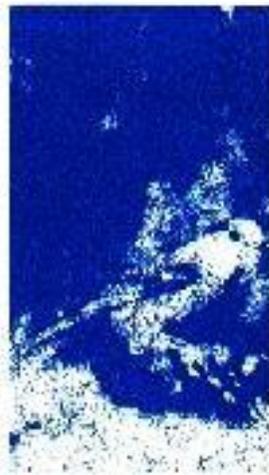
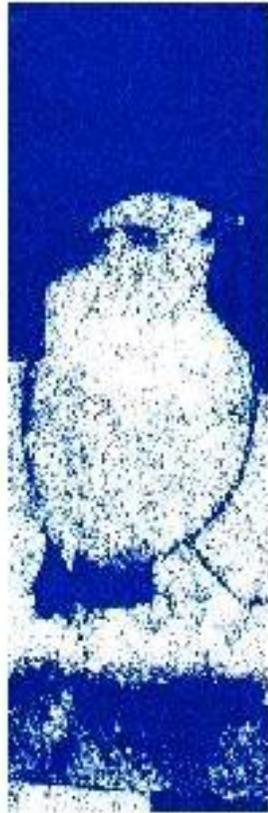


Whiskey Jack



**Milton
Acorn**



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WHISKEY JACK

Milton Acorn

Introduction by Al Purdy

Toronto

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Whiskey Jack

Milton Acorn HMS Press
Review by Rob MacLeod Anthos 1986

In some ways Whiskey Jack is very much in the mainstream of Milton Acorn's writing; in other ways it is a radical departure. Acorn often uses animal metaphors and he often writes allegorically, but in the past he has never used an allegory, let alone a bird allegory, as a unifying theme for an entire book. That he does so in Whiskey Jack means that he is joining the ranks of those writers of earlier ages (mostly Ibn Atar and Geoffrey Chaucer) who used the characteristics of birds to express the foibles of their human contemporaries.

This is to say that the book attempts a large vision. In spite of this, Whiskey Jack is not vintage Acorn. In poems such as Hummingbird and To Draw A Robin incipient, versifying wit for no apparent reason other than to settle minor scores. On the other hand, What Right Has A Gull reminds us of Acorn the visionary who showed the way to so many younger Canadian poets.

Overall, HMS Press is to be heartily thanked for giving us this last installment from a fine writer who is no longer with us; and for showing us some of the promise that a few more years of life might have fulfilled. Recommend.

Standing Up For Himself

The Uncollected Acorn: Poems 1950-1956

by **Milton Acorn** edited by James Deahl, Deneau. 149p.

Whiskey Jack by **Milton Acorn**

HMS Press Toronto 49p. 1986

Review by Paul Denham, *Books In Canada* June/July 1987

The Uncollected Acorn brings together poems from Milton Acorn's whole career, some previously published in magazines but most selected from Acorn's manuscripts in the public archives. Editor, James Deahl has organized them topically into five groups - love poems, elegies, political poems, poems of nature, and religious meditations. He also provides dates, so that we can see how the poems are related to Acorn's poetic development.

A couple of poems in an uncharacteristic 19th-Century style turn out to be from 1950, the beginning of Acorn's career; this one, for example, sounds like Lampman or Roberts:

*The autumn edgens and the geese go south.
From towns and trudgery fields their echelons
are glimmered, and recall a long-time drought;
the voice-cracked air of camps in nomad dawns . . .*

There are a lot of experiments with the sonnet form, an interest that found fuller expression in *Jackpine Sonnets* (1977). "Never Say It's All For The Best," a poem dated 1958, contains lines later used in "Knowing I Live In A Dark Age."

Yet few of these poems are likely to endure with Acorn's best work. Some of the political poems read more like letters to the editor than like real poems, and in the love poems he is often as interested in his own erections as in the subject of his desires. If they haven't appeared in print before this, that may be because Acorn, an exacting craftsman, knew they weren't ready. *The Uncollected Acorn* is not a brilliant final testament, but rather a window into Acorn's career, and a tribute to the

importance of that career for English-Canadian poetry.

It's not at all clear why we have two posthumous collections of Acorn. *Whiskey Jack*, a much smaller book than *The Uncollected Acorn*, is offered without explanation. Is it composed of poems that didn't make it, for whatever reason, into the Uncollected? Or was it in press at the time of Acorn's death? [correct ed.] There is no editor; Deahl is listed as the proofreader, and there's an introduction by Al Purdy and an afterward by Gwendolyn MacEwen, but nobody takes responsibility for *Whiskey Jack* or explains what it represents.

Purdy quotes a passage from "*The Hummingbird*" that, as other reviewers have already noticed, is different from the one on page 14; it turns out that Purdy's version is the one that appeared in Acorn's 1969 collection *I've Tasted My Blood*. Future scholars will have fun sorting out the textual problems. It all makes work for the working man (or woman).

Many of the poems in *Whiskey Jack* are about owls, ravens, crows, swallows, and herons. "*Mister Owl*" indicates Acorn's interest in birds:

*To be what you are with no intention
Or concept of being otherwise . . .*

These are self-sufficient, unpretentious Canadian birds, utterly determined to be themselves - rather like Acorn himself.

There are some non-avian poems too, such as the comic "*Sonnet X*" - another erection poem - in which the poet makes love to a foghorn:

*Waking with a heavy-duty thruster
Rude as a rocket nuzzling orbit
From my fork; I heard a soft contralto
Hoot appealing like a love-sick dinosaur
Through fog lingering from the lakeshore.*

We're so used to thinking of Acorn as a raging lefty that it's surprising how conservative he could be on some issues; there are two anti-abortion poems in *Whiskey Jack*. Acorn's politics, like everything else about him, was his own creation entirely. He followed no party line. And a good thing too.

Acorn: Swept Up In Imagery

Whiskey Jack by Milton Acorn

HMS Press, 1986. 48p. \$9.95

UofT Varsity Review by Maggie Helwig

I knew Milton Acorn only at the very end of his life, a few cold months in Toronto before he returned to the Maritimes to die. Just released from the hospital, he wandered aimlessly in bookstores, delivering harangues, sleeping on a friend's floor or at the League of Canadian Poets; broken down, often incoherent, apparently one more Queen Street rubby. Yet, even then, there was something special about him, some quality you could immediately see, if not define.

Now we have been given *Whiskey Jack*, a posthumous collection of 28 late poems, to remind us of what Acorn was, even in disintegration - one of Canada's truly distinctive poets.

Acorn was always fiercely himself - 'Acorn never changed' says Al Purdy in his introduction - so *Whiskey Jack* is, in one limited sense, predictable. We know we will find rhyming poetry in simple, formal constructions; and anti-intellectual bias; a preference for unsophisticated subject matter (he had a great liking for birds, and they are the main subject of more than half the poems).

These sound like limiting factors, perhaps, but when Acorn is at his best you simply do not notice; everything is swept up in the rush of imagery.

He is not always at his best - some poems in *Whiskey Jack*, notably the anti-abortion series, are weak and preachy. But often enough the verse catches fire; as in , for instance, *The Raven Conceit*:

*Like breaking the ripple-barrier of wind
That flicked as flame about the eave:
Or his shadow made more noise than he did.*

Or at *St. Michaels Hospital*:

*Outside Saint Mike's a wildcat's howling
That peculiar humanlike intonation. . .
Somewhere there ought to be a few kind words.*

The title poem speaks of the tiny whiskey jack, a 'little red drumb of a bird.' But reading the last lines, I thought immediately of Acorn, lost in Toronto, filthy and luminous: And you know who he is, not so ambiguous, as the presence of God, a lesser sign.

Whiskey Jack by Milton Acorn

HMS Press, Toronto 1986

Review by Malcolm Burrows *The Varsity* March 26th 1987

"A fire engine in blue jeans" was how someone once described Milton Acorn - abrasive, muscular, strident. The cover of the first of what might well be many posthumous collections of his verse seems to recall this description. Printed in a brash red and blue depicting the fragile figure of whisky jack, the cover points to contrasts in Milton Acorn and his verse.

Whether it is critically correct or not I've always thought of the PEI carpenter-cum-poet as a lyric Marxist. His poetry has a political element which garnered him the title "the people's poet", but he had an intuitive sensitivity to life that could not be contained by polemics.

As the title *Whiskey Jack* suggests this collection is largely made up of poetry about birds - the Robin, the Hummingbird, the Great Blue Heron, the Raven. These poems generally have a precision and clarity of imagery

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Introduction

During those Montreal days, 1956-60, I was working at a mattress factory on St. Germain in Montreal East. Acorn had about three different addresses in the mid-fifties. Every room he occupied was soon knee-deep in crumpled papers and books: you couldn't empty his wastebasket, you had to empty the room itself. He was writing short stories when I first knew him. The two I remember best were "The Winged dingus" and "The Red and Green Pony." I thought them excellent. Milton showed me a letter from Whit Burnett, editor of a prestigious U.S. short story annual, expressing much interest in the Acorn prose.

Several times during that Montreal period, Milton ran out of money. My wife and I invited him to our apartment, where he slept on a spare mattress and ate enormously. I don't think he ever got enough to eat, living in rented rooms and eating at crummy greasy spoons. But he loved junk foods, potato ships and the like.

"The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud," a four-volume set, was lying around in our apartment. It was a book club premium. Milton went through that set from cover to cover on one of his visits; then he confounded me with his knowledge of Freudian concepts. I had to read frantically to get some idea of what he was talking about. And just try to digest Freud after working a full day at a factory.

When Milton decided to sell his carpenter tools to help finance being a full-time writer, I was appalled. "Why, Milt," I said, "even a great writer like me can't make a living at it." Milton eyed me speculatively. "Maybe you should buy the tools." Much later, after Milton and his wife, Gwen MacEwen, broke up, he came to visit me for consolation at Roblin Lake. He helped me install a television aerial. We held it over our heads at arms length, while at the same time straddling the gable roof of a small shed, one foot on either side of the peak. And that aerial was heavy. It butted at one end of the roof, towards which we walked slowly, lifting this considerable weight from horizontal to vertical.

At the moment of greatest strain Milton said, "Oh Al, I love her, I love her," and started to drop the aerial, which I couldn't hold up alone. "For God sake, Milt, hold onto that fuckin' aerial, or you'll kill us both. Please Milt, love her after we're both safe from being crushed to death." And Milton gave the matter his attention.

In Montreal when I first met Milton Acorn (Layton had told him I could supply some hints on play writing), I felt ineffably superior. ("Ineffable" in this case meaning from two different worlds.) Acorn was rough-hewn, not to say crude, he was uneducated in any advanced academic sense (as I was myself); and he wrote what I thought was rather simple-minded rhyming verse, the kind I had just broken myself of writing--the rhyming kind, I mean.

...

Acorn was also a Communist with strong humanistic beliefs, and this belief gave his poems a strength and certainty which my own did not possess. Not that his work had any extraordinary excellence at that time: it didn't. But there was something, a directness, naivete if you like, a warmth especially. And I learned from it, as I did from Layton as well. Whereas I doubt if Acorn ever learned from it, as I did from Layton as well. Whereas I doubt if Acorn ever learned anything from me, not about writing either plays or poems; if he had, it might have been harmful to the sort of instinctual ability of the man. Looking back, I was plastic man; in some ways, Acorn has never changed.

What all this amounted to was: he forgave me for not being a Communist, and perhaps

admired something in me that I couldn't discern myself: and I forgave him for being crude versus my own undoubted sophistication, and learned from him without knowing I was doing so. Because it took several years before this mental and physical (working in a Mtl. Factory) turmoil evidenced itself in what I was writing.

...

The job became unbearable to me all at once, as if there was a fever in my mind to quit that factory. I did, and returned to the house my wife and I had half-built at Roblin Lake earlier, leaving her working at a 9 to 5 job as a secretary. Acorn came with me. Just before that Montreal departure I had applied for a small grant from the Canada Council, with Frank Scott and Layton supplying supporting letters. But that application was irrelevant to my quitting the job: something irrational had stirred in my brain. It said: stop wasting your life conventionally, waste it unconventionally. It said: be yourself. And I said: who are you to tell me what to do with my life? (You hafta treat these inner voice knowitalls as if you have some rights too.) But I went.

The house at Roblin Lake still lacked most of the amenities - even the necessities- when Acorn and I arrived. It was late February, cold, cold winter. A wood stove created a small warm spot in the near-freezing living room. Water came from the frozen lake, chopping a funnel-shaped hole in three-foot-thick ice, and scooping it out with a dipper. The lighting was still coal oil lamp; it's a wonder we didn't go blind.

A brother-in-law of mine who worked at the C.P.R. enabled me to secure a couple of boxcar loads of scrap lumber from the railway. I borrowed an old truck, then Acorn and I hauled wood to the lake. We sawed some of it to woodstove-size with a handsaw, lacking anything better; and just managed to cut enough to supply that ravenous stove and avoid freezing. But much of the wood was blessedly Douglas fir and gave a good heat.

Acorn and I worked at the house, between and during arguments about almost everything. All of Milton's opinions were red-hot gospel in the cold house; not merely gospel, but communist holy writ direct from the mouth of Jesus-Karl Marx. I really didn't know a damn thing about Communism, but I was forced to learn very quickly. I couldn't let such dogmatism go unchallenged, and scraped the bottom of my brain desperately for arguments to refute Acorn.

Outside the frozen lake cracked from shore to shore with a sound like God's artillery; inside was nearly as noisy. The moment either Acorn or I said anything, the other was bound to disagree. And to save my soul and mortal spirit, I had to defend the most ridiculous theories and indefensible positions. All that saved me was that Acorn was little slower in his mental processes than I, so that I was sometimes able to see where his skeins of thought were leading and lay semantic traps for him, head him off at the pass. But very often he cornered me with some obscure fact or bit of astute logic which I had entirely neglected. And the arguments continued, sometimes far into the night. The wild grape wine I had brewed the previous year declined somewhat in quantity.

In the five years between 1955 and 1960 a chapbook of mine had been published by Fiddlehead Press in New Brunswick, and two more by Ryerson Press in Toronto. Lorne Pierce, the editor at Ryerson, had approached me with an invitation for the first chapbook. Trading on this slight acquaintance, therefore, I sent him a small manuscript by Milton Acorn. It was untitled at the time, but later called "The Brain's the Target."

I explained about Acorn in a covering letter to Pierce, describing my friend as a Maritimer and ex-carpenter from Prince Edward Island. I said Acorn was a very good poet, although his social and political views were somewhat at variance with my own. To my stunned amazement, the Ryerson editor thought I was Milton Acorn. He refused to believe my denials, even when I offered to send him a photograph of Acorn, whose physiognomy was as much different from mine as his politics and poems. Acorn was, to his way of thinking, a

pseudonym of Purdy whereby I would flood the eager Canadian market with Purdy poems. Lorne Pierce was supposed to be knowledgeable about literature, but he couldn't distinguish Milton Acorn from Al Purdy.

But the worst blow of all was the gradual realization that Acorn had become a better poet than me. Thankfully this understanding arrived slowly, with time enough for me to get my bruised ego ready for it. Even when Ryerson finally decided Purdy wasn't Acorn, and published Milton's book, I managed to evade such hurtful awareness. But somewhere in my mind I must have known, because my own stuff was beginning to change again. I had reached a kind of plateau with the two Ryerson books, but had needed some violent mental blow to shake me out of complacency and into a fumbling progress outward, without being fully conscious that I was moving at all. But it was only when "Poems For All the Annettes" appeared with contact Press years later, that I began to feel that tremulous excitement in my head which signaled reaching unknown continents. But sometimes Acorn had reached land ahead of me.

Over the next few years Acorn's life and my own moved together and then apart: I was at Toronto City Hall (the old one) when Milton married Gwendolyn MacEwen in the early 60's. In Montreal we published a little magazine, *Moment*, with a mimeograph machine which I suspect Acorn had purloined without permission from the Communist Party of Canada. In 1969 I edited his *Selected Poems*, "I've Tasted My Blood", for Ryerson Press. And much later, in 1982-83, I made another selection of Acorn's poems for McClelland & Stewart, as part of a series of books of which Dennis Lee was the overall editor.

Much time has passed since I last read Acorn's poems; maybe a few waves lapped the shores of eternity, if we knew what the galactic engineers were doing with our tidal power. Anyway: I've read Acorn again, and think to hell with engineers.

The first thing you look for in a writer, knowingly or not, is images, metaphors, colourful birds that fly around in your brain, and maybe produce progeny images if you're a writer. Exuberance and warmth:

Since I'm island-born home's as precise
As if a mumbly old carpenter,
Shoulder-straps crossed wrong,
Laid it out,
Refigured to the last three-eighths of a shingle.

And maybe you have to know that old-time carpenters used to do that: "shoulder-straps crossed wrong" on overalls, they measured small openings and distances with the tapered end of a wooden shingle. And Milt throws the images at you fast, as in "Hummingbird":

One day in a lifetime
I saw one with wings
A pipesmoke blur
Shaped like half a kiss
And its raspberry-stone
Heart winked fast in
A thumbnail of breast.

And the Acorn hummingbird is hovering under your eyelids. Me, I'd have said "raspberry-seed heart" and probably been wrong. I don't see how anyone can resist the last two verses of "Sky's Poem for Christmas":

Surely at least once when a new star burst thru heaven
Three old men forsook the stern fantasies
Of mummy-clothes they'd wrapped around the world,
And surely they found at least one babe
Who held great bear time by its short tail...
For birth by birth the many-coloured creatures of Earth
Break ranks and dance apart calling their names and numbers
To reassemble with shoutings and elbow-digs
In formations first seen by the mindseye of a child.

Christmas I became that ho-ho-ho of a saint
To wind on a piebald disbelieving burro
Along the wisemen's trail thru a desert of grownup people
Like cactus with its growth stalled in tormented poses:
Till housed and run around by squirrels I found the boy Sky
With eyes hazel windows into outre dimensions
Now looking out on wonder, now looking in
At wonder...I came not with gifts but
For a present of the universe made strange, tumbling
With odd fuzzy animals, blue of high heaven
Siphoned down to tank up my brain,
For meteors he caught and sent sizzling past my ears:
And for myself made quaint, totemic
Like a think oak come wobbling, walking
Grotesquely on its roots over patches of dark and sunlight.

But the Acorn-tree always walked on its roots, and always into sunlight. But not grotesquely. It lifts the heart.

Al Purdy

The Raven Conceit

Down over the lip of the verandah
Into my sights swept the raven. Whup!
His shadow fell from the roof to the lawn.
So quiet his spell I heard that patch flop.

As always reasonable explanation
Haunts the untoward phenomenon
Which is the constant rule for miracles;
Like breaking the ripple-barrier of wind
That flicked as flame about the eave:
Or his shadow made more noise than he did.

I do maintain it's likely, to repeat,
For the very green grass to feel a twinge
If suddenly brushed by coolth and such
Conceit as is dealt by ravens, so flinch.

That raven wore a tight toque on his head
Quite black of course, plus a body-stocking
Blithe russet brown, for those raven-pelts
Have touches of tinges that loose gawking

Without a raven's gaze will not descry
So that you are strange to news of yourself...
That shadows are not black but coloured.
I saw him as oneself, as Christ himself.

The Redheaded Woodpecker

There was a fiddler, now a ghost
Who put a woodpecker on a post -
One of the redheaded species -
And used him for a metronome;
Attaining such rhythmic perfection
That an order was made out to hang him
So much does authority fear good fiddlers.

Just as much as force and rhythm
Another of his powers is stillness.
There on top of the skymost clutch
Of needles on a spruce, he sits
With beaked head held back to deliver
According to his anatomic plan
An accurate to parts-in-a-million
Regular series of affirmations
Of death to a grub in wood or predator.
Thus he sits as truth, a carven emblem
To mark a Micmac camping ground
To warn the unruly of his nature.

The beat sounds like the tap of a fingernail
On layered hollow wood of a fiddle
Although the log he hammers on
Is hardly that precise an instrument
As is the fiddle, or violin.

The Great Blue Heron

The great blue heron, common on the Island
Is a refugee from dirty water,
Not liking pollutants in the cold soup
She fishes for nourishment and flavour.

Look at the way she stands, as jokers say
With just one foot at a time in the water,
Counting herself a delicate creature
Subject to chills, although I've not seen her
Shift her stance from one leg to another
To disturb perfection in her figure
Surreally drawn, as if with a few strokes.

The chatter and movement of other bird
Sorts are not for her. Still as space she looks
Between her toes for fish, and when she moves
The lightning is more sudden than the stroke
She makes, I guess. Or if dissatisfied
With the place she's taken she takes up
One limb by ineffable precision
So that not a ripple is much altered
Then puts it down, commences progression
With attention to each carefully poised step.

Hummingbird

There is a spirit works its life in all
Hummingbirds as in the great Blue Whale.
How big is big in relation to all
The Magellanic Clouds, small galaxies?
Man has hands which give him mastery
But hands are the attributes of servants
As the housekeeper holds the keys of the house
And must be mistress or hop like a flea.

Why did you betray that spirit my friend
Who pointed out two hummingbirds to me
In the valley of blossoms and long songs -
Two eyebright gems, manifestations of spirit -
When you wrote to one I know for a good lad
That he should use his nose to stir the shit
Of Boring and Deafy, fakes and gauleiters?
Whose persecutionist must be endured
In ignorance by small-brained hummingbirds?

One day in the first half of a lifetime
I saw one with wings a pipesmoke blur
Shaped like half a kiss, and its raspberry
Stone heart beat fast in a thumbnail chest.
In a blink he was around a briar, out of sight.
He's dead now, being a shortlived creature
Except in my sweatdrops, teardrops of vision.
I have revised this poem and apologize
For standing off from him, to pose as wise.

Notions In A Letter From Outback

After a dismal winter the wild geese
Are passing overhead at night in sheets
Not venturing to land in settled places
Knowing there are some long and thin faces,
Even a certain amount of malnutrition
Down here above our determined livers.
Who has ever bagged a Canada Wild Goose
Outside the pages of the picturezines?
The Yanks may do it but I'm sure they cheat.
Nevertheless it's good precaution
For sake of the human beings that means
Who might get desperate and exchange shots.

Work has recommenced on a concrete bunker
Among the sand dunes of the North Shore,
Rumoured to be an ultra-modern torture chamber
Where the surf may drown out the screams
Or else an illegal abortion centre
Where the screams are strangled by conditions;
Yet each one thinks it best to just dither
Disbelieved fears. It doesn't happen here
I know but where is here? Planet Earth
With everything a fraction of a second off there!
The world has survived even my own wild birth
Though many zany antics followed it.
Now we're told we ought to print an obit
For each human who achieved erection
Standing upright on two pretty feet;
Celebrate death as a succor from dearth.

The dudes are absolutely raping the fields
That my great-great-many times great grandfather
Resolutely nursed into handsome yields,
Piling mussel-mud with shovel, sweat and bother
On top of the snow between freezes and thaws.
They seem to think the clay was always there -
Not the creation of our ancestors;
And when it's gone rightly gone to profit.
Why, back on Arron, God quietly nodded
To see his sturdy monks grind up the rocks
Like grain in a quern to make good bread;
Eventually to grow wheat and potatoes.
I've got a vision of great soil-combines
Moving over ancient Earth's waste places
To make a space for blossoming rose-bushes,

Plus other lovelies, useful and nutritious.
But most people listen just for the mirth
And will not pick the olives of the mind.
But what's the use? They aren't ours anyhow.
Who knows the rows that we lads worked with hoes?

In the heat last summer there were crows
Didn't like the stuff some men had planted;
Plucked up every shoot, laid them in rows.
"That's not good. Plant something else," they hinted.
Enraged plantermen pursued them with guns,
Cursing them for downright vandalism,
But they flew away from their signallers
With their cawing wild and musical.
So it continued - this mortal schism
Between us and nature's other creatures
Not tolerant of danger to their chicks,
Thinking their rights as good as our own.
The rain dissolves all but granite and fieldstone
It stings my face. It
Is not as good as once
But most of the water still has a good taste
As we hold out like a gang of dunces
Like mites still holding on to wilting bunches.
What will we do next when this is all done?

I heard a voice that whispered "Whist-a-wee!"
The call of a bird I hear of the same name,
So sudden and alive that I started
Thinking it meant to get my attention -
Maybe another cry of the whippoorwill
I've also heard at times but seldom seen,
Oh God speak now for I'm about to spill!

Centimeters seem a miserable
Measurement for snow.
How about Kilotons?
Or tonne hectares?
Such a mighty swath of it descended
In a fortnight that's not long past
That in that bright chilly effluence
The people seemed like motes in their own troubled dreams.
Psychological and psychic manifestations
Roared and spun in those snorting storms.
Banners of reality flapped, frayed and were torn
Until we fancied ourselves heroes and plotters -
Prophets and unbelievers according to some.

In the cellars of our evident beings
All that fantasy acquired real structure.
People were snowed in, financially blockaded.
There was hunger and the threat of hunger;
Though no cases of cannibalism
Are reported yet, what will the thaw reveal?

At Saint Michael's Hospital

Outside Saint Mike's a wildcat's howling
That peculiar humanlike intonation.
Inside a woman calls for her mother
Though she's been twenty years an orphan.

The rich want everything, including the wee cups
In which we are served our morning pills
They want returned for re-use.
Around the walls the desperate traffic spills.

Jesus Christ, wood-carven on the wall
With the tight lips of a desperate criminal
Desires that we all be free and equal
Or at least get a nod before nightfall.

Why was he born? For what offence
Was he hung up for all to observe?
The wildcat's howling fades in the distance.
Somewhere there ought to be a few kind words.

The Bourgeoisie

The Bourgeoisie won't give the time of day.
One by one the clocks are coming down
From bank-fronts, store windows, wall of restaurants
For that everything you get must be paid for
Including a report on the weather
Is the bourgeoisie's invariable rule.

The bourgeoisie won't give a drink of water,
Even fountains in the public squares
Unless polluted. For this reason water is free
If supplied by an obliging slave
In restaurants where it's given reluctantly
And food is not delivered to the starving.
They even begrudge birth to babies
Treatment to the sick, in which case there's some trick,
Some special case in which you'll have to pay
Like for medicine to a diabetic
Because it's a product of slaughter houses
And they might as well give free sausages.

Garbage

Outside among the garbage bags
Of a Winnipeg abortion clinic
The corpse of a new-born baby was found
Only hours after it was closed down.

Of course no one official suggested
What everyone was thinking;
That the purpose of the clinic was to kill babies.
The difference in time less than a minute
Between an abortion and a foul murder;
And there might have been confusion
As the police came in the door,
The knife descended to cut the cord
Too short for the slip to be mended
And after all who can tell the difference
Between an aborted or murdered newborn?

A Mass for the Unborn New Dead

There'll be a mass for the unborn new dead
In the Basilica above the water,
Grey, green, blue, icy or a swirl with snow as it is
In Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island,
This Wednesday and many Wednesdays to come;
For the rich think they've no more use for us
And our cunning hands once we've built civilization
And want us off - gold watches clutched in lead.

Valerie will be there on my right hand, Michael on my left.

The Hose will be on display the entire day
Further action will be decided on
If not immediately, eventually.
The doctrine of limbo has been eliminated
As not much use in a situation like this.
Faith remains faith if only faith in life.
We will not substitute a faith in death
At the mass for the unborn newly dead.

To Draw A Robin

The robin's a caricature
To unbelievable degrees
Of everything the Dean of Arts
At Port University
Regards with a dreadful hate
To mollify his hateful dread.
To draw a robin is the truthman's test.

This bonny gallant gentleman
Wards his chicks and his half-acre
By expression to a raider
Not so much ferocity as courage,
Which would indicate a like conscience
To all the bad beasts and worse men.

So much is vigilance expressed
With swank just so and not too much
By beak and posture of chest and its colour,
One can see absolute rejection
Of fear and all manner of treason;
Misrepresentation, dissimulation;
Opinion sold on a cash basis,
Monetary retaliation for criticism;
Mean persecution of who's honest:
Everything the Dean of Arts
At Pork University likes best.

Nest With an Eagle

An eagle's nest with grim-eyed bird brooding
In a clearing untidy with beaver littler
Which for all is common-looking stuff
When the dam is nowhere in sight,
Lodges not so easy to spot - just mounds
Probably weed-grown in some near place -
Is so common to the brooding bird
The spell of commonness takes over the mind ...

Quickly, looking out of the quotidian
Train on its ordinary route by;
So much that the gasp "Nest with an eagle!"
Is delayed until the coach has gone past
That oddly peeled thirty-foot stump...
As if a difficulty for egg-thieves
Had been prepared by common men-at-work:
On railroad property? I'd never known the C.P.R.
To be attentive to aesthetics raw
Although it's true that Maritimers are ...

And the crews around here are Maritime.
Under that uncommonly unfluffy grey
Upper fundament, the bird has no look
Of self-appreciation; is grimly
Intense in waiting without patient thought
As any hen in any common dirt plot.

The Ballad of Den-Mother Raven

Of all manifestations of life
The birds are the most visible.
The ravens are most risible
Although at first not amusing but grim;
The comedy of human affairs
Enacted in the decks of wind by them.

Usually considered a scavenger
The raven will descend to that loot
Out of the sky if there's no better food;
But looks more likely as a carnivore
Who knows attacking fliers in the air
Where the smaller bird has the advantage
And the hawk must strike by surprise,
Is a mug's game, prefers his squab-and-eggs.

Once in a pre-dawn light I excited
From the swinging screen door of a cottage,
Easing it shut so that my light leman
Would not awake cursing at a fell bang.
A flock of ravens, five, had spent the night
Or a later part of it anyways
On a lawn, which is the safest place
When the gunlaws of Prince Edward Island
Forbid the firing of any projectile
Weapon within five hundred yards of a dwelling -
Which rule covers most of the landscape -
But shooting from a doorstep is forbidden
As beyond all stretchable reason
As to law-observance. If you told me
That those dark heads can't read, I'd say perhaps not.
Then as the sun was so to speak booted
Like a soccer ball up from behind
A small spruce-ragged offshore island
To make wells of gory light and shadows,
Like a dark rustle-out of fallen leaves
In autumn, a later season than this,
That little pack of five flapped not smoothly aloft.

The leader whom I will call den-mother
Pointed her beak and arrowed like a draft
Toward the unawakened bank of swallows
On the lapping sea-cove by which we all lived.

Previously I'd noted only lesser corvines

Nest-robbing there. I mean that's a joke!
A flock of crows heisting a bank of swallows
Is funnier than kids' tickling bout
Or cowboys and Indians. One crow
Will hobble-fly through those swirling droves,
Till he gets onto the porch of a cave,
So proud he's made it that he'll stop and pose
As deserving lots of pride and glory;
But his rearguard has been cut off at the pass:
Another swallow out of the throes
Of mad cheeping action, drives him off again.
The ravens are more like hip businessmen.
But what was the purpose of this dour action
With guardian swallows still in their dens?

Did they mean to rend adults of vitamins?
Den-mother glided, four more after her
Straight to the swallow-bank beside the water
To turn and give the L a perpendicular
Stroke at the furthest end.
As she flew parallel to the dens
The other four came bunching after her
Up to the end of the line of apartments.

I heard den-mother raven make a scream
So dreadful that all my blood other than Indian
Chilled, jelled, a clinking flux of ice-cubes.
Swallows jerked from dreams to a nightmare;
Active in it, tore out of their holes
Like bees in the buzzing of their heads,
Tumbling hazy in sleepflight;
But gallant still and mad enough to fight
As if the artificial wings of a skydiver
Wouldn't work right, though I saw none hit the ground.
Off flew the pursued ravens followed by their
Pursuing prey, flightlines like tangled balls of string!
Not one beak ever plucked a black feather.

What was the purpose of this devil's game?
It was soon evident. Two more ravens
Appeared from the trap-door of hell I guess,
With easy speed toward the bank of swallows.
Those poor nestlings! Not one guardian left!
I was awed, but then I started to laugh
And told it with amusement to my girlfriend.
Also I should mention those poor crows
Who had no peace handy there from then on,

For those swallows could no more tell a crow
From a raven than some human beings can.
From five hundred yards those mites would fly at one.

The Robin's Dawn Song

If you haven't heard the robin's dawn song
You're a poorer man than you ought to be.
Up early once, by a small factory
Alongside which an elm tree was growing
Vibrantly in one of its early springs
With about two hundred heart-shaped leaves
Green as if it had just invented them;
I heard and saw a robin in the tree
Emit I'll swear in one protracted chord
With not a one I could label discord,
A note for every new leaf on that tree,
As if each leaf issued another leaf
Of spiritual stuff, metallic as well;
Brilliantly shone, etched with one perfect word.

The Intellectual's Nemesis

Over the lake in the Quetico
As green as Coleridge's emerald
I saw a raven flying, looking up
When the eggs and nestlings he wanted
Were down below in little wicker cups.

Above him flying in a close bunch
Were seven starlings on raven patrol,
Intending to deprive him of his lunch
By making him continually look up.

Pitiful is a raven on a bad day:
For starlings know he has a blind spot
Under his tail as I've got piles too;
A situation enemy of thought,
Making a whole school of assets useless.

The Whiskey Jack

An involvement in the world as its own
That characterizes crows, jays
And the present in its presence raven
Also is the mood of the whiskey jack;
Little red crumb of a bird
With a crest and legs thinner than matches ...
He's there before you know he is
To the campfire in a cedar glade
Where the forest is dark as its sighs
With his moves quick as fingers
Snapping, certain as a seamstress' hand
With you not the target of its eyes,
Though any nutritious fragment
You might drop by accident or chummy purpose is ...
And yet the whiskey jack is company:
However small the heart a fine lesson.

2.

Why are you so sure that you're loved
Whiskey jack with little beak and eyes
Quick as jumps in movie frames?
My partner nudges me, "Look he's here!"
And you know who he is, not so ambiguous
As the presence of God, a lesser sign.

The Nostril Mite

The nostril mite that inhabits the nose
One to a person, but not one to all
Was an exceedingly rare animal
About a fiftieth of an inch long
Until we, his hosts vividly increased.

Contemporaneously the whales decreased
To shadow the abyss of extinction;
The billions of the passenger pigeon
Fell to almost nothing, then none.
The clever coyote did better than survive
While the wee humble nostril mite flourished
Through increase of cleverness, not wisdom;
That germinal quality not her own.

Now that our curiosity has unveiled her
She might be called an endangered species
If these excesses of hygiene go on;
As for example the neutron, clean bomb.

Therefore I tell you, love one another
Cleanly, not making cleanliness madness
So that her gentle tribe of consomals
Not parasites - doing no harm - living on snots I guess
Whose extinction would extinguish us
For all we know, and conversely, flourishes.

The War of The Sparrows

A flock of song sparrows came to nest
In and about our clump of cottages
Northwest of the burrows of the swallows
In the bank beside the little bay
Above which they and in which we played
And fishermen worked as in fact did the swallows.

Then all was music, loop and bustle
Until a phalanx of english sparrows
Nested in a semi-circle about
Us to offend people with their ugliness
Of voice and coloration, though we're glad enough in
Winter.
Of their perky and incessant behaviour.

Not only human human beings know strategy!
This was a siege, and soon the fights began
Between the singers and the crude chirpers
Who outnumbered the friendlies three to two
I guess since I established two to one.
We all seemed doomed to hear the crude squawks
All summer of that grey-backed limey flock.

But the issue turned out to be a surprise.
The songsparrows turned out to be better organized.
Londoners would often fight with each other
(as birds fight, mainly bluff and dare)
Let one of them set himself in the dust alone
The six of the pretty in echelon
Complete with tail-end charley would shoot at him
As direct as an arrow from a bow
With all beaks set to deal a piercing blow
Though we never saw it come quite to that...
Lightning flashes of moves with never a gash!

One of the mornings in the second week
Of the battle which had been raging around us
Until we feared there'd be some casualties
Between one row of moaning pinetrees
And willows with leaves in constant movement,
I called my girl to look up at the peak
Of a shack where a songsparrow was sitting.
"Isn't that english sparrow territory?"

"Indeed it was!" she said, "And that means we've won!"

We danced for a glorious triumph
While sober neighbors sat and sipped their rum;
And many eggs rotted, near at hand, abandoned.

Wild Strawberries

We came upon strawberries in the cemetery;
Little wild strawberries of the best kind
To be taken one at a time for the tongue
To crush the whole of it at one time on
Not the teeth but the tongue. We picked,
Myself and three others, those wild strawberries
In the cemetery of the little white old church
By the waters, with the names of ancestors
Or at least relatives, on the tombstones;
One with a little lamb and boy on it
And one which gave an age of ninety-nine;
Put them delicately past reddened lips
One by one to crush each with our tongues.
How sweet were the strawberries in the cemetery!

The Crows of Perth County

A flock of a hundred or more crows
In echelons of three or four
Were flying obvious search-patterns
Over a square mile of wet, recently ploughed
Country in Perth County, Ontario;
In spring so cold you might still call it winter.

There was no missing the fact of
Their intent to find what was to be found
For their provision. Without lamenting
The shortage of life's commodities,
They looked for food with such sure diligence
That discovery was a certainty;
For which they would pay neither taxes or rent.

Portrait of Elizabeth I

The woman called the best man in Europe
Sits for her painting, insisting on sun
Right in her face. "Shadows are unflattering"
So we see not much but an enchanting smile.
Sunlight obscured her features in its mist;
Perhaps what in fact she privately wished.

Even though a sparrow falls her people won't
Get overmuch wasted. She's seen to welfare
And had it administered by the parish
Thus solving the problem of masterless men
Which had bedeviled stern male ancestors,
Set her skirts and sails en route to empire.

She sits in rays, sundazzled little flirt
Whose maidenhead has hardened - too long virgin -
Called in her presence the prettiest woman,
At appropriate distances the best man:
Approachable by no doubtful surgeon:
Not to risk an empire for fun in bed.

Mister Owl

A little perfect owl, size of a sparrow
But an owl by manner of intention
I discerned in a flash on a wee branch
As a seat in a vehicle bore me by.
It had no doubts about being an owl
I repeat, quite certain and casual.

To be what you are with no intention
Or concept of being otherwise,
With nly the dimmest thoughts about that
Is something of which I won't philosophize;
There being too much made about that stuff:
So much hyperbole about small truth:
Lies shielded by poor refugees from bluff.

**October Twenty-first
Nineteen-eighty-one**

It's autumn now. Thats for a surety.
The leaves are dry and tap by in windrows
Except for those who mime exultancy;
Let go their branches not to trickle low
But up in bird-like flocks. A jagged raven
Heaves to with wings at a flap like a crow's
To let them pass possessing downward heaven
As things are and should be, says Alex Pope.

Some blue rock doves are racing in the sky
In pairs and threes, single and then small flocks.
Let jealous petit-bourgeois gloom-bards vie
In the echoes, dying falls, and slop-knocks.
A corby wheels to race a speedy dove
For the fun of it, wings at clip and shove.

Tom Tac's Running Sonnet

Like I'm a tongue in the mouth of the wind;
In my face or at my back it moves me,
A mouse in its pocket, or a weasel
According to what present song it sings,
Low and limpid, high or hollowly.
It's seven minutes now; I'm still grinning
Since no breath opposes in all this whirlwind.

Let this my hide be brown sun gold. Let this
My body make a melody in muscle,
Elevated quick when love crooks her thumb
To the exit that's an entrance to sky kingdoms.
As long as any snuff of wind can tone a whistle
To thrilled ears, I'm a note in that mad chant.

What Right Has a Gull

"What right has a gull
To cry so pretty a whine
Of lust in this light?" MacDougal
Asked and got an appreciative chuckle
But no backslap, since his schooner moved
And he was the untouchable skipper.
There was a suddenly sunburst cloud-hole
And something was fluttering in the beam
White like a newspaper dropped from a plane -
The first such thing the captain'd ever seen.
Swift as a thought he called the rag that name,
Which was checked and accounted possible.
"How otherwise would such an article
Get to such a height? All men should trust their dreams."

The Canadian Moon

I say that the moon is still in the sky,
Though not appropriate to current thought
That the truth is no better than a lie,
A man's chosen land not worth much or a lot
If it doesn't register on the scales
As high in weight, population, or some
Category approved now in gales
Of words to or from a damned negation.

She going up. The last prick from a tall fir
Puts her to the luminescence of a ride,
As right and sensible as a cat's purr;
There if you look, there if you turn aside
As I will now to praise best things and least,
To sign my marks as human, of no beast.

The Blackbird

For Jim

I was going to say it. It was silly.
Shove orthodox sentimentality
To scrutinize the blackbird flying straight
Always as if along a tight drawn cord
From spot to spot, by a map in its head,
To what acre has no guarding chap;
So's nestlings and its mate might well be fed
Outside of ideological textbooks.

There are all manners and means of doing
Things, my friend, not excluding love.
The only aim of love, like life, is love itself;
Of which no facsimile is good enough.
The main aim of the blackbirds's flight is food
To poop on Yankee theories. Yea but rude!

The Unlighted Hour

In this unlighted hour before the dawn
Kindles its campfire at the horizon,
Instruments of torture and abortion
Ring and glitter as laid out, sterilized or not,
Beside a garbage can for pity and the future.

If that sun which ought to rise does seem swollen
Would't it be fair for it to explode
As other stars have been known to erupt...
Accidents not likely to happen ours
According to star-gazers, guessing from afar?

Analyse for us the content of hope'
For a land engaged in wasting its young...
Of a world that's quite unfree of torture
Whose tide has not yet splashed in hissing here.

Sonnet X

Waking with a heavy-duty thruster
Rude as a rocket nuzzling orbit
From my fork; I heard a soft contralto,
Hoots appealing like a love-sick dinosaur
Through fog fingering from the lakeshore.
All majestically sceptred nude I rose
With that ruby ramming prow undaunted
Aloft, hardly swaying, praising day but
Regretting my uncomforted poor bed,
Graced by no fair arousable body,
While the horn continued its moot sound
To tell the truth that somebody loved me;
Sure as sunspots peered from that pale shocked face.