Shelf Life

poems by

Mori McCrae

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Dean's Wives

Dora would dry
her long wet hair
sitting on the front porch stair
in the sun while she smoked
menthol cigarettes,
claiming as she smiled
through even yellow teeth
that it never fully dried
underneath at the nape.

Claire rarely spoke
saw the back
of her gloss black head
as came and went
in a convertible Corvette,
cancer came back
glimpsed her bald
top down, full throttle
chauffeuring her wig
in the back seat.

Memorial School

This morning I saw a squirrel
examine his nuts in the middle
of a vacant schoolyard.

Carpet green, the grass expanded
all around him, each direction ending
in an even line of deciduous trees,
trunks clouded in shrubbery.

I observed this brave diminutive
sharing the warm sun
with a metal detectorist
whose ear shopping had earned him
a walnut for his pocket.

My dogs quizzed the gate
I poked my toe into third base,
and wondered: what would this matter
if all the children disappeared.

Port Weller

Through the reeds we weave
the insect end of summer,
see us fade beyond the dry-docks
stirring dust to our knees

as locusts launch
worn, grey, flocculent
criss-crossing like clothespins
their bodies snap

soft against my spaniel pup
who nose taps the back
of my calf calf calf.
Dragonflies hover-swing

above, dive-bomb
my cradled yorkie chum
struck dumb, mid yap
he retreats to the stair of my left rib.

A heron stands, thug hunched
dark against the distant edge
of an inland pond,
steeped in shallow browns
the froth of sphagnum moss
floats bright, two swans converge
scissor cut

an inversion of land and bird
like thoughts we link together,
and those we pull apart
as we trace into the blinding dust
to find the place we start.

Ottawa

The way we sleep;
your skin oiled, makeup removed
gold unclasped, uncoiled
perfume flooding the sheets while I,
stand naked, before eyelet drapes
stars navigate; north, northeast, northwest
without the lake to know for sure
which way to lay our heads
we curl up knee to shank
in the familiarity of this spare room

trace the checkpoints and the markers
of our shared lives, wrestle the prospect
we will, one day, be corpses.
Your goal; one hundred and ten
mine to let go sooner
falling from the living halter
ghosts must wear.

We're both awake
at the thin pink crease of dawn
pray in morning whispers
as the automated sprinkler
jacks across the lawn
robins land in rainbows
pull worms, play tug of war.

Demolition of the Dieu

The Hotel Dieu is coming down
like a hospital gown
inner cubicles exposed
walls tent-folding
before the cuticle of
a faint October moon,
private places
no one sees
unless they have too.

Voices carry, calling out five o'clock
the demolition crew stows instruments, tool belts,
dust settles, machines sputter-off.

Sunset's fireball throws
multiple rays of red orange
fingering derailed corridors
concrete slabs of broken scapula
rebar's wild extrusion into thin air.

What remains?
The custodian of our bones
and flesh may sigh, resolved,
high on a precipice.

Frail, soundless
yet untouched—
the south wing stands
blinds half drawn
against traffic noise
where work renews Monday.

I Can See Your Sail

The great mouth that breathes me
inhales your continent now
I can see you losing ground
though I blow and blow
and blow and beg—

you used to hail me
like some kind of hero
now the wrists I lift
drop like doll's.

Your line, my line
though we share no blood
curl each cool finger
command, hold on tight
as your ankles fall
and and feet take flight.

Last Act

After the ritual we depart
a long queue of bowed heads
sun glinting off freshly washed hair
pressed into suits and dresses our
scuffed heels crunch gravel

getting to act two
at the church hall where
we munch through cucumber and
egg salad sandwiches,
save gulping for private
tea and whiskey lives
without you.

No Weight To It

A sudden beeline
to your body
after digging
a grave, no bigger
than your nest.

After choosing
the most suitable
shovel of six

considered for grace
and economy—
shape of handle
temperance of blade
length of shaft
to match that lump
one foot
sticking out, like a fork
lost in spaghetti.

Courage to convey
your body
ground to a halt
in asphalt
as I stumble, tumble
most of your bones,
let these twenty-seven
clumsy lines
shaken loose
make amends.

Complicated Skins

Wearing complicated skins
hides he's naked underneath
a man, just a man
who believes himself a beast

Colossus

I often think of *these friends*
that I do not deserve them.
They are my superiors.

Sniff at their appointments: their casual calls
their crusades, their horned appetites,
their ferocity and ramshackle ease. In meekness
I pin my eyes to them, core my ears
zest my lips, trim both arms sparingly.

Shall we stay coupled forever
locked in this jealous embrace
like mass versus line
fighting to own an infinite ray of light?

Charcoal lines follow the hand;
feathered crumbling strokes that
contour and cross-contour
like Lilliputian lines
reckoning a blackish mass,
lost strands in the retina
and the deaf ears of Goya
upend to catch truth—

Art's colossal swing answers itself;
a closed circuit, shifting the globe in waves
sets long legs galloping
gravity chasing levity
levitychasinggravity, toys to trophies
we stuff ourselves on these amusements
holding out our hands each turn passing.

In Search of Guthrie's Grave

A stack of sheep shit

Day by day I pass
its ruins, a populace
of red flies brewing
shimmers, levitates
then resettles

like a sequinned cap,
the dung of tomorrow's tandem
of wet dry, rinse shine
when I step aside its fine republic

vigilant, yet again
and carry-on through
farmer's fields
in search of Guthrie's grave.

Misplaced

We're waiting here.
Where are you?
People are asking questions like
How did I lose you?

As though you were my reading glasses,
as though you were that hollow flask my lips still long for,
as though you were a blackened toenail sloughed off all winter.

And, when they come closer to the truth—
this pen, this pen
that drops from my hand
again and again
rolling to a dead stop
under our bed.

At times, I find you
tucked under a bald cushion,
sitting bronco high on my old thin head,
in the blue moon that
sees me to sleep.

My overnighter, you
renew me like keratin
brilliant, as always dear
that's what we'll tell them;
you never left.

Aviator Widow

On a cool June morning
her new/used KIA Soul sits
parked in the driveway.
She's washed up

like driftwood
picking her way down to a car
the dealer assures is, ugly/cool
like shabby/chic used to be.

She considers driving
from sparrows point of view
soaring on the spur of instinct
head tilting slowly left
adjusting right
she cruises low, lofts higher
takes the corner airborne
on a pinch of nerve, a shriek
she hits the horizon
not a look back.

Shelf Life

Once we pass the shelf
of all green growing
the unhurried hand of love
transplants us
to an island
beneath the clasp
of two hemispheres.

Here we drift
our water bodies
pulling up alongside
other water bodies
spilling over the lip of the world
headfirst.

Bode

When all I want to do is lie down like an animal
sumptuous, sweet sleep eludes me—
the snore stirred, grainy eyed bliss
of absolute surrender, the slipping under
currents of deep peace denied,
until today

as each eyelid peels open
the clouds have flown
the sky, smooth creamy creaseless
a disk of powder blue
echoes a mind without guilt.
its voice, soft thistles inward.

My pillowed head just popped open
like a can of joy! Where, oh where
did my weary old lug bolt eye go?
It flew. Just flew.

Labour Day

"Do you flower?" she whispers
bending to lift spent and dying
stems from the sidewalk.

The brain works now.
How to resist this—kindness,
mildew clings to goose necked stalks
rubs off like old lady talc
damp on my forearms.

Calm grey eyes hold mine, canyon arms,
sinewed hands, outstretched
insist pleasure.

Insist, until I find myself
writing "Zinnia" across the face
of three brown lunch bags
a marker lid clamped between my teeth
as crushed seedbeds fall—once
pink, gold, vermillion, now
grey-brown, their tic sounds like
chicken scratch I'll soon forget,
stowed way back of a backroom cupboard,
bags cinched tight like wicks at the ready.

On impulse I undo one
shimmy my wedding ring off
and toss it in, its rolling clunk a question:
Do I have what it takes to flower?

Safe

Another porcelain morning
eyeful of blue sky
a tea cup's diameter
opens before me.

My forearm passes
knuckle eyed awake,
can pure stark joy camp
inches from my face?

Mettle to the Water

There could have been a boat
but there wasn't
so we swam the cold hard lake
to prove we'd pass muster
our feet and toes clamped
to slime skulled stones,
water hauling us nearly naked
into deep reed beds that
stroked our underbellies.

The men marvelled
at our heart-shaped wake
pacing to and fro
arms held stiff as oars
mutely wishing
they'd built a sprightly craft
if nothing else, but to follow.

Aftermath

Blizzard's cleared,
the road emerges
slush pocketed and gritty
malt coloured mud blurs
the centre median.

Traffic returns to normal
on this county road where
chunks of grey snow
dislodge like small road kill
haphazard forerunners
of spring soon upon us.

Reflections, Holiday Inn

Just when I thought
there'd be no newness to the day
underwater jets surge.
Two small blondes wearing
slicked back water helmets merge,
edge of a pool, their shoulders glisten
like porcelain or pearl.

The youngest spurts "You first."

Crab toeing behind a pole
they make crisscross bows
with red ribbon lips
so smooth so slippery their
chests touch like suction cups.

Grandpa's poolside snooze goes undisturbed,
a walking stick spans his mottled thighs,
white knees reflect glow worms in the water
they wobble.

Expelling a retentive snore, he awakens
grips his plastic chair and shouts
"E veeeee, Hazel! Stop that! Stawwwwp"
he returns to a faraway dream
of drowning in kisses

Mocktail

A wedge of lemon fizzes
my glass of cranberry over ice
and soda.
A submersible smile
bumps the tumbler twice.

I hold it
to the light.

Awash in clear reds
vibrant pinks, lift the yellow rind
micro bubbles surface burst
my taste buds lean forward
for their kiss.

Tickle on the lip, tart on the palette
bitter winter berries and sugar
cruise the tongue, mingle with ice cube's
crystal clear voice
clanking the goblet for a toast.

New neighbours,
new metaphors, New Year's
Eve and new babies,
dedications after

one long drunk
of acrimony and waste,
traded this winter night
for a reading lamp,
sober, buoyant, writing.

Shelf Stable

Nothing Be Still

As I chew two oatcakes
sun lights the pages of my book
one free hand brushes warm crumbs
falling , as I look up

clouds jackknife,
rain raisies goose bumps
on a plate glass lake and
the sun's monocle recedes

its flame, doused from the treetops
smooths the brushcut lawn, and
my room darkens to velvet green
drapes, pulled aside

reveal the last oatcake;
like a breast laid flat
walnut half perched
in a drawl of chocolate
charming.

Lavina's Fish Bake

Pale uneaten potatoes
slump on the sideboard,
the casserole gleams
from the table.

Its liquor stored on our breaths
hints of, fresh salmon, smoked salmon
David hmmms "hake"
forginger guessing
his unshaven cheek

We fork swab our plates
each turn dragging cream
a morsel or two slipped
to the stray at our feet.

Longer in pie and wine
fed, story infused, zombified
Hanneke notes "midnight's come"
the candlelight nods time
to return our stowaway home.

We mobilize at the patio door,
collect torches, flashlights, iPhones
as the dog zips off
fish tailing at the outer fringes
of our batteries' limits.

Sabina leads us
her iris, the color
of scotch pine needles
pricks a desiccated corridor
of overhead stars, above the famous
not so famous and the completely unknown.

Couple

Words dodging molluscs and shrimp
show me your mouth, your teeth, your tongue
where words thoroughfare meets
oncoming spoonful's of seafood paella
like a circus reeling a busy street.

The Popcorn Poem

Over the rim
of a large red bowl
I snag a posi
of soggy popcorn.

Doubt dissolves
like styrofoam
as I chew and muse
about poetry and food.

All those words
to squeeze and squirt
butter from, then
there's the lightness

the air-y-ness
and the kernels
to crack between one's teeth
to suck the luscious juices from

drink the sea salt
wear one sprite filly
on the tip of my tongue
and wave it around

un sheathed

never to wonder
is this good for me,
as I lick my greasy fingers
one by one.

A Portentous Poem

Quick stepping,
desk to kitchen sink
writing eight inelegant lines of poetry
on a cupboard door,
I am scrambled senseless
scooching dog food,

fusing words,
innocent quantities, at first;
the carrots, the kibble, the hard boiled egg,
enjambed lines lubricate
in petit pois, and tuna.

A crosshatched mash of mistakes
fork, over knife, over pen
dog food, word flow have become—
too involved.

A simple poem would have done.

The New Lords

I'm going to the kitchen
to get more cake (chocolate)
it's a luxury to be here
like a slug in the rain.

Guthrie's house is quiet
writing in his rooms
we tip in patterned chairs
commiserate with words

    as songbirds tune their
    forks on steel
    and raindrops plink
    the fire escape

am I a clown, a lunatic or a new born king
awakened on the teat.

Mori McCrae has lived on the western crook of Lake Ontario all her life. Born in Toronto, she grew up in Port Credit, then studied Fine Art at the Ontario College of Art. She graduated with Honours in 1984. Her journey continued, relocating her to Grimsby and finally St. Catharine's, where she began to write poetry. She's settled in a house nicknamed The Hobbit with her husband and two dogs.

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