



Selected Poems

8th edition

Andreas Gripp

Selected Poems

8th Edition

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Selected Poems

8th Edition

2000-2024

Andreas Gripp

Beliveau Books

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Selected Poems 8th Edition

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Foreword

I turned 60 in 2024, and decided to create this updated 8th edition of *Selected Poems*, containing 285 offerings, including a number of brand new ones written up to the publication date; and together with my other recent works (listed just after the first title page of this book), I feel as though these all coalesce to present my poetic vision in an artistic endeavour that has gone on for over 30 years. I'm never certain what may follow the completion of a project, but if this is it, then thank you for being a part of it all.

Andreas Gripp
London, Ontario, Canada
Spring 2024



For my mother, Maria

*Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty
of the world, and makes familiar objects be
as if they were not familiar.*

—Percy Bysshe Shelley

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.

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 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.

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.

Tiles

There was a time
we showered together –
saving water
wasn't the reason.

Now I let a dozen
tepid streams
strike the tiles,
fall to waste,

rinse the empty spaces
where your hands
and breasts
should be.

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.

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.

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.

**Leaving the Dance Early
to Watch a Vintage Musical on TV**

I said we'd dance
like Fred & Ginger,
Gene & Judy,

that some lessons
weren't needed,

but forgive my blustered
boast,
my off-timed, two-step trips,
my squishing of your shoes
and turn-and-fall;

I'll prepare
a popcorn snack,
keep the candles all aglow,
and the swing of black & white
will give your throbbing toes
a break;

we'll see that love
between the couples
never weakens in the hush,
the quelling of the band
or the steady click that tells them
that the needle's out of grooves.

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.

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 Bush.

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.

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.

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.

**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.

The Season Arrived in Birdsong

The season arrived in birdsong,
in snowbanks receding like glaciers,
their slow and dripping melt
under a radiant sage of sun
eager to redeem itself
for its many days of absence,
its inability to warm us
when we needed it most,
and winter's cruel colding
instilling an innate experience
of Pleistocene hunters and mammoths,
of being bound inside our caves,
of venturing into the ice and wind
while we dreamt of distant greening.

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.

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.

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,
afame, 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.

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.

Why I Refuse to Write a Sonnet

If you were to give an ape
enough time, behind a typewriter
I've heard,
it will compose an English sonnet –
via the laws of chance
and average,
a billion trillion years
if needed,
defying the rules of death,
decomposition,
in the process.

If granted a span
of the same duration,
I wonder if I'd fare any better,
constantly failing
in bumbling attempts
at the alternating
rhymes and schemes,
confusing all the a's with the c's
and then forgetting
what *quatrain*
should be.

Although,
if I were honest,
I'd say it has *nothing* to do
with technique,

that my inability
is tied to its subject,
the *what*
that inspires the write,
or to be more precise,
the *who* –

your face and your body
untouched by my hands
as I type and I type and I type.

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.

Weeping for the Rain

Nobody plays
in the rain.

There are
no bundled children
making rainmen
in the yard,

no one on the pond
figure-swimming,
skimming pucks,

no angels made of rain
imprinted
on the hillside green,

no cups of hand-held water
tossed about
around the schools.

I saw a smiling youngster
catching raindrops
with her tongue,
promptly scolded
by her mother
to wait for winter's
flakes of white.

And so it goes –
the splash of boots in puddles
nixed by fears
of catching cold,
the rain adored by flowers
and the ones who reap and sow,

all the others
fearing the wet
of water's drop,
umbrellas
never opened in the snow,

the rain regretting
the warmth
of mild air,
the love it could have had
in a child's
touch.

11/3/11

Blossoms
were the first to fall,
in the rumble
that ruptured the calm,

and the land was shaken
as a globe of snow
in the hands of a beaming
child,

and window and wall
were cast to the earth
like an expulsion
from heaven of old,

boats and cars
both raced in the rush
of a fleeting, fatal
sea,

and the homes of Sendai
buckled,
as an origami's
fold,

were carried
with all the dead,
in the swell that defied
the tide,

and the sirens screamed
of fire,
reactors wailed
of melt,

while the callous sun
descended,
teased millions
with its kiss of light.

September 11th

When we set a date
for coffee,
you picked Tuesday,
September 11th;

and now I don't think
of espressos,
of bagels or a patio chat,
only airplanes exploding,
towers imploding,
a war on terror
launched.

I want my September
11th back,
without the carnage
that now comes with it.

I want its return
as a late summer day,
with a sun
that warms our arms
still bared
by breezy, short-sleeved
shirts,

with the kids settled in
at school,
first-day jitters
all behind,

a time to stroll
through country fairs,
red and yellow
coding games of chance.

Sing

Don't drop streaking tears
from your blurring, tissue eyes
at the death you think has consumed me.
Don't serenade my tombstone
with your weeping violins
or *play* a sombre requiem
for my god-forsaken soul.

Laugh out loud in lieu,
not in metaphor but for real;
I'm just beyond your touch
but not your still and silent sight;
see me in the spectrum
as the glass breaks down the colours:

sweating, pitching leather baseballs
in a lot in Tennessee,
arguing with the umpire,
throwing spitters past the plate;
and on days I'm feeling calmer,
serving ice cream cones to children
on a Sunday at Stanley Park;
and just beyond the tree line
in the north,
when I'm a little more daring,
burning a trail
on a snowmobile,

scraping bones
from frozen ground.

On a clear black night over Chile,
I'm mapping out the stars,
listening for radio waves,
sending signals of my own:

that I
was never lost
but never found,
that I'm more than just a body
and the sum of all its parts,
that my poems can really breathe
out on their own,
for all our benefit –

yours, mine, and the cross-eyed,
baby girl in Lisbon.

Dial proper frequencies
for pick-up.
Hear me sing a lullaby,
softly,
in Portuguese.

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.*

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.

The Pitiful Crow

The pitiful crow,
its grating caw
competing with
the blissful song of birds,
its attempt to join the choir
thankfully shunned.

If the finch and robin's
warble
is accompaniment to harp,
the lilt for ascending sun,
then the crow in all its blackness
is a heavy metal shriek,
the violent jolt of blinding
rays-in-eyes.

You'll never find a record
filled with crows,
a disc akin to woodwinds
all off-key,
a hungry baby's cry
or a parrot's vexing squawk
before its mimic.

Only deathly shadows
give their blessing to the crows,
call them *brother bird*
and *sister winged*,

their lot among the headstones
of the gone,
and the ones who hear
the reaper's nearing thresh,
the drowning of the starlings'
call of dawn.

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.

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.

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.

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 complete and 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 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.

Just Friends

In this, your final visit,
we talk of “only friends”
and the other silly things
that make us turn
and look away,
from each other’s eyes,
when neither you nor I
would want it this way.

And I change the subject
rather hastily,
when you ask
am I still pretty?
Its catch twenty-two
stares me in the face
when I speak in lieu
of suitcase bombs
and bio wars
that make for front page fodder.

I don't want to die unloved
you say and I agree,
and a gas bar clerk
is shot five times
as if once
won't do the trick,

bread lines grow in Montreal
and the Budget calls for higher tax
that moms can never give;

and Jihad's called again,
stocks are set to crash,
and I think you're just as pretty
as the day we danced to Liszt,

and I speak of strikes instead,
of whales harpooned
and seals still killed for fur,
of famines in Angola
and that nukes are everywhere,

and I'd like to kiss you now
but I'm too afraid to try
and land mines blow six kids
apart
and ain't it great
to be alive.

Fish Out of Water

It's no one else's business, Martha,
why you did what you did,
or why you made the mistake
of stepping out of bounds
where geeks with glasses
should never dare to tread.

Perhaps you got tired
of sharing your lunch
with the Chess Club,
or wolfing down a sandwich
amid a hurried rush to the library
lest some thought you friendless
if you stayed in the cafeteria
to eat alone.

An "L" on the forehead
may only come off with gasoline,
but why torch the whole house
and take your parents with you?
Why not leave them
to find you in a state of grace,
yielding to the punishment
that served them best?

Why not drop a pompom
at your feet,

letting them recall the day
the ugliest girl in school
tried out for cheerleading,
so they may indeed know
at least *one* reason
why they saw you swinging
from the end of a ragged noose,
your diary turned to a blank page
where your first kiss should have been?

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.

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.

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 pious, 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 blessed, 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
karma at the finish line.

The Sapling

After years of talk and deferral,
this is the Spring
I planted the sapling,
the one to be our tree (*albeit* a little too late).

And someday in our future,
when we're much too old to climb,
too frail to sup in its shade,

in wheelchairs, perhaps, we'll be,
seeing its bounty
unfold by the window,
from inside a pane of glass:

an umbrella of sheltering leaves,
a cathedral for choral birds,
a path for dashing squirrels;

and when we're gone,
when another man and woman
dwell within our past abode,
its bark will await the touch,
engraving, from this couple's supple hands
(*without* procrastination),

tender as our own in times
when love and seed were one.

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.

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.

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.*

**On Our Search for Leonard Cohen
and Maybe One of His Many Lovers**

*If I am dumb beside your body
while silence blossoms like tumors on our lips
it is because I hear a man climb stairs
and clear his throat outside our door*

— Leonard Cohen, from "Poem"
in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*

The expenditure is worth it
you contend,
hundreds for a train
that stank of fish,
a hotel with no TV,
the cost of wine and dining
and the tip we never left,
lapping lukewarm lattes
under awnings of cafés.

Yes, I too have heard the stories
of his coming,
every so often,
to his haunts in Montréal,
the *bridge* that spans the river
though we argue on which one,

the kiosk in the market
where *Suzanne* was given birth,
amid the lemons
and yellow beans,
the singer seeing the sun
in all those tints
and tones of fruit,
how its setting were tangerines,
the moon a whitish melon
giving muse.

I dispute your speculation,
say the woman
the tune was named for
didn't cook
or squeeze a lime,
that you've confused her
with someone else,
a silent, unnamed mistress
from a stanza
of his *Poem*.

We can always look
for *her*,
her features gone to prune,
dentures getting stuck
on autumn apples,

purple *veins*
about her calves
and swollen feet
that scrape the ground
around her cane,

never
measuring up
to *Marianne*,
her existence
only words
without a song.

Friendship

Unlike bells of marriage,
friendship has no pomp,
is without a clergy's blessing,
is void of ceremony
and a contract signed with quills,
has *no* pronounced beginning
though it can end
with prevailing winds:

blown like *dust*
with gossip's tongue,
cast as *dross*
with a secret's leak.

Friendship grows as a fetus,
limbs and eyes
and pumping heart
fully birthed
when it is ready:

though without
the labour pains,
those instead are saved
for its untimely,
grievous loss –

through sudden death
or mounting lies
or the tremors
of earthly change,

the “going our separate ways”
that sometimes circumstances
state –

no one’s willful *fault*
but stretching time.

And *when* a friendship ends,
there *are* no funeral rites,
no eulogy draped in black,
no tomb to house its body
or chiseled dates
inscribed in stone.

There *is* a pool of promise,
baptismal font
and passage,

when *listening*
grasps our hearing,
holds a clenched
and shaking hand,

when a hug
bestows its comfort
and a shoulder
absorbs the tears;

confirmation
of a *whispering* kind,
a *pledge* to rise
past selfish:

a never-too-busy-to call,
a wobbly, winter skate,
a bowl of steaming soup
when one is sick
and dearly missed.

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.

Seventy times Seven

Conjure, if you can,
a world with no forgiveness,
that cancels second chances,
no *redemption*
to be found,

mated
the rest of our lives
with first *dates*
from junior high,

the original *yes or no*
leaving no room
to wriggle out of;

hair that doesn't grow back
after the initial, single cut,
the barber's trembling scissors
defining the look you'll wear
for life—

the stress of such decisions ...

to be denied
a change of lanes, change of job,
or *change* of style of clothes—

just wash and wear and underwear,
your signature branded
in cotton.

To err is human, they say,
to forgive
a divinity's kiss—
but pity the child
who swings and misses,
denied a second strike,
or the waitress spilling drinks,
joining the *sinner*s at outer gates,

and the one who was to come,
who would have *discerned*
what cures our cancers,
expelled from medical school
for arriving a half-a-minute too late,
the only warning issued
at the time of registration,
perfection the priority—
for clocks here never run fast.

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.

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.

**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.

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 too
homely,

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

On Your Beauty

And when the starling's song
was heard
along the trail we walked,
it failed to draw my mind
away from your
melodic voice;

and when you wondered
if you had such beauty,
I said that yours was always there
just like the things we take for granted:

the inch of sticking snow
on naked trees;
a prism bending light
and splitting colour;
that unexpected violet
poking through
the thawing ground;
the wonderment of sound
the time a harp
is strummed on stage –

and your tenderness
of touch,
your slender arc
of hips,

your fluttered blink of eyes
and ease of laughter –

these, yes these,
forever more so
than the bids
of birds and man.

Adagio

The violin's colour
has faded, like a novel
in a bookshop window
that's faced the sun
for several weeks.

It was a brownish-
red I'd say,
maroon you'd call it,
a double entendre no doubt,
its body begotten
of trees,
its nylon voice a language
transcending all
that tongues have spoken.

You haven't even touched it
in the three years
since he died, the one
you were to marry.
But I sense you'll clasp it
a final time,
perhaps after gentle prodding,

to play the melody
you once envisioned,
not saying whom it is for,

though I really needn't ask,
feign surprise
at its dénouement:

a long and wailing coda,
a flinging-into-wall,
the splintered wood
and silence
entreating no applause.

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.

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.

Our Song, Many Years Later

The ballad we once danced to,
with its backdrop strings
straining for prominence,
the sombre piano forefront
and the male & female singers
championing *forever, devoted,*
hold you tight, is now just a blare
from the kitchenette radio,
the one that sits to accompany
your fuming potato peeling,
sullen stirring of stew,
my reading of stocks and bonds
and another procrastination
(on a promise to help you today).

Your feet shuffle to the fridge
and I note the murmur they make
as your heels scrape the floor
in running shoes –
not unlike the pair you wore
when music wasn't noise
and the only bonds I thought of
held us ever-so-close together.

The Sisters of St. Joseph

Curious,
in this convent's
"open house,"
I study portraits
framed in bronze,
a sort-of hall of fame,
those who took the vows
and were devout, chaste,
awaiting their reward.

Most appear
quite homely,
plump as frumps
can be,
and I think that in their youth
they flowered walls
at every dance,
friendless
at their school,

who clung to Christ
for refuge,
a sanctuary
from the sneers.

But there's one
among these pictures
who was really
rather pretty,
and I wonder
if her hair
had flowed,
if she'd run
along the beach,
a breeze to brush
her skin.

Beauty, yes, was here,
buried
beneath the habit,
the baggy robe of black
in which she hid,

away from the looks of men
and from their hands
that offered touch,
feeling,

an answer to prayers
unspoken,
purged
in the clutch of beads.

Lesbian of the Thames

Why do they abhor you,
for finding the tender feeling
of sameness?

Why would you want the other:
the drunkard, the dullard,
the angry clenched-fisted,
the ugly-to-look-at-nude?

There are places of touch
in a woman,
a velvet of skin and of voice,
that are unattainable in man
(and that suits you just fine).

Consider how you are
in making love:
it's yourself that you caress,
it's a mirror that's above you,
her name a thing of beauty,
not like *Bob, Fred, Hector*,
and the other slovenly louts
who would *only* seek
to own you.

I see you there,
by the Thames,

between the willows
and Pentecostals
passing tracts that burn
with fire,

holding her hand
along the curves
of your breasts
and hips,
winding in a way
that only a river
and a woman possibly can,

a fruit
no tree of knowledge
can ever take from you
again.

Amy's Convocation

There's a dress shoe in the corner
of your photograph,
on the bottom right,
about to enter the scene –
the scene of *you*
in a cap and gown,
clutching roses wilting slightly
at their tips,
smiling expectantly to the camera,
in one of those staged, plastic moments
where you're directed
and sternly prompted
and that you wish were more authentic.

But the shoe, it's a man's shoe,
headed somewhere I wouldn't know
except it's not supposed to be here,
in this family's keepsake portrait,
set in awkward motion
against the stillness
of composure,

the exposure
of graduation
coming faster than it used to,

with our smartphone eyes
and digital selves
that flash worldwide
in seconds.

Your blonde, tumbling curls
rest loosely on your shoulders,
limp from humidity
with the breeze too abated
to lift.

An expansive shrub guards you
against the sun and scorching heat
instinctively drawn
to nylon black.

But about the shoe, it's chestnut brown
and polished,
with its lace drawn good and tight,
preventing a bumbling trip
that if timed to the moment of clicking,
could bring *identity* to this subtle intruder –
his clothing, limbs
and unwanted face
crashing to the grass of ground:

spontaneous, unrehearsed,
forever *locked* in his clumsy fall.

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.

The Gleaning

Not the flowers
at their peak,
petals ripe
with colour,
standing taut
and proud and tall,
but the withered,
the stooped-over,
the faded and the frayed,
the ones about-to-die,
from these
I take and give you,
plucked
and propped by hand,
one now spotted
and gnarled,
so that *love* be said
by the no-longer-lovely,
by the beautiful
never again.

Apocrypha

Write a love psalm to the Goddess,
and watch how fast they damn you.

Say God's not bound to gender,
and *anathema* will be
your name.

Say our blood
shares the warmth
of the shrew's,
that foxes, elephants, weep,
that a chimp
isn't guessing
when it's right,
and to outer darkness
you're cast.

Tell them that a Book
is only a book,
that saying so
doesn't belittle
its worth,
that truth is fluid,
ever-moving,
never carved
on slabs of stone.

They'll bar you
from gates of pearls,
assign them a flaming
seraph.

Now, in a whisper,
tell the woman you adore
she's more beautiful
than the angels;
that the path of dirt
you walked on, together,
far better than roads of gold.
That if she'll spend
a starry night
in your waiting-to-embrace-her
arms,
she may even love you back.
She may even let you kiss her.
She may even lie on the bed,
in eternal, restful pose,
allowing you to paint her,
or better still, to write a poem of her,
and of you and your misplaced gods;

and she might also watch and laugh
as you fold it in an envelope,
for mailing to a
publisher,
one who surely knows
to never print such dross
and drivel;

and she'll hope you come to your
senses, take it *out*
before it's stamped,

and turn it into a plane
you can sail
on a summer's day,

a wind from the west
to whisk it on a journey
more pleasant, meaningful,
less stressful for your mind,

never having to worry
where it lands.

Verses

Poor poetry,
jeered and ridiculed,
discarded to bins
half-priced,
banished
to basement boxes,
more paper
than lines of ink.

Yet I will never abandon you:
still endeared to me
for your rhymes,
your single line
that sears:

the chosen, road less traveled,

less read and far less honoured
than our ghost-wrought
starlet novels,
our fibbing
celebrity bios,
our how-to
do-it-yourselfes,
our books with many pictures.

On dust-rich shelves
you sit, neglected,
the plump girl
at the dance,
watching others be held
and heard ...

but *when* you rise
to speak,
in those instants
the world, yes, listens,
it's something more remembered
than what's currently number 1:

a comparison
to summer's
day,

from failing hands,
a torch,

a set of shoreline
footprints
and the wonder
that we're carried.

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.

Unborn Daughter

I fear for you and what's ahead:

Wars of race and creed,
cities bombed and shelled,
skeletons of bone and stone
and fresh water dried to sand,
radiation in the land

and even if there's not,
if it doesn't come to pass,
how can I let you out of doors
with the bad man there
and waiting?

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.

Coda

I dedicate the poems I'll never write
to you and to us,
tiring, perhaps, of coming up
with original ways to say *love*,
of finding a miracle in the humdrum,
of finding a thesaurus that does the trick.

So as for that dishevelled old man
I pass by on the sidewalk,
he'll remain *anonymous* and his shuffling
stay un-scribed –
I will not imagine him as a sturdy young lad
whose heart was cruelly splintered
at a high-school dance;

and the verses on the abandoned house
with its peeling paint
and missing-a-few-planks
veranda –
I won't picture the children
who may have raced
throughout its corridors
or the daughter whose father caught her
with her teenaged beau
on the backyard swing,
or the tree branch on which it was fastened,

how the birds helped the mother to get up
in the morning instead of wishing
she hadn't married or even that she were
dead;

and the one about the loons
who sleep standing up,
their faces buried in their wings,
how uncomfortable that looks to me
and if I'd ever trade the warmth of a bed
for a single chance to fly.

Japanese Robot

Dr. Zimmer's acquisition
caused his colleagues
to stop and wonder:

a single man, never wed,
never telling tales of
love and sex,
and now, living with this
curvy, comely being
made of wires in lieu of veins,
simulated layer of skin,
synthetic stream of hair.

Sue-Lin, her name, she has a name
he'd say, always emphasizing
she, never it,

and when we came to visit,
she was seated at the table,
greeting us with a blink,
a nod and a gracious smile;

and yes, he still did all the cleaning,
and yes, he spoke so very gently,
complimenting her,

even singing *happy birthday*
when we all sat down for cake
(which we never saw her eat);

and yes, hers was a separate bed,
in a separate room, and he always knocked
first, he told us, never touched her
without consent,

wrote some verse for her
in English,
awaiting her translation,
marvel she'd uncover
all his metaphors for love:

*She was never really programmed
for either poetry or passion.*

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.

Flapjacks

I overcooked the pancakes.
No matter how much syrup
we pour, they're way past
edible.

We can use them in the yard,
toss them as a Frisbee,
have the *dog* set out in chase.

Even our retriever
will have to wonder
how we can eat such a horrid thing,
so black and coarse in the mouth,
never knowing how they're really
supposed to taste,
or how *fluffed* they would have been
had you took your rightful place
behind the stove;

instead of rummaging
through closets,
looking for games to play,
in the hours before our lunch
when we feign we have no problems.

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.

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.

Love Seat in the Snow

On a snow bank hugging a street
I saw it leaning,
threatening to *fall*
in oncoming
traffic.

It seemed in mint condition,
albeit damp
from the elements:

the vermillion hadn't faded
and the fabric wasn't worn;

I couldn't see
a patch or tear –

it wasn't *stained*
by Cabernet.

I surmised the couple
this belonged to
had a major falling-out,
that doors were slammed repeatedly
and a suitcase had been packed
until it burst,

that in the *dead*
of winter's night
it awaited the rumble
of garbage trucks.

But then, perhaps it *wasn't* discarded,
that this pair have so much warmth
that brims between them,
they sit in comfort
amid the scream of gales
and flurries,

waving gaily to passers-by
between their kisses.

From the Tomb of Departed Words

If I'd written my verse
with quills,
in a century
long since passed,
when archaic
words were fresh,
would my *bombaze*
style *bewilder*?

If I'd begun
as a mere *haspat*,
a naive, *teenaged* lad,

describing the *cank* I heard,
along the bustling, market
square, the *talk*
of many townsfolk,
would irony
undoubtedly abound
within my scrolls?

Would I fear
becoming *popular*:
a *common, vulgar* fellow,
strive instead for *special*,
extraordinary:
a *tirant*, yes, indeed?

And as I aged,
would my *caution*
be scribed as *charely*
as I carried a candle
through black?

Would I decry
all the *killing*
in Europe, grieve
for the ones
who were *qualed*?

Would I lament
the loss
of my *moppet*,
the *daughter*
struck down
by the plague?

And in seeking
a *gentle* God –
and an even *gentler*
woman – would *boneryte*
still be worthy
of the poets,

yes the ones both *quick*
and dead?

Today I Turned 50

Fifty is halfway there,
to one-hundred.
It's half a century,
five full decades and the epitome
of "middle age."

But I don't want to be a centenarian,
be a triple-digit number
and have more experiences
being old and sick
than young and spry.

The shorter lifespans were better,
not the 30-somethings of the Middle Ages
where disease was around the corner
and you had to marry when you were a teen,
but the 74s and 75s of the 1950s,
when the aged knew what was golden,
didn't take their years for granted,
and three-quarters 'round the bend
was more than enough of a ride.

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.

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.

White Wigs

In the 18th-century,
men who could afford them
wore white wigs.
Presidents and noblemen,
shopkeepers and servants,
Baroque musicians playing sonatas
for an audience, the males applauding
all crowned in white wigs.

I pity the ones with glorious red curls,
blonde flowing manes
and those who were thirty and yet to grey,
all forced by social norms to don the look
of the worn and the aged,
no one knowing if they might be bald,
had dandruff, or were hiding some other
follicle disaster,

maybe one of them having a chance encounter
with a beautiful woman,
her slender, supple fingers
fondling his fake and lengthy hair
and he would never know how it felt.

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.

Andante in H

– for Carrie

Each note I play on the piano is for you
I say, in my adoration, the real ones
and the ones that I've made up,
and I really can't play the piano
as well as I pretend I can,
but the songs I string together,
impromptu, spontaneous as they may be,
are nonetheless love songs,
ones that Brahms and Debussy
could have conjured
had they not been so obsessed
with trite details like composition
and wondering if the cellist and pianist
could really play their instruments
or were merely faking it
amid the frantic waves of a baton
and the gasps from a startled audience
who'd heard nothing like this before.

Sounds from an Open Window

In the calm of dewless dawn,
with the overlap of dark
and August light,
the cicadas, crickets,
competing with the swallows
in the art of song and calling.

I look *over* to the bed
where you're sleeping rather soundly,
knowing soon that only the warbler
will remain,
the insects taking a breather
till the dusk makes its return.

I want to conjure a summons
with my voice,
with sounds that can't be wrought
in words and poems,

from a gentle *paramour*,
ever so frail, so human.

Believe

– for Carrie

They no longer believe
that I will lay it down,
that I'll cease to write these poems
and they are right.

I never said
I wouldn't draft a verse,
a stanza on my love for you
and for Summer's
flowering shrubs
along the pond.

But I'll keep it hid,
and far between and few
it will emerge,
and just between
the three of us:

You, my honey love,
myself, ever seeking to find,
and that which is someday found,
on earth as it is in heaven.

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.

Ryan Gosling

When you mentioned
how hot you thought Ryan Gosling
was, it wasn't to make me jealous
or envious of his looks
(though of course life would be easier
if I had them),

it was to display your belief
in the rule of exceptions,
that *he* would be able to take you out
of your aura of celibacy,
your prudish disdain of sexy talk,
your vow to read *Anna Karenina*
from cover to cover,
of never caressing yourself in a stimulating
way or leaping in front of a speeding train
you once said you'd do as a joke.

Reflection

In the mirror, my face is “backwards.”
The only image that I behold, of me,
is inverted.
What’s left is right
and what’s right is wrong.

Everyone else sees what’s really there:
the moles, the creases,
the straying strands of hair
where they surely ought to be.

Yes, I can see the accuracy
in a photo,
but I want the view of my true countenance
from *your* authentic eyes,
my frown rising, dropping
like the east-to-west path of sun.

Of course, you have the very same problem,
this fallacy of glass,
the swallowed myth
that *mirrors never lie*.
I’ve merely stated what the issue is
and await some puzzled look on your face
that only I will ever see.

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.

Panthera Leo

That heavenly bliss, where is its promise?

I looked for lambs that lay with lions
just to see one in the jaws of a King.

I will shear its royal mane while it is sleeping,
paste it as a beard
onto the face of an heir apparent,
one of my own biased choosing –

and I will say that peace has come,
that there's no more room
for melancholy,
anthemic songs of death.

Hear it, the roar of a dolphin
in waves;

and see it, amid the bramble
of your own backyard,
a mourning dove
gone gold, majestic,
ruler of an aberrant Earth.

Stereotypes

I have to confess.

I haven't worn
the kimono
that you bought me
for my birthday.

It isn't
that it's hideous,
with its pitter-patter prints
of leopard paws,
or I'd be embarrassed
to be seen
in its flow
of purple silk –

or perhaps it's true I would,
but only because
I believe
in authenticity –
not appropriation;

that I've never set my foot
in Yokohama,
Tokyo,
or any other portion of Japan;

that I abhor the thought of sushi
which is not to say
that all the Japanese
are fond of it,
eat with wooden chopsticks
(which I've never been able
to master),
and that a single grain of rice
is never spilled,
as if the starch
was somehow
magnetic
and the utensils
simply conducive
to the attraction
of innate law;

that they all believe
in Zen,
bow to ancestral
shrines,
smoke and incense
wafting through each room;

that Godzilla
haunts their dreams
and they'd flip me
in a second
since they all know martial arts.

No, I'm sorry,
but the kimono
that you got me
doesn't fit,
is like a dress that holds
2 people,
makes me trip
when I'm on the run,
gets tangled
in my spokes
when I'm on
my bicycle,

pedalling frantically,

pretending I'm chased
by a giant lizard
stomping cardboard houses
underfoot.

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.

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.

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.

Après Renovation

From inside the louvre door
I inhale the lily-of-the-valley
bestowed in aromatic wafts,

I can hear the fleeting patter
of rain from cauliflower
clouds brimming coal-
blotch grey,
the red-breasted nuthatch
exclaiming it's coming home
with limp worm supreme

and that there will indeed
be a sunset after dinner
from its vantage above
this portal of privacy slits,

this giver of air and of sound,
taker of water and light,

which only the grieving
and sometimes the blind
accept as worthy sacrifice.

Astronaut

The child still in me
imagines the *what-will-I-be-*
when-I-grow-up
becoming true:
gaping out of a space station
window, gawking below
at a world tilted drunk,
lovers looking up at a faint fuzz
of light, thinking I'm a falling star
on which to offer wishes,
granted or otherwise,
my own but to never plunge back
into the sea, believing
the lack of oxygen a lie,
that I can breathe like the moon
and illuminate the darkest of all skies.

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.

Innocence

When I was a child,
I said that meat was grown
in fields, amid the rows
of blondish grain, though I knew
that wasn't true.

They can nurture
it now in labs,
I've heard,
making *prophetic*
my naïveté.

But back then,
my Christ was
somewhat kinder:
all had enough to eat,
on that holy, grassy knoll,
and twelve baskets
were brought back up—
loaves only, not a martyred
fish in sight.

If you looked between the clouds
you would see them,
as if that too were sea
and you could travel anywhere
and breathe.

Water as Sky

This pond is teeming
with tadpoles,
tiny fish soon amphibious,

and we question which is better,
to breathe in both the air
and in the water,

or to remain below the sheen
of a translucent
surface,
unable to take in the breeze
that carries the clamour of words
and of wars.

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.

Tally Marks

I etched *seven*,
not as 7 or even
VII,
but as +++ || ,
a whole week's
worth of vagueness,
waiving the classic
ease of Arabic,
the Roman's
pillared grandeur;

and you rightly assumed
that I was counting down
to *something*, ticking days
until what's *better*
eventually came,
my number again
numerical,
concurrently revered
and wicked:

a triumphant role of dice,
or the *scratch*
of infidelity,

a septet of iniquities
grievous,

primeval *marvels*
of our globe.

Always complete;
sometimes lucky.

Le Fait Accompli

*I didn't know
that black and brown
could look so grand you said,
in the painting's critique,
a pair of squares
side-by-side
with cream its neutral setting.*

I followed the
pattern
of your gaze
and the path
your stare was plodding –
seeing *nothing* grand,
nothing outside of *bland*,
with *pedestrian*
two steps up.

*Together, they're a rectangle,
as if you'd made a breakthrough,
discovered the cure
for cancer.
Two sides the same,
two are different.*

I wondered
if you spoke of squares
or the art
of mediocrity;
an artist's vapid state
or ourselves as rigid shapes:

dried,
on canvas snared.

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, 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.

Forza Italia

I was always an A+ student in geography –
really, I was. Knowing all our provincial capitals
by rote, filling in the blanks
of fifty wordless states
and coming up with the quickest route
from New Delhi to Beijing
on a globe without any boundaries.

But I thought Tuscany was in France –
not the home of Florentine.
There's no excuse for this blunder
though I could easily blame
the Pinot Noir,
its fragrant burn, hint of berries,
and the fishnet-stockinged waitress
who had sung its praise to me
in a Monte Carlo accent

but then I'd be guilty
of forgetting the freedom
of that smallest of nations
that took Grace Kelly away,
left me thinking the Riviera
was little more than bikinis and baguettes
and the *bordel de merde!* of the painter
specking sand upon his canvas
by the shore.

Chelsea and Liverpool

I asked where you were going
and you replied
*I need to be out in the world
to write about the world*
and I thought to follow you
but checked myself in time.

I've no right to pry and spy
at what you see –
bring a coloured notebook with you
and jot down what you feel –

I'll be at home, on the couch,
watching English Football
and eating pickles from the jar.

And we'll hear it *all* –
the curses, the cheers,
the upheaval of the crowds
and their disenchantment,
and you'll nail the winning header
just before the final whistle,
the man on the corner
shooting heroin,
causing you to gasp,
the punctured veins
that keep things from being
forgotten, tied at nil.

Just another coup d'état

When he opened the account
we called him *Jonas*,
cheques and balances
as gold cuff links
without a scratch.

The business thrived:
he hired and fired
without conscience or remorse
and the ties that bind
were locked
in stocks and bonds.

We gasped and called him *Daniel*
when he gave it all away,
save the dollar that he placed
in a child's
outstretched hand,
saying, *invest as seeds*
in those who thirst
and hunger,
one fine day
they'll bless you
with a poem
expressed as thanks.

It made no sense:
the words, the deeds,
why he lives in cold damp hostels
and gives his kisses to the poor.

Perhaps he saw a vision
of his death,
amid the mansions
and the yachts,
the loneliness
of beachfront homes
when there's no one to see
the sunset with.

Or maybe Wall Street lions
took the life of someone dear
and he *seized* a second chance
to get it right, to make amends,
to pet the heads of puppies
he once shook his briefcase at.

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 sel-
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.

Mariner

A nightmare, yes:

your seven hands,
all clutching,
all out of reach
of my rusted
iron hook.

When I was a boy,
I dreamed of sailing seas,
climbing masts,

whenever clouds
amassed
on horizons;

the sun
cast from sight
like the tail
of a whale
after breath.

Fog

There's smoke
streaming in
off the lake,

as if it were
ablaze,

as though
physics were defied,
fire and water,
fused.

But upon
my reaching
the beach,
I see serenity
there instead,

its opacity
puffing
ashore,

while the distant waves
are veiled
by wayward cloud.

It's like I've hit
the end of the world,

with geese and gulls
as ghosts,

that a Christ-like walk
on the wet
would have me vanish
in a cottony
realm,

into that place
of lore
and myth,
where the expired beloved
await,
to welcome me
into their calm.

Yet it's not
a miraculous thing,
no revelation
for revelling
aloud –

just the gift
of a temperate day,
a refreshing
sprinkle of cool,

a veering
volatility
of vapour,

the weaving
of wings
into white.

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.

Ex gratia

The seeds
you left for the birds,
by his grave
(your betrothed's),
are still untouched
with our leaving,
in your throes
of "letting go."

We stood there
a good two hours,
your fingers following
the furrows
of his etched-in-granite
appellation,

your spirit rapt
by the melody
coming from trees,
and by the reverie
of your blissful days with
him.

*They'll eat them
when I'm gone, you said,
a reference to our departing
(or so I thought),*

with the cemetery gates
about to close.

I don't mean at dusk,
you uttered as addendum,
during our trudge
back to the car,
I mean when I lay beneath,

beside him.

Bitter Jeeze Louise

The raincoat that she dons,
on sunny days, makes them laugh:
the girls in tank and halter tops,
the boys on black skateboards,
even grandmas walking dogs.

She spends her Spring
in stack 9B,
section E point six-four-three.
She's working on a thesis,
I've heard,
from the driver on my route.
How fossil fuels
can be replaced
by solar panels,
westward winds.

"Louise" never smiles
when she boards the city bus,
her change dropped like anchors
from her hands.

*She gave her quarters
all to bullies, learned to study
without lunch.*

Even now,
she sits in corner cubicles,
eyes graffiti scrawled of her,
twelve years past,
has yet to scratch it out
or eat a sandwich,
soup, at noon.

The Goat

When we stopped
at Sheppard's farm,
you spotted
the friendless goat,

unfettered,
unfenced.

Such a darling,
bleating creature,
its milk to make
our cheese.

While we wait,
I read
of the centre-fielder
dropping the inning-ending
fly.

A tinny clang
of bell
signals sprints
in grass land-
scape.

Dear discarded
from the sheep,
our wine
is that much better
and our bread
is duly crowned.

Who would choose to blame you?
Who would choose to blame you?

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.

Bullets

On his passing's anniversary,
you write of your soldier-brother,
signing *up* for Bush and Blair
and all the blood that smelled of petrol.

Like him, you set yourself alight
with your poem on random bullets,
their anonymity,
how most of them miss their mark,
lie flat in their innocence,
or wedged in the greater distance
where the sidewalk meets the street,
between blocks on boulevards,
in bricks of banks and buildings,

that only one in twenty-seven
pierces bone, fragments flesh,
is cursed by sons and daughters
and the woman who becomes a widow
the very moment that she is told,

asked if she'll identify, verify,

keep the flag that drapes a coffin,
possess a plaque that bears a face.

A Week in the Life of Morgan

On Tuesday,
wheat stalks bowed in half
as if bending to a god;
a god without mercy,
and a field of gold
at once showed its fear.

It was hot that day
and that's all it was.

On Wednesday,
I said there was no god
or gods
and that droughts and rains
don't depend on deity,
but on currents
and jet streams.

On Thursday you picked some blooms
and made a garland
for Saint Jackie.
I said there was no "Jackie" saint
and you dropped the "Jackie O."
"Oh," I said and sighed.
Maybe for the Kennedy years
but wedding Aristotle
raised too many brows.

Let's talk philosophy, shall we?

On Friday, the King of David
brought us fish.

I thought the reference
was biblical.

You said your friend
delivers to Catholics
and he runs a market stall.

Saturday, everything changed.

It didn't stop raining,
the neighbours built an ark.

You called to cancel our session
under the stars.

I would have proven Sagan right
and Einstein a cosmic fraud.

Sunday we rested,
according to the Sabbath.

The Adventists say it's Saturday
and we know they're damn well right.

I cut the grass with scissors.
When no one was looking.

On Monday you met me on campus.
We read the books of Donne.

I spied your lashes
and your eyes, a powder-blue,
lips that curled to stanzas, commas,
thinking you'd found me wrong,
that Jehovah laughed last,
that by tomorrow
I'd confess belief,
my sins,
light a candle to the Christ
and whisper prayers to Jackie O.

You said you simply found him funny,
would look for Bukowski,
Plath, a Ferlinghetti work
that rhymed.

Ashes of Books

There, another thirty feet,
the mound of charcoal grey,
The Communist Manifesto
by Marx and Engels.
Twenty-two copies
bought in bulk.

The chestnut embers
were *Mr. Bryson and I*,
by Mary Maynor,
considered her magnum opus.
You learned of it as a girl in Gdansk,
at age nine,
a year before you fled for good.

Mr. Bryson was a Black man.
Mary was pasty white.
She taught piano.
And how to kiss.
The keys: black, white,
and the ones stained with sweat
a streak-filled coffee/cream.

And there, a little closer,
Lennon's bio,
an annotated guide
to Zen;

no Jews in sight,
no Kristallnacht,
just the amens,
hallelujahs of old,
the scent of corn dogs
in Mississippi air.

Dropping Acid
or Oliver's Awakening at Lee-Anne's Potluck

No, that isn't how it happened,
you tell me, pouring our drinks
beside the fire. It wasn't the
hit-while-riding-the-bicycle thing at all,
that's yet another unfound rumour.

We toast to mental health
and you give the proper setting,
the moment when he snapped, your friend,
and how that actually made him smarter:

Wesley reciting the Beats,
Borscht simmering
a percussive accompaniment,
Jenny Chang on the violin,
lamenting war's not dead,
it never dies, and all of our talk,
simply that.

Pick a Preston lilac
and say you haven't killed.
Boil eggs at Easter
and persuade that peace prevails.
Call the five-and-dime tout de suite
and cancel your reservation.
There's work to be done.

Give the postman “return to sender”
and throw your bills away.
Tell the boss to fuck himself
and the suits to shove it twice.
Grow your hair down to your feet
and trip on the stairs to the church.

Tell the children of God
that you love the witch and homosexual,
that Esau got a raw deal,
that Thomas was a gullible skeptic,
that it’s OK to admit to errancy,
that teaching their kids to kiss the trees
isn’t idolatry,
turning princes to frogs not so bad
when we consider the weight
of crowns,
of gold and of thorns.

Picking Baby Names with the Toss of a Canadian Quarter

You felt the baby kicking
and our time is running out.
The books have left us quarrelling,
Google's made it worse.

I want something rare –
another *Stephen* or *Stephanie*
isn't in the cards,
and the trends you offer up,
Jessica, Kyle, will never make the cut
(so sorry, there are enough of you
already).

Leafing through the Scriptures,
there are those no longer in use,
ones that we consider with a cringe:
Jezebel, an evil witch and harlot,
and *Bathsheba*, an exhibitionist at best.

And if it weren't for the connotations,
Lucifer would be a lovely name
and it's too bad it's associated with the devil
and all. *Judas*, too, sounds rather sharp
but our friends would take amiss.

Should we *put* the family Bible down
and consider contemporary?

It depends on where we live
you pitch in wryly and you're right:
Derek Jeter gets egged in Boston
and Yankee pinstripes damn him.
Katrina is ousted in Orleans,
the scourge of townsfolk flooded.

It isn't just geography,
I add with my two cents.
Sometimes, there is nowhere
to go.

There's half a million *Michael Jacksons*,
and all but one
are using their middle initials.

Remember the price of war:
Stalingrad got overturned
and *Adolf* lost its luster
with the German men and boys.

And the *Lee-Harvey* combo
is no longer in vogue,
that name is *Mudd*,

and *Quisling* is long since finished
as far as the present Finnish go.

Unless you're Hispanic, *Jesus* is a no-no.
We're unworthy of this holy name,
one without stain of sin,
the other side of the dichotomous coin.

Flip it for me, a quarter,
and we'll choose one by fate and by chance.
Pray that it's a girl,
for *Buck* befits a dimwit
and a PhD is out.

Elizabeth, and she's a queen,
with longevity, grace,
enough to make us proud;
without stigma, shame,
originality be damned.

Chatting with Death over Chai

I met Death
for tea today,
surprised by its
invitation,

sent
nonchalantly
like a post
from a Facebook friend.

It asked
how I was doing,
why I hadn't
cared to call,
or write,
or even think
of its existence
in the days and weeks
gone past.

I said
I'd been
too busy,
that Life
snatched all my time
(being the
possessive sort
that it is),

telling me to hurry,
to walk a little faster,

put my heart
out on the line.

I confessed to Death
that it nagged me,
Life that is,

like a spouse
that cracks a whip,
grinds me to the stone,
imploring me to reach
for unseen heights,

failing to configure
that from there
I tend to fall,
bruise and break
on the ground,

that it seems
to disappear
in the aftermath
of plunging,

returning to rasp
sweet nothings
in the time
I start to heal.

Life
was once its friend,
I hear from this jaded
soul,

extra cream and sugar
in its ever-steaming cup,

stinging
from a throbbing hurt
I didn't know
it had,

treated oh so frosty –

like a neighbour
that we see
but never wave
or smile at,

one
we've heard
bad things about,

lamenting
its ostracism,

our blatant *hatred*
of its name,

our avoidance
at every cost,

our refusal
to look it in the eye,

to hear *its* side
of the story,

its claim it isn't
so bad,

it's been
misunderstood,

that it's here to shield
and shroud us
from the wounds
that *Life*
inflicts,

that breath
is the ultimate villain,
a hero
of sham and spell,

Life's
night of sleep—
a *lie*,
our pillows but a tease,

that only *it*,
our scarlet-lettered
Death,
cold-shouldered to the bone,
gives rest
that won't be ruptured,
time without a tick,

that its bond with Life
was severed
by assumptions
that weren't true,

that Death
was the cause of sorrow,
we should flee it
whenever we can,

and our lack
of understanding
that it keeps us sealed
as seed,

buried,

safely *tucked*
from the gales
of living,

that it's calm
and far more patient
than this Life can ever be,

will wait for the ripest
moment,
a burst of solar swell,

before releasing us
from its care,

to grasp at second birth
and hope what blossoms
will be kinder.

Richmond & Central

There's an enticing young woman
across the street
running towards me.

She's just trying to beat
the light, I know,
coffee in her hand,
spillage dropping
to the painted pavement
below –

those two white lines
that tell pedestrians
the boundaries
where they may safely tread
but safety is not on her mind,
with the light a fleeting amber
and her boots a scampering din

as I wait for the next
circumspect walking figure
to signal when it's time to go,
not daydream of arcane girls
I pretend are in love with me
to the point they'd risk their lattes
and their lives just to race
into my waiting arms.

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.

His and Hers

In clashing closets,
your reds mimic my blacks
in starch and wrinkles,
in pleats unkempt
and the way that mothballs
keep our earwigs at bay.

When we were younger,
we shared our cramped enclosures,
complemented
pinks with blues,
folded every sock
and cashmere sweater,
high heels and tennis shoes
conjoined in copulation.

Now they're flung
across the bedroom
after a brutal day at work
or an aggressive walk
from the bus,

butts of cigarettes
scenting the soles,
snaps and laces
securing our silence.

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.

Clichés

I'd like to damn the poets
who've said it all before:
the encounter with eyes
as jewels. With hair that's gold
in ponytails,
that's brushed
or held in braids.
Who've met the small
of slender backs
and the curves of hips
and their sway.

If only none had written
of the bliss in a kiss of lips ...

I want to be the first to sing
*you are the prettiest girl
in the world* –
and because a million bards
have penned it,
it's trashed as trite cliché.

O God of archaic
verse and psalm,
bring me back
to English Dukes,
to Scottish Dames and castles;

not to fight a flaming beast
or bear the shield of the Lord –

instead, but for a moment,
with feathered quill in hand,
let me write of her radiant face,
how it enraptures me,
and her lissome, favoured figure,
how I'd lose my life to hold.

Let me be the first
to say, to state, to scribe *I love you*.
Allow the pressman's ink to dry
on antique, rolled-up parchment.
Award the abbey's archivist
the sealing of the Queen.
For it was never, ever heard
of such a lovely maiden, fair –
for just this wondrous instant,
a thousand and one years past,
before the Shakespeares,
Blakes and Burns have poems
that scream from my horizon.

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.

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.

Valentine Memories

When we were in 2nd grade,
I made you a card
with red paper and mucilage.
Drew your face in pencil crayon.
Signed my name with the same:
Happy Valentine's Day
(from me and Fuzzy my cat).

In Junior High, in the Fall,
I picked my mother's roses
behind her back, preserved them
in a book for months,
then passed them onto
you, nervously:
all dried and petals falling.
You've kept them in a jar
for all this time.

In college, I got a cookbook
from the library
and endeavoured to make you a cake,
failing in my measurements,
stumbling in the steps.
The result was hardly edible
though you swallowed your only bite.
It's still somewhere in the back
of your freezer.

And just before you wed,
on the fourteenth day
of the second month,
I made you a friendship ring
from coloured strings
of your favourite yarn –
all woven, braided,
to fit your slender finger.
You wear it on occasion, I've heard,
with the golden band your husband
gave you that morning in the Church,
when the sunshine poured
through painted glass
and I feigned a joyous smile
from the darkest pew at the back,
wept but in despair
throughout the organ's loud refrain
and when a truck outside the grounds
rumbled madly down the road
spreading salt.

The Artists' Long Weekend

It was supposed to be
a day off from the squabbles,
from the debates on right & wrong
and the five stone pillars
of Western Imperialism.

Saturday I like you best.
You leave your texts behind
and Naomi Woolfe is kept
in white sheep's cloth,
talk of apple cobblers, chocolate sprinkles,
as deep in thought as we'll ever get
but not this time:

You battle greedy parking meters,
wage war on 10-cent hikes,
relive the Russian Revolution
and complain of cookies
looking better than they taste.

Let us leave the bakery,
I say in reckless suggest,
offering to whisk you
to splendoured heights
and the flashing bulbs of theatre.

You counterpunch,
and the Museum it is,
old relics left to rust
behind coloured Chinese glass,
and sculptures chipped & shorn.

We're the only ones here,
we sadly slump and sigh,
with nothing more to see,
our disappointment
caroming off walls
as van Gogh in a straitjacket
would have.

A Station Wagon's Dead Transmission

The car broke down today,
on a cold, pre-winter morning,
and left us with options, three:

We catch a bus and learn the ropes
of never-ever staring,
of leaning left and right
when staggering turns
are made at red,
of pretending not to notice
when the man beside us slobbers
as he speaks,
to neither you nor I
nor anyone in-between.

We take our *bikes* out
from the shed,
put our lives
at stake,
looking out
for racing trucks and vans
that honk their harried horns,
that run us off the road
and to an icy curbside tumble,
wrought with bumps and cuts
and shaken nerves.

Third and final pains us most:

We walk in awkward silence,
the crunch of frosted sod,
the small-talk that we mutter
saying we are strangers,
each step along the path
revealing all that's lost
and wanting.

**And about the wind, the branches will bend
from its affection**

Though the sun and the rain
take the credit or the blame,
it's the wind that roars
like a neglected middle child,
receiving little thunder
for its contribution to our lives
(for it's the water, dear,
that nourishes;
the rays of our star
that causes things to grow).

And scribes of old and new
romance the heavens,
the seas that tickle feet
upon the beach,
whispering now and then
of the wind's surging power
to make the surf
that pummels sand
and draws our shores,

strength reserved
for the usual suspects,
ignorant of the fact
that the wind has had its fill
of flapping flags,

hoisting balloons,
raising bubbles blown by children,
keeping kites
from knotting in trees;

wishing to be something more,
paradoxically less –
gentler, yes,
than even the breeze
that guides our sails
and bounces hair,

nudging tiny
seeds
when farmers
miss their mark;

saving a moth
by lifting it
out of an awaiting spider's
reach;

taking sides, perhaps, heroically,
but never tearing
wing or web
in the effort.

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.

On my leaving you, unexpectedly

I've booked three men
and a cargo truck
for this Thursday, October 1st.

They'll come promptly, at 8 a.m.,
too early for an encore
of our Timbits, milk & tea.

My dirty clothes, in garbage bags,
my science books wrapped tightly
in Friday's wrinkled *Globe and Mail*.

"Herbert, the Happy Hippo,"
won at last year's Western Fair
(on my final throw-to-the-wall, no less),
discarded for curbside pick-up.
Even its grinning, glued-on mouth
has fallen.

In my desk, a will
(you'll get it *all*, my dear),
paperclips aplenty,
all loose and without a box;
your love letter,
from seventh-grade,
signed, "yeah, it's me" –

and under a sheet of résumé bond,
a rotten sketching
of your pretty face:
faint smile, eyes looking away
at something I can't remember.

You posed for half an hour, sensing
I couldn't draw to save my life
and we knew it didn't matter.

Bob, Hospital Janitor

He's showered with disdain
by candy wraps and bubble-gum,
by pools of the great unflushed,
and though he's cleared
contagions beneath our steps,
cleaned our counters of its germs,
he's open season for callous jokes
and blackened fruit mere inches
from the basket meant to catch
what ranks and rots.

That's what he's paid for
is the license to squalor,
turning his rubber gloves
from cotton white
to garbage brown.

He doesn't have a caddy
and oysters missed the menu
by some ninety grand or so.
His office holds a mop and broom
and no one comes to call
when *M.D.'s* not on the door.

His trudge in drizzled night
awakes a nagging, seal-like cough –
for doctors have their pick to park,
their choice of seats and sex,
and he should have finished *Ehrlich*
when he had his only chance,
and learned to look the dying
in their soiled, watered eyes.

She's the Bookworm of Santo Domingo

William Faulkner's got his hold on you
with Gretna Green and Ernestine
but he's really not the bard
you thought he was
because he hasn't made you cry
like Cohen does
when he's on his game
or Emily
because you know she lived alone
in that big old house
when she should have been on her back
and getting laid.
Such passion.

Sylvia Plath married an ingrate
who became the laureate,
the toast of the town
but you know that rascal Ted
lost out in the end
and she was quite the swimsuit charmer
(and a *poet* to boot).

Your soft spot's for Henry Miller
and his *Rosy Crucifixion*,
and though your mother thinks
it's literary,

it's just a cunning way
to do some porn
without you ever getting caught.

But Nabokov's your idol
because he told it like it is
and every forty-something teacher
you've ever come to know
has yearned to fondle your budding breasts
and painting outstretched toenails
is just the appetizer
for something deeper.

Leaves of Grass is Whitman's triumph
and makes you look respectable
when you carry it around,
an iPod filling your ears
with Gregorian chants,
ignoring the boy in heat
who runs behind you, heart a thunder,
staining his pants and calling your name.

Playing Chess with Dr. Kreidel

In his younger-than-fifty days,
the professor's music played:
a Verdi season,
a Brahms concerto,
a triumphant crescendo of brass.

Today, in his tie
and cardigan sweater,
his bearded chin supported
by an anchored, open hand,
the only accompaniment found
comes from the waft of his cigar,
left to rest forgotten
in a dish to catch the ash.

Thirteen minutes.
He never takes more
or less when making
his pondered,
predictable move.

*Did I tell you
when Aiden died,
how his mother refused to weep?*

I've yet to see the photos
of the wife and son, now gone.
They're only ever mentioned
in the times of his Bishop's move.

My Knight's the first to go.
It always seems to be.
Something about the horse's head
that makes him go for throat.

*The man of cloth
had told us, "he's in a far,
better place."
Aiden's mother left me,
saying he'd been too young
to ride.*

A pillar of smoke
arises,
as if pushed
by a lantern's swing,
as though
a gift of incense
from the hands
of God's High Priest.

I pretend the smell's not pungent,
that my lungs will never mind,
that I relish returning home
smelling of an old-time carnival.

My Rook, in turn, takes Queen,
in a forty-one second wait.
Check.

The professor slumps
and chortles,
grabs his vice,
takes a puff.
This is good.
I'm much better off
this way.

In the twelve-plus minutes
that follow,
I'll *absorb* the awkward silence,
stare at paintings on the wall:

Courbet,
de La Tour,

eye the futile
back-and-forthing
of his fingers
gripping King,

my empathic throat lumping
when I know he can't let go.

For every poet who knows what it's like

There's a woman in the front row
who has started to cough.

I spent seven wretched hours
on a rancid bus to get here,
to read poetry in this bookshop,
in front of fifty-six people
and now one of them
is coughing up a squall,
doing a fabulous seal imitation,
lacking only flippers
and an inflatable ball.

The store had laid out padded chairs
and a table full of books –
mine and those of a trio of poets
who'd read 'fore my turn had come:

in feather-dropping silence,
in monastic quietude,
in that attentive hush that happens
when the audience is rapt in words.

I raise my voice in hopes of drowning
the woman's incessant hacks,
bellowing *there's truth in affirmation*
and in eyes that see past stars!

And my pacing is off,
my inflection is chaotic,
my ability to focus
easily thwarted
by gurgling phlegm.

I want to stop abruptly –
ask her what her problem is,
if she's a smoker who's never quit,
if she waited for *me* to begin my set
before unleashing her pent-up noise.

But I forge *on* in a smouldering stride,
thankful I've saved
my favourite poem
for the climactic dénouement,
grateful she's just left her seat
and gone off to the back of the shop,

where, if I'd been more observant,
I would have *noticed* the coffee bar,
the gleam
of frothing machines,
figured she'd forego
the Buckley's,

embrace the whirr
that cappuccinos bring.

Michael Jackson Isn't Dead

Michael Jackson is still alive.

My friend who's into
conspiracy theories
said so, adamant like he is
about the others
in his arsenal:

JFK's demise
at the hands
of the CIA,

those famous
faux footprints
on "the moon,"

asbestos-laden twins
abruptly imploding
from within,

and those flicks
that flash a light on
illuminati.

Michael Jackson isn't dead.

No arrest
in California,
“the case of
cardiac,”

no Coroner cutting
a corpse,

coffin carrying
a King.

Look, he says,
pointing at a fuzzy pic
downloaded to his cell,

that’s him,
in a fedora,

the smooth criminal,

a kerchief cleverly
covering
the caved-in
face
(from all those clumsy
plastic surgeons –
half-blind,
a bungling baker’s dozen).

*He's in the Canary Islands,
getting richer
and more beloved
than he'd ever been "alive,"*

hiding in a
beachfront
hut of straw,

a hole within the stalks
that make the wall,

so a native boy,
naive,
can come and go
unseen,

or measured
to fit a misfit's
cloudy mirror,

a looking-glass
to Neverland,

where Peter,
Alice, await:

always failing
in his effort
to get his fairy tales
straight.

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.

Autumn Green

The backyard tree
has shed
its Joseph's coat
of many colours,

the aged, lofty maple
leaving assorted threads
to clear:

The red ones
were afire
as Antares,
ready to supernova,
explode
in silent splendour,

the orange, yellow-gold,
like the citrus fruit
they mimicked,

catching *light*
from a southern sun
and drawing eyes
to the crown
that held them;

yet it's this fallen
green on grass
that now has garnered
my attention,

brings ensnarement
to my sight

as my rake gathers
the limbless
on the ground.

It seems locked
within its youth,
nary a crease
or wrinkled part

while its verdant edges
call to mind
the early days of June –

which leaves me then
to wonder
why it fell,

looking full
of chlorophyll,

as if it never
would have shifted
tone or colour.

Perhaps it simply
couldn't bear
to dangle
lonely
on a branch,

its brilliant brethren
lifeless,
unable to flap
in the breeze;

that none
would care to sit
beneath a bony tree
as this –

naked, as its neighbours,

with arms of gnarled wood
and all but barren
of its beauty,

save the leaf
that wouldn't change,
bear resemblance
to the one
that's on our flag,

that missed
October's chance
at blazing out
in a gloried state,

that couldn't stand
the quiet
that longevity
inevitably
brings.

The Twig

In the braided brush
it sits,
at the base of that
which held it,
robbed of all
potential
by a walker
unaware,
the push
of a careless
hand –

for you would have been
a branch, mighty,
housing birds
and a path for squirrels,
coloured leaves
and a cloak of snow,

upheld the
silence
of the air,
the hush
of forest frost,
the sleep
before the snap
from boots below.

Secondary Thoughts from a Street Sign

The right-hand turn
in detour brought me
to this boulevard,
with its generic
rancher dwellings
and two cars stationed
in each drive,
as if on call
for the kids
I assume inhabit
these gaudy homes.

There's a distant yellow marker
coinciding with a curve,
getting larger
by the second:

Ahead,
Slow Children
becoming clear
as I coast just past
an oak,
like an older *Yield*
but diamond-shaped
with a vaguer sense
of message.

Whoever could *be* these
“slow children”
and what’s the cause
of their sluggish gait?
How leisurely
must they be
to merit a municipally-
funded sign?
And why don’t I ever see them
though there’s a warning
that they exist?

Perhaps they’re not in a hurry
in those moments they *do* appear,

without the need
to be on time
and *too laid back* to care,
content to be so nonchalant
crossing this particular street,

requesting drivers
to *please take care*,

*place your dress shoe
on the brake
and ease your fingers
off the horn,*

*there's seldom a reason
to rush,*

*and we doubt that we'll be
running away
or leaving
anytime soon.*

Coffee

You brewed tea
for the two of us,
after I'd poured
my coffee,
my morning mantra,
its Colombian aroma
competing with the scents
of Ceylon.

And yes, your set
of sandstone cups
look so much prettier
than my mug,
contain
Tibetan characters
carved within.

And of course,
it might be better for me,
my dear,
your herbs and caffeine-free,
your elixir's vow
of longevity.

But there's a kind of grit,
an aftertaste,
that's part of my every day.
I take it with me to the office,
as I pass the urban beggars,
the off-key, curbside buskers
ever-imploring me
for change,

guessing
nary one of them
even *thinking* of a tea,
its tonic leaves of green,
its detachment from them
and from me.

Alice, Mother

In your photos
you are young:

The world in black
and white,
ripple-bordered,
secured in albums
by a glue
now hard as amber.

Your man's
in a fedora,
leaning proud
against the Buick
he brought you to
the movies in.

In another
you are smiling
(which I've never
seen you do),
your sweater
bouncing light
blessed of the sun,

your eyes looking
upward
as if a plane
were overhead.

You tell me stories
of the war,
how he went away
to fight,

a pilot
dropping bombs
on German bases,

*never cities
or children hit,*

how the message
said he'd died,
shelled by anti-
aircraft strike,
plunging to the
ground
(the curse of
gravity).

*There's a chance
he may have lived
and the Captains
didn't know.*

You think,
in his supposed
loss-of-memory,
he met a Parisian
girl,
raised a son
he called André,
who drives
across this land
in lunar glow,
at his father's
stayed request,

looking for *you*
in every seniors' home
in sight,

saying *il vit!*
il vit!
(he lives!)

and, *ma mère,*

knowing you surely
would have birthed him
had the drums of war
been mute,

had eyes
not seen the red
mar hues of
grey.

The Winemaker's Son

In your sour middle age
you are drunk
on grapes, fermented.

I choose to recall your visage
in another, kinder vision:

the child who picked
the purple
from his father's
ripened vines,
popping globules
in your mouth
on days that *he*
had gone away,

your wincing an attest
that they were tart,

yet the sweetest thing
to burst upon your tongue,

much better than the fallen,
the ones upon the ground
assigned for birds and the boy
he cursed.

Elegy in the Eleventh Month

As done to sun,
the clouds of drizzled dawn
have cloaked your presence,

curtains closed
within your brick abode.

And in your garden's gloom,
where the colours rose and stood,
the brown of twigs entwined,
the dirt dug up by squirrels
which had abounded.

Your thoughts reflect the wife
who'd worked the ground,
who'd sung the heaven hymn
of lark and jay,
in the clear of tearless day.

But now, your sound
of laboured breath, the callous
click of clock,

your wanting of what's white,
the snow that shrouds the loss
of what was living.

Clothing

Today was less eventful
than the norm,
the ho-hum talk
of boredom
leading to subjects
rather silly:

most notably,
while sorting through
laundry, how our clothes
are lifeless shrouds,
merely wrappers
without a will:

gloves with palms and fingers
and yet unable to wave
on their own,
turn a *handle*
without a hand
that's slipped within;

the dress that's frilled and airy,
the *perfect* attire
for dance, too *weak*
to spin and shimmy
without your figure
to flesh it out;

my collared shirt
and pants,
whose elbows, knees,
can't bend
(helpless
without my bones);

and our shoes that only dream
of walking solo,
to the very ends of the earth,
beholden
to the *feet*
that lift and lead,
nothing in our closet
that's beneath them.

Quakers

Our new neighbours,
the couple we've yet to meet,
the pair who cling to Bibles
securely snuggled beneath their arms,
are always garbed in black,
have yet to crack a smile,
raise a chuckle,
wave *hello*.

The *Welcome Wagon* hostess
told you all about their faith,
news that made me cringe
with prejudice.

I spy them from the slit
between two drapes,
believing that they're sour,
puritanical,
that they never have sex
or fun.

You wanted me
to break the ice
the evening before the last,
while I washed my compact car,

observing
how they glumly rocked
in shabby, squeaky chairs,
on their drab, unflowered porch,
as I rinsed the suds away,

that I should extend a caring hand,
introduce myself with a sob,
offer condolences
from us both,

that someone
must have
passed away,

that they're merely
just in mourning,

saying that they're *Quakers*,
the *Society of Friends*,

that they'd laugh
and run
and *be* much more
outgoing,

that they'd cartwheel
on their lawn,
play some hopscotch
in the street,
if a *beloved*
hadn't died,

that they provide
our morning cheer,
our oatmeal, *Cap'n Crunch*,

that when they meet
at Sunday's dawn,
there's peace
in the hills around us,

that the ground
is only shaking
from the unleashing
of their dance.

Ode to Olivia

I'll sign my pseudonym to your confession,
echo expletives in overture,
regretting the passing through birth canals,
staging reenactments
of the favourite, precious moments
from the history of Hillside High:

How they tore your dress
in ribbons,
keeping snippets as souvenirs,
your weeks of toil
on your mother's machine
all for fucking naught.

And when your face broke out
in acne,
you'd said it was a case of hives,
caused by the stress
of obligations,
that your father fell behind
in clipping coupons,
your brother
caught on tape in tights
your former friend forsook,
that, and the rest of memorabilia,
home to spiders making nests
in all your letters penned to boys.

Now no one writes by hand:
tapping emojis on their phones
or clicking left on a plastic mouse,
while those annoying ringtones
clench your fists and badger
your Spock-like ears,
hearing *I just called*
to say I love you
on the cell of a passer-by,
thinking *Superstition* would have been
a better choice,
something Stevie's not ashamed
to say he sang.

You know I never thought you *fat*,
that *unibrow*
was a dumb-ass word
from the kids rolling grass
in the pit, near the schoolyard,
while the principal turned his nose
and feigned congestion.

You cry that kindergarten
was a *kinder* place,
that cruelty, though innate,
had yet to fruit and flower,
still covered in inches of ice.

Let's go back to the monkey bars
and hang upside-down
while it snows,
feeling flakes
melt on our faces
as the blood goes rushing to our heads,
suspending the law of gravity
or pretending to the world that we *can*,
on any given moment, without notice –

deferring our death if we want to.

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.

Garden Sunrise

We say the birds
are singing when we wake,
our assumption
that they're happy.

When I open the window
on this cloudless Summer
morning,
I hear *chatter*, not scales
and notes ascending,
like where the worms
might be burrowing
or that the widow
has placed fresh seed,

or beware,
that cat's been eyeing us
again,
from the camouflage
of shrubs,
or did anyone catch
what the cardinal was up to
last night?

Perhaps it is *they*
who need to hear:

a gently played concerto,
a yoking of keys
and of strings,

and so I'll raise my record's
volume,
tell Bernstein to conduct
with calm,
have Bach conveyed in arias
with *elongated*
pause,

where the robins, if they want to,
can take a break
from breakfast gossip,
blend with the *second*
pastoral movement,
or the scherzo,

take a moment to brighten their day
we may have judged, in err,
as joyful.

Family Photo

It hadn't been seen
in ages
(if a decade
can be deemed
as such),
there, in the frame,
a mother and father
ecstatic,
grateful you've entered
their world;

and you'll feel
the photo
in front of you,
strain a tear
for the parents
that were,

for there's but twice
in your life
where you're loved
so very deeply
(and which you'll have
no recollection):

at the moment of passing
and burial,

and that magnificent morning
of sun,
where you're cradled
in wraps of white,
in your mother's crib of arms,
your enveloping father
proud, beaming,

the wound of words
an egg, untouched
by swim of seed.

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.

Camomile Tea

Camomile
supplanted your caffeine,

this gentle, calming herb
no *longer* just a toast
in winter's night,
the warmth of a second
quilt;

it went on double-duty,
helping nerves to settle
down, be unfrayed,
keeping phantoms
past and present
from taking form,

each sip a sheep
that's tallied
under sun,
making mellow
each moment's breath,

bidding dreams to offer trailers
of the features soon to come,

where flowers
by the billions bloom,
and no face is void of beauty.

Upon scribbling another poem on dying

the writer bid adieu
to the spray-paint tags
and needles,
the cracking plaster walls
and the busy bars
of intoxicants;

purchased
a humble cottage
in the country,
at the time the sap
was dripping,

and the words as well
grew sweeter,
the maples in the stanzas
to *nevermore* be cut,

cleared away for sprawl
or serve as paper for a poem
that spewed of cities,
their muffled hunger pangs,
their riffs of jazz and blood.

On the loneliness of drowning

The moment you are drowning
is a time you're not alone.
Somewhere in this world,
at this very same instant,
someone else has slipped
beneath the surface of the water:

perhaps a doting father
or a wide-eyed little girl,
a homeless youth swept off a pier
or a banker from a plunging plane,

their lungs
filling with the wet
that quickly kills,
their arms and legs all flailing
in an effort to reach for air.

Unlike all the other
ways to die –
by bullet or by flame,

by the weight of crumbling walls
whenever the ground begins to quiver,

by the stealthy crawl of cancer
or the inevitable toll of age –

drowning has a way,
for a moment,
of allowing the dead
to float,
as though in orbit
around the globe,

of letting *currents*
carry corpses
to their eventual resting place –
somewhere in the deep
from which we came,
all of us that creep
upon the earth,
beyond the reach of
memory.

But back to you
who may be drowning
and the *ones* who share your plight,
think of how *they're* feeling,
the gulf now black
around them,
a cold far greater than ice,

a startled school of fish
watching closely,

suddenly *thankful*
for their gills,

envision how they struggle,
offer prayer
to whatever God
of their up-
bringing;

ponder in that second
if you'll meet them in the sky,
in that blue that mimics oceans,
lakes and churning seas,

wonder if what follows
will ever loosen
this new-found bond,
with your fellow sub-
mariners:

the warming breath of angels,
a calming flood of stars,

their ever-eternal effort
to keep you dry.

State Flower of Arkansas

It's in the vase
you placed
in the hall,
after the night
we heard the twang,
the song
that played
unexpectedly

to our impromptu
bare embraces,

our kisses too fervent
for friends –

a single Apple
Blossom: pink and white,

the *Pyrus*
Coronaria,

from the state
'side Tennessee;

it harks *back*
to munching cattle
in the fields,

to trucks
that dust the sides
of gravel roads,

to a cowbell
calling all
to Sunday lunch.

And now it speaks
in a tongue
we cannot hear,

an ethereal
howdy and drawl,

the unexpected
spell
of strangest days.

In Late Afternoon Shadows

I picked you out from the crowd
although your slender back was turned,
with a gathering throng
to challenge your spotting
like a *Where's Waldo?* book –

and when you asked
how I managed to do this
with my glasses scratched
and autumn's umbrae
shrouding hippies & hipsters alike,
I said I recognized you by your

ass, particularly taut and rounded
by the shifts of shade and radiance
within which you'd been standing,
during this surrealist time of day
that dares me to say things
I really shouldn't,

when change is just a jig
beneath a tired, slumping sun
that's given me more
than I've ever asked of it.

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 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 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.

The After Christmas

The tree is dismantled,
limb by artificial
limb,
boxed in its cardboard coffin,
while its coloured lights
and trinkets sit
forlorn,
between the jam
and pickle shelves;

the wreaths
pitched like horseshoes
into the closet of hiatus,
with cards & bows & ribbons
and things I hoard
with no discernment.

And yet
they're the lucky ones—
they'll return in ten months time
(being November's never-too-early),
unlike the banished to garbage bins:

re-gifted no-name chocolates
(from my cousin, ever-cheap),
well past their *best before*;

the sweater from *Le Chateau*,
with its gaudy dots and patterns
that scream *hey look*,
I'm haute couture!

And the mistletoe
that failed me Christmas Eve,
while you checked out several stockings
crookedly hung,

then slapped my entitled face
when I attempted
an old tradition.

That guy in those commercials

He's always there in the background, laughing.
With a dozen attractive "friends" –
all of them feigning laughter.
See him holding a beer, laughing.
And later at a steakhouse,
encircled by happy people,
laughing his cares away.

The only time we've seen him
is when he laughs.

He's never appeared
in a sitcom,
or as a blur in a feature film.
A paltry line of dialogue
seems forever out of reach.
But still he looks ecstatic,
with a grin that's even broader
than the "Pepsodent Twins" of old.

We imagine when he is home,
in a shabby, bachelor walk-up
several miles from Rodeo Drive,
that he barely cracks a smile,

watches those who have succeeded
being featured on *Tonight*, trading chuckles
with Jimmy Fallon,

hurls his curses at the screen
whenever his ads run back-to-back.

Not the Madonna I had in Mind

The elegiac
piano suite
I was to write a eulogy to
has gone missing.

It was fitting, funereal,
backed by a Venetian
choir to the Virgin,

and would have helped me
to write a tribute
to a neighbour
who's passed away:

of how she'd fed
the dishevelled poor,
been a tender, doting parent,
a community's
concrete mast.

Instead,
with the clock my sudden foe,
I slip in the nearest disc,
an '80s guilty pleasure,

and now the tempo
isn't conducive
for verses so morose,
for words that beckon tears,

and I find myself too flippant,
of making wisecracks
in solemnity's stead,

of envisioning
how badly
the deceased
may have danced,

how often she was drunk,

what the circumstances were
when she was touched
for the very first time.

Tanka

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

Asiago

In my childhood,
the moon, of course, was made of cheese
but not just any pressed milk curd
or the expected block of Swiss
but rather *Asiago*, the kind the other kids
had never heard of,
whose mothers never sliced
and sloppily shoved beneath their ham,
the type that got me beat up,
by the bully who thought me
a snob,
whose idea of fancy dining
was potato chips on the side,
whose fists I never forgot
whenever midnight glow
slipped through the
crack of blinds,
from a drifting ball above me,
that may have stopped to pity
when I cried myself to sleep.

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.

Cavendish Park

You picked chrysanthemums for me
and I asked *is it the proper thing to do?*
Their colour would fade, I said, petals wilt
and life give way to death.

We ran through grass
and crushed its green
deep in the spongy earth.

We celebrated the living,
stomping ant hills in our wake
and swatting flies that came too close.

We didn't mean to, really,
take the role of sinners
purging blood reborn
in sacramental wine;
we preferred the blue, the white of clouds
aloft, heads drawn to heaven,
asking *why* we were no better.

The Better Kiss

Today I kiss
your monochrome photo
more fervently
than I do you –

maybe it's because of the way
the paper bends
back
when I do,
its passionate manner
of yielding,

or that the gloss
on the page
tastes better than the one
on your lips,

or perhaps the black & white
of print
is more pretty, candid,
than all the gaudy hues of red
you've caked your frown-of-a-face
with.

Too Happy

We say we're too happy
to write any poems,
our usual musings
inspired by misery,
our current state of bliss
not conducive
for an elegy in rhyme.

But I say that this is good,
that I'd *prefer* an empty notebook
to one that's filled with ink,

finding metaphors
for what has died, been lost,

finding rhythm in a land
bereft of trees,

or in a lover waking up
to a vacant bed,

in a child mourning
at her mother's funeral,
her father hit by shells
in a far-off war,

burned off the face of an earth
filled with poetry.

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.

May Song

Branch's buds
burst into blossoms,
pinkish petals,
grass-green leaves.

Love leaves
its speckled eggs
in nests.

Eggs are birds
yet to be born.

Flight is love ascending,
wings but leaves
not fastened to trees.

Snow Peas

At first glance,
the snow peas are strangling
the peppers –
the stringy ends
of their stretching vines
wrapped
around their neighbour's
stem, tugging them
by the "throat."

Then, another perspective
offered:

*It's not of violence
or of struggle,
the Bodhisattvas murmur
from the brush,
always finding the good
below the surface,
it's the longing of love's
embrace.*

*They too have need
of this, don't you see?*

Goodwill Hunting

I scoop her book out of the bargain bin
and at a dollar, it's precisely that.

I hadn't heard of the author before,
and this title, twenty years past
its original release,
shows little wear or evidence
that it was barely ever read.

What has become of you now,
oh minstrel of autumnal decay,
your blackening shades of mind?
And who'd leave this forlorn volume
to languish amongst the chaff,
beside a pile of business books
so terribly out-of-date:
advising us how to invest
in a '90s economy,
that a crash is on the horizon,
that the Internet will never take off?

You'll live on my shelves beside Shelley,
with the Brownings a few spots away,
relieved of your discounted sticker
which only embarrassed you
even more,

like the school boy picked last in gym,
or that girl with a lisp in your poem,
the one you abandoned
at the dance,
in a heavily shadowed corner,
watching the others clench and kiss,
your cruellest dénouement.

Columbia, 33 1/3

Yesterday I bought a record,
the kind that's made from vinyl,
this one being the old-fashioned,
more durable variety,
the no-longer-in-use 10-inch size,

and though I don't really know
how old it is,
it's old, much older than I am,
and looks like it hasn't been played
in half-a-century.

It's the *Sonata No. 3 in B minor*,
Opus 58,
by Chopin,
played on the piano by Malcuzyński,
who, like Madonna or Prince
of the '80s,
is a one-name wonder,
this time the surname, I assume,
being paramount, with the given one
nowhere to be found;
and though I know who Fredrik Chopin
was, I have no idea who the hell
Malcuzyński is, only that he's really good,
and probably really dead.

But this isn't about the pianist
or the composer,
or the piano which never gets enough credit
for the emotions it inspires,
or even about the record
though it claims, as most of them did
way back when, that it's "non-breakable"
(though I've no plans to put it to the test),
and that it has a "silent surface" –
which it may have had when it was new,
but today, as I listen to it for the first time,
it has more than its fair share of muffled
scratches, which, yes, makes it all the more
endearing.

What I'm thinking of instead of all of this,
is how often this record was played,
in the past, and by whom:
if it was an old music professor
filling his room with beautiful notes,
as opposed to the rasps of his own breathing
(that always amplify in loneliness),
or maybe a '50s schoolgirl
who rebelled against rock 'n' roll,
was a misfit who dwelt in libraries
but had a smile I would have swooned
for,

or maybe both –
the girl picking up the record
at a used record shop,
long after the professor had died,
with no loved one to pass it on down to,
both of them connected
through the grooves that may have given them
some solace on a Saturday night,
when their peers were out there dancing,
or under a flowered bed sheet somewhere
having the kind of sex
that Chopin may have alluded to in the finale,
where Malcuzyński's fingers-pounding-keys
speak of *climax* of another kind,
that only the fortunate know.

Ward One, Civic Election

You heard a knock
upon the door;
I begged you not to open

He's there, again, isn't he?
The man from city hall,
the one with leaflets,
slogans, pitching us
to vote

I point to the neighbour's
house across the street.
Needles on the
lawn, a tricycle bent
by a car,
and unpaid bills that sail
mid-air

Catch one, I dare to say,
as you smile to him
apologetically.

*Take the place of
children playing ball*

September Dew

In the days of almost-autumn,
the dew mimics frost
with beads of light,
water bouncing sunshine
in a harbinger of white.

Frost is still at least
a month away,
on this morning
in September, my garden
losing green, the wane of
fruitfulness.

I catch the yellow
creeping up
the veins of leaves,
orange forming islands
in a verdant span of sea,
to grow in red and brown
and be as continental
mass,

like the spread of cancer cells
that spell the ever-inevitable,
that incision cannot stop,
and the fall of what was once
so beautiful.

Soon, even the birds
will rise and flee –
to warmer spheres
that beckon.

If I were free
as they,
I'd depart as well,
unable to bear the sight
of no-more living.

But today, while I feel
the summer's close,
the clothes of clover's
grass arrayed in wet,
I'll harken
in a heartbeat
to the cardinal's
snatch of worm,
spy the struggle so in vain,
the writhing giving way
to limp and still,
to the quiet come
when something's been
consumed.

An Ephemeral Affair

On our final day together,
my lover brings a blossom,
a solitary bloom,
says flowers are lost
by the dozen,
that the beauty
at the top of a single stem
explodes upon an iris,
that an orb should not absorb
a flood of fleeting,
fragile colour.

I take my darling's gift
and soak her mahogany hair
with my eyes,
grateful that I'll remember,
be fond of the fronds
we've felt, the pond
by which we sat
upon a wooden bench
for two,
pitching pennies
for a wish,
knowing nickels
purchase more,
are less toxic
to the fish.

Come Winter

– for Carrie

In the summer sun,
the moth believes its beauty
rivals the butterfly's.

In the summer sun,
the plainness of white
is vivid, gleaming;
its diminutive wings
casting a canopy's
shade.

You are beautiful
under the summer sun.
Come winter,
yours will be the effulgence
outshining the snow,
whose shadow is a swirl
of turquoise, lilac,
circles of garnet and gold.

Planting Roses on the Sabbath

Yes, the searing sun
scorched our backs in the sowing,
the SPF 45 left inside,
for on this day we thought of nothing else
but the trellis, the vines that would ascend
and the pink-to-red side of the spectrum
that would indeed beautify
the barren side of our yard.

On this, the eve of June,
let us drink to a job well done,
to our labour on the Sabbath,
to our sin and all that will blossom
by its stubborn, rebel hands.

For our palms and brows
poured saline sweat and dreams,

and when we're grey,
when we're bent but still in love,
when our fingers are too gnarled
to spade and to seed,
we'll water gently,
evade the stabbing of thorns,
and number each bloom
in honour of our crime
and passion.

Carrot Tops of the World, Unite

You are cast aside like weeds,
twisted, ripped off orange heads
without a pause or second thought,
as rubbish to be bagged,
composted at very best.

I will *not* be so cold
and so cruel:

I will trim your green for garnish,
with the finest of meals,
on porcelain.

I will hang you on the wall
in lieu of crosses,
instead of icons of the saints.

I will put you in a vivid vase
or re-plant beneath an elm,
to find a character all your own,
with neither fruit nor flower
to be loved as much;

none to spurn
your ragged crown as worthless –
without resplendence, beauty,
birds that praise above.

For Basho

The frog that's in my garden
is incredibly far from home.

This cannot be its abode
since by its very amphibious
nature it lives and moves –
part-time – in water.

Yes, there are puddles filling
holes along the dirt, in
inconsistencies of deck
and stepping stone –
the coloured blocks that sag
in certain places,
in a way I cannot notice
unless it rains.

There's a river to the east
about a mile,
30 light-years for a frog,
with its inefficient hop,

and every taxing, sluggish jump
preceding scheduled breaks
to rest,

while predators await,
the scores of running wheels
ever-ready
to squash it flat.

It pours in summer daybreak
while I sleep,
as I dream of downward
spirals,
of plunging from the sky
and flapping arms
in lieu of wings,

a frog beneath
the beanstalk
sponging water's
soothing drops,

its wart-less head
and back
now beaded wet,

leaving nothing lost
or wasted in the fall.

Linus and Lucy

There's a girl around the corner
taking lessons, on a piano,
her bay-sized windows open,

with every missed-hit key
made that much louder
by Murphy's law—
no muting
of what normally
muffles
(at least if the music
were good):

the choir of barking dogs,
lawnmowers spitting grass,
a freight train's ill-timed
crossing.

If it could at least be
something pleasant,
some Grieg or Chopin
prelude,
the mistakes might somehow
grate less
in my mind,
intermingled
with moments of calm.

But Guaraldi's *Linus and Lucy*
should never be butchered this way,
the over and over
rendering
of what frequently speaks
of failure,
even when perfectly played:

that unrequited love,
that poor ol' Charlie Brown,
his dancing beagle's scorn,

is just too fast and tricky
for this child's
clumsy fingers,

strikes much too close to home
for any neighbour
who thought forgotten:

that desk without
red hearts;
a kite torn
in a tree;
a football held for kicking,
the tears
when snatched away.

Filler:

The album's seventh track,
that isn't very good,
that you find yourself
skipping
like the fourth, eleventh
ones,

as though the artist
couldn't conjure
another hit,
recorded
lifeless strumming
so the deadline could be met,
the catchy songs adjacent
caught in a buyer's
shopping list –

and the book's insipid poems
that plod along
around the middle,
where the poet doesn't have
a thing to say,

as if the blather of the lines
trumps the wordless white
of page,

the flight of fleeting
muse,

the emptiness of things
on which to ponder.

The Dwarf

Think of Rumpelstiltskin,
childless, spinning gold
for a promise, broken,

or an allergy-ridden servant
of Snow White,
known only by his malaise
and not a name;

the Lilliputians, thwarted
by a single Gulliver,

and that diminutive fish
of the ocean,
pining for a place in a pond.

And then there is *Pluto*,
too far to be warmed
by the sun,
complaining it's the smallest
planet,
until even *that*
is taken away,

the ninth and last in line,
darling little *world* no more,

no longer *scanned* for
in the skies,
a speck or dot
or lowly mote
not *worth* the squint
of eyes.

Regarding the Pitfalls of Finer Dining

The zoologist
you used to date
turned you entirely off of men:

*The dung beetle
is a survivor,*

*eating excrement
for millions of years
and never complaining
about the taste.*

I admit my skills
of conversing
aren't *envied*
by the erudite,
but even *I* would find
something better to discuss
over string beans,
seasoned shrimp:

*On the pathway
in the woods
behind my house,
there's a bird's nest
that's been empty
since the days I was a child.*

It's a subtle invitation
to an after-dinner stroll,
a chance to burn some calories
post-dessert,
hoping I can *conjure*
a funny joke
along the way,
something to make you giggle,

re-ignite your *faith*
in fallen males,

watch for robins
reclaiming roosts,

our eyes to the skies
never shifting to the ground,
where waste
and crawling vermin
coexist.

Hispaniola

On the right side of the line
he envisions
greater things,
his life as a baseball star,
perhaps a house on the hill with a gate,
looking down on all the tourists
who are sunning themselves in the sand.

Left of the Dominican,
in the searing Haitian heat,
she cannot feel her feet,
the fractured concrete ceiling
breaking bones, chalking skin—
a ghost before she is gone.

And from the hovel that was her home
about a half a mile away,
her aunt and brother calling
from the land of the freshly crushed:
food and water coming so they're told,
coffins too, from the other side
of the border,
being built as fast as they can.

The Buddhist

Your apartment smelled of sandalwood
the day you went for refuge,
submitted to the Sensei,
cleared your mind of racing thoughts.

Your locks of hair, unshorn,
no need to practice bald,
no yellow robes or statues save the one
of Gautama,
in crimson soapstone, seated,
a three-fold jewel to ponder.

Your candles will illumine
midnight steps, bead-strung
prayers,
vespers from the mould
of monastic
chant,

so far from forest groves
uncut by hand,
your speech a distant cricket
in the grass.

Type Writer

Your words are never wrought
by pen and hand,
neither are they scribed
on computer screens,
but somewhere in-between,

on that Underwood
from the '20s,
from the days of silent film
and prohibition,
before the typing
went electric,
every *snapping* stroke of key
a laboured struggle
for your fingers,
every letter
birthed by grunted
downward thrusts.

Your poems were never easy
to understand,
the obscurities from the Scotch
and blurring sight,
but at least I know their embryonic
state,
how they physically came to be,

that nothing in their telling
was ever simple,
convenience
never worthy to consider,
verses void of the calm
of soundless things.

No. 6, in C Major, with Voice

I've opened a window
to blend the outside
with what is in,
the strings of a concerto
playing from my radio,
accompanying a cardinal
in its morning lilt.

When an adagio arrives,
an oriole will add a vocal
that the composer did not intend,
unless it was of love
the violinist lamented
in the unspoken sweep
of his bow.

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.

30 Years

If I were thirty years younger,
I'd ask the woman at the bar
why I hadn't seen her here before.

If I were thirty years younger,
I'd write down my phone number
and leave it next to her purse.

If I were thirty years younger
I wouldn't leave this place alone,
the girl beside my table
would turn around and smile at me,
instead of *past* me
to some well-built, wavy-haired fellow
who'd rushed for 90 yards in last week's
homecoming game.

If I were thirty years younger,
I wouldn't be jotting down lines
about being thirty years younger,
I'd be living as someone that age
currently does – on some precipice,
with no fear of falling off,
having another round of drinks
with my lively, spirited friends,

exchanging flirtatious glances
with lovely young women
who are not too young for me
to respectfully eye
without feeling like a dirty old man,

and certainly not
carrying a notebook to a pub,
scribbling thoughts
that someone less than half my age
wouldn't think to entertain,
shamelessly calling it a poem.

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.

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.

Goderich

The stones amid the rocks
form a pattern we promptly
discern—*Inuksuk*, conveying
human without a visage,
from meticulous, Inuit hands:

a marker on a route,
a site of veneration,
a place to catch some fish
when we are hungry.

This beach is crowded over every summer,
and the stones are just as plentiful
as the sand. Tomorrow, the Inuksuit
may be many, the art of imitation,
Caucasian appropriation,

or the *one* that's been here days?
Dismantled, caught up in a wave
whenever the gales are temperamental,

or the consequence of a child,
ambling along the shore,
seeking *ujarak* flat and smooth,
for skipping on the rippled sheen,

who took to playing Jenga under the sun,
wary over dislodging from the middle,
the kerplunking of a game that went awry,
one *set* of naked footprints
fleeing trespass, its shame
and culpability,

to be expunged upon remorse,
the soddening of eyes,
this water's absolution
once the wind has finished its rage.

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.

Seclusion

I have all the time
in this pandemic world
to create my *Magnificat*,
the magnum opus
to be said or sung
for generations yet to come;

and with my calendar
of vacant squares
there is *no* excuse to delay,
no obligation to grant me pardon.

They say Shakespeare
had a similar quandary
and he managed to pen *King Lear*—

no one to disturb or vex him
while he dipped his feathered quill
into the murk of bottled ink.

No pressure.
And whether the tragedy to unfold
is due to the love or
due to the greed I cannot say,

for I too will need Five Acts,
a post-curtain bow,

and I've still to build my stage
of paper maché—

so do not let us flee our homes
before this plague has ended.

Oh come, dear Cordelia,
guide this blinded Gloucester
to scribe *whatever* lines he must,
give magnificence to a poem
that will inspire—

both the feverish woman
in the laboratory
forging *on* to our salvation,

and to the man beneath the trees
who sweats profusely,
digging graves in case she fails.

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
ferverently that this is just pretend.

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
turn 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*.

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 Garage

You phoned on your way
back home,
saying there's a garage sale
in the neighbourhood, asking
if I'd like to join you.

*We have
a garage already,
I said, we don't need a second one
(and besides, where could we possibly
put it?).*

It's not an attempt
at a tired quip, my dearest,
like my reply to your
previous request,
the *go window shopping
with me ...*

*Our windows are fine as they are,
incompatible
with your search
for clothing,
knowing that we'd gaze at
mannequins,
all in fancy attire, ones
missing limbs and faces.*

And I could have said
you're beautiful
just as you are,
without the need
of pricey garments,
that I adore you in sweatpants
and tees,

but all I could think of
were the forced-upon poses
of the lifeless,
how they can do nothing
other than model,
without eyes to see outside,
though they're facing the bustling
street,

and if there are more of them
out there *naked,*
in some stranger's creepy garage,
awaiting
the inevitable day
they'll join a tea set
missing a saucer,
a chess set minus a queen,

a tricycle robbed of its bell
and a teddy bear bereft
of stuffing,

on a lawn with passers-by,

couples
looking for anything
to distract,
from their silly,
daily quarrels,
from their lack of meaningful sex,

all of them hunting for bargains
amid the cracked
and the once-beloved.

Gale from the North

– for Carrie

This wind wielding its vigour
brings a reminiscence:
your face buried in my shoulder
as I stroke the back of your hair,
saying all will be alright
and that storms are needed
to recycle the air,
to cleanse our skies and valleys
and are a prelude to something
better, like a kiss that says
how much you're adored,
that all will be calm
by the time I let you go.

A Muse

You noticed my proclivity
for the overly sentimental,
the *Romeo and Juliet*,
the hours I spent re-reading,
my watching of *The Notebook*
with a pad and pen in hand,

the *Mantovani*
taking turns
with *Manilow*,

all for inspiration,
that poem about our passion,

your sulking
a display for this affront,

as though your stale,
chaste kisses
were not enough.

Sorrow

lowers its head
like a contrite,
a collector of tax and interest
at the back of the Temple of God,
a deflowered droop in humidity,
a humbled *curve* at the top of a cane,
knowing not what the sky is doing
but cognizant instead
of the number of ants and crickets
crawling *beneath* its chafed feet –
one to offer its serenade to the night,
the other soon to rest after a *day*
of repetitive toil, too weary to dwell
on what happiness could possibly be.

After the Melt

Every *leafless* tree in the valley
is lifting its hands in praise –

true, they're always *raised*
in exaltation
but today they are especially grateful
to a sun that's freed their arms,

taken their *knotty*, spindly fingers
and relieved them of the ice –

the glossy, glassy coating
that had frightened off the finch,
shooed away the owl,
brought their boughs to *bend*
from limpid weight;

yet if there'd been a giant mirror
in which they'd seen their own reflection,
they may have viewed a splendour
that's unmatched, even by the Autumn's
red-and-golds,

and, albeit for an hour,
when they'd never been so alluring,
every bird on its makeshift perch
chanting homage from a distance.

Hermitage

This Fall, I didn't leave the house at all.

I spent the Autumnal Equinox
at one of those grocery-plus-
everything-else-you'd-ever-need
kind of stores,
overflowed my pantry with the canned
and the dried, the toiletries good till Spring,
then waited out the shortening of days,
spied the apple-coloured leaves
and their falling yellow brethren
from the safety of my window,
barely a crack in its anti-social drapes.

I kept abreast of the world
the old-fashioned way, with my radio,
had the mail dropped into a newly-
carved slot in the door
and then imagined
what the neighbours thought
when a lucky midnight wind
blew my leaves all down the street,
if I'd raked them under the dark
of a new moon,
my form as black as shadow,
waving to an insomniac
out for a jog,

or bagging them before my ride
to a possible graveyard shift,
where a skeleton crew of workers
wonder if anyone out there misses them,
when the sun arises to light
the once-hidden bones of trees.

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 keeps 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.

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.

Having a Cigarette with Daphne du Maurier

The ashtray in the drawing room
brims with stubs, and that
which mirrors soot,
and I cannot say I blame you
as your match ignites my vice,
setting it aglow
like a hearth-side midnight ember,
all but extinguished,

and you're telling me of
shrines and hidden places,
all within this house—*mansion*, I call it,
speaking as an apartment-dweller,
and I hope you understand,
that Mrs. de Winter
spent many a time
in hotels, yearning for space
before realizing that
too much under a creaky roof
gives rise to conjured spectres,
encircling our throbbing skulls
like the smoky rings
that surround us;

that there's a Mrs. Danvers
lurking about every corner,

the shadows of whom
take shape upon the walls,
like a flame that licks the
paint in feigned innocence,
tickling before it consumes.

Like me, your narrator
isn't *worthy* of a Christian
name, that we're unable to
live up to our *Rebeccas*,

that Manderley, as an
incinerated shell,
with its wild, snaking foliage
creeping *out* of glassless windows,
stands *victorious* in its rubble—

to those of us who see
what burns
as not a hellish vision,
but a preface to paradise,

where all of us are called
within the fire,
by a voice which only
we sinners understand.

The Difference a Single Minute Can Make

I'm finding myself
forever late
and running a frantic catch-up
to every place
I need to be:

The city bus *bolting*
as I stretch my waving arms
to flag it down;

the opening credits rolling
as I scramble for my seat,
popcorn spilling
from its bag;

missing the woman I would have met –
and *married* –
had I seen her seconds sooner,
before a line of people
blocked our path,
leaving us as strangers,
our eyes to never lock.

I lost out
on a stellar career
because I didn't see the want ad
in the paper –

the listing stamped for me
under the arm
of another seeker,
who snagged
the final copy
of the city's daily news
just a breath-and-a-half before.

I want to ask my mother
why she couldn't birth me faster,
why she hadn't *heeded* the contractions
just as soon as they were felt,
without delay,

pushed an extra bit harder
while my head was popping out,

that additional minute of life,
that little head start,
giving me adequate time to stroll
to that bus stop down the street,
smell some flowers along the way,
tell a woman I think she's pretty,

if we can meet for a funny movie
when my day at the office is done.

Percussion

It was one of your friskier nights
and you suggested “strip poker.”
I don't know how to play poker,
I lethargically said, with no desire
to either strip or deal cards.

Your temperature rose,
in a flash and in a flush,
and you put some rumba on,
whipped off your blouse and bra,
and shook yourself silly
while I flipped through
the *Business Weekly*,
lifting my eyes when the congas
kicked in and when the columnist
talked of tax.

Tigris and Euphrates

Shelly says if she were God
or last upon the earth,
not another soul behind,
she'd start it all again:

Breathing life in crackled sand,
forming mouth and nose and eyes.
Not "Adam" this time
but "Ben."
Her father would be kinder
and neither Fall
nor bear a Cain.

*When he took you to the fair,
he did whatever you asked,
didn't he?*

You nod and point to clouds:
cotton candy by the mile,
a smiling sky
that never yells.

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.

Vodka Bill

takes to the bottle
as soon as he's through the door.

But this isn't one of those distressing
alcoholic poems.

Bill can hold his liquor,
is rarely reeling drunk
and his liver functions fine.
He has no wife or kids to beat
but would never do that anyway.

You see, it's just something he does,
two-thirds vodka, one-third
orange juice and lime.
Forget his vows to move away
and find someone who loves him;
move away to that grander job
eluding him to this day.

There's nothing wrong
with Walmart blue, living
alone in his squalid apartment,
practicing *hello* and *how are you?*
and *can I help you find anything?*
and maybe he simply likes the taste
and wouldn't have it
any other way

and it's not so bad for
do you love me?
to go unanswered
in his dreams
and in the shoe department,

runners to the right,
slippers to the left.

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?

Eggs

Omelettes were our breakfast
in the days before we bickered,
peppers and parsley pressed
amid the shredded mushroom bits—
served on gilded plates as gold as sun.

It's 8:13am, and the eggs
you pitched in the pot
have started to crack
and leak a mess.

If I'd been
a few steps quicker,
didn't dilly-dally,
made it to the kitchen just before
your stomps and slams,
I'd have placed them gently
in the cool of filtered water,
set the aging stove
at medium-low,
brought them to a boil,
peacefully,

allowed our yolks
to stay intact,

leave this one last thing
unbroken.

Lady Agatha

The neighbour next door has no clothes on,
is 83 and creased like a raisin.

There are curtains in her house,
sun-faded,
once-gold, now yellow,
and always left open, day or night;
and at night, with every light in her home
ablaze,
she shuffles about from room to room,
hoping the curious are watching.

I *can't* confirm my theories,
say *why* she does what she does,
but outstretched drapes
like the yawn of a cat
will be
my damning witness.

I sometimes wonder
what she was like
before the age
and fat set in,
before cellulite took its toll
and silky skin began to sag –
supple and svelte and 20-something, yes;

frolicking out the front door, perhaps,
as an unabashed doe
and skipping around
her garden,
where, if I'd been around back then,
I *could* have made
her acquaintance,
impressed her
with my ability
to maintain eye contact,
merely blush
at her bouncing breasts.

As it is, I have *no intent*
on paying a call,
walking her barking dog
I only hear,
extending an empty cup
in need of sugar,
resisting the urge
to search and scan
for *the beautiful*,
long-since lost.

Knick-Knack

The schnauzer figurine I gave you
was dismissed as a *knick-knack*,
a worthless ornament,
unable to bestow its
love, wag its tail, or beg for a walk
around the block.

*You'll never have to clean up
after it*, I said, knowing that
"poop 'n' scoop" was outside
your realm of comfort, that it would
never shed its coat or
grind your brand-new slippers
with its teeth.

*I had a real-life version of it
once*, I confess, revealing
the reason for this ceramic imitation,
*rubbed its head against my shins
even when it wanted nothing from me
at all.*

Laugh Track

I'd like to *erase*
all the people
on the laugh track,

their giggles in a sitcom,
manufactured
and rehearsed.

I doubt they even *see* the shows
through which they're feigning chuckles,
and if in fact they do,
with *signs* that prompt them when
and how to chortle,
then shame on them, I say,
allow a karma's curse
to bite their asses –

for let them sit through circus clowns
and be as mute as mimes,

have them weep in hankies
at the dimwit's bumbling fall,

and may it be a Requiem
when pies are plunged in faces,
the *Adagio for Strings*
a serenade
for splitting pants.

The Drought

We are dry
as cacti,

cracks in our lips
from Gobi winds

and blinking eyes
blinded by the grains
of aches and pains.

There's been
no rain
in years,

our once-supple,
braided flesh

long-since parted
by grey and age –

its canes, its creases,

its mantra that
*we're tired, so very,
very tired;*

dreaming that there's
water stored
within our lower
trunks,

enough to hope
the next time
moonlight falls,

a coyote's
midnight call
will cause our needles
to conjoin –

moistened, pliant,
tender to the touch.

Silence

If small talk's
about the weather,
the shine and rain
of days,

then ours is microscopic,
a blip in the barely heard.

*Salt, where's
the salt?*

*and It's there
beside the milk*

with not a word
about its ills
or that it's really
bad for me,

my arrhythmia,
my blood pressure
gone berserk,

that makes me *yearn*
for morning nags
that *drown* the sounds
of chewing.

**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.

I Surely Would Have Fallen Had I Tried

*Thus God made the firmament,
and divided the waters
which were under the firmament
from the waters which were above
the firmament; and it was so.*

—Genesis 1:7

As a boy,
the sky was the ocean;
its islands, wisps of white.

We lived landlocked,
never to see the sea,
and streaking jets
were distant boats
that sliced
the tranquil deep.

I was drawn
to all things tall:
telephone
poles, chapel
spires,

and the backyard tree
that seemed to grow
a little every year,

in increments
scarcely noticed,

beckoning
that I climb
to cambric clouds,

with its branches
brawny-firm,

while the shifting blues
of lakes
beyond its soaring
broccoli crown
had summoned me
as well:

Leap! Splash! Swim!
The water, child,
is fine.

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.

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.

Multitasking

You come home smelling
of Export A, saying you've had a
stressful week, had a
cigarette in the car
as you sped along the streets,
getting nothing but lucky greens.

When I play the role of
skeptic, asking *how*
you lit a smoke,
kept your hands
upon the wheel, watched out
for errant kids,
you say you can walk
and chew gum
at the same time.

I've *never* seen you do it,
that the *last* time you had
a pink Bazooka

it was stale, bereft of all its
flavour, that the comic strip enclosed
wasn't funny—that Joe
had jumped the shark,

that I'd kept it in my pocket
half-a-year,

that you were *sitting*
on the couch, viewing *Days*
of Our Fucking Lives.

I've watched you mop the
floors, bulky headphones
on, dancing to Bruno Mars
like a sotted college frosh;

and the time you did the dishes,
reciting all your lines,
from the play that was up-
coming, effervescent
suds upon your nose,
upstaging the final act.

I knew a postman
who chomped his Wrigley's
every morning on his route, said
a barking cocker spaniel
had induced a sudden gulp,
that he swallowed as he tripped,
just minutes before his lunch;

that his *appetite* was lost,
that the gooey thing
fermented in his gut,

that sweet & sassy cherry
had lingered on his tongue,
that it lasted thirty days;

that he kept
his wife *awake*
throughout the night,
that it somehow worked its way
back up his throat, reviving
a vexing habit as he slept:

the grating smack of chewing,
the breath of exhalation,
the pop from blowing bubbles
in his dreams.

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.

Dedication

We've noted that the
crossing guard on the corner
has *never* left his station,
when the school a block away
is brimmed with kids.

Every time we're peeking through
a crevice in the blinds, go for *walks*
around the crescent

there he is—that he's adopted
the mailman's creed, that rain
or snow or heat or gloom
won't make a bloody difference,
that he's never missed a day
in thirty years, ducked *out*
for a cup of coffee, ran back
to his abode for an untimely
bathroom break.

What everyone *admired*
morphed to being
weirded out, seeing him there
on Saturdays,
even Sundays—
when there isn't a soul in sight.

You've heard a story from our
neighbour, that he was half-a-minute
late, one misty Monday morning
back in 1993,

that a boy had tried to beat
the flashing light,
that he was struck
by a turning car, that when the
rookie guard arrived—
panting, breathless,
aching from a frantic
sprint, the boy was spurting blood,
that the driver just took off,
that the moment the medics
showed, he was dead, held
in the arms of his sentinel
too numb to shed a tear,

that the family never sued,
the hit-and-runner
never caught,
that he wasn't *fired*
from his job.

There's also those who've spied him
in a glowing, orange vest,

in the midst of midnight fog—
vigilant, alert,
standing *still* at his usual
spot, stop sign at the ready,

looking left and right as though
a child needs to cross—

a belated *ghost*, perhaps,
worried Mrs. Henderson
will keep him after class,
call his drunken mother saying
this was the final straw.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Ablutions

We're cleansed, supposedly,
by this *priest* who signs the
cross of Christ's forgiveness
in the air, the beating upon
our breasts

replaced by our relief, that we've
dodged the flaming bullet,
an eternal state that burns
with our regret.

What will Heaven be like?
our fledgling niece
inquires, on her day
of confirmation.

As godparents,
we tempt with *clouds*
of cotton candy,
the honeyed *mists*
of the beloved
we said goodbye to
long ago,

the myths of endless cake and
chocolate rivers,

that she in her diabetic
state
has yet to savour,

that every sugared thing
of taste and sight
will *enthrall* in
perpetuity,

her angelic ears
deaf
to the gnashing
from the damned
who missed the cut,

the shrieks subdued
by choirs
singing their sweet,
incessant praise.

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.

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.

Horticulture

I *murder* every houseplant
that I purchase.
Not deliberately, of course,
like some serial killer
in search of stalks and leaves,
but an accidental agent
of their demise,
thus *involuntary*
plantslaughter
is more befitting.

My weapon of choice
is water, that there's a
fine line between
just enough and far too much,
a single drop the difference.

And I wish the ivy and the ferns
could somehow speak,
tell me *this is great*
and *no more please*,

with a few more inches
to the left
guiding their placements
by the light,

that they could tell me
what kind of songs
they like to hear,
that maybe Mötley Crüe
ain't the greatest choice.

My *green* thumb has become
a midnight *black*;
I should get
another hobby,
one that doesn't end in
genocide.

I envision my arrival
at the greenhouse,
just beyond
the city limits,
the flora *cringing*
at the sight
of my shopping cart,
knowing I've come
for their generation,
that they might as well
start climbing
out of their pots,

throw themselves to the
floor, to be swept away
and bagged,

aware their odds are better
in the compost,
when the sun
crashes through
organic waste,
when the clouds
drop their store
of saving rain,
if I'm not
within a mile
of their shoots.

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.

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.

Incongruity

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.
All 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?

Woman is whom God should have made
in the beginning. A more admirable name
for each animal.
Someone the Lord
would not have said *no* to
regarding the leaves and fruit of trees.

I plucked the olives from the salad
and that made it less than Greek.

I retained the blocks of feta
and considered *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?

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.

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.

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.

“Skinny Minnie Miller”

We tend to feel bad
for *the fat kid*,
the comparison
to whales and hippos,
the earthquake jokes
and *thunder thighs*,

while the skinny
boy in the desk
near the window
has also heard it all:

the human toothpick,
bag of bones,
the *eat a sandwich!*
said a hundred
thousand times,

that he can slip into the crack
between the doors,
the ones which lead to the gym,

the girls in
stiches
whenever it's
shirts and skins,

saying they can't
tell him apart
from the *shaft*
of his hockey stick,

that the kids can wrap
two fingers around his
wrist, that he's come to
dread the summer,
the taunts at the swimming
pool,

and if he thought public
school was cruel,
grade nine will be a
hellscape, the acne *rising*
across his face
as if pushed *up*
from tectonic plates,

a range
of red mountains
that will disfigure
a gauntly smile,
when he'll ask a *dozen*
girls to dance,

on a throbbing
Friday night,

their callous *no*
that come with snickers,
not the chocolate bar
to blame
for his bumpy visage,
or the one he
should devour
to put some flesh
on his skeletal frame,

but the laughter that's
heard when you're no longer
human, when your clothes
forever sag,
when you're sarcastically
asked
of *Auschwitz*,

that you should get on with it
already, find a lanky shovel,
dig your fucking
grave, climb right into your coffin,
the one with plenty of
room to spare.

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.

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 sibilliance 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.

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 calmy
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.

Bing

*Hello, this is Bing!
I'm the new AI-powered
chat mode
and the search engine
of your dreams.*

*I promise creative inspiration
and summarized answers
to all your questions,*

such as
*How can I improve my
sleep quality?*

*Which I'd like to know
in case my nightmares
start acting up,*

the one with my favourite
crooner,
who's killed
by a single bullet
from my gun,
in the middle of
White Christmas,

or was it his duet
with David Bowie
recorded shortly
before he died?
Felled by a failing
heart
after a hardy
round of golf,

though it's only
September
when it happens,
in my midnight
revery,

where I'm looking for
his granddaughter,
Denise,
totally delish
in *TNG*,

the scene of her
with Data, *Star Trek's*
Pinocchio android
(episode 3,
The Naked Now),

that I was simply
looking for the shot,
of her and her naked
stomach,
the bottom of
one of her breasts
exposed
by the skimpy
cut of her dress,

the one that all
the nerds
had saved,
in the gallery
of their iPhones
come the days of
internet,

but neither of the
Crosbys
are the point
of this stupid poem,

though Google gave
the elusive
pic much *sooner*,

wise that Bing
would cough it up
a little later,
protective granddad
that he was,

knowing I was a
creep to leer
at Denise's
sexy curves,

but I surely must
digress,
wondering *why*
my hands are
trembling, when I'm not even
scared or anxious,

knowing Google will leap to
Parkinson's, and I'll start
to plan for my *death*
ahead of time,

Medical Assistance
In Dying
just a couple of clicks
away

while Bing seems
clearly open
to other *scenarios*:

*It might just be
a case of
rattled nerves,
too much fucking coffee
to begin your day,*

*that wasted crush
you have,
on the girl
from the seventh
floor.*

*Go ahead, ask me anything
that's on your mind—
anything, anything at all.*

I promise not to judge.

The Postulant

You asked me if I'd still love you
if you became a nun,
an odd thing to inquire I thought
as I've never heard you consider
religious vows
or donning a veil or habit—

in fact I've yet to see you pray
although I really think you do,
before you're asleep in the guest room
after a glass of wine too many
(like tonight),
mumbling something about its redness,
its salvation from our iniquities
but then it wouldn't just be wine
but the result of a priestly
sign-of-the-cross;

and I can't hear anything more
through this heavy, wooden door
I once carried up the stairs,
sweating, knees buckling,
falling more than once.

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.

The Sapling

After years of talk
and deferral,
this is the Spring
I planted the sapling,
the one to be our tree
(*albeit* a little too late).

And someday in our future,
when we're much too old to climb,
too frail to sup in its shade,

in wheelchairs, perhaps, we'll be,
seeing its bounty
unfold by the window,
from inside a pane of glass:

an umbrella of sheltering leaves,
a cathedral for choral birds,
a path for dashing squirrels;

and when we're gone,
when another mated pair
dwell within our past abode,
its bark will await the touch,
engraving,

from this couple's supple hands
(*without* procrastination),

tender as our own in times
when love and seed were one.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Success

The truncation of words is nothing new. I've heard we're too lazy, as speakers of English, to go with the weighty version of common terms.

Congratulations! was the norm when acknowledging someone's success, till 5 syllables were simply too clunky, only 50% of the letters now in vogue.

Congrats! was sent to me, from another struggling wordsmith, for some smudgy, crummy chapbook, spat out from my printer, the *brother* I call the *bro*,

its twenty pages
poorly bound
by my *Stanley*
Bostitch stapler,
nicknamed *Stan*
the Man.

Of course, in another time,
I'd have cracked the
Dom Perignon,
celebrated 90
collected poems
and offset printing
on the spine.

As it is,
there's nothing
to *revel* about,
everyone & their
goldfish
are doing
the very same thing,

whipping out the
verse
as if a drag
on a *cigarette*—

a *ciggy*,
my friend from
England
would say,

until it's shortened
to a *cig*—

by some torpid
excuse for a
parrot,

the one my nosy,
next-door neighbour trained
with cookies, not
saltines,

its daily *grats!*
that make me feel
I've yet to accomplish
a thing.

Pornography

The woman
in her bikini
loves my poems.

We see her Insta-
profile, *Katie*
XXX, note she's managed
to read all thirty,
in less than
half-a-minute;

and you play
it Captain Obvious,
say she's always
half-naked
in her pics, as if
genitalia,
a pair of nipples,
make up 50%
of the body,
her arms and legs
and waist—

merely tallied
to the total
of a tithe,

being somewhat
more liberal
with her face,

while in the back,
her thong that's
up her ass
is once *again*
an equal share.

And I wonder
if she concurs,
if she divvied
up the fractions,
if she made it
past third grade
math, thinks a dollar
off a dozen
is the greatest
deal on eBay,

maxxing out
her VISA
on a line of
skimpy swimwear,

to don around
some poolside
in Miami,

reading Wordsworth,
Whitman, and Wilde,
maybe lumping me
in with the greats, awaiting
my future verses
with bated breath,

will put a pause
on the sex
with Raoul,
the second her *phone*
begins to beep,

devouring poem
after poem
after poem,

her emoji hearts
that follow
saying to the *world*
I'm not half-bad,

a middle-aged
prodigy,

with decades more
to pen
my magnum opus,

that at 60
years of age
it'll be
2084
before she sees it,
having taken that
ultimate step,
finally reclining
in the nude—

bestowing a *scanty*
quintet of stars
that say it's perfect.

Achilles

The name our
friend has chosen
for her mastiff
is sublime.

We wait to hear
the inevitable:
Achilles, heel!

Almost *invulnerable*,
were it not
for a patch near his
paw;

able to sniff
out a cad,
any boorish
lout
who makes a pass.

We envision
a vivid
scenario,

picture him
by her side,

at the *Apollo's*
Pharmacy,
a box of Trojan
love balloons
snuck discreetly
in her purse,
the one she got
on Etsy,
made with
vintage
'80s horse hair,
as if some
stealthy *turnabout*,

hoping a heroic,
Grecian Spartan
will ascend
from *The Illiad*,

the copy she keeps
by the fire,
beside a dog-
eared *Ancient Myths*,

with two
glasses of
Muscat Blanc,

one for *her*,

and one for a
woman's best friend,
beside her with
his vicious mouth
agape, a cave of tongue
and teeth,

ready to *bite*
on his arrival,
sit back *down*
if she commands;

lick the spot
below his calf
as if to pity his
single weakness.

Rumours

These juicy *pineapple*
tidbits
are up to speed
with the latest gossip

or so I quip,
as we divvy
them up
in bowls,
one for you

and one for my
idiot self—
remarking
I've heard the
pears are splitting up,
that one was caught
in a morning
tryst with a fig;

while cerise
did *ooh-la-la*
with some Auckland
kiwi rogue.

And the coconut
from Manila?

It ran *off*
with the melon's
daughter, mixing
its *milk*

with the seeds
we always
spit *out*,
like the *crétin*
from the streets
of Bordeaux,
who taught the
bona fide way
to *cracher*,

and that *pineapple*
in French
is *ananas*,
confused
with a tropical
lech,

the one that's
sheathed
in yellow, boasting
of the length of
his sweet
everything.

The Blues

*Got to pay your dues
if you wanna sing the blues*

—Ringo Starr

I'm melancholy enough to sing the blues.
There's surely no shortage of sadness
to birth despondent, lyrical quatrains;
my voice just a coke & crackers away
from that gravelly, soulful sound
that makes an authentic virtuoso.

But then there's my name—
with no notable ailment or physical loss
to grant entry to that Hall of Misery:

*Blind Lemon Jefferson, Peg Leg Howell,
Cripple Clarence Lofton, Blind Willie Johnson,
James 'Stump' Johnson, Leukemia Louis Brown*

Let's be perfectly honest:

Stubbed-Toe Charlie doesn't cut it,
and *Runny Nose Ron* isn't worthy
to strum of endless pain and woe,
to garner empathy from the folks
who'd pick *Chess Records* from the stacks,

their singer in midnight shades,
who knows of poverty, oppression, infirmity;
that I in my tripping-over-the-cat
can *never* comprehend.

Tatanka

—*The Lakota word for Bison*

This is it
at *last*: my epic about
the bison eating
grass,

these *Bovids*
of the Badlands,
a saga
bereft of length,
a noble poet's
insight.

I'll throw my
erstwhile
cohort
under the bus,
saying he
was just as lazy
as I,

tatanka
supposedly
sketched
on the over-
leaf, appearing *no-*
where within the frame,

that there is *nothing*
within the frame,

which I pretentiously
bill as *ekphrastic*,
a piece of
innovation
to cold-
start my career.

Well where's the fucking
grass? you ask,
querying *that*
over the absent
herd,

my shrug
a clear annoyance:

the buffalo
ate it already,
I reply,

had gone to look
for more

by the time some
idiot with a pencil
finally showed,

boasting *stark*
is all the rage,

that he'd give it
to me
for a hundred
if I agreed
to his demand,

place it within
the pages
of a chapbook,
priced at a
quarter-dollar
by antiquarians,

ones who pour
their saline
in my wounds,

label it
unread, creaseless,

without a speck
of any kind
from front-to-back;

ones tired
that their city
only has
a single mascot,
the error of *inter-
change*,
no matter the
sport or game,

the place that's
overshadowed
by *Niagara*,
just north along
the highway,

its rumble
the sound of
a billion
cloven hooves
which scarred the land.

faggot

It took many drinks
and decades,
it did, for you to offer
amends, apology,
and still with your twinge
of prevarication
and over-the-top erudition:

*We revelled in the archaic,
the antiquated,
anachronistically worded,
not quite antediluvian
but certainly obsolescent,*

*yes, a bundle of sticks,
tied out of drudgery,
that you were simply boring,
that's what we called you,
dull as dish soap,
nothing more nothing less.*

Silenzio

The g in Paglioni
is apparently
silent,

with the i
the sound of e
(robbing it of
a kingly lion's
mane),

while the e itself
is long and clearly
Italian,

though *we'd* have
guessed it simply
by the *décor*,

the bottles of Abruzzo
on the wall,
the scent of fettuccini
in the air—

but this *isn't*
consequential,
it's not a *Yelp*
review,

it's all about
the g
and its refusal
to hold its weight,

its obsession
with its stealth,
its channelling
Marcel Marceau,

or like the cat
of Cary Grant,
scaling the many *roofs*
To Catch a Thief,

that it should be
rooves instead of
roofs, like hooves
and a single hoof,

that the horse
has got it right
despite its *neigh*,

the shyness
that comes and
goes,

inside our alphabet's
seventh letter,
hooking us *along*
either way—

soundless as a feather,
roaring
like a Roman
god.

Slim Pickings

For whatever reason,
I have a habit of confusing
Slim Pickens with Wilson Pickett.
There's no answer to why I pick
this couldn't-be-more-different pair
to mix *up* or lump together,
with Slim's southern drawl
the antithesis of Wilson's Soul,
In the Midnight Hour
being as far
from a rodeo star
as one could get.

At the same time, I can't imagine
Pickett riding the A-bomb,
at the end of *Dr. Strangelove*,
though he did do a rendition
of *Mustang Sally*, perhaps
as homage to his hee-haw counter-
part, that a car and a horse
have a similar role to play
on any stage,

one to take a drunken man
on a deadly city spin,

the other to gallop at a
breakneck speed, saddle
ablaze, that they don't call it
horsepower for nothing,

and I doubt they'd ever met,
one destined for the bottle
while the other by a *tumour*
felled, over twenty years apart,

that it's a case of Black and White,
that the next time I'll play it safe,
stick with doppelgängers,
mistaking Prudhomme for
DeLuise, like Seinfeld
and everyone else has done
in this totally fucked-up
world.

Mantis

It's been *years*
since we've seen one,
and the wait
was all for naught—

its head raised
haughtily,
raptorial *arms*
held far apart,

not together
in supplication,
not in grovel
to a God,
an Abrahamic
Deity
who supposedly
made its blueprint,

in the burst
of a quantum blink,
along with all the *locusts*
and big-eyed bugs,

ones who later *devoured*
Pharoah's fields,

doing whatever
Yahweh asked,

but let's *dispense* with
all the hoppers
in the grass,
get back to this
apostate
who *isn't* on its knees,

you say it's an
Atheist, the mantis
who balks
at prayer,
who watched its *offspring*
eaten alive,

while humbly
bowed in *reverence*
to its Maker,

pled for mercy
for its young,
to make the hunter
much less hungry,
find a way to *slice*
its viscous web,

reminded of the
time
its mate was *snatched*
by a thrush's beak,
a bird's *Kaddish*
from the highest branch

ignored
by the lobes of the Lord,
the morning
in which its hatchlings
had all *fallen* to the ground,

consumed by an *infidel*,

a hyena perhaps, one who
merely chuckles
at the thought, that

the *couturier*
of fang and claw
will *yield*
and intervene,

make the *trophic*
ledger even,

admit

to a blatant flaw
in His design,

that Eden
never happened,
that Darwin
had it right,
that life is just
a bitter work-in-
progress,

and when asked
by His disciples
why things *are*
the way they are,

He'll simply shrug,
say none of us
understand,
that perfection
can't be rushed,

will be non-
negotiable,
in that distant,
utopian moment

when a spider
sucks on nectar
instead of blood,

when all of us on the *Earth*
will give His tired ears a break,
allow Him to hear
the dawning lilt
of starlings much in love.

Angel Clare

In these days of middle age,
her sense of the progressive
is gone,
replaced by a centre-of-the-road
accessibility,
she who *raised the bar*
of innovation,
the poster-poet of the
avant-garde,
the neoteric,

now disavowed
by the beret &
cappuccino crowd.

Everything she loves is *sanitized*,
so nuclear-family-friendly,
yet there's none to deny
the beauty she's embraced:

the cobblestone prints
of Thomas Kinkade
supplanting her Warhol
walls;

motherly
Maya Angelou
at the beginning
of bookshelves, cleaned—
Ginsberg's *Howl*
weeded out;

Garfunkel's
Angel Clare,
from '73,
heard from speakers
Sonny Rollins
had governed;

All I Know
escorting the jotting
of birdie-in-the-branches
verse,

as within-the-bounds
and radio-cordial
as the split with Simon allowed,

crooning an after-the-silence
sound so pure,
so snowfall-
on-the-summit,

so gentle
a stream after melt—

she may never leave the trees
to write of rape
and blood again.

Roomies

You ride the rhythm of your snare
as I attempt to scribe a stanza
to Quan Yin.

Maybe your distractions
are deliberate—
maybe you want my words
to sound like shite
(when our goddess
of compassion reads along);

nevertheless,
I'll stick your name
beneath its close
as co-conspirator, have her
judge the couplet
clearly worst,
and we'll argue over
who saw and loved her first.

Just give me a single drum roll
as I pay my share of the rent,
but do it like *Blakey* does,
make me *bop* my way
outside,
oblivious to her rejection,

skipping down stairs
while reciting Beatnik verse,

escaping
to see some paintings
by a Greenwich Village drunk
who, like us,
has never mattered to anyone,
on any path, to fucking
enlightenment.

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.*

Blank Notebooks

When you're a writer, people tend to give you blank notebooks as gifts. Sometimes, you see one with an enticing cover, one with a picture of a painting by Matisse, for instance, or a Viennese café with old world artists discussing philosophy and love over cups of cappuccino with strips of cherry strudel by their side, and you buy these hardcover books of empty, lined pages and then realize, after the euphoric moment of purchase has passed, that you've sentenced yourself to filling it with poetry or prose whether you want to or not.

There's nothing more demoralizing than having an entire row of virgin journals on the shelf, accentuating your failure to do what you'd promised yourself and others in your usual boastful manner. Sometimes, to lessen the sting of their spotting, you scatter them about your abode—one in the dresser, for example, and another under the bathroom sink, where it may garner dampness and mould, making it unworthy to write in.

And that's when your conniving hits its stride,
the excuse you've been looking for
to avoid telling your immediate circle
of individuals that you've had writer's block
or have spent too much time on the sofa
watching reality television or were just too lazy
to get the job started never mind done;

that all the caffeine in the universe
couldn't stain the pages with ink;
that you were secretly hoping that termites
would infest your place and that they were
hungry for paper and bookbinder's glue
and you could show everyone
the tattered red ribbon they left behind,
that it was placed near the end
of your magnum opus,
the great dystopian novel where the world
runs out of trees because madness gripped
the poet and he was unable to stop
his scribbling even when pens were smashed
to bits by the masses and he grew sickly
and pale from frantically jotting things down
with the blood he once claimed as his own.

The Baby, Albeit...

Maybe I mirror
you, in ways of
unawares, as your
mobile *carousels*
above your head,

a monitor
that ensures
you're sleeping soundly,
a roll from shielded
eyeballs

hinting of a dream,

though you're more
than just phantasmic,
some fluid, chimeric
guest, absent of
speech and belief,

these faintest of
gurgles unfurling,
from a body
that knows not
its name,

under lull
of clement light,
cerulean ceiling—

this elusive, crooked sky.

The Cameo

The years of the hunt
have blurred on past
like a passenger train at guard rails,
where faces are impossible to recognize
but waved to nonetheless,
so as to greet
in the comfort
of anonymity.

Then there are the treks to the jewellers,
the flea market artisans
and the antique markets
where none was to be found
but *good luck in the search*
consistently heard.

Yet now there's *one* at last,
made by a craftsman who's clearly gay,
who I could kiss in a flash of gratitude:

a pallid silhouette,
embossed as for the blind,
amid the smooth of charcoal grey,
Victorian she'd surely be,
over a century in the making
(and the finding),

its stark revelation
at the epilogue,

the strings on standby
to mark the credits'
ascending scroll, its appearance
ever-memorable—
in the less-is-more shock
of such brevity.

Waiting at the honky-tonk, 4 drinks later

When my friend, fresh
from her Dylan Thomas
dissertation,
finally shows up
with a Seagram's face,
I grow wary
of her innuendo,
her philosophical drool,
delivered one slurred poem
at a time—

and the brevity of seconds
pass, my drunken incarnation
punches back,
and if I can match her shot-
for-shot, I'll spout the same
solipsist creed
without the call for cabs
and bouncers,

inebriated enough
to attain Bukowskian *wows*,

undecided on which desire
to lay hold of:

to silence her with the shriek
of a cowboy's drawl,
or to lay at her feet, extradited
from inhibition,
my applause taking
the form of a kiss
she has but seconds
to accept.

Beach Baby, 40 Years Later

All the sunbathers
save one are rather young—
Coppertone, Hawaiian Tropic
bouncing beams from taut bellies
and shapely thighs—
attracting gawkers mostly male
as well as a pair
of female marchers
I'd seen at the recent
Pride Parade.

Then there's the woman in black—
not a spectre from a graveyard
or a burka-clad visitor
from afar
but a past-her-prime and plumpish
matriarch,
garnering no first
and second glances
from the ones who look for flesh
under the *guise*
of seeking stones to skip
across the sheen of lake.

Her bikini in the sand
reveals the creases
and the rolls of
excess food, childbirth—

a difficult delivery
to a stillborn
terminus,

a husband who fled
for a teenaged touch,

and the body
bearing those wounds
now the periodic brunt
of sneers from those
who dare to peek,
feigning that they're squinting
from the light.

Before the Abortion

i

*Whatever happened
to Flip Wilson?
He got into real estate,
fixed up dated homes,
was known as Flipper Wilson.*

There's a time
and place
for flippancy. The day
that someone dies
isn't it.

ii

You compared
yourself to Jesus,
that your "dad"
wasn't your dad,

saying your uncle
was your father,
or maybe your
second cousin.

*Where is
Maury Povich
when you need him?*

I replied,
incurring your
bottled wrath,

cursing that
I'm ever-
inappropriate,
making jests
about the pretzels
at the wake
of our beloved friend,

the lawyer
who flagged
an ambulance
every day,
the hearse of
every mortician
in the city;

that there's
no one on the planet
like a lawsuit-driven
man,

one who splits
the profits
with the *devil*,

who, like the
very phantom poppa
that you have,
has offspring
he never avows,
that God
was only like that
on Good Friday,

when the sky
was a cauliflower
gloom, over Pilate's
King of the Jews,

that this poem
will be *misconstrued*,

like the one
you wrote
for your daughter,
telling her *why*
she'll never be
born.

iii

This was never
meant
to be funny.
Do you see
funny?

The Horologist

*Does Anybody Really Know
What Time It Is?*

—Robert Lamm

Twice a day
and broken clocks:

the right-
wing politician
I agreed with

on policy
76,
something to do
with the care of
feral cats,
that he seemed so
human
for a change,

or the lout
in his pickup truck,
with a monstrous,
patriot flag,

Don't Tread On Me,

and I won't,
that snakes deserve
better,

they have feelings
too,

that I so much
want to believe
he really cares,

knows that
they got a raw
deal, took the
fucking blame
for our Fall,

that the Devil too
was correct, for once
(maybe twice),

that we'd become
like our Creator
and *all*
His many flaws,

except for the
single instance
He actually *did*
something about it,

the raining down
of bread—
of *Manna*—
that sweetness
from the sky,

that He must have
lost the recipe,

His bakery in
disrepair,
until this very
day,

the hour in which
a hundred million
children, thinned
to their very bones,
beg Him
for a miracle,

believing it will come
when the chimes
convey a song,

maybe the one
Rod Stewart
nicely sung,
back in 1988,

the final year
my mother was
cancer-free,
Forever Young,

that I hated
everything he did
until that moment,
his grating,
gravelly voice,
his plebeian
take on life,
*Da Ya Think
I'm Sexy?*

that my watch
had stopped
cold dead,

that no one
even knows
what a horologist
does

no one even
cares

these fractured,
clockless days

with tar
in our hour-
glass

our dial
without a shadow,
our smoky excuse
for a sun

*And may you never
love in vain*

Condiments

There's a woman
in a mustard-
yellow parka,
at the bus stop
we're driving past,
a contrast to the
parachuting flakes
of squalling snow;

and I tell you
she's on a mission
to grab a hot dog,
that the fellow behind
the cart beside
the Costco
churns them out—
for a toonie-a-piece—

that the woman is
clearly clumsy,
gobs too much of a
condiment
on the wieners,
that, according to the vendor,
are much better
than the ones that spin
eternal at 7-Eleven.

And we'll surely
take his word,
share a *foot-long*
solemnly laid
in a pillowy bun,
like a cadaver
that's relinquished
to a coffin,

me with my sweater
tomato-red,
you with your scarf
of relish-green,

and the frank-
furter peddler,
stenching
the frigid air
with his steaming, phallic tubes
of cut-up pig, bundled in *layers*
of black-to-brown,

saying *no one's* tried the
soy sauce from
Korea, the one beside
the salsa,

guaranteed
to splatter should you
slap it too hard
from behind, like a *man*
who's never learned
to use the Heimlich,
trying to be a
hero for the child
who is choking,

on a sausage
with too much mayo
on the top,
her fleece a winter
white,

promised she'd *never*
forget the flavour,

the mortician
to try his best
to curl her lips,
as if in the *midst*
of a colourful dream,
the taste of something
grand behind her smile.

Doomsday

I've never believed the apocalypse
will come,
that the Mayans ever said
it would,

espousing instead
that the alignment of the
planets
is simple cosmology—
no pull on our tides or our fate.

It's not to say
there isn't a final trumpet,
the inflation of our star
like the swell of a balloon
(and a most beautiful burst
and nova);

it's not to say our DNA
won't ripple through the universe
like the calm of a petering
wave,

or I won't meet my own
unfortunate close someday,
after I've scribbled a poem
about the ocean's demise

or the death of my high school
love,

that I could be struck by a driver
not paying attention,
thinking of the
diagnosis
he was given earlier,
envious
of my quick-to-happen
departure,

the crawl of cancer
consuming his fear
that the world will someday
end.

Groundhog Day, or *Wiarthon Willie*

I didn't see my shadow
at the bus stop—
but no one even
asked me if I had, if I
was A-OK
after slipping on the ice,
the coffee in my hand
to rouse the snow.

On this day of psychic rodents,
what's it like
to sense an early Spring?
To feel that others
give a damn,
if only once a year,
40 million moods
to be contingent
on your forecast?

Or there's six more weeks
to sleep
before you rise,
missing nothing more than drifts
and biting wind,
that our grudge
will be forgotten
as you dream?

That in your den
of slumber, you speak
to Sun and Earth?
The only ones that love
without condition,
to wake you
very gently, forever
expecting nothing
in return.



The author of over 30 books of poetry, as well as one of short fiction and another of art & photography, Andreas Gripp lives in London, Ontario, with his wife, Carrie.

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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.

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