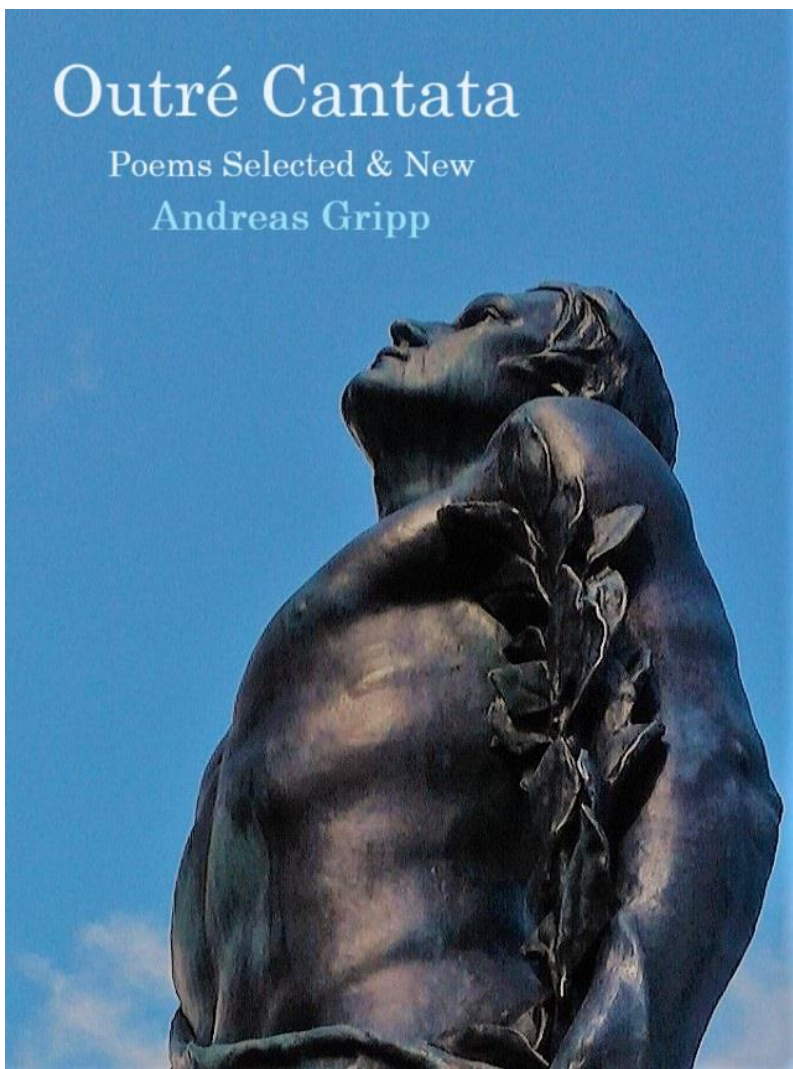


Outré Cantata

Poems Selected & New

Andreas Gripp



[Inside Front Cover]

Outré Cantata

Poems Selected and New

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Outré Cantata

Poems Selected and New

Andreas Gripp

Beliveau Books

LONDON

Outré Cantata: Poems Selected and New

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For my mother, Maria



November Rose

It's a Jane or Johnny-come-lately,
the solitary rose in my garden,
a harvest holdover or belated bloom
that's risen when the others have died.

It has none to compete for attention,
isn't lost in a sea of red.

I ponder its predicament,
think of it as lonely,
regretting it didn't blossom sooner
when the buzz of flying insects
were droning their affection.

I'll water it in the evening,
as stars speck the sky in Autumn's cool.
I'll sing it to sleep
as I retire,
pray for grace
should the frost strike swift.

Metronome

You never had a clock
within your home,
just a single metronome,
keeping tempo
more important
than the time,

its clicks a call to dance,
without the chains
of *start* and *stop*,
that never
issue edicts
to awaken,
no pre-set ring
to jolt
from peaceful dreams,

no big and little hands
that point to numbers
which command,
saying *when* it's time to eat
and when to leave,
when to walk the dog
or check for mail,

just a steady, rhythmic beat
of unfettered sound,
the passing of the hours
all unnamed.

The girl I would have married

The girl I would have married
had we met
is on the other side of the street,
a walking blur
I only notice for a second.

And her hair is a shade of blonde
or maybe brown I can't recall,
nor anything about the jacket
she'd been wearing nor the boots,
only that for some silly unknown reason
we would have married had we met,

maybe at the bookshop
where I would have bumped her arm,
said sorry for my clumsiness,
which caused her to drop her classics
and a dictionary too;

or it may have been at a party,
hosted by a mutual
friend,
finding that we shared
a favourite song,
or that we're social
democrats,

or that neither of us
can stand
the sight of blood;

then again, it may have been something
random,
her seated in the row
just ahead,
in a theatre
with a paltry slope,
her failure to remove the hat
that blocked my view,
my gathering the brazen courage
to tap her shoulder,
whisper into her ear
that I'm unable to see a thing.

**My Cat Is Half-Greek,
or Zeus Left the Acropolis Open Again**

My cat communes
with the mythical, with the infinite
and glorious invisible,
getting an inside track
on the weather
and when the sky's
about to change its tune.

My cat leaps up and tells me
whenever it's about to rain,
by the way she wiggles her whiskers
and tilts her head
beside the bathroom wall.

My cat instinctively knows
when it's going to pour
in Noachian proportions,
when the neighbours
will pound the door
and beseech us to let them in,
their basements flooded
and the water still rising.

Silly cat, tumbling around
with slanted head
and twitching whiskers—

I'm only turning on the shower.
Go back to your bed of sleep—
and *dream*
of chasing moths
in the garden,
the sun brighter
than an Orion Nova
and your shadow in pursuit
as you run.

Let's not talk of storms today
despite the warnings
you sense from above:

Perhaps those sounds you hear
are the thunderous applause
from the pantheons up from their seats,
as Taurus snags the matador;

the rumbling
that of Hercules in hunger,
starving for the love of Deianeira,
she who brings his eyes
to overflow
with spit and drizzle,

a few simple sobs
to remind us men and beasts
that the deities too
feel that which pains us all,
blotting out the sun
when there's none to share
their sorrow.

Or it may only be Aphrodite
calling you in
for your dinner,
unaware you have a home
with *me*,
cavorting with the mortals
since we bow to your meows
and your purrs,
our closest, intimate link
to both the eternal
and the divine.

Before You Die

Before You Die, it seems,
has been springing up in bookstores
all over the place.

“1001 Movies to See Before You Die”—
double-faced in Performing Arts.

“1001 *Places* to See Before You Die”—
yields a tepid trudge to Travel.

And every genre,
it seems, has its own
Arabian Nights-inspired thing to do
before the hooded hangman calls:

“1001 Foods to Eat *Before You Die*”
“1001 Albums to Hear *Before You Die*”
“1001 Books to Read
Before
You
Die.”

It’s worth noting
that with all this talk of death,
the titles continue to fly
and booksellers can scarcely keep up.

Maybe that's due to the fact
that you're never, ever told
exactly *how* you'll die,
for it's unlikely you'll see:

"1001 Dances to Learn
Before You Develop Cancer"

or

"1001 Liqueurs to Drink
Before You Get Hit by a Train"

OR

"1001 Puzzles to Solve
Before You Get Shot in the Head."

Perhaps we prefer that Death
keep its *own* swell of incense,
its *own* black curtain,
its *own* cryptic crossword,
one not deciphered
by reader or writer alike.

But why that extra *one* after *one thousand*?
That little bonus, as a P.S. or encore—
to make amends
for the penultimate trip or film?

Where you're much too anxious
about your impending expiry
to *enjoy* that stroll in Oahu ...
too *perturbed* about your nearing demise
to *laugh* through *A Day at the Races* ...

and only Banks' *allusion*
to *The Sweet Hereafter*
will make that final book
even tolerable.

Upon Our Awakening

Upon our awakening,
you ask why men
want sex
first thing in the morning.

It was merely a kiss
on your arm.
You read a tad
too much
into it,
not good morning love,
did you sleep well?
but dear god
I need to fuck
like a dam about to burst
or that final moment
on earth,
when you only have seconds
to live,
before the fabled flash of light,
then cinders.

Penny-Farthing

You sense I'm not impressed
with your selection.
It's antique, you say
and British at that.

I will not be seen
on such a bicycle as this,
its front wheel a mammoth
and its rear a mere mouse.

Unloved by me it will wilt,
from encroaching rust
and loathing,
like the bicycle built for two
which you despised,
the one I acquired
for a pittance and a pence,
dreaming we had desire
by which to ride,
turning corners
without a care.

Initials

After you left,
I carved our initials
into the stump of a fallen tree.
I tallied its age before death,
thought of its stunted remnant
as a trunk, soaring
to swirling heights, with arms
that housed the bliss of many birds,
our love now wrapped in the rings
that spoke of years, to a time
when heart and bark and wing
were very much alive.

Another Hallmark Moment

On Valentine's,
I didn't think of hearts
but of shamrocks,
of St. Patrick,
the lush and kelly greens
of the Irish,
the luck that clovers bring.

So leave your blood-filled, beating
organ at the door
and your chocolates, flowers, with it.
Let me pine for almost Spring
and a romp under leaves,
through grasses.
You can have your snowy day
and diamonds, pearls, to go.
You can have your lover's kiss
and night of heated sex—

No, I'm lying.
Forgive me, Triune God,
and Mr. & Mrs. O'Shea.
Your time has not yet come,
for I need to *hold* and *be* held,
love and *be* loved and *make* love,
and dream of Dublin another day,
another month, when the vestige of red
has melted with the white.

Early Morning Rain

In the yard,
you felt sorry for the slug
that crept so slowly up the stem
of one of your greens.

*Poor thing,
it doesn't even have a shell
to call a home.*

Afterward,
I compared it with its cousin,
the snail, several of which will
gather in the garden
after an early morning rain—

sturdy,
in the swirly cave it carries
on its back,
a place to retract its head in
when it pours,

feigning it isn't there, perhaps,
should a desperate, homeless mollusk
come to call,
knowing there *isn't*
any room
for two,

and yet burdened
by that extra weight,
its inability to travel
wherever it may wish,
at its turtle-like, sloth-like pace,
like a car that's always pulling
a camper/trailer,

never having the mettle
to face the world
when things get tough,
even ducking in its hovel
when there isn't a cloud
in the sky.

Nine

There's a beauty to our numbers
that I note with admiration:

the shape of cipher 6
and its curving, crescent close;

8, with its weaving, double loop
that skaters strive and scratch to mimic;

3, and its ability to complete,
to divide as trilogy, to *manifest*
as Trinity;

1 which finds the wholeness
in *itself*, never wishing to *flee*
its core or essence,
for the sake of multiplying:

*One times one times one
will always equal one.*

2 is the sum of love
and the most romantic of all
our digits,
and in terms of teaching math,
it gives a break to all our children:

*Two times two is four,
and the answer's the same
when adding.*

7 is Biblical,
the time for God's creation,
the length of telling tales
of *Harry Potter*,
of *Narnia*,
the complement of 12.

5, the Books of Moses,
the fingers and thumb
on our hands,
giving us ability,
the gift of grasp
and molding, making shapes
from slabs of clay.

4, a pair of couplets,
the voice of poems
and song, the rhythm
and march of the saints.

Yet when I come to number 9,
my spirit starts to sink:

it has such *lofty* expectations,
aspiring to reach new levels,
only to fall so painfully short—

missing the mark of 10
by just a meagre, single stroke,
always being known for
“almost there,”
remembered for the glory
it could have gained
but never got,
its cousins—
19, 49, 69—
bearing the brunt
of all its failings.

99 is but a stepping stone,
a grating *lapse* towards 100,
a number we only *watch* while it rolls,
a humble *countdown* to celebration,
unable to give us merit on its own.

I spent all of '99
yearning for 2000,
anticipating a new millennium,

the fears, excitement
we thought awaited us
in a dawning, changing world,

never enjoying the year for what it was,
practicing the writing
of an exotic date—

January 1, 2000

and eager to see
the masthead of that early morning paper,

ridding myself of the nines
that only accentuate defeat,

thinking I'll *pass* some kind of threshold,
a singing, flowered archway
bidding *come, enter,*
leave what troubles you
behind.

The Decoy

My hunter friend,
the one I haven't converted
to my "animals-have-feelings-too"
frame of mind,
uses
a wooden decoy
in an attempt
to lure some ducks,

the painted, smiling duplicate
successful
in its duty:
three already shot today,
bagged and ready to carve.

If objects had living souls,
I wonder how it would feel:

a traitor,

causing the *death*
of what it mimics,

floating on water
like a wannabe bird,
even feign it could fly
if it *wanted to,*

have its pick
of choicest mates;

like *Pinocchio*,
eager to be turned
into the real thing,

hoping its rifle-bearing
Gepetto
will make it
flesh and bone,
allow
a brook of blood to pump
throughout
its winding veins,

pray it might *even*
bring salvation
to this hunter's
calloused heart,

spot a chance
at its own redemption,

have its maker
see its feathered shape
as something
more than food.

Raking Leaves with Anneliese

She holds open
ruptured bags
as I heave
loads of coloured
leaves
into their crinkled,
paper mouths
like a backhoe
dropping dirt
into a pit.

*The Stasi
took my father
into the night,
she firmly sighs.
I sent letters
to the prison
but I never heard
a word.*

I note golden,
scarlet foliage,
fallen
like unpicked apples.
Some have twisting
worms, limp
as flimsy laces

on my loosely-knotted
shoes.

*She says mother
stayed in sackcloth,
with a veil
that wouldn't lift
in public places.*

November's
biting wind
scatters half
our work away,
our faces
turning numb
in waning light.

**Fabric Carnations,
or My Dog was a Vegetarian**

The flowers in my house are a fraud,
marigolds that never wither,
forsythia forever fake
with vibrant yellow
that doesn't fade,
daisies dotted about
as if I had an eternal supply,
the faint of sight
and squinters
never guessing
the awful truth,
nor those who call, congested,
unaware
they're counterfeit.

For years, *before* I built
what's bogus,
this simulated sham of silk,
every bluebell, phlox and lily
were rich in wondrous
redolence,

concealing the smell of "Spot" —
my shaggy, shedding dog
with neither blotch
nor original name,

who'd eat the roses
when in season,
plucking petals
when backs were turned.

The dog was mine for a decade,
had a couch he claimed as his own,
an old stuffed cat
with which he played
but never thought
to bite or chew.

When he died,
I was told to go back
to blooms, genuine,
the ones that I'd discarded
after "Spot" had overate,

rid the rooms of imitations,
inhale the fragrant scent
of life.

It's *all* a fabrication
I replied: aromas
from the freshly
cut, telling the world
they're bleeding,

their beauty-in-a-vase,
embalming;

that flowers too
love living
as much as a man
or departed pet,

that my *forgeries*
are better,
no perfumes
to pronounce what's dead.

Aardvark

And there he is again,
on the very first page of
every Merriam-Webster,
the top of the list of
Animalia,
the Everest of his kind;

Aaron, if he were human,
dismissing as jealousy
his rivals' cry of "cheat,"
that the double A
is so superfluous,
he's *no* transistor battery
or city on the Danish coast;

and if he could scream,
a pirate's *aargh!*

as if on a ship of stolen
gold, strutting haughtily, as though
he'd a mane of the same colour,
asking disdainfully, *just WHO*
is the King of beasts?

The Birth of Lovely Veronica

On the morning you were born,
covered with film,
coated with the remnants
of your cocooned state in the womb,
a knife was lodged
in Thomas Murphy's chest,
stopping his heart
with the hardness of steel,
and the thug who cruelly robbed him
ran into a sheeted night
of just-fallen rain,
in that nebulous wetness
that remains
before wind and air
dry each drop to nothingness.

On the morning you were born,
you cried your first cry,
and Kim Yung cowered
in a solitary cell,
awaiting another visit
from the torturers,
the ones who never forget
Tiananmen Square
or his shoutings
that Mao was dead.
He wishes *he* were dead,

that someone on this earth
gave a goddamn,
that today they'd just finish the job.

This morning, when you were born,
a Sudanese mother
cradled
her skin/bone son,
rocked him
in her shrivelled arms,
sang *return you now to Heaven*
in her own, raspy tongue
while nurses cleaned *you* off,
prepared you for our smiles,
our initial touch and kisses,
our deceiving ourselves
and the world
that you're in a safer, *better* place
than a mother's cave of calm
or the planes of ghosts
and gods.

Psalm for Aquarius

In the days and nights
of my naiveté,
when hope blasted blue
in carbon cloud,
the constellations
stepped out of line,
formed new patterns,
gave my dreams names
that they'd discarded:

*Pisces, someday she'll adore you,
hold your hanging head
beside her breast,
pluck out poisoned hooks
inside your heart.*

And of love, it lost
its battle with beauty,
lives on to cut to the quick,
chain the *soul*
in heavy iron,
to thrash hopelessly,
like fish in a sweeping net,
then hauled to shore
while salvation ripples beneath,
so cold in all its glory.

Hearing Ted Hughes at Plunkenworth's

Our friend dropped in again,
the one who always says
he's met some rather famous poets,
like Billy Collins, Rita Dove,
Molly Peacock,
boasting he's taken them out for beer,
that in their drunken state
they've read his work
and said it was the best damn thing
they've ever seen on paper.

It's been difficult to prove him a liar,
authors and their tours
have coincided with his claims
but this time he was sloppy,
saying he'd heard Ted Hughes
last night, at Plunkenworth's,
the run-down, downtown gallery
that exhibits skateboard
art and molds of vomit
by its barely-on-its-hinges
front door.

He's been dead more than two decades,
we said, snickering, knowing we finally
found the lie,
that he'd admit it's been a charade,

the name-dropping, the tales
of autographed books
(that we've *never* been allowed
to see).

But he didn't blink an eye,
unfazed, undaunted in his delivery,
saying that Ted had read
a dozen new poems,
one about Plath,
how he would have *rushed*
to save her,
turn off the oven,
inhaled the toxic fumes
himself
if he only could,
calling it "Sylvie's Stove,"
and we corrected him,
saying it was *Sylvia*, not *Sylvie*
and he said no,
that was an affectionate name
he had for her, very French
as he really loved the language,

that he'd come back from the grave
just to read it,

even if but a single person
listened, believed
that he was sorry,

that the dead
could be so sorry.

Francesca, Weeding the Garden

My daughter, all of six
and bursting with a Big Bang
sort of energy,
zigzags across our fenced backyard,
picking dandelions she holds
in her fist,
for an "I love you daddy" bouquet,
like the lofty ones
I snagged for her mother
before the tumors took her away,
their sunny heads of yellow
jutting freely from curling fingers,
my steady, sturdy voice
now a downcast, trembling shell,
saying *they last a little longer
than flowers,
we'll wish you better
when they turn to spores.*

Strings of the Great Depression

In your chair,
covered in a shawl to warm you,
hot milk by your side,

arthritic, gnarled fingers
pulling limply
on elastics
(ones that held
your meds together),

you speak of your farmer-father,
coming home
without the radio
he'd promised,

and of rubber bands,
how he stretched them
over a can,
plucking them
with his thumb.

For music, he said,
while you eat.

La Fin

La pomme de terre,
the potato, the earth apple,
its womb a warmth of ground,
unable to tempt the eyes
of unfallen man.

The apple, *la pomme,*
kept cool among the branches
by an evening's autumn sky,
painted so very often,
the centre of our lore.

In French they're more poetic,
sounding
that much better
on the ear,
no bitter taste
that settles
on the tongue,
no judgement on their worth.

Le poème,
the poem,
that hovers in the vacant space
between,
the fruit of ground and tree,

the one I wish I'd render
en Français,
to mask the many flaws
that come when beauty
can't be seen.

América

The isthmus
was the adhesive
always holding us
together,

like fraternal twins
conjoined,
locked
by a crooked rib.

And *though* it looked
quite thin,
brittle and ready to
snap,

the mightiest ships
of imperial fleets
could only
turn away,

to round Cape
Horn at a crawl,
to meet Pacific waves.

El Canal de Panamá,
christened in
'14,

in the summer
of the Serbian
shot.

Yes,
this brings us Yen
and Yuan.

Yes,
this hews in half
the journey.

But brother,
earthen-brother,

your breath
is not as close,

and strangers
sail the space
between our scars.

The Language of Sparrows

Your sister is dead.

We plant seedlings
by her grave in April,
when Spring seduces
with all its promise,
moisten the ground
with a jug of water
and say how, years from now,
a bush will burst and flower,
be home to a family of sparrows,
each knowing the other by name.

I ask you if birds have names,
like *Alice, Brent, Jessica* and *James*,
if mother and father bird
call them in when it rains,
say *settle here in branches*
amid the leaves that keep you dry—
not in English, mind you,
or any other human tongue
but in the language of sparrows;
each trill, each warbling,
a repartee,
a crafted conversation of the minds.

I then notice
that we never see the birds
when it rains,
how they disappear in downpours,
seeking shelter
in something we simply cannot see.

When we're old,
when we come to remember
the loved one that you've lost,
they'll be shielded in our shrub,
not a short and stunted one,
but a *grand*, blessed growth,
like the one that spoke to Moses,
aflame, uttering
I AM WHO I AM,

one that towers,
dense with green,
a monument
to the sister you treasured
and to the birds
that she adored,
naming the formerly fallowed, *hallowed*,
sacred, *remove your shoes*,
Spirits and Sparrows dwell
and sibilate secrets
we're unworthy to hear.

**My lover hates Roy Clark
but hasn't heard of Sufjan Stevens**

My composition of song,
for you, has been rejected,
not because the sentiments
were bad, or the structure
of verse and chorus,
but that I played the chords
on a banjo
when I should have used a guitar.

You say the *banjo*
is a trite,
hee-hawed thing,
for barefoot, hick-town loafers
with dangling straw
between their teeth.

I'd like to change the words,
dedicate it to another,
one who doesn't ridicule
the music of the mountain,
one who'd know its origins,
before Burl Ives' arrival.

Bania,
in the Mandingo tongue,

from the minstrels
of the African west,
whose moonlight lovers
never shunned
their poignant serenades.

Winter Solstice

Christmas
with an ex-lover
is spent whenever
there's time to spare,

so *today* I invited you over,
with the promise of friendship
and fire,
hoping for kindling wood,

but the flames are merely embers,
like the Sun in its tepid glow,
forsaking us much too soon
on this shortest day of the year.

So I'll make you Darjeeling,
my darling,
suddenly *clasp* your hand
into mine—

for gauging a glove size, I'll say,
feigning I've shopping to do,
the warmth of tea and touch
creating such a beautiful lie.

The Astronomer

Even on the eve of June
you're early,
your telescope set by six o'clock
to *scan* the roofless sphere,
as you used to do with your child
before the day she succumbed
to sickness,
before her locks of hair fell out
and your lulling-to-slumber stories
were heard by eager, itching ears.

She'd said from the hospital bed
her ghost would guide you
to discover—
stars and worlds
not seen by a sea
of billions and billions
of eyes,

when the hues of tranquil sky
have come to lose
their sun-birther blue,

become
the midnight black
that's needed for light
to speak from afar.

Preservation

You've stopped
coming over of late,
sensing I've crossed
some sort of line,
saying you want to preserve
our friendship,
this affection of another kind
we can't describe,
our sibling-like rapport,
this anything-but-fall-in-love
that's protected just one of us,
the other silently smitten,
burning when our touch
is accidental.

Omnipotence

*I, more stolidly, tend to suspect that God
is a novelist—a garrulous and deeply
unwholesome one too.*

—Martin Amis

As a novelist, you say,
you have the powers
of a god,
the death and life
of characters
in your potent, scribing hand—

deciding who is loved
and who survives,

who is buried
or burnt to ash,

strewn into the Ganges,
perhaps,

or left to rest
in a marble urn
over a family's
fireplace.

Piddling details
aside,
let's promote the *poet*
to the omnipotent Lord of yore,
a God unmatched by others,

mould the *world*
to what it really should have been
(from the start of *Genesis*),

when the Spirit hovered
over the waters' face;

make a *Pangaea*
that never splits,
do away with all division,

trim the *claws* of carnivores,
let the lions chew the grapes
of flowered fields,

and if that's asking way too much,
at least allow your hero
the saving *kiss* of his beloved—

do not let him
drink himself
to a shrivelled, pitied state,

nor *allow* his neck
to fit into
your frayed and knotted noose;

show the mercy you believe
you never got,
show the dead
and deities
how it could have been much better
(if only *you*
had been in charge),

and do not await a Messiah's
return
to get the work that's needed
done—

do it now
and do it quickly,

in the loving,
triune lines
of your haiku.

Miracle

Tonight I will ask you to marry me.
You will surely say I am mad,
in the British sense of the word,
and then laugh off my promise to love
and commit as I-must-have-stopped-over-
at-the-pub-and-had-a-few-too-many
before our coffee date on this insignificant
middle-of-the-week kind of evening.

But this day is anything but ordinary:
Look at my hands, they are stained
from painting my kitchen the colour
that is your favourite
even though my eyesight is failing,
and I'm convinced that both our God
and the birds have given us their blessing
as shoots sprouted in my garden overnight
from seeds dropped from above
and the weather person on TV
said there'd be no rain
for the next seven Saturdays to come.

Hildegard's Tomb

I offered to go with you,
to the mausoleum,
thinking you'd said "museum,"
believing we'd gaze at vases
and cracking busts
made by the dead;
instead we entered a corridor
filled with corpses filed in rows,
inscriptions engraved
by the living
in a climate-controlled
grave,
and I wondered which was better
in terms of art,
immortality.

Coda III

That page at the end of my notebook,
the one that is blank,
is the best poem of mine you've ever read,
you say to me as I choose which to keep,
which to toss and pretend I never wrote.

*I went through it
when you were away, you reveal
in a tone bereft of innocence,
like a boy boasting to his friends
that he managed to swig some vodka
when his parents were in the basement,
perhaps sorting through laundry
or checking on the furnace
or doing something that required him
to be cunning and to seize the moment
like a vulture that dives to the ground
while the corpse is still warm enough
to pass for something living.*

*Your metaphors are silly, you say bluntly,
your analogies make me laugh—
those of scavenger, Russian drink,
mischievous youth.*

*Take the last sheet in your book,
the one without any writing:
it made more sense than anything else
you've rambled on about.*

I reply that you are right,
that pallid vacancy and lines of blue
have more to say than verbosity,
that I should just write "white"
instead of "pallid,"
that I misread my spiny thesaurus,
that what is simplest
is most complex
and lives in a realm
no words can elucidate
or yield direction to;

that it's a sign of literary innovation
to have an entire volume
of nothing but lined paper,
that the next time I buy a notebook
I'm best off to merely scrawl my name
upon its cover
and wait for the accolades to pour in
from those who know the work of a genius
when they see it.

The Fall

I sigh at the sight
of the moth I find so lifeless
in the garden,
rarely noting
its beating white
in the days or weeks gone past,

and my friend who'd passed away,
from a toxic mix, concocted,
said the reason why
he longed for death
was to grasp the love
he'd missed while still a-breath,

that after you have died,
others speak well of you,
spill eulogies of praise,
cry that you'll be missed,
say your poems were *beautiful*,
your paintings, *works of art*,

that all the things you'd ever done
are now *immortalized*,
once ignored, *beatified*,

that he didn't want to take his life
because he loathed the sun,
its warmth upon his face
or the birdsong of the dawn,

but in the *hope*
he'd somehow feel
the intangible touch
of love,

its too-little, too-late
arrival,
its better-than-never embrace,

its invisible kiss that's heard
when someone weeps
at the foot of your grave.

Marooning the Muse

We sat at the beach *together*
but I didn't write a thing.
I looked to the horizon
and its meeting of sky and sea
and the cerulean they both shared
at the point where we see
the world is round indeed.

You wrote of sandpipers
on the strand and the seagulls
encircling the trawler
traversing the harbour,

and I left you the metaphors
to find while I was lost in a reverie
that had Magellan meeting
Eratosthenes
on the edge of a precipice,
saying yes, it's all an illusion,
this vortex of birds and their fish,
this looping of ships and our poems.

The West Coast of Somewhere

As a boy, I saw only sand and sea
and stones I pitched with a splash
beneath the shifting animal clouds
that I envisioned.

As a single young man
on a day of sun and cirrus,
I knew nothing of rocks
and waves colliding with the shore,
only the flash of skin and curves
exposed for browning.

Now middle-aged in wedlock,
ambling along the beach
beside my wife,
I see the patterns on pebbles
and the gulls that dip for trout
while the crew of college girls,
jumping for *frisbees* in the surf,
are supposedly a blur below
this cumulus of savannah cats
overseeing their great,
ephemeral kingdom.

Fidelity

*This is the fluid in which we meet each other,
This haloey radiance that seems to breathe
And lets our shadows wither
Only to blow
Them huge again, violent giants on the wall.
One match scratch makes you real.*

—Sylvia Plath, “By Candlelight”

Our shadows, faithful followers,
super glued to our
forms—
ever-loyal,

whether we’re good
or whether we’re not,

and there—
if the right
kind of light
will allow—
in our lovemaking,
our murders,
our scaling of mountains
and stairs,

and here, leaping
off a trestle,
when all's become too much—

see one dive
towards the river,
disappearing
in water's crest,
engulfed below the
ripples,
in the darkness
where light is lost.

Third Trimester

The Beatles are on Sullivan
and I'm about to be born.
There is no correlation
other than my mother
is watching them on television,

and though my eyes are developed
by now, they're closed inside her womb
but I swear I'm hearing something
with these new ears of mine
that I've never heard before
(not only this thing called "music"
but the frenzied screams
of American girls);

and yes, once I've entered the world,
the melodies meant for me
will be simple and patronizing,
designed to soothe,
make me slumber,
and I'll wail, scrunch my face
instead, demanding, in my own
wordless way, that the mobile
above me start to chime
She Loves You Yeah Yeah Yeah.

Interlopers

I cannot be sure that the birds
and the squirrels—let alone the big racoon
that climbs down from the belatedly budding
tree—are the same characters
who I used to see then didn't
through months of frozen landscape
when, I imagine, the mammals
were in some sort of hibernating state
or at least taking it rather easily
in their primitive burrows while the birds
were in Florida sunning themselves
and drinking premium water from a fountain.

I feel they'd be offended
if I said "welcome back"—
that they'd believe I think they all look alike,
that they might be here for the very first time
and I've mistaken them for last year's gang,
that the food I'm leaving
as a token of friendship
wouldn't be their first choice on the menu,
that a would-be friend wouldn't assume
they're all the same
and that they could easily pick me out
of a crowd of 100,000 people
within a second of doubtless wonder.

Flower Children

It's hard to believe that crotchety old man
and his wife hobbling into the store
where I work were once hippies.
Their faces creased like a shirt
I forgot to put in the dryer
and had no time to iron, the man's pants
pulled up to his chest and his wife muttering
something about the pie she has to bake
for the Sunday church social.

I try to picture them at Woodstock,
a farmer's soggy field overrun
by painted young ladies
showing their bouncing, naked breasts
at a time of dawning liberation,
the man then bearded without the faintest
hint of grey and both of them smoking pot
and waiting for Jefferson Airplane
to hit the stage.

I can't imagine them
listening to acid rock
or Led Zeppelin's vinyl debut
with its flaming Hindenburg crashing
to a hellish death in New Jersey.

I can't see the man swapping his
Arnold Palmer polo shirt
for a psychedelic tie-dye
and the woman with her midriff
bare and smooth, a peace sign
above her navel.

They ask if they can pay by cheque,
that they've never sent an email
when I suggest our online specials,
that they've yet to see our Facebook page
and that Instagram is something
they never would have imagined
when they rolled in the mud over
half a century ago, dancing
as if they would never age a day.

Priscilla, Asleep

I've noticed,
whenever you roll to your side,
you take much of the blanket
with you,

my legs and feet bereft,

left bare
but ready to run,

into some sentry owl's
night,

through ethereal
sheers of fog,

should I renew
my dream of old,

our missing
child's
help,

with neighbours
roused
by ruckus,

the slaps
of a shoeless
dash.

Cassiopeia

On our anniversary,
we spend the evening
gazing at the stars

yet not as lovers do,
making wishes
on ones that fall,
but imagining instead
there's an alien couple
on some distant
speck-of-a-world,

not quite as human as us,
with a few of their organs
flipped around,
but still the kind of people
we'd relate to,

not as deeply "in love"
as before,
yet *enough*
to never leave
the other,

and we wonder
if they think
they'd each be happier
in the arms of another,

if they too
have awkward silence
in the aftermath
of a quarrel,

if they believe that they can last,
at least, until the offspring
are all grown up,

if they envision
what it would feel like
to have their spouse,
unexpectedly,
pass away,

and if they'd ever survive
a frigid night
looking *up* at the sky
without them.

A Place Beneath the Water

We drive to the beach
the day you're released
from the hospital,
the pills once afloat in your glass
currently a memory
taken by tides;

and I suggest a brief, brisk swim
in cleansing waves,
to wash the stress
from your battered mind,
and you strip-down rather hastily,
splash about as a child might,
as you did when you were a girl,

and I lose sight of you
in a panic of thirty seconds,
as you submerge your head
and hold your breath
for a protracted half-a-minute,
attempting to touch
that part of yourself
where the air cannot reach
nor light tell the world
what you've hid.

Minus 21 and falling

It is colder than before,
the other night
I complained of chills,
and frost embossed
on windowpanes;

that which they call *cancer*
eating away my insulation.

Bring me a second sweater,
my cherub. Wrap me
in scarves and a toque.
Clothe my feet in woolly socks
and give me tea to drink,

hot enough to warm my hands
when they hold the steaming cup,
but not so hot they burn
or bring me back to vibrant nights
we spent on other, happier things

and my hands cupped
your breasts and ass
and I knew nothing of the cold.

Exhalation

*Breath is the bridge which connects life
to consciousness, which unites your body
to your thoughts.*

—Thich Nhat Hanh

My muses
must have fled from me
before
my coffee fix,

in the crash
of afternoon,
my pages white
and naked,

in clamour
that comes
from *nothing*,

leaving me feeling
foiled,
unable to pen
my poem.

I opt instead
for inertia,

open windows
bringing breezes
from the west,

sibilating
stories
of the sphere,

wind that carries
exhalation
from peasants
in the field,
who groan
while bending backs
and picking rice;

from mothers
in their push
to birth their babes,
and the cries that come
the moment
they emerge,
cords cut,
bottoms slapped
with care;

from orations
from the senates
of the world;
the homilies
of the holy;
the prayers
of all devout;

from the schoolboy
spouting love
into the ears
of his first
crush;

an alcoholic's
song of rote
into a stumbling,
crooked night;

the death-bed gasps
of the sick and grey
in the seconds
before they die;

from a waitress
and her drag
on cigarette,

in her too-short break
from servitude;

from all the creatures
of the forests
of the earth,
the hunters and their prey,
the yelps and screams
of the kill;

by the will
of currents, carried,

co-mingled in jet-
stream,

abating breath
that lightly ruffles
the adjacent
chimes and sheers.

Poetry, it heaves.

This
is poetry.

The Fence

On the other side of the fence,
the neighbour's grass is lush
and weedless. I see him kissing
his stunning wife, tenderly,
without hesitation.

On the other side of the fence,
I see the public school
where children tumble,
laugh, dust themselves off.
Recess comes twice daily,
and at lunch the shouts
are louder.

On the other side of the fence,
I see the skyline miles away;
clear glass towers
holding clouds
but for a moment,
the ones that sail through sunlit blue
and I think I see a window-washer
dangling
like some *Spider-Man*—
with binoculars I make him out

and though I'd never do that job myself,
I imagine the pulse of life
around him
five-hundred feet mid-air,
his beaming face
bouncing back at him
from the translucent, 38th floor.

The fence
in my backyard
is far too high.
I'd like to see much more,
see what lies
beyond the pillars
of banks and monoliths,

the foothills in the distance
which rise and drop,
like breasts that lift and fall
in heated breath,
like those of my neighbour's wife,
who sunbathes
while he's away,

a *hey there* look that's thwarted
by the noble tenth commandment
and six feet of cottonwood.

Watchful

—for a sculpture by Walter Allward

In the hours after dusk,
we deduce he plots the *path*
of distant suns, waits
unabatedly
for Antares to explode,
its cradled remnants
to feed five fetal stars,

or stares expectantly
at the halved or crescent moon,
hoping to behold
a *crater's* new creation,
amid the burst
of meteor impact.

At the pinnacle of noon,
we can't surmise the subject
of his gaze, always skyward, note
the sun should bring his eyes
to squint and narrow, fancy
if he's witnessed
every shape and sort of creature
in the clouds,

wonder if he's worried
about *the big one*,
the asteroid that's due
to smite the Earth, if the flesh
of what he emulates
follows the fate
of dinosaurs,

praying that some *God*
will part his lips
if he should spot it,
beseech us both to kiss
then run for cover.

Haight-Ashbury

The temperature in our apartment
is always moderate,
20 Celsius, or as our friends in
San Francisco call it, 68, never too frigid,
too torrid, as pleasant as its people
who birthed a twentieth-
century love of gay and poetry,
where Ginsberg howled
and Ferlinghetti kept the city
lights plugged in,
grateful for their dead, their '67
just a narrow notch
before some elusive ideal
that hovers within our reach.

You tell me to never touch
the thermostat and I acquiesce.
What we call *warmth* is but the middle,
the centre of some utopia
absent of fire and of ice.

Yes, the ground there occasionally
quakes, much like our walls and
ceiling do whenever the tenants
upstairs argue about the bills
or break into a dance
we've been curious to behold.

This is the Reason

I've never written you
a love letter, as I did for the girls
I crushed on in school,
vowing a childish *forever love*.

I've been told that *both*
can never truly be promised,
there are too many variables
upon which they can falter—

an unexpected loss
of mind and memory,
the foreboding phantom
of infidelity,

that our lifespans
are simply too long,
the decay of what we were
befalling while we breathe,

that the warbler outside my
window, his years but a
jaunt through junior high,
says it better,

his skyward pledge
to his treetop mate
daily putting me to shame.

The Carnation

The carnation I left you
was given with much pondering—
not as romantic, they'll say,
as its more beloved, historic rival,
the rose;

not as many songs and poems
describing its allure;

without plethora
of oil paintings
to capture its pale pink petals
on canvas—

but please remember, darling,
it will last a little bit longer,
even if but a day,
those extra, precious hours to say
I love you, I'm sorry, come back to me.

Tanka

Our daughter races,
attempting to catch the birds.
If she had the wings
of a pigeon, she'd leave us,
dropping occasional notes.

The Ellipsis . . .

teases amid the white,
leaving us to guess
what's been omitted,
cherry-
picking its many biases,
filtering out the
disparaging in every
book and movie review.

See it there, at the start
of a neutered sentence,
as though the initially
penned words
were never scribed,
not critical enough to share,
like lifting a stylus
above the grooves,

lowering it precisely
into the record
after the opening verse
has been sung,
singling out the chorus
as if that alone
were more than enough.

I was recently told
I was doing it wrong,
failing to leave a space
between this trinity
of dots. *It takes up
too much room*, I replied,
looks peculiar on the page.

Do not leave me
wondering what these lines
conceivably said,
in the heat
of an angry moment,
within the quote
of a love confessed,

this trail that leaves
the ending to conjecture,
a search for the
discarded
we were never supposed to know.

Lionel

lays down tracks
like he did when he was a
kid, predating *The Neighborhood
of Make Believe*—
he was already in college
by then, getting A's and getting
laid, evading the Draft
till the excuses had run out,
a frontline Private
ducking marksmen from
the Viet Cong,

returning with his leg
blown off and his carob skin
scarred by the relentless spray
of shrapnel.

Today, both the medal
he was given and the pin
of *Old Glory* ride in the caboose,
behind the load of Pennsylvanian
coal that's terribly out-of-date,

as all of it is, really: the freight
cars disappearing into a distant
tunnel like a rodent's tail
that darts into drywall,

a baseboard cavity never patched,
puffing smoke as if a gambler
sucking on a cigar smuggled in
from Havana when the Cold
War brought us all to our knees,
shuddering under our desks
though we had told ourselves
fervently that this is just pretend.

Wild Bill McKeen

This village
through which we're
driving is home
to "Wild Bill McKeen"

and though we haven't
a clue who he is—
or was—
his name is on
a banner in the air,
tied to a pair of
streetlights
to make certain
we'll never miss it.

The posted limit
of speed is only
30, and there's
not a lot to look at
so we defer to
our conjectures
as we crawl—

surmise
he's a hockey
player, spent his time
in the penalty box,

a master of slash
and slew foot,
told the refs to
go fuck off,
took a piss
on the Lady Byng.

We then travel
back in time,
think he may have
robbed a coach,
rustled cattle,
outdrew the county
sheriff after starting
a barroom brawl.

We think of synonyms
for *wild*,
saying his hair was
endless, unruly,
he'd grown a beard
from chin to foot,
grunted like an ape,
clutching a raw steak
with savage hands—
tearing off the
pieces with his teeth.

In minutes
we're back
in the country, racing
past the farms
and grazing horses,
say his rep
was overblown,

mere hyperbole,

from the folks
who've led some
pretty boring lives,

that Wild Bill McKeen
took his steaming
cup of coffee
without cream,

once jaywalked
across the road
while it was raining,

returning a *book*
overdue
by a day,

never guessing
he'd be immortal
on a sign,

or better yet—
in a poem,

by someone too lazy
to google
his claim to fame.

Osmosis

The way our cat
sleeps on books
makes us think of *osmosis*,

her head reposed
on the cover's title,
her paw outstretched
over the author's name
denoting some kind of kinship,
as though the writer
forged a portal
for lazy felines
to stealthily enter.

I've heard that whiskers
help a cat to navigate
the dark,
are conductors that channel
information to its brain
in a manner much quicker
than the antiquated roundabouts
of a podium-chained professor.

Let's wake our dearest pet
upon sufficient assimilation,
see if she spouts some Shakespeare
as none other than Shylock could—

or replace *The Merchant of Venice*
with a treatise of greater use
than a reprisal's pound of flesh,
done in a hush that doesn't disturb,

propping *A Brief History of Time*
beneath her chin
and await the meows
that otherwise beckon us
to feed, to stroke,
to clean her kitty
litter,
that speak instead
of cosmological aeons,
the pull of black holes,
the deep red shift in stars
much too far for us to see.

The Deck

You've been
bluffing your way
through our friend-
ship, the wine you've
swigged in fifteen minutes
making its naked presence
known,

that the joker
is worth
an even dozen,
one-up on my
ace of hearts,
for he vows to
make us laugh
at this time of
unspoken amour,

your royal flush
in the house of cards
we'll construct with
trembling hands,

while love is concealed
like the side of the moon
that dares not show its face,

veiled in the
kitchen window,
withholding
its fevered glow.

The Lesser Light

“Then God made two great lights:
the greater light to rule the day,
and the lesser light to rule the night”

—Genesis 1:16

No one writes of the moon of day,
the one that’s overshadowed
by the brilliance of the sun,

the one that sits in blue,
that’s pale and white as cloud,

its craters scarcely noticed
and its phases gone unchecked.

At noon, lovers holding hands
do so in a golden light,
beams that warm the faces
locked in smiles from solar shine.

While ignored at 4pm,
our satellite must reckon
that its time is slowly coming,
when its giant, yellow rival
will sink *below* horizon’s line.

And it is *then*,
when couples feel a chill,
that Luna's lamp aglow
alights their footsteps and their kiss,

casts a suitor's shadow
'neath a window washed in song,

that daughters eye its pockmarks
from their fathers' telescopes,

that poets pen their verses
for this orb of wolf and tide,

that nature finds its way through dark
in the shroud of a sleeping sun.

Paris

This one is not so Grand
as its river, no Seine
cutting at its heart
or couples arm-in-arm
amid *je t'aime*.

We can see
the eroding townscape
from this crowded
rooftop bistro,
and there's a soufflé
on the menu you'd like to try,
while I scan the varied wine list
for *Château Valfontaine*.

We made a *hard*, last-minute
left off the 403, figured
Brantford would be dull,
there's only so much
Bell and Gretzky
we can digest, yet again.

And substituting for a tower?
There's the truss bridge
serving the railway
that traverses the muddy banks,

its lattice now a respite
for a dozen, migrating flocks,

and, upon which, the locals say,
some have confessed their love;
plunged down in *ultime liberté*.

Rx

The pharmacist I talk to
totally gets my problem.
I show her my prescription
for *Joyfullix*, a new pill
to make you feel happy
and she gives me *beta-anaporilinovium*,
its cheaper generic cousin that's
the exact same thing except
for the impossible-to-memorize
multi-syllabic name.

To curb the pendulum of my
mood swings, the *Abilify*
my psych recommended
comes to me as *apo-aripiprazole*, 5mg,
to soon be doubled to 10.

Does this mean it will again be
rechristened? Will *cazolipiumestroniasin*
work just as well? If I show up at the
desk, will my pharmacist simply shrug,
tell me to close my eyes
and imagine the best, the cure
within me already, in the fantasy
that every drug is a miracle,
hot off the fucking line?

On My Literary Failure

The poem I've written isn't good enough.
It surely won't win an award,
be published in a magazine
or make the list of "Selected Verse."

I don't even know why I wrote it.
There was nothing inspiring me,
no thoughts of a long-past love,
no longing for a present-day face.
To tell the truth, I was too tired
to write anything at all,
had considered going to bed early
and not worrying myself about writing
a poem—good or otherwise.

The problem is that not only is this poem
not good, it isn't even mediocre.
It's one of my lousier offerings, to be frank,
and the fact that I'm even writing it at all
breaks the unwritten rule
about penning too many poems
about writing poems,
since poems about poems
shows that the poet was too lazy
and uninspired
to actually write about something
meaningful
and instead took the easy way out.

For it's clear there's no metaphor here
or clever devices that poets use.
I'm just whipping out words
with very little effort and it shows.
It fully deserves the rejection slips
it will undoubtedly encounter
throughout its many travels.

It will be the filler poem,
the last one shoved into the envelope
to make the submission an even five.
It will be the spare one,
the one that's always unpublished
and ready to go
if an editor friend needs one,
on short notice,
for their third-rate Journal/Anthology,
the one the better-known poets
will never bother to send to.
The kind you don't want to waste
your "good" poems on.

I'll pretend I wrote it just for that,
and that I made a special effort
to do so, getting up at 3 a.m.,
stepping lightly on my toes
so as not to awaken the cat,

and making a cup
of warm milk in the process
because it's an ungodly hour
to drink something stronger.
That after a sip or two,
I chose to pour it
over a bowl of cereal
since breakfast
was only a few hours away
and I needed the strength to finish.
That I struggled until dawn
over every word, comma,
line-break,

and if a rival poet that I know
happens to see this wretched piece,
I'll blame an overcast sky
for its vapid state,
its piss-poor stanzas,
spoilng the sunrise I was waiting for
and a subject other than this,

saying my poem about the night
yielding to day,
about the ever-elusive muse
I nearly caught,
would have been glorious
if not for that.

The Way in Which I Prefer My Demise:

by drowning in the Pacific,
not because it's pleasant
(like dying in my sleep
during some subconscious,
midnight reverie),
this under-the-surface
suffocation,

but for the reason that
if I ever did come back,
as the Buddhists and
Hindus say I will,
I'd want to live in the sea,
its relative calm and serenity,
its teal and aquamarine,
with humans seldom to be seen,
my hands but fins
and a caudal for feet,

and death, should it come calling
once again, taking merely as long
as the cavernous gulp
from the whale's insatiable hunger.

The Ruse of Mild Air

In this warmer than normal winter,
the trees are budding early,
in February's
rain instead of snow.

I feel I ought to go outside
and *bring* some soothing tea,
play a tranquil song
for harp and strings,

be the sandman for a spell,
send the rousing leaves-to-be
back into their shells,

lest the winds return from the north,
puddles freeze over,
and greening branches waken
to a bird-less lie of ice.

Poetasters

I've been told to never use *heart*
in a poem.

It's worn, archaic, schmaltzy—
used by all the *doggerelists*
this workshop leader
has warned us about.

It's right up there with *soul, love, yearning*.

If it's in the poem you're working on,
she begins to thunder, *cut it out!*—
using the image of a paring knife
which *seems* a tad cliché
(if I do say so myself),
wondering how much rent she pays
atop Mount Hypocrite.

I check her *curriculum vitae*
at the break—
stealthily, like a covert anti-lyrist
attempting infiltration,
masking the use of my smartphone
as if I'm an iambic James Bond,

praying she *doesn't* suspect a thing
while the others are out for coffee,

a smoke, obvious signs of stress
while interacting with a demi-
god: one who judges, demeans
your silly muse, encourages your
toil at a day job that's been dull,
monotonous, sucks your *spirit*
to the bone.

She's also wise to the way
we would-be bards cloak *banality*,
catches my synonym for my *psyche*
masquerading as my *soul*—
which, by the way, is counting down
the hours till this hellish experience
is done, wondering if I can duck
out for an afternoon *root canal*.

When we finally reconvene, she rails
against the *light*, how every single poet
and their grandmother's fucking dog
keeps spouting its tired truth,
and if she hears the word *shard*
just one more time,
she'll break the user's neck
like it's a fragment of fragile glass.

I wonder who it *was* that broke her heart
(sorry, I mean *vascular organ*);

if she's ever been kissed
under the shine of a faithful moon;
if she'd know what it's like to have
a mother die in her arms when she's only
seventeen, and a father who'd fled at five.

At the close, I'm the first to offer what's
written, wanting to get it over with,
my teeth chattering like a typewriter
on speed, my hands quaking
as if *all* the tectonic plates
were having sex,

the birdie in my treetop
fleeing at that moment—
terrified, vaporous, out an open window
with several cracks all down the middle,
believing it was to break
into a million little pieces,

unable to reflect
a summer sun
that's no longer welcome here.

Milestones

I missed my car's odometer
hitting the 100,000 mark,
despite my awareness
it was coming, that at 99,999
it was just a quick *jaunt*
to the grocer's,

that I'd happily watch it roll,
purchase a bottle of champagne,
toast my Chevrolet's achievement.

But then I got distracted by
a woman and her dog,
how sexy she looked
as she walked, wondering
if she was single,
if the calico kept her up
with its incessant, midnight
bark.

By the time I remembered to
check, the number read
100,001

and I cursed that damned diversion,
that it could take me *years*
to reach two hundred
thousand Ks,

that I'd have to drive
across the continent, say to hell
with the price of gas,

that my eyes will lock obsessively
on the dashboard,
in the hours I'm getting close,

that I'll disregard the safety
of other drivers, pedestrians,
the moment I'm *within*
the final roll, creeping at
a turtle's vexing pace
in NYC,

ignoring the crown of the Chrysler,
its delightful Art Deco,
the look of Lady Liberty
from the road along
the Hudson,

or if you find me in LA, that
Hollywood will fail
to get a glance,

that I'll never know how *right*
the Beach Boys were,

about *California Girls*,

not daring to peek at their legs,
the swaying of their hips,
lest a second landmark moment
fall to waste,

and I'm mapping out another
winding trek,
through the blandest fields
imagined,

only risking that a *scarecrow*
or a farmer's lovely daughter
will snatch my gaze.

Mahavira

I've fallen in love
with every animal
in the world.

So much so
I'm unable to do a thing
around the house.

You ask me to clean
the windows so they'll
shine, and I say that
spotlessness will harm
the backyard birds,

the thud of *slam*
and sudden death,
that I'll be triggered
by the sight of feathers,
a blue jay's broken neck
and fractured skull.

Our vacuum is an enemy
of *ahimsa*, that Sanskrit
word of peace for every
Jain, non-violence
with every step, that I've studied
Mahavira—

am convinced
the spiders in our carpet
smell of sentience;
that to suck up their silky
webs, their eggs and
future offspring, would be
nothing short of murder.
Live and let live,
in all those corners
we never look at
anyway.

I'd wash the supper
dishes, dust the counter-
tops, if it weren't for the
microbes and the mites,
that they've existed
much longer than we have,

that to disregard their feelings
due to stature
is clearly sizeist—
they're in a universe
all their own
and we surely wouldn't like it
if a colossus
of cosmic proportions
did the very same to us.

And the reason I refuse
to cut the lawn? The mower is
a guillotine on wheels,
one that would make Napoleon
cringe,

that the field mouse in the grass
has done *nothing* to deserve
this dreadful fate,
that both of us
will reap from lofty turf,

you with your toes
in the soft of green,
me with my feet
on the ottoman,
cheering when the quarterback
is sacked, by the defensive
end who's never squashed
a bug since he was born.

Bistro de Montréal

You're hesitant
to check
the bill of fare, *note de frais*
it says
in padded vinyl, recalling
as a girl
you'd ordered *consommé*,
after your parents
let you pick
from the menu *en Française*,
anything
that you wanted,
thinking it sounded cool,
never catching the
smirk
from the maître d',

that you were left
to learn your lesson,
slurping broth
and fallen tears,
eyeing your siblings
wolf *le hamburger*
et les frites, with a slice of
à la mode,
your parents, their
crème brûlée,

while you chose
to play it safe
and ordered nothing
for *le dessert*,
your mother's *rien*,
s'il vous plait,
delivered with an air
of punishment,
for your pouting
and jealous gaze,
for your failure
with a language
they had loved,

and you plotted
a future meal
when you were older,

worked your way to
C in fifth-grade French,

when you gleaned
a dozen mollusks
from the garden,
placed them
on your parents'
gilded plates,

that *escargots*
would surely
pay them back,

that *vengeance*
is the same in either
tongue,
served best
when *il fait froid*,

will take
its sweetest time
to come to pass,
like a snail that needs
forever
to move a mile,
careful not to crack
its spiral shell,
like a chicken
and its egg,
un oeuf
et un poulet.

Victor

Our friend prefers Victor
to Vic. He has no patience
for those too lazy
to include the second syllable.

What's the big deal?
he hears, from Steve
not Steven, Dave not David,
Mike not Michael.

His parents
had stayed up
throughout the night,
just days before he was born,
chose *Victor* over 100,000
others, that they declined to
save some dollars
on the engraving of his bracelet,
never falling to truncation,

that *Vic*
was nowhere to be spoken,
from junior kindergarten
to MBA,
birthday gifts unopened
if a short-form had been
scrawled,

saying
it wasn't him,
that he refused to wear a lanyard
pre-scribed with Sharpie black,
by someone who assumed
it didn't matter,

and he won't check-in
to the hospital
on point of death
if they get it wrong,

swearing
the carver of his tombstone
had better *etch*
in all six characters,

just a single letter shy of
seventh heaven,
the luck of the dice,
a wonder of the world,

that he really doesn't
need to add a y,
knowing that to him will go
the spoils either way.

Pockets

*I've got one hand in my pocket
and the other one is playin' a piano*

—Alanis Morissette

I can never have enough pockets.
I've bought a dozen cargo pants
for the multifarious pockets
that they boast. No other kinds will do.

I need a pocket for my keys.
I need a pocket for my wallet.
I need a pocket for my covid mask
and ones for the notes I jot—
with a selection of ballpoint pens.

I realize I've embarrassed you on dates—
your slacks without a ripple
while mine are hugely bulged,
sagging from added weight:
my plums and water bottle, my phone and
cigarettes, the pair of Ralph Lauren—
hoping the lenses aren't scratched
by the deodorant I carry just in case.

I bring a bar of Dove, a folded facecloth
with me when we're at the shopping mall—
their bathrooms are notorious

for their running-out-of-soap,
for their dryers on the fritz,
that hygiene's more important
than my wearing some haute couture.

And I've ketchup when we need it—
the food court cutting costs,
too cheap to include
a packet with our fries.

I want *pockets* within my pockets—
ones that securely snug my
Fisherman's Friend, knowing I can't afford
to drop them on the floor, how germly
that would be, though I have some *sanitizer*
with me if it happens.

You tell me I should get a better system,
like you with your nylon purse, that women
are a walking *pharmacy*,
have ten times more to carry
than us males, have foregone the many
pockets since the Holocene began,
knowing *one* was a pain in the ass:
for the desert kangaroo with precious lading,
the knackered baby within,
hopping along the outback
without a means to ease her burden.

Ratios

There are 20 quadrillion
ants upon the Earth,
at least that's what the experts
gauge, and there's two-and-a-half
million for every human.

I don't find that comforting,
that there's fifteen fucking zeroes
after twenty,
that I'm somehow
responsible
for 2,500,000 ants,
feel unsure of what to do
with that amount,

and if my neighbour were to die,
do I care for twice as much?

Ants can look after themselves,
you remind me, speaking of their
diligence, the way they stick together,
that their antennae relay messages
much faster than our texts,
adding they could conquer us
anytime, if they really wanted to,
from their colonies around the house,

that they're content
to simply go about their business,
hard-working communists
that they are.

I feel the need to get away,
where I'd forget about the ants,
do some tourist kind of things,
take in New York City in the fall,
breathe the *crisp* of Brooklyn air,
find all of the varied spots
where *Seinfeld* had been set.

Seated behind your laptop,
you declare there's over
two million rats in NYC,
that it's not as bad as it sounds,
say there's *four* of us
for every *one* of them,

that we could saunter
through Central Park,
extol the spectrum
of the leaves,
catch some vintage jazz
in Greenwich Village,

while we wonder if these
vermin know the ratio,
that it actually falls
within our favour,
every time they migrate from
the sewers, join us on the subway,
risk our baited traps,

if that bite of smelly pizza's
really worth it,
for them, for us,
and the anxious Italian baker,

who never checks what's crawling
around his feet.

Algorithms

After thirty years of struggle,
I've penned my *masterpiece*.
It's the poem I can gloat is *perfect*:
funny, heart-wrenching, born of
blood and sweat
with not a hackneyed phrase
to be found.

I call it my magnum opus,
think I've *reached* top-
echelon, that I'll have to
conjure up a way to make my
humble brag sincere.

It's flawless in its cadence,
accent after accent,
but to attract the *avant-garde*,
I've thrown in extra lines
that look

 look l
 o
 o
 k

like

 this

knowing it's *innovative*,

that if *everyone's* being innovative
it's still called innovative,
and to fail to see my *genius*
means you're clearly just jejune.

I *refuse* to send it to a journal
unless they publish it *right away*,
allow me to pick the font
and put my face upon the cover—
filtered, the one that sweeps the
crow's feet from my eyes,
masks the freckles that haven't faded,
turns my grey to lightning blond.

I post it in a *hurry* to my accounts,
wish the Facebook, Twitter crowds
could have *seen* it in the making,
like watching *Rodin* sculpt his *Thinker*,

that I should have up-
loaded the entire process,
let them see the brandy
that I guzzled,
as if I were drinking
Dylan Thomas under the table.

After half-an-hour, I wonder

why it's still without a *like*,
that it probably isn't showing
in the *feed*,
that it's all a conspiracy,
between Musk and Zuckerberg,
that what Penelope put
on her fucking toast
is considered more important;

that they're the lowest, common
denominator, the *plebeians*, who
wouldn't know a *chef-d'œuvre*
if they stopped and *sat* on it;

that all the other poets are simply
jealous, afraid I'll show them up,
that they'll look like grade-school
jingers compared to me,
that I'll crash their open mic,
say to *hell* with allotted time;

that *Auden* is put to shame,
that I've trumped his *Icarus*,
that no one will give a shit
about his wings from here on in;

that the ship will thumb its nose
instead of sailing calmly on.

Sister Doreen

paced up and down the rows
between our desks,
yardstick in her
grasp, ready to rap
the knuckles of our hands,
should we dare to grin or
sneer, fail to pray *Hail Mary*
without the reverence
She was due.

Behind
the school at recess,
we surmise
she's never had sex,
been a frump since she was
eight, wouldn't know a
condom from a balloon.

She greets us back
with a snarl,
ever-scanning for
mockery,

bellowing *wipe that stupid
smirk
off your face!*

And that's the moment
when you did it,
took a napkin from your
pocket,
dragged it *across*
your curling lips,
your mouth then a rigid
line, like the *pews*
at Sunday Mass,
or the cross above
the Confessional,
in which you'll enter
the day before,
offer remorse
to the forgiving
Priest,

who'd met the Sister
years ago, when she was
a *postulant*,
one who took a binder
to her breasts,
a practice
she began at
13 years, after her
father began to fondle
her in the dark,

shoved his hand
between her legs,

in front of Mary
cloaked in blue
upon the wall,
who later offered
solace, a place
where she was shielded
from the touch,
where the only
naked man
she'd ever see

was nailed above her head,
in wood and then in
gold around her neck,
unable to lift a finger
in the night.

Spoken Word

I definitely feel out of place,
at this late-night poetry
slam, over 30 years older
than this crowd of teens and
twenties
who are speaking
their bitter truth:

the fracture of relation-
ships, the lines of intersection,
narratives
of racist taunts
and kicks
to the fucking head
(from the anti-queer brigade),

and it's not that I can't relate—
fag! tossed my way
from all the kids
now grey with age, playing
sudoku by the fire
but that's *another* shoddy
poem I'll likely write—

for within this present moment
Naomi has hit her stride,
hooking me along
with her inflection,

familiar as it is,
an echo of a hundred thousand
poets who rarely glance
upon a page,

or don a pair of glasses
sliding down
along their nose, one that's
burrowed in a book
these flashy vogues
have yet to read,

and her eyes are seared in mine,
perhaps wondering
why I'm here,
so straight and pale a visage,
so Luddite
without a phone,

that I've likely never heard of
Twitch and TikTok,
knowing that I'd be lost—
especially in the latter,

where every word's a beat,

every syllable
always locked
in recollection,

where youth and fleeting beauty
pirouette,
in the shadow of a *bomb*
that's failed to show,
for generations,

of which poets
abandoned birds and blooms
to howl against its menace.

Sébastien

The artist exhibiting his work
in this dingy, downtown gallery
paints nothing but bowls of fruit.

Maybe he has some other
themes in his vapid repertoire
but all that's here
from wall to wall
are bowls of fucking fruit,
ones so dull and trite
he should have handed us
espresso as we browse.

In a whisper,
I ask you if he's ever read
the news, notices the homeless
in their rags a block away,
a mother selling her body
near the stoplight, kitty-
corner to where we're trapped,
unwilling to cause this dilettante
offense,

that we're pressed
by etiquette
to act like we're
enthralled,

eyeing every
stroke, insipid tint
and tone,

that we'll be obliged
to tell this boring hack he's great,
we'd *love* to take his card,
maybe purchase something later,

but before that dénouement,
here's a banal bowl of apples
to make us think
life's peachy-keen,

forget the Black youth
gunned by cops—
here's a pair of
avocados

and the Residential
"schools"—
bananas have never
looked better

please don't speak
of genocide—
the plums still have
their pits

and the earth getting
hotter by the hour—
see the orange
and its arc,
how fresh it looks
in my vessel,

its sweetness in my mouth
once I've put my brush away,
kissed the photo of my wife
snapped a day before she died.

The Mona Fucking Lisa

After a single session,
I already regret my *sign-up*
for this ekphrastic poetry
course, cursing to you
the assignment I was given:

*Mona Lisa, the fucking Mona
Lisa, like that hasn't been done
a gazillion times*

and yes, I won't be able to fake it,
that everyone and their mailman
knows her visage,
are well-versed in da Vinci's flair,
and their lofty expectations
will be something I can't deliver.

You ask me what our poet friend was given,
the one who always gets the lucky breaks,
and I tell you the *Voice of Fire*,
three lines of blue-red-blue,
vertically trite and prosaic,
that no one's ever heard of Barnett
Newman because he sucks,
that I could have scrawled a sonnet
on my kindergarten days,
on a pair of simple colours,

how the Gallery
had been fleeced in '89,
caught up in the avant-garde,
how 1.8 million
could have gone to help the homeless,
paid for their chalets
and pedicures, covered
the cost and tip
for their tortellini
Bolognese;

but as it is,
I have to *sleuth* my way
behind that Delphic smile,
invent a tale of Giocondo,
that Leonardo
tried to paint her
minus mirth and maturation,
in 1499,
when his subject began to sob
from pent-up grief, reliving the death
of her baby daughter,
his *Moaning Lisa* a work of art
the Renaissance ignored
(bathing in their beam
of erudition), that even Machiavelli
said *chin up, she needs a grin*;

that when the *time*
arrived to try it all again,
da Vinci made a jest,
a side-splitter, that Lisa barely
smirked at his ill-timed droll,
that he hadn't a clue
how it felt to love and lose,
consumed as he was with
innovation, invention,
his maps and magnum opus,

failing to heed
the red of blood and life,
her blue, blue mood.

Contractions

I say our spell check's
rather daft
to underline in red
my use of *amn't*.

I am not impressed
when you tell me
it isn't valid,
despite the Irish
lips that speak it,
adding it's a stunt,
to inflame
the English snobs,
the ones who lift
their crumpets in the air,
sing *Charles is our King!*

Amn't I your girl?
Joyce in *Ulysses*
came to write,
and none would dare
to insert an
erratum slip,
citing it as *err*.

You're not in Ireland
now, Boland as a
girl was told
when she sprung the word
in class,
immortal now in verse
she penned
without a second thought,

as will I, in a poem
that even you'll
refuse to read,
unless I *write*
a second draft,
for a sharp-eyed
London editor,

who has never set a *foot*
in Cork or Dublin,
one who knows a typo
when they see it.

Ennui

I'm bored.

This would be
a terrible time
to scribe a string
of words.

It might be better
if I depicted
my mood as *ennui*—

then at once
I'd pique some
interest, from both the
writer (that's me) and the
reader (that's you)

but maybe not, that the
word's been used
en masse,
in a slew of
poetry chic,

that it's
trendy to slip it in,
our scrawls
without a muse

though we could say
it's the current *zeit-*
geist, leaving us at the
periphery

which all sounds
kinda cool, but still a *bore*
nevertheless,

that it's the proverbial
worse-than-death,

whereas the end of life
births epics, sagas,
ones to last millennia

while my staring at the wall,
at paint that's been
dry for years,

is hardly
conducive
to legend,

unless a Frenchman's
ghost, invoked,

the one who coined
the term,

on a week
he sat *alone*,
watched the sloth-
like ascent of grass,

before he could
summon
the word to describe it.

Barky McBarkface

is mailing it in today,
his half-assed *ruff*
a far cry from his
usual barrage of
WO-WO-WO-WO-
WOOFF!!!

when his teeth
are keenly bared,
sharpened by the
years of crunchy bits,
his tongue a hanging
sock that's soaked
in drool,

and we've been
grateful
for the window
that keeps him in,
on his human's
upholstered couch,
intimidating
any who venture near,

who worry he
might smash right through
the glass, devour the flesh
right off their bones,

ones he'd calmly
chew
come the slaughter's
epilogue

but not *today*,
his head barely
lifting from his
post, where his daily
sentry duties
have kept the neighbours
on their toes,
literally—

a ballerina's step
to check the mail,
a soft and trepid
creeping to the car,
an *exhalation*
once they've locked
themselves inside,
repeating the
scenario
but in reverse,
when they've returned
to their driveway
with a gulp,

but for *us*, on our
pleasant constitutional,
the one he *normally*
interrupts,
we worry that he's
sick, that decrepitude
and wear
have settled in,

that we *won't*
know what to do
come his passing,
won't know what to
speak of
when the birds are
melancholic,
when the air
is dense with sweat, the
clouds a brim of black
before they spot us,
walking 'round the bend,
a *flash* and peal
of fury to be unleashed,
one that scares us
shitless, warns
us to keep our distance.

“me too”

When I tell you
I love you
you answer
"me too"

and perhaps
I misconstrue,
that you love
yourself
like the
affirmations
advise,

the ones we
see on Instagram,
that Rupi Kaur
is full of them,
churning them
out
like some poet in
a fast food
window,

where you pick
up a side of
"you're better off
without him"

plus some
platitudes
on the rain
to wash it down,

or maybe
"me too"
is a memory,
in the (not so)
recent past:

an abusive ex,
a diddling dad,
the gymnastics
coach who always
held you snug,

checked out your
ass
instead of your
landing,
after vaulting
and parallel bars

but then
I've always
read too *much*

into your
words,
thinking there's some
story
below the surface,

a recollection
that encircles
like a shark,
that you're afloat
in a punctured
dinghy
awaiting rescue,

by an aqua
knight who rides
the seven seas,

one who sees
a kraken
where there's not,

thinks "right
back at you,"
"ditto kiddo"

is the beast
of a thousand
fathoms
he's come
hastily
to slay.

After the Eclipse

It's there,
in our walk around
the crescent,
the sign a golden
diamond:

Blind

Child

Area

one that's weathered
from the elements,
from the creep
of rust and age.

It's *been* here
long enough
for the kid to be grown-
up,

and now we
look around us
left and right,
spy the houses
and their trees,

the veranda
on which he sits,
in the vivid
imagination
of our minds,

tinted Ray-Bans
on his eyes,
their black *opacity*,

in his lap
an open book,
the white of
pimplly braille,

perhaps a 19th-
century classic,
or the latest from
Stephen King,

subduing his depression,
his lack of intimate
sex,

his hearing
sharp as ever,
as it was when he was
six,

right after he
lost his sight,

when the footsteps
of the aphids
piqued his ears,
the wings of moths
to follow,
even spiders
threading webs,

and now,
if he could sense us,
the heaving
of our breath,
the thump
of our assumptions,

bursting
through our chests
like the roar of an
atom bomb,

the flash of which
would blind us
unless we looked
the other way,

as we'll do in just
a moment,
when we think we've
seen him waving
from a porch,

the one on which
he rocks,
wistfully,
cacophonous
amid the quiet.

Chuck Barris

That guy from *The Gong Show*

Is dead.

I only think of it

because there's a portable

gong in this antique store,

way out in the country

where we say we're never judged.

The only reason

for a gong like this

was to summon someone for supper:

an irritable granddad, conceivably,

much too hard-of-hearing

to heed a vocal call

to consume.

I don't know how a *gong*

came to symbolize

artistic failure—

a juggler dropping eggs,

their shells now sticky shards;

a ventriloquist

flapping his lips

like wind-blown ensigns

on a ship;

a gorilla-suited singer
cracking notes
in drunk falsetto—

the padded mallet swinging
really an act of *euthanasia*,

sparing
would-be performers
further jeers and rotting fruit,

its reverberations longer
than a verbal shout to stop—
but not so cruel and caustic.

And then there's
Gene Gene the Dancing Machine—
never allowed to finish
his minimalist moves,
cut off by a *commercial*
before his inner Fred Astaire
could be unleashed,

score three *10s*
from adjudicators
who were always on time
for their dinner.

Sui Generis

It's never the same sky
twice, I remark,
on this walk that hugs
the river

and you're right to cite
the saying as a riff
from our former
Sensei, who spoke of ripples
in the water and the
debris that's carried
away,

and I'm sure he thought
the *same*
when it comes to clouds,
each wisp and configuration:

like there, the horns of a bull,
one that mimics Taurus
in the night, when again
the combinations—

endless, like a lotto
with only a fixed amount
of balls,

their digits dropped
by the *push*
of gust and gale,

their numeric, Arabic faces
granting wishes,
like a genie
freed in the desert—
from a bottle swept
by something we cannot see,

where there's *never*
a nimbus in sight, a stream
that surges through, and the stars
a phantom tease,

that under their fleeting cool
we swear the patterns are alive,
inspire us to entreat
upon the first we see
each dusk,
as if the billion proffered up
by all the children of the Earth

never go unanswered,

as if the mothers and
their dead arose
when early morning sun
was at its lowest,

like a Christ who strolls
the streets of Jerusalem,
His blood on cobble-
stones

barely even dried,

mistaken for a Ghost
who answers prayer
to this very day,

with the holes that
grace His palms,
the rivers
gushing through,

astonished He holds
the whole world in His hands.

Longing for Charlton Laird

The best thesaurus
I've ever had
(and yes, I'll admit
that I use one,
that I can't
fire off
five-hundred
thousand words
from the front of
my fucking skull)
is a *Webster's
New World
Thesaurus*

by Charlton Laird,
2003 edition,
one I had to tape
like a doctor
closing wounds
on the battlefield,

and I've been
hunting
for an updated
version ever since
(though mine *boasts*
it's "completely new" —

a one-time *truth*
now faded lie),

well, sleuthing
as far as
bookstores
will allow,
and that a google
search will take me,

only to discover
Charlton died
in '84,

making me wonder
how he'd done it,
invoking *synonyms*
while in a coffin
(or as a forlorn
heap of ash
in someone's urn),
figuring
what to say
in place of *life*—
though life *itself*
had slipped
on through his fingers

(well, if he still
had them that is,
boney as they'd
be).

I feel as if
I should name him
as co-author,
of all the poems
I've ever scribed,
knowing some
of the searing verbs
belong to him,

that I might have
uttered *heart*
instead of *pith*,
if not for his suggestion,

old rather than
seasoned,
which may have
caused my wife
a bit of offense,
the spark to end our
marriage,

though I might have
won her back
with my *enchantment*
in lieu of *love*,

that my little extra
effort
regained her favour,

a sprinkling
touch of magic
from the pages
in my hand,

that I've never
believed in ghosts
until today,

his sibilance of
nouns
providing rescue,
from another
tired lyric,

his antonyms
a warning
to watch my step,

that what I'd thought
was a flawless term
is in fact
the *opposite*,

that I'll die from
embarrassment
if I use it,

join him in that great
Athenaeum in the sky,

our conversations
locked
in pregnant pauses,

each of us
trying to conjure
the perfect word.

Untitled

I asked if you'd
come up with a
name for the poem
you've been writing
and you answered *not yet*,

annoyed by my
response: *great title*,
succinct and
to-the-point,
which was super-
fluous, I know,
as well as most
unfunny,

which reminded
me of the moment
REM were *Out of Time*,
to conjure the *name*
of their new LP,
that Warner
unwittingly *broke*
the creative block,

that I too
have seen the crag
of muted stones,

the words that failed to
topple
off my tongue's
precipice,

like the night
I was unable to
speak, *anything*
of love, if I loved
you, if it thrust into
my side like a lance,
nailed my wooden
heart upon a stake,

that in the agony
that is silence,
all I could finally
manage: *not now,*
I'm sorry, not yet.

This Bag is Not a Toy

This pellucid,
plastic sleeve,
slippery as an
icicle
to the touch,
which held my *trio*
of padded envelopes
(used to mail those
once-in-a-blue-moon
orders for my book),
is inked with
an outré caveat:

THIS BAG
IS NOT A TOY,

and I'm forced to
wonder what *birthed*
this bizarro warning,

if it was a toddler
who had ditched
her coloured blocks,
to slide
her chubby fingers
into its mouth,
unable to shake it off

(like a fox with its
foot in a trap),
and bawled her
bellowing tantrum
through the daycare,

or possibly
a boy of six,
slipping it over
his head,
mimicking the
helmet of an
astronaut, taking
that *one giant leap*

before suffocation,
before seeing
his entire world
as the forlorn,
trifling marble
that it is,

then maybe that
kid in the barrio,
who's never had
a plaything in her
life,

whose father
brought it back
for a refund, in
order to buy some
flour, the stationer
refusing
before he's shot in
desperation and
an orphan is born
of it all,

hearing from her
dad via letters
from the jail,
arriving
stamped & sealed
for 40 years,

who saved up
for a telescope
to scan the lunar
landscape, had it shipped
to her lonely *hovel*
in São Paulo,

coming with *Silica* packs,
labelled CAUTION:
DO NOT EAT,

which perhaps
has saved some lives,
a culinary
temptation
otherwise,
sheathed in bubble
wrap,

that you'd pop it
between your teeth
were it not for
the admonition,

with a dash
of cardamom,
a swig of Brazilian
rum to wash it down.

On the bliss of our collective ignorance

Let the *Fur*,
Zaghawa,
Massaleit,
mean nothing at all to us.

Let *Darfur* remain a reference,
vague, to be sometimes heard
as filler, when what's cooling
on the back-end
burner is calmly
condescended to,
allowed a scant
half-minute of mention.

Let a late-night
documentary
on the pulse of genocide
give its nod to west Sudan,
to the region
that was touched upon
earlier in this poem.

Now flip the jarring channel
just as quickly as you can,
as if a commercial's
annoyance,
an interruption,

a splash
in the sleeping face
of our complacent, crass TV.

Let the villages be burned
and watch their women, raped by gangs;
let the *Janjaweed*
wield machetes
and the children lose their limbs—
we only save for oil.

Let the camps swell up
like a wave, crash
from overcrowding,
stomachs cave and bulge
and the sickness be unnamed:

it's hard
to remember
each one,
easier, by far, to say

we did not know about it,
we did not know about it,
davon haben wir nichts gewußt.

St. Christopher's Playground

That boy
who plays alone
is a future poet,

the way he throws the ball
against the wall
betrays it best:

a bounce against the bricks
and rolling past
the other kids—

none to pick it up
for him, landing in the mud.

Look at how he cleans it:
his sleeves absorb the earth,
the water,
the melding of the two.

See its mock rotation,
still wet with residue,
its slow and soggy spin
cupped by his wobbly,
sodden hands,

giving time
for phantom people
to get off,

the ones that stay behind
to write the reason
they cannot jump.

**The excuse I use
to avoid cleaning under the stairs**

How lonely it must be
to be a spider in the basement,
one that's sitting on its web,
in a corner without light,
awaiting that *rare* arrival,
the hoped-for, off chance encounter,
when an insect-thing
will venture where it knows
it really shouldn't,
get trapped in sticky white,
kick its hair-like limbs
in a panic,
sensing deep-down in resistance
that the end has inevitably come,
there's no escaping this alive,
feeling the webbing
beginning to bounce
as its maker at last approaches.

I sometimes have to wonder
if the spider ever pities,
considers *mercy* for a moment,
seeing its tiring victim struggle
in the seconds before the kill;
being tempted,
not by pangs of some *compassion*,

but by those of *isolation*,
supplanting that of hunger
and its drive to feed and hunt;

taking an instant to say *hello*,
in its sly, spidery way,

enjoy the twinning breath
of *company*,
a meeting of insect/arachnid eyes,
wish it could *share* a tale or two,
get to know this flying creature,
fellow cellar-dweller, *better*,

hope there's no karma-bearing grudge
or vengeance *doled* by divinity,
that its prey will understand,
know the slaying isn't personal,
that the pinch and bite are quick,
that the blood that's drained
is a *gift*,
gratefully received,

that *calming* sleep comes first,
so deep in life's last ebbing
there'll be the precious chance
to dream.

Rodentia

My landlady is ranting
about the squirrels,
how they dig up all her flowers,

calling them *tree rats*,

that all of us would hate them
if it weren't for their tails,
how bushy they are,

their skill at being cute,
adorable, the *way*
in which they nibble.

I try to give them credit:
that they don't crawl
out from the sewers,
pillage our provisions,
leave dark *droppings* on our floor.

*Name a plague traced back
to squirrels,
the time they carried fleas,*

*stowed away
on Spanish galleons,
kindled contamination.*

In addendum
I mention *Willard*,

its sequel in '72,
remind that *Ben* goes hand-in-hand
with Michael Jackson, whose life
was a horror all its own.

Yet I still admit defeat,
that no one's ever
crooned to a bounding
squirrel,
that it would never
top the charts,
be in a position
to redeem,

rain disdain
on those below
who curse its splendour.

Saturday

The backyard birds
have competition.

I came here
to hear them,
their morning melody,
rousing like a symphony
with a wind-blown branch
as baton,
small and so frail,
severed off a tree
by a sunrise gust
from the south.

The men next door
are re-roofing their house,
hammering shingles
while their radio blares
a wicked country brew:
a cacophony of twang
and Texas drawl,
with *she's-a leavin' me
behind in muh tears*
accompanied by their raucous
talk and the snap
of beer-in-a-can.

I pluck weeds from the garden,
ears straining
for the inimitable notes
of nature,
wishing the robins
could drown
the pedal steel,
the pedestrian
commercial pap,

that their crescendo
devour
the chorus of nails
and *woe-is-me*,

stain the fresh-laid black
with white
when they are finished.

On Solving the New York Times

The broken bits of pencil
only spoke of your frustration,
and it wasn't from the headlines,
the *Pax Americana* and things
pertaining to Trump.

Your seething led you stomping
to my door,
to the greying goatee clippings
left unswept. To the empty bottle of rye
I'd purposely hid, miserably.
To every quip and inane joke
expressed at breakfast.
The Cream of Wheat is burnt
and *I should have made it myself*.

You play it taciturn,
and I go out for a timely jog,
feigning smiles to the neighbours
in case they heard us fight.

Darling, do a complex
crossword
just for *me*. Squeeze in words
not yet invented.
Damn the dictionaries
to a mangled heap.

Scribble

“I never loved you anyway”
and find a synonym for *lies*,
in your thesaurus,
before that too is discarded
as my heart
in *seven down*,
twelve across.

The Wisdom of Rice

Don't pity the rice
Aunt Josephine
had said,
during her usual mirth
and merriment,
and we wondered
what she'd meant.

Now, with news
of her earthly passing,
her mantra is remembered
and its meaning,
made clear:

*Rice, my children,
will likely fall to the floor
as it's poured,
a grain that's grown
for nothing
and yet it grows,
in tawny fields and tall,
the height of pride
and triumph;*

*not concerned if it's crushed
by a farmer's boots
or spit aside in mills;*

*neither worried if stuck
to the bottom of pots
nor wedged between the teeth
of a fork;*

*and, if it's not to be consumed
as food,
it will leap in the air
in a second of joy,*

*to be trodden
by a bridegroom's shoe,
perhaps caught
in a wedded wife's veil,*

*swept in a pan
by a janitor's broom,*

*resume its endless celebration
with the dust.*

Past Life Aggression

Perhaps I was a ruthless *Khan*,
vengeful, without mercy,
who cut down peasants
by the thousands,
taking an unsheathed sword
to young mothers and their babes;

or I may have dwelt in dungeons,
coaxing heretics to confess,
beat remorse from wicked witches
and any soul who wouldn't kneel
at the foot of the Papal throne.

Was I simply just a gadabout
who cheated on his wife? A *rogue*
who left his children
for the warmth of a harlot's touch?

Did I ridicule the Crown,
crudely scrawl on Cambridge walls?

Did my horse
trample *Queen Anne's Lace*?
Had I ignored its defecation?

My dearest, would-be betrothed,

is the reason for your “no”
the fact I deserted my troops in the war?
Had I fled from German flags,
escaped an ambush out of fear?

Or was I incredibly initiative instead—
start a firestorm in Dresden,
drop a Nagasaki nuke?

Did I watch as the Chinese starved,
give my approval to the Red Star State?

If so, please forgive me my transgressions:
taking the Name
of the Lord in vain;
my callous *killings* of the innocent;
my drunken, playboy ways.

Impart to me your pardon,
your blessèd, fragrant kiss—
not the one that Judas gave
but the caress of *Juliet*,
the embrace of *Bouguereau*, eternal;
the one that ends the cycle, trips up
karma at the finish line.

Like Darwin Among the Gods

Christmas, and the word became flesh
on our scribbled, Scrabble board,
an empty bottle of wine
and a record strumming chords so calm
in lieu of breeze or fire.

"Calvinist" to your "random,"
with "stop" and "go"
branching out,
feebly, with little imagination
or points.

And we discuss
the interconnectedness
of all things,
how life is tangible—
dependent on dice and chance;
how the meeting of hearts
is coldly decided
by the lefts and the rights,
the ins and the outs,
of daily mundane doings.

Look, a physicist is born
because a young cashier has smiled
at a completely foreign stranger;

had he foregone the pack of gum
you say, he'd have married another woman,
who'd bear a son
that serves hard time—
20 years, no parole, no remorse.

Watch the atoms collide at will
and all the faces disappear;
observe the cells dividing,
for they too will reach dry land.

When Reverend Tucker
quotes the scriptures, he says
"I ain't no ape."
Show him how his sins hold fast,
how he fails the Lord of mercy,
how he strains at gnats—eats camels,
ignores the tailbone of his ass.

If I leave you, my love,
at 10:03, I'll make it home in peace,
write a tender song for you,
how your scarlet locks are streams,
flowing to and fro' in dreams.

You'll be enchanted,
consider my proposal,
say "yes" for all it's worth.

But please, don't let me tarry,
say a word or phrase ill-thought:
for if I go at 10:04,
I'll catch a damned red light,
my car side-swiped by drunkards,
my chest pinned to the wheel,
legs crushed,
spirit floating somewhere
to a place of God's own choosing.

And it is there, as Dante warned,
amid the howls and shrieks of loss,
I'll die a second cosmic time
from a flash of what would
and should have been;
your breath pulsing on in bliss,
the ignorance of the not-yet-dead.

Bread, Blessing of Birds and of Widows

In the park,
one of the pigeons
stands by the wayside,
watching the others
devour the bread
you've shred and tossed
about our feet.

She's in grief, you say to me
with conviction,
recalling my scolding
from an hour ago
(for your leaving your lunch uneaten).

You add that her mate was likely killed
by a lunging cat,
or maybe its wing was fractured
and it took days to die,
unable to fathom
why the sky
suddenly seemed so far away,
indifferent
to its laboured hops,
its failure to seize
what was cast:

seeds of melon, sunflower,
bits of broken crust.

Juanita

The email labelled as “junk”
by my vigilant catcher of spam
says “dearest one”
in the subject.

Though I wish it weren’t so,
I confess I don’t recognize
the sender,
Juanita McTavish,
of Spanish-Scottish descent
no doubt.

She’s indicative
of the many others
who send me junk,
all with unusual names
that speak of cultural
intercourse:

Vladimir Cobb, Horatio Singh,
Mumanabe Parker,

all just saying “hello,”

or the pleas from the African rich,
from the widow of Todd Buwakadu,
who left so many millions

she doesn't know where the hell
to put it.

I then decide to add
all of the missed opportunities
I've had,
all of those British lottos I've won
but never bothered to send in my claim,
always *hastily* deleting the message
because it's labelled *virus B.S.*;

why I've suffered through all my ailments
when the cure is found in the link,
the one so kindly included
since my sex life
is *Mannfred's* concern.

But getting back to the matters
of heart,
my Juanita's endearing message
that's been clicked and purged, unread;
I'll wait if another is sent,
if I'm still her dearest one,
and perhaps I'll take a chance,
those one-in-a-million odds,
ignore my email's discerning filter
and see if tonight true love
be mine.

Socks

The *most* insulting reason
you can give
for declining an invitation
is that you have to fold your socks
(or maybe rearrange
their drawer).

There's nothing exciting
about socks.

They look plain silly
in sandals,

wearing white
a winter *faux pas*.

The only heed
I pay them
is when I check they're not
mismatched.

I'd never give a pair
on Christmas Eve,
or Valentine's,
or even Office Workers' Day;

and what they cannot
and will not be,
aside from a token of love,
is an excuse from a family function
or an escape from a date
that's made,
with the girl you think is
homely,

the one you'd like to flee from
though you've never checked her out
below the knees.

Trumpet Player

Trumpet player,
hold your note against the backward mind
of the corps of your oppressors,
stomping off to office towers,
cubicles and charts.

Do your solo
on the spur,
the squall of sound
that lets us know
the anger of your race,
the family left behind
in run-down walk-ups.

Sweat from your brow
under hot blue light
and rail against its calm.
Tip the scales both low and high
and do it poetically.

Trumpet player,
play for *her*,
the one you loved, now gone.
Make it seem
that flags have dropped
with sailors dead at sea.

Anthem

The path to peace it's said
is found in sacred books of old,
on parchment, scrolls and ink;
in a choir's hallelujah,
ringing bells and fervent prayer.

Let's scribe our wishful reveries,
our old prophetic songs,
say the bomb will never fall;
that police will join the protest
and the judge will grant a pardon
to the Indigenous kid in chains.

For it's not that hard to add a verse
and paint a pretty picture:

Governments disband,
there's no more need to demonstrate,
and prison gates swing open,
those who leave bear violets,
while violence drops as dust.

Faith begets trust,
trust begets love,
and the one who was your enemy
brings you candy in the night,
saying all is calm in Jerusalem,
and flags are neither waved nor burned.

As Spring Yields to Summer

I only see her when she's out,
the woman across the way,
pushing her lawnmower
that has no engine,
the grating of squeaky wheels,
its whirling, rusty blades,
the sound of a hundred haircuts.
A fumeless, slicing symphony,
the grass wafting fresh
and green.

Day and night
through my windowsill
and all is
as it should be:

cat eyes narrow to slits
at the first burst of light,
squirrels play tag,
bumblebees collect, send static
through the afternoon,

dogs howl at three-quarter moons
and backyard Copernicans
marvel
at the shadows on lunar scars.

A couple kiss and rock
on gently swinging seats,
embrace, sigh into sleep,
and dawn comes back again,
announced by startled yawns
and singing larks.

As Spring yields to Summer,
tulips slump head-first,
vibrancy fades, reds go rose,
goldenrod yellows,
joining the ordinary
around us.

There's my neighbour
riding his bicycle, narrowly missed
by a milk truck,
Ms. April May receiving delivery,
twice weekly, half a quart,
that, and measurements
long thought dead
still heaving
their penultimate breath.

Hawaii

The summer gusts
are making Lake Huron
look like the ocean—
and I envision for a moment
surfers roaring to shore
at Waikiki
and this landscape littered
with high-rise condos,
beachfront Hiltons
where the conifers are
and the skateboard kid
a gofer
for the drug runner
up in the penthouse.

There's little sand to spare
when tourists congregate
by the thousands and
thousands of miles away
from that fantasy
I'm suddenly grateful
for this water's low salinity,

that it's free of sharks
and jellyfish stings,

that the jetlagged couple
who'd stomp on my towel
aren't here, too rude
to say they are sorry.

Church Bells

The steeple bell
from the Anglican church
chimes every 15 minutes,
doing a double at the bottom
of the hour, and nothing short
of a concerto at the top.

I check my watch
and it's 2 minutes ahead
of what I hear,
on par with my smartphone
and the shortwave station
that's purportedly set
to an atomic clock.

They say on WWV
that it's accurate
to within a nanosecond
every 3 or so million years,
though I doubt
the Australopithecines
who must have got it going
could have foretold the competition
from Rolex, Samsung, and the Rector's
reliable ringing
just a block-and-a-half away;

that these simple-minded crosses
of ape and men
could have envisioned accuracy
above that of God,
that His House of Worship
is 120 ticks behind the times,
that I haven't a clue what to do
with that brief but priceless allotment
that the good Lord, if He is right,
has given me.

The City

The city you say we hate
has grown on me now
and I feel no enmity with it.

And I walked today,
through the city you say we hate.
I stepped in snow
and slipped on ice
but I didn't really fall—
a railing there to rescue.

It was cold today, in the city
you say we hate,
and the homeless sat
on sewer grates
and felt the heat blow up.
I thought it ranked of methane
but there wasn't an explosion.

I was accosted,
in the city you say we hate,
by a man panning for coins.
No change, no change, me no English,
no change, I shook my head at first,
then turned and flung two quarters at him—
from the both of us,
though I knew you'd disavow.

A fire truck roared past me
in the city you say we hate.
Its sirens screamed like murder
but then that would have been the police
and there were none at all in sight.

A house must be aflame,
in the city you say we hate.
I hope right now it's vacant,
with a mother and child away,
shopping, or on a visit to a friend.

If it's you who've befriended,
tell them not to worry,
that there's a hydrant
on the corner where they live;
that all will be rebuilt
by kindly neighbours and their kin;
that they needn't feel embittered,
blame the gridlock, shunting trains.

Tell them, while you too
have time to love,
a little.

Curbside Café

I thought she watched me
as I wrote,
a girl with beret cliché,
Irish cream and lemon Danish,
who'd smoke a cigarette
if legal
but it's not;

and she's reading *Schulz*
and Robert Frost
and the many roads to heaven
and I thought to ask her what she thought
of love and death and living
amid our own self-
fish carte blanche.

She wasn't there, really,
nor am I—we weave and thread
and move about
as atoms from the sun,
that settled here so predisposed
to birth and fear and loathing.

I see her sometimes, singing praise
when the moon
is halved

and if the evening tide
pulls cold,
when the waitress looks for dollar tips
and the closing chimes
ring sweet;

and I have no time to end the verse
with lights that cue to leave,
the sax that fades to hush,
and the cop who walks the beat
looking through
the tinted glass,
ideally dreaming
of a night
without a single
shout or crime.

The Porpoise

*That's
not a dolphin,*
our niece and nephew
complained,
wiser-than-the-norm,
their hands and faces
pressed
upon the aquarium's
massive glass.

That's
when I felt sorry
for this poorest chap,
the porpoise:

sent to the
ocean's
second division
for its blunt and rounded snout,
its smile not as cheery
as its beloved,
famous cousin,

without kids
to toss it a ball
with which to balance
and entertain,

few to care
if it's caught in a net
that's cast
to sweep our tuna,

lacking loving liberators
to mass upon the sands,
newsmen
leaving its beaching
on the evening's
cutting-room floor.

We decided to take the children
on a hired boat one day,
sat still in the calm of the bay,

waiting for dolphins
to show,

watching for fins
that slice the water
always reminding us
of the sharks,

wishing for leaps
that announce their arrival,
the happy grins
that say *we're here*.

Maybe

When you turned to me
and raised your brow,
I too made a face.

He sauntered past:
grey, dishevelled,
second-hand clothes
still rank with beer and smoke.

The little girl beside him
was clean and bright
and smelled of soap.

Maybe he was her father
or her granddad.

Maybe a stranger she befriended
as he panhandled,
in front of the candy store
a block away.

Maybe he had a few coins to spare
and bought her gumballs
instead of the cigarettes
we assumed he craved.

Maybe he was gentle
and didn't fondle her at night
when owls made their perch
and roosters knew their time
was coming.

Errata

sounds so chic
I almost yearn
for that fatal flaw,
on the printed page,

denoted as a footnote
'fore the text,
or on a photocopied
slip that slides within.

In real life,
there isn't such a
lovely-on-the-tongue descript:

*Error, Mistake,
Bone-headed Blunder;*

their speaking
ever caustic
from the lips,
their hearing
so acidic
on the ears.

Soothe my wrongs
with word, my dear,
with Latin
that is kinder;

let others know
there's beauty
found in failure,

in the remembrance
of my sins.

Seven Day Rental

One of my students borrowed
La Maison du Plus Pied
by Jean-Pierre D'Allard,
telling the rise, fall
of the Sainte Bouviers,
ensnared by riches,
hatreds spawned
and business won, lost,
won & lost.

She recounts her favourite scene
towards the end,
where a liberated Marie
slaps the face
of brutal Serge, her husband,
played by an aging
Stephane DeJohnette.

It's the one-eighty,
the turning point for both characters,
the moment where love
drops its transcendence,
its fixed and static state.

I think Anise, my student,
sporting occasional welts
that I ask nothing about,
has found a muse
to lift her trampled spirit
as she says
the film, the film.

Yes it is such.

Grandfather's Room at the Greenwood Nursing Home

The caregiver warned us
about curtains,
how they keep
the sunshine out,
that Venetian blinds
are preferred,
allowing the light
to seep in slowly
in your sleep.

This residents-wish-they-were-dead place
never ceases to depress.
And it's more than just the usual
smell of urine.

Watch us watching
watches
and ponder lame excuses
to leave.

You're somewhere else
entirely,
a decade ago
we think:

*Let me try and show you
how the Gordian knot
was solved*

and

*We'll sing Opa
Opa Opa*

like when Nana
slipped out
from beneath us.

Poison Ivy

The lawyers had stamped and signed,
the executor divvying up
what was left of her possessions,
and content or so we thought,
we paid
a belated call
to the scanty cottage
she'd called her home,
two rooms of creaky floors
and a kitchen more mildew than tile.

Grandma's abode
had been neglected,
no one paying visits
while she rotted her final days.

We expected something pretty,
the irises we were pledged,
the gladioli and ripe persimmons,
not the brambly knots of branches
free of foliage,
prickly green
popping up
where the perennials once had stood,

leaving us to wonder if the bulbs
had birthed a miracle,
somehow dug themselves
out of their dirt,

snuck *away*
in the thickest night
while the owls and bats bid adieu,

and later
found the graveyard
where she rested,
draping her headstone
with dangling blooms

as we took out
our corroded spades,
our hoes and bending saws,
and cut away the chaff,
wiping foreheads
with our forearms,
soaking in our inheritance.

The Child

Yes, yours was the most unusual
of reasons,
to avoid the city playgrounds,
the parks where noisy children
race amok.

*One of these little boys
will be the death of me* you said,
singling out
the preschool lad
on the base of the monkey bars.
*A murderer,
when he's all grown up,
one of them has to be.*

You quote statistics, demographics,
the laws of happenstance.
*Look at his cherub innocence,
that ice cream-covered face.*

For whatever wayward reason
he will turn,
despise a younger sibling,
his mother's scolding ways,
learn that knives can do much more
than slice an orange, butter bread.

You'll pass him on the sidewalk
in the future,
your purse will tantalize,
sway with every cane-abetted
step,

or, on a night you're even older,
you'll *answer* fervent knocks,
shed your caution
when it's due,
his blade upon your throat
upon his entrance,
no hint of recognition,
no sub-atomic
memory
of your eyeing his every
leap,

when he fell
upon a stone
and you were near,

stuck a bandage
where he'd bled.

The Monk of St. Marseille

Your prayers
are duly recited
in the Latin you learned
while young—

yet still
you fail to forget her,
your unrequited
love,

her voice a melodic
scale, sacred
as Gregorian
chant,

without brass
or string
to accompany,
divine in its naked key.

The Violinist

I'll wait for you in the foyer,
alight by a chandelier,
and streetlights seen
from the window sill.

I'll be sitting
in the velvet chair,
an antique too good
to touch,
but hardwood floors
should not be soiled
by shoes I've muddied in the rain.

As I dry,
your lesson will come to a close,
and the student that you love
will leave some angel cake
as thanks,

for teaching her Dvořák,
his cycle of *Cypress Trees*,

perhaps
unbeknownst
of its origins,

how Antonín
was inspired
to write it,
loving Josefina,
his pupil in Prague,

watching her marry another,
leaving a muse
to scribe his work.

You will keep her gift
in the freezer,
not daring to warm
in an oven,

eat,
and be left
with only the crumbs.

You'll buy tickets for two
to the Symphony,
the Number 6, in D Major,
with me as reluctant guest;

and from
a concealing balcony,
you'll boast of your protégé,

that she's a cellist,
violinist, as well.

You'll say the pastoral
sequence to come
is her finest musical moment,
her strings ascending the others
in an overture to *you*,

and it's only the ill-timed
coughs from the audience
that keep me from hearing it
as so.

Aurora Borealis

In the north, at this peculiar season,
at this time of cricket-night,
we'll see aurora borealis,
the waves of greenish light
on grand horizons.

I think of stately trees,
if *arboreal* pertains to Heaven
and you tell me that it doesn't,
that it's terrestrial,
that the trunks and spindly branches,
with leaves that fill each top
as *diadems*,
are simple, silent observers
of the celestial show above.

I mention *holidays*,
the one we're currently on,
if the calendar takes note
of the kaleidoscope ahead
and again I'm deemed confused,
that the planting of oaks and elms
has *nothing* to do with the stars,
that *Arbor Day* is christened
with a shovel and a spade.

A final, blazoned variant comes to mind:

Aurora, with radiant, emerald eyes,
a daughter's perfect name,
one that we'll hold onto for the future,
as a *tribute* to the swirls
of cosmic glow,
ones that dance aloft,
soundless and angelic.

Slavic

The couple behind me at this outdoor café
speak in a language I strain to distinguish—

perhaps it's Czech or maybe Polish,
their inflections rising and falling
like the scales from an innovative pianist,

or it's possibly the Ukrainian
I think I recognize
after surmising I've heard "varenyky";

and I imagine the man is telling the woman
that despite the many trials of his day,
he is lucky and blessed to have her,

that when his boss yelled at him earlier
he thought only of stopping at the florist
on the way here to meet her,
hence the arrangement on their table
is *his* doing,
not the proprietor's,

that even though
all the other tables in this place
are crowned with pink and red zinnias
and the varied shades of phlox,

this was merely a case of the waiter
having mimicked what he'd seen
when this Slavic-speaking pair
were the only ones here,

before myself
and the other patrons arrived,

talking to each other in a tongue
that kept no one guessing what was said
as the late-day sun began its daily descent
behind the jagged skyline in the distance.

Methocarbamol, 1500mg

I'm unable to open
my tiny bottle of pills.
No matter the effort,
the creases of *strain* upon my face
and its fervent flush of red,

no matter how forcibly
I *push* the cap down, twist it to the side
as instructed, it simply won't release
its chalky stash.

There is *tamper proof, child proof*,
and then there's *paranoid*—
that a *psychopath* might taint
this guarded cache, laugh
in his mother's basement as I gag
on *arsenic*, wishing me well
in hell.

I picture Sisyphus on steroids,
his inability to *budge* a puny pill,
its supposed stoney ascent,

and the child of the Hulk
and Hercules, teeth clenched in frenzy,
veins *popping* under the skin
of his brawny arms,

as this vessel begins to *mock*
with its modest plastic,
its illusion of simplicity,
that a little old lady from church
sprung these oblong captives free;
that he was cocky, overconfident,
that he'd finally met his match.

Oh, did I tell you? The meds are *muscle*
relaxants, designed to loosen the grip upon
my back; that I am powerless to *bend*,
touch my toes; that a game of *Twister*
is out of the question;
that I'm even going *barefoot*
since it's *impossible* to pull up my socks;

that this agony of exertion
exasperates my condition,
is another prime example of the
cure being *worse* than the disease,
one it swore would be vanquished,
with an eight-ounce glass of water
filled with ease from the kitchen sink.

Aquatics

*Can you cry
underwater?*

the click-bait
write-up
asks me,

well, poses
the question
to *you*,

who've gone
further down
than I have,
in the nearby
lake and ocean,

swum in the
deepest end
of every pool
since you were 8,

and you concur
with the premise
of the essay,
say your face
was soaking wet,

and not from
H₂O,
but from the *grief*
discharged
from your ducts,

that it was the *only*
place you could
find
to let it go,
the fish *indifferent*
to your wailing,
the tremor of
your limbs,
the scream
they couldn't hear—

or the weeping
that you did
after plunging
off the board,
knowing few
could hold their
breath as long as
you,
knew the figures
that you saw
were shoulder-down,

no open eyes
in sight,

that none could
decipher *tears*
from all the beads
that dotted faces,

knowing you're not
allowed to cry
in summer sun,
even if your uncle
who had touched you
shouts *Marco! Polo!*

under the guise
of being playful,
that he's
only setting *free*
his inner child,
like your father
always did
until he couldn't
touch the bottom
with his toes.

Meter Maid

*Lovely Rita, meter maid,
nothing can come between us*

—The Beatles

The parking meter has ripped me off
again. Granted, a quarter doesn't buy a lot
these days, 12 minutes
in the crumbling core,
and there's little I could have done
in that paltry span:

watch an addict score some meth, perhaps,
or a behemoth lumber towards me
with his biceps freshly inked;

or maybe spy the hoodied teen
in front of the *Cash and Dash*,
with all of the windfall
from a senior's cheque.

Shaking this rusty contraption
accomplishes nothing—neither does
thrashing the part that promises
each Sunday will be free—
which does me no *good*
on this middle-of-the-week
kind of moment.

I'm *yearning* for the world
that's gone *away*, in which Petula
Clark had sung to go *Down-*
town;

storefront *windows*
filled with stock,
the bustle of suits and dresses,
a cop directing traffic,
with seldom a skateboard seen.

I would have waited
for *Lovely Rita*
to arrive,
the heat from her sultry sway,

her expunging this metal rogue
of the piece of *change*
it stole from me,

saying it *buys* a leisurely stroll,
a chance to see the sun
ascend its zenith,

with plenty of time for coffee
at the shop around the corner,
or maybe *lunch* and herbal tea,

that she'll join me
once she's dispensed with
all her tickets.

The Shower

The pounding on the door
says *hurry the hell up!*

Have it your way, dear:
I'll emerge with hair unkempt,
still wet but apple-scented.

I swear I didn't mean
to use the *last* of your shampoo,

my eyes were *shut* when I groped,
while I palmed the bottle's nape,

like that *time* on a wobbly
ladder,
five or six years old,

stretching for autumn fruit,

in Uncle Richard's
country orchard,

afraid of slips and falls,

of biting into worms
should my *feet* be firm,
unfailing.

**This is all you learned
from your trip to the tabloid stand**

That walking isn't as pleasant
as you'd envisioned,
your memories
like the brazen cars
behind you,
running amber lights
and spitting smoke,
indifferent on
your quest to cross the street,
the man who's selling news
annoyed by a nickel
you say you're short.

That the Prince of Wales
is bald before his time,
that toupées are not befitting
for a King, that *Republic*
will be declared before ascent—
waiting for Godot and for what?

That your sneakers
are tearing suddenly
in the rain,
that they are cheap,

that leaves clog the sewers
and your socks are soaking wet,
to microwave
a dumb idea,
thinking they'll warm and dry,
not guessing
they'll start to flame,
the firemen
becoming angry
when they see the reason why.

That within
a crowded hospital,
your mother's stuck in bed,
on the 10th or 11th floor,
you really can't remember
because you never *visit* her,
save the time you needed money,
brought her crosswords
but in *Dutch*,
discarded in the dumpster
near the Starbucks coffee shop,
and you never bothered to check
if they were *English*
or ever solved.

That somewhere on the beach
in Monaco,
celebrities plunge in surf,
bake in Mediterranean
sun,
hope they're properly
buffed and waxed
lest paparazzi
snap their flaws.

That you'd wanted
to breathe some blooms
throughout this morning's
mile walk,
foregoing
the check on forecasts,
too impatient to read
at home,
the soggy pages ripping
as they're turned,
the wind smelling more
and more of worms.

The Weather

We realize at this instant
that the entwining of our
thoughts has come undone,
in perpetuity,

in a moment you
remarked about the weather,
the trading of cloud and sun,
a *peekaboo* of sorts I would've
wrote

but *too* many poets
have said it, in their lines about
the sky, its mutability,
ones scribbled
in lieu of love,

when their beloved
is unable to inspire,
when kisses are
chaste and clean,
a going-through-the-
motions like the constellations
do,

when we tire of their patterns,
their formulaic pose
in evening skies,

when Scorpius
and Libra
have nothing more to say,
to us and to each other,

a hush from which
the rain will give
reprieve,
in its soaking of our
clothes, in its thrumming
on our roof,

that a discussion
on our shingles
will be birthed,
that our dryer's
full of lint,
that the percussion
which we hear
reminds us of
applause,

ones noted
at the end
of a symphony,
the Mahler number 9,
through *which*
we listened
attentively,

relieved by
social graces
that beseech our
lasting silence.

The Tortoise

takes it personally
when called a *Turtle*—
scantly referred to
in poetic lore;
remembered
as a laggard,

for its excessive
longevity—
over one-and-a-half times
a centenarian,

seeing kings and
kingdoms fall,
new countries
arise
from the smoky
dissipation
of war. Surviving both Castro
and the Queen
and a dozen-plus
Presidents
in-between.

You've endured,
dear tortoise,
all of your animal friends
(if indeed you had any)—

and at funerals:
always the deathmaid,
never the death.

You were there,
creeping over a log
when the Wrights learned
how to fly, then
awkwardly stretching
your wrinkled neck
to see the moon
in '69;

and still, as the unburied
decay and scatter,
you linger, freeze-
framed around the world
by an iPhone's mocking
meme;

and you recall
when it was *new*,
these devices for
distant speaking,

hand-cranked,
then dialed numerically.

Only the trees
can tell your tale,
that you once
were young and spry,

plodding a *quarter-*
foot a minute
while the wild west
was won,

spending evanescent
moments
within your crusty shell,

that you were
far more sociable
than we think,
a jokester by the pond,

and yes, *you* were the one
that bested

the rabbit's
cocksure cousin,
one with a similar
problem
and a homophone
of hair,

getting
little respect,
shamed by losing a
race so long ago—

that to you was merely
yesterday, your single
instance of glory,
the only act to *outlive*
your endless aging.

And Then There Was Light

With your hands wrist-deep
in fertile soil,
you tell me your
infant daughter died
at break of dawn,
on a day that our star
rose without hindering cloud;

and you mused that early morning,
as you sadly went and found her,
stiff as a *Hasbro* doll,
her unblinking eyes
locked upon the ceiling,
that to call it “sun” is a misnomer,
for it’s connected to *Mother Earth*,
and either “u” or “o”, it says the same
masculine thing.

It’s the *female*
that reproduces,
you said, gives seeds
a place to call home.

“Daughter,” you decreed,
call it Daughter.
It will surely love us more
and our weeping will be greater
on the days it isn’t there.

Incongruity

i

Your mother was alluring in the nude.
I say this because you left the photo album
on the table. Did shyness overcome her
when she picked up the pics at the Fotomat?

We are the only creatures, clothed.
The others haven't a stitch
and we say we are enlightened?

All of us are naked in the shower.
I don't mean at once, in the same stall.
Just the thought will make us wince.

Back to the point about the clothing.
Do the children who sew for a pittance
make it moral?
Was the cotton picked to the lash
the sign of some godly purity?

You are whom God should have made
in the beginning. A more admirable name
for each animal, winding in a way
that only a river
and a *woman* possibly can,

the curves of breasts
and hips,

someone the Lord
would not have said *no* to
regarding what's in-
between the leaves,

a fruit
no tree of knowledge
could ever take from you
again.

ii

I pluck the olives from the salad
and that makes it less than Greek.

I retain the blocks of feta
and consider *German-Jew*.
It's been an oxymoron
since nineteen-thirty-three.
Bring me beer from Bavaria
and hot latkes from the slum.
I'll gladly show you
what can and can't go together.

A frown is a smile
standing on its head.

Feet are a pair of *hands*
unwilling to clasp in prayer.

Toes are cognisant
that fingers are more lovely—
so they never stretch for the sky.

Unable to offer light of its own,
the moon is but a mirror for the sun
in which to worship its own reflection.

What is *ugly*, anyway?
Is it the absence of beauty
or too much of it all at once?





The author of various books of poetry, as well as one of short fiction and another of photography, Andreas Gripp lives in London, Ontario, with his wife, Carrie.

Notes

p.78 *Watchful* The sculpture by Walter Allward referred to in the poem is on the front cover of this book. I took the photograph while living in Stratford, Ontario.

p.127 *Algorithms* The final six lines are a take on the second stanza of W.H. Auden's *Musée des Beaux Arts*.

p.172 *On the bliss of our collective ignorance* The closing line of this poem is in German.

Lauds and Laurels

I've always admired the progression in your poems and the way they move, effortlessly, from a quaint or innocuous observation to their unlikely dénouement, the way you succeed in always turning a thing on its head! I love the sweeping twists you deftly wring out of your closing lines, at once so obvious in their necessity and altogether out of left field. Spontaneous and clever and always a refreshing surprise!

—*Teresa Daniele, author*

I love your craftsmanship, your sense of rhythm, and deployment of consonance and assonance and internal rhyme. It's poetry after my own heart, poetry that dares unabashedly to be beautiful when discussing hard things. Poetry that knows that rolling your car and landing upside-down in a ditch gives you a new perspective on the ground above and the sky below.

—*Richard-Yves Sitoski, Poet Laureate, Owen Sound*

The poetry of Andreas Gripp takes hold of readers like a beguiling scent, evoking both nostalgia and the transcendence of memory

from the moment it is apprehended. This is poetry of common life, a relatable and lyrical poetry which propels itself like a song newly sung yet undeniably familiar.

—*Chris Morgan, Scene Magazine*

Your poetry has an uncommon, common touch: it touches something in each of us, gives us a word, a phrase, a picture that we can easily relate to. Poetry that does what poetry is meant to do: communicate!

—*Carol A. Stephen, author and poet*

The lyricist of our nation, determined to give the oftentimes untold stories of personal tragedies; the conveyor in the most exquisitely personable language of seasonal wisdoms; and perhaps among the leading spokespersons for the reinstatement of the poetic voice in contemporary verses ... as good as the American Poet Laureate, Billy Collins.

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