





**hurt durations**

**poems 2009 - 2010**

**ross bender**

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return  
mennodada



## Lady Catatonia

tell me again, Lady Catatonia  
hybrid beast with face of woman  
body of leopard, tail of snake  
where did you lodge the memories?

she sighs under the Western Mountains  
down the eternal river, where  
the visual pleasures are vivid  
commensurate with those of the ear

where traces of the nocturnal visits  
infinitely recede among the jagged peaks  
the mist of her tangible embraces  
echos down the dry wadis, resounds

you beg for music as she flies by  
the feathered chariot drawn by winged horses  
she smiles and grants you music  
ancient music -- flute, zither, sheng

then dismembers your body  
shackles your bones to the steel wheels  
grinding down the inebriate track  
rolling and pitching on the drunken river

now, or someday, you will learn  
to have no more questions, or to abandon  
the memories. they reside somewhere  
under the Western Mountains. enough

## morning these chains

morning these chains old loves  
caress you again

a footprint in neatly raked asphalt  
the old La Brea tar pits

*"Tu a souffert de l'amour à vingt  
et à trente ans"*

now you are on the West Coast  
flying to Japan with a girl who says she loves you  
but her moods are not your moods

then the white-gloved driver at Narita  
conducts you to the old stone house on the bluff

Yokohama  
haunt of foreign devils rising from  
distended graves

shackled down again  
in the little room, your Muse approaches

your Muse of many names - Lady Catatonia,  
Miss Dance, Mama Echo, *Toyotamahime*,  
the White Heron -- she enters and in her train  
the familiar sky horses -- you mount  
and ascend, flying to the moon in the company  
of the pihī, the hoopoe, the phoenix

now you are in the Midwest  
flying to hell  
the Mennonite farmers are angry, schizoid

in the locked ward your tablemate is psychotic  
whereas you are merely  
suicidally depressed

now you are in the Hamptons in the lap  
of improbable luxury  
with a Chinese girl who wishes you to fuck her  
on the pristine beach  
you oblige

morning these chains old lives  
caress you again

now the air is pure, the *momiji* bleed  
deep red, even in winter you bleed, and your hurt  
recollection

but the air has changed, and the century  
and the melancholy humors

new lands up here, new moods, new loves  
in this ancient world  
old chains welcome you again

## little rooms

in the little rooms  
the trance arrives then departs  
and so forth

furious priests march in  
beating their tambours  
the drums, and the incense

imposing women, formidable as storms  
rush over you  
delirium in their wake

the keys to the little rooms  
on a ring in your faded pocket  
to find them you consult  
the subway maps

these little rooms are always  
similarly furnished --  
a narrow bed, a lamp, a desk

reserved for you  
in a decaying building  
down in the slums of time

## pied-a-terre

the return to the little room  
studio, efficiency, or cubicle  
solitary cell in the brain

blundering home at odd hours  
you miss the address, or the building's  
down, burnt out, demolished

or the elevator refuses to pause  
at your floor, and you wander out in the night  
the mesh, Manhattan street matrix

it was the decade of the solitaires long-distance  
hollow-eyed striders  
up and down the wounded bleeding avenues

at last, guided by some god's hand  
you stumble home to the little room, safe place,  
asylum, undisturbed, it endures in time

narrow bed, desk and lamp, and in the drawer  
the deck of suicide cards, your old poems  
cryptographs line the shelf

these days barbarians camp on the floor  
these wild young artists, festooning the walls  
arrogant, misguided

on the shelf they set up their own poems  
dressed up as books  
you take one down and read to the airwaves

at first it seems garbage, wild pencil scrawls  
howling, formless  
the volume dissolves in your hand

then reclining you recite aloud  
to your amazement the old bards gather  
chanting greybeards join in

at first a low hissing, then a hum  
voices echo  
the volume dissolves in your mind

in the little room form is not different  
from emptiness  
no cessation of appearance

moonlight plays over the foot of the bed  
autumn returns and in its clarity angels take wing  
over Harlem

full moon slides and with it your mind to the west  
over the cliffs to paradise  
down to the river, onto the rocks of time

## moon again

moon moon and moon again  
tonight's bright crescent

slashing

but remember --  
bulging refulgent white  
breasts -

the goddess star  
bewitches you three times

count count and count again

## icy persistence

cracked sidewalks red berries  
dead brown leaves

the neighbors' ithyphallic  
remnant paganism

they pile up rocks like  
moss-covered stupas  
Sumerian boundary heaps

which archaic gods decreed  
this deep freeze?

stone gardens preserve  
gripped lapidary memories

Martian water ice breathes  
liquid beneath  
this icy persistence

## impatience

these earnest urban gardeners  
composting religiously

massage the wounded dirt  
in the sad abandoned lots

nurturing malformed zucchinis  
in the lead-leaching soil

me, I spill my seed  
on the cracked pavement  
like Onan

jacarandas spring up  
in my wake

## dogs stare

dogs stare wan, reproachful  
jackhammer medley now the hood's  
main motif

buzz saw whines up the scale  
steps up the registers and backs down  
in sweet modulation

from the street corner big bangs  
building boom, early spring  
sad old canine voices can't compete

## spring planting

glacial glacial  
spring emergent breath

now frosty, now slowly nuzzling  
fresh-turned earth on the avenue

tender backhoes churn and screw  
wide-lipped furrows

waiting to receive  
an urban monster dibbler's seed

## nap

lips sleep  
and liver  
grey eyebrows  
in spring sun

## troll

old troll  
under the bridge  
feeds on insects and scraps

plops into murky water  
the old pond  
searching for mud

## little green robots

in spring  
little green robots  
shuffle through  
pubescent grasses  
shoot up tendrils  
climb up trees  
hang there triumphant  
doing chin-ups  
on black branches  
unraveling themselves  
beeping, exulting  
calling to others  
of their species  
and of other tribes  
unrelated  
mating, unfurling  
lasciviously  
bumping, jostling  
making robot babies  
in wild riot

## spring fling

early days yet, but it feels like summer  
trees flower, drunk with sap  
as I stroll along Baltimore Avenue,  
foreigners dressed in foreigner clothes  
humming foreigner songs

this old woman, pushing baby in stroller  
hums some pentatonic Chinese tune  
men on the benches chatter  
in a dozen Creoles  
crossbred with snatches of Spanish

the perpetual ladies squatting  
on the sidewalk sell old shoes  
for Liberian orphanage as I pass  
in rapid succession the Laotian restaurant,  
then Ethiopian, Chinese, Indian, Ethiopian again

suddenly aware of  
white girls' whining chit-chat  
crossing the permeable membrane  
between town and gown, the frat boys  
playing beer pong on the veranda

gradually more beer, more money  
in the air  
I had walked out innocent, forgetting  
today was Spring Fling, Ivy Carnival  
flash mobs of the privileged

they all carry these trademark  
red plastic cups, brimming with beer  
and other alcohol  
of course back in the day we  
smoked marijuana every chance we got

oh back in the day we were  
laid back, flashing, stoner hippies  
grooving in the spring  
kids these days do stranger dope  
mainline junk bonds, credit default swaps

has it ever been else?  
four years in the Metropolis  
an Ivy degree  
before suburban marriage, wealth  
responsibility

still, old greybeard, it's spring  
might as well groove with the children  
in their bubble  
tonight the white kids will writhe  
to faux-ghetto, Snoop Dog in the house

## spring storm

enough gusts  
rattle woodframed windows  
in their ancient sockets  
wind rising in the west  
religious fanatics  
down in the park  
start their drumming again  
chanting the names  
of ancient polyvocal gods  
at first, open syllables  
liquid -- "olo, olo, olo, olo"  
but as night falls  
hard velar stops  
"marduk, marduk"  
dancing up a storm  
closet doors teeter  
slam with a bang  
whole house rocks  
and the red Korean vase  
with single tulip stem  
crashes from the shelf

## fertility triumph

pink trees bricks interlocked  
shore up old rowhouses  
with incongruous Spanish roof tiles

astonishingly delicate color of bricks  
pattern even old drear apartment blocks  
anything goes this wild morning

spring sun illumines abandoned towers  
dead landlords weeping  
cherries gold forsythia

tenements who once housed dumped  
refugees now sing  
slumped gables ateeter

sagging dormers lift up weary heads  
once more breathless  
wheezing out ancient dusts and asbestos

pushing my handcart  
willynilly all atumble  
up sad cracked pavements

patched asphalts leaking winter dew  
spout forth  
geysers of laughing children

cockeyed babies proud fullbosomed  
mothers in stroller brigades marching  
marching abreast to park

wild conquering eyes -- "see what our powerful wombs  
brought forth!"  
daring you to bitch about overpopulation

death of the planet  
not evident this morning  
for an instant mad fertility triumphs

## emergence

you push open the stiff wooden gate  
last night's rain swelling the door frame

air humid, warm, it envelops your face  
a tropical nuance, after the monsoons

cats scatter, mewling at your advent  
reggae on the radio through the screen

across the alley they're frying sausage  
yard choked with ivy, multiplicity of weeds

you pause, pat your pockets for the keys,  
but it's not those you've forgotten

a rush, your senses deluge you  
for a moment you emerge from the womb

## two bridges

two bridges two shadows  
the obligatory madman approaches  
explains to me the pattern  
of the cosmos in the ripples

why do they choose me,  
these fervent compulsive talkers?  
does it still appear that I wish to have  
the meaning of the universe parsed?

after all these years  
it's very simple -- two things  
water goes under the bridge  
joy comes after the pain

## in swimming

in swimming this morning  
I observe my body evolve

left brain to right flipper  
right brain -- transmit!  
slogging through primeval  
sea syrup  
now again left brain

is this how it goes?

clumsy reptile  
plodding through oceans

now amphibian  
sun gleams on my  
barnacled carapace  
and I fly

brain transmit again  
stroke stroke  
winged horse ascends  
in stratosphere  
over holy mountains

## oracle bones

bones crack and the turtle sings  
sun tomorrow, snow to melt slowly  
the king will be victorious, no disaster  
springtime and harvest, sowing and reaping

Saturday morning I go shopping  
bare trees blossom filthy plastic bags  
sixteen pigeons on the roof's edge  
the trolleys and El are running again

and the snow is melting slowly  
our kitchen sink is stopped up  
no hot water, the toilet is leaking  
how long, oh Lord, how long

snow melts slowly, no flooding expected  
dirty mounds stick up like Devil's Mountain  
robins pick at the plastic foliage  
this year's nests will be poisoned

my bones are old and my bags heavy  
for the first time I hire a driver  
the hack's friendly, an entertainer  
he's from down south, can't believe this weather

I lug my groceries up the stairs  
the steps are always getting steeper  
but the view from the third floor is worth it  
in my windows wisteria blooming

## owl collection

the sun slants west  
layer of dust and feathers  
on collection room floor

count again --  
thirty-seven specimens  
bent wings, bedraggled

an obvious pattern  
prime number  
no duplicates here

owls dancing  
in the marketplace  
wide-eyed and frenzied

## in the Chinese Rotunda

in the Chinese Rotunda  
the rheumy-eyed docent says  
"you're in the wrong pew"

you look down at her blue-haired  
senility, steady-state drunkenness,  
shrunken, on the verge of  
mummification

giant green Luohan  
big-eared arhat offers  
fierce brand of salvation  
gazing over your head

in the distance fat Tang horses --  
are these the blood-sweating  
flying horses of Ferghana?

## strangers

they have come over the mountains  
from the east, laughing,  
shouting in strange tongues

taking whatever they like  
seducing our daughters, fascinating  
our young men with their greedy ways

a restless people, already scouting  
spying out the western hills

our elders confer with secret sighs  
pray they find their hearts' desire

how long, how long, what rites  
will cleanse the land of their blood

## old stone

dig out an old stone with peculiar markings  
fashion an archaic language, runic, before speech,  
to recount the primordial hurt

hollow a log, or make a coracle or kayak  
across the ancient starry river  
do not count the suns or moons

a dark goddess will shield you from  
sun's harsh light, in her cave sing to you  
on the far side of the moon

you sing too, and write in the rock  
while on the further island impotent demons  
buzz and flash, fires in the sun

## she teaches astronomy

she teaches astronomy with a scalpel  
trims the constellations, launches the stars  
distributes them in your mind

scissors out the galaxies -- her lace  
garments trace on her body  
the ancient gradual shadow and shift

of the horizon. her silence  
the obliquity of the ecliptic  
her glacial frown the precession of aeons

when she deigns to smile at you  
once, in a cycle of millennia,  
you melt. you beg her not to cast you  
out again into orbits of darkness

## memorial day

street thronged with women on bicycles  
hair dyed pink  
naked footballers bereft of helmets  
and armor, perform groove maneuvers  
to delight the children

long snaking lion dance  
ferocious, with samba drums  
policed by the Granny Brigades  
and Women's Strike for Peace

in the free theaters everybody's wobbly  
kissing strangers, running up  
on stage, doubled over with mirth  
dancing in the aisles as flags blaze

traumatized soldiers, home  
from the wars, open their eyes  
with tears and disbelief  
their tortured victims rise among them

on stage, the warriors beat their  
swords into musical saws, angel  
nurses soothe their fevered brains

and the collateral dead in millions  
napalmed girls, Arab families, wives,  
children left behind at Fort Benning  
the dead rise and chant hymns  
prayers and sutras

exorcisms -- the fierce demons  
of war are chanted back to hell

children and bent old men  
go down to the river

they purify the perverse universities  
and study war no more  
pull down the bronzed image of Moloch  
whose blood is running money

the wounded oceans weep and  
sea turtles sing and the whales  
plankton and small creatures rejoice  
demented warriors bathe in the salt

while the devils burn eternal  
in the oily flames of hell  
and torment the living no more

## laundromat

in my laundromat folks don't talk much,  
although yesterday a young woman asked  
where I bought my extra-strength detergent,  
the eco-friendly kind

washing machines line the narrow storefront  
on the left, the driers on the right, folding  
tables in between, and an irregular line of six  
old plastic chairs

in my laundromat the AM radio plays  
tunes of the sixties and seventies,  
Motown and classic rock, my kind  
of music

occasionally somebody sings along  
but for the most part it's quiet, just  
the swish and hum of the machines,  
conducive to meditation

when it's crowded, we shepherd our laundry  
carts through the crowded aisles, slowly,  
careful not to bump into each other, quick  
to apologize

that's my favorite part -- the slow and  
stately dance, to Motown and classic  
rock, weaving among the tables and  
the bodies of the other washers

## landline phone

my life is a landline telephone tethered  
to the ground  
magnet for nuisance calls

on the bus they all dab madly  
with their thumbs on colorful wireless gadgets  
with all these appliances -- music, games,  
video, text, tweets, and the endless jabber jabber jabber

each morning at 9:40 precisely I get the call  
from Mumbai, some young chap with a thick Gujarati accent  
"Hello, sir, my name is Villiam Jones..."  
he wants to sell me protection for my credit card

then at 4:24 pm the automated girl calls  
inflection always the same (must be a tape) --  
"I'm calling because there's a chance that I can  
save you a lot of money"

I gave up talking on the phone in the late sixties  
when all the phones were tapped  
you never knew who was listening --  
might be the Russians, might be the CIA,  
might be the SIS, or even your mother

but I keep paying the phone bill in the hopes  
somebody will call who's worth talking to  
it's like playing the lottery for 30 bucks a month  
always a chance for a miracle

## night train

onto the opposite platform at night  
the escalator disgorges a young woman  
with a seeing-eye dog and rollerbag

alone on the night platform  
without hesitation she follows her dog  
into the traincoach door standing open

while above the moon begins  
its rise, full, and as my train  
slowly pulls out I feel anxious, forlorn

for a moment like a child  
returning home late at night  
after a long journey to the south

## genetics

my grandmother taught me  
Chinese checkers  
by lamplight

what skill I have at chess comes  
from my father, since my mother  
wanted me to play only Scrabble

games of spacial orientation  
bounded squares, triangles  
strategy and letters

what my ancestors neglected to  
teach me was low cunning, stealth  
greed and numbers

so my play has always lacked  
hard edges, the will to crush  
an opponent, raw glee at winning

my appetite for chess died  
at puberty

as I age, my memories  
of what Grandmother taught  
in the old farmhouse  
clock ticking  
take on a golden glow

## golden turret

she sings again  
in her golden turret  
many allelulias

the rain chips down  
now dancing  
now marching acidic

she pulls babies  
from the dark raging sky

weaves them into  
glimmering coherent  
tapestries

## rain a study in itself

rain is a study in itself  
which is to say it ponders itself  
without need of you the observer

it examines the omens --  
nine pigeons motionless on the eaves  
soaking it in at odd angles

and it studies you to determine  
whether you are an object  
worthy of study

rain investigates your melancholy  
as you sit tired of traveling  
returning exhausted from unpleasant places

a "steady downpour" -- not at all  
steady or unchanging but nuanced  
as a dog chasing its tail

now turning in upon itself  
thinking -- "therefore I am,  
or must be" -- probing porous interface

rain and not rain, rain and cloud,  
rain and infinite leaves and branches  
on infinite neural trees

or, tiring of metaphysical speculation  
of pondering the human condition  
continues simply to rain

## **crows at high noon**

since the lightning tore through the city  
last month, and the thunders ripped up  
trees in the sacred grove in a microburst  
of savagery, upended great oaks

the crows have come to torment me  
their raucous mockery begins at high noon  
in the height of summer, they alight  
like mad dogs on the sickened limbs

twisted helpless boughs askew  
day after day, bones protrude through  
flesh, and die slowly like a body  
on a crucifix, lifeless leaves wither

and the crows come to torment me  
in this high season of despondency  
intense sunlight withers my spirit  
death croak where once pretty birds sang

## cicada prayer

late August sun washes the people  
out of the city

flotsam of human detritus on the avenue  
bent old man, sweating, swearing,  
obsessively scraping weeds from the sidewalk

bearded lady dwarf ranting at  
nothing in the air

and me, some kind of wounded derelict  
wandering the streets in the midday sun

but the cicadas song is more persistent now  
righteous hum, autumnal voice of prayer

a petition and harbinger  
of that great good time, and place

when the leaves and cicadas die  
and the chilly winds breathe life again  
into the city, into the streets

## dog days

flags droop  
leaves wilt

elderly Chinese ladies in the park perform their tai chi,  
apparently unwilling to perspire

but the heat withers me, and the dogs  
--they pant, pant, pant and drool

sweat rolls down my arms  
plops into the dust

## scarecrow

now the leaves are tinder dry  
wind rattles the upper branches  
my body a scarecrow in autumn dark  
mid husks of dead cicadas

## tattoo this poem

tattoo this poem on the back of your neck  
and forget about it

years hence, when you're starving in your garret  
or in the gutter  
people will suddenly take note

"it's art!" "I'll buy it!"  
and you'll be rich beyond your wildest dreams

you'll collect all the royalties -- unbeknownst to you,  
scholars have been quoting it for decades  
and rap artists remixing it

at 7 cents per citation you can retire in style  
buy a cottage on Bimini, purchase a king-sized bed  
and fill it with Chinese beauties

sure it's nice to be famous when you're young  
how much better when you're old and jaded  
no ambitions, no scruples, left to torment you

## you sirens

you sirens, yes  
sudden on a Sunday afternoon

I decode sirens -- fire, police, ambulance,  
homeland security  
but you, siren, unique!  
you ejaculate slowly, and wind, wind up!

this rural urban landscape  
we have the cicadas, the locusts sing  
presaging the gentle autumn

golden autumn comes  
and slow sirens presage  
the invisible transition

sirens get the listeners high  
(although prose brings us down)  
"like a field of sunflowers  
a poem should not have to be explained"\*

but you, Beats, liberate me  
oh Sirens, sing me your endless songs of desire  
on the islands, down in the streets

*\*Ferlinghetti*

## in the Sun Yat Sen Garden

pine, bamboo and fat orange carp  
lazing in the old pond

twisted stones, moss-tufted, pocked,  
superannuated, dance deformed like  
Daoist saints in flight

Chinese pavilion with hipped roofs  
arches tangle into the air like tentacles  
beside glass highrises, like Shanghai

but this being Vancouver, a sudden vision  
a sign -- "Everything is going to be alright"  
in block capitals on downtown Eastside  
brick abandoned warehouse

in the Silk Road Gift Shop  
a pushy Chinese lady wants to sell me  
flying horses -- "special jade from Himalayas!"  
"half-off for Thanksgiving!"

## in the Nitobe Garden

moon off the full this morning  
last night it was haloed and grand

in the Nitobe Garden  
momiji aflame, moss on rocks  
the stillness sinks into you and the stones  
where divinities have passed

gravel under your tread  
step step and step again

crows from a distance, singing  
neither harsh nor insistent  
no demons in the tall cypress

no wind. pine boughs droop over  
the water. needles frozen in time  
even the alder leaves, tinged,  
"turning", are utterly still

## Berlioz and Saint-Saens

you don't know what romantic is until  
you're sequestered in the first class cabin  
of an old Boeing 747 blasting off  
from Haneda across the Pacific with  
a 90-piece orchestra and a massed choir  
of thousands. the engines thrum beneath you  
and before you the light of ten thousand suns,  
pagan brass defiling the Te Deum and the organ  
these Napoleonic Frenchmen aspiring to be Wagner

or at 19 writing your masterpiece at midnight in the  
East Asian Library with the glittering magnificence of  
Manhattan all around you and within you, just a little  
Sturm und Drang. you go to the Met to hear  
Les Souffrances du jeune Werther and while the Met  
bedazzles you Massenet's passion is not that of Goethe's.  
casting around for a hopeless woman to obsess over  
and finding none you return to the library reflecting that if  
you're going to blow your brains out it will take more than  
a silly French opera to make you do it

## Beethoven's fifth, Kimmel Center

released from the dungeon  
you walk on the sky in a vast, soaring glass  
terrarium

your daily solitary walk in brick exercise yard  
suddenly blossoms  
with possibilities

those horns, those horns lift you up  
rising into the velvety contours  
of the viol's body

## reverie 2

here it is -- old age

to your surprise, you've finally learned  
to appreciate Brahms

to your surprise, you're still sitting  
in the cheap seats

what happened to that notorious midlife crisis?  
it too seems to have passed you by  
last wild illicit chance for ecstasy

leaving not a trace in the dead brown leaves  
as you shuffle along, en route  
to senility

## radio voice

ugly noise on the radio  
in the next room early weeds sprout  
amid winter stubble

her voice his voice *sotto voce*  
radio voice machine modulated  
like automated drumbeats  
day after day

internal hum  
like cactus growing in  
desert terrarium  
year after year

## midnight farewell

lights fall  
and the street slows  
chimneys totter  
against the indigo sky

young woman walks by  
with a big black dog

the street full of slow taxis  
and the huge white university bus  
taking up space  
full of nobody

around the corner it's like Broadway  
used to be  
restaurants full, sidewalk cafes  
hustlers, get ready men

but on your block  
nothing much  
so you say goodbye  
to the neighbors  
although you're only moving  
a few blocks this time

or maybe across the continent  
to the other side of the world  
no matter  
you'll be back  
when the lights come back up  
when the sun rises on  
the other side of the world

## when you ride some other bus

when the 34 is no longer your trolley  
and you ride some other bus  
in a parched city in the hinterland  
or across town, or in some other borough

when we no longer meet by chance  
under the fairy lights, in the midnight park  
you strolling with your duena  
me all strung out on a hot bench

or at the farmers' market, briefly  
where you buy illegal drugs --  
homegrown, you wide-eyed and innocent  
or in the check-out line

don't send me those you-tubes  
of your last performance, standing mute  
at the window, hours on end  
snapshots of bridges you've designed

I've found another bodega to haunt  
looking for exotic beans and guavas  
old Guatemalan laborers chanting  
a new language I might learn to love

## old books, previous mistresses

old books, previous mistresses  
take down a volume from the shelf  
sink into that familiar embrace

a novel from the seventies --  
Provos, bombings in London  
radical chic -- how antiquated it seems

in the flyleaf the inscription  
"Merry Christmas Joyful 1978"  
"Love" from an old girlfriend

thirty years have passed, and that love  
or youthful infatuation, whatever it was  
leaving no visible scars

## Asian chicks sent me letters

Asian chicks used to send me letters  
"Dear John Letters" was the obvious genre

apprising me of my faults  
and deficiencies  
weighing the merits of their new boyfriends  
against mine  
which they politely allowed  
were considerable

these missives always contained  
the same generic content --

"even though I love another,  
I hope that we shall always remain  
dear, dear friends"

"even though it cannot be,  
I will treasure the tender memories  
of the time we spent together"

it's like they all read from the same  
manual:

"how to write 'Dear John Letters' in English"  
(of course, they all attended similar  
British finishing schools)

one was a Sikh, one a Malay Chinese,  
one a half-caste Gujarati,  
another from Sarawak (or was it  
Kalimantan?)

but the diction, the sentiment, the passion  
-- if it could be termed passion --  
always the same

then the next letter would inevitably  
arrive --

"are you angry with me? Oh,  
be assured that I can understand  
your feelings -- after all we have been  
through together"

and then, inexorably, the  
penultimate communique --

"my sister and I will arrive in  
New York next month en route to  
Nairobi. May we stay with you?  
Also, there are some books  
I left in your apartment -- will you  
help me package them up and  
send them airmail to Penang?"

and the ultimate epistle --  
(it came in one of two flavors)

"oh, I know I take advantage  
of your goodness"

or --

"why haven't you written? can it be  
you are still angry with me?"

depending on my mood  
when I responded  
to the previous letter

I preserve these letters neatly  
in a binder, arranged chronologically  
and by girlfriend  
and reread them  
when the seasons are changing

## **muse**

I'll wait till she's gone  
then write a poem about her

women have been leaving me  
all my life, inspiring poetry

it began with my mother  
whose departure has inspired  
one lifelong wail

## reasons to be cheerful

how grateful are the dead  
when all is said and done

how grateful are the living  
for reasons to be cheerful

for mass transport --  
light rail, quiet gliding buses  
robot trains between ports  
at SEATAC  
not to mention the ferries

this evening in robot train  
I am all alone,  
three empty cars  
to myself, gliding  
ghostly around the track

the sound track in  
Japanese, Korean  
and basic English

for a moment I think myself  
alone on the planet  
or in a space ship  
gliding to Jupiter  
with only a calm-voiced  
polyglot computer  
for companion

though when I glide  
to a halt at the S gate  
hordes of travelers from

Asia crowd to enter  
I'm grateful for the company  
not alone after all  
on a dead planet  
or robot starship

this morning the finches  
at the thistle feeder  
on the deck -- some  
flashing gold, some muted  
brown with stripes --  
I imagined them grateful  
or cheerful at the least

last night listened again  
to Ian Dury -- Reasons  
to be Cheerful --  
but not the abbreviated  
single I'd remembered  
but the extended 45 LP

when the saxophones  
wailed off on their riff  
I thought I was tripping  
the horns swelling  
and grooving like  
a sudden rush in the veins

so many reasons  
to be cheerful  
though if I knew  
the language of finches --  
those cognitive linguists vow  
they've begun to ken

the language of zebra finches --

if I knew the language  
of the birds, would I  
discover them grateful,  
or simply cheerful,  
excited, jubilant, ostentatious,  
self-consciously proud  
exhibitionist  
or merely hungry for thistle

I imagined a gold bird  
looking me over  
happy with what he saw  
"a fine-looking human, like  
to get to know him"

sometimes I count the  
number of true friends  
on the fingers of one hand --  
not the thousands of  
Facebook fans, or  
imaginary shadow robot  
followers, but tangible  
men and women

and I'm grateful that  
I'm not dead, not shut up  
in the back ward of some  
bleak German asylum, like  
Robert Schumann, waiting  
in vain for his Clara  
to visit

## autumn homecoming

under the bridge the commuter train  
glides toward the western suburbs  
in yellow oval windows, a binary message  
head, head, not head, then countless blur

as I stride over the bridge, north  
homing too, but on foot, and unaccustomed  
this pink dusk, crescent moon just rising  
and the glitter of downtown striving

the bridge rises and takes me up  
launches my body into unaccustomed space  
over Philadelphia, over Vancouver too  
in earlier autumn across the continent

by FEDEX -- these books left Tokyo  
yesterday and arrived here this morning  
by what magic? ancient history and  
global transmission, it pulses

and I pulse with it, strange to be out  
at this time of evening. the junkman  
takes down his table of third-hand relics  
from the sidewalk, how carefully

work has ceased on the old cars  
across the street, hoods lifted  
batteries strewn across the pavement  
blotted by yellow ginkgo leaves, still wet

## dermatologist

space aged hospital, glass and steel  
three-story atrium sprouts gleaming columns  
all atilt, facade more a whirling laboratory  
in orbit than a rational, balanced Greek temple

light glances wild all multi-planed, starry  
blind you wander among cubicles till nurse  
leads you into crazy labyrinth, where young  
doctor in collarless sweater, looking for

all the world a Captain Kirk from decades  
ago, rolls his wheeled deck chair to and fro  
his zapper freezes four spots on your scalp  
to protect from solar radiation, he says

solar radiation! who knew trudging  
in the increasing dirty dark toward winter  
midst twisted stone and ivied brick corridors  
of old city that sun would be a threat?

## raw November

strange in this raw November to see  
pretty women wielding transparent  
plastic umbrellas, laughing as though  
this were some spring rain, and thrusting  
forth an inordinate amount of cleavage,  
inordinate considering the season

on the Friday bus ride to City Line  
the sun gleams on whited sepulchres,  
bone-bleached steeples in the cemetery  
thrusting through denuded trees, and the  
turbaned swami, a regular on this route,  
explains "The Evolution of God" in an outrageous  
accent, babu English, to an entranced  
old woman, always the same

## root canal

ice sliding from the roof  
crashes down  
on Broad Street slush  
sucks at your boots

Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber  
brings in crowds at the Merriam

I never cared much for  
Broadway musicals, still less  
for the soft rock on the radio  
as I sit in the endodontist's chair  
pondering the X-rays of my molars  
blown up on the flat screen  
as though reviewing a misspent life  
while I wait

the dentist and her assistant  
converse in code:  
"2-3-6-10-3-3" "ok"  
"18-18-22-18-22"

my dentist has brown eyes and  
peers down at me anxiously  
like my mother

## transmitter

in the attic loft of the old stone cathedral  
abandoned by timorous Episcopalians  
in mad white flight to the suburbs  
trees now thrust up through the roof tiles

you unpack your radio, spin the dials  
set to transmit for the first time in twenty-five years  
blurt out your new coordinates for 12 seconds  
then pack it all up and run like hell

new avenues, new angles, new horizons  
the walnut trees wave upper leaves in the mornings  
dialects on the street have changed  
as you settle in to study them  
and wait a radio response or a letter  
on aged parchment by snail mail

## old cathedral

of five clerestory windows  
in the afternoon sun  
three are blind eyes already  
two, cracked, sparkle  
ivy sucks at the lead frames  
while I struggle to find words  
adequate for this dismal obituary

## old Presbyterian church, 52nd and Chester

ruined cathedral falling down  
broken spires, leaded window panes  
cracked and dissolving  
and the whole elegant monstrosity  
drab-wrapped without success against  
the rain and mightier elements

this leaky church proclaims  
Presbyterian glory a mere century  
ago, and Calvin's eternal folly  
as doctrines shift, moods change  
whole peoples flee, and waves of  
mammon wash in and out  
like tides and mock the stone house  
that Calvin built in the city

## Queen Victoria in my bathtub

Queen Victoria squats in my  
deep clawfoot bathtub  
sloshing tepid water onto  
her fat breasts, splashing my  
decorator braided rugs on the  
newly varnished floors

she appeared without invitation  
at a party a week ago,  
asked "May I use your bathroom?"  
"Of course," I replied, thinking  
she merely wanted to  
do her business

but now she's installed herself  
ordering in pizza and barrels of  
moo goo gai pan  
her appetites know no limits  
nor do her progeny

I'm trapped -- how does one ask  
the Empress of India of  
the British Raj to get out  
of one's bathroom? politely, or even  
otherwise --

there's no help  
in the etiquette manuals  
and if I called the sheriff to  
begin eviction proceedings  
no doubt he'd laugh in my face

## watching Lady Gaga on Father's Day

watching a Lady Gaga music video  
on my computer on Father's Day  
I experience mixed emotions

she represents in  
a six-minute video clip  
all that is cruel, trashy  
and decadent in American culture,  
such as it is

I feel overwhelmingly grateful  
to have only one child --  
a son -- he's sensible

the same age as Lady Gaga,  
but he's finished college now,  
over picking up garbage  
on the Jesus Trail

gazing at her latest image  
on the cover of  
the Rolling Stone, the one  
with the machine gun bra  
and the bare bottom

I reflect that if she had been  
my child  
I surely would have had  
to spank her  
occasionally

a strangely disturbing thought.  
note to self -- discuss

**this with psychiatrist  
next week**

## Amos in Goshen

when they carried me down to this country  
as a child, already the rites  
were martial and harsh and the music was perverse

I sensed as only a child can sense that something  
was rotten -- the lust for meat things  
the thrill of acquisitiveness  
the joy of begging your neighbor  
orgasmic survival of the fittest

this terrifying fiendish swamp  
whose creed was ultimate selfishness  
whose blood was running money -- ah then  
I discovered Ginsberg and it all made sense

how long ago? how long ago?  
yet nothing has changed  
drear mental concrete walls  
big-mouth TV swallowing infants whole  
brick ugly factory of Goshen High School

Kolymsky Heights of the mind  
Siberia was hell and Stalin put me there  
a phalanx of Nixons and fascist redneck principals

(some argue no equivalence of physical and mental suffering,  
but how quantify?)

how quantify torture? I've been  
in maximum security lockdown since 1960  
they got my number coming over the border  
when they carried me down, an innocent, a naif

the next year they blew up Cuba  
they shot a Kennedy, then another and crucified King

lathered naked Asian girls with jellied napalm  
how to quantify terror?

they locked me up because I knew too much  
here and there in shackles and restraints  
here and there in screaming ugliness  
chemical dungeons and junked Coney Islands of the mind

today I was rereading Howl, and Rexroth,  
the whole boatload of sensitive useless old Beats  
and it all made sense again, a cogent analysis

but times have changed and nothing has changed

dharma bums and queers and Quakers  
immolated themselves at the Pentagon  
I saw the monks flaming in the streets in Saigon  
like the flower burning in the day

the moneychangers have set up  
in the temple again -- no surprise  
Moloch wants you for America's unending wars  
flower children resist! but the Hoosiers beat you down

(Savio told us to throw ourselves on the wheel but really!  
dude! how many times?)

how many times can the children jump in the river  
break self on wheel of karma, dharma, what the hell  
it stinks here, no joy in this cell, no solution here

and Goshen the genetic chemical restraint  
bashes my head against its grey and stupefied walls  
lacklove and vicious, cancer-production center of the world  
DNA Mennonite straitjacket, inquisitors, they watch you  
in the Anabaptist panopticon -- what will the neighbors think?

you tried to escape and you failed  
brain police locked you up and brought you back  
thorazine, haldol, mellaril, and the beat goes on  
you killed yourself and they dragged you back from the dead  
to be a zombie in Goshen, a useful cart horse for the  
bourgeoisie

but the light breaks, thrill codes blaze in the skylights  
now Pegasus in yoke sprouts wings!  
let's all fly away to the further shore and make love  
for Babylon is fallen and America is damned

## leaving Goshen

the radio wakes you, a sudden ugly hallucination  
but outside the Super 8, it's not as bad as you had feared

a breeze, wind in the trees, some birds, and the landscape  
though flat and sordid, is not immediately threatening

trudging with suitcase along the gravel shoulders of US 33  
you curse the land and the humidity, the lack  
of civilization, imagination, and brio, until  
a sympathetic pickup truck driver offers you a lift  
to the Walmart Supercenter

after all, Abraham pleaded with God not to blast  
Sodom and Gomorrah if there remained only one  
hospitable person; you met one this morning

and then there is the Negro trolley driver  
and the colorful Amish out on dates

but the Amish have stark raving German pride  
in their eyes, that air of righteous superiority  
they know they're traveling among Babylonians  
whom God has cursed, damn it

rolling out of Goshen on the interurban trolley  
just the start of the long trek back to civilization  
trying not to vomit, I curse Goshen too

if an all-merciful God chooses to pluck a few souls  
from damnation, from the coming brimstone  
then that is the prerogative of the Almighty

## when poets grow old

when poets grow old they go  
to teach English in the universities  
thus Ginsberg wound up at  
Brooklyn College, and Snyder  
at UC Davis, like gentle lions  
in the protected game preserves

they were forged in the fires  
of the fifties and sixties  
the heroic Journey to the East,  
assaulting the politicians of  
the deadbrained armies, the soulless  
and lacklove Molochs of Amerika

Snyder a shaman of the mountains  
and Ginsberg a shaman of the cities  
Ginsberg sending out cosmopolitan greetings  
and roars to the end; I saw him a year  
before his death, chanting "Don't smoke  
the official dope" - wry, cynical, untamed

Snyder making love to the earth  
he discovered oil as long ago as the fifties  
and named the addiction; in sixty-seven  
at the Houseboat Summit with Leary  
and Watts, they plotted a new civilization,  
just around the corner, the new dawn

and fought for it in the streets; well,  
we all know what happened to that  
fabled Age of Aquarius we thought  
would save us, and the world - the devil

principalities and wicked governments  
shot that down, discouraged our children

I studied Russian Novel with Nick Lindsay  
at Goshen College, wrote a paper on  
“The Impotent Hero” - how prophetic  
Nick’s old man Vachel had killed himself  
so Nick fathered thirteen children, delivered  
them all by hand, with DuBose’s help of course

Nick remained a carpenter on Edisto Island,  
banging out the Gullah rhythms, poetry in  
his calloused hands and tormented hammers  
so poets forge their own destinies - Rimbaud  
went off to sell guns and trade slaves, Thomas  
drank himself to death

poetry is not a trade for the faint-hearted who  
wear green Nehru jackets when they’re in  
fashion and flit about reading crap at the  
colleges - we’ve all seen them come and go  
some poets write one poem in their life  
and that’s it - most die weeping in the alleys

## hurt movement

hurt movement across the evening sky  
flight of birds scattershot and torn  
in the east glass towers mirror the colors  
of sundown in the suburbs to the west

in the eternal hospice your father is dying  
he's been doing so for a decade or more  
your son moved across town this morning  
to a vacant attic with a northern exposure

like you, your son prefers lofts and garrets  
as where he grew up, perched in high places  
unlike you he goes slowly, with deliberation  
at his age you had flown to the moon

long lives, a measured pace, totemic tortoise  
grandfathers and sons, down the generations  
some genes skip over an entire epoch  
winged horses shooting up the family tree

## **I invite you to follow me on my blog**

**I invite you to follow me on my blog  
but not on Facebook or Twitter or whatever  
other demonic electronic social medium  
the devil may invent in his spare time**

**I invite you to follow me on my blog  
or on the sidewalk, at a distance of  
one hundred yards. Note that I carry  
no electronic devices, no GPS**

**I invite you to follow me on my blog  
but not to datamine my dreams  
my cortical defenses are prepared  
ready for any mechanical onslaught**

**I invite you to follow me on my blog  
or to read my old letters or memoirs  
as I choose to publish them  
at reasonable times, of my own selection**

**I invite you to follow me on my blog  
at a reasonable distance --but know this --  
my psychic powers will blast your spy satellites  
out of the sky if you attempt to map me**

**I invite you to follow me on my blog  
or to converse with me at times  
of my invitation. This means take  
your shoes off, no telephones**

## return

anxious dreams in the small room  
again, returning  
from wounded travels  
unpacking your few possessions

the small room familiar  
yet crowded with two women  
they help you unpack  
sympathetic, but their presence  
cloys

note how this chamber  
orients itself from east to west  
changing only slightly over the years  
with the horizon's ecliptic

the walkup studio, fourth floor  
you've never lost the key  
the kindly landlord but  
the room floats in space

from the window ghastr orgies  
florid sundowns over the river  
onion domes of Russian churches  
the pantheon of lost loves

## return

the elevator stops abruptly  
at the eighth floor  
you stumble off

first door on the left  
the little room with desk,  
chair and bed

but the lock is undone  
full of young people laughing  
beds stretch off to infinity

window open over the park  
down where maples bleed red  
whiff of autumnal incense

they give you the baton  
applaud, tell you to smile  
you try, but it's hard

still stiff, the medication  
as usual, and then  
the stage fright

but you begin to conduct  
the movement comes  
of itself, slowly at first

the ceiling heightens, more beds  
a fountain now, and crews  
shift stage sets in bright colors

you bend, and wave the baton  
cheers, more laughter,  
that girl winks, stage whispers -- "Smile!"

celestial music  
fountains rise in stereo  
colors, you dance

and now the white horse  
plods up the ramp, pauses  
wings sprout

jumping astride,  
you drop the baton  
soar out the window

fly, leaving the little room  
behind, heaving with  
sighs, laughter, and cheers

## **mennodada**

mennodada the scent of manure in Central Park meticulously  
deposited by  
skyhorses racing back back back to Baden Baden Baden the  
ancestral farmyard

mennodada is an urban phenomenon

mennodada the innocent gaze of the mennonite maiden as  
the tonguetied and  
hamstruck mennonite youth fumbles with the trappings of her  
imbroglio

mennodada the hidebound conscience banging on the walls  
where  
neighbors ceaselessly indulge themselves in the arts

mennodada a fleeting impression of wistful yearning after the  
bygone days  
the curse of the manly desire

mennodada a sermon gone wrong baffled by the minotaur no  
longer caring  
beyond misgivings up the chinese channels of her bound feet

mennodada the stately measured rapture of the myrmidons in  
heat who do not  
perspire as they gyrate to hydrogen jukebox

mennodada is know nothing ramifications the yogi hicks  
climbing up the  
sacred tree of regulations and weeping transgressions  
blissfully approved  
by my naked pleasure do not diminish

