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sex at thirty-eight:  
letters to unfinished g.



*rob mclennan*



ALBERTA SERIES #1  
above/ground press

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The skin thin parchment.  
Its word, the

word for it, whispered here.  
— Erin Moure

I can no longer keep a journal. My life erases everything I  
write.  
— Robert Kroetsch

This is not about music this is about desire. The desire that rides us,  
four horses on a carousel. When the music stops we are obligated to  
change horses. How did I, the first violin, learn of desire this  
temperate man this musician of controlled vibrato and perfectly  
creased trousers? There was a spot on her hand and it preoccupied  
her immensely. She rubbed at it, a cat with buttered paws.  
— Méira Cook

Geography is not the point here, it's the landscape we make  
on the page [...].  
— Lee Ann Brown, *West Coast Line*

**continued shield notes:**

the bone across the soft flesh  
is only bone

a completeness of virtues spread  
from tree to distressed tree, compressed

into a boundary of north

what is the impulse of barriers  
& transformation

into violated frontiers? what would  
your father

think of me? the chinese wall  
of ontario, shield

an endless, sudden relief

rice lake: how could any cold lake  
in such a province

otherwise be filled

**sex at thirty-eight: a discovery poem**

realizing there is nothing left to discover  
but for everything else

we had never occurred, the map of my mouth  
opening up

your west. I am writing you now  
in discovery; just as you

would write me. like columbus or cooke,  
learning what someone else already knew,

but never knew. this is the arrogance  
of the foreigner. learning too late

the difference

between understand  
& overtake. so how I long

to understand. small endless fires  
distant.

help please me to know.

**sex at thirty-eight: a list**

this is the body  
this is the book  
this is a list of where you have entered  
    & have entered me  
this is the subject  
this is your leg over my leg  
these are your blue blue eyes  
this is a citizen walking aimless  
    through course  
this is the first time  
this is the last  
this is a letter hammered into stone  
this is the body, not symbols  
this is the sweat under snow  
this is the body working past lyric  
    into post-lyric  
this is the between rhythm, singing

**poem on the canadian shield**

I love you rock, my corner-stone  
I love you littered w/ children  
    & snow  
I love you river, acrid  
    on stony plain  
I love you 19<sup>th</sup> century digression  
    into the principle  
I love you story, & its alternate  
I love you, caught  
    between trees  
I love you myth, & the place  
    of your myth-making  
I love your distance, but I  
    would rather  
I love your history, & embrace  
    at this joining; this entering into  
I love what your future  
    will consider this

love is a road  
    we can only get by train

**continued shield notes:**

in space of human boundaries & geography,  
so too, the space of five foot eight

blonde hair settles; I would write  
“shimmering” (I would

remember you)

post-colonial slippage; a sweet  
& little dimple when she smiles

an effort  
that may sound slight

more lines to cross  
than this one

across the boundary of evening, & one  
less car to travel; out here, certainty  
& love is everything

expanding out a certainty  
into discovery

& discovered; a land no light could master

presuming, mister livingstone, a heart  
of darkened light

**sex at thirty-eight (lost in the barrens)**

writing sex at thirty-eight a flight  
of marking through the barren

patchwork black rock stubble  
entreating wilderness of some

of pudding stone, a ragged fainting strand  
made whole

of twoness, twosome; blood bold  
into purple shadow scenes

we could have passed an isolated world

I read you tearing, stubble  
three hundred miles south

a particle of belief; a catalogue  
of longing, thirty-eight

& forty-one; we are as old  
as centuries of trees; we are the newborn,

where even the familiar new,  
& unforeseen

## **one fainting strand**

I want to write you in as endless, a tour  
but theres no one in it, write you in

to the continued story; the authentic measure  
of the longest road

heart is made of muscle, heart; writing  
made of language, lines

in my glittering dreams

at the end of dragonhearted sheer, the tavern  
parkdale market long, I watched you leave

for hours more than you left me

a habit of crows & thorn depend; is there  
the red wheelbarrow, market thrush

I want to write you in

I want to write around what else you  
signed yourself, away

blank-blind & open faith

## **the practice of outside**

would shade me a determined breath  
would slide

would catch as catch  
would make visible the air  
would caution snow

would mark a magpie song  
would substantiate a repetition

would hero at the fore  
would court remembered meaning  
would break up a begin

would shoreless inexhaustible  
would weather storms  
would, w/ every experience together

would at home differences  
would genuine poetic depths  
would strata, sub & sub

would drum beat lyrical rebirths  
would love loving, reject rejection

would long against the wall  
would occupy

**continued shield notes:**

this is a portrait against portraiture; a moment  
parceled into being

oh lord, let us be married all over ontario

a love of years & solitudes, the space  
where rivers meet, the ottawa (grand)

& ste laurence, lake  
of two mountains

a devotion to speed & shine, the bawdy  
aspirations of birds & bees, an arrival

planet we would reach

not like swords in the path; a sea  
of birch trees, flogged w/ lines

along a primal shore

I am enveloping a frontier beside you; I am  
continually reimagining white space

& delicate strength, this knowing craft  
into the wildwood

it writes: your love a series of endless lake

**writing, unfinished g.**

my unfinished helena, writing out  
of bare bone elements; finished craft  
to launch a thousand circles  
north to south; what is this distance  
I have seen before, what has  
grown longer & more wide  
w/ each shortened step; I wonder,  
time compressed, the vacuum ground  
become immortalized, black blackened smoke  
across the stone faced stone, I checked  
the sequence of provide & watched  
the forms diminish; where are you now,  
where are you, I am wanting &  
then wishing just where are you  
& my ancient breath, a footfall  
starved to catch up, could I then  
have ever held, or held on, this is  
elongated grief, delinquent  
broken cup & desperate plea that would  
fall silent, bent & bent upon

**your borders are unthinkable**

& silent  
& supplemental lines

but west slope facing east

& would calamity the best guess  
& wondering sex at any age, be it  
thirty-eight or where we

but came upon, a sense of dereliction  
& of duty

& work w/ what, discarded love  
that we would willingly take  
& through an endless prayer I sit  
your naked feet

but prone would make me  
stone

& if betrayed face pleasure made to dream  
an end to all your heartache  
& faithless I were not completed

but in a poem, lonely  
as a single vowel

& made out to be numerous  
& made to coat your honeyed voice  
w/ actual

but to measure mine is insufficient

& would agreed upon, all love  
& would work to risk all love  
& unattainable

**sex at thirty-eight**

expansive poem,  
expansive love

body, then  
no body

drizzle, then  
a sharpness

pull of strings, a  
heart-knot

letters to  
unfinished, or  
the letters

done themselves

unfinished, or  
unsent

I write you out  
& out then,  
writing

sex at thirty-eight  
& what else

glistens

## **expansion**

unaccustomed to this present  
limbs go weak, are unaffected

what madness, drives  
to hotwire the past

a slovenly make; as adults, pretend  
to know the difference

between real love  
& imitated, pantomime

festooned; the breeze  
cant hold

or what the difference sex  
and endless love, two corners

of the wooden brush

& what depends upon  
& what red wheelbarrow then scrapes

**continued shield notes:**

as papers papered  
& collected in the field  
& written bound, distilled  
an entry made in waves

do not pass go

every morning he would wake  
& make tea, collect  
his notebooks  
& record what he had seen

look, she said  
look

the birds cry caw caw  
cawcawcawcawcawcaw

the birds cry can  
that can

unruly sex, the power  
to bend spoons

backwards, not enough;  
at thirty-eight,

to turn that spoon  
to powder

**sure as if by flowers**

create this was were was none  
loose a sure idealism

strong, a sex  
would get sex, given

a fine grammar, set loose  
on blood-bone

this invitation  
cues a complex visual

given voice  
to address the right hand, right hand  
reaching

silences stored in memory

silences adrift, gone out  
& stamen-fed

this bed of pollen; thirty-eight  
at sex

against our primary tools

against this gesture of invented  
possibility

**a telephone, a letter**

& a painful click; depends upon,  
a narrative understanding beauty

you, & therefore you

would tongue an instrument; travel  
headlong into framing; *where*

*are you*; confident that I will not wander,  
venture into clouds

& then be lost again

amid a constant static; *what is my name*,  
this measured bliss I will not

steward or secure;

*a path of waiting*; scored the corner  
list of missing days

if this is love; strips naked & allows  
as slippage, never

on the platform, word  
& word she whispers in the ear

of what comes after

## constellation

\*

a method taped to the door. a burgundy curtain. the expansion of trees; collar smoke from the factory. sudbury squalls. the water indigent; the water indifferent, dying.

\*

a long paper wonders; stomach lining. philosophy profs, props headframes. what holds the open door. I would recognize you, even the ring of your folder. this is a postcard from mars. I hold the moss in high regard. do you think of the weeds.

\*

stars bustle & send. will articulate here. common practice, & a new relation. I am bendable, elbows & knees. a hearty telegram stock. would you process & please. I am bustle & blend; so lost.

\*

a small engine whirls; rent temperature. said thank you; land lines separated by equal indistances. the space occupied by space. a wisp in a stare. an installation in figures. field failing a courtyard. there was never a court.

\*

stand up to be mounted. young western duds in custom. I would delicious rain. you the time of her life. absurd living of while; pretend clouds. hunger the beauty myth, hunger the ears. I would change lovers to everything; an eye after looks.

**sweat**

thumbs down  
from the blue

sex at a number  
defies, defines

would entry a whole,  
would subsequent set

a sweat, soldiered  
on

one wants the connection  
to remain

depleting chill, de  
scends

& demarcation

if would soldier on

if would de  
ep

end

**sex at thirty-eight: canadian shield**

to propose myself in order to propose  
I write *my self*

a letter unfinished I include to you  
to be included

so that

how can any draw a parallel  
a step against a foot

or human conquest; *am I*  
*not moving*

to include a reference point  
to truly know

if stars once moved, the earth  
stood still

come shooting stare

a constellation we would empty  
& propose

in lieu of nothing

**continued shield notes:**

a boiled scar of (blended) sun

on the way up to the sound, we looked  
& listened; *paused*, a bit

a commensurate action  
, soundless rapture

a buildup, twenty years or more  
of minor fumbblings

where are you now; a judgment singular  
& secure

how do you hold an absence

how do you hold a rebellion  
in the troubled heart

once started, it cant  
just begin

be done

**dueling notebooks:**

one tells the story, of a pulp log  
journal writing truth as lies &  
poems writing lies as truth; *which*  
*would you believe?*

if she was ever blonde as blonde  
or beautiful as she were quick  
& brilliant sweet, if she were even she  
or we were planting secrets  
in the temple of her thighs

if I were even there or here, if I  
were rapt in sex or even thirty-eight  
years old, if seven years is long enough  
to remember to forget, to grow  
a new skin, new body waiting  
writing in the margin

if I could fill these blanks  
if I could fill these stories & these scars

if I could write these stars the  
letters of her name

glow down upon her; the shade her  
pudding-stone  
& such , for *putting up*

## parts of a doorframe

the whole world posits little

end of autumn / time  
blooms forward

& stands down

if but running  
could keep it available

*sex at thirty-eight*; forgotten  
principle

of speech & writing, write  
out a cavern

of another speech

what would happen  
to a granary of snow

or softened fruit?

what would happen to the frame  
if just a little light

could enter?

**icon driven**

I am content to leave my theory  
; the baby w/ the bath

steps you & you & you & you  
& you & beautiful restless you

an hour day would drop away  
we are portable as clocks

these useless withered hands  
at this point speculation

oh thousands of hands  
w/ your playing cards more

than your prayer

how can I believe; even faith  
a misnomer

tearing sex with whole heart

teasing sex out your tongue  
& recreating it; like man

& a woman

writing out loose scriptures

**sex at thirty-eight (a head count)**

sex at sex at sex at sex at  
sex at sex at

*thirty-eight years*

*not thirty-eight times*

(more than)

(whos for counting)

**collected sex**

*would be so joyous*

a golden arch of knowledge; experience  
& years, *of all the girls*

*I've loved*, & loved  
them all

mistaking heart for hole, mistaking  
hole for the space in my head

less a collected than a sheer accumulation  
of what body went before

, slowly fitting into the new

& what would make new,  
renewed w/ my seventh letter

struck down by the seventh wave

as many years behind, begun

**continued shield notes:**

if this is anything  
if this is canadian shield  
    body north, pointed  
& a bruised month, looking

for what comes next

if this is myth  
if this is writing true or false  
the lifeless land the lifeless rock  
a moonscape uninhabitable  
white men w/ guns go travel  
    for lake trout mammal meat  
come back to the train  
come back south to suburb jobs & houses

if I am talking here  
if this is even talk  
the myth of women & men as they  
    near their fortieth year  
as forty the new thirty  
as this is what Ive heard

as this is what Ive heard &  
    want to believe

as a friend of mine turnd forty some  
    seven years before, saying  
*no, no way; saying cancel my birthday*

& taking three more than years to get over

**suddenly I realize what silence is**

the smell of the radiator, her  
arm under pillow

if this would be heart  
if this could be little me  
& skin

if this her body exclamation mark  
a question I repeatedly ask  
*do you love me, do you love me*  
this continual; sex  
at whatever age being

I am repeatedly my age

, percolation of willow, stone  
& a stony silence

interchangeable between two volumes

this song, this smell I carry  
further on into the world

elimination trance of quarters  
marking too thin for stamps

& the letterhead

& a swift return address  
I would translate a common noun

dissemination of some

would occupy the whole

**signature event**

against the signature  
all else is transcribed

to a single writ  
to a mark upon leaves

or a ripple

by losing this operation  
the name itself derives

*with/ to whom I address*

a traditional collapse  
this love buckles under

*such feeble narrative  
& strategy*

of art looking under

of subsequent these eyes

*shirtless sleeves shape  
what thinking residue*

**sex at thirty-eight: sure, steady breathing**

if I am this  
if I am such  
if I am breath-body  
if I am cloud  
if I am mark upon  
if I am skin made  
if I am temperate  
if I am bone & blood  
if I am layered  
if I am textured  
if I am quick & the dead  
if I am singular or multiple  
if I am highway  
if I am dross  
if I am slow-mood & tempered  
if I am supposing your other half  
if I am completed  
if I am conflicted  
if I am porch-light  
if I am modest compatible  
if I am sure-footed, stepping  
if I am carnal & unabashed  
if I am all fingers for reading  
if I am blind to this  
if I am ageless  
if I am the point that could map you  
if I am the rose to your east  
if I am entered against all numbers  
& come through, come through

sex at thirty-eight (~~omission~~)

a poem written  
single sided on a train  
out of a love  
out of a loss  
out of a longing for

what we are getting at

this sex at thirty-eight  
this future  
this poem of the future  
& forestalling

how do you bring me  
how do you sing me  
sing  
into the telephone  
into these letters  
into these absences  
these omissions

every word I now write  
has the hole of you hanging over

hanging over me

**sex at thirty-eight: perpetually begun**

when I started this poem, writing sex  
at thirty-eight; a north ontario heat

writing into  
& out of that north, letters  
to my bombshell blonde, unfinished

every poem here would write you  
every poem here begun, writing  
*where are you & writing space*  
*where you & I would touch, begin*

, begin again

in a european city writing your german roots  
in the canadian north writing scottishness  
    , this lack of speech

writing writing; where otherwise I would  
entreaty be

& writing capreol, the payphones still  
you never answer

where some would call not north  
or north enough

admitting out my borders

**writing-on-stone: sex at thirty-eight**

how is this writing sex  
how is this writing

how is this the poem it set out to be  
or even close

this rock green moss companion  
this perpendicular need

this mathematical certainty  
numbers is as does; old kroetsch  
twice my age, a poem

still evolving; sex at thirty-eight,  
nights swoop very low; there can be no end

a percolation stone  
of thinning branches; group of seven  
tom thompson wild wet; *lake-swimming*

to know the depth eventually will surface  
oh unfinished g I long to finish

slow & slow  
w/in this flowering

w/in this unrelenting adaptation line & need

**continued shield notes:**

if this is where you begun  
the poem is where we will continue

*the poem of your nother, north*

writing sex at thirty-eight  
writing how many more added

I would repeat a noise  
I would repeat a noise

I would harken back to

I am all the years we have already lived  
riding geological formation, a survey

of what we had done  
& have yet to do

writing sex at thirty-eight  
writing out a universe on skin  
held together tight w/ words

& wild cat-tails  
& junction underbrush

I would embrace you, skin on skin  
to ancient stone

& geophysical remain  
; this cairn that you would paint me, on

## the poem, heading south

write out impassible; *I planted a poem*  
*in the ground*

*☞ waited, spring, to see*

if I am flightless as a sea-bird  
if I am flightless as a broken line  
of prose

the hills would crumble, into

unnameable, unfinished, if I would meet you  
somewhere passed between

what is a line a map  
, protracted banner lines we sing  
& flesh upon

*the first time I saw you*  
*the first time you spoke you radiated*

warmth, a stone  
warmth, the sunlit bowl of shale

reflecting outward; reflecting back  
some ten

or tenfold, maybe more

the poem, taken root

**sex at thirty-eight: political poem**

the poem cant help but be political  
, the space between two bodies

I hold out rich hand poor  
& cant tell the difference

the train track & the tire tread  
, a grade school margin of snow

, a ledger error, continued  
down the snowy page

the birch lines black a horsehair brush  
against widening blue

deplete the billowing smoke  
amid the powerlines

**the hills have eyes**

the rolling cyprus hills  
the rolling adirondacks

the rolling rocky folds  
the rolling blue ridge splendour

the rolling snowy peaks  
the rolling gatineau  
the crisp precambrian, up  
    across the snowy backs

the poem folds  
& then it unfolds, furls

across the deep expanse  
    of what else follows  
against a primacy of parallel,  
    north of fifty-four  
against the stubble of a longer foot,  
    that further bodies see

, remark upon  
; this business of sex

; this margin of unfinished news

**continued shield notes:**

thrust a smokestack deep in hackled ground  
& gasp

contingent smokestack rising; put it then,  
a standing valley still

lateral the muscled earth

describes the ground the net worth possible,  
a seed

as tall as it would creek & bleed

**continued shield notes:**

blood on the paper  
blood in the water

blood on the tracks  
lost in thirty-something idealism

bouncing off canadian shield

thunder bay  
goose bay  
horseshoe bay  
parry sound  
owen sound

if you could name the water  
if you could wish it

black rock black rose black water

the sound on the page  
writing any one thought out of another

writing poetry at the foot of  
writing poem at the mouth  
of the long river

writing when one will get home again  
writing once bit, thrice shy  
writing the end back out at the beginning

writing famous last words  
writing live at the apollo  
writing the cherry orchard

this accumulated flesh  
of sex; this simple word

, this simple whorl

## slow hand

what is  
is a four letter word  
come back to bleeding  
at thirty-one, at thirty-eight  
circumnavigating years  
the seventh wave  
the seventh seal  
writing north as north  
the pulp mulls prince george  
the ontario mining booms & busts  
the nickle held at arms length high  
writing a penny for your thoughts  
writing sex at  
writing anything, noisy as a white river  
writing phantoms at the only lake  
writing lakes that dont exist  
writing poem into statement into song  
into floating entry  
writing erotic & the mythic shelved  
writing out this way, hopelessly devoted

**continued shield notes:**

the skeleton requirements attest  
to work themselves carefully

barren at the land bare  
echoes watch the water trace  
& false play

mining & smelting works & then works  
, grey pantomime of sludge

& whatever can grow as outcropped rock  
& what cant; *another description*

the passing ships; you get out, then  
you circle back

how many circles

moving forward ahead

, what sex

at thirty-eight; it reads  
*the forest for the trees*

**sex at thirty-eight: letters to unfinished g.**

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**rob mcLennan** lives in Ottawa, no matter how much time he lives in Edmonton (sorry, Alberta, nothing personal) as writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta. The author of thirteen trade poetry collections, fall 2007 sees the publication of three new titles: the novella *white* ([The Mercury Press](#)), *subverting the lyric: essays* ([ECW Press](#)) and the non-fiction *Ottawa: The Unknown City* ([Arsenal Pulp Press](#)). He often posts reviews, essays and other items on his clever blog ([robmcLennan.blogspot.com](#)), as well as on his newly-formed communal Alberta blog ([albertawriting.blogspot.com](#)). He can be found hiding in his office at the University most days.

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