

“I Will Write!”

by William Aide

Since I didn't keep a diary, memories of Margaret Avison are a sometime thing. I'm glad, then, for the few Avison letters I still own. Five decades ago she wrote often to Haide and me, more than a score of letters full of wit, tender understanding, poetics, compelling theological thought, and first-draft poems. But something weird happened. When we lived in Winnipeg in the early seventies, a kleptomaniac baby-sitter stole the entire packet. Those letters never resurfaced.

In 1980 I was preparing an article on Margaret's poetry for Oberon Press and I asked her about her use of forms. She replied by mail, "Quatrains are tense, or highly constrained. Wit and anger fit that form. Intense *awe* does too. (Hymnody adds the requirement of syllabic and stress uniformity from stanza to stanza—) (not a form I've managed—)." She *did* express admiration for the "technique" of one hymn-writer whom we both knew at church.

the two margarets

The church was Knox Presbyterian, corner of Spadina and Harbord. Margaret Clarkson, a Knox pillar, was important to Margaret Avison at the beginning of her life in the Christian faith, and remained for a time her most influential, if not dearest, friend. Critics have noted that *Winter Sun* appears to be an underwater religious book:

(George Herbert – and he makes it plain –
Guest at this same transfiguring board
Did sit and eat.)

(AN 1.100)

According to one view, it was Clarkson who helped her to surface.

This Margaret was a tall, homely, redoubtable woman, accustomed to laying down the Christian law as she knew it. She was much revered in conservative evangelical circles for her books (*So You Are Single*, *Susie's Babies*), her hymns ("We Come O Christ to You"), and her doctrinal rigor. But I knew her as a woman of compassion, especially for those who must agonize through deep depression. She herself had been stretched on a Stryker frame and her book on suffering (*Grace Grows Best in Winter*)

spoke truly. A distinguished elementary school teacher, she was also an avid birder: “a robin with a sore throat; look to the tops of trees, against the sky”—and sure enough on a hike with her, my first scarlet tanager, glorious on blue. It was *this* Margaret who helped to lead *that* Margaret to fullness of faith, in spite of the fact that her agency is not mentioned in Avison’s autobiography. In fact, she is not mentioned in that book at all.

Margaret Avison converted to Christ on 3 January 1963. The story of her throwing a bible across the room with the words “Okay, take my poetry too” finds its place more than once in *I Am Here* (142, 330). As for supporting *dramatis personae*—a fervent, witnessing woman/girl in the Victoria College ladies’ cloakroom advises Avison to go to Knox Church and provides her with the church’s address; two years later, Knox’s Reverend William Fitch instructs her to read, repeatedly, the gospel of John. The autobiography credits these two people as catalysts. But there is a third person, a woman on the steps of the church who “said nervously” (*I Am Here* 330) that Avison should see the minister. Nervousness was not Clarkson’s manner, but was she the woman on the steps and did she simply take control of the situation? That would have been like her. Clarkson told me that beyond a certain point “it was easy” clearing roadblocks to Avison’s Saviour. My wife, Haide, remembers Clarkson’s recounting that she saw Avison smoking on the library steps (Victoria?) and said to her, “That’s not good for you,” and to Avison’s rejoinder urged attendance at Knox Church. Speak, garbled memory! What matters most is that the new convert *kept* her poetry or had it given back:

the morning after that initial experience of Christ’s presence,
my scripture reading was broken into by the need to write a
new poem. It came fluidly, arriving at a first draft without blots
or second thoughts. It was “*A Story*.” (*I Am Here* 142)

“*A Story*,” that wonderful *scena*. A new opening-up, a new symphonic First Subject and a cascade of new poems, enough within a few months to inform *The Dumbfounding*.

But where is Margaret Clarkson in the telling? In a 1966 article entitled “What Knox Church Means To Me,” Avison wrote, “And over Wednesday dessert and coffee I met the first person who began to pin me down, the person who was to become my friend and the prodder and the reassurer and teaser and encourager, who retraced the first steps of faith for me and with me, in Christ” (6). This nameless first person must have been Margaret Clarkson. Such a signal meeting preceded Avison’s conversion, for Clarkson herself writes in a letter to David Kent, “I might say that she and I

became friends in the summer of 1962, and (*mirabile dictu*) I became her mentor as she struggled towards a faith in Jesus Christ (January 3, 1963—how well I remember it!) . . . we saw each other or talked on the telephone every day for many, many months. I was very much *there* during those years, and witnessed at first hand her struggle, some of which she writes about in her poems.”

During the school year 1963-64, while I was preparing my Toronto Symphony debut, we lived on Madison Avenue and attended Knox. I had purchased *Winter Sun*, my first book of modernist poetry, and could not believe that its skyscraper author was a fellow-worshipper. I knew Clarkson from my undergraduate days at U.of T. and asked her if she would introduce us to the poet. We met over a gerbil cage. Clarkson had recently written *Susie's Babies*, a book on sex education for children that narrates how gerbils do it. “Manna from Heaven,” this author trilled while scattering crumbs onto the shavings. Then Avison accepted our invitation to dinner, to which she brought a list of fruits, every name from kumquat to quince, arranged and intoned for verbal music and hilarity (better than any wine). We owe our rare friendship with Canada’s great poet to Margaret Clarkson.

I would surmise that as a new convert, Margaret Avison, for all of her brilliance and sun-shot IQ (around 200), would have sought Margaret Clarkson’s theological comprehension and devotional discipline. But as Avison found her sea legs among her new community and sounded deeper the radical presence of Jesus in her poetry and life, her reliance on Clarkson’s approval faded. They were, after all, of two temperaments. Clarkson had no sympathy with modernist music; for a remote example, I remember her flicking off, disgustedly, a radio broadcast of one of the Bartok string quartets: “Enough of *that!*” Curdles with Avison’s translation of Gyula Illyés’s *Ode to Bartok*—how he broke bans, what his music meant to his people under tyranny. Avison understood modernism inwardly and valued its stretch of languages. The “Emperor of Ice Cream” drummed on her tympanum, as did Elizabeth Bishop’s forgiving chanticleer. Clarkson was largely ignorant. But I’d wager, rashly, that their differences in temperament travelled to the heart of their evangelical sensibilities. Leadership in Knox Church could cultivate what someone once called a “garrison mentality.” “Come out from among them and be ye separate” (2 Cor. 6.17). Avison was never a separationist. She always looked for common ground with the world and her unbelieving friends in it. She wrote poems to find it (*The Jo Poems*, especially). Clarkson knew her Creed to be the only one and stood by it. Everything *she* wrote was addressed to her kind, to defend

and strengthen them. She trusted only the orthodox, both credal and cradle. There were never any question marks.

Whatever their dust-ups and reconciliations, E. M. C. has no name in the Avison canon. David Kent has suggested that, to some persons in her life, Avison was reluctant to acknowledge her indebtedness. Clarkson was one of them. This brings to my mind the example of Glenn Gould, who never allowed by name his teacher of ten years, Alberto Guerrero; as if to say he owed his vital apprenticeship to no one. Was the other Margaret too overbearing in the long run? Who knows? But in the short run she was *there*, Edith Margaret Clarkson.

I will write!

I once opened for Margaret Avison. The time was the summer of 1966 and the venue was the YMCA Conference Centre on the north shore of Lake Couchiching. A sizeable circle had gathered there for what was called “Grad Camp,” university people connected with the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. In a room with a reasonably grand piano I played a rough-and-ready Liszt B minor sonata. Margaret followed by reading the three center pieces of *The Dumbfounding*—“First”, “Person,” and the title poem. She also read “Bestialities” (which amused her as she spoke it) and *The Jo Poems* cycle about the afflicted death of her university friend, Josephine Grimshaw. Her voice caught. But it was a technical *tour de force* Margaret read that night that intrigued me the most, mind-boggled as I was by what she once called her “ready skills with language” (the phrase is from a letter, probably in 1963, now lost). It was a poem about a mother who must bind the feet of her crippled daughter, written in a playful jazzy idiom. Here is the first part, complete with its hospital-green title:

A Medical-Psychological Decision. (Anagoge?)

Farm it out
 let her go
 eany meany was my baby was born was
 twisted in the
 ankles.

When she get to heaven
 will walk over
 in the far-offs a walk-over but they're telling me
 never for this little baby (so be it, lay

low till then) *unless*
a press-bone bandaging
bind and bend
the gristle of the eany meany
ankletwist.

All the birds of the sighing
air are sobbing. Who's
going to my robin in her babycage warbling with
the morning, set to
singsmile, momma got the
short'nin' bandages to wring your bad
bones down and
she's grinding grit from her own jawbone
for it's I scream you
scream, squirm:
"momma's come.

And here are the last lines:

Will you one day walk in summer
scream-hating out of momma
of the robincrib twisting?

or one day love your walking
enough to bear
the jawbone grinding pillar of terror who
am here?"

This poem was never collected, along with about 700 others. Perhaps it doesn't work on the page as vividly as it did in performance. Did Avison feel, so early, the scruple about "voice appropriation"? Maybe because the echo is mainly that of the "Short'nin' Bread Song"? Whatever the reason, it never made the cut.

For over a decade I remained curious about this poem. In 1980, David Helwig asked me to write on Avison for "The Human Elements: Second Series," a book of essays he was preparing for Oberon Press. When I asked her for the poem, she at first said she'd lost it, but then said bpNichol might have it. Not to be thwarted, I applied to bp at his *ganglia* office; he hauled out from his files a carbon copy on yellow paper and handed it to me, no

questions asked. I asked Margaret again if I might use it. This is what she wrote: "The 'rights' of poetry are mine till death—especially to an unpublished poem that has been lost by me. (I can't imagine how you located a copy.) It would not have been 'lost' had I liked it as a poem enough!—i.e., it is *not for* publication, I'm sorry—."

In 1994 David Helwig asked me again to write, this time a memoir-type book about my life in music and related subjects, one of which, obviously, would be my former friendship with Margaret Avison. I was nowhere as close to her as I had been, but I remembered phoning her up a number of times for poetry paraphrases (*groan*) and fact-checking. She was nettled or suspicious or both and asked me what I was up to. I wrote at length describing what topics I had planned for *Starting from Porcupine*—citing, among others, my father's experience in the Dieppe Raid, a comparative essay on the pianists Horowitz and Arrau, and pieces on people like herself who had positively changed my life; I outlined the whole book. I promised her that I would send her what I had written about her and that I relied on her approval. I made the mistake of not living up to my promise completely, forwarding the lyric and sixties bits but withholding the sections about Knox Church, Dr. William Fitch and what I naively termed the "Knox Critique," speculations on what her new evangelical readers would require of her. I assumed she would be offended by this material. Of course, what I sent her had white spaces and the text must have reached her as a bunch of Rorschach blots. She phoned. In measured ire she told me that if I proceeded without submitting the complete text, *she would write!* My stomach plunged; she is going to sink my book, I thought. I was silent. "You don't sound happy," she said in a tone I couldn't interpret. "*I will write!*" she repeated. There was nothing for it but to say I'd send her everything. Recently, a copy of the above letter describing *Starting from Porcupine* was returned to me with Margaret's annotation at the top, in her squiggly handwriting. She had guessed I was so distressed because, she jotted, the book was "all typeset already." She wanted "2 lines revised, where I am misquoted—wanted to see all the pages re me in case there were more such lines." The book was not typeset, and I changed what she thought a misquotation. I sent her everything I'd written, all about her and about Knox and its minister. Dr. Fitch had refused to baptize our son, Christopher, because we could not accede to what we thought was an exclusive biblicism. I was sure that our defiance and my flimsy "Knox Critique" would not pass muster. This was its conclusion:

Knox requires total credal acceptance. 'Unbelieving' is a word just short of anathema. Margaret, like C.S. Lewis before her, is a defender of the faith.

She will continue to write poems declarifying doctrine. Knox will edit them in her mind. And she will consider my readings of them to be ruthless. (59)

How would Margaret Avison receive this presumption, this tyro criticism, this oversimplification of what prompted her to change her poetry's orchestration? I was *not* happy with her adamant sense of privacy, her pen's power. Haide was disturbed by her obstruction, knowing that I *had* to write about her influence on us both. Then the phone rang. Her voice had changed. It might as well have been the voice of Victoria de Los Angeles. She recognized William Fitch's "flaw." She implied there was something to what I said about her "making it new"; there was nothing to prohibit. She allowed me my own reception of her work. She read a poem from Denise Levertov's newest book, as if to make peace. And finally, she said she was "neurotic" about being written about. She used the word.

Endorphins zoomed. Was I was fortunate to get off so lightly? Oberon published *Starting from Porcupine* in 1996; it included the Knox material that Margaret had sanctioned over the phone. Our friendship had dwindled, but I am persuaded that a remnant had moved her.

roosters

When I was in my early twenties, Margaret Avison took me for walks. She pointed out that a sharp sun through deciduous trees casts perfect circles on the sidewalk. On one walk she encouraged me to read Elizabeth Bishop, as if some of that marvelous poet would rub off. It was easy for me to realize that Margaret was the most astounding person I had ever met, so when I came across a Bishop poem in the Mentor anthology, *One Hundred Modern Poems* I wanted to forward it to her in case she didn't know it (sic.). "Roosters" is a big sing on the typewriter and I worked hard to reflect its correct spacing. Margaret thanked me for it, without mentioning that I underestimated the breadth of her reading: young and foolish. This Bishop incident brings up for me the question of poetic influence, if any, on the Avison voice. Perhaps the authors of "The Imaginary Iceberg" and "Our Working Day May Be Menaced" shared a kindred sensibility. I believe, however, that Margaret settled the question by saying that certain poems struck "her headbone" but that she didn't consciously copy them. She has described her early reading and referred to those poets and poems that impressed her (*I Am Here* 225-30). Nevertheless, the example of Elizabeth Bishop poses an intriguing possibility, especially now that Bishop has swept away all claimants to supremacy among American poets of her generation. Would most savants agree that Avison was an original? With this poem I offer a probe into the Bishop-Avison duet:

What Hits The Headbone

A woman can stand on another woman's shoulders,
Avison placed on Bishop's navy *Collected*
on the bedside table, both moving boulders
in the mind, how respected

each of the other, though they'd never meet.
A moose, a filling station, sagging balloons in the trash—
optics of the common touch, how they'd have meshed,
would have got on, eyes and I's of the same sort.

Now wait! Their landscapes are wholly unlike—
Brazilian blossoms circumferenced like tympani,
fishy Florida, risqué Morocc-
o, the restless traveller's empathy!

versus Avison staying put, a child's "pункт"
on the deepening prairie gaze,
then the fixed urban Toronto highrise
people, pigeons, parks, walkways, all distinct

in quirky tender observation. But what
did each retina retain? What inner images?
Were their languages moved about
the lost and found scrimmages

of being fully, incessantly alive?
Pain and revelation, engulfing fear
uniting lonely geniuses—forgiving chanticleer
the pealing messenger of Love?

The larger utterance, a grandeur of poetic words
aligned on this "peculiar shelf
of being" keeps them side by side,
each a miracle-maker of herself.

Coda

On our small dock I sit looking at Ice Chest Lake. The day is radiant, the air so still I can hear only the perpetual ringing in my ears. But five yards

out, the airflows create symmetrical cross-hatchings (not waves). Closer up, light ripples from somewhere and light-arrows shoot across cedar trunks in rapid sequence. Minnow schools point in one direction, then flicker. The sand is fretted. And on the sand are strange jet-black amoebas with fringes of bright gold. These are the intense shadows cast by what appear to be translucent bubbles or egg clusters. When I pick them up they sparkle. They are too flimsy to throw such stunning images on the underwater sand and my single eye cannot understand these particulars.

Margaret Avison would have made of this some indestructible anthem, beyond description. *I will write* is Margaret's leitmotif for me. As she aged, the poems issued in ever more abundance. Her career did not turn out to command the international scope Northrop Frye had expected. But all her books are a testimony to the power of the word/Word. What had happened to our friendship? In 1979 she wrote to me in a letter:

It is bewildering to not see friends as in Paradise will be natural—but *no* reason explains it, nor does friendship seem 'dormant' to me when ties are invisible. There is a discrepancy in our leading re art—not in *any* way a 'right/wrong distinction, simply a different leading for His Name's Sake, that implies diverse deployment. His choices are good, and consistent with Life Abundant all round though.

Margaret slipped away unnoticed, by all but a very few. Others, like myself, whom she touched or scraped, would have wanted to pay their final respects. That I did not work hard in later life to revive our friendship aggravates me. That her memorial was so out of reach grieves me. These unquenchable regrets.

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