

*for*  
AND  
*against*

Sharon McCartney



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*For Shane Neilson*

## Decaf

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Like donning a tiara of nails, those days when I brewed decaf by mistake, pain in my skull, something ungraspably awry, as if a child were suffocating in a van I couldn't open or I woke to blue paint peeling like burnt skin, curtains in soggy heaps, the cat moaning. I thought the end was coming. After three days, I checked the labels, my ballpoint scrawl, frost-faded, grabbed the right beans, Kenya AA, 18% cream from the Mennonites, and the ice-jam of horror in my bones melted, the skittish lights on the walking bridge winked out, the sun, a pink fist, rose resolutely over the Irving storage facility, transfusing the soapy Saint John. I kissed my dog on the muzzle, puzzling him, elated, like seeing a vision of Christ in firelight or the Virgin's tears falling from granite, synapses rewired, all systems up — not just coffee, but redemption, the troubled teenager relenting, asking for you, or the surgeon glancing up from the chart, saying *no, we were wrong, it's nothing after all*. Happiness distilled, enhanced, a dark blend of joy, like glimpsing a handsome stranger arcing an axe under cedars, splitting stumps into kindling, the animal exhalation each time contact is made, the blade bites deeper, and realizing you are married to him.

## *After Little Italy*

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After too many pints of brown at the Communist's Daughter, the bartender's muted horn, *sotto voce* undermining contentment like a duplicitous friend, sparking friction, I'm stomping back to the Delta, shoulder-checking leisurely Saturday summer night amblers, tube-topped, spaghetti-strapped tourists, right and left, you at my heels, anger on anger, petty resentments we've collected over the years spilling out, 52 pickup, littering the sidewalk. Actually shouting at each other on Bloor — like the couples we've always laughed at, trailer park romance. So caught up in it, divorce the only thing we can agree on, we lose track, forget where we are, which way to the hotel. *We're on Yonge Street* — you stop as if at a precipice. *I hate Yonge Street!* And I, out of habit or love, I don't know which, pity you. That part of you I know too well, that won't wait in line, that despises the tawdry crowd, *ordinary fucking people* — , said Harry Dean Stanton in *Repo Man*. Later, in our room, a *Seinfeld* rerun, wordless reconciliation. You're a little bewildered; first, I want out, then, I want sex. Forget what I said. I was hammered, my thoughts a jumble of elbows, desire, regret, bumping rudely on a street you never wanted to see.

## *A Relationship*

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Though the old cat both fears and detests  
the dog, she wants the warmth of the room.  
The dog curled beside me on the bed, the rest  
of the house unheated. She hooks a claw  
under the door, then thins herself to slip  
through the crack. Pauses on the rug,  
staring at us, alarmed. If the dog moves,  
she jumps, imagines he means harm.  
But he's just preparing to leave.

## *The Variety of Autumn Sunrises in Fredericton*

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Yesterday, fog so thick it rattled audibly  
in the ochre and amber maple. Today,  
cloudless, still, a full moon illuminating  
the turquoise hull of pre-dawn sky.  
Standing outside, shivering, waiting  
for the dog to crap, anchors your morning  
wonderfully. Later, a walk on the green,  
along the Saint John, the dog excited,  
nosing the strata of leaves, mad dashes  
in the muddy shallows, a dramatic leap —  
he's showing off, giddy with freedom,  
the chill in the air. Autumn's the best  
season here, season of dying, surrender.  
None of the violent urgency of spring,  
icy sidewalks awash in slush, unsettling  
swings in temperature. Nor the irritation  
of summer, sleepless heat, enervation.  
October leaves you alone, lets you be,  
its attention elsewhere. Only the open  
vistas of winter ahead, bare branches,  
clarity, certainty, the river frozen over.

## *Recurrent Military Imagery*

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Rommel driving deep into Egypt, bulbous-headed U-boats ping-pinging off Halifax, bejewelled armies advancing majestically, doomed Polish cavalry, Slavic triangular faces, thin-skinned Shermans raising orchards of dust, periscopes, telescopic lenses,

*no, not military —*

an overstuffed armchair, a warehouse packed with boxes, stacks tilting, a half-ton's axles dripping mud, a candle going down the well, windlass moaning, *no, that must be me*, Robert Capa and Ingrid Bergman in ruined Berlin, Robert Jordan and Maria under pines, *don't laugh*, Robert Blake and that stupid bird, *don't laugh*, Heinkels, Junkers, Spitfires, air crumpled like wrapping paper, distant tremors, *stop it —*

galloping on hard sand, dark Arkansas highways, my head in his lap, a story so good the walls of my room surprise me, diving, not breathing, blue water, blue sky, pressure building, hot Baja sun penetrating dermal layers, a guerilla, the underground, Paris in 1944, *no*, a bottle of Pacifico sweating on his Che beach towel.

*It was like eighteen*, I say afterward, rearranging my face. *What a shame, then*, he replies, *that I only had three*.