I fell  
into that chair  
and sobbed

inconsolably.

## THE HOUSE, AFTER YOU'VE LEFT

1

The clocks instruct amnesia.  
Eight in the morning, eight in the evening, all the same.  
Hands whirligig as if they'd never waved  
good-bye to a most constant lover  
or held the xenon silence  
between tick and tock.

2

The paintings are cold.  
Birds dabbed onto cool skies  
pantomime flight. Human figures  
bend at their joints, once.  
They need us  
to sit before them  
and reassemble.  
Someone must gather  
kindling and tinder,  
clear the grate, open the flue,  
drag a match assuredly  
across the flint  
of her own life.

*cont.*

3

The plants keep on  
with variations on leafiness.

Some throb still  
from your tending -  
fists of new leaves  
opening heart-shaped,  
tear-shaped.

## MY LIFE, ONCE HAPPY

Shorter distances now  
and night comes earlier.

Pyjamas. I have never owned  
so many pairs. I wear them once  
and want them warm  
from the dryer again.

What changed,  
my friend wants to know, peering  
as at the small print  
of ingredients on a cereal box.  
I wish I could oblige  
with a tidy list of doses.

Let's say I was at a play,  
the kind where the actors  
every so often ask for directions  
or to point where the monster's hiding.  
The audience shouts and laughs out loud.

The person beside me  
falls asleep.

A deep sleep, though  
she had been enjoying the play,  
really throwing her head back,  
showing her teeth, her tonsils, chortling  
and oh just loving the loose feeling of that.  
Now her head falls against mine.  
Heads are awfully heavy.

*cont.*

I push it away

but it crashes back.

And the actors keep running about on the stage

saying their funniest bits.

The audience howls, roars.

The woman beside me

keeps sleeping.

## TRIP A

Now that I run, regularly,  
out of the house as if released,  
to the blue spruce on Dallas Road  
for which I have some private,  
explosive affinity which sends me  
trotting home again, obedient dog.  
Now that it's habit, a patch  
of false work, I'd like a measure  
of my escape. So, in the car, kids  
in the back seat, cheerfully bruised  
by the sausage machine called school,  
I set the odometer to zero.  
Then Hazel asks about two times infinity:  
does it come up even? Good mothers  
nourish their daughters' interest in math.  
Next, Ezra reports on bear hibernation: I attend  
every word, readying the path  
for urgent heart-to-hearts. Weeks pass  
before I remember to check the gauge.  
By then we have travelled very far.

## IF LIGHT WAS SUDDENLY NEW

if light was suddenly new the ocean would hang above us  
 the sky swim through the valleys  
 we'd cheer compose dirges for each ripe bruise  
 sustained by the fall leaves if light was suddenly new  
 every cow in the pasture would be as different  
 as Margaret Thatcher and Ella Fitzgerald

if light was suddenly new our skin  
 would praise cocoa plums rice strawberries  
 ivory would rebecome bone and night  
 would be so lost it would rub up against truth  
 follow it around

if light was suddenly new we might not need  
 the word love we'd crack egg after egg  
 to find out how it happens the roots in the field  
 would be partners in any dance  
 stones might be surface all the way through  
 stars would be travellers  
 we would put out dishes of water to help them home

if light was suddenly new  
 we might never stop touching  
 a mouthful of pear could make us happy forever  
 we'd care for the moths at the window as if  
 they were our own eyelids  
 we would sun ourselves  
 blameless as the water where Narcissus drowned lapping at the wind

## CONSCIOUSNESS

My husband is downstairs rattling dishes in the sink;  
he could throw them out the window, it's a glorious summer.  
The windows are open, the crickets thick  
with their own thinking, rubbing their legs. This isn't talking,  
what would they have to say to each other, *I'm here?*  
The children are at their safest. Sleeping.  
One with a bandage and under the bandage, stitches.  
I remember the moment before the accident, perfectly:  
him pedalling furiously, head bobbing with joy,  
even the short shadow - it was just past noon.  
That's enough. It's the best I can do.  
That bird today as we drove down a country road,  
at the top of a tree, lazily surveying. I understand now  
why I watched her for so long and was satisfied.

## NIGHT IN THE WINDMILL

We've done well today, we've quashed  
our better judgements, smiled benignly  
rather than bicker over directions  
and backtracks.

Arrived, at our novelty bed and breakfast,  
a once-upon windmill, the great, motionless X  
marking the windblown past. Blades, they're called.  
Our European rental car cute in the cobblestone lot,  
which is scrubbed clean of chaff and horses  
slobbering blacksmithed bits. No drifts  
of flour along the windowsills.

But the breeze  
is throaty at the mullions, and the furniture  
insecure: the walls, or rather, the wall, arches emptily  
behind the rigid carpentry, behind the headboard  
of this bed where we've made fairly passionate love.  
Large slots hewn in the beams above our heads  
threaten ghostly purpose, the high, stone ceiling  
lowering toward us as we sleep.

## AFTER THE TSUNAMI

All night I diagnosed:  
sleep.

Woke often, afraid to find them  
packaged in their sheets,  
failed boats.

This morning they emerge  
hair-stormed, fists at their eyes -  
the work of re-igniting.

Now, Hazel twirls  
in her Christmas tutu,  
Ezra ploughs a new toy  
through the debris  
of wrapping paper –

unaware they've perished,  
building on the light.

## THE ENGINES OF BEAUTY

1.

A scrap of beach we found by a lake,  
fly fishermen whirring fishing lines like lassoes,  
writing and re-writing: *abracadabra*  
as dragonflies mounted each other on air,  
jewel-blue bodies redoubling the sunlight.  
Those fishermen didn't catch one fish.  
You and I didn't love each other yet.  
Didn't pretend  
love was why we were lucky -  
dragonflies landing on our knees.

2.

A fall fair, the parachutist angling down  
to a soccer field dotted with paper plates.  
We were still new to each other;  
nearby, couples in crisp fall jackets  
rooted through each other's pockets  
for a five-dollar bill. At a table, someone  
took the money for a *good cause*,  
wrote their names on a plate before setting it  
on the field, a tidy randomness.

*cont.*

We put our names in, too,  
though the prize seemed impossible:  
a week at a resort, white sand,  
blank horizon.

The parachute neared the plates, the crowd hooted -  
the woman in the harness: was she happy?  
She landed exactly -  
raised the plate from under her foot, waved it,  
a silent tambourine as her parachute dissolved  
behind her like an exhausted squid.  
She read the winning name into a microphone.

I want to say we never needed  
that white sand, blank horizon.  
I watched the parachutist fold her sail  
with an engineer's care, tie it finally  
with canvas straps. As she headed to the parking lot,  
I heard the bitter music of the keys  
in her pocket, and admired her courage  
to know the cheerless engines of beauty.

3.

For years, you floated as you slept,  
hands dangling over the edges of the bed,  
trailing the air.

I lived on the absence you made,  
that unconscious *where*.

*cont.*

Sleep, for me, small meals delivered by an anxious waiter:

*do you need a glass of water?*

*did you lock the doors?*

*have you studied for your exam?*

What exam?

I've sought shelter against your sleeping,

edged close, let your heart's surf

cover me. Thieved you, burdened you.

asked that marriage be a sharing

of deficiencies, too.

Tonight, you draw the same slow breaths

into the same body, sure. But it's as though

over the years, gravity has collected in you.

You are falling, falling, beyond my imagining.

## APPRENTICESHIP

Sweating, cycling uphill while I could be hanging  
bedding on the line. I've planned the day  
to this dab of truancy.

I'm scraps, strips of skin, and my children  
want these, too, for a craft, their doll hospital,  
or a mystery recipe they'll serve me later.  
And my husband's imprecise love, distractible affection...  
Uphill, high on the pedals: no one to apologise to.

I never apprenticed in domestic work,  
as my mother did. At thirty-one she raised her head  
from nine years dumbly folding laundry.  
At thirty-one my body was just leaving the party,  
the roadside, boarding houses, cool basements  
of municipal libraries, the afternoon's books still open on the floor.

I fight my hands into my mother's precision -  
happy dash of oregano, joyous unfolding of lettuce head.  
But it's too late, the salad is metaphor. Greenness, life.  
A breeze. Downhill, home. My children  
happy to see me, my husband looking into my eyes  
for the story.

## FAULTLINES

A terrible fight that morning with my son. I admit  
I angrily did not hold him, rebuffed his sobbing. For only  
an eyelash of time. We mended over lunch. Then, wobbly,  
needing a clean patch, I decided on a bike ride. He went ahead  
on the trail, exuberantly bobbing his head side to side, trying,  
I think, to lighten things. I wanted to remind him to ride carefully,  
but bit my tongue, the morning's shrew-voice  
still in my ears. I threw open the world with my silence,  
letting him pedal too fast; over he hurtled into its violence,  
long and slow, I know, I still see it, his small body  
through the bike's triangle frame, skin tearing.

The doctor threaded the starburst  
rupture, saying it doesn't matter, a beard will hide it.

I'm in no hurry to see my son's beard. I go at the ragged seam  
three times a day with anti-scar cream. Of course I'm to blame  
but the smallest part of me won't forgive my innocent boy  
for adopting forever this stubborn frown.

## RENOVATIONS

1

To the couple sitting at opposite ends of her sofa,  
 the marriage counsellor has learned to inquire, *Are you  
 doing renovations?* At their address, she means,  
 their dollhouse. Three weeks now, bulky carpenters and  
 single-minded electricians have muscled our space.  
 Today, Monday, one arrived with eight fresh stitches  
 trekking diagonally through an eyebrow.  
 Hockey puck, he sheepishly explained. He was fine  
 on Friday, threading wires through the walls,  
 absently eating a box of my daughter's Girl Guide cookies,  
 chocolate row first. I held myself back  
 from smoothing his brow. He should never  
 have left our house.

He should never  
 have entered our house.

We haven't had heat for three winter weeks.  
 Every day, there's another layer  
 of dust on the butter dish, the bedstead,  
 the children. After his bath, the baby  
 leaps for an open switch and is thrown  
 by a new current. I dampened my hand,  
 reached for those same wires:  
 he should have cried more.

At the end of each day, the workers sweep the floors  
 - they've admired my new broom, the static of its bristles -  
 then staple a plastic tarp across the door to *the new room*

*cont.*

as if sealing from us what they know of our future.  
 Lately, the wind has been strong, we hear it  
 bat at the plastic as we rise and fall together in our bed:  
 electrified, renewed, discovering  
 so much forgotten, so much possible.

2

Couples, the home décor magazines explain,  
 break up during renovations because of the tension,  
 all the decisions: paint colours, light fixtures, ornateness  
 of the newel posts.

But I know what it is. It's the plasterer  
 who dials the transistor radio to Mozart; the floor sander  
 who lives with cat hairs all over him, who smokes  
 heavily, smells of beer, wears no protective gear;  
 the young, inarticulate carpenter's assistant carried to us high  
 on his gleaming four-wheel drive F350. All of them:  
 electricians and plumbers and drywallers tramping  
 in and out, glimpsing us through the holes they've punched  
 in our walls.

You can only wave cheerfully for so long, put on  
 an act for this audience who, of course they do, appreciate  
 the entertainment - beginning with the family photos on the mantel,  
 moving on to the black bra forgotten in the bathroom, then  
 the persistently cheerless husband, the nervous, exasperated wife,  
 hushed squabbles, prescription drugs, self-help books.  
 The more they watched us, the more I saw.

And that room?

That space we needed so badly? It won't be big enough.

## IN THE KITCHEN OF FORGETTING

the kettles have boiled dry  
and the fridge self-defrosts

the cookbooks are written in lemon juice  
and there is no fire left, no gas for the stove

the carrot peeler has peeled  
every carrot to its very centre  
the meat tenderizer has gone soft

all meals are served in colanders

the calendar on the wall is faded blank  
by sunlight sifted  
through the screen door

the dinner bell is mute

the herbs in the garden outside the door  
have long been used –

    first, the cook took all the leaves  
then the stems  
then chopped at the roots

she still boils a teaspoon of the dirt  
when hope seizes her

## MORNING

Wakeful with flu, the long  
middle-of-the-night  
comes to an end, wing lifting.

Outside, birds shatter icicles, announcing  
my mother, who hasn't been seen  
for two years.

I have ideas about where she is -  
dusty fistful of grey on the branch  
now repeating, *here she comes!*

But the light arrives first.  
She's invisible in the light.  
The birds blaze anatomy.