

Companion Pieces



poems

Kirk Johnson

"The brilliant edge of a shining, fresh wave in Canadian poetry."

— GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

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Cumulus
P R E S S

MONTREAL

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for Catherine Marie-Pierre Surprenant

The train's brakes are cast in shoes made of cherry wood coated with peanut oil, producing the particular odour when the train brakes at high speeds.

CONTENTS

Prologue	11
1	15
No hurt, no pardon	17
Blue	20
Waiting for the train	21
August	22
On the platform checkered black and white	23
On the line	24
Conundrum	25
I am in your closet, on a hanger	26
Sleep study	27
Is there an end to the drifting wreckage?	28
Aubade no. 1	29
2	31
Inclination	33
Vacuuming	34
Leave ill enough alone	35
In the meantime, this did not happen	37
By the way	38
Autumn in the shape of a square	39
Aporia	40
Periwinkles	41
Carry your weight	42
Aubade no. 2	43

3	45
Retaining a singular identity	47
Sidetracked	48
A small contradiction of fact	49
The city in winter	51
Let me sink	52
It's come to this	54
The eavesdropper	55
At the end of things	56
Along the canal	57
For the record	58
Aubade no. 3	59
Epilogue	61
Acknowledgements	64

PROLOGUE

Morning presses pale blue
and then blue into the grey
crease of dawn.

It muscles down alleys
and streets and bustles
across lawns and sidewalks.

It slivers past blinds,
muffles through curtains,
and hustles into bedrooms,

bathrooms, and kitchens.
It scrambles onto countertops
and pours across worn

wood-stripped floors,
cold-white tiled floors,
carpets, and linoleum.

It licks warm and delicious
into the corners
of a mouth.

She dashes an egg
against the knife-edge
of a pan half-full

of salted, boiling water.
It droops from the shell
and under the water's surface



where it heaves and gasps
as the water blunders
out a rhythm.

A small, wet sparrow.
It's feathers loose and
downy in the water.

She sinks too and follows
the elusive outline of the egg
into the water

until she can no longer hear
the water splashing over
onto the element

as the thin cohesion
at the surface is breached
and breached again.

The early morning light
blurs and dims with each
breaking wave above her.

There is the sound
of floorboards creaking
under weight.

A hand mutters open
and converses on her shoulder.
It is a memory



blurred loose on the skin.
It is the tide healing her
with its salt cure.

The hand ebbs from her shoulder
and drifts down
the bone-creek of her back.



❧ 1 ❧

NO HURT, NO PARDON

The woman living
in the apartment
above mine
stumbles out
of her bedroom
towards the kitchen.

I follow her path
along a crack
in the ceiling.

When I hear the
floorboards creak,
I know she is above
the yellow water stain
in the hallway.

I hear the dull, distant,
metal clunking of pots
as she roots
through a cupboard
looking for a pan
to make breakfast.

It's not difficult
to tell she is barefoot
from the slight
hesitation of her step.
Each toe
taking the temperature
of the floor.



I can tell when
she is wearing
slippers, socks, shoes.
Almost their colour.
I know too much about her.

She is in the bathroom,
turns on the water
to the shower.
The pipes stammer
the news through the walls.

She walks
from the bathroom,
into the bedroom,
and to the closet
above my bed.

I listen to the rattle
of coat hangers
and the push and shove
of dresser drawers.

I trace her back
from a slouch
of plaster
around the base
of the bare bulb
hanging above me.



She walks to the bathroom
and eases her way
under the hot water.
I listen to the shape
of her.



BLUE

The tile in the shower is pockmarked
with blue flowers that owe their faint,
untrue scent to the conditioner mired
deep in a woman's hair. She waits

the necessary minute with her head
propped against the shower wall
just under the spray of the spout.
Her forehead presses against a tile.

One flower wilts under the weight.
From inside this private soliloquy
I am composing for her, she watches
a few, fallen petals wash down the drain.



WAITING FOR THE TRAIN

I wish I had faced those stairs
and knocked on that door
and said the words,

Walk me to the station.

Instead, I sulk here alone,
as if you are to blame.



AUGUST

I am leaning out
the kitchen window
putting a few things out on the line:

from a balcony,
two floors below,

a man calls to his friends
down on the street

to suggest an outing
to the look-off;

two balconies over,
a woman is beating eggs

for an omelette and wonders
if two are enough,

she calls to a neighbour
to borrow more;

another is in the shower,
cursing a lack of hot water.



ON THE PLATFORM CHECKERED BLACK AND WHITE

Stooped against a pillar,
I am working out
with a pen and paper
the relationship between the train,
bearing down the tracks,
and the fluorescent lights
that illuminate the station.
They lack a sense of discipline.

I overhear a conversation
and I look with the pen and paper.
It is the coincidence
of overhearing your name
that forces me to write
this all down.

I hear the train approaching,
wailing down the tracks.
Above, the fluorescent lights
drone an elegy
in accompaniment.

One lone tube marbles and tries to light.



ON THE LINE

Throughout the week,
I constantly check
my pockets
looking for your name.



CONUNDRUM

On the train tonight,
crowded three crooked
poems that could be poems.
On the way home
to straighten them
into something else.

The train scowls
down the iron road.

On the train tonight,
crowded three crooked
poems that could be poems
that the weight of a train
couldn't straighten.

The train files
down the iron road.

At home tonight,
could only find
two of the three poems.
Considered going back
to look for it.

The train whimpers
down the iron road.



I AM IN YOUR CLOSET, ON A HANGER

I hear the tap creak shut
and the thud of your footfalls
on the bath mat.

The bathroom door opens
and you rush into the bedroom
towards the closet.
You finger through your wardrobe.

Your hand pauses for a few seconds
on the shallow of my back.

I am aware of the cool
knot of air cupped in your palm.

I wait in the damp sweep of the second hand.



SLEEP STUDY

A nude light bulb sways
above my bed.

It is the last thing I see
before sleep manages
away my view of the moon.
A nude light bulb is the moon.

I chart my location.



IS THERE AN END TO THE DRIFTING WRECKAGE?

I am convinced,
grey is the colour of your eyes
when you're listening to the train.
I am half in love with trains.



AUBADE NO. 1

With a crude and mangled
accent, a crow startles a city awake.

A reflection
of the grey-blue dawn
pools on it's back

like oil on water.

Below, the traffic yawns
and begins to shuffle along the street.

The crow tips it's wings,
and leaves it's roost.
The work is finished.

For a brief moment,
a building below is bathed in the colour blue.



✂ 2 ✂

INCLINATION

He lies in bed wondering
why the word bed
looks like a bed.

Thinking he'd like to go
back over every word
he ever had the nerve to write,
to scratch out the ones
that don't work
like the word bed.

Thinking, he'd open his rib cage
while he was at it,
snap back the pages
until his spine cracked.
He'd blot out himself
and every other word he could find.

Wanting to go to the kitchen to try.

Instead, he lies in bed
too lazy to answer the phone.



VACUUMING

Vacuuming now more than usual.

Sometimes twice a day,
while the sink is full of dishes.

Vacuuming even the dog.



LEAVE ILL ENOUGH ALONE

The thin scarf knotted around my neck
failed to keep the cool air from reaching in
to pluck the thick string
strung inside my spine.

I shivered past the neighbourhood women,
past some complaining beggars,
and an epileptic demanding
money for his medication.

I walked into a hole in the wall
I had never been in before.
The waitress was young looking,
but old everywhere else.

Her thin legs staggered
in a young man's awkward glance.
He lounged in the corner,
his fingers stained blue with ink.

I watched him slide his oily eyes
over her when she wasn't looking.
I listened to him try to pry her thighs
with an off-handed remark and a dejected look.

An older man sat smoking at the counter.
He constantly reached his free hand
to his back pocket to make sure
his wallet was still there.

Beside him, a small, green-tinged face
of a child balanced on the counter.
The man smiled at her
as he smashed his cigarette into an ashtray.



Behind the counter, another waitress
yelled out the orders.
She blushed each time.
Even her hands turned red.

I lit a cigarette.
The young man in the corner
turned his attention towards me
and betrayed my presence.

IN THE MEANTIME, THIS DID NOT HAPPEN

In the afternoon, we followed
the paved trail along the canal.

The potted geraniums hung lifeless
but full of life from the lampposts.
On the benches and picnic tables,
business types sat eating their salads
or tuna casseroles made meticulously
the night before.

We followed the pavement out
until we were lost and glad
to be there. I pulled out a mason jar
of gin and tonic smuggled past
the geraniums. We got more drunk
barking at the fish
that came too close to shore.

You heaved your drunk mouth onto mine
and bit into my lips like they were limes.
You weren't concerned with small-talk.

The way you pared back my clothes too severe,
I thought you were a prophet.



BY THE WAY

By the way, I'm tearing up my parking tickets and those on the other cars I pass on the street. Yesterday, I disconnected my phone where it runs into the apartment. Try to call me and you will see.

Don't bother coming by. I have unscrewed the screws holding the door buzzer to the wall. Have clipped the green and red wires that run to it.



AUTUMN IN THE SHAPE OF A SQUARE

There is no one shouting.
No infants crying.
There is no moon
in the square of the window.

In the dark, my numb fingers
forget which way to turn
the small wheel
that controls the heater.

My numb fingers
forget which way to push
the small point
of the pen.

I falter,
no longer propped-up
by a sentence.



APORIA

She fills the room
like cigarette smoke.

I detect the smell of her
heavy on my clothes.



PERIWINKLES

The small blue flowers
reeked towards my outstretched hand
joining the twenty or so already picked,
fingers stained blue, green, and dirt.

The flowers are called periwinkles
and vine-like, they crept
and cabled everywhere
over the small strip of grass
between the canal and the paved trail.
A small sea of flowers
fished from the soil
with a muted jerk.

She calls them mayflowers
because they bloom in May.

Maybe next spring
we could pick these mayflowers together
and tie them into bouquets
with a piece of stem.

I am no longer interested calling things by what they are,
only what they might be.



CARRY YOUR WEIGHT

You sleep like a train
winding through a city.
You travel without apology.

I am so desperate that I am in the kitchen writing
this down on a box of crackers while the macaroni
and cheese burns on the stove.

You, sleeping
in the bedroom,
make it look so easy.



AUBADE NO. 2

The dry leaves
that made it autumn
clutched to what remained

of the sun,
daily trudged under
by winter's blundering gait.

In a sapling,
growing along the canal,
a crow roosts through the racket
and dreams it is a man.



3

RETAINING A SINGULAR IDENTITY

I pace the planks watching you
propped-up in bed with a notebook,
its spine broken backwards over your knee.

You're writing a poem about your father's
tomato sauce. How you could smell
the way the spoon moved.

I climb into bed beside you and change
what you could have written. I untangle
the blankets, careful not to disturb you further.

I begin to count the countless stitches
along a seam in one of the blankets.
The small, ordered knots measure time and place

Impatiently, I lean over to read
what you are writing. I look down the pen
and watch you write the word heart.



SIDETRACKED

I tear your name from me.
I scratch and screech it off.

Through the night,
the train sounds the way for you



A SMALL CONTRADICTION OF FACT

I'm lying in bed
trying to write
this poem
but the pillows
are not just
right and the
blankets are too
heavy or not
heavy enough.

The nude bulb
sways above my bed
and I am thinking,
Tomorrow I have
to fix that draft
under the window.

I am doing my
best to struggle
through this poem,
but just now I found
myself listening
to the breath
roll in and out
of the woman sleeping
beside me.

Her stomach
rises in tandem with
each sentence
I stumble through.



Her breath—
sentences I write
and rewrite.

She stirs,
as if something I was thinking
moved her body.



THE CITY IN WINTER

Outside the snow is falling.

I hear the cars on the street.
I wonder if they have towed mine away.

Can hear the train ploughing
down the tracks, practicing
its chained gait through the city.

The train moves like a grey eye
across a body.

~~heart~~



LET ME SINK

Please. Please.
Let me sink
into the paint
or keep me
under the kitchen sink
where I'll peel
the potatoes
and onions
whenever you
need them.

Or keep me
in your sock drawer
where I'll make sure
you'll never again
wear one grey
and one slightly
more grey sock.

Or keep me
in the trunk
of your car
where I'll hold
the antifreeze
so it won't bounce
around and spill
over the carpet.



Or keep me
in your hair
where I'll work
out those knots
you never have
time to find.

Have I gone too far already?
What do you want me to do?
Throw myself out?



IT'S COME TO THIS

This is an admission of failure.

This is a burst door.

This is the end of my exile.

This is the end of my apprenticeship.

Forgive me for the brutalism.



THE EAVESDROPPER

She fumbles one hand
across the bottom shelf
of the medicine cabinet
for an elastic to tie her hair up.
The other spins
the hot water faucet off.

I am in the kitchen.
Chili boils on the stove.
Corn muffins brown in the oven
to be followed by a dish
of apple crisp.

She tip-toes one foot
into the tub to test
the temperature.
The water floods a reply
to her ankle.
It is too hot and perfect.

She eases into the tub
until the surface of the water
rests around her shoulders.
She starts to sing a song
I can't place.

The shallow of her stomach
is a small, warbled lake.



AT THE END OF THINGS

The water carries her out,
further out.
The shore leaves it's awful edge behind.

She opens her rib cage,
folds each rib back.
She kicks her legs in and together.
Gills open her neck. Skin scales.

Beyond the reach, the moon blurs.
She drowns in and out and up
and into and breathes.

The tide now measures the distance
between us.



ALONG THE CANAL

She can hear the ocean
in the slip of bone
within a shoulder.



FOR THE RECORD

This is the way it happened:
she came into this watering
hole in the wall that I just
happened to be sitting in.

The place was empty,
but she takes the table
right next to me.
I should have been home,

watching the Super Bowl.
If the truth be known,
I didn't even know
who was playing.

Later I said, jokingly,
You have incredible eyes,
and she, not to be outdone,
batted them at me like a door
that doesn't latch.

Now it's 5:30 on a Tuesday
morning and I'm tracing
a few triangles from a few
freckles on her arm,
but I'm no geometrician.
I am aware of how I fail you.



AUBADE NO.3

A crow grows old
in the time it takes the sun
to uncover a row of buildings.



EPILOGUE

She, half-dead,
in a half-dead apartment,
fumbles out of bed,

trips towards the kitchen,
opens the refrigerator,
and plucks two eggs

from the compartment
on the door.
She pulls a pan

from a cupboard,
fills it half-full of water,
and places it on a burner.

She turns the element
to high, adds salt
and waits

for the element to heat.
Water sputters on
the bottom of the pan

and small air bubbles
form along the inside.
She watches them grow

heavy, loose their grip,
and fall to the surface.
She breaks an egg



into the boiling water
and drifts half-asleep
watching it cook.

When the egg is ready,
she rescues it
with a slotted spoon and

dumps it into a bowl.
As a fork breaks
through the rubbery skin,

she curses herself
for leaving it
in the water too long.

The yolk is tough.
She forces the egg down.
He, on the other hand,

decides on cereal,
and gulps it down
as if the milk was a street.



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In this well-crafted sequence of poems, Kirk Johnson creates a poignant reading experience, demonstrating the talent and originality that is establishing his place among Canada's bright young poets. With every nuance, every turn of phrase, Johnson skillfully combines the tentative with the precise, summoning a deeper look.

The poems' strong, lingering imagery recounts the way a train approaches a station and how the sun uncovers a row of buildings at dawn. They often blur the space between the fantasy of an inner world and the reality of an indoor place.

Companion Pieces is fine fabric, best worn next to the skin. Feel its intricate weave of urban alienation, rural nostalgia, and dreams born of a futile longing. Like memory, an intricate pattern emerges of threads both beautiful and plain, impulsive but long-lasting.

Sense "the cool knot of air" beneath the touch on a companion's shoulder. Listen to "the grey crease of dawn" as it follows the gait of another passing train. This collection of poetry will resonate in your imagination long after you've put the book down, leaving you with a heightened awareness of the extraordinary in the mundane.

