Four Poems

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée
Nash, Roger L. "Four Poems." The Goose, vol. 13, no. 2, article 38, 2015,

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To Think or Not to Think?

I float, not thinking, in our calm green lake,
waried 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 mosquitoes.
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 Upsilon
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