

After Avison

by Jill Jorgenson

Perhaps my first encounter with Margaret Avison's poetry was when I happened upon "Snow" somewhere in downtown Toronto, one installment in the city's former transit project, "Poetry on the Way." Though possibly I'd heard of her by then, it was the subway's overhead "Snow" that sticks. I didn't entirely get it, if at all (Yangtze? it perplexed me; and why *sad* listener?), but I know I liked her images, her way of seeing and saying things, her perfect lines and rhymes.

Fast forward to *The Essential Margaret Avison*, as selected by Robyn Sarah, and I was quickly star-crossed with her verbal cross-pollination, word combinations. Her innovative approach to poetic expression not only presented precise vivid pictures (not least of which those of the natural world, which I'm often fond of), but also to me felt like inspired nimble wordplay—her verb-nouns and adjective compounds, say, and other hyphen-surprises and unexpected linguistic manipulations. Lines like "In the sunward sugarbush / runnels shine and down-rush / through burning snow and thicket-slope" ("Released Flow" in *AN* 2, 29) or "Pedestrians linger / striped stippled sunfloating/ at the rim of the / thin-wearing groves..." ("Pace" in *AN* 1, 150)—they got me. To lose myself and follow her lead, try to write in kind, "copy" her, raised my game, even if intermittently. And to read her not just for leisure but as a master guide is to hold my own writing to a yardstick, a measure of rigour. It will not do (she reminds, kind, stern) to settle for mediocre, lax.

The other aspect of Margaret Avison's poetry that drew me, not insignificantly, was her spiritual and philosophical inquiry. I connected with this, her attention to this line of thinking. I'd known a life steeped in Christianity—church was the fabric of family and community, and ideas around God very much at the time taken for granted—which eventually in adulthood left me with questioning, and doubt. I did not arrive at the same assured conclusions as Avison; yet the speculation and reflection persist, and so her direct celestial addresses distinctly struck a chord. (In terms of a verdict, the jury's still out.)

That "search," as such, if it is that, is ongoing. As is the sometimes fun (and admittedly sometimes vexing) wrestle with words.

Works Cited

Avison, Margaret. *The Essential Margaret Avison*. Ed. Robyn Sarah. Erin, ON: The Porcupine's Quill, 2010.

Getaway

Imagine for a moment
this moment's sun-decked deck

is country cottage, this lull and humid must and almost
listless air is lake-effect, late-morning early-fall not all

next-door neighbour natter driveway chatter-backed soundtrack
and more boreal birds than everyday blue-jays and sparrows and grackles

but a lonesome loon's distant keening call, and say the hum
and drone and motor-moan of nearby inroads always trafficked

is the whine and bump and splash of a speedboat whiplash-
whacking through another's wake's waves in the water,

just there, unseen, past (imagine) a dense screen of overgrown evergreen . . .
and every once in a while when here sound dies down,

the accompanying calm is a balm better, even, than that
of this urban borough's backyard blessed and blissed respite

(eyes closed head back in your deck chair, picture it:)
. . . of something rustic, and way remoter

Squirrel Young

1.

Look up. You won't see
tucked in a nook-crook'd tree vee,
curled in the curve of a burl'd branch's cleft,
inside a sky-high I-spy ("with my little eye") foliage-nestled nest:
a half-dome domestic zone, the homemade (dad-and-mom-made) home's
a twig-knit spit-stuck moss-matted mish-mash mesh,
pine-lined and resin-rimed, leaf-weft;
or, in short, your ordinary dendrite denizens' dense den.

2.

(These bow-bough Bedouins are ersatz rats,
land-version-citizens' distant cousins, quill-tailed and best-dressed
in fine furs, which itch—witness the twitch—and up darts a right hind reach,
quick-switch to left to stretch a scratch
for a fast head-cock'd shoulder-back
paw-claw bat-bat-bat-bat-bat—thus proof

under shiny ebony far-fetched "finery"
they're still resident rodents with rabies.)

3.

Watch: once but plum-slick squirms warm
in a thick-thatch quilted bark-craft loft, hidden and protected,
these spring-sprung squirrel-lings now are no longer babies—

the spry young, upstarts, small and lithe (if a titch tick-and flea-bit), pitch
(here picture a projector's slo-mo film clip)—

they fling, fearless, flawless, fly, roof to roof.

A Lovely Astound (On Reading Margaret Avison Slowly)

A vision of Avison . . .

Avison astonishes with her words, her word use.

Uses them, places them in places so as to seem
as if new, thus astounds, a lovely astound.

She thrills, delights, and amazes.

She might verb a noun, or compound the two,
out-of-box adjectivise, dehyphenate outside the lines, wildly,

mildly, or add them, ordinary order-flip, childly, trim excess and clip,
balance on any given fingertip perfect sense/image synesthesia—

and distill to sublimation.

As sweet strong drink, mete me
but a dram. (As

a rough farmer whose crude beer ferments in his hold cold
months, sow-till-harvest sustenance for toil's honest hands,
sips a jug's thimble sample from the visiting ace artisan—
his eyes boydream pools of his own hill-king sky-pie
mirage of excellence. Still he tries, fists of ham:

“Ave: saison.”)

Matchless alchemist—
like liquid gold, a charming bewitch,
we receive and savour her grand,
humble, sparkling gift.

Paraphrased Avison

(after “Prayer of Anticipation”)

Whoever You are,
wherever, “speaking,”
if speaking,

and me deaf,
utterly cluttered
and ever forgetting
what I know—

and You there—

How can I believe
it's not up to me.

Fine.

Show me then.
(I mean it.)

Shouldering Should

(after Margaret Avison's "Oughtiness Ousted")

"God (being good)" strikes the first
deviance in a loose effort
at an "after-so-and-so." *Trust*
is her sparkling hillside freshet,

plus a kinship, and her faith the rock they spring from.
This light she describes—I know,
I've tried the unflexed open palm,
its summons to meadows and rainbows

and a promise to, I'm told, release me
from a maddened captain's whip . . .
—That the treasure hunt could be that easy
flashes an ocean-glint hope . . .

—which I'm quick to pitch with a grunt from a cliff-top,
lose sight of it midst my jetsam:
I think I'm almost certain *it's up*
to ME. "NO HANDOUTS." (Just ask Him.)