

# Housecleaning

LORRI NEILSEN GLENN  
*Mount Saint Vincent University*

*The body itself is a dwelling place, as the Anglo-Saxons knew in naming it banhus (bonehouse) and lichama (bodyhome)<sup>1</sup>(Mairs, 1989, 7)*

Dust. Stale smoke. I wrestle another box from the back of the top shelf.

—Good grief, mom.

—I know. I have no idea what's in there. When he left, everything was tossed into boxes and I put them away. Up and away.

—Hang on. It's too heavy. I'll get down off this chair.

Under the white scrub brush of hair I see her scalp is pink, a shock of youthful skin unlike her weathered hands and finely wrinkled face. She is bent as she beetles from the closet to the living room with one item after another. My mother, walking through the world in italics. Silly image: it's how we deal with aging, isn't it—jokes as insulation. But that line of rough red skin that arcs from the nape of her neck to her shoulder—is it getting worse? The place where her fingers are drawn, sweep, sweep, like she is strumming a guitar behind her. Something under the skin, she insists: a fungus, and the doctors can't figure it out.

—Oh, I've needed to do this for years. What a jumble. What's in that white one? Whoof-so much dust in the air.

Fungus schmungus, say my brothers. It's OCD—eighty years of anxiety funnelling through her hand and writing pain on her body. Dirty Thirties. Father dies; mother leaves. War years. Marriage; children. Major surgery several times. Twenty moves across the Prairies in 37 years. Divorce; left for a ditzzy bit of nookie who'd followed him for years. Heart attack. Then blindness. How much can a body take? This morning, when I woke her

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Mairs, *Remembering the Bone House*. New York: Harper and Row, 1989. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes in italics are from this text.

up—oh, my have I slept that long? oh, my, I never sleep in, I'm always up by six—her eyes looked as though she'd been travelling deep. Away. Meditative. No finger-sweeping so far today. It has to be nerves.

—Spatula. Old electric knife. Colander. Cheese grater. Tupperware thingees. An

extension cord. Old Christmas cards—blank. They're pretty yellowed, mom.

—Oh, my. I'll never use those. Millie's coming on Thursday to clean and shop for me. She'll want those for her daughter. She's on her own now, with the kids. Has nothing.

—This old can of Silvo should just be thrown out, I think. Remember that?

—What?

—The Silvo. This finger. Baby finger. I was—what?— five, maybe six? I figured if you can get it in, you can get it out. You can't see the scar, but it's right there, right across the knuckle. A fifty-year-old scar.

—You were always curious. And bad. They made those spouts with metal then.

—Sometimes it amounts to the same thing, doesn't it? They haven't improved much on packaging, I don't think. Cornstarch boxes, for one— If they can put a man on the moon—

—Did you find the pictures up there? I swear he took the pictures, you know. I keep hoping I'm wrong. Yes. Or honey containers. Cornstarch. Honey. Silvo's the worst.

This is a different tone, I think. Where is the rest? Where is "If he doesn't want the family, why would he want the pictures? Just for spite, that's what. Selfish. Arrogant. It was always about him, always about his needs." The rants have abated these last few years. He is still He—no name necessary. But language no longer stings like an open wound. Yesterday, when I mentioned I ought to call him to say I am in town, her comment was oddly sincere, dispassionate: "I think he would appreciate that." No acid leaking from the words. No editorial remarks. No sudden rising from the chair to slam the cup on the counter. Progress? Equilibrium?

—Let's get all these down in one swell foop and see what's inside. Do you want to put the kettle on and make us some tea? I'll put them in the living room.

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*Women haven't had eyes for themselves. They haven't gone exploring in their house. Through writing her body, a woman may reclaim the deed to her dwelling. (7)*

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—CJOB traffic watch. Twenty-eight below, exhaust fog. Car stalled on Bishop Grandin. Icy out there, folks, so take it easy.

Still dark. We're falling toward winter solstice, shortest day of the year. From the fifteenth floor, one floor above mom's, I can see a stream of lights—prairie ocean of cars—and fog. Not a phrase I hear at home in Nova Scotia. Ice pellets, black ice, plain ordinary fog, sea smoke, yes. But not exhaust fog. The hum of traffic like a low growl. I wonder how she can stand the noise.

Long day yesterday. She'd hardly slept the night before, waiting for me to come. She's probably exhausted, and sleeping in. Either that or still wired, up at five a.m. listening to American talk shows on the radio, sitting by an open window in her bedroom, smoking. Angry at "that stupid man George Bush." When she arranged for the guest suite for me, neither of us knew it would be only a floor away from hers. She was thrilled to be able to take the stairs. One at a time, mind you, and very slowly.

Today she wants to go through her closet. To send me home with things. I've always spouted some silly fantasy that I could free myself from all worldly possessions—everything in a backpack—to teach myself impermanence. What a load—I'll never do it. Only people who have time on their side can indulge in playing at principled behaviour. When you're walking in that valley of the shadow—I want you kids to have these, so there are no fights or hard feelings when I'm gone—when you know you will never again make a large family dinner of jellied salads, baked ham, scalloped potatoes, and an assortment of pickles, you don't need the Silver Birch. It just collects dust. It's not a principled decision. It's practical. Realistic. Serious housecleaning—getting ready to have only a body. Thirty years from now, will I be ready to be that realistic?

I made myself some tea. The kitchen was well-equipped for guest quarters. Microwave, coffee pot—broken handle, but it worked. A lot of frill and floral around, a lot of plastic. Mom had carried up a poinsettia last night, a real one. A petal lay on the floor now, curled. For some reason, I needed to leave it there. She had balanced a plate of fruit in the other hand: tangerines, an apple, and grapes with all the stems removed. A couple of them rolled off the plate as she wrestled the door open, but she managed. She always knows where to feel. Proprioception, I think it's called. How the body feels itself in space, knows how far to reach, what angle to shift. She's become a curved five-foot antenna. Human radar. A lightning rod. A walking DEW line.

A couple of years ago, the morning after she called to say that the macular degeneration had suddenly swept away the last veil of light and shadow, I woke up and closed my eyes. Kept them closed. Used the washroom, brushed my teeth, tried to make tea, find a banana, the

oatmeal in the cupboard and the switch on the stove. I lasted fifteen minutes. What would I do? My body knows so little. Most of what I take in is with my eyes: a novel, a poem, a street sign, a gesture, facial expressions, where I last left my hairbrush. All my senses, and still I'm handicapped. I've not used my body to its fullest. And likely never will.

Nearly thirty below out there. Shirtsleeves weather at home. When I arrived at the Winnipeg airport, I lay my coat on the luggage cart and walked outside to the rental kiosk. Foolish. It may be a dry cold here, but it's bloody cold. I'd forgotten about the clap of ice in your throat as you breathe, the hollow sound of boots on frozen ground. I'd forgotten what every cell in my body had learned all those years on the prairie—from northern Alberta to Saskatoon to The Pas, to Dauphin, to Winnipeg. The real Canadian winter. The baseline winter, against which my body has measured all other winters. But this exhaust fog—that's new, and not exactly what I'd call progress.

By now, mom should be up. When I hugged her last night, she felt like a wire cage. I kissed the red scar on her neck, rubbed her back. You need a good, long sleep, I said.

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*When we were children, we formed an enclosure of hands linked into arches and sang: Go in and out the window, as you have done before. Writing my past as a body enacts that circle game. I invite you through my openings because I have been schooled in hospitality... writing itself is space. It is a populated house (10).*

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—Oh. My. God. Mom, this is the pattern you used to make David's sweater.

—And yours, you know. I'd saved that from when you were in high school. You had to have that sweater. Had to, had to. You came home and said "We're all going to Regina on the bus for the drama finals and everyone has a Cowichan except me." I had a three-year-old, a ten-year-old, an eleven-year-old—and you—I was working for the VON part time, and I still knit a whole sweater in less than a week. I don't know how I did it.

—I don't know why you did it. Oh, here we are. A box of pictures.

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Cowichan<sup>2</sup>

At sixteen we tumble on the bus to the provincials, props folded, capes and gilded gowns tucked in trunks, greasepaint and pompadour wigs, clamour in the belly of the night-riding coach, merry troupe of tender thespians, delectable tomorrow under our ribs, a time to make old Willy proud, out-perform the others, our lanky limbs wrapped in splendour, lungs inhaling the excitement of the small-town crowd, hear them now—*imagine, this old gym, transformed, just like that, in no time*—but tonight, we ride, ninety-nine bottles and boys at the back, girls, the front, and our Native-knit sweaters a roll call in a glance: Pat's, browner, Mardi's narrow pattern edged in black, Wayne's high collar, smaller weave, mine homemade, and Dale's worn, shredded at the elbow and the sleeve. Oiled wool, stitches purled and turned, patterning the night, knitting our bodies, imprinting days unravelling, singular, pile them on the floor before rehearsal and find yours after with the ease of an old dance, just

as you know a face in a photo years from now, how you lift it whole from blur and grey, how you wear it like a talisman inside your skin, how its heat makes you shiver, sing—*transformed, just like that, in no time*

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—Oh, my. Are they in—

—frames, envelopes. And dust. We'll sort them. Some here from Alberta, from Edson. Some from Strathclair, when you were a girl. Look, this must be Jean. Have you talked with her since last summer? How's she doing?

—Viv died, you know. Stroke.

—Oh mom, I'm sorry. Oh, I didn't know. When? Did you tell me and I forgot?

—Maybe. It doesn't matter. I'm glad I got to see her last summer. I'm glad you met her.

—How's Doug?

—Not so good. Jean says he won't last. I introduced them, you know. Viv and Doug. I was going out with Doug's brother and we used to double-date. Donald Beamish. He never came back from the war. By then, I'd met your—

—That was a great trip, mom. I loved meeting them. Viv was so frail. Your best friend. Well, your first best friend. That must be hard. I can't believe that Jean is eighty-five.

—Hot as Hades and she still made me smoke outside!

—You and those smokes. I have no idea where that Cowichan is now. Are these needles for socks

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<sup>2</sup> From lorri neilsen glenn, unpublished manuscript.

*The past itself is an oneiric house: the house we were born in. You can't get into it in real time, or in real space...there's no place to go to get there. Nor can you relive it, even in imagination, if by that you mean re-experience it exactly as it occurred. You are now another person (14).*

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### Home Stretch<sup>3</sup>

Febrile air, Portage la Prairie PetroCan  
and the restaurant boarded up. Only a till,  
a restroom. Trucks swarm like flies  
around the rich draw of pumps  
and on the east side, in shade,  
a shiny hog, black as a roach  
and a biker's tan body stroked by shredded jeans.  
He holds a lighter at the end of a long brown  
fresco of tattoo and leans toward  
the woman's tiny frame,  
his ponytail whipping in the fetid exhalation  
of traffic on the Trans-Canada, this long  
hot summer road. Snaps  
his thumb, flame pops out like a tongue.  
She curls around it, curves into a promise  
of smoke, late afternoon hit, one of the few remaining  
pleasures, she always says. Her hair white  
as stripped bone, too near the flame I notice,  
and her hand shakes, steady now, steady, the glare  
of prairie sky beyond glancing off her shades --  
*We're pariahs, you know.*  
She spits it out like a blown piston, barks  
her Dunhill-and-scotch laugh and the trucker  
at the pump nearby startles, notes  
the rumpled face, white cane, body like  
a divining rod, tremulous and twisting,  
  
but grounded.  
She nods her thanks, the biker  
smiles, they are nose to nose now --  
*We get it where we can, you bet.*

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<sup>3</sup> from *All the perfect disguises* (Broken Jaw Press, 2003).

They giggle, inhale with satisfaction.

I have emerged from the restroom  
into the fullness of the sun and waited within earshot until  
she has tossed the smouldering inch  
next to the Harley wheel. He flicks his next  
to hers. They look out beyond the shimmer of road  
ahead, huddled,  
silence reaching.  
I join them, grind the fires out with my heel and they look at me as  
through a dream. Smile.  
*Take it easy now:* whisper, fingers light on her  
sleeve. My mother grins at us, gives me her arm,  
warm and fragile as ash, lifts her cane  
in salute and we open the door  
for the last leg home.



—I'm so glad you found those pictures. Her voice from the bathroom.  
—I'll make copies of them for Brian and Ron.  
—I wish I could see them. Even the shapes. For a long time I could still  
see shapes.  
—We'll sit down and I'll describe them to you.  
Her hair, flat against her skull like the down of a wet cat. The room is  
steamy, and I catch a glimpse of her belly—the cup that poured five  
children into the world. Only three of us around now. One stillborn, and  
one who seems to have disowned us all—both long gone. Her breasts are  
flat against her chest, and as she snugs the tie of her dressing gown, I see  
they hang just at her waist. First food. First body I knew. I flash to an  
image of Playboy cartoons of the 60s and 70s, caricatured images of old  
women's bodies. Every young man's worst fear; everyone's cruel  
joke—even women laughed. How we write the story of a woman's body:  
madonna, whore, and then hag. Woman disintegrates into a disposable  
joke—we've come a long way, baby. I find a dry towel on the rack and  
begin to rub her head.  
—Fuzzy wuzzy wasn't very fuzzy, was he?  
—Did you find the crème? She laughs.  
— Yes, and it's aloe vera, too. Should work great. It'll soften the skin, at  
least. Give you some relief.

Her skin is like a sponge. The crème goes on easily and I find myself wincing. The angry rawness of the abrasion on her neck. The memory of Sheryl.

—You remember my friend Sheryl, mom?

—You taught with her. Went on trips. Does she still have her travel agency?

—No. She's gone. Pancreatic cancer. About a month ago. I had a long talk on the phone with her daughter, Kelly, before I came here. She's a doctor, a researcher, in Toronto now. She took time off work to be with her mom for the last few weeks.

—Oh. Oh, my.

And I rubbed crème on her everyday, Kelly had said. Pancreatic is the worst, you know. You starve to death and you're in pain constantly. I had to monitor the morphine. Slept in a chair by her bed. She was curled in a ball like a malnourished child. All the body fat gone—her backside was flat and her buttocks concave. Massaging her gave her a bit of relief. It was a gift, really. It was all I could do. That, and sit there as she drifted in and out. As Kelly talked, I thought of all the burial rituals that honour the body of the dead with water, lotions, perfume. Even the bodies of emaciated old hags. Especially them.

—It happened so fast that Kelly wasn't even able to contact everyone to let us know she was sick.

—This is the best present I could ever have.

—Good. I'm glad.

—I mean you being here.

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*Like all children, except perhaps orphans, my memories begin before I have the capacity for remembering, coded for me in the tales adults, and Mother in particular, recount over and over, joined in time by stuttering images that gradually become surer, more continuous, until I can say on my own: "I remember!" (16)*  
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#### Combustion<sup>4</sup>

And so the nuns put my brother Jack into the furnace, and that's that. My mother doesn't know until she wakes up, the white shoes a whisper by her bed, my father's voice cold sand in her ear. And I, at home, curled near the heat register on the floor, Gram despairing that I won't eat. Won't eat.

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<sup>4</sup> lorri neilsen glenn, unpublished manuscript



Waiting for the baby. Snowball sits on the back of the chesterfield, watching what wind does in the claws of bare trees, the drifts outside too high and wilding for her paws, too high for me and my snowsuit. Too high, too cold. And the black phone on the wall. And no baby. Fine then, no soup. *They decided*, she says now, fifty years away, as we sit on the deck, our skin inhaling summer-waning sun. *The Holy Trinity. Doctor, nun, husband. Dead of winter. They could have waited until I saw my son's face.* Dead. Of winter. She stuffs out her cigarette, rolls her head back. That distance. Where she goes. I reach, grasp only the howl of storms in the small railway town, fist of cold at the door in winter, maw of streets under high clouds and summer dust. My father's voice at supper—*they fired the stationmaster today*: image of a man tied to a pole over a bonfire. A July parade. Crepe paper, my white peaked hat and apron, the Old Dutch cleanser woman. Joey, hobbling beside me, brown fringed hat and holster. The water tower, the highest thing in the world at the end of Main Street. Drums. And the Switzer girls, on their tricycles ahead of us, gone the next winter. Fire, the whole house down. Clang of our coal stove, my father shovelling early in the morning. Heat. Cold. Mother. Gram. Cat. And the empty space where a baby was going to be. Old shadows, smoke of memory. I could pull out the old Brownie photos, crisp and snapping from their little crow-wing tabs, I could burn those into my mind. But how to go back on my own. How to go where she goes, even to the edge. She pulls out her lighter again. The DuMaurier, a small white finger in her mouth, sparks. Ash. *Lying there, cut from my gut to my ribs. Sick from ether. Out cold. And he comes home from Hinton in time to tell them to go ahead. Dispose of the body. Small town. Small hospital. And you at home, waiting.* Stillborn. A brother. Out of the chimney into the air. The whole town breathing him. Her smoke drifts off the deck toward the trees, white mark in the air, a wavering trail.



CJOB Weather. Warming up out there, for those of you headed out to do some Christmas shopping. Ten below, no snow in the forecast, but watch out, the mercury is dipping verrrry low tonight, so bundle up. Minus 30, and that will stay with us for the next couple of days.

I pack my great-grandmother's crocheted bedspread into my suitcase—each time I push with my hand, the smell of smoke escapes. I dust off the mirror and brush set, wrap them inside a sweater to protect them. Yesterday I spent at a Mailboxes outlet, having Gram's few remaining pieces of Limoges packed in about nine square feet of bubble wrap and Styrofoam. Why do I keep these things? Because mom wants me to have them? Because I know they were touched by bodies no longer here? Because I want to imagine the stories, perhaps even re-create the stories that trail behind them? How do we carry stories forward except in bodies? on bodies? through bodies? Will my sons care that their great-grandmother bought herself one piece of Limoges per year before the war? That their great-great-grandmother's hands were the crucible through which this bedspread was formed? The alchemy of hands. No, that doesn't work. Words fail. Are elusive. The body can never tell all it knows.

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*My body is going away/It fades to the transparency of rubbed amber held against the sun/It shrinks. It grows quiet... Who will have it/when it lies/pale and polished/as a clean bone? (240)*

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—Have you got everything? Mom in her housecoat, sleep in her eyes. Coughing. Her bunions poking from her soft slippers like aberrant thumbs. I should have made you breakfast. You can't go out like that, without eating.

—I finished up the fruit, Mom. Thank you for that. And thanks for everything. I loved being here with you. I'm just sorry I wore you out.

—Oh, no, I'm all filled up. Cheered me up. I'm good for a few months now. And that damned closet is finally clean. Oh, my, that was bothering me.

—I don't like that cough. Take it easy. Be careful in your bedroom with those cigarettes. Her body warm, so small. I kiss the top of her head.

—I'm fine. They did an X-ray, you know. He said my lungs are like a twenty-year-old's.

—Uh, huh. Well. My fingers on her cheek. My brother says I'm starting to look like her. The thought used to scare me.

—I hope that storm doesn't hold you up in Toronto. Call me when the plane lands.

—I promise.

One body. Then another. Processes of cell division over time and over land. Bodies propelled through frigid air, so natural, so unnatural. Tin cans full of stories and connections. Cargo—crocheted bedspreads. A hairbrush. An old photo of us at 1019 15th Street, before my brother was born. If we crashed in the Arctic, who could match bodies with belongings, pictures with stories, bodies with knowledge? I don't fear flying, I realize. Or death. I think I fear not leaving something of what my body knows, has learned. Erasure.

The suitcase wheels squeak along the corridor, past the mistletoe on 1428, the large red sock on the door of 1418. I press the down button on the elevator, turn to wave one last time. At the end of the hall, her hand shakes like a small tree branch through the crack in the door.

