

Climbing Mount Royal

The rot remains with us, the men are gone.
Derek Walcott

New to the place, I thrust
the blackout drapes apart;
from a suite aiming west
some four centuries up,
my sightlines sweep to a stop
on a hillside's emerald arc.

Montreal's matrix, like sheets
of pentimentoed diagrams,
parquets the earth beneath
except where this green fin
rips through. I thrum right then
like a tuning fork, at the summons

struck by those heights. Downstairs,
I can feel the city's hem fraying
as its streets cant up steeply,
till a last curbstone frontier
what, with a shrug, my maps supply
no paths for, bluntly daring

me to enter. So I enter.
Encroached on by oaks and maples
that seem stricken with some stark question,
I must parry with selfies and labels.
Gouged-through switchbacks lever
me upward as smoothly as when,

a child, I could sleep through long
rancorous car rides home
as if still uncompromised. . . .The woods
admit the vista in shreds,
its perpendiculars jarringly plumb,
till I reach this plaza slung

out from the crest, and behold
at last how the St. Lawrence runs
like a cut, stitched with bridgmetal,
across tar and cement accretions.
Where the downslope flats, a stand
of towers smokestacks level

with this terrace, my po-mo hotel
among them. There, I thought here
quaint and vestigial, not this shrine
to a Cartier still gallant behind
his fleur-de-lys and crucifix, still
grappling these horizons as far

as now to his New France.
What it takes to get a man plinthead
I know from home, where our myths
rear up real as monuments
that brood, like scarecrows of bronze,
over fields fructified by wrongs.

It's time to go. Descent
restores nothing but distance
to what whispers, even through glass,
of the first, the lost, and the last,
of the all gone, of the soon going,
and of that world, the new one, now coming.

Just Like That

Moments like this the surround shifts.
Your inboxes banked with urgent matters
flutter like drapes, then fade to disclose
some rubble aftermath where wailing mothers
slump on blood-splotted hospital floors.

Or if, that day, the surround consists
of boulevards down which you amble,
your shadow dimming shoes and watches
asplay in plate-glass boutique windows,
with one deep blink it all peels away
and you sprawl, too filthy not to ignore,
camped under roaring off-ramp arches.

The surround can flicker out even at home:
sharing the sofa, feet on the table,
and the lived-in colors click to grays
just like that, every humble thing
now hateful, hated, bluntly reminding
that you who were partnered now lounge alone.

Star Treatment

Memory, that staid impresario,
prosceniums your past:
repertoried stagings,
a familiar cast.

At the quaintness of sets and costumes
you smile from your box,
then wince suddenly, like a Claudius
when *The Mousetrap* locks.

Centerstage, *the very worst thing*
you've ever done—
a backstory you haven't told
anyone—

you never got caught—
nobody saw—
no one even talks about it
anymore—

Setting aside of course
that party who,
someday, might yet revive
the truth of you.

How wise then your silence, when others
blurt *Look, that's me!*
how shrewd of you, to act always
and naturally.

Morning Commute with Revenant

You know how it is: going in to work,
Who looks anything? You're late, it's cold,
hot, raining, no buses *again*, whatever.
You're long past fighting this fast-forward blur,
pure A-to-B time, better numbed than bored.

But then the street-views you sluice through slow and lock:
some old warehouse abutting a blacktop lot.
Why here? Don't say a bird.
You do and this is *over*.
No birds, no clouds, nothing with petals or fur.
What then? Don't expect much:
high up this soot-caked chainlink fence
that nets, for no one else, blank swaths of sky,
there juts forth a sawn-off sumac branch,
em dash black and cocked at ten-to-three.

See it first, since you must, as a quenched torch,
a club hanging half-swung,
or someone's bony forearm thrust through the mesh,
lopped at wrist and elbow, and left as a warning.
Fine. But you're not one to confuse
fancied-up musings with the truth:
one hapless stick is all the chainsaw left
the day someone decided
this tree—a weed that wedged upwards from
the cracks its seed happened among,
that rose against the traffic-ravaged air,
that pierced that fence and knuckled this pavement up—
had to come down.
Rough cobblestones plug the square yard
where its raw stump once weathered anvil-hard;
no doubt the sheared-off roots still grip
deep undertiers of pipe and stone.

A passing siren's wave-crest flushes you
back in the churning surf of city noise,
but by now it's too late:
you've gone and glimpsed that voided silhouette,
you've heard, in its tousling leaves' soundless hiss,
another of those random sidewalk elegies
work alone can dismiss.
And not because it isn't true,
because it is.

Memento

As the bobbed ashtray's shards
splash my feet in a swift blur,
I watch, seldom uselesser,
 how a thoughtless world discards
one proof more that you once were.

Purloined from some hotel bar
years ago, a trophy like this
ambers no *mot* of yours I miss,
 hubs no scene with you its star,
never stirred us to reminisce.

Yet I grieve losing this thing,
because even to possess
one second-rate relic less
 teaches me, like you, to sting
with the slap of my carelessness.