

GROUNDHOG AMONG THE STARS

*The Poetry of
Raymond Souster*

Louis Dudek

Get out your gun and call to your dog,
Get out your gun and call to your dog,
Away to the woods to catch a groundhog,
Groundhog, groundhog.

AMERICAN FOLK SONG

SOUSTER'S POEM "The Hunter" is the first poem of his I ever read, and it remains for me to this day a key to his poetry:

I carry the groundhog along by the tail
all the way back to the farm, with the blood
dripping from his mouth a couple of drops at a time,
leaving a perfect trail for anyone to follow.

The half-wit hired-man is blasting imaginary rabbits
somewhere on our left. We walk through fields steaming after rain,
jumping the mud: and watching the swing of your girl's hips
ahead of me, the proud way your hand holds the gun,
and remembering how you held it
up to the hog caught in the trap and blew his head in

wonder what fate you have in store for me.

It was in 1942. *First Statement*, a little mimeographed magazine, was in its beginning (later it became *Northern Review*) with John Sutherland as editor, and Audrey Aikman (soon after, his wife) for associate. Irving Layton and I had

just joined the group. We were sitting in a shabby room on Stanley Street in Montreal — a street now demolished to make room for parking lots and subways — deep in an old chesterfield with horsehair sticking out through the rents. “This is the kind of poetry we want,” the three of us agreed as we read the Souster manuscript together. There was actually a snag in the syntax of that poem, toward the end, which we took the liberty of correcting. It has stood with this improvement in almost all the Canadian poetry anthologies since then.

The recent publication of *The Colour of the Times: The Collected Poems of Raymond Souster* by the Ryerson Press brings to an end the period of Souster’s hothouse fame with a few admirers and makes him known and appreciated by a much larger audience of readers. It is time for the critic also to put aside the bugle of the Town Crier and to look at him more closely, more thoughtfully, and with more leisure for the shape and nuance of his art.

The Colour of the Times contains 256 poems. It replaces the Contact Press *Selected Poems* which I edited and published (at my own expense, let it be known) in 1956. The *Selected Poems* only recently went out of print. It contained 100 poems; but only fifty of these are retained in the new *Collected Poems*. Thus the new book contains 206 uncollected poems, but it omits a good number which have become standard Souster material. For the reader who wants to know what he is missing, I will list the most important poems which he must still look for in the old *Selected Poems*:

- “The Enemies”
- “When We Are Young”
- “Apple-blow”
- “Phoney War”
- “Green, Wonderful Things”
- “Queen Street Serenade”
- “Ersatz”
- “Sunday Night Walk”
- “Litter of the Last Rose”
- “Girl in the Gumbo”
- “The Hospital”
- “Fredericton”
- “Nice People”
- “Scandal”
- “Five Dollars”
- “The Specialist”
- “Breakfast: Old Lady in Hospital”
- “The Eggshell Blue”

“First Spring Day in the Canyons”

“Girl at the Corner of Elizabeth and Dundas”

(The economic pressures of publishing, where “we cannot go beyond 125 pages”, is probably responsible for this catastrophe. In the case of poetry, especially a Collected Poems, surely it is the poems themselves which must dictate how much space will be allowed.)

A good number of the poems, also, have undergone some revision, in vocabulary and verse arrangement; usually to the good, but sometimes losing the force of the original. Polish is not always perfection, and energy may be better than trim propriety. To take one example:

And our friends of the dance-floor
Guzzling pop, tearing the skins of hot-dogs —

has become in the new version —

and our friends of the dance-floor guzzling pop and piercing
the sad skins of hot-dogs.

The change loses a violence which the original contained, and replaces it with a lethargy of ageing disillusion. As we shall see, this is an aspect of the later Souster, incompatible with “limbs aching with desire” recorded in this poem (“Cape Breton Summer Evening”).

Let’s go back to “The Hunter” to study Souster’s ambivalence about sex. On the one hand, we have the girl, masterful and desirable: “watching the swing of your girl’s hips/ahead of me” (sexually ahead of the speaker, perhaps). Yet at the same time she is the ruthlessly cruel female. The poet ruefully and ironically studies his strange fear of her. This mixture of desire and fear is a keynote of Souster’s personality; or rather, the opposition of love and cruelty, the twin poles of his sensibility, is the dramatic centre of his poetry. The “half-wit hired-man” is a further projection of mindless violence, toward the weak and timid — “rabbits”. But most significant of all, the groundhog, the victim of ruthlessness (on the part of the woman), and explicitly partner-in-fate to the lover, is being dragged by the tail, the blood “dripping from his mouth a couple of drops at a time”. It is certainly a trail to follow.

The ecstasy of sex is one of the sources of high lyric delight in Souster’s poetry. To complicate the matter, we have horror, or fear, associated with sex. In the poem “Night Watch” the unconscious crowd is whooping it up “at Angelo’s with wine and spaghetti . . . at Joe’s, Mabel’s or Tim’s Place . . .” while the lovers stand

here with the lean cold pushing the light from the stars,
 here under ghost buildings, here with silence grown too silent,

you and I in this doorway like part of a tomb,
 kissing the night with bitter cigarettes.

I would point out the simile of the tomb, the cold, the stars, and the ghost buildings, in this picture, as providing one side to a three-cornered drama: the horror of the night; the ignorant merrymakers who know nothing about it; and the lovers who know their love and desire. But to know love in this way is to know also the night, the cold, and the terrible silence. The linking here of love and death, against the blind distractions of the city crowd, is only one example of Souster's fine, exact, yet quite undeliberate imagination. Once the relevance of his imagery is established, there is hardly a poem which does not contain some such subtlety.

A very fine poem of the early period, "Dominion Square," presents the lovers as almost mythical beings, at one with the night, the cold, the rain outside, while the speaker hurries to escape into the warm tavern with its human hubbub. (This poem has been drastically revised; I do not know whether I do not prefer the early version.) We should note the pattern of thought:

They wouldn't understand my haste
 in getting out of the rain, in leaving this cold
 wind-blowing night . . .
 . . . they seem almost part of the rain
 . . . they seem almost part of the night,
 these two lovers,
 with their slow lingering steps, their total unawareness
 of everything in this city but their love . . .

The hard inhuman features of the city are frequently used by Souster as correlatives of human indifference, cruelty, blindness. This is the shape of evil in his poetic hell and heaven:

City, while the night rides high, the filth, the stink, is forgotten,
 what the sewers run with, what the hospitals throw in the garbage,
 what the stockyard breathes, becomes

the dancing neon, the white necks, the glittering encore,
 the multiplying mirrors . . .

 ("Night-Town")

Opposite to this, there is love and compassion. For this reason the two lovers in “Dominion Square” with “their total unawareness/of everything in this city” are wondrously moving in a mythical space beyond our lesser human evil, and also beyond the greater menace of “night” and death: “they seem almost part of the night”. (The significance of that “almost” emerges at once.) And the paradox is that the human world of noise and unconsciousness — which is in fact “the city” — is at the same time a shelter. In Souster’s poetry certain features of city life become rich havens of recreation and pleasure — he loves the jazz, the lights, the crowds, the eating places — when these are seen as temporary refuge from the cold of space (death) or the inhumanity of man.

In the city proper, with its “black-hearted buildings”, life is slowly but relentlessly destroyed. Compassion is eroded away and cruelty wins out. In the biography of a criminal, “Court of General Sessions”, the life story of a city-dweller in this mythology is sketched: street gangs, poolrooms, dance-halls, girls in borrowed cars, crap games, cops . . . culminating in the “Army years/learning to be tough, to kill.” This is the essential story; and war in Souster’s poetry is the ultimate shape of evil. It is killing suddenly made plain as the reality and purpose of life, while the poet stands against it, opposed, as pacifist.

We can now read a poem, another about a kind of groundhog, in the light of this interpretation of the imagery, and see how apt the simple details suddenly become:

I want to put it down
 about the animal
 that burrowed its way
 under my back porch,
 but there’s not really much
 to say: simply, some animal
 fearing winter’s approach,
 the season of death,
 has tried to find shelter,
 and I, half in my stupid
 human fear and half
 in my pride of possession,
 have sealed him out
 so ingeniously
 with my boards and shovel,

then gone inside
 to be out of the cold,
 quite proud of myself.

It is remarkable here that Souster implicates himself in the guilt of cruelty. We find this repeatedly in his poems, a moral equation that refuses to put the poet himself on the side of the untainted, the arrogant and free, and involves him in the common fate, of pain and guilt. This poetry is essentially Christian in its assumption of guilt and compassion; and it is a poetry of the common people in its participation on humble terms in life. (Souster has said in private that he is “a working class poet”, a title which no one will be willing to contest with him in this era of affluence and conspicuous spending.)

For just as he is involved in guilt with mankind, so Souster bears the fate of suffering with average mankind. Often in his poems he is a trapped creature, living the life of a victim and captive of society. At the personal level this may even appear as weakness — perhaps it is; at any rate, it is the voice of a poet who is not above the modern urban situation, but who is entrapped in it, and records its private agonies with a personal accent.

On this theme, the sense of frustration and inescapable boredom is conveyed in such a poem as “Yonge Street Saturday Night”:

and there are some like us,
just walking, making our feet move ahead of us,
a little bored, a little lost, a little angry,
walking as though we were really going somewhere,
walking as if there was something to see at Adelaide or maybe
on King . . .

No reader can fail to be struck by this side of Souster in despairing poems like “Bridge Over the Don” or “In Praise of Loneliness”. The tone of desperation creeps in everywhere, and is projected often into others, men, creatures, objects, as in “Old Man Leaning on a Fence”, “Litter”, “Sucker Run”, “The Child’s Umbrella”. Even such a poem as “The Tame Rabbit”, with its naïve correlatives of entrapment, belongs in this sequence, as the closing lines of the poem make clear:

So the cage for you
and the swinging by the ears,
that’s all there is
for you, little one,

and come to think of it
why should you, rabbit,
be any better off
than the rest of us?

The entire poem is extremely significant.

For after all, the groundhog (or rabbit, or ferret) is unquestionably the poet himself: looking for spring in the middle of winter, not finding any (as in the poem "Groundhog Day, 1960"), getting shot or wounded for his trouble, digging in to stay holed up through a long bad season. "Groundhog's My Nature" says Souster in the poem with that title:

Groundhog's my nature:
hole up deep in winter,
walk cautious above ground
in spring and summer:
leave a piece
of arm or leg
and a smear of blood
in the crafty hunter's trap
just to hold his interest.

PERHAPS WE CAN GO back now to the unresolved mystery of the poem "The Hunter". Just as groundhogs, ferrets, rabbits, squirrels, rodents, and captive bears (they hibernate) appear in Souster's poems as variants on a single theme — of the secluded and beleaguered self, the victim, or the canny enduring animal — so the cat and the cat family is the counterpart female symbol. "The cat comes at me . . ." in the poem titled "The Cat at Currie's":

The cat comes at me
slowly, cautiously, one pad before the other,
lifting the springing muscles over,

then strikes — to find me ready
and she unready — rolls over on her back,
fighting the losing battle with my hands
which soon pin her down: . . .

Some critics would say the poem should end here. The sexual overtones and the man-woman relation has been sufficiently implied — or has emerged from the poet's subconscious. But Souster has a genius for clarion declaration, and his privilege to make it should not be denied him:

... and as I hold her
 I remember your body, more soft, more pulsating
 than this sleek animal's, your arms more deadly,
 lips more engulfing
 and I let the cat go . . .

The word “deadly”, confirming the metaphor of “strike” and “battle”, may remind us of the gun that “blew his head in” in the “Hunter” poem. Nor is the fear of woman superficial or particular: it is a profound fear of the sexual abyss — “engulfing” — which is always associated with death, and which like any fear can only be quieted by a reassuring love.

Paradoxically, as we have already perceived, this same source of fear, sex, becomes in Souster's poetry also the greatest of ecstasies, a kind of heaven; or in the groundhog metaphor, the safe hideout from all troubles, the one reassurance in a world of cruelty and indifference.

Deep in the middle
 of this forest a cave
 made for only one
 where I often go
 to escape from man
 his cruelty
 his desolation

A small neat cave
 always warm
 always beckoning

To get there I head
 for two far birches
 then slide through moss
 to the waiting wide
 cavern of her love!
 (“The Cave”)

And best of all, in “A Bed Without a Woman”:

A bed without a woman
 is a thing of wood and springs, a pit
 to roll in with the Devil.

But let
 her body touch its length and it becomes
 a place of singing wonders, eager springboard
 to heaven and higher.

And you may join her there
in those hours between sleeping and the dawn.

Once the pattern of the poet's expression, in images as vehicles for recurrent emotions, is established, even the most trivial poems yield a nuance of meaning which adds to their fascination:

. . . you throw your slippers
across the room at me, one, two,
but checking your anger enough
so they come at me lightly
which is why I suppose
I go on loving you.

What the poem tells us is that the woman's anger is, in this event, harmless, discharged by love or temperamental mildness. She is incapable of any ruthless cruelty: "which is *why* I suppose/I go on loving you." The groundhog, let us remember, is phonetically "hog" as well as earth-born creature, and his base proclivities are humanized as well as domesticated by gentle exercise in the institution of marriage. Marriage, in fact, can be a lair or cave in the middle of the forest, where one can escape "from man/his cruelty/his desolation".

Despite these compensations, however, the permanent ground of Souster's poetry is human deprivation and loss. Unlike other poets who find their dream of happiness and fulfilment in the future, or even in the present, he looks backward to the past. "John warns me of nostalgia," carries the theme ("John" is the late John Sutherland, editor of *Northern Review*). Happiness is "a lost but recovered joy"; and all are "groping for something lost they will never find/in the drab of the street, in the dirt, in the smoke, in the noise." The imagery of youth usually conveys this meaning of loss in Souster's poetry, as in "Young Girls", where it is also an image of sexual promise; or in the poem remembering boyhood —

It's nothing but desire to live again, fresh from
the beginning like a child.

Some of his most moving and beautiful poems turn on this theme: "Not Wholly Lost," "Lagoons, Hanlan's Point," "Lambton Riding Woods," "The Amusement Park". But the return to youth is only one door to a lost heaven. The ideal good also shines for him in the natural world — where the epiphany is a total return — in images of "snow" and "green", in ecstatic jazz, in perfected

love, or in “the great/untroubled/voice of poetry”. As we shall see, also, joy is often the achieved reward of Souster’s patient realistic vision, so that retrospective nostalgia is only a more defeated direction in an idealism that ends in measure and acceptance.

The sense of loss and deprivation, the erosion of time, the cruel impersonality and brutality of the city are nevertheless the groundwork of these poems. Nor is it a private and personal condition limited to the poet. The bulk of Souster’s poetry deals with other people — the people of the city — and these are truly observed, not faceless democratic symbols as for example in Carl Sandburg. They are actual individuals (not that characterization is any aim in poetry); their pain is real, and their “wasted bitter years” are specific as their deaths and entrances. A personal predicament is projected outward in this human landscape, and at the same time a truth about the general life is revealed (since the individual is our source of knowledge about the universal, the mass, and a single imagination, if it has poetic scope, sympathy, the gift of extension, becomes representative for mankind).

If the groundhog is the signature of the poet in this book, there could be no better illustration of the transfer of the personal to the level of objectivity than his use of this figure in describing a city-dweller. He provides this for us in the poem “The Quarry”:

The terrified look
on the groundhog’s face
looking from his hole
one instant ahead
of the trap’s deadly spring,

I saw today
in the ferret stare
of the old lady lush
up Bay Street somewhere,
wandering like a child
bewildered, crushed,
in and out of the crowds,

waiting, waiting,
for that blow to fall.

Obviously Souster’s verdict on modern life is not very cheerful. Whether there is truth in this picture of waste, vanity, frustration, poverty and desperation, we may

allow the reader to judge. The poetry is not a sociological survey filled with ideological jargon, nor is it a political language about power or prestige or money; Souster's depiction of modern life is humble, human, and close to the satisfactions and discomforts of the average man. He shows people in their intimate real moments of despair, love, and pleasure. And the first of these is the ground-tone of his canvas of life.

IMAGES OF ESCAPE, liberation, total self-realization on a plane of pure fantasy, will be found in Souster's poetry. These are important, but they should not distract us from the main direction of his development. There is "The Old Prospector" who advises him to "get out of here/leave the city . . ./Move out, buy a fruit farm . . ." There is the memory of liberty and self-realization in the war years ("our careless/new-found, exploding strength"); and the memory of childhood as the continuing promise of such freedom ("so much/in the warm darkness around me tingled/with the unknown, the adventurous"). Even jazz is for Souster a realm of freedom, total mobility such as actual life denies:

all this noisy crew bringing
their Manhattan madness up here where we like it quiet
(but never the death-quiet our elders have given it!) . . .
(*"Jazz Concert, Massey Hall"*)

But actually Souster never takes the risk of total abandon, he merely observes and participates by observation, in a wishful fantasy:

The rain is only the river
grown bored, risking everything
on one big splash.

The one most revealing poem where this fantasy of revolt and liberation is explored is "Coureurs-de-Bois". Here the break with moral and religious conformism comes to a head. (Souster, a true Protestant, is a kind of heretical saint, despising Church and State, and even castigating Isaiah and "the over-zealous touch/of Matthew Mark Luke and John"; yet he goes to church on Sunday night — see the poem "Sunday Night Walk" in the *Selected Poems* — and he speaks the grace at table in his own home.) The *coureurs-de-bois* "were glad to get away/from Montreal and its whores, from Quebec/and the Great Bishop's lamentations"/; "they'd wenched, drunk, played their last louis" in the trading centre, and then went "back on the trail" — to "hardship, danger, but as well

the rub/of young flesh among the pines, in the drunken wigwams,/sweet sights of torture, dark flowerings of blood”:

while the whole colony waited their return
for a sight, for a breath of that savour
of utter abandonment to Flesh, Food and Finery,
strong, clean as the forest air sweeping into lives
watered down by the Church and eviscerated by the State.

What fascinates me in this poem is the acceptance of cruelty: “sweet sights of torture, dark flowerings of blood”. Since fear and recoil from cruelty, the impassioned rejection of cruelty, is the mainspring of Souster’s poetry — the city appearing as a monster of indifference, and desire itself a threat of violence — how astonishing to find here “the rub of young flesh among the pines” combined with “sweet sights of torture”. These *coureurs-de-bois*, deeply buried and forgotten in the beginnings of Canadian history, provide a rich symbol of primitive release and catharsis, an emotional correlative of that total orgy of fulfilment and adventure which actual life can never support.

To accept the limitations of actuality, however, is Souster’s primary road of poetic development. Here the fact — at its worst — must be attested in the face of human loss and failure — “It must be like this” — so that we can go on and endure. There are numerous poems that illustrate this direction. In contrast to Souster’s early poems, which expressed their disillusion by means of invective, these middle poems are often starkly objective and non-committal. Since they, too, turn on a conflict between the actual and something lost, irony and ripe humour often come into play; in fact, if the balance falls heavily on the side of harsh reality, cynicism results inevitably, as in the poems “Drunk, on Crutches,” “My First School,” “Another Day”. The neutral objective tone, and the idea of fact remorselessly there to be accepted, may be illustrated in the poem “Girl with the Face of Sores”:

One could get used to this face
by looking long enough at it.

Each separate oozing sore
would develop its own character,
each red valley of irritation,
each rounded hill-top of pus.

Even the white skin fighting
a losing battle beneath — one could find here

the eternal parallel — beauty slowly crushed
by relentless ugliness. . . .

But the eyes are chicken
and partly betray you. And so it's much easier
to turn away, your shame greater than her shame.

I find significance in “beauty slowly crushed/by relentless ugliness” — a general statement or paradigm of Souster's most pessimistic conclusion; but even more so in the first two lines — a statement of reconciliation with reality and of acceptance. “One could get used to this face/by looking long enough at it.” The trouble is, the poet says, that we do not have the courage to do so (and as usual, he implicates himself in the guilt and failure to do so).

Souster, however, does have this courage, as numerous poems attest. Reconciliation with life — with boredom, with suffering, with defeat and death — is his sad and constant achievement as the book advances. It brings a quiet only few can know. The following poem defines much of the same idea in terms of a person who knows only sorrow and cannot come to terms with it:

She waits
for fortune to come to her
like a steeple-chase winner
like a million to the missing heir.

She goes to see the priest
reads her catechism over
then waits for the miracle
to happen.

And I'd tell her
only she wouldn't believe me,
life isn't a matter of luck,
of good fortune, it's whether
the heart can keep singing
when there's really no reason
why it should at all.

Yes, I'd tell her
but she'd only start crying,
her with a heart that never had
the excuse for a single song.

But having learned to sing when there is really no reason at all, when there is no excuse for a single song, Souster is surprised on occasion with the gift of inexplicable joy. Renunciation and acceptance of inevitable tragedy set the stage for a burst of song such as could only be equalled or surpassed by the first promise with which life began. Souster repeatedly discovers poetic ecstasy at the end of renunciation and suffering: as this pattern is perceived, the brief poems at the end of the book readily yield up their honey.

I don't wait for spring
spring waits for me

With a snap of the fingers
I can focus the sun
with a turn of the head
bring warm winds on

So the whole world waits
eyes me patiently
for something to stir
to burst inside me

like the push of a root
or the swoop of a bird!

Astonished himself, this poet of extreme and simple modesty will now address the Muse:

desiring nothing
and expecting little, living only
for your secret, inner praise,
I give thanks
that you, goddess, from so many
should have chosen me
for your cursed and singular blessing.

There is a delicacy of arrangement in *The Colour of the Times* that may be missed by the unwary reader. Again and again poems interpret one another and add nuances of meaning by their placing. Following the poem just quoted, which does perhaps contain a shade of self-approval, we find four lines entitled "Thrush":

The thrush on the farthest-out bough
sings the best song his heart will allow.

And if we haven't liked what we've heard
there's tomorrow and another bird.

(Don't fool yourself, this is no country bumpkin but "the thrush on the farthest-out bough"! And far-out is far-out in any language.)

IF THE FIGURE for Souster the man is the groundhog, then the figure for the poet is that of butterfly or bird. On the last page of the book there is a wild canary, with "the poise/of the high-wire artist" (a reminder of Ferlinghetti), "who takes every bend/every crazy sway/indifferently . . ./intent on his fill" —

then O
the wind must tire of your insolence
for with one great gust he flings
you from your perch, up and over
in a sudden yellow flash
that blinds like the sun.

And following this, in the last poem of all, groundhog becomes "weed-cutter", a plodding efficient metaphor for the creative process:

Be the weed-cutter
steaming slowly the lagoons,
working quietly, well,
your blades searching out
a clearer, deeper channel
than has been before.

Surely this is poetry of the highest order. Apparently casual and even haphazard at times, it has a sureness of touch and scope of vision that will amaze and delight futurity. The best description of it, with the larger implications of the theme we have followed, appears in a single brief poem, "I Watched a Bird," which is one of Souster's finest pieces, and one in which again the bird speaks for the poet (perhaps unawares) yet conveys everything:

I watched a bird blown in the sky
like some poor thing without control,
dipping and swerving here and there
with wings spread wide and motionless.

I watched a bird tossed down the wind
that never fought or uttered cry,
surrendered to that boundless air,
caught up in that great mystery.

