

*Theory of Illumination*

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*Spoulin*



ALSO BY VALERIE POULIN

POETRY

Something to Hide  
The Trunk of a Green Malibu  
Brushing Back History  
Celaire's Crush

NON-FICTION

Seeking Representation: A Step-by-Step Guide  
to Finding a Talent Agent (in Canada)

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

A Mixed Bag of Bones, Volume One  
A Mixed Bag of Bones, Volume Two

FICTION

Letters to My Girlfriends

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*To my father: A gifted dinner-hour storyteller*



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## **Remedy for Longing**

calling to every constellation  
pelvic bones crawl to the edge  
lean against selfishness and sorrow  
awaiting the gift of salt

I press my tongue to the mattress  
a cure, a remedy for longing  
a moth steps across my closed eyelid

count the lashes, count the lashes

a moth steps across my closed eyelid  
a cure, a remedy for longing  
I press my tongue to the mattress  
awaiting the gift of salt

lean against selfishness and sorrow  
pelvic bones crawl to the edge  
calling to every constellation

## Theory of Illumination

the crow that flew into the greenhouse to greet  
my father; it was time to go

broken secrets chase one another

an old wives' tale: the one about a cat  
who climbed into the baby's crib and stole his breath

a barrier to movement

three older sisters draw bow strings to shoot arrows  
through a young maiden's heart are turned to stone

like water that distorts, a mirror bends intent

branches of naked trees plead to the wind  
the sky lowers to touch my fingers

you in every breath

with the wind comes rain  
a psalm to weather the storm

a meter of light remains

## Loose Connections

The landscape of your sorrow: a house  
fallen, in the dark. You follow him

longingly, your knees in his footprints.  
Loose connections, a workable love. You

need a fall back position to memory  
that is split, tiled, broken like satellite

transmissions. The winds pick up gently  
and the landscape passes by. You turn

to catch a flash of colour, the briefest  
flicker of illumination. Then it moves, leaps

off the terrace, and turns out the light. Death  
is a kind of a ladder. Keeping safe is

essential. In the dark, he follows you through  
the landscape of your sorrow.

## O Love

*for J*

O love, you were born before  
midnight moments before the next day  
the breaking of the skin, the breaking  
of the sun, movement and flutter of air

midnight moments before the next day  
at the exact moment you entered this world  
of the sun, movement and flutter of air  
beginning, the only ceremony

at the exact moment you entered this world  
small prayers and a voice that answers your own  
beginning, the only ceremony  
a small drama playing its way into my heart

like notes in a musical arrangement, or scribbles by G-d  
the breaking of the skin, the breaking  
whispers shaken loose, as light as day  
O love, you were born before

## **The Nature of Passion**

*Holly Bushes need  
only one prince for every six princesses.*

Princesses must remain  
within twenty feet of the prince,  
to birth Holly berries.

Holly bushes can survive  
in clay ground, but prefer enriched soil.  
They are, after all, princesses.

They also prefer their beds high, to draw off water.  
So raise their beds. Because

with only one prince, there will be  
plenty of tears.

## The Hungry Season

It is likely that she kisses  
the papery skin of her child's fontanelle,  
stretches her fingertips above  
his belly, begs his ribcage  
and thin arms, where inky flesh greys.

There is a slow tearing, an acceptance  
of parting. An unbearable surrender  
she does not resist.

She may ask her child's forgiveness;  
she understands the burden  
of motherhood.

This is the curve of her story.

This is a moment  
she recognizes.

It is not yet mid-morning  
and even now the sand burns.

She buries her child  
in the ground wrapped  
in a shroud. She plants  
his bones, so close  
to dust already.

She does not say goodbye,  
does not turn back for one last look.  
Clouds of sand rise as she walks

the long dirt road of the hungry season.

## **Worse than Weeds**

On the other side of Helen, my fallen  
friend, something is cast adrift.

I am invited to dinner to learn the art  
of grieving something, but guarded  
and sullen, it is difficult to decipher meaning.

My body forced to the shape of a chair,  
my mood blameless, like an imprint  
slung over itself; a near synonym.

In the beginning, someone tells  
a story. Others share news of the day.  
We delight in details and narrow  
passages. Into the night, she sculpts philosophy;  
I compose new language.

We set aside exceptions and rules issued  
at seven past midday, turn to  
metrical fences, then to the mechanical  
reproduction of our history. Before long,  
the ground shifts, slides forward.  
And strategy, like rain water collected  
in a choir of raindrops, slides  
the length of a window pane.

This burden leads us in separate directions.

The next day, I do not resist. She  
takes position, gives no ground; I keep  
beautiful explanations and tales of ruin  
knowing the sweetness  
of friendship has turned sour.

I look to the inhospitable terrain of the past  
and find it *far worse than weeds*.

## Invitation

The width of her hand, measures  
the span of his chest. It is a need she knows,  
a need he shifts. His hesitation offers promise.  
She sees his colour of thirst, believes the lure  
of intent is an invitation that falls open, unexpectedly  
becomes an arbour, held high to keep out the rain.

He carries his young daughter on his shoulders, she  
watches as he bends to clear the door's threshold.  
They dip in unison, pass safely  
beneath the bulk of would-be peril.

In the remaining narrow space, she tries  
to pitch her body, but they fill  
the door's frame. She watches as he raises  
his hands like an arbour,  
held high to keep out rain.

## Lost

Eleven years in the making, his mistress  
grabs the night. Eyes down, she holds out

a piece of meat cooked for him. He eats  
from her fingers. Next. Ceramic plates piled

in the trash, breakfast served in a hall closet.  
She pushes his voice under water, listening

with an unforgiving shrug, she blinks her way  
through dinner parties. Each night she falls asleep

to the music of her ancestors, skin against bone.  
She permits him to sleep with her, in case she

dies in the night. She turns over, her legs curled  
under a once strong belly. In the space between,

there lay everything she'd lost.

## Things Undone

before a stove,  
match in hand, union  
of gas and light

solitude, the  
stillness of prayer left  
kneeling at recollection

rustle of stones,  
at the mercy  
of blackened boots

an iron ore dock measures his  
heavy history, metal grates,  
a swing bridge bares down

weight that anchors morning  
closes in before thunder  
arrives, the wind gathering

rain clouds in place  
alone with a history of wishing

## **The Makings of Melancholy**

Born on the day the sun changes  
signs, I return as if to lost love, you  
in every disrupted cell.

On the day of a funeral he stepped  
up the walkway, as I imagined  
you would have at his age. Oh, he  
came into view, an undersized version  
of you, so close that I record his movement  
in scattered breaths.

As ritual, I spend hours listening, closely  
watching for tell-tale signs, prepare to bury  
irregularities and ambiguities. In arguments  
and accomplishments, I wait. In explanations  
and agreements, I wait.

The tempo of his adolescent footsteps are written  
in letters to you. They create a small clearing; this is  
no celestial accident. I describe him  
in detail. My hands translate  
meaning.

Four lives of cellular memory  
rendezvous beneath his skin.

*Sometimes poetry cascades through the generations.*

## Charms

he is a water sign  
she is a fire sign  
both signs are masculine  
a fight to the death  
in a game of rock, paper, scissors  
paper covers rock, scissors cut paper

moon charts tell her  
to forget him,  
it would never work

water extinguishes fire

## **Walking the Same Ground**

You climbed through a hole in the Earth's surface, through height, cold, beauty, through depth, heat, emptiness. I climbed

to meet the sister who fell from the sky,  
just as a son rose to greet me.  
Gods gave us the power of dreams.

In fabricated photographs, we press our selves  
into ceremony as crown dancers bless the way  
before us. We watch tobacco smoke take prayers

to our creator. I stitch sacraments together, mourn  
black markings on sleeping birch trees. Ancestral  
wisdom passes through four lives. I pause

on the fourth agreement with land, consider this  
code unbroken. With hands hungry for light, I cast  
a new body in mud. Bones vanish in imagination

and I learn to dance backward, to hear the gentle beat  
of footsteps, to bring forward spirit ancestors, to walk  
the same ground.

## A Slip of Regret

### *Position*

A casual example of corresponding elements:

Keys hang from a ring in a lock, the door  
pushed part way open, left ajar.

In this spine of light, conversations  
dissolve to his point of view.

A woman pulls at her pearls, seizing duty  
in the dark space of perspective of position, voice.

### *Voice.*

Volume expands. In it, a clue to solitude.

Obligation nearly slips from her tongue  
pressed to teeth. This slip of regret twists

to a half-finished song. Sheaves  
of unwritten notes drawn into his memory.

The solid surface of a sphere with its fluid line  
allows for her retraction, of voice, distance.

### *Distance*

She searches stretches of time for some thing  
she believes he has.

Placing parable between letters, she presses  
his voice flat, stores it with weathered notes

from lovers who misspelled their intent,  
or cleverly hid good judgment

in photographs. His words a spire of ions,  
an endless loop. Distance, position.

## The Language of My Father

Measured by consonants, guilt  
a misstep of language.

My father's voice passes back  
and forth translating heavy  
curves of garden tools. He converses with the land.  
I am an outsider, uninvited, watching, eavesdropping,  
remembering.

He summons order from chaos, makes  
neat rows to bury everyday acts and objects.  
He works to change the landscape to what  
should have been, but it refuses, refutes  
his call to order.

The clang and clatter of this past vibrate against  
my wrist, like a bracelet of memories.

In August's burn, the wind pulses through  
an impossible, impassable turn of promise,  
yields to the season and collapses into  
loose shadows of dusk.

Rake, hoe, wooden handles smoothed  
by calloused hands like worry beads worn constant.

I hear his voice  
in random pairings of words.

## **The Explosion of September 19, 1951**

he lost himself, the moment the explosion took breath away  
a flashpoint, he saw his future unravel beyond the window frame  
lost himself as smoke smudged the orange sky grey

sepia and silver nitrate, time-stained and measured by yesterday  
a newspaper photograph of the accident; a toll: the dredge's claim  
he lost himself, the moment the explosion took breath away

dark shadows of night, counting sorrow by each bouquet  
received, every sympathetic hand, every mention of name  
lost himself as smoke smudged the orange sky grey

a black crow carried an invitation to his brother miles away  
the wind cooled skin, dampened the heat of July's flame  
he lost himself, the moment the explosion took breath away

his only company stars and grace, the dead mourn everyday  
his mind pressed by what would never be the same  
lost himself as smoke smudged the orange sky grey

tomorrow is filled with his memories of yesterday  
the colour of midnight revealed in his eyes, his shame  
he lost himself, the moment the explosion took breath away  
lost himself as smoke smudged the orange sky grey

## **Distant Voices**

In her dreams, a mother calls to her child.  
A distant voice calls back.

In the light of day,  
she dreams a tree,  
places palms against  
trunk, presses her cheek  
to its rough, rests her chin in  
collar bone. A late study of pose  
and position. In theatrical  
slope, there is a suggestion of loose  
workings. Her body pulls  
away, in search of  
the sky's other half.

In the light of day, she believes  
if she encircles the tree long enough,  
she'll will her arms into branches, branches  
that will lift in search of the sun,

branches that crawl over one another  
reaching for the light. She will dream herself

tree meeting sky.

## **Holding Focus**

I stand staring  
at the sea, a mathematical answer  
in my pocket. Waiting  
for you to arrive. Where the dark  
moving water barter with the wind,  
rises to inspiration and argument,  
then turns back. He is a vista where  
the length of fading shadows meet  
quicken light of the horizon,  
a deliberate anchoring that holds her  
in place. It is said that clay  
hardens with heat, but left  
to riverbank remains soft.

In the arms of her husband I am  
a lens that holds focus.

## Manhattan, 2006

On 32nd Street, in Korea Town, alone  
on the fifth floor, thinking of you  
on a bed, unmade. Delivery  
trucks below inventing idle love  
calls to men standing

in doorways smoking cigarettes. I call back.  
The musician playing his saxophone beneath  
a bridge made of stone. Slow notes tumbling  
down my back as I walk a path

tucked neatly into a ridge. Make-believe  
a lover's hand strolls  
with mine. I imagine kissing him

open-mouthed, in a taxi-cab. Instead,  
I sleep, I write  
"I was here" on the hotel wall, adding  
"Where were you?"



Footsteps call for you, a slow beat. They echo  
against the skyline, settle in the morning light.



At a museum I buy a book of poetry  
inside it reads, "denying everything  
I am looking for you." I recite this line  
at ten-minute intervals, throughout

the night. I walk Broadway  
in a rainstorm – my first.  
I believe  
the city is crying for me.

The rain extinguishes taxi-cab lights. It fills  
narrow corridors and building lobbies.  
It holds me  
down.

This is October and I would rather  
turn my collar against falling snow.



By nightfall I have denied everything.

## **The Sun and Sky Remain Unconvinced**

On its way home, the moon lifts off the tree's muddy bark, pushing through foliage, on its way home. It has been away too long, it thinks and moves back into position. Too many nights of this and the tree begins to disintegrate.

The sun does what it can for the tree during the day, but it is no match for darkness of the night sky.

Under the moon's watchful eye, the tree grows tired, dies. Her leaves turn brown, split stem from limb, settle on the floor of the forest. The tree's trunk leans, as if taking part of a lumberjack's tally and will soon provide nutrient to the soil in which it is rooted. This satisfies the moon. This, says the moon, is the privilege, of dying young.

In the night sky, the moon stares at the bended tree below, shines its beams miles southbound through the canopy of tree tops.

## Morning

A silver pendant drawn against my neck;  
its metal mouth open. Rain pellets tap  
the window, like impatient fingers.

You press emptiness in your hands,  
to the closest degree of persuasion.

I turn over a collection of possibilities, trying  
to create meaning from the essential difference  
between shadow and light.

Last night, I dreamed a child.  
I dreamed a lover.

He crawled through an open window, dragging himself  
through volumes of poetry, warning me  
that black is the absence of light, unless held

outdoors. The cold air fragments and I name  
the days of October for you.

## Separation by Moonlight

Male butterflies visit their favourite watering hole  
where they collect salt to give as a gift in mating.

This is something I can use, or use against you,  
but the information comes to me too late.

When the breaking light of morning slips into the past,  
the moon slinks from daylight. Fingers unloop

the length of my body, he brings me salt. The act itself  
is uncomplicated. I place candles around the room

to bring back lost loved ones. Preserved love can  
be dangerous. Morning slips into the past,

loosens the memory of mouth. Someone else's words  
slide across rumpled sheets, make their way across

skin, rubs against separation of moonlight. Unable  
to release itself, the moon slips from breaking

light of morning.

## **Matrilineal Lines**

countless questions  
count the questions  
silence falls  
from tongues drop  
between letters of ink  
in blank spaces where light  
bends against darkness  
another direction  
count the questions

## What Went Before

She left. Always  
the one to leave.  
This time, she stands  
in place. A breakwater, a heart  
shadowing, shattering  
pieces breaking off, scattering  
in all directions. The idea  
of something more,  
something else,  
some thing missed,  
tucked away. A catch  
fixed tight, in place. A reflection  
of time fading/faded.  
The knowing is enough.  
She is no longer  
a different country.  
An argument  
with the heat of flesh  
hurts more/most  
after its fleeting introduction.  
It is asleep in the warmth  
of empty sheets. She knows  
him as much as light. His  
lifeblood a signature  
of discovery. Uneasy in his  
nearness, stilled by  
silence. His name a calling.

*Time is not a line, but a series of now-points.*  
— Taisen Deshimaru

## **Now Points**

We draw  
imaginary lines from  
one burning stone  
to another, create  
a constellation, something  
we can almost touch  
something we can believe because

if it can be held  
it can be held close.

✧ *slp* ✧



## **Acknowledgements**

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The title and one line of “Worse Than Weeds” are borrowed from William Shakespeare’s “Sonnet XCIV”: “For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;/Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.”

The origin of the line “there lay everything she’d lost” in “Lost” is from Paulo Coelho’s novel *The Witch of Portobello* which reads “there lay everything I’d lost.”

In “The Makings of Melancholy” the line “Sometimes poetry cascades through the generations.” comes from Wisława Szymborska’s poem “In Praise of My Sister.”

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## Biography

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Valerie Poulin is the author of poems, essays, and a non-fiction book for aspiring actors.

Her poetry has appeared in *Misunderstandings* magazine, *Jones Av.*, *Coffee House Poetry* (UK), *Erato* (US), *The Sentinel* (UK), and *The Prairie Journal*, and in various small and micro press periodicals and anthologies.

She regularly blogs for a regional newspaper, and has published articles in print as well as online, contributing articles, essays, and creative non-fiction to [WomenBloom.com](http://WomenBloom.com), [Breadnmolasses.com](http://Breadnmolasses.com), and [MississippiCrow.com](http://MississippiCrow.com), [NYCmidnight.com](http://NYCmidnight.com), and [TheGlassHammer.com](http://TheGlassHammer.com), among others.

A Shaunt Basmajian Chapbook Award finalist, in 2003, Valerie works as a technical writer in the retail pharmaceutical industry.