

*Ayorama*¹

1.

I've walked many seasons the crooked path
I cut and carved through this Glengarry wilderness
following the turns of boulders and the twists
of tree trunks to clear a lane wide enough for two
to ponder the absurdity of being

there. We

cannot flit like chipmunks between ferns
and goldenrod, nor swing from tree to tree
like our distant cousins – we must have level
ground to bend the mind to broken planes.

Not a straight line in sight, said the Scot
who drove the dozer. *I aim to keep it that way*,
I avowed and told him to turn south by the hard
maple then west behind the butternut south again
around the basswood follow the bull moose
tracks east to the sitting-bear rock after that
go north northwest by the oak... *Crazy as a coon*,
he muttered under the raucous breath of his
diesel engine, but shouted *You're the boss!*
thinking truly his machine was, revving it up to roar
to pounce with iron paw, push aside petrified
aeons and gouge out an eccentric circle back
to the loghouse where the trail begins and ends.

I too have had to brutalize the silence I came
to recover. How else could the forest have taken me
into its arms and I have embraced it had I not
stepped close enough to feel smell taste
its body, close enough for us to enter each other?
Even diminished as you are by the cruellest
animal to stalk this planet and conquer it,
your presence still overwhelms my senses
with a ceremony of communion, a ritual of
transfiguration more ancient than memory.

2.

Prehistoric glaciers and earthquakes, continental
shifts and collisions, stellar bombardment,
millennia of rainstorms heatwaves blizzards
laid out this landspace without forethought,
raised tall as a hawk's steep fall red pine and white
spruce, black oak and yellow birch, to take

under their green stalwart wings rabbit and racoon,
at random, bear and beaver, white-tailed deer
and beady squirrel, skunk, fox and coyote. Lofty
spaces woven of tangled shadows on thin spindles
of slanting light where grouse screech owl bluejay
oriole cardinal and warbler nest between song
and silence under a sky that reaches forever
and ever wordless beyond measure into unknowing.
Homeless as humans we made our home there.

Before I gathered these timbers
time had worn away all
that was extraneous already.
The space they sheltered for a century
and more had been abandoned.
They watched the infants
flushed from water into air
scream at the light, grow
to come to terms with the lot
they had not chosen, and return
to the dust and darkness
whence they had emerged
into the twilight of a settler's cabin.

Spring was a bursting of seed and sod.
The logs held the seasons in place
bridling the heat of summers
bent on horses and hay, corn and cattle.
Kept the autumnal rains to their promise
of feeding creek and pond. Stood up
to winter howling at the door,
rattling windows, battering the cabin
with ice fists in snow gloves.

Survivors too must die.
The same weathers that wiped their lives
off the now forgotten stones
tilting at weeds in gardens of memory
left their homesteads empty shells
scattered across Glengarry. Rainstorms
and blizzards gnawed away the shingled
roofs, leaving the rafters a ribcage
of the beast that devoured them.
Carcasses of farms that struggled
with drought, debt and depression
in vain. Now skunks and squirrels

nest in the mouldering silences between
jumbled tin and timber. Graveyard
of pioneer dreams and aspirations.

Till I brought these cedar logs north
four concessions and reassembled them,
hewed, heaved and fitted them
for a new lease on life and love.
Soon they were at home among spruce
maples cedars aspen ash birch and
joisted and rafted they became home
to us. Did some residue of the voices
and labours of generations long buried
still linger between phloem and pith
in the heartwood to bear witness
to what the bones always know
even while the flesh dreams?

3.

Ayorama is a love story. I have never been alone
here. You, my love, came early to join me
in these backwoods lost between two cities.
The logs were barely bound to each other
and the ramshackle floors expected pioneers,
not high heels. Blackflies and mosquitoes
held sway that spring across the untamed woods,
but the nights and the summer were ours.

For more than three decades Orion visited
our sleep with his star-spangled sword, Jupiter
and Mars wandered up and down the shingled
roof while sun and moon painted fleeting
patterns across the pond. I worked the world's
iniquities into the soil and in their time and place
light and water, fire and air conspired to raise
a green harvest sufficient to feed a multitude.
At dawn the nights yielded what sustains a garden
in the mind. In the twilight came the shape of words.

4.

Passion powers a process that carries us beyond
ourselves to engender beauty precisely
at the comical moment when flesh and flower
want a voice to be heard speaking from the podium
at the centre of their tempestuous tranquillity.

You raised your belly naked to the August sun
and on a skyblue morning the primal sea broke
into your solitude and by nightfall a child was born
to us in defiance of the probabilities of fate. She
grew here from egg and sperm to womanhood
instructed by a harsh taskmaster in the school
of flora and fauna that eloquently teach verities
of innocence and experience blunt as winter
and spring between tree-house and ice-wind lane.

Such flowering of flesh into mind hallows the forest,
its spaces domed under vaults branches construct
fanning arches from the trees' pillars against the sky,
the footpath an aisle between anguish and chance.

5.

There is no way to redress the injuries axes
and chainsaws inflict on birches and cedars,
oaks and beeches, though I have tried. Profit
is the world's executioner. Cats and dozers
erase forests, steel traps eliminate wolf and beaver,
rifles exterminate bear and moose. We poison
and plunder all habitats as if we owned them,
though I never cast net or bait in the lake
I had dug and seeded with fish – the long-legged heron
took care of that: elegantly, aloof as a connoisseur,
with chopsticks sharp as a spear he picked them
from the water in languid flight, like choice morsels
one at a time, and swallowed them whole.

We knew love's labour alone can turn wilderness
into a garden; we learnt that it must yet remain
wilderness. You elaborated your instincts to nurture
and protect with acts of beauty as I struggled to create
a balance between the imperatives of nature and art,
leaving the long and the short of it to their discretion.

Slowly acid rain trained moss to cover fifty loads
of gravel on the poet-philosopher's path

I walked time and again till I understood from
the soles of my feet up this neck of the woods
owns me. Soft knowledge that finds peace
in surrender. Wherever I go, Ayorama
will raise my bones tantalizing to the sky.

6.

How to bid thee farewell when you cannot hear
even your own voices? The wind haranguing
ash pine and tamarack each in a different tongue,
the sap singing the seasons' melodies under the bark,
the medley of sounds ten thousand creatures make
to command and maintain their place in the sun –
what words can make this parting memorable?

I learnt to read the aspen trembling at the edge
of a storm, the cardinal's punctuated whistle
who pecked at his own image in the glass
when I whistled back from my den three short sharp
glissandos down to a rapidfire shrill, the outraged
shrieks of bluejays determined to drive me away
from nests I never saw, the spit and hiss of squirrels
and wild geese, the jumpy deer in the orchard,
the circling hawk – who will I be without them?

The smell of pine in the spring air, a taste of mint
on summer's tongue, the maple flames, a raspberry's
velvet touch and the crunch of snow and ice
under fur boots drew me into the season's dance
spinning everlasting death into the delirium of living.

7.

Ayorama hung the planet in my study like a *perpetuum
mobile* suspended from the sky. How else could I
have recovered the music my father played me
in the cradle? Melodies lost in the jangle of terror
and tyranny till I heard them again in the bullfrogs'
bassoons, the soprano voices of birds, the pizzicato
chipmunks, an owl's misty call, the whispering wind,
a hush of snow, the dark hum of summer? How else
could I have recovered that lost child and moved
atonal meaning through music into mute assent?

You made it possible for me to put down the burdens
of this bloodshot age, lean them against your trees
while I searched day and night for the well and web
of understanding. Never were the stars more loud and clear
in pointing the way from one darkness to another.

That's how I found a voice and my love the images
that will speak to us long after we have moved

to other spaces, other sounds. The deer harvested the apples in the orchard, ample every other year, picked them from the branches on their hindlegs or dug them up from under the snow. The fruit that ripened in the orchard of the imagination must feed us now in the urban years to come, even if we have to dig it up from under the ice of a winter of the mind. It too provides a harvest ample enough to share with all who still know how to look and listen.

8.

The girl who saw the deer and heard the voices of the forest has spread her wings and flown the nest. Every fawn learns to dare the future's promise. Then is the time too for the parents to move on – time for us to move into the city as we move into winter. Already flocks of wild geese surprise the evening with the shrill lament of their departure. Feathered arrows across a bloodied sun. Flight into an uncertain future. Soon the fir trees will fold their wings under the pressure of snow. Ash and poplar stand unleafed in the naked cold that will test our mettle. But in the midst of winter it was fire put us to the test – the ultimate test of endurance and renewal.

9.

We built Ayorama not for eternity but for generations to come, sat around the fieldstone fireplace to share with friends alive and dead the joy and the burden of knowing the short, ample measure of things, raised a child there, engendered others, less tangible and therefore, perhaps, more durable – word creatures and painterly beings – all in search and celebration of the incomprehensible world that gives us light so that we can see the darkness.

Past midnight, at the hour when arsonists prowl the impotence of their blistering brains, fire broke out at the east end of the house. No one saw the prowler, no one was at home.

The flames raced along the desiccated timbers, bit through the shingled roof and screamed at the sky. Freezing rain came down, too slow and too thin to match the fury of the fire. Windows exploded, beams became torches. No one came and no one could have come in time to put out the flames lit in foul play.

10.

Not all who listen hear.
Shall I speak of the neighbour
willing to kill for a foot
of land he imagines part
of his ill-begotten lot?
A good fence will not
make him a better man.
He is deaf to the wild
and its creatures, to the make
believe stars that puncture
all boasts and leave him
more silly than his tail
wagging dog when he barks.

Or shall I speak of the stranger
with the mango-mellowed
tongue that talks seeming
into being? A limp handshake
seals a sly purchase.

Not all who look see.
Shall I tear the mask
of peace and piety
off the arcadian idyll
of rural living? Not
all that's picturesque
is also salubrious,
even in the unpolluted
air of the woods.

Better to remember
the neighbours who learnt
the give and take of labour
and harvest, seasons, sickness,
youth and old age. Hewing
wood and milking cows,

they know we are in transit
here, guests at the mercy
of a world at once
hospitable and hostile,
where the clouds are our neighbours
and the groundhogs burrowing
under the fence we must love
each other or perish.

11.

The police arrived to witness a blazing
pyre, summoned us from unimpeachable sleep
lest someone was trapped inside: they
did not report the tales of lives lived and loved
from the heights of happiness to the pits
of pain and sorrow, did not see the labour of decades
burning prematurely to cinders. Dawn saw
only a blackened chimney towering. Tombstone
for a history too brief for time's annals. A pile
of fallen timbers, charred and glazed
with a thin crust of ice even as fire crept still
crackling through the logs' heartwood. Soon
racoons and chipmunks will clamber all over
the rubble, and rats may find a home here.

12.

What will the lessons of a hundred acres avail us where
monsters of steel, glass and cement have devoured
the forests and their inhabitants whose lives we shared
for three decades? Pride and ambition have choked
the breath out of this land with streets and alleys
crowded with imperial creatures puffed with the power
of hundreds of horses, noisy creatures with venomous
breath, robots surpassing Ayorama's creatures
in everything except curiosity, affection and fear.
Cities have given birth to beauty unknown to birds
or trees, but must they pay for it with their lives?

13.

I must learn again to abide the whistle of authority,
the hiss and spit of the hucksters of news and wares,
the posturing of con-artists honoured for what is trite
and truthless as they humbug their way to tawdry fame
and the applause and admiration of what is worthless
by the gullible multitude. In the silence of a star-blazed night
in the company of pines and birches, foxes and grouse,

you can forget all that comes with membership
in this species mutated from rats, scurrying to and fro
between slot-machines and combustion engines right up
on their hindlegs but not upright in the search
for their lost selves, you forget you belong to a species
bug-eyed for instant gratification, chasing its own tail
as though it were the holy grail. We know not who we are
or where we're going. Greed springs a leak in the mind
and leaves a vacuum, and the jackpot turns out to be
empty when the chips are down. By hook and by crook
you cannot harvest happiness or fetch fulfilment.
Only fools think hype and chutzpah are life forces.
Give me the soft touch of a lady's slipper in flower.

14.

You, my love, wanted the city
and must now be my companion
in the search for new beginnings.
The intricate play of light and shade
across Glengarry fields and forests
hovers around us like the ghosts
of a sensual affair come to a bad end.
Dance of fireflies in the noisier nights
as dusk falls across the memory.

15.

In the urban hustle
and among strangers
to weave a new web
of adventure and affirmation
and yet remain true.

I shall plug my ears and listen
to the voices speaking inside me
straight from Ayorama's mouth.
They tell me the blue heron
carries the universe on his wings
and the artful lupines
have colourcoded its secrets.

In the city too there are trees
and where there are trees
there are robins to deliver dawn.
I shall converse with those
who see when they look
and hear when they listen.

I'll laugh with them
knowing tomorrow
is no more probable
than today was yesterday.

16.

A tree uprooted
may yet extend its being
from darkness to light.

But light is fire:
it lives and dies by consuming
what it fetches from darkness.

17.

Ayorama is no more
than a time and place
in the mind now.
Without a tongue
the wind has nothing
to tell us except
that it blows
blows forever
and deposits our voices
in the fields and forests
of eternal silence.

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¹“Ayorama” (Inuit for *fate*) was the name of the poet’s residence in Eastern Ontario which he built himself from 150-year old logs on 100 acres of bush, where he lived for thirty years with his wife, the painter & translator Arlette Francière, and their daughter Clara. On January 17, 2006, two months after the property was sold, an arsonist torched the loghouse.