

**THE AFTERLIFE**  
**(a homily)**

One is dying indeed when the secret is out  
    and the children gather round the bed  
    each keeping his own counsel.  
For a while, friends think they hear our dead

voices in the marketplace, misled  
    by a strange perfume – then nothing. Long  
    ago, the unlettered died misread.  
Now 1984 has come and gone,

we all do. Let us praise in public song  
    the mother whose charred body wrapped  
    her unharmed daughter in her strong  
embrace, the one survivor of a trap

where hundreds crashed and burned. The usual pap  
    in the Yakville Times would have it she land-  
    ed on her senseless. Why remap  
the landscape of our lives, as if to pan

a tasteless rumor? A crossing guard outran  
    our doomed children's fate. She flung  
    them to safety and died where she played her hand,  
staking her life for theirs. Curse the tongue

that hushed her fame at once and left unsung  
    her act as a fool mistake, killed  
    her memory while it was young.  
And what of the guttering hope with blazing will

who shuffled into the freshest bend in the chill  
    torrent, breaking out of the warm,  
    smelly void where, often ill,  
stooped and toothless, he served a life term

for a brain that we found wanting in substance or form.  
    The guilt of the warders defended sagely  
    the unlocked basement door, norm-  
ally unused – like him, forgot for an age.

And, "He had the mind of a baby," to assuage  
our pity before we could be sure  
compassion was in us. Yak turned a page.  
"He was nothing like us, forget it." Now immured

in our years, we see that we have been on tour  
in a time machine. Toward the end,  
all we knew has gone, like moor  
and rider from a moving train. And then,

we ourselves are context. The man depends  
on the mask, flesh shrinking from the brazen  
weight of public comment, blends  
into the pit, at one with its scorn, its praise

or its indifference. All our earthly days  
forever after must be spent  
as radiance or scars emblazoned  
on confluent worlds. Oh, sing your discontent

in unvexed numbers, lead a cause, invent  
the shape of grace – with the purity  
of Fra Angelico, who lent  
the homely Christian vessel's history

the glory of his vision, mystery  
to fill its images of the dull  
and the deformed – the sanctity  
of Wyeth's fishing nets hung spread out tall  
in wings to catch for all to see  
a light that never shined on you and me.