

## 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.

*Andra McCartney*

**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  
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**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

*Andra McCartney*

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.