sightlines
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In the mind’s theatre
sightlines determine
where and who you are.
1. so many worlds to see ...
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.

The rain’s eyes have sightlines that conceal nothing. They embrace a drama whose plot is contrived by grasping hands and unfolds against the backdrop of this careless forest. Learn the lines for your bit part as you walk back to the house. Intermission is almost over, and we’re all on stage for the final act that’ll run far into the night.
1.

I've walked many seasons the crooked path
I cut and carved through this Glengarry wilderness
following the turns of boulders and the twists
of tree trunks to clear a lane wide enough for two
to ponder the absurdity of being there. We
cannot flit like chipmunks between ferns
and goldenrod, nor swing from tree to tree
like our distant cousins—we must have level
ground to bend the mind to broken planes.

*Not a straight line in sight,* said the Scot
who drove the dozer. *I aim to keep it that way,*
I avowed and told him to turn south by the hard
maple then west behind the butternut south again
around the basswood follow the bull moose
tracks east to the sitting-bear rock after that
go north northwest by the oak ... *Crazy as a coon,*
he muttered under the raucous breath of his
diesel engine, but shouted *You're the boss!*
thinking truly his machine was, revving it up to roar
and pounce with iron paw, push aside petrified
aeons and gouge out an eccentric circle back
to the loghouse where the trail begins and ends.

I too have had to brutalize the silence I came
to recover. How else could the forest have taken me
into its arms and I have embraced it had I not
stepped close enough to feel smell taste
its body, close enough for us to enter each other?
Even diminished as you are by the cruellest
animal to stalk this planet and conquer it,
your presence still overwhelms my senses
with a ceremony of communion, a ritual of
transfiguration more ancient than memory.

2.

Prehistoric glaciers and earthquakes, continental
shifts and collisions, stellar bombardment,
millennia of rainstorms heatwaves blizzards
laid out this landspace without forethought,
raised tall as a hawk's steep fall red pine and white
spruce, black oak and yellow birch, to take
under their green stalwart wings rabbit and racoon,
at random, bear and beaver, white-tailed deer
and beady squirrel, skunk, fox and coyote. Lofty
spaces woven of tangled shadows on thin spindles
of slanting light where grouse screech owl bluejay
oriole cardinal and warbler nest between song
and silence under a sky that reaches forever
and ever wordless beyond measure into unknowing.
Homeless as humans we made our home there.
Before I gathered these timbers
time had worn away all
that was extraneous already.
The space they sheltered for a century
and more had been abandoned.
They watched the infants
flushed from womb water into air
scream at the light, struggle
to come to terms with the lot
they had not chosen, and return
to the dust and darkness
whence they had emerged
into the twilight of a settler's cabin.

Spring was a bursting of seed and sod.
The logs held the seasons in place
bridling the heat of summers
bent on horses and hay, corn and cattle.
Kept the autumnal rains to their promise
of feeding creek and pond. Stood up
to winter howling at the door,
rattling windows, battering the cabin
with ice fists in snow gloves.

Survivors too must die.
The same weathers that wiped their lives
off the now forgotten stones
tilting at weeds in gardens of memory
left their homesteads empty shells
scattered across Glengarry. Rainstorms
and blizzards gnawed away the shingled
roofs, leaving the rafters a ribcage
of the beast that devoured them.
Carcasses of farms that struggled
with drought, debt and depression
in vain. Now skunks and squirrels
nest in the mouldering silences between
jumbled tin and timber. Graveyard
of pioneer dreams and aspirations.

Till I brought these cedar logs north
four concessions and reassembled them,
hewed, heaved and fitted them
for a new lease on life and love.
Soon they were at home among spruce
maples cedars aspen ash birch and
joisted and raftered they became home
to us. Did some residue of the voices
and labours of generations long buried
still linger between phloem and pith
in the heartwood to bear witness
to what the bones always know
even while the flesh dreams?
3.

Ayorama is a love story. I have never been alone here. You, my love, came early to join me in these backwoods lost between two cities. The logs were barely bound to each other and the ramshackle floors expected pioneers, not high heels. Blackflies and mosquitoes held sway that spring across the untamed woods, but the nights and the summer were ours.

For more than three decades Orion visited our sleep with his star-spangled sword, Jupiter and Mars wandered up and down the shingled roof while sun and moon painted fleeting patterns across the pond. I worked the world’s iniquities into the soil and in their time and place light and water, fire and air conspired to raise a green harvest sufficient to feed a multitude. At dawn the nights yielded what sustains a garden in the mind. In the twilight came the shape of words.

4.

Passion powers a process that carries us beyond ourselves to engender beauty precisely at the comical moment when flesh and flower want a voice to be heard speaking from the podium at the centre of their tempestuous tranquillity.

You raised your belly naked to the August sun and on a skyblue morning the primal sea broke into your solitude and by nightfall a child was born to us in defiance of the probabilities of fate. She grew here from egg and sperm to womanhood instructed by a harsh taskmaster in the school of flora and fauna that eloquently teach verities of innocence and experience blunt as winter and spring between tree-house and ice-wind lane.

Such flowering of flesh into mind hallow the forest, its spaces domed under vaults branches construct fanning arches from the trees’ pillars against the sky, the footpath an aisle between anguish and chance.

5.

There is no way to redress the injuries axes and chainsaws inflict on birches and cedars, oaks and beeches, though I have tried. Profit is the world’s executioner. Cats and dozers erase forests, steel traps eliminate wolf and beaver, rifles exterminate bear and moose. We poison and plunder all habitats as if we owned them, though I never cast net or bait in the lake I had dug and seeded with fish—the long-legged heron took care of that: elegantly, aloof as a connoisseur, with chopsticks sharp as a spear he picked them from the water in languid flight, like choice morsels one at a time, and swallowed them whole.
We knew love’s labour alone can turn wilderness into a garden; but we learnt that it must yet remain wilderness. You elaborated your instincts to nurture and protect with acts of beauty as I struggled to create a balance between the imperatives of nature and art, leaving the long and the short of it to their discretion.

Slowly acid rain trained moss to cover fifty loads of gravel on the poet-philosopher’s path I walked time and again till I understood from the soles of my feet up this neck of the woods owns me. Soft knowledge that finds peace in surrender. Wherever I go, Ayorama will raise my bones tantalizing to the sky.

6.

How to bid thee farewell when you cannot hear even your own voices? The wind haranguing ash pine and tamarack each in a different tongue, the sap singing the seasons’ melodies under the bark, the medley of sounds ten thousand creatures make to command and maintain their place in the sun — what words can make this parting memorable?

I learnt to read the aspen trembling at the edge of a storm, the cardinal’s punctuated whistle who pecked at his own image in the glass when I whistled back from my den three short sharp glissandos down to a rapid-fire shrill, the outraged shrieks of bluejays determined to drive me away from nests I never saw, the spit and hiss of squirrels and wild geese, the jumpy deer in the orchard, the circling hawk — who will I be without them?

The smell of pine in the spring air, a taste of mint on summer’s tongue, the maple flames, a raspberry’s velvet touch and the crunch of snow and ice under fur boots drew me into the season’s dance spinning everlasting death into the delirium of living.

7.

Ayorama hung the planet in my study like a *perpetuum mobile* suspended from the sky. How else could I have recovered the music my father played me in the cradle? Melodies lost in the jangle of terror and tyranny till I heard them again in the bullfrogs’ bassoons, the soprano voices of birds, the pizzicato chipmunks, an owl’s misty call, the whispering wind, a hush of snow, the dark hum of summer? How else could I have recovered that lost child and moved atonal meaning through music into mute assent?

You made it possible for me to put down the burdens of this bloodshot age, lean them against your trees while I searched day and night for the well and web of understanding. Never were the stars more loud and clear in pointing the way from one darkness to another.
That’s how I found a voice and my love the images that will speak to us long after we have moved to other spaces, other sounds. The deer harvested the apples in the orchard, ample every other year, picked them from the branches on their hindlegs or dug them up from under the snow. The fruit that ripened in the orchard of the imagination must feed us now in the urban years to come, even if we have to dig it up from under the ice of a winter of the mind. It too provides a harvest ample enough to share with all who still know how to look and listen.

8.

The girl who saw the deer and heard the voices of the forest has spread her wings and flown the nest. Every fawn learns to dare the future’s promise. Then is the time too for the parents to move on—time for us to move into the city as we move into winter. Already flocks of wild geese surprise the evening with the shrill lament of their departure. Feathered arrows across a bloodied sun. Flight into an uncertain future. Soon the fir trees will fold their wings under the pressure of snow. Ash and poplar stand unleaved in the naked cold that will test our mettle. But in the midst of winter it was fire put us to the test—the ultimate test of endurance and renewal.

9.

We built Ayorama not for eternity but for generations to come, sat around the fieldstone fireplace to share with friends alive and dead the joy and the burden of knowing the short, ample measure of things, raised a child there, engendered others, less tangible and therefore, perhaps, more durable—word creatures and painterly beings—all in search and celebration of the incomprehensible world that gives us light so that we can see the darkness.

Past midnight, at the hour when arsonists prowl the impotence of their blistering brains, fire broke out at the east end of the house. No one saw the prowler, no one was at home. The flames raced along the desiccated timbers, bit through the shingled roof and screamed at the sky. Freezing rain came down, too slow and too thin to match the fury of the fire. Windows exploded, beams became torches. No one came and no one could have come in time to put out the flames lit in foul play.
10.

Not all who listen hear. Shall I speak of the neighbour willing to kill for a foot of land he imagines part of his ill-begotten lot? A good fence will not make him a better man. He is deaf to the wild and its creatures, to the make believe stars that puncture all boasts and leave him more silly than his tail wagging dog when he barks.

Or shall I speak of the stranger with the mango-mellowed tongue that talks seeming into being? A limp handshake seals a sly purchase.

Not all who look see. Shall I tear the mask of peace and piety off the arcadian idyll of rural living? Not all that’s picturesque is also salubrious, even in the unpolluted air of the woods.

Better to remember the neighbours who learnt the give and take of labour and harvest, seasons, sickness, youth and old age. Hewing wood and milking cows, they know we are in transit here, guests at the mercy of a world at once hospitable and hostile, where the clouds are our neighbours and the groundhogs burrowing under the fence we must love each other or perish.

11.

The police arrived to witness a blazing pyre, summoned us from unimpeachable sleep lest someone was trapped inside: they did not report the tales of lives lived and loved from the heights of happiness to the pits of pain and sorrow, did not see the labour of decades burning prematurely to cinders. Dawn saw only a blackened chimney towering. Tombstone for a history too brief for time’s annals. A pile of fallen timbers, charred and glazed with a thin crust of ice even as fire crept still crackling through the logs’ heartwood. Soon raccoons and chipmunks will clamber all over the rubble, and rats may find a home here.
12.

What will the lessons of a hundred acres avail us where monsters of steel, glass and cement have devoured the forests and their inhabitants whose lives we shared for three decades? Pride and ambition have choked the breath out of this land with streets and alleys crowded with imperial creatures puffed with the power of hundreds of horses, noisy creatures with venomous breath, robots surpassing Ayorama’s creatures in everything except curiosity, affection and fear. Cities have given birth to beauty unknown to birds or trees, but must they pay for it with their lives?

13.

I must learn again to abide the whistle of authority, the hiss and spit of the hucksters of news and wares, the posturing of con-artists honoured for what is trite and truthless as they humbug their way to tawdry fame and the applause and admiration of what is worthless by the gullible multitude. In the silence of a star-blazed night in the company of pines and birches, foxes and grouse, you can forget all that comes with membership in this species mutated from rats, scurrying to and fro between slot-machines and combustion engines right up on their hindlegs but not upright in the search for their lost selves, you forget you belong to a species bug-eyed for instant gratification, chasing its own tail as though it were the holy grail. We know not who we are or where we’re going. Greed springs a leak in the mind and leaves a vacuum, and the jackpot turns out to be empty when the chips are down. By hook and by crook you cannot harvest happiness or fetch fulfilment. Only fools think hype and chutzpah are life forces. Give me the soft touch of a lady’s slipper in flower.

14.

You, my love, wanted the city and must now be my companion in the search for new beginnings. The intricate play of light and shade across Glengarry fields and forests hovers around us like the ghosts of a sensual affair come to a bad end. Dance of fireflies in the noisier nights as dusk falls across the memory.

15.

In the urban hustle and among strangers to weave a new web of adventure and affirmation and yet remain true.

I shall plug my ears and listen to the voices speaking inside me straight from Ayorama’s mouth. They tell me the blue heron carries the universe on his wings and the artful lupines have colourcoded its secrets.
In the city too there are trees
and where there are trees
there are robins to deliver dawn.
I shall converse with those
who see when they look
and hear when they listen.
I’ll laugh with them
knowing tomorrow
is no more probable
than today was yesterday.

16.

A tree uprooted
may yet extend its being
from darkness to light.
But light is fire:
it lives and dies by consuming
what it fetches from darkness.

17.

Ayorama is no more
than a time and place
in the mind now.
Without a tongue
the wind has nothing
to tell us except
that it blows
blows forever
and deposits our voices
in the fields and forests
of eternal silence.

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.
Ash Tree Greening
(for Clara)

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.

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.
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
Camping Out

It's as though the crimson sun before slipping over the horizon had put its finger to earth's lips to sanctify this hour with silence.

One by one the stars light up the night's raven-feathered dome that shelters all our fearful stores of love and longing forever.

All day long the rains beat the storm's drums on our tent and howling winds danced around us like a band of frenzied flagellants.

They lashed the lake, cutting deep welts across the water and whipping waves into an incongruous surf ragged as the rocky shore.

And we ran naked between trees that were whirlpools of leaves. Knotted rainthongs lashed us into ecstasy till we outshouted the thunder in the clouds.

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.

into truth before silence returns to the forests you explored, the seas you sailed, the cities you built.
No one heard us, no one could hear us. The birds saw the storm come and took shelter, leaving us to our high-flying selves in the spiked wind.

Oh for that fleeting barefoot encounter with eternity when the toes are intimate with heather and grass, and the skin tastes primeval oceans! Then is oneness without name.

The damp cold brought us back down as a heavy grey curtain rose to reveal the bloodied sun like a rubiate pearl coming to rest in the hand of darkness.

Now the woods are closing in on us. Night is on the prowl, stings, claws and fangs at the ready. Danger drips from wet leaves. We huddle close in the shivering gloom.

We're meant to be at home here, my love, in this wilderness. But a tent doesn't deter a hungry bear. A thin moon floats on the lake — a silver canoe from one darkness to another.

It's one of the small hours when the aged die in their sleep while infants cry out for consolation at their mother's breast. Those on shift now get to feel the weight of time in every bone.

What woke me, what drew me to the window? A face limned dark on dark, its features washed out like the weathered sculpture on an ancient tombstone. It hangs in midair, an eerie sketch on glass.

The night is hot and soundless the fireflies set off their tiny charges of light. I catch the glint of many knives beyond the circle of darkness. A throat. A wrist. Cut. Is it the pain that woke me and now withholds sleep?
The sky strains
asteroids and meteors,
galaxies and supernovae
from the distant light
and then disperses them
in the dark grey of trees.

I cannot see the trails
a myriad creatures leave
who crowd the dark
with a life richer
than my audio-visual world.
I see only the brooding
night reflections on the glass.

Recognition always comes
as a shock. A sleight of the eye
has cast the face in the glass
out among the trees
like some ghost of the woods—
my face, pale,
more mask than portrait,
the eyes holes gaping
as black as the flowers
out in the garden,
shafts deep down
where they mine
the ore of nightmares.
I hang there
in the spruce tree
suspended from shadows
hearing in the void
sighs, laughter, screams.

By the pond a bullfrog
throbs basso profondo.
Lovers have long drifted off
into their post-coital utopias.
The stars are not
where they claim to be.

My face is
impaled on the spruce tree’s
spiked branches
where thin and chilly
a faint glitter
etches shadows
under my eyes.
“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.

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 Afre. 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 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)
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.