

# *Splashes and Breezes*



*Poems of 1988*

*by Alan Harris*

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**To Linda: Wife and Best Friend**

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## Alma Mater Revisited

The campus seems all hollow  
today as I walk in its leaves again.  
The marching band warms up in the  
distance for a football game of  
whumpgrunters and whoopleaders—  
but the booming band sounds vacant.  
All the music is there—the  
brass, the drums, the tearing  
and merging of harmonies—  
but I am gone, nowhere near it.  
The now magicless bookstore I worked in  
has shabby Shakespeares languishing  
between glossy audio-visual texts and  
sterile physical geology workbooks.

Is the college hollow, or am I?  
I remember classes where  
cocky professors taught  
stimulating sensical stuff  
which flew the way of  
June fireflies after exams.  
Hormone-smitten twist dancers  
flexed and flirted their nervous bodies  
toward flippant connubialities  
while I tried to study my brain into a  
tested heaven of alphas.  
The fatuous sounds of  
today's rah-rahs echo as before  
among stately buildings that housed  
the tenure-drones of worked-over lectures.  
Now, whom are we all trying to fool?  
College is, I confess, as dead in me  
as a syllogism, but supportive America  
of a Saturday puts down its newspaper,  
pours out a Bud Light, and  
remotely emotes from its easychair over  
conference headcrunching  
seen through colored electrons on glass.

Who died? Did I? Are the college sounds  
I hear today on my old campus—the band,  
the cheers, the dead leaves underfoot—  
any hollower than 25 years ago? No, no,  
I heard their emptiness in youth, but  
this milieu quickened me then as liberation  
from a safely parented childhood  
and insurance against an empty future.  
After a full life I would be most ungrateful  
now to pronounce college dead,  
but let us stick with hollow.

## **Animal Tao**

A cat is mostly yin;  
of the Cosmos she is the twin.  
Like the mysterious Cosmic Laws,  
she keeps well-hidden her claws  
until some urgent necessity.

A dog is thoroughly yang,  
with his boisterous bark and his fang.  
Ignoring the subtler laws  
and concealing none of his flaws,  
he pursues life and cats with avidity.

A dog is always searching,  
but a cat is content with perching.  
The dog loves to follow his nose,  
while the cat simply sits there and—knows.  
Activity ends in tranquillity.

## August Sunday

Pounding hammers sing  
along with church choir anthem—  
confusing rhythms.

Depth of azure sky  
recedes to far galaxies  
behind daylit moon.

A leaf waves gently  
in a breath from summer's lungs,  
then hangs green and still.

## Cat Lying Down

When my cat lies down,  
it is with utmost  
gravity.

No circular trampling first  
like a clumsy canine,  
no great sigh  
like a human  
being on a couch.

My cat lies down slowly,  
naturally,  
smoothly,  
participating with  
controlled abandon  
in a dignified  
gravitational event.

## The Cry of Everything

Where the crow twitters  
and the bluebird cackles,  
there is the cry of everything.

Bees moo and ducks roar;  
horses croak and rocks snore.

The cry of everything, yes all of all,  
fills creation and non-creation  
with the delectable din  
of a monstrous pin  
drop.

Screen nothing out;  
mute nothing.  
All is here but for an eternal moment,  
a timeless flicker of the sun.

And when the cry of everything dies out—  
well, won't that be grand too?



## **Death Is Life Bursting into Bloom**

When I die, I will not die.  
I will be a foot coming out of a too-small shoe,  
a bird flying free out of a cramping cage,  
an astronaut taking off his space suit,  
having safely returned home.

When you die, you will not die either.  
You are not your body, as I'm not mine.  
You will see a brighter rainbow  
and hear heaven's ethereal music  
which no stereo can capture.

When I die but not die,  
I will leave a little part of me  
inside your memory.  
It will be your key to my door  
that is always open in heaven.

When you die but not die,  
I will have the key to your door too.  
Better to have keys for open doors  
than closed doors without keys,  
as in this locked-up life on earth.

When I am gone but not gone,  
think of me and I am there.  
When you are gone but not gone,  
I will send you flowers through the air.  
Let us celebrate the magnificent safety of death.

## Death through a Peephole

How can I word it?

I am 45, on the  
downhill side of life.  
Lying on the couch,  
eyes closed,  
my stereo playing Bach's  
St. Matthew Passion,  
I see death  
through an inner peephole—  
a visionless glimpse.

There it is,  
a threatless,  
benevolent space,  
neither outer nor inner,  
where neither moon nor  
Andromeda move.

I feel the grip of a subsonic  
bass note in my chest,  
a whole note from  
the bottom of the cosmos.

Death? Is that you?  
A beautiful black  
emptiness full  
of friendly steadiness?

Yes, comes no answer.

I look up at the ceiling  
and smile at 46.

## Effort

Try to force a flower,  
and what do you have?  
A mutilated bud.

Try to be happy,  
and very existence becomes  
trying.

Try to live long  
by running and jumping,  
eating by the book,  
sleeping wisely,

and die truly old  
in a nursing home  
beside a pot  
of plastic flowers.

## Free Now

I get up in the morn  
ng, and my life is totally, ra  
dically free. What do I do? Do I m  
ake the bed? Do I ta  
ke a shower? Do I eat a meal ca  
lled breakfast? Do I go to wor  
k at an office?  
Do I sell my house and move to a  
nother state? Do I give my mon  
ey to charity and beg? How  
do I think if I am free? Do I thin  
k of myself at all? Do I think of o  
thers? Am I just a clear lens which sees, b  
ehind which there is no thing, an  
d in front of which is every thing? I a  
m free, but how do I act? What do I  
do? I am free from how, and from doin  
g, but my heart still beats, I brea  
the, I must eat, I must elimina  
te and perspire. Do I feel overw  
helmed with freedom and long for the old  
cages? Do I become depress  
ed because I can find nothing to do?  
If I see the futility in every hum  
an motion and emotion, how can I live?  
Where is my base of operations? In  
space? In nothingness? In someth  
ing called God? In whatever love  
is? Am I really totally, radically f  
ree, or have I just enlarged my c  
age? Can I find the boundaries of my p  
rison if they are invisible to me? I feel  
them holding me in. Am I free? Yes, I  
am free. No more family is necessary.  
No more society. No more  
civilization. I can walk ou  
t the door and never come back. I ca  
n go anywhere on earth. I am com  
pletely free. But to go anywhere is  
to not go everywhere else. I leave  
a trail. I remember. People remember  
me. There are ties. Within memory ca  
n I be free? Can I remember without encum  
brance, without attachment, withou  
t hope, without fear? Yes. I am free. I sit on

a rock. Where am I? Who am I? Why am I  
here? Am I free? Yes, totally, radically f  
ree. Do I like it? That is not the question. F  
reedom is all there is, and I am it. Each thin  
g matters as much as each other thing, an  
d yet no thing matters. Matterin  
g is a trap, but things are just th  
ings. I am free to lie in the mud o  
r to go to the office or to sit here on th  
e rock. What am I to do? Free, as I am,  
what is there in life? The cage has  
been sprung open and destroyed,  
and there is no going back to it. I b  
reathe, and I walk, and I stumble, a  
nd eat, and see. A man walk  
s by and sees me sitting on t  
he rock, and he says, "Hello. Nice mornin  
g, isn't it?" I say, "Yes, it is." Am I  
still free? What is another person, r  
eally? Before, I could only assume, bu  
t now I must investigate.  
What, really, is another person?  
I breathe deeply, and I get up and  
walk toward nothing, away from nothi  
ng, just walk. Now I know what I mus  
t do, now that I am radically free. I m  
ust find out what the other person is.  
He is there. I see him. He is not an illu  
sion. Is he free? If not,  
can I free him? Am I free no  
t to free him? What is relationship when th  
ere is freedom? I will investigate until I die.  
A bird lands on a fence post.

## **Frozen Fantasy**

My first breath outside  
on a winter morning  
speaks a frosty sentence  
and drifts off.

When my hand sticks  
to a cold pipe,  
I have joined the winter club.

When the sneaky wind  
finds a crack in my coat,  
I feel the grip  
of zero.

Winter is,  
if anything,  
a surprise in ice.

## Haiku (2)

Our supper table,  
magnet of our emotions,  
lies covered with crumbs.

\* \* \*

Gusting summer rain  
glitters into our backyard  
under shining sun.

## How We Came to Know Truth

Our village mystic (who,  
by  
the way, is President  
of the National  
Mystical Association)  
decided he had studied  
enough.  
He would, by  
God, climb  
the sacred mountain  
out beyond the village  
limits and find  
out what  
was what.  
We villagers don't  
understand him,  
but we know he must be  
quite  
great.  
Someone even says there's  
a faint halo around  
his head, visible  
only to the more advanced  
souls.  
This is probably  
true, for why would an advanced  
soul lie  
to anyone?  
So Mike (our mystic) climbed  
the sacred mountain  
a week  
ago when there  
was a quadruple conjunction  
of some planets I'd heard  
of and some I hadn't  
(I don't understand  
these things, but I did  
think the air  
smelled different that  
day).  
Mike meditated (you know, where  
you sit  
down and do holy  
things to yourself)  
and then climbed the

mountain just like he owned  
the damn thing.  
We all watched from the  
bottom.  
He was at the top about  
half an hour,  
maybe receiving his  
instructions,  
and then he came back  
down.  
We all gathered around  
him and asked him what  
he saw, what he learned,  
what he heard, how did it  
feel?  
Mike rolled  
his eyes up and  
began to speak in a  
quiet but firm voice, saying:  
"I have been to the mountain  
top.  
I have had  
an Experience.  
I cannot possibly tell you  
how it really was.  
I must speak in veiled  
terms for your own good.  
I say unto you,  
'Roses are red,  
Violets are blue,  
What's false is false,  
And what's true is true.'"  
As he spoke,  
I thought I noticed a faint  
shimmer of light  
around his holy head.  
It is humbling to be  
able to live in the  
same village with  
one who knows,  
and who knows  
he knows,  
and has a  
halo according  
to some reports.

## Howling at a Real Moon

What is illusion,  
really?  
Is it the satisfied look on a rich  
lady's face?  
Is it a boy smelling the evening  
breeze as he rubs his magic  
lamp and has  
visions?  
Is it the mathematically  
maternal thrill of writing a tight  
algorithm for a computer?

What is reality,  
sort of?  
Is it the headache after too  
much ice cream too  
fast?  
Is it the birds before a spring  
sunrise singing their hearts  
out?  
Is it the symphonic  
climax hurled out  
of a conductor's  
baton?

If we knew what illusion is,  
would it be found but a  
word?  
If we knew what reality is,  
how long before the knowing  
were but a memory?

Give me a breath at a time  
and keep your reality.  
Show me a round  
orange moonrise  
and I will fully embrace illusion.

I look into your eyes  
and I see the absolute  
reality of illusion.  
Then it is that I forget the  
illusion of reality.



## Love Is

Sunlight twinkles yellow  
off the neighbor's tree leaves,  
stirred by a sibilant breeze.  
All is well.

The sky is empty, empty, empty, and azure.  
Do not worry.

The rose window decal  
on our east window glows  
with what glass and plastic know of love—  
crimson, aqua, yellow, and amethyst,  
concentric in twelves.  
It is all right.

Your eyes shine behind mine,  
energizing my thoughts,  
giving off a gentle voltage.  
Fret not.

You are more than you are.  
You are the prism,  
the white light,  
the rainbow,  
and more.

Notice your depth sometime  
as you awaken from sleep,  
and rest assured  
that depth never dies.

Serenity,  
a smooth current of calmness,  
surrounds.  
Permeates.  
Is.  
Is.  
Is.

It is too silly now to say  
what love is,  
or that I love you.  
Words trouble the serenity.  
Definitions becloud the sky.

Tremulant leaves  
twinkle sunlight.  
The sky is empty, pure.  
The rose window  
glows with color.  
Your eyes,  
your deep eyes—  
enough.

# Moodrider

How so up we go  
and so down,  
we moodriders,  
spirits abuilding  
and acrumbling.  
A day or peaceful two,  
then zapperoo,  
off we tumble from our  
pinnacle of hail-fellow peace into a  
tar barrel of angry gloom.

Pin me up on a bulletin board  
and study me, Mr. Doctor.  
Give me lithium or understanding  
or electric temples to make  
me cool.

Thank you.  
Now I see. I see the gentle  
love-waves shimmering  
in the atmosphere.  
I see WHAT IS—  
the sharp outlines of the furniture,  
the swaying trees.  
Here we are in reality,  
or what's left of it.

Peel me off the periphery of mortals,  
would someone? Why cannot I have  
the normal agonies of mankind?  
Why do I ride on a little toy boat through  
such choppy moodwaters?  
Give me a reason, please.

No, don't.  
It's all right.  
I see so many  
normal folks in such pain,  
caught in business envelopes of stuffy fright  
or pulsing with radioactive rap music  
or yammering in their beer.  
What right have I to ask that a corner  
of the universe be lifted so I can peek  
at God's underwear and understand  
why I am why I am?

I do my work and I pay my bills and I  
contribute to the coffers of  
such democracy as we have.  
Oh, I emote a bit unevenly,  
yes, I do.  
But then, Uranus doesn't  
rotate the same as the other planets do,  
and it still makes the charts.

Whatever the mood,  
there is a place that is here  
and a time that is now  
and a cracklingly deep intelligence  
smack in the middle of everydude,  
be he into  
pills or pajamas or private jets.

How so up we go  
and so down,  
with a smile,  
with a frown,  
slightly unpinned,  
scarf in the wind.

## Moon and Mars Conjunct

Walking at night  
to the corner mailbox,  
breathing deeply of  
cool September air,  
I look up and see  
Mars by the full moon,  
quiet friends,  
like a tiny garnet  
by a round opal  
set in the sky's  
planetary ring.

A carful of teenage girls  
zooms by,  
emanating shrieks and  
laughs and  
whoops,  
careening between curbs  
through our  
planned community.

The red taillights  
soon zigzag away  
into velvet distance,  
and silence prevails,  
broken now by  
this old mailbox accepting  
my letters with a chuff  
and a clanky groan.

I look skyward again.  
Mars and the moon,  
quiet friends still,  
stare winkless from the surface  
of the universe.

Has anything changed?  
Yes, my letters are  
in the mailbox;  
yes, the car has painted  
a picture in my ears;  
yes, the moon is  
imperceptibly  
closer to Mars now—  
but nothing deep  
has changed.  
The night has merely  
taken a breath.

## Mother Greets Newborn

I see you have been  
traveling through the universe  
without a map again.

Welcome to earth, my friend.  
I breathe on you with my eyes  
and I hear you with my breast.  
You squall and you squirm,  
but you did come to this place,  
and I opened the door,  
so let's learn to be together.

As your first guide  
on this strange planet,  
I will introduce you to your body  
and mine and everything else.  
Let us proceed together now  
as companions.

Earth is not a bad place to live.  
There is much room here for love.  
There, there, there....  
Drink of the earth and sleep.

## One Glance

From its western podium  
the setting sun conducts  
for half an hour  
a symphony of colored sky:  
loud oranges and penetrating purples  
resolving into softer pinks and muted blues.

Under this musical sky,  
noticing your smile and breeze-tossed hair,  
I glance deep into the centuries  
behind your clear eyes—  
and I remember.

This moment was and is and will be.  
It never was not, and never cannot be—  
one precious moment of purest love,  
breathless and deathless.

Inner spirit needs only one glance, no more—  
no rush or embrace or kiss or promise.  
One glance opens your soul to me,  
and I know your soul and love your soul.

This musical sky is fleeting;  
these bodies will grow old and cold;  
but my memory of this one glance  
will never fade, as must the sky.

Our symphonic sun's bright colors  
have mellowed now to a somber gray  
as we walk along  
not knowing what to say.

## **Philosophy**

I saw a philosopher  
driving to work  
at the college  
in his Pontiac  
Sunbird  
to pick up  
his biweekly  
paycheck,  
and I said  
to myself,  
“What does  
this really  
mean?”

## Planting an Apple Tree

Our green earth is turning brown  
like a skinless apple  
when wrapped in clear plastic.  
We cough and spit our technology  
into its atmosphere,  
pumping it full of our pumpings,  
heating it with our heatings.

We fail to hear earth wheeze  
as we motor to the flea market  
for our next bargain  
or to the supermarket for 2% milk.  
We dump our chemists' ideas  
into the only air there is  
and pump carbon  
into our children's lungs.  
Already we smell our urban halitosis  
blowing back into our faces  
and we make little jokes about it.

Will earthlife fade away  
along with our generation?  
Or will we let it breathe  
the saving breath of trees?  
It is too smoky to tell from here,  
but I plant this apple tree  
in case earth heals one day  
and some new Newton needs  
a lump on the head.

## Rolling with the Thunder

Why I was angry matters not,  
but fury had blossomed in me,  
and I was it—no turning away.

Fingers atremble,  
voice ashake,  
heart apump,  
I challenged a present wrong  
yielded up to me  
from some chasm of an obscure past.  
I stood resiliently firm,  
arteries turgid with love and law.

It is over, and I did not lose.  
No one lost—or won.  
The conflict was as imperative  
and brief  
as a summer thunderstorm.

I sit now electric with leftover adrenaline,  
images of the struggle  
reverberating in my thoughts—  
but already a silence in my blood begins  
to bathe me with merciful forgetting.



## **The Sound of Dying**

If you have heard  
a train go by,  
you know the sound  
of dying.

A buzz, a roar,  
and no more.

Oh, maybe a little clacking  
in the distance,  
but nothing to  
speak of.

## Suburban Reverie

Watering the flowers,  
I happen to think of  
all the famous authors  
working on their newest  
books.

Mowing the yard,  
I wonder how the  
great mathematicians  
can prove their theorems  
even with computers.

Sitting in my front yard,  
listening to the songs  
of cardinals and wrens,  
robins and blue jays,  
I wonder at the amount of  
practice an opera star  
must submit to.

How about the columnists  
and cartoonists and  
astronauts and painters,  
all being  
something?

Here I am,  
sitting in my front yard,  
in an aluminum lawn chair,  
staring at my suburban home,  
supporting and  
supported by a nice family,  
wondering,  
wondering.

I'll water the flowers a little more.

## Three Root Words

When all the words are done,  
and all the gestures and looks,  
I love you.

When all the miles are traveled  
and all the roadblocks passed,  
I love you.

When all the arguments are over  
and the smile comes after gloom,  
I love you.

Love abides beneath all words.  
Love knows no distance.  
Love dissolves every difference.  
I love you.

## Tavern Talk

Did you ever look deeply  
into the eye of a chicken?

No, you say,  
they have  
nothing between their eyes  
but cartilage,  
and you laugh at your little joke.

Did you ever look deeply  
into the eye of a chicken?

Yes, you say, and  
it came over and bought  
me a drink,  
and you laugh some  
more.

**Did you  
ever look  
deeply into  
the eye  
of a chicken?**

No, you say, have you?

Yes, I have.

What did you see? you ask.

I saw a light like a little  
egg-shaped sun,  
and inside it were countless  
smaller eggs.  
It was like touching my eyeball  
to a live wire,  
and it lasted for only a split second,  
but I saw infinity in the eye of a chicken.

Yeah, I saw that once in a waitress's eye,  
you say with a snicker.

Same infinity I saw,  
only I didn't have to leave a tip.

## **Tired Minds**

Our minds,  
like tires,  
tread round and round,  
going places,  
coming back,  
going flat,  
getting pumped,  
wearing down,  
and finally  
retiring.

## **Two Birds in a Tree**

A large bird alights  
on a small branch  
at the top of a poplar tree.

He bounces and wavers in the breeze,  
keeping his balance.

Such is human life.

Another bird alights  
on a small branch  
very near the first one.

Both bounce and waver in the breeze,  
but in different rhythms.

Such is married life.



## About Alan Harris

When Alan Harris was born on Sunday, June 20, 1943, his father, Keith E. Harris, was piloting a B-17 in bombing missions over Europe while his mother (Margie) worried about Keith lovingly from Illinois.

Schooling in Earlville, Illinois (Alan's home town) was interesting, useful, and generally free of creativity (do what the teacher says, get the good grade). From 5th through 12th grades he played the trumpet in the school band and enjoyed the contest trips. His father drove a school bus as part of his living (farming was the other part), and if Alan happened to ride on his father's bus, he had to very much behave.

Illinois State University was where Alan became chagrined over how a student with a full class load could possibly keep up with all of the assignments given in said classes.

He felt he was a pawn in a game, but with judicious time-shuffling and corner-cutting he plowed along and made respectable grades amidst all the worries.

A bright spot at ISU was taking a contemporary American poetry class with Dr. Ferman Bishop. Through him Alan discovered depths in poetry that he had never dreamed of while in high school. E. E. Cummings took him for zingy flights of in-your-faceness. T. S. Eliot, whose symbols even had symbols, fully baffled him. Robert Frost was slyly charming. Emily Dickinson's mastery of rhyme and meter for conveying soul and spirit made the young poet's heart go funny. Alan started "being a poet" in his sophomore year (1962) at ISU. Poetry had been previously unneeded in his life but now was available to contain parts of his soul that he hadn't realized were there.

After graduating from ISU in 1966 there was the little matter of having to earn a living, which took the form of two years of high school English teaching, three years of tuning and repairing pianos, and (after a 1976 MS in Computer Science at Northern Illinois University) about 25 years of computer work (mainly programming, in-house computer teaching, and Web development—for Commonwealth Edison Company in Chicago).

During most of that vocational stint before retirement, Alan continued to write poems. Even with the whirl of commuting it was still possible to emote at home. He launched his current Web site ([www.alharris.com](http://www.alharris.com)) in 1995 with a few poems, and eventually has populated it with almost everything he has written. As a poet, essayist, story-writer, and photographer he has spurned the print publication route, having seen the excruciations gone through by other writers trying to make a big name and big money for themselves via magazine and book publishers. With the Web, there's instant publication, moneyless communication, and a worldwide potential audience. Of course, the literature has to stand on its own feet to get readers, but it's always there for those who seek it, or just happen in, or get sent in.

Alan met his wife Linda at ISU in 1962 and they were married in 1966. Linda has worked as a school speech therapist, insurance medical office worker, and medical transcriptionist, in addition to being a conscientious wife, mother, and grandmother. They have a son, Brian, who is a Tucson percussionist.

