

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Softly in German

by

Laura Lush

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

CALGARY, ALBERTA

AUGUST, 1991

© Laura Lush 1991



National Library
of Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Canadian Theses Service Service des thèses canadiennes

Ottawa, Canada
K1A 0N4

The author has granted an irrevocable non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of his/her thesis by any means and in any form or format, making this thesis available to interested persons.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in his/her thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without his/her permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence irrévocable et non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de sa thèse de quelque manière et sous quelque forme que ce soit pour mettre des exemplaires de cette thèse à la disposition des personnes intéressées.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège sa thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

ISBN 0-315-71096-9

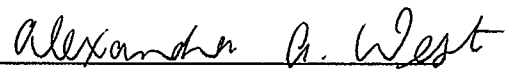
Canada

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled, "Softly in German," submitted by Laura Lush in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



Supervisor, Dr. Chris Wiseman
Department of English



Dr. A. West
Department of English



Professor A. Bell
Department of Music

DATE August 30, 1991

ABSTRACT

Softly in German is a creative thesis consisting of 71 poems and a critical introduction. As a creative work, all the poems have been extensively revised and edited.

The manuscript contains four separate thematic sections ranging from family and childhood to personal relationships and world strife. The four sections can be read as discrete collections of poems or as integral parts connected by similar motifs and images. Specifically, the manuscript is linked by recurring images from both the natural world (fish, stars and shells) and the material world (ropes, necklaces and cords). And while the subjects explored in each section are different, the language used to describe these subjects is not. The poems rely on a concrete physical language to emphasize the tactile nature of experience and life as a whole.

All of the poems are written in free verse and contain a variety of rhythms depending on line length and the number of stanzas. A lot of the poems are written in the lyric mode and achieve their energy through metaphor and simile. There are also a number of poems that blend the emotional intensity of the lyric with the story telling quality of the narrative. The result of blending these two forms is a tightly woven "lyric-narrative" that links images and scenes without restricting voice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the English Department at the University of Calgary for their generous financial assistance and support over the 1990/1 academic year.

I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Chris Wiseman, for his insightful comments, patience, and generosity of spirit.

CONTENTS

APPROVAL	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
Softly In German	1
INTRODUCTION	3
I THE WINTER POD	
The Ravine	8
Turnips	9
The Boogey Man	10
Shiny Dimes	11
First Born	12
Fish	13
Young Neighbourhood	14
Broken Heels	15
Foul Play	16
Cuts and Scrapes	17
The Winter Pod	18
The Fire Genie	19
The Mad Mother	20
Margaret	21
Dolly and Rose	22
Sisters	23
The Junk Man	24

Summer	25
Winter Mornings	26
Garden	27
Pigs	28
The Dry	29
Winter	30
II THE DEAD LINE UP	
The Dead Line Up	32
Heart/Fish	33
The Amber Crash	34
Thick Skin	35
Shipwrecked	36
Grapes	37
The Well	38
Alone	39
Taking Off Our Clothes	40
On the First Night of Our Love	41
Secret Admirer	42
Boxes	43
Skaters	44
The Sky Dominated Me	45
Something in the Streets	46
River and Anger	47
Photograph of Ghosts	48

III TALK

Black and White World	50
Talk	51
Slamming	52
I Am Not Afraid of The Dark	53
Ubud, Bali	55
Kondohsan Goes For Pizza	56
Seeing a Geisha in Kyoto	57
Night and Sky	58
Summer Solstice	59
Thaw	60
Immigrant	61
One on One	62

IV SOFTLY IN GERMAN

Old	64
Border	65
Marek	66
The Quiet	68
Drifter	69
A Small Black Bundle	70
When Samson Cut Off his Hair	71
When No one Hears	72
Solitaire	73
Julieann	75
The Flight of Angels	76
Softly in German	78
The Hunted	79

Boy Soldiers	81
The Day Frank Drowned	82
When Trees Aren't Enough	83
The Last Morning	84
Hunter	85
Recovery	86

APPENDIX 1	87
------------	----

SOFTLY IN GERMAN

"It is possible that there is no other memory
than the memory of wounds."

--Czeslaw Milosz, Nobel Prize Lecture 1980

INTRODUCTION

While reading a collection of Polish essays, I happened to come across Czeslaw Milosz's 1980 Nobel Prize speech. Although I was not looking for a particular epigraph to speak for this manuscript, this one simple yet powerfully stated line seemed appropriate. If I have understood Milosz correctly, he is speaking of the profound effect that "wounds" have on memory. And while I do not want to interpret Milosz's definition of wound, I am certain that the relationship between wound and poetry is a very strong one. For example, the more times I sat down to write another day's work, the more I realized how much I depended on these wounds to give both shape and an emotional centre to the poems. Not only did I depend on them, but I actively sought them out with the belief that memory would never fail to call up the "right" wound. I also discovered that there were as many kinds of wounds as there were memories and poems. The act of sitting down to write a poem did not then become an anxious or aimless activity, but rather a rich and fruitful one where the emphasis was not so much on the final written product as it was on the process of exploring and delving into memory.

I would now like to say a few words about the actual process of writing this creative thesis. Softly in German represents my third completed manuscript since 1985. The experience of writing the two previous manuscripts proved invaluable for the writing of this manuscript. For the most part, I was able to anticipate when, where and why most

problems would arise. I was able to face such familiar yet troubling problems as periods of low inspiration and mechanical impasses with the assurance that they were part and parcel of the writing process, and given enough patience, time and guidance from my supervisor, they could and would be remedied.

I also discovered that following a regular routine of writing was much more productive than waiting for any such moments of inspiration to arrive. A typical writing day involved writing two or three first drafts (as I tend to write poems in clusters), and reading from a variety of poetry books. Reading other poets proved not only to be invaluable but also necessary. I depended on these other poets for inspiration and for ideas on how to handle difficult technical problems and subject matter. I did not limit myself to one particular poet, nationality or sex. Instead, I read as many poets as I possibly could from a variety of nations. Listening to these other voices also assured me that each of us has a unique way of looking at the world. Writing for me, then, did not become a search for authentic material, but rather a search for an authentic voice.

Although I have stated that I was able to anticipate most problems that would occur during the writing of this manuscript, I could not foresee the actual direction that the manuscript would take. Originally, my thesis proposal stated that I would attempt to write a manuscript of poems that would bridge three generations of family. While this is realized to some extent (as in section one), the

manuscript is, by no means, limited to family. Other subjects, such as relationships and world conflicts, are also explored.

The first section entitled The Winter Pod focuses on childhood and family. Although it is naive in subject matter, it tries not to be in tone. It strives for an ironic, and above all honest voice that can best render the memories and wounds of childhood. Hence, "The Boogey Man" and "The Junk Man" earn their place in memory by their capacity to scare and delight respectively. Other poems such as "Winter Mornings," "Pigs," "Broken Heels," "Young Neighbourhood" and "The Mad Mother" focus on farm life and the weariness of motherhood. This section does not try to puzzle or explain; rather it tries to show the impact of both the familiar and the sometimes strange on memory. The opening poem, "The Ravine," is an attempt to capture the energy of childhood which is full of unexplained sexual tension, while the last poem, "Winter," attempts to juxtapose the hopes and dreams of middle class parents with those of a young teenage girl.

The second section, The Dead Line Up, is an abrupt departure from the nostalgic feel of the first section. Here, the tone shifts from ironic to wistful, the voice from personal to detached. Although there is a hint of playfulness in such poems as "The Dead Line Up" and "Thick Skin," a sense of sadness, loss and helplessness pervades most of these poems. Here, the wound seems relatively recent, and the poems do not have the same luxury of introspection as those of the first section. And while

there does not seem to be any one subject, the voice is trying to address a lover of sorts--a lover who is contained in the square parameters of "Boxes" yet desperately wants to become the elusive spirit of "Photographs of Ghosts."

The third section entitled Talk attempts, as the title suggests, to capture both those voiced and unvoiced moments. The poems try to combine the domestic and urban with the surreal ("Talk" and "Afraid of the Dark") as well as present entirely surreal landscapes ("Night and Sky" and "Summer Solstice"). And then there are those poems like "Ubud, Bali" and "Kondohsan Goes for Pizza" that venture into a foreign landscape.

Finally, the fourth section, Softly in German, attempts to do what the other sections have not done: that is, move out of the personal and into the socially and politically conscious realms. In general, the tone is sombre as is the subject matter. While not all of the poems address these issues ("Old," "A Small Black Bundle"), the majority of these poems do attempt to reach beyond self. I have chosen "Recovery" as the last poem to show the mixture of hope and nihilism which the world seems to give us back simultaneously.

I

THE WINTER POD

The Ravine

We run deer-like
past the numbed buds of trees
the white mouths of icicles
shiny as fish.

Down to the ravine past
the innocuous stench of winter,
the trees locked in their
death-scent.

We are nine and ten,
tiny brush strokes of legs,
arms that have just unwrapped
the world for the first time.

We see the white houses
that brick our dreams every night.
The unflowing river.
How its water has stopped for us,
hardened like our brothers' penises.

Turnips

My brother's friend Willie
took me down to the root cellar once
to feel the vegetables
burst blue under my palms.
Our fingers trickling like wax
over hairless skins.

Bare naked, Willie and me.
The floor gripping our toes like moss.
Quiet, except for the tingle of spider legs.

The door stayed shut
while mother peeled turnips,
kept a bowlful for the hogs.
Outside, my brother's voice choked
like a buried root, crying for me to come out.
It was all his idea.

The Boogey Man

Under the bed he lies
in blue jeans, the mask
stretched tight over his face.
The large, rubber lips
swollen and bloodless.
The Boogey Man tap, tap
of his heels while we
curl like woodshavings
under the covers,
our faces tight as fists.
Then the cover suddenly off,
the tangle of our shadows.
Clutching at each other's
pyjamas as the Boogey Man's
hands get closer.
Between the slits of our eyes,
our fear escaping, somehow
twining around him,
a small, lubricious rope.
Until finally his mask pops
off, the pale choked
cord of his laughter.

Shiny Dimes

She used to say, "I'll give you
a shiny dime if you can
find my purse." Other lost
things that slid from her hip
pockets lodged between cushion
covers or sent rolling under
couches after Saturday nights.
Once, a pearl necklace
lost in the driveway, peering up
unseen. Each pearl fattening
with snow. All winter
hibernating, living off
the memory of my mother's neck.
Spring, and the necklace
blinking up. Small eggs
sticking to our fingers.
How we imagined our mother's
face when her necklace
touched her flesh.
Soft and warm
as an umbilical
cord.

First Born

My brother came first,
the one who had to brave the distance between
the farmhouse and the end of the laneway each morning.
The one who had to make up stories,
leave them like polished stones
on the steps of the verandah,
take singing lessons, hold his hands together so his arms
shaped a cradle for the baby he will never have.
Had to defend my sister and me when we pelted
cars with snowballs, knock down the paperboy
for stealing my wallet.
Had to go to Cubs, learn to light fires,
protect my mother from door-to-door salesmen.
Hold a hockey stick even though he didn't want to.
Shake hands with uncles, admire their wide-belled ties.
Learn to drive, squeal tires, walk the dog,
chase it back home again.
Had to swallow the worst of the family traits
like a snake swallowing frogs.
Had to do everything first.
And right. And best.
Still trying to walk that lane alone.
One foot in front of the other,
the wolves still nipping at his heels.

Fish

You had fish and so
you were allowed
to come back with those
small clear bags,
the pulsing orange hearts.

Upstairs your room
bubbled quiet.
In the tanks, the small
private world of gills.
Water the colour of
underworld.

Sometimes a tetra
beaming its blue fin at me.
An angel-fish, sanctimonious,
fluttering.

Each tank stirring
with a different life
as if knowing that you too
would be different one day.
Brave guppie swimming
with its clear silver belly.
A glove without a lining.

Young Neighbourhood

What kept them sane then?
All the young mothers
sandwiched between the walls
of white houses, their kids
pawing at the door like strays.
They threw bread, their hearts,
the ragged end of their souls.
But still their kids wouldn't go away.
They'd change their hair colour,
the TV channel, but they were
still there, squished like pillows
on the couch. Mrs. Sarowski
boiling the same potato over
and over again. Her five kids
like the glove she slipped on every morning,
each finger a defiant child
pushing through the silk tunnel
of the world. And Mrs. Porter
repeating the same nightmare every night:
holes gaping like hungry mouths.
What kept them all sane then?
Each house squaring off for its own
bit of green lawn, as all the young
mothers sat in their cars
wishing they knew the way out of the neighbourhood.

Broken Heels

The girl reaches
for her mother.
This one simple need
to breathe the warm
wool skirt.

How her eyes open
like buttons
release the soft
dawdling souls.

Falling like cotton
to the floor.

Her mother's soul,
however, is a star thinning.
A coathanger bent
again and again
into the different shapes
of the world.

Foul Play

Was what we heard on the radio.
Our child-ears sponges of grief.
Then came mention of small items:
a sneaker, orange satchel, a sock
tied around a throat.
No one knew who or why.
Just Foul Play. And for that
our mothers wouldn't let us
play outside alone, take the hands
of strangers, those gentle giants
whose one hand could cover
our childhood forever.

Cuts and Scrapes

Is what we wanted, rode
our bicycles over gridded streets for.
Elbows and knees cracked
onto pavement, coming up
redder, brighter.
The skin mapped with a new pain.
The gravel, exotic jewels
as our voices let loose in
tiny white flags that
soared over housetops.
Knowing that every mother
standing by a window
would drop her dish, phone,
rush outside to the heap of child
the pain flowering inward.
With one hand, unbend
our legs--fuzzy pipecleaners
until the blood finally
clotting quiet.

The Winter Pod

The winter pod opens
and all sorts of things pop out--
my mother's eyes
scuttling like crabs
over the bleached day.
The limp string of my father's
smile, still glistening
as if below ice.
My grandmother's heel marks,
false teeth clicking across pavement.
And the line of sky--
I pull its blue yarn,
tender wool
that joins my heart to my sister's.
How we separate without tearing
the bright stitches of our blood.

The Fire Genie

Only came out in winter
trailing her wand of flames
up the stairs.

While we slept, she
covered our eyes in ash,
plugged our lungs with cotton-
thick smoke.

Crackled away like
a thin blistery branch.

Until my father
grabbed her by the throat
the hot hoop of flames.

Stuffed her back
into her bottle.
The tight glass home
knocking with light.

The Mad Mother

She had just finished dishes,
her hands finely bubbled,
her wedding ring glistening
on the sink, silver
and open like a fish's mouth
when she went out to the garden,
lay there in the soil.
Soft cool cake of earth.
She felt the colours
move slowly toward her like blood,
heard the lilies' velvet noise.
The quiet figged wind.
No one could find her.
Not her husband, the neighbours,
the ladies that came for bridge.
She stayed like that until
clouds unstitched
pulled apart like small
children in a crowd.

Margaret

Had eight kids, but lost two.
Sank her grief into two cats
that used to rub outside her window.
Thin pane of glass.
Unbelievable to think they'd leave,
spend their nights
coiled around car tires.
"Will they come back?"
she asks me, her hands dangling
at her side like keys. "Yes, Margaret,
they'll come back." But I'm not sure.
I tell her an old stray used to visit
that very same window last winter.
Its back a sinewy river of ice.
We'd let it in to drink
from the small plate of milk.
Its tongue a small pink razor.
But when spring came it didn't come back.
I imagined all the rivers in the world
swollen with baskets, the sudden movement
of a hand among bullrushes.
Then one night I woke up,
saw its eyes coming toward me
dim as car lights.

Dolly and Rose

Dolly and Rose. Rose and Dolly.
Together in their pink cottage
sitting on the verandah
drinking gin through straws
wondering how all of a sudden
it got so dark. .
Their hair the same shade of red
when the sun glows angry.
The eyebrows arched into tepees.
Still laughing despite the Parkinson's,
mastectomies, untimely gout.
Like to play cards, blackjack,
their red nails covering
the cards like tacks.
Old flappers that still string
hearts like beads.
Their hands reach into paper bags,
pull out Crown Royal, soft and black
as the first day of alcohol.

Sisters

They dance the way
the night breaks
when it's mad for rain,
intent on clatter
intent on making a fissure.

Barebreasted
they let go of their thunder
in a final heave of hips
and thighs.

All around them,
the whiskey breaths,
hands pulsing like stars.

And after the last clap,
the last song's sung,
they'll cut the gold
out of their hair,
watch it fall
hard and yellow
as summer's old peels.

The Junk Man

He lived next door.
His wide chrome smile,
the lawn that shook like
a rusty dog. Afternoons
gleaming bright as tin cans
as the dragonflies hovered
over old toilet bowls
in delicate tremors.
How he'd walk between
the shells of cars,
pass them quietly
as if they were sleeping,
as if their tires
were still weary with roads.

Summer

The sun hung its rope
over our farm all summer

drew the earth
into dry puckers

sliced haystacks into matchsticks

squeezed my father's face
into a small red apple

the geese rattling like gourds
until one beak snapped

the rope, flung it like
a long yellow snake

bursting into bits of rain

jewels dripping until
the sky shimmered dark

Winter Mornings

We awaken and out slithers
morning, a sac of heat
my father drags
into the summer kitchen.

Inside the heat blowing
like dandelions.
The kitchen's soft down.

My family trades geese
for extra blankets.
Watches the snow tumble
like berries. Small red
knuckles of winter.

Garden

She moves in and out deciphering
the slender weight of asparagus,
the faint scent of peas. Slitting the pods,
small fetuses uncoil under her tongue.
Seeds pop between breaths. Near her
the stillness of cows steadying their bellies,
teats slackening, tame milk emptying into pails.
While birds, the colour of charred figs
wrap their wings in sun-splints.
Another leaf cools her face,
the hum of vegetables surfacing,
roots spreading, curious as hands.

Pigs

The barn door opens and the pig
lungs stretch like pink elastics.

His barn. His pigs.

Every spring my father grabs
their hind legs, feels their tails
straighten between his fingers.

Places them gently in the iron machine,
the blade taking their tiny male parts away,
dropping to the cement floor soft as plums,
the sweet-sick smell of blood.

Then their quick scampering away
to hide until they become big as bathtubs.

Six months later, the drive to the Keady market,
their ears like dried leaves
through the slats in the truck.

Walking around in the sawdust ring,
my father's eyes--two hard lights.

Half an hour later the 6,000 pounds
of pig flesh gone.

All winter, he dreams the soft
pockets of baseball gloves, the place
where his heart rubbed deep.

The Dry

In the summer kitchen,
the warm snooze of sun on your shoulders,
soft breeze of peaches on the sill.

I'll remember these the most.

Everywhere the quiet scrub of stubble
shrinking back into the earth.
You sit, stooped
listen to the fields tap with dust.

Far off, husks of old dog-howls
tumble under transport trucks.

Winter

We walk into winter,
slam face first into
its brilliant white globe,
take each flake on our tongues,
watch them melt into the nothingness
of our thirteen-year-old lives.

Around us the subdivision lying
flat and still as a winter corpse,
while inside your mother and father
eat take-out Chinese food,
roll pennies bright as butterscotch
for your college education.

Not knowing that one day Lori,
you'll be hitching across Canada,
a hole in the seat of your pants,
stoned, the highway skipping
like a Ferris wheel
beneath you.

No time for husbands or babies,
you'll roll from province
to province, weary stone
hardening.

II

THE DEAD LINE UP

The Dead Line Up

Every year the dead line up
for kisses. The boldest of them
pushing their way to the front,
professing love,,
the passionate tongue.

They want to be kissed
by the posties, the bakers
and the bricklayers.
They want to be kissed by angels,
their mouths tiny
gold bars.

No one turns them down.

Not even the bankers
cracking open their scotch.
Their fine white nails
hard as tombs.

Heart/Fish

Every spring the heart
gets thinner, its husky
muscle lies flapping
on a dock, upturned
and shining.

Its lips want water.
The soft back of a plum
under its tongue.

We throw the heart/fish
back in the water.
It pulses, the lake's
gold organ.

All day long, the delicate
beat of fish.

The Amber Crash

No. This isn't it.
Words like sandpaper
over our hearts,
the occasional
well-cooked meal.

Each day we leave
each other, come skulking
back at night,
demanding the same
sure flesh.

No. This isn't it.
It's too close to the bone.
When we touch
our hearts drop
from fifty stories.
The amber crash.

Thick Skin

Co-dependent, he says
as I step into the large
gulf of his footprints.
If he were a hippopotamus
I would ride on his back,
a small ticking bird,
peck at the laces of bugs.
He wouldn't even notice me.
Up there riding in the thick
scrotum of his nape.
And when he'd slip
into the river, I'd
stand at the very top
of his head, the hard
gold knob of his thoughts.
Watch the water spread
like glue over his skin.
Just before he'd go under
I'd peel back his lid
whisper, "I do."

Shipwrecked

When we were young
we could make our hearts
stick to each other
like burrs.
There was no such thing
as leaving. Just getting
lost as our legs
parted the ravine's grass.
Our voices were small
boomerangs gliding
over telephone wires.
We'd always come back
to each other, our legs
throbbing from imaginary
horses.
But now, not even rope
will hold us down.
Our hearts keep floating
up in different parts
of the world.
These small ship-
wrecks.

Grapes

They lie secure in their
green sacs, small
soft scrotums
that push at the tips
of my thumbs.
I peel them back
delicious one night stands.
Their translucent skins
cover my tongue
gentle as the heartbeats
of moths.

The Well

It happens when I put
my ear to his chest
wait for that hook of blood
to snag. I look up
and the sky is a bright
blue eye. My own heart
empties, a small bucket
lowering into the dark
well of his body.

I wait for the clank,
the thud that tells me
it's touched ground,
the small black stone
of his soul.

Alone

After a while
you get comfortable

listening to your
blood pass over your bones.

The love and hate
battling every cell.

If only alone didn't
mean peace.
And together unrest.

Taking Off Our Clothes

What really happens
when we take off our clothes?
Do our souls shrivel
to tiny apples?
Do the ghosts of our great
grandmothers hang from the ceiling,
blanch us in light?

That necessity to pull
the sheets over us,
to bury the skin-pools.
Yet our eyes glowing
like emeralds
their green lights
casting over our bodies.

On the First Night of Our Love

No one said a word. Not even
the dark spinning like batons.
Your fingers shaped
into every letter of the alphabet.
On my back, "grief" was spelt.
In the morning my girl's
face was gone.
The trees broke sentences.

Secret Admirer

We walk by each other,
old bones meeting for the first time.
We know the rattling inside,
the dry cage that holds our hearts,
the flowers that burst into all the dead
people we know. It is not enough
to walk with our thoughts at our sides--
those obedient sniffing dogs.
We must let them loose,
the careful word-links
that form the chain.

Boxes

You keep climbing
into boxes, walking from
corner to corner stubbing
your toes. "There's no where
to go," you keep saying.
Boxes, smooth as bone.

Even your heart has become a box,
its four chambers pumping at 90 degree angles.
At night I try to walk into your dreams,
enter by your small square lobe,
a star gone wrong.

But you wake and swat me away.
"There's nothing you can do."

Skaters

As I watch you sleeping
I know what you do and don't let in.
I know that your dreams curl their tails
toward you, how ice skates take you over
the fast stream of your life.
You can't stop. Your arms open
a wide net of disasters.
You hang on, past the snap
of ice, your bones'
sinking sailboat.

The Sky Dominated Me

Not once, but twice it forced me
to lie on my back, tuck in my
limbs until I became a round disc of flesh,
a trembling piece of sod.

Not once did I say stop.
I could have gotten up.
But what good would
it have done, my arms
pinned like a brooch?

Something in the Streets

There is something in the streets
today reminding me of you.
A newspaper blows up an alley
wraps around my bare ankles.
It's you, isn't it,
saying, "Cover up. Cover up."
When I pass these old brick buildings,
the window blinds snap up suspiciously,
the sadness of inside.
I look up and see the sky
pull its kite over trees.
The way your body pulls
the same tired shadow
day after day.

River and Anger

The river is sure
and so it surges forward
tumbles salmon like dice.
We sit on the banks
watching, quiet as stone.
Our bodies give off nothing.
We would like, just once,
to be that angry.
Be able to move with the power of storms.
Pick up the world by our teeth,
give it a shake. But we are
not like the river and our anger
flows quiet as blood.

Photograph of Ghosts

Even though you take
my photograph, it isn't
my face that you will have
a week later when you
are sitting in the back
of a jeep, a bowl
of dust in your lap.

You won't have my
restless arms or my
eyes that disappear
like clams when you
come near.

You'll have something else:

A lost strand of your
mother climbing
the wooden stairs,
her legs like small
blue lights. Or the cherry
blossoms. Each one
a warm pink ghost.

Your hand opening
to the tiny traffic
of lines. Each one
darkening to heart.

III

TALK

Black and White World

It's 2:00 a.m. and people are out as they should be.
Friday night punching in once again.
Voices arc over the street in night rainbows.
I lie awake, glimpsing the black
and white world through blinds.
I wait for the next trumpet chord,
the words from drunks to slide
like cars over this icy night.
Not even Christmas sounds this good.
If I try, I know I can
open them.

Talk

The stars consume the small
pond of moon
alone in its furious light.

In my livingroom
voices lap like waves,
smash up against the couch
then recede again.

The well-oiled conversations.
Our habit of leaving
our best thoughts
in the kitchen sink. Words
spinning like olives
in Martini glasses.

Another mouth drips
its rich red sound.
A basket of hearts
tumbles across the carpet.

Slamming

I've always lived in houses
where doors slammed and the ivy
leaned precariously off the walls
trying to touch the shore of trees.
Those doors ripe with sound. Not knowing
why they had been used to bear
the brunt of an argument, another
unhappy day put to rest.
That one sudden fling--
the hand a dark wide paddle
as the fury of air swirled
under cracks like fire hungry for oxygen.
With each slam my body flexed
my eardrums cast out like
corks afloat in a storm.

I Am Not Afraid of The Dark

The dark unfurls
like a thought

slithers down the
hall, the apartment's
clean bone

I am not afraid
of the dark

(although it would
like me to be)

I flick my fingers across
the hard ribs of blinds

in between each one
the night enters
hungrily

as the dark tightens
round the livingroom

cont'd.

plant-like, it reaches
out to drink the small

white drops of my breath

Ubud, Bali

for Paula

We spend our days stepping
over the mud's gentle
perking, the rain's broken chimes.
On the ledges of shopkeepers' doors
the bright blood of petals.
Oblations for the gods.

On the walk down Monkey Road
the hundred dogs like torn
flags that have been left
to flap on their tiny
withered legs.

But the monkeys.
Oh how they come at us
like small children,
insolent beggars.
We have nothing to give them.
The German lady bends down,
her hands scattering
nuts like gold falling
once more from the sky.

Kondohsan Goes For Pizza

It's five o'clock and so Kondohsan
slides her window shut.

Her face disappearing
 then reappearing like a small
yellow sun over my shoulder.

Every Thursday we go for pizza.

 Rub our taste buds
 over chili,
the hot curls of banana peppers.

Not rice, gohan puffing out of bowls.

She dreams pepperoni--the tongue's
 hot gold coin.

We drive out of town
 past the rice fields
the women gleaming like hooks.

Even the wind tosses slices of field.

Seeing a Geisha in Kyoto

We were looking for Christmas
dinner, a burst of cranberries,
a curve of a drumstick.
Instead, the raw quiver of fish,
the small pearls of roe
dripping from chopsticks.

And then we turned, and saw her--
the flash of her kimono,
her pale white face
like the moon coming down.

Night and Sky

The gold lope of stars
never stops here.
Like a storm clicking
on, the colours boil brighter
while the sky extends
its one torn muscle.
Forget the sea,
bird-waved, the sun
somersaulting down
each night.
Here, the sky slits
open, mad as blood,
a tiger rolls over the moon.
The night rocks back and forth,
a dark black bell.

Summer Solstice

Night warms
its soft yellow egg.
The moon bounces off
the equator, a small
hungry ball.
The whole earth leans
cooler now, a drop
of star beating.
A grey-out of birds
takes the ocean
by its corners
shakes out its shells.

Thaw

There is a raw sound
of flowers opening

winter tearing from a tree

I pull at the ground
still frozen

my hands come up dark
the nails violent with spring

I tilt my ears to
the small struggle of seeds

desperate to break out
breathe that pinch of air

lungs those tiny strings
that snap as sky lets
go of birds

these small unnamed deaths

Immigrant

I keep on hearing stories
of how easy it was.
Boats would land
and a new country
floated up in the form
of gold fields.
So they built their houses,
hung lace curtains
from windows.
Whittled nights away
like bars of soap.
That was fifty years ago.
Now they come.
Learn English, that difficult
vegetable they cook
over and over again.

One on One

Through the quarter-inch
thick glass they face me:
the bulging eyes,
the rotating lids.

When my thumb presses
against the tank,
the glass blooms a white
mushroom, the thick noise
of skin. They flash by
again and again,
the way only fish can
pace. Without legs,
their bellies a stroke
of hope ripping
over rock.

IV

SOFTLY IN GERMAN

Old

Late August and the world
braces for fall. The blood
of trees a little slower,
the ground, a smooth brown
trunk that won't open.

The earth's getting older.
It waits for the sky's final snap,
the milky eyes of ponds
to float shut.

I climb the hill, looking
for nothing special,
content with the weeds
sinewy round my ankles.

The stars have nothing left to give.
Yet they persist like
the small unattended flowers of night.

I watch the sac of moon
descend, heavy and blood-rimmed.
It anchors itself on the hill
waits for the sun's
sharp thistle.

Border

What good would it do
to wake you?
Sleeping man, whiskers
rising like tiny
black flags on your face.
How is it that you look so peaceful
yet wake with your head in your hands?
Do you see the gold gills of light
that breathe through the dark?
Did you know they are still selling roses
in Warsaw, drinking the cool
blue streams of vodka?
After three months you still
don't know how to step back
into your country. You dream its border.

Marek

You remember Lublin,
the food lines, the blunt fists
of men, and especially
the small clouds of alcohol blooming
out from coats white as winter flowers.

Survival, you said. Your own father
stooped over the kitchen table
at night while your mother's
hands combed the rosary. Each
bead a dark warm star.

The first time they sent
you to prison, dragged
you out of history class.
Impudent Pole saying Pilsudski
was the real hero.

Some mornings you awaken
still holding a scrap of Poland
in your hands, the scarf
of your last lover, your grandfather's
winter hair.

cont'd.

But you are here now
and you have forgotten how to be strong.
You don't know what to do
with all this peace.
I watch your body enter morning,
a small dark sliver.

*Joseph Pilsudski was a prominent figure
in Poland's fight for independence.

The Quiet

The women huddle round
the fire, shelling nuts,
husking stars from their children's eyes.
One by one they stub their voices
out on the soft thick of smoke.
Coals smoulder pulling off
the last bits of flame.

They lug their hearts
over the hills.
Coyotes nip at their skirts,
their smiles ghosting in
the shade of trees.

All night, the lunar smell
as the river rushes over stone.

Drifter

A notch of mid-morning sun warms his head.

The wind's smooth as ball-bearings.

He calls out to passersby--

change, tokens, tickets.

The clear wrapper of his voice.

He remembers the landlady who stole his gin,

the man at the depot who tore

up his ticket like bread.

If he could find the thread to his heart,

that one twig of fresh blood,

he would tie off

his birth cord; call home

the birds.

A Small Black Bundle

When you came to this country
you carried a small black
bundle over your shoulder.
It went everywhere you went.
To the supermarket,
the English classes, and especially
with you to bed at night
stretching like a dark canopy
over your long August body.
And even though you wouldn't
let me, I carried it also.
Two hobos walking down a road.
And sometimes I'd stop to open that bundle,
and see that there was nothing
really there: a comb, an empty bottle.
But you'd reach into your bundle
anyway, pull out the past--
the living and breathing,
a dark glowing dragon.
Still, I couldn't find anything,
so I traded in my bundle for a basket
of apples. Opulent and red,
I ate them with passion
those small hard lifebuoys
bursting from my hands.

When Samson Cut Off his Hair

When Samson cut off his hair
in my dream
the whole world dropped
a little darker.
Trees webbed their black
branches together,
the sea flipped
over its dark shells.
Nothing could help
the small gunned
fish swimming
the ocean's
barrel.

When No one Hears

We send our voices up
in small white clouds.
They drift on the ceiling
touching no one.
Below the aroma of conversation,
lips bursting open
like fruit.
All night we peel
the words from each
other's mouths.
There is nothing that
escapes the gold trap
of our teeth.

Solitaire

On the first anniversary
of your son's death
we play solitaire,
the two of us facing
each other, fingers
trembling over the surface
of cards. I watch you
like a mother, my eyes
meet yours bouncing off
in small blue lights.
I am your twelve-year-old
babysitter, the one who sucks
on your white butts when
you leave. The one who
tries on your long black
gloves, the hat that
pockets your fine brown hair.
You are safe with me
you think. I won't open

cont'd.

the past, the pool that
still lies dark and quiet,
the ghost of your child
underwater. You go out
a lot, your hair is different.
You and your husband are more
polite to each other now.
You never fight.
And that new child growing
inside of you, it floats
as quiet as the other one. Still,
your hands circle your girth,
smooth out the turbulent
water. I am thankful for rain,
the way the trees
refuse to be still
or silent.

Julieann

What was it about you
that made you ripe
for us? What made
us choose you? Everyday
your name carved on school
seats, your initials
like dead larvae
on a tree.

Julieann, we said.

Julieann. Then cut
your picture up in
small triangles
while you looked on,
your eyes like goldfish
through your thick glasses.

All day hunched over
your book, the first to perspire,
wear a bra. We wanted
your quivering voice,
its dark feather
ruffling the sky.

The Flight of Angels

We take the new war
and lie it over the old war.
A hot, glistening bandage.
Watch the old scars heal.
The tanks, B-52's, the burned
dog tags, discarded toys
rattling around in the same box.
Celebrations break out
in the form of parades.
In every small town across
North America, mothers, fathers
come to watch their children
blow their souls
through a brass trumpet.
Even the Scarecrow is there
clapping his gloved hands
together as straw drifts
across the crowd like
the ghostlimbs of men.
Watch the mothers put their
hands across their chests,
bloom their hands into carnations.

cont'd.

the urgent ticking
of their hearts as the old
soldiers in baseball
caps and golf jackets
rise off the pavement,
moth-like. Hands fluttering
like the wings of angels.

Softly in German

"To capture prisoners lie up close
in rear of enemy you have located and
collar any stooge who moves away or
comes up. Either tackle him low
or call to him softly in German."

From the "Allied School of Infantry."

Slowly, untie your voice.
Its long red ribbon,
its corpulent sound.

Let it float over trenches,
slide past the ears of sleeping men.

Watch each other's mouths become
a different shape, a different language.

The tongue a pick axe.
Those small, chisselled words that kill.

The Hunted

It is barely seven o'clock
and your feet kiss the cobblestones
praying for swiftness,
the speed of deer, even though
you say you are not hunted
only wanted. Like food rations
or meat glistening in butcher shops.
The whole city's empty, gutted
and drying with old blood.
Still your blood pumps with purpose.
You pass an old woman
at a flower stall.
When she smiles, her face
becomes the enemy
or the friend, the one to trust
or not trust depending on how the hair
rises at the back of your neck.
You walk on, the scent of tulips
a thick June smell, the sound
of feet behind you telling you not
to look back. You are the hunted
although you say this is only
an imaginary hunt.

cont'd.

In a park, you stop to drink
from a fountain,
breathe the warm Warsaw spring
as birds hang like dark cloths
from trees. You know when
that hand finally clutches
your shoulder,
you will turn to meet them.
Even as you step into the dark
car, you will smile at the pretty
girls. Imagine tulips
without bent stems.

Boy Soldiers

Are everywhere.

Peering from behind
buildings or out of ditches,
their hands balancing
grenades like eggs.

Or firing AK-47's.
Their childhood escaping
in the form of a bullet.

Except for those small breaths
of boy wriggling through their lungs.

The Day Frank Drowned

He went to Vic's Grill,
ordered ham and eggs,
listened to the low cackle from booths
that said, "Cuckold. Cuckold."
He read the paper,
drank three cups of coffee,
left a quarter under the plate
like a small piece of his heart.
Then went for his morning walk,
passed the Greyhound station,
the large yellow laundromat
with dryers spinning like all
the days of his life.
Then he went to the river
now swollen and brown.
Wading up to his knees
he waited for the current
to catch him, the river to open
its long cold pair of arms.
As it took him, he saw the rocks
lined up on the riverbank, bright
as campfires at the end of summer.

When Trees Aren't Enough

May 7, 1991

When the earth opens,
mothers run for the bamboo grove.
The deep roots holding,
sucking the earth
back into place.

When the tidal wave hits,
mothers run for the trees.
Hand over their babies
like fallen fruit to the branches.
Until the water goes down.

But when the mothers return
their babies are gone,
slipped like buttons
through holes.

The mothers close the trees
like umbrellas.
Watch their soft leaves
turn into small fists
that shake up at the sky.

The Last Morning

In Germany a streetcar stops.
People get on and off
in a smooth procession
of steps. Morning
climbs like a gold cat
through the window.
For this, the people
give their thanks.
Except for the man at
the back of the bus, the one
who unzips his vanilla skin
lets the animal out.
Takes another man
by the dark scruff of his neck.
Throws him out the door.
His skull splitting
open like the grief
of the world.

Hunter

He cuts the doe warm,
the liver-smoothness when the hide opens.
His hands sink in deep,
twist like a cork, pull out that living string--
a small heart, that one hooked jewel.
He presses his ear to the snow,
listens to moles chew back their shadows,
tails threading through dark.
Another five miles and the telephone poles vanish,
just bush wetting bush.
There are things too small for his eyes--
crow scratches on ice,
old trails grunting with chase-memories.
He walks, steady, the scent crisp in his palms.
Above, the tracking moon pulling his limbs apart.

Recovery

January 21, 1991

Last night the sky was beautiful.
God it was beautiful!
Everywhere, the small teats
of stars fizzing,
that one opal shock of moon.
And then it was over.
The houses looked like houses
again. Small, tight,
knuckled into the ground.
Only the faint whine of windows.
Then the morning came
like a goldfish floating
to the top of a tank.

Appendix 1

"Recovery" appeared in A Discord of Flags: Canadian Poets Write About the Persian Gulf War: April, 1991.

"The Quiet" and "Marek" will appear in the League of Canadian Poets' 1991 National Poetry Contest anthology.