

Night Poem in New Glasgow

The tavern drones with menace.
The rawboned faces
are those of The Black Watch
or The Scottish Rifles ninety years ago
wild drunk in cantonment in India.
The uproar at the soaking tables—
the Pictou County Rugby Club is in full cry—
roils the smoke, the fumes of beer and urine:
thick fingers rub at the hot stitches.

The patrol cars prowl MacLean Street,
turn downhill, and wait.

The Armoury shows two lights.
Stricken sergeants
are leaning toward the fire;
they murmur
of a place of shell-torn olive groves
and of deeds among the hedgerows
west of Caen.

Upon the dark harbours
the gull-lined boats
of lobstermen
float like white shadows.

Inland,
a long freight,
heavy with coal and pulpwood,
labours with the undertone
of muffled drums.

Seaward,
in the island of Cape Breton
MacLeods and Camerons tilt their heads
to smoothened violins.

Elbows, wrists, and fingers
find again the unforgotten tunes:

The Land of My Youth

The Mist-Covered Mountains

Lochaber No More

lift resound and ebb
across the moonlit slagheaps,
hills, and waters.

From River John to Rossfield
red-haired girls
lie awake in their beds,
imagining cities.

At the edges of the midnight fields
time is breathing
in the rib cage
of each abandoned hay rake.

—Robert Cockburn