

Alaska Passage Earle Birney, 1934

ka pass age alaska passage ALASKA PASSAGE alaska passage alas

our ship seems reefed
and only the land comes swimming past alaska pass

the firs through the fog in green crescent to the
 tramp downwards O f O R E /
 SHORE'S pleD cOMmotion of bristled ROCKS
 and blanching drift
 up from a spew of splinters & BARK A Logchute
 ARROWS

(one mark of few that men have scribbled
on this lucky palimpsest of ranges)

at times a shake-built shack exchanges
passive stares with Come & Gone
or eyeless waits with stoven side

to slide its bones in a
green tide

age alaska passage alaska passage alaska passage alas-ka pass

David
Earle Birney, 1941

I

David and I that summer cut trails on the Survey,
All week in the valley for wages, in air that was steeped
In the wail of mosquitoes, but over the sunalive weekends
We climbed, to get from the ruck of the camp, the surly

Poker, the wrangling, the snoring under the fetid
Tents, and because we had joy in our lengthening coltish
Muscles, and mountains for David were made to see over,
Stairs from the valleys and steps to the sun's retreats.

II

Our first was Mount Gleam. We hiked in the long afternoon
To a curling lake and lost the lure of the faceted
Cone in the swell of its sprawling shoulders. Past
The inlet we grilled our bacon, the strips festooned

On a poplar prong, in the hurrying slant of the sunset.
Then the two of us rolled in the blanket while round us the cold
Pines thrust at the stars. The dawn was a floating
Of mists till we reached to the slopes above timber, and won

To snow like fire in the sunlight. The peak was upthrust
Like a fist in a frozen ocean of rock that swirled
Into valleys the moon could be rolled in. Remotely unfurling
Eastward the alien prairie glittered. Down through the dusty

Skree on the west we descended, and David showed me
How to use the give of shale for giant incredible
Strides. I remember, before the larches' edge,
That I jumped a long green surf of juniper flowing

Away from the wind, and landed in gentian and saxifrage
Spilled on the moss. Then the darkening firs
And the sudden whirring of water that knifed down a fern-hidden
Cliff and splashed unseen into mist in the shadows.

III

One Sunday on Rampart's arête a rainsquall caught us,
And passed, and we clung by our blueing fingers and bootnails
An endless hour in the sun, not daring to move
Till the ice had steamed from the slate. And David taught me

How time on a knife-edge can pass with the guessing of fragments
Remembered from poets, the naming of strata beside one,
And matching of stories from schooldays. ... We crawled astride
The peak to feast on the marching ranges flagged

By the fading shreds of the shattered stormcloud. Linger
There it was David who spied to the south, remote,
And unmapped, a sunlit spire on Sawback, an overhang
Crooked like a talon. David named it the Finger.

That day we chanced on the skull and the splayed white ribs
Of a mountain goat underneath a cliff-face, caught tight
On a rock. Around were the silken feathers of kites.
And that was the first I knew that a goat could slip.

IV

And then Inglismaldie. Now I remember only
The long ascent of the lonely valley, the live
Pine spirally scarred by lightning, the slicing pipe
Of invisible pika, and great prints, by the lowest

Snow, of a grizzly. There it was too that David
Taught me to read the scroll of coral in limestone
And the beetle-seal in the shale of ghostly trilobites,
Letters delivered to man from the Cambrian waves.

V

On Sundance we tried from the col and the going was hard.
The air howled from our feet to the smudged rocks
And the papery lake below. At an outthrust we balked
Till David clung with his left to a dint in the scarp,

Lobbed the iceaxe over the rocky lip,
Slipped from his holds and hung by the quivering pick,
Twisted his long legs up into space and kicked
To the crest. Then, grinning, he reached with his freckled wrist

And drew me up after. We set a new time for that climb.
That day returning we found a robin gyrating
In grass, wing-broken. I caught it to tame but David
Took and killed it, and said, "Could you teach it to fly?"

VI

In August, the second attempt, we ascended The Fortress,
By the forks of the Spray we caught five trout and fried them
Over a balsam fire. The woods were alive
With the vaulting of mule-deer and drenched with clouds all the morning,

Till we burst at noon to the flashing and floating round
Of the peaks. Coming down we picked in our hats the bright
And sunhot raspberries, eating them under a mighty
Spruce, while a marten moving like quicksilver scouted us.

VII

But always we talked of the Finger on Sawback, unknown
And hooked, till the first afternoon in September we slogged
Through the musky woods, past a swamp that quivered with frog-song,
And camped by a bottle-green lake. But under the cold

Breath of the glacier sleep would not come, the moon-light
Etching the Finger. We rose and trod past the feathery
Larch, while the stars went out, and the quiet heather
Flushed, and the skyline pulsed with the surging bloom

Of incredible dawn in the Rockies. David spotted
Bighorns across the moraine and sent them leaping
With yodels the ramparts redoubled and rolled to the peaks,
And the peaks to the sun. The ice in the morning thaw

Was a gurgling world of crystal and cold blue chasms,
And seracs that shone like frozen saltgreen waves.

At the base of the Finger we tried once and failed. Then David
Edged to the west and discovered the chimney; the last

Hundred feet we fought the rock and shouldered and kneed
Our way for an hour and made it. Unroping we formed
A cairn on the rotting tip. Then I turned to look north
At the glistening wedge of giant Assiniboine, heedless

Of handhold. And one foot gave. I swayed and shouted.
David turned sharp and reached out his arm and steadied me
Turning again with a grin and his lips ready
To jest. But the strain crumbled his foothold. Without

A gasp he was gone. I froze to the sound of grating
Edge-nails and fingers, the slither of stones, the lone
Second of silence, the nightmare thud. Then only
The wind and the muted beat of unknowing cascades.

VIII

Somehow I worked down the fifty impossible feet
To the ledge, calling and getting no answer but echoes
Released in the cirque, and trying not to reflect
What an answer would mean. He lay still, with his lean

Young face upturned and strangely unmarred, but his legs
Splayed beneath him, beside the final drop,
Six hundred feet sheer to the ice. My throat stopped
When I reached him, for he was alive. He opened his grey

Straight eyes and brokenly murmured, "Over ... over."
And I, feeling beneath him a cruel fang
Of the ledge thrust in his back, but not understanding,
Mumbled stupidly, "Best not to move," and spoke

Of his pain. But he said, "I can't move. ... If only I felt
Some pain." Then my shame stung the tears to my eyes
As I crouched, and I cursed myself, but he cried,
Louder, "No, Bobbie! Don't ever blame yourself.

I didn't test my foothold." He shut the lids
Of his eyes to the stare of the sky, while I moistened his lips
From our water flask and tearing my shirt into strips
I swabbed the shredded hands. But the blood slid

From his side and stained the stone and the thirsting lichens,
And yet I dared not lift him up from the gore
Of the rock. Then he whispered, "Bob, I want to go over!"
This time I knew what he meant and I grasped for a lie

And said, "I'll be back here by midnight with ropes
And men from the camp and we'll cradle you out." But I knew
That the day and the night must pass and the cold dews
Of another morning before such men unknowing

The ways of mountains could win to the chimney's top.
And then, how long? And he knew ... and the hell of hours
After that, if he lived till we came, roping him out.
But I curled beside him and whispered, "The bleeding will stop.

You can last." He said only, "Perhaps ... For what? A wheelchair,
Bob?" His eyes brightening with fever upbraided me.
I could not look at him more and said, "Then I'll stay
With you." But he did not speak, for the clouding fever.

I lay dazed and stared at the long valley,
The glistening hair of a creek on the rug stretched
By the firs, while the sun leaned round and flooded the ledge,
The moss, and David still as a broken doll.

I hunched to my knees to leave, but he called and his voice
Now was sharpened with fear. "For Christ's sake push me over!
If I could move ... Or die. ..." The sweat ran from his forehead,
But only his eyes moved. A hawk was buoying

Blackly its wings over the wrinkled ice.
The purr of a waterfall rose and sank with the wind.
Above us climbed the last joint of the Finger
Beckoning bleakly the wide indifferent sky.

Even then in the sun it grew cold lying there. ... And I knew
He had tested his holds. It was I who had not. ... I looked
At the blood on the ledge, and the far valley. I looked
At last in his eyes. He breathed, "I'd do it for you, Bob."

IX

I will not remember how nor why I could twist
Up the wind-devilled peak, and down through the chimney's empty
Horror, and over the traverse alone. I remember
Only the pounding fear I would stumble on It

When I came to the grave-cold maw of the bergschrund ... reeling
Over the sun-cankered snowbridge, shying the caves
In the nêvé ... the fear, and the need to make sure It was there
On the ice, the running and falling and running, leaping

Of gaping greenthroated crevasses, alone and pursued
By the Finger's lengthening shadow. At last through the fanged
And blinding seracs I slid to the milky wrangling
Falls at the glacier's snout, through the rocks piled huge

On the humped moraine, and into the spectral larches,
Alone. By the glooming lake I sank and chilled
My mouth but I could not rest and stumbled still
To the valley, losing my way in the ragged marsh.

I was glad of the mire that covered the stains, on my ripped
Boots, of his blood, but panic was on me, the reek
Of the bog, the purple glimmer of toadstools obscene
In the twilight. I staggered clear to a firewaste, tripped

And fell with a shriek on my shoulder. It somehow eased
My heart to know I was hurt, but I did not faint
And I could not stop while over me hung the range
Of the Sawback. In blackness I searched for the trail by the creek

And found it. ... My feet squelched a slug and horror
Rose again in my nostrils. I hurled myself
Down the path. In the woods behind some animal yelped.
Then I saw the glimmer of tents and babbled my story.

I said that he fell straight to the ice where they found him,
And none but the sun and incurious clouds have lingered
Around the marks of that day on the ledge of the Finger,
That day, the last of my youth, on the last of our mountains.

The Road to Nijmegen **Earle Birney, 1944**

December, my dear, on the road to Nijmegen,
between the stones and the bitter skies was your face.
At first only the gatherings of graves
along the lank canals, each with a frosted
billy-tin for motto; the bones of tanks
beside the stoven bridges; old men in the mist
knifing chips from a boulevard of stumps;
or women riding into the wind of the rims of their cycles,
like tattered sailboats tossing over the cobbles.

These at first, and the fangs of homes, but more
the clusters of children, like flies, at the back of messhuts,
or groping in gravel for knobs of coal,
their legs standing like dead stems out of their clogs.
Numbed on the long road to mangled Nijmegen,
I thought that only the living of others assures us;
we remember the gentle and true as trees walking,
as the men and women whose breath is a garment about us;
that we who are stretched now in this tomb of time
may remount like Lazarus into the light of kindness
by a hold in the hands of the kind.

And so in the sleet as we neared Nijmegen,
 searching my heart for the hope of our minds,
 for the proof in the left of the words we wish,
 for laughter outrising at last the rockets,
 I saw the rainbow answer of you,
 and you and your seed who, peopling the earth, would distil
 our not impossible dreamed horizon,
 and who, moving within the nightmare Now,
 give us what creed we have for our daily crimes
 for this road that arrives at no future,
 for this guilt
 in the griefs of the old and the graves of the young.

Mappemundi
Earle Birney, 1945

No not this old whalehall can whelm us
 shiptamed gullgraced soft to our glidings
 Harrows that mere more which squares our map
 See in its north where scribe has marked *mermen*
 shore-sneakers who croon to the seafarer's girl
 next year's gleewords East and west *nadders*
 flamefanged bale-twisters their breath dries up tears
 chars in the breast-hoard the brave picture-faces
 Southward *Cetegrande* that sly beast who sucks in
 with whirlwind also the wanderer's pledges
 That sea is hight Time it hems all hearts' landtrace
 Men say the redeless reaching its bounds
 topple in maelstrom tread back never
 Adread in that mere we drift toward map's end

From the Hazel Bough
Earle Birney, 1945

I met a lady
 on a lazy street
hazel eyes
 and little plush feet

her legs swam by
 like lovely trout
eyes were trees
 where boys leant out

hands in the dark and
 a river side
round breasts rising
 with the finger's tide

she was plump as a finch
 and live as a salmon
gay as silk and
 proud as a Brahmin

we winked when we met
 and laughed when we parted
never took time
 to be brokenhearted

but no man sees
 where the trout lie now
or what leans out
 from the hazel bough

The Bear on the Delhi Road **Earle Birney, 1958**

Unreal tall as a myth
by the road the Himalayan bear
is beating the brilliant air
with his crooked arms
About him two men bare
spindly as locusts leap

One pulls on a ring
in the great soft nose His mate
flicks flicks with a stick
up at the rolling eyes

They have not led him here
down from the fabulous hills
to this bald alien plain
and the clamorous world to kill
but simply to teach him to dance

They are peaceful both these spare
men of Kashmir and the bear
alive is their living too
If far on the Delhi way
around him galvanic they dance
it is merely to wear wear
from his shaggy body the tranced
wish forever to stay
only an ambling bear
four-footed in berries

It is no more joyous for them
in this hot dust to prance
out of reach of the praying claws
sharpened to paw for ants
in the shadows of deodars
It is not easy to free

myth from reality
or rear this fellow up
to lurch lurch with them
in the tranced dancing of men

My Love Is Young
Earle Birney, 1978

my love is young & i am old
she'll need a new man soon
but still we wake to clip and talk
to laugh as one
toe eat and walk
beneath our five-year moon

good moon good sun
that we do love
i pray the world believe me
& never tell me when it's time
that i'm to die
or she's to leave me

Lens
Anne Wilkinson, 1955

I

The poet's daily chore
Is my long duty;
To keep and cherish my good lens
For love and war
And wasps about the lilies
And mutiny within.

My woman's eye is weak
And veiled with milk;
My working eye is muscled
With a curious tension,
Stretched and open
As the eyes of children;
Trusting in its vision
Even should it see
The holy holy spirit gambol
Counterheadwise,
Lithe and warm as any animal.

My woman's iris circles
A blind pupil;
The poet's eye is crystal,
Polished to accept the negative,
The contradictions in a proof
And the accidental
Candour of the shadows;
The shutter, oiled and smooth
Clicks on the grace of heroes
Or on some bestial act
When lit with radiance
The afterwords the actors speak
Give depths to violence,
Or if the bull is great
And the matador
And the sword
Itself the metaphor.

II

In my dark room the years
Lie in solution,
Develop film by film.
Slow at first and dim
Their shadows bite
On the fine white pulp of paper.

An early snap of fire
Licking the arms of air
I hold against the light, compare
The details with a prehistoric view
Of land and sea
And cradles of mud that rocked
The wet and sloth of infancy.

A stripe of tiger, curled
And sleeping on the ribs of reason
Prints as clear
As Eve and Adam, pearled
With sweat, staring at an apple core;

And death, in black and white
Or politic in green and Easter film,
Lands on steely points, a dancer
Disciplined to the foolscap stage,
The property of poets
Who command his robes, expose
His moving likeness on the page.

The Improved Binoculars
Irving Layton, 1955

Below me the city was in flames:
the firemen were the first to save
themselves. I saw steeples fall on their knees.

I saw an agent kick the charred bodies
from an orphanage to one side, marking
the site carefully for a future speculation.

Lovers stopped short of the final spasm
and went off angrily in opposite directions,
their elbows held by giant escorts of fire.

Then the dignitaries rode across the bridges
under an auricle of light which delighted them,
noting for later punishment those that went before.

And the rest of the populace, their mouths
distorted by an unusual gladness, bawled thanks
to this comely and ravaging ally, asking

Only for more light with which to see
their neighbour's destruction.

All this I saw through my improved binoculars.

Song for Naomi
Irving Layton, 1956

Who is that in the tall grasses singing
By herself, near the water?
I can not see her
But can it be her
Than whom the grasses so tall

Are taller,
My daughter,
My lovely daughter?

Who is that in the tall grasses running
Beside her, near the water?
She can not see there
Time that pursued her
In the deep grasses so fast
And faster
And caught her,
My foolish daughter.

What is the wind in the fair grass saying
Like a verse, near the water?
Saviours that over
All things have power
Make Time himself grow kind
And kinder
That sought her,
My little daughter.

Who is that at the close of the summer
Near the deep lake? Who wrought her
Comely and slender?
Time but attends and befriends her
Than whom the grasses though tall
Are not taller,
My daughter,
My gentle daughter.

There Were No Signs
Irving Layton, 1963

By walking I found out
Where I was going.

By intensely hating, how to love.
By loving, whom and what to love.

By grieving, how to laugh from the belly.

Out of infirmity, I have built strength.
Out of untruth, truth.

From hypocrisy, I wove directness.

Almost now I know who I am.
Almost I have the boldness to be that man.

Another step
And I shall be where I started from.

Das Wahre Ich
Irving Layton, 1964

She tells me she was a Nazi; her father also.
Her brother lies buried under the defeat
and rubble of Stalingrad.
She tells me this, her mortal enemy, a Jew.

We are twenty years removed from war.
She urges on me candied biscuits and tea,
and her face is touched by a brief happiness
when I praise her for them and for the mobiles

she has herself fashioned
in the comfortless burdensome evenings.

Her face is sad and thin as those mobiles
moving round and round in the small wind
my voice makes when I thank her
and she bows her frail proud head into her hands.

The terrible stillness holds us both
and stops our breath
while I wonder, a thrill stabbing into my mind:
"At this moment, does she see my crumpled form
against the wall,
blood on my still compassionate eyes and mouth?"

For My Brother Jesus
Irving Layton, 1976

My father had terrible words for you
— whoreson, bastard, *meshumad*;
and my mother loosed Yiddish curses
on your name and the devil's spawn
on their way to church
that scraped the frosted horsebuns
from the wintry Montreal street
to fling clattering into our passageway

Did you ever hear an angered
Jewish woman curse? Never mind the words:
at the intonations alone, Jesus,
the rusted nails would drop out
from your pierced hands and feet
and scatter to the four ends of earth

Luckless man, at least
that much you were spared

In my family you were a *mamzer*, a *yoshke pondrick*
and main reason for their affliction and pain.
Even now I see the contemptuous curl
on my gentle father's lips;
my mother's never-ending singsong curses
still ring in my ears more loud
than the bells I heard each Sunday morning,
their clappers darkening the outside air

Priests and nuns
were black blots on the snow
— forbidding birds, crows

Up there
up there beside the Good Old Man
we invented and the lying angels
do you get the picture, my hapless brother:
deserted daily, hourly
by the Philistines you hoped to save
and the murdering heathens,
your own victimized kin hating and despising
you?

O crucified poet
your agonized face haunts me
as it did when I was a boy;
I follow your strange figure
through all the crooked passageways
of history, the walls reverberating
with ironic whisperings and cries,
the unending sound of cannonfire
and rending groans, the clatter
of bloodsoaked swords falling
on armour and stone
to lose you finally among your excited brethren
haranguing and haloing them
with your words of love,
your voice gentle as my father's

Absence
1971

Love,
I make a silence
Out of your name
And dip
my hands into it

The Silence
1973

It grew from nothing
Inside me it grew
It grew in my veins and arteries
In my bones and flesh
It mastered my blood
One day I found it curled up
In my skull
Under my useless tongue
Now I have nothing to say
To anyone

**When Death Comes
for You**
1978

When death
comes for you, my dear,
let him take you
like a candleflame
that is taken
from its wick
by a gentle stir
of wind
smelling of lilac.

**The Poet on His
Detractors**
1980

I piss on them
from a great height;
if they're lucky
some drops
will fall
on them
and make them immortal

Bright's Wine
1980

It takes
a decent
God-fearing
Canadian
to turn
a lovely grape
into a lousy
wine.

For My Neighbours in Hell
1980

God made the viper, the shark, the tsetse fly.
He made the hyena, the vulture, the stoat.
By the time he made man
He had the combination down perfect.

Cathleen Sweeping
George Johnston, 1959

The wind blows, and with a little broom
 She sweeps against the cold clumsy sky.
 She's three years old. What an enormous room
 The world is that she sweeps, making fly
 A little busy dust! And here am I
 Watching her through the window in the gloom
 Of this disconsolate spring morning, my
 Thoughts as small and busy as her broom.

Do I believe in her? I cannot quite.
 Beauty is more than my belief will bear.
 I've had to borrow what I think is true:
 Nothing stays put until I think it through.
 Yet, watching her with her broom in the dark air,
 I give it up. Why should I doubt delight?

The Day That Would Never Come
George Johnston, 1972

The day that would never come comes, it is
 not what was expected, not the dreamed of
 gay trip to Montreal and the gay leave
 taking on the dock for Europe for whose

conquest, making of many friends; she
 no longer wants to go but she must,
 nobody says so, but the last
 thing she would do is turn back and I

think, That's my Peggy, which makes this a love
 poem. Is there another kind? but is there
 something else to be told, of the tremor
 of the ship, the day's departure, her wave?

Firefly Evening
George Johnston, 1984

Heft of earth, under;
evenings heft, thunder;
evening of fireflies;
thunder in western skies.

Airs through windows yet
and through the downstairs let
that over pastures come
thunder from.

Brigid Newly Arrived
George Johnston, 1996

Dear child, dear little child,
hardly into the world,
a few weeks into our
cold you intrude your fire
for us to warm ourselves.
Look kindly on our eyes
that gaze down into yours
to quicken our low fires.

Dear wordless little girl,
forgive our words, we live
by them as you soon shall.
Choose wisely as you grow
into your wording age
among their worn meanings
some you will surely need
and we bleed to give you:
luck, charity, courage.

Traveller's Palm**P. K. Page**

Miraculously plaited tree.
A sailor's knot
rooted,
a growing fan
whose grooved and slanted branches
are aqueducts
end-stopped
for tropical rains.

Knot, fan,
Quixote's windmill,
what-you-will —
for me, traveller,
a well.

On a hot day I took
a sharp and pointed knife,
plunged,
and water gushed
to my cupped mouth

old water
tasting green,
of vegetation and dust,
old water, warm as tears.

And in that tasting,
taster, water, air,
in temperature identical
were so
intricately merged
a fabulous foreign bird
flew silent from a void

lodged in my boughs

The Filled Pen
P. K. Page,

Eager to draw again,
find space in that small room
for my drawing-board and inks
and the huge revolving world
the delicate nib releases.

I have only to fill my pen
and the shifting gears begin:
flywheel and cogwheel
start their small-toothed interlock

and whatever machinery draws
is drawing through my fingers
and the shapes that I have drawn
gaze up into my eyes.
We stare each other down.

Light of late afternoon —
white wine across my paper —
the subject I would draw.
Light of the stars and sun.

Light of the swan-white moon.
The blazing light of trees.
And the rarely glimpsed bright face
behind the apparenity of things.

Planet Earth
P. K. Page, 1994

*It has to be spread out, the skin of this planet,
has to be ironed, the sea in its whiteness;
and the hands keep on moving,
smoothing the holy surfaces.*

----- *(In Praise of Ironing, Pablo Neruda)*

It has to be loved the way a laundress loves her linens,
the way she moves her hands caressing the fine muslins
knowing their warp and woof,
like a lover coaxing, or a mother praising.
It has to be loved as if it were embroidered
with flowers and birds and two joined hearts upon it.
It has to be stretched and stroked.
It has to be celebrated.
O this great beloved world and all the creatures in it.
It has to be spread out, the skin of this planet.

The trees must be washed, and the grasses and mosses.
They have to be polished as if made of green brass.
The rivers and little streams with their hidden cresses
and pale-coloured pebbles
and their fool's gold
must be washed and starched or shined into brightness,
the sheets of lake water
smoothed with the hand
and the foam of the oceans pressed into neatness.
It has to be ironed, the sea in its whiteness.

and pleated and goffered, the flower-blue sea
the protean, wine-dark, grey, green, sea
with its metres of satin and bolts of brocade.
And sky - such an O! overhead - night and day
must be burnished and rubbed
by hands that are loving
so the blue blazons forth
and the stars keep on shining
within and above
and the hands keep on moving.

It has to be made bright, the skin of this planet
till it shines in the sun like gold leaf.
Archangels then will attend to its metals
and polish the rods of its rain.
Seraphim will stop singing hosannas
to shower it with blessings and blisses and praises
and, newly in love,
we must draw it and paint it
our pencils and brushes and loving caresses
smoothing the holy surfaces.

The Swimmer's Moment
Margaret Avison, 1960

For everyone
The swimmer's moment at the whirlpool comes,
But many at that moment will not say
'This is the whirlpool, then.'
By their refusal they are saved
From the black pit, and also from contesting
The deadly rapids, and emerging in
The mysterious, and more ample, further waters.
And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn
Pale and forever on the rim of suction
They will not recognize.
Of those who dare the knowledge
Many are whirled into the ominous centre
That, gaping vertical, seals up
For them an eternal boon of privacy,
So that we turn away from their defeat
With a despair, not for their deaths, but for
Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret
Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth
Where one or two have won:
(The silver reaches of the estuary).

At The Quinte Hotel
Al Purdy, 1968

I am drinking
I am drinking beer with yellow flowers
in underground sunlight
and you can see that I am a sensitive man
And I notice that the bartender is a sensitive man too
so I tell him about his beer
I tell him the beer he draws
is half fart and half horse piss
and all wonderful yellow flowers
But the bartender is not quite
so sensitive as I supposed he was
the way he looks at me now
and does not appreciate my exquisite analogy
Over in one corner two guys
are quietly making love
in the brief prelude to infinity
Opposite them a peculiar fight
enables the drinkers to lay aside
their comic books and watch with interest
as I watch with interest
A wiry little man slugs another guy
then tracks him bleeding into the toilet
and slugs him to the floor again
with ugly red flowers on the tile
three minutes later he roosters over
to the table where his drunk friend sits
with another friend and slugs both
of em ass-over-electric-kettle
so I have to walk around
on my way for a piss
Now I am a sensitive man
so I say to him mildly as hell
'You shouldn'ta knocked over that good beer
with them beautiful flowers in it'
So he says to me 'Come on'
So I Come On
like a rabbit with weak kidneys I guess

like a yellow streak charging
on flower power I suppose
and knock the shit outa him & sit on him
(he is a little guy)
and say reprovingly
'Violence will get you nowhere this time chum
Now you take me
I am a sensitive man
and would you believe I write poems?'
But I could see the doubt in his upside down face
in fact in all the faces
'What kind of poems?'
'Flower poems'
'So tell us a poem'
I got off the little guy reluctantly
for he was comfortable
and told them this poem
They crowded around me with tears
in their eyes and wrung my hands feelingly
for my pockets for
it was a heart-warming moment for Literature
and moved by the demonstrable effect
of great Art and the brotherhood of people I remarked
'— the poem oughta be worth some beer'
It was a mistake of terminology
for silence came
and it was brought home to me in the tavern
that poems will not really buy beers or flowers
or a goddam thing
and I was sad
for I am a sensitive man.

Necropsy of Love
Al Purdy, 1965

If it came about you died
it might be said I loved you:
love is an absolute as death is,
and neither bears false witness to the other —
But you remain alive.

No, I do not love you
 hate the word,
that private tyranny inside a public sound,
your freedom's yours and not my own:
but hold my separate madness like a sword,
and plunge it in your body all night long.

If death shall strip our bones of all but bones,
then here's the flesh and flesh that's drunken-sweet
as wine cups in deceptive lunar light:
reach up your hand and turn the moonlight off,
and maybe it was never there at all,
so never promise anything to me:
but reach across the darkness with your hand,
reach across the distance of tonight,
and touch the moving moment once again
 before you fall asleep —

Funeral
Al Purdy, 1977

The preacher called beforehand
to make sure God
occupied a place in my heart
or somewhere nearby
I made a mistake
told him the truth
said I wasn't religious

During the funeral chapel sermon
called a eulogy by some
among my mother's friends and relatives
dressed in their black Sunday best
and the smell of sweat and formaldehyde
he preached the evil of unbelievers
clubbed me with clichés
stunned me with Job and Jeremiah
and the sheer surprise of it
pinned me to the chair
The United Church minister
kept hammering away
knowing I was a prisoner a
nd couldn't escape
because a son must be there
because a son must bear witness
when half his reason for being
vanishes into the earth
and there is no longer
a warm presence behind him
he stands naked
on the needle point of now
before the rushing winds of time

At first it was exhilarating
being so damn furious
drunk and sober simultaneously
atheism seemed glorious
then changed my mind
wanted to be a believer
in order to render aid
and comfort to Satan
Finally some relief
that it took a phony god
to make this bastard possible
then amusement that my immortal soul
was worth only twenty minutes
as the red-faced prick thundered on
for his audience of one
and the dead woman listening

The Last Picture in the World
Al Purdy, 2000

A hunched grey shape
framed by leaves
with lake water behind
standing on our
little point of land
like a small monk
in a green monastery
meditating

almost sculpture
except that it's alive
brooding immobile permanent
for half an hour
a blue heron
and it occurs to me
that if I were to die at this moment
that picture would accompany me
wherever I am going
for part of the way