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Four Poems

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To Think or Not to Think?

I float, not thinking, in our calm green lake,
wary of what sudden thoughts might decree.
For this frog, with bellows for cheeks, can make –
just by flicking one leg – his lake into a tree.

Leaving the Future Behind Us

During the potato famine, we set sail
for Canada, stacked, in the hold, like a cargo
in sack-coats, still smelling
of sheared sheep who'd stumbled absently
above the thin footfalls of their mildewed hooves.
We sailed to leave our hollow-cheeked future behind us,
and return to a new past, which was nothing
yet but keening seagulls above a quickly closing
path in the featureless foam. To begin again?
We sailed, singing at night, in tall-masted
chariots from the Palms; slept in billowing
tents of Abraham and all of the prophets.
We woke to the ever-present question: would we drown
on a mountain of spray within eyeshot of the unattainable
land? I had in my pocket a pebble
from Limerick. Each night, I laid my head upon it,
like Jacob, resting my uncertain road
upon the certainty of stone, and dreamt of angels
ascending and descending, who spoke only
in Irish. They preserved all that was left to us
of our country: a landscape of language. The village
I came from was the roll of blanket on my back.
But, in the past we sailed to, new legends
would meet us, new jigs be done,
with fiddles carved hastily from driftwood
and longing, that played mainly drifting
tunes. This invisible home we returned to,
we believed in it because we had to. It was all that kept
the ship from sinking, as we bailed with cracked
and even glued cups of hope.
We pulled sometimes empty nets from a sea
that stayed, ambiguously, both empty and full.
But at sunset, all the waves turned
as purple as our wished-for passport stamps.

The Ministry of Uncertainties

In the Ministry of Uncertainties, words are kept
in cages, instead of birds. Once, one sang,
and was starved of ink. Blotting paper
on desk tops is as anxious as beached whales.
Affidavits are filed under forgotten birthdays,
Annual Surveys issued daily,
Green papers only when it snows.
Confidential Estimates will be required from all
who gossip. Wills become Progress Reports.
Street Directories are issued as Nautical
Almanacs, so mail arrives in the prairies
with each high tide. On office clocks,
time passes on schedule, as slow
as a sunken ferry. What gets done here
is as real as a stuffed, antlered trout.
Resignation unrolls its rug of silence
to walk on. But outside the sealed windows,
pigeons swerve in a flurry of storms.

Nothing Ever Happens Here

“Nothing happens here, only someplace else.”
The hands of the clock are stiff with arthritis,
and hardly move. The radio coughs
with asthma, instead of the news. Neighbours
sigh and say only “Eh?” and then “Eh?”
in both official languages. At night,
a naked girl swims in the lake,
but clothed decorously, right up
to her chin, in a thick shimmer of moonlight
and several flying frocks of mosquitos.
Seagulls try to find wires
to settle on, but the wires won’t agree that they’re there.
There are no adulteries among the tall cabbages.
When the newspaper arrives in the driveway, it’s a reprint
of tomorrow’s. Our hen looks attentively
at absolutely nothing on the ground, then pecks it
all up, with one jerk
of her neck that’s so fast, she never
even moved. And the nude girl swims
on and on, completely unnoticed.

ROGER NASH is a past-President of the League of Canadian Poets, and inaugural Poet Laureate of the City of Greater Sudbury. His literary awards include the Canadian Jewish Book Award for Poetry and the PEN/O. Henry Prize Story Award. His most recent books of poetry are *Upsidown* (Scrivener Press, 2014) and *The Sound of Sunlight* (Buschek Books, 2012). He has a collection of short stories, *The Camera and the Cobra and Other Stories* (Scrivener Press, 2011). He is Professor Emeritus in Laurentian University’s Philosophy Department.