



# The Merla Poems

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**THE MERLA POEMS**

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*For friendship*

## **Introduction**

For three decades, Merla and I have been friends. We met in a night school watercolour painting class and instantly felt a strong affinity. Physically, we are opposites. Merla is petite and slim, with bobbed still-brown hair and matching brown eyes, usually framed in smart metal-rimmed glasses. I am tall, big boned, and my once curly dark blonde hair is now grey and wispy. Merla dresses with style. I follow my mother's dictum: just be neat and clean. When we walk together along the street, we certainly look mismatched. But in the way our minds savour the ironies of existence, and our spirits love harmony and beauty, we are alike. Where had our paths crossed before? We never did come up with an answer. Was it perhaps in an earlier place and time, as in "Past Lives"?

Once the art course had finished, we continued painting together. On summer evenings, we set out our palettes and wine beneath the huge old maple, facing the tall flowers in Merla's large English-style garden, as in my poem "In Merla's Garden". When the weather turned chilly, we sat around the old wooden table in her white-stuccoed kitchen. It was there I discovered that her love of travel books and biographies did not include poetry.

Since poetry, for me, was even more important than painting, it was hard to grasp Merla's distaste. "I just don't like puzzles," she explained, "imagery so obscure that only the poet understands it and does nothing to invite the reader in—no setting the scene, no background details about who the 'I' and 'you' are—just words in a vacuum." (Yet months later, a true friend, she would listen to the entire manuscript of my first book in one sitting, through the fog of a bad head cold.) After that, I resolved: my poetry must reach outward. My task as a writer was to build bridges—not walls—out of words.

Sitting comfortably in Merla's old-fashioned kitchen, I could appreciate her hunger, both as a painter and as a woman, for sensuous detail. The poem "Domestic Artistry" honours the skill, care, and subtlety with which she orchestrated her surroundings. For many years, Merla and her husband Lynn were antique dealers, and their home, the historic gardener's cottage from Toronto's former Massey estate, was also their showroom. As clients bought up various pieces of art and furniture, from week to week the beautifully cluttered rooms constantly changed. On each painting night, my fascinated eyes sought out the newest acquisitions.

As summer evenings took us outdoors to paint by Lake Ontario, we frequented the Beacher Café nearby, the setting for Part I of "Pink and Indigo". Along two sides, the café's large windows opened over busy, treed Queen Street, letting patrons enjoy indoors and out at the same time. The remaining walls were hung with watercolours, acrylics, or photographs, the exhibit changing every month or two. As we got to know each other, our conversations moved beyond art to more intimate concerns about family life, and a few years later, middle age. The elements of food, art, and angst near the lake gradually came together in "Pink and Indigo".

Besides our painting sessions, we also shared invitations to a number of art-show openings. Many contemporary exhibits at the Art Gallery of Ontario we found disappointing. More and more, we lingered over dinner in the Gallery restaurant beforehand, eventually allowing only five minutes to dash through the exhibit before closing. How we longed for the invention and draftsmanship of earlier masters and subjects that would delight our imagination. A large reproduction I had been given struck such a chord, and in "Before the Portrait of Lucretia Panciatichi", the distance between Renaissance subject and twentieth-century viewer dissolved.

At Gallery One, however, a contemporary show by a mutual acquaintance, sculptor Anne Lazare-Mirvish, enchanted us both. In her work, Anne had gathered the detritus of modern life—pop cans, wire mesh, corrugated cardboard, wrappers—and transformed it into the astonishing constructs of imagination. As we walked down the steps of Gallery One, “It’s a poem,” I promised, and that night began “Annie’s Recipes”.

As Merla’s and my own children grew older, our lives seemed to wax more complex. “Last Photographs” marks a turning point, where Merla’s travels, partly for business, much for pleasure, but also a kind of quest, become the dominant theme. Many of her early visits abroad had been centred on England. There, she, Lynn, and their two sons often stayed at Ockenden Manor, a grand old house converted into a hotel where a few country gentry remained as permanent guests. One, in particular, an accomplished and prolific watercolourist, shocked us by the sweep of her English self-effacement that rated her roses above her paintings. Once Merla’s boys, and a few years later my own children, reached adolescence, they begged off family holidays, and set out on journeys of their own. A middle-aged melancholy settled over us both, echoed in the sombre first lines of “Last Photographs”. Were we outliving our maternal usefulness? Where should our lives go from here? As the pleasures of tending an antique house and garden paled, Merla began to explore other parts of Europe, Italy in particular. “Last Photographs” ends its long meditation on mid-life restlessness not with a solution, but an uneasy question.

While Merla travelled further afield, I stayed home—at least in body. Throughout my years at university, art history lectures had shown me the artistic and architectural monuments of Europe. Now, I could “visit” them more intimately through Merla’s firsthand accounts, as summed up in “Traveller”. I even took a few imaginary trips of my own. For example, as Merla set off on yet another Italian jaunt, in “Across the Piazza” I



pictured myself in Venice, sitting at a café table. However, my persona was not the excited tourist, but a greying melancholic. As Merla ventured into the Eastern Bloc, in “My Prussian Past Holds No Comfort” I tried to imagine life in my father’s Baltic hometown near what was once Königsberg.

After each return from abroad, Merla and I would meet for lunch. As she recounted anecdotes from her trip, I pored through her photographs. One incident that especially struck me is recorded in “Appointment Above Florence: Visiting Sir Harold Acton”. Before going away, Merla had chanced upon an article in *Architectural Digest* describing Villa La Pietra outside Florence. It mentioned that owner Sir Harold Acton sometimes permitted private visits. Merla promptly wrote to request an appointment, and Sir Harold agreed. Off she set in great anticipation. Afterwards, at our ritual post-trip lunch, she described her day to me in thrilled detail. Not only had she toured the house and grounds, but Sir Harold (“you” in the poem) had taken her and Lynn around himself, then entertained them in his drawing room.

Her excitement was infectious. At home, straining to remember her every word, I scribbled my first attempt at the poem that same evening. At our next meeting, I showed her the draft. Delighted, she helped me correct a few details and fill my notebook with many more. As well, she suggested a visit to the reference library to look up Sir Harold’s book *Tuscan Villas*. Not only did it describe La Pietra and the gardens further, but it also contained several large photographs, including a haunting one of small statues flanking the garden’s hedged theatre. With her continuing suggestions, through several revisions, the poem eventually reached its present form.

Since her visit to La Pietra, Sir Harold has died, and his 57-acre estate has passed to New York University for its Cultural Education programs abroad. Merla’s memory remains vivid, of a gracious elderly gentleman whose acute awareness of his

privileged position in life obliged him to share the beauty of his surroundings with others. How the experience enriched our discussions of what gives meaning and shape to our days is reflected in “A Civilized Life”.

Poems on everyday concerns also have arisen from earnest conversations about our hopes and worries. These I have read aloud over a glass of red wine at lunch, waiting to savour Merla’s wry chuckle or nod of commiseration. For instance, “Signs of Aging” mused on the not-so-subtle changes that the advancing years bring, such as the health dangers in “Cardiac Hunted”, while “Merla Dream”—scribbled on awakening—gave surrealistic expression to our multiple anxieties.

Despite medical crises warning of mortality, Merla and Lynn continued to adventure abroad, and I to reap the inspiration. My longest travel poem to date dealt with a less-than-happy incident in Italy. It was sparked by the late York University Professor Emeritus Harry Girling, reminiscing about his youthful visits in “Bagni di Lucca”. In that favourite nineteenth-century spa district, Harry enthused, the scenery was exquisite, enough to have lured even the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley to its shaded streams. In fact, the countryside was so lovely, Harry insisted, that it had inspired some of Shelley’s famous verse. Later, after deciding to write the poem, I wanted to find out what else Shelley had felt in Bagni di Lucca. My library research uncovered a book of his letters, in particular one to Maria Gisborne back home in England that vividly described the surroundings, from which I was able to work a few lines into a stanza.

With so much encouragement, once in Italy Merla took Harry’s advice. Despite their reluctance, she finally persuaded her three travelling companions to make the lengthy detour to experience this enchanting spot with her. However, fate was against them, and the trip turned out far differently from planned. On her return, Merla faced a dilemma. Whatever

would she tell Harry? It took many months and not a little prodding before she had the heart to reveal the truth.

Given her love of travel and our lives' long and intimate conversation, no doubt I shall write many more "Merla poems". After every trip, as she talks of the colourful sites she has visited, my pen is poised. But a peripatetic muse involves more than cathedrals, quaint harbours, or an exotic marketplace. Stone and heart must intersect, for a poem to happen. Our painting, Merla's travels, and my writing are embodiments of a shared quest.

Confiding our worries and hopes in each other, we continue to ponder, beyond "In Middle Age", what pulls the pattern together. Again and again, we come back to the same conclusion, as expressed in "Perfect Canvas": "the power of art / to contain, to transcend / what we suffer. . . ."

*Susan Ioannou*

## Past Lives

Through a small door in a stone wall,  
a child with blue ribbons in long blond curls  
steps out to a garden,  
and skipping along a shaded path  
between high lilac bushes in blossom,  
sees ahead in sunlight gilding the lawn  
ladies long-dressed in white  
fluttering under white parasols  
as a tweedy old man  
in cap, jacket, and bags  
looks up from a folding stool.

Who are they?  
And that mauve hat with a veil,  
turning above a matching taffeta gown  
to greet her—it's Merla  
setting her teacup down  
on white wicker.

*Come out of the lilacs,*  
her white glove is waving.  
Where is everyone going?  
*A picnic?* The little girl hopes.  
*Along to the Norman tower?*  
She gathers her skirts, scampers after,  
as chatting, arm within arm,  
ladies in white dresses stroll to the river.

Into the rowboat she clambers, kneels down.  
Away they all glide together.  
Her fingers trail through cool water.  
How bright the reflections ripple  
sky-blue through cloud-white and curls  
sliding greener and deeper  
under the old weeping willows.

## **In Merla's Garden**

Under the dimming maple  
where Japanese rock bounded garden from lawn,  
we dipped our brushes from mauves to magentas  
painting the puppy-tossed flowers down.  
To dusk!—Our toast with white wine  
as we splashed on ultramarine,  
and sniffing the moistened earth,  
burned our umbers to browns.

As tiny shadow-wings flitted  
across a cigarette's flares  
stars barked, and jostling bushes  
hinted at pathways beyond  
where our loose wash and inked line  
might dabble at night's ancient questions.

—Until the moon waggled back,  
and emptying bottle and glasses,  
we rose and stumbled through dark  
toward the far kitchen and light.  
We laid mugs and bowls for the morning  
and propped up our paintings to dry,  
hoping soberer eyes would sharpen  
washes and wobbly lines  
by dawn into more telling shapes:  
something, at least, how it looked,  
if not what it might even mean  
when stars tipped our white wine  
and squinting deep into darkness  
we heard the shadows breathe.

## Domestic Artistry

As naturally as breath,  
her world is arranged.  
The little black table, just so, by the kitchen window  
quietly knows its place.  
Above, geraniums spatter red  
counterpoint to the tasteful restraint  
of brass agleam from the ceiling rail.  
The butcher block demands the centre,  
while *Classical French Cuisine* lolls open,  
“*Fines Herbes*” addressing tonight’s *beaujolais nouveau*.  
Even hand-quilted oven mitts  
congratulate each other.  
The impractical white floor shines.

In this room, as in all the rest,  
one never simply is, but glides with grace.

Silent as primitives bordering stucco walls,  
tinted pink through cranberry glass,  
silvered from napkin rings,  
pleasure is 9/10ths consciousness:  
watching for a nod, that soundless “ah!”,  
the respect, jealous yet genuine,  
for artistry’s delicate clasp on life.

## **Pink and Indigo**

I

Behind pink neon  
glowing against night's indigo,  
we sit within the wide café window,  
and over chilled lettuce leaves and pâté  
watch the world pass.

Watercolours on off-white walls  
lie quiet: orderly rows of Italian roofs  
tiled in pink, blue pastels.  
Their existence is framed, without change  
except, imperceptibly at first,  
to fade when exposed to light.

We love the darkness for that reason.  
Imagination flushes our colours bright  
as the curved pink chair, where a wizened lady  
puffs defiance under her broad pink brim.  
Smoke uncurls between pink nails,  
drifts pink rings down jacket and skirt,  
dissolves between pink hose and shoes.  
She turns, and her crinkled smile puffs us pink too.

Outside, a streetcar climbs the slope,  
sliding with purpose, who knows where.  
Electric-lit faces, framed like stills,  
glide as the movie draws them along.

—And where are we headed, behind pink neon  
gazing into the night?

II

To be. To feel the sun  
redden our evening faces,  
board upon board blurring under our feet,  
as daylight dwindled, we walked away the beach  
—and back, for no reason, against a rising wind.

Here where the rhythms of wave and breathing  
intersect the sun's slanted warmth,  
we stand at the beginning: water and sand.  
In this light, edges show sharp  
the vastness, yet simplicity of living:

we grow older  
gardens wither  
step by step  
children, husbands  
leave us  
to ourselves

here, now  
this particle of time  
is enough  
to isolate  
to know  
to love



III

Yet, driving the darkness before us  
far from limp lettuce, indifferent wine,  
although in distant gardens  
pink and orange tulips clash,  
we envy the illusory purpose of trains  
and long to arrange, once and for all,  
our lives like unfading watercolours.

**Before the Portrait of Lucretia Panciaticchi**

Lucrezia, grand on the drawing-room wall,  
reflecting your green transparent eyes  
I braid up bead-roped hair,  
compose my brows into swans.  
We smooth our pride's four-hundred-year-old lace.

No painter can part these small tight lips.  
Crimson shoulders bunched in satin sleeves,  
we stiffen from the darkness' warmth  
and let long fingers barely touch  
the dove-tailed arms of polished wood,  
the lustrous, heavy folds.  
A little red book in our lap deflects  
light from the wedding band's black stone.  
Tiny gold letters circle our neck:  
Amoré a word we no longer know.

This massive filigreed frame  
transfixes our silence like pearls.  
We look through illusion,  
permit time's brush its stroke  
—our long fine nails rigid and sharp.

## **Annie's Recipes**

*(Viewing the sculpture of Anne Lazare-Mirvish,  
Gallery One, Toronto)*

Squares on dark pedestals,  
pushing out of themselves,  
metal frays, or waves, or grows tails.

Touch us! strange shapes whisper  
uncoiling round layers and dents.  
Our edges are beautiful!

And knowing how fingers crave secrets,  
heaven you frizzle like angels' hair  
over earth's satiny planes.

Sparkling, a fish becomes its own net.  
Between two yolk-yellow rocks  
a crocodile writhes.

Through chain link and litter  
out whorls a hole  
rigid and ribbed, from where?

From a dark, underground garden,  
worm flesh twining and shining in mould-light,  
phosphorescent?

Or tunnelling blind beneath branches  
deep into witch-black forest  
a harvest moon sets afire?

Bereft, a lamb baas.  
Who will listen?  
—A headless Nereid who kneels in aluminum folds?

Children tucked side by side,  
row above row, under a cover  
dream with invisible smiles,

for you, like a mother bending to kiss,  
have smoothed the red cockatoo's razor head feathers  
and popped three bellybuttons from one deep mouth.

How mysterious such creation  
where wire, drink cans, tubing, mesh  
awake as 20th-century icons.

Only you could gather and meld and polish  
castoffs and air into hard-glowing cushions  
imagination dances upon.

## **Last Photographs**

### **I**

Across rhododendrons, hollyhocks, roses,  
summer fades from your garden.  
Tall sons have gone.

The dark one, with delicate wrists,  
the older one, blond, big-boned . . .  
letters from Europe to open as light falls.

Little boys echo, then vanish,  
Evening's last showers of gold.

### **II**

And you, in beige lace, Irish linen,  
surface smooth as an unstrung pearl,  
watch night clouds slide down.

Leaning within the darkened bay window,  
slowly you twist the rings round your finger.  
Where does the future begin?

England?  
Provence?  
Rome?

The wealthy Umbrian farmer  
raising his glass at the marble-topped table  
sweeps the air with wide hands:

“All my young days  
around the whole world I have travel.  
Here is the best. I stay.”

An acre of earth  
—or inside our heads—  
where do we wander, describe what is real?

Twenty years motoring weekly to King's College,  
Cambridge,  
painting seventeen hundred precise watercolours'  
intricate revelations of cornice and spire

to the fat American guest at her Tate retrospective  
"I grow roses,"  
Lady Brockington sums up her life.

Remember the luminescence of Turner country,  
mists burning pastels into simple canvas:  
"Romantic Abstraction," the art critic claims.

You know better, have touched their soft fire.  
Dreams are the same:  
what is there, to be known.

### III

But first the tangled plants must be taken down,  
rooms emptied of complications,  
the armoire sold for a comfortable wicker chair.

Kindred spirits murmuring dust from their frames  
stop you, walking down a long hall.  
You study their secret faces, and wonder

what train whistles into the evening,  
when is the channel crossing,  
before the shutter's last click?

## **Traveller**

Into my eyes you gather  
great cities' glittering spires,  
rugged towers, and airy piazzas.  
Like sunshine on aqueducts,  
each peeling century you adorn  
with the lustre of pale frescoes,  
chipped mosaics, rain-worn statues,

and I breathe in  
crumbling walls as they open  
onto a terraced garden  
where a dark pool ripples  
rows of rustling poplars,  
and shadows blue a pergola at dusk.

One by one you call up  
not simple photographs  
but spirits of water, earth, and air,  
and eased from aching bones, close crowds, and heat,  
a thousand miles, still home  
I travel Europe with you.

## **Across the Piazza**

Across the piazza  
this Perrier and matchbook afternoon,  
I watch the girl in blue and gold stripes  
stream down the marble stairs,  
uncathedralled hair long-summer light  
as doves that sweep  
wide rivers of air  
from dome to arch  
to the cigarette laid ready  
beside a glove.

Beyond my glass,  
the square spreads white with sun  
while figures cross  
like footed organ pipes,  
silent, distanced in their busyness,  
as sure, as I am not,  
of where the corniced shadows lead,  
of what the ancient campanile sings.

My long gaze arcs to catch her blue and gold  
flashing haste away on rivered hair.  
I want to cup her light  
within these shadows,  
strike fire  
from this blazing afternoon  
where my glove,  
so cool, so white,  
crumples on the café table.



## **My Prussian Past Holds No Comfort**

My Prussian past holds no comfort.  
This cobbled street overhung with windows  
blinkers the eye, then thins

desire to twin blue spires,  
or narrows the other way  
to the town's far edge  
and a black tree.

Even snug courtyards, arch upon arch  
opening ancient and slow  
down vined walks to a distant bridge  
curving over thick-timbered river,  
offer no comfort, although  
round calm reminds:  
spaces wait to be filled.

Were my rooted forebears happier?  
Did climbing tiered vineyards to town  
sky eyes with anticipation  
for a house to loom round a corner,  
a gargoyled door  
to glide open?

At night, golden with lamplight and sniffers,  
leaning back, did they sip and sink  
under darkness' unbroken music?  
Or strolling arm in arm Sundays  
through handkerchief-tidy parks  
did they understand  
how to uncrinkle pain,  
how to nudge the crooked  
and set it square?

Stone, high ceilings, night silence  
upheld order, walled back

undergrowth creeping the town's far edge.  
Behind teacups, my ancestors  
balanced politeness and longing,  
smoothed troubled hearts like silk sleeves.  
—That is why I take no comfort in them.

**Appointment Above Florence:  
Visiting Sir Harold Acton**

I

We create our own estates  
within the mind.

Yours a quiet dusk in Italian hills  
amber on stucco and sandstone,  
six centuries' adoration of hands:

Villa La Pietra—first milestone  
crowning a cypress drive up vineyards and olive

Villa La Pietra—first step stone  
to pleasure flowering year round

In your calm, vanished ages blend:  
the facade where Renaissance lintels  
curled to Baroque circa 1620  
for Luigi Capponi, the Cardinal,  
opens into a frescoed rotunda  
circling up wrought, pewter stairs.  
Glassed over since the 17th century,  
below, da Maiano's fountain still splashes,  
ghost of a quattrocento well.

II

We create our own estates  
within the mind.

Objets d'art—*just so*—on the chinoiserie table,  
from a red velvet wing chair  
the butler is silently summoned

for Scotch—in the *right* glasses—  
and canapés.

From sixty rooms, evening opens  
French doors to parterre and sculpture  
—*giardino grande*, restored in 1904.  
Steps curve under pines, by fish pond and hedges  
till, along pea gravel, down a mossed second stair,  
beyond the round lower terrace, day rests.

Within his wisteria pergola, fading  
Apollo turns from Florence, departed friends,  
and gazes at shield and mitre cresting the house.

By its side, 400 years, the ilex bends  
toward rose-hung columns and rocaille grotto  
where, like sky-ceilinged rooms,  
boxed lawns edge twilight down the slope  
round Hercules' shadowy peristyle,  
and Marinali's granite colossus  
lit by fireflies.

### III

We create our own estates  
within the mind.

Yours, time marked off with boxwood and yew  
hedge upon hedge mounting the theatre's grass.  
Music, whispering, laughter:  
six leafy wings shelter each a commedia player,  
Francesco Bonazza's 18th-century marbles  
your father rescued from the Palladian villas  
abandoned along the Brenta Canal.

Yours, time outgrown in old kitchen gardens,  
*giardino segreta*, where a glass *limonaia*  
ripens azalea and orange,

while the crumbling *pomario* wall  
—so startling its robin's-egg blue—  
turns memory back to the house,  
past servants, white in the sunken pantry,  
past potted oxlip, gardenia  
blooming pink along halls,  
and climbs another dark stair,  
nodding as heavy portraits rise  
toward you along the wall.

When you sit in a corner by the drawing-room window  
and chat about semiprecious stones,  
you know this is where the light waits,

its legacy a debt one repays  
by showing admirers the house and grounds,  
by sipping Scotch—in the right glass—  
and offering a salver of canapés.

With courteous smiles you point out  
your father's *petit-point* chair,  
and chuckle when a guest mentions  
—*Berenson? Oh my yes, and Duveen*—

while it is such a bother these days,  
spring sniffles, the servants . . .  
and you just turned 85.

## A Civilized Life

### I

A gull's cry carves the bay  
(Tell me,  
what makes a civilized life?)

Starlings dive a basket of trash,  
snapping black plastic inside with thick wings,  
then hop on the edge, look around.

(If we keep oblique lines to a minimum  
and fear a *frisson* within larger calm,  
if one gull rides out a cresting wave,

does it all make sense somehow?)

### II

Like slicing a blue orange across  
and raising the bottom half near eye level  
to trace the outline of the flat

scanning the lake's horizon  
the neck twists in an arc.  
How could past ages not deduce the earth's sphere?

They must have sensed this much roundness at least:  
the earth not a lid  
laid over the underworld

but the cut-away part, their sky,  
and horizon the far  
rim lost sailors fell off.

III

How many have watched this loose splash and wobble,  
crest and collapse,  
smashing on haphazard rocks

—no hopeless beating against a wall,  
but whitecaps chasing to shore  
tumbling and spilling over each other

like children running the sand, throwing bodies  
after their arms, after pebbles  
the waves gather into their frills?

How many have counted  
blue's flouncings and fallings  
shoreward to slide in and slam?

The same wave never repeats itself.  
Another surfaces from the deep.  
Not a drop falls over the edge.

IV

Waves are Romantic, washing from unknown shores  
bringing the distance in.  
*Swim out!* they circle and splash

and pull us away—to ourselves,  
open the mind to air's lightness,  
shake off the heat of the sun.

They bring us the underside of the mirror:  
life in reverse, inside turned out  
—lungs to gills

spaces between our fingers finned,  
yearning an undertow  
pulling us further down, further out.

V

In contrast  
are fish ponds and fountains  
civilized—or claustrophobic?

Boxed in some parodied ocean,  
fish swim eternity's tightening circles.  
Longings bump against corners, concrete.

All day, all night water splashes.  
What dulled existence  
a marble basin provides.

Or maybe that's all fish want,  
to swim for swimming's sake,  
not tourists, but saints in communion with water

so one with their element  
they have no need  
to sense anything else?

The highest serenity, such  
life without thoughts  
like being a cloud or a stone.

It's man that's blessed  
—and cursed—with a mind,  
that leans toward the horizon

wondering always  
what's on the other side  
or below.



VI

If a thousand caged chickens lay eggs on conveyer belts,  
by turning them into food-machines,  
is a farmer civilized?

If we treat every beast like a part  
of the same whole  
in which we live

and *create*, not produce,  
*enjoy*, not consume,  
are we?

The civilized honour a constant  
flowering from the past,  
not a lone moment in digital time.

VII

Hot milk cups hands at nap time:  
Sir Harold wrapped in his blanket  
dreams on the terrace, in afternoon sun.

The rose-entwined bone china  
curves like a Victorian corset,  
headless vessel of whiteness and warmth.

Wine glasses curve too  
and salvers, and Florentine chairs.  
Candelabra—yes, in the old days.

(What softness do chrome and glass fear?  
Time for sunlight?  
Time to breathe deeper

to pluck a chord unheard in the self,  
make it sing  
—a pre-cell phone music of the spheres?)

A civilized life means  
slowing,  
finding the curve in the once-straight line, the bay

riding the waves' hidden shapes  
like a gull,  
like a cry.

## Signs of Aging

Like shifting clouds  
the hours  
begin to thin,  
pull too far  
and now and then  
part, from widening  
vapour lips  
letting “O”, “O”,  
long blue sighs  
drift.

Less and less gets done:  
the violets unwatered,  
dust sun-baked on glass,  
chaos creeps in through drawers  
and newspapers dropped unread.

It's a comfort  
not to find  
forgettable things,  
no longer straightening lines  
or checking  
that corners are squared

but also, of course, a signpost  
along a dead-end road  
unwinding into weeds.  
Instead of *must* and *should*,  
we pluck the fragrance of is.

## **Cardiac Hunted**

Deeper into the snow  
they gallop on scarred  
crimson heels.

Cornered, stiffening  
withering spines  
they try

to smile  
how lovely  
light falls in late afternoon

and go on denying  
wind nipping at ankles  
its indigo promise of wolves.

They shiver as each howl fixes  
teeth in a razor-blade line  
and suck in another sliver of pain.

Memory bangs into rage:  
midnight will flicker here soon,  
redden more faces felled by the dark,

limbs dangling  
sinew severed from muscle,  
stomachs and tongues pulled inside out.

They look at each other and count  
how many days to each wrinkle,  
how many nights are there left.

Their eyes are a doe's stunned by a bullet,  
bleeding into blue snow,  
waiting for the moon's wolves.

## **Merla Dream**

Her firstborn made us  
a magic green carpet of playing cards  
to visit Merla's mother downtown  
who wanted my serrated knife  
for sawing off slabs of angel cake.

We didn't know how to fly high.  
Our ride toward a cartoon city  
undulated on queens and kings.  
We'd need to clear tall buildings, but  
the cards whipped up and down  
and Merla flipped off,  
bounced to the grassy ground,  
green as a swizzle stick.

While I slid down to breathe (like God)  
life back into little green Eve,  
her firstborn's round pink face transformed,  
sprouting long whiskers and a snout  
atop Sylvester-black fur  
and tunnelled head first  
into the earth, away and around,  
coming up several times,  
in search of a passport abroad.

Whatever did he find?  
Merla to stir his drink.

## Bagni Di Lucca

I

“Shelley stayed there . . .”  
The kindly professor smiled,  
hearing your travel plans.  
“Bagni di Lucca,  
high in the wooded Tuscan hillsides  
above the heat of the cities on the plains.

“With Mary and Claire  
he made a *villeggiatura*,  
renting from a Signor Chiappa  
a small-gardened summer home,  
its arbour of laurel trees  
so thick the sun could not penetrate;  
no sound, except the rushing Lima  
through the valley below.

“Closing Ariosto and Plato,  
morning and evening Shelley rode,  
or strolled by the river  
and up narrow paths  
noisy with cicala, sweet-singing birds,  
even a cuckoo,  
crisscrossing the chestnut woods.

“Once, he climbed high as Prato Fiorito,  
the meadow a decaying sweetness  
of violets, jonquils, and moss  
that ‘dart their arrowy odour through the brain  
Till you might faint with that delicious pain.’

“At noon, hidden by alders  
where water ‘transparent as air’

spilled from steep rocks into pool below pool,  
naked, he sat, cooling little by little,  
reading Herodotus.

“Of the landscape, he wrote to a friend:  
‘I take great delight in watching  
the changes in atmosphere here:  
thundershowers break towards evening  
to flocks of delicate clouds  
or, growing, overshadow the moon.  
Our fire-flies are fading  
but over and over, pale summer lightning  
spreads across the night sky  
and lights home the low-flying owl.’”

## II

Reciting from Shelley,  
white hair tilted back,  
did the professor return  
to Bagni di Lucca golden as dusk  
melting the Tuscan hills,  
or stroll toward sunlight, like Mary and Claire,  
along the ramparts of Lucca’s 9th-century stone?

Seventeen centuries,  
those Ancient Roman streets frilled  
outward to alleys and squares,  
buttressed themselves in three walls,  
and raising palace and church  
fattened on trade in agriculture and silks.

Spreading up to the hills  
16th- and 17th-century villas  
—Mansi, Torrigiani, Reale  
(home of Elisa, Napoleon’s sister)—  
opened from frescoes, rococo facades

to shady parks, where fountains hid lovers  
—even, perhaps, a youthful professor—  
slipping among nymphaea and grottoes.

### III

Eighteen kilometres out of the way  
skidding through high winds and rain,  
you fix on the kindly professor back home  
—the reason you rented this car  
and promised three grumbling friends  
a sylvan beauty like none they had seen.  
Steel yourself, grip the slippery wheel,  
and stare straight ahead through the sheeted panes.  
In either side window flow by  
smokestack, warehouse, factory, crane.

At last, turn off the highway to find  
from guidebook phrases long memorized  
“the countryside dotted with villas”,  
and slithering down toward Devil’s Bridge  
Shelley’s once exquisite view  
flooded—a valley oozing brown muck, and wrappers,  
plastic bags, and toilet paper  
snagged on branches and bushes.

Below, approaching Lucca’s bastioned walls  
“undoubtedly one of Italy’s most beautiful cities”,  
squint through the windshield wipers  
for one of four streaming gates to the saints  
San Pietro, Donato, Paolino, or Santa Maria.  
Where is the Via del Anfiteatro,  
its “yellow mediaeval houses” looping “a green”?  
Whipped by the rain, only narrow  
blurring facades splash by.  
Park. Is it worth getting soaked  
running to Duomo di San Martino,



“a masterpiece in the Pisan style”,  
for the “accurate portrait of Christ”  
high on the wood crucifix  
“carved in New Testament times by high-priest Nicodemus”?  
What shivering Santa Croce procession  
lights candles through the alleys tonight?

A few steps ahead of the car,  
a café looks onto a lopsided square.  
Inside, crowd steamy tourists and children.  
But surely—squeeze through, with a smile—  
pasta, carafes of red wine  
will soften the rain.  
Your friends’ three dripping faces glare:  
*You pay.*

#### IV

“. . . a charming air, unscathed . . .”

Ascending mud hills, sodden dales, why glance back?  
Shelley, your heart would burn.  
But what of the kindly professor at home  
awaiting night’s fireflies?

Tell him, as eyes turn away,  
“Yes, how lovely it *was*,  
Shelley’s Bagni di Lucca.”

## **In Middle Age**

### **I**

We want it all smoothed out,  
like waves  
flattened to ripples.

No high winds, full sails,  
prow veering through foam  
toward rocks

but a cruise with time to notice  
corner to corner across the bay  
pinks rising to blues

a wide band  
pulling the iris along and back  
like shaking the head against haste, against

a vertical intrusion:  
—a lifeguard stand  
in this tranquil sea?

We're not so close to death yet  
that we need a step up  
to leap into clouds.

### **II**

This is a  
slowed time.  
The body reigns us in.

Muscles dough,  
hearing fuzzes over,  
fingers ache to hold a pen.

Even the eye squints outward, surprised:  
so much is still there  
that stays

as our worn selves slide  
inward  
toward that black spot.

III

We cannot remain,  
but search for the form  
that may:

an axis under greenings and blowings,  
behind once knee-high children  
topping our brows.

What pulls the pattern together,  
meshes life into art  
while water runs through the holes?

What smoothes a breath  
flat into paper or canvas,  
holding it with a pin to discover

behind the orange and black wings  
its simplest  
meaning?

## Perfect Canvas

On this blue and white canvas, the black speck  
in the bottom left-hand corner is death.  
It doesn't frighten  
or spoil the horizontal design:  
sand, sea, smooth as unclouded sky.

Instead of a seagull,  
it simply is  
a flattened fruit fly or bit of grit,  
perhaps a flick from the painter's pen  
signing another contract to hang  
—the unexpected, perfecting dot of an *i*.

For the living  
death is a huge black hole  
swallowing time, love.  
This speck, for the canvas,  
strategic dark accent  
balancing mass against line.

Ah, the power of art  
to contain, to transcend  
what we suffer. . . .

**- FINIS -**