

Al Purdy (December 30, 1918- April 21, 2000)

With the death of Al Purdy on April 21, 2000 a major voice in Canadian literature was stilled. From the early nineteen sixties onwards, Purdy was a huge presence in Canadian poetry, a figure who loomed large both physically and literarily in the country that he ceaselessly celebrated with a lover's awareness of its beauties and its secrets and a lover's forgiveness of its faults and its foibles. Once described by George Bowering as "the world's most Canadian poet," he more than any other poet of his generation wrote about Canada for Canadians in the manner of a man speaking to other men (and, though less directly, to women). A temperamental descendant of Bliss Carman, an attitudinal beneficiary of Irving Layton, a boon companion of Milton Acorn, an astute critic of Leonard Cohen, and a rambunctious and desultory trail blazer for the generation of late Modern Canadian writers who embraced postmodernism, Purdy was a strong and vital link in the Canadian poetic continuity. If there is such a thing as a tradition of Canadian literature, he was and is an inevitable component of it. That he was a long-time subscriber to *Canadian Poetry* is characteristic: much more than many of his readers realize, he was a scholarly poet and a master of allusion whose poems are rich in deliberate echoes of writers as diverse as G.K. Chesterton and D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams. From the outset, he constructed himself as a "weed" ("Self-portrait"), but he was always a sensitive weed—a wild plant with the sensibility of the Romantic poets from whom his deepest roots drew sustenance.

One of Purdy's abiding ambitions was for the reader to feel a poem as an "extension of his or her own eyes and mind." No doubt there are as many instances of his successful achievement of this goal as there are readers of his poems, but here is one. A little over a year before Purdy came to national attention with *Poems for All the Annettes*, a teenage boy had immigrated to British Columbia with his parents from a remote area of Africa that his father had pioneered as a soldier settler in the years immediately following the First World War. To put it mildly, that boy's sense of dislocation was acute and prolonged: the distance from a coffee farm in Africa to an urban home in Victoria was great both geographically and environmentally. But it was not

permanent, and one reason for its gradual diminution were some lines from "The Country North of Belleville" in a review of *Cariboo Horses* in the May 28, 1965 issue of the Canadian edition of *Time*:

And where the farms are it's
as if a man stuck
both thumbs in the stony earth
and pulled
it apart to make room
enough between the trees...

In the *Time* review, the quotation stopped there, but the poem itself soon furnished other resonant lines:

...to make room
enough between the trees
for a wife
and maybe some cows and
room for some
of the more easily kept illusions...

Not only did these lines spark across gaps of space and place for a teenage boy deeply in need of such sparks, but they also helped to ignite a love of Canadian poetry and the Canadian landscape that grew through the years into a vocation. So I know very personally what Purdy means by the "thing we touch that touches a future we don't / the continuity of people / a we / they and me / you / concept as saccharin as religion" and what he had in mind when he wrote of his conjured image of his grandfather that "such a relayed picture perhaps / outlives any work of art, / survives its alternatives...." And I will never cease to be fascinated by the combination of poetic temperament, literary origins, and historical moments that generated such phrases as "saccharin as religion" and "perhaps / outlives any work of art"—indeed, that made Purdy add the lines from which this last statement is quoted to the first published version of "Elegy for a Grandfather" (1956) and, in the last (1986), replace them with words whose humble truth is at least partly belied by the power of the poem:

There is little doubt that I am the sole
repository of his remains: which consist
of
these flashing pictures in my mind,
which I can't bequeath to anyone,
which stop here...

Dull would he (or she) be of soul who could not feel such lines as an

"extension of his or her eyes and mind."

Purdy chose to conclude his *Collected Poems* of 1986 with the elegy to the brother that he never had that he entitled "The Dead Poet." As he may well have intended, its open-ended final stanza could as well have been an elegy for himself:

*Sleep softly spirit of earth
as the days and nights join hands
when everything becomes one thing
wait softly brother
but do not expect it to happen
that great whoop announcing
resurrection
expect only a small whisper
of birds nesting and green things
growing
and a brief saying of them
and know where the words came from*
