

## Rachel Rose / FIVE POEMS

### IF ONLY

I squander my nights longing for what's lost:  
the propinquity of your heartbeat,  
the certainty of your weight,  
your jealous dog whining at my door.

I still have the dog. That should be enough.  
A small black dog, surprisingly bright.  
We walk together all over Montreal  
trying to forget you. In the park  
at twilight your dog flips like a shrimp

in the tulip beds, zags to sniff  
dogs' flagged rear ends.  
I stand around and try to be more like her.  
Try to improve my sense  
of smell, discern cinnamon  
from urine, crocus from crow. This  
could be of use in my future.

Once we saw a ring of people  
around two dogs  
locked in coitus. The neighbours prodded  
and shook their heads. An old woman  
offered a bucket of ice.  
The bitch's claws scraped cement  
as she tried to find some place  
where they could be alone,

but she made small progress  
with that yellow dog's weight  
anchored in her.

Your dog tugged me past.  
She was trying to teach me  
a lesson. She wants me  
to avoid crowds and idle gossip,  
to delight in Forsythia, Irish  
Setters and fire hydrants.  
She wants to improve  
my mind.

I want someone  
to teach me the heart  
of things, tease the grit  
from my scrapes, nudge  
the dog eye sludge  
from the bridge of my nose,  
love me through the slits  
of their eyes.

I want an intelligent cocked  
ear and six nipples.  
Someone to pirouette with,  
someone to curl against  
these cicada afternoons.

I move slowly through the dog days  
of summer in Montreal,  
your weight locked  
around my hips, dragging  
the carcass of love behind me.

## THE NEIGHBORS

We've never been introduced  
but we know the most intimate details  
of their grief, their sexual pleasure  
and the smells of their cooking  
leaking under our doors.

And tonight, because it's April,  
the neighbors are at it again.  
Fucking surrounds us  
on all sides. It starts  
with the neighbors above us  
a woman whose voice is a circle  
of moans like a peony unfolding  
a man who reaches a note  
so high we can hardly  
bear its weight.

We are silent in the dark,  
dry eyes burning, holding hands  
as they crest in screams.

We rest, all four of us  
slowly growing calm on each side  
of our respective walls. Four pulses  
return to normal. We sleep,  
the neighbors sleep,

For two hours. Then we are woken again.  
We think it's the neighbors  
on the left. This time  
my lover is strangely affected.  
She sits up trembling in the dark  
waiting for it to be over.

The bed creaks  
like frogs in moonlight  
and above the bed their moans  
shudder and weep like November.

When silence falls again  
my lover cracks  
into voice.  
*Bravo!* she shrieks, clapping the wall  
between us. *Bravo! You both came!*  
*Now shut the fuck up!*

On all sides the neighbors  
sit up in stunned silence.  
Everyone holds  
their collective breath.

By morning, none of this will have happened.

## ONE NIGHT IN FIVE

The lungs project above the medial one third  
of the clavicle and the skull holds a bone  
like a fossilized butterfly. Each cranial nerve  
tells its own story and the innominate bones  
resemble nothing but themselves—

The throat begins with a trap  
door. Liquid has two choices:  
esophagus or trachea,  
stomach or lungs. Mostly  
there is no choice:  
the epiglottis  
clamps, water  
does not enter  
the lungs.

Today she drains her first lung. Last night  
I held her while she told me so, I drew her  
skin over mine and we pulsed. Today  
in her books I find *lung*, I find  
the position where her needle will enter—

All winter I have studied  
anatomy. Love taught me  
to cherish the sponged  
bulk of a lung. When  
I run my tongue



up the slopes  
of her body  
I know each  
relationship:  
skin over  
manubrium  
over lung.  
All that I love  
is layered.

One night in five I lie alone, she stays  
at the hospital. At night comes the firstblown  
snow. Yesterday her friend died in childbirth  
in Rome. The anesthetic took her under.  
Her lungs snagged on a certain breath  
in a certain Roman clinic—

It was Sunday, bells ringing  
past the olive trees  
outside city limits.  
Women in black shawls  
were already gathered  
for bad news. My lover  
has confined her grief  
to saying, as if  
in prayer—

*Such things shouldn't happen anymore.*

Love, the world  
is half in  
and half out  
of your tired hands.  
There is a baby  
left behind  
in a Roman clinic  
as yet  
innominate.

## AUBADE

Consciousness is a gift brought by the dawn.  
They watch her crawl across the floor  
and locate each item of clothing. Her silver chains  
are lost, all her rings are gone.  
They won't meet her eyes, dust cracking  
their lips in the dry air.

The sand leaves a trail  
from where they picked her up on shore  
passed out with one hand in the sea,  
the girl left behind  
at the high school bonfire.

From what has fallen out of her  
you could find your way back to the sea:

Pliant mute, pliant mermaid, each step  
a blade entering. Love's cost.  
Woken briefly  
by the grinding in and out of her.  
Sand in her mouth and falling from her skin  
as she tried to push it away.  
But it drove in. This  
the price of being human.

In the bath that night, the water runs grey  
with sand. She could have made a castle



with all that spilled from her body.  
Made her escape to the farthest tower  
    dragging  
        her burden of hair  
            behind her.

Beauty, she slept on bare wood  
and her dreams were blunt with alcohol.  
Now nothing is as tender as her abraded skin.  
Even the floor of the cabin is strewn  
with what was inside her: crunching  
under their boots, her clothes  
stiff with salt.

And it is no surprise  
when one of them offers to drive her home  
as if she'd had a flat on the highway  
and they'd pulled up behind her with a jack.  
As if she'd been rescued by them.  
She resists the urge to thank them  
or breathe too hard  
    their smell  
        on her skin.

Aurora now, one of them opens the cabin door  
onto a mess of sunlight and purple alders.  
Her heart jolts as they pass around  
morning's whisky. Something pricks her finger.  
She has misplaced  
    three wishes.  
        And her hands

are burned, from where, they said  
she caught fire. Someone put her out.  
Alcohol is ether  
and she is full of unconscious  
grace. He leads her to his truck,  
opens the door for her  
as if he were helping her escape the wreck  
but he has no money; she buys the gas.

## SMALL JUSTICE

*For my cousin, Teresa Gonzales*

He's gone before you,  
the one who taught you  
what you learned of love.  
That's small justice,  
cousin, but small coins  
might make a dollar  
eventually.

You will go before us.  
You will drift away  
in a sea of night sweats.  
Already your body  
has become the furnace  
of a ship. You burn  
through the night  
and the sheets  
are water.

On this shore we stand  
with our foolish confetti  
and our white handkerchiefs  
waving up a storm. We are  
not sure our voices carry  
over water. You smile patiently  
from where you are, long past  
the bitterness that keeps

us here, and our terror  
of love's pandemics.

In the toss of waves  
your future beckons,  
a stolen necklace.  
Some crows gather,  
attracted by the glitter.  
They set up a dark  
& raucous debate.  
We don't know  
if the sound carries  
over water.

And finally  
there is an absence.  
No nipple in your mouth  
these apricot nights.  
No movement in love  
across the living room.  
Finally there is no justice.