

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.

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.

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 Shards¹

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.

¹ 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, mussing 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.² Very few persons possess entirely straight legs.³ Arms even an inch too long will destroy the balance and relation of one part of the body to another.⁴ I ate a lot and therefore feel death.⁵ Where there is dirt there is system.⁶ Fine bodies were in evil plight.⁷ All these defects, mortifying for those who have contracted them, cannot be remedied except in their early stages.⁸ The development of grace should be the principal aim of instruction.⁹ In the correct use of the body, which makes possible a correct use of time, nothing must remain idle or useless.¹⁰ Unless body and spirit come together, the principle will have nothing to do with them.¹¹ They must thrill to the strength of lithe muscles responding to the bite of their shoes in the resin.¹² Drawn higher and higher, more unstable, closer and closer to the sun's effulgence.¹³ Both feet are off the floor.¹⁴ The best thing to do when you're in this world, don't you agree, is to get out of it.¹⁵ Music with feeling is God.¹⁶ I'll have faith in God only if he dances.¹⁷ On landing I was more impressed and enthusiastic than I had ever been before.¹⁸ Corpses lie all around, but how did they get there?¹⁹ I do not eat meat, but today God wanted me to eat it.²⁰ The Spirit is clean.²¹ The aristocrats and the rich people begged me to dance again.²² I would whisper in their ears: *non olet*. It doesn't smell.²³ Soldiers, secretaries, orderlies, menial staff, and other bunker dwellers began to frolic.²⁴ The faithful butler kneels beside his master, tries his pulse, listens to his heart, then with a serious expression indicates that all is over.²⁵ They have slipped away, like water down the drain,

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

with never so much as a gurgle of protest.²⁶

²⁶

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.

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*.