

**Notebook
of unremembered poems**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

Jean Wallace McKeown

March 2016

Abstract

My poems contain narrative elements and explore themes of identity, motherhood, sexuality, and fear of relinquishing control. Sharon Olds, in her book *Stag's Leap*, sums up my intention: “and I saw again how blessed my life has been, / first, to have been able to love, / then, to have the parting now behind me.” My collection chronicles a path towards acceptance of self from childhood onwards, and, more than that, a pleasure and pride in self, and I have tried to find the forms which will reflect this path in the reader's own experience. Most of the poems are written in a conversational voice and a free-form style which gives me creative licence to explore transition and transformation.

**Notebook
of unremembered poems**

By Jeannie Wallace McKeown

On childhood and its end

Poet	9
Miscarriage	10
Censored	11
Boxed	12
Waiting	13
Microwave	14
Near-Death	15

On love and other beginnings

First Time	17
Outside the Youth Hostel	18
First English Winter	19
Lunch Hour	20
In Silence	21
Transformed	22
In the heat this pencil sings	23
Seasons	24
Arrival	25
Boyhood	26

On separation and isolation

Seesaw	29
Damage	30
Chinese Takeaway	31
Separated	32
Rings	33
Ripping	34
Lawyer's Rooms	35
Fury	36
Citalopram	37
At the Beach	38

On starting all over again

Dating Website	40
Taste of Whisky	41
Naked	42
Shadow	43
Durable Things	44
Inked	45
Startle	46
Boots	47

<i>On mortality and ongoing life after all</i>	
After the Blood Tests	49
Abdominal Ultrasound	50
Scomatoma	51
Stargazing	52
Hijacked	53
Car Journey	54
Letting James Go	55
Notebook	56
Dusk	57
Writer's Block	58

On childhood and its end

Poet

Be in everything:

The tides of the wind
slow dance of traffic
dust in a pathway of light
ice in a comet's tail;

The snake on the road
(heat on your belly)
hawk on the fence
(red scent of blood).

When it rains
be present
inside your dampening skin,
the taste of the dust as it swells,
joy on the crust of the earth.

Miscarriage

My father drove to three hospitals,
with Sindi, our maid,
lying on towels on the backseat.
He showed doctors the blood
from a baby coming too soon,
but they shook their heads
(perhaps regretfully)
and said no, not here.
He drove into Soweto,
to Baragwanath Hospital,
a long way from Sandton or Morningside
or all the white hospitals.
Sindi lived, but the baby died.

Censored

The townships all around
were on fire,
and the newspaper left its
front page blank,
with only a sentence:
There is news we are not allowed to bring you.

Boxed

Catholic children learn early -
church altars hold relics;
shrivelled saints' bones in boxes,
fingers, jaws, toes.

I believed
tight within statues
were bodies,
bones and flesh rotting,

stone figures reclined
over marble tombs
were the mortal remains
of old knights and crusaders.

Soon I learned from adults -
the knights had stone hearts.
Statues just bronze over hollows.
But I swore I could hear
the saints screaming.

Waiting

I was ten
and she was playing Snow White
in the school play,
singing solo
someday my prince will come
when she walked through
the school corridors.

She left me unable to breathe,
craving a different element
to stay alive:
her attention, her smile.
In each performance I sang
only for her.
If there was an audience,
I don't remember.

Only her dark hair,
only her blue eyes,
her voice,
waiting for a prince.

Microwave

No-one else had a microwave.
Friends used to come back
after school for cheese rolls,
gouda piled thickly
in a white bun,
given a minute of fierce
Instant Cook.

We watched the figures
tick down from 60 to 1
and if you pressed Stop
at just the right millisecond
a 0 would be left
on the digital screen.

The gouda would be vulcanised,
the white bread soft
until it came into contact with air.

Sunny afternoons spent
in swimming costumes,
wet footprints on the kitchen floor,
and gouda in lava-lamp globs
raising blisters on fingers and lips.

Near-Death

Bleeding out
on the side
of a gravel road
femur a mess
of shattered bone
in the heat
in the middle
of a nowhere
poised

sun warm on my face
I turned in
towards the calm

screaming
in the ambulance
in the neck brace's hold

why did I decide
to live?

On love and other beginnings

First Time

In the narrow side street
by the restaurant's door,
you pressed me against
your Golf's steelchrome heat,
kissed me, for the first time.

You ordered red wine in a jug,
coiled its dark plum flavour
around your tongue;
I wanted to take it from you
with my own.

What did we talk about?
I don't recall,
but I do remember laughing,
and later,
in the wine-sweet dark,
we kissed again, and more.

Outside the Youth Hostel

Decanted from the train,
everything I own on my back,
4 pm January late-sun,
post-Christmas lights and sales
peoplepeoplepeople
I raise my hand
to the youth hostel bell;
I'm a new photo
on a London Travelcard,
girl in a pink jersey
first-time-on coat.

First English Winter

Mornings in Wembley,
snow thick on the ground
around the bus shelter.

A hot climate seedling,
out of place and out of season,
I would leave the house
with newly-washed hair.

For a week of mornings
my hair froze,
and I snapped it,
strand by strand
into a fringe,
uneven, jagged blonde ends
like dropped spaghetti
gathered back carelessly
into the packet.

Lunch Hour

I took my lunch an hour early.
I wanted new shirts,
so I went to Marks & Spencer's at noon,
the one on Bishopsgate with the big glass doors.

No-one looked at anyone else,
not on the street,
not on the long escalator.

The choice was limited. M&S had only winter stock -
they hadn't planned for an Indian summer.
None of us had.
We sweltered in winter shirts and jackets.

It was too hot to eat.
I bought an ice-cold fruit juice,
stopped to drink it outside Whittards,
enjoying the scent of their fruity teas.

I walked down Bishopsgate back to my office,
across the road from the first Bedlam Hospital,
remembered with a little plaque on the wall.

I had just got back,
taking out my new shirts
to show Sylvia, my boss,
when Roy,
the computer guy,
came in and said that he
was setting up a TV set.

The reception
in our basement office,
was pretty poor,
but we saw enough.

The phones kept ringing.
Rumours mostly,
that London was next,
our cataclysm
delayed
only by hours.

The City emptied,
an orderly evacuation.
We watched each other leaving
and when a Boeing 747
disappeared in flight
behind the NatWest Tower

we all stopped,
shared three heartbeats

and when it re-appeared
we said aloud:
Thank God
the planes,
the flames,
the tumbling bodies
burning in our eyes

In Silence

I wish there were someone
someone I know
but not very well
who would take me home
and in silence push me to bed
hold me there;
not to hurt but to give me
something
I know I need

Transformed

Here beside you
I learn your
secret language;
half-breath gasps,
silk of skin, your
flesh leaping
to my touch,
reflecting our animal selves;
salty sweat slicks us
to seal shapes.

In the heat this pencil sings

yellow roses
from the first flower stall at Embankment Station,
riding the underground to your office, their scent
fainter than the reek of scorched hair from the tunnels.

Along the highway past Jeffrey's Bay
my car hugs the road, chasing heatwet mirage,
each kilometre travelled towards you
a statement of intent.

Lyrics thrown as a net to hook back the past;
Mango Groove on the stage at Plettenberg Bay.
Roxy Music plays Oh Yeah on the radio
while you drive us home in the rain.

Seasons

I know before the blood comes
every month,
the summer-heavy ache
in my breasts,
the same every 28 days
since I was eleven;
autumnal blood on toilet paper,
flushed away.

My egg and his sperm,
given every opportunity
to meet
have not bonded.

Month after month,
each week a season -
my body, remorseless
will not be breached.
I've failed again
to bring the spring.

Arrival

After the birth I didn't feel
like a mother, more
a torn, limping creature,
crudely stitched up at the core,
floundering,
breaching depths to snatch
shallow breaths.

My house didn't fit me,
its floors didn't welcome
my steps as I walked
up and down
down and up.
You couldn't suckle,
you screamed,
yellowed like old parchment.

The trip to the hospital,
too fast in the car,
you panting, tiny, yellow
incubator
tubes
green room.

My hands,
larger than you,
crept through the portholes
of the glass aquarium,
stroked your head, your feet,
rested on your tentative skin;
your fingers gripped mine,
we held on, you and I

Boyhood

Engrossed in your game
you stand,
shoulder to shoulder,
unaware of my gaze

and I fall awake,
see clearly that you
are no longer babies,
nor even toddlers.
My eyes trace the men
you will grow to be,
strength already mapped
on your bodies.

For you
childhood stretches ahead.
For me the time telescopes,
just a few more years
and you will both be grown.

For now you still creep
into my bed at night,
your small bodies fitting
into the curves and hollows of mine
closer than a lover ever has.

On separation and isolation

Seesaw

I wake on the back foot,
tipped sideways by the alarm
out of a nightmare.

Dizzy, I stumble to the bathroom,
sit heavily on the toilet seat,
clutching it either side of my thighs
to make sure I'm awake,
not still in bed in a different dream,
and all day the metronome inside my skull
seesaws.

My heart stutters/soars/falls
breath surges and ebbs
swallowing is aspirin-bitter.

Damage

By the time
I remember
I am self-sufficient

and that your approval
is not the rock
I base my life on anymore,

your careless words
have flayed open
my hollow heart.

Chinese Takeaway

I passed a couple
who looked like us,
only younger.
They were loitering
in the last light,
touching hands.

The kung po prawns
in the deep fryer
smell as good
as they ever did.

Paper bag in hand,
my dim reflection
in steamed-up windows
accompanies me
on the short walk home.

Separated

The kids are asleep.
We made love
the way parents do,
quietly.
They didn't wake,
were already asleep when
you brought them home to me
from their home with you.

Into the curve of your neck I say
"I still think we could make it."

I feel your shiver; it's cold outside.
Your car starts first time,
reverse lights glowing briefly,
red in warning.

Rings

You take yours off first;
its absence hits me,
leaving a round
in my chest.

My parents are there.
“Arsehole” my father whispers.
I’m bewildered.
I believed in our promises.

Mine I take off later,
hide it in a box
in the bathroom cabinet.

For months I tap that finger
against the steering wheel,
wondering why
it doesn’t chime.

Ripping

Around the time
my marriage failed
mind and body separated
(tattered torn tenuous)
burnt to bone
wrapped in grey

now

a threadbare patchwork
woven without a loom
has no shape to define
(touch caress hold)
delicately interconnected fragments
remember the ache where a body once was.

Lawyer's Rooms

I ask:

“where is the man I knew,
the one who loved me?”

but you shake me aside,
a stranger,
a bitter one.

A shawl of ice settles over me,
standing beside a ghost,
your doppelganger,
signing papers to cut yourself free.

Fury

She stalks my nights
like a vengeful Fury.

In daylight I repudiate her,
banish her to secret corners,
the barbed-wire traps of my mind.

Dark half to my conscious self,
she hides in wait
for the defenceless dark.

Citalopram

Engineered to separate
you from yourself,
a buffer zone,
as if you'd never learnt the art
of creative drowning,
no whitespark of bliss.

One morning
rainwashed into brilliance
you feel something new
emotions well up
but nothing
bursts through.

At the Beach

I am contained
in the swells
blown-glass green
to the sandy floor.

Families swim in and out,
around and through
each other's spaces.

Beyond the flags
sand stretches a belt
around the coast.
I gather my things
and walk for miles.

Arriving home, I park the car,
watch the day fade
pinker and pinker.
The light above the door
flickers on,
inside the emptiness grows.
No-one to put on a light,
turn on the kettle,
hold back the jeering dark.

On starting all over again

Dating Website

On the dating website

I write that I love my children.

I laugh less than I would like.

I cry about as much

as every woman.

Under Additional Comments

I write that I didn't end up

where the fairy tales promised,

but fairy tales are unforgiving.

No matter how handsome the prince,

how big the ever after,

I don't believe I would be happy

living in one.

Taste of Whisky

I bring the whisky you like,
pour us glass after glass
until your cheeks are flushed,
until my eyes are enough
to stop you talking,
to make you swallow,
lick your lips
You ask me
to take you
to your bed;
I murmur words
you don't hear -
you're concentrating
on the feel of cotton
being dragged slowly
over your skin,
nerves flushed close to the surface.
My hands on your thighs -
where you open
silky and wet
and so hot;
your hips squirm in time
to your cries so
I pinch a nipple hard,
roll between thumb and forefinger,
as I sink knuckle deep into you,
as I drop my head,
fingers curling up
inside
towards where my mouth
holds you down,
down on you;
whisky replaced long since
with you.

Naked

You'll not be satisfied with the usual things:
flowers, a moon rising, flickering candlelight;
no, you want the bone and the muscle,
you want me to peel back layers
of my needs,
which can only end with me, whispering,

let me

let me please

kneel to taste that soft, salty skin,
hands to the brown backs of your knees,
explore, with fingers and tongue,
flavours, curves, folds.

Shadow

This, you being ill,
has gone on so long.
I'm worried you're going to die.
You promise you won't,
like you get a choice.

I used to ask you not to die
when I couldn't imagine
being in the world without you,
but we're not married anymore.

It's the walking stick
to stop you falling
which scares me most.
You don't wake up easily,
confused when you do,
still strapped into the machine
to help you breathe at night.

It's the sick smell of you,
trapped and fermenting,
despite every shower you take.

I dream of houses,
of rooms which are yours,
and rooms which are mine.
Family – yours.
You walk in once or twice
with no stick.
Since the divorce,
I'm not supposed to touch you
in front of them.
There are presents on the floor, wrapped.
I didn't buy you one.
I'm not supposed to be taking care of you anymore.

When I wake
I call your phone,
wake you
confused
thick –mouthed
dizzy
sick.

“I'm here,” you say,
“I'm not dead.
I'm not going to die.”

Durable Things

It was a gift from you
although I chose it,
and paid for it
with our joint credit card.
This one was pink:
my little pink friend.
It was longer
although you had
the advantage
when it came to girth,
which was more important
I reassured you,
and we laughed, teasing –
how did anyone
have satisfying sex
without two cocks
in a bed?

Durable things,
more so than marriages,
although the first one
I ever had
(purple and a bit sparkly),
disappeared from under the bed
in a seaside hotel.

Inked

How do the blind
see tattoos? do their
fingertips learn to
trace ink like Braille?
and if you were to
bind my eyes
and my hands
could I use my tongue
to see them,
tracing lines
with its tip,
flattened to taste
colours - would my brain
know which saltiness
was ink
which not?
what flavours would
your body be?

Blinded,
it would be
your pulse I'd read;
with each flavour
it would quicken
would you cry out
if I used my teeth,
biting to release
the astringency of colour;
you would taste of artwork
canvas, parchment, oils,
sweat over green/blue/red skin
stretched tight,
a masterclass for the blind
and the bound.

Startle

Never again a man,
I thought; I believed
in only the slim, agile fingers
of other women
inside and around me,
polished skin, breasts,
nipples pebbled for suckling

but your angular hands,
calloused fingerpads plucking
the six strings, the guitar's
deep notes carrying
your voice across the grass,
set shooting stars alight
in my belly,
sparking lower
and lower

startling me.

Boots

Those boots -
the ones I didn't buy
but wanted to,
oh so much:
red oxblood & eye
shit-kicking boots,
bovver boots,
whether worn with jeans or dresses
all eyes would be
on the boots,
shone with wax,
don't-fuck-with-me boots
I'm a lesbian boots,

I didn't buy them,
only half a lesbian
then and now;
didn't kick up much shit,
in my timid twenties.

Now there are the boots
on a website;
Don't-fuck-with-me.
I want them still.

*On mortality and ongoing life
after all*

After the Blood Tests

The doctor calls me
during the working day.
“Do you drink?” he asks.
“I think I had a drink last month,”
I say, unsure.
“That won’t be it then” he says.

There is probably enough blood
in those vials
to test for hepatitis
but if not, I think he
will ask me to come back.

“Don’t google aberrant liver tests,”
he says. “It’ll only scare you.”
I promise not to. But I do.

Abdominal Ultrasound

The gel is cold.
I shiver, the wand
already moving across my abdomen,
the left side,
then the right.
The nurse presses hard, says,
“I’m going to check with the doctor.”
She smiles,
so I smile back
and don’t ask what she’s seen.

One day something will kill me -
perhaps it’ll be seen first
on a scan, or on a mammogram, or an MRI.
Traveling towards my death,
I will have found a lump
or vomited blood.

The nurse returns,
offering a handful of tissues.
I’m ushered out,
jeans pulled on hastily,
still undone.

Scomatoma*

Black words shimmy on white pages,
jitterbug and jive in lightning flashes,
jagged pathways,
animated railway sleepers,
lozenge-shaped foot soldiers marching
across my eyelids' inner terrain.
Dark spaces float across my vision field,
twisting bacterial worms,
darting tadpoles,
shadowy negatives between flashing lights.

**the visual aura sometimes accompanying a migraine*

Stargazing

On a new moon night
my sons ask to stargaze;
we lie on a blanket on the grass.
“Hey,” calls James,
“I can see the Southern Cross,
and that dude's belt.”

“Orion's”, I answer,
“look, that cloud is a dragon
flying across the moon.”
It breathes out cloudy fire;
Nicholas sings “I see it! I saw it straightaway!”

Across the span of the sky
a shooting star flares;
we catch our breath
while it flames and dies.

Hijacked

Nicholas laughs at my grimace.
“It’s only a toy,” he says,
turns it so that I can see
the empty plastic shell
into which bullets are imagined.

In his soft, boy hands
it casts callused shadows,
a snubbed barrel
through the car window
get out!

“I don’t like guns,” I say.

Car Journey

Growling trucks char the tar outside.
I taste its bitter burning through the air vents.
Inside the car, a radio comedy
pumps voices and canned laughter.
James pops his lips,
hums notes in colour;
copper-flavoured explosions
erupt from his games console.
Nicholas calls from the backseat
*Mommy, Mommy look
look at this Mommy.*
I pull hard left to avoid
another truck;
the verge reacts angrily,
spits me back onto the road.

Letting James Go

I say yes when he asks
if he can go away with his friends.
He is his own person, after all,
more so this year than last.

When he learned to walk
I followed him everywhere,
not sure I was ready
for his mobility, his independence.

In a few years he'll be eighteen.
I'll pay for driving lessons,
let him practice in my car.
It's what parents do.

Then he'll drive away with his friends,
leaving me behind
not thinking to ask where he's going.

Notebook

Buried for months
at the bottom
of my everyday bag,
among old sunglasses,
sweets from restaurants,
till slips for groceries
I don't remember eating.

Between the covers I find
snatches of unremembered poems,
in last year's handwriting.

Dusk

It's the hour
where the first red lights
above the wind turbines
prick the evening,
echoing the garnet gleam
in the wineglasses.
Christmas beetles redouble
their static buzz;
the swallows transmute
seamlessly into bats,
gliding behind the sun umbrella
to emerge, fully-formed,
on the other side,
skittering determinedly
after night insects.

Writer's Block

I have writer's block
I have writer's block
I have writer's block

I'm sitting in a coffee shop.
I got the table with the comfy sofa.
My coffee is hot because the waiter
brought me hot milk, even though
I asked for cold.
I'm on holiday and I didn't feel like arguing
on the first day of my holiday.
So I poured in the hot milk.
The coffee is bitter.
One spoon of sugar has made no difference.
I can taste the sugar layered over the bitterness,
but it is still there.
I revel in it.
I have a headache.
The coffee is bitter like medicine.

I have writer's block
I have writer's block

There are blonde women in this coffee shop
These women are glamorous.
I am in a corner
at the table with the comfy sofa,
sipping coffee with one sugar
and my writer's block
and my belly which shows when I lean back,
my hair which is silvering.
While I sip my bitter coffee
my ex-husband is driving our children
and his parents
along the coastal road on a journey towards me
in this little town.

I have writer's block
I have writer's block

Nothing has happened yet to write about.
Everything is on a knife's edge of nothing happening,
while he drives along the coastal road
and I wait and sip and wait.
The coffee shop sells crafts and arts.
Kitsch but I like them.
Beside the sofa four mannequin legs
stretch flatfooted, toes at my earlobe,

plastered and painted in printed paper,
all in the blues.
The radio plays music from the 60's.

Many people have sat on this sofa before me.
My arse slots into the dip they have left.
My arse.
My comfortable arse
with writer's block
while I sip bitter coffee.
My belly trembles so I suck it in.
The blondes have no bellies
and no arses, but people with arses
have sat on this sofa before,
left their mark.

The waiter tries to take my plate.
I am staring out the window, fork in my hand.
I have eater's block.
This is unusual (see belly, see arse).
My eyes are not seeing the blown tree
or the Coca-Cola umbrellas outside.
They are watching the sea on the left
of the car, the traffic on the road,
the wind turbines under which my ex-husband
is driving, with our children and his parents.
I reclaim my plate.
How much easier to resolver eater's block
than writer's block.

I have writer's block
I have writer's block

His parents and my parents have not been together
in four years,
since we split.
This visit is a big deal.
He is bringing them down the coastal road
to my parent's house.
I am not a young woman.
I am not glamorous.
I am not blonde.
My belly shows when I lean back.
My hair is silvering.
I sip bitter coffee on a knife edge in a coffee shop.

Four years since our parents were together.
"You're so lucky" says Jane
(all the artwork is signed *Jane*. Her eyes
are the cobalt blue of the sea).

“Divorcing and losing family is hard
but you’ve kept that friendship.”
“Yes, yes, we’ve worked at it,”
I tell her.

I close my eyes, picture the road,
put myself in the car.
“We’ve worked hard at it,”
I tell my ex-husband at the wheel.
He turns and smiles.
“We’ll be there soon” he tells me.

I drain the last of my coffee.
I embrace my writer’s block,
and my bacon and scrambled eggs.
The blondes have all left.
Two women hold hands over the other table
with comfy sofas.
My ex-husband is driving our children
and his parents down the coastal road.
I am right here;
in the dip in the sofa,
belly and silver hair,
sipping bitter coffee.