

A Poet's Voice

John B. Lee

John B. Lee was appointed Poet Laureate of Brantford in perpetuity. He was also appointed Poet Laureate of Norfolk County where he lives now in the lakeside town of Port Dover. The most recent of his books include, *Dressed in Dead Uncles*, Black Moss Press, 2010, and *In the Muddy Shoes of Morning*, Hidden Brook Press, 2010.

Author's Statement Poetry slows us down; requires that we linger in the moment, and, that we are attentive to that which deepens experience. If we might accept the truth of Marianne Moore's statement that "poetry is imaginary gardens with real toads in them," and if we might agree with Coleridge's definition that poetry is "the best words in the best order," and if we might know what MacLeish meant in his wonderful poem, "Ars poetica," when he wrote, "poems should not mean/ But be," and we might feel "hairs on the nape of the neck" rising when the words sing, then we have it in us to partake in magical thinking and we might find in dictionary music the connection between the deep wells of the self and the far realms of the universe, between the indwelling soul and the all encompassing spirit. I want the best poems to challenge the mind, to touch the heart, to thrill the body, to enthral the soul and to include the spirit in one surround.

look, a dog wearing sunglasses

I'd sometimes
watch my shadow as a lad
grow long upon the lane
of morning
how that still darkness
misfit my shape, hinging outward from my feet
like a miss-measured door
how I could
swing that thin shade
so it
floated in bent black angles
staining down the ditch
or looming
in spilled flimsy
over the sprung-brown furrows
like the unabsorbable soak of runoff
seeking to be gone
from old rain
my body
like cloud scrap
fascinated by sunlight
went yawning beyond exhale
improving impossible contemplation
it could climb
singed deadfall like grey ash at the edge of
a dying fire
or smoulder
up through tree limbs
to the very bud of twig tips
pierced through like smoke
and then tatter
backwards into the brave acrobatics
-a flame's leap of free thinking

those who linger on desire
until they're self-dizzy
with inner delight
in the blue regions
of mind like sky-touched water
feeling that super-luminous caress
of true presence come real

how sad then
to see how, at a family picnic
when one woman shouts in glee
"look, a dog wearing sunglasses"
and she points
and everyone suddenly
gives over entirely
to the shallowing of attention

"look," she says, "a dog riding a motorcycle
wearing sunglasses... get the camera, dear"
and every dear does

I must confess
the dog who rakes the cinders
on my silent tongue
draws forth his cup
of splashes
from a deeper well
and slakes a larger thirst
than this, perhaps
he finds my fragrance
in an empty glove
and shakes five flaccid fingers
till my spirit fills it with a hand of air

How Easily We Die

a Cuban boy
curious to know
the living interior
of a Caribbean clam
threw the sealed shell
again and again
at the concrete sidewalk path
running east-west
between the aquamarine paradise
of the sky-green sea
and the forbidden zone
of the tourist-resort hotel
and like a hungry gull
he cracked the hold
so it smashed into arced shards
of thumb-swirled calcium
and life oozed through
a doomed grey-white tentacle
came threading out
of the shattered gap
like a coagulated curd of sour milk
and the father arrived and saw
and asked "What happened here?"

meanwhile the little boy having lost interest
was moving on to other joy
and the father
picked up the dying creature
cradled in his palm
the failing energy, feeling life go
as it is with time and sorrow
the falling off and fading into
the permanence of grief
the *sombría* of woe, the little shadow
we carry in consequence
when we know that what we do
sometimes lingers in the light
he says to himself
in the soul-story of his own life
remembering how he had drowned
as a child
how he had let himself
sink through the dark halo of deepening water
learning in those slow fathoms
how easily we die
like the letting go of the sticky string
of a wind-caught balloon
bluing into the twin direction
of a lovely disconnect
we might speculate

'... was my life the drift of light
or was it the shadow vanish
of a shrinking shade?
... which journey am I on
the one remembering where I was
or the one
no longer here?'

and he gently places the mollusk
in the sand
beside the walk
where in the final moment of wonder
we might feel
the absent hand of God

Wild Mushrooms

I did not trust my bachelor farmer uncle's knowledge
an expert of puffballs, mushrooms and morels
though he was master
of the forest floor's
swamp-water spring
he'd park his truck
and cross the over-silvered
mirror of the ditch without a splash
then slog the algae-verdant mire
that broke its blanket
to a worn-through ankle green
to find the sacred hold
the faerie circle of his appetite
my mother's fragrant kitchen afterward
asizzle with the pan's perfume
macadam-black the full-pure midnight colour
of old and much-used motor oil
I would not eat the stuff
for toadstool's poisoned fear
though now I live in that regret

some say
the cities make us smart
where live the star-starved children
of neon nights
let's to the library
let's to the zoo
let's to the urban park
where squat trees thrive
let's to the cold cathedrals
with this worm in the font
there we built the madhouse
there we built the mall
there we built
the ash heaps of the poor
I see my uncle's knowledge
in his working hands
his gritty palms, the spore and gill
and now I thrill to know
the earth receives us
like the winking of a dusted eye
and we are rich with seeing
like the wind within these words
become the breath that bends the sun-gold wheat
this light, the light we all must sleep to dream