

Gathering Traces

Selected Poems 1975-2002

J. A. McLean

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the members of the Ottawa Creative Writers' Group, formed in 1993, and still extant in 2012, who have served as thoughtful listeners and helpful critics in my creative process. Although some members have come and gone over the years, thanks are due especially to Linda O'Neil, one of the co-founders of our group, Jim Desson, Sylvie Nantais, B. K. Filson, Damian Firth, my cousin Heather Nablo Cardin, Joyce Loeffelholz and spouse Charles Rea, Donald Bourque, J.P. Quinn, and Barbara Rager, for the critical feedback on those poems that were first read at our meetings. Any changes made as a result of their comments have hopefully made for an improved final version.

Special mention must be made of our much admired dean, Larry Rowdon, who passed away in the summer of 2001. "Larrow" was not only an accomplished published writer of the short story, novel and poem but also friend, counsellor and mentor to us all. Larry won our affections by his attentiveness, sincerity, warmth and gentle good humour, but he was no less an insightful critic and helpful teacher. In a life that was constantly challenged by health and other personal issues, he never lost his steady optimism. Despite the empty chair, our frequent reminiscences bring a welcome return of Larry's presence.

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Introduction

These ninety-five poems have been selected from a larger number that cover a 27 year period of life from 1975-2002. They were written during those phases of life in Gatineau, Quebec that included married life, child-rearing, a teaching career, the dislocation of separation and divorce, a two year transitional stay on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia (1997-1999), after early retirement when I was 52 years old, and the beginning of private life to pursue writing and research. Following the two years on Salt Spring, I relocated in Ottawa in November of 1999, where I remain to date in 2012.

I would like to offer the reader an explanation of the creative process that has brought these poems to life. I view poetry essentially as a sharpening of mundane consciousness or intensification of human experience that becomes, by a heightened and transformative act of perception, something singular, memorable or extraordinary. Most of these poems have been generated by “peak experiences,” to use Maslow’s phrase, experiences that are akin to the mystical or meditative state. By “mystical” I mean simply a heightened state of consciousness that is characterised by a keen or intense sense of well-being, when the writer is fully possessed and focused on the points of attraction in his or her experiential world. Writing poetry is, then, an occasion of joy.

The meditative state that possesses me when I write poetry leads to the discovery of deeper realisations, and the experience of various imaginative states or intellectual perceptions. In some poems, allusions to the dream world and/or the actual dream symbols themselves are included. Most of these poems are spiritually autobiographical. Almost all of them are based on direct or indirect personal experience, either my own or that of others.

I have not consciously modelled myself on any particular poet or school, but I should say that when I read the metaphysical poets of the Elizabethan Age and beyond, I recognize in them something of myself. They had a fondness for the philosophical puzzle or “metaphysical conceit” which can also be found in my poetry, although my metaphysical musings are conveyed in a less rigorous fashion. But I hope nonetheless that these poems, whatever their resemblance may or may not be to poetry of a bygone age, will strike the reader as being thoroughly modern in tone and spirit. I hope they will convey something of the existential dimensions of the human condition.

“Existential” refers to a lived, direct, authentic human experience, an encounter of self with itself, another self or the world.

The great teacher and renowned literary critic Northrop Frye (1912-1992), whose classes on biblical symbolism I attended at Victoria College, the University of Toronto (1969-1970), pointed out the highly allusive quality of imaginative writing. Writers remain indebted to other writers when they engage in creative writing, even though their work is largely their own. Creative writing is so allusive and subtle, and the influences and effects on writers so diverse, that it is difficult to account for all influences on a writer’s work. And it is, perhaps, for the critic, rather than the poet, to sound out the influences of particular poets on one of their own kind.

While I cannot point to any poet who has consciously influenced me more than any other, I can say that my mentors in poetry have been, *inter alia*, the authors of the Bible, Shakespeare, Rumi, Hafiz, Saadi, and other Sufi poets, Blake, the prodigious Arthur Rimbaud, the German Rilke, T.S. Eliot, various Romantics, the metaphysicals mentioned above, and the Bahá’í sacred writings. While it may be true that imitation is a form of flattery, it can prove fatal to the creative artist. Each writer must find his or her own voice. If readers chance to discover anything of enduring value in these poems, the perceptions that they offer have been born out of a vital and urgent need to portray my own personal and subjective landscape.

Finally, I consider myself to be a cosmopolitan of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The world is currently emerging from the tumultuous twentieth into the early, no less fractious twenty-first century.. We live in an age that is fraught at every turn with catastrophe, despair and tragedy. So widespread has become this scenario that the word “crisis” has become an outworn platitude. Crises of every kind are by now so commonplace that we seem to have become inured; we numb ourselves in hope of escaping further pain. But with all its sorrow, the present age is still riper with opportunities for better tomorrows than at any time in history. To view a profound spiritual crisis in this way is not to be defeated by it, but rather to find the way through it and beyond to achieve a fuller sense of self-and-world-realisation.

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Gathering Traces

The following verses explore the dynamics of the human condition through poetic reflections, insights or ideas.

Stepping Out of the Dream

Just enjoy the dream, your natural history,
movements of a heart in motion,
taxonomy of fantasy.

Step out of the dream if you dare,
to walk in thin air,
a daring funambulist be,
balancing earth against sky so precisely.

Can you make it work, my father, my brother,
my sister, my lover? Finish the story,
you die hard blue flower, you?
Only if you really care, step out of your dream,
if you dare.

Thoughts at the Winter Solstice on Anne Sexton's Suicide

I get out of bed and wonder
what this day will bring.

I slept in to heal a nagging back,
sore from too much writing.

Arthritis in my right hand is spreading
to the index of the left.

Tinnitus drones on in my head.

The sun's up on McLeod Street,
beaming down like a friendly face
that sends you loving greetings,
streaming down on all those façades
of buildings facing south in Ottawa.

I raise the Venetian blinds,
sit cross-legged in my underwear
in a sunny spot on my native rug,
warm-blooded, hairy-chested,
heat-seeking mammal that I am.

This year no foggy winter dew
of the BC coast to endure,

no virtual eclipse of the sun,
bone-chill, invisible mould, perpetual damp.

The long glass in the balcony door
posts a clean, clear view of blue
in the south-east corner of the sky.

A solitary pine stands beside a concrete wall,
nature-made, man-made juxtaposed downtown
in mid-December, behind the naked branches
that veil the red-bricked house across the road.

Anne Sexton felt despair at the coming solstice,
could not endure the ravages of discontent,
but hung a wooden cross around her neck,
sent by her friend Ruth who urged her
to take the Sacrament of Confession,
both women trying to make belief.

Maybe, though hope flickered, faith might catch
like an upstart flame.

But as day dwindled down,
and light waned,
Anne's struggling self broke through.

“Need is not quite belief,” she wrote.

The voice spoke true.

Her only tidings, comfort, joy,

her poems, she said – “mercy for the greedy,”

“the tongue’s wrangle,” “the world’s potage,”

and the telling line, “the rat’s star.”

What gods we play with power to take a life,

worth more than rat’s black eyes,

and rat’s feet scurrying away into a black hole.

But if poetry could stop self-slaughter,

it would be a holy thing indeed,

immortal talisman to stay the icy hand of death.

Millennium Man

he's built for speed,
strives for gold,
wall street hustler
is growing old.

Dwarf's feet,
pockets full of lead,
empty silence
once he's dead.

silly man,
millennium hero,
vaunting himself,
a great big zero.

Bafflefooz or Love's Science

“Wouldst thou that the mind should not entrap thee?
Teach it the science of the love of God!” Bahá'u'lláh
Science tries, errs, fails, starts again.

The scientist conquers fear,
seeks counsel, makes method,
learns to watch through the night,
waits for the breaking light,
only then can *see*, records results,
concludes...sometimes.

“But is this really poetry?”

The gnostic enjoys naked predictions,
hitches his wagon to love's star.

“But how do you hitch your wagon
to a star?”

“No way!” says the logician.

“Eliminated by deductive logic.”

— or common sense.

“You think not?” retorts the magician.

“Just watch.”

He cracks his whip.

The handsome bay moves briskly forward
pulling in its traces, while the rider of the storm
moves on to the next stage in the pilgrim express.
Back in the buckboard sits
a delicate and beautiful turbaned figure
guarded by a standing ring of God-intoxicated
oriental talismen.

The gnostic muses as he rides.
He wants to ascend out of flatland,
not just keep criss-crossing the surface
of the earth, aspires to walk on a moonbeam,
or become a shining moat of light
floating in the soul's eye.

As the chestnut horse trots on,
he keeps one clear eye fixed
on the round virgin moon,
about to become a bride,
then give birth nine months later.

But friend, please beware.
This is no Latin tarantella
whirling around in the month of June.

“Come on man! Get to the point!”

“White man speaks with forked tongue.”

“So where’s the natural law in love’s science?”

I say: It’s in the madness, in the maze,
in the burlio, in the gaze, in making rhythm,
striking rhyme, learning to see clearly
through a blue haze, spinning stories,
finding reasons, growing mellower
with passing seasons.

“Oh.... Oh..... Yes.... I see.

At least, I think I see.”

But not before the friends came.

(They did so with your consent).

Job’s witnesses.

But Job had to agree. One by one,

these faithful friends brought test-I-moan-ee.

“You talk too much.”

No matter. God is the Great Silent One.

We can always learn silence.

But even if the tongue is still,
the noise that is the voice of our thoughts
goes on in our heads.

Or, “We just want you to be happy.”

Whatever.

Let the witnesses feel the heat of the day,
lose their way in a milky grey fog,
watch the vapour mists take a long, slow flight
down, down by the river-run,
before the invincible rising sun,
the fierce copper-coloured warrior
who has never been slain but slays only.
Let them all be baffled by the subtle miráj,
unspeakable wonders of this most great cause.

“But few of them will be overawed.”

No matter. They will find their way.

Some day...

Wagging tongues can be discreet.
Bare your soul to foe and friend.
Speech will dry up in the end.

Friends will judge,
will sermonize,
could feign belief,
or minimize,
shake their heads,
confused, in sorrow.

But little do they know,
if only they could,
— but how could God judge them
anyway? — that the Valley of Peace
is found on the morrow,
the Way Valley of the ceasing Yes and No,
ancient Nile Valley of the No-More-Questions,
where the eternal, inscrutable Sphinx rules silently
in the Great and Blessed Land of the
No-More-To-And-Fro.

“So, what’s love science then?
Let’s come to the end.”

Predictability, my friend.
Predictability, pure and simple.
The constant factor in among
all the shifting variables
of the changing colours of the world.
The world is a coat of many colours.
Wear it loosely.
Find the colour of all colours
and Bob's your uncle.

"Bob's my uncle?"

Why, yes. You didn't know?

"By George, I've got it!"

"It's the joy in sorrow,
peace in pain,
feeling dry in the driving rain,
righting the wrong,
grieving in sin,
losing your life,
letting trust in."

Yes, but not quite.

And here's One Big Thing.

“What's that?”

Are you willing to accept suffer-ing,
that alchemical sort of ring?

“Oh.... Oh.... So, that's it?”

Yes. That's all. (Folks).

And so, Ameen, remember this:

Love's hard case law has writ no rules,
just slippery paradox to confuse,
and a wayward heart to make us fools.

One final word.

Just live for love and love only,
though she may mock or grieve or pain.
Embrace the cross that Love Herself bestows,
and you will wake to love again.

The Whistling Train

The whistling train,
the whistling train,
that passes in the night,
moaning low, sweet and low,
plaintive wail of a vapour fife,
breathing notes of wonder
into evening's mystic life.

Blotted out by nightfall,
rushing in full flight,
haunting as she shuffles by,
as she hurries out of sight:

Tschuka. Tschuka. Tschuka.
Tschuka. Tschuka. Tschuka.
Speaks balm to dread and fright.

The whistling train,
the whistling train,
that passes in the night,
speaks of eons to my brain.
Says that we are journeymen,
salt and shadow, spark and gloom,
birthing from this narrow womb,
escaping from an earthly tomb.

There Is No Sorrow

There is no sorrow

but a warrior falls,

tears but when a hero dies.

Preserve your grief

for mourning's sake.

For the gravest time,

all your sorrows save.

Belonging

Night owl. Howls coyote.

Wind song. Desert sand.

Droplet. Vast blue ocean.

Sun spot. Burning brand.

Fishes swim in oceans.

Leaves dress spreading trees.

White jasmine breathes its perfume.

Honey comes from bees.

Bodies long for soul-flesh.

Meat to marry bone.

Our house still stands divided.

The earth not yet our home.

Man stands lone and lonely.

Woman lives apart.

Children keep the sick bed.

The door is not ajar.

Adam's child.

Soul of Eve.

Our genesis is one.

Cease slaughter,
senseless violence,

the age of peace is come.

Isle of Bone

bleak skies,
mournful cries,
pall of winter descends.
shrieking corners,
pitiful mourners,
stand on street corners,
windows and frames distend.
sun gone away,
heaven turned grey,
long journeys have come to an end.

I am an isle of bone
no mind can transgress,
surrounded by a sea of flesh,
anchored on a coral reef,
built up by marine zoophytes,
an invisible soul,
by water and blood enmeshed.

nature is a starting point

that finishes in man.

but where does man start?

where on the arc of ascent?

the body is an *ultima thulé*¹

locked up by the law of the ages,

that weeps in its prison

while spirit discovers the wisdom

of its own burden,

learns to fly free.

¹. Greek for “the farthest island.”

Hymn to the Beautiful Mind

Some have mused on the truly great,
what makes them so and the mind
that carries intellectual weight.

A few thoughts, then, to put down
on my grievous slate.

I do not despise the encyclopaedic brain,
the conceptual synthesizer who relates and correlates,
alludes back to, springs forward, anticipates,
throws light on Jude the Obscure,
takes the random incident, Gordian knot,
unties and expostulates.

The mind that makes new meanings,
on the Pilgrim Way of Discourse
to the Sacred Shrine of Meaning
where the mothers of invention
give birth to the prodigies of pure thought,
along the smoky pine trails
where words whisper and woo
then go down spinning down to the sea.

I will not spite the mind that invites,
incites to reflection, has honours bestowed,
from whom knowledge has freely flowed,
has read what's in print row upon row,
is a peripatetic speech-maker,
punctilious fact-taker,
ready conversationalist, skilled artisan
of highborn discourse that never ceases
to amaze — and — with perfect prediction
leads you sagely out by the labyrinthine ways
of the original mind.

But is it beautiful? I ask.

Is it beautiful, the mind that leaves you shaking,
wondering in awe at the all-swaying wit
that ascends Mount Zion with words of power,
wields a golden sceptre to rival the gods,
works will-to-power in the service
of haughty urban intellectualism,
one of the last great idols soon to fall?

Beautiful, the mind to devise, conceptualise,
expose, play on paradox, pose and juxtapose,

plummet myth and metaphor, conclude
in the multi-layered tapestry of speech,
spins on and on, like an old weaver
at the loom, whiling last hours away?

But the weary brain must soon yield and fold
from the wave-like shocks as they unfold.
Its very self will soon grow cold.

A long, slow pang begins to rise in him,
somewhere at the centre of his being,
for the daisy flowers, happy hours, summer showers,
buds bursting in spring, rich sap of life,
the longing to let feeling in.

The soul begins to pant, to drink again at Lethe's stream,
Chora's waters where the Four Great Imaginations
rise up fount-like, with the easy grace
of a shaft of crystal light, to still the busy mind,
the restless heart, the lonely hunter who knows
no peace. Tells him to come home again,
like the erring nightingale returns
to the rose garden of morning dew,
and the lark wings it way back
to evening's sanctuary.

I loose my cloak of knowledge,
cast it to the wind, return, retrace my steps
back to the simple propositions
of the gentle Nazarene:

God is love and mercy. Here is rest for the weary,
respite from the journey, heaven in the bosom of the blest.

The Art Deco² Apartment

Is a narrow range of flat metallic grays
fading into purple blues,
the chroma a 5 on Munsell's scale,³
a short colour spectrum.

The condo furnishings are art deco,
1930 recast as trendy modern.
White bay doors open onto a balcony.
A decorator fireplace, framed in black iron,
centers the living-room,
its sleek glass doors cast in amber grain,
the furniture is a velvet touch,
the rug a pile gray, near onto plush.

Guests ambulate silently from room to room.
Couples with a touch of class move on padded feet.

². An atypical use of the phrase Art Deco is used in the title. Among its several features, Art Deco exhibits vibrant colours in marked contrast to the muted tones that appear in this poem. Here Art Deco is used as a symbol for (1) the subtle but rich aesthetic implications of spirituality (2) the perennial aspects of spiritual being which renders it ever modern.

³. The chroma measures the colour intensity or departure from white on the colour scale invented by A.H. Munsell as part of his system of colour measurement (1915).

There are no children in this place,
for no one is married.
They know no allegiance to anyone.
They know allegiance only.
They are speechless. They have no need of words.
No music fills the air but the silence of there.
There's no buffet table at the gathering,
for there's no hungry mouth to feed.

The gathering has no purpose.
The purpose is to be.
They are close to one another,
these inhabitants, but generate no body heat.
Innocent, no passion moves these gods of youth.
Wall Street wise, they have no need of money.
Harvard grads, they are beyond instruction.
Beautiful, they have never known desire.

They move as pure forms of being,
exist as true names only,
never having known their own.

They move as dancers in a stream,
flowing as one body,
circling in a gentle whirl of ecstasy,
these forces generated by a Will.

The Allmerging

The light of burnished brass reflects the male,
the chastity of pure thought.

Atlas winked at the burning globe, shrugged,
and set it down to think.

“This is a circus,” barked the carnival man.

“Step right up,” but the crowd turned and went home.

“This is an art gallery,” cried the joker.

“Come see French ladies, nice and sweet,
in broad brimmed hats, with cut white flowers
in flat baskets resting on their laps.”

The fool said: “Come look at the pretty pictures
of fresh young ladies charming and neat,
whirling around in a ring, hanging on by fingertips.”

The school man said:

“Free the land from the geometry of form.

Beware of vibrant energy. What’s intrinsic to the object
is lost in the vision of the Allmerging.”

The school man laid down his old black tomes,

turned to the east window to face the rising sun,
made a slight adjustment to mortar and gown.
His mind was a mill turned by the poetry of heavy waters,
a limpid stream tripping along its way,
on logik and essence, the one and the many,
the first and the last, the many proofs,
the hylomorphic composition of angelic beings,
and the triumph of his own soul.

Thanatos had come to haunt him
with the spectre of his own death,
yet a knowing laugh broke the silence,
reverberating to the rafters.

He took a deep breath,
raised his eyes again to the sun,
clasped his hands behind him as if he stood
before a superior officer or were one himself.

Faded memories filled his mind,
memories of long ago,
of women he had once loved.
Where is she now, he wondered,
she who had once ruled me as an alchemist,
she to whom I gave my soul away?

This past seemed now like a very long time ago,
yet a wave of gratitude flooded his soul,
a retreating flood that left a philosophic mind.

The molten sun had broken day,
casting long rays of light
across the Ottawa Valley,
making morning jewels on
window panes, stainless steel, reflective glass,
sleek office towers, those minarets of true North.

The river flashed, danced below.

The People Walking On The Street

The people walking on the street
go this way, that.

Up and down they move along,
pursue discrete, unknown ends,
like soulless bodies in a slow-motion dream.

They come toward and make a mask,
show a mysterious face,
pass by on the other side.
We look back clinging to the outline.

The people walking on the street
are symbols of desire,
moving in and out of weary lives,
breath ecstasy and fire,
turn their backs, move on.

Solo Violin

The man stands before
the picture window
on the 27th floor.
He faces west,
looking out on the Pacific.

Playing solo,
he wrings consolation
from an ancient violin.
Angels watch, vaguely aware,
suspended in the air, listening.

There are no curtains
on the large expanse of glass.
White-shirted, tieless,
he stands and plays his violin.
The melody's heard
by him alone.

Out to westward,
a fierce winter storm
howls and hurls

above the Pacific,
thrashes the waves.

Seen from outside the window,
there is a bare essential to the scene.

A silent tune, one man above,
a Peter Quince at the piano,⁴
blending subdued tones,
whites, off-whites, grays.

“Beauty is momentary in the mind —
The fitful tracing of a portal;
But in the flesh it is immortal.”

He reflects about just being,
about waiting, transiting,
marking time, working magnificent patience,
watching without desire or intent,
being open, finding consolation.

Seeking and finding,
accepting the small graces

⁴. A reference to the title of Wallace Stevens’s poem “Peter Quince at the Clavier” (1923). The quotation below is from the same poem. Stevens’s poem alludes to the immortality of imaged beauty through memory, symbolised by the effect of “Susanna’s music” on “the white elders.”

that come with solitude,
with no more mind to analyse,
understanding that some things
must come to pass,
that some things just must be,
and to accept their visitation
will help to set us free.

Smoke and Mirrors

Faces return from diverse places,
softened by the veil of time,
placid, beautiful, loving, kind,
laughing, joyous, serene and fine.

I find mirrors in memory lane.
Passing there is never the same.
I recall each soul before my eyes.
Constrained to image, I surmise.

Summoned by consciousness
loved ones come,
recollected one by one.

Intrusive world of meetings,
schemes, reports that analyse
dead-end dreams, wasted words
in endless reams, institutions failing,
politicians railing, while tear-drenched hearts
burst at their seams.

The beloved yield their souls to death.
Though still we live, we are bereft.
Who is left to envy yet?

Once order flew on silver wings.
Trapeze artist in the sky faltered,
slipped — crashed broken, bleeding,
down olympic heights fell reeling,
down from lofty throne on high.

Beware coyote's bag of tricks.
Stretch and rub your sleepy eye,
lest Old Harry give you the slip.

Awaken from your misty dream.
Drink the liquid crystal stream.
The market place, the town, they cry:
“Believe not in this outward seeming.
All we show is but a lie.”

Sex goddess of a 1,000 faces,
Astarte in her new attire.
Maya leaves chameleon traces
in the world of the 10,000 things —
diamonds, pea pods, apes and kings.

Taste love's droplet on my tongue.
World-come-of-age has just begun.

We Are Tired Children

We are tired children,
waiting at a window,
watching double rainbows
in the sky.

Phosphorescent arches
soothe our sunken spirits,
turn these downcast faces
to the sun.

Tell me, o my father,
tell me, o my mother,
tell me, then, my daughter,
from where has sprung this sadness,
since when the nameless grief,
persistent pain beyond belief,
once day's begun?

Ars Poetica

Poems on the art of poetry and the creative act

Reading Charles

(While reading *Selected Poems* 2001 by Charles “Chuck” Rea)

When others read you, Charles,
they will find words on a page,
make the effort to decode the poet’s mind,
savour the surreal, the bright crystal imagery,
sometimes rhyme, feel the moist and the dry,
trek across the vast inner landscape,
read the romance humanist,
the man thinking thoughtful letters,
experimental verse-maker, heart ever-open to love,
the poet seeking the elusive self,
find the occasional green oasis, there to drink,
the point that satisfies brings an exclamation.

But when I read you, Charles,
I hear the sombre, resonant voice,
the reluctant chuckle, just a beat behind,
see the thin white hair, the reluctant eyes,
remember the quiet man who sits
cross-legged in the eye of the storm,
abstracted in thought, while his brain

whirls within him like a cyclone,
drawing pictograms on the blank wall of the mind,
as he voyages throughout the starry universe,
flees black holes, ambles down love's byways,
highways of man's ascent,
drowns himself in the whirlpool of his words
that he might find himself at last,
land with feet on bottom.

The Man Who Hated Speech

He spoke not except by leave.
Utterance was for him a fruit-offering,
served with a nod of the head,
and a gentle bow.

If you ventured a question or two,
his tongue turned round in his head.
The accent was foreign.
No one dared to ask from where.

When he did speak,
the words were spare but courteous,
and graced with a jewel or two,
the answer found between the lines,
in the what-was-not-said,
spoken — again — with a nod of the head.

He held a secret treasure,
was reluctant to share,
like a gambler holds a lucky hand,
and plays it close the chest.

Weary was he of the endless babble,
noiseless sound and wagging tongues,
the forced hot air and patent posturing,
ego inflation, dominance by inflection,
in a dance of the demoniac.

Society was a bore
he spoke not of.
A lady or two he did frequent.
We never knew her name,
for he was a master of discretion.

But late at night,
well on to twelve,
this curious fellow
bolted back his door,
sat himself down,
— and —
spilling an inky torrent
onto the page, wrote until dawn.

A Poem in Plain Speaking

i've always wanted to write a poem
in plain speaking,
before a critic tells me
i belong more to the nineteenth
than to the twentieth century

before I'm told I'm too symbolic,
sentimental, cryptic, moral,
metaphysical, didactic,
before someone analyses me away,
before i analyse me away.

the poem that would be
the imagist's dream,
a poem not crafted,
but spontaneous,
the gentle curve of a white dove's wing,
the direct life experience.

here it is, my direct poem,
but it is not W.C. William's
red wheel barrow shining in the sun

after the rain on which so much depends.

this poetry is a cigarette vending-machine.

you put in your coins

and out pops the product.

But should poetry be like grace,

so freely given, so freely received?

Poetry Is

Poetry is, sometimes may praise,
lets vision see clearly
through its own haze.
Swims at you,
as a swimmer strokes boldly out
to meet a wave,
when breaking through a header
is launched forward triumphant.

Verse is a horizontal word
that lies down but never goes to sleep,
a vertical ray that keeps hope alive,
holds the man musing in a gaze,
leaves the woman entranced,
forever puzzled by love.

The poet struts or walks on tiptoe,
recites bombastic,
or whispers his lines as if
he were a saint at prayer.
He has sonorised philosophy,
the sound not heard.
Poetry is. Meaning is absurd.

To Make a Poem Pure

It is hard

to make a poem pure,

when tempted more

to make the thought obscure.

The purest thoughts

that rise up in the mind,

find their own voice,

are not by self confined.

Poem From The White Room

Darkness has fallen.

One long green blade of the elephant plant hangs down
over the dark chestnut grain of the rattan chair,
like the rakish finger of an elder grandfather
who places a hand on your shoulder.

A cluster of shoots, like the hands of a praying-mantis,
reaches up to a lone street lamp, a hazy globe burning
through the picture window.

The branches of the East Indian palm have been plied
into living room chairs and a grey clay pot marked
with a 5 houses a Benjamina Fig.

In the supercooled clarity of the window-pane,
liquid mineral fusion transpierced by light,
a pink lamp shade sits reflected.

In these tenuous galactic positions imposed by the eye,
the lamp shade, now a pastel UFO,
about to be erased by the blink of an eye,
has come to rest below the street light,
itself become a star in orbit, and the lamp shade,
is a pink volcano launched by a star.

Outside, it starts to pour rain in slanted sheets.

My eye rests on the grey corner cabinet, its white lamp, black shade.

I hear a voice upstairs on the telephone emphasize the word “pouring.”

The dusty rose venetian blinds lie open in wafer-thin slats,
supported on the thin spine of vertical line cords.

The intersecting line, the cone, the disc, the triangle all conspire
to configure this vision, a geometry of semblance reflected in the glass.

On the wall, Benjamin Chee Chee’s northern geese,
framed in brushed metallic gold, lift off the water, webbed feet up,
racing into flight, caught by an artist in a few deft lines that seek
to capture motion in immobility.

The divan, a thick cream fabric of light brocade, invites reclining.

The candy striped sofa stirs with the clean elegance of art deco.

My heart gives way to eternal youth at the sound
of the guitar strains of a love duo playing on the radio.

The highest form of earthly love transports to the heavenly,
while the heavenly contains within her breast
the finest flower of the seed of earthly love.

A moment of clearest vision, intensest pleasure of the soul,
feeling through its senses, without paradox, conflict, contradiction.

Breathe deeply o my soul! Drink to the dregs o my eyes!

Listen well now o my ears! Fly, African stone bird from Gabon. Fly!

But the real poem is you, my daughter,

The real poem is you singing a love song.

Art Encounters Logic: Doc Woodman Explains Otto Don Rogers

(Ross Woodman, Professor Emeritus, English literature.

Otto Donald Rogers, Professor of Fine Art, *artiste extraordinaire*)

The precise idea stirred his soul,
the movement of the artist's mind, the birth of creativity.
Doc Woodman explains Otto's paintings,
the breadth and height,
the light that orders ample space,
puts symmetry on infinity's face,
balances circle to square, spiral to straight line,
paints signposts on the vacant prairie.

The artist creates surface tension on the canvas,
walks a tightrope, masters his fear of falling,
flies, becomes free.

Art that is a paradox.

Sight for our eyes, but cannot itself *see*.

Art is blind. *We* see and become seers for others.

Art envisioned by Doc Woodman through a theologic focus
becomes a point that breaks infinity,
the line that means eternity,

the horizon that symbolizes the God we think we know,
remains as still, the closer we come, so far away.

We approach our heart's desire through informed consent.
But this close is never close enough,
is only an imitation,
a longing once-only-to-be-filled.

Now Otto walks along a path of giant cypress,
sits high on Akká's shore, watches the swirling surf
that carried a Persian Prisoner to a lonely sea gate,
an Exile who declared the stones immortal.

The waves found tongues for singing when He set foot.

The artist finds mute metaphors in the elements.
They watch each other, these artists, saints and scholars,
find fragments of meaning in brief encounters.

Vincent

(After studying “The Field of Yellow Wheat” (1889))

Look and see how gray-blue clouds
roll high above the fields of southern France.
Then as now, in old *Provence*,
the ancient cypress reaches up to ardent summer skies
from roots below the copper-coloured earth.

In this moment of sublime intensity,
I think of how your ravaged soul
found healing in the strokes
that exploded on your canvas at *Midi*,
respite from torturous pain assuaged
by the fiery concentration on the four-square
canvas of your world.

For what some call madness
can never betray the *artiste*,
the sensitive who bears
the horrors of his own anguish
and drowns himself in the sacrificial sea
of beauty's dream.

Norrie⁵ Analyses Wallace Stevens

The Eternal Now wandered
into the Hall of Mirrors
and saw nothing but herself.

All the same she heard echoes
bouncing off reflected images,
walls of sameness from different angles.

She heard the words no longer,
not yet, never and never quite.
She heard one day, some day soon.

Whispers of the voices that said
for a while, till the time of the end.
But the voices faded and died.

The Eternal Now looked again
and saw only herself present
where everything is everywhere at once.

Then she smiled a blissful cosmic smile,
fully conscious of the direct experience
of pure being as immortality.

⁵. The nickname for the literary critic Northrop Frye as used by his colleague Marshall McLuhan.

The Phrastis

He is a verbal jabberwock,
a vowel slop, a consonant fink.

What he writes don't misconstrue,
as being what he really thinks.

He just wants to make you blink.

A sentence merchant is what he is,
a slippery phrastis on the run,
put on earth to make a pun.

So friend, beware then of the shrifty cream.

There's a whole lot of slippage in-between.

Love Only

Love is an encounter of the human and the divine,
an occasion for spiritual transformation.

The Necessary Meeting

I'll meet you there,
before the altar,
beside the stair,
by the sea shore,
on a plane,
in a fleeting glance
from a passing train,
soaked in the sheets
of the pouring rain.

I'll meet you there,
where loving legs entwine
with mine, scissor legs
defined sublime,
joined at cheek,
joined at jowl,
joined in the place
where fair means foul,
palm to palm,
joined at hip,
joined at breastbone,
joined at lip.

The meeting's unconditioned
for ourselves to know,
never plagued with doubt again
that one of us might go.

Bill Evans Plays “A Time For Love”

Now that you're gone,
the room is scented
with the fragrance of your passing,
the spaces are grown larger, warmer,
redefined, contours, lines refreshed.

Sweet repose and comfort linger
at two o'clock. The sun streams through
the stained glass window of my study.
A Turkish sultan was not so rich, at ease.

Bill Evans sits alive at the piano keys
speaking a solo, quiet conversation,
chords out the notes to “A Time For Love,”
picks his way deftly along,
carefully sorting out harmonies,
laying down the melody, thoughtfully,
in a criss-cross pattern,
stops and starts, hesitates.

Music must wait for the maestro.

He begins to amble, zig zags,

jives a jazzy blues, sounds a discord.

The music starts to swell and sway,
modulates to Asia minor key,
retreats like a wave to a diminished third.

Now the piece crescendos,
coming together on one point,
falls.

His voice murmurs a few stray after-notes.

They tinkle, trail away in time to love.

The Love Feast

(after Wendi and Moojan's *Soirée*)

We didn't know
who we loved anymore.

We were all in love
with one another.

Everybody was somebody else's wife.
Ex-wives were lovers again.
Spouses not yours were yours,
and looked at you with love-filled eyes
as they reclined on perfumed cushions.

The tainted were engulfed
in a wave of purity.
Those going down and out
were buoyed up by love.

Food celestial was laid out
in courses sumptuous enough
to delight all eyes,
satisfy every palate.

Otessa of Hashem,
a black-eyed Persian damsel
regaled you with love tales of old Iran,
of Persepolis in all her glory,
while you watched the supple mouth
speak the words, admired the ample nose
in profile.

Lives were lived, stories told,
mystic visions shared,
tokens from a gracious Hand
that told us we were out of time,
beyond farthest space.

Powers of mind released
once ego boundaries disappear,
radiating waves of love
to melt the Polar Cap Indifference.

They came — the hesitant, the querulous,
the common. They all came rank on rank.
The few sustained by armies still unknown
became extraordinary, pacified, blue bloods,

royals defined as lovers by clasped hands,
and arms gulf-wide to hold in fond embrace
another soul.

At 3:00 a.m. you lie awake
and dream the dream of love,
in a kind of madness, dizzy ecstasy
that drives on till dawn.
Sleep comes at morning light.

When you awake, your tired eyes
still hold the grit of love,
your soul dissolves the vapour trail
of love, the warmth that never dies.

You've been to the Love Feast.
All you know. All you ever need to know.

To Jennifer at Big Sur

Down the Oregon coast you go,
following the line traced south to Golden California,
along the broken ridge of coastal mountains,
the jutting spurs, the small discrete valleys.

Twice you called me on your cell.
I was not there. The answer phone played back
a message from the dream world.

You called at dawn as you watched
the dashing leap of swirling surf and spray.
I hear the love song in your voice,
but rain has damped the ocean view,
the mist of grey days blown about by salty air.

You tell me a lighthouse lies off in the distance.
I remember that your soul is pacified by wild lonely spaces,
your heart restored at the in-between of dusk and dawn,
when the All is hushed and still as night's fading mystery
grows into its own awakening and day dies down to itself.

Below the slabs of red granite in the Gatineau Hills,
I learned to sit with you and watch a sunset die,
refrain from naming colour symbols,
learned to let inquisition lie sleeping,
like the massive rocks of the Shield itself,

intrusive but still,
there on the pine-fringed lake,
haunted only by the loon's lonely cry.

I had to slay dragons to find my way back to you,
reinvent myself, suffer tortures of the damned,
disavow the dream, the psychic voices,
be born again to love only, to love's sure wisdom,
still the voice of conscience, the knowledge bred of fear.

Waiting for you early one hot August evening,
pacing up and down Elgin Street,
there above the summer sky,
I saw the two seas let loose to meet one another,
there over Parliament, high above the War Memorial,
walking the horizon, bigger than big,
in that spaciousness of love where human meets divine,
in the cosmic world of Big Sur made Big Soul.

Later that night I walked you back home
to prosaic Patterson Ave and looked into your eyes
when I saw two limpid pools of love streaming up
from deep within the soul.

Signs and wonders I have seen.
But love will have its way with love,
make the dreamer bear love's heavy beam.

“The Cure For Death By Lightning”⁶

I took the cure by taking a thunderbolt.
The lightening twisted my body,
rivetting me to the ground.
I sparked and smouldered,
then died.

Now in the open field,
when skies begin to darken,
as thunder clouds assemble,
and forked tongues of yellow light
like stinging serpents strike the earth,
fearing for life and limb,
I run for safety.

You can die twice, she said,
Don't need that much energy.

⁶. This title is borrowed from the title of the 1996 novel by Canadian author Gail Anderson-Dargatz.

Returning

Yes it will return,
the loving gesture, tender care,
simple act of being there.

Time honoured, years braved,
riding the crest of an endless wave,
for this one true dawning
duly saved.

The singular deed,
sown one spring,
sprung to fullest blossoming.

Speaking to you,
the soft, sweet faces,
from a myriad mystery places.
The sunrise of love
beams a thousand traces.

Love's Discipline

So we shall be in love with love,
and love again every passing thing,
until we learn love's discipline,
to stay, to loose, and bind again
what Love Himself finds pleasing.

Indian Summer

The poetry of autumn is written
along the trails by Meech Lake,
on a studio tour in Wakefield,
where a mystic canoe emerges
suspended on a canvas,
glides into the foreground,
paddle and canoeist being absent,
majestic on the waters of the murky Gatineau,
paints in granular tones the sombre blues and greys,
the lingering morning mist, the muted greens
that colour crowds of firs on sheltering banks.

You dream splashes of scarlet, flaming crimson, saffron,
while paler sheets of light, torn by taller trees,
fall and melt in all this hazy flow,
on a moment in time, by the river of immortality,
where the bark becomes the native symbol
of the journey each must make as we paddle
westward to reach the Great Eastern Sea.

We reach your favourite resting place.
A craggy fold of rock juts out on a bend
in the shore, invites a natural pause.
A cypress growing on the bank arches out

over the lake with maiden grace.
I climb onto the forked trunk,
rest my back against the branches, close my eyes,
find shelter from the blazing sun of Indian Summer,
sense the autumnal stillness. Once rested, I come down,
bathe my feet in the clear water, contemplate a swim.

You sit above me on the rock,
remove hat, shoes and socks,
roll your pant legs up, pause and look out.
I squint against the noonday sun to see you.
Brightness blurs the outline of your body,
etches you in mystery. Slightly out of body,
I hear the voice that speaks in measured tones,
does not press a point, the easy chuckle,
breathe the aura of your presence,
smell the fragrance of your hair,
feel the outreach of your hand,
the longing, the fond embrace,
look into the luminous round eyes
those windows on the long ago.

Back on the trail, I break into a sudden run
and jog on up the hill, legs still strong
despite the ailing back, call out my challenge.
I hear the child's voice cheer her mother on.
I look over my shoulder. You are coming up,

running fast, sockless in deep blue moccasins,
light blue leather purse slung in front,
in denim jeans and jacket,
Tilley hat angled slightly back.
The chase is on.

Up you come, laughing as you go.
You are gaining as I reach the top.
The trail flattens out. I slow up.
We catch one another and walk on together,
half-breathless in a side embrace.
I am happy to be caught.

There, with nature's help, upon the rocky shore,
below the trees, beside the living lake,
we worked out issues earnestly,
in this evening of our life,
striving in our gentler ways
to win the victory over history,
the burdens of past karma to erase,
to find our little peace of soul
in the golden of now, and be not fools
to cheat ourselves of happiness,
knowing that the like shall never come again.

Ambrosia

So it repeats the same old tale.
It's in your blood, your body frail.
The canny gene pool will not tell.
There's no escape for bones and brain,
the Moving Hand will not refrain.

But love will cast, remake your story.
As days wear on and work will out,
you bang away at your machine,
harvest what the mind will glean,
an endless quest to banish doubt
and make thoughts clean.

But love's the only fruit you crave,
the one ambrosia to amaze.

Yes love.....
its laughing eyes,
and graces saved,
sacrificed so long ago,
when nagging doubts,
and tempests braved,

when God might bless,
and time forego.

— at least —

the earnest martyr thought it so.

But where the tender touch might fail,
then let the head that nods assent,
a brief consent repair,
the human voice that warmly speaks
the forlorn heart a joy prepare.

But not this gem,
to every learned fool display.
The blind in heart will not desist
from ego's rule,
cannot assay the precious stone,
the sunlit beam, not sapphire's heart ignite ,
— to such alike — though they might gaze,
by day, by night.

The One Great Love

Forever do we seek the One Great Love

which first we knew,

Its joys and haunting pleasures to renew.

Love's Paradox

You were one I wished to love,
according to an old expression.

I longed to read thick tomes with you,
bound in brown leather that could only be released
by shiny brass locks.

We would read silently, huddled together,
books on knees. A fruit bowl lay at hand.

I desired to share my world with you,
and travel one time more to mystery places,
converse like lovers old but friendly still.
When the words could not the soul express,
I'd close your mouth with kisses 4.

I dreamed of rising mornings,
to greet you with an amber face,
my soul with all your presence fill.
I would touch your hand
when it was time to sleep,
and close your eyes one last time,
if God will.

And though I chased love's fancy forms
among these amorous skies,
and raced along old passage ways,
lured on by ancient lies,
I never found your face...

Till one clear April morning,
a misty dreamer did awake,
to solve love's highest paradox,
love's deceptive dream forsake:

Only love will be love's cure.
Only love procure love's sinecure.
Only love through love will love dissolve.
Only love will love's one great question solve.

Our lesser loves like sailing ships
cast off in morning mist,
then fade away and die.
Yet we remember well
the ships at sea,
the captain's bell,
the tall ship's mast,
the powder keg,
the looking glass.

Love Is Not A Woman

A lattice curtain billows up,
blows back to caress neck and face,
falls into place against the screen,
then repeats.

The man rests his chin on the window ledge
to gaze at the city lights across the valley.
He finds delight in the body,
as he stands repeating the gaze.

The erring breeze bears the scent of spring rains,
the freshly tilled soil of farmers' fields,
the small squares of garden plots,
freshly textured, made ready for seed.
He breathes in the fragrance of the good earth,
the living land, moist with mix of root and sprout,
of shoot and seed.

He sighs. Not the sigh of anguish,
but the sigh of a gentle release.
His body melts to a flow.

It's the subtle thing, the mere trace,
the fading echo, the after-thought
that stirs the man as he stands in his place,
and moves him into peace, peace unto content.

The gentle ticks and clicks, the friendly cracks,
the groans of a house at late watch,
become a sleeping giant moving in its bed,
resting its own tired body, while we Lilliputians
watch and listen for his somnolent stirrings.

Now it's the minuscule world
that moves to please.
The four square criss-cross
of the screen comes into focus.
The close-up pattern he will freeze.

He marvels at the monotonous symmetry,
the serried ranks of set squares.
He breaks focus again to fix
on city lights across the valley.

He feels no need to call a name,
to shout it to the Spring air,
to invoke it to the plants

now pushing up freshly green.

Some faint echoes linger in his head,
a few names of faded flowers —
white daisies once in bloom, purple irises,
blue bells, dark-eyed susans, red-lipped tulips.

No need to conjure up the image of a face,
to embellish all this fertile space,
for it is Love Itself in all these forms
he does embrace.

Hotel Vancouver

(room 1230)

I called you there.

Then you called me.

Contact.

A seagull flew and landed
on your window sill
high above the crawling
rush hour traffic.
Sea borne birds now haunt
tall buildings, craving odd morsels
in places where fish can't fly.

The pesky creature forced his beak
through the window opening,
and fixed one red eye on you,
blinking sideways,
anticipating a feed
from unaccustomed hands.

I wondered about the sign,

this visitation at the very moment
of our call, whether birds may be
living symbols speaking messages,
if such sentient beings can create meanings,
write a line or two for human stories.
(You were less symbolically impressed).

Weeks later my eye caught sight
of the name of the hotel, room number
written casually on a pink posting note.

Just a wing-beat in the flight of time
has made Hotel Vancouver, room 1230
a marker marking stages on a journey
into the depths of soul,
signpost for daring pilgrims who venture
into the Living Land of Love,
then reach a blessed sanctuary
after a long journey.

Places in the Heart

I know that I shall have found you
when you come stealing to discover
all the secret, mystic places in my heart,
when you stand before me
a living, beauteous presence,
one of the angelic beings that has appeared
from out the World of Spirit,
the world that I have seen so many times
in the shadow land of strange and wondrous visions
into which I sometimes fall just before sleep,
that world inhabited by all the real and ideal loves
of our brief life, the souls who lie in wait to rise up
and lovingly greet us — there, just there,
on the surface of the heart.

The Sacred and the Profane

Nature and the everyday, the ordinary and
the extraordinary afford encounters with the numinous.

The Book of the River

(for May and Mary, mother and daughter)

Life goes on like a river
a river that flows and flows...
On it you and I sail
our little boats,
and hoist for a day
white sails to the wind,
are cast upon the water
as dried up leaves,
dropped by a famished tree.

All things the eyes of the river see.
She delights the green banks to caress —
land moist and dry, tall Sierra sky,
forests gone wild, sparse desert place,
bows as she lowers a weary head,
“Not I. No, not I,” ever said.

Without ebb, ceaseless flow,
does the Book of the River go.
Moves in, out of time,
past all reason, without rhyme,
beyond life, outlasts death.

Read the Book of Nature now.
Here's mother round with babe,
then fair child on her lap.

Turn the page. See a youth among men.
When? I say. When?
Before they were born.

In crystal waters lives unfold,
the toiling millions yet untold,
takes earth's masses all as one,
the loves and triumphs, sorrows,
yesterdays, today's, tomorrows.

Mirrored in the murky blue,
sun-glanced portraits shimmer there,
scarlet beauties raving, fair,
gone down now to calmer waters,
till the moving image moves no more.
But she wanders on,
in a Body of Glory,
arteries streaming
in the River of Life.

Beyond the Sea Evermore,
I hear her voice calling me,
just as before:

“O sailor on a windy shore!
I live forever.
Dying man be.
Die to the body,
that others may have Life.
Drown in my waters.
Set yourself free!”

The Yellow Babylonian Idol

(or his greatest sin)

The priest made an idol of himself,
and it was small and smooth,
paltry outline of a thing,
a glazed, pale yellow,
mouth, digits, eyes and nose
immature, ill-defined.

Crude work of art,
made by unskilled hands.
Not fashioned on the potter's wheel,
no labour of love, just one cheap statue,
burnt by fire.

Adam without breath.

On it he wrote his greatest sin.
Nothing there to make the mind
recoil in horror. It said simply:
"I should have been happier."

At Starbucks

I would not speak to you,
at Starbucks or the Second Cup,
if I could not love you
as a stranger loves a stranger,
in my own way.

Love you in a way
you don't suspect,
as I while my way
into your life,
on a Sunday morning,
a moment in time,
to stake a claim
on the fringes of your heart,
baffle your mind a little,
then tell you of this Day of Days.

And, somehow, if I could,
here on cosy Elgin Street,
speak to you of the coming
of a red-robed Persian King,
while dark roast Colombian
with cream flairs our nostrils,
and desserts lie on the table,
beside the morning papers still unread.

Mrs. Nixon's Pooja⁷

Mrs. Nixon throws sand onto
her walkway to negotiate passage,
steps carefully as she goes,
shod in clean white joggers.

She thrusts her hand repeatedly
into her little pail, throwing handfuls
onto the ice, exposed and melting now
in this mid-March thaw.

She utters some determined imprecations
to the elements, inaudible to me.
I hear nothing, watch the silent movement
of her lips as I look down on the little scene
from my apartment window.

But in that moment,
I hear no curse on nature's house,
damnation of the last vestiges of winter,
but see instead a Hindu celebrant
throwing rice at a wedding,
a devotee spreading ashes on the Ganges,
a mother making pooja in the morning.

⁷. In Hinduism, a poojah is a ritual or devotional act.

Summer in April: An Evening Meditation

Next door a woman sits on a lighted balcony,
speaks, laughs and smokes, laughs, smokes and speaks.

Her voice is carried on the night air.

The errant breeze carries the scent of tobacco
into my kitchen as I dry dishes.

Summer's come in April.

Garments are briefer now. It's life out-of-doors,
passing time in the cool of the evening
in the company of friends, in full enjoyment
of the natural life force, simple recreation.

The wine flows. Elbows are raised
to drink to health. Toasts are proposed.

I listen as she laughs, her words barely audible
as syllables and sounds bounce off walls,
then fade and die on the evening air,
like an retreating echo.

I wonder if she knows what it is to speak,
to break silence? Is it not the most natural right,

the might that belongs to all who can speak,
all who can put tongue to voice?

The most natural of human interactions,
the most comfortable of human affections?

I wonder at the one who takes speech acts
for granted, though it be a universal right and freedom,
who does not ask what it is to speak,
what it is to break silence, to verbalize the world?

Late Island Winter

It frees,
the bough
in the breeze.

Wetland vespers,
coastland fir trees
point fingers down,
laud the lowly earth,
loftier limbs are raised up
in prayer.

On tender tree tops
a once mute green,
long since silenced
by a vast grey sky,
manages a whisper
of the coming spring.

Dates and Tea

I drink the amber-coloured tea,

eat the dates.

I think of the Blessed Beauty,

the tea He drank, the dates He ate.

In my mouth the taste becomes

alive, singular, electric.

Rizwan Eve in Gatineau

The April rain froze at mid morning,
encasing the still bare branches in coats of ice.
That afternoon, we should have seen jewels dance
in the trees, but no sun appeared to chase away the gloom.
Commuters returning home stared at the ice-clusters
that were trees, the frozen bouquets of shrubs and bushes
on hillsides, and in still dead fields, a *nature morte*,
revealing subtle shades of browns
still transparent through the *glace*.

As I drove up the long *montée* to the exit,
a flock of blackbirds shifted on the wing,
veered suddenly upward,
in a way that reminded me of a child
hop-scotching through the air,
a child who knows nothing but the innocent joy
of its own playfulness.

The glaciation of the land was short lived.

Later that evening, warmer rains fell.

The ice casements melted away,

leaving virgin branches free again,

to put forth leaves, buds and flowers

in the coming sun of spring.

Another Rizwan eve liberated every land.

The wave of a Prisoner's hand melted every heart,

banished all the winters of our discontent.

Northern Geese Returning

Today I hurried from my bed to see northern geese returning.
Stumbling to the west window, then to the south,
I saw them in the sky.
Sliding back window and screen,
eyes still full of sleep, smarting in the bright May sun,
I saw them moving northward, honking.
Not a textbook V formation, but one great gangly chevron,
deviating from the straight line in a sharply slanting Y,
changing on the wing in brush stroke animation,
daubs of faded colour on the living canvas of the sky.
The angle changed its shape, now becoming more obtuse,
single birds breaking line, moving up to lead, retreating,
joining ranks again but moving ever upward to northern skies.
Not eagles these clumsy geese, but fliers of fortitude.

Sacred rite, celestial divination,
blessed by visual intimation,
to see, to hear northern geese returning.

Labrador Mystery

Mystique land on the edges of an awesome silence,
a vast, sacred space where history's moving stream has coalesced
the blood and bones of European, Newfoundlander, Inuit, Innu.
Métis flesh, where jaw-bone, frame and faces fuse,
like children out of Arab tribes, set by almond eyes,
land where old trappers with parchment skins,
wrinkle-deep, sun-burnt, brushed by ice-whet winds,
hide themselves in shy, reluctant speech.

Kids play road hockey on the dirt-packed streets of Shesheshee.
The faces of novice Buddhist monks from Tibet
peer impassively back at you out of slit eyes,
in this reclusive land where magic is still alive.

Up One Mile Mountain, I scan the mystery face
of the Infinite, the outstretched vista of lake-beyond-still-frozen-lake,
the panorama of the hardened crust that will soon give way
to an implacable spring sun.

The music of the Arctic wind rustles in your ears,
finds a way into your coat to chill your sweating spine.

Entranced, you stare as a filigree of snow whirls by at arm's length,
pirouettes off the mountain crest and fades away into the icy air.

Elegy

It's July again.

Waves of summer heat
shimmer upon Quebec fields.

On distant, rolling hills,
sheep stand still and graze.

The bundled yellow hay sits close by,
rotund pieces on a outdoor checker board
that knows no rules,
the players being absent.

At this distance,
the sheep could be stones.

The mounds of hay beside them
look themselves like grazing sheep,
one vision superimposed upon another,
each image transparent to the other.

We too are sheep who nourish a blind life,
and graze to feed our elemental bodies,
yet do not ask the reason for our grazing.

We pasture on fertile hills,
yet give no thanks for sustenance,

stand blissfully oblivious.

We have no life but bucolic blues,
the graveyard the only peace we know.

Night is falling.

Wolves await the thickening shroud,
yet their shepherd has come to lead them home.
They hear his voice but do not follow him to refuge,
to stiller waters, to finer pastures green.

We do not hear the shepherd's voice
and choose instead to slaughter,
sheep of one flock,
lost among the hills of home.

Noah

At the sound of his word,

the beasts on the shore

go this way or that,

iguanas, elephants, cats,

tigers, cockatoos, bats.

Of one firm accord,

they swim out toward,

the ark on the shining sea.

Epiphany in Late October

This late October an epiphany is declared.
While standing, looking out the kitchen window,
you see the brightest morning sun wash the side
of the brown brick house next door,
with its narrow strip of garden plot along the base,
lining the driveway.

And it is all illumination, not lambent light,
but light irradiated, light falling except there is no falling,
but a ubiquitous presence, so massive but only by its brilliance.

And the few red hollyhocks still clinging to their stalks are retreating,
shrivelling slowly before the steadily advancing armies of cold,
and the hosta leaves are fading to a sickly yellow round the edges,
but the veins of each raised leaf run through them,
like plenteous streams feeding the breast of a verdant summer's plain.

And the spare cluster of rosy morning glories planted
beside the downspout speaks to me.
It says: "I am here. See me. I am still here.
I am nature's child too bathing in this chill sunshine."
Little glory says: "I am life as much as the sun itself,
though I be nipped by frosty air. I bow slowly to the Sun King
who turns his face away from me, yield to Old Man Winter's call.
Eternal as the sun, I am, paling before winter's descent."

Consumer Products

The morning is still small.

I play radio and find

a lingering piano bar,

American 1940's nostalgia

in a minor key.

I gaze into the pantry.

It is almost one.

The white grained rice

preserved in the large Mason's jar,

the sugar crystals in the stainless steel bowl,

the red tomato sauce encased in glass,

take on a hint of life,

a kind of solitary, almost-knowing

as the melody plays past.

These consumer products are visions of delight,

rescued from oblivion's darkest night.

From out of the primal garden,

I hear their far-off names being called.

Paradise

The paradise I've lost,

I've never solved the losing.

The paradise that's here,

I'm not apt at choosing.

O who is there to tutor me

in the paradise that's lost,

the heaven that is here and now,

the paradise to be?

Passing Gently

Fallen leaves on wetted path.
Take comfort in the growing grass.
Stop here, then gently pass.

Cast your burden to the wind.
Tears shall wash away your sin.
Laughing eyes are yours to win.

The passing years break down the walls.
Voices echo in the halls.
Mighty is the Force that falls.

Though you fall, you will rise up.
A Heavenly Guest will come to sup.
Your lips shall taste the banquet cup.

Surrender now youth's broken sigh.
Tears must flow in the anguished cry.
The bloodied heart discerns the lie.

Sorrows vanish. Some remain.
Circles widen like ripening grain.

How have I endured such pain?

Shadows falling. Night descends.

All's fulfilled at journey's end.

We wayfare on. There is no bend.

This world outside turns round complete.

At eventide lies calm and sweet.

An ancient tale we do repeat.

We've sailed the eastern rim at last.

The farthest shore. Our sails flew fast.

Stop here. Then gently pass.

Flowers Flew Upward

Flowers flew upward,
breaking the spell of gravity.
Up from my palms they flew,
drawn by a commanding force field.
I never stopped to pick them.
They blossomed in my hand.

I crushed some buds
between my fingers,
noted they were imperfect,
had not yet come to fruition,
let them go anyway,
but could have held on.

The pink carnation was perfect.
It wandered off mechanically.

They flew off,
up and away,
upward in line,
as if under orders from an extraterrestrial
with point-of-light index finger.

They could have been ducks
waddling up into the air.

Meanwhile you circled in the field
in front of me, walking in a ring.

“Hey! You picked the circle of unity,”

I said delighted. (After I noticed I wasn't in it).

I never stopped to pick the flowers.

They blossomed in my hand.

I did not hold them long.

They escaped me for heaven.

The Sphinx

The platinum blond in black tights
pumps iron and does aerobics,
opens doors for you.

Flight and escape can be found
in the faces of a thousand women,
the virgin who invites you to Vienna,
finds you in a prison cell, a black hole,
offers a white line, a cheap thrill, an icy bottom.

Symbols of flight and escape.

The madman's contorted face betrays
a frozen hurricane of never-ending rage,
the sunken despair of depression,
a smoking gun.

We imagine we cannot bear the pain,
the sin, the unmentionable deed,
that we cannot bear the break,
the banishment,
the lonely exile from Eden,
the long journey back home.

If only we would wait,
we would find another Eden at the gate,
in the golden mercy that has created the world,
raining down its tears of love, as mysteries unfold.

But the self is prisoner of its own singularity,
victim of its own high court of conscience,
undecipherable as the Sphynx
in an Egyptian desert wasteland of meaning.

We stand before and say:

“Sphynx. Give me a thousand years,
till I, like you, break out in the gentle bliss
of a cosmic Buddha smile.”

“Man,” replies the Sphynx,

“Be swift. Be equal to the task,
cleverer than the riddle.

The rock of ages presses hard on you.

In a moment, you’ll be mown down like grass.”

Gems

Take the amber crystal, trust,

the deep blue gem, content.

Hold them to the sun.

When your heart is being rent,

and solace there is none,

seek the blue gem of content.

When your face is in the dust,

find the amber crystal, trust.

Emptying the Ashes

As the ashes fell, an epiphany was raised.

Astonished I did watch,
wrapt in my repeating gaze,
when on command a passing breeze
sprang from out a plenum void,
below the massive rock,
to catch the mandrake dust
in one swift sure motion,
and lift the ash-grey specks
up into the air.

Turning my head, standing upright,
I veered around to watch the dusty train,
the diffuse cloud glide along
the contours of the land,
to rise above the slope of Mt. Vesuvius
into the bright blue island sky.

It was ecstasy and epiphany,
sweet surprise, divine delight,
was poetry-in-motion,
a one act mystery play,

an artist's living scene and moving sketch,
creation *ex nihilo* rising into life,
then dissipating to a little death.

But as the cloud of my unknowing lifted,
the angle of my vision shifted.

An unlocked door revealed this scene:

I saw there, rising in the air,
the unnumbered souls of generations
born and gone, lifted by the faintest breath
of a Strange and Mighty Wind,
that unrestrained stirs the traces
of earth's smallest things
— and —
bears them up to disappear,
beyond the sight and ken of men,
in the one great flow of life and death,
to become all things again.

Zen Moments

Zen refers to the simple, the effortless, the quiet state of being that is born in the contemplation of “...just sitting quietly, doing nothing.” But, paradoxically, the Zen moment may define itself as a jarring intrusion, a challenge or a rude awakening.

Apples in December

Lost to harvest, the apples hang

on the tree in mid-December.

But how alive the deep red globes

against the grey sky!

Sand

Silicon wafers and optically pure glass

are made from lowly sand.

Through this medium

you and I communicate.

The pagan heart in me is tempted to exclaim:

“Matter is divine.”

If

If I were not here,
who would hear
the sudden flutter
of a passing wing,
these chattering birds
in summer
just beyond the basswood tree?

The Cawing Crow

The crow caws at early dawn,
breaking the promise
of the coming day's peace.

Caw! Caw! Caw!
the voice says,
cheeky, scratchy, rakish.

Crow's voice says:
I am crawfish,
I am catfish,
I am scratching cats.

I am irritation built into the world.

The Half Moon Hangs

The half moon hangs, a silky pearl

in the cold March sky.

One black crow nestles

on the stark fingers of a barren elm,

oblivious to such beauty.

The Heat of the Day

They asked —

“Where is Alfred?”

“What has become of him?”

“Burnt out,” someone said.

“Couldn’t take it anymore.”

“He’s just a sunken shadow
of his former self.”

“What made him that way?”

I asked.

“The heat of the day,” they said.

“The heat of the day.”

A Zen Sunday Morning in Spring

I wake, raise the blinds. A new day begins.
Shades of light, peace and beauty enter the room.
Sunday sunshine banishes gloom.

Sap rises up in stately old trees.
Buds slowly swell.
The tender leaf grows.
The Kosmos is well.

Outside my window a visitor lights,
watches and waits, bobs a tiny light head,
flits to my feeder, is filled, flies away.

Bird song fills the air,
a jubilee carolled above somnolent streets.
Do they know their own song?
Know the world has gone wrong?

A cold April wind has fetched sparrow's return,
but conspires to vacate the heart that will yearn.
The thrall of existence is what I must learn.

A zen-like spring morning,
not yet quite green.
But in the hue of this comfort,
a touch of the spleen.

Point Vierge

Early bird declares the first halting note,

then retreats into solemn stillness.

Virginal point is broken,

soundless space fructified.

Little Johnny-one-note has sung,

is strangely silent again.

Passages

Life is a continuous journey in which we transit from state to state and from stage to stage. This journey demands the acceptance of a process of constant readjustment to existing conditions, of accepting endings and making new beginnings. The fulfilment we seek comes by a dying of the old self to make place for the new.

Prairie Song

The Trans-Canada Highway #1, heading east.
Cattle graze on the stubble of Alberta foothills,
the still golden remnants of the summer harvest.

Sagging wires join faded power poles
as dry as August kindling that line this prairie path
and link lonely hearts mile after country mile.

Passing cars cast fleeting shadows on the roadway.
My own sticks relentlessly to me.

Now a pale blue moon rises early out of a Picasso painting,
showing a ghostly half-face. M' lady's shy
but manages a saucy wink from a steady gazing eye.

I hang my Swiss watch on the visor,
glance at the red cross on the white face.
The second hand ticks the time away,
the precise movement no more a tyrant,
once a clock-work of fiction and fake.

Through open windows, warm air rushes past my ears,
flows over arms and elbows, relieves the burning sun.

Uphill I go, pedal to the metal.

(Who said the Prairies were flat?) Way to motor.

Imagine we're a submarine. Sound the alarm!

Down periscope! Dive! Dive!

Somewhere inside a child is laughing.

I peel my top to cool my skin,

a chagrin to highway etiquette,

dismiss the sidelong glance of strangers on the road.

I name the towns out loud,

sound a little alchemy of the word,

let them say their own magic:

Gem, Brooks, Ralston, Rolling Hills, Millicent, Redcliff,

Medicine Hat. The ancient shaman's feathery crown

becomes my goal, a milestone to mark my passing,

speed me on my way.

Mellow tunes unheard before begin to sound

in the tropics of a somnolent brain.

I intone the melodies, a transformed day composer now,
but only in this altered state when Alpha, Beta and Theta elongate.

The wheels go round and round and rumble on below.

The tires yield to the dull shocks of an obdurate highway,
like the flub-dub of a beating heart.

Tar serpents wind their narrow bodies across the pavement,
patching the cracks on aging arteries.

I delight in the vast spaces of this tenuous togetherness,
the transiting community of passers-by,
note the paste board figures on the fly,
anonymous faces with a story to tell,
speeding our lives away till we die.

Smiling, I remember the beat poet's line:

“The trip's the thing.”

The Light Once Given Has Faded

Larry Rowdon, in Memoriam (summer 2001)

The light once given has faded,
the benign presence that once sustained,
the aura of magnetic love, withdrawn.

Must be — so that would-be-pilgrims
cease blind groping, aimless stumbling,
then march straight on.

So richly blessed,
we trim our own wicks now,
light our lamps of hope.

That by our kindling
we curse not holy darkness,
endure the waves of fear and dread.

Become instead a shining path of light
where faith and love will dwell
in every heart as partners,
and all things lead to certain triumph.

The Definitive Translation

(for mother passing away)

We just pass away,
lying in hospital beds
or quietly at home,
dreaming our limbic dreams
in subcutaneous slumber,
escaping from psychic traumas,
the very long-lived days and fresh wounds
suffered by dysfunctional bodies.

Translated into imagery
that sun-fringed clouds afford,
when the tick-tock of the grandfather clock
has been stilled and the time machine of Kronos
goes kaputt, or Dali-like just melts away,
over a table edge on a flat, mute canvas,
icon of postmodernity.

Where we find ourselves, there we are,
in the copula of the verb to be,
engendering infinite possibilities,
just waiting for Godot,

once cultic priests have been denounced
and all last rites abandoned.

Till sons and lovers break away,
flee the body, while natural science
dreams the wondrous dream that children dream
again, and the soul sensing her own immortality,
escapes the world of dust, rises up on angel wings
to a garden paradise rejoicing.

The Dancing Dress

In Memoriam: Joyce McLean (1920-2001)

I hear your voice in the wind,
in the adagio movement
of tender trees.

You have been transposed,
at last, to another key,
a dominant ninth,
unmistakably major.

Yours now, the unheard strains
of celestial choirs, rich symphonies
that unstop ears of the deaf,
awaken them to the gorgeous life
of a perennial spring,
where an ever-shining golden sun
warms silken skin to always.

I know you are dancing
in your dancing dress,

the one you saved
for your last dance.

You told us with a smile.

We'll turned out,
as you always were,
not classy anymore,
not the looker that once
made men swoon,
but oh so graceful as you are,
noble as a queen,
and joyous beyond words...

Dieppe Revisited: November 11th

He lives on, the dying soldier,
after all these vanquished years,
his flickering face still haunts you,
through stopped up sobs and tears.

Then as fresh as now in memory,
the pangs that stab with bugle's call,
you call up his remembrance now,
the bloody place where he did fall.

You remember, ancient fighter,
the comrade fading in the sun,
you hear again the youthful voice
that knew his fateful time had come.

Once too painful to remember,
the names of loved ones called aloud,
hearts held dear, the vows he made,
soon muted by the funeral shroud.

The slow return from out the dusk,
the man who died there on the beach,

you could not stanch the mortal wounds,
the flow of blood like scarlet maple leaf.

Your companion long lay buried,
down the windswept hall of years,
Canadian soldier tarried long,
with unspoken toil and fears.

But tonight you will remember,
the one in all his woe,
the one who fell and died there,
at Dieppe so long ago.

End of the Dance

At the end of the rumba
or the dance it dies,
going down to the rhythm
of its own slow death.

Alone on the dance floor now,
it seemed to him the last go round
could have been a pack of lies.

But no, when the lights went up
on the darkened house, he remembered
that awakening to self is a kind of
ritual death and burial, come resurrection,
never just a waltz in three-quarter time,
and that we are all our own Van Winkle,
Rips coming to life years later
in some sleepy hollow,
waking to gaze on the world.

No, it's more like a jitterbug — baby —
when the jukebox suddenly quits
but you want to go on dancing...

Brief Noble Life

Allan James McLean in Memoriam (1913-1995)

The face grew paler with the pain.
There were fewer trips into the garden,
sojourns in the morning sun.
The wheel chair became the pivotal point
from which you surveyed your world —
the matches on T.V., the daily round of meals,
a book or two, a song,
friends graciously received,
the long hours broken, brightened,
by intimate speaking with an old companion.
Once in a while, a restaurant outing.

The understatement always there
when I asked about the pain
of bone on bone, derelict knees,
a hip consumed.

The magnanimity stretched out the years.
To old age, immobility, you acquiesced
and to the dull, nagging pain
ever-boring in on your racked joints.
With the same winsome wit, easy laughter
you settled into slow motion,

as when you strode along
strong and free as younger men.

At last you grew weary
of your stalwart soldier,
fatigued and worn by the long campaign,
the barrage of the pounding shells.

The signs we read too well in moments after —
the favourite dessert left untouched,
the ritual of the daily bath sometimes neglected,
your repeated solicitude, the anxious caring.
You slept curled up on your bed.

So finally you took your leave, great soul,
and let her go, the darling of your youth,
destined long ago to wed.

How can such a noble life pass by
so brief, with all the goodness gone,
the gentle, winning voice now still,
the benevolent face erased from view,
from our lingering, indecisive present?

Father. What I would not give
to have you live, one moment more,
to hear the fixed, familiar voice
speak to me again among the stars.

Ballad of the Purple Flowers

The flowers in your window,
you alone will know,
you alone will tend them,
you alone will grow.

Let the sunshine spread their gladness,
let the showers be their rain,
let the purple cure the madness,
and the sorrow and the pain.

I won't be with you, darling,
just to watch the flowers grow,
but I'll watch from another window,
I'll watch you come and go.

You'll remember me with gladness,
beyond sorrow, beyond pain,
the sun will stay your sadness,
give you respite from the rain.

At the day long's fading twilight,
when at last we're free from strain,
I'll remember you, my darling,
and be glad that you came.

I'll remember you, my darling,
as the one whom I loved so,
and the sorrow and the sadness,
will help your flowers grow.

Between the Lines

Then I was young,

now I am old.

Between these two markings

my story is told.

Just these few lines,

writ on a page.

Between them the telling

would last for an age.

In My Life

Experiences of the self with self and
with persons, places and things

Quiet Rain

I make myself tea.

Like a solitary bachelor enjoying a quiet house,

I spin out the anguish of my mind.

Outside, in late September, a quiet rain is falling.

The back lawn, parched by a summer's neglect,

will at last have a chance to drink.

I return to the constant readjustment of the self,

to "existing conditions" as Grandpa Halsted used to say,

making his point as he stood up before us

in the middle of the living room, like a preacher,

pounding his left fist into his right palm.

"Oh, sit down, Will," Grandma would say.

I no longer seek to understand the why of plentiful pain.

Freud and Jung have somewhat lifted the burden,

but we grope on, muddling through, bearing up,

as dumb to our yoke as is the beast of burden

to its own load.

Those who revel in live emotions think they are free.
Tempted to envy when I'm sad,
I remember they are happier who know they have a soul,
happier than to live happily without one.
For we possess the soul by knowing it,
by piercing what we can of this subtle mystery of the sublime.
Through its knowledge, we shall enter the realm of the placeless,
in the last seconds of the last minutes
of the last hours, of the last days.

Relaxing now,
I remember the bitterness of my own tears,
the rhapsodies, the explosions, the return to delight
of the child inside, the child who needs to learn how to dance.

Outside, the patio furniture looms up faintly
in the kitchen light, a resin cream-coloured corner
on the edge of night. They are solitary objects now,
sleek pieces from a black and white photo show,
a New York exhibit that yuppies might hang
as exclusive decorator art.

The upright chairs sit stiff, leaning slightly backward,
exchanging a pompous dialogue in the dim of night:
“Quite, my dear. Right, my dear. No such fear, my dear.”

I continue reading about Eliot’s life:
a breakdown, Margate and Lausanne, psychiatric treatment,
“the collapse of marital expectations.”
Grief, it seems, the price exacted to bring the poet
to the philosophic mind.

I pour out the Red Rose Tea,
symbol of my English connection.
Like a good Brit, I pour in the milk first, then the steaming tea.
The lactic stream swirls, struggles to the surface
like a drowning swimmer and comes to rest.
I reach for a spoon, find the honey, stir it in.
Sweeten to taste. Drink.

Once We Played There My Daughter

Once we played there, my daughter,
at the base of that old elm tree.

That summer another tree had fallen
near the trunk and we had made
the stricken tree our spring for swinging.

We stood on a thick limb,
you in a printed beige cotton dress,
bright with red kettles, tea cups, and sweets,
your father in grey cotton trousers and T-shirt.

I rocked the limb to set it in motion,
steady myself on the branch above.
With the force of each bend of the knee,
the freshly fallen wood yielded under my weight,
and bounced back again with the promise of a fresh delight.
You, much smaller, did the same.

And there we did spring and swing
on the creaking branch,
and laugh on that summer's day.

Splashes of sunshine,
spots of shadow danced across our faces
as we swung from high to low, from low to high.
We were dizzy with the thrill of it,
the chance that we might fall off.

You were much younger, then, my little one,
and the fallen tree is long since cleared away.
The old elm is still there,
but now stands bleak and barren,
newly dusted with the first fall of winter snow
nestled on its branches.

It will be a white Christmas this year.
One thick branch arches its back
and stretches arms to heaven rejoicing:
“It’s Christmas! It’s Christmas!”
says the tree. And all the world rejoices.

I sometimes think of those days,
a little misty-eyed for the past,
when you were still my little one,
and I could hold you in my arms,

as a royal treasure, so quickly robbed
by fleeting time.

Now past midlife, I am thankful
for this present hour,
still ripe with fresh possibilities,
on its way to new tomorrows,
and wonder if you remember that summer's day
when we swung on the fallen branch,
my daughter, my much loved daughter.

Axel Fay: The Open Road

There once was a man who wrecked his life,
fled a desolate home, a mystery wife.
With children grown, he stands alone.

Now he ciphers secrets
whispered on the open road.
Delightful tunes entrance his ear.
He motors west, free-wheeling,
reborn to feeling, retreats from fear.

He goes
up the Bruce to Tobermory,
greeted swooping swallows
 on the way,
speeds on past the clean and tidy rows
 of freshly mown hay,
flies by shady brooks and scented nooks
that shimmer in the heat of day,
savours whitefish freshly caught along
the shores of crystal Georgian Bay.

With the passing miles

he settles in, centering,
finds equipoise, contemplates,
takes transitions in time,
retreats from ceaseless mental fight,
turns turnstiles, life styles,
listens for artesian voices
welling up from fathoms deep,
where fishes sleep;
repeats the greatest name,
lights a holy candle to his breast and brain,
to solve the problem of redundant pain.

To declare life's quiet mysteries:
to struggle or surrender,
keep peace, break peace, loudly complain,
with why the roads that loved ones take,
that lovers make must needs be twain.

He knows that he will love again,
for love is always, with him to whom
all things declare the Face of Love Himself,
beyond every shook form of love,
out of sight of love's every cast and hue
and shifting face, love out of Love.

But love is only true when spoken
by ancient, cryptic tongues,
in the glossolalia of hidden meanings
and traced in script by consecrated hands.

For shifting love is trickster love.
The fool's gold that moves
the grasping hand strikes the gleaming eye,
sees Love Himself concealed in the flash.
Love is only love when we are god-like,
dying gods.

The man gazes on the vast expanse of evening sky,
as he drives on, drawing ever closer to his goal.
The fading pink and orange hues, the blessed isles
float in the ethereal sea above the great Manitoulin.

True on true as love is,
true love on true,
as heartache is on heartache,
and joy heaped on joy,
as true as clouds piled high
as caravan camels in the sky,
in this early evening of a rare July.

A Tourist Travels to Holy Stream in Reading

(for Robert, Stephen and Gillian with loving non-conceptuals)

From the bridge above,
I read the holy stream that once fed Reading Abby.
Robert full of flu, left a sick bed to show me Reading town.

We passed through the Reading botanical,
paused at the victory lion resting on four colossal paws,
colour of faded alabaster, and in a phrase or two summoned up
the glory days when the sun never set on the British Empire.
We did not tarry long among the ruins of the Abby,
stopped at the priory door, took a path through ancient graveyards
grown sloven with long grasses, where the faces of faded monuments
are overgrown with mosses, some names now quite obliterated.

Robert stood at the priory door, hands crossed in front of him.
We snapped pictures to preserve the form of these elemental bodies,
now still alive with colour, eyes still bright with life,
voices still animated by laughter, minds still engrossed in *falsafa*.⁸

We linger at the bridge on holy stream, look down below.
The streaming waters trip along their way,

⁸. Arabic for philosophy.

over narrow beds where reeds and spindly aqua life
swing and sway beneath the surface of the water.

“But is it the self-same stream,” I ask Robert,
“the very one that slaked the thirst of monks
who drew from her waters, the waters that turned the stone
to grind the grain to make the bread,
or another stream, another self?”

My mind tripped back to other waters,
back to the Aegean Sea and to those who laid the foundations
for Lady Wisdom: to Anaximander the Greek and perpetual motion,
and to all the greats who framed the same questions we still ask today,
when Xenophanes first spoke the words:
“We are all of earth and water born.”

I turned my thoughts to the ether
and to the harmony of the spheres,
to that sacred space where the vibrations
of celestial bodies resound in the soul,
to a heavenly melody no longer heard because it's constant,
as the venerable Pythagoras once had taught,
whose accents our English father Shakespeare caught:

Lorenzo speaks:

“Sit Jessica: look, how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st

But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-ey'd cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls.
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.⁹

All these first grasped science by reading nature's book.
Then read the book of man. I thought of all these things —
of the quizzical Quintessence that first made earth, air, fire and water,
forever lost to mind, and those last free radicals of which they're made —
the sun, the moon, the stars.

But, my Robert, we are dukes without titles, lords minus lands,
cathedralists *sans* chair, scholars without books,
jurists without moot court.

In the sacred academy that only celestial travellers know,
we have no names, no titles.
There we exist only in the present of the copula verb to be,
in the jussive mood that needs instant recognition.

Eure Freundshaft ist meine Sehnsucht,
Eure Liebe mein glückliches Andenken.¹⁰

⁹. To Shylock's daughter Jessica, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act V, Scene 1.

¹⁰. Your friendship is my longing. Your love my happy remembrance.

The Willows

The willows bowed low to me,
blown by a balsamous¹¹ breeze.
I lay flat on the grass, looked up,
transfixed by the blue sky.
They either wept out their sorrow,
or confessed a saraband of adoration.

— I could not tell —

It was summer again.
*Die ewige Wiederkehr.*¹²
A romance dream?
Symbolic possibilities?
“Be flexible,” whispered the willows,
as their tendrils grazed past my face.
“Be flexible,” they echoed, weeping.

¹¹. Poetic licence. The correct word is “balsamic.”

¹². One of Nietzsche's favourite expressions. German for “the eternal return.”

The Eton Man

I never went to Eton.

I don't wear the school tie.

I don't throw flowers on the Thames.

The girls don't make me cry.

I don't bowl cricket on the green,

nor sip two pints a day,

or don a football jersey,

for games both home and away.

I don't hang on the master's sleeve,

to curry with him favour,

to press a timely interview,

his conversation savour.

I will not hide my boyish tears,

when mother takes her leave,

in halting steps, make on, look back,

with nothing left to grieve.

I shall remember heroic souls,

at the tolling of the bell,

at the brassy bugle's blowing,
Noblesse oblige my one *rappel*.

An Etonian is obliged to pray,
the chapel hall frequent,
though body and soul may not be whole,
and the wayward mind hellbent.

My heart will never languish,
for the gardens of Windsor Castle,
nor linger about old Henry's school.
True royals live in Newcastle.

The Eton man were self-contained,
his own private deacon be,
find solace in his book-lined rooms,
an artisan in spondee.

For the old boy is a self-made man,
his politics utopian.
Verily, verily, the true Eton man,
never was Etonian.

Endless Joy

He rides fleet street,
the broad highway.
The city on the crown of the hill
he leaves behind, fast retreating.
He angles for the cleft,
racing into the valley,
free-wheeling, a boy again.

Is this why men play war games,
why the last great myth of the fighter pilot
is taking time to die?
A mad race seeks intoxication
through obscene death.

Then,
one tiny drop borne up by the wind
breaks free on the windscreen.
It explodes — a gentle jewel lanced by the sun,
the genesis of this brief life set in motion
by the elements, those last free agents
that have life in themselves,
the sun, the wind, the stars.

The drop irradiates and does not die.
My eye follows as it tracks its course
dead-on along the glass.
Miraculously, it remains intact.
It tracks and tracks as if it were a pilot.
But now there are two pilots,
each on its own mad mission of joy.
They run on pure ecstasy,
no melted skin, compression wounds below.

For a second, space seems to curve,
time accelerates, then stops.
I am enchanted by the microcosmic scene,
watch the brief course of this one act cosmic play.
The burning drop speeds on and disappears into night.

A drop of water or a comet in full flight?
Endless joy. Endless joy.

City Lights

It is dusk. The man is writing at his window,
listening to night music.

City lights five miles distant glow,
a faintest phosphorescence, softest scintillation.

Solo notes sound off from the cusp of a crescent moon.

Breezes born higher up in the Gatineau
sweep down the valley to cool his torso,
to ease his skin almost to a chill,
surprisingly cool for July...

On his arm, a few light hairs are stirred,
then settle down to lie.

Land locked at the window,
his spirit journeys east and west.

He sees fishing boats turn homeward,
on the labour of the day.
The lamps of loved ones, burning brightly,
beckon home to rest, to play.

Pacific Rim peoples rise to greet him

at the waking dawn.

They scan the waters for their sea-bound guest,

who once cast anchor in the West.

He sees their coloured garlands and tanned skin.

He furrows on.

Lovers send off loved ones

on a journey from the nest,

hug them briefly to the breast,

release into the Stream of Life,

in which all things flow,

once they are kissed and blessed,

once they are kissed and blessed.

An Afternoon With Roger

The Best Western Hotel. Downtown Richmond.

An unlikely spot to meet the poet, I thought.

The first images I conjured up were of western saddles,
long-horned steer, images of the American frontier,
and an U.S. hotel chain moving into Canada.

“I’ll meet you just outside the restaurant,” Roger had said.

I saw the trucker’s cap before I recognised the poet.

The preconceived image didn’t fit — the beige windbreaker,
the blue slacks, the demure, quiet motion.

But, then, how does a poet look?

We exchanged greetings, the pleasantries,

I happy to meet again this “poet laureate of the Bahá’í world,”¹³

who once, from his stage in Haifa, had observed a parade of mahatmas
traverse the wings on their way to eternity,

Roger, “delighted,” he said, to meet the odd soul who savoured poetry.

It made me feel like a rare bird doomed to extinction.

Personal history was in the making,

an alchemical significance of the moment.

We had met briefly once before at a conference in Montreal,

¹³. This is Geoffrey Nash’s epithet.

his easy eloquence was quickly evident then.

Only a snippet of the conversation comes back to me now:

“...some little Arab girl looking as if she fell out of the Bible,” he said.

Time has long since claimed the point of the story,

but the poetry remains. And the wit of the man.

That day is a picture show of memories

made bright by travel and the light of meeting a great soul.

The quotidian rubbed shoulders with the sublime that afternoon.

I drove you to the printer's for *Notes Postmarked The Mountain of God*.

Your doctor wasn't there. We did lunch instead on the terrace

of a Vancouver restaurant. We enjoyed the brilliant sunshine,

the coast mountains, savoured conversation.

The waiter placed the meal before you,

an enormous filet of fish fried golden brown.

The silverware glinted as you cut into the thick coat of batter.

I still see the careful movement of your hand, almost hesitant.

Later at the bookstore, I observed the poet-teacher

give a message to two strawberry blond, freckled,

adolescent sisters with ease and simplicity,

a mark of nobility in the delivery,

the generation gap erased in a sweep of courtesy,

my faith in youth, temporarily lost from witnessing

too many antics in the classroom, restored again.

Then on to Stanley Park and the Welsh tourist.

We lazed on a bench enjoying the sun, chatting,
when he happened by, torso bare, moving to the rhythm of aerobics,
breaking stride for a moment to ask directions.

The Welshman snapped the picture of two poets,
office towers at our backs, sail boats anchored in the inlet.

You tell me you're weighing anchor one last time for Haifa Bay.

There you'll find a resting place in the Carmel mosaic of great souls,
an intricate design undreamt by men, that holy wall alive with colour,
the wonder of every face and hue reflected under heaven.

What a company you will join, the motley crew that became His lovers!

The children of Bahá, those of us as yet unborn,
shall pass their hands along that wall,
point a finger when they find the Sadrat Tree and say:
"This is Roger, our golden-throated bird."

Copper Leaf White October Moon

The poplars have a moist smell in late October.

The bark, the decaying leaves, now copper-gold,
mingle with the vapours rising from the flowing Gatineau,
the all-merging in a pungent scent that still defies winter's coming sleep.

I cycle into suspended currents of air,
now warm, now chill.

Breathing deeply, gazing up at the round moon,
my skin a sense organ, body alive,
I try to absorb this last glimpse of ethereal beauty
before the snow flies.

I veer along the path that runs the edge of Lac Lemay.
On the far side of the lake, I catch sight of hazy,
orange columns of light reflected in the water
by the lights of overhanging street lamps,
and passing cars on highway 5 and boulevard St. Joseph.

I cycle on under the Lady Aberdeen bridge.
As I emerge, a vaporous moon waits
to greet me, a waning, fading late autumn moon,
hung up in the sky above the steeple of St. Francis church.

I turn sharply and pedal hard up the steep grade.

Now I am above the river. I cross the bridge and turn.

Up St. Antoine I go.

In that fleeting moment as I pass,

I see a man sitting at a table in a tavern,

a caricature of valley days gone by.

He wears a lumberjack vest and blunted black beard.

His face has never been softened by love.

He tastes the salt of his own tears when he goes home,

and when he dreams, he finds the bitter taste again.

I make for home, coasting down the last stretch.

One last hill. The angle is too steep.

I dismount, walk my bike up the path to home,

and to my own uncertainties.

As I walk, I recall the vision from long ago,

the celestial maiden in the air, with outstretched arm

pointing an urgent finger to the heavenly body:

“I direct you,” she commands.

“I direct you to the moon.”

Swimming at Meech Lake

The water is liquid silk.

An ambitious crawl moves me further into the lake.

I submerge my head briefly, surface, catch my breath, repeat.

Through water-stained eyes, I glimpse the Gatineau Hills
on the other side of Meech.

The white cottage and veranda that dominate the island
just ahead seem only an arm's length away.

I keep on swimming.

Seen through fish eyes, the discreet dimensions
of the hills and inland lake hem me in with memories
of Red Pine Lake, Gooderham, Haliburton Hills, 1950.

And I am there again with Mom and Dad, Mary Lou and Stephen.

Dad manoeuvres the black Fargo van over the rough surface
of the bush road, broken here and there with igneous rock.

We scrape bottom, bounce around, as we make our way down to the lake.

Already fresh evergreen fills our nostrils and mingles
with the scent of the forest floor, the berries and ferns,
the soft mosses, the dry needles and pine cones.

The shadows cast by still-standing silent trees
are lanced by shafts of brilliant sunlight.

The screaming jay strafes us with an impudent welcome.

Smiling, Mom dips Steve in and out of the water off the end of the dock.

Steve murmurs his delight.

Uncle Stewart hunts bullfrogs in the shallows of a rocky shoreline
in search of an exotic supper. Later the weather turns bad.

Already tipsy, Stewart drives the motorboat in circles,
trying to catch hail stones with a scotch-on-the-rocks in his hand.

From the veranda overlooking the lake, the family watches,
grimly concerned at these antics, only slightly amused

Evenings, I slept on a soft grey cot in a cabin of knotty pine,
varnished fresh, swept clean.

Mornings, my waking eyes thrilled to the sight of sunspots
dancing splendid over the water,
in the first birth of bliss that weds
soul of delight to body, ravished eye to spirit.

I return to myself and swim on,
buoyant with memories.

July 9th

(a true story)

This morning I awoke with blood in my eye.

Go to doctor. Doctor says:

"Subconjunctive haemorrhage.

I wish I had a dollar for every one I see."

Metaphysical me starts to cipher —

or is it decipher — ?

Soul longs to rise out of Flatland,

escape common sense,

the land where one-dimensional logic reigns supreme,

where fools entrapped by their own minds pontificate,

and kings become court jesters.

Signs and symbols, syllables slowly yield

their brides of inner meaning.

I lovingly embrace them, these virgins, on this journey.

For mythos is not mindless repetition, crass mistake.

It is called eternal now.

The practicum of reason finds

the blood in my eye signifies

capillaries breaking down. Nothing more.

But I find the logos is in the mythos.

His blood, the blood of the Kosmos,
the ambrosia of the gods, the Divine Elixir that sets
the universe to spinning, each star a whirling dervish
to dance a hymn of praise, of God-intoxicated love,
never-ending, ever-free.

My eye solicits prayer, concern.
His eye resurrects the fallen warriors.
My eye, this bleeding stain of ink,
marked, remarked upon.
His, crystal fount of heavenly light,
the Eye of God whereby we see.

My eye, faulty orb.
His eye, body of pure grace and beauty.

My eye, unchaste.
His, chastened to Perfection.

Mine — particulars of matter.
His — Symphony of Spirit.

“No redemption then?” I ask.
“Am I lost to imperfection?”

Yes, says the mind.
No, says the voice.

Today we are drowned in a wine-red sea.

The blood in my eye is a spot of His love,
the joy of remembrance of four companions
conversing in a jail cell in Tamerlane's Tabriz,
with the mirth, the gaiety that laughs at death,
His countenance set aglow the night before the execution,
uncommon radiance before High Noon.

The Holy Seed will yield at last the precious oil,
to feed the wicks, to light the lamps of wisdom for all time,
to fan the flames of love without end,
crushed by cruel oppressors, who, O Lord,
bestowed upon us greatest favour
from your bounteous hand.

The hour of deliverance approaches.

He counts each golden moment,
savouring suspended time,
till the deed at last is done,
and he is hung, and He rejoice
the soul's rejoicing, shout Hosannas.

We see only tragedy,
smoking rifles, riddled corpses.
Ah, but think of the mesh of love
that blended Master to disciple,
uncommon worlds now shared,
triumph of their sacrifice.

Non Imperator

Dishonour the experience
anchored in illusion,
unchain yourself from castle walls.
Refrain from engraving the stolen imprint
onto the soft wax of the hasty heart.

Non imperator.

Beware the falling shadows,
the widow's black veil.
High-handed puffed-up clouds
spell vain immortality.

Cast away, sail away.
Soar speechless, spaceless,
unbind presumptive words,
the vain discourse,
the careless whisper
of what is not mine.

Remembering Northhill

(for Wendi and Moojan Momen)

Northhill, Beds, the summer of '92.

A fine rain drizzles down.

I head out for morning exercise,
go east of the village in search of England.

Following the fences, I jog past the closely cropped turf
of the common, observe the single oak,
ancient in its veil of misty rain, lordly but lovely,
looking for the clues that gave birth
to our tongue and to our psychic soul.

I find ivy, well-worn brick, thatched roofs,
hand-quarried stone, inns, terraced homes,
kitchen gardens, centuries of cultivation,
discrete dimensions.

Cars swish past on slick narrow lanes.

I have to remember to look the other way when I cross,
now that left is right and right is left.

(I almost came to mishap acting by reflex.)

I keep jogging and turn round at the cotts up the long grade
where the road bends. The going back is easier.

My runners now quite saturated, slosh and squeak in the wet,
in a dull, barely audible thud as my feet strike the pavement,
the occasional friction of grit underfoot.

I approach a car standing in a laneway,
headlights on, motor still. I stop for a moment,
slog on up to the door. The bells chime.
A tall lady full of grace, head slightly angled in anticipation,
demurely greets me as if I were an unknown guest
just arriving for dinner. Have I met an angel unawares?
“Excuse me,” I say, conscious of my Canadian accent,
my cap dripping wet, “I just wanted to let you know
that you've left your headlights on.”
“That’s very kind of you. Thanks very much,”
comes the clipped reply with the tonic falling on the word “much.”
The faint smile echoes after her.
The white bevelled glass door closes.

World without suspicion...
No invitation to dinner
from the graceful lady in shades of grey.

From the Other Side of the Mountain

As I work blind,
feeling my way along,
a half-conscious
subterranean being,
I feel the workings
of your mind,
the distant impulses
of your will.

Like a silent voice
I can almost hear
from the other side
of the mountain,
you call to me and say:
“This way! Over here!”
“No.” “This way.”

Earth Mother at Montebello¹⁴

(remembering David Erickson and Jacoba da Voss)

O time runs on down to the rivers,
and the rivers run down to the seas.

The sounds outside my window
run down to infinity.

Poetry broke that first morning,
when I awoke to the song of the birds,
when the sun scattered jewels on the water,
and melodious voices were heard.

¹⁴. Montebello Quebec is about 30 miles east of Ottawa. Stanzas four to seven of this poem may make those inclined to the Freudian interpretation smile, but beginning in verse four, this poem is grounded in a real mystical experience that took place in the presence of the two other poets to whom the poem is dedicated, David Erickson and Jacoba da Voss. David, Jacoba and I used to drive occasionally to the Château Montebello to enjoy the Saturday morning smorgasbord and to discuss poetry and other things. On the morning in question, we had left the restaurant and walked down to the Ottawa River to continue our chat. I stretched out on the grass and continued talking with David and Jacoba when I was suddenly transformed by the experience of feeling the earth beneath me come to life as a living person that sustained and supported not only myself, but all life on the planet. I related the experience to David and Jacoba as it took place. The experience was in reality an undeniable awareness of the living presence of a larger-than-life maternal figure who gave comfort, understanding and support. Subsequently, I came to realise that the "earth mother" whose presence I so vividly felt that day was an archetypal mother goddess figure whose likeness, previously unknown to me, I subsequently discovered in my readings of illustrated mother goddess figures of the ancient Near East. About ten years later, while living on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia (1997-1999), I came across a likeness of the goddess figure I saw and felt that day in the sculpture of Mr. David Spencer who lives on Salt Spring Island. During a stroll through the Saturday morning market in downtown Ganges, I discovered Mr. Spencer's sculpture of the image of a mother goddess who strongly resembled the archetypal figure I had experienced in Montebello. Mr. Spencer told me that this figure, whom he had sculpted without prior knowledge of the goddess, was immediately recognized by several women who came to view and to purchase his sculpture of the goddess-archetype.

For true love will remedy passion,
a nectar to dry wasted tears,
elixir for one's petty hatreds,
the small self that must disappear.

I lay at the breast of Earth Mother,
as she lulled every plaint and cry.
The grounds rolled along to the footpath,
tan ponies pranced fleetingly by.

I rested on Earth Mother's body.
She lent solace, support and rest.
She became a living person,
and comforted me at her breast.

She gently supported and nourished,
this mother of solace blessed,
cheering the soul with good humour,
in compassion and wisdom best.

No mother of mine was the Earth Mother,
but big bosomed mother of all,
this Earth Mother, our very planet,
who sustains and embraces us all.

Foreign Places

“When you play on the flute at Zanzibar, all Africa as far as the lakes dances.” Arab proverb

Let me travel through open spaces
to foreign places, greet unfamiliar faces.
to a land away from x=
at the antipodes of hermetic thought.

Perhaps I'll see a Chinaman working his abacus,
or find an Arab trudging through the sand,
pulling on a camel.

Maybe visit sunny Zanzibar,
where Ethiop and East Indian
while time away in crowded bazaars,
wake my ear to the cacophony
of splendid caged birds.

I'll play on my flute till Africa
as far as the lakes dances,
pass through brass-studded doors
into garden enclosures,

that disclose flaming Acacias
that run dilatory with gum Arabic.

When I reach journey's end,
I'll weigh anchor once again,
ride one last time the riotous waves,
and come flying on home.

There I'll sit before the fire,
reinvent the chronicle
within the embers' glow.

Little Light Boat On The Ottawa

Tonight I stand on the banks of the Gatineau,
where it meets the Ottawa,
down from the bridge built by Lady Aberdeen,¹⁵
watching a vapour moon wink a misty eye
through thinning veils of clouds blowing by.

It is a night of a thousand Julys,
filled with the perfumed breath
of a mute lover's sighs.

I spy a little boat across the way.
It seems to hover in the aura of its own light,
afloat upon the black water,
bobs and weaves in place, moves haltingly upstream
toward the faintly glowing outline of the city.

Just beyond, the skyline looms with arcs of bridges,
state museums, office towers, federation buildings,

¹⁵. A story has long circulated in Gatineau that I heard while I was living there. The story says that Lady Aberdeen, wife of the Governor General of Canada (1893-98), Lord Aberdeen, 1st Marquess of Aberdeen and Temair, John Campbell Gordon, had this bridge constructed as a debt of gratitude. It is said that she fell into the Gatineau River and was saved from drowning by a local *Gatinois*.

high rise apartments, the Château Laurier,
the spire of Notre Dame Church, indeterminate structures
that resemble dark medieval battlements
impervious to human onslaught.

Monstrous stands the city and its lights,
as if to knowingly defy that one small boat
gliding into port, where once not long ago,
sinewy voyageurs paddled their *canots de maître*
with pelts destined for Nor'west trading in Montreal.

At least you are travelling, little boat,
a moving vessel, *une petite force qui va*.

We too are vessels on our way,
each of us belonging some where,
for some time, some of us to some one,
some how, as we move toward
the next stop-over, making criss-cross patterns
in the world.

Happy

Happy as I am,

I am. O so happy.

Happy. Happy.

I am happy,

as I am. I am.

Happy.

O so happy!