

WHISPERS OF ANGELS

Poems

1990

J.A. McLean

These poems are dedicated to my father

Allan James McLean

(1913-1995)

Prince and Commoner Who Lives in Our Hearts

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1. Lyrics

Swimming at Meech Lake

I have never known such swimming. The water is silk.
I bob my way ahead with an ambitious breast stroke,
head submerging briefly, surfacing, catching breath, repeating.
Through water-stained eyes I catch a glimpse of the Gatineau Hills
on the other side of the lake.
The grand white cottage and veranda dominating the island
is only an arm's length away. Should I push on?

I keep on swimming.
Effortlessly the water seems to carry me.
Seen through a fish's eye, the discreet dimensions
of the hills and inland water hem me in with memories
of Red Pine Lake, Gooderham, Haliburton Hills, 1950.
And you are there again with Mary Lou and Stephen.
Dad negotiates the black Fargo pick-up over the bush road,
stumped with igneous rock breaking through.
Up and down we go as the track wends its way down to the lake.
Already the smell of the whispering pines reaches our nostrils,
now primed for all the scents of the forest floor,
the berries and ferns, the soft mosses, the dry needles and pine cones.
The dark forest green is lanced with shafts of sunlight as we pass.
The screaming jay strafes us with an impudent welcome.

Smiling, Mum dips Steve into the water off the dock, coos with delight.
Steve smiles too. Uncle Stewart is hunting bulls for a frogleg supper,
with a scotch on the rocks in his hand,
and for crazy antics he drives the motorboat in circles
under a grey and rainy sky.

Then I slept on a soft grey cot,
awoke in a round log cabin of knotty pine, varnished fresh,
screened and swept clean.

From where I lay, my eyes thrilled to the sight
of the bright morning sun on the lake.

Sunspot crystals spangled the breadthway.

Laughing eyes danced, moved splendorous over the water.

I would not now trade Inca treasures for that scene,
the soul's first birth of delight.

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

Rizwan Eve 150

I shall always remember this Rizwan eve.

The April rains froze at mid morning,
encasing the still bare branches in sleeves of ice.

We should have seen jewels dance in the trees that afternoon,
behind a brilliant sun, but none came out to chase away the gloom.

The homecomer with amazed eyes stared at ice-clusters of trees,
frozen bouquets of shrubs and bushes on hillsides,
and in still dead fields, a *nature morte*,
revealing subtle shades of brown superimposed,
still transparent through the *glace*.

As I drove up the long *montée* to the turn off,
a thick flock of blackbirds off to my left
shifted on the wing, with the sudden movement
of a fan in a lady's hand, and with one motion,
as if they had gained omniscience,
veered upward in a way that reminded me of the child
hop-scotching through the air,
who knows nothing but the pure innocent joy
of its own sudden motion.

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 their buds, their leaves, their flowers,
all in a sequence that has been planned timeless,
yesterday, today and tomorrow all seen as one
in the mind of God.

The bobolink, the robin, the rare yellow canary,
the red-winged blackbird, natives all to these northern fields,
are now trilling out their songs, in the land of the melting drop,
in the season of flowing waters.

The eaves gurgle with the liquid throated sound
of the commerce of falling rain.

The water heads where it will,
following a path of dead reckoning.

Northern Geese Returning

Today I hurried from my bed to see the northern geese returning.
Stumbling from the west window, then to the south,
I finally caught them in the sky at the east window.
Throwing open the glass partition, then the screen,
eyes still full of sleep, half closed with the smarting glance
of the May sun, I spied them moving northward, honking.
Not a textbook V formation, but one great gangly chevron,
deviating from the straight line, in a sharp, oblique slanted Y,
changing on the wing, animated brush strokes,
daubs of faded paint on the canvas of the sky,
alive and moving, as the oblique angle changed shape,
becoming more obtuse; individual birds forming,
reforming, joining, separating,
but ever moving up to northern skies.
Not eagles these clumsy geese, but fliers of fortitude.

Few rituals men have these days,
but this is one I gratefully observe,
should chance and circumstance find me in season,
awake upon my bed of negligence.

This spring sighting has blessed me with a glad ritual.
Blessed be my eyes, half full of sleep,
to see northern geese returning.

The Half Moon Hangs

The half moon hangs

a cold pearl

in the March sky.

One black crow nestles

in the stark fingers

of an elm

oblivious to its own sleek beauty.

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 one myth of the fighter pilot
is taking time to die?
The 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 doesn't 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 exstasy.
No melted skin, compression wounds below.

For a second, space curves.
Time accelerates, then stops.
I sing quietly the brilliant birth
of the microcosmic scene,
watch the coursing of the one act play.
The burning drop speeds on and disappears into night.
A drop of water or a comet in full flight?
Endless joy. Endless joy.

Consumer Products

The morning is still small.
I play radio to find
a lingering piano bar in
nostalgic, asia-minor key.
America in the late 40's.
The keys tinkle as they ramble.
I gaze into the pantry.
It is almost one.
The white grained rice
preserved in a large Mason's jar,
the sugar, *blême* in its 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.

I see them now,
these products to be consumed,
as visions of delight.

From out of the last night of nothingness,
into the first green morning
of the primal garden,
I hear their far-off names being called.

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 will wash away your sin.
Laughing eyes are yours to win.

The passing years break down the walls.
Your 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 will taste the banquet cup.

Surrender now youth's broken sigh,
False tears can flow in the anguished cry.
The bloodied heart bespeaks many a lie.

Sorrows vanish. Some remain.
The 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.

The world outside with sounds replete,

This eventide lies calm and sweet,

It's common lore my pen and I repeat.

We've sailed the eastern rim at last.

The farthest shore. Our sails flew fast.

Let us stop here, then gently pass.

A Day in the Life

The faucets are leaking,
the garden needs weeding.
The rugs need shaking,
the side door needs painting.
At least I've started the sanding.

I sit in the bath
and gulp down some hot tea.
It tastes gorgeous.
My body becomes my real existence.

In the balm of the hot water,
I plan a trip to the bank, the post office.
The increasing costs. The shrinking budget.
I tell myself to sit up straight,
when I'm not reclining.
Bad posture can make you tired,
even though you have bad posture
because you're tired.

The jarring phone call. The demanding, intrusive voice.
The heart-breaking funeral. The slow return to normalcy.
When. The research. The writing. The composing.

When those favourite trips to the library stacks?

There are many letters to scholars, editors,

exchanges with the *Mutakallimún*.¹

I write a poem.

Then I'm off for the slow-burning thrill of the department store cruise,

looking for a portable barbecue for a backyard cook-out,

and the intimacies of some quiet conversation with a few friends,

and the insistent taste of charbroiled food in the mouth.

Outdoor cooking on the cool of a summer eve.

Get out of the heat of the kitchen.

Maybe I'll be able to sit down with Leah,

and visit a while, even though she still lives here.

She said all of your time belongs to God.

Is it true of the bathing, and the cooking,

and the department store cruising?

So much movement. Busy day. Busy day.

Those busy steps are directed to him,

far off in the glazed haze of eternity,

I remind myself as I walk quickly.

Were I a marquis, baron, or earl

¹. Arabic for "theologians". Some of my correspondants specialise in Islamic studies.

I would engage servants to feed me sitting down.
No more getting up for the marmalade, the peanut butter,
fetching the tea pot, putting the juice back in the fridge.
How can one stay quiet for a moment?

To enjoy the discipline of sitting in the silence
of my sacred space, ruled by the rod of *Zazen*.²
To sit almost soundless, except for the chicklet keys computing;
pausing to hear a solitary page or two turning,
the pen striving to scratch out the flawless phrase.

Exploring, discovering the great of mind,
the seminal truth seekers, the minor revelators,
the scorned poets, those most philosophic of thinkers.
To focus, to compose, to create, as in a whirlwind,
while you be as still as a stone in a pool,
as brilliant as a jewel.

². I am using *Zazen* very loosely. The Chinese Zen master Dogen who brought Zen to Japan from China in 1253 taught that *Zazen* or "sitting in meditation" had as its goal the gradual attaining of *satori* in a total experience of body and mind without the resolution of any particular intellectual dilemma or problem. My use of "sitting in meditation" is mostly intellectually goal oriented.

Earth Mother at Montebello³

(Remembering: David Erickson, Jacoba da Voss)

O time runs on down to the rivers,
and the rivers run down to the sea,
the sweet sounds outside my window,
pass on into infinity.

A man hammers. A door slams,
the cars rush on by down the road.
A sound indistinct blends in symphony,
to bear up the mother lode.

These sweet sounds I heard one fine morning.
Such sweet sounds I'll hear once again.
In the black verticals of the beige tapestry,
I am no longer conscious of pain.

Prosody brought back that fine morning,

³. Some lines of this poem may make the Freudians smile, but beginning in verse six, the 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 Chateau Montebello in Montebello, Quebec 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 water's edge on the Ottawa River to continue our chat. I stretched out on the grass and continued chatting with David and Jacoba when I was suddenly transformed by the experience of feeling the earth beneath me come to life, no longer a mere inanimate object to which one might relate in only an esthetic way, but as a living person that sustained and supported not only me but all life on the planet. I related the experience to David and Jacoba as it took place. Any sexual allusions read into the poem are misreadings. The experience was in reality a very large sense of a living presence of maternal comfort, understanding and support.

when I awoke to the song of the birds,
when the sun dappled jewels on the water,
and melodious voices were heard.

There is antidote *sans passion*,
a nectar that dissolves without tears,
remedy for one's throttled hatred,
the small self when abstract disappears.

I lay on the breast of earth mother,
and she comforted me with a sigh.
The trim glebe stretched away to the footpath,
tan ponies pranced fleetingly by.

I rested on earth mother's body,
and she gave me support, strength and rest.
She became a living person,
and comforted me at her breast.

Gently supported and nourished,
mother of solace blessed,
cheering the soul with light humour,
in compassion and wisdom best.

No mother of mine was the earth mother,
but big bosomed mother of all,
the earth mother, our very planet,
that embraces us all.

Islands in the Sun

We are islands in the sun.
We cannot stretch our limbs beyond the waves,
throw open wide our arms in fond embrace,
build an arc across the quay,
but blest lie we in the same shining sea.

The Aegean's lapped our shores for eons now,
and girded us about with robe of salty blue.
Our silent eyes have witnessed times *sans* score
the disappearing sun, beheld again
the day star's weary climb from Oceania's floor.

We are droplets of dry land
that share this space offshore.
We who were not drowned survive.
We see you, watch you, wait,
and greet you with our eyes.
We live in hope, anticipate
the great surprise, the day
when we shall break our hold,
and you rise up, be free.

Come Embrace the Gentle Sleep of Time

Come, embrace the gentle sleep of time
that beckons you away,
to pause from labour's weary task,
the long and dreary day.

Sleep. Sleep and rest,
noble soul, pretty one, heaven's blest.
This senseless world scarce knows you yet,
cannot feel your beating heart,
see "the sorrows of your changing face".⁴

The angels see you at your desk,
hear your prayers and sighs.
They will grant your every wish,
of this you can be sure.
Soon will the morning sun
break and rise, be mirrored
in your smiling eyes.

⁴. This familiar line is taken from Yeat's poem "When You Are Old". (1893)

Sky Rocket Over Gatineau East

Running easy, I head along the third concession road
to Scullion's farm. I turn at the laneway leading to
the white clapboard farmhouse with green trim.
Arnold and Norma Scullion and the still smiling black-spotted cow
always greet me no matter what the weather.
As I head back, two scaffolds of amber street lamps
hanging high over the end of the half-thawed gravel road
beckon me on where black asphalt begins.
One light is the Báb. The other Bahá'u'lláh.
They are waiting for me at the end of this stretch,
the two brilliant globes that light the night.
I'll make them my goal. They'll be there at the finish.
But there should be a third light.
Where is `Abdu'l-Bahá? The correspondence is not there.
The superego tells me not to dare to test such great powers
by looking for a sign. But it is already done.
The eager soul that sees the universe as person
has asked for one already.
It came uncorked from some deeper recess of the heart.

Another persona speaks.
The scholar's sceptical voice challenges my conscience:
"Highly unlikely. You can't contrive the universe.
This is silly. There would be good reasons should a third appear.
You don't have to invoke the great powers of the universe.

The mistress of reason shall explain should it happen."

I still my mind, but not quite forgetting, keep on running.

I hadn't run three hundred yards.

A sky-rocket in upward flight explodes on the dark horizon,
showering its reddish orange spots of falling incandescence
over Gatineau east. Only one reddish orange night flair.

Amazed, I run on, reflecting. It's March, not Canada Day.

I search my mind for explanations. There is no repeat.

The scholar and the telltale heart talk in a *Begegnung*.

I find be and it is. I find all things are possible with God.

I find a world of correspondences, valid for the middle-aged schoolmen,
still valid for me in the here and now,

for one lone, late twentieth century suburban runner,

seen by an omniscient and benevolent eye

whose love still overpowers the world.

I run on mesmerised by the encounter.

Back in the project, I am startled by two partridges

flying off from the base of a snow bank,

beating the air furiously with their wings.

I watch them rise into the sky over Scullion's field,

and disappear into the dark night.

I wonder how they feed themselves these little birds

when all the fields are still crusted over with snow.

I head home my soul swimming in delight.

The Willows

The willows bowed low to me,
 very low,
blown by a balsamous breeze.
I lay flat on the grass,
transfixed by the blue sky.
They either wept out their joy,
or confessed a saraband of adoration
I did not suspect.

It was summer again.

*Die ewige Wiederkehr.*⁵

A romance dream?

Symbolic possibilities?

"Be flexible", whispered the willows,
as their tendrils grazed past my face.

"Be flexible", they echoed, weeping.

⁵. One of Nietzsche's favourite expressions; German for "the eternal return".

Pastoral Elegy for Analogy

It is July again.

Once more summer has lain
her shimmering girdle of heat
upon Quebec fields.

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

Close by, the harvested hay
has been bundled up in rotundas,
like circular pieces
on a golden checker board
that knows no rules or boundaries,
the players being absent.

The fields have been combed and shaved,
leaving tawny stubble.

The sheep seem to be stones,
grazing motionless.

From a distance, the rounds of hay beside them
look themselves like grazing sheep,
one vision superimposed upon another,
each image transparent to the other.

We are sheep who nourish a blind life.
We graze as sheep to nourish elemental bodies,
yet do not ask the reason for our grazing.
Like sheep, we pasture in the rolling hills,
yet do not give thanks for sustenance.
Like sheep, blissfully oblivious,
peaceful in the pastoral fold,
we have no life but bucolic blues,
the peace of the graveyard.

Night is falling quickly.
Wolves await the thickening shroud to devour,
yet their pastor has come to lead them home.
I sorrow that they do not hear his voice and follow,
follow to refuge and to other pastures green.
We hear the shepherd's voice yet dumbly perish.
Let us troop together as one lost sheep
at the close of the darkening day,
and at the sound of the quickening voice,
be lead to safety, be lead into eternity.

Sailor and Pilot

I am two things only:

Sailor and pilot. Pilot and sailor.

I move quickly in my skiff,
to trim my sail and catch the warm gust,
nimble to the side of my craft,
to slice my way through whitecaps unfurled,
and embrace the happy beams.

I veer and soar on breathless heights,
and from my springboard in sunny skies,
plunge deep into the valley's cleft,
pull steadily up to ride rivers of liquid air.

No end to my seven journeys,
no end to my sailor song,
no end to high flight on the face of God.⁶

⁶. I clearly recognise in this last line my debt to John Gillespie McGee's superlative poem "High Flight".

From the Other Side of the Mountain

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

Like a silent voice
from the other side
of the mountain,
--if only I could hear--
that calls to me and says:
"This way! Over here!"
"No." "This way."

Today I Just Went Out Into the World

Today I just went out into the world,
our wild and raging world,
and saw a child take her father's hand.
And, as I rode along, high in the June sky,
where sultry summer reigns queen again,
other comforts did I find.

I studied clouds and felt so free,
heard summer's call so rare.
To ease my mind, laid books to rest,
and learnt her lessons fair.

Today I went out again into the world,
a world of *erotica* driven,
where men command by the threat of their fists,
where women rule with the power of their hips,
where politicians deceive us with their lips.

But then I heard the children laughing,
watched the little children splashing,
watched the older children passing,
into adulthood.

I watched young lovers walk on down the road,
living the golden extasy of now.

Do not taunt them with a wagging face,
or spoil their lovely dream,
burst the flimsy bubbles they are blowing.

Do not say:

"O my children! Your only enemy is time.

I am wiser, because I know time."

Let me them glory in the luscious extasy of now.

Today I went out into the world,
heard my wife bring greetings
from those who saw my place was bare,
mused on how my daughters grow apart from me,
as they pursue appointed courses,
closed my study door then laughed at funny films,
ate popcorn, cooked hamburg steaks
with hot pepper rings, made myself tea.

Today I went out into the world,
the lovely, lovely world,
and for my restless, wandering soul
found one happy moment in fleeting time
of quiet, peace and rest.

I read into nature's breast,
divined the forms of clouds again;
found camels, angels, creatures, lovers,
searched her ways and in her soul
found Heaven blest.

Today, I called to mind two loving brothers
far across the sea,
thought that I would journey soon
to England's shore to join their company.

Thought that I would follow bliss,
in the short moments that are mine,
savour my just lot of precious time,
and taste the heady wine.

Today I went out into the world.

The Enigma of Paradise

The paradise I lost,

I never solved the losing.

The paradise that's here

I've always failed at proving.

O who is there to tutor me

in the heaven that is here and now,

the paradise to be?

Tahiti North

Went out from my house today
my mind to vivify.

There, like a pilot,
under a gauginian sky,

I met the autumn.

Tahiti north of a sunlit afternoon,

delirious, icy, burning blue,

swept clean, daylong,

as keen as the hour,

painted by a gargantuan hand,

white wisps from one corner of heaven

to the other.

Went out from my house

to look up at the azure blue.

Bouteille à la Mer

(Bottle to the Sea)

I have launched a bottle on the sea.

My name, a message I've enclosed, date unknown.

I'll entrust it to the hazards of the waves.

I'll risk the venture of a far-off shore,
where storms might break and seagulls cry,
and jagged rocks might lie in wait,
with gaping, laughing teeth.

My smoky vessel has now slipped away,
and is ridden out atop the waves,
to be hurled and whipped to flight
by storm lashed seas.

So cast adrift, I'll vogue along
for days and months and years,
where sleepy time has scarce a thought for you,
and bob my way across the vast and watery deep
to reach the furthest shore.

The murky dawn will call you down,
to the fathomless mystery of the ever-surging sea.

Drawn by the wanderings of your own restless soul,
you'll spy my craft along the beach.

At water's edge you'll stoop to find,
uncork, and scan my word or two.

And there as bottle was made for ship,
and ship for bottle,
we'll meet me and share in time's embrace,
at the edge of infinity's sea.

The Bath

This morning I discovered the bath. Fanta Sea.
Aromatic of lily of the valley, almond oil, tuberose, lilac,
jasmine, other lubricants.
The crassly commercial leads to silken skin.
I lounge in Turkish luxury, chin-deep in the pool,
bordered at right angles by palmed, courted, pillared tiles.
A sleeping swimmer in warm tropical seas,
buoyed up by the incoming tide.

This morning I discovered the bath.
Now I am taking *la cure*.
I am at Baden or the hot springs of Bath,
or the salvific waters of Thonon-les-Bains,
Torso deep, I stand in mineral-salted-waters
that massage the skin.

You bathe too you say?
But that was not the same bath, I say.
Mine is the bath of wisdom waters
that come crashing, riding, rolling, tumbling over you.
Mine is the bath of a surging, swirling, wash of waves,
of limerick-kicking laughing waters,
of surf and riding tide, of water-jet,

of foam and spray, of streams limpid and cool,
black and shadow-deep where fishes sleep.
Water in the singular, waters in the plural,
of bathers in the placid green of evening,
or swimmers in the cool orange of early morning.

No. Not the same bath.

Mine is the Mother Lode of Water,
of whirlpool and windpool.
It's the brine that laps the rocky edge
for salty eons, geologic time.
It's tiny pools of crystal life in crevices of stone,
alchemical springs gushing from holes in a green pasture.

No, that was not the same bath.

I bathe alive on sea-bottom,
Lotus-poised, Buddha-like,
seated in the ocean of reality.
My bath is Genesis water, creation of life,
all creatures from the sea.
Have you ever drunk it,
this elixir of the sea of life,
the mother lode of waters?
The pure beverage drunk by turbaned scholars,
bearded saints, grave philosophers,
mystics laughing raucously in echoing halls,

poets in extasy, drunken by maidens

who are neither nuns nor whores.

Baptism of Genesis waters, origin of life,

ocean of reality. Taste and bathe.

This morning I discovered the bath.

Fanta Sea becomes ocean of reality

Requiescat

Stars will let fly.
Mountains will come crashing down,
icebergs will split.
There will be a mighty sigh,
a groundswell of relief,
a breathless pause of extasy
in the hovering between two worlds.
There will be irradiated light,
peace without pain.

Like the snake that sheds its skin,
like the skin of one wounded sorely deep,
who fully heals and forgets her malady,
the fever dream a thing forgotten.
Like the prisoner of war liberated
by a host of allies one Sunday morning,
stumbles smiling into the sunshine,
and learns how to walk again,
exercising stiff limbs.
Like the hapless one suddenly freed,
graced by the sovereign's decree.

Like all these,
will I say goodbye to mother earth,
fly free from the mountain peak,
veer and soar, wing heavenward.

The Whistling Train

The whistling train,
the whistling rain,
that passes in the night.
Moaning low, sweet and low,
a darkie on a vapour fife.
Breathing nocturnal sweetness,
into late evening's mystic life.

Blotted out by nightfall,
rushing in full flight,
whaling 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 eons to my brain:
Says that I am but day journeyman,
salt and shadow, spark and gloom,
birthing from the narrow womb,
passing into infinity's room.

The Lilac Tree

We linger at the beauty vein,
the lode to remedy life-long pain,
the brush to paint infinity,
frame the lovely face,
in bold strokes free.
We strive to find
the lilac tree.

If i never strike
the beauty vein,
if i never remedy
life-long pain,
never frame infinity
paint the lovely face
in bold strokes free,
i know i'll find
the lilac tree.

Copper Leaf. White October Moon

The poplars have the most distinct smell in late October.
It is the decay of leaves now copper-gold,
the breath of bark merging with the vapours rising
at the confluence of the Gatineau and the Ottawa,
pungent, trace of acid, dank, yet retaining the moist smell of life.

The waters are soon to be cleared of the dead heads
floating here and there, soggy isles of wood,
that lie half-submerged in water,
like cruising crocodiles gone momentarily inert,
predacious submarines that mark time
and wait for unsuspecting prey to pass,
certain of a hearty feast swallowed whole.

A municipal plan well-conceived will relieve
the valley rivers of a eye-sore,
make the annual tour up the Gatineau to see
the fall show of leaves more pristine.

The children will have their summer dream
and splash unencumbered in the water,
but the municipal planners deceive by image.
The children frolic in acid waters.

The scientist on T.V. says we need more studies,
a betrayal of the organised common sense
that lies at the bottom of science.

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

Breathing deep, gazing into a veiled 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 bikepath that runs the edge of Lac Lemay.
Turning, I catch sight of the hazy orange columns of light
reflected on the far side of the lake by the lights
from highway 550 and boulevard St. Joseph.
They look like a dissolving Captain Kirk
and members of the crew as they are beamed up
to the Enterprise.

I cycle on under the bridge.
As I emerge, a postcardish scene awaits.
A waning, late autumn moon hangs in the sky
to greet me, almost a ghostly scene,
were it not for the steeple of St. Francis church.
The round white lady is fading.

I turn sharply and pedal up the steep grade.
Now I am above the river on the Lady Aberdeen bridge.
Up St. Antoine I go.
In that fleeting moment as I pass,
a man sits at a table in the tavern,
a stereotype of valley days gone by--
checkered lumberjack vest, blunted, unkempt beard.
His face has not been softened by love.
He tastes the salt of his 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,
pointing an upward finger to the heavenly body,
commanding with authority:
"I direct you, I direct you to the moon."

The Russian Olive Tree

I never knew you,
though you stood silently by,
outliving all my fears,
magnificent in your patience,
parched in summers,
craving water,
shivering in winters,
enduring icy blasts,
branches entombed in coats of glass,
in the north wind January to December.

You survived your tender years
among these hills, grown now,
spice of orange aromatic,
yellow minuscule blossoms pointed four.

Russian olive,
tree of my longing.
I have heard you calling me,
calling on the shores of Lake Baykal.
Oh, how I long to see you there,
on the shore of the mystic lake,
along the shore of crystal lake Baykal.

Tree of my longing,
other loves have died,
with love of self implied.

A greater love is born
with self decried,

O tree of my longing,
a greater love.

O how I long to see you,
tree of my hope,
community of names,
palettes all aswirl.

Tongues of fire,
speak to me of delight,
tell me there are children laughing,
let me hear the children laughing,
along the shores of crystal Lake Baykal.

Sky

My eye goes
to the isle of sky,
the endless vat
of blue.
the supernal,
the silent draws me to
the father face
of the primordial sea.

As lofty rivers rush
from mountain peaks
down to lowly oceans,
as the dew-drop drips
into Newton's law,
as the tincture is lost
in the oil,
there spirits will merge
in the land of all souls,
shall awake to a sweet sleep,
to restful repose.

Juxtapose July-December

The view through the window pane
is a december postcard,
glazed lights on a Christmas tree.

The doctor's house lies still in frost.
No gentle snow nestles
at eaves and window ledges.
One lone traveller shuffles by
at midnight huddled against the chill.
His boots yield a trenchant crunch
as he trudges on the hard packed crystal.

I wonder what brings him out
at this late hour,
to walk about the funeral shroud,
of summer's frozen flowers.

A dog barks.
The rasping voice was heard
by neolithic villagers,
and in the caves of pithecenes
gone before.
No one breaks the silence of the night
to tell me why it very nearly ciphers
with a human voice.

His master went to bed at seven.
He still lies sleeping deeply,
sheltered from both friend and foe,
lost to the fiery horrors of a blazing hell,
unmindful of the brightest promises of heaven.
Will he awake when the clock strikes eleven?

The dainty pines stand quite sedate,
fixed frigid in their tender years.
The juniper wears a spindly crown.
Fern branches of lattice lace quiver
in the frigid air without a whisper,
but the silky breath of summer
still hangs about this ice-bound place.

The contours of this winter scene
are blurred by time-gone-wrong.
The doctor's house is past its prime,
the fir tree, lamp post, vacant car,
belong to another time.

1919 or 1991?
The hearth, the wreath, the carol-singing,
recall an antique hour,
yet a blinking light rudely intrudes
from a misbegotten radio tower.

City Lights

City lights on the curve of the three cities
five miles distant. It is dusk.

Faintest phosphorescence, softest scintillation,
solo notes from within an incandescent choir,
sounding off from cusp to cusp.

A crescent moon.

Breezes born higher up in the Gatineau
sweep down the valley to cool the torso
of the man writing at the window,
to ease his skin almost to a chill,
surprising for July....

A few light hairs are stirred to fly
briefly upward, then settle down to lie.

Land locked at the window,
his spirit journeys east and west.
He sees fishing boats in cluster
making shoreward in the evening,
on the labour of the day,
lamps of loved ones burning brightly,
beckon home at journey's end,
to rest, to play.

Pacific rimmed peoples wait for him
at shoreside, with the rising dawn,
to greet their coming sea-bound guest,
who once cast anchor in the West.
Still days away he perceives the garlands,
and tanned skin. He furrows on.

Momentary revellers send off
kin and loved ones from the nest,
clutch them briefly to the breast,
release into the stream of life,
in which all things flow,
once they are kissed and blessed.

I Have Sailed on Many a Ship

When I first learned to speak,
I learned that men went down
to the sea in ships.

I learnt it from a picture
on white porcelain and blue,
that once adorned a kitchen shelf,
or a canister of tea.

When I first learned to speak in English words,
I learned that a warrior-lad with club-in-hand
might fell a fearsome lion,
while bees buzzed about the dead beast's head,
a lesson in early apprenticeship.

Since the time I was a boy,
I've sailed on many a ship,
and I am still sailing.

I have sailed away to the far-off coasts
of ambitious, ambiguous relationship.

I have furrowed the calm bright waters
of lasting sunny friendship.

Despite myself, I've been drawn onto
many a troubled warship,
dipped my pen in scholarship,

fell on my knees in worship,
had glorious moments of fellowship,
chanting praise, and breaking bread
in far-off lands in accents strange,
and meetings unforgettable.

Once in my maritime travellings,
I was reduced to rags by her ladyship,
but am growing wiser now to the gentler ways
of partnership.

O Friend,

I have sailed on many a ship
and I am still sailing.
Now I am building a spaceship,
preparing for celestial citizenship,
perhaps to find a bit o' lordship,
on his majesty's flagship.

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.

I'll visit sunny Zanzibar,
where Ethiop and East Indian
while time away in the commerce of 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,
where white stone homes

disclose flaming Acacias
that run dilatory with gum Arabic.

Soon I'll reach journey's end,
weigh anchor on a cutter,
ride one last time the riotous waves,
master the heaving tumult,
and come flying on home.

Home again,
I linger in the picture gallery,
and reinvent the chronicle
before the fire's glow.

There Is No Sorrow

There is no sorrow

but a warrior falls,

tears save when a hero dies.

Preserve your grief

for mourning's sake.

For the gravest time,

all your sorrows save.

This Morning I Heard the Cawing Crow

This morning early as I lay in bed,
I heard the crow announcing spring.

Caw. Caw. Caw.

Three times did he punch out the rakish call,
then staccato did repeat--Caw. Caw. Caw.

As I lay drowsy,
I marked the triple pattern
imprinted in the semi-conscious cry,
the refrain, then the repeat.

A pause. I listen well.

Then in accelerando,
the cheeky bird grackles out,
as if to mimic me,

Caw! Caw! Caw! Caw!

Labrador Mystery

Mystique land on the fringes of an awesome silence,
a reverent space where history's labial stream has coalesced
the parts of European, Newfoundlander, Inuit, Innu,
a mix of *métis* blood, jaw-bone, angular frame,
where faces fused and almond eyes,
children out of Arab tribes, or old trappers
with parchment skins of antique leather,
wrinkle-deep, burnt by the sun,
brushed by ice-whet winds,
hide themselves in shy, reluctant speech.

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

Up one mile mountain,
I scan the sacred face of the *Eyn Soph*,
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 muse rustles in your ears,
rushes down and finds a way into your coat
to chill your sweating spine.

Startled, you stare as filigreed snow
whirls by at arm's length,
and pirouettes off the mountain crest,
fades away into the chill.

2. Didactics

Art Encounters Logic: Doc Woodman Explains Otto Don Rogers

(Ross Woodman, Professor Emeritus, English literature.

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

It was the precise, austere engineering of an idea
that stirred his soul, the steeled precision of a thought,
the movement of the mind, creativity in the making,
a hymn to beauty.

Explaining Otto's paintings,
the breadth and height,
the light that orders art to be more ample,
puts a loving symmetry on infinity's fearful face,
balances circle to square, spiral to straight line,
paints signposts on the vacant prairie.

Otto creates a surface tension on the canvas,
walks across a tightrope and becomes free,
masters his fear of falling,
climbs mountains to know the slow thrill
of gliding through space.

To fathom the realms of the placeless,
he marks time, smiles faintly as he walks on water,
but knows that if he ever forgets,
he can slip through the waves and drown.

Amazing art that is a paradox.

Sight for our eyes, but cannot itself see.

Art is blind. We see, become vision makers for others.

Art now envisioned by Doc Woodman through a theologic focus:

the point that breaks into infinity,

the line that symbols eternity,

the horizon that is 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.

It is only an intimation,

a longing once only to be filled.

Otto now walks a path between a swaying wall of giant cypress,

sits high on Akká's shore, to watch the swirling surf

that once carried a Persian prisoner through a Roman arch,

a Shackled One who declared the stones immortal.

The waves found tongues for singing when He set foot.

The artist finds mute metaphors in the elements.

I too sit and watch the saints and scholars,

those creative artists,

and find fragments of meaning in brief encounters.

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.

The Heat of the Day

They asked:

"Where is x?"

"What has become of him?"

"Burnt out", someone said.

"Couldn't take it anymore."

"He's just a sunken shadow
of his old self."

"What made him that way",

I asked.

"The heat of the day",

they said.

"The heat of the day."

Noah

On his word,

those on the shore

go this way, or that,

iguanas, elephants, cats,

tigers, people and bats.

They swim out in accord,

happy creatures all toward,

the rim of the shining sea.

Quiet Rain

I make myself tea,
like a solitary bachelor enjoying a quiet house,
I spin out the anguish of my mind.
If I craft my words too carefully,
they shall not be mine.
Outside, in late September, a quiet rain falls.
The back lawn that has languished all summer
will at last have a chance to drink.

I return to the readjustment of the self,
to "existing conditions" as Grandpa Halsted used to say,
stressing the "con" as he stood before us
in the middle of the room,
pounding his left palm with his right hand,
clenching the fist to make a point, one hand in the other.
"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 the beast of burden is
to its own load.

Those who live in the joy of their emotions
think they are free. Tempted to envy when I'm sad,
I remember they are happier who know they have a soul,
than to live in bliss without one.
For in the possession of the soul,
we shall enter the realm of the placeless,
in the last seconds of the last minutes of the last hours,
of the last days.

Detached now,
I remember the bitterness of my own tears,
the rhapsodies, the explosions, the return to delight
as one grown, playing with a child.

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,
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 pompous dialogue in the dim 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."

Is grief the price exacted to bring the poet
to the philosophic mind?

I pour out the Red Rose Tea,
symbol of my British connection.

Contrary, I pour in the milk.

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.

Pennies, Nickels and Dimes

The vendor gave me a quick glance
as he handed me *The Jerusalem Post*.
It was a precise instant assessment,
born of a practiced sense of recognizing
one who is not quite alien,
one who also calls Israel home.

The tone was almost juridical:
"You a Bahá'í?" came the interrogative.
"Yes", I returned a reply.

"This building works on the Carmel",
he said, "must be very expensive".
"Yes", I said. "Expensive".

"But where do you Bahá'ís get money
for such buildings? You must be a rich religion.
Wouldn't you maybe do better by spending it on the poor?"

"Where do we get it?" I repeated.
"I'll tell you. Our poor give it.
Our poor, with their pennies, nickels and dimes."

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.

Or sip two pints a day,

Or don my 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 intoning,

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 mind's intent 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 *dozent* be,
Find solace in his book-lined rooms,
As artisan in spondee.

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

Pony Ride

Once long ago when I was small,
I went to a pony ride in New Toronto,
probably in Long Branch or the village of Mimico.
I don't know why I've recalled this ancient
and all-but-forgotten memory now,
that has come so clearly to consciousness,
sharply etched before my eyes,
although if I stare too closely,
or too long, the recollection becomes hazy.

I remember a common man in black trousers
leading ponies by a black halter around in a ring.
To move those animals that man said:
"Gee! Haw!" "Gee! Haw!"
Then he told me that "Gee" meant left
and "Haw" meant right,
or was it the other way round?
I recall his firm hand on the halter,
the compliance of the leather,
the lathery smell of the miniature horses.

Then I remember a blond headed kid in white shorts,
mounting the back of a animal for the first time.

Surge of power! Biggest thrill!

But now I'm wondering if we went around in a ring.

Why would the man say "Gee! Haw!" which meant left and right,
or right and left, as the case may be,
if we went around in a ring?

Well, maybe he was drunk.

I am fascinated by those words,

"Gee!" "Haw!"

I wonder where they came from.

I wonder how old they are.

I wonder if those words might be as old
as the horses that once ran in Angle land.

Maybe they are the oldest words I've ever heard,
connecting me with something very ancient.

Well, horse words, anyway.

Children Massacred, Murdered, Maimed

Children massacred, murdered, maimed
by those who were their parents,
shed their bodies.

Dressed in the spirit of angels,
they fly.

In filmy dress I dimly behold
they play,
on the green, gentle grounds
on the rolling downs,

and, without a care,
circle gleefully around,
and take the hand of Him
who is their Father.

The White Birch Tree

I watched the sapling from my place
planted in sacred space.
A white birch, tender, mild,
leaves trembling,
as a child quivers with delight
to each fresh ode of joy,
to inflections of sun, wind, rain and stars,
as innocent as youth at first communion,
unafraid, unashamed of holiness,
hands planted palm to palm in prayer,
fingertips aspiring heavenward.

I watched my sapling as it grew.
The seasons changed as seasons do.
I kept watch at falling night,
changed the guard at morning light.

But disquiet claimed the passing years.
I began to mourn the little tree.
A deeper green had now displaced
the freshet leaves.

The exuberant growth of youth,
now mocked the once slim stock,

the child-like grace.
My purblind eyes sought out a trace
 of that lovely face,
now spoilt by the ravages of time.
From my little tree I turned away.

The springtime came and went again
 as springtimes do.
I ventured once again to find the little tree,
along the ancient, stony path
where love and dread are partners.

But hope intoned her aged song,
and faith sang out acceptance's mellow tune.
Summer bloomed this day, a glorious surprise.
I looked again and found my white birch tree,
leaves flying all flags unfurled.
My tree had become another state,
strong and wise,
emancipated, eulogized.

Isle of Bone

bleak skies,
mournful cries,
pall of winter descends.

shrieking corners,
pitiful mourners,
stand on street corners,
windows and frames distend.

sun fled away,
heavens gone grey,
long journeys come to an end.

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

Nature is a starting point
that finishes in man.
where does man start?

The body is an *ultima thule*⁷
locked up by the law of the ages,
that weeps in its prison
while it discovers the wisdom
of its burden.
Sometimes flies free.

⁷. Greek for "the farthest island".

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 craving spontaneity,
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 process reminds me
of a cigarette vending-machine.
you put in your coins.
out pops the product.
can poetry be like grace...
freely given, so freely received?

In Silence

A furious scathing of the dogs
breaks in on the quiet of the supper hour.

From the back quarter acre comes
the indistinct frenzy of the fray
latched onto its quarry.

There is a gnashing and howling,
a frothing and growling.

A barn cat is fighting for its life
outside Mr. Whipple's stable.

The fur is flying.

I throw open the window.

Now nothing but the silence
of an early October evening greets me.

I listen but hear only the sound
of my own breathing.

One lone bird peeps a sheepish note,
blissfully uninformed of the death
of a species not its own.

Silence soothes the violence.

The silence lets one little life pass away,
as if to say it's o.k..

We shouldn't notice.

When the bullet nestles in the victim's brain,
his fallen silence is pregnant with life's continuance.

The colt is delivered from the mare's womb
in a silent birthing, stands on spindly legs, falls,
breathes jets of air and stands again.

Judges too sit in silence till sentence is passed.

Poetry Is

Poetry is, sometimes may praise,
lets vision see clearly
through its own haze,
swims at one,
as a swimmer strokes 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 the gaze,
leaves him puzzling, confounded,
forever entranced by love.

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

Old Clothes Are Rarer Than Old Friends

Old clothes are rarer than old friends.

They have served me well.

Without complaint, the mute cloth

has assumed my form at will,

no matter what the hour;

danced when I danced,

knelt when I knelt,

protested not when I cast them off,

stood with me when I stood,

bolted dignity to my naked body.

They were not so durable as book-ends,

but wore until the stitches split.

I used them till they were patched,

weary and thread bare.

Faithful garments, comfortable, old companions.

With a small regret I lay you aside.

Great Thoughts in Music Are Born

("La musique avant toutes choses". Verlaine)

Thoughts blend with music,
in clarion tones,
with the first choir of angels
singing praise,
heard in the chanting of children
who pour forth their song,
unaware, unafraid.

Pure thoughts are murmured like melodies,
soul musings deep, gently nursed.
Thoughts rocket upward like fireworks,
and crack in staccato unrehearsed.

For thought is a feeling sung on a tone,
thoughts void of feeling are never alone.
The logic so pure on the wise teacher's part,
is a musical score in Pythagorean art.

When man first loved wisdom,
she was sung as a song.
When the poet ceased singing

and thought all alone,
thought all outloud
and thought all alone,
when melody ceased,
with holy surcease,
was Sophia born.

The pretendants to wisdom
are going tone deaf.

The conceptual line
is of music bereft.

The thinkers of deep thoughts
to the score don't belong,
for the greatest of thought
was born in a song.

3. Spirit Kin and Bone

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.

"Just outside the restaurant", Roger had said.

It was the a.m.

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

The image didn't fit again. I caught sight of the beige windbreaker,

the blue slacks, the comfort of the demure, quiet motion.

We exchanged greetings, the pleasantries,

I happy to meet again this "poet laureate of the Bahá'í world",⁸

who once, from his stage in Haifa, had observed a parade of mahatmas

who traversed the wings on their way to eternity,

Roger was "delighted", he said, to meet anyone who savoured poetry.

It made me feel like a valuable but rare bird about to become extinct.

Personal history was in the making, an alchemical significance of the moment.

We had met briefly before in the hallway at a conference in Montreal.

⁸. This is Geoffrey Nash's epithet.

Your eloquence was early in evidence then too.
I remember only a snippet of the conversation...
"...some little Arab girl looking as if she fell out of the Bible", you said.
Time has claimed the characters, the point of the story now lost,
but the poetry remains, and the wit of the man.

That day is a picture show of pinpoint memories
bright with 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. Your doctor wasn't there.
We did lunch instead. On the terrace of the Vancouver restaurant,
we enjoyed the brilliant sunshine, the coast mountains, the 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.

Later at the bookstore you taught two adolescent girls
with ease and simplicity, a mark of nobility in the delivery,
the generation gap erased in a sweep of courtesy.
They were as fresh as ripe strawberries,
these blond beauties from suburban Vancouver,
on their maiden voyage to a search for spirituality.
My faith in the maturity of youth, temporarily out of shape
from witnessing too many antics between classroom walls,
was restored again.

Then on to Stanley Park and the Welsh tourist.

We sat on a bench still enjoying some rays and 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 tourists,
office towers to our backs, sail boats anchored in the bay.

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

There you'll find a final resting place in the mosaic of Carmel,
in a design undreamt by men, the pattern most intricate,
that holy wall alive with colour,
the wonder of every hue reflected under Haifa's heaven.

What a company you have joined, 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".

A Tourist Travels to Holy Stream in Reading

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

From the bridge above,
I read the holy stream that once fed Reading Abby.
Robert "full of flu" had come out that day to show me Reading town.
We passed through the Reading botanical,
and 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.
Hurriedly we stepped among the ruins of the abby,
made a stop at the priory door, took a path through graveyards
now sloven with long grasses, where the faces of ancient monuments
are overgrown with moss the colour of pickle,
names quite obliterated.

Robert stood at the priory door, hands crossed in front of him.
We snapped some pictures to preserve the form of these elemental bodies,
now still alive with colour, eyes still bright with life,
voices still animated by laughter, these minds still engrossed in *falsafa*.⁹

We linger at holy stream.

⁹. Arabic for "philosophy".

The crystal waters trip along their way,
over narrow beds where reeds and spindles of aqua life
swing and sway like Sammy Kaye, heads swirling and undulating
below 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 her waters, the waters that turned the stone
to grind the grain to make the bread?"
--No artificial flavours or colours--
"or another stream, another self?"

My mind tripped back to other waters,
to the salty drops of the Aegean.
I thought of those who had laid the foundations
for Lady Wisdom, of Anaximander the Greek and perpetual motion,
he who had framed the great questions for Sophia,
and all the greats who followed, the same puzzles we still ask today,
when Xenophanes uttered these eternal words:
"We are all born of earth and water."

Then to the air and the harmony of the spheres,
and the musical vibrations of celestial bodies resounding in the soul,
a heavenly melody no longer heard because it's constant,
as the venerable Pythagoras 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-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls;"¹⁰

All these first grasped science by reading nature's book,
then read the book of man. I thought of all these things,
the quintessential elements of earth, air, fire and water,
and those last free radicals of which they're made,
the land and sea, the wind and rain, the oceans,
rivers, lakes, field and stream, the sun and moon,
the planets and the stars. And we are stardust too.

The hour was brief, but the space travelling has endured.
On the sweet ethers of remembrance I often call you to mind.
An eternity ago, we had already strolled together,
as jurists, schoolmen, noble doctors.
Before I met you we had walked the thousand steps

¹⁰. Reference Shakespeare.

on the common of the El Azhar, along mosaic courts,
beneath curved archways, as turbaned orientals,
bejewelled Franken dukes, enrobed scholars,
men stirred by breaths of holiness.

As dukes without titles, lords we were none,
cathedralists without a chair, scholars without books,
jurists without moot court.

In the sacred academy of those luminous heights,
ones that only celestial travellers know,
We have no names, no titles.

There we exist only in the present tense of the verb to be,
in the mood of instant recognition.

Eure Freundschaft ist meine Sehnsucht,
Eure Liebe mein glückliches Andenken.¹¹

¹¹. Your friendship is my longing. Your love my happy remembrance.

Remembering Northhill

(Wendi and Moojan Momen in Memoriam)

Northhill, Beds, the summer of '92.

A fine rain drizzles down.

I head out for morning exercise,

jogging 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, hand quarried stone, inns, terraced homes,

kitchen gardens, centuries of cultivation, discrete dimensions,

but no bright lime light to bring the actor's mind to prominence.

Cars swish past on slick narrow lanes.

I have to remember to look the other way when I cross,

where left is right and right is now 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 an almost imperceptible dull thud as my feet strike the pavement,

the occasional friction of grit underfoot.

As I return, I approach a car standing in a laneway,
headlights on, motor still. I veer right, 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, 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.
I would have stayed if she'd invited me to dinner,
the graceful lady in shades of grey.

He Chose Thailand

(for Peter Smith)

He chose Thailand,
though he loved the narrow land,¹²
and loved to breathe the English air,
and follow English ways.
Though he spoke the Anglo-Saxon tongue
with a singular, well accentuated clarity.
He chose Thailand and left behind
the secular academy, its love of books,
its fine distinctions,
its high thoughts and professing,
left behind the distinguished ways of masterdom.

Left for fume-filled Bangkok,
oppressive heat, intolerable commuting,
teaching conditions lacking by his standards,
and a health impaired.

The world wagged its head.
"Why did he do it"? asked the world.

¹². The German words "Eng" and "Land" when combined mean "narrow land".

"Pity. He could have stayed here
and made himself a name, stayed here
and become a fellow of the academy."
Yes, stayed and lived, loving his forbears' ways,
and followed the predictable mould
of the "How do you dos",
the judicious likes and dislikes,
to serve at the altar of 'the comfortable pew',¹³
and mingle with those who were high church,
learned to imitate those slow patterns of culture
that have emerged over centuries,
the assiduously attended to folkways,
not to be denigrated.

Yes, *why*, asks the three letter word
that is the source of all science,
except the science of divine love.
The *why* that is completely confounded
by the because of the godly mind,
when the heart has her own reasons,
that reason does not know.¹⁴

¹³. *The Comfortable Pew* is the title of a book by Canadian author and journalist Pierre Burton written some thirty years ago as a critique of the established churches.

¹⁴. This is, of course, a reference to Blaise Pascal's famous phrase: "Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas". ("The heart has its reasons which reason does not know".)

Perhaps the answer lies in what
the man has become, or rather,
in the elixir that has wrought
the alchemical change, and precipitated the man
into another being, a living sacrifice,
whose struggle to bear his cross
has melted him into a crucible,
not of his choosing.

This prisoner shut up in his prison house,
this exile to the Orient has become
of such substance as he would have never been
in tea-cosy England with its proper ways.

When the Romans crossed you, you were buried.
This man lives on to tell the tale,
a living witness,¹⁵ too close to his own suffering
to see himself with the eyes of God.
Yes love is a crucifixion,
a mystery and a paradox for our believing.

¹⁵. The Greek word *martyr* means "witness".

A.J. McLean

It was the day of the vernal equinox.
A spring sun had begun to warm central Canada.
Most of the snow was gone, but scanty ribs of ice clung
in relief here and there to the still brown land,
hardened ways soon to disappear.

You sat on the side steps,
your back resting on the aluminium door,
your benevolent face, fuller then,
enjoying some friendly beams.
Rarely did I see you sit in the sun.

It was a lesson in patience.
The previous autumn you bought
an old American Motors Ambassador sedan,
to drive to the cottage on the Crow River.
Parked in a field adjacent to our house,
--we were the last one then on Joannis Street--
it had lain derelict all winter, snowbound.

Now the hood was open to catch the rays.
Running an extension cord,
you had set a lamp beside the motor,

bulb exposed, and covered the engine block
with a folded blanket.

I urged you to call the garage,
the simpler, quicker way.

Came the gentle no,
followed by the sure affirmation
the car would go.

All morning and afternoon you waited,
while the spring sun beat down.
At times, you checked the position of the lamp
and made a few adjustments.

I see you yet, as you slide behind the wheel,
steadying yourself with your left hand,
as you lower yourself into the driver's seat,
knuckles turned down, thumb up,
in that characteristic way of yours,
the look of cautious optimism
and thoughtfulness on your face,
The experiment in patience is about to be tested.
You place the key in the ignition,
the motor turns and hums to life.

You were often vindicated in the small things of life.
But to those who use a sliding scale,
the same power that sustains the starry skies above,
and the stately earth below,
bends to assist in its courses
the smallest doings of men.

At times it seemed the *Tao* of all creation
worked for you, pleased to grant the wishes
of one so simple, yet so princely.

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 lowly, thick limb,
you in a printed beige cotton,
bright with red kettles, tea cups, and sweets,
I in cotton trousers and T shirt.

I would rock the limb first to set it in motion,
steady myself on the branch above.

With the accumulating 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 branch seems to arch its back
and stretches arms to heaven and says rejoicing:
"It's Christmas. It's Christmas!

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

But I am very thankful for the on-marching present,
still ripe with possibilities,
on its way to other tomorrows,
and wonder if you remember that summer's day
when we swung on the fallen branch,
my daughter, my much loved daughter...

A Night to Remember

There are nights of power and nights of glory,
and nights of the revelation of power,
and nights quite blue with glee,
when they who sit in the heavens will laugh,
and laugh with you.

Were you there then on the day
when `Abdu'l-Bahá cocked his turban back
on his forehead, revealing his mighty brow?
Mr. Yazdi, who saw him when he was a boy,
said that when the Master placed his turban
just thus and so with a backward motion of his hand,
the mood was one of jollity.
And when he rocked the air with laughter,
or danced with the children in a ring,
then all the universe was wreathed in smiles,
and sorrow was no more.
The onlookers just smiled and smiled,
and their picture is forever.
That night at Sam's you had never seen your father
quite as he was that night.
Till then you saw your dad as serious,
too studious, not as one who knew the freedom of laughter.
That night came with an unaccustomed break

of the decorum you had always observed as a little girl.
The dad you came to know that night became another dad,
gone slightly mad.

Michel and I sat knee to knee in Sam's basement apartment,
telling stories, hitting jokes off one another.

Your sister and your Mom sat close by,
amused spectators to the ridicule.

Michel and I were on a roll, two mad chemists
who had discovered the elixir of perpetual laughter,
two comedic voyageurs who had found the jester's jewel,
a pair of Ponce de Leon who had drunk
at the fountain of juvenelia.

On we rolled, Michel and I,
in a game of verbal wit,
a contest of chain-reaction frivolity.
You three, powerless to intervene,
watched the shenanigans, until you, Leah,
unable to contain yourself,
finally exclaimed your protest with a "Dad!",
your voice registering all at once
a mixture of delight and mild disapproval.

That "Dad!" still rings in my ears
after all these years.

So happy was I you saw at last the clown in me.

The Man Who Rose Early

The man in the black greatcoat
etched out against the pale ashen grey
of the dawn, heads west to work.
He halts. In one motion pivots,
waves, turns, resumes his stride.
He repeats the gesture a few steps on.

A mother and child at the kitchen window sill,
blow kisses and return the wave.

The man in the dark greatcoat
thus rose early for 40 years
in the grey dawn,
while we slept on.
He who won the affection of all,
never spoke of his own pain.

Aunt Vi called him "the prince",
and at 10 to 4 in the afternoon,
she would wash her face, comb her hair,
smile at him when he came home,
and serve him tea.

Winter mornings, I would hear you shuffling
in the kitchen at 5:15 a.m.,
the odd rattle of dishes in the sink.
You always left your paper napkin on the table.
Was it a silent protest?
Half asleep, I would hear the tires of your car
whirl with fury as you inched up Korol Avenue
on those mornings after an ice storm.

Somehow you never got enmeshed in our devices,
the traumas of us all. Somehow you escaped all that
with your detachment, knowing they would pass.

When you finally retired, I couldn't believe
you didn't work anymore,
No work anymore.

In Memoriam: John Aldham Robarts

(1901-1991)

Our stricken voices are transformed
by a certain serenity.
One lone lady with hair of living silver
is sometimes radiant.
You so enriched by your presence,
so ennobled by your love,
the two a bright bouquet
that beautified with passing years.

The moral man who trod the Way
with such confucian simplicity,
deeds quiet, unannounced,
ever so with the model man,
with masters of virtue.

We rose with you as smaller craft
are buoyed up by a mighty tide
that ebbs from lowly ground,
to set the vessels on their way.

The captain of our indentured ship
who stood on deck and watched
throughout long nights,

and prayed on bended knee,
who peered through mists
with intent eyes,
alert for rocky shores,
and vessels alien,

Orders there were few,
for you knew your course.
The benign word, the note of praise
spurred us on.

Pious in a generation of impiety,
you were full of winsome laughter,
as noble as the knight you were,
yet close familiar friend to all.

An echo of the poet's words:
With you a part of us has passed away.¹⁶
The eulogist's voice sounds the passing of an age
that witnessed greater things, mightier beings,
first heroic deeds, the Sign of God on earth.

Earth remembers all that you did,
all that you were, gives thanks and smiles.
Heaven has now claimed her handsome prize.

¹⁶. In *O World!* George Santayana wrote: "With you a part of me has passed away".

My Mother's Locket

The golden locket out of all those years
in which my mother's face appears.

Why have I remembered now
the tiny locket with its picture small?

In words of two was love engraved,
so that father might yet gaze
on my young mother's youthful face:
"Hello Darling. Love, Joyce."

Now do I find it passing strange
the locket's message I repeat,
to my own fair daughter about to bloom
in turn into her youth...

Nothing of the locket now remains
save what in my mind's eye became engraved.
The tiny picture and the words of love
have to three generations now endured,
words of my mother who was not then mother
but young Allan's gentle lover.

O the world is passing strange,
when lockets and their little words of love
are lost awhile and yet remain.
And mothers, fathers, daughters, lovers,
down the generations blood and spirit-soul entwine,
and from the matrix formed of spirit, flesh and bone,
each from its own time something
down the generations does transmit.

And Mukina, my daughter fair,
when you are grown and still more beautiful,
for it seems to me you grow in beauty with the season,
pass these down, your father's words of love,
to those whom you shall love in turn.
In this way shall the sparks of love
that light our family's blazing hearts,
outlive us all and cast their lights in turn
into the hearts of those of us as yet unborn.

Deep River

(for Gilbert Bartholomew, deep in Deep River)

I found comfort in your gentler ways,
the outlook in the evening of your life,
your home on Deep River a refuge,
where one might sit in nature's lap,
and sleep at nature's breast,
as a little child at rest,
and try to count the endless waves
that lapped the sandy shore.
Someone calls your name. You awake.
"Pardon me", you say.
"The watery scene has left me mesmerized."

The last time I stood on this shore,
the river lay fast, blanketed with snow.
No woodland fox would venture out
that chilling night, when the winter moon,
northern January bride, shone radiant.
Now the waters run free again,
the beach is clear,
the moment lies promisingly near
when I shall bathe my weary feet,

once Spring shall yield up fair Summer's crown.

Deep in Deep River lies a jewel,

Gilbert Bartholomew.

In some far-off distant lands they say,

diamonds and emeralds lie in the sand.

The desert camels pass them by,

and trod them underfoot,

oblivious of where they lay.

The divine assayer's task carefree

where gems are mined so easily.

But jewels are worthless did men but know,

compared with such rare substance of soul.

The time is passed,

the hours flew,

but those were halcyon days

I spent with you.

The Hakim

He threw caution to the winds,
and laughed in the face of academe.
It is the reality, I offer you, he said.
Why be content with shallow imitation,
with a gaudy show?
If truth be your ultimate concern,
you will not fail to examine this cause.

The scholars of this world,
with all their acumen,
knowledge of several sources,
they who are published far and wide
and much touted, have not drunk
at the crystal fount that gushes from
the Rock of Ages, and have failed to grasp
what God, in His mercy, has chosen to reveal
to children of the half light.
Because they love not,
because they are not yet thirsty,
and do not know.

Ah, the truth...

Sophie is so deceptively simple,
astonishingly beautiful, lovely, wise.

She puts fear into the heart of the faint lover,
makes all of his excogitations a pack of lies.

Will he gamble his life to embrace her,
his pale of truth demythologize?

The Hakim continues on his way
with full integrity,

a wry smile upon his face.

He knows. He will endure.

The King of scholars beckons him on.

He has overcome the world.

4. The Real and Surreal

Flowers Flew Upward

Flowers flew

upward,

Breaking.

the spell of gravity.

Up from my palms they flew,

drawn by a greater force field.

I never stopped to pick the flowers.

They blossomed in my hand.

I crushed some buds between my fingers.

I noted they were imperfect,

had not yet come to fruition;

let them go anyway,

but could have held on.

The cut pink carnation was perfect.

It wandered off *machinalement*.

They flew off,

up, up and away,

in line upward,

as if commanded by E.T.

with point-of-light index finger

to rise.

Could have been ducks
waddling into the air.

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

"Hey, you picked the circle of unity,"
I said delighted.

I never stopped to pick the flowers.
They blossomed in my hand.

And a Little Child Shall Lead Them

She led them down the country road,
the wee small hours as black as pitch.

The moon-man who dwelt there once
had all but disappeared.

The odd one of his incontinent descendants
lives here still,
busy erecting a slick townhouse condominium
on his ancestor's land, even at this dark moment.

But the barn is gone,
the show horses he once proudly rode are gone,
the business partners that slept with his daughter,
they are all gone.

His swimming pool, once the envy of the country folk,
has disappeared without a trace,
and all the cash he once boasted of.

"I pay the paper boy by the year", he said,
and pulled a fat wad of bills out of his pocket
to impress the impressible.

His hired man, the Dutchman, who lived with his family
in the kitchen house and did his chores is gone.

But we are still here.

This chestnut maiden, just out of tender years,

leads us down the road.

A point of light from the erecting condo
glints off to my left in the still early hours.

She leads us to a homestead in the field,
that looks no longer pioneer, to a sight unseen.
By now dawn has broken. No, it is morning,
or late afternoon, but time does not matter here.
A noble line of stately, friendly pines
settled on a base of rock stands up front,
with leaves of autumn gold and green,
arms waving in the friendly sun,
shining down above their heads.

And, as they wave, we now perceive
that time has lost its meaning here,
the season with its colours.

The kingdoms have lost all reason,
retain no rhyme.

Earth has been grafted to rock,
mineral atom to diffuse dust,
summer blends with fall,
evergreens have flagged other colours,
free-will is determined.

She has led us to the world of there.

Surreal Transformation

When I first looked out my window
 onto Lake Ross,
some surface movement I barely detected
 pimpled the water.
"Gnats who play above, fish that jump
from down below into the air
 or that hunt prey,"
a unsteady thought ran through my mind.

I returned to my guest.
When I returned and looked again,
I saw an aqua-aerial ballet.
Three ballerinas, Soviet north,
encircled by crinolines,
skied upon their feet,
pulled by power boats,
somersaulted through the air,
did tricks and turns,
while the outboard roared by,
vibrating the window.

Reality is Better

Things are not what they seem.

Reality is better than a dream.

This world is the thought of the Supreme.

The Willows

The willows bowed low to me,
very low, blown by a balsamous breeze.
I lay flat on the grass, transfixed the blue sky.
They either wept out their joy,
or confessed a saraband of adoration
I did not suspect.
It was summer again. *Die ewige Wiederkehr*.¹⁸
A romance dream?
Symbolic possibilities. Perhaps.
"Be flexible", whispered the willows,
as their tendrils grazed past my face.
"Be flexible", they echoed, weeping.

¹⁸. German for "the eternal return".

Death the Masquerade

(for Barbara Lonergan dying of cancer)

I first caught sight of you from the doorway.

God knows I knew you not from sight or sound,
or any other thing perceptible.

Recognition dawns. Barbara it is you.

Dear, sweet, you.

I emerge from the cloud of unknowing,
by some sense spiritual, dimly forgotten.

Death is donning his mask over your devoured body.

Faltering, I confront my revulsion and walk on.

You were sitting in your chair as I approached.

As if transfixed, awakened from your stupor,
gazing through the eyes now made numb with radium,
you speak my name out loud, with urgency, quite surprised.

"Jack!" you almost shout.

They heard you at the desk.

I stoop and kiss the face
now made old by thirty years.

Death the masquerade is winning.

Formless has your face become,

your right side atrophied,
your body limp and helpless.
Stripped of your glasses,
the last measure of your dignity is taken.

On your temples the green arrowheads,
the strange and gruesome tattoos.
The arrows mark the target for the burning bomb,
but this is no time for a game of cowboys and indians.
These doctors want to burn the creature
out of your brain, but the rays transfix the eyes.

"Barbara, do you see me?" I ask,
drawing my face close to yours.
"Yes", the weak, dry voice replies.
"I brought you these yellow roses".
They were cut flowers interspersed with tiny mums.
"Would you like to smell them"?

Not waiting for a reply, I hold them to your nose.
A faint smile breaks through the lips
of death the masquerade,
a miracle of sunburst gleams forth
from behind the cloud.
There is light in your eyes.
God still breathes His breath of joy

into your living soul and you smile.

But you are not lucid long.

I hold your hand and smooth your face,
for in this touch resides
the last refuge of the spirit,
the fragile thread that strives to hold
a fast-retreating life.

I did not know you well,
but we shared a love of things spiritual,
although brief and ill-defined.
Yet I wonder still, has this oncoming death
transformed the budding fruit and ripened it in time,
yielding the flavour of old friends who say farewell?

Now you sleep and so I take up
healing verses and begin quietly in tone:
"Thou the Sufficing, Thou the Healing,
Thou the Abiding, O Thou Abiding One."
But prayer is painful, and I must rein in
my straying mind.

I persist. The names and attributes justify their claim
to transmute the dross to gold.

Rising as I pray, I approach your bed whispering.

Briefly your eyes flicker and you return.

The time draws close.
I stoop again and plant a kiss
on the face of death the masquerade,
a face I would never have approached this way,
when it was laughing with good humour,
sometimes tense, yet open in a friendly way.

That night as I lay sleeping,
the King of Glory's prayer returned to me,
the prayer I thought I had let slip
out of my heart in a hospital room:
"Her salvation is assured", the voice seemed to say,
"Upon her will be peace. She is in safety."

And so Barbara Lonergan,
somehow I have found you in death,
alive, as I would never have found you in life.
And through on-marching death,
the most weighty of life's moments,
ripe and poignant with significance,
we are brought into eternal relationship.

Soon will you, laughing as you once did,
throw off the mask of death the masquerade.

Pilots Are At Risk

Mounted high,
streaking through silver skies,
you veer away, hurtling sidelong,
slanting smartly at 2:00 o'clock,
manufacturing thunder in the ears
startling the eyes.

Faces raised in fascination.
You stand atop snow-capped peaks.
You stride mountains.

But gravity can turn a mighty machine
into disaster.

"A jet is falling," Robin cries
as he runs to the kitchen window.
"I'm going out to see the crash."

The family had been at supper,
enjoying their own simple humanity,
fruits of the earth and mountain air.
But now they sit in stunned silence,
realising that they are powerless to prevent
the tragedy about to fall.

No one but Robert has moved.

The wing glances off the barn roof,
and breaks away as you fall flying.

The jet percusses the ground, gouging out a crater.
You fall into a mountain farmyard,
as clear and pretty a sight as you will ever see
in Colorado or the Catskills.

At the crash, the family came running out to see,
the reserve to respect the dying now cast aside.
Only Grandpa stood disapprovingly on the porch.
"Let the dead die with dignity," he shouted.

Grandma, curious in old age,
came first, peering into the crater. Then Dad.
Sis jagged absent-mindedly to the edge of the chasm,
half-frantic as if she were running away.
Mom, timid as a deer, first stayed inside,
fearing the horror that she might see,
but came out belatedly, wringing her apron
in her hands, running curiously.

You crash landed yards before the well-kept house,
yards before the trim green lawn,
yards before the little cluster of buildings --

house and barn, shed and home,
all built compact, clean, neatly nestled
into this mountain corner of the world.

You all finally peered into the mammoth urn of ashes,
with innocent, amazed eyes,
cohesive kin touched by the devastation
that had struck even here.

You all stood staring into the hole,
watching the rising smoke.

I Saw Infinity the Other Night

I saw infinity the other night,
not the fearful void through which
we might fall in free flight,
but an endless stretch of blue sky,
ocean strand, curve of a white dove's wing,
where sea foam refreshes sand
the colour of faded leaves.

Black Magic and the Pastry Buffet

Angie Brown serves *torten* and *gâteaux*
at a dessert buffet, even though she is pleasantly plump.
The French *maitre d'hôtel* has a plumpish face too,
but speaks an accented English fairly well.
Rare are those modern Frenchmen who become *émigrés*,
who settle in America.

He orders her to serve up cakes from the pastry board.
Angie refuses at first. "Say please", she says.
She does not fear him.
I pass by the sweets while the other patrons dine,
and continue along the upstairs gallery,
descend the stairs along the outside of the house.

Reaching the ground,
I pass in front of a lady in black.
"I am going to tell your fortune",
she says, confident that her psychic force
will compel me to accept.
"She's psychic", I say to myself.
"No thank you", I say and keep walking.
"Then a black cat will cross your path", she says.
"Let it cross", I say.

A black cat appears from out a side door
and crosses just in front of me.

I reach the kitchen door,
and opening it find my sister.

I begin to tell her of the black cat and the lady.

As I retell the tale, she mouths the words
in double time with me: "And a black cat appeared",
we say simultaneously, almost an echo.

I am not surprised that she knew.

Some people might make a big thing
out of a little black magic
at the pastry buffet.

The Art Deco Apartment

A short colour spectrum.

A narrow range of flat metallic grays
fading into purple-blues.

The chroma is a 5 on Munsell's scale.

The condo furnishings are art deco,
1930 recast with a hint of trendy modern.

White bay doors open up to the balcony.

A decorator fireplace, framed in black iron,
centers the living-room.

Its sleek glass doors are cast in amber grain.

The furniture is a velvet touch,
the rug a pile gray, half plush.

The guests ambulate silently from room to room.

They move on padded feet, couples, newly anchored,
with a touch of money, freshly graduated
from the business schools.

Children there are none for no one is married,
and they know no allegiance to anyone.

They know allegiance only.

They do not speak for they have no need of words.

There's no buffet table at the gathering,
for there's no hungry mouth to feed.

No music fills the air,

no colour-music for the symbolist,
but there are no symbols here.
No purpose has this gathering.
The only purpose is to be.

Guests move like noiseless dancers flowing in a stream.
Their bodies are close but there's no body heat.
No passion in these innocent gods of youth,
fresh in blood and seed and brain.
They are Wall Street wise, yet have no need of money.
Harvard educated, they're beyond instruction.
Beautiful, they've never known desire.
They are effaced.

They move as forms of pure being,
as expressions of a will.
They exist as names only,
never having known their own.
Among the gathering there are 5:
Angela (Beauty), June (Youth),
Lily (Selflessness), Iris (Peace), and Grace.
There is the whirl of extasy here,
in these gentle forces generated by a will,
an air of pure being.
They move as demure dancers in a stream,
flowing as one body.

The Beauty That's Greater Than Praise

I wanted to bring you cut roses
but I did not dare, knowing not
what the colour and fragrance might tell.
I wanted to visit but I was not able,
for intimacy is too great a void
that can only be filled at the invitation.
I struggled with the card and finally said nothing.
Nights I thought of you and rose
and struggled with a prayer
and sent it off for you both,
hoping for a blessing beyond the pain.

Remembering your sensitivity,
depth of emotional ability,
in my mind, I feared a shipwreck,
a great vessel split, a mother lost at sea,
beached, drenched, exhausted on the sand,
having yielded to a raging sea.

Then I saw you standing there,
that afternoon, the mind's image deluded.
I saw one transformed,
now outlined with a greater clarity,

a sharper image, the dross burnt off by the flame.
They say the Divine Jeweller plunges the gold
in the fire till His image is seen in the braze.
The fire of anguish will melt the heart
with a pain that's too great to tell,
but up from the tears wells a beauty of soul
that is deeper and purer than praise.

The Violence of Logic Will Fail

Two words came back out of a dream
as I was on the verge again of slumber.

Perhaps it was last night's dream.

Two words, the only fragments that remained
to explode within the brain, said:

"Immerman Stoddart".

Now he was the last candidate I ever suspected,
as unlikely an atheistic communist as ever lived
to believe in something spiritual,
to attain such a high station.

For he was the master logician,
living by the violence of logic,
laying traps of wide-open steel jaws
when he discoursed with you.

He did not hesitate to spring them shut.

He cared not for your friendship,
nor did the arbitrary abruptness of it all
seem to bother him.

He simplified by saying that science was things as they are,
and religion things as they should be.

Another one who could not begin to deal
with the grand question and preferred therefore to separate.

He has faced it now. He had to.
What brought him from circumscribed logic
to the land of the living?
He will tell his own story.

So he will be the one?
Yes, he will be the one.
The dark horse,
the one the faithful rejected,
the one the people of God never suspected.
He has broken some of the rules,
was once antipathetic to fools.
Yes he will be the one.

The Allmerging

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

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

"This is a circus", barked the carnival man.

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

"This is no art gallery", cried the joker.

"No effete French ladies, vaguely sweet,
in broad rimmed hats, cut white flowers
in flat baskets resting on their laps."

The fool said: "Don't look here for pretty pictures,
for young ladies dewdrop fresh that whirl around in a ring
clutching fingertips, dizzy with the extasy of first youth,
essence of rosewater."

The fool fell silent feeling foolish.

The schoolman said:

"Free the land from pure form,
from vibrant energy. What's intrinsic to the object
is lost in the fluid vision of the Allmerging."

The old schoolman laid down his black bound books,

turned to the bay 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, proofs, the lie of the
hylomorphic composition of angelic beings,
on the triumph of his own soul.

Thanatos had come to haunt him,
yet a crystal laugh broke the silence.
He was surprised to hear the sound of his own voice,
raising the rafters in levity.
Still he watched the rising sun,
hands clasped behind him as if he stood
before a superior officer or were one himself.
Faded memories filled his eyes for a moment,
memories of long ago. Where is she now, he wondered,
she who once ruled me as an alchemist.

The molten orb had now broken day,
casting long lines of light across the Ottawa Valley,
catching the jewels of morning through the filter net
of window panes, stainless steel, reflective glass,
sleek office towers, minarets of true North.
The river flashed, danced below.

The Sphynx

The platinum bomb in black tights
pumps iron and does aerobics.

She opens doors for you.

Flight and escape can be found
in the faces of a thousand women,
the virginal girl who innocently invites you
to Vienna, or a prison cell, a black hole,
a line, a thrill, an icy bottom.

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

Symbols of flight and escape.
We imagine we cannot bear the pain,
the sin, the unmentionable,
that we cannot bear the break,
the banishment,
the long, lonely exile from Eden.

If only we would wait, delay response,
we would find another Eden at our gate,
and the mercy that created the world,
compassion undreamt, raining down
its tears of love, as mysteries unfold.
But self lies too close to its own singularity,
undecipherable as the silent 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."

Sunbeams, Moonbeams

"Are the leaves still waving green and tender
on the boulevards of the City of Lights"?

Why, yes.

"Do the breezes blow still balsamous,
with beauty and mercy blest"?

Yes, it is so.

"Does the light in the City of Lights
still delight the eyes?"

Most certainly, dear friend.

"And the moon? Does it still cast
its silvery beams?"

Beloved. There are no moonbeams in
this land of the risen sun,
for there are no mysteries here.

"Are the friends still laughing there?"

They are the merriest of the merry,
and have given mirth the essence of its name.

"And tears? Do they ever glisten in the eyes?"

They were wiped dry so long ago,
no one remembers when.

"And pain. Surely, no one is without
some recollection of its pangs."
I tell you, truly, it is a sickness
unknown here, gone like a fever dream.

"And the denizens of that city?
Are they as I have imagined?"
They are such souls, beloved,
as you have not dreamed of
nor can as yet conceive---
loving, peaceful, mercy-blessed,
wiser than the wise,
angels invincible.

"Could I perchance one day meet them?"
Pilgrim, they will seek your company,
and salute you with praise.

But more I say:
In that world reigns a glorious king,
such as men have never seen.
And He shall call you "son",
and you shall answer "Sire",
sit at His feet, and there to be,
enthralled by His love,
for all eternity.

5. Love or The Masquerade

Poem From The White Room

Darkness has fallen.

The drooping tendril of the elephant plant creeps 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 in a gesture of affection.
Another 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.

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 U.F.O., about to be erased by the blink of an eye,
has come to rest below the street light.

The street light has become a star in orbit,
and the lamp shade, 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.

A voice upstairs on the telephone emphasizes the word "pouring".

The dusty rose venetians lie open in horizontal wafer-thin slats
supported on the thin spine of the vertical linecords.

The clear vision is peopled with the geometry of reflection,

the intersecting line, the cone, disc and triangle reflected in the glass.
The flexible branches of East Indian palm trees have been wrought
into living room chairs, and grey clay pots marked with a 5 house friendly plants.

On the wall, Benjamin Chee Chee's northern geese,
framed in brushed gold metal, lift off the water, webbed feet up,
racing into flight, caught by an art in a few deft lines that strains
to capture motion within immobility.

The divan, a thick cream fabric of light brocade, invites reclining,
and the candy striped sofa stirs with the elegance of art deco.

My heart gives way to youth at the guitar strains of a love duo
playing on the radio that could have been *a cappella*.

Even the things we sometimes despise for thwarting our spiritual drives
because they force our affections, appear at these moments loved.

Love. Love. Love. The highest earthly transports to the heavenly.
The heavenly contains within her breast the finest flower of the seed
of earthly love. A moment of clearest vision, intensest pleasure of my soul,
feeling through its senses, without paradox, conflict, contradiction.
Breathe deeply oh my soul! Drink to the dregs oh my eyes!
Listen well now my ears! Fly African bird in stone, bird from Gabon.
Fly!

But the real poem is you, oh my daughter,
The real poem is you singing a love song.

Will I Speak The Word?

Will I speak the word to release
torrents from the skies?
In the lucid moments when the heart is still,
I dare not breathe the word
to loose the tears of angels,
so break the hearts of friends,
put sorrow in the wagging heads of white-haired folks.
(You will be old soon too)

In the deepest dark,
the dark that is quiet and rest,
I lay my head on the breast of the sleeping giant,
when I have put passion to sleep,
and float in placid waters
that follow the hard won sleep
of wrestling with an angel

Says Plato in the Symposium:
male and female were created from one substance,
and go on forever seeking to join
our two halves together again,
a metaphysical Humpty Dumpty
who might be saved.

The proofs lie everywhere
to expose the heart's subtle lies --
palatial images in high skies
that wane with the reddening dawn,
an ecstasy of tender images
swimming round in the brain,
shadows reflected on shimmering skin
that fade when we come down again.

Another voice speaks.
The law of God is not a fraud.
It speaks of final things,
the path of self denied,
of the heart's True Ravisher
with journey's end contiguous,
of the power of One.

I hear the rhythmic chanting of a low voice,
I hear the beat of the African drummer.
I face a universe of questions,
in the hard red billiard ball of the One Big Question,
when we all stand face to face,
in the everywhere and always,
not in the here and now,
once we dislocate personal space
in the eternal *jihad* with self.

Love Is Not A Woman

A lattice curtain billows up and over his face,
blows back to caress his neck,
and falls into place pressing against the screen.
The first movement repeats.

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

In rising crescendos he breathes in
the scent of May bearing the Spring rains,
the freshly tilled soil,
the small squares, giant rectangles
and garden plots, freshly textured
in their readiness for seed.
The erring breeze brings to his nostrils
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 gentle release.
His body finds its rhythm.

It's the subtle thing, the mere trace,
the faint suggestion, the fading echo,
the after-thought that stirs the man
as he stands fixed 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,
to invoke it to the plants
pushing up freshly green.

Some faint echoes linger in his head,
a few names of faded flowers--
daisies once in bloom, purple irises.

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

The One Great Love

Forever do we seek the one great love

which first we knew, its joys

and haunting pleasures to renew.

Little Light Boat On The Ottawa

Last night I stood on the banks of the Gatineau,
at the confluence of the Ottawa,
down from the bridge called Lady Aberdeen,
watching a veiled vapour moon
wink a misty eye through wisps of trailing clouds.
It was a night of a thousand Julys,
filled with the perfumed breath of a lover's sighs.

I spied a little boat across the way.
It seemed to hover in its own light,
afloat upon the darkness of the water,
bobbing, moving upstream toward the glimmering
outline of the city.

Looming upstream were arcs of bridges, museums,
office towers, federation buildings, high rise apartments,
the Château Laurier, the church spire of Notre Dame,
indeterminate structures that might have looked
in the Middle Ages like dark battlements.

The city under its night lights stood astride the horizon,
as if to unknowingly defy that one lone glow gliding
to its port of call, 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 going, little boat,
a vessel on its way, *une petite force qui va*.
We too are vessels on our way,
each of us belonging somewhere, for a while,
some of us to someone, for a time,
while we move about, making criss-cross patterns
in the world.

I Have Been Fed

I have been fed
on lyric, faith and song,
bred on truth's mighty crumb
to fill a hungry mouth,
been lost in desert sands,
in wastes of agonizing dread.

I have loved all precious things
to warm me in the sun,
to find a name to name me with,
to see where I belong.

I once gambled all for love,
my very life and breath,
not the love that I supposed,
suffered fortune's great reversal,
will find instead,
love's abiding, deep repose.

I would have died for beauty
in a day when none could stand,
and may yet still.

Lay me gently,
gently,
gently down,
beneath flowers bright,
upon a grassy hill.

The Bible, Woman's Lib And Rock 'n Roll

Needles tap at the window pane.

It's winter again.

In the silence that surrounds me,
the gentle pin points fall to cadence out
an irregular tapping.

Now we're in the dead of it.

Soon we'll seek refuge under billows of blankets
and in deep sleep.

Those who travel out of doors must be frosty snowmen,
with icicles for veins, frozen water for blood.

Should I have said "snowpersons" in this age of liberation?

The doctor's house still lies wrapped in frost,
but he is gone, his house now occupied by others,
occupation army of the consumer age.

We haven't spoken yet. I don't even know their names.

If I passed them on the street, would not recognize.

The global village should move in next door.

The fridge hums.

Leah now turned teen exchanges a word with her mother
as they stir below in the kitchen.

Soon my daughter you'll be 23,
and soon your baby will be 3,

and you'll be 53 or 93 or 103,
and then be just a name remembered by your children's children,
a fond memory, the only immortality recognized by a pagan world.
But never just a name to me,
your identity preserved forever as all who live for peace,
my peace child, my Leah.

I fancy pipe-dreams so I could watch the wisps rise and twirl,
and with the heaven-sent smoke, dream up images of contentment,
and ease the tension through my teeth,
and live in hope as I wear out these long years,
patient with the daily buzzing in the brain,
perplexed by all the rage, the tinsel and the pain
of this decadent age.

Write on the tombstone of planet earth (1988-2000)
"One million species of plants and animals eradicated."
Let us become recipients of graces rare,
undertake great projects, be not fretters over little things,
just waiting for the next stage, the next mysterious increment
in the planetary crisis phase. "Where to. What next?"
Rock on. Rock on.

I believe---
Thy love,
Thy bounteous pity will make amends,
even when we cannot make amends for ourselves.

Love's Paradox

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

I wished to read thick tomes with you,
bound in dark leather, that could not be released
without shiny brass locks.

We would read silently together,
huddled, books on knees.

A fruit bowl lay at hand.

I longed to shared the world with you,
and travel it one more time,
to converse with you like lovers old,
still friendly.

When the words could not the soul its due express,
to close your mouth with kisses 4.

I dreamed of rising mornings,
to greet you with an amber face, still smiling,
my soul with all your presence fill.

I would touch your hand when it was time to sleep,
and close your eyes that one last time,
If God will.

And though I chased love's fancy forms
about the amorous skies,
and skated down old passageways,
lured on by ancient lies,
I never found her face.
But one fine 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 great question solve.

The lesser loves like sailing ships
did cast away at morning light
to fade away and die.
Yet I remember well the ships at sea,
the captain's bell, the tall ship's mast,
the powder keg, the looking glass.

Litany of Love

She rises higher as I lie in my crucible,
one hour past midnight,
fire consuming my limbs, brain a burning braise.
Above me she rises, my soul, the great bird of paradise,
seeking a rarer atmosphere between two worlds.

First scene: Martha Root in New England

My astonished eyes see Martha Root.
She stands between two white pillars
on the veranda of a New England home.
She stands close to the railing and looks down on me.
I dialogue with that earnest face now a youngish 35.
Gone the wistful look, the eyes of luminous blue,
gone the white and iron-grey strands framing the face
softened by years of unrelenting service,
living out of a suitcase, through world tours and wars,
mountain voyages, sea-sick on sailing ships,
through fires, hurricanes, famine, snow storms,
journalistic pieces, countless lectures,
talks and interviews with royalty...
and slow, advancing cancer.
No husband and kids for you.
You had other plans.

Marion Little once told me in Versailles
that she had travelled down the U.S. east coast with you.
Just the two of you, back in the 20's.
Once a lone stranger appeared for a public talk,
this solitary individual. You didn't cancel but stood and talked,
said Marion, as if you had just filled Albert Hall.
You stood and spoke there for an hour,
while Marion sat beside the gentleman
and said the Greatest Name.

The greatness of your station is of no account.
My struggling self of no account.
You speak, intent on teaching me.
I see your lips moving but hear no sound.
I am not yet ready. You are gone.

Second scene: The Gatineau Hills

High above the Gatineau Hills I see the Ottawa flowing below.
All the names are changed. Quebec has become "New Israel",
Canada herself a soft rosy pink, rivers are renamed for spiritual purposes.

My soul speaks. The litany of love begins.
I love you Mom and Dad, patrons of my soul,
I love you "White Feather", you for whom I met obstacles in loving.
I love you our two daughters, Mukina and Leah.
It does not matter, I love you.
I love you my sister, Mary Louise, with a love too deep for words,

a love that only tears sometimes express.

I love, too, all the windswept landscapes of this vast country.

I love all wild places.

I love all of you who have shared your soul without shame.

I love Canada's hills, forests, scented pine,

the haunting call of the loon as evening falls,

the whistling jay on a hot summer's day,

the arctic's barren soul of mysterious grandeur,

the splashing brooks, the light-dappled limpid lakes.

I love all living things.

I love you all as Tristan lived and loved and died,

he, the personification of a living love,

and whosoever was held by those outstretched loving arms,

did not doubt that he too was loved.

His last words, "I'm so glad I'm a Bahá'í",

heaved out of his convulsed and sunken chest,

the last few breaths of a life spent in discomfort,

then in pain. You never lived to see your adult years,

but there are other worlds that will delight

even the most experienced traveller.

These Women

The women came home from the banquet,
not weary, still chatting, animated,
full of life. The men were not there

They brought with them the sandwiches,
the cookies and cakes, the green grapes,
the other left-over finger foods
that were the fruits of their labours.

Now at home, late at night,
when their work is done,
their mouths will soon enjoy
the pleasures that their hands have wrought.

They glowed with zeal these women,
organized to perfection,
created an angel ruckus,¹⁷
they blew spirit into lifeless bodies,
were sublimely creative and noble,
and lent kind words to one another.
They strove for perfection.

¹⁷ *Angel Ruckus* is the title of B.K. Wilson's book of poems.

Ah these women!

I wonder that the world

does not marvel at them more.

They fuss, they worry, they care--

if only men did more.

At night they lay their weary bodies down,

their devotions thus fulfilled,

and lend themselves to their menfolk,

who grasp at them in the dark.

Love Transforms With Flowers

She took the carnations as a young mother
might cradle her new-born in her arms.

A barely inaudible "Ohhh..." passed her lips,
an oh that was no oh but a murmur of delight.

She leaned slightly backward on her stool,
held the flowers to her cheek.

In one moment, a cosmic smile of rapture
rose in her face.

It was the same smile the Buddha smiled
when he held aloft a lotus blossom,

his soul immersed in joy.

The flowers spoke to her.

They said:

"I love you. You are loved. I am lovely."

So rare a scene of transforming love,
one indeed that I had never seen.

Later I thought as I wrote this poem:

"If flowers of love will so transform a soul,
what will the heavenly hyacinth do?"

Star Gazer

I may follow them to glory
the myriad, the odd,
observe the age-old passage rites,
the stony path they trod.

I see their shining faces
amid the galaxies of stars,
that numberless look down on us
benign, detached, afar.

I sense the tender hearts
who so often stole a tear,
the penetrating minds that
incised error without fear.

I yearn for those immortals
who while still youths,
chose to burn their lives away,
to cast a spar of heat and light
into a cold and darkened world,
who journeyed uphill to Jerusalem
in search of celestial gold.

But most I love those loving souls
who having known the lures of love,
escaped love's snare, and passed beyond,
to become true lovers of God.