



Delirium Lullaby

a collection of poems favoured and new

Andreas Gripp

Delirium Lullaby

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Andreas Gripp

Black Mallard
ESSEX COUNTY

Delirium Lullaby

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DIGITAL EDITION

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Foreword

The primary reason for this volume is that I've fervently scribed seven books of poetry in 2025 since my last "new and selected" was released, *Clocking the Equus*. As a result, there are plenty of new additions to this edition as well as a fresh title. It's not easy to glean work from a 25-year publishing history, but I've done my best to present the poems which have stuck with me as well as brand-new pieces written in the Summer of 2025. If you've ever read my previous books, I hope you'll enjoy some updated favourites and maybe find a new one here and there. This collection is something I would like to be remembered for, if indeed we're reminisced about come our life's inevitable expiry. Thank you for probing into my complicated soul with me. All the best.

—Andreas Gripp
August, 2025



*Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed,
which consumes the scabbard that would contain it.*

—Percy Bysshe Shelley

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 more vivid
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
who is beckoning
you for dinner,
unaware you have a home
with *me*,
cavorting with the mortals
since we bow to your meows
and purrs,

our closest, intimate link
to both the eternal
and the divine.

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.

Sturnidae

Come, and trip it as ye go
On the light fantastick toe

—John Milton, from *L'Allegro*

Surrounded by their
chatter, we note we *haven't*
seen the starlings
after dusk,
a whirl of black-
on-black,
how pointless that would
be, while Sol is on its errand
to warmly soak
the other *side*—

the Philippines, Australia,
the islands of the rising
red.

They sleep *inverted*
with their eyes
toward the ground, you've heard.
Like the bats. *Have you ever seen
the bats?*

My phobia
won't allow it, I respond,
something about the
flight of ghastly rats

but by then you're back
to talk about the star-
lings:

*They trip the light fantastic
while it's day,
trying all their lives
to get our attention.*

As to *what* they might be
saying you simply shrug.
We'd be indifferent
to their warnings, think we
know it all
when it comes to love.

Sunlings,
you conclude,

that's what we should've
called them, so we'll
heed at last the
nightly murmuration
of the stars—

so slow to our perception
but at the sprint
and dash of light,

their wings of silver-
white, every feather
standing
on its head,

revealing the *world*
is upside-down
and only the birds
have twirled to see it.

Wild Bill McKeen

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

and though we haven't
a clue who he is—
or was—
his name is on
a banner in the air,
tied to a pair of
streetlights

to make certain
we'll never miss it.

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

surmise
he's a hockey
player,
spent his time
in the *penalty* box,
a master of slash
and slew foot,
told the refs to
go fuck off,
took a piss
on the Lady Byng.

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

We think of synonyms
for *wild*,
saying his hair was
endless, unruly,

he'd grown a beard
from chin to foot,
grunted like an ape,
clutching a raw steak
with savage hands—
tearing off the
pieces with his teeth.

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

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

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

once jaywalked
across the road
while it was raining,

returning a *book*
overdue
by a day,

never guessing
he'd be immortal
on a sign,

or better yet—
in a poem,

by someone too lazy
to google
his claim to fame.

The Mona Fucking Lisa

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

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

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

You ask me what our poet friend
was given, the one who always gets
the lucky breaks, and I tell you the
Voice of Fire,

three lines of blue-red-blue,

vertically trite and prosaic,

say no one's ever heard of Barnett
Newman because he sucks,

that I could have scrawled a sonnet
on my kindergarten days,
on a pair of simple colours,

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

but as it is,
I have to *sleuth* my way
behind that Delphic smile,
invent a tale of Giocondo,

that Leonardo
tried to paint her
minus mirth and maturation,
in 1499,

when his subject began to sob
from pent-up grief, reliving the death
of her baby daughter,

his *Moaning Lisa* a work of art
the Renaissance ignored
(bathing in their beam
of erudition), that even Machiavelli
said *chin up, she needs a grin*;

that when the *time*
arrived to try it all again,
da Vinci made a jest,
a side-splitter, that Lisa barely
smirked at his ill-timed droll,

that he hadn't a *clue*
how it felt
to love and lose,

consumed as he was with
innovation, invention,
his maps and magnum opus,

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

The Puffin

Hear this:
a puffin
is not a baby
penguin,
despite my decades
of thinking it so.

I cannot be
angry
at the puffin,
its countenance
of cute,
its psychedelic
beak,
no matter how hard
I try;

adoring its every
sway
from side-to-side,
much like its
fellow seabird,
surprised by its
capacity to fly,

confused by
its being an
imprint
of Penguin Books,
its children's line
since 1941,

that they're clearly
to blame
for my ignorance—
there in *A Little Princess*,
in the tales of
Anne and Alice,
and especially
Call of the Wild,

which, to my chagrin,
contained no penguins
at all—
clueless I was
on *where* they
really lived,

thinking *perhaps*
they were away
when Jack London
came to visit,

shopping for tuxedos,
at the place the
puffins do,
who took to the air
once suited —

while the penguins
doubled back
with their receipts,
fuming at the
snugness
of their fit,

pouting like Pingu,
crisp like Chilly Willy,

cursing their genetics,
their ever-inability
to soar,

retracing every
step in single file;
their long, bitter
waddle
in the snow.

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,
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 week 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.

"me too"

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

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

the ones we see on Instagram,
that every *sprat* has
churned them out,
like a poetaster
in a fast-food window,

where you pick up a side of
"you're better off without him"
plus some platitude on the rain
to wash it down;

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

an abusive ex, a diddling dad,

the gymnastics coach who always
held you snug, checked out your
ass instead of your landing,
after vaulting and parallel bars;

but then I've always read too
much into your words,
thinking there's some *story*
below the surface,
a recollection
that encircles like a shark,
that you're afloat
in a punctured dinghy
awaiting rescue,

by an aqua knight who rides
the seven seas, one who sees
a kraken where there's not,

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

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

Shells

Can't you hear the Atlantic?

little Shelly asks,
handing it to me
as if in turn, a pearl
that's found *beneath*,
the odds of one-in-three,
the triptych of a guess.

I say I hear the traffic,
the road rage of the freeway,
the citiot on his jet skies
drowning waves. I'd set
a bad example if I lied,
feign I'm hard of hearing.

It's not far
till there's another, a crack
that runs along it like a
fault; a scar
from the shaking
of the earth. Her lips begin
to part as if some Moses
gave command,

used some driftwood
as a staff.

Her teeth will
gleam in the spot-
light of the sun, stop-
ping me in my steps.

She tells me that she
hears it once again —
this one's the Pacific! —

adding that there's whale-
songs in the spiral,
that she knows they are
in love.

When my turn to listen
comes, there isn't a single
sound but for the gulls
above our heads. Squabbling
over food.

Before we find the third,
she'll urge me to *believe*,

like *wishing* on the evening
star,

that I should twist my
tongue around, envision
we'll be rich

while she sells these ghostly
mollusks on the shore,
make *enough*
to buy a boat,

christen it after *mother*,
sail against the winds
that one day swept her
off her feet, her kerchief
waving madly like a flag.

Meter Maid

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

—The Beatles

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

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

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

Shaking this rusty contraption
accomplishes nothing—
neither does thrashing
the part that promises
each Sunday will be free—

which does me no *good*
on this middle-of-the-week
kind of moment.

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

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

I would have waited
for *Lovely Rita*
to arrive,
the heat from her sultry sway,
her expunging this metal rogue
of the piece of *change*
it stole from me,

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

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

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

The Sharpener

In those days,
the plot was only
as sharp
as pointed lead.
HB didn't stand
for Harcourt Brace—
not yet,

and every yarn
dependent
on a narrow shaft of
wood, a hexagon
swaddling graphite
like the wrap of
a pogo dog;

my hero
locked in peril
whenever the barb
had lost its bite—

as if the break
of a daring tooth,

one that's lost its
battle
with peanut
brittle,

the precipice
crumbling *beneath*
his fading feet, the story
going grey upon the
page, his damsel
snatched by claws
of a hungry griffin,
sketched along the
side so horribly,

both awaiting rescue
by the sharpener
on the wall, its holey
maws of eight, the round
of a rotary
dial, the insertion
a guesser's game—

botched, like the very first
thrust of sex, at 14
years of age,
or gambling
on the 7
in roulette,
when you've just
turned 21,

its daily
grind of pencil, cranked
into its duty
like a forlorn
Model T; shavings
like the fallen
peels of apples, potatoes,

each one with their
own little tale to
tell.

Hair Care by Pierre

I was finally
compelled to cut
my lengthy hair.
Twirling it on my fork
in spaghetti's place,
staining it Ragu-Red;
quaffing it with my
wine, the peril of dangling
strands;

unable to see the road
whenever it flopped
in front of my eyes—
like a weary, shaggy
dog that blocks my view—

of the movie I'm
trying to watch: *Medusa*,
rival of Rapunzel (in terms of *follicles*
gone amok);
locks which turn to snakes
before it's over—
causing havoc
when it's lathered in
Selsen Blue.

This Frenchman barber assures
me I'll be able to see her *face*
as clear as day,
thrilled to make a house call,
that 911 has an option now
for bedhead gone berserk,
its clump of grey
expanding on the floor—
that my cat's been *hissing*
at, her back arched like the
Triomphe de l'Étoile,
mistaking it for
another of her kind.

I'll offer up a eulogy
at *St. Andreas*—
the Orthodox Church
of the Greeks
just down the road,
blubber I'll *miss*
the way it lifted
in the breeze,
like some starlet in
Côte d'Azur,

my tresses later waving
like a scarf out on a line,
gone blanc in its surrender
to the wind; or a flag
at the half of mast, mourning
my *forfeiture*,

like a blinded
Samson, betrayed —
not by some Delilah
but my need to be
pragmatic; what's left
beneath my *New York*
Giants cap, snagged
amid the incense
in the nave;

glancing
behind my unobstructed
shoulder —
as I walk the promenade,

fret the *breath* of old Perseus
will hoist it off my head
and out to sea.

Monday, 7am

You greet me with
Morning, never
Good Morning—
like you did when
hearts were younger.

Morning will rise
from horizons, like an inmate
from a metal bed,
nothing to cushion
his nightmares—
sentenced to relive
a *life*
that isn't a life—

the cursing, the welts,
the bruises;
the slop passed off
as food;

the absence of
privacy,
when one needs it the
very most,

gone with a swirl
& gurgle.

Good Morning
is harkened by
glows, the lilt
from a lark
at dawn, the gradual
lift of the light,
each moment
far brighter
than the last.

Morning is stating
the obvious,
the drudge of a
turtle-drive,
the blaring of
horns at red,
a finger in the *air*

from the car
that will pass you
on the right.

It's the demand
from your boss
to get cracking,
the indigestion
from the eggs—expired,
the coffee from *McDonald's*
too acidic,
the leaving of
your kitchen
without a kiss.

Good Morning
is the merge
of ardent lips,

the ecstasy
of a lingering
hug,

a taste
from the dreams
before,

the confession
of a love
that never wearies,
never reaches
for a cup

until the curtains
have been opened
and you stand
in gaping awe
at what's to come.

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 blatant
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.

Epiphany

All of us are
smitten by the *cute*.
And the shine of
symmetry. The clear, un-
blemished skin
of stunning's layer.

I could sing
each varied *note*
of your cantata. In
its proper key. Something
that's beyond
my scratchy throat.
My wineless inhibition.

You say the loveliest
intonation
was from a haggard
in the alley,
bottle on its side
beside her feet—bare,
sniffed out by a rat's
consuming hunger—

*Mama take me with you.
Reach down with your hand
upon my face.*

Now replace that
newborn kitten
with a shoe. A soiled,
baby's boot
found in a slum.
Fractured by a
wheel that wasn't
looking.

Cradle it in your palm.
Mouth it a lullaby.
Know nothing is so
broke it can't be loved.

Juxtapositions

I pluck the *olives* from the
salad and that makes it less than
Greek. You ask me if they're green
or black and I state
it makes no difference.

I replace the blocks of feta
and consider *German-Jew*.
It's *been* an oxymoron
since nineteen-thirty-three.
I'll blend some smoky *Rauchkäse*
with an aged *Gvina Levana* —

swap my baseball cap
for a *yamaka*
in *case* you take offense.

Now bring me beer from Bavaria
and hot latkes from the slum.
I'll gladly prove

what *cannot* go together
is just a fallacy of
thought:

A frown is a smile
that's standing on its head.

Feet are a pair of hands
which are unwilling to clasp
in prayer.

Toes are very cognisant
that fingers are more graceful—
so they *never* stretch for the sky.

Unable to grant any light of its *own*,
the moon is but a mirror for the sun
in which to worship its own reflection
(and we thought that
Dorian Gray
was the one who's really vain).

What is *ugly*, anyway?
Is it the absence of beauty
or too much of it all at once?

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*,
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,

wish 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 prey.

The Language of Sparrows

Our daughter 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 their name.

I ask you if birds have names,
like *Alice, Brent, Jessica* and *James*,
if their parents
call these fledglings
when it rains,
say *settle here in branches*
among 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 their wings
amid the showers,
how they disappear in downpours,
seeking shelter
in something we simply cannot see.

When we're old,
when we come to remember
the beloved we have lost,
the *songs* will 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 child whom we treasured
and the feathers she adored,
naming the formerly fallowed, *hallowed*,
sacred, *remove your shoes*,
Spirits and Sparrows dwell
and sibilate secrets
we're unworthy to glean.

Magic

The final line of this
poem no longer
exists. It was surely there
for the taking, its fingernails
clutching rock, at the
top of a ragged *cliff*
from which it hung,
a *Wile E. Coyote*
in the making.

This poem's closing line
is a bar of *soap*
in a steamy shower,
pushed *away* from my
hand by its slime,
ready to trip me up
the moment it falls,
my eyes shut tightly
from the suds of cheap
shampoo, its lie of
no more tears.

The final line of this
poem is a cheeky *kid*
playing hide-and-seek,
concealed behind the
curtains, waiting for me
to open—

then disappear
like David Blaine.

Dear darling of a
brat, I promise not to
harm, will only *borrow*
what I need to make this
grand, let you vanish
in the air

once I've wrenched you
from my hat
by your fluffy ears.

Paris, Ontario

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

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

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

And substituting for a tower?
There's the truss bridge
serving the railway
that traverses the muddy banks,
its lattice now a respite
for a dozen, migrating flocks,

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

Thumbs Down

I blame *everything*
on our thumbs. Their
cursèd opposability;
picturing how things
would be
if not for their relative
acrobatics:

the trees all
where they were
if not for them; none to wield
an axe, grip a barrelled
pistol in the night,
birth the drop of
Fat Man
in Japan.

We've been told this
supposedly *elevates*
our species above the rest—
the way in which our
thumb has touched the tips
of every finger,
the sign of *I'm OK*.

This stout & stunted digit
is a narcissistic
rebel, refusing to stand
in line with all the others,
the longer, slimmer *doigts*
above its head —
stuck in its lowly place
upon our hand.

It gets an unduly
amount of *credit* —
for crafting our way
to the sky, the moon,
and one day to *Tau Ceti*.

I say it's not as clever
as we've made it out to be —
its lexicon rather
scant — locked in *yes* or *no*;

while the index points our
way; the pinky uplifts our
class while sipping chai;

and although the middle
likes to cuss, flip its phallic
shaft into the air, you have to admit
it's effective at revealing its
message in every language;

and then the one that
screams *commitment*—
“sorry boys, I’m taken” —
this bearer of gold & diamond,
breaker of fervent hearts.

Jitter Juice

The coffee maker's
cacophonous, its array
of beeps enough to rouse
a cadaver.

No need for over-
kill—though my eyelids
have been leaden
as if weighted down by
coins, a pair of
silver dollars
bearing Lincoln's
bearded visage,
laurel-headed
Caesar, or a Pharaoh's
crowning pschent;
arms clasped to my
sides

like a stiff & mummied
Ramses, woozy like some
bandaged Lazarus,
days after rigor
mortis,

staggering out the
bedroom
as if it's a tomb
and Jesus summons,

a Frankenstein's
plodding steps,
convoked by the
song of my people: ever-
groggy, dishevelled,
beyond any bed-
headed author of
 $E = mc^2$,

who admonishes
morning wrens—for their
failure to do the same,
their lyric
unable to waken,
their beauty put to
shame by the smell of
beans, hand-picked
by Juan Valdez,

worthy
of our worship, up before
the rooster's grating
call to rise & shine.

Best Served Cold

I've learned my bitter
lesson, to never ask a
question on our city's
Facebook group.

*Does anyone know
if there's a Dairy Queen
in town?*

—Yeah, it's at 33 Google Lane.

There's no reason
to be an asshat. Maybe I was
lonely, just sparking a conversation
in the night. Had no one
else to talk to
when the winds were from the north,

and stars were spelling
Loser where *Orion*
usually dwells, ignored
& most forlorn,
none with which
to share a celebration;

and FYI, it's not some run-
of-the-mill DQ ,
the one on Google Lane,

but one in which they'll
carry you on their backs,
sing you *Happy Birthday*
in the sun —

and their ice cream
never melts, regardless if it's
30+ above, no matter how
many candles blaze
at the top of your Blizzard
cake,

and I'll never-ever
invite you for a scoop,
walk you to the beach —

the most pristine one
in the world,
at the end of the *road*
I bet you thought
could not be real —

in spite of the
teary regrets
you'll no doubt offer,
emojis I will savour
on my phone, such weeps
& wails of sorrow,

your delicious,
frozen sorrow.

The Problem With Nature

is that we're duped to
trill its praise, just
beyond our tarmacs &
cement, our fists of rage
and road, the screech of
iron wheels, the digestion
of garbage trucks,

crooning that it's *peaceful*,
lovely,
the essence of the gods,

this calm of kindly
souls,

so entranced
with its seduction
that we fail to
note the talons
of the osprey,
its snatch of vole
like the *claw*
that snags the pony —
in our gaudy, cheap
arcades,

the birl of *eat-*
be-eaten, the bones
beneath the soil,

impotent to
see the brutality
of the leaves, there
on the forest floor,
the stretch & shove
of stems, seizing all the
sunlight of their neighbours,

and then the half-a-
belly *up*
of discarded fish,
there along the shore,
in the clap of a gentle
lap,

seagulls shitting green
upon your head, your
insistence it's OK,
that it's natural and
deific—

this sharing of
their warmth, kiss of
celestial wings.

Mahavira

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

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

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

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

Our vacuum is an enemy
of *ahimsa*,

that Sanskrit
word of peace for every
Jain, non-violence
with every step, that I've studied
Mahavira —

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

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

that to disregard their feelings
due to stature
is clearly sizeist —
they're in a universe
all their own

and we surely wouldn't like it
if a colossus
of cosmic proportions
did the very same to us.

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

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

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

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 Fucking 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.

“google it”

When you asked me for
the best Italian bistro
in this city, I answered
google it.

That day on the beach,
as you peered into the
murk of knee-deep
water, you questioned if it
was *safe* to take a swim,
and I responded *google*
it.

Dalini's had a slew of
great reviews—its ambience,
its al dente and
pinot noir, its well-earned
Michelin stars;

while the lake
had tested positive
for bacteria, the kind
that makes you sick,
and I was relieved to
stop our plunge
in a matter of moments,

singing the praise
of the county's
daily testing
regimen.

I reply to your
every question
with *google it*.
There is nearly nothing
that the search
cannot answer —
and yes, I imagine
you think me *lazy*,
terse, that my lexicon
is void
of romantic words.

But when you ask me
if I love you
I say *google*
the centipede,
how it never
runs out of
legs,

google the single
polar bear on ice,
never bearing
to leave it
until the final
floe has melted,

and please *google* the man
in Uzbekistan,
becoming a widower
at 21,

never remarried,
never missed a daily
graveside visit,
and when he turned
one hundred and one,
worried the world
would run out of flowers
before his final, doleful
kiss upon her name.

Only Two Words

The answer to this
question is
yes or no.

That's *three* words.

Everyone assumes
the *yes* is most important,
the positive-affirmative
of *yes, I'll be happy to help;*
yes, let's call it a date;
she said yes when I asked her
to marry me;

that *no* is ripe
with negative connotations,
its signs of *no right turn on*
red; no exit;
no, I'm already going to the
prom which you never forgot.

No one gives any credence
to the *or,*

though it's simmering
on the stove of
possibilities,

the middle door you
take when making a *deal*,
supposedly vacant of
worth,

but flexible *enough*
you're never trapped.

Or ascends
the current of the
late-day breeze,
coming from the west
and then the east,

the north when it is
humid, the south
with its winter respite
from the ice, thawing
your dithered brain
like a Bunsen burner.

I learned from *Conjunction*
Junction
(*what's your function?*),
an earworm from '73,

despite my knowing
a schoolhouse
never rocks,
unless it's filled with
stones
from the Moon
or Mars,

that if given the freedom of
choice I'd take the Moon,
looking down on Earth
while all the people made
decisions—

who is saved
and who is not,

who is *loved*
and who is not,

that when it comes
to *war and peace*,

we inserted the wrong
connector;

that *or*
would have laid
the cards out on the table:

a Queen of hearts;
a King of clubs;

and a Joker always laughing
while you sweat.

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.

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.

A Place Beneath the Water

We drive to the beach
the day you're released
from the hospital,
the pills 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.

**for the doctor who took me out
of my mother's womb**

A baby never chooses
to be born. That much
I can tell you.

If presented with
the option, I would have
turned and climbed
up the birth canal—

if I'd *seen* the
copious suffering
that awaited, spreading
wide its talons, seducing
like a salesman, ever-*willing*
to beguile,

with the lie
of love and life,

how much *sorrow*
you can take,

that you'll bounce right
back like the balls
in every lottery there is,

the one you'll never win,

like a worm that
arises
to the surface,

failing to burrow back in-
to the earth, be wise enough
to leave the world
behind,

leave the birds
behind,

proof it isn't
sightless
to begin with,
that eyes
are not the only way to see,

that worms have learned
at last

to finally *snub*
the falling rain,
this somber convocant,

its call in April
air, its hoodwink
that it's here to
bathe them clean.

Psalm for Aquarius

During the days &
nights of my naiveté,
when hope blasted blue
in carbon cloud,
the constellations
stepped out of line,
formed new patterns,
gave my dreams the 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.

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.

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.

Haight-Ashbury

The temperature in our apartment
is always moderate,
20 Celsius, or as our friends in
San Francisco call it, 68,

never too frigid,
too torrid, as pleasant as its people
who birthed a twentieth-
century love of gay and poetry,
where Ginsberg howled
and Ferlinghetti kept the city
lights plugged in,

grateful for their dead, their '67
a narrow notch
before some elusive ideal,
one that ever-hovers
within our reach.

You say *never touch*
the thermostat
and I mildly acquiesce.
What we call *warmth*
is but the middle,

the centre of some utopia —
absent of fire and 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 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.

Milestones

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

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

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

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

and I cursed that damned diversion,

swear it could take me *years*
to reach two hundred
thousand Ks,

that I'd have to drive
across the continent, say *fuck*
the price of gas,

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

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

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

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

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

never daring to peek
at their aesthetics,
lest a second landmark moment
fall to waste,

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

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

Pockets

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

—Alanis Morissette

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

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

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

I bring a bar of Dove, a folded facecloth
with me when we're at the shopping
mall—their bathrooms are notorious
for their running-out-of-soap,
for their dryers on the fritz,
that hygiene's more important
than my wearing some haute couture.

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

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

You tell me I should get a better system,
like you with your nylon purse,
that women
are a walking *pharmacy*,

have ten times more to carry
than us males, have foregone the many
pockets since the Holocene began,
knowing *one* was a pain in the ass:

for the desert kangaroo
with precious lading,
the knackered baby within,
hopping along the outback
without a means to ease her burden.

Victor

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

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

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

that *Vic*
was nowhere to be spoken,
from junior kindergarten
to MBA,

birthday gifts unopened
if a short-form had been
scrawled,

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

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

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

just a single letter shy of
seventh heaven —

the luck of the dice,
a wonder of the world,

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

Ratios

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

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

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

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

if they really wanted to,
from their colonies around the house,
that they're content
to simply go about their business,
hard-working communists
that they are.

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

Seated behind your laptop,
you declare there's
over two million *rats*
in NYC,

that it's not as bad
as it sounds, say there's *four* of us
for every *one* of them,

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

while we wonder if these
vermin know the ratio,
that it actually *falls*
within our favour,

every time they migrate from
the sewers, join us on the subway,
risk our baited traps,

if that bite of smelly pizza's
really worth it—

for them, for us,
and the anxious Italian baker,

who never checks what's crawling
around his feet.

Spoken Word

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

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

and it's not that I can't relate—
fag! tossed my way
from all the kids
now grey with age, playing
sudoku by the fire

but that's *another* shoddy
poem I'll likely write—

for within this present moment
Naomi has hit her stride,
hooking me along
with her inflection,
familiar as it is,
an echo of a hundred thousand
poets who rarely glance
upon a page,

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

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

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

where every word's a beat,
every syllable
locked in recollection,

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

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

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,
they'll endure while the others drop,
even if but a day,
those extra, precious hours to say
I love you, I'm sorry, come back to me.

Clair de Lune

Our moon's a prime
example of less-is-
more. Its slivered,
crescent shine. Its mountains
on the brim of light &
dark. Risen like a curve
of chiselled braille.

Like a face that's
glimpsed in *profile*,
never looking you
in the eye. Its mix of
smooth and scar
that's nearly hidden.
A veil in silhouette.
A broad, funereal
umbra. Mourning
yet another
cataclysm — maybe
our existence.

If I could only
read its message
then I'd share it with
the earth.

My telescope —
the perfect
go-between.
As it was for Galileo.
Its sibilance
in his ear that we are
specks along the edge,
as far away from centre
you could get. That it's only
with our eyes shut
we can see. Why the blind will
know its language. Its sickle
in the stars. Singing we are
triflings to be threshed.
Its notes on a single
staff. Not crescendo
but a piece by
Debussy: serene,
misleadingly uplifting,

which I never learned to
play
when I had the
chance,

so caught
up in the sky
while just a boy,

its shadows and its gleam,
its trembling, bleeding
voices in the night.

Psalm for Kenneth Salzmann

*What is it about our conditioning
that moves us to hate the weak
and ugly? What stories were we told
of beautiful riders and delicate girls
to make us persecutors of the lame,
the coarse, and the broken?*

—Leonard Cohen, *A Ballet of Lepers*

Have mercy on the man
upon the bench, whose palms
lie open
for the doves—
this flock that will
adore him
though he has no seed to give.

If we loved as well as they,
he'd live until one-hundred,
teaching us to *kiss*
the sewer rats, the flies
upon the dung of German
Shepherds,

and even the
Deutsche themselves—
when the Holocaust
was over and the gates
gave up their ash
& living dead;

beating their sour
breasts:

*We knew nothing
about it! Davon haben
wir nichts gewusst!*

Then tell me
you know of anguish
more than they: oppressor
& oppressed. Gentile,
Ashkenazi. In Hell
there is no difference.
In Heaven
they've yet to sing.

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 out
there 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 another's arms,

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.

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 be truly 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.

**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.

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.

La Belle

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.

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.

Miracle

Tonight I will ask you to marry me.
You will surely say I am mad,
in the British sense of the word,
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

though my eyesight has been 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.

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.

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 Insta page
and that TikTok 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.

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.

**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.

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.

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.

The Fence

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

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

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

with binoculars I make him out,
and though I'd never do it myself,

I imagine the pulse of life
that throbs around him,
five-hundred feet mid-air,
his beaming face
bouncing back at him
from the translucent,
38th floor.

The fence in my back-
yard is far too high.
I'd like to see much more,
see what lies *beyond*
the banks & monoliths,

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

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

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 had 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 deemed
exorbitant,
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.

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 darkness
where flame is lost.

Tanka

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

Tempo

The website says
this poem takes a *minute*
to read — well, if you're
an auctioneer, perhaps.

A poem is not
the climax of a thriller,
where Poirot
has solved the crime,
everything tied-
up in little bows.

It's not the ticker-
tape of stocks,
the scores that flash
from baseball's
night before,

and it's not an
Archie comic,
the *duh* of lumbering
Moose,

Veronica's
shallow depth
compared to Betty,

the *laughs* behind
Mr. Weatherbee's
portly back.

But then Big Ethel
has *never* been loved,
sees her future
in old Miss Grundy,
unable to win the
heart of even *Jughead*,

losers in every
universe there is,

that when you *reach*
for the bottom rung
you come up *empty*—

in terms of love,
in terms of life,

in terms of a poem
you've read in only
60 seconds.

Past Life Aggression

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Impart to me your pardon,
your blessed, fragrant kiss —
not the one that Judas gave
but the caress of *Juliet*,

the embrace of *Bouguereau*, eternal;
the one that ends the cycle,
trips karma at the finish line.

Smut

—*a small flake of soot or other dirt*

Oxford English Dictionary

To say my brand-
new book of poems is
just a magnet for the
dust

is an egregious
understatement.

It's the maid
in fishnet stockings, feathers
in her hand, bending over
with a *twerk*,
whenever I enter the
office.

It's the Swiffer
that's ascending to the
ceiling (one that *consists*
of teasing glass)—

dander *thudding*
upon its clarity
like a lark.

It's the Dirt
Devil
drafted into service—
like the cavalry
on horseback,
fire from its nostrils,
its tail of red
that's locked into
the socket, coiled
like a serpent,
because nothing else
can gather up the
mites, their hunger
never chuffed.

If they stopped to view
my scribbles they might be
fans, foregoing their all-
day breakfast

just to read my *absurdity*—
like this, for instance,

where they line
up on the shelf
like an ellipsis
that is endless, half a trillion
strong, little pens and
paper in their hands,
awaiting my auto-
graph—

and one who lifts her
skirt, imploring me to
sign her naughty thigh.

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.

Chester

The cat of which
I scrawl
is but a menace.

He doesn't make
an attempt
at being cute.
His purr is like a
Dodge without a muffler.
He will bite you
to the bone
and meow *it's love*.

I bet that he was
birthed
in smugglers' alley,
in a litter
among the litter,
taking a dump
wherever he pleased.
His papa
was a pirate,
felling Puss in Boots;

his mama vowed
to never have sex
again.

And he'll watch with
glee the mouse that
gets away, laughing
at our traps, downing
the block of brie
we leave at midnight
as a bait.

He's never done a
thing to help us out;
merely shrugs
with his indifference
to our pain, our sodden
handkerchief, thinking
he may use it
as a toy.

You tell me *every*
cat's a booger
and you're right.

He plays us
like a fiddle
on the roof. Leaves us
for the larks
to paint us white.

He devoured
all our chocolates
by the tree, then knocked
it down at Christmas
as he peed. Sits
upon our laptop
as if it was made
to warm his ass. Scratched
up every Warhol
in his reach. Our sofa
like the Passion
of the Christ.

And yet we
still adore him,
cradle him in our arms,

like the chubby,
newborn babe
we never had,

his broadening
Cheshire grin
amid our cuddles,
our stupid, googly
eyes,

a canary
in his gullet
we thought had flitted
out the window
to be free.

Rodentia

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

calling them *tree rats*,

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

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

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

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

stowed away
on Spanish galleons,
kindled contamination.

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

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

rain disdain
on those below
who curse its splendour.

Barky McBarkface

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

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

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

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

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

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

a ballerina's step
to check the mail,
a soft and trepid
creeping to the car,
an *exhalation*
once they've locked
themselves inside,

repeating the
scenario
but in reverse,
when they've returned
to their driveway
with a gulp;

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

that we *won't*
know what to do
upon his passing,
won't know what to
speak of
when the birds are
melancholic,

when the air
is dense with sweat, the
clouds a brim of black
before they spot us,
walking 'round the bend,
a *flash* and peal of
fury to be unleashed,
one that scares us
shitless, warns
us to keep our distance.

After the Eclipse

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

Blind

Child

Area

Weathered from
exposure,
from the creep
of rust and age.

It's been planted
here so long
this sightless *kid*
must be grown-
up;

so now we
look around us
left and right,

spy the houses
and their trees;
the veranda
on which he sits—
in the vivid
imagination
of our minds;

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

in his lap
an open book,
the white of
pimply braille—

perhaps a 19th-
century classic,

or the latest from
Stephen King,
subduing his depression,
his lack of meaningful
sex,

his hearing
sharp as ever,
as it was when he was
six,
right after he
lost his sight,

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

and now,
if he could sense us:
the heaving
of our breath, the thump
of our assumptions,
bursting
through our chests

like the roar of an
atom bomb—

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

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

the one on which
he rocks, wistfully;
its creak that
lets us know
we have encroached.

How Far Would You Go for a Gag

Our long-awaited
jaunt to *gay Paree*
has been postponed.
I try to be upbeat
as I spring the news:

*In a year
it will still be there.
It's not going anywhere.*

Aside from the predictable
poet and I didn't even know it
remark, you bring up the
chance that it *won't*,
blown right off the map
in a Putin tantrum,
or as the bullseye for a
space rock—or suffer yet
another bubonic plague.

I take it even further
than your gloom—
that Parisians will roll
their streets up like a scroll,

take apart their homes,
disassemble the
Eiffel Tower
like Meccano,

once they hear that
we are coming;
that we've waited
20 years for their baguettes;

corking their champagne,
stuffing every suitcase
with berets, leaving
every *Fifi*
with their friends in
Monaco—

which should *be*
a part of France
I've heard them say;
that its monarch is no
Louis—Fourteenth or
otherwise—

and the only good
thing about it
was Princess Grace,
who, upon visiting
the Champs-Élysées,
was struck that every inch
was crammed with lovers,
no space without a kiss,
no scene that wasn't
painted—
and that Khrushchev
was a monster
on the news, vowing
when she was there

to launch it
into orbit,

once he tried the cognac
from Marseille, which,
I've been told,
is just as good as Paris
in November, the airfare
half the price.

Sébastien

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

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

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

eyeing every
stroke, insipid tint
and tone,

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

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

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

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

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

and the earth getting
hotter by the hour—
*see the orange
and its arc,
how fresh it looks
in my vessel,
its sweetness in my mouth
once I've put my brush away,
kissed the photo of my wife
snapped a day before she died.*

Curbside Café

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

and she's reading *Schulz*
and Robert Frost
and the many roads to heaven,
and I thought to ask her what she thought
of love and death and living
amid our own self-
sought 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
has soothed,

when the waitress looks for dollar tips
and the closing chimes
ring sweet;

and I have no time to end the verse
with lights that cue to leave,
the sax that fades to hush,
and the cop who walks the beat
looking through
the tinted glass,

ideally dreaming
of a night
without a single
shout or crime.

The City

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

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

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

I was accosted,
in the city you say we hate,
by a man panning for coins.
No change, no change, no English,
no change, I shook my head at first,

then turned and flung
two quarters at him —
from the both of us,
though I knew you'd disavow.

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

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

If it's you who've befriended,
tell them not to worry,
that there's a hydrant
on the corner where they live;

that all will be rebuilt
by kindly neighbours and their kin;

that they needn't feel embittered,
blame the gridlock, shunting trains.

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

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 & 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,

instantly forgetting
every porpoise,

waiting for dolphins
instead,

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*.

And Then There Was Light

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

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

It's the *female*
that reproduces,
you said, gives seeds
a place to call home.

“Daughter,” you decreed,
call it Daughter.

It will surely love us more
and our longing will be greater
on the days it isn’t there.

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 Harlem 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.

The Deck

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

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

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

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

veiled in the
kitchen window,
withholding
its fevered glow.

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*
molds of vomit
by its barely-on-its-hinges
front door.

He's been dead
a quarter-century, 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*, brand-new poems—

one about Plath—

how he would have *rushed*
to save her,
turn off the oven,
inhale the toxic fumes
if he only could,
calling it "Sylvie's Stove,"

and we corrected him,
saying it was *Sylvia*, not *Sylvie*

but he said *no*,
that was an affectionate name
he called her, very *French*
as she 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.

Achilles

The name our
friend has chosen
for her mastiff
is sublime.

We wait to hear
the inevitable:
Achilles, heel!

Almost *invulnerable*,
were it not
for a patch near its
paw;

able to sniff
out a cad,
any boorish
lout
who makes a pass.

We envision
a vivid
scenario,

this slobbering
pooch
by her side,
at the *Apollo's*
Pharmacy,
a box of Trojan
love balloons

stealthily snuck
into her purse,
the one she got
on Etsy, with its
vintage
hair of horse,
as if some
turnabout:

hoping a heroic,
Grecian Spartan

will ascend from
The Iliad,

the copy she keeps
by the fire,
beside a dog-
eared *Ancient Myths*,

with two *glasses*
of Muscat Blanc—

one for *her*,

and one for a
woman's best friend,
its vicious mouth
agape, a cave of tongue
and teeth;

ready to *bite*
on his arrival,
sit *down*
if she commands;

lick the spot
below his calf
as if to pity his
single weakness.

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,
assure 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 did not want to take his life
because he loathed the sun,
its warmth upon his face
or the birdsong of the dawn,

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

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

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

**The 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;
relish its company's
heated breath, 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.

Silenzio

The g in Paglioni
is apparently
silent,

with the i
the sound of e
(robbing it of
a kingly lion's
mane),

while the e itself
is long and clearly
Italian,

though *we'd* have
guessed it simply
by the décor,

the bottles of Abruzzo
on the wall,
the scent of fettuccini
in the air —
but this *isn't*
consequential,
it's not a *Yelp*
review,

it's all about
the g
and its refusal
to hold its weight,

its obsession
with its stealth,
its channelling
Marcel Marceau,

or like the cat
of Cary Grant,
scaling the many
roofs
To Catch a Thief,

that it should be
rooves instead of
roofs, like hooves
and a single hoof,
that the horse
has got it right
despite its *neigh*,

the shyness
that comes and
goes
inside our alphabet's
seventh letter,

hooking us *along*
either way —

soundless as a feather,
roaring
like a Roman
god.

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 workers
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,

corde cut, bottom
slapped with care;

from oration
from the senate
of the world;
the homilies
of the holy;
the prayer
of all devout;

from the schoolboy
spouting love
into the ear
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.

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, merrier things;

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

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.

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.

Watchful

—*for a sculpture by Walter Allward*

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

or stares so sanguinely
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 is
due to smite the Earth, if the flesh
of what he emulates
will follow the *fate* of
dinosaurs,

praying
that some *God*
will part his lips
if he should spot it,

beseech us both to kiss
then run for cover.

The 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
is poorly sung,
singling out the chorus
as if that alone
were more than enough.

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

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

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

Lionel

lays down tracks
like he did when
he was a kid,
predating *The Neighborhood*
of Make Believe—
he was already in college
by then, getting A's and getting
laid, evading the Draft

till the excuses had run out,
a frontline Private
ducking the marksmen
from the Viet Cong,

returning with his leg
blown off and his carob skin

scarred by the spray
of shrapnel.

Today, both the medal
he was given and the pin
of *Old Glory*

will ride in the caboose,
behind the Pennsylvanian
coal that's out-of-date—

as all of it is, really: the freight
cars disappearing
into a tunnel, like a rodent
that darts in drywall—

a baseboard cavern
never patched,

puffing smoke
as if a gambler
who is sucking on cigars,
smuggled from Havana

when the Cold War
brought us all to our
boney knees,
shuddering under our desks
though we had told ourselves
fervently
that this is just pretend.

Osmosis

The way our cat
sleeps on our books
has made us appraise
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 in
the dark,
are conductors that channel
info 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,

buttress Hawking's

Grand Design

beneath her chin,
await the meows
that would otherwise
beckon us to *feed*, to stroke,
to clean her kitty
litter,

that speak instead
of cosmological aeons,
the pull of black holes,
the deep red shift in stars
much too far for us to see.

The 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.

Contractions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 raucous
talk, the snap
of beer-in-a-can.

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

their crescendo
devour the chorus

of pounded nails
and *woe-is-me*,

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

The Blues

*Got to pay your dues
if you wanna sing the blues*

—Ringo Starr

I'm melancholy enough to sing the blues.
There's surely no shortage of sadness
to birth despondent, lyrical quatrains;
my voice just a coke & crackers away
from that gravelly, soulful sound
that makes an authentic virtuoso.

But then there's my name—
with no notable ailment or physical loss
to grant entry to that Hall of Misery:

Blind Lemon Jefferson

Peg Leg Howell

Cripple Clarence Lofton

Blind Willie Johnson

James 'Stump' Johnson

Leukemia Louis Brown

Let's be perfectly honest:

Stubbed-Toe Charlie doesn't cut it,
and *Runny Nose Ron* isn't
worthy to strum
of endless pain and woe,

to gain 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.

Socks

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

There's nothing exciting
about socks.

They look plain silly
in sandals,

wearing white
a winter *faux pas*.

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

I'd never give a pair
on Christmas Eve,

or Valentine's,
or even Office Workers' Day;

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

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

Osaka

I think I've had enough
of our know-it-all
acquaintance.

He'd be another *friend*
if he wasn't such a dick.

Just today, in the
hallway for example,
after I mumbled
about the swallow
in the soffit,
how the raptors
hadn't scales
but pretty plumage:

*Well, birds aren't only
DESCENDED from dinosaurs—
they ARE dinosaurs.*

Which to me is ridiculous.
Tell me to my face
that the goldfinch in your
hand belongs in the latest
Jurassic World.

That the seed
which it is eating
is akin to *Ankylosaurus*,
hard as fucking armor,
that its beak could break
a 4-by-4 in two.

But I bite my tongue
so I won't have to bear
his smarmy condescension.
It bleeds as if a T-Rex
chomped the tip.
I'm in no condition now
to give rebuttal, my
Godzilla similitude—

warbling like a nuthatch
every morning;
stomping its way
through buildings as
it sings. Burning
this fellow to cinders
where he stands,

my cheering
that is muffled
by its *roar*, swelling
like a pillow
with all its feathers
down my throat.

Rumours

These juicy *pineapple*
tidbits
are up to speed
with the latest gossip

or so I quip,
as we divvy
them up
in bowls,
one for you

and one for my
idiot self—

remarking
I've heard
the *pears* are splitting up,
that one was caught
in a morning
tryst with a fig;

while cerise
did *ooh-la-la*
with some Auckland
kiwi rogue.

And the coconut
from Manila?
It ran *off*
with the melon's
daughter, mixing
its *milk*

with the seeds
we always
spit *out*,
like the *crétin*
from the streets
of Bordeaux,
who taught the
bona fide way
to *cracher*,

and that *pineapple*
in French
is *ananas*,
confused
with a tropical
lech,

the one that's
sheathed
in yellow, boasting
of the length of
his sweet everything.

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:

it's a pair of minutes
ahead of what I hear,
on par with my phone and
the shortwave station

set to an atomic clock.

They say on WWV
it's accurate to
within a nanosecond
every 3 or so
million years, though
the *Australopithecines*
who got it going

couldn't 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 apes & men

were wrong to envision
such accuracy, above that of
even God,
think His Holy House of
Worship

will be one hundred & twenty
ticks behind the times,
that I have no *clue* of what to do
with this brief but priceless allotment

which the good *Lord*, if He is right,
has given me.

Franklin, 2.0

It's only the beholder's
eye, you've said,
that makes you
do the things you do—

giving an appellation
to every roach
that's crossed your path,
believing they'll
inherit the Earth;

every cavity in the corner
with a piece of camembert—
not a single trap in sight.
A mouse deserves much more
than processed cheese.

We thought you mad
when you spurned each
opportunity—
to *rid* the rooms of
spiders, the eggs of
brown recluse,

squealed venom is mis-
judged, like the snake's
out in the desert of
New Mexico,
where you hugged
every cactus like a
cat.

The spawn of every
fly you'd dubbed *Mag-*
nificent, said the rat
was like a chipmunk
in our scraps —
that fleas were entertainers,
jumping like acro-
bats. And the creatures
of the night? Their bite
just means *I love you*,
which you uttered
in the halls of junior
high, to the girl
who called you *gross*,
disgusting, a zit face
to the max,

that day you
came out of the rain,
head and shoulders
slumped like letter f,
hands and mouth of
mud from kissing worms.

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 gabbling 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's delivery,
twice weekly, half a quart—
that, and measurements
long thought dead
still heaving
their penultimate breath.

The Stroke

Maybe a shot of luck —
the deflecting of fired
lead.

Or a golfer's
placid putt
into a cup; the baseball
which is launched
into the air —
handled by bleacher
creatures, bathed in Yankee
beer.

A brushing of the ego.
Acquiescent *you are right*.

A caress with caring hands;
the beginnings of
consummation.

A comely *swirling*
from a nib & fountain
ink,
scribing *love*
in all its facets.

Quiescent paddles
along the river
in canoes, or frenzied in
the race of
dragon boats,
passing the swimmer
who took a plunge
into its murk;
lying on his back,
bedevilled by the sun;

and the stab within
my temple, sudden slur
of speech; the numbness in my
arm and icy fingers,
which moments
ago had pet our purring
cat, who has no idea

why I'm prostrate on
the floor,
awaiting an *angel's*
feathered fondle,

her wings to
lift me up beyond the
ceiling, where everything is
gentle, soothing,

the heavens like the
sea and she a ship,
convex in her sails—

or down on through
the tiles, a sneering
demon

dragging me by the
feet, like the pull
from a cedar galley,
its many oarsmen
lashed
into rapidity, no other
touch but this
till the journey's done.

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 an awkward, 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.

Visiting My Mother at St. Leo's Cemetery

We discern the milky
seeds
of dying dandelions,
afloat in
mid-June breeze,

and I tell you
as I boy I saw them
through my bedroom window,
wondering how it snowed
when it was sultry
beneath the sun.
It was only after that

when my mother
spoke of *wishes*,
I should run into the
yard and pluck a stem,
blow my breath
in yearning, seeing
what might come true.

I asked her if
this weed was *King*
of Flowers,

if our cat
was a distant cousin,
if a wish was
better than a prayer
(the latter gone unanswered
in her days of sick & blood);

if it mattered
if my eyes were
closed or open;
and if I peeked, was it
critical if I witnessed
where they landed, like
bowing my head
at grace

while glancing at
the others, thanking
some fickle God
who'd take offense
if He ever caught me,
make me go to
bed without my dinner,

my litanies
unheeded as she passed,
drifting off my tongue,
useless as a cloud
that gives no rain when it is
begged, a winter-hearted
genie in the wind.

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
now translucent:

*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
nor 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.*

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 popped *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.

Warning Signs

You say our *survival*
is dependent
on the heeding
of *warning* signs.

A tickle in my throat
precedes a cough,
and the cellist
can somehow
sense it, glares
an evil eye, just daring
me to do it,

become the centre
of attention
like the imbecile
applauding
before the adagio
is done,

unaware a pause

will herald
coda,

like a catching-
of-one's-breath,
once the *firing*
squad takes aim,

that they'll blast away
your brain
upon the wall,
tear the Vyshyvanka
off your back,
say there's nowhere
else to flee that isn't
"Russia" —

or like the time
the road was icy
with the brakes about
to give—your vision
Kreskinesque,

that the *bridge*
is closed
is a horrible way
to tell you
you're about to die,

that the river
is frozen over —
but not enough to
prevent you falling
through its frosty
sheen—like the skater
too obsessed with
figure 8s, has no *inkling*
her time has
come, that she'll swell
up like a fish
upon the dredging,
mouth agape, a hookless
suffocation.

I hold our humble
baby in my arms,
watch her *naïveté*
of smile, warning
she *hasn't* got a clue
of what's to come,
millions more of *her*
in sterile cloth,

unless they're
somehow birthed
in bombed-out basements,
the *Hospital* above
in *Arabic*,
curving lines and dots
a ghost of shorthand,

which had gone the
way of Beta, Blackberry,
any B-word
not in style,
leaving *nothing*
that is hidden,

no miracle of teething,
elemental word
that's just *exhaled*,
initial steps of
wonder on the broadloom,
like footprints
on some moon
we thought we'd conquered
long ago.

Lady Rubenstein

ran the deli
by Central Park,
ran her mouth more
than the food, always
had something to
say between our bites of
matzo balls, our swigs
of Dr. Brown's,

entreating us to
never waste a
morsel, that in Belzec
they would *kill*
for a single pea,
that the dying
would bury the dead,
climb beside a corpse with
end-of-breath;
so much skin-and-bone
they should have been buoyant
as a feather, floated
up to *HaShem*
like the fog.

But the day
before she passed:
the hole is
more important
than the bagel,

forever in its
place when even
the final crumb's
consumed,
whit and seed

are given to the
wind, to divvy
as she does
among the wings,

seldom so opaque
they cannot rise above
the dirt and waft away.

McCloskey's Fish & Chips

Grandad stopped getting fish
& chips

once they were no
longer wrapped in
newsprint, the headlines
from the night
before.

*It sucked up the grease,
he croaks, kept it warm
in the wintertime,*

saying nothing
of the ink
that would have seeped
into his haddock,
the germs
from the pressman's
hands, that the soap
was always gone
in those early morning
hours of the run.

It's the only way I
ever got the news,
he notes in spotty
recall, after we'd heard the
tales of no TV, wireless,

that the London *Times*
was just a little pricey
for the day, a subscription
wrought in *pounds* —
of money and of flesh —
that he was perfectly
contented

to read of a ship
which *sunk*,
another *Ripper's*
on the loose,
of a bombing
by the IRA, as he
dipped what we call
fries
in *Worcestershire*,

and not just loss of
life, but the races
down at Ascot,
the complex cricket
scores,
the win by his
darling Ipswich
on the road in
Liverpool;

but always back to
death—
Lennon's
headline shooting,
the Diana-Dodi
crash, the obit
of an adolescent
love, who'd marooned
him at the chapel
in '52, neither
having funds by
which to live;

swallowing
every story with
the batter, every
inverted letter
tartar-stained,
sticking in his
foodpipe
every while,
before guzzling
down his Guinness,
feigning he loved the
taste.

Upstream in 2nd Grade

The only thing
I gave her was
a poem. Probably
pretty shoddy. Scrawling
that I loved her
at the bottom. With an
unused salmon crayon
from the box. I never
thought I'd need it.
Draw a pinkish fish

attempting to *swim*
to its place of birth.
Maybe had a crush
when it was young.
Make it leap the rocks
beneath the current.
Always against the grain.

A grizzly in the middle
of sierra, expecting the
easy meal,
scribbled past his lines
in heartache rouge.

Startled by the madness
of the finned. The stupor
on its face. How far
it is willing to go
for the chance to spawn.
Or love. That colour
never matters
in the dark. When the light
has just gone out. When we
remember to remember to
forget. Evanescing

like a moonlit
aspiration. In the brush
of sleep from eyes.
In the seconds
that it gambols
off the tip, of mountains
and of tongues.

A Strain for Judas MacLeish

Everyone gasped in
church whenever his name
was voiced aloud,
snubbed him during
handshakes, shunned
him through their coffee.

The kids in gym
would whip him with a
rope—when the teacher's back was
turned, told him he was *hated*

when the day of love
would pierce him like a
shaft, only weeks
before Good Friday—
the time he dreaded
most.

He was asked to play
the role of Benedict
Arnold,

Brutus,

even Mata Hari

when the girls would
drop their gaze
and feign the dress
would never fit them;

and though his parents
called him Judas,
digging its *sui generis*,
its brief, melodic
cadence,

he was loyal to the
core, give you
thirty bucks
if you were hungry,

tell you trees
bestow our *breath*,
our shade and
tint of fruit,

held a noose
to stay connected
to the earth,

the pulse of
what is sacred,
no need to
dangle feet

above the worms;
burst from inside-
out,

and there's redemption
if you ask, no matter how
grievous
the sin, or appalling
appellation
he had carried like a

cross
along the halls,
our *Via Dolorosas*
of the damned.

Colours, or the Bonbons of Leopold II

When you told me
the biggest human
genocide

took place in the “Belgian”
Congo, I cursed my
homeroom teacher,
my biased
curriculum,
the Hershey’s bar
I’d grab at noon
from the *squalid*

cafeteria, in tones of
brown & black,
the white that claimed
vanilla.

It was like the Holocaust
on hormones, or the energy
from cocoa, causing you to
kill a little
faster, twice as many
victims at half
the price.

If they would have
been fair as ivory,
with orbs of sapphire-
blue; a field of wheat
for hair, I swear
we would have known.
I wouldn't have waited
a hundred years
to learn from a
TikTok reel.

It's 2025, I've heard
the pundits shrug.
Nothing has any
colour anymore.

The mocha of
west Darfur — the girl who isn't
worthy of a name?
She's a simple, spinning numeral
in my Insta's
algorithm, like the wheel
from Price is Right,

when dollars
have more value in
our tallies.

Or consider young
Ahmad, crawling
between the concrete
of his freshly fallen
home, thinking his *newly*
chalked-up skin
will mean the world will
stop & care: he starves
in Gaza's sand,
will no more see
his olive epidermis,

win the prize
that comes when mercy's
dipped in bleach,
the peace & pale of
doves, a heart that says it's
chocolate but it's not.

Another Noah, or Shrine of the Libertines

*And God made the firmament,
and divided the waters under
the firmament from the waters above
the firmament: and it was so.*

—Genesis 1:7

Your love of fur &
fowl
was much more than
heresy, beyond
apostasy,

clinch the trophied
antlers
in your arms, begging
a buck's forgiveness,
claiming that it *felt*
as much as we,
cared for sons & daughters
& the sick, grieving
every passing
like a drenching
burst of cloud;

saying nothing's
upside-down
amid the stars,
you're grounded
while you're upright
on your head, your ears
a pair of eyes—or maybe they're
a *2nd*
tongue & mouth,
screaming they can
do much more than
see—

a human who is
sacrificed
for lambs, a lion
roaring prayers
up to the Sun on
our behalf, humbly
laying aside
his golden mane,

knowing birds are
really fish,

wings but fins
which skim the
waves above us,

and the prophets
had been right about

divides,

the sheen of
firmament,

keeping the seas
apart,

lest we know that
lungs are gills,
heads are tails
no matter how they're

flipped
into the air
and wrongly called.

Exsanguination

You bought a
dozen roses
for the thorns,
wrapped your palm
& fingers round their
spikes, the rivulets
of rouge—
dittoing their corolla
of the dawn—

then brought them
to her door, sharing *love*
is never wilted
but it wounds, bleeding
in the grim & glow of
sunfall,

that passion
and its pain are
equal measure

beat-for-beat,

there's not the other with-
out the one,

the charge of minus/
plus,

an engine unable
to rondo if
the negative's
negated,

hoping the *slap*
that greets your cheek
is just a little S&M,
a shade of her
that no one's ever known,

and when she plays
the scherzo on the
keys, imagine she is
sure to use the dark as
well as light, the bass as
well as treble, her flat then sharp
ascending to the ceiling

like a bee, to prick you to
the bone when she has ceased —

your hands so steeped with
crimson
your applause
will seize the ears of
every angel of the
dusk—the *clement*, not-yet-
fallen.

Ray-Bans for Bartimaeus

The Word says scars
are but the sum of
notre beauté. The girl
who survived the fire
is the most ravishing of us all.
Just murmur that you love her
into what's left of her knobby ear.

She cannot hear you.

In the End there was a whisper,
and the whisper was
with God
and the whisper *was* God.
With no one who could listen,
He caused every single
star to *adios*. A flash & burn
of two-hundred
sextillion
bulbs. Forgetting only
the blind are able to see.

The beautiful, beautiful blind.

Elegy for Hannah Brockman

On the day of your
Bat Mitzvah, you twirled
beneath the snow,
your unpierced tongue
extending

like an ophidian
from a cleft, trans-
muted from a staff,

tasting the sacred
nectar
of the sky, as if a Levite
under manna;

knowing *cold* can
speak of love as
well as warmth,
when the flakes will
plunge together
by the trillions,
parachute
out the nimbus—

vowing to drape
your spirit like
a quilt; yet
not so flushed
they'd fall as limpid
rain; trickling

like a creek from out your
eye, spilling in the
dirge of human mourning,

then freezing like the
wax along the sides of
Shabbat candles,
or maybe they were
Seder, when the light
can grieve no more,
when the smell of
rose & lily
comes and goes,
petals fastened tightly
in the dusk,

fearing
they'll be pried on
blessèd ground,

once the footfall
of the night
has shed its shoes.

Cat's Game, or Playing Noughts & Crosses in the Dusk

You tell me *tac-*
tac-toe is
boring, will always
end in ties, a stale-
mate just like us,

where nothing has been
lost but never won,
our draws *ad infinitum*,

our pencils ever
dull in HB grey,

from the scratch
of X & Os, in a box in
a box of *nine*, lives of a
sterile cat, jejune
along its treadmill
night & day,

stop & start
eternally out of
reach—

of its clawless,
pacing paws, going nowhere
slow yet swift—

a circle
for which there *is* no
bitter close,

commencement,
a first or final kiss,

and where an X
is always X—

regardless of
inversion,
its red of *wrong*
& quarry,

will always mark the
spot that lied of love.

The Doohickey

The webhost that I use
is claiming a widget will not
load. Nothing is where it should be
because of this power-tripping
gizmo.

There's not a word
that piques my anger
more than *widget*.

It's the Brian
Jones of apps, doing nothing
but bang its palm
with a tambourine,
taking credit for others'
success. You rarely
note its absence
until it screams
that *I'm not there!!!* —

throwing its rusted
wrench
into your efforts,

saying if *it*
can't kick the ball —
then no one else can
either.

It's never been the hero,
saving a bus of schoolkids
in a fire. Fixing a river's
bridge
before collapse, sending
every wheelchair
to the fetid murk
below.

Show me a single
instance when the widget
has been summoned from
a toolbox, like a phantom
in a séance, able to
shake the table,
tell us what it wants.

Batman carried *everything*
in his belt except a widget.
Opting for a phonebook
in its stead.

After a number of
cussing hours
it finally hits me:
it's the chartreuse
clock
I added
failing to show —
ticking *vainly*
in some corner of my
site. No one clicks my URL
to synchronize their Gucci.

Yet this fucker
will do its darndest
to keep you from seeing
my latest sketch, buy
my newest title,
cringing
at the poem you'll swear
is worse than even this.

Another Daring Day on the Parker Freeway

My *death* is 60
inches to my right.
The tire of a
tractor-trailer

which is whirling
like a drunken
potter's wheel—
albeit *vertically*,

the push of wind
that shoves it
to my lane, looking
like a table saw
on meth,
one that chops your
fingers if you stumble,
cuts your jutting
wrist

just like the end
of a suicide poem.

If I survive
our frenzied ride,

I'll be sitting with
my friends
in a motorboat,
my head a mere
meter from the swirling
propeller blades;
ready to decap-
itate, telling the Frenchman's
guillotine: *hold my bloody*
beer!

And then there is
the water
which surrounds,
much deeper than the
wading pool
I was unable to
graduate past,
always fearful
that I'd drown, inhaling
through my nose
the sopped chlorine,

or be the butt of
eat a sandwich! —
if I take to
the diving board,
the obtruding
of my ribs
in midday sun,

or later that same
evening, the dread of
spin-the-bottle,
emptied of its wine,
pointing to the girl
who hates my guts,
will spill them
to the floor
if I should make
a single *move* —

as though I'm
merely obeying
the rules of this
lethal game.

**The Cone, or *Empty Canvas*,
by Desmond El-Jardin, circa 1946**

The gallery
forked out millions
for this thing. You chuckle,
what a waste!

But I say there's no
such thing
as a blank &
vacant canvas —
everything has a story
it can share.

Ask the atoms
beyond our *gaze*,
fixed upon its pith;
how their collisions
will impact us

years from now,
at five-hundred
feet per second; surviving
life's hard knocks.

Tell me of the
one who put the
wooden frame together,
to serve as *border*
for the white:

linen & wall & artist;

that cotton costs
much less
and serves as well,
absorbs the *water-*
colour like a leech,
a gift from horse-
whipped backs
that keeps on giving.

And then there is the
man who planted birch
which gave it birth,
thinking he would
sit beneath its shade
with all his children,

his now-gone
belovèd's initials
in its bark.

Relay how in war
he moved away,
how a clearcut
made a mall,
how paint is sold
for bathrooms
not for art.

Then share its
dénouement:
how the brush had
snapped
before a sunrise
stroke,

that there was so much
weighty baggage, *nothing*
could've captured every
heartbreak, throb of ruptured
dream,

but the snow on snow on snow
of all his sorrow,
ice cream never melted never
licked.

Yesterday

*All your money
won't another minute
buy.*

*Dust in the wind.
All we are is
dust in the wind.*

—Kansas

We never should have
deemed ourselves as dust.
Quenching rain, perchance.

And never in the
wind—
but the benignity
of breeze.

I've *had* the chance to grasp
that we are seed
as well as bloom.

Gifted in a pistil
from the flight of
savvy wings.

Transpose
our next tomorrow
for today. Tell me how it
differs. It's some-
how *yesterday*.

No, not McCartney's
rueing ode. This
isn't '65.

But maybe it's
conceivable.
A miracle in mist.
The blear from
dampened eyes.

Perhaps I'm still that
toddler
in the garden—

the brush
of moth
beside me.
The backyard
soil

sieving
through my fingers
as a prayer;

pretending it is
water
& you thirst.



for my mother, Maria



Andreas Gripp was born and raised in Treaty 6 Territory (London, Ontario) and in 2024 relocated to Leamington with his wife, Carrie. He's the author of 40 books of poetry, including *The Earth is Painted War* and *Yada Yada Kismet*, both of which appeared in 2025. His poems have been admired for their lyrical and literary merit, accessibility, and for their blend of comic and poignant storytelling.

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Black Mallard

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