THE LAYERS OF EARTH

by

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ABSTRACT

These fifty-seven poems are a partial record of three journeys, in five stages. The journeys are:
(1) chronological growth through and from boyhood; (2) changes of physical environment, of place; (3) interior journeys relating in various ways to the other two. The stages, or movement of the poems, as revealed in the section divisions, is: (1) from a view of immediate surroundings; (2) through observation of a wider scene; (3) through exploration of social environment, with its interior counterpart; (4) through involvement in socio-political concerns; (5) and finally to a sharper focus on the individual again, this time on the individual's only truly shared group of sensations, love. The book has the only possible central theme: (birth-growth-love-death) life.

The experiences we have are basically our responses to objects or forces. Our beings exist as a network of responses to physical, mental and social environment, these being but aspects of our own physical selves. We receive, observe, explore, express, and love, through sense and sensation. "We think by feeling." And we can feel only the surfaces (inside, outside, along the edges) because as soon as we are through one surface we are onto the surface of another layer. So, paradoxically, concern for surfaces pulls us deep into the object or experience; so also the response is the experience. ("The Medium is the message.")
The poems then are surfaces, sensations, responses. And all of this is in a context of "earthness." "Earth" is the starting place and the raw material graveyard of all our mental, spiritual, and social structures. Our experiences, sensations, imaginings, thoughts, reactions, actions, hopes, fears, and natural-cultural environments are but different aspects of one substance, ourselves, different layers of our own earth. Our journeys and our stages of development are travels through the layers of the earth.

In structure, the whole collection parallels each part, and the essential structure of each poem. The poem looks above and below, within and without, ahead and back. Each section begins and ends with a poem looking both ways. The collection begins with a poem stating the "why" of it all, and ends with the "Beginning." The main theme of each section is interwoven through the other sections. Unity is provided also by re-occurrence of symbols and images, and by a certain tone or point of view throughout. But the significances of these elements change with changing context, as the poems uncover successive "layers of earth."
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FIDDLEHEAD

DELTA

B.C. CENTENNIAL ANTHOLOGY

TONIGHT'S HOUSE

POTLATCH
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NOW ...
NOW

My reason reaches out

a clutch of words

I must

catch quick that sun bit

(slippery
don down my fingers to the sinews past the eye)

:because sun, at the musty down end of a
day once dawned won't wait for
clumsy hands
to fiddle with abstraction.
II

RECEIVING
ON THE POINT

Side slipping down the unseen cliffs
out there,
a strident gull reflects
a child's salt and tangled cries
woven in the swell and spray
still wavering on this coast of spring;

(black birds red winged ripple and dart—
gorse-thorned, they counterpoint the restless
cchild and gull declaiming in the sun);

... almost true, but a season of the sea
grass-robes the clay
the ancient broom bristles.
SUMMER PLACE

Sand scattered children
fly their laughing high above
the gull cries playing the air;
suddenly the afternoon drops
into echoes from cliffside cottages
of salad and ice cream;
beyond the twilight screens
childhooded patterns
dwindle with the gulls;
a silent dark
coils in below the sand;
humped backs swell the covering sea.
DOWN BEACON HILL

Once we ran the ragged hill to bay,
chasing its tattered paths,
threading thickets;
broom and gorse cut,
clutched at our sleeves.

No time for questions from
the permanent gray gulls that garbled
repetitious air;
no care
for lovers started from their nests
in the blossoming woven hill toward the sea.

Our quarry would not stay;
the carping birds could see
how long the reach is of the wishing shore.
VICTORIA

Victoria, I cannot get a metaphor from you, except perhaps in shifting sky, or the same gull, restless, or sea writhing in my writing in beside the grass-clothed mounds that fortified those barked brown forebears against all but cannon's deep infection or the blast of merchantry.

Victoria, into Maquinna's salmon-yard, his berried worlds, his whale-ward reach, Cook's flowing empire whelmed momentarily; ebbing, left the sea-salt pastures heavy with a new breed: hunters of mythology or money, on the gull-wailing shore where otters slipped and slid.

Victoria, now your spinstermen of local history slipshod slippered join the barbered brokers who await their coming down to join Maquinna's crew.
WATCHING THE WIND

Watching the dissolving wind
attack the sand cliffs
and the bitterness of sea-flung rocks,
below whip grasses pluming
a seashell slant of earth;

watching a boy
wander, eye following the stone shine,
timed by tide among the shells;

I reach along the wind to welcome him,
but my feet feel the shifting hill,
and banners of the grass are all
that mark the driven air.
THE SHELL

Within the noon
sounds proper
to Victoria's oak bay
shoaling waters
dissipate this hushing tide swell
washed from there
from some where
long away:
an undercurrent still
sounds
the deep city.
The yellow broom explodes
summer by sea:
waves of echo splash the town.

Summer's end spouts
dry black pod-seed
sputtered into the raked out
dun gardens,
guarded past
a picket gated ricket fence.

The ocean's violet doom rolls in
evening on the town: a muffled pounding underneath
the boundaries of mind.
The coils of the open ocean wind
along the causeway,
tidal currents sway
and rest,
sullen upon a man-made beach.

Only gulls
not many
walk the driftwood
past the fence barbed
wire holding a world away.

But gulls belong here on the jumbled shore,
or
in a spray of wind,
eyeing
the tide crushing rocks
shift in a motion
of sea.
The shoulders of the open ocean push
    against a crumple of rock and driftwood;
This threatened point was left for native denizens;
    gulls glimpse an underbrush of shells and sheds.

Inland the highway now shoots arrow-straight
beyond an incidental turning
where some wrinkled by-gone way
fumbles off, out of sight, past: the world,

A ragged church, a still half-unsubmerged canoe.
MESSAGE FROM THE SUBURBS

Outside our columned cells
upon a decent street,
the poplars' flying pages scatter
into yellow broom before our eyes
can weep;

(none of our brightness
shafts the air,
nor do we reaching find the roots of springs);

this drone,

ourselves ourselves,

will buzz, repeat,
its frittered newspring leavings
from a schoolish past
to worry this late afternoon;

perhaps there will be a new pillar of
or something like a final flowering of a
some how the clocks are counting backward to
III

OBSERVANCES
DECLARATION

Through forest, wind, and fire,
my laboured earth

breathes its best below the impelled flight,
yet drives it on,

will block the going of a moment
that bleeds our pinch of light
or drains the hearth of incense,

will pursue the flame and force
within leaf, pebble, purple shell.

No enemy the heart has but departure,

and earth will bring seed sparkling from the sea.
NATURE STUDY

That black dead branch:
w\text{watch it}
reach
\text{this window.}

Will it stop?
SUDDEN PASSING

bleak marsh flat:
stripped
harsh grass;
sudden sun:
on wet soil flashes back
a crackle in the eye
or one bleached fragment sparks
a memory of mind.

In this world thin trees,
limbs bone brittle, stiffly crippled,
stalk to get a grip, or
paralyze into questions,
while
steadily the half merged fence posts march
like syllables across a printed field.
SEASONAL

The hours have drifted off
to woodsmoke fall.

Tarnished leaves crinkle the air.

The lady in dry pepper tweeds
trundles her dog along the boulevard.

Ivy clings to cold stone walls.
It hangs above us there,
or stands on pinnacles of air;
only the earth moves under it.

Its eyes embrace the world,
vision swings
across the airlined paths,
rays down to treetops,
probes to underbrush and roots
(the space between the branches has the meaning).
The view from space has not to do
with beauty or with mercy.
HILLTOP

Dead uprooted cut-down bodies of the forest
   (the boy once leaned upon)
mark the jagged road-edge blasted
   into pavement.

This air once vibrated murmurs in to all the senses:
   flower grasses echoed mosses drying,
balanced on the sound of nothing
   but the sunlight.

Below, and just beyond the boy's reach out,
   tops of trees once tufted up
in a move of air
   passed off to shadow on the textured sea.

Three houses stand there now,
   flat blank glass to seaward,
and the road to carry quick
   nuzzlers in the late black night, windows closed.
In any faith
I should not question your going
under summer or sharp shine on shaken branches:
the slide of cedars into rust
stops at the cliff edge; the sun turns;
they melt back to green;
while gulls lift air
some light will filter through.

I reach for the restraint of fish, flower, forest,
but am driven to consider in imprinted nerves
and waxen hiving brain,
our numbered skin, the falling of
our grave and scaled images.

I wonder: in the no more noon,
will memory remember to remember?
I am willing to grasp singing
vein of tree or blood
in the moment of the earth;
and my fingers will be seeking
your instruction, your persuasion.
SEASONS

Hummingbird passes:
fuchsia flowers above the
stillness
dry grasses.
GULF ISLANDS

These sleeping animals, unidentifiable, slide serpent shapes in these white waters where we pass.

Is it they intertwine and coil the wake beyond my fabulous and floating island?

Not one has opened a great jaw to swirl us down and disappear us—so far.
REMINDERS

These twigs that grow
leafless on winter trees
peculiarly surrounding us
under the cloud are
doubtful silhouettes against
our adam manned imagining.
IV

EXPLORING
CREDO

Come to the edge of the uncomfortable sea
I, still, did not, yet, believe;
but
the stone-neighbourhooded sea became not cold,
the undulating green world wavered around my eyes
more real than earth,
and the shore resisted all my trials.
EXPLORATION

In a shell of skin
nerves finger out strange contours,
the inside of the mask.

In this unknown and knowing country
of concealment,
years pass toward nothing left;

yet slowly the roots of trees,
slowly the smell of petals of roses,
slowly the colours of morning air

creep through crevices,
slide through faults and fissures,
from their own shelled world into something else.

And down the bone,
along the muscled blood, I see
the far world leaving its print on the brain.
THE PLACING

I seek exact location;
now that mathematics moves on constantly
coorinates are only on the old old mappings.

Intersect the bone and muscle;
where the rivers of the heart run out
I hear a purple eagle and a serpent cry;
but leave them---brain does not belong in
this location.

Say perhaps they will adorn the borders.
(But still, what holds it all together
with the arteries in circle
and the nerves in parallel?)

I'll give up for now the short sharp struggle,
leave the brain an incognita land,
and ride the whales and serpent eagles
off the edges,
past the corners of the wind.
JOURNEY

Tenth Ave. is so well lighted now
you can look up but not see any starlight, any time;

farther out it's darker, so
you see more
(clouds, but only perhaps).

Today in the pale winter lack-light
I am
past the philosophers in their chambered faculties,
but
nearer the sea, and wonder
if that tree leans
or
the earth tilts.
TOTEMS

A surround of thunder follows the brooding beak, ready, poised, solid.

Unseen, under the moss, are curving fingers that once surged on cedar in the long rain wound in the mists where the carved trees now grow and vanish (no shadow hands can help them any more, no hands to hear the forest).

Today our totems move and shape us to the listening circuitry.
DERRICK I

A giant insect
perched and picking clean
the girdered skeleton;
only the slow swing
of the stretched neck
sinewed
tells
of the directing cell
the micro brain;
downward into downward
eyes probe
hooked tongue hunts down
some last
matter.
DERRICK II

Still:

at day's end

lines and angles

on a flat

blank

sky.
UNIVERSITY

Hybridized
to bustled mini-chrome
crackling out its mod serenity;
deified by dirt of course
and plaster taints, ancestrous
involution images of action;
its theory-coated strollers pander down
the mental mossways in the muddle of the road.
In the box of paradise, or liquidity of here, motion brings cold mourning:
I have felt the size of heaven and dimensions and dimensions of a hell;
my first thrust upward,
mountains penetrate a thickened atmosphere,
swell in creased masses to the tumulus of time.

(Once eels slid their ways through marsh and ooze, mountains trembled in their roots, skeletal birds beat the air, moist and pulsating in the hot green neighbourhood, before the old man's dreaming energy spent itself upon a dream of hours.)

The mountains stare:
I follow lights trickling from some sprinkle back in the starred hills, and the last slide of sunlight down the slow sides of mountain, snowed and floating, wave and wave, both edged and ridged.
TOUR OF THE CITY

My circled eye resists the stratosphere,
envisages itself beyond to inward.

Where are the summer dancers from the crippled past?
The last geographers and music men depart;
we lure our selves down echoed alleys;
(the cornucopia streets are disappeared)
and blank back windows' stare the only answer beckoning
at all.

A candle burns in space,
melts and consumes
into your body.

My flame divides the sky;
I too thrust earthy welcome into the stars and light
beyond the seeing and sensation;
circle with me in the cold spark--
reflective drops on moonlit winter trees.
MOTH

Out there no follower,
no fire to warm or crackle up
the heart or fluttered wings;

out there anxious I swerved
through weaving air,
something and despair, small flames,
brushed my wings and held me
halfway between, and moving, there;

now my circle intersects itself,
my heliotropic senses all compound
to magnify a pinch of light.
blonde girl
    genuine rain wet
    haloed hair;

your oxford accent ceremonially
    looks for tea ceremony sets
    (I look for you)
    but not with
    plastic imitation wicker handles.

Vancouver girl
    you want the real thing
    in the Ginza Shop
    on Robson Strasse
    British Columbia
    near False Creek.
There is some risk

travelling

these days

: throw it back into mythology

and say

if we rode bareback pegasus (but bridled),
those hero head lines might have drawn
our selves into the shape of reigning hunters

or

: natural history comes to our assistance
(the difference between

sacred oak and ivy

and

poison oak and ivy

is chiefly in our reaction to itch;
and poison oak differs but by syllable

from

poison gas).

And In Fact,

add two symbols to

poison

: obviously you get a new position;
all you can use is the science of linguistics.
I have seen bodies fall like cats, like dogs,
from skies with no cloud;
brightness does now fall
in deed from air;
the winged horse struggles for breath,
so I shall stay within the safer faculties,
and keep my leaves in order on the shelf.
V

LAMENTS
CELLO CONCERT MAYBE

Nerves of pain
wind tight
to hold this city to a centre—
not burst, blast, and fly
zap apart
or dribble off at the edges.

Would you melt in a cloud?
The tracks of trains torn,
up or down the nails held;
the player's fingers twitch
uselessly, feet crossed,
thighs strain.

I can sell pain or buy,
can give, can give,
while busses rumble smoothly on
across the red rails of the bone and blood;
or look for flowers in the reeling night:
to say that pain must stop (like that)
it would be crueller than pain.
Incensed air from distance
threads my acrid self around it;
(religious smoke as well can surely
penetrate the membraned skeleton).

But make it close
--only close can--
sharp, harsh,
the twist of word sears into sight.

Let me peel back the chemistry of clothing,
(the shapes of nerves are plain),
and on the tension of a pitched string thrust
my muscled brain into contortion's calm.
POSTWAR
SIGHTSEEING

Leaves surround the field now:
the burnt past whispers;
birds hang in the air,
drift of dead wind.

Restless, we hesitate, observe still
peace, in the caked earth;
stiff wry branches beckon even us
to lie together in the crater's pocket.
EASTER

X marks this yearly place;
we come here regular as clockstop;
it seems to be a live one, though
perhaps some seedier; the clientele
someone has tattered round the edges;
our paths did cross before of course,
and now it's hard to tell
which is.
In any one case it must be time indeed
to see that jesus added death to spring;
so shelled in each hour's crowded metaphor
we wait in sun on this bright brittle day.
RESURRECTION

This crag of a sick man
fumbles his creaking corner,
is no more notable,
his tatters hang at every crossing.

A broken glass of house believes
no tears
but collapsed reflection of unreal timed eyes,
love's memory in the sweep of emptied sun.

And should there be fever of flesh
he would be only bold
enough to stay
cornered in the sepulchre sun.
TWENTIETH CENTURY: A P.R. PROBLEM

The brain might gag on bodies;
a computer fingering statistics
until nerves run out.

Cancel the air
lest breath release
some curse from the unborn, unthought of, dead;
lament is only for the willing properly,
but even some of them suspect
that incantation lies.

The small ones could most dangerously be
a needle in the brain
shorting out the necessary current.
HAVE TIME

Have time.
What use is now to us?
All left is personal and short.

We have seen nothing stir beyond a shout
all the great night while in the library
we looked along the laddered years of ancestors.

The faded dears called, echoed down
the long air, where the love-roughed fingers were
cressing a cold moon, a thought ago.

But ears are deaf now;
on the vacant margin of a history
we dare not use our drawn-blind eyes
balancing like careworn cottage windows
on the edge of space--
where galaxies have whined and shot
blind gods with fear.
LETTER BACK

Lost to time's reach
we did blend our bones with (loser) Mercury;
unseen beyond the flashpoint we saw history
rack out its unknown ages in the dark;
when fire fingered crooked in the eyes
our blind nerves raised the heart stone altars,
sifted ashes aimlessly from twisting rock,
above the unhinged graves.

We have found at last
bare bones of a lesson legend
torn from schoolbooks.
The bigger drops bounce, at least visibly, to somewhere else:

: into the Coffee Garden rebounds a Tyrolean hat, plasti-protected,
its man wise in a fashion with fuzzy feather,
its umbrella and insurance journal;
surely he will not suffer from the raindrop's weapon?
CONVIVIAL GOTHIC

Across the teacups,
shielded by a line of table,
faces,
an enamelled stare of linen
blank as guest towels,
glaze a manufactured gathering, answer to
the unrelenting ordinary thing.
THEATRE, CAFE, OR SOMEWHERE

Smoke rises from votive glows;
blood-shapened points write laughlessly
on walls of air;
cubes rattle in the cup;
motley dancers in the throat
mock time's stretched arms,
and ignore the crowned italics in the air.
PICNIC AT PASSCHENDAELLE

Tearing apart the cold chicken
thoughtfully provided by our hosts,
who welcome tourists at a reasonable rate,
we consume local history from
the paper plates engraved with SOUVENIR,
sold on appropriate occasions, and
we read there are no carnivores
remaining in that district.
MEMO: RE THEOLOGICAL DISPUTATION

As for me, send this:

sensible of follies, and bereft
of platitude and dogma once I prized,

(Christ-lifes!)
let love fall fast
like light, before exploding night
has passed the hours of humankind wide sky.
VI

LOVINGS
Your thighs, my love,
are metaphor
of stripped arbutus flesh-
tinged, and repeating curves
as girls in growing curve and weave
about the growing, and air moving resounds music
through their own and man's mind.
In among the firm and silken curves
there's something dead and brittle-sharp.
EVENT

Once when I felt the green and reaching
world within your eyes,
You burned my coverlet of words away:
Young and afraid,
I drew my sleep around me.
ROCK AND MUMBLE

Do twenty cacophonic centuries lead to
this madscrap scramble into some succinct salvation
in rag-tag-time dirges?

We bring to an emasculated life
the billed bored symphony of selling
corrugation's walk of any ages, with of course
paraphernalia globally significant:
it gives salvation syncopotency.
A fantasy of your shape in a cloud,
flashed in silver in the split, charged air,
lasts but for the love the wind takes to discharge
the passion of my own imagination.

But now what lightning rod can drain away
the urgency of earth?—
our isomeric bodies charge themselves.
LOCAL GEOGRAPHY

On snow-spent nights
here river's ocean meets
my spring of stars
that yells and spouts from the moist inlet
to the farthest probing urge of mountain.

Up the inward precipice of night,
your rounds and rivulets,
the forest darkneses are sprayed
with hot sparks from the milky way
that shivers in the sea.
ON THE DIFFICULTIES OF COMPOSING VERSE

OR

ACTRESS RELAXING IN A NIGHT SPOT

Locked
back of the black-encircled eyes,

words wind,
reverberate from walls,
cluster to gather into--
twist to--
slipshod strained attempt
to liberate self,
or by lurid metaphor leap over,
or by straight sharp stab attack,
or by heaven lie down together.
APPOINTMENT

It is almost better
you are not where I am;
on the crest of the flowing street
a splash of cars
rushes away the shapes of others, but no other
fills the space
beside my body.

Isolated by my own repeated battering,
angry atmosphere and beating self,

I no longer need await what happens to me
near or far.

I will not now say the
old things unless
they are newly
true for
now.
CONVERSE

Tulips unfold slowly in the early light, from budding to the curving hands, then to mouths ominous but more; dark gentle flames bloom at night.
MOUNTAIN

From the mountain,
tiger
carries his illusionary
visionary black and yellow
tail and belly,
senses tightened,
(slipping tall grasses,
sliding between bamboo),
shades his own track down,
head swinging to the valley snarls
and the intermittent brightness.
My blistered mouth:

an icarus of tongue and lips

or fish drowned in its boiling sea.
VII

CONCLUSION
Crabwise,
the tide sidles back from the beach:
beside me a shell shifts;
pebbled capillaries collapse;
other laggard scuttlers,
ccaught in the killing air
beside me crouch
robed in seaweed;
I hear a tick and slight crackle;
inexorably a green world shrivels.