

THE BURDEN OF GRAVITY

poems

Shannon McConnell

CAITLIN PRESS

Stones

1958

The last body covered,
patted with shovels, the final
gravestone, placed.
All those who came after,
unclaimed, transported to the university.
Cadavers.

1977

The hospital board claimed
the sick and elderly didn't
want to see—
rows of death markers
from their windows, their future.

Eighteen hundred gravestones
relocated into the city.

Staff used some stones to build
a retaining wall behind the school.
Autumn rains seeped into
the soil, dislodging
the slabs, tumbling them
into the creek, submerged.

1986

Playing in her front yard, a young girl pulled
loose one of the stones from the pathway.
She wiped the dirt off,
perplexed by the letters and numbers.
Her father dug out a hundred
more from their driveway.

Visitors discover the patio
behind the school, where staff gathered
for barbecues, was a puzzle
of levelled stones, forced pieces,
some face up.

1999

Five hundred stones recovered.
Every chunk and fragment rescued
regardless of size, shape or integrity.

While preparing to convert
the cemetery to a memorial garden
nine stones are discovered,
forgotten in the purge,
left concealed in the solitude
of fallen tree branches, overgrown
grass and moss.

2007

Survivors gather at the garden,
sombre, despite the steady squeal
of power tools, condos rising across the street.

They congregate, hands gripping
tissues, walking through the park.
They pause, read each name
on the rows and rows and rows
of inset stones and plaques.

Wedged between the rows,
an eight-foot block of granite.
Its eerie black surface, buffed
of imperfections, holds their gaze, aged
reflections. Below it, sunken
into the dirt, one new stone, inscribed:
respect.

Cathode Rays

Alone in the ward two boys lie
in their beds, limbs constricted against
their bodies like twisted tree branches.

They let their eyes relax, watch
the scattered black and white
patterns and shapes form
and fade into hockey rinks
and muscle cars and backyard fires
and playground swings and shooting stars
and ice cream sundaes and sidewalk chalk drawings
and loosened knots in twisted branches.

Across the room
white noise hisses
from the small
television set.

Circles

He walks laps for hours.
His tattered sneakers have
worn a circle into the grass.

Children gather to watch
his hunched shoulders,
strained neck and arms'
rhythmic sway.

Soft words jumble on his tongue
as children try to block his path.
He passes them on the inside,
returning to his track
unfazed.

The children whisper
about the boy
whose parents chained
him to a tree, still unable
to stop the spinning.

Name: Paul [REDACTED]

Age: Fifteen

Gender: Male

Diagnosis: [REDACTED]

Medication: [REDACTED]

Ward Occurrences:

The swaying branches
temporary eclipse the sun
a cool brushing over pale skin
not felt through pane.

The Burden of Gravity

From behind the pane
of his ward, Paul watches
a colony of seagulls glide
up from the Fraser. Their mocking
scatters. Paul longs
to detach from the burden
of gravity, hollow his bones,
sprout dark feathers all over
his smooth adolescent skin.
He's eager to join
the other birds on the green
sun-bleached shingles outside
his window; silent
and crouching between
folded wings, waiting
for freedom's lifting breath.

Headstones

[REDACTED] decades, [REDACTED] concrete [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] wooden block letters — [REDACTED] buried or ripped out [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
few [REDACTED] signs [REDACTED] remain.
[REDACTED]
former residents [REDACTED]
the cemetery [REDACTED] citizens [REDACTED] lie silently [REDACTED] grassy
knolls. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] the garden [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] living survivors [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
those who didn't [REDACTED] wait their turn. [REDACTED]

60 Pages

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Woodlands [REDACTED]
casualty list [REDACTED] 3,081 [REDACTED] buried

[REDACTED] in the woods, surrounding [REDACTED] stone [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
housed them. [REDACTED] patients [REDACTED] died [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] dumped there. [REDACTED]

Friends Who Didn't

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] thick grove of maples, [REDACTED] tardy summer sun, [REDACTED] survived

[REDACTED] wept, [REDACTED] the friends who didn't.