

Rae St. Clair Bridgman

# Jimmy Tattoo



homeless on the streets of Toronto



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Thank you to all the men who have shared stories  
of their years of homelessness with me

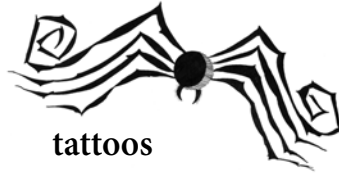
*Jimmy Tattoo* is dedicated to them



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## tattoos

thought tattoos was cool  
thought tattoos made you tough  
my dad my uncle my brothers  
everybody had 'em

got a bottle of that black ink  
ink as black as  
my mother's iron frying pan  
a bottle of India ink  
had a picture of a creepy-looking spider on it  
spider sitting in a web  
    waiting  
waiting for somebody like me to come along

squirted that ink into a beer cap

got white thread and a needle from  
my mother's sewing basket  
and I literally went ballistic on my arm  
my left arm 'cause I'm right-handed  
so that was the beginning

    no way  
no tattoos in the world don't hurt  
believe me they hurt

nothing to lose  
have this big raspberry mark under my chin  
    birth mark  
won't see it when the beard grows out  
my mother always said it was a lucky sign  
God made a special mark on me  
my mother's always sayin' stupid things like that



don't know about no God  
but if there is one  
I'm just working on what God started  
that's what I figure  
God started painting got bored I picked up the brush

never said nothin' to my mother  
she would've hit the roof  
if she knew what I was doin'  
    snuck into her room  
raided the sewing basket  
it was pink had a shiny lining and inside  
the threads they're all tangled up like  
a cat fight was goin' on inside that box

there was this envelope  
it was at the bottom  
and inside that there was  
a brown envelope it had a torn flap  
and inside that there was  
an old dirty envelope  
and inside that  
    a silver quarter  
only it wasn't shiny it was  
    almost black

and the writing on the old envelope  
the writing was brown and faded and it said

*The first quarter  
Oscar J. Whitford  
earned when he was a  
little boy. Grandma  
kept it all these years for  
him.*

*July 5, 1930*

it was written just like that

and after my mother finishes cussing me out  
one for the new tattoo  
although how she knew I done it I don't know  
'cause I was wearing a long sleeve shirt  
one of my brothers or sisters musta told her  
and two for snoopin' around in her sewing basket  
takes a couple days for her to calm down  
that's when she tells us

my grandfather  
picked apples for one day  
not just an hour but a whole day  
that's how he earned the quarter  
he was 12 years old

always remember her tellin' me that story  
how he almost fell off the ladder

that quarter was so smooth  
you could hardly read the words on it any more  
must've seen a lot of pockets in its day

money's best alive when it's being used  
pass it around  
that's what money was made for in the first place isn't it  
if it's sitting in one place it's dead money

I used to sneak into the sewing basket after that  
try and polish that quarter  
so it wouldn't feel like dead money

pretty amazing my mother never tried to sell it  
she pawns everything else  
never touches that quarter though  
like it's sacred or somethin'  
like the family honour's tarnished if she doesn't keep it  
not that we have much honour left to tarnish anyway  
too late for honour

wonder if my mother still has that damn coin  
I asked her about it the other day  
she starts mumbling somethin' or other

come to think of it maybe she did pawn it  
after all  
wouldn't put it past her  
that'll give you a hint  
she's not exactly the go-to person if you're looking for  
reliable  
that's the kind of mother she is

too bad that quarter's lost  
had 13 stars flying around this statue of a woman  
she's sitting down on a big rock  
found out later her name was Liberty  
there's a big eagle on the other side too  
and a date but it's practically worn away  
1857  
came from the U.S.  
that's where my family's from originally  
North Dakota somewhere

I'm sorry that quarter's lost now  
it kinda connects me and my great-grandfather  
my brothers they didn't give a damn about that quarter  
neither did my sisters  
which was just as well otherwise  
there'd have been a big fight

maybe it's actually better if it's lost 'cause  
I couldn't live with myself if I pawned it  
probably would have too  
guess I'm not that reliable either

maybe it was because he was my age when  
somebody gave him that quarter  
he must've held it in his sweaty hand  
musta been proud  
somebody paid him good silver  
for an honest day's work and

his mother wanted to keep it for posterity  
to remember

long after all those apples got made into pies  
long after those apples got eaten  
long after that apple tree died  
they wanted to show that quarter  
it was some kind of proof  
he could pull his way in the world

you can see the numbers  
right here on my left arm  
1857  
did a pretty good job on the 13 stars too  
they're all in a circle  
like on that coin

took me a couple days  
did it at night so no one could see me  
and when it was finally done  
I'm proud  
real proud  
like I can shoot for the stars or something  
this skinny little punk thinks he can do  
whatever he wants

was 12 years old  
wanted to be cool like everybody else  
funny though  
I regret it now and  
if I could go back to a point where I didn't have  
no tattoos on me at all  
I would  
I gladly would

yeah I could start all over again  
with a brand-new skin  
like a newborn baby  
no scars no marks no nothing  
start over on a whole new life while I'm at it  
if I could  
that's what I'd do

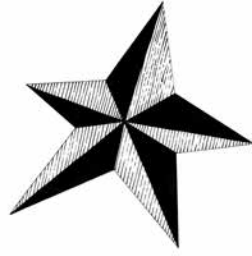
no hesitation  
no ifs ands or buts

but I can't

I know that  
so I live with it  
I deal with it

I'm a regular walking art gallery  
every inch  
that's why they call me Jimmy Tattoo  
'cause of all these tattoos  
it's as good a name as any  
at least people don't forget it  
and maybe that's a good thing or  
maybe that's a bad thing  
depending on how you look at it

## my gold star day



you know I had a guy come up to me once in a bar on Queen  
I'm sittin' at the counter minding my own business  
not looking for any trouble  
when I feel somebody lookin' at me

I turn around  
and sure enough  
there's this guy starin' at me  
he's a big guy  
and he's wearing a pair of cowboy boots

he comes up to me  
stands six inches from my face  
he says  
I wanna buy your skin

say what  
thinking maybe I misheard him  
maybe he actually said  
you're lookin' kinda thin

he says it again  
I wanna buy your skin

it's unmistakable  
the guy really did say  
I wanna buy your skin

maybe I should've been flattered you know  
the skin's worth something after all  
but the guy stinks  
he's plastered

so I say  
that's a good idea my friend  
but this skin's already occupied  
makes it sound like I'm a landlord or something and I say

see this nice No Vacancy sign here on my knuckle  
it's not lookin' for a new tenant  
not that I know of anyway  
this apartment's rented  
got a few more years to go  
if you don't mind  
no breaking this lease  
it's hard to come by a good place these days

he laughs says  
buddy I'm serious  
here's my card if you ever change your mind  
    I want your flayed skin when you die  
I'll pay you cash up front  
how's that for a deal  
and he hands me his card  
there's a gold star on it  
and he's wearing this big gold watch

swear to God  
that's what he said to me  
I want your flayed skin when you die  
swear to God  
no guff I kid you not

and I say  
sir you are one sick man  
but I'll take it as a compliment  
no harm done  
no offense  
thanks for the offer  
I'll give it serious consideration

    like hell  
that's what I'm thinking  
actually I'm having trouble thinking straight

'cause all I can see is a skinned cow  
it's hanging upside down on a meat hook  
in the back of a truck in Kensington Market  
what's left of that carcass anyway  
red meat sagging  
only that skinned cow is me  
and that's my blood smeared on  
the butcher's white apron

meanwhile a couple other guys  
they're sitting right there at the bar beside me  
they say hey man that's a great offer  
can't take your skin with you after you're dead  
can't take your money either  
might as well spend it now  
make that skin work for you man  
get back your investment

and I say  
look fellows I happen to be a little  
attached to my skin

they laugh one of them says  
man if I had some tattoos I'd do it  
no problem

and that guy in the cowboy boots  
he holds out his hand to shake mine

no way I'm gonna let him near my skin  
dead or alive  
said excuse me

toss that card with the gold star in an ashtray  
as soon as I can

step out onto the sidewalk and  
breathe in the Queen Street fumes real deep  
someone bumps me I don't care  
for once I'm glad to be alive  
wanna keep it that way



even I am not that desperate for cash

stand on the corner holding out a cup  
can you spare some change buddy  
until I get enough to buy a piece of pizza  
there at the corner of Bathurst and Queen

funny thing is  
a few years later I find out  
there's guys actually sell their skins  
you know the full body suits  
those Japanese ones

fanciest tattoo I ever saw  
this guy had a Japanese fish  
one of those big orange koi  
it was wrapped right around the calf of his leg  
man his leg was one big goldfish  
scales and fins big round eyes  
blue water lapping around his ankle  
looked like that fish was gonna  
    swallow him up whole

there's guys actually sell their skins before they die  
end up on some museum wall  
flat like a dried fish  
    even your fingers  
you're nothing but a piece of parchment  
bunch of drawings on it

hey it's only skin man

yeah but it's the only skin I got

but you're dead so who cares  
they wait 'til you die  
like how are you gonna know  
you're already a dead man

so you want me to run back to  
gold star man and say  
what a great idea  
it's a deal  
and just to make conversation  
I'll ask casually  
do you have any other specimens  
how large is your collection of complexions

it's a little personal if you ask me  
tattoos are supposed to breathe  
tattoo's meant to breathe and sweat  
shouldn't be all dried up

so yeah there's quite a collection  
here on this body  
friend of mine did this one here  
the heart and the arrow  
I got a big one on my back  
a dragon guarding a skull  
it's still healing up  
got it done a month ago  
that one's professional  
took a long time  
the only times we stopped  
I went to the washroom

wasn't intoxicated  
wasn't on drugs  
it was straight  
'cause when you get tattoos  
they don't allow you  
you can't be intoxicated  
or on narcotics

to be blunt  
I really shouldn't be here  
probably should've been dead at least  
a dozen different times in my life  
but I pick myself up keep on walkin'  
nothing else for it

with all the accidents I been in  
car crashes  
almost drowning  
thrown out of cars  
hit by cars  
takin' knives  
bad drugs  
you name it

and every time somethin' happens  
I get another tattoo

story of my life  
it's all right here  
behind every tattoo there's a story  
you ask anyone and they'll tell you  
nobody ever forgets when they get a tattoo

it's not like scratching somethin' down on a piece of paper  
somebody else they're scratching it on you  
right in your skin  
so you don't forget  
you're one big picture book turned inside out  
and everybody else can see it  
all your secrets right out there in plain sight  
they may not know what it means  
but it doesn't matter  
'cause you know

I look at all those freakin' accidents  
everything that's happened  
look at them as escaping

somebody up there  
way up there in those clouds  
there's gotta be somebody pulling you out  
somebody's pullin' you away  
from whatever hell you're in  
pickin' you right up by the tail

they're sayin'  
it's not your time rat  
you got more work to do here on this earth  
let's go  
rat get outta here

the way I figure it  
when your time's up  
that's it  
until then  
you better

I'm still here  
still vertical  
still walkin'  
still takin' whatever life I can get

don't ask too many questions  
'cause it's a crazy game  
learn the rules  
bend 'em  
make up your own  
    cheat  
whatever  
same thing's gonna happen



## a skipping stone



first time it started  
I was six maybe seven years old  
me and my dad  
we went to pick up my mom for lunch

I'm sitting in the back of the truck  
jumpin' up and down  
I'm so happy I'm so happy  
we're goin' to the restaurant  
where you get this free toy  
that's what I'm thinkin' about  
gonna have French fries

my mom and dad they get hamburgers all the trimmings  
onions tomatoes lettuce the cheese  
two big milkshakes they're goin' all out  
kid's meal for me  
comes with the French fries  
and a blue plastic space alien

I'm squeezin' out the ketchup  
'cause you can't eat French fries without ketchup  
big squirt on my shirt  
I start cryin'  
'cause it looks like  
    blood

my mom she tries to hush me up  
it's okay Jimmy-boy  
lots of ketchup  
eat your French fries  
change your clothes when we get home  
stop your fussin'

if I don't get this blood off me  
I'm gonna die  
I'm howling my head off  
only nobody knows what's wrong

my dad he yanks on my arm

hustles me out

they don't get it  
I'm looking down at my shirt  
all I can see is blood

my mom and dad they're sitting in the front  
big Ford truck black leather seats  
vinyl tattoo stuck on the side  
long red and orange flames  
yeah there's this white head of a bald eagle and  
its body's made of fire  
man it had this really vicious beak

so we drop my mom off at work  
they're arguing over something and  
she gets out of the truck  
slams the door

I go sit in the front seat  
beside my dad  
I'm still crying  
quickly run around front  
that eagle's gonna grab me  
get in fast

thought I pulled the door shut  
but at six years old  
your muscles your strength  
it's really not up to Hercules you know

so I pull the door  
hear it click  
it's fine  
yeah it's fine

but my dad he's still  
pissed off at my mom  
pissed off at me  
he floors the gas  
whips around the corner  
door flies open  
there's no seat belt on me  
I fly  
    right out the door

at six years old  
I must've looked like a pebble

I'm a stone  
    skipping the water  
I'm a stone  
    crossing the road  
I'm flyin' across the street  
    almost get hit by a car  
it's all happening real fast  
    in slow motion

that car must have missed me by half a foot  
there's this squeal of tires  
on black pavement  
I'm biting gravel  
dirt in my mouth  
burning rubber  
whole world's upside down

one of those things  
you never forget

I'm flying through the air  
all I'm thinking about is how  
that eagle's chasing us  
me and my blue plastic space alien

only the space alien's head's ripped off  
it's rolling around on the road over there



then everything turns  
white

there's this fat lady she's all dressed in white  
she's wearing a white coat  
there's a white hat on her head  
she's wearin' white shoes  
she's even got white gloves on her hands  
and she's driving the white car that  
almost hit me

everything's white

and the fat lady she's got a white poodle too  
and that dog's lickin' my face

the white lady bends down  
picks up the space alien's head  
snaps it back on

then everything turns orange  
it turns orange and red  
and I feel like I'm on fire  
the eagle got us

and there's puke all over the road  
lumpy pieces of French fries

I try to tell everyone about  
the eagle and the white dog and the fat lady in white  
how she put the head back on my space alien

my mom and dad they just look at each other  
then they look at me they say  
what are you talking about Jimmy  
there's no eagles here  
you're seein' things  
there wasn't any lady Jimmy  
there wasn't any dog  
you imagined it  
but that's okay Jimmy

Jimmy you're gonna be okay

one of my first experiences with almost being  
dead  
almost dying

I almost died

that's why I got this eagle tattoo  
body of fire  
so I wouldn't forget





## luck magnet

and after that  
guess it made me  
made me braver  
I had more of an attitude  
death-defying you know

hey kid if you can survive this  
maybe you can do this and  
maybe you can get away with that  
maybe you're a luck magnet  
you're not afraid of nothin'  
why not  
it was irresistible  
try anything out accidentally on purpose  
see what happens

'cause I used to climb on buildings  
jump from one building to another  
jump down a flight of stairs  
I'm no stunt man but  
used to do a lot of tricks  
people thought I was a little crazy

hey Jimmy they'd say  
dare you  
bet you can't

you kinda wonder  
am I cheating death  
why am I worth saving

why me

what about my kid sister  
died before I was born  
I'm the youngest  
seen a picture of her  
she had this great smile curly hair  
clutching this teddy bear

she drowned when she was two  
why did she have to die  
just some innocent little kid

why not me

hey death come get me  
what's the matter  
you scared  
I dare ya

that old saying  
cowards they die a thousand times  
crossin' every bridge before they get to it  
me I'm only gonna die once  
that'll be for good  
fly you son of a bitch

this tattoo here  
this death skull on my arm  
cheatin' death  
so why not  
it's symbolic  
death's part of you boys and girls  
death's nothin' but a piece of your skin

for some reason I can't die  
should be dead  
should be dead so many times man  
I'm one of those cats with nine lives

no ifs ands or buts  
somebody up there wants me here  
don't know what for

don't care either  
don't need a reason  
don't make life any easier

consider myself sort of unorthodox  
compared to most people  
the way I think  
the way I see things  
the way I act

been called abnormal  
been called strange or different  
by a lot of people  
take that as a compliment

like me for who I am  
if not take a hike

don't need you to like me  
don't need you to be my friend  
don't want you to be my friend

too many people in this world  
sayin' I wanna be your friend  
over-rated word if you ask me  
jump down turn around shoot 'em up  
stay away from any asshole who says  
they wanna be your friend  
stab you in the back first chance they get  
that's what happens  
watch your back



## what the parrot said



remember when I was growing up  
we used to have a neighbour  
pretty crazy old lady  
had this parrot  
must've been two feet tall  
only it wasn't real or nothin'  
    it was fake  
one of those talking parrots  
all these yellow and blue feathers  
white face it had black stripes and  
a big fat beak could bite your whole nose off  
least that's what I thought when I was a kid

this parrot it was pretty special  
could talk move flap its wings snap its beak  
big claws sat on a perch  
eyes clicked open and shut  
pink tongue too  
had this rubber cracker it chewed

that thing's looking right through you and  
you're starin' at it for ten minutes  
it doesn't move not even a blink

for no reason there's this big fart sound  
eyes click open and the parrot's laughing  
I'm laughin' so hard  
can't stop myself  
parrot's eyes click shut  
there's these snoring sounds  
like it's asleep



and sometimes the thing dances on its perch  
sings a song  
swings from side to side  
cocks its head  
it starin' right at you all the time

Mrs. Harris that was her name  
no it was Mrs. Harvey  
called that bird Henry  
my pretty bird she always said  
and it would talk right back to her  
sometimes repeat what she said

*pretty bird*  
*pretty bird*

I love you Mrs. Harvey would say  
she'd be patting that parrot on the head  
like it was her baby and  
and wouldn't that damn bird answer right back

*I love you*  
*I love you*

man that woman was nuts over her bird  
like Henry really was  
a parrot

so one day I'm sittin' on her porch  
watching this parrot  
only it's not moving  
maybe it's playing dead or something  
hasn't done anything in at least 15 minutes  
Mrs. Harvey goes inside to get some lemonade  
it was hot out must have been the middle of the summer

screwed up my courage  
touched one of the parrot's claws  
that bird's eyes click open  
looks right at me it says

*bad boy*  
*bad boy*

I jump back like that bird bit me  
it turns its head once twice  
clicks its eyes squawks it says

*keep a secret*  
*keep a secret*

never heard the bird say that before  
never heard it again either

always wondered what the bird was talkin' about  
what secret was I supposed to keep  
guess I'll never know

maybe Mrs. Harvey was just inside and she was talkin'  
maybe she had a microphone somewhere  
maybe she was the one sayin' keep a secret  
maybe I only imagined it  
maybe it never happened  
maybe it's a story somebody told me

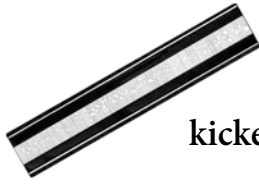
but it's stuck in my mind  
can hear that bird's clicking eyes  
see its white eyelids  
hear that parrot voice

*keep a secret*  
*keep a secret*

that stupid mechanical bird  
it was right  
just do it  
you'll never know what the hell *The Secret* is

and sometimes you gotta keep a secret to survive  
and even if there is no secret  
doesn't matter  
that's not the point

you know somethin'  
nobody else knows  
not even you



## kicked out

people know what I'm like  
my true friends  
they accept me for being strange  
abnormal quirky even creepy

when I was a kid I was super  
hyperactive on Ritalin four times a day  
teachers used to bribe me to sit in the classroom

if I could sit down  
in my class  
in my desk  
    all week long  
my teacher would take me out for lunch at the end of the month

even with the medication  
had a hard time focusing on school  
always wanted to do something else  
was put on this special diet  
they took away all sugar products  
wasn't allowed to eat  
no ice cream  
no cookies  
no cake  
no candy  
you name it  
just about everything  
all the other kids could eat

and even if I wasn't allowed to eat that stuff  
I'd sneak it anyway  
actually made it worse

to get what  
    I so desired  
I'd just steal the sweets  
    I wanted

went to school until grade six  
started having trouble in school  
got bored to death  
it was the same thing over and over again  
the same lessons  
tell me once I knew it  
that's the way it was  
but we kept going through the same stuff  
couldn't be bothered taking notes

actually the way I remember it  
spent a lot of time  
standing in the hallway  
staring at the wall  
staring at my feet  
staring at the hole in my sock  
staring at the dirt on the floor

or I'd be standing in the corner for  
    being bad so-called  
one day the teacher got so mad  
she put a dunce cap on my head  
long pointy thing  
that's what they called it  
made of pink construction paper  
had the letters D-U-N-C-E on it  
thick black letters

made me stand in the corner for the whole class  
so how's anybody supposed to learn like that

and you know I can't even  
remember what I used to do  
what would have driven the teachers to put me there  
sure must have done a lot of whatever it was  
'cause I was out in that hall most of the time

actually I do remember one time  
only it wasn't me  
teacher left the room one day  
can't remember his name  
he had to go down to the office  
oh yeah it was Mr. McPhail  
only we always spelled it McFail  
yeah that's what it was

remember he had blond hair cut razor short  
like he was in the army or something  
he had a real tight mouth  
no lips only a straight line for a mouth  
and man he had a temper

when he caught someone chewing gum  
made you take out the gum  
put it across your nose  
you'd have to sit through the whole class  
that piece of gum stuck on your nose  
how you were supposed to learn anything  
with a gum nose

then one day  
Mr. McFail caught someone chewing gum  
again  
and he lost it  
he went ballistic

I was lucky  
good thing he didn't catch me  
'cause I just finished  
sticking a piece of gum  
underneath my desk  
otherwise it could've been me

well Mr. McFail starts shouting  
man he goes on a rant like  
somebody'd just been murdered

it's only a piece of purple grape bubblegum  
for God's sake

Mr. McFail picks the poor kid up  
by his feet  
holds him upside down  
sticks his head in the rusty green metal garbage can  
begins shakin' him up and down  
the kid's hollering and shouting and  
Mr. McFail's glaring at everybody  
looks as crazy as one of the bulls on my uncle's farm  
his eyes it's like they're turned red

funny thing  
guess it worked  
don't remember anyone ever  
chewing gum in his class  
not after that

but that wasn't right  
you can't manhandle a kid like that

heard he had a nervous breakdown the next year  
he would've been fired nowadays for what he done  
teachers can't lay one baby finger on you now

the principal used to give us the strap too  
used to get sent down to the office all the time  
you'd have to hold out your hand straight and  
slap  
that leather strap  
black with a white strip down the middle  
like a skunk  
comes down on your hand  
hard as a whip  
used to burn something fierce  
palm of your hand turns ketchup red

didn't do any good though  
same people always gettin' sent down to the office  
how your brain's supposed to work better  
'cause you hand's hit  
there's another mystery

by the time I hit grade nine was skipping all the time  
grades started falling  
I'd get beaten at home  
for my report card

finally left school for good  
couldn't take it no more  
I was 16 in grade ten  
my mom kicked me out again  
told me to pack my bag and go  
she threw a couple twenties at me  
shut the door in my face

she made it clear  
very clear  
she'd had enough

so had I





## leftover donuts



so I was with both my mom and dad  
until I was nine  
that's when they separated  
my mom took my two sisters two brothers and me  
my dad was an alcoholic  
so my mom had custody of us

but I was given up to my mom's brother  
he lived on a farm

and that's where  
my uncle he physically abused me  
beat me with a car fan belt  
every time I made a mistake  
must've been that whole philosophy  
spare the rod spoil the child

got hit if I came downstairs  
in the middle of the night  
to get something to eat

they took to locking me in my room  
wouldn't even let me out to use the washroom at night  
had to pee out the window  
and then I'd get beat again

spent my tenth summer  
shovelling stinking cow manure from a barn into a wheelbarrow  
taking it about half a mile out to pasture  
from six o'clock in the morning  
until it turned dark at night

that was my uncle's form of punishment  
Children's Aid wasn't even involved  
it was just a family thing

eventually  
after being beaten by my uncle  
with that car fan belt  
I call my dad  
from where he's living to where my uncle lived  
45 minute drive  
I call my dad up after I got whipped again

couldn't believe it  
my dad got there in 25 minutes  
he must have driven like a crazy man  
he was there that quick

and when my dad gets there  
he calls me  
tells me to come to the door says  
show me the marks Jimmy  
show me the marks

I had four or five half-inch welts on my back  
they're about six inches long  
looked at them in the mirror afterwards  
red welts criss-crossing my back  
and these big purple bruises

my dad sees my back  
he opens the trunk on his car  
pulls out a baseball bat  
my uncle starts to run

my dad proceeds to literally beat  
the hell out of my uncle  
and the only thing that stops him is my aunt  
she's shrieking  
stands in the way with her two kids  
they're looking scared shitless

cops were called  
Children's Aid was called  
my mom was called  
everybody witnessed  
I'd been beaten

went back to living with my mom after all that  
only ever seen my uncle  
one more time

few years later  
my mom took me to see him  
I think it was to say good-bye  
she never said nothing  
I never asked her neither

my uncle he had some sort of disease  
died pretty soon after that  
he was lyin' there in his bed  
in a dark room curtains closed up tight  
his legs they were all twisted and shrivelled  
there was a wheelchair sittin' in the corner  
the room smelled of piss

he didn't look like the man I remembered  
that man was tanned blue eyes big white ugly smile  
muscles like you wouldn't believe  
had this big tattoo of a snake coiling up his arm  
real dark

this man he's all bald head like a bare-assed egg  
his eyes the colour's all leached out of them  
his skin's so white it's scaly  
teeth blackened

and that snake tattoo  
all the colour's leached out of it too  
the snake's shrunk  
it's wrinkled

he can move his head but that's about it  
and one hand  
he's trying to talk making sounds  
his words they're so garbled  
can't make out what he's tryin' to say

all I can think is  
he's living hell

I stare don't say a word  
can't think of anything to say

all the words I wanted to say  
they're smashed  
    around my feet

feel plain sorry for the man I'm looking at  
the guy who beat me up  
he died a long time ago  
never speak ill of the dead  
that's what my mother always said

that's what happens  
sometimes the words you wanna say  
the words you been waitin' to say all your life  
never get spoke  
least not to the person you wanted to  
    say 'em to

and after all that  
don't even know if he remembered  
who I was  
what he done

so ever since I was little  
I was a chronic runaway  
had to get away from all these people

they're ruining my life  
bullshitting me  
telling me they're trying to help me

doing the best they can for me  
for my own good  
they're goin' on and on  
about my own good  
I figured the best thing for myself was  
myself

I was never beaten again  
after my uncle  
that was the last time  
I was never beaten again  
not like that anyway  
'cause I wouldn't let it

I'd run away  
always ran away  
if I got scared  
ran away

it was chronic  
I'd run anywhere just to get away  
wouldn't know where was I going  
did I care  
just wanted to get away

slept under stairwells  
ate out of garbage cans waited 'til  
the donut shops threw out their leftover donuts  
I'd go and eat them

did what I had to just to survive  
if I was lucky there'd be one of those  
chocolate ones with the sprinkles on top  
that was my favourite  
I'd steal if I had to  
then I'd get picked up by the police  
I'd be taken back  
again  
and again  
and again



## shadows



seems like I always been into drugs and alcohol  
started drugs when I was about 11  
very first drug I ever tried was cocaine  
and I didn't even smoke cigarettes yet

it was my older sister's boyfriend  
that got me started  
they must've thought it was a big fat joke  
what did I know at 11 years old  
it's what everyone else around me was doing  
wanted to fit in  
be one of the gang

began stealing money from around the house  
from my mom's purse  
my brother's pockets  
wherever  
began using drugs  
the bad thing was those drugs  
they turned me paranoid  
only I didn't know it was the drugs

I thought people really were trying to kill me  
my brothers and sisters kept telling me  
their friends wanted to beat me up  
it was nothing but a joke to them  
and my sister's boyfriend  
he was going to beat me up too  
and these are pretty tough boys in Regent Park  
so half the time I'm scared  
scared they really are gonna get me



so scared  
I begin to hide  
four in the morning  
climb out of my bedroom window  
can't let people see me  
go home at three in the morning sometimes  
get an hour sleep  
    if I'm lucky

anything so people can't find me  
go down by the ravine  
or hide down by the train tracks  
hide in a boxcar  
anywhere there's shadows



## dog house days

flew the coop when I was 12  
had no place to go so  
I snuck into my brother-in-law's doghouse  
slept in there every night  
    beside his dog

he had this dog named Brutus  
one of those Newfies  
big black furry Newfoundland dog  
had a bark to rattle your bones  
used to slobber all over  
whimpered and growled in his sleep  
his paws they'd be twitching  
as if he was chasin' something  
maybe he was chasin' a bear down a mountain

that dog took care of me  
let me eat his food  
kept me warm  
I loved that dog  
I really loved that dog  
there was nobody like that dog

the really sad thing was  
one day he  
    dropped  
he died right there in front of me  
it was all over

must've been his heart  
it just  
    stopped  
he was a young dog too

funny thing I'm there holding this dead dog  
as if I can pull him back  
he's not breathing  
and I'm screaming

you can't leave  
come back  
please come back  
you can't leave

and then there's these seven crows  
they fly right over my head  
seven crows and there's tears  
streaming down my face

and all I can hear is my mother's voice  
singin' some old song her mother probably taught her  
*one crow for sorrow*  
*two crows for joy*  
*three crows for a girl*  
*four for a boy*  
*five for silver*  
*six for gold*  
*seven crows for a secret never told*  
*eight for heaven*  
*nine for hell*  
*ten beware for nothing bodes well*

and that's all  
it's goin' around in my head  
around and around and around again  
and there's nothing but warm black fur  
turning cold

that's why I got those seven black birds  
flyin' around on my neck  
it's a collar  
so I don't forget  
I'll never forget Brutus  
if there's a life after  
that's where Brutus is  
that's where I'll be

after that my brother-in-law said to me  
you can go sleep in my car Jimmy  
he had this old red Ford Mustang  
used to curl up in the back  
windows'd steam up at night  
unless you kept the window open a crack  
it was pretty comfortable in there  
I'd pretend to drive down the highway  
pretend I was moving to another city

but I didn't change my clothes  
my feet stunk  
no way around it  
I was dirty

and my brother-in-law wouldn't let me stay  
in that old car any more  
his mother wouldn't let me sleep in the empty doghouse  
she caught me sneakin' in there one night

what the hell are you doing in there  
get out of there

she kicks me out of the doghouse

yeah so I even get kicked out of the doghouse  
that's how bad it is  
can't get much worse

if you can't even live in a doghouse  
where can you live

it was a nice doghouse too  
wood painted white blue shingles two windows  
purple curtains with white polka dots  
it stood back under this tall spruce tree  
you'd wake up in the morning  
smell the spruce air

there was this big white fence  
goin' around the whole backyard

it was a pretty big doghouse  
old piece of carpet inside  
it was like a little room  
big enough to stretch out in  
had cushions too  
only Brutus had chewed off the gold tassels

but without Brutus  
that doghouse  
it wasn't the same any more



## a black stone

basically I was pretty violent  
I was very violent  
a lot of people think I'm a very soft-spoken person now  
try to be anyway  
'cause I used to be very violent

in my family  
everybody was pretty violent

I was four years old  
when my neighbours told me  
here's a rock Jimmy  
they put this big black stone in my hand  
took two hands to hold it

go throw that stone through that window Jimmy  
that's what they said

so I throw it right through the window  
first try  
that's what they were telling me what to do  
that's what they wanted me to do  
so I did it

I'm scared  
but I wanna be like the big guys  
there's this loud cracking noise  
glass splintering on the ground  
shards glinting a thousand diamonds in the grass  
big black gaping hole in the window

and my parents they're sittin' there  
drinking with these people  
they all think this is very funny  
they sat there they laughed  
everybody was laughing  
they clapped when that rock hit the window  
what a strong little boy they said

well I must be doing something right  
that's what I thought  
they're laughing they're happy

they wanted me to throw that rock  
so it must be right  
so I thought all these bad things were right

I had to learn what was right  
had to learn what was wrong  
had to learn all that by myself  
'cause there sure wasn't anyone else doin' it  
whatever anyone else was telling me  
it was upside down

I'm a very violent individual  
not proud of that  
not proud at all  
I do not like violence in my life  
not any more  
I was so scared of hurting people  
I'd wake up in the morning  
praying I wouldn't hurt anybody

now I control it  
walk away  
deal with it  
talk it through

taught myself how to read how to write  
went to school but I wouldn't  
sit down and learn  
but all those times in jail

I took correspondence courses  
you have to do something with your time  
I was getting ninety-eights and hundreds in English  
grade 12 English

I got my grade 12  
nobody taught me  
taught myself

I was still using crack but not as much  
went to Regent Park to visit my sister once  
these kids they jumped me  
stabbed me a few times  
they put a ten-inch scar down the right side of my face  
all the way down my neck  
they tried to rob me  
for fifty bucks man  
that's all I had  
I wasn't even there to buy drugs  
that's the funny thing

almost died  
again  
that's pretty much been the story of my life

if you look at my left eye  
you can see the scar on my left eyelid  
a man stabbed me in my eye  
it went in  
right behind my eye  
missed my eyeball and all the nerves

the knife went into the back of my head  
punctured the muscle wall punctured the bone  
right through to the cavity of my skull  
in the back of my head  
you know I can stick my finger behind my eye  
through my eyelid  
don't do it too often  
grosses people out too much  
hell it grosses me out



would've lost my eye  
but I didn't  
that's when I decided to have an eye  
tattooed on my left shoulder  
has eyelashes and everything  
and if you look closely you can see a skull  
it's starin' out from right inside the pupil  
so I remember  
how lucky I am

I seen a lot of things in my life  
seen my brother throw a fork  
he threw it across the room at my other brother and  
it stuck in my older sister's forehead  
stuck right in her skull  
and this fork it has a red handle  
my sister's head looks like a dart board  
with this fork stickin' out of her head  
they couldn't get it out  
they tried  
they tried to pull it out  
but it was stuck right in

and my sister's hollerin' and screamin'  
she's swearing bloody murder  
says she's going to kill my brother  
but still that damn fork doesn't come out  
she even tries to pull it out herself  
they actually have to bring her to the hospital  
and everybody's looking at her  
when she comes walkin' in the door as if  
she's Frankenstein or something  
that fork's sticking straight out  
like a unicorn horn

I seen my brother push my sister off the sink and  
her arm it got caught in the towel rack  
got ripped right out of the socket  
it was dangling there  
and everybody's screamin'  
my other sister she's grabbing this tea towel

tryin' to tie my sisters' arm back on  
and I'm thinking how her arm  
it looks like it's gonna fall off right onto the floor

and my mother she beat me  
so bad  
so many times  
she literally tried to kill me  
my two sisters had to jump on top of me  
they took the hits that I was getting so  
my mother didn't kill me that day

my mother  
this is my own mother  
I love my mother  
no matter what someone says  
if you let your mother go  
you don't have nothing

so this is the mother of all mothers  
the first morning of the month  
she used to do this every month  
she used to say  
white rabbits white rabbits white rabbits  
she'd say white rabbits three times  
it was supposed to be good luck  
bring you good fortune whatever  
my mother was filled with stuff like that  
don't do this don't do that  
she'd win the Superstitious of the Year Award  
and I'm not joking  
she was always goin' on about three this's and three that's  
never light three cigarettes with one match  
that was another one

yeah so this is the mother who beat me with extension cords  
she beat my older brother with an electric guitar over his head  
almost killed him too  
he ended up on the street  
she used to beat him all the time  
but I heard he's got a family now and kids

basically I didn't want to listen to no one  
my mother was a very  
    outspoken person  
when she said somethin' you done it  
but it was a case of  
when she said something  
I didn't wanna do it  
so I didn't do it

authority figures meant nothing to me  
even when I was a kid because  
I knew everything  
I had all the answers  
everything I said was right  
    even if I was wrong  
didn't listen to nobody

so I'd get grounded  
climb out the window

no point in sticking around  
where I wasn't wanted  
why stay to get beaten up  
least that's what I thought

the street was safer than  
livin' at home  
and the fact of the matter is  
maybe it was safer  
maybe I was right or  
maybe I was wrong

that's the choice I made at the time  
always lived on the streets  
slept in staircases starting at 10  
and when I was 16  
that's when I first got arrested

## iron city



first time  
first time I got arrested

see this small axe tattoo  
here on my leg  
that's for pickin' up a hatchet

I took a hatchet  
ended up destroying this guy's 1957 Chevy  
trashed it  
hacked so many holes in his car  
that thing looked like a cheese grater

it was a red convertible  
shiny chrome headlights

the only way to get back at him  
for what he done  
'cause he hit me  
that's how bad my temper was  
all I could see was red

wouldn't do it now  
machine like that  
not very many of those left  
it even had the big tailfins

but I was violent  
I was very violent  
my temper got so bad that  
even my mother was scared of me

I'm not proud of that  
but that's how it was

so I got thrown in the clink  
somebody called the cops  
they caught me red-handed with the hatchet  
that's what landed me in jail

got this double-head axe tattoo in jail  
there was this guy there did all the tattoos  
from Australia  
his name was Kenny

tatts  
his black work  
he called it

all the prison tattoos they're black  
but I'm a black and white kind of guy anyway  
don't need no fancy equipment  
prison tattoos they're all black  
cause it's hard to get a hold of colour  
one of those clear Bic pens and a bent spoon  
attach a little motor  
run a sharp guitar wire through the pen  
that's about all you need  
feels like dragging a sharp nail on your skin  
that's what they do for a home job

whatever you got you make do  
amazing what you can trade for in jail  
all you gotta have is somethin' the other guy wants  
it's all supply and demand  
just like anywhere else in the world

heard from this one guy  
he came from Eastern Europe  
we called him Big O  
there in the prisons  
they take the rubber  
off the bottom of a shoe

melt it mix it with soot  
that's what they use for ink

there was another guy  
he worked for years in the coal mines  
everybody called him Andy  
'cause his last name was Andrew  
don't even know what his first name was  
there was these blue lines on his face his neck his arms  
any time he got a cut that coal dust  
it got right in there  
permanent blue

remember one night we were all sitting around drinking  
any time it was prunes for dessert  
everyone would put their prunes in a plastic bag  
we'd let 'em ferment  
the guys would do up a brew

Big O  
he stands up  
says he wants to show us an  
Eastern Europe tattoo  
stands up undoes his zipper  
I'm thinking where's this tattoo  
Big O

Big O  
he drops his pants  
they're down around his ankles  
there's this star tattoo on each knee  
Big O  
tells us a star on your knee means  
bow to no authority

I should say  
nobody wants to tangle with  
Big O  
that guy has muscles it's scary  
and he doesn't take kindly to the word  
no

jail's like a society within society  
in jail you know what to expect  
in jail you know what to do  
in jail you know what not to do

there are lines in the sand  
they don't call it the slammer for nothing  
the pen the tank the bighouse  
the cooler the iron city  
no matter you call it  
no way around it

I didn't know the rules 'til I learned  
I was put in with a guy named Roger  
he was in his forties  
got sentenced to 15 years  
Roger was from Alberta  
came home one night  
and this is what happened

this is the story he told me

I was logging  
timbering up in B.C.  
I was a faller  
cut down the marked trees  
it was hard work dangerous work  
paid good money though  
you have to be strong  
fast on your feet  
trees don't always fall the way you tell 'em to  
anyway I'd been away for two months  
came back home a day early  
was carryin' a string of pearls for my wife

and I come in the house  
find her in bed with  
    you guess it  
find her in bed with my neighbour

went nuts  
got my gun  
shot him

she was screaming

after that  
never looked at her once  
never looked at her again  
there was nothin' to say  
they had to chain me down  
in the courtroom

three whole days  
I was that goddam mad

back home we got a rule  
a lot of people work away  
in the coal mines in oil fields  
they work in the tar sands  
we have respect for their wives  
or their girlfriends  
or their husbands  
everybody respects that  
because everybody's working outside  
two or three months at a time

you don't mess with nobody  
you respect the fact  
a man's out making a living for his wife and kids

that's the story he told me  
and at 16 years old  
I was put in this guy's cell  
I'm in a cell with a guy who  
tells me matter-of-factly  
    I killed a man  
tells me he has a son my age back home  
he makes sure nobody fools with me  
'cause I didn't know the first thing about jail



you got at least six hundred guys in there  
it's a beehive of cells  
you wanna know what jail's like  
think bars on windows  
think bullet-proof glass  
think barbed wire  
think cameras everywhere  
think guards they never smile  
stinks of lysol mildew and bodies  
they tell you what to do  
every friggin' moment  
every friggin' day  
peel potatoes wash dishes scrub the floors  
make furniture in the shop  
no email no internet no doors on the toilets  
you're never alone never  
unless they throw you into the *hole*  
solitary confinement

you're working as hard as the next guy  
you go out on committees  
you'll take a gang of six or eight people out  
two guards follow you  
you do trees you cut grass you clean up  
whatever you're told to do  
you work or else and  
you make a buck an hour  
adds up after a while

you have money to spend every week  
cigarettes toothbrushes toothpaste  
I was doing ironing for some extra  
we had to iron our clothes  
well we didn't have to  
but who wants to walk around in wrinkled clothes  
when you can walk around in ironed clothes  
and a lot of people they don't like ironing

so I was ironing everyone's clothes and  
doin' a good job of it too  
for three packs of smokes I'd iron

your two pairs of pants your three shirts your jacket  
had a little home business goin'

I survived jail  
it was a dry roof over my head  
free room and board too  
that's the way I look at it

in jail there's respect  
learned all about that too  
but it's a different type of respect  
not respect for you  
not respect for the person  
it's respect for the crime  
what you're in for

murder is very high  
rapist is very low  
diddlers the guys who rape kids  
raping that's pretty much the lowest of the low  
most rapists or diddlers they  
usually don't last long enough to see  
the end of their court trial

it's called inmate justice  
kangaroo court  
you have your judge your jury your council  
it's all done  
within the confines  
of the inmates

there's a lot more camaraderie  
in jail  
than the outside world  
not exactly Club Med  
but when you live with thirty guys  
you see 'em every day

you go to bed they're there  
every night you wake up they're there  
you brush your teeth they're there  
you get to know everybody real well

after that I was in and out of jail  
six months here  
nine months there  
15 months here  
18 months there  
everything and anything  
here we go again  
armed robberies break-and-enters  
theftovers anything over a thousand dollars  
theftunders under a thousand  
fraud  
you name it  
to survive  
it was never-ending

it was a challenge to stay out of jail  
when most kids my age are out there  
partying  
having a good time  
goin' to the movies  
worryin' about who they're goin' to the prom with  
look at me  
here I am  
I'm spending most of my time tryin' to  
    stay out of jail  
only it's not going too well

s-u-r-v-i-v-e



the summer I was still 16  
lived down in the valley where  
there was this creek  
lived in a lean-to  
made it out of wooden pallets and scrap wood  
had a tarp over it for the roof  
the tarp used to leak  
too many holes in it

my parents used to kick me out all the time  
gave me a curfew  
no way  
I'm gonna abide by any curfew  
it's a big joke

I was gettin' royally pissed off with  
the whole situation  
stop listening to any damn thing they said  
not that I ever had anyway

as far as I was concerned  
they didn't follow whatever they told me to do  
so why should I

one night  
they wouldn't let me in  
locked the door on me

one night  
they said  
go away never come back

that's the polite way of putting it  
doesn't take a great imagination  
but there were a few choice words  
went along with that

go away  
never come back

that's what they said  
that and the door slamming in my face

take a hint

I didn't go back

and that's when it really hit me  
the bottom dropped outta the rusty red pail  
right in front of me  
right there at my feet  
I'm thinking  
my brain's moving kind of slowly

this is no joke  
I'm not thinkin' in actual words here  
I've got nowhere to live  
I actually have nowhere to live  
all I have is the two twenties my mom threw at me  
and I haven't eaten all day  
now what am I going to do  
Houston we have a problem

Jimmy you're up a tree

that's about as far as it went  
wasn't really thinkin' anything  
other than where should I go

all I could think of was to go  
down to the creek  
actually it must have been early spring  
'cause there was still some ice left in the woods  
but the birds they'd already started building their nests

lived down there on through the summer  
I'd go over to a friend's house during the day  
when their parents were out and  
I'd have something to eat use their shower  
I wasn't working yet

you know I'd rather be in the woods  
it's safer in the woods than it is in the city  
there's nothing down there in the valley  
the ironic thing if you think about  
the most dangerous thing down there is  
a human

they're the ones you gotta watch for  
it's the humans  
other than that  
what do you have  
raccoons squirrels few sparrows crows  
maybe an owl for a little excitement  
that's about it  
on cold nights I curl myself around a fire

used to garbage-pick used to shoplift  
you know when they deliver the bread  
they put the trays out back of the store  
before the store opens  
sometimes the bread's still warm  
so I go up there help myself  
whatever I want

used to go into a grocery store  
I'd go in there buy a loaf of bread a quart of milk  
but there were filet mignons under my armpit

I'd go back down to that creek  
have a nice little barbecue  
get some long slim green branches from an apple tree  
put them over the rocks by the fire to make a grill

I'd go in and shoplift  
those cast iron frying pans a set of those

a big one a medium and a small  
they're hard to hide under a jean jacket  
but I'd get them outta there somehow

meanwhile I had a bag from the store  
I'd get one of their bags  
put those frying pans in the bag  
take them back in  
ask to speak to the manager

bought these for my sister's wedding I say  
but my mother already gave her a nice set  
I must have thrown the bill out  
when I used the bag for a garbage bag  
didn't know I'd have to return them

some sob story like that  
then lucky me  
I'd get 20 bucks for the frying pans

that's how I did it  
you get pretty good at telling stories  
'cause if you don't  
you're not gonna eat  
it comes down to that  
you're not gonna eat  
s-u-r-v-i-v-e  
it's that simple  
that's the point of this card game



## end of the line

landed my first real job  
it was in packaging in this factory  
walked in one morning 'cause I read an ad in the paper  
they were looking for someone  
got lucky 'cause I was the first one in line  
and they said you'll do

they made plastic bags  
shopping bags for one of the big stores  
you have two rows of machines and  
they take a whole roll of plastic  
it's a sheet of plastic folded over  
it comes off this huge roll  
this thing's massive  
could crush you easy  
the machines cut them into bag lengths of printed plastic  
they get cut with a hot knife at the same time  
that seals the seam  
they go onto a pair of metal prongs  
then a bunch of them  
they go onto a wicket  
always sounded like *wicked*  
laugh every time I hear that word

it's a real numbers game  
bags and wickets and boxes  
so many bags on a wicket  
so many wickets in a box  
they jog down a conveyor belt to  
the end of the line

that's me



the end of the line  
that's what they call it and  
that's where I am  
waiting for these boxes  
at the very end of the line of bag-making machines  
my job was packaging them  
put the proper boxes on the proper skids

the boss was gonna make me  
the foreman of the afternoon shift in a few years  
I was a steady worker and he said  
Jimmy you keep goin' like this  
you're gonna move ahead

those machines was noisy  
always smelled like oil in there  
you had to be on top of things  
'cause the machines kept juggling along and  
if you didn't keep up  
the next guy couldn't do his work

but I liked the guys there  
they had a sense of humour  
always crackin' jokes about me bein' at  
    the end of the line  
anybody in the middle of the line  
they used to call them middle management

the only problem was  
    I couldn't kick the drugs  
it just got worse

I'm taking a handful of pills  
orange yellow green red blue  
white with purple polka dots  
don't care what they were  
so long as they get me high  
that's all I can think about  
    getting high  
keep me going at the end of the line

one of the guys there he used to  
rattle off everything he could think of that  
rhymes with line  
moonshine porcupine  
mainline grapevine  
lifeline deadline  
that guy was one walking dictionary  
used to rhyme everything  
got on everybody's nerves after a while

pretty soon I got busted for drugs  
so what else is new Jimmy  
just shoot yourself in the foot

you'd think  
I'd have learned something by now

the addiction's the king  
that's all you care about  
everything else is a blur  
it's like you're a snake and you're biting your own tail  
and you're goin' around and around in circles  
nothing's gonna stop you  
nothing

so that job was nice  
while it lasted  
pretty short and sweet  
lasted only a month at the most  
maybe three weeks tops

you know  
it really was  
the end of the line  
for this porcupine



## almost



after I got out of jail  
needed some place to live  
got this green tent from the army surplus store  
put it out in a field near  
one of those housing projects

there was a big field there  
filled with dandelions  
every time they cut the grass  
they grew faster  
it was like being in the middle of a thousand suns

weird thing about dandelions  
ever look up close  
when all the seeds are gone  
just a bare dandelion head left  
looks like a white pin cushion  
only there's this perfect design  
like it's been tattooed  
right on its bald head

I put that tent at the far end of the dandelions

somebody complained  
to the housing authority  
for my tent being there

it's public space right  
you're allowed to look at it  
you're allowed to walk on it  
you can run on it  
you can pick the dandelions

let your dog shit on it  
but you're not allowed to live on it

that tent was like some fungus mushroom  
sprung up overnight  
and they didn't want any fungus  
not in their backyard

I didn't let people see me go in  
I didn't let people see me come out  
so they burned it  
they burned it on me

only problem was  
I was in it

that tent went up in flames  
and I was inside  
my sleeping bag was on fire  
I barely got out of there  
sparks like it was fireworks  
like orange snakes shooting up into the sky  
like bein' in the middle of a phoenix show

went to take a look at it the day after  
and there was this big round black circle  
on the ground where the tent was  
the grass was scorched  
it was torched  
cremated worms everywhere  
and the dandelions the yellow was gone  
those suns had all turned into moons overnight  
those seeds were takin' off in the wind  
like they couldn't wait to get outta there  
the whole thing looked like a graveyard

the smell sticks in your nose for days  
you can't get rid of it  
some days I think I can still smell it  
that sour scorch smell

and after that I was  
so mixed up  
so hyper  
so confused  
    didn't know what to do

one of the ladies from Metro Housing  
comes to me she says  
Jimmy why don't you put some of that energy  
    to good use  
I said how and  
I started to cry

we have this job opportunity for you  
from 15 to 24 years of age that will train youth  
as long as you're in that age category  
we'll train you  
it's an apprenticeship  
maintenance plumbing electrical work for six months  
we'll pay you to go to school

I said okay

two people out of 189 kids got accepted  
me and another guy  
can't beat that  
so I have a plumber's certificate  
I can do electrical  
I can do tiling walls paint  
you name it  
if it's broke I can fix it

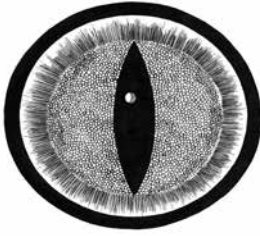
it's weird 'cause I was still using cocaine  
I'd stay up all night  
use cocaine  
go to work every day  
did that for roughly seven months  
then I got laid off because it was seasonal  
six months here six months there  
I was like one of those clocks  
you know the ones with the pendulum  
swinging back and forth

took a break  
tryin' to catch my sleep back  
only thing was  
I was still  
using  
abusing  
accusing  
confusing

finally caught jaundice  
skin turned all yellow  
looked like I'd been to the Bahamas  
my skin was so dark  
had to be hospitalized

almost died  
again

heard that one before  
that's why I'm so skinny now  
can't get my weight back up



## home sweet box

I was 17 years old  
no must have been 18 when  
I went to a men's shelter  
found out about it from one of the guys in jail

the place was pretty rough when I was there  
not the kind of place you'd visit  
if you weren't desperate  
bought a new pair of shoes  
put them underneath my pillow  
woke up  
    they were gone  
cried 'cause I paid a lot for my shoes  
I never buy cheap running shoes

the place it's like a jail  
it's all bunk beds  
we're all sleeping in the same stinkin' room  
it's all men  
it's dirty  
it's disgusting

only stayed in there  
two days  
couldn't take it  
didn't like it  
didn't trust it

I was scared



all these full-grown unshaven men  
they're cursing they're spitting  
they're groaning in their sleep  
man you never seen so much  
misery crammed in one place

plus I was coming off of cocaine  
had a paranoid complex  
where I thought everybody was out to get me  
so I hid from people

I'd hide in staircases  
hide in ravines

that's when I started living in the Rosedale Valley ravine  
stayed there and winter came  
I lived in a lean-to  
hidden in the bushes  
had a mattress shimmed up off the ground on Styrofoam blocks  
plastic tarp over me nice and sealed  
half a dozen sleeping bags

used to go out collecting beer bottles  
checking newspaper boxes for loose change  
garbage-picking stuff  
selling it to a secondhand store  
had a magnet on a thread  
heavy thread  
I'd fish down sidewalk grates for coins

bought a little army surplus heater  
a pocket warmer  
you open it up and  
it's got two sheets of fiberglass  
stick in a light at one end  
it embers down like a piece of incense  
it's got a metal cover holes punched in it

so I get out of my sleeping bag in the morning  
there's all that condensation  
comes off your body at night

I light that pocket warmer up  
hold the sleeping bag open  
prop it up with pop bottles  
put this pocket warmer inside  
it all dries out

stayed down there for the winter  
was warm in that tent  
I'd wake up sweating sometimes

started going to the out-of-the-cold program  
was going there for the dinner  
there was a free dinner and a breakfast  
didn't sleep over though  
didn't like being inside

I'd go back to my place  
liked that little place  
it was private  
didn't have to sleep in a room  
full of other people

liked my privacy  
liked the fresh air  
cars are honking  
you can hear the sirens  
you're livin' in a city with millions of people  
but there's just you and the stars  
it's hard to see 'em some nights  
except on a real clear night

looking up at those stars makes you feel small  
    real small  
like your problems are small  
so puny they don't matter  
you're a piece of dust  
yeah we're all just pieces of dust

met a guy named Gray  
he was picking up firewood in the ravine  
was living there like me

only I never found out where his place was  
Gray told me all about the stars  
he had names for every one of 'em  
he was a walking observatory  
I swear he could see all the stars inside his head  
they were like his friends  
The Dragon  
McDonald's the Big M  
only it's upside down looks like a W

and there was the Seven Sisters  
only he's telling me all these different names  
Mayan Indians used to call it a rattlesnake's tail  
Czechs call them small chickens  
what the hell I can't remember them all  
he was rattlin' them off like  
there was no tomorrow  
*hoki hoshi* that was the Japanese  
paint dabbed on the sky  
there was a whole bunch of other ones  
he had some pretty strange names for them

and I'm lookin' up at that inky night sky  
and it hits me just like that  
tattoos that's what they are  
only they're inside out  
white on black  
imaginary lines connect those dots  
or black on white  
look for the dark patches  
make all the shapes  
whatever shapes you want

the small stars they're chasing the big one  
those ones over there those are the three dogs  
that's what he told me  
they're chasing three wild pigs  
only they never catch them  
they keep chasing them across the whole sky  
those dogs their tongues hanging out  
they're never going catch those pigs  
never

and he tells me  
Jimmy you'll never lose your way  
all you gotta do is find that Pole Cat Star  
it's shining bright like a cat's eye compass  
never blinks  
never moves  
everything else spins around it  
so you'll always know which way your feet are goin' Jimmy  
that's what he says to me

I showed him my 13 stars and the 1857  
told him about my great-grandfather and his first quarter  
told him about Big O too  
how Big O had these stars tattooed on both knees  
Gray he laughs and laughs  
says he wants to get stars on his knees too  
nobody ever told him what to do

Gray was an old man  
stubble on his chin greasy hair slicked back  
had a real skinny pony tail seen better days  
his eyes they were all red caked with crud  
he grabbed my arm real tight  
wouldn't let go until I listened  
like maybe those stars were seagulls gonna take off  
and he wanted me to see 'em before it was too late  
he wanted me to know their names

I think he was going blind  
he knew he wasn't gonna be able  
to see those stars much longer  
but honestly I don't think it mattered  
he had them all in his head all the stories  
he could see them with his eyes shut

every time I look at those stars now  
I hear Gray's cracking voice  
see his tobacco-stained fingers  
his teeth yellow as a groundhog's  
he told me he was going out east soon  
he was going home to Nova Scotia

hadn't been there in forty years  
was gonna see his brother

all I could think was  
he was going home to die

found a package on the sidewalk one night  
plastic stars  
somebody musta dropped them  
the kind that shine at night  
gave 'em to Gray before he left

you wanna know all these places  
where to get free food  
where to go for shoes  
where to get a warm coat  
it's all word of mouth

there's flyers tellin' you  
where to go for this  
where to go for that  
but they're always out-of-date

I liked the ravine  
if I wanted to sleep in  
I could sleep in  
was afraid if I left my place too long  
someone else would come take it  
trash it or whatever  
possession being nine-tenths of the law  
and all my stuff was in there  
clothes tools catalogue  
from the army surplus store

but I get to thinking how  
time's going past me  
I'm not really living in it  
I'm not nailed down to it  
my mind isn't calculating its passage  
that's homelessness for you  
when you're empty

when you walkin' around  
you're passin' all these people  
everybody's goin' somewhere  
    except you  
you don't really feel like you belong anywhere  
all you're doing is you're goin'  
    garbage can to garbage can  
you're picking through it  
you don't belong  
but you need to live

your only purpose becomes  
keeping out of the way of  
anything else that's alive  
don't get in its way  
you're a problem  
just by being alive  
you're a problem  
'cause you haven't died yet  
so they can put you put you in a box  
or burn you up  
'til you're nothin' but ashes

it's as if the balance of life finds you guilty  
you're just a big burden  
not to the point where it evicts you from life  
only you're alive and  
    you don't really have a place to go  
you're an eyesore

a city street is  
just an endless passageway  
there's nothing on it except houses and  
they belong to other people  
the street's some kind of endless place  
with nothing on it for you

you go down a street  
there's houses and doorways and driveways  
houses doorways driveways  
and everyone one of them there's lights

someone else owns those houses  
there's people going in and out of them  
people you don't know  
and there's no place  
there's no place nowhere  
for you

and you keep on hoping

somewhere there's a door  
and it's mine  
one of those doors  
it'll be mine and

I'll walk

through



it



## never say sorry

moved back in with my dad for a while  
didn't last too long  
I was almost 19  
we had a fight  
don't even remember what it was about  
so I went and got my own place

but him and my mom had a fight one night  
he'd moved back in with her  
so he was crashing at my place

and I asked for an apology  
'cause he used to

you know that game of what if  
well I keep thinking about it  
this was one big what if

he used to sexually abuse me and  
I asked him for an apology

I wanted an apology  
that's all I wanted

for the man to say  
I am sorry  
three simple little words  
that's all I was askin' for

he couldn't even  
open his mouth

say them

he used to fill my baby bottle  
full of beer  
get me hammered  
this is when I was a baby

so that went on for a while  
until my mother caught him one day  
they had a big fight over it  
so it stopped but  
I remember

he used to beat me with a belt too  
I remember all these things  
just 'cause you're a kid  
doesn't mean you don't remember

why don't you friggin' say you're sorry  
that's what I said to him  
and he's standing there looking at me  
and I'm not shoutin'  
I'm talking real quiet  
'cause I want him to hear me  
I want him to know

but he's just standing there  
he's still not saying anything

did you hear me  
say you're sorry

now I'm shouting

I don't have to  
that's what he says to me

you're my son Jim  
I brought you into this world  
I'm the one that made you  
it was my right

you're mine to do with  
what I please

that's all he can say  
like I'm a piece of furniture  
like I'm something he can kick around  
throw out in the garbage  
whenever he damn well pleases

don't know what would have happened if  
I'd asked him when he was sober but  
he isn't sober very often

you make the commitment  
to bring a kid up

if you don't want to bring the kid up  
adopt him or abort him  
do something

but once you bring him up  
don't make it a living nightmare  
where you gotta fight just to survive  
where the odds are stacked up against you  
they're stacked up so high  
man you're never gonna climb over 'em

I ask him for an apology

you're mine to do with  
what I please

what kind of a thing is that  
for one human being  
to say about another

I tell him  
get out  
'cause I'm seein' red

he says I don't have to get out  
you're my son  
this is my place  
just as much as it is yours

and I say  
you get out of here or  
I'm gonna dump a pail of water on you  
then throw you out

it was cold out it was winter  
so he got up and left

he hit me with the belt all the time  
he has this tattoo on his arm  
it's a lion's head  
big mane big man  
whenever he hit me  
the muscles on his arm bulged  
looked like that lion was roaring at me  
like it was alive

my mother used to beat me too  
beat me black and blue  
I got pushed down the stairs  
couple of times my mom suffocated me with a pillow  
once I was drowned in the bathtub  
this is all before I hit kindergarten  
and I remember it all  
you don't forget that kind of thing

my parents were alcoholics  
they don't drink every night but  
they drink all weekend  
they drink until they're hammered  
they drink until there's  
nothin' left to drink

they'd have a party  
have all their friends over get hammered

they'd be laughing having a good time  
and there sure wasn't much of that in my life

I'd get up early in the morning  
there'd be all these glasses with the dregs in them  
they're lyin' around all over the place  
wherever somebody happened to be standing  
lipstick stains and all  
so I'd go check 'em out  
drink 'em  
try out all the different ones

remember one night my dad sitting there  
he has a drink in one hand  
can't even hold it up straight  
he's that plastered  
a cigarette in his other hand  
the ashes are falling off on the sofa  
he's slurring his words  
it ain't a pretty sight  
and he's goin' on and on

I hope to God you never start drinking or smoking Jimmy

well you don't listen to that 'cause  
it's not coming from anywhere you know  
there's the biggest two-face piece of shit  
sittin' on the sofa  
right there in front of you  
you're not gonna believe anything they say  
'cause if you do  
you're stupider than they are

'cause it's not like they're even tryin'  
they don't get it  
they never will

what's wrong with this picture

maybe if they quit drinking and said  
you know I used to drink  
I don't drink now  
you really shouldn't  
maybe I'd have listened  
    but I didn't



## pin cushion

by the time I was 21  
I was so messed up in the needles  
it was rough believe me  
looked like one of those old tomato pin cushions  
the kind my mom has

I'm going through a box of needles a day  
must be a hundred needles  
I was in pretty bad shape  
had a friend who  
thought he could do  
as much as I was doin'

he thinks he can control it and  
do whatever I'm doin' in a needle  
he's thirty at the most

and I'm saying to him  
tryin' to tell him  
you better cool it man  
man you're wasted  
you're gonna end up at the city morgue  
your tongue's gonna be hangin' out  
he laughs in my face

and one night he died  
he dies right  
    in front of me  
only it doesn't happen that quickly

*he died* makes it sound real simple you know  
one minute you're breathing



the next minute you're down  
like in the movies

but that's not the way it was  
it was messy and he was screaming

I seen a lot of people die  
you live on the street  
you see a lot of asphalt  
maybe that should be ass-fault  
it's inevitable  
so why should this be any different

only it was

when I close my eyes  
I can still see  
I watched him  
watched him die right then and there and  
there wasn't  
    nothing

I couldn't help him  
it was all happening too fast  
like a movie playin'  
only you can't press stop  
you're in the middle of it  
and I'm callin' his name  
but he can't hear me no more

he had seven brothers and  
I had to go to the hospital and  
tell his mother what happened  
in front of his brothers  
I was scared they were going to kick my ass  
like it was my fault

so I went into the hospital  
there's all these nurses and doctors  
they're running around 'cause  
there's been this big accident on the highway

and they're bringing bodies in  
there's stretchers everywhere  
everywhere's blood  
I can't get the red out of my eyes

got on my knees and  
I'm crying and  
his mother she forgives me says  
it wasn't your fault  
it was his own fault  
he was a full-grown man  
made his choices  
doin' what he decided to do  
nothing we can do about that

they phoned my family and  
said I had to go somewhere  
'cause it looked like I was dying

the cocaine was so pure  
it was killing me  
I was puking my liver out

they took me to my mom's house  
drove me there  
my mother let me sleep there for about six hours  
then she told me to get out again

I couldn't tell his family  
I couldn't  
I couldn't tell them what I seen  
couldn't tell them

I watched his brain hemorrhage

you can't tell nobody  
no one wants to hear something like that  
so you gotta keep it all inside  
and after a while it starts to drive you crazy  
you don't know what to do with  
    what you're remembering

even if you did try to tell somebody  
it wouldn't help  
'cause all the pictures  
they're still hiding in your head  
they're deep inside the caves  
and you know you're never gonna forget  
as long as you live

there's nowhere to put those pictures  
you can't glue them in any photo album  
put a date on them  
you wanna cut those pictures right out of your head  
but there's no way you can

it's not like you see them all the time  
but you'll be in the middle of doin' something and  
there they are again  
you forget what you're doin'  
and you're right in the middle of it again  
it's like one of those nightmares you have when you're sleeping  
like you're trying to telephone someone  
but there's no answer  
or the telephone's broke and you know  
you've had this dream hundreds of times before  
and you're gonna have it hundreds of times again  
only this time you're not asleep  
you're awake and you can't get away from it

and maybe you're sittin' on the grass in the sun  
you're minding your own business  
and all of a sudden  
that's when it comes back  
you remember everything  
and there's no place for what you're remembering  
feels like your brain's splitting inside  
'cause you're doing your damndest to figure it all out  
tryin' to make sense of everything  
and you're thinking  
I should be dead too  
and this is all a big joke

his eyes exploded  
this is something you never want to see in your life  
a man die like that  
all the blood  
a man who's scared  
he's so scared  
he's out of his mind

I'm in shock  
but I'm so high so wasted that  
I don't even realize it's actually happening

and I was still in shock  
sitting there talking to myself and  
I went literally crazy for thirty days  
sitting there on the concrete curb by the road  
near the restaurant  
near where I'd lived  
didn't talk to nobody  
not eating not sleeping  
just sitting there

because of what I seen  
what I was forced to see

not even my mother  
she couldn't talk to me

I didn't acknowledge anybody  
was too burnt out

you're sitting there but  
you don't feel like doing anything  
you can't even force yourself to move  
there's nothing  
it's all a big nothing

you're just kind of sitting there in the world  
and the world's all around you  
all the people the cars the trees the pigeons the flies  
you're looking at the world but

you're not really part of it all  
you're somewhere else

so I'm sitting on the sidewalk  
I stay up  
I don't sleep  
traffic going by  
    I can't sleep  
people try to give me money and buy me food  
they see me sitting there on the street

there are nice people out there  
they were kind

I'm sitting there for a long long time  
just looking down at grey  
looking down at the sidewalk  
one day at a time

I'm not thinking about nothing  
it's like you've fallen off the truck into the ditch  
and everybody else is whizzing by you  
nothin' stops

finally I say  
no way man not me  
I'm not doing this no more  
    forget it  
I'm gonna help myself

that was the big plan  
I'm gonna help myself

## betrayed



by the time I was 22 or 23  
decided to move in with one of my brothers  
we had this one-bedroom on Jarvis  
I used to sleep on the sofa  
had a hot-plate for cooking  
not that there was ever any food  
mice got to it before we ever did  
or the cockroaches  
make themselves right at home

we started doing drugs together  
pills and things  
and I was stealing things  
left right and centre  
doin' whatever I had to  
breaking into people's cars  
robbing motor homes  
breaking in the windows of stores  
kicking in the front window  
grabbing whatever I could get and  
running real fast  
that's how fast I could run

I didn't give my brother nothing  
'cause he wasn't doin' any of the work  
he just wanted to have the money and split  
yeah he wanted everything I had  
but I wasn't givin' it to him and  
he got pissed off  
so pissed off that  
he phoned Crime Stoppers on me  
they gave him a couple hundred bucks to  
testify against me in court

brother against brother  
all over a few drugs  
that's how deep we were in  
we were up to our armpits in shit  
we were that deep

and when it gets to that point  
you think you're never gonna crawl out of it  
you got a record longer than from here to Lake Ontario  
let's face it  
nobody's gonna listen to you  
nobody's gonna believe you  
so you're the dregs  
you're whatever the cat dragged in

so I fought it for 18 months  
while I was in jail I fought that case  
I fought that case  
fighting and fighting and fighting  
sayin' over and over  
I'm not guilty

what a line  
I'm not guilty  
'cause of course I was guilty  
but if I was guilty so was he  
only Mr. Goody-Goody was tryin' to pretend  
as if he didn't know nothin' about nothin'

they wouldn't let me out on bail  
and guess why  
'cause my brother told them I'd come after him  
probably true by the way

I had it all figured out  
I had all the time in the world to figure it out

so at my trial he shows up  
goes through his statement  
then he says he lied  
that's my brother for you

I plead guilty to fraud and  
they throw everything else out  
I end up with 14 days  
but I've already done 18 months  
so I get out

betrayal's a strange thing  
it's kinda like a big snake  
it's got a grip on you  
like a python  
or one of those boa constrictors  
squeezes everything out  
suffocates you until everything's dead  
except the rage isn't dead  
    my own brother  
it's in your heart and  
you wanna scream

my brother invited me to his house for dinner  
bygones are bygones  
I had dinner  
it was a nice dinner  
roast beef potatoes peas good gravy  
ice cream and pie for desert

then I stabbed him five times with a kitchen knife  
put him into intensive care for six months  
he could have charged me  
he never did  
he never told them I did it

I went into the subway  
phoned my other brother said  
look this is what I just did  
I'm gonna jump in front of the next train and  
he said please don't and I cried  
sat on the floor in the subway station for an hour  
watching the mice run back and forth on the tracks  
and there's this one rat  
it's got a bent tail



all I did was cry  
people thought I was crazy but  
I was facing death  
didn't care no more  
didn't have anybody to turn to  
nobody

so I went to my father's place  
turned on the gas on the stove  
blew out the pilot lights  
went to sleep

my mother came  
shut off the friggin' gas  
let me sleep

I woke up and I thought  
damn I couldn't even do that right

stayed at my father's by myself for about a month  
he was back with my mother  
I had no food no money no cigarettes nothing  
couple cans of soup in the cupboard  
the mouse turds were rattling around  
that's all there was in those cupboards

one morning I phoned my mom said  
I'm going to come and get ten dollars  
so I can eat and get some cigarettes and  
she said okay

then I messed up again  
yeah that's me  
one big screw-up

started smoking cocaine again  
stopped using needles  
started using crack and ever since then  
I've been using crack  
until about six or seven months ago

it's harder to get off crack  
the high made me feel loved  
made me feel good  
made me want more

I'm living in my dad's place  
I'm living on the street  
I'm at the men's shelter but  
I've punched out so many staff  
so many by then  
I'm banned from Social Services  
I'm banned from MacDonald's  
I punched out one of the guys  
behind the counter there

I kept screwing up  
see all these scars  
every single one of them  
it comes with a story  
just like every single one of these tattoos  
means something

I keep making mistakes

these tattoos  
they'll go to the grave with me  
there's no erasing the past

I sold cocaine  
I did cocaine  
I had 131 convictions to my name  
with drugs and violence

there was more time in jail than out  
in and out in and out in and out  
the most I was out was 21 days at a time  
I couldn't even be out one day  
that I didn't have to stab somebody or  
I didn't have a fight or  
I didn't use cocaine

and I'd had enough  
couldn't go to any hostels 'cause  
I had so many enemies  
and I'd had enough being scared  
running from all these people

## dust in the wind



what if my life was different

what would it be like to have a  
stable family  
all those things I've never had  
all the things I ever wanted

home  
not a word I use too much

ended up on the street  
'cause I chose to be there

you're making choices  
but where's the options

you got this deck of cards  
somebody hands you these cards  
that's what you gotta play the game with  
those are all the cards you'll ever get my friend  
but you gotta remember there's a joker in there  
and he plays or not  
rules or no rules

so I ended up on the street  
right here in Toronto  
right here in this rich country  
this democracy  
and yeah you got the opportunity  
you can do anything you set your sweet little heart on

if you're in some other country  
maybe you're broke  
maybe you're poor  
you can't go to school  
you can't get work  
you have no choice  
you're gonna stay like that the rest of your life  
there's where you have no choice

unless you're sick  
unless you don't know how to get help  
you can live right here on skid row in Toronto  
you can get ahead  
you can become a millionaire  
that's what they say  
if you wanna get a job move on  
there's courses you can take  
do it

but me  
I kept screwing up  
over and over and over again  
one big screw-up  
only I didn't care  
I was addicted  
and what did I do with my money  
I smoked it all

no dreams no plans  
no nothing in the cards

end game

people who don't wanna help themselves  
don't wanna get any medical help  
don't want to stay clean  
and it's not just *they*  
it's *me*  
'cause I never tried to help myself

once you become an addict  
you're an addict for the rest of your life  
it's a sleeping dragon  
don't wake it up  
you tiptoe around  
you whisper  
you hide  
you hope that dragon doesn't open its big ugly eye

if you go back out there  
have another toke  
everything happens again  
it'll just repeat itself  
twice as hard  
twice as fast  
best friends turn on best friends  
can't trust  
    nobody

you gotta understand the drug  
gotta understand the addict first  
you can't trust an addict

smile at you  
stab you in the back

I gave up on hostels  
too many enemies  
they were all around me  
waitin' to jump

the real truth  
I was barred from all these places  
I was a threat to staff  
was a threat to everybody  
I'd walk in the door  
pick a fight  
didn't care if it was staff  
I didn't care  
lay one hand on me  
one push one shove

anything would set me off  
like a firecracker

so there was nothin' else for it  
started livin' back outside  
built a lean-to from an old pool table  
down by the viaduct  
put one of those blue tarps over it when it rained  
you could crawl underneath  
found a mattress dragged it in there

was camping out there with this woman for a while  
'til she left for Vancouver  
that's where she was from  
her name was Martha  
she had a tattoo a beautiful one too  
covered up her whole chest  
she'd had cancer  
tattooist he did a whole garden on her chest  
took 'em weeks to finish it  
there was even a bumblebee in there somewhere  
hid all her scars

we had a radio out there  
we even had an old TV  
ran on batteries  
listened to the news every night

in the winter it used to get real cold and rainy  
stayed in a friend's car  
put an extension cord out to the car for a heater  
had some old blankets  
used to get free coffee from the neighbourhood café  
they were kind people there

one night I was eating one of those  
all-you-can-eat spaghetti dinners  
Fran's Restaurant on College  
hadn't eaten in a couple of days  
I just heaped my plate up  
man it looked like a mountain  
there was garlic bread too

I'm in there eating my spaghetti and  
there's this guy sitting at a table beside me  
looks like a trucker  
he's wearing the blue shirt the blue pants  
he's hitting it up with the waitresses  
shooting the shit and talking

turns out his name is Guy  
only he pronounces it the French way  
we get to talking he finds out  
I'm looking for work need a place to stay  
and he says  
today's your lucky day man  
'cause we're lookin' for another guy  
need help with loading and unloading stuff at  
this trucking company where I work  
and I say  
bingo

Guy gives me his address  
tells me I can crash at his place  
for a couple of days  
he's got a spare room  
wait until I find a place  
and everything's good  
so I arrive at his place that night with my stuff

walk into his place  
it's got orange shag carpet orange walls  
and I don't mean pale orange  
those walls are orange like oranges  
there's a bunch of knives and swords hanging on the wall  
some of 'em look pretty old  
he must be into antiques  
there's big stuffed birds all over the place  
there's an elephant leg footstool  
snakeskin hanging on the wall  
that snakeskin must be nine ten feet long  
all these dead things are startin' to creep me out



and there's these tattoos all over his walls  
at least that's what they look like to me  
they're stuck-on green vinyl or whatever  
these wild vines growing all over his wall  
like he's in a jungle or something  
only they're shiny like poison ivy and  
they're starting to peel off the wall

something's wrong I can smell it  
and he's looking at me funny  
now I'm getting really creeped out

and you got it  
it turns out it's a scam  
there's no job  
at least not the job  
he was tellin' me about

he's no trucker either  
he's lying  
deal is Guy wants me to *keep house* for him  
him in his blue silk kimono or  
whatever it is he's wearing

here's the deal  
for room and board  
he wants me to share his bed

I don't even stick around long enough to  
say goodbye  
just long enough to tie him up  
pocket one of his knives  
woulda liked to scoop a sword too  
only it's a little obvious  
not easy walking down the street with a sword  
not these days

it's too bad 'cause  
there's a nice one  
a saber it has that long curved blade  
real fancy handle

with a lion on it holding a crescent moon  
these Latin words under it  
PATIENTIA ET SPE

he told me it was a British cavalry officer's saber  
he was bragging  
bought it an auction for six thousand bucks  
WITH PATIENCE AND HOPE  
that's what the Latin says  
patience and hope  
good thing to keep in mind  
for somebody who has the time

but the fact of the matter is  
this guy hit on me  
so I tie him up  
take his cash

invite someone home  
gotta think twice  
you gotta think twice

anyway I'm outta there  
head back to my ravine  
hope no one else has moved into the shack  
it's still there

you know I've only had two or three friends  
in my entire life  
everybody else they're just dust in the wind

a friend is  
someone who doesn't care what you wear  
doesn't care what you look like  
doesn't care how you act  
a true friend is there for you  
whether it's just to talk  
just to walk  
just to stare at each other  
someone to get pissed off at  
then turn around they'll say  
it's okay Jimmy

I remember seein' guys come outta jail  
these big tough guys  
a lot of 'em end up dead  
no matter who you are  
no matter how big you are

I seen a big guy pick a fight  
he tries to rough up some small guy  
small guy knifes him right then and there  
big guy bleeds to death just like that  
nothin' nobody can do  
watch out or  
you'll get the knife too

don't matter if you're a woman or a guy  
you end up getting done in  
killed  
you live by the sword  
you die by the sword  
I seen a lot of that

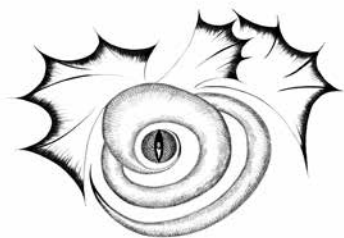
gotta change my ways  
spend my whole life lookin' behind  
like living backwards  
I'm living life lookin' behind me all the time  
thinking someone's gonna jump me

one day I'm watching re-runs of *The Beachcombers*  
you know that old TV show from the seventies  
and I'm thinking  
why don't I go out there

one day I just up and  
hitchhiked to Gibsons Landing  
only took me 13 days to get there from Toronto  
saw where they shot the movie  
same restaurant it's all there right beside the wharf  
that big yellow sign says  
*Molly's Reach* all lit up and *welcome back!*

so I camped by the side of the road ate in the hostels  
people gave me money out of the goodness of their hearts  
then I'd get fed up  
move on  
go somewhere different  
Edmonton Calgary Saskatoon Winnipeg  
wherever





fresh

best friend I ever had  
he was my street brother  
just somebody I met  
his street name was Fresh  
met him in one of the hostels downtown  
he was standing in line

we were all standing in line  
in the rain  
waiting for the doors to open for dinner  
all the regulars are there  
Geoff he's got a hook for a hand  
there's Buddy always good for a cigarette if you need one  
if you don't mind the fact he stores 'em in his underwear  
and there's this new guy  
only he looks too young to be on the street  
he's laughin' and jokin'  
tellin' all these dum rain jokes  
I mean they were plain stupid

there was this beautiful female raindrop  
what did the male raindrop say to her  
*I'm falling for you*  
that kind of stupid little joke  
but everybody's laughin'  
and we don't care if we're standing in the rain  
gettin' wet

or where do clouds go to the bathroom  
*anywhere they want*

that's a funny one 'cause when you're homeless  
you're always lookin' for a place to piss  
when they've shut down all the public latrines  
so there's nowhere *to go*  
can't go to a restaurant unless you buy somethin'  
so everyone just ends up going in the back lane  
*piss-ass corner* we call it  
'cause that's where everyone pisses

you'd think it'd be simple wouldn't you  
it's kind of a basic human dignity  
if you ask me  
it's obvious  
everybody needs to pee

up until he died  
for two years Fresh and me  
we were like Siamese twins  
we were inseparable

Fresh died

he was hit by a streetcar  
he was my street brother

we were very  
    very close  
we were like  
well we were inseparable  
we did everything together  
except for have sex with the same woman  
except for showering together and stuff like that  
but other than that  
we did everything  
and for two years  
up until he died  
you'd never see one of us without the other

that Fresh  
never seen anyone who loved duct tape so much  
nothing like a new roll of duct tape  
waitin' to be used

Fresh says that's what holds the world together  
uses it to hem his pants make a wallet  
fixes a broken plate it makes pretty good fly paper too  
one of his shoes looks like it has a flapping mouth one day  
he patches that hole with duct tape  
uses it for a splint when he breaks his baby finger  
patches a broken cigarette  
nothing duct tape can't do  
man he even tapes his fingertips on a job  
avoids leaving any fingerprints  
that's Fresh

can't look at duct tape no more  
not without thinking of Fresh

stupid thing is  
I never asked him why he was on the street  
how he came to the street  
thought when it was time  
he would tell me  
    only the time never came  
never told him about my life either

for the first time  
I was trying to take care of myself  
was trying to get a new place  
you know start over  
get a life  
make some plans  
have a future  
was trying to  
I was really trying

and when my brother needed me  
and I don't use the word brother loosely  
when my brother needed me the most  
when I should've been there  
if I'd been there

but I was too damn busy worrying about myself  
and that's what happens



you think you're doin' one thing  
but actually you're doin' something else  
it's all spilled ink

for the first time in my life  
I was taking care of my needs  
at least that's what I was telling myself  
and

he died

and now I'll never know  
he never even had a chance  
he was young  
he was only a year older than I was  
we both looked alike  
dark hair cut short  
we both had a moustache  
only Fresh had freckles  
made him look like a kid  
guess that's why everyone called him Fresh

his legal name was Evan Frobisher  
but no one called him that  
that's not who he really was  
that was a name his parents gave him when he was born  
but I don't think  
he hadn't seen them in years  
that's the kind of name you only see on paper  
when no one actually says it  
it's a dead name

talked to Fresh that night  
the night it happened  
he told me  
I'm coming over to see you Jimmy  
got a great piece of news  
man have I got a good piece of news for you  
you won't believe this

he wouldn't say what it was over the phone  
want to see your face when I tell you  
that's what he said

it's a secret  
it's a good piece of news Jimmy  
this'll make your day

well he never made it  
so whatever it was  
it's a secret now

he was dead  
he was drunk when he died  
he'd been beaten  
robbed  
left in the middle of the street to die  
it was winter  
a big snowstorm

read about it in the newspaper  
that's how I found out  
had to read about it in the newspaper  
only they didn't spell his name right  
you'd think they'd get that much right wouldn't you  
that's the least they could do  
for God's sake  
at least spell the man's name right

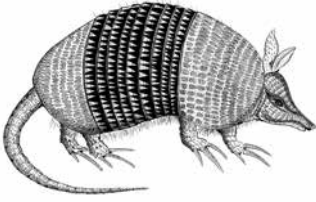
whoever did  
whoever the bastards  
left him in the middle of the street to die  
all by himself

streetcar driver didn't even see him  
it was snowing too hard

nothing to mark his passing  
and you know what  
he had a roll of duct tape in his hand  
right up to the end

got two tattoos  
that big dragon on my back  
and this one on my baby finger  
this one's for him too  
it's real small  
    FRESH  
so I'll remember

always liked the word fresh  
it's new  
clean  
original  
the one and only



scuttlebutt

you know I can look at homelessness two ways  
look at it as the ignorance of a society that  
doesn't really want to do anything or  
    help the homeless

heard about Guatemala what they call *social cleansing*  
makes it sound like some hand sanitizer doesn't it  
get rid of the germs  
they have these squads they even have business cards  
go around killing young kids living on the street  
you know the undesirables  
well we don't do that here  
not in this country

we just take a longer time doing it  
'cause if you stay on the street  
you're gonna die sooner rather than later

and you can go ahead  
make all your pronouncements  
make all your plans  
make all your reports  
how the government's gotta do something

or you can go ahead look at homelessness as  
    the ignorance  
of the person who doesn't want to do anything  
    for themselves

every homeless person has the right  
if they have  
    the determination  
    the willpower  
    the guts  
to get off the street  
that's the line  
that's what they tell you  
that's what society believes

but you know what  
society has made the streets what they are  
because if society cared  
cared about what was happening on the street  
instead of turning a blind eye  
then maybe the streets wouldn't be so bad as they are  
with all the muggings stabbings rapings

and yeah there's a lot of bullshit goes on  
you'll find that everywhere in the world  
everybody talks too much  
everybody has problems  
you have to deal with your own problems  
instead of squattin' on somebody else's doorstep

my philosophy is  
you can walk around a pile of shit so many times  
don't get involved in that pile of shit  
but if you stick around it too long  
eventually you're going to step in it  
there's no way muk is luk  
sure as hell  
you're gonna get  
back into the drugs  
back into the bullshit  
back into the violence

I'm not going to  
I'm not gonna step  
in that pile of shit  
again

I had to learn what was right by myself  
nobody taught me  
learned what was right myself  
now I know what love is  
what hate is  
what pain is  
what sorrow is  
what death is

maybe others can learn from my life and  
things I been through

but I need to help myself  
before I can help anyone else  
have to take it one day at a time  
hopefully this new place I got  
it'll be my big giant stepping stone  
so I can get my life back in order

don't want to rush

been volunteering at a couple of churches  
at the Yonge Street Mission too  
with some of the young people  
there's this group of kids  
came in from Guelph  
maybe 16 years old

thought I could share a little bit of  
my life  
what I been through

you don't want to be on the streets  
like me  
all my life what I've been through  
even stabbing my own brother  
losing my street brother  
I told them everything  
didn't spare the details  
thought they should know  
they should know

maybe it'll help somebody if I tell them

hope I don't mess it up now  
'cause the whole thing can blow apart  
just like that  
yeah I need to help myself  
before I can help somebody else

learned something  
from an old man named Edward  
he said to me  
take the cotton out of your ears  
stuff it in your mouth you talk too much  
you think you know everything don't you  
but when you've been alive as long as I have  
and this is what else he says to me

used to think I had so many friends  
everybody was my friend  
but they were all criminals  
they weren't my friends  
and then he says to me  
I'm ninety-four years old now

he was ninety-four years old  
his hands they had tremors  
his eyes were all watery  
he was in no great shape  
so this guy's ninety-four years old  
he's in jail  
we were in jail together and  
he says to me

here I am  
I'm gonna die in this jail  
'cause I killed a woman in a motel  
a hooker  
some woman I met at a bar  
it was so many years ago  
I was a different man then  
it was wrong I know that

but knowing it's wrong doesn't  
bring her back to life  
she'd probably be as old as I am now  
that's the funny thing

here's what my father told me  
before he died  
long before you were even born Jimmy  
I don't have any kids to tell this to  
or I'd be telling them what I'm going to tell you

my own father  
he was in jail for thirty years  
they were never gonna let him out  
never

my father told me  
when you die  
if you can count all your friends  
on your hand  
when you die  
you're luckier than me  
'cause I never found a friend  
that's what my father told me

you're born you live you die  
it's easy isn't it  
so how's it get so complicated  
I was born you were born  
we make our choices  
we live those choices

I'm ninety-four years old  
got the Father the Son and the Holy Ghost  
but I've yet to find a friend  
I've never yet found a friend  
just like my father

well you got me buddy  
that's what I told him  
but I didn't have an address at the time



didn't keep in touch  
not proud of it  
but that's what happened  
I would've liked to be there for him

and after all that if I could  
if I could go back  
    no tattoos on me at all  
    none  
I would

a tattoo makes you special  
it marks you  
it's better than a name

but I'd start all over again  
with a brand-new skin  
like a newborn baby  
no scars no marks no nothing  
start over on a whole new life  
    if I could  
no ifs ands or buts  
climb out of the ashes  
that's what I'd do

but I guess no one can  
no one can just  
    start over  
and if you do  
you're foolin' yourself  
'cause everything you ever done  
everything you ever should've done  
you're carrying it right there with you  
inside your skin

what you can do  
    begin again  
you're always at the beginning

I'm a regular walking art gallery  
every inch

and yeah my name's Jimmy Tattoo  
only it's really spelled T-A-T-O-U  
don't usually tell people that  
just let 'em spell it the way they want  
tatou that's a French word  
you know what it means

armadillo

lots of armour  
roll up into a ball protect yourself  
if you don't nobody else will  
that's why I have that small armadillo tattoo  
right over my heart



## epilogue: now

yeah I'm married now  
have two kids  
I'm working in a shelter for street kids

we're building a new place  
gonna call it *A Fresh Start*

don't give up on somebody  
just 'cause they're down  
just 'cause they're out

Fresh he should have had a chance  
I wish he was here  
wish he was here right now  
him and all his duct tape too  
nobody gave him a chance

maybe somebody else'll get a chance  
they'll be a phoenix





# Jimmy Tattoo's story begins —

I'm a regular walking art gallery  
every inch  
that's why they call me Jimmy Tattoo  
'cause of all these tattoos  
it's as good a name as any  
at least people don't forget it  
and maybe that's a good thing or  
maybe that's a bad thing  
depending on how you look at it

Homeless on the streets of Toronto, Jimmy Tattoo offers up a chilling story for young adults in this long poem. A life of abuse and survival...and ultimately, redemption.

Jimmy Tattoo draws inspiration from many years of ethnographic research on chronic homelessness in Toronto.

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**Rae St. Clair Bridgman** has authored several books, including *Angel: Homeless in Toronto* (2016), *Safe Haven: The Story of a Shelter for Homeless Women* (University of Toronto Press, 2003) and *StreetCities: Rehousing the Homeless* (Broadview Press, 2006), co-authored *Braving the Street: The Anthropology of Homelessness* (Berghahn Books, 1999), and co-edited *Feminist Fields: Ethnographic Insights* (Broadview Press, 1999).