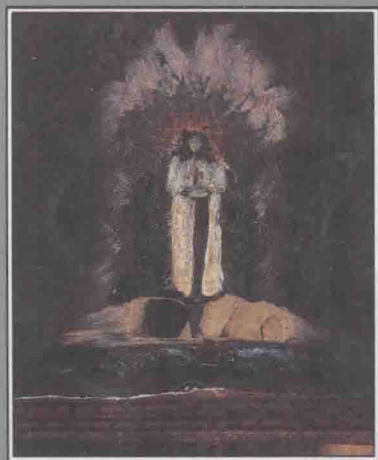


Steven Heighton
ON EARTH



AS IT IS

On earth as it is

By the same author

Fiction

Flight Paths of the Emperor (1992)

Poetry

Stalin's Carnival (1989)

Foreign Ghosts (1989)

The Ecstasy of Skeptics (1994)

For Mary

Everything may change in this demoralized world except the heart, human love, & our striving to know the divine.

— MARC CHAGALL

Steven Heighton

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AS IT IS

The Porcupine's Quill

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'Townsmen of a Stiller Town' is for Kent Nussey & Lydia Joss.

'The Patrons' is for Vanny Douch.

To Everything a Season

*A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from
embracing*

— ECCLESIASTES

I *Winter Earth*

How does it happen for the last time? The lovemaking. Two bodies joining once, twice, a thousand times, then never again. How?

* * *

OVER THE CITY a vault of winter clouds as grey and cold as limestone. Like the walls of the old house, the walls of the garden, where the raised beds of frozen earth pushed through snow like islands in an ice-bound lake.

Through a circle he had cleared in the frost of his study window Alden looked out across the garden and over ranks of snowy roofs to the lake, where the ferry was crossing to Wolfe Island. At this distance it seemed to glide above the ice and only the mist rising around it from a slim, tenuous lead of open water proved otherwise. The newspaper open on his desk advised commuters that tonight the channel would freeze hard in the few hours the ferry docked; from tomorrow until the lake warmed in early March, the much longer, winter route would be used.

Perfect. Yes! And those scales – the ones in D minor! You won't forget! So – next week at the same time!

Holly dismissing her last student downstairs, playing her own voice with virtuoso skill – touching all the lively, pert, high trilling notes.

Alden! Alden! Her own voice again, weary and dissonant, tuned back to the cracked muffled chords of old age by the departure of outsiders, the front door's slam.

Alden got up from his hard chair and stood facing his

great-great-grandfather Caleb MacLeod, the 'rebel and exile', who glowered out of his framed old charcoal sketch as if from a prison casement. Chastened, Alden pocketed his glasses, crossed the small dim study and pulled open the door. The glassed-in parchment map on the back rattled softly as the door swung to. Alden's study was papered in maps, framed and unframed, contour, weather and relief maps, ancient, old, or recent, the former tools and current mementoes of thirty-six years in the Geography Department at the college. Alden had been – and in retirement remained – an authority on historical cartography, especially as it applied to the mapping of south-eastern Ontario and the Thousand Islands. *The Garden of the Spirits*, the Iroquois had called it, *Garden of the Gods*, before they and their names were written over or erased.

After Holly's Sunday afternoon lessons a blessed silence settled over the house. After eighteen years with his own children at home and with students at school, then fifteen more among the swelling undergraduate hordes, Alden had been ready for retirement, for the cozy undemanding silence and setness of the old limestone house, for a study untrespassed by students who sprang lately from a world for which he had no maps, and which continued to spawn junior colleagues of an increasingly remote and radical stripe. *Post-colonial revisionings of the mapping process. Marxist demography. The cartographer as rapist*. Before his departure Alden had made a few listless bids at befriending and understanding his new colleagues, but they had not really wanted that any more than he had. He did have a few friends – one left in the department, the others retired – and they still met sometimes for a drink or two, at the faculty club, Friday afternoons.

He had always been more comfortable with maps than people anyway.

Alden!

He started downstairs. Holly had taken on the piano students soon after Caleb and Annie left home, within a year, one after another, the house suddenly silent after all that time. She had said the students were to give her something to do besides the garden and her winter reading – and he had seen her point. It was good for her to get out of the house and to meet new

people. But in the last few years her back problems had worsened, and her students had begun to come to her. And, inescapably, to him.

He could hardly object, out loud, to such a necessity.

She was waiting for him at the dining room table, a dull grey cardigan over the ochre paisley dress she had worn for her lessons. He sat down across from her. Her three students, who came one after another for an hour each, had made distressing inroads on the plate of biscuits she had set out earlier in the day – but a few of his favourites remained. He heard the kettle steaming in the kitchen. Snow fell behind her, beyond the picture window giving onto the garden, and it seemed to fall around and onto her head, whitening her hair, which had been white now for a decade and grew whiter each year so her shrinking face seemed each year redder against the white, her blue eyes refined to an eerie brilliance.

‘Really, Alden, there’s no need for you to hide away in your study whenever they come.’

He selected a small piece of her shortbread.

‘Or to look at me like that.’

‘I was watching the snow. Behind you.’

She half turned in her chair and winced, her rouged mouth pinched and puckering. Alden started to his feet, and then, seeing she was all right, settled back down.

She said, ‘I would have thought it was too cold to snow.’

‘Well, the paper predicts the ferry channel will freeze tonight and they’ll have to change to the winter route tomorrow. So tonight would be better for the island.’

‘Yes ...’

‘Is your back too painful? We don’t have to go.’

‘Alden, *please* ...’ That faint, exasperated quaver betraying deep weariness. A yellowing key, accidentally touched, on a worn old piano.

‘I only meant –’

‘No, I want to, we go every New Year and we’ll go tonight. I want to.’

‘I realize the food isn’t as good as it used to be.’

She smiled. ‘That’s us. We don’t taste things the same way.’ She started to get up for the kettle but he waved her off with a

brisk teacherly sweep of the hand. He rose and strode smartly past her as if entering a crowded classroom.

'To hear you talk,' he chided from the kitchen, quickly finishing his shortbread, 'you'd think we were in our eighties.'

He poured a stream of boiling water into the white stoneware pot she had already sprinkled with leaves. He checked his watch. Beyond the kitchen window snow sifted into the garden, filling the furrows between the raised beds; tucked invisibly under the sill, the stiff frozen stalks and clenched, faded flowers of the snapdragons would be sinking under the snow.

Alden brought in the teapot and cups and saucers on an heirloom tray. As he served her, Holly frowned and fidgeted with the brooch pinned over her thin breast, the grey cardigan that grew looser by the week. How much longer, he wondered, would she be able to go on teaching? He did wish she could still go out to do it.

They drank tea in silence. The room went darker, the clean corners growing dusty with shadow and the dust seeming to creep outward and suffuse the whole room. Above the piano there was a small Krieghoff that had been in Alden's family for years and by the time he had finished his third cup of tea the voyageurs heaving their sledge through snowdrifts, pipes pluckily chomped in their mouths, were almost imperceptible.

He squinted again at his watch.

'Shall we get ready?'

She swallowed the last of her tea, as if bracing for an ordeal.

'You really don't want to go,' he told her, sensing her fatigue and how it mirrored his own and accusing her of both. But her back, he thought, her spine – the bones there dissolving. A woman who had loved more than anything else *to go out*, for dinner, for walks, for drinks and dancing when a sitter was found and it was Friday night or even on weeknights when the children were older and Alden willing to go along. To the theatre, then, or a pub by the harbour – or, more recently, on her own, to the warm houses of students where she would be offered such delicacies, Alden, such delicacies, you can't imagine! Things we never had when we were young. *Sushi*,

samosas, blue corn chips with homemade *salsa*, pickled ginger! How our old city has changed!

Each New Year as they got ready for the drive to the ferry and the island for their annual celebration she would grow spry, sprightly as Caleb and Annie years before at Christmas: the drive down Princess Street crowded with students under the green and spruce-blue lights and then aboard the ferry, pulling out, the half-hour passage with the boat grinding through the ice-clogged channel or taking the longer route past Fort Henry and the lights of Marysville to the winter dock, then a short drive to the old limestone inn, the Sir John A., and the table they reserved each year by the window with the city lights mirrored in long tapering rays over the ice....

He helped her upstairs and in their bedroom turned on the dim lamp on the oak table between the beds. Her idea, these matching single beds; not long after his retirement she had pointed them out in a catalogue and said that with her pain and her waking at night for pills it might be better for him, he might rest a bit better. 'Well,' he'd said after a time – a short time during which his mind flashed over a broad, sombre spectrum of feelings – 'I suppose it's a good idea. It would be better for you, I suppose, your back.'

And he'd added, 'Besides, we never really make love anymore.'

'We never much did,' she'd snapped. And after all there had been a time when only he was indifferent – once the children were born, and his academic standing and responsibilities increased, when sex had seemed, as often as not, just too much fuss. He wondered sometimes if he had left his most passionate efforts in the lecture hall – or perhaps at his desk? He could not be sure. He couldn't say. He could only wonder how a man put in thirty-five years at 'an esteemed institution of higher learning', reading and thinking and teaching, and forty-one years in the institution of marriage, perfectly faithful (in marked contrast to his colleagues, or most of them); how it happened he raised two good children and cared for his wife in health and now in sickness and did everything one is supposed to do only to end up so baffled, bled dry, alone in a study scanning the legends of priceless old parchment maps for a clue to where he was

and what had happened. *One of the country's foremost authorities on. The author of respected volumes concerning. Lies, on one level. A stranger to his most basic desires.*

He eased shut the bathroom door and shaved for the second time that day. The light above the mirror granted, as usual, no quarter at all: his dull eyes trapped in a cobweb of wrinkles: deep shadow in the wattled folds of his neck. But a full head of silver hair, swept off the forehead and back from the sides, still handsome.

When he stepped back into the bedroom the lamp was off, the room almost dark. Holly sat on the side of her quilt, knees in the furrow between the beds – her knees bare. She was naked. They always undressed separately these days, not exactly hiding from each other but with a kind of coy, Victorian stealth, discreet contortions and turnings-away, Holly stiffer, more clumsy all the time, Alden more precise and methodical.

It had been a while since he'd seen her naked. Thinner now. Sitting on her bedside in the near-dark.

'Alden ...?'

Faint stirrings, a quickening in the belly, not the rushing spring-melt of early youth but an echo of that, muted as so many things now seemed, as if age were gradually cooling, burying him in drifts of softly falling – what? Not only snow. Cheques and bills? A storm, maybe, of calendar leaves blown from the old black-and-white films of his youth. Blurring his eyes, frosting his brows and hair. His ears filling up. His senses shrouded, deadened – but alive.

He undressed. Snow slipped past the darkening window and for a moment a gust rattled the pane and snow whirled and flocked against it.

'Of course I want to go,' she said softly as he eased down beside her. 'I still look forward to it. Every year. Here, kiss me.'

Her face looked different, smoothed out by the near-dark; in bright light her papery skin seemed almost translucent, as if she were melting from outside as well as from within, but this dimness filled-out and deepened her face so she seemed now more solid, substantial, less likely to fold up and crumple if he held her.

And as they lay back together on her bed and began again, with great patience, for the first time in a year and the second in three years and for the last time, a thought drifted through Alden's mind and he wondered if it mattered and thought it must but then he lost it, he let it go and only recalled later, when they arrived an hour late at the Sir John A., that he'd been worried about missing the next ferry. Their pale bodies stirring like snow outside the window, blending, settling through grey air then churned to life by occasional gusts and floating down again to sift white over the frozen earth like seed. But cold. And as Alden made slow and difficult, blissful love to Holly he wondered why they had never much done it and why they did not do it more often now in spite of everything, to let it heal and bind them, and he vowed he would not let the intensity and purity of this moment melt away, he would keep it alive inside him, he would make this happen more often, again. But afterward as they lay on her bed he felt the warmth and rapture beginning to fade and bleed away: stored heat drawn from the body of the earth as summer ends, and autumn, and ice embalms the dead stalks of flowers and glazes over the lake – an old woman's eyes dulled, glassed-over with time.

So they came home later that night from the island to their separate beds, and went on as before, and Alden failed to keep his vow. And kept on asking himself how, and why. How was it that the love and gravity stored in the lodestones of the body – the organs and the brain – were strong enough one day to draw two people together and the next day not quite strong enough? Or the next, or the next. A threshold crossed. The body's brief half-life ending.

He holds her arm tightly as they come downstairs, he in a wool suit, dark grey, she in a pleated maroon skirt and jacket. Telling her he wants to clear snow from the steps he carefully bundles up and hurries out around the house for a shovel. The air is clear and cold. Orion's belt hangs over the chimney like three sparks and, in the back garden, light from the picture window maps a gold square on the beds of soil. Huddled by the limestone in deep shadow under the kitchen are the stalks and wizened heads of the snapdragons; each year he records the

date they last until and this year has been the latest ever. A few hardy survivors, closest to the wall, were still waving gamely from the snows a month before.

A faint high trilling of music. Through the dining room window Alden sees Holly at the piano, hunched painfully over the keyboard, her face flushed and her lips, half-open, budding into a smile. He can't quite make out the piece she is playing but he stands a long time, leaning on his shovel in that parcel of light, and watches.