

THE BONE PURSUIT

poetry 2007-2011

A.S. Popowich

Difficilia quae pulchra

Copyright © 2012 A.S. Popowich, Entropic Press

For Marie-Claire Simard,
and for my mother,
who never met.

Contents

Part One – An Anatomy of the World

1. Electra, 11
2. Vir, 12
3. Death in Winter, 14
4. Imitation, 15
5. Genedlaethon, 16
6. Macbeth, 17
7. Bookworm, 18
8. Patterson, 19
9. Imitation 2, 20
10. Patterson, part 2, 21
11. Sonnet, 22
12. Your Mum and Dad, 23
13. A Metaphysic, 24
14. Montréal!, 25
15. Love & Slaughter, 26
16. Sarabande, 27
17. The Icon and the Axe, 28
18. The Lady in the Lake, 29
19. Platinum Blonde, 30
20. Toluene, 31
21. Chasse-Galerie, 32
22. Sisters, 33
23. Ginger, 34
24. Walcott, 35
25. Government, 36
26. Mother Tongue, 37
27. Another Metaphysic, 38
28. Imitation 3, 39

29. Omnia Vincent, 40
30. The White Savonarola, 45
31. Childhood, 53
32. Myrmidons, 55
33. Song, 56
34. Rue, 57
35. Ruth, 58
36. Dulcimer, 59
37. Latency, 60
38. Infidels, 61
39. Cancer, 62
40. Scapegoat, 63
41. Buried Alive, 64

Part Two - The Bone Pursuit

1. a condemnation, 69
2. your compound fracture, 71
3. machines, 72
4. invented memory, 73
5. long odds, 74
6. highschool sweetheart, 75
7. meat, 76
8. the bone pursuit, 77
9. photography, 78
10. malignancy, a nonsense poem, 79
11. lifestyle, 80
12. the return, 81
13. politics, 82
14. halifax, 83

Part Three - The Coil Without a Twist

1. The Sea Wall, 87
2. The Coil, 88
3. Tom Waits, 93
4. The Campidoglio, 95
5. Amor Fati, 97
6. Under the Influence of Tool, 98
7. Singers, 99
8. Restless, 100
9. Blood in the Mask, 101
10. Variation 1, 103
11. Upsetter, 104
12. Bullwhip, 105
13. Variation 2, 106
14. Too Skinny, Bad Teeth, 107
15. Wildcat, 108
16. Martini, 110
17. Variation 3, 112
18. Blood fjord, 113
19. Babylon, 115
20. die Fürstin, 116
21. Nativity, 118
22. Don Giovanni, 119

Part Four - The Abyss

Part One

AN ANATOMY OF THE WORLD

2. Vir

I want a girl who reads, like, Henry Miller;
Who stays at home when all her friends go out;
Whose breasts are ravaged by some lonesome killer
Yet who strains with copper and makes bold to doubt.
I want a girl who reckons weight in feathers
And casts her hand upon the side of rapture;
Whose tongue is sharp as glass, as light as flame;
Whose lips have burnt beneath a manufactured
Quiz, which she answered in my name.

Was my timing so very wrong? And was my
Strength unwelcome in its stench and in its rigour?
I want a girl who reads like Henry Miller
And like Anais finds election in my vigour.
Her muscles will be tense with a feather's action,
Her mouth wide in the absence of a song,
Her lyrics stumbling on her crazed reaction
To the virile stump that kept us slaves so long,
Like Jagger's jagged song of satisfaction.

There is an unsung bullet in the twist
Of a long life, in the groove of the holidays
Forgotten like snakeskin, love lost, worm-cast,
Obliterated in the blindness of the sun's last rays.
There is an unseen glimmer in the vanished
Hope of childhood, rearing like a stallion.
Once in a while among the beaten, the punished,
salvation comes as one chance in a million:
And all I want is one girl mine to ravish.

Where are the girls who read to Henry Miller,
Whose throats are full with the futile gall of Paris?
Whose slender throats are slick with dirty words,
Whose humid cunts exposed flush dark as claret?
Where are the girls who sit alone in bars
And count off lines of poems like a rosary?
At the bottom of a wine glass, there they find the stars,
Reflecting the promise of a lonesome Calvary.

3. Death in Winter

where are you, my runaway,
across what stained threshold have you collapsed tonight?
what sterile men are venting their sterility
even now across your puffy thighs?
where are you, my runaway?

where are you, restless twin?
are you hidden in the pages of a comic book,
using your team-building exercises
to avoid the temptations of the flesh?
where are you, narcotic ballerina?

where are you, mother?
where is the thread that tied the world so tightly
that I could never have fallen through
- “sometimes to hell I fall” -
where are you, teasing ashes?

where are you, starving virgin?
a year has gone by and still you are not satisfied.
your lusts may still inspire you
to further heights of fame and carnage
where are you, silver spur?

where are you, death in winter?
your approach heralded by hawks and packs of wolves?
you have played this game too long, and your torn overcoat
cannot conceal the spare regiment of your ribs.
The hawk and wolf spurn such tawdry recompense.
Have you found me yet, death in winter?

4. Imitation

Doomes every chance to reap through Crooks of Lymphe
in Works collected by the Skinne of Ewe
by Fingers cast and bound in brasse
Rings for Doome, every Bell cast trewe.
Darkes Corruption nestles Necke by Toothe
by Fingerbone or Dactyl prodding Gall the Sonne
to sound Doomes Belle (cast trewe) in Evenings Pall.

If Pawn to Quenes Rook two, the Game is Wonne,
our Game is Doome, our Darke corrupt,
our Sonnes collected by the Scruffe of Necke -
our Belles are cast, our Game, our Duct,
our Logick like swete Lymph – in Effect
competing with the Harlotes Trade
then collapsing like a Starre in the black Holes Shayde.

6. Macbeth

Released on my own recognizance
My echo stains the whisper in the smoke
My voice rebounds like echoes off the glass
The sheer cliffs that hang above the lake

The brass pins that knit the bone together
Weave stories in the scars that never spoke
Before with a voice of pines and poplars
Shaking like the wind beneath the rock

The wind that shakes the leaves dissolves
The bond that picks the moonlight from the dark
Shadows in the middle of the street
The brass that seeps like wine into a cork

The brass that hides its secrets in the shadow
Falls upon the concrete. Bullets smoke
Wipes clean the gunsteel as the lake
Extinguishes the fire that you stoked

Released on your recognizance
You sank beneath the deep
Shadow of the spine's stain
And murdered sleep

7. Bookworm

A rule, a law, a straight line, a yes –
These are myths for someone else's children.
Someone almost happy:
Him that is alone, worthiest of degree.

I burn the books that give most comfort
To create an army without a need for stories
The bonfire of the vanities was nothing
To the purifying flame of these my crumbling pages.

What good is writing when we do not speak?
A rule for setting English brings defeat,
We die upon our bloody feet
Among the graves of bibliographers.

Unruly, unreliable vulva –
Good is the lay, sweet is the note.
Unremarkable vulva,
Gibbet of bibliographers.

8. Patterson

Two drops from your cunt scalded my wrist
As we changed position on the pristine bed
Then I held your hips like some mad machine gunner
Pounding out the rhythm of the earth's lost song.

When I touched the rough tattoo on your scarred hip
The ink gave me wisdom, soaking through my prints
Not tempted by the quarantine, coming from the desert,
I regained my lost communion with the world of men.

Later, when we slept, the dream came again:
A skull played by a shadow like Cain's brother's drum.
I could hear the jaw unlock and lock again, unlock
The fearful angry tick of the lockjaw's clock.

The coded scream of tetanus written on your skin
In faded scars and fresh tattoos still scabbed and raw
Will help me sleep beside the lion, beside the raven,
Each will hide its talons while the white dove strays.

The warm wet pocket of your soft receiving mouth,
Your sweet spit flecked in foam across my thighs,
My fingers in your hair, tangled in the sweat
And hurrying to realize the moth's dear suicide.

No longer barred from the table of the bridegroom,
No longer lost amid the desert of the quarantine,
I take my place with lions, with ravens, and with men,
Like them I hide my talons while the white dove strays.

9. Imitation 2

To draw your likeness in diamond lines
(the Word, the Flesh, the Devil, and Time)
With your armoured heart and your birthday dress
(Word, Devil, Time, and Flesh)

Here is a monument in rhyme
(the Word, the Flesh, the Devil, and Time)
Your dress was burnt when your heart was heard
(Time, Devil, Flesh, and Word)

Think me absent or unkind
(the Word, the Flesh, the Devil, and Time)
I am far beneath your level
(Word, Time, Flesh, Devil)

10. Patterson, part 2

Back into the desert, a good man and a true;
My first thought was she lied in every word.
The consequences blew like a prairie hurricane;
More than forty days, an unfair quarantine.

The jawbones of the raven in the desert sand
(bleached white as semen on a stiff black wing,
Onan's mother-of-pearl wasted in the mouth
Of Lot's firstborn, lonely after Sodom)

Brings me back to the bridegroom's table,
Blowing once more like the prairie wind;
A fire in my head, a cyclone's vapour,
Pushed me through the breach into the harlot's arms.

Crying like a newborn when the cervix snaps
Attention to the foreskin, to the rubber's heft;
Aching for the suicide of the moth against the bulb
Burying my face between her shoulder and the sheet.

No longer barred from the table of the bridegroom,
No longer lost amid the desert of the quarantine,
I take my place with lions, with ravens, and with men,
Hurry home to Patterson and stay two days.

11. Sonnet

Full of a worm's rancor, prevaricate,
And waiting out my crime in patient stance,
Ready to pierce the hour with a lover's needle;
In the world's eye: a dreadful recompense.
Upon the hollow breath of January's frost
An icy abscess occupies the sky.
Amid that dark condensate I am lost
And the songs of winter birds do sullen die.
My archers line the dark arcade
Lost in the geometry of life's contingent hexicon.
By noon they will wait, chastened, drunk, and satisfied,
As I cross the threshold of my pragmatic rubicon.

To the whetstone press this hot recriminate steel
Then lance my pride and free my ridicule.

12. Your Mum and Dad

There are times when I long to forego being serious
When the pressure of perfection grows unbearable
It's at these times I grown manic and delirious
(sinking at times to despond & hysteria).

I can't help but wonder at the cause of my delirium
(this hunger in myself to be more serious)
Instead I sink into this bath, read Larkin, drink a glass
of vodka sweetened with a hint of Larkin's wickedness.

Like the drum never beaten, like the gun never drawn,
Like the virgin unravished in the hour before dawn,
I have gathered my power, I have marshalled my strength
On the side of the hill, on the river's soft flank....

Outside the bath I hear the distant thunder
And with my spunk, my hard-on, my sense of wonder
I dream of love unearthly and mysterious
And when I wake the water's cold and mother's furious.

13. A Metaphysic

Each day, like a child's puzzle,
Is a different shape
 and must be slotted in somewhere
To constitute a whole, while I must muzzle
My impatience 'till the shape like blood has clotted
To a scab.
 It always
Seems that I have one piece or another:
The sky, the street, the river;
And just as something new comes into focus
The foundation of the rest begins to shiver,
Shakes, collapses from the weight
 of an unsatisfied mind.
The puzzle breaks, the scene dissolves
 and all is undefined.

14. Montréal!

Montréal! Vos cuisses, vos hanches! I want to do violence to your two official languages. I want to scrape your autoroutes and arteries, press the marrow of your delicatessens through my teeth and tear apart your sainted alleyways!

Montréal! Your danses contactes intrigue me, as the long limbs of your women excite the scars in my ears!

Montréal! The Poles, the Czechs! The robbed Hungarians have learned to speak your mutilated French, have learned to suck your tongue out at the root, and announce your future with vulcanized hockey pucks.

15. Love & Slaughter

There are rumours going around
Among the gamblers that you hired
That your vices have retired
Now that your virtues have been drowned

There are witnesses who say
You are not your father's daughter
Witnesses to love & slaughter
Witnesses who lie for pay

16. Sarabande, BWV 1011

August is the only month for rhapsodies,
And Bach the only genius that I recognize.
Dreyer, Kurosawa, or my beloved Tarkovsky
(Those etched medievalists in their cellulose cloisters)
Merely spin their reels, simply sculpt in time.

There are no lies in sarabandes,
The tensile power of the unnamed chord is stronger
Than the will of Christ to climb up to the tower
Of his humanity, and sacrifices more
Than it takes to miss a stolen child.

To think this sarabande of Bergman's
Could compete with Bach's, that perfect statement
Of the tears and arguments that whet the appetite for life
In the face of so unconquerable a death:
The greed that makes each day so sweetly won....

But sarabandes are meant for endings, not beginnings:
To bind the wounds that daylight always brings.
They ease the dreams that morning cannot salvage
And drive away the wasp of midnight's stings.
We are the ones who hurt, the frail ones, the ravaged.

We are the guilty ones who sleep in narrow beds,
Who toss and turn while nightmares shred our sleep
Of innocence to ribbons
Tonight a sarabande will play our tears to rest.

17. The Icon and The Axe

I am not the raven, only a crow; the raven flies still.

Is it not fitting, brothers, to sing this grievousness in the manner of the ancient songs? If I wished to make a song, I would let loose ten raptors upon a flock of swans. Like a wolf the memories of war bound over the grey land and my fingers pluck the harp like falcons, or wolves beneath the speeding clouds. Let me sing, brothers, of Igor Svyatoslavich, and let the music pound in thunderous glory to the princes of Vladimir.

A solar eclipse, an unkindness of ravens, which of these presages sadness, tolling “The sick man's passport in her hollow beak”? Upstart crow, what right have you to disturb the campaign of a king? Black sun, forsaking your accustomed place, you make him blind among his enemies, allowing them to cheat the prince at dice.

An axe upon an icon-screen, rough-hewn from hand-cleared forest, gilded without gold.

The image of the saviour not made by hands.

Satisfied with a crow's life we build our nests in safety

And forgo the spilling of blood.

18. The Lady in the Lake

This is where you come in
Your love in samite, worn like armour
Your arm rising from the lake, bearing
The broken sword of this my dissolution

That arm, that sword, have laid the world to waste
Scorching the earth in deference to me
Burning through the empty miles to reach me
Leaving hostage families behind

Your arm, your sword, has made my soul a waste
Scorches the ocean with ripples of flame
Surges through the empty night to reach me
Finds only a lifetime of regret

19. Platinum Blonde

There is metal in the rock
And bone beneath the flesh
When my father stares
At all these empty pages

There is iron in the ink
And sparks caught in the glass
When I stare myself
At a platinum blonde

There's tequila in the worm
And oak inside the brain
As the muscle whips up
Ripples in the skin

There's a platinum blonde
In a pinstripe suit
Her fedora stained
With pomegranate

And my father waits
In the declining station
With an empty page
Torn from my book

The platinum blonde
In her pinstripe suit
Autographs the page
With juice from a vein

20. Toluene

Ticking and ticking in one man's metronome
You have crept among the pulses of chrysanthemums
The garden of your watchman, the dance of your retainer,
Teaches you the steps of the latest craze,
Tastes the scent of your skin's pheromone.

Crying with tears of basest glycerine,
The false crocodile of the jammed gun,
Laid out on the slab like a concrete longshoreman,
Empty as the cradles of Pompeii,
Frozen as the stone of Istanbul.

Ticking and ticking in the dentist's toluene,
Bursting through the seams of nitroglycerine,
To shine upon the garden's truculence
And wash you in your jailor's gentleness
And paint the hothouse windows black and green.

Your lips are stained with the pomegranate juice
Penelope's stigmata, and yet you are in season.
Ticking and ticking in one man's metronome,
Fading with degrees on the horizon
Of your retainer's law and your own cruel reason.

21. Chasse-Galerie

The sun kisses the earth entrenched
and cracked with barren fissures, torn
open like the belly of a beast, dead leaves
stuffed in its wounds like spiderwebs
in the hope of a cure.

Trapped is the lure,
while the hunters in their featherbeds
dream of feats of arms, husbands relieved
of wives and children, left forlorn,
bones bleached.

At the blood's call they are wrenched
from their beds to the dusty hunt

Husbands bereft.

22. Sisters

Lilith, the leaf of the poplar;

Mary, the curl of silk;

Eve, the wife of the willow;

Esther, the blood in the milk.

23. Ginger

Someday her man will bring her
Watercress and ginger,
All through the night she waits
For his beckoning finger.

She locks herself away
From the skylight and the sink
Till the break of day
And the body's stink.

What draws him there
Her legendary man?
He brushes her hair
She rakes his sand -

And in his burning eyes
She lies.

24. Walcott

Speaking the treachery his tongue wreaks,
The gentle Caribbean made harsh with age,
When he wants to write a poem about Paris
He feels the betrayal of his skin's badge.

What does he mean, Rome is no more
Significant than a small St Lucian village?
The tenor of his homecoming
Spells the cost of Roman damage.

He talks of Joseph Brodsky, Russia's parasite,
Condemned by all the trials he won,
And, laughing, in the accent of an exile,
He tells a joke or two about John Wayne.

25. Government

Who tends the fruit
In the silence
Of the dead trees

As a blackbird flies
Above the wall
Of the abandoned orchard?

26. Mother Tongue

The crow's bludgeon and the statue's wail
Combine to spark this heady dungeon with disease
And break the bricks apart with sweet contagion
Semantically cemented in the history of the region

For syntax still is prison for the tongue
Sliding like a babe from the meek placenta
These men are hard who have hard women won
Hard women dressed in carmine and magenta

The crow's bludgeon and the statue's wail
Break apart the bricks of sweet contagion
That men bear hard who have meek women stung
With syntax still imprisoned by the tongue

27. Another Metaphysic

Just a little bit worn out I guess
Worn out from work, worn out from loneliness,
Worn out from waiting for my mother's death,
Unequal to the ribbing of the daily test.

Burned out in that encaustic flame
That eats up every ounce of pain,
Temptation, frustrated desire, and shame,
Leaving nothing but an empty shell and a name.

Just a little bit worn out I guess
From all the hours that my dreams bite through
Looking for a taste of coy deliverance
From all the horrors that the flesh is heir to.

This spirit, once willing, is now too meek I guess
To keep the mask on in the quiet parade,
I long for the cool air of a lost arcade,
Out of the sun's light and the wind's stress.

This spirit, once worn so lightly, now worn out
In the furnace of work, burning like a solitary coal,
Alone among the flames, my prophecy born out:
I have nothing even like an everlasting soul.

28. Imitation 3

They carried his coffin onto the bridge
The life of a yew the length of a ridge
They wove his shroud on a copper loom
Seven ridges from creation to doom

His brow they washed & bound with silk
The life of a yew the length of a ridge
His cheeks & chest they bathed in milk
Seven ridges from creation to doom

They made him a mask of green leaves
The life of a yew the length of a ridge
And sacrificed virgins from Cairo and Thebes
Seven ridges from creation to doom

They threw his coffin off the bridge
The life of a yew the length of a ridge
And watched as the river his body consumed
Seven ridges from creation to doom

29. Omnia Vincent

“what can they do to prevent/ passengers from/ soiling their/
small blankets with love?”

- Allen Ginsburg, Iron Horse.

Stumbling through snow shouting one last wasted winter evening all Lawren Harris blue and Tom Thomson spindles of leaves I sweat shouting one last word into the black pit of the night sky and I spit encaustic spirit against the iron rail to clean from it the frozen tears of Indian girls bent along the pole taking their johns up the ass and I bury pity beneath the elm trees that line the street bare now as naked children stuck knee deep in snow rotting inside out because of beetles I exhume my parents from the chrysalis of memory I locked them in burning up in an avalanche of cancer while all around the stars fall like sheets of leather blinding me to the heft of the butcher's cleaver.

Lenin scorpion of the sand Mexico and all other red things should freeze and burst at the feather's touch while armoured now I roast the victims of this government in the juices of their own loins and the windows shatter to the sound of Tool and Portishead at impossible volume music as a weapon arms laid down sick men laid up in beds spattered with the juice of love like the Santa Fe train car Ginsburg jerked off in hoping for a vision to equal Blake's apocalypse.

The frozen timbers of whole trees comprise my parapet and I wander on the edge of the sea while the noise of wine and my

own footsteps echo on every spar as if I walked the plank of some disloyal shipwreck and my schoolwork keeps me only from the fingers of the deep a girl sits on a deserted bench counting off abortions in the crumbs of bread she feeds the birds and I imagine now the man she has succumbed to the man who turned mere contact into a dependency as if his muscles were a drug and each of us an addict of a different kind a different flavour the salt drying on her skin tasted sour as a crust of uric acid or the listless gout of some severe arthropathy.

Somewhere Horace says that neither a woman nor a boy nor the possibility of love can please him and since I gave up drinking I have given up also the dream of fresh flowers to wear around my head without work without wife unable to drink or smoke or fornicate even food tastes like ashes in the cavern of my yawning mouth better that it yawns than screams I guess though it takes more energy to keep myself from screaming here I am ready to work ready to devote myself like a Greek trained in the art of duty but still unwanted unneeded surplus to requirements.

Surplus to requirements I spend long hours in the steam room where I can be alone in the silence of the thick air that fills the lungs like a dentist's plaster where I don't have to listen to the chatter of monkeys shrieking on about their cars and their insurance hot yoga raw diets cheap pussy cheap beer large portions kids today old fuckers pulled muscles atrophied hamstrings heart attacks bowel cancer auto-erotic asphyxiation or the ugly vulgar armature of married life all the seedy adjectives that stick to Quinpool Road or Montreal Road Ste Catherine like vultures itching for a free meal.

And which of us is the slowest of the herd the one left behind the one for whom speed and cunning are no virtues the one who finds it hard to open up his inner wound for the inspection of the world the doctors of received opinion chest pinned open the blazing incision scarlet on the pale skin and breastbone white and trembling as Angel Clare's confession.

Perhaps its true that we keep all the women we have ever loved in scrapbooks of memory safe and unchanging without age or disagreement is it wrong of me to pin my women down like that to stop their tongues hold them back from any exercise of body or judgement? are they still human these women once we have loved them and let them go wandering out of our lived to bring brief joy to someone else or are they simply bookmarks then snapshots two-dimensional reflections of virtue or sin. Perhaps the women we love are merely allegorical one Praise one Blame one Pride another Vanity meek reflections of what they made us poor simple-minded men.

I have a forgotten wound less obvious perhaps than the oedipus of Philoctetes.

Those of us born to be martyrs build our lives on a mistake we expect reward for all our suffering and what hurts most is when your hero swings in on his vine easily to acquire all that we have ached and burned for how can he deserve you if he has not bled for you? I'd drink the septic tank if I thought you'd shit in it.

Every day a vivisection every act nothing but chorea an involuntary dance the orbits of my eyes are hollow the skull beneath my skin scraped clean as vellum by the jawbone of a child this emptiness is heavy pressing my shoulders to the

earth breath whistling through the eye of a needle not wisely but too well too long too seriously the ache of love became a habit and envy a daily remonstrance this hiss of steam from a safety valve, the howl of a siren spurned not wisely but too well excavating the crater of my pain like a dentist's drill I chew the foot that has no bone within it.

Light from the bottle of Jim Beam glints in the corner of my right eye scratching like a hair against the cornea full of sound and itch like the diamond of the record-player's needle and since bourbon is an American import I wonder if the light and the itch have been imported also which seems reasonable now that the clouds above Hochelaga have transformed themselves into a dew become fractal reproductions mushroom clouds above the Plains of Abraham yes yes betrayal with a kiss betrayal with a cup of coffee the sight of your two swimming breasts yearning to breathe free as you bend to lace up your winter boots

How can you be so happy in the face of that betrayal? has no-one ever stifled your optimism with an unwanted kiss or a whip the rawhide taunt of your parents' tradition? ordinarily I would cast this inquisition in the form of a song to find out what scars like earthworks pick out incantations in your raw and ravaged flesh, leaving behind only this room this night this bottle of Jim Beam and nothing else but a wisp of hair a mute guitar an empty chair a letter from the underground and a charcoal sketch of that statue you wished one day you might become If only you had found a surgeon to do the messy work excise your compassion like he did your sister's womb, cut off your woman's breasts, unsex'd and hard as a shiv of ivory or marble

If you went through all that for me then I would believe that you were happy to be betrayed, but the warm & swollen tits nestling in your sweater argue back, have less in common with ivory or marble than I do with a man in love, and put forward fierce persuasive arguments against androgyny in perfect silence I hear you have animals in Alberta which it is much easier for you to love since they do not wound with language but only with hoof or tooth or claw and then by accident only you never have to worry that one day your dog will open wide his jaw and break your thin skin (like the milkfed covers of your christening bible) with the point of a yellow rabid tooth Leaving you bound and swaddled, abandoned by the infidels.

I'd rather live with one of those seventeen-year-old Colombian girls who dedicated their lives to FARC who put up with violence were raped by their comrades and took the needles bravely that would bring on their abortions than one of this year's crop of comfortable narcissists so confirmed in their comfort that there isn't even space to slip the blade.

30. The White Savonarola

The moth died out upon the naked bulb,
The jukebox burned with rock before the windowpane
The draft went flat in the forgotten pitcher
Rack 'em up....

The arithmetic forefinger
Of Kingsley's beck and all,
Pricked Jill – the girl in winter –
In her dream's candled hall:
The bloody sheet and the bridal screen,
The humped confection's rise and fall,
The black snookered to the green.

And Kingsley found that vast o'erblown Rashomon
On her bedside table, sat up all night
Sipping the vintage, the brittle yellow book,
While eager Jill, unsatisfied, slept soundly
And dreamt of rings.

*The vulgar sheath sliced open frees the nerve,
The moth dies out upon the naked bulb,
Our bones decline into the dust to starve.*

And with Jill's wrists in hand
Her thighs entrenched,
He pinned her leprous to her resting place,
Exposed her poor anatomy,
The arms and legs pulled back
Like a moth in an inspecting case,

He rubbed and died upon her naked face.
Jill picks out on her lover's skin
A frail divinity:
The slick salt beads of sweat upon his back.
She, stretched and broken on the rack
Of his devotion,
Divulges sweet maternity in pillow talk:
A haze of tar & cordite hides the sun.

Mid-morning and her paltry store
Of books lie in a heap before her:
The octavo of Browning, the folio's facsimile
Topmost i'th pile
Propped up by Wycliff
And that Congo travelogue of Greene's.

She sets them all alight,
Sits back and wonders
What became of him
Her white Savonarola
A martyr for a cigarette.

The moths fly in,
Burn sink and die upon Jill's counterpane.

Devastating canyon,
O grave of Browning and Pound,
What rings, what books did charge their magnitude,
While Jill and Kingsley trembled in the sheets
of their reckless mad engagement?
Where is the simulacrum now?

Where is the truth that conceals that there is none?

As Dr Johnson stubbed his toe upon a stone and cried,
“I refute it thus!” I write these words,
I sing this song, I burn my books

My love gave in and died upon Jill’s maidenhead.

Myrmidons searching after myrmidon women;
Hopeless women clutching at marriage
Like the fingers of shipwrecks the delivering spar;
Victorian silence confronted with the wish
To cry aloud the simplicity of the body.
Small-minded aunts and uncles
Obscenely deny the immanence of misery.

*Apparently there is some rare
Variety of life that might be called “normality”.*

And this consists of, chiefly:

- *Lifelong waiting for a wedding day*
- *3.5% financing on approved credit*
- *The unconscious scratching of the cunt’s unwavering itch*

*& I am led to believe it is easy and desirable
To achieve these things.*

Escaping the unholy mist that crept along the ground,
The chevrons choked his fingers in the sand,
Chopping at the banks of the filthy river
Surging inches from his hands,
Sucking at the clay with every breath.

His ribs stuck out

And his hollow lungs tormented by a stubborn cough
Seemed to me the hollow laugh
Of a man in love.

The fetid mist carved clouds across the beach
Like gas in Flanders
Or a calving iceberg in the dark Atlantic
And the sun hung in the gloomy sky
A dreary lunatic's mooning face
Balefull as headlamps.

I pinned that leper to his resting place,
Exposed his worn anatomy:
The arms & legs pulled back
Like a moth in an inspecting case
To see what all this meant for me.

These lepers of mere vanity
Speak to me with mutilated mouths
I am the white Savonarola
Who gives no man a cigarette

So many lepers press for warmth
Against unworthy fires
Hot as the dissembling hearth of a lying man
Whose strength lies in seduction
Whose pain comes from his hand

On the flames of this stout fire I threw my book
And from a sleep of sod, soil, and weeds
I broke my back upon the compost heap

The jungle's heat cuts through the ancient wood
And, lying like Iago to the hilt,
It chokes my throat with recklessness

On the bank a naked girl rubs her back against a tree
I ask to buy her for the trip's duration
But the Captain tells me No: a native child
Would only be a complication

Arrived next day at the colony of lepers

Where my wife is queen over

- *Muscles tense with atrophy*
- *Palsied eyelids drying out the orbits, unable to blink*
- *The ulnar sheath slices open to release the stifled nerve*
- *The child from the bush who lost a toe from jiggers*

*That night they held a feast for my arrival
And on the tender flames of that rich fire I threw my book*

Time passes
As slow as the mounds of jungle grass
That float down the river
Clogging the river
A menace to shipping

The government, I've been apprised,
Uses poison to kill the stifling greenery
And after a while the poison drives men mad

The white Savonarola wrapped in weeds and doctorates
Chastising churchmen with his impious cheer

The bonfire broke his will, buried his heat
In vanity, and venial men advanced

A womb as full as an elevator of grain
The loins on fire with irrepressible youth
The bibliographers watch her dance beneath the rain
Repeating dead precepts with dry mouths

The white Savonarola
A rich harvest of maggots
Pale as the writhing moon

*I let the pepper settle in the glass
The pure vodka of the ambitious state
Outside the lepers congregate
Stacking faggot upon faggot
To burn Savonarola*

My mouth is stuffed with wet leaves and soil
My child sleeps in the belly of that girl
My eyes are bathed in paraffin oil
My loins engender the fruit of the world

John Wycliff
You gift to bibliographers
Where is your feigned contemplation now?

*I raise this glass to the dream of death
While the bonfire comforts me with breath
Of hardwood and conifer
The worlde's blysse*

Burn me with pages torn from the hands
Of the old bibliographers, ink from their glands

Spurts at my feet to feed the eager flame
Like an untouched boy on his first naked night

My flesh crawls with a candescent harvest
The maggots of flame burrow into my skin
The impassive Florentine stares down his captors
Indifferent to the cries of the merciless crowd

These blistered bibliographers
Their skin as fine as vellum
As smooth and tight as the belly of a girl
Swollen with child
What fertility do they know
Those penitent bibliographers

Punished for a harvest of bookworms

A haze of tar & cordite hides the sun, and a
Cold neurotic girl sits alone
At the end of the pier.

She feeds the seagulls with the crumbs
Of her maternal power,
Spent on shabby men and the indifferent sea.

First her fingers turn blue, then ignite
With the pale flame of some obscure antimony,
To burn in the vacuum of her wasted hysterectomy.

The spur, the welt, the tapestry
Weave their stories in a thousand tongues

Worn to the root
By years of stale discussion: Lust or chastity,
The tired old debate.

My boots pound on the hollow spans,
The rotten wood booms like a ten-pound gun.
A flicker of distemper burns my glans,
A haze of tar & cordite hides the sun.

A couple brought together by coincidence
An accident of timing
The happy fit of private parts
As snug as any prison.

*They look for tyranny in the proudest places,
Captivity in the narrow bed,
Shackles in the boy's strong thigh,
Handcuffs in the girl's eye.*

*Happily slaves and executioners
For the antinomy of love.*

31. Childhood

piss in the shadow of the daycare centre, her unswaddled thighs glowing like great heaving moons out of the darkness, my best friend revolting in the half-light of the cold basement with her hand on the hard denim of her crotch, her vulgar tongue nestling its obscenities in the welcoming whorl of my ear, hard with the fear of all things banal, cruel, vulgar, the unshanked iron of our ape relations, the small & empty passions of the human wound, the blushing gasp between pubescent thighs, newly pink like the fingers of dawn, blushing, rusty as a desire in old & aching limbs, my body despicable as idle machinery, a factory fallen into disrepair, a garden overgrown with weeds while all others' are tended by careful, sculpted, manicured fingers, watered, cut, full of bright new seed

despicable, this my weakness & indecision, my historical impotence, the sinking of the virile chip by rupture, breach, disjoint & barricades set up against all community with men, the tear of the uterus, the burn of air in the newborn baby's lungs, the clip & cut of the umbilical cord, all safety, peace, security only temporary, like childhood, cunning as a glass of milk or the sweet chaste kisses of a redhaired girl, her dancer's body hard, her armpits sweet, embarrassed by her pale stomach full as a sheaf of wheat, tight as drumskin, my hand inert against her breast small and hard as an apple or an oak's knot, her nipples taut, convinced, against my fingers' indecision, both of us afraid to move, too old and inexperienced to learn new tricks

much later, refreshing openness, a heavy breast warm within my grasp, tongue strong against my lips antagonism. Tentative fingers raked the soft & naked nipple, mouldy lips suckled there, coming up once more against the stiff impermeable denim of the blushing fork. A few hours' peace like a midnight mass, at long last close to happiness thinking, despite the womb, the breath, the knot umbilical, that this time it would take like a recalcitrant skin graft and I would be whole, useful, a man at last, at peace

no longer barred from the table of the bridegroom

32. Myrmidons

Myrmidons searching after myrmidon women,
Hopeless women clutching at marriage
Like shipwrecks cleave to the delivering spar,
Like the blacksmith to his red hot steel.

In this city you and I are only pilgrims,
Smoking jazz cigarettes at cafe tables
While fires burn and blizzards freeze
Bringing outcast poets to their knees.

I am full of a worm's rancour, prevàricate
In the world's eye, a dreadful recompense
For waiting out my crime in patient stance:
But now I'm ready to be pierced by a lover's needle.

An icy abscess occupies the sky
And the sullen songs of winter birds do slowly die
Upon the hollow breath of January's frost:
Amid that dark condensate I am lost.

Take heed, take heed, for such die miserable.

33. Song

From Battle Creek to Stamford Bridge,
In the Paris of resistance
These girls avoid the heart's soft ridge,
The hand's rigid persistence,
And give themselves away at my insistence.

And reflecting the promise of a lonesome Calvary,
Deep in the bosom of the evening's pall,
There are girls who wander from slavery to slavery
Ignoring the command of the abolition's call.

34. Rue

Dark men in snapbrims come to wake men that are no less
[dark,
The corpse of a fisherman floats in the prow of his canoe,
Reflecting in his eyes the million moonlit dead
Lost in the geometry of life's contingent hexagon,
Crossing the threshold of this pragmatic Rubicon.

Swaddled in silence, heavy with rue,
I'm protected here
By the uncompromising thread-count of my sheets.

35. Ruth

She said “the only difference
Between you and him
Is that later on he's going to see me naked”

You're my kind of girl
Witty and intelligent
You always know what you want
Especially when
It isn't me

Having loved me for a lifetime,
You wear a mask to hide your deepest injury:
The merciless fury
Of a girl just learning how to touch herself.

36. Dulcimer

There were people whose respect for you has tarnished
The perspective that you might have gained with age
There were people that you could perhaps have punished
If they weren't already people that you'd saved

Our excursions after dark into pain and emptiness
Have brought us to this coven of the maimed
While the needle that you press into those monuments to flesh
Has restored your faith at least in the poppy's ochre stain

A bruised and empty politics of ignorance and lust
Can't bring back the sacred hour or the harmony of work
So build a bunker in the meadow, hide a landmine in the dust,
Romper among the soldiers, take a bullet to the heart

Come by some time and see me, we will knock down all the
[walls
And blow up your brother's towers till the only thing that
[stands
Between the silent rooms of poetry and the laboratory stalls
Is your parents' mausoleum and their vigilante bands

I guard your fractured minarets, I ward off your despair
So turn your face towards me, you who once heard Helen
[sigh
And while lines of crippled veterans go by in wheelchairs
Ask me for forgiveness one more time before you die

37. Latency

All beginnings knot in bright potential
Like the knuckles of a fist
Already moving through the grip in which it dies

38. Infidels

Who tends the fruit in the silence of the dead trees?
The blackbird circles the abandoned orchard.
A newborn with a broken arm
Lay bound and swaddled, abandoned by the infidels.

Lebanon is not so empty
As these streets and squares,
These abandoned downtown malls,
Their windows shut against the weekend rain.
There is no comfort here,
Nothing but the open churning mouths
Of an audience enraptured
Gladly paying for the privilege.

Infidels.

Once before the rain,
I found myself in the pride parade,
They were all so happy to be celebrating
Difference that they chanted the same slogans,
Wore the same leather, admired the same tattoos,
Whipped each other with the same whips,
And danced the same mazy dance:
The sameness made my mouth dry up,
My cock shrivel in my shorts,
And I found myself unable to speak out
Against the everyday fascism of the once-repressed

Infidels.

39. Cancer

Like the swollen appetite of Joan of Arc
The crab huddles, whispering like a dark star
In the ear of the burning girl -
The Maid of Orleans in flames.

These cells divide more quickly than they die;
The tumor swells like fire in the wood,
A mass of claws, a mutant in the gene,
And the sins of the tribe are wiped clean.

The crab huddles like an obscene star
A mass of claws, a mutant in the cell
And in the gene

It has the appetite of Joan of Arc
To burn the world down. Its children
Never die, their suicides bring
No advantage to the organism

The cells divide more quickly than they die
The tumor swells like fire in the wood
And the smoke hides my face
From the cancer I can see on the horizon

40. Scapegoat

She bites my neck and I bite her lip,
Stalking like a shadow her scapegoat's regret;

Sperm and egg combine
in a pessimistic molecule
of recombinant DNA

And after the shakedown
The sins of the tribe are wiped clean.

41. Buried Alive

*“My mother has her pain,
And I have mine.
Only my mother's grieves me,
Not my own,”*
- Siguiriyas

Suddenly the world seemed full of people, and I recognized
How impossible it was to ever be a hero:
The ordinary story of a body winding down,
Bent beneath the weight of age, or scars, or cancer,
Can only be digested like a dream, alone.

And in that dream of death, will my mother be forgotten?
Will she slip silently away, fading like a memory,
As the tumour feeds?

*I sit here listening
to Sanlucar's bullfight-epic
while
my father waits at the hospital
for her blood pressure to stabilize.*

There is no poem here.

The room filled first with a fire-engine's crew
Giant in their heavy boots and overalls.
My mother, small and frail in her blue nightgown
Sat upon the couch among these avatars,
Brunhilde of a distant star.

She seemed so small and in my selfishness
I waited for acknowledgement
In many ways I am still my mother's child
God knows I am not yet a man

She is slowly being buried alive
Beneath the pressure of the blood inside her veins
The pressure of the tumor on her kidney, in her lungs,
The pressure of her sixty years of living to remain alive

And in the same deep way I fear
The hot love I bear my parents,
That it will crease me with the will of their confusion
To the dappled life that could so easily

Be mine,
If only I'd give in and be their child forever.

Carried outside in the ritual manner, She seemed so small.
And I was left with my self-centredness.
Small.
It is something
I ought to be ashamed of.

Must every thought by necessity be selfish? W
as Bishop Berkeley right?
I refute it thus.

My nerves once sundered brought together on a loom,
Martyring themselves upon love's frozen ration,
A Christ with no temptations
In the vacuum of my room,

In many ways I am still my mother's child.

I have reached the minute when
I told myself I would stop writing this
But every action has
An equal and opposite reaction

Now let a sarabande lay all my fears to rest.

Part Two

THE BONE PURSUIT

1. a condemnation

and as I stepped outside I
discovered that I had always been beyond

the ships floated like snowflakes through the harbour

my command of nature faded like exposed film
leaving white patches
on my dreams

and like a broken bone the shell began to teach

yes, like a broken bone
the shell began to teach
the impossibility of love, the obscenity of peace
the oblivion of belonging
to the crowd

that gathers just beyond my walls

and as I stepped outside I
discovered I had always
been another

the skies fell in a hard rain
and I realized

that these white patches
on my skin and jeans

were the stains of my unhatched dreams

an egg crushed in the hand
of my invisibility

crying for leadership
crying to be delivered
crying to be condemned

to the broken bones I tried so hard to reach

2. your compound fracture

your compound fracture
beyond my skill to knit
I gathered as your lung collapsed
that
only your engagement ring
saw clearly my discomfort
at the very thought of being bound
my unwillingness to compromise in matrimony
my suspicion that all who give in are unsound

3. machines

we are like two machines
each aware of the other's
signals
yet
you will not take seriously
the conviction of my hand upon your leg

I'm afraid you are indifferent to my subtle codes

I should be spraying blood upon the walls
I should scrape in gore this testament to love
I should murder a thousand crippled children

and on their gravestones compose my masterpiece

4. invented memory

an empty bed cold dinner cold books
warming my brittle bones on a dream
the way your body moved inside that dress

5. long odds

I have two friends who have somehow found each other
they have entwined like symbiotic flowers
neither strong enough to stand up all alone

which leaves me here, condemned to strength
with two friends that have pierced their impotence

and expatiate upon it at some length

6. highschool sweetheart

it hardly matters what he says
about you, Charlotte -
whether it's all true or none
of it is true - whether you took
the football team in your mouth
one at a time in the order of their jerseys

it doesn't matter to me,
Charlotte, whether you smoked
grass and, stripping off your
clothes in the back yard,
let him take you in the ass

whether it was true or not, Charlotte,
when he said that as a teenager you
used to let the neighbourhood boys
finger you behind the school...

none of that matters to those of us who never touched you

7. meat

What's most mysterious is no mystery, the pathetic rambling of the blood through veins equipped with nothing but the ravenous gaze of skin and hair and lips and tongue. What's most precious reeks of rot already, though the meat was fresh a day ago when the light, ineffable mystery, tanned a motto on the freckled sheet. A day ago, then, happiness still reigned, though already the mystery had begun to rot, sapping the strength of this, my own precocity, and leaving nothing but a stain of blood upon the sheet, reminding me that even lovers have to have their meat.

8. the bone pursuit

yesterday it rained so long it even seemed as if all the plums
might perish in the yard while chimneys and compact cars
washed blithely out to sea

there is a harsh serenity in rain that does not exist in anyone I
know

we are restless, we are... dissatisfied... and without courage

you tried on dresses for the wedding last night, having found
nothing that would suit you in any of the markets, and you
told me you cried a little every time you put one on

did the rain, beating on the window cool your cheeks? Did it
break through the desolation like a branch breaks a window
pane?

or were you alone inside, protected from the shriek of nature,
protected from the bone pursuit, the hot cry of the convulsing
earth shaking like an epileptic at the senior prom

or a young bride on the lip of her captivity

9. photography

wolfhounds patrol
the perimeter of this timeworn eden

10. malignancy, a nonsense poem

vapour's orchid exhalation
scrapes the tired flesh
father's scream, mother's ration
mirror's sweaty mesh

nickel, tooth, & amethyst
pharaoh's ochre plague
malignant on malignant cyst
mome raths outgrabe

11. lifestyle

I take long walks and cold showers
I drink my bourbon neat
I cut the heads off the tallest flowers
I sweep you off your feet

I take sharp photographs of broken bones
I sweep the streets at night
I build houses in evergreen trees
I run away from fights

I take poor advice and ignore my doctor
I eat salad every day
I try every new pill on the market
I never play

12. the return

how dare you come back to this empty room?
have all your mistakes broken their banks?

13. politics

all that's left is the mole between your shoulderblades
the flush of your skin when you follow me to work
your anger at our two official languages
the drinks we share, the meal, and then the bed

14. halifax

I wish I had a photograph of the public gardens
in Halifax, NS

I could plot the distribution of the empty benches,
and maybe a graph like that would take me
to the childhood of my early twenties
when I still believed there was significance
in the emptiness of benches

They used to close the public gardens for the winter
in Halifax, NS

And I would have to satisfy myself
with peering through the bars of the old gates
at the beautiful bare waste of snow amid the trees
bare as the childhood of my early twenties
when snow seemed as good a cause as any
and I stood on the edge of something great

I used to feel I had some sort of future
in Halifax, NS

I used to feel deeply enough to write poems
and drink and talk and argue with my friends
But now I am employed in Ottawa, ON,
and there are no public gardens, no empty benches,
and I can do nothing but think back on
the childhood of my early twenties
(when I stood at the gates of something fabulous)
and worry that I might never feel again

Part Three

THE COIL WITHOUT A TWIST

1. The Sea Wall

The church in Levanto is black and white
Walking down the sea wall
The lemons are as bright as the autumn daylight
Breaking down the sea wall

But there is no black, no white
Walking down the sea wall
So you'll find me sweating in the moonlight
Breaking down the sea wall

2. The Coil

I.

The beast beneath the skin, behind the eyes;
never unawares, never able to relax:
a skull of steel, a spine of ancient oak,
a tongue pierced by a thorn:
it is a beast out of a rumour...

A century of malice, fairy-tales,
rivers, weirs, and cold white wine,
I have been assigned
to be this beast's companion.

Jailer? Master? Eyes of grape and gunpowder
burn beneath the porticos:
Francesca della Paola
and the Bull of Savoy.

Born beneath the porticos,
a whelp of Pasiphaë
in the shadow of the Alps.
The bull allows no rest
but clamours for fresh coffee, ground glass,
and the bones of Piemonte virgins
dripping with olive oil.

Thighs, thighs and olive oil
slipping through centuries of rumour,
centuries of fairy-tale:
a risorgimento of song, a renaissance of crime.

Napoleon stands on ceremony
 in the Beast's vile audience;
He gives his testimony
 With all due deference

And spits upon the polished marble floor
And is not seen in Turin evermore.

II.

Can the flesh know pleasure
Can the coil thrive without a twist
 every now and then?
Does the mind drive the erection,
 even the marbled grip of fingers
 on this shaft of skin and sinew,
Or the gush that wets the bed
 when my finger finds its home?

Florence is a city of mist, Torino a city of stone.
Their citizens do not interest me,
This world of men is not for me.
I have a barrel bought in Rome,
worn in place, patched with bone.

If there is an absence of pleasure
Does it bring pain?
Would I enjoy the sting of leather
More if spiced with a little rain?
 A sting in the tail,
A coil without a twist.

In the Uffizzi Americans come and go
Looking for Michelangiolo.

And if there was a risorgimento of song,
If we could witness Dante's glimpse of Beatrice
in the church of the Donati,
 There was also a seedling of conformity,
Leading to a fascism
 I would have to abhor.

I deny this world,
This spire of stone,
This coil without a twist,
This Bull beneath the skin.

III.

Behind the eyes, inside the barrel,
My Epicurus shudders to relax;
One hand pierced with juniper,
One hand holds an axe.

A skull of steel, a spire of stone,
Dressed in a barrel patched with bone
My Epicure - the beast's companion -
Slouches towards Rome.

Born beneath the porticos,
Tongue pierced and stained,
The sting and coil might disappear
But the Beast remains

Looking for Michelangiolo.

Italy, December 2009.

3. Tom Waits

My jeans are crisp, fresh from the laundry
there's a girl on a scooter waiting at the light
Wearing black leather and purple tights
Her mouth is crisp as denim as she drives away

The rain falls in a curtain of violet
Peppering the street with shattering glass
I'm sitting in a coffeeshop drinking cheap whisky
Watching the ambulances hurry by

Can I take this language, so straight and American
and bend it to something as rich as Petrarch?
Or will it all come out sounding like a Tom Waits song?
The hookers don't answer and it's getting late

I leave the Dominion and make my way homeward
Humming the tune of an old rebel song
The nights are so cold, this couch is so lonely
Christ, do I have to suffer so long?

Her mouth, crisp as denim, could have smiled at me softly
Her legs could have shifted a little to brake
Her black leather jacket could have hung in my closet
She could share my breakfast, I could split her stake

Both running from something, the hard and the easy
Both tired of making the same mistakes
Both trying to survive an ugly disease,
she with her scooter and I with my bait

My jeans are all filthy, it's been weeks since the laundry
Another girl, another scooter, another red light
Her body contains all the bodies I've wasted
All the women I've watched drive away in the night

4. The Campidoglio

Echoing the centuries, the square of Michelangelo
High on the hill
Suffering its multitudes, the Campidoglio
Seems so still,
At the close of the evening, dark and sweet
With me alone
Waiting in the colonnade, tapping my feet
On the ancient stone.

There is more to the world than the shrill
Fever of desire
But this is only a sugar-pill
A high-wire
When anything of worth only becomes so
When men are gone
When their bodies are buried and the snow
Hides their gravestones.

Browning wanted a world of men
To ease his fate
I want an emptiness, and then – only then
Will I wait
For the calm that floats through the Campidoglio
Like a ghost
The calm that comes with a dead Michelangelo
And with the frost.

He must be dead, that vanished man,
For us to see
The glory of the possibility of man
And to be
Able to carry on, I have to find
Some spark
Of potential in the mouldering rind
Of the fools and the marks.

5. Amor Fati

There is destitution in a love of fate
There is a wilderness in science
There is a genius in those who stay up late
Building monuments to defiance
Their cenotaphs are full of ash
Their sarcophagi of sand
Their hecatombs are unachieved
Their shrouds unwound

Once I too dallied with life and fate
Once I too studied science
Once I too liked to stay up late
Sharpening my defiance
But now my head is full of ash
My heart is full of sand
No hecatombs stain my altar
No need to wash my hands

6. Under the Influence of Tool

Encased in my relationships
With people, things,
I have tried to give them all the slip
To dream with kings
And with weightless wings
To fly.

Entombed in this body,
these ticks and leeches,
this bowel rotting,
I have beseeched my teachers
to lie.

Embalmed with this oil
This balsam and myrrh
I have reached for the soil
Like a wounded cur and helped her
to die.

7. Singers

I awoke in a church where the singers prepared
To sing the last song in a concert for fools
I sat at the back to rehearse unawares
The razorblade counterpoint I learned at their school

The singers began to pour out their music
Into the vault of the timeless church
Collective their breath stank of sulfur and oozed in
My ears like a slug or a leech

My razorblade sharpened I opened my suitcase
And drew from inside it my old tommy gun
I looked at the singers in rapture, their faces
Turned godward, turned spiritward, turned to the son

I fired my quid at the singers lamenting
The fall of their kingdom's thousand year power
I fired for the centuries' cruel tormenting
Of children and weaklings, cripples and cowards

Then the singers fell silent, their throats nicely cut
And the fools turned to see who the terrorist was
Their faces were blank, their eyes only slits
Their voices were only a chaotic buzz

I jumped up and I ran from the church to the silence
Of the street and I stood in the blood and the rain
And I laughed at how futile, how impotent, my violence
Seemed when the singing started over again

8. Restless

Tired of this ambition
As a soldier tires of the medals that he wins

Tired of being restless
As a horse must tire of the whip against its limbs

Never satisfied
Are there even laurels one might rest upon?

Always moving on
There is no romance in the open road

9. Blood in the Mask

Blood is thick as semen in the cold
And neither you or I used condoms this time 'round
There is blood upon the mask you wore to spy
On all the children who once spit upon your ground.

Are spit and semen so far removed
To bear no family mark against the blood
We spilled on sheets for five long years
When we loved whores in sewage and in mud?

Their children - whose earth do they revile?
Whose hearth do they tear down with reverie?
Whose pyre do they instill with jeopardy
While casting off the clothes that they desire?

Blood is thick as semen, thick as cold
Air in the lungs, cancer of the tongue.
There is blood upon the mask you wore to scold
All the lovers that you chose when you were young.

Look at them now - all your lovers lost their teeth
And lie in wards uncounted and unnamed
They are wild in their costume, wild in their belief
And in their tunics do they lie ashamed.

We have squandered their bodies in our hospitals
As we squander youth and cash in our olympiads
We have saved them nothing with our anaesthesia
As we challenge nothing with our capitals.

Blood is thick as semen, blood in the mask
Coats our history with histrionic verses
Coats history so thick our children have to ask
What was it like before we ourselves were sick?

Blood is thick as semen, blood must ask
What was it like before we ourselves were sick?
And in the dawn such a question begs
I offer comfort in this bloody verse.

I offer solace in this twisted branch
That falls to dust beneath a coachmans wheel;
The wheel must turn again, I hope, with history,
The only guarantee of what is real.

10. Variation 1

Of the school year
That you wish now I'd told you I despised
Because I took your side in an argument
The wide horizons of the other joint
Climbed down from the double-decker bus

With the windows and the blinds wide open
As I went to take a piss
How we laughed at the cunning little rituals
And asked to use the bathroom

Because it was crowded with cornflower ties and black mas-
cara

Later on the freshmen in their togas
Laughed lightly, sat up late,
Shared deep-fried jalapenos
Beckoned; we drank cheap beer
I repaid the gift with my famous melanzane

Too young to buy a beer
You gave me a jar of pickled beets
We tried to sleep together too soon
And I touched your shoulder

11. Upsetter

choke turns millions of jaws to plaster
cheek by jowl, wolf by frame
powder of bonemeal sups like a master
equal to poison, equal to fame
crust and mantle sleep together
cheek by wolf by jowl by frame
attila the hun, the lousy bastard
ran off with my father's name

a pride of gold in tarsand festers
crows invoke the frozen pools
ravens tear down all your posters
frost invades the abbot's tool
cheek and wolf and frame and jowl
here's where you make your mark
here's where you hang your towel
here's where you stab the narc

one step forward no step backward
the war in babylon coming soon
count the beaks a-flying rookward
human beaks that know, that swoon
sharkskin saves the monstrous reject
from the wolf-cub's cheeky frame
the volcano's enigmatic eject
swallows and smothers attila's frame

12. Bullwhip

bullwhip cracking by my high heel
enrages
blades
too thin and quick to energize the field

vale of glamorgan come unto me
engorge
the forge
empty now of rockhard sea

bullwhip on the scrotum seizes
winedark
theme park
rockhard now with plastic seizures

plastic jesus come unto me
glamorgan
organ
of deliverance, maybe

bullwhip cracking by my high heel t
he blade
enrages
fields whose energy drains, sulks, squeals

13. Variation 2

Climbed down from the double-decker bus
Because it was crowded with cornflower ties and black
[mascara

Because I took your side in an argument
We tried to sleep together too soon
I repaid the gift with my famous melanzane
How we laughed at the cunning little rituals
Of the school year

And I touched your shoulder
As I went to take a piss
The wide horizons of the other joint
Beckoned; we drank cheap beer
You gave me a jar of pickled beets
And asked to use the bathroom

Later on the freshmen in their togas
That you wish now I'd told you I despised
Shared deep-fried jalapenos
Too young to buy a beer
With the windows and blinds wide open
Laughed lightly, sat up late

14. Too Skinny, Bad Teeth

It seems you *can* live too close to work
For mental good and exercise to catch
and hold, like crabs in a crevasse,
Or mountaineers their chalky crampon holds.

A pink skirt lifted briefly by the wind;
Ukrainian twins playing soccer by the fence;
The dog-park full of yuppies and their waste;
A teenage girl, too skinny, with bad teeth.

All this knits up the ravelled sleeve of care
As well as sleep, a half-hour's walk,
Some groceries, some downbeat mp3s,
And soon I'm home, but more than that, I'm *there*.

And there amid the many death had long undone
A teenage girl buries her nose in P&P
While I walk by, listening to Mezzanine
On my adamantine headphones.

15. Wildcat

tapetum lucidum
claws that pull you from the edge of sleep
tearing at the nightmare
ninth circle

good friday rebellion
counterpoint of black shirts
with a fugue at the supertonic
eighth circle

actaeon's hounds
diana's open wounds
weep like the nazarene
seventh circle

unbound uterus
late to the party
heroin eyes
sixth circle

malebranche out of order
the entropy of the law
restricts the law of entropy
fifth circle

false prophets, fraud of Urbino
pape Satan aleppe
the prodigal son in chains
fourth circle

You're top, he's bottom
1302
gluttony of punishment
third circle

malebranche incontinent
undiscovered, unnamed
harrowing good souls
second circle

asphodel that greeny flower
not my line
wasps & hornets
first circle

16. Martini

sure to burn in the breath of eight-hundred-forty pederasts
I climb the stairs to the depths of the cellar door
locking behind me all saints and souls who died of thirst
naked in the sunburn of your glorious afternoon

and here I sit and scrawl my condemnation

equal lengths of sapphire and of bronze
anoint the nigger-loving hippy
and taint my music with the stain of gold
all sour and petrified with crucifixion

head down, St Peter, head down

long lines twist away from this perspective
neck after neck in collars of black steel
picture me giving a damn, I said never
burst your banks, O river, cull the damned

and drown all cripples with your tenderness

harrow this field, plough this maimed beauty
drain the abscess of its power and strength
leave nothing but the shining skull of legend
the diamond skull of last year's season

and wake the sleepers from their token absence

drink the waste of this ocean, and of that
forget the peace that buries you alive
recuse yourself from silence lust and drink
and bore your forebears with your taciturnity

drink martinis to seem less the gnome

malignant, rumpelstiltskin
my shorts can never be untied
my foreskin reeks of smegma untransfigured
a crust grows over my mouth and eyes

and I am silver in my innocence

17. Variation 3

We left the first place
Because it was crowded with cornflower ties and black
[mascara

The wide horizons of the other joint
Beckoned; we drank cheap beer
That you wish now I'd told you I'd despised;
Shared deep-fried jalapenos;
Laughed lightly, sat up late.

You gave me a jar of pickled beets
Because I took your side in an argument
I repaid the gift with my famous melanzane
We tried to sleep together too soon
With the windows and the blinds wide open.

Later on the freshmen in their togas
Climbed down from the double-decker bus
And asked to use the bathroom
Too young to buy a beer.
How we laughed at the cunning little rituals
Of the school year,
And I touched your shoulder
As I went to take a piss.

18. Blood Fjord

for Joel Grunerud

Skallagrim, the bald vagina
 waits like a murder on the morrow:
seek it out and break its head with a stone.
Skallagrim, your maiden voyage
 squats to shit on yesterday:
 where will it take you to sleep?

Voluspa, your howling mouth
 foresees the ragnarok.
You cough up tar from your pack-a-day habit.
Tell us, tell us,
 O vision of the past, Where will it
 take us from here?

A prayer, a prayer,
 for Skallagrim,
wading his blood fjord,
A prayer for the green wood burning to ash.
 A prayer for the sap in our trees, in our veins,
 Blushing our cunts and cocks.

Fuck like a beast,
 fuck like a murder
Has just occurred in your father's barn,
Fuck for the ransom,
 fuck the blood eagle,
 Bind me with veins you have torn from your arm.

Tie me with leather
stripped from your children,
Blind me with cotton torn from your sleeve
Leave me to follow
old Skallagrim homeward
Leave me to fill my mind with ease.

19. Babylon

one step forward two steps backwards
step out of babylon
amethyst partisans sucking their longswords
chucking their steel

draft meshuggah to the army's party
oliver cromwell rules OK
babylon calls the unborn children
to arms, to arms, to the wall, today

Burckhardt's *Civilisation of the Renaissance*
started working in the dark
like valium, like viagra,
like a sheepdog's stifled bark

drown, drown, in the kingdom of the green,
fly, fly, in the entropy of earth
dig, dig, to the drilling of the drummer,
die, die, to the muffled sound of love

one step forward, two steps backwards,
war inna babylon
dub the hotstep, dub to upset
the chiefs of babylon

and drown, drown, in the kingdom of the earth

20. die Fürstin

rain falls
apokalopsided
falling
with a monotone and a drone
on the ruined concrete.
what have we produced of any value?
what have we created that will last?
Ulysses? The Lute Suites?

rain continues
hysteria-inducing.
What condemns us?
The rape of a sleeper?
The breaking of backs?
Ivan Karamazov's
pernicious honesty?

a drone, a drone, a metronome,
crime of a sexual nature
the morning-after coverup

princess -
rough furrow fringed with royal maidenhair
angelhair and muslim gauze

Guinness,
bread,
and toilet paper -
the navel of the world:

omphalo-thalatta!

Red meat and naked women!

21. Nativity

Knifecallous

all the mingled cookie-smells
christmas the time of strain
christmas the time of guilt
abstracted from cause or reason.

Bellblizzard

all the sweet, the cuckolds drop
their trousers, christmas
the time of shame, unreason
gathers like dead leaves around my heels.

Fingerlock

time stops, ponders,
loses a weekend in a bar somewhere,
the dead leaves of christmas
rot beneath the snow:
the time of guilt,
abstracted.

22. Don Giovanni

Between atrocity and tragedy there falls
A light transfigured lampshade. Beside
A pile of teeth, a lake of blood and gall,
Boots and clothes are abandoned, hands are tied.
Between beauty and remembrance all must fade
And in the dream of skylarks on the wing
Cold towers cast a lowering shade
Stopping every voice that ever sang.
Between the silence and the song, there music sleeps
In shadow and in swaddles like a babe;
The forests climb and clothe the naked steep
Mountainside the deep anemones crave.
Between the second pint and, oh, the third
There lies a crab ensconced within an orbit;
Perhaps it was an earlobe, at least it spoke no word:
The gracious music that was gone before we heard it.

All is silence, all is darkness, all is deep:
Between atrocity and tragedy, all is sleep.

Winnipeg – Ottawa
April 2007 – December 2010

Part Four

THE ABYSS

“Is this the sickness that is Doom?” - Allan Ginsberg

Head.

Catspaw of woodsmoke on the winter air
Breasts like hard apples on a warlike chest
Parking lot gravel in your filthy hair
A skull and crossbones shaved into your pubic nest
I found you there, far from the brightest and best
I drank in the reek of blood and bowel
Pulled from my pocket a creased copy of "Howl".

Like a butcher I came to slice the meat
That came my way, the tattoos that I fancied
Slid into my wallet like baseball cards, neat
And clean like the wrists of a pansy
Or the impunity of thistle, Nancy's
Symbol, Duchy of Lorraine,
Extinguished by a bullet in the brain.

Like an emperor I commanded my inmates
To violate each other under winter's sky
Rape was my circus - there's no disputing taste -
A syphilitic sister and a suicide
Upside down in the woods I crucified.
To be drawn and quartered in that singing forest
Would have been a blessing, instead the torus

Has revolved upon itself, its case is now degenerate.
I am back Woody's, Connor's, the Fox and Feather,
Pubs and bars that reek of piss, potassium manganate

in a disproportionate reaction. Dead in the heather,
She was slim as a chestnut, burned as a feather,
Slim as a saucer of cool cream,
Naked as the dying of a dream.

Blue as a sapphire, slim as a foal
Dead and silent as fate, or hope,
Green and heartbroken, ruined as a roll
Of film exposed to sunlight, unravelled as rope
Picked apart like oakum, pointless as a slope
Leading to nothing. Her back was as long as music:
A jazz improvisation after someone had abused it.

Scarred with fingernails, bruised by tire treads
Someone blew her tonsils like a saxophone
Her chest an etch-a-sketch, her nerves like threads
Abandoned on a broken loom, her bones
And asshole torn and left for dead, alone Amid the mi-
grations of fireflies,
The swelling of thunderheads, the echo of lies.

First Chorus

In olden days these phone-book confessions
Held more weight, now they're obsolete.
We used to leave our captives naked in their cells
Throughout the winter's hail, and snow, and sleet.
Imagine these interrogations under heat,
Perhaps over chess in some tropical bodega,
In plain view of all your friends and neighbours.

She is gone now in a catspaw of woodsmoke,

Left for dead, left on your doorstep,
Stolen from her parents, heavy as a book
Mouldy with tears, once so full of vim and pep,
Each step of the investigation leads to the next step
And in my arms each obscene instrument
Contributes to the tedious argument, "of insidious intent".

Her taut stomach someone used to love
Watching her breathe while she looked the other way
Every hair on her breast, when looked at from above,
Used to glow in the moonlight, shining bright as day.
She used to shine like El Dorado, now she's gone away.

Never will he see her breath again - night falls -
And, falling, offers nothing but a ghastly pall.

Ink drained from her fingerprints, ink drowned in rain,
Her body nothing but a tortured golden mean
Bears no stigmata, no bruise or scar remains
To be read by those who might have seen,
To testify to that extremity of pain
Which was her lot. But neither has joy
Or bliss or pleasure signed its toy.

Was life indeed a pleasure? Life is long
And proud of my disloyalty I strike
Two prisoners a day - do not call it wrong:
life is too short for "like" and "do not like".
Besides, most of them were fags or kikes,
For whom each day outside the ovens was a gift
It was in my power to prolong or to lift.

I'm sorry if this account seems cold

The language of a bureaucrat is all
I know, the language of the old
Injustices in my throat brings gall,
As do the senior-citizens chatting in a mall.
Is this an interrogation? I have no ripcord
For this parachute. Is this a permanent record?

I have tied the knot on Biskupia Gorka
I have lowered the hood on the city of Gdansk.
Women and children without hood, without burqa,
Coins stamped with the Danish "Amerikansk"
(To distinguish them from the common "Dansk").
The ashes of war float from Danzig's cremation
Let the historians fight over each ashy ration.

Second Chorus

An unnerving lack of focus in the things I do;
I need set problems to concentrate the mind.
Programming computers, drinking, cooking stew,
Or playing music are the activities in which I find
Myself most capable, sidelined,
however, through a lack of serious projects:
I am condemned to forever be a reject.

Sitting on the Mayflower patio
It's still too early to be counted spring
But the tolerance of our vernal ratio
Makes us all too conscious of the sting
Or spur of winter, drives us outdoors
Into the arms of bartenders and bores,
Drunks and radicals, senators and their whores.

(Have I already messed up the rhyme?

Auden was much better at this sort of thing.
Still - must go on, in the interests of time.

Despite the rhyme-scheme, I can only sing
The things I recognize, the things I bring
To the table of verse; across the bar a baby cries,
The barkeep listens, the humble lover lies).

The sci-fi geeks discussing some high-concept,
Taking themselves too seriously, while the girl
Behind the counter obeys the precept
That waitresses must their underwear unfurl
To get the tips - I sip my beer
Trembling in arrogance and fear.
Ready every moment my pint-pot for to hurl.

Advanced polling takes place in the gym:
that quadriennial grubbing in the dirt
For votes - stability and security are hymned
While in the suburbs young lions lose their shirts.
A myriad offenses, a million hurts,
Prick the skin of gelded urbanites;
The city center's filled - they say - with sodomites.

"Appalling", "Inappropriate" - the retiree's refrain.
Currencies, birthdays, festival volunteering,
Conservative majority, crass electioneering:
These monuments of their passion I disdain.
Passion expressed in halting, querulous tones,
Trembling with the meekness of their weakened bones.

Dishonest laughter, from workers and from toffs,

Newlyweds and nearly deads, laughing
At their animal proclivities, all the soft
 Desires of the chimpanzee, staffing
 The ranks of foul reaction, always chaffing
Each other for their political views
Believing only what they see on the TV news.

This political contempt in election season,
 This bile of personalities, this bane of choice,
This hatred of people without rhyme or reason
 Denies the sounding of a stronger voice.
 The shrill panic, the lack of poise
Evident in their coffee table chatter
As if these weak banalities could matter.

The ghost of Karl Marx has risen from the dustbin.
 His books, his followers, neither are red
Anymore, his theories of consumption,
 Value, labour, all have raised their heads,
 To frighten our prime minister in his bed,
In this election. Is it finally the time
To to blow the dynamite our parents' primed?

Interlude

Is spending half the day in bed
 Prerogative of a pair of younger lovers?
When I was young such portents filled my head
 That now it's hard to exchange them for others.
 More prosaic, more mature, our fathers and mothers
Turned out were right: our New York lifestyle
Is worth more than a childish lack of guile.

Transition

In 1953 it seemed the light grew dark:
Dylan Thomas, Prokofiev, and Bird,¹
Hank Williams, Django Reinhardt, their spark
Was snuffed, as if the world
Required their deaths to curdle
Stalin's dream of a world of philistines:
I present the America of teenage dreams.

Third Chorus

The slick sweat of your nervous body
Waiting in the wings to go on stage
Gazing at the footlights, taut and haughty
The cold light of the performer's rage;
Pink Floyd's Wall is now a cage
Augmented by the backbeat and the bass,
Stigmatizing the landscape of the race.

Miles Davis as Diaghilev, Birth of the Cool,
Signifyin(g) attitudes to space
And time, the deep black pool
Of the trumpet's bell, the taste
Of the chord and the pace.
Arpeggiated power, tenor sadness,
Coltrane's sheets of power and Monk's madness.

Metaphysical poets, masters of bebop,
Strong lines, hard words, blood and fog.

¹ Charlie Parker died in 1955.

Armies of beatniks waiting for re-up;
 The tension between the engine and the cog.
 Avoiding all that might tempt or jog
The memory of a bygone music,
Replacing it instead with "Tempus Fugue-it".

Song of the New World, Sama Layuca,
 Extensions, Trident, The Real McCoy,
La Leyenda de la Hora,
 Reaching Fourth, Soliloquy,
 The Turning Point and Journey,
Inner Voices, Supertrios, Extensions, and Atlantis;
Echoes of a Friend, Illuminations.

Fourth Chorus

As Auden says, I'd like to find a form
 That's large enough to swim in,
And talk on any subject I might warm
 To: music, politics, food, women.
 A form elegant, but slimming;
A form carefree as a bordello:
But there can be only one Sordello.

Perhaps the large scale forms of Charles Mingus
 Will do, rather than the Ring and the Book.
Plenty of scope for these tripping fingers:
 Plenty of groove, plenty of swing, plenty of hook.
 In a Sentimental Mood, by Ellington, might look
Too slight, but in the hands of him and John Coltrane
The tune became a palace, perhaps the frame

Of those chords might modulate this verse
 As I play the changes in everything I write
I don't think any of this is worse
Than Byron's forced rhythms or the white
 Heat of Shelley's Queen Mab's night:
 A night of so many wretched souls
Over which the endless sun endlessly rolls.

“The strategic adversary is fascism,” wrote Foucault,
 “In our heads and in our everyday behaviour.”
And I admit, in a voice both hoarse and low,
 That I am no longer looking for a saviour.
 There is liberation even in a razor
Freedom from domination, exploitation,
Freedom from exile, freedom from nation.

Fifth Chorus

New Orleans, where the tramps of Storyville
 Rag their monthly music, where the whores
Paint their toenails and silks reveal
 Pubescent chest and pubis, and the bored
 Businessmen have left their stores
Unattended, the tinkling of the keys
Red as menstrual blood, keens like bees.

Harmonic simplicity, black polyphony;
 The creole belles cross the empty street
To avoid these buck musicians, funny
 In their bourgeois suits and bare feet.
 There's something dangerous in the sweet
Lecherousness of the trumpet's call;

The levees themselves stand or fall

By the trombone's thick erection,
 New Orleans, where the tramps of Storyville
The semen pumping hot through every valve
 Rag their monthly music and the whores
Spit lubricant in their sexual selection
 Paint their toenails and in silks reveal
Pussy lips moist with polytonal salve
 Pubescent chest and pubis, and the bored
Bassman's jizz in the boudoir revolves
 Businessmen have left their stores -
To hear the drummer's stick, the piano's chords -
 Untended. The tinkling of the keys,
This ragtime, keeps the girls from getting bored:
 Red as menstrual blood, keening like bees.

By the trombone's thick erection,
 The semen pumping hot through every valve;
The spit lubricates the sexual selection
 Pussy lips moist with polytonal salve.
 The bassman's jizz in the boudoir revolves
Around the drummer's stick, the piano's chords:
Ragtime keeps the girls from getting bored.

Blue as a sapphire, slim as a foal
 Harmonic simplicity, black polyphony;
Dead and silent as fate, or hope,
 The creole belles cross the empty street.
Green and heartbroken, ruined as a foal,
 Avoiding these buck musicians, funny
Film exposed to sunlight, unravelled as rope.
 Their bourgeois suits and bare feet

Knotty as oakum, pointless as a slope.

 There's something dangerous in the heat
Leading to nothing: her back was as long as music,
 Long as the lecherousness of the trumpet's call,
Or a jazz improvisation after someone had abused it.
 The levees themselves stand or fall

in New Orleans, where the tramps of Storyville
 Rag their monthly music, where the whores
Paint their toenails and silks reveal
 Pubescent chest and pubis, and the bored
 Businessmen have left their stores
Unattended, the tinkling of the keys
Red as menstrual blood, keens like bees.

Sixth Chorus

Stultifera navis, the naivety of fools,
 On the day after the general election,
Thinking whoever holds the throne, rules
 Is nothing but a bourgeois deception.
 Power runs deep, and there's a tension
Between class and violence that no trombone
Can overcome: it must stand alone

Among the spoiled ballots and the wasted votes:
 The glee of politicians cashing their cheques,
The civil service careerists tote
 Their copies of Keynes or Hayek.
 From their suburban mortgages built on the wreck
Of empty pension funds and endless credit
Held against the next generation's debit.

Those beardless fascists, their moustaches trim,
 Waddle in their boots from pillar to post
The cash nexus between man and man, slim
 Comfort to those of us about to roast
 In the purifying flame of the nation's reaction
The caustic fire of its imbecility
Invisible, burning clear, free of hostility.

Recapitulation

Catspaw of woodsmoke on the winter air
 Breasts like hard apples on a warlike chest
Parking lot gravel in your filthy hair
 A skull and crossbones shaved into your pubic nest
 I found you there, far from the brightest and best
I drank in the reek of blood and bowel
Pulled from my pocket a creased copy of "Howl".

Like a butcher I came to slice the meat
 That came my way, the tattoos that I fancied
Slid into my wallet like baseball cards, neat
 And clean like the wrists of a pansy
 Or the impunity of thistle, Nancy's
Symbol, Duchy of Lorraine,
Extinguished by a bullet in the brain.

Coda

Coming home to a house without a cat,
 A broken ukulele and some puppet strings;
A quilting square or two and the air conditioner,

Croaking like a toad on the windowsill,
Strives to bring this heat under control,
To cool it into some degree of sanity.
This must be how death is.

The Grassmarket square beneath the hump
Of the castle rock, the feedback of a microphone
Ringing in the brain:
These are the comforts of the twenty-first century:
Wind farms and haggis and good grey cloud,
Cattle and beer and a sleeping girl in my bed.
I wonder how death is.

Ottawa, May – July 2011.