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The Book of Hours

*We climb up on the rocking scaffolding,
the hammers in our hands swing heavily
until our foreheads feel the caressing wing
of a radiant hour that knows everything,
and hails from you as wind hails from the sea.*

~ Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926)

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*The capacity to respond to actual life experience
may be heightened by the contemplation of art.*

~Alex Colville (1920-2013)

These ekphrastic sonnets respond to twelve small paintings that Canadian artist Alex Colville created for a portfolio entitled *The Book of Hours: The Labours of the Months* (Mira Godard Gallery, 1979), a contemporary take on the medieval tradition of illuminated calendars such as *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (c.1412). In 1973, Colville moved to the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia, an agricultural setting that inspired these seasonal images which can be viewed online at the National Gallery of Canada website.

The Book of Hours

for my daughters

January

This is what it means to winter prune:
when the branch is bare of foliage and fruit,
in the coldest days when the dark comes soon,
to climb up high and cut away each shoot
that grows up barren to crowd out the heart
of the apple tree, to clear away conflict and loss,
free the old fruit wood from sucker and sprout,
sick or broken boughs, ones that criss and cross.

Old farmers would say that a well pruned tree
was one that you could toss your hat through.
Let the light back in and the air flow free
to reclaim an orchard that's overdue.
The work is slow but we'll know we're done when
there is space for buds to begin again.

February

Deep winter makes us think about the choices
we have made, the things that we desire.
Deep winter makes us think about the voices
that no longer come singing down the wire.

He looks on as she steps into the snow
unblinded by the flurry of the facts.
Surviving fifty winters helps her know
how easily we get lost without tracks.

Somewhere along his journey he has learned
that a storm curdled sky means more than loss.
He will keep looking though her back is turned
and the telephone pole looks like a cross.

She is kept warm by the skins of the dead,
escapes the maze though she can't see the thread.

March

He springs over tide flats, this fox in flight.
Beneath him marsh grass, like a woman's hair
streams through the chilly salt-shattered air
as she runs toward horizons of light.

Just because his underbelly is white
and she cannot see his underground lair
does not mean that she should never prepare
for the *tapetum lucidum* of night.

Yet this ginger angel can still announce
the immaculate coming of the day;
no matter how sharp or cunning his claws
or how patiently he waits to pounce,
the bunny in the clouds shape shifts her way
right out of his nimble but sooty paws.

April

As day descends to a twilight finale
and the tractor echoes the exact blue
of the quiet hills that hug the valley,
I think once again of far-away you.

To redeem last season's weeds and stubble
the harrow is hauled through the fertile filth,
just as time turns under years of trouble
and transforms it slowly back to tilth.

My lines stretch back and forth across the loam;
sometimes the only way to keep a furrow
straight is by driving away from the home
that seems barely more than smudge and shadow.

I'm hoping we won't need to use the lights
but they're good to have for early nights.

May

Dreaming of big and little hands she's held,
the mother lies exhausted on top of
all of the months and minutes she has felled
in over fifty years of life and love.

Maybe if she knew before she started
about all the labour that lay ahead
she might not tackle terrain uncharted
or feel the pea beneath her wooden bed.

She has lost count of rings including those
of tree and telephone, siren and sigh.
She sees the golden one she wears and knows
every ring puts her closer to the sky.

Each load of moments waiting to be milled
becomes lumber others will use to build.

June

Remember how you used to want to fly
over the valley's patchwork of brown and green
but left cadets before you got to try
gliding over heights of the drive-in screen?
Your dad was first to brave the parachute.
It wasn't textbook—he just cleared the fence—
but I have to say this in his defense:
who remembers everything enroute?

Loath to measure your life with coffee spoons,
you now trot the globe, count trip after trip.
If prayers can equip you with pontoons
that turn each lake into a landing strip,
I look up as you clear the jagged trees
and wish you all the days you wish to seize.

July

In that mystic hour when the tide is high,
she gazes out at Blomidon's red cliffs
from the beach where sandpipers swoop and fly,
marking the mud with hunger's hieroglyphs.

She has few strokes in her repertoire
but when water has the inviting sheen
of polished pewter it won't look that far
from where she now stands at Evangeline.

She wades into the chilly water with
only a cap like a fighter pilot's on.
Leaving behind each memory and myth
she will swim into the conch-hued dawn.

Time somehow leaves us naked in the end
and transforms distance from enemy to friend.

August

The window is open and leaves are green;
it's only August but the year has turned.
Your Nan's mind is a muddled time machine
worked by fingers that forget all they've learned.

She repeats herself and can't recall how
to complete the tasks of each afternoon.
The little cat she loved is buried now;
I can't help feeling she may follow soon.

We watch her mind grow brittle as a cup—
the china kind from which she drinks her tea.
But this does not mean that we should give up
though slow diminishment is hard to see.

We can decide the future in our leaves:
whether years are philanthropists or thieves.

September

For your father, April wasn't cruel
but September was since it always meant
boarding a strange bus to a new school
where he must relearn the world and reinvent
himself. I, too, rode a bus through the thick
tropical heat with no return at night,
so fell asleep heartsick and homesick
dreaming of the coming of the light.

All parents are, I'm sure, guilty of gaps
and failures, but have patience with us please—
the blonde boy with eyes big as hubcaps,
the dark girl for whom distance was disease.

The bird on the bus leaves behind a line,
a high contrail that somehow learns to shine.

October

To draw a coin of moon from night's black hair
is only one of October's magic tricks.
Everywhere the trees are catching fire
and snuffing out like smoky candle wicks.

In one an owl reminds us to be wise,
that gratitude's our only antidote.
Though choosing at month's end we agonize,
each year's costume is covered by a coat.

I can't help it. Already I'm thinking of
scrapers, boots and shovels lined up for war
but meanwhile I'm thankful for those I love
who take the much we have and make it more,

the ripe autumn sweetness that fills my cup,
the branch that holds the weary feathers up.

November

As I recall, you almost never erred
on the side of caution, or quit the fight,
driving through the blizzard or through the night
flying as fast and as fierce as you dared.

It comes upon us when we're least prepared
the dreaded siren and the flashing light
He seems always to be waiting out of sight
to catch us speeding or otherwise impaired.

So we touch our noses or walk the line
because someone has to *maintiens le droit*
and remind us we're not in this alone.
Whatever it takes to prove we're fine,

the tests we survive are complex scrimshaw
etched deep into our simple blood and bone.

December

Colville's crow looks just like a plane.
His claws come down like hi tech landing gear
he makes a flare path of the yellow line
when there are no stars by which to steer

Crows, my daughter says, might be as clever
as we are. They use tools, recall faces
hold funerals for kin fallen forever,
pass down their knowledge in tree top places.

We may know a crow is not a raven
though they share a freight of flight and feather,
but still must learn a road is a runway
where we can land in all kinds of weather
and a hometown can become a haven
where the darkness does not defeat the day.