

Slug in Woods

For eyes he waves greentipped
taut horns of slime They dipped
hours back across a reef
a salmonberry leaf
then strained to grope past fin
of spruce Now eyes suck in
as through the hemlock butts
of his day's ledge there cuts
a vixen chipmunk Stilled
is he—green mucus chilled
or blotched and soapy stone
pinguid in moss alone
Hours on he will resume
his silver scrawl illumine
his palimpsest emboss
his diver's line across
that waving green illum-
itable seafloor Slim
young jay his sudden shark
The wrecks he skirts are dark
and fungussed firlogs whom
spirea sprays emplume
encoral Dew his shell
while mounting boles foretell
of isles in dappled air
fathoms above his care
Azygous muted life
himself his viscid wife
foodward he noses cold beneath his sea
So spends a summer's jasper century

1942

EARLE
HIRNEY

① Bushed

He invented a rainbow but lightning struck it
shattered it into the lake-lap of a mountain
so big his mind slowed when he looked at it

Yet he built a shack on the shore
learned to roast porcupine belly and
wore the quills on his hatband

At first he was out with the dawn
whether it yellowed bright as wood-columbine
or was only a fuzzed moth in a flannel of storm
But he found the mountain was clearly alive
sent messages whizzing down every hot morning
boomed proclamations at noon and spread out
a white guard of goat
before falling asleep on its feet at sundown

When he tried his eyes on the lake ospreys
would fall like valkyries
choosing the cut-throat
He took then to waiting
till the night smoke rose from the boil of the sunset

But the moon carved unknown totems
out of the lakeshore
owls in the beardusky woods derided him
moosehorned cedars circled his swamps and tossed
their antlers up to the stars
then he knew though the mountain slept the winds
were shaping its peak to an arrowhead
poised

And now he could only
bar himself in and wait
for the great flint to come singing into his heart

1952

EARLE
HIRNEY

② *Can. Lit.*

(or them able leave her ever)

since we'd always sky about
when we had eagles they flew out
leaving no shadow bigger than wren's
to trouble even our broodiest hens

too busy bridging loneliness
to be alone
we hacked in railway ties
what Emily etched in bone

we French & English never lost
our civil war
endure it still
a bloody civil bore

the wounded sired off
no Whitman wanted
it's only by our lack of ghosts
we're haunted

1962

The Bear on the Delhi Road

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

1962

My Love Is Young

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
to eat and walk
beneath our five-year moon

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

A week, and it will crack! Here's money that
a fortnight sees the floes, the smokestacks red!
Outside *The Anchor's* glass, St. Lawrence lies
rigid and white and wise,
nor ripple and dip, but fathom-frozen flat.
There are no hammers will break that granite lid.

But it will come! Some dead of night with boom
to wake the wagering city, it will break,
will crack, will melt its muscle-bound tides
and raise from their iced tomb
the pyramided fish, the unlocked ships,
and last year's blue and bloated suicides.

1948

③ *Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga*

Where are the braves, the faces like autumn fruit,
who stared at the child from the coloured frontispiece?
And the monosyllabic chief who spoke with his throat?
Where are the tribes, the feathered bestiarities?—
Rank Aesop's animals erect and red,
with fur on their names to make all live things kin'—
Chief Running Deer, Black Bear, Old Buffalo Head?

Childhood, that wished me Indian, hoped that
one afterschool I'd leave the classroom chalk,
the varnish smell, the watered dust of the street,
to join the clean outdoors and the Iroquois track.
Childhood; but always,—as on a calendar,—
there stood that chief, with arms akimbo, waiting
the runaway mascot paddling to his shore.

With what strange moccasin stealth that scene is changed!
With French names, without paint, in overalls,
their bronze, like their nobility expunged,—
the men. Beneath their alimentary shawls
sit like black tents their squaws; while for the tourist's
brown pennies scattered at the old church door,
the ragged papooses jump, and bite the dust.

A.M.
KLEIN

Their past is sold in a shop: the beaded shoes,
the sweetgrass basket, the curio Indian,
burnt wood and gaudy cloth and inch-canoes—
trophies and scalpings for a traveller's den.
Sometimes, it's true, they dance, but for a bribe;
after a deal don the bedraggled feather
and welcome a white mayor to the tribe.

A.M.
KLEIN

This is a grassy ghetto, and no home.
And these are fauna in a museum kept.
The better hunters have prevailed. The game,
losing its blood, now makes these grounds its crypt.
The animals pale, the shine of the fur is lost,
bleached are their living bones. About them watch
as through a mist, the pious prosperous ghosts.

1948

Portrait of the Poet as Landscape

I
Not an editorial-writer, bereaved with bartlett,
mourns him, the shelved Lycidas.
No actress squeezes a glycerine tear for him.
The radio broadcast lets his passing pass.
And with the police, no record. Nobody, it appears,
either under his real name or his alias,
missed him enough to report.

It is possible that he is dead, and not discovered.
It is possible that he can be found some place
in a narrow closet, like the corpse in a detective story,
standing, his eyes staring, and ready to fall on his face.
It is also possible that he is alive
and amnesiac, or mad, or in retired disgrace,
or beyond recognition lost in love.

We are sure only that from our real society
he has disappeared; he simply does not count,
except in the pullulation of vital statistics—
somebody's vote, perhaps, an anonymous taunt

The Improved Binoculars

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.

1956

(4)

The Fertile Muck

There are brightest apples on those trees
but until I, fabulist, have spoken
they do not know their significance
or what other legends are hung like garlands
on their black boughs twisting
like a rumour. The wind's noise is empty.

Nor are the winged insects better off
though they wear my crafty eyes
wherever they alight. Stay here, my love;

IRVING
LAYTON

you will see how delicately they deposit
me on the leaves of elms
or fold me in the orient dust of summer.

And if in August joiners and bricklayers
are thick as flies around us
building expensive bungalows for those
who do not need them, unless they release
me roaring from their moth-proofed cupboards
their buyers will have no joy, no ease.

I could extend their rooms for them without cost
and give them crazy sundials
to tell the time with, but I have noticed
how my irregular footprint horrifies them
evenings and Sunday afternoons:
they spray for hours to erase its shadow.

How to dominate reality? Love is one way;
imagination another. Sit here
beside me, sweet; take my hard hand in yours.
We'll mark the butterflies disappearing over the hedge
with tiny wristwatches on their wings:
our fingers touching the earth, like two Buddhas.

1956

From Colony to Nation (5)

A dull people,
but the rivers of this country
are wide and beautiful

A dull people
enamoured of childish games,
but food is easily come by
and plentiful

Some with a priest's voice
in their cage of ribs: but

IRVING
LAYTON

on high mountain-tops and in thunderstorms
the chirping is not heard

Deferring to beadle and censor;
not ashamed for this,
but given over to horseplay,
the making of money

A dull people, without charm
or ideas,
settling into the clean empty look
of a Mountie or dairy farmer
as into a legacy

One can ignore them
(the silences, the vast distances help)
and suppose them at the bottom
of one of the meaner lakes,
their bones not even picked for souvenirs.

1956

IRVING
LAYTON

ESKIMO GRAVEYARD

(6)

Walking in glacial litter
frost boils and boulder pavements
of an old river delta
where angry living water
changes its mind every half century
and takes a new direction
to the blue fiord
The Public Works guy I'm with
says you always find good gravel
for concrete near a graveyard
where digging is easy maybe
a footnote on human character
But wrapped in blankets
above ground a dead old woman

(for the last few weeks I'm told)
 without a grave marker
 And a hundred yards away
 the Anglican missionary's grave
 with whitewashed cross
 that means equally nothing 20
 The river's soft roar
 drifts to my ears and changes
 tone when the wind changes
 ice debris melts at low tide
 & the Public Works guy is mildly pleased
 with the good gravel we found
 for work on the schoolhouse
 which won't have to be shipped in
 from Montreal
 and mosquitoes join happily 30
 in our conversation Then
 he stops to consult
 with the construction foreman
 I walk on
 toward the tents of The People
 half a mile away
 at one corner of the picture
 Mothers with children on their backs
 in the clean white parkas
 they take such pride in 40
 buying groceries at H.B.C.
 boys lounging under the store
 in space where timber stilts
 hold it above the permafrost
 with two of them arm in arm
 in the manner of Eskimo friends
 After dinner
 I walk down among the tents
 and happen to think of the old woman
 neither wholly among the dead 50
 nor quite gone from the living
 and wonder how often
 a thought of hers enters the minds
 of people she knew before
 and what kind of flicker it is

as lights begin to come on
 in nightlong twilight
 and thoughts of me
 occur to the mosquitoes
 I keep walking 60
 as if something ought to happen
 (I don't know what)
 with the sun stretching
 a yellow band across the water
 from headland to black headland
 at high tide in the fiord
 sealing in the settlement
 as if there was no way out
 and indeed there isn't
 until the looping Cansos come 70
 dropping thru the mountain doorway
 That old woman?
 it occurs to me
 I might have been thinking
 about human bookkeeping
 debits and credits that is
 or profit and loss
 (and laugh at myself)
 among the sealed white tents
 like glowing swans 80
 hoping
 for a most improbable
 birth

[1967]

ARCTIC RHODODENDRONS (7)

They are small purple surprises
 in the river's white racket
 and after you've seen them
 a number of times
 in water-places
 where their silence seems
 related to river-thunder
 you think of them as 'noisy flowers'

Years ago
 it may have been
 that lovers came this way
 stopped in the outdoor hotel
 to watch the water floorshow
 and lying prone together
 where the purged green
 boils to a white heart
 and the shore trembles
 like a stone song
 with bodies touching
 flowers were their conversation
 and love the sound of a colour
 that lasts two weeks in August
 and then dies
 except for the three or four
 I pressed in a letter
 and sent whispering to you

LAMENT FOR THE DORSETS 8
(Eskimos extinct in the 14th century A.D.)

Animal bones and some mossy tent rings
 scrapers and spearheads carved ivory swans
 all that remains of the Dorset giants
 who drove the Vikings back to their long ships
 talked to spirits of earth and water
 —a picture of terrifying old men
 so large they broke the backs of bears
 so small they lurk behind bone rafters
 in the brain of modern hunters
 among good thoughts and warm things
 and come out at night
 to spit on the stars

The big men with clever fingers
 who had no dogs and hauled their sleds
 over the frozen northern oceans
 awkward giants
 killers of seal

10

20

(1967)

10

they couldn't compete with little men
 who came from the west with dogs
 Or else in a warm climatic cycle
 the seals went back to cold waters
 and the puzzled Dorsets scratched their heads
 with hairy thumbs around 1350 A.D.
 —couldn't figure it out
 went around saying to each other
 plaintively

'What's wrong? What happened?
 Where are the seals gone?'

And died

Twentieth century people
 apartment dwellers
 executives of neon death
 warmakers with things that explode
 —they have never imagined us in their future
 how could we imagine them in the past
 squatting among the moving glaciers
 six hundred years ago
 with glowing lamps?
 As remote or nearly
 as the trilobites and swamps
 when coal became
 or the last great reptile hissed
 at a mammal the size of a mouse
 that squeaked and fled

Did they ever realize at all
 what was happening to them?
 Some old hunter with one lame leg
 a bear had chewed
 sitting in a caribou skin tent
 —the last Dorset?

Let's say his name was Kudluk
 carving 2-inch ivory swans
 for a dead grand-daughter
 taking them out of his mind
 the places in his mind
 where pictures are

20

30

40

50

He selects a sharp stone tool
 to gouge a parallel pattern of lines
 on both sides of the swan
 holding it with his left hand
 bearing down and transmitting
 his body's weight
 from brain to arm and right hand
 and one of his thoughts
 turns to ivory
 The carving is laid aside
 in beginning darkness
 at the end of hunger
 after a while wind
 blows down the tent and snow
 begins to cover him
 After 600 years
 the ivory thought
 is still warm

60

70

[1968]

POEM

You are ill and so I lead you away
 and put you to bed in the dark room
 —you lie breathing softly and I hold your hand
 feeling the fingertips relax as sleep comes

You will not sleep more than a few hours
 and the illness is less serious than my anger or cruelty
 and the dark bedroom is like a foretaste of other darkneses
 to come later which all of us must endure alone
 but here I am permitted to be with you

After a while in sleep your fingers clutch tightly
 and I know that whatever may be happening
 the fear coiled in dreams or the bright trespass of pain
 there is nothing at all I can do except hold your hand
 and not go away

10

[1968]

GROSSE ISLE

Look, stranger, at this island now
The leaping light for your delight discovers—
 —W.H. Auden

Look stranger
 a diseased whale in the St Lawrence
 this other island than Auden's
 dull grey when the weather is dull grey
 and an east wind brings rain
 this Appalachian outcrop
 a stone ship foundered in the river estuary
 now in the care and keeping of Parks Canada
 —a silence here like no mainland silence
 at Cholera Bay where the dead bodies
 awaited high tide and the rough kindness
 of waves sweeping them into the dark—

10

Look stranger
 at this other island
 weedgrown graves in the three cemeteries
 be careful your clothes don't get hooked
 by wild raspberry canes and avoid the poison ivy
 —here children went mad with cholera fever
 and raging with thirst they ran into the river
 their parents following a little way
 before they died themselves
 —and don't stumble over the rusted tricycle
 somehow overlooked at the last big cleanup
 or perhaps left where it is for the tourists?

20

Look stranger
 where the sea wind sweeps westward
 down the estuary
 this way the other strangers came
 potato-famine Irish and Scotch crofters
 refugees from the Highland clearances
 and sailing ships waited here
 to remove their corpses
 and four million immigrants passed through

30

Susanna Moodie (1970), *Power Politics* (1973), *Selected Poems* (1976), *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), *True Stories* (1981), *Inter-lunar* (1984), *Selected Poems* (1990), and *Morning in the Burned House* (1995); several books of short stories: *Dancing Girls* (1977), *Murder in the Dark* (1983), *Blue-beard's Egg* (1984), *Wilderness Tips* (1991), and *Good Bones* (1992); and two books of criticism: *Survival: A Thematic Guide to*

Canadian Literature (1972) and *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (1982). She is also editor of *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (1982).

Margaret Atwood: Conversations (1990), edited by E.G. Ingersoll, is the most useful compendium of Atwood's statements about writing. Several of these are included in the Poetics section.

IT IS DANGEROUS TO READ NEWSPAPERS

While I was building neat
castles in the sandbox,
the hasty pits were
filling with bulldozed corpses

and as I walked to the school
washed and combed, my feet
stepping on the cracks in the cement
detonated red bombs.

Now I am grownup
and literate, and I sit in my chair
as quietly as a fuse

and the jungles are flaming, the under-
brush is charged with soldiers,
the names on the difficult
maps go up in smoke.

I am the cause, I am a stockpile of chemical
toys, my body
is a deadly gadget,
I reach out in love, my hands are guns,
my good intentions are completely lethal.

Even my
passive eyes transmute
everything I look at to the pocked.

black and white of a war photo,
how
can I stop myself

It is dangerous to read newspapers.

Each time I hit a key
on my electric typewriter,
speaking of peaceful trees

30

another village explodes.

[1968]

PROGRESSIVE INSANITIES OF A PIONEER

9

I
He stood, a point
on a sheet of green paper
proclaiming himself the centre,

with no walls, no borders
anywhere; the sky no height
above him, totally un-
enclosed
and shouted:

Let me out!

II
He dug the soil in rows,
imposed himself with shovels.
He asserted
into the furrows, I
am not random.

10

The ground
replied with aphorisms:

a tree-sprout, a nameless
weed, words
he couldn't understand.

made ragged by his
effort, the tension
between subject and object,

80

the green
vision, the unnamed
whale invaded.

[1968]

BACKDROP ADDRESSES COWBOY

Starspangled cowboy
sauntering out of the almost-
silly West, on your face
a porcelain grin,
tugging a papier-mâché cactus
on wheels behind you with a string,

you are innocent as a bathtub
full of bullets.

Your righteous eyes, your laconic
trigger-fingers
people the streets with villains:
as you move, the air in front of you
blossoms with targets

10

and you leave behind you a heroic
trail of desolation:
beer bottles
slaughtered by the side
of the road, bird-
skulls bleaching in the sunset.

I ought to be watching
from behind a cliff or a cardboard storefront
when the shooting starts, hands clasped
in admiration,

20

but I am elsewhere.

Then what about me

what about the I
confronting you on that border
you are always trying to cross?

I am the horizon
you ride towards, the thing you can never lasso

30

I am also what surrounds you:
my brain
scattered with your
tincans, bones, empty shells,
the litter of your invasions.

I am the space you desecrate
as you pass through.

[1968]

DEATH OF A YOUNG SON BY DROWNING (10)

He, who navigated with success
the dangerous river of his own birth
once more set forth

on a voyage of discovery
into the land I floated on
but could not touch to claim.

His feet slid on the bank,
the currents took him;
he swirled with ice and trees in the swollen water

and plunged into distant regions,
his head a bathysphere;
through his eyes' thin glass bubbles

10

he looked out, reckless adventurer
on a landscape stranger than Uranus
we have all been to and some remember.

There was an accident; the air locked,
he was hung in the river like a heart.
They retrieved the swamped body,

cairn of my plans and future charts,
with poles and hooks
from among the nudging logs.

20

It was spring, the sun kept shining, the new grass
lept to solidity;
my hands glistened with details.

After the long trip I was tired of waves.
My foot hit rock. The dreamed sails
collapsed, ragged.

I planted him in this country
like a flag.

[1970]

YOU TAKE MY HAND

You take my hand and
I'm suddenly in a bad movie,
it goes on and on and
why am I fascinated

We waltz in slow motion
through an air stale with aphorisms
we meet behind endless potted palms
you climb through the wrong windows

Other people are leaving
but I always stay till the end
I paid my money, I
want to see what happens.

10

In chance bathtubs I have to
peel you off me
in the form of smoke and melted
celluloid

Have to face it I'm
finally an addict,
the smell of popcorn and worn plush
lingers for weeks

20
[1973]

MARRYING THE HANGMAN

She has been condemned to death by hanging. A man may escape this death
by becoming the hangman, a woman by marrying the hangman. But at the
present time there is no hangman; thus there is no escape. There is only a
death, indefinitely postponed. This is not fantasy, it is history.

*

To live in prison is to live without mirrors. To live without mirrors is to live
without the self. She is living selflessly, she finds a hole in the stone wall and
on the other side of the wall, a voice. The voice comes through darkness and
has no face. This voice becomes her mirror.

*

In order to avoid her death, her particular death, with wrung neck and
swollen tongue, she must marry the hangman. But there is no hangman, first 10
she must create him, she must persuade this man at the end of the voice, this
voice she has never seen and which has never seen her, this darkness, she
must persuade him to renounce his face, exchange it for the impersonal mask
of death, of official death which has eyes but no mouth, this mask of a dark
leper. She must transform his hands so they will be willing to twist the rope
around throats that have been singled out as hers was, throats other than hers.
She must marry the hangman or no one, but that is not so bad. Who else is
there to marry?

*

You wonder about her crime. She was condemned to death for stealing
clothes from her employer, from the wife of her employer. She wished to 20
make herself more beautiful. This desire in servants was not legal.