

An Afternoon with Roger

J. A. MCLEAN

He fixed our *rendezvous* for the Best Western Hotel in downtown Richmond. The first images I conjured up were western saddles, long-horned steer, images of the American frontier, and a U.S. hotel chain moving into Canada. "I'll meet you just outside the restaurant," Roger said. I saw the hat before I recognized the man. The trucker's cap didn't seem to fit my preconceived image of a poet. His attire was simple: a beige windbreaker, blue slacks, a demure, quiet motion in his step. We exchanged greetings, the pleasantries, I happy to meet again this "poet laureate of the Bahá'í world,"¹ who once from his stage in Haifa had observed a parade of mahatmas traversing the wings on their way to eternity, Roger, "delighted," he said, to meet the odd soul who savoured poetry.

Our first meeting happened years earlier at a conference in Montreal. His charmed eloquence was quickly in evidence as we stood in line. Only a snippet of the conversation of his days in Israel comes back to me now: "Along came some little Arab girl looking as if she fell out of the Bible," he said. Time has long since claimed the point of the story, but the music

of his speech remains and the easy, quick wit of the man.

That day is a picture-show of memories, made bright by travel and the light of meeting a great soul. The quotidian rubbed shoulders with the sublime that afternoon. I drove him to the printer's for *Notes Postmarked the Mountain of God*. Then off to the doctor. He was already ill with the cancer that claimed his body, but his doctor wasn't there. (It was the wrong day). We did lunch instead on the terrace of a Vancouver restaurant, enjoying the brilliant sunshine, the coast mountains, and a slow-paced conversation. The waiter placed the meal before him—an enormous filet of fish fried golden brown. The silverware glinted in the sun as he cut into the thick coat of batter. I still see the careful movement of his delicate hand, almost hesitant.

Later at the bookstore, I observed the poet-teacher engage two freckled, strawberry-blond teenaged sisters, in a message proclaimed with the energy of a determined simplicity, a mark of nobility in the delivery, the generation gap erased in a sweep of courtesy. Then on to Stanley Park where we lazed on a bench along False Creek, enjoying the sun, chatting, when a Welsh tourist happened by, torso bare, moving to the rhythm of aerobics, breaking stride for a moment to ask directions. He snapped a picture with the office towers at our backs and sailboats anchored in the inlet.

Roger told me then he was weighing anchor one last time for Haifa Bay.

1 This is author Geoffrey Nash's epithet.

There, I mused, he would find a final resting-place in the Carmel mosaic of the Greats, an intricate design undreamt by men, that holy wall alive with color, the wonder of every face and hue reflected under heaven. What a company he has joined, the motley crew that became His lovers! The children of Bahá, those of us as yet unborn, shall run their hands along that wall, and pointing a finger at the divine Lote-Tree say: "This is Roger, our golden-throated bird!"