

THRONES

poems 1998–2007

A.S. Popowich

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Thrones
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for Jana Sheardown, without whom many of these poems would not have achieved their current form and others most likely never have been written.

Fintry, Scotland, 1984

The end of the valley
Where rocks are stoned and all white,
Pebbled over with birds and singing.

The trees,
Whispering their thunder of acorns
Over the park where children are sinking.

The wetness of leaves
Under the old school where the crying
Leprosy of knowledge shirks itself.

The houses
Like private parties of influence:
Clubs of Roundheads and Guelphs.

The dance at hallowe'en
Dressed in cotton and paper for the silver
Innocence of imagined horrors.

The apples
Bobbed and speckled with the sweet
Spit of children, their happiness borrowed.

The woods behind the centre
Over the river, scaled with wetnesses of fish.
Playing over kingdoms of acreage, blowing

Away
The congested spirit of the inbred town,
Working at the simple act of growing.

The end of the valley
The end of living inside my skin;
The end of races in the wild hills.

The quarry
Of memory is not abandoned;
The blood quickens, never still.

The Utmost Sea

Then the mariners were afraid and cried every man unto his god.

The nasty bruise of junkets sits awater
Waiting for the turning tide to sip
The ocean without copper crook or falter
The ocean with the arrogance to tip
The scales of salted peters and their jewels
Down to the docks come spilling on the quay
Children gaggle at the scar of rolling schooners
Murdering their parents. Let me see

The drowned men watch from the depths of ashes
And laugh with the best the rabid ocean marks
And rise with runic surfeits to the lashes
And quench with thirsty parables the sparks
Of childish jealousy, that passion for the sea
That sucks too many cracking boys abroad
Waiting for the turning tide of life
To turn for them, commit again its fraud

The fraud of sailors drinking from the wounds
Of Christ the bo's'un, Christ the sinking ship
The lamb was crucified without crook or halter
The lamb who had the arrogance to tip
The scales of rocky peters to the church
Down to the docks and away upon the sea
Walking on the waves he's coming after
Murdering his parent for the sea

Ayodhya / Babri Masjid

Civilisation is the sleight of hand that conceals our natures from ourselves.
Salman Rushdie

Heads have rolled in the birthplace of Rama
With their teeth they have bitten the tongue of God
Many more will have to suffer in the evening of nations
Many more will have to die in the birthplace of fire
Heads have rolled in the birthplace of Rama

With their teeth they have bitten the tongue of God
With their swords they have tried to reach for his skin
Who can tell where he lies in the clouds of sundogs?
Who can tell where he sits on an evening of rain?
With their teeth they have bitten the tongue of God

With their swords they have tried to reach for his skin
What is there but an old man, toothless and blind?
Does he care, does he even remember
The place where he was born, where he won battles?
With his sword he had tried to teach them lessons

What is there for an old man, toothless and blind
But the house he grew up in, long ago gone?
Who can tell where it was in the clouds of the sundogs?
Who can tell how he suffered in the evening of nations?
Many others will die in the birthplace of fire

Heads have rolled in the birthplace of Rama
With their teeth they have bitten the tongue of God.

Ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt?

Between the hideout and the hall of fame
is written, high up on the bone be-mortared wall,
an impression of your cool dramatic name,
a horse from Greece to make a city fall.

Between the dagger and the open door,
high above the common, ugly green,
you dance as traitors dance, to end a war;
a foal from Greece that only I have seen.

Jailed for a Fascist

In nineteen-eighteen he began
Investigation into the causes of the war
To oppose the same. Lectured in Milan
Till 1931 and moved
(in two languages, he would later add)
From social credit to the radio at Rome
Where (promise faithfully observed)
He never went against his conscience,
Supported the constitution,
And then went down to the ships

Where translations from the Chinese he
Unearthed from concrete chests
Of images long buried in the swart holds
Of junks Formosa-bound
(and Kung gave the words order)
Where he discovered in that pale port,
That quay of rebel provinces
The renegades call Taiwan, that
With usura hath no man a house of good stone

An Attitude To Girls

winged victory with impure thoughts
tight skin and denim over a pubic rack
stretched tight on a loom of nerves
darting like taut drumskin up your back

I could unseal with my tongue
your sweet crevice, tasting of piss
nestling, naked of hair,
classically Greek.

simple
strokes of a shell-shocked labyrinth
desire
rocksolid and searching through oceans of blood
for the taste of your fingerprints
leaving
traces
of oil in my life.

exposed in a flash of tungsten
burning one thousand degree white
chalked on your skin
divulging fingerprints
pressed into the flesh around your navel
tight like a drum
or some obscene balloon
ready to burst and spill
on the wet ground
the grey spores of your insecurity
cadaverous
insatiable
snow.

that puffy thumbprint of soft flesh
where your vagina starts to fold
a stray hair tells a story
a tastebud leaves a scar.

Moscow Hostages, October 25 2002

The hatred of Chechens
drowns out the dying tears
of children who stand fast,
escape the falling bombs of Allah
for the choking tongues of gas.

At home,
behind the safety of barricades
conscripts
whisper through the night to shades
of Chechen women
filling empty wombs
with high explosive.

Faces raised in the everlasting rain,
slabbed out on sidewalks, despairing of the morgue,
we grim dead, like poets, never speak,
but gently chide, in row on row of corpse.

There they hoist us,
to cry to the sea that roared to us, to sigh
to the winds whose pity, sighing back again,
did us but loving wrong.

Requiem

Beslan, North Ossetia, September 2004.

If one is to combat the fetish of force, it will only be
by means totally different from those in vogue among
the pure worshippers of force.

Gandhi

*

Akhmatova's Requiem

Whispered over the graves of children
When no-one but the dead are smiling –
This could not happen under another sky;
No far-flung power inflicted this on us:
I was there among my people,
Under the thumb of power –
Weak masters though they be –
I have be-dimmed the noontide sun,
Called forth the mutinous winds
And 'twixt the green sea and the azur'd vault
Set roaring war.

The hatred of Chechens
Drowns out the dying tears
Of children.

Where is the bird of peace
We dreamt of
After the fall of the juggernaut?

She has lost her way, somewhere
Between the Kremlin walls
And the high Caucasian mountains;
Her scorched wings fail
And she drops like a mortar –
A long flight but only one arrow.

Vladikavkaz,
The fortress of subjugation,
Squats above Grozny
And fires upon a captive people
Who dared to raise
Their heads above the firing line.
All it takes is one arrow
To raise a leader like Shamil,
To raise an army in the south;
And after all the deportations,
Executions,
Rigged elections –
We are led here:
More hostages of school-children.

It could only happen here.

The Caucasus hangs from its rebels
Like a withered arm,
The jewel in the crown,
The lost cause of empire.

The children sing sad songs
In harmony with their captors
And guiltless Russia
Squirms outside the walls
And does not negotiate
With terrorists.

Gimli

A coastal town in an ocean of wheat
Hugs Lake Winnipeg's easternmost shore
And hearkens in silence to the harbour's unease

No industry here but the fishermen's fleet
For the children, the future must promise more
Than a coastal town in an ocean of wheat

The youth of this town at the harbour's seat
Are unwilling to fish or to mine for ore
And hearken in silence to the harbour's unease

Where are the Icelanders, quick on their feet?
We never will look on their kind more
A coastal town in an ocean of wheat

The compass needle shirks its heat
From the highway across to the general store
And hearkens in silence to the harbour's unease

The children wear the stone out with their feet
And trek the length of the frozen core
And hearken in silence to the harbour's unease:
A coastal town in an ocean of wheat

St Petersburg

So that the black damp
should cover us like wet leaves
tired lungs
as we creep from the Moscow Station
to the hostel, ground floor
of red brick tenement
lived in by Dostoyevsky;
seep consumption into our

And that the rising sun
should feed our chillblains
past Gostiny Dvor
towards the stark spire
of the Admiralty;
down Nevsky Prospekt

We visited Kutusov's grave
marshalled by flags and
won from Napoleon, lying
in state among the hewn
granite
of Kazan Cathedral;
keys to lost cities

And so that the archway
should bring into focus
its green and white façade
sturdy on the pale
snow
of Palace Square;
the Winter Palace

And that the statue of Alexander
should point towards the
commanding heights
that Russia never reached
and never will
though
she die trying –
that's why the city was built.

Modern Times

Such were the moments,
When children were fed
When near was the saviour
And peace was the slogan
And ecstasy came
But now they have gone
Replaced by a horde
Who cross the wide prairie
To escape from the city
While leaving behind
To sing the sad songs
Until they remember
And bring them to justice
The scorn of the victims,
In costumes of dignity,
As if a new uniform
While all it can do
the days and the hours,
and criminals sleeping;
but dry were the flowers
for those who could listen
to the dreamers with vision.
with their wagons and children
of door to door salesmen
like so many sailors
of death and of failure
their wives and their mothers
in words they've forgotten
the crimes of their fathers
with judges applauding
the nations marauding
crosses and garters
could make them look smarter
is make us fall silent

And pray that the soldiers
And whether or not
To the girls left behind
Drinking glasses of wine
Who builds city blocks
And fills up the gutters
(the girls left behind
While the mayor and his cronies
Till finally the owner
How much they are stealing
And takes them to task
Gives back the city
Whose children will feed
And when they are grown
While the mayor and the rest
Such were the moments,
When near was the saviour,

know where they are going
they will soon be returning
with wombs left empty
with the deputy mayor
for the pride of his person
with the girls who desert him
by the company's soldiers)
get bolder and bolder
sees what they are doing
and who they are screwing
for outrageous behaviour,
to those who deserve it,
in the criminals' service
then perhaps they'll remember –
of the criminals slumber –
the days and the hours
but dry were the flowers.

May 7, 2005

For Wendy

That first kiss at midnight, once the rain
had stopped, alone in the dark street;
You filled my mouth with movement,
tasting sweet.

The touch
Of your lips stayed on mine for days.

I was in fact relieved to be in your captivity.

Will & Idea

You are one of those whose lives are planned
In confidence and trust in your own power.
What you saw at seven you see still,
The world kneeling at your word and will.

You are one of those whose strength stands
By the possibility pregnant in a stolen hour;
In your successes you see the failures still
That crumble at the touch of your steel will.

Each moment serves its purpose in your program,
Devised in the silent bedroom of your tower;
Each decision must be taken in the still
Moment between the fancy and the will.

You are alone, and you think you love your solitude,
But you are just afraid of living men,
Their fallibility, the weakness of their will,
You are afraid, and yet they love you still.

2 Villanelles

The First

Bearing kisses to the parched earth,
The waste land, with breath and blood
You breathed life into me first.

Spring came from your hearth,
Spreading through the frozen mud,
Bearing kisses to the parched earth.

Flowers bloom where there was earth,
The branches push forth buds
But you breathe life into me first.

Alive now, I bate my breath,
And skip the hated ruts
Bearing your kisses to the parched earth.

Sorrow gone, you bring me mirth,
Worry gone, I can now be hurt,
Since you breathed life into me first,
And bore our kisses to the parched earth.

The Second

I taste your kisses on my parched lips
And feel the blood course through my hand
Where my fingers lie on your hip.

I was cautious, expecting to slip
Between my desire and my clumsy stand
I taste your kisses on my parched lips

Time has ruined itself, and ripped,
Exposing solitude and the waste land,
Where my fingers lay on your hips.

Between the sword's length and its tip
Honour dies, dishonour stands,
Sees the naked steel at your hip

And tasting your kisses on my lips,
Feeling the blood course through my hand,
I dispatch dishonour with no slip,
And drop my fingers to your smooth hip.

Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria

October 13, 2005

Cry havoc!
The warlord's smile
Is cruel, his host
Is savage and the horde
Betrays the loss
Of virgins in a neverending dream.

Let slip
The tongues that cry in empty streets,
Pockmarked with shell-blasts;
Widows cry tears of rivers,
Fields and hills and their children's unmarked graves,
While the warlord sends his troops to Nalchik,
Using his tanks and his guns
To muzzle the dogs of war.

The boot of a soldier
Crushes the throat
Of the dissident
And Russia is saved.

The warlord smiles
His cruel host salutes
The sentiment: cry, havoc!
And let slip the dogs of war.

Gallimaufrous?

Quotations can always be found with which to pin Gladstone to a particular school, political, ecclesiastical, or philosophical, but they always misrepresent the gallimaufrous nature of his mind, taken as a whole.

Matthew.

*

Gallimaufrous?

This needs a touch o' the Browning
To put it right –
A light puncture to whistle out the steam
Of neologism,
And let the bladder sink to rest
Upon the comprehensive belly
Now satisfied with steak and drink.

Gallimaufrous?

What allusion could Eliot
Eke out to classify the strange-marshmallow love
Of Tristan and Isolde, perhaps,
Or closer to home,
The bowler-hatted bureaucrat,
The part-time stenographeuse
With the kettle on the hob?

Gallimaufrous?

What decadent breed of men gives birth
To such hollow phrasifying
When examples like Gladstone
Fill history with the rigour of their rhetoric
And cause the Hansard covers to explode
With the beauty of the word?

The Love Song of the Sub-Librarian

The black and tannin morning cup
Sprung like eyelids from the pit
Stained against the desert or the snow.
This filthy wind pricks the window
Pane and fills my ears with caution;
Rain-clouds sit above the lost horizon.

Six months of frozen sunshine, I
Think is better than this cataract,
This murky shadow lying on the harbour.
These pregnant skies, these creaking yards,
Awake in me a momentary longing
For the quiet museum and my cup of tea.

A month ago it would have seemed
A fantasy, a foolish dream
To think that we would still be here together.
The arches fall, the statues break
The flames that singe my veins ache
And all your eagles hide me in their feathers.

Your marble flesh has a taste like iron,
Your eyes are tired with the strain of crying
And I am here to give your tension peace.
The eagle soars above the wall
The searchlight catches you and all
The inmates cheer the fleeing of the beast.
The pale fire of the funeral flame,
The stolen secret of the Yukon claim
Share the colour of the golden ore
And the promise of the open door
And my apple's oaken core.

Green Eyes

She asked, where are the poems for green eyes?
All your poets think about are blue
eyes, golden hair, fair skin, and I'm surprised
At them, but most of all, at you.

I looked her in the eye and thought about
The green her eyes were, lighter than the forest
That we lived in, more delicate than the shoots
And tender leaves we scatter for the tourists.

Her green eyes, clearer than olive oil, the shade
Of fresh figs, swollen and heavy on the bough
Like the filled womb of a young maid,
Seduced by a pair of green eyes – enough!

If I dream the dream of your dark, river's eyes
In my waking hours, who will I meet at night?
Who will lie beside me, her body still, baptized
In the silent room, her sleeping eyes shut tight?

The War Bride

I lay awake last night and dreamed of her
One heart still beating by the lonely Somme
She wears these scars to remember the battles
Only those she lost, never those she won.

Her hair is black like a murder of crows
A liquor of ravens or a paper of pins
Please wake her before her cover blows
And her squadron of heroes comes running in.

Her father has made her wash for him
Every night since her coming of age
His vision soaks her body and his eyes
Cut like a thousand obsidian blades.

She sings him to his gentle sleep
Selects one blade from the length of her arm
She watches the water, still and deep,
And leaves his body on the banks of the Marne.

I love her pale skin against my arm
The thrust of her back and her desperate rage
Her Passchendaele cross, her echo of Christ
And her hundred thousand obsidian blades.

My head on her shoulder like a murderer knows
A disorder of conscience, a concubine's guilt
I wake her, she rises soft and she goes
To the house her holy soldier built.

I forget her name

She has red-hair, dry as straw,
Wound around an HB pencil.
She wears dresses,
Which is unusual in itself,
But the floral pattern is unheard of.
And yet the tight drum of her stomach
Beneath the thin screen of rhododendron,
The shallow scoop of her breasts
Behind the daisies
Breathe life into the garden.
The three-dimensions of her beautiful body
Fill out the merest flowerbed.

Knife

Well-weighted, stainless,
Sending shivers down the spine,
The knife teases the skin of my thumb
As I run it down the length to test the edge.

Your absence, shapeless,
Presses like a knifeblade on the heart
As I run my tongue along the memory,
Testing the edge.

Borrowers

Lips poised to recite a sacred range of titles,
Eyes ranging silent over fields of text,
Neat as the outline of a leaf
Pressed between the pages of this book.

They search the open index of the world,
They run their fingers through the catalogue of cards,
As if teasing out a lover's strand of hair.
They are only borrowers of paper hearts.

Taking them home they strip the novels
Of their boards, bleach them of their naked print,
Press like virgins press the olive oil
To screw out the last sweet drop of the books' intent
To fertilize their heart's most barren soil.

Carmen

It was then, or never:
The weight of her breast in my hand
As heavy as a wounded bird.

Without waiting for the elevator door to close
I pressed my face to hers,
Stunned as the bird that flew into the glass.

The white frost at her fingers' tips
Burned silver at the limits of her crimson lips,
Commanding silence

Then and ever,
The deathly silence of the rebel bird.

Prairie Landscapes

The bales and clouds reflect each other,
Spread over the burnished fields,
Almost random,
Like the bowler-hatted raindrops
Of Magritte.

The hay-bales scatter over the fields,
Knitting together in a sunburnt embroidery
A tattoo of man's map,
Traced against the flesh of the world.

Hysteria

If my own proud hands can't stop it then what will
Hold back the fear that I felt every day
Of my arid twenties?
What flock of choices strangled in their beds
Nestle among the graves of decades?
How brittle must the sound of laughter get
Before the womb I envy is removed,
The uterus excised
In a subtle hysterectomy?

If my own proud tongue can't speak it then what good
Are these builders following my design?
The architects have graven shelters
For the nerves in screens of marble.
If my own rough tongue can shriek it is only
The hysteria of the unspent love,
The unspilled seed that I lament:
The silken gnomon of a castrate child.

The Oboist

I would love her with an alto's rhapsody,
Learn to blow the double reed,
And beat my fists against her windowpane.

Mary

Lonely as a ghetto full of strangers,
Crowded as Nazareth
When all the babes have gone
Seeking safer mangers.

mountain

the fingers of the mountain
have reached into the room
and slivers of the sunlight
caress the sleeping moon
I feed you ice and honey
with my only spoon

the injury of childbirth
has found you in your chair
the fingers of the mountain
comb out your tangled hair
while from the mountaintop I sing
and from the valley's depth you stare

the stillness of this mountain peak
has reached your silver ear
the words I thought you'd never speak
have caused me here
no more to wander or to seek
love's fabled spear

my fingers in the darkness
feel beneath your shirt
I touch the place beneath your dress
where only virgins hurt
your breath grows quick, your eyes are shut
your nerves alert

I trust you with a secret
& a thousand lies
you trust me with your body
I betray your disguise
& with a single ill-judged word
love dies

Cante Jondo

My fingers deal
the deep song of the guitar
like razorblades from a stacked deck.

A shard of glass
cuts the chord in three:
the stained windows of the Malaga cathedral.

Song

I passed a girl on the stairs
Who turned away in shame
As if she feared to find on me
Love's unruly stain

Chords from an opera gently crooned
From a distant radio
"Is it certain that this house is doomed?"
I asked my lady.

I took my children's hourglass
And all their broken toys
I helped my daughters' hours pass
With the sound of my voice.

In the rags of Christmas eve
Girls see clearly what boys glimpse:
The hearts they are born to thief
Are weak and limp.

Away from this city of Philistines
Seeking the young girl's thigh;
The youngest untouched epicene
Is an older man than I.

My fingers bruise the porcelain,
My eyelids stain the sky;
The youngest schoolgirl's fantasy
Is an echo of my cry.

What if they steal
My heart with a cold hand?
When will I love
What I do not understand?

Rejoice (on leaving home for a while)

Riverrun past easels & outgrown shirts
Turned into paint-stained smocks;
The pale hairless thigh beneath the frock.

Syphilitic city
In its tertiary phase –
Such a stench of failure!
Such rancorous days!

The melting tar, the sting
Of burning asphalt on my skin.

My plane ticket is in my pocket.

Without let or hindrance.

Nerve / Paralysis

Is this my nerve's hyperbole,
Tighter than a child's grip,
Tighter than the fingers of an ordinary hand?

This nerve slakes my paralysis
And makes my fingers move

Let me take you to the bridge where I was born
& I will tell you the story
Of how it was built to span the Nile.

Nurses

The sapphires of nurses, the holes in their hands,
Remind them of whom they were born to command.

The coin in their fingers is my only law,
Heads and tails, ice and thaw.

Experiment in Truth

Huddled in the ghetto
The patriarchs read
Gandhi's "Experiments in truth"
And wonder
If martyrdom could save them.

Christians gather in the shadow
Of the Parthenon
Sucking the flesh of olives
From the hard stones,
Spit into their hands
And wonder
Where the other cheek has turned.

Dawn

The lights of the city
Spread out against the sky
Random as only men can make them.
Overhead is silence
Unbroken by a rook's cry:
My word is not enough to wake them.

Hector

Sarpedon's anguish
At a pointless death
Is a fruitless gesture, a wasted breath.
Hector's long ride is Andromache's rest.

Jealousy

Permission granted to explore your lips;
Access to your thighs: given.
Rewarded with your cunt
The foul scent of your skin,
The follicles of pride.

What is the secret?
What was it that I struggled for?
What did you refuse to let me see
While lesser men crawled
Like white lice over your pubic bone?

Villanelle for a Proud Man

The meter's proudest mark is meaningless
When reckoning the measure of a man
Whose duty calls him to his life's caress.

His honour fills his nightmare with distress
And reduces all his days & hours to sand:
The meter's proudest mark is meaningless.

Watch him expose her poverty of dress
Or abuse her chastity to another man
Whose duty calls him to his life's caress.

& in the darkest hour of his distress
Watch him seek out a further flame to fan:
The meter's proudest mark is meaningless.

His mind obscured by his heart's humbleness
Has made him ever watchful, a timid man
Whose duty calls him to his life's caress.

So do not reckon duty any less
When thinking up the measure of a man
Whose duty calls him to his life's caress.
The meter's proudest mark is meaningless.

A Visitation

my thumb nestles between your skin
and the rigid virtue of your underwear
like a worm
or a spy
locked in a war to wear you down,
my thumb locked like larva to your flesh.

your fingers searching for something hard
something you can count on
somewhere in the folds of my body
as if your fingers and my thumb
were agents of some vast conspiracy.

Sit

You're afraid to sit beside me,
Like the beetle afraid of the ragged tree;
As if you think I might attack,
Poised on the wrist of your extended arm.

You're afraid to come and eat with me,
Like the lamb is afraid of the lion;
As if you think I might devour
The full extent of your silken thigh.

You're afraid to see my wound,
Like a surgeon afraid of the flesh;
As if you think I might infect
The stitched-up memory of our past lives.

Bedlam

In this scurvy nightclub where the shadows dance
& shriek with bloodlust at the ferrous moon
Where lovers seek absolution from romance
And the band wails second-hand on a palsied tune

There you sit, old comrade, with your wineglass full,
Waiting for the impotent nightmare to recede,
Waiting for the noise to stop & in the lull
To find out what it is you really need.

Your face is white as clay, your eyes are glazed
With the shock of starlight on an open iris
You are seen, you are witnessed, the witness is surprised
At the length you'll go to put down your desires.

Where are the girls you loved? they've strayed
In boneyards & in stockyards where the cattle
Low in premonition of the coming days
When lovers will burn and their empty sockets rattle

With teeth and cartilage, the wreck of carnal years
Unreaped, unsatisfied, of sinews left unstretched
Upon the loom of slaughter, the loom of tears,
Leaving only carnage & this wretch.

Take your hands from your pockets, you old desperado,
Pluck your eyes from their orbits, you clown
Reap the harvest of hurricanes, whirlpools and tornadoes
Leave us the image of a man of reknown.

Stay away from these nightclubs where waves hit the sand
With the sound of a culture in hell
Where the drums don't react to the smack of your hand
And the innocent flower-children smell.

Go back to your impotence, go back to the rage
That you keep in control though it howls in your head
Give your verdict to all who would look at this age
Like the living look at the dead.

A Comedy

It's hard, Rebecca,
To sit here with a smile on my face,
My teeth as white as the keys of the piano.

Do you know what I did, Rebecca,
Locked in the threadbare room,
With my teeth broken on the rack
Of a tapestry?

I was caught
Drawing a picture of your face, Rebecca
So I cast it in the teeth of the fire.

Anticipating your return

The blood is drawn
To the soles of my feet
Leaving my veins dry and straight
As a highway empty of traffic
At four in the morning.

And the place where your lips once branded me
Is only the pale reflection of the bruise;
The place your fingers once touched
Has been washed, laid out and shrouded –
There is a dread in anticipation,
But your return cannot be worse
Than this bloodless happenstance.

The days are colourless
Like water in a graduated cylinder,
Straining up the cool, slick column of each day,
Yearning for release from all constraint.
In celebration of your return
I will spill the wild, raucous drops across the floor.

The nights are black as ink,
Flowing from the tip of my pen
In pointless exercises of futility,
An endless practice upon a keyboard,
An endless restringing of my lute.

The days and nights are without passion,
Are empty of everything that once made me feel alive:
The cool touch of your fingers on my throat,
And your hair falling past my hands.

2 Valedictions

The First

When the last shrill notes of the evening's sirens have faded
And left nothing behind but a crypt of empty bottles, dead flowers,
And trampled broadsheets smeared with mud -

And when the last shreds of the morning sky have been peeled
From my eyelids like flakes of soap or the bloated highway
Of veins binding a drowned man,

I remember the wall around you, Susan,
The dark glasses that you think will hide you
From the grim responsibilities of the everyday,

The armour of harsh words you wear as lightly
As taffeta or fine silk, as fine as fiberglass, cutting
Anyone who gets too close,

And the hours of work you build up like the walls
of a tower, fortified against intruders,
Such as footpads, highwaymen, thieves and poets -

And I thought of how I did my best,
Nailed my thesis to your door and walked away.

The Second

Susan, your sister's fear of being alone has made a mask of flies;
Covers her pale skin;
And yet the family resemblance peeks out: the wild words,
The dark glasses.
But she has no walls, her gate lies open, and many men have
Passed that way.

She stands on the eastward road and wishes them safe from harm.
Then, coming back inside, she cries, the mask slips just a little,
She watches me a moment and says, "You have to go."

Outside

outside a battle rages
the bars are letting out
and the wet leaves line the gutters
like a junkie's mouth

the late night girls
wriggle their breasts back
into their promising blouses
their prophetic miniskirts
leading these timid men
over the cliffs to rest

the flaming livers of force-fed militants
squeezing tobacco smoke from balaclavas & lampshades
made of the finest snakeskin
shaving their beards in disguise

you call to me from the farther shore
of the dark puddle guarding the sewer and ask
“is that the best you can do? hide inside your uniform,
tear the patches from that jacket
for your rash to show through?”
outside a battle rages

outside a battle rages
for control of these arteries
the cancers that feed on the fallopian tubes
& on the sperm-sacs
that give this night its smoky flavour
its peculiar taste of anarchist cells, rebel chromosomes
itching to come up with something new
out of the ribonucleic soup
of a lost generation

you call to her from the wrong side
of a semi-automatic
the twists & grooves of an impossible year
and ask “what did you mean? when you said our rods
& our cones were incompatible?”

she dusts off her knees
unbuttons her blouse
and autographs her famous chest for you

outside a battle rages
between longhair and skinhead
olive drabs and ravers, their teeth ground down
by heavy expectation, graceful chemistry
& the pride of capillaries flexing the hot beautiful blood
in a piping symphony of oxygen
across the pale albino skins,
the dark & sunken eyes
of howling teenage prostitutes

reminding us of our anaemia
they embrace with abandon in long abandoned doorways

Betrayal

He really did a number on you,
Didn't he? The archetypal male,
Reducing your private tragedy
To a cautionary tale.

He really made you tight,
Right here in the shoulderblades,
Didn't he, the archetypal traitor?
I love what he betrayed.

Sestina

Half of us afraid to live together,
Half of us afraid to live alone,
Half-wondering if silence might be better
Than the soft, impatient musing of our bones,
Sealing with a lie the empty kiss
That promises much more than we can test.

Even the solid swing-set proves a test
Of mettle and of woven weeds together,
Pressed tightly like the lips around a kiss,
Or the silence of a night spent all alone,
Or the nerves and sinews tense around the bones,
Though a little give and play might still be better

(who cares if our prescriptions ever better
the ancient codes of honour at the test?)
For the rhythm and the atrophy of bones
Whose muscles sag, afraid to live together
Lacking the stamina, afraid to live alone:
Seeking day to day that wanting kiss,

Searching in the alleys for a kiss
Which never tasted sweeter, never better
Than a kiss tasted in an evening all alone,
A kiss put to the sword and to the test,
A kiss to weave sweet bones together
(never mind this imagery of bones)

No, never mind this imagery of bones!
I wake too strong for a sugar'd morning kiss!
Bring my horn, my arrows, sing together
Of a man too proud for any bloodless test,
Of a man too proud to admit a better,
A man too proud to suffer being alone.

A man too proud to suffer being alone
Was never born, was never kissed,
Was never comforted till he felt better,
And though the women nurtured him together
And drew the blueprints for a virile test,
Still they passed a law against his bones.

So mothers test your children with a kiss
And gird their bones with songs, much better
Then all the nights we were alone together.

Maudlin

The living look at the dead:
The devils wipe their feathers from the tile,
The white tile of the antiseptic.
Every day treats you like an inmate,
Your insecurities are so easily provoked,
That you fear to move, you hold your breath,
And wait for sleep or nausea to overcome you,
Spewing your reaction on the tiled floor.

Where is the wild abandon of this poetry?
Where is the articulate madness of Bedlam?
Is it too much to hope that you would love me,
Too much to hope I'd made you come?

Magdalen gave your name to me,
She tore the pages from her little book,
Bound in leaves, with paste-downs of fine silk,
And a single watermark embossed upon the skin.

Magda is a fine girl, with hips like a mountaineer's:
She always speaks the truth, whether I like it or not.
But she too is an inmate of this place,
With her patron saint nailed above the door.
Susan and her sister make their rounds,
With nurses' coins emblazoned on their throats.
One shrieks her curses like a dying sea-bird,
The other's silence is a stern reproach.

The living look at the dead:
The living lift their fingers from the sheets,
The sweaty sheets of the baptized quick.

Every bed proves they too are inmates,
Every stain is an echo of their chart,
Every tattoo a stitch in their winding sheet,
Every pierced lobe another shroud.
We who live in Maudlin look at the living,
Like the living look at the dead.

Sleeping

I knew I would have to hurry up
And sleep with some other girl
So that when the time came
And she slept with some other man
I would not be the one that suffered.

Impatience

Written with Jana Sheardown, October 2006.

“The scowling mottled face of the aged clerk,
Drinking from the inkwell,
Looks familiar – is that my birthmark on his cheek?
Check the ledger, he must have left his name.
But no, the icy blonde in four-inch heels
Threw the book out long ago.
She needs no record of those she has admitted
To the lobby – her look of disdain
Pins every guest wriggling to the wall,
And classifies them, according to her impatience.”

Barricades

Pain is a more or less constant state of being, sometimes dulled,
sometimes accentuated into acute distress.

Work is the only antidote to it.

Caitlin Thomas.

The barricades are sirens to my unwaxed ears
As I pluck messiahs from this rainforest of cripples.
Like a badge of rank, a star of David,
I speak their language but am not one of them.
There, where the shadows meet,
I mend the aches that make our silent bodies sweet.
And when my corpse has aged you out,
And bled me free of your affliction,
When after seven sweaty days I lose
The menstrual nature of this cramped condition
Then my flesh as dry as clay will wait
For the moment you might reciprocate.

Mausoleum

Running by the swollen river
Where the wildcats have drowned
I hear Agamemnon's trumpet
I see Clytemnestra's scowl
On the outskirts of the city
The wolves prowl.

In your family's mausoleum the blood-red hand
Wards against despair,
The coal-pit's bruise and the vein of stone,
The snowdrifts and innumerable trees.

Calligraphy & Swordsmanship

The long despair of doing nothing well:
Ascribed to writers, but I sometimes wonder
If you women have a harder fate:
Snapped up, collected like a trading card,
Placed in a relationship, on a pedestal,
Like a doll in a collection, or an exotic bird in an aviary:
The doors locked, and your feathers fading.
These long years you devote to a cause that in the end
Proves worthless, that collapses under the weight
Between the girl you were and the girl you become,
Is that more difficult to bear than the writing of a novel,
The long despair of doing nothing well?

And in those long years, the 9 years that you shared your life
With someone, what was I doing? Living in the dark,
Preparing myself like a student in a dojo,
Like a monk, learning the martial arts,
And all the other necessities of life:
Calligraphy & swordsmanship.
This was my life, but now I have come down,
Now that you have extricated yourself,
Withdrawn your affection, withdrawn your trust,
Knocked down the aviary, smashed the china dolls,
And escaped.

 You escaped in my direction,
But you did not come to me.
So I go back to the endless permutation of these letters,
I write calligraphy with my sword's tip,
I wander across the page as if it were a desert,
And I some wandering monk, lost
In the long despair of doing nothing well.

The unease with which you treated
The most humiliated of caresses
Shocked me into silence –
The burnt sienna silence of the autumn leaves,
Hanging like hanged men from their branches.

Send me, Mary, to the ship where I might drown
A perfect being at the harbourfront,
Soak his skin with tar, and fill his lungs
With the last cry of a heron taking off
For the free lane of the untrammeled sky.
He drowns.

I drowned
In wine and beer and halcyon,
Waiting for you to erase the sketch
Of his timetrammeled face.

Sinai

Blessed are they that mourn,
For they shall be comforted
By the subterfuge of her eyes and mouth,
The fiction of her fingertips
Among the bones of a thousand indiscretions.

“You now therefore have sorrow
But I will see you again.”
How long have I been waiting
To speak those words in a sympathetic ear?

Blessed are the dead which die in the lord,
Theirs are the walls without windows,
Theirs are the books without covers,
Theirs are stains of ink on pristine pages:
It is better to take their pen and ink away
That they may rest from their labours,
For their works do follow them:

Their stakes, their crucifixions,
Their bottles of adulterated wine
Red as the blood of children
That stains the sand of Sinai.

Corrosion

From the yard of your house you blessed the multitude
That appeared on your neat lawn that Thursday afternoon.
The privet hedge marked the nuisance ground conclusively:
The picket fence an altar.

You threw parties that became fables
And the young believed that everything was possible,
At least until you left them for
The epiphany of marriage.

Before asking if I was a Christian
You told me another rule had been broken
And I felt like laughing
At the ruthless little fascisms
Of our everyday lives.
Did no one explain that
Putting on a uniform
Was no way to escape from the army?

Winter

To search for love among the crumbling factories
Or in the bars downtown
Is a waste of talent just as criminal
As cracking walnuts with a painter's hand.

Victoria

Victoria, the apprentice sage,
Sings songs of succour to an age,
I wash my hands and bind my hair
And cautiously ascend the stair.
I wash her hair and bind her hands
And acquiesce to her demands.
No meter, no machine can gauge,
My love for the apprentice sage.

Toccatà

Nailed to the floorboards
Next to Christ's second crown
I pluck toccatas from this keyboard
With steel in the sound.

Nagyszentmiklos

“My own idea – of which I have been fully conscious since I found myself as a composer – is the brotherhood of peoples, brotherhood in spite of wars and conflicts. I try – to the best of my ability – to serve this idea in my music: therefore I don’t reject any influence, be it Slovakian, Rumanian, Arabic or from any other source. The source must only be clean, fresh and healthy!”

A turning
The point of which is unclear
To those who suffer most
Beneath me

A burning
Potential for greatness
Driven like ice through
Solid rock

Though the world be empty it is not dead
The noise of murmuring is not hid

A clearing
In the woods has opened
The rain and grass bow down
Before me

Though the world is silent it is not dead
The noise of murmuring is not hid

A tempting
And the millions of the world
Though they know it not
Adore me

Though the world be empty it is not hid
The noise of murmuring is not dead

Nagyszentmiklos where Bartok was born:
With the heart of a shepherd and a hand of horn
He roared in his silence and wept in his cups;
The slits of his eyes were tattered and torn.
Ready to burn and prepared to erupt,
With the heart of a shepherd and a hand of horn,
Into this earth of groans he was born.
Conducting the universe, strange and bright
With the heart of a hero and a hand of ice
(the slits of his eyes ragged and torn).
Nagyszentmiklos where Bartok was born.

Decline and Fall

On the 15th of October
I sat musing in the ruins
of the Capitol.

While barefoot friars
sang Vespers in the temple of Jupiter
the idea

of the decline and fall
first started to my mind.

City
ripples of Apollinaire
shriek-lipped Mayakovsky
I
witness the laying-waste of foundations.

One minute of silence
observed
to remember the fallen
has turned for me
into unrelieved eternity.
The deed is all and not the glory.

Red River, 1785

Damn you, Mackenzie
And your honeyed harlots kneeling
For a lash of my tongue,
Their cat's hair g-strings oiled
Like a cowhand's rope,
Coiled about my tarred & feather'd manhood
For fifteen dollars and change.
What do you give them?
A place to stay?
The generosity of your sinews,
Straining to serve them?
What did you ever do for me,
Alone on the prairie?
I don't often make it to your town,
And when I do,
Your whores won't give me credit.

Sarpedon – a fragment of an imitation

Never equalled by any (in this kind) of all that have written.
Chapman

I claim a kinship with the mountain lion
Starving, but strong and daring in his pain
Which causes him t'assault the guarded sheep
Watched o'er by men and dogs – casting his all
Against his prey – to kill, or die in the attempt.
I claim this kinship, since I do not see
No man of arms yet to compare with me.
And so I force my armour to the wall
Where, pausing, I speak to one who stands:
Why am I worth more than other men
That round these walls lie slain and strewn about?
Why should the better meat be mine, and drink?
Land, stables, women – all these are mine to choose.
I see my Glaucus tremble, take his arm
And give him what encouragement I may
To see his weapons drenched by end of day.
The noise of battle drowns the voice of man,
So let our actions quench in turn that sound –
We'll end this battle with many a glorious deed,
Covered with gore and shining, not with gold,
But with the valour of our soldier's arms
And thus deserve all praise and merits won
From subjects ruled by noble wit –
Excel in what we promise, and compel
By firm conviction, not command
By trust we've won in battles such as this!
These words proud Glaucus heard and raised his head
And sowed that honest field with many dead.

Aleksandrovsky Sad, Moscow, 2003

With vapours of an epileptic tinge,
My eyes streaming from a passing twinge,
I am still unblessed with hearths,
Uncheered by bones, harried to the grave,

Moscow is no city for living with a purpose
It is full of sound and fury to no effect.
I have no enemies, no lovers, no slaves:
A shambling cosmopolitan without a penny to my name;

Snow

You scraped the sky, so that blood
And ice fell to the earth below:
One night of furnaces, one dream of coal:
One race against a moonlit foal;
My honour in a world of snow.
I misspoke a word
And the sky fell
Burning, a lord
Of flame and heartbeats.

The Instrumental Case

after EBB

What have you sought, my biting child,
Through many a dark night's hour?
Spreading grace and sowing wild
The monkey nature of laughing man,
The hairy sinews of god-like Pan,
Beguile the weary hour.

What did she break, that laughing child,
Who once was you, for an hour?
Tearing hearts and rendering mild
The milkwhite tempers of coal-black steeds,
Beyond all others' beck or heed,
Or a stallion's patient hour.

When did you see that crying child
Awake in the house for a silent hour?
Alone in the cool breeze undefiled;
The faint breeze of a child's fear –
Mother far but father near
For another endless hour.

What do you seek, you foolish child
With your lips so straight and sour?
What do you seek to be so reviled,
Cast out from the homes of honest men
Whose wives will let you in again
To the secret of the tower.

What have you found, my dying child,
In the last minute of the hour?
What have you found in the meek and mild
Breast of the heartless mother,
In the stony glance of the other,
But your own dread bower.

Flesh

The flesh speaks words the ear cannot repeal;
The ear hears what the flesh does not rehearse;
The tongue trips over all the tricky words of love
And bruises the skin beyond my skill to nurse.

Harbourfront

Upon the harbourfront I said
“This too must end,” the air was breezy,
The breeze filled up my empty head
And my voice sang easy.

Elegy

after Gray

Leave the world to darkness and to me,
But lady, take the rest with you and go.
If I can't have you, let everybody know,
That such was the limit of my fealty.

I waited years of childhood all alone
For you to meet me on that lonely road,
So I could join you, I could bear your load,
Flay your enemies, boil their bones.

In tears are all our honours given
In tears are all our knives kept sheathed
In tears are all our traitors hidden
In tears are all our hunchbacks wreathed

A teenager proud in feats of arms
Provoked your rampage in a stream of smoke
And wrote your likeness in a blasphemous boke,
Raised the tax, the drawbridge, the alarms.

I was the boy who stoked that fire,
I was the boy who fanned that flame,
I was the one who stroked your thigh,
I was the one who spoke your name.

That was the limit of my fidelity.
If I can't have you, let everybody know
You take your due, and taking, go
And leave the world to darkness and to me

And set in stone a ringing epitaph
To one who was as constant in his death
As ever sinner drew hot breath
And never drop't nor broke in two his staff:

*Here rests his head upon the lap of earth,
Whose every thought was bent towards his lady
Whose hand did what his will durst
Who loved loud, sang sweet, and stood ready.*

Last Poem

Nobody wants to be loved,
To drown in the wetwork of relationships.
No one can endure the fixed intensity
Of a lover's stare.

But they suffer it passively,
Those martyrs of love,
And the spear of their submission
Is broken in the deep gash of the ribs.

And they share a lifetime's bondage
With an unworthy partner
Each one crying with the ecstasy
Of the Christ they betrayed.

Postscript

I have taken care of myself
Since the age of thirteen,
That critical age when the Greeks
Grow tired of their beautiful little boys.
What aphrodisiac compares
To this personal chaste earthquake of my own?

A Half-Savage Country
Sonnets 2000-2007

seeing he had been born
In a half-savage country, out of date;
Bent resolutely on wringing lilies from the acorn.

Introduction to the Sonnets

As Wordsworth said, to struggle through dark ways
A sonnet serves; to soothe an exile's grief
Full fourteen lines (by Shakespeare's rule) suffice.
The sonnet glittered a gay myrtle leaf
For Petrarch, Tasso, Milton, and the frail
Portuguese who cast her love at Browning's door;
Who followed him to Italy's bright shore:
The sonnet served a cold heart to implore.
And with it Shakespeare did unlace his mind
And cast his rhythms to the western wind
Accosting his dark lady and young man
With fourteen lines, each with a five-foot scan.
 The sonnet is not scorned by those who know
 The word-horde's pull, the swift song's undertow.

I.

O Hymen long their coupled joys maintained
Until the bashful bridegroom lost his nerve
And weeping to her flesh he laid his face
Between her thighs and tasted kerbs
And asphalt, licked concrete from her pores;
The salt of highways from the years before:
The years before, the men before, the time
Before when he did not exist for her, and she
Was nothing but a glint in Hymen's eye.
Her fingers dry and cold roll his lips away,
Tear out his tongue, swallow his eyelids whole;
She bites his naked gristle, chews his grit
And grinds up in her jaws his innocence,
His winter rhymes, his snowy charm.

She does not swallow, but spits into his hand
A new and perfect, fully-formèd man.

II.

An antique vision stretched forward like a dart
New and dancing music throbs in hands
Doomed to darkness and the skillful mix of parts
Raised against the silence of barbaric lands
Ever-present symptoms, the anxiety of the age
Sound quivers like a neuron down a pinch of skin
Surrendering the body to the music and the stage
Enduring every motion, a drop of blood upon a pin
Gaining in intensity from the swelling of the crowd
Overhead the stormclouds gather in the frenzy of the word
Victim of your music: only speech is not allowed
Interred within a barricade, it nevermore was heard
And nestled in beside it, there the music found its place

And everyone who heard it raised his hands up to his face.

III.

Culain's hound in ancient days was come
With men of Ulster to share their new year's feast.
For battle and great tales, food, song and wine,
Every year they gathered at Muirthemne;
The fourteen days and nights that were Samhain...

This have I heard, that great Cu Chulain
Would not allow the warhost to begin its joy:
Missing from the revelry was Fergus,
Foster-father to the hound, and Conall his boy.
Connar the great, high-king, was in attendance
And many heroes of the wild Ulaid were there;
Women also, heroes' wives, and kings' –

The wife of Culain's hound stood most fair
And from a watchful distance combed her hair.

IV.

From empty harbour to whitest crawling sea;
From the chapters on abortion to the cooling summer breeze;
We have looked at our positions and we know they are the best;
We have laughed out all our poisons and are dying for a rest.
From rehearsing all the actors we have come to know their wives;
We have sat through dinner parties and used all the proper knives;
We have tasted wines and cheeses, all hunting for a glimpse
Of talent or ambition among the catered shrimp.
What legacy we leave – two cars, a bungalow,
Three dogs and one canary, eight maids and one Van Gogh.
We have carried on our shoulders the burden to relieve
All those poor complacent buggers from the handcuffs of belief.
And in payment, expectation far exceeds the recompense:
 Every generation seems to waste its ounce of sense.

V.

The whiteness of your throat, your albic flesh
Could never satisfy itself with less
Than this moor's tendency, my dark complaint,
The straining of my thighs against restraint.
The whiteness of your throat, that naked stretch
Of skin has tagged the world I thought I'd left.
Your agnostic faith in blindness will attract
An ignorance of patience, firm defense
Against my hooks, a milky cataract
Floods an ocean of blind nonsense.
Echoing herons crying in the brook
Calling with my tongue: I am the only rock.
 I will place your body under siege
 Until you have been taught to recognize my liege.

VI.

We share both hue and stature, you and I;
Perhaps a drop of dark Uzbeki blood
Blushes my cheeks as well, perhaps the South
Echoes in both our ears. The tall masjid
Spire harbours a sleepless muezzin
Who cries from his minaret, 'this pair
Of lives is one life, though neither lives
Nor partners are looked upon as fair.'
Does he speak the truth, my darling of Tashkent?
Or does he lie for our sake in the face of God?
Does his love of swarthy peoples make his honour bend?
Or does he think our passion odd
 Enough to excise your name from the stone
 Of all the women who have too long been alone?

VII.

The rites mysterious of connubial love
Rain down on me like molten flames above
A vast tectonic plate, all smeared with ash
My back stripped bare with a tired lash
As if proceeding from an antique whip
Made of leather, and with knots of lead.
Devout witness of the unexplained event,
The miraculous exertions in a sultan's tent:
An Arab secrecy of spices, musks and oils
Stretching like a muscle tight with toil
Proves to you the everlasting plan
Only needs one woman and one man.
 Reclining like animals when we've had our fun
 We jointly wonder at the life that we've begun.

VIII.

How the world in miniature infects
Your sleeping head, and there distills within
The porches of your unkempt dreams, the core,
The atom of the real, knitting to it
Every heartache of your antic past
To bear a race of Amazon women
Through clouds of dope, the saline drip of sex,
Showers of teasing, tested with cramp
And blood to wage a war against the tempting
Guilt that pulls you through yourself.

Yours is not Cassandra's curse, to speak
Shrill prophecies and never be believed.
You have more in common with those long dead wives
Hiding stillborn babies under leaves,
Mistaking your abortions for your lives.

IX. Moscow Sonnet One

The hostile winters and our staunch defense
Kept, year by year, the enemy at bay.
To see the Kremlin through a haze of snow
Was a sight withheld from Hitler in his day.
Marshal Zhukov, half-risen from his horse,
His shoulders dusted by the purest white,
Seems to halt with his commanding arm
The dreadful sweep of the encroaching night.
This city seems to gain with the first snow
A touch of class. Vulgarities can hide
Beneath the ice, and history peek out
At Zhukov on his long nocturnal ride:
 Guarding our past for the future's sake,
 He leaves the dreary present in his wake.

X. Moscow Sonnet Two

The Red Square cobbles, slick as glass,
Well-worn beneath these centuries of care;
The heels of tsarist ministers ring out
And echo back with the accents of Boyars.
Peter abandoned you, the capital of years,
Where Ivan slew his son in a fit of rage;
But now Great Russia has come back again
To the fortress of her ancient glory days.
Does the Kremlin keep out Tatars as it used?
Or hold inside some dark incestuous shame?
Does it hide an army trembling in its boots?
Or generals AWOL for a better game?
 The Red Square cobbles keep out the silent spies,
 Protecting Mother Russia on all sides.

XI.

Late at night the fire-engines come
And wake the neighbours with their dreadful charge
They stand like peasants on their stoops to watch
Knights flourish the nobility of Mars.
Beneath a canopy of uncaring stars
They huddle in pyjamas while the darkened yard
Reflects the conflagration in the street.
A family of castaways negotiates with fate,
Preserving in their anguish the memory of sleep;
Like ambulating dreamers they survive
To gather up the ashes of the house
And rebuild the broken mem'ries of their lives:
 How, late at night, the fire-engine came
 Bringing with it wakefulness and pain.

XII.

How long does it take a dream to fade and die
To let me wake from this false sleep of peace?
To fight for love and livelihood; the goal
Of life is struggle, work, and war
Against platitudes and commonplaces
Cowards and injustice
Who, brazen, stare us back to darkened rooms,
Our aches of care, our drums of peace,
The quiet discontentment of our lot.
So let me ask once more how long it takes
Our dreams to fade and die, our sleep
To crumble and our armies wake?
For in that instant will the revolution dawn
And a new and wakeful age of men begin.

XIII.

On Rock Lake's shore the gathering storm will break
And creep with thunderbolts and groaning clouds
All veined with craggy threads which throb and glow
In yellow and in purple like a bruise
Against the weeping sky. The rain will cry
The coming of the storm and daylight fade
Before the lightning and the wind. Then all
The lake will rise in tumults up the shore
To cast its waves against the puny docks
And the temp'rature will drop a bare degree
From safety to discomfort, and the flesh
Of fishermen will tingle with the change.

Nature's strict supremacy over man:
He fools himself who stood and never ran.

XIV.

For jealousy, the injured lover's hell,
Has kept me sleepless many an endless night.
This phrase of Milton's, as clear as it might seem,
To the injured lover's ear seems merely trite.
Where are the aching loins, the fiery brain,
The very madness that love may drive us to?
And unrequited passion prisons us
In chains and shackles, and in jails too,
And all for witnessing a passing glance:
Her cunning smile shining on another -
She might have met him at some club or dance
(Desperate for something distasteful to her mother).
Let's not deceive ourselves for once: this craze
Is nothing but the lover's commonplace.

XV.

A scattering of schoolboys on the field
Run with the ball towards the guarded goal
Abandoned, blissful, unaware
Of dying childhood and the rising pall
Of living, working, dying in an age
Without a sense of richness, nor a strange
Delight in mystery which might save
These boys from the anguish of the grave.
The field of sport is limited, and legs
Grow numb as childhood runs away.
The boys are too old now to run and play,
To chase the men they'll soon turn out to be.
The shade of childhood falls upon the day
When children run and too soon fade away.

XVI.

The sun is shining on the grassy yard
The prairie fields ablaze with ears of corn;
The sky is cloudless, and invites the birds
To soar with frightened fledglings newly born.
The lakes disturb the green and yellow field
With liquid mirrors the colour of the sky;
The shorelines to the rivers gently yield
And all below the sun's rays silent lie.
The chattering of squirrels, flight of deer,
Give notice of the encroachment of man,
His presence tolerated on these fields and streams;
His roads dividing habitat from home.
And when the men have gone, not to return
Above the silent fields the sun will burn.

XVII.

Celia's pretty, carnal-minded prose
Has given me a firm idea of bliss;
No music in the world could sound as sweet
Or consummately praiseworthy as this.
And Celia of the inkwell surely knows
The effect of her endeavours on my heart;
That sweet liqueur that passes from her lips:
It binds us two, that we may never part.
Her mind so active that it seems to skip
Ahead on paths I rarely ever tread;
She comes to find me, dawdling as I do,
With reams of paper filled from top to toe
With pretty Celia's carnal-minded prose
Which I will treasure more than she will know.

XVIII.

Amid the cypress with which Dante crowned
His project, strong men are at their work;
They do not pause or hesitate or shirk
The labours by which they seek reknown.
The deed is all, the glory less than zero,
So Goethe said in his portentous way.
The molding of stark beauty out of clay
Has in the work itself a glorious hero
Which Dante recognized as worth the price
Of living in the world of day to day.
Instead he held the crying earth at bay
With consolating dreams of Beatrice.
 Even Chaucer, that earthiest of men,
 Forsook the world for paper and a pen.

XIX.

You are too young to lay yourself to waste,
Condemn yourself to following my lead;
A hermit so deluded by his rage,
His solitude and jealousy that he,
Though he loves you, still he cannot see
That he may be the weaker one, and you
Might be Svengali, the dark corruptor.
You might be the eminence who holds
The strings of my slave and puppet nature
In the golden hollow of your tender hand.
Perhaps instead of mine, your wish might be
The guiding principle of both our lives.
 It's this uncertainty, combined with reckless love
 That makes the greatest husbands, finest wives.

XX.

How does it appear, this lecherous age
Thirsting after youth and inexperience.
It is not your body I am lusting for
(though that too has its fair attractions);
But your uncorrupted purity of voice,
Your nose buried in a book to hide from boys
The blush that thrills upon your nectar'd cheek.
I know how it looks – your sister thinks
I am a man devoid of conscience, thief
Of cradles. How could she imagine I,
So old, so weary – I could be as pure
And chaste as you, who with that mind so quick
Sees through the ugly fawning that I use
To mitigate the scars of my abuse.

XXI.

I'm in love with loving and I hate myself
For wasting away so tame and womanless.
Safety I crave and the snare of beauty;
A cauldron of holy love. But duty
Tells me, "stay away, do not allow
Your age and your suspicion to infect
Her innocence and youth, her neck
Deserves much more than your decrepit noose,
A full heart but an empty house.
What could I offer a strong and shining girl
But confusion and experience of the world
That she should be protected from as long
As I am able: all else would be wrong.
I am bound to keep myself strong.

XXII.

When evening comes, and I have given up
This sweat and work of labour, you erupt
With lightning love and most electric speed
To put me at my quiet, at my ease.
After a day of hulking through the storm
Of travel and the crying empty worm
Of loneliness you will come home to me;
Alone and safe together we will be.
The only light we have comes from your eyes
Enough to read by and a little more besides,
To find the contours of your lips, to trace
The lovely outlines of your open face.
And though the morning come and with it, light;
And though we must prepare once more to fight;
We know, my Cat, this room will come again
And with it our escape from world and pain.

XXIII.

The prairie wind is hollow in its fullness
And aches to spring the winter's hard surprise
It burns like a high and lonely furnace
And rubs the sand of tundra in your eyes
The prairie children wake in ticks of danger
And run through swamps of peril with their feet
Bound in skins and pierced with splintered bone
To make the ecstasy of hunting still more sweet
The tundra sunlight arches into darkness
And falls to stalk the dreams of prairie thieves
The tundra sunlight swallows moons and arches
Sinks its swollen knife into the sheaves
The prairie wind is hollow in its fullness
While farmers gaze and townsfolk kneel to pray
At the coming of a new and awful harness
For the prairie night and the immortal day

XXIV.

The shank of bone and the curled slit:
What rough function does this straining signify?
What impotent friction do these muscles take
As payment for tight singularity?
What nub of cartilage awakes
The night from the trembling suck of sleep?
What vow of tender hair brings slick awakening?
And why? The dictatorship of soft bone,
The shell come covered with a clenching stain, pressing
Hard until it twitches at the verge of humped discovery,
Retracting the pale liquor of its gland.
The shank, the slit, follows no command
But falls back blinking to its cave
While lesser organs whisper in their graves.

XXV.

The margarita afternoon
Spent soiled in searching for a crack
Of sunshine in a cloudy day,
All beckoning an instant in the sack.
The track of tender years filched through
A pair of eyes made havens;
True blossoms of blood-orange, granite-blue,
And hair black as ravens.
Keep an ear out for a shattered glass
Whimpered in nations, sulking through gain,
Blown up like horses, bludgeoning the grass;
Painted like a harlot groping for pain.
Seated on an island like a cowgirl,
Nestled in sand to her childbearing hips,
Whispering in cannons, this is the only world
That ever snuck between my cheating lips.

XXVI.

Until the thunder speaks I will not cross myself;
A soldier finds his moment in the light.
The rest are lost in shadow like childhood itself,
Without a name to whisper in the night.
Until the thunder speaks the prisoners will work
On paper allocutions of their crimes
Until the day is over and the overseer sleeps
And the prisoners surrender to hard time.
Until the thunder speaks I will take its groaning part
Or else the stubborn silence will win.

Cold seconds bring relief between the lightning and the sound;
Without his armour the knight has no protection;
And the women of his sagas tear his clothes off all at once
To clothe him in the armour of affection.

XXVII.

an epitaph for Vladimir Mayakovsky

My collarbone wiped clean of every impulse;
Every desire stifled in its birth;
Aborted in the opening of a tired eye
Leaving only shadows and the everlasting earth.
I have not found a substitute, nor hooked
Beneath my skin some cunning surrogate;
Only these pale words, like shadows, bridge
The gap between ragged stain and bullet.
Some day when I find that sound is not enough
To cover up my lonely nakedness
They will find me in an attitude of peace
Pretending to be nothing more than sleeping.
Then will they take my ugly corpse away,
Wipe clean my collarbone, and let the rest decay.

XXVIII.

Stern as early parenthood, the unforgiving God
Reflected in the furnace of your scent
Blasts criminal reactions from your brotherhood at lauds
And smothers my intentions in your abernethy tent
As neutered dragonflies conceal the legendary haste
With which I try to dive beneath your richteabiscuit clothes.
Attacking with my puny claws your bourboncreamy waist,
The schoolgirl honour hidden by your emptyheaded oaths,
We fly in swarms of envy and of dread uncertainty
Through dreams of infiltration and of desolated homes.
You gather up my life, and bring it to me presently,
A rearranged new order for my bones,
And the closet that you empty of my enigmatic dust
Leaves me free to cast aside my myths, my images, my rust.

XXIX.

Whose heart with fear doth freeze, with love doth fry.
In soaring heights with majesty unguessed,
Amid the blue earth-fearing firmament,
The lover in his anguish remains blessed.
Thule, the period of cosmography,
Doth give the lover ample scope to roam.
The fire by which he burns, the ice he fears,
Attracts him to high places, where alone
He searches for the voice that whispers clear
In the lover's pierced and baited ear.
The voice insists, "thou canst compare
No beast of earth, nor all the birds of air,
With love, that drags you on, perhaps to die:
These things seem wond'rous, yet more wond'rous I."

XXX.

Cunning stronghold of virtue and of strength,
Last outpost of Christian purity of thought,
A charity of daughters raised apart
From barbarians who, to any length,
Would seek to spoil that paradise on earth.
Among the cedars and the pine trees of the north,
Where children grow up proud and straight and strong
Like the trees themselves, there I belong.
And yet I ask myself how long I'd last
Among the catechisms and the hellfire blasts
From pulpits raised atop hypocrisy;
How long before my dread apostasy
Would be exposed, and I cast out,
For the insufferable crime of doubt?

XXXI.

I want to talk about her all the time
In short clear words that all might understand.
I want to talk about her downcast face,
Her laughing eyes, the gestures of her hand.
I want to speak plainly to her listening ear
And hear her answer with her patient mouth.
Her lips are red, her skin is light and here,
Here is a body to sing about.

But all I have in place of open words
Are muddled line and stilted rhythm
Which muddy the occasion of my speech
And push her even further from my reach.
 This ancient language I am not master of
 Does bid me forfeit this bloody game of love.

XXXII.

Art and inexperience within a subtle frame,
She burns like a virgin in a sacrificial flame;
Held back from all the snares in this dark and stunning world,
Laying down the law like some unseemly, fractured pearl.
Every man around her wears his heart upon his sleeve,
Yet every man must swallow whole his pride before she leaves.
Could I revive within me both her symphony and song,
Or call back to my memory the things that I did wrong;
Say, how much I loved her, how I wished that she could stay.
Then I would not have to suffer every blessed endless day.
If I was near her now I doubt that I'd survive
(How long can a furnace keep an icy heart alive?).
But this affair was over when it had just begun;
She rode back to Alberta and took away the sun.

XXXIII.

I in my grieving troubles like an Irish feast
Of double murders and nerves of copper trinities
Deep in star-flung majesties of strongholds
I mantra teasing syllables into cries for peace.
Like priests of hubris inching through hoarfrost
I am cuckolded and patient in too many things,
I wait all morning for the night to come:
The sainted night of pale magnesium.
Miraculous are the cloud-burnt faces
Raised blaspheming to an angry, empty sky.
I pity only the stonebacked masons
Maggoting the barren fields like flies.
Rogue and tribal states shall be my allies,
And I will fool them like cadavers in the breach.
Like a spy in my grieving troubles,
I have sold my only secret to mine enemies.

XXXIV.

The unabating loneliness of travel
West over the snickering prairie, leaving
Home and safety, warm nights and solitude –
All right, that was ungenerous, better call it
Loneliness than solitude, the anguish
Of the unaccustomed traveller.

This talent masks an evening wolf
This gift with children fortifies remorse
Gulfs expectation, renders flesh futility
And seems to pierce an unexpected source
Of panic and the flowing forth of words
A source of pride but also of dark shame
A revelation of my shortcomings
A revocation of my name.

XXXV.

The scout-watch by their hosts cried, Lords!
Here be your enemies at your hand,
Ready at the least command to steal
The strength of men to make them bricks of sand
Without lime to crumble and to wither as a life
Beneath the vanity of ages, the vanity of men
Searching every hostel for a wife.

And there the scout-watch silent stood
While mercenary warcries strip't their lord
With sound. The scattered sonics rendered him
And dropt upon the ground a sword
Molded in an image just as brave
As King Canute amid the scouring waves:
Then marched the scout-watch to his lonely grave.

XXXVI.

Skull and shell and carapace,
Love's wanton, ambling nymph
Comprise the saviour of the race:
A god with cancer of the lymph.
The stain of jism marks his gist;
His brow with chrism has been christ
Wherever there were mouths, he kissed
And regretted enemies he missed.
Achilles' weakness, a changeling in the blood
Does crab his kanker to the heart and pith,
The marrow that hides beneath the hood
And noble keeps him from the pride of kith.

Daily humiliations crave his tragedy
And all his strength dissolves in agony.

XXXVII.

That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow
Is the sin original that cramped my style
And kept me from the wedding and the aisle
And stood behind my shoulder, crying “no”-
This was how I felt a year ago.
But now the laughing word’s a cheerful “yea”
And every morning promises a day
Of confidence and belief in my own strength
Which cleans the weakness from my body’s length
And lets me live amid this field of death,
The only living person, looking down
The barrel of a gun at all my wasted breath.

The field of Golgotha and dead men’s skulls
Redeems me from the grave to soar with gulls.

XXXVIII.

Be strong in your deformity
And proud of your discomfort
Marked with ash upon your brow
Which no man ever conquered.
Your loud, portentous voice belies
The quiet of your heart
The repose of your silent songs
The harbour of your art.
You are a man apart, my lord,
A cripple to make men wince
Your wearisome condition
Is the envy of a prince,

The seed of a sedition,
A spark of brilliance.

XXXIX.

Absence is the noble truce,
And proximity the balance
Weighed together in scales so fine
That a breath alone would challenge
And disturb the quiet of the mind
Which rules the heart and often brakes
Passion's wild, unruly kind
Which does not pause, but takes,
Unmindful of the consequence:
That Death alone will follow
A squalid life in self-defence,
A marriage lorn and hollow.

XL.

Full martyrs we to carvers bound
Like slaves in whoreson galleys
Our strokes we suckle like raw stone
In the master carver's alley.
Half green and growing, the desire
To take to bed a foolish girl,
To stretch her on a cataract,
Expose her to the world
Of falcons, stones, and glaciers,
The helpmeet of Prometheus...

But to your own unflinching gaze
Turn now and do not falter,
Even the Titan's fruitful rays
Have proven to be halters.

XLI.

This rude and barbarous kingdom,
Whose love is of the phoenix kind
Grows stale to me, is overgrown
With weeds; no shelter from the wind
Is gained by evening, my lover's face
Is raw with crying, her baby dead
And sleeping in God's grace;
Her wounds, her royal bed.
Provide, my lord, your servant
With the means for his survival:
Beer and poetry will suffice,
And the frustration of a rival.

XLII. Sycorax

Sometimes am I

All wound with adders, who with cloven tongues

Do hiss me into madness.

Display me crucified above

To take the sting out of the sight

Of drowning men clinging to stars

And dashed rocks in the dead of night

Let Caliban shake his dreary hips

In time to music made to sweet

And simplify these cycles

Of insurgence, battle, and defeat

Let the rocks shout you are the godless man

Let the god drown in the pistol of rain

Let him pull the trigger and sink

To the ground and the dark stain

Display me, caught in the act of love

Beneath the lights, behind the police tape

Let me pull this carcass one last time

Through acres of humility and nakedness

And there embrace the pistol's stark monstrosity.

XLIII.

We never got to know each other well,
Both of us too shy to speak our minds.
But we recognized at once, beneath the shell
There lay a heart both charitable and kind.
Worth the effort to uncover, though the work
Be slow and hard and sometimes dreary,
And both of us too innocent to know
In what direction we would be less weary.
And so our life together faded slowly
From the first kiss to the last quiet goodbye
What we had was neither dark nor holy
But pure and simple and I'm glad we tried.
 I won't forget you, and the things you did
 Though both our hearts remain forever hid.

XLIV.

An unanswered question presses on my throat;
The probing knife-edge of decision
Tickles beneath a hidden fold of skin
That marks the damage done by my condition.
Hundreds, millions, weep in fear, keeping
One eye out for me, the Cross of legend, leaping
Crimes and judgements with my inks and pens:
They little know how much their fear depends
On my questions, knives and indecisions,
My hours of vision and revision.

My canvas is a fragile film of thought
Which stinks of love, and all that love has wrought.

XLV.

Here am I, a midwife to lovers
And never loved in turn –
Spending my power in the service of others,
While they in their rapture allow me to burn.
Forgotten as ancient words ungraced
By tongues for many a bygone year –
Where is the heart I might unlace?
Where are the lips that will stop my tears?
This burden I bear is like Narnia's winter:
Never Christmas but always cold.
This heart that I have is a buried splinter:
Burrowing deeper as I grow old.
There is no remedy for a parfit knight
Who works his arms for other men's delight.

XLVI.

I stood in the rain and watched them speak.
She smiled as openly as I had ever seen.
I made the mistake of thinking he was weak
And she and I were always might-have-been.
When they came down she laughed and said
“Go home!”, and like a son I went.
But all night long the ghosts disturbed my bed
Of all the love that I had never spent,
Spending instead my energy to keep
Displeasure from my friends, and pain from all the rest:
To spare the heart its ache, the dream its sleep,
I counted above even vanity the best.
Who then to blame for choices I had made:
If she had wept I doubt I would have stayed.

XLVII.

The neverending rain of Halifax
Drives me indoors, the grey light
A palliative vision, the faint cracks
Of sunshine a substitute for sight.
The noise of raindrops defines the silence
As a fly would on a lazy summer's day:
There is no summer here, and violence
Still seems very far away.
Single, but not alone, I lose an hour
In Sterne, in Eliot, and even my lord Brooke;
My loneliness is not able to devour
The pleasure I get, lost inside my book.
For who is lonely with such constant friends,
As men whose company does not fade or bend.

XLVIII.

Far from my natural habitat,
Free from the hearth, and alone,
The pleasant harbour of Halifax
I've taken to calling my home.
Come maidens and men with your sea-legs
And listen to the waves on the shore:
The harvest will wait till the strand begs
The ocean to kiss it no more.
Come maidens, be ruled by my singing,
The waves and the harbour ignore:
My lady has sent back my letter
And said, do not bother me more.

XLIX.

My arms are weak, my chest hurts,
I find it hard to breathe:
Whoever kisses her neck first
Will be the last to leave.
My weakness, the bruised glands,
Fuse paranoia and disdain
The mark on her throat of my dry hands
Does not justify my pain.
These coercions of conformity,
This drift of silence
Deeper than snow, the enormity
Of my passion for violence,
Is the size of my deformity.

Like a Baron whose line is extinguished,
My hour of struggle is finished.

L.

He comes but like a harbinger, being sent
To liven up these parties and to spurn
Discomfort, the pride of wills being bent
By suffering, and by learning being burnt.
The crown prince of tinseltown,
Unconscious on the ground,
Does not see the contracts flutter,
Softly, floating slowly down.
He's the prince of wine and roses,
He's the television's soul,
Watching all his petty rivals
Climbing from the hole

You drilled into the ground:
Content's a kingdom, and he wears that crown.

LI.

A city's not a city till it snows:
This much I recognize, and yet
A woman's still a woman in her clothes,
At least, the women that I have lately met.
The truth is that a city nightly clothed
In frost and sheathed in ice and wind
Is more a city than when summer's glow
Infuses all the sidewalks, all the streets
With walkers, lovers, beggars, gamblers, cheats.
And women with their clothes on seem the same:
Hiding their true nature from the gaze
Of winter.
But when January came,
I saw a city and a woman fully clothed
In ice, and snow, and I did love them both.

LII.

The tyrannous dominion of a face
Gives hope to mankind's treachery.
There is no thought of violence, no race
To gain her body for my lechery.
I love the freckles on her nose, the way
She keeps her lips pursed tight to hide
The braces she has been convinced to wear
And the simple dullness of her nut-brown hair.
No impure thought corrupts my admiration,
And yet I see her face all night before me
Like Macbeth's dagger, or his lady's spot:
No perfume of Arabia will sweeten this poor hand.
I am prepared to fire my lady's shot,
To fly if she should bid me, or to stand:
The tyrannous dominion of her face
Gives me fresh hope that in the world lies grace.

LIII. January 8, 2006

J.S.

It's nice to be a grown-up for a change,
To feel what Miller felt for Anais;
To touch you with no childish breach
Of decency: childishness is strange.
We laugh, of course: our veil is silliness
To cover up what modesty remains.
I know you, as I do, take great pains
To laugh and grope and show your willingness.
I try to be as honest as a poet
As you to be as willful as a woman;
If there's a price to pay for being human
Then you and I will gladly earn and owe it.
 This sonnet serves my happiness to speak
 At this, the end of our affair's first week.

LIV. January 21, 2006

I know sometimes I bet my wit and lose;
Sometimes I find it difficult to speak
Clear enough for you – you are used
To poise and pride and openness and truth.
I do my best to stay upright and clear,
Not let you down, not give in to fear
Or doubt - another vice of men -
To be worthy of my girl again.
The sky drops its load of rain
And tears the velvet of the crowded hour
Alone in the apartment where I press
The tension from your limbs with my caress.
 I am caught in the romance of the easy lie
 With only you to ease my tired eye.

[And after silence, wit once again returns
to hide the scars, the blisters, and the burns. - J.S.]

LV.

Condemned to freedom, this situation
Reeks of straitjackets, and the cheap
Scent of stale beer, this shopkeeper nation
Hoisted above the uneasy sleep
Of heroes, muttering in their moustache-cups
The dreams of damsels, eking out fortunes,
Suffering through daydreams, important,
Useful, unlike their ragged husbands – but
What about the young men, what about the girls,
Those whose lives spread out like Ocean,
Whose minds are free of all convention,
Whose flesh contains the only hope o’the world?
Their diagram dissolves beneath their parents’ tyranny,
Their cousins’ love, their children’s villainy.

LVI.

After years of self-doubt and timidity
I found myself at last, a strong, outgoing man,
Knowing my own mind, unafraid of reality,
Action, or the need to take a stand.
But now I see in you so much to admire,
So much to live up to, a challenge to my pride,
My complacency, my raging ego, and a fire
Set beneath my cop-outs, my illusions, and they die.
You complete my sonnet with a flash of intuition,
An insight I was blind to, and I can see
The hidden depths you hide behind a gloomy fiction
Among the public you disdain, but never flee.
Flight you see as just one more deception,
One more imprecision, one more crutch.
You drive me to appreciate my own reflection,
And to be a better man, which matters much
 To me, who still has much to learn,
 From you, in whose clear flame I burn.

LVII.

When, in disgrace, I sat alone and wept
For my outcaste state with bootless cries,
I picked up that slim volume which I kept
Close at hand in the table by my bedside,
And read over Shakespeare's second sonnet
Which ascribed to love the power to ease
The pain of solitude, and thinking on it
I felt there was something missing, a tease,
An absence that did not comfort me.
It took a while before I thought it through:
"Thy sweet love rememb'ed such wealth brings"
But having no love to think on, the sonnet rings
Empty to my desolate heart and mind,
Quick to search for love, never, it seems, to find.

LVIII.

Is constant love deemed here but want of wit?
By my lady's cruelty I would count it so,
By her pride and disdainfulness she makes me go,
And in my quiet apartment bids me sit
And wait her pleasure, bids me wait all night,
And in the morning she greets me cold as stone,
As if she'd rather be alone
Than bear the injury of my lovelorn sight.
Than bear the witness to my broken state
For which the blame is hers, how another's?
Since only she commands the whip and tether
That binds me to her, and drives me under weight
Of loss, of her eternal enmity,
Never to give up this slave's security.

LIX.

The dark days of my virginity
I thought behind me
And she was willing (so it seemed)
To strengthen my infirmity.
But stress too great to bear took hold
Upon my lady's charity
And I condemned to one more year
Of unrelieved fragility.
I cannot blame her for the end
Of our love's jaunts and jollities.
I blame myself, however, for
Deficient masculinity.
My love grows every year
In fecund- and fertility.
I might fill a thousand wombs with
A million heirs to poetry.
But love evades my reach and I
Do suffer in my gravity.

LX.

As Yeats once said, to weave sweet sounds
Is harder work than all the martyrs lost
To memory; but why should I expound
To you all the Rubicons I've crossed?
Although you never spoke of it at school
(Your throat dry with the joy of being dutiful)
You watched your sisters play at being fools
While you worked hard at simply being beautiful.
And now you stand secure in all you hold
Like a sailor long since won his legs:
A little confident, a little secretive, but bold,
You suffer only worshippers who beg
So you may rise and coldly walk away
Leaving them to weave words as they may.

LXI.

An early Sunday morning this far north,
Still dark and cold at nearly eight o'clock;
I dress in silence, drink tea and lock the door
Behind me, set off for the corner of the block.
Swathed in wool, kept warm, prepared
For my office job with its indolence and boredom,
A figure caught my eye: undressed
Or so it seemed: a frozen stitch of whoredom.
I watched the woman ply the age-old trade,
Slow her gait to draw a passing glance
From every slowing driver in parade
As if in curious innocence or happenstance.
The darkness was as solid as the middle of the night
While innocence and love died slowly, from frostbite.

LXII.

Like a coven or conventicle
You huddle round the microphone
And in this mass of tentacles,
Of thrashing limbs and dancing bones
She holds the cups and pentacles
You hold the sword alone.

Teasing you, her lips are open,
To breathe the fetor of the crowd;
Your hands are open too, expecting
All your hopes to be allowed;
The crowd engulfs you, sloping
Towards the gathering shroud.

And you, you understated fool, you think
That in this crowd you are the weakest link.

LXIII.

I have a secret hope that one day she
Will tame the wild urge living still:
The urge to fight, to gain a new complexity,
The urge to resurrect the things I kill,
The urge to swallow whole reptilian lovers
The urge to feel the anatomic thrill
Of making new worlds underneath the covers,
To play the game until our cover blows.
With a wife like that I would abandon India,
All her worn-out faiths, the satisfaction
Of dismal conflict, like the white-noise of the wind
To an autistic patient mistaking dreams for action.

Of all my dreams, the only still to show:
To find a wife like that and let my urges go.

LXIV.

From a line by Anthony Burgess.

Thin panther kittens locked in clawless play*
Awake the neighbours at the crowing day
And draw weak beads of blood upon the chest
Of a dancing girl dying for a rest.
Too late the neighbours rush to the dancer's side
All worn and calloused from long years of pride
Like the panthers' toe-pads and the sceptered bride,
Wounded by love like the spear in Christ's side;
Awake, the neighbours at the crowing day,
Thin panther kittens lock in clawless play.
The claws are mine, the blood is hers, and never
Can the tapestry of veins in us be severed;
If for example you had said to me
"The dancer died", I still would not be free.

*Enderby Outside.

LXV.

I can leave behind my legends,
You can leave behind your cross,
We can finally come together
To supplement the welcome loss
Of our hangups, our neuroses,
And the nights of bitter fear
Conjured up by childish gnoses
Dispelled by passing years.
You are calm and I am confident
That with childhood behind us
The stress will ease and only memory
Will linger to remind us
Of childhood's choices, poised on the lip of life
Like Damocles (the hair, the wind, the knife).

LXVI.

I wish I could erase the memory of men
Long past, and their betrayals too; I wish
I could smooth out the crease of pain
From your forehead, the pain they left you.
I want nothing, I hope for nothing, I work
Merely to make you happy; it is the only desire
I have left. Not even the desire to love you
Remains in me. This sonnet has no rhyme,
And the rhythms it presents to the world
Are the rhythms of my working day –
Working to make your shoulders easy,
Working to make your eyelids shut,
Working to make the fresh field daisy
Worthy to bring you, worthy to cut.

LXVII.

Speak, shrewd priest of impotence –
So proud, so powerless –
Speak to your heart's content:
Words enough to fill your hourglass.

Embrace your fated failures now,
Pray for princes or for laws;
Day by day, with never a pause,
Princes break our backs to make us bow.

Our daily lives are ripe with fear,
Humiliation, failure, the scent of death,
A struggle to catch the next forbidden breath,
A cancer doted on by tears.

But all this does not mitigate the fact
That as long as we draw breath we have to act.

LXVIII.

The clouds gathered Friday afternoon,
Heavy as lead, rust red, a sky born of blood and plasma,
Tinged here and there with the brown and violet of a bruise,
We cast our eyes down, cast like iron
Into a pit of our own molten solitudes.
Some of us have fathers we no longer speak to,
Some of us have fathers we protect,
Some of us have fathers whose hands have been replaced
With hooks, whose brains are injured, whose eyes are blind.
Each of us with a father on our back.
Why are we dumb in the face of such a certainty?
Why do we bow down before a sky that does not order us?
Only one of us had an answer, but she would not speak;
Some hero must have failed her sometime.

LXVIX.

Never in my eagle's youth had I seen gold,
Yet as you lay the necklace in my hand
I recognized the worth so many had died fighting for,
Quivering and heavy as an eaglet,
Trembling like a sleeping mouse, and just as innocent.
The gold was humble, a deep surprising colour,
Rich as cream, incredible as blood:
Always more red than I imagine.
Your brother sent it all the way from India,
And to me the quiet and simple chain
Was like his sister: so rich, so beautiful,
A worthy thing to kill a man because.

One day I know you will receive your stamp,
Safe inside the vault of your possessor;
Your necklace burning as a treasured lamp
Around the neck of an even greater treasure.

LXX.

Plagued by a lack of confidence,
Like a stale actor in the green room,
Or an understudy too long stuck in the wings
I make serious too many trivial things.
Why am I the one who has to doubt
Every second of every day, while the day
Goes on regardless. I, with my natural talents,
Ought to be a gentleman, a gallant.
With my books and music, so many hours
I've spent inside, getting my head straight,
That I have no excuse for acting like a child,
Or moody grumblings in this petulant style.
What is left to try to overcome my shyness,
But Montreal, a quiet room, and the ribs' dryness.

LXXI. Ginger's Tavern, Halifax.

In the steam of the coffeeshops
I plaster hot words onto a page.
The smell of real ink fills my nose,
Not this gummy blue stuff they give us,
More useful for tarring ships,
Dark as a convict's uniform.

My ink is black,
And Ruskin was shocked into impotence
At the discovery – on his wedding night –
That women had hair between their legs.
O! for an ignorance so solid
That even the ships could pass before me,
And I would stay forever blind,
In the comfort of my solitude.

LXXII.

Awake in the morning after another sleepless night
You pull up a chair, sit at your desk, and try to write
Love-songs for the lonely girl who used to lay her head
On your chest in silence; you remember that her hair was red.
The track left in the desert by a prophet halt and blind
Is the memory you hold, is the image you rewind.
No girl lives in the desert, no love grows there;
In your chest there's only silence and red hair.
The roundness of apples in a wooden chest,
The sweetness of the flesh encased in lavender,
The musk of strong woods in her groves of hair,
Lying like a pistol hard against my side.

Writing the same thing over and over
Never won a lonely man a lover.

LXXIII.

Let the world's sharpness, like a clasping knife,
Petrarch, never clip my burden in a pauper's grave,
Never bind my blade in a rapier's lock, or save
My blushes while it sweetly takes my life.

Petrarch, her comfortable weight pressed against
The whole length of my body could save me,
A single inch of her skin would be enough to raise me,
Through the realms of loneliness and the well of my complaint.

Where is Shakespeare to blast his sour comfort?
Where is Dante to shine the poet's way?
Where is Milton? They have all gone away
And we poor drudges are the worsen for it.

But I know, Petrarch, there is no poetry
But the innermost poetry of Goethe or Rilke
And, like sails stitched out of the finest silk,
These songs must serve to swell my heart's geometry.

Sonnet on his Thirtieth Birthday.

See the colossus of librarians, standing astride the ruins of his boyhood;
Marble and granite dissolve beneath his stone's contempt
Etching like acid new whorls of his fingerprints,
The rods and cones of his discovered supervision.
Scanning the horizon for someone to recognize
His capacity for devotion & his manly gratitude,
A woman of warm arms and hawthorn eyes
To focus on his love.
Life begins at 30: ambition, pride, the sins of angels
Begin at thirty, while his sinews stir to the call
Of his self-recognition. He will allow himself some pride,
A touch of superstition, because the trust he sculpts
In his onyx flesh has made him strong
And the song he skins out of the long nerves
Have raised his weakness to an art, his sweetness to a pulp
Of righteousness.

And the scandalmongers cry to celebrate his birthday.

