

## First-time poet impresses readers and critics

A young Canadian writer has impressed and surprised critics with his first book of poetry.

The book entitled, *A Fragile Tree — Has Roots*, was written by John Walker, a 20-year-old mute quadriplegic from St. Catharines in Southern Ontario. What makes Mr. Walker's book even more unusual is that he has never spent a day in a classroom. He has been taught by his mother, Jean Walker, his sisters and brother, neighbours and volunteers.

The St. Catharines, Ontario poet's problem began at birth when for some reason he suffered a lack of oxygen, causing cerebral palsy.

Since then, his brain, fed by hours of reading by his mother and sisters and

listening to music records — ranging from classical to punk rock — has become his dictionary.

### Long process

Creating a poem takes him hours, sometimes days. His knowledge of his collection of records is so intense that he knows the words and phrases of them all. And for years, his family had been unaware of his capability.

About six years ago, by using a Bliss board — a symbol system which permits handicapped people to communicate — the then teenager indicated to his mother he wanted to write. And she began indexing his records.

While Mr. Walker stretches out com-

fortably on his bedroom floor, he will indicate what record he wishes and his mother plays it. With a slight movement he will tell her what word or phrase he wants out of the song. And laboriously a poem develops.

When some university professors read his work, they thought his poems should be published. As well, some musicians are trying to match his poetic thoughts with musical notes.

### Dream comes true

But early in 1982, Eleanor Koldofsky of Toronto and Proclaim Publications Incorporated, made the poet's dreams start to come true. Recently, 2 000 first editions of *Fragile Tree* were printed.

Like his poetry, John Walker's book dedication was simple, too: "To all handicapped people and those who believe in them." In Eleanor Koldofsky's tribute to Mr. Walker, she says: "Not every one realizes and understands the need of all races and of all levels of ability, and to accept a poem, a picture or a song. John Walker, a mute, cerebral palsied quadriplegic, has with his brain hammered, crafted and wrought as surely as an iron-monger these poems of strength, understanding and thoughtfulness. By just being, he has given others a glimpse of the grace of life. I am grateful to him for showing and teaching me another path."

And then there's Mr. Walker's first poem, called *To Lead a Playful Life*:

*"I always seem to miss so much  
one step ahead and two behind.*

*I am not complaining*

*I look around and see  
birds singing everywhere.*

*Midnight I'm travelling,  
round and round I'm spinning*

*come with me, run free,  
don't worry hear the beat*

*there's no use to worry,  
worry is a lie.*

*I've got a busted wing  
and blood upon my breast*

*I'll walk along the street  
in the land of make-believe.*

*Let me take you,  
the path is free to walk  
let's walk, let's talk."*

The poem is just one of 50 poems.

Copies of *Fragile Tree* will be placed with the Commonwealth Literature Collection in the Library and Resource Centre of the Commonwealth Institute in London, and other copies will go to the Arts Council of Great Britain's Poetry Library and to the library of the Poetry Society of Great Britain.

## Early Canadian painters featured at Toronto museum

Works by a number of nineteenth-century Canadian artists including 20 by Cornelius Krieghoff, are featured in the exhibition, *People and Places: Early Canadian Paintings* on view at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto until September 1983.

The exhibition, based on the museum's permanent collection, is organized as a three-part survey of oil painting during the years of this country's settlement and growth.

The lively mid-nineteenth-century Quebec views by Krieghoff are followed by works of various artists depicting Canadian landscapes, cityscapes and historic subjects. The third group presents portraits of early settlers and noted

citizens of the time.

Approximately 60 oil paintings are included in the exhibition. *People and Places: Early Canadian Paintings* provides not only a good representation of the work done by the prolific Krieghoff, but also an overview of the works of other artists, known and unknown, active in Canada in the nineteenth century.

The exhibition includes portraits of famous and lesser-known Canadians, and paintings by artists depicting the breadth of the Canadian landscape, the cities, and the historic subjects of interest in their day. The oils provide a survey of this most popular form of painting during the years of settlement and growth of the country.



The Polaris, Far North, oil on canvas, 1882, by William Bradford (1823-1892).

Royal Ontario Museum