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Paul Cameron Brown**

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THE LAND OF LOOK BEHIND

BY

PAUL CAMERON BROWN



FOREWORD

The Land of Look Behind hopes to be something of a rear-view mirror, at once cocked to reveal our innermost dimensions while transporting that, which by necessity, must lie beyond. Involving ourselves in any interplay with flickering images, of course, must be more than fireside watching and it is my hope the book will be seen not solely as a collection of short stories, although these do figure prominently in the narrative. Satire, "beast fables," and texts (single-page entries) mingle casually with the longer tales. Regardless of the genre, they hope to speak as a unit--to view the conflicting colours of a prism's radiation. Allow me to detail

what you can expect.

On the subject of Indian myths, these are entirely of my own making. They are an attempt to visualize the mysteries of creation through alien perspectives. Oral myths were Canada's indigenous literature. In this vein, the writer resorts to utilizing the spoken ballad form in some of his exercises. Some of the prose pieces reflect a mirror world where the gazer chances upon reality with a new breath of perception--much as the native people's world was to the arrival of the whites.

Bewilderment with the natural world is the keynote here. For how many of us have wished, like the Indian, to clarify a particularly taxing bit of life--to elucidate its function into a more recognizable form?

On a larger plane, this is the issue before the book--the "terrible algebra of our existences,"--explored with the urgency and sometime seriousness it deserves.

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TO CROSS THE BAY

"I wouldn't try a crossing in weather like this," warned the old man. "It's a bad time of year, what with the wind and all. Worse still, the lake water is lethal by November. That means if you capsize it will be the chill that does you in."

The old man stopped short, conscious of the look of defiance in the youth's eyes. Young fool biting the nose to spite his face, he thought.

The marina was closed for the season, but the island's residents made contact with the mainland one way or the other. Until mid-winter there was a ferry service, but that assumed a fair bit of discipline from a resident. He had to go and come when the province obliged. Young bloods off to escape the monotony of Wolfe Island were only marginally willing to conform their Saturday festivities with an arbitrary ruling. No, it was too easy to keep a boat in tow at a friend's landing. Keep a bottle to ward off the night's chill. A bottle for tonic against the elements and a buttress against authority. The old man knew if he did not avail this one a boat--a safe one at that--he would put his hands on a craft of some sort. Accountability, he thought. They mustn't care about their own lives. Still, there was a living to be made and it was a marina, albeit a closed one. He would still get a boat one way or the other, he mused again as he watched the light fade in the evening sky. He pulled his collar sharply. Yellow leaves were beginning to form a mat on the wooden stairs leading to the shed. He could just make out land's end against a funnel gray sky. Better to advise the young man of the dangers, suggest a daytime crossing. Perhaps even try a little reverse psychology.

The boy, if he could be called that, was growing impatient.

"I'll be all right with a life-jacket. The boat won't be overloaded. Just the three of us. My cousin and her kid are going with me."

The old man's eyes stirred from the damp reverie of the previous moment.

"I can't let you take a child out into that. The water's choppy at best. You know next to nothing about handling a craft if she takes on water or if it becomes turbulent. Why are you in such an all-fired hurry to get across anyhow?"

"Let's just say it's my business. My uncle supplies you with business during the summer months. He has a boat in tow here now. I'm responsible. It's still normal weather for this time of year. Now step aside and stop your glib patronizing and palming yourself off as an expert on the sea."

"I can't stop you, son. I can only suggest, well that you await next morning and only take two across at one time. Many a person has received a cruel surprise out there. Why this area's full of tales dating back to the earliest times concerning drownings. Why from the time of the Loyalists up through my earliest childhood--all the time in between that--my family has run the marina and it seems someone is claimed yearly by this lake. The French didn't call it an inland ocean for nothing. Some even claim there's tides--real swells that will take a boat and . . ."

"The French, the Loyalists. I'm not here to listen to a travelog. What do I care if a long list of idiots blundered to their doom. I'm now and intend to keep on living. What should I care about the past!"

"That may very well be, son, but nobody sets out to drown. Even on the calmest days a sudden storm whips up and . . . I remember my daddy telling of a group of early settlers up from the Bay of Quinte area crossing to attend a church service--full seven of them drowned after a heavy wind whipped . . ."

"Church," snorted the other. "Well, I'm not going to any church that's for sure." He broke into a snicker, his dark eyes flashing above a set of stained teeth.

"Yes, I guess you're not. Your type will . . ."

"My type, is it? My type is not so gutless as you, that's a fact. A little natural obstacle doesn't send me shivering to the nearest root cellar. This is near winter. You have to bloody well expect a little discomfort at this time."

He had unnotched the first of several ropes securing the craft. The boat, a little three seater, sturdy, but otherwise quite frail was bobbing up then down as each successive dark wave hobnolled it against the current. It looked for all the world like a large, red currant fleshy against the wind. The young man checked the fuel, began to rev the motor before glancing toward the distant shore. A package of cigarettes emerged from his coat pocket. Blue gray puffs, sentinel like, climbed the air about his person. He spat into the water and proceeded to throw the match after it. Both whirled in the spray, then disappeared from sight. The old man sensed his growing uneasiness but that resilient pride checked any apparition of modesty.

"Put the fare on my uncle's account. I'll return the boat tomorrow morning."

Little lights some ten miles distant were fingering the early darkness. Something near the water's edge bobbed cork-like in the growing dusk. Always the worst time of day, the old man pondered, a process of diminishing returns. Not quite dark, sure as hell not light--an in between shudder world, a limbo of gray.

"When will the girl and her baby be along?", the old man queried.

"I'll see to that. You never mind. Go back inside, pop, where it's warm. You'll feel better. Entering the number and registration just about does it. I'll keep you posted," he laughed a growing laugh that tore soft wind from his mouth. He spat again, returned to his car and was soon out of sight.

The old man looked wearily at the ground. He was recalling more and more of that early story his dad passed down from his dad concerning the overcrowded boat up Adolphustown way so many years ago. If God allowed decent churchgoers to be snuffed from sight in the act of attending His worship, think of what must await young fools who defy His natural laws. To be drowned outright was bad enough. To meet death on a fool's errand with a woman and child in tow for some vaguely evil purpose was scant courtesy to their lives. He recalled seeing the plaque near the church outside Adolphustown and wondering as a child why, how, they could have met death that Sunday morning when crossing the bay in so devout a fashion. He had never tried to anticipate God's will or ponder events anymore than passing suggestion might receive. The little white pioneer church near a knoll on a rising hill framed the growing memory in his mind. A dirt road snaked up to its door with the bay clearly visible from every pew completed the stucco walls that dotted the heavy distance. A pretty enough place, especially in mid summer with the smell of sweet hay in the nostrils or a full breakfast under the belt with a pleasant drive out to smell the country air. Yes, that little church made a lasting impression on any who might see it. Certainly more for its serene presence than any link with that dark episode in its past. At least this was the way he was thinking. Yet he always wondered where the graves of those seven drowned might be. They were pioneer graves, a mite shy of 200 years but they must exist. A cold wind with the not too

distant splash of some object brought his thoughts back to the present. Wonder what happens to those drowning today, he felt himself saying almost aloud. Do they really resemble the element they've been cast from? I mean, are their lips really blue or did fear choke all colour from their countenances? He thought of the baby and its mother he had not met. Wondered if the next light he saw midway out into the channel would be the same skiff he had registered and had at least ostensibly given the O.K. to make the perilous crossing. Many thoughts like these passed through his mind as he swathed a scarf more fully around his neck.

"Must be cold, so cold down into that channel," he thought turning to the stove door on his shanty. "I'll put a few extra logs on the fire," as he poked some tattered newspapers by the edge of the stove. He lit his pipe and watched the smoke fade toward horizon's line where a skiff disappeared from view. Half absentmindedly, he thought he measured a headline describing a craft missing since, since ... No, he mused, just my preoccupation, he thought settling down for a quiet smoke.

[9]

UPTURN THE ROCK

Upon the rocks where the baubles of broken blue glass wink at the sun and gather strands of rusted wire with the occasional bloodroot wildflower, a man is unbending in his efforts to construct a stone rail fence. Specks of mica in the rock are like lizards basking in the heat of a mid-day or a man's thumb placed squarely about these noisome stones clattering as one more of their number comes to rest and home.

The line of cherokee rocks bends first up, then downward in movement across the meadow much like a labouring oar listing but finally brought into play. The glitter of turquoise water with jewels of light on her passing wave--like wings entrances much as does this fence moving smartly into the space of green and earth.

The man, a stooped farmer, has toiled for days to clear this land for tillage. His impact seems negligible to efforts given yet gradually he surmises a scant return is being paid. He picks a wildflower nudging its face through calloused stone and watches the juice break onto forward skin. An old saying reminds him insect bites will lessen should he smear the liquid onto exposed limbs. He is perspiring now and the rocks shove face-like projections into the consciousness of forest and that periphery area, his clearing.

The fence begins to melt as if in a haze and the logic of clearing this vast expanse of earth and rock escapes him. He thinks of each rock as the buttress of a treasure box he has just hidden and is loath to dislodge further stones. He ponders Christ's parable of the Kingdom of Heaven likened unto treasure buried in a field. For reasons unclear but not necessarily related to the blood juice, he imagines the fence to be the one at Chancellorsville where a Union regiment died to a man and was found by a burial brigade with apple blossoms stuck to each bloodied face.

Evasive now, he perceives the fence to be the one stopping Pickett's charge at Gettysburg or that fence at Mons in northern France which turned a war. He begins to rummage through the piled stones for spent bullets and other mementoes of a great battle. He relives the story of the Angel of Mons[1].

As he dislodges more and more stones, he showers chunks of limestone and granite backward onto the barren field. The shower of rock is somewhat reminiscent of Ungava's meteor spray or splintered debris forced down a soldier's foxhole. Perhaps a runic stone will fall from tangled roots when he burns the dead stumps of trees deciphering once and for all why men labour or think at all. The fence swirls on and on in growing amnesia becoming the very touchstone of all purpose, stones from Jericho's Wall or the passkeys taken from our material existence. Gabriel, the archangel, will sound his trumpet here, he is assured. The dead and unburied of nameless acts of toil and dread will stand a stone's breadth across this fence. The Face of God will be seen in the pact nature has made with earth and stone.

He turns and puts his hat by a tree, lifts a canteen and imagines what all might be should vegetation ever be coded and stones prophets to their accordion earth.

[1] Allied soldiers at the first battle of Mons believed certain of their numbers had escaped destruction by the intervention of a Heavenly spectre.

[14]

SEAEGGS

The reef was inviting, her languid coral nudging the breakers as they returned

from sea. From the instep of the dingy, the fisherman in his broken English was advising the seated men of dangers indigenous to these waters.

"None of that hostile marine life business, Steve--keep it simple--use words he's familiar with," the man with a razor lip, Cliff, muttered to his companion. The other was busy going through the motions in heavily accented Spanish broadly emphasizing common words that lead to nods and ballyhoo, those expected currencies of behavior.

"I'm getting through," came the reply. "Seems beyond the reef, dolphins and the occasional shark gather. Good fishing, though--red snappers and groupers with anemones along the bottom--the Mexicans eat those you know--call'em seaeggs."

Cliff, only vaguely interested, beckoned Steve's attention back to that one inescapable query--was it safe to dive.

Another brief flurry of words were exchanged with the fisherman raising a bronzed arm to touch the crown of his cap. Some indecipherable Spanish mutterings followed and another burst of loud exclamations before Steve halted his forays into that basic issue of logic and perniciousness. Cliff eyed the two and then spoke again.

"I don't have to catch every word of his conversation to understand the general drift of his speech. He feels some danger exists, so why chance it? Why soften his warning with your doggerel translations. Your Spanish is at least good enough to surmise what I'm instinctively feeling. Let's quit and go ashore."

"Not so fast. The water's calm here and the visibility rings like a bell. He mentioned sharks have been sighted here not that there's ever been an attack."

"Yeah, well if there's never been a problem it's because this spot is so isolated. Remember this area is no regular mecca for divers of any type. Consider its remoteness and then do a little basic thinking as to why no one has reported an aggressive White, let alone one barracuda incident. I say it's not worth chancing and I can tell by his face that even despite your bundle of pesos something has been set registering."

Steve feigned disinterest. Buckling his tanks, every nodule of perspiration shone like beaded stud marks across his back. The salt on their skins was razor sharp and the wind's jerky movement caused incessant choppy movements about the breadth of the boat's rhythm. A cross-section of moods was close to enveloping them. For one, the afternoon sun was like a bayonet shoved through the thin sky. Obtrusively red, it fumbled renewed sweat beads across each man's brow like an eager dresser's haste with an awkward button. No sooner was one silenced than another plodding moisture bead appeared. Only the Mexican could remain unmoved to droplets skidding toward the vicinity of his lower eyelid. It conjured up tales of flies crawling into the eyes of aborigines in the Outback but without any apparent discomfort to the owners of those eyes. The two Americans, distracted by their sweating, cursed the heat and the loggerheads of their situation. No flies or bobos, as they were known here, added to their misery given their great distance offshore. Their greater paralysis of the will lay in the low horizon of the shore receding, then, appearing silhouetted against blows of driven water. This, then, was the mainstay of their indecision. All that blue--the blue of shining sky married with further Wedgwood blue sea careening in a plaster Paris water dish, bounced up as if up from the shadows and made renewed fear inevitable. The fisherman, quiet above all this, seemed content to let inertia make her case. He knew heat held a silent, unassailable logic. Sooner or later the water would call or repel its protégés. His task was no easier whatever their final deliberation. A long toil with stubborn currents lay ahead, whatever. The journey to shore was inescapable. And so he sat, patiently content to provide that most meager of gruel--his slight infusion of calm and warning to the strange fellows he knew only as Touristas or more profitably, "amigo," Steve and Cliff. His lines, staked for fish, would remain regardless and the thin fingers of his existence remained coiled about a routine as numbing as that the two men had pretended to escape.

Now, at first furtively, then with the fury of an immense belch only the sea could muster forth, a school of porpoises broke about the little craft. Baleful but expression-filled eyes of each beast broke with water, then took in as only an intelligent creature can, the mission of the three surface beings. Each in a return splash shimmied the dingy making for a resurgence of what, until now, had been a barely muted panic. Yet most of that brief moment was consumed in expectation and, as suddenly as it had begun, the pregnancy of the incantation was dissolved. Slipping beneath the waves, these most human of fish returned to nurse from the ocean's depths.

"Five of them," Steve was yelling--all at least twelve feet in length. Incredible.

"See, that settles it. Porpoises are the natural enemies of sharks. A school surrounds nursing calves and will, on occasion, rupture an intruder by butting the

offender's abdomen. We have no more reason to fear. Any shark is long gone."

Cliff, as if moved by the last events or his friend's logic, also appeared to have altered his position.

"See, that settles it. Porpoises are the natural enemies of sharks. A school surrounds nursing calves and will, on occasion, rupture an intruder by butting the offender's abdomen. We have no more reason to fear. Any shark is long gone."

It was now Steve's turn to renew the apprehension. The size of the animals and the crash of their drift against the boat, was sobering reality of this stretch of water's potential for the unexpected.

"Cliff, I have all the makings of a complete smart ass. All this talk of being an experienced diver--that's all armchair politics at this point. Sure, I've done my bit in pools and their like. But the immensity of this place terrifies me. Just staring down through the shades of colour, seeing the breadth of that reef, what with all this salt and heat, is taking its toll. I've lost my sense of the dramatic. The rapture of the deep has been displaced by a chilling realization we don't know the state of any conditions normally common knowledge before a dive--drop-offs, undertows, further hostile marine life, the"

"Hostile marine life," back to that eh, chickenshit. Hey, where's your wings, boy? That little show whetted my appetite. I'm all for seeing what's below. Yet I'll give you this much. I'm sick of the confidence racket we've been pitting against ourselves. What's more, my body fluids are near depleted. I'm numb with heat--I can imagine myself thirsty for disaster drinking seawater and thinking there's a spring nearby. And that sun grows more forbidding the lower it drops. And, as you say, I am also angered at ourselves for our naiveté. No one can appreciate how enervating it is just watching our skin sear and peel displaced of its water. That's been the real experience out here today--seeing what this world does to an outsider. I imagine an odour growing from my arm by the moment. All I can see is yours and his face swimming before my eyes. I don't want to get punch drunk. I fear the prospect of going down into whatever awaits us and struggling to re-enter a little boat with a fisherman whose so hazed he's beyond understanding what turmoil comprises our lot. I move we do go in, but only at the insistence we ponder a little more firmly what the words, "devil fish," moray and danger mean to cock and bull swaggers like ourselves.

"This is no Keokuk, Iowa venture into the tristate area on a licensed Mississippi riverboat. This is as bitching as blood can seem."

[16]

THE HIRE

"Corn's high this year," chirped the old woman, almost with a cackle. "All's the better for them to hide in," the old woman was continuing, her face a brazen mixture of disdain and contempt.

"These come to the house, late model cars, too, and just wait. Lord if I knows what for," her voice trailing off, reedy, almost water besotted much as the likeness of an old boot, the colour of her wrinkled skin.

Old Meg was an authority of sorts in these parts. Seems she had had her share of the strange and eventful in her time.

At the age of sixteen she had married. I'm speaking now of early in this century, just as the car was making its appearance in this part of eastern Ontario. Right away her new husband and she had bought a farm some eight miles distance from Kincaid off Palace Road.

"Yeh, well we weren't in that house morn a week when the strangest things began happenin'." That was the extent of her explanation as to why she and her hubbies of a few months made the journey into town to stay at her in-laws not once but every night of their married life for over forty years.

Meg was a recalcitrant soul. Probably had she been born three centuries earlier folks would have said worse. Certainly she said little and allowed you to say scarce more. Why, even now she was staring at you, just like her custom offering only a pittance of facts as to why there occurred an exodus of cars to the lone side-road by the big weathered house. A cynic would have begged the hire of something illicit to summon numbers in that quantity. Old Meg let it be known it was something more profound than that. Her every manner convinced you comments as such were guilty of the grossest understatement.

Weird lights, barnyard animals could be seen in the house and a hulk of a rusted car in the debris of a lawn. She was a widow of 18 years with no one to call her

home. To listen to the neighbours tell it, they were alarmed, best as they could recollect, when the old Ford lumbered toward town regular as ever each night at dusk.

"What ails those two," folk along the Palace would say. "You'd think new marrieds wouldn't care to be disturbed. Maybe Humboldt's right when he says there's some awful going's on there."

Rumors don't substantially change, I thought. Take, for instance, stories people tell of old Lake on the Mountain in these parts: the underground reservoir replete with ghostly lights, bottomless channels and of a lake not giving up its dead. It was alarming alright to sit across that expanse of water and see not a boat or hear a sound. Almost as eerie as standing here looking at Meg talk of Humboldt's forecasting eclipses back in '32. How he'd been right, dead right, each time with his divining rod.

Meg was still on the subject of Humboldt. Seems as for all his questions he had met a bitter end. To hear Meg tell it, one evening after the leaves were down--a cold evening at that--Humboldt, a recluse and bachelor recently separated from a sister with whom he had lived, was fetching wood. Being old and a careless housekeeper, the old man tripped and split his lantern. They found his charred remains near the door of the woodhouse next morning. Meg had seen the flames light the November sky. To hear her tell of it, that night had seen an uncommonly large number of cars on the back roads off the Palace. Meg was not drawing direct inferences, but I could see in the space between her eyes a sly connection.

She was silent on such things, drew the conversation back then forth to peculiarities surrounding the Ashley home. Meg was an Ashley. Since her husband's death, she had stayed in the family home not only days but those dreaded nights as well. I pressed for explanations.

"But if you wouldn't stay a night with Charlie when he was alive--the two of you--when you were married and had the companionship, why would you dare now? If you made the journey into town each night religiously for forty years only staying here during the daylight hours, how can you bring yourself to remain now?"

The question seemed logical enough, but seemed to irritate her. But was I trespassing too indelicately on the subject of the late model cars or probing into a veiled past too transparently?

"You're a relative of Conrad's,"--Jean's I heard her say. To my surprise, I told her my aunt had often taken me by this house on the way to Kincaid. As a child, the house in its unkempt stage had made a lasting impression on me. Brooding, enormously lonesome, the derelict house slouched against a weathered fence in a loathsome fashion. Overcast skies or darkness gave it the appearance of containing as many goblins or trolls as fancy might see fit to inhabit, I thought of a magnificent set of ruins, something Hawthorne might have used for his Seven Gables or a nigh perfect setting for a decadent family in the throes of their own poverty--some chilling Gothic charmer!

What was more, the chief inhabitant of such a home seemed straight off the grill of the gingerbread lady or the hag who forced her fattening children to hold out fingers to see if they were plump enough for the oven. Sufficiently chilling for a precocious mind--the place guaranteed sleeplessness for nights on end. Visions of the old woman, cat in hand, standing on the deck of her flag ship-like house, ghostly in its gloom, rifled through my consciousness. The abundance of animals and the witchy control she exerted over them, simply reinforced the spell over an impressionable child. Every detail was complete, right down to that proverbial one decayed tooth dangling from the centre of her facial cavity. One could only expect her to jabber in cackles instead of sentences for her memory to be entrenched deeper in every aspect.

More startled now than taken back, I summoned my organizational abilities to make sense of what she had imparted to me.

"Jean ever tell you of Direxa?"

The name jolted me. I summoned forth the pieces in a haphazard way. An old woman who traveled miles from Hay Bay into town to sell her produce sped across my mind. Consistent to the end, she sauntered through drudgery and routine until they claimed her sanity.

"Must be the climate in these parts," I found myself saying drily in the back of my throat. Meg was staring at me. I made an attempt to put my eyes off her.

I nodded my agreement indicating I had heard the name.

"Yes, Direxa. Of good Puritan stock, I added."

She spoke no agreement this time and told me to consult her if I had questions.

"Direxa, she's long dead!"

"I know, she still talks to me," Meg whispered turning to walk away.

In a typical fashion, I thought of the lore concerning the supernatural adolescent reading had brought me--the Superstition mountains of Arizona, dream time and the Darling range in Australia's north, the Snowmen, the Wendigo tales of the Coast Salish Indians. These, it seemed, were not more exotic than the home spun tales of my province's eastern townships, Lennox and Addington. Those two ghostly minutemen drilling in the marshes of the Ontario Coomb, Canada's answer to the Fens district of East Anglica. Strange, much as my presence here volunteering information to a woman who freely talked in lurid details concerning poor Humboldt's death but not of cars that visited these roads at night, clairvoyance, poltergeists or spells that bound her to a second home.

[21]

THE NIGHTLAMP

Like a wail in the back of an inflamed throat came that protracted noise once again. Interminably, the rhythmic pitch of pounding grew louder as if several loose stones had swished themselves against the larger cylinder of his room. Already, the steady rap of a hammer's edge oozed from night's blackness disparate as a voice muffled in protest against an exhausting load.

Again, the unyielding barricade of sound renewed itself much as a headlight might fall against the path of a dazed woodland animal. The same enervating crust of unreality accompanied this sound as must, he imagined, light that focused itself upon a stunned rabbit at a roadside clearing.

Steady now, it peaked again after a small hiatus interrupted only by the staccato bumping of his own heart within thin visceral walls. Catching the bed-sheets in his hand and moving to switch the nightlamp on as his feet touched floor, Durfield let his eyes grow accustomed to the bright light now filtering across the room. Same turmoil as with the ruddy animal immobilized in its tracks, he thought, excepting now the darkness coiled in wait instead of that speeding car. Same fate, he pondered, nearly aloud. No, not really, because I have a vestige of control here, he reassured himself. The lamp-switch allows me, of course, to commandeer the ignition keys to this vehicular room. I have mastery of my environment, however limited. The fawn or hare has no more free will in that regard than a stone spinning upon itself through orbital space. The animal freezing in its tracks is but a by-product of its own misshapen destiny--a projection of inward fear itself. Instinct knows only one route when threatened, he theorized. I, at least, have that avenue of self-preservation plus the dimension of reason. That and that alone separates me from the splattered remnants of a deer against the highway. Its over-specialization dooms or pre-dates its response. So very predictable, he mused fingering the face of his big, green lettered clock. I'm different, he began reassuring himself adjusting his eyes to the flooding light a little less nervously. I have the calling card of reason plus an instinctual nature. The two should compliment one another. Why, take that accursed noise. I can attempt its categorization in hope of dispelling the fear of the unknown. What's more, I can move to lessen its impact or remove it altogether. In effect, I can take the edge off its annoyance altogether and sleep peacefully for the rest of the evening. If only I could identify its source!

Still, it was so very still in the room now. It was as if the advance of light had checked the noise, whatever its origin acting as a deterrent to its raucous splendour. Yes, that's it, he thought. The light in some fashion interfered or dispels the racket that spawns the darkness. How irrational. What a repudiation of his earlier thesis that man, as a rational being, manipulated his surroundings as opposed to being the mere lackey of circumstance. Yet, there was but one way to determine the logistics of his theory, he reasoned. Apply brakes to the light and brace oneself for the possible resumption of the unearthly noise.

Did he dare? Did he, in a Profroukian sense, care to challenge the impetus of the moment--that crackle of sound made as it darned a wavy edge over the liquid crack of an audible wave? Could he presume to roll up his trouser legs, eat the allegorical peach or clutch the parchment of his being to prepare a loosing onto the gates of night? A strange synthesis for a man priding himself on logic, he muttered quickening the thought process. Carefully, he prepared himself for the venture. Barely a flick away, he imagined a surge of electricity to go rifling through the inroads of his body, illuminating in garish sequence the duality of his true nature--lucidity and ghost fear. He was ready to examine the Hegelian fusion of his private universe.

The light remained off. Unbearable became the mental jousting going forth across the diameter of his brain, that circle of intense inner reasoning. Yet nothing

threatening had yet developed. No formidable barrage of sound like the last time just bare minutes before when the noise had tormented him so. No creeping need to silence the unexplained droning that parried his sanity. But where did that place his theory on darkness and a correlation with the heightened noise's proliferation? What if the noise should return when, say, he awoke tomorrow in the luxury of a room bathed in morning's warm gaze? How might he cope amid sheer inconsistencies, such contradictions like that?

Now the uninterrupted silence assumed growing dimensions. There was nothing amiss, yet nothing resolved either. The sound and fury existed in a mute silence, growing within the totality beyond categorization. After all, it was darkest before dawn. And when did a fat man look his most corpulent--next to one deprived of flesh, of course. One could not react too carefully juxtaposed against glaring opposites in a universe filled with few resolutions. No, he would not be lulled into a false confidence, into the luxury of seemingly overcoming the mystery of his baffling noise. In all sincerity, he must anticipate everything.

Perhaps the very silence harboured little noises like maggots invisible to the eye? Invisible, yet nonetheless there, brooding for an assault beneath a limpid surface? Yes, the enemy--that pestilent noise was still in its lair watching his fragile kingdom, eyeing an opening, searching out his jugular. He would blunt it, though. Under no circumstances would he crack. Not the likes of him. Must remain calm at all costs, he cautioned himself. He must remain master of the situation, not be alarmed should the phantom noise return. After all, in darkness lay his chance to test his theory of the sound's interrelation with shadow. Without darkness, there was no sure way to clear this mess up once and for all.

The doctor searched again for a pulse, then shook a wearied head. The bedclothes were damp with perspiration and the room lay ajar with evidence of disarray. Durfield's eyes stared voluminously through their sockets and seemed fixed to the furthest wall of his bedroom. At the room's opening lay an overturned table with the smashed remains of a deflected lamp with its nightshade crumpled lying by the base of the wall.

"I just got up for a drink in the minute of the night and stumbled against the door," the younger brother was explaining. "I could barely even see the door, honest. I didn't mean to wake him or anything like that. He's given me heck before."

The doctor closed the eyelids against pupils bulging in a vacuous profusion. He said nothing, but renewed his glance at the broken glass and dark spot on the coiled rug where spilt water had made a crevice-like opening over the linoleum and upturned nightstand.

[26]

THE STRONGBOX

"He was always the one to figure things," remarked Humboldt. "Always the smart ass type, big jawed lazy bones--couldn't make a good farmer out of that sort. Didn't want to do much of anything 'cept run. All his money went on his car. Drinking in the Richelieu most every night. I suspect that's where he were coming from when it happened."

Humboldt leaned back against the store front. Twice weekly he'd take a cab into town to fetch sundry articles as he said--one day went for shopping t'other for visitin'. Retirement had given him the necessary time to concentrate almost exclusively on the latter. This was the first trip in this week and already the day was abuzz with talk of the recent mishap.

"Now let me get this straight," Russell was interjecting. "According to what Humboldt says, the car just plain left the highway and crashed through the barrier where seven meets the Bath road."

"That's what Thompson was saying and he was talking to the widder Jocelyn the very morning after. Makin' a run into Kincaid and happened to see the downed guard-rail. Accordin' to the widder, she was awakened late Saturday night by the crash. She wasn't what you call definite seeing how it was in the middle of the night and all, but still claims it scared her half to death the thought of that car entering the lake."

"Serve's 'im right," Humboldt began again. "Probably smokin' drugs and boozin'. Ain't no proper place for the likes of him, anyhow. Just plain crazy. Why that Scots boy was a born no good. Heard tell he let berries fall off their stems rather than pick them, then go to town to buy a quart basket. Blamed foolishness. Why me and Jimmy Robinson remember hayin' with their old man when he'd fork a bale then sit under the tree and smoke. Gave up farmin' good land to guard at Ronald Bay. Between stints on welfare, of course. The two of them, Ester and he sitting in that

kitchen--too damn lazy to rototiller that garden. Had a big bitch dog, Buzzy--tail like an ice pick that was always swishing and chased my stock afore I got Scot to tie him down."

The conversation slowly became a praise of working values with an occasional homily to flaunt the more ensconced rural virtues. Humboldt referred to the List brothers both dead lazy and drinkers, too, as the dialogue became more dogmatic.

"Seems he'd had to swear off the bottle or go blind," Humboldt continued.

"And you know what List said? Guess I've seen all that's worth seeing. He ended up in a sanitorium in Stephenville. The other stayed on allowing bush to burst up through the cement walk and a tree to come through the drive shed. Imagine that."

Humboldt and his friend were grinning the same wide smile. Apart from an occasional story of their own garrulousness or resentment against authority, their past was free of such tales and they knew it. It was enough to make a man feel proud knowing he had nothing to live down. Humboldt was cradling a watermelon to take back. His time was old and he was given to all sorts of quirks he would never have allowed himself but even five years ago--like taking a taxi, selling part of his farm or, worse yet, eating good weiners on any but festive occasions. Such things, he had once remarked, were the very stuff of foolishness.

The taxi would only take him to the end of the long lane. Punctuated by his mailbox and an old haying shed, the driveway was well over a mile from the house. The road was all that remained of an old county line that had since fallen into disuse. Provided considerable privacy, he thought, well in tune to his love of isolation. Barring, of course, those bi-weekly ventures into town. Yes, they were needed.

Pulling the latch over the door and stooping to rekindle the fire, many would have thought such an existence unbearably dull. Not so, Humboldt. Since his sister had died it was true he had sometimes felt the need for companionship but this was a world of his own making. He felt the thrill of self-accomplishment knowing it was his land. He was alone with memories. Quietly rocking by the fire, he began to doze off, little thinking materials like old magazines, old rags to start a fire lay strewn about the floor. Basic cleanliness had been an early casualty since the sister's death. Gone was the regimen of order and weekly cleans until now the house was like a dusty candle box. Still, his was an orderly world. Soft fashioned, it was free of the tatters that change brings. He thought of the years, the steady labour in the fields, the thriftiness, his distrust of banks, the big city--the new highway that had compelled the sale of the "lower 40" and all the rest of that blamed idiocy.

The fire was gentle and massaged the chill from his fingers. An old man's fingers. Honest hands not creased with pleasure but with familiar toil. He used to liken his life to that drive into town. Steady, small pastimes where every bend was anticipated before rounding it like the neat little farms all in rows. His warmth was in the security of the knowable, he thought nodding off. He was thinking little thoughts like strawberries in spring or what the icy water must have felt like closing around the throat of Scot. If he had only lived like himself, got into farming and enjoyed life instead of dashing off to lose touch with reality. Yes, old ways were best.

"Seems we've got two things to stir folks up with in this town," the officer, a new constable with the OPP in Kincaid was saying.

"It looks like a routine blaze what with all the junk laying around but we'll have to check out all possibilities seeing that Humboldt had the reputation of having lots stashed away. We all supposed the old man kept considerable money hidden in the house. Checks confirm no bank accounts so a strongbox is suspected. It may be that some of the damage here was not the work of fire alone. These are things we would like to probe, Jake, and would appreciate any help you might provide." The officer was looking straight at Jake asking his questions routinely, matter of factly.

Jake surveyed the still smouldering ruins. Only the brick chimney still stood. They had found Humboldt's body by the door. Apparently a clear case of smoke inhalation before he was burned. Yet the scene betrayed Jake's own involvement. Surveying anew the debris, Jake began to reassemble recent events and his stake in having Scot rob Humboldt. The policeman was saying nothing of any valuables found on the dead Scot. This worried him, especially those heirloom bits containing Humboldt Bennett's name. Perhaps, perhaps yes I could figure that the money spilled out of the wrecked car or a strongbox now lies at the bottom of the lake, Jake was thinking to himself. Yes, that could very well be, he thought.

Still, I wonder, yes really wonder had Scot managed to locate Humboldt's nest egg at all? And what if Scot's drowning occurred before the robbery, before he could rob Humboldt at all? If so, this would explain why no money had been found and that no one so far had the presence of mind to connect the two episodes. Or were the police withholding this information for reasons of their own? Still, how

could the two incidents be woven together by the authorities when Humboldt was freely talking of the Scot disaster only yesterday. Unless, yes damn Scot, evidence was found of Scot rummaging around Humboldt's property the day Humboldt was in town! That would be just like Scot to disobey a good game plan!

He was thinking now which, of all possibilities, would implicate his name the least. Wiping his brow and trying to remain calm, he pressed the investigating officer as any concerned neighbour might. After all, he was Humboldt's closest friend.

Yet to Jake's mind another probability was presenting itself. Humboldt, on returning home from his visit to town yesterday, might have found himself robbed, his place pilfered and, in his angst, knocked over a lantern or, worse, suffered a stroke in the ensuing panic.

"Can a coroner establish if heart failure occurred prior to asphyxiation?" he found himself muttering half-absentmindedly.

Jake was hoping so. Gingerly, he fingered memories of what he would have done had Scot returned the night as intended. Still, if all held true, there was nothing to implicate him, even if Humboldt had died unexpectedly. Jake was in the process of reassuring himself. All had been taken care of. Scot dead and now the car a convenient shambles--the only possible source of clues or evidence. How tidy fate had been. Strange. If only he had managed to get the money prior to Scot inadvertently doing away with himself. He smiled, how lucky he had been. Especially now, that Humboldt, too, was dead of God knows what and he, he was no worse off for his pains. He still might locate a cache or two on the property when all this blew over.

The other side of Jake's personality was now exerting itself, the peasant cunning of folk long inured to the earth's rhythmic cycles. He knew of the officer's steady gaze and his ploy. The officer was playing it smart, letting Jake see all the possibilities when asking his opinion. First mention the near likelihood of a robbery but be vague on the question of accomplices. And, of course, the question of the necessary instigation. Jake was wondering if he were looking a little too detached from his friend's death. A little too sincere? Then there was the issue of a second coroner if the evidence seemed inconclusive. Wild fantasies swept through his now activated brain. Did he dare? Might he risk it? Would the officer be . . . well receptive to a little more . . . er fact finding? And the best way to approach him? Hmmmm.

Jake stared at the charred hulk of a bedpost. Humboldt's? The long deceased sister probably. He couldn't rightly tell but did recall Humboldt hadn't removed the bedding at the time of her death. Either way, he mused, he would have to let events take their course or steer them back his way at once. He pressed his manured boot over a darkened brick kicking it free.

"Am I free, uh, to go?" Jake asked the constable.

"Free to go, why, why shouldn't you be Mr. Wright?"

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THE SANDPIT

Bertrand had been surprised by the recoil of his father's rifle. He had not prepared for the sight of the weasel pasted against the barn door, a dozen pellets alone penetrating its upper neck and mid-thorax region. A mass of blood and fur seemed to have been twisted onto the vicinity of the latch then held in place as if from afar by many bullet-like prongs. Surely, the calibre of the shotgun was too strong for his choice of game.

Bertrand had a tendency for overkill. Possessing a temperament and a super-charged imagination that demanded structure even when little existed naturally, his mania for organization had presented itself on innumerable occasions about the homestead. There had been the case of his clearing a brood of starlings from the drive house. A messy business, if you let it but from one Bertrand would not flinch. A half dozen squawking, flightless birds coiled above the door in the attic were disposed of. After all, it was his job to end the clatter and they were an obscene, noxious bird what with laying their eggs in songbirds' nests and crowding out more desirable species. Moreover, their very presence constituted an eyesore and that, coupled with their grating noise, concluded their fate. They were pests, simple and unadulterated, and on a farm any such nuisance had to be wrenched aside. Still, he had not drowned them like unwanted kittens or burned them out like that nest of yellow jackets in the currant bush. A simple twist of their neck either between the fingers of his leathered gloves (he disliked the feel of flesh on feather so this necessitated hunting for a thick pair of mittens), or placing the head of the

screaming nestling under one's boot did the business. Almost effortlessly, but again nothing about tending land was done entirely without deliberation or exertion. Structure and foresight held things together. It was the nature of the beast.

And so it was with Bertrand's decision to hunt bees. The best method to oust any hive from its perch, so talk ran, was to wrap an old cloth about a stick and daub it with flammable pitch. Once lit, it made an impressive torch and could be brandished against pests of any description. As a kid, Bertrand recalled killing bumblebees in the old woodshed with a fly swatter. Now that was some kind of action which allowed the adversary manoeuvrability above and beyond that of skulking bees with a flame or killing baby birds. The enraged swarm would charge out from paper lairs encircled about the inner walls of a shed through whatever chinks or holes led to their tormentors. A little smoke applied judiciously, moreover, would send dozens piling out the holes in threesomes so that only a good, well balanced swat could hope to silence several existing at once. At times, the bees would threaten to get the upper hand and Bertrand and a friend would get panicky, think of the Alamo or just about any heroic last stand made possible by sheer courage.

Once, as a torrent of wasps had flown angrily out a large chink in the wood, Bertrand had been hit squarely in the forehead causing him to abandon his post leaving poor Alex a near victim. Fortunately, fear had given proverbial wings to their feet and they had outdistanced the swarm out the shed toward the relative safety of the house. In recalling the story, endless rejoinders were made back and forth as to what would have happened had a river been the only salvation. Could they have outfoxed the bees, held their breath long enough and swam the distance or would the cagey bees, if pressed, have waited patiently above the surface to wreck revenge? Bertrand did not have answers to these questions but it made for good speculation, bravado and late evening entertainment. Killing enraged bees with a swatter or the end of a broom or plank was keen sport and one culled with knife edge excitement. He craved excitement almost as much as his regimen demanded rigidity. And to be fair, he had heard all wasps were quite savage and retained venom in their sting that could prove lethal to the elderly or infirm. It was a quick rationalization, then, to believe such creatures were of the same stock and trade as weasels, starlings or the other unwanted denizens of his father's farm. Why, more people died of wasp stings than of snakebite in North America annually. Something had to be done about that outrage.

Late summer is a time yellow jackets have primed their airborne paper lodges with enough sustenance needed to carry through from fall to winter. Some mature nests average the breadth of a good sized milk pail but Bertrand had heard tell of an occasional oddity exceeding the circumference of a waste paper container. Just the thought brought the fire into his eyes. Oh, to find such a one on a search and destroy mission then lodge a tent pole up its arse! A good bout of artillery practice might then follow--rocks at 40 paces until the enemy had been given a sound thrashing. They shall not pass was the watchword of the night.

Alex had been reluctant to accompany Bertrand northward through the lower forty toward 3 mile wood. For one thing Bertrand had not been specific about the actual purpose of the errand so he had surmised it to be mere peg-legging or a chance to kick up a little steam. What finally swayed him was the mentioning of a visit to the sand pit toward the end of the miles. Now this was something he had rarely visited and it did present some possibilities for exploring. In spite of warnings to stay clear of the pit, every boy along the river had a fascination with the dunes and gorges pock marking that bit of earth. Wind sculptured landforms notwithstanding, imagination unfettered itself in myriad forms that stretched from shades of Arabian Nights to more recent movies wherein the protagonist had to climb a seemingly endless mound of sand to fulfill a sadistic command. Plenty of ammunition there! Perhaps something to the effect of double nought seven might be conjured from that heap of sand.

Images of gouged out earth, mole hills and a troglodyte's existence in the trenches of Verdun flickered across Bertrand's mind. An old grandfather and trunks of adventure books in his attic had fascinated him with story after story around a winter's fire about men burrowing like moles during World War One. This and the primeval urge to dig and bury lurked fiercely in the breast of the newly erect carnivore, the man child.

It was not long in coming. True to form during the woodward trek, a wasp's nest had been located and, once clubbed with a stick, yielded a livid horde. What was more, this time no adventure book heroics took hold. Instead, stung and dazed, his face a mass of welts, one of their number crashed through brambles and thickets toward the sand and gravel pit. In a few more strides, Alex would be over its outer perimeter spiralling down endless chutes of dirt. Suffocation and the random jerk of limbs caught in some nightmarish bog would overpower any resistance.

In a mind made panicky with fear, Bertrand recalls a spate of facts from the

natural world. Any item grounded in natural fact was accredited with near reverence and infallibility. Alex's upcoming fate would even be held explicable if seen through this context.

Wasps in their predator state have been known to render spiders senseless, then bury them encrusted with eggs.

An ant lion will dig an entrapment, then hiding behind a blind, await the unwary.

Caterpillars are butchered by flying insects with jaws extended for that sole purpose of slaughter. Less luckier ones live on as hosts for mounds of greedy larvae.

Bertrand stirred himself from his covering. Having climbed into a low lying cavity of limestone shelves, he was able to elude his pursuers. His thoughts wander again to Alex. Had Alex heeded local caution concerning the sand pit in his panic stricken flight? Unlikely, as Alex was unclear of the exact presence of the quarry and could not be expected to realize its many treacheries if terror stricken.

Like the starling young, Alex had been sluggish, refusing to be stirred until prodded by a stronger outside stimulus. And, as with the nestlings, Alex had succumbed to laws red in fang and claw, cause and effect relationships.

Emptying the last stone from his knapsack, Bertrand imagines the huzzah of battle to have cleared this forest glade. He perceives the clenched stone to be the stream smoothed missile David used in overpowering Goliath-the last silver thimble fired at Goliath[1].

With a cry, he implores Alex to come forth and stand his ground--sensation and imagery roam lawlessly in his brain as mop up operations are set to begin.

[1] Site of a second Texan massacre in the war of independence with Mexico.

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THE WAGER

"We think by feeling. What else is there to know."
Theodore Roethke

"I can live an adventuresome life vicariously through my characters. It's inexpensive and a dandy form of ready made self-expression. The perfect sort of sublimation exists after all. For years I wore myself out trying to amass enough experience to commence serious writing. You know the having to see all and do all syndrome. I realize the pursuit of that plateau s sheer idiocy as it remains ever distant as one grows older."

Wenceslaus at that point placed his pen down and turned to open a glossy picture print of a ship under full sail, a clipper mail packet on the China run over a century ago.

"Shakespeare never experienced the myriad situations he subjected his characters to--how could he--except perhaps subliminally. Jules Verne must have employed a similar type of wish fulfillment with his prophetic writings that splashed a hundred years into the present. What I propose doing is to animate my earliest atavistic yearnings in a like fashion. I hope to give scenarios embedded in the innermost recesses of my psyche time to materialize, to exude from the substance of dynamic characterization. In short, the cave wall pictures Plato mentioned, hitherto until now dim and elusive flickers, will become flesh and bone entities within their own right."

Wenceslaus reached back propping a foot against the table containing an old woodcut with some masking tape and a copy of Stendal's Rouge et le Noir. I thought of him subconsciously acting out the role of his many anti-heroes by parading their values through the pages of his many would-be books. Rather impatiently I moved to counter his studied expression.

"And what of actual events rooted in your own experience? How will you give your characters real presence, an allowance to take away from them unintentional archetypes or woodiness? What are your chances of breathing life into these shadow forms without some common backdrop with which to share a basic empathy?"

He continued to maintain his stare, not even breaking the gaze to light a cigarette or reach for his mug of coffee. He replied with a little annoyance.

"Words, nothing but smoke screens to conceal a bankruptcy of the thought process. How on earth do you propose I make love to every woman alive, explore every crevice of this earth? Surely, you aren't serious with this mumble about

animating characters. I propose to let the characters speak of real ingredients through the force of actual events."

"Animation is for cartoons, not serious playwrights. I'm surprised at you," he went on. "What you are advocating is a bilateral pool of shared traits. I venture to say such a thing is not only patently absurd but unnecessary." He had let the coffee grow cold and turned to it with renewed annoyance.

The wind, it seemed, too, was expressing a little of the afternoon's short-tempered.

"Pity we live in this climate. All bluster and snow. Hardly the stuffing from which romantic heroes are made," he said stiffly.

"And what of Tolstoy, London, or Service?" I nearly whined back at him. "They used lack of glamour in their settings to their advantage. Primeval landscapes are not only physical but the force behind many a fanciful mind. That's the artificiality I was concerned with earlier. Next you will be playing the Gauguin adventurer convinced your lack of inspiration or ready talent is attributable to March weariness rather than to personal shortcomings. You will spend all your time searching for that thatched cottage in picturesque Arly country."

"Let me offer some more unwanted advice," I said, renewing the attack. "Remember the example of William Turner, the English landscape painter? He embodied in this next example what I attempted to clarify by argument. In crossing to Calais he had himself strapped to the mast at storm's height so that he might better witness the pummeling of his own ship. A breakthrough in the use of colour led to the hey day of romanticism and preparation for neo-impressionism. This all came through one man's willingness to live events in the flesh not by haphazard random reading."

Wenceslaus was staring out the window apparently unmoved by what I, in my vanity, thought the near-definitive illustration.

"So you suggest that for me to write effectively about a given period I must breathe the very strains, the odours, verisimilitude of the age? By that account no one would be accredited teaching Macedonian history unless he first had witnessed the Hellenic revival in the first millennium before Christ. I would bloody well have to be impervious to all the dictates of common sense to follow through on your suggestions!"

"To prolong your garrulous argument, let me continue with this case in point: to understand the problems of the blacks or talk intelligently about the colour bar I would have to dye my skin and assume the identity of a Negro. Is this correct?"

"Well, hasn't that been done?" I replied carefully.

"Yes, but not for the reasons you advance."

"For sociological reasons, for the sake of novelty to do ...", he finished with a gesture.

"This argument is growing stale and circular, he began anew. Quite frankly, I grow tired of you and your pedantics. You remind me of the Medieval Schoolmen and their emphasis on clarification to the point of excluding Truth. Yes, even Truth if it could not be neatly packaged in their air-tight groupings."

I perceived Wenceslaus, in a moment of understatement, to be more than a little disaffected.

"And isn't it you who argues the finer shades between thisness and whatness, thickness and opaque intrusions at this juncture?" I was now needling him with his own wealth of details.

"Opaque intrusions," a bewildered smile now entering his face.

"Take out your razor, Ockham." [1]

Wenceslaus fingered the mug more openly. I didn't know who was baiting whom. I thought I had bested him but realized in doing so I was only personifying the shallowness I strove to dismantle through argument.

"Wenceslaus, Wenceslaus, let's cease this before emotion colours our better judgment. Let us stop for the time being and let a wager stand."

"A wager?"

"Yes, you know of Pascal and his wager on faith?"

"Vaguely, but I'm tired of this thumb-pressing."

"I know, but hear me out."

"What we wish to establish here," I began. "is the superiority of experience over imagination, actual events to intellect."

"Precisely," I maintained. "Let each of us do a bibliographical survey establishing the whereabouts of most authors' inspiration. The Muse as it were, that is the point whereby a given author is ready to grasp order from the chaos of eclecticism. Not exhaustively, of course, just a random selection of say ten and then report back to one another. Each must promise to abide by the general consensus of the search."

"Such a thing will deteriorate to mere sham, a freshman's guide to the use of periodical literature, he parodied holding a hand aloft like a scolding professor."

"It's one step in the direction toward delineating how others reacted to a similar problem."

"Fair then. We'll try it. But isn't it doomed to a split vote by the very choice of our authors, we having had some previous contact with their lives and thus knowing under which force the man propelled his search?"

"Partially, but we are after the division point, that hiatus in time whereby each no longer procured experience but began to write. That's our quest. The movement towards actual writing, why the mood descended on whom when it did at its precise locus in time."

"Locus?"

"Yes you know locus, in mathematics."

"What have we accomplished," he said turning to me wearily.

Tongue in cheek I replied by his very gestures he was experiencing a weariness with the thought process and embarking on the need to try the experience route.

"Sophistry," he cried aloud. "Pure bullshit. But we will let the wager stand and upon it our friendship, our acquaintanceship all I associate with the likes of you and yours. And, further, for argument's sake, argument itself."

"Aye, let all that stand and more. Let's get Faustian about this and raise the tempo, I nearly implored. One, by virtue of his defeat must swear off writing for a full three months. He must promise not to desecrate paper with tainted thought until the ink of this clamour gels as a sturdy lesson to his peevishness."

"Awkward, but interesting. Continue."

"Nothing more, just this little writing circle shall have the papal rite to banish anyone from its blessed entourage for violating the tenets of established truth. Let's rest our case for argument's sake, on this and all that has transpired today"

My companion was working on a pair of stubborn galoshes as I prepared my coat for a quick exit through the snow.

The workings of Truth, all debate seemed so pointless after all--just an elixir for resentment with the shifting sands of mood ever ready to wash away any permanency. Like snow, words reigned as queen of the elements for an appointed time, then they, too, passed away.

I had the feeling I had witnessed more than a huffy outburst within myself against winter's dreary confines or the frustration of a limited talent.

I had expressed the narrowing of tolerance and the box canyon of a roped spirit that clamours for freedom on the wind of a signal fury.

I paused and went forth into the storm.

[1] A Medieval Schoolman celebrated Or his sharpness.

[\[41\]](#)

ERRANDS

We repeat, the aim of the IRA has always been the liberation of our homeland. Any who aid or abet the enemy must fall full prey to force of arms.

(The Republican Proclamation)

Somewhere in the distance a dog kept at his baying. A long mournful whelping that seemed torn from the damp night's very throat. Sean could not help but hear it; so deeply did the dog's vocal cords implant sound upon human ears. He could not help but think of the provos warning nuzzled like that dog's steady cry over and over into the fabric of one's memory swift as searing iron.

"Aid or abet," he murmured softly to himself, "a long distance is covered by such a comment."

His Catholic heritage did him no justice in resolving the torment. By birth, name even appearance and occupation--all such persuasions meant he should embrace what the Republicans preached. One no sooner got his name on their lips, Sean Paddy MacGuire than they knew him Catholic. Two grandfathers had died in the troubles prior to Erie's break with Westminster. That alone should dictate undying hatred for the English and their stooges, the Prods, in Ulster. He found little comfort, though, in the ever continuing war of nerves. Yet the manifesto bade every Catholic to think with his blood and put shoulder to duty.

Sean emptied his glass, left his seat at the window's ledge and made for the tavern door. Sectarian violence often came to pubs and was drawn clearly along denominational lines. O'Leary's was an obvious target for Protestant extremists that much he knew. Still, a man needed a pint from time to time so he doubted if he would discontinue the practice.

He shook his gabardine jacket clear of his arm and stepped into the night. Overhead a moon glimpsing the clouds made through an effortless sky. He might, should impulse seize him, step through the border area of Protestant Ulster to reach his home near Falls Road. Suddenly, the pub door became a fringe of orange heat amid whirls of smoke. Barely clear of the doorway, MacGuire was propelled by the force of the explosion's impact clear of danger. Dazed and uncomprehending, the full realization of his chance good fortune not yet registered, he stood watching the flames etch their amber fingers through the archway into the pilings about the roof. Elsewhere, two figures ran through the night scarce turning to watch their most recent torching. Had he a revolver bringing them down would have been matter of fact, at least the part of squeezing several bullets in succession about their direction. He had no such weapon and could only watch them make good their escape.

From the vicinity of the blast Sean could make out only engulfing fire spreading itself over the full circumference of O'Leary's pub. Placing coat against face, he edged closer to the door in hope of entering the building. Common sense told him anyone in the interior of the pub would be cremated by now. Foolish to speculate further about them, he winced. The demolished doorway also seemed to exclude any survivors since in all likelihood the blast had originated from those quarters. Silently, he tried to reconstruct the former faces about a room which minutes before had seen quiet patrons sipping a pre-supper drink. He was close enough to peer about the ruins of the entrance. A form or rather a booted figure face down under what appeared a fallen beam lay motionless before him. Astride the man, he half dragged then manacled the bleeding figure clear of the surging flames. Ensuring his immediate safety, MacGuire went a second time into the now inferno like remains of O'Leary's. Conscious now of the enormity of the blast as sirens wailed and a clatter of noise began, grim faced police and officers whose job it was to make sense of such happenings began to arrive. He was about to attempt a second entry when a wall of fire ended further heroism. He could not visualize anyone surviving twin disasters of explosion and torch. For a scant moment he watched the smoke billow into the sky illuminating the shabby houses of the neighbourhood. Nowhere could he find it within himself to hate. This surprised, even frightened him. An utter exhaustion filled him as he turned to see whom chance had allowed escape from the fire.

His shadow cast a tower's presence about the parking lot onto the prostrate form. Swallowing hard, MacGuire prepared to stare into the face of the man he had carved from fire's possession. In a single motion, once his fist grabbed the man's clothing, a muzzle lay against his throat.

"Thought I was through eh, damned Mickey," the fierce eyes seemed to speak all at once. "I've killed tonight. I'd soon as kill you now and complete the errand 'cepting I may need the temporary use of your skin. Now get to your feet."

MacGuire obliged the blackened face with nostril openings gaping hate. Already he was calculating his chances. The area was filling with people. The light from the raging building had ended their darkness. The gunman shoved the revolver again into his face. The man seemed to enjoy his threats of pistol whipping and promised death. MacGuire looked once again into the face more from force of the last twenty minutes' unreality than any perplexity of fear.

Got to think fast, must use the chance card of generosity for all its worth, he thought.

"I saved your life," he pronounced slowly. It met the anticipated response. In that slow second when his gaze met his assailant an opportunity afforded itself. The gunman in a mock gesture of appreciation had trained the weapon barely upward into his reach. In a single motion, half embrace and step into his adversary's stride, he had the man over. MacGuire was instantly aware of his opponent's strength.

Enraged at the ruse's success, he glanced a blow across the Catholic's forehead.

"Guess you're happy he's dead," the soldier was saying as he helped wrap a bandage into place. "We're grateful for any extremist's death. Makes our job a lot easier," he was almost laughing now. Death wore such an ordinary face when it courted so often.

Sean had yet to reply. He was staring at the shovel with the snapped handle. The blade had separated on impact against the terrorist's head. The man was nowhere to be seen. Rescue squads--the familiar ambulance, fire brigades were attempting a body count in the rubble of O'Leary's.

"Say, you alright? I said guess you're pleased you managed to pull away from that one," the lively soldier virtually leered as he pressed again for some comment.

"The dog . . . his noise, did you . . ."

"No," the soldier stared uncomprehending.

[47]

PONCHONTAS

Years ago, when life was too violent for any to live very old, the Spirit invented a ruse to give great age to Man.

Late one fall, Ponchontas was keeping a slow fire to smoke his strips of salmon. It occurred to him that by stoking the flames gently with bits of chips, the fire would burn not only smoother, but more evenly.

Ponchontas held the block firmly and brought his axe to play on the extended limb. Suddenly, his grip faltered and the blade struck flesh drawing blood. Panicky, he thrashed about the sand scattering it into the face of the fire. Quite by accident, you see, as his foot only convulsed the pain his bleeding arm felt. One by one, the blood fell in drops then trickles, rivulets until a veritable torrent seemed loosed. Ponchontas screamed till the woods listened. The spirit that governs the pulp of the wood and the sap to rise took pity on Ponchontas. It curdled the sap to thick resins in the chopped wood and the gummy resin fell to the forest floor. As it lay so glutenous, the Earth Mother was also quickened to show sympathy. This she did by touching the marrow of the hurting wood. By a thick chain of being, Ponchontas felt his skin harden. The painful throb soon began to leave the wound and the scar healed. Immediately, he was on his knees imploring the spirits. He begged what small favour he might return. The reply was instantaneous.

"Liberate three husks in your crib."

Then, with much saying and thoughts multiplying forth within his head, he gave word to the council of Voices. Once dispatched, the three ears lost their kernels giving old women to this day their namesake of beady eyes. The abandoned husks became their withered forms and sacks of corn were found to be "old bags." The empty rinds became harridans' cancelled lives. Tares in the fruit were seen as the trials and vicissitudes of this life, wormholes as their tears. So, in an act of mercy, old women and crones were born saving future generations the misery of living too old.

To this day, an old woman often has a husky voice and an ear for medicine.

[51]

THE BLOODFISH

A story about tears that became minnows and sobs large fishes in their place.

Once, when the sky was young and the spirits were expressing their wishes, peals of light and thunder damaged the heavens until they were swollen and purple. Rain fell like leaves as the victors banished the fallen from the clouds. The vanquished were ordered to supply the empty lakes with forms fitting their previous ways. Swimming in oblivion, they only stopped to rest in reed beds on August days when the Great Spirit smothered his anger.

The evil ones assumed the course of large blood fish scraping the silt bottoms in reminder of their reduced state. All sorts of creatures--the catfish with his whiskers to remind the new creature man of his pre-human state and the eel and lamprey with their sharp eyes to disclose to the world the inherent baseness of their rebellious nature. The giant of the deep--the sturgeon--had a sucker form mouth. Every time man lifted him across the keel of a boat he would see his obsequious face panting to the sky.

In fact, when sturgeon or the spirit commanded to be pike were caught, the thrash of their tails sent small tears as ripples across the lake. These stirred sand people and minnows were born. Each sob from dying pike's tail, doomed to a long toothy snout for her disobedience by Manitou, formed a larger fish. In this way, fish were ever reminded of their punishment and man kept fed.

The Indians enjoyed new food as plenteous as the grains of golden earth on each lake's face.

[53]

THE GARDEN PATCH

Gourd was taken to task when she understood the limitations the garden patch had placed upon her people.

It was early fall and the dancers of the vegetable kingdom paraded their charms in bright, full regalia. Across the earth in splotches of colour, the tomatoes scented a good fall. So, too, the kingly husks of corn and the melons, spinach and cucumber in turn eyed the approaching season in growing faith. Each had a succulent function and dangled their inviting flesh to the beholder.

But, alas, what did gourd promise? She was deeply conscious of lacking the forward brightness of tomato and pumpkin. She lacked leafy greens so evidently prized and when her fellow vegetables covered the brown soil in preparation for the fine day they would bask across a kitchen table, it was almost too much for the sensitive gourd to stomach. Why even squash, which she felt closest to, had more of a function than she. So versatile did the big neighbour seem in comparison to herself, the ugly dwarf.

She was on the verge of casting herself in despair across the rickety fence or joining the long, black embers of a dead fire young boys had prepared months back. Surely, she was the outcast of the plant world. How grotesque her features were, so hard and unpliant seemed her flesh. Even her skin tones were half-caste. No recipes called for her presence. A mood of growing helplessness seemed to envelop her.

A boy, the earlier fire setter, is describing an odd vegetable, tubular and often misshapen, that was excellent for all sorts of childhood pursuits--making paperweights, building scarecrows and decorating mantles.

"If only people knew," he bubbles.

"Still more success stories," the little gourd cries on hearing the child's comment.

"At least I won't have to be humbled in her presence," the gourd thought, her self confidence shattered.

And with that the little gourd approached the Vegetable King and asked to use her remaining wish. For in those days all living things were handed one means for improving themselves.

"I resolve to be a new edible," she sighed, "something other than a gnomish gourd. Make, O King, a glorious . . . pumpkin." But the Vegetable King decided not to abandon his earlier invention and so gourds live on. Distant relatives of the bright, new pumpkin, but their inspiration nonetheless.

[55]

THE MONARCH

She wanted her beauty too soon and must now forfeit it for the moment.

One day, when the Earth was a glorious garden and ruled by a brilliant sun flower towering above the plants of her domain, Monarch butterfly, not yet her familiar orange, complained she wished to be large as a bird with petal wings translucent to the sun, folding with the rain. Sunflower, taken back by this unusual demand, sought to humble Monarch.

"Henceforth for your imprudence, each one of your race must toil for your wings. No more shall you enjoy fruits without labour. By daring to be mighty you will begin existence as a pale, green egg hardly distinguishable from the lowliest leaf. Moreover, as a reminder of your insolence, you must pass through four purgatorial stages. The bitterest bane of your people will be the bread of the milkweed."

"You wish to aggrandise yourself? So be it--you will shed your skin like a snake and hang upside down in stupor for weeks on end. Only then, will I allow you to

retain your former excellence."

And with that, sunflower drew hard upon her curse and winter formed. She, too, planted seed-eggs across the face of the earth. Her face lost its radiance by fall and her petals cried to the ground. Even today, when people eat of her wealth they devour it with salt. This is in remembrance that, in cursing Monarch, she, too, felt her own wrath for salt is more bitter than the bane of the milkweed.

[57]

BRÉBEUF

Brébeuf is looking at the land that bears his namesake. He has no recollection of the horrors to come for his gaze unfolds as if in a dream.

The wide expanse of blue water pleases him. Certainly the area holds potential--many hard and softwooded trees not unlike his native Brittany. In the warm glow of a July morning, he belittles his misfortunes, the present trials sapping little Ste. Marie.

The kindly father dashes the recent sleep from his eyes with cold brook water. The shimmer seems to fit the haze his current thoughts pivot in. Sweet water country might yet prove both fortress for Christian souls and strength at feeding Louis' New French dream.

The sun is no longer in the sky. Instead a ghoulish orange disc fastened between sharpened sticks is brought closer and closer to the white face. He is maddened with pain. The circular nature of the mind in torment flits to the earlier morning rumination. Someone spills part of a hissing kettle on the fire in mock ritual of the Baptism. Too abundant waters, ah yes that could prove a difficulty in cultivating this pleasant land. The swinish feast in preparation re-echoes thoughts of ample provisions so vital to this distant land.

An Indian brave stands holding the scalp, his face with all the leer of a carnival barker three centuries hence intent on making a sale.

[59]

CITY THE INSECTS INVADE

"From the indigo straits to Ossian's seas, on pink and orange sands washed by the vinous sky, crystal boulevards have just arisen and crossed, immoderately inhabited by poor young families who get their food at the green grocers. Nothing rich-the city."

Arthur Rimbaud

The old man sleeps with his weeping. Another old one pauses with her cats on a fire escape while nursing a sore like a precious stone. A garbage can is an herbivore grazing on stalks of ringworm. Vermin are the pool sharks of this brothel polishing off the tenements' fur lined rails.

At last, the skid of tires tears a hole in the river bank. Sand-fleas and blowflies become nightriders marauding a new turf of godzilla cars. An urchin dangles his stolen wristwatch like a fish in a bottle while shoals of centipedes make a beeline in a poseidon stampede. Filthy rags are prayer cakes left over from the last sabbat and become holed coffins for those still searching for involvement.

Islands drift into protoplasm atolls as the city stalks itself. Cockroaches are the plumbers of eternity. Rapid fire legs sidestep the etchings of industrious ants while silverfish are the boatmen trouncing human oars. Living is a Stegasorous swinging its tail.

Scraps are inviting guests as insects lord over a habitat free of blight and homuncular stain.

[60]

PLAUDITS

Loki, the Norwegian god of mischief, sends out a lithesome blonde with a slinkiness that ravishes the libido. She presses her dream-like form against the windowpane. The night is soft about the city's lights. Water cascades in the distance, while small, black crickets' shovel sounds around pricked ears. The diminished man ignores this, instead busying himself with drawing lions on a vast sheet of blank paper. There is no word for happiness in the Malawi tongue and this

disturbs him. What far reaching implications for the people of Africa.

He stands and downs a drink to ease his parched mouth. A moisture ring blurs one of his lions, and, again, he will lose the battle against the king of beasts tonight.

[61]

SUMMER'S CLOCK

" . . .and the day is a wounded boy."
Garcia Lorca

Two is a fonder number gracing the clock than one--a relief from monogamy, a rightful place to start. Three is too midway, cantankerous in its sound, still four is drab and stony and the sun lies too low in the sky for any truthful expression of real afternoon. Five is somewhat better, the sky is pressuring evening and, by six, is big with shadows that foresee the coming dark.

With seven, ambers and misty wraps are charged in pastel tones celebrating the arrival of eight. At nine, all pretense is dropped that its still daylight and colours lie bludgeoned--extinguished in the dark. Ten through near dawn is blissful and quiet, no confusing escapades of shifting light. Only the hour before dawn promises a summer respite any different than the cue sung at midnight.

The absence of colour and light diminish confusion over the sun's relative positioning. One need experience no mood fluctuations over birth or hasty departure of the day. In the broad smile of no light, the frock of virginal black remains securely intact.

[62]

AUTOMOBILE SOFT LEGS

"The world's smallest painting . . . Our Beautiful Canada was painted with a single hair and the aid of a microscope. The artist considers his price of seven million dollars not too high."

The Globe and Mail, January 25, 1979.

Now, it came to pass that a seasoned young diner by the name of Simon decided to revolutionize the restaurant trade. It was his firm desire to bring some chutzpah into the all too predictable and dreary cuisine on this part of the continent. From the first, Simon maintained that food and pleasure were inseparable. Moreover, since food could be a vehicle for fantasy, even more tellingly it could provide an outlet for self-expression.

The lily pad pizza was typical of his new approach and was a twofold operation: a parent might buy an inflatable plastic "pizza," the size and shape of a small wading pool. It had an edible spout and dehydrated "sister," pizzas attached to the parent ship that allowed a child to fantasize while sailing and enjoying his favourite food. If that sounded too decadent or illusion inspiring, a sleeker model existed minus the extras--in other words the green wading pool size pizza unruffled by further wizardry.

Simon always maintained not everyone could handle too much soft-pedalled reality. Out of the dense formations of endless fast food chains, Simon's novelties were to titillate the jaded restaurant goer.

Interpretive signs and amenities guided the erstwhile onlooker to the "ultimate," in fantasy dining. Rhinoceros pizza was served flanked on an inflatable horn. For the less adventuresome, a lobster pizza with drawn butter could be had either with tangy dough balanced along its claws or imprints of lobster cut into the succulent crust. Children loved the lily pad pizzas and mothers discovered how delightful baby tears were when presented in tastefully done little cups. Terrariums soon arrived and were pedalled shamelessly. Some outlets claimed "billions and billions," were sold.

Simon also cornered the potent swamp water drink market and was having his empire go "wet." The familiar Chartreuse would now be available at request and a grown up might indulge primal fantasies along with a taste to be a gardener, rake and glutton all at once. Special suites were rumoured to exist patterned after the Poconos in Pennsylvania where a couple could bathe in a pizza-shaped tub embroidered with baby tears, fountains, tropical lianas and all the air plants one could stand pressed against your steamy shower. Pizza machines for a quarter lined the tubs and one operation had dispensed with coins altogether issuing instead rubber baby tears that substituted for money. They could be strung around the neck like shark's teeth. Swamp water in little jars added a further touch to this risqué

scene.

But, of course, for the really discriminating the boar's head feast was the sign of a truly adventuresome palate. A Black Forest effect could be conjured up complete with moveable props. A pig's head stuffed with not the familiar apple but instead each tusk hollowed bulging with pizza. Another version saw rhinoceros shaped pizzas rolled in the style of Yap Island discs, that land being noted for its odd wheel like currency. A boar's head contoured in the recognizable shape but with tusks only made of pizza was a favourite alternative. After all, gourmands bought escargots in order to fill their shells then, after washing, repeated the process on future occasions. And, most certainly, no one could deny that Simon's ideas were anymore outlandish than the epicurean Romish feasts of peacock tongues and assorted other naughty delicacies. His was but an updated version appealing to the mobile North American lifestyle. Frisbees even began to resemble pizza and trampolines approached that air. It was all the rage to be Italian and boast of one's prowess in demolishing mounds of pizza.

Yet trouble was afoot for Simon and his proteges. The very real puritanical element in society saw Simon's chain of exotic pizza emporiums in the same league as exotic dancers and sought to banish them, seeing that gluttony was akin to lust. Therefore, pizza pie body parlour rubs began to vanish.

Moreover, peevishly spiteful children insisted on spreading rumours that Simon's operations used day-glow worms as substitutes for pepperoni and unwashed algae as a base for pasta crusts. People began to question the wisdom of letting children act out their fantasies with food as that commodity was a very emotional subject and a testing ground for good parenting. Psychologists soon began to join the harangue and claim the pizza emperor was a poorly toilet trained debauchee acting out repressed impulses in the form of a greedy diner. Some, in fact, claimed he was in the anal stage of his development and that his taste was all in his mouth. Food faddists and health nuts wondered aloud about the wisdom of combining so much dough with gelatin plant fibre. It seemed most everyone was rushing to deflate the pizza bubble and end our love affair with the anchovy.

Unemployed pizza cooks and pizza rub girls were soon at the end of the dough line. In fact, so great was the influx of misplaced persons that the term "on the dough," for a time replaced "dole," as an euphemism for hard times. Extortionists began to muscle in asking for their share of the pizza pie. Newspapers began gloating over the imminent bust of the "infantile," pizza passion.

Still, Simon confided his trust in the same observation that must have motivated Lord Sandwich when he launched his invention. People will always search out the delicious and the readily available. What could be more elementary than meat between bread, frogs on lily pads, protein over raw vegetables, food amidst food?

Simon set his heart to selling automobile soft legs to hosts of touchy epicures who really wondered at this juncture if anything that unusual could really taste like chicken.

[63]

THE PELLY, THE POWDER AND THE SNAKE

The cowboy's overriding presence in North America's mythology is not difficult to understand.

Perhaps the great lone land ethos of endurance, stamina, self-resourcefulness and "a man's got to do what a man's got to do," John Wayne brand of thoroughness, still endures more so than once admitted. Talking in these terms usually elicits a responsive chord. Everyone has felt that, at one time or the other, only his carbine (wits) stood between him and the fate accorded to the Sundance Kid. As life increases in complexity, in all probability there will be a tendency to create myths or revive tales from the past to help blaze trails. The westerner personifies close shaves with danger. So, too, surviving in the corporate jungle implies a similar fixation in manufacturing responsive heroes to see us through.

In one scenario, the setting of a gruelling contest at the managerial level becomes "highnoon," for the Earp brothers. The plug uglies in the vein of the Claytons are the bush-wackers waiting to play upon any opening. The board room assumes the air of OK Corral with old Doc Halliday leaning on the fence or a tombstone, if the exchange goes dismally.

Most of us would naturally see little identification with the Renaissance condottieri or mercenary or understand the Laager[1] mentality of the white South African. Yet we do have some input into what the bounty hunter is capable of or the

ramifications of being dry-gulched by an insensitive or unfeeling person. All have had to cross their Badlands, ride roughshod above the timberline or grab for cover to avoid a ricochet.

The two legged coyotes are still with us no matter how humanitarian we might fancy ourselves.

The Ox-Bow Incident[2] can overtake most anyone, although the saying "meeting one's Waterloo," seems at this writing more commonplace. In ramrodding an outfit to market, or seeing a plan to completion, all must stand clear of brackish water, wolfsbane and loco weed. Place these symbolist terms in their updated context and you will understand a hockey player's nickname "cowboy," and the slow irrelevance of that veneer time.

A primeval instinct beckons through time to the campfire. And I suppose a campfire logic might be said to exist in all of us. The thinking of things out carefully over a second and third cup of coffee, cautious self exploratory reasoning. Today, any job ad will still warn: "Only the aggressive with a proven trail record need apply." Myths and more myths, the saga makers are legends in their own time, recreating themselves shamelessly.

It may be time to pull on the reins, but allow one last indulgence. Who is the modern centurion? The town marshal finds his present niche in foreman, boss man, supervisor(?) The heart is a lonely hunter and amidst renegades, mavericks and poisoned water holes, the modern Cincinnatus[3] or wagon-master will be found contending with an array of tenderfoots, greenhorns and Jimson weeds up the Chisholm Trail through the Cimarron to market.

Chiggers, jerky, sweat beetles and hardtack are but mementoes of this earlier romantic interlude.

[1] The formation of a circle shaped wagon train to ward off danger at the time of the Utilanders trek across the Transvaal to the Orange Free State.

[2] Popular novel written in the early nineteen forties.

[3] Legendary Roman hero who safeguarded a vital bridge into the city from the Etruscans.

[67]

JABIRU

Clarence, the pipe stem would grow hot with rage, then become agitated over his apparent inability to stop smoking. You see, he was a misfit in more ways than one. He didn't snap firmly in place when ordered, and more importantly, he resented the appendicular attachment to a place and time not his own choosing.

Clarence would stew near the pipe bowl, rife with burnt ends and hacking smoke. The pipe had a bite and it was he who enlisted its bitter end.

Now Clarence had designs of escaping tobacco road. He envisaged a future free of pool hall smells and the glandular malfunctioning of his predator owner. They say the stem of a pipe pressed against one's tongue for extended periods of time will cause aggravation, perhaps "malignant growths," worse yet, cancer. To Clarence, however, it was he who was sickened by the onrush of brown saliva and halitosis as his compulsive partner pressed his bones to an opened jaw. He felt like Cain and wished he could kill this man with the jawbone of his own ass. At the very least Clarence wanted to be something more than an after dinner pipe. He wished a certain notoriety, a dance on pigeon feathers, to be a pipe of Nordic proportions--a yard's length of smoke. If he was to be engrossed in smoke, he at least wished it to arrive in exotic blends, from textures rich with the warmth of their climes. Turkish root, jabiru, all were curiously better than the stuffy domestics he had come to know.

But alas, Clarence for all his fuming saw nothing ahead but more of the depressing humidior. His lot was to be a rack in a provincial smokehouse kept aglow by a poor man's fervour for post-natal security. The additive was relaxation and his world was to be as commonplace as the hearth. Home was a blackened stem yellowing with age against a bewhiskered face. There was no knowing when a pang of nicotine might hit, so he spent his off hours in a coat pocket or a sleeve's rear end eyeing the world from a very shaky distance. Life was indeed strange when one was rudely hauled out of near hibernation into the brunt of day, stuffed into an asphyxiating batch of tacky powder, then pressed into open flame. Afterwards, further indignities were exacted as one's head was slammed against the pavement or struck on the heel of a manured boot. Existing was not sweet (barring Prince Albert) but likely to be hellishly warm or worse, infuriatingly commonplace. Still, he

comforted himself on the knowledge Alex the cigarette could sense his end more dreadfully as a butt in some pool-side urinal. At least, his demise would be a trifling more dignified--or so he assumed.

Now it came to pass that Clarence's owner was passing through a metamorphosis of sorts where he believed a meerschaum pipe would ease the tobacco habit. At once, Clarence faced the twin prospect of being not only redundant but phased out as an aging health risk. This was clearly the siren call to action.

Clarence thought of suicidal urges. He would lodge himself in his owner's windpipe. He would fall from grace with a thud, enmeshing himself in a thousand pieces at his distant relative's feet. Least-wise, he would rot in a sewer near a busy bus stop replete with all the dronings of archaic feet. Or, or he reasoned, he would outwit his opponent and maintain his old hegemony. Oblivion seemed a more forbidding fate than drudgery.

For sometime, Clarence had watched the new meerschaum from a distance. Its lily white figure elicited a plan. He would disgorge from the pit of his favourite ashtray all the toxins lodged in the burnt up tobacco. He would prove white was an aberration. He and he alone would disfigure her perfection. A good pipe should camouflage its owner's hazards. He had only to tar and weather his rival or await the smoke to cloud the delicate perfection of that effeminate form.

Reveling in the sense of this new found power, Clarence became puffed up with more than his own smoke, and his thoughts fell into a dry rattle. The owner feeling this unaccustomed rush of heat and experiencing hard drawing from his companion, vigorously tapped the stem against an open door's edge. He muttered something to the effect about the clogged nature of his old instrument and how refreshing his next smoke promised to be.

And so it would, without the residue of filth lodged inside the once trusty pipe.

[70]

ADUA

Adua had never regarded his life as a pantomime. He wanted so much to please. As a dandelion, he thought of himself as little brother to the sun catching her yellow butter in his eyes.

It came as no small surprise, then, when Adua learned of the world's misgivings toward him. Other flowers, far less nobly constructed, seemed held in such greater esteem. The first shred of evidence of this that Adua was indeed not a bountiful plant came when cattle distained his presence. Later, a smelly herbicide was used in his presence and Adua knew all was not well. Most discomfoting, however, was the manner in which other flowers measured up in comparison to Adua. Even flowers that Adua considered quite ordinary seemed, tongue in cheek, to fare much more prettily.

"Adua, Adua as the wind blows so do the poppies grow."

Somehow, Adua heard that refrain while nodding his head in the summer heat. He had grown accustomed to the red blotches that spilled their colour so near to his own colony. To him, their mauve crimsons were gaudy, a shrieking red quite unlike his gentle yellow nectar. He was feeling quite smug that, at least compared to that recluse, his kind were visibly better.

But then, proximity to the poppy family started him thinking. Firstly, unlike his brothers, the poppies were well tended. A dutiful human watered and caressed the plants commenting on the fullness of the pod and the grandeur of their petals. Yet, all Adua could see was a lot of goitered looking droopy herbage. As time went on, it became painfully obvious that the big house and her attendants had established clearly a floral arrangement that did not include dandelions. Adua grudgingly admitted some of his cousins, in careful manicured garden beds, deserved their swooning praise. But not, not the poppies. Why, they were not even solid North Americans like himself. They had no native roots in the solid soil of his pastureland. The poppy was an Oriental import, too foreign to be assimilated. And what of its reputation for buccaneering. In some countries it was illegal even to grow them! Wasn't it worse than the demon weed since its seeds carried the substance necessary for narcotics? Surely, anything brewed of opium should be shunned in real life. Convinced of his moral superiority, Adua could at least comfort himself with the realization his breed was of a fine upstanding kind, even if reduced by circumstance to humble origins. His kind went about their business peacefully enough.

As summer ripened into fall after all dandelions had long stopped blooming, Adua was content to pass his declining months as a stringy plant. It was then Adua came

to learn more painful truths stalked the earth. Other flowers were plucked for corsages, arrayed in stately carriages for banquets, had toasts drunk to them and found themselves into the hair of pretty maidens. The most Adua had ever seen his dandelions construed for in the spring was a mere ringlet chain. True, hardy souls brewed a concoction of dandelion wine but what good was that if it was rebuked with taunts of "too bitter," or "how crass,"?

As the cold winds licked about him, gone were the memories of his tussled gold headdress worn a season ago. He was about to commandeer the last of his strength before frost demanded his shop close for the winter. Through progeny produced months before, his kind would spend the cold in tolerable warmth as a seed. Germination was such a marvelous adventure. And what of poppy'? Instead of feeling that burst of speed and sense of the unknown flitting across creation as he had like a parachutist ages ago, her brood had to stay bundled up in a pod. How dull, thought Adua.

Then, as Adua prepared to tuck himself in for the winter, life handed him but one more setback. It was nearing the eleventh of November, and a curious custom was presenting itself. To be sure, Adua had seen real flowers adorn lapels of both men and women as well as bridal wreathes of the most exquisite colours. Yet, never had he seen a poppy, living or otherwise, at the centre of adoration. He was mortified now to see imitation ones worn as a symbol of remembrance, John MacRae notwithstanding. How could she symbolize the dead of Canadian wars when he, Adua, was a native son? Why, if you wanted to get technical about it, even his name contained reference to a lion and to his mind that meant courage. He was perplexed to see how Britain, with all her reliance on that beast, had not seen fit to incorporate his kind as the founding race should have done into her coat of arms. The Scots had their order of the garter and a thistle, of all things, was emblematic to that northerly land. Why not a dandelion even if it were a bit of a dandy all dressed in that, shudder, colour of cowardice, yellow'? People were so emotional choosing a red flower simply because its colour reminded them of shed blood.

Adua was hurt to the quick and could bring no comfort to himself either in hope of future aerial flights or the prospect of his greens being eaten next season as tasty helpings.

There was nothing to do but sport a brown coat, suggestive of the treatment the world had seen to give him.

[73]

RIP

Rip, an inarticulate dog with a namesake derivative of more.

Rip arrives as a pup, large, abounding with energy though somewhat clumsy in his gait. But Rip is no matter of fact bowser--the type that woofs approvingly at your presence then is content to carry himself off to a corner and deliver up his bulk with an unrelieved sigh. Nevertheless, one does suspect his nose is wet (or as shiny) as a washcloth but such familiarities are not extended to strange dogs.

Rip's progress in his new home is eventful. Early in his stay, he gleefully corners a porcupine and gets a face full of quills for violating that one inescapable fact accorded to all life on this planet; introductions are always in order in untried situations. One must proceed with due caution through proper channels or suspicion will ensue. Rip nurses a bandaged nose, sees the inside of a vet's garage (replete with a scourge of animals more reminiscent of a concentration camp than an infirmary) is duly horrified, then droops off to a needle. While recovering, a kitten perches on his upper abdomen and goes to sleep. A thoughtful child covers Rip with an old rug. Rip's tongue nearly flattens the mat as it lolls from his mouth. The edge of his jaw is ringed with a black, tarry substance that grows more viscous the longer Rip is under sedation. Rip's education proceeds apace.

By a queer turn of events, big Rip was to become associated with a number of incontestable oddities, each sufficient to besmirch his name. Firstly, Rip's very name popped up with annoying frequency. How, the family queried, had the name "Rip," been chosen anyway? Of this, no one seemed certain. The father remembered some vacation talk when references were being made to a rip roaring time and that, perhaps, a pup would soon be in the offing. Apart from this, Rip's name and how they had deigned to associate that foppish hound with "Rip," remained a mystery. The children in their homework, moreover, were increasingly being made aware of the times "Rip," seemed to get in the semantics of the language, English orthography and even the warp and woof of history itself. Certainly, Rip or someone like him, had been outstanding.

Rip Van Winkle's first disclosure caused one such stir. One child particularly pressed for explanations. Had this other Rip been doggishly inclined? Did

Rumpelstiltskin have a brother named Rip? No, repeated the mother unless the child's inference was to Rip's great doggish capacity for sleep or Rumpelstiltskin's spinning or spilling of hair or food. A second child, not meaning to be overly precocious, similarly unearthed a red herring. Rip Taylor, the comedian, had Rip's name. Was he, too, er . . . like Rip? The mother smiled. Only in his buffoonery, but she, again, was unsure why either Rip had been so named.

Some days later, the children heard one of the older boys in public school boasting of being "ripped," the weekend before. The younger child, wary of being ridiculed but curious as to this new utterance of the family pet's name, pressed for some explanation. Utter derision. The child shame-facedly brought the problem home. The mother, not trained in the lore of schoolyard vernacular, thought the boy in question had escaped a whipping for tearing something and was boasting of his prowess in side-stepping authority. The father thought not. He gently told the child that the wine the parents were enjoying could be, well, "abused." One child immediately thought abused was a reference to abusing one's body through self-exploration or playing doctor but the father clarified that matter. A touchy exchange followed over how something pleasurable caused harm. The mother retreated into a homily--"all things in moderation," and told the children they would understand as they grew older. The elder son persisted, however, in questioning how something bad, if included under the "all," as stated, could be either moderate or good depending on the circumstances. He further demanded what reception the schoolyard braggart would have given such sagacious counsel.

Events were kept on slow boil over the following week. It began to appear as if the issue was becoming only remotely curious. Rip still dozed before the fire and wagged a buffoonish tail in servile recognition. Then one day, on researching a project, the son happened upon the term rip-tide. Further inquiries followed. The hound, of course, had not the remotest connection with ocean currents. Yet the origin of his nickname was as puzzling as ever. Ripcords and ripoffs deepened the controversy. The rippling effects of wind on sand, too, had to be dismissed out of hand as a key to Rip's misnomer. Strange, too, that no one thought to question the nickname Sandy as a touchstone for unraveling Rip's dilemma.

Perplexity next turned to one Rin Tin Tin. He, too, had a nonsensical name but his sanity and reputation escaped unscathed, perhaps for no other reason than the sonorous incantation of his vowels. To be called Rip, it seemed, was nakedly plebian--a type of proletarian churl of the canine underworld. Besides, substituting Rip for Rin seemed too openly imitative and it didn't begin to solve what prompted the naming of the family pet. It began to look as if all coupling of objects and titles was, by its nature, inexplicable.

The father then proceeded to bring a certain sophistication to the broadening quandary. People, he ascertained, grew towards their names. Positive, intriguing names were an asset. Awkward, embarrassing ones, moreover, were definite obstacles to progression in life. Did not Jack the Ripper have infamy forever etched within his name? Maybe none ever took Doctor Cream (alias the Ripper) seriously. And whose idea was it to substitute R.I.P. on tombstones? But then a certain Ripley made a name for himself by documenting the unusual so Rip wasn't the only one that lived in a dog eat dog world. However, the evidence was not in as to whether a dog could labour under a name's handicap.

Then one afternoon, while engaging in the bravado of chasing cars and attempting to bite their hubcaps, Rip miscued and ran headlong under the wheels. Rip's entire frame rippled with the impact of the collision. Thereafter, Rip indeed became an oddity for more reasons than his name. Some say he became psychotic, if indeed dogs are capable of such things. Barking at imaginary postmen, baying like a banshee at cars, baring his teeth at passersby, word travelled about this insufferable dog. The father, skilled in avoiding unpleasantness, had Rip put to sleep. The children seemed to understand.

And of Rip? He went to his end as uncomprehendingly as he had sat through the entire deliberation on his title and existence.

[76]

REVIEW

THE LAND OF LOOK BEHIND represents a third volume of work written by Paul Cameron Browne. His two previous books, Whispers and Eyeshine have been reviewed in Malahat Review, Quarry and The Canadian Author and Bookman:

"An exquisite revelation of detail."

"Excellent control and imagery."

"Original observations."

END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LAND OF LOOK BEHIND ***

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