

# Images, Book 1

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*Ever since I began writing as a child, my poetry has explored the themes of solitude, love, and death. Lurking under my adolescent scribblings was the question of sexuality, which came to the fore in my fourth book, Bodily Presence. Increasingly, my poetry and my prose is preoccupied by differences – cultural and linguistic – in Canada and between Canadians and people they encounter in other parts of the world. This poem is from my current poetry manuscript The Craving of Knives. (blainemarchand@hotmail.com)*

“J’aime presque les images autant que la musique?”

(Claude Debussy to Edgar Varese)

## 1. Reflets dans l'eau

We are only permitted impressions  
as the Docklands Light Rail  
pulls out of Tower Hill,  
past the sallow tenements  
where, through a window, I glimpse  
one man, arm raised, clutching  
a tea cup while another turns  
away. Your fingers staccato on my wrist,  
point to the distance,  
the autumn darkness clots, ink  
stain against hundreds of lights,  
festooning the mast of a ship,  
the highest building in the British Isles  
you say. I am only half listening,  
my attention still snagged on that passing scene  
in the kitchen. Would he set the cup  
down on the table, the other man

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just come in? Or, is he about to  
 chuck it, the other ready to duck?  
 The train glides around a curve,  
 lights at the water's edge  
 stitch the basin's loop. The cars stop  
 in the concave of station: Canary Wharf.  
 You lean forward, watch office workers,  
 collars unbuttoned and ties askew,  
 rush off escalators, push through opening doors,  
 cram into aisles, onto seats.  
 I think of the headlines back home  
 – this developmental folly almost sinking  
 the family whose fortune  
 shores up my country.

You recount how your ship docked here  
 that first time you arrived from Durban  
 to study, launch your career.  
 Even after so many decades away  
 your voice betrays the liberty,  
 your feet pressing down  
 onto the gangway as it bowed  
 under passengers' weight,  
 the air brisk in your mouth,  
 your heart pounding, ignited  
 by desire as porters shoved  
 your steamertrunks into the boot  
 of an uncle's waiting car.

The beat of your fingers against my knuckles  
 draws me from my reverie.  
 Your voice fills the shape of my ear.  
 South Quay. We must disembark  
 switch lines, go deep underground.  
 I follow you through  
 the doors onto the platform, let  
 you walk ahead through moorings  
 of light into shadow.  
 You are still so elegant at eighty-one,  
 your height full-drawn.

Your turn toward me, your lips  
discreetly curved to a kiss.

2. Hommage à Rameau

The paths are rutted deep in the earth  
as they arc, crisscross among unkempt grass  
around the oak stands of Hampstead Heath.  
I listen to your ragged breath  
as you mount a small incline.  
It is not so easy as it once was.  
You turn to wait as I catch up.  
You speak of death,  
as you have done several times  
in the last few days.  
Sometimes seriously,  
sometimes joking, ready with a scenario  
– a sudden tumble onto Oxford Street  
coming out from the Underground,  
courteous shoppers pausing,  
but not too long, weighted down with shopping bags  
they must move on. Never realizing,  
I add, you once brought  
London to its feet  
in Wigmore Hall. So long ago,  
you say. So long ago.

But today the music you made is invigorating  
as autumn's air. The movements  
of branches those notes  
in the drawing room before we set out  
as we listened to tapes of performances broadcast  
across Europe, in Africa. I ask how you drew  
these sounds from inside? What deep recess  
like tap roots your fingers reached?  
You smile at my insistence, my imagery,  
quietly say: "practise."  
I persist. Before you began,  
did you fuse emotion to an image?

Did you follow the sheetmusic note-perfect?  
 Was it already arranged inside  
 your head the way you have memorized  
 every stop on the Piccadilly and Victoria lines?  
 You laugh with such ease.  
 There's talent, you know.  
 Occasionally inspiration." Over your shoulder,  
 along the Heath's edge, a white stallion  
 vaults over a fallen tree.  
 I think of the way my heart leaps  
 when I look at you, ask why?  
 Is this a search for a father?  
 "Sometimes I just let go, follow instinct."

You point the way  
 along the path, through a clearing  
 to the roadway, the house.  
 We walk side by side in silence,  
 past couples on benches unwrapping  
 sandwiches, thermos of tea. You unlock  
 the front door, we pause  
 in the vestibule uncertain  
 whether to go in or embrace here  
 in the enclosed space, unsure  
 what holds us together despite living  
 in different hemispheres, generations apart.  
 A low moan quakes your cousin's house.  
 The tube speeds on its way to Golders Green.

### 3. Mouvement

Belsize Park. Chalk Farm. Camden Town.  
 Tottenham Court Road to Leicester Square,  
 past Charing Cross and Embankment.  
 Our bodies sway with the rhythm of the coach,  
 the movement of our thighs this morning.  
 We touch and then roll away from each other.  
 The powdery scent of your skin on my fingers.  
 A tattooed couple in the seat across the aisle

watch us intently. His lips move to her ear.  
A gloved hand covers her crimson mouth;  
at her wrist, thick loops of chain spill out.  
The two stand, leave. I watch your eyes  
follow in their wake. We, like them,  
believe the truth behind  
our relationship remains subterranean.  
Each day I have travelled with you beneath this city  
past stations with names I know chiefly  
from movies and books – Knightsbridge, Earl's Court,  
conjured images vague as waking dreams.  
For you, they are the fabric of youth.  
Depart here and just around the corner,  
the church where you staged your first recital;  
or here, pass under the subway,  
two blocks down, the bedsitter you  
and your first lover shared before the Blitz.

Is our love this? A passing in and out  
of view, time distilled, remnants trapped inside  
the head or heart, a reflection, my face  
in the window, thin  
membrane that separates us  
from dug out earth as we roll  
onto Highbury & Islington. This station  
we enter and then leave behind,  
the route we have chosen  
not so straightforward, emotion  
close to hand as the folded map  
I always carry, refuse to put away.  
I trace and retrace our journey  
certain only where we've come from,  
wanting to anticipate but unable  
to follow the announcer's voice  
garbled through the speaker.

