

# POETRY

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## Five Poems of Memory

### 1. Imprecision

My image of the poem  
is not so much crystalline—  
diamond, snowflake, ice  
in underground caves:

it's cherry blossoms falling  
on grass that grows and withers,  
turns to compost

spring rain rivering  
on blurred windows

though maybe in coming years  
the only beauty left  
will be in gems and icebergs

no longer clouds in motion  
the shift of seasons  
real apples with worms in them

the lovely imperfect world  
haphazard  
its wavering  
lines

## 2. Sweet Peas

On the morning before Grandmother's funeral,  
Cousin Stella and I were sent out  
to pick sweet peas in the garden.  
They were wet with dew, I remember,  
flyaway blossoms, pink, blue, purple,  
like perfumed butterflies growing on stems.

We laid them, bound round with blue ribbon,  
on Grandmother's breast in the open coffin.  
"How sweet," the aunts said,  
"a last gift from two little granddaughters."

But what a pity, I thought,  
those flowers going  
before their time  
down down into the dark  
with Grandmother  
into that black hole:

the coffin lid closed now,  
the first shovelful of earth  
thudding down on it,  
the women's handkerchiefs  
flagging their grief

Stella and I at our first funeral  
both (I think) grieving  
for the flowers.

## 3. Writer's Block in Victoria

Pick a word—any word—and start from there:  
*winter*, perhaps, or *February*, what does that make me think of?  
 Death, always lurking in the background;  
 snow, though winter here means rain. I stare  
 through the window and see it's green outside:  
 green underfoot, grey above.

Sleep wishes to enfold me.  
 There's also television,  
 or other people's books.  
 Why do I need to write?

someone's water taps are running.  
 Someone above me walks across the floor,  
 which creaks. A man clears his throat.

*Winter*, I say to myself again.  
 I see a sled on snow,  
 the smooth, crusty kind.  
 A child sits on the sled.  
 She is wearing a red scarf.  
 She's about to slide downhill,  
 she and her elder sister.

I'm the little one, am I?

There's a tracery of hoarfrost  
 on all the branches  
 of all the trees  
     remembered

but not here, not now.  
 Those red buds  
 on the bush in the back garden  
 will soon be popping out.

What if I picked another word?  
 spring, maybe? gardens? rain?  
 resurrection?

#### 4. Circular

How reassuring  
the circularity of seasons,  
the leaves' gradual greening  
for one more year.

The trees throw shadows on pavement  
as beautiful as reflections in water.  
The shadows sway in the wind.

A woman weeds the flower plot  
in her front yard.

A girl with long red hair  
wearing a blue smock  
rides past on a bicycle  
and returns again.

An airplane flies overhead.  
Dogs bark and then are quiet.  
There's the sound of wind-chimes  
on my neighbour's porch.

To the small boy with spectacles  
sitting on his front stoop  
every minute is special,  
watching sunlight and shadow,  
the quick flight  
of a white bird,  
insects of the new season.

The whole world  
(he imagines—  
I imagine)  
is a sundial  
telling of time's past  
revolutions,  
future prospects.

Leaves of yesterday's newspaper  
 blow on the wind carrying  
 what singular  
 familiar narratives?

### 5. Child's Prayer: A Gloss

"Matthew, Mark, Luke and John,  
 Bless the bed that I lie on.  
 Four angels round my bed,  
 Two at the foot and two at the head."

A child frightened of the dark,  
 of ghosts hiding in closets  
 and skeletons rising from the grave  
 to clatter at my window  
 pretending to be trees,  
 I shivered in my bed alone,  
 but cast a spell and called  
 the four benign Evangelists:  
 and there they shone,  
*Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.*

Not six-winged seraphim,  
 not grand archangels,  
 not baby cherubs carved in stone:  
 more like favourite uncles,  
 only touched by flame,  
 brilliance of star or moon.  
 Any messenger's an angel.  
 Their message (this time) had no words,  
 but I spoke to them, prayed  
*Bless the bed that I lie on.*

And all night long they stayed.  
Sometimes they changed their shape:  
one was a gentle lion, one an ox,  
one was an eagle, or was eagle-eyed:  
one stayed a man, but winged.  
Always they shone as sentinels.  
The ghosts and shadows fled  
from that protected space  
ringed all about, made  
by *four angels round my bed.*

Not only children dread  
the night-horse riding through the night.  
Come back, my blessed messengers  
along the track of stars.  
Put dark to flight.  
I do not fear the dead  
as once I did, but there is space  
and emptiness and absence.  
Stand as you stood before,  
angels round my bed,  
*two at the foot and two at the head.*