

**THE DEBT**

**(POEMS)**

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## ABSTRACT

*The Debt* is a collection of poems exploring tensions between tradition and innovation, between past and present. Set largely against the backdrop of post-moratorium St. John's, Newfoundland, the collection is based on my own experiences as the product of a province unmoored by loss and grief. The opening long poem, "Crown," sets the tone for the project, juxtaposing formal verse and prose poetry in a vernacular commentary on culture and social class. *The Debt* is about development and change, idleness and activism, ecological stewardship, feminism, motherhood, the personal and the political. It is also about resistance—against the encroaching forces of greed and capitalism, even against the accumulated notions of the self. The poems are an argument for community and connection in an age increasingly associated with isolation of the individual. *The Debt* explores the dues we all owe: to nature, to those who came before us, and to one another.

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*The Debt* was written in St. John’s, in the ancestral, unceded territory of the Beothuk.

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I. Crown

[We grant our trusty and well-beloved servant . . . free liberty and license . . .] to discover, search, find out and view such remote, heathen, and barbarous lands, countries, and territories not actually possessed by any Christian prince or people.

—Queen Elizabeth I, *Charter to Sir Walter Raleigh: 1584*  
as read to an assembled crowd by Prince Charles, St. John's, 1983

What he meant was *uncultured*. What he meant was *bestial*. What he meant was *far-flung*, yes, but also *improbable*, as though this place were mere outside chance. When the Crown came, it came with baubles, with dancers, so many petty conceits to share among the hungry gathered crowds. When the Crown went to the edge, to the bedrock balcony perching on the fog-hemmed Atlantic, it saw an ocean possessed by no one. The Crown claimed it. Sometimes a ship goes down and takes all hands; a man cannot outgun an ocean. The Crown remembers frantic spadework, the rush to plant a colony.

Planted in our little colony, we kept ourselves useful by keeping busy. Out of sight. Those were years of a quiet harbour, the White Fleet long gone and its dockside soccer matches long over, *tchau, Novos Mares!* We were used-book shoplifters, record-store hangers-on in torn jeans and scuffed Army-Navy boots. War Memorial loiterers, Sharpie graffiti artists defacing the white chipped stone of the national monument, reasoning that the war dead, spared their gruesome end, would have done the same. The King and Country that they died for were not our king, not our country. We were outpost, not empire, nothing but a pack of ignorant city kids.

Pack of city kids: we couldn't have known  
what *no more codfish* meant. We would never  
have made it as fishermen anyway:  
our world was girders and concrete. No boats.  
Our parents hadn't raised us in this grey  
maze of roads to go on the water. Clever—  
or, we thought we were—whooping at the phone-  
in radio callers, their voices rough  
from salt air and cigarettes and inhaled  
affirmatives. Men who'd always hauled nets.  
Women who'd split a million fish, their throats  
raw from plant-floor cold. And we would place bets,  
choke back laughs as the bravest prankster dialed,  
no sense to tell when enough was enough.

Enough is never enough when the TV tells you there's another world out there, speaks to you in flattened English, makes you want to flatten yourself into an envelope and mail yourself to Toronto so you can dance yourself sick on *Electric Circus*. I spent half my life in front of MuchMusic, a blank tape in the VCR in case a veejay read a request from Newfoundland. I didn't even care that they couldn't say "Newfoundland." One time, a St. John's band dropped by the studios at 299-Queen-Street-West-Toronto-Ontario to sing a song for the cameras. It was Christmas, and they sang about home: *John Crosbie, one brainstormy night / had a vision, how to set the wrong right. / "It's seasonal work, don't you see, we'll take all those men of the sea, /make them all clauses, mister and missus /there won't always be fishes, but there will always be wishes..."* Singing about no fish for the shiny Toronto people. I watched the clip until the tape wore through, half mortified, thinking, *Don't let the Canadians know, guys. You're giving away too much.*

I've said too much already. I'd sworn  
I wouldn't breathe a word about the stand  
of golden raspberries behind the school,  
or mention the apple tree spiralling low  
with bright fists of fruit. A grandfather's rule:  
*take some, leave some, tell no one.* You understand,  
it's born of fear of empty pantries, born  
of a hungry history. It makes martyrs  
of us all come fall, wasp stings and heatstroke,  
panic-picking to fill each cellar shelf.  
But it feels wrong that I should know  
an apple tree, keep a berry patch to myself.  
Come here, I'll draw you a map. If he woke,  
my grandfather'd have my guts for garters.

*I'll have your guts for garters, I'll crown ya, I'll cuff ya, get in off the Jesus road, put your goddamn bike in the yard, your dinner's cold now, it's ruint.* It was a tough-love street, and I was a bookish kid, and the infill houses where I babysat had empty cupboards save for packs of noodles and those marshmallow cookies shaped like four-petalled flowers, checkered pink and white, a biscuit base and coconut all over. Pastel food cased in cellophane. I could scramble eggs, I could bake fishsticks. I could put the kids to bed without reading (nothing to read) and wander downstairs into the finished basement ashtray pornmag rec room. But only once. I was raised in a house with no men. This was not my world, not my time, the grit of it someone else's industry.

The sediment of another era's  
industry (the flour mill, the tannery)  
slows the river's turbid flow through town,  
past tennis complex and past stadium  
where it spills into the lake. German Browns  
still draw anglers in rubber livery,  
despite reports of fish kill. Now, dare us  
to scabble down the bank in canvas shoes,  
muddying our white socks as we  
bunch fragrant wild mint, piling up armloads  
of toothed green leaves: we'll do it. Radiant  
pageant queens with weedy bouquets bestowed  
on us by a last-century city.  
This is childhood. We live it how we choose.

We lived our childhoods how we chose, half feral half the time, acting young sophisticates the rest, local intellectual royalty talking politics until sunrise in the all-night coffee and doughnut shop. Proper diplomats. At sixteen I started renting foreign films from the corner video shop and watching them alone; *Godzilla vs. Mothra* one week, *The Seventh Seal* the next. *Nosferatu*. *Roman Holiday*. I was indiscriminate in my longing for new tongues, new scenery. Baby cinephile, baby critic. I devoured subtitles, dreamt of passports, plane tickets, an apartment and a video-store membership in my very own name.

We take care of the things that bear our name,  
take care of our houses, cheques. Our children.  
The rest is someone else's business. What  
falls outside the fence line—beyond the rock  
walls, silvering softwood posts, the slipknot-  
secured gates—is the empire's. The heathen  
without a heath knows a peculiar shame:  
the empire sends us scraps, and so our scraps  
to the empire we return. We bank trails  
with refrigerators, washers, dryers,  
rolls of carpet. Leave burnt-out cars to block  
paths, toss blasty boughs on tire fires.  
Berries blaze through ragged, rusting coils  
of mattresses resigned to slow collapse.

At times it seemed that everyone was resigned to slow collapse, the way the garbage collected under the patches of cow parsnip and Queen Anne's lace, the way the empty storefronts blinked their blackened eyes at you when you walked by. We killed time at Harbourside, standing in a ring, staring at each other's feet until someone came along with something to kick. Or we sat at the harbour's edge, watched the detritus of our unprocessed sewage system float by like ocean life. *What a shitty town.* One summer, we spent our nights in a field between my two best friends' houses, plotting capers. Overnight in the graveyard. Overnight at the park. Overnight on a bridge. Overnight wandering east-end suburbs, thinking: *adventures, escapades, wild exploits.*

Between exploits, we thought we'd propagate  
a new empire of conservatory  
curiosities from far-off reaches.  
We sampled seeds, took cuttings, transplanted  
stolen stems. Now each common name teaches  
the true nature of this predatory  
project: *Himalayan balsam*, its straight  
stalks gleaming translucent. Or *Japanese  
knotweed* in its mile-a-minute thickets.  
What pleasing captives we thought they'd make, so  
exotic. Sublime. And all we wanted  
from our conquests was obedience. Oh,  
but see how these green, growing syndicates  
advance, spread, bank our rivers, naturalize!

My friends and I naturalized, made ourselves at home in every parent's living room. We were good kids. We would go far. We wanted to go far away and never look back, wrap Newfoundland up and hide it under our beds, maybe put it on like a comic tiara at parties, sport it at an angle, *It's on squish, your hat's on squish*. Or maybe not, maybe I didn't bring it out until I was off at university and there was a charter bus booked for Ottawa so Canadian first-years could go protest the Newfoundland seal hunt. Billboards gaudy with tempered blood, big-eyed bedlamers camera-frozen, plastered on signs in the nation's southernmost cities. Maybe then I mentioned it: *I'm from there, your billboard's ridiculous, your charter bus is ridiculous*. Maybe then I brought out statistics, anecdotes, tales of dying industries and people dying to be part of them. Naturalize, humanize. Maybe I used the word *abundance*. My tiara on squish, glinting gold.

But in the spring, such abundance of gold  
bursting from grim cracks in fissured sidewalks,  
nodding yes, throw your jacket down and sit,  
winter-pale legs crossed on sun-warmed concrete.  
Raw material for a coronet  
fit for an urchin in a tinderbox  
town. Milky stems stain my skirt where I hold  
my pulled flowers, stamp a constellation  
of gasping *O*s that will never wash out.  
With my bitten-down nails I slit these same  
stems, slide one through the next till I complete  
a chain, a circle. A crown: flimsy frame  
on untamed hair, yellow pollen fallout.  
Sticky, bitter fingertips. My station.

## II. The Sea's Own Moods

By boat: Queenie's first visit

There is nothing quite like, or perhaps quite equal to,  
the scenery of Newfoundland.  
—Victoria "Queenie" Hayward, *Romantic Canada*, 1922

Everything lies ahead: the  
rapturous clash of sea-stones  
heaving under the chill collapse  
and pull of tide to shore, moss  
padding the shaded forest  
floor in deepest green shot  
through with chartreuse  
strands, the marshes inlaid  
with autumn fruit. The streams  
whispering orisons, their water  
so pure you almost want  
to breathe it. Everything lies  
ahead: the earth's own  
shrouded cathedrals carved  
by time, the congregations  
of gannets, the shoals of cod  
once thick enough to stand on.  
Everything lies ahead: newfound  
country, the Crown's oldest  
colony, the land so loved  
by her only love. She has seen it  
laid out in light and shadow,  
pieced it from Edith's prints  
and plates. The photographs  
can't tell her what she longs  
to know: how many colours  
pulse in a single shard  
of Labrador feldspar? What  
is the sound of twenty thousand  
seabirds calling through silken  
fog? Can all this rumoured beauty  
persist in a wild and wave-wracked  
dominion?

Everything lies ahead, and Queenie  
settles in to rest as the strait  
rises in silent time, lifts the  
mail-and-passenger boat eastward.

Where horses are unknown

In Fortune Harbour, where horses are unknown...  
—Edith Watson, photograph caption, undated

Where horses are unknown, women  
cannot rest, hauling hay packed tight  
in quilts they've pieced from the least-worn  
bits of work shirts and flour sacks,

hauling spruce boughs they know  
will burn with a gritty smoke  
and spit flankers when the stove  
door opens, but what else is there  
to burn but sod and driftwood?

Where horses are unknown, women  
walk in whisper-thin boots through  
ice-packed footpaths, sliding,  
punching their fists through the well's  
frozen armour, hauling their full pails up,  
never losing a drop, hauling two  
days' worth on Saturdays because—  
because the priest says so.

Hauling babies on their backs,  
the memories of their babies, always  
the feel of cool, scuttling fingers  
grabbing the softest hairs  
at the neck's curves, and how  
they hurt, they never stop  
hurting.

Where horses are unknown, women  
step heavy, toss their hair, sniff  
at the air for signs of rain, eat  
bitter dandelion,  
stinging nettle for strength  
come May month, eye the ocean  
and ponder, *what if I were to pick up  
my skirts and run.*

## The water-carriers

A large hoop, in the midst of which the water-carrier steps,  
helps to relieve the weight and keep the water from spilling  
as the woman steps briskly along. This method of carrying  
water seems to be the Newfoundlander's own invention.  
The Water-Hoop is here one of the furnishings of every household.  
—Victoria Hayward, *Romantic Canada*, 1922

From a distance, you might think  
they're farthingales, crinolines.  
Sinewy arms and weighted pails  
braced by wooden water-hoops  
trick the eyes into seeing sweeping skirts  
fit for plantation daughters  
of decades past.

Your mind might make a palimpsest,  
sketch slender ribs of steel, crosshatch  
horsehair over each bent-birch apparatus,  
wrap entire girls in satin and send  
them off to the dance, hands  
gloved in kidskin, wrists wrapped  
in sapphire circlets, in silver, palms  
open and idle.

You might mistake their slenderness  
for the work of whalebone and lacing,  
but it is the fruit of a more tangible  
toil: fishguts and heavy lifting and  
a lifetime of letting the men eat first.

Best to keep visions of leisure and frippery  
to yourself: there's something in their faces  
that says, *Go on with your foolishness!*  
*Sure there's too much work to be done*  
*to be jawing about frocks and gewgaws. Grab*  
*your buckets if you're coming, and go on out of it*  
*if you're not.*

## Queenie at the flakes

Queenie knows this sensation:  
salt crusting skin, salt catching  
in the throat, salt and  
fishsmell straight to  
the brain like a cure  
for fainting. Saltfish, same  
cream-and-silver boards  
bought and sold by women  
in the clattering markets  
of home.

Has she never wondered  
until now just how this fish, netted  
in the coldest currents of a distant  
ocean, had come to grace her  
breakfast plate each Sunday  
of her early life? Had anyone  
ever spoken of all this salt  
sailing north as ballast, returning  
as barrels of slab-stiff cod?

In the bowed backs of the women  
and girls who clean and salt  
and watch and stack the fish, who  
brush away flies and rinse away  
maggots, who shield their work  
from ruin by rain, from scorching  
by sun, does she glimpse the backs  
of those who rake and shovel salt  
from West Indian ponds, hands  
swollen to cracking, eyes  
unfixed, awed by the gleaming  
white of their harvest?

And does something in her blood  
know the saltfish meals of her country  
for what they once were: fodder,  
not food, worse again than the scraps  
these salt-skinned folk indulge in?

## Dismantling the great whale, Snooks Arm

A work that always fetches an audience if carried out on shore!  
—Edith Watson, photograph caption, undated

White fat like foam, a lather  
spilling over the beast, as though the men  
were doing the animal some great  
favour and bathing it. The whale  
is lodged on its side on the slipway,  
flanked by clapboard. One man stands  
atop it, knife honed and quick. One  
fin leans over casually, as though to beckon,  
*come closer, witness the new century  
at work.*

Tensile baleen won't cinch the waists  
of the world's wealthy wives much longer.  
Soon the machinery of the age will forge  
smoothly onward without  
the need to boil down humpback,  
minke, Northern right.

Blubber is dragged away  
to the fires, flesh is stripped from bone,  
bristled plates ripped from jaw. Ribs  
make a bloodied cavern. The photograph  
is a black-and-white moment, proof  
that once we knew a time  
when mere men broke Leviathan  
into his elements, melted monsters  
into lamplight.

## Barrens

*After the frost, miles  
of colour: wild red  
and black currants,  
rowan berries,  
bakeapples. Partridge-  
berries like garnet beads,  
blueberries bunched  
like dusted clusters of  
moonstone, nested in  
cracks and scarpings of cliffs  
where one would not  
suppose a thimbleful  
of earth could cling.*

They seek a country

Edith abandons her cameras, leaves them behind like shed skin, lost teeth. *Easier to buy a new one when I get there*, she says, but where is there? Convenience framed as generosity, or is it the other way 'round? Still, she excels at making pictures, and Queenie, when she cares to, sets down lines to frame them, their *scenes of superlative beauty*. Edith's focus is sharp even when her technique is not: forever in a rush to pull an image out, mail it off, put her name on something, hope that it will last. Cash the cheque. Nobody in Hermitage or Burgeo has ever seen the like, Queenie with her easy laugh that sounds like England but not quite, Edith with her mannish ways, a little brisk, always chasing after the most mundane things: water, fish, and firewood. Across the island, locals smile to think that their world could be of interest to strangers upalong. Photographs, books: imagine.

### III. The Debt

## In Montreal

Hard as a townie *R*, I tried to resist the tide's pull  
toward home, folded the map that's printed  
on my genome. What I mean is I made myself  
feel nothing, and feeling nothing made me  
something less. I am trying to soften, I am  
trying to be soft enough to lean. In my rush  
to understand the colony, sometimes I fail  
to understand myself. I've been tuckamore, all  
windward side, no blackest green, no shelter  
for the smallest birds in the heaviest gale.  
We take care of the things that we can name,  
and what we can't name, we don't know; is there a word  
for *burst feeling inside* or *radio-tears* or *deferred  
longing*? I recall the person I became the year  
that I resigned myself to collapse: an ocean  
trapped in glass, beating against the sides, barely  
contained, retreating only to whip myself into whitecaps.  
Roiling inside but smiling while being served imported  
beer, *amuse-gueules*, whiskey, smiling while wearing  
miserable shoes. Like a fish out of goddamn water.

## Vocabulary

The year I was born, we  
earned the compound *strip mall*.  
*Hydrochlorofluorocarbon*  
and I have shared an equal  
number of turns around the sun,  
and I could say the same of  
of *biodefense*, *ecotoxicology*,  
and *deconstructionism*.  
*Levonorgestrel* has been  
here as long as I have, though  
one has only newly found  
a place inside the other.  
When I shouldered my way  
into the world, I came with  
*exercise bike* and *kitesurfing*, *heptathlon*  
and *jumper's knee*. *Text message*,  
*upload*, *download*, and I  
could have shared a nursery.  
*Warp speed*, *power chord*,  
*radar gun*. The year I was born,  
*white-bread* proclaimed itself adjective,  
*guilt-trip* turned verb, and *plus-one*  
added itself to the nouns.  
*Point person* nudged out  
*point man*. *Beam weapon*,  
*brownfield*. *Expert system*.  
*Knowledge engineering*.  
An anxious age, a year  
of too much: *gazillion*,  
*megahit*, *supercentre*. I have  
no longing for such excess.  
Leave me here with my  
quietest age-mates: *grapholect*,  
*geometrics*.  
*Earth-sheltered*.

## Entertainer

In his rush to plant a colony,  
my father failed to build a fence

at the top of the thirty-foot  
cliff that edged his land. Dogs

and ducks and chickens kept  
their distance by instinct;

we kept our distance out of fear.  
We sifted soil year upon year

to grow the carrots straight,  
dreamed stones when we closed

our eyes at night. He won over  
the crag-faced locals with his crawlspace

homebrew and highway sagas, his country  
songs sending them staggering

through fogbound, lightless roads. Always  
the entertainer. He invented a handle

for the stage, and kept it. Changed  
his ID but never changed ours. Our faces

were his, but never our names. I felt like  
a foundling every day of my life.

## Mantel

after the painting *Just an Illusion*, by Kym Greeley

No stacks of books, no file-folders  
crammed with annotated sheets, edges  
a ridged baleen grin. No pencils, no pens.  
No stubs of crayons skinned by toddlers'  
agile, focused fingers. No hidden rings  
of house keys, no angled orphaned  
arms of sunglasses long since replaced.  
No months-old greeting cards,  
no loot bags emptied of all the best loot,  
no framed photos, no unframed photos,  
no business cards, no packs of matches  
grabbed from little hands and deposited  
somewhere safe. No tax receipts,  
no irate bills shrieking for payment.  
No snapped elastics, no strands of silver  
bracelets, their lobster-claw clasps  
torn clean. No dust. No broken  
watches, no broken bits of toys,  
no jam-jar-propped weedy wildflowers,  
lupins idly pulled while passing, daisies  
snatched and brought home roots and all  
because wasting them would be  
the greater sin.

None of these. Just a white expanse  
against a wall as pink as the smooth inside  
of a souvenir seashell, as the inside swirl  
of your ear. Not grand, but grand enough  
to recall a time of taking time to finish  
work with elegance, a few carved details here,  
a measured symmetry there. Uncluttered, civil,  
the mantel bears a single houseplant:  
a dense-fleshed begonia, its cordate leaves  
profuse and shadow-veined, thriving  
in a hunched pot the colour of rust.

## Winter

The adults warned my mother  
never to eat snow, never  
even to catch flakes on her tongue.  
Each hexagon harboured in its  
symmetry a latent nuclear threat,  
even though her island was half a world away  
from those in pictures, shrinking  
under their mushroom clouds.

In front of the TV, in the days of TV,  
my mother tries to keep ahead of  
the weather by building up a stock  
of mittens. Practical and almost pretty,  
tactical use of bits and scraps. Rough  
wool, coarsely spun, means our mitts  
soak through with each handful of damp  
Avalon snow, the stuff of muffled  
bootsteps turned ammunition for  
winter's neighbourly wars.

With each snowball we shape, with each  
trench we dig, our mitts slip from our  
cold-pinched wrists, stitches caked  
with small white bullets, crystals compacted  
to something like ice. We sit in our snowpants,  
chew at the geodes of our cupped palms,  
wool-threaded rock candies laced with road salt.

My mother never heeded fallout  
warnings. None of them did.  
Fatalists even in childhood, knowing  
that whatever fell from the sky  
couldn't be avoided.

She knits with a speed that seems  
the stuff of cartoons: heroic, impossible.  
But we are young, and our hands  
are very small.

## Cigarette

Punctuation mark, point-prover,  
satisfier of need. Calmer of rattled  
nerves. Shield behind which  
shyness quivers. Social pyrotechnic.  
Changer of vocal register. My most  
important errand: grey bike over railroad  
tracks with a note for the shopkeep,  
*Please sell my daughter one pack...*  
no laws against it then. Smouldering  
cylinder balanced on the rim of the white  
porcelain sink. Butt-end shedding  
paper wrapper, nicotine streak  
yellowing the toilet bowl. Birthday  
balloons popped, Springsteen  
on the Fisher Price phonograph,  
thin line of blue smoke dancing.  
Accompaniment to lullabies,  
nearly imperceptible. In the darkness,  
a scarlet satellite tracing its elliptical  
orbit through the apartment's electric air.

## Impromptu

after Alexandra Oliver

We picnic by the artificial pond,  
below the ancient oxidized statue  
gleaming bronze through its seafoam patina.  
There's warmth in early evening's orange light.  
The weeping cedar tree that sways behind  
us hunches like some swamp thing, brings to mind  
old monster flicks, while low sun slings pyrite  
patterns on the water's surface. In a  
heartbeat, just beyond the clumps of fescue,  
two young herring gulls—local toughs—abscond

with someone's dinner scraps. We eat faster,  
anxious and alert, eyes scanning the stones  
that line the pool, watching as our children  
scatter along its bank like marbles loosed  
shining from an unstitched pocket, colliding,  
bounding. They are made of motion, striding  
to the edge of earshot. Our cupped hands boost  
our calls, bounce them over pools that roughen  
into ripples. Our daughter stands alone,  
ignores us, pesters swans, courts disaster.

## The engineer

Five years old: too young to read,  
or wander far alone, or stay in school  
for more than half the day. With startling  
speed he outgrows his boots and jeans.

Sometimes he dedicates himself  
to sullenness and temper, the worst  
of his character. Right now, he steadies  
a blocky spacecraft he's put together

from neatly interlocking bricks  
and planks, studs and hinges, a tiny  
black door-frame, small grey pins. *Watch this,*  
*Mom*, he says, and yanks a cylinder from

the ship's tail. The same thing happens  
each and every time: pieces clatter  
to the floor, slide, disperse. He watches  
as the broken craft releases its minuscule

spaceman, as lasers on the segmented wings  
deploy and arc through the room's winter-stale  
air. At first he stares, then switches gears:  
mechanics to forensics. How did it go wrong?

The ejector seat was loaded right. All the base  
plates were firmly set. His eyes scan the wreck,  
the small rectangles at his feet and beneath mine.  
Last week he might have stamped his heel,

and frowned, and if the spirit moved him,  
hurled the last bits of his spaceship to the ground.  
Today, it's in his nature to stay calm, assess,  
rebuild, rework his rocket, fly it again in new form.

*Look at this, Mom. Look.*

## Golden

My daughter can explain it all:  
the biggest hits of nineteen  
twenty-nine, each step  
from vaudeville to sound stage,  
casting and costuming, choreography  
and triple threats. The slapdash  
scaffolds of a quick-and-dirty  
Golden Age.

I can explain none of it:  
how this child has outgrown  
me, her worn pink shoes now larger  
than my own. This child who began  
to dance three months before she was born.

The screen flashes silver  
while my daughter corrects  
the turns of dancers long since turned  
to dust. She breathes ambition.  
Under the fractal branches  
of a metallic tree, unnumbered  
figures swirl in black and white.  
They spin into a sequined froth  
and their *pointe*, I am informed,  
is terrible.

## Left side

I marvel at my own asymmetry:  
left elbow broken at the age of three  
and never quite corrected, bending rogue,  
precluding push-ups, dictating  
a childhood of purple participation  
ribbons. Left ankle, thick from decades  
of sprains and fractures, stiff and reluctant  
and no doubt a site of arthritis to come. Left  
eye, weak, taking in a blur through pop-bottle  
glasses lens, its right-side partner compensating,  
always overworked, doing its best but leaving  
me clumsy and anxious. Left corner  
of my mouth, scarred from colliding  
with dense, untended branches  
at the base of a snow-covered hill,  
an evening's sledding brought to a bloody  
halt, a lump of lip growing where no lump  
should be, a red crack at the edge  
of each self-conscious school photo smile.

The next-to smallest finger of my left hand,  
embedding my ring in its own bulging flesh,  
a thick tree swallowing a chain-link fence.

To my spine

You've got a lot of nerve.  
You've got all the information.  
A body's rolling highway, a body's

rising and falling railroad. A body's  
*cordillera*, means cord, means  
little rope. Little knotted rope

gripped by big knotted muscles  
in need of kneading to pliancy.  
Gentle curve, gentle arch, gentle

ridge: the softest geometry  
hills have, beaches, streams.  
Swaying column, creaking

ladder, sounder of cracks and pops,  
you demand wringing-out, wish  
to be folded, draped. Where

do you find the resolve to keep  
me upright when some days it's all  
I can do to keep my head on straight?

## Aubade

The radio whispers us awake. We sleep  
light, rouse easy. The day is dark still,  
new. We are also new, charmed  
by the newness of a shared bed,  
by sleeping twined like bindweed  
sprawling rampant over field and fence,  
renewing land long been left fallow.

A room away, my tiny daughter turns  
and shifts, summoning creaks from mattress  
springs, murmuring into air. We hear  
her stir and we play statue  
until her faintest sounds subside.

I've kept you from her, fearing  
flight, fearing that loss compounded  
is worse than loss alone,  
that I'll wake to find you disentangled  
and gone. But daybreak after daybreak  
you are here, and I long to tell you, *stay*,  
to call off the daily goodbyes.

My tongue won't move, lies thick  
and slow behind my teeth, a slug  
curled tight inside a night-closed flower.

We dress; we walk in silence to the door.  
You're the lone man in the street, stepping  
backwards, first, to keep me with you  
longer, then turning, striding off,  
collar up against the dawn's damp chill.

Morning presses the full length  
of its pale, calm fingers to the harbour's  
open mouth. The harbour doesn't  
say a thing.

## House sparrow

Little message, tiny  
feathered communiqué: how did you  
find your way between my window's  
antiquated panes? Pressed  
like a living picture, just able  
to turn your body around, you jerk  
timorous and wild, head cocked,  
black eye blinking, alarmed  
as the loose glass rattles when I  
gingerly lower the wind-worn  
frame. I work against gravity,  
fraction of an inch by fraction  
of an inch. Because which is worse  
luck: a bird in the house, or killing  
that bird while trying to free it?  
Fraction of an inch, fraction of an inch,  
and you finally hop up, take flight,  
light on the kitchen shelf, inspect  
my houseplants, catch your breath.  
I raise the window to its full height,  
scatter sunflower seeds on the sill  
to try to lure you out. So what  
does it mean when you circle  
the room, then fly to the window,  
and fall between the trembling panes  
again?

## ICU

I got used to the others. The family whose mother was killed on the highway, her husband still poorly, her funeral passing him by, unknown. The elderly woman, her grown children no comfort at night, when the monitor's light cast orange shadows of snaky tubes, her shaky voice calling out for anyone, anyone at all. We'd all done a day or two together, talking about the weather and the traffic on the road into town, speaking the code of not knowing what to say. *This one's husband may not make it. That one's father's in no good shape, doctor said so. It's a shame, a shame, a shame.* No one told me their name, what they were doing before they got the call, ran out the door and boarded a plane without packing. We sat, side by side, red eyes tracking the path of each passing nurse. Someone pulled mints from a purse and we breathed cold breath, in silence, praying, weighing the odds of our going or staying.

## Amoxicillin

I'm always letting something in:  
that's my problem. I'm so permeable,  
my windows don't have screens, my  
house is full of mosquitoes. The new  
doctor chitchats with the nurse while I  
count all the thumbtacks in the corkboard.

An immeasurable sadness, that's what  
this really is, its tug so taut, so  
fierce that it tears at my very cells, opens  
their walls to whatever wants in, any  
microbial invader. Better choke down  
my pills, or the sadness fools me into thinking  
I'm fine. It weeps through, right through,  
and there's only gauze for armour.

## Walking it off

You park your car beside the walking trail  
and let your spring-wild dog bounce out. Wet clay  
grabs at our thermal boots. Years ago, rail  
cars barrelled down this river path; today,  
it's us, two women mapping a shared pain,  
a stream that is both place and boundary,  
a destination and a mark. Again  
we curse that man whose words are weaponry,  
who's fashioned one knife called Love, one more called  
Friendship. *Worst kind of man!* we shout. *Danger!*  
*Save yourselves, girls!* to the air, to the walled  
bank of the walk. For a breath, all anger  
recedes: a nearby car blares disco songs.  
We dance in mud, triumphant, giddy, wronged.

## The lot

All summer, the children recited  
the names of the diesel creatures  
that lurched and roared at the top  
of our street: excavator, front-end  
loader, bulldozer, dump truck. Empty  
space turned to storage for gravel  
and lengths of PVC. Rumours  
of new infrastructure, something to fill  
the gap where the hospital had been.

A summer of dust stirred up,  
of mammoth machines belching  
black grit, of nine-to-five digging  
and dumping. A thrill for three  
little ones, a trial for a nervous  
mother who heard shrieking brakes,  
hydraulic gasps when she went to sleep  
each night.

And then it was gone, nothing  
but a flat plane of chipped stone behind  
the galvanized fence. The trucks moved  
on, and the lot grew into a meadow. I recite  
the names of flowers: clover, daisies,  
vetch, burdock, curled dock, evening  
primrose. Mugwort, thistles, goldenrod,  
wild mustard. The children watch blossoms  
double under the weight of bees,  
see proof that no lot is truly vacant.

Putting up

Call it canner's greed: smug with pride  
at my new-learned skill of trapping

fall's free bounty in federally-approved  
glass, I wage my wars on the birds who

panic their way toward winter: they  
have begun their occupation of our yard.

I shoo starlings, startle waxwings. I pick  
blackcurrants, and, when my baskets are full,

I toss the fruit into the waiting pot, flick  
with my purpled thumbnail a hundred

new-hatched snails into the sink. On  
the hob, the currants pop and splutter. I couldn't

have known that boiling down my backyard  
harvest would make for such a sinister scene:

bruise-blue smears up my forearms, violent  
streaks smearing the off-white stovetop. After

I've heaved a crock from the cupboard to  
catch the dripping juice, I watch the jelly bag

hang dense and heavy. It's a picture fit for a  
butcher shop, as though the stained muslin

strains against something used to beating,  
turning cold. Or worse, against *someone*:

my husband spies the mess and asks,  
*What did you do with the rest of him?*

## Revival

The national canning company said  
there would be no more mustard pickles  
for our Sunday dinners of cabbagey  
boiled comfort after Mass,  
no pickles to grace our salt-meat hash,  
no pickles for our baked-ham suppers  
nor for our cold ham sandwiches  
on warm white bread. None  
for the pan-fried fishcakes, dense  
with salt cod, confettied with onion  
and flecked with summer savoury.  
No thick yellow sauce to spread  
and pool on charity turkey-tea paper plates  
at the Lions' Club or the parish hall,  
no pickles left in the shops at all.

So we opened our pantries, brought jars  
from basement shelves, ducked crawlspace  
clearance to emerge with half-pints, pints,  
standard and wide-mouth jars gleaming  
gold (and near as dear). We arranged  
our wares on church-sale tables and raised  
enough money to fund a mission to India.

The missionaries returned with suitcases  
of turmeric, fat, damp rhizomes folded into  
souvenir T-shirts and silently smuggled.  
The turmeric was planted in new-built  
community glasshouses, flourished  
among the cucumbers and red peppers.  
Gardeners tended their vegetable plots  
with wartime vigour. Around the bay,  
old-timers hauled the fitful silver  
bodies of capelin by bucket loads  
to nourish the stony soil, lugged pans  
of clean ocean to dry in the sun, raking  
the water away until there was only  
salt. In town, construction sprawl  
was halted, the land dedicated to lush,  
waving mustard fields and the cultivation  
of sugar beets. Children spent their  
summers plucking pale-green caterpillars

from cauliflowers' pale-green ribs,  
wrapping the leaves tight to shade  
the white heads of curd within. Lowly  
crab apples were newly prized, as urban  
foragers learned the ancient secrets  
of making vinegar from windfall.  
Each small shop developed a signature  
slant, each community a variation, an accent.

In the provincial archives, two pieces  
of paper are on prominent display: one,  
a brittle, spill-stained list of ingredients  
taken down in an oblique, last-century  
hand, and the other a facsimile of an  
official letter to the national canning company,  
telling them they can shag right off.

## Exhibit

Gannets perched up top, stately, still.  
Carved polystyrene crags, coastline  
grasses massed and paint-spattered

to look for all the world like shit-matted  
nests. Eggs everywhere, some tucked  
around the stationary feet of razorbills

and turr, some untended and conspicuous.  
Smashed shells, smashed whelk, smashed  
urchin, upturned carapace of crab. Dirty

shafts of fallen feathers, spare, barbless.  
Bones strewn, stripped with oceanic  
proficiency. A gull with wings frozen

mid-flap, the silver arc of a capelin  
gripped in its beak. Charcoal guillemots  
in cliffside holes, earth-black and curled

in on themselves, like city pigeons.  
Among the curated shambles, a cracked  
rubber baby bottle nipple, dry-rot dumbtit,

mottled grey and greenish, nearly  
camouflaged against the simulated stones.  
Midway down the rock face, puffins

are posed as though about to launch  
themselves, in their graceless way,  
into the graded blue of the display's back wall,

into the brushstroke line meant to signal horizon.  
Above it all, two metallic sprinkler-system  
stars shimmer in cool fluorescent light.

## Infinity dress

The infinity dress was a lie, and we all bought it.  
A circle skirt of quivering, cool silk jersey, two

broad straps plenty long to drape over shoulders,  
stretch across breasts, wind around and around

the waist and tie up in a tight, bright bow.  
A little something nice to take us

from boardroom to ballroom to bedroom.  
One cocoon to metamorphose any woman

into Marilyn on Monday and Farrah on Friday,  
Helen on holidays and at the annual regatta,

our faces launching a hundred rowboats. A dozen  
cunning ways to be the bride's best friend, a dozen

more to stand out or blend as the moment might  
dictate. But the joke was on us: now we know

how fifteen feet of strap gets twisted and twisted  
until the dress is not a dress at all, but

just enough rope.

## The shovellers

Now that the sky has cleared and all the snow  
has fallen that will fall, my neighbours  
and I make our way into the street, emerge to form  
a ragtag cleanup crew. One from every house,  
pushing snow from stairs so we can step  
unhindered to the walk. Below us, the harbour

itches white fistfuls of sun at the harbour-  
couching hills, an excited child tossing snow  
at her father's broad, wool-coated back. Step  
by cautious step, bending, lifting, my neighbours  
excavate their narrow paths, heap snow against a house  
here, a frozen flower bed there. It's a form

of socializing, if an artificial one, a forced form,  
strained at times like the ropes of harbour-  
lashed ships that strain against bollards, like a house  
that walls in senseless rivalries. But some days, snow  
brings something human out in neighbours  
who might otherwise devise a way to step

past one another on the street without hello, step  
past without so much as a nod. I form  
resentments easily, but when I watch my neighbours  
share the season's labour, the grudges that I harbour  
start to melt to formlessness, to slush-soft snow-  
boot trackings pooling in a warm, dry house,

vanishing to grit, to nothing. In my chest today I house  
a tiny love for each of them, the way they step  
forward and back with the heft of each load of snow.  
I love the curses, choreography, the arcs of light that form  
as sun hits metal shovel blades, the voices that blast like harbour  
horns, the tongues harbour-salty. My neighbours

like to say good fences make good neighbours,  
but from outside this slanting wooden house  
that shrugs into itself, shouldering the icy harbour  
wind, it seems that maybe digging out a car, a step,  
a stretch of sidewalk might just form  
a better sort of tie. The man next door thinks it will snow

again tomorrow. My neighbours and I sweep and step  
from house to house, as dug-out routes form  
banks toward the harbour, a strange new citadel of snow.

The model train is undergoing repairs

It's out of all proportion: rabbits  
like terriers, a mud-coloured  
pond with lily pads fixed

in their chase, green-marbled  
hole-punch disks with notches  
snipped like snapping mouths.

Two ducks stare past a third,  
knocked arse-over-kettle, head  
and wing resting on the cloudy

surface, unruffled. The steps  
to the general store's covered porch  
hover, knee-high, impossible,

while a woman in a drop-waist  
dress juts her hip, lifts her hand, motions  
to no one. The power lines across the dam

have snapped, catgut dragging despite  
all signs of hot-glue intervention.  
On a piece of ice like a wadded napkin,

two miniature seals recline,  
no larger than the seagull lighting  
on the teal epoxy harbour.

In the train yard, well-dressed  
wives tilt stiff against a car, aquarium-  
gravel rubble around their feet.

## Stew

### *Parsnip*

Unmoving as bones in the catacomb  
of the frozen garden. All fall they wait  
to be turned up when the ice-solid loam  
is unmoving as bones. In the catacomb-  
dark soil, they're spade-heaved to light and brought home,  
scrubbed to ivory brightness. Elegant, straight,  
unmoving. Like bones in the catacomb  
of the frozen garden, all fall they wait.

### *Cabbage*

The luminous lacework of veins, the green  
leaves enclosing a cream-white crystal heart.  
In silver fields the pickers stoop to glean  
the luminous lacework of veins. The green,  
dense concentric waves are graceful, unseen  
until a keen-edged knife forces apart  
the luminous lacework of veins, the green  
leaves enclosing a cream-white crystal heart.

### *Turnip*

A purple-shouldered globe, an earth-cool stone.  
Solid and smooth, with ragged roots removed  
by farmers for market stacking. When shown  
a purple-shouldered globe, an earth-cool stone,  
see low-slant winter sun. Feel salt air grown  
to cellar storage-keeper, frost-improved.  
A purple-shouldered globe, an earth-cool stone,  
solid and smooth, with ragged roots removed.

## Hydrocarbon

In chemistry my friends and me, we gathered  
information, collected recipes for anarchy, tips  
for the chronically civilly disobedient. Homespun  
explosives, household items that we  
would dream of reconfiguring into the tools  
we'd need to bring corrupt officials  
to their knees.

We spun fantasies involving chains affixing  
us to the fuel tanks on the hill. A gesture, a set  
of demands, articulately phrased and passionately  
resounding across the harbour. But we weren't  
the kind of kids who blew things up for real.  
Comfortable in dialect and dress, we got  
our high school and went on. By the end  
of that summer I'd moved away, failing  
to remember to write home for news.

And damned if some kid (or was it kids?)  
didn't steal our teenaged thunder by winging  
a smoke into one of the great white oil-tank monoliths,  
blowing the thing to bits and setting the town ablaze,  
flames dancing over the water for days.

He did it for nothing. No cause, no righteousness.  
He did it out of boredom, maybe. Just for badness.  
He wasn't one of us. If we'd done it, for sure we would  
have crushed the government, showered City Hall  
with buckled metal.

No, just some kid (or kids) who died, or didn't die,  
and now I can't remember if there was one of him or  
more. I can't remember if he lived. All I know  
is that combustibles did what combustibles  
do, and nothing really changed.

Mark and the Lieutenant Governor

At the luncheon—where they served imported  
vegetables and gave us polyester napkins  
and rationed our drinks—you read a poem  
about the scenes we'll never see: the men  
out in their boats, the women walking home  
in packs from the fish plant, empty lunch tins  
swinging from tired arms. The queen's man wanted  
you to amuse him, but what's poetry  
for if not provocation? After cake  
and coffee it was clear he hadn't heard  
a word. Why would he? Wasn't his fault when  
the whole thing went under. All too absurd:  
the blame. Accusations. He didn't take  
the fish from the goddamn water, did he? Did he?

## The mussel hunters

Just half an hour, the narrator explains,  
until the tide returns. I watch the hunters  
work to pierce an aperture, human-sized,

in the ocean's crumpled mantle. I watch  
as they slip down into the eerie blue  
hollow. They are undersea now, but there

is no sea, just barnacle-spotted stones,  
furuncle clustering to carbuncle,  
marring what smoothness comes of an eternity

spent pressed upon by water. The Arctic's  
slanting light glows emerald through ancient  
sea-ice. Strands of kelp, stems of bladderwrack

hang like streamers, like tossed bouquets caught  
in mid-air, spinning out of time. On the ocean  
floor, the hunters hunch, plunge bare hands

into seaweed, feeling for this fortune  
worth risking their necks for. Their energy  
is fervent, keen: they pick till their fingers

plump and prune, salt-crusting, numbing as they  
clatter their mussels into aluminum  
pails. Their treasure glistens onyx, bearded

with broken threads that seconds ago  
held creature to sea bed. Against the hush,  
a tidal sound returns; the hunters' voices

rise, becoming anxious, a little hinky.  
Minutes to escape, emerge, head for  
some place solid as the water rushes in

with force enough to animate the groaning  
slabs of ice, to float them back up forty  
feet as though they were not made of crushing

weight. I watch the hunters carry home  
their feast, the sky pink as the soft flesh  
waiting in each tight-closed, slick, black shell.

Single use

There is purpose in the gently arcing tower  
of stacked cups, purpose in the way the server

spoons heaped measures of white sugar, tips  
a doubled quantity of cream, slips

her thumb around the brittle plastic lid, seals  
scalding heat inside. There is purpose in the way she fills

a thousand cups, a hundred thousand  
cups. She knows just how to stand,

knees soft, white runners planted, the slightest  
shift of her body with each reach, each pour, east to west

along the sun's determined path. There is purpose  
as customers stride boldly in, purchase

cups, dream of things they'd like for free:  
a bowl of soup, a sports sedan, a new TV,

and when the cups can't make magic happen  
there is purpose in the way they're trodden on,

discarded along sidewalks, flattened against  
walls, matted in grasses, banking the fenced

rings of schoolyards. There is purpose  
in the rain that swells the cups' sides, makes loose

their glued seams, turns paper to fibre to pulp  
for the Earth's parched maw to swallow in one gulp.

Fall fiscal update, with damsons

I know  
that all  
signs  
point to  
*have-not,*

but I've got  
more  
plums  
than can  
fit  
in my  
jam pot.

## The debt

I have said no to unlit city streets, I have said  
no to highways splitting parkland, no  
to cuts that make one person do the work  
of three. I have said no to shutting schools  
and clinics, no to warplanes tracing  
ancient paths of caribou, to sea-bed  
bombs that box the ears of whales. I have said  
no to filth in rivers.

And, too, I have said yes, I live at this address,  
yes, you've spelled my name correctly  
on the card, that's it, that's me, yes. Yes  
in cabbage-scented parish halls, church  
basements, yes in gymnasiums  
and auditoriums, yes in libraries, yes  
under cold tube lights, over carpeted floors.

We are all debtors here, beholden  
to this jagged place for every lungful  
of spruce-laced salted air, each slap  
of ocean blasting rock and boat, dock  
and ankle. Each berry-bucket filled  
begs something in return. I pay  
my dues with words: a *no* to harm, a *yes*  
to harder work. I pay my dues in placards,  
ballots, chants, in reckoning.

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## APPENDIX

### Notes

The song lyrics quoted in “Crown” are based on my memory of a song performed live on MuchMusic by Jody Richardson some time in the early 1990s. They may not be entirely correct, but that’s how I sing them.

The poems in “The Sea’s Own Moods” are inspired by the photographs of Edith S. Watson and the writing of Victoria “Queenie” Hayward. Between 1890 and 1930, Connecticut-born photographer Edith S. Watson visited outport Newfoundland frequently; her photographs of the fishing families she met there were influenced by the artistic ideals of the Romantic Age. From 1912 or so on, she was accompanied by her partner, Bermudian journalist Victoria “Queenie” Hayward. In 1922, the two published *Romantic Canada*, a travel book that included a section on the attractions of rural Newfoundland. The italicized lines in “Barrens” are borrowed from Hayward. “They seek a country” is the epitaph inscribed on Edith Watson’s gravestone.

Kym Greeley’s painting, *Just an Illusion* (acrylic on canvas), was featured in the 2016 exhibit *All Day Within the Dreamy House* at The Rooms in St. John’s. A photograph of the painting can be seen at [kymgreeley.com](http://kymgreeley.com).