



Early
Uncollected
and
Unpublished
work

1961-1967

I PASTORALE

All the years I remembered those fields,
The colour of washed grapes,
And the webby well
Whose water would make frogs of princes
(And that is the point.
The myths, like the living people,
Wear disguise of the plausible,
But that is the point—
To become amphibian,
Live in diverse levels, all innocent.)
There I played at modesty
Not with fig leaves
But with leaves of the grape,
The assertive, acid, green grape.
Velvet dust settled upon my hair.
All the years I have been angry
Remembering so much wasted on innocence.
And yet they will never break the silver fences
For firewood, for summer firewood.

2 A MORAL TALE

O once I found a wounded lark,
with wings too weak to fly.
I nursed him through the winter's dark,
then gave him back the sky.

I sent him forth on shining air,
his sweet, swift self to be.
He climbed the sky like a crystal stair—
but came straight back to me.

I have no bread to give him more;
his stillness makes me rage.
But still he croons outside my door,
and begs me for a cage.

3 BALLAD OF A CAREFULLY BOLSTERED ILLUSION

Oh, love can trick and love can lie
And kill the angel in the eye,
Seduce the virgin in the dell
And find a bed turned down in hell
And drink the nectar of the blood
And find the rhyme for clotted mud.
Then, knowing love can shrink to this,
How brave are we who dare to kiss!

4 SCHOOL CHILDREN IN SPRING

They sparkle up to amber air,
Their ice cream dresses and taffy hair,
Their hopscotch, skipping rope, run sheep run,
Their cheeks like apricots in the sun.
And here comes the boy from all the cartoons,
With pie-round face and glasses like moons.

They gulp the spring like a soda, I think,
But brew something stronger for me to drink.
What luxury, in this vintage year,
To taste these bubbles in May-bright beer!

5 ECHO

When sun stains grass
with long trees' shadows,
I go out
and fill my lungs with air
to send my call
along the space of street
to her, bike-riding,
back straight, Infanta of motion,
possessing the sectors of sunlight,
easy, alert joy
in her new skill—
“Katharine”
“Co - ming”
bell and bell-echo on the air.

6 AFTER RAIN

The greyness has drained at last.
Under the trees, the air gleams
Like a sky-green glass.
Like a fountain, opaque with bloom,
The pear tree stands,
Lifting its white plume;
And in this blossoming it seems
My heart puts forth green hands—
Not to hold you, never to hold you fast—
Only to touch you gently as you pass.

7 ON THE BRIDGES

See them on all the bridges—the people waiting to fall, the
barbed-wire people.
See them at clangorous corners, in bathrooms, on beaches.
See them driving Ferraris or toying with razors,
Avoiding mirrors or staring expectantly into them,
The leapless, the unresolved, on all the bridges.

8 BIRDSONG

What is the unthinking nature of birds—
Swift knife-thrown flight, all business,
Song without the applause of consciousness,
This is the claim we feel most bitterly denied.
In dreams we own air.
Regal as migrant swans, we sail obedient winds.
But man is a brittle perpendicular of bone
Supporting a globe too heavy, too valued for flight,
For that sweet uncomplexity—
And song is a long tormenting tension in his throat
And a heaviness of arms.

9 HAIKU

April plucks my sleeve,
offering fat fistfuls of
red japonica.

10 I LIFT TO THE NOTES

I lift to the notes
Of a far flute,
A high white
In the dark of many voices.

I stood in a servant's posture,
And my hands were like
Five-pointed stars,
And my body was a shaft of light.
For this, to be quenched in darkness?

I shall cry out,
Over the crowd,
Over the roar of tides and years.
Surely your eyes will find me
And the ravening darkness
Shall not have me.

II POETRY

Come walk with me:
I've laid this path
with mines
set to go off
at the first footfall
of perception.

Firebombs are in the mind
but so is love,
its soft flowering explosion,
scattering violent seed
sweet, sweet.

Such violence is
my work's intent.
Come walk with me.

Or if you fear
bring winter,
lay a crust of snow
to guard your senses'
frail autonomy

Armour yourself with ice;
no lesser shield will do.
I've tried your customed mail
of linked complacencies,
and know.

I practice
love and war
and you will not heed
your chill white smile,
your flag of truce.

But come,
The view is worth the danger.

12 CHOICE

I have not watched the seasons by
this year,
Not marked the months,
Only I know it is late,
this morning,
Late for the first injection
of light
To be spreading under the sky's skin,
And I am old, stone-old,
to hear
This mounded earth muttering
unwelcome waking,
And the thick spider-speech
of fruit trees
Clotting the close horizon;
And I wait for a hand
to stifle,
As one would stifle a yawn,
The faint exhalation of the city's
night-time neon.

Then to turn away,
Not to send out breath, stretched eyes,
and all senses,
Nor wait for the first bird
to tongue the air,
Not to be the clear scream and wingbeat
of sun
Over everything piled and particularized
with frost,
Not bear this chill integrity
into the day...
But to turn, fleshy and small,
exact,

To the full noon's spectrum
And thousand alternatives
demanding choice,
Demanding cultivation, and the stone years
set behind
Like winter before the miracle
of owning hands
And a mouth shaped for the colloquial,
And now take on these vivid,
numbered years
And build a world within
a world, human.

13 DIVISION

When our mouths have slid apart
from the last blurred kiss
and landed, quenched, in pillows,
he closes on a private agony
and sends his last thick thought from me.
O even lulled in billows
of warm-wave loving, I know this:
Flesh has not healed his scissored heart.

The spinning female thing that lives in me
and all night weaves a blunt, blind skin
over the day's ruptures and incisions,
needing only the grace of his assent,
tacit in flesh's sacrament,
lives not in him.
The total of his day's divisions,
a soft ripping, widens stealthily.

Then shall I mourn the whole
and silken sphere of me, a mate to this
bloodied rag and lace
of a heart that took my hand
in hot despair of love like a command,
and laid it on his wounded place?
Ah, I can only kiss
the sound, sweet body, and regret the soul.

14 THE SQUATTER

Goat-bearded clean old man
lives on the point
where the rocks are celled, windowed
skulls;
lives in a confiscated Japshack.

The speedboat people will tell you:
the place has a forty-degree lean,
only the vines hold it up,
never known paint since the year one.

Older islanders could tell:
the west window, from inside, 's a mosaic of grape-vine leaves,
the room's full of peridot light sieved through leaves,
the old man makes his tea in a small porcelain pot
forgotten in that terrible abrupt
exodus.

Bony hard-veined old man
sets his traps in the first light;
a wedged spike serves in place of one oarlock;
a jam tin for bailing.

The realty dealers will tell you:
his place stinks of crab,
he boils them outside in a cannibal kettle
beside the well,
but the well's good.

Long neighboured islanders could tell:
the carcasses lime his garden,
the salt soil yields sweet peas,
cucumbers, corn,

his pumpkins make fierce jack-o-lanterns
for half the island children's
Halloweens.

Salty brown-toothed old man
lives with the tides and weathers;
watches the sea
and thinks.

The summer settlers will tell you:
he's some kind of religious
fanatic,
spouts about Noah
to anyone who'll listen.

The older, the seasoned, islanders listen.

*Islanders know things they can not say:
the shape of a whorled shell
on the skin of the inner hand;
how the flood of the highest tide
by moonlight night
floats something in the watcher too.*

*They will not say what they know
of the old man
dreaming himself Noah
awash in oceans of light.
Nor what they dimly know,
islanded themselves in the same sea,
of the old man's brain,
tight in the tanned skull,
sucking year after year
sea light*

*like a great sponge,
its volutes luminous
with silt of light,
furred like moth velvet
with the sea's green light.*

Tough-handed slow old man
mends intricate knots in fishnets;
sows his garden;
freaks himself for the tourists,
hiding his salt grin;

Watches with cornered eyes
the overnight A-frames
encroaching;
reads the horrible headlines,
thinks of Noah;
waits between death and Death
and the subdividers.

15 BEFORE THE WRECKERS COME

Before the wreckers come,
Uproot the lily
From the hard angle of earth
By the house.
Crouch by the latticed understairs
Rubbish and neglect
(The sudden lightning
Of sun
On your back
Between the opening
And shutting
Of the March-blown clothesline,
Rise and fall of the swift light
Like blows.)
Here a lifetime's
Slimy soapsuds
Curdle the earth,
In this corner
Under the stairs,
But have not killed
The woodbugs
Nor the moths' pupae
Which brush your fingers
As you dig
For the round, rich root,
The lily root
Which has somehow, senselessly,
Not been killed either
But has grown every year
An astonished babyhood,
An eye-struck Easter.
Pack it among the photographs,
The silver polish,
And the last laundry

Which will not again
Lift and shutter
For the shattering sun.
Mark its container : X,
Two intersecting lines,
A lattice point
Of time
And the years' seasons.

Before the wreckers come,
Carry away
The lightning-bulb of sun.

16 SUMMER SICKNESS

Every summer faithful
as sun my hands
burned with their own heat
infrared in the blood
long sleeves and gloves
in the zenith of summer

total immersion at Horseshoe Bay
in two feet of water
fully clothed (how can you
fall in over your head
in two feet of water?
boys on the dock weak
sprawling with laughter)
the capsules to keep me
from burning to death
dragging me always under water
even on dry land
wading instead of walking

consciousness blinking off
like a negative strobe:
clutch at tables and chair backs
on the way down
the malignant hiss
of the drug in my head:
cat and mouse

sitting pale and clothed
among tanned bodies
I was more alien even
than they could guess:
my body at war with itself
its own juices
fighting for territory:
my hands burned like cities
movements of armies under the skin.

17 BETH

A human child
so lovely and so right
puts smiles in all my corners:
the bends of my elbows,
interstices of all my bones
are lotioned with pleasure

Until the child turns
on an inner spine of pain,
some nerve whip coil
I cannot know.
All is disharmony.
Her happy reaching symmetry
is all askew
and I can only cry,
What do you want?
What can I do?

18 LYDIA'S CHILDREN

“Whatever they are,” someone says,
“they’re beautiful children”
and I know they’ve been puzzling
over Lydia:
white negro? thinly diluted blood?
but cannot dismiss
her classic angled face,
her unquestionably negro husband,
and the little girls:
black hair, beige skin,
delicate profiles,
and Greggy, golden boy,
hair and skin a monotone
dark gold;
and I think
of their beginnings:
telegram from her parents
to a girl in love:
consider some less irrevocable
step stop.
And the rabbi
sending her answer:
remember the nuremburg
laws love.

“They’re beautiful children,”
someone says, and eyes return
to the exotic family
suddenly in the midst
of all-average vacationers,
as if in a vegetable garden
some chance of wind
and magic pollen
grew a miracle tree
with graceful and rich fruit,

the sturdy, delicate girls,
the golden boy.

Somebody smiles self-consciously
at me, travelling with them,
no longer pale, medium,
ordinary canadian,
but someone to be seen whole,
and grateful
to be travelling with
pioneers.

19 SALT WAFERS

The sea proffers,
like wafers on a palm,
islands, tufted, many-shapen.
The sea, at full tide, calm,
stretched like an open
hand at day's end, offers
these, with the sun's last rays
lighting their crests,
cedar-furred, thin-soiled crusts,
salt to the least shale crumb.
Such rich salt on the tongue
is an organic praise.
Somewhere the senses lock
on tactile memory—
the original, pure salt lick,
the clear water at its flood—
'This do,' murmurs the blood
'in remembrance of me.'

20 CREEK DELTA

Now, rocks change character,
furred with flat green tongue-fuzz
and minute pimples of salt,
and I smell the breath of the sea
that has breathed
mouth to mouth with me
since my time began,
and that I know
as I know what my brain holds.
I am restored,
walking among sea-mud
and weed-expropriated rocks
to the stretching-away sea.

21 AFTER A DAY CANOEING

Close your eyes and see water
closing over water;
beneath your eyelids great cool weights
of water move, dispose themselves;
or see under webbings of light
the furred and musselled shallows
where we watch with paddles wary
for a scraping rise of shell.
Your skull like a sea shell
repeats the sea
Wind v-ing the water, swell of waves
touching the shore thin and lacy,
their solemn weight curled under.
This pebble-dragging sea washes
the membrane of your mind
as the tide, nudging
upward, reaches for your
water-closing-over-water sleep.

22 ROCKS IN COPPER-BEARING WATER

bruised,
washed with amber and rose
like reflected light ...

each rock
is an untranslatable
poem
that will never be said
being
a thing transcending
human speech
and any word
i say
modifies, therefore diminishes
and is a lie.

23 SPLIT ROCK

I am divided
like a cleft mountain,
and the push and weight and motion
of my life
sizzles through that gap,
and the I of me
that is monolith
that would speak a word
luminous and whole as
a rock
is apart from the I
that stands dazzled
before luminous rocks
that round all my perceptions
to a whole,
and the white unquiet water
falls and falls
between those cliffs.

24 SALAAL

The little plump fluted white bells,
hanging in strings and garlands,
as dainty as pampered girls,
will ripen to black furred berries
under their dark leaves.
I'm told you can make a living
on them then:
Pick them and sell them
for funeral wreaths.

25 ION

Strange, the need to be hung
hooked on
some other ambience...

Hi, little polar bee!

—Buzz off.

This hive's as tight as silk.

You see that tree
with pale silver-paper leaves
hanging in clusters
like sleeping moths?

Sleep like a moth,
or spiral
in a falling dance.

no I think I am not
worth the pain
of the one-legged man turning
circles on his own axis.

But have you seen the chestnut
in full bud?
Positively indecent,
like a full-grown phallus
on a baby.

The bee has been
here, I tell myself.