

sightlines



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Henry Beissel



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*In the mind's theatre
sightlines determine
where and who you are.*

1. so many worlds to see ...



Through the Rain's Eyes



I've watched the news and walk down the lane
into the forest where the rain's voice is still green
as August. The trees lean into the light like crows,
their trunks black and glossy; their branches follow
the crooked ways of the wind that delivers autumn,
willy-nilly, with a cold eye. No bird sings in this
weather. Leaves, wet and still green, fall to the ground,
numb and mute, one by one—

like famished children

along a dusty track in Somalia or in Sudan: suddenly
something gives, the force that holds the parts in place
lets go ... Except that the desert speaks in tongues
of fire, sucks bodies dry till they drop, emaciated,
dying in the crooked ways of a world of plenty.

Wet leaves begin to mat the forest floor between
wild garlic, wild mushrooms and wintergreen.
They stick to the soles of my boots and cluster
until I walk on lily-pads as though to polish
the many mirrors the rain has cast across my path,
pools reflecting larger worlds in miniature reflecting
worlds to be seen clearly through the rain's eyes.

You cannot count the leaves in this patch of forest,
or at night the stars in this patch of sky, no more than the tears
shed in Somalia or in the slums of Bombay, Bogota,
Brazzaville—continents of sick and hungry children—
you can count them one by one every 22 seconds, makes
35,000 per day, totalling 12,775,000 dying every year.
Can you measure their pain? Or their mothers' grief?

A spider has hung a row of raindrops out to dry
between ferns, trapping in each a world where
everything is upside down: trees dance on clouds,
the rain jets up in countless sputtering fountains,
and I hang by my feet from a patch of earth lost
in a wobbling globe. The wind bends and stretches
the trees, bends and stretches my legs, then plucks me off
the line, drops me ...

I fall headfirst, spatter on the ground
and lie shattered among fragments of forest and sky.
Thus images shatter in the rain's eyes just like the credulous
images that shatter in the breaking eyes of children—
kaleidoscopes of what might have been. Hunger plucks them
from their life-lines, drops and buries them without ceremony
in the ever drifting sands of all the saharas of our madness.

The rain washes the trees, washes my face,
but it cannot wash the stain from my heart.
The wet leaves on the trees shudder in the wind,
the dampness draws the cold to my skin; I shiver.
September brings home a promise of new seasons,
but the children of Somalia shall never hear
what the still green voice of the rain whispers.

A Poet's Path Revisited



Seven years gone and the path still winds its way
languidly through the wilderness
of my dreams, starting where imagination
brushed lines, shapes, colours
into landscapes of the mind responding to nature's
prompts where the heron poises
still as a stone statue to snatch fish and frog from the edge
of the pond whose waters rise still
from the molten remains of ancient bygone glaciers.

The path skirts the artist's studio, then plunges
southwest into the woods
where he used to pause on his walks to listen
to the aspen whisper on the wind
before entering the green tunnel between cedars
pines, sumac, and wild apple trees
planted at random by the digestive grace
of squirrels, grouse and deer
plus the bluster of the heady air too easily
troubled by any passing weather.

Past the venerable butternut whose bark is grooved
 like an unruly surf frozen in midair
 the path now turns east to where a soaring ash
 has hoisted a tree-house straight up
 on limbless trunk into the sky, too high to climb
 except on Jacob's ladder.

But the hunters knew nothing of angels in their blind
 as they waited for an antlered stag
 to wander incautiously into the cross-hair of their gun
 and fired to kill the beast with the beauty.

The path curves now through the sepia spaces
 of an open sugar-bush, meanders
 between ferns and blackberry bushes and points
 north, my love, to the pole star
 around which we spin ceaselessly at 1,000 km/h
 to emerge at the other edge of the pond
 across from the loghouse that completed the circle
 in a raging fire a few steps
 from where the path ends at the door of a lowly hut
 that sheltered a poet's multiverse.

There, in the den of my dreams, worlds were born
 with the flick of a pen, war and peace
 shook the earth and rent the skies at the mercy of language:
 what might be and what is clashed
 as words confronted what they tried to say—rhythm and image
 offered coordinates to locate experience
 and call the incomprehensible to order. Turning and turning
 with the spin of planets and particles
 I awake on the path thinking cuts across the bewildering landscape
 of mind and matter, and walk on.

But the latitudes and longitudes of language stay in place,
 providing maps to the matter of my dreams
 and guidance to the search for treasures buried in the mind
 for a future archaeologist to mine.

Ash Tree Greening

(for Clara)



Summer is the trees' season
though the ash is slow getting there,
slow coming out of its winter coma,
stretching green fingers towards the sun
inch by inch till they have raised a dome
of shade the birds want to inhabit.
Nuthatch grosbeaks finches jays—
they move in late to chase and chatter
where a feeder hangs that saw the stalwart
through the bleak months of ice and snow:
they're at home here now more than I am.

A green summer wind turns the ash
into a shimmering sphere struggling
to break free from its anchor deep
in the earth. Its interior remains calm
harbouring its own memories, of storms
and frost or the woodpeckers' shocking
visits, but also of children and lovers,
of those whose gaze it can raise to the sky.

Remnants of a tree house—a few planks
rotting askew in its branches remember
a child's games that turned many a summer
into dreams of freedom as girl became woman.
I never saw lovers loving in its shade
though in the heat of August the ash tree
invites such pleasures without shame,
offering to shelter their tenderness
against the torrid light running off
its leaves like torrents of green rain.

In fall the ash tree clings to its leaves
till the green is drained from them;
they return to the colour of earth
and rough cold-fingered winds pluck them
one by one, crumpling them on the ground.
This is when I climbed its peak, hoisting
myself up the ladder its branches held out,
invading a privacy of birds to put
my pluck to the test and reach the top
where hawk and raven perch. I sat there
pressed against the trunk, the bark
furling my back stiff and green with fear
and surveyed the dizzy woods: so many
worlds to visit travelling by tree.

Soon the ash will withdraw its offers
and retire into winter solitude,
standing naked when it most needs cover,
its stamina fed from roots that know
the greening of more springs and summers
than children and lovers can muster.

Leap into the Light

(for my grandson Bennett)



The pulse that pumped the seed prompted
the drumbeat that woke you—a soft nimble

pounding to summon generations for an assembly
of parts to embody an ancient blueprint.

The blind seed found its partner and blindly
they embraced the intricate symmetries

where to draw the strength and hone the skills
for a bold leap breaching the surface of darkness.

You are that leap into the light. Newborn
you burst in a flurry of promise and potential

from histories recorded in star tracks and stone
to protest life stridently against oblivion.

Who knows what shudder at the cosmic birth
sent light years eddying across the void

to spin electrons around protons into vortexes
that still ignite millions of suns each day.

They catch fire in the centrifuge of galaxies
and spread energy to animate dead matter.

You'll learn to walk upright into that mystery
on a planet that's but a hiccup in a cloud of dust.

We are composed of what rain washed from rock
and the inexorable wind carried across land and sea—

fruit of fusion and diffusion at play in a patch of light
passing between one impenetrable darkness and another.

Yet in that leap and play lies the key to all the wonders
of the world that whet your appetite for living.

Playful, we poke the membrane of what appears to be
real, groping for the tempting how and the enigmatic why

in things and their shadows, push open doors, windows
of perception, inch by inch, until our senses are wide

awake and clamour to rejoice in the passion of being
here and there being an infinite recession of reasons.

Today's seas are turbulent and the coming storms
will exact a price for overdrawing our allotment.

The tempests of our passion have driven us off-course.
Tomorrow is your chance to pilot the ship home.

It's a stormy, unforgiving sea you'll have to cross
in a ship whose engines are failing, whose crew is waking

from a dream of lotusland too late to find their bearings,
and a killer wind is tearing the sails we hoist to shreds.

Lunacy is already the order of the day. The captain
is counting gold coins in his cabin while desperate

passengers brawl between decks to reach derelict lifeboats
monster waves will capsize before they are launched.

Such is the winter of the age you are born into
with the promise of another spring and the power

to blossom and translate anguish into music and dance
that are the mind's own purpose and fulfillment.

Let not the pain of living consciously diminish its joys.
The seasons wheel all things through the phases

of the moon and the conflagrations of the sun. Watch
a spring dawn hang dewdrops out to dry in a spider's

web while the early light sings with the voices of birds
and flowers break into exclamations of colour.

Feel a soft summer wind fondle you velvet and
fragrant in the arms of your first eternal love.

Smell the heavy bouquet of an autumn afternoon,
rich with decay and renewal, its light maturing

to a glass of sherry as you toast the anniversary
of trees at their carnival of heedless dancing leaves.

Taste the first snowflake and know winter
is a sleigh ride from the top of your dreams

to the depths of your delight in defiance down
the long slope of never ending merry-go-round

stories that tell the wind all your adventures, all
your moments of ecstasy in which beauty turns

into truth before silence returns to the forests
you explored, the seas you sailed, the cities you built.

Life is a mixed bag bursting at the seams with trivia
and surprises. Between the week's science and lit classes,

Saturday's soccer game and Sunday's concert there are
worlds of beauty, corruption and mystery to explore.

Between mom's chicken soup and your predilection
for desserts there is enough food for thought to tantalize

your insatiable curiosity for a dozen lifetimes. Against
the daily grind I recommend exercises in bravado.

One needs to grow wings and fly beyond the petty turmoil
born of ambition, greed and ignorance. But remember

Icarus. The moth's craving for the candle is stilled once
only, yet we must reach forever for what we cannot grasp.

Supreme ecstasy springs from knowing freedom
and to be free we must learn to unknow everything

we know so that we can become what we are: part
of the whole where Phoenix soars into another dawn.

2. away from home ...



There Are No Ends



*We are the sea's, and as such we are at its beck.
We are the water within the wave and the wave's form.
And little will man—or woman, come to that—
Know what he shall dream when drawn by the sea's wrack.*
—P.K. Page, “The End”

I have felt the flow of many oceans lure me
beyond the surf where the sea foams at the mouth
chewing rock and roots, felt its ebb draw me
below the sea's spit and spume by wind and weather
jumbling surfaces. An undertow too strong to resist,
too ancient for the neocortex to reason into words
has pulled me down to the dark centre of beginnings
—and there, by the flicker of phosphorescent fish,
I saw the circle close in the hull of a ship's wreck.
We are the sea's, and as such we are at its beck.

The foundered ship is but a prodigal return.
I hear the distant drumming waves in my heart
though we have moved far from the sea, dragging
its weight and its salts from species to species
and to the moon. We have transubstantiated water
into worlds of steel and concrete, music and microchips,
that seem a triumph over nature. Yet we must
each replenish our cental of saltwater day by day
and make singing the sea to the sky life's norm.
We are the water within the wave and the wave's form.

I have drifted in the waters of many oceans
and felt the waves form at the core of calm seas.
Everything is forever moving, forever becoming
something else. In the cosmic recycling plants
that mixed the elements which produced us, water
is nature's strategy for transformations. The sun
draws from the wave the drop that must pass your lips
for you to see, hear, feel—just for the blood to flow
and for synapses enabling love and poetry to grow.
And little will man—or woman, come to that—

how we came to travel these waterways of thought
and perception. The trillions of particles chance
compounded into, say, Plato or Cleopatra have long
scattered far and wide again and may even now
in their countless manifestations be stirring the hand
that writes these lines. Passion and wisdom too
are strategies of transformation. There are no ends
to justify beginnings. We are passages between worlds
past and future, and none of us can ever bring back
Know what he shall dream when drawn by the sea's wrack.

Notes



“Ayorama” is the name I gave to the loghouse I built on 100 acres of woodland near Maxville, Ontario. My partner, Arlette Francière, and I lived there for over three decades, raised our daughter Clara there, and pursued our creative commitments. The pond, big enough for a canoe and a rowboat, I excavated in the middle of the bush, prompted a visiting Chinese scholar to declare that we lived *life by a Canadian Walden Pond*. — “Ayorama” is an Inuit word which I translate as “it’s destiny”.

“Mer Bleue” is a 3,500-acre conservation area on the eastern outskirts of Ottawa. It is perhaps the most remarkable part of the city’s Greenbelt. With its 7,700-year-old bog, the area offers a flora and fauna more typical of northern boreal wetlands than the Ottawa valley.

“El Mirbed” is the name of a pan-Arabic poetry festival held annually in Baghdad. I was told it dates back to the Middle Ages. The name means “the place where the camel squats down,” i.e. in the evening when the caravan comes to rest for the night by an oasis after a hot day in the desert sun. That’s the time for the storytellers to regale and relax the tired travellers. I was fortunate enough to be one of a handful of poets from outside the Arabic world to be invited to participate in this international festival. I attended for four consecutive years in the eighties, and I can testify to the enthusiasm with which audiences flocked by the hundreds and thousands to these poetry recitals—at least until the USA brutally destroyed civilized life in Iraq.

The “**Manifesto in Times of War**” was my answer to a poem by a princess-poet from Kuwait who rhapsodized the war effort (against Iran) at the El-Mirbed Festival in Baghdad (1986), declaring that this was no time for poetry and that she’d trade a hundred poets for one soldier. I wrote the poem in anger overnight, and it was read the next day in English and in Arabic—to the consternation of the many army officers in the large audience.

“**Letter to the Goddess of Flowers**” was written after viewing the Indian film, *Bandit Queen* (1994), based on the extraordinary life of Phoolan Devi (Seema Biswas) who suffered the abuse and indignities of a member of a lower caste as a child. It turned her into a revengeful criminal and finally into a combative politician, a story both tragic and heroic.

The “**Jade Canoe**” won first prize in poetry at the Surrey International Writers’ Conference in Vancouver in 2006.

Acknowledgements



Some of the poems in this collection have been published in various magazines, such as *Anthos*, *Ariel*, *The Canadian Forum*, *Decabration*, *Corridors*, *Fiddlehead*, *The Harpweaver*, *Humanist Perspectives*, *Poetry Canada*, and *Verse Afire*. I thank the editors for their trust in my work.

My special and warmest thanks go to my wife and partner, Arlette Francière, not only for her passionate love of poetry, but also for the tireless practical help in assembling this collection, her sensitive and intelligent response to the individual poems, and for her impeccable proofreading. She is a splendid artist in her own right, both as painter and as translator, and I deeply appreciate her sharing her formidable gifts and her generous spirit with me.

Poetry Collections by Henry Beissel



- WITNESS THE HEART (1963)
NEW WINGS FOR ICARUS (1966)
THE WORLD IS A RAINBOW (1968)
THE PRICE OF MORNING (transl. Walter Bauer, 1968)
FACE ON THE DARK (1970)
THE SALT I TASTE (1975)
A DIFFERENT SUN (transl. Walter Bauer, 1976)
CANTOS NORTH (1980, 1982)
SEASON OF BLOOD (1984)
POEMS NEW AND SELECTED (1987)
AMMONITE (1987)
A THISTLE IN HIS MOUTH (transl. Peter Huchel, 1987)
STONES TO HARVEST (1987, 1993)
DYING I WAS BORN (1992)
LETTERS ON BIRCHBARK (transl. Uta Regoli, 2000)
THE DRAGON & THE PEARL (2002)
ACROSS THE SUN'S WARP (2003)
THE METEOROLOGY OF LOVE (2010)
COMING TO TERMS WITH A CHILD (2011)
SEASONS OF BLOOD (2012)
FUGITIVE HORIZONS (2013)
COMING TO TERMS WITH A CHILD / EIN KIND KOMMT ZUR
SPRACHE (bilingual edition, 2015)
FUGITIVE HORIZONS / FLÜCHTIGE HORIZONTE (bilingual
edition, German translation by Heide Fruth-Sachs, 2015)

About The Author



Henry Beissel was born in Cologne (Germany). His father was a pianist whose career was cut short when the Nazis came to power. By temperament and disposition an outsider, he is subjected as a child to the ubiquitous regimentation of dictatorship and develops a vehement and permanent hatred for authority. His youth is shattered in air raids and bomb shelters in what he regards as one of the cruellest wars in history because much of it was directed against unarmed women and children. A voracious reader, he finds in books the only sane and rational world he has ever known. He begins to write before the age of ten as a clandestine way of asserting his freedom.

The end of the war is traumatic because it brings revelations of Nazi atrocities that fill him with horror and shame which eventually drive him out of Germany in 1949 to go and continue his studies in philosophy at the University of London. It took him almost 70 years to deal with his childhood trauma in a cycle of autobiographical poems, *Coming to Terms with a Child* (Black Moss, 2011), which has been republished with his own German version, *Ein Kind kommt zur Sprache* (Verlag LiteraturWissenschaft, Marburg, 2015)

Determined to start a new life away from the burdens of the past, he emigrates to Canada in 1951. Years of struggle follow to find himself and to survive economically in Toronto where he held many different jobs from clerking at Canadian Tire to freelancing for CBC radio and television. He writes consistently throughout these years, mainly poetry, and discovers his vocation as a writer. In 1956, he enters the University of Toronto to study English literature to find roots in a new culture, and completes his M.A. in 1960. By now an academic

career seems the only possible compromise between his need to support a family and his commitment to serious writing. University posts include Edmonton (1962-64), Trinidad (1964-66) and finally Montreal where he is Professor of English at Concordia University, teaching Literature and Creative Writing for 30 years. In 1996 he retires as Distinguished Professor Emeritus.

His commitment to writing comes to national attention in 1963 when he founds and edits *Edge*, the controversial Journal of the Arts, Literature and Politics. Since then he has written and published extensively—poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction—over thirty books in all; the most recent is a collection of poetry, *Fugitive Horizons* (Guernica Editions, 2013), a journey across the known and unknown micro- and macrocosm.

Throughout his career as a writer, he is active in all the writers' associations: the Guild of Canadian Playwrights (a co-founder), the League of Canadian poets (president in 1980), and the Writers' Union of Canada (which he represents for a time internationally). He is the recipient of many awards and prizes, including a Senior Canada Council grant, the 1994 Walter Bauer Literary Award, and the Naji Naaman Literary Prize, 2008, Maison pour la culture, Beirut (Lebanon) for his book length poem, "Where Shall the Birds Fly?" In October 2015, the University of Marburg made Beissel an Honorary Member of the Marburg Centre for Canadian Studies "in recognition of his exemplary work representing Canadian literature and culture in Germany."

He has three children, all grown up, and one grandson. He is married to Arlette Francière, painter and distinguished translator (Robertson Davies and W.O. Mitchell into French and Michel Beaulieu into English). She has provided cover artwork for many of his books. Henry and Arlette now live in Ottawa.