What do I have to tell you? I could wish
today was fifty years ago for then,
chock-full of schooling and high spirits, I
knew what was what. And where. And even when.
In other words, the word for it was on
the very tip of my too-talkative tongue.
Give me a subject – any subject – why
poetry and art could change the world,
and I could talk the stars out of the sky.
Not that I gave addresses, but with friends
I never lacked conviction.

Now I know
a good deal less than fifty years ago.

So what I am to tell you? or to write?
I’m unconstrained. The space is adequate.
It’s not a telegram I’m sending, nor
is paper rationed – yet. Although there may
be paper shortages before the day
is out, what with computers eating it.

And the way
they cut the trees down – you might say
they thought them hay. But that ain’t hay –
that is the planet’s lungs.

I hear you say,
‘The subject is a bore, and anyway,
we’ve heard it all before. What devastation!
we’ve said, seeing the clear-cut ravaged land.
Whose do they think the trees are anyway?
we’ve said. Cliché. Cliché. Cliché.’
But whose are they? Think about it. Whose? The planet may be watching this abuse.

To change focus, winter’s here. It’s cold, much colder than we’re used to on this coast, a fact that either proves or contradicts the greenhouse theory, depending on which scientist you are reading. Outside, snow from an Arctic movie blows and drifts. We’re bundled up in comforters and coats. I’m cooking with my gloves on – what a gas! – over the butane burner bought for just such an eventuality as this.

Some of us have no water, some no power. And some have floods: the frozen pipes have burst, the broken waters freezing on the floor. One friend says she could skate on the Tabriz inherited from an aunt – a layer of ice is glazing all the woven leaves and flowers, and calls to mind the crystallized violets she ate at the same aunt’s dinner table once, a small, enraptured child. What, eat a flower?

In nature, leaves and flowers are freezing too. So overeager – some, already out, are little sherbets on their frosted stems, and some have lost their buds. How can I bear to think the ostara hyacinths may be dead? – their curling, crisp blue petals and their scent of heaven filling all the sky-blue air…

I hope they can survive it, if I can’t. Of course I can, but there are problems. One, I cannot get the car out. If I could, the street is glare ice and the nearest hill is now a frozen, rutted, glassy chute better for bobsleds than jalopies. So I cool my heels at home, and wait it out.

I hear you say – (who are you, by the way, so quick to interrupt me. Are you me disguised, a kind of phantom limb, equipped with larynx and a point of view? or, to reverse the question, am I you?)
– I hear you say, provocatively, ‘How account for planetary warming now? As no one knows for certain, let’s suppose the greenhouse boys are mad, or wrong or blind. Then we can put their nonsense out of mind until they are proven right.’

O Nero dear, can you stop fiddling and hear the flicker of those small flames drawing near? Once proven, it will be too late.

Meanwhile, what should we do about it? should ‘I part my hair behind?’ or dedicate my whole life, or my half life if you will, to lobbying politicians? (What a fate!) or making speeches which I rarely do? Polemics. Mercy! I was never good at argument or logic, never felt the writer had a role beyond the role of writing what he/she must write, but if the whole great beautiful caboodle hangs in the balance – (d’you remember how celestial our planet looked from space and how the astronauts who saw it small floating above/below them like a ball thrown to delight a child, returned to view their world transformed – beauty is in the eye – [Is hell then heaven if we see it so?] and they, the astronauts, transformed as well) – and, if our future here is unconfirmed, and we are on probation, maybe I must change my tune, my scale even, and try some left-brain reasoned thinking, learn to write well-argued dissertations and forget poetry and the arts I love.

And yet I can’t believe it. Surely art is more important than it was before – Before! Before what? Curious how we wear binary blinkers: BC and AD. Even our global history can be pre which shows we see it as finite, as if we, homo sapiens, had invented it. (It all began with us – like love and sex!) We are such one-eyed kings, or one-eyed jacks. There are no one-eyed queens. Go check your packs.
Surely our break with nature is the source of all that’s out of kilter, out of sync. How can a city dweller visualize a world unpavmented, unstreetlamped? or imagine how the constellations shine as night ingathers earth and sets alight the topaz pole star pulsing in the north – front runner of vast galaxies that stretch clustered in patterns like honeycombs. The jury’s out on this, and who am I, neither astronomer nor scientist, to venture an informed opinion? Yet the mere idea of honeycombing space so matches with some image in my hear that when I read the story in the press I shouted ‘snap’, and saw, as a flash, The whole hexagonal geometry.

And how can youngsters who have never seen a seed by slow degrees become a shoot, conceptualize, except in their own loins, ‘the force that through the green fuse drives the flower’? A city boy I know won’t eat a pear picked from a green, unsanitary tree, balks at the thought of it, prefers the bland and un-sunripened, supermarket fruit refrigerated, plastic-wrapped, germ free. Is he the symbol of an age that’s lost it’s evolutionary memory?

But to get back to art, for there my heart is, there – beyond materiality, beyond the buy-and-sell, beyond the want embedded in us, and beyond desire – resides the magic greed has cancelled out. If we’ll but give it time, a work of art ‘can rap and knock and enter our souls’ and re-align us – all our molecules – and make us whole again. A work of art, could, ‘had we but world enough and time,’ portray for us – all Paradise apart – ‘the face (we) had/before the world was made.’ or, to compound the image, vivify Plato’s invisible reality.
But is there time enough? This turning world we call home, or notre pays – could become inimical to humankind – humankind as cummings might have said – in fewer years than I have walked this earth.

So, what is there to tell you? Only this. ‘Imagination is the star in man.’ Read woman, if you wish. And though we are trapped in the body of an animal we’re half angelic, and our angel ear, which hears the music of the spheres, can hear the planet’s message, dark, admonishing, as the archaic torso of Apollo admonished Rilke, ‘You must change your life.’

Art and the planet tell us. Change your life.