Andra McCartney

coiled chalk circles

the mathematics of separation

we started with simple
arithmetic
one family divided
by violence
equals two
remainder one, remainder two, remainder three

mathematics to pacify
- how many? just three
sleeps until you see me
can you count
to three?
one two three
yes, that's it, three, just

we segment life
turn on our heads and repeat
indefinitely. Fractured
patterns form frost on a
windowpane behind plastic and tape,
the wind still whistling through.
This is a hole mathematics
cannot even estimate.
The true mother

Each of the parents claimed them
So the law said
- Divide the living
in two, let
them be pulled to pieces by
the desires of their parents, for
they each have the right
of appeal
the next year, and
the next year, and
the next.
  My children
still lived, their pale faces
haunted by court assessments,
counsellors’ questions. Lies.
Accusations. Half-truths.
I could not see them
torn apart
- No, give them to him,
then the torture will stop
and the judge in his wisdom said
  - Let it be so
Real mothers,
seeing me alone
said I did not care

I. Sunday afternoon, Peterborough
The body of my family
  separates today
we’re reading a poem
about custody arrangements and my son
says he has four families
  not two
- Yours, gran’s, dad’s
  and my friends.
- No, his sister adds. Six.
Andra McCartney

One! fills my silence. I am tired
of living at the margin
gathering scraps of their lives
too small to hold together,
patterns lost in tears, loose
ends unravelling out of reach

But they are the weavers
only they can darn this cloth
It is a fancy stitch
my mother taught me, to make a web
as good as new, seamless
so no-one could tell. I was never
that careful, never neat enough. With my fingers
I follow their ragged stitches,
help fill the holes

The phone rings.

I hold them, they change
into their Whitby clothes and
open the door.

II. Sunday evening
Abandoned, a
Lego ambushes my stockinged feet as
I head for my desk, prompting
aimless curses

This tranquil island of light
contains a growing world
beneath my searching fingers
dinner will be late tonight
the dishes will not fight with the laundry
for kitchen space
I will not be asked to be
judge or saviour, cook
or nursemaid
I am free again,
free to imagine
the soft weight of
their blond heads against my breasts
Lake Ontario

An apology for a beach. This is where we went, confined by the hours we had left. The brown wind carried the smell of fish to the strangled weekend margin. I was skipping stones, trying too hard to be as real as the daily routine of life with your dad.

- He brings us here all the time, you say.

Frayed Connections

Ten dollars in quarters by my side A pay phone and trembling hands. I dial, wait through interminable clicks Then -

Her voice. Small, excited, sad Mummy? Sweetheart, I love you, I miss you, Remember - remember when we look into the sky at night we see the same stars. Mummy, Daniel can say Tuktoyaktuk. Listen... Yes, love, you clever..What's that? Yes, I...

Hissing, stuttering, clickbuzz click! Silence.
End of summer

Everything has found its place. GI Joe glares at me from the shampoo label as I take my bath. My daughter has found her scissors, now I can find mine. The soccer ball hides in a giant terra cotta plantpot on the front porch. Our bicycles lean on each other in the back shed.

They fit now, exactly, in the crook of my shoulder. When we cross the street, we automatically reach for each other. We know who is next in line for the bath, whose turn it is to tackle the dishes. They see when I need to write, I know when they are hungry. We have triumphed again, learned how to live smoothly with each other. I fix this place with sunny photographs, avoid stores with back-to-school sales, shadows of their father's house alone in my bath in the cool morning, I whisper to a paper soldier - Hell no, they won't go.
Twelfth Night.

Led by the nose
to the take-off point, the plane
waits, steaming from the tail.

I saw the flight attendant smile
down at them, take them gently
by the hand.

The tractor rolls away, I gather
my breath, searching faces
at the window, already too distant.

The plane turns slowly, gathers speed and two weeks blink past the
terminal
with a roar, rise and
merge with grey clouds
framed in the grid of the glass, a dot
despite my fixed stare still
disapp
ea
r
s.

cooperative agreement

I still could not see
him, the antagonist
even after he raked me
naked across the carpet
even after he broke my rib,
even then.

I was happy
the day we signed together
one lawyer, one strategy
we had been a team
together, barn-building,
bridge. He stood by me
as I strained at their birth. He hugged me in the bright summer sun on the main street - I will never fuck you around about this agreement. I will never keep the children from you. Holding me still tighter, his voice shaking too

first shift

We memorize security codes, alarm systems. We ask when to push the panic button, how to guard the door.

Dierdre brings us tea and cookies, hot chocolate and crackers. She shows us her tattoos, except the little devil, her old man's pride.

- She is sweet, a counsellor says, it roots her victimization.

Carol went home today, to the loving arms and heartfelt promises of the man who holds a gun to her head.

Louise leaves too, tomorrow. She has paid for power, and rent. A secret place, alone. Tonight she chose the movie.

Inside this fortress We are rewinding the love scene.