**Domestic Epic**

By Daniel Goodwin

Poems

*For my family, without whom none of this would have been possible.*

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# I

“I am sorry that the conspirators must go

the ones who scared me by showing me

a list of all the members of my family.

I loved the way they reserved judgment

about Genghis Khan. They loved me because

I told them their little beards

made them dead ringers for Lenin.”

- Leonard Cohen, “Disguises”

# THE CAB DRIVER

He’s a serious reader of biography,

has a thick volume on Geronimo

on his dashboard he recommends

as he waves it and weaves deftly

in and out of traffic,

tells me how Geronimo

could run 75 miles in a day,

could outrun the cavalry hunting him down,

at least for a day.

But it’s when he starts in on his last book,

on Genghis Khan, that I sit up straight

in the back seat and pay attention.

He tells me how Genghis invented

the modern world, the welfare state

and the career open to talents, how

anyone could rise to the top in his world,

how that didn’t stop him

from lighting peasants and their children

on fire and using them as human catapults.

How he took umbrage when

the soft men in their walled cities

scoffed at his demands for surrender

and promises of mercy, instead

beheaded his emissaries,

impaled their heads on stakes

high above the turrets,

and Genghis grimly went about his business.

How if he found a moat in his path

would throw enough slaves in, like so many stones,

until their bodies made a causeway

his warriors could march across;

how, for all this cruelty

he was no worse than the Crusaders

or the civilized men on the wrong side of history

as the flying bodies hit the walls

and their Western luck slowly ran out.

# ISAAC

My father was unlike the other fathers. Older

and less humourous. Rationed out his words

like sips of water. Didn’t listen to our music

or play ball hockey with us on the streets.

Locked himself in his study each morning

like a human caterpillar with his film of books

and meditations. But that day, was even less

himself. Woke me up before the alarm clock

rang, and saddled up the mule. Told me

we had a mountain to climb. We left before

my mother was awake. Even at that time the day

was hot iron and I remember being thirsty

and stupid with sleep. But what I remember

most were my father’s eyes, dark like words

on the pages of his books, or sodden as earth

after rain, and how he didn’t glance at me

that morning as we rode. We passed other

gods along the way, with swollen mouths

and bellies that swallowed up the world.

They leered at us and I watched them

curiously and half afraid, but my father went

on as if they were not there, as if the wood

and stone were cheap hallucinations dreamed

up by amateur magicians. I asked him our

purpose for the day and he was silent

for a while. Finally he said “Sacrifice”

and held me in his jogger’s arms both

tighter and farther away. We moved on,

the only sound the mule’s footsteps

and the eternal human buzzing of the flies.

I looked back and didn’t see a lamb or goat.

I feared the effects of Alzheimer’s or drugs

with unpronounceable names. When I called

his bluff he said nothing. Then he leaned

over me and smiled, held my impertinent gaze

for the briefest time and said “God will provide.”

We spoke even less after that. My thoughts

now strayed to nervous breakdowns and mid-life

crises delayed, but he was my father. So I obeyed.

When we reached the mountaintop we stopped.

The sky was wide open like my mother’s arms

at the end of the day. Our village far below

an easy target for a lighting bolt or flood.

(I must confess I wanted to fly like a boy

in someone else’s myth.) When my father gathered

the small pieces of wood and then the big ones

without smiling, like a priest, I expected him

to ask for help. But he declined and let me be a boy.

I kicked the dirt and pulled the grass. Bent the world

of ants and grasshoppers to my untested will like a

god. Even when he asked me to lie down on broken

wood and bound my arms gently with rough twine

I did not second-guess or doubt. Only after

he unsheathed his knife and brought it near

did I begin to wonder. I searched his

dark eyes but they were dead. There was

only the two of us and the voice inside his head.

The sun wandered boldly across the sky like one

of the tribal kings my father lived in fear of.

And he and I began to sweat. He was this close.

\* \* \*

In the end, my father nodded, as if on cue. Bowed

his head and put away the knife. He unbound me,

and a ram conveniently appeared. We rode back

that night without words. Neither of us ever spoke

of this to my mother. For the rest of my days, no

matter where I began or ended, I could never forget

that morning at the top of the world, and the strange

power of my father’s invisible and jealous God.

# THE SNAKE

The snake was young and obviously

unaware of antecedents:

hadn’t read the Bible,

was not familiar with the myths.

When his keeper took down

the Tupperware that was his world

and turned him over

to the grade one class on a field trip

he didn’t know he was supposed to hiss,

tempt us with his sibilant sly poet’s tongue,

or rise up and mesmerize

with his cold empty eyes.

Instead, so as not to offend,

pressed himself down on the warm skin

of the six-year-old who held him,

as if he hoped to disappear, and puked.

“It’s nerves,” his handler said.

“He’s never been out of his container

and is not yet comfortable with people,

not yet at ease in his own skin.”

# GALEN

The time in Rome, when I was young

and making a name for myself

was educational and thrilling –

physician to Marcus Aurelius’ son,

making the rounds of patients and high society –

but the pull of Pergamum

was not something I could resist.

It’s there that I became what I am,

learned at my father’s knee

medicine and philosophy,

the four schools like the four humours

of the mind, that mind and body are

indivisible as our Empire;

took in the teaching of the high priest

at the temple of Asclepius,

watched as great men traveled

to the god of healing, humbled in their misery,

for whatever ailed them ­–

war wounds, fevers, mysterious pains that lingered

for no apparent reason –

the whispers behind the marble pillars,

surgeries like so many hushed prayers,

how even the loudest and most callous

became children.

The troop of gladiators kept by this physician

who fought for the pleasure of the crowd,

spared or not by the crowd’s mercy,

lent their bodies

to a different sort of sculptor,

were stoic in their fear and pain

as the swords and daggers

opened up their bodies to the Roman sun.

I could watch the blood run for hours

onto the white sand, soaking in

the roar of the crowd’s bloodlust,

watch the red blood spurting,

the torn muscles; and afterwards

amidst their quiet groans

my steel tools, as precise as their own

put in the service of Asclepius

to sew up these rents in the order of the world;

how some begged to be free,

the many times I was ready to betray my oath,

an innocent Sisyphus or Penelope

weaving by night what was unraveled in the day.

From them I learned how the blood flows,

to endure and observe the truth

in how flesh reacts to steel,

the meat beneath the skin

and the power of the mind –

how some lived when they shouldn’t have.

And at night, when the sounds

of men grunting and crying receded

before the professional pride in a day’s work,

as I fell asleep I would begin to dream

of the other world – not that of the Christians

who speak softly and with conviction

and slowly suck the lifeblood

of the Empire like a leech –

but of the other world beyond this shadowy one

and the gods who hurt and heal us.

And I would try in my way

to bring our bodies a little closer to that perfection

I knew in Pergamum as a boy.

# EIGHTIES GOURMET

I’m a good man

but if I’d carried it

to extremes in the ’80s

I’d have starved to death.

Enjoyed caviar

from the Caucasus,

a country making

fish eggs of her people.

Drank juice from South Africa,

separating her races

almost as well as she filtered

impurities from her oranges.

Crunched Chilean grapes

between my teeth

that were so sweet

and propped up Pinochet.

Drank the same

Brazilian coffee

death squads downed

before leaving for work.

Peeled bananas

with less skill

than their torturers

could peel a man.

And yet I had

a healthy appetite,

and always slept

well at night.

# NEW WORLD

Europe seems so long ago. So telescoped.

As if nothing ever happened there. Yet I

won battles for my king in foreign landscaped

playgrounds - the battlefields of Europe

are so civilized, I shall miss them - not so long

ago, and today I buy another trophy for my

sovereign with my blood and my men.

This New France that is no longer, this craggy

Quebec, stone built on stone, will learn to hate

the sounds of English. The measured syllables

of Shakespeare will sound like marching soldiers,

and so it goes, victory after defeat after victory

after defeat. The river I followed to my fate

still flows below and it will bear my body

back to England where perfumed lords

and ladies will gaze on Wolfe and smile.

The artists will paint my portrait with my wig

in place, clear eyed and serene, and it will hang

in pretty, peaceful palaces, continents removed

from cannon’s counterpoint and boys screaming

for their mothers because their bright uniforms

are ripped and their bodies are turning inside out.

The smoke clears and I can see plainly now

I am dying in an old, old world we flatter

ourselves by calling new, the same old story

happening all over again. The great distances

are shrinking, the plains are falling into the river,

and Europe is right here with me, an infection

in my wounds and dirt and pain that never heals.

# 

**THE FATHER EXPLAINS THE**

**CHESS PIECES TO HIS YOUNG SON**

Even though he’s often overlooked

with his small stature and round head,

with his strange way of taking a life,

the pawn is the hero of the chessboard.

The pawn stares ahead and is not afraid of death.

He’s the most willing to sacrifice himself for the greater good.

He fights for the man beside him and for his Queen,

whom he worships without doubt.

The pawn doesn’t look far in front, but he can dream.

He gives us all hope we can make it safely

to the other side, become more than we are.

The turret is strong and steadfast

with his wide shoulders and square

jaw; played football in college, went

on to success in business and law.

The turret works out regularly

and prefers double-breasted suits;

speaks slowly, calmly, and never blinks.

He sees his life as a series of straight-ahead

moves, as an exercise in drive and will.

The bishop is modest and slim.

Serious, seldom seen to smile,

moves slantwise in a gridiron world.

He stands beside his King or Queen

and whispers wisely in their ear.

But he can only ever travel half the board

and that restricts his worldview.

The knights are the wild men of the chessboard.

They are the only ones who leap for joy

and turn in mid air; they are

the drinking buddies of the turrets.

They are happiest in a pair.

But their wildness has a price.

They love nothing more than to surprise

and brutalize their enemies.

The Queen is absolute power in a square

and when she wields it well she is reserved,

doesn’t try at once to be everywhere.

She gives power to her subjects

in order to wield it more.

She is loyal to a fault to her King

and brings her trophies back to him.

When she’s not fighting near the front

she’s quietly at home managing the royal house

and royal ego; playing the dutiful wife.

The King? Well, he’s the King,

and though he’s hobbled by his role,

keeps his focus and stays grounded

as he moves slowly and not far.

Knows his limitations and his gifts.

Best serves the cause by staying alive

and remaining on the right side of his Queen.

He’s at his best when delegating to his team.

# RECONSTRUCTING KING TUT

They never told you, did they,

that the afterlife would look like this,

with bright lights rivaling the brilliance

of your beloved, slow-moving sun.

They never hinted that

the safety of your sarcophagus,

with all its golden weight and beauty,

might not protect you

from the prying hands of our high priests

with their sacred cat scans and PhDs.

They never prepared you

for the sight of your soft features

plastered all over our modern papyrus

and your kohl-ringed eyes

staring out calmly

on a world without patience

for kings or pharaohs or anything

silent with its mystery.

Most of all, they never let on

that living forever would be so

uncomfortable, so permanent,

so like an exile with no return.

# THE BOLIVIAN NAVY

Like the ostrich or some other flightless bird

flapping its wings, or the Jamaican bobsled team,

like a mythologically incapacitated Odysseus

dunked in captivating island estrogen, hankering

after the comforts and challenges of home,

the Bolivian Navy maneuvers high above

the world, on Lake Titicaca, with its smattering

of boats, the highest navigable lake in the world,

the only armada on earth devoted to defense

of lakes and streams. Every year it longs

for the Pacific, keeps the dream shipshape

and free of barnacles of self-doubt. The Bolivian

Navy has been dreaming this way since 1879,

like novice soldiers aching for the battlefield’s

expanse and glory. Every year, religiously

on El Dia del Mar, they petition proudly

for the Chileans to return war’s spoils – the strip

of land that bridged them from mountains to sea –

and do the right thing. For this day sailors

drill and dream, and portage the national pride,

fragile as a man’s ego, like the hull of a ship,

sheet metal stretched over a frame. They train

for when they will once again have access

to the endless dark, to the living murderous sea.

Five thousand sailors dream together, moving

mountains in their minds through sheer willpower

to the coast. To tide themselves over they chase

smugglers, train with sympathetic demagogues

with ocean to spare, protest vigorously when FIFA

ponders bans on soccer at high altitude, prove

athleticism’s no pushover in the face of thin air,

their dreams bright as their white uniforms, the surf

of pomp and parade yard, their serious president’s  
watery unwavering praetorian guard.

# ON REREADING HOMER WHILE AT UNIVERSITY

Homer, to tell the truth,

though admittedly I once was,

I’m not really all that impressed

anymore, by all that macho posturing

going on in your book: you know,

all those spears and arrows

entering behind the jaw below the right ear,

and leaving through the left eyeball,

(or was it just above the right nipple

of some well-proportioned chest

that might have served a sculptor

as a model if only some god,

hadn’t guided that arrow or spear

right to its tanned anointed target

that it pierced, shattering

the lung and shoulder blade,

the muscles of the back

on passing through)

of some peerless or fearless hero or other

with impeccable credentials,

from Xanthis or Cytoris

(any old mythological island will do)

and some good bloodlines,

so that our big brawny boy

goes crashing into the dust

biting it for good measure

or poetic special effects,

all that manhood going

so recklessly to waste

on the Trojan cornfields,

their blood baptizing

the already innocent earth

and the sun falling out

of the Anatolian sky

and the inevitable weeping going on

back home in some decorated palace

with blue bulls and virgins

and geometric designs

and as for your gods, Homer,

come on: what a collection

of lightweights, yahoos,

drunken frat boys cheering on

their favourite gladiators

whose main talents, (let’s admit

man to man here)

are for maiming and destruction and death.

I mean, in the final analysis, what’s so neat

about breastplates and greaves

though they be hammered out by gods

or sturdy shields or

sharp well-formed spears

with shafts of steely wood

and fancy swordplay on sun-flecked fields?

The game’s fixed anyway; it’s all about

securing the biggest sponsor up in heaven

or having your nymph of a mother

call in favours from Zeus or god knows who

and all for what?

To recover some woman

hatched from a swan’s egg, of all things,

who, Graves informs us,

loved hunting and wrestling

and who ran off with that

Trojan pretty-boy cum shepherd.

Poor misguided boys

trapped in the ideology

of the golden age,

victims of Attic patriarchy

and Aegean jingoism,

pouring out your lives

on a foreign beach

(Monday Night Football for the gods),

all your love going to seed:

poor Achilles, poor Patroclus.

Ten long bloody-metred years

full of greatness and poetry,

full of hacking limb from limb

to bully and batter and burn brazen Ilium.

Such fun. Such fun.

# ICARUS

Icarus, you are always there,

frozen in our minds in free-fall

for the sport of us poets

who are compelled to wring,

like second-rate magicians,

meaning out of the thinnest air.

You are always there with your trite

moral and wax wings for us

to trip over in our lemming rush

to frame your mythical fumble.

Each night we see you

in our nightmares, the bright flash

going off just as your wings

melt away from your slender back

and you begin your long slow tumble,

the cinematic cart-wheeling

of a stunt double. The water

and your father’s screams

are coming up quickly,

and no architectural masterpiece

or sculptural invention,

no end of cunning making can compare

to the art of a son falling through air.

# LEPIDOPTERIST

I long to hold you

with my inarticulate love

my porous butterfly net of poems.

I want to trace

the filigree

of your frangible wings.

At night I worry

I bring you death

in my oversized hands.

ROMEO AND JULIET GROW OLD

Thank God the friar messaged me on time.

Then blink and half my life is done.

Our half century sum - seven children

living; your dyed auburn hair sliding

by a slightly wrinkled neck; my spreading

gut and balding pate; domestic spats

spurred by Mercutio’s raunchy wit

or palace renos running over budget –

haven’t slowed my heartbeat at your sight.

Each night is the night - dark torch-lit

palazzo, blood-pumping lutes - we first met:

when we dropped our masks, my Juliet.

**POET’S FANTASY**

I wish I had been born a novelist

and had the literary stamina

of the long distance runner,

to be able to run for miles in the desert

in my bare feet like those champions out of Ethiopia,

and I could get up every morning before going to work

before eating breakfast, before going to the bathroom

to work for two hours, or just even one,

maybe just write two pages a day.

I could finish in six months if I wanted,

some three hundred odd pages,

good, steady, forward movement, picking up each day

where I left off the day before no matter what my mood,

no matter whether I felt like writing or not.

The inexorable forward progress

would be motivating to myself and friends alike,

like a rigorous exercise regime

or diet with visible results

after months of grim, monk-like determination.

And I would write an award-winning book

that would be published to popular and critical acclaim,

a book that people would read and buy.

My book would be on Oprah,

or at least among Heather’s Picks, and I could walk into Chapters

where my thick, hardcover book would be proudly displayed

in a prominent place.

My book would be discussed in book clubs,

its themes and characters and plot

dissected in serious, even reverent tones,

as the layers of meaning were slowly stripped away

like an onion, bringing tears to everyone’s eyes.

My book would be positively reviewed

in *The Globe and Mail* and win major awards

like the Scotia Bank Giller or the Man Booker.

My book would stay in hardcover for months

but would eventually be released

in trade paperback, and just when

sales were softening

the big news would be

the movie rights had been sold to a quality studio

for a ridiculous sum, and the kind of director

who knows how to adapt highbrow literature -

resurrecting Anthony Minghella - had signed on,

and to top it all off I’d autograph copies for my mother.

# CATULLUS IN A MARTIAL MOMENT

Caesar has his legions

to move this way and that,

to cross the Rubicon or not,

to live and die at his imperious word.

For this Caesar shall be remembered

when he is gone.

But my army is greater in number,

and of infinite formation.

I tell them when to come and when to go.

They march to a cadence of my choosing,

across the page like a wave of soldier ants

and set up camp in the country of a foreign mind.

When all of Caesar’s soldiers have fallen

and lie mingled with the marble ruins of his desires,

or are pensioned off to farms of forgetfulness,

when his colonies have rebelled or been conquered

by barbarians whose time has come

and no more tribute is forthcoming,

my soldiers will still be winning over

a different people in a world

I cannot even begin to imagine.

# SIMILES FOR POETS

Like a Vestal Virgin who keeps breaking

her vows and getting buried alive.

Like a deaf mute signing

in the world of the blind.

Like a stand-up comedian providing

his own simultaneous translation.

Like a boat person at the mercy

of his craft and bureaucrats.

Like a panther in a cage.

Like a monk in Times Square.

Like the last person on the planet

to speak a dialect.

Like a drunk at last call.

Like a dyslexic member of MENSA

writing a seventeen-page suicide note

with the aid of a thesaurus.

Like Noah in the final days

before the flood.

Like a well-read cannibal

invited to supper club.

Like Cerberus chasing his tail.

Like a leper falling in love.

Like someone studying

anatomy before having sex.

Like a ballerina with a broken toe.

Like an augur the night before the battle,

the entrails still steaming,

the prediction still to come.

# CRAFT

I tend to my crazy aunt

living in the attic.

Quietly, unobtrusively,

I climb the stairs to bring her

food and water.

I spend time with her

between meals

or when nothing else

is going on.

Half an hour here,

twenty minutes there.

I don’t go every day.

When I go I don’t tell anyone.

I regret the time I steal

from my wife and children.

I dream of the day

when my aunt combs her knotted hair,

wears her well-wrought clothes,

speaks in complete sentences,

and I can take her with me

into the living room

and introduce her to the visitors

whom she will charm

with stories of her life.

On that day I will take her

for long walks in crowded streets

and will talk about her

to anyone who asks.

Until that day,

I climb the stairs quietly.

# BLANK CEILING

The popes who pay the bills

are both a blessing and a curse:

I would be much happier

quarrying at will and imbibing

secrets from cadavers

without commission

than brandishing a brush.

A man with hypochondria

and various unimagined ailments

should not spend his middle age

supine on a rickety scaffold

painting upside down on plaster,

but good help is hard to find.

As I lie here on my back,

staring at the blank ceiling

slowly filling in with colour

like a basin filling up with blood

I find myself thinking it’s too easy

to end up on the wrong side of a prince,

and of the wars that pay for art.

The worst is I’m an impostor.

I’m a sculptor, not a painter.

Painting is a sacrilegious pastime,

a pale imitation of the divine.

Sculpture is of this world:

tactile, human, reveals

what is already here but hidden.

With painting I begin with nothing,

a white darkness that must be overwritten

with a million blasphemous creations.

Each day I struggle to raise myself

to this claustrophobia high above the floor

and imagine a world completely into being

beyond this blank ceiling.

(It is a different sort of seeing.)

Every morning, as I climb the rungs

and prepare myself to labour all day,

I imagine my soul is empty like the blank ceiling.

If I’m not careful, I’ll miss God about

to touch Adam and breathe life into Creation.

In His mind, he’s already painted the Garden of Eden

and in a tiny corner of the canvas

penciled in a small, harmless looking snake.

**WALKING IN MANHATTAN**

Sometimes you only see the sun

reflected in the steel and glass

buildings tall like canyon walls

the people flowing around you

like a flesh and blood river

twisting slippery shoulders

to avoid the human boulders

and you feeling like a salmon

out of water trying to spawn

against instinct and a million years

of evolution. There are no children

or old people on these streets.

The stores stare down at you

like the haughty pages in a fashion magazine,

but every few blocks you are taken aback

by a stone church, squatting and serene

in the shadows of skyscrapers, like a plainer

sister among her supermodel siblings.

The churches are dark and stolid

in their audit of time, the ebb and flow

of intellect and empire, the cubicles of men

shouting into phones and trading their derivatives,

the neon flash, the material energy

that sparks its own electricity.

Up ahead I hear a pounding unusual sounding

and think it’s rhythmic construction.

When I am close enough to see,

I see a man crouched on a pail.

He’s carving out a drumbeat.

Wooden blocks on tin buckets.

Hands a blur. Has eyes only

for the surfaces he’s bringing together.

Ears only for the music he’s making.

The buildings, crowds, and cars

flying by like the personal spaceships

in a science fiction movie disappear.

I can hear nothing but the

beautiful sound of wood on tin.

Soon a crowd gathers, pulled from the stream.

Like fish they are gasping for air.

He keeps drumming, head down,

oblivious to the pleasure he’s creating

and to the coins falling like raindrops at his feet.

# II

“How to dominate reality? Love is one way;

Imagination another. Sit here

beside me, sweet; take my hard hand in yours.

We’ll mark the butterflies disappearing over the hedge

with tiny wristwatches on their wings:

our fingers touching the earth, like two Buddhas.

- Irving Layton, “The Fertile Muck”

# 

# SUMMER OF LOVE

The summer you worked in the slaughterhouse

in the East End was paradise. The pregnant

refugee from Bosnia who didn’t know the English

words for the carcasses she managed

around her belly, or the Portuguese foreman

who held up the stumps of his missing fingers

like Victoria Crosses. You were the only one

who spoke English or French, forty years

removed from your grandparents

taking the ship to Canada, old world valises

packed with hardy dreams and a slim vocabulary.

The men dismembered the world with cleavers

and the women reassembled the exploded universe

in bits of plastic. Baptized the body parts

in boiling water, the rebirth as meat.

In the evening we dissected Frankenstein

and debated Percy Shelley’s editing

like two innocent MA students.

(Knowing nothing, I even wrote you poems.)

We never slept that hot Montreal summer,

as you touched my breathing body softly

with your still-attached fingers

and told me stories of your day.

I was young and didn’t know

you took that job to stay with me.

# EVENING SONG

At dusk, when the sky and the river

turn gray as a dove’s back

and the green hills tumble

past the dark trees standing like giants,

the earth is full and silently

rocking itself to sleep.

I want to melt together into the moist air

or lie down on the moss with you,

like the two stone lovers

on the Roman sarcophagus

we saw in a book once,

but warm and gently breathing

in the soft belly of the night.

**THE MOLE**

Let us first examine my moles.

On my belly and back,

in between the scars of the removed.

The dark and splotchy, irregular

revolver chambers, or the loiterers,

suspicious persons casing the joint.

The reappeared, like determined

dandelions bursting through scar tissue.

Let us go slowly and examine

the bumpy one behind my ear

that catches always on my barber’s

comb. The clusters on my neck.

The constellations of my chest.

The ones to watch out for

just change one day, like politicians

crossing the floor.

Then let us leave this careful

study, you who love skin

so much. Let us forget

this death we are all born with,

that grows inside us

like a mole

until it has blotted out

everything else, and make love.

# MY PENGUIN WIFE

My wife feels like Homer

Simpson, but like a graceful

penguin, she walks carefully,

on ice. Balancing her slender

body, she adapts her lovely gait

to buttress her swelling belly’s

counterweight. Nuzzling her face,

I hold her in my flightless arms,

my husband penguin’s mute

embrace, wanting to protect her

in my imperfect masculine way

from nature and from pain.

But that’s too simple

for my penguin wife, as we

stay together and huddle.

She quietly laughs at me as she

endures, and freezes my gaze

with her wide-apart eyes.

# CURLY-HAIRED EMPEROR

*For Ariel, just about walking*

You are my blue-eyed prince,

my curly-haired emperor.

I carry you high

in your high chair,

live in fear

of your imperious stare.

When you throw food

on the floor for the dog

it is with gusto and disdain.

When I run your bath,

I am there to be splashed,

and dress you in your soft robes,

act the court jester

to coax a smile,

and when you wake, I wake,

come running to relieve you

of your soggy raiments.

When you take your first steps,

I want to lay out the red carpet for you,

in this wide and bumpy world,

but I hold back, and hold my breath.

# HERITAGE

You wear the burden lightly, my son

of those who went before you:

Dutch and Jew,

masters of light and shadow,

fussers over fairness,

deft peddlers and cyclists and proud

of succeeding where Canute failed.

Tall farmers and soldiers, scholars and lawyers,

merchants and bankers and masons

who know what it means to be occupied,

to sweat and serve on spongy land without defense

or to have no land at all

but to bear with them, in peat hut or city,

the portable wisdom of those who have been displaced.

Hard-working and industrious people who build windmills,

not tilt at them; two small nations

scattered or squeezed between empires,

the domestic sphere the only safe harbour,

strewn with children, tulips and books,

maneuvering carefully through the narrow straits of civilization

like a rolled up torah or canal boat.

# SON IN MY ARMS

To amuse the children

outside the take-out restaurant

that sells gourmet mussels

served twenty different ways

a half hull of a ship

rises out of the red sand

with a deck that rolls and pitches

like a see-saw on which

you can test your sea legs.

My six-year old son sees another boy

jump off the prow into his father’s arms

and wants to try.

I reach up, quietly nervous

about letting him slip

somehow through my arms:

the prow is more than

twice his height.

I see in his eyes

he is nervous too -

and afterward in the car

he will confide he thought

he was going to die -

but he jumps anyway

into the air above my arms.

He falls into me

like an acrobat on a trapeze.

I am surprised

by how solid and heavy he is,

how he is still falling

in my arms,

toward the hard red earth

before I have him

inches above the ground.

He is pleased with his leap,

rushes back to do it again

and I am too pleased to wonder

how much longer.

**SUNDAY AFTERNOON**

Someone on the pink radio I bought

you last year for Christmas is singing

about her body and your body

and what she’ll do to you if you don’t

do something or other to her.

It’s not Keats, but our daughter

in her white Ikea highchair

and I are swaying in our seats,

waving our hands (all wrist, no elbow)

and lip-synching like Milli Vanilli.

I am channel surfing between

three poetry books on my lap,

split-second images remaining on my retina:

Telemachus and Odysseus embracing

before the arrows fly - dandelions falling politely

like soldiers on eighteenth century battlefields -

Ezekiel drinking water from the Dead Sea.

You are holding up a red pepper and asking

if I want some. I imagine it is my heart,

as you hold it glistening firmly in your hand

and slice into it. I can see its ventricles

filled with seeds. It’s still beating

on the counter as you hold the strips

of sweet red flesh and shyly feed me.

**MY DAUGHTER WALKS**

My daughter walks like Frankenstein

with unfamiliar joints and arms outstretched,

feeling her way through a new world.

My daughter walks like Charlie Chaplin

with surprised eyes and choppily-edited

penguin’s gait.

My daughter walks like a trotting camel

rolling gently and forever from side to side.

My daughter walks like a slender sumo wrestler

wading into the ring with wide-apart legs.

My daughter walks too fast for me

or words to hold her.

# WEEDING

*A weed is a plant that grows in the wrong place.*

Dictionary definition

I am the unskilled labour in my wife’s garden:

neither planter nor designer, but weeder

(and financier). I don’t pretend to know

the names of all the living plants

but keep them safe with my clumsy hands.

I move silently among the leaves and petals

like an Elizabethan fixer, Walsingham

rooting out Catholic conspiracies, to keep

Elizabeth breathing, or a Borgia *consigliere*

unafraid to dirty his hands in a Roman alleyway.

The earth sticks to my palms the way blood drips

off the hero in a Shakespearean tragedy.

Burdock, thistle, crabgrass, ragweed keep coming

like the unnamed villains in a samurai movie

or an uppity peasant rebellion against the feudal order

that must be put down, village by village, without mercy.

As a husband I tend quietly to us, bent on

culling overgrown emotions or out-of-control

resentments. Wild insults fertilized in fatigue

must be removed or suffocate the rose.

As a poet I don’t plant seeds or order

images neatly in rows, but sense a flower

being swamped by dandelion spores

and stubbornly yank out wilderness.

Weeding is a labour that never ends,

like punishment in a Greek myth. A weed

condemns a garden’s rhythm. Growing

out of place, a word sentences a poem.

# AS MY FATHER LAY DYING

As my father lay dying,

shrinking before our eyes,

I could not believe how light he was,

how his strong limbs became tentative,

how much he resembled a bird.

About what was happening

he kept laughing and telling stories.

He kept his amazement to himself because

death was just another of life’s gifts,

and because he wanted the last word.

# ONE MORE

*For William Goodwin 1916-1999*

Although old

and the end is palpable,

growing inside me,

and although I have lived a good life

and death is no longer

tragic or surprising,

I am not yet quite ready

to lie down and stop moving.

There will always be

one more book to read

and give me a new world;

one more Goldberg variation

played by my oldest son

to listen to with my two hearing aids;

one more argument with my loyal wife

to start and lose and forget;

one more conversation

about politics, love, literature, art, old age,

film, youth, economics, war

with my oldest friend;

one more pain to endure

and one more philosophy to counter it;

one more poem to chisel

out of the unforgiving marble of experience;

one more walk and one more swim

to feel the muscles elongating and contracting,

the air coming quicker into the working lungs;

one more poem to memorize, to take inside me

and make a part of my meaty neurons;

one more kiss from my wife

who takes care of me

and tries not to show that she’s afraid;

one more question to ask,

elaborate on, rephrase,

turn this way and that,

toss up in the air, catch

and then answer it myself;

one more experience to test

the accuracy of my reading,

to see if Shakespeare was right

about the old man Lear;

one more time to fall

and have my youngest son

pick me up off the floor

and ask me how I am

while trying to hide his sadness

at how every man must fall eventually.

Even his father.

# MY FATHER’S SKULL

My father would go to Greece

in the summers, sometimes with us

but mostly without. He was old enough

to be my grandfather, and on his second

marriage. He would write us

postcards from the small islands.

I pictured him as a pirate,

sun-tanning and drinking ouzo,

and crossing the Bosphorus

like Byron, with his slow,

rhythmical crawl, his eyes green

and wide open like the Aegean.

One year, at the end of the summer

he returned, brown as stained walnut

and grinning. Put down his suitcase

on the floor. We gathered around.

His hand emerged with a ball

wrapped in a sea-blue towel.

Unrolled it carefully and, a

magician, pulled out a skull.

It was yellowish, small, the dull colour

of sand. I took it to school for show

and tell. Hijacked biology class. Called it

Yorick and played a teenage Hamlet.

My mother kept it on the piano.

Our doctor cousin told us

it was from a child. He could tell

by its size and by the fontanel.

Only much later did I recall my father

as a grave-robber, coming through

customs with his luggage, tanned

and green-eyed and too calm.

**MY FATHER’S BOOKS**

There were so many, they stretched so high,

bound in hardback before popularity was invented,

not one volume of pulp fiction among them, only

the hard stuff enshrined on shelves: history,

biography, novels, poetry, plays, philosophy;

psychology the only allowance for soft sciences,

and almost all of them classics, most written

and the authors died off before I was born,

every room in the house colonized by

bookshelves, the way other men flaunt sports

awards or cars, today flat screen TVs. I’d like

to say I read them all in my over-read adolescence,

picked them off one by one, Penguin Classics,

Everyman’s Library, the first editions of Montreal

relatives and family friends, the Camus, the Sartre,

but I didn’t even plow through Shakespeare until

I got my own 1911 edition for my bar mitzvah,

instead dipped my toe in Hemingway, Fitzgerald,

almost everything by Plato but never landed

Aristotle, or Mann or Hesse if I remember

correctly; tried and failed at Nietzsche, Kafka,

never embarked on Ulysses although I thought

about it several times. Scalded my still child’s mind

with Kosinski, Decameron, adult stories taken

too soon - unlike Aspirin these books came without

warnings - when my friends were reading adventure

stories and playing sports, watching blockbusters,

attending parties, and I was slowly learning

to dislike reading from having to write about it

in school, treat it like work instead of play, and

answer multiple-choice questions, like a trained

seal or mule. Whenever I had a problem, didn’t like

school, down on life, trying to make sense of teenage

years’ heavy-hearted mysteries, my dad would proffer

lessons from his books, tell me what had happened

to Hamlet when he couldn’t manage his thoughts,

or downplay angst and ennui as yet another emotion

already lived through with more wit by made up people.

A decade and a half later when he died, (older fathers

do that early), the Kindle still a decade away,

I grabbed a few books at my mother’s bequest to take

with me. But the print of most seemed old-fashioned,

tiny, the pages yellowing and brittle, not enough

or too many modern chemicals, or nobody thought

the books would be kept that long, the papery pages

of the classics thin like onion paper or an old man’s

skin. Or else by this time I had my own editions

with more colourful paperback covers, or I no longer

wanted to read some of the books written in another

century and style, had my own taste now, and even

though they were my father’s, stubbornly let my mother

give most of them away to her favourite antique book

dealer who came to the house and showed respect.

**ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA 1983 EDITION**

In this finely edged world, black leatherette

bound, gilt-edge sheaves of paper channeling

skin, the world ends suddenly in 1983,

the year I turned thirteen, and good boy

that I was, all I wanted was an encyclopedia

to look up kings and queens, warriors and poets,

the occasional philosopher or scientist. The Berlin

Wall never falls, nor does Apartheid end, Twitter

is never invented, and the Internet is still

a military secret wet dream in this tight little

universe where erudite contributions are

initialed, there is no Wikipedia even

beginning to spark in someone’s garage

or basement, not everyone has an opinion

worth sharing and I am still a late twentieth

century boy yearning to learn everything

in a few pages, lives and ways of living,

Richard the Lionhearted returning to an England

he barely knows after taking Jerusalem or Pizzaro

forever hacking his path into the history books via

South American jungle, the desire to leave a mark

in life or on the page starting a slow steady burn,

# like poison ivy in the mind.THE BUTTERFLY

The swimmers laugh and splash each other

in the zebra mussel-cleared water. Further out

men fish. In the shipping channel a freighter

slides by with surprising silence. The swimmers

soon feel the ripples. On shore a Monarch

butterfly lies flat on a stone. Its wings

do not look broken. Its body is intact.

It is still and looks asleep. I have never seen

a Monarch butterfly so still. I have never

really seen the patterns on its wings.

When I touch its wing it barely flutters

under my fingertips. The colours, gold,

black, amber, become clearer to me,

as everything around it - swimmers,

river, freighter, sky - keeps moving. It looks

like an expensive hand-sewn silk scarf or tie,

or the Indonesian shirt my late father

bought once. Since it can no longer fly

it lies in the sun and waits.

# CEMETERY IN AUGUST

The stones are old here but not as much as those

further down the hill, with their short stories

of babies lost year after year. Here I scan the lives

of husbands and wives parted too soon, by accident

or cancer, and those who received their allotted time.

Some stones punctuate the husband’s name

with both dates, and the wife’s name faithfully beside

with birth date and a blank space waiting to be filled in.

Beneath the tree a stone for a baby who lived

six months. Perched on the edge, as if sitting on a bench,

the stone statue of a small child reading a stone book.

He never gets past the first page of *Once upon a time.*

Our one-and-a-half year old daughter laughs and runs

and our seven-year-old son, tanned and lean as a river eel,

follows her to see she doesn’t get too far ahead.

The gravestone of your grandfather is tall and quiet,

like he was, and your aunt has placed a stone dove on top.

The baby’s grave is on the right but not yet marked.

We have to get a stone and we discuss if it should be

vertical or flat. You leave the writing to me for later.

I remember the day over two years ago. In winter.

A blustery day when they lowered the little white coffin.

# LOST

Love, the love is always

there, but you always wonder

if the life is real as the flesh

of your wife’s soft shoulder

as she sleeps, or if you

have slipped on her slender

hip into a dream as it rises

like the dark green hill

in a scurvy-ridden sailor’s

nightmare, and you wake

up sweating because

you know you are lost.

# THE BIRD

You rescue the bird like you rescue our love.

(That’s not true, for anyone attempting

to divine autobiographical detail

but I liked the image and the way it sounded.)

It is a baby robin actually, not a dove,

with embryonic feathers, blue quills

like miniature writing implements or ornaments

on its sides, its breast and back exposed

pink wrinkly flesh, torn from the tight jaws

of the cat, surefooted and quiet as time.

Too young to fly or walk. Pink feet with long

toes remind me of our son’s slender feet.

You make a nest out of an old margarine container,

keep it warm in a makeshift incubator

under the porcelain lamp on our chest of drawers,

prop it on a pillow of your cashmere socks.

When it extends its neck and twists around

like a periscope, and opens its bright

yellow primary-colour mouth in a silent cry

you impersonate its mother, drip water

from your thumb and feed it blueberries, dog

food, and chopped up worms from the garden.

(You learned this from the Internet.)

You don’t say much but you must be

thinking of our babies and the one we lost.

You Q-tip Polysporin into the gash

in its head, the other on its breast.

Apply a child-sized band-aid.

You always wondered how birds had sex.

(Differently.) You clean out its plastic nest

each morning after throwing up. All this

happening two weeks after the little line

turns blue on the pregnancy test.

# DOMESTIC EPIC

My wife’s torn free for a couple of hours

on the Saturday morning suburban lam

to the farmer’s market with a friend

like a slave on the run ferried across the river,

the sweet dogs of motherhood losing her scent.

My seven-year-old son going on seventeen,

he seems to barely need me, calmer than

most adults, his tall thin body solid as marble,

and a mind smooth and graceful as the river.

His evening ritual of drinking tea with his mother,

the two of them holding and sipping and murmuring

their stories about everything to each other

when his whirling dervish of a sister is finally

asleep, and I am still with words upstairs.

He’s playing with a friend, creating and destroying worlds

with the confidence of youth or an Old Testament god.

That sister’s stretched out on my lap

and we’re on the speakerphone with Bubbe.

Daughter’s babbling her toddler shibboleths,

Homeric epics of lifelong friendships on the swings

and clashing encounters with the cat’s claws,

articulating her myths for the first time

and my mother trying to follow along,

laugh and interject in the right places.

My mother who never filtered or edited

the games and genocides of the adult world

for my brother and me, splicing in her current reactions

to the floods in Myanmar and earthquakes in China,

telling us on the speakerphone “Armageddon is coming,”

and my two-year-old daughter doesn’t understand

the word, doesn’t cease relating the chronicles  
of the playground and her pets in her voice,

low and musical like her runaway mother’s.

# ELEVATOR

Your water broke at a quarter to nine

with a gush, while you were reading

one of my James Lee Burke noir

detective novels. We’d had a family

argument over supper. Everyone

joined in and handled themselves well.

It flooded our fluffy mattress

and a good pair of pants

like Burke’s Lake Ponchartrain

after the Hurricane. The night

was cold, the road icy black.

You urged me to drive slowly

as you soaked the leather seats,

leaked like a gunshot victim

bleeding to death on a Los

Angeles freeway. We drove

in quiet, already beyond words,

each of us worrying on our own,

and I who like to think ahead

imagining how I’d call 911.

At the hospital we took

the elevator. Pressed third

but descended. A woman

got on but we didn’t climb.

I was cursing by this time

under my breath and you may

have been too. The woman smiled

like our quaint idea of a saint

and the elevator began to rise. I had

to say *pardon me* but I had heard.

*My son’s in palliative care.*

*He’s dying of leukemia. He’s 40.*

*They called me to come tonight.*

No anger or despair. She could

have been telling us he’d gone

out West to work. *The drive*

*in from St. Martin’s was clear.*

*No ice and no red lights. Not even*

*a stop.* We rode the elevator

together, you and I embarrassed

into silence. At the third floor

we all exited, said goodbye.

We went left. And she went

right. And as you laboured

into the late night and early

morning, as I massaged

memory into your skin

and rubbed the tennis balls,

wrapped like cosmic testicles

in a sock, into your back,

you squatting on a ball

like an ancient giant on

the world, grunting in pain

until our son, pink and crying

and flawless was born,

the woman down the hallway

cradled her 40-year-old son.

# FALLING

**1**

Remember our third date, me above you

stopping to look into your eyes and telling

you *I think I’m falling for you*, expecting

nothing in return and you measuring

the rest of our time together from this?

**2**

My father falling four years later

on his pilgrimage of pain from his bed

to the desk where he ate in the foreshortened

months he was dying, the cancer rooting

through his dry body like it was earth.

His skin dark and wrinkled as the bark

on the double-trunk elm growing

like a married couple together and apart.

**3**

After the windstorm, nine years on,

we’ve moved our son out of his bed.

The ancient maple still half standing

might fall into his room while he sleeps

before the tree-limber, like a surgeon

on a stubborn tumour, goes to work.

# DOG

The day should have been dark and torn

by hurricane-force winds or dampened with fog

so heavy you could taste it but your last day was sunny

and warm, perhaps to ease your back legs

straight and rigid as two crutches.

(I had to tell myself dogs don’t know when

they’re being taken to the vet.) Your tail wagging

and your eyes alert, while we waited we began

to doubt ourselves until the vet said

it was adrenaline and normal, how pets on their last legs

jump up on vets’ couches like puppies, that we were

making the right decision. You lay down, tired,

we had to help like you were an old woman,

so you wouldn’t land hard on your skinny, arthritic hips,

the hair on your chest matted where it used to be

so intractable and proud, your muzzle a shroud.

We remember you when you and we were young.

We had all the time and could walk for hours

in the uptown, where you frightened people

because you looked like White Fang, even though

you were the most mild-mannered Dutch barge dog.

You did, however, bite the electrician once, and you

often launched from the house to pick fights

with golden retrievers. You didn’t like retrievers or labs,

as if they were somehow too bourgeois, upper class

for a kid born on the wrong side of the tracks, with a chip

on her furry shoulder. They found you running wild

in Sussex, took you to the SPCA. Were about to put

you down five times, but each time, the needle prepared,

put it off because they thought you were good.

You’d been fenced in so long, after our first walk

we nearly brought you back, you pulled so hard you hopped

on your hind legs like a kangaroo. You never stopped pulling,

I thought we should have trained you as a sled dog. And you did

eat my favourite chocolates, After Eights, when I was careless

enough to leave them out one night. We were impressed

that every one was gone but all the envelopes intact.

You weren’t perfect but you were. You were gentle

with our children, and uncomplainingly moved

to second, third, fourth place in the pack.

On that spring day you lay down and we ran

our fingers through your thick hair. You looked at us

with your trusting brown eyes. We held your head

as the needle entered and your eyelids flickered.

# HOUSE FIRE

It begins without precedent on a non-descript

spring night while I’m in the study. First

the boom and shake like thunder, what I learn

later is the propane tank cracking under pressure,

then flames boogying like maniacs at a rock concert

above the forest perimeter of our neighbours’ lot.

You want to leave with the children and you do,

trekking across the desecrated golf course

in that forced pilgrimage made ancient with use:

mother and children fleeing the city just hours

ahead of the barbarians. I, nursed on images of looters

having their way with Ste. Catherine Street after

the Stanley Cup, stay back to guard the house

from flying sparks and the gawkers who’ve

surfaced like the extras in *Thriller* to watch.

They stop, transfixed, to tell you hushed

stories of their own past intimate destructions.

The sparks are traveling like a fireworks display,

floating embers bearing memories of Vesuvius

and book burnings in the 1930s, the villagers

clutching their pitchforks in pursuit of Frankenstein’s

monster, the orphans and mental patients locked inside

their rooms, the Luftwaffe pilot known for his good

looks and deft way with a plane shot down, his

handsomeness burned beyond recognition but his life

unscathed. I smell Troy and Carthage and Rome, the French

fleet burning at Trafalgar, Achilles’ funeral pyre

melting with the nameless dead who’ve never read

the Iliad burning sweetly in their Mumbai slums,

the heretics offering their bodies as collateral

for their beliefs, the smell that insinuates itself

like a Hollywood stalker in your favourite clothes.

And I am my unconverted ancestor drenched

in blood before the flames, mesmerized by love

and fear on some limitless European steppe before

there was a Europe, the gaping red mouth

impatient for my first born so rain and crops

would follow and the future might exist. The fire lifts

its bright snout to the darkening sky and noisily licks

its cracking dry lips. The older couple inches ahead

of the flames. Eyebrows singed. Eyes full of grief

for the dog they couldn’t save. Afterwards we will gather

on the street in quiet groups to commiserate and gossip

like neighbours, and speculate. Dark rumours

of fire hydrants that wouldn’t flow for twenty

minutes. Mysterious fires and explosions

at three other houses on the street. Forgotten

capillaries of an old water system. And theories

of new cell phone towers, the microwaves

that surge and trigger events, like cancer cells. Later,

when it’s over and the drivers who’ve seen it

on the news parade by for a lascivious peek, I resist

the urge and walk on, as if everything is okay,

and the smell in my nostrils is not the acidic

bittersweet smell of death and what keeps us intact.

# SPRING

The clustered tick-bearing deer droppings

like grapes glistening on a Roman mural

pockmark the sloping garden, snow splashes

receding and clinging to the urine-coloured

grass like microscopic glaciers in the final

shudderings of our annual human ice age.

We slough off our emotional hibernation

and hobble outside like blond hairless bears,

awkward in the sun that swells and stains

the manic-depressive river cracking up

again, the ice shacks with their monomaniac

inhabitants bent on coaxing life briefly

from beneath the ice washed away

like a Brazilian shantytown overnight.

My forearms are etched with fresh blood

and fingertips flayed mildly from pulling

thorn-choked wild raspberry bushes.

I’m that transitional age when my lower

back is sorer than I would have surmised

but my children are shrieking and inventing

games without worries, shoving each other

down the hill while the adult world

keeps spinning toward the equinox

and everyone in North America is turning

sun-crazed and money-burnt in the daylight.

My wife’s inside cooking supper

and going gently stir-crazy. She’s glowing

more relentlessly beautiful by the hour

but sees shoots of gray cropping up

and new nano wrinkles by her eyes.

My skin’s coming off in my hands,

the sap’s starting to thoughtlessly run,

and I am being reborn achingly again

in this, my fortieth spring.

# KILLING WASPS

Lacking the terminal cuteness of the bumblebee

who hovers like a gentle linebacker at half time

the lean, black-jacketed wasp’s a high school tough

on perennial hunt for insults and excuses to put up his fists.

A Hollywood hood in tight black pants and yellow t-shirt,

his sneering tone an unfulfilled fighter pilot’s drone,

honeyless and insecure in his speed zipping by,

every flight a reaction to a feminine world

of bright flowers and pollen. The previous night,

my wife and I debate suffocation or poison.

In the end I choose death in an aerosol can

and stand back like someone dropping

a bomb from a safe distance, smothering

my doubts with the logic it must be done

before the children are stung. I soak the nest,

like parchment paper, a rounded teepee or inverted

yurt, a desert tent with minimum provisions clinging

to the ceiling of an outdoor cabinet. Lacking

a honeycomb’s amber liquidity and intricate

geometry, the nest has its own pale attraction,

knit from regurgitated plants and wood

sealed with wasp saliva, paper domes

within domes like a Russian doll. Seconds

later the wasps collapse to the lower

wooden shelf, stilled in a makeshift circle

like the bodies at the Jim Jones massacre

after the Kool-Aid. Translucent wings fixed in place

as outstretched arms, warding off blows

or in prayer. Larvae strewn among the bodies,

curled, and one still twitching.

# HANDLE WITH CARE

Something breaks or goes missing, invariably, in transit,

no matter how careful the movers, no matter how often

you ply them with double doubles and thank-yous:

like the antique dining room table won at auction

for two hundred dollars when money was

something to us - when we too were beautiful -

round table top set on strapping Empire legs,

acquires a gash we can’t see past because

it didn’t come before us. Like your sense of place

and wild attachment to a particular view of road

or river, a yard a certain shade of green

and degree of slope, an irreplaceable light

informed by ocean and fog and shore, the distinct

way dusk falls, the memories that begin to recede

with distance, the way you sometimes wake,

eyes insistently closed, and assume yourself

unchanged, remember the window on the wrong

side of the bed. Like the Christmas ornaments handed

down from immigrant grandparents who started over

with nothing, ornaments that overcame an ocean

passage in the '50s and rambunctious sons

and border collies that came and went and were

always called King, taken out and hung

on sweet-smelling trees and lovingly replaced

in tissue in cardboard boxes year after year,

that shatter inexplicably but surely on a bland

land crossing between provinces; the cord for

the under-appreciated, undersized TV that never

had cable; the Father's Day gift IPod missed for days

that eventually disappears, perhaps stolen by movers

who can't get enough online music; the book

corners crushed by less-than-careful packing

in 2' by 2' cube boxes which movers curse

as they shoulder them up and down narrow

or curved or sloped stairs, their professional

stoicism slipping for a moment, movers everywhere

give a silent cheer for Kindle and Kobo. And amid

the torn-open boxes that can't now be returned

and the reams of newsprint no longer pristine

like a newborn's skin, no longer fit for children's

marker murals, a wife's trust in her husband

also goes missing: her confidence he has

her best interests at heart, that he knows

in what town and house she will be happiest,

that he can hold down a job like her stone-

mason grandfather who kept everyone in place

through recessions, political ebbs and flows,

corporate restructurings, because there were always

stone walls enough to build, and her grandmother

didn't have to pack up their future again, ship it

somewhere else, sweep up the pieces of everything

that broke or got dented or went missing.

**DRUNK DRIVER**

After a workout, the mind and body

calm as an ancient Greek treatise

on the balanced life, the 12-year old son

riding shotgun. Intimations on the slide

of our civilization toward a social media

fin-de-siècle orgy at a cyber Versailles,

pre-TV celebrities in full flight, guillotine

sensed but still out of sight, dissipate

in the muscle memory of the rowing

machine. The motion fixed in place,

the limbs stretching and contracting,

the surprise sight of five deer sauntering

through soccer fields in the city, flashback

to fifteen years on the East Coast, while lungs

find their optimum rhythm. The Ford 150

pickup slams head on into our Honda Civic

as we exit the parking lot. Nobody at speed,

but the Ford’s heavy grille doing its damage

to the light metal, plastic and glass, the front

of the Civic crumpling the way modern

cars do, the crunch and crash, abrupt

ceasing of motion that always sounds

and feels the same, the thought you

could only have sidestepped it if you’d

been quick or smart enough, the sense of self

and confidence crushed as easily as the front

of your car, your hand that refuses daily to hit

the horn easily, still in place and sounding

the cry. You turn to your son. He’s pale

and surprised, eyes wide. No air bags are

deployed, and there is no blood, no limbs

at wrong angles, no broken teeth, no heads

smashed through windshields. When you exit

slowly, the door’s bent but opens and the other

driver steps out. Of course he’s ordinary. Middle-

aged, white male, grey hair, jeans and winter jacket,

his eyes are not all there, his inoffensive smile

not quite pasted on properly. But he has the presence

of mind to apologize and it sounds genuine, before

walking over unsteadily to his hood. Pulls out

a notebook and offers to exchange phone numbers

and insurance information and then stands there,

smiling, tentative, pretending to write but getting

nothing on the page. I call 911 and the voice

at the other end of the line talks me through

the description, the accident, the apparent

presence of alcohol, the absence of weapons,

the non-descript descriptions, while the police

blare sirens to arrive. Even they are surprised

by how drunk the other driver is, he nearly

falls down like a gymnast about to start

a cartwheel and they cuff him and arrest

him, and I am asked to fill out the accident

report, and to do so in my car if it still runs

so I won't get too cold as the temperature

is dropping, and I am surprised by how

formal and correct my language is,

how it all feels too much like TV.

# COOKING WITH GAS

Cooking with gas is light years from electric,

demands a be-here-now attitude I’ve learned

to fake whenever I am neither here nor there,

instead dreaming or fearing past or future,

a remembered recipe that changes every time:

what I would do differently given half a chance,

and what I will do next with benefit of forethought

or imagined hindsight. With gas I’ve got to summon

all my senses, and listen for the clicking’s stop the

second heat displaces sound, note fire licking edges

of Paderno pot as I lean over elements with shirt

unbuttoned, untucked. I wear everything untucked

at home, hardly bother to zip my pants, my domestic

antidote to extravert life being lived by introvert,

counterpoint to carefully chosen shirts and suits,

pay my homage to outside world. My shirt caught

on fire once. I leaned back against our old ceramic

stovetop, no-flame electric, five provinces away,

two moves ago, relaxed, at ease, a moment

without worry to be savoured, and I thought

the food was aromatic, took me a while to clue in

my clothes were on fire. Unbuttoned the few buttons

and threw the flaming shirt, a soft, often-washed

flannel favourite, in the kitchen sink, emerged

without a scratch. It runs in the family, this absent-

mindedness, this neither here nor now-ness. Might

be a side-effect of too much time with books (and

not manly ones like sports biographies or how-to-

get-rich manuals) but the soft vicarious fluff that keeps

women occupied and safely out of off-the-books

drunkenness, love affairs, suicide, the nagging

sense there must be more: novels and poems. One uncle

went to his garage, perhaps to retrieve something after

a long day of work he wasn’t meant to do. Turned on

his car and forgot to turn off. Or a great-uncle who

as a boy afraid of dark carried a candle to the bathroom

and when he tripped it gripped his nightshirt with fire.

Burned his right nipple clean away. Or closer to home,

my father in between marriages, in love with his life,

batching it up in a downtown apartment, fell asleep

with the gas on. Would have trailed his brother

if my future mother hadn’t stopped by unexpectedly

to save the day. My wife doesn’t get it when I leave

the kitchen cupboards open, socks on the floor, forget

where the dishes are, the cheques. (With all the moves

in recent years I’ve misplaced my memory.) She takes

it personally when she hits her hips on an open drawer.

This lack of attachment to things and their place rubs

her the wrong way, so alien to the ordered beauty

she creates with each new object she brings home,

settled in its space, the colour-matching of a sofa

to a frame. Her art is home, pardon the feminine cliché,

whereas mine is all in my head, and sometimes,

if I’m lucky, splatters on the page.

**DOMESTIC ARGUMENTS**

They blur the lines: who’s right, whose wrong,

the same old dance, the same old song. We’re

fazed by little things, different ways of keeping

house or spending money, that would in courtship

days spur a smile and sharpen lust. The times

we marveled at the fitness of our love

now make us doubt our common ground,

wonder whether we can only be at peace

in a queen-size bed’s no man’s land, and

fear whatever happened to the future.

But something of before endures:

when we wake, we’re both still here.

# THE BULL

There are too many adjectives, women

and children, unremarkable families

out for Aggie Days at the indoor pavilion,

rubbing shoulders without anxiety or

bloodshed, not enough early twentieth-

century cool or predilection with detail,

for it to be Hemingwayesque: not a well-

turned out matador to be found, nobody

getting plastered or into fights over

women, or blowing their prematurely

aged heads off with a shotgun. And the bull

is young and solidly inside a built doll house

ring, just two stalls away from bearded goats

hopping up and down boxes arranged

like miniature peaks, and show ponies,

rabbits coaxed to run the obstacle course

with crisp pats on bushy buttocks, agoraphobic

ducks huddling in a circle like shell-shocked

soldiers after a nighttime raid or serious

middle-aged women at a cocktail party,

hay strewn semi-artistically on the polished

concrete floor, no whiff of manure

in the air. And the bull is silky black,

wearing his fur like a cloak or doublet, no

horns to intimidate or offend, bearing the ring

in his nose without rancour, gold on black,

placid as a good-natured teenage son, minus

the hormones and congenital violence,

an anti-minotaur motionless as children

pat his head like the giant and over-priced

stuffed animal some parents buy for their

offspring who have everything. And yet

you know he isn't stupid, this bull,

taking everything in with his wide apart eyes.

You can tell he knows his strength without

having to prove it, no dramatic snorting

or stamping or quivering in anger for him,

no premature end in a sand-strewn ring,

his blood floating in the heat for the crowd’s

desire in some warmer and faster culture,

and him on this cold spring day bringing

so much pleasure to my animal-loving wife,

with her wide apart eyes taking everything in.

**FACADE**

*“Dress British; think Yiddish”*

*- Hollywood talent agent Lew Wasserman*

The first time I fell in love with a house was

in my early thirties, climbing corporate rungs,

one child to dote on, not earning enough for

my wife to stay home even if she wanted to.

I always thought only the British in their storied

books, aristocrats with coats of arms and reputations

to defend, old-fashioned views of honour and stiff

upper lips, loved their houses and their land - their

bricks and mortar, mahogany stripped from some

unfortunate colony, maid’s twisted staircases and

tight butler’s pantries - so much they gave them

names. The house I fell for had it all, built by two

spinster sisters in 1917, the men at war, life or death

unclaimed. I have a penchant for tailored suits,

Shakespeare, churches with their charming idolatry,

statues everywhere, the sense of walking on top

of kings and queens. What’s in a name, anyway,

Goldberg to Goodwin and back again.

# GRADE TWO SPELLING WORDS LIST POEM

*For Anneke, my super speller*

Oily boy, choose your poison: moist oysters

or chocolate. Choose to enjoy the moist

voyage. (Oyster voice.) Choose to voice

your oyster moist. I join the oyster voyage

without moist chocolate, without a choice.

If you had to choose moist voyage or oily

boy, what would be your choice? Is your

poison oily boy or moist chocolate?

Must your poison be your first choice?

Is chocolate poison or moist choice? Must

you choose your poison boy? Must you enjoy

your voyage poison? Is the oyster oily voyage

really a choice? Choose your choice, poison

oyster, chocolate oyster, moist boy, pointing

at poison, moist chocolate. Choose your voice

to voice the oily boy with his poison of choice,

his moist chocolate pointing to oyster voyage.

Enjoy the poison. I choose to enjoy the oyster

voyage, the oily choice. If I had a coin would

my poison be a choice? Would my choice be

moist? Would my chocolate voyage choose

to be joined? Would I join the oily boy

on the moist voyage if I had a choice?

The coin choice is very moist, almost no

choice. Almost an oily poison. No boy

voyage but an oyster. Would the oily

boy choose as his poison the oyster voyage

or his choice of coin? Would my voice be

my choice or my poison? I choose to poison

my voice and my choice with moist chocolate.

I point to my oyster voyage with my voice.

I choose my voice to voice my choice. The oily

boy makes his choice his poison. I enjoy

my choice. The oyster has no voice, no choice,

only poison from the oily boy’s voyage of

choice. I choose to join, to enjoy the moist. The

chocolate boy enjoys the voyage. And the moist

oyster enjoys the oily boy without a choice,

without a voice to join the voyage. Oily boy,

must you voyage without a choice? Then choose

your poison on the chocolate oyster. Moist boy,

enjoy your choice, your poison voyage. Join

the chocolate voyage, oily boy: it’s your choice,

with or without oyster coin, without poison.

The oily boy had a poison choice, a choice

of voyage. The oyster chose the oily boy

and the moist chocolate joined. The oily

boy chose the moist poison over the oyster

voyage. The oyster joined the oily boy

in the moist chocolate. Join your poison

oily boy. Make the moist oyster choice.

Enjoy the choice oyster: moist chocolate

or coin. The oily boy gave voice to his

chocolate choice. Joined his oyster poison

on the moist voyage. Your voice. Your choice.

READING NERUDA

You handed off the Virago book

of women’s love poems I bought you

(years ago for your twenty-second birthday

at the quaint Green Avenue book shop

before Indigo rushed us like a paper tsunami)

to a friend when the desire to cull books

gathering dust on the shelves swept you away.

Ten years later for Christmas you give me

a cute edition of Neruda’s love poems, clad

in pink, from your favourite design store

at Chinook Mall. I am touched by the subtle

latin lover pre-Internet eroticism. Original

Spanish verse on the left, and my eyes scan

its passage to English – my college Spanish

rusty after twenty-five years – searching for

sounds and rhythms diverging, trying to pin

down what has been lost in translation.

IXTAPA

We are soaked with images of parents losing

touch with their children in tsunamis at far

ends of the world. And yet. And yet I take my son -

thirteen years-old, taciturn, never remembers

what happened at school when I ask him, almost

as tall as me but willowy, so thin I once feared

he had leukemia - into the kind of surf I haven’t

seen since I was sixteen. I want to body surf

with him, catch the wave as it breaks and

start swimming madly for the shore. It’s been

over twenty-five years but I figure all waves

near the equator are the same. I want to bond

not like women face to face but side to side.

So I don’t bother to test the waves but rush in

like the teenager I’m not at forty-three. The wave

lifts my two hundred pounds and cartwheels,

slams me on the sand like a wrestler forgetting

it’s all fake. My son – who’s half my weight –

gets grabbed and thrown by water that’s not

like any pool. And when he stands up on bird

legs with the feet with crazy long toes I guess

he wants to do it again, but I see fear in his gray

eyes for the first time in my life. This is new

to us. We don’t know what to do with his fear

before the next wave hits us except he points to it

and goes down. His mother screams from shore

while we’re under. She’s worried only about her son;

her husband’s to blame. This time I drag him out

and he falls to the sand, propped on his elbow,

like Jesus in his mother’s arms, his long legs

splayed out as a deer who’s been shot, taking in

the air in slow motion, not looking me in the eye.  
And I wonder how in my exuberance I went wrong,

I who am never surprised by the danger in anything.