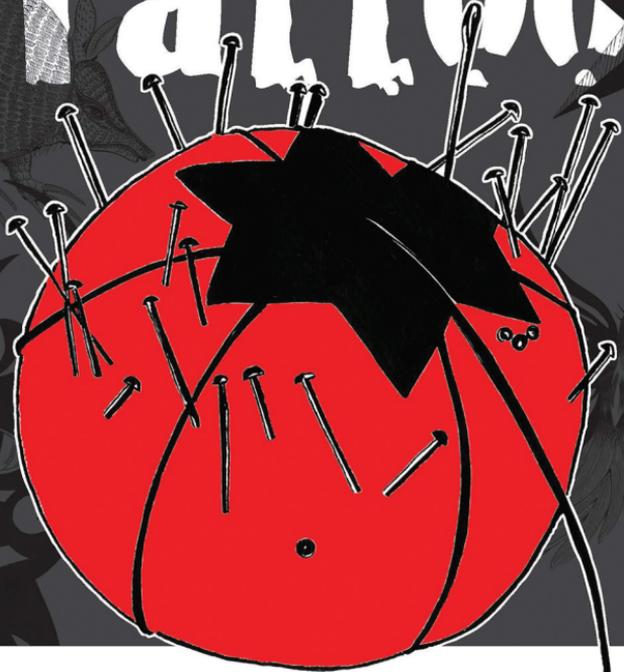


Rae St. Clair Bridgman

Jimmy Tattoo



homeless on the streets of Toronto



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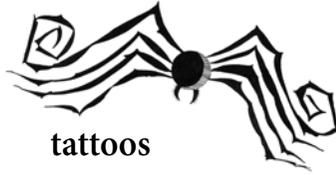
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Thank you to all the men who have shared stories
of their years of homelessness with me

Jimmy Tattoo is dedicated to them

Contents

tattoos.....	1
my gold star day	7
a skipping stone.....	15
luck magnet	21
what the parrot said	25
kicked out	29
leftover donuts.....	35
shadows.....	41
dog house days	43
a black stone	47
iron city	53
s-u-r-r-i-v-e.....	61
end of the line.....	65
almost.....	69
home sweet box.....	73
never say sorry	83
pin cushion	89
betrayed	95
dust in the wind	101
fresh.....	111
scuttlebutt	117
epilogue: now	125



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

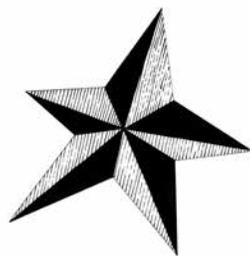
no hesitation
no ifs ands or buts

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

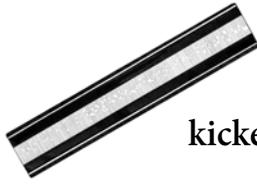
but it's stuck in my mind
can hear that bird's clicking eyes
see its white eyelids
hear that parrot voice

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

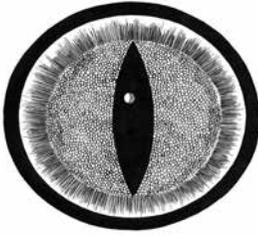
it's weird 'cause I was still using cocaine
I'd stay up all night
use cocaine
go to work every day
did that for roughly seven months
then I got laid off because it was seasonal
six months here six months there
I was like one of those clocks
you know the ones with the pendulum
swinging back and forth

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

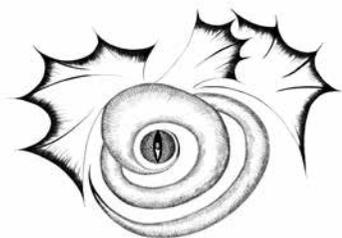
don't matter if you're a woman or a guy
you end up getting done in
killed
you live by the sword
you die by the sword
I seen a lot of that

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

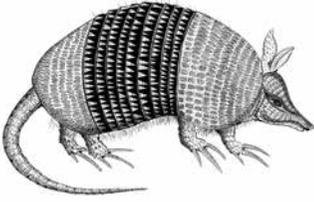
whoever did
whoever the bastards
left him in the middle of the street to die
all by himself

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

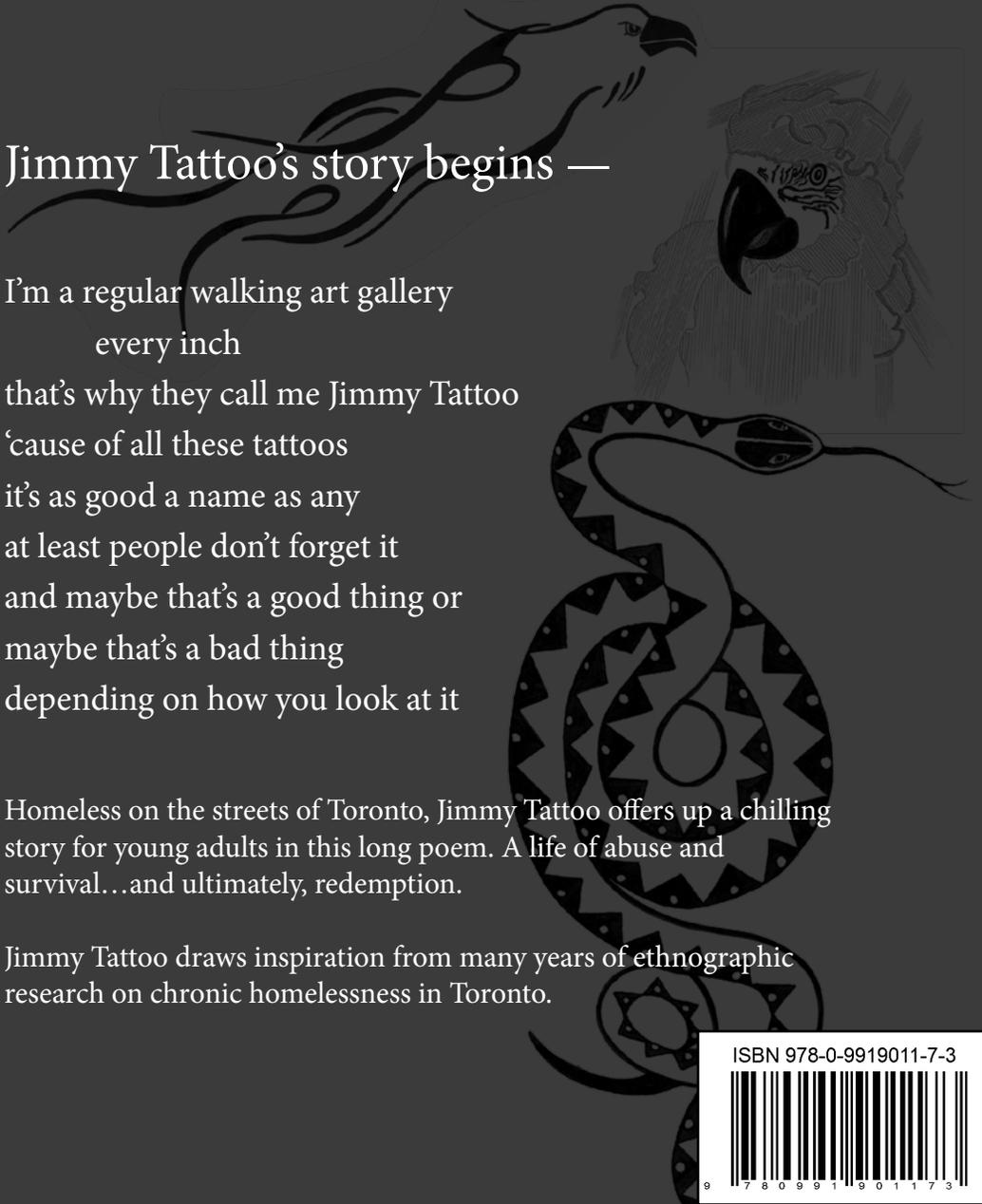
we're building a new place
gonna call it *A Fresh Start*

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).