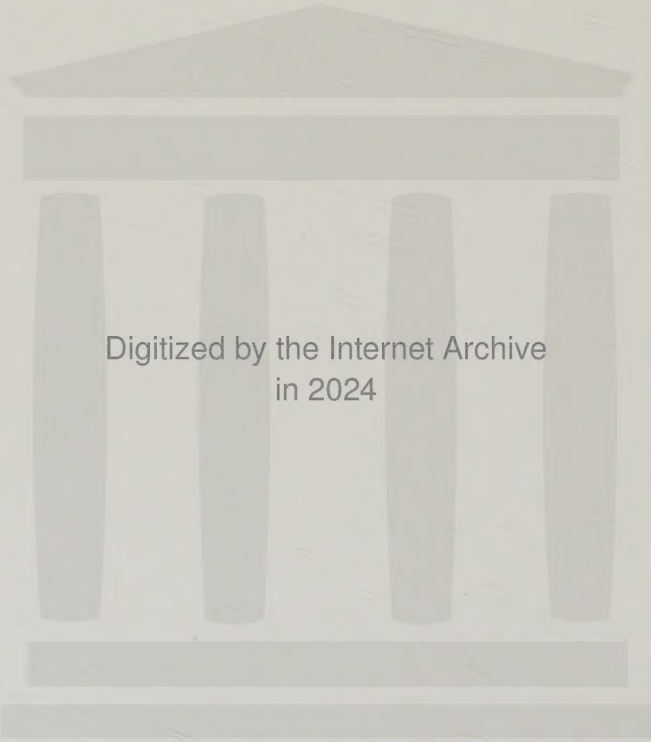


YES

IS SUCH A LONG WORD



Selected Poems
RICHARD GEORGE-MURRAY



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Selected Poems by

RICHARD GEORGE-MURRAY

Edited with an Introduction by

Ian Young

**Entimos Press
Amsterdam
1995**

Yes Is Such a Long Word

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Introduction

It takes a very special kind of artist to produce a really good small poem. China and Japan, of course, have a great tradition of small poems by illustrious, beloved poets. In the West, the lineage and the poems are more elusive, gradually coming to the fore in recent decades, thanks to the growing popularity of haiku and the genius of such expert practitioners as Cid Corman, James Kirkup and Oswald Blakeston.

Richard George-Murray is the foremost American exemplar of this delightful art: delightful because a good small poem, whatever other qualities it may have, always seems to instill a feeling of happy astonishment — like Whitman's sudden "glimpse through an interstice caught," and never forgotten.

I first came across Richard George-Murray's work in New York's Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop in 1976. His *Markings*, a pint-sized chapbook of small poems for a young guy called Mark, reminded me of a small, tasty apple. In *The Body Politic* I called it "a sweet, crisp, appealing little book."

Richard says he wrote his first poem at the age of five or six, when he was just learning to write. He only remembers its first line: "Selah Cole is my friend." He read it to his mother, who said something like "Yes, dear, that's nice" — his first critical notice. I'm not sure whether mine was the second.

At any rate, my appreciation came at a good time: I met the poet soon afterwards, at a reading at The Glines. As it happened, I was looking for an apartment, and as it happened, Richard knew of a sublet two floors below him in his building on Cleveland Place — a rather obscure street, I was to discover; even cab drivers do not always know where it is.

In New York's cramped quarters, it's a luxury to be able to pop upstairs for a change of scene, a cup of tea, some conversation, or the loan (or gift!) of a much-needed item. To my delight, I discovered that Richard

George-Murray is a good neighbor as well as a good poet, and we became friends.

In the past couple of decades he has produced over twenty more hand-made, hand-bound chapbooks, with titles like *Lilac Cure*, *Hop on the Running Board* and *I'll Give You a Lift*, *Lavender Soap*, and *This Playground Closes at Dusk*. They are collectors' items now, and hard to find. It's time for a bigger book.

Yes is Such a Long Word is my selection from Richard George-Murray's chapbooks, a representative sample of about a quarter-century of poems. Its subjects are boys, cats, the seasons, love and freckles, death and flowers. And of course, Mark. The important stuff. Short and sweet. And unlike any other.

Ian Young
Scarborough, Ontario

Poetry Chapbooks by Richard George-Murray
Issued by the Primrose Apathy Press

Markings: *Thirteen empty verses* October, 1975. 16 pp incl. wraps, 14x11 cm, stapled.

Yellow 16 1975. 20 pp incl. wraps, 14x21.5 cm, stapled.

Patchwork: *Seven loving poems* February, 1976. 8 pp incl. wraps, 14x10.5 cm.

Nightmares and Out June, 1976. 20 pp incl. wraps, 21.5x14 cm, 100 copies.

Lilac Cure: *New poems* Drawings by Mark Tambella. November, 1976. 16 pp incl. wraps, 18x10.5 cm, stapled.

Fox Day: *Poems* Drawings by Jackson Schulte. February, 1977. 24 pp incl. wraps, 10.5x7 cm, stapled.

Patchwork: *Twelve loving poems* Drawings by Mark Tambella, calligraphy by Colin Sanderson. 1978. 28 pp incl. wraps, 21.5x14 cm, stapled, 200 copies.

Denizen 1979. 14 or 16 pp incl. wraps, various sizes, Japanese fold, each made individually.

Six Poems December, 1980. Calligraphy by Jean Carbain. 8 pp incl. wraps, 11x14 cm, tied. Second printing, 1981.

Denizen 1981. 12 pp incl. wraps, 10.5 x 14 cm, tied.

Markings Revised edition, 1981. 10 pp incl. wraps, 28x11 cm, stapled, 200 copies. Drops three poems from the 1976 edition and adds ten new ones.

Burning Tulips: *Poems* Calligraphy by Jean Carbain. June, 1981. 20 pp incl. wraps, stapled, 100 copies signed by the poet and calligrapher.

Cat: *Poems* 1981. Illustrated with silhouettes "borrowed from Charles Robinson." 20 pp incl. wraps, 11x14 cm, tied, 100 copies signed and numbered.

The Stilted Chapbook (To the trade only): *Poems* Calligraphy by Jean Carbain. 1981. 20 pp incl. wraps, 14x11 cm, tied, 100 copies numbered and signed by the poet and calligrapher.

Box of Contents: *Neatness counts, these contents by Richard George-Murray, Licensed Reality Broker* January, 1982. 12 pp incl. wraps, 14x11 cm, 50 copies.

Attic Window, Slow Clouds Drifting: *Poems* January, 1982. 12 pp incl. wraps, 14x11 cm, tied, 50 copies. Revised second printing, February, 1982. 12 pages incl. wraps, 11x18 cm, stapled.

Lavender Soap: *Poems* February, 1982. Cover hand coloured; 8 pp incl. wraps, 11x18 cm, stapled, 100 copies.

This Playground Closes at Dusk: *Poems* 1982. 16 pp incl. wraps, 10.5x14 cm.

Hop on the Running Board and I'll Give You a Lift: *Poems* December, 1983. 20 pp incl. wraps, 11x14 cm, tied, 200 copies.

Proud Flesh: *Poems* 1984. 20 pp incl. wraps, 11x14 cm, tied.

Some Poems December, 1984. Calligraphy by Jean Carbain. 8 pp incl. wraps, 11x14 cm, tied, 100 copies. Also: **Some Poems** 1984. Calligraphy by Jean Carbain. 8 pp incl. wraps, 11x14 cm, tied. These two items, outwardly identical except for a different cover drawing (the former has a male torso, the latter a drawing of the poet's boyhood home), contain a different selection of poems, the latter, with non-erotic poems, being issued for Christmas distribution to the poet's family.

Is It Monday? March, 1985. 8 pp including wraps, 10.5x18 cm, 15 copies.

G — Burn This. Love, R. Easter, 1987. Calligraphy by Jean Carbain. 12 pp incl. wraps, 11x14 cm, issued unstapled, 25 copies. Poet's name does not appear in this book.

Christmas Baubles, *from Richard*. 1992. 8 pp incl. wraps, 11x14 cm, tied, 25 copies.

Thin Edge: *Six Poems for 1992* December, 1992. 8 pp incl. wraps, 10.5x14 cm, 25 copies.

Richard George-Murray also issued non-poetry titles through his Primrose Apathy Press, for instance his listing of eighteenth century English women silversmiths, **Not Only Hester** (June, 1976).

There were also three chapbooks of his poetry issued by other presses:

Bedlam: *Elevations and Perspectives* (Jersey City, NJ: Ross Paxton, 1966); **Ralph Rambone:** *A Poem* (Jersey City, NJ, 1976); **Tin Roses** (New York: Michael Siegelau, 1973)

How sweet to sleep
with a young man in my arms —
how also sweet
is a long nap next day
alone.

Hidden among roots
the patient locust ticks off the years
and when the seventeenth comes by
he digs himself up to the spring air,
rises, and thinks of sex.

I spread some small-leafed red
calico on the floor, to
think about.

The cat, always alert to new
and favorable background,
quickly moves off-center
on it, and poses.

A few minutes of attitudes, and
she moves on to the food
dish. She has priorities.
Art is fun, food is serious.

Let me
spend the day in bed with you
avoiding words. Words
are jealous of love's living crystal,
and struggle to raise
crude cages,
to wire down
feelings.

Let me float above
the traps and mazes, wrapped
in your sweet smell, my ears
hearing only your heart,
my mouth sealed
with love.

My life is feverish, dry:
my thoughts are chilled —
doctor me
with your body.

He sits at the diner counter,
hair so curly, so light,
hands so dark from work,
and above his upper lip, maybe
a moustache,
maybe
a smudge.

The cat spends long hours
studying corners,
and any day now I expect
a new book:

CORNERS — THEORY AND PRACTICE
maybe only a couple of volumes,
but thorough, very thorough.

I changed the sheets
I changed the very sheets
for the first
time in weeks and
you never showed.

I exist in your interstices —
while you were blinking
I quickly
smiled.

In the early dawn's quiet the neighbor's boy,
about six feet so far,
unfurls himself from the backyard tent,
goes to the edge of the trees
to take a leak.

In my haste to get the binoculars
I knock over the tea tray,
making a noise that would startle a distant deer
or a sleepy morning boy, and alas
now I know no more than I did.

Anciently
someone's horses once ate
human flesh, and certain centaurs
listed them among their sires.
From these stocks, and others,
observing rigid Mendelian law,
you are descended.

I open my eyes
in the dim early light,
remembering the smell of you, and I turn
and there you are, asleep,
and — I see —
thinking of me.

We are together in this new bed,
in this new room;
and as you doze, I look out
the uncurtained window,
watch Orion moving by.

You're dressed and down the stairs,
halfway to Queens
but here in this quiet room
my head still rings
with your cock.

I tell Tony his leather
cap looks great —
but
I wouldn't even see it
on another head.

I am still, I hold my breath,
and your hand
like a bird lighting
on my shoulder.

Making love, in the summer, on the water —
waves slapping that wooden barge.

The Jersey lights across the Hudson,
the smell of river, of kerosene lamps
on that barge, the sound of water,
and making love, long ago —
barge and captain, gone long ago.

Apollo never even
pauses
but Denis in his yellow
pickup
stops.

Denis got stoned and got
into bed with me. Now
he talks to me
soberly.

Morton Street Pier:
three times
in ten minutes I've fallen in love —
I wonder what's
the record.

Oh how I wanted
to wink at him but
my eyelid
was rusty.

In the marigold jungle
thinking of finches
pretending to sleep, lurks
the marmalade cat.

I won't hand you a poem
in the morning;
the words would stutter,
the poem fall apart
at the touch of your fingers.

I put
our computer cards
together
held them up and
some light
came through.

We had a party and
someone brought a pair of sailors
— so much sweeter than flowers
and nowhere near
so durable.

My jeans are buttoned carefully
not that I expect
an inspector or
that there's to be a test,
and not
that it will matter that
inside I'm all undone.

Late at night
Mark zig-zagged
down Spring Street —
curb to curb to curb
and solemn,
sewing it up,
stoned on being.

Mark's cheap ring won't turn him green
oh no. Instead
the brass is turning gold.

One poem
perfect
on a small sheet of paper
torn
into tiny pieces
and all
flushed away.

The second perfect poem
pencilled on bond
taped to the iron
fire escape
washed by sun, rinsed by rain,
amended
by rust.

The third perfect poem
written in dark
echoing rooms
with a broken
flashlight.

I come home
and find
once again
the cat has been sitting
in my chair
pretending
to be me.

"Yes" is such a long word,
three or four syllables,
when he agrees to come to bed,
when he begins to unlace his heavy boots.
His rumpled blond hair tears my heart
— I could have two or three heart attacks
between the question and the end of
"yes".

I saw Marshall
last night and he
tried to just wave
and get away
without talking. Why
haven't you called
I said. I've been
busy he said. I'll
bet. He's been
dead for two years.
He's had time.
Then he told me
he'd been writing
a lot lately,
with a stylus,
on black velvet.
Not everyone can
read it he said.
I'll bet. The
velvet looked deep
and soft, here
and there a little
stormy like maybe
a cat had clawed it.

Five deer
on the edge of the light
green field, under
the dark green trees,
and watching.

The snapdragon
swallows the willing
bumblebee.

There's no cure for lilacs:
one May day
I'll die of lilacs.

The cat ignores catnip
but exalts, purring and kneading
on this Mark-scented shirt.

How nice to lie sleepy, alone
up in bed, hearing small certain noises
of you, your shoes coming off, your change
jingling, of you undressing, of you
coming up to bed.

I swallow the lightning
and breathe
the muted after-storm brightness.
The smell of you
shelters me, like angel wings.
Behind our closed eyes
we quietly glow. In time
our pulses will again match
the slow world's pace, and we'll get up,
put on blurred clothes,
go out again, stepping carefully
through blurred streets.

Poetry
is like masturbating
while climbing mountains
— solitary
and dangerous.

Strawberries
come from fields
not stores,
and in this bobolink patrolled meadow,
the thorough bee and I
explore
philosophy.

On the side porch, the compact black cat
tail over toes, stares at the falling rain.
Upstairs, the neighbor's boy, about
seventeen, dark and sullen, elbows
on the pillowed sill, leans
out of his bedroom window, wearing
just a thin
trickle of smoke.

Like an unpaid
bill on a spindle
here I am
stuck
on your cock.

Remember the first man
you had sex with?
Remember the second?
How long ago
did you lose count?

Stay away from love they're saying,
love can kill,
and oh it's true enough, I've
died time and again
for love.

Jokingly,
Henry put his hand on my brow
to see if I had a fever,
and quickly
I had a fever.

Oh you with the polliwog eyes
how can I keep serene
seated on the subway
with so nice, so neat
a basket
so near, so near
my nose.

Freedom arrived bleeding
pounding at my door
saying please please
hide me.

If an apple seed
got stuck
in Mark's belly button,
we'd have the Garden of Eden
all over again.

Some say
the soul is in the belly.
I said hello, softly,
and listened in silence.
In time there was an answer,
and maybe
it was your soul.

Cocks cocks cocks
cocks cocks cocks cocks
and love fluttering
in a small steel cage.

The pillow rumbled
your silky hair, remembered
you for part of next day,
but now
has lost your print. Put not
your faith in feathers.

When I'm 75, or 100,
maybe 150,
I'll understand everything
about sex, only
there's more to sex than sex,
so then
I'll start on that.

A hundred
canaries later, I'm walking
home from the baths, all
shining and tanked up with loving,
and I pass a dim shop,
with a big black and white cat,
watching the door, awake
and all alone.

Luckily there's a cat level
mail slot
in that door
so I can pass him a few fingers,
scratch his head, give him
some of the overflow.

I'm sure there's a law
against carrying anything
as explosive as that
but
I've swallowed your bribe,
I'll never tell.

Lost somewhere
on Spring Street: one
small friendly
freckled
thought: answers
to the name of Bill.

In the June heat, knees wide apart,
seated on a low wooden crate, wearing
a careless wealth of muscles,
an eagle tattoo, and
overworked cutoffs; grinning
at me, calling out "Fireworks? Fireworks?"

Oh yes, I feel like some
fireworks.

Dear Tim — I found
your poem, seemingly
misfiled under CAT —
how'd you know
that's where I'd look?

I wouldn't dare tell Martin
about Danny,
or either of them
about Sal,
and yesterday I added up
all their ages
— they totalled mine.
Exactly.

So sweet a swallow —
the flavor maybe
white violets
hummingbird eggs
skateboards.

He sits naked, quietly at ease
on the bench, legs apart,
belly and thighs
framing
a bobbing, hopeful cock.

Does he startle me
or am I frightened?
...This heavy blurred
ghost
son of an old lover.

Mother
ran off with the ferryman
crossed that last river
drank the local water
forgot us all.

Around midnight
the Old Cathedral cats
gather by the east door, safe
behind the locked gate,
the iron fence,
from Mott Street dangers.
There they pace impatiently,
mewing to any late passerby,
food? food?
Someone has been feeding them,
secretly. Charity
waiting
til piety sleeps.

Today I walked down Third Avenue. I passed a man shaving. He had a paper coffee cup for water and a throw-away razor. He used a store window for a shaving mirror. The window was behind criss-crossed iron bars which protected his image from him. He was a throw-away man but he tried to be neat.

Defeated words in flight
tattered meaning streaming
in the unreasoning wind.

Like wolf-raised children
we have problems being
with our own kind.

Trampled
worn love letters
official warnings on post cards
blow down the street
all directions for delivery
ignored.

Like a feather
fallen
from an angel

this single
floating
sailor.

Sleeping bag zippers
are the only argument
I can think of
for circumcision,
and that was forcibly
brought to my attention.

What if I had to choose
between a Paul Revere
teapot
and you?

What if I could pick only one:
a Winslow Homer
seascape
or you?

What if I had to decide, right now,
a first edition of
Leaves of Grass
or you?

Old men
think of things like this,
but I'm not all that crazy about
Walt Whitman.

Christopher hugs the dog,
looks into his eyes,
and says,
"Give me a kiss," and
the dog, no fool,
licks the boy's face.

My pen has been missing two days
and any moment now
I expect a ransom note
(in that dear familiar brown ink)
from some roach terrorist group.

If I were to meet me,
age seventeen,
would I know who I was?
Could I stand me,
would I like me?
Would we be safe together?

Mark's beauty hides
his beauty — fire
burning behind fire.

A rainy August Tuesday
and a naked Eddie
sleeping on the couch,
his watchful cock awake,
keeping an eye on me.

Belly button modestly
blushing
somewhere
behind that cock.

At the upstairs window,
between me and the North Star,
the desperate signals
of a lightning bug.

A dull orgy
lit by a dozen wristwatches;
no gleaming eyes,
no inner light.

My next love poem
will be left-handed lines
to my dear right hand.

Years
all fled
like frightened mice.

My genius, my work,
all my motions
only a sideshow
for a watchful cat.

I threw your underwear
over the clock,
swallowed the swollen moment,
held my breath for hours,
but time came back.

At the next table the lanky bus boy —
long blond hair, jeans, dirty sneakers,
and so sweet a face —
whistles, clears the table,
casually avoids the interweaving cat,
leaves me almost grieving
that next he won't buss me.

White quiet
under January moon,
the pond spillway's falling water
makes an under ice sound,
and up in the barn a cow
resettles herself.
White, white, quiet,
and the stars slow circling.

Out on the clothesline, hung out to dry,
a thousand icicles, and two
forgotten clothespins.

In the night breeze
the curtain flapped
— I thought it was you,
laughing in your dream.

Someone should
listen to the wind dying in the birches,
hear the crows and crickets,
eat the berries too ripe to carry,
hear the apples fall,
stand ready to testify
it all happened.

Palimpsest —
on the heart's brittle scrubbed
tissue, with slow awkward letters,
I write your name
over and over.

Turn off the moon;
such fullness
hurts when I'm
so empty of you.

Older
with less to say
to fewer people.
Tapering off
for the big
silence.

We were young once —
on the beach
our footprints glowed.

Small grey bird digging my grave
with a tiny silver shovel,
no rush.

1000 copies of this book
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at Drukkerij Bevrijding, Amsterdam.

49 are numbered and signed
by the author.

This is number



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