Assumptions

open your flesh, people, to opposites
conclude the bold configuration, finish
the counterpoint: sky, include earth now.
Flying, a long vole of descent
renders us land again.
Flight is intolerable contradiction.
We bear the bursting seeds of our return
we will not retreat; never be moved.
Stretch us onward include in us the past
sow in us history, make us remember triumph.

— Muriel Rukeyser, "Theory of Flight"

¶ MY FATHER WAS DESCENDED FROM A PEPSI, OR A rotten-tooth, as the lowlife francophones like my grandfather were called in Belle Rivière. In the twilight hours of

humid Ontario evenings, you can still see these shackers sitting on the wide stoops of their decrepit tarpaper houses, drinking ale and flinging the bottles onto the porch. Most sported sweat-grimed undershirts stretched tautly over what they proudly referred to as their "Molson's muscles." In their teens and early twenties, they wore tight trousers and strutted down the streets or drove fast cars; they believed they were big-time operators, smooth and immortal, intact. The lucky ones had jobs in nearby Tecumseh or a half-hour's drive across the bridge in Flint, working in the auto plants and making decent money, which they squandered on enormous RCAs and Chevrolets. Those who were not blessed with good luck spoke to their wives and children through bars. And no Pepsi could gain the respect of the Anglos until he could afford a month in Florida every winter; a Miami tan was worn like a badge in lower Ontario, where the last thing anyone wanted was camouflage.

The youngest boy from a family of twenty-two, my father would feel each sweltering supper hour melt into early evening. As summer took over, he watched the acrid sun sink into the steam of nightfall. It never really cooled down enough to sleep at night for more than a few hours. He sat on the stoop alongside his siblings and garrulous neighbours. He scuffed his sandals against the rotting porch deck and listened to the gossip, turning his head first to face one person on his left side and then to another on his right side. When he realized that this

sideways glancing would get him nowhere, my father turned his gaze upward instead. Whether it was from a quickness of mind, impatience, or both, he recognized that flying away was more expedient than running away. My father was noted in school as an ace with numbers who painted model airplanes and had serious thoughts about the sky and the planets. He was only seventeen when he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. Given full gold wings, he wore the RCAF insignia imprinted on the centre of the crest on his shoulder, where it divided into rich black and red embroidered patterns. He was also given a language of precision, designed to say everything necessary for the rebuilding of postwar empires, a brown leather jacket, and a ready-made self-regard. He cruised at high altitudes in his Lancaster Mark II. Yet none of these things could ever mask my father's lifelong sense of inferiority: a French-Canadian stationed in France, whose accent was never pure enough, whose unerasable *joual* earned him as much teasing in the bistros there as it did in the taverns of English Canada. My father never got to see combat, so he invented his own. And thus we became a part of his personal war.

We were living in the barracks near Metz one grey French winter, and my father was trying to decide where we should go for a brief spring holiday. " 'Bout time I get some goddam R 'n R," he said, slurring his words. My mother wanted to go somewhere warm. But her suggestions for possible holiday destinations were shot down

immediately. She put up no struggle. My father's air force buddy Karl had been the one to suggest going for mussels in Brussels. The two of them were sitting at the kitchen table late one night, drinking and smoking, and snatches of their loud conversation drifted up the stairs as I was falling asleep. I was nine years old, but accustomed to my father's drinking binges. Most nights when my father drank in the kitchen, he sank into one of his accusatory moods, and we could hear him yelling at my mother, dark and horrible noises that filled the barracks and spilled over into our dreams. I was the eldest, and he hated me the most for not being a son he could be proud of. When he remembered that my mother had forgotten to give him a boy yet, he would turn to me in gradual recognition of my face and spit in it with the slow calmness of the alcoholic whose gestures become almost graceful through habituation.

But on this night he was excited, full of plans. "*Bébert*, keep your voice *down*," my mother kept interjecting, but to no avail. My father had prepared one of his favourite dishes for supper, rabbit stew. Years later my middle sister Odette revealed, with a shudder in her voice, his cooking secret. He bled the freshly killed hare's blood from its neck directly into the stewing pot. Now I am not so certain I would relish the taste of the stew as much as I used to. Yet certain smells alone can take me back to that evening. The slow-cooking aroma had filled our tiny officer's quarters for days, and that night I had taken

great pleasure in ladling the rich stew over my spaghetti, removing the delicate bones after my teeth found them. Karl's boisterous appreciation and numerous bottles of local red wine increased my father's delight. The two of them began talking food, which led to memory, which led to travel and the scheme of driving to Brussels two weeks later to eat mussels. It was not until many years later the phrase "mussels in Brussels" would acquire a wistfulness, become a family anecdote, a litany of better times.

We were all duly packed into the rusty Citroën: three girls cramped into the back, our legs perched on top of the suitcases, our immobility making it easier to pinch one another. "I'm going to give you what you deserve if you don't sit still," my father threatened. "But she's asking for it," my youngest sister Francine responded, and I dug my nail harder into her thigh to make her be quiet. "That's it! I've had enough!" he would explode. "Everybody out now for some fresh air!" We would run before he caught us and vented his anger. Usually this involved his removing his air force belt and bending us across his knee until our bottoms were so sore we could not sit without weeping. But he also made it clear that he would not put up with such weaknesses as tears, so we learned not to whimper after he strapped us. We pretended to be entranced by the wildflowers across the field where we stopped, and flew off to gather a bouquet for our mother. The drive took the better part of the first day, but we made many stops to sniff out bakeries that

sold Easter breads, then ate and slept at a small family hotel. It was drizzling a bit as we approached Brussels early the next morning, settled into our *pension,* unloaded all the bottles my father had consumed in the car into the trash bin, and got ready to go out.

Mostly I remember that day as the first occasion to wear my shiny new patent leather shoes. Every spring my father handed my mother money to buy us girls new shoes. He was insistent that we should have the best leather. His own feet were badly deformed and he suffered from hammertoes, a condition made worse by his being the last in line for hand-me-down shoes. I have maintained, although often been unable to afford, a taste for elegant leather shoes. I was wearing my new Easter shoes for the first time that April when we climbed up three sets of stairs to arrive at the restaurant Karl had recommended to my father. I also had on new white knee socks that offset the black patent leather in a very pleasing way, I thought, as I clicked my heels together in what my dance teacher called *plié*, almost as if my shoes had wings. I could see my face in my shoes all the way up the stairs, they shone so much! My father poked his finger into my backside from the step below me, too hard, until I winced in pain. "Hurry up! You're as bad as your mother," he said. Impatiently, he took the stairs two at a time until he passed in front of me, then turned back to urge me to move faster once more.

On the very top floor, in a small room, we were seated at a table with a red and white gingham cloth. My mother, who was wearing a green suit she had made herself after seeing a similar ensemble worn by Jackie Kennedy in a fashion magazine, reminded us to remember our manners. "Especially you. And don't wipe your snotty nose on the napkin," my father snarled at me. I could smell the stale wine fumes on his breath from all the way across the table. My mother folded her own cloth napkin neatly in her lap and passed the breadbasket to my father.

And then the mussels began to arrive, plateful after steaming plateful, platters of mussels smothered in tomato sauce, others in garlic and butter, some marinated in wine and herbs. The smell in the air was heavenly, all yeasty warm from the bread, and freshly sautéed garlic teased my nose, but I could tell from my father's stern glance that this was one of his moments of glory, not to be interrupted by my enthusiastic comments under any circumstances. And I knew well enough not to touch the food until he had helped himself first. "Children need to be seen and not heard," my mother's echoing of his admonition, seemed to ring in my ears. Before we were allowed to dig into them, my father made us fold our hands: "*Seigneur, nous vous prions* …" He had already had too much wine and his face was overly ruddy for this early hour. Yet I had never expected that he would make us say grace or that he might expose our family prayer

rituals so publicly. He expected us to feel beholden to him, to remember that these were the very best mussels, that May would bring the smaller Danish mussels, that we were here just in time. I am not sure why I felt so mortified, since it was a Catholic city and the waitress and other patrons never took any notice of us. I believe my father wanted our everlasting gratitude for his bounty when he spread his hands and said, "Let us have grace." I gripped my fingers tightly against the backs of my hands and lowered my head in prayer, but again, all I could smell and breathe and think was garlic.

Suddenly he noticed me beside him, turned his head to look below the table, and said, "What are you wearing those ridiculous stockings for? They make your knees look like fat sausages." I wilted. Suddenly my new shoes seemed tawdry, and my pretension of patent leather glamour, a sham. My stomach churned as it usually did when he made comments about my ugliness. For thirty years thereafter I believed I was ugly, and made it a habit not to look in mirrors. I caught my mother's glance briefly before she turned to watch the waiter moving toward the table with more food. I had learned long ago that my mother always took my father's side, and always did exactly as he said. She was beautiful in that quiet moment, her head downcast, in spite of the marks he had left across her cheek the night before, and I secretly believed that I resembled her just a little. I prayed until I finally found something I could be grateful to God

about: at least we were in a restaurant, and chances were that I wouldn't get the usual whack across the back of my head when my father was displeased with me. In public he was the model father. All I could do was make the sign of the cross against my forehead, lips and chest, and ask God why I had to have a father who could be so mean to all of us in one moment, and so generous in the next. I was learning that not everything that is incredible is untrue.

Pewter-coloured buckets filled with French fries arrived at his elbows, and we set to the meal. Enormous platters were placed ceremoniously in the centre of the table and were soon laden with our empty mussel shells, mountains of blue-black shells with undersides as shiny as dreams. But I cannot really remember what the mussels tasted like. I was too distraught and angry with God for being unfair. I do remember that it was the first time I didn't have to drink my wine watered down, only because in his distraction my father forgot. And that, after a crisp green salad, another accompaniment arrived at our table: the first white asparagus spears of the spring season, wrapped in wilted leeks tied into bows, drizzled with butter, parsley and pepper, and served on a red platter. It was the prettiest dish on the table. Biting one of those white asparagus tips, I thought I had never tasted any vegetable so divine, a texture at once luxurious and simple. In all of my culinary quests since, there has never been any comparison. If I have any taste

today, if my hunger is inspired and rampant, I attribute it to that first taste of white asparagus.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON WE TOURED BRUSSELS. It is a city whose palaces, museums and basilicas have a rich Gothic texture. But for me the former guildhalls in the Broodhuis inspired a certain chill in me because the architecture is so remote and otherwordly. Perhaps my career as an art critic began at the moment I saw the holy card, which had a baroque warmth that the city itself did not possess. I loved the luminescence of holy cards, their gold and silver foil papers surrounding the saints in their humbler, more subdued colours. They looked so real that I believed if I popped them out of their laminated packets, the saints themselves would spring out at me and perform any miracle I requested of them. I remember gazing longingly at the huge collection of them and trying to decide which ones I could purchase. Mostly because I still have a postcard of it, I also remember all too clearly the famous statue of the little pissing boy, called the Mannekin-Pis, who is supposed to have extinguished by "watering" a firecracker meant to blow up the town hall. Other legends had it that he was the son of a rich bourgeois, found by his grateful parents at the corner of the rue de l'Étuve and the rue du Chêne, relieving himself in the same manner as the famous fountain. It has become a symbol

of all the city's tragedies and fortunes. I think of it when I recall the grubby street urchins who played on the paving stones outside the church, and wonder if their parents would have even sent out a search party should news of their children's disappearance be made known. I think of the miracle of the fountain's survival, its mocking and arrogant arc of water spouting into the air, when I sift through the sepia-toned photographs of rubble-strewn postwar cities.

But it was really the holy card I finally selected at St. Catherine's church that captured my most intense memory of Brussels. We went to church early that evening. I collected holy cards for my missal from every church I visited with my parents. Some of these I traded with other girls from my catechism class. For many years of Sundays after that day, I remained enamoured of the gilded picture I bought with my allowance at the gift shop at St. Catherine's in Brussels, a fourteenth-century church rebuilt in 1850. It was a version of the Assumption that I eventually learned was attributed to that "meticulous Flemish realist" who alone succeeded in "unifying myth and reality," Rubens. I remember being astounded by the pull between heaven and earth, the voluptuous virgin, the brilliant darkness, so much muscular light and glory.

On the back of the card was written mysteriously: *Expleto terrestris vitae cursu.* My fifth-grade Latin teacher, a Jesuit, later explained it to me as: "The Immaculate

Mother of God, the ever-Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory." (Much too lugubrious. I have always preferred the compactness of Latin.) He went on to explain the official Church doctrine on Mary's privileged role as daughter, spouse and mother; as Adam's love for Eve led him into sin, so Christ's love for Mary led Him to allow her to share in the conflict. This escaped me entirely, and made me sorry I'd asked, especially since I doubted the veracity of his translation. My favourite features of the holy card were the rays of gold emanating from Mary's soaring arms as she rose toward heaven. I returned my eyes again and again to the Rubens and was swept up into the unending white light.

My parents must also have loved blinding white light because they became snowbirds and settled in Florida when my father retired, where they assumed that the sun would keep them eternally young. My father also assumed that happiness was something that could be bought or achieved if he just found the magic formula; he never learned that happiness is not a permanent condition, but a relative state, a matter of degree. I have had my share of assumptions, too. For one thing, I always assumed that I too could fly. Indeed, in my dreams I flew all the time, and had difficulty accepting the reality that, if I stood on the edge of some cliff, I should not be able to take off with the same ease I did in those dreams. I assumed I would always be as ugly as my father informed

me I was, and did not assume I had the right to be beautiful. I had also assumed that my lifelong argument with God about what was fair and what was not, begun that spring in Brussels, would go on forever and forever, and I had planned on winning. I had *not* assumed that I would be left here, standing alone, shouting in the dark.

MY FATHER COMMITTED SUICIDE LAST TUESDAY night. My youngest sister Francine, who had stayed in touch with my parents many years longer than I cared to, called to tell me the news, and to ask whether or not I wanted to attend the funeral. At first she told me it was only one funeral. I had not spoken to my father in eight years, not since he had rearranged the fine bones of my mother's face beyond recognition, the year before they retired to Florida. I tried to picture her again, smiling in the Jackie Kennedy suit, how proud she had been of it, but all I could think of was her bandaged head in the hospital, how even her tears couldn't escape the eye slits carved in the plaster covering her mummified face. My sister announced that my parents had been reading *Romeo and Juliet* the week before their deaths, that my mother had called to tell her that she was newly enamoured of Shakespeare. This was her way of preparing me for the fact that there were two funerals. I cannot envision what demons my father grappled with as he lay in that white room in a Miami condo, curled up in a fetal

position, nor can I guess what memories haunted him as he clutched the same weapon he had used to kill my mother several hours earlier. Perhaps he cried afterward, not for her, but for himself. Human beings are rarely given to understand what occurs between them in the darkness. Most of us recover by mourning; others encounter only the madness. *Let us have grace*, then.

My father still stands in my mind, young, dignified and handsome, raised halfway up the staircase that leads to a small restaurant in Brussels. He is wearing his RCAF uniform, the distressed leather jacket covering his wings, its brown softness and fine fissures gleaming in the light from the open window on the landing. It is a weak spring light, but gentle somehow, barely illuminating his face and changing his otherwise invisible eyelashes into a startling, haloed fringe around eyes that are sad and hungry; I am condemned to see those eyes every morning in my mirror. I do look at myself in the mirror now, and I know that I am not ugly. But when I look back carefully at that scene in Brussels, I see that he stands there, poised in flight, one leg up on the next stair, bent over so that he can extend one arm down toward me as I climb upward, beckoning. The staircase below is only dimly lit, and outside the sun is descending slowly over the evening. It is an indeterminate season; the ground is still damp with winter's cold breath but musty with the warmer odours of packed dirt, stale beer, urine. Fog swirls around the building, the streets are paved with sombre concrete

and cracked cobblestones, the vendors are closing their stalls now, and the ghosts of incomplete conversations linger in empty alleyways. Looking down upon that edifice, the first thing I notice is that the roof is flat, but as I rise higher and higher, that it is surrounded by a certain lustre. Drawing back, pulling away, my hand on the throttle of the engine of a Lancaster Mark II bomber, I stare down upon the tiny city of Brussels in the expanding dark night. The smaller it grows in the distance, the greater my compulsion to recall the erosion of an embattled Europe. Others could be forgiven if they believed that all that could be seen in that evolving twilight beneath them was one city twinkling its neon-lit eyes at them, or if it appeared to them that thousands of tiny white votive tapers were being lit to usher in the blackening night. But I know, God knows, and my father knows, that these are young, tender, white asparagus shoots. And they are everywhere, luminous, just below the surface of the earth, reaching toward the sky.