

## **Chapbook 1**

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## Walking with Give

That's the city sound of it, the dumb foot treading  
downward, flat as your arches, the sole's  
smack against the *trottoir*, and then the next  
step's clap, and on, into the kind of eternity  
you asked for, you, with your proud gift for walking.

You've done it for years, even here, hard pricked  
by these hot stones as you steal up from the shingle  
where you've beached the kayak for a quick pee—  
Johnny's on the spot, across the gravel road  
of the access, and you've gritted your teeth and set off

like Samuel Hearne, except tender and naked soles  
seeking the ashes in this summer bed of coals.  
But on this day the gravity's less, or the bitter stones  
and man have at last agreed on a mutual prayer.  
Whether it's age, wisdom, whether it's weakness, now

you seem to have learned to walk with a better give,  
your footprints shallower, toes more diffident, generous  
with the contours of your path. Not yet without pain—  
just something pliant, tree-like, now, in your skinny limbs:  
the wind and you, beginning to drift the earth in the same way.

## Wasp Trouble

They were still there in the morning, doped  
with the chill of the night, and stunned now  
by the sudden sun that flooded the window-screen.

We've had wasp trouble since we opened—  
fat ones, in the early spring, their newspaperly  
nest hidden somewhere in our open rafters.

Three or four I'd trapped in a glass, lidded it  
over, and carried outside, their anger  
electric in that prison--imagine drinking it down!

I tired of that game. Yesterday afternoon I opened  
a window for the lake air; returning later  
I saw them, incautious, walking across the screen

and slammed the window shut. They puzzled,  
vibrant, an hour or two, between  
the pane of glass and the open mesh that held them

inside, outside, scenting and feeling  
every light of that evening but their freedom.  
Starving, too, I imagine. Or perhaps like sharks

of the small air, dying, denied all motion.  
Dying: that much was plain—they legged their feelers  
and ambled slowly; one tried to sting the glass,

leaving a drop of poison. The open question  
was whether I could leave them as long  
as it took. The next night was to be warmer;

they had a last-year's fly or two between them.  
I had my work to do, which kept me near them  
most of that morning. I began to know them.

## Water Lines

I came to nature after my conviction  
and learned patience; conviction here is patience:

the gift of outlasting; the felt fact of being  
no other can destroy: let mankind take all trees,

divert all rivers, do this sun-capped lake to death  
with algae, drought, puncture each green vertebra

of Vermont's spine with a line of windmills  
facing the sunset, raise a dozen waterfront mansions

to drain each aquifer, or still these waves  
under the ash-drift of a nuclear winter:

their patience is too great for man's undoing—  
he has only been destructive in his fashion

for forty thousand years—and the verse of those hills  
mastered its rhythm long, and long before

he learned his bitterness in exile; they will persist  
in their song, and know it:

so it is to know one's virtue and one's calling  
and to voice these in ephemera: lake rippling

westward; flight of goldfinch, sonic and precise;  
birches swaying on a steep slope; man awaiting words

## **Old Trees**

learn toughness  
you need to be cooked dry  
and still walking  
you need to take a little cancer  
and still put out apples  
you need to take a little noise  
in the heat of the day  
and drag the old dog  
up the late summer hill  
past the broken orchard  
that no one sprays  
you need to bite that apple  
you need to grow that rind  
you need to eat that worm

## Summer of Mars

O wrathful god draw near  
show me the light of blood  
thy membrane lit from behind  
pulsing with purple storms  
and capped by a stain of ice

cast your disdain  
here on the green of the earth  
find me among the shepherds  
loutish and pastoral  
and raise my hand, O Mars  
high overhead in a fist  
of splenetic light

I have not wanted your name  
on my lips, but now  
when my body is vital and old  
and the skin has begun to sing  
and sag in the rising wind  
I call you to enthuse  
me and my pacifist kind  
with the glint of weaponry  
and the gleam of separate bloods

father Apollo, whose hand  
is the mother-work of harmony  
in which all planets weave  
admit you have moved it so  
that Mars draw closer to Earth  
this season than it has hewn  
in sixty thousand years  
before the gallant Neanderthal  
knew how to lift his head  
and release your grip on my tongue

for one good season of war  
give over the bodily rhythm  
I've offered you all these years  
to the drum-cry and the fallen  
hymn to those who will die

## **Virus Song**

the streets are quiet as I love them because many are dying  
and because in fear of that rising wave we have closed  
ourselves in our homes and shuttered businesses and love  
has constrained itself to one per household. The pathos  
of abandoned cafés is like lymph nodes that have failed  
against loneliness. There's nowhere to drive to, not even  
the synagogue down the street, so the daily ritual chanting  
of Hassidic men my neighbours in tens outside their homes  
has replaced the warning coos of truck reversals and sonic  
droppings of jets and the dirty tinnitus of traffic  
so deep in the background it goes unheard like Cohen's crickets  
or my pulse until it pauses in sudden silence. A little sideways  
glance at death for us all, the empty world, and at dawn too—  
double paralysis, peace for work, because many are dying

## Yemen

Nothing can be done for the starving child.  
Her father, young and handsome surely to the local women, says,  
“The world has forgotten us.” He strokes her hanked hair,  
puts grains of sugar on her lips, there is no other food.

Her rib-cage is a swelling tent whose size  
is constrained only by her papery skin.  
Her eyes deepen as the fine skull  
pushes out of her head to set them off.

She chants some phoneme of her suffering,  
looks away to a fixed point over his shoulder. The sugar  
sticks to her lips as if she had no tongue.

*Stop now, child.*

If you have drawn well and delivered her horror  
better than the news did at six o'clock  
you have also taken a poem from it, from her.  
Just as you will eat your spoken meal  
tonight, you will rise from this desk feeling nourished  
and virtuous. You may also send money  
her father will never see. Admit that you'll publish  
in spite of all this knowledge. You saw what you saw  
and she can't now be taken from your eyes.  
Just stop. The child,  
by the way, is already dead. You've changed  
nothing, given nothing, seen nothing, written  
nothing?

*Breathe your last, sweet one. Release your father.  
For you there is no hope. Around you  
are thousands the camera didn't show.  
He will live with you forever,  
the polite young man. His is the dignity  
of your death*

We are all impostors.



*from Socratic Monologues*

I

The most terrifying of all the gods  
is character. There is no Fate

here; your ghost is your essential nature  
and all its postures now are fled

with the body that housed them. Here  
you will face eternity with your true soul,

and it is not gazing forward into stars.  
The infinity of Hell is retrospect,

each peevish gesture relived without  
the complacency flesh always granted me—

seeing myself now as a character  
I chose. There are no minor decisions.

The great are always those who feel  
unutterable power over their own beings;

that folly's name is genius. What we endure  
in life is the precise fruition

of our real wills, the selves we cannot know  
till death, the bystander, makes our business plain

*from* Letters to Louise Gluck

IV

because you say the names of the Greek gods  
as others say *headache*, *infidelity*, and know them

as some know shortness of breath, the spastic  
grip at the chest—and know yourself too the Fates’

plaything, their little thread, briefly entangled—gods  
to be spoken to casually, or with an intense pleading,

like the memory of a remote friend now grown bitter  
or the ghosts of your sister, mother, younger—or *anguish*

when your father appears in shade at the foot of the garden  
in the stiff linen suit and absurd panama

he wore at the seaside when you broke from his adoration;  
he doesn’t know he is dead, merely stretches out his arms

shaking his head, rueful, and then—not *disappears*—  
but agrees, smiling, with the emptiness of the garden;

his pale lapel-flower is now one hanging rose  
and you have no weapon against the force of this last god

so you write him terse prayers, beginning (always  
hidden in the margins, poem after poem) *O Time*

## Man to Man

They are all gone, and their sisters survive,  
those four boys of the tall clapboard house  
on Pleasant Valley Road and the sepia light  
of the twenties. The loss is of a world,

boys' goods, the books of my father, his body  
least among those grown men; caroming clouds  
cooling the Okanagan like an ember as he dropped  
head first into the lake, and broke his frame

slightly, but for long. Where then was the Coral Island,  
the litheness of Tarzan, as he lay sore and peevish  
while Frank and Jim rode into cattle herds,  
older daily, as his mind grew beyond the valley

and he first turned his pen? What pivoting of limbs,  
shock of lake-soaked hair, what dogs adopted  
among them, now are forgotten, as all first loves  
lie quiet and ashamed in the boy's back mind

and the man regrets them? There is my uncle  
as I will never know him, dead now, the last of them,  
the reason of his being no longer apparent,  
his gentleness surviving, and I in him imagining

my father as he was, incipient boy, not yet  
ready to anger, and his hopes as soft as his brother's smile;  
that lineage of lineament erased, and nowhere now  
ghosts of expression visible

whose cousins were my father's lips and eyes  
instantly before he struck, with hands outspread  
the cloud-reflecting water, and was made a man,  
discomfort, limitation, and gave a son a world.

## ghost of my mother

you might have been she: with your good tweed coat  
in a cranberry twill, the thin tartan lines  
turquoise and blue, buttoned tight to your throat  
at a robin's egg scarf, and your knotted kerchief

wimpling the fragile skin at your temples  
where curls of permed grey hair blew back  
in the damp wind at my shoulders, a wind  
you took head on with your cheerful shoulders squared

(your sparrow's frame—that was my mother's  
always unglad to be held in a strong son's arms  
away from the weather, but ah, now unresisting  
the wilful embrace of the dead by the living)

your blue rubber boots were poor. Your sharp eyes smiled  
frankly across the wind at the utter stranger—  
their candour exactly hers, and her generation's ease  
with others, casually passing: trusting, clipped

as the war had taught them. My mother's world  
walking toward me sly, and I, her son, busy that day  
did not even see you until we were close to passing.  
In those sudden eyes at mine and their confident kindness

and confidence I, young man, would smile in return  
I chose my shame, the instant I'd hurried past you.  
Am I wrong to think, think still, that your smile suddenly  
stiffened, with the blue of your ancient irises

when you knew, dear mother, I hadn't even noticed  
you walked alive on this earth, and had paused to bless me  
with the clear wind of your fading, earnest goodness,  
I who had not yet mourned my mother's passing?

## leaf raking

while the black dog frisks  
the piles I've stitched  
into the cool lawn  
and her breath shows white  
like soft hair  
the century-deep maple  
pursues its dissolution  
the leaves keeping falling  
over my page

I show much discipline  
erase and rework  
a further hour  
the bareness of the grass  
until the breeze slenders  
and holding its breath  
the old tree honours  
my afternoon of skill

so we go in; the dog drinks long  
I listen for messages  
stare out at the lawn

the leaves describing  
spirals and slaloms  
down the hard air  
are general again  
on my work of grass  
and Nell goes out happy  
to play in their margins

she heeds the different calls of pleasure

and I (now I have written  
my life out of that green page)  
accept the detritus of the season  
better than the perfect  
silence I tended

## **Apology**

I gave you flowers  
I wrote a poem  
the dog was in the poem  
the dog was in the flowers  
I showed the dog the grass  
and told her stay out of the poem  
I gave the dog flowers  
the dog wrote a poem  
across your flowers

*from Domesticity Sonnets*

V

For whom do I dig, pull roots, injure my back  
each spring in the struggle with this choking earth  
so I can sting it later with a few flats of annuals  
too unvarious in colour, too straining for the sun?  
What's the good of impatiens but love of shade?  
Why fill the dead corners with shrubs that may or may not  
thrive, hose every second day against smog and dust,  
knuckle down into earth against glass, weeds, seeds  
and squirrels? Imagine the garden I imagine here  
and it's absurd, in this forty by fifteen foot plot chock  
against the tough, dark alley: it's a luxuriant lawn  
overhung with fruit trees, swaying delphiniums  
mirroring pillared stars overhead, the sweet deep loam of the beds  
undulating with our breathing as we turn and lie in love.

## Halfway Ourselves

The shyness in our eyes when we call this happiness  
by its name. Incredulity, even. We spent so long

in a mutual unspoken forecast of heavy weather  
that when pale sun broke out through western leaning cloud

we looked away from one another, standing in that light.  
We've stood together on so many headlands

gazing at the same outward heaving seas, and the same  
rocks below. We know how many fall. We've fallen

halfway ourselves; but gravity is not our god,  
so we hung there, side by side, and then the thermal wind

wafted us upward gently into one another's arms. I said  
something poetic. I have to stop doing that. The line

was already in your head: utterance only made its touching  
literal. You've forgiven me so many times.

What was it I was thinking I too had to forgive?  
The truth be told, it's not always clear or still air

enough to hear your voice, though I see you pleading  
and never pointing. The laughter comes so easily now—

smiles and interlocking eyes less often than the sun would wish  
that blesses us, and blinds us, though our hands grope in the space

between us like animals in their burrows and other lairs,  
finding in scent and warmth alone the windless touch of marriage