

Faith

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Prelude

a broken leaf
like a fallen shell
curls on the surface
of gathered rain

the wind knocks its edges

the damp driveway
littered with red twigs
lies in a frame of earth
where heavy geraniums
darken;

there is laughter
in the park
a child in a red jumper
ignores everything

may she lie tonight in her mother's arms

younger, I would lie in my own bed
and whisper to her

*when the rain cut down
to the road's tar
later that evening
I leaned from a dark window
to watch the drops bounce
in the headlights' pale intervals*

*passing after a few moments
from room to room
I saw you leaning
out of your window
into the spattered curtain of the night*

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perhaps I never saw her
my mother in a patchwork skirt
and a blue blouse
for young women
leaning back for the bird
racquet leaning
eagerness blurring
her face and black hair

behind him the mountains
forested with blue pine
shoulder into the sea

the deep navy jacket
sprawls from his shoulders
a yellow cloth cap
jaunts on thin hair

in his spread palms
held out to sunlight
a salmon is resting

his smile is ship-deep
his face is swagger and love

he and I are the only ones
sleeping out tonight
the cold air is generous
a dying wind

as we lay out the cots
and fragrant sleeping-bags
on the mossed ridge over the small cove
we tell jokes, quietly

before I fell asleep
on the pillows of the slurring waves
I gathered the constellations
and shared the swoops of a bat
with my real father

the sunlight of this photograph
escapes me
as I lean
behind my brother

in grey flannel shorts, blazers
and navy caps for Sunday
we pose against the siding
of the blue bungalow

the Lord's low sunlight
opens across the lawn
the flower of the shutter

I am to be remembered
but look skeptical now
and then

I mouth full words
in the massed hush of prayer

shorter than the pew
I watch my father's heels
polished by these hands
and my mother's, dyed
a late red

the light is dusty and stained
across my locked fingers
the minister extends his hands
to sleeve the dust away
from the pulpit
where he climbs when he needs me to see him

usually I am skilled at inattention
but my father's palm on my collar
feels warm and is a greeting
the heft of which I recognize

so I speak out loud
this one is a creed

the dog is dead
and my father has returned;
we weep at the garden table

then agree to a walk
where we can cry free
arm in arm

his grief is pure
his son's touch is assurance
of the forgiveness of heaven

mine has a boy's odour
my tongue distils and swallows
a drop of venom

as we near the house
he suggests we unlock arms
and clean our loving eyes
my mother is home
unmoved

I blink past her after a small hello

one teacher was young handsome and smelled good
we played a game where
the other guy has to lift you off the ground
and you were dead
and each side had a teacher

we all ran to get Mr Hobden
I was carelessly fast
arriving ahead of the general urge
he lifted me like a son

beyond the shrubs at the limit of the yard
I gaze
on a clear lunchtime
to the mountains
just visible

the cold air bleeds
through the skin of the glass
to my open lips
and the pane is disturbed with fog

their sharp immensity blurs
their call is not brotherly
life in their rim smacks of the finite

pirate books
boys read them to turn manly
I fell in love;

my father knew
his son's canvas gusted
with romanticism

in Captain Blood he had hoped
I would seize the exemplum
of discreet bravado.

instead I watched the pages
for formulae of love
wondered if only an ocean exile

won you the girl, turned
briefly foppish and looked
in used clothing shops for a billowy shirt

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cutting away of friends
indifference to strangers

fondness of pain
erasure of memory

refusal of new homes
hatred of commerce

scorn of self-sacrifice
rebellious formality

as we moved so often
I learned the skills

in the afternoon
the broad cluttered window-sill
is golden, the papers
stirring in the open wind

the man is not old
he wheels his chair
suddenly to my side
of our audience
Eliot in hand
and reads his insistence
in the fraudulent lines

I am moved
I fight myself on it
fix on the taint of his breath
between us, the crooked finger
tracing the lines
I remember the moisture
of those moving eyes

and gone too far
for irony now
I cared for the modern poem

In memoriam Louis Dudek

I divert myself with spring
when she is distant
describe with sexual clarity
a contour of the land

under a broken tree on the mountain
with one arm snapped and hanging
I recline like a wild man
and sniff the air

the late bushes cluster round me
I pray in their shadows
small sparrows pluck twigs
from the evening air

I people the city
for sensitive scenes
give lives to beautiful women
under the poplars on Sherbrooke

that she has lived so long
embarrasses me among friends
who have long put to bed
their dumb purity

I have hardly touched her skin
her skin
can be a thing of words
and worked upon

in this room the candle-light
hovers on the boy's things
sword, skull, lion poster

casts the tines
of a dessert fork
onto the white cloth

napkins are flung aside
a drop of wine
dries in the glass's throat

by the door I have kissed you
to stroke your breast
is easier than expected
to kiss the strap of a bra

in your brown hair
your eyes hold steady
no kiss closes those
your face is loose gold
I waver at its distances

in the deep summer
night dry night
feels like rain
the darkness in curtains

in the park by the pond
gazing upwards
the moon is egg sliced
by the razor leaves

the ripples on the water
grow heavier, their shadows
stumble and round

as the wind hurls itself
through the lungs of the maple
in a separable rush

although I called the wind
and it came on occasion
lifting the hem of my hair
and closing my moist eyes

although such invocations
served often and for a time
could be relied upon

when I sought soothing
or the emphasis of power
or redemption from disease
I spoke to the empty sky

and the deep breezes
gathered against me and my long coat
flapped open in the warm dark air

I will not trust these affinities
stuff and love of adolescence

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the moon breaks over us
we are dead white in our clothes

the old father tree
prays out from its roots
across the water
a lamp floats on the surface

you climb slowly
then stand
we stare, differently
nothing there

my feet are damp in the autumn earth
pushing the strained grass
the ripples sleep

you recede into shadow
the farther I grope
for any memories
the farther you move
into the terms of your future

the dark leaves hover
over the park bench
where we sit until three
in the autumn night
we talk privately

we light the candles again
and sit in the familiar
armchair and sofa
communicating in a perfect silence
certain of mutuality

we think of death
I say nothing
your experience is varied

like watercolours bleeding
into the wrong fibres
the friendship of today
stains these dark purities
as art fails us both

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the star sapphire
stone of a dead love
our bond of friendship

I keep for him
in a private drawer
so no one will know

of his past
I help to forget
what only I remember

I bury her as I will bury him
alone with an interpretation
and then this friend

a young man in a trench coat
hair smeared to forehead
by the indifferent rain
on her dark street
enters her unlocked car
and waits in the shadows

my friend leans back
after a third coffee
and lifts a thin arm
to glance at his watch
then exits
for a round of meetings
with men of finance, taste

these stanzas have no relation to one another

after dinner I leave
by the back door
walk across the mud yard past
the bare posts of the unfinished fence

where the asphalt ends
the suburb drifts into ruts
the western edge of the city
stumbles into prairie

planets open in the empty sky

at the edge of the long valley
I sit and mutter
down to the trees
where the lone wooden
shack still
leans with its long light
out from the broken window
into the leaf tattered wood

this is impossible now
to stand here in the last sunlight
the wheat darkening around my hips

the flats growing
and the low whistle
of the silence

the car a hundred yards away
in the distance only the sure line
of the circular horizon

to stand with the Albertan breeze
bothering my hair
and to forget Hulme and free verse

I swore I would share the silence
but the mind has been taken from its own ground

my eyes focus on the mailbox
as our lips first touch

the bare bulb of the foyer
glistens on the metal lip
sheltering your name

we continue
my mind refuses
my eyes are in business for themselves

when it is over I have not known
fully the details

now in my doctored
photographs of love
this one is a silhouette
taken from outside

when you first throw
your body over mine
your china-minked arms flung
round my overcoat
the cold wind
lifting out of the city's face
up the cliffs of the mountain
to this look out

I am astonished
I lose my breath in clouds

as I stumble
my hand in your pocket
tears away from your side
and the old fur
rips easily

the poem I have been reciting
echoes away into the ice-case
of the trees

your anger, like a quaint phrase
accidental and revealing
comes out in laughter
dark laughter

I am beside myself
your hand is damp with rain
and nests in the cup of my hand

the street lights break like yolk
over the soaked pavement
small twigs accompany our footsteps
as they fall

with the coolness of the air
we have drawn close beside
the stranger for company

your shoes have laces
your steps are small

the quiche is hot and soft
to the teeth and palate

we hold it between quick fingers
on the rain spatted bench

pitched uneasily into the elms
among the parked cars
and the loud lanes
of the Avenue des Gobelins

one of the broken wings of Paris
where tourists come without money
a hindrance to a way of life

at home we are remote from such tastes
the senses here return to adolescence
that shyness between us

as we lick from reaching fingertips
the lucid oil

28

rain is the thing
rain on the stones
rain in your hair
the smell of rain is in all rooms
we water our roots
we live everywhere

at the perimeter of the mountain's air
 the city's consumptive breathing
 but not here
 the border is guarded
 here the loose-belted summer trees
 tangle their leaves audibly,
 the sunlight stipples the packed ground

look at the several brushes
 she has laid on the ground
 the sable hairs of one in her hand
 buttered with colour
 the palette with many colours
 not one in nature
 but quietly observe her moving hand

the air parts between her gaze
 and the taut organ of canvas
 the brush is a tense resisting
 implement swathing
 in her fine hand
 the air (the distant
 horns) between

here is a tree
 a stem of relations
 a ground of difficulty in the visual plane
 not her forte, trees
 and a problem of rendering
 (to Lily, lighthouse
 growing in mid-garden)
 a foliate thesis between
 detail and abstraction - green,
 phloem, bark, shadow on bark
 but here is a tree
 the painter's relation to the tree
 is a play of honour

I envy this poised mind
 her devotion to the tree is entire
 the strokes of scarlet and mauve
 tree is not a word
 the woman paints the tree

my eyes are bland
when the light of the world
touches my skin with fluorescent pallor
and all pages are one page
I enter this forest
all words are one word
easily forgotten in the green wind
I rest under the bushes'
snapped outer branches

she is at a distance on a knoll
the wind defeated by her old apron
paint encrusted
no pleasure gentler
than gazing at a loved one
whose whole mind is elsewhere
the wind annoys her braided hair

love will you never paint the tree
how well you have forgotten me

we decide when our lives begin

they are random in the years
before happiness yields
the vanishing point

we satisfy ourselves
and then look rearward

parallels merge and gather us
into the fine net of this present love

I have cried for your shoes
you wore them seven years ago
when we first walked together
through the rain
and their alligator polish
sparkled in the street lights

when I call them up I see no more
than your ankles in the dark
stockings and the wet sidewalk

but in the small perimeter
of your steps
we are young

we embraced music
wishing to love as in a film
with pungent score

these strains grow distant
Lennon dead
the Pope in stained white

we listened to Pachelbel
hard, to retain its urgency
when these would be long gone

but he too has soured
gauze curtains drift in commercials
to those dead violins

we don't listen now
we kiss without music
and await the year's
mild assassinations

you hurry away;
the cold air
slams between us

I close my eyes
a slow draining
of liquid will
into the melting ice

if she will turn again
we may have this day
through veined lids I see
the certainty of her pace

the hollowness of soul
I struggle to avoid
all skewers of need
of desire

a deep breath
betrays myself
I cannot begin again
the brain-pan is full

and you with no look back
have turned with relief
the last corner

now and again I look at you for the first time
perhaps with the lamp behind you
your face cast over
your hair scattered bright

or the dark skirt you wear
folds and flounces as the twilight did
when we first spoke, the cafeteria
isolated and fluorescent in the winter

you are an utter stranger
broken through the barriers of my life
resting well-breathed next to me
disarmed in loose trust

I fail to understand this
am briefly disturbed
but when the marriage rushes back to me
my relief is not pure

as in real winter
when the snow deadens the highway
noises crack into oblivion
and the illuminated field
opens mute and empty
under the street light

when the brisk swept stars
pose as if infinitely cold
and the opaque wind
burns your lips and nostrils

and in the morning
the blue of a painter's sky
fierce like genius

so will we all gather
weeks from today
when the bleak wind subsides
and the clarity is there

all forces meet indifferently
the leaves look to the wind
dress themselves to its shearing
without the sap of the will
intruding in their small deaths

in the lake water is no plan
the waves take rhythm
as we take sleep
imprecise in that oblivion

there is nothing to be done
when I lean against this tree
it does not support my spine
nor my spine its limbs in winter

we do not move one another
but in a mutual isolation
fall resistless on our way
from shore to shore

where will we turn
when even the dream of turning
is known for a dream

when the old tunnels
have collapsed behind us
and ahead is the new snow
of a finite plain
cloud bright

when the first step out
into the blatant air
is an imprint, a determination
on direction, an obvious
folly, a love