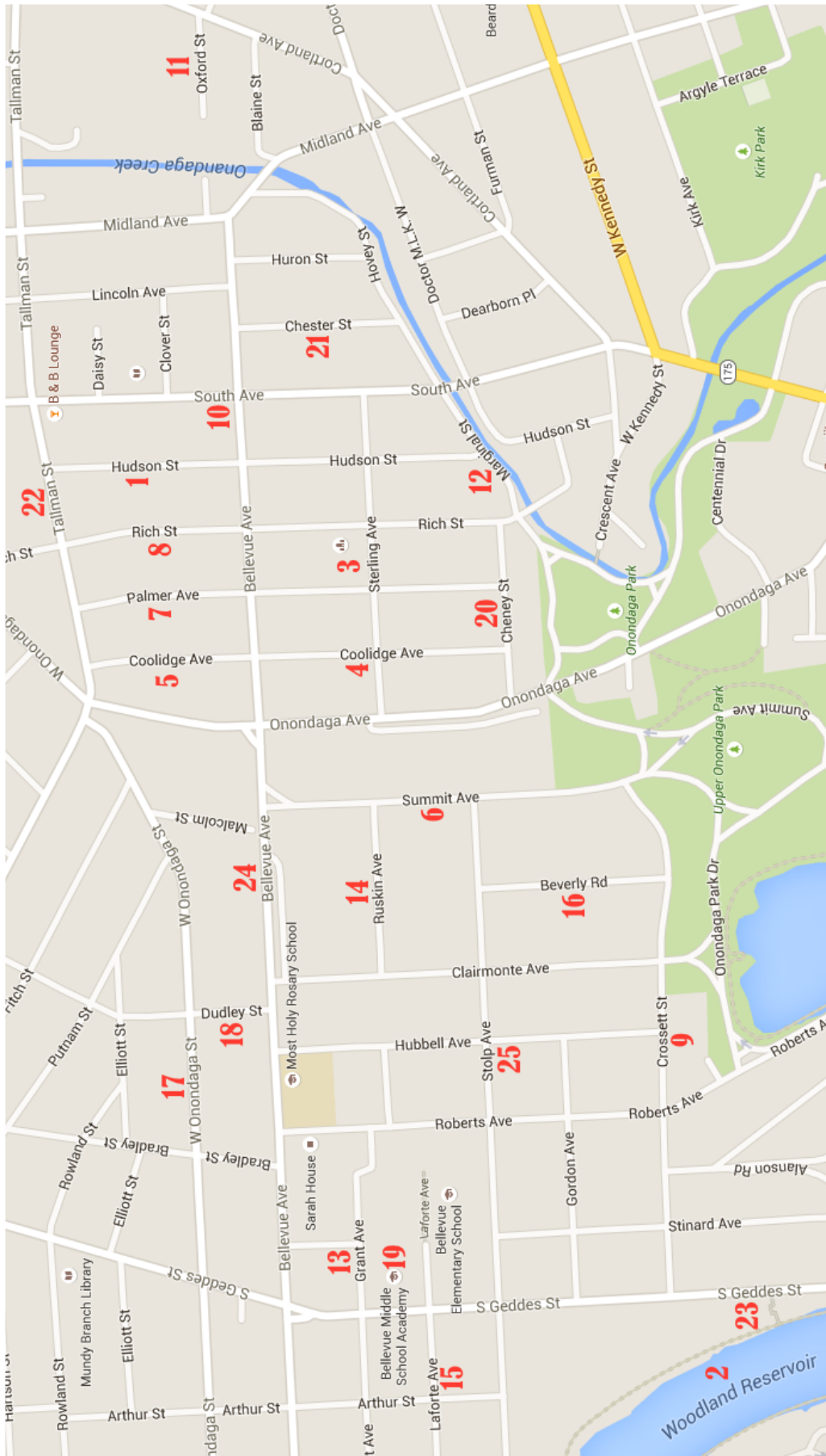


A DEED TO PRECIOUS PROPERTY



KATHLEEN BRYCE NILES



Numbers on map correspond to page numbers of poems.

**For MICHAEL LEO CLAUDE MORGAN
1946–2007**

**who is ... was ... my history ...
more precious than property**



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HUDSON STREET

**She was a huge woman,
seismic and fluid,
who walked shifting her burden
from side to side.**

**A Druid,
whose Stonehenge was built upon a ledge of bottles
calibrating the trips through back lots of weeds and
rocks, celebrating pale hours spent among the ruins
of beer and ale.**

**Her veins,
blood clot riddled,
rose out of socks,
purple pathways hidden under absurd skirts.
And, in each hand,
as we would learn,
were shopping bags heaped with empties
for deposit or return.**

WOODLAND RESERVOIR

**They had both come back from the Reservoir
very different than before...
he as a hero and she as a whore,
each swaying to a different tune,
a score not heard by others in the room.**

**While he with virgin boys encircling him,
boasted in the center of the gym,
of brandishing excalibur,
and of the rock he plugged it in;
she, out of rhythm, Queen of Tarts,
was caught between the yearnings of a
dozen hearts.**

**The girls, with good intentions,
held back a thousand questions,
each query hummed in unison and parts,
and every girl, in harmony, realized
this royalty's fall
was not simply the magic of the ball.**

**She was supposed to treasure this dream...
this night the Class of '58
chose her the Homecoming Queen.
But, at fourteen,
wounded and afraid,
it became just another night
when her body was badly played.**

STERLING AVENUE

**There were close to a dozen of them,
all filthy and pest-ridden;
alone and unattended
by a mother whose lips kissed
a bottle and a series of fathers,
eight in all.**

**The boys, tall and thin, ate cereal
sitting one above the other in the hall
leading to the top floor
where nothing lived within save
one mean cat that thrived.**

**The girls were thick and angry cattle.
I punched one once and hurt her badly
and gave myself more credit than deserved.
Sadly, all the meals she had consumed were grain
just like those of her brothers.
Only I, like others,
thought it didn't matter.**

**Years later,
we were to meet on a downtown city street.
She was in black, black leather from neck to toes
serving a message that had everything to do with
Cheerios.**

GORDON AVENUE

She was from the State School,
sent there as a babe to put some house in order,
living out her life as a boarder in a public rented room.
At fifty-four,
she was at her peak,
cleaning a half-dozen flats each and every week
for ladies of particular leisure.
Her sole purpose was to please her,
the one who hired and fired.

Monday's lady, always tired,
wanted sparkling floors
and Wednesday's lady
was deeply into wax on all the cupboard doors.
Every want and every need was memorized
and tucked away like a deed to precious property.

She was never allowed,
according to law,
to be left alone with any man.
The trustees, all male,
had declared that even the very best of men,
hungry and in need,
will take advantage of "girls" like her,
when and if they can.

Some of us who knew her from the drugstore on
the corner went to Most Holy Rosary to mourn her
after the car struck her down.
And, six free lunch ladies,
none of whom appeared,
had dirty dishes in their sinks and tables left
uncleared.

COOLIDGE AVENUE

**She moved through the neighborhood
like a panzer division;
an invasion of huge indecent power.**

**When they were seventeen,
she wrestled my cousin in the driveway.
Head nestled in her grip,
she drove his face into the stones,
twisting his muscular arms and
nearly breaking the bones
before his tears stopped her
from ripping him apart,
and hinting that beneath the rage,
there might be some heart.**

**For years, she was stronger than they
who grew to manhood with memories
of the beatings endured in retreating
from her hostility...ignorant imps
with all the civility of chimps at a charity ball.**

**As a woman,
hardly larger than most,
she grew fearful and retreated.
And the men around her had nothing to fear
as before,
she wouldn't let them near her anymore.**

SUMMIT AVENUE

He'd gone to be a Jesuit,
or so someone had said,
at a time so tense
we couldn't measure it,
in the midst of the 60s
when so many were dead
in the war, other boys
from the Academy
who had ridden our bus.

He said he didn't understand
the fuss we made
over Quemoy and Matsu,
singing his Mater Christi
and Pater Jesu.

Last we knew,
he had grown long hair and
hidden his face behind a beard,
speculation was that he had understood
and feared he'd recognize himself
for less than good.

PALMER AVENUE

**She had been grabbed,
just after dark,
we heard it through the door...
down at the park by three
maybe four young boys.**

**She was as homely as her sister pretty
and wept now for the pity
neither sister nor mother would offer.
They laughed amid her anguish
saying the boys,
in order to accost her,
must have bagged her head
in satchels from the A & P.**

RICH STREET

They owned the store,
if it could be called such.
So little stock:
candy, beer, cigarettes,
not much to attract the trade of high rollers
or the staid.

She sat on the porch in dresses sizes too small
and spread hirsute legs for all who could handle
the pleasure of an old woman's treasure gone to seed.
Men would come and go fulfilling a need,
perhaps for Camels or a chocolate bar.
For her,
their snickers were approval,
their nod a gift of truth.
And, once in their cars,
they gagged on Baby Ruth.

He worked the counter slab
and the widows forced to run a tab,
telling lies about his prowess
and taking a grab at their virtue
between rings of the register.
He'd take the willing to the stockroom,
the jester,
laughing and boasting intermittently,
of how the bill could be reduced.

And, on the porch,
ear cocked to the door,
while he seduced,
she would score with a flash
to a passing amour.

CROSSETT AVENUE

**His name was Abdo A. Abdo
and we were certain
of what the A just had to be.
Astute in business,
surely no one's fool,
his tiny store was housed between
the public and parochial school.**

**His accent,
so thick, one listened to it in layers...
seven syllables to the sound...
disabled English limping around a mouth
not used to forming words so foreign.**

**Of all the memories time could have bourn,
two alone remain of him...
pretzels, 2c salted and over-roasted
and Catholic school boys
who boasted of Arabic windows assassinated
in holy innocence,
with BB guns given as Christmas presents.**

SOUTH AVENUE

**He was close to seven feet,
in other circles very tall,
but somehow for the NBA
just a bit too small to do the job.**

**For a million or two,
some other dude from Detroit or L.A.
would get the nod,
the dream come true...
the chance to prove that his jumper
was in the groove not just a fluke;
that the fade away was here to stay
and rebuke all those who used to say,
get something else,
one thing more to fall back upon
if they close the door to the Parthenon...**

**But he knew all along
that he'd get his break,
one slam dunk was all it would take,
cause Lord knows every tall dude
goes to the "Prose."**

**Now he lives high off the hog,
very sleek, very posh.
He's the main man at the local car wash.
He doesn't worry none,
cause Lord knows every tall dude
goes to the "Prose".**

OXFORD STREET

The old woman next door
had gone a bit around the bend
and the ambulance attendants had come to tend
to taking her to hospital.

One was dressed all in white from ankle to crown,
and against the snow drifting down,
his old brown shoes shone like a pedestal for
an ivory statue.

The sirens and lights attracted us to the scene,
something unique,
something new,
and we surrounded the area as children will do.

And I,
always lucky in matters as these,
found myself alone with him who was bare
from stomach to knees.

Through the years,
others like him would appear...
men whose fantasies,
isolated and remote,
exhibited themselves beneath a coat.

It was a decade or more before
I was no longer uncertain nor confused,
and, three decades later,
I am still unamused.

MARGINAL AVENUE

He was textbook perfect,
slack-jawed,
sloped forehead,
raw-urged...
a Neanderthal, merged with child...
a peasant, of sorts,
whose glands rented his few brains
and vented their youth in
hot pursuit of manhood.

None of us,
no matter how plain nor unappealing
was not mauled in his lust.
His approach was with candy
stolen from his father's store.
His patter,
loose and randy,
as if directed at the lavender ladies...
another woman,
another whore.

He was a caricature...
a dangling body,
lurking beneath a pumpkin head...
an amorphous boy
who housed a junior cad...
much in the likeness of his dad,
the man they often grow to be.

GRANT AVENUE

**The old woman had us over the barrel,
no doubt about it.**

**Her box of "twofers" was all we could
manage on bottles found
and other valuable trash scrounged from
the yards and parks around.**

**Two for a penny,
every piece an adventure...
nary a wrapper in tact;
in fact,
hardly any piece younger than we were.**

**We despised her for her greed,
never considering there might have been a need,
to sell everything to the last and only piece.**

RUSKIN AVENUE

She had reached that time,
the turning point,
when she looked closely at old women.
Was that walk quite similar,
almost familiar,
or would her's differ as she began the decline?
Was that lag in this one's gait the way
she tended to hesitate when exiting a chair?
Did that one's chin seem to sag or lie in folds
upon her throat?
Did another look past her as if she wasn't there?
Did she see her old, fat self hidden,
wrapped in an Orlon overcoat against a colder winter
than remembered?
And, would she hesitate before
stepping from the curb?
Would shadows,
exaggerated and grey,
betray her fears and seem closer than today?
Would she swallow up her history
in every glance at young women,
living clocks...
déjà vu,
was it she or who?
Or would she simply grow so old that today
would seem like it was yesterday
as often happens to those who live too long?
And, if it did,
then all her todays must be twice as strong,
if they must be two times lived.

LaFORTE AVENUE

She read to us that entire month
from *The Yearling*
in a voice luxurious, lonesome and appealing.

It was the season of the chemise,
part of the reason
she looked so neat, so clean, so wholesome.
And, at thirteen,
we all wanted to be wife and mother just as she.

The story was as far from our city lives
as tales of men in the moon,
but we loved every word and
a wondrous fantasy filled the room.

Somewhere toward the end,
when we were transported
and she,
long since bored and reading by rote,
Rawlings wrote of men,
evil and remote.

The epithet, as written, was "black buzzards"...
dastards, each and all...
and teacher read "black bastards"
that semester, in the fall.

None of us could now recall
the way the novel ends,
but each remembers that September
learning, without being told,
that far too often
people who glisten aren't always gold.

BEVERLY ROAD

Each, with operas in his soul,
found the road a concert hall.
Both, very old...
unknown to one another we supposed...
strolled streets paved with less
than the gold fancied in retreat.

The green grocer whose cart,
a moving garden,
was orchestrated by a laden scale,
cucumbers and zucchini
moving laterally...
a metronome,
keeping time to an aria,
stolen, in part,
from Puccini.

The scissors man,
sharpener of knives, sickles and scythes,
rang his bell,
signal of arrival,
taking each tool, turning it,
this way and that,
just so.
The lyric of the grinder was
a reminder of his own Caruso.

W. ONONDAGA STREET

**Old maids, the neighbors said...
scared of men
who might take them to bed
and hurt them in the night.**

**We knew differently...
near the turn of the century,
each chose to have the only voice,
be judge and jury for her life.**

**Three sisters, so dissimilar,
so much alike...
Irish women, seven day Catholics,
perennially on strike.**

**It took the earning of all three
to support a home,
a place for a family,
free from dependency.**

**The decision to make it on their own
required a partnership,
a marriage, nevertheless,
and constant bickering was a miscarriage
of intent...
ironic lives spent on illusion...
great beginnings,
sad conclusions.**

**Only granddaughters each never had
could choose
not to lose themselves
under any circumstance.**

DUDLEY STREET

Each took the tragedy different from the other.
She, Lady Macbeth, stripped herself of all kindness
and laid the world to blame for medical clumsiness.
Her frame, so compressed that head nearly sat upon
hips so everything between seemed all the same.

Her voice was shrewish and unforgiving,
cursing her body, born uneven and askew.
We knew her vitriolic glare
and seldom entered the store when she was there.

And he, MacDuff, was everywhere.
Up and down the streets
riding that enormous three-wheeler all over town.
He was cheerful and pleasant
and no one quibbled when he nibbled on his lip
or drooled a little bit.

The merchants waved to him
from windows and doors
and there were none of them
who didn't want him in their stores.

Both are off the streets now.
She finally died,
still angry that life dealt her such a cruel aside.
His trike,
old-fashioned and of another time
is now modern and electrified.

BELLEVUE HEIGHTS

He had a half dozen names
given in derision by child-women,
individually terrified,
collectively driven,
to hurl insults as cruel as any they'd heard,
to curse him in return,
if not in like,
for the assault upon their womanhood.

"Finger," for those lost or missing on each hand,
theory runs rampant and lingers, weary even now.
"Red," for the hair slipping back from his forehead,
thinning everywhere and somehow disappearing
down from the crown.
"Pervert," for want of something better to shock,
to yell from a block away
to eyes whose aggression
was the worst suggestion we had known
besides a call or two on the drugstore phone.

It would be years before we knew
his lust was harmless,
not so very whole,
and far less sinister than the sins
that exist in the darkness of our soul.

CHENEY STREET

**Had he been White,
decked out in lavender stripes,
they would have quickly labeled him a "fruit."
But strutting cool and clean,
this slick machine,
dressed in a ridiculous suit,
was well-known, Black and mean.**

**He would ride through the block
in the back of a deuce and a quarter;
continental tire, red velvet seats,
chauffeur for hire,
and make a martyr of any who defied his worth.**

**When the cops blew him away,
Monsignor, himself, said Mass
and sang the hymn.
He used to put big bucks in the collection plate
and that often keeps debate
about one's sin to the bare minimum.**

CHESTER STREET

**She sought the home of her soul as far from Rome
as freeing herself from the Pope was possible...
her hatred for everything papal
was the staple of her life
and her word was gospel as mother and wife.**

**She wanted to be a Huguenot
but the aunts who brought her up
were devout Catholic
and not about to raise her otherwise.**

**The litany of masses,
the lessons in the catechisms,
the rosaries to bear,
brought about the schism that would tear
her world apart.**

**Her boy grew to manhood strong in her lack of faith...
free to sin in ways the Sisters taught us to fear.
Our envy was enormous
but each year there was less to draw us near.**

**He comes to visit year to year
but no one recognizes him or so we hear...
even she who bore him and taught him
independence
hardly knows the stranger at her door.
Soon, she won't even touch him anymore.**

TALLMAN STREET

**Our masks were all the same...
dime store black,
really quite tame,
made to cover the eyes and the bridge
of the nose.
Everything else was merely old clothes;
trousers and shirts,
thrown together in search of just desserts.**

**How we hated being poor on Halloween.
No matter how many miles were covered,
the most we gathered were stale popcorn balls
and brown apples.
No one cared if we got a razor blade or
a hat pin now and again in trade.**

GEDDES STREET

**While Senator Joe McCarthy railed about
subversives and communists,
teachers terrified us with lists of battles waged
and rampant terrorists.**

**With all the talk of nuclear fission,
it was logical to believe those air raids
to the basement,
done with such precision,
meant the decision had been made to
bury us beneath the rubble...
saving the survivors all the trouble
when the cloud had cleared away.**

**One time, four stories below,
I told my classmates my theory,
in answer to a query of one who didn't know.
The teacher and the principal were hysteric,
like medieval clerics forced to endure heresy.**

**After that, we never had to run to the cellar
when sirens beckoned us to stay.
The Pharisee had triumphed that cold war day.**

BELLEVUE AVENUE

**He was ten, maybe eleven,
an only child, shaken and unharmed,
when police came round that summer
asking our mothers if we'd seen any strangers
up near the wood...**

**A tall, gaunt man,
new to the neighborhood,
who might haunt areas where little boys strayed.**

**We were confused and afraid that a man,
grown and all,
could steal in where we played,
a miniature forest,
an everglade,
and kiss a boy he never knew.**

STOLP AVENUE

Death comes so simply to the old;
they go to sleep or catch a cold
that takes them off in the night
but these young boys had no right
to leave us when they did.

Danny, tough machine,
who, wise at thirteen,
called me "molehill" because my breasts,
stuffed in sweaters,
were so small.
Stupid, stupid son of a bitch,
missed the curve,
hit the ditch, dying almost instantly.

And Walt,
so quiet and forgiving,
tried not to let his seizures slow him down
from living the life a new teen dreams can be his own.
The other kids,
in reporting it,
said he tried to eat his pillow...
must have smothered in his sleep.

And, Rhett,
hardiest of them all,
almost six feet tall before his liver gave way
was to wither long before he could deliver
on the hopes of a boy just turned thirteen.

And, we who were not taken,
unprepared and unannounced,
were shaken to discover
that adulthood starts when we begin to doubt.