

MEMORY ORGANIZED:

The Novels of Audrey Thomas

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WRITERS ARE TERRIBLE LIARS," begins one of Audrey Thomas' short stories, where the speaker is herself a writer, tussling with the nature of art's relationship to life.¹ It is worth bearing this caveat in mind as one reads Thomas' novels, for it is tempting to interpret them only as thinly-disguised autobiography, where the narrator, whether unnamed or called Isobel, Miranda, or Rachel, speaks in the author's own voice. The narrators of the different novels are indeed haunted by similar memories and concerns. Isobel's obsessions, and those of the unnamed narrator of *Mrs. Blood*, centre on having been jilted by the first man she really loved, and on a prolonged miscarriage suffered in a Ghanaian hospital. Miranda/Rachel is a writer highly conscious of the complexities of her craft, desperate to communicate with the man she loves but finding neither words nor deeds adequate to break down the traditional attitudes to woman's role. These characters struggle and endure in settings drawn from the author's own environments: the New York State of her childhood, various parts of Europe and Africa where she has lived and travelled, and British Columbia where she now makes her home.

Audrey Thomas has acknowledged that writing about her own suffering is a form of therapy and that this very fact contributes to the strength of her work: "Going back over my own works, I reread my first 'real' story, real because it *had* to be written, it seemed to be the only way I could organize the horror and utter futility of a six-months long, drawn-out miscarriage in a hospital in Africa."² This episode forms the basis not only of the early story "If One Green Bottle"³ but of Thomas' first novel, *Mrs. Blood* (1970) and the later work *Blown Figures* (1974). While it is understandable that so disturbing an experience might have to be relived and interpreted more than once, it is less clear as to why, in novel after novel, apparently identical episodes, characters and settings of not so traumatic a nature reappear. Being jilted, trying to lose one's virginity, working in a mental hospital are among the experiences we encounter in similar form more than once, reworkings which, however therapeutic for the author, must have some

more artistic justification if they are not to seem merely repetitive and self-indulgent. When one looks closely at all of Thomas' novels, it becomes apparent that the episodes are not in fact repeated; each telling is in a different form and for a different artistic purpose, as a painter might give the same model in different poses. Whatever the origins in real life might have been, the experiences are altered by their fictional contexts and it is the artistic shaping that gives them universal significance. Rachel, the writer who narrates the novel *Latakia* (1979), comments on the need for such formal control in art. Looking at a friend's painting she thinks, "Yes, the pain is there and very real, but where is the organization? She is at the beginning of a long, long road. . . ." That is a road Audrey Thomas has travelled in her six novels, where the pain may be very real, with its origins in actual experience, but where it is controlled and given meaning by fictional organization.

If we look at the novels in the order of their publication, we see that in each one the organization involves a technique, variously handled, that for the time being we might call "splitting." This is seen most clearly in *Mrs. Blood* where the unnamed narrator sees herself as two figures: Mrs. Thing, the "acted-upon," fearful, self-conscious wife of a university teacher, and Mrs. Blood, a guilt-ridden bundle of memories and poetic visions, wracked by physical and psychic forces beyond her control. Instead of chapters, the novel is divided into sections spoken sometimes by Mrs. Thing and sometimes by Mrs. Blood.

A somewhat similar kind of character-splitting occurs in the volume containing the two short novels *Munchmeyer* and *Prospero on the Island* (1971). Loosely related to the tradition epitomized by Gide's *Les Faux Monnayeurs*, which is a novel about a man writing a novel about a man writing a novel, *Prospero* is the diary of a woman who is writing the novel *Munchmeyer*, about a male writer who keeps a diary. Although Miranda says that no-one could tell from her diary what *Munchmeyer* is about, the two narratives are in fact subtly related, both in the narrator's projection of a reverse image of herself as an egotistical male writer and in shared perceptions and images. One simple example of the latter demonstrates the technique. In *Prospero*, Miranda describes being out with her child: "I walk through the crisp leaves with Toad and suddenly think of new, crisp bank notes. Then laugh at the simile. 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun.' Why must I always search for similarities?"⁵ It seems here as if Miranda is rejecting that simile but in fact she uses it in *Munchmeyer*: "Leaves crisp as bank notes crackled under their feet. . . ."

In *Songs My Mother Taught Me* (1973), what may appear at first to be a conventional first-person narrative, split only chronologically into the "Songs of Innocence" of childhood and the "Songs of Experience" of adolescence, is in fact a curiously constructed record of two voices, where the narrator refers to herself sometimes as "I" and sometimes as a third person she observes. The division is

not made as one might expect into infant Isobel, not yet conscious of her individuality except as a name, and the older, self-conscious "I." Sometimes, a distancing occurs during a recollection of something the older girl was afraid of: "At first Isobel did not dare go beyond the swinging doors until the inert shape beneath the blankets had been wheeled away."⁶ Sometimes, on the other hand, it is the adult teller of the tale who is objectified: "Look how well Isobel remembers." The process is described elsewhere in the novel as a means of protecting against pain, especially as inflicted by the mother's cruel comments: "I learned to disconnect myself early, to leave my body and stand outside, above really, looking downward at Clara holding Isobel." This technique is found also in the story "Still Life with Flowers" (*Ten Green Bottles*), where an adult distances herself from painful encounters with death by speaking both of "I" and "she."

With *Blown Figures* we enter a world where the technical word for psychological splitting can appropriately be used, for Isobel is now indeed schizophrenic. The miscarriage suffered in *Mrs. Blood* has haunted the narrator with guilt and loss until she has gone mad. She relives psychically a journey to Africa, gradually turning in her own mind into a destructive and doomed witch. She directs her story to a named but unidentified auditor, "Miss Miller," thus providing the reader with a kind of double, someone within the book who is addressed but cannot intrude.

Latakia, like *Prospero on the Island*, is a "portrait of the artist" and the splitting technique here reflects the crisis faced by a woman who wants both love and art, but cannot give up the second for the first. The split Rachel sees between her physical/emotional and her mental/spiritual needs is reflected in the time and space pattern of the novel. In the "present," Rachel writes from her solitary rooftop in Crete, where she endeavours to capture as accurately as possible the total look, feeling, sound, taste, and scent of the place. Interwoven with the vivid colours and heat of the present scene, where nothing much happens in terms of plot but where everything is happening in terms of artistic being and creativity, are the episodes of the past action, the full story of the relationship with her now-departed lover to whom she addresses this "longest love letter in the world." Fully secure in herself as artist, Rachel does not split her own self schizophrenically as Isobel did. The choices sometimes threaten to tear her apart, but that is a different matter from being in a state of disintegration, and she is strong enough to withstand the threat. Instead, the split is observed as one of the processes of creative response to experience. The artist lives imaginatively in two places at once, or simultaneously at two different times: "The artist almost always lives in a Double Now. Therefore, it is not difficult for me to be up here on the roof, thinking of you, and still very much aware of the sound of Heleni's loom two doors down, and the noise of a motorbike coming down that last spiral before the village proper, and the moon slowly surfacing behind the hill."

THE REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST serves a double purpose in Audrey Thomas' fiction. On the one hand, the deliberate memorizing of details, first as a childhood habit and then as a writer's trick-of-the-trade, is a means of triumphing over time. The narrator of *Mrs. Blood* compulsively hoards the little details of important days as she did in childhood: "Thus on the way to my grandfather's cottage I would try to memorize the billboards or the number of cows in a field in order to preserve that day more perfectly in my memory." Isobel analyzes the habit more thoroughly in *Songs My Mother Taught Me*:

From as far back as I could remember I was aware — and afraid — of two things: death and the passage of time. ("Isobel, you are dying faster than the day.") On the way to the mountains each summer I tried to memorize each group of Burma Shave signs we passed, every new billboard or poster slapped against a barn. If someone made a remark and I didn't hear, I would be driven nearly frantic. "What did you say?" "Please, oh please." And sometimes I would say to myself, "Ten years from now you will remember this moment and it will be the past." If something truly unusual happened I tried to impale the whole complex of sight/sound/touch/taste/smell on my consciousness and memory as though such an experience was like some rare and multicolored butterfly.

Memorizing is a necessary part of the writer's craft. Miranda keeps a notebook: "I *must* try to record important things — the way trees look in certain lights, the sound of the wind howling around the cabin, the changing colors of the sea. How many past impressions, like skillful, slippery fish, will elude my nets I shudder now to think." To Rachel, memorizing has become an almost automatic process; whatever she may outwardly be doing or saying, inwardly she is registering every detail around her: "And I am a magpie; I pick up information whenever I can get it."

Memory takes a less conscious form, too, surfacing in dreams or breaking from its deep suppression under stress. Rachel keeps a dream-notebook and recognizes one of her dreams as a warning from the subconscious about the affair with Michael. Possibly all of *Blown Figures* is a kind of dream, an inner journey of horror needed to exorcise a long-suppressed guilt. The stress of the long confinement calls forth buried events and emotions from the narrator of *Mrs. Blood*: "I have memories preserved intact, like men in peat to be found by a later me." It is only when the foetus is expelled from the body that the cause of the guilt and fear is fully recalled and for Mrs. Blood the interior journey of miscarriage is an ironic parody of the famous madeleine cake: "Proust had it easy with his tea and bun."

Such literary recollection is an almost obtrusive part of Thomas' fiction and one could make a very long list of authors alluded to or quoted in the novels. The touch of academic pedantry is, however, quite consistent with the characters of

the college-educated Isobel or the writers Miranda and Rachel. On two occasions, literature of the past furnishes an ironic framework for the entire novel, with Blake's titles used for the two parts of *Songs My Mother Taught Me* and with *The Tempest* providing not just names but a controlling set of images throughout *Munchmeyer* and *Prospero on the Island*. There is also the form of literary echoing where a present experience is implicitly assessed by comparison with an earlier literary statement. When, for example, Rachel recalls how skillfully Graham Greene or Somerset Maugham could create the full "perfume" of a described scene, she invites the placing of her own evocations beside theirs. The process occurs most often in the three treatments of the miscarriage where, under physical and emotional stress, the mind is triggered into a schizophrenic pattern of associative language, the sound of one word evoking another apparently for its sound alone but producing highly resonant connections: "Love. *L'oeuf*. Nothing. Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again." Foreign languages are often used to give this kind of shock, as when charged significance is found in a dictionary definition or when the impact of orthography overrides pronunciation and meaning: "Avez-vous du pain?"

One of Audrey Thomas' favourite literary reference points is *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. The epigraph to *Mrs. Blood* focuses that novel's concern with absurdity, futility and the topsy-turvy:

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.

"You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."

At the end of *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, this same quotation appropriately comments on Isobel's work in the mental hospital but it also points forward to the kind of experiences she can expect to find on her European travels.

Echoes of Carroll's work are everywhere in *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures* to enforce the narrator's sense of alienation in the strange "mad" land both of Africa and of her own mind and body. In addition to this psychological level of reference, *Through the Looking Glass* also contributes to the pattern of mirror images which Thomas uses not only to enforce the kind of doubling of a person's image that we have been observing but also to explore the nature of the relationship of art to life. Using the old critical idea that art "holds a mirror up to nature," Rachel in *Latakia* wants to capture Crete exactly as it is, but has to acknowledge that "it's all done with mirrors, it's all illusion" and furthermore, that the illusion depends almost as much on the reader's imagination as it does on the writer's skill: "I have to make you believe in the Emperor's New Clothes."

If mirrors give a reflection of reality, it is a reverse and therefore distorted reflection only: this theme is treated at some length in the stories of the collection *Ladies and Escorts* (1977). In "Rapunzel," a Californian flower-child wanders through Africa looking for artistic images and forms, "Old ways of looking at the world." Her notebook of sketches always shows her own face with camera lenses instead of eyes; all her verbal sketches are set down in "mirror writing," except for the one word that has shocked her out of her dreamy fairytale naiveté. "Initram" is a complex working out of ironic double images, where a woman writer visits another woman writer whose circumstances and experiences she finds to be a striking and painful reflection of her own. The title reverses the word "martini," seen in the story on a wrongly projected slide which, even if viewed correctly, gives a distorted picture of the facts: "that is to say [it] told me nothing about the two people who had taken that trip." Nevertheless, martini does exist in the real world and so did the scenes photographed. One of the more subtle explorations in this story is of the transformation of autobiography into art. In the opening passage, the narrator discusses the topic in terms of the subject-matter of the preceding story (a situation slightly reminiscent of the way *Prospero on the Island* relates to *Munchmeyer*). Is, then, the narrator "really" Audrey Thomas herself? Dare we identify the other writer as specifically as some of the "facts" in the story seem to invite us to do? There is an element of playful teasing in the method of this serious and subtle story, with several warnings to keep us from the quicksands that would confuse fictional reality with literal fact.

Closely associated with the mirror motif is a set of image patterns to do with vision blurred by water, as in weeping, swimming underwater, or looking through a glass darkly into, or out of, an aquarium. These blurred visions invariably occur when a sexual relationship is doomed: they are most forcefully deployed in the fine story "Aquarius," which opens *Ladies and Escorts*. In *Latakia*, the images are perhaps over-explicit: "Ours was certainly a relationship remarkable for its liquidity!" Rachel says wryly, as she notes yet once more that she began to cry. Despite the Mediterranean sun, much of the affair is conducted in torrential rain, and it began on a wet night when Rachel was contemplating a friend's aquarium: "Every time I see an aquarium from now on, I will think of you." In context, the remark implies more than just a memory of that encounter: it suggests that the relationship has put her in a state of suspension, disoriented by seeing things through a veil of water. Rachel is caught by Michael's "octopus-love" for her, "suffocating, drowning, ruthless" and caught too by her own "octopus-need."

WE HAVE SEEN HOW "SPLITTING" or "doubling" occurs within the individual novels; a larger version of this device is apparent when one

looks at the work as a whole. Speaking in an interview of the relationship of *Blown Figures* to *Mrs. Blood*, the author suggested ways of reading these novels either individually or as a connected pair:

Someone, probably Durrell, talked about the novel of sliding panels. Well, in a sense, that's what I'm doing. It's all one novel really — *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures*. But the novel of sliding panels can be read separately. The panels — like Chinese panels if you like — can be read separately; they also fit together. It depends which way you want to do it.⁷

Since *Blown Figures* deals with Isobel's attempt to exorcise her guilt over the miscarriage suffered in *Mrs. Blood*, it is not surprising that similar episodes are found in both. As in decorative art, a repeated motif may be set in a different context, to catch a different light. Take just the simple example of the satisfying Saturday breakfasts of pre-marriage days. These are mentioned twice in the earlier novel, first by Mrs. Blood: "Every Saturday he brought me a brown paper bag full of eggs and bacon and tomatoes. And we would have a huge breakfast, Jason cooking, and fried bread and coffee to complete it." Here there is nostalgia for a loving, indulgent past; a few paragraphs later it is made clear that the past is irrevocably lost, both because the neighbourhood has changed and because of something eroded in the relationship: "Even the street was gone, he said, and we looked at each other, appalled and maybe a little frightened." Later in the novel, it is Mrs. Thing who now interprets the breakfasts as something to resent in Jason, a male plot to prepare a sacrificial victim: "On Saturday mornings he would bring me a brown paper bag of bacon, eggs, tomatoes and a loaf of bread. And cook my breakfast for me. Fattening me up." When this is recalled in *Blown Figures*, it manifests Isobel's greater willingness to sympathize with Jason, to recognize his sufferings and sacrifices as well as her own:

[she] never asked him how *he* felt, coming back on the train from the city every day, back from youth and laughter and comradeship, to a dinner left warming over a saucepan of hot water and these two women, so obviously fierce enemies, who wanted to devour him. How *dreary* it must all have been. How different from their crazy Saturday morning breakfasts of the winter before, he arriving with a big bag of tomatoes and eggs and rashers of bacon. . . .⁸

Songs My Mother Taught Me also forms a "novel of sliding panels" with *Mrs. Blood*. In both books we learn of an inherited "legacy of fear," of an early sexual experience with a lifeguard, called "Trigger" in *Mrs. Blood* and "Digger" in *Songs*, of celebrating the end of the war and a memento in a Japanese silk parachute, of a summer's work in a mental hospital. The general horrors of meal-times in the hospital, of bed-making and working in the operating room, are presented in both novels and so are specific episodes: a bungled taking of blood from one of the patients (called "old George" in *Mrs. Blood* and "old Harold" in *Songs*), being called whore by "Eleanor la Duce" (who also appears in the

same setting in “Salon des Refusés” of *Ten Green Bottles*) and being accidentally cut by a possibly infected scalpel. Although these episodes appear to be repeated, apart from minor name changes and different phrasings, they are used for very different effects and are substantially altered by their context. In *Songs*, the mental hospital is the shaping-ground of Isobel’s maturity, her “experience,” showing her that misery and hostility can be played out on far more grotesque battle fields than she has known in her own unhappy home and social life. Isobel emerges with new strength from this trial, but that much of the horror was suppressed and buried in the psyche appears when the episodes surface in *Mrs. Blood*, not as in the consecutive narrative of *Songs*, where chronological sequence orders events and makes them appear to be logical, but as scattered fragments periodically marking the narrator’s obsession with blood and madness.

If we add *Blown Figures* to *Mrs. Blood* and *Songs*, we have a kind of triptych, where the story of Isobel is told from childhood through marriage and motherhood to psychic disintegration. Motifs from one “panel” reappear in another, not necessarily requiring reference back and forth for interpretation, but certainly gaining new dimension when juxtaposed. The greater amount of biographical material about Richard in *Blown Figures*, for example, is not in any way necessary to understanding the narrator’s mourning for a lost lover in *Mrs. Blood*, but it rounds out a picture and gives fresh detail. The very title of *Blown Figures* is illuminated by reference to another panel in the triptych. As George Bowering aptly demonstrated in his review of the book, the power of the title lies in its ambiguity:

What are figures, and what is blown? There are fly-blown corpses, and corpses once were figures. Craftsmen blow figures in glass. If you don’t have a good figure you’d better turn the light off if you want to be blown. Bad counters blow their figures. Poets who reach for effects blow their figures up fat. Some flute-players blow outlandish figures. Add you own, and you’ll be ready to read. . . .⁹

Each of Bowering’s suggestions is appropriate, in some degree or other, to the experience of the novel; that the phrase has yet a further significance for the author is apparent in a passage from *Songs* about the ending of the war: “the 90,000 killed in Hiroshima, the 40,000 killed at Nagasaki, the mushroom cloud, the screams, the blown figures melting in the heat.” Here the glass-blowing metaphor fuses with the idea of violent disintegration, the sinister pun on numerical figures increasing the horror. The image relates powerfully to Isobel, her mind violently disintegrated, as she is blown on her psychic journey through the melting heat of Africa. But the blown figures of Hiroshima were also blasted into nightmare silhouettes, outlines of the human form burned into walls as a perpetual memento mori. Thus the blown figures are part of a pattern of memory images, the people, places and experiences of Isobel’s past burned ineradicably into her subconscious.

Bowering is right in suggesting that the author intends the reader to work at interpreting the title, and one of the ways of working is to remember how the phrase was used elsewhere. All of *Blown Figures*, in fact, requires unusual exertion on the reader's part, if only in turning over so many pages which are empty except for a line or two. Audrey Thomas explained the intention behind this device:

Partly so that these things will have force, like slides or bullets or anything that there's a slight time lag between — A plus B plus C plus D — maybe like breathing? It's up to the reader how fast he turns the pages, but he has to turn the page; there has to be a time lag. . . . They all relate just as if you showed me slides of Greece or something to do with Greece. Occasionally there's one thrown in, as you might do with friends, that doesn't relate to Greece and that's to keep you on your toes.¹⁰

The comparison to a photographic medium again implies the illusion/reality theme but also suggests the author's manipulation of the reader into "interpreting" the novel as one "interprets" a work of art. It is not "meaning," character, or story one only looks for in a novel, but shapes, textures, and colour also.

I HAVE ALREADY MENTIONED the way in which *Munchmeyer* and *Prospero on the Island* are intimately related, though even here each work can be read fully without reference to the other. The two novellas appear to be set apart from the Isobel series, and *Latakia* to follow, with a different name for the main character and a study of an enriching friendship with a male artist instead of the desperate struggles of love and guilt in the other novels. But Miranda obviously has the same background as Isobel: there are several references to an earlier time in Africa and to the same fear of blood. She has her youngest child with her on the island and when she talks to another mother, she feels very much as Mrs. Thing did: "We are together on an island of babies and women with babies." Even the childhood obsession with memorizing reappears, with the same advertisement mentioned as in *Songs*: "as a child I was desperate to remember everything; would stare hard at billboards, burning their inane messages into my head, terrified I would not pass that way again. Burma Shave, Burma Shave, Burma Shave."

Miranda's name is chosen for all its resonances, both ironic and emblematic, of *The Tempest*, as well perhaps of that poem of a lost past, Belloc's "Do you remember an inn, Miranda?" In *Latakia*, the narrator, fully fledged now as a writer and free at least of a restricting domestic pattern, if not of the longing for love and sex, is aptly and ironically named Rachel, she who in the Bible waited fourteen years for the fulfilment of her destiny. But Rachel shares at least one

memory with Isobel and the narrator of *Mrs. Blood*. Each recalls a deaf old relative of her grandfather's who had "a black and silver ear trumpet" (*Latakia*, p. 22), "an ear trumpet — black, with silver-gilt decorations on it" (*Mrs. Blood*, p. 134), "her ornate ear trumpet, black with silver chasing" (*Songs*, p. 47). "Aunt Deveena" lived to be a hundred, and in *Songs* she is a focus for Isobel's fear of and curiosity about death; "Mrs. Blood" finds her to be one of the "encrusted" memories of death and dead babies, for homage to the family graves was always a part of the visit to the old lady. In *Latakia*, the self-conscious writer seeks an appropriate analogy for the distortion of personality she and her lover have wreaked on each other and finds it in the supposedly senile but highly sensitive remark of the re-named aunt: "An enormous dog, a sheepdog, I guess, came loping down the road and Aunt Aggie took a look at it and said in her high, cracked voice, 'My, what a small dog in such a big box.'" The ear-trumpet and senility are useful images in a novel that wrestles with the problems of communication and the world behind the looking-glass.

Audrey Thomas' novels, then, do in some sense form a continuous semi-autobiographical narrative, a kind of *roman fleuve*, and it is clear that the narrating voice belongs to the same person at different phases of experience. The split in the narrator/persona is similar in many respects to the split between Mrs. Thing and Mrs. Blood: Isobel is the girl and woman who struggles to be defined in terms other than someone's granddaughter, daughter, mistress, wife, or mother; Miranda/Rachel is the self-conscious artist and craftswoman who is able to insist on her own identity and purpose even at the cost of losing the men she loves. As the author herself sums it up: "I think that's what I was trying to deal with in my writing, the two different sides of me."¹¹ Each novel is completely self-contained¹² and very little is repeated in exactly the same form. The reader can respond to each novel as a shape in itself but may find totally new levels of response in remembering the others while reading any one. The demands on the reader's memory are considerable but the results are rewarding.

NOTES

¹ "Initram," *Ladies and Escorts* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1977), p. 88.

² "My Craft and Sullen Art . . .," *Atlantis*, 4, no. 1 (Fall 1978), 153.

³ *Ten Green Bottles* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), pp. 5-16.

⁴ *Latakia* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1979), p. 46.

⁵ *Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 101.

⁶ *Songs My Mother Taught Me* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1973), p. 221.

⁷ Elizabeth Komisar, "Audrey Thomas: a review/interview," *Open Letter*, 3, no. 3 (Fall 1975), p. 61.

⁸ *Blown Figures* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974), p. 216.

- ⁹ George Bowering, "The Site of Blood," *Canadian Literature*, 65 (Summer 1975), p. 86.
- ¹⁰ Komisar, p. 63.
- ¹¹ "Interview/Audrey Thomas," *The Capilano Review*, 7 (Spring 1975), p. 95.
- ¹² This is contrary to the view of Robert Diotte, who argues that, of the Isobel Carpenter "trilogy," only *Mrs. Blood* "is even remotely capable of standing alone." See "The Romance of Penelope," *Canadian Literature*, 86 (Autumn 1980), pp. 60-68.

POETRY READING AT THE VETERANS' HOME

Glen Sorestad

They are mustered together in the lounge
a dozen veterans, legions of memories on stiff legs.
The marshal is a young woman devoted solely to program
some interest into their dying.

She introduces me, and I read to them — or try.
One silver-haired vet of Vimy dozes fitfully
snapping upright from the past, on occasion
like a sentry caught napping on duty.
Others stare past me to distant fields —
past horrors, past glories, comrades lost, past loves . . .

I read a few humorous poems into a maimed silence
profound as the aftermath of battle.
I try a few poems about old-timers, pioneers
and read them with the inspired passion of second generation.
But they fall on the floor around and between us
and burst like mock shrapnel, wounding no one.
I try pub poems, and finally one vet stirs
and announces loudly that he is going to the john.
My poems collapse around me and I stop reading.

"Does anyone have any questions?" I implore,
prepared for another barrage of silence
and the ignominy of my imminent departure.