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ON THE SECOND DAY: AN ANTI-POEM

On the second day I had it all worked out,
Except I was not yet able to distinguish darkness from light
When I stepped into the backyard,
Stirring already with commotion—
No serpent to tempt me, though there once was
A garter snake with three yellow stripes along its body
Trapped in the net spread over the pond to protect the fish
From the vast-winged great blue heron of the East
Who had taken a liking to dining on such easy prey,
But it had been carefully untangled and released
To slide away to its refuge in some shady part
Of the garden and hadn't shown itself since—
All fuss and flurry at this hour, the unlocking
Of tiny shuttered nodes and nubs to let shoots through,
And young stalks, and germinating leaves,
Their tongues gingerly stretched to sip on fresh breeze,
While a pair of doves flew down from somewhere
Picking in fern and grass by the waterfall,
And, before long, a thrasher and its mate joined them,
Floating to the wet stone steps, their feet in tumbling water,
Their heads bobbing under it, flittering and fluttering their
wings—
Now a bluebird comes looking for its mealworms,
A spangle of hummingbirds blazes at the feeder,
And those overgrown, greedy squirrels scurry about,
Sit back on their haunches and nibble away
At all they can find, never satisfied, making sure
They get the best pick before any others arrive,
Crested cardinals, in pairs, the strutting, flaunting-red male
And the steady, olive-bronze, fire-tinged female,
And here come the rest of the regulars,

Wrens, robins, mocking birds, goldfinches,
Chickadees, house sparrows, even a blue jay,
Suddenly agitating trees humming quietly in their vernal
leaves,
To raise a chorus of calls, titters and chirps, whistles, coos,
and trills,
Flying down in ones and twos to check out
Loose hung baskets and plates stocked with birdfeed—
There now, a couple of cottontails, hop lightly into view,
Sniffing in the vegetable patch, looking suspiciously around,
Their nostrils flare and flicker, their eyes
Alert to the sparrow hawk high up in the maple—
And imperceptibly even as attention is absorbed
By all that is stirring and happening all around
Light breaks free of darkness and brushes first the tops of trees,
An extravagant display of greens in a wash of liquid gold,
Stippled with pinks and splotched with crimsons,
Strokes down their smooth or chequered trunks
And sweeps clean across the lawn as it flows
To the street below, quiet and deserted at this hour,
Its sombre grey fringing the landscaped view—
Nobody would know we are in a lockdown here,
She and I, just the two of us, together, from as long
As it seems the beginning of all time, the end of it,
Or that a phantom sovereign gone viral
Continues to reproduce itself
Not only in what we witness within and around us,
But in forms and colours we may not know,
Cannot yet imagine, see or have not the capacity to see,
Quite another life, another world, active, dynamic, secreted
Beyond the eye and ear, the nose, the tongue, the fingertip,
Teeming, prowling, seeking to escape its corrals and cages,
Spill out into the world we perceive, undo and disassemble it,

Take away its forms, its dies and tints, its proportions and scale,
 Strangely, precariously, held together against this impulse
 To shatter entirely its already permeable walls and screens.

II

The world, its shapes and shades, its cares crowd in—
 The school bus arrives on the street below,
 Not to pick up kids for school
 But to deliver their breakfast—it will return again
 In the afternoon with lunch, even here, in this neighbourhood,
 A reminder it won't be the second day forever—
 Nor is it now, for already weeks, or perhaps eons have passed,
 And the world, dreamt into existence and inhabited,
 There's little else to do, except to watch it spiral
 On its fine-tuned course to its inevitable destination—
 Of all that is planned, and what indeed is embedded within
 To disrupt or defeat it.
 Back in our house of confinement
 The ordinary plays itself out with unerring fidelity—
 Late mornings, unsettled by a headache, news,
 The chastening toll of infections and deaths over breakfast,
 Virtual peddling of learning and skills, not much rated in the
 best of times,
 To others equally dubious, equally dispirited and dismayed,
 Anxieties more exacting with each passing day,
 Long evening strolls on half-deserted streets,
 Weekly excursions for provisions,
 Uneasy with others about for the same purpose,
 Striding by with the same alarm—
 In all this commonplace newness,
 The urge to write poems that will not be coaxed,
 Cannot be enticed, unless they come in defiance,
 Resist and revoke all that you thought about art and life—
 Simple clichés of our ho-hum lives that survive all catastrophes:



Neither happiness nor sorrow comes unmingled with its opposite,
 Our world is prey perpetually to contradictions,
 This too will go away, things will change, there's light ahead—
 And the everyday takes over the uncommon,
 Savings sink, endowments plummet,
 And individuals and institutions that depend on them stagger
 under the blow,
 Trades and businesses crumble, jobs are extinguished,
 And it is far more fatal for families without food,
 Without means to maintain shelter over their heads,
 For people friendless and forsaken, a bristling silence,
 For the elderly and ailing, their shit and grime,
 While nurses and physicians front the enemy in its lair,
 And lab researchers seek to demystify its perplexing disposition—
 Migrant labour on farms, in slaughterhouses and meat-packing
 plants,
 Drivers, grocery-store workers, warehouse packers, carriers,
 Recalling attention to 'essential work' and 'essential workers',
 Regularly disparaged, now regularly in demand,
 Plucked even from loss-of-employment indemnification,
 Regularly obliged to put themselves in danger,
 For their disparagers as much as those indifferent to
 Or unaware of their existence,
 To ensure that supply of daily needs and services,
 And profits, no doubt, is not interrupted—
 'It is the economy, stupid!
 The centre and the circumference of the universe,
 The force that rules the planets and constellations,
 The apple and the seeds at its core.
 Time to reopen the marketplace of exchange and extraction,
 No matter the risk. People die anyway.'—
 Who does though, at the borders of peril and menace,
 But the essentially expendable?



Those who gather profits, indulge their whims and
investments,
Are not the same who do the work to produce that wealth,
To enable that indulgence,
Their stakes and shares not the same—Clichés,
Our ordinary world, our ordinary lives are made up of them.
These are still the early days.

III

But birds and bees don't much concern themselves with this,
Trees rustle with delight in the breeze, insects go about as usual,
Fish in the pond chase each other with the abandon of the
breeding season,
And thick-skinned frogs imitate the sheep's bleating as
carelessly as ever,
Though the family of deer I saw one night under the cypresses,
That flicked their ears as I approached and sprinted away
through the lawn,
Is no more—the stag I saw two months ago, dead on the side of
the road
That leads to the highway, while the doe was hit by a speeding
truck
On a two-way city street less than a mile from our home, I
found out driving
Back from work one evening—only the fawn remains, a little
bigger now,
Magnificent though, as he grows into adulthood, but seen always
Wandering alone in the woods and cleared spaces
Between houses lining that city street where his mother was
killed—
What of that? Birds have declined by almost five billion these
last fifty years,
But you will not see any carcasses of birds anywhere!
And where are the swarms of butterflies?



The buzzing clouds of pollinating bees?
 Underground, the red ants march in vast armies north across
 the continent,
 We make our own deserts and pretend they are fruit-bearing
 orchards,
 Hard cash, their fruit—Our enterprise wipes out
 Millions of acres of earth's forests around the planet,
 But we still have these, oak and hickory, tulip magnolia and
 maple,
 Beech and Leyland cypress, Yaupin holly and weeping red
 dragon,
 Chinese witch hazel, river birch, tea-olive, crepe myrtle,
 All these cultivated varieties in our backyard, it is easy to forget
 What is lost elsewhere, what ecological systems and micro-
 ecologies,
 Communities and life-forms native to territory and
 environment—
 So too, the population of rivers and seas,
 Unsparingly harvested for what we did not sow,
 To serve our tables and salons, pharmacies and ateliers,
 Their fish and plant life, organisms that sustain them,
 Their rich habitats, coral reefs, salt marshes, mangrove forests,
 Expunged from the geological register—
 There is no end in sight to our plundering for dividends—
 Meanwhile, in our garden that has no gates, nor flaming
 swords,
 We mourn Xena, our turquoise-eyed, Siamese Tabby,
 Who died last year after a warm companionship that lasted
 eighteen years,
 And quietly sleeps now under the ice-blue cypress in a grove
 of trees
 And shrubs beside the grass, lavender and rosemary growing at
 her feet.



IV

So, truly, nothing is quite worked out,
Days and nights could just as well be nights and days,
I wouldn't care, it wouldn't matter—
But the brain-shattering white noise
That keeps minds and bodies chained
To the endless task of serving in anguish and despair,
Or just the sliver of a mirrored hope
That keeps them shackled to the daily grind,
Is broken, if only for a fragmentary slip in time,
And in this interval, in this very garden in the backyard,
Where no one is an intruder, no one under surveillance,
Where no whispering slanderer traduces or defames anyone,
Where no interdict or ban curtails the comings and goings,
No transgression, no judgment, no penalty, no retribution,
Right here, where exiled, we were meant to earn our keep,
With the bloodstained sweat of our humiliated brow,
May lie our only salvation, the redemption of reciprocal
exchange,
Of incessant transition and burgeoning that goes on all
around us,
From which we keep ourselves stubbornly in ravening
isolation.