

Selected Poems

2000-2020



Andreas Gripp

Selected Poems

2000-2020

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Selected Poems

2000-2020

Andreas Gripp

Beliveau Books

Stratford

Selected Poems 2000-2020

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Foreword

This past year, I decided to create this updated version of *Selected Poems 2000-2020*, containing a number of new poems written up to the publication date; and together with my recent book *Candelabra*, as well as my haiku collection, volume of short fiction, and book of visual broadsides, I feel as though these all work to present my poetic vision in an artistic endeavour that has gone on for three decades, with myself nearly age 57 and eager to see what other muses are out there in my personal universe. Thank you for being a part of it all.

Andreas Gripp
Stratford, Ontario
February 2, 2021



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 daughter passed away
at break of dawn,
on a day that our star
rose without hindering cloud;

and you mused that early morning,
before you sadly went and found her,
stiff as a petrified trunk
and 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.

Unsinkable, at the Centennial

If my love cannot sink
in your sea of splintered floe,
then history does not repeat itself:

for this Titanic won't be breached,
nor torn and split in two,
and the jagged white ahead
is merely a piece of floating ice
no match for Her Majesty's
finest vessel.

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 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 up *karma*
at the finish line.

Incense

The priest leads the people in chant,
in a dialect as unfamiliar
as the saints whose icons stare blindly
into space –
expressionless, conveying no sense
of either misery or mirth or anything
in-between.

I am here because my Christian friend
pleaded, saying I'd at least enjoy the wafts
of incense swinging in a timely manner
by this cleric's holy hands,
getting high on its smoky ascent,

reminding me of the cypress, sandalwood,
patchouli I've lit and placed in a burner
no bigger than an acorn,

offering supplication to a God I don't know,
who might take pity and grant
the silent pleas of my own
that I dare not speak aloud.

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.

Gravity

The earth has learned the virtue
of turning the other cheek,

of letting bygones be,
of *being* slow to wrath.

Sure, she has
her bouts of temper,
her quakes and lava flows,
her pelts of bruising hail
and her roar
of whipping winds,

but when all is duly said,
when we've torn
her groves of hair
out from her crown
of muddied hills,

when her lungs
are filled with soot,

her pools of sight
with sludge,

she refuses
to let us go,

let us float
to cosmic realms
where we'd meet
our dying breath,

thereafter start
her time of healing.

Perhaps she simply needs
our presence,

the sound
of Celtic harps
within her caves,

the times
we're not so bad
and shower love
upon her babes,

the pups,
the kittens,

the birth
of a million birds
who soar like kites
on her many strings.

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
ugly,

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-birthed blue,

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

Meeting Boris

They said that David
had a funny way
of playing chess.
It wasn't just the manner
he moved his knights
or his bishops around –
always back and forth,
on *his* side of the board –
never his opponent's;
but the way that he had,
on occasion,
sacrificed his Queen
to save a pawn.

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 sobs
at the foot of your grave.

From *The Guide to the New Apostasy*

When I was a child,
I said that meat was grown
in fields, though I knew
that wasn't true.

Back then,
all had enough to eat,
and twelve baskets
were brought to Him
who blessed, bread only,
not a martyred fish in sight.

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

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.

Visiting St. Raphael's

I went to the church you said you liked,
the one you entered when no one was there
(while thinking what a grand place
to be married),
and here I am on another day
when those who pray
and those who bless aren't here,
just an open door
and a sign that reads *open house*
as it always seems to be
on a Tuesday afternoon;

and I'm standing in front of the altar,
icons of saints peering down at me
while I say *I do, I do*, over and over,
pretending I hear sobs of joy
from an imaginary maid of honour
who's dreaming of a newly-wedded bliss
of her own,
and if she'll engage in a similar reverie
when the priest is away
and the choir practitioners
are at the all-you-can-eat buffet
in the restaurant just down the road.

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 Native 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.

Typo

I move you
should have been
I love you,

and my letter
is now consigned
to your basement's
blue recycle bin,

in crumpled form,

in the ball of a broken
relationship,

labelled as *vain*
and *conceit*;

and because of the slip
of a finger,
my failure
to be attentive,
so much is now deemed
as lost.

And hence how I hate thee,
dear typo,

for making a mess
of things,

and I wonder how many other
wounds
you've inflicted in the past:

the *shift* without its *f*,
a *condo* with an added *m*,
Scotty suddenly *Snotty*
with the stroke of an errant right –
not left;

even God not spared your fury:
the *Lord* a portly *Lard*
which every *spell-check*
seems to miss,

His churches
open to a *public*
clearly missing
their modest *L*.

Maybe someday
we'll get it right,
have a siren sound
before *send*,

and no one will ever need
to misconstrue,
hear dyslexia's
run amok,

know that a *goof*
was really a *good* word
having a horribly
bad day.

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.

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.

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.

On Our Getting Soaked

It's "monsooning," at least as far
as we're concerned, in this city
where we complain when it rains
and again when things wither
from its lack. Nevertheless,
the reason for our grumbles
is valid: the umbrella we share
has a tear,
one of its ribs jutting forth,
ready to randomly poke
a passing stranger in the eye,
and a gale has turned
the already-battered thing
inside-out, not unlike my heart
the night you murmured my name
in your sleep,
that still skips a step when we meet,
like that gleeful little girl
on the sidewalk, splashing her boots
in water-birthed puddles
that have nowhere on earth to run.

Québec

– *for Carrie*

On our honeymoon, between rows
of coloured awnings, balcony flowers,
you ask me if I'm going to write a poem

and I tell you that *you* are the poem –

amid these godly cathedral spires,
aged cobblestone walkways,
French-Canadian painters
and the accordion player
we will be dancing to
once our café-au-lait is finished
and my journal stays empty as the sky.

If I could have held a proper note:

I would have sung this in refrain,
refraining from these quatrains,
these words in stanza form
without guitar or key in C.

I would have crooned my love for you,
causing hearing hearts to swoon,
the piano striking chords
these noteless letters never could.

– for Carrie

This Vision

Maybe I mirror
her, in ways of
insignificance,
whenever I'm bare-
ly dressed,

though she's more
than just phantasmic,
some fluid chimeric
guest, absent of
sex and of name,

these faintest of
curves unfurling,

under lull
of clement light,
cerulean ceiling—

this elusive, crooked sky.

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.

The Blues

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.

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, me no English,
no change, I shook my head at first,
then turned and flung two quarters at him –
from the both of us,
though I knew you'd disavow.

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

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

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

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

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.

Missing the Cat

Please keep an eye on your son,
he continues to sit at the window,
drawing a face
with pointed ears,
several wisps
of frowning whiskers
when condensation will allow,

staring into the street
where his beloved had been killed,
run over during the night,
perhaps struggling
to get back up
only to be struck and struck again;

and at least he was spared
that sight, seeing
but the aftermath
at early morning's dawn
(traumatic as it was),

shrieking,
wishing he'd called the feline in
at his bidden time for bed
(still too early
as any eight-year-old
will tell you);

but now he doesn't argue
over when to fall asleep,
clutching his pillow tightly,
hoping he'll hear it purr.

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 or whore,
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.

Something Other Than Jesus

*I'm not saying that we're better or greater,
or comparing us with Jesus Christ ...*

– John Lennon

Not all will sing the anthem
when it's scribed,
that *All You Need is Love*

and there is no love
when records smash and burn
and vinyl has a sickly smell
and ghostly smoke
and hate is heard in stereo,
that *Old Time Religion*
where fire sets the heretics
alight,

we with effeminate hair
unshorn,
our women appropriating
pants,
their naked breasts bouncing
to our fleshly beat of sin,
we who know nothing of a love
that lies in its own blood
outside us.

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,
alit 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.

**At the Tone: 17 hours, 46 minutes,
Coordinated Universal Time**

It all occurred in the course
of a rooftop pigeon's blink:

the homeless streaming
into lofty bank towers
decreed low-cost housing
by politicians who truly gave a damn,
bankers themselves
saying to hell with the profits
and building wells and clinics
in the horn of Africa,
Africans feeding their own
with manna that snows
from the hands of a loving God
who really *does* exist,
killing in His name ceasing
with the *clang*
of a million guns
being thrown to the war-torn ground
at the same splinter of being,

and on a darkened street in Copenhagen,
a skinhead hugs a Jew
he would have beat with a club
only seconds before,

Hell's Angels pop wheelies
as they bring canned goods
to a hospice for ex-hookers,
Colombian cartels
burn their hash & heroin,
Jerry Springer
talks quantum physics on the BBC,

while in a gnarled thicket
in the woods of Minnesota,
Ted Nugent drops a rifle
at the foot of a deer
he embraces as a son,
which *needn't* fall and bleed
when love's been said and done.

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 bubblegum,
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.

Martin's Christian Restaurant, 53rd and Oak

The Song of Stephen
was too low-fi
and the garlic too vampiric
to make its cleansing presence known.

You spice things up with rhubarb,
and patrons please take note:
jazz at 2 and 3 a.m.
will not be free or *free*,
and tethered hats
will now be passed
in 12-part harmony.

The collection plate
was full at dawn,
the Pastor blessed the wine.
Come and hear the sunrise chimes
and throw your sunblock out.

*In memory of Gwen,
who left in unbelief.*
Her vegan ways
left meat intact,
her mercy was misplaced.

Your coat was guarded
by Saul the Taurus,
a dollar was all its worth.

I pass it by on Wednesday nights:
boarded, sign that reads
for lease.

When I call the number mentioned,
you make no stipulations,
offer rental bonus,
no first,
no last,
last shall be first, you'd heard.

The Bedridden

It was like that drive through Appalachia,
the tin-can houses and the faces of the poor
who stared with owl eyes
in midday light.

You were despondent then,
and now I bring you lavender and tea
and a jelly-filled crumpet
to make your mourning better.

When dinner comes, I'll cheer you
with a lemon loaf and Shelley sonnet,
cane sugar, raw and freshly picked,
to sweeten the sting that bitterness brings,
glossing the thought of those
who reaped the crop so long ago
and knew of a sorrow deeper
than those mountain folk hummed
without singing a single word.

2010: First Day of the Decade

I leave *one* nameless decade
and enter another
without distinction,
ten long years that
defy all designation.

We had a problem like this
in the *last* century,
between
'00 and '19,
and no one's been able to come up
with a proper appellation.

I've heard that a *decade*
are ten *Hail Marys*
in a Rosary,
and yet none of the nuns
who proffer
have offered a decent
moniker,
nor the monks
attuned to time
who pray at the monastery
down the road,
its resounding bells
reminding this is a very
special day.

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 agèd, 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.

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.

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-imploing 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.

Walking with Wrigley

Your therapist
spoke of your anger,
of its need to dissipate,
to ascend with the dust
of the street
as it is swept
with the rush of dawn,
to cloud then climb past steeples,
rain upon what's dead
and hope a seed of green
takes root,
its shoot a calm for ills:
your drinking,
your divorce.

In the days that broke
since parting,
repeating as a canyon's call,
your spouse's callous words
never left your seething side,

like that stretching piece
of chewing gum
that's stuck to your favourite shoe,
from a spot on the city sidewalk
that the garbage-picker missed,

to vex poor soles
as yours
until that gooey
scrape-with-a-twig,

a residual
sound like Velcro
damning steps
and blocks to come.

Moniker

Starfish,
so named though they
are neither:

a Sol-like ball of flame
in midnight spheres,
a finned and lung-less swimmer
of the seas.

We wouldn't give them
a second thought
if we called them what they are:
echinoderms,

revealed
by the pull of tides,
long dubbed
for their points of five,

the symbol of the lights
that guide our ships,
though in truth
those shapes are round, afire,
forming patterns
of the residents
of Earth,
of water, land and air,

like *Taurus*,
Cygnus,
and there, *Pisces*,

made of the dots
of distant suns,
their outlines too
misnamed,
the ever-erring
of our illusions.

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.

With Dora, After the Divorce

You're not angry anymore,
you tell me, and now
I can sigh with relief.

Vesuvius had nothing
on your temper,
your screams
that cracked my walls
with coiling streams –
looking like lines
on a Minnesota map.

In the days
of your fiercest fire,
lava poured forth
from the *shouts*
across the room,

from the pots you slammed
in the kitchen,
from the glasses
you smashed to bits.

You're calmer now,
you confide,
in this diner where we've met –
and you've yet to make a scene.

We've sat and gently talked,
no spats of vicious venom
being *spewed* in my direction.

But *venom's*
a jaded word to use
and I'd like to take it back,
acknowledging the errors
all my own.

You *had* your rightful reasons
to strike me *down*
with burning coals,

blocks of which still glow
when you arise
to pay for meals,
ask where *restrooms* are.

**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 pennies
you say you're short.

That the Prince of Wales
will be Charles the Third
and King for twenty days,
expiring from wear and age,
just weeks
after his "Methuselah" mum,
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.

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,
spoil 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.

Slavic

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

perhaps it's Polish or maybe Russian,
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.

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.

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 his cut finger and what remained
of his diluted blood.

Tanka

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

The Waning Moments Before Dusk

The sun is ahead of me always.

No matter the speed of my car,
it reaches the horizon long before
I can possibly get there.

A Pegasus might make it a race,
its white, airy wings catching a gale
to take it within a feather's breath
of a photo-finish

or my grandfather's catamaran,
moored at the marine museum
'cause it won a regatta
in '81, on the crest of a wave
reflecting errant speeds of light

that may be exhausted at last
from the pressure of placing first
day after day after day after day.

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 Mall of America Celebrates Earth Day

Let us raise our fossil fuels
from Cretaceous tombs of stone.

Let the cancer of our toxins
spread to rivers and their lakes.

Let us raze the jungles
for our sprawl
that needs more wood,
for the cattle
that have to graze
and the burgers
that we ingest.

Let the forest
turn to desert
and the dolphins
drown in nets.

Let consumption
reign supreme
and our TVs
spread the word:

*See, we've given seeds
to Boy Scouts,
engraved our logo
on their trees.*

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.

Unfriended

The twist and stab
of shunning's sting
gave birth to death,
my spirit's fling

with living.

*I was hoping to be here
much longer.*

Because so great
your expectation,
there left little
to be given.

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?*

Fugue in F Minor

The key of *F*
is not for failure,
and minor/major –
it does not matter,

for it's in
your honour alone.

Love needn't be
anachronistic,
not the kind of love
where clefs and staves
are scribed,

with an eccentric
ensemble
to accompany:

the prodigy from
Vietnam
on violin,
the flautist a sobered
drunk,
the swan-song cellist
soloing
'fore his heart disease
takes hold,

and on a *harpsichord*
I will play,
the “piano” before the Baroque,
make a melody
unmarried
to the *past*,
say what’s old
was not yet born,

that it was *ahead* of its time
all the while,
that its disappearance –
hibernation,
a slumber
to prepare its unleashing
on your vibrant, youthful ears,

never expecting the passion
from what’s creased
and salty-grey.

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

Loved Me Back

If you said you loved me back,
everything transmitting misery
would be something other than it is,
would one-eighty like a spinning top
that knew right when to stop,
and every embittered memory
would become just that and less:
something X'd out, cast aside,
like a homeless mom who dumps her babe
on privileged, cleaner steps;
or a veteran wheeled to a nursing home,
plastic limbs attached to his stumps,
prosthetics being what they are –
a saccharin substitute.

If you loved me,
as strong as I do, you,
Israelis, Palestinians,
would play a game of football
in the fields,
for fun, without keeping score,
no gunners, bombers,
no flags of stripes or stars,
just *people*,
kicking a checkered ball around,
wondering why
they never thought of this
in the *bloody* first place.

On the day you tell me you love me,
misfortunes are reversed,
chickens are freed from their cages,
the Dalai Lama holds court in Tibet.
The Tigers come back to win it all,
give their players' millions away.

Love me, for all the right reasons:
so that my world is freed of its throes,
so I'll no longer drown in the shrilling cries
from five million starving Somalis,
from ten thousand bludgeoned seals,
from a single, wrist-slitting teen,
the unrequited, goddamn it, yes.

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.

Reading Winter Poems at Carl's Café

If you as well
spend evenings
with anachronistic
bards,

then it's true
that you might spot me
at this table made for two,

with a candle,
empty chair,

and I'll spy a lovely woman
in a line-up for a drink,
beg your pardon
for my fancy,

my feigning
she's bare at the waist,
softly shuffling
to where I'm seated,
introducing herself as Kate,

my flipping through *Tennyson*
a sign I'm far less living
than he.

Chilly Willy Meets Pingu at the Dairy Queen

When penguins gather over ice cream parfaits
and cookie crumbled blizzards
that people take for granted, one need only
watch the weaves and bobs of heads
so black and white and orange
to know they're having fun,
and the colours make for striking contrast,
and I guess that's why Burgess Meredith
and Danny DeVito enjoyed their roles so much
but I'd take Pingu any day
even though he speaks nothing but gibberish
and he's made of plasticine or play-doh
or whatever that claymation stuff is
and even if Chilly Willy can talk
I can't remember him anyway
because I'm not that old and I'm not American
and there's more character in a character
that uses his mouth like a bugle horn
and has to tell his story in five minutes or less
and he's really just filler material
before the next show starts
and he probably knows it
and I wonder what he does during the other
99.6525% of the day.

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.

From A Window

I vowed I'd give you flowers
on your birthday,
fresh-cut
and in a vase I'd make
from clay,
the stems and petals pretty
from the border
of my yard.

But I was selfish,
wanting not
to lose a single speck
of colour,
though I'd seen it all
for weeks,
having had my summer fill,
that I'd barely even notice
there's a vacant patch of ground.

I was lazy,
too busy with the ballgame
to perfect a potter's craft,
having washed my hands already
and shunning thoughts
of muddied nails.

So happy birthday, darling.
Here's a strip
of patterned curtain
that I cut below the pane,
from a stretch of thirteen inches
I could spare,
a single row of roses
never seen by eyes outside;

and should a lurker
try to peer inside
the glass,
he'll see nothing more
than fabric
that to him is still intact,
unshorn,

without the sacrificial scar
of love and lies.

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.

The Unwritten

I haven't forgotten you,
indigent Somali child
with your empty,
outstretched bowl—
I simply haven't scribed
it, the poem
to be your tribute,
knowing *not*
the name you were
given, by a mother
laid into a grave,

or was it the father,
off to fight in a war,
who'd *know*
just how
to say it,
sung
in the pitch
of battle,

to inspire
my set of stanzas,
something
other than this
that's more befitting.

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.

Christmas Holiday

When we were children,
it was never too cold
to play—marching snowmen
returning indoors
after an hour of
storming a fortress,
puddles pooling
beneath our boots.

In our elder years,
the intricacy of patterns, frost-
formed on the kitchen window,
is enough to prevent our dash
into swirly hills of white,
our breath unseen
in crackles of calming fire,
our daring but the sip of
peppermint tea, still steaming
and hot to the touch.

Roaring '20s 2.0

Sydney and Seoul
explode in burning spectrum,
roses parade in Pasadena,
Oregon roll in the Bowl,
NASA's '20s to soar,
up to Moon and Mars,

and the streamers
from the party
we didn't go to,
lifeless in lone-
liness,

our dancefloor
littered with resolves,
confetti-cut
from the night before,

each step
an unknown promise
never kept.

Watchful

—for a sculpture by Walter Allward

In the hours after dusk,
we deduce he plots the *path*
of distant suns, waits
longer than for Godot
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.

With Aaron on Earth Day

We dig the relenting soil
in a spot we think is special,
widen the furrowed space
as if a Sea of Reeds were parting,
and, much like Moses,
my speech to you is clumsy,
without confidence of execution,
but Passover now has past,
this is the day the Earth
can find some healing,
of hearing our vows to bathe
her skies and streams,

and the seedling we are planting
will in time reach out to heaven,
be much taller
than the lofty trees around it –
you faithfully saw to that
when you'd enquired
what was greatest
in the market to which we'd drove –
might have *walked* to in spite of the distance,

my *cane* just like a staff
with every laboured, hobbled step,
cars brought to a stop
when we crossed at red between them,

as if I'd raised
its wooden handle
into the air,
as if my countenance
were radiant,
my beard as white as the light,
transfigured by visitation,
communing with the One
who left us stewards of the world,
sharing where we'll find
its most muted, sacred places.

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 sincerity of tears,
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
fervently 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
left off the 403, figured
Brantford would be dull,
there's only so much
Bell and Gretzky
we can digest, yet again.

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

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

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

Leap Year

I have four years'
notice that it's coming,
this quadrennial appendage
to winter, wondering why
there isn't a 31st of June
instead, how an extra day of
summer would be preferable,

that I've yet to write a poem
to mark the occasion, that I'd
better do it this time, since
2024 is a long way off,

talk about the poor souls
who have to celebrate their day
of birth on February's
28th, every three-of-four swings
about the sun,
or worse, at the lamb's
or lion's demarcation,
marching into a month
that has never marked their exit
from the womb in the first place.

Some scientist-type said
if it weren't for the leap year,

we'd eventually have snow
in July, our Great Lake beachfronts
housing ice castles
and every bikini
covered up in a coat.

But then, the opposite would
have to be true—putting up
the mistletoe
while the kids outside
skateboard down the street
wearing shorts, playing baseball
out-of-season and the burly boy
at the plate smacking a homer
into the neighbour's window,
narrowly missing the Christmas tree
cut from the county woods,

like it would if this were LA,
the Dodgers winning some phantom
World Series in the imagination
of a child who's never learned how to
ski in his life.

Ukrainian Christmas

It's the second time around,
with the Eve on Epiphany,
wooden dolls within a doll
and the varenyky warm
on our plates.

This isn't lateness in Kyiv
or Julian stubborn
in his err;

it's the tree still aglow
while the neighbour's leans
discarded in the snow,
January gales
dispersing needles
once green
and under a star
no different than our own.

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?

Spirits of Stratford

It doesn't sing, the swan,
and glides under the footbridge
without rehashing the earworm
chorus. We conduct it
with kernels and grain
purchased from the boy
behind the counter by the boat,
the one that took us
up and down the Avon
beyond the pontoon;
orchestral ghosts
with their sour suite
in remembrance of riverbanks
filled; throngs that cheered
the piccolo's off-key
note,

knowing the composer
had it wrong
from the get-go,

had failed to heed the geese
wailing proper scales
above him.

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.

Festival Marketplace

There's a sculpture
of the Earth inside the mall,
outshining the rings
and necklaces of the jeweller
directly across it—
I'd give it more regard
but the liquor store
is only yards away,
and that bottle of wine
from Italian vineyards,
that I buy because it's lush,
sirens me like a woman at sea,
my *Bella D'ora*,
who is more beautiful
than *anyone*, in any corner,
of our tilted, drunken world.

The Roots Beneath Our Steps

It's the trees that reach
enlightenment, never the people
sitting beneath them—Siddhartha,
I am sorry if this hurts you;

their tranquil pageant
vaults over words
with Olympian, wooden poles

while their burgeoning buds—*rebirth*,
when all of their beauty
looked lost and bereft.

Consider their green,
mimicked by grass that soothes the steps
of our naked, anxious feet;

and their autumn spectrum—
a sermon heard by shades
of bark and skin;

their silence amid the snow
giving our tracks a chance
to answer.

Sunflower

The sunflower I photographed
is missing a petal. With the dozens
it still has, this is hardly a concern,
for either myself or the sunflower.

It's the mystery of its disappearance
that makes this a poem,
why there's a gap like a lost
tooth in what would otherwise
simulate our star, a single ray alone
illuminating umbrae in which it may hide—

too long in its golden taper
to become the victim of a
ladybug's lunch,

the wind as well
having alibis in its day-long
gentle breeze, no spore
or plumage aloft
amid the lengthening blades of grass;

barely lifting the tresses
of the woman in her summer dress,
its lilac reflecting the light
I noticed five-
hundred seconds before,

during *he loves me*,
he loves me not,
in the absence of daisies gone,
abandoning the disfiguring act
right after the initial
pull and pluck,

becoming sickened
by the ugliness of chance,
its reconstruction of
her world—and our own

as something a little less beautiful.

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 orca's great 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.

Corvus

We're not alone in this
late-September field.

The magpies circle as a
parliament,
their squawking sounding better
than politicians whom we scorn,
while our third-grade son
mistakes them for a murder
of cousinly crows,
missing out by decades on the
Heckle and Jeckle Terrytoons
of our youth.

Genus means nothing to him,
not now as he envisions himself
the hero, discovering secret
passages out of this maize,
calling up to the scarecrow
clearly slacking in its duty:

*The corn will never hear us—
'cause all of their ears are gone!*

And we don't dare correct him
when he says they must be deaf,

that no matter how loudly
he shrieks his truth
to the expanse of western sky,
the universe will merely
look down upon us all, and laugh.

The Revivalist

— *for Carrie*

Love-gifted,
its blooms past potpourri,
nursed *back* from a pitch
in the trash.

I see *more* than merely
green now. Far more
than verdancy.
Can't you feel the colours?
The pinks and reds of tomorrow?

Praying the sun stays faithful,
burning every cloud
that's impeding its obsession.



The author of 26 books and 17 chapbooks of poetry, as well as three books of fiction and three of photography, Andreas Gripp lives in Stratford, Ontario, with two cats and his wife, Carrie Lee.









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