

The Lost Cafeteria: Poems

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**ABSTRACT**

The Lost Cafeteria

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Taking its cues from the twentieth century life writing of Robin Blaser, Frank O'Hara, William Everson, Sylvia Plath and Alden Nowlan, *The Lost Cafeteria* is a stylistically shapeshifting *bildungsroman*-in-verse which examines and attempts to resolve the author's parochially religious upbringing with his secular, peripatetic adulthood. Exploring the shape of the "I-within-history," Ferguson mixes confessional lyric poetry with experimental détournements of texts from high and low culture to visit (and revisit) issues of labour, rebellion, family (biological and chosen), class, travel, memory (personal and historical), religion, place, and the meanings of the word "home."

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## Capacity

A friend of a friend from out west  
 comes calling to the verdant college town  
 where I live like a bandit king, where I drink  
 wine made from dumpstered apricots by a stone bridge  
 over the Speed River (or was it the Eramosa?)  
 I read Max Stirner, pack on  
 ill-gotten weight eating stolen wheels of brie.  
 I've forged a new aristocratic, deadbeat identity.  
 while the southern Ontario summer sprawls  
 leans into farmland, stretches its arms and yawns.  
 I have sticky fingers. I smell of rot.  
 I believe I am happy. I'm probably not.

I never meet him. He leaves  
 his backpack on my porch, heads downtown  
 decides to swim the Eramosa  
 or perhaps the Speed. He's young and able  
 and a chance current buries him  
 like a blade deep in the river.

I walk the gravel paths of the Eramosa  
 and Speed that night— calling out  
 a name I have no face for  
 the ritual to conjure life.

What rise instead are Latin names  
 for rare diseases that singled out classmates  
 in the first-world backwater of my childhood.  
 I return to the small-town, non-denominational  
 services for the silent girl from math class  
 loved fiercely by a few close friends,  
 for the high school principal's outgoing son,  
 his football teammates in the front pews.

I resurrect the yearly contractions  
 of extended families, elderly neighbours  
 who fell into black-hole retirement homes. A friend  
 lost her father in pre-school. Assuring everyone  
 how little she thought of him  
 set the rhythm for her nervous tics. The sick  
 and old became less themselves  
 in well-mapped increments. Surviving  
 was within their capacity, until it wasn't.

All of this followed naturally, in stages  
with grief counsellors and pamphlets at every milestone—  
reading from their scripts made sense of life.

The spell breaks with morning. He is found  
downstream a span, tangled in the town's  
flotsam. I see the gurney  
they carry him away on, the black sheet  
that covers him. What remains, awaits—  
his army-green rucksack on the stoop  
with its boundary-stone weight.

## Twenties

Uprooting for a crush was simple at nineteen:  
the sharehouse fridge still full of vegetable salvage,  
my last twenty got me off the island.

Cresting on uppers, the long-haul driver  
outside Rivière-du-Loup grew suspicious  
called me a narc when I copped to being  
a Nova Scotian who'd never been to Cape Breton.  
Too many short rides later, Yves the traveling jeweler  
dropped me off in a warehouse district and rain,  
a two hour walk to my new home.

Of the crush's roommates, one plotted a move to Germany  
where gay wrestling leagues sprang up like fistfuls of flowers.  
The other was a law student and activist, remaking the world  
as a federation of communes from behind his germaphobe's mask  
in the age of Swine Flu, in the afterglow of SARS.  
Third night there, she let me in on her love  
for him (the masked man, not the wrestler)  
while we filled army-surplus rucksacks with dumpstered beets.

Their bedrooms flanked mine,  
and the Saint John River had no dishes for me  
to wash (no work, no deliverance).  
I waited a week in the nest I'd made  
out of blankets and sci-fi paperbacks,  
rolling dimes in sunspots on matted hardwood floors.

I didn't want to die so much,  
just silently joked about which room  
leaving my body in would make the biggest splash—  
but the highway was just a two hour walk away  
and besides, it was my birthday.

Beginnings were still as easy at twenty,  
chopping wood, clearing deadfall  
for friendly strangers one province east of it all  
for two days and five twenty-dollar bills.



## Rucksack Elegy

Most things are left out and what isn't  
takes on its proper dimensions.

Essentials and irreplaceables only:  
wool socks, trail mix, letters (love

or otherwise) formed into a cube  
by gravity and canvas and fastened

to the torso. A seat while waiting, pillow  
in highway-side underbrush come dark,

ready for most anything. Sturdy too,  
when tossed from a freight train

slowly pulling into a railyard,  
its fall gauging speed and safety

for its owner who waits to follow.  
Laid over in unknown cities,

it stretches sufficiency just that  
little bit further for the lived road

movie, the pastoral painting,  
a clumsy joke finding its moment.

The Kitchen Debates, Early-to-Mid 2008

Other people's suburban kitchens existed for us  
 to put anything which our paws could muster  
 up our noses, for forgetting  
 a thieved Ted Hughes omnibus in (forever),  
 to walk from talking to rustle up booze  
 and to never come back to.

Talked walking down the tracks in Southern Ontario  
 ganging-way to let late GO Transit trains go,  
 their double-decker windows  
 fishbowls in the snow.

Debate frothing about Chiapas,  
 Italian Autonomists, Alfredo Bonanno.  
 Conclusion: of course the state must go.

A giddy, addled gestalt kicking down  
 the back door of another half-finished trackside  
 bungalow abandoned mid-sentence, like it was owed  
 to encroaching war, the first  
 of many more in the crashing months to follow.

In this pad's other rooms, comrades, sex for them.  
 as for me, Pasternak and Dexedrine,  
 a kitchen sink to piss in and a carpeted basement  
 for sleep. Who would need more?

What times to live through! Pockets and backpack  
 compartments filled at the supermarket  
 before the housing bust, then go-go-go!  
 seven white smiles, then mine, piling  
 into someone's mum's minivan  
 with Subcommandante Marcos,  
 the Years of Lead,  
 Alfredo Bonanno.

No volta here, no tears  
 for a lost generation, just petty crime brazening.

## Riding Freight

adrift on a line          revering machine precision    bearing our lives slowly

through interchanges          around blind corners  
causeways across muskeg          mile markers

where mottled bits of dross float

        plastic bags in dead trees          the only sign of civilization

        unseen          lulled on by the rhythm of this stillness

open-air metal coffins          the porches of grain cars

grime and soot          the smell of grease following us through city

upon city, rail yards

hushed by the bull's flashlight

the yard worker's high beams

in the name of this world's sovereign          (Capital)

a night of wilderness remains

blank to us above

        the plains oh lord

at rest

        at a siding

        lightning (purple and gold) on all horizons

to emerge hundreds of miles later

        the trick pulled off

        unscathed

                        grounded

## Shooting Guns with the Europeans

There's a cock-up with the packing house machinery  
so a rare day off bisects the cherry harvest.

*Why don't we go shoot some guns?*

The Europeans follow Country Boy's pickup  
in a rattling, rusted-out Astrovan, its body a patchwork  
of spray can dregs. Here they come—  
Florence, Greenwich, Heidelberg, Prague.  
They keep pace with the truck, careening  
through every blind turn and switchback on our ascent  
to the shooting-copse, while the mountains of the Okanagan  
hold their breath and turn a deeper blue.

The Europeans park and scatter, dreadlocked,  
jocular and slap-happy, boxing with their shadows. Country Boy's  
the youngest here by a span, a local among come-from-aways,  
generous with his license and guns, the small trap  
and box of clay pigeons last heard skittering  
around the flatbed like an ad hoc bonspiel.  
Taking a knee to set up the launcher, he rises  
an adult, extolling gun safety basics  
as the Europeans sip cider on the tailgate  
and paw the dirt, eager for gunplay.

We try blasting the pigeons down, taking five shots each.  
The best first-timer among us is the only woman.  
She brings each bird to ground  
with fitting neophyte gravitas, but European smirks fly  
like oratory on the last pull that wonkily veers hard left,  
her barrel tracking it in a sweeping arc but missing.

No one is shocked when they change into wolves. One moment  
the Europeans play at war, firing wildly at stumps and road signs,  
taking videos of each other, little kids  
pushing every button on the elevator to feel  
the power of their clumsy fingers over the wide world, then—  
tails and snouts, crazed yellow eyes  
they bolt through the underbrush and up along the ridge.

We never find them, just traces— retirees' lapdogs  
that disappear from fenced-in yards to turn up on trails,  
throats ripped out, and the yammer-yowled threats bouncing down  
from the hills before dawn to mark their presence,  
    walking parallel to us  
    towards a future made for carnivores.

## Bughouse

...the blizzard the bedbugs the bastard landlord  
is too cheap to spray for all deserve each other  
and we haven't hit december yet... we are weary  
from the outset doorways become jammed  
with ice the one window that gets some sunlight  
shattered by the settling of the house garbage  
bags taped to window frame rippling in the arctic  
breeze... the social shrinks and the walls amplify  
every sound too many friends paying too much  
rent for too few rooms the whole rotting place  
becomes one high-register piano key they take turns jabbing  
harder and harder... it's the least-bad option  
it isn't even the goddamn new year yet... another winter  
spent stacking empties bingeing  
on television and self-reproach spent scratching  
bug bites and waiting for the world  
or the weather to pull a u-turn escalating  
screaming fits scandal over small things  
speculation around who is going to fuck over who  
on the lease come spring... frequent trips  
down icy streets to the psych ward a ten-ring circus  
juggling prescriptions and crises...  
*resilience* is now a weasel-word  
that everyone's grown tired of just makes them think  
of bedbugs those bloodsuckers will persist  
beyond the heat-death of the universe... and yet  
the latest traveller from bughouse to bughouse  
sneaks her visitor a baked potato  
from her tray he eats it slowly and draws a promise  
from her that she'll bring him some of those ill-fitting  
blue denim shirts the attendants make her wear  
a genuflection to all her tomorrows a sound request  
because all his clothes have been sprayed with raid  
and he can't take them out of the garbage bag  
for another two weeks... everyone would prefer  
winter to be over the words *kindness*  
*decency* *respite* we would prefer  
to thrive... so we cling  
to the moments when we can still cope

with each other...

An Economy like any Other

Traded *Les Fleurs du Mal* for *Nine Stories*  
 to S on ferry from Caribou to Prince Edward Island  
 as dolphins paced us and crossed the tack.  
 a real bad trade. He turned up  
 a couple weeks later at my house, dropped acid  
 made a pass at a roommate—  
 shot down, he ran off naked into the night.

Traded *Discipline & Punish*  
 for *Gramsci is Dead* to E  
 at some collective in downtown Kingston.  
 Confused, I thought I was getting  
*Let's Spit on Hegel*. What else to say?

Traded *No Great Mischief*  
 for some essays by Mary Baker Eddy  
 (why do I do this to myself?)  
 to a sweet old Christian Scientist  
 on the train to Montreal,  
 she left before the blizzard that brought  
 and lengthened the night.

Traded *A Place in the Country*  
 (Essays on German Romanticism)  
 for Zamyatin's *We* to M  
 in London (England not Ontario!)  
 We also trade postcards and photographic evidence  
 of all things pedestrian from Tbilisi to Tofino.

Received: C's copy of *Paterson*  
 with scorch marks  
 from a dropped match  
 imprinted on the cover  
 just like a muskellunge  
 trying to leap  
 the image of the falls  
 and continue  
 up the Passaic.

Abandoned: Hemingway, Gogol, Red Emma  
 the driveway of a burnt home  
 while hitchhiking, outside Saint-Nicolas, Quebec.  
 Forgive me this offering, I was  
 dehydrated and not thinking clearly.



A few Train-hoppers

A ragged, xeroxed zine  
 spews its pages  
 from the gondola into  
 the woods five minutes  
 past Riviere-du-Loup,  
 its directions, symbols  
 and schedules. So expires  
 the hidden story's  
 statute of limitations.

[...]

(another junker  
 fresh air, kinda)

[...]

("no, my dog loves it,  
 this life on the rails")

[...]

(Dodging the Charny bull,  
 his mirror on a stick,  
 living to tell the tale  
 to those who'd lived it  
 already. Or not—)

[...]

(secondhand story—  
 flail-handy, sloppy  
 drunk, vaporized, pissed,  
 eviscerated riding suicide  
 blowing up the squat)

[...]

(A last-summer type of friend  
 in the word-of-mouth streets.  
 Faint-faced, distant-eyed,  
 hard lines glazed on whatever,  
 cute liddle cupcake  
 last year. Nod of recognition  
 then gone forever.)

[...]

(Tamped weeds, snipped  
 fence, waiting with bag wine  
 under some now-bulldozed  
 Vendome overpass. the horizon's  
 endless, especially

where it isn't.)

[...]

That's what it's like

that thing about secrets  
passed on mouth to ear,  
the feeling that keeps getting  
traipsed 'round: nostalgia  
without regression (almost).

## Quickening Cities

While buried in Turgenev on an overground train  
there are the glass towers of course, but also  
the Anglosphere shade of Roque Dalton  
lingering in a third-storey bookstore or the Sun  
Yat-Sen memorial garden most afternoons. Each lost face  
waits on Commercial Drive with its dog, ready  
with a mickey of whiskey to freshen my Slurpee.  
Whichever continental philosopher hated the city's countless  
locked doors has been reincarnated as janitors  
with the master keys. The singing cowboy of yesteryear  
still fills my mug with joe in the Bon's on Broadway  
of memory. The deluge lifts  
off from the flooding and moves  
northwards. Drunk-punks like cherubim hold up  
a SpongeBob beach towel for a girl who changes  
to a girl-plus-one in Grandview Park. Keeping cold,  
the mountains trade in baldnesses. What is it about  
last year's snow, Franky-boy? I watch  
an East Berliner face his acrophobia  
among a score of newborns on the Grouse Mountain  
cable car— this other city  
coming thru with the dawn sun's  
slow moments commuting towards Autumn,  
Portage and Main.



To the curb with the rest:  
we lived with it all for as long as we could stand it.

## Shunpiking

Hottest day of August. I'm on the apartment's roof  
 thinking about what I've been reading  
 —Egon Schiele      Spanish Flu  
 last days of the Hapsburgs  
 1918    the end of the war  
 culture      high and low  
               “last words”—

but mostly just watching the traffic pass  
 below, thinking about how little I want  
 to walk back to the laundromat, when  
 a jeep guns and swerves through a red  
 at the corner of Windsor and North.

Cursing from shotgun, a muscle-man half stands  
 in his seat to make a throwing gesture and yes  
 something glints an arc through humid air  
 from his hand to an unseen resting place.

They roar off down the road, only  
 to return moments later in the oncoming lane  
 mounting the curb. Excitable tank-topped boys  
 hop out, scour through the grass  
 outside the leftie magazine office next door.

It's so hot that everything's melting,  
 leaving gaps where I catch glimpses  
 of Vienna through the sweat  
 palaces that look like ornate cakes

while below they look, dig, look,  
 and the one who tossed away  
 his wedding band cries  
 into his phone, asking for her forgiveness.

## Walking Backwards

*after Joe Brainard*

I remember heading downtown on the eighteen  
                  how at Selkirk and Main  
my phone shuffled onto some old song  
and the early morning light suddenly dazzled me.

I remember business-sponsored street art  
covering up off-sales and pawnshops  
like broken-down salarymen  
forced to wear party hats.

I remember photocopies of train schedules  
Canadian Pacific crew-change locations  
vague directions on getting there from the highway.

I remember you and I breaking  
into a falling down cottage by the lake  
but can't say which of us fell asleep first.

I remember taking a sharpie  
to draw a big, rococo-looking gateway  
around the window overlooking the tracks  
(a gesture to endings and false-starts, I think).

I remember you and I standing sheepish  
by the train when the engine-workers saw  
us trying to find rideable cars  
that train heading north without us.

I remember the butterflies  
waiting for that next one  
and having to piss every five minutes (nerves).

I remember hitchhiking to Sudbury alone.

I remember old Spanish loyalists  
speaking at anarchist bookfairs.

I remember my first hit of acid  
and writing gibberish about Heidegger.

I remember taking toboggans  
to Ford Needham Memorial Park with friends  
whose contact info is now long lost.

I remember photos from after garage shows—  
twenty sweaty teenagers, punks and goths  
giving their small-town best with impeccable hair.

I remember “Might as well go for a soda,  
nobody hurts, nobody cries” (Kim Mitchell)  
and how straight-edge made one feel above it all.

I remember mosh pits, elbows,  
noses, jets of red, red blood  
at the Legion, teenhood’s  
broken-nosed jubilation.

I remember that Victoria Park closes at ten  
to fill with creeping small-town cops  
trying to pot-head kids and guys cruising.

Mostly though I remember overnight trains  
in my bedroom window as a kid—  
sleeping travelers heading elsewhere  
in a golden flash of light.



On Site, Over Surface

the red-flecked barn  
the baseball arcs up  
and down the roof  
back to glove or to ground  
    at last crests over shingles to come  
down behind the neighbour's fence

elsewhere, out of mind  
    patchy lumps of green grass  
hide the dent a septic tank inhabited  
    and the burial grounds surrounding

no amphora's handle here  
through the soil's roils  
    troubled stones  
    coins and bones

and through numbered days  
of sash window squares  
next to 1890's buggy calendar  
    faded patches of george v  
    still affixed *in situ*  
look out at wreckage wrought  
by the ball among the  
    raspberries.

After Turner's Stags

I see a clutch of red and fallow, all  
 enclosed off-canvas. Day chases night  
 with a can of black and tan,  
 while jumbo jets float  
 in the pink of a bad year, caught  
 in marmalade above Gatwick.

Sweltering Brits! Long grass tamps  
 down the slope. Robust regard  
 for parks but sold out of cornettos.  
 Again and again explained a drive to flee  
 for Kent, Galloway, Somerset, the din somewhere  
 waves crash into stone lions' cliff-carved maws.

Polyphemus is in the next chamber, his father stirring.  
 The rubber map of an old port's streets I leave  
 as giants grind down to enjoy feeling  
 a city squish beneath heel. Fairy-rings  
 are sprouting around Saint Paul's.  
 Underwater tunnels are the last damp place, cool,  
 the Thames' old bricks quivering green jelly.

The point of dogs to Turner's at-bay stags.  
 The roars are hollowed,  
 weather no polite conversation  
 when an age of aftermath arrives. Two centuries on,  
 Greenwich, I didn't mean it. Straw hats,  
 subscription lawn chairs should take note.

## Boxing Day at the Fort Garry Palm Lounge

Well, the ghosts are locked in their hotel rooms,  
 or hotel room closets, and the botanical gardens  
 have been knocked down, their centennial ficuses  
 and turtles are gone. The palms left to us as a city  
 are those patterned into the carpet of the Palm Lounge:  
 the rest is ice chunks and hypothermia.

Worst snowfall since '87, I keep hearing.  
 Hours spent finagling a snowblower thru downtown drifts  
 until I can track slush across the fine lobby floor,  
 regress into whatever pricey cocktail  
 I remember Don Draper ordering. The interior  
 is all gilt imperial, the brass-buttoned  
 waiter in his Kim-Jong Un coat chatty.  
 He has a strong union, his name is Dave  
 there are sealed-off tunnels below the hotel, a settler *malakopi*  
 he's making time-and-a-half bank this Boxing Day.

The pianist's off to Chicago to see family.  
 Billy Joel will have to wait til the new year.  
 Scarce-to-gone, too, are the Easterners, Yanks,  
 German tourists roaming about for a peek  
 at the necessarily-lost world of vaulted ceilings. The locals  
 would come to play tourist among them while they, the tourists  
 waited for their westbound train to let them back on,  
 continue on Cornelius Van Horne's Edwardian El Dramino  
 at the lounges of Chateau Lake Louise or "The Empress."

Light fails fast here now  
 and a thigh-high slog home  
 in bitter cold is the evening's chaser.

Ghost Hunting at the Ninette Sanitorium

Down the stairs  
 from wreckage to ruin  
 I feel the absence  
                             of a presence at my elbow.

Something's about to begin.  
 Goosebumps. Electric.  
 Breath held. Any moment now.

Twenty bucks a gander:  
 the brown grass outlines outbuildings' foundations,  
 a fear of TB lingers in negative.

      No footsteps to ruffle the asbestos  
       dust in the main ward's attic  
       locked thirty years until this morning  
 the caretaker says. It's her birthday  
 and the spirits are whiffs of vodka:  
 we ought to have brought masks.

      A search for meaning in malfunctioning light  
       switches, creaky floors, resonance, miasmic  
       dis-ease. *Does a life have to end for a ghost to begin?*

We recover them later, back in the city—  
 photographed, smiling in sepia  
 lined up in their beds  
       along the balcony and behind them all  
       a white coat and glinting spectacles.  
 Aunts, grandparents, progenitors who passed through the San  
 hang around families' forks and branches  
 smile and pace in the background  
 haunt the tall grass  
 stick to the burrs that stuck to us.

## The Folly Arch

I step aside gangway  
 out of London South Western Rail  
 boot sale regalia  
 fallen from the lorry laid  
 in a polyglot field mugs  
 to commemorate royal marriages  
     now long-dissolved  
 past pubs thru two villages  
 the ring road asleep the islands  
 small when all's added up  
     stone steps  
 old growth shade footpaths  
 around great craters  
 dug up no doubt by  
 German bombs out  
 into June heat the farmers' wilting  
 fields hedgerows a riding  
 lesson and into vision

the arch from Thomas More's time

fenced off for farthings  
     that childhood scuttlebutt  
 placed under bricks five centuries'  
 waifish deconstruction  
     the foundations of  
 a house beneath feet above  
 winds in Gobions Wood  
     still the green-sea  
 the utopia left over  
 from some dead lord's  
 garden come clearance  
 enclosure some googled stone  
 bridge wrapped in bluebells  
 under repair cannot find it  
 cannot approach trust that it's there  
 in the glow of what years remain to us

## Historical Drama

*Water laps.*  
*Boat creaks.*  
*Footsteps rustle through leaves.*  
*Horn bellows.*  
*Rhythmic drumming.*

the mercy of the old stories  
 recognizing their conclusions  
 as present consequences

*Festive chatter and laughter.*  
*Cutlery clatters.*  
*Doors burst open.*  
*Flames whoosh.*  
*Ominous howling.*  
*Footsteps scuff.*  
*Log clunks.*  
*Flames roar.*  
*Startled gasps.*  
*Relieved sigh.*

warm screens            familiar folk  
 the bog-standard glow of childhood  
 dance of cathode shadows    den of memory  
 before the responsibility to know begins

*Birds chirp.*  
*Laboured whispers.*  
*Wheezing.*  
*Men chatter and laugh.*  
*Drunken sighs.*  
*Horse whinnies nearby.*  
*Rain patters.*  
*Kissing, sighing with pleasure.*  
*Harness jingles, goats bleat.*  
*Wagon rattles as it trundles away.*  
*Wailing. Gut-wrenching sobs.*

go back to whatever beginning  
 I was small    the world was small with me  
 after nature            before culpability  
 no log cabin in a dark wood to revisit  
 a golden age            an infantile disorder

***Loud thunderclap.***

***Heartbeat pulses loudly.***

***Men scream in agony.***

***Fighting grunts.***

***Warrior yells.***

***Weapons clank.***

***Gurgling grunt.***

***Hard blow.***

today's nightmare made fodder

tomorrow's period pieces

boltholes for Pangloss            carnage naturalized

made bearable            inevitable            a good

***Grunts of effort.***

***Flames crackle and roar.***

***Ragged breathing.***

***Blood splatters.***

Halifax: Colonial Shards<sup>1</sup>

## I

Perhaps these are the bones  
of those stolen, enslaved, or protestants  
called foreign, mercenaries from Westphalia;  
anyhow, an open pit

was dug, a vessel now  
beneath the church's abutments.  
Like a shaggy-dog story  
spilling the bounds

of its purview,  
like a child's game,  
old-fashioned, pick-up sticks,  
the city forgets itself,

flying from the hands  
that first raised it,  
shackles daisy-chained,  
ragged sets of lungs.

## II

These are expected shards,  
the buried stories  
returning to haunt:  
kidnappings, bounties,

plague ships explicated  
by tangled roots  
of stone and bone,  
which in the breach

retrace their anabasis  
so that each brainpan  
is a wide-bellied ship  
crowning out of Halifax harbour,

past expedience and assault,  
remembering the path  
from Demina, Dahomey,  
Hesse, Hamburg, Cologne.

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<sup>1</sup> after "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces" by Seamus Heaney



## III

Like wet gunpowder  
 spilled across abandoned  
 acreage allotments,  
 the boneyard in bloom

just beyond the palisade,  
 that charged limit  
 bloody and final as when  
 Cornwallis first said *scalps*.

And so now we hear  
 from students on the dig,  
 the codex of femurs,  
 the twice-buried men:

and from these test fragments  
 inscribed by Great Empires,  
 a pilgrim ship the hydra's tooth  
 today springs from.

## IV

Here this imitation falters,  
 didactic, unraveling  
 into the semaphore of concern,  
 the *topos koinos* of white guilt

at a remove from the material.  
 I write 'I am Bartolomé de las Casas,'  
 turn moralist, truism-mouther,  
 one of the good ones

making the demanded judgments  
 of the dead and of history.  
 Pinioned by a greed  
 to be beyond reproach,

pious and useless,  
 rolling around on this  
 and that burial mound  
 like a mutt in the sun.

## V

I get on with it,  
 shut-in student  
 trying to reach terms with  
 the ancestors who lived on:

broad-gaited, notch-hilted  
 killers, rangers  
 and *landschnekte*, ten-guinea men,  
 agents of pain and terror,

who gained notoriety or respect  
 working to carve title and deed  
 in the growing neighborhoods,  
 who time transmuted into the names

of streets, schools, statues.  
 Old names that cling to the now,  
 that dig down deep into my bones  
 like a thoughtless pride.

## VI

“And here you will see  
 where three hundred bodies  
 were stacked head to heel,  
 forgotten for two centuries

under the Little Deutsch Church,  
 until renovations in the lead-up  
 to Helmut Kohl’s G7 visit.”  
 Would the tour guides who patrol

pecuniary neighborhoods say this  
 if a key market wasn’t kept moving  
 by the engine of storytelling,  
 tales quaint and easy to grasp?

The words slip around  
 submerged crafts, dig up  
 fragments of ignorance (my own)  
 from within the stratified earth.

Percocet on Election Night, 2016

Sent home with kidney stones and a script for pills,  
 the pain is replaced with the sense that I'm one  
 of William Blake's paintings, little boy lost  
 done, gone, bedbound  
 as the whirlwind comes unwound.

I eat painkillers in reams,  
 prognosticate hopeful  
 lies about the shard pressing hard upstream.  
 By the john I watch myself sick.  
 I fire codeine in a golden stream.

Sisyphus is now carefree from his burden,  
 drifting through the patriot colours  
 and analyses of the live-streamed verdict.

In the dream I'm breaking  
 all of Blake's plates. My body is  
 both banks of the river,  
 a Quisling on the make.

The world is my pillow. Like a haze  
 I rise out the window, then on  
 and on. I'm a scroll unfurled in the sky  
 over Spain. I glide above Guernica.  
 What's below is ablaze  
 but I'm at rest, well past dawn on day zero  
 well beyond healthy or ill.  
 At the bereft heart of heart's deficit  
 Percocet won't wake me  
 to anything harsh just yet.

## Aubade of the Oprichniki

■■■■■ nurses a grudge— Someone has cut him  
 off on the road. Someone has sure done ■■■■■ wrong. ■■■■■ doesn't  
 like the look of Someone's face. ■■■■■ is drawn to Someone  
 and hates Someone for it. ■■■■■ knows  
 Someone has stabbed The People in the back.

Come, oh come, day when The Word is given,

**Speak, speak, speak the sentence!**

A fear of shrinking and blowing away  
 consumes ■■■■■.  
 ■■■■■ is tired of the bills and purposeless drudge.  
 ■■■■■ thrills to think of kicking Someone down the street.  
 ■■■■■ hates distant relations and burns for familial killings.  
 The Eye craves, Eye wants the viscera of abject reality.

The World has broken, The World will be fixed; the past's purity is a truncheon.  
 The Voice speaks the words that ■■■■■ knows and that Someone dreads.

**Tell, tell, tell and keep on telling.**

The Law is given, The Word is taken, yes,

**Speak, speak, speak the sentence!**

Eye has an escape from the quotidian  
 a purity of purpose from naming  
 Someone The Enemy. ■■■■■ takes  
 up a mask of red, ■■■■■ a mask of white.  
 They come snickering to Someone's dwelling  
 and drag Someone from bed. Yes,

**to Someone's house came dreaded guests,  
 axes danced upon their head!**

■■■■■ ■■■■■ & ■■■■■  
 take a cue from ■■■■■'s laughter  
 in the night. ■■■■■ holds the rope that drags someone  
 by the neck and through the mud. ■■■■■  
 merrily throws a child-sized Someone from the upstairs window.

**The gates split down the middle, down the middle!**  
**Golden goblets are passed from hand to hand!**

The play of work is finished,  
The Eye takes it in and enjoys it all: the degradation  
of Someone destroyed, the smell of burning crossbeams  
the royal blue of the coming of dawn  
the killers' laughter as they sing their morning song.

## The Hôtel Universel

A ziggurat of all that's best for only the best, the guests  
are dry and well-fed. The wedding on the mezzanine level

is one to remember for all in attendance, but the halls above  
are cold and silent. After the front desk formalities, no one's asked

for their papers, and the beds are so large that nobody touches  
if they don't want to. The pizzeria the concierge suggests

gets so many orders wrong, sends every room extra anchovies  
that perfume the halls with the sea and death, but a woman's kind voice

will dispatch apologies and free pizzas with an accent  
that can't quite be placed. At the Hôtel Universel

no one feels transient, and not in an unsettling way either—  
it's just that none of the pens bearing the hotel's logo have ink

so one's thoughts keep escaping out into the drizzly night.  
The wi-fi is a patchy too, but you can still stream

*Frozen* or *The Shining*, if you don't mind the pauses to buffer  
that extend and silence the closeup of Danny's silent scream.

### Apartment Hunting near the Jolicoeur Metro

The break you catch at last is not yours. It's the rentier's, it is psychotic. Since the photos were taken for Kijiji, the white walls have been lovingly swabbed black and red and a pentagram's been carved into the coffee table.

He rambles about the book he's writing on Satan, the Kingdoms of Hell, the Transmigration of Souls; names an ever-rising price, but lets slip hidden fees.

Continuing the tour, he presents the kitchen; appliances pawned. The backyard is overgrown. The zeitgeist has been captured in the plastic bureau housing the rats he bred to keep his pet snake fed. He says there's only two rats left. The snake is dead.

You say you'll contact him, soon, and hurry back to the Metro. The day's housing crisis aside, doubling what's broken does not make it whole.

## Maud Lewis Houses

### House #1

You see the replica first—  
 a wee, shed-sized thing,  
 white with green and red  
 trim. The summer morning's  
     light and the dew  
     on the grass in your approach  
     make you feel young as when  
     the world was new. But in your eagerness  
 you have arrived early and cannot enter  
 this copy of her life. The tourist centre in Digby  
 is open, so you buy a mug  
 with a winter scene printed on it. Belled oxen  
     pull their sledges through a world  
     without shadows within the wrapping paper.

### House #2

In your rented red convertible, you drive  
 twenty minutes down the Evangeline Trail  
 to see the memorial. Another scale replica  
 of Maud Lewis's house stands uncomfortably close  
 to the highway, in the glade where the genuine article  
 once stood. This copy is made from unpainted steel,  
 its ashy surfaces lifeless and cold, reminding you  
 of the skyscrapers in the big city you left behind.  
 No, you don't like it, this tiny metal box shorn  
 of every ingenuous element. You leave quickly,  
 not waiting for years of salt-water vapours  
 to rust this monument back into innocence.



## Final House

Her original resides inside the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia now—  
 the provincial government purchased it after she died  
 and moved it here in the eighties. Hurry through the other  
 exhibits to arrive at her true home, your excitement growing. Here it is,  
 nestled in the corner of a gaping room, a handful of quilt  
 still hot from the dryer, clutched loosely in a treasure-laden hand.  
 The door is open for you. Pass inside. You half-expect—  
 what? Her to be alive within, at work, small as the last  
 of a nesting-doll sequence? Or perhaps to find her body  
 laid out for a viewing, miraculously preserved, an influx  
 of peasants steadily coming to do homage, touching her  
 crooked hands, praying to be cured? But no, there is only you,  
 stooped low by her ceiling, the only beating heart within your chest.  
 The colours she laid on every surface of this humblest home run riot.  
 Blooms shoot across the walls, the table, the cast-iron stove,  
 the rustic crockery the gallery nailed to the countertop.  
 Wonder that any life exists outside her home at all, so total,  
 vital, all-devouring the paints at play within this house.

You are returned from your reverie by the television  
 that's been mounted on the back wall. A documentary loops,  
 the black-white-grey of the screen so out of place here.  
*Until recently, she sold hand-painted Christmas cards*  
*to local sophisticates for five dollars apiece*, the narrator explains  
 as she paints a harbour scene. Leave her creation now,  
 having seen that which you'd come to see, and try to glow  
 in a satisfaction that will remain with you in the weeks to come,  
 after you've returned to your home in the world.

## Night Roads, Long Exposure

*for Maeve*

Pull back the camera, the tripod,  
the body from the freight train's path.

Foothills winter in condensation  
rising from trickling rocks. A general  
store in the woods, the husk of a world  
today's ventures won't fill. Churches,  
farmhouses conceded atop hills are painted  
time and again to adorn retirement homes.  
Here a residential school left ablaze,  
a village named for old barns abandoned  
when redcoats came, somehow standing  
decades before joining the common litany.

*the folly cut**o lord, antecedent**shubenacadie**same*

Here are cabins left behind, photo albums intact,  
an airstrip's guardian the lonely chain slack  
across broken concrete, an old highway's *rimae*—  
and over rime-crusting roads, you  
with camera, plastic bags in shoes, the night being yours,  
frame forms to endure the negatives.

*kemptown**debert**still*

## Closed Space 1988

An early dream or memory—  
the end of the sci-fi horror show,  
on the big tv-as-furniture *Zenith*,  
past bedtime at a relative's house.  
An old man, wild white hair  
inventor and/or victim  
is tricked into his glass coffin  
by a rogue computer, or jealous brother.  
A needle (poison? embalming fluid?) jabs him.  
The actor emotes pain and howling-terror.  
I watch as open palms strike the lid.  
The glass box starts rolling on its own  
(the camera inside pointed  
at the ceiling and chandeliers).  
Classical music bombasts.  
Oak doors heave wide. The coffin leaves  
what's revealed to be a mansion in the woods,  
rollsing itself into a fresh grave  
under bared-slick trees in the rain.  
A little metal shovel periscopes up  
and starts to fill in the hole.  
Crescendo. Fade out. Credits.

Distance, Love, Sum

*for Anne*

In measure of the hours  
 we keep, the world  
 to which we belong  
 being how it is seen,  
 there are tracts and versts yet  
     to travel. We see  
     the materials as they are now,  
     not without a story but total,  
 a hole in the page, in the letter  
 adrift among stones and firs  
 on the lonely-line approach to northern towns,  
     in a lone onion dome marring the line  
     between snow and grey sky, the green signs  
     that point to dirt roads, shout Icelandic  
     patronymics. Ignore this strength that did nothing,  
     forgive the pulsing clusters of subdivision  
     that creep as farms first crept, which we cross  
     and are perforated by, shot thru with joy.  
 The little ruts too, marked with orange  
 warnings that precede the rumble of gravel,  
     are more in the groove  
     of the grandfathered-in hut  
     on the back quarter that peaks round  
     the manse, that drinks trunk  
     highway. There are men  
 wearing skull masks, who don't see  
 the ends of their thirst and grant nothing. Again  
     you and I know the ache that flares  
     with distance, measure time  
     by that meter— in the ringing  
     industrial park, the engines  
 skittering thru skies and over roads,  
 the heat and frosted eyelids. Learn  
 this distance in the zones we cross  
 and reset clocks for, and see therein how  
 we must number and budget a love  
 before the little lights re-emerge for us.

## Common Coin

*for Cam Scott*

my hands  
hair  
cruelty  
buses  
shoes  
phones  
chairs  
stones  
meat  
garbage bags  
discomfort  
pigeons  
stares  
houses  
floors  
pennies (fewer now)  
warmth  
parked cars  
junk mail  
spam  
“thank you”  
“sorry”  
“excuse me”  
sleeves  
elm trees  
squirrels  
bladder pressure (not too much)  
Youtube comments  
looking away  
eyelid tics  
intestinal pains  
the last two months of summer  
bananas  
thirst  
words from Latin  
words from Greek  
depression  
violent death (in media)  
fear

bread  
bad news  
tears  
touch  
touchability  
airplanes  
helicopters  
climate change  
climate change denial  
numbness  
the sun  
the moon  
chain-link fences  
'bad neighbourhoods'  
avoiding crowded public spaces  
laughter  
salt packets  
coffee  
churches  
recordings of bells  
conversations on the bus  
legs falling asleep  
my breath  
your pulse  
sports highlights in bars  
CIA black sites  
secret prisons  
federal prisons  
Van Gogh prints in apartment hallways  
absentee landlords  
profanity  
cameras on buses  
traffic signs  
indoor plumbing  
my cavities  
abandoned warehouses  
old, repurposed Tim Hortons buildings  
canker sores  
nuclear war (at 4 a.m.)  
mass extinction  
travel mugs  
biting my lips  
(water bottles, too)

comma splice  
Manitoban accents  
split infinitives  
plants (indoors)  
the federal conservative party (these days, ha-ha)  
sleeping in movie theatres  
*son et lumière*  
gardening gloves  
Californian wildfires  
Australian wildfires  
Canadian wildfires  
dog leashes  
glass sitting on a nightstand, one-third filled with water  
blinking  
Quaker Oats  
radiators  
the 'Dean Scream'  
"love you too"  
ritual  
my political stances from one, two, five years ago  
reactionary ideas about the decline of Western civilization  
'money trouble'  
toques (in summer)  
toques (worn inside) in winter  
a pencil behind the ear  
the smell of mulch  
window sills  
parallax  
doorsteps  
pulling my hair out  
coffee stains on walls adjacent to trashcans  
residual light on the inside of my eyelids

## Paris Syndrome in New York

Poem: to be determined.  
 Poem: an archaeology of tomorrow.  
 Poem: it is sundown in America.  
 Poem: will I be as surprised  
 to be alive in a year as I was at thirty?  
 at fifty? 100? Poem: will I live  
 to forget this year's snows, should they come?  
 Poem: a clearing, morning mist,  
 a dark green forest, a JPEG  
 of a guard tower, glitched by artifacts. Poem: the last  
 leaves are falling, poem, the adults aren't  
 around to tidy them up. Poem:  
 some Canadian bohunk at the heart  
 of empire and world culture  
 for the first time. Poem: roadrunner in Manhattan,  
 achieving escape velocity only  
 if he doesn't look down or back  
 (the coyote is Eurydice or maybe us.)  
 Poem: the museums keep us out and history in,  
 in theory. Poem: inconceivable vs unelectable  
 so obviously the former wins—  
 it's not a conceivability contest. Poem:  
 the future of [declarative verse] is that it has none.  
 Poem: I'm trying to be discrete but failing.  
 Poem: language has its own evil  
 intelligence. Poem like a ninety-percent  
 unoccupied condo tower. Poem: *sans papiers*  
 disappeared at Union Street Station. Poem, are we just  
 your plague rats? Poem, I'm sick  
 of listening to my own voice, go fuck  
 yourself and your atom bomb.  
 Poem, will you remember  
 my birthday when I'm decrepit?  
 I'm writing you now, Poem, and reading you out  
 in a walk-up mansard in Stuyvesant,  
 to hear and make you over the A.C.  
 in a friend of a friend's garret  
 near the former armoury's turrets.  
 Poem, it's well past midnight.  
 Poem, tonight Jordan Scott gave a talk  
 about Guantanamo Bay and played a tape  
 of an army medic glibly describing 'enteral' feeding.  
 Poem, a young Bobby Dylan has failed  
 us and we have failed ourselves.



Poem, the world has us  
where it wants us. Poem, I'm overcome  
by a want for new needs. Poem, I don't even  
like milk or molly. Poem, can I ask  
if a cartography of nightfall is the best  
you and I can manage? Poem, I wish  
you were about reading Catullus at the Starbucks  
inside Trump Tower. Poem, I have only myself to blame.  
Poem, lead us back to the dialect  
of nuclear anxiety. Poem,  
I remember reading *I Remember*  
by Joe Brainard in Battery Park a couple nights ago.  
For me, poem, please stick a pin in the future,  
be for Catalonia again and for play as play,  
stop pretending to be just an engineer of the human soul.  
Poem, resuscitate Phil Ochs and stay  
true to the memories of regional truths,  
be an inconvenient something I'd like to catch  
in the Egyptian wing of the Metropolitan Museum.  
Poem, I think I know how this film ends.  
Poem: the call was coming from inside the house.

## On-the-Job Braining

How to be a body for eight hours.  
How to build a better boss. How to accrue.  
How to speak softly on a city bus.  
How to exploit chaos. How to lift a woman.  
How to re-gift the things people give you  
in their moments of despair. How to love  
a peon. How to identify  
as a consumer. How to hear an important  
voice. How to take a biology lesson  
based around a recently-extinct species.  
How to live in fire. How to live on hotdogs.  
How to discourse. How to receive a message  
from the Government of Canada.  
How to monetize human suffering.  
How to win and go on winning.

## Nightsoil

My title as janitor at a ballet school is 'Mister.'  
 This is the propriety of the propertied.  
 A future Nijinsky smiles and winks at me,  
 snaps his fingers, points to what's his, what's mine.

Other bodies make mine an amalgam of horrors.  
 The scrapings sluice into the trap.  
 I eat my midday snack in the stench and vapours.

I scrub out stains for a modest fee.  
 An ideal *Europa* on the Canadian prairie,  
 the pickup-truck bourgeoisie pull up at the shores of Tripoli.  
 From the passenger's seat, Marinetti calls, "*Forza Italia!*"

His big-wheel hemi disgorges a trophy family.  
 Pursuit of beauty is the goal, but the effect is of denial.  
 To transubstantiate one hunger for another

is a matter of power projection. It is a matter of matter,  
 to dance up into pure aether until your leavings splatter.  
 It's a matter of rejecting what you can't bear to be.

Ballet school on a Saturday is the fall of white Saigon.  
 Every day is like Sunday. Every night is *bunga-bunga*.  
 Call what's left behind nightsoil. Call me Mister Joel.  
 Please think kindly of me when I'm gone.

Downtown after Dessert

I've taken the bins to the dumpster  
and I'm wasting time, musing around  
outside the range of the cameras  
the boss might see me goldbricking on.

I'm reading an op-ed on *The Guardian*  
about "sweat-shaming" and a jogger  
who'd been asked to leave a stateside Starbucks  
because of their smell.

Rancid coffee  
covers my shoes: the bins and dumpsters leak.

Across the street, in front of Starbucks, the man  
screaming about how he has no money  
is screaming to himself, of course:  
what the passersby pay him is no mind.  
The pigeons coo, too, but not so much as before  
the falcon eyries were installed all around the downtown.

*There are so many good-hearted people  
in the world,*  
so many bosses, birds of prey,  
Starbucks, cameras, dumpsters.

## Spring Without End

Dancing is of no small importance viewed from a hygienic standpoint.<sup>2</sup> Very few persons possess entirely straight legs.<sup>3</sup> Arms even an inch too long will destroy the balance and relation of one part of the body to another.<sup>4</sup> I ate a lot and therefore feel death.<sup>5</sup> Where there is dirt there is system.<sup>6</sup> Fine bodies were in evil plight.<sup>7</sup> All these defects, mortifying for those who have contracted them, cannot be remedied except in their early stages.<sup>8</sup> The development of grace should be the principal aim of instruction.<sup>9</sup> In the correct use of the body, which makes possible a correct use of time, nothing must remain idle or useless.<sup>10</sup> Unless body and spirit come together, the principle will have nothing to do with them.<sup>11</sup> They must thrill to the strength of lithe muscles responding to the bite of their shoes in the resin.<sup>12</sup> Drawn higher and higher, more unstable, closer and closer to the sun's effulgence.<sup>13</sup> Both feet are off the floor.<sup>14</sup> The best thing to do when you're in this world, don't you agree, is to get out of it.<sup>15</sup> Music with feeling is God.<sup>16</sup> I'll have faith in God only if he dances.<sup>17</sup> On landing I was more impressed and enthusiastic than I had ever been before.<sup>18</sup> Corpses lie all around, but how did they get there?<sup>19</sup> I do not eat meat, but today God wanted me to eat it.<sup>20</sup> The Spirit is clean.<sup>21</sup> The aristocrats and the rich people begged me to dance again.<sup>22</sup> I would whisper in their ears: *non olet*. It doesn't smell.<sup>23</sup> Soldiers, secretaries, orderlies, menial staff, and other bunker dwellers began to frolic.<sup>24</sup> The faithful butler kneels beside his master, tries his pulse, listens to his heart, then with a serious expression indicates that all is over.<sup>25</sup> They have slipped away, like water down the drain,

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- <sup>2</sup> Friedrich Albert Zorn, *Grammar of the Art of Dancing*  
<sup>3</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>4</sup> Cyril Swinson, *The Teach Yourself Guidebook to Ballet*  
<sup>5</sup> *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*  
<sup>6</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*  
<sup>7</sup> Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*  
<sup>8</sup> Jean Georges Noverre, *Letters on dancing and ballets, Letter XI*  
<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Albert Zorn, *Grammar of the Art of Dancing*  
<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*  
<sup>11</sup> Yukio Mishima, *Sun and Steel*  
<sup>12</sup> E. Kelland-Spinoza, *Male Dancing*  
<sup>13</sup> Yukio Mishima, *Icarus*  
<sup>14</sup> Margaret Fonteyn, *A Dancer's World*  
<sup>15</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline – *Journey to the End of the Night*  
<sup>16</sup> *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*  
<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*  
<sup>18</sup> Adolf Galland, *The First and the Last: The Rise and Fall of the German Fighter Forces, 1938-1945*  
<sup>19</sup> Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies Volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*  
<sup>20</sup> *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*  
<sup>21</sup> Laibach, 'The Whistleblowers'  
<sup>22</sup> *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*  
<sup>23</sup> Roberto Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives*  
<sup>24</sup> Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*  
<sup>25</sup> Cyril Beaumont, *Ballets of Today*

with never so much as a gurgle of protest.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>

Ann Barzel, *Ballets Down the Drain*

## The Lonely Numerous

The world is having a fire sale.  
All banknotes and first-person singulars must go!  
The Last Men (sic) keep traipsing  
off the roofs of the earth's mighty condominiums.  
We line our pockets with them as they fall.

We work as day-janitors in a ministry  
at the heart of the continent.  
We comb the grit from its chambers.  
We kiss the organs of state goodnight.  
We coo to ourselves  
about what an excellent job we've gone and done.

By backshift we clean social housing  
high-rises like cardboard boxes  
with air holes punched out, producing  
the dead at a well-measured clip.  
We keep our heads down all night,  
mop the excess from the floors and walls.

Creaking specialists have words sharpened  
for when they hold court in their lost cafeterias.  
The ~~foree~~ service has its one good cop  
who shakes his head while he delivers the script  
for another body bag being wheeled out.  
"This is a disaster," he repeats to no one.

We want to crossbreed our neuroses with the rest  
among the stacks of folding chairs, the smell  
of chemical hibiscus, the breeze on our necks  
as the doors we pass through  
gently close and lock behind us.  
But nothing seems familiar anymore.  
We are lost, and we are all alone.

## Tower Block Cleaner

*Naming these things  
is the love-act  
and its pledge.*

/

*Patrick Kavanagh*

i'm here,  
janitor inside the cardboard  
box where problems  
are placed. here, where  
the leavings of money,  
colonization, tragedies  
of the commons meet  
management systems  
wielded, with good  
intention, by specialists,  
experts, technocrats. here  
where blood and piss  
nevertheless accumulate  
and the security man itches  
for an excuse, laughs at the old  
drunks with their pants falling  
down. here with the flickering  
fluorescent lights under  
which an industrious nana  
daily cleans her floor's  
hallway, in a tower block  
otherwise clogged by garbage  
bags, pizza boxes, adult  
diapers, sherry bottles  
old newspapers, and so on.

here, where the do-goodery splats onto concrete,  
a narrow  
stream  
of words  
trickles,  
leads  
down  
towards  
the hole  
where they  
accumulate  
in a puddle  
to speak  
about cast-



off people  
and things.

everything tumbles out onto the basement's trash heap, next to the overflowing dumpsters, inconvenient, constricted, obscured as the inhabitants' lives. the chute is usually filled up to the seventh floor by mid-week. facilities department always has fresh staff shuffling in, new temps and supers but never in force. our labour isn't enough to make this a home, just a hold. and that's the point.

## Creatures of the Field

Out of place on a Christmas VHS—  
a cartoon version of *The Velveteen Rabbit*.  
Even at three I wasn't falling for the ending  
that the death by fire was no death, no fire  
just a magical change, the rabbit becomes real  
breaks itself away from the rosy child's bedroom  
to live in the forest, watercoloured and wild.

This returns to me in adulthood, a townie  
picking fruit for a summer in someone else's paradise.  
There's a fire on the other side of the mountain  
and the drone of waterbombers overhead  
but these cherries won't pick or sort themselves.  
I'm daily in a grove with a smiling-dumb golden retriever  
who one morning digs a hole by my ladder  
that forces me to the ground. I watch  
as she uncovers the burrow, the blindness upon blindness  
of the baby moles, each like the nubbin of a child's thumb.  
They go their jagged way past a vacancy  
that is no smile, just the weapons that mark  
a mouth among holes that nothing returns from.

### Moon Poem for Coleridge

There're kids bouncing around on the bus,  
somehow, though it's well past midnight.  
That's okay. You have headphones on  
and white noise looping. Across the aisle  
a couple argues, the boyfriend leaning in  
like he's her manager and she's screwed up  
some rich lady's order. He's going to cut  
her hours next week for it. She won't make rent.

You aren't Superman. You look up at what  
is visible of the moon. Some Yanks went there  
once, drove around, came home  
with moon rocks in their pockets. It follows  
that nobody has ever died there. Dead quiet.  
*Sea of Tranquility*. Dust commands the sphere.

You picture yourself aged ninety-nine  
bivouacked on the cusp of lunar orbital bone.  
Your breath stops. You float up, keeping watch  
over your body, the first corpse on the moon.

Something yet Deserves to Live

He gauges how far the train that followed  
his dragged the woman along the platform  
last week with a sweep of his arms, Moses  
parting the kitchen table's plates and empties.

Committee-vetted language upholds  
the distance a transit worker needs to dodge  
a breakdown. An Incident. An Emotionally Disturbed Person.  
A fated statistic for him, this

his tenth year as an operator.  
When I talk some bad-taste bullshit about it  
he's quick to stop me. He did feel compassion  
for her. What he resents is the eye contact

she made with him before her half-jump,  
before some indwelling counter-force pulled  
her back to safety a little while longer,  
like God's own rag doll. Eye contact like that

of miserable thousands he sees every day  
from the train's cab. In a town where all look down,  
passing eyes are dared only underground.  
Our talk branches back to the village of our births,

the land he and his wife plan to buy there.  
I start clearing dishes when he goes to check  
on their daughter, asleep in her crib.  
Jack Spicer was wrong. Something yet deserves to live.

Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, New Year's Morning

jesus-fucking hell of a time  
 to place and brace myself  
 a pedestrian hours before sunrise  
 done with backshift  
 answering calls for - the veterinary after-hours line  
 - hungover bus drivers taking sick days early  
 - lonely texan shut-ins with crossed wires  
 somnambuling home down second avenue  
 Whitehorse an unstruck bell in hoarfrost depths  
 towards the bridge and paddleboat  
 and it dawns on me there's been this coyote  
 trotting along with me for a while  
 down in the park by the waterfront  
 and i ought to be cautious  
 but it's been months since i've seen the sun  
 so i keep walking                      thinking the usual  
 about friends and exes down south  
     and i couldn't yell or say hello anyway  
     with a tongue gone slack  
     from lack of real live conversationalists  
     just - the libertarian scotsman on dayshift  
     who wants me to think  
     he knows what the american civil war was  
     all about - the afrikaner i replace some evenings  
     (a skeleton with cancer in the bones)  
     - the up-all-hours owner  
     one leg shorter than the other  
     from a teenaged injury in the mines  
     drinking health shakes  
     fighting a strategic withdrawal  
     as lou gehrig's quakes him  
     - the woman from mainz  
     he brings by sometimes  
     approaching forty with such a terror  
     you wouldn't believe if i swore it to you  
 all within the furthest dot on the globe  
 from where each started  
 - furthest with daily commercial flights  
 - furthest from what goes unsaid

(to say nothing  
of all those dots that don't make the map)  
    best i can figure i'm just off  
    dead-centre of the coyote's universe  
    it knows where it needs to go  
    breaking from the lines we beat  
up the robert service highway at a jog

## Rush Our Bus

*A man who, beyond the age of 26,  
finds himself on a bus  
can count himself as a failure.*

coming going excruciating  
underfunded overworked  
jerked stop-stop-start  
Thatcher's dead and I'm here  
extimacy's a word I've heard  
Halitosis Hal and B.O. Barry  
tradies immobile in traffic  
pressed chunder-arse to face  
the working world botulism  
tin-crammed passing  
ill-loved mall promenade  
shuttered Russian specialty shop  
cheques cashed Lions Manor  
Assisted Living an unsignalled  
town-car bougie coupe cuts  
a sudden incipient We.

## Cool Universe

This poem will be urbane,  
dressed in fashionable, seasonable clothes  
set in motion

    on a bicycle, legs growing  
swole from all the inclines.

This poem's view will atomize  
the passing frames—

    apartment windows  
    old sheds, snatches of the harbour  
    caught between passing hills.

This poem will be carried on the North  
    Sea-breeze into a birch forest  
thru the natural world's categories  
like precision flicks on an abacus  
to spiral out beyond the local cluster  
    a précis to warm a cold universe.



Ora et Labora

He'd wanted to fly airplanes.

Grown now, his eyes spend the days  
auguring the nicks on his steel-toed boots.

One falls off the rack, lies  
on the floor until morning. He spends his years  
on a dwindling trajectory, a shipping clerk pushing carts  
full of bandages, syringes, x-ray machine parts  
around the county hospital, learning the broken vectors  
of work and prayer, marking obsequious time.

My father's post-work ritual—  
words  
for no one, his fists quivering  
to point groundward, arms six and thirty at 5 p.m.  
every day, a storm inside the master  
bedroom after the door slams, shouting  
at absent bosses and superiors,  
incoherent rage a drafty old house  
is too worn down to mute, half-hour diatribes  
practicing what he should  
and someday surely will say to his tormentors.

Different prayers on Sundays.  
The Devil is adversarial, real,  
keeps us where we don't really deserve to be,  
loots our pockets for change,  
makes it rain every long weekend.  
Devotion to a long dilution. All struggle  
soon to end, a song of heavenly paradise  
bringing joy to hurting hearts—  
for the True Christian, we are told, life begins at death.

Country drives in the blue '82 Pontiac Acadian afterwards.  
Sometimes we idle around the private airfield,  
watching Cessnas circle and land.  
A doctor took us up once, one of the bosses  
he'd cursed. This small-town, *noblesse oblige* gift of flight  
may have shamed him, but I wouldn't have known then,  
four years old and gape-eyeing the patchwork below.

## The Berlin Wall, Again and Again

The world was far from life in our Maritime village,  
four years old while they sang and danced on  
our twenty-two-inch TV. What was it all about?  
I wanted to know about library late fees—  
if a West Berliner borrowed books from the East  
in 1961, would they be in trouble now?

Some local businessman (don't ask which)  
bought chunks of the wall a few years later  
placed them in the shale lot between the dollar store  
and the revivalist hall—  
this was supposed to be a big tourist draw.

More years and wrecking balls, box stores,  
the end of Mom & Pop. English graffiti  
dancing with German on mottled grey  
adjacent to box store parking lots.  
A tanking economy. The end of history?  
The young went west for work anyway.  
The wall fallowed, couldn't follow. It fell instead.

## His Whitetails at the Northern Shore

Forty-odd years selling vehicles for General Motors  
 round central-northern Nova Scotia, down dirt roads that curled  
 into forest hamlets with tiny wooden churches—  
 over Nutby Mountain, the old highway under  
 the Folly Lake rail bridge, thru the Wentworth Valley,  
 Oxford, Springhill, Parrsboro, then home through Economy  
 and Masstown on Saturday's last dime of light.

At retirement: a plaque reading 'Platinum Dealer,'  
 gilt-lipped tumblers, the continent's golden outline  
 on their sides, sixty-five acres and a cabin for hunts  
 amid fallow farms and cottages on the Northumberland.  
 He saw hoofprints and bought.

Years of renos, a satellite dish  
 for weekends with us grandkids, the time  
 until he'd hunt his deer always growing.

How he felt about the quad-tracks,  
 the spent shell cases on his side of the gate?  
 His was the generation that kept the inside in,  
 but the stands went unfinished. Fences grew  
 in thickets, strands, haphazard. Walking his domain,  
 looking for the soft spots in his defenses, his worn  
 fatigues fit like an older brother's  
 hand-me-downs would have (if the Spanish flu hadn't...)

Weekend mornings, we'd join his foglight rangings  
 at the northern shore, checking locks and fences,  
 walking the path along his boundary-stream.

Later, before the estate sale, we came to him  
 in album pages, among sun-bleached, notable absences.  
 He was younger there than we'd thought possible,  
 with beers and bucks on a score of hoods.  
 His familiar smile betrayed nothing.

Hunting with pals til the end, guys he'd sold pickups to,  
 their sons. Never on his land, never his whitetails.  
 Never bagged another deer. Bad luck or old age, perhaps  
 the subconscious deep-down unsteady his hand?  
 We cannot say.

## A Catalogue Mandolin

Sitting at a rail-siding in the Miramachi  
 waiting on the freight  
 schedule's inscrutable will to transport me  
 onwards to Edmundston, Charny, Montreal.

The woods are a tunnel  
 of gold-orange-red with arterial  
 highway overpass for a ceiling.  
 To hold off the dawn's frost I watch

my teen self drive over the bridge  
 to my grandmother's house  
 one last time— a cabin assemblage  
 that reeks of small animals, the smell

filling the gaps left  
 by deep-pocketed homecare workers  
 and late-stage, early-onset dementia.  
 I get out of my folks' minivan and see

myself again in the passenger side mirror  
 six years old, walking alone down the country road  
 standing on the suspension bridge.

I see no salmon

only the rusty bones of a bicycle  
 just below the river's surface, the back wheel  
 still spinning in the current.

I double

back to the ramshackle house,  
 seat myself at a last thanksgiving  
 dinner that goes on too long while  
 Her mask of lucidity dips then slips.  
 I hear the mandolin she ordered

from the Sears catalogue  
 then forgot about a year before  
 she's moved to the rest-home.  
 The mandolin that's handed to me

after dessert, the two chords I know  
papering over the silence of missing years.  
    I haven't played since  
though I carry the instrument with me everywhere.

It waits with me, exposed  
in those childhood woods  
for an engineer to release the airbrake,  
the next leg of the ride westwards to start,

just out of reach as I shiver  
trying to recall every detail I missed then  
the melodies it won't play for me  
everything that's slipped from our hands.

## Bed Leaves Red Fall

North-south, the orchard's  
high-density rows are made stately  
by dawn's late arrival. Hustle

on the cusp of sun, fingers  
kept cold. Late the hour  
a grandmother died in, under other trees,

by train tracks, the Miramachi flowing to the sea  
four hours closer to Greenwich mean.  
Last night, space folded like bin-tags

in a picker's jostling pocket, the promise  
of payment at season's end. Rupture  
led to coma, to a passage— all flitted

by in sequence. And the news is here,  
in the sign of data that buzzes  
in your pocket, among the ladders of the other

farmhands walking sideways, stooped  
to glean the lowest-hanging apples,  
forgotten before in their simplicity.

They resist the frost accrued, cling  
then nourish, but for a time.  
You are finding out in this moment.

## The News

I imagine his head wrapped in bandages  
like Apollinaire, like Kenzaburo Oe  
imagined his infant son's head wrapped  
in bandages in *A Personal Matter*.  
There're crow-caws and his voice

falters, choked-off, alien.

Three years estranged submit to four  
to eight weeks remaining. My mother says  
a deer just walked past the driveway's mouth  
that it's getting cold, that they're heading in now.

## The Eschatongues

God the end arrives tomorrow I've heard again and again.  
 Love and terror and bits of white bread  
 purple robes, Welch's grape juice  
 in clear plastic thimbles. Up and to church  
 on time, or else.  
 What child would want to get smacked around?

God I'm most humble, except for the pride  
 I feel when I accept you, age seven.  
 I'm mature for my age, I'm told by grown-ups,  
 this though is refuted by the snakes in my stomach  
 as I await through the service by the baptismal.

God I keep speaking your name  
 keep telling the kids at school  
 they're going to hell, keep listening  
 as Mom and Dad speak prophecy in their eschatongues  
 to wrong numbers and co-workers who come once  
 for tea, never twice to  
 the oldest house on the floodplain with the portraits  
 brought down from the attic, their glares that follow  
 through the empty rooms of the Victorian two-story.

God I keep calling your name as we're dragged by our purity  
 from one hilltop church to another  
 after a batch of Baptists "let too much of the world in"  
 (let little pointy-hat witches into the church basement  
 Halloween party that wasn't supposed to be a Halloween party).

In between comes a year in the wilderness  
 comes Bible study and church at the kitchen table  
 Sunday mornings, Mom, Dad, me. Home becomes church  
 and we encircle the table with our hands, the purple  
 and yellow tablecloth flowers.

God I keep talking but my fun-sized eschatongue tires  
 sooner than adult talk of flames and damnation  
 sooner too than the baptismal's patient waters  
 so I learn to shut my mouth and look to the ceiling  
 through the little waves, until the preacher pulls me up.



"I saw the father..."

I saw the father  
and the juices flowing from his mouth—  
Cronus eating a good, rare steak.

At age four, after dark  
I talked to God.  
God seemed to answer  
with words, without a voice.  
The stars above our village  
froze in terror too.

██████ came to my home some nights  
to the little writer's club my mother hosted.  
██████ hosted foster children.  
Years later the allegations and jail time.  
██████'s church rallied around him and denied, denied, denied.

I read Nijinsky's sanitarium journals  
the part where God commands him to eat meat.  
I picture Diaghilev on a palanquin  
dying then dead in Venice.  
I picture God's canines.  
I rub my gums.  
I spit blood.

God casts off his cloak.  
God spreads his sheets.  
God picks his teeth.  
It is not yet time for his next meal  
but God lives outside of time.

## Bonafide Masters

I like the poems I ought to like,  
 With a force that feels like destiny. It's what's best  
 for me, I believe. The boss lives upstairs.  
 He commands me to live my best life.

I write what I think you will like,  
 glove expectation's hand.  
 I mind to mine what is mine.  
 This is the day's cant. I can't unwind.

Never could. I deliver a sermon, a shaggy-dog schpiel,  
 to a small Baptist church. I am a child,  
 literally, maybe eight. At six I'd discovered hell.  
 I would have preferred not to. I'd yet to read Pascal.

Rewind and dissect. Switch to infrared.  
 Sunday Best is a synonym for fervour.  
 I do what's required and lead a prayer,  
 would plead for stigmata if Baptists knew what those were.

I do what's required and read this poem to you.  
 Please disregard the previous line.  
 I believe I believe what I say I believe.  
 I believe now that my beliefs are mine.

Vivisect a true believer's mind.  
 Peel back the glove's roasted skin.  
 Kill the child within if it is found alive.  
 The topic of my sermon is love. I am still inside.

## Head in the Clouds

No, they won't tinker  
with his mind any more.  
Faith bestows comfort  
in this, its death-orientation.  
Hands aquiver, his face  
comedy and tragedy,  
glioblastoma.  
It's like bubble wrap  
(in his words) in the hands  
of a five-year-old, the mind.  
On the monitor it was  
a black star, tendrils  
snuffing out functions:  
language, memory,  
the smell of purple,  
heart and lungs.  
I'd like to tell him—  
who is dying a year  
after early retirement—  
anything that comforts,  
so I do, but there there's no  
need. He repeats himself  
about Jesus, who he'll  
get to meet shortly, with primacy  
over departed family.  
All my life I never  
felt like I knew the *real* him.  
Jesus, Jesus, Heavenly Dad,  
Holy Ghost, revealed here, now,  
a tarp in a patchy back lot  
under which little grew.

## Patch Work

Culloden? Could be.  
 Crest: three thistles.  
*Dulcius ex Asperis*—  
 sweeter through difficulties.  
 We were peasants  
 eight generations ago.

Huguenots? Throw  
 in some of those. Race  
 back thru varied points  
 of interest towards

three Orange brothers  
 leaving Ulster in 1788  
 for the Canadas.

A (fore)Father  
 of Confederation-slash-amateur  
 phrenologist is local flavour,  
 so long after the fact.

Quick to suggest  
 a half-Indigenous great-grandmother.  
 Quicker to defend *terra nullius*.

What we like to see  
 in ourselves: kings, heroes,  
 untouchables, all real characters;

magpie genealogists  
 hoarding shiny things  
 from across the water,

gentleman amateurs,  
 selective seers  
 let loose in the archives  
 taking stock of the old stock—

snuffling at roots  
 a forage of fragments  
 from the tree of compound folly.

### The White Horse

Fearing that his memory will go  
before he does, we press on  
in the bedside history lesson, wading  
into familial etymology.  
Here are the words  
learned, earned, returned with  
from him—

### Kilkeel

a fishing town in County  
Down            images in my head  
of fallen, bronze-age hillforts (Gaelic:  
dún) almost-fjords to hold Northern  
Irish commercial fleets—

### Scrap

found in bad neighbourhoods,  
his father charged him  
with a bouquet of them in defense  
of the fat-mouthed younger brother,  
far-born feuds clenched in small hands  
on the sulphur-smelling streets  
of their minor port city, New Brunswick—

### Orange

rhyming with itself, like Saint John  
rhymed with London-  
Derry or Belfast, Fenian with Williamite  
bullet with sacrament—

### Boyne

river of July Twelfth, only  
a name to him, me, so many  
generations on these western shores,  
an idea flowing never the like twice,  
same as “Jordan,” (no, “Scamander”)—

### Grandfather

his, not mine, in his sash those days  
of marching and prideful lineage,  
twice it's said he rode the white horse  
at the head of colonial Orange Order.

Here the first and final story ends, exhausted  
in the telling by what's eating him.  
I see what preceded us both in welcome sepia,  
dashing, primal, terrible,  
and am for once glad we have learned to forget.

## Continental

Montreal, September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

The man is dead and I am here,  
hunched over papers on "A Satyr  
Against Reason" in a windowless room  
a hundred feet  
above the street. Street names the same  
here and there, Battle of Waterloo,  
Duke Wellington, the names of imperial metropolises  
mispronounced differently on each "Dell-  
High" street forming their own sort of distance.

The man is dead and I am here hours  
after we spoke last, my last words  
over the phone being the "I love you" repeated  
between us during his rapid decline  
becoming garbled transmissions  
as if I were by myself, echoing back  
from the opposing cusp of a submerged canyon.

In the streets below today the world  
marched as I was asked to march.  
Greta Thunberg was there, bringing traffic  
to a standstill, here, for a few hours.  
Instead I sit alone marking undergrads  
who sat at their desks with Rochester.  
When I step outside it's to step inside  
a phony Irish pub to sit  
beneath authentic green road signs pointing to Tyrone and Meath.

Word came  
its bled-modern way through the continent's nodes.  
"With dignity," "Without suffering,"  
"Without losing himself."  
On a five-star hotel's wall in green paint  
was the dripping sign of the hourglass, the words  
"today's inaction=tomorrow's dysfunction."  
Today was a dysfunctional one as well,  
spiting all prognoses and timetables.  
The man is dead, and I am here.

## Notes

**After Turner's Stags:** While this poem (obviously) functions as an ephrasis of some of Turner's better-known poems, it also references Lebanese artist Marwan Rechmaoui's installation *Beirut Caoutchouc*, a map made of rubber outlining the streets of Beirut.

**Historical Drama:** Much of this poem's text was taken from the described audio of the T.V. show *Vikings*.

**Aubade of the Oprichniki :**White-on-black text taken from the lyrics to "Dance of the Oprichniks" by Sergei Prokofiev, from the Sergei Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible, Part II*.

**Paris Syndrome in New York:** Some lines of this poem are taken/adapted from "America" by Allen Ginsberg and "The Death of the Shah" by Frederick Seidel. Jordan Scott's project on Camp X-Ray can be accessed at <http://lanternsatguantanamo.ca/>.

**Rush Our Bus:** The epigram at the beginning of the poem has been (apocryphally) attributed to Margaret Thatcher.

Versions of some poems have previously appeared in *Arc Poetry Magazine*, *The Capilano Review*, *The Columbia Review*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Death Flails*, *Dusie*, *EVENT*, *filling Station*, *Grain*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Insight Journal*, *The Malahat Review*, *Meniscus*, *Orbis*, *Prairie Fire*, *Scrivener Creative Review*, *Soliloquies Anthology*, *Southword Journal*, *The Spadina Literary Review*, *The Void*, and *The Winnipeg Free Press*.