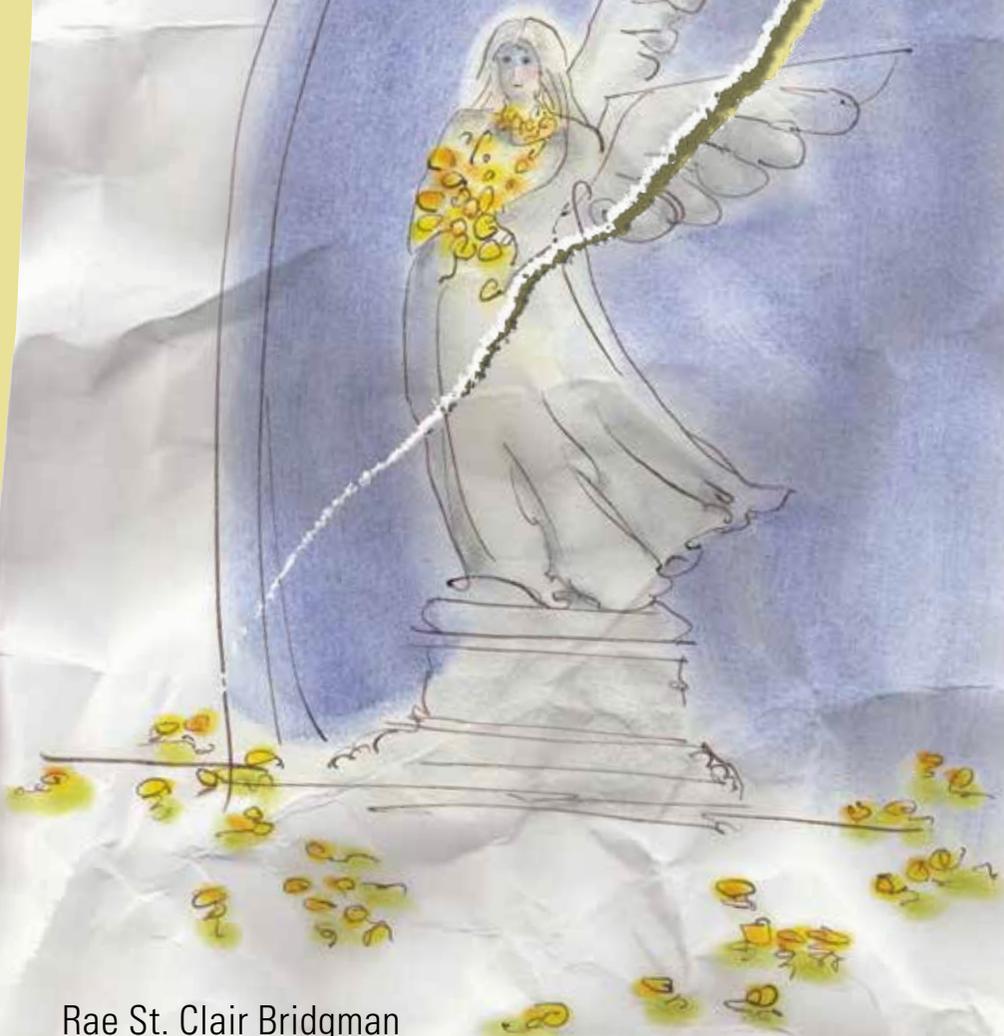


Angel

homeless in
Toronto



Rae St. Clair Bridgman

Angel

homeless in
Toronto

Rae St. Clair Bridgman

© 2016 Rae St. Clair Bridgman

All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system now known or hereafter invented, without written permission from the author.

ISBN 978-0-9919011-6-6

Design & typography by Karen Armstrong Graphic Design
Printed in Canada by Sure Print & Design

Angel is inspired by the lives of
women street survivors in Toronto

This story is dedicated to those who have
died on the streets

contents

1	scar _____	1
2	once upon a time _____	3
3	somebody's mother _____	7
4	hidden heart _____	13
5	blue room green room _____	19
6	nothin' ever changes _____	23
7	run away _____	29
8	infirmary _____	35
9	lucky _____	43
10	hippo in a tutu _____	51
11	coffee and paper _____	57
12	ruby slippers _____	63
13	ink blots _____	71
14	1-2-Z-5-4-17-3 _____	75
15	them _____	77
16	two weeks _____	85
17	hostile hostel _____	91
18	street sisters _____	95
19	guest _____	103
20	stubborn _____	113
21	kicked _____	115
22	cleaver _____	121
23	graveyard of names _____	125

1

scar



have this scar on my forehead
hair covers it up
but when I swim
which isn't very often
everyone's lookin' at it
I know what they're thinkin'
know exactly what they're thinkin'

they're whisperin'
won't ask
too scared

what's that on her head

it's a scar stupid
I know it's a scar
but how did she get it
you ask
no you ask
I said it first

they don't wanna know anyway
it's obvious

no one has a scar like this unless
go ahead
yeah someone's tried to
kill me

girl you must be here for some reason
that's what I keep tellin' myself
you must be here on this blessed earth
for some reason

gotta be a reason
why you're still here

could as well be dead
or worse
livin' like some jellyfish
swimmin' around
lookin' for somethin' to eat
like a lot of people do

2

once upon a time



once upon a time I was born

Toronto's where I'm from
this is home
don't know if it's where I belong
but this is where I am

a lot of places in this world
buy a ticket
get on a bus
head out
got money
it's a free country

maybe Montreal
got a friend there
heard it's nice
maybe some day

so yeah I was born

she was born

all you can say about that

no baby quilt
no teddy bear
no lace curtains
no music box
no pink
no pink

rock-a-bye baby on a treetop
wind blows
cradle drops
nice thing to sing to your kid

cradle drops
no more baby
no more song
no more
no more

it's the back of a bus for me
everyone's hackin' and coughin'
moanin' in their sleep
grindin' their teeth

the wheels go round and round
you want to get off but
you can't

they stop get a coffee
everybody looks
as if they're wishin'
where eggs over-easy
slop off the edges of the plate
edge of the world
no centre no more

they stop get a coffee
somebody gives them to my mother

a bunch of dandelions
the sun is shining on your little angel

that's what I imagine anyways

dandelions are weeds
that's what they say
they pesticide 'em to death
pull 'em out by the roots of
their little yellow heads

go ahead kill 'em
you're only killing yourself
goes around comes around
outta sight outta mind
comes and bites your bare behind

small suns
braidin' a gold crown

sticky bitter stem
some old man he told me once
s'good for warts

ghostball swine's snout
lion's tooth cankerwort
blow the puff make a wish
eat the root
you'll piss in your bed for sure

seeds gone
floatin' off God knows where
what's left
little bald head
all poked with holes

all's I got
my name

my mother gave me
everybody's gotta have a name
or you're not real

all's I got
 my name
and this scar on my head

colicky cryin'
alcoholic and colic
bad combo

don't know where she is now

somebody's mother



it's my son's birthday today
 he's a rape baby
 he's three or four
 maybe he's five now
 gave him up
 right after he's born

picture in my wallet
 never show it

eyes like dark raisins
 dandelion fluff hair
 skin smooth like inside a shell

he'll never know who I am
 he'll make his own story

don't know my family
 no one
 maybe I'm standin' right beside 'em
 maybe that guy with the red shirt
 maybe that woman
 cut lip and a bruise
 maybe them
 don't know

can't carry on the stories
if you don't know the story
behind the stories

can only tell my own story
my son he'll do the same

you know those bag ladies on the street
one near Spadina and Bloor
livin' by the church
bags wrapped in rope
whole street it's her living room
her kitchen her bedroom
she won't come inside
she says they'll get her
if she comes inside
she won't go with them she says
you gotta wonder who them is
until one day you understand

she says she's born in England
she's born again on the boat goin' over to Canada
then she lives in Sri Lanka and she's born again
she's been born lots and lots of times
maybe she's the storyteller
you get to thinkin'
what if I really am bein' born
again and again

stop to help those bag ladies
struggling with their stuff
ask them if they need help
it's the right thing to do
they need help gettin' across the street
I know them

this one woman she lives
on a bench at city hall with
two pink suitcases matchin'

diaries in the small one
they're all tied up in yellow ribbon
her writing it's all thin like spider legs
she writes everything down
everything that ever happens

she's a lady
shiny nails nice jewellery
you wouldn't know
you'd hardly know
 she's livin' outside
she's like some tourist
watchin' people
watchin' all the wild things they do
she likes livin' outside

don't wanna be in some shelter
with a bunch of crazies

she's carryin' around a whole library
only all the books are written
by one person

don't know where she is now
no vagrants allowed
no drifters
no beggars
no panhandlers

she doesn't drift she doesn't beg
 she's a writer

the business type he says
rude things about bag ladies

I turn to him
he looks shocked
I'm talkin' to him
can tell he's squirming
his eyes are darting around

he's tryin' to escape
the situation
hopin' he can get rid of me with a loonie
can see it in his eyes

he walks away real quick
like I'm crazy
he's tryin' to
escape his own guilt
like it's somebody else's problem
when really
he should be doin' something

they get this scaredy look in their eyes
like they already know what I'm gonna say
but they don't want to hear me say it

they wanna run home
forget they ever saw someone livin'
on the street
someone carryin' everything they own
holdin' it tight 'cause
someone'll steal it

this is somebody's mother
in fact maybe it's your mother
maybe it's your grandmother or your auntie
or maybe
maybe it's your sister
your cousin
your neighbour
maybe it's your ex-wife
and if you don't watch out
it'll be you

why are you makin' fun of your own mother
why are you makin' cracks
know nothin' about
you can't see the person
all you can see is the bags

no matter
how many soup kitchens
how many churches
how many reports
how many homeless
how many newspapers
how many movies
how many marches

I want to make those ladies feel
you're still wanted
someone remembers you
we still remember

you can be yourself
true to who you are
what's good about you
 not what's misunderstood
take the good and the misunderstood

maybe you won't leave anything behind
to be remembered by
doesn't mean
you don't live
you don't love
you don't hope and dream

maybe it's 'cause
maybe I'll turn into one of them
if I don't watch myself
that's me
that's me pushin' that shopping cart
plastic bags hangin' off
every which way
that's me carryin' all my stuff in a suitcase

I wake up
 one day
I'm not gonna do this
don't want to be doin' this
it's like one of those things

something happens
somebody dies
you wake up
you say to yourself
 enough already

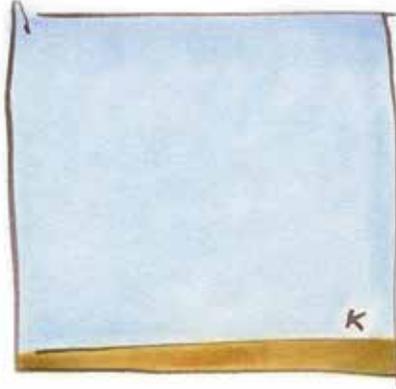
no big explosion
no big revelation
it's a quiet thing
it's
 I'm doing this

you hit
 bottom
nowhere else to go

but I keep bumpin' into walls
you can't do this you can't do that
I'm turnin' back into something
I don't want to be
 again
 again
 again

problems don't stop comin'
problems don't take holidays
by the time I solve my problems
there are just more problems

hidden heart



when I'm a baby
 they put me in an orphanage
 big stone building lotsa windows
 brick wall so high
 you can't imagine climbing it
 then I go to this school with nuns

the doctors say I'm unadoptable
 basically the same thing as unlovable
 your own family don't want you
 no one else will ever have you either
 'cause someone tells them
 she's unadoptable

no room for you
 anywhere on this planet
 at least that's the impression
 what do you do when you're told
 you're unadoptable

those doctors
 whoever they are
 they're the ones who decide
 they have the power
 they sign all the forms

did they ever talk to me
ask me what I thought

look at me
I'm still alive
did they think I'd give up and die
make it easier on everyone
 give up and die

then they won't have to fill out
no more forms for me
close my file
don't ever have to worry about where to put her
 ever again

no where's she goin' next
no legal responsibility
'cause she up and died all by herself
they didn't even have a chance to
give their permission

it's easier for everyone
all you gotta do
sign here on the dotted line

they'll let her into heaven this one time
speed her on her way
 nothin' left to say
 get out of my way

I'm sick all the time
in and out of hospital
it's my kidneys
they're infected
my feet swell up

no one'll ever adopt me

at school they put me in the blue room
whenever I do something wrong
spend hours in there

can't remember
tryin' to forget

can't remember
here and there

flash into my mind
like a slippery fish
flash
 gone

I'm all alone
walls so thick
you can't hear any sounds
there isn't no windows
can't tell if it's night or day

stone sandpaper walls
stale bread
bed
not much else

someone scratches a
 letter
corner of the wall
behind the bed
near the floor
where no one can see it
 only I see it

K

play this game
Kay's my new friend
we talk all the time
have tea parties
she likes five lumps of sugar in her tea
we eat cookies the marshmallow kind
covered in chocolate

they never allow us to eat those at school
but Kay likes them
 a lot
she gobbles them all up

Kay don't be greedy
one cookie at a time

make up stories
read to Kay
she reads to me too

long spelling contests
let Kay win most of them though

she's a cry-baby
if I don't let her win
she cries and cries
no stoppin' her
she kicks and screams
they come runnin'
take her away

sometimes the nuns they let us
have a dictionary sometimes
Kay and I play dictionary

close your eyes
open the dictionary
 anywhere
point your finger
keep your eyes closed

no cheating
you opened one eye
saw you peeking
no you didn't
yes I did
I'm not gonna play with you any more
 if you cheat

'cause I saw you
it's not fair
you're tryin' to trick me
bet you want me to lose
don't you don't you
can't fool me
I won't be friends with you
no more

open your eyes
read the word
other person spells whatever word
your baby finger touches
your baby finger

pick a word
leafin' through the book
find a word
guess the meaning

I'm laughin' so hard
my sides hurt

take all the letters in the word
make new words

Kay's name backwards yak
it's true
she's yakkin' and talkin'
no tomorrow

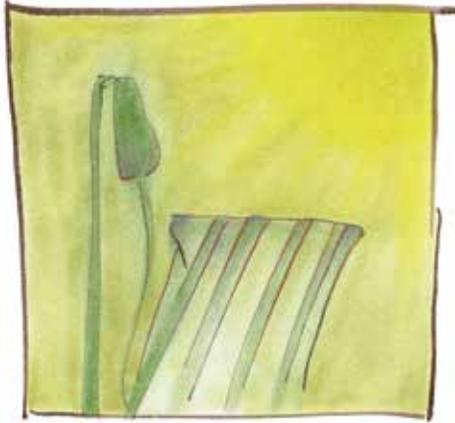
Kay and I we laugh for hours

that's when she isn't cryin'
sometimes she cries so much
she can't stop

how can she have that much water inside her
I swear she can fill a pail
with her tears

she bangs her head
against the wall
that's the worst
I can't get her to stop

blue room green room



I collect words like people
 collect stones
 when they go to the beach

carry this dictionary in my pocket
 found it on the sidewalk
 there are words in here for things
 you'd never think there'd be a word for
 dot on the i
 tittle
 I kid you not

takes me a long time to figure out why

why I can't sleep in the dark
 why I sleep door open
 why I can't sleep

count backwards from one hundred
 whatever else stupid thing they tell you to do

it isn't until
 I go back to Children's Aid
 big stack of papers frayed corners
 flippin' through faded ink

tryin' to understand
in the spaces
in between all the words
what they write about me

date number name born
allergies medications notes
please see attached
custody order
author concludes
follow up
not
not
no

and that's when I really understand why

punished
punished
punished

you can make a lot of words out of that one
nude hips
pushed in
shined up

so this is the room I'm in
 the blue room
old yellow papers
yellow like groundhog teeth
they don't say how long I'm in this room
in there more times than not
Kay and the tray of cold food
but Kay she doesn't care

if the light's on
it's like something's watchin' over us
guardian angel
nothin' will happen if that light's on

then I have foster parents
they're gettin' paid
I'm like a job for them
yeah I'm their job
I'm a business opportunity
they're the only parents I have
at least the closest thing to parents

I'm sick so much
in and out of hospital
spend more time
in than out
needles and tubes
I'm a pin cushion

middle of the night
someone's wailing
end of the hall
shoes
squeak
fade

pee only keeps so long in a room
no getting away from the smell
sour
even when they take the bedpan away

who's ever in the next bed
sneezin' coughin' moanin'

want to go home

this green light
street lamps comin' through the windows
shadows 'gainst the wall
gettin' bigger and bigger
they're gonna swallow you up

want to go home

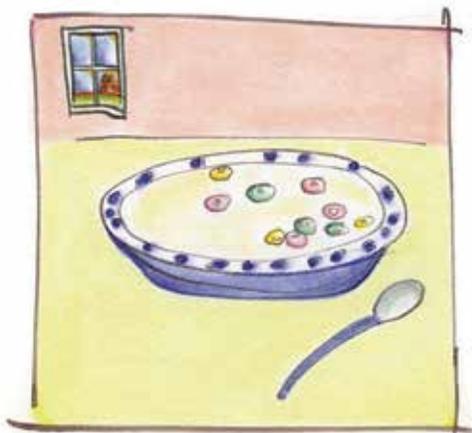
day break
trolleys jolt
dishes clatter
shadows slink off

want to go home

other kids in the room
soon as I get to be friends with one
their bed's
 empty
like they were never there

want to go home

nothin' ever changes



Children's Aid Society has the power
 they've got a God-given right
 'cause I'm a crown ward

yeah I'm wearin' a real crown on my head
 a dandelion crown
 everyone does what I say
 they bow low
 Your Majesty this and Your Majesty that

wardship means plain old hardship
 they pick you
 up out of any place
 do whatever they want with you

all they need is a piece of paper
 stamp it date it sign it
 they got that piece of paper

without a piece of paper
 you're nothin'
 nobody listens

listen to that voice
 my foster mother

get those wretched weeds off the table
how many times do I have to tell you
 don't pick the dandelions
bet your hands are all sticky now too
go wash your hands
right this instant

I'm eatin' a bowl of cereal
mindin' my own business
watchin' the dandelions in the cup on the table
picked 'em this morning before breakfast
but their heads are droopin'
they're closin' up already

if I hadn't picked them
let them grow
the way they were supposed to
they woulda been happy

phone rings
put my spoon
 down

you don't swallow
so you can hear everything
 heart
 thumpin'

yes she'll be ready that's fine
not long to pack her things
no problem I understand

no I don't understand
or maybe I do

fly falls into my bowl
legs wavin' around

climbs out
 falls back in
pick it up with my spoon
put it on the table
soggy wings

even if you're halfway happy somewhere
nobody asks you
do you want to stay
first you're here then you're
 not

pack up your clothes
say goodbye
where's your toothbrush
no time to cry
look under the bed
see if it's there
go outside and play
they'll be here soon
it's not good-bye
don't worry
you're comin' back

but you never do

they come get us
Kay forgets something
runs back inside

come back Kay

I try to tell them

they leave her behind
yank my arm
suitcase in the trunk
see Kay's face in the window

never see Kay again

they throw you somewheres else
sink or swim
fly or die

you'd think they'd tell you why
you'd think there'd be some reason

they just want to fill you up
more paper
it's more proof

it's all like it or lump it
gotta do exactly what they say
if you don't like it
they won't support you
no more

for your own good
we love you
God loves you
don't expect
something for nothin'
what's a little freedom for a bowl of cereal

you can't complain about nothin'
beggars can't be choosers

we're takin' care of you
world doesn't revolve around you
you should be thankful that
there but for the grace of God

scream inside my head
I'm no beggar don't go tellin' me
can can't do

they write it down with their fancy pens
write down what you're tellin' them
as if writin' it down
will change things

so that's how you feel
then what happened
that's hard to believe
we'll look into this
 straight away

arrangements can be made
sorry to hear that
we'll see what we can do
now you're quite sure
you're not makin' this up
of course no doubt perhaps
certainly definitely absolutely
we'll see what we can't do

scream inside my head is gettin' louder
she's really not listening

you're thinkin' about the argument
with your husband this morning
the kids wouldn't eat their cereal
what should we have for supper tonight
whatever else people think about

you're starin' at that piece of paper on your desk
you're starin' at your pen
you're starin' at the desk
the telephone
the floor
the ceiling
the clock

goddammit you're lookin' at the fly crawlin' on the wall
more than you're lookin' at me

and you're writin' it all down
your head nods
sympathy oozes under the door
but it never changes

no point in even tryin'
soggy fly in the cereal bowl
nothin' ever changes

does anybody else
ever read what's written down
on those pieces of paper

you think
they must
but if they did
they'd do
 something

it's like those pieces of paper are blank
or they're usin' invisible ink
it disappears after you leave the room
whatever they write down
it's like they have amnesia

you begin to think
maybe that really didn't happen

well it must have happened
because I remember it happened
even though everybody's askin' you all the time
are you sure that's what really happened

yeah I'm sure

even though I keep tellin' them
 nothin' ever changes

run away



I go to a girls' boarding school
 I'm nine when I go in
 leave there when I'm fourteen

my foster parents
 I write them lots and lots of letters
 they hardly ever write back

I know they aren't my parents
 obviously
 but when you got nothin' to hold onto
 you take what you can get

I'm in boarding school
 those five years

there's a lot of good
 first lover
 there's a lot of bad
 accused of things
 slapped around
 this place is run by nuns too

there's a big dance in a week
can't go unless you clean your room
cleanliness is godliness
dirt's the devil's work
in their eyes

you can't go anywhere
without hearin' someone talk about
the dance
everyone's so excited
the nuns say they'll
cancel the dance
but they can't stop
the whispers

what you gonna wear
you can't wear that
so-and-so's got the same thing
definitely not
that's terrible

nothing to wear
wear this belt
you can borrow it if you want
who are you goin' with

the nuns will die if they
catch you
what would be so bad about that

where did you get it
my sister sent it to me
can she get one for me too

I'm up real early this morning
strip the wax from the hallway floor re-wax polish
floor's so shiny
you can see yourself in it

take everything out of my room
clothes shoes books papers
scrub
the ceiling
the walls
the windows
the cupboards
under the bed
dust until
every last mouse turd's gone
put the spiders outside
room's so clean
looks like there's no glass in the window
you can eat off the floor
it's that clean

four o'clock
get ready for the dance
brush my hair a hundred times
maybe two hundred
hair's as shiny as the floor
wear my favourite top
blue with the big yellow flower

one of the staff comes up to me
why didn't you clean your room you silly girl
clean it up now
or you don't go tonight

she's lookin' at me like
I'm something nasty stuck to
 the bottom of her shoe
piece of chewed gum
residue scum
no one ever looked at me like that
 before

but I spent all day on this room

either you clean this room
right this minute or
you don't go

no point in lying to me girl
clean this room
and the hallway
no dance for you
you shameful girl

that's what she says
you shameful girl

she did finish it
we saw her do it
we saw her
her room and the hallway
it's not fair
you have to let her go

but she doesn't believe me
she doesn't believe anybody
she can see perfectly well
how shiny the floors are

she's a mean woman
plain nasty

some things you try to understand
you go over them again and again
tryin' to figure out where the truth is

all you've got
is your own truth

you can't crawl out of your own skin
into someone else's to figure out
what they're doin'
why they're sayin'

he asks me what I'm doin'
tell him what happened
he listens really listens
feels like somebody hasn't listened in a long time
maybe never

nice eyes
doesn't look like he's had an easy time either
little finger on his right hand's missin'
his nose it's squashed crooked
he's comin' off the night shift at the slaughterhouse

it preys on your mind
killin' things all day

drives me back early in the morning
sun startin' to come up
worms musta found whatever they were lookin' for
they're all gone

infirmary



supervisor
 when she hears
 I can't believe
 you ran away
 veins on her like blue rivers runnin'

now there's a whole big investigation
 what happened why when
 we're glad you're safe

upshot

that woman is fired
 the mean one
 because I don't run away

you did the right thing
 the girls say
 they pat me on the back
 she never should have said that
 how'd you have the guts to up and leave

join the club
 I'm finally one of them

what did he say
what did you say
what did you eat
what's it like to be free
why'd you come back

longing in their voices

it isn't as if we're in prison
but we aren't allowed to leave either

thou shalt not leave the school
girls been here for years
their families forget
they're alive

I run away
it's the talk of the place
everybody's glad she's gone
isn't the first time she goes after someone
everyone else is too scared
say something

that's what some people do
wherever they go
spread misery

she's probably doin' the same thing
the exact same thing
to some other poor kid somewheres else
accusin' them like she accuses me
she'll get away with it again
and again
nothin' I can do about that

what goes around comes around
like killin' the dandelions

of course I get punished
doin' somethin' so stupid

expect to be punished
who wouldn't in a place
where heaven and hell's more real
than anything here on earth

bein' punished doesn't change anything
only makes me think
more and more
about leavin'

want to go home

they throw me in the infirmary
what a euphemism
there's no way anyone
will get better in here
if they really are sick

they want to make sure
nobody else catches
whatever strange disease you have

don't want to be called a liar
they accuse me of a lot of things in this place
lying's the least of it
they blame me when things go missin'
a bible a pencil a shoe a ring

even if I did steal everything
where would I put it
room's big enough
for one bed one dresser
hard enough
goin' to the bathroom
to get some privacy
let alone tryin' to hide a stash
the size of a barn

don't call me a liar 'cause
I know what's right
I know what's wrong

the infirmary
where they punish you
solid brick walls two feet thick
door with a small peep hole
impossible
for any disease to get out

you can't hear anything
dead quiet

door's locked
but there's a keyhole
Mary and Baby Jesus are hangin' on the wall
big black crucifix under
that picture musta been there a long time
can't see the eyes or nose of Baby Jesus any more
should paint them back
not fair he can't see

what'll happen
if there's a fire
'cause prayers to the sky
they aren't always enough

take action yourself
don't rely on others
not even God
'cause God
if there is a God

that's what they keep talkin' about
like it's all they think about
God this and God that
until you'd think that God has nothin'
better to do than listen to them all day
maybe they carry God around
in their pockets
because they're always shakin' God in our faces

God must be pretty busy all the time
so many people gettin' in trouble
not a job I'd want

stuck in this stone room
what if there's a fire and they forget
no one'll hear me
I'll burn alive like Joan of Arc

soak my blanket in water
stuff it under the door
hide a cup of water under the bed
in case of emergency

a concrete bed
two blankets
one skinny pillow
one window
way high up
the only light in here
watch the sky and the clouds
guess what time it is

spend five days solid in this room
meals on a metal tray
no one speaks to me

they take me to the washroom
they stand right there
lookin' at me
watch me go to the washroom
no doors nothin'

take a bath
somebody's with me
no towels allowed
somebody's watchin' me the whole time
got nothin' better to do
they think I'm gonna drown myself

they're scratchy towels anyways
no soap either
maybe I'll eat it and choke
they take away any pleasure in gettin' clean
how are we supposed to cleanse our souls
without soap

supper's cold potatoes
grey gravy
grey peas
old salad
lumpy bits floatin' soup

lots of stories
about where those bits
come from

three sheets of paper and a pencil
that's all I got

draw dandelions
stems and leaves and flowers and roots and fluffs
hide them under the pillow
so nobody can take them

make me as small as
a dandelion seed
gone with the wind
hide in a crack
they'll never find me

think over
what have you done
what will you do
in the future

what future

don't see how it'll be any different
had enough
rules
had enough
scrubbin' and waxin' all their floors

like bein' free
and even though it's stupid
'cause I'm only a kid
even though it's against the rules
I know I'll try it again

one of the girls has a long skirt
tapes a bottle to her leg
she's real good at walkin' that way only
the tape tears the hair off her legs
no razors to shave our legs
one day she wears knee socks
but the bottle keeps draggin' the sock down
as she's walkin'
they almost catch her this time

the nuns go to bed
last rounds ten o'clock

midnight party
we drink our hearts out
we laugh and giggle until six in the morning

we pretend
we're the nuns
we deliver these really long sermons about good and evil
we're all plain old evil kids
all of us we're goin' to go to hell
sermons way better than
the ones we have to listen to

we know our bibles inside out
the nuns know for sure
the bible saves our immortal souls
with or without us

lucky

it's rainin'
 rainin' a lot
 I find a book of matches on the ground
 they're sopping wet
 try one see if it works
 sulphur cakes off
 there's no way it's gonna light

throw the box in the garbage bin

garbage bin goes up in flames
 you wouldn't believe it
 how quickly that fire begins
 black smoke everywhere

I'm coughin' and chokin' and spittin'
 there must've been paint in that garbage bin
 something for it to go
 up in flames that way
 big orange flames lickin' out the top
 the whole thing's gonna blow
 and me with it

run back into the building
 I'm yelling

what trouble have you got yourself into
this time

I didn't do anything
found this book of matches
didn't do anything
I swear I didn't do anything

they accuse me of tryin' to burn
 down the school
like I have this whole huge plot goin' or something

this is a very serious matter
cannot be ignored
this will go in your record

the big threat
add another piece of paper to your files
by your sins so shall ye reap
 your one-way ticket to hell

who else is in on it

there isn't anybody else

there's this huge conspiracy
it's so big so real
they can't see what's right in front of them

a scared little kid

and even if there's a plot
and even if there's somebody else in on it
that's the worst thing to do
is rat on somebody

rat on somebody
gets you killed

so I'm punished
this time for a month

there's not one piece of kindness
there must be one
there must be one nun out there somewhere
you'd think there'd be one
who's encouraging me
it would be an act of charity wouldn't it
a good deed
wouldn't take much
offer a little praise

I'm gonna be in this infirmary
for a whole month
more like solitary confinement
it's torture

nothin' to do
nothin' to read
no paper no pencil either
nothin' other than
 nothin'
and one small window up by the ceiling

I'm one of the lucky ones
I'm allowed
to read
I'm allowed
to come out of my cell
go to the basement reading room
there's a table and a chair

two hours is up
go back to your room

some people there
they don't even let 'em read
God knows what they do
inside their skulls
I'm one of the lucky ones

the books are old
books about saints
books about popes
books about sermons
I'd give anything for a dictionary

most of the time I cry
sometimes I cry so much
I use up all the tears

a person can only cry so much
before they turn into a desert
maybe that's why I never cry again
no more
all the tears are used up
in that infirmary

I make up sermons
about guardian angels
the nuns always tells us
every child has
a guardian angel

one of those psalms
God orders all the angels to guard us
to hold us in their hands
they're supposed to save us from lions and snakes
that's the story anyway

angels of God our guardians dear
protect us all from harm and fear
ever this day be at our side
to light and guard to rule and guide

stop bein' such a cry baby
you're really beginnin' to bug me with all your crying
it could always be worse
what's worse
at least you're allowed to read
what's the point of readin'

if you can't share it with anyone
don't know how many days
it'll be over soon

I'm hearin' voices
I'm hearin' music in my ears
it's a buncha radio static
somebody's talkin' right at you
inside your own head
I wish they'd go away
so I can be alone

it's my own brain
goin' around and around in circles

stick us in this room where we're all alone
fillin' our heads with stories about
guardian angels savin' us
they're savin' us so
they can punish us some more

our guardian angel is always right here with us
never doubt the angel is here
proof comes not only by sight
you'll hear the angel
or touch him
why it has to be a him I don't know
or you'll smell the angel
a special perfume in the air

what's an angel smell like anyway
cinnamon wild roses oranges
maybe vanilla
that's a good angel smell

the only thing they don't say
an angel might taste like something

maybe 'cause we'd have to bite the angel's arm
to know what an angel tastes like

all those big philosophical debates about God
they have nothin' on me
debatin' all the possibilities

I try listenin'
I wait
I wait for the weight of
an angel's hand on my shoulder
or something whisperin'
be not afraid for I am by your side
as hard as I try smellin' the air
nothin' comes to me

maybe my guardian angel's takin' a vacation
maybe there never was a guardian angel in the first place
nothin' sittin' in this sorry stone room other than me
no wings no feathers
no dandelion fluffs either

sit starin' at the intercom
plastic box screwed into the wall up by the ceiling
try speakin' to somebody in the next room

anybody there
can anyone hear me

this really crackly angry voice comes
over the intercom
all of a sudden

be quiet

no talking allowed

now that's creepy
'cause nobody's talked to you in days
and here's someone shoutin' at you
but they're invisible
there's all this static
and they tell you to shut up

there's no way you can talk back to
a voice in a box
no body it's just a box
doesn't have eyes or a face
can't argue with a box

feel like smashin' that box
pullin' it down from the wall
but of course with my luck
I'll have to stay in here
for another whole month

swallow everything
but now I can hear someone
snivellin' in the next cell

but it's hard to know for sure
'cause you're too busy
cryin' yourself

hippo in a tutu



a week before I'm supposed to
leave this absolutely wonderful school
the best school in the whole country

everything's bein' prepared
I'm movin' back to my foster parents' place
that's what Children's Aid says

everything's packed
room's empty
 real empty
like I never lived here
like I never even existed
clothes books my stone collection
all my drawings everything
two suitcases sittin' in the corner
waitin' to go home
can't wait to leave

my mother and father are gettin' my room all ready
they're even gettin' new curtains for me
high school knows I'm comin'
I'm excited

I'm gonna take ballet lessons again
I have an old photo they took of me
I look like a hippopotamus in a pink tutu
this girl with these really chunky legs
she's so happy
wearin' this pink tutu
'cause she loves to dance

I'm supposed to go back
but a week before I leave
get this call from my foster mother
she calls me up on Friday night

she's cryin' she's angry
can't understand what she's sayin'
her words they're slurrin' together
like peanut butter and raspberry jam
my heart starts thumpin'
can't breathe
the telephone feels all slippery
'cause my hands are sweatin' so much

you changed your mind
why

what are you talkin' about
what do you mean I changed my mind
I'm comin' home
comin' back to your place
my bags are all packed
everything's packed
I'm comin' back

no you're not

what are you talkin' about
who told you I wasn't comin' back
who did you talk to
what did they say
and why haven't they talked to me

no one said anything to me
don't know anything about this
I'm comin' back

but you said that you didn't want to come back
I spoke to them tonight

I want to come home

talk to your social worker
find out what's goin' on
something strange goin' on
they said
you changed your mind

have to wait the whole weekend 'til Monday morning
the office is closed
there's nothing
absolutely nothing
I can do except
wait

can't eat
can't sleep
can't read
can't do anything

the first thing I do Monday morning
I'm up so early no one else is awake
refuse to go to school
until I talk to my worker
glue myself to that office door
nobody can get in or out

now they hustle around lookin' for my worker
I'm sittin' in the office on the hard wooden bench
underneath a picture of the Pope
there's this glowin' light around him
there's another picture of Mary and the Baby Jesus too
they're both starin' at the Pope

the secretaries they're answering the phone
everybody's real busy
but they keep starin' at me
like I shouldn't be there
like I should be somewhere else
of course I should be somewhere else
but I'm stayin' put until I get
 an answer

the smell of coffee fills up the whole office
and I'm waitin' and waitin'
bell rings halls empty
still sittin' there
waitin'
 to go home

but inside
I know they're not
gonna let me
go home

I'm gonna have to stay at this school
forever fever amen
and they're never gonna let me go home
and the smell of that coffee is makin' me feel
sicker and sicker
like throwin' up

I'm all alone and everybody's runnin' around
it's me the Pope and Mary and Jesus
I really am in prison
 stuck
they're not lettin' me go nowhere

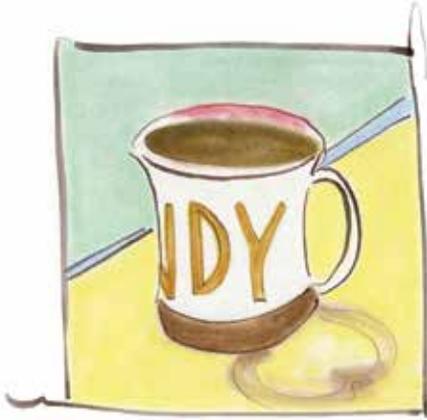
saw one of those paperweights in a store once
one of those dandelion puffs only it's
 stuck
inside a clear orb
plastic or glass or something
preserved forever

it's a little funny
'cause lots of people call dandelions
plain old nasty weeds
then somebody sticks 'em inside a clear glass ball
makes a lotta money

and the guy that's out puttin' weed poison
and this is the funniest thing
you know what he's got sittin' on his coffee table
you know what his grandkids give him for Christmas
yeah one of those dandelion tombs
and he can't throw it out
maybe if he looks at it long enough
he'll stop killin' the dandelions

smash that glass
free the seeds
'cause even if they rot
even if some sparrow eats them
they get chewed up by some squirrel
still one or two of those seeds will grow
that's what they're meant to do

coffee and paper



so they find her
 my worker at the school
 her name's Cindy
 finally I get to talk to her

she has an ugly brown coffee mug in her hand
 lipstick tattoos all over it
 coffee's stinkin' up the whole room
 she takes a sip
 she's buyin' time

you know
 women who wear lipstick
 they swallow four pounds of lipstick
 in their lifetime
 they don' mean to
 just happens

used to make lipstick out of whale blubber
 can't do that no more
 whales they're all gone
 now they use
 cow brains coal tar
 maybe it's a big invisible plot
 kill off all the women

so Cindy smiles at me
only the bottom half of her lipstick face is smiling
the smile never reaches her eyes

before she even opens her mouth
I can see exactly what she's gonna say
can see it squatting there in her eyes

no you're not goin' back there

why not

she takes another sip from her mug
like the coffee is gonna find the
God-given answer for her
she's tryin' to pour words into her mouth
'cause all the words in her mouth they're dried up

she's mumblin' something
her words are gettin' blurry
or maybe it's not the words
maybe it's her face
it's turning into a blurry ball
the room is spinning
my eyes are blinking
I'm havin' trouble swallowing
my stomach's tight

we don't have to tell you why
 simply put
we believe
it would be in your best interests

then she repeats herself
as if I didn't hear her the first time
as if I'm stupid don't understand

we have your best interests at heart of course

but I did hear her
I'm not stupid
I can hear what she's thinking inside her head

welcome to Monday morning Cindy
what a doozy of a way to start the week
have a good one

what the hell kind of phrase is that
your best interests at heart
my heart is splittin' inside out
everything's spillin' out onto the floor
and I'm runnin' around tryin' to pick it all up
but it's no use
'cause everything keeps rollin' around and around

and if there are best interests
there must be worst interests too
can't have the best without the worst
but no one asked me about my interests

a kid's just a nothin'
gettin' in the way
makin' trouble for everyone else
that's what they think

you have the option of either goin' to
a new foster home or a new group home

fine if I go to a group home
will I still be able to see my foster parents

unfortunately not

good I'll go to a group home then
that way I don't have to see them

and I'm thinkin' in fact
I'll disown them right now
sure seems like they don't wanna see me

a big scream
it's fillin' up my head
and the scream is gettin' bigger
it's shoutin'
 why

Children's Aid doesn't give
 no answers

they have this big pile of papers
it's sittin' right on the desk
between you and them
that big pile of papers

everybody has the same pile
the same old ugly coffee mug
brown stain from all the bad news

and those papers they're all about you
but they won't let you see those papers
least not when you're a kid
everything's marked
 private
 confidential
 restricted access
 restrictive asses

everything they're thinking about you
it's all written down in
 black and white

it's like their eyes are glued to those papers
they're fingering them leafin' through them
starin' at them
it's like you're not there
those papers are more real than
 you are

and they're tellin' you all about
why you can't go
 home

only they aren't tellin' you the real reason
lies and truths but you're lookin' for reasons

we have another good idea
what would you think about this

and you can't think about anything except
one thing

this big elephant in the room
it's standin' right in the middle of the room
it's takin' up the whole room
it's practically pushin' everybody out the door
but everybody's pretendin' they don't see it
it's hungry
it's thirsty

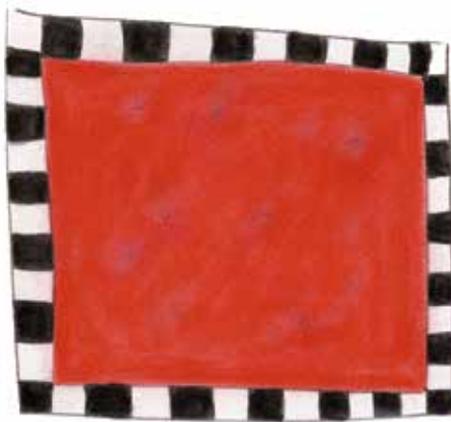
who are you to ask questions
'cause the answer will always be the same
it's in your best interests

I'm lookin' out the office window
Lipstick Cindy's voice is far away
I'm lookin' at all the dandelions
growin' free by the fence
they're wavin' in the wind
their yellow heads tossin'
they're wavin' right at me
they're callin' me
waggin' their jagged leaves

why won't she stop
nothin' more to talk about
nothin'

stuck in this chair
can't breathe the lipstick coffee air
stuck behind glass
if only I could

ruby slippers



two weeks after that
straight back to Toronto

I'm the first person in this brand new group home
see my foster parents a few times
but it's not the same
they don't wanna see me
I can tell
no room in their lives

I'm not allowed to go
to my grandmother's funeral
which is a real drag
she taught me how to bake bread
how to knead it how to braid it
and every time I make bread
smell the dough risin'
see her hands kneadin' the bread
she was good to me

sometimes I save a piece of bread for her
the dead
they need to eat too

my uncle dies
can't go to his funeral either
that's the last straw

isn't right I can't go to their funerals
pay my last respects
especially when there are so few
so few who actually care
who want the best for me
they look at my drawings their eyes light up
give me hope that maybe
 just maybe
a reason

for the second time in my life
 I run away
want to go back home

my uncle's the first person who ever
gives me a book
 my very own
it's a birthday present
cover's falling off now
Wizard of Oz
flyin' monkeys carryin' everyone off
with their big wings
copy all the pictures
only have a pencil to draw with
no pens at school
pencil's as good as anything else
better in fact
at least with a pencil you can rub it out
can always find a pencil
nothing fancy
not like those pens to write all the reports

ruby slippers
ruby slippers

all Dorothy has to do
say
no place like home
no place like home
no place like
home
click her heels together three times
she's right there

every time I see a pair of red shoes
can't stop lookin' at them
remember Dorothy

I run away
get picked up by my social worker

I can help you if you tell me what's wrong
you know it's not safe
didn't you hear what happened last week
you're lucky to be alive
everybody missed you
you must understand

I stop listening
don't say anything
get him riled
he starts pointin' his finger at me

running away from your problems doesn't solve anything
we can't help you
if you don't want to help yourself

you have got to face up
no point in
think you're so smart
you don't
can't you see
if you think
if I were you

big bunch of clichés
nothin' but one lecture after another
what does this guy know
he doesn't get it

he isn't me
he can't possibly know

they're always puttin' me somewhere
but they never ask me where I want to go
what I want to do with my life

they're squeezin' my life in their hands
pullin' it up by the roots
 over and over
shakin' it out
diggin' a hole somewheres else
stickin' it in that hole

be grateful and shut up
and if you aren't grateful
if you don't shut up
then we're sorry
game over

no way I'm gonna talk to this guy

refuse to talk to him
the entire drive back
sit there lookin' out the window
watchin' the seagulls swoopin' overhead
wishin' I could fly

another lipstick social worker gets assigned
brings me into her office
asks me a question or two
at least she doesn't have a cup of coffee
sittin' on the desk

she's askin' a lot of questions

same questions as before
but this woman seems pretty on the ball
maybe something'll happen this time

finally someone's gonna listen
someone's gonna do something
things are gonna change

then she says
she asks
sends shivers
down my back

do you know why were you in that school

you people put me there
you're the ones makin' all the decisions
not me

you should never have been put
into that school in the first place
it wasn't the right school for you
they made a mistake
whoever put you in there
you shouldn't have gone to that school

what are you talkin' about
the right school

that school was for emotionally disturbed girls
her answer is plain and simple

they let me spend five whole years of my life
in a school I never should have been in
they told me when I went in there that
it's a boarding school
my idea of a boarding school
it's a private school
you know an independent school

and what's an emotionally disturbed kid
someone who pees in the bed
that's emotionally disturbed
does it mean you're sick
they need to put you somewhere
far away

I'm shy
therefore I'm emotionally disturbed
just what are they sayin'

I spend five years of my life
in the completely
wrong school
somebody signs a paper
sends me there
somebody signs a paper
keeps me there
somebody signs a paper
gets me outta there

pick up one of those heavy-duty swivel chairs
pick it up as if it weighs nothin'
my social worker
she's lookin' right at me with her lipstick face
her face it's nothing but a stupid mask
eyeholes starin'

pick up one of those office chairs on wheels
fake leather
little rubber wheels spinning
they don't know which way to turn

heave the chair at that pile of papers
never want anything written down
about me
again

not unless I say so

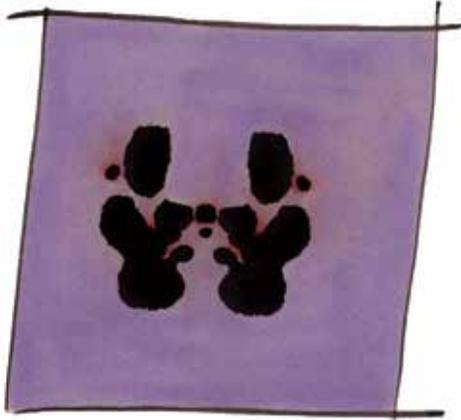
walk outta that office
no lookin' behind
 slam the door
last I see of her

hey you're not supposed to shoot
the messenger
it isn't her fault

nobody ever apologizes
nobody ever says I'm sorry
everybody's too busy pushin'
the pile of papers
so they don't have to deal with
 someone like you

too late now
woulda shoulda coulda
build the wall
higher and higher
you can't see over it
 no more

ink blots



four of us in this group home
 feels like family
 I have a small bedroom
 pin up my drawings

Uncle John and Aunt Leona they're nice
 they have an adopted daughter
 little younger than I am
 there isn't any shoutin'
 that's new

learn how to make spaghetti sauce and roast garlic
 how to make pickles from baby cucumbers
 there's always lots to eat
 for a change

by the time I move in here
 I'm already tryin' acid
 already drink
 start goin' to high school and dealin' drugs
 begin hittin' the bars

first couple of years of high school
don't do very well
I'm not a quick learner
nothin' goin' in there
nothin' anyone says
no difference

Mme. Sardou's shoutin' at me
she's asking me a question
she's leanin' over my desk
glarin' at me
her breath stinks of old coffee
she's shoutin' in French
some pretty choice words
judgin' by her expression

sit there lookin' down at my
je ne sais pas je ne sais pas je ne sais pas
for good measure Ich weiss nicht
one of the girls in the group home
she speaks German
she's teachin' us a little

Mme. Sardou thinks I'm swearin' at her
makes me stand in the corner by the garbage can
put my head against the wall
stand there with my back to everybody

school counsellor shows me
a bunch of ink blots

big pieces of paper
someone spills the ink
didn't clean up the mess

tell me about this picture
what do you think it is

looks like somebody's throwing up
splat on the floor

anything else

two people kissing
don't know
two ink splotches

try using your imagination

okay use my imagination
I got an imagination
we all got imaginations
humans got 50 percent of the same genes as a banana
99 percent of the same genes as a mouse
who's to say
a banana and a mouse don't have imaginations either

looks like an alien space ship
maybe some kind of insect
it might eat me up

yeah it's a flower
a venus flytrap
that'll eat you up if you're a bug

it's some kind of amazing diamond
you could get a lot of money for it
nope looks like a frog
or a motorcycle
looks like a bird actually it's two birds
and they're fightin' over a grasshopper

actually I don't see
nothin'

she's busy writin' everything down
again
it's not like there's a right answer
it's all a bunch of choices
it's a lottery
sure would be nice to know if
you're on the right track or not

nice to know
not that you're the same as everyone else
but you're not way out there weird either

they're lookin' to see how psychotic I am
that's the game

is she getting confused
how rational is she
how does she think

the pile of papers is gettin' bigger and bigger

what if they spent as much bloody time
actually helpin' people
as they do writin' down stuff about them

could as well be lookin' at
the cracks on the wall
the scuff marks on the floor
the coffee stains on the desk
as those ink blots

somebody's makin' a lot of money from these blots
they sure as hell have a pile of paper
all that writing they do
everybody's gotta have a job

whatever they think
whatever they're findin' out about me
they're probably makin' up a lot of things
like I'm makin' up all those things about
their precious little ink blots

1-2-Z-5-4-17-3



I'm always drawing
 every chance I get I draw
 draw doodles on any old scrap of paper

they're always telling me I'll never be an artist
 always being told I'll never amount to anything
 never go anywhere
 never do anything
 just plain gonna be dead
 that's all they say

I'm livin' under a rock
 no sunlight
 can't crawl out
 buried alive

no one's out there for me
 make your own joy
 make your own luck
 no one else is gonna make it for you baby

what if someone had actually wanted me
 what if I hadn't been sick
 what if I never
 what if everything was different

not like you can erase your memories
even if you want to
not like you can turn the clock back

yeah it could be better
could always be worse too

could be damaged for life
be psychiatric
 for the rest of my life
so drugged
don't even know
 I'm human

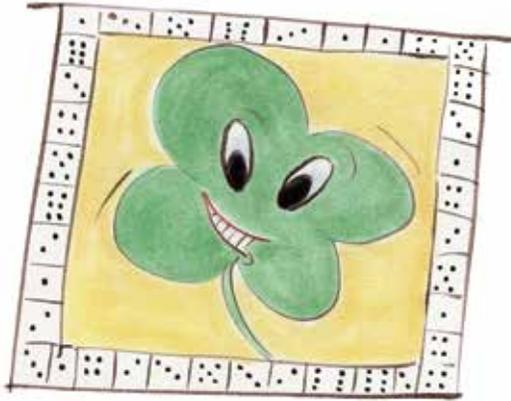
or I could be plain dead
or could be servin' years of jail
with no chance of never

why be angry
play that boring old blame game
when it could be as easy as 1-2-3
everybody else's makin' it 1-2-Z-5-4-17-3

basically it all comes down to
whatever doesn't kill you
makes you stronger

girl you're here for a reason
you may not know what it is
maybe you'll find out years later
maybe you'll never know

I'm still tickin'

them

I'm in this independent program in Children's Aid
 it's supposed to be a steppin' stone help you
 live on your own
 support yourself
 take care of yourself
 I'm seventeen

instead of bein' under a rock all my life
 I'm makin' progress
 I'm on my way somewhere
 headin' to better things
 I'm jumpin' over the rainbow

I'm goin' to school
 get a job
 do normal
 make something of
 this life of mine

they're gonna help me with my schooling
 'cause I'm goin' to university or college
 psychology or sociology

we're very pleased you're goin' to college
 exciting idea well worth pursuing

you have potential
why don't you contact
of course
demonstrate financial responsibility
plenty of time to discuss
perhaps we can
that's definitely probably a possibility

I'm really excited
for the first time I have a plan
gonna make something of this life of mine

day I turn eighteen
I'm literally cut off
from Children's Aid
just like that

cut off
no if
no but
no money
no nothin'
no place to stay
kicked
out

it's two weeks before I'm eighteen
and this is the notice they give me
this is what they say

in two weeks' time
you have to be out of this house

they changed their mind
that's all I can say about that

don't know why
'cause as far as I know
this isn't supposed to happen

it isn't my worker
don't know who it is

it's them
whoever them is
the same old them

them
hide everything under a rock word
it's like a marshmallow
got no centre

it's always
 in the mail
it's always
 don't call us we'll call you
if you need assistance
please call 1-800 mumblemumblemumble
please press 1 please press 2
for more options please press 3
if you know the person you want to reach
please dial the number now
loopdeloo around and around
something goes wrong
gotta be strong
so long so long

don't get it
how they can be sayin' one thing
just like that
it's a completely different story

only it's my story

it's like talkin' to somethin' with two heads
saw a sheep skeleton once had two heads
in some museum
that's what this is like
those heads are lookin'
two completely different directions

turns out
all I've got is

a ghost of
a plan

slam

I'm lookin' at another pile of papers again
black and white gobbledygook

it's somebody new
someone I don't know
she's my ninth or tenth social worker

doesn't look any older than me
so here I am lookin' at this worker
sure enough
same old coffee mug with Cindy on it
think I'm seein' déjà vu
laughin' to myself
until I hear her say
I'm sorry

and I'm afraid she's gonna tell me
my other worker's dead
she looks through my papers
she's frownin'
she's lookin' way too serious

Children's Aid has come to
a decision
they are closing your case

her voice sounds real far away
like it's comin' from inside a sardine can

I'm starin' out the window
like I always do
'cause you can breathe out there

don't see any dandelions
they're buried under the snow

know they're out there somewhere
what I wouldn't give to see a dandelion right now

and I'm tryin' to listen real carefully to the words
the words comin' out of her mouth
but they sound like they're from
some place that has
nothin' to do with me

we can't possibly support
you've had plenty of opportunity
there are so many others who
I'm sure you'll be able
certain responsibilities
I'm sure you understand
you're eighteen
you're free to leave
plans in place
custody discharged
sign here on the dotted line
so everything's clear

she's waitin' for me to say
something

buzzin' in my head
screwed again

what plans are you talkin' about
I'm thinkin' in slow motion
yeah but free to go where
what does free mean
doesn't free mean
 havin' a choice
what kind of a choice do I have
if I don't have any money

I'm left holdin'
this white piece of paper

dear so-and-so
rip it up

shoulda kept it
for posterity
for history
in case
'cause you'd have to read it to believe it

I'm supposed to have
a plan for where I'm gonna live
a plan for a source of income
a plan for where to go
dentistdoctorcounsellinglegalservices
you name it

try to make some phone calls
have some friends stayin' with
an uncle or a grandmother
no room at the inn

gonna get a place with a friend
we go lookin' at apartments
can swing it if I get a job
pillowcases and knives and forks and spoons
my foster mother she's got extra sheets
this is gonna be okay

my friend ends up movin' back
with her dad and stepmother
it all falls through

I go lookin' for work
help wanted apply within
take a deep breath
walk in
ask to speak to the manager
like you're supposed to do
hand in my resume all typed up it's perfect

but they're lookin' at me
and I can see the no in their eyes

have you had any experience

how am I supposed to get a job
so I can get some experience
when I don't have any experience
beyond me
even though I can type
I can sew
I can cook
I can do all these things
it still isn't enough

have lots of experience
too much in fact
guess it's not the kind they're lookin' for

of course being a drug dealer doesn't count
not in this world no matter how
you slice it or dice it

entrepreneurial spirit a must
check
financially accountable
you better believe it
customer relations experience an asset
yup
prepare to be part of a global network of distributors
okay
flexible hours must be self-motivated
definitely

legals get in the way of course
wrong means to an end

nothin' worse than havin' people look at you
like you're a nothin'

they actually send me this birthday card
four-leaf clover big smile on its face
it's a cartoon
open the card up
it plays Happy Birthday

now that you're an adult
good luck!
we thought you might need a
four leaf clover
lucky wishbone
horseshoe
lucky 7 dice

but we realized that
everything you need is right
inside you

yeah right

that's all I need to get by
don't need a place to live
don't need food
don't need any cash before I
crash

two weeks



two bloody weeks to find a place
just isn't workin' out
not for lack of trying

sometimes the universe
doesn't go your way
you're buttin' your head against a wall
so thick so tall
no way you can climb over it
no windows
 no doors
 no cracks

so you say hey go around this wall
but you look left and right
wall goes for miles and miles

so you say hey dig underneath this wall
but you don't have a shovel
all you got is your bare hands

you keep hopin'
'cause a bottle of hope
that's all you got
that and a few books

couple of old photos
your drawings
four school trophies
shirts pants jacket socks
a hat if you're lucky
a toothbrush
one pair of shoes

it's not a case of you can't always get what you want
it's more like you can't even get what you need
that's what's happening to me

apply for 25 jobs in 10 days
maybe it's 26 or 27
it's all gettin' to be a big blur anyway

thank you for your interest
we certainly appreciate
we'll let you know
we'll keep your resume on file
a pleasure to meet you
thank you for coming

it's startin' to feel as if there's no place for you
anywhere on this whole
godforsaken planet

have no money comin' in
not enough to pay
first and last month's rent

havin' trouble imagining
what I'm gonna do
where is this story goin'

no idea

I can draw a path
and it looks real
can draw what I want

but what's it mean

when I leave
the only person to turn to
my foster mother

hi it's me
oh it's you
silence
sucks everything up

I can hear the questions
they're strangling in the telephone wires
halfway between here and there

why's she phonin'
always something
what does she want
must be in trouble
again

explain the situation
how I have nowhere to go
okay if I stay with you for a few days
until I get my own place
until I get on my feet

got a couple leads on a job
have this friend
actually she's a friend of a friend
I'm hearin' about this other place soon

sounds pretty feeble
wouldn't believe it myself actually

silence

gotta say something

or I'm gonna get
swallowed up by that silence
there won't be anything left of me

she always sighs
like a saggy stocking
with a gaping hole in it

any hope you mighta had
drops out
 rolls into the ditch

she gets off the phone
she's talkin' to my father
only I can't hear the words
but I'm hangin' on to the other end of the phone line
feelin' like one of those bats upside down
I'm hangin' on by
 one claw

she gets back on the phone

big sigh

okay you can come here
 for a few days
we'll see how it works out

thank you

this isn't rocket science
know how it's gonna work out
not a lot of options
beggars can't be choosers

we'll see how it works out
turns into
I gotta get outta here
as soon as I walk in the door

memory chains
same old noisy clock by the front door
same old crucifix hangin' right beside it
fly speck on Jesus's nose
Our Lady of Perpetual Cabbage soup
simmerin' on the stove
I'd be willin' to swear it's the same soup
that was cookin' on my last visit

same clock same cross same pot same soup
welcome home I say to myself
it would be nice if somebody else said it
but it's obvious no one else is gonna
so I do the honours

nothin' I say seems to make things better
 which is too bad
'cause I try to clean
do the shoppin'
keep askin' if I can help
even clean Jesus's nose

I can't do anything right
they're criticizin' everything

don't know what Children's Aid said
must have been some pretty bad stories

always two sides to a story
always three or four or five sides
hexagon stories
stories inside stories inside stories

just 'cause you have a pile of papers
doesn't mean your side of the story is true

my foster parents and me
we don't really like each other I guess
they're the only family I know

they try to correct me
the clothes I'm wearin'
the people I'm with
the books I'm readin'
how I use my knife and fork
it's like they can't help it

it isn't workin' out
and we all know
it can't
it won't
it'll never work out

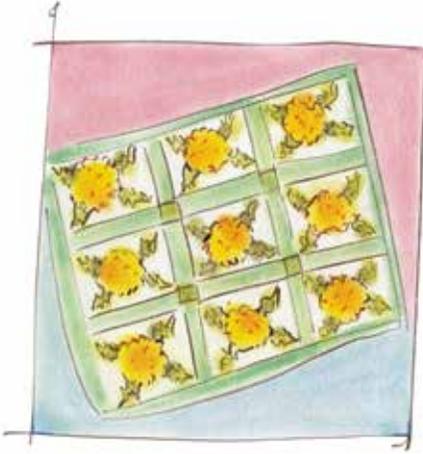
my foster mother
she's actually the one
she calls this hostel
to see if they have space

don't know what to expect
no one knows who I am
don't have to live up to anyone else's
expectations

looks like a pretty ordinary brick building
three stories tall
school across the road
big trees
kids playin' ball hockey
they're yellin' and screamin'
all looks pretty normal
pretty ordinary
outside

but it's pretty scary
inside

hostile hostel



why the hell am I here
 girl you better turn around
 right now
 and I mean right now
 'cause you don't belong here
 no place here for you either

but I'm already steppin' in
 they shove this form into my hand
 sign here on the dotted line

someone's screamin' at her husband
 go to hell
 only she's talkin' to thin air
 a woman's cryin' in the corner

someone else paces looks at me says
 if you don't watch out
 they'll take you away
 so you better listen to me
 do what I tell you

this place is a
 nuthouse

someone's stolen my glasses
maybe I lost 'em can't remember
can't see much
everything's a big blurry
smudge

can hear this woman growling
she's growling at me
growling in the back of her throat
like a dog growling
if you take its bone away

the place smells of
cigarettes and bleach
soup and bread

without that soup I probably
what with that woman growling at me
I'd be out the door
on the street tonight
doin' God knows what

takes a couple days to get new glasses
the very first staff member I actually see
her name's Sarah
short red hair and too many rings to count
in her ears on her nose her eyebrow her lip
never seen so many earrings on one body before

she's sittin' at the dining room table
fifteen women sittin' around there
they all look up at me at the same time
I start backin' away

Sarah says come join us
introduce you to everybody
she smiles
and there's this other woman
sittin' beside her
her name's Catherine

she's the growler
and she starts growling at me again

does this woman even know how to talk

I look at her
don't want to get too close to her
one scary woman

this Catherine keeps growling at me
it isn't a game it's for real

remember Alice in Wonderland
remember the part where Alice says
I don't want to be around mad people

and the Cheshire Cat says you can't help that
I'm mad you're mad we're all mad
and Alice she says how do you know I'm mad

cat says you wouldn't be here then
cat says I growl when I'm pleased
wag my tail when I'm angry

but a dog wags its tail when it's happy
growls when it's angry

that's what this was like
as upside down as Alice in Wonderland
maybe this woman is actually
glad to see me
but this woman's definitely not purring
not by any stretch of the imagination

and she can speak all right
she has more than a few choice words for me
she doesn't even know me
I'm too scared to answer back
but I swear I can match her
word for word and then some

all week she growls at me
after a week I look at her
say yeah okay
after a month
we're best friends
we're inseparable

when I finally get my glasses back
right as you walk in the door
hangin' on the wall
there's a quilt somebody donated
one of those home sweet home quilts
somebody must have spent hours on it
tiny stitches

bright yellow flowers and jaggy leaves
even if I couldn't see them
when I first walked in the door
there they are
 my dandelions

street sisters



Catherine and me
 we're street sisters now
 family outside a family

there's a feeling you have
 for somebody
 goes beyond

when everybody else has disowned you
 or you've disowned them
 even friends you thought were friends
 they're bad-mouthin' you behind your back

your street sister
 that's the only family you have

whatever happens they'll be there for you
 they'll always be there for you

your street sister and street brother
 will protect you
 if you get charged they'll jump in
 they'll say no it was me who did it
 she's innocent it was me

this is what Catherine does
I do the same for her

we're inseparable
we talk
we argue
we probably argue more than we talk

whenever we get into an argument
it's scary like two cats
spittin' hissinn' caterwaulin'
everybody stays away
'cause no one wants to get between us
no one

and then it's all over
everyone brings us
back together again

why was I so angry with you she asks
like she can't remember
and I sure as hell can't remember

all you know is that
you were really angry
about something or other
but now you can't exactly remember why
and now it doesn't really matter anyway
even though at the time
it was the most important thing in the world
like the entire world was gonna blow up

I don't know
could be anything
I said something
you don't want to hear
I did something
you don't want me to do

I know you'll always come back

we have a pet rat named him Alfred
he's brown
looks like he's wearin' white gloves
funny we're keeping a rat like a king
when where we're stayin' is
nothin' but a cockroach hotel

turn the light off at night
hundreds of 'em crawl out
is it us or the cockroaches sign the lease
it's more their place than ours

I'm getting so sick of macaroni and cheese
can't even take a mouthful of the stuff
 not without gaggin'
can't even look at the outside of the package
 just barely

Catherine has a lot more than I ever had
she has a family
she has people who love her

around Catherine
I'm somebody
I can do things
I have ideas

there are a lot of good times
and a lot of sad times too

we face an awful lot of deaths
that's the thing about the street
it's a hard life

our friends
don't know how many funerals
lose count
you're always thinkin'
there but for the grace of God
'cause that could be you

it's a fluke
I'm still here

hard when you know
someone died alone
there wasn't even anybody there in the end
everybody should have somebody
to hold their hand

mark their passing

but when somebody dies on the street
they die alone

maybe they're livin' in a lean-to
under the overpass
die from the cold
maybe they're mugged
left to lie in the street
get run over by a streetcar

maybe they jus' plain give up
check outta this hotel

it's full-time work
survivin'

my friend Frankie's goin' to jail again
she's been in and out so many times
we're all losing count
Frankie's laughin' and tellin' me she's gonna go
kick a few tires
'cause Lacie her lover
Lacie's back in jail
they wanna have Thanksgiving together

how're you gonna do that
what do you mean you're gonna kick a few tires

she laughs again
watch me

doesn't Frankie begin to holler and shout and scream
make a real scene
crowd's gathering
everyone's starin' at her

run around the corner don't want any part of it
Frankie's kickin' some shiny red car on Queen
frie kin' car alarm goes off
buzzin' and honkin' and beepin'
we're in the middle of a war
and maybe we are
kicks it three or four times before the cops
pull up handcuff her haul her off to the station
I'm watchin' from around the corner

and Frankie she waves goodbye to me
she flashes me this huge smile
mouths the words
 good-bye

she's gonna shout
Lacie honey I'm home
as they bring her in
that's the kind of person she is

last time I see Frankie
 alive

she loves drawing wolves
she did one of a wolf howling at the moon

if you ever hear a wolf
moanin' at the moon
you're hearin' something
ten thousand years old
once you hear it you never forget it

can hear that wolf of hers howlin'
gives you the shivers
that wolf is starin' right straight through you

jail's like a retreat for her
like some kinda holiday
no worryin' about
where's your next meal comin' from
where you gonna sleep tonight

take a holiday from beggin'
at Yonge and Bloor
panhandling's outlawed no loitering it's a crime
cops tell you move along move along
no room for you here in this city
get invisible
get lost
get dead

Lacie's still hookin' the last I hear
Frankie she's dead
she's stabbed
they think she's somebody else
drug deal gone bad
she knows the odds
beats 'em for a while

another hopeless homeless
statistic

never forget full wolf moon
that's how I remember her
that's how I want to remember her
I'm sure that's how she wants to be
remembered

Catherine dies too
cause unknown

she's a year younger than me
we spend a long time together on the streets
she never tells me everything
about her life
always thinking she will

we're never lovers
always thought one day we would

she never tells me the story of her life
people think we're real sisters
we braid our hair the same way
wear the same kinds of clothes
people think we're twins
they can't tell us apart

if no one remembers us
if we don't remember ourselves
what then

livin' on the street
you never get the dirt out
from underneath your fingernails
sometimes the only thing you can do is
 act crazy
maybe people will stay away from you

I'm hooked on alcohol
everything keeps goin' back and forth
like a see-saw
I stop drinkin' for a while
 start again
stop

you're so stuck
no point in changin'
thinkin' about changing
'cause everybody else around you
they're doin' the same thing
this is the way it is
this is life
this is your life
 nothing else
normal is ten in the morning
passed out
wearin' the same
clothes for days

'cause you haven't bothered taking them off

you don't even notice
stink of old puke
that stink is you
your hair
your shirt
puddle of sick on the floor
can't smell it

no more

guest

I been raped twice

and now it's three times

the first time it happens
 when I move back to Toronto
 go downtown
 and this guy has a bottle
 we're sittin' there in the park
 he says he's gonna walk me back to the subway

nobody around

he knocks me over the head
 drags me into an alleyway

the second time it isn't
 an actual rape
 it's an attempted
 but it's close enough
 by another friend's boyfriend

you're askin' for it
 no I'm not
 I kick him hard

and then the third time
get hit on the head
knocked out again

I get up
get dressed
look at him
scar on my head

throbs

don't say a word

he won't even look at me
leaves

nothin' left

I see it

the dandelion growin'
out of a crack in the pavement
one flower lookin' right at me

pick up the spill from my purse
yellow comb two teeth missin'
only now three teeth missin'
drug prescription
money gone
cigarettes gone
hey still got my free French fries coupon
guess he missed that

the flower
so soft

stumble over to one of those places on Yonge Street
where eggs over-easy
slop off the edges of the plate
edge of the world

no centre
no more

woman behind the counter looks at me
brings me
hot barley soup brown toast

on the house honey

sometimes people do good things
just not enough to make up for all the
other times

funny thing is
have to get up the next day
go to the university
talk about homelessness in a sociology class
I'm it
I'm the guest speaker

feel like a real pile of shit
all I know is I have to concentrate

I'm gonna call this woman up and tell her
I can't do it
can't make it
to the university
to do the speech
that's all I'm gonna say
and I'm gonna
thank her
for invitin' me

then I say to myself
gotta do it
gotta do this
gotta get outta here
this is my only reason for
gettin' out of here

I go there I do it
stand there in front of all these students
they look like they're still in high school
here they are in this class that's teachin' them
why the poor are poor
they're readin' the books
they've never lived there

so I try to tell them
what it's like
to be homeless
what it's like to live on the street
how you eat the half sandwich
thrown in the garbage

how you eat the packages of ketchup
from that restaurant
check the dumpster behind the grocery
survive every little you can
tell them how you think you'll never get
 off the street
how you keep tryin' and tryin'
but everythin' pulls you down

and I tell them how you never have enough money for
first and last month's rent so you end up livin' from
hostel to hostel
corner to corner
when you get some money
spend it fast
so no one robs you
or help a friend out of a tight spot
that's where the money goes

I tell them how you sleep on so many sofas
so many places you lose track
every time you move
lose something else
there are pieces of you all over the city

and when the students ask
how did you get off the street
tell them how it wasn't easy

it's a lie
should be tellin' them
I'm still on it
I can't leave

once you live on the street
once you've been a street person
you're always a street person
you never forget it
it's always inside you
you never forget your friends

you never forget the ones who are dead now
you never forget
because you never know if
 you're gonna end up there again
you're the one they'll find

maybe you only stop bein' a street person
when you stop carin' about your street friends

I'm not thinking

I'm not thinking about
what he did to me

I'm a wreck
I don't know what to do

there's only one person who knows
I'm havin' a baby
I'm hiding my pregnancy
wearin' baggy clothes
no one knows
and when the day comes
this good friend of mine
she's in the delivery room with me

have to argue with the doctor and the nurses to
allow her to come in
it's a Catholic hospital
it's supposed to be the man

don't have a man here
I want her

she can't come in

she'd better come in or I'll do everything
in my power to
not have this kid

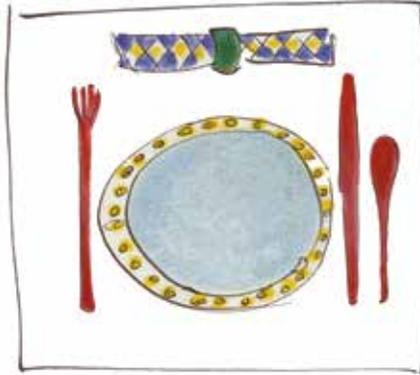
I'll lock myself somewhere in a washroom
I don't care
that woman has to be in here

so they finally allow her in

she has four kids herself
it's the first time she's
ever seen a baby bein' born

say goodbye
sign on the dotted line

stubborn



this women's shelter
 something's changing
 I'm helping the staff
 I want to stay here
 I'm cooking the dinners
 cauliflower cheese soup
 dandelion salad
 pick the dandelions myself

I'm cleaning the place
 doin' anything to stay

so they won't
 kick me out

whenever someone says I have to move on
 I say I'm gonna go to
 the streets

we'll find you another hostel
 we'll send you over

fine goodbye pack my bags walk out the door

here's some bus tickets
take care of yourself

keep your bus tickets
give 'em to somebody who really needs them

aren't you goin' over to the other place
we phoned
told them you're comin' over

I'm not goin' to another hostel

sometimes
actually most times
people don't listen
they get it in their own mind
what's best for you
only what they're tellin' you to do
it's really what's best for them
what's easiest for them

why don't you
if I were you
but it's mostly do as I say
not as I do

kicked



meet this woman at a party
 Sybil's her name

friend introduces us
 you two will hit it off she says

this woman has a great crooked smile
 like she's holdin' a secret inside

my husband beat me says Sybil
 pretty bad
 they want me to press charges
 don't ever want to see him
 never again
 not for the rest of my life
 I up and left him
 walked out one day with my suitcase
 haven't seen him since

Sybil and me
 we both like the same ice cream
 yeah we're livin' on the street

eatin' rocky road ice cream
almonds with those small marshmallows

we have a great time
for a while
yeah until it starts turnin' ugly
and I'm regrettin' we ever
got together in the first place

she's sick
really sick
takes a while to realize it

have so many problems of my own
blinds me to the fact
she's drinkin' more and more

the whole thing's falling apart

things turn really bad
she's jealous
she's accusin' me of goin'
behind her back

I'm not seein' anyone
no way I'm seein' anyone else

you're lyin'
I can tell when you're lyin'
how'd you think I wouldn't know

if you want to go screw around behind my back
that's it
that's the kiss of death
and if you think I'm gonna wait

she's on a rant
no reasoning with her

can't figure out why
maybe the alcohol's destroying her brain cells

one of those things that haunts you
until your dyin' day

what have I done to deserve this
what have I done to deserve anything

the world doesn't owe you nothin'
up to you
make the most of what you got
nobody else's gonna do that for you

and if you don't
if you want to screw around
who am I to stop you
she turns blue in the face
from all the lies

I'm a beater
I abuse her
and every other bad thing
under the sun

the more I hack away at the lies
twenty more like it
there's no stoppin' her

can hardly put one foot
in front of the other
she's harassin' me so much

when I finally move
I can breathe again
get accepted into university

quit drinkin'
thank God my life is startin' to turn around

but she's followin' me
she's callin'
she's makin' my life hell

I'm at the university
go to the washroom after class
it's a night class
sociology course on deviance

what's normal what's deviant what's criminal
we're talkin' about
all these mental disorders
all these crazy things people do

I come out of the bathroom stall
she's there waitin' for me
she doesn't say anything
standin' there lookin' at me
it's creepy
she's gonna kill me

she knows where I am
and she's standin' there waitin' for me
no one else around
she musta followed me to school

I have to quit

it's a long road from the street
keep lookin' over my shoulder every second
wonderin' if she's gonna jump out at me

move again
'cause I can't take it
no more

one day she up and leaves
she's gone
it's over

but I keep lookin' around
somebody's watchin' me

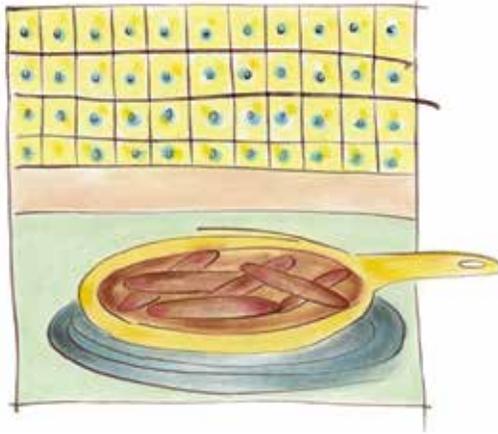
Sybil's behind that tree
she's standin' there when I turn the corner
she walks in the door of the laundromat
and I'm foldin' my clothes
catch her out of the corner of my eye

my insides pitch

it's always somebody else

I'm jumpin'
from home
to home
like a frog
for years
no safe place

cleaver



I'm workin' at a shelter
 one of the bag ladies comes in
 it's Hazel
 you have to go through her every bag
 every last thing she's carryin' is broken
 you're lookin' for weapons spray cans
 knives drugs rotten food oven cleaner
 anything lethal
 you name it

here's a pork chop
 petrified green
 lookin' like a semi-precious stone

you need this

yes

it's so hard
 it isn't gonna decay anyway
 crystallized like a chunk of jade

one night a woman threatens to
 kill one of the staff members

I walk in
 between

 give me the knife

she's screaming
breathin' heavy

I grab her arm
grab the cleaver with
my other hand
pull it away

someone's callin' the police
critical incident that's what we got

I walk away with the cleaver

she follows me

I look around
I turn around
I look her straight in the eye
my voice is flat
it's not loud it's not soft
say it casually
as if it's something you'd say any time
no one would think twice about it
like please pass the pepper

and this is what I say
plain and simple

if I see you pick up another knife here
I'll chop your hand off

she looks at the cleaver in my hand
 backs off

threaten her with the same thing
she wants to give other people
it works
 sometimes
not all the time

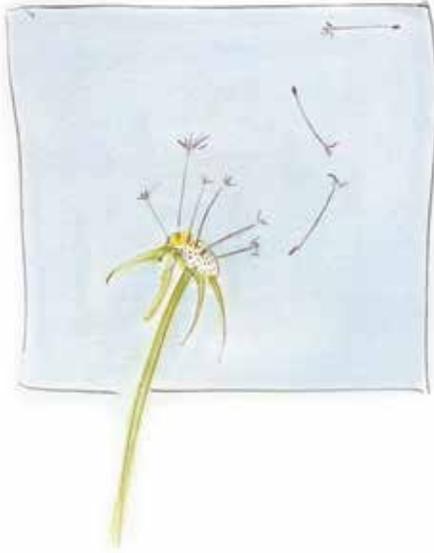
depends on the situation
depends on the individual
depends on the wind
depends on how the stars line up
depends on how the sausages
fall into the saucepan

what works tomorrow
won't work tonight
won't work yesterday

you get an extra sense
like your nose hairs tickle
or a spot on your arm goes itchy
you know you better be careful

talk 'em down
cool the air
connect
whatever level they want to connect
somebody else is standin' by the phone
in case they really need to phone
 911
 just in case

graveyard of names



all those people you meet
never see again

I'm walkin' down Yonge Street
this truck pulls up beside me
this guy's drivin' a truck of flowers
rolls down his window says
you doin' anything tonight miss

no

hard question to refuse sometimes
need the money
must be the smell of all those flowers
I climb into the truck

whole truck smells like a flower garden
roses and daisies and lilies
and a real fancy one
he tells me it's a bird of paradise
nice name

long beak
crown fire orange
arrow-shaped blue tongue

he's lookin' for a good luck piece
I'm his good luck piece
so he buys me
a steak sandwich fries chocolate milkshake
takes me to the racetrack

he wins in five races
thousands of dollars
he passes me five hundred bucks
buys me a case of beer
gets me a hotel room for three days
it keeps me goin'

I'll remember him
if I ever see him again
he laughs when I tell him
my name

go by a lot of names
depends who I'm with what I'm doin'
one way or other
drive the suits and their computers nuts
they can't find me
not unless I want 'em to

depends how long someone knows you
what they call you

if you got a secret name
they can't curse you kick you beat you down
'cause they don't know your name

Kay Sarah Gracie Lori Barb
whatever

Angel
that's the one
my parents gave me

but I ain't no holy saint
angel means messenger
maybe that's what I am

maybe I'm a messenger
but a messenger's gotta have
a message
someone wants to hear it

don't give up
you can't give up
give up and that's it
game's over
no more dandelion salad

you're here for a purpose girl
even if you don't know what it is
you won't ever know
even if you try
that's the funny thing
the joke's on you
you'll never suck out the end of the story
outta the melon

you're always comin'
in the middle
you're always leavin'
in the middle

you can only say a name so many times
life's only got
so many heartbeats
so many breaths

name gets worn out
like an old sock with a hole

your name drops out onto the sidewalk
and you hardly notice it's gone
'cause everybody calls you something else

someone finds it
puts it in their pocket forgets about it
falls out in the laundromat
they sweep it up in the dustpan

they throw your name away

somebody else comes along
steps on your name
squashes the whole thing

it's a dead name now
goes to wherever dead names go

names like dandelion seeds
every time someone reads your name
every time someone writes it
every time someone whispers
sings shouts curses it
every time someone hears your name
another seed lifts off
drops inside the crack of the curb
the city is my mother

when your name's all used up
when the jar of raspberry jam is an empty smear
when you chew the last slice of bread
when the milk's all gone
last squirt of ketchup
last lick of margarine
last pickle in the jar
cupboard's so empty
the cockroaches scut away
the dead names rattle

Angel's a good name

an angel's watchin' over me
since I was a baby
else how would I still be alive
 how can I still be alive
 how can I survive
 everything

the world owes you nothin'

guess my mother thought if she brought a little angel
 into this world
she could just as well kick a little angel
 outta this world
that's what she wants to do
gets it in her mind
and there's no stopping

how
could
she

if it isn't for my father
 I woulda died
he carries me to the hospital
 four miles
he walks along the railway tracks
stumblin' through the snow

funny thing
 in my dreams
I see her
see her clear as day
long brown hair pulled back
eyes like dark raisins
she's wearin' a hair clip
dandelion on it
she's smilin' at me

in my dreams my mother smiles
sometimes she touches my forehead
frownin'
sometimes asks me puzzled
how'd you get this scar

it doesn't matter mom

she's my mother
no matter what she does to me
she's still my mother

Angel's story begins —

no one has a scar like this unless
go ahead
yeah someone's tried to
kill me



girl you must be here for some reason
that's what I keep tellin' myself
you must be here on this blessed earth
for some reason

A testament to the search for reason in the face of loss and sorrow,
the resiliency of the human spirit, an unerring sense of hope...

Angel tells her story of a treacherous childhood, abuse and living homeless on the streets of Toronto. First person narrative, fragments of memory and free verse heighten the immediacy of this gritty yet poignant story for young adults, which treads a fine line between the sane and the incomprehensible.

Angel draws inspiration from many years of ethnographic research on chronic homelessness in Toronto.

Rae St. Clair Bridgman has authored several books, including *Jimmy Tattoo: Homeless on the Streets of Toronto* (2016), *Safe Haven: The Story of a Shelter for Homeless Women* (University of Toronto Press, 2003) and *StreetCities: Rehousing the Homeless* (Broadview Press, 2006), co-authored *Braving the Street: The Anthropology of Homelessness* (Berghahn Books, 1999), and co-edited *Feminist Fields: Ethnographic Insights* (Broadview Press, 1999).

ISBN 978-0-9919011-6-6



PRINTED IN CANADA