

Nostalgie



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With the recovery of a box of negatives, I began a month long search through my past. Photographs, journal entries and poetry took me through most of my life. This book represents the start of a look back that I had not been able to take. Thirty and forty years later, it still hurt too much, but now I have finished that journey and I have made peace with that skinny fellow with the long hair in a bandana. He had a lot of growing up to do from that photo.

This book is dedicated to the friends and especially the women who helped me along the way. I'm sorry I wasn't a faster learner but in my defence, I was very young.

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A Decision About a Bruise

I look at my elbow
the blood-taking bruise there
and am reminded once more
of how little time I have left

Any thoughts of being 100 are gone
replaced by a deep longing for quiet
And yet I am drawn into the world
of small annoyance, of other people

Should I pretend I will live to 100
and snipe and snap at the world
as I have always done
Put things off until too late

~~

Winter Projects

There is a book in my journal
waiting to be typed
There since the July long weekend
but I plead July
and August
Perhaps when the snows come
and I can't work in the shop
and I need the illusion
of creation

~~

Distract Me

Once again the quiet
the space at the start of a day
where a coffee cools
and I have room to think

Too bad there is nothing much
to think
I think
and I want someone to get up
to start the day
to distract me

~~

Like the Weather

When she laughs
I love her more than life
but when she howls
and snaps
an ill mannered dog
I wonder what I have done

~~

What You Need

Look for it far away
somewhere else
anywhere but where you are
and you will surely find misery

Stop, sit
open your eyes
then open them again
to see what there is to see
to see that what you desire
what you need is there

~~

Facebook Design Theory

Five lines
all this program will allow
five lines to see
and then I suppose
you should stop

After all, the idea is quantity
not quality
Looking back
scrolling back
to see what you wrote
is a sin

So many words
in giant typeface
and then the punishment
of smaller type

Don't think, thumb
and send it
get it out there
hunt down those likes
that ding of delight
~~

What Was Left

We made the bed
and I tucked the top sheet
under the mattress

She stomped around
to my side
and pulled it out again

I had forgotten
that she liked her feet
to stick out when she slept
and she liked to twist
and roll
and wind herself in the covers

I would get what was left
~~

I'm In

I got into bed
and said "I'm back"
She said "yeah"
with twinkly delighted eyes
and cuddled up to me

"I'm in" I thought
as I circled her with my arm
A couple minutes of warmth
and anticipation
brought me some soft snores
~~

Not My Circus Any More

We're going to practice
said the Pamurai
That's good I said
You want to join us
No, I'm going to work in my shop
you guys have fun

Fifteen years of almost daily training
has finally paid off
While I pottered around
the Pamurai taught
and all is good

~~

Pavlov's Dog

The phone rings
and I let it
The nice man says
"leave a message"
and once more there is silence

Is there anyone out there
Are these robots
calling one another
in an endless round
of useless dialing
as the humans ignore the bell
No Pavlov's dogs we
~~

Tough Decisions

My emotions swing
between bar soap
bar detergent
and liquid detergent
for washing myself

It is surely a matter
of suds

~~

We Had Chickens

We had chickens
and as a young man
I ate a lot of eggs

Egg salad sandwiches
every single day
through high school

And occasionally a chicken
The rural Sunday ritual
One chicken less each week
One egg less each day

~~

Friendly Fire

Is there a Father alive
who has not been chased
around the room
by a Mother
squirting milk
~~

Becoming Inhuman

Life becomes less funny
race jokes
moron jokes
politician jokes
have all joined cringe jokes
in a special place

The place where my brain nods
and says "yes, that's why"
as I watch some
become inhuman

~~

It Equals Out

As I got closer to her neck
I lost focus
and could no longer see
that mole I loved so much
but as a reward
I could smell that place
between her neck and shoulder
that I loved just as much

~~

Love is Strange

A curious thing, love
I have eaten her hair
had it caught on my teeth
reaching into my throat
and it never bothered me
~~

Who?

As you walk away
I am already forgetting you
and as you turn the corner
your name is gone

~~

I Hear and Obey

I hear my old grey cat
asking to be let in
and I look in surprise
at the chair
I thought he was there
sleeping

Early this morning
he went out
and I saw a black cat
outlined against the garage door
the black cat ran
and my little cat chased him
I went back to sleep
to find him inside later

But for now he somehow
transferred from chair to outside
and wants the door to open
I will open it
Oh God from Egypt
I hear and obey
Brave deaf kitty
~~

To Become Old

I will sleep when I want
and nap when I'm tired
for I am old and I will die

I will buy strange tools
and never use them
and my son will have them

I will buy pretty things
and never look at them
and my daughter will have them

I will work when I can
because I must pay my way
but I will stop when I'm tired

I will let go of the things
I should let go
and be happier for it

I will keep the things I love
and give me comfort
and be happier for it

And when it's time to go
I will not wail and gnash my teeth
for it will be time to go

This is my due
for I am an old man
and I am happier for it

~~

Did I Imagine

The small hours of the night
and I had to be somewhere else
I rose from her bed
and she jumped up to tickle my back

I turned to look
and she was tucked under the covers
fluttering her eyelashes
Did I imagine that tickle?

~~

My Beautiful Bush

"My beautiful bush
I'll kill him"

"Look" she said
"I'm your model
not your girlfriend
I'm his
and he gets a clean crotch"

~~

Such a Small Thing

How much must we do
to express love

With a broken neck
I would go to bed
and she would hold the covers up
then tuck them over me
I never felt more loved

Such a small thing
you might say

~~

It's Just the Dishes

To do what needs doing

Can you do it

Can you do it without thought

without considering

the unfairness

Why is it always you

It's just the dishes

~~

The Hardware Store

The hardware store
and the grocery store

No great adventure
yet, for the first time
in a week
I was out of the house

And once again
I realize how difficult it is
to be around others

It's not that I'm emotionally fragile
or withdrawn
or even shy

I just don't like people
They are thoughtless
careless, selfish

They are tiring
I figure I'm good
for about a week
~~

What is Marriage?

You ask me about marriage
Pick up a fork-full of stew
catch the shine of a stray hair
Swallow
~~

At the Checkout

At the checkout
the magazines are lined up
Britney will marry
and have a kid
The royals
The stars

I look straight ahead
unload and pack
as quickly as I can
~~

September 25

The chirp of a Cardinal
just outside the window
and I wonder
if the idiot is building
yet another nest
~~

The Shot That Keeps Me Alive

Idly I rub the bump
on the bottom of my apron
That bump of hormone
That apron that happens
when hormones castrate
It itches for a few days

~~

Live Pared to the Bone

How wonderful
is a life pared to the bone
Tomorrow I will eat oatmeal
with seeds and yogourt
I will hear "it's ready"
and the tap of the bowl
hitting the table
I fall asleep quickly
thinking of the waking sound

~~

Yes Dear

Holy cow, you've got ten
tins of fish

Yes but you told me
I couldn't eat them quickly
that I had to save them

Well just remember
that you have to eat them
if I buy them for you

Yes dear
~~

Familiar

What is that line

"I've grown accustomed to your face"

Well I have

I did

and it was hard

to grow accustomed to another face

~~

Maipo Valley Home

Riding in a bus
up the Maipo valley
Stopping at a vinyard
and having dinner
on the veranda
Before heading back
to Santiago

Several years later
I have flashes of vineyards
and the scene across the valley
looking at another winery
we visited days earlier
And several years later
flashes of a place
that my brain says is home

~~

My Chilkoot Pass

A notch in the mountains
Snow covered
and clouds

The Chilkoot pass is mine
Because I was there
Because I remember that
Because I walked through
that notch
into the spring below

Below the blue glaciers
that lined the valley of spring

~~

Not More Cancer

I catch a glimpse
of a lesion on my neck
Oh dear
and I look again
but no, just wrinkled skin
that took some sun
Sun that isn't supposed
to get near my neck
after the radiation treatments

Is it any wonder
that I avoid mirrors
Not that I was ever fond of them
but now it's necessary
to my emotional health
that I not look

~~

Sheldon

I knew a gentle fellow
who loved the idea
of a chivalrous time

He was one of the first
of my friends arrested
in a public toilet
and one of the first to die
of Aids

All these years later
I feel I failed him
Somehow didn't protect him
From what?

~~

She Slept

She slept
and the sun through the window
fell across her face

I moved my hand
so that my finger's shadow
traced her lips

~~

Northern Albertan

Oh those wagon-burners
he said, this kid
driving his muscle car
with a steering wheel
about four inches across

I said nothing
it was Northern Alberta
and he was driving
and it was a long way
from anywhere at all

But I wondered
if he meant the Mormons
in Utah
who dressed as Indians
To kill a wagon train

~~

Not You Babe

If you came back
through my door
I would smile
but I would know
that you would walk
back out that door

It's not you babe
it's me

~~

My Socks

Do you have any idea
how much love
you can feel for someone
who puts your socks on

My neck was broken
and I didn't know
but I knew I couldn't move
I knew my left arm
wouldn't move

And I knew
that there were people
who would put my socks on
and take them off again
I may have screamed
and snapped
but never, ever, did I not love
~~

They Die Often

I thought that death
came only once
but I was wrong

The deaths of those I love
come whenever I remember
Remember that they are dead

They die because in my mind
they are alive I feel them
and then I make them die again

~~

Please O Teacher

Please O teacher
remember us
your students
Be what we need
you to be

Only living
within your subject
Only kindly
as you guide us along

Never shocking
Never what we don't expect
This for us
your students

~~

Every Time

She would turn her eyes
and see me
I don't know how
but I fell
every time
into love with her

If you asked me
I would tell you
I never fell out of love
yet every time she saw me
I fell in love with her

I know I repeat myself
I know I repeat myself
But year upon year
She saw me and I fell
Until I had to stop looking
at her

~~

Breathless

Today I saw
an old photograph
one I took forty years ago

She was naked
hands above her head
sitting on the edge of a chair

It took my breath away
just as it did then
the day I took the photograph

~~

In 1975

In 1975
she is gone to another man
and my mind is open
my thoughts are free
as is she

But the body has its own thoughts
and it hurt
when she left my bed
to go to another
I ached to tell her to stay
~~

Three Years Dead

I am three years dead
three years in the grave
kept alive by strange potions
a zombie without a master

What am I to do
these alchemists
who keep me alive
have not told me why

~~

My Broken Neck

When I could
I carefully went up the stairs
and into the shower
I would sneak up the temperature
until my skin was almost blistered
and the pain was close
to the pain in my neck
the pain in my back

I would stand still
and with each breath out
I would feel for my muscles
willing them out of seizure
slowly, slowly
I would feel the warmth
as the pain inside subsided

~~

Every Time I Hear That Song

Memory is a strange thing
Peter Gabriel's Salisbury Hill
and I'm in my 20s somewhere
In a lounge at UBC
sleeping
On my way somewhere
with my thumb out

I have no idea where I was going
but I can feel the cushions
on the side of my face
and the slight worry
that I won't look like a drunk student
crashed in someone else's lounge

~~

Local Bus Routes

Those local bus routes
I would hitchhike home
in a couple of hours
but my mother didn't like it
so I took the bus
a local

I met her in Hamilton
during a change
we talked for three hours
and then the bus came

I saw her once again
took her to a wedding
I might have seen her more
if I had just let it go
the way we said goodbye

If I had kept my mouth shut
not written about it
like the stupid child I was
And so I had her and lost her
at the very same time

I never could keep
my tongue still
or my pen dry
and I have paid for it
~~

The Gifts I Had

The gifts I had
as a young lad
I spent
and wasted
thinking they would keep

The old man I am
can look back and weep
for all the time lost
the days, the friends
and yet here I am

~~

Who Are These People

Who are these
I seldom took pictures
of strangers
and so friends
and friends of friends
but these people
in photos I took
negatives I developed
are unknown to me
Their future is lost to me
as I lose their past

~~

I Know A Girl

I know a girl
who shook her head
when I asked her
how handsome I was

You know I don't like boys
she said
with sad eyes
at my longing for that boy
in the photograph

~~

How Much Acid

How much acid did you do
I was asked
but I was never much interested
in the pretty colours on the wall
of my apartment

Beer was good enough
to make me forget
and for long years in my life
I forgot
~~

Put It Away

You will not point
that camera at me
she said
I will happily strip naked
and fuck you through the night
but I am not going to think
of photographs of me
somewhere out in the world
~~

How Curious

How curious
to find a photograph
that I have long remembered
and to look upon that girl

To see how unremarkable she was
to be reminded once again
that all things are perceived
and never seen

~~

I Was Going to Go There

The fall has come again
as it did two years ago
when we had plans
for South America
Are they still plans
or another faded memory

I was going to Cuba
with a girl I barely knew
but somehow it didn't work out
The girl I lived with
had such a hurt look
when I mentioned it

I of course
didn't understand
why she would worry about it
Still, I never went to Cuba
And when I see the news
or a tourist ad
I think "I was going to go there"

~~

For Half an Hour More

Just to hold her in my arms
for half an hour more
To hear her breath
and that pleased sound she makes

To feel her fall asleep
And lift my arm
as she shifts, restless
To watch her face
as she begins to dream

~~



'70s Selfie

In the early '70s
selfies involved a mirror
and to flip vertically
we simply loaded the negative
upside down

Hands, camera and hair
were all we needed
to know it was us

~~



The Orange Cat

We've always had orange cats
or is he a single cat
who lives a circle
young to old
and young again
At this time
I think he said
his name was Pumpkin Pie James
Always a bit of a snob

~~



Sharecropper's Farm

A sharecropper's farm
was always distinct
outbuildings perfect
and the house
good enough

~~



Pronounced Kill

A tobacco kiln
(pronounced kill)
burned hot
so set them wide

One day filling
a few days curing
and unload in the early morning
while the cured leaves
are still soft
with the morning dew

A fire could take several kills
tobacco half cured
and not yet emptied
Keep a sharp eye on the wind
~~

Just In Case

It was always a small celebration
I would smile quietly to myself
that night when we slept together
without fucking
(and without anger)

It wouldn't happen
for several weeks
but when the night came
it meant that this one
would stay for a while

No need to fuck
just in case
~~





Rich Enough

There are a lot of landscapes
in my old negatives
People were expensive
ten rolls they said
one good shot per roll

Trees, farms and sunsets
didn't jump around
didn't make strange faces
didn't need makeup
but I longed to be rich enough
to shoot models

~~



Coffees and a Mountain Dew

How young was I
when I brought coffee and pop
to my father and the boys
while they built the cover
for the docks

I had a Mountain Dew
and felt quite grown up
being the go-fer

~~



Oof

Jacqui stretching on her bed
such a long drink of water
I must have met her early
shortly after I arrived
at the University

There was a bit of a dance
but I don't think she ever
invited me into that bed
~~



Nostalgie

The past is a dangerous place
You can get lost
You can be caught by ghosts

I remember a photograph
of my stepfather
and his brother in law
on the big bed
after Christmas dinner

The bed that was dismantled
during the chivaree
and squeaked ever after
(the gunshot hole in the eaves
was later patched)

When I got older
I made them a bed
so as not to hear

Ghosts, all ghosts now
and the bed I made
is in the cottage
I sleep on it now

~~



Mac Loder

Even when I was young
the Walter Mac was old
one of the few open deck
fishing tugs I'd ever seen

Walter Wilson and Mac Loder
Partners in a tug
and in a fish packing plant
I got my Port Stanley spanking
from Mac Loder
as I wandered too close
to the harbour

Every town kid learned
that the harbour
especially that fascinating water
between the dock and the boat
was dangerous
if only because of Mac

Much later I worked for Wood Wilson
harbour master and owner
of Wilson and Loder
and my great-uncle
I carried frozen bags of fish guts
over my shoulder
and shovelled ice

All gone now
like the ice out of the harbour
all gone, and in the place
are fancy restaurants
and condo apartments

~~



My Father's Ramshackle House

There, across the harbour
across the street
I can see my father's ramshackle house
the now heritage smokehouse
that was just the cement building to us

That house grew organically
room by room
and beside it "the building"
which I helped build
being too small to help
on the house

Can you see the image

as I remember it
There across the road
is the fish shanty I helped shingle
Mac Loder's place
and at the water
would be where I was spanked
too young to remember

The tugs lined up
Not as many as once
but more than now
and closer to the entrance
is the coal sorter
and the boom from the steam shovel

There, behind the house
is the clay cliff
I used to retreat to
when life got too much
It is on top of that hill
I read the letter
from the girl who took my virginity
So much past
so much passed

~~



Selfie Shadows

Old school self portraits
Shadows and mirrors
'True likeness' for photographers
we all hide behind our cameras
and so you will see no fish faces

You will just have to take our word
that it's us

~~



What Drove Me Out

What drove me out
in the bitter cold
so cold the shutter slowed

Yet day after day
I would photograph
net reels
and the harbour
always the harbour

Was I searching for an anchor
some way to know
that I belonged somewhere
anywhere

~~



Backlit World

All my life
I have looked into the sun
reflecting off water
reflecting off ice
The backlit view
of the world appeals to me
not so the world can see me
but so that I can see the sun
~~



Spring Breakup

Someone fires up the diesel
and starts to attack the ice
Soon there is a path
from the harbour
and the men go out
to set the nets
to bring them in

Freezing hands
picking freezing fish
"You don't want
to be a fisherman"
My family said
~~



That's What You Look Like

A lighted doorbell
on a padlocked door
That's what you look like
in my deepest thoughts

There seems to be a welcome there
but look again
There is nobody home
to someone like me

~~



The Clifton Hotel

The Clifton Hotel
was the only place
I drank with my old man
I was glad I had that chance

I would go there myself
once loaned a book
by Peggy Atwood
to a pretty girl

Nothing came of it
and I never got the book back
but I was glad of the chance
to make a pass

The hotel burned, long gone
I would have liked
to have a drink with my son
who drinks rum and coke
like his grandfather

~~



Edna's Greenhouse

Edna's greenhouse
was a wonderful place
cobbled together
old windows
old boards

She would save nails
hammer them straight
and use them again

I would help her sift dirt
slip next year's geraniums
and otherwise putter with her

I was fascinated
by her slow fan
created by wiring a lightbulb
in line with the cord

The strangest thing
was that my grandmother
never had a plant in her house
Like a pet dog
they were restricted to their place

~~



The Lighthouse Was Mine

Big Beach in Port Stanley
and the lighthouse
were mine

While others could walk
I alone hung by a rope
upside down
and painted that damned lighthouse
~~



Friend's Girlfriends

How do you learn
how to take pictures of people
Serious photos
If you are a shy boy
who doesn't know how

Use your friends
and your friends' girlfriends
Those who will forgive you
your fumbling, trembling efforts
Shoot, develop and shoot again

~~



Conversat

Conversat they called it
some long past formal dance
and I went with Jacqui
in a suit my mother made
Lemon jacket
Green pinstripe pants

The roommates took me along
guided me and chided me
and in the end
I had a good time
but never attended another

~~

You Can't Be Serious

Often I have wondered
why I screwed
so many relationships
and all I have
is that I could not believe
that anyone was serious
about me

~~

She Cut the Damp Part Out of the Tomato Slices

I would stumble up the stairs
and into the apartment
somehow I would get my shoes off
but then would flop onto the bed
fully clothed

In the morning I would wake
naked and covered
She would be up
making breakfast
making lunches

Never saying
how I got undressed

~~

70 MPH Coffee

A classmate from Germany
he finished his national service
and came to Guelph

He fed a block one autumn
from a huge pot of sauerkraut
with sausage and juniper berries

He told me of driving
and passing two girls
of slowing down

a hastily drawn sign "coffee?"
held to his window
I took the lesson

~~



11.4 Glengarry

There is a time and a place
where a boy becomes a man

On the whole
I suspect this time
and this place (11.4 Glengarry Hall)

It might not seem likely
the crazy pair
the engaged guy
the always absent ladies man
and two frosh
(Oh, and two rats who ate with us)

But I learned about life
and how to live it
Lessons I never forgot
~~

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