

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Victorian Lady Travellers

by

Nancy Holmes

A THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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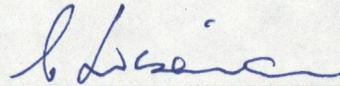
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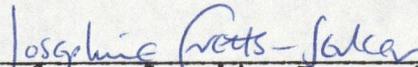
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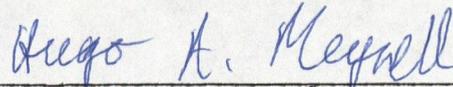
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For Leslie, Douglas, Ian and Alex.

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## Introduction

Ever since I can remember I have been fascinated by the nineteenth century. The books I remember most vividly from childhood and my early teenage years are the novels of Jane Austen, the Brontes, E. Nesbit, L.M. Montgomery, Lewis Carroll. Somehow those books I read when I was between the ages of ten and fifteen are the ones most permanently embedded in me and they are the books that made me first want to write stories of my own. It seems that when I write I am grappling with many emotions and ideas that grow out of my own experience as a woman, a lover, a mother, a daughter, yet somehow I am always tapping into that first love of books, that root of my desire to write. I feel, sometimes, when I write I am travelling between the present and the past, both my own past and present and past and present centuries.

Just before I started to write these poems, I chanced upon a paperback called Victorian Lady Travellers by Dorothy Middleton. I had bought it in Vancouver a couple of years earlier, and had put it aside at the time. Now I opened it up and began to read about several women of the nineteenth century who had abandoned the conventional life of domesticity, the Church, and the usual woman's lot, to become "globe trotteresses," as one contemporary called them.

Somehow, the idea of myself surrounded by young children, mired in the home and all it entails, reading about these women from my adopted century romping through the world, made a thousand connections in my mind. It delighted me to start imagining poems about these women-- to be able to abandon the home and travel with them, to stay in my own century and yet go back into theirs, to bring them into my home and use my writing to tap into theirs, to stay in my own country and write my way into places I have never been. I also wanted to write poems for the type of Victorian woman who hardly ever had poems written about her: the middle-aged spinster. Almost immediately, then, I decided to write a book about Victorian Lady Travellers. The next problem was which women to choose and how to go about doing it.

As I began to research I realized how far afield, how frequently, how many, English Victorians travelled. If it was not the Great Age of Exploration, it was the Great Age of Travel-- not the civilizing Grand Tours of the Eighteenth Century, but travel to wild and exotic places, the more untamed the better. It was the age of Franklin, Stanley and Livingstone, missionaries, geological and natural history voyages. The scope of their interests and voyages amazed me and daunted me. It seemed less unnatural that women, too, would be travelling and I began to have to sort out why and what type of women travelled and to take a representative from as many of these types as possible. There were women who

travelled for adventure; women who travelled to escape loneliness and a stifling existence; women who travelled to further their knowledge and improve their minds; women who travelled because their husbands travelled; women who travelled for a cause-- usually to improve the health or religion of the "heathens," but even some suffragettes who wanted to prove anything a man could do they could do better.

The four women travellers in this thesis have something of each of these motives in their lives, for Marianne North wanted to escape loneliness, Isabella Bird hated her stifling life, Mary Kingsley collected statistics and facts like a sponge, and Mabel Loomis Todd was an "adventuress." However, I have concentrated on what seem their most prominent motives and desires: Marianne North's love of botany, Isabella Bird's adventuring, Mary Kingsley's cause, and Mabel Loomis Todd's reluctant accompanying of a husband. In the end, I focused on these four women out of a long list although it was difficult to pass by such women as Kate Marsden, a nurse who wrote a book called On Sledge and Horseback to Outcast Siberian Lepers or May French Seldon, also known as Bebe Bwana, who consorted with tribal African chieftains wearing a ball gown and a sword or Fanny Bullock Workman who placed suffragette placards on Himalayan peaks or... the list is endless and exciting and I felt I could have gone on and on. However, since I had to limit myself, I chose the four women I did because they are my favourites, they are the best

writers and recorders of their experiences, and they are the women whom I would have most loved to meet.

I decided to try and use the form of a narrative in these poems, something which I had never done before in poetry. The narrative form implies movement through time and space which the discrete lyric can sometimes block. The lyric holds time within the space of the page and within the words while a narrative implies mobility. I thought that poems about travel would be ideally suited to a narrative style, and in fact the first piece I wrote was "The Ascent of Fuji the Peerless" about Mabel Loomis Todd and I used an actual prose narrative. However, as I found, the short story seems to be more closely related to the lyric poem than to true narrative prose-- one does concentrate time and travel into something almost static in a short story. When I began to write the poems in the Lady Traveller section, I found that I had to try to combine narrative and lyric. I was not writing chronological, factual stories but psychodramas, mysteries, poems that are linked by all kinds of connections and threads of theme and place. I read other works like Margaret Atwood's The Journals of Susannah Moodie, Michael Ondaatje's The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and Stephen Scobie's The Ballad of Isabel Gunn and realized there was a form available, a form that seems particularly congenial to contemporary Canadian poets-- the long sequence of lyrics that creates a narrative structure, even if it does not actually, step-by-step, develop a

narrative flow. In the end, this is the form I have used-- the lyrical sequence which uses documents and narrative prose to bridge individual poems.

In some ways, the bridges between the poems became my touchstones. One of my own reactions to poems like Atwood's and Ondaatje's is that their tone is almost unrelieved. The violence and intensity of Moodie's or Billy the Kid's voice which, even when humorous, unified their books into one penetrating vision, seemed inappropriate to my collection. Partially because I was writing about several separate visions and partially because I want the irony of these Victorian lives to be always present but never damning, I started to use documents and comments on the action to give the reader back his or her own perspective-- to play on the pull between past and present in a serious (and not excluding comic) way. For I do not think that any of these lives were tragic lives-- on the contrary. They were rich and fulfilled and it is a mistake to see these particular Victorian women as victims of their time.

These bridges, or documents which I have culled from numerous sources (and some which I have written myself), had to be carefully considered. I was always aware that my research could potentially interfere with the poems themselves. I had to try to let the poems speak for themselves and try to get as much information as was necessary without presuming too much knowledge on the part of the reader

or without swamping the reader with too much extraneous fact. How much to tell became the most problematic dilemma. I tried various strategies to overcome this problem and ended up dealing with it differently in each of the sequences. With Marianne North I gave almost no biographical data and stayed within her mind. With Isabella Bird, I tried to write a more factual "story" and thus the sequence is the longest one in the book and I made full use of documents and comments and some of the poems further the "plot" as much as reveal the workings of her mind or emotion. With Mary Kingsley, I used her own writing extensively to create her personality which is perhaps her most attractive and appealing quality and I felt she should speak for herself. And, as noted above, I used an actual prose narration of an event (which I made up - in other words what happens to Mrs. Todd in the Rockies did not, as far as I know, actually happen) in the Mabel Loomis Todd section.

This is probably a good place to mention my particular relation to biography. Another problem I encountered was the conflict between biographical fact and the urge to take some poetic license. I would like to state here that I have in almost all cases adhered very closely to the known biographical facts about these women (where they travelled, whom they met, events that happened are all taken from their own writings). However I have elaborated on their emotional states. I have fictionalized their inner lives and stressed

certain events and symbols in ways that they never did. (For instance, Marianne North certainly loved pitcher plants but was probably unaware that she painted them in a most Freudian manner-- they have the raw, red wounded quality of a vaginal opening. (I would love to use her painting of Nepenthes northiana as the cover illustration to this collection of poems.) Or to give another example, I have used the image of a single eye frequently in the Isabella Bird Bishop sequence-- Rocky Mountain Jim did indeed have only one eye, and she did see a tiger's eye in Malaysia-- but she never comments in her writing on any emotional connection.) I have tried to use the facts of their lives as a basis for exploring their emotional lives, and have tried to be faithful to both. I wanted to look at the world the way they looked at it and have tried to fuse myself into their world as much as possible when speaking in their voices.

This is one of the reasons I have used rhyme and meter in many of these poems. When these women thought about poetry, they would have naturally thought of verse in traditional forms. In the Isabella Bird sequence I have used these forms often, usually when the emotion is particularly heightened and yet repressed or controlled in spite of the strength of the feeling. Thus when Mountain Jim speaks to Miss Bird about his love, the poem is impressionistic free verse because she is in the grip of terrible feeling. However, when she leaves him, the poem is written in a

variation of sonnet form because although she is feeling deeply, she has her emotion under some fierce kind of constraint. Therefore, I am playing with the quality of verse forms-- how strict form can contain and control strong feeling, how free verse can be a "wild scheme" and yet deliberately move the story forward in a more or less orderly way. Finally, I continue my use of traditional forms into the second half of the book (especially the sonnet) largely because I derive so much personal pleasure out of writing formal poems. I feel I have a lot to learn about this skill and I want to be able to confidently use this most difficult poetic art. Some of these poems, then, have quite consciously been learning experiences for me about my craft. I hope that they do not come across as exercises. Each formally crafted piece is meant to be first and foremost a poem.

As I wrote each sequence, I was increasingly aware of the connections between all these women-- Mary Kingsley's father knew all the main characters in the Isabella Bird story; Mabel Loomis Todd travelled the Rocky Mountains, although in quite a different fashion than Isabella Bird; Isabella Bird and Marianne North were together invited to fashionable London "salons" and were treated rather like freaks; Marianne North and Mary Kingsley were both fascinated by Charles Darwin. As I thought about Darwin, the man who made perhaps the most influential journey of the century, I thought I saw a way to tie the whole section up: a sequence about Darwin's wife-- one

of the women who stayed at home with her family, who once married never travelled, who seemed to lead the most exemplary Victorian female life-- children, husband, home. She was the link between the voyager and the stay-at-home, the woman who nursed and nurtured the century's greatest traveller at her own English hearth. I want her to be the last word on these women, for, in spite of the numerous women travellers, women for the most part did stay home, as I am doing now in my own life. Her story brought me back to my own world so that I could end this collection with Part II-- poems about my own time and place. I have kept the length of this section comparable to the average length of the previous sequences, in order to make my own voice only one of the many in this collection.

If this seems ironic, that the most conventional woman brings me back to the late twentieth century, well, that is an intentional inversion. For, except for Mabel Loomis Todd who had one daughter who was largely raised by Mrs. Todd's mother, none of these other women did participate in motherhood, raising children, the daily stuff of life for most women even today and, at this time of my life, the mystery of children seems to be my most urgent preoccupation when I am not reading Victorian novels. And like Victorian novels, having children and living within a marriage pulls me constantly from the present to the past, a memory of my own childhood jolts me back and then my children's sticky hands

reach out and grab me into this moment again. And the marvel and magic of lyric poetry is for me that attempt to hold the past and present there, together, still for a split second, on the page.

VICTORIAN LADY TRAVELLERS

## PART I

## VICTORIAN LADY TRAVELLERS

...It was a Hill  
Of Paradise, the highest, from whose top  
The Hemisphere of Earth in clearest Ken  
Stretcht out to amplest reach of prospect lay...  
His Eye might there command wherever stood  
City of old or modern Fame, the Seat  
Of mightiest Empire, from the destined Walls  
Of Cambalu, seat of Cathaian Can  
And Samarchand by Oxus, Temir's Throne,  
To Paquin of Sinaean Kings, and thence  
To Agra and Lahor of great Mogul  
Down to the gold'n Chersonese ...

(Milton, Paradise Lost, Book 11)

Victorian Lady Travellers  
OR  
How You Found the Book

This fixed idea I've never travelled  
and been six years chafing in the house  
(the house has changed,  
it's just got crowded  
and no room to swing  
an arm, a leg, a door)

I see is sheer delight.  
From the back of a room  
you wave a book.  
This is your time, you said,  
the volume falling into my cupped hands.

Now I remember: it was Vancouver.  
The hotel with the wonderful bed  
and sheets flung open.  
Never has a peach tasted so yellow  
as the one you bought  
when we were walking down  
the book-lined street.

Reading, walking back,  
a lake breaks open  
as the canoe splits through  
the mirror of trees,  
past the crooked graveyards of the Yukon,  
past the blue-skinned Albanian mountains  
adrift on the Adriatic sea,  
churning on and on  
until the sudden becalmed  
moment beside the belt of railway tracks  
in a waist of prairie grass--  
derailed.  
Derailed! And exulting to be derailed  
on a yellow Manitoba day.

And standing still  
my fingers touch the sheaf of pages.  
Where their story ends  
I travel in.

With one arm I teach the baby  
to wave bye-bye, bye-bye,  
while I hold his body close  
with my other hand.

The Body of My Garden

Marianne North

(1830 - 1890)

2d August, 1881  
Down, Beckingham, Kent

My dear Miss North, I am much obliged for the 'Australian Sheep', which is very curious. If I had seen it from a yard's distance, lying on a table, I would have wagered that it was a coral of the genus Porites. I am so glad that I have seen your Australian pictures, and it was extremely kind of you to bring them here. To the present time I am often able to call up with considerable vividness scenes in various countries which I have seen, and it is no small pleasure; but my mind in this respect must be a mere barren waste compared with your mind. I remain, dear Miss North, yours, truly obliged,

Charles Darwin

I. In the country house where I grew up,  
I learned music and flower painting,  
primrose, bluebell, violet, cowslip,  
all ladylike accomplishments.

But when I was forty, Papa died.  
I still can hardly speak of it.  
It was the death that like an axe  
cut through my bright and living wood.

I took my easel near the Equator  
where no cold could harden my hands  
nor fill my bones with pain.  
No man, no child, no home, no God,

what could I do? But in Jamaica  
I saw a winter cotton tree  
standing like a ghost against a forest  
of evergreens, encroached by the embrace

of orchids, wild pines and other plants  
that lodged themselves in the soft white bark  
and branches. I saw this was my body  
and my calling. I knew then

I could turn my art into my science  
and yet stay womanly and domestic.  
I'd travel hidden jungles and paint  
tropical flowers in their homes.

II. I begin to oil incessantly.  
The paints dream wet California trees  
that swell enormously at the base  
and rise bare for half their mighty lengths.  
At Lahore I stroke waxy pods of flowers  
one foot long,  
and stir water tanks that brim with lotus.  
On warm islands the coco de mer  
palms are in full fruit.  
I peel the heart-shaped outer shell  
and find a centre of white jelly.  
Beside the mud of a swollen Indian river  
I take opium to prevent infection  
and sketch the long inflorescence  
of the male screw pine swinging  
above shaggy buffalo,  
and Hindu temples.  
The blossoms of Japan are too cold  
so I sail to Borneo  
and ship crates of canvas back to London.  
Ah, here, here, I find  
those plants most particularly mine,  
the pitcher plants  
growing wild.  
I insert my easel into the soft earth,  
paint the horn-like funnels and fiery  
open lips.  
The pitchers grow  
into perfect wounds.

III. I only go home to frame my canvas  
and to catch another ocean liner  
aching in its cold berth.

I read more books on botany.  
Look how Darwin marvels his pencil  
into the mouths of orchids  
to probe their nectaries.  
I long to trace the delicate calyx  
again  
under his direction.  
Brazil crawls beneath my skin.

The sea draws me out.  
I am Ceyloned.  
Vanilla, orchids, hibiscus  
flourish around the world  
if you can find them.

Now I know the secret side of a single love.  
I paint my own new temple.  
Darwin, priest of men,  
turns his shadowed head towards me.  
I want him to smile,  
bless this joining  
with myself.

IV. To give an idea what the above figures really mean, I will briefly show the possible rate of increase of Orchis Maculata: an acre of land would hold 174,240 plants, each having a space of six inches square, and this would be just sufficient for their growth; so that, making the fair allowance of 400 bad seeds in each capsule, an acre would be thickly clothed by the progeny of a single plant. At the same rate of increase, the grandchildren would cover a space slightly exceeding the island of Anglesea; and the great-grandchildren of a single plant would nearly clothe with one uniform green carpet the entire surface of the land throughout the globe... What checks the unlimited multiplication of the Orchidae throughout the world is not known... [But] Nature tells us, in the most emphatic manner, that she abhors perpetual self-fertilization.

Charles Darwin  
(The Various Contrivances By Which  
Orchids Are Fertilized By Insects)

V.           This, then, was Eden.  
              A planet liquid  
              with orchid and ocean

              until murdering Nature  
              scythed the green,  
              ripped man from out of woman,  
              killed my father.

              A green serpent is draped  
              on the white chair  
              beside my easel.  
              My brush is too soft.

              I am growing deaf with vegetation.  
              The earth sags under the weight  
              of my canvas science  
              and voices mutter obscenities  
              in my head.  
              Undress. Show them.

              The gallery at Kew  
              will take my paintings.  
              I must entice ten thousand people  
              to glide in and out  
              my folds of oil.  
              I botanize the trim and doorways  
              with vines and flowers.

              Come in.  
              And they do.

              Look at the elaborate trap  
              of the pitcher plant.

              Slowly, oh millennium,  
              the plants begin to prey  
              on animal life.

VI. Love is the device for preservation.  
Time is pouring out of the jungles  
and the Amazon is a great vein  
in my throat.  
We are Nature's accomplice.  
The colonists do not love their own plants.  
The great forests are butchered  
and perfect English gardens  
eat Australian soil.

I am not a real artist  
but a flank attack.

Even when I retire  
to my country village  
the jungle wants me to protect it.  
Each day a crate arrives  
on my slate doorstep,  
swelling with moss-packed plants.  
I can hear nothing but their sighs  
as I bury their white nerves  
in the brindling Cotswold dirt.  
The work, the endless work,  
of adjustment.

I have two of the most exotic gardens  
in England  
and one will die.

I look out of the window  
and my hands thatch my mind shut.  
I see no sweeter species  
than primrose, bluebell, violet, cowslip.

Soon, soon, they shall root in my chilly body,  
and grow into my English skin.

The North Gallery at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew houses 832 oils painted by Marianne North. The paintings are depictions of plants from every vegetated continent in the world. Marianne North's name was given to one genus and four species that she either discovered or was the first to describe: Northea seychellana, Areca northiana, Kniphofia northiae, Crinum northianum, and Nepenthes northiana (the world's largest pitcher plant).

The Golden Chersonese, or the Way Thither

Isabella Lucy Bird Bishop

(1831 - 1904)

Prologue

Home: Scotland, 1872

Dim pale island  
paralysed in a cold sea.

So still.

My nerves are  
long grey streets of stone  
that choke in bone.

The church is a pair of locked hands  
that make ribs above my head.

Father, aunts, all dead  
in stones of cage.

My sister sits so silently.

I can hear the three clocks  
in the house  
all ticking.

## Ill Health: A Memory of an Early Journey

I was a young woman  
among so many Americans at the Falls  
with missionary work tying my eyes  
and only alone when I looked into the torrent

now some supple sense hallucinates  
Niagara

sliding over that glass curve  
my eyes endless sliding over  
that still moving curve

a light warms nothing  
not a room  
not the damp rail

the sun is outside  
this chain of spray and mist

I see  
but my skin is falling

a helpless travel  
hearing nothing but that roar  
of crushed water

my back would break open  
the corset bones crack

must peel my eyes  
from the hypnotic

stiffly start to back  
away

## Reaching the Sandwich Isles: 1873

The undone green thaw of a tropical storm.  
My eyelids lighten.  
The Equator is the largest circle;  
its hot wedge opens every plant.  
The islands lick the warm sea  
and my spine

becomes elastic.  
I turn astride my horse  
lift my leg over  
the nut brown neck.

For the first time I feel  
how the gallop meets me  
in the thigh.

## A Vow to Travel Unencumbered

"I may come and join you,  
If Hawaii is so perfect,"  
My unmarried sister says.

To be up high and gallop down a slope  
And up again, is all I want.  
Share? Share this with anyone?  
I can't.

To leave the scented Sandwich Isle coast,  
To wade through lush and blade and fern  
And meet the foot of lavabeds  
That burn

No longer here but take the horse between  
My legs to reach the hurting source.  
The Climb! Each stride his hard legs take  
Is mine!

A mine of living rock. So swift is this.  
What will you say when I write of it?  
But I have breathed a volcano's breath  
And looked

Straight into its original eye.

## Another Proposal Before She Leaves

Mr. Wilson has asked me to be his wife.  
A wealthy, respectable man with  
a great plantation.  
But it is twenty years too late and tame.  
I am no longer an old-fashioned lass but  
a woman of Victoria's reign.  
I will not be joined,  
not yet, not now.

But, although this may be  
unpardonable vanity  
in a woman of forty,  
this small romance has turned me out,  
made me long for greater things.

I am leaving for the Rocky Mountains,  
and more  
climbs.

The Peak

### A Selected History of Her Destination

Early in 1860, Joel Estes recovering from gold fever found a tender valley along the flanks of Long's Peak. With his wife and son, Milton, he moves into the Park.

After the desperate winter of 1865 they abandon their homestead just as Jules Verne in France installs a 280 foot telescope on the top of Long's Peak to watch a projectile land on the moon.

In 1868 James Nugent, also known as Rocky Mountain Jim, settles at the entrance to Estes Park, in a place called Muggins Gulch. Some say he is a nephew of General Beauregard.

In 1869 Griffith Evans stakes a claim in Estes Park, begins cattle ranching and is soon renting cabins to a growing trickle of tourists and big game hunters.

In 1872, one of these big game hunters, Windam Thomas Windham-Quin, fourth Earl of Dunraven, casts a covetous eye on Estes Park and begins to make plans involving real estate.

In 1873 Isabella Lucy Bird at loose ends in the Sandwich Isles hears glowing reports about Estes Park from a friend who is acquainted with the Earl of Dunraven's wife.

On her reluctant way back to Scotland she decides to visit Estes Park.

Estes Park: A Letter  
September 1873

I've just dropped into the place I've been seeking,  
but in everything it exceeds all my dreams!  
A pine-laced valley, a sheltered blue basin,  
a wilderness garden at the foot of Long's Peak.

Let me tell you how I got here, Henrietta.  
The landlord at Longmount found me an escort.  
"They seem two innocent young men," he said.  
Rather dull that meant! But my horse was the sort

that made ascent wonderful! A chasm, a lake,  
blinding streams and riots of mountain.  
What thunder and sunlight hurled us through  
a narrow, grass combed gulch. And then

we came upon a black log cabin  
as rude as any I've ever seen.  
A pretty mare was hobbled outside  
but it was a veritable ruffian's den!

The roof shingled with furs! Then a man stepped out.  
"Desperado" was written all over him.  
Tawny hair in long curls, dressed in leather and guns,  
and a scarf round his waist. Once he'd been handsome

but half his face was scarred, and one eye  
was gone. He saw me and raised his hat.  
"Is there anything I might do for you, m'am?"  
I forgot his appearance for his manner was that

of a chivalrous gentleman. What men live here!  
A savage in deerskin, with an accent refined!  
And as we began to leave, he said,  
"I can tell you're a countrywoman of mine.

Allow me the pleasure of calling on you."  
I admit I was quite taken with him.  
And then-- the valley opened out  
of the rock, a green flank bathed in

air so clear, each needle seemed  
to prick me. And now I'm settled in.  
I have a cabin to myself and dine  
with the other guests. I asked about him,

my desperado-- Mountain Jim  
they call him. Evans, my jolly host,  
dislikes him extremely and says that he  
is a terrible criminal, a truly lost

soul. He does not tell me the details  
and although I'm sure Evans is right,  
nevertheless he was charming to me..  
But Estes Park!-- it's such a delight!

I ride over the range all day  
and help Evans' wife and his girls with chores  
and sing and talk half the night with the guests.  
Oh Henrietta, I've found far more  
than I have ever dared hope for!

Comment of Platt Rogers  
(One of the "Innocent Young Men" and later a Mayor of Denver)

"The innkeeper of the hotel, learning our destination, asked that a lady might accompany us to Estes Park. We were not at all partial to such an arrangement as we were travelling light and free and felt the presence of a woman would naturally operate as a restraint upon our movements. However, we could not refuse, and consoled ourselves with the hope that she would prove young, beautiful and vivacious. Our hopes were dashed, in the morning, when Miss Bird appeared, wearing bloomers, riding cowboy fashion, and with a face and figure not up to our ideals."

## Not Bloomers But a Thoroughly Serviceable and Feminine Costume

For the benefit of other lady travellers  
I wish to explain that my "Hawaiian riding dress"  
is a half-fitting jacket,  
a skirt reaching to the ankles,  
and full Turkish trousers gathered into frills  
which fall over the boots.  
I always turn side-saddle  
when I ride into any civilized establishment  
although this causes great discomfort to my spine.  
Thank Heaven Estes Park is not such a place  
in spite of the innocent young men  
who sneer at me behind their city-white hands.

To be frank, who writes poetry to women  
with grey in their hair?  
Even if dressed like a Countess?  
Flaxen, raven, poppy, chestnut,  
glossy, golden unlocks  
a poet's pen to speak of love.  
Need I worry like a young girl?

Although I know no lady poets  
there may be some men  
to whom a woman could write a poem.  
A grey-blue eye,  
a weary shoulder,  
a stained past.

But who would write of this trapper?  
He has a myth of an old arrow wound in his chest.  
What he has seen.  
And done.

I meet him when I'm out riding,  
the mountains crack open all around us,  
the long legs of our horses  
trail glacial streams behind us,  
the air so freighted with the scent of snow  
I feel as if the forehead of Long's Peak  
is pressed against my mouth.

I tell him I want to climb it.  
Our eyes lock.  
His hair has sixteen golden ringlets  
each eighteen inches long.  
He does not hide his broken eye  
under any patch.

## Jim's Stories

There was a trapper in Muggins Gulch...

I always call him Mr. Nugent  
and he appreciates the courtesy.  
How he can talk!

"When I came to, the bear was dead  
beside me. I staggered up from the pool  
of blood, weak as a newborn babe,  
all chewed up, my scalp nearly off,  
and one eye gone. I crawled to my mule  
and started for Grand Lake. I fell  
off twice as I blacked out."

There was a trapper in Muggins Gulch  
Who loved a lady far away...

"When I got near Grand Lake I yelled  
and yelled but no one came to help.  
Seems they were expecting an Indian raid  
and thought I was some savage."

We speak of Browning and spiritualism  
and he recites his poetry to me.

There was a trapper in Muggins Gulch  
Who loved a lady far away  
And never will he see her face...

"Finally they crept out of their hovels  
and found me sprawled on the ground.  
I heard one say, 'Indians are 'round  
sure enough. Here is a man scalped.'"

Mr. Nugent is what is known as splendid company.  
Singing, talking to his Arab mare and bright repartee.  
His cabin is littered with paper, his poems and essays.  
I told him he must get them published  
and he was very pleased.

There was a trapper in Muggins Gulch  
Who loved a lady far away  
And never will he see her face  
Or redeem his deep disgrace...

But there is something tragic and moody about him too.  
I know that he must have ruined his own life,  
he says such fearfully bitter things.  
But he can talk on all subjects and has real genius...

It takes all peace away.

"The principle theme of his poems was himself, varied by reference to a fair maiden, of whom he seemed to be enamoured, and who we afterwards learned was Griff Evan's daughter. I cannot speak of Griff without paying tribute to his genial, kindly nature, which it was my privilege to enjoy upon several subsequent occasions."

--Platt Rogers

"I playfully called Jim the 'Mountainous One' on account of the extraordinary altitude of his lies."

--Dr. George Kingsley  
(personal physician to the Earl  
of Dunraven)

## Jim's Grove

Yesterday Jim banged open the door  
of Evan's cabin,  
pistols in his belt and hand,  
screaming, "I'll shoot you you two-faced bastard!"

"Git down, Jinny, Sarah! Miss Bird!  
Jim's on the shoot!"  
and Evans stood in front of me.

I stepped forth and held out my hand  
but before I could speak  
Mr. Nugent swore horribly  
and shouted, "If I see that English bastard lord  
and his lackeys slinking round my cabin  
you tell them I'll blue whistle the Bejesus  
out of them. Tell them that  
you treacherous son of a bitch."

Each window shuddered when he left.  
"He's drunk. Do you see what I have to put up with?"  
Evans shouted, reaching for his bottle.

Today, I am letting him guide me,  
and the "Young Innocents",  
to the top of Long's Peak.

We bed down for the night  
in a grove of trees  
under twelve degrees of frost.

He smiles at me and sings,

You cannot go and leave me here  
My true love said to me  
My darling girl, my lovely dear,  
The West is my countree

Is it too late in the season  
for such an attempt?

But even if we only reach the timberline  
the view will surely be worth the effort.

## The Climb

All night we spoke of dangerous things,  
the climb, the cold, the barren top  
and what's beyond,  
and made a vow to speak beyond the grave  
if it's allowed,  
and of this great divide, this watershed,  
and comfort versus loneliness.

What a singular sleep this dawn awoke.  
Why still the night has splinters  
in the sky.  
But light has reached our very goal.  
We eat, we pack, and start the climb,  
riding as far as the lava beds.

The rare thin air oppresses my breath  
as we leap from rock to rock.  
He stops and says,  
"I was thinking in the night  
about your travelling all alone  
and wonder where you keep your gun?"

I laugh and turn a dizzy eye  
to lake and canyon stretched below  
that ravish out the mind.  
And from that point I am roped to him  
and I sometimes crawl or scale him  
as he makes steps with his feet and hands.

## The Summit: 14,000 feet

This gasping acre in the air, the reward,  
and where it starts,  
the plunge to earth.

But for the granite  
what else starts here?  
No snowflake drops a frail hand  
without being torn away,  
no ice warms  
and nothing melts or falls  
but wind-mauled rock.

Your deep eye is single still  
and rimmed with ice  
and my double vision  
sees only the depth of distance.

A mind topples to its hemisphere  
and so we will go down  
empty  
even our mouths shorn of speech in the gale.  
What poor wings lungs are.

So, why do your cold hands unroll a slip of paper?  
Why do you kneel and press the paper on a rock?  
Why take a pencil and write our names  
and slide it in a hollow tin  
and bid me help you bury it on this dead-end top?

Strapped to you in the long descent  
toward the torn side  
of your face  
I feel only terror when you shout  
that legends say  
Indians once trapped eagles here.

Back in Estes Park: A Letter  
October 1873

With much assistance I recrossed the lava beds,  
was carried to the horse, then lifted off  
and laid on the ground, wrapped in a roll of blankets.  
Mr. Nugent told the "innocents" that we  
would stay the night.

For what can one do on a mountain top?  
Only this: come down.

When I woke up, the moon was high, whitening  
the bald peak above, and shining the abyss of snow.  
The beloved stars of my home were overhead  
so large I've never seen Orion's studded  
belt so clear.

I could hardly see his face as he told  
me about his youth.

He was the son of an English army officer  
stationed in Canada. He fell in love with a girl  
he couldn't marry. Tears rolled down his cheek.  
I grow tormented by his lawless life. Is he  
only acting?

Now snow is falling on the summit.  
No more ascents for months to come.

## Evans' Reasons

Because he's a violent drunk  
when the whiskey's on him.

Because three years ago  
when my daughter Jinny was fourteen  
the nasty-minded brute  
demanded she come and live with him.  
At gun point.  
He thinks this is still the old Colorado  
when you could shoot a man and get away with it.  
He doesn't know it's all changed now  
and there's some big interests moving in.

Because he's just a squatter  
living off his traps and a puny herd of cattle.  
But unlike the other lowlife,  
he is dangerous.  
He controls Muggins Gulch,  
a pretty piece of real estate,  
and won't sell his claim to no one.  
He sits at the entrance to the Park  
and keeps his beady eye fixed  
on all our comings and goings  
and menaces my paying guests.

Alone Across the Great Divide  
October 20 - November 20, 1873

- I. How necessary to be alone again.  
Estes Park, you're mine, but farewell  
For now. With relief I leave the quarrels of Evans  
And Jim, young Jinny's whining, the innocents'  
And their sly remarks. Alone again!

I ride through a firecracker slowly exploding--  
The strips of sun all tangled, crossed and solid  
As the air they colour. This trunk is split  
By light and shade, fresh tufts of needles lie  
On the ground from last night's passion. The moss  
That greens the forest floor more vivid than  
The roof, sweetens the spring in Birdie's legs.  
Alone again.

II. Each night I find a cabin in the woods.  
The settlers always welcome paying guests.  
Rarely do I find them lonely. It's not  
The empty bush that drives them mad, it's work.  
Each crowded cabin is like a magnet that draws  
Stragglers out of the trees. But the inmates are  
Half-dead with drink or struggle. Can I blame Jim  
Or even Evans for trying to relieve  
The drudgery of their task-trapped lives with drink?  
The women are so worn to bone their eyes  
Are vacant as drained streams. I must leave quickly  
Every morning, go back into the woods.  
But even here it sometimes seems too human.  
A trunk creaks like the hinge on an abandoned house.



IV. Right here, where the two continents are crushing  
Together, I know I must go back to the Park.  
This wasteland of mountains grappling, and snow hurtling  
Down on every slope, has stunned my heart.  
I am frozen in every limb and only see  
The black, deep puncture marks of Birdie's legs  
In the icy crust before me. Oh, slowly  
She moves ahead. I'm going back. This plague  
Of doubt must cease or I'll never be  
Alone again. The snow fed sky above  
Has teeth and mountain sickness makes me reel.  
But still. I stop and let my new eyes rove  
These ranges uninhabited. Then swiftly press  
Them shut, to avoid the brand of snow blindness.

What Jim Was Doing While She Was Gone

(Excerpts from the Boulder News)

October 25, 1873-- "'Rocky Mountain Jim' is talking of writing a book. Jim has, under a rough crest, no mean abilities, coupled with a heart that beats right, and if he writes a book we predict it will not be tedious and unreadable."

November 14, 1873-- "'Rocky Mountain Jim' came down from Estes Park last Tuesday, bringing along 300 pounds of trout for a share of which he has our thanks. Jim never forgets a friend, nor enemy either."

Back in Estes Park: A Letter  
November 1873

Back home and immensely snowbound.  
There is no getting in or out of the Park.

To my dismay, Evans and his family  
had gone to Denver and there were only  
three young men "baching it" at the ranch.  
We have little food and much work to do.

You would laugh to see me in my bearskin jacket  
herding in the cows. The Park's all ringed  
with winter mountains and I am the only woman  
round for twenty miles.  
But I am in no danger (I never am) for my companions  
are all gentlemen, except for one  
of the young men who nearly eats us  
out of rations. He is also an aspiring  
author and has shown me some of his published poems.  
In one there are nearly twenty lines  
copied without alteration from Paradise Lost!  
Worst of all, nothing can be kept  
from him unless it's hidden.  
He ate two pounds of dried cherries from the shelf  
and privately devoured the pudding  
I had made for supper.  
And he professes to be a theology student.

I take great delight  
in telling Mr. Nugent all his escapades.

Not that I see him much these days.  
He told me how greatly he admired my trek  
across the Great Divide  
but he has since been black and moody.  
I fear he has been drinking alone  
in that snow buried hovel of his.

Tomorrow, however, we have arranged an outing,  
the first we have taken since my return.  
He is guiding me to Fall River Canyon  
which I have not yet seen.  
"Not that you need a guide, Miss Bird,"  
he said rather coldly.

I'm quite nervous.  
The weather is so unsettled.

Jim Speaks on the Trail  
to Fall River Canyon

Oh God help me as I draw away.  
"I must speak and tell you that it's killing me."  
it's killing me to dream that climb  
your hands choking at my waist my back in snow  
your gun in my side my lungs pinned down  
and struggling What you ask would carve me far too  
open expose our tired skins to winter Each broken  
mountain speaks its violence My eyes see nothing but  
the earth torn from itself and the wind is a bolt  
thrown from that bald peak all shot  
with ice Your bitter words your hand on  
the ice-soaked reins that my fingers knot and not  
let go How can you love someone  
and leave them alone in the wilderness with a gun  
you do you do I accuse you  
the monstrous sheets of snow black out your face  
and I can't see how my heart is mirrored there  
split down the middle and half-ruined, ruined,  
self-ruined the forest wrecked in snow  
the blood freezing as it spreads out runs out  
the horses panting leaning forward  
"I must speak and tell you that it's killing me."  
Oh God help me as I draw away.

## Frozen Time

This was my dream:  
I was sitting by my fire  
with a book.  
The door and gale burst in  
lifting me off my chair.  
The book fell to the ground  
but made no sound on my dry skirts.  
He stood there with a silver pistol  
and shot me in the head.

This was what happened:  
I could not leave him thus  
with violence still between us.  
I rode through a gale.  
A black shape rose out of the snow  
and an explosion shattered  
near my ear.  
He ran up, his rifle hot,  
and pulled me from my horse.  
He took me, soaked with storm,  
and set me in a chair beside his fire.

## Memory of Jim's Grove

October is my time of life.  
In the woods the grass is flattened brown,  
And trunks of pine are scaled with grey,  
But see the wind bend the mountain skin  
As if it were young grass and green.  
The ancient bones have sapling's give  
And cry hush, hush to fallen ones below.

Is this your grove? Do we sleep here tonight?  
The mountains circle only us  
But, like time, are far away.  
We pitch our beds in folds of wood  
Which break the circle into strips.  
I take a bar of sky and rock  
And lay it lengthwise in the book  
That I will write when gone away.

## Leaving Him

The storm has finally exhausted itself  
And I quietly left today.  
Mr. Nugent led me down  
To the village where I catch my stage.

We spent a long and closeted night  
In the parlour room of the noisy hotel  
Talking about so many things  
Many of which I can never tell.

When we woke, frost had fallen  
And feathered every blade and branch.  
I've never had a more fragile hour.  
With one white breath, the ice would vanish.

(And sometimes the thought of all that's done  
Comes between me and the sun.)

Leaving Colorado: A Letter  
December 1873

I can only hope for the best.  
Perhaps, someday, I shall come back.  
As I left the Park, Evans and Jim shook hands.  
I have entreated Jim not to drink.

Mr. Nugent and I had a good joke  
between us when I left.  
When the stage pulled in, Mr. Haig,  
a not objectionable but extremely dandified  
Englishman whom I had briefly met before,  
stepped out.  
I can't tell you how unsuitable  
his tiny, tailored leather boots seemed in that rough land.  
He drawled hello and told me he wished  
to hunt in Estes Park.  
I introduced him to Mr. Nugent.  
As Mr. Haig held out his small hand  
encased in a lemon-yellow glove,  
I could not help but smile at Mountain Jim  
who grinned back at me.  
But he agreed quite cordially  
to take Mr. Haig back to the Park.  
"Any acquaintance of Miss Bird's..." he bowed.

And so our last moments were spent.

I looked at him in his leather rags  
and his golden curls around his neck  
and could not imagine a man I like or pity more.

The last I saw of Mountain Jim  
was the sun setting on his fiery hair  
as he set out over the snowy plain  
slowly leading his Arab mare

with that Englishman mincing behind him.

After a drive of several hours  
the ardent mountains and all that they enclose  
sank beneath the prairie sea.

## Comments on the Shooting of June 19, 1874

- Neighbours: "Evans was hired to do it."
- "Evans was drunk when he shot Jim."
- Boulder News: "English gold killed Jim for opposing the Earl of Dunraven's land scheme."
- Mrs. Evans: While she regretted the killing of Rocky Mountain Jim, she could not blame her husband for the deed as it appeared to be a case of kill or be killed. Both when he was drunk and when he was sober he had repeatedly threatened to kill Evans.
- Evans: "Evans told the writer [Enos Mills] that he shot Jim for insulting his daughter, but incidental remarks of Evans to the writer concerning the affair did not harmonize with this assertion."
- Earl of Dunraven: "Evans and Jim had a feud, as per usual, about a woman-- Evan's daughter."
- Brown, a witness: "Jim and a friend were returning from a ride and stopped to water their horses by who disappeared a few days after the shooting Evans' house. Evans and Lord H. [Haig] were drinking at Evans' cabin. When Jim left the stream, Lord H., putting a double-barrelled shotgun into Evans' hands said, 'I want you to protect me.' Evans took the gun, and as Jim passed near, fired two shots without warning. At the second shot Jim fell from his horse. Lord H said to Evans, 'Give him another; he's not dead yet.'"
- George Kingsley: "Mountain Jim evidently tried to 'draw a bead' on the seated Englishman, a Mr. Haigh, an associate of the Earl's. I was called to attend Jim, and although a teaspoon of brain was oozing out, still I got him to the hospital in Denver. This Colorado air is wonderful for wounds. He survived for weeks."

James Nugent died in September 1874. Evans was acquitted of murder due to lack of witnesses. He sold his ranch to the Earl of Dunraven for \$900 and continued to manage the Earl's private hunting ground and resort until it was bought by another developer at the turn of the century. Mr. Haig, one of the Earl's land agents, bought much property in Estes Park for the Earl.

Convalescence and Spiritualism  
Switzerland, September 1874

The guilt and shock have made me sick.  
Until I can go I'll stay in bed,  
my back deranged on these soft pillows.  
I remember the thin white thread  
of milk poured into my aunts' tea cups,  
for though Wilberforce was long dead,  
they took no sugar because of slaves  
in far Jamaica. And I have read  
that when a spirit speaks through some  
streams of white, thick liquid come

pouring from the tranced one's mouth.  
I take blank paper wherever I go  
to write to those I've left behind.  
But when so far, how can we know  
what happens to those who stay? Once  
I risked a blizzard. The horse was slow,  
fair manacled by ice. I had to see him.  
Out of the mist he fired a pistol  
at me and missed. Who speaks through whom?  
He pulled me from the saddle. His room

was my sudden refuge. His gate  
to my white-aired valley where  
he was so soon shot to death.  
Whose hand? I stare at mine. There  
I mounted the Great Divide astride  
my horse; now I hardly dare  
to leave this bed, my spine's so broken.  
What can I do to show I care  
except to write this book and tell  
long white lies to make me well.

A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains by Isabella Lucy Bird was published in 1879 and became an instant bestseller.

"It is known that Jim had a mass of written material just before he was shot, but I have failed to find any trace of it."

--Enos Mills, 1917

## Down to the Golden Chersonese

This is romance.  
Did she profit from it?  
She married briefly,  
her dead sister's gentle doctor,  
but he too died soon.

Victorian ladies are this or that,  
so hard is it not to see the past  
as a rigid island behind us.

She let him drag her up a peak,  
that murderer and poet.  
Raw America!  
If his gun was pointed at her  
when she left  
the bullet missed her.  
Whose frustration was this  
left buried in a mountain valley?

For thirty years she travelled only in Asia  
for even if you cannot love it  
there is more to see there  
than anywhere else.  
Riots in China saluted her.  
If at first she travelled with one small pack,  
a silk dress and a horse  
but ended up on the Yangtze River  
with a boat and sixteen oarsmen,  
what had she done to get there?

Resist the idea of her books as children.  
This cannot be true.  
Instead they pull us down to the golden Chersonese,  
its glossy shrubs of tea and pepper vines.  
Malaya's tepid shores of volcanic ash  
bore fruit for her, letters, journals,  
increasing observations.

As we spread through her books we see  
that only once did she ever drop her eyes.

A jungle river,  
the green slow pulse of the golden Chersonese.  
A naked boy held up a tiger's eye,  
plucked and dripping on a skewer,

suddenly laughing, carelessly pointing it  
at her.

October 1904-- Isabella Bird Bishop died with her luggage packed for China.

September 1915-- Estes Park and Long's Peak were incorporated into Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park.

Wherein the Voyager Exorcises the Devil of an Uncle

Mary Kingsley

(1862 - 1900)

Now this is a noble story-- there is a lot of fine  
confused feeding in it, as the Scotchman said of  
boiled sheep's head.

M.K.

Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever.

--Uncle Charles Kingsley

Dear Failure,

Ah Papa, brains being none too plentiful  
in the Kingsley generations,  
you and your brothers are the Renaissance,  
the flowering.  
Look at me, a small weed, toiling with Mama's bedpan  
in your shadows.  
Are you shooting beasts tonight  
in a Canadian wood?  
Or angling for breezes in a south sea swell?  
I swear I only meant to experiment  
quite nobly when I took the tin of gunpowder  
off your desk and blew up  
the whole spring wash.  
Ah me, I'm a poor uneducated female.  
I want to study Origin of Species  
but you took it with you  
so I must read for the thousandth time  
The Murders and Robberies of Famous Pirates.  
I believe it is getting rather dull.  
As I close Mama's curtains  
the limp silk cord has none  
of the taut tangent of a ship's hawser.  
Think of your little wretch  
who dare not step outside the door  
without a pot of soup and an improving novel,  
and write to me tonight.  
For months your letters do not come.  
The last one said you were in Colorado  
chasing mountain lions  
and Mama is hysterical in bed.  
Soon I must go and see if my pet fighting cocks  
have savaged each other on the lawn.  
Good night, good night.  
The hedges encroach damply  
against the brick walls.  
I believe my starved head  
is empty of everything but laughter.

Ah me! if the aim of life were happiness and pleasure,  
Africa should send us missionaries instead of our  
sending them to her-- but, fortunately for the work of  
the world, happiness is not.

M.K.

Dear Aim of Life,

Mama and Papa died within  
days of each other,  
now conjoined in the soft earth  
of an English churchyard.  
God, did you jest  
when you kneaded them together like this?  
They who juggled oceans between them?  
Great judge, would you not allow them  
one moment of eternity  
apart?  
I know this feeling.  
Tonight I stand on the splitting prow  
of my southbound  
voyage. The night breaks open  
and stars and sea spray drench my lashes.  
I cannot look directly at the pleasure;  
I stare through silver cracks of light  
at my letter from the British Museum  
authorizing me  
to collect fish from African rivers.  
My mission, my precious science.  
My feet spring on the living wood  
that rises and falls like a man's  
heaving chest.  
My head and heart are so spacious  
there is no me  
to get in the way of all this travel.  
How safe my vacant soul will be  
as I watch Sierra Leone unravel before my eyes.  
Yes, tonight I saw a bishop and the captain  
of this vessel  
locked in a drunken  
brawl on the saloon floor.  
My joy sucks fiercely this tropical flight.

It is almost as safe and far more amusing to be born  
lucky than wise.

M.K.

Dear Tedium,

I abandon you absolutely.  
You think to trap me  
in this mangrove swamp,  
in the aerial stench  
of black trunk and endless mud.  
But no,  
I dearly love a swamp.  
When your crocodile  
has the bow of my canoe  
between his crusty jaws,  
I take my umbrella  
and poke his monster yellow eyes  
until he sinks away.  
Catch me if you can.

The African point of view is sure to linger in your mind as the malaria in your body. Never then will you be able to attain the gay, happy cock-sureness regarding the Deity and the Universe of those people who stay at home.

M.K.

Dear Convention,

A good thick skirt  
may not be the fashion of choice  
for all jungle travellers.  
The stinging grass, the hair-pronged insects  
and slimy catawumpuses  
stroll up one's ankles  
and nibble on one's legs  
rather disagreeably.  
However, when I fell into a man-trap,  
my superior armour kept me unharmed.  
The upright knives only pierced  
a layer of my petticoats.  
Now I march along a jungle trail  
quite cockily.  
I look over my tweed shoulder  
at my cannibal guides  
and note how their shiny, knotted thighs  
pump through  
their flimsy bits of loin cloth.  
I know I am a better comedian  
here than any man.

I shall never forget the pleasure with which, in the forest among the Fans, I netted one reason for the advantage of possessing a white man's eye-ball, and, as I wrote it down in my water-worn notebook, saw it joined up with the reason why it is advisable to cut off big men's heads in the Niger Delta.

M.K.

Dear Respectability,

I am collecting silver fishes  
from their fresh skulls  
and pickling them in alcohol.  
All spiny species of fish and fetish  
are roiling in my head.  
Oh beautiful frolic  
in the mind forest.  
I watch them bribe their malicious gods  
and cheer.  
I trade my linen shirts to warriors  
for legends, snail meat and dance.  
Monkeys fall out of trees  
to stare at me, this curiosity.  
Shall I die with a spear in my breast  
because some wild man desires my pill box hat?  
Come further in, come further in  
each slippery sword-shape beckons.

'Is this road here to go anywhere,' I interposed,  
'Or is it only a kind of joke?'

'It no go nowhere 'ticular, ma,' she says, 'But--'  
'In a civilised community like this of Gaboon,' I  
say, 'it is scandalous that roads should be allowed to  
wander about in this loose way.'

M.K.

Dear Imperialist,

If you want to do this right,  
listen to me.  
Trade with them, but let them slit the rubber  
trees open with their own brown hands.  
All you cold faces wrapped in beards and bonnets  
in this lecture hall,  
can't you see how the continents  
of urgent tendrils cherish  
the sticky bats and black deep rivers?  
The paddles of their canoes  
drip with nameless fish.  
If they eat human flesh  
is it because they feel no better  
than a snake or toad in the eyes of god?  
And are we, Darwin? Noah? Priest of Eucharist?  
This I am only asking  
but I claim  
our white skin is not a beacon.  
Cover it up.  
Enter the swamp  
that erupts with death and delight.  
Let the hidden leeches kiss your body  
until you swoon.  
Listen to me,  
for a woman can both penetrate  
the tunnel of jungle river  
and let life feed on her forever.  
I tell you I straddle both islands,  
my long skirt spread like a bell  
over all peninsulae.  
to make them equal mysteries.  
Or have you lost your belly  
for this sort of thing?

I would rather take a 200-ton vessel up a creek  
than write any book.

M.K.

Dear Duty,

This is a flimsy disguise,  
this book.

I have stuffed it so full of fact  
it is like an overfat parlour cushion,  
or like a dead hippo six days floating in a river.  
Cut it open, disregard the decaying science,  
and find the bones of farce.

I shall always walk with you, my skeleton.

Yes, I admit, I am shackled to you,  
unlike Papa

who removed you quite soon

and, spineless,

did nothing of any worth but be happy.

But as we walk together

I shall be laughing up your windy sleeve.

Now who is holding onto whom,

and for what purpose,

uncle?

Mary Kingsley, author of Travels in West Africa, died in 1900 at the age of 38, nursing Boer prisoners of war at Simonstown, South Africa. She was buried at sea.

The Ascent of Fuji the Peerless

Mabel Loomis Todd

(1856 - 1932)

And yet a Pit--  
With Heaven over it.

Emily Dickinson

Even as she read, the grassland moved across her vision. White mounds of skulls rose up out of the earth, bones spilling out of heaps piled beside the tracks at the isolated dusty stations. Buffalo bones, stacked as high as the train itself. Mr. Holland's smooth voice: "Waiting to be loaded onto the train, Mrs. Todd. The settlers earn money by shipping the bones out east for fertilizer." The great gaping sockets, the chips and splinters of bone lying in the gravel beside the tracks, all bleached in the prairie heat. Sometimes, when the wind was blowing around the great broken bones, the dust flew up from beneath them, swirling into the pale sky, and it seemed they were disintegrating into chalk. The train rattled on.

He broke into sobs-- a man's difficult, ugly, tearing sobs. For an instant Asapasia was terrified. But for his desperate clutch, she would have fled. The next moment, however, all the woman in her awoke.

Mrs. Todd shut her book, pushed the heavy plush footstool away and rose, staggering as the train jerked sideways. Holding her skirts in one hand, she moved slowly down the centre of the parlour car, passing the Philadelphia woman and her pimply-faced son sitting in the large, wine-red armchairs that were bolted to the floor.

"All I'm saying, Martin, is that it doesn't look right. A young man should be in his office in the afternoon, not escorting young ladies to the theatre. Matinees are for women, Martin. I insist on that."

She avoided their small, bright eyes. They had boarded the train at Winnipeg with Mr. Holland.

Austin, this is a wilderness.

Only three days since she had left Montreal, five days since Boston, a week since Amherst and leaving him. Winnipeg, Montreal, Boston, Amherst. She stumbled down the length of the car, clutching onto the plush backs of the chairs, heading to the end of the train. That last time in Vinnie's house was vivid yet.. They shut the door of the dining room. How polished the walnut table had been beneath her bare hands.

Now the mountains still to go through. And David always leaving her alone to work on his calculations. All the other loud Americans; the mindless nasal babbling of the English gentlemen talking about guns; the dull, badly dressed missionaries.

She wanted to lie down and sleep but to unbutton her boots and loosen her stays was more than she could bring herself to do with dinner only an hour away. She reached the Pullman and sat down on the lower berth. If only she could write in her journal or write a letter to Austin but the train moved too violently.

She had felt feverish since they left the Great Lakes

country, rocking through the hot, desolate prairie. Even the shade at the tiny, dusty stations was mean and thin. The Pacific ocean and Japan were nothing to her. A cool dream.

She needed fresh air. She lay flat on her bed and put her mouth against the slatted ventilator and closed her eyes. She moved her hands to her throat and undid the collar of her blouse.

"My dear Mrs. Todd. Are you ill?"

She rolled over and struggled upright, her blouse twisting around her neck. Mr. Holland stood in the open doorway. He was a preacher from Philadelphia and a specialist in natural history, paying his way to accompany the expedition to Japan. He was taller than David by about six inches, as tall as Austin but younger, maybe forty years old. He had large liquid eyes, as brown as hers, and a satin waistcoat pulled taut over his broad chest.

"My dear Mrs. Todd." He stepped over the threshold.

"Excuse me. I was merely resting." Her book had slipped to the floor. Her portmanteau was open; a lace petticoat and the brown volume of her journal were sliding out onto the floor. A sheaf of Austin's sister's poems lay on top of a soft roll of skirts.

"I'm quite all right," she added sharply.

"Of course. I'm so sorry to intrude. But I saw you enter in such a hurry. And so pale. Are you sure I can't get you anything?" He smiled.

"No," she said. "Not right now."

\* \* \*

The china and silver were clinking delicately as the train moved westwards into the growing dark. The white-coated waiters slipped between the tables of the dining car. Mr. Holland was the only one at their table who had left his napkin, tall, pointed and intricately folded, standing upright in front of his plate.

They were speaking of Japan. The lords who ruled there, and their ladies. What the women wore and what they did.

"I suppose, Mrs. Todd, you are a suffragette?"

David patted her hand. "Oh, she isn't overly political, are you, my love?"

Mr. Holland laughed. "No, I didn't think so. Not our Mrs. Todd. Much too lovely and gracious for that dirty business."

"You are mistaken, Mr. Holland. Of course, I think women should have the vote."

Lieutenant Storey and his young wife, who were part of the Navy branch of the expedition to Japan, were whispering together across the table.

"In Japan, I hear the men..." Lieutenant Storey was whispering into his wife's ear.

The Philadelphia matron looked pained. "Oh no, surely

not, Mrs. Todd. Why that's men's business."

The young son spoke. He was short with a skinny face and body. The movement of the train seemed to affect him more than anyone else. As if he had no weight to anchor him to the chair, he swayed back and forth dangerously.

"I'm glad Mama didn't have to vote to take care of the nation. Maybe she wouldn't have had time to take care of my brothers and me."

The Philadelphia matron put her hand to her brooch-encrusted bosom. "Dear boy." The boy swayed towards his mother, looking pleased.

"How long do you spend voting, then? Seven hours a day?" Mrs. Todd laid her silver fork on the dining room table which was covered in white linen; the cloth rested on her lap, spotless.

The boy's face twitched as he lurched sideways.

"He's not yet twenty-one, Mrs. Todd," the mother complained.

Mr. Holland interrupted smoothly. "You might be interested in a little story I published in our church magazine, Mrs. Todd. I believe your good husband told me you were a bit of a scribbler yourself? Isn't that what you said, Professor Todd?"

David, who had been staring at his nearly empty plate, looked up startled. "Yes, oh yes. My wife."

"It's a little piece called 'Woman in a Jury Box'. A

woman is called for jury duty, as of course they would if they had the vote."

"Oh no, Mr. Holland! Surely not!" the Philadelphia woman cried out.

"Oh yes, indeed. My lady character serves on the jury until a domestic calamity occurs. Her children come down with mumps."

"Oh mumps are a terrible thing. Three of my poor boys had them at the same time."

"And she scorns the court and marches home. A humorous little tale, but it was well received."

"Tell me, Mr. Holland, was it a murder trial? I could see mumps taking precedence over a trifling matter like murder," Mrs. Todd said.

Mr. Holland laughed. His large, mobile mouth was like silk. She couldn't bear him looking at her. She crushed a fold of white linen in her fingers and stared down at her hands, the two gold bands, one on each ring finger.

She stood up. "Excuse me, I think I shall retire."

Austin. She willed herself to think of her hands unbuttoning his collar, her mouth on his throat, the root of greying hair on his chest. Her clothes seemed unbearably hot and heavy as she dragged her dress between the tables, nearly colliding with a waiter who ducked daintily out of her way, his silver tray glinting with dark wines and brandies.

When she lifted the latch on the door in the Pullman, Mr.

Holland came up behind her.

"I had to see you arrived safely, Mrs. Todd. There are a lot of young ruffians in the colonist coaches. We must take care of our ladies."

She had not seen a single immigrant colonist on their part of the train.

The latch was difficult to open.

"Allow me," he reached over, laid his hand on her fumbling one and lifted the handle easily. In her haste to enter and shut the door in his face, she brought the latch down hard and pinched his finger.

"Damn," he whispered before she slammed the door. She had a split second to notice that he was smiling.

She sat down on the berth but couldn't hear him move away from the door. The train shook her. She dropped to the floor and folded her petticoat and wraps into the portmanteau. Why was she so horribly untidy? She took off her dress, her stays, peeled off her stockings and kneeled on the narrow space of floor beside the small case, her bare knees rocking on the floor. She picked up the white, oddly bound poems: small square pages sewn together on the left margin with taut, delicate stitches. Later she would call them "fascicles." Austin's sister had stayed up late at night sewing these poems into small volumes; these were the only existing books of her poetry. It was wrong; Mrs. Todd knew it. A terrible loss. But for now they were all hers. She read them over and over,

privately. It burned Me-- in the Night-- It Blistered to My Dream-- It sickened fresh upon my sight-- With every Morn that came-- She hugged them to her breast for a moment then quickly hid them beneath her heavy skirts, her winter coat and her journal and then she lay in the half-dark, eyes wide open.

Waking or sleeping it's the same. Waking or sleeping.

David came to bed several hours later. She called to him and he murmured in surprise. "Yes, yes," he whispered. He smelled of wine and tobacco. The train jerked back and forth, riding into the night more quickly now than it had during the day.

"I'll do it. You'll see. The eclipse is mine. Do it. Yes." He mumbled into her dark hair. When she finally slept he was still lying on top of her, moving slightly side to side.

\* \* \*

They had come to a stop at the last station before the mountains. The railway buildings were papered with advertisements: "The Canadian Pacific Railway: The New Highway to the Orient" and "A Railway from Atlantic to Pacific: All the Way on British Soil". Dirty, horrible British soil, Mrs. Todd thought, her hand resting on David's arm. This small town, scattered in patches on bare, treeless hills, was devoid of charm. Of the frame buildings only the spires of the two

churches were higher than two storeys. The sky above was bright almost to whiteness and it was cool now, much cooler than June ever was in New England.

David bought a four-day old newspaper and they returned to the station. Groups of dark-faced Indians watched the train. She was attracted to a solitary Indian woman with a handsome, rigid face. The woman was wearing a common gingham dress but her long black hair was braided and tied with thongs; she wore a deerskin belt, colourfully beaded, around her cheap gingham waist and she had filthy moccasins on her feet. Mrs. Todd found herself staring at the Indian woman, who unexpectedly looked back, the darkly-lidded eyes just narrow slits. Then the Indian woman closed her eyes and put her hands on her breasts while her face remained utterly rigid. Wet spots began to appear on the Indian woman's breasts-- milk soaking through the faded gingham.

Mrs. Todd continued to stare. She heard Mr. Holland's sure, soft voice insistent in her head. "The once dreaded Blackfeet, Mrs. Todd. Really more to be avoided than pitied."

David noticed nothing. He left her standing on the platform while he went to check his equipment. He was particularly worried about the fragile instruments, the lenses and the photoheliograph.

A railroad man suddenly grabbed the Indian woman who was soaking the front of her dress and shouted at her. He flung the woman off the station grounds and Mrs. Todd turned away

and walked to the Pullman car. Now that the train was still, she would write Austin a long letter. She must remember to ask him to go to her house and see about the carpets, and tell him how Josiah was so nervous about the preparation for the eclipse, and ask how Austin's children were-- especially Ned. His trouble. She would avoid any mention of Austin's wife-- they had no code name for her...

"How we would enjoy this together. Some people on board exclaim at the scenery but they don't have our kind of enjoyment. There are some thin-faced Englishmen who do nothing but talk about guns and what a great country this is because they can shoot and fish at their own sweet will. All I can think of is how despicable they are and I close my eyes and remember each detail of our long drives together in the hills around town, all the woods and shaded lanes, and hummingbirds, and bluebirds. I have spent hours thinking of you and I have come to you, my own beloved, my sweet true husband, with a sense of absolute nearness and belongingness. I nestle in your heart every second of the day. Do you not feel me there? But lately, as the continent spreads between us I feel a terrible restlessness upon me. Even when we can't see each other at home, at least we pass each other's houses and send notes. I've never realized how hard it would be to do without it... They say it has snowed heavily in the mountains. In June! I am journeying into another world. I can't tell you the strangeness of it. The snow has meant that

the train might be delayed for some reason... This route has only been in operation a year now. Everything is very raw and ugly, the buildings, the land itself, and yet sometimes beautiful. The Indians are curious, my love, and I wish I knew more about them... if we are delayed in the mountains we may miss our steamer to Yokohama. I think if we do I will come home, just come home. Josiah is so worried about this expedition, as if something will go wrong. As if he hasn't spent years in preparation."

David walked into the Pullman but stopped abruptly when he saw what she was doing. "Ah, sorry to disturb you, my dear. I'll just have a quick smoke. Outside, you know. On solid ground."

She barely looked up from her letter.

"Josiah says hello. Do keep us informed about the Observatory controversy, my dearest."

\* \* \*

The mountains rose huge and raw all around them, snow and cataracts streaking their white into granite. The engine was steaming and idling in the narrow valley, halted before a spindly bridge which spanned a gorge. Great logs were tangled in the boiling river far below, ramming into the feet of the bridge.

Men ran back and forth between the small coaling station

and the train. Some message was being relayed by telegraph.

"It's been eighteen hours," Mr. Holland said. "Still can't trust that bridge to hold us."

"We can't miss that boat. I can't stand this delay." David paced the gravel. "Totality is only two months away. August nineteenth. How will I ever have time to prepare if we miss that boat?"

She couldn't tear her eyes off the mountains and all the ice and water streaming through the dark forest. This wilderness, this cold. How dwarfed the train was; how high the plumes of steam rose, to be lost in the cloud and sky.

The dining car had been detached and sent back hours ago as the train was incapable of pulling heavy dining cars over the mountains. She bought some crackers and sardines in the tiny store in a place called Canmore, several miles back, but David hadn't eaten a thing.

"It's the other train!" someone shouted. "The eastbound train is on the other side! They're going to transfer all the passengers and baggage!"

"Oh, thank God," David cried and he left her standing in the freezing wind.

The eastbound train was waiting for them six or seven miles away across a series of bridges. The baggage was piled onto handcars and shunted across the bridge, slowly. She saw David perched on one handcar, guarding his priceless scientific equipment. She could see a great cylinder propped

between his legs-- one of the telescopes he would use in Japan. The roaring in her ears was deafening.

"Come, Mrs. Todd." Mr. Holland took her arm in his large fingers. "They're loading the passengers onto the handcars."

She saw the Philadelphia lady and her son being handed up to a tiny manual-driven car. They both looked pasty and cold. The boy put a stick-like arm around his mother.

"Come along, my dear Mrs. Todd. You can't be nervous. The handcars have been back and forth across the bridge all day."

The spindly wooden structure swayed over the log-choked river and the mountains darkened and lightened with cloud.

"I will walk across the bridge," she said.

"Oh now, come, a nice comfortable seat on the handcar would be much more suitable for you. Let me take you."

Lieutenant Storey and his wife were standing nearby and cried in delight. "Oh how exciting," Mrs. Storey said. "Let's walk across the bridge, too, Wayne!"

She glared at them but the young couple linked arms and began to move towards the foot of the bridge.

"What spirit you have, Mrs. Todd!" Mr Holland said, patting her arm slowly. She pulled herself away and walked to the bridge, too, and waited until the handcars were safely across.

The depth is all my thought. The wind caught at her heavy coat and her hat which was tightly pinned to her thick

hair.

Lieutenant Storey and his wife went first and she followed, stepping cautiously onto the planking that seemed fragile beneath her boots. Mr. Holland was behind her.

"Isn't this thrilling?" she heard Mrs. Storey squeal above the drowning rush of wind and water. The couple were clutching hands as they inched forward.

The wind sluiced down the canyon, roaring in her ears as she walked. The depth is all my thought. She kept her eyes on the clasped hands of the Storey's until she reached the middle of the bridge when a hard tug of wind made the timbers creak.

She looked up into the sky and saw the mountains encircle her vision but directly above, only air and beneath the thin planks of wood, only air, the abyss, and far below, rocks thrashing in and out of the white water. Heaven over it-- And Heaven beside, and Heaven abroad-- She was surrounded by air. She felt as if she must be flying, or falling. This was wonderful: to be seized in icy air, this stunning illusion of weightlessness; the mountains so stiff with power the air was alive with their roaring. Ah! Pit! With Heaven over it!

His arm suddenly intruded around her waist.

"Steady on, Mrs. Todd. Keep on walking."

How dare he! She wanted to turn and push him away from her, off the narrow ledge, into the fierce stream below. But his hands were locked on her and the couple in front of them

was moving further and further away. How could she struggle with him? There were no railings on the bridge and there were four inch gaps in the planks beneath her feet. Her long skirts and coat were whipping around her legs in the wind.

"Take your hands off me. Stop it," she shouted.

"Steady on, steady on. I'll help you."

His lips were right against her face, she could almost feel them brush against her ear lobe. If he fell off the bridge, he would not let go of her; falling with him clutched onto her. They would crash together into the noise.

The quiet dining room, the closed door in Austin's sister's house and Austin crying slowly, that first time, "I can't help it. I need you." Her hands on his face. "If we had been born a hundred years from now the world would rejoice with us. I know that." Now the air cracked like breaking ice all around her.

His hands moved slowly and the slowness was terrible, around her back, down her thighs, behind her knees. He lifted her and took a few awkward steps forward, grunting.

"Oh, you..." she shouted and then turned her face away, and looked into the gaping blue and white sky. His heart was beating so hard she felt it throbbing into her side like a small limb.

As they neared the end of the bridge she could hear people shouting.

The bridge trembled. The mountains closed in, blotting

out the air. The earth was buckling up all around her and that was what was so unbearable, not his arms aching around her nor his hot breath on her cheek.

The passengers cheered as he stepped off the bridge and she was surrounded by people. Mrs. Storey latched onto her shoulders and led her towards a handcar where people had cleared a space.

"Are you going to faint?" Mrs. Storey asked with a certain relish.

"Of course not," she snapped.

"It could happen to anyone. I couldn't have done it without leaning on Wayne's arm. Come, let's get those railway men to give us a cup of coffee or maybe some of their nice tea."

Behind her people were congratulating Mr. Holland.

"It's the height, you know. She must have looked down and froze."

No up. Up. The pit.

\* \* \*

They were in the other train now, going west, crawling up mountains and down into valleys. Earlier, the conductor had entertained them with stories of runaway trains on the steep slopes. She was wrapped in blankets in the parlour car with David at her side reading her bits of the six day old newspaper.

"The Emperor William of Germany always has a chapter of the Bible read to him immediately after dinner."

The Philadelphia matron said, "Religion gives us all strength. I will always think of you, Mr. Holland, saving Mrs. Todd on the bridge this morning. God was with you. You must have prayed the whole time."

"Really, the Emperor William must be a revolting man," Mrs. Todd said. "Give me a gentleman who drinks port after dinner, any day."

"Oh no, surely not..." But the Philadelphia woman encountered Mrs. Todd's cool stare and said nothing more. She pursed her lips together.

"There is an article here about Indian burial customs. Shall I read it to you, my love?"

"Please spare me."

The Philadelphia woman tossed her head. It irked her to hear anyone speak sharply to a man. "Fetch me my chocolates, Martin," she said.

The train slowed but did not stop as it rolled by a row of shacks, perched on the side of a mountain. There were a few signs nailed onto the shacks: "Barr and Ross, General Store" and "Toronto House". Several Chinese workers with dark faces, wide-brimmed felt hats, and old boots were sitting beside the tracks, shovels scattered all around them.

David did not look up. He was reading something in the paper. She noticed that his hands were trembling, the paper

rustling faintly.

"A work gang," Mr. Holland said loudly to everyone who had flocked to the windows. "Upgrading the tracks. Or could be a snow shed camp. They're building sheds over the tracks to keep avalanches off the mainline during the winter."

He had an answer for everything. David tossed the newspaper down and left the coach. She reached over and picked the paper up. A small headline read: "Insanity: Long Devotion to Any Subject to Result in Unbalanced Minds."

She stared out the glass as the train rattled through a monotony of mountains and forest. Is Bliss then, such an Abyss, I must not put my foot amiss... The Lady cross or not? Emily dead now. And Austin too far away. She was all the time aware of the Philadelphia woman droning on to Mr. Holland who was staring out the window too, watching whatever she watched.

\* \* \*

In the evening, the train pulled to a halt at a newly constructed stone building. Here they would have their dinner; by breakfast time, there would be a dining car on the train again. A sign that hung over the double wooden door said "Glacier House". The building was lit golden in the dusky air and all the first class passengers moved away from the train towards the wooden porch, picking their way up a

path that skirted huge rocks. Glacier House was built on a mountain plateau and across a valley a glacier sprawled out of the gap between two mountains, a cold, dead angel.

Before Mrs. Todd entered the dining house, she stood on the porch and looked at the high ice. She thought of Austin wearing himself out with guilt and work. His wife's dinner parties, the tiny print of documents in his office, the endless bickering at the College about money, running over to Vinnie's house every evening to see if there was a letter from her. What waste. Emily had wasted nothing. She had sat up in her room late at night when everyone was asleep, writing her poems, sewing them into little white booklets, never seeing anyone, never going anywhere. The only time she herself had seen Emily was in her coffin though they had spoken through closed doors for four years. Safe in their alabaster chambers. How difficult her handwriting was. It would take Mrs. Todd years to decipher a few hundred poems.

The bare broken rock around the little house, the sheets of ice in the sky, the rose light on the fir trees, and the train steaming and hissing. Her mind was irritated to infection. To lash the Magic Creature Till it fell. She clenched her hands and turned to the door of Glacier House, ignoring Mrs. Storey.

"It's so pretty, isn't it? I think I prefer cherry time in Washington for scenery, really, but this is very sublime, isn't it, Mrs. Todd?"

Inside Glacier House, the contrast was startling. The hallway was decorated with paintings of serene mountain landscapes and elegant tables crowded with vases of wild flowers. The stoves were warm and crackling and in the dining room, tables of six were laid with silver and crystal. She sat down beside David who was pale and silent. Small bits of paper, smudged with mathematical calculations, were sticking out of his coat pockets. For once, Mr. Holland was sitting at another table. She turned her back on him, then wished she hadn't. How would she know when he was looking at her?

How hungry she was. Where did all this food come from? Salmon, boiled potatoes in cream sauce, carrots and honey, fresh bread and butter, red wine. She ate quickly, gulping down ice cold water and two glasses of wine. The first-class passengers laughed and talked. "They say sweetbreads are the most easily digested foods with the exception of tripe." "I never know what gift to give to a man. A mouchoir case, maybe, but then everyone thinks of a mouchoir case." "Until we've had a generation on bicycles, we can hardly know if there are unrealized dangers to the spine or not."

She leaned back in her chair, her plate and glasses empty. Lieutenant Storey and his wife kept touching each other's hands. David was staring into his wine.

She left the table, no apologies this time, and deserted the warm, humming room.

She ran down the empty hallway and out into the evening

coolness. The sky flared with colour. She ran across the gravel, hitching up her skirts, past the tracks and steaming engine. The grass grew in sparse patches between the rocks and she had to slow down once she was past the train because the path was gone. The mountain slanted into the dark valley and she descended until she came to the edge of a steep incline where she paused to rest against a huge boulder.

The glacier hurt the peaks above her, white and purple in the half-light. She thought briefly of bears and other wild animals but was not really afraid. She turned and laid her arms on the boulder and pressed her cheek into the rock, still faintly sun-warmed.

He came of course. He had been watching her. His excuses to leave the table when she did must be becoming rather laboured. He said nothing. Then he touched her back. She stood completely still. He pressed himself against her. Her cheek and lips bit into the warm rock. She closed her eyes as he rubbed his body against hers and his mouth was rough on the nape of her neck.

He turned her around, raising her slightly off the ground. "Oh this is... this is..." he gasped as one hand fumbled with the buttons on his trousers.

The air was heady and light, shot with scent of pine; his hands moved underneath her skirts, pulling them up. The breeze was cool on her legs and lovely; her waist loosened and the rough rock pressed into her bare skin somewhere; her

throat and breasts exposed to the semi-light. There was water, a stream rushing, somewhere close by. She would drink from it when this was over. Quickly, over.

"I knew you wanted this, this..." he panted.

"Yes," she said, her eyes closed tight.

He finally slumped against her. She pushed his large, heavy head off her shoulder and ducked underneath his arms which were stretched out on either side of her. She shook her skirts and covered herself.

"Now, please don't speak to me again. I believe it is only another day or two until Vancouver."

He backed away, stumbling slightly over his fallen trousers. "Now, look, you... We have months... In Japan..."

She laughed though her mouth was dry and her lips seemed to crack as she moved them. She walked into the woods, as gracefully as she could, towards the sound of the running water. As soon as she was out of sight, she tripped into a run. Japan. She couldn't believe in the eclipse. Nor in the Pacific Ocean. There were just these huge, blank mountains, breaking without end into her head. It meant months and months until she was with Austin. Oh my God, oh love. How everything fails. Fails terribly. And Emily dead and the poems folded and unread in her trunk. A hundred years from now the world would be the same.

She fell to her knees beside the wild twist of stream. She put her fingers to her hot cheeks. Her mouth was parched.

She poured water over her face and neck; it stung like particles of ice. She rubbed the icy water into her skin. I reason, Earth is short-- And Anguish absolute-- And many hurt, But, what of that? She drank deeply. Oh Austin, you are in me. In me. This is all I need. But her fingers grew numb as she dangled them in the cold water and she stared vacantly into the woods. She sat motionless on the slippery bank hugging herself until even her feet grew cold and damp.

When she walked back to the train, Mr. Holland was nowhere in sight. The train hissed on the track, each shudder seeming to ripple down her skin. People gathered quietly, the first class passengers and the colonists in separate groups, looking at the hushed sunset. She walked to the back of the train, down its long, glimmering length. The stillness was everywhere. She climbed into the Pullman. Sitting on the berth, she opened her journal, turning to a blank page, the single dim lamp quivering above her.

\* \* \*

"August 20, 1887, Mount Fuji Observation Post, Japan--  
Austin, how can I tell you about it? It clouded over, just hours before the eclipse. We watched anyway, with all the equipment set up, in case it cleared. And as it grew darker and darker, the landscape became almost lurid and when totality was called, I felt that I must be in some other

planet. A few lanterns down in the town flickered feebly and I could just see the outlines where the rice fields and mountains lay. In the east was a streak of sulphurous yellow - the only light in the world. While the whole body of spectators was trembling with the weirdness and disappointment, he was perfectly calm and clear, watching for some half rift in the cloud to catch one gleam of the corona - but none came."

The Marriage Vessel

Emma Darwin (nee Wedgwood)

(1808 - 1896)

We will now discuss in a little more  
detail the Struggle for Existence.

Charles Darwin  
(Origin of Species)

Darwin's father's List of Objections to his son's appointment as Naturalist to H.M.S. Beagle:

- 1) It would be disreputable to your character as Clergyman hereafter.
- 2) It is a wild scheme.
- 3) They must have offered to many others before you the place of Naturalist.
- 4) From its not being accepted there must be some serious objection to the vessel or expedition.
- 5) You should never settle down to a steady life hereafter.
- 6) Your accommodations would be most uncomfortable.
- 7) I would consider it as yet again changing your profession.
- 8) It would be a useless undertaking.

A Clergyman Hereafter: The Beagle, 1836

He is devout yet finds a bitter age  
circumbind the earth.

What then? Did God so loathe the world He saw,  
He tossed it on the fire?

Across His second try did He rake  
a glacial afterbirth?

So when did Eden start? The natural law  
says only in desire.

## A Wild Scheme, 1839

There are no photographs of the wedding.  
But, of course, they were only married  
the year photography was born.

So what was Emma like?  
Not a young girl,  
at fully thirty.  
How we forget that virgins were often  
quite elderly.

But, ah, she was Wedgwood.  
Her body was white clay,  
her hair heavy rope  
braided into cameo,  
her cheeks creamware plate.  
Her cupped hands,  
for let us pose her,  
held to her lips,  
spin into a vase,  
her pale wrists, the pedestal.

This was the Wedgwood secret:  
how to take raw earth  
and make it white.

You, sir, would be a ragged barnacle  
spreading over a jasper vase.

But look,  
she turns on a smooth lathe  
to watch him coming home.  
His aching bowels,  
his blighted eager eyes.

She sees the century's greatest traveller  
in her home.

Voyage cakes his fingers,  
a potter blasting at a new wheel,  
Atlas becoming Wedgwood,  
he turns the earth  
plunges his fingers in

and woos her with the fire  
of his five most utter years.

A wild scheme.  
Their hands join  
in the hollowed church,  
kneading each other.

Does she yet know  
they will never leave  
this island again?

## Offered to Many Others, 1840's

The geologists and biologists  
accept their invitations to dinner  
and the theatre  
but nothing else.  
The new babies play with rock hammers  
and Mama's breast while Papa  
keeps a secret diary  
on evolution.

Emma, Mama.

He writes a book on the origins  
of volcanoes. This is accepted.  
But another baby erupts,  
and he cannot look  
for birth terrifies him.  
Soon, soon, he will get his hands  
on chloroform  
and beg she use it.

But now he empties his pockets  
beside the bed.

Perpetually earth layers bone  
in the tug and melt of clay.

The slender hammer  
withdraws from the bed  
trailing the scent of genetic secret.

His grandfather saw this before him  
and dipped it into a poet's glaze.

But he arranges  
the still warm entrail  
on her Victorian carpet.

She cannot bear  
to look.  
The labour pain  
cripples the walls again.

He thinks in a spasm of sickness  
that species must fail  
but still he writes of safe volcanoes.

And Emma?  
She is his Pompeii,  
once covered hotly with living geology,  
her marriage must now be excavated  
if we are to see  
the mosaics on the wall,  
lead pipes of plumbing  
exposed like arteries in the dirt,  
and the scattered crockery.

For she is Wedgwood.  
She takes the common art of sex  
and transforms it into  
prosperous family business.

Her record, too, survives.  
The Victorians bled ink,  
so much survives.  
Seven children thrived.  
Three were selected to die.

Three were selected to die.

Some Serious Objection to the Vessel or Expedition, 1851

Under the crystal sails  
pinned in the centre of the century,  
they let loose their restless family.

The Great Exhibition.  
Air in an iron lung.  
The new machines churn in the brilliant air,  
and the Wedgwoods display the gilded reproduction  
of the Portland vase.

The children grow  
bored and want only  
sweet cakes and ices.  
She guides them out  
of the brittle progress

to a green lawn.  
He stretches his trembling limbs.  
The baby rolls in his fat  
in Emma's lap.

She watches him break into a headache.  
Her hands soothe the treachery  
beneath the thin skin of his eyelids.

The frame of his body is under seige  
as the future litters the grass with shrieks.

The ink fed embryo  
pushes the walls of the brain-wrought urn.

## Never Settle Down, 1850's

He has a Victorian malady.

"For twenty-five years extreme spasmodic daily,  
occasional vomiting, on two occasions  
prolonged for months."

Two hours of work exhaust him  
and he must crawl to the invalid's couch.

"Vomiting preceded by shivering,  
hysterical crying, dying sensations and  
copious very pallid urine."

It wore him out last night  
to sit in the gin house  
with the local pigeon fanciers  
taking notes on breeding.

"Vomiting and flatulence preceded  
by ringing ears, treading on air,  
visions and black dots."

The children ransack his study  
for rulers, paper, kisses.

"Head symptoms. Nervousness  
when Emma leaves me."

She press her lips against  
his beard.  
Hush. She closes the door  
into its frame.

"Tongue crimson in morning, ulcerated.  
Feet coldish. Pulse slow, like thread."

The children ride without stirrups  
and collect wild orchids,  
not for her vases  
but for his dissection.

"Cannot walk above half a mile.  
Always tired. Conversation and excitement  
weary me much."

Hurrah! Her sleeves curl up  
over her plump arms.  
She pushes the furniture against the walls.  
The children scream and race  
around the parlour  
as she pounds a galloping tune  
out of the huge piano.

"Eczema. Lumbago. Dyspepsia.  
Fiendish rash."

When he awakes,  
he dresses slowly  
and fills his pockets.

"Always been temperate.  
Wine comforts me much.  
Physic no good. Water cure and douche tried  
but last time at Malvern  
could not stand it."

The handle of his magnifying glass  
rubs the curved lid  
of the Wedgwood snuffbox  
in the folds of his long black coat.

## Accommodations Most Uncomfortable, 1858

The female os innominatum is somewhat more protuberant  
to make a fairer cavity for the infant.

Sir Thomas Browne

the nameless bone  
in her body  
levers out the last child

tender, too tender

shadows stain drafts of letters,  
piling on desks, shelves of books  
spill open under gaslight  
as the rocking chair is filled  
with skirt and loose  
too loose fingers slide  
off her dry neck  
and the rootless mouth opens

next year all the old scientists  
shall die  
along with this last child  
the final chloroform applied

his eyes blur to her cheekbones  
as he moves slowly through  
the hushed rising of his great book  
paper swelling the humid walls  
of his long forehead

another log is placed in the grate

he should study embryology  
in more detail  
but he has no time

for how can he think now  
in a small room with a woman and infant  
perpetually

this helpless tender

for human origin

## Changing Your Profession, 1882

Fifty years he has devoted his brain  
to this one design  
and his body to hers.

She wants to know,  
when did marriage begin, then?  
He cannot answer.

Is it just this,  
biology and several  
narrow train trips  
across a crowded island?  
He labours dying.

She says nothing now  
of meeting him in the lost hereafter.  
She has changed.  
For it is spring outside  
and he reminds her  
that life does not travel  
only mind.

Later, as he is buried  
in Westminster Abbey,  
she knows she can never join him.

But she regrets,  
regrets  
she never told him  
how she loved it  
that he kept her photograph,  
--this matron: grey and ribboned--  
on his desk,  
in his broken study.

## A Useless Undertaking

One of their last journeys  
was to Stonehenge  
not to see the standing stones  
but to collect new specimens of earthworms.

Would any business be undertaken  
if we knew how little of us  
would be evolved?

And are origins only studied  
for their easy satisfaction:  
Eden can be imagined,  
but not the end of time?

When she was a child,  
she played with a salt-kilned  
puzzle-jug her ancestors made,  
a seventeenth century joke.  
It was a cup of many spouts  
and no matter how you drank from it,  
water spilled down  
your breast.

If a man's hands travel  
over you,  
will you blush a purer lustre,  
or become a common vessel?

Taste this. Make it work.  
But the prosaic secrets of marriage  
always elude us.

What two letters of the alphabet  
express perfection?  
N and O.

Emma Darwin writing to Charles Darwin:

"May not the habit in scientific pursuits of believing nothing till it is proved, influence your mind too much in other things which cannot be proved in the same way?... It is feeling not reasoning that drives one to prayer. I feel presumptuous in writing this to you."

Charles Darwin's reply, handwritten on the bottom of her letter:

"God bless you. C.D. June 1861."

PART II

A WOMAN'S BACK

## Canadian Sonnets for my Son

He has found, and newly loves, the museum's fourth floor,  
the luminous cases, hushed with burnished muskets,  
pikes, maces, double-handed swords  
longer than his body, ruby-encrusted  
daggers and, mostly, the empty knights in armour.  
He cannot yet read that the mail gauntlet  
is Italian-made, the breastplate French, no war--  
just show-- for the nineteenth century German helmet.  
He sees himself behind those slitted eyes.  
He holds his light-weight metal globe and says  
he wants to go to Scotland to see the castles  
and where do they live now, the steeds and knights?  
Both here and there. He joins these separate places:  
cold blue sky, lit glass and fraying tassels.

I have been to Toronto's gallery, surprised  
by Holbein's sketches. The gaze of Thomas More  
fells mine. Stripped faces now have no disguise  
but paper. Hair bound back, just the pure  
bones, lips, eyes. The labels recover  
names: one, not a nurse of the young Prince  
as formerly thought, but a great Greek scholar;  
George Carewe, captain of the Mary Rose-- since  
dragged from the sea in silver streams;  
and, mostly, Henry Howard's long calm face:  
"he brought the sonnet and blank verse to England."  
Outside the concrete building, our tongues steam  
with English. From the white length of this huge place  
I am pulled home, still speaking, by his hand.

The Various Contrivances By Which Orchids Are Fertilized  
By Insects

I.

The ladybug we found  
on the backseat of the car  
entertains the children  
as it crawls over their small knees.

A bright red bead,  
the growing noise, enter  
the long drive home.

when I grow up I  
want to be a scientist--  
when I grow up I want  
to be a scientist and a fire  
engine driver--

What did I say?  
I remember so little of what happened.  
You can't keep everything  
but where does it go?

I tell them they might lose it  
for it is two hundred miles  
to home.

Yet when we discuss grass and aphids  
as we leave the silver city  
the steering wheel becomes the polished rim  
of a glass jar.

## II.

Now in the long wedge of countryside  
the windshield streams with hot sun  
and insects streak to get in.  
I cannot say this for  
the ladybug is running over their tangled fingers.  
I look through the glass  
and all that lost honey.

A half-devoured nectarine is pitched forwards  
and its orange stone cracks open  
in my palm.

The road ahead,  
a long warm throat.  
This hothouse,  
here inside.

## III.

Two hundred miles later  
(they no longer speak of a natural history)  
the ladybug is still cupped in my son's moist hands.  
Such devotion.  
The car is slowing.  
Like an old sea voyage,  
how far this is  
to be so patient,  
so young.  
His eyes meet mine in the rear view  
mirror, anxious and elated,  
talking all the time  
(but tomorrow he will cry)  
about how perfect this feels  
right now  
to have an insect select  
the sun in his juice-soaked skin.

## A New Year's Day Conception

Crackling January opens stiff and shining,  
the snow unpressed and trembling. A tree's awash  
and clean with ice and amber beaks of waxwings  
pierce the hard red berries on the mountain ash.

We call the winter morning, shake the sheets  
all cold and lie, long and battered hill  
and bone. Oh late migration, we taste the seeds  
though spring will push us backwards, longing still.

We see the winter in each other. The tree's  
an old tree, the branches scatter deeply in  
the secrets of our bodies. Can we appease  
the soft grey hearts that start beneath our skin?

We never tell how other lovers touched us;  
but each New Year will bury that old richness.

Mother, Oh North America, With Arms Spread Open

My child drew me a story.

On page one a spaceship  
flies through a white void.  
It has ten odd-shaped windows  
and red fire scribbling from its tail.

On page two spacemen  
with stick bodies and round glass heads  
are attached to the ship with crooked cords,  
all floating on blank paper.

On page three the spacemen  
with their legs like "L"'s  
march across a barren circle.

On page four the spaceship  
leaves the empty circle  
on the bottom of the paper.

On page five the spaceship  
with one less window and its nose dipped down  
is heading towards a broken circle  
mostly blue  
except  
for a bright red centre  
shaped like a heart.

Or maybe like  
a woman's back.

## Peel River Bridge, Yukon Territory

Bitter soft tundra, two naked halves of earth  
split by the iron lance of river. One strip  
of road, broken by a bridge, cuts north.  
I have never seen such a monument. This trip  
across that steel arch to another hieroglyphic  
skin of moss. Nothing, nothing for the eye  
to keep. Two bare palms, the shivering sky  
of dying Arctic summer. Do we pick  
our symbols for love, or do they just survive?  
This is memory: I cross the bridge with him.  
A single wolf haunts the dissolving rim.  
It is only the curve of earth that will deprive  
us of the sight of our snowing desolation  
as we enter the pyramid of our destination.

## The Decline of Irresponsibility

One warm wet winter by the sea  
she will have a white wedding,  
damp and ill-attended.  
The slender golden organs already vibrate.  
The bride's hair and skin are moist  
beneath the bodice and pale hooks.  
She moves forward into satin,  
her mind hot and bothered with vows.

On her honeymoon she will  
walk along the sea shore  
through a wealthy neighbourhood,  
watch the arrogant lawns  
claim the beach  
beneath her feet.

Soon, soon, the sea air will slowly force  
the long white wedding dress  
to unfold, to richly open.  
She will buy this she desires,  
and that.

But in another city  
the winter amaryllis  
sold in Safeway boxes will crowd the shelves.  
They will tempt her.  
She can't afford them.  
Her two children are caged in the shopping cart.  
Her family allowance is folded in her purse.  
She buys twelve litres of cold milk,  
and closes her eyes through the plant section.  
The bouquets stiffen.  
The milk wobbles in its plump bags  
and the round fists of the children  
cling to the metal mesh.

She will pry open their small mouths,  
and feed each one of them  
a stolen grape.

## Sheet Lightning

Their angry voices stop and I feel slight  
and shivery in bed. The door opens and he  
lifts me into the shuddering summer night.  
"I see you're still awake. Come out with me."

The screen door snaps shut. His body and the air  
are warm and black. His circling hands are tight,  
my head is on his heart. "Now look up there."  
Suddenly the quiet stars are stunned with light.

Perhaps I slept. That summer is long broken.  
Now I lie silent in the hidden sweetness  
of my children's breath. My father has not spoken  
of that night. I carry its small completeness

in me. And think of you, our words. Did I dream?  
Yes, this sequence soothes me in the now empty room.  
That I had a night so rare. Yet does it seem  
too little? Do we make love or only pass it on?

A silver heat slips through my nervous fingers.  
I fear I dream away a living thing.  
My father watches northern lights alone  
and all small eyes are darkened in my home.

## Stillborn

August 5, 1914-- I had expected that by this time I would have had my baby. But my hour is not yet come... I wish greatly that it was all over... I am full of forebodings.

--L.M. Montgomery's Journal

I.

a priest has bought your kitchen  
detached it from your family home and moved it  
now this small cabin  
is planted by a sandy Island lake  
of shining waters  
the rock, his rock  
oh father who art  
in Prince Edward Island  
what does he feel there with you?  
the warm surge of rural blood  
washed with weekly transformations  
the red Edwardian soil  
the lapping years of menstrual cramps  
the prosperous slaughter by the sea  
and a single star scratching an inky sky  
he's aging rapidly in the severed piece  
of your first home

## II.

outside that kitchen the black snow  
panics against the icy panes  
she wrote in her journal  
of deepening winter and  
of her lover's hands in the farmhouse parlour  
remembered

oh mother and darkling flirt  
your fiance is doom seduced  
the lick of hell is in his eye  
and waits for you

oh members of the church  
her legs are sheathed in long black stockings  
she lets them watch her walking down the aisle  
religious men, they always write of women

and so do we  
I do. I do.  
the paper fan with which she cools our girlhood  
flushes open white and shuts in darkness

the lover that never, never  
the salvation that never, never  
came  
the century  
stepping through trenches  
to reach the knot of unborn  
over book over  
sweet physical objects  
the final hue and cry  
it's over  
and the remains  
just gaping holes in poetry  
the birthing bed empty  
the earth's muscles  
slit open, pouring, pouring  
her breasts  
white stones

## III.

the rest of her house is burnt now  
the bedroom where her grandmother  
slept so feebly in her abusive dreams  
and the narrow pinching stairs  
rushing down  
in flames

but a priest  
a Catholic priest  
has saved this room

oh Godly man  
the black snow fills the ploughed up ground  
oh Godly dying man  
and God a man  
who dealt you this  
this piece of prophecy  
his soft  
and wretched hand  
must be  
forgotten and to forget  
this must  
be gotten  
down

## Bright Words From the Circle of the Globe

(for Doug and Karen)

your hands are freshly washed  
in foreign water

you take my eyes  
syringe them into postcards  
make me riot in my sockets

Jane Austen tramples Africa  
Georgia O'Keeffe sips opium in the Raj  
Charlotte Bronte ropes horses in the Rockies

rich mockery you mine  
in my monkey strewn home

you carousel the world  
around my pen  
the musical centre  
now deafened in the delight  
of children's screams  
and now a blare of organ

you peel back the globe  
as the envelope slices open  
my wrists bathe  
in the dazzling sink

you keep me sliding modern  
always shooting home

The Children Make Valentines on My Thirtieth Birthday

(for Anne)

I trace paper hearts for them to paste  
 a Valentine heart is pointed  
 my pencil draws it sharp

and when the baby cries  
 the milk is piercing

is thirty too young to stop  
 with three children  
 only  
 the kitchen floor is patched  
 with crooked hearts  
 chopped sheets of paper  
 my handwriting shreds and falls  
 from their plump hands

bright noise                      and generous  
 with glue  
 their Valentines dent softly  
 when I press them  
 whiteness oozes out the sides

I cannot walk away  
 without small hearts  
 sticking to my feet

once I was alone  
 under the dining room table  
 as young as this  
 hem of white tablecloth laced my eyes  
 the heavy walnut slab  
 above my head  
 long legs and braces  
 were ribs around me

my finger traced blank vowels in the dust

my mother loves to tell how she bought the table  
 from a mansion  
 and now the cushioned seats are worn  
 but I have put my mouth there  
 tasted  
 the flat wine of wood and leather

when I crawled out  
 I looked into the glass door  
 of the silent china cabinet

ruby and gold Venetian goblets  
 I never saw my mother use  
 they cannot be used  
 I know

Venetian goblets ruby and gold  
 the first poem I read alone

this is my birthday  
 too tired to write, to read  
 I close my eyes around my baby's feet  
 last born, in my lap

a dream of red glass  
 slow pale planets of dust  
 a mansion I lived in once  
 not mine to give

the children's wet and sticky hands  
 comb paper hearts from my hair  
 my lips

the glass door opens  
 soft flushed cheeks, gold down on skin

and thirty crimson fingers pressing

at my breast

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