

First Chapbook

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All work in this booklet is by Janet Lois Fraser

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A Cricket Lives

A fat, shiny thumbnail-sized cricket
lives in my garden
I found out today
as I pulled the little weeds
from between the bricks
of the path beside the beds.

It lives there with several and
several other tiny things:
the first several I don't mind –
sow bugs, friendly spiders and once,
a lovely little brown lumpy toad;
the next several I find and get rid of
(even though I know their families
will always prosper) –
cabbage butterflies, cutworms, slugs.

It lives there despite the sprinklings
of cayenne and the odd dousing
with seaweed extract.

Although the cabbage leaves are a bit ragged,
the beans, some years, have to be planted twice,
and a few holey tomatoes go to the compost pile,
I will plant, and water, and weed,
as long as even one single solitary
cricket lives in my garden.

Ottawa sometime in the 1990s

Window Sill

Crisp juicy crinkled green leaf
Moist crumbly speckled black soil
Ruffled satin pompom pink flower
Clear bright sudden spring sun
Got papa's mama's green thumb

Ottawa November 2015

Harold's Pond

Peaceful little pond
set in lush grass near the house;
Buddha watches silent on the edge.
Stocked with trout fingerlings early in the spring,
by September the heron and otters have their fill.

Val des Monts November 2015

Storm Musings

Big splatters glisten on roof tiles
Leaning out the gable window
Trees stretch above me
They sway and crackle
Bare branches scrape and dance
Wind roars by but doesn't touch me
Then swoops in
I'm wrapped in coolness
Rain stops but the storm goes on
What joy
To lean out into the chaos
And not get wet

Toronto, November 1983

Lament of the Urban Canadian

I was too long in the city
Chasin' hands around the clock
I was too long in the city
Goin' round and round the block

I was too long in the city
Body stiff and heart full sore
I was too long in the city
Swept away by the urban roar

I was too long in the city
I couldn't shake the blues
I was too long in the city
And the match was at the fuse

Gettin' outta town
See the water running
Hills, trees, a rock face
See the water falling
Down a gravel road
See the water shining

Take a deep breath

You can see the sky down to the forest
You can taste the freshness in the air
You can touch the fiery molten centre
You can hear the murmur of the wild

Gettin' outta town
You can feel the whole earth

Val-des-Monts April 2012

The Calendar

Once it lay on a table near the phone
At the centre of my world
Ready to be filled with activity
Ready to bear witness to my life
To remind me of things –
Things I was looking forward to,
Things I had done
But perhaps forgotten.
Now it hangs on a wall in my room
Upstairs, in someone else's house.
Every time I walk by I see
That the calendar is empty.

Val des Monts March 2014

In A Moment

In a dim world
Not our world
The elder remains.
Wakes, stands, sits
Eats, stands, sits
Stands, walks, sits
Sits and sits and sits

Darkness.
High up
To the left
Small and bright...
A window.
Fluttering...
Curtains.
Lilting voices...
Playmates.

The elder waits
just a moment
drifts on
and sits.

Val des Monts March 2014

A Blessing in Disguise

The elder forgets:
Finding herself purposeless,
Struggling toward usefulness,
Stumbling into loneliness,
Rambling into aimlessness,
Wandering into thoughtlessness,
And, finding bitter emptiness,
Embracing kind forgetfulness.

Val des Monts April 2014

Building

With hope you built a memory castle life,
As we who dare to dream so often do.
And as a daughter, mother, and a wife
You stored the moments glorious and true.

Now, day by day, you lose the home you made
And one by one the things you know are gone.
For you each moment now a new daybreak
Each thought a dream that vanishes with dawn.

Until, at last, you live for here and now:
A song, a hug, a gift, a smile, a tear.
Safe in another's dream you bide your time,
Fade and withdraw from action year by year.
And we who daydream still now understand
The castles that we dream are built of sand.

Val des Monts April 2015

Missing

you are like a tree
standing in a forest
a hollow in the sturdy trunk
once a welcoming shelter
in your heart
now close and heavy
with a mighty storm
of emptiness

the storm breaks
bursting from deep within
fierce winds spiral out
doubt, fear, anger
shake the tree
strain its roots
bark cracks
sap oozes
like tears
beneath closed eyelids

standing
like a tree in the forest
though your storm has passed
gusts of wind
stir your topmost branches
you look around and realize
you are sheltered
in a forest of hollow trees

Val des Monts Spring 2011

Someone Else's Skin

Voices saxophone wide in a snowy night,
we stamp at the door,
leather dress boots salty wet,
and forage hangers for evening coats.
Winter rite delays nighttime routine:
“One thing before I come up, dear.”
Water washes away winter sidewalk.
Little tin opens, oyster-like,
Cradling waxy, naphtha scented balm.
Swirl on the polish,
Brushing makes them gleam,
Buff with hand hot flannel to set the shine.
Proud as Punch, the boots are safely closeted.
Poor penance for wearing someone else's skin.

Val des Monts March 2016

You Think You Know Her

You think you know her,
angry young man
who shifts his weight
leans just a bit,
and bumps her shoulder
to knock her off balance
in passing
on a suburban city sidewalk.
(just some old white hetero bitch)

what you don't know is
when the girl from the only Jehovah's Witness family
in her neighbourhood stood alone
every day in the school yard,
she was the one who went over and made friends

what you don't know is
a closeted queer guy was her best friend,
and in high school they were seen as a couple
so she never, not once, got asked on a date
'cause she was not gonna be the one to out him to anyone

what you don't know is
of all the variety of guys who were her friends
and who she dated over the years,
an immigrant from a different culture and language
was her first love and her first lover

what you don't know is
when same-sex "couples" prom tickets
were debated and voted down by the student council
she was the one who called out her friends
and walked out of the meeting

what you don't know is
when the first black department manager
was hired to help run her family business
working with him on the leadership team
came as naturally to her as breathing

Your anger may be righteous, young man,
but what you don't know is
if you open your fist, she will shake your hand.

Val des Monts March 2017

Deadlock

You discovered a labyrinth
On the way to death's door.
We explored it together,
Doggedly evaded the heart of the mystery,
But here we are.

The door has exactly your size and silhouette;
Your passkey is shaped by suffering.
Which can I forgive?
Standing by while you draw out your key
Or opening the door with mine.

Val-des-Monts August 2011

Morning

Awake, awake, and look out at the world
Go into the bathroom you beautiful girl
Empty your bladder, your kidneys will laugh
Wash clean your hands at the porcelain trough
Ointment for lips – they stretch into a smile
Drop saline in eyes and massage a short while
Now take up the brush and smooth hair upside down
Your scalp and locks love it and feel like a crown
While you are down there, place hands on the floor
Rest in that pose though your muscles are sore
Then up, to stand tall and expand your ribcage
(Your body starts loving the day at this stage)
Time for clean teeth, dab paste on your brush
Start at the back, brush two minutes, no rush
Floss though its awkward, your pearly whites shine
And they'll be there to feed you beyond ninety-nine
Rinse off your hands, dry them well and add lotion
You're up and alive and your body's for motion

Val des Monts March 2016

Sense of California Girl

There once was a little Ruud girl
“I think I’ll go traveling” she said
She took down her little red cap
And clapped it pell-mell on her head.

She pulled out her big leather purse
(The one that came ‘specially from Gran)
“I won’t pack the things that I need”
She said “I’ll pack whatever I can”

She dug out her camera
And plenty of films
(Both badly damaged
While rolling down hills)
A whistle, two cymbals
And two wooden sticks
And an old run-dry ballpoint
“Because it still clicks”
A cold hotdog sandwich
she managed to make
(with plenty of mustard)
on stale chocolate cake.
Some other small things
she could fit down the side
a notebook, a shoehorn,
a bow that she’d tied.

She called:
“Mom I’m traveling, don’t worry,
I’m having my lunch on the way”
She burst through the door in her hurry
And travelled the garden all day.

Toronto 1984

The Feast of the Greedy Reader (fragment)

Scorning the couch-potato cousin
(mesmerized by flickering images on television)
and the gamer grandchild
(entranced by blue light in a darkened room),
the greedy reader sits in an overstuffed chair,
gobbling up pocketbooks of fantasy and romance,
gnawing through novels of history and war,
nibbling on the news,
and slurping poetry
like oysters on the half shell.
Head bowed,
gaze fixed on pages propped next to navel,
knees crossed casually
(to give an impression of remembering their last call to action)
or slippered feet resting on a padded footstool,
(topped with the needlework of a forgotten female relative)
the greedy reader is cocooned
in a world of print on paper.

Ottawa August 2011

The Mouse

A mouse ran out on the pantry floor
Through a pool of light that spilled through the door
And into a shadow on the other side
Eyes bright, ears pricked, and tail held high.
The tiny dark body seemed to float when I spied it
Over pale little feet that flew quick and quiet.
Though women with petticoats shrieked and then fainted,
And Farley dined on them so wolves could be sainted,
I remembered wide eyes of one caught in a trap,
When I lifted the bar, how they closed with a snap,
And a barn kitten who had caught one in his paws
But, half-swallowed, its tail end hung out of his jaws.
As objective observer my own part was done
I couldn't resist and I tossed him a crumb.

Kingsmere August 1989