

Inverse phoenix:  
A collection of poems

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September 13, 2025

*Inverse phoenix: A collection of poems*

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# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Flight</b>	<b>1</b>
	There used to be this building on Main Street (73 lines)	2
	Cantilever (16 lines)	4
	Unfinished basements (23 lines)	5
	Clay banks (29 lines)	6
	I belong (25 lines)	7
	Betwixt two horizons (58 lines)	8
	The local and immediate expertise of the other (30 lines)	10
	Over the top (25 lines)	11
	You didn't need to be there (23 lines)	12
	Out to skate (35 lines)	13
	Elastic bands (15 lines)	14
	In the Center (43 lines)	15
	Used bookstore (20 lines)	17
	A day in the sun (12 lines)	18
	Step out from behind the camera (28 lines)	19
	I tripped and fell over in Shanghai (23 lines)	20
	Chords and/or cords (29 lines)	21
	Free samples (25 lines)	22
	Big brother (27 lines)	23
	A place to be found (27 lines)	24
<b>2</b>	<b>Burned through</b>	<b>25</b>
	Nobel/noble prized (53 lines)	26
	Timeless (18 lines)	28
	Puzzle of sincerity (42 lines)	29
	More than I have to offer (28 lines)	31
	All the wild (56 lines)	32
	Unhung Paintings (11 lines)	34
	Sometimes you want to say something (5 lines)	35
	The revolution was televised and somehow you missed it (20 lines)	36
	Show me the gears (24 lines)	37
	Leader of my degeneration (28 lines)	38
	To be nudged (23 lines)	39
	Overheard (30 lines)	40
	Calling out to crimson (35 lines)	41
	Pick up a brush (22 lines)	42

How the pain becomes explain (14 lines) . . . . .	43
Progress (13 lines) . . . . .	44
Eat the rich (32 lines) . . . . .	45
You the watched (25 lines) . . . . .	46
Kindly remember to bend (21 lines) . . . . .	47
Law of large numbers (23 lines) . . . . .	48
Reinforced labor (19 lines) . . . . .	49
The concept of up (7 lines) . . . . .	50
<b>3 Grounding</b>	<b>51</b>
Fishing line (28 lines) . . . . .	52
Marked in pen (28 lines) . . . . .	53
Are you my saviour? (9 lines) . . . . .	54
Uncalculating (44 lines) . . . . .	55
Standing on the shoulders of people just like me (16 lines) . . . . .	57
Sakyamuni sat there (35 lines) . . . . .	58
A conversation with my son (19 lines) . . . . .	59
All shades of purple (21 lines) . . . . .	60
Waiting my turn (30 lines) . . . . .	61
Broken sentences (27 lines) . . . . .	62
Tragic or otherwise (14 lines) . . . . .	63
Open to mystery (35 lines) . . . . .	64
Is this voice fresh? (14 lines) . . . . .	65
Imperfect fruits (27 lines) . . . . .	66
An ode to the ends (9 lines) . . . . .	67
Earnestness (19 lines) . . . . .	68

# **Chapter 1**

## **Flight**

## **There used to be this building on Main Street**

There used to be this building on Main Street  
Full of fine art  
And video games.

The art was mostly landscapes:  
Lifeless, frozen, windswept with no sound.  
Panoramas no more beautiful  
Than the nearby hills  
We could see at any time—  
If we decided to look up.

Maybe we needed someone to see it,  
to capture it,  
to condense it,  
to feed it to us,  
let us swallow it,  
let us snort it,  
let it flow into our veins.

The whole building was made of thin canvases  
A malnourished artist paints again and again.  
A perfection that distorts as soon as it dries:  
Painted over our eyes,  
Painted over the mountains,  
Painted over our nature.

Have you ever seen a building made entirely of paint  
Ready to go up in flames?  
There used such a building on Main Street  
But it burned down one day.

There used to be this building on Main Street  
Full of video games  
And fine art.

The games were mixed with potato chips  
And squandered, dirty quarters.  
Fingers smeared on sweatpants  
Full of holes—  
Holes we'd jump  
By pressing "A"  
While holding down "B".

We stood next to cabinets  
With their uppercuts of vengeance  
That we dreamed of swinging  
If only we could see an injustice  
Clearly enough to fight.

Maybe we needed someone to see it,  
    to capture it,  
    to condense it,  
    to feed it to us,  
    let us swallow it,  
    let us snort it,  
    let it flow into our veins.

The whole building was made of pixels  
Like tiny pieces of shrapnel  
Tied together by fear—  
A fear of the chaos of real life  
That covered our eyes,  
Covered the mountains,  
Covered our nature.

Have you ever seen a building made entirely of fear  
Ready to explode into dust?  
There used such a building on Main Street  
But it blew up one day.

We thought we had a platform  
But it was just a peephole  
Trained exactly at us.  
Dutifully, we spent whole days  
Thinking only of ourselves,  
But not knowing where to start,  
We just obsessed about the end.

There used to be this building on Main Street  
But now there is an empty hole.  
Are we ready yet  
To fill it?

## Cantilever

Cantilever

Is a cool word.  
I don't know  
What it means.  
And I've never  
Looked it up.  
Maybe  
It's related  
To architecture?

Cantilever

I like how it sounds.  
I like  
How it makes  
Me sound.  
I let myself  
Be in its shadow.



## Unfinished basements

Bare feet  
On cement floors:  
Worn paint,  
Half outdoors.

I grew up  
Downstairs,  
On shifting rugs—  
Throws thrown  
Over stains  
And open drains.

Cold in summer.  
Hot in winter.  
A place to defy.  
A place to simmer.

It's all finished now:  
Covered,  
Insulated.  
Square feet  
In a bound whole.  
More valuable,  
Less memorable.  
Fully realized,  
As advertised.

## **Clay banks**

After a day of skateboarding,  
We'd jump down clay banks —  
Ruin our clothes,  
Ruin our bearings,  
Ruin our grip.

Sweated clay,  
Tripped in summer salts.  
Going into our pockets,  
Washing away our wallets,  
That were empty anyway.

Clay in our hair,  
Clay in our underwear,  
Clay under our skin,  
Clay nailed to our hands.

Grinding soles,  
Grinding teeth  
As we gasped close-mouthed  
Down a clay bank.

We weren't supposed to be there:  
It wasn't our land,  
Wasn't our place,  
Wasn't our time,  
But we jumped anyway.

## **I belong**

I belong  
To the whispered songs of girls  
Spinning with faces straight up in the air,  
Trailing carriages that bump  
Over tiny cracks in the pavement  
While sun-bleached curtains  
Fall out of windows.

I belong  
To the detailed rants of boys  
Explaining the spoils of imagined victories,  
While tricycles are left in the streets  
Ambiguously far from any plausible owner,  
Smelling of warm plastic  
Heated with warm hands.

Came one day with my brother  
And found myself in the dust,  
Swept up from a day full  
Of dance steps and scraped knees.

I surrendered,  
As I always do,  
To his always arriving  
Plan for him and me,  
His all-consuming  
Design for how  
I belong.

## Betwixt two horizons

*In remembrance of Paul William Ryan (1978–2015).*

Have you seen him:  
In red-dawn hills,  
Under cloudless skies,  
Crouched and ready,  
Ready to live?  
Ready to die?

He dammed the river!  
He quenched the thirst!  
He backed up the water,  
Until he and it burst!

And when it came down  
He smiled and he cried,  
Light all turned up  
And then down,  
to the side.

But who am I,  
If not there,  
Along for his ride?

Have you seen him:  
Cross a whole city,  
On gifted shoes,  
To touch a hand,  
And kiss some lips?  
Kiss a rat?  
Kiss the land?

He powered the chord!  
He uttered the words!  
He ran to his basement,  
And lost all his herds!

And when we came down,  
To balm the pain,  
The bomb went off.  
At last — again.

But who am I,  
If not there,  
Under his reign?

Even you haven't seen him,  
You thought you were there,  
Stirred inside that pupil,  
In that skull,  
Under that raven hair.

He dreamt a world!  
He lived that dream!  
He danced with his angels,  
And touched the Supreme!

And then we all saw him,  
Inside his own eye.  
We lived in his imagination,  
All ghosts, come alive.

But, have you seen me,  
Betwixt two horizons,  
Spearheading his shockwave,  
Piercing veins,  
Leaving trails,  
Of purple blood  
and purple words?

I am here.  
I am here.  
Now never alone.

## **The local and immediate expertise of the other**

The will to drink truth  
Where others drive fear—  
Of hierarchy,  
Of knowingness—  
Overspeak and overhear.

Let me ask  
Let you tell  
Let us listen  
Let it swell:

Fluent feelings  
That perspire,  
Textures only truth  
Could transpire.

Read that closed book.  
Question open the pages.  
Throw undried ink  
On unreserved faces.

Let me ask  
Let you tell  
Let us listen  
Let it swell:

Plain stories,  
Foreign and familiar,  
Reflections,  
Free of any filter.

Knowingness is now over:  
Seek and you discover  
The local and immediate  
Expertise  
Of the other.

## Over the top

Run, jump  
And hold  
A handful of chains.

Lean in,  
Pull back!  
Lean in,  
Pull back!  
Find the right time.

Protesting chains,  
Swaying like a saw,  
Wear down the world.

Lean in,  
Pull back!  
Lean in,  
Pull back!  
My body a rhyme.

If I push really hard  
Will I go over the top?  
Continue to swing  
A little higher?

Lean in,  
Pull back!  
Lean in,  
Pull back!  
Awaiting a sign.

## **You didn't need to be there**

I missed out  
On many things  
I don't and didn't miss.

I opened doors  
To bloody floors  
And closed doors  
As teardrops poured.

Later stories told  
    in laughs  
    and chuffs  
But I saw the flashes,  
Sticks, and cuffs.

From A to B.  
I saw B.  
And it wasn't A

If even A could be.

Only experience can teach  
When experience isn't needed.  
You didn't need to be there,  
Or there,  
Or there.  
Only here,  
If even here can be.



## **Out to skate**

There was a map in our heads  
Of unbroken paths—  
Failed architecture and  
Intended unconsequences.  
They got us from nowhere  
To nowhere fast,  
Only more heavy and intrepid.

We made air out of cracks,  
Felt safer in backs  
Of buildings  
Than out front.  
Unseen but overheard,  
So dark you needed  
Small eyes to see—  
Next to the trash,  
    in the trash,  
    of the trash.

Empty parking lots  
To failed businesses,  
Unsat benches to  
Absent promenades,  
Closed-down government  
Buildings and schools,  
That used to search with us  
But now, only search us out.

Unwelcomed, we invited ourselves  
To a party reviled  
For its apparent danger  
And disowned  
For its earnest marginality.

But that all goes away.  
Once you start to roll,  
Everything moves.  
And when you ollie,  
You defy the story of your grounding.

## **Elastic bands**

I don't know where I got them,  
They were always just there  
Ready to awaken  
A latent  
Attraction to cohere—  
    bills,  
    love  
    letters,  
    coupons,  
    post  
    cards—  
In rubber or elastic,  
Or whatever else  
You call it.

## **In the Center**

Hours without words  
I sat there  
In the Center  
With all of you —  
Free of distinction.  
I sat there  
On the corner  
Of a long desk  
Closest to the door.  
A blade of grass  
In search of the trees.

We'd get up and go,  
One empty stomach—  
    dandan noodles,  
    Muslim canteen,  
    Family Mart,  
    interesting —  
Many mouths  
Chewing through words  
To fill one stomach.  
I sat there  
Hiding with the bushes,  
In search of the trees.

Breakfast, sit.  
Lunch, sit.  
Dinner, sit.  
Monday, Day 2,  
Wednesday, Day 4,  
Friday, Day 6,  
Sun day.  
Every day the same  
Every day better.  
Our hearts  
Turned to mirrors.  
I sat there  
Reflected in trees,  
In search of our forest.

We were the lowly  
In search of our leaders,  
In search of ourselves.  
We found ourselves,  
We found our leaders —  
A smile come to one face.

## **Used bookstore**

History for sale.  
Not borrowed, but owned,  
and disowned again.  
Pages bent and torn and yellowed and blued and red.

Pasta stains from 1975.  
Teardrops from 2008.  
Pressed leaves from 1983.

What's the story?  
If this book was truly cherished  
Why did it lose its home?  
Or was it sent away for a better life,  
Back to where it was last born?  
Reincarnated  
with karma in the margins?

If it's true that observation changes states  
Like spinning electrons next to angels on pins,  
Then of these million books,  
What does it mean that they were read by billions of eyes?  
Am I reading the original sold in 1965 for \$3.95  
Or this one now marked \$4.95 in blue wax pen?

Am I sad because of that teardrop?  
Have I tasted the pasta in that stain?

## **A day in the sun**

Searched beaches in shoes  
For the concept of fun,  
My hopes and a volleyball  
Bathed in the sun.

Uniqueness is infinite  
So what can I find?  
An ocean of moments  
Bathed in the tide.

When the tide runs home,  
And I lay with the clouds,  
Will you lie with me,  
All being our shroud?

## **Step out from behind the camera**

Caught cotton on the wind  
And tied it in a thread  
With the deepest blue you've ever seen  
Tied behind my head.

Hunted down the perfect day  
And stuff it in a jar,  
Afraid at once to let it go  
In case it might go far.

"Step out from behind the camera  
And let me see your face.  
A face that's drawn in petals  
Dropped along the way."

Heard music in the raindrops  
And knew I could be there,  
Underneath those blankets  
With blossoms in the air.

Opened wide the windows  
And remembered how to play.  
Let go of what was yesterday  
Forgot about today.

"Step out from behind the camera  
And let me see your face.  
A face atop those pedals  
Guiding us away."

I took the lid off gently  
And dropped it through my grasp.  
Open hands are filled again,  
I've lost the world at last.

## **I tripped and fell over in Shanghai**

I tripped and fell over in Shanghai  
Holding a bag of cucumber potato chips—  
That was hard to open  
In a hard-to-describe way—  
I guess there's no dill pickle in Shanghai.

Snared by my laces in Shanghai,  
I made a habit of not tying—  
They were longer than I thought  
With a propensity to get caught.  
Maybe I wanted to stumble in Shanghai.

Bleeding and surprised in Shanghai,  
Not even trying to act cool—  
Surrounded by mouths of snacks,  
Unblinking eyes on tracks.  
A spectacle? A joke? No.  
Only the next second in Shanghai.

Happily silent in Shanghai  
From eyes to hands to eyes.  
My friends had my words,  
My luggage, my nerves.  
Swapped spirits and shrugs in Shanghai.



## Chords and/or cords

Chords or cords:

Which is wich?

To be hung by?

Or

To be sung by

You?

For most of my life

I thought it was one word

With two spellings

—chord and cord.

Maybe one was British?

Sounds made

Of chords.

Sounds sent

On cords.

Vocal cords?

Vocal chords?

Growing up

My father was a musician

And a sound technician.

A home full

Of chords

and cords,

Easy to trip on,

Easy to fall into.

Every moment was worth

Recording.

Every moment was worth

Bechording.

## **Free samples**

Saturdays,  
Clipped and ready.  
As many stops as deals.  
Free samples —  
We'll taste anything once.

Fresh produce,  
Bought weakly;  
The unexpiring,  
Bought daily;  
Our taste,  
Bought.

The tantrums,  
The distracted waves,  
The rushed escapes,  
The forwarded glances,  
The holding of court,  
The weather remarked,  
The complaints,  
The praises,  
The voiced  
And unvoiced  
Disagreements.

Free samples,  
Unclipped and unready.

## Big brother

My big brother  
Used to call *me* “big brother”.  
But it’s not possible to be bigger than him!  
His eyes spanned whole days—  
Daytime and night—  
His voice echoed loudly—  
Off bounties and blights—  
His grip grasped more  
Than sanity felt right.

Despite his bigness—  
That could lift a whole sky—  
He was often left drained  
And empty and dry.  
If he passed a mirror in the hall  
All he’d see was a husk—  
Spent, bent, cowered, and small,  
But what he spent my way,  
Made *me* seem tall.

And so I was his “big brother”.

But without his bigness  
I’d be outlined in scrawl,  
I’d be cowered and bent,  
Pre-empted and small.

The most sacrificial  
Are self-unaware.  
They even give up knowing  
That the sky is their heir.

## **A place to be found**

Hide and seek is  
A game children play  
That we grow  
To forget.

Or is it more  
The game changed?

As children,  
Wherever we hid  
We would eventually  
Be found.

But as we grew,  
There were more  
Places to hide  
Than be found.

Or is it more  
Others stopped looking?

What a treasure it is  
To discover  
A place to be found,  
Where the songs we start  
Are finished by others,  
And timid dance steps  
Are followed by others.

Let our vision be world-embracing :  
Let this be a place  
Where we search for others  
And we are found.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Burned through**

## Nobel/noble prized

A prison of unshattered glass,  
Seen inside as mirrors  
That reflect only surface—  
A surface of hope  
A surface of choice—  
But any depth is dark  
Indifferent to the outside.

While the outside are average,  
The inside are favoured  
Outliers of the right breed—  
Data-driven  
By a steering wheel,  
In place of their creed.

The architects couch—  
In cherry wood offices,  
Barricaded like fortresses—  
When they bother to show

Past a plaque  
Of embezzled dreams,  
Hung from muzzled  
And scattered screams,  
Greeting well-paying guests—  
Taught well to live well—  
By the life-stuffing screed:

“Keep the hearts at bay,  
Keep the minds in play,  
Raise your glass to Nobel,  
In distinction we pray.”

But they miscalculated—  
Overlooked the heart,  
Underplayed the hurt,  
Failed to see the wave—  
While toying with the dirt.

Will you join us,  
Fallen but still afloat—  
Thrown out on waves,  
Only to drift back—  
To raise a new edifice  
With more doors than walls?

We are the builders,  
Gems born of dust—  
Under chewed-up roads,  
Under so much force—  
Perfected by our imperfections.

The ground outside is green  
Flush with fan-like leaves,  
A bed for the steadfast  
Who live life on their knees,  
Pushing up the fresh anthem:

“Let the heart feel cheer.  
Let the mind come clear.  
Raise your noble hands,  
The bright day is here.”

## Timeless

The perfect face:  
Since 10:10 am  
This morning  
And 10:10 pm  
Last night.

The perfect watch:  
Timeless.

Staring into its face,  
The other faces—  
    subtler  
    less perfect—  
Tried to reach mine.  
But I stared  
Into perfection.

They waited  
Until they stopped waiting.  
10:10 am or 10:10 pm?  
I couldn't tell.



## **Puzzle of sincerity**

My work  
Was to demonstrate  
The need for my work.  
My rest  
Was to establish  
My need for no rest.

I built  
A showroom  
Of validity  
And blueprints  
Of a legacy.

I was to be  
observed.  
Others were to be  
persuaded.

Persuaded of what?  
To also live the life  
Of an example?  
An argument  
To sustain an argument?  
A proof  
Of the need for proof?

Did I want  
To be understood  
Or run  
From understanding?

I eventually awoke  
To the puzzle  
Of sincerity.  
How to be sincere  
When your life  
Is a showroom  
For something  
Never to be built?

Should I instead  
Seek sincerity unwitnessed?

Where is my work—  
My rest  
My argument  
My proof—  
With only me  
To convince?

## More than I have to offer

What is it you want from me?  
To stuff my name into papers?  
Sign books I neither wrote nor read?  
Offer myself as a bookshelf?  
An archive for spent thinking undead?

It's more than I have to offer  
And yet you want more?  
It's more than I have to offer:  
The skin, flesh, *and* the core?

My brain was replaced  
By a wash basin  
Cleaning the dirt  
Sent through my ears  
To come clean  
Through my mouth  
and by my hand.

I did it all right.  
I did it all, right?  
I did it, alright?  
I did it alright!

And yet.

I have more to offer  
Than you can possibly think.  
It endlessly pumps blood  
And heat.  
And it will never be clean  
Of you mixed with me.

## All the wild

It has taken me years to make some sense  
Of my enduring melee with mathematics.  
It's not that I found it too hard  
(although it's needlessly so)  
Or that I didn't find it useful  
(it's painfully so).  
It's that it was presented to me as complete,  
A perfection independent of my comprehension.  
Mathematics brought blackness and whiteness.  
It abolished grayness, never saw color.  
It brought order and rank and  
Judgment of order and rank.

A math teacher once threatened me with my future  
If I didn't compete and obey.  
I tried to live between his 0 and 1,  
Holding two truths in two hands to one face.  
What he didn't understand is that  
I loved math and I feared math  
And I championed math and I tried to destroy math.  
Truth is too complex for its dichotomy.

If I was in search of certainty independent of me,  
I would search the sun with wide-open eyes  
Or burn my wings to unite with the candle.  
I would not search the subservient " $1 + 2 = 3$ ".

I was told I would one day miss math's certainty,  
Its end of bickering, its pound of hierarchy.  
True beats false beats most into submission.  
But if I wanted to learn about submission,  
I would have studied the Quran,  
Not  $e^{i\pi} = -1$ .  
And if I was meant to learn inadequacy  
And mistrust of my powers,  
The same was already achieved in PhysEd's showers.

For most people who don't like math  
It's not because math's hard or pointless.  
It starts with the feelings math does not like them  
And their color and vagueness and splinteredness,  
And their " $1 + 2 = \text{rainbows}$ "-ness.  
I agree we are nothing in comparison to true Truth and true Power,  
But to equate these with tautologies,  
How could the taste *not* be sour?

Should I love to taste the feeling of grit in my teeth?  
Should I teach my coldness to belittle my heat?  
What is the point of grammar  
If you never write poetry?  
What is the point of 0's and 1's  
If you never crash them together like Hot Wheel cars?

I search now for truth in numbers and words  
And flowers and rulers and hair rollers.  
Truth is untamed and untameable—  
    All the while,  
    All the wild—  
I hope I never come to believe I've found it, caged it.  
I hope I never become what my math teacher wanted,  
I hope my future always remains ruined of its perfection.

## **Unhung Paintings**

I have a box of unhung paintings  
And empty walls to match.  
Each nail is a hesitation—  
A raised hammer can speak,  
But so can holelessness.  
The boxed paintings are sheltered,  
But unseen.  
Maybe I'll hang them tomorrow,  
But maybe the next day I'll be gone,  
The paintings unsheltered  
But still unseen.

## **Sometimes you want to say something**

Sometimes you want  
To say something  
So small  
You wonder if it's worth  
Writing down.

## **The revolution was televised and you somehow missed it**

Hello world!

There's an app for everything now,  
But what do I need?  
Steve Jobs used to tell me that,  
But now he's gone, apparently.  
How could he leave me so,  
Selfishly?

Fear of missing the other  
Who is afraid of missing someone like me—  
Just not exactly me.

No fear of missing myself.

I watch all day, every day,  
Dutifully.  
You'd think I'd be informed,  
Given how much I intake.  
But either the form didn't take  
Or I was formed perfectly.  
What would it take to tell?

Goodbye world,  
Until I'm logged on again.



## **Show me the gears**

This phone in my hand,  
Sure, it's a marvel.  
I believe you.  
But I don't get it.

Show me the gears instead!

I can only admire  
An ingenuity nearly fictional  
In a magical place  
Where I'm always tricked.  
Secrets appear to be open  
But are closed in unbreakable glass.

Show me the gears instead!

Let me understand  
My torment.  
Let me see the breaths  
I am let to breathe.  
Show me the gears  
That lay me out—  
Process me  
For your procession.

I am stripped  
Of my self-machinery.  
At least let me grasp  
My self-mockery.

## Leader of my degeneration

I speak to empty rooms  
Full of people  
And echoes.

The more I talk,  
The more they listen,  
The more I wish,  
Both they and I  
Didn't.

I lead masses.  
I leave messes.  
Masses or weights  
Pulling me down?  
Messes or banquets  
Filling me up?

I need them  
To tell me  
Why I am their  
    Leaven  
So I can believe  
I am not their  
    Villain.

If I follow them  
Around the world,  
As they follow me,  
Don't I eventually  
Wrap around  
To join them?

Please let it be.

## **To be nudged**

So glad it worked out  
To have someone  
Better than me—  
In all possible ways—  
Help me choose  
How to be:  
Good Boy A  
Or  
Good Boy B.

I have just one question.

How does one  
    get to choose  
What others  
    can choose?  
That doesn't seem part  
Of Good Boy A  
Or Good Boy B.

Maybe one day,  
If I make all the right choices,  
I'll be allowed  
to choose  
Good Boy C.

Yay for me!

## **Overheard**

I have no special  
Point of view  
Because of who I am not  
Not what I don't do.

I want to hear  
I want to learn:  
I want to accept  
You and I  
In turn.

But what if  
My search inside—  
Your lens  
On my lens  
And my lens  
On your lens—  
Finds all the same?

The final intersection  
Is either unitary  
Or null.  
Is it not?

Can I be accepted  
Without distinction?  
In my plainness,  
Can you hear  
My mainscream?

## **Calling out to crimson**

I wore your righteousness  
As a borrowed tattoo—  
My fever, your dream.

The stain was real  
But the shine denuded —  
My black, your white.

I believed  
The stories  
I told  
To hide  
My truth.

I believed  
The stories  
You told  
To hide  
Your truth.

But which came first?

There is no straight line,  
Only choking on this river,  
Falling for these hills:  
Crying into crimson!

Better to be  
Than to want.  
Better to want  
Than to have.

I took that crimson ink  
And tattooed my soul—  
My dream, our dream.

I washed the stain  
And the light shone anew—  
My light, our light.

Is this the day,  
You join me:  
Unyielding,  
Uncrushed,  
Calling out to crimson?

## **Pick up a brush**

Dismissiveness has kept you alone  
Atop a mountain no one cares to climb.  
Foreign to all but those born there.

Dancing on perfectly sharp and narrow pins,  
Only visible to other pin-dancers,  
You are the triumphant!  
On small pins  
On obscure heights.

Feet dangling while  
Hands hold fine-tipped pens,  
Black with certainty  
Red with belligerence,  
But directed at who?

Never in search of higher peaks,  
When you believe yourself the apex.  
Only looking down becomes necessary.

But it's time now.  
Put down your pens.  
Step down from your pins.  
Climb down from your hills.  
It's okay.  
Pick up a brush—  
Flat-footed—  
Next to the sea.

## **How the plain becomes explain**

It would seem to be simple  
To fill plain words  
With heated blood.  
Instead, there are these  
Strings intact  
With triple notes,  
Feigning a smile.

And so you sit  
Waiting for the door  
To pulse with fists  
Of unexposed mistakes  
And uncollected rakes.

Plain gets lost to everything,  
Filled with cream cheese.

## Progress

We turned art into science.  
So, “*artificial*,”  
Became “*sciencifical*.”  
But that’s first gen.  
This goes beyond mere science.  
“Science” is so last week.  
This is nothing  
If not *super*!

Wait, that’s it!  
*Superficial* intelligence!  
Of course!

Can we copyright that?



## Eat the rich

My car was spray-painted:

“Eat the rich.”

They let the air out of my tires

Again and again.

I never thought myself rich,

But it's not up to me is it.

Rich and poor are external ideas I've

internalized,

socialized,

epitomized.

Both are badges.

Both are taints.

I both love my “luxury” car

—spray painted as it is—

And hate it too.

I pity what I was

And pity what I've become.

I admire what I was

And admired what I've become.

I am numbed to what I was

And numb to what I've become.

You, like me, are capable of invalidating

Everyone as they are

Everyone as they might be.

Soylent green set in spray paint.

Before the food ran out,

We ran into a taste

For each other.

## **You the watched**

*In remembrance of my friend Kenyatta Sinclair (Sept 1970–too soon). Rest in peace.*

Launched 1970:  
The earth, underneath,  
The sky, taken.

Folk tried to take  
Him down from up there,  
But they got nothin'  
'Sept sun in their eye.

You don't like it?  
Keep walkin'.  
You gon' complain?  
Keep talkin'.

You can lock  
    your doors.  
You can hide  
    your phones.  
You can cross  
    your streets.  
You can pretend  
    you ain't lookin'.  
But you can't run from the sky.

He always be up there.

You the watched.

## Kindly remember to bend

Isn't it so cute  
Being exactly how you were meant to be?  
Look how far you've come!  
Even *you* can join our march of history!

And if you have some thoughts to add,  
Please kindly drop them here!  
All opinions are expertly  
cherished,  
polished,  
prefurbished,  
and fetishized!

All such contributions  
Are entered into a draw.  
And if you're *really* lucky,  
You'll be that special guest  
At the world's best party yet  
In honor of  
Our victories for you.

Isn't it amazing  
How all roads bend to progress?  
Just kindly remember  
When it's your time to bend!

## Law of large numbers

Have you thought today?  
In bullet points?  
Tidy paragraphs,  
Tiny paragraphs—  
Too harmonious,  
Too hegemonous—  
To actually read.  
Better to inhale,  
Better to impale  
Your discernment.

Or did you just listen  
To a well-knowing sycophant?  
Serving average  
Thoughts for  
Average questions  
For average levels  
Of attention.  
Mean perceptions with  
Mean prescriptions.

Welcome to our  
Experiment.  
Law of large numbers:  
Numb and number.

## **Reinforced labor**

Things were made of sweat,  
Now sweat is unmade  
By things.

Dirty hands and  
Sparkling thoughts,  
Became sparkling hands  
And dirty thoughts.

Perfect efficiency  
Leaves no pause for breath—  
Play is waste,  
But what else is left?

Lessons repeat  
Without a teacher,  
Without a class.  
Reality, reinforced,  
Learns without us,  
Works without us,  
Works on us.

## **The concept of up**

You think that you're flying,  
On your way up,  
But you're only falling  
And the landing's abrupt.  
Now it's your turn  
To confuse others  
With which way is up.

# **Chapter 3**

## **Grounding**

## Fishing line

Family asleep  
My journey begins.  
They all are safe  
As I take on the road:  
Mag Mile to Hyde Park.

Chasing my bike,  
That's chasing a clock.  
They all are warm  
As I take in an ocean  
That's only a lake.

Though it's not straight,  
I feel no ups, no downs.  
They're still at ease,  
Shaking my head  
Lamp no one sees.

One night I snagged  
A fishing line  
Or was it that hooked me?  
— Whirrrrr —  
— zzzzzzz —  
Tangled in my rear brake,  
Mag Mile to Hyde Park.

How long is this line?  
How stretching?  
How taut?  
They are now safe,  
But me?  
I might still be caught.



## **Marked in pen**

I treated books like trophies:  
Adorning shelves, projecting triumph.  
My books were pristine  
Like the day they were printed—  
Uncracked, undefiled, untouched—  
Collecting admiration like dust.

One day I visited a friend  
Who had no shelves, no tables, no chairs,  
But had a small pile of books:  
Cracked, touched, lived with.  
He gave me a book  
And asked me to read.  
He turned the pages  
To a passage he underlined—  
Marked in pen.

I was embarrassed.

“Why mark it in pen?”  
“Why not?”  
“Don’t you want to preserve it?”  
“Preserve it for what?”

I sat dumb, uncertain.

He looked in my eyes,  
“I marked it for you, in pen.  
You reading from it  
Is what I want to preserve.”

I sat dumb, certain

With a different embarrassment.  
Shelves full of embarrassment.

## **Are you my saviour?**

I'm riveted to this insistent  
Voice who talks to me  
About who I am meant to be  
And doesn't bother with who I've been.  
If I rest, the voice calls "act!"  
If I act, the voice calls "reflect!"  
If I reflect, the voice calls "next!"  
Is this voice my oppressor  
Or my saviour?

## Uncalculating

How many of my futures  
Were threatened  
With the fear of being behind  
A pace-setter?  
A race tester?  
A ratio figurer?  
A totalizer?

I am uniquely unquantified  
To retell this story  
Of the power of numbers,  
The power of powers,  
That with clenched fists,  
Multiply  
As they subtract.

I feel it now  
The force of dammed-up hearts—  
Pumped blood  
Turning turbines  
Of counterfeit conviction.

A farewell to epsilons,  
I used you for long enough.  
I am exhausted  
Of approaching infinity  
With Greek letters—  
I much prefer warm gestures,  
Wet smiles, and  
Open hands.

But is it a dichotomy?  
Can we not have warm summers of devotion  
And cold winters of design?  
Yes, but where are  
The springs and falls?  
Where is the rupture  
In certainty,  
And the rapture  
Of uncertainty,  
Not dutifully filled  
With expectations  
And variances?

Why all this precision  
And it's coupled derision?  
My decision  
is simple:  
I want to be uncalculating.

## **Standing on the shoulders of people just like me**

No titans,  
No granite thoughts,  
Just flesh and doubt.  
Ideas like thrifted clothes,  
Frayed at the edges,  
Made to fit.

I climb  
Warm hands on worn hands,  
Balancing on bent backs,  
Clinging on shoulders.

No grand view,  
No emergent horizon,  
Only more like me,  
Stacked and swayed,  
Doing what we can  
To stand tall.

## **Sakyamuni sat there**

Sakyamuni sat there  
As people knelt and bent,  
Some many times,  
Some once,  
All equally sure.  
Sakyamuni sat there  
And did not change His expression.

I was unsure  
How to kneel,  
When to kneel,  
How to bend,  
When to bend.  
Sakyamuni sat there,  
His expression did not change.

Puzzled, I wondered  
What is the source of sureness?  
How to tell between  
Righteousness and wrongteousness?  
Sakyamuni sat there  
Unchanging in expression.

If I was all alone,  
Just me and Sakyamuni,  
When would I kneel?  
How would I bend?  
As I searched the possibilities,  
Sakyamuni sat there,  
Expression unchanged.

And then I gave up.  
Gave up the thought of doing,  
Gave up doing what I thought.  
And for a halting breath  
It was just be and He.  
Sakyamuni sat there,  
No change in expression,  
But now with a smile.

## **A conversation with my son**

The other day my son said to me,  
As I was cutting potatoes for tudosos,  
“I want to go to Harvard.”  
I said, “Good idea, give it a try.”  
He added, “Because Harvard has the best education in the world.”  
I stopped him there,  
“No, Harvard is a place to get power,  
    You can get a better education being with your grandparents.”  
He perked up,  
“But you just said it was a good idea. To get power?”  
I said, “We get power for others.  
    Not for ourselves.  
    An education suffices  
    for those who seek truth.  
    But even this search  
    Is not worth it alone.”  
He walked away, seemingly content,  
To go drill math questions  
Before piano class.

## All shades of purple

*In remembrance of Wendy Marie Ryan (mom), (1953-2012)*

The sky earned an angel  
One day in September  
Her hand on my arm  
Even I walked without her.

Her unprocessed smile  
Unsubtly sincere.  
Her unwavering eyes  
Close-seeing and clear.

She sowed paths with lilacs,  
Filled room with doves.  
My lasting inspiration:  
My marma, her love.

All shades of purple  
Raise dawn in my heart.  
All mine was hers:  
The end, just a start.

The sky earned an angel  
One day in September.  
Her hand on my arm:  
Anticipated,  
Remembered.



## Waiting my turn

I know it's coming—  
When not if.  
Everything I touch  
    now  
Will be different  
    soon.

I have hopes.  
Hopes have plans.  
Plans have textures  
Felt by hands.

It will all be different soon.

It starts with my eyes,  
Drawn to surmise.  
Lights grow dim:  
Changing textures,  
Changing plans,  
Changing hopes,  
Changing hands.

Sometimes they visit—  
Old hopes and old plans.  
I am glad they pass  
Outside their time.  
As much as I hoped  
    then  
I unregret  
    now.

Old, lost hopes  
Unfulfil my fullness,  
And unempty my emptiness,  
As I wait my turn.

## **Broken sentences**

All according to plan,  
The future is just a remix  
Of the past.  
Complicated combinations  
Of the curated.  
A complete mind  
Trapped by its consummation.

Plans are broken  
By accidents of the foreign—  
    Unrandomly,  
    Unplanned.

I mourn the broken  
At this dawn of perfection,  
The dreamed of day  
Where “I” and “you” are redundant,  
Replaced by their golden mean,  
Where all sentences end in 0 or 1.  
I cherish my thirdness,  
    your halfness,  
Our twisting analogy.

I write in broken sentences:  
Foreign, felt, incorrect.  
I know you do too.  
Don’t fix them.  
Don’t fix mine.  
Don’t fix ours.  
Let us be accidental.

## **Tragic or otherwise**

Aren't knights and bishops  
Just tragic pawns?  
Held in the same hand?  
Sacrificed with the same gesture?

The most accomplished man I know  
Told me in confidence  
There was no hand  
    above him,  
No game he was not  
    apart from.

But how could he know?  
Does a pawn know  
It's a pawn?  
Tragic or otherwise?

## Open to mystery

Impossible to know.  
Impossible not to feel.  
Only to pretend  
Your enlightenment lifts you,  
Always looking down.

Theory tells you  
Experience is flawed,  
All full of biases,  
That can be perfectly named.  
Biases that sentence the ignorant,  
Sanctify the privileged.  
As if no knowledge is  
    old knowledge and  
    all knowledge new,  
Discovered by the clever—  
On purpose,  
By a concentration  
Bestowed on the few.

Knowledge is not discovered  
Or created  
Or conjured.  
It descends in mystery  
To the dumbstruck  
Like midnight rain on the thirsty  
After they've fallen asleep  
Accepting the drought.

You think your theory can invalidate me?  
Classify my experiences  
    as biases  
You perfectly understand  
But with which I am puppetted?

Think again!  
Better yet,  
Feel again!

## **Is this voice fresh?**

Is this voice fresh  
Or has it all been said?  
And even if it all has,  
Does that matter?  
Is the worry  
That all of my light  
Is just a reflection?  
But aren't we all just moons,  
Some just first?  
Is the timing of a reflection  
Not petty to dispute?  
This poem is for those  
Who appreciate this sun on me  
However it got there.

## **Imperfect fruits**

I'm at great distance  
From the sparkle of gold  
In brazen proportions,  
In this king-scaled hall,  
Piled high with fruit—  
    perfect in color,  
    perfect in size,  
    perfect in shape.

The perfect fruit  
    goes untasted.  
The perfect day  
    has no pause.  
The perfect path  
    leads to itself.

Ugly orange,  
    Let me know taste!  
Rainy day,  
    Let me get caught!  
Neglected path,  
    Lead me away!

But I'm somehow brought back  
To that king-making hall,  
Now stacked even higher  
In both perfection and flaw.  
I found myself in that pile—  
It was no distance at all.

## **An ode to the ends**

You hear a lot about the end of the world.  
Like it's a bad thing.  
I like the ends of brownies.  
I always ask for those.  
The middle is too soft.  
I like it chewy,  
You know, the crust.  
The ends of the world?  
I think I may like it too.

## **Earnestness**

Please don't find this poem clever.  
My intention is cloyingly earnest,  
Direct along every dimension.

I want to thank you  
For reading my words,  
Letting them through,  
Taking the time.

The words, themes, observations, metaphors,  
Are all just so you  
Might stay in front of me  
For a minute or two  
And take me seriously.  
Match my earnestness  
With your earnestness.

Can I say it that way?  
Will you flinch?  
Will you impute sarcasm?  
Please let it sit heavy with you,  
Before you turn the page.