1994

No Answer but Solitude: A collection of poetry.
(Original writing);

Steven Christopher Markwick
University of Windsor

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NO ANSWER BUT SOLITUDE

A Collection of Poetry

by

Steven Markwick

A Creative Writing Project
submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of English
in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

1994
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NO ANSWER BUT SOLITUDE

A Collection of Poetry

By

Steven Markwick

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Master’s degree in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor.

April, 1994
DEDICATION

These poems are dedicated to the people who inspired them and who helped me put them together. Without you there would be many blank pages in this book, and in my life.
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Singular Visions
First Weekend in April

An early Spring.
The thinned branches
of our apple trees,
diseased and amputated
to save the rest,
lie like mammoth bones
in the sun.
Shadow City

Grey air streams over the Detroit river, past its looming, rusty ambassador and clings to the dull buildings on the south side.

Gleaming skyscraper eyes and brooding slums watch over a watery border.

Small parks in a small city wither under a gaze full of dreams of fire, violent redemption.

Poor sandwich town, homeless in its own country. Made up of shadows.
Frigidaire

Pedestrians steam through morning
as the ragged tails of shivering cars
lash round their legs.

Spring promises the smell
of softening asphalt,
pushing through woodsmoke.

What would you think
of my desperation
for an uncertain future,
cold, jobless days?

Snowflakes settle in my hair
like false wisdom,
melting into youthful rain.
Early
morning
bus spews
grey clouds
down the road

looking at it
from a window
in a row of gemini houses
a woman balances one child
on the unborn swell of another
Window Shopping

In the first, frantic snowfall
of winter, the wind
blows a dozen names
past my aching ears.

Each crystal caught on
my dull brown glove
demands acknowledgement
of its uniqueness.

I don’t know why I came out,
it looked better from inside
twisting, white air.
Promenade

My footsteps assault winter-still air,
crashing against the salt-white sidewalk.

Cringing on a dead lawn,
a stunted tree clutches withered fruit
in its leafless fingers.

I feel close to this tree.
Stopped in my purposeless walking
I admire its tenacity.

Its wizened grip pleases me,
for we are both guilty
of keeping what we should not.

We carry the rotted past
into a new year.
Dead Tired

Stepping into the swift darkness
of early Winter, it seems later than it is.
Dinner-time blends into half-past midnight.

When I board the westbound bus
it's absolutely silent,
no one knows anyone else.
The blue light turns us vampire-hued.

I cough a couple of times,
human sounds over the engine's low rasp.
A man with too-dark eyes looks suspicious.

At my stop a man pulls
his daughter back urgently
"No honey, we don't want that bus."
As I step down, breathing gouts of steam.
Smoke

Smell of tortured wood
spliters the air.

In one of these boxy houses
two someones warm their love
by a fire.

Their smoke mingles
with the damp air.
Fog swirls around
my idle feet.

I can’t see,
but that sharp scent
follows me home.
Stillstanding

Sleep-walking again,
a dull ache in my knees,
stretched-tight pain
behind my forehead.

I spent the sunset indoors,
oblivious to another sinking day.
Night opens me up and I watch
my shadow spread out, shrink,
as it slides streetlamp to streetlamp.

It’s been a long time
since I wrote "La nuit je t’aime."
Now I wander towards someone else’s home
and a thin pull-out couch
I have all to myself.
Tears

The rain on my face
is almost as good,
marching down the grey streets.

A Coke can scuttles through the gutter,
an old snowman has melted
into something obscene.

It's too dark for morning.

It's not hard to do,
a life of waiting in the interim,
the in-between of rainy days.

I zombie-shuffle up the road
until someone else comes along
to carry me somewhere.

It's not clearing,
but the rain on my face
is almost as good.
Drowsing

End of the month
my list of things hasn’t shrunk,
it still burns my fingers.

"You look very tired."
No, I’m fine, I’m fine,
I’m always fine, it’s only polite.

At the front of the classroom
words bounce off the chalkboard;
Myths, legends, the Voice of God.

From under my heavy eyes
I see the other side,
where a low white blouse,
loosely tied, sweeps pink flesh.

After drowsing I always wake
with the taste of daydreams
sweet in my mouth.
Rumour-Mongers

Gossip breeds in the walls
of apartment houses, college residences,
scuttling under ancient fridges
in the mouldy afternoons.

Everyone wants to know
who's fucking who,
ears perked for drunken promises
and the squeaks which outdo the mice.

Faithfulness evaporates into
knocking pipes and burning showers,
other names are written
on steamed-up mirrors.

Rumours are crawling
through the radiators,
gathering like dust-mites
under every innocent bed.
Woman on the Patio

Though the day's end
slid shadows across her face
her voice gleamed like sunset,
rich as liquid amber.
From the Window

Halfway between the sunrise
and the sidewalk,
below my fourth-floor
cloud-smeared window

a runner.

Her ponytail bounces
in the light, throwing
shadows across her back,
across the dark legs

gravity and defiance.

It is possible
to fall in love with motion,
to run for no good reason,
to run away.
Cover-up

Went home,
end of another week
spiralling through
the month, to find
all the woodwork in my room
stank of new, white paint.

It crawled across
every nick and gouge,
filled all the imperfections
left by hard living.

They tell me
it's only an undercoat,
something to cover up,
to be covered up.

It lies heavy in my nostrils
when I try to sleep,
silent, drying.
Chores

It's almost noon
and the dishes still lie
soaking in the basin
and the garbage squats
accusingly by the door

Lying on the pull-out couch
I read poems from an old book,
marred on the overleaf
with an 'I love you', a few x's and o's.

It's been breathing dust
for four years now.
I handle it a little less reverently,
though it meant something, once.

Outside, the rain falls
like Spanish doubloons,
gleaming on the grass.
Night Out

Patter of rain left behind
as we enter the bar;
Thursday night pandemonium.

I try to focus
on swirls of light,
thigh-boots and feral smiles.

Perfumes drape me
in an alien place
where tawdry hangs in the air,
like smoke.
Eclectic Cafe

Just before the witching hour
I flow into the Eclectic Cafe,
leaving the sharp night
for the murky afterthoughts
of cigarettes and coffee-flavoured steam.

Patrons sit like their own shadows,
munching the dim sum of their knowledge
and wiping their mouths
with left-over Picasso napkins.

I breathe in dusty philosophy,
push back my chair
and drink thoughts like cinnamon tea.
Solitary Pursuits
Mediation

I have peered around the corner
into your life,
disturbed your work
and tried to make you laugh.

All that, for no better reason
than to hear your voice,
roughened by a scratchy throat
or smooth as liquid air.

I am made up of moments,
expressions, the arch
of an eyebrow over
your blue eyes

and I wonder, will you
look into my corner,
sit in my chair?
Sparks

Once you were only a paper-figure,
sparks blew across my mind.
Now you dance, red-hued
in my smoky eyes.

Nothing is consumed,
no ashes smear my face
but this fire warms my skin,
heats my blood.

The yellow flicker
calls to its sky-bound kin,
they wheel and turn
dancing.
Firefly

For less noble reasons,
but mostly to hear you sing
I breathed smoke and people
in my solitary corner.

Through streaming eyes
I saw blurry fingers
on the guitar,
your reddened face.

I lost the words
in the music,
straining to hear
over busy, endless
conversations.

When it was over
I walked home,
let the cold air
clear my head of smoke,
and dreams.
Traces

I have sketched my name
in the constellations of freckles
lying sun-dappled
across your shoulders
and that is enough for me.

To listen to your heartbeat,
bathed in the warmth
of your skin
was more than I hoped.

I pull off your earrings
and new textures, the contours
of your naked ears
join the weight of memories
in my fingertips.

Only a little time
has passed between us,
but traces of you
linger in my deep places.
Silent Dancer

You’re so quiet
my sense of you
is muffled.

But I’ve seen the way
you enter music
and you’re like
a silent dancer
in my mind.

I must have failed
to listen, but I have
all these pictures

of you swimming up
a rocky cliff, or
tipping back a drink
with female grace.

Last of all I see
a rainy highway slipping by,
when my head rested
on your shoulder, safe.
Wildflower

I've said "Fine"
two hundred times today.
Same question, same people.
A Town Convenience store
Sunday afternoon.

I almost say the same
to you, but you've gone.
I pretend not to watch
as the blue station wagon pulls away.

With you it's never anything more
than a brief appearance,
a flash of colour.

You're my wildflower,
bright-hued, stubborn
and fine as lace.

Home at dusk I see
the cloudy blue of your eyes
on storm-darkened petals,

before the spring rain
washes clean my empty spaces.
The Candy-Man

Never having loved anyone
equal to write every day,
I scatter my fancy
to the east and west.

If I could, I'd embrace
sunrise and sunset,
divide my being
in two amorous selves.

My imagined passions
stretch me like taffy,
sickly-sweet,
pulled in two directions.
Distances

Being right isn’t always a triumph,
His name seldom came up
but I knew he was here.

It’s easy to understand.
Five years of love,
moment weaved into moment
in a long joining.

I like your honesty,
but this confession
shrinks my hopes.

I go into hiding,
like the time
I broke
my mother’s crystal.

You can’t untangle
all your knotty feelings,
so you go back,
put on an old sweater.

I can always step away
and wait,
patient as a barren tree
for spring’s first green touch.
Take Care

I seldom cross the street
without looking several times.
Except when, deep in thought,
I trust my grandma’s prayers.

Standing in your doorway
I wait for an invitation,
water drips down my neck.

This I’ve learned
from blundering in, all light,
when you need cool darkness.

As I turn away from
a closed door into heavy traffic,
I can see you, walking with an umbrella
in the rain.
Praise

I can’t write about
twilight strands,
hanging mischievous
over your forehead.

I can’t tell you
that your glasses
make me think
of trust and cleverness.

All artistry deserts me,
turns of phrase, imagery,
and I’m left with
your hands.

Long, slender fingers
like proud Elizabeth’s but
freckled, lined, pale.

In my mind I trace
their backs, a scar
between right thumb and forefinger
like a story.

I wonder about all
the other stories here,
touches, textures, feelings
these hands have known

and I wonder,
would your blood pulse through
a little faster,
if I raised one to my lips?
Linda's Wedding

Not long ago,
in some sort of half-assed
clairvoyant dream,
I saw you get married
in blurred beauty.

I could only watch,
helpless, silent
like a shadow
made of old emotions.

We have never loved
but you know
almost all my secrets,

and you fit so well
in my arms whenever
we say goodbye.
Steel Touch

Sometimes you seem remote,
like a loon on a summer-still lake,
calling the sun in.

When your eyes brighten,
I can't keep up.
You slip past like a blade in flight.

I see you walking
down Kincardine's main street,
right into uptown woods

in your thick, black
grandmother-knit sweater
that whispers "hug me".

With your dark hair,
and eyes that see
more sun than rain,

I couldn't believe it
when your steel touch
bruised my heart.
Giant Bones

I have gathered rainbows from around the sun, plucked the trees like stems for a bouquet,

though a giant’s love isn’t big enough for you.

I’ve bent lakes and rivers to reflect your view, pulled the clouds apart to clear the sky,

still all the light I bring is too dim for you.

Should I rearrange the mountains, should I drain the sea? Will I leave my giant bones to moulder at your feet?

For all my giant efforts still fall short of you.
2Sight

It would be easier
if I hadn’t become
sensitive to your skin,
tuned to a song you played.

Because I’ve seen your future
with my eyes shut
and you always say
"I’m sorry but..."
before an electronic nudge
pushes me back
to a still dark morning.
Annie’s Birthday Poem

Whenever you unexpectedly appear,
I forget what I’m doing
and my thoughts scatter like birds.

Even after you’ve gone
your image paints my eyes
and leaves me unfocused.

How am I supposed to keep my sight
in the brightness of your
summer-morning smile?

I don’t know nearly enough,
only that your history stretches south
and you dream a banker’s dreams.

That will have to do.
Your new year began even as
I wrote your name across this page.
First Degree

Late last night on T.V
I saw an actress that used to look like you
and I waited for something like pain,
but it didn’t come.

Disappointing,
but her hair wasn’t red anymore
and her freckles, fading.
She was someone else.

Now that such reminders
don’t leave me as pale
as a low-sky moon,
what am I supposed to do?

It’s cruel of you to slip away,
leaving me no excuse
not to jump back into the fire.

I can’t believe how little time it took
to forget the smell of antiseptic
on my blistered flesh.
Familiar Ground

When I almost call someone else
by your name, I know I’m in trouble.
You should be a skeleton by now,
worn smooth and white by repetition.

I have told our story many times
to a sympathetic audience.
I always make myself the hero.
Claiming I was victimized
by your refusal, by your half-hearted acceptance.

I’m the only one
out of at least a dozen
that you didn’t sleep with,
singular and unprivileged
the embrace of your thin limbs.

Even now, I should know better
than to summon up your ghost
and watch you whirling down
a winter’s road in my memory,
sunlight burning in your hair.

I have covered you too thinly.
Your freckled fingers
claw at the earth
and draw me back,
to familiar ground.
Season

I've one less Christmas gift
to buy this year, one less name
on the list I make by heart.

Through these head-cold, mid-December days
I see your changing face,
I miss your name.

Your voice enters my dreams,
talking around me, over me.
You speak to a higher, ideal creature.

As I sleep, dreamer becomes reaver,
your white knight sheds into demonic skin.
Hot blood burns away his perfection.

Waking into this season
of forgiveness and ancient hope,
come to me, tell me regret is enough.

One last gift
in the short days of winter
and we can part.
Restless Spirit

My dreams trouble me lately,  
she's there again,  
breathes and speaks.  
I don't know what to say.

It's worse when,  
striding through my familiar life,  
I see freckles or flaming hair  
and I have to forget  
what scratches at my sleeping mind.

It isn't her, it never is.  
My hands unfist,  
my burning eyes turn watery.

At night I tell myself  
it's been a long time  
"two years, two years"  

But I still sleep  
on the right side of the bed,  
and whisper her name.
Petrified Forest

We sculpted our moments together in blue ink and the silence of dead forests.

Green canopies sank into the mud, just so we could write our paper wishes.

I know many more axes will lie sap-stained, before the trees swallow you up.
Kerry

I’ve spent all this week
trying to remember
my first love’s name,
when I was fourteen
and I knew what that meant.

Oh, it’s easy enough
to conjure up a flimsy picture,
to think how my eyes darkened
when she talked of older guys
with cars and chests and razor-burn.

She’s the whole reason
I scribbled desperate romantic stuff
that she smiled at, as if
I’d passed her the potato salad.

She moved away long ago,
made someone, grew shorter
and just now,
I’ve remembered her name.
Memory Cells
Journey Back

Home sits like a matriarch
among winter-rough fields,
square, red-bricked, patient.

Around her,
a thick screen of trees
glistens with ice.
Snow lies like penitence
on evergreen branches.

High on the northern wall,
the words "Maple Lea 1899"
give us a name, a birth-date.

Legends grow even in a little time,
a house built for a young bride,
the old farmer and his jealous sister.
Empty, passionless rooms and waiting.

Memories of a bitter spinster,
her unwilling bachelor brother.
Long doubts and arguments,
shadows in the stained-glass windows.

There are no ghosts in my home
except shades of disappointment,
a jilted bride, her rustic lover
rattling round the old rooms.
Grandpa’s Ring

Long enough to seem like part of me,
an old ring circles the third finger
of my right hand.

Half a century ago,
it was promise fulfilled.
Three letters in white gold,
as close to forever as we can know.

I can’t even see the break
where it was cut from swollen fingers,
only to dull in a forgotten drawer.

It’s been fixed.
Mended and re-sized for me.
Only ten dollars to wear a promise,
discount memories, thin gold.
Lightning Rod

Uncle Joe's aluminum boat sat dry
for a dozen years, 'til dad fixed it
at season's end.

Though the trees had all changed
I took it into the dark lake,
checking for leaks.

There is no silence,
even in still water.
Loons called to each other,
waves slapped against the sides.

When I looked to the far shore,
the sky creased in thought
over riotous, red hills.

Far away, lightning struck
a struggling beech, close to the water,
thunder splashed around me,
over a frightened creaking of oars.
Sawdust and Steel Guitar

On Sunday winter nights
I warm up an old radio,
and listen for the music
Dad used to play when
he was working.

Sawdust and steel guitars
run together in my mind,
one evokes the other,
and my father in the centre.

I never knew what he was doing,
but I followed the motion of the saw
and moved my tiny, awkward body
to the twangy rhythm.

If I leave the radio on,
I can fall asleep
with sawdust tickling my nose,
dizzy with motion.
Closing Time

My father and I.
Rubber boots and
green hip-waders,
waterproof creatures.

Standing beside our dock,
which lies old, exhausted
over its water-bed.

Lifting and shoving,
we are two thin hercules
hauling the rotted planks in:

A blizzard of leaves
in the wind,
urges us.

Kind weather
makes our task easier.

Loons guard our lake,
aloof and sad, calling
'Only-two, only-two'

My father and I
at his retreat
from a frightening world,
our cottage, at closing time.
Sacred Grove

In late autumn
the road beside the lake
lies wet with the paint
of a thousand damp leaves.

Somewhere beyond evergreens,
maples, birches,
cold water numbs a dark shore

but I walk on the path
to my sacred grove.

It happens suddenly,
a clearing on the left
lets the watery sun in.

Green stumps and furred boulders
lie scattered around their shrine,
four trees whose trunks embrace like lovers,
struggling for the light.
No Answer But Solitude

Midway between downtown streets
and the dusty roads of home
I watch you bustle around
your parent's restaurant
as if keeping busy were
the answer to everything.

From my counter stool
I watch the familiar customers,
they ask too many questions,
wondering who I am and if
we're sleeping together.

I have to leave, go back home
where my parents work in different worlds.
Mom's a martyr to dirty dishes
while Dad mourns his dying wallet.

I seek answers in computer screens,
blank paper, but I can't satisfy
the customer's desires,
my mother's clean obsession
or my father's green blues.

Though I stay awake until
the wrong side of midnight,
there's no answer but solitude
and the dawn seems a long way off.
First Times

Speak to me about first times,
about a bottle of orange pop
almost as big as you,
that you held with both hands
serious as a five year-old can be.

Reach back to the bullies
who stole your toque in winter
and taught you about shame
and the impotence of rage.

Can you still feel the air
parting in front of you?
Master of the three-speed,
newly-empowered suburban raider.

How does that compare
to a first, sweaty embrace
in a darkened gym,
music, strobe lights and fear?

We are bound by these moments,
steps on the ladder of experience,
alphabet blocks of the spirit.
The Bench Warmer

Every recess I watched him,
mornings and afternoons
at our school, built among
Ontario's shrinking hayfields.

In the yard a monstrous,
splintery arena lurked.
Peeling green pain, rusty wire fence,
cracked asphalt.

He was always there,
sitting on the rough wooden bench
of a forgotten penalty box.

Just enough sun came through missing boards
to leave a mixture of light and shadow,
by which to read the book
he always carried.

It changed from week to week
but there were often dragons on the cover
obscured by small white hands,
or reflected in enormous glasses
until the bell made him close it up
and go back inside.
Leavetaking

Late spring flows past me
in grass-green pools spread
neatly round the city's stones.

Darkened by a swift rain,
afternoon walks swim by like storms
leaving the air damp and heavy,
nodding off to sleep.

Lilacs purple the breeze
on mornings when I wait for dawn
to return everything to colour.

Shadows fall away when I think
how light falling through a window
woke the sunshine in your hair.

Unlike me, you belong to beginnings,
to the waking-month of May
in the turning of your year.

You've always been spring to me,
opening my eyes to a new morning
under the same, invisible stars.

So it comforts me to know that,
miles apart, we still share the sky.

"Bye, for now."
Linda's Going-Away Present

As snow clothes
Christmas-tree bound-evergreens,
I think of sun-red on your arms.

Even then, my thoughts reaching
southward, I warm my hands
with the memory of hot-chocolate
and your steamy eyes.

So if, on a miraculous night,
a few white flakes dust the ground
I'll save a few in mind, heart,
or a jar in the deep freeze.

If there's white magic on Christmas eve
I'll think of distances, a clear hot sky
and while I'm star-watching
I'll keep some for you.
November Morning

Light through
the big front window
shines in sleepy-eyed dust.

A few friends snore
on the floor
of someone else's cottage.

Then, one stirs,
sudden gold on gold,
her hair glistens like
a spider-web at dawn.

She's a little wobbly,
she has water on her mind,
but there's something
beautiful, still.

November morning sun
shines in the corner,
brighter on Monica's hair.
Blood Sample

Something in your body has failed you,
dreams of children blur, dissolve
among stubborn tears.

No one is supposed to know.
Your mother mourns for an
inverted womb, reproductive imperfection.

When you tell me, with admonitions
of secrecy in your brave voice,
I can’t even touch you in sympathy.

I am too much your friend,
aware of my place, my usefulness.
I can check your essays,
listen to your complaints
about a jealous boyfriend.

You should be rounded as a sunrise,
a gentle swell above your hips,
greedy for a miracle.
Stealing

Yesterday I said I'd kill
for one of Stevie Smith's end-lines
but that isn't true.

I wouldn't kill but I might maim
just to be able to say:

I was much too far out all my life
and not waving but drowning.
Engineering

For days I have tinkered
with the engine of my imagination,
trying to rouse the dusty gears
into mechanical life.

I ran my blood through it like oil,
but it has dried away,
mingling with the rust
in a shower of brown flakes.

A little neglect
has dimmed endless coils
of coppery thought,
left them green, and dying.
Riddle-Master

I have lived like a question mark,  
curved around mysteries  
and riddled with fill-in-the-blanks.

Creeping through conundrums,  
my feet grow heavy and stick.  
A sick, green smell clings to them.

Bring me a jug  
from the river of forgetfulness  
to wash away this puzzling muck.

I never asked for curiosity,  
the sharp taste of doubt  
and the unknowable.

I would rather sneak  
under the labyrinth  
and pull the minotaur's tail on my way by.
3-D Technicolour Unicorns

My friend keeps a stable
full of popular fantasies.
He trots them out, now and then,
for my inspection.

It’s carefully impersonal,
it’s safer that way.
Their naked feet won’t scuff
his polished wooden floor.

He’s proud of his sterile herd,
mind-inflated creatures,
rainbows and stars
with a cardboard aftertaste.

I don’t envy his plastic magic
even though I can’t remove
the tangles and burrs
from my rough-coated memories.
Covert Operation

Gather round the table, gentlebeings,
today’s operation is simple but profound.
We are attempting, with anaesthesia,
the circumcision of language.

Our patient is, as you can see,
hormonally challenged.
A man rather than a womyn.
He doesn’t understand why.

Our task is more difficult,
since this is not a person of colour,
we may not see the blood
until it’s too late.

Fortunately, our team of
non-differently abled specialists
-Gender neutral to a man-
have practised by removing malignant novels
from our school’s diseased curriculum.

We begin, the patient unconscious,
a sterile atmosphere all around.
I shall make the first cut,
you see how easy it is?

Now, I may have sliced too deeply
but you needn’t worry,
the patient can’t feel a thing.
About the Author

Steven Christopher Markwick first emerged (under protest) on August 31st, 1969, just in time for dinner. He received his B.A in English and Creative Writing from York University in 1992 and is currently pursuing a Master's degree in the same field at the University of Windsor. Mr. Markwick has been published in University newspapers, yearbooks, and the 1992 student anthology *Svengali Fish*, edited by N. Kim Stitt.