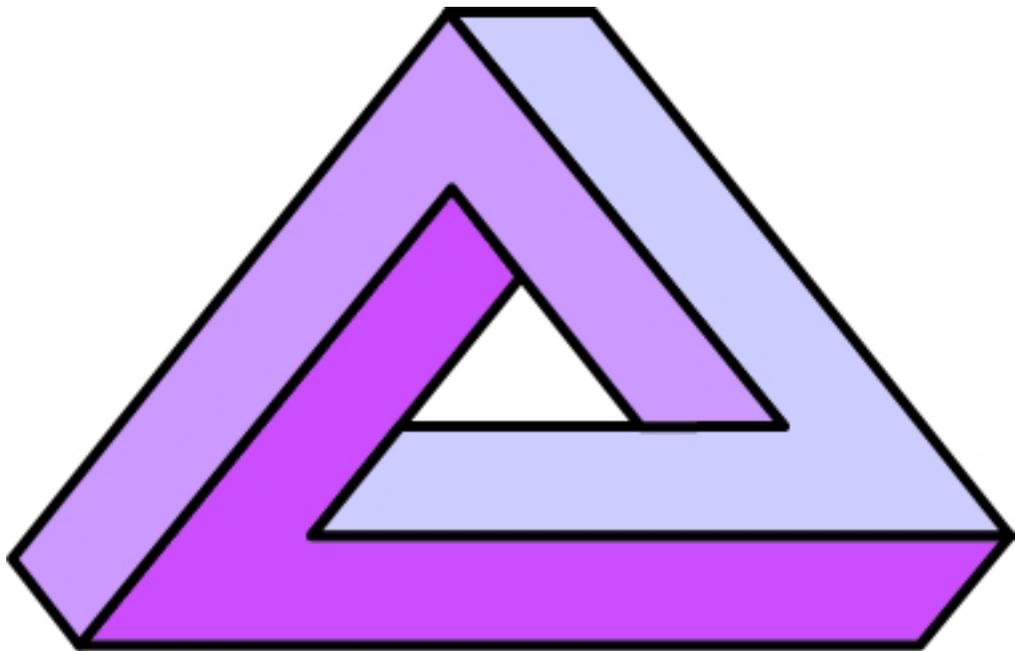


College Poems



Poems of 1966

by Alan Harris

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**Higher education trains your mind to feel good later
by making it feel terrible now.**

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Contents

(Alphabetically)

At the Abattoir.....	7
Bidentity.....	2
Free	8
The Monument.....	1
The Prophet.....	3
Song of the Sick Minstrel	4
A Sonnet to Igor Stravinsky.....	9
A Traveler's Tale.....	5
Twenty-One Lines of Tree	6
About Alan Harris	10

The Monument

Our elm began to die that spring, slowly.

Wanting stability in threat of change
we ourselves searched all summer
for a superlative glue,
found it in our store of hardest ware,
bought it dearly.

That fall our elm did die, slowly.

But we on variangled ladders
refastened the fallen leaves with
peerlessly permanent glue,
then stood back and looked.

Still it stands:
crisp, dead;
cutting the winter wind.

Bidentity

Beware, They warned;
Scoff, We scorned.
A pernicious disparity of essences shall be thy blight, said They;
Love merges divisions to conquer all, We Two replied.

Time wore on and us.
Time found our seaming,
Rotted away the silly thread,
Laid bare two essences, unjoined.

We cried, Woe: We lie in the palpitating entrails of
Circumstance, never to be ejected: Woe.
Then stopped.
Reasoned:
Who despairs at one disparity
Must perish in a human crowd.
Traded a sob for a synthetic:
Be, difference;
Viva.
For now we are a pair.

The Prophet

Our city's wild-haired prophet
Stumbled through the gutter
Of our subtle street
Crying:

God is being killed,
Murdered by a stoneman's hand-ax.
Giddy chaos overwhelms his brain;
Head-blood gushes down his face,
Gurgles in his throat.
He tears his chest
With dying fingernails.
I see him falling to the nadir
of neurotic nothingness.
God is dead;
Mourn, man.

Our prophet staggered on
With timely steps until
His voice was out of range
Again.

Song of the Sick Minstrel

The winter night droops down
Around the scratchy trees,
Tinkled by an icy breeze,
Snapping.

Let's stand beside this creaking tree
And watch the bold eclipse
Devour the midnight sun
As if it were a yellow wafer,
Crisp and cold.

At full eclipse,
Then shall I love you,
In snapping cold,
Beneath a moon-dark tree.

A Traveler's Tale

Step over here a moment, if you please;
I'll tell you a tale which may your fancy seize
Or, if you're old, may possibly displease.

Slipping time, of course, will kill a man,
But, think I, there is something more than time
In every natural death. Oh yes, say I,
Vibrations of the supernatural
Confound our lonely loony lives the more
For our denial of their awesome power.
Let me pluck a rich example from
The undercurrents of my memory:

The beard of wizened white swayed calmly as
The brittle ancient rocked his pensive chair
And reveried his many pasts. He knew
Somewhere within his lonesome bones the ten
Dead-looking fingers he possessed by far
Outnumbered his remaining years or months
Or—what he thought was likeliest—days.
The optimist, yes, optimist I say,
(Ten minutes would have been a closer guess)
Could not foresee his tragedy that day.
Each time he rocked he minused his remaining
Seconds by one tick, one tock, one rock.

The red clay jar stood center on the broken
Top of marble on his yearful desk.
The center of his life, this jar became,
For parent after parent of his line
Of ancestors had forwarded the myth
That supernatural forces lurked within
Its clay, some power that governed life and death.
Religiously, throughout his wifeless life,
The old man trimmed his fingernails just so,
Not too long or crookedly or short,
And dropped the trimmings carefully into
The timeless jar with utmost caution not
To let one fall outside its gaping rim.
Oh, deepest death if ever that should happen—
Time would shuffle to a sickly halt.

But now yeared eyes could plainly see that death
Was far from far away: a mound of yellowed
Fingernails was piled above the rim.
The jar with all his packing down would hold
Not many more, he knew. The time when one
Would vibrate from the pile and fall beside
The jar was near, too near to free his thoughts
From dreams of death and musings of its shape.

In silence as he rocked in silent thought
His black-haired cat traversed the soiled rug
And stopped unseen beside the desk. It gave
A weakened leap (it lived on non-existent
Rats and mice that roamed the undug basement
Of the one-floor house) and missed its mark,
Falling on its once-lithe feline ribs
With an animal thud. The old man stopped
His motioned chair and sat transfixed, wide-eyed.
The cat resumed its feet and jumped its all
And landed on the olden oaken desk.
Its thready whiskers brushed across the jar:
A fingernail end fell to the broken
Marble surface of the desk, and then
The cat fell lifeless to the rugged floor.

A wave of horror washed the old man's brain—
He felt a thrill of long-lost warmth surround
His head and stomach, bones and gasping lungs,
And down into the deepness of the rug
He fell, beside the rocking rocking chair.
As nothingness approached he thought he heard
His doorbell ringing for the first time since
The ancient inundation and the garden
With the stones and fiery wheels had come.

The aged one was thus undone, kind friend.
If this has entertained you, please be kind
Enough to drop into this hat a coin.

Twenty-One Lines of Tree

A fecund soil-seed makes explosive blossom
In the dankness of the womby underearth,
Assimilates the healthness rain and chemistrates it
Steadily into an ever-growing stem and
Pop, one day,
Pop.

The embryo gives itself rude birth in dirt.
A green grapple begins:
Growth against the grave inexorable final-falling force.
The yearly climb proceeds.
Atom mounts photosynthetic atom, clings and lives.

Cold unfeeling freeze-trees breezes wind
Around a thickened frozen trunk,
And warm moist licking balms blow teasingly
Into unfurling sun-retaining leaves.

Its life of cycling seasons lingers on
Until arrives the fatal year:
The tree dies—that is all, just dies and falls.

The rotting wood and roots return their loan
And merge into the ground again until

A second soil-seed makes explosive blossom.

At the Abattoir

Splat.
Grunt.
Plop.

We feed the world,
Except for bloodless vegetarians.
Come hither, sweet swine,
And we will make you useful,
Oh, so useful to mankind:

Thud.
Rip.
Crack.
Slit.

Cow, your life-long destiny is consummated here.
Your epitaph reads "Grade A, choice;"
Your burial ground, the maw of man,
Is decorated with two rows
Of tombstone teeth.

Remember, as you face the club,
Your life perhaps has been in vain,
But not your death.
You die to serve a greater cause than you:
The betterment of man, who talks and reads.

Chop.

Free

Blurry smog feeds the morning sky gassy gulps as
Germ motorcars scuttle in lines along their causal highways.

Here we are folks in our trafficopter helicopter reporting the-
latest developments in the traffic condition All streets-
are running smoothly as of right now and it looks as though-
this condition will continue for the remainder of—

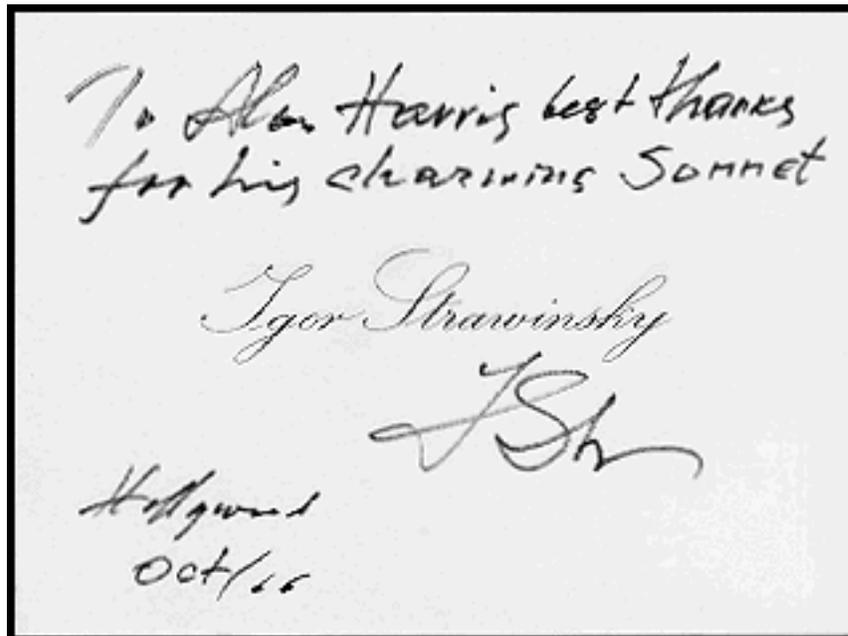
The helicopter suddenly
Descends into the mass
Of smog and tin and milling men
And violently cracks open like a transparent egg,
Giving birth to an afterlife or two.

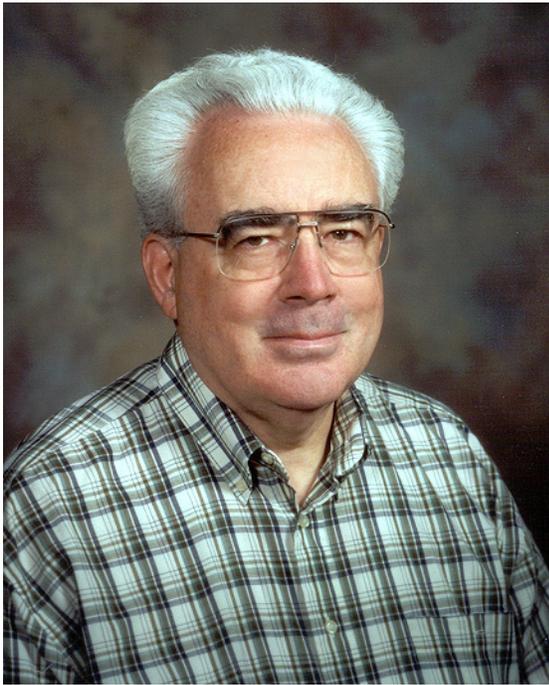
Free.
Free are helicopters.
Free to fly about in untold yards of morning sky.
Free to watch the roads of other men, advise them where to turn.
Free, some, to fall a fast free path to the hardness of the ground.

A Sonnet to Igor Stravinsky

Stravinsky's measured steps—halting by A
cross an autumn-browning field of sound--
accent his humming of tomorrow's hymn on
yesterday's three-octave voice of string.
He ran away from sentimental ground to wA
r against its farmers on a dim internal B
attleground, and thence each spring has F
ound him planting in new five-row fields.

When blackbirds mimic from the field's ri
m parading red and yellow on each wing (F
or innovation raises greener yields), he
styles himself Beelzebub in brown. Acros
s the breeze Stravinsky halts by--his gro
und will soak the blood of birds that diE.





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) 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.

