

Margaret: Snapshots

by Joan Eichner

On the Bloor streetcar one evening in early summer, 1955, I had my first conversation with Margaret Avison. We were returning to central Toronto from our piano teacher's home on the Kingsway, where a monthly "class" had just taken place. "Class" was like a private mini-recital, when, playing on Miss Cockburn's forbidding Steinway piano, we each performed for other piano students. Margaret had long since stopped taking lessons, but remained friends with Miss Cockburn and came to class as an auditor.

Aware that she was already a well-known poet, I asked Margaret about her work. The answer was unexpected: "I am going to France as nursemaid for a family of four young children." A nursemaid? This accomplished poet?

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My next surprise about Margaret came when Miss Cockburn told me, with rancour in her voice, sometime in the mid-sixties, "Margaret has 'got' religion, and she is working in a storefront mission." This was a few years after I had delightedly purchased *Winter Sun* when it was first published in 1960. The poetry was not easy to understand, but I 'got' enough of the meaning and nuances to be full of admiration for it. What was a writer like this doing in a storefront mission?

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My next memory is somewhat hazy. What led to my being there, I do not now know, but I was in a basement apartment on Lascelles Boulevard, with several people of different ages and denominations, sitting around drinking peppermint tea and discussing a Bible passage. This was Margaret's apartment, where she lived with her mother, and the occasion was a weekly Bible study session. Margaret's insights astonished me even though I was quite familiar with the Bible and was a regular church-goer. Margaret's mother, although blind and quite elderly, participated as eagerly as all the others.

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Margaret was devoted to her mother Mabel, a brilliant woman. When she lost her sight after age 80, she learned Braille. In spite of blindness, she maintained her piano-playing skills well past her 90th year. Other tenants in their building would sit outside the Avison apartment just to listen to Mabel play her favourite Chopin waltzes and nocturnes. Less spectacularly, she once taught me a rhythmic device for memorizing the books of the Minor Prophets in the right order—Ho-Jo-Am, Ob-Jo-Mi-Na, Ha-Ze-Ha-Ze-Ma—for which I am grateful to this day.

Mabel was also a realist. She knew enough about the debilitating effects of stroke and heart problems to have signed a Do Not Resuscitate order, should continuing life depend on “special measures.” When heart failure ultimately sent her to hospital, however, the emergency doctor refused to recognize either the DNR document, or Mabel’s own reiteration of it right there from the gurney: if the doctors were not permitted to treat her condition, they would send her back home. As a result, she lived a bedridden existence for three more years before her death in 1985. Her mother’s unnecessary and undesired life in limbo had a profound effect on Margaret.

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Back to Fall of 1972: Margaret phoned early one morning from London, Ontario, where she had been appointed by the University of Western Ontario as its first writer-in-residence. Her message was bleak: she was frightened because suicidal thoughts had assailed her all night, so she had made an appointment for that afternoon with her psychiatrist at North York General. Could I pick her up afterwards and take her back to Union Station?

When I did meet her outside the hospital, she got into the car announcing that the doctor had told her she needed a friend in whom she could freely confide. As it turned out, I was to be that friend and confidante, and she mine. What precipitated her distress was perceived enmity between two church leaders who were close to her. As a relatively new believer, she was confused and conflicted by this.

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I remember visiting Margaret one weekend while she lived in London. Her apartment was above the local farmers’ market, up a steep stairway. It overlooked the store roofs, back alleys, and fire escapes. It was small, sparsely furnished, and redolent of apples. At night there were happy

sounds from Chinese students in the next apartment who ate dinner together around midnight each night.

I also remember visiting Margaret's University College office with its casement window. A wire basket was attached to the door for students' poems and requests for appointments. I remember a beautiful walk along a river, and above all I remember Margaret's absolute delight in some of the poetry she was receiving from the students. This is where she met her lifelong friend and editor, Stan Dragland, and where she encouraged young writers such as John B. Lee.

This was a time of relative freedom for her own writing. Her mother was being looked after by her sister Mary in Ottawa, and church politics were now safely confined to Toronto. Many of the *sunblue* poems came out of that year in London.

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1973, sometime early in the year—a scene on a Sunday afternoon in St. George's United Church, Toronto, at the front of the sanctuary by the baptismal font. My fourteen-year-old daughter Jane had chosen to be baptised, and invited Margaret to be her Godmother. The baptism was private, with the Very Rev. Dr. Angus MacQueen officiating, and Margaret and myself as witnesses. (She always returned to Toronto from London on weekends for the Bible study meetings, now in a friend's apartment, and for the Sunday evening services at Evangel Hall, the store-front mission.)

Margaret had asked that the old service of baptism in the Church of England Book of Common Prayer be used. Probably she enjoyed the semi-Elizabethan flavour of the wording. Dr. MacQueen would not have chosen that wording, but he gamely went along with it, and baptized my daughter: "And as for you, who have now by baptism put on Christ, it is your part and duty also, being made the child of God and of the Light by faith in Jesus Christ, to walk answerably to your Christian calling, and as becometh the child of Light; remembering always, that baptism representeth our profession, which is, to follow the example of our Saviour Christ...."

To mark the occasion, Margaret had typed out the service on large index cards held together by a metal ring (I still have that set of cards), then taken them to a calligrapher and arranged for the service to be written in calligraphy as a keepsake for Jane. Who but Margaret would have taken the trouble to do that?

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The time is early Fall, 1973, after Margaret had begun to work in the CBC Archives. The scene is a vacant lot off Spadina Road near the building on Lonsdale Avenue where she would subsequently work as office manager for Mustard Seed Mission. She enjoyed walking in that area because of its closeness to nature. The vacant lot was filled with weeds, wild flowers and warmth from the afternoon sun. Likely moved by the freedom of her surroundings, she confessed that she lacked the courage, and the will, ever to publish poems again. (Her last collection had been *The Dumbfounding*, seven years earlier). Caring for her mother and working full-time left her no time to revise drafts already written, she did not want to deal with publicity, and her work was not worth publishing, anyway.

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That was a low-point which gradually became history when Rev. William (Bill) Pope agreed to look at some of Margaret's poems. He had left official United Church ministry to take charge of his small publishing firm, Lancelot Press, in Hantsport, Nova Scotia. An unknown publisher, a small collection—these meant relative anonymity for Margaret, but they also meant poems in print. That first Lancelot collection was *sunblue*, the beginning of a new stage in her writing life.

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After her mother's death in 1985, when Margaret was living in a seniors' residence, she became friends with two other residents, Connie Stokes and Genevieve Carder, who were also University of Toronto grads. On weekdays they gathered each afternoon at 5:00 PM for sherry, book talk, sometimes poetry reading. When they wanted to communicate at other times, they would slip little notes under each other's doors rather than phoning. A collection of these notes is in the Avison archive at The University of Manitoba.

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Margaret's desk in the seniors' apartment faced east over the Rosedale Valley Ravine. With that view from the twelfth floor, and equipped with a notebook, her Bible, and several reference books, she would spend an hour every morning from 6:30 to 7:30 engaged in Bible study. Her many note-

books from these sessions are also in her archive. Many of her later poems play on the ever-changing sky views from that window.

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As Canadian winner of the Griffin Prize for Poetry in 2003, Margaret was invited to give a reading at the Edinburgh Festival of Books that August. After the reading, her immediate aim was to go to Starbucks for a good cup of coffee, and then to find out how, in spite of her increased difficulty walking, she could somehow to get out to the Firth of Forth next day, to the sea. Buses and a long walk did get us there. Margaret's greatest delight was exploring the tidal sand and picking up tiny shells. She also had enough courage to eat haggis.

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As she became frailer and needed to use a walker when outside the seniors' building, Margaret's chief aim was to walk north on Yonge Street to one of the parks on either side of the street near Crescent Road. There she would talk to the trees, even stroking their bark and trying to hug them from a sitting position. To enjoy their shade on a hot day was bliss for her. If pigeons gathered, or busy ants came into view, she was mesmerized.

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I can still see Margaret sitting on the most comfortable chair in her apartment, feet elevated on a hassock, head bent under a reading lamp to catch the light, writing none too legibly on legal-size yellow paper, hoping to finish her memoir while she still had enough eyesight and energy. In her last two years, this was the routine every afternoon until sherry time. *I am Here and Not Not-There*, prepared for publication by Dragland and Eichner, appeared two years after Margaret's death. As the Foreword states, the book is "a self-portrait by one of the country's best and most revered poets, a woman of almost unparalleled humanity and humility."

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In July, 2007, a broken hip sent Margaret to hospital, where surgery weakened her heart to such an extent that she was forced to choose between death in a few hours, or immediate heart surgery and then nursing-home

life. She chose to be taken off life support rather than live on as a chronic invalid. The mother's lingering existence in total dependency was not to be repeated by the daughter.

Knowing she would die that day, 31 July 2007, she summoned, me, her nephew, David McKim, and two close friends (both of whom she had known while volunteering in the Palliative Care Unit at St. Michael's Hospital) to her bedside, asking that someone should read Jesus' High Priestly prayer, the prayer He prayed as He faced death, recorded in John 17. There followed four hours of complete silence until a nurse came in and, probably testing for alertness, greeted Margaret in a cheery 'nurse' voice. This elicited a weak "hello." Responsive to the last. Soon after, she was quietly gone.

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The Avison grave lies in an old section of the Necropolis Cemetery in Toronto. Margaret's paternal great grandfather was keeper of the grounds there, thus her paternal grandmother was brought up in the keeper's house. Her grandfather Avison, who married the keeper's daughter, was a Methodist minister who served in Todmorden Mills across the Don River. He was buried in the Necropolis when he died of tuberculosis as a young man. Margaret's parents' grave, which holds Margaret's ashes, is located there as well. She and I visited the cemetery several times in her last years.

When it is dark although
 the cemetery is in
 our blindly self-obliterating
 city, the trees
 gather, encircle
 benches and grassy places.
 In here, looking up, the starry
 night is barely
 visible; yet its scent of *far*
 breathes gently.
 ("Shelters," MD 88)

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One more snapshot, this time from the realm of *far*—a snapshot by the poet George Whipple, who died in 2014. In his poem "The Seven Ages" he

described himself as “hiding from the world and others / until he wrote his soul / into existence, priest / of the invisible” (*Tom Thomson and other poems* 123). George and Margaret never met, but they corresponded extensively, greatly admiring each other’s work and ultimately becoming devoted friends. Perhaps he thought of Margaret as “priestess of the invisible.” He tells us how they might have met.

On Not Meeting Margaret Avison

I remember
not meeting Margaret Avison
in her Mustard Seed dim lair
sitting small and straight
in a wooden straight
backed chair
her hair
in a tight
grey tidy bun
typing tap-tap-tap,
on some work of charity.

I had come
to that upper room
to show my work but was
too shy to enter there
and slunk away before
she was aware
that a wuss
had stood a moment
by the open door
of that little room,
her second home.

(*The Seven Wonders of the Leg* 40).

Works Cited

- Whipple, George. *Tom Thomson and other poems*. Newcastle, ON: Penumbra Press, 2000.
———. *The Seven Wonders of the Leg*. Victoria: Ekstasis Editions, 2010.