

Achieving Disaster, Dreaming Resurrection:

Witnessing The Halifax Explosion, 6 December 1917, and After

By George Elliott Clarke

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Sad as was the day, it may be the greatest day in the City's history if we as a people consecrate ourselves to the new and better spirit whose highest expression is true [human(e)] consciousness.

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I.—Precedent

Defiant, *History* rarely gifts us idylls—

not much sweet talk accompanying gun-smoke—

just brusque *Misery*,

sound-track of carping—

supposed heroes harping on and on

about alleged harpies—

the “Injuns,” the “Frogs,” the Yanks,

the Boers, now the “Huns”—

all those insurgent heretics,
 rebellious devils,
 “baby-killers” grumbling numbing mumbo jumbo—
 shabby ranting—
 all damned by fecal, warmongering oratory—
 impervious to disinfectant....

Thus was Halifax—by kingly *Bellicosity*—blueprinted:
 To keep (stolen) “America” British—
 to keep the backbiting Yanks happy, uncranky royalists—
 by establishing a beachhead harbour—
 hill-encircled, ice-free, with an Atlantic inlet/outlet—
 from which to get scrappy with the “Frogs”
 and slash at Louis XV’s overreaching guts
 (already puffed up due to Haitian molasses, rum, sugar,
 and Québécois beaver, and Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon’s cod),
 by turning Acadie into mangy, weedy ruins;
 leaving Louisbourg a prosperity of corpses;
 awarding Ville de Québec a halo of fire,
 then a monotonous, featureless murk,
 lurking—moping over—
 a dingy pile of scattered, shattered granite.

No way to debouche troops to render New France

proper *Extinction*,
 unless Halifax is founded and fortified;
 so the glossy sapphire of that harbour—
 or the corrugated slate of that harbour—
 (the colour of coagulated ash)—
 allows His Majesty's ships to dash or crash
 through North Atlantic waves (year-round)—
 so Jack Tars get spattered by sprinkles
 sprayed from crinkled, wrinkled water;
 or gravity tugs down anchors
 the same way that cut-throats jerk from nooses
 (always the gallows equals premeditated government),
 despite the bamboozling gabble—
 or slick grievances—of solicitors....

At that bicameral legislature cross th'Atlantic,
 thanks to all that untentative tea-drinking
 and gin-sloshing—
Pro-Slavery humbug, *Expansionist* bunkum,
 anti-“rabble” pettifoggery—
 as gilded gentry ogled mermaid-tattooed maps,
 praying to not mismanage *Aggression*
 versus the “Indians,” the French,
 and soon those newfangled Anglos—the Yanks,

the Halifax colony got conjured
 to mirror Hamilton, Bermuda,
 and grant the Royal Navy means
 to barrage “savages,” north and south,
 from Newfoundland to the Falklands,
 to satisfy either Great Britain’s petty instincts
 or buttress the Monarch’s *gravitas*
 so that Angle-land could posture as militarily irresistible
 to as-yet unconquered Indigenous
 “Infidels,” and/or *Independence*-minded zealots,
 or gutsy guerillas like Jamaica’s Maroons.

The encampment of Halifax was the precondition
 for *Realpolitik*:

Edward Cornwallis commanded
 his soldiery to neutralize
 recalcitrant Mi’kmaq,
 by sanctioning their scalping—
 the slashing or hammering of their foreheads—
 dashing out their innards,
 so brains squirted out, looking like custard.

The sanguinary rule was *Pragmatism*:

To turn English Halifaxers
 into Nova Scotian Haligonians,

but grant the Natives no quarter, no room,
 to extend their civilization,
 but either settle down like squatters,
 or settle in as corpses,
 on so-called Crown lands,
 save for whatever stony or swampy acres
 they might be allotted;
 but also stymie—paralyze—
 their spears, arrows;
 impose a killing, shrouding *Quiet*.
 Cornwallis's murderous impulse imported
 King Lear's Duke of Cornwall
 as a terrorist imperialist,
 ethnic-cleansing the colony
 to befit (unkind) Christian Caucasians
 and their "Ethiophe servants"
 (i.e., slaves).

So Halifax matured as a redoubt—
 spiting soft gusts of influenza—
 or sporadic tempests of TB—
 or spasms—fits—of polio—
 or crescendos of rheumatism—
 to bid formidable formations of *fourmis*—

ant-like squadrons—
 construct the Citadel's four-square, granite stone,
 star-shaped, more-or-less octagonal, hill-top
 but entrenched—
 and trenchant—battery;
 to preserve the Red Ensign flotillas from any foe;
 and allow the transplant of German settlers
 outta New England;
 and oversee the muster and exodus of *les Acadiens*
 (1755),
 but also the import of hundreds of Yankee or Dixie slaves,
 to be auctioned off on wharves, docks, or Black Rock Beach—
 to wait in stately, South End (or harbourside) mansions—
 or be trundled to th'Annapolis Valley
 to pack potatoes and apples by the bushel;
 to survey through fog, after fog,
 a harbour steamy as a lagoon;

 then anchored The Scots—*The Hector*—
 landing cleared-off Highlanders in 1773;
 and pursuantly the Loyalists and Black Loyalists by 1783;
 followed by the Maroons—
 1796-1800
 (that's how and when a Jamaican “wench” and Jack Wentworth

conceived—gubernatorially—the Colley clan);
 and then the Black Refugees of the War of 1812—
 escapee, legal stowaways *ex* Maryland and Virginia—
 figured Bedford Basin right pleasant for a south-beach village,
 alpha-ing as Campbell Road Settlement,
 omega-ing as “Africville”—
 site of saltwater spirituals;
 with the regional municipal Mi’kmaq village—
 Turtle Grove—
 immediately adjacent cross The Narrows.

Throughout that sesquicentennial—
 1749-1899—
 Halifax plumped for *War* and even rumours of *War*,
 the city’s big-buck *Business*.
 From here, sallied forth the vessels
 to volley British suzerainty,
 cannonballing down Nouvelle-France, Acadie—
 striving to skewer would-be, Yankee regicides—
 or anchoring—
 in New Scotland, “New Darkness,” “Nova Scarcity”—
 carpetbagger Planters, piebald Loyalists, Black Refugees,
 marooned Maroons, motley Scots, ex-mercenary Hessians,
 plus indelible individuals:

Adèle Hugo (the English-Lieutenant's—Mad—Woman),
 and two opposite heroes of the U.S. Civil War:
 Africadian Ben Jackson—slave emancipator for the Union,
 and Captain John Taylor Wood—“Johnny Reb” naval officer,
 who divagated into the Haligonian *bourgeoisie*,
 after serving cheek-by-jowl—once upon a time—
 with Africadian William Hall,
 who well-nigh singlehandedly manhandled India
 into kowtowing to the Scarlet Empire
 an extra ninety years,
 thanks to his cannonading a halt to the Siege of Lucknow (1857);
 and then Haligonians Major Welsford and Captain Parker
 sacrificed in the Siege of Sebastopol (1860),
 occasioning the erection of Turtle Island's single memorial
 to the Crimean War—
 a twelve-ton, New Brunswick-sandstone lion
 striding atop a ruddy, sandstone triumphal arch
 (a pint-size Arc de Triomphe)
 unveiled in 1860 in St. Paul's Cemetery,
 facing the Lieutenant-Governor's salt-bleached mansion.
 Come 1887-92, gung-ho Billy Stairs
 swashbuckled through The Congo—
 as sidekick to Lord Stanley—
 but pillaging and raping and beheading Negroes *en route*,

and getting a Halifax street dubbed for him
 up in the Richmond District—
 a laurel for his *Crimes Against Humanity*
 (that's some deeper blues);
 and then John Taylor Wood's son
 got shot up—shut down—(1899) in The Boer War;
 which was yet one more *Putsch*
 to accumulate more seawater
 for an “Empire Upon Which the Sun Never Set,”
 and somehow whitewash all the bloodshed that necessitated—
via Tennysonian treacle (sheer drive)—
 asserting, to whit,
 that slogging to Cairo and the Cape,
 or slugging through Québec and the Crimea,
 is merely about dutiful “doing and dying,”
 and not about dragooning the globe,
 dispatching goons to govern—no, devour
 (same difference).

Halifax swaggered into the 20th Century
 as the once-and-future warrior city,
 privateer city, *War*-profiteering city,
 if accommodating also fishers and farmers,
 though neither's ever as lucrative as serfs and sailors,

primarily the gunboat guys—
 eager to consume the rum and grog
 gleaned from Caribbean sugarcane
 (best to distill rum than trade in tea)—
 refined in Halifax—at Richmond District—
 in exchange for salt cod
 (sloped to Jamaica to surface as “saltfish-and-ackee”),
 while molasses spooned onto white bread—
 became “bread and lolly”—
 to sweeten a diet of tea and condensed milk—
 “poor-people’s food,”
 alongside bologna (Newfie steak),
 green-tomato chow-chow, and scorned-like-pig-feet lobster—
 and cod-liver-oil
 (good for keeping the bow-legs off)....
 Anyway, sailors are as fleeting as waves,
 lapping, in port
 (once harboured, watered, fed);
 then it’s anchors up and gone again,
 away from “Jenny” and “Jane” and jade and tart
 (the wholesome, revivifying *Luxury* of perfume and petticoats)—
 away from tavern and pub and boxing match
 (the vertiginous gab and head-knockings);
 and gone their briny oaths,

spat out twixt snuff and/or rum.
 See em gangway off—
 helter-skelter, higgledy-piggledy—
 to one *War* or *Action* or *Ruction* or another,
 chary of *Commitment*—
Piety to the now-long-gone, helpless, useless dead;
 or *Fidelity* to a lover who's no longer fun,
 but just work-work-work
 (taxes, travails, termagants)
 and so jettisoning bastards
 and slipping away from courts, shops,
 accounts, *Keystone* cops—
 the capital, decapitating spittle of judges
 (those unpopular top-hats);
 to pursue ardently some *Distance*,
 navigating animated, unencompassed liquid,
 to zigzag—zesty—always exotic seas—
 rather than be seized, or see one's most precious asset—
Freedom—
 liquidated to bankroll a diamond ring, then two gold rings.
 Better the blank-paper records of *Erasure*,
 of already-gone,
 of cut-and-run,
 than *Surrender*

to landlubber—lawn-and-garden—*Law-abiding Normalcy*.

“*Geez!* No way!”

Better to bugger off, than end up suburban, sluggish,

or lugged off to a bug-house.

So, Jack Tars are unsettlingly restless,

act out nonchalant *Audacity*:

Once they’ve staggered through London Town,

acted blackguards in brawls,

how can they be lugs for housewives?

Iconoclastic icons—

half-pirates, half-playboys—

they can port and sport in the lollygaggers’ ghetto

that’s Haligonian Sailor Town—

blue-collar nook and *sans-culottes* enclave—

and never be glossy characters—

spiffy, given to shining palaver—

drowsing in the coach-houses of Spring Garden Road.

“By Jove, Jeeves! *Never!*”

So they belt out, “Farewell to Nova Scotia,”

in big-ass baritones,

righteously befitting Mens-o-the-Deeps.

(How likely that the *Mont-Blanc* sailors,

once helming the doomed steamer under a Marseille flag—

their home-port as dreamy and derelict as Carthage—
 and stopping by Halifax, N.S.,
 in August 1900,
 fed up with fish, onions, red wine, bread—
 availed themselves of the Bluenose port's distractions—
 all those taverns and pubs that are welcoming wharves
 and docks—
 bedlam bordellos beckonin even odd fellows....
 And, on that call to port, the French,
 could've been able to catch Can-Can—
 or can catches (as "catch as catch can")—
 or maybe tipple jade-tinted absinthe,
 so gutsily explosive!)

Halifax was for the defiantly homeless,
 the wavering chaps, the cavalier wanderers,
 preferring to war, find opportunity to plunder,
 and never hunker down to marriage, mortgage, cradle, factory.

II.—Precipice

The machine-gun black-market roared afresh to life—
 August 1914—
 after yet another desperate *Crisis*

for the Briton Coal-Cotton-Steamship Empire—
 striving to keep more gunboats afloat—
 if only it could afford to
 (for oceans are global)—
 than it supposed Germany could supposedly afford.
 Best policy? Ask the Dominions
 to ante up—
 to tax their citizenry and consign scrap metal to sea;
 staff em with guys who hate real estate
 (too close to the grave),
 but adore royalty
 (somewhat closer to God).
 So, The Colossal War looming,
 Canada scratched together a Navy—
 1910—
 and soon turfed out—
 1911—
 that French-orating, suave-Grit Laurier
 (cos he didn't say, "Aye! Aye!" lickety-split to King "Joygee"),
 and voted in Anglo-spittin Borden—
 that silver-haired, black-moustached Tory—as P.M.
 And once the *War* got going gangbusters—
 Halifax Harbour—
 requisitioned by Great Britain,

enthralled and bossed by John Bull—
 ratcheted up cranes, gantries, coal yards,
 coal boats, cross-harbour ferries,
 stevedores offloading tea, sugar, tobacco, whiskey,
 and loading coal, apples, fish, potatoes, Stanfield's long-johns, rum,
 in casually dangerous, unusually rackets work,
 even if such allowed pleasures of outbursts,
 rum bottles uncorked and hefted from lunch buckets,
 the bobbing of poor-boy caps up downtrodden steps,
 kiddy coolies employed as filth-faced colliers....
 But "wharf rats" comprise the Home Front, really,
 whose stocking of kit-and-caboodle to warships—
 keeps Canuck boys boisterous in France—
 or Belgium—
 serving up doggedly dirty doggerel
 with tea-lashed rum or brandy,
 so the privy runneth over with bilge and crap,
 before lads frog-leap "over the top,"
 and belly-flop—machine-gunned—down.

On the Western Front, cannons brim fire
 slurping out like butter;
 trees exit from battlefield smoke as ash or sticks;
 spy the Gothic chiaroscuro of black mud and pale corpses—

sensually serpentine corpses—

limbless, headless, noodle-like,

thanks to slash-and-burn *Slaughter*.

Number the unidentifiable Goya corpses in No-Man's-Land—

that *del naturale* morgue—

al fresco mortuary—

the sloppy, soggy turf of bled-out cadavers.

Hear this: The sprocket-clicking newsreel footage

dissolves into that *Götterdämmerung Terror*

Wilfred Owens stutters in brutally truthful sonnets.

It's increasingly hard—

exasperatingly hard—

to talk about the thousands and thousands slain—

nay, wasted—

in the medieval mode of this grotesque *Annihilation*—

Adonises gone to garbage—

all the silent heroes now silenced,

all their *Ambition* scrubbed.

To defend the bloody *War Effort*,

Britain had to jail Trotsky—

“a dangerous socialist”

in Halifax's Citadel—

in April 1917—

after tugging him off the *Christianiafford*
 (a Norwegian vessel, just like the *Imo*,
 flagged ironically out of Christiania)—
 to forestall his voyaging—
 New York to Russia—
 to catalyze a fresh revolution
 and crowbar the czar *out* the *War*,
 thus letting Krauts concentrate Big Bertha's behemoth shells
 on the Belgians, the Brits, the Canucks, the French, the Yanks....
 But the Stiff-Upper-Lips cut Trotsky loose,
 and the Commie polymath alighted at St. Petersburg
 to reconnoiter with Vladmir Lenin—
 that methodical firebrand—
 and remake Russia
 into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—
 and free peasants and workers from soldiering—
 in a revelation of *Liberation*—
 thanks to the high-minded, Bolshevik loathing
 for proletarian dying that benefits moneybags
 (although such is Bolshevik cold-blooded playacting—
 given their willingness to massacre
 all dissenters to their Utopia)....

So, this is the “eve of destruction”:

Unacknowledged poets plunk asses—
 and glasses—
 down in pubs,
 strategize tobacco into pipes,
 sprawl out around the fireplace—
 with a knee for a waitress
 (if “darling”—or her hubby—don’t mind),
 and blab balderdash about the *War*
 and/or hockey or boxin or rasslin
 or the cross-harbour rowing contests.
 Maybe some brew-gulping, would-be “Reds”
 are joshing or gushing bout the intriguing “polyanna”
 of the U.S.S.R. “*Kindergarten*,”
 affirming that the Just Society
 must seize power from high muckamucks and pooh-bahs
 and hand it to “riffraff,”
 turn queens into charladies,
 transform tramps into dictators.

 Maybe they also wager on
 who’s really tops at *War*?
 Brits or Yanks?
 And why won’t Frenchy Canucks line up
 to drop dead for the Anglo King?

So, there's just enough of a war frenzy—
 in Nova Scotia's capital—
 to chuff the ("Redcoat") military,
 Halifax merchants,
 and lads itching to combat-test *Courage*
 and sail home heroic.
 (After all, the Johnny-come-lately Yanks
 ain't seen much battle yet.)

Well, alcohol's a no-no aboard *Mont-Blanc*
 (now flagged out of Saint-Nazaire)—
 and smoking too:
 Can't chance a drunk's stray cigarette spark
 from lighting up Hell—
 given this Bordeaux-bound cargo.

Aye, *Sorrow* be the marrow of the ship:*

--12,000 barrels of Dry Picric Acid (worth \$960,000 U.S.);

--10,330 barrels of Wet Picric Acid (worth \$2, 256,000 U.S.);

--4,500 barrels of Trinitrotoluol (T.N.T.) (worth \$216,000 U.S.);

--300 drums of Chloro-Benzol (worth \$59,000 U.S.);

* The *Mont-Blanc* ship cargo manifest, tonnage, and 1917 dollar values are derived from *Fort Needham—Interpretive elements: February 6, 2017*, prepared by Ekistics Planning & Design, of Dartmouth, N.S.

--200 drums of Mono-Chlorobenzol (worth \$45,550 U.S.);
 & 680 drums of Guncotton (worth \$65,000 U.S.)....

(All these cool numerals—char—chillingly
 on snow-white pages.

But who dast redact this accumulation
 of *Conflagration, Decimation, Mutilation?*
 T.N.T. be the preface to $E=MC^2$)

So, Captain Aimé Le Médec (sobre, pragmatic)
 and his *consigliere*, pilot Frank Mackey
 (lawyerly, but likeable)—
 and crew (thankless-tasked operatives)—
 just have to bunk down with taut nerves for the night,
 snore like drug addicts in beds unfurled atop
 3.6-million-dollars U.S. of munitions—
 some 3,000 tons of explosives (golly-gee)—
 (enough smackeros to blow most any city to Kingdom Come)—
 outside the anti-U-boat nets
 (iron chains and steel mesh)—
 promptly plunked down at dusk,
 to ward off Kaiser-class subs—
 hinder any harbour marauding.
 Let the anchor drop down fathoms,

while, on the upper deck, black flocks of oil cans
roost like portly, squat, unflappable crows.

It's a coffin-ship, demonically a dead-ringer.

The good news? Munition ships get to drift
through harbour-regulations, scot-free:

Lest slit-eyes (spies) be afoot,
they can't be flagged as hazards.

Imo is stuck in Bedford Basin:

The coal-supply boat forgot to materialize,
so now *that* Norwegian vessel—
with clothes, furniture, dishes, and food, all donated
to succour the Boche-besieged Belgians
(whose emperor had once terrorized The Congo)—
is stopped, fuming, for this night,
and is anxious to surge to open sea
and a full-throttle crossing to Europe—
soon as dawn's pink sky serves
as the ship's green light.

Captain Hakron From wants to get "to";
wants to get away;
and may countermand or contradict—
in any tentative feud—

the expert, savvy pilot William Hayes—
 to try to get *Imo* clear outta Halifax
 “by any means necessary”—
 at the topmost speed possible
 as his bottom-dollar, bottom-line.

No matter: Tonight’s a nocturne
 that’ll abracadabra an alba—
 solid sunlight—
 exquisite, diurnal *Perfection*—
 that’ll seem to erase any errors.

Hey, one enjoys the sun most
 just as it breaks from shadows.

III.—Predation

Was Cap’n From as vexatious as that chilling hothead, Macbeth?
 Well, *Imo* is kicking up some foam—
 flabby wash flopping back—
 as she steams from Bedford Basin
 past Tufts Cove (Turtle Grove)
 and must almost side swipe *Mont-Blanc*
 at The Narrows (Africville),

which is possible if *Imo* can clip closer to Halifax
 and let *Mont-Blanc* hug the Dartmouth shore.
 Opposing, and closing not menacingly,
 is *Mont-Blanc*,
 chugging placidly—plodding—through colluding furrows.

This Thursday morn, December 6, 1917,
 sultry, soft-gold sunlight—
 balmy like Indian Summer,
 warm like Thanksgiving—
 is no way as frosty as Saint Nick's month oughta be.
 (Feels more like Ol Nick's subterranean furnace-digs!)

It's a workday, school-day, and the blue
 that's sea and sky is promising—
 just as the Eastern Front is not promising—
 but maybe the Western Front will end up promising—
 and King Georgie's cousin—
 the Prussian Caesar (Willy) will finally be carved up—
 willy-nilly—
 like Xmas turkey—
 thanks to the fresh infusion of Yank blades
 into the bloodletting
 (as of October 1917)—
 dudes who can do away with British,

outdated tactics,
 and precociously copy the Canucks—
 so good at handing the Huns
 blistering, hand-to-hand tit-for-tats,
 to bag body-bag-upon-body-bag *Victory*.

Inbound *Mont-Blanc*

and outbound *Imo*
 shouldn't be at cross-purposes;
 but horn-signalled rights-of-way
 seemingly go unheeded,
 nor does *Imo* slacken speed.

Then both vessels crowd The Narrows,
 and Le Médec's relentless *Caution*
 gotta yield to angina-provoking *Concern*.

A fiesta of blunders is inexplicably being staged
 as if a saboteur is scheming *Treachery*.

Pilot Mackey also wonders how professional, efficient Hayes
 could possibly back such shame-faced *Negligence*—
 or piratical *Malice*—
 to hurl *Imo* toward a tacitly inextricable conjunction.

Oui, *Mont-Blanc* feels forcibly entrapped—
 despite her rueful, pitiful manipulations—
 to avoid staving in upon Dartmouth shoals

or slewing ashore into the Halifax docks;
 but, in dramatic insult to Mackey's expertise,
 Tom-Hardy-style *Fate* coaxes on *Collision*....

(Impossible not to dredge up the *Titanic* here.

Both *Imo* and *Titanic* got hammered, welded,
 at Harland & Wolff shipyards,

Belfast;

Both ships suffered fatalistic crashes—
 with undue speed a factor.

Victims of obliterated Richmond got to be buried
 alongside victims of swamped *Titanic*,
 whose tombstones—pallid mirrors—mark
 a more prodigiously prestigious *Catastrophe*....)

The fleet ship butts where the stalled ship noses.

Mont-Blanc drifts more-or-less dead-in-the-water

when *Imo* smacks-cracks-smashes-crashes

bow-to-hull—

Norway smucking France—

so to speak;

even then, there's still a chance

to dodge the local holocaust

that's been plotted for Europe's battlefields.

To stave off *Concussion* conceiving *Percussion*.

But!

Imo reverses itself, to allow for review

of damage and *Fault*,

repair of damage and rebuke of *Fault*.

Imo's retro motion sets metal grinding against metal;

sparks shoot into instant, incendiary life.

(Then again, *Sin* and *Crime* are irreversible.)

Friction between metal plates—

the fusion then fission of the vessels—

ignites the fuse of the *War*-lobbed, cherry-bomb afloat

that's *Mont-Blanc*.

8:40 a.m.

The first whiff of smoke—white—

is inexcusably delicate—

like what elects a Pope.

Outta benzene barrels, mono-chlorobenzol seeps, wafts,

begins to act as Frankenstein *Science* expects:

To ignite—and go black

(and never go back).

The *Mont-Blanc* crew dreads their cargo—

“It’ll erupt in a flash”—
 and Le Médec and Mackey gotta say,
 “Save your souls,”
 and the sailors “scatter like rats”—
sure, rowing like devils for the Turtle Grove shore,
 but not before trying to alert—alarm—
Imo’s men to monkey-mimic, i.e. scam.
 The French and Mackey know an obliterating jolt
 is on the horizon—
 itself obscured by tons of hard-core smoke—
 robust, Heaven-curdling smoke—
 inky majesty—
 shifting itself skyward hundreds of feet,
 so that the *Mont-Blanc* looks like a smokestack fail.

The water slobbering against the hull sizzles;
 blue water goes nigrescent
 where unignited benzene leaks.
 Liquid jabbers; fire whinnies.

The *Mont-Blanc* blaze is spectacular—a crisis.
 Yet, far from the hard truth of *Collision*—
 away from the gashing, gnashing metal,
 and red sparks, yellow flame, and black smoke—

Halifax harbour remains deceptively placid—
 a million, flat cobblestones of light-paved water.

So, the inflamed ship is *the* sight to see!
 No gimmicks or hoopla necessary!

Nigh 9 a.m., punctual salutations
 resonate in Richmond homes
 as spouses trudge to factory or menial jobs,
 children troop to school,
 and many of these cheery, kiss-cheek good-byes
 will prove—unknowingly—final.

But many heads swivel to gape at
 the upward-thrusting, kinky cloud,
 roiling, seething,
 demonstrating an internal boiling,
 venting from a blistering, festering ship,
 drifting toward Pier 6.

Laggard lads—10 o'clock scholars—gawp—
 conventional gawkers—
 hypnotized by streak of flame and smear of smoke—
 the putrid, turbulent exhaust that is this sea-bound cumulus:

Yet, lovely lavender plumes disgorge from the wrathful, aerated char.

Note: The sky's tinged absinthe-chartreuse here

(gangrene, chancre-green here)

or rose-pink-and-chocolate there—

as if one's spying spumoni-ice-cream spirited into fumes.

What's more exuberant than an inferno?

The fire department's hurtling engine, *Patricia*,

wants to somehow squelch the boat-borne fire's

gleaming, belching heart—

lavishly yellow-ochre (immodest as mustard),

grimy, grey, flickering—

under that licorice-coloured, columnar nap—

that more-or-less, pumped-up clumping.

Nervy fire-fighters siren at the plush, charcoal imbroglio:

Smoke-defecating flame amid smoke-suffocated water.

The zooming car's iron klaxon smacks each ear—

hard as the boom of benzene barrels bursting like shells.

There are no soft claps—

just the tintinnabulation of *Incineration*.

Who scamper to concrete shelter,
 seek cold-eyed self-help,
 trundle goods to cover,
 waddle with children to a basement
 or a stronger door,
 or, at the very least, turn away from windows?
 Few ever expect the *Future*—
 save the *Mont-Blanc* crew tugging madly to Dartmouth's shore,
 to throw themselves face-down on soil and grass,
 bidding for a hiding-place from *Apocalypse*.

But Vince Coleman, alert, alarmed—
 taps out urgent, percussive Morse—
 “Ammo ship afire in harbour
 is fixing for Pier 6.
 The hulk's doomed to detonate.
 Hold back trains outside Halifax.
 Guess this is my last message.
 Good-bye boys.”

Yes, *Mont-Blanc*—self-immolating—
 makes Halifax now as much a bull's-eye
 as shells have made Belgium.

9:04 a.m.

Witness the melting ship beneath the smoke-blotted sun?

Thou canst! Glass bits have daggered thine eyes.

Or the intense gleam of mortal-made lightning
has opaqued thy sight.

Mont-Blanc divides as ripely
as a woman becoming a mother;
yet, this birth entails instant, mass-death—
the toll numerically as long as the two millennia
since the *Crucifixion*.

The detonation was vanguard *Desolation*.
Noise gone concrete—
then disintegrated into banshee atoms.

A ramrod blast-wave.

A surface-to-air-to-surface trajectory.

The *Mont-Blanc*'s anchor goes rogue;
tilt-a-whirls naval architecture into avionics.

Its sling-shot flight equals
 a scrappy riposte,
 so ironmongering boomerangs.

(Suddenly, the far-flung anchor plummet,
 crashing through forest on the Northwest Arm.)

Now harbour water clobbers all harbour offices.

Thanks to an unusually gaping gash—
 an athletic gullet—
 an *azzyra-negra* aperture—
 the wash sucking down anything unanchored—
 the segregation of the urban and the aquatic
 endeth.

The harbour volcanoes upward
 as the blast-wave hammers down—
 unfathomable fathoms,
 cratering a bottom.

Imo's too bulky to plunge down
 into *Mont-Blanc's* abyss;
 it's muscled aside, slammed upon Dartmouth shoals,

bogged down in gravel mash, pebbles levelled to mud—
while the *Mont-Blanc* endures
immediate scuttling
by rebutting its existence,
vanishing into smithereens.

The fulminating flash
dismantles the *Patricia*:
Carnage disables *car*.

Halifax slumps amid the bereaving *Siege*
of fire and flood.

Other metal is pulverized,
and, as igneous powder—
like what drifts off dead fireworks—
spiders—webs—space as sparks—
mini ingots spewed from a million spigots—
then spikes lungs, eyes, mouths,
imping on imprisoned roasting.

The very air, a tsunami of scalding metal,
volleys incinerated iron and steel—
hot metal bolts catapulted up,

only to hailing back—
in salvos of spat or flung-down flak....

The molten, hardening iron rat-a-tat-tats on roofs,
and where roofs have split open—
onto floors and furniture,
to impregnate wood and paper
with ember seedlings
(smog-choked butterflies);
or ignite pungently
premature Xmas pine,
so a turpentine reek wafts up.

Already more ghosts than living beings,
undead mortals cook.

Pressure-wave permutations purchase *Erasure*
and *Mutation*—
bulldozing Richmond—
block by block, street by street, home by home.

Where doors have been pulped to molecules,
one discovers bashed-dented-broke-doll denizens.

Fires stiffen, firm, though the overall shape
performs amoeba-like shifting
as houses splinter into inflammable lean-tos—
or smouldering nooks—
bricks cornered by hobbling heat.

Fire—that unbridled insurrection—
incubates bone and ash.

The earth squirms underfoot:
Nothing staid can stand.

Piled with the latest *War* news, newspaper carts—
overturn and ignite;
their newsboys
ignite and disappear.

Windows slip from their frames;
glass fails; becomes wind:
Instantly, two good eyes are as good as dead.
And any surviving eye is a pocket of tears.

Picket fences shatter into spears and impale faces.
Or, off a lacerated body,

Flesh peels like onion-skin;
bones poke through remaining shreds.

Once-incarcerated organs are liberated—
icky—
like yolks from cracked eggs.

See tissue, skin,
cut open, now red-wet through muscle.

Incredulous molars crunch on daggered panes.

Casual Horror is Catastrophe.

North End Halifax's "Sugar Hill" District—
Richmond—is history.

Acadia Sugar Refinery (Richmond), Richmond Depot, Richmond Printing Company,
Richmond School, St. Joseph's School, Protest Orphanage & School, Alexander Mackay School
Kaye Street Methodist Church, St. Mark's Church, St. Joseph's Church,
Upham's General Store, Creighton's General Store,
Halifax Graving Dock, Hillis and Sons Foundry, Nova Scotia Paint Works,
& Oland's Breweries:

All crumple; citizens tumble in bits and pieces—

utterly scrambled up with dreck—
 stubby, bunched up shambles,
 or pointed, stabbing glass—
 or sidewalk slabs, flung helter-skelter,
 dislodging crabby, cranky rats.
 What's not blood-smudged is tar-slimed.

Streets throb; avenues ache.

Like a glacier shaving down a mountain,
 harbour waters disgorge an Atlantic of ruin
 upon Richmond's toothpick-flimsy waterfront.

Upsurged, turgid waves—pincers—
 rip away docks, wharves.

The debris field resembles berserk brambles—
 jumbled clumps and lumps of bricks—
 the craggy gravel roughness, sharpness,
 of *bric-à-brac*.

Scrap-this and junk-that harmonize in a garbage collage.

(Salvador Dalí meets Jack-the-Ripper.)

Clotted wreckage fumes.

Corpses—horses, cows;
 cadavers—quasi-human;
 clog roadways.

Note the dun tint of each done-in body.

Note the done-in tint of each dun body.

Spy Pisan-tower telephone poles,
 all sagging, precarious.

In the sugar factory, machines crash
 hurly burly down through pinewood floors,
 crushing those sweetheart workers,
 fracturing bodies into torsos.

The sugar-cane refiners are bewildered
 as sweetness darkens, turns to tar,
 smouldering.

Households—hundreds—hunker,
 frozen in dreadful *Alteration*.

Carpets sport slime, ash, mulch;
 living rooms feed picnicking gulls;

interiors look chaotic, quixotic,
but then toxic with fire.

Whalebone-bodiced wives become iced bones
corsets partly hold together.

Not *Death* nor *Health*
nor *Injury*
is feigned.

That some lived and others died
proves God contradictory—
or that He hath perfect *Liberty*.

The familiar miracle of *Survival*
is actually unique in each circumstance.

The *Explosion* exaggerated *Caprice*?
To decapitate a baby
and denude the mother.

Or it urged impetuous gestures:
To hammer down a house, punch through a wall,
butcher a leg of its flesh, or torch a dock,

or pummel a school into a shrivelled hut,
or leave a catatonic mannequin,
indifferent to her naked exposure.

Survivor! Grope rump-first over the rubble.

Find your child, find your spouse.

Alive?

Don't hope so!—*if* the living
are trapped in timbered beams
already incensed by coals,
about to spit or roast
flesh caught therein,
and waft the stench of a summer mortuary.

Given the nadir of Fahrenheit
and allied, barometric complications,
minus-zero sunlight heralds the blizzard—
snow sticking like frozen lava.

A strikingly spiky breeze arrives, galling.
Ice sculpts water.

The good—or grace—this frigid gale blows?

To sugar-coat visceral *Destruction*.

To bandage *Wrack*.

Soft, white, featherweight flakes—

sheer, democratic whiteness—

offer all a bleached, lace shroud.

The once-smoke-churned atmosphere pales.

Pick through—pick-over—a blizzard-slathered ruin.

The cool, glimmering, dinner-time squall

fields engulfing ivory, gruff with grit.

At first, blood steams in the ice-freezing temperatures;

Then, it gels into incarnadine slush.

Hands thrust out of burnt-wood jumbles, a charred glut,

clutching at fresh snow.

Punishing ice now contends with sweltering fires.

One bleaches; the other excavates.

Come dawn's strawberry periphery,

the living gonna—gotta—sift

frosted cadavers—
 a repertory theatre of em—
 outta ice-crustrated drifts.

But all hail the arrival of the emergency train ex-Massachusetts—
 medics, bandages, crutches, morphine, iodine, scalpels....

Soon, bedraggled, dirt-streaked doctors, nurses—
 (regard Frank McKelvey Bell, a dude but *feminist* novelist)—
 white coats blackened, blood-splashed—
 straggle from ward to white-sheet-nailed-together ward
 to conduct, principally,
 the staccato work of plucking out
 stricken eyes and slopping em in buckets.

Spy the bobbing, slimy, ocular globes—
 glass-sliced orbs.

The luckiest victims only gotta suffer
 the bitter, stinging *Pleasure* of iodine.
 (But the unluckiest lucky get to perish,
 happy, grinning, doped on morphine.)

Ex-hospitals, out of surgery and if out of danger—

and with stop-start, herky-jerky *Passion*—
 survivors orbit
 like stricken moons—
 the awful gravity
 of black, gimcrack coffins, a
 s gloomy as deceased stars.

(Stop by the Conservatory, that inventive morgue,
s'il vous plait,
 where corpses lay as dark, flat, and still
 as unplayed, musical notes.)

IV.—Prejudice

Where does *Blame* fall?

Where does *Fault* lay?

Whose *Incompetence* lobbed bobbing munitions at—
 nope, let's say, torpedo'd—a city?

Whose *Chicanery* and/or shoddy planning
 beheaded babes in cribs?

Whose *vendetta* knifed the city's jugular

with a spear-like stiletto?

Did zigzagging flares or the Kaiser's zeppelins
trigger howls, thus mortifying *Silence*?

(*Panic* had swamped the first-rank survivors:
Had the German *Foe* bridged the Atlantic?)

Had *Nature* (God) deigned to mutiny against "Man"?

Who was spared?

Who engulfed?

Who materialized, clutching spoils?

Who emerged spotless—

or blackened, bloody—out of fog?

Who disappeared into droopy smoke, frothy light,

and is listed now as "Missing"

that most hurtful, bureaucratic?

Who was crucified upon razor-sharp shambles?

Who felt needles fanging eyes?

Whose feverish recaps of *Trauma* prefaced his/her coma?

Shrill witnesses shriek recollected *Horror*.

They shiver, sigh, shout!
Or whimper, squeamish.

Will Government attend—*attendre*—
such unstanchable, unkempt keening—
and—pretty please—i.d.
the coughing, harrumphing jaws
of the putatively *Guilty*?

The process mandates revolting *Accounting*—
nothing gauze-veiled,
no measures of opium,
just the registering of insupportable *Agony*.

A magistrate's gotta apportion
Blame for the *Blast*.
A magistrate's gotta chase the phantom spark.

The necessity is—
an anchor of facts.

However, bronze-black, gleaming,
that anchor is really a double-axe,
already dividing air—

like Macbeth's premonitory daggers.

(Each line in a law book
is, at first glance, a latrine,
and then, on second look, a grave—
a ravenous hole.

The singe-black marks on a page
are as dark as the humus
(sable churn under ivory crust)—
swallowing up so many now-spectral Haligonians.

Time's now for show-off politicians and *show-me* solicitors?
Time's now for judicial, slapstick Chaplins
(and half-hyena-laughing, half-crow-cawing chaplains)
to strut *Rebuttal* and pose *Supposition*—
to be rancorous, cantankerous pranksters, eh?

Thus, shortly, suds-soused, grousing lawyers prepare
a cache of papers—
exuberant with *Accusation*;
they rally in pubs,
sallying through cup after cup,
so liquor bitingly embitters their quarrels,

to be staged outrageously
 in the glossy-lamped courtroom,
 enacting imperatives of slammed doors—
 if not knife-thrusting for in-close fighting.

They love the decorum of quorum—
 maintained *via* a décor of backroom rum—
 wardrobes of low-key tweed—
 and no inflammatory flimflam (*ideally*)—
 and no excessive silk and gold in ornament—
 to *maybe* not grandstand while people are being laid to rest,
 nor while limping livestock are being put to sleep.

The frilly overture to the swish of robes,
 bang of gavel,
 is a prime ministerial visit—
 parliamentary posturing
 (as congenital as *Decay*)—
 to scatter floral bouquets over corpses
 and deter allegations of constitutional *Negligence*....

When the Wreck Commissioner's Inquiry convenes—
 13 December 1917
 (only 7 days since 2000 died

in just 1 second)—
 the inquest is partly a grisly burlesque,
 for the solicitors can't comfort the tidily, unfussily dead,
 but only try to exorcise their ghosts.

The “Family-Compact”-style lawyers
 (and implicitly the Justice)—
 Drysdale, Burchell, & Co.—
 seem to wanna bully the breathing Jack Tars
 off *Mont-Blanc*—
 and Pilot Mackey too—
 to bear pernicious *Onus*—
 and thus endure public *Opprobrium*....

They charge:
 “Must’ve been your faults—
 that blast—
 cos ya quit *Mont-Blanc*—and live.”

(To snipe:
 That’s the flippant chore of prosecutors—
 to snip away at chronicles
 until *Truth*—irreducible—emerges—
 relatively reduced—

as *Theory*.

Invective gets conjured from *Conjecture*.

All the authoritative hectoring
 echoes Iago's polluting of Jekyll-&-Hyde Othello—
 with tales profoundly doubtful if critiqued,
 but posited as *Probitiy*.)

Each pose struck is a dandy equilibrium—
 and colluding speeches strive to hum.
 This modelled *Accident* requires an aquarium
 where one ship burns like tinsel aluminum.

Accusation is operatic, an aria:

“Why donchas accept even a smidgen—an iota—of *Guilt?*”

But Mackey and Cap'n Le Médec stay the course:

Imo was racin out Bedford Basin
 at bat-outta-Hell-hellish knots
 (nautical miles-per-hour)—
 at a sore speed—
 and proved unwilling to yield
 what it didn't have by rights—

Right-of-Way—

and let *Mont-Blanc* slide through The Narrows.

Yep, the testimony was *Torture*,

but the *Explosion* had been a bludgeon—

and an axe—

so the proffered *Truth* had to be bruising

and/or gashing.

Curt were the competent Captain and Pilot;

smarting was their conviction

that *Imo* had been impetuous—

improvident, impious, impish—

in galumphing reckless—

steaming bullish

(like a government at war)—

through The Narrows,

as if to shoulder aside *Mont-Blanc*.

(They trust that *Testimony*'s steely cut-and-thrust

chisels *Truth* out of Blarney-Stone-solid *Repartee*.)

Meanwhile, preposterous, Xmas-time widows—

and other jobless, viral, plaintive saints—

suddenly, sloppily, spouseless, houseless, childless—

zigzag the courthouse labyrinth,

only to hear asp-hissed excuses,

raspy rationales,

waspish *Accusation*.

Insiders to *plein-air Devastation*—

they're outsiders to the court,

who may view em as impatient patients—

addled, blind, crippled, displaced, ectoplasmic Caucasians—

haunting the august premises

as if by being face-to-face

with the infrastructure of *Law*,

they could conceivably identify *Justice*.

What else can their fate be but *Charity, Relief*, dox;

ambivalent donations, prosthetic eyes, icy detritus;

renegade teeth, inalienable scars, damp cakes of ash;

degenerate muscles, drop-dead-ugly, Spanish pestilence;

raggedy-ass breathing, lungs that act like bowels, bent spines;

cortical nightmares, compulsive weeping, drooling toms;

skeletal remains that could be Mr. & Mrs., expert and apprentice;

skeletal remains that might be mixed up with machine parts;

deranged mutts giddyng, yelping, through anonymous addresses;

frozen-blood-stiffened, creaking bandages, shabby toilets;

vertiginous interments of shambled, mangled, unnameable faces....

But also must come new street names—whitewashing, sanitizing;
 charismatic gardens, Richmond beautified right out-of-existence;
 hydrostoned, Tudored demi-mansions (slated for the unhoused);
 carts trundling heaps of undiminished potatoes, turnips, salt cod;
 Harvard-experimental maintenance of fluid balances in infants;
 scribbled down insurance claims, psy-op spasms of official grieving;
 manila-brown envelopes disseminating manna (usually moolah);
 legislatures distilling Scotch, minting new *Marine* regulations....

So white citizens risk *Anticipation!*

But Africville's Haligonians?

Not so fast and not even half as much.

There are black dead and black-owned, blown-up properties.

But Africvillers' invoices for their parings, their paraphernalia,
 their knickknacks, their left-over lodgings (some now gaping),
 count as *Fraud*—pure fudge.

Any pallid tears allotted now-bankrupt or now-bedridden "darkies"
 weigh as shallow moisture indeed.

Ain't no waterless eyes at all in Kepe'kek

("where the great harbour narrows")—

the Mi'kmaw settlement,

otherwise known as Turtle Grove
 (or Tufts Cove, dictate European maps)—
 realm of hazelnut trees, wild strawberries,
 fiddleheads, birchbark manufacture.

The de facto *Reserve's* been unreservedly ravaged.

And no words wrinkle any barrister's tongue
 to offer any inkling of *Reconstruction*,
 of primordial Mi'kmaw civilization
 beside freshet, beside lagoon, beside marsh.

\$35-million in urbane repair's not gonna get doled out
 to most Mi'qmaw, most North Atlantic Africans
 (Africadians):

Just gotta go beggin, eh?

As if their collision with *Oblivion*
 was asymmetrically trivial.

And Dartmouth's also darkened, appalled,
 by *Mont-Blanc's Immolation*.

(Thanks, *Imo*,

vessel of *Misfortune*,

that's gonna falter off the Falklands in 1921.)

Nivens Street & Shannon Park don't get off lightly.

Rushing to his prejudiced verdict,
 Mr. Justice Drysdale demonizes *Mont-Blanc*—
 Le Médec and Mackey—
 because the *Imo's* mirror command
 (From and Hayes)
 are deceased
 and not available to be condemned
 (unless the courtroom doubles as a séance parlour)—
 and also because Anglo-Canuck *Public Opinion's*
 tilting at *toutes les choses* Frenchy—
 cos Québec ain't rah-rah bonkers for the *War*.

Anyway, *Justice* is seen
 to *not* be done.

V.—Premature

Hymns carolled at the yuletide funerals included,
 “Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past”
 and “Abide With Me.”

(A poet would've pencilled in also “Pass me Not”
 and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”)

The U.S.S.R.-favouring *Reconstruction* workers declared,

“We Shall Never Rebuild Halifax

Unless Everybody Works!”

The humanitarian—or prudent—*Public Policy* wonks concluded,

“Quit allowing munition vessels entrée to harbours.”

But all provisos, programmes, and policies

are premature—

so long as we presume global, socio-economic division—

(Caucasian) rich versus (Coloured) poor—

and premeditate *Mutual Assured Destruction*—

as our “Final Solution”

for all religious efforts to ameliorate

unholy, uneven distribution of staples production—

and *Wealth*

and *Health*.

Therefore, do cite this *Poem* as a cosmopolitan *Christmas Carol*

or as an ecumenical *Easter Spiritual*.

(It's all I could write after a half-century of knowing—

since I was a boy, aged 7—

that *War* blew up my city,

Halifax—as if it were in alphabetical order—

“before Hiroshima”:

Horrified, terrified, terrorized—

fifty years back—

I cringed; I planned for survival;

I didn't discriminate among disasters:

Titanic, The Poseidon Adventure, The Killing Fields...

Calamities were not only history, but Hollywood:

The napalm that inflamed Vietnam

also ripped through my comic-books;

The zyklon gas that suffocated World War II Jewry

also robbed me of rambunctious, boyish *Joy*.

Pain is the universal—evening out everyone:

Thus, on December 6, 1989, in Montreal,

a misogynist shot fourteen women dead

for daring to plan to become engineers.

Disaster, truly, is all of our *History*.

However, now, nearer the grave than I am my cradle,

I will not say that anyone has learned anything
 from the 2,000 Haligonian-dead a century ago—
 or the thousand million world-dead since—
 for, as I speak, atomic missiles are aimed at us all—
 from earth, sea, space, and sky—
 10,000 dreadful munitions readying our *Extinction*—
 to prove that *Hell* is all we should ever know of *Heaven*.

And yet the *Present* is elastic, forecasting *Disaster*
 or *Dream*—

depending on how you'd like it:

“Now” never has to be “Just like before”....

The *Future* is not only a cemetery;

it's a playground, a farm, a garden, a *Kindergarten*—

We can build *Peace*; we can achieve *Justice*; we can *Love*;

and clasp hands and shout out that classic, Negro spiritual—

to adapt Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—

“Ain't Gonna Study War No More”—

No more, no more....

No more *War* gonna be our study.

Amen, amen, amen.