

## STUDIES

### Unsettled With Margaret Avison

by Stan Dragland

Alien doctrine, i.e. someone else's doctrine, grew in a different soil; something *can be learned from anything or anybody who is alive and growing.* (AKP 37)

How can we catch the illimitable in our little bottles? Yet we must learn precision with particulars as well as spacious thinking across centuries. (AKP 47)

Poetry is always in unfamiliar territory. ("Poetry Is," MD 27)

In her autobiography, *I Am Here and Not Not-There*, Margaret Avison writes about the sequel to her mother's death at Toronto's Riverdale Hospital, where she had been in chronic care for many months:

I signed something in the nursing office, then a nurse I had not met before appeared with a large grocery bag full of Mother's personal effects and conducted me to the downstairs office where I was asked to sign a form giving permission for an autopsy. In the elevator this woman said briskly: "That's what it is, eh? It all ends up in a paper bag!" And I heard myself firmly declaring, "No, that is *not* all there is!" (*I Am Here* 207)

That was in 1985. Flying to the Vancouver Poetry Conference in 1963, the same year as her conversion, with her father approaching his death, Margaret had this reflection on what else there is:

At takeoff, unbidden, came the metaphor of my father's approaching takeoff, a more exhilarating one, for he would not be crashing, or arriving at any airport, but out-distancing earth and sky to reach his destination. I wonder if it's true, as I felt then, that to such a person, who does not fear death, there is nonetheless a kind of nervousness at doing something radically new, without fellow venturers, without any credible rehearsal. (*I Am Here* 144)

The destination is eternal life in Jesus. In "The Dumbfounding," He is "the all-lovely, all-men's-way / to that far country" (AN 1.198). Lacking the

irresistible conversion experience Margaret had on 3 January 1963, not having had my life so redeemed and realigned, I don't follow her. However, nobody else of my acquaintance and no other Canadian writing except Tim Lilburn's has so dignified Christian inquiry to me. And, in fact, I have always been on a parallel path.

One day in 1972, Margaret told me she didn't expect many readers to be interested in the poems inspired by her faith and I said, implicitly confessing myself a non-Christian, "but when you write, 'In the mathematics of God / there are percentages beyond one hundred' (*AN* 1.190), that makes sense to me." I meant that I'm drawn to what in her autobiography she calls "the knowledge that covers the ranges beyond reason" (*I Am Here* 200). (There is an echo of this in one of her "jailbreak" poems, "Alternative to Riots but All Citizens Must Play," *AN* 3.179: "Explore only the ranges / beyond our mastering"). She was exploring these ranges well before conversion. One such exploration is "The Valiant Vacationist," an astonishing poem about climbing the 235-step spiral staircase inside Brock's Monument in Queenston, Ontario. The ascent leads to a folktale/dream-like emergence into another dimension, a far country so remote from this one, and so mysterious, that the speaker despairs of explaining it. "The word I send from here," she says,

Is pitched so fine it lances my tympanum  
And I begin to wonder whether you hear it? (*AN* 1.28)

(When we were assembling the collected poems, I asked Margaret about "The Valiant Vacationist." I knew it from the New Canadian Library *Poets of Midcentury*, but found it in none of her books. "I had forgotten about that poem," she said, "and I used to like it." That was my cue to search for other orphans. They appear in "From Elsewhere," the first section of *Always Now*, along with poems that Margaret did remember but hadn't collected.)

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In a seminar Margaret taught in 1967-8, at the Scarborough campus of the University of Toronto, she and her students spent the year working toward defining a poem: "A poem," they decided, "is that creation, in words, that requires the same energy from the reader as from the writer" (*I Am Here* 161). In her interview with Sally Ito, Margaret personalizes this when she says that readers "are the completers of what the text began. I address them as co-creators, unknown but for sure out there, and exacting" (Ito 162).

Well, it may not take much effort to delight in a Margaret Avison poem, but, since the freighted meanings exceed 100%, it's anything but simple to respond in words that do justice to it. This return of energy is necessary when a poem has emerged not only from some particular inspiration, but also from a life of attention to the tradition and discipline in the craft. For Margaret, add exhaustive converse with the infinite. Maybe there is, or can be, a reader equal to all that, equal to what Margaret has called "Verbal events of absurd independence" ("There are several writers," 15), but even the exacting reader of her poems is likely to find himself beyond his depth at first.



The day Margaret and I had that exchange about "the mathematics of God," we were walking out of the lecture room in Middlesex College at The University of Western Ontario where I was in my second year of teaching and Margaret was writer-in-residence. Margaret had just addressed a class in Canadian Literature and Culture designed by James Reaney and team-taught by seven of us. I can call up all the places in London, Ontario, where Margaret spoke, whether personally to me or to a group I was part of, because the novelty and intensity of her company fixed them all in my mind. She poured her whole self into the most casual exchange. I have never known a person who gave so much of herself to everyone she met. Having read the chapter of her autobiography about the Western year, I see that I could write a longer one solely from my perspective.

I was trying to write poetry in the early seventies. I gave some poems to Margaret. I can still see the page containing one of the better ones that she handed back to me with brackets around the extraneous words. The cuts were a revelation, a shock lesson in verbal economy. I have adopted this method of bracketing, rather than crossing words out—a more respectful, less invasive way of editing somebody else's text—and Don McKay has too. We both showed Margaret our poems and one of us kept on writing poetry, with such success in Margaret's eyes that she bequeathed him her copy of *Klein's Etymological Dictionary*.

After *Winter Sun* and *The Dumbfounding*, Margaret had been publishing with Lancelot Press, of Hantsport, Nova Scotia. When the publisher retired, Brick Books took on the distribution of *sunblue*, *No Time*, and *Not Yet But Still*. That's how, almost thirty years after we first met, the manuscript of *Concrete and Wild Carrot* came to Brick Books. I was appointed

editor. With the memory of what Margaret had done for me still fresh in my mind, I worked as hard on her poems as I would on anyone else's, putting pressure especially on the line breaks. Then I returned the manuscript to her. I was summering in eastern Ontario when I got word from Kitty Lewis, business manager of Brick Books, that Margaret was hot under the collar. She was considering pulling her book. Would I call her?

What on earth was this about? I revered Margaret as a poet, but by that time I was not short of editorial experience and I knew that a deferential editor is no servant of art.

Before going on to that call, I'll introduce two bits of context I lacked at the time.

When Margaret spent a year in Chicago on a Guggenheim Fellowship, to work on what became *Winter Sun*, she became friends with Frederick Bock, a poet and assistant editor of *Poetry* (Chicago), which had published some of her poems. Bock's training in poetry was very different from hers. "At Iowa," she says,

Frederick had taken a course in 'creative writing.' This was the first time I had ever heard of such a course. It was an introduction that jaundiced my opinion. Why? First, because Frederick would show me a new poem—in the first draft stage—an impulse I recognized, with delight. No later touch seemed needed in most cases: his impetus was strong from line one to the end. But then, as instructed at Iowa, he began picking at every punctuation-mark, every word, testing every cadence, worrying over every consonant, until I felt that his poem was being needlessly battered. When I wrote "Butterfly Bones; or, Sonnet Against Sonnets," the rigorously disciplined Iowa poets were in my mind. Their individuality was worked out of them, somehow. I saw the process, from the joyful 'first drafts' Frederick showed me, to the colder, surer final versions—although 'final' is inaccurate. He never was satisfied with his finished work. (*I Am Here* 133)

Perhaps that was one thing: resistance to too much tinkering. I'm another who picks at everything, and unapologetically, because tight as a drum (heartbeat of the world) means maximum resonance. And a good drum has to breathe.

But then how to account for the fact that, since well before *No Time* (1989), Margaret had been blessed with the advice of an invaluable informal editor, Joan Eichner. Joan's importance to Margaret, both as friend and first reader, cannot be overemphasized. "In my later years," Margaret says in her autobiography,

I discovered how essential for me, so given to impulse (the underside of openness to nature and fleeting insight), was Joan's objective, logical, disciplined mind. She could have had a university career, teaching philosophy, if she had not chosen to accept the responsibilities of family life. The disciplines she had learned exposed my tendency to self-indulgence, to statements so fuzzy in outline as to be virtually evasive, even untrue. Learning is always painful; making a good friend has costs. But the reward, a true friend in old age, continues to be astounding and delightful to me. Joan became the reader to whom I ran with any new poem. Instead of a reaction of 'wow,' what followed—and I came to expect and want this—was a close reading: what do these four lines mean? Does this stanza belong in the poem? In this place? Are you sure this is the word you mean? This title doesn't seem to introduce what you've written. (*I Am Here* 217-8)

Maybe the "primary sensitive reader," as Margaret calls Joan in the Acknowledgements to *Momentary Dark* (91), is not picky.

Well, there I was, faced with making a phone call to an esteemed poet I had somehow offended. I called her. She said she had no intention of making all those changes. I sighed a big sigh. "You sigh," she said. "I do," I replied, and went on to explain that all my suggestions were serious, but they were also starting points for discussion. Try lining this way, see how that feels. The final say is yours. Seeing that the relationship was to be collegial, Margaret dropped her objections to the approach. She did accept some of my changes, and we ended up pleased to be working together. Which we did again, on *Always Now*, the three-volume *Collected*, and *Momentary Dark*. Joan was involved with all these books as well, and the two of us have collaborated on the posthumous works: *Listening: the Last Poems of Margaret Avison*, *I Am Here and Not Not-there: An Autobiography*, which had not reached final form when Margaret died, and a re-edited reprint of her Christianity and the University lectures called *A Kind of Perseverance*. I now have my own reasons to value Joan's knowledge and advice. It eventually came out that Margaret thought I was nudging her back toward the iambic pentameter she was always trying to resist, while actually I was offering alternative takes on the integrity of each line. Margaret has since survived various superb copy editors at Brick Books and The Porcupine's Quill.



In 2015, Joan sent me a couple of books Margaret had bought second hand and eventually gave to her. One is *The Lore and Language of School-*

*children* by Iona and Peter Opie, with an introduction by Marina Warner, which she found fascinating; the other is *How to Analyze Poetry*, by Christopher Russell Reaske, a 1966 volume in the series of Monarch Notes and Study Guides. One might be surprised to find such a basic how-to-read-poetry text in the library of such a sophisticated poet, but Joan says Margaret “liked its definition of free verse.” Open the book, indeed, and on the title page, in pen, Margaret has written “p. 18—free verse”:

Poetry composed in lines which are free of the traditional patterns of rhyme and meter and whose rhythm is based, instead, on the stress resulting from the meaning of the line and its natural and punctuated pauses. Each line contains varying numbers and types of poetic feet; however, although the strict traditional patterns of versification are not followed, free verse can not be said to be formless. A pattern of rhythm is established within the poem, and the lines move away from, and back toward, this norm.

So much for “playing tennis without a net,” Robert Frost.

To think Margaret would have no use for a basic book about poetry would perhaps be to expect snobbery where there was none. Or, if not snobbery, then plain old putting aside of “childish things.” Margaret had her B.A. and M.A. in English and was ABD (all but dissertation) in her Ph.D. programme before deciding that academic life was not for her. In a deep sense, she never graduated, not if graduation means having achieved command of the basics and henceforth thinking only at higher levels, and not if it means embracing a career and joining the middle class. Margaret’s attitudes were the most democratic and the least specialized I’ve ever encountered. Once, before an English class at Western, she recited a concrete poem by Ian Hamilton Finlay. I wonder if Finlay ever anticipated hearing aloud his series of discrete adjective and nouns, colour-coded on the page. I certainly did not, and was amazed to find them so riveting in the air. And I was amazed by the mind that would even think of doing that.

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During the year that Margaret was writer-in-residence at Western, someone left a brief, typed, aphoristic poem, illustrated with a cartoonish drawing, on the door of my office. I asked Margaret if she was the one. She said no, but for forty-three years I have believed otherwise, thinking that her (unconvincing) denial may have been meant to keep the enigmatic advice given in the poem from being traced to a particular source (her). My context for that advice is the fact that Margaret once commiserated with me as

another who didn't fit snugly into academic life. She thought I didn't belong. The cartoon shows the rounded surface of the earth with a few buildings on the edge of it. Bottom left sits a drudge with his nose down on his desk. Upper right, standing on top of a boulder or something—a big circle raised off the earth—is another person with arms wide open to the sun that appears just below the frame of the picture. This could illustrate many Avison poems. The briefest version is probably this stanza from “Civility a Bogey *or* Two Centuries of Canadian Cities”:

To walk the earth  
Is to be immersed,  
Slung by the feet  
In the universe:  
(AN 1.67)

The cartoon is not hard to interpret: you are stuck at this desk in this office in this university while the immense, illimitable world of possibility goes on by without you. Why not rise up and go out and grab it? Open your arms to the life-giving sun! The meaning of the poem is less accessible. With its Tao-like paradoxical wordplay, it has kept me thinking for decades. No wonder I thought I was in sole possession of an unpublished Margaret Avison poem:

Our so-called limitations, I believe,  
apply to faculties we don't apply.  
We don't discover what we can't achieve  
Until we make an effort not to try.

I have always felt my own intellectual limitations. As a green academic I felt them keenly and probably mentioned that to Margaret. She could be trusted with confidences. For forty-three years I kept that poem and cartoon on its square orange sheet of Western memo paper. I framed it: memento of someone I revered whose advice I didn't take—unless early retirement was a belated acknowledgment that she was right. I wrote to Margaret as I was retiring in 1998, reminding her that she'd recommended a much earlier exit. I don't remember what else I said. Probably it was that I had no real regrets about staying. For me, if not for her, the academy was a good place to grow, given both institutional obstacles to be surmounted and real opportunities to learn. And now it occurs to me that maybe the fellow with his nose to the grindstone is no mere drudge. Maybe he's learning the necessary precision with particulars to complement the spacious think-

ing across the centuries and out into the wild blue yonder represented by his cosmic self.

There is plenty of scope for growth even yet. In some ways I'm as dim right now as ever I was. Or else why would it never have occurred to me to research that "unpublished Margaret Avison poem"? Now, all these decades later, it finally occurs to me to try Google, and Google shows me that it's actually one of Piet Hein's *gruks*, or Grooms as they were published in twenty volumes. I used to see copies of those rather amateurish-looking books and assume they were for kids. I was never curious enough to look inside, but Margaret was. She probably knew, or found out, as I did not back then, the interesting information that Hein was a Danish scientist and poet, a member of the Danish resistance against the Nazis. According to *Wikipedia*, his "*gruks* first started to appear in the daily newspaper *Politken* shortly after the Nazi Occupation in April 1940 under the signature Kumbel Kumbell. The poems were meant as a spirit-building yet slightly coded form of passive resistance. The grooks are characterized by irony, paradox, brevity, precise use of language, sophisticated rhythms and rhymes and often satiric nature." Satire aside, much of what is said here about Hein's poems might also be said about Avison's. And her poems have always offered good advice about active seeing:

Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes.  
The optic heart must venture: a jailbreak  
And re-creation.

("Snow," *AN* 1.69)

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"It is [Alister McGrath's] assumption, and mine," Margaret says, "that it is impossible either to be bored by or to reject Jesus Christ. 'But I *am* bored, and I *do* reject Christianity,' you may think. No. You are bored by or reject some notion of what it is, put off by somebody's notion who presents a blurred picture, or by a misunderstood idea from other people's ideas. It is a Person with whom you will have to do, and He is not boring; seen clearly, He could not be rejected" (*AKP* 32). When this kind of position is held by someone apparently locked within and thus limited by her own ideology, I can't take it seriously. When it's held by a woman and poet I admire so deeply, one of whose most constant metaphors is jailbreak, I am more than intrigued.



Anita Best is a Newfoundland traditional singer/storyteller with what she calls an active and a passive repertoire: songs and stories she can offer today without a hitch, and songs she knows or has known but would have to rehearse for performance. Margaret's faith was in a passive or potential (agnostic) state until her conversion experience; thereafter it saturated and directed every day of her life. For me such faith in God and God's word is passive at most, a remote possibility. But "possibility" now, or even "Possibility"—thanks to Margaret Avison the word carries a rich halo of meaning for me.

Asked to visit a Canadian Literature course when she was writer-in-residence at Western, and to shed some light on her poem, "The Apex Animal," Margaret not only agreed but wrote a new poem which revisited the earlier one. This course was crewed by a four-person teaching team of which I was a member, one of many such teams then in fashion at Western, but this one had no centre, no focus or meaningful armature. One divided by four doesn't go, not without time-consuming planning and consultation. Given the choice (at the time I was not) I would have much preferred to be governed by some shapely discipline like Northrop Frye's, literary theorist of choice at Western, rather than the slipshod anarchy of English 381.

Though I was one of the instructors of 381, now sitting in the classroom among the students, 7 February 1973, as Margaret began to read "Strong Yellow, for Reading Aloud" (AN 2.44-46), I hadn't been told what was coming.<sup>1</sup> Was anyone else prepared? Did any of the students realize that Margaret had been asked some questions about "The Apex Animal" which she incorporated into her poem of response? I don't think so.

"The Apex Animal" opens *Winter Sun*. It's a poem about a vision of the "Head of a Horse." "It, I fancy," says the speaker, "and from experience / commend the fancy to your inner eye" (AN 1.53). One thing I like in Northrop Frye's writing about literature, especially poetry, is that he recognizes the irreducible mystery in the real thing. His "inner eye" is active. What that Head of a Horse is doing in the poem will not come clear to anyone who fails to view it with the eye of the imagination. It's obviously much more all-embracing than anything could be that is merely visible. It's personified and all the words about it are capitalized:

It is the One, in a patch of altitude  
troubled only by clarity of weather,  
Who sees, the ultimate Recipient  
of what happens, the One Who is aware  
when, in the administrative wing  
a clerk returns from noon-day, though

the ointment of mortality  
for one strange hour, in all his lusterless life,  
has touched his face.

This is a strange and wonderful metaphysical yoking: the Head of a Horse possessed of a caring, anagogic consciousness. Nothing at all literal about that.

*Winter Sun* came out in 1960; many of the poems in it were written well before then, some during Margaret's stint in Chicago on the Guggenheim Fellowship for which Northrop Frye had urged her to apply. Her conversion came in 1963, so "The Apex Animal" predates it, a fact the questioner incorporated into "Strong Yellow" apparently doesn't know.

Q: "The Head of the Horse  
"sees" you say in that poem.  
Was that your vision of  
God, at that period  
in your development?"

(AN 2.44)

You can see the logic in the question, but logic will not work here. God would be an intelligible analogue (though weirdly incarnated in just the head of any kind of creature) if the poem weren't seeking something beyond the merely intelligible. Something even non-Christian poets have been known to pursue. In writing "Strong Yellow" Margaret was clearly trying her best to read a poem she had written almost twenty years earlier and come up with some sort of helpful context, not a mere paraphrase that might masquerade as literal meaning. The new poem begins and ends with images of a horse painted (a new detail) on a wall, "a powerful presence" still, though not vouchsafed the proper noun. One way to look at "Strong Yellow," then, is as an expansion of "The Apex Animal."

But also, in response to the question about God, there is a new reminiscence of how a person back then, a woman now, stuck in the dreary workaday system, caught up in the bleakness of nine-to-five uncongenial work which Margaret herself occasionally experienced, was in desperate need of jailbreak:

when it's like that: no heart, no surprises, no  
people-scope, no utterances,  
no strangeness, no nougat of delight  
to touch, and worse,  
no secret cherished in the

midriff then.  
Whom you look up from that to  
is Possibility not  
God.

I'd think...

(AN 2.45-46)

Capitalized, "Possibility" is in the same honorific zone as the Head of a Horse in the original poem. The reductiveness of "God" is being resisted by a poet who has become a child of the "living Jesus" since she wrote the poem but still wants to be true to the agnostic she was then and also true to the poem she wrote those many years ago.

This is all happening in an English class, remember. English classes are taught by professors who know how to read and teach poetry, right? Of the four teachers who shared the lecturing, two, myself included, had nothing to contribute on this day. One of the others seized the opportunity to ramble on about obscure poets hiding the meaning of their poems from well-meaning professors. That was embarrassing enough, but worse was the question posed by the other prof: "Do you like horses?" Pause. "I can take 'em or leave 'em," I guess," said Margaret, inserting some much-needed humour into a tense situation. Much needed by the students for sure. Few of them had anything to say, probably because they didn't know what was going on, the whole exchange having been caused by the horse-questioner. He had thought to get the goods from the Horse's Mouth and here, as far as he and his colleague could see, was nowt but more obfuscation. I wonder how many students realized that the profs who spoke up, one cynical and one in earnest, were in different ways displaying their total ineptitude as readers of poems.

I don't know whether Avison or Dragland was the more depressed after that sad afternoon. An odd, rather bitter poem called "Us artists—Before Public was, or Grants *or* Can Litter" follows "Strong Yellow" in *sunblue*. I wonder if it's a sort of coda:

Condeminstrel copia  
the archway read.  
Not to go in  
would unframe my head.

Inside the court  
a fountain dribbled

so I stayed on and  
hourly sibylled.

Nobody expected  
commerce or coin  
each one teaching  
his own-bound voisin.

One wore a stilts,  
one a daubed top-hat.  
Well, among us  
we were satisfat.

The chestnut leaves  
rotted us under  
and you'll find that archway  
now a choke of cumber.

(AN 2.47)

See also “To a Pioneer in Canadian Studies; and to All in Such Pedantry” (AN 2.89).

All this, many years later, flows out of that word Possibility. Some open it up; some choke it off. I may be some kind of limited ironist by nature, but I'm comfortable with that upper case P.

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In the room on the lower floor of University College that housed The Belial Press, with its ancient printing presses and cases of lead type, I was working on *The Pom. Seed*, the new English Department student literary magazine. Some of the writers who came to Margaret's office had complained that *Folio*, the literary magazine sponsored by the Student Union, was not open to their work, so we started another. Margaret named it *The Pom. Seed* after the six pomegranate seeds Persephone ate in the underworld, though she was instructed to eat nothing down there. The lapse meant that her mother Demeter lost her to Hades for six months of the year, the world above enduring winter for that stretch of time. Margaret may have said what she meant by the title, but not in my hearing and I've never until now put it to myself to ask. It's interesting that it's not the characters of the myth, not Persephone, not Demeter, not Hades, but the contentious seed itself that Margaret picked out. That seed of disobedience splits Persephone's life in two, between above and below, summer and winter, female

and male. In the context of a student magazine, I think it's the seed of unpredictable independence, of conflict and creation.

On this day, Margaret was visiting the press and Marg Yeo was there as well. I think Marg was acting with me as faculty advisor to the magazine's editors. She was certainly the fourth member of that wretched English 381 teaching team. London's Applegarth Follies was about to publish Marg's collection of poems, *The Custodian of Chaos*, a book she had dedicated to Margaret. Marg wasn't about to give that away, not until the book was out, but she did venture to hint. "Do you like surprises?" she asked Margaret. "Do I like life!" Margaret exclaimed. It wasn't a question.

I can still see the expression of delight on Margaret's face as she and Colleen Thibaudeau walked by my office one day. "I'm going Colleen-ing!" Margaret bubbled. Anyone who knew the irrepressible, unpredictable Colleen would know how accurate that coinage was, with its echo of careening. Margaret well knew that to go with Colleen was to drop all expectation of what might now be done or said. One of the country's very best and least-known poets, Colleen was the soul of improvisation. Margaret caught her dynamism in a single word. I'm very glad to have been on the spot to hear that word invented; otherwise, it might never have been spoken. And, speech being so evanescent, it might have been lost. I had no occasion to use it for another forty years, not until Colleen died in 2012. Then I wrote to her son and daughter-in-law with some memories of Colleen, and the Avison coinage took on a surprising new life. *Colleen-ing: The Poetry and Letters of Colleen Thibaudeau* is now the title of a play by Adam Corrigan Holowitz, with music by Stephen Holowitz and Oliver Whitehead.

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One of the poems Margaret was polishing in Chicago is part of the permanent lining of my mind.

New Year's Poem

The Christmas twigs crisp and needles rattle  
Along the window-ledge.

A solitary pearl  
Shed from the necklace spilled at last week's party

Lies in the suety, snow-luminous plainness  
Of morning, on the window-ledge beside them.  
And all the furniture that circled stately  
And hospitable when these rooms were brimmed  
With perfumes, furs, and black-and-silver  
Crisscross of seasonal conversation, lapses  
into its previous largeness.

I remember

Anne's rose-sweet gravity, and the stiff grave  
Where cold so little can contain;  
I mark the queer delightful skull and crossbones  
Starlings and sparrows left, taking the crust,  
And the long loop of winter wind  
Smoothing its arc from dark Arcturus down  
To the bricked corner of the drifted courtyard,  
And the still window-ledge.

Gentle and just pleasure

It is, being human, to have won from space  
This unchill, habitable interior  
Which mirrors quietly the light  
Of the snow, and the new year.

(AN 1.82)

I often find myself reciting the last movement of this gentle elegy at a gathering of friends enclosed and protected by one of those “habitable interiors.” When I first read the poem, it spoke to me partly because so much Canadian literature of the time was questioning the process of “civilizing” the country, carving a country out of wilderness. According to Margaret Atwood’s *Survival*, “The order of nature is labyrinthine, complex, curved; the order of Western European man tends to squares, straight lines, oblongs and similar shapes” (120). What European settlers loved most—needed most—was straightening out and boxing those curves. In the 1960s and 70s we were all going back to the land, if only in our minds, slightly ashamed of having been so successful in the combat with our adversary, nature. And here was a poem, written by no champion of enclosure, that called it “just” to have “won from space” a heated house to keep you comfortably warm while you look out at the winter-gripped land. Well, “Canadian winter nights [and days] call up / defences” (*MD* 84). I needed to know this? Apparently I did, the area right under my nose being so often a blind spot.

But it's not just winter that's out there. Out there is also the immensity of space, which haunts Margaret's poetry. "To walk the earth," she says—I quote it again—"Is to be immersed, / Slung by the feet / In the universe." "Old Woman at a Winter Window," the opening poem of *Not Yet but Still*, is a reprise of the safety-from-exposure theme:

We claim these square ceiling and walls  
and floor from the immensity  
as all that have, for us,  
meaning, against the encroaching ice,

the ice that somehow  
signals another space, a fearful,  
glorious amplitude.

(AN 3.15)

In *Momentary Dark* (2006), Margaret was still s(l)inging "A sky-blue world in the dark / outerness" ("Not Words, Alone," 5).

In "New Year's Poem," "the long loop of winter wind" is "Smoothing its arc from dark Arcturus down..." Both the image of curving arc and the chain of alliteration links outer space with a particular window-ledge on earth just as surely as if there were a bridge. It's typical of a Margaret Avison poem to take these dumbfounding leaps. Such poems carry a jolt of reveille: wake up, look up, look around: everything is here and it's all contemporary. "[W]e are of our time, not outside it," Margaret has said; "we are in the miasma of this violent, headlong, desperate, fragmenting world" (AKP 28). But her poems are not stuck in our time. They read our time in the light of "fellowship across the centuries" (AKP 27) and "the holy / vanishing point" ("Other Oceans," AN 3.149) beyond which it is "always / now" ["What John Saw, (Revelation 4)," AN 3.75].

The last time I spoke with Margaret she proposed that poets have a chink through which they can easily access their childhood. It seems to have been very true in her case. Between the lines of "New Year's Poem," in fact, is an arc from her cosmic adult self to an infant moment of discovery. "My life's first remembered winter," she says in her autobiography,

is defined by the Regina morning when, as always, I had been bundled up and put out to play, alone. Mary and Ted [sister and brother] were, respectively, in "infant school," mornings, and public school, all day. Things did not look right to me. A dusting of fine snow was everywhere, and a great hardness underfoot. Where was the earth? I fetched my sand pail and tin shovel, and tried to dig down to the beautiful ground, but a glaze of black ice everywhere was

all I found. Despairing, standing there alone, I felt the wind as an assault “from dark Arcturus down” (“New Year’s Poem,” *Winter Sun*) and stood paralyzed with a deep sense of desolation. Children feel all the human emotions but they lack words, alone in whatever washes over them. Over the long years I have tried to remember that when children are staring, transfixed, some impression is going down into memory for them. (*I Am Here* 15).

A variation on this childhood experience is given to “Carl” in a poem called “Cosmosis” (*AN* 3.192-94).

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I would say that Margaret’s character blended wide openness—or open wideness—with, in her own phrase, “pure contrariness” (*I Am Here* 279). She was unpredictable, even to herself. Once, stressed by work and other matters, she left the Toronto office where she was employed, and, without plan, started walking. She kept on walking. She walked and walked until she reached Hamilton, with just enough money to take a room for what remained of the night. I remember James Reaney introducing Margaret at a reading and speaking of that marathon forty-mile walk as though it were a hike: impressive, yes, but involuntary.

What so engaged me from the time of my first meeting with Margaret was her fiercely intuitive intellect. She was a true seeker without any protective social mask. Her heart wholly and pre-critically opened to the world, but she tested every thought that ever entered her mind. With the help of her beloved Klein’s *Etymological Dictionary*, she also assessed “the full halo of values in the words” (“Muse of Danger” in Kent 148) she used to make a poem. She was her own person always, always holding to an independent course, and always, always learning. What have I been learning from my recent work with and for her? She has again unsettled my wobbly pagan self, the one who honours his doubt as much as his faith and cultivates his status as hungry outsider, even within the warmth of his loving community.

Even before her conversion, Margaret had a mind to embrace all of time and space. Thereafter, the cosmos radiated spiritual sense for her. Beyond reason was also, for her, “out of time” (“What John Saw [Revelation 4], *AN* 3.75). Most likely she welcomed death, both as release from infirmity and as entry into another life. She left us immensities grounded in dearly loved particulars and voiced in words that are more than words.

I don’t know what Margaret made of my remark about “the mathematics of God,” but I thought it glib. I felt that my kind of belief paled before



hers, that she was much more valiant, and had ventured where some personal governor prevents me from going. “There is for a long time in one’s search,” she has said, “an impasse, a spiritual hunger which refuses, has been culturally conditioned to refuse, the steps necessary to appease itself” (AKP 49). In my sense of limitation, heightened by my writing about Margaret now, I acknowledge an edge of anxiety. Does everything reach me in a translation of some fuller original? Does the best of it arrive only in analogy, in metaphor, that often-glorious language of the fallen?

Is the visible universe, like death, “*not all there is*”? When Margaret died, did she “outdistance earth and sky” to reach her destination? I can’t say. I only know that, for just as long as there are co-creators, her poems will be unsettling them, stretching them into the interrogative, enriching them beyond measure. May it be—in a word few but Margaret have recently used with conviction; I filch it from her lexicon—forever.

Note: This essay is a revised and expanded version of a paper delivered at the League of Canadian Poets Poetry Festival and Conference in 2008, and published in *The New Quarterly* 115 (2010). Another section was drawn from Stan Dragland, *The Bricoleur and His Sentences* (St. John’s: Pedlar Press, 2014). Thanks to *The New Quarterly* and Pedlar Press for permission to reprint.

## Notes

- 1 “Strong Yellow, For Reading Aloud”: “Written for and to be read to English 385’s class when asked to comment on my poem ‘The Apex Animal’, etc.” was first published in *sunblue* (Hantsport, Nova Scotia: Lancelot Press, 1978), 41. In *Always Now*, of which I was the editor, the class somehow became English 389. It was actually 381.

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