

# Elaine Kathleen Swanson

(December 21, 1957 – March 2, 2002)

## Heart Songs



I

i have waited far too long for trees  
to throw their blossoms wild – too long  
too long for warming winds and mornings  
yellow blue – i want the softening –  
the richer hues that melt inside the eye –

tonight – tonight i'll dream the radiance  
of snow white apple trees and weaving grasses  
brushing past my knees – and dandelion gold  
reflecting earth smells rising damp and clear –

tonight i'll dream the summer rolling thick  
in leaves and vines and sleepy afternoons  
and shining thunderstorms in thick and hot  
that gather faces laughing into rain –

and tomorrow i will waken to my dreams.

II

december twenty-one – nineteen fifty  
seven – i saw you first on christmas day –  
small – smaller than my giant doll  
called margret ann – the doll had silver hair –  
you had none – none that i could see –  
and crawling up your forehead was a cross  
of brilliant red that darkened when you cried  
like some strange omen walking on your skin –  
we waited all our gifts until the day  
that you came home – wrapped three blankets deep  
in arms that shielded you from outside cold –

i see you now – i see what you were then –  
elaine kathleen – who would dare to guess  
that you could be a winter sacrifice?

### III

this is an hour of remembrance –  
the sunshine summer opens into june  
in backwards forwards touching of our hands –  
tree blossoms scatter petals to the wind  
revealing a brilliance of new leaves –  
this is an hour spiralling between  
memories of days that have not come  
and yesterdays that twist outside of time –  
of copper evenings – snowdrop afternoons –  
a child's startled gaze – an ice cream smile  
and popcorn midnights gathering our names  
through words that somehow never slipped to sound –

and flowers root and bloom and bloom again  
to celebrate the worlds we are growing.

### IV

a summer moving house – another home  
for worlds to grow within – burning days  
of rubber swimming pools and sandboxes  
and bookmobiles and fairy tale beds –  
your tricycle was green – the hedge grew tall  
and thick – star shaped thistles spiked the lawn –  
a little corner shop made fish and chips  
where once you pushed a penny on the counter –  
i tried to stop you but the lady filled  
a paper bag with french fries when you smiled –

then school – the beginning of the end -  
you did not fit and hid beneath a table  
to escape – so doctors put you into  
hospital to see if you were real.

## V

the winds are rising – hold me in your mind  
to share this calm – this daydream gentleness  
lazing in the summer of the sun –  
we knew so many spells – and will know more  
drowsing without words – sharing a still  
that liquefies the stiffness of our bones –

we have shared many hours of quietness  
talking depths that grew into our cells  
and rearranged the whispers of our skins –  
and now togetherness returns again –  
the breeze is slow – close your eyes and spin  
loose thoughts twisting in and out of mine –

apartness is illusion – we are near  
wandering this breath of afternoon.

## VI

a tiny figure on a window ledge  
in white pyjamas – crying three floors up –  
we waved at you but you did not wave back –

it was a month – a month of incomplete  
till you came home – redescribed in labels  
that did not fit the child that we knew –

a special school – a special child - we listened  
and obeyed but did not understand –  
another year in days of upside down

and thunderstorms where lightning forked and speared  
the afternoons – severing the air  
till everything smelled strange and crystalline –

then you moved away – too far to see  
and we moved further than the voice could reach.

## VII

your birthday – this day of thunders rains –  
of winds and cloud – of sunshine crevasses  
streaking sudden radiance to haunt  
a cabin and a cedar grove in gold  
and then to disappear –

you dove the aura  
in and out – an almost presence that was  
never there – two years of distances  
shift between the letters of our names -  
two years of change –

did thunders split  
your ears today? and did you think of me?  
i heard your voice but could not place the words –

now the evening rains to nothingness  
and half-forgotten hours that recall  
a half-remembered presence that was not.

## VIII

i think we lost you then – like cataracts  
thickening your sight you felt the loss  
and slowly slowly closed your ears and mind –

safety in infancy – remember when  
you were a christmas sister bundled pink  
taught in mysteries of nursery rhymes?

no more tricycles no swimming pools no paten  
leather shoes – no flowered easter hats  
no family to throw your arms around –

you twisted spine and dream to rearrange  
the regiment of walls where there was no one  
with the time to teach you how to sing –

no sunday schools no backyard barbecues –  
only rails jailing your bed.

## IX

it is late – one lamp against the night  
windowed to a pale yellow square –  
no other light disturbs the outside street –

this is a quiet time – a time of ghosts –  
of almost real shapes that swell and sway  
and mumble in my ears – more real than

the days of cardboard people flashing  
automatic grins and practising  
the rush to isolate each place in time –

endless endless plastic-coated words  
entombing surfaces – hiding depths  
that silent nights recall –  
now faces merge  
a timeless spaceless unity with dark  
and shadow selves awaken from their sleep.

## X

another year another year another  
year – i see you now – a skeleton  
moving moving moving hands and feet  
and eyes and mouth and head – you do not see  
me standing at your side – you do not hear  
or answer to my words – you do not laugh  
but rough and harsh and loud you cry and cry  
and rage against the nowhere of your world –

days and days that i can never know –  
your memories of ritual and rules  
and pills to keep you quiet – make you fit –

even then it seemed no one believed  
that you were real – and everyone agreed  
that unreality must be a crime.

## XI

whispers creep the walls and swell the doors –  
it is your voice – i know the rhythm  
lilting through the shivers of my mind –  
i feel your sudden nearness circling  
and turn to look - but lamps are lonely  
throwing golden greys across the floor  
and chairs reach out to no one – all is still –  
muted into evening sleepiness –

am i dreaming? conversations sweep  
my thoughts and trigger answering – i speak  
startling the air in syllables  
that do not fit – silence responds –  
dreaming or awake – i only know  
my hands are warm in hands that are not here.

## XII

twenty-seven years – instructed long  
in anonymity – now no one is  
allowed to penetrate your privacy –  
secure in eyes that do not see the bars  
on windows – ears that will not register  
in sounds – skin no longer sensitised  
to gentleness – shelled too deep for touch –  
shelled inside the long of tearless cries  
that grate your throat and drive your arms and legs  
pushing endlessly against a flesh  
that will not let you die – whose was the kiss  
that nailed you so deep in separateness?

no more laughter – years since you have smiled –  
years since you have understood your name.

### XIII

the shadows of my thoughts have been unleashed  
and thrown to dusk – a thousand bird flights blurring  
my horizons – growing into yours –

elusive thoughts – i cannot call them back –  
like children gone – like children never grown –  
the you that was – the you that will not be –

memories i could not hold inside  
burst my ribs to mists – massing wings  
and feathers – beating – beating silver grey –

a thousand phantoms rushing – soaring clouds –  
filling skies in promises – in words –  
in silences – the unshared days and years

melting grey on grey – a part of me  
escaping skin to be a part of you.

### XIV

a dozen phone calls and i hear the claim  
of governments to close down institutions –  
now you do not even have a bed –

a dozen people rearrange your files –  
i collect old snapshots – and we meet  
suddenly deciding you are real –

is it too late for miracles? i will put  
a tulip in your hand – brilliant red –  
the inside crawling black – and when your arms

swing back and forth against the padded bed  
the flower will fall apart – you will not notice  
petals bleeding sheets – but i will see

and gather each one carefully and press  
them dull between your childhood photographs.



## XV

what is love – if not the sun reflecting  
dust in silver phantoms of disguise?  
look now – can you see it? window panes  
opening to sun with dancing spinning  
leaping spectacles of pantomime –  
eyelashes tip the spectrum and we see  
rainbows flash on walls and slip away  
through strange familiar ghost realities –  
our ears whisper in songs – as if each laugh  
grew lives beyond our breath and multiplied  
the richness of the air –  
what is love?  
something that the hands can't hold – webs  
of silver glistening through alter suns  
springing into worlds that we share.

## XVI

child – you are no child now – nor are you  
grown up – you've grown away – away  
from our uncivilised humanity –  
we hid you walls away from sunday picnics  
baseball parks and trees – we taught you how  
to breathe in stereotype – no one would  
stand up for you – you would not stand alone  
and grew an ocean none could penetrate –  
  
now a thousand pages fill with ink  
and multiply in programs that would like  
to call you back – no one quite knows how –  
no one knows if you would want to trust  
our transience – we talk sandcastle loves  
building dreams the tides will wash away.

## XVII

it is not summer yet – the long of spring  
finds all things waiting – hovering the brink  
of new discoveries – mountain snows recede  
and skies stretch out to claim a slower sun  
promising a time of breakfast mornings  
bending cherries to our open hands –

the cherry tree is white and crimson lined  
in flowers swelling thick and rich between  
reflected snows and heaviness of red –  
and on the wind the sweet of days to come  
when leaves have widened deep and strong and green  
with ladders climbing branches to the birds –

and we will rise into the birds and songs  
feasting cherries through the heights of june.

## XVIII

there is truth – the world is alive  
we are the caretakers who took no care –  
now we try to turn the clock around  
and everything sounds great in triplicate –  
a dozen people rush to help you stand  
but no one can untwist your spine or close  
the open scars of cheeks and feet and hands –

are we kind? to want you to rejoin  
uncertainties of our inhuman kind?  
where are your thoughts? do you sense or almost  
understand our starlight plans? or will you  
throw the whole thing back into our eyes  
leaving us with papers collecting dust  
in files – and no one to practise on?

## XIX

yellow green the hills stretch out of sight –  
arm in arm we stand beside a road  
watching quietness – drinking in  
the vastness of a treeless countryside –

a melting sound of wind and i awake  
to rain streaked windows – and a radio  
in last night's bomb attacks and politics –  
gradually i feel you return  
inside my thoughts – your arm around my waist –  
your tousled hair – a wordless love  
that underlies the difference of our worlds –  
there is no answer to the tears we cry  
but deep nights find us travelling through skins  
until the days become our sleep disguise.

## XX

we try honestly – as honestly as finances  
permit – as honestly as textbooks will allow –  
as honestly as schools teach us how – trying to  
believe in people who've forgotten how to  
believe – there are deadlines to observe –  
this is the longest spring – winter waits –  
you will not be allowed to keep your room –  
it is no room for keeping but the years  
of washed out walls and corridors and doors  
that echo every step – and wheeled beds  
and wheelchairs and meal carts and pills  
accumulate the patterns you call home –

we taught you institutions – are you ready  
to disrupt foundations once again?

## XXI

we do not write – i walk the raspberries  
tasting red – and taste a cottage day  
of wild raspberries bushed deep in thorns  
where we ate all the fruit that we could find –

we do not speak – i walk towards the lake  
and see the sands of now and then converge  
with giant waves and blue blue sky and sun –  
no mountains there - but here they overrun –

we do not touch – i sit a pale log  
and glimpse a plastic pail shining green –  
a plastic shovel – yellow – digging sand  
to watch the waters fill each hole again –

strange how we can be so far apart  
yet always close enough to overlap.

## XXII

there is a time for miracles – if not today  
maybe tomorrow or the next day or  
the next – no one knows your thoughts  
but sometimes when the midnights close around  
i feel your dreams – images that dance  
and grow beyond your skin – i do not know  
if you would want to try again - returning  
to a body twisted small – eyes  
of damaged sight – with strangers bustling  
around your bed – a kinder world perhaps –  
of closer hearts and hands - coaxing you  
to share a new reality –

and i?

i almost think that hours and hours of talk  
have said again we think you are not real.

### XXIII

gigantic maple leaves in purple red  
thrown ankle deep and crinkling toes –  
a brittle sound – a smell of moss and age  
waiting to return to return to earth again –  
gold and orange and brown – every leaf  
creates another moment to absorb  
until somewhere somehow it disappears –

but never gone – only grown to change –  
trees rise taller fuller into spring  
wiser in another year of leaves  
that fall and grow again into themselves –

and like each leaf – we chase and touch and collect  
and move a little closer to the earth.

### XXIV

adventures – adventures of pursuit – we try  
to catch your dreams and make them fit with ours –  
benevolence or menace? gods or demons?  
i do not know the roles that we will play –

communication – we cancelled sight and sound  
to prison you in flesh – now we try  
to free your spirit into our ideals –  
what is free? no one knows the answer –  
only that we have to try and crack  
the guilts that ride us now – my secret guilts  
my silences – do i want to believe  
in you or do i only try to ease  
my long-term absences? i cannot promise  
that i will not disappear again.

## XXV

cold and cold december – cold and dark  
waiting on the winter equinox –  
a time to hibernate – a time to pray  
to meditate the strengthening of sun –  
i grow more and less the winter child  
in knowing you – the strangeness of this night  
trembling silver snows – it is your night –  
everything begins and all things end  
stretching moon and stars and promises  
through magics deeper than our thoughts can name –

jagged shadows write into the stillness  
of these hours – these hours of between  
these hours sacrificing last year's sun  
to move into the next year's wakening.

## XXVI

the night is dark – i feel the misted edges  
of your mind – i almost hear – as if  
you try to comfort my confusions – yes –  
yes there is a truth – the future waits  
and i must follow dreams – if all things fade  
it will not be because i did not try –  
that is my truth – and you? are you willing  
to try one more time at love – at trust –  
at intersecting worlds? there are people  
wanting to believe in something new –  
should we share those beliefs – repainting walls  
and washing windows to admit the sun?

for us or you? i think you are the teacher  
teaching us that we know how to care.

## XXVII

this is our secret – they will never guess  
those who walk the lines of documents  
and rearrange legalities to prove  
i have no claim on you nor you on me –

i draw strange pictures thrown from your heart –  
you cry my tears – i write the ice and fires  
of your spaceless wanderings – we share  
the rage and laughters of a midnight sun –

you are prisoned flesh – i am prisoned  
thought – the bondage of our distances  
cannot be erased – but love expands  
and joins the inside reaching of our minds –

our secret and our truth – that we are one  
exploring alternate realities.

