Two Poems from: “Guide to the Perplexed”

III Lebanon

One more place I cannot go
without the prospect of a stray bullet
or the loud blast in a crowded cafe
where I might lie twisted
and knowing there is no justice
under heaven’s roof, only
sunlight and dying.

But I fantasize: a fortunate man
imagining distant horrors
at my desk. The radio
reports the rising cost of luxuries,
strange agonies in foreign lands,
inertia governing our works and days. Why
do I feel like prey in a chaotic hunt?
I live in a farmhouse in Nova Scotia, the old
Acadian dykes of Grand Pre to the east
out my window and Lebanon invisible beyond.
These green winding barriers against the Fundy tides
remind me of the age of faith. And promises
broken. Cameras did not exist to document
British troops rounding up French habitants,
families crammed into boats or fleeing
deep into the wilderness; there were no taped
interviews with officials, explaining, one hundred
years later, the need to repatriate Acadians
to repair the dykes. Old news, trite
as poets in the archives gleaning
the sadness of the dead, their scattered
seed, voices lost under sand or snow.
As a child in school, it seemed so simple: textbooks
mapped the fertile crossroads of the world,
strategic ports, conflicts inescapable,
yet far away, curious as mummy skulls.
We were so blessed, laughing behind history's back.
Now in the east, the night sky begins to glow.

— Richard Lemm
from: "Guide To The Perplexed"

VI An Israeli Soldier Finds His Brother

Again there is war
and again we fight with our own shadow.
What can I despise and kill
but my own fears
projected on a stranger's window.
Yesterday there were bells
calling my neighbors to a feast;
now we are full and the ringing beckons
unexpected tribes to our door
speaking in the homeless voice of our past,
calling on heaven.

Their men lie face down on the floor,
bowing to the god of our guns,
whispering revenge to the dust.
We are to teach them silence, surrender.
But my heart beats in their breasts,
we suffer from the same sins.
Strict orders from our commander
forbid us to know the enemy
except as a senseless
terror bent on our destruction.
Outside, children cry, and women
plead in a foreign tongue, but the meaning
obliterates creeds,
hangs in the air like an omen.
When we herd them back to their camps
we shut away our unknown selves.
Hide from our unfinished birth. This man
I stop and search, in his eyes are lamps
that might illuminate my secret wells:
hand-in-hand we could reach
inside each other, touch our worth.
On the surface, where the death-dance rules,
we are victim, oppressor: deny
each other's pain, and prayers
that the Earth will hold us
like a crown its jewels.

His papers in order, I can
let him go. Or break him open
tenderly, and taste the strangely familiar
fruit of his life, and his wonder.
Dark rooms inside me would grow brighter.
And what if I take him home,
call him by his real name,
praise the Creator we both adore
and hold him under the sky's vast dome?

Teach me your music for the Psalms,
your vision of the far shore.
Let us learn each other's words
for love and water.
We have the same tears.
Inside us there are flocks of birds
nesting together.
At last, I share
everything, everywhere is the holy land.

— Richard Lemm