



The Left Atrium

Knowing Nowlan

Alden Nowlan & Illness

Canadian Masters Series: Volume One

Edited and introduced by Shane Neilson

Victoria: Frog Hollow Press, 2005

Letterpressed and hand-bound edition of 150 copies

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Paging through this edition of Alden Nowlan's poems about illness, I wonder what Alden would have thought of it. The book cover is Japanese silk, the marbled endpapers are a French reproduction, and the hand-sewn binding is a Coptic variation (designed to lie flat when open). Nowlan biographer Greg Cook describes the volume as a "souvenir anthology" in his Foreword to this collection, which is edited by writer and physician Shane Neilson. The book is more homage than souvenir. Frog Hollow Press has produced a limited-edition *objet d'art*, certainly more beautiful than any of the other volumes of Nowlan's poetry on my shelves.

Alden was born into difficult circumstances in rural New Brunswick during the Depression. In a poem entitled "It's Good to be Here" (not included in this collection), he describes his humble beginning:

I'm in trouble, she said
to him. That was the first
time in history that anyone
had ever spoken of me.

It was 1932 when she
was just fourteen years old
and men like him
worked all day for one stinking dollar.

There's quinine, she said.
That's bullshit, he told her.

Nowlan, who dropped out of school as a youngster, was essentially an autodidact. He worked first as a woodcutter in the New Brunswick forests before

getting hired as a reporter for a small newspaper in Hartland, NB. He began writing poetry in his twenties. In the latter years of his life, he was poet in residence at the University of New Brunswick. He died at 49 of complications from longstanding thyroid cancer.

What would Alden think of this current gathering-up of some of his poems? Look for clues in the enigmatic expression on the poet's face in the woodcut engraving by Wesley Bates, which follows the book's title page. The irony is not lost on him. I suspect he would enjoy the beauty of the object, while being a little self-conscious about the multinational finishings used in its creation.

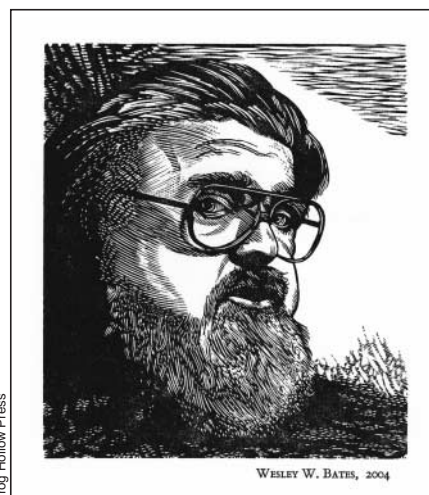
The content of the book is in two main parts. Neilson writes an introductory essay that includes essential biographical information and incisive critical explications of a few of Nowlan's poems about illness. Although Neilson never met the poet, he, like Cook in the Foreword and Robert Gibbs in the Afterword, all describe the significance of Nowlan and his empathic and insightful voice in their lives — and, in Neilson's case, to his occupation as a physician.

According to Neilson, Nowlan's illness (diagnosed at the age of 33) marked a major turning point in his maturity as a poet. He quotes one of the poet's letters from the early years of his illness:

Ever since I got sick I've become less and less hypocritical and more and more honest. Since we're all of us going to be out of the world so soon it seems silly not to tell one another what we really think and feel.

In 1967, a year after his cancer was detected, Nowlan won the Governor General's Award for Poetry for his book, *Bread, Wine, and Salt*, which included some poetry about his illness.

Neilson has chosen 21 poems to showcase the art Nowlan fashioned around the theme of illness — both his own and others. You can read them aloud in less than an hour. I enjoyed reading and rereading pieces like "Morning of the Third Operation" and "Written while Waiting for Another Chest X-ray." Still, I feel that the illness theme of the book constrains the richness of this poet's voice.



Frog Hollow Press

To be fair, a close examination of even one great poem like "Five Days in Hospital" provides enough evidence of Nowlan's inventiveness, emotional range and spare use of language:

I have come beyond fear to a place
where there is almost silence,
except now I am all the numbers
on all the clocks in the world:
things are broken apart,
I am the ruins of a crystal man
and there are no sentences
but only words...

The poem is effectively five short variations on the theme of mortality,

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and on the poet's irrepressible desire to articulate what it means to be alive:

I have discovered to my amazement
that I am unable to believe
in my own death.
I know that I will die but I do not
believe in it.
Then how is it there are times
when I am almost crazy with fear?

Alden Nowlan is one of a select few poets I turn to for help in negotiating the world of illness and injury. We traditionally assign that role to a family doctor; at the same time, some of us also benefit from the alternative counsel of a professional poet. As one of my oncology

colleagues says, "It's hard to be a human being." Reading Nowlan's poems doesn't make it any easier, but he does provide salutary insights into what Zorba the Greek describes as "the full catastrophe."

Alden Nowlan & Illness is an admirable work of art, part of a long tradition in aesthetically pleasing book creation. It is an object that provides tactile as well as intellectual pleasure. For those who've not yet met Alden, it is an artful introduction to one facet of the man and his words. To experience the full dynamic range of his voice, I suggest pairing your copy with *Alden Nowlan: Selected Poems* (edited by Patrick Lane and Lorna Crozier). In the in-

troduction to their collection, they outline the reason for Nowlan's enduring appeal:

Alden's poems continue to be published, read and talked about not only because he was a skilled craftsman and immaculate writer, but also because he had a great heart. Our literature has not produced another like him, none with the gift of such honesty and insight, and such a wry recognition of human frailties.

Don't wait too long to make his acquaintance: *Alden Nowlan & Illness* is limited to 150 numbered copies.

Vincent Hanlon
Emergency Physician
Lethbridge, Alta.

Room for a view

Friday afternoon

Melanie insisted on being his last patient on Friday afternoon. The doctor leaned forward and studied her face in his windowless hospital office. Under the fluorescent lights her skin was pale. Her eyes were glassy, blood-shot, half-closed.

"I am fine." Melanie sipped a Tim Hortons coffee. "I'm just tired, a bit."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course." Her eyelids dipped. "Would I lie to you?"

"You don't look so well," the doctor said. "Could you stick out your tongue?"

"I'd rather not stick out my tongue you know."

The doctor waited several seconds.

"All right, if I have to" Melanie opened her mouth. Her tongue appeared between her lips like a damp grey slug.

Melanie had been coming to these

appointments for three months, smiling, saying little, showing no feeling except when she told him last week that she had been abused as a child. She brought with her an intricate fragrance: a waft of perfume, an aroma of tobacco and coffee, a mustiness of old clothes and a medicinal Listerine smell

that emanated from her throat. She held a purse and a shopping bag. The doctor sniffed the air like a bloodhound, searching for other unspoken accents.

"Do I look ill?" Melanie asked.

"You do." The doctor backed away from her mouth and face. He tried to place the lingering

nameless scent, a subtle vinegary aroma.

She had been beautiful in her mid-thirties, with her clear jawline, broad forehead and luminous eyes — an ac-

cess in musical theatre. He had seen her on stage. Now she said she gave voice lessons and was otherwise unemployed.

Her eyes were dull and flat, her face swollen.

There were two selves to a person, the doctor thought, a public and private self. The art of medicine was to know both sides. Each of us has a private side, he thought. The patient's madness — that is, the shame and torment of her early abuse as a child — had been ignored by her parents. She had not been able to look at or think about the ordeal. Her feelings had been pushed far away. She still pretended that everything was fine — this was her facade — but the doctor listened to the pain and depravity underneath. Was he wrong to try to understand or listen? She acted as if she did not want to see it, or even think of it. It was so terrible she had to close her eyes, her feelings, to hide herself in her room for days.

On Friday afternoons she came out into the world.



Art Explosion