A Ghost in Waterloo Station

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Whenever I open a new collection of poems by Bert Almon I look at the back of the book first—a habit that goes back to the 1980 Edmonton launch of Blue Sunrise, his first Canadian publication after he moved from Texas in 1968 to teach at the University of Alberta. We discovered the title page at the back: the printer had bound the pages in reverse order! With characteristic quickness, he seized the moment and signed his name "nomla treb." A mirror moment, a moment of delight.

Almon ends his ninth collection, A Ghost in Waterloo Station, by paying tribute to hospitable friends. As he sips gin and tonic with them on their patio, his poetic antennae stay on full alert. He ends the poem with "benign chanterelles / in a golden heap on yesterday's toxic headlines / and the toy shark safe in the sheepdog's mouth." It's a peaceful ending for a book that starts edgily, in a surgical theatre, where Almon finds his muse watching a kidney transplant. The medical diction made me wince at first; but the poem shifts from a "golden drop of urine" to "the first drops of water / formed in the Hippocrene Spring"—classical source of poetic inspiration. Almon's muse "doesn't flinch or turn away" from the toxic, difficult or fearful in human experience, but she also inspires him to write about moments of grace, hope, humour and deep feeling. Andrew Motion observed that "Whereas Larkin's poems relied on his saying 'no' or 'perhaps' to life, Keats liked to say 'yes'" (Guardian, 9 September 2006). Bert Almon is clearly with Keats in saying 'yes' to life.

Peripatetic as always, Almon travels in Ghost from Texas to Melbourne, Greece to Heptonstall, London to Montreal, Salzburg to Stettler. Usually someone is with him—his wife, daughter, son, or one of a cast of strangers from butchers to security guards, waiters to taxi drivers. He is content to be solitary and look within, but his poems more often connect with people through time and space, imagination and chance, kinship or choice. Almon also looks outward to the world, enriching his poems with specific details drawn from the sciences, art, philosophy, history, literature, myth, religion, music, popular culture, and nature. But his poetry doesn't sink under the weight of allusion, for his aim is to communicate with his readers rather than confuse or impress or trick them.

We could be seduced into enjoying Almon's poems for content alone; indeed, his informal, conversational style encourages and allows such a reading. His preferred form is free verse, his grammar and syntax standard, his sentences complete. We can look right through these poems and perhaps not even notice their technical skill. For example, at the word level Ghost is filled with the bliss of etymology from "abbatoir" to "spanghew." At the grammatical level, Almon uses the possessive in surprising ways: "My First..."

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The poems in A Ghost in Waterloo Station take the everyday world as their point of departure, but the place of arrival is never the shore you started from. Vivid invocations and meditations on childhood, art, and travel bring together places and people as likeable and unexpected as the wry poetic sensibility recommending them to our attention. Greece is a country where cla The poems in A Ghost in Waterloo Station take the everyday world as their point of departure, but the place of arrival is never the shore you started from. No, Waterloo Station was gorgeous in its grandeur. The large room rose high above her head, made of glass, and at dusk everything was lit with a golden hue, giving her the illusion of warmth even though she stood in her scarf and winter jacket. "Wow," she mouthed, watching as people bustled to their platforms, waiting around screens to check the arrival and departure times. There was a massive clock, with a face similar to Big Ben suspended in the air. "Welcome to Konohagakure Prefecture. Thank you for traveling with The Ghost in Waterloo Station, where the everyday world's your point of departure, but the place of arrival is never the shore you started from!" She blinked, checking her wrist watch whose hands stopped moving, frozen on the nine and four. "What?"