

language.

The writer has to tell. It is the weapon I know how to use.

Dear Diary, did you give her what she needs? Did you back away in horror at the pain of her life? Did you open beneath her to receive the blows of her testimony? Did you wrap your pages around her incest-battered body? Did you make her feel clean again, innocent?

Yellow paper, please give me what I need.

Pen, be my strength.

If love could be made visible, would it be on the skins of trees, this paper spread out beneath my hands?

Who will heal the healer? Dennis Maracle

Love as piercing as the screwdriver's thrust.

Love as searing as the marks on an infant's leg.

Love as clear as her face.

Love as clean as a sheet of yellow paper.

Love as honest as a poem.

I have to tell.

It is the only thing I know how to do.

1989

Toronto, Canada

Honour Song

I will listen to you

For every ear that turned away from your story, I will finely tune my own to hear every syllable, every cry, every nuance of speech, every whisper, every secret.

I give you what you have given me

I will touch you

For every hand that failed you in gentleness, my own will become birds to lift your tired body into flight, will become water to bathe your wounds, will become caresses to ease your spirit into calm.

I give you what you have given me.

I will believe you.

For every time they called you liar, I will trust your honesty, I will be faithful to your words, I will be a sentinel of your story.

I give you what you have given me.

I will see you.

For every eye that glanced away, that refused to look, my own eyes will behold beauty, will reflect our history, will softly cover you with respect.

I give you what you have given me.

I will stand with you.

For every war that rages against you, I will be on your side. I will be as a warrior beside you, I will fight with you.

I give you what you have given me.

I will laugh with you.

For every insult and curse thrown down at you, I will throw it back and turn it into a joke on them. I will tell you gossip and dirty stories that cause laughter to rumble from your gut.

I give you what you have given me.

I will cry with you.

For all the ugliness you were witness to, I will shed tears for each one. I will cry for lost babies, for lost language, for unnamed sufferings. I will cry and my tears will fall on you and you will feel them and know I am with you.

I give you what you have given me.

I will love you.

I have so much and I give it to you humbly, respectfully, honestly.

I will love you as you have loved me.

Our love will turn over this earth.

Our love will be a seed.

Our love will be a flower, will be fruit.

Our love will be food for our Nations.

I give to you what you have always given me.

I sing your names aloud to honour you.

Mary, Celeste, Vickie, Connie, Nicole, Doreen, Janice, Elaine, Doris, Donna, Viola, Dorothy, Jan, Karen, Margaret, Chrystos, Katsi, Elizabeth, Monique, Muriel, Lisa, Gloria, Joanne, Carole, Susan, Cindy, Beverly, Anna, Maureen, Littlefeather, Kate, Betty, Judith, Terri, Raven, Nila, Share, Midnight Sun, Jackie, Awiakta, Barbara, Linda, Edith, Deb, Marcy, Leslie, Lee Anne, Jeannie, Redwing, Diane, Sharon, Sandra, Charlotte, Linda.

I sing your names aloud to honour you.
I give to you what you have always given me.
My sisters.
I sing this honour song for you.

1991, 1994

Stillborn Night

Wind.
Outside my suite, wind screams.
There is no rain, unless my tears can be called so.
I have heard over the wires, the phone held weakly—
My fourth grandson is dead.
Unable to make the journey of birth, he has become a
spirit.
I am unable to be with my daughter, my son-in-law, my
grandson that
lives.
The wind. The wind has cut power lines, has uprooted trees,
has
cancelled flights. But the ringing of the telephone remains
constant.
Through the wires, I hold my family. Voice becomes the
means to
love and comfort
My daughter cries—“Mama, why did he have to die?”
Tim cries—“Mom, I’m scared.”
And I think about the careless words that are said by
people when
a baby has not completed the passage to this world.
“You’ll have another one, you’re young and healthy.” “It’s
better
this way.”
I can only say—“I love you”. “I know you’re scared.” “I’ll be
home as soon as I can.” “I don’t know why he died.” “I will
miss
him too.”

But I did know that he would die. All these months—I knew
—and I curse this knowing and want to scream like the wind
outside my suite.
My immediate thoughts are for my daughter—how to ease
her pain,

wanting to take that pain and absorb it for her, my lovely
daughter.
This is what a mother wants to do.
The grandmother wants the impossible.
To hold a baby in her arms. To rock him. To sing to him.
To imagine the first time he looks at me in recognition and
smiles at
his grandma.
I bought no baby clothes, no rattles, none of the little
things
that signal the celebration of a new being. I assembled no
medicine
bag for him, no filling the pouch with gifts to keep him
strong and
balanced in his journey of life.
I told myself I was being careful. This had been a difficult
and
dangerous pregnancy. I was being careful, I told myself. I
did not
want to presume the outcome.
But when I wandered through stores, I would go to the
baby clothes
and hold them in my hands, fingering colours. I picked up
rattles
and shook them, then lay them down. I looked at tiny
shirts and
diapers, smelled baby powders. I wanted to wonder if this
baby
would have thick, fine black hair like his brother, Benjamin.
I
wanted to wonder what the mixture of Tyendinaga and
Kanawake would
produce this time. He was to be named Brant Montour,
family names of
the grandmothers of this child.
I bought no baby clothes. I kept this secret of knowing
from everyone, even the woman who shares my bed and
my life.

I went with my daughter to doctor’s offices. Went with her
to have tests. She talked of looking forward to being home
again, not having to go to work, looking forward to the
night feedings, the smell of baby’s head, Benjamin’s
reactions to having a baby brother, the solidifying of a