

From *Notes from an Old Montreal Wartime*

XIII *Desert*

Hereabouts is desert, it's a bad country,
grows nothing, nothing to show for, sand has no whereabouts,
goes everywhere and nowhere like a sea:
yes, I said, and noticed the flash of sun on grit
and knew that all the hourglasses in the world had broken
and this was the sum of all the hours of the world.

Did you ever see a man bleed in sand? I
asked him, did you ever see a soldier, a khaki
hero with his life blood blotting entirely and quickly
into the khaki sand? Did you ever see a man drown in quicksand
or, let alone a man, a tree or a bedstead?

It's not just that there's so much of it, he said,
nor the bitter heat of it nor its blinding glare
but it's the shiftlessness, that there's no purpose here,
nothing but a blanket warming a blanket, or a sum
multiplying and dividing itself forever, a sum
adding and subtracting itself forever and ever.

XIV *Poem As Bird*

This side the enormous trust of poetry
the irritable passion like a bird
whose gift is to be feathered on a cry
or preen itself in the syllabic wood
pecks intellectual bars and fouls a word
and is the parrot of my solitude.
If I should let it go it will not be
myself but like the nightingale express
(or the vulgar cuckoo) all things to all people
and turn on me its savagery of success,
and when I say 'You lie for all your song'
insuperably impose its separation.

For, as I breathe, it amputates my breath -
becomes maybe some watchword to the young
but tiptoes, like an angel, from a death.

XV *Chinese*

It was raining: in the evening you began
to read aloud Chinese poems;
I thought then, I am fortunate
for I have a window filled with a big tree.

As you read some verses of Li Tai-po
I thought how I go down from my house by wooden stairs
into a quiet place of grass and loose fences,
returning by wooden stairs up to my balcony.

You recited small things that had such a tone
as the moist buds have and the undying wings
accusing history; with that clean note
water has often washed the hunter's feet.

I thought then that my house was like a shell
because that is simple, curled on itself, freckled
with shyness. Like bare bright furniture
a sufficient language drew round us but did not speak.

From *Twenty-One Love Poems*

I

Wherever in this city, screens flicker
with pornography, with science-fiction vampires,
victimized hirelings bending to the lash,
we also have to walk... if simply as we walk
through the rainsoaked garbage, the tabloid cruelties
of our own neighbourhoods.
We need to grasp our lives inseparable
from those rancid dreams, that blurt of metal, those disgraces,
and the red begonia perilously flashing
from a tenement sill six stories high,
or the long-legged young girls playing ball
in the junior highschool playground.
No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
our animal passion rooted in the city.

II

I wake up in your bed. I know I have been dreaming.
Much earlier, the alarm broke us from each other,
you've been at your desk for hours. I know what I dreamed:
our friend the poet comes into my room
where I've been writing for days,
drafts, carbons, poems are scattered everywhere,
and I want to show her one poem
which is the poem of my life. But I hesitate,
and wake. You've kissed my hair

to wake me. *I dreamed you were a poem,*
I say, *a poem I wanted to show someone...*
and I laugh and fall dreaming again
of the desire to show you to everyone I love,
to move openly together
in the pull of gravity, which is not simple,
which carries the feathered grass a long way down the upbreathing air.

V

This apartment full of books could crack open
to the thick jaws, the bulging eyes
of monsters, easily: Once open the books, you have to face
the underside of everything you've loved—
the rack and pincers held in readiness, the gag
even the best voices have had to mumble through,
the silence burying unwanted children—
women, deviants, witnesses—in the desert sand.
Kenneth tells me he's been arranging his books
so he can look at Blake and Kafka while he types;
yes; and we still have to reckon with Swift
loathing a woman's flesh while praising her mind,
Goethe's dread of the Mothers, Claudel vilifying Gide,
and the ghosts—their hands clasped for centuries—
of artists dying in childbirth, wise-women charred at the stake,
centuries of books unwritten piled behind these shelves;
and we still have to stare unto the absence
of men who would not, women who could not, speak
to our life—this still unexcavated hole
called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world.

Crossing

The water is one thing, and one thing for miles.
The water is one thing, making this bridge
Built over the water another. Walk it
Early, walk it back when the day goes dim, everyone
Rising just to find a way toward rest again.
We work, start on one side of the day
Like a planet's only sun, our eyes straight
Until the flame sinks. The flame sinks. Thank God
I'm different. I've figured and counted. I'm not crossing
To cross back. I'm set
On something vast. It reaches
Long as the sea. I'm more than a conqueror, bigger
Than bravery. I don't march. I'm the one who leaps.