Beautiful houses built of brick and stone
Stood on the slope of Westmount Avenue –
In Montreal, the place where I was born.

Even as a child, unknowingly, I knew
They stood for something with solidity,
Something that was self-evidently true.

They spoke the language of civility,
Mellifluously lucid and refined,
Shaped by a concept of nobility

The eighteenth century had redefined,
And on our sad uncertainty conferred
Faith in the destiny of humankind.

I was a child: I spoke and thought and heard
As a child does, unknowingly: the deep
Feelings that habitually were stirred

Within me were inchoate, had no shape,
And would have languished useless and forlorn,
Smothered in silence, swallowed up in sleep,

No sooner born than stifled as if stillborn,
If in that far off time there hadn't been
Beautiful forms to house and give them form,

Till clarity at last should intervene
And consciousness be rendered less obscure.
I was a child: I didn't know it then,

But in this world nothing is ever pure.
No one can ever know another's pain,
And nothing that we value can endure.
Those lovely houses, though they still remain
Standing for values that we thought secure,
In truth will never be raised up again –

We know too much; there's too much to ignore:
The many toiled to build them for the few,
And all their labor only kept them poor.

There wasn't anything that they could do
But follow out the arc of history,
Fulfill their role, then disappear from view.

We know that nothing in the world is free,
And beauty comes at a substantial cost.
The values of the eighteenth century,

With all its universals, have been lost –
Or if not lost, then hedged around by shame,
Resentment and hypocrisy. The ghost

Of poetry still bears that sacred name,
But only lives among the illustrious dead.
I was among the lucky ones: I came

To consciousness after the Muses fled,
But warmed my bones against their dying flame.
Most people lived in poverty and dread.

War, terror, havoc was our constant theme.

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