INTERIOR AUGUST

--original poems

by

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B.A., The University of British Columbia 1955

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
IN THE DEPARTMENT OF
ENGLISH

We accept this thesis as conforming to the
required standard:

The University of British Columbia
April 1965
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Date April 21, 1965
The following pages contain a group of original poems. They are mainly lyric poems and employ free verse techniques. The poems are connected in their pre-occupation with imagery, especially sea imagery. They are aware of place, i.e., the coast of British Columbia. They deal with childhood, old age, death, and the sense of loss experienced in maturity.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TO

Alaska Review for "Clamming"
  "Flight from the Coast"
  "August My Love"

Canadian Forum for "News Items"
  "In the Fraser Canyon"

Dalhousie Review for "All Soul's Day"

Edge for "A Grandmother"
  "Downtown"

Evidence for "Parking Lot"

Fiddlehead for "Interior August"
  "Saturday Winters"

Northwest Review for "Fogs"

Potlatch for "Mountains"
  "News Items"
  "Interior August"

Prism for "Hospital Visit"

Queen's Quarterly for "The Ferry"
CONTENTS

News Items 1
A Grandmother 2
August My Love 3
Downtown 4
Interior August 5
Hospital Visit 6
Reality 7
Saturday Winters 8
The Ferry 9
Sunday in the Cariboo 10
Prairie Stop 11
At the Airport 12
Verses for Christmas 13
In the Fraser Canyon 17
Agamemnon Bay 18
Supermarkets 19
Uncharted Canada 20
Clamming 21
Fog 22
Cruise 23
Seascape 24
Gold in the Fraser Canyon 25
Armistice Day 26
History Class 27
Sunday Evening 28
Fogs 29
Marking the Fall 30
Song for a City 31
Parking Lot 32
Mountains 33
Flight from the Coast 34
All Soul's Day 35
A Dirge 36
Spring Sidewalk 38
Lent 39
At the Summer Cottage 40
Spring Burial 41
Sometimes I think how humorous
in our absurdly quaint hand-set civilization
fear could exist
snapping like quick spring storms
at the throats of cities
calling up ancient reactions
like toy bombs exploding in some antedated war
dropping from biplanes
strutting in the sky on balsa parts
with comic pilots
staring out of lead eyes
burning bodies
on hilarious jig-fast silent films
From the coy data aired on antique type
in each day's news
who could imagine
an ultimate up-to-date finish
to our neatly balanced lives.
A GRANDMOTHER

My grandmother fastened to her wooden chair
dreaded night leaning into it reluctantly
her speckled hands biting the edges of her chair
shutting inside, the cough that drenched her with
wet humiliation

her eyes apologetic
for the suddenness of urination
that lit the room with its sharp outrageous smell
I wondered as the light went how she could smile
watching from her chair for the steep cough
that climbed intensified toward her throat
now I know her warm eyes
saw through the agony of every night
an eventual gasp and the easing in
of a prouder dark.
AUGUST MY LOVE

Beautiful from the porch
the white sea sniffing
at the hollow dead crab ends
and the dirty smokes
you threw out all week
August scribbled on the sands
like a name
greased on a washroom wall
while we stand
hand in hand
squeezing out
the last thick bit of night
and summer
like a tired blackbird
gargling on a pine
grows progressively
less
tuneful.
DOWNTOWN

The old man's world is a room
dry as stale cornflakes
the ceiling
like a burst paper bag
dangling
limp and outmoded
over the bleak fourposter
the stove
and the piles of magazines he hoards
dust etched as evening moths
in summer the old man
airs his world
opening the window with gauzy hands
to stare
uncomprehending
at the crackling traffic
the shoppers wrinkling in the sun
like waxpaper
and pigeons
spread like soot on a hot walk
scenes
as puzzling
as the swirling letters in archaic type
unreasonable
as scrolls of daisies
blooming in a city square.
INTERIOR AUGUST

The day drips hot and blue
into the lake
sleek as suntan oil
the hills
    naked as buttered clams
sweat tumbleweed into the wind
and the beach people greased with sand
turn opulent bottoms
to the sun
raw sienna flesh
    warm as the hills
stranger than
parchment figures glazed on a Chinese screen
the sky
    hangs blatantly
    like a bar-room nude
over the brawl of motor boats
    and the divers soaring drunkenly
    into the air

In the frame of this August
I stretch on the wrinkled sand
remembering the moisture of firs
    massed subtly
on a coast trail
    overhead
in the sweeping fresco of branches
    the silence of a green sky.
HOSPITAL VISIT

Even John Keats
dying young
in an extraordinary spring
lay like this
strange hands
brittle as snowdrops
clawing the familiarity of cup
the mouth
losing
faint elliptical phrases
spittle
yellow white
stinging the heave of sheet
and saw
in the mirror of Severn's eyes
a beginning day
pigeons
washing in the sunshine
the scoured stone of buildings
traffic newly set out
and the inevitable sight
of people
rushing like fresh clouds
in the February morning.
REALITY

The lost land
    I still remember
was hopscotch squares
        sliced
on spring cement
a tree house
    rising
    in the faint mould
of yeasty August woods
huckleberries
    swishing salmon pink in pails
was chocolate clucking
    on the stoves
    the crack of leaves
on frosty streets
a fat wing of quilt
    spread over a night of snow
    a pond hard as cheese
    and blades nipping still porous ice
was transient magic
a land
    where bobbsey twins
and outdoor girls
    climbed with childhood fidelity
summer's improbable Adirondacks.
SATURDAY WINTERS

Where are the comic strip winters
the straight lines of snow pinned down
for the kids in the land of boxes
to crease in colour on Saturday
major hoople sledding
down freckled hills smooth as his summer sand
(in summer ducks and mice and orphan kids
float on blue inflated seas)
skeezix sparkling
in snowflakes big as mittens
falling without covering
the chatty big balloon
he wears like a sun
and skaters slipping like party soap
over eternal porcelain
oh nowhere in the paper world
do comic blizzards sting the friendly cheeks
but only cozy creatures
bask in snow
as warm as grins through five unmelting months.
THE FERRY

I like the ferry
rubbing its sides
against the islands
several times a day
on a sea
dull as unpolished linoleum
going through the comfortable machinations
of a slightly worn ship
guzzling diesel oil
and patted into place
with no one mentioning
the occasional engine belch
expected
from an old boat.
The young priest
  pale as weathered sage
  walks slowly
    down the rumbling altar steps
  to face his congregation
  his church thin and hollow
    as a starving colt
  holding in splintered ribs
    of stalls
  a few Indians
    sleepily radiating beer
      like incense
  and a greased cowboy
    flicking
      through a pocket magazine
In the silence
  shuffled by someone's feet
the young priest speaks
  his voice futile as the sad angel
  saddled over the altar
while through the stained dust windows
  over his head
the Cariboo morning grazes
  shiny and unconcerned as pasture grass.
PRAIRIE STOP

The greyhound loose as store dentures
clatters
over the icy lip of road
stopping
by a row of decaying false fronts
spread like a poultice
over the white painful face of the land
where elevators
like discarded ice chests
gape in the refuse of railway yards
and an old ford
sobs in the main street.
By the stove in the bus stop
I wait to melt
with pools of other passengers
noticing
an ancient man
shuffling his big boots like a trapper on snowshoes
happily
home.
AT THE AIRPORT

November leaving the earth
bare and black
and jets taxiing on the ground
with their fins in the air
like sharks
exposed at an aquarium
the sky dark as the sea
in November
waiting for the blunt thrust
of the grey planes
pointing east and west
into the dull foam of its clouds
I turn away
my eyes salted by bleak runway winds
reluctant to lose
the warm curve of your hand
to see you stepping into savage steel
leaving me empty
as the vacant ocean.
VERSES FOR CHRISTMAS

I

The shelves of dolls
melt like frosting
over the blend of toys
And bundles of small girls
fastened with mittens and scarves
burst with a wish
the glass package of the toyshop window
to carry home the smiling dolls
their faces
wondering like flowers.
II

For nine of my Christmas years
a doll
picked by my grandmother
from the catalogue garden
bloomed in its long-stemmed box
under the tree
making me gladder
than her tea-kettle
or the cat
laughing under the stove
balancing the insult
of her diligent sod-brown stockings
knitted each year
to muddy my winter legs.
All the mornings with her were festive
the flock of dolls
  growing like lambs
  on a spring hill
I wrapped them in silver paper
  make-believe silk
  from her tree
fed them like orphaned sheep
  combed their clay hair
suddenly softer than new born wool
  softer than the snow hair
  of my grandmother
curling like tinsel
  crisp and white as the Christmas star.
The year she died
there was still Christmas
falling silently
on our family
covering the black empty spots
softening the dark hollows
of our loneliness
On Christmas day
we stood quiet as the grass
by the new mound
ornamenting the strange walled town
with twinkling flowers
bright as the colored lights on bushy firs
I covered my dolls that night
with special hands
wrapping their soft pink arms
against an untried year
preserving in
mute clay and sawdust
the fragile promise of Christmas.
IN THE FRASER CANYON

The old Indian
his face quilted like a worn eiderdown
squints at the tourists
stitching his road
with threads of kleenex and empty cartons
and prods a cigarette
into the jagged zipper of his mouth
he sits in a yard patched with the punctured innards
of an old boat
and watches for the pattern of cars
to break
for a tourist purring with dollar bills
to ask the way
down the furry banks
to the home of the plump fish
trapped in the howling river.
AGAMEMNON BAY

Hanging by a piece of love
  to this Mediterranean hill
reeled off a jut of Canadian coast
sun wearing grasses thin
  with daily shine
you and I  (wreathed with bits of plump sky)
  flamboyantly flattened
  on the rims of potato chip ruins
  (the seeds of grapes
disgorged on the round fat bay--
  and the arbutus leaning  over the rail of the sea)
I love you better
  when the day
  has Bacchanalian traces.
Mothers in ice-cream prints
steer cool babies
into shelves bright as popsicles
toss red and yellow cartons
into baskets bulging
with instant tea and lemonade
while happily caged the children
slip flossy legs
through bars
and ride the shining carts
but somewhere day jolts
like a broken carousel
and mother soothing
bloated babies
wait at the white man's hut
where medicine is scooped
into dry mouths
and the sun
like a lost balloon
drifts higher in an unmelting sky.
UNCHARTED CANADA

Flat bottomed prairie towns rowing by--
toss out the road map compass
this is wide open god forsaken
nowhere
sprays of wheat splashed on bizarre earth
the ripple of a bird  throwing up a voiceless landsick wail
the inevitable blue sky
hoisted overhead
no clouds (only the wisp of fence post
blowing
black wires across the land)
no hills (a once in a while cow
bumping the horizon)
and always
just over your shoulder
the elevators
mythical silver mouthed
holding back
the prairie ocean.
CLAMMING

I like to bellow after
clams sliding their hard quick bellies
pointlessly
into the sand
smack
on the moist fuzz of the sea edge
slipping
into their private darkness
licking out a place in the shade
for themselves and their clam descendants
lucky for clams
they don't know how quickly someone anyone
could ambush them
slide down the feathered sand
and tickle gently
till their whole quivering
battlement collapses.
FOG

On foggy nights
   young gaudy boats
decks well scrubbed
   sneak from the docks
to howl
   under bridges
raising their low lusty voices
   in noisy counterpoints
of complaint
But old squat boats
   making their way wheezily
down the slippery sea
tut-tut
cautiously at the roistering horns
telling each other
in cracked sodden whispers
old boards bursting with pride
that fog was thicker years ago
when they were young.
CRUISE

The sea lay a rumpled cloth
   and our boat rumbling like an empty stomach
      eased her prow
         into apple green waves
            turning logs in long sizzling rotation
On the greasy deck
   we stretched like drunken romans
      inebriated by the poignant blue sun
         crushed in the sky like a grape
by the shimmering sails
   by the closeness of hands
      in the wild candlelight of August.
SEASCAPE

The morning squeezes crabs onto the sand taping
the gluey shore assembling pieces of a jigsaw dawn
a silent whole a completion of rock and gull and sea
a finished print of barges cutting waves square as
stamps and the wet movement of small crusty things
Bound by the defacement of increasing light
I wait - knowing my next move will scare the pieces
off the sea shelf scattering the dawn like a fallen game.
GOLD IN THE FRASER CANYON

Broken mountains blasted out in black
like overturned hulks masted by
an occasional derelict tree
perched sideways over the canyon's wreck

the reality of this black river
spinning the miners closer to the myth
the repeated thread
of someone's fierce arabic dreams

out of the sand rushing for the blunt shovel nose
of the practical sternwheeler

each man shapes his own romance

this bleakness hiding gems
larger than the stolen treasures
dug from the yielding imagined caves
of forty thieves.
ARMISTICE DAY

Military tailoring a century ago
was colourful
so history has caught the gentlemen who charged (lithographed figures)
dying gracefully in blue cashmere
our wars are less picturesque
who wants to see
khaki forked by barbed wire
or bloody scarecrows over the top
of some ravaged field
or the gleaming bones
after the blast

war belongs in the unreliable prints of memory
(and so we remember
the eleventh of November.)
HISTORY CLASS

She read about the country's pioneers
and they lived independent of the words and the book
fighting the wilderness
in the clarity of her invention
In a coast autumn the cedars blazed with green
the swelling trees hid wary eyes
moved ominously
and bushes walked with upraised arms
Released from school
she saw the world was dangerous
and raced wildly through the unfamiliar path
menaced by the pine trees and the hurting cones'
and the fallen leaves which scorched her running feet.
SUNDAY EVENING

Outside rain is dying
on corners
bleached by street lights
and in the pale night
curled wisps of faces
pause
to envy our walk
So the silver night
burns away like incense
leaves only the smell of spring
gives us little time
to hold something
shining
and fugitive
as mercury.
We hide in fogs
covering with a pale skin
the crude bones of our desires
the naked incongruity
of appetites
in the frozen marrow of November bodies
the fusion of what we look for
the warmth of some remembered or anticipated spring
with cold reality
the now of ineffectual winter
creating screens
our smiles our skins stretching over bones
the movement tingle of living
all fogs hiding
the limp fall of the last leaves
the rot of summer's green
the hope that we should be alive
before we die.
MARKING THE FALL

Once together the perfection of a moment
promised something I was never sure--
I remember the car the black rip of trees
the road chalked out
the hallucination of your touch
I remember and I note it is like thinking back to fall
like imagining asters wandering uphill
a city of puddles with the shells of a thousand leaves
tramp ships brown and russet over rennet dyed seas
like feeling in imagination the mud and pulpy grass
and the first frost starching leaves
I note and I remember
yet I know the symmetry of early tracings fade
and today in october
I walk in the garden seeing
a sky disfigured by faint clouds
dead trees
and leaves like black wings
mangled in the trap of reality.
SONG FOR A CITY

I remember your beaches oozing like whipped cream out of the edges of apartments your architecture a cubist experiment your rainy people sprinkled everywhere and all those mountains like coloured slides beautiful and repetitious

I remember your backyard on the sea the yachtsmen who never leave shore celebrating with nautical zeal the ships dabbled in between buildings and the smell of seaweed bouncing off the sidewalks

I remember your wet streets shining like oil paints the shoppers with mushroom heads the collage of constant damp the sudden lift when a snow wind swells the mountains or when the fog churned out of sea boilers clears and we see you for what you are a charlatan full of promises leaving your people somewhere else longing for you.
PARKING LOT

I wait in the car while the fog steers down
and human mobiles night years away dangling from some still ceiling
shift  bend and cohere
into clearer outlines as they walk
Watching for you
while horns dapple the invisible inlet with running sound
I stare at the thick oils of night
feel the panic of the cold hours
the foreshortened buildings  the globules of neons
the striated lamp posts
know the terror of a burning city
put out by november
and alone in the rasping smoke
I know you will not come
yet I wait  my loneliness deepened by this grey coating
this congestion of fall
making me  like the scene
an abstraction
my heightened unreality  blending with the
strangeness of
this futile lost night.
Mountains

Walking through an arabesque of mountains
I feel the vitality of these wild things
these bold dancers
rock streaked trees pinned on
ripping the sky
all resounding, all movement
small things pivoting on the steep sides
waterfalls crashing through the gripped hands of
fern and frond
winds circulating like blood
through the great bodies
At the feet of these immortals
I walk a dead thing
my life a still erosion
my slow disappearance controlled and perpetual.
FLIGHT FROM THE COAST

I came to this town (the mountains removed)
and sorted my desires

to move from myself firmly netted by the sea
from all my close loves all that the sea heaps greedily on its lap
boats and seagulls clouds and rain
from the enclosure of green trees
I came to this place this immensity this arena held down by
three-quarters sky

here where birds are open as clowns
here where the beer parlours are staccato with
construction men

and the one main street is pitted by tire claws
here where only the jubilant fat ice grows long and sleek
and the northern lights are hostile
spitting yellow fire out of a black alley

Alone on Saturday night I hear
sudden cacophonies of men and women swaddled in hairs
hurrying nowhere in the snow

and all the night (mountainless)
staccato with cold
passes me by.
ALL SOUL'S DAY

I listened to the organ and the dies irae—the old brooding rite
But I was young that November and I walked from the church
into an evening rain too vital for an old year
the drops racked the pavement and ran off like cats
to mix with the dark
Past swaying coke and cigarette signs I ran
triumphant while the rain dripped like wax off my face
the flickering neons stained me
and I became a shining mosaic
Store windows highlighted me
and I was wooed by paintings and china and blurred furs
(But I saw a dresden figure gleaming in an antique window
its face unmarred by two hundred years
and I was suddenly moved to tears
my hands withered and grew old
and I heard with futile understanding
the solemn music of All Soul's Day.)
A DIRGE

I

The old Highlanders my people crossed the ocean forty years ago
came through the aridity of prairie
to the west coast
to the rain the wild chanting of the trees
and drone of waves moving in remembered patterns
on shores rockier than those left behind.

II

they were strong faces rubbered by the wind and sea
women with hands veined blue rivers on hardened flesh
the men giants who defended the faith in waterfront joints
with fists powerful as the sea ripping the rocks
whose young eyes followed the words of the Gaelic songs
and saw their island glorified

III

powerful proud men
they worked by the sea and on the sea
threw their nets into the big belly of the Pacific
gutted fish sailed as carpenters and mates
and saw from the decks the half-finished jigsaw
of the coast
bits of land hanging off the sea
steely tips of mountains
and disjointed curvature of trees
IV

Here in an alien land they raised us
their children
gave us in the groping complexities of time
the simplicity of an old belief
marvelled at our new learning
and held us with the compliment
of their trust

V

now they are dying
now we read to them wipe crumbs off their blue creased lips
listen impatiently to the recurring pattern
of embroidered tales

Now at our turn
when the pipes shriek the splendour of our dead
at the last resting place
we of a new generation
seeing the strong bodies laid simply in the earth
tremble for what we do not have.
SPRING SIDEWALK

Spring leaped through the pavement
taught small girls and boys to fly
skipped them over diamond stones
pitched wagons scooters runners
down the hill in the clean sun
brought us out too wiser than Solomon
old faces trenched in the light
stepping backwards over birds and plants and hours
to sweep the grey cement.
LENT

This year the sun
came out sharply
cought our breath
like a jib
snapped into the wind
heaved up plants
and backyards of tom cats
pollinating the sky

grew branches of birds
chased dogs rippling
into bony earth

and gave old men
another year
sent them grinning
into the wind

and who can pray
when mountains race the sky

and who can ponder
in this kitey weather

excuse us lord
till some more sombre time
when dark rains soak the sun
and drown us
bugs and flowers and men

too hard too hard
this bursting spring
to think as we should
of the fact of death.
AT THE SUMMER COTTAGE

Once as a child in a simple perfect summer
when seaweed clawed the rocks
and sailboats with white mouths
clung grudgingly to piers
a wind rammed the sea
and my cat reading hysteria
into the sudden storm
ran
a froth of madness on whiskers and ruff
In the long useless chase
I lunged and fell
sobbed at passive trees and grass pleaded with dead stones
but the cat blazing at me with terrified eyes
disappeared
leaving me with a handful of uprooted moss
and a suggestion of cruelty
in the simple perfect summer.
SPRING BURIAL

I see the old people step carefully
over the rounded grass
the old harsh people
faces laid pitiful in a morning of rock clarity
uncovered
like the grave stones squatting low on the ground
Nearby in the still untidy time
before spring greens the mounds
the new box waits its futile use
and the priest prays for the dead
ancient gray words set like slabs in the memory
prays for the dead and for all of us all old people
dying in the grass
buried in the relentless coming and going of every spring.