

Silence, Like Breathing

This book of poetry is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (Creative Writing)

by

Megan van der Nest

November 2011

Abstract

In this collection of free verse lyric poems I have drawn inspiration from childhood memories, as well as from the natural world and encounters with the people around me. Each poem focuses on a small moment, presenting an emotive portrait of a memory or an experience. These small moments lead, cumulatively, to deeper insights into myself and the world around me. The collection is divided into four seasons, in part because the work is strongly influenced by the natural world, but also because the progression of the seasons mirrors something of the personal journey reflected in the poems.

*Pencil, ink marks are
highlighting ruin books
for other readers.*

Acknowledgements

My thanks to my supervisors,
Dr Brian Walter and Professor Laurence Wright,
for their guidance,

and to my teachers,
both official and unofficial.

My thanks to my parents,
and to my brother and sister,
for their love and support.

And finally, my thanks
to all the people in these poems
(including those between the lines),

to Sharli Paphitis,
for her unwavering encouragement and good humour,

to Lindsay Kelland,
for helping me to step out of my comfort zones,

to Martin Villet,
for giving me a new perspective,

and to Jonathan Le Roux,
who read these first.

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Part One
Summer

Cat's Cradle

Halved and twisted and halved again
into diamond patterns between our fingertips,

my sister and I wove fragile webs
out of twine scavenged and carefully knotted,

the rough string pulled just tight enough
to show the pattern

passing from my hands to hers;
strands of light in the space between.

Now the space fills with a pattern of days,
opening and closing in the strands of light;

threads of memory in the twisting diamonds,
and the careful dance of hands.

Locust

Not the storybook
black clouds of insects
that blotted out the sun
and left the land
without colour; it was
an unexpected green,
spiny among the dewdrops,
with jaws that drew blood
when I held it to my ear
to hear it chewing.

When I let it go, startled
it took flight, on wings
more full of colour
than any butterfly.
Somehow, the bite
didn't matter,
when the single tone
opened and spread
into a symphony.

Some kinds of music
are multi-coloured like that
and some melodies
always bring to mind
that moment,
when the green insect
took off and became
rainbow coloured,
leaving some of the red
to stain my finger.

Summer Dream

On the edge of the cliff comes the longing for flight,
to step out into the empty air, to float, to dive,
to follow the curves of the earth, to wheel
from the treetops into the clouds, to breathe in the blueness.

My eye splits light into laddered rings, receding, climbing.
I lose myself in that space, melt, dissolve, disappear.
It sings peace through me, this silence;
it deafens, it breathes, it fills me with dreaming.

I shed words like scales, strip my armour,
lay down my spear. Lie back in the grass
and let it grow through me, fill my lungs with tangles,
bare my ribs to the earth below.

Walking the Labyrinth

I had expected high hedges,
to block out the world,
but the only boundaries
between the pathways
are simple strips of ground
covered with creeping flowers,
and at once I like that better;

now the pacing back and forth
and around the curves
laid out on the ground
becomes a choice; the edges
are in my mind and in the sky,
and I follow my feet
to find the rhythm;

one step, two step, around the curve
and one step, two step, back again,
I seek the centre, find it, leave,
one step, two step, one step, two,
a peace of mind here, one step, two,
a breathing in here, one step, two,
the journey is what counts in this,
no final destination here,

the rhythmic pacing, one step, two,
and inward, outward, upward, clear.

Monet's River

flowed in from the white water
rocks tumbled turning foaming
scraping gasping upturned dragged
back into the boat and round
the bend, to where the water

lies still in the sunlight;

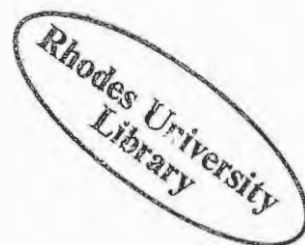
moved in slow ripples
through the river painting
between the clouds
and the water lilies
and the mirrored trees
looking straight down
into the sky.

Northumberland Road

The street is grown up now;

bicycles and ball games
have given way to cars
and cellphone calls,
and my childhood friends
who, like myself,
have matched the subtle growth
of walls and trees
and reached their height,
begin to show their difference;
uprooting, to find new streets
and new walls and trees,
where new childhoods
will in turn
trade bicycles and ball games
for cars and cellphones

and move on.



Germiston Lake

No paradise this:
a simple stretch of water
amidst factories
and high-rise buildings,
the park on the far bank
not safe to visit.

But I recall
early mornings spent
sitting quietly in the back
of my father's canoe,
lifejacket digging
into my chin,

breathing in the scent
of motor oil and water,

watching first light
break over the lake.

Cathkin Valley in December

Dark sunshine streams
through clouds gathered
over the mountains,
rich with summer green.
It is going to rain.

The river is broader now;
years of floods
have washed away banks and bridges,
the edges are shored up
with ugly concrete scars,

but all across the valley
the landscape moves
in waves of warm-aired butterflies,
and the twist-stemmed poplars
shiver with cicada song.

Honeysuckle

On the fringes of the playground
among the bushes, against the fence,
someone taught me to taste honeysuckle;
to pinch the velvet pink flowers
between my fingers, and catch the nectar
dripping from the stem with my tongue.
It tasted like I thought kisses would taste.

I hid there one morning, seeking safety,
among the sharp scents and bright colours,
ringed around with the fear of discovery;
it was the taste of freedom then,
and all day I savoured those sweet sips
from the sun-warmed flowers,
and lined my pockets with blossoms.

That bright morning passed too soon,
and now I know the hard truths;
kisses do not taste of honeysuckle,
nor do they bring freedom, and I
am once more just a truant child, dragged
from the bushes with a stained mouth
and a pocketful of crushed kisses.

Graveyard

No well-tended graveyard this;
the carven names all but lost
under lichen on fallen headstones.

Memorials writ by those long dead;
even those who mourned are gone
and no one now remembers.

The rustles in the silence are
not ghosts, but grasshoppers
among late summer flowers.

Part Two

Autumn

The Elephant around the Corner

Above my Oupa's easy chair,
in shades of red and gold,
there hung a simple autumn scene
of oak trees in the light,
that blazed so bright because I knew
it was not all it seemed.

If you knew how to look, you'd see
much more than just the trees;
a painting of an elephant
is what it used to be,
before he left the frame behind,
the light, the falling leaves.

'Look just around the corner there,'
my Oupa used to say,
'just there, where night is closing in,
beyond the turning lane,
there is the place he used to stand,
before he went away.'

'Look close,' he said, 'and you will see,
among the autumn leaves,
the places where his footprints were,
before he made the turn
around the corner, painted there
below the autumn trees.

'He's gone to find another world,
where none of us can go,
beyond the golden picture frame,
far past where we can see,
the endless twining autumn lane
goes on, and so does he.'

Swamp Cypress

the autumn tree in front of me
wears her orange leaves proudly
as if to say
what other colour would I be?

of course a tree should be orange
and burn brightly

in the cool sunlight

Dad and the Pigeons

My father wages war
on the birds and the crickets

that make our garden home,
or so my mother tells me;

each day a new report
of restless nights spent hunting

the sounds of crickets
who are never where their voices are,

and water gun battles with the pigeons
who come seeking shelter.

Perhaps once he was content
to let the sounds sooth the night,

the wild things nestle close.
Now he demands a tidy silence.

Now he stills the singing
with buckets for drowning.

Now he lays spikes on the roof,
as if to barricade even the sky.

Burning

There are fires outside Alice,
burning beside the river,
the smoke rising behind the houses,
a pale contrast to the silver township roofs.

It makes the landscape seem bigger,
to see the columns of smoke rising
into the air, up and up, making it clear
that there's no end to the sky.

Playground

I played like that once;
the witch's hat, whirling
round and round
until the dizziness
conquered my stomach;
driving the swing
higher and higher,
past all sense of up and down,
past endurance,
seeking transformation;
a longing for flight,
for transcendence,
to climb past the treetops,
to swing all the way
up the arc,
to find space to breathe.

Rage

There are days
when I sit on my hands;
longing to reach out,
to take someone's hair
in my fist,
to hug someone,
to strike.

There are days
when I take too long
to cross the street;
when I long
for someone to meet my eyes,
for a kiss,
a blow,
a car to hit me,

anything.

The Tortoise in the Road

I drove over it, in my car,
and caught a glimpse in the rearview mirror,
of it spinning to a halt in the road,
red glistening through a hole in its shell,
the top sliced off like a hardboiled egg.
I should have gone back, to help it,
or to finish it off, but I was afraid
that I would not be able to do either.
I left it stranded, exposed
and bloody, in the hot sunshine.

The Cat and the Singer

The sudden crowd disturbs the peace
of the cleanly delineated cat
who had claimed the square foot
before the fire. She retires
to the windowsill, and begins
a careful smoothing of affronted fur.

The audience stuffs itself into the couches
and the floor overflows with children
too young to leave at home. The young man
in the dark suit keeps a watchful distance
from the others, wide eyes taking in the room
as he steps forward, all sharp angles

and suppressed flinches, and song.
His voice belies the timidity, liquid,
pure, and the moment stretches out, the crowd
hardly drawing breath, until the cat
abandons her disdain, to press against his legs
and curve herself to the music.

Magpie

I collect the shiny bits;
little pieces of the happy days.

A bottle top
from the first day we talked,
a pinecone saved
from our fire,
a key from the old door
in your apartment
that doesn't open any more.

Talismans against the days,
when there are no more happy days.

[Untitled]

I dreamed the end of the world
came with an explosion of rainbows.
We painted the light
onto the walls with our fingertips,
and the children laughed
while their skin bubbled
and their parents screamed.

Loss

every night I skirt the gaping holes
where things used to be

my eyes tug against the emptiness
as I thread a path on fragile sands

each breath a struggle in the scouring winds
the edges draw me in, call for an end

but in the cold dawning, the light catches
on waving grasses, and I move on

Part Three

Winter

Snow in Johannesburg

The day the snow came we awoke, the three of us
to a world unfamiliar with winter white,
coating the dark green of the ivy in the garden,
lining the ridges of the roof, where the pigeons sat, waiting
for the world to unfreeze and the seed to be scattered,
that my mother always scatters, though she says
the birds make a mess of the roof. That day
she was not there to protest, and we doubled the handfuls,
tripled them; the birds must be hungrier, we felt,
when the cold coalesced from the air into this strangeness
on the ground; the ground that held our childhood
in familiar footsteps, tracing patterns in connect-the-dots;
there the tree that held our homemade swing, until a storm
claimed its branches, here the sandpit, covered over now
and sheltering spiders, there the rusting jungle gym,
the jagged slide, and here the trampoline, now a perfect circle,
white on white. The snow fell geometrically, a circle here,
triangles in the wheelbarrow frame, straight lines on the roof,
hearts on the leaves of the ivy; and in us too, rediscovering
the shapes of those things, and of each other, and the world,
and of the snowman that we scraped from the ground,
quickly, racing the early morning sun, that scattered
diamonds across the whiteness to light our faces.

Lesson

This classroom inspires
nothing, the whiteboard
stained with years of lessons,
ceiling panels sagging with mould,
broken desks, and cracked chairs
splintering; all must sit carefully;
and now the floor strewn with glass
from the broken windowpanes,
all must tread carefully, avoid the rocks
that broke them, avoid the anger,
all must speak carefully,

but in the long silence,
white moths camouflage themselves
against the walls, wings edged
in delicate tracings of brown,
and a songologo curves across the floor
flowing smoothly over shards of glass.

Starlings in the Library

In the eerie late-night library
the light buzz silence is broken
by a starling call;
a sudden flutter of wings
starts another in my chest.

The pair ignores the open windows
to soar through the space
between ceiling and shelves,
each aisle a new gulf to explore.
They ignore me too as I follow,
trace the soft tones of their calls
down the rows, hide and seek.

With no thought for knowledge
these two visitors
trade the world of trees
for wooden shelves and warmth;

another world up there,
each shelf another resting place
each pipe a place to hide,
and the space between
leaves room for dancing.

The old man in the shop

his hair whiter than the white
in his houndstooth cap,
takes one hand from the pocket
of his button down jersey,
lays his wooden walking stick
on the counter
and slides a laptop case
from his shoulder.

'I cannot go to the internet,' he says,
unzipping the case, his hands
gnarled and slow with age.
'I need a new virus protection.'

He watches, hands folded,
waits patiently for a solution.
'Ah, here we go,' says the technician,
'your Norton is fine,
but you need Spyware as well.
You can download it
from Microsoft.'

The old man nods, sagely.
'Thank you,' he says,
and with careful movements
takes up the case
and the walking stick again.
'So many tricks these days,' he smiles,
'so many tricks.'

Windfall

Winter gales set the last
of the leaves dancing
and someone's towel
lands in the garden
while mine (left on the balcony)
has gone to someone else.

Pilgrim's Rest

*to the unnamed child buried at Pilgrim's Rest,
who was born and died on August 18th, 1895*

1996

among the graves
a child rests
in the red dust
after the long climb
to the graveyard

the late sun
strikes the carved stone
above her seat
outlines a date
of birth and death
the tiny grave
smaller than its marker

someone has left a gift
of plastic flowers
purple and white
in a clear box

someone cares

*

2001

the plastic flowers
all faded to white now
are still in their box,
cracked and stained
with age, and overgrown
with tangled scrub;
but by that marker
I know the grave

the giver must be gone
too, now; I wish
I had brought flowers

Poetry at Reddits

It was easier, before, in the garden
where I hid in the shadows
and dreamed of lantern light
to play with the shadows on the walls
so that when I spoke, I could pretend
I spoke only to the shadows, and myself,

but tonight the wind drove us inside
all of us jam-crammed
into the creaking room upstairs
with too much light in it
and no space for the words
to form around me.

Without the shadows, I stutter,
something I never do;
drop my own words to the floor,

but the listeners cushion the fall,
and I can pick them up again,
only slightly ruffled,

because these people too
must know what it is
to drop a poem;
to see the carefully structured words
shatter and tangle on the floor.

After, I slip out into the night
for the walk home in the dark
and I can tell myself
I'm trembling
because it's cold.

Star

In the dark gardens, we shiver around the coals
of a fire that died before it could warm us,
huddled in blankets wet with dew.

The Milky Way spreads its broad length in a moonless sky,
the four corners of the bright Southern kite
a familiar marker in the brilliance.

I lie back in the grass to see the whole of the world,
edged with frost tipped trees in the clear night,
and breathe in the silver air.

A falling star flares in the darkness,
once, twice, and then it's gone,
a ghost left in my eyelids.

Journey

Singular, lonely, I break away
to begin the long tangent
that will bring an end.

I pass the purple-green halo of a new cluster,
their union sparking tingling
tempting, but I rush by.

A youngling still clinging to an edge of origin
sends a flare of farewell
to speed me on.

Weary, I skim the surface of a planet,
dipping into the warmth,
and shed the stone of the void.

How beautiful, to blaze in the darkness,
to leave the long cold of the journey,
and end in a glory of burning.

Between Grahamstown and Fort Beaufort

Morning

Morning mists break
on the hillshore
and the prickly-pear people
shuffle back
to their roadside poses;
shift to cacti
in the early light.

Noon

The telephone poles
bear strange fruit;
a baboon tops each one
with casual ease.
Below, the land burns red
with the slow, dry growth
of winter flowers.

Evening

The road unwinds
its elastic length
across the valley,
while clouds probe the hills
with rain grey fingers
and the sun smoulders
darkly in the west.

Rock Paintings at Salem

for Don MacLennan

We reach the end of our pilgrimage,
shielded with hats and sunglasses
against the arid sun, and settle
in the overhang, crowding around
the faint red marks that seem
so insignificant, until I remember
how long they have survived.
Conversation is out of place here,
the harsh laugh of a sunburnt
blonde woman seems sacrilegious.

We come to remember him;
to read his words again
in the place where he wrote them.
I made this trip once before,
and the battered copy of his poems
that I pull from my backpack
still bears the marks
of the midwinter storm
that we climbed through then,
clinging to the rocks.

We read slowly, each in turn,
passing the words between us.
An owl flies out from below
to glide down the valley,
strange in the daylight,
with the sun on its wings
and for a moment, I think
it might be Don, come to listen.

I wish I could be alone here
with the paintings and the silence;
to hear, as he did, the echoes
of the ancient dancers.
The birds are out below me,
and the butterflies, catching the light
like drops of water in the sun,
and the owl, on its silent wings.
I am listening too, Don.
I am listening.

The hippie in the garden

turns the page of his book
and lies back,
his painted toenails
glinting purple
in the afternoon sun.

His long dreadlocks
match the blonde hair
of his children,
who call to each other
from the trees beyond.

A companionable silence
fills the last sunny corner,
as the long winter shadows
edge us closer.

A sunbird in the hedge
catches the light;
a sudden iridescence
amongst the green.

Part Four Spring

Spring

This first day of spring brings the bright air
through my window, and the warmth invites
a soft repose, a sweet simple stillness,
that lets the small sounds in. All afternoon,
with idle hands, I have breathed in the silence.
All afternoon I have been listening.

All afternoon the first weaver of the season
has flown to and from the first nest,
weaving each new find of grass or leaf
into a tapestry that requires no pattern,
no instructions, only his constant attention
and his diligence; and all afternoon
he has filled the air with his singing
to match the sunlight, a joyful yellow tune.

Rain

Against the storm clouds
a red glow of coral trees
stores the last light.

*

The lightning sets off car alarms
to merge with the thunder;
music of some modern god.

*

All across town, the hail
has painted the streets
with Jacaranda purple.

*

A monkey's wedding
sets the afternoon to sparkling;
each drop shows a smile

*

Ankle deep in a rain-pocked stream
I breathe deep the scent of earth,
like mint, crushed by the storm.

Playing Hookey

It's a grey morning, but the fresh air
hints at spring in the early light.
The wet tree outside my window
awakes, and shakes itself off,
life dripping from every leaf,
and the fork tailed bird in its branches
seems to call like Browning's thrush;
a song of fine rapture, that I cannot ignore.
This is a day for listening, for being still,
for breathing.

S

The colourless days have receded;
a light kindled with the spring
that makes the gold gleam flowers glow
along the roadside, and beneath the trees
the undiscovered deeps bruise purple,
like the marks on my neck
where his mouth claimed the night.

I left him naked in my bed, and all day
I have remembered him sleeping,
and before that, the softness of his eyes
and his skin, and his touch. In this memory
all the light in the world.

Five Times I Didn't Kiss Lindsay

We dance close on Halloween
in a strange new friendship.
She takes my face in her hands
to pull me closer,
and I breathe in the smoke
from her lungs;
taking my high from hers.

She emerges from the warm darkness
to sit beside me in the firelight,
a frangipani flower in her hands.
'These remind me of home,' she says
and tucks the blossom behind my ear.
'You are home to me, too.'

She runs through the waves
to press herself against me;
all sharp angles and sea-cold skin.
'I love you' she laughs,
and the world is all blue sky
and white sea, and sunlight.

She takes my hand in hers
in the strange half light
of a super moon.
Drunk and breathless
with the beauty of it,
we run together
through the foam tipped water
on the dark shore.

She sits across the room
from where I fear her loss
after a drunken almost-confession,
and talks of nothing in particular.
'For what it's worth,' she adds later,
with a gentle smile,
'I would have kissed you.'

Hubby Bubbly

Sharli goes about the familiar ritual,
preparing the evening's smoke.
First, the selection of tobacco,
tonight a mix of coffee and cherry,
then the careful tearing of the foil,
the neat wrapping, to cover the bowl.
The coal lies ready for lighting,
the pipe uncoiled and waiting.
Now the final touch,
she pulls her long dark braid aside
and removes an earring
to make the tiny holes for the air.
Her preparations complete,
she lights the coal,
its sparks reflected at her ears.

Kasouga

A contented silence falls around the fire,
the evening moving in about us.

A nightjar calls in the soft air,
counterpoint to the melody
Alex tinkers from his guitar.

In the dark margins of the firelight,
a praying mantis, just a centimetre long,
picks a careful edge around the fireplace,
its fragile silhouette outlined against the light.
It slows there, as if to enjoy the warmth.

Verbena

for Martin

'Is that what you call them?'
he laughs, when I tell him
the purple flowers are in bloom,
and I know it's the scientist speaking,

but I wonder if he knows that
there is something of the uncanny
about the purple mist that hovers
above the fields, pouring

from the ground, as if some dark god
under the earth had brewed
a love potion, that sent up smoke
to curl in the hollows of the hills.

'They're called Verbena,' he tells me,
and I'm glad to learn their name,
to learn to see the world
as he sees it, but still I wonder

if he can see that the flowers
that dust the hills in wide swathes
of colour look like powder paint,
spilled by a careless child.

On the Roof of the Monument

Come, let us steal in the night
past the cameras and guards,
and ride the elevator to the top.

Let us climb up, through
the concrete warren of block square
staircases and metal hatch doors.

Let us climb the last ladder
in the cool darkness, to the rooftop
above the lights of home.

Let us spread blankets in the shelter
of the satellite dish, huddled
in the warmth of the shadows.

Let us drink wine from plastic cups
and pass the joint around
the circle, and laugh together.

Come, let us break the rules
that don't matter, let us dare dreams,
let us be young, let us live, now.

Shell

Hermit-like, I find a home
in loving these people,
who paint the pale walls
with pink traces and joy.
I draw them around me
like a second skin,
stitch a second nature
from pieces of theirs.
In the new shell, I grow
and become someone else;
partly who they are
and partly myself
and partly someone
who I ought to be.

Silence, Like Breathing

This is what a poem is;
an understanding,
as breathing in
is an understanding.

The outdoor silence
with its hints of birds and blueness
comes through the window
to mingle with the stillness indoors;
the buzz of lights
and the suggestion of thought.

This silence is like breathing.