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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

when salt water breaks

by

Beth Munroe Hill

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

Department of English

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL, 1987

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*Bath Munroe Hill*  
*Box 242, Ponoka, AB*  
*TOC 240*

Date: August 27, 1987

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA  
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "when salt water breaks" submitted by Beth Munroé Hill in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

*Bert Allen*

.....  
(Supervisor)

*[Faint handwritten signature]*  
.....

Date: August 27, 1987

for my mother and father

Kathyrn Brookman MacDonald  
William Raynor Munroe

### Abstract

"when salt water breaks" is a collection of poetry which explores the ways in which women define and express themselves in and through language. The poetry creates an intertext woven from threads of the expression of inner and outer reality; the poet's private voice is juxtaposed with voices of other women heard in the everyday world. Verbal relations and human relations connect in the play of language, releasing poems of sorrow and celebration.

#### Acknowledgements

Some of these poems have appeared in Whetstone, blue buffalo, NeWest Review, The Antigonish Review, and The Pottersfield Portfolio; some have been broadcast on CBC Radio's Alberta Anthology.



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## Introduction

When salt water breaks rhythmically against a shoreline, energy is released from the liquid surface tension. When salt water breaks from the eyes, sorrow is released in tears. When salt water breaks out on the surface of the skin, perspiration is released, cooling the overworked, fearful, or feverish body. When salt water breaks from a woman's womb, a child is released from her body and delivered to the world. All of these connections to salt water are at work within the poetry of this collection. The woman/poet gives form to her salt-watered experiences, and by so naming them is released into new beginnings and celebration.

My geographical connection to salt water is an important one. Born on Cape Breton Island, as were my mother and father, my grandmothers and grandfathers, I hold the notion of island, land completely surrounded by water, above all others in placing myself. When I return to Cape Breton shores and immerse myself in the Atlantic, I experience at-one-ment with the sea, with my self. My childhood was filled with swimming, boating, and fishing. Over and over again these facets of early life surface in my poetry; they become vehicles for expressing what comes from deep within. The body of language surrounding my life holds the same fascination for me as the body of water surrounding the island. I find myself fishing the depths of etymology, listening for the rhythmic ebb and flow of voices, and acknowledging the power of the sea of language. My family lines and my lines of poetry are anchored geographically and metaphorically in salt water.

My break with salt water came when I married a mathematician and moved with him to his home in Alberta. This relocation introduced me to prairie people and landscape. Through his family connections and through the birth and raising of our family here, I have assimilated prairie spirit into my life and my poetry. Perhaps this influence manifests itself most obviously in my poetic style, which strives to be spare and uncluttered like prairie topography. Despite the richness and satisfactions of life in Alberta, however, the dislocation and distance from my extended family, from the sea and language of home, express themselves in salt tears of homesickness.

Recently the relationship which brought me here has ended. More tears, fear-induced sweats, more unbearable tensions created by emotional distance. Pain and anger surface in the poetry: the abrupt short line and the violent image embody the rage and brokenness which I, and others like me, must survive when facing the death of a long-standing marriage. It was during this difficult time I began to make progress in claiming my own power as a woman, as a writer. Nurtured by the strength inherited from my mother and grandmothers and from women friends, I began to find, in the sisterhood of women, and in the literature of women writers, connections to the struggles, dreams, and stories of many women. In the matrix (from the Latin "mater", meaning "womb") of language shared by women, I began to find that common ground on which women stand and from which they speak, that place of our connection.

For me, the word "matrix" provides useful insights into the origins and processes of my writing. In its biological context, the matrix is the intercellular substance in which connective tissue is embedded. As poet I become surgeon, cutting into the body to find and examine such connective tissue. At the same time, the body of language provides the matrix-womb, nurturing fetal poems, creating the poet/mother who gives birth to new life (art, self). I see myself in the roles of surgeon and poet, traditional male domains, at the same time defining myself as mother.

A second meaning of matrix, in a mathematical context, is an array of elements which, when combined, can form new sums and products. My role as poet/mathematician is to find in the matrix of language new connections among elements which can produce new poetry, fresh expressions. Here I appropriate the role of mathematician for myself while, perhaps ironically, rejecting the old role of mathematician's wife. I revel in the combinations and permutations revealed in the matrix of language.

A third definition of matrix, in a geological context, is the natural material in which a fossil, metal, gem, crystal, or pebble is embedded. I come from a long male line of pick and shovel Cape Breton coal miners, and this tradition can represent the process by which I dig into language to investigate what is under the surface of words. I discover treasure in the matrix; gems attract my interest and energy. I begin to write with a sense of wonderment at the richness of the dig.

The Greek-derived word "heuristic" meaning "to find" best defines this approach to my discovery of poetry. In the search, possibilities present themselves. I must allow mystery, paradox, serendipity, and play, must remain open to where such seeming randomness takes me. I remind myself to respect what is happening in the process of working on each poem. Time and time again, when a new connection is discovered, I experience that moment of insight which I imagine to be like Archimedes' bathtub-moment; in his excitement, we are told, he ran naked through the streets shouting "Heureka!" In my excitement, I take the leap from the waters of language (womb) into the streak of creative energy which becomes, after much hard labour, the new poem.

As a collection, the poems do not represent a fixed, linear order. I understand the poems' relationship to each other in terms of an intertext woven from the threads of what constitutes expression of inner and outer reality, the life of dream and memory, the life expressed in the private, personal voice, and in the voices of other women heard in the day-to-day world. Generally speaking, the poems relate to each other in pairs: sometimes one poem speaks to the other on the same subject but in a different voice; sometimes the ideas in one stand in opposition or contrast to those of the other; sometimes one poem merely contains a seed out of which the next poem grows. And always the intertext attempts to grapple with the on-going re-definition of the self. Re-vision, seeing with new eyes, exposes many facets of the self, many versions of the self, through the encounter with language. The text proceeds and the self evolves: one process

becomes the other. Present circles back to past and returns to present. Tears, sweat, tensions, once secret, appear on the surface, on the line of language.

In this poetry, when I speak in my private, inner voice, the self-important "I" is non-existent. The exploring, tentative "i" resists the privileged discourse of the traditional lyric, the traditional poet/ego. The voice of the "i" becomes one of many voices and claims no corner on "truth". Its goal is authenticity. The poems do not represent an attempt to be "correct": they celebrate contradiction and play, and promote the search for new forms and voices which push out the boundaries of poetic jurisdiction. In the use of found materials, in ludic-rous juxtapositions, in the appropriation of what is not "poetic", the poet searches (with her reader) for new meanings in the intersection of the "far-out" with the "far-in". There is a desire to be open, to laugh at myself as I invite the reader to share the joke, share the process of revelation, to share the private places.

Beth Munroe Hill  
Ponoka, Alberta  
August, 1987

\*

the poet

she is fishing for the poem she has  
never dared to write  
she thinks she has  
hooked it soft flesh tears  
just under  
the surface

no longer submerged words  
surge into the stream  
she raises them up they  
sparkle in the light  
flash in blue-bright element  
cool air on their  
naked rainbow skins

she reels to see  
she has caught herself  
pisciform she  
struggles caught on the hook at the end of her  
line



\* 7

the poetaster

my cat tries to make me believe  
she is a poet  
she has the right habits  
rises early every morning perches on  
her typing chair yawns takes her first  
drink of the day she

plays with her pen struggles to make  
connections  
circles lines  
doodles tail-ends of old plots  
notes from cats she always was rather  
musical  
nothing i do distracts her from  
the passion of her art a lightbulb  
flashes on above her head  
one fang exposed she  
sinks her teeth into the back of my hand

yes she's a bold one poets must be bold  
she tells me gives the tooth-holes a  
rough-tongued lick you see she adds a  
wicked, kitty-gleam in her green eye  
i need to taste flesh before i can  
write about it

\*

remembering

weeping birch  
outside our darkening window whispers  
kisses drift the half-light we  
lie together form the  
accustomed geometry of  
beginning memories of  
when we were  
young and  
shy and  
in love

\*

solitaire

night after night she  
can't sleep  
his quiet breathing stirs a  
single wisp of neck hair  
gnaws nerve ends  
can't sleep she  
steals from bed  
seeks reprieve in the ranks of  
solitaire

night after night    black  
on red    red  
on black  
prim patterns of  
neatly ordered certainty on  
flat grey tabletop  
red jack on  
black queen  
red queen on  
black king  
third ace exposed  
(perhaps this game will work)  
two cards left  
two cards  
one    to keep  
one    to throw away  
perhaps this time she'll have to  
cheat

\*  
out beyond the reach

and this is the way she points her dory  
out to sea  
out beyond the sandbar  
out beyond the reach  
and this is the way she pulls  
arms outstretched  
back arched  
feet braced flat against the ribs  
and this is the way she gasps  
and grips the oars  
and fights the combers as they  
beat her back toward shore

and this is the way she presses her face  
against her sleeve  
salt lashings rasp and burn  
her cheeks

and this is the way  
she staggers back to land  
beached and shivering  
she stands  
eyes fixed out to sea  
out beyond the sandbar  
out beyond the reach

11  
\*  
leaving the island

it would be night  
a bell would be ringing  
i would ride the ferry  
between the islands  
it would be cold i would be  
wearing my red bathing suit  
we would have to swim the last stretch  
to shore there would be  
fog on the surface

we would have to jump  
mother father uncles aunts  
they could swim but  
six strokes or  
not at all  
we would leap  
together they would be  
gone where are you where  
are you i would call

i would be afraid i would be  
numb in my red  
bathing suit it would be  
night a bell would be  
ringing

\*  
the woman above the falls

the man from far away comes  
to where i hide . he comes  
after me long legs  
step across rivers climb cliffs  
i hide in the jungle hope  
he will go away

he waits

i wait

i stand my ground tell him  
no i will not listen i do not want him  
he comes after me  
i run  
hands cup his mouth he  
calls my name where are you why  
do you hide i hide  
inside myself i  
do not want to be  
found

\*  
waking in a strange place

i am afraid  
i am afraid i will lose the key  
to the door of my heart  
i am afraid a bear will  
pick it up  
burst in  
swing his head from side to side and  
sniff my fear.

i am afraid  
his beady yellow eyes will  
hypnotize he will  
pounce (he is so quick)  
sink curved yellow teeth into my  
breast (the stink of his breath)  
i am afraid he will  
rip me  
open

\*

one soft spring evening

she returns home from a walk to find  
her door locked  
in white ice in the light of the  
new moon she finds an  
axe in the shed begins to  
hack her way in she  
calls his name are you in there  
sweat freezes her hands to the axe handle she  
smashes at the door frame swings wild  
arcs and screams like an animal  
tears scald her cheeks shards of  
ice dart past her eyes she  
thinks of him  
trapped inside

the ice gives  
the door bangs open she  
runs in to find him a note  
pencilled neatly taped to the icebox reads  
gone north



\*  
Saturday night social hour

funny he says he  
pushes back his battered stetson hat  
you don't look married

married she says in 'ought seven  
i was so cold i up and  
married me a man married him quick  
dumbest trick i ever pulled she  
slaps her knee

pours herself another shot of  
prime alberta whiskey  
yessiree-bob that winter of 'ought seven was one  
helluva humdinger

you don't look married. to me  
he says sips his second whiskey  
i mean you look like you never  
needed a man  
he cocks his head in thought

needed a man she bolts up straight  
i guess i  
needed a man  
durn near froze stiff in 'ought seven  
ice on the shack three inches thick she  
measures three inches with thumb and first finger  
on the inside i guess i  
needed a man

your husband he asks his voice a whisper

picked up with some fancy dame in town  
lit our fer parts unknown she slips the whiskey into the  
little drawer beside the bed  
i guess i  
needed a man

and now he asks  
his hand finds hers  
footsteps clatter in the corridor  
their hands tremble withdraw  
a nurse appears whisks  
him and wheelchair toward the door  
and now he calls his voice  
thin high

you expectin' a cold winter

\*  
There's a Trick with a Knife

she is  
assistant to the knife-thrower  
she stands dull-eyed  
before the crowd he arranges her  
in place dead  
centre of his bull's eye he  
backs sixteen paces to the rack of  
knives

bow at the waist of her  
dress flutters in the light  
breeze first knife nips  
left wrist next snicks  
stray curl at left temple  
the knife thrower loves to  
please the crowd draws  
lines of perspiration on their upper lips he  
fixes her in his gaze extracts a black  
blindfold from his sleeve ties it across  
his eyes he waits  
to hear their little  
cries she  
holds her  
breath

\*  
pickle-making

it is fall  
she is making pickles

sharp knife  
vinegar salt  
scalding water  
sterile jars

she removes her  
wedding rings  
places them in the empty  
egg-cup

she picks up  
the knife  
without ceremony  
cuts him from  
her heart

paring him to  
reasonable pieces she  
pickles him  
twists tops tight  
wipes jars  
descends to the  
cold cellar  
arranges him neatly on  
one pine shelf

a line from Margaret Atwood

And you play the safe game  
your rules circumscribed and logical  
there is to be no  
dancing naked on the high  
white window ledge a red rose  
shooting from your wrist  
there is no taunting of the caged bear no  
nimble shift so claws just  
graze your ear no  
leaping onto firetrucks  
sirens tearing night's  
black flesh no  
wondering if the flames will make you  
laugh or  
cry

And you play the safe game  
while i  
hang on hooks above you  
knowing i could  
never do  
the same

\*

Preparation and Dressing of Lobster if not to be Served Whole

Plunge  
Live lobster into  
Boiling water  
Head first  
Add salt  
Cover  
Keep pot boiling 20 min.

Plunge  
Cooked lobster into  
Cold Water  
Take meat from shell thus:

Chop off claws,  
Split body lengthwise  
Throw away stomach (small sac  
Just back of the head)  
Pull out intestinal canal (it runs  
From stomach to tail remove entirely)  
Crack claws  
Take meat  
Eliminate creamy green fat (the liver)  
Discard spawn found in  
Females

Arrange meat  
Attractively

\*

this is just to say

i'm going  
not goodbye  
not arrive merci  
just going

not thinking  
not talking  
not doing  
just  
going

red or  
white or  
green or

feathers  
or moonbeams  
or horse-shit

just going  
to Mexico or  
Kapus casing or  
crazy

up yours

this is just to say

\*

amo  
amas

decline:

first person singular imperfect  
I used to love  
i used to love in  
the past

first person plural imperfect  
we used to love now  
we

decline

\*

when i was a fencepost

barbed wire bit deep  
scarred my heartwood  
hooked me to  
another post  
wind leaned me to the  
ground snagged wires held me in  
pain

you came with your  
bright axe you  
split me to  
kindling teepeed me into a  
circle set me  
ablaze i burned  
blue red gold  
danced sparked in the darkness

now i am a flame  
aflame



\*

the dream

i go from room to room empty  
 hear a woman crying she is crying for her dead  
 husband i find her sitting on the bed smoking  
 a cigarette my husband stands by the window  
 his back to me hands in pockets he says  
 nothing at all

the fire alarm is ringing they think there is a  
 fire i know it is only her smoking on the bed  
 she moves toward the window  
 looks down my husband is helping her out i think  
 he is going to push her  
 i cover my mouth to keep from  
 screaming i sit  
 still on the bed there is no fire  
 the alarm is ringing  
 she is gone

he is turning he is  
 looking at me hands in pockets he says  
 nothing at all

i hear her crying from  
 somewhere below he is dead dead dead  
 smoke passes between  
 me and my husband

the alarm is ringing  
 there is no fire the bed  
 is burning

\*

talking in dreams

chasing after the firetruck i  
stumbled on your 'grave  
your lonesome grave  
what a surprise to see you  
this time of night  
you said

just going  
to the fire  
i said  
bare-assed  
and a bit  
out of breath

i used to do that too when i was a girl  
don't get burned at the fire

don't worry mother  
i called  
and ran toward  
the flames

\*

my father is a fireman

volunteer retired  
 in the nights when fires used to start  
 the whistle pulled him from her bed  
 fumble of underwear and socks he was  
 gone  
 she waited the house  
 silent her breathing  
 timed with each third heartbeat her  
 hand resting where  
 just a moment before  
 his body lay  
 as if to keep him safe  
 and close  
 beside her

my father is a fireman

volunteer retired  
 in the nights when fires start  
 the whistle stirs him from his sleep  
 first impulse to rush away to fight  
 old fires which haunt  
 his dreams still burning  
 in memory he reaches for her  
 to say goodbye to say  
 he will be home soon his  
 hand searching where  
 not long before  
 she lay safe  
 and close  
 beside him

ironing

i find myself this tuesday morning  
 ironing this set of clothes  
 everything hand-picked to go  
 together she was  
 particularly fussy about  
 ironed underwear and i wonder if  
 all mothers before wrinkle-free were  
 like this or was it just her  
 drive for perfection that enslaved her  
 hours at the board pushing  
 sad irons over mountains of  
 whites palms burned red feet  
 aching tuesdays were always  
 ironing days

this morning faced with her  
 underwear slip dress i  
 stand at the board

she used to warn me about  
 clean underwear in case something happens  
an accident something too fearful to  
 name clean and ironed she'd say as if  
 such sacred vestments would keep me  
 safe from any evil

she kept one set of clothes neatly  
 packed in an old black case you never know  
when you might need to take a trip she said  
and you'll have to go

i lift up the slip  
 slide its flesh-colored body over the end of the board and  
 begin to press this slip  
 fancier than i'd ever seen her wear  
 suppose she thought it a small reward for  
 years of housework and  
 frugality

i'd always chafed at ironing told her she was  
 silly to fuss over such  
 details so much to do that was more  
 important for years she persisted but  
 finally saw me wash and wear and  
 didn't speak of ironing again

i lift each item from the case make it  
perfect as i can dis-  
connect the iron shocked by its  
sharp spark

i gather up her clothes press  
them to my face still warm  
this last gift of  
ironing from my hands  
to her

\*  
 vision

my father is disappearing  
 into the eye clinic the sight of him  
 stepping through that door he  
 doesn't see stumbles on the  
 threshold uncertain he  
 steps with care regains his  
 dignity lost just for the  
 wink of an eye

Glaucoma Clinic the sign reads  
glaucoma tongue  
 shapes the new word voice  
 shakes first time he  
 says it out loud.  
glaucoma range of vision  
 tunnels darkness  
 closing in

i see him  
 eighty-one years, forty of them my  
 father the vision of  
 what it means to  
 love a child range of  
 possibilities clarity of  
 feeling touch of his  
 rough hand

for years he worked underground dug coal in  
 dark tunnels pick and shovel  
 loaded top boxes 60 cents a ton  
 20 tons a day he and Alec (brother  
 Alec eighty-three and  
 blind)

the cause of glaucoma is  
an increase in pressure  
in the eye

underground bright flame in  
 coal oil lamp meant methane gas an  
 increase in pressure run (don't stumble) before  
 explosion bright flash in the eyes

sometimes he falls into  
 depressions eyes fill he

sees visions of my mother she  
filled his lamp at night before his  
shift every night but  
saturday saturday they went  
dancing they were  
high steppers then

in the glaucoma clinic  
his first instinct to  
run but he stands then picks his way with  
care takes the necessary steps  
laser beams bring down  
pressure bright flash  
just for the  
wink of an  
eye possibility of blindness  
disappears

once again he  
steps across the threshold (don't  
stumble) at the sight of him  
my eyes fill he reaches  
my hand care  
to dance he says

Thomas and Nain

Home from work in the slate quarry  
 Thomas finds her  
 pressed against the back corner of the fence  
 crumpled paper bag  
 wind-driven  
 caught  
 pinched eyes stare  
 down at the ground

Jesus is coming for me today  
 she assures the dahlias  
 good black taffeta flaps at  
 black stick legs  
 white hands hang  
 empty at her sides  
Jesus is coming for me today

gently Thomas leads her back  
 along the slate walk  
 into the house  
 his battered hands press her into  
 the green wing chair by the  
 window she stares  
 astonished  
 at the parlor

Jesus is coming for me today  
 she assures the plaster cat  
 leaning forward her flat black church hat  
 perched a crazy angle  
Jesus is coming for me today

Thomas brings her white tea and  
 buttered bread folded over  
 he sits on the low stool  
 beside her

the clock ticks

the quarry whistle shrieks

the dead stare from the mantle



she looks up  
she holds him with a gaze  
reserved for strangers  
absently pinching soft bread between  
thumb and first finger  
she rolls a tiny bread ball  
holds it to blue lips in  
thoughtful communion  
Jesus is coming for me today  
she assures him

Thomas stares at his scarred hands  
split nails  
split slates  
layered lives blasted from quarry face  
grandfather  
father

Thomas lifts the blue teacup  
she sucks the tea  
false teeth click the cup  
she looks up at him

Jesus is coming for me today

Pietá

vision and prayer

slim hope born of woman's womb  
 heart-print of man  
 cunning hands raise the high rood  
 at dawn fling him woundward  
 at his rest he hangs enduring tomorrow into darkness  
 and splashed pain

men crown his brow his  
 eyes blaze bright miracles under  
 dazzled heaven

this maiden bears him this  
 stone rolls into her heart  
 one kiss she gives him her be-  
 loved in the dark womb of  
 death her son  
 lies crouched bare  
 how she rocks him cries  
 blind dumbfounding grief her life  
 wound around his heart her heart  
 vision-slain driven through the  
 furied kingdom

\*

Peter

she waits curled on the green  
carpet by the fire  
son Peter leans forward touches his nose to her  
soft throat she  
reaches up draws his face  
close to hers he laughs  
the brand-new man's voice  
startles her he eases  
down beside her snuggles in to her neck that  
comfortable place he has loved for  
years they watch the fire light  
touch of his hand the old cat  
purrs drifts off to sleep  
dreams him her  
little boy again

\*

Sarah's pas de chat

dance your birth dance daughter  
lift up out of the yawning sea  
belly sliced open for your entrance dance  
quick turns whirl out from cramped walls caged  
thoughts defy  
gravity dance  
green waves fishes dazzle of  
stars dance midnight darkness and  
blood

dance little cat  
claws teeth you  
know them well innocent  
brutal

dance daughter  
dance sand-castle puddle yellow  
sunshine willow your  
grace

\*

In the spaying process the navel of the female cat is tucked into the fold of the incision. . .

my cat is sad

she quizzles up her little face  
head tipped  
to one side  
green eyes  
pensive

she tells me she wants  
a belly button of her own

why i ask  
would you

they're so (she gropes for words)  
wonderful

wonderful i ask

yes she says  
wonderful i feel belly buttons (she sighs)  
are absolutely mystical  
a tie a break perfect  
antithesis  
eschatalogical genesis

her eyes (wonderful)  
gaze off  
through the picture window to the  
world

my cat is sad

she quizzles up her little face  
head tipped  
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her eyes (wonderful)  
gaze off  
through the picture window to the  
world

\*

driver

she chucks her bag in back  
 jumps hard brown body  
 behind the wheel  
 (dark-green back-woods Morris)  
 bangs the tinny door  
 revs 'er up

sunglasses squared  
 mirror just right (no cops)  
 first gear the Morris hops like a fart damn  
where the hell is second  
 a cow looks up  
 chews once  
 blue sky winks between the spruces  
 second keep 'er in the ruts  
 the Morris whines c'mon you  
pile o' junk  
 third engine drops a tone she  
 eases back in her seat  
 soft breeze shimmers  
 heatwaves on the Brickyard Road

Winding Road sign to the beach  
 long downhill unravels  
 two-track back road she  
 takes a deep breath rams  
 stick in fourth sun flicks windshield  
 tires kick gravel  
 close spruces swoosh intermittent rhythm  
 she leans one slim elbow out the  
 window tips back  
 battered blue camp hat  
 jee-eez she's  
 Queen of the Road.

\*

for Beverly

me and you be sisters  
we be the same  
me and you  
coming from the same plate }  
way inside  
me and you  
writing lines  
scratching our heads like  
crazy me and you  
got men got  
troubles lordy lordy  
gotta laugh them off  
gotta love  
us' gotta  
ring that bell and  
sing  
hallelujah  
me and you be  
sisters



\*  
National Geographic Smell Survey September 1986

answer the questionnaire ask others  
to wait remember  
there are questions on both sides don't be  
offended ask yourself  
if you are a woman  
whether you are  
pregnant remember odors  
may be influenced by age physical  
condition sex and much  
much more

let the smells arouse you let your  
longing your  
sadness your  
passion be a  
rose in the parlor  
fish on wooden barrows on the wharf salt  
sweat on your lover's body remember  
there are questions on both sides

do you currently  
smoke tobacco have you been diagnosed as having  
hypertension bursitis morning sickness have you  
experienced a loss of  
smell of babies after baths of  
libido and how would you describe  
yourself (in parentheses) in Ponoka in  
love circle  
one number for each  
question and what is your  
age are you left-  
handed alone don't be  
offended remember there are  
questions on both sides

how do you rate how do you  
measure the smell of  
tension Central High certain  
men certain  
women in different situations what do you  
say to yourself when smells  
arouse you  
answer to the best of your  
ability

\*

## Mamie Mac's Washday

I used to make up dreams  
 before that day  
 too tired to dream at night but  
 that day just a Saturday  
 hangin' out the wash (ten kids my God the clothes  
 them youngsters go through in the run of a week  
 and my Alec pick 'n shovel man clothes stiff with  
 pit dirt and sweat) well like I said  
 I used to like to make up dreams  
 before that day  
 I was gettin' to the bottom of the pile  
 pickin' up the last work shirt shakin' it out  
 when Mother of God what do I spy but an ear  
 lyin' in the bottom of the basket

now the kids play tricks on me  
 (little devils that they are)  
 likely its rubber I think to myself  
 but its real enough  
 delicate and innocent just lyin'  
 in the bottom of the basket  
 must have been in Alec's pants pockets  
 he's always got smoke butts or screw nails or  
 some fool thing to bugger up my wash  
 so I ask myself how Alec would come by an ear  
 I mean the man's got the temper of Satan himself  
 but he'd never do the likes of this  
 not even drunk  
 likely he'll have some big story for me tonight

well now Mamie he'll say  
 ol' Phonse took another fit in the tavern tonight  
 mutilated himself somethin'  
 wicked out of the goodness of me heart I took the ear  
 off his hands  
 what else would you have me do

I'm standin' at the line wonderin'  
 what to do next when  
 curiosity gets the best of me (it always does)  
 I pick up that ear ginger-like a shudder  
 goes through me from head to toe  
 it's as waxy as the flesh of the dead

I throw a glance around the yard makin' sure no one's lookin'  
 and give it a sniff just the faintest whiff of  
 nutmeg I squeeze it a tiny twig and Virgin Mary  
 a band starts playin' music beltin' straight out of that ear  
 quick I shove it into the pin bag and stuff my apron in on top  
 that band don't stop the tuba's doin'  
 ba ba ba bums of McNamara's Band (McNamara used to be my  
 maiden name you know)  
 I stand there kinda stunned for a time  
 Mama always said when somethin' was gettin' your goat  
 just pretend it ain't even botherin' you  
 I haul a breadcrust out of my pocket and feed the goose (she  
 follows me around when I'm hangin' out the wash)  
 I stand there waitin'  
 clothes flappin' in the sou'east breeze (great dryin' day)  
 after a long while everything goes quiet and still  
 I can hear Sean and the young kids up the far pasture playin'  
 hoist your sail

I check my own ears just in case  
 they're both still fastened on tight as the skin on an eel  
 I wonder if maybe I been  
 makin' up dreams again (mind I was feelin' a mite  
 queer in the head when I was puttin' them clothes through the  
 wringer) I look around  
 just a Saturday morning in May  
 just like any other day  
 the house the yard  
 the clothes line the chicken coop everything  
 just the same as it always was

I take a deep breath and say a prayer to the Virgin Mother

Holy Mary I promise not to  
 make up dreams I always knew deep down  
 I was playin' into the devil's hand  
 wicked it was to make up dreams to get myself  
 through the days but I  
 solemnly swear Holy Mother I will never  
 make up dreams again  
 and keep my mind on my work  
 and think Holy Thoughts

I pick up  
 the clothes basket  
 the pin bag  
 and start headin' for the house

\*

three sheets to the wind

i pin sheets to the line

sheets white pristine

prop the line to

keep the sheets from

dragging i

raise my arm poised

wait for words

from underneath i

prop my mind against the line

reach up i can barely

touch the edge i

want to write

you hear exhalation

stirs the sheet

your breath v

inspiration

\*

you breathin'

you  
breathin' my name  
with a sigh  
and i  
fly to the moon  
laughing high gold notes  
twinkling the night sky  
a woman  
comin' through the  
just a  
poop-diddley woman on a  
souped-up broomstick  
comin' through the  
sigh you  
breathin' my  
name

\*

dream whip

dream of you leaves me  
 wide awake body  
 wanting you beside  
 myself i  
 get up in dim light  
 wander to the half-lit  
 kitchen window winter  
 snow moon smooth white  
 curves body in  
 reflection  
 i find myself half a  
 bowl of dream whip take  
 spoon from drawer remember  
 you ~~along~~ my back taste  
 smooth curve hollow of your hip  
 kiss

s

p

o

o

n

s

n

o

w

h

i

p

m

o

o

n

d r e a m

\*

madness of the moon

four in the morning light  
pearls white comb on  
marble tabletop  
pink tinged dawn softens  
comb to harp  
i hear music bare feet  
brush sea-green linoleum  
dancing i glance back  
the white comb  
abandoned by your hand  
so carelessly to  
lunar magic

\* ①

moments like this

you me

black highway

in the flicker of passing car lights i meet

your eyes

last turn before the exit you

touch my cheek

yes i say silently

yes



connection

telephone rings

i pick it up we make

connection

you laugh two thousand miles away connection

thread of voice between us the line we reach out

miles across the gap i can barely

see you at first then

putting myself gingerly on the line catch a

glimpse of your green umbrella

you balance your

loneliness on the line make your way

to me

the line trembles between us we

recover the balance keep

eyes on each other you smile

two thousand miles away

we pause we don't want to break the connection

\*  
beginning of summer

lights across the bay wink in  
pink dusk one big  
fishing boat putters in the distance slices  
water's surface black wake lines slide  
under the edge of  
break softly on the  
pilings my mind and  
overhead a jet cuts a  
white vapour trail perfect  
perpendicular to the  
far shore the sky  
neatly halved  
silver eyelash moon  
silhouetted hilltops

from somewhere a radio  
plays artie shaw  
grace notes float out over  
the surface  
drift up rest on the  
inside curve of the  
moon

Vita

NAME: Beth Munroe Hill  
BORN: Reserve Mines, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia  
1946

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION:

1983: Diploma in Creative Writing, Red Deer College, Red Deer, AB..  
1968: Bachelor of Education, Mt. Allison University, Sackville, N.B..  
1967: Bachelor of Arts (English), Mt. Allison University, Sackville, N.B..

HONORS AND AWARDS:

1986: The Henry Kreisel Scholarship in Canadian Literature, Dept. of English, The University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB..  
1986: The James Patrick Folinsbee Memorial Scholarship in Creative Writing, The University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB..  
1983: The Michener Medal for Excellence in Fine Arts (Creative Writing), Red Deer College, Red Deer, AB..  
1964: Entrance Scholarship, Mt. Allison University, Sackville, N.B..

RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE:

1986: Editor, Heartwood: Growth From The Centre, Naramata Centre for Continuing Education, Naramata, B.C..  
1986: Graduate Teaching Assistant (Creative Writing), Red Deer College, Red Deer, AB..  
1984: Creative Writing Teacher, Ponoka Further Education Council, Ponoka, AB., Naramata Centre For Continuing Education, Nar., B.C..  
1984: Scriptwriter, Kapler and Hill, Writing Consultants, Ponoka, AB..  
1969: English Teacher, Secondary School, Ponoka, AB..  
1968: English Teacher, Secondary School, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

PUBLICATIONS:

Some of the poetry of this collection has been published in the following literary magazines:

The Antigonish Review

blue buffalo

NeWest Review

The Pottersfield Portfolio

Whetstone

Some of the poetry of this collection, as well as one short story, have been broadcast on CBC Radio's Alberta Anthology; one long poem was commissioned by CBC Radio and broadcast on Up And Coming.