

# Poems

Arsine Victoria Peterson



Arsine was my sister. She was born on August 25, 1941, in Annapolis, Maryland. She died on May 23, 2022, in Canberra, Australian Capital Territory. We called her Arsine, but as soon as she left home for college, she declared her name was Victoria, and all who knew her after that called her Vicki. It seems high school boys were unkind to her about her name Arsine.

She went to MIT at a time when only a handful of women were being admitted. I think she was one of twenty. There was no women's dorm; the women were housed in an apartment building across the river. In college Vicki met Bruce Peterson; they were married on September 1, 1963, after graduation and just before they drove to California for their graduate courses at Cal Tech. They both became astronomers (I believe the preferred term is astrophysicist), often spending nights at the observatory on Mount Wilson. By 1968, with their doctorates in hand, they decided to go have a look at the southern hemisphere, and they took jobs at the Australian National University in Sydney.

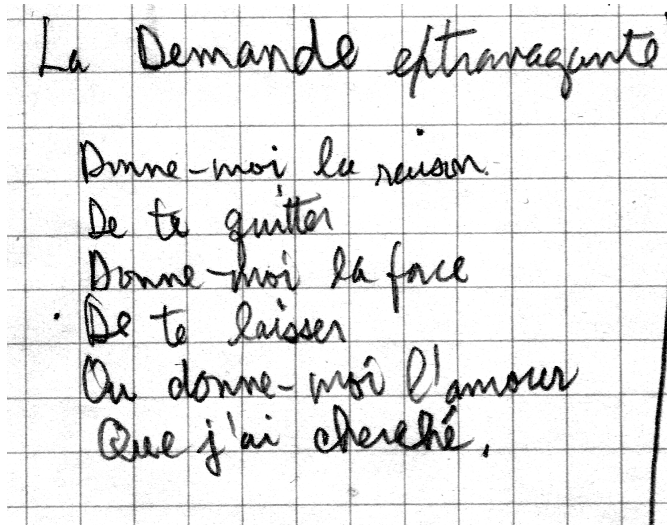
It was during her last years in high school (1958 and 1959) and during her college years that she wrote the poems you can read here. I do not remember if she ever showed me the ones she wrote while in high school, and I can only blame myself for that. We did, after all, share a room and everything that goes with that, such as closets and drawers, for all the time we lived at home. Nor did Bruce know about her poetry when they were at MIT.

Bruce wrote me in 2023 with a request to translate two poems Vicki had written in French. He had come upon them after her death. And soon he had found others, some typed up, some handwritten, and he sent them to me. I read them, and right away I thought they should be published. Bruce was not immediately in favor of publication, but he came to think of Vicki's poetry as a kind of legacy, something of hers that she left for others, that survived her death. He wrote that he realized the poems were a part of who she was, and that he should share them.

So I retyped Vicki's poems, and I present them here as she left them, perhaps unrevised, perhaps not intended for other eyes, but proof of a talent we didn't know she had.

Armine Mortimer

Two poems handwritten in French on a sheet torn from a pad of graph paper that Vicki used in 1962 in her junior physics lab at MIT, along with her husband Bruce.

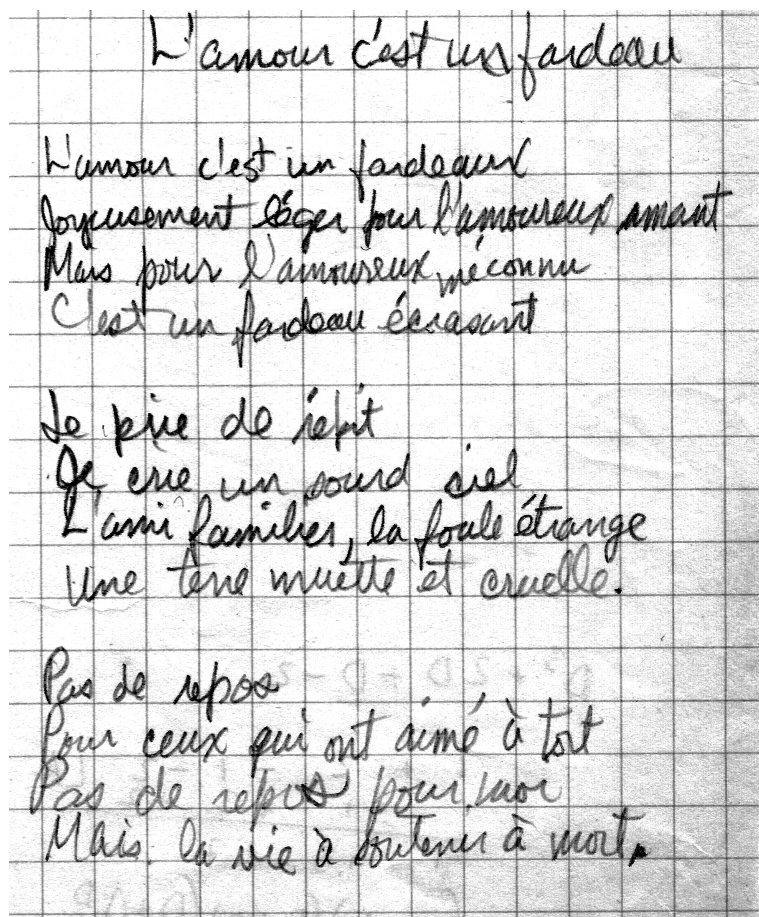
A photograph of a piece of graph paper with a handwritten French poem. The paper is torn from a pad, with a vertical crease visible on the right side. The handwriting is in cursive, written in dark ink. The title 'La Demande extravagante' is at the top. The poem consists of six lines: 'Donne-moi la raison', 'De te quitter', 'Donne-moi la force', 'De te laisser', 'Ou donne-moi l'amour', and 'Que j'ai cherché,'.

La Demande extravagante

Donne-moi la raison  
De te quitter  
Donne-moi la force  
De te laisser  
Ou donne-moi l'amour  
Que j'ai cherché,

#### The Extravagant Request

Give me the reason  
To leave you  
Give me the strength  
To abandon you  
Or give me the love  
I have sought.



Love is a Burden

Love is a burden  
Joyfully light for the loving lover  
But for the disregarded lover  
It is a crushing burden

I pray of respite  
I cry a deaf heaven  
The familiar friend, the crowd of strangers  
A mute and cruel earth

No rest  
For those who have loved wrongly  
No rest for me  
But life to be borne to the death.



## THE WALL

A wall, how odd  
And I had thought  
I walked where no man else had trod.

May 1959

## LILACS

I'm almost sure I caught the tantalizing  
whiff of lilacs  
Like the ones that grew beside her door  
Like the ones she always wore  
In her hair  
In the spring when  
I knew her.

May 1959

## FAIRY GOLD

Last night the fairies sprinkled  
Gold upon the lawn  
And there it was to greet me  
When I arose at dawn.

Cool and slippery underfoot  
The grass was damp with dew.  
And full of joyful morning songs  
I breathed the morning new.

I knelt to touch the shining gold  
That lay upon the ground  
And desired to possess the gold  
That no one really owned.

I gathered one, I gathered two,  
And more and more and more  
And with my shining gold I turned,  
Behind me shut the door.

Alas without the grass and dew  
Without the morning sun  
Without the song of joyful birds  
The magic was undone.

May 1959

## PRISON BARS

I am my prison bars;  
I hold me in  
And keep me from living life.

I wish to be free;  
But my prison bars  
Are strong by years  
And keep me from truly trying them.

I wish to be free,  
To sing with joy of freedom.  
Will no one set me free —  
Or has everyone his prison bars?

1959

## GOLDEN PATHS

Will you walk down the yellow-strewn path with me  
On the golden carpet of fall  
Will you sit on a cool mossy rock with me  
And golden autumns recall.

Will you hold my hand as you often did  
And kiss me by surprise —  
Will you touch my hair with a sweet caress  
And gaze into my eyes.

Will you wait by the side of the pool for me  
And catch me unaware —  
Will you wish on the Evening Star with me  
And say a silent prayer.

I cannot shed the tears I must,  
I cry out in despair;  
To walk on golden paths alone  
Is more than I can bear.

May 1959

## BEAUTY PAST

One by one the leaves have fallen  
Dead and curled and brown.  
Only a few weeks ago  
In a blaze of beauty  
They brightened the day and deepened the sky,  
And men paused in their hurry  
To watch their glory and praise their beauty.  
Now they are trampled underfoot,  
And men rake them and burn them  
And wish there were not so many leaves.  
But I remember their beauty and glory  
And sigh to see them trodden underfoot;  
I wish that others would remember.

1958

## ONE ROSE

One rose is left me,  
Withered and brown  
To recall memories of love.  
My heart is as the rose,  
Withered and brown  
Forsaken to die.  
As the rose crumbles to dust  
And my memories fade  
So shall I.

1958



## DARK CORNERS

They revel in their confinement  
And strive their utmost  
To make their bonds secure.

A pride there is in their lowliness,  
A sorry pride  
That will not let them rise.

In the filth of ignorance they grovel  
And scorn the water  
That would make them clean.

Generation to generation, filth and squalor accumulate.<sup>1</sup>

Do you think it hard to chain the spirits of the young?  
They starve hope on ignorance  
And smother faith with scorn.

Do not undervalue the tenacity of ignorance  
And the strength of scorn.

1959

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<sup>1</sup> Following this line, Arsine crossed out this stanza: "For why," they ask, "should we,  
Our fathers' children,  
Do otherwise than they?"

## LONELINESS

I can catch  
The scent of apple blossoms in the air —  
Yet I see  
The apple orchards cold and bare.

I can hear  
The welling song of meadowlark —  
Yet I see  
The snowflakes softly falling in the dark.

I can feel  
The warm and gentle zephyr breathe —  
Yet I see  
My breath the silver moonlight wreath.

I can sense  
The presence of a warm<sup>2</sup> and lovely being near —  
Yet I know  
No other lonely soul is here.

November 1959

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<sup>2</sup> Variant: good

## NIGHTMARE

I stare into the purple deep of night  
And feel your pulsing presence there.  
An agonizing cry within me leaps  
And struggles to escape my lips.

The overwhelming silence of the night  
Shrieks with pain too sharp for ears to sense —  
A pain which strikes my wounded heart  
And opens old and wretched scars.

The scream long wrestling with tight ironbound lips  
At last breaks out in torturous gasps;  
As worried hands come soothe my fevered brow  
The purple silence of the night moves in.

November 1959

## THE TOP OF A HILL ON A WINDY DAY

On the top of a hill on a windy day  
With the world stretching way around  
I can lift up my head<sup>3</sup> and sing to the wind  
And the world is mine.

January 1960

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<sup>3</sup> Variant for lift up my head: stand straight and tall

TO THE EVENING SKY

A sapphire glowing in the fading light —  
A luminescent portiere of blue —  
An efflorescence fleeing the invading night  
And shrinking from the destined rendez-vous.

The deep cerulean velvet of the night  
In silent, graceful, liquid motion sweeps  
Its canopy of darkness o'er the flight  
Of eventide. And the world of daylight sleeps.

January 1961

## THE NIGHT AND THE STARS

The night and the stars  
Can know my love  
And the wistful sighing  
Of the breeze;

For I love without words  
And weep without tears  
And sigh with the wind  
In the trees.

I sing with the river  
That flows through the woods  
And laugh with the brooks  
In the hills,

And run through the meadows  
In carpets of flowers  
Then sleep on the  
Sun-drenched earth.<sup>4</sup>

February 1961

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<sup>4</sup> Variant of the last two lines in pencil: Then sleep to the Whippoorwills.

A misty blankness of truth  
And shadowy forms of fantasy  
Unfounded in life  
Forgotten dreams  
Or nightmares  
Haunt me —  
Memory  
Ah that is your substance  
A billowing gray  
Of nothing.

April 1962



Echoes in vast  
Empty spaces  
Eternal reverberations of  
Everlasting  
Ennui

April 1962

I spread my hands for aid  
And there is neither help nor comfort ...  
Only the heartless mockery  
Of those who understand too well  
To have compassion  
And not enough  
To love.

April 1962

“The world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those who feel.”  
– Horace Walpole

Ah, you laugh  
An amusing little comedy, no?  
I laugh also  
But it hurts inside when I laugh  
Might it be so with you?<sup>5</sup>  
I can see only your mask —  
Which laughs.

14 May 1962

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<sup>5</sup> Earlier version of this line: So you feel nothing at all?

*Les minuits bleues  
m'arrachent le cœur  
où es-tu?*

Blue midnights  
tear out my heart  
where are you?

le 16 mai 1962

*Ah, ne touche pas mon cœur<sup>6</sup> si négligemment  
Les telles blessures sont à jamais.*

Ah! Do not touch my heart so negligently  
Such wounds are forever.

le 16 mai 1962

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<sup>6</sup> Variant: *âme* (soul).

When in the brightness and glory of blue sky and sun, of golden leaves, I walk in triumphant splendor singing — but is my very song yet sad, and were I not deaf and blind, I would see the emptiness inside and know the sun and gold without meaning, and hear the hollow echoes of my song reverberate in lonely eternity.

When I walk alone in the gray and dismal weariness of never-ending rain, then can my aching heart understand its loss, can comprehend an eternity of loneliness.

Then when my soul is blended with the grayness of the rain and sky, then when the ache is wrapped in the mist of my tears and cradled by the dreary lullaby of rain, then in the soft gray light of gray evening, yielding up hope, submitting to despair, my heart bends before relentless destiny, relentless rain, relentless gray, and gray eternities.

10 October 1962 - 15 December 1962

## MORNING

The silver morning mist  
gently turns to gold and sunlight  
and the cool green meadow  
wakes my sleepy feet

You are here by my side  
but in this enchanted moment you are not mine —  
you are the morning  
and the morning is you

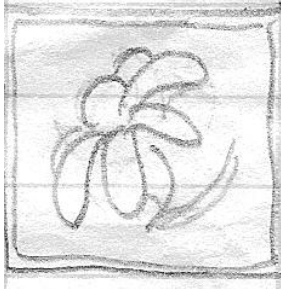
I love the meadow and the morning and the mist;  
the mist caresses my cheek farewell;  
in the warm and golden sunlight  
you are mine again.

23 April 1963

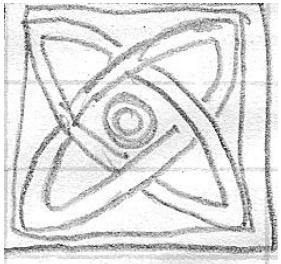


## HAIKUS

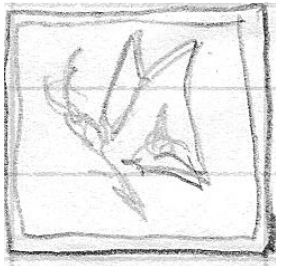
These poems from July 1964 are hand-written in pencil on a sheet of lined paper. Vicki illustrated each poem with an emblem framed in a square.



Softly forest mist  
Come ease my weary spirit . . .  
There the whippoorwill.



White kitten sleeping  
In the house of those who feed him . . .  
Ah! Carefree content.



Quickly autumn clouds  
Cloak the laughing day in gray . . .  
Blazing maple trees.

One final poem, probably written after Arsine's brain cancer diagnosis.

The grass grows green  
The grass grows long  
To cover where your steps have been

The grass grows long  
The wind blows sere  
To hide the passing of your song

The wind blows sere  
The grass turns brown  
And leaves no sign that you were here

The grass turns brown  
The wind blows cold  
So sad your melody to drown

The wind blows cold  
The snow grows deep

The snow grows deep  
The winds keen shrill  
They do not reach you where you sleep

## Appendix

This poem is handwritten and has no date. It looks like an unrevised draft, possibly incomplete. Arsine repeats some of the lines over and over, between parentheses— perhaps later additions to the original text.

Oh, I am sad, my heart is weeping  
And I long for the only boy I love  
When will he come, when shall I see him  
Oh never more again

Oh, let me lie and ease my sorrow  
And weep beneath that willow tree  
Someday he'll hear that I am sleeping  
And then, then let him think of me

He told me how he'd always love me  
And I told him  
But the angels whispered he would leave me  
And I

Tomorrow is the wedding day  
My heart beats wild where can he be  
He's gone, he's gone to seek another  
And he cares no more for me

Oh let me lie and ease my sorrow  
And weep beneath that willow tree  
Someday he'll hear that I am sleeping  
And then, oh then, let him think of me

Bruce, Vicki's husband, wrote this obituary in August 2022:

Vicki Avakian, my wife, died in May. She was one of those exceptional people who enrich the lives of everyone they know.

Vicki and I married at the end of summer in 1963, after receiving our SB degrees in physics from MIT in June.

Our adventure began with our honeymoon, a road trip across the USA from Massachusetts to California. We went trekking in Nepal, and in the highlands of New Guinea, ice climbing in New Zealand, walking on the sand dunes in the Gobi Desert, crawling through passages in the Pyramids, and we saw the rising sun glinting off hundreds of temples in Burma from a hot air balloon. We marveled at seeing emperor penguin chicks in Antarctica, musk oxen and polar bears in Greenland, blue-footed boobies and giant tortoises on the Galapagos Islands, and cheetahs near our tent camp in the Serengeti.

Vicki was an artist and a craftsman. She enjoyed drawing and painting, weaving and knitting wool in elaborate designs, faceting gems, and cutting and polishing minerals.

Vicki was a musician. She had an Alexander French horn, made in Germany after the war, which she played in the MIT band, in the Pasadena Orchestra while she was working on her PhD at Caltech, in the Canberra Symphony Orchestra while she was a post-doc at the Australian National University, and in the National Capital Orchestra, of which she was a founding member, while she was lecturing computer science at Australian National University.

Vicki was the mother of our two children. Our son, Davin, graduated from Princeton, and has a business in Whistler, British Columbia. Our daughter, Lucine, graduated from the University of California at Santa Barbara, and works at Lake Tahoe, California. Most years Vicki and I would visit, and ski with them, but after three grandchildren arrived, we visited in the summer, walked with them in the woods, and swam with them in mountain lakes.

I have a block of land in the Australian bush, populated by kangaroos and wombats, where Vicki and I set up a camp near a field of wildflowers, *Patersonia sericea* (native iris), which bloom around the summer solstice, and were the subject of several of Vicki's art works. I have scattered Vicki's ashes over these flowers.

Bruce Peterson

