Splashes and Breezes

Poems of 1988

by Alan Harris

To Linda: Wife and Best Friend

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Alma Mater Revisited

The campus seems all hollow
today as I walk in its leaves again.
The marching band warms up in the
distance for a football game of
whumpgrungers and whoopleaders—
but the booming band sounds vacant.
All the music is there—the
brass, the drums, the tearing
and merging of harmonies—
but I am gone, nowhere near it.
The now magicless bookstore I worked in
has shabby Shakespeares languishing
between glossy audio-visual texts and
sterile physical geology workbooks.

Is the college hollow, or am I?
I remember classes where
cocky professors taught
stimulating sensical stuff
which flew the way of
June fireflies after exams.
Hormone-smitten twist dancers
flexed and flirted their nervous bodies
toward flippant connubialities
while I tried to study my brain into a
tested heaven of alphas.
The fatuous sounds of
today’s rah-rah’s echo as before
among stately buildings that housed
the tenure-drones of worked-over lectures.
Now, whom are we all trying to fool?
College is, I confess, as dead in me
as a syllogism, but supportive America
of a Saturday puts down its newspaper,
pours out a Bud Light, and
remotely emotes from its easychair over
conference headcrunching
seen through colored electrons on glass.

Who died? Did I? Are the college sounds
I hear today on my old campus—the band,
the cheers, the dead leaves underfoot—
any hollower than 25 years ago? No, no,
I heard their emptiness in youth, but
this milieu quickened me then as liberation
from a safely parented childhood
and insurance against an empty future.
After a full life I would be most ungrateful
now to pronounce college dead,
but let us stick with hollow.
Animal Tao

A cat is mostly yin;
of the Cosmos she is the twin.
Like the mysterious Cosmic Laws,
she keeps well-hidden her claws
until some urgent necessity.

A dog is thoroughly yang,
with his boisterous bark and his fang.
Ignoring the subtler laws
and concealing none of his flaws,
he pursues life and cats with avidity.

A dog is always searching,
but a cat is content with perching.
The dog loves to follow his nose,
while the cat simply sits there and—knows.
Activity ends in tranquillity.
August Sunday

Pounding hammers sing
along with church choir anthem—
confusing rhythms.

Depth of azure sky
recedes to far galaxies
behind daylit moon.

A leaf waves gently
in a breath from summer’s lungs,
then hangs green and still.
Cat Lying Down

When my cat lies down, it is with utmost gravity.

No circular trampling first like a clumsy canine, no great sigh like a human being on a couch.

My cat lies down slowly, naturally, smoothly, participating with controlled abandon in a dignified gravitational event.
The Cry of Everything

Where the crow twitters
and the bluebird cackles,
there is the cry of everything.

Bees moo and ducks roar;
horses croak and rocks snore.

The cry of everything, yes all of all,
fills creation and non-creation
with the delectable din
of a monstrous pin
drop.

Screen nothing out;
mute nothing.
All is here but for an eternal moment,
a timeless flicker of the sun.

And when the cry of everything dies out—
well, won’t that be grand too?
Death Is Life Bursting into Bloom

When I die, I will not die.
I will be a foot coming out of a too-small shoe,
a bird flying free out of a cramping cage,
an astronaut taking off his space suit,
having safely returned home.

When you die, you will not die either.
You are not your body, as I’m not mine.
You will see a brighter rainbow
and hear heaven’s ethereal music
which no stereo can capture.

When I die but not die,
I will leave a little part of me
inside your memory.
It will be your key to my door
that is always open in heaven.

When you die but not die,
I will have the key to your door too.
Better to have keys for open doors
than closed doors without keys,
as in this locked-up life on earth.

When I am gone but not gone,
think of me and I am there.
When you are gone but not gone,
I will send you flowers through the air.
Let us celebrate the magnificent safety of death.
Death through a Peephole

How can I word it?

I am 45, on the
downhill side of life.
Lying on the couch,
eyes closed,
my stereo playing Bach’s
St. Matthew Passion,
I see death
through an inner peephole—
a visionless glimpse.

There it is,
a threatless,
benevolent space,
neither outer nor inner,
where neither moon nor
Andromeda move.

I feel the grip of a subsonic
bass note in my chest,
a whole note from
the bottom of the cosmos.

Death? Is that you?
A beautiful black
emptiness full
of friendly steadiness?

Yes, comes no answer.

I look up at the ceiling
and smile at 46.
Effort

Try to force a flower,
and what do you have?
A mutilated bud.

Try to be happy,
and very existence becomes trying.

Try to live long
by running and jumping,
eating by the book,
sleeping wisely,

and die truly old
in a nursing home
beside a pot
of plastic flowers.
Free Now

I get up in the morning, and my life is totally, radically free. What do I do? Do I make the bed? Do I take a shower? Do I eat a meal called breakfast? Do I go to work at an office? Do I sell my house and move to another state? Do I give my money to charity and beg? How do I think if I am free? Do I think of myself at all? Do I think of others? Am I just a clear lens which sees, behind which there is no thing, and in front of which is everything? I am free, but how do I act? What do I do? I am free from how, and from doing, but my heart still beats, I breathe, I must eat, I must eliminate and perspire. Do I feel overwhelmed with freedom and long for the old cages? Do I become depressed because I can find nothing to do? If I see the futility in every human motion and emotion, how can I live? Where is my base of operations? In space? In nothingness? In something called God? In whatever love is? Am I really totally, radically free, or have I just enlarged my cage? Can I find the boundaries of my prison if they are invisible to me? I feel them holding me in. Am I free? Yes, I am free. No more family is necessary. No more society. No more civilization. I can walk out the door and never come back. I cannot go anywhere on earth. I am completely free. But to go anywhere is to not go everywhere else. I leave a trail. I remember. People remember me. There are ties. Within memory can I be free? Can I remember without encumbrance, without attachment, without hope, without fear? Yes. I am free. I sit on a rock. Where am I? Who am I? Why am I here? Am I free? Yes, totally, radically free. Do I like it? That is not the question. Freedom is all there is, and I am it. Each thing matters as much as each other thing, and yet nothing matters. Matter is a trap, but things are just things. I am free to lie in the mud or go to the office or to sit here on the rock. What am I to do? Free, as I am, what is there in life? The cage has been sprung open and destroyed, and there is no going back to it. I breathe, and I walk, and I stumble, and eat, and see. A man walks by and sees me sitting on the rock, and he says, “Hello. Nice morning, isn’t it?” I say, “Yes, it is.” Am I still free? What is another person, really? Before, I could only assume, but now I must investigate. What, really, is another person? I breathe deeply, and I get up and walk toward nothing, away from nothing, just walk. Now I know what I must do, now that I am radically free. I must find out what the other person is. He is there. I see him. He is not an illusion. Is he free? If not, can I free him? Am I free not to free him? What is relationship when there is freedom? I will investigate until I die. A bird lands on a fence post.
Frozen Fantasy

My first breath outside
on a winter morning
speaks a frosty sentence
and drifts off.

When my hand sticks
to a cold pipe,
I have joined the winter club.

When the sneaky wind
finds a crack in my coat,
I feel the grip
of zero.

Winter is,
if anything,
a surprise in ice.
Haiku (2)

Our supper table,
magnet of our emotions,
lies covered with crumbs.

***

Gusting summer rain
glitters into our backyard
under shining sun.
How We Came to Know Truth

Our village mystic (who, by the way, is President of the National Mystical Association) decided he had studied enough. He would, by God, climb the sacred mountain out beyond the village limits and find out what was what. We villagers don’t understand him, but we know he must be quite great. Someone even says there’s a faint halo around his head, visible only to the more advanced souls. This is probably true, for why would an advanced soul lie to anyone?

So Mike (our mystic) climbed the sacred mountain a week ago when there was a quadruple conjunction of some planets I’d heard of and some I hadn’t (I don’t understand these things, but I did think the air smelled different that day). Mike meditated (you know, where you sit down and do holy things to yourself) and then climbed the mountain just like he owned the damn thing. We all watched from the bottom. He was at the top about half an hour, maybe receiving his instructions, and then he came back down. We all gathered around him and asked him what he saw, what he learned, what he heard, how did it feel?

Mike rolled his eyes up and began to speak in a quiet but firm voice, saying: “I have been to the mountain top. I have had an Experience. I cannot possibly tell you how it really was. I must speak in veiled terms for your own good. I say unto you, ‘Roses are red, Violets are blue, What’s false is false, And what’s true is true.’” As he spoke, I thought I noticed a faint shimmer of light around his holy head. It is humbling to be able to live in the same village with one who knows, and who knows he knows, and has a halo according to some reports.
**Howling at a Real Moon**

What is illusion, really?
Is it the satisfied look on a rich lady’s face?
Is it a boy smelling the evening breeze as he rubs his magic lamp and has visions?
Is it the mathematically maternal thrill of writing a tight algorithm for a computer?

What is reality, sort of?
Is it the headache after too much ice cream too fast?
Is it the birds before a spring sunrise singing their hearts out?
Is it the symphonic climax hurled out of a conductor’s baton?

If we knew what illusion is, would it be found but a word?
If we knew what reality is, how long before the knowing were but a memory?

Give me a breath at a time and keep your reality.
Show me a round orange moonrise and I will fully embrace illusion.

I look into your eyes and I see the absolute reality of illusion.
Then it is that I forget the illusion of reality.
Love Is

Sunlight twinkles yellow
off the neighbor’s tree leaves,
stirred by a sibilant breeze.
All is well.

The sky is empty, empty, empty, and azure.
Do not worry.

The rose window decal
on our east window glows
with what glass and plastic know of love—
crimson, aqua, yellow, and amethyst,
concentric in twelves.
It is all right.

Your eyes shine behind mine,
energizing my thoughts,
giving off a gentle voltage.
Fret not.

You are more than you are.
You are the prism,
the white light,
the rainbow,
and more.

Notice your depth sometime
as you awaken from sleep,
and rest assured
that depth never dies.

Serenity,
a smooth current of calmness,
surrounds.
Permeates.
Is.
Is.
Is.

It is too silly now to say
what love is,
or that I love you.
Words trouble the serenity.
Definitions becloud the sky.

Tremulant leaves
twinkle sunlight.
The sky is empty, pure.
The rose window
glows with color.
Your eyes,
your deep eyes—

enough.
Moodrider

How so up we go
and so down,
we moodriders,
spirits abuilding
and acrumbling.
A day or peaceful two,
then zapperoo,
off we tumble from our
pinnacle of hail-fellow peace into a
tar barrel of angry gloom.

Pin me up on a bulletin board
and study me, Mr. Doctor.
Give me lithium or understanding
or electric temples to make
me cool.

Thank you.
Now I see. I see the gentle
love-waves shimmering
in the atmosphere.
I see WHAT IS—
the sharp outlines of the furniture,
the swaying trees.
Here we are in reality,
or what’s left of it.

Peel me off the periphery of mortals,
would someone? Why cannot I have
the normal agonies of mankind?
Why do I ride on a little toy boat through
such choppy moodwaters?
Give me a reason, please.

No, don’t.
It’s all right.
I see so many
normal folks in such pain,
captured in business envelopes of stuffy fright
or pulsing with radioactive rap music
or yammering in their beer.
What right have I to ask that a corner
of the universe be lifted so I can peek
at God’s underwear and understand
why I am why I am?

I do my work and I pay my bills and I
contribute to the coffers of
such democracy as we have.
Oh, I emote a bit unevenly,
yes, I do.
But then, Uranus doesn’t
rotate the same as the other planets do,
and it still makes the charts.

Whatever the mood,
there is a place that is here
and a time that is now
and a cracklingly deep intelligence
smack in the middle of everydude
be he into
pills or pajamas or private jets.

How so up we go
and so down,
with a smile,
with a frown,
slightly unpinned,
scarf in the wind.
Moon and Mars Conjunct

Walking at night
to the corner mailbox,
breathing deeply of
cool September air,
I look up and see
Mars by the full moon,
quiet friends,
like a tiny garnet
by a round opal
set in the sky’s
planetary ring.

A carful of teenage girls
zooms by,
emanating shrieks and
laughs and
whoops,
careening between curbs
through our
planned community.

The red taillights
soon zigzag away
into velvet distance,
and silence prevails,
broken now by
this old mailbox accepting
my letters with a chuff
and a clanky groan.

I look skyward again.
Mars and the moon,
quiet friends still,
stare winkless from the surface
of the universe.

Has anything changed?
Yes, my letters are
in the mailbox;
yes, the car has painted
a picture in my ears;
yes, the moon is
imperceptibly
closer to Mars now—
but nothing deep
has changed.
The night has merely
taken a breath.
Mother Greets Newborn

I see you have been
traveling through the universe
without a map again.

Welcome to earth, my friend.
I breathe on you with my eyes
and I hear you with my breast.
You squall and you squirm,
but you did come to this place,
and I opened the door,
so let’s learn to be together.

As your first guide
on this strange planet,
I will introduce you to your body
and mine and everything else.
Let us proceed together now
as companions.

Earth is not a bad place to live.
There is much room here for love.
There, there, there....
Drink of the earth and sleep.
One Glance

From its western podium
the setting sun conducts
for half an hour
a symphony of colored sky:
loud oranges and penetrating purples
resolving into softer pinks and muted blues.

Under this musical sky,
noticing your smile and breeze-tossed hair,
I glance deep into the centuries
behind your clear eyes—
and I remember.

This moment was and is and will be.
It never was not, and never cannot be—
one precious moment of purest love,
breathless and deathless.

Inner spirit needs only one glance, no more—
no rush or embrace or kiss or promise.
One glance opens your soul to me,
and I know your soul and love your soul.

This musical sky is fleeting;
these bodies will grow old and cold;
but my memory of this one glance
will never fade, as must the sky.

Our symphonic sun’s bright colors
have mellowed now to a somber gray
as we walk along
not knowing what to say.
Philosophy

I saw a philosopher
driving to work
at the college
in his Pontiac
Sunbird
to pick up
his biweekly
paycheck,
and I said
to myself,
“What does
this really
mean?”
Planting an Apple Tree

Our green earth is turning brown
like a skinless apple
when wrapped in clear plastic.
We cough and spit our technology
into its atmosphere,
pumping it full of our pumpings,
heating it with our heatings.

We fail to hear earth wheeze
as we motor to the flea market
for our next bargain
or to the supermarket for 2% milk.
We dump our chemists’ ideas
into the only air there is
and pump carbon
into our children’s lungs.
Already we smell our urban halitosis
blowing back into our faces
and we make little jokes about it.

Will earthlife fade away
along with our generation?
Or will we let it breathe
the saving breath of trees?
It is too smoky to tell from here,
but I plant this apple tree
in case earth heals one day
and some new Newton needs
a lump on the head.
Rolling with the Thunder

Why I was angry matters not,
but fury had blossomed in me,
and I was it—no turning away.

Fingers atremble,
voice ashake,
heart apump,
I challenged a present wrong
yielded up to me
from some chasm of an obscure past.
I stood resiliently firm,
arteries turgid with love and law.

It is over, and I did not lose.
No one lost—or won.
The conflict was as imperative
and brief
as a summer thunderstorm.

I sit now electric with leftover adrenaline,
images of the struggle
reverberating in my thoughts—
but already a silence in my blood begins
to bathe me with merciful forgetting.
The Sound of Dying

If you have heard
a train go by,
you know the sound
of dying.

A buzz, a roar,
and no more.

Oh, maybe a little clacking
in the distance,
but nothing to
speak of.
Suburban Reverie

Watering the flowers,
I happen to think of
all the famous authors
working on their newest
books.

Mowing the yard,
I wonder how the
great mathematicians
can prove their theorems
even with computers.

Sitting in my front yard,
listening to the songs
of cardinals and wrens,
robins and blue jays,
I wonder at the amount of
practice an opera star
must submit to.

How about the columnists
and cartoonists and
astronauts and painters,
all being
something?

Here I am,
sitting in my front yard,
in an aluminum lawn chair,
staring at my suburban home,
supporting and
supported by a nice family,
wondering,
wondering.

I’ll water the flowers a little more.
Three Root Words

When all the words are done,
and all the gestures and looks,
I love you.

When all the miles are traveled
and all the roadblocks passed,
I love you.

When all the arguments are over
and the smile comes after gloom,
I love you.

Love abides beneath all words.
Love knows no distance.
Love dissolves every difference.
I love you.
Tavern Talk

Did you ever look deeply into the eye of a chicken?

No, you say, they have nothing between their eyes but cartilage, and you laugh at your little joke.

Did you ever look deeply into the eye of a chicken?

Yes, you say, and it came over and bought me a drink, and you laugh some more.

Did you ever look deeply into the eye of a chicken?

No, you say, have you?

Yes, I have.

What did you see? you ask.

I saw a light like a little egg-shaped sun, and inside it were countless smaller eggs. It was like touching my eyeball to a live wire, and it lasted for only a split second, but I saw infinity in the eye of a chicken.

Yeah, I saw that once in a waitress’s eye, you say with a snicker.

Same infinity I saw, only I didn’t have to leave a tip.
Tired Minds

Our minds,
like tires,
tread round and round,
going places,
coming back,
going flat,
getting pumped,
wearing down,
and finally
retiring.
Two Birds in a Tree

A large bird alights
on a small branch
at the top of a poplar tree.

He bounces and wavers in the breeze,
keeping his balance.

Such is human life.

Another bird alights
on a small branch
very near the first one.

Both bounce and waver in the breeze,
but in different rhythms.

Such is married life.
About Alan Harris

When Alan Harris was born on Sunday, June 20, 1943, his father, Keith E. Harris, was piloting a B-17 in bombing missions over Europe while his mother (Margie) worried about Keith lovingly from Illinois.

Schooling in Earlville, Illinois (Alan’s home town) was interesting, useful, and generally free of creativity (do what the teacher says, get the good grade). From 5th through 12th grades he played the trumpet in the school band and enjoyed the contest trips. His father drove a school bus as part of his living (farming was the other part), and if Alan happened to ride on his father’s bus, he had to very much behave.

Illinois State University was where Alan became chagrined over how a student with a full class load could possibly keep up with all of the assignments given in said classes. He felt he was a pawn in a game, but with judicious time-shuffling and corner-cutting he plowed along and made respectable grades amidst all the worries.

A bright spot at ISU was taking a contemporary American poetry class with Dr. Ferman Bishop. Through him Alan discovered depths in poetry that he had never dreamed of while in high school. E. E. Cummings took him for zingy flights of in-your-faceness. T. S. Eliot, whose symbols even had symbols, fully baffled him. Robert Frost was slyly charming. Emily Dickinson’s mastery of rhyme and meter for conveying soul and spirit made the young poet’s heart go funny. Alan started “being a poet” in his sophomore year (1962) at ISU. Poetry had been previously unneeded in his life but now was available to contain parts of his soul that he hadn’t realized were there.

After graduating from ISU in 1966 there was the little matter of having to earn a living, which took the form of two years of high school English teaching, three years of tuning and repairing pianos, and (after a 1976 MS in Computer Science at Northern Illinois University) about 25 years of computer work (mainly programming, in-house computer teaching, and Web development—for Commonwealth Edison Company in Chicago).

During most of that vocational stint before retirement, Alan continued to write poems. Even with the whirl of commuting it was still possible to emote at home. He launched his current Web site (www.alharris.com) in 1995 with a few poems, and eventually has populated it with almost everything he has written. As a poet, essayist, story-writer, and photographer he has spurned the print publication route, having seen the excruciations gone through by other writers trying to make a big name and big money for themselves via magazine and book publishers. With the Web, there’s instant publication, moneyless communication, and a worldwide potential audience. Of course, the literature has to stand on its own feet to get readers, but it’s always there for those who seek it, or just happen in, or get sent in.

Alan met his wife Linda at ISU in 1962 and they were married in 1966. Linda has worked as a school speech therapist, insurance medical office worker, and medical transcriptionist, in addition to being a conscientious wife, mother, and grandmother. They have a son, Brian, who is a Tucson percussionist.