THIRTY POEMS

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ABSTRACT

This collection of thirty original poems is submitted with the permission of the Department of English in lieu of the usual thesis requirement.

The poems, although not a cycle, are interrelated in theme, imagery, technique and conception. The prototype of many of the poems is primitive song--poems which describe, accompany, or embody a ritual. Genres include the lullaby, riddle, counting rhyme, and dramatic sequence.

The content and impact of the poems is as much a function of sound as of meaning; these poems are meant to be recited, chanted, or sung. Strongly rhythmic cadence and a free use of rhyme are usual; this includes rhyme of entire repeated lines, and rhyme of ideas in parallel construction. Rhythmic tension is created by asymmetrical stanzas of three, five, and seven lines, used either by themselves, or in combination or alternation with symmetrical stanzas.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce recueil de trente poèmes originaux est présenté au lieu d'un thèse, sous l'autorisation du Département des études anglaises.

Les poèmes ci-inclus se réfèrent quant aux thèmes, aux images, et à la technique; pourtant, ils n'ont pas été conçus comme un cycle uni. En général les poèmes s'inspirent de la chanson primitive, ayant comme but, de décrire, d'accompagner, ou d'incorporer un rite. On reconnaît parmi les genres adaptés, la berceuse, l'énigme, le jeu de nombres, et le dialogue dramatique.

Le contenu de ces poèmes est une fonction de son autant que de sens. Ce sont des poemes à reciter, à psalmodier ou à chanter, qui sont marqués par des cadences très rythmés et l'utilisation des rimes libres. On y retrouve fréquemment la répétition de vers entiers et la reprise fonctionnelle d'idées, qui tiennent lieu de rime. Un conflit de rythme est crée par des strophes asymétriques de trois, cinq ou sept vers, qui peuvent s'employer touts seuls ou bien en alternance avec des strophes symétriques.

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INTRODUCTION

I wish to make it clear at the outset that this Introduction is in no way a necessary prerequisite to reading and understanding the thirty poems presented here. It is to be considered separately, as an essay on poetics, rather than as an integral part of the manuscript. It is my belief that a good poem should stand by itself, requiring no introduction, explanation or commentary. (T. S. Eliot's Notes to The Waste Land, which, the poet ruefully remarks, "have had almost greater popularity than the poem itself," were actually written as filler when it was discovered that the poem was inconveniently short for publication in small book form.)[1]

One other preliminary note may be advisable. What I offer here, alongside a collection of thirty poems, is the basis for a theory of poetry--a theory influenced by varied readings in literature, criticism, philosophy, psychology, and anthropology--but based above all upon the experience of poetry, from both the creative and the receptive end. Without a doubt ideas expressed here will be reflected in the poems: it would be strange indeed if they were not. However,

[1] T. S. Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism," in On Poetry and Poets, (London, 1957), p. 109-110.

inasmuch as a theory speaks for the general and the ideal, there will be places where individual poems depart from it. Practice does not always reflect theory, and while this may sometimes indicate a failing, it may also have its own internally valid reasons for the departure.

Moreover, there may be elements in the poetry which I do not speak of here, because they exist for me still on an intuitive level and have not yet become articulable as part of a theory. The attempt to formulate a theory of poetry at any given time, I regard as a valuable exercise, but inasmuch as the product will be bound by the limitations of a particular stage of development, I should consider it artistic suicide to hold to it as dogma. In writing this I demand of myself that I formulate something workable and consistent within itself--not something absolute or permanent. I say this not by way of excuse, but to ensure a degree of honesty between myself and my reader regarding the particular limitations of this statement, and the nature of its relationship to the poems.

What does it mean to say that a poem should be able to stand by itself? That The Waste Land stands by itself is a statement I think few would dispute, however valuable the Notes

have proved to scholars and critics interested in sources and allusions in the poem. It stands by itself because its sound, structure, movement, and imagery speak to the imagination in such a way that a number of different interpretive constructs can grow out of it--each of which, though maybe not "what the poet meant" (if the poet knew), can be demonstrated to be internally consistent.

Internal consistency is the key. The order a poem creates must be rational from within. It may depart from the usual order of things, but it must harbour within itself no fundamental contradiction, no extraneous or inappropriate element.

When I speak of the order of a poem, I mean to suggest that poetry in some way re-orders both the experience which germinates it, and the language in which it is written. For the purpose of discussion it may be productive to examine this re-ordering process in terms of a dualism--that of experience (content, signification), and that of language (symbol, medium). However, I mean also to show in the course of the paper that no such division exists in practice: that in a good poem the re-ordering functions simultaneously, or synchronistically, at both levels.

If we begin from the poem itself, it is already impossible to separate experience from language. The experience of a

man building a wooden table is not a poem; neither is his, or another's perception of that experience. In the poet's perception of the experience, we may have the germ of a poem: that is to say, the re-ordering of experience is partly a function of perception. But only when that perception is articulated, and that, by transformation, rather than mere translation, into language, do we have a poem.

I make this distinction (transformation vs. translation) because it is just what I mean by "re-ordering experience" in poetry. The perception of an experience, even the poetic perception of an experience, can be translated into language without becoming poetry. Words, used as significant symbols and nothing more, become a vehicle for description and/or conceptualization. This is the function of language in speech and its written equivalent, prose. The poet does something more than "translate" his experience into language; he <u>transforms it by means of language</u>. In the process of becoming language, the experience ceases to be itself, becomes something different and/or larger--something which incorporates language and thenceforth cannot be separated from it. The poem is its own experience and a new experience, one in which language is an inextricable component. A type of fusion has taken place. A poem is imperfect insofar as the fusion is not complete. Prose is poetic insofar as a partial fusion

has taken place. (We might say that the difference between a perception and its articulation in prose or speech is quantitative--by articulating it we duplicate it--whereas the difference between a perception and its articulation in poetry is qualitative--by articulating it we change it.)[2]

Now if we step back from this fusion, it may be possible to view experience and language as separate entities in the poem, and so examine those aspects of poetic transformation which involve only what we call the (significative) content, or "subject matter" of poetry, as distinct from the signifying symbols (words). To return to our example: If we perceive a man building a wooden table, we may translate this perception into language qua speech or prose, without fundamentally altering the nature of the event. We will still have a particular agent (man), a particular act (building) performed with respect to a particular material (wood) and yielding a particular product (table); and this is all that we will have. These are the bare bones of individuated experience. If, however, we were to look upon the constituents of this experience in a nonspecific framework--in other words, take "man" "building" "wooden" and "table" not as particulars, but as pure concepts in themselves as well as in

[2] cf. Paul Valery, "Poetry and Abstract Thought" in The Art of Poetry (1938) as it appears in The Modern Tradition, ed. Richard Ellman and Charles Feidelson (Oxford University Press: New York, 1965), p. 74-85.

relation to each other, a different perception begins to emerge. Concepts combine to form new concepts (man building : the human creative agent) and/or evoke associations (wood : tree), and the event takes on a cosmic, atemporal aspect. This man, building this wooden table, comes to stand for any man turning nature to human ends: the creation of "table" from "tree" stands for human will in nature. The much larger concepts of man and nature become the true content or context of the experience, and notions of power, responsibility, control, energy and invention come into play.

In articulating his perception of a man building a wooden table, the poet will choose words which evoke the larger perception, the atemporal one. I say "words which evoke" because it is not a question, here, of stating or "translating" the larger perception. That, I have just done--in prose. A poetic perception is not a poem. "Words which evoke" is the key to a poet's re-ordering of language. The evocative power of words is a function of two properties, sound and meaning; and the interplay between these two will be the primary subject of the remainder of this paper.

I pause at this point to make a not uncommon observation about the nature of "atemporal" perceptions. I have suggested that a poetic perception is any perception of an experience or event which goes beyond the immediate, links it with all like

events, and invests it with significance on an atemporal or a cosmic level. It goes without saying that such perceptions do not belong solely to poetry. They belong to a large sphere of human consciousness, a sphere which is concerned not only with the creation of works of art, but also with the evolving of mythologies, religions, and magical systems, and their attendant rites and liturgies. At a primitive level, art and religion go hand in hand. Cult objects are made visually beautiful; dance and song form the basis for religious rites. The use of language in primitive culture which comes closest to our contemporary notion of verse, is found at its most basic level in primitive prayers and prayer-chants, as observed by C. M. Bowra in his book, Primitive Song (New York, 1962).

It is also worth observing that certain recurring images, or archetypes, are to be found in the subject matter of bodies of myth, religion, literature and art, and that this holds on a world-wide basis, transcending cultural and temporal boundaries. Treatment and context vary from culture to culture, and there is infinite variety of detail, but the archetypes are recognizable underneath. The hero, the trickster, the mother are examples of archetypal figures; descent into the underworld and rebirth are examples of archetypal events. The fact that these same images occur in dreams, even of children and uneducated people, at all cultural levels, led C. G. Jung to

postulate the theory of a "collective unconscious". Whether or not we hold, with Northrop Frye, that such a theory is "unnecessary" to critics dealing with archetypes in a particular body of literature, as a theory it remains a useful tool for exploring the relation between myth, religion and art, and it may sometimes explain the appeal and accessibility of certain works of art to cultures other than the one which produced them. It is not the place of this paper to discuss further the theory of the collective unconscious; suffice it to say that the appearance of archetypes in poetry is a measurable phenomenon, that the archetype is the closest we can come to such a thing as a "universal symbol", and that insofar as a poet's work utilises or evokes them, his work will be apt to retain in translation an accessibility that it might otherwise lose.

I have said that poetry differs from prose and speech both in its perception and treatment of experience (the subject matter of a poem) and also in the way it uses language, and I have termed both processes "re-ordering". The re-ordering of experience in poetry, as I have just tried to show, takes place on a mythico-religious plane. What of the re-ordering of language?

Here we are dealing with an immensely complex process which, again, harbours a duality. The rules of prosody and

versification, the techniques of metre, rhyme, alliteration and so forth, fall under this heading, but to suggest that the entire re-ordering is a question of exploiting sonorous properties of language would be a vast oversimplification. The reason for this is that language is composed of words, and so long as the language is one which we know, we cannot, in experiencing it, separate words from their meanings. We hear sounds and simultaneously register meanings. Yet this in no way alters the fact that language has a sonorous aspect which is experienced by the ear--and through the ear by the emotions --rather than by the mind: much in the way that music is experienced. Just as music has a meaning in its own context (such that certain sounds grouped together "make sense" to the ear) so the sounds of a language have a meaning--what Robert Frost called "the sound of sense." But the meaning of the sound of a word and the meaning of a word are not the same thing. It is the fact that we experience them simultaneously (in a language that we know) that leads me to say a poet's re-ordering of content and language is synchronistic.

In his essay, "The Music of Poetry," T. S. Eliot elucidates this duality of sound and meaning. He calls "musical", not only the sonorous aspect of the word, but also its meaning insofar as it generates secondary meanings and associations:

> The music of a word is, so to speak, at a point of intersection: it arises from its relation first to the words immediately preceding and following it, and indefinitely to the rest of its context; and from another relation, that of its immediate meaning in that context to all the other meanings which it has had in other contexts, to its greater or less wealth of association. . . . This is an 'allusiveness' which is not the fashion or eccentricity of a peculiar type of poetry; but an allusiveness which is in the nature of words, and which is equally the concern of every kind of poet. My purpose here is to insist that a 'musical poem' is a poem which has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words which compose it, and that these two patterns are indissoluble and one. And if you object that it is only the pure sound, apart from the sense, to which the adjective 'musical' can be rightly applied, I can only reaffirm my previous assertion that the sound of a poem is as much an abstraction from the poem as is the sense. [3]

The "pure sound" of a poem can be experienced only if the poem is in a language we do not know, or know imperfectly. Elsewhere[4] Eliot describes this experience:

> I have sometimes found, in trying to read a language which I did not know very well, that I did not understand a piece of prose until I understood it according to the standards of the school teacher: that is, I had to be sure of the meaning of every word, grasp the grammar and syntax, and then I could think the passage out in English. But I have also found sometimes that a piece of poetry, which I could not translate, containing many words unfamiliar to me, and sentences which I could not construe, conveyed something immediate and vivid, which was unique, different from anything in English--something which I could not put into words and yet felt that I understood. And on learning that language better I found that this impression was not an illusion, not something which I imagined to be in the poetry, but something that was really there.

[3] On Poetry and Poets, p. 32-33

[4] Ibid., "The Social Function of Poetry," p. 24

What he apprehended in this case was the meaning of the sounds of words: the sound of sense of another language, or perhaps it would be more apt to call it "the sense of sound." And since, in good poetry, the meaning of the sound and the meaning of the word are fused in a harmoniously interdependent relationship, he was able in some way to grasp intuitively the meaning of the poem. In the same way, a person with a gift for languages is able to formulate syntactically correct sentences in a language he is learning before he "knows the rules" -- he will say that this or that "sounds right."

The meaning of the sound applies to individual words, but more importantly it applies to groups of words, to syntactical formations. It is the mood of a statement--indicative, interrogative, exclamatory--the gesture, as it were, that the sounds make. The gestures are found in articulate speech. In a letter to his student, John Bartlett, Robert Frost stresses the importance of this awareness, and describes how a poet must work with it:

> Now it is possible to have sense without the sound of sense (as in much prose that is supposed to pass muster but makes very dull reading) and the sound of sense without sense (as in Alice in Wonderland which makes anything but dull reading). The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words. . . .Those sounds are summoned by the audile (audial) imagination and they must be positive, strong, and definitely and unmistakeably indicated by the context. The reader must be at no

> loss to give his voice the posture proper to the sentence. . . .The sound of sense, then. . . .It is the abstract vitality of our speech. It is pure sound--pure form. One who concerns himself with it more than the subject is an artist. . . .An ear and an appetite for these sounds of sense is the first qualification of a writer, be it of prose or verse. But if one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skillfully breaking the sound of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre. . . .We depend for variety on the infinite play of accents in the sound of sense.[5]

In poetry the sound of sense is half, or more than half, of the message. On even the most basic level, in primitive prayers, songs, and incantations, sound-meanings figure in the form of functional and structural repetition (the refrain line seems to occur in all languages and cultures), parallelism, rhythmic drive, metrical regularity, onomatopoeia. In terms of sound, a statement made once does not mean quite the same thing as that same statement made twice. The statement made twice in succession does not mean quite the same thing as the statement made twice with intervening material. While the subject matter differs from one villanelle to another, something of the meaning of the sound, of the sound-structure of every villanelle is the same. This also holds for musical forms.

In good poetry, the meaning of the sound and the meanings of the words are one in that they are experienced wholistically, even though their messages may not be the same. Each illuminates

[5] Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost : The Early Years, (New York, 1966), p. 418-419

the other--by heightening or by subtly altering. Thus, the poet is working with two systems. This is what I mean by the re-ordering of language. It is as though the language in which a poem is written is not the language of the poem, but only the material from which the language of the poem derives. The poem itself is in a secondary language, one which uses the forms of the "mother-language" but uses them according to different rules, rules which it creates for itself. The poem creates its own contexts of sound and meaning, and thereafter its only linguistic rule is the rule of internal consistency--of faithfulness to these new contexts.

The notion of poetry creating a new language is set out with remarkable lucidity and succinctness by Claude Levi-Strauss:

> [I]n articulate speech, the primary nonsignifying code [phonemes] is a means and condition of significance in the secondary code [morphemes]. In this way, significance is restricted to one level. The dualism is reestablished in poetry, which incorporates in the second code the potential, signifying value of the first. Poetry exploits simultaneously the intellectual significance of the words and syntactical constructions and aesthetic properties, which are the potential terms of another system which reinforces, modifies, or contradicts this significance. . . .Two articulated mechanisms mesh to form a third, which combines the properties of both.[6]

The new, internally consistent language of a poem may be the creation of an individual poet, or it may evolve

[6] Claude Levi-Strauss, The Raw and the Cooked : Introduction to a Science of Mythology : 1, translated from the French by John and Doreen Weightman (New York, 1969), p. 21.

cumulatively through the work of many poets, resulting in a particular school or style. Among modern poets, e e cummings may be taken as a clear-cut example of an individual poet creating his own secondary language. Theoretically at least, a single poet could create a new language for every poem he wrote, but this is not usually what occurs in practice, and a poet's own secondary language, if it remains fairly consistent through the whole body of his work, is what is known as his voice.

I should add at this point that the re-ordering of language can take place on a visual as well as an audial plane. Where literature is experienced primarily visually--written down and read silently--the sound of sense is replaced, or enhanced, by what we might call the "look of sense"; and the distribution of words on a page, the embellishment of letters or words by means of calligraphy, illumination, or printing techniques, the geometrical shape of a poem, can also function as language within language. This, too, occurs at the primitive level; it is the case for certain prayer-amulets and poetical charms, the ancestors, perhaps, of modern "concrete" poetry. As poetry has come to be experienced more in its written than in its spoken or sung form, the visual element figures strongly along with or instead of the sound of sense, in much of modern poetry.

It is significant, I believe, that Levi-Strauss's

statement about poetry occurs in a lengthy discussion of the nature of the arts as compared to the nature of mythology. He examines painting, sculpture, poetry and music, viewing each as a language unto itself, and compares them to mythology which he also defines on a linguistic model. The interrelation of these fields--art, language, and mythology / religion--seems to me to be the only key to formulating a comprehensive theory of any one of them.[7] They are all outgrowths of the creative imagination: perhaps a truly thorough investigation would begin with the whole problem of human creativity and its source. In this sense Jung's theory of the collective unconscious is a possible point of departure: it at least recognizes patterns which are transcultural and apply equally to artistic and mythological constructs; and it grapples with the principle of active imagination in human psychology. If this were combined with Levi-Strauss's language model, it might go a long way toward evolving a theory of the nature of art in general.

My conclusion is that any theory of poetry which failed to come to terms in some way with these relationships, with parallels between the arts, language, and mythology, would be, at best, incomplete.

A word, then, on the thirty poems. As I stated at the

[7]See Susanne Langer, Philosophy in a New Key : A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art (Harvard University Press : Cambridge, Mass., 1951)

outset, the relation of this essay to the poems presented here may not always be immediately apparent. I would say that only three of the poems--those numbered XXII, XXVII, and XXIX in the manuscript--are straightforward examples of transformation of experience in the manner which I described (the simple events being, in the first poem, the handing back and forth of the load of firewood; in the second, the woman watching her lover through the glass pane as she waits for him to open the door; in the third, the attempt to destroy a gift.) In the large majority of the poems, the germinating experience is of a psychological or a spiritual nature. Because of this, there is no external event to re-order; instead an internal event must be conveyed through language. Oftenest this is accomplished with recourse to the imagery of dreams and rites. Such poems re-order events of the psyche. This is the reason for their "otherworldly" quality. Like the poems dealing with external events, they seek the atemporal; hence, their imagery is elemental and archetypal. The archetypal circle image occurs in Quartet (XIV); archetypal number imagery, in Quartet, The Dead Tree Speaks (III), Counting Song (VIII) and others. Touching Bottom(XIII) evokes the harrowing of hell. Figures like Marion (X, XV, XX, XXV), the grey lady (XVI), the dancing girl (V), the

women in Blue Girl (XVII) and the woman in Riddle (XI), involve or evoke archetypal women: mother, muse, fate, temptress, etc.

As for re-ordering of language: the "voice" of the poems borrows a great deal from primitive song, and its most obvious features are repetition--of lines, of parts of lines, of whole stanzas--, repetition with variation, and structural parallelism. Almost any of the poems can be taken to illustrate this; Vessels (IV), Quartet, and Cane (XVIII) are, in terms of structure, the most extreme examples; but the same principles are at work, more subtly, in a longer, discursive poem such as Blue Girl (XVII).

I

The Trees

They told me where my voice lay sleeping:
It was in a bed of stones.

Verse by verse I count my song
on the nodes of a twig
that the wind brought down.

It was in a bed of stones.

II

The Other

Your voice--
above all I love
your voice: there's earth
and water in it.
Where did you learn your songs?

Songs
are not learnt.

But. . .the wind!
the cracked bell!
and the hooves ringing. . .?

Where I come from
things happen easily as
morning comes to the mountain.

Ah. Will you teach me, then?

When we were children
gently and gently our insistent
caressing fingers traced
circles on each other's arms
till the blood came. . .
In every gesture we were
tender as doves. Our skin was
soft as the backs of leaves.

And did you croon songs then, or whisper
rhymes in each other's ears?

--As mosquitoes draw blood from your earlobes,
carry it singing in their bodies. . .

The hairs at the nape of my neck
curl at the sound of your voice.
What is the name of the song I heard you singing?

Where I come from
leaves let go before
the wind shakes them, and no one
answers questions.

III

the dead tree speaks

Why have they left me standing
chained to my own parts?
My three trunks lean awry,
my limbs are all cut off.
Twelve forks have I
that do not even remember the weight of my leaves.
I will never lie down
till the wood crumbles.

The fungus like a yellow curd forming,
feeding, spreading,
The fungus like a yellow brain
sleeps at my heart.
Will you renew your life?
Bite it open.
What do you wish to know of death?
The answer is inside.

Where my bark is stripped away
I am white as milk.
I am smooth as bone
but without bone's brittleness.
Twelve horned heads were my twenty-four branches--
And what are these black chains
that will not let me fall?

IV

Vessels

Your mother gave you a tiny bottle,
glass crinkled like old silk.
When you uncork your tiny bottle,
birds stream out of its mouth.

Birds stream out of its mouth!
Oh lucky one! my urn,
my urn of a thousand ages, it is empty!

I live on a lake without horizon
in a ship without a sail.
Into my windy cabin
your birds are blown

and their colours crack in my sight
and they hang on the air
like spots of unvanishing light--
eyes open, eyes closed.

Your mother gave you a tiny bottle,
glass frosted like green foam.
When you uncork your tiny bottle,
birds stream out of its mouth.

My lake has no horizon,
my ship is unpainted.
Oh my urn, my stone urn,
my urn too large for lifting,
my urn of a thousand ages, you are empty!

V

Dancing Girl

Who is that, dancing on your tired head?
Your face collapses under the weight.
Your huge nose spreads like wax.

Already your eyes are haunted: dogs' eyes.
She flutters a red mantle.
The dance sinks hollows under your cheekbones.

Sad faces turning in the wind
can sway you no more.
You remember the summer of your first love,
brought to flower in a windmill's shadow.

Your face caves, a horse looks out of one eye.
She's put a death's-head in the other
with one thrust of her iron foot.

Pale voices keening on the wind
can sway you no more.
You remember the summer of your first love,
brought to flower in a windmill's shadow.

VI

Cradle Song

rocks me now the wind
like a giant hand
sifting seed to earth

an acre wind-sown
hand to the mouth of earth
rock and dust

home now to earth
I slide
through the wind's fingers

rock and dust
hand to the mouth of earth

VII

You are seven parts stranger to me,
my love.
I hear your silence in the next room
like a voice on another balcony.
If you cough, or turn a page,
it is a sentence that the wind wafts up to me
in an unknown tongue.

These walls that are ours, my love,
are neither mine nor yours.
We can stop up the cracks where the wind seeps in,
to make them warmer.

When we talk, we are two blind people
exploring faces with hands.
I hear your silence in the next room
like a prayer of another faith.

VIII

Counting Song

He found a child, frightened by the rain,
against a wet tree leaning.
Her face changed once, and told of the wind's cunning.

He found a queen of fury and despair
who banged upon his door.
Her face changed twice, and shone in the dark mirror.

He found a Muse upon a wooden stair
who sang to see him there.
Her face changed thrice, looked down from the high tower.

Four times was her face made new
when the floor fell through.

Five times was her face made over
for five flat stones that he bounced
on the wide river.

IX

She waits, and counts the days.
--Supposing it were so: she would go away, of course,
somewhere beside the sea, to seek new beginnings.

Will they ask, will they wonder
who came into the midnight garden
pried back the damp turf and
found the door to the dark chamber--
forced it? or found the lock rusted, the hinges willing?

Will they ask, will they wonder
who took heed of the rain's whisper
set his foot inside and
put down there for a night's slumber--
Will they search for signs? his footprints in her irises?

--After all, he did not leave very much,
a nothing, a grain of sand off his toe
no evidence at all--save that this grows
secretly round and milky in its cell
becomes precious, awaits its own discovery
presses against the shell. . .

and thus the pearl becomes her universe,
demanding light. Can she deny it that?
What else is certain? This alone,
expanding inside her, is no midnight wraith
that might have been a dream--stealing away traceless,
resurrected only in conjecture:
no, this is real, and she will feel it grow
more real within her day by day, more terrible
for saying that he was there--indelibly.
('If he came back to stay?--but that would be
at best a tenuous and cloud-bound thing:
he sought a wayside shelter, not a home.')

--She waits, and counts the days.

X

Marion (i)

My mind when I met Marion
went out of me--
flew windward till the wind backed up,
caught in an elm tree,
fell earthward when the wind died.
Under the tree sat Marion
counting the scales of fishes,
Under the tree sat Marion
with a basket at her side.

My voice when I met Marion
went out of me--
hid in the grass till the birds came down,
broke loose, broke free,
fled to the hills of blown sand.
Down through the dunes came Marion
singing of old bones.
Down through the dunes came Marion
with a spade in her hand.

My soul when I met Marion
went out of me--
rose toward the sun like a leaf on fire,
fell like a cinder,
came to rest on the water.
Down to the shore came Marion
trailing a net of silver.
Down to the shore came Marion,
the ferryman's daughter.

XI

Riddle

Her dream like drops of rain,
her face, through that spattered glass.
Neither window nor mirror,
you cannot wipe it clean. Though near,
if you think you can come any nearer,
think again.

XII

Your Words

The sound of paper rustling
and your words like dry bones on the page
stop my heart tonight.
I want a love who writes his songs on sand,
whose messages
are bits of shell and a round stone left on a log
I may never find.

XIII

Touching Bottom

Old stones that the light lost long ago,
I know you.
It's black down here.
Damp earth still falls in flurries
when my fingers speak along the wall,
But my hands have uncovered your faces,
old stones.

I know your blind eyes,
your mouths that the rain can't fill.
It's black down here.
When I find my way out
--even if it's light there, still--
my hands will remember your faces,
old stones.

XIV

Quartet

She in the glow of the lamp,
he in the shadow
call down the night with songs:
Oak-arms angle out
into dark.

Into the lamp's circle
her sister, his brother
carry the dark things
that the storm washed in.

Count one for the star that rules them,
two for hands joined.
Count three for the comings and goings,
four for hands joined.
Here, beyond the window
the night comes gently.
Oak-arms angle out
into dark.

He in the glow of the lamp,
she in the shadow
call down the night with songs.
Into the lamp's circle
his sister, her brother
carry the dark things
that the storm washed in.

Under this roof, with songs,
we close the circle.
Oak-arms angle out
into dark

XV

Marion (ii)

Marion sits by the river
(the leaves of late summer
lick at the sun)
and the wind comes down by her side
and the hairs from her head
fall one by one

The birds fly up from the grass
with the soft bright strands
and vanish upstream without a sound.
The dew is cold
on Marion's hands
when the sun goes down.

"Something called you.
Was it the wind?
A great downward pull--
Was it the river?
A strange cold promise--
Was it the dew?
All my own ocean
couldn't stop your ears
so the warm walls gave
and brought me to my knees.
A great tug downward,
what white silence,
my child?

Bright birds, then take of my hair
for your nests' lining, and bare my head
to warm your young."

(and the wind comes down by her side
and the hairs from her head
fall one by one)

XVI

The grey lady with her hair under water
bows to the wind, bows to the rain.
She is the keeper of the nightingale.
She fans the dark candles.

See, her hair moves like the fronds of seaweed,
Her ears are filled with a sound of flutes.
Moss grows between her fingers.
The wind bends her.

Dry windy laughter has cracked her mouth's corners,
Her hair swings down in an arc.
Her body is pliant as a dancer's,
Her fingers are bones.

When I woke in the night her face was at my window,
grey in the wind, grey in the rain
(and I must leave you in the morning
O my love)

XVII

Blue Girl

flowers of a late spring cannot fill
the wells that sank in her eyes
too long empty, these latter months of winter

I have come under the spell of the little blue girl
now that it's fall.
There, on the wall,
in a faded calendar print, she stands--
blue pinafore, clasped hands,
black hair cut close around a pointed face.
December in the orphanage. There--in a cold corner--
alone, quite motionless, face pointed like a leaf,
she stands: frail rib cage housing
silence like a blind canary.
Why have the nuns not combed her hair?
for it is ragged as a cretin's hair.
Her eyes peer out, blue wells
waiting for winter.
(Pale ghost of Adelheid, the sleepwalker,
stock-still in moonlight, listening to the wind
in fir-trees no one else can hear!). . . the air
around her blue, and her thin lips
blue from the touch of air
in windy corners where bare walls meet.

What are her blue eyes like?
They are like small blue flowers
trapped under ice. . .
nuns' eyes, submerged,
longing to burn
(and now in an instant she is Joan
surrounded by voices)

Arlette in her bare chamber
opens crazed eyes.
Dry leaves whisper at the window.
Now one bare arm
swings out at random, clutches at the sheet,
stiffens and drops. It hangs from the bed
like a dead arm. She does not blink.
The wind comes in.

Wind
rises, the leaves come down
with a papery rustle.
The house in autumn
assumes a dingy air; doors bang, the leaves
blow in. . .
I have come under the spell of the little blue girl.
There, from the wall,
she stares--pale paper doll
in a cold corner, saying,
I am Sabina's child. Be warned

of sudden departures
of nights on trains
of silence in unfamiliar rooms.

This man, Modigliani,
whose vision she was, for six years in Montmartre
prowling by night, silent, given to excesses,
endlessly shifting lodgings, drawing from wine
his disenchanted nudes, this man too
was of Sabina's cult. You could not follow him
through his dark changes, you could not keep pace
even a single night, tracing him from café to café.
The post came back with a terse 'Déménagé'--
No known address.

(Arlette in her bare chamber
stares her rag doll stare. . .)

-I have come under the spell of the little blue girl
now that it's fall.
I see the stars grow blue between the branches,
the leaf wither, curl inward on itself,
the wind curl round the leaf.
Leaves
fall, leaves follow me--
Bright leaves to warm my room grow brown and brittle
and I wait here for the cold coming. (But after all she,
Sabina's child with the leaf-like face
is only a square of paper, cut from December,
with old brown scotch-tape peeling
at the curled corners. . .)

XVIII

Cane

Grasp it with both hands,
the bough, the green bough that you broke,
grasp it with both hands.

You stripped its leaves away,
you cut the knobbled branches,
peeled off the rough bark,
found its green bareness--
under the rough bark
its moist green bareness,
its fresh green bareness.

The bough, the green bough that you broke,
you stripped it bare.
There in the woods where you broke it,
you stripped it bare.
Now grasp it, the bough, the green bough,
grasp it with both hands.

XIX

Sooke Sketches

i. Alien

Sitting up there, among the tall friendly grasses
on that ledge, looking down on the sea,
seemed like everyone knew which way to bend when the wind blew
except me.

ii. Talk

So much is said by two
who say nothing,
but sit in silence by a flickering lamp
and cast huge shadows on the cabin walls
and hear the waves knock logs against the sand.

iii. What Really Happened

It wasn't ghosts that rocked the house last night,
shaking the windows in a tinny rhythm,
but only the sea, come smashing up on land
to toss the jumbled logs like pick-up-sticks,
pin down the frightened creek to its clay bed
and stop its mouth.

iv. Airtight

Lying awake in this dark cabin room
I have, for company,
the stove's orange
eye

v. Escort

A kind tree offered me a springy arm
and helped me down that slope--
then flew back up, and, quivering, seemed
to wave goodbye:
pebbles and sand rolled down
behind me.

vi. Unloading

Take it
off, throw it in the
sea
    and stand
up free where the white foam
skates up the sand,
let it curl round
your feet
        and stream
back down, stand still and listen for
that clicking sound, when the wave
sucks back pebbles through its
teeth

XX

Marion (iii)

Marion
four years gone this winter
(the thaw, the yellow
sun) and we at last
grown old enough to know
time can't run backward

Marion
fish in the desert
your dress of cornflowers
the green gull and the shadows
Marion

drowned in a sea-cave at high tide
fallen off cliffs
eaten by wolves
still alive: Marion

so many times I have
buried you, it seems that now
one could hope to spend a summer
together
eating cherries
Marion

XXI

Clearing

Branch of a branch
forked long ago,
bend to my knife now,
bend low, my willow.

Flat leaves of yellow
whisper my willow
I've come to cut dead wood,
dead wood, in the grey morning.

The leaves all are down
and the stream, it is shallow.
I've come to cut dead wood,
dead wood, my willow.

come a long way
by flat leaves of yellow
in rain and alone
and whisper my willow

And there's no sound here
but the squeak of my knife
cutting away dead wood,
dead wood, in the grey morning.

XXII

October / Sutton

We climbed the pasture hill to fetch down wood
from the damp pile beside the sugar-shack:
five of us, single file on the stone wall
to keep our feet out of the marsh--Once there,
you balanced log on log on waiting arms,
and you and I were the last back.

You gave me almost more than I could hold--
a great weight of dark damp logs, the smell of the bark
coming loose, leaving marks on my bare arms.
When I was halfway down the hill
I knew without looking, you were up there still,
standing a little bemused in the sunlit clearing,
maybe listening, maybe only half hearing
a loud jay on the sugar-shack roof. . .

Things I had wanted to say, but there seemed no words
so we exchanged silences, and that was good.
-You loaded my arms with logs, I brought them down
and set them on your hearth--and that said it all
for both of us. Whether or not you understood,
it was a kind of gift--that wood.

XXIII

Love, when I die, when I die,
carry me off beside the sea
and bury me there beneath a tree
with silver pennies on my eyes,
with silver pennies on my eyes.
Love, are you listening? will you remember?

Shush! I won't have such talk.

Oh! but that rumbling under the lichens, before the rock
splits, and the hills swallow me!
I'll know it when it comes. I wait, eyes shut.
Lean down. Do you see
how the shadows of saw-toothed mountains
move in my tea?
Day by day
the cat comes and goes by the window.
Where do you suppose
she goes to, dear? Oh! not where you think.
I know, I have seen her bring back
prickly things
And I have heard the sound of an osprey's wings--

But, so have I.
On the cliffs, where I climbed as a boy--

No. . .no.
You don't see what I mean.
You don't see what I mean.

XXIV

Who's mad--he or I,
Old Honesty?

The room's askew,
The night's cold,
Old Honesty.

Sit at the window,
Burn the candle late.

Cats' eyes
blood moon
and the wind,
Old Honesty.

XXV

Last Song for Marion

As water trickles out through
cupped hands
so words cannot hope to hold
Marion .

whose hands are printed on the
sides of cliffs
in the blue clay
where the water runs down

I saw her name
painted on the wind.
When I reached, her blood
ran into my mouth.

When I called her bluff she
stepped out of her own shadow,
walked away singing in a
voice like fireflies--

The dark one to the woods,
the white one to the sea--
leaving my hands empty, my
hands full.

XXVI

I saw a shadow come to try the door.
(Leaves and the lamp make shadows,
and out the corner of your eye, that small
catlike motion, glanced along glass or screen
is none but they.
But this was a larger shadow)

I saw him come sliding through the dark
and over the wooden boards: black shadow man
stands at the porch door. And I remember:

. . . . . .

Down there in the dark, it's fall,
cold fall.
But this is my high room, my lit kitchen.
He waits--
he will not come in, but now,
calmly, at last, we exchange that long glance
denied to childhood
and it's like a slow smile
that leaves a crinkle in the corner of your eye.
This is the thing that was always about to happen.

No one has seen him but me.
Gone out like a candle! and the room
unchanged, the tuneful clink of tea things--

(Leaves and the lamp make shadows on the screen.
Down there in the dark, in the alley,

running footsteps)

XXVII

He hears her on the stairs, but for the moment
the page holds sway--
there will be time enough to mark the place,
lay down the book, and cross the lighted hall
to let her in. . .

-But she,
watching him through the glass that separates
night and the rain from the dry room beyond
and hand from hand,
remembers who he is, knows what she knows,
and knows this pane to be a precious thing.

Touch knuckles to this were sacrilege!
and so she stands, her face
pressed on the dark glass
like a leaf under ice.

XXVIII

The Wind Bends Me Down

When my love's face to leather turns
the devil in my left ear wakes and whispers
"Come away."
But I go out alone,
find a high rock where
the wind bends me down
and blows the trouble out of me
and drives the devil home.

XXIX

Blowing the Fluff Away: For Beth

The piece of camomile you sent last fall
spent the long winter drying on my wall,
mounted on black. But it had turned to fluff
some months ago. Tonight I took it down
because I thought that I had had enough
of staring at it. Brittle, dry and brown,
it seemed to speak too plainly of a waste
of friendship, forced to flower, culled in haste.

So, after months of fearing to walk past
in case the stir should scatter it to bits,
I took it out to scatter it at last
with my own breath, and so, to call us quits.
-Fooled! for the fluff was nothing but a sheath,
with tiny, perfect flowers underneath.

XXX

Traces

He is walking on my soul.
On the edge of my soul, with a light tread, barefoot.
By night my dreams take the shape of his footprints.
By day I bear his weight that is no weight at all.

He is walking on my soul.
On the edge of my soul, beyond reach, without sound.
Each step comes down with a touch like wind,
and he breathes through the eye of my mind.

He is walking on my soul.
On the edge of my soul, on my soul of sand.
Though waves wash it clean,
the print of his foot is in the palm of my hand.

Author's Note

Three of the poems included in this collection appeared in Canadian periodicals during 1973.
They are: 'Dancing Girl' and 'the dead tree speaks' in Prism international, Volume 13:1, and
'He hears her on the stairs. . .' in The Antigonish Review, Number 15, Autumn 1973.