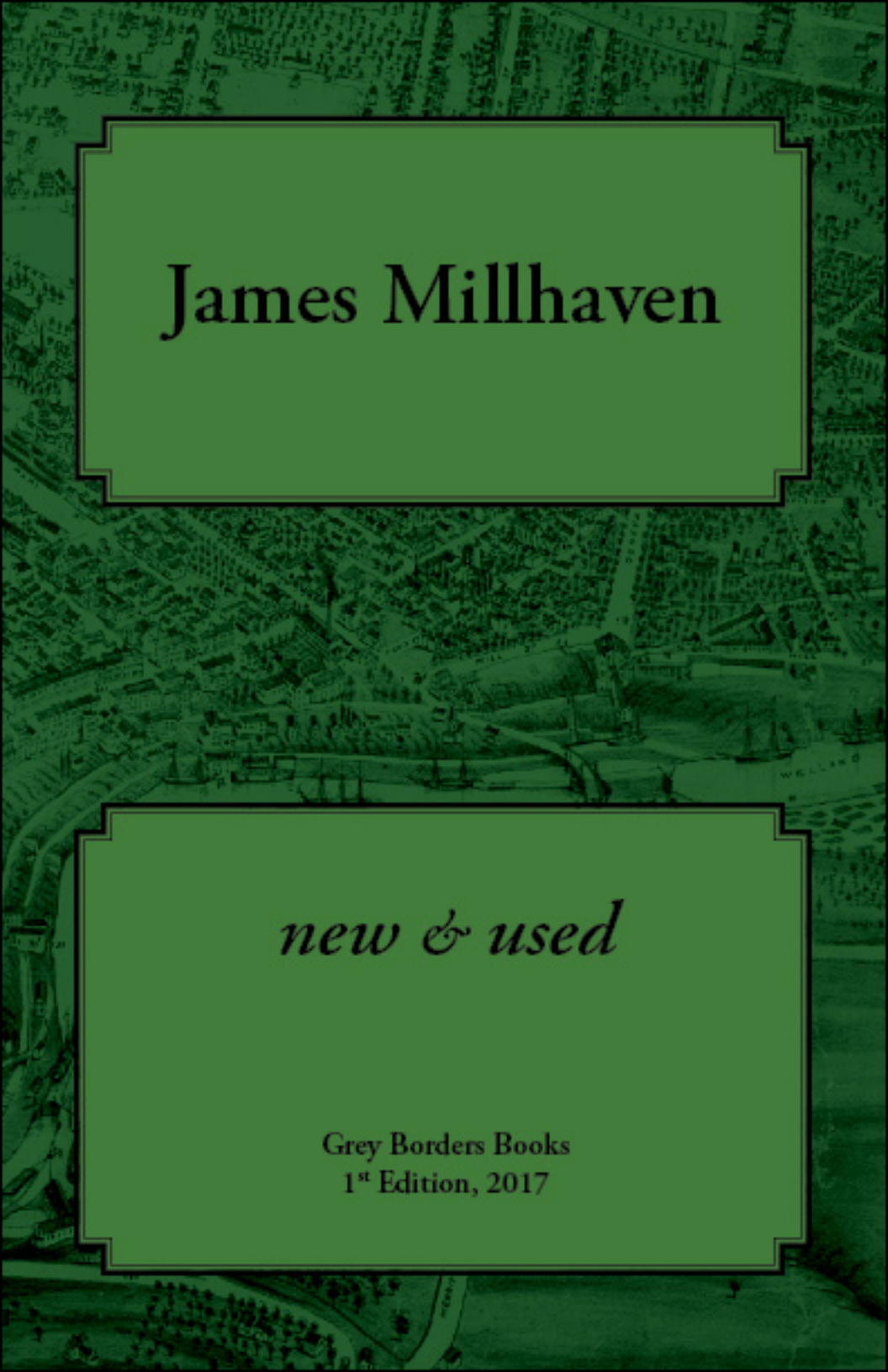

James Millhaven

new & used

Grey Borders Books
1st Edition, 2017

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Grey Borders Books
online editon 2020

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Edges (2010)

Thaw.

Parking tickets under park benches.
Birds knurled
and cats flattened by cars.
The unthawed ground trod on
by people still wearing boots,
and the not green grass poking through
what's left of Winter.

Closure

On the night we dug up your father's body
(for reasons I can no longer remember)
we took turns with the shovel
as we passed a bottle of *Whyte & Mackay*
back and forth.

You didn't say anything
until we opened his casket:
looking at his corpse you said,
"He's smaller than I remembered"
and then walked away,
leaving the scotch and the shovel behind.

The next day,
when the police came to the apartment,
they didn't say anything—
really—
even though we were covered in dirt
and stunk of death.

After they left,
you made breakfast,
and we watched black-and-white movies
until it was time to go to bed.

Morning struck you down

And morning struck you down
where you stood.
Birds collected at your feet
and pulled on your shoelaces
thinking they were worms.
Flies landed on your face
and sucked the water from your eyes.
Homeless men went through your pockets,
and children poked at you with branches
they broke off of trees.

And I
kept walking.

Surahs for one-hundred

Qur'anic verses are called out over the air
on the television below me
or across town—
I cannot tell.

The minarets and the aerials stand tall
in place
to send and receive their messages.

Is it time for prayers?
Is *Jeopardy!* on?
I don't know:
I am lying in bed,
staring at a stuccoed ceiling,
hoping to see clouds.

Winnipeg

When we drove to Winnipeg
to visit your parents
you wanted to pull over in Thunder Bay
so you could have your picture taken
        with Terry Fox,
but I wouldn't
because you wouldn't pull over for the Big Nickel
        back in Sudbury.

When we got to Winnipeg,
I slept on your parents' couch.

Distance

Silence

after breath
and words
and sleep.

After the hand was proven empty.
After the cup was broken.
After the blinds cut into the sun.

After "we" became
you

and I
with distance.

Play

When we met—
I don't remember when—
in whatever bar that was, then,
you were smoking *Players*
and I was drinking gin.

Your boyfriend—
what was his name?—
was at the jukebox, playing songs.
You said "I hate his taste in music"
when I was about to say the same.

Later on—
after we had left him there—
you smoked another cigarette
and I had another glass of gin
while I played with your hair.

Edges

We transplanted ourselves
to a new topography,
but our lines
    still
do not match up.

As Well (2014)

One

You
(that's me)
you are sitting in *The Merch*
watching a band you don't know
(they're okay)
and it's Friday night
or Wednesday or Sunday;
it doesn't matter.

You
(that's you)
you are nuzzling your way around the bar
stopping to leer at each table.
Up front there's a guy in a vest
with a beard and his *Ray-Bans* on (for some reason).
If he'd shave,
you'd fuck him.
At the back there's a girl in a wife beater
with an asymmetrical green haircut and matching nose ring.
If she'd stop shaving,
you'd fuck her.

But maybe that's still me.

Two

Wake up too early
and try to let the sickness settle back
in your throat.

Cower in the park,
        wishing you had slept more
        (or drank more)
and listen to *other people* up
        far too soon
politely call each other *faggot* or *cocksucker*
while you hold your ribs
and cough
and ask the squirrels
to kindly fuck off.

Four

The blonde Catholic high school boys walk
with their shirts off
in the midday sun.
Sweating
smoking
strutting down the sidewalk
to get their lunches,
while I leer from the bus
and pine
and cross my legs.

Five

She is sitting across from me
going over her lines
as I go over her lines
to make sure she is remembering them.
And I cannot meet her eyes
(and I know she is staring at me)
because I'm thinking
how she must have thought
all these lines to herself
        once,
but never said them
except now
in character
for show.

Seven

You got back into town the week before;
messaged me when you landed at Pearson.
You didn't say hello,
but talked about Bernini instead.

Now, it's Thursday
and I'm not expecting to hear from you,
and I'm not going to call.

You're not leaving,
but you're not staying either.

Eight

Arrive, and
immediately set about making a wreck of yourself
for whatever your excuse is
        this evening.

Glide through a room full of
clinking wine glasses and polite hellos, slipping past installations—
        and questions—
from the well-meaning.

Ignore the show you're there to see,
        and instead
hide in the back room
with cheap rosé and acquired rye.

Binge and chain smoke your way to morning
        and say you don't remember anything.

Ten

Less awake with the hours ahead;
less wanting
less alive.

Sit in places you used to enjoy
with people or
alone, even when you have company.
Smoke, though you don't smoke and
drink, though you shouldn't.
Fuck, for whatever the reasons.

Now more tired;
more alone.

And what I won't say
is what I have left.

Afterthought

Keep track
of the small mistakes of the evening,
and don't give anything of yourself
away.

People ask:
"How are you?"

I'm fine,
how are you?

Say nothing else.

Afterthought

There's never been a lesson
that I haven't learned—
        and forgotten—
almost immediately.

Sometimes,
I feel on the verge of something
        very basic.

Self Portrait

Starry nights
and wheat fields eaten.

Chrome and cadmium yellow swallowed.

Lead and zinc white
vermillion
red lake
and Prussian blue
all swallowed.

Raw umber
picked off the floor
grit between teeth
ground between finger and thumb.

Raw umber
rubbed on his face
and drawn into form
by brushstrokes.

Thirty:

poems about St. Catharines (more or less)

(2015)

Busker, playing at 10pm in the chill
of the first night of spring—
        -10 °C or so.

No one looks
        or says anything
        or throws him any change.

There's no one on the road but him and me,
and I'm walking on the other side,
and I have no change.

. . .

~Thirty, 2015~

For my sins, I work at *Sitel*
with the over- and under-educated,
the dispossessed of *GM* and *John Deere*,
the short-timers waiting to finish their degrees
(or waiting for their degrees to be recognized here)
and those—
like myself—
who may never leave.

Everyday is penance in the post-industrial gasp,
waiting for a different air
to rush in.

. . .

Wait at the bus stop
either too early or too late—
there's no way of knowing—
and spend three dollars
(the same cost as the *TTC*, mind you)
to be too early or too late
for work
for school
to cash a cheque
to take out a loan
for your doctor's appointment
for your fucking transfer onto
another fucking bus.

There's no way of knowing.

. . .

~Thirty, 2015~

It is not the first day of Spring
in downtown St. Catharines
until the same man
has asked you for change
three times in a row—
        forgetting that you gave him a quarter the first
        forgetting you told him you have no more the second
        forgetting you told him to fuck off the third—
and realizing you no longer have enough change
for an extra 12 minutes of parking
to *maybe* get your licence renewed
at the MTO.

. . .

Hills Bros. coffee cans rest outside of
cut-to-pieces office blocks and
faux-Victorian family homes,
filled with smoked-to-the-filter tenants,
waiting to be deposited
elsewhere.

. . .

Gibson Lake
in Thorold where I've lived off and on,
is not a real lake—
        it was dug for the canal, I think.

What's left of the house Laura Secord ran to is nearby;
my brother used to cut classes and get high there with everyone else.

My grandmother used to live
where they dug the pit to fill in with water—
she lives beside the lake now.

One evening,
over 20 years ago now,
her nephew-in-lawish, William, went canoeing with his wife,
and found what looked like a foot encased in cement
as he was pushing off.
He told a couple of fisherman who took a couple of hours
to take a look themselves—
        it took a little while to find the rest of her.

When I visit my grandmother,
and take a walk by the lake,
I tend to think about how polluted it seems
with all the litter floating in it,
and how—
        now that I live in St. Catharines—
I drink that water.

. . .

Cash for Gold
Cash for You
Pay Day Loan

Driving through the city,
on St. Paul or on Scott,
the yellow signs are lit,
next to closed restaurants
and family owned shops.

My friend Terry once,
looking up the stats,
told me no new businesses opened in Niagara one month,
but seven loan centres had.

It'd be more convenient to just give them back
their tables
in the temples again.

. . .

~Thirty, 2015~

My mother,
after going back to high school
and then to college
while working in a rubber factory, then a restaurant,
and finally an insurance brokerage like she'd studied for
(while raising me and my brother)
managed to buy a home
that she nearly lost
after another bankruptcy.

The only man my age that I knew
who owned his own home
was an ecstasy dealer in Port Colborne.

He eventually went to prison
for five to fifteen.

He's at least close enough for his mother to visit
every other weekend.

. . .

Tim Hortons cup tacks into the wind
down the tarmacced road—
past the rimless and winter cups
        crushed flat and faded
past the closed power train factory
        with its Hilco Industrial auction banner
past the homes and bars of former employees
        now unsellable—
down the overpass to 4th Avenue,
and over the side into the creek
with everything else that's been discarded.

. . .

On the walk downtown,
after work,
I saw a ramshackle house for sale
at Ontario and Welland.

"*1% Realty*" the sign said.

I guess
"*Go fuck yourself, you couldn't afford to*
buy a home in this market, anyway Realty"
wouldn't have fit on the sign,
or they couldn't copyright that.

. . .

The art centre opens in August, I think.
Not that I'll ever be able to afford to go to it.

None of my friends will be able to rent it
to even put on a ten minute play,
or have any kind of show in it.

The Courthouse theatre will close after,
and local productions will go with it—
they'll have to book Michael Bublé
or a Jimmy Buffet tribute
(if not Jimmy fucking Buffet)
and corporate workshops
to keep the place open,

And it'll be even harder
to find a parking spot
just to have a drink on a Friday afternoon.

. . .

You get used to people's
talk about leaving,

I used to be surprised
when the person who served me
for a couple of years
would disappear—
usually to grad school
or another continent
or Toronto.
(Toronto comes up a lot.)

I met all of my friends at places they worked,
but then the café closed,
or they got tired of working in bars.

I try not to act surprised anymore
when they talk about leaving these days—
there's not enough jobs,
(the jobs there are get taken by students)
the rent's too high for the places you can find,
and they have lives they'd like to get on with.

Sometimes,
    I wonder about why I don't think about leaving
    more often,
and usually I say
    "Where else would I go?"

But that also means
    "Where else would be home?"

I'll probably never leave.
. . .

The faces of the famous
(more or less)
hang from lamp posts.

Some, I wouldn't know without the
one line descriptions;
even then,
an essay would still be needed
to tell me who they were.

The other ones—
Mikita, Peart, Evangelista—
could have been from anywhere, really.

Born here,
famous everywhere,
live elsewhere.

Except for the faces I don't know.

. . .

~Thirty, 2015~

When I walk along King street,
I take a minute to spit on the
Right to Life Association office,
and then continue on my way.

Part of the reason is that I am immature,
and cannot think of a better way
to voice my displeasure.

The larger reason is:
It is 2015,
and in the largest city of the Niagara region
in one of the largest municipalities of the country
in a town with a newly built hospital
(to replace the two we already had)
there are two "pro-life" groups
and nowhere to get an abortion.

We force women to go to Toronto,
getting them out of sight
as though this were Victorian England.

. . .

They leave their home in the north end
in the April afternoon
for a short drive around
to pass the time before a family dinner.

She had just left the school ground,
and they stopped her walk home
to ask directions,
though they knew where they'd soon be bound.

After,
when they'd washed her on the Easter morning,
and left her in the ditch where she was found,
they arrived for their family dinner.

The television played the news,
        without sound.

. . .

Drive up to Port Dalhousie
to walk along the pier at night—
or not,
as it's been closed for repairs.

Now,
the only thing there
is a port you can't dock at,
two pits they haven't filled spots for,
and a bar I never want to go to.

There's always the beach,
but I don't like to swim.

. . .

In Thorold,
up the Escarpment,
they painted murals along the lock
showing the schools,
a bombing,
and the surviving veterans.

I used to think my great-grandfather was one
of those,
but he died long before they were painted.

I doubt he would have wanted to be painted, anyway.

When he came home, my grandmother tells me,
he jumped off the train to avoid the fanfare at the station,
which sounds like him.

I prefer that story to a painting, anyway.

. . .

The Welland House.
Jerry's Alley.
Red Square.
Gord's Place (original).
The Mindbomb.
The Honest Lawyer.
Beantree's.
Beantree's (again).
Stella's.
Strega.

And somehow,
Canton stays open.

. . .

Sitting in the Town Cinema,
huddled under a blanket
(in July),
eating week old popcorn
watching *Super Size Me*.

It was the last movie I got to see there.

It's been left to fester
with the marquee proclaiming
"Prime Development Space"
and xeroxed photos
of Dan Aykroyd handing someone a shitty bottle of wine
to try to sell it.

Downtown could always use
a fifth burrito place.

. . .

Wait three months to go to the clinic
to let whatever I have
(or don't have, as it turns out)
incubate in my blood long enough
to show up in a test,
and then take a day off work to go
because they're only open weekdays.

I guess they can't get anyone to volunteer their Saturdays
to inform people
they may have HIV.

. . .

An article a few years ago
pointed out that for every one job
in St. Catharines and Niagara
99.9 people applied to it.

This was before
Future Shop shuttered all it's locations,
Target left after about five minutes in the country,
and the government decided they didn't need
quite so many mail carriers
anymore.

Supposedly,
they're putting another *Wal-Mart* in at the Pen Centre.

That'll fix the problem.

. . .

~Thirty, 2015~

Stand in the line at the *Avondale*
waiting to get carded by the same cashier
for the third time in a week
behind the same maybe-middle-aged-man
I saw last time.

Last Tuesday,
I watched him win $30
and spend it on *Cash for Life* and *Nevada* tickets again.

I bought my cigarettes
and went outside to smoke.

I figure our chances are about even.

. . .

My niece was born about two years ago—
well, not my niece really,
but my friend's daughter—
and I wonder what kind of city she'll grow up in.

When I was her age, in 1989,
St. Catharines still had *GM*
and the schools hadn't been ravaged by Harris
yet.

My father had a job with *Welland Transit*,
but that eventually made way to work in foundaries
(and various felonies).

I'd like to think,
over the past 25 years
with it's losses and disappointments
that she'll have some reason to make a home here.

I'll take her to Short Hills
before she leaves.

. . .

For five or six years
I worked
(sort of)
at *Hannelore Headley's*,
mostly stacking books
(restacking after they'd been knocked over)
and talking with Hanna.

Eventually,
I had to get an actual job.

What I miss most,
besides Hanna,
was that I could have walked in there
anytime between 1975
and 2005
and it would have been the same
small bookshop.

I go back in every so often and get lost—
the new owner actually organized the place
and now I can't find anything.

The tea cups are still in the right place, though.

. . .

What I like best about shows in St. Catharines—
music or theatre or art—
is that the people I pass in the street
or who serve me drinks
or that I work with
after working 40 hours in a call centre
or until last call in a bar
will paint or write or play something
that will make me just the right level of jealous
that I didn't do it.

And that,
when I see them next time at work
I can say
"Good work, man"
and they know I'm not talking about their job.

. . .

On Sundays
with no market open
and no one really downtown
(and everyone being a little hung over from the night before)
I like to sit on James street
at *Fine Grind*
and have the street to myself.

Usually a few people,
besides my friend who's working,
may pop in,
or they won't and that's okay too.

I like to pretend I'll get some writing done there,
but mostly I just lose at cards and *Scrabble*.

. . .

Every May,
the migration occurs.

Moving vans block every spot
the cafés and bars get easier to find a table in
and the streets seem quieter.

The first weeks of Summer in St. Catharines
are a game of seeing which students have gone
and who's still around,
and learning the names of new servers.

. . .

I get uncomfortable when I leave the city,
even for an afternoon these days.

I like going other places,
but not *being* there.

The only vacation I'd ever be
able to abide
would be a round trip
with no stops
that lead back here.

If I were to be impolite,
I'd say it were Stockholm Syndrome
by location.

Or maybe I just like to know the name
of who hands me a coffee,
and to keep an inside joke going.

. . .

I'm trying to be fair.

No, really.

It's difficult to balance the problems I see
(or maybe my level of pessimism if you were being unkind)
with the things I like here.

I like being able to nod at people when I walk around
and say hi without needing to know their names.

I like that, despite my best efforts,
I somehow have friends here
and that I have to admit
it's home.

Just don't tell anyone.

. . .

New (2017)

standing outside my home on the sidewalk
at 4am
chain smoking my way again to morning,
watching the haze of my lungs
breeze through the streetlamp's light
and away down the road—
in the direction of work
past the leftover walls of *GM*,
over the 406 and Twelve Mile Creek
toward the new hospital
and the fields,
where grapes will be harvested
in the freeze.

▪ ▪ ▪

~New, 2017~

plastic roses
paper wrapped
individually in their
glass capsules
for the quick romance
of receptors
a toonie each.

the flower is thrown away,
brideless.

▪ ▪ ▪

He sleeps in the *Royal Bank*
beside the ATMs
an empty bottle of *Listerine Original* next to him—
floor mats for bedding,
his folded arms as a pillow.

Cash is dispensed while he lightly snores;
the automatic doors
open and close
as people make their way to the bar.

▪ ▪ ▪

Winnipeg II

When I did drive to Winnipeg with my wife
(then girlfriend)
we stopped at neither the Big Nickel in Sudbury,
nor at the statue of Terry Fox—
not out of spite for each other,
but because we couldn't find the way to either so easily
while trying to get a set to a theatre company.

She did all the driving as I never learned.
(I drove once, for five minutes, in Smithville
and didn't feel the need to ever do so again).

I remember stopping
in the large town-centre of Marathon—
population 3034, maybe—
for far-too-good Chinese food,
and Thunder Bay to get drunk in a *Pizza Hut*.

When we reached the city,
we stayed with an uncle of hers
and went to lunch with a different one.

That one and his wife had us over at their home for coffee
where he explained how "the Natives" wanted to be "given"
the disused barracks, and how that was a problem.

We didn't say anything
as I was a little drunk
and it was her aunt and uncle,
and we needed the ride.

Afterwards, smoking out front of the airport,
I thought about what I should have said but did not;
about how people like my grandmother
(and those far less lucky than her)
didn't want buildings or land back
as much as they wanted themselves back,
and I felt ashamed for saying nothing.

That was Winnipeg.

▪ ▪ ▪

on the anniversary of metric conversion.

I only know how many liters are in a gallon
because some urinals are polite enough
to point out how much water they use
when I take a piss.

▪ ▪ ▪

Catastrophe holds us now—
the limp hours between spent
bracing ourselves
        and each other
against the next furtive wind.

Days are measured now
in response time to the following outcry:
the declaration of falseness
if inconvenient
in a smattering of formless missives.

Silence is no longer so quiet.

▪ ▪ ▪

the shape of things.

I imagine I know your face
to think of it.

I like to think I remember where your eyes are,
        or how your cheeks line up
        and what a smile does to them,
but I can never fix it in my mind.

I've never been good with size or shape
        or memory, for that matter.

sometimes, I know what my mother's voice sounds like
        before she speaks
        or how tall my best friend is,
but I may be lying.

▪ ▪ ▪

We glide through rooms
full of people who say
        they know
but really,
do they?

our tongues are held
out of a feigned politeness

because:
who wants to point out such failings
when what we want—
        really—
is the silence of friends and loved ones
to hold and guide us toward a place
where love
is the only remedy of pain
born out of love.

▪ ▪ ▪

~New, 2017~

Outside,
the notion of warmth
is misplaced
like children plunked into snow banks by parents
who want maybe five or ten minutes to themselves
and forgotten about until lunchtime or so.

Winter is five or six months long if we're lucky;
two months if we are not.

▪ ▪ ▪

I'd like to think that my great-grandfather
didn't fight across North Africa and Europe
in a tank for six years
for nothing,
but I wonder if he wasted his time
when I see the same fascists—
with the same targets—
pretending they care about what he fought for
while being what he fought against.

▪ ▪ ▪

polite accords given with hellos—
truth sutured within a smile
agreeing to disagree itself to death
rounding the point from dithered to vacillated
not using the word that fits
understood but not said
expecting someone
to do something
but not wanting
to say anything
impolitic.

▪ ▪ ▪

There should be something poetic
about finding a dead sparrow in the evening
while blocked for ideas and trying to write.

There should be a metaphor in this:
something about fragility or decay,
or how winter becoming spring
does not necessarily mean a rebirth.

But not everything is a symbol
just because it's lying there in front of you.

Sometimes it's just a bird you can't bury
because you don't own a shovel.

▪ ▪ ▪

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