

NO SUBJECT FOR THE INEXPERIENCED

(POEMS)

by © Clay Everest

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“...to write about the *Titanic* a poem worth printing requires that the author should have something more than paper, pencil, and a strong feeling that the disaster was a terrible one.”

New York Times, April 1912

ABSTRACT

No Subject for the Inexperienced is a collection of poems that explores the commodification of disaster narratives in the tourism industry and how these curated narratives influence our understanding of place. Focusing primarily on the relationship between the city of Halifax, the sinking of the *Titanic*, and the Halifax Explosion, the poems investigate how history is experienced and consumed by those within and without the culture, using a range of perspectives and materials. Museum artifacts, tourist brochures, as well local attractions are used to underscore their own commodification. A series of unreliable narrators, such as a conspiracy theorist, *TripAdvisor* reviewers, and a talkative barfly, reveal their own agendas as consumers and producers of culture. Finally, the collapse of a fictional relationship invites a consideration of how an author selectively creates and presents a private narrative to an audience, paralleling the larger public curation of history and culture. Through this collision of narratives, voices, and ephemera dealing with loss, *No Subject for the Inexperienced* ultimately critiques the ethics of ‘knowing’ a past, how history is packaged and sold in the present, and how our own relationships with place and history are influenced by the recirculation of these narratives.

Keywords: Titanic (steamship), Atlantic Canada, Poetry, Nova Scotia – Tourism, Nova Scotia – History, Ships, *Titanic*, Halifax Explosion, North Atlantic – Shipwreck, Disaster Tourism, Commodification.

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RESEARCH

NARRATOR

Sit at the bar,
not by it. It makes conversation
easier. Scan for signs of admission:
plastic tags with museum logos, Hop-On-
Hop-Off-Halifax stickers, or paper bracelets
loosely wrapped around their wrist. Listen
to their reason for visiting: distant cousins,
history buffs on a cruise, parents of university students
up for the long weekend. Tell them
the best donair place (Tony's by The Commons,
not the one downtown); say the food is "right good"
and add a "b'y" at the end (they'll love the local colour).
Let them correct you with the wrong dates
and butchered pronunciation of place names.

Wait until they are about to lose interest
then mention the curse. If they perk up
and ask what curse, you have them.
You are now The Mariner.

Wait for them to take a seat
before you tell them,
"It's a bit of a story."
Decide what will appeal most to them:
White Star ships built to bring death to Halifax,
the mother who died in the Explosion
and continues to search for her missing children,
lovers who tried to swim across the narrows
but were caught in the tide. It doesn't matter if it's true –
only that the story is good and the curse
believable. When you are about to reach
the climax, finish your drink,
look at the empty glass and let them
buy you another, something cheap like Canadian
or Keith's (as a kindness to their wallet). Finish
the story and assure them it's true,
that you read it in a book you made up,
"It's hard to find unless you know where to look."
Shake their hands, wish them well on their journey,
and remind them it's Tony's on Cunard.
Disappear into the crowd on Argyle
and make your way to the next pub.

ARCHIVIST

His arm turns the wheel,
pulling him through the first weeks
after the disaster. Descriptions
of white lifejackets resting on
swells like seagulls or ice floes.
Sailors' accounts: "It must have
been violent." Splintered
deck planks and cabin fittings
scattered among the bodies were
enough for the papers to speculate about
an explosion, though official reports
state the *Titanic* sank in one piece.

He can feel dampness in
his bones, the kind that can only
be helped by warm water mixed
with rum and sugar. The kind
of damp waiting outside to
seep into his body as he walks
the short distance from the archive
to the warmth of home—where
she is wrapped in a blanket, reading,
and there is chicken thawing in the sink.

He can already hear the clatter of plates,
water churning in the kettle,
the crisp strings of Christmas songs
from the radio. He will watch the window bend
at each gust of wind, the dull orange tinge
cast in the sky from streetlights, her reflection
in the glass, lighting candles over the South End
of Halifax before extinguishing the match
with a quick flick of her wrist.

CURSE

Outside, wind stripped leaves from trees
and drove snow into the window like a hammer

against a rivet head. “Three disasters,
all Belfast born, will land upon these haunted shores.”

Your expression changed from tired to excited,
as if the rhyme could make the curse real. I watched your silhouette

on the wall lean into mine. “The first will come in storm,
the second in silence, and the final in violence.”

We were still, listening to the gusting wind, flakes bursting
against the glass. In the soft light of the candle I saw you believe.

CONSTRUCTION

After exchanging “what do you do?”
and “I just moved to town”, where the conversation
stumbles like our friends out for a smoke,
you told me about your great-grandfather,
a survivor who helped rebuild the city.
I told you I loved boats, but couldn’t articulate
why, so I began explaining Edwardian shipbuilding instead.
They used small bits of iron, heated
until they were white hot. They were placed
between steel plates, and hammered until watertight.

“Like this,” I said, overlapping
my pinky with your pointer.

“What if,” you asked, placing a finger
where our hands met, “I were to press here?”
“The rivets would pop.”
“And?”
“That’s how the water gets in.”

COLLISION

The gentle rise of hulls riding swells,
the pop of rivets opening to water, groans
of stressed steel bending in ways
it wasn't designed for. The forceful exhale
of air escaping from below the waterline,
the severing and settling into the mattress
as sleep washes over the twain, stilling
fingers, loosening grips. Around us
lay the debris of need, shirts
tossed away, pants coiled at the foot of the bed,
sheets resting on the steady swell of breath.

FIRST LINES

I.

She ran her thumb over my palm,
followed the lines across and down,
spent time where rope had cut my skin,
where wood splintered and fire burned.
She stretched skin as if that would reveal
a river to follow.
"What's this?" she asked, circling a mark.
"Where Jimmy Brooks stabbed me
with a pencil in second grade
and the graphite broke off under the skin."
She studied my hand a moment more
and placed it on the table.
"I'm sorry," she said, "I have nothing for you."
"What does that mean?"
"It means when you hold someone
it isn't in your palm, when the lights are out,
you don't look with your hands."
"What does that mean?"
"It means on your way out
Kathleen will refund your forty dollars."

II.

I asked the widow for advice,
wandered the forest with a broken
coat hanger and waited for the wires to cross,
walked backwards downstairs with a mirror
on Halloween, and saw nothing.
The helpful gave advice, "try asking
yes or no questions," "wear wool gloves,"
"next year put honey on the mirror,"
everyone else shrugged, made sounds
and kicked at the dirt. "Maybe there's not enough
ocean in your blood." "Maybe you don't really
want it." "Maybe," they joked, "you have no future."

III.

I found my fortune
carved on the ribs of a whale.

Sun-bleached bone
flecked with bits of salt flesh,
traced where gulls pecked meals,
cracks where beaks went too far.
Jagged edges protruding from sand
where tourists claimed bone trophies
for story rooms far away
from the smell and surf.

The scars matched
where rope had burned and wood
splintered. Skin against exposed
bone, where the sand spoke
and the surf was at my knees,
though the tide was still hours away.

HISTORY

If you threw a stone into a pond
you would scrutinize each second,
until the anointed moment, the exact instant
the rock breaks the surface,
and a column of water is thrown into the air.

I would watch the water until the last bubble
has risen, imagine the stone settling
into the lakebed, and wait for the long ripples
to unfurl and reach shore.

FOG

When it consumed George's Island,
we would look for shelter.
It became our little game, get indoors
before the fog reached us.

We would never run, just walk
quickly to the nearest Tim's and watch
as the mist devoured a Hapag-Lloyd freighter,
Murphy's, and Theodore before breaking

against the window. When you moved to town,
you would pretend you'd travelled through time
and were walking the streets of Old Halifax. You'd hope
to find some newspaper that read 1917, to hear

the excited gasps of people watching a ship
on fire. "When I was a kid," I said,
"I used to take the stairs on all fours.
I liked to pretend our house hit an iceberg

and the basement door was a watertight compartment.
The only way to escape was to scramble up the stairs
and slam the door before the water reached me."
"Would you make it?" you asked.
"Sometimes."

LOOSE ENDS

There are pieces of this disaster they don't want you to know.

For example: Morgan Robertson wrote the book, *Futility*, in 1898, almost 15 years before the *Titanic*, about an unsinkable ship, the *Titan*, that strikes an iceberg off the Grand Banks and sinks.

Too many passengers and not enough lifeboats.

Sound familiar?

What you probably haven't heard is that the spiritualist W.T. Stead also wrote a fictional account about a ship hitting an iceberg and sinking. The story takes place on another White Star liner, the *Majestic*, which was also commanded by Captain Smith.

Stead died in the *Titanic* "disaster," so did Smith.

It's there on paper, you just have to do the research. It's called predictive programming. They tell us what they're going to do before they do it. Of course it doesn't stop after they've done it.

Every couple years they'll do some movie or TV show to rub our noses in it, like the season 13 episode of *Mayday*, "Titanic of the Skies." Then there's the 2007 *Dr. Who* Christmas special, "Voyage of the Damned," where a space *Titanic* hits some asteroids.

That was five years before the *Costa Concordia*. I mean, c'mon, they aren't even trying to hide it.

I'll bet you didn't know how many other ships involved in the "disaster" were sunk.

The *Florizel* in 1914, *Californian* in 1915. The sister ship, *Britannic*, in 1916, same year as the *Mount Temple*. Finally, in 1918, they sank the rescue ship *Carpathia*.

It's as if they were cleaning house.

Then there's the *Lusitania*. Before the liner's last voyage Captain William Turner was deposed as part of a negligence lawsuit brought against the White Star Line. Seven days later the *Lusitania* was at the bottom of the Irish Sea.

Of course Lord Mersey led an inquiry to discredit Turner's testimony. Don't even get me started on his role, the crook.

Then there's the recovery business.

They sent four ships into the middle of the Atlantic to recover the bodies of the dead. Why?

What were they looking for?

The Mackay-Bennett left two days after the *Titanic* sank.

Two days!
337 bodies were recovered.
Out of those, 119 were buried at sea.
On top of that, one of the crew members of the *Minia*
disappeared after they returned to Halifax.
What was the White Star Line hiding?
Whatever it was, they must have found it
because on June 6th , my birthday,
the last body was recovered and buried
at sea. There are too many synchronicities.
You can't ignore them.
Someone must have been pulling the strings.

THE MERSEY INQUIRY

Still, they speak my name, remember me
as the greatest obstructionist in maritime history.
They forget I found the Germans guilty for sinking
the *Lusitania* and *Falaba*, ruled that the *Storstand*
was at fault for the loss of the *Empress*. I blamed
the iceberg for the *Titanic's* fate. I recommended
more lifeboats, a 24-hour radio watch, exonerated
Ismay and Turner, the Board of Trade, the Admiralty.

Ships kept sinking: fog, war, bad luck.

I took no joy in examining photographs of victims,
their eyes closed, heads resting at unnatural angles. I did not revel
in listening to survivors recount their memories, the sounds
people make when the last scrap of life drained into the sea,
the faraway look in their eyes before saying, "I would rather not
continue." I was happy when the inquiries were finished,
when I no longer had to see the faces.
All told, 3,828 were lost.

It was a different time,
you have to understand.

The water always found its way.

ECHOES

You ran your hand along the spines,
cracked and red, blue and pristine, the ugly beige
one paperback. There was a yellow
jacket with *Rückkehr zu Penelope* on the back.
“An old boyfriend got me this,” you said,
“he knew it was my favourite book,
but neither of us could read a word of German.”
Your hand continued to drift, “This was the copy I used
for my first book report,” a New Canadian Library
paperback with clear tape holding the cover in place.
You smiled at the memory, “I thought Peggy’s Cove
was downtown because it was on the cover. My teacher
told me I didn’t do enough research so I only got a B.
It was the descriptions,” you said, resting
your hand on the cover, “of the South End,
Grade Parade, the idea of a city where people
could recognize you on the street.
When I moved here I felt as if I already knew Halifax.”

ARTIFACTS

You drifted with the current of visitors who
viewed the displays with quick glances, were unimpressed
with the wreck-wood turned to crib boards,
picture frames, a medicine cabinet pulled from the ocean.

You found me reading Robert Hunston's log
and told me you were going to the washroom,
asked to meet at the gift shop. I nodded, but
was focused on Hunston's clear writing.

I imagined him hunched over the wireless key
at Cape Race, recording Phillips' desperate pleas.
In my mind, his head is cocked as he quickly
translates electric sparks into testimony.

HALIFAX WRECKED: THE HALIFAX EXPLOSION

I

You were fascinated
by your grandfather's watch,
would follow the second hand's journey
around the white face, tracked the reliable,
measured skips between Roman numerals.
Quietly, in a voice below a whisper,
you would number each tick.

You rarely noticed the stout hour
climb from seven, to eight, then nine.
All you knew was you had sat in the gold light
of a setting sun and it was dark now.

In the soft yellow of a lamp, you lay awake
into the night, mesmerized when you realized
the twitch of an hour could go unnoticed
unless you were careful.

You were careful
and watched its slow creep,
like the moon across a window.
At the time you felt a sense of pride
knowing exactly where an hour went.
Now, you want those seconds back,
to spend reading, or playing outside,
asking your grandfather what kept the hands
moving and consistent? Instead, you fall asleep
to the tick, tick, tick of the mechanism
carrying you into morning.

II

I found you in the Explosion gallery
staring at a clock. "This has been still
for almost a hundred years,"
you said, eyes fixed on the snapped hour
and twisted minute where the glass covering
had melted, etching the moment of the Explosion,
into its face. We continued through the exhibit
and you would tell me about the artifacts,
never needing to consult the placards.
Occasionally, I would catch you looking
at the fused clock as if you expected
the hands to begin spinning madly
trying to make up for years of stillness.

TOUCHING HISTORY

You described the seconds before disaster
as you circled the fragments of the *Mont-Blanc*.
The tense moment before collision,
sparks dancing across the deck'
small orange flames growing on crates
of TNT, picric acid, benzol, and guncotton,
an inferno drifting closer to the city, tugs and ferries
rushing to fight the blaze, people lined on shore to watch—
the instant of combustion.
At once, rivets holding
hull plates popped,
steel was torn as if it were paper,
the chemicals an excited child on Christmas.
“Picture it,” you whispered,
“the shockwave moving towards you,
water swelling, parts of the dock thrown
into the air, glass shattering before the flesh
from houses is torn away. You feel the breeze
before the air assails you, and you are far away
and naked, the wind having taken your clothes.”

How gently your hand moved
over the shattered surface of the *Mont-Blanc*,
your soft touch making its way
along the steel, down the shallow bank,
and into the curve at the bottom of the fragment.

Beneath my finger I felt
the pebbled surface of metal.
Nothing more.

HAUNTING

You paid attention to sudden shifts in temperature,
knew where the departed could be caught mourning.

The kids in your class called you spooky
because you wanted to speak with the dead.
Some days you pretended, just to fuck with them.

Your friends from home gave you a Ouija board
when you told them you were leaving for Halifax.
They wanted to help with your research.

You laughed and told them,
“Ghosts aren’t academic sources.”

DISAPPEARED

“Cablesip Seaman Mysteriously Gone”

He magnifies the article and begins
turning the focus until he can read
a name, the date of disappearance, that the lost
sailor had been a part of the crew of the *Minia*,
just returned from recovering victims.
He wheels through days of sports,
weather, classifieds, the shipping news
for any hint of what happened to the man.
He finds nothing.

At home
he scrubs the rice pot,
showers, and watches TV.
Through the night, Richard Elliott
haunts his thoughts.

He dreams of broken limbs,
the unnatural way a body crushed
between piling and hull,
rests on water, or sinks.
How the sailor spent his last days
scanning the sea for bodies like this.

The man becomes a buoy.

SILVER SCREEN

REAL LIFE *TITANIC*

“Why did their dream vacations end up a real-life nightmare like director James Cameron’s *Titanic*?”

Entertainment Tonight reporting on the *Costa Concordia* disaster.

In scenes reminiscent of a real-life version of James Cameron’s film *Titanic*, panic spilled across the decks of the cruise liner *Costa Concordia* last night. Much like characters in the 1997 blockbuster, passengers were forced to watch lifeboats lowered into the water half-full. Some were even forced to swim to the island of Giglio for rescue from the doomed ship. On top of all of this, it has been reported Céline Dion’s academy-award song “My Heart Will Go On” was playing when the cruise ship collided with an underwater rock formation.

The ocean around the stricken liner resembles the Baja studio where James Cameron constructed one of the largest sets in movie history. Unfortunately there was no one to yell “cut” for the people stranded on board the *Costa Concordia*. Some passengers were forced to wait hours for rescue and did not have the amenities available at the Baja studio, where blockbusters such as *Titanic*, *Master and Commander*, and *Pearl Harbour* have been shot. The studio has also acted as the rehearsal space for U2 during their 2005 *Vertigo* tour.

Unfortunately for us, *Titanic* cinematographer Russell Carpenter was not on board the *Costa Concordia* when this disaster occurred. If he had been, we would probably be able to show more than this shaky footage captured by stranded passengers on their cellphones.

TITANIC (1943)

I.

They spoke to the nation in images. Germans shown their new ideal, what rot had caused the nation to collapse after the first war, why they continued to fight.

The Germans wanted to find a way to turn this weapon on the allied powers, the same as they had with *Casablanca*, *Went the Day Well?* and *In Which We Serve*.

The spectacle, drama, and romance of *Titanic* would break box-office records and, most importantly, show the corruption and greed at the heart of Britain and America.

II.

The only glow on the horizon came from film lights casting a sheen across the surface of the lake. At Selpin's command, the model began its journey toward the iceberg, began to settle into the water, and stop when the slow whirl of the air-raid siren rose.

Crew members and soldiers scrambled around the set extinguishing lights, looking for cover. Once they had hidden their work, they listened to the distant rumble of British bombs falling somewhere. Occasionally the sky would turn red.

When the sirens were silent and the evening was still they reset the model and began again.

III.

Extras, sailors drafted from the navy, who were more interested in drinking and chasing actresses, actors who couldn't learn their lines, curiosity seekers wandering into frame, unrehearsed panic spilling across the deck of the *Cap Arcona* (the *Titanic* for that moment), demands for updates from Berlin. Selpin watched his film come apart, felt his career was over, and began drinking. Speaking his mind

about the military, his film crew,
and even the Führer.

His words were recorded as treason.
According to officials, Selpin committed suicide on August 1st, 1942.

Filming was completed three months later.

VI.

A disaster
movie where incompetent leaders
drove the great ship Deutschland
into an iceberg. The film was banned
in Germany, but showed in Prague,
Stockholm, Madrid, Brussels,
and finally Paris.

It broke box-office records.

Titanic wasn't screened in Germany until 1955.

V.

Rusted, immobile, the *Cap Arcona*, former "Flower of the Atlantic,"
stand-in for the *Titanic*, was loaded beyond capacity with prisoners

from the camps. Rumours of high-ranking Nazis fleeing
to neutral countries by sea meant the RAF had a target.

Made to look as if they were getting ready to sail, the SS hid prisoners
below decks. There were no markings to suggest anything but an old liner.

The message about the prisoners failed to reach command.
The *Cap Arcona* was sunk, the people below decks abandoned.

VI.

Scenes of the *Titanic* sailing on calm seas, a tilted engine room
flooding, the stern of the model pointing toward the night sky
before disappearing beneath churning water and escaping air
were the only part broadcast into the living rooms of America, presented
to an audience thirsty for stories of nobility and chivalry, the superiority
of the American character and British resilience.

LAWRENCE BEESLEY: A NIGHT TO REMEMBER (1958)

He told the producers how standing by the lifeboats saved his life, about the sailor who called out, “You’d better jump,” which he did. He tried to describe the sound of boilers crashing through bulkheads, groups of people in white lifebelts still clinging to the rails, voices singing to drown out the cries of those still in the water— then silence.

In passing he asked when they’d shoot the movie.

He remembered press clippings from the days between disaster and arrival, the proclamations that every man from first class died a hero, and any men who survived must have cowered in the boats dressed as women. He thought of the student who asked him how he survived then why.

His grip on the rail tightened at the memories.

It took time to forge the union card, to find his way into the crowd of extras rehearsing panic. He watched the director prepare the shot, straighten his spine, and shout, “Get Beesley off my ship!”

Slowly, the old man shuffled out of frame.

HALIWOOD

I

The mother and daughter had stopped and knelt
in front of a headstone. Holding their phone aloft, they smiled,

made a peace sign, rested their heads on the granite marker.
Later, we made our way to the grave and found “Dawson” carved into the stone.

II.

Even though the Cold War was over
the sight of a Russian ship sailing into the harbour
and dropping equipment into the water was enough
to make people nervous. The curious watched the cranes
hoist and lower submarines over the side
before returning to their days. The only one to witness
the white and orange hulls emerge from the harbour depths
was the delivery man counting American bills
before handing the producer his pizza.

III

“International Visitor Center
1595 Barrington St. (corner of Sackville)
(902) --- ---

The center features new interactive displays on Nova Scotia’s links with the *Titanic* along with a special documentary on the filming of James Cameron’s *Titanic*. Two weeks of shooting took place in a temporary sound stage in Dartmouth and on board the Russian research vessel *Akademik Keldysh* off the coast of Nova Scotia. About 25 extras and 60 support crew were hired locally.”

-Taken from the pamphlet *Voyages Remembered*.

IV

A photograph of my friend’s mother with Bill Paxton,
and her husband. “It was after that whole chowder thing,”
she said, “he looked a little worse for wear,
but was still the nicest man. Luckiest I’ve ever been
in an airport, every flight I’ve taken since
has been delayed.”

V

“Jim would come by every morning before work and buy a couple Crunchie bars. Turns out you can’t get them in the States. At one point his assistant had to come by and ask me not to sell him any more, they were disrupting his work or something. Of course I didn’t. I figured if he wanted them he’d find a way.”

VI.

“Stuck with a wedding caterer in a backwater town, they had some memorable mealtimes and none more so than the evening of August 8th.”

-From *Titanic and the Making of James Cameron*, by Paula Parisi.

Seven drunks who half-confessed, half-bragged that they were the ones who slipped PCP into the clam chowder.

VII.

I gasped when Jack and Rose tried to clamber onto the wood panel I had seen a dozen times at the museum. After the movie, I studied the weathered fixture,

looked for marks left behind by handcuffs. It looked smaller in real life, not big enough for a person to rest on. I believed in Jack and Rose for too long,

never considered that real hands could have wrapped themselves around the edge of the panel. That the wood had been artifact before prop.

THE UNWRITTEN HISTORY OF ROSE DAWSON

She slipped away from reporters and onlookers
and disappeared into the night with nothing
but a diamond and dead man's name. For the first time
in days she laid down on a mattress, falling
onto the sheets in her still wet jacket, singing
"Come Josephine" while tears welled in her eyes.

Those first days in New York were full of paperboys
shouting the latest news, crowds outside the Waldorf-Astoria
who gathered hoping to catch sight of a survivor.
For a moment, she met Lowe's eyes and saw a brief flash of recognition
on his face. That night she ran
and caught the first train west.

For days she watched the horizon. Cities turn into fields,
into cities, into desert. She fell asleep with the gentle rocking
of the train, sang "Come Josephine" each night
while looking at the stars, forgot about water
until someone handed her a glass and said, "Drink."

She found work in the background, eating two tables down
from the stars, switched jackets and walked back and forth
in front of the camera on street sets. Some days she thought
of the afternoon on the promenade with the Melvins
and their camera. Some days she wondered if her mother or Cal
ever saw a ghost in the background.

Then there was a man, a war, the depression,
things they didn't speak, chasing work to Cedar Rapids,
new ways to be negligent. She had her hobbies, the dog,
children and grandchildren who saw an old woman,
but never her. Not until someone asked
about the diamond so she could finish her story.

POINTS OF INTEREST

SIGNAL HILL

Marconi stood here and looked
to the future, saw the electric impulse
of language in the air, over the horizon
across the sea. Even then,
looking to the future, he couldn't
imagine a ship, alone in the Atlantic
signaling for help, or Coleman at the key
frantically warning trains about a munitions ship
on fire. On the horizon,
Marconi saw only the future,
for a while. Towards the end
he became convinced there was a frequency
that held the words of the dead,
and, with the right receiver, he could listen
to the past, hear the words Christ spoke to Lazarus,
the voice of his mother, even the quick inhale
at the success of the telegraph.

ICEBERG SEASON

We spent the morning chasing rumours of icebergs. Following winding roads to the lookouts at Middle Cove, Flatrock, Portugal Cove, where the concierge had said we may catch a berg. We stopped at each spot and strained against the wind until our eyes watered, searching for a white speck against dark blue.

We decided to go as far as St. Philip's before the airport. At the rental place, we shared our disappointment with the clerk. On her phone she showed us growlers off Cape Spear. We cooed at the screen, zoomed in on the white masses so close we could see the grey and brilliant white pixels that made the border between water and ice.

TOURIST POLE

It became our meeting place, the traffic pole
on Lower Water where tourists plastered
their used admission stickers from Citadel Hill,
the gallery, their bright hop-on-hop-off passes,
all carefully peeled from their shirts and slapped
on the pole. Out of habit we would run our fingers
over the slick surface of new additions, try and peel
the faded yellows, greens, and blues from the week before.
We were too aware what they'd left behind,
not once thinking about what had been taken.

COMPASS

At first I thought you had bought a grinder
on which someone had etched *Titanic*.
I twisted the heavy lid and found
they had engraved the date, time, and wreck coordinates,
41.726931° N and -49.948253° W
on the inside. In my other hand
the eight points of the rose, small lines
marking the degrees between each direction.
The needle, the magnetic end painted red,
frozen on North. I tapped the glass,
shook the case, but it wouldn't move.
I turned the N towards you.

NOSTALGIA

Netting made it easy to climb the inflatable slide.
At the top we lay on our bellies, shuffled back
to the edge, and let go, falling like we saw in the movies.

We rolled the dice and helped our pieces escape
their staterooms, collected lifebelts, jewels, and tickets
to the boats before we raced outside to our stations.

We filled the bathtub and placed the plastic boat
on the surface to watch it sink. The model was supposed
to split. It never worked as advertised.

Every morning the soundtrack was on our discman,
our parents played it in the car on our way to Cubs,
we sang along to Celine every night before bed.

Our grandfather's voice told us,
"Do the outsides first." Piece by piece
a sinking ship materialized before us on the table.

Jack, our first pet fish, swam around the broken ship
resting at the bottom of the tank. One morning
we found him next to the ship, just like Leo.

Singing campfire songs about the husbands
and wives and little children who lost their PANTS!
while roasting marshmallows around the campfire.

Uncapped blue markers filled in the pants of people waiting
for the lifeboats. We didn't know Edwardian fashion
trends, had no idea they didn't wear jeans every day.

The poster of Jack and Rose on the bathroom door
in our first apartment. It was two dollars at the Sally Ann
and we wanted to see what people would say.

The silicon mold required a gentle touch. The *Titanic*
shaped ice cubes split too easily, and we needed something
next to the iceberg in our rum and coke.

She sang what she could remember of her song from
her high school's production of the musical. She played

one of the Kates, but couldn't remember if she lived or not.

It was only a loonie for the two VHS cassettes.

There wasn't a home in our childhoods where we couldn't find them on a shelf. It was a comfort to bring them home.

ESCAPE

We had been caught sneaking around below decks trying to sabotage the engines and were detained in the captain's quarters. If we had succeeded it wouldn't have changed anything because we found a bomb under the bed with papers that proved he was a German spy. We only had an hour until it would be too late to prevent the Explosion and expose the traitor.

Though we had not seen them, we were aware at least forty minutes were gone by. So far we had only been able to open the first of three locks that protected the mass of wires and timer. Frantic, we tore open books, turned over chairs and held maps against the light, hoping we could find some clue that would help us escape.

My nervous fingers jumped at the click of the cams as you shouted numbers at me from across the room. We listened for the churning water of a reversed engine, the screech of tearing steel, or oars rowing towards Dartmouth.

Instead we heard footsteps from outside the door, the gentle click of a key moving the mechanism, the voice of the teenage staff member who locked us in the room say he was sorry, but we had been vaporized.

Outside, we posed for pictures in front of a wall with "December 6, 1917" over the backdrop of the wrecked city. We held placards that read "Almost!" and "Exploded!" Our heads hung in mock disappointment at having become the latest victims of history.

On our way out we heard excitable voices shouting at each other through the doors and wished the group in the lobby good luck.

FAIRVIEW LAWNS CEMETERY

-Found in reviews on TripAdvisor

OK we were tourists when we visited. Makes the disaster feel 'more real' and not just a movie or book. If you are a *Titanic* and/or history enthusiast, a visit to the *Titanic* section of the cemetery is a must. I lived in Halifax most of my life and until the movie "*Titanic*" came out, tourists did not go here. After the movie was released, young girls came in droves. Our guide knew the history and shared some of the DNA evidence. It brought realism to the horrible accident that I only knew by history books and movies. Not a tourist attraction, so there may be others visiting the cemetery. We spent a few quiet moments there and said a little prayer. A visit to the Fairfield Cemetery will allow you to say a silent prayer for the souls lost in 1912's *Titanic* disaster. The guides, dressed in kilts, are very informative. The reality of the *Titanic* comes full circle when you visit the site. Our guide, Jonathan, explained a lot about the different people buried there as well as some history of the *Titanic*. This attraction takes just a few short minutes but is very interesting. My wife and I visited from the hop-on-hop off bus. I never bought in to the 1997 film version of reality. Remember, this is a cemetery and not a tourist attraction, so there may be others visiting the cemetery for reasons other than the *Titanic*. I know the guides have stories to tell but I felt we were intruding on those poor souls. This brings a big reality trip about the tragedy that happened off the coast. There are tours available for this attraction as well. I first thought it a bit odd to go to a cemetery as a tourist attraction, but I'm glad I did. Without a guide, this would have simply been just another cemetery. It brought on a sense of reality to stories and documentaries. Definitely not a 'fun' or 'light-hearted' attraction, but well worth the effort to find the cemetery. Visiting here is of course free, but expect a lot of tourists like yourself.

COAL

I.

The company offset the cost
by cancelling the sailing of their other ships
and transferred passengers into empty rooms
on the *Titanic*. It made good sense from a business
perspective, travellers called it good fortune.

II.

Tumbling from the surface,
carried by ocean current,
raining from a split bunker
across the seafloor.

III.

They moved over the field,
the extender arms of the submarine
harvesting the small bits from silt.

IV.

Resting on the mantel, next to a framed
certificate of authenticity, under the glass bulbs
filled with black sand, a small sliver
attached to the hourglass housing.

FIVE FISHERMEN

You gave her the whole story
about growing up in the nation's capital, the move east
to follow your heritage (and for school), the great-grandfather
who met a great-grandmother in an emergency hospital.
She left us with menus, the special, and a couple moments
to think of the building's former life. I tried to imagine
caskets stacked outside on the street, blocking the windows.
Removed the tables, bar, and kitchen, replacing them
with more coffins, the quiet steps of undertakers moving
around bodies, the chemical smell of embalming fluid
soaking into the tables and walls. In the back, the photographer
waits for workers to place coffins in frame and scurry away.

"Do you have any questions?" she asked, interrupting
our thoughts. "This may be a weird one,"
you said, "but have you ever seen a ghost here?"

"Not yet," she said, "I haven't worked a night shift."

We ordered appetizers
and ate in silence,
still hoping to catch a glimpse
of the other world.

ST. PAUL'S

See that window? The stained glass
with a shattered pane. The one that resembles a person:
shoulders, pointed nose, the unkempt hair. Well,
you know St. Paul's was used as an emergency hospital
after the Explosion. What you don't know is they found
a headless priest in the middle of the church.
They say it's his face that left that profile.
Others think it was a sailor who was praying and it's his face
that's burned into the glass. Some said it was the face of Abbe Moreau,
an early minister returned to his church. Whoever it is,
they've stopped replacing the window. Every time
they installed a new pane, the glass would break in the same shape.

MAYFLOWER

We found relief in the hot breeze that washed over our sweat-soaked clothing. The fog that flooded the streets in the morning burned off and left us stranded in the North End, looking for the curling club that had once been a temporary morgue.

At first we missed the small crest, a blue bird and red curling stone, of the Mayflower. Eventually, after consulting our phones we found the building. Standing in the heat we imagined the relief of lying on the pebbled ice, melting into the sheets.

LUNENBURG

I wanted to show you my Nova Scotia,
the old Number 3 highway hugging shoreline,
waters where ghost ships still sail, beaches where rum runners
would come ashore, the buoy where they sank an old destroyer
for an artificial reef. You were excited to see the *Bluenose*,
told me your favourite coin was the dime,
how often you watched the Heritage Moment
where the schooner beat the Americans,
you could still hear the cannon signaling victory ringing in your ear.

I was worried you'd call me cynical again
if I dismissed the *Bluenose II* as an Oland's ad, mentioned
the original was wrecked off Haiti, rolled my eyes
while you sang the Stan Rogers song. I felt relief
when we found the empty berth and the teenage cashier
at the gift shop told us the *Bluenose* was on the Great Lakes.

That's how we remember the day,
How relaxed I was driving home,
your disappointment at missing
a part of our heritage. Not the winding roads,
the stop at Fox Point to strip
our shoes and walk through the surf,
the plates of mussels and fried clams we shared
at one of the diners along the way.
We drove home in silence. My focus on the road,
yours on the schooner-shaped keychain
swinging from your finger.

APRIL 1912

THE GAFF-MAN

I.

He knows balance, how to bend the knees, sway his hips with the rhythm of the ocean. He has mastered breath, inhale on rise of the swell, exhale on the fall. His motions are exact, the wide arc of his left arm, his right hand softly guiding the tip of the hook. He has to be gentle. Carefully, he draws the pole, hand over hand.

He lays aside the gaff and grabs the shoulder straps of the lifebelt. He waits for the tillman to call "Oars" and tries to avoid looking at the body. He watches the boatmen move, listens to the water lap against the skiff, the flecks of frost in their hair, closed eyes, and shattered limbs.

He can tell some passed peacefully, as if they had drifted into sleep, waiting. Some were gathered in small groups, as if at a party. Others strayed farther away and could be found among the wreckage, lingering by deck chairs, clinging to wood panels. He can see their fingers still wrapped around the edges, bodies mostly out of the water. Others snapped limbs by falling into debris or hit something on their way down. Now, they rested in odd ways on the water. He learned to tell the ones who jumped, their necks broken from the force of cork hitting the sea and leaping into the neck. Their heads at unnatural angles, moving whatever way the sea urges.

He waits for movement to cease, braces himself, and pulls. Slowly, the ocean releases the dead, water cascading off saturated clothing. He rests their chest against the gunnel, grabs the back of the lifebelt, and levers them into the boat. Gently, with the help of the oarsmen, they lay the body in the bottom of the skiff.

He returns to his place and remembers breath. Inhale with the rise, exhale with the fall. From behind him the tillman calls, "Give way together" followed by, "Mind your Oars!"

II.

He remembers them, every one. The mismatched layers of petticoats, serge jackets, boots, skirts over pants and stockings, flannel singlets, trousers, shoes, layers of socks, jackets thrown over pajamas and night dresses. Crucifixes, union badges, gold, wire, pearl, silver, and turquoise rings on every finger, engraved wedding bands: "H.N. to D.S." "Madge" "A.L. to C.S." and "Ethal."

Short-sleeved stokers still showing off tattoos, a blue mark on his right hand, three small dots for identification, a man with clasped hands on his bicep, another with an American flag and *Dieu et mon droit* on his arm.

There was the man whose upper teeth fell out of his head when pulled into the skiff, a fur boa wrapped around one woman's shoulders, the struggle with a jacket that jingled when they placed him in the boat. Later, he learned the owner had sewn 150 Finnish marks into the liner.

III.

“For as much as it hath pleased Almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the deep...”

His voice joins the others in “Amen.”

There is the strain of lifting. They place the body, wrapped in canvas, onto a board for a makeshift burial. The Cannon makes a cross and the men lift the board. There is a sliding sound, quiet, and the sea opening as the body collides and breaks the water. They will fall two miles to the seabed weighed down with scraps of metal. There is lifting, crossing, the quiet fall, and opening of water. Crossing, lifting, the quiet fall, and opening of water.

A black haired immigrant, 22 years old. A fireman on the cusp of 30 with brown hair and mustache. A dark haired cook in his 30s.

“For as much as it hath pleased Almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the deep...”

“Amen”

Crossing, lifting,
the quiet fall,
and the opening of water.
Crossing, lifting,
the quiet fall,
and the opening of water.
Crossing, lifting,
the quiet fall,
and the opening of water.

A woman with brown hair and a gold tooth. A dark-haired young man with a nice overcoat but no boots. A light-haired steward whose age they couldn't guess. A kid with dark hair who carried nothing to identify him. A fair-haired young man wearing a blue White Star jersey. A man with dark hair bound for Ottawa. A steward with light hair and mustache. A young fair-haired fireman. A young woman with jet-black hair. A light-haired stoker with three dots tattooed to his forearm...

“For as much...”

“Amen...”

There is dim light from a crescent moon, the rolling ocean against the steel hull, wet rope pulled taut, boots shuffling against the deck, the sea throwing itself against cliffs of ice somewhere in the fog.

Crossing, lifting
the quiet fall,
and the opening of water.

Crossing, lifting,
the quiet fall,
and the opening of water.

The Cannon begins a hymn.

The Gaff-man joins the chorus of tired voices singing “Jesus, Lover of My Soul.”

BURIED AT SEA

They fell like seeds from the surface, canvas caskets, scattered amongst the valleys and plains of the seabed. Bodies recovered then returned to water. The process of disintegration beginning immediately. Flesh removed from bone, bone returning to silt. Eventually, the carefully stitched seams dissolve and the canvas blooms in the current.

IDENTIFICATION

The hiss and flash of powder, light
reflected from the white cloth lining the coffin, rushing
through the aperture, burning the image—an upright casket,
the dead man, the number 265 stenciled on a scrap of canvas—
onto the film. They wait for the image to develop.

Grieving families will be shown this photograph—
a 35-year-old steward, his mouth slightly open,
eyes closed, his skin various shades of grey from sun
burns and bruises, his hands so swollen they looked like
a single mass of flesh when placed together—
in White Star Line offices across the world
they will show his picture.
No one will claim him.

From outside the lens, funeral-home workers drive nails
into the lid of the pine box before moving it
down the row of caskets to be delivered to Fairview.
They place the next body in front of the photographer
and retreat once more.

THE JUST MISSED IT CLUB

They heard about the iceberg, the lifeboats,
how many people had been left on board, and thought how lucky
they were to have narrowly escaped the same fate.
With wide eyes and a slow nod that said, "Life can be like that," they told
their friends how they survived by sleeping in,
cancelling their passage on a whim, or had the realization
it could have been them stranded on deck while sailing for England.
It was almost them bobbing in the Atlantic,
their names listed next to Astor, Butt, and Guggenheim.
It was almost them. They were so close.

Memory

MORNING

09/11/01

That day you decided to finish every phone call with “I love you.”
“It seemed important,” you told me, “that friends, distant cousins, workers
at the pizza place knew they were loved before the gentle click of disconnection.”

My family stayed up with the news, ordered a pizza, kept every light
in the house on, and watched the towers fall again. When I realized
it was dark outside and a plane could see us, I panicked,
and ran around the house, and flipped every switch.

MORNING AFTER

09/12/01

I wrote my first poem because our teacher believed
poetry would help us process.

Your parents kept you home from school.

I found my father on the deck staring at the sky.
It was the first time in the eight years we lived there
he could see blue without the long white vapor trails.

WITNESS

I didn't describe the crumpled hood, the long fracture lines across the windshield that originated from a hole over the steering wheel. The blankets laid on the shoulder, each one a cairn.

I didn't point out where the cross had appeared under a bouquet of yellow and red flowers wrapped in green cellophane. Now, nothing but stems and plastic held to a tree trunk with a bungee cord.

TESTIMONY

It went *quick*.
There was quiet,

then the faint sound of stress, the familiar
noise of chairs dragged across a floor,

*shattering plates, wood. As if everything lost
its footing* and was thrown down stairs.

It went dark. We reached
for silhouette. *Could see the ship*

through the absence of stars. There was thunder,
a snap and we fell, *pin-wheeling into the ocean*.

We couldn't tell if the fall hurt *or feel the lack of heat*.
There was thrashing, *inhuman screams that scared us*

until we realized the sounds
came from us.

SCARED

You woke to dreams
of ships burning in the harbour.
“You’re good with metaphors.
What does it mean?”

“It means your lust
for me knows no bounds,” I said
pouring you a cup.
You laughed, looked into the coffee,
at the cup, the table.
“Really though.”
“Well,” I said, sitting down,
“It’s December and you’re editing
passages about the Explosion.
These things seep in.”
I squeezed your hand,
trying to distract you from hellfire,
screaming, and ash while I tried
to forget my own dreams of darkness,
drowning, and cold.

WINTERING

For too many years we relied
on reckless luck,

*used novels as maps,
trusted in myth,*

exhausted promise.
With nothing left to burn we fell on memory,

it warmed us in the colder months.
Winds still blew,

the sheets became threadbare,
the sleeves of our coats moth eaten.

We burned our plans, *held*
close Arctic dreams,

became ill-prepared explorers
who wandered into wilderness

with pocket combs and baseballs,
ate our boots in a serious way.

They thought us dead until
we were laid out in the sun.

For the first time in months
there were birds. There was hunger.

We ate until we were left
with the cracked ribs of intimacy.

MOTION PICTURES

We needed the changing tide, the reassuring sound
of water filling the space between the shore and stones,
the rush of retreat, the indecision of gathering.
Somewhere behind us was a thrumming engine.
Around us were dull thuds of gravel thrown by bored kids
trying to hit a lamppost. Between us, Neil Young's guitar,
all the way from '74, through my shitty phone speakers.

A thick fog surged towards us,
burying McNabs, the market, a Haplin-Lloyd
freighter sailing by while you held your hands.

"Looks like a metaphor's brewing," I said
in a way that used to make you laugh.
"I hate this fog," you muttered, standing,
"it gets in my bones."
I watched the stern disappear, only the white water
turning in its wake and the extra surge striking the shore
to show something had passed.

NAVIGATION

You were the iceberg
and I was the lookout, unable to see
you against the stars until
your finger traced a line along my palm.

We were hulls
full of chemicals, daring sparks
to dance across our decks. We
believed any flame could be contained.

It was inevitable, you wrote,
a tragedy written in the stars
like Leo and Claire, or
the poisoned tip that opened Mel Gibson.

There is no romance in an end,
just people and a handful
of moments— like the night drive home
on the 103 you spent watching the sky.

You had never seen so many stars
at one time, watched for silver streaks,
and asked if I could show you the constellations,
but I didn't know how to read the sky.

POEM

Orange light from candles paced
the ceiling while we explored each other's
histories. I told you about curses, ghosts,
the kinds of stories locals knew. You talked
about Ontario, how lucky you were to have two homes:
the one where you were born,
and the one where your family began.

You left. I stayed.

I picture you now, home.
After work you tell your children stories
about pirate ghosts leading people to treasure,
storms that could turn the sea and pluck people
from the top of a cliff, the time you saw the *Bluenose
II* at full sail in Halifax.

The refit is done.
They rebuilt the keel, changed the deckhouses,
and redid the hull. Our friends were outraged
until someone pointed out there'd been so many repairs
since the '60s it hadn't been the *Bluenose II* for a while.
There are new admission stickers at the Citadel, condos
on Quinpool, also, we love roundabouts now.

SUMMONING

Cast your laughter into the surf
and busy yourself with sand piles,
give them shape, five fingers on each hand,
as many toes, two shoulders, a chin, do not
worry about eyes or teeth or single hairs.

To the wind whisper words that remind you
of me. Collect driftwood, place it
in the center, on Saturday's paper.
Watch the tide. Do not worry,
everything moves. Remember breath
follow it in
then out.

Feel the gentle curve of life
your body makes, how it carries
you through the days, months, years.
the gentle curve of life your body makes,
how it finds new ways

to hold breath, brush cloth.
Become aware of the ocean
around your ankles, allow it
to crawl up your legs to flow
into the man you built in sand.

The magic we learned
we learned to keep us warm.

I am still there
in the words you thumbtacked
above your desk, your new habit
of damning ducks when you remember
my favourite punch line. The same
as tonight, I hear wind chimes and expect
you to arrive with a Joni Mitchell song.

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APPENDICES: NOTES

The curse mentioned in the poem “Curse” and “Narrator” is from Laura M. MacDonald’s book *Curse of the Narrows*:

Three times a bridge over these waves shall rise,
Built by the pale face, so strong and wise,
Three times shall fall like a dying breath,
In storm, in silence, and the last in death.

Three White Star Line shipwrecks fit the rhyme. The first is the wreck of the SS *Atlantic*, which sank in a storm while approaching Halifax on April 1, 1873. The second is the *Titanic*, which sank in a calm sea off the coast of Newfoundland on April 15, 1912. The third shipwreck was the *Runic* (which had been sold and renamed the *Imo*), which collided with the *Mont-Blanc* in Halifax Harbour on December 6, 1917.

The poems “Artifacts,” “Halifax Wrecked: The Halifax Explosion,” and “Touching History” were inspired by the *Titanic* and Halifax Explosion exhibits at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The poem “Real Life *Titanic*” was inspired by *Entertainment Tonight*’s reporting on the sinking of the *Costa Concordia*.

The chowder incident mentioned in “Haliwood” refers to a story in which someone slipped PCP into the clam chowder served to the cast and crew of the film *Titanic*. No one has been arrested.

The poem “Fairview Lawns Cemetery” is constructed from numerous reviews posted on the website *TripAdvisor*.