JUST BEGINNING
a height of prairies

a height of prairies over the river
sideways sun in the brown
stubble, twisted speech
of dead trees, the duplicitous
sun, but in decline, eyes
seeing for miles, all
at the same moment, elsewhere
the room with the blinds drawn,
the cancer advancing like traffic

or the smell in the corridor
of cooking, a fire hose for decor,
a life, long at its time, unmet
in words, a day in the
Shirley apartments, the smell
of cooking, long demolished,
home to a bowling alley,
automobile garage, passing
unmarked

a day in Connaught
in Ladbroke Road
Billy

look, Billy dead, the city empties,
the city of London empties,
if we don’t enter we needn’t
remember, nor see others
in his room, his things
scattered, his ghost thin
in my belly what is there to say
without the listening man?
your death Billy,
confounding time, burying
your friends, burying the stories,
plentiful as books in your room,
your Vancouver, long buried,
long demolished, sun the liar
saying this is the last of all days, yet
we bound for the next day, your music
on the tape deck, we travel
two ways now, playing you
one day at a time
Billy at Notting Hill
at Ladbroke Road
at Gennaro’s, at Prost’s,
talking the eyes out of a girl,
dancing near the wide Saskatchewan
in shoes shiny enough to show
the mossy face, Billy leaving
Christmas at Finchley for the
eight-mile walk or crying
in the crowded hospital at Paddington
and saying I don’t usually cry,
the pain swallowing Billy
the night edges over the house
into the branches of the tree
the branches of the dark green fir
into the forest of the peony
into the dirt under the peony
in the dead centre of the day
in the mid of the mid day
the sun like a perennial
the bluebells happy in the
sweet breeze the lilies
pointing skyward the raspberries
in spiky bud all wait oh they all wait
for their first love the lady
gardener but she is unavoidably
detained the faces of the pansies
the petunias watch and wait but
she is unavoidably
detained
the voice of Anne

if your words fall into her ear
and you are in the same room
the one with the column of cds
the heater that eats logs
the walls insulated with books of poetry

in that room, your words falling
into that ear, need no other home
until she, the lady gardener,
dwells only in our rooms
cluttered as they are
with all matter of the living
absently watching cars
people and the faintest
of faint snow falling
from a heaven grey as ghosts
or your eccentric angels falling
into the pie-shaped lot
on Connaught saying in their
odd way for heaven’s sake
pick the raspberries
red as thick blood
the sparrow hopping about
looking for the ear to pour
its song into while I, bereft,
fall back into the habit of books

and she sits, makes tea,
tends the garden, reads,
in the voice of Anne,
all days in disarray
sun

if there is no sun
and the sky draws down
you walk through
a veil of mist and are not
at home

sun shone before you knew
sun and wherever you travel sun
is your home your dream
of Rome   sun rising
and falling in Claude
of Lorraine   the wide bay
or the bones leaning like flames
into only sun

when you see sun
rocking the lake, firing the woods
with a latticework that greens
the ferns, laying great hands
on the hills, scouring the bare
valleys and the small forests
of your arms and legs,
would you praise god?
or let the mind go dead,
the body drowsy   bathing
in sun heat and day light
the jesus poems

1.

jesus held me
in the grip of hell
my grade three teacher
lit the fire
and only prayer
said over and over and over
might keep me green and cool
terrified always to re-enter
the brick prison of St. Joe’s School
or to tell the terror
held me in thrall

baseball was the way
and the light of day
jesus never played baseball
maybe umpire or scorekeeper
but the soft bunt down third
the leaping catch at second
to be lead-off batter
to wait in the on-deck circle
to do the chatter
to win at tough
St. Mary’s to forget the fire
concentrating on the next pitch
was the best way out of
all that other stuff
2.

There is nothing I believe
with mathematical precision,
no equation out of the self.
If lonely enough or vanishing enough
would Odetta effect a cure?
Patsy Cline or Casablanca?
Yet there is the temptation,
the nothing into everything,
true life in death, the miracle
of the cross, the Catholic
calculating machine.

easy enough to say
black on a health day
sweet church, its large emptiness, candles burning for the dead, the boy counting how many souls could fit and fly in the large auditorium of god, quits at thousands, looks at silence, the creak of a kneeler echoes, he kneeling, hands clasped holy, sinks his teeth into the varnished pew to leave his mark, under St. Joseph in the brown cloak with a staff the candles burning like souls, like hell, like purgatory and so beautiful, eyes caught, body gone quiet he crosses himself, walks down the stone steps into the wide street
this was the sermon
that a great garden
our heart’s desire
green and golden
was surrounded by a high fence
with a narrow entrance
and outside all was fury and fire
storm and stormy plains
the land of all fear
I knew I would never
discover that narrow way
to the green garden
and day after day
I picked the deadhead poppies
in my mom’s garden that they
would flower orange and yellow
like fire all the days
of summer
Is it possible to be a fallen away United Churcher? Like my dad.
We discovered in the apple-box bookshelves in the basement his prize for bible studies in grade six in Nokomis. That wasn’t the father we knew. He attended Catholic mass with my mother on Easter Sunday and was reading a detective novel in the back pew when the priest, confessions over, asked him if it was the good book. My dad, halfway through a Rex Stout, grinned. He was an accountant but not a Catholic. His balance sheet was numerical. “Who made you?” “God made me to…” After church wind in trees makes shadows.
6.

What was it you called me? catholic or socialist.
Call me something less something you know little of.
Call me baroque.
Fellini says labels should go on suitcases.

The old house on eleventh with so many gimcracks on the lawn folks could not fathom the lady maker, mad they said, their clothes shrinking. Or a church I saw as a kid, basement only, or the one tree left where we necked in the shadow of long-gone Rosary Hall we edging nearer to finale but hanging fire anteroom to living room and if you talk
don’t focus

okay
for fear, I moved silently
for fear, I said little
for fear, I kept to myself
for fear, on my knees in prayer
for fear, never entering
for fear, never entering
for fear, no life but fear
the body poems

1.

the body is sick
the head says
the body is growing
mosquito bites
ankle aches belly boils
and the like
just to spite mind
no choice but to live above that damn body
head whose clarity reviles
the accident of body
wants to be left alone
feels trapped in
errant & bloody sullied
stink of flesh and bone
nearing the end, the body failing,
you learn modesty in all desires,
except the desire for desire,
a modest thirst, the rose hip
or the lemon or the mint tea,
settling inoffensively in that body

oh that was

in its time so arrogant,
so easy in its words
a soft-shoe body
dancing body
blues body

ahh
when I feel awful, so far at least, it’s provisional, like a hangover that has always its slow end encoded in the very libations you drank, and at this moment on a cool morning in October the fumes from my coffee pour over this page like clouds in fast motion, so light a grey, so tentative, so provisional
the worm under the skin
leaches colour, rolling
in the sun, basking in dark,
the colour of cement, pocked,
scarred with cracks, worn,
walked on, the day on the move,
cars talking in their boring way,
the sun blueing the sky, the worm
grinning over its first coffee of the day
5. a modest carnality

when I ordered a grande au lait
on Denman the girl asked,
two or three shots of espresso
and I said two, I wasn’t man
enough for three and she said
she was, the modest carnality,
in the swing-walk of the waitress,
in the hug of greeting, in the
amazing summer legs of the
server girl, in this
light touch and that,
in the communion of smiles,
the perfect stranger, the
touch on the shoulder, the purring
of invisible antennae,
in for a penny
6. the dance

those times ago the dance
enveloping us none other
than dance hip check
eye trap sun
rising in a series of steps
down the railroad hotel
body wakes in the shank
of next afternoon the sun
imprinting itself in the brain
find a beer start a
slow dance waiting
for the music of your lover
to take you over
and over again
the waters of life

which then are the waters of life?
at Fishing Lake on quiet days
the water lolling about
like a lazy fish

at Windermere the bonfire
of evening at the end
of the lapping day

at English Bay the eye
drawn to the line
where water ends
and sky begins

waves washing ashore
under the still water sky
what then is free?

like water to find your own level
without guilt
to fade from view
while others talk
to arrive at each day
without a plan but with,
let us say, poems to write
in the sun of morning
to have an appointment for lunch
you want to keep
He knew he should be bereft at the prayers for his mother. It was what he felt but when the old priest did the stations of the rosary the rote beads he felt only anger. His mother had said the trouble with the Catholic seniors residence was everybody was so damned religious. Age eating at her never got all the way.
the last day

he forgot one wound
in another
one ghastly presence
replaced by another
a kind of motion disease
from body part to body
part, head to belly to
limb, this day the last day
of the freshly dead
hearing all the words
that lay you under
on the last ride
the cars smelling each other
down memorial drive
under the elm roof
shredding the sun
then the day too is done
I told you I could drive

I’ve become a brandy drinker
a swirl at the bottom of the fat-bellied
glass, with the elegant scent

on a particular day
of no particular sort
my mother, having received
her first driver’s licence,
aged 72, drove to my father’s grave
and said, “See, Cam, I told you I could drive,”
used one tank of gas and sold us the car

it’s not a bad brandy
I should be drinking
rye and ginger
my father’s and his brother’s
and Canada’s national drink

a toast to our fallen comrades
Ila

Ila who tended
our kids with verve,
leaving us now behind
the wind beating us
down swallowing all
testimonials, chilling us
to the bone, driving us
to the warm cars,
you betcha,
Ila in the cold, cold
ground, brother took the soil
temperature, four inches
down it was only thirty
can’t plant, yep, clouds
bundling over the April grey
stubble, cars gone, you
betcha
a memory

a memory
rattling in the head
the face of one long
dead in the dream
in the city you’ve never been
the ambulance in its white coat
its cargo dying
in the dead of winter

the ghost in the belly

song by Mabel Mercer
by Oscar Brown
by Nina Simone
is then and then

oh then
oh then

while journeys end
they begin again
all finales provisional
the meeting over the walking begins
the walking over the bus begins it’s
hardly news years ago there was
one sunset I decided would never
end colours blurring the evening
by the river whatever evening
it was remains still colours blurring
all going down and every
sundown is a replay
of that evening antennae
quivering

oh then
is it rooms or parks
we desire wombs or space
low roofs or sky high
the friend in the room
at Ladbroke has died
the room at Connaught
the room where the stories
were stored gone dark
the city empties
street by street
gone large gone small
the dust of just beginning

the trees by the river yellowing
the day without breeze
golden coins hovering
in the blue sun
the car tailing through
parkland or prairie
a chill in the air
first taste of winter
white and cold
is the taste of the first melt
on the south side of stores
on Broadway where the low rise
encourages spring arriving
street by street everywhere
the scent of dust
slow stepping spring
in the nostril
the dust of just
beginning