

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Alden Nowlan**  
**- poems -**

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# Alden Nowlan(25 January 1933 - 27 June 1983)

Alden Nowlan was born into rural poverty in Stanley, Nova Scotia, adjacent to Mosherville, and close to the small town of Windsor, Nova Scotia, along a stretch of dirt road that he would later refer to as Desolation Creek. His father, Gordon Freeman Nowlan, worked sporadically as a manual labourer.

His mother, Grace Reese, was only 15 years of age when Nowlan was born, and she soon left the family, leaving Alden and her younger daughter Harriet, to the care of their paternal grandmother. The family discouraged education as a waste of time, and Nowlan left school after only four grades. At the age of 14, he went to work in the village sawmill. At the age of 16, Nowlan discovered the regional library. Each weekend he would walk or hitchhike eighteen miles to the library to get books, and secretly began to educate himself. "I wrote (as I read) in secret." Nowlan remembered. "My father would as soon have seen me wear lipstick."

## <b>Career and later Life</b>

At 19, Nowlan's artfully embroidered résumé landed him a job with Observer, a newspaper in Hartland, New Brunswick. While working at the Observer, Nowlan began writing books of poetry, the first of which was published by Fredericton's Fiddlehead Poetry Books.

Nowlan eventually settled permanently in New Brunswick. In 1963, he married Claudine Orser, a typesetter on his former paper, and moved to Saint John with her and her son, John, whom he adopted. He became the night editor for the Saint John Telegraph Journal and continued to write poetry. In 1967, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, and his collection Bread, Wine and Salt was awarded the Governor General's Award for Poetry.

In 1966, Nowlan was diagnosed with throat cancer. His health forced him to give up his job, but at the same time the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton offered him the position of Writer-in-Residence. He remained in the position until his death on June 27, 1983.

## <b>Awards and recognition</b>

Nowlan's most notable literary achievements include the Governor General's Award for Bread, Wine and Salt (1967) and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He took over the job Writer-in-Residence at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton from close friend Warren Kinthompson in 1968 and kept it until his

death in 1983. He has a provincial poetry award named in his honour.

Nowlan is one of Canada's most popular 20th-century poets, and his appearance in the anthology *Staying Alive* (2002) has helped to spread his popularity beyond Canada.

In the 1970s, Nowlan met and became close friends with theatre director Walter Learning. The two collaborated on a number of plays, including *Frankenstein*, *The Dollar Woman*, and *The Incredible Murder of Cardinal Tosca*.

The home of the Graduate Student Association at the University of New Brunswick is called the Alden Nowlan House.

Nowlan is buried in the Poets' Corner of the Forest Hill cemetery in Fredericton, New Brunswick.

# A Certain Kind Of Holy Men

Not every wino is a Holy Man.  
Oh, but some of them are.  
I love those who've learned  
to sit comfortably  
for long periods with their hams  
pressed against their calves,  
outdoors,  
with a wall for a back-rest,  
contentedly saying nothing.  
These move about only when  
necessary,  
on foot, and almost always  
in pairs.  
I think of them as oblates.  
Christ's blood is in their veins  
or they thirst for it.  
They have looked into the eyes  
of God,  
unprotected by smoked glass.

Alden Nowlan

# A Mysterious Naked Man

A mysterious naked man has been reported  
on Cranston Avenue. The police are performing  
the usual ceremonies with coloured lights and sirens.  
Almost everyone is outdoors and strangers are conversing  
excitedly  
as they do during disasters when their involvement is  
peripheral.

'What did he look like? ' the lieutenant is asking.  
'I don't know, ' says the witness. 'He was naked.'  
There is talk of dogs-this is no ordinary case  
of indecent exposure, the man has been seen  
a dozen times since the milkman spotted him and now  
the sky is turning purple and voices  
carry a long way and the children  
have gone a little crazy as they often do at dusk  
and cars are arriving  
from other sections of the city.  
And the mysterious naked man  
is kneeling behind a garbage can or lying on his belly  
in somebody's garden  
or maybe even hiding in the branches of a tree,  
where the wind from the harbour  
whips at his naked body,  
and by now he's probably done  
whatever it was he wanted to do  
and wishes he could go to sleep  
or die  
or take to the air like Superman.

Alden Nowlan

# A Poem About Miracles

Why don't the records go blank  
the instant the singer dies?  
Oh, I know there are explanations  
but they don't convince me  
I'm still surprised  
When I hear the dead singing  
As for orchestra's  
I expect the Instruments  
To fall silent one by one  
as the musicians succumb  
to cancer and heart disease  
so that toward the end  
I turn on a disc  
labelled Gotterdammerung  
and all that comes out  
is the sound of one sick old man  
scraping a shaky bow  
across an out-of-tune fiddle.

Alden Nowlan

# Broadcaster's Poem

I used to broadcast at night  
alone in a radio station  
but I was never good at it  
partly because my voice wasn't right  
but mostly because my peculiar  
metaphysical stupidity  
made it impossible  
for me to keep believing  
there was somebody listening  
when it seemed I was talking  
only to myself in a room no bigger  
than an ordinary bathroom  
I could believe it for a while  
and then I'd get somewhat  
the same feeling as when you  
start to suspect you're the victim  
of a practical joke  
So one part of me  
was afraid another part  
might blurt out something  
about myself so terrible  
that even I had never until  
that moment suspected it

This was like the fear  
of bridges and other  
high places: Will I take off my glasses  
and throw them  
into the water, although I'm  
half blind without them?  
Will I sneak up behind  
myself and push?

Another thing:  
As a reporter  
I covered an accident in which a train  
ran into a car, killing  
three young men, one of whom  
was beheaded. The bodies looked

boneless, as such bodies do  
More like mounds of rags  
and inside the wreckage  
where nobody could get at it  
the car radio  
was still playing

I thought about places  
the disc jockey's voice goes  
and the things that happen there  
and of how impossible it would be for him  
to continue if he really knew.

Alden Nowlan



# The Anatomy Of Angels

Angels inhabit love songs. But they're sprites  
not seraphim. The angel that up-ended  
Jacob had sturdy calves, moist hairy armpits,  
stout loins to serve the god whom she befriended,

and was adept at wrestling. She wore  
a cobra like a girdle. Yet his bone  
mending he spent some several tedious weeks  
marking the bed they'd shared, with a great stone.

Alden Nowlan

# The Bull Moose

Down from the purple mist of trees on the mountain,  
lurching through forests of white spruce and cedar,  
stumbling through tamarack swamps,  
came the bull moose  
to be stopped at last by a pole-fenced pasture.

Too tired to turn or, perhaps, aware  
there was no place left to go, he stood with the cattle.  
They, scenting the musk of death, seeing his great head  
like the ritual mask of a blood god, moved to the other end  
of the field, and waited.

The neighbours heard of it, and by afternoon  
cars lined the road. The children teased him  
with alder switches and he gazed at them  
like an old, tolerant collie. The woman asked  
if he could have escaped from a Fair.

The oldest man in the parish remembered seeing  
a gelded moose yoked with an ox for plowing.  
The young men snickered and tried to pour beer  
down his throat, while their girl friends took their pictures.

And the bull moose let them stroke his tick-ravaged flanks,  
let them pry open his jaws with bottles, let a giggling girl  
plant a little purple cap  
of thistles on his head.

When the wardens came, everyone agreed it was a shame  
to shoot anything so shaggy and cuddlesome.  
He looked like the kind of pet  
women put to bed with their sons.

So they held their fire. But just as the sun dropped in the river  
the bull moose gathered his strength  
like a scaffolded king, straightened and lifted his horns  
so that even the wardens backed away as they raised their rifles.

When he roared, people ran to their cars. All the young men

leaned on their automobile horns as he toppled.

Submitted by cutebabystar

Alden Nowlan

# The Masks Of Love

I come in from a walk  
With you  
And they ask me  
If it is raining.

I didn't notice  
But I'll have to give them  
The right answer  
Or they'll think I'm crazy.

Alden Nowlan