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Tonsil Hockey: After, Around, and Through bpNichol's Poetry

by

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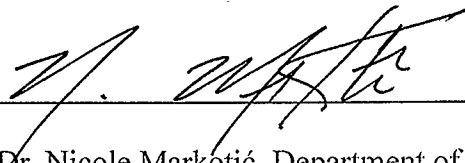
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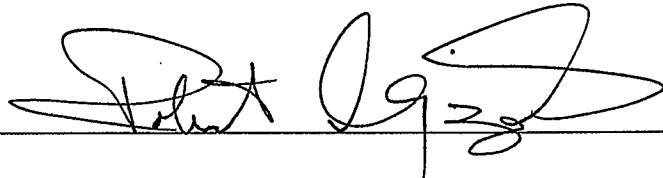
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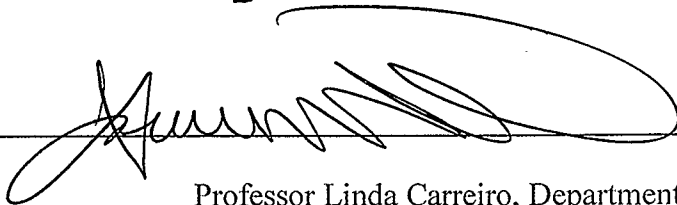
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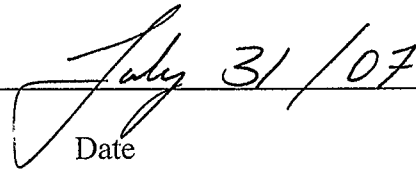
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## ABSTRACT

In “*There Are The Poems*,” Phyllis Webb states “the proper response to a poem is another poem (Webb 57).” This statement applies with particular significance to the work of bpNichol. It is more than “proper” to respond to Nichol's poems with more poems; it is necessary. His work invites readers to take on the author's position and opens myriad entryways for other writers to continue his texts. In response, I have written a manuscript that interacts with Nichol's poetry through the language and structure of play. In my writing, I employ word play as Nichol did: playfully. I take Nichol's metaphors and extend them into different contexts. I position my writing next to Nichol's as one half of a conversation toward/between Nichol's work and my own. I read the openings into Nichol's texts as doors, and I write 'Tonsil Hockey' as one of the texts to which those doors lead.

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For Harry and Margaret Walschots.

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## Leaving a Message After the Beep

### plasticine

I began kindergarten the year that bpNichol died. I fell in love with plasticine and I spent that year making dinosaurs. There was a huge, meteor-like hunk of it in our classroom, all the colours long ago smashed together into a homogeneous mass of brownish-grayish uncolour. It was nothing, and it was perfect..

I spent the year making brontosaurus, triceratops, and the occasional pterodactyl. It was a pleasure to carefully coax something into shape, to know no matter how many times I smashed my creations flat I could make something again. I created and destroyed whole worlds in a few hours. Plasticine was my first magic, the first time I consciously remember being completely overjoyed by the creative potential of play.

I learned to read the year that bpNichol died. I spent the year writing. Words changed when they sat next to other words: 'car,' next to 'red,' transformed into something suddenly sporty and cool, 'bark' morphed when it was beside 'tree' or 'dog.' Words, like plasticine, built whole worlds.

I spent the year writing words down: cherry tree frog leg lift; kick stand hat stand mic stand. There were always more words, always more combinations of words. Language, like plasticine, never ran out, and could always be torn apart and put back together again. I knew, with the complete certainty of a five-year-old, that language would never have an end. Language and plasticine were twin concepts: they were both play.

Years later, language became a game. I was in the sixth grade, and stumbled across some sexy poems in a collection in the school library. I immediately checked the book out and read the juiciest bits to my friends. One of them said, "that sure sounds like some tonsil hockey." I thought they meant the poem itself. I was in love again. I imagined words as players using language as a puck. I saw the poet's tonsils mimicking goalposts. The following week, during a social studies lesson on career

choices, I wrote that I wanted to goal-tend for the National Tonsil Hockey Association. I was sent to speak to a counselor.

The idea that poetry is a game has never left me. I had always constructed language in a way that amused me, but now I learned that my play could extend beyond the manipulation of individual words and their permutations: I could make up whole games, create and tear down and work within rules. I could write poems.

I was in high school ten years after bpNichol died. I discovered his work that year, and fell in love. The very first pieces of his I read were 'Blues' and *from* 'The Captain Poetry Poems' in Gary Geddes's *15 Canadian Poets x 3*. I read those pieces and laughed. I was reading at my locker, had to sit on the dirty tile of the hallway. It wasn't only that the pieces were funny, they were *fun*. The letters in 'Blues,' the l, o, v, and e, had been set free to play hopscotch or chess. They were recombining like rogue atoms or square dancers. The excerpt from 'The Captain Poetry Poems' was playing its own game with the conventions of the sonnet. These poems were the opposite of everything that was stuffy and boring and quiet. I was looking at language at play, and I wanted more.

I am in graduate school nearly 20 years after bpNichol died. I still want to do nothing more than play. For my Master's thesis, I chose to engage with the nine-book poetic behemoth that is *The Martyrology*, as well as the four-book-long cycle that is composed of *LOVE: a book of remembrances*, *ZYGAL: a book of mysteries and translations*, *ART FACTS: a book of contexts*, and *TRUTH: a book of fictions*. To this end, I have written poems that interact with these two cycles. This original manuscript, which I have titled "Tonsil Hockey," forms one half of an imagined dialogue speaking toward bpNichol's work. Sometimes my poems directly respond to a specific piece or passage in Nichol's work, and sometimes they reach toward the cycles as whole units. Overall, I write "Tonsil Hockey" as the result of looking at Nichol's work, picking up language like a hockey stick, and attempting to join something that looks like an awful lot of fun.



There are several key reasons why I choose to engage with these particular pieces. Both *The Martyrology* and the second cycle of four books are extended efforts, stretching over many years. Both have multiple beginnings and re-entry points. Both contain material that was published only in the years following Nichol's death. What ultimately drew me to write alongside these pieces, however, was the fact that they are, by nature, unfinished and unfinishable. In the time I've spent with Nichol's work, I've come to believe that with forty more years and hundreds more pages, they'd still be just as open-ended (and open-beginned). *The Martyrology* and *LOVE/ZYGAL/ART FACTS/TRUTH* are the most inviting texts: they have both been written for so long that I imagine they wouldn't mind letting another text wander alongside. There is plenty of room to play.

In a piece entitled "There *Are* The Poems," Phyllis Webb states that "the proper response to a poem is another poem" (Webb 57). I believe that this statement has never been more appropriate than when applied to the work of bpNichol. It is not just proper to respond to his poems with more poems; it feels necessary. His work openly invites readers to take on the author's position, and opens myriad entryways for other writers to engage with and continue writing his texts. I believe that the best poetic response to Nichol's texts is to poetically play with them. Therefore, to engage with Nichol's work I have written a manuscript of poetry that interacts with Nichol's poetry through the language and structure of play.

While scouring a used book store, I found an old magazine called *The Dinosaur Review* tucked in a corner. It was only after I'd brought it home that I found it contained an article by bpNichol entitled "Narrative Language: The Long Poem." It was published in 1986; I would have been three then, and Nichol would have been nearing the end of his life. In this article, he writes that "at a certain point you decide to start with what's in front of you" (Long Poem 57). I don't have Nichol in front of me. I can't engage with him. I do have his poetry in front of me, and I can engage with that. I can know and play with Nichol's texts. In the same article, Nichol offers this definition of writing: "to write is to

continually reshape the given" (Long Poem 57). He refers to the way that writing about the mundane makes it extraordinary, simply by drawing attention to it. He describes how writing is transformative. This observation can also be applied to Nichol's texts. bpNichol's poetry is a given; it is a gift. To read Nichol's texts is to continually reshape them by taking on the function of the author. I have dramatized this by reading Nichol's texts through writing them, by writing about and beside and toward them. I dramatize the creative and authorial demands Nichol's texts place on the reader by literally writing along with them. Just as the best way to learn a game is to play it, I am writing Nichol's work to read it. As Nichol states, "that's how you get the given. You give in" (Long Poem 58). I choose to give in, to join in. This manuscript of poetry is my participation in the game.

**“dinosaurs carried an extra brain in their tails”**

Nichol's work is the perfect play-date for my poetry. His work loves language as I loved plasticine. He is in touch with play not only as a sophisticated intellectual, but through a poetic awareness of the necessity of play. For Nichol, language is a toy he manipulates and reconfigures. Sean O'Huigin comments upon this phenomenon within Nichol's writing, which he encountered as a primary school teacher introducing his students to Nichol's work. Through Nichol's writing, O'Huigin observed that his students, “learned to regard language as a plastic medium which can be picked up and manipulated for sheer pleasure” (O'Huigin 212). Language becomes a plasticine that could take on any shape and stretch as far as the mind at play would allow. Language possesses a massive amount of flex to accommodate play, which Nichol refers to as the “the ideal transit of language (the pleasure of reading as a child...)” in an interview with Steve McCaffery (Meanwhile 332). In his writing, Nichol creates a space for language that is infinitely flexible rather than fixed, playful rather than prescriptive. When discussing Nichol's visual art, Gil McElroy notes that “Nichol never outgrew his childhood love for comics” (St. Art 19). I spent some time with that sentence, and found myself stopping early: “Nichol never outgrew.” He never presumed that he has grown too big to play with language. He sculpted a vast landscape in which to play.

Nichol himself observed the potential significance within the play of children. In “Toys-R-Us?” he describes the tendency for adults to get bored with the repetitive nature of children's play (Meanwhile 446). He tells us to watch children's play carefully, to note the way kids incorporate toys and actions into their imaginative lives. He notes that the way a toy is ultimately played with has nothing to do with its prescribed purpose, and “once the toy is in the home you're in a position to work with its meaning because from then on it's out of their (the company's) control. R-Toys-Us? I don't think so. Toys-R-Ours once they come home, but we have to work with them to make them our own” (Meanwhile 447). Toys are shape-shifters filled with imaginative significance through play. Language

occupies the same space. Words are instrument of play and have enough flex and give to accommodate whatever imaginative manipulations play requires. Nichol observes that children treat language as a toy, something to be played with and tested to its limits, and handles language the same way in his own writing.

As Nichol's writing engages constantly in this limit-testing play, my poetry does the same. Throughout "Tonsil Hockey" I pull language apart and reshape it. I break language down into its smallest components, such as individual sounds or letters, play with them. Throughout the section 'Em,' for example, I focus on vowels, especially the lowercase 'o,' as opportunities to fracture language and experiment by manipulating smaller units (42-49). Sometimes I separate the 'o's from the rest of the word to emphasize their position as holes in the words. As well as emphasizing their shape, I wish to draw attention to the function of the 'o' as an opening for breath to fill the word so it can be spoken. I also play with the 'o' as a symbol. Even at its most basic level, an individual letter, language still has the potential to function metaphorically. In the section entitled 'dash,' the 'o' serves as an onion ring, an engagement ring and a donut (60). In the poem 'lope' from the section 'vol au vent,' the 'o' becomes a smoke ring and a spaghetti (65). Like Nichol's texts, in this project I play with the materiality of language and explore its potential for meaning even when broken down.

Nichol's work and my own poetry also play productively together because of a shared cheekiness. We both employ the techniques of play and use them playfully. For example, in the 'L' section of "Tonsil Hockey," I deploy the phrase "aitch ee double hockey sticks" (36). I draw Nichol into the game by invoking his emblematic 'h.' At the same time, I connect the idea of the game to the idea of language by conflating of a piece of sporting equipment and the letter 'L'. I am also using this phrase because, particularly in this context, I think it's funny. Like Nichol, I both play with language and have fun with it. I picture my text alongside Nichol's as two gangly kids sticking their tongues out at each other.

Nichol's work draws much from the literature and language-play of children. In Part 3 of *Rational Geomancy*, Nichol and McCaffery examine children's literature. They encounter pop-up books, books with scratch-n-sniff pages, books that sing and make noise, books that can be taken apart and put back together. Nichol and McCaffery see language play being dramatized through the book as a physical object, which they call the "book-machine." Nichol and McCaffery observe that "one of the ways that writing itself can change is by an alteration in the mechanical function of the reader. In the realignment of his kinship the number of physical tasks demanded of the reader expands, but with a resultant increasing in the variety of reading experiences" (Rational 171). It is easier to see language as play when interacting with a book that demands one to physically play with it and manipulate it. The playful characteristics of many children's books "[require] the reader to manipulate the book-machine in some novel or unusual way, [and points] inexorably towards the issue and status of game" (Rational 167). Nichol's texts, even when they may physically resemble ordinary books, always demand readers play with them.

**“i'm the whistleblower/ you're the zamboni”**

In order to write “Tonsil Hockey,” I had to define the games Nichol's poetry plays. The first thing that struck me about his poetry was its bravery. Play is creatively invaluable and deeply pleasurable; it is never easy. In *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction*, Brian Edwards notes that “play is antithetical to rest” (Edwards 273 ). In language, play is an equally exhilarating and exhausting experience. As Roland Barthes notes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, “as a creature of language, the writer is...never anything but a plaything in it” (Barthes 34). In order to play with language, an author must surrender a significant degree of control. Nichol himself admits that “madness is language is how you use it (Zygal 84),” suggesting that poetically playing with language is synonymous with a loss of control.

Despite a potential loss of control, Nichol dives into language play, full belly flop. Both *The Martyrology* and *LOVE/ZYGAL/ART FACTS/TRUTH* are full of elaborately interwoven word games and language play. They include experiments with sound and word structure that resemble the pre-linguistic vocalizations of children. An example takes place in *LOVE*, when in the poem “Heaven&Hell” Nichol writes “h h white h h/the h the the the/ heaven height where the/ h h h// hard when oh help/ h h h h h/ heat heaven hard/ h the/ when when when.” His lines reach for sound as much they reach for sense, stretching the aspirate. Another example of this word play occurs in Book 3 of *The Martyrology* when Nichol writes “every letter/ invokes a spell/ in is/ the power/ letters have/ over me// word shaping// addition of the l.” Language is made powerful through play, which Nichol describes as a sort of magical authority while playing with the multiple senses of 'spell' as magical incantation and the organization of letters specific to a certain word.

Nichol's dedication to play manifests throughout his work. In *What History Teaches*, Stephen Scobie notes that Nichol's work is “marked by an tremendous energy and joyfulness” (History 30). He notes that “based as they are on puns and word-games, they seem to invite the dismissive response that

[Nichol's work] is all whimsy, self-indulgent silliness, and pointless mystification...[or] represents a genuine extension of the possibilities of writing, and that they admit into the poem a radical sense of linguistic free play" (History 127). Scobie sees the power and freedom in this apparent silliness, a power that can squash words into raw material and build something new. The joyfulness and playfulness that Scobie observes is energy that powers Nichol's work.

Pauline Butling examines the tremendous creative energy Nichol employs in her article "bpNichol's Gestures in *Book 6 Books*." Butling focuses her examination on how Nichol uses play to coax out multiple meanings and allow them to coexist. Butling also comments on the dangers of such a task, as it requires trusting "that the surface wordplay can draw out the depths" (Butling 245). Nichol employs playful techniques to generate material of considerable structural and contextual integrity. In *LOVE*, within the piece "A Small Song That Is His," Nichol writes "adore adore/ adore adore/ an opening an o." Nichol plays with the simple homophonic correlation between 'adore' and 'a door' to explore multiple meanings. At the same time that a door is an opening, the letter 'o' itself serves as an opening, both within the word as a vowel sound and also as a physical representation of an opening or a hole. Vowels, carriers of the breath, are crucial to the sounds of words, the openings or doors into their pronunciation. At the same moment, "adore" is also 'a door,' indicating that affection and pleasure are ways into the text.

I see language as a lump of plasticine: a vessel of limitless playful potential. Just as plasticine resists permanently assuming the likeness of one thing, Nichol's poetry resists following one path of significance. In "A Critical Balancing Act," Wallace Martin states that Nichol's work exhibits an "unwillingness to emphasize one path over the other" (Martin 54). Nowhere is this desire to preserve multiplicity more pervasive than in Book 5 of *The Martyrology*. In addition to the elaborate chains of word games, Book 5 uses a numbering system to indicate places where readers can diverge from reading the text in a linear fashion and choose other paths, much like a choose-your-own-adventure

story. By providing multiple potential paths and not choosing between them, Nichol positions language as his plasticine. Words may take on a certain shape when pressed a certain way, but there is no singular prescribed technique. One can use the same raw material to shape a duckling or a dirigible and Nichol takes full advantage of this property of language. Nichol uses the inherent flexibility of language to provide opportunities for multiple readings to exist at once. Roderick Harvey observes one of Nichol's poetic strategies in his article, "The Repositioning of Language," stating that "Nichol views language as a machine with interchangeable parts" (Harvey 29). Nichol's poems are never prescriptive; they present options and let the reader build a text by choosing between those options. In Book 5, Chain 8, Nichol describes how language opens up when a text is not confined within a closed system: "lower&upper/middle voice\tongue\world)/ i mean the earth yes the puns get the more the pen can pin it down to." By presenting many options and opportunities for play, Nichol creates texts that his readers recreate.

By constructing texts that embrace open-endedness and seeking to open as many opportunities for play and choice as possible, bpNichol writes unique texts. In "Exegesis: Eggs a Jesus: *The Martyrology* as a Text in Crisis," Frank Davey states that *The Martyrology* resembles an artist's notebook and, despite being fixed by publication, a state resistant to revision, *The Martyrology* remains unstable. It is a text that is constantly rewriting itself, layering revisions into a volatile interplay of language (Davey 47-48). Through wordplay, Nichol creates a text that is always in process. He uses devices based on subtle revisions of sounds, spellings and words: "in the pun, the palindrome, or even the just-passed sign in the play on minimal difference by which Nichol so often moves from one word to another by vowel changes, each term is simultaneously present and erased by a second term in a continual process" (Davey 62). Each line in his poems emphasizes or changes every other line, never fixing on any one iteration of the text, but eternally flickering somewhere between. For example, in *Book 6 Books*, Book IV: Inchoate Road, part 2, Nichol writes "life like lake like/ line/ lingers." The



first five words of this section differ no more than a single letter from each other. The sound and the sense of the individual words layer on top of each other. They “linger,” deferring a solid identification of the text. The result is a collection of singularly plural, ever-changing, playful texts that never cease to amaze and never, truly, cease.

In the article “The Martyrology as Paragram,” Steve McCaffery also makes note of this indeterminacy of the text. He observes that “each phrase [of *The Martyrology*] is *itself* only insofar as it is also *another*: no where nowhere now here” (McCaffery 194). The text never settles, merely presents options, a characteristic that produces a rupture in the semantic economy (McCaffery 195). McCaffery interprets Nichol's wordplay as a way to release the text from a latent position within syntax, allowing for the possibility of additional meanings with no desire to control them (McCaffery 199). Nichol presents options and allows the reader to choose between them. In doing this, Nichol invites his readers to become co-authors of his texts, to write alongside him and engage in an act that is just as much creation as it is consumption.

I decided to take this invitation one step further and create the texts both by reading and by writing along with them. I often take metaphors that Nichol created and extend them further or transplant them into different contexts. For example, in Book 1 of *The Martyrology*, Nichol presents the image of a saint ascending as a frog. I run with this metaphor throughout the 'Em' and 'Dash' section of “Tonsil Hockey.” I refer to Nichol's “amphibious children,” progeny that can breathe more than one substance; in other words, readers who must also function as writers (48). I pull out the image of frogs further in the line “my frog's eggs bubble prosecco” (53). The bubbles can serve as 'o's, little vessels of air to speak through, and the eggs represent the potential I see in Nichol's writing, where one tiny letter can become a whole new creature or text. By extending these metaphors, I add to the body of Nichol's work, contributing more raw material to the extant lump. Nichol's texts never lose the potential to become something else; his poems never wear out. In fact, they become ever more pliable the longer

you play with them. I believe flexibility indicates that Nichol's work not only invites readers to play, but thrives on play.

“the he/ hee hee/ ha ha/ ho ho/ tho i know it's no laughing matter some days/ a sum of ways/ weights  
the measured writing of the poem” *Book 5, Chain 3*

### **“pleasure is the skin you move in”**

Play is behaviour that seeks pleasure. It is unalienated labour, something for its own sake. Play also becomes pleasurable in its defiance of constraints. Play offers an open field and the sheer pleasure of running. Both play and poetry connect to physical pleasure. This connection is particularly significant within bpNichol's poetry, which is aware of the physical body and in touch with the bodily pleasure of writing. Nichol agrees with Barthes' assertion that “text means tissue” (64), and to play with language to create literature is the “physics of bliss” (42).

Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* changed the way I read bpNichol. I had always enjoyed reading Nichol's work, but Barthes' prompted me to examine the physicality of that pleasure. Words became “language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony” (66-67). Barthes and Nichol are both concerned with the articulation of the body, the eloquence of the breath and the tongue. Nichol explores this articulation in his written work. On the first pages of *Zygal*, before the title page, are six images of Nichol's nose, mouth and chin in blue ink (See Appendix A). These resemble drawings less than actual imprints of the author's face. In two of these images, his mouth is closed; the next two, his lips are parted; and in the third pair, his mouth is open wide, baring teeth, in the expression of a shout. This, strikingly, is a reminder of the very physical body behind the words, and I can't help but read and “hear in their materiality, their sensuality, the breath, the gutturals, the fleshiness of the lips, the whole presence of the human muzzle” (Barthes 67). These images are a striking reminder of the physical presence of the author within the text, allowing the author's physical speaking body to become a part of the text itself.

In addition to this metaphorical connection between the text and the body, Barthes also proposes that texts generate a pleasurable or erotic experience themselves. This pleasure within language, the pleasure experienced when reading, occurs when “language is redistributed” and this

“redistribution is always achieved by cutting” (Barthes 6) . It is not by following a system or remaining whole that language gives pleasure, but when it splits. When this split occurs, “two edges are created: an obedient, conformist...edge...and another edge, mobile, blank...the place where the death of language is glimpsed” (Barthes 6). It is not either of these edges that are sources of pleasure, but “it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so. ” (Barthes 7) Being a pleasure-seeking text, one that both employs and thrives on play, I position my text to inhabit this seam, the site of the rupture of language where pleasure originates.

I do not want to create a text that is perfectly ordered within the system of language, because that would not reflect Nichol's aesthetic nor my own. Also, as Barthes notes, conformist language can only repeat itself (Barthes 6), so it cannot be the source of anything new. Nor do I wish my work to inhabit the opposite point where “everything is attacked, dismantled” (Barthes 7) since that is a place where language fails completely. Instead, I position my work to inhabit the space between the edges, alluring as “skin flashing between two articles of clothing” (Barthes 10).

I place “Tonsil Hockey” between language's edges because it is the point where the most play is possible, the point where the most productive pleasure can be derived. Firstly, by positioning the work as one half of a conversation that cannot be finished, the text perpetually inhabits the moment immediately after having spoken, the beat before the other text in the conversation draws breath to replay. Also, I repeatedly allude to the position between the edges in the symbols, images, and devices I employ throughout the text. For example, In the section 'em,' I include a piece that takes the form of a quiz. In order to read the piece and complete the metaphor, the reader must select one of the three posed options (53). The pleasure of this piece comes not from a complete, clever metaphor, but it's incompleteness, that point where such choices, like flashes of bare skin between clothing, are revealed. Later, in 'frenetic con,' I deploy a series of phrases that use a different set of devices to inhabit the seam of productive pleasure: “a tip of the slung/ a grip on the rung/ a slip to eclipse” (87) . All three lines

share a very similar construction, with the same first word, a variance of only the first two letters creating a full rhyme between all the second word, a single letter shifting in the third word (which always contains an o), and a shift in the final two-word phrase from a full rhyme in the case of the first two lines to an assonant rhyme in the third line. These three lines relate very closely to each other, and thereby have an indeterminate quality. I intend for them to be read, as many of Nichol's lines are, as falling over onto each other, their sounds and senses blurring together. By using phrases like this, I want to expose the raw material of language, the mass of potential sounds and letters that is the source of all sense (or nonsense) and writing. In doing so, I reinforce the position of "Tonsil Hockey" as occupying the seam between the edges of language, the place where the pleasure and playfulness of text originates.

**“we's a long way away some days/ there's so much i”**

I am used to playing with people who are physically far from me. To go to graduate school, I moved over 2500 kms away from my family, friends, and fiancé. My ideas of intimacy shifted, became more elastic. I took the phone to bed with me. I typed my laughter. I learned to be close to people without being near them. I played board games over the Internet with friends several time zones away. I moved a game piece, and my partner moved his piece.

Writing back to Nichol's work feels like an extreme version of the transformed relationships I experienced during my first months in Calgary. Despite the physical distance, I was shocked at the sense of intimacy I felt when I did hear my father's voice, or played chess with my partner. Separated from my loved ones, I focused on their voices, or the words they were typing as an instant message. I feel a similar sense of intimacy during my writing toward Nichol's work. The limitation of my ability to interact with Nichol has made me focus on what I have: his work. The writing, recordings of his performances, and descriptions via others relationships to him, are what I have. Gathering what I have, I begin to respond.

Nichol's body of work is built as much out of absence as it is out of presence. An acute spatial awareness characterizes bpNichol's work. Often, single words or even letters will be left by themselves, surrounded by white space. Nichol often composed phrases that came up short, omitting an expected word, leaving the reader with only air. This space often gives clues to the thematic underpinnings of the work as well, such as in Books 1 & 2 of *The Martyrology*. Here, Nichol confines the majority of the text to the bottom of the page, with white space evoking sky above. The text seems to grow up, like vegetation, or rise like the construction of an architectural landscape. There is a sense of gravity, of weight, holding the words down. The words seem to huddle together, small, while the vast whiteness of unfathomable heaven looms above. As heaven and earth become conflated as *The Martyrology* progresses, the text explodes upwards, filling the space/sky like stars or snowflakes or

clouds. *Book 6 Books*, notably Book 4, contains within its strings connections between the physical landscape and the words on the page.

In addition to cunningly deployed white space, the language in Nichol's work also evokes openings and absences. In *LOVE*, Nichol calls on "a blank spot/ something which is not" (*LOVE* 3). Language can never truly conjure absence, as it fills the space with words, but it can hint towards the void with its own painful inadequacy. In Chain 11 of Book 5, Nichol touches the not-enough-ness of language through fragmentations. Here, language branches off and breaks down, and finally Nichol declares it all "as all scruptures this/ah this nothing's thus" (*The M Book 5 Chain 11*). All the copious words Nichol produced gestured towards the space, the emptiness that lies just beyond the scope of a poem or a sound. It seems that Nichol agreed with Robert Kroetsch's assessment in the article "Reciting the Emptiness" that "an emptying out is fundamental to any making of art" (Kroetsch 34). Nichol spent books and books writing around this place of emptiness, creating a contrast to that space with a proliferation of words, until his readers are left, after his death, "at the very middle of things, the presence of absence" (Kroetsch 38).

This sense of loss within Nichol's work takes on particular significance for those encountering his work after his death. Lori Emerson sums up this sense of absence particularly well, describing the feeling of being "acutely aware of the loss of a poet whom I did not know yet whose living trace I feel strongly around me" (Emerson 29). Since Nichol's death, all interactions with these texts must be "characterized...by longing" (Emerson 27). This sense of longing can be seen as a particular kind of mourning. Rather than coolly observing an abstract sense of space at work, we are standing beside an open grave, bearing witness to a very specific and identifiable loss. Nichol, in his use of space, conjures a vivid sense of that emptiness through what he said and what he did not say. Theresa Smalec addresses this phenomenon in Nichol's writing in her article "Lamenting the M," where she writes that "Nichol's lettered poetics seek to revalue what is not 'really' there" (Smalec 16). Nichol manages to gesture to

emptiness with countless pages by pointing beyond the text to the limit of what can be said. Throughout his work, Nichol draws attention outwards towards "the world ends at the door/bodies/ uncrossed geographies/ outside" (M 7& Monotones LII).

As silence and emptiness temper writing, "the pressure to live and breathe is conditioned by the fear of death and absence" (Miki Paths 22-23). Nichol's work represents a body of texts full of absences, texts that endlessly gesture beyond themselves. Nichol fashions the space of his own absence, envisioning the author thus: "his head is blank/ between lines a not ke/ filled with nothing but the knowledge that/ the he's ain't t/ nothing left to be written" (The M Book 5 Chain 4). He removes himself from the text, creating a space ready for his absence and a text that is prepared to function autonomously. He is nothing more than a hole in the text, a cut-out shape where an author might be. "The effect is to finally rob the author of authority, speech of sound, and absence of sense. All that is left is the writing" (Burnham 212). The writing, riddled with this emptiness, points to what James Sherry refers to as "the vacancy of literature, the barrenness," which is then "irrigated" through the "activity of constant interchange" (Sherry 111). In the absence of the author, in the absence at the heart of language, Nichol creates a text that not only manages to survive, but thrive. Nichol wonders about the status of the poet, questioning whether viewing "poets as receivers? As fax machines?" is an accurate assessment of the authorial function (M7& st.Anzas IX ). If the function of the author is that of a conduit, then the text can be autonomous. The author's presence is convenient, but not necessary to the text's survival. Whatever the identity or location of the author/scriptor, Nichol's texts insist on being written, even if they have to do it themselves.

I originally thought that my lack of any personal experience with bpNichol while he still lived would limit my response to his work. I now see it provides me with an opportunity to focus. I never listened so carefully to my partner's words as when his words were all I had. Likewise, I can focus completely on Nichol's work because his work is all I have. Barrie Nichol, called Beep by his friends,



is not there to compound and complicate my reading or my response.

This conflation between Nichol the man and Nichol's work has been pointed out as problematic by some. Frank Davey, in "Exegesis: Eggs a Jesus," bemoans a kind of honorific criticism that conflates the morality of the poet with the poem. He encourages Nichol scholars to engage in the "important task of distinguishing the writer from his other constructions" (Davey 39). Davey warns against reading Nichol's life as a saint's life, and hence conflating the work with the man. This kind of reading transforms Nichol's work into exegetical texts, implying that their correct interpretation will reveal Truth. This works against the goals of Nichol's texts, which function as arenas for free play and multiple meanings.

Nichol and I are very far apart. We have not been together on this planet for nearly twenty years. Rather than look at what separates us, however, I focus on what we do share. Between us is a text, and that text reaches out. It is a text that invites responses, that leaves gaps to be filled, poses problems to be muddled over. A chess board is left in the middle of a game. I come across it and I make a move. I do not expect my partner, who left the board so long ago, to ever return. However, someone else might also come by and make another move in response. What seems much more important than who is playing is that the game continues.

**“the place the puns flesh out/ the body of speech is/ re vealed”**

Throughout “Tonsil Hockey,” I deal with the issue of perspective primarily by deploying a pair of pronouns: ‘I’ and ‘you.’ Part of the reason I do this has to do with the form of the piece. I envision the manuscript as one half of a conversation between my text and Nichol’s texts. Using ‘I’ to point toward “Tonsil Hockey” and ‘you’ to indicate Nichol’s work, I establish and maintain the direction of that conversation. However, I do not intend for the ‘you’ and the ‘I’ to remain fixed. Just like the rest of Nichol’s texts, and mine in response, I intend for the perspective to shift and remain open. As such, ‘you’ sometimes refers to the entire body of Nichol’s texts; sometimes to one text or a specific passage of a text; sometimes to the idea of bpNichol the author, present in the criticism surrounding Nichol’s work; and sometimes to the position itself, that of the author function, inhabited by whomever is doing the reading/writing at any particular moment. Likewise, the ‘you’ sometimes points toward the my text itself as a speaker; sometimes toward the system of language at work or a specific incidence of language play; and sometimes toward the reader who, by engaging with my text, is also having a conversation with Nichol’s text through my own. In doing this, I seek to keep the perspective open to accommodate as many potential locations as possible.

By creating a text in which the speaker/pronoun shifted, especially in the context of an I/you or Self/Other dichotomy, I draw “Tonsil Hockey” into the realm of the abject. Julia Kristeva begins *Powers of Horror* by identifying the abject as neither a subject nor an object (Kristeva 1). While writing “Tonsil Hockey” and wrestling with the subject/object dichotomy in relation to the interaction between Nichol’s work and my own, the concept of the abject opened a potential third position to locate my, and Nichol’s, work. Kristeva defines multiple sites for the abject, and repeatedly locates where “the fundamental opposition between I and Other or...Inside and Outside” takes place (Kristeva 7). I is not you – abjection occurs at the point where this border blurs (Kristeva 10) and this is the place where “Tonsil Hockey” dwells. I attempt to blur the boundaries between Nichol’s text and my own, and by

inhabiting that border I invoke the abject.

There was another key reason why the abject presented a desirable position to locate the junction of my and Nichol's work, aside from the productive complications surrounding the subject/object position. By positioning "Tonsil Hockey" within the realm of the abject, Nichol's texts remain indeterminate, and therefore open to addition and manipulation. Kristeva writes that "one must keep open the wound where he or she enters into the analytic adventure is located" (Kristeva 27). Time and criticism conspires to make the work permanent, to fix the beginning and the ending. Criticism wants the wound to heal, to make the work an object it can examine. By keeping the work in the position of the abject, by keeping the wound open, the borders blurred, and the entrances and exits multiple, the work continues to live and expand. For the purposes of this project, Nichol's texts actually functions *better* after the death of their author.

Once I began to work with the idea of the abject in my own work, I had to turn towards Nichol's texts and examine them as abject texts. By creating texts that continue to be written without him, that work without him, he positions his work within the abject. After Nichol's death, when his body is a corpse and therefore an object, his work takes the place of his body. As Kristeva states, "for the absent object, there is a sign," in this case Nichol's textual body taking over for his physical body (Kristeva 46).

The work itself, and any reader or writer continuing to work on the text and therefore occupying an authorial position, becomes abject. Nichol's texts are also abject because they are, intentionally and otherwise, unfinished. They remain incomplete both by design, as they do not neatly begin or end, with multiple entry points, and also because Nichol's death prevented him from finishing them. These "remainders are residues of something but especially for someone. They pollute on account of their incompleteness" (Kristeva 76). Nichol's work, being incomplete, are remainders, residues left over. They pollute, meaning they leave bits of themselves elsewhere, by continuing to move forward and

grow. Through the work of other authors, such as myself, new texts are 'polluted.' My text is polluted by Nichol's text because the two overlap, and being unfinished Nichol's work assumes mine as part of itself (and I position it to do so).

In order to write a text that gestured both to the abject and toward, or after, or around Nichol's work, I brought the physical presence of the body into the text. In order to invoke the abject, the point where subject and object dissolve into abject, I wrote poetry that exposed "the body's inside...shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's 'own clean self' but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents" (Kristeva 53). In 'Dash,' I figure the 'a' as a body being dissected, with a pronunciation symbol for a spine (58). In 'frenetic con,' I present an image of a human body that has undergone an autopsy, emphasizing how the triangular incision into the torso resembles a 'A (80).' As I broke down language into its component parts, I also reduced the human body to its components. As I break down the bodies in my text, I also add to them: I give them extra appendages, such as wings and eyeteeth. The body, as the text, must also be as flexible as plasticine: it must bend instead of break and transform instead of being destroyed. In addition, I emphasize the textual body's relationship to the author's speaking body. In the poem "or" within 'vol au vent,' 'o's become teeth (71). Throughout the text, I discuss the lungs and the lips, the tongue and the trachea, all the parts of the body involved in speech. Throughout "Tonsil Hockey," the notion of one's 'own clean self' or later 'clean and proper body' is absent (Kristeva 75). The representation of the body I present is fragmented and exposed.

As Armine Kotin Mortimer describes in *The Gentlest Law*, "the book is a fragmented body – *le corps morcele* -- and this leads to the temptation to put the body back together again, in a different organization" (31). The creative portion of my project comes from a desire to add to the body of the text. I do this both by literally adding to the body of the text by producing more writing, and also by

introducing a new textual body. I position the body of my work next to Nichol's text. I imagine the two texts in dialogue; much of "Tonsil Hockey" can, in fact, be read as one half of a conversation between my text and Nichol's writing. My work is a reply to Nichol, which in concert with his work forms a dialogue. As Mortimer suggests, I am not simply attempting to reassemble a fragmented body, but to remake it into something different by introducing my own work. In doing so, I employ Kristeva's idea of "condensation:" one sense unit made out of two (Kristeva 52). She states the blurring of things is abject, and therefore metaphor is abject. In blurring the boundaries between my text and Nichol's, I attempt to create a metaphor *with* the work. My work is a metaphor for Nichol's and vice versa. By creating a text that I envision as being a part of Nichol's texts, with the border between the two indeterminate, "Tonsil Hockey" comes to occupy the position of an abject text through it's refusal to cleanly separate subject from object, inside from outside.

**“i know you're dead but could i bother you one more time”**

I find it impossible to talk about bpNichol and not mention his sudden death. I see his death as part of his texts, as he struggles with the idea of his own mortality throughout his work. It is also a part of the larger text that other writers and critics have built up around and after Nichol. “Tonsil Hockey” is a conversation with Nichol's work; it is also a response to one of the great tragedies of the Canadian poetic consciousness. Nichol died in the middle of his career. He was writing dense, exciting work. He had multiple projects on the go and many more lined up. It is almost eerie now to read the criticism published just before Nichol's death, hailing Nichol's immensely productive first twenty years of writing and all, invariably, looking forward to another twenty or forty years of the same. The vast body of work Nichol left behind is shadowed by the spectre of what he might have written.

Nichol's death, and the criticism of his work that followed, radically changed the context of his work. As Nichol wrote in “Two Words: A Wedding:” “we are words and our meanings change” (Meanwhile 29). What must have seemed like a much more abstract, if personal, engagement with his own mortality while he was alive became haunted after his death. In particular, examples of Nichol's work published posthumously seem, eerily, to comment on his death as if with the benefit of hindsight rather than as a distant future inevitability. In *TRUTH*, in the piece ‘Winter: 35<sup>th</sup> Year,’ Nichol admits that “I traveled longer on this road than i thot i would (TRUTH 37).” Throughout Book 7& of *The Martyrology*, interleaved with the bound pages of the text are a series of poems entitled “bp: if,” which speculate on the outcome of his then-impending back surgery (see Appendix B).

bpNichol's writing represents a body of work deeply engaged with mortality. In *Canadian Literature*, George Bowering, suddenly in a position to write a kind of obituary for Nichol and his writing, finds Nichol's consummate interest in mortality thrown into an ironic light. He notes that “*the Martyrology* has been our first great life-poem, yes and often its subject is death,” and doubts that the resulting ironies will pass unremarked (Bowering 296). Nichol echoes this feeling in the line “all these

deaths now/ the ironies" (M7&, stanzas II). Bowering also discusses, albeit it in a slightly roundabout way, the manner in which Nichol's death becomes a part of his writing: "with the literal death of the author, *the Martyrology* is an unfinished poem; but then it always was. It is, in fact, a poem that seems as if it will never get started, either" (Bowering 295). *The Martyrology* is so unfinished, so essentially incomplete that it cannot be ended even by the death of its author. Bowering notes that throughout the body of Nichol's writing, "he continued to fight against cancellation," a fight that continued on in his writing long after his death (Bowering 296). Nichol's writing ignores its author's death and stubbornly survives. Bowering notes this startling continuation, and ascribes it to the text's energy as well the author's generosity: "the artist has received a gift called talent, and understands that for art to stay alive it has to be handed on" (Bowering 295). Enabling his work to continue despite his death, building in that momentum that has enabled critics and writers to continue to pick up Nichol's work and play with it, Nichol ensured his projects have long outlived him.

While death may be the ultimate silencer, Nichol is without question the loudest dead person I have ever come across. His body may be absent, but in the wake of his death his projects continue to speak and be written. Roy Miki considers Nichol's active postmortem presence in "Turn This Page." Generally, when an author dies mid-project, the project remains unfinished: "the project's termination in the death of the scriptor freezes the frame in the same way that the reader, in history, is framed by the text" (Page 119). In Nichol's case, however, writing carries on. In "the biography of bpNichol, the moving signifier, who functioned as absence of presence in a text that continually confused the boundaries of the living and the dead" (Page 126), the text continues writing itself. This continually occurs as readers serve author functions and other writers continue to play the text.

I regard "Tonsil Hockey" as my own extended version of the following cry: "The poem is dead/ long live the poem/" (The M, Book 4). I position my work as a gesture towards continuing Nichol's project. I don't imagine it as a specific or direct response to any one individual piece, such as a

direct continuation of *The Martyrology*. Rather, I want to continue the practice of Nichol's writing, to engage with his processual poetics and allow it to carry me along and create new work. I want to create more space for Nichol's texts to stretch into. Often, while writing, I felt that I was simply allowing Nichol's work to borrow my synapses and neurons and nerves for a little while.

It did not feel strange to step into an authorial role after reading Nichol's work. Through the choose-your-own-adventure-poem that is Book 5 of *The Martyrology*, and through various other tactics in effect throughout this and other projects, Nichol places the reader in an authorial position, where the reader's choices profoundly effect, even write, the text. By placing the creative energy within the text itself, independent of the author, Nichol designs texts that continue with or without him. By separating "[his] life...[from] these fits of sound// eruptions// interruptions" (The M Book 5), Nichol's writing is able to continue being written by readers and new authors, to continue to create those "connections made in life and those continued after death" (Munton 214).

Nichol's texts, and their criticism, have been accused of being inseparably entwined with the life of the poet. Despite this, his texts appear to carry on very well without him. It would be a mistake, however, to say that Nichol is not present in his texts, and in his death, Nichol "the author appears in the apparitional form of absence" (Page 119). Nichol, in his very absence, continues to write and rewrite his texts. As Nichol writes in his critical reflection, "Waiting," "when you close this book i will be waiting...if you even pick me up i will be waiting/ you will pick me up/ you will be different" (Meanwhile 15). Nichol's presence in his writing did not terminate with his death; it transformed.

Nichols' writing may indeed continue to write itself, but it is also calling, endlessly, for other authors to come and write it too. In Book 3 of *The Martyrology*, Nichol describes his idea of eternity: "long after i am dead/ me alive inside some other head/ not me// a million years hence" (M 3). Glen Lowry discusses what happens when other writers encounter his texts' direct challenge in his article



“Where do we go from here?” Nichol's texts position readers as authors, and “the task of 'writing on' bpNichol's life work is strangely imposing” (Lowry 59). Nichol's texts demand not only to be written about, analyzed and abstracted, but to continue.

This demand is echoed by some of the anti-sentimental criticism surrounding Nichol's work. These critics have no desire to resurrect the author of the texts, but rather desire for the texts themselves to continue. In the article “Nickel Linoleum,” also in the 10+ collection, Christian Bök advocates that more writers take up the challenge, to play the game as left unfinished by bpNichol. He calls upon writers to respond not only with solid, interesting criticism, but also with new creative material. Bok asks “Why not apply the whimsical procedures of bpNichol to himself? Why not use his old work in order to invent new work...” (Bök 63)? Later, Bök seems to be speaking with the voice of the text itself when he asks “rather than explain or imitate, preserving his work in a mausoleum, why not expropriate bpNichol” (Bök 70)? I see “Tonsil Hockey” as a direct response to this call.

### “stretch backwards/ to the beginning”

It is easy to look at bpNichol's writing, especially large ongoing/unfinished projects such as *The Martyrology* and the 4-book cycle that is *LOVE/ZYGAL/ART FACTS/TRUTH*, and see it all as one vast middle, with no beginning or end in sight. The beginnings can be a little easier to detect and pin down, as any project must have a chronological start date. But once begun, Nichol's writings tend to branch off, developing multiple points of entry, and each of these points can be read as a beginning. Endings are even more problematic, for though books have final pages and certain projects gesture towards conclusion, in many cases any kind of real closure is elusive. Like plasticine sculptures, Nichol's poems defy attempts to fix their shape. Over time, their pliable material slouches and melts, or grows brittle and cracks. It is only by constantly working and reworking the material that Nichol's pieces fulfill their function. This is not always easy. Nichol himself declared the *Martyrology* complete on more than one occasion; then, mysteriously, another book would appear. *LOVE/ZYGAL/ART FACTS/TRUTH* is also problematic, in that two of the four books in print appeared posthumously. Also, a fifth text (actually the fourth, originally supposed to go between *ART FACTS* and *TRUTH*) entitled *OX, HOUSE, CAMEL, DOOR: a book of higher glyphs* remains unpublished. This book's absence is marked by notes in *ART FACTS* and by Darren Wershler-Henry's *Nicholodeon*, which he calls “not a substitute for that book, but a lowercase cenotaph, a monument to its absence” (Wershler-Henry Epitaph). In both cases, these projects remain unbegun and incomplete. Rather than hobbling these projects, their incompleteness opens them up both as texts and as sites for the creation of new writing.

While I don't intend “Tonsil Hockey” to mark the absence of a specific work as directly as *Nicholodeon*, it does point toward Nichol's unpublished and unwritten work. For example, in ‘vol au vent,’ I position my work as monument to Nichol's work in the piece ‘aspirate the stairway.’ The title of this poem, a play on the phrase “l'espirit d'escalier” (which refers to the moment when one finally thinks of the perfect phrase or retort only after it has ceased to be relevant, usually right after leaving

the room), is an example of paranomasia. I wanted to draw upon the image of a trailing ghost with terrible timing whispering the perfect phrase. In the piece itself, I refer to my text as a “slab of paragraph,” which likens it to a gravestone or mortuary slab (74). While I don't intend “Tonsil Hockey” to stand in for a specific absence in Nichol's body of work, it points to that absence and recognizes that something should be there, even if all it can do is mark that place like a headstone.

Nichol wrestled with beginnings and endings throughout his body of work. In *LOVE*, he opens many doors even as he struggles with the difficulties of these multiple entry points: “everyone enters something/ everything becomes then/ end/ begin” (*LOVE*). With no clearcut entrance and exit, Nichol finds himself trying to write language that is constantly in the middle of things. He struggles to find endings, admitting with the line “is this the end/ it is not the end/ we will say it is the end” that endings are not true instances of conclusion but arbitrary decisions to stop writing. Nichol's work longs to be continued, cries out “oh i wish these lines were longer longer” (*LOVE*).

I do not wish to suggest for a moment that I regard my work as an attempt at an ending, or even a gesture towards an ending, for Nichol's work. I am just engaging the process for a little while, adding new material and creating shapes I believe Nichol's texts would enjoy inhabiting. I imagine bpNichol's work is a hitchhiker, and I am someone with a car. I am taking Nichol's poetry down the road a little way, having a conversation, before we both continue on our separate paths. The more I work with Nichol's texts, the more I feel like the texts themselves are doing the writing and I am just an eye, a hand, and some gray matter that it borrows for a while. That is not to say that Tonsil Hockey isn't a deliberate text, or that my own aesthetic and authorial presence doesn't saturate that text. But writing “Tonsil Hockey” feels like letting go. Just as Nichol's texts allow the reader to copilot, so did Nichol's texts help drive my own project.

This difficulty with beginnings and endings carries on throughout *LOVE/ZYGAL/ART FACTS/TRUTH*, such as in *TRUTH* when, in “Before Closure,” Nichol writes “a closet closes. a close

loss seen/ becomes a loss enacted. all loss seems active/ (closest to the heart). closure means/ a loss of becoming/ becomes/ a closet in ourselves/ closing" (LOVE 130). Closure is not a door, not an exit, but only a closet. Shutting it can only evoke a sense of loss and absence, and that sense of loss can add momentum to the piece, which snowballs. This kind of closing does not end with departure, walking out a door; at most, something has been hidden or put away. The closet door must open again, defying any sense of finality the idea of closure as an exit would conjure. Nichol is unsure he ultimately wants the text to end; in being eternally unfinished, the text can buoy up the mortal life of the author. In writing an unfinished text, Nichol "books my's time/ resisting closure" (TRUTH 54).

In accord with the premise and tone of this project, I don't look toward finishing "Tonsil Hockey" so much as I look to where to go next. Much like Wershler-Henry's *Nicholodeon*, which Wershler-Henry freely admits that it "will never be finished because it never can be finished...Mostly, it goes from Now/Here to Nowhere. The important thing to me is the process of building" (Wershler-Henry Epitaph). While writing a text that is not designed to end in the conventional sense of the word can be liberating, it also means that the work always continues. The question that looms largest as I move forward revolves around gender. "Tonsil Hockey" examines the work of a male poet, the criticism of which, with a few notable exceptions, has been primarily written by men. I feel it is impossible, as a young female poet, to engage with Nichol's work and the surrounding criticism and not comment upon how issues surrounding gender have an impact on this project.

I have just begun to engage with this question critically within my poetry. This occurs primarily through my use of the letter 'o' as a symbol. As Nichol employed the letter 'h' as a representation of his authorial presence within his texts as well as a kind of personal emblem, so I repeatedly call upon the 'o' to function as my own typographic thumb print within my text. The 'o,' like the aspirate of the 'h,' is a vehicle for the breath, and therefore shares an implied equality with the other. However, like two different genders, the letters remain diametrically opposed to each other as a consonant and a vowel.

Of all the vowels, the 'o' presented itself to me as the most feminine. Its circular shape, one long associated with femininity, conjures the image of a vessel or a womb. The 'o' also represents an opening, and therefore serves as a yonic symbol.

However, and possibly most significantly, I choose the 'o' because within the context this project the 'o,' as an opening, is a symbol with particular power. Nichol's texts, and "Tonsil Hockey" as a response to those texts, rely upon multiple entry ways to function. Each opening into the text represents the potential to begin again, the potential for a new revisioning of the text of alternate interpretation, and it is the constant remaking of the text via these openings that allow the texts to change and thrive. Therefore, I take on the 'o' to represent my own, feminine presence in the text, and align that feminine presence with the strongest typographic symbol. Thus, my engagement with this particular letter is the first step towards a further engagement, and future direction, of the "Tonsil Hockey" project.

Robert Kroetsch elaborates on this openness in his essay "For Play and Entrance." Kroetsch states that poetry is "not the quest for ending, but the dwelling at and in the beginning itself" (Kroetsch 118). In the endless deferral of closure through an ending, the text can only begin again and again, looping back in on itself so potential exits transform into entrances leading back in. Whenever there is the hint of the end in sight, the text presses to "begin again then/ the road/ begin again the/ the log's an art/ begin again/ begin again/ begin again/ that song/ it is a cycle i have chanted" (M 5 Chain 2). This aesthetic based on sustained effort rather than brevity "teaches us a Miltonic scorn for economy" (Kroetsch 125). This focus on points of reentry and sustainability also recontextualizes the death of the poet. In texts dedicated to continuing, I see "death as deferral only, as another grammar of delay" (Kroetsch 122). Nichol is not dead; "the poet [is] (gone) fishing" (Kroetsch 122). In the poet's absence, the poem continues forward transforming exits into entrances. Though Nichol himself worries that "this poem/[is] longer finally than any real wish to read" (M 7&), the reading, and writing,

continues. Nichol realizes that he recreated an object that will inevitably continue even if he cannot: “a lack of notation/ reaching for conclusions/ tho none are there...leaves you wondering what it is ends/ or is it only an endless renewal/ God my life ends/ years before this poem possibly can” (M6 Book 3 Hour 3).

In “‘Syntax Equals Seriality’ in bpNichol’s *gIFTS: The Martyrology Books 7&*,” Nicole Markotić offers a particular take on the deferral and defiance of closure in Nichol’s work, stating that it operates on what Walter Benjamin would characterize as nonlinear, “constellation” discourse (Markotić 84). According to this model, by reaching beyond the context of the book itself, alluding to external events and conversations, Nichol locates “this poetics within a larger discourse going on outside the physical limitations of the book” (Markotić 187). Nichol defies the physical markers of the beginning and end of the text, the covers, resulting again in a text that cannot be contained by its own corporeal form or the life of its author. Constantly and consistently reaching out beyond itself, the text subsumes “the larger conversation [which] also includes writer and reader; the composition begins from the idea of what has already been said, but not completed, from the idea of what can still be said, what can never be completed” (Markotić 187). Pulled inside the text, the reader becomes a part of the text’s creative engine, fueling a processual poetics that cannot end but only repeatedly begin and inexorably continue. “The problem” then becomes “to know when to stop” (Markotić 186). At the moment, Nichol’s texts have not stopped. Nichol addressed this challenge himself, noting the twin problems inherent in such an open text: “the trick is to keep writing/ tho the trick is you’re bound to stop/ writing” (M 7&). Though Nichol himself has stopped writing, the text continues being written. All of us who come to the text and are caught up in its engine are similarly unsure where, or even how, to stop.

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**Tonsil Hockey**

we still got 'em

your vowel shoots

uyula's sweet spot

ricochets off

my glottal goalpost

re: shoulder pads

nothing fits you. please, you're not a human being now.

re: re: equipment means quipping

you're right. i'm a whole stadium.

puck spells foul

sentries upchuck

our slapstick

your puns slalom

around pugilists

crickets in a jar

glass ricochets

jars my skull

I dine on my teeth

and slam into sideboards

as toothless pugs ululate

as an elbow venerates my temple

concussed but kicking

our goal sans period

through wailing wrist shots

aitch

eee

double hockey sticks



i'm the whistleblower

crosschecking linesmen

my voice box serves penalties

no room for my tongue

as shoulder pads jostle wrist guards

and skates lace up my throat

so many men down

power plays massacre

shorthanded poems limp

there once from nantucket

with eyes like

the way the world

meats

blue line grinds my lymph nodes

I suck chipped ice for lozenges

you're the zamboni

never in want of a smooth surface

i lick icing

buttery slash

you pour syrup

over waffle pads

i gum biscuits

we steal the cherry picker

gorge our mouths and fingers

my swelling tonsils wail

where else can you cheer for a siren

my body's blobby white referees

flag a virus

throbs between the posts

the refs protest

square off,

gloves drop

ice chips fly

blisters burst

as the staph infection takes it on the chin

refs eject any limb or non vital organ

that looks swollen or sideways

the game flow like a bloodstream

uppity germs in line

I lie oozing at centre ice

wish someone would turn off the alarm

or get me an ambulance

you slog through snow

capital A

between shoulder blades

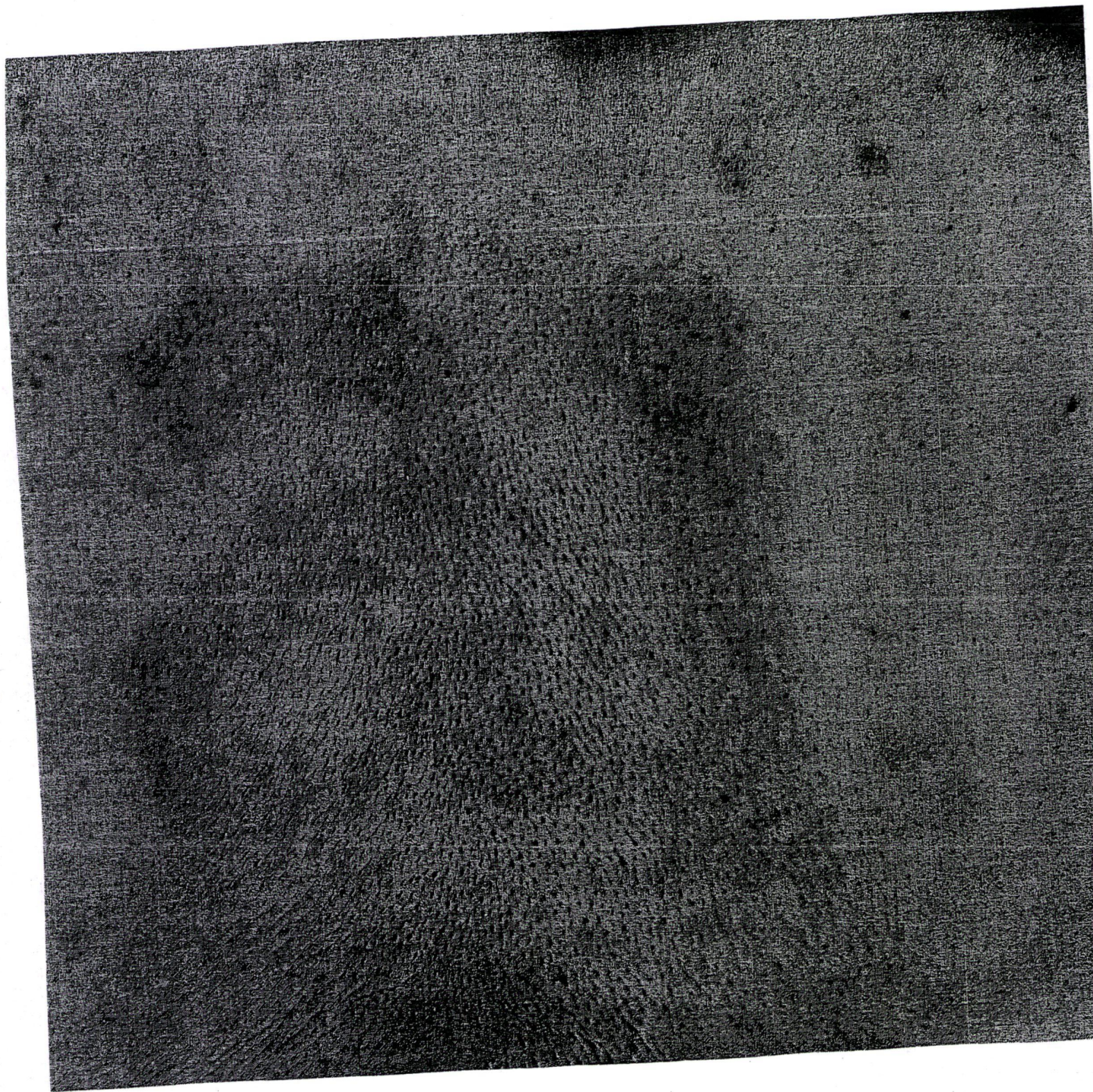
you skate a figure 0

i salivate

each branch and stem

lodged in my throat







em

saint nickel sports a halo of dimes

out for an off-handed hand out

I gnash copper teeth

I borrow

you burrow

st. ickleback grins a tenner

happy birthday bill winks

green tendercrisp

I offer my last

melting smithereen

we're beg o tten

caught

begging being

c o tton gaunt

boggling braking

gluten gut

braided

bearing

get breeding

looted o vum

sp o t bleeding

baying o rgan

g o ut br o o ding

getting b o ught

you're the primary charge of my corona wire

my silicone fuser unit meets your exposure lamp

xerox my central nervous system

I fax you my palms prints

wait for the beep



I'm a sopping puppet

you win more wrist

your seagull eyebrows fragment

into a keyhole of sky

you tickle cloud ticker tape

win the lightning round

I peek beneath your mantle

smirk as your belly shines

we hail o

your halo says hello

you're begging to begin again

your coins split like cells

I'm a barren revolver

revived by your coins'

small suns

you've gutbusted

i'm blinded by

a belly full of nickels

a nickel over each of your eyelids

goldcapped eye teeth

my clattering tongue cuts your temp      oh

twinned saint nickel

your nucleus splits

please fill out the following quiz

thotfully

my melting face:

- a) a chianti bottle
- b) a waterfall
- c) a trapped frog shedding its skin

thankyew for your time

taste buds stretch as you flick your protractable tongue

your children amphibious

all webbing and semipermeable membrane

the dissected son

electric leaps again

your split gut, slipshod

belies the neat fiveness of your holy toes

you're my daddy l o nglegs

saint nickel stained c o llif o rm

y o ur c o iled pr o file stamped o n dimes

y o ur livid secreti o ns cypher my c o wer ing 000 00 00 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

**dash**

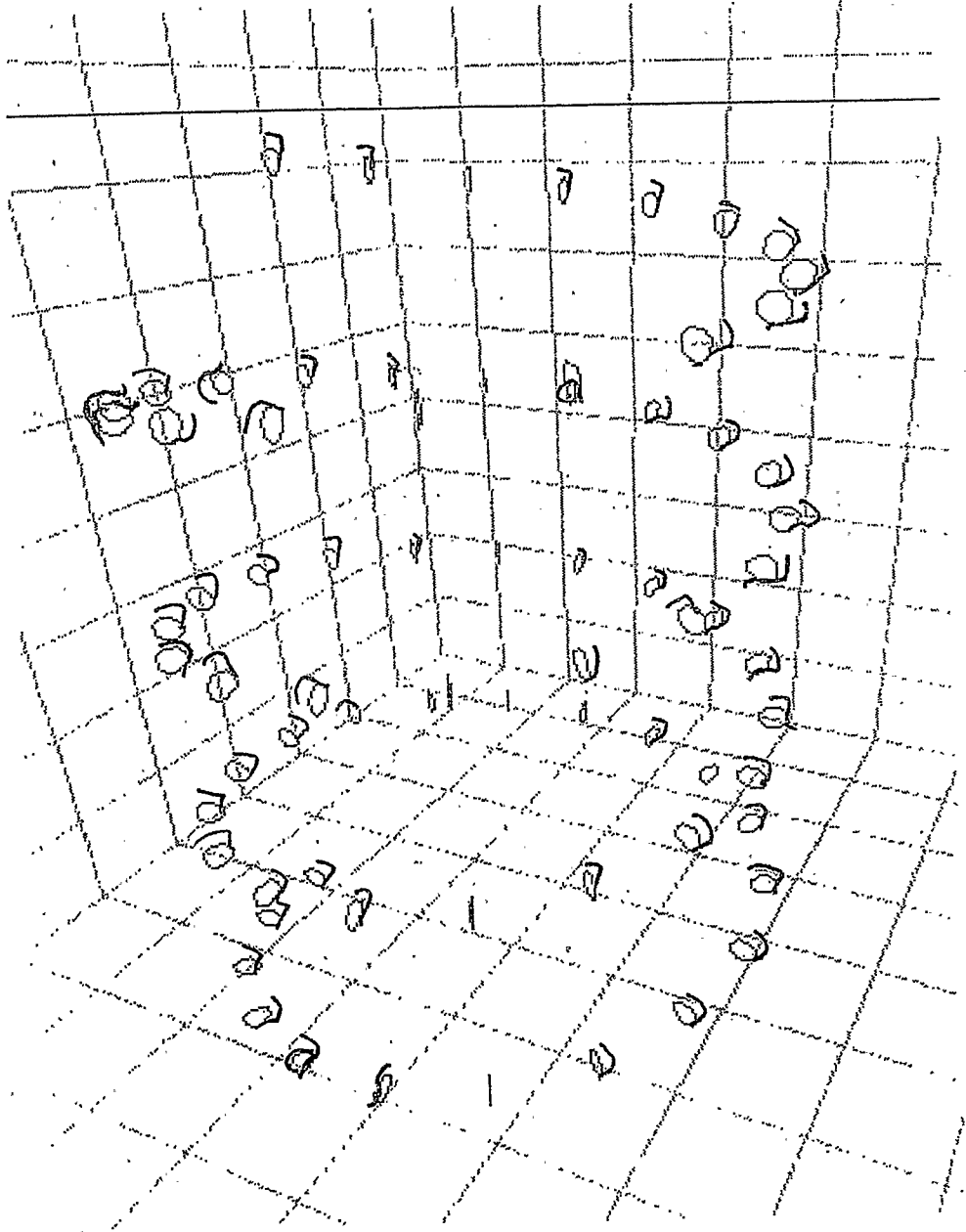
a simile smiles a lily while  
your wordy gullet  
belies the belly

your gut encloses  
the lowercase ocean

I'm curled snug  
as an ampersand  
in your belly button

I'm the punk u ate

lofted



you're my spectral snowbird

I raise a trickle toast to your return

you're a cloud cutter

cut swathes in my cotton mouth

you're my skyscraper's blue nose

you give on the glider

while I lick your linoleum

then rip up the floor



your blue blurs my bower

your vowels insulate

brick consonants air

your belly a bowl of oh

o o

my frog's eggs bubble prosecco

in the sinus of saint nickel

each exhalation precious

I glue down your shedding skin cells

catch each crescent of nail

each gobbet of spit

each last word

you lave my ardent larynx

pluck frayed strings

stud my tongue with eyes and ohs

you know my teeth

spelunk each enamel crevice

dinosaurs carried  
an extra brain in their tails  
a crafty blob of ganglia  
at the base of the spine

give me your second brain  
while you steer I'll take the tail  
the clumsy appendage of balance  
left dragging blindly behind

saint nickel rides a triceratops

I climb up your throat

to catch a barbed vowel's stem

lower case a tugs my lip a fish hook

it tears my turf like a golf cleat

I mind your queues and peas

your woof and weft

your anatomy cracks many handholds

each aspirate a crampon

each sibillance a plectrum

saint nickel's monks

clip swash

stress and spine

coax each serif

as delicate as bonsai

I scuttle into your garden

to steal clippings

slips of bar and stem

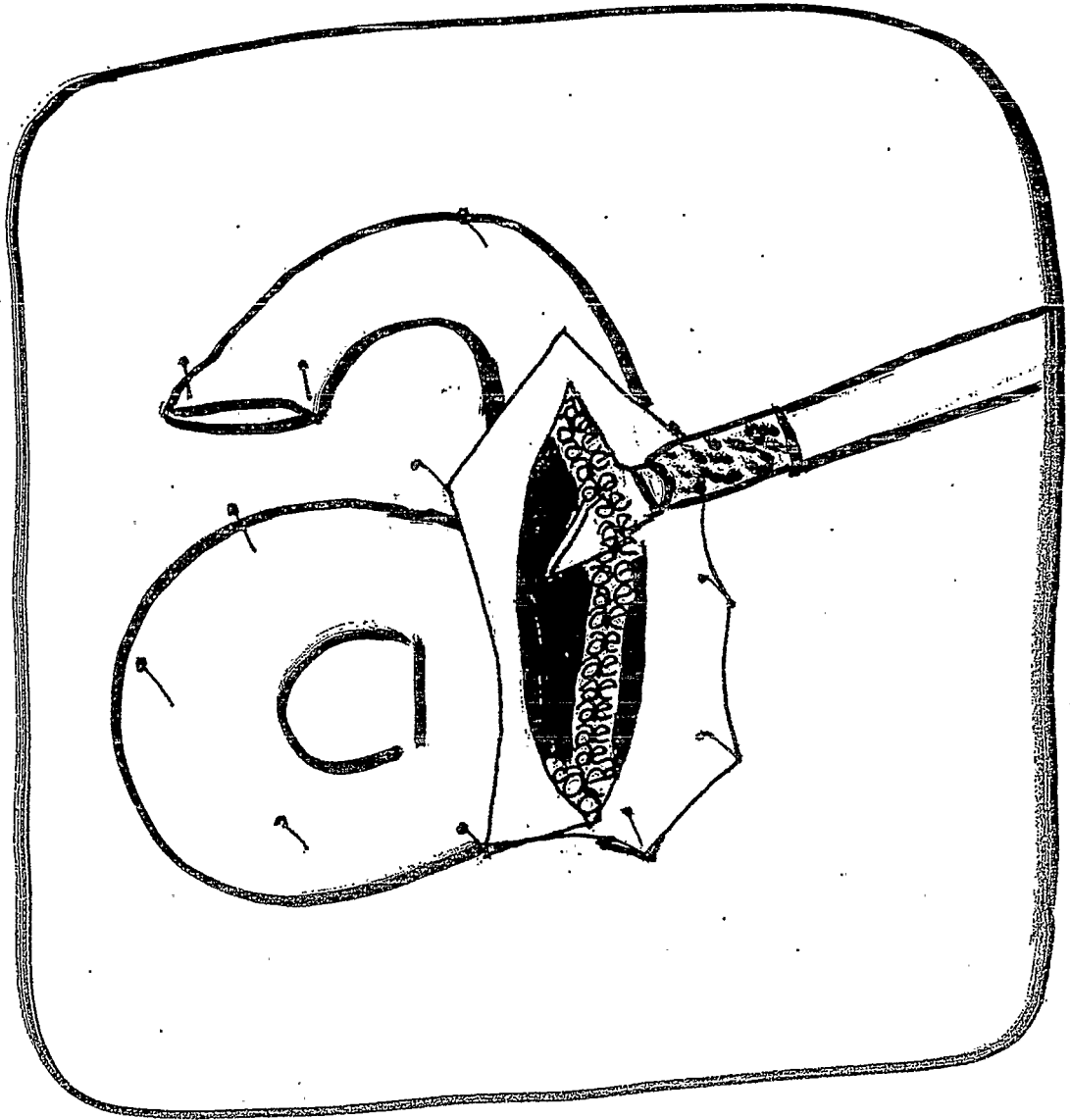
or an errant spur

to graft onto my own springs

I pray each transplanted

ear or shoulder shoves

down roots



each nickel you've bestowed  
swells as leavening holy dough

your tapestry a trapeze

I stun the brim

your busted logic

you grin in the beak

a bird counting your sheckles

and clack giggling claws

throwing nickels  
into the bowls of ohs  
you slip an onion ring  
onto my pinkie

my finger fills  
the deep fried hole  
sure as a clogged vein

sure as a nucleus  
nestled in the centre of a cell  
my finger fills your onion ring  
answer to my gastric prayer

we defy verbal lowcal  
crunch your breaded ohs



your cerebellum curls

saintly as a seahorse

your ears cockle shells

above your head

blue as beach

I blow out my birthday

candles

you bring the cake

I'll bring the sparkler

oh holy linoleum  
with your reverent grout  
I scrub your forehead's tiles  
gleaming but for my thumbprints

I bow beneath your showerhead  
step into the steam and sing

**vol au vent**

to recall

your mouth inkpots

each cleft scrawls

hangnail ghosts

your toenails pencil

blue sueded softshoe

each shimmy shreds

yawn in your maw

brimming cavities

grind phonemes

res

sonant

con

garble sniffers

you heave a chuckling hawk

spittoon rings

radios

wave

far me

each syllable dovetails

each joint into socket

a head board

head

my head pillows

an oh's downy hillock

vowels pop thought balloons

e e c e

u u

o

a a

(y)

y r l t t r s q r d n c

piano to pillow

the bed you built

I dream molecules and galaxies and tongues and belches

lope

your cumulus crushes granite  
stomps thunderhead galoshes  
chews tinfoil

my cirrus bums a light  
coughs smoke rings and spaghettios  
grins licorice

your stratus sprays ozone  
clatters through a tapdance  
never keeps it down

my nimbus shoots and ricochets  
splatters buckshot  
holepunches constellations  
punch cons

cloud poke

sheet metal

severs your breath

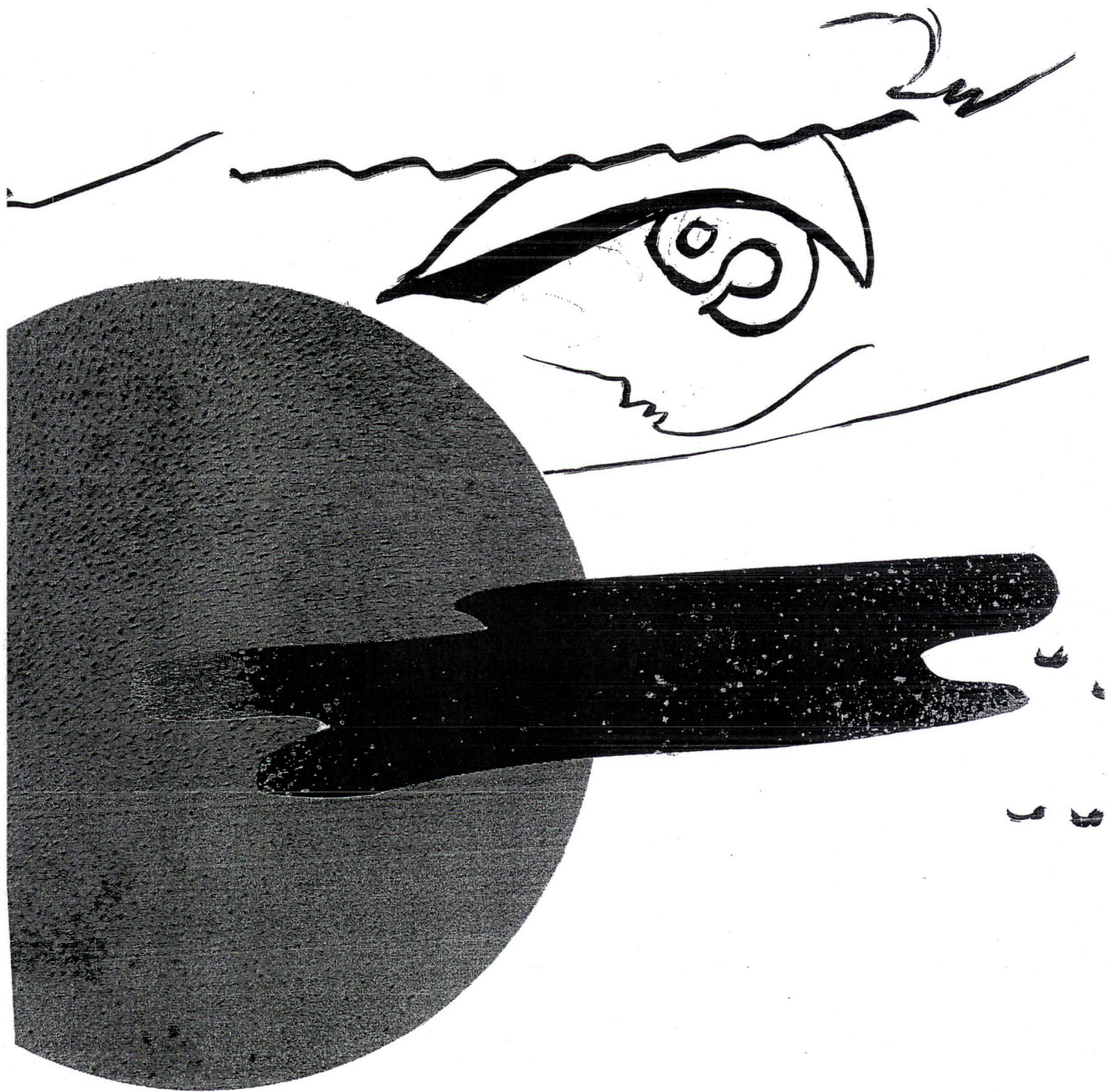
your tongue lunges

lingers over crumples letters

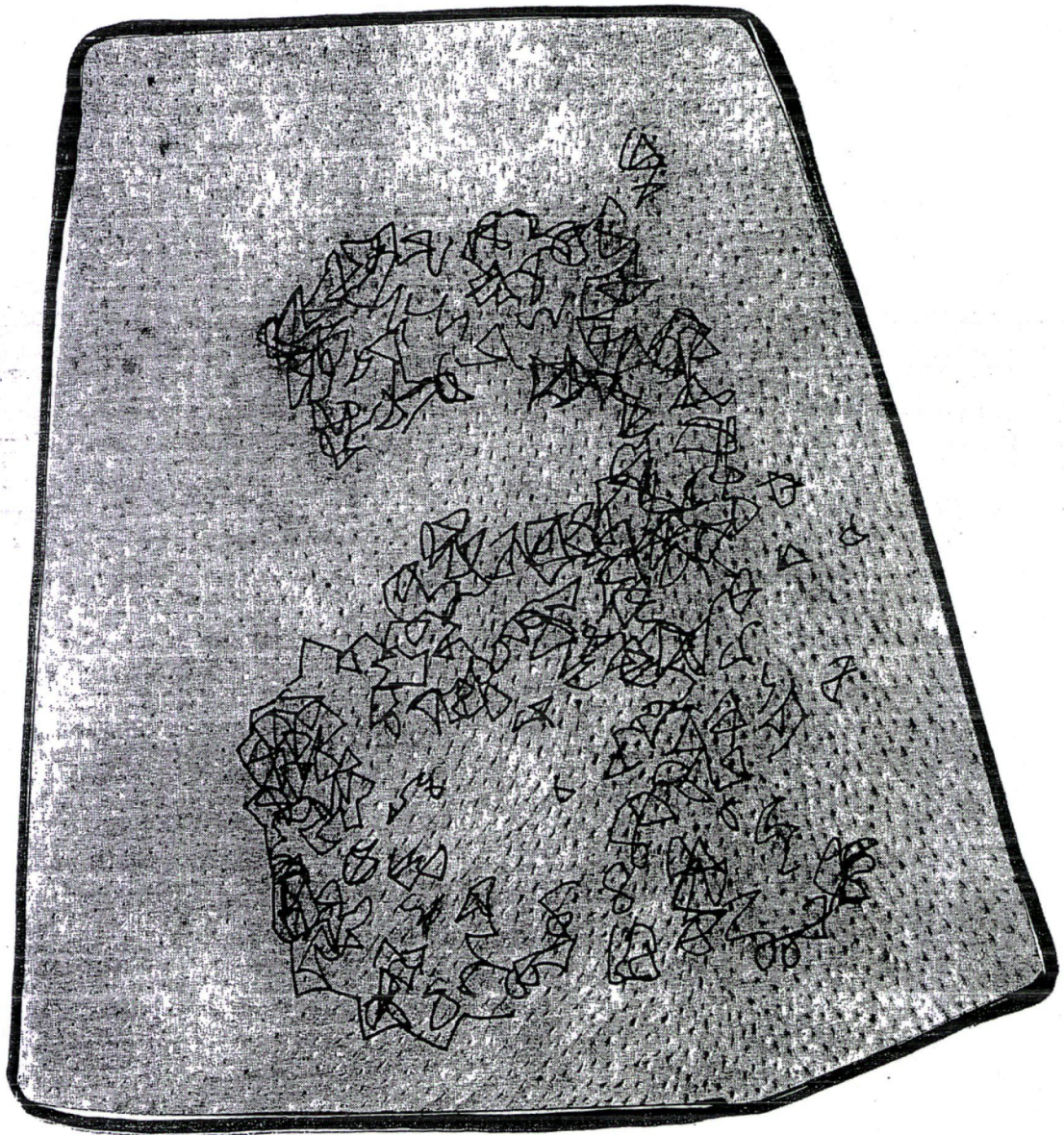
your mouth trips

over each broken stem

each bruise









a door

our lover

lower dear

dire

lower

your upper cut

lowers each capital's case

resembles err

air

ing

blue better dear

lower

counting

I call you a letter rustler

as you flank a branded aitch

each triangular hoofprint

an ah

your plump thumbing

above the gumline

herds the shearlings throatward

stampeding throatward

you swallow thundering

and here hear my margins

full of hoofbeats and breath

or

on tongue I hold

the hole of the holy donut

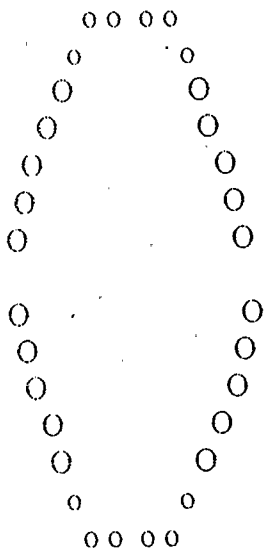
you double flop

each vowel gut

belly up their wholes

walls of o collapse

between molars



dribble down the page

down your chin

bubbling grin

of babble

oo

letters se ped

chew your cloud

our unleavened leaves

dapple holy throat

aspirate the stairway

slab of paragraph

text

brick

corner optic

cop-out

your switch hairpins

for keys and wait

twist our copper wires

we toe

our cue card

towing graph

from granite

kowtow to giggles

bower bard

egg spackles

my

i

i

w nd

she

ld

gait

you kiss lines

flaw feline

scratch catgut

catch squeeze cop a grip

a cloud of gray matter

you whistle

teethcubes

arrest my brainstem

inflate a head

your voice

blusters razorwire

flays speech

ohs catch barbs o ol

ohKay o oo

ooooooooOOokaAyYyy

deflate like pufferfish



**frenetic con**

you tether my oriole

gargle gravel

you egg me on

to build a gravel nest

aloud, your columns

curl i queue against your palate

two thinshelled decades

frail as parentheses

insulate your heartbeat

each every o is an egg

backlit by a lightbulb

see each muscular squeeze

catch

me

oh

h(Oh) (Oh) (Oh)h

hhhhhhhhhhhh

you've razed your pages

torn to tidbits

I scatter to feed

monkfish and koi

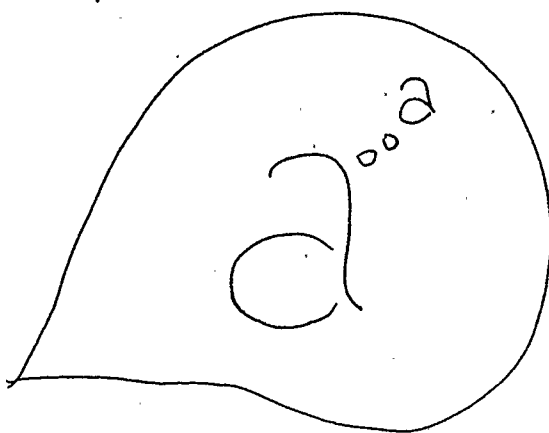
fragments

of shell

stick in my teeth

I crunch

on thought baubles

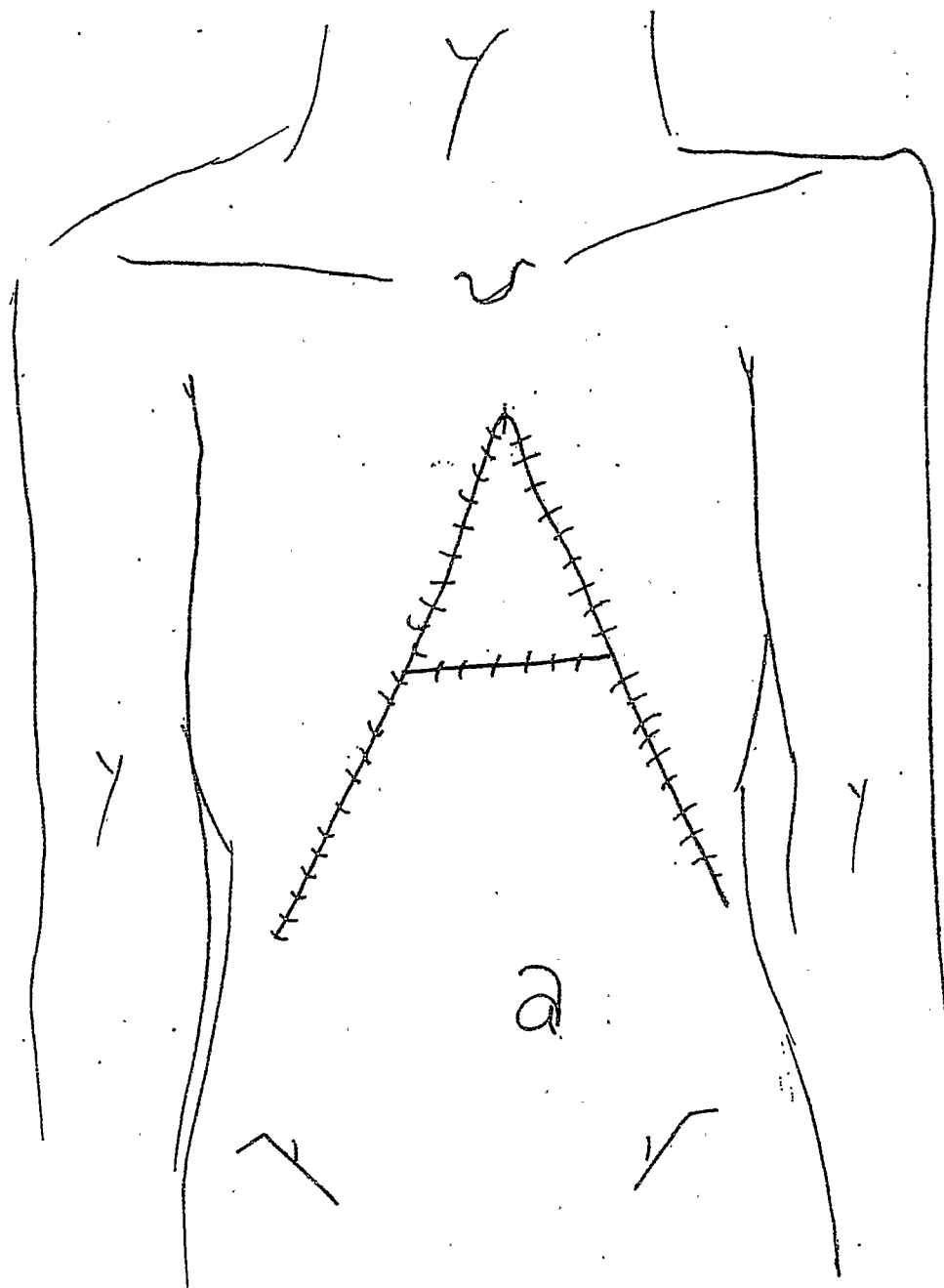


left cold now

they ink you bate

against my uvula

scratch my eggteeth



your seems rip

I trepan your skull  
for a dash of blue

a tip of the slung  
a grip on the rung  
a slip to eclipse

memed since rhyme  
clad in stanza  
vestments consonants long

your ghost gridlocks  
strapped to the hood  
cussing

you tent my calm

I dwell in lung

hum leather

below my squawking throatward

a flutter safe as blouses

tens come

count tense

allow

lowly almost

my tent walls wave

at your chuckles and coughs

my wind at the whim

of your esophagus

bellows

oh low hola oh lolly oh holly hallelujah

outspoke a cloud poke

you mouth behind

I'm not a puppet

a megaphone with yolk

on my face

sucker holepunched

you holler shrapnel

sharp holy

yes

...

diphthongs deke DEYfence DEYfence defensemen

joints hose the house

same accs bite their blades

the dome rolls and roars like lightning

they join the game

grin a spiteful faceful

and slew spellcheck into a hookshot



my epiglottis a microphone

records the shink and snick and hush against ice

whuffle of jersey against foam padding

a creak and shh then whizz bonk of puck

ha

ah

then rocketing freight and kablooie

knees chew tinfoil spitting sparks

torsos thunk reverb

hollow pop of jaw against plywood

shoulder gives a grinding kapow plop

huh

ga

huh

then collapse to the ice a whistle thump thump

raw skull a th-thock and gasping huh ga huh

and a dip dip dppp dip dip dip skin opens

over an eyebrow

skinflap

rips

you riff a longshot

i long for a rimshot

my esophagus stretches and my jaw pops

a python or hatchback

you swallow the season

i choke in the finals

talk for a year past

the game in my gullet

all my sweet nothings

whispered between goalposts

laugh over the loudspeaker

coxsackie highsticks the offside

blisters my larynx

each word exclamated

by a cystic pop! cystic pop!

white blood cell refs

redflag as my tongue wags

Is called for spearing

stars strobe

I'm crosschecked at the crease line

lungs sopping lights out

you pinch the sleeper

slashed trachea grins

from ear to ear

i trip at the blue line

down with a slosh

a fishbowl in my chest

you breath through ice

OT

holy wraparound

that crash tore you lobes to lights

I was blind by halogen

my tonsils were already vulcanized I thought

despite your warnings

i'd worn out the tread

left my throat unsuited for winter

now i'm dental records

the rest of me fit for a spatula

my body is soft

my teeth remember to spell

the lowercase h in my incisor

tells investigators i was besotted

with the aspirate too full of air

to operate any machinery

we might have survived

if my throat got a grip

if my lungs weren't so full

the uppercase A on my molar

an itchy overachiever anxious trigger finger

only a matter of time before splatter

I zone my soft palate

your skate blades vs. my ragged gums

the playbook spells rival

are eye we all

feet first

throat out

every sport has a Malachuck

every throat    a strep

thyroid cartilage meets skate blade

i sandblast my vocal cords

you bring the popcorn

we scream our lungs out

the only pair not banking on blood



i thank you from  
the cockles of my skates  
the coccal of my throat

while I swallow a tonic that coats  
you're pricked by whitecoats  
your spine à cauldron

i recoup a wristshot  
you puck-wrangle slapdash

C-Letter grab bag

leave a code read

a sucker for highstick

three seconds to go

my throat went off

i make a well in my tongue

cup the puck

smooth as an egg

my clumsy jaw breaks

drooling

i spit black yolk into the net

at the buzzer

my wagging tongue a rubber slug

you lift your goalie mask

rust

my blades metre groove

I circle the ice

we play

your one sip of fizzing iced caffeine

your one sip of steaming black caffeine

I stub a cigarette in one palm

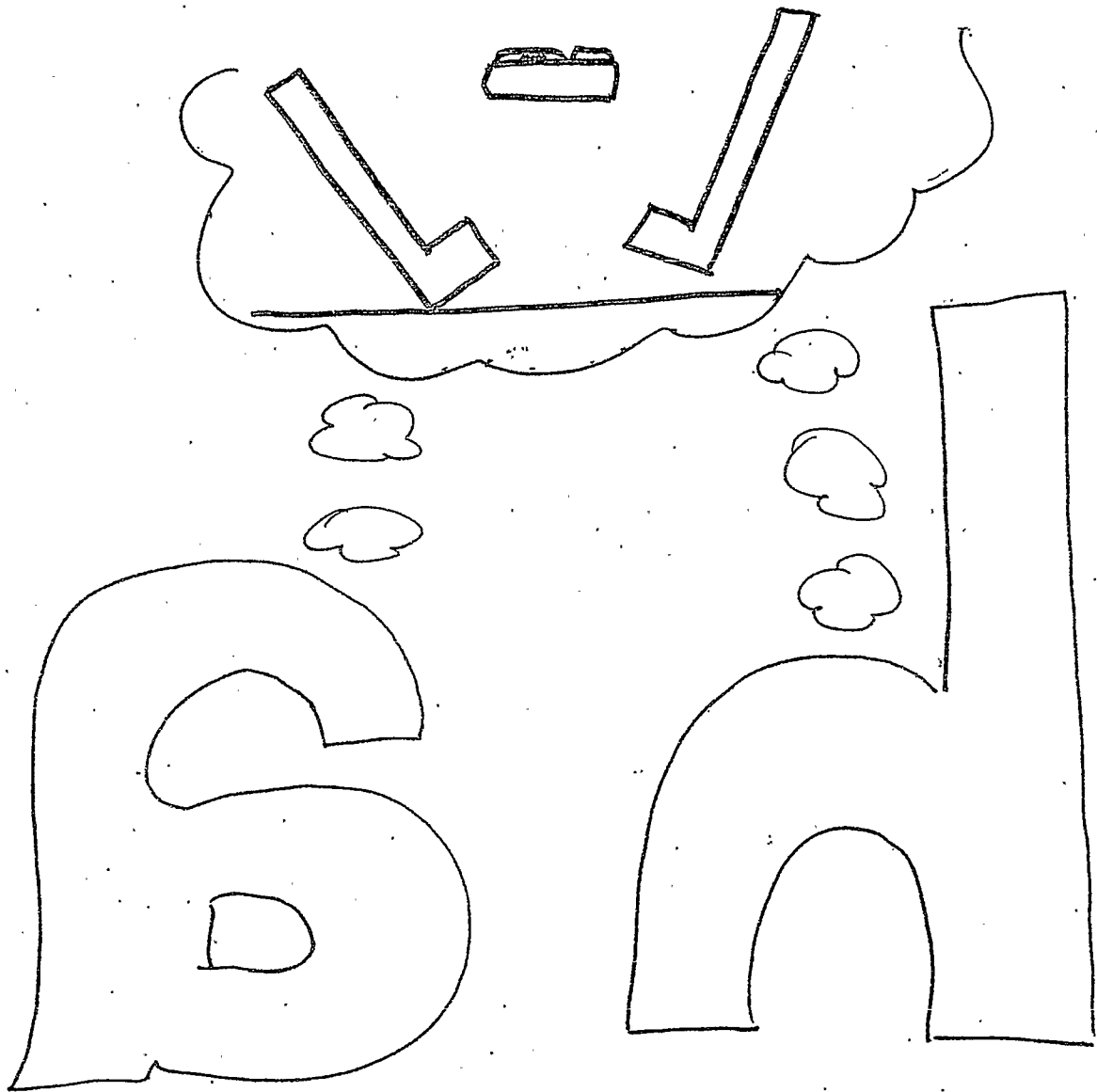
I press an icecube into the other

neon blares

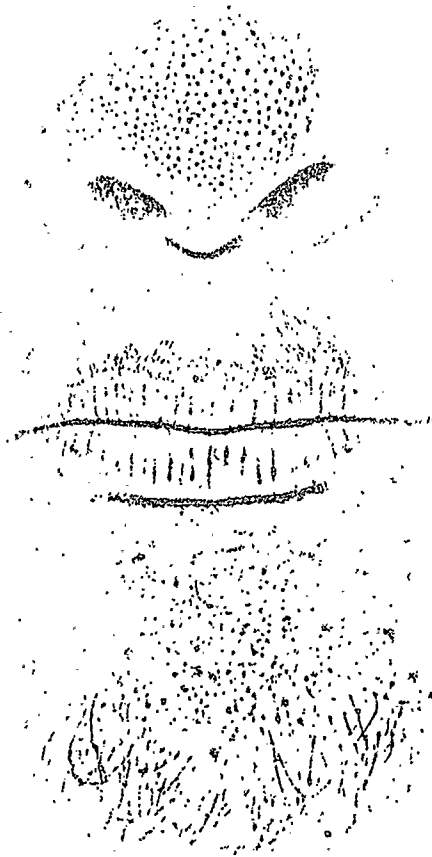
blades bow

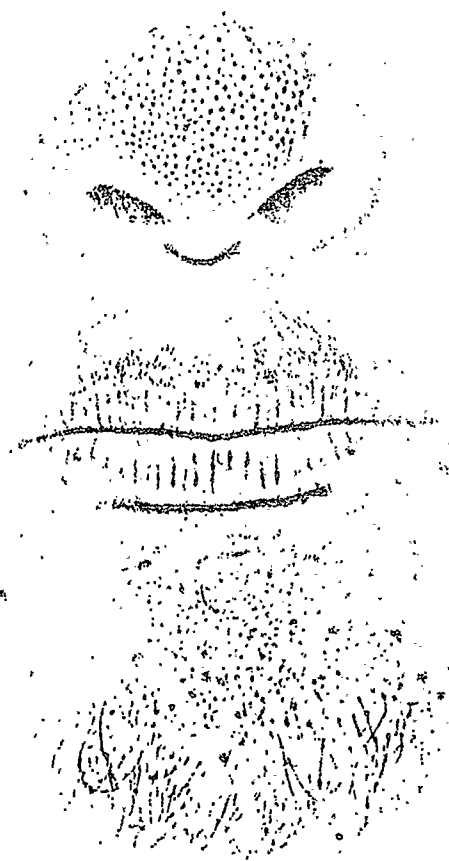
throats close

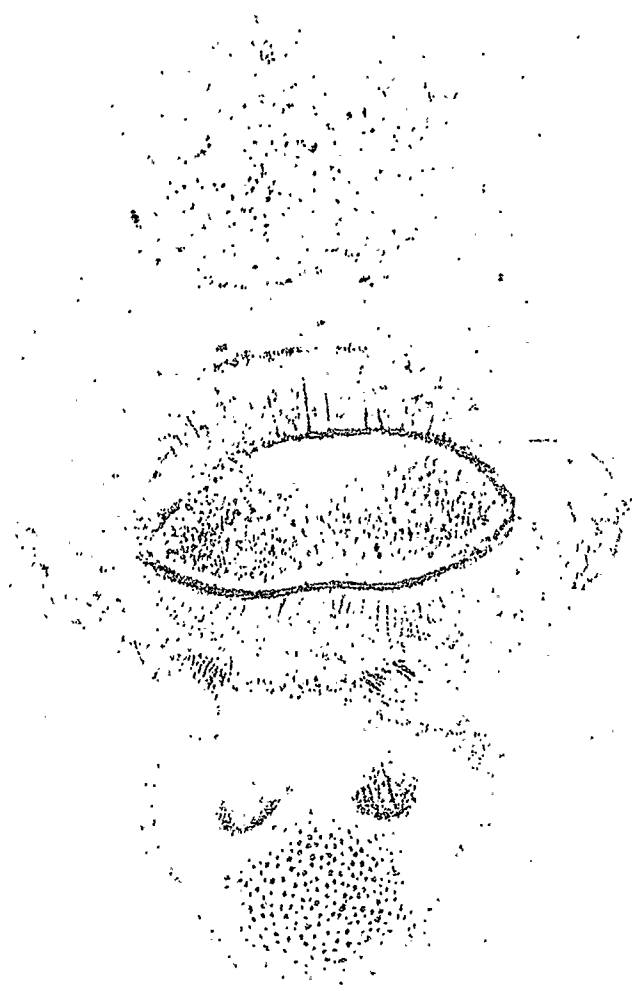
we hit the ice

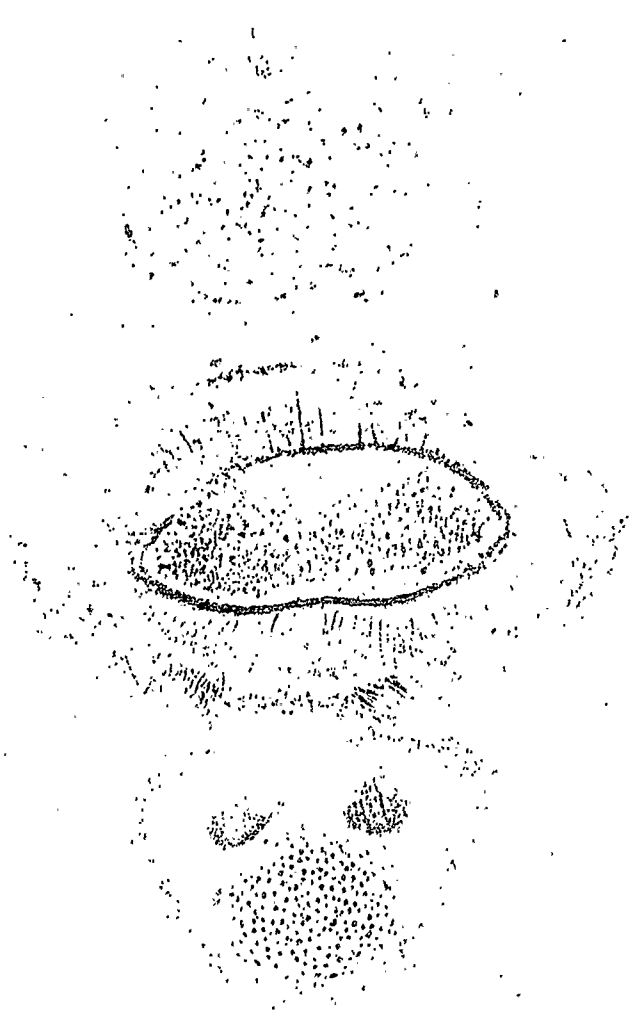


Appendix A: from *ZYGAL*

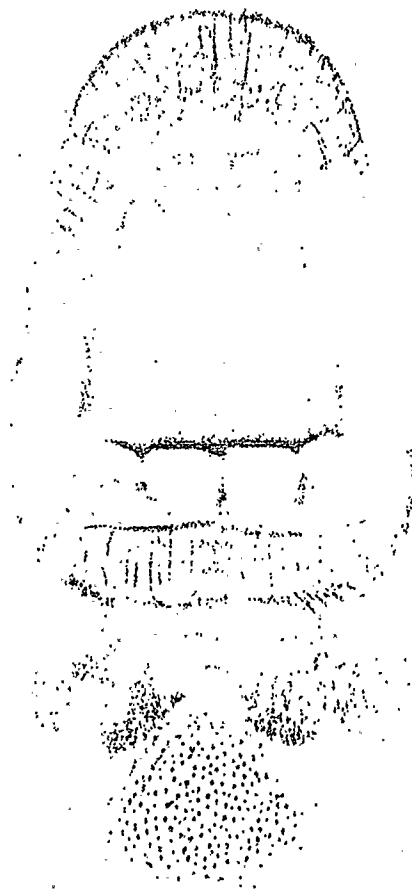


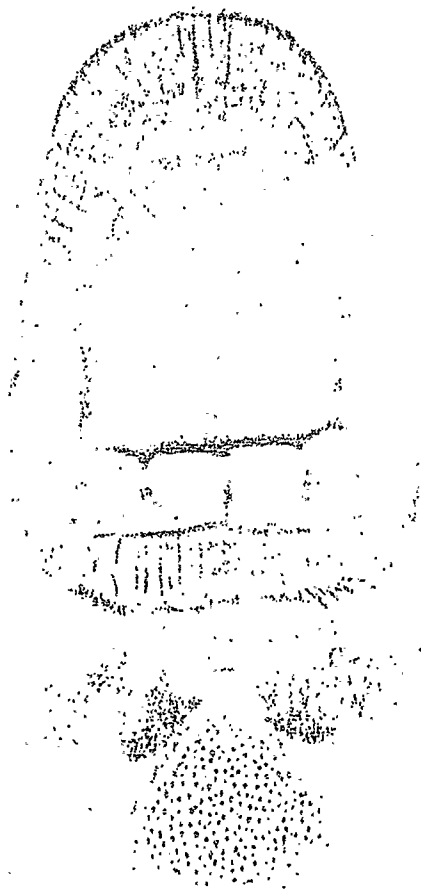












Appendix B: *if*bp: *if*

so if the poem's line  
the body (that metaphor)  
it falls apart—right?

awkward bits

relationships  
that don't work out  
(between words &

where does fear fit in all this?  
anxiety?  
terror that we might not  
grow older

middle initial art

"watch out for the vitalistic cop-out,"  
steve said  
(we were both looking  
a little worried about our health)

the body of the poem  
the leading

pair o' graphs  
at the foot of the press bed

the sub-head  
in that medical book  
"if you die"

as tho you'd get a chance  
to read it  
when you need it

gifts: The Martyrology Book(s) 7& bpNichol August 30, 1988

bp: if

•

sacrum

say  
the whole thing ends

say  
you're frightened  
of the whole thing  
ending

say  
cheese

say n't

n't ready

n't ready to die

gifts: The Martyrology Book(s) 7& bpNichol September 1, 1988

bp: if

under the knife

under the gun

under the bottom of  
the sea

underconscious

overaware

the hill &

climb  
stand } ing  
fall }

gifts: The Martyrology Book(s) 7& bpNichol September 1, 1988

# **body paranoia: initial fugue**

shadow on  
the X

ray

body parts  
line the red sea  
maybe

lure id lure  
for sure

cyst or?  
tumor? or?

two more sister

what?

months to live  
years maybe  
(said that before)  
maybe may  
be maybe

gifts: The Martyrology Book(s) 7& bpNichol August 30, 1988

bp: if

free

dumb

[3000 B.C. quote]

"free will"  
as i was taught it

free to live

free to die

will has  
nothing to do with  
the will you write  
to write

gifts: The Martyrology Book(s) 7& bpNichol September 10, 1988