

THE POCKET POETS SERIES

SELECTED POEMS
of
MALCOLM LOWRY

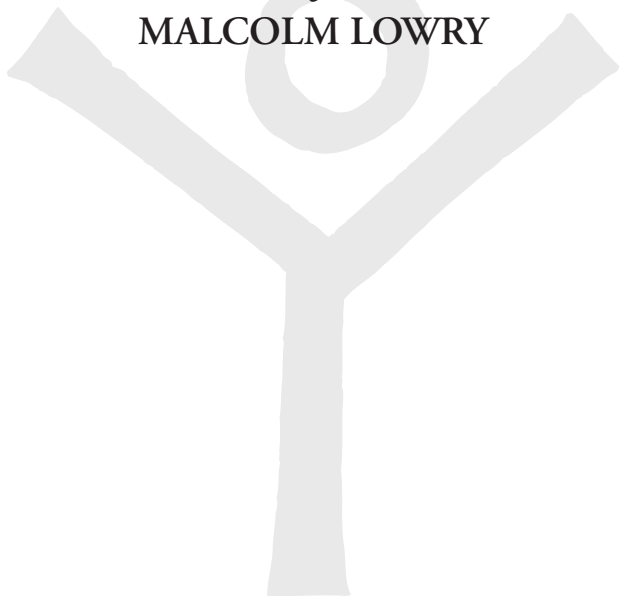
NUMBER SEVENTEEN

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

SELECTED POEMS

of

MALCOLM LOWRY



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CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

SELECTED POEMS

of

MALCOLM LOWRY

Edited by
EARLE BIRNEY

*with the assistance of
Margerie Lowry*



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First City Lights Edition, 1962

These poems have been selected and edited from manuscripts at the University of British Columbia. Some of them have already been published, or will appear, in: *Arizona Quarterly*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Audience*, *Canadian Forum*, *Canadian Literature*, *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, *Contact*, *Contemporary Verse*, *Dalhousie Review*, *Evidence*, *Exchange*, *Fiddlehead*, *Harpers*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *London Magazine*, *Minnesota Review*, *New York Times*, *New Yorker*, *Northwest Review*, *Outposts*, *Paris Review*, *Perspective*, *Queens Quarterly*, *Southwest Review*, *Tamarack Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *X*, and in A. J. M. Smith's *Book of Canadian Poetry*.

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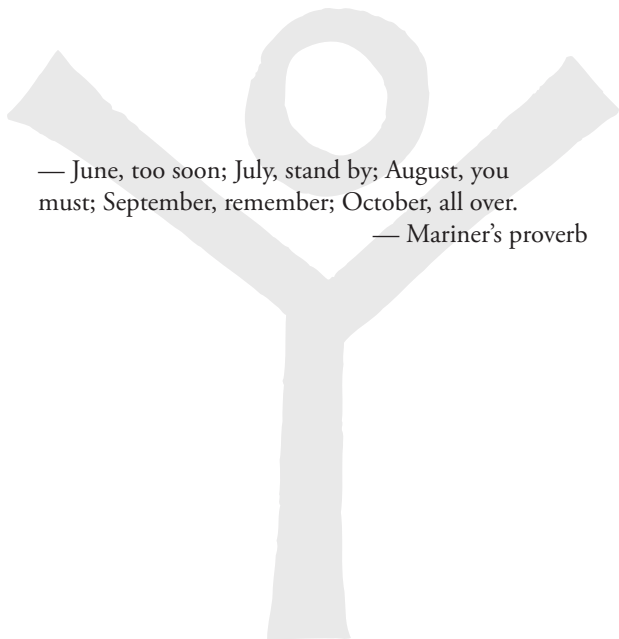
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— June, too soon; July, stand by; August, you must; September, remember; October, all over.

— Mariner's proverb

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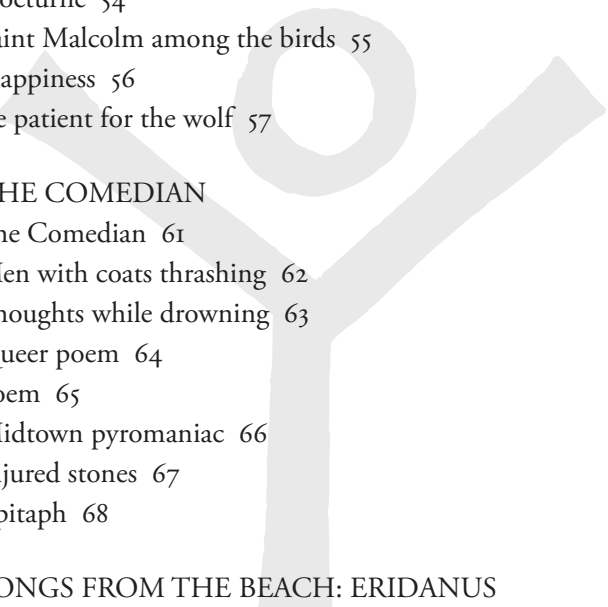
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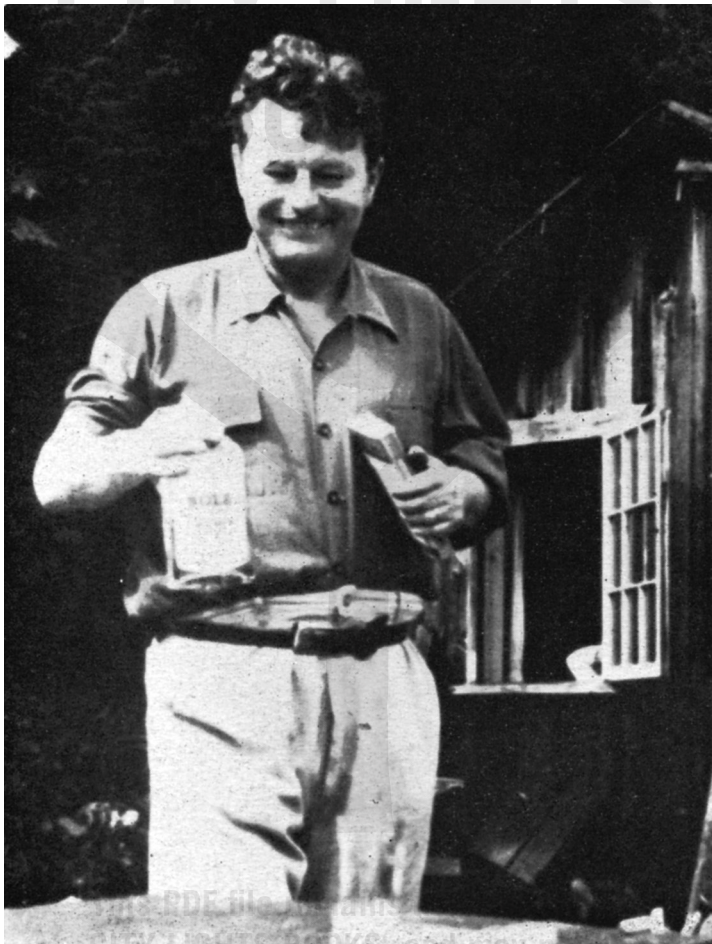
I've never regretted taking ship to Vancouver B.C. and talking Earle Birney, keeper of Lowery's manuscripts, into giving me these poems to publish *City Lights* in 1962, though they were greeted with a loud silence in the world press.

I believe in the poems not a pure poetry but as the flawed record of a man, as Birney put it, "drowning in the lonely seas of alcohol and guilt." As such, he joins the company of great poets like Dylan Thomas who also drank and saw the spider.

—Lawrence Ferlinghetti

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Malcolm Lowry in front of his squatter's shack, Dollarton, British Columbia (circa 1953). Photo: David Markson.

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INTRODUCTION

‘When the doomed are most eloquent in their *sinking*,’ wrote Malcolm Lowry in one of the poems in this book, ‘It seems that then we are least strong to save.’ The words are the man; they have the wry, archaic irony of his talk, as it still sounds in my ears; they have his stance, teetering on a rope of comic fancies between grandeur and self-pity, between exultation in his own power and agonies of self-contempt. Even the image traces an epitaph; his whole life was a slow drowning in great lonely seas of alcohol and guilt. It was all one sea, and all his own. He sank in it a thousand times and struggled back up to reveal the creatures that swam round him under his glowing reefs and in his black abysses. His talk and his writing were endless and autistic in their compulsion and terror, but they carried an eloquence such as no other artist has ever shaped for such experience. And, for all that, he never phrased an exorcism to bring him back to land. Neither *Under the Volcano* nor the success of it, nor all the growing company of readers and friends, could save him from his destructive element.

He has dissolved into it now, leaving only the countenance, stricken yet curiously jovial, that haunts us from his writings. In the great novel, and in the stories of *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*, and in those works still to be published we can see him through the naively translucent masks he put on. But here, in the poetry, we are confronted with the naked and doomed face of the man himself.

Who was he? An international man, surprise mutation born in 1909 into a family of wealthy Liverpool cottonbrokers;

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fan of Beiderbecke and Voodoo, who suffered, in the inevitable British 'public school', as in his family, separateness and rejection; close reader of Marston and Melville, Nordahl Grieg and Hart Crane, toyer with the Kabbala and numerology, who took a classical tripos at Cambridge; teen-age weight lifter and guitar strummer who claimed Conrad Aiken as his spiritual father and wrote, while still an undergraduate, a novel under the influence of *Blue Voyage* fictionizing his seventeenth year, when he had knocked around the ports of Asia as a fireman's boy on a freighter; lover of outcasts and prisoners and seagulls, hater of patriots, evangelists, critics and other tenders of the mass mind. He married an American girl in Paris, took her to Cuernavaca, settling down to writing and tequila. After their divorce in 1939 he married a Hollywood starlet and writer, Margerie Bonner, now his widow. They came to British Columbia and moved into a tidal shack among a community of squatters along the Dollarton beach, in Vancouver's upper harbor. Apart from a few trips (Haiti, Rome, Paris), this was their home during his fourteen most productive years, 1940-54. From his beach went out the final revision of *Under the Volcano*, and most of the stories in *Hear Us O Lord* . . . Here also he wrote or re-wrote several hundred poems, in which he set down, without disguise, himself.

It was, I think, because his verse was so innocent of defenses, that he was chary of publishing it in his lifetime. With Margerie's help I pried a few out of him, in the year the *Volcano* appeared; they were published in some Canadian journals and anthologies, but remained unknown to his international following. Still he went on working seriously with poems, fitfully revising them between prodigious bouts not only of drinking

but of sustained and sober prose writing, the pouring out of stories, novellas, novels, trilogies, plays, journals, letters, even film scripts.

Most of this lay unfinished, in disordered masses of manuscript, when Lowry choked to death in his sleep in a Sussex cottage, while on a visit to England in 1957. Eventually, it was brought back by Margerie to Vancouver and the University of British Columbia. Meantime an equally huge confusion of penciled scribbles and palimpsests of typing had been rescued by friends from his beach. While the Lowries were in Europe, their shack had been wrecked and burned into oblivion, along with the homes of all their fellow squatters, by the official preservers of Rent, Sanitation and Taxes. Margerie and I pooled the Dolarton manuscripts with the material from the English cottage, and began, a year ago, to edit the result. The first fruits of this collaboration are a novella, *Lunar Caustic*, appearing this year, and the present volume, A novel, *October Ferry to Gabriola*, as brilliant as anything Malcolm Lowry wrote, is next on the list for editing out of the great thicket of manuscript.

The present selection of poems contains about a fourth of those he completed. It has been chosen to represent the chief groupings which Lowry himself had made for a full edition he planned (under the title *The Lighthouse Invites the Storm*). Four of the subtitles used here were his own: The Roar of the Sea and the Darkness, The Cantinas, The Comedian, and Songs from the Beach: Eridanus. The order of the verses he had not fixed; the present one reflects roughly the chronology of his verse writing. The initial group is reminiscent in theme and sometimes in phrasing of that first novel, *Ultramarine*. The next two reflect

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the Mexican years, in the mid-Thirties. But all were re-worked, some many times, in the Dollarton beach shack, where most of the remainder were begun.

The bright crazy little shack is gone; all the sloppy ramshackle honest pile houses where fishermen lived and kingfishers visited are bulldozed into limbo, along with the wild cherries and 'the forest path to the spring.' Now there is an empty beach and beside it a Park with picnic tables and tarmac access; the sea air stinks with car exhaust. And the city that ignored him plans to cement a bronze plaque in his memory to the brick wall of the new civic caphouse.

The world he could not live with is drowning in its own element. The self-drowned poet survives here in his.

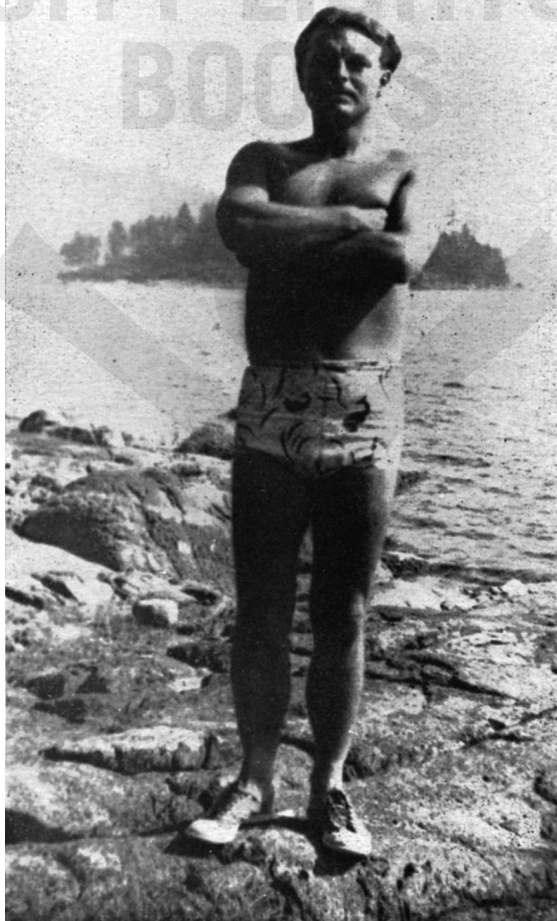
— Earle Birney

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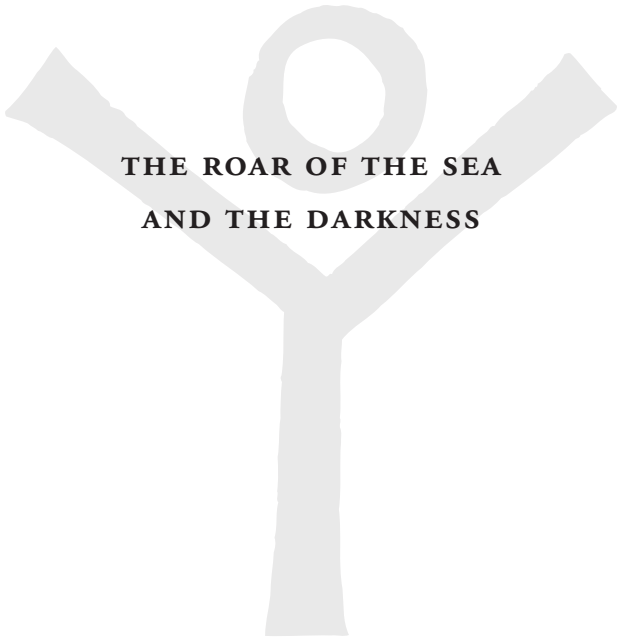
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*Malcolm Lowry on the beach at Dollarton, British Columbia
1940-42. Photo: Earle Birney.*

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**THE ROAR OF THE SEA
AND THE DARKNESS**

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NO KRAKEN SHALL BE FOUND TILL
SOUGHT BY NAME

Here is the ship, with decks all holy white,
Pure as the stone that scrubbed them to the bone.
Scuppers cleansed: and red lead shining where it
Would be, the blood all carefully washed from the deck,
The poop a pure arc on the Indian sky,
Cabined and perfect, with flag flying,
And bosun reading the bible, while with t'other hand
He gropes for Ahab's solution. And at the wheel
Another Ahab, whose rhetoric's however not his own.
Ah, who shall say that this is not the noblest of ships
Whose cargo's underwritten by heaven.
The dirt's all neatly hidden under winches,
The stokers are dropped overboard at night.
And sure her virtues do not lack acclaim
As, certain of salvage, she heads straight for the rocks
. . . Never so proud as in her hour of doom.

LOOK OUT! THE BLOODY BOSUN

A ship long laid up is a filthy thing
Cabled with rust, debris of the shore gang,
Filters gangrened, only a homesick tang
Reminds us of our longed-for suffering:
The sea ! The watches pass, the hours take wing
Like seagulls stuffed with bread. Tin-tin; pang-pang.
And this monotony is our *Sturm und Drang*
Of which few poets have the heart to sing.

I like to think we're scaling the old world
Down for a dose of red lead, as hammers snap
And ever grindstones wait to whet their lust.
Splendid to think so, yet in dreaming whirled
To abstract hulls, one falls into the trap
Set by that two-faced pimp who sees mere rust.

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BYZANTIUM

— Don't come any of that Byzantium stuff
On me, me fine young toff! Just plain Stamboul
Is good enough for me and Lamps and Bill.
Constantibloodynople's right enough —
Used to be, eh? Eh? Don't give me that guff
Like that wot you said about the ideal
— In a blind eye socket! But a girl's a girl
And bobhead tigers here'll treat you rough,
And give you ideal! . . . I bid adieu,
The siren moos; oh whither where away,
The engine stampedes: more fool you, hee hee,
And ukuleles mourn a ululu,
The iron groans: every dog will have its day,
And stars wink: Venus first then Mercury.

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OLD FREIGHTER IN AN OLD PORT

It had no name and we docked at midnight.
Nor could girls, shadowed at the dead car halt,
Laughing in linked quintets in the lamplight,
Leaven our hearts embittered with sea salt.
There was no beauty then about that place.
But waking early, to see near at hand
The wharf, road, and market, friendly clock face,
— The very lineaments of a new land —
Our flag run up the post office in spring,
Whose each stone seemed to promise news from one
Loved, and from our rusted bow the soaring
Car lines burning straight-ruled into the sun —
Emergence was of Christian from Despond
And Friday's print for Crusoe in the sand.

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IRON CITIES

Iron thoughts sail out at evening on iron ships;
They move hushed as far lights while twelve footers
Dive at anchor as the ferry sputters
And spins like a round top, in the tide rips,
Its rooster voice half muted by choked pipes
Plumed with steam. The ship passes. The cutters
Fall away. Bells strike. The ferry utters
A last white phrase; and human lips
A last black one, heavy with welcome
To loss. Thoughts leave the pitiless city;
Yet ships themselves are iron and have no pity;
While men have hearts and sides that strain and rust.
Iron thoughts sail from the iron cities in the dust,
Yet soft as doves the thoughts that fly back home.

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THE FLOWERING PAST

There is no poetry when you live there.
Those stones are yours, those noises are your mind,
The forging thunderous trams and streets that bind
You to the dreamed-of bar where sits despair
Are trams and streets: poetry is elsewhere.
The cinema fronts and shops once left behind
And mourned, are mourned no more. Strangely unkind
Seem all new landmarks of the now and here.

But move you toward New Zealand or the Pole,
Those stones will blossom and the noises sing,
And trams will wheedle to the sleeping child
That never rests, whose ship will always roll,
That never can come home, but yet must bring
Strange trophies back to Ilium, and wild!

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