



POEMS

I AM

THE

BIG

HEART

SARAH VENART

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: I am the big heart / Sarah Venart.

Names: Venart, Sarah, 1968- author.

Description: Poems.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20200220535 | Canadiana (ebook) 2020022056X | ISBN 9781771315364 (softcover) | ISBN 9781771315371 (HTML) | ISBN 9781771315388 (PDF)

Classification: LCC PS8643.E53 I2 2020 | DDC C811/.6—dc23

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We acknowledge the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund, and the Ontario Arts Council for their support of our publishing program.



Canada



The author photo was taken by Cristina Lugo.

The book is set in Scala.

The cover image is *Carey*, by Janet Werner.

Designed by Marijke Friesen.

Printed and bound by Coach House Printing.

Brick Books
487 King St. W.
Kingston, ON
K7L 2X7

www.brickbooks.ca

Epiphany

Here I am, with one hour to find it.

Here I am in this tenth month, the peeler of pears,
the slicer of hot dogs, cutting them into strips
smaller than a child's windpipe.

Here's my apologetic smile, accepted by the daycare
in return for my children. So what is there to find
in one hour on my desk's shallow surface?

I've mislaid all of it somewhere among
my mind's tiny grey flags, in the millions of scraps
piling up. I left it behind in the dark bleeding gums
of the dog that I loved, watching her clench yet another rock
from the tide. That was twelve years ago.

What was she looking for?

What if she'd stopped looking?

Metaphors were easy then, not only the sky,
but migrating everywhere. And now everyone is arrow
arrow, arrows. Everyone harpoons.

And I am the big heart, aren't I?

When my black dog was being put down, in her last
second I whispered, *Squirrel*.

The Difficult Ones

I'd been having problems, so I made an appointment to return to Sinclair the midwife. I needed her one more time to teach me, or my baby, to latch on.

In the sunlit dream of her office, in the easy chair, an afghan and a pillow propping my arm, Sinclair stood behind me, used her palm and this indulgent voice reserved for babies, and she got us latched.

Between us, my baby swallowed silky mouthfuls at my breast. Latching was so easy with Sinclair. I had a vision in that plush chair: I'd be able to go it alone

on the fussy evening feed tonight, I was planted now with the wisdom of the palm, the pinkie, and Sinclair's voice in my head. How grateful, how tired I was

when I thanked her, shakily: *I'll never forget you.*
Nor I you, said Sinclair. Her hands clapped onto the knees of her colourful scrubs as she added: *You always remember the difficult ones—*

I forget almost everything else about the birth: how long I pushed, was the water around me really a cesspool, did I climb from the tub, did I wash or sleep? If my stitches had broken,

or I'd complained about how I'd been sewn up, that to me would be difficult. Had I sworn at her during the labour's transition from woman to mammal,

okay. If they'd needed the big fish sieve to clean up my pool—
I couldn't remember. Everything I'd been so sure
I'd been before—affable, even gracious in my first trimester,

smiling benignly when, with her fingers inside me,
Sinclair had pushed at the wall between one part of me and another
and suggested I needed more fibre?

I wanted to be carried back a minute to that warmer armchair.
Sinclair had helped me then, unclipping my bra cup
before transporting my fussing newborn with her tiny chafed pout
onto the firebox of my breast and fixing us, the difficult ones, into place.

Albert County Breeder

It was years before I could walk back
to that doorway, figuratively hold

the post of your fallen porch
with its thousand green Mason jars

staring out towards the weathered barn.
On each window your dust

held the shapes of the cobwebs. Here
is your father coming out the kicked door.

Inside I've seen the hard-packed dirt
on your kitchen floor, ketchup caked

to the spoons, the bucket in the corner,
a.k.a. the winter toilet.

Outside we have more in common: bus shelter
for the wait at the end of the lane, broken-looking

crab apples, blue spruce, red pines,
tar shingles on the coop,

and the wild eyes in the animal
we brought to breed with your animal.

A White Tent Goes Up

What brings me to the empty pasture
across from the tomb they use
when the ground's too cold to dig?
It isn't the wooden poles' creak where joined at an apex
or the sun pushed into white canvas
or the women fanning their skirts
against their shame. I'm pushed by a crowd
of other children into an aisle, I feel too much skin
on the cold metal seat of a folding chair.
By the pulpit, Carter Bagley floats smugly
behind the drum kit. And in her slippery blouse,
training bra visible on shoulder bones,
Paula says, *I feel the Spirit*.
Someone shouts, *Amen*.

Which weighs more, dead body
frozen or unfrozen? It's the kind of question
I want answered. Yesterday, my father sent me to collect
docked lambs' tails in the clover. Five cents a tail.
The weight of them collected in my plastic bread bag.
What did you do for currency in your father's eyes?
Bread into fishes, bread into wine, what's revelation
is the first time I bear witness to the lamb
still inside its pink sac, swinging like wet grey rope
from the vulva of the ewe. Revelation is this lamb transforming
with apricots into stew on rice. Revelation is clotted
cream churning to butter, cheese hanging in its cloth
on the doorknob, the streams of yellow whey.
I haven't heard much from the preacher,
but the sweat on his cheeks

is pure biology.

I cannot lie: I'm scared I'll feel you, Spirit.

So show yourself to me.

Troy

I love Troy and I carve his name in the blond oak of the pew
and wait at the phone booth for his bus.

As it passes by, I find his window silhouette,
exquisite throat, delicate Adam's apple.

I give away so little of myself when I visit his house,
and as long as I wear T-shirt over swimsuit, place an ice pack

on the baby brother's swollen gums and wash the bacon pan,
I can even slide into Troy's pool and do laps.

I come up for air and every fibre of a curtain in the upstairs window
undulates with Troy. From the filter I remove leaves so wet

they disintegrate on touch. His mother strokes the lace on the velvet elbows
of her chair and says, *Bedroom Eyes here wants to sit with you in church.*

I come through the back gate in the morning, hoping.
On the long bench of atonement, she hands me the baby brother.

While Reverend Bagley peers through his bouquet of plastic tulips
on the pulpit, Troy looks straight ahead. But I know inside him

there's a horse. The horse will be unbridled if we speak.
I run across the backyard. I run past the church.

At the diamond, I run up the mountain of trembling bleachers to oversee
the red sand paths between first and second base.

Far off on the sidelines the parched observers see my wooden walls.
They don't see what's inside me, what it will do for Troy.

Dénouement

When she loved me, she got on with it
in silence: she punched down the bread and salvaged
the cold oatmeal on the stove.

It wasn't what I asked for.

Near the end, I help her off the toilet—
so light and mean.
She grazes a fist against my leg.
Leave me, she says.

There, there—
I'm speaking to a meadow about its chaff.
Why bring up the clover.

Flowers for All Occasions

On the Prime Care bed in the living room
it's time to say goodbye. *Too soon to say for sure,*

I tell the limboing silence and the shroud
who is still my mother.

I am also a kind of chrysalis. I tuck the word
pregnant behind her ear.

I'm guilty of something
even as I run the pink sponge-pop of moisture

around her lips, even though I've changed
her pyjamas and her diaper, administered to her chest port

the drug that supports the freezing illusion
that we are both sitting outside of time: she's not leaving,

I'm not leaving. It's still good
to hold her hand on this bedsheet.

I pretend I am a membrane
through which she could pass

to forgive me for wanting also to be recognized
as someone changed by life.

The Falling Action

She was sixty-nine or was it seventy? Some people said a ripe old age.
It's said that if the young learn that they are dying, they become holy.
I suppose it's their face. It is said, anyway. Above the barn sink,
the glass held the reflection of a barn cat leaping for a barn swallow.
I saw it go down, slapped my wet hands
and seethed: *Shit! Well, that's over.*

I looked everywhere for meaning: in her pyjamas,
in her somewhat-holy face. I read poems to her that were little stories:
man walks into autumn beach town, is a skunk, finds a skunk, the end.

I made lemon custard. I set spoons on the two-by-four table.

I pushed in her Puritan bench. The other side of the window
bloomed lilac—I can't say what I want that to mean—
still I brought a bowl to her table. She spat spoonfuls into the napkin,
her face lit with adoration for that later-place. She made a device
of folding her napkin into smaller squares, hiding my love without looking.
But who can talk about what you will miss
every minute? *We turned toward signs painted Peaches*, I recited.

Once she looked up and said, *I'll miss that face*—I
keep combing the moment. It was said.
I return to it—anything could happen.

The News

I placed the telephone in the cradle
and did not stop walking

until I was lying
under a cave of trees in a stranger's yard.

I lay there like a wide lake.
I didn't have the deep thoughts

of a lake. Instead, I had the modest thoughts
of a mother:

*I am the lake if you want me to be the lake.
I can also be the kept lawn or this cedar shrub.
Even the roses, which I dislike. Or disliked
before I became them.*

The End

I've been saying it for years now on the last page of every story—
The end, The end, they sing as they toddle to bed.

When she could no longer leave her bed
I gave my mother a gingko in a plastic bucket. I was thinking

she might plant it. I wasn't thinking. The papered leaves
turned yellow and fell off suddenly one night.

A Pollyanna principle is love with all you have
and the love will return. But my mother's face

was silent and stainless as a sink. The glass of water
at the bedside was full because she didn't drink.

I close the book. My second-born is asking if it's the end.
It hardly bothers me to look into eyes so like my mother's and lie.

The Saving of Things

found poem, Mommy's journal

The flowers are not real
but when I thought they were,
and that a hand had put them there
for my pleasure, I felt happy.

Fox's Sleep Revisited

She wants my hens.

Hunger makes her small-waisted
as a wasp. Mid-afternoon, voracious,
she slips by the verandah to attack the cat
and the grosbeaks in the feeder.

But really she wants the hens,
so silent in the shed they must smell her.
In the morning, four feathers on a fence post,
Swiss dots of blood and musk.

Woolf Digression

Each time Woolf turned a page, the words bored her.
She thought, there's a chance here

for surprise
and then no surprise.

She could not take another last page,
not another syllable, she could not stop

the wishful voice of the scissor, the penknife,
its gleaming eye tooth.

Me, I see the corner of a page like a mouth
asking for its bed covers to be turned down, a voice

under the pillow: *You are what loves you*
not what you love.

I still have eyes, Woolf said. She could not stop the new
keen love for the speckled pinks, greys, the liver red

of stones. It didn't seem unreal, this river
and love. It looked real.

When I tell this story to an intern in a lab coat,
I can see I scare her.

You are what you love, she corrects me.
She thinks she corrects me.

She writes on her pad, hands me the page.
There's no surprise: swallow with water until

it looks real, until it gets real, what you love.

Chance Harbour

Some things cannot be faced head-on. Inside
the tide mark, men in boots come with clam shovels.
They scrape the ocean floor. The thoughts I can't lose

or use spout from the sanded throats of clams beneath
what the tide exposes. Two years after your death, you're back—
visiting my sister's yard, admiring the lilacs. Some things cannot

be faced head-on. When the men climb into a dinghy, they each accept
a black mask and plunge for prickled urchins to be eaten, peeled,
by wealthy Asian men. What if I lose these thoughts

beneath the bay's smooth skin, where low tide holds its copper strength
for only sixty seconds? I have no time to fix you in place before
you're gone. Some things cannot be faced head-on.

This visit, you stand by those lilac flutes, unruffled
bay behind you. All pettiness aside, I can't be the daughter
pulling something hopeful from my thoughts. I must never lose

you, but are we allowed a break? Now on the peeling rust stones,
the tide stops—nothing to heed. Farther out, the black suits dive
for gold. Some things cannot be faced head-on.
What I can't lose, I've used.