



# TREES & SEASONS

Poetry by Mark Clement

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**MARK CLEMENT**

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Copies may be ordered from:  
Mark Clement  
106-980 Burnham St.  
Cobourg, ON K9A 4T7

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email:  
markwpc@sympatico.ca

website:  
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First full collection

***Islands in the Shadow***

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Ripples smooth to calm.  
The weeds and trees are sun-green.  
Birds rest in the shade.

## **We are Colour**

When storytelling movies were black and white,  
how did we know when to laugh, to cry  
or cringe in terror when the villain crept  
past the night-time window in our mind?

I say, we think in colour, paint the world  
from an infinite palette; shades of emotion  
mixed in a mind filled with exultant summer.

We know that black and white winter  
covers the fire of dying, the reds, browns  
and bright yellows of the withering sun.

We know the sleeping black sticks  
remember every shade of green,  
every bright bird flowering in the sky.

We know the clouds, those gray shades  
hiding a blue expanse that will emerge  
and merge with slate winter water.

We wander in the listless spring garden,  
are infused with early lilacs  
and the green promise of imagination.

We are colour and paint our lives  
every vibrant hue of the world.  
Our movies are not black and white.

### Seasons come and go

The old earth spins. The rapture threatens  
but we are still amazed when leaves fall  
and flowers bloom. We turn these times  
into celebration, create artificial sacrifices  
to gods and are bewildered at decline  
or renewal. We can explain these times  
but choose not to listen, choose instead  
to be in wonder, in awe that these cycles  
are not man-made and fearful they will end  
because we have intervened. We are  
unwilling to take our place in the forest.

### Sounding the Seconds

The moon tugs at the oceans  
in its endless revolution and time  
is in the sun's coming and going.

Fat geese fly south  
with their summer grown young  
then, when the ice flows into rivers,  
they follow the sungod north again.

Leaves flourish then fall. Bees  
buzz and hibernate with flower's  
sweetness safely stored.

We see all this again and again,  
and measure our lives in winter  
by the infernal clock that ticks  
and tocks as it sounds the seconds.

## As Seasons Flow

Fair rose, whose beauty thrived in summer's eye,  
you were the subject of much idle chatter  
when you spread bright petals in the wind's sigh  
and dressed in bright green leaves meant to flatter.

Thorns protected you from idle pickers.  
They were few and much softer than they seemed,  
but they impaled those casual snickers  
of tongues that could not say what dreams you dreamed.

Soft green thorns could not hide those shades of rose.  
A careful look revealed your subtle dream  
and you were discovered. High summer flows  
into fall, still those fading colours gleam.

The seasons always flow but all is right  
for I can see those colours in the night.

## The Land is Comfortable

We are so certain that the sky is blue  
and confident that soil is black and rich,  
that burning leaves will fall then rise anew  
and rain will nourish flowers in the ditch.

The new moon rising also lights dry sand  
piled high in frozen waves that burn men's feet  
and only shadows flow across that strand  
where change is slow and seasons are discreet.

If we could smell that sand-burnt flesh each day,  
instead of rich and sun-fired rotting leaves,  
would we still make our statues out of clay,  
let them wash away in rain and not grieve.

The forest holds us firmly and it keeps  
us certain even while the cold land sleeps.

Published:

- *Islands in the Shadow* – collection
- *The Moon & War* - chapbook

## About Trees

I write poems about trees, their summer green,  
their fall of burnished tones, the frieze  
of winter's wondrous gleam on bones.

They give the wind a voice, a rustle  
in a slow evening tussle with summer,  
a chatter, in a brisk midday fall.

Birds, not seen, flutter about. Hidden  
in the lush green summer, they sing  
louder than the shush of windy leaves.

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Window,  
cracked open,  
lets winter chill slide in  
and memory retreats  
to a summer.

## When I Hug a Tree

I wilt with the leaves of late summer  
then feel barren in the winter snow.  
My thoughts go astray in a cold sun  
and I am left unclothed with black limbs  
that are voiceless in the wild winds.

I have roots, but they are hidden  
and digging at them only spoils  
their gathering from soil that takes  
back fallen leaves, turns burning  
into sun-filled dust; rich blood  
to feed the pumping heart.

When I hug a tree, my arms surround  
my soul so that I can feel complete  
and know the light and dark, feel the rain  
and sun that takes it back. Warm budding  
blood flows upward from the buried roots.

## Haiku Cycle

The wind whispers cold.  
Dry leaves hurry from the tree.  
Rose upon a page.

Silence in the night.  
Woods and cold and white alone.  
Rose remembers day.

Water in the sun.  
First crow flaps across the sky.  
Rose a tender green.

Small birds flutter by.  
Snakes lie still upon the rock.  
Rose upon the eye.

## Dance on the Earth

Living mysteries dance  
and play their secret games.  
Let it be they say, let those years  
of dangerous sunlight play  
in the snow, let it open a crack  
in the ice of time and before long,  
you will see among the flowers  
those mysteries you already know.  
You will smell those hidden things  
that are dead or alive, those subtle  
fragrances that say to you  
it's true, there is a beginning,  
there is an end and when you dance  
on the earth, you will discover  
the first stage of life.

## Geese Disturb My Sleep

It's that time of year again  
when the sun shrinks its daily manna  
and leaves give up their lush life.

The earth sighs, relaxes and breathes  
its resignation that opulence  
is giving way to a spartan reality.

I get to sleep later and still rise  
with a sharp-angled glow  
pressing through the curtains.

I have forgotten that the world  
is still a busy place and life  
urges continue in the dark.

Just as forgetfulness eases  
into remembrance, southbound geese  
call me back to the earth.

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First fall of leaf seen  
red and brown below the tree.  
One goose overhead.

Nov. 11, 2008

Summer leaves have fallen in fire,  
been bagged or buried in the compost heap.  
Some left behind have dried, their urgent colour  
faded to a wrinkled brown. They are gathered,  
placed upon a lonely pyre and a green man  
watches the stuttering flame send summer  
wisps into a grey winter sky. The wind moans  
as it flows through empty trees and new birds,  
now on the wing, follow a warmer sun.

The green man sighs and shivers in the chill  
as fire consumes the last memory.  
A few desultory snowflakes float between  
the bare black branches as the green man  
spreads ashes across the lawn, rakes them  
into the patient soil where they will wait.

Published:  
- *The Moon & War* - chapbook

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Fire sears the green leaf.  
Memories fall to the soil.  
The edge of clouds blush.

## They Do Not Rage

Brown leaves do not mourn those long summer days  
when their compliant swish was fed by fire  
and blood, from fertile soil, surged through soft veins.

They do not rage with sad regrets or sigh  
in silent brittle discontent. Instead,  
they clutch the branch, hold fast in dry decline  
and let their song fly crisp upon the wind.

And when a sharp northern gust snaps them free,  
they flutter, from branch to root. The bare tree  
does not grieve their flight, neither does it rage  
as soft snow settles on the ground at night.

Published:  
- *Along the Path* - chapbook

## First Snow

Snow covers summer and frantic footprints  
have appeared around the silent trees.  
Squirrels look for their caches and dogs  
sniff the territory and leave their scent  
of ownership. From here, I can see the street;  
that artificial footpath with small snowbanks  
piled along its length and an occasional  
pedestrian focused on some destination.

My bones seem less able in this season.  
I have no urge to plod along the sidewalk  
or leave footprints around the trees.

I remember being a squirrel, poking  
every corner for hidden treasure,  
dashing along the empty branches,  
flying to the next tree, landing skilfully  
on those bare winter bones.

I remember being a dog, my brisk pace  
to find competitors and let them know  
I am in the territory, let them know  
I can be a friend or foe, let them know  
that even in this winter, I am not asleep.

I remember the sidewalk, its slush  
sticking to my boots as I pressed  
between the snowbanks, my direction  
firmly focused, my legs directed  
to some important goal. I remember  
the journey as I made new footprints  
in fresh winter snow.

## Winter Scene

Three geese startle the big blue sky  
and their wings press against the still air  
of winter as they rise from the flat gray river  
and circle in search of the southern compass.

White is everywhere on the land  
and on the trees whose black bones  
bow beside this old gray house.  
There are no footprints at the door.

Gravity pulls the building and it leans  
towards the hidden summer soil  
where green lives once stood or sat  
content beside the flashing river.

And here I am, a witness to this edge  
of sleep at the end of summer's sun.  
It is cold as the warm geese flap away.  
There are no footprints in the snow.

Published:  
- *Islands in the Shadow* - collection

## Birds and Ice

The cool air is clear  
and a thin layer of ice  
has calmed the water.

The winter sky is empty,  
gulls huddle on the icewater  
and the sharp sun bounces  
and burns the unwary eye.

These ducks don't know  
which way is south and waddle,  
more than usual, through  
a blanket of fresh snow.

I step out of the car and the ducks  
start to mutter and clutter  
in anticipation. The swans waddle  
through the crowd towards me.

I open the bag of mixed seeds  
and throw a handful to the ducks.  
A big swan pokes his orange beak  
at my empty hand, a mute demand  
for his share of the bounty.

The swans are bold, the ducks frantic  
as I litter this snowy patch with grain.  
There is an official sign that says,  
"Don't feed the wild birds." Onlookers  
only smile and stand on their piece  
of the snow covered earth, too warm  
to report this gratuitous infraction.

## Winter Dawn

The sun is fixed and we  
cannot stand still long enough  
to let it warm the winters. Instead  
we bask in the weak reflection  
of our cold companion. It illuminates  
early morning demons. They scurry  
along the fenceline, skim  
freshly fallen snow, engulf low  
black bushes but leave no footprints.

The air carries no telltale odour.  
Fresh and clean, some say. But then,  
the lost sun forces this creation,  
this world of living things, shadows  
with ill-intent or mythical creatures  
fallen from a heaven of light.

All of this can be explained.  
If you focus on the window glass,  
you will see a reflection  
of the mad inventor.

Published:  
- *Cobourg Poetry Reading* – chapbook

## All About Ice

One should not hold onto ice too long  
or let it shimmer on the inside of windows.  
It has been said that ice is death  
or at least, only lives in shortened days  
when the sun rides low and casts  
long shadows on commerce.

Ice loosens your grip between the earth  
and the sole of your warm-day shoes.  
It clings to once-green-laden branches  
and bends them towards the fallow earth  
where sunshine lies buried, burnt  
and crumbled into summer dust.

Water becomes emotionless and fish  
can only breath old air trapped below.  
Swimming is out of the question  
and fancy skating scars the brittle skin.  
The wind has no grip or loose thing  
to rattle and its song is only a moan.

Moisture clots to ice in cold air,  
falls slowly and is almost invisible.  
The air becomes dry in the throat  
of old men who lay in their daytime bed.  
Sunlight bounces from the sheen  
and can blind the unwary eye.

So, should Ice be avoided in all its forms?  
Even though ice cycles with the sun  
and regularly presents itself,  
it is, after all, transparent.  
If one simply looks bravely through it,  
it will melt before your eyes.

## It's Almost Spring

I arise filled with the expectancy of birds  
as they flit through empty tree branches  
searching for signs of renewal.

The clouds didn't show up today  
and the bold sun on icy sidewalks  
has turned them into gray mush.

Cold air spills through the open window.  
Destiny is chilled but the winter wind  
has failed and I am encouraged.

I have not listened to the news  
so my heart is free to imagine  
time filled with quotidian sunlight.

I think I will dress lightly,  
not turn on the TV and sing  
to those boisterous birds.

Published:  
- *Cobourg Poetry Reading* - chapbook

## Spring Poem

It's time again to write a poem.  
I look out the window and there it is.  
spring, stark and eager for the sun.

Is this the stuff of poetry, this dingy  
morning light, sun filtered through  
a melancholy sky and crisp air.

Unseen in leafless trees, the birds  
sing and seem to know, or perhaps,  
they just encourage this new turning.

There are shaded patches of snow  
tucked like small memories beneath  
evergreens. Are they poems?

Discordant sounds from the street  
confuse sonorous birdsong  
and spring somehow seems delayed.

Poems take a turn as the wheels  
of a factitious life crowd out  
the subtle signals of the earth.

The poem's soft edges flow  
into the cold soil and spring mutters  
its faltering collection of words.

Published:  
- *A Poet's Lament* - chapbook

## The Colour of Spring

The remembrance of spring  
is held in the earth and we  
endure the short days.

The earth and sun dance  
through the stars, repeat  
their cosmic steps and life  
flows out of the soil, struggles  
in the cool nights and finally  
our dream of long sunny days  
becomes a canvas of colour,  
a painting of our lives renewed  
and we are amazed that the world  
has so many shades of green.

ж

Between the brown leaves,  
bright green springs toward the sun.  
Snow patch by a rock.

## The Smell of Spring

I should go, walk along the quiet street,  
walk and meet those who are alone and know  
that winter winds, at last, have lost their chill,  
that lonely snowflakes tossed about will fall  
on placid lakes and land where sun-warm blood  
flows deep between the fertile grains of soil.

I should go, stroll in a park between the trees,  
along the path where summer past is still  
an odour in the dust, where creatures stir  
and fuss with life between the old brown grass  
where fat geese honk and flap up from the pond  
and turn in search of northern memories.

I should go, stand beside the calm cool lake  
where moist and musty breezes push waves  
that slither up and down the sand and bring  
the smell of spring from some far land. I Should  
break the winter crust, breathe in summer's lust,  
shake off the dust and measure out another year.

## Leftovers

it is spring again  
and there is hope  
that an angry God  
will hear our incantations  
and look with favour  
on our contrite sacrifice.

We cower in fear  
at the unknowable universe  
but our wise men tell us  
that the sun has turned  
to rise higher every day  
and will wake the sleeping seeds.

ж

The crow flaps frantic  
as the swift sparrow defends.  
Lilac on the breeze.

## Warm Rain

The ploughed land is dark.  
Sunless leeward slopes  
and hollows are white.

Near the road, a shed,  
released from winter,  
leans against itself.

I imagine, in this quiet  
of dawns expectation,  
the soul of the shed  
straining to be free;  
a grinding paradox  
of its purpose.

The soft rain  
urges the snow into mist  
and the trees are silent.

## Spring on the Beach

It's early spring on the empty beach,  
gulls soar on a still-chilly breeze,  
the slate sky slides and blends  
with an endless empty lake.

Waves are big enough to swoosh  
as they end their journey with the wind.  
The seamless sand is pitted  
with last year's plodding footprints.

It's too warm for heavy coats, too cool  
for bare-arm shirts. It's in-between time.  
Sweaters and desultory conversation  
seem to match the uncertain season.

Small furtive clouds float west  
on an invisible current of air, capture  
the sun then releases it just in time  
for a few more encouraging words.

Soft sand yields to our pressing feet.  
Walking is a chore and the cool wind  
carries our words towards the green land  
where we gather them from the grass.

Published:  
- *Reading 66 King E.*, Cobourg - chapbook

## Flowers and Weeds

The field this spring is wild  
with flowers that show  
bravely above hardy weeds.

The careless sun feeds  
them all and rain rains, soaks  
the soil where roots mingle.

Who is to say  
which are flowers  
and which are weeds?

The farmer doesn't care,  
he ploughs them all  
to make way for corn.

✱

Fields of old brown grass  
soak up the fresh cool rainfall.  
Crows sit on a fence.

## Daggers

Shafts of sunlight are daggers.  
Leaves, sabre-tipped and green,  
rain from the sky to the stream  
in my cathedral.

In those forests where I walk,  
it is dark.  
Listen...  
The grass bends underfoot.

ж

At the smooth pond edge,  
bulrushes stand tall and straight.  
A water spider.

## Summer Leaves

It is summer,  
leaves speak of the wind,  
sun presses the shadows  
into small hidden spaces  
and his shirt hangs lazily  
on the empty lawn chair.

Black soil clings  
to her busy hands  
as lawn mower growls  
compete with the leaves,  
edge out the thoughts  
of recent events.

The lie in her family  
was out of place today.  
Lawyers don't work  
on summer Sundays  
and the bitter words  
have not been recorded.

It is summer,  
birds flutter in branches  
full of leaves that know.

## Meltdown

Sun fills the cloudless summer,  
birds are silent as they rest  
in the branches of quiet trees.

On the patio, in the shade of our  
big umbrella, the air is heavy  
and our words fall to the ground,  
unable to go the distance.

Angel, our neighbours' dog,  
usually eager for a scratch,  
hugs the cool ground  
underneath our porch.

We decide to go to the beach  
where we might feel a breeze  
from some cooler place  
far across the lake.

We buy ice cream cones and walk  
barefoot in the shallows.  
In the still air our words  
tumble into the slack water.

Ice cream flows down the cones  
onto our clasping hands,  
we lick the coldness furiously.  
It is messy but very sweet.

Published:  
- *Reading 66 King E.*, Cobourg



**Mark Clement** is retired and lives with his wife Margaret in the quiet town of Cobourg Ontario. Mark went to highschool in Cornwall Ontario and in 1958 had his first poem published in the St. Lawrence highschool yearbook. Following highschool, Mark attended what is now called a 'community college' and became a technocrat in the field of electronics. Work and family life overtook poetry and Mark didn't begin writing again until the mid '70s. Since that time, he has become increasingly active in the world of poetry and following retirement, poetry has changed from an avocation to an almost full-time job.

Today, Mark has non-paying jobs as webmaster and doing the layout of chapbooks and anthologies for The Ontario Poetry Society. In between, he manages to write a poem or two and participate in the local Cobourg Poetry Workshop. *Islands in the Shadow*, Mark's first full collection of poetry, was released in November 2008.



Lake Ontario Winter from Cobourg



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