***The Gauntlet Road***

My father is driving north through snow

from Orangeville on to Primrose, Shelburne, Dundalk

where beyond the big bend at the cemetery

it’s a straight run all the way

the old road scored

into the mind inside his mind

like some primal planisphere

or the photo of his daughter

stapled to the pickup’s visor

but tonight it’s falling heavy

and he’s flanked by drifts and stark

wind devils, tailed by blizzards

heading into whiteout

the weatherman reporting

more to come, a storm front

bearing down across southwest Ontario

so he’s looking out for signs

familiar shapes to guide him

since the centre and the shoulder lines

have dissolved in roiling columns

of hypnotic superfine grainflake

and he’s thinking what would Freddy do

(Freddy who signed up and made it back

from the war without a scratch

who’s not his brother but is more

a brother than the two who were)

wondering would he pull over

but keep the engine ticking

or hold to driving, snowblind

and all the while there’s this war inside his head

in the head inside his head

over how he doesn’t know

what Freddy or the rest would do

(not his father scaling dirt tracks

in his maroon Model A

or his son whose red Camaro

kind of surfs the 401)

because they’re not here

it’s himself alone this time

dicing the ice stung blacktop

he’s driven half his life

to that flare he’s got a bead on

up ahead but still a ways off to the left

that might be marsh gas

foxfire, daybreak, porchlight

or another winter barn gone up in flames

and the horses, those same ones

the Talbot kids rode bareback

through last summer

spooked and out there too

running just like him the gauntlet road.

***The Fulminologist***

My father could tell us

everything we needed to know

about lightning –

how on average storms deliver

three strikes to earth per minute

or that each coursing flash

maintains a tight diameter

of just one inch

whole show an incontrovertible

transfer of energy.

He’d figured out its frequency

velocity and distribution

in certain regions of the world

– Kifuka, Catatumbo

the Kimberley Plateau –

could reckon if a charge was travelling

from cloud to cloud

or cloud to ground

or, intra-cloud, just roaming round

inside the cloud itself.

He would describe dark lightning

as a rain of gamma-rays, rhyme off weird varieties

from ball and bead and dry and heat

to ribbon, rocket, sheet, staccato

the enigmatic thundersnow

then have us count up beats between

dazzle-flare and rolling clap

– five seconds to the mile –

or measure if the storm was too far distant

for thunder to be heard at all.

June nights he’d scan Jim Dawson’s

ridge of pines and say

that lightning rods

and surge protectors

are a guarantee of nothing.

But mostly all the charts and tables

the observations and predictions

the sitting late alone

beside the lake or safe beneath

the front porch canopy

were divination, straightforward

old time guesswork

aimed at the odds of lightning

striking the same tree twice

or else a patient’s patient wondering

about metastasis, just how easily his mouth

might open wide to greet

that superheated, therapeutic bolt of blue

his name in radiant stitches

along its ravaged spine.

***Affreca and the Rooks***

In a thicket of question marks, where can a noblewoman turn to speak?

When you prayed for landfall and unwrecked

the ship streamed into salvation, through the storm’s teeth

whose voice did you hear incanting – *Mainistir Liath, Mainistir Liath*?

Did you promise Grey Abbey to God, a gesture of thanksgiving

or take the chance to stake a place of your own, bolt-hole half way between

Dundrum and Carrickfergus, one castellated stronghold and the next?

*Affreca* – Gaelic, Saxon, Scottish. *Affreca* – small hill of reproach.

Godred’s daughter, de Courcy’s wife. What did the locals, the blow-ins

the holy men make of your outlandish name?

What did it mean to marry a Norman knight, maverick mercenary, the Earl of Ulster

who ate and slept in his armour, the most devout

warrior in Christendom? What price to you his kingdoms?

Where was he warring while you praised the yew trees and welcomed

the white monks from Cumberland

all that singing, all that silence?

When they raised the crossing tower, paved the cloisters

appointed the chancel’s lancet windows

did you fear erasure?

Restless on moon nights did your green skirt’s hemline

dust and polish the garden’s limit, gathering the medicinal

signatures of pennyroyal, feverfew, foxglove?

What disturbance made you ask yourself whose idea were the rooks

their round the clock canticles cherishing oak groves

like you cherished saltmarsh, samphire, otters, egrets?

Did you write, plant, sketch, embroider alone or in company

saunter solo or flanked by greyhounds

a silver merle, a sable, a brindle blue?

What colour were your eyes when you scanned the lough

for your Viking father, your Irish mother, the brothers and sisters

you wouldn’t see again?

Was it your wish to be buried here, French barley in your left hand

rosemary in your right, a white shell under

your multi-lingual tongue

the rooks relentlessly questioning what the gods gave back to you?

***The Pineries, Hillsborough Castle***

*‘tasting…as if Wine, Rosewater and Sugar were mixed together’*

John Parkinson, Royal Botanist to Charles I, *Theatrum Botanicum*, 1640

October’s moon is cinnamon.

Under it Wills Hill, 1st Marquess of Downshire

and his elaborate entourage

are drifting off

the dinner party’s over and the candles

that amazed the orangeries and river walks

have guttered to a wink.

Only the pineries are wakeful.

What are they whispering to one another –

those heated, glowing rows of *Ananas Comosus*

(Smooth Cayenne, Jamaica Queen, Black Prince)?

Neither pine nor apple

are they tickled by the mania, the Old World’s passion

for a fruit with character?

Are they sorrowing the colonial plantations

of Brazil and Paraguay, that archipelago of wounds

across the tropics?

Or are they thinking back

through trans-Atlantic crossings

to Surinam, to Guadeloupe Island

and further back again

to the Tupi saying *nanas*, *nanas* –

quiet people cultivating

the Orinoco basin’s fragrant fruit.

***High Fidelity***

*for Celine & Daniel*

Seven swans, six white, one black

taking their leave of Lough Erne

stir up an unpredicted blizzard

on highway 93, Banff to Jasper

where I’m driving when your call comes in

to say that yours will be an Easter wedding

high noon at Dunamore, the twenty-second day

of April, two thousand and fourteen

and ask if I can be there, witness to

your pledge and consecration.

I can barely see the centre line, this storm’s a norther

as they’d call it down in Dalhart

but I tell you yes, I wouldn’t miss it

for the world or all its husbands.

Sunwapta Pass, a glimpse of Snow Dome

the glacier a glitter, sun-shock bright

then suddenly a pair of Trumpeters

clear the crest and climb

their reedy, hollow honking a wild jazz

broadcasting ivory vows – *I will, I do* –

long range, high fidelity

godspoken seal on the unbroken blue.

***Bob Dylan’s Paintings***

‘Bob Dylan’s paintings are not at all

what you’d expect of Bob Dylan.

They’re watercolours washed with light

and a certain kind of effervescence,

the lot of them just coming down

with frivolity and gravitas

the two in equal measure.’

You called that hot June night

from the Riverside to say

you’d been around the exhibition

not once but twice and might go back

again, if the schedule allowed.

You talked about the transport

and the pickup trucks, the sailing boats

observed from hotel balconies

the drifters and the diners

the disused beds and chairs

all of it a deckle edged dramatics

staged under claret skies.

‘What’s really knocked me sideways though

are these portraits of a woman in a pub

and a man up on a bridge.

There’s four or five of both of them

the lines identical, give or take

but the colours and the tones

completely changed. The same thing

with a traintrack where it veers

westways into the middle distance.

Okay, they’re variations on a theme

but there’s something else besides…’

I wondered what he’d said to you, Bob Dylan,

that you didn’t know before. Which story

about desire, desolation or being on the run

shook you to your boots each time you looked

and heard it play out differently?

***Burying the Raven***

Let him come back to me whole, in dreams stain

my bleached mornings, undead familiar.

Let his nacre wingspan outgleam itself

in death, the swarming mites turn to snow.

Let his scimitar beak inscribe on my emerging

skull the poetry of the stratosphere.

Let his brave talons transport

my long shanks, my folded ribs, my irreducible heart

to the tops of cedars where under

Pacific cloud cover he places in my mouth

the almandine blessing stone

I have set into his.

***Will It Fly?***

Who’s to say if these slight wings

can bear the weight of so much air

if the engine’s primed to peak

the ballast laid in evenly

if the calculations all add up

to something sound?

Guy wires whine like fiddle strings

or cicadas high on heat

the tail piece shimmies –

a girl’s kite, a dragonfly

and etched into the fuselage

autobiographies

that rarefied aluminium

a sheet of aerial parchment.

We fly on faith, you’d say

but all I’ll ever know for sure

is when the day arrived

- holy gold, annunciation blue -

the wind kept to its cage and I

did not forget to kiss your soul.