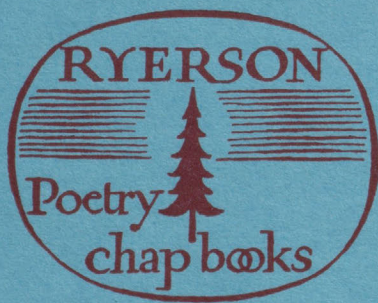
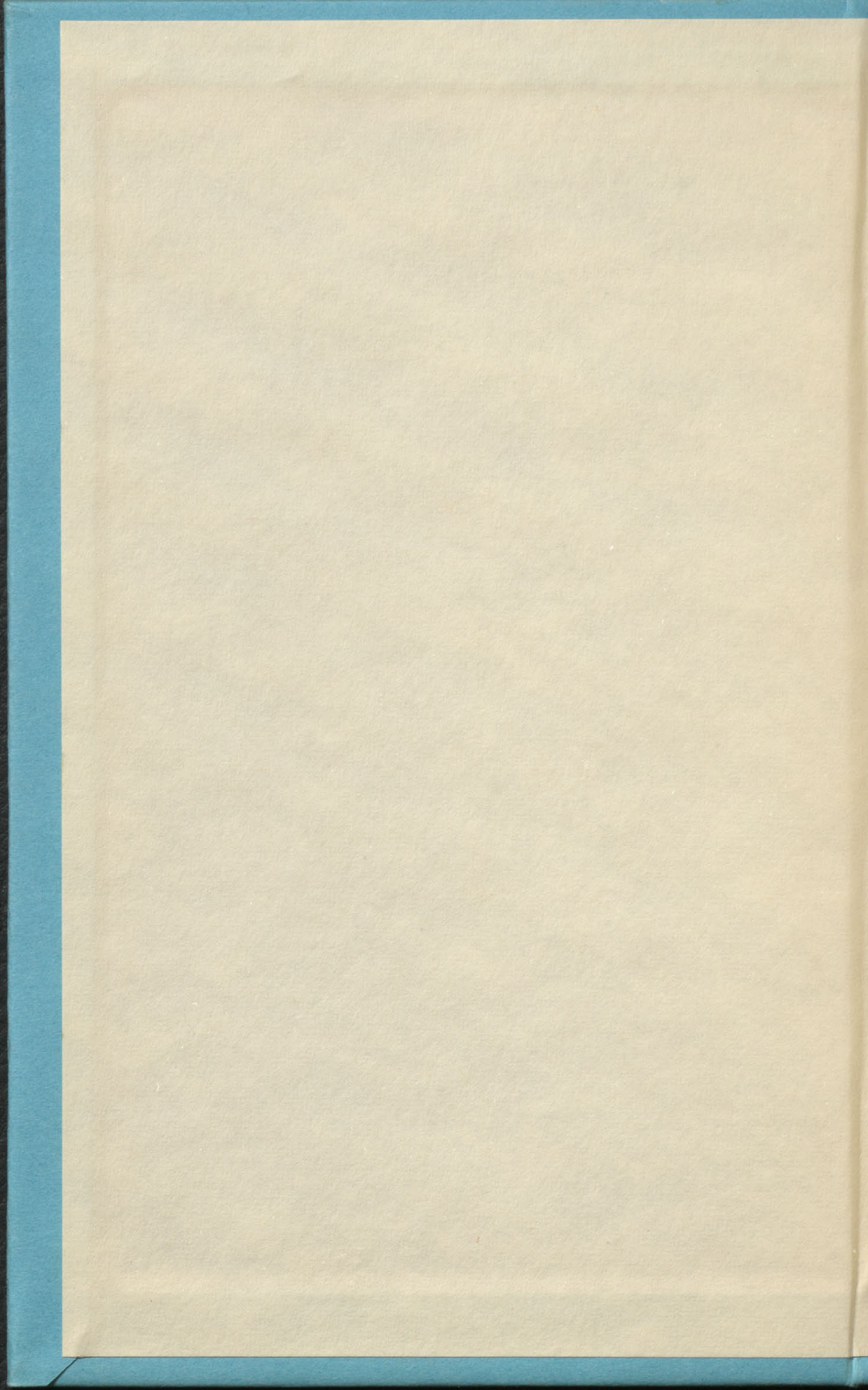

APHRODITE

JOHN HEATH



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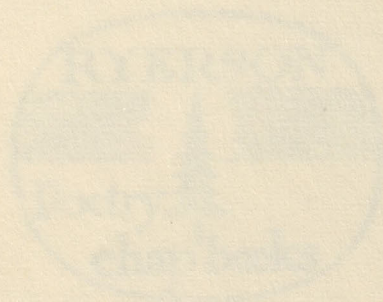


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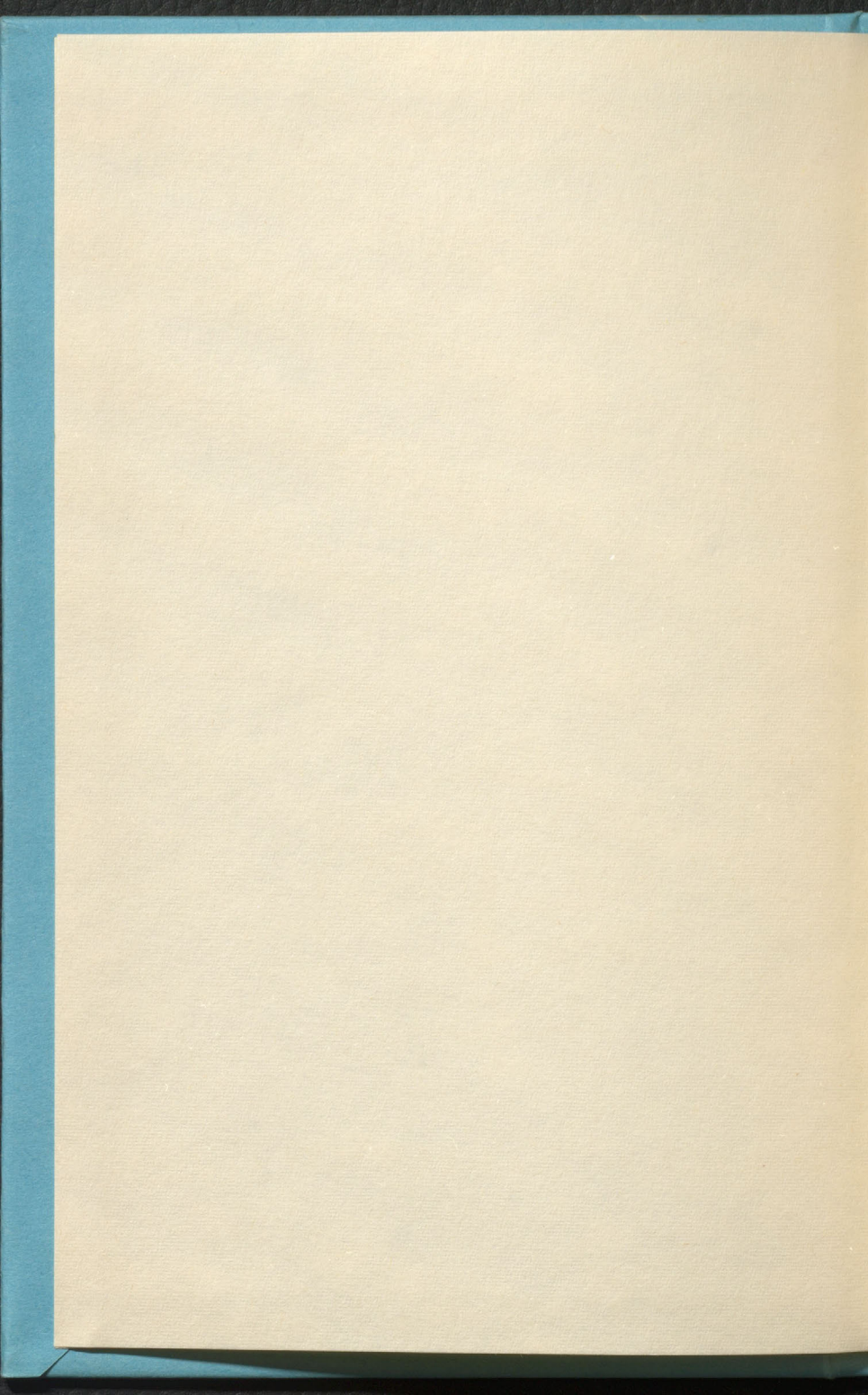
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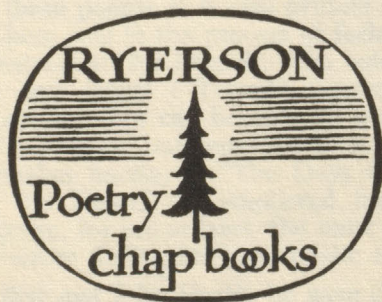


TORONTO - THE RYERSON PRESS



APHRODITE

JOHN HEATH



TORONTO • *The* RYERSON PRESS

This is Chap-Book 178

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FOREWORD

JOHN HEATH was born in England in 1917, but came to Canada when he was three. He was brought up on a Saskatchewan farm, and educated in Saskatchewan schools and at the University of Saskatchewan. He joined the army when war broke out, had a very distinguished war record (M.C. and bar), continued his studies at the University of Toronto after the war, taught English literature for two years in the University of Alberta, but then rejoined the army, and was killed in Korea in 1951.

This is a brief outline of the tragically short life of a man who might have made a very substantial contribution to Canadian poetry. He began to contribute to periodicals in 1948, and some of the poems in this little volume were first published in *Contemporary Verse* and in *Northern Review*, the two magazines in which much of the best Canadian poetry of the past fifteen years or so was first printed.

Although the major poetic influences can clearly be detected in these poems, it is also evident that the man who speaks here was in the process of fashioning a very individual instrument for himself. The voice we hear is often ironic and satiric ("Toronto Sunday" and "Fun Fair" for example), but can become, in such a poem as "Aphrodite," sensuous, but sensuous in a rather austere way, and reaches finally, in "The Days Go By Like a Shadow on the Heart," an emotional intensity which makes this poem, for me at least, the most moving piece John Heath wrote during his brief poetic career.

When I first met John Heath, he gave the impression of a man who thought of himself as an extreme rationalist. But the very fierceness with which he insisted upon the paramount importance of reason betrayed his own emotional temperament. For he was, as I began to realize when I came to know him well as a kind and generous friend, a very emotional man, deeply sensitive to the

suffering of others, and often troubled and unhappy. His insistence on reason was a way of mastering and controlling his own emotions, and his struggle to hold emotion in check is clearly reflected in his poetry. For he strove constantly for the hard line, for clear, spare imagery, and he was always suspicious of poetry which was too obviously emotional. His style is therefore generally austere; it is a style particularly well suited for ironic statements, and, surprisingly perhaps, for an extremely fine evocation of the northern landscape in such poems as "October," "Winter Solstice," and "Northern Spring."

There are indications that, towards the end of his life, he was beginning to explore more complex themes than he had hitherto attempted. In one of his last letters to his wife he wrote: "I have been thinking that some day I should weave out of what we know a book that would have as its theme the disparity between man's desires and the universal obstructiveness that would point to a resolution in the act of love, in the ultimate fortress of the human heart, and then the fortress threatened by the frailty of its fleshly walls."

It is a great pity that he did not live long enough to attempt so ambitious a subject.

HENRY KREISEL.

University of Alberta
July, 1958.

APHRODITE

TORONTO SUNDAY

THIS morning the word is god;
Pass friend and be forgiven foe.
This morning the word is God,
From pulpits and the radio
Manuring the apostolic field.
Pass friend and keep an eye well peeled,
This morning the Word is god.
In several thousand pyjamaed homes
Let us exalt the consecrated toast
And let Dick Tracy
Grapple the satanic host.

This morning the Word is cud
To six score congregations;
We have the excellent percolator
To assist our ruminations.
Pass toast and let the coffee steam,
We have been harrowed by Orphan Annie's scream.
This morning the Word is cud
For cardinal and reverend mastication—
Oh do not twist the obliterating dial,
We shall hear the news
In just a little while.

This noon the cudded Word is meat
In after church return from wafered god;
Communicants will reinforce the sign
With nothing so abstemious as cod.
The Word is Flesh and flesh becomes the word.
Is that the benediction just declared?
Then give the word to start the meat,
If we are going out this afternoon
To drive along the never tidal, tidied shores
Of Sunnyside,
Braced for its social chores.

FUN FAIR

THIS is the roller coaster;
It was built by a boaster
Who wanted a model of the universe.
Its space folds back upon itself
At the intersections of its curves;
Men scamper round it in a flying hearse
And lose the beginning in the end.
Its Daedalus had no wax or feathered friend.

And here is the ferris wheel.
You can hear its riders squeal
As they get their exercise.
They have been paired off in little cages
And there may be litters in the spring;
There are couplings of shoeblack eyes
And lots of showing of white teeth goes on.
But something puts me in mind of Ixion.

The horses of the roundabout
Are leaping frantic as angled trout;
Someone has mistaken them for Centaurs
And they are making agonized bounds
In a galloping consumption of vexation.
They have no ambition to be mentors
And want no part of an infant Argonaut.
Nevertheless, they are poled and caught.

Listen to the calliope
With its whistle full of hope;
Orpheus' mother seems to have lost an e.
I like its popping corks and shrieks
But would not think it advisable
To ask an apparition of Eurydice,
Though the Plutonian iron tears
Might be detectable among its gears.

Ah! the girlies in their tights!
Shall we attend the Eleusinian rites?
Within the tent they have nothing on.
Perhaps we can pimp a revelation
Between the closing and the opening of a fan;
The dancer may have been fathered by a swan
And trail a secondhand divinity along.
Besides, the Muses are not always clothed in song.

MATIN IN THE MODERN MODE

MECHANIC morning erupts metallicly;
A groping hand squeezes it into silence.
The outraged mind squirms back
Under the padded layers of shifting sleep,
But marble halls and gorgeous palaces
Bulge on the elbow troubled backcloth;
The adoring nymph, the astonished audience
Digress, dissolve among subsiding sets
And leave not a wrack behind;
Macbeth hath murdered sleep. The body turns,
Conscious of pressures and the twist of sheets.

The bathroom light leaps violently at the eyes;
Shower projects small surgeries of water on the skin,
Then floods tropic magnificence on the basking spine;
Engorging pipes lapse and resurge in glutinous rhyme.

The sharp, sweet shock of orange juice dilates
The aseptic pucker of mouth baptised
With sludge removers out of glass and tube.
The evening engulfing body of the wife refutes
Bright essence of black coffee with an alien smell.

The fleshly embodiment of soul assumes
Symbolic halter in the Windsor knot;
Dispatch case comes to hand and hand to knob,
The locks relatch, and sapient man goes forth
To shear the commercial harvest of his kind.

STREETCAR RIDERS

THESE have been ejaculated
From their sheet and blanket wombs
By the tinny volleying of clocks,
Brains briefly briefcase crated
And muscles packaged into shirt and socks,
Away Rio! the Bay Street car is headed for the docks.
But these will hardly get that far;
Manipulating keys
To offices on King and Queen
They will not venture foreign seas
Or hear much calling at aquatic bars.

MARRIAGE MARKET

THE sound securities of flesh
Will underwrite with signatures of trust
The scrip of words current in kittle markets,
And ventured capital will fructify
In bonus dividends of lust.
Due promissories redeem at par
In tangible assets of the marriage bed,
And income of the common shares
Restores the balance solvent side of red.
But mind will not assess in these chipped counter words
And audits back discrepancies
Juggled by fraudulent cashiers
In favour of certain bookies' fancies.
The unresolved recurrencies and surds
In mind's involved prospectus
Defy a simple settlement of cash and kind.
Small change of words and mattress dividends cashed in.
The solvency of soul is still to be undersigned.

HOTEL HONEYMOON

ACROSS the hall

They broke the bones of old contention
Striking arguments like matches on the wall,
Jammed words, swollen with recrimination,
Spilt dirty linen like yanked dresser drawers.
Their minds slammed compartments shut like fire doors
And bedsprings jounced exasperatedly
In a vindictive settling of old scores.
The onestringed fiddle of a baby's crying
Played obligato to it all.

Outside the mountainous midnight
Pressed glaciers of darkness against the doors
And a stir of wind banged on Venetian blinds.
An early riser after trains stifled his alarm,
And my new bride slept charmingly,
Breathing her breasts against my arm.

WIFE

CROSSING the valley broken up with rocks,
Warmed by the casual sun,
Bedding in rock rifts weltered up with leaves
And reading cloven moons for clocks,
Old caveman heart slept frosty o' the nights,
Enduring the sharp stars and the naked lights
Come early into the gray sky.
Wrapped in its tiger's hide
It drank at the salty pools and saw
The stolid rocks look blank from the pool's eye.

Now heart hearths with heart
In the honey celled hollow of rock,
And the fire struck from the bony flint
Holds shadows apart.
Orion pursues his bright sidereal chase
Outside, in the dark heavens wheeling by,
But the hunt of the universe passes over
The niche where we harbour from rolling sky.

A VALENTINE AFTER JOHN DONNE

NOW we have inflected love
Through all its conjugations,
How shall we construe it further
In the grammar of its making?
With what verb, and by what conjuration,
Marry this sweet noun?
Why, predicate us with verb "live"
And scorn all heads a-shaking,
Run our fair sentence through
A complement of both the genders,
Displaying our hearts no reedy benders
Before the balefulness that time can do.
And when that's done no one can hold
Ours a simple proverb linking night and day,
O no! it will essay whole volumes of the universe
Before Death binds it up in red and gold.

APHRODITE

STILL queen, still queen,
Still incense on my knees
And mutual sacrifice of curtained hours
In days struck motionless for my devotees;
Still that same queen my well remembered Greeks
Entempled in Cytherea and the Cyclades
Fresh from the bloodied toss of spermy sea.
I have outlasted them,
Poor peacock Hera petulant at Zeus
And Attica's longnose divinity
And some young moonfaced chit of Bethlehem
Bouncing a second Eros on her knee.
I still am queen
In those deep downy nights of Theodora's pillows,
Let whosoever play Cleopatra to an Antony
Or Desdemona to the weeping willows.
Still I mass trophies at my gates
Whenever swallows breed, the salmon spawn,
The rutting stags work out their rival hates.
I have empiry
In every lily's mouth that takes the taste
Of pollen from the rapacious bees;
I reign
When the nightwind stirs the moonstruck moths
To harlot among the apple trees,
While that pretender, stiffened in her niche,
Postures above her dusty altar cloths,
She, with her plaster Eros on her knees.
Still queen, still queen,
When the green fire of spring
Burns through the scaffolding of naked boughs,
When the white hawthorn smokes along the hedge
And the mating gulls
Follow the April ploughs.

SUPERSCRPTIONS

OVER the winter's brown, prosaic
Tesselation of the land
May palimpsests its green mosaic,
River metallated and furrow spanned.

Over the solid, bare mechanics
And limey whiteness of the bone
Flesh cocoons its red organics,
Artery channelled and ganglion sown.

Over the stark, necessitous stoics
And canvas backing of his year
Man embroiders his light heroics,
Bravado beaded and cobweb sere.

OCTOBER

IN this gray habited land
What celibate severities must be undergone
Before the spring;
What frigid asceticisms
Will bring the season on
In alkali bitter sloughs,
What arduous marathon
Of penances run in tonsured fields.
The featherless trees must take
The flagellating wind
On braced backs,
The weedy luxuriances summer sinned
Peel from the sod like rotten hair,
Those inky rangs of sin, the crows,
Blow by on scouring air,
And those purblind hypocrisies, the moles,
Shuffle below the sod.
With iron endurance the land awaits
The whitening absolution of the snows.

WINTER SOLSTICE

EARTH'S plumb bob mass leans out
Against the stringtight gravity,
Sloped pole of North averse
To hearth-hub sun's home charity.

From forehead shade of globe
Axially declined from grace,
Peeled eye of arctic earth
Prospects the cavities of space.

Blotting paper black of space
Takes radiant blood of sun;
No belch from maw's abyss,
No after taste of currant bun

As outleant earth forescans
In absolute zero atrophy
The ember sun's demise
In cosmos' iced catastrophe.

NORTHERN SPRING

THE outspace looking, stark, star bitten
Pole slopes back into the sun,
The white owl haunted, gray wolf daunted
Winter world hears rivers run.

The wind chilled furrows, mudmucked fallows
Are rectified by tasselling buds,
And snowbank brinked, windblue inked
Sloughs sport courting mallard bloods.

The newborn hungering, splitbeaked gaping
Life breaks multicoloured shells;
The old, newseeming, birthbig, dreaming
Land breaks out its marriage bells.

The long snowhidden, frost rent riven
Orchard whitens with blossom flakes
As the green blood flowing, rich, leaf growing
Earth sloughs winter's sins and aches.

THE SEASON

THE green born moment of the spring
Defines itself as flowered summer;
Embryonic buds proliferate,
Explicate, as sun falls plumber.

Limpleather leaves expostulate
Air's unprecipitated thunder;
Crab-catching sun prepares retreat,
Eyeing the southern Goat for plunder.

Equinox calls in battered coinage
For death plaques stamped in bronze and gold,
And peeled skulls of the senile poppies
Donate their recent flesh to mould.

The interstellar space convects
The vitalic heat of winter earth,
And its mob of gimlet stars screw down
The carcass in its coffin berth.

EVENING

BLACK bull leaps heifer whiteness
With spurt of spermatic stars in sky,
Gray hide of evening showing through
The washing out of sunset dye.

Landscape crumples into miragery,
Horizon moulders, liquefies,
Eye stumbles in prevarication
As hill dissolves, hollow solidifies.

Night oozes amorphous girth
Into interstices of lighted town;
Cars valiant under arc and neon
Plunge highways countrywards to drown.

Headlights jewel roadside eyes,
Moths fluff into windshield wall,
World creates and uncreates
In flow of road's lit rise and fall.

COUNTERBALANCE

THE seismographic heart records
The delicate shocks of sense,
But auditor brain deplores
The unsettled bills, nontallying pence.

Past's incised cylinder reveals
The arabesques of artist heart,
But navigator brain complains
Of shoaling soundings not on map or chart.

Adventurer heart extravagates
On ghostly orchids in the moon;
The gardener brain grows grain and fruits
Working the seedbeds of the sweaty noon.

BURDENS

THE weight of space borne light
And chill split, star chipped night,
The spin worn mass
Of rock and grass
Pole falters left and right.

The shunt of rain runged weather
And crash of leaf and feather,
The leaning thrust
Of sun and dust
Crimp sod and soil together.

The sag of flesh and bone,
The heart's old rolling stone,
The twist of brain
Against the grain
The bull-brute years have grown.

SLEEP

THOUGHT divagates, dissipates,
Into the sentried swamp of sleep,
The abstract gap of bloodless hours
In night's dead vast and disembodied deep
Where the spectral animus of things
Concocts dark occultations,
And the geomantic stars
Portend disasters and the death of kings,
Quartering the obscure abyss of sky
With grave ideograms of divination.

Horizons moulder, liquefy,
And moon exhales from yellow atrophy
A chill of aeonslong decay;
The eye prevaricates, pulse crawls,
And attenuated mind suffuses
Thin speculation through landscape's fleshless gray.

Clocked hours evaporate;
Red light wheeling up the rim
Of turning earth in noisy verberations
Heckles the sky with violent affirmations.
Quenched mind repudiates its owl hour foray,
Retracting its thin spread oscillations
Into the beaten mould of day.

THE SUN, MINE EXECUTIONER

SUNBARBERED earth turns shaven jowl
Into the evening shadow line,
And sprout of midnight beard cones out
Towards Polaris' ploughing sign.

Day laundered linen crimps with limbs
Under the blanket press of sleep;
The dark kelptangle strands of dream
Ribbon the mind's eclipsetide neap.

Sown shoal of sperm fry battle up
From Hellespont of waiting womb
From coil of knotting genes run back
Through corridors of ancient tomb.

Red razor dawn shears shadow beard
Along jawline of head turned earth
The seaweed dream stalks dessicate
As mind tides back to daylight berth.

Grave's vacuum throat takes up
The line of lives from carpet time,
And bright bone Adam chips endure
Their pluck back to original lime.

*THE DAYS GO BY LIKE A SHADOW ON
THE HEART*

IN this dilapidated mansion of a mind once me
Nothing remains, not even rats, not ghosts,
Nothing but sunsplit shingles,
Creaks in corner posts,
Water decay in cellar walls,
Nothing but ulcer of heart
Still discharging acidulous memory;
Nothing but tarnish of gone brightness
Burnt into wallpaper retina of blank rooms,
And the nothing of me whistling through into vacancy
Through the unbunged barrel-belly of universe.

I think of that poor Plantagenet
Immobilized upon a sonless throne,
Having always behind the wrinkles of the mind
The echo of the White Ship's plunge like a well-dropped
stone,
Seeing courtiers smirk and go
And knowing smiles no longer legal tender
For rent-rolls of the universe,
Knowing the ingot weight of heart.

In this denuded domicile nothing remains,
Nothing but slow stain of shadows once alive
Agonized upon the carpet heart,
And the wear of limboed passage over sills.
Life is a desperate contrivance for existence
Using the indelible heart to spike itself
Into an indifferent universe.

FRAGMENT

THE child heart land
Behind the accumulations of grown mind
Skyset, skybeached
With coppered summers and the cold-leached,
Eggshell winter colours
Under the autumn peeling of green rind;
The birthright land
Dawn hung, star stung,
Sharp coloured in the heart
As daylight splashed on denigrating dreams,
Greenjacketed with spring
And blue with scarfing wind,
Sunwaded, willow waded, and welted
With plowblack furrowing,
Bush belted and scuffed with slough,
Wind high and water wide
The land, child held,
Inalienable in the heart.

Land burning green,
Ashed yellow with dandelion and buffalo bean,
Windrun with water blue,
Milky with sperm and spawning jelly
Pulsed sticky in frogfranked sloughs,
Colloidal in egg and belly,
Membraning maternities into bud and bone;
The fleshed and fibred earth
Hairing through last year's grass
And coining the summer green in poplar leaves
Sky bent into burning glass
Of sunsuck pulling the land
Back from its slant of winter declination.

This is the land we watched,
Waiting for wind to walk the rain
Into the multibushelled acres,
Watching cloud convolutions crawl
A mucus of trailing wet into the grain
From snailflat bellyfeet;
The noonland metallised by July,
Arched under furnace heat,
Rose rouged, clover curdled in ditches,
Jasmined by wolf-willow wind
Crisping the armpits dry.

FRAGMENT

THE day split red like a dropped plum
And tilted us into the sloped stars;
We were come
From perpendicular noon
Into shadows askew and worlds walking overhead.
Minds moved on planes of inclination
And talk tampered with foundations.
Mr. Duperriot, the intellectual godling,
Descanted medievalism charmingly
Into modern flasks and snuffed the reek divinely;
Our host pourquoi'd the obliquities of Sarte
And broke bread on the nonfunctionalism of art . . .

The Peterson Poetry Chap-book

Louis Peterson—Editor

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