

**Ongoingness and Nearer
Farnesses: The Place of “Too
Towards Tomorrow: New Poems”
in *Always Now: The Collected
Poems***

by Gordon Johnston

*The far-off isn't, and is all
that is.*

(“Other Oceans, 4” *AN* 3.149)

For her admirers, that Avison is still writing poems is very good news. Nineteen new poems appear in the section called “Too Towards Tomorrow” in Volume Three of *Always Now: The Collected Poems*. We, her readers, approach them with eager anticipation, but are we looking forward to their newness or to their familiarity? Do we expect them to be a continuation of her work so far? Do we long for a summation of her career? Are they climactic, apocalyptic? If they constitute an ending (as they do, literally, for *The Collected Poems*), what kind of ending do they provide? Their methods and interests are for the most part familiar from the wide range of Avison’s long career: there are personal anecdotes and memories (“The Fixed in a Flux” [185], “Early Easter Sunday Morning Radio” [195], “Strolling” [202]), probings of scripture (“Resolute Lament” [190], “But One Recoiled” [198], “Because Your Hour Is Dark” [199-200], “Betrayed into Glory” [205]), explorations of etymology (“Ne Cedere: ‘Won’t Go Away’” [187-88], “Nahuatl/*Tomana* (to Swell)” [191]), cryptic image sets (“Ajar” [201], “Resolute Lament” [190], “The End Not Yet” [204]), in-house sermons (“Ex-Communicants” [198]), urban observations (“Strolling” [202], “Loam” [208-09]), and an implied dialogue (“Because Your Hour Is Dark” [199-200]). There is a rich layered meditation (“Cosmosis” [192-94]) which forms part of a very long arc in her career, including the poems “Apocalypitics” (*AN* 1.105-08), “The Earth That Falls Away” (*AN* 1.175-84), “A Parallels Poem: Hearing” (*AN* 1.42-43), “My Mother’s Death” (*AN* 2.170-77), and, more recently, “Other Oceans” (*AN* 3.146-54) and “Alternative to Riots But All Citizens Must Play” (*AN* 3.179-82).

There is, in addition, surprisingly, a startlingly candid and moving lyric of loneliness called “Sad Song” (*AN* 3.203), deflected from the poet’s self only by means of the remarkably transparent second person pronoun.

If, as the title of the section suggests, the primary subject is the lateness of the day (both the deepening twilight and the coming dawn with its hints of glory), the poems are also interested in travel and home, indoors and outdoors, safety and danger, privacy and commonality—subjects we recognize from every stage of her career. If some of the poems do their work primarily at the level of abstraction and generality, that is also a familiar tendency. And of course in individual poems all the subjects and methods overlap and interact in characteristic ways and with characteristic assurance and brilliance.

Not surprisingly, the poems are deeply conscious of the end of life, of her own life. To point out that they are not weighed down by this consciousness but are rather energized by it is to begin to get at an essential dimension of them, the “resurrection dimension” one might call it. The question about her own going-on, as she phrased it herself at the time of her mother’s final illness, has to do with the prolonging of life. In the 1985 interview with Bruce Meyer and Brian O’Riordan she describes her philosophy as Hezekiah’s Poultice: King Hezekiah who is ill asks Isaiah if he will die. When he is told that he will, the king asks to be cured and God relents and Isaiah applies a poultice of figs which cures him and extends his life (2 Kings 20.1-7). Her comment on this story at the time was “It is our choice, you know, to accept or to fight it off and if you believe then something tells you when to do which” (Meyer and O’Riordan, 9). It seems likely that the poultice is on her mind these days, some days. In practical terms if you keep on going on, the question then is whether you’re being called at any point to some act of courage and individuality.

The courage of the solo traveller, the obligations of independence, the recognition that separation is the way ultimately, and her understanding of these challenges have intensified and deepened as she approaches her own end. Far from turning to the Christian faith for certainty, security, easy answers, she has always valued and insisted on its adventurous daring. She has always been skeptical or even scornful of the herd mentality, of unthinking conformity, of the false safety in going with the crowd, but now more lately she also has a richer, more complex understanding of the necessity and complexity of communities such as those found in apartment buildings and church congregations.

For both individuals and communities, there is a kind of courage in persistence, in ongoingness, especially for the elderly:

Among the older, worn by day
upon hypnotic day,
the hope was hope for stamina
not for success, and for
courage for those more able.
("Other Oceans, 6" AN 3.152)

At the same time she recognizes a more urgent need for all of us, whatever our age, to "break out". The points of contact between "Those who fling off" and "Those who are flung off" ("Meeting Together of Poles and Latitudes (in Prospect)" AN 1.73-74), between those who "force / Marches through squirming bogs" and those who "sit / Dazed awhile," between those who linger and those who go, have always been moments of great energy and interest for her.

In terms of her own life, and possibly in the history of civilization, the new poems included in Volume Three of *The Collected Poems* (like the ones of *Not Yet But Still* and *Concrete and Wild Carrot*) indicate that it is late in the day: "Nightfall is near," she writes in "Alternative to Riots But All Citizens Must Play" (AN 3.182). But it is equally true that we are pushing through a dark dangerous place and have some intimation of dawn breaking. The seminal image of the seed in the soil becomes more and more urgent: we are in the dark of the earth, contemplating the rotting of the seedcase necessary to initiate germination. "Break out!" indeed.

In cosmological language we are moving from the unroofed but claustrophobic universe of the early poems ("Jonathan, O Jonathan" AN 1.72) through the opening farnesses of the middle poems ("To a Seeking Stranger" AN 2.234-35) towards what she calls the "[r]afters of forever" ("I Wondered As I Wandered" AN 3.207). The new poems express an appreciation of and gratitude for those structures of safety, those solid houses made out of the materials of this earth, but Avison is equally aware of the inhibitory and transitory nature of those earthly walls:

Walt knew the importance of
the place of abode he kept
maintained, for him and family. . . .
.....
But the day fell – . . .
.....
His place of abode, for all its
roseate stability,
became – in a few
shuddering moments (only a chance

to escape out to the lawn) –
bottomless, the foundation
crumbs.

(“Cosmosis” *AN* 3.193)

The two most prominent narrative events here in these new poems are, first, of a going on which is a going forth (the model for it in Christ’s life being his crossing the brook of Cedron into the Garden of Gethsemane, after the climactic teaching of the disciples in the upper room [John 18.1]) and, second, of going through a wall, which may remind us of the prison escapes in Acts 5 and Acts 12, and of the sudden resurrection appearances of Jesus in the enclosed room (Mark 16.14, Luke 24.36 and John 20.19) but more directly refer to his death which is the cause and basis of that same climactic instruction:

A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father. Then said some of his disciples among themselves, What is this that he saith unto us, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me: and, Because I go to the Father? They said therefore, What is this that he saith, A little while? we cannot tell what he saith. (John 16.16-18)

The primary experience for Avison in these poems seems to be of separation, anticipated or already experienced, of being alone or isolated either as an individual or as a group. The isolation of the group is expressed quite frequently as a minority report on behalf of the Christian community in a world less and less religious, less and less Christian. The poems struggle with the paradoxical experience of Christians being on the margins of history but in their own terms at the centre of reality. The more recent poems have provided a means of locating herself in a narrative and in a locale, in which she can look forward to, and seek out, what T.S. Eliot calls “the summer, the unimaginable / Zero summer” (Eliot, 49) beyond the cycles of recurrence and the recurrence of cycles. They are very conscious of the difficulties and pain of the present time, of pushing through the dense underbrush, of waiting in a bleak wasteland, of longing for clarity and simplicity (outlined candidly in “Concert” *AN* 3.65). Explorations of the way out beyond past the seasons and cycles are part of a very long arc in her poetic career which includes the rhizomes of “Snow” (*AN* 1.69) and the silver reaches of the estuary in “The Swimmer’s Moment” (*AN* 1.89).

Here, from *Not Yet But Still*, is a fairly abstract version of where we are and what we’re doing, from a poem revealingly titled “Interim”:

Our severed lives are blundering
about in what's been done,
appalled, exultant, sensing
freedom, we seem alone,

but doggedly set out, against a sting
of rain, moved by His plan,
through night and shale-blue dawn, remembering
at least to follow on.

(“Interim” AN 3.85)

This poem understands “ongoingness” in terms of that familiar Canadian version of courage—doggedness—and it understands it explicitly as at a minimum a “following after.” The poem that opens the way most clearly to the most recent set of poems and their “ratcheting up” of going-on (“Cosmosis” AN 3.194), is the last poem in *Concrete and Wild Carrot*, a kind of pivotal diagnosis: “Alternative to Riots But All Citizens Must Play” (AN 3.179-82). It attracts attention to itself as an essential moment in her career, as both a landing field and a launching pad. It clearly rewrites and expands “Snow” (AN 1.69) in ways and by means entirely characteristic of this late assured accomplished stage of her career. There, the hortatory injunction to break out of jail was largely aesthetic and psychological; here it is still that but it is also political, social and by implication epistemological and theological. It confronts the bureaucrats who for their own reasons encourage passivity, conformity, “comprehensive arrangements,” a “monstrous / sameness” (AN 3.180). It is conscious of the failure, the collapse of our protective shells, and the “unsettlingly wobbly” nature of our foundations:

Gunshot crackles in the
streets after our sheltering
walls have crumpled.

(AN 3.181)

(Those gunshots after the year 2005 in Toronto are all too audible.) It also includes a precise memory from her earlier days (the department stores’ metal baubles on wires carrying money and receipts to and from a mezzanine, AN 3.179-80); such memories have always been a conspicuous part of her toolkit. It concludes with a climactic and compelling version of smashing the inhibitory scaffolding and boldly lifting off into the prospect of possible glory:

Break in! Break up
all our so solid structures for the
glory of
nothing to hold on to
but untried air currents,
the crack and ricochet
of impact.

(AN 3.182)

It also ends with another appearance of the entirely idiomatic image of new plant life possibly beginning its sunward growth:

There will begin,
perhaps, a slow
secret, gradual, germinating
in the darkness.

(AN 3.182)

(The candour and courage expressed in the word “perhaps” are as impressive as anything in Avison’s poetry.)

The seedcase is one prominent version of a wall which must crumble, but the walls of her poems also preserve her valued and guarded privacy (as David Kent points out in his review of *Concrete and Wild Carrot*). She is conscious of walls more practically as protective against danger to one’s person. The anecdote of a stranger at the door in “Embrace Change?” (AN 3.77) provides a striking example. It is clearly intended as a parable (possibly for a Christian community) about the resistance to and fear of change, but it also reads as a recognizable account of urban anxiety. She is also aware of prison walls, how we are contained and limited by them. The recurring narrative in parts 3 and 6 of “Other Oceans” is of a prison yard which may be an actual prison but is certainly also allegorical. But of walls she also knows (from those seedcases and from Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection) that they must be gone through.

Two passages from John’s gospel are profoundly revelatory of both the new poems’ anxieties and their courage. The scriptural passages recounting Christ’s preparation of his disciples for his coming absence (from John 13) and his resurrection appearance on the shores of Lake Tiberias (in John 21) are very rich texts for her. The John 13 account of Christ explaining to his disciples his necessary departure is referred to in two of these late poems: “Because Your Hour Is Dark” (AN 3.199-200) and “Betrayed into Glory” (AN 3.205).

Going through the wall (when viewed from this side of the wall) seems likely to break you, and the line is repeated exactly in the two poems, along with the introductory line “separation / was his way” (*AN* 3.199 and 205). They are the only examples I can think of in her poetry (other than the quotations in “Strong Yellow, for Reading Aloud” [*AN* 2.44-45]) of such a repetition :

‘Through? he’ll be broken’
(*AN* 3.199)

through? He’ll be broken!
(*AN* 3.205)

She contemplates in these poems the inevitability and pain and fear of separation, but also the breaking of the body in Christ’s crucifixion and his entry into the upper room through its walls, so that the splitting of a seed-case is recognized as an image of bursting into glory.

“Betrayed into Glory” is a tightly stanzaic meditation on scripture, a familiar procedure with its probing, exploratory questions testing out the sense and coming to a renewed understanding of its meaning (Christ’s meaning) but also its implications for her, its relevance to her. The scriptural account quite deliberately links Christ’s being betrayed by Judas to the glory of his resurrection. She mentions the 32nd verse of John 13 explicitly in the title (“If God be glorified in him, God shall also glorify him in himself, and shall straightway glorify him”) but is clearly thinking of the following verses as well. The great discourse to his disciples, individually and collectively, before the crucifixion narrative (John 13.31 to 17.26) is essentially about his departure and its significance and consequences. It changes the disciples’ relation not only to Jesus but also to each other. What she recognizes is that in her own life the betrayal has led to glory. In theological images, the way of the crown is the way of the cross. And the way is not an evasion or escape: it is not “Over, under, / around, away” (*AN* 3.205). It is “through”—through the wall, through the barren wasteland, which must be traversed.

There is for her too then a going through walls, in death and that separation. She was not deviating from the way, even when she thought she was:

The troubled way I went
Is what He meant!
(*AN* 3.205)

This is the future she imagined for herself as long ago as 1968 when she wrote a pseudonymous account of her wandering lost and then being ‘found’:

Gradually, a malaise, a false peace, settled in. Persons, events, and my own responses grew more and more indeterminate, lost the bite of uniqueness. I was going down into living death. The way has seemed to me hideously time-wasting. But the lagging and preening and deriding He forgets. His forgiving, strengthening, renewing love opens a future, even now. He will use even the long willful detour into darkness: I trust Him (at this moment I can say it) with my long failure to *know*. In the touch of His hands it can be transmuted, His way, whether or not I understand or even know. Bit by bit, then, the ways I hinder Him now will be lightened by His mercy, His grace[.] (“I Wish I Had Known,” 93.)

She has superimposed on the pre-crucifixion narrative the resurrection appearances in the upper room and elsewhere, the recognition of Christ having said he was going and of him returning: “And it is He!”

She explores the personal implications of her own lift-off or separation more fully in “Because Your Hour Is Dark” (AN 3.199). The indented stanzas provide a capsule summary of the great discourse in John’s gospel, and also a scriptural commentary from it on the confrontation with death, but the poem as whole seems to be one of those dialogues with an implied questioner we recognize from every stage of her career. The first impression is of a confidante revealing occasional feelings of isolation and exhaustion, but here as elsewhere the “you” seems also to be a version of “I.” The adjective “wall-eyed” describing “you” is particularly telling, and suggests the enclosed circumstance of an apartment or nursing home room, of either another person or of the self.

The poem is a candid account of the painful feelings of the faithful at the end of life, an admission that one does sometimes sag on “the way,” that the landscape (the allegorized external version of the confined space) is bleak even for the believer:

Animals cough here, in the half-light.
Some prowl. You try to hunt down
peace like a prey.

The future holds bed curtains and solicitous strangers. Avison has been particularly sensitive to timely deaths and institutional deaths since the

death of her own mother and has made clear her sense of outrage at the artificial extension of a life:

I believe her life is being prolonged unnecessarily—falsely, and against God’s will.... This is the fruit of technology and I’m against it. (Meyer and O’Riordan, 9)

However near or far that grim inevitable reality may be, the present foretaste of it for the “you” of “Because Your Hour Is Dark” is what she calls “this total aloneness under heaven.”

But then the implications of the scriptural account of Christ’s separation for “a little while” from his disciples intrude again, and the central, urgent question is asked:

So – not alone?

The answer to that question is an image, a surprisingly familiar one with a very long history, of the fusion of spring and autumn outside of the seasonal cycle. The phrase that introduces the image is both striking and vague: “A merest whiff / of other weather somewhere” (*AN* 3.200).

The progression through these various difficult landscapes is presented in a condensed imagistic form in the next poem in the section, “Ajar” (*AN* 3.201). The last section gives a summary version:

Toiling ahead
through long wet rasping
grasses in dimness.
Delicate apricot and lilac tints.
A hint of the imponderable
power of glory – thickets, end of
everything else to be
faced first.

The future is the same in every case:

The forecasts, all:
fair weather.

Here something is “ajar”; there is a way through, out of the room. But the way is still through death, just as from the upper room of the last supper and after his long address to the disciples, Jesus moves outdoors across the brook of Cedron into danger towards his death.

By contrast, the resurrection appearance alluded to in “Three Shore Breakfasts” (*AN* 3.196) is outdoors. After the disciples have been fishing all night, they suddenly see Christ on shore cooking breakfast for *them* (John 21.9-14). What is particularly striking in this poem is that Avison does not include the scriptural breakfast in the poem; she tells the story of two other breakfasts and only implies this one. Through the middle of her career she has always been willing to meditate explicitly on particular identified passages in scripture. In the early poetry the scriptural allusions were implied or unconscious, as Redekop demonstrated in “The Word/word in Avison’s Poetry” and especially its Second Appendix (Kent, *Lighting* 140-43). Here late in her career, again the gospel narrative is an unstated or unembodied presence.

It is a brilliant poem, fusing and aligning elements, styles, interests and methods from every stage of her career. The first breakfast is a childhood memory, on the shore of a lake after a swim but recalled on a snowy evening. It is presented in those characteristically refined subtle enjambed stanzas by means of precise diction and image. The second breakfast is also presented in stanzas but they are now indented, compacted and elliptical, and have an edge of social consciousness and anger expressing her familiar allegiance with and compassion for working people. It comes after a night shift where the workers seem to have wasted their time. This is the observed urban world of “tough slogging” which has always attracted her attention. (It also reads as a modern day “in-house” parable of the under-employed labourers in the field consoling themselves with what congregations call “fellowship.”) Here the adult sorrows are juxtaposed to a childhood world of bodily joy; the two worlds of work and play have throughout her career sat in the two balanced dishes of the weigh-scale.

But the final stanza of the poem, placed back at the left margin, does not, as we might expect, present the third breakfast. Instead, it comments on the second, and finds some compensation for the workers’ idle night: heart warmth (of friendliness) and belly warmth (from the shared food). And their pay does in the end arrive.

But the resurrection breakfast of the gospel is discernible in certain elements of the first two. The workers’ night shift recalls the night spent fishing by the disciples and their despair. The old hymn says “Work for the night is coming.” The friends’ shared meal points clearly back to Christ’s feeding his disciples fish. The bodily joy caught up in the sun of the child’s breakfast recalls the physicality of the Easter experience. The prospect of glory apparently suffuses both the past and the present. The poem is a scriptural commentary after all.

The two breakfasts also juxtapose the double nature of the experience of faith which is both private and communal, individual and shared. There have been since *No Time* more frequently poems which seem to be parables of the perils and difficulties of church politics and communal differences. They are sometimes related to those parables of different human types, as in “Ex-Communicants” (AN 3.198): those who cling to the familiar, as opposed to those who “break the cast of thought and travel free.” A number of poems address the particular difficulties of living within a community of the faithful. There have been through the last few books a number of allegorized anecdotes of church politics, of getting along and finding ways to agree (for example, “Beginnings” in *No Time* (AN 2.224, and the poems in the “Now” section of *Not Yet But Still*). There, for example, in “A Basis” Saint Paul is shown being either expelled or sent by the church in Antioch. As a “venturesome unsettler” (AN 3.40) he reveals the strains within the community of the faithful, he enacts the tensions between the individual and the group, and he also incidentally and probably unintentionally gives us a clear exemplar for Avison the poet, the one who boldly goes, who stirs us up.

Also from the “Now” section of *Not Yet But Still*, “Cultures Far and Here” provides another clear narrative of Christians being alone together, of both the comfort of community and its limitations:

We cluster
telling each other
stories that build the vault of a
shelter from the wholly
unknown, comforted by what
is recognizable in our overlapping
awareness.

But sky and weather
have a way of disregarding our
walls, sweeping us on to
not being an ‘us’.

Out there it’s larger
every time we’re stripped
of almost everything familiar.

(AN 3.50-51)

Even within the community, the underlying question often seems to be Am I alone? It has been an urgent question throughout the career, audible in the

panicky solipsism of “The Valiant Vacationist” (*AN* 1.27-28), the psychological distress of “The Mirrored Man” (*AN* 1.125-26), the plastic safety of those who diagnose themselves as “self-immured” in “Prison to Fastness” (*AN* 2.221-22). The experience of being isolated continues to be an intense one. In the new poems, Avison expresses this loneliness in a movingly candid personal lyric gesture unlike anything else in her work, “Sad Song”:

You open your eyes on a lonely light.
Something not there you'd dreamed would be.
Utterly lost from all company you
yield to an absence from long ago
looking for pencil-tracings out on the
waiting wash of the lonely night.
(*AN* 3.203)

But of course in Christian terms we are not alone, ever.

The holy one . . .
.....
will not be banished from
room or field or cockpit or
anywhere we are, is

patiently, alone,
fingering the snarls and
stringing out the one-by-one
way of liberation.
 (“Astonishing Reversal” *AN* 3.68)

A beloved stranger
has gone
whose reappearing
spells apprehension, panic,
all we have to hang on to.
 (“Breath Catching” *AN* 3.78)

What if the someone
were to be, every sinking moment,
were to have been,
present, all along?

You mean – that's true?
 (“That Friday – Good?” *AN* 3.84)

And more recently, in a poem equally and bravely aware of ecological disaster and the reductionism of deconstructive thought:

And whether some finally
together break out till
the stars fall, or
a sudden global change
freezes inhabitants' pulses

one artist who, in one
impulse once called out, from surging
waters and fires and molten
rock
our earth, our little lives,

maintains, Himself, the
no longer appearing
structures.

(“Other Oceans, 7” AN 3.154)

But still we are obliged to wait “a little while,” however long that is. We keep on going on. Sometimes “merely” going on *is* the act of courage. How is one to distinguish between them? From a sufficient distance, an astronomical collision is only “one probable ratcheting up of / ongoingness, out there” (“Cosmosis,” AN 3.194). From closer up, as here in these poems, it takes our breath away.

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