

Snippets of Beauty and the Bestial (1988-1994)

Κάλλος



αισχος



The following excerpts are from notes taken over the first 4 months from departure from Africa to resettlement in Canada:

What portent?

At 9:30 PM, as we drove back to Sandringham mission from Harare for the final time, a fiery meteorite shot over Hunyani Hills. Were I not so fatigued after the long day of hoop-jumping the departure formalities—I would have almost wept for the most dazzling celestial display ever witnessed.

Tomorrow, T. is headed to her father's farm in Topola and I back to Harare to continue battling the Ministry of Education and Finance for tax clearances. Driving on in the dark I had to wonder whether this heart-stopping arc of dazzling light was to be taken as a portent of good—or one of ill...

1988, August (Zimbabwe)

One moon removed: 

Kneeling outside the New Westminster bus depot at 10:00 PM, I pulled my baby daughters closer as we waited for our taxi to transport our shipped boxes from the Post Office back to our shabby apartment.

"I've had this terrible headache on that horrible bus all day," murmured T. as we squeezed into the taxi.

I looked up at the sky above the tinsel glitter of city lights. Just a few weeks in the northwest and already the heart yearns for the magic of night in the Capricorn sky.

Yet then unexpectedly emerging palely from a scud of black clouds over the Fraser river was the full moon...

For a tingling moment, I recalled the last full moon. It had risen over the Zimuto hills behind T.'s family farm in Zimbabwe. The full moon before that was beheld from the window of the overnight bus shuddering across the desert to Gaborone, Botswana. Could well be 2 years ago!

Just then, the hole in the clouds closes, leaving a ghostly areola. I tingled again in the strange and subtle beauty for which I must relearn to be grateful...

1988, September (Coquitlam, B.C.)

Winter light: 

I was in the midst of fumbling through "wish we could use you" replies from NGOs in the latest mail when I heard the muffled knock on the apartment door. Imagining it might be a telegram in response to my Civil Service application, I nearly tripped over the strewn toys in rushing to open.

"You're back already?"

T.'s return within a half-hour after heading out to the mall to apply for Christmas season sales jobs was not a good sign. She clomped past with a withering look and threw the wet umbrella in the middle of the floor.

"Look what you gave me!" She held up a rain-spattered paper. It was a copy of one of my own resumes prepared for subbing in adult English classes.

"Shit! What happened to yours?"

"You gave me the wrong one. I didn't notice until I gave it to 2 shops. You made me look like a fool."

I winced in the latest folly. "Okay, I made a mistake. I'm sorry. But why the hell didn't you check first?"

T. sank with a sob to the sofa. I tentatively put my hand on her shoulder relieved she did not flinch away.

"T., both of us can't be disorganized. We have to learn to cover for one another. Otherwise, we're completely fucked."

She burst out crying. "I won't put up with this. I won't stay here. Get me a ticket home!"

At that moment, little MT came out from the bedroom, pouting: "Mommy, don't talk to daddy like that! I won't play with you."

"I need to get out of here!" My wife wailed.

"T., I stepped back, "get a grip on yourself. We've got kids to take care of. Please!"

"Mommy!" MT ran up to push her mother's leg. "Don't make me angry!"

As T. sobbed deeply, I stood by the balcony window holding up open hand before the dim light.

For the first time in nearly 12 years, eczema was back with a vengeance. In stretching ravaged fingers, there came to mind a scene from Ingmar Bergman's '*Winter Light.*'

1988, October

Bad Angel: 

"An angel came into my room last night," declared our 3-year-old.

"Really," I asked, spreading my eczema pustuled fingers under the desk lamp. "What did it look like, honey?"

"It had wings – and a long tail."

"A tail? I didn't know angels had tails. Was it a black or a white angel?"

"It was black," she said matter-of-factly.

"Was it a good angel or a bad angel?"

"It was a bad angel," she chirped, eyes widening.

"Bad?" How do you know, honey?"

"It growled at me and TE. I told it to go away and it *growled*."

8 hours later as I filled yet another application in the corner desk of the disheveled living room, MT played with an empty Triscuits box on the floor and little TE, having climbed on the kitchen chair, waved an empty toothbrush packet.

"Daddy, daddy – I want a drink!" MT whined.

"TE, be careful!" I rushed to swoop up the 1-year-old from the chair. "M., could you just hold on until I finish with this?" I set TE back on the floor before twisting back to the desktop.

"Why did you bring us here to suffer. Can't get a job! I had a job in Zimbabwe. I didn't come here to go on welfare!"

Haunted the while by the taunts of T. before she took the bus to the Caribbean food store, I stared at my ravaged paw.

"Daddy, I want to drink *now!*" yelped the 3-year-old.

"OK, OK," I snarled, nerves pinging like an over-stretched guitar string, "can you just shut up for a few seconds? You'll get your goddam drink!"

"You scared me daddy," cried my beloved MT, " you *growled* at me!"

1988, October

Trial Sedation: 

"You can try this," said Dr. C. drawing forth another item from his Halloween drawer of pharmaceutical samples. "It's an antihistamine combined with a sedative. We usually prescribe these for anxiety related problems. It could make you sleepy—you'd better wait to take it before bed."

T., who has accompanied me into the examining room for my latest eczema consultation, leaned up expectantly up from her perch on the edge of the examination table. After the Hoerst and Sandoz agent exited, she whispered:

"Why didn't he give you blood tests?"

"He's the doctor," I mumbled struggling with my shirt sleeve, "Doctors know best, right?"

Later in the night, I took the sedative with a mouthful of dealcoholized beer in front of the TV PBS documentary marking the 25th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination. Might as well follow the adolescent ethos to try everything once...

Just as Oswald was led forth handcuff-cuffed from the basement of the Dallas police station, a numbness invaded the brain. At the same time, an alarm honked through the fog: *'Just what the fuck is going on here? At which point do I fight back?'*

1988, November

The consolation of baldness: 

Sinking downward on the Mall escalator towards Shoppers Drug Mart, I clutched in my pocket the latest RX from Dr. C. for even stronger cortisone. With suppurated hand hidden in one pocket and the other sleeve dangling, I was jarred again by the fear of something more lethal behind the leprous rash, mental lassitude and queasiness of late.

In that piercing terror, I conjured the faces of my sweet fledglings. What would become of them in my absence? Would T. take them back to Zimbabwe? Since even MT is still too young to retain a memory of me, perhaps I should already be composing a tape letter that someday she and her younger sister could listen to:

"Remember that no matter how tough things get: remember your late father fiercely loved you both. His hope was that you might keep a photo of him holding you as a talisman of comfort and strength..."

At the escalator bottom I was snapped back to attention by the approach of a pair of longhaired greasers in black leather jackets. Too late to avoid a change of direction, I stepped awkwardly between them.

"Hey, granddad!" one grunted, "Hey, do you want to buy some here hair? I'll sell it to ya *real* cheap!"

For noticing only baldness—I could well have shaken their hands in gratitude...

1988, December

The following excerpts from the first 2 years back in Canada begin with the gaining of a tiny foothold:

Of the briefly serendipitous: ☀

On the 4th Avenue UBC bus at 4 PM at Granville Street, a wizened lady in the neat brown raincoat, redolent of cloves and sherry, eased herself down beside me. As we were crossing the Granville Bridge, she suddenly pointed at the patch of blue over English Bay and chirped:

"Look at that sun!"

Ours were not the only heads turned thirstily towards the first break in the grey for more than a week.

"It has real warmth in it," she smiled.

"Let's give it a few more weeks," I chuckled, "It's still February. Maybe middle of March we can be feel surer about spring."

She began reciting: "*Spring wakens and my regret— becomes an April violet...*"

Startled, I caught her eyes, rheumy and pale blue.

"Thank you," I smiled.

"I believe that was Tennyson," she said. Delicately she touched the shivering wattles of her throat. The Chinese man holding the rail above us, turned with a wince from the smell of sherry.

"When you're nearing the end, it helps to think positively," she said.

"It doesn't matter what your age is," I said, "It's important to appreciate every day."

"Yes", she said, "there's something beautiful in every day."

Even though the brief and serendipitous encounter ended in this exchange of platitudes— her snippet of poetry will endure...

1989, February

Feral Nordics: 

After they were cooped up though a Saturday morning watching cartoons, I took the girls out to the apartment complex playground just beneath our balcony. With the chilly air and seesaw too wet for little TE, within 10 minutes I was ready to bring them back inside. Still, eyeing a few other little girls approaching, MT wanted to stay longer. Thinking she might make friends; I came back up to the apartment with TE and watched my 4-year-old from the balcony railing:

MT had one hand on the chain of the swing as the 3 little girls, all in bright ski jackets, scuffed into the concrete playground. Suddenly, one blonde girl jumped towards MT and spat. Another of the little feral blondes rushed forward and scooped up a handful of mud.

Before my beloved cried out, I was shoudering through the door and was leaping down the back steps.

“It’s OK, honey.”

She wailed, bewildered by the hostility. Swooping her up, I glared at the urchins who had retreated to the edge of the parking lot.

Back in the apartment, I brought her story books into the living room. At the corner desk I tried to return to the linguistics course work, but my chest still thumped. What else can be expected until we move from these white-trash environs?

“Read to me, dad!”

A few moments later she was holding up a *Berenstain Bears* book, tugging my arm. The first encounter with unprovoked meanness, had hopefully disappeared without an imprint.

1989, March

A shaft of wane sunlight, breaking: ☀

A shaft of wane sunlight broke through the cedars of Burnaby Mountain illuminating the faces of our two little girls as they ran down the slope of Discovery Park. In mittened hands they clutched clods of wet snow. Then came their mom, running after, arms outstretched for balance in the snow. Laughing, she suddenly sank to her knees, throwing her own snowball at the squealing girls...

Can food or water any more vital than such moments?

1989, November

fwt

An unteachable moment: 

I was standing in the complex parking lot directing the newly licensed T. in parking the AMC Eagle. The faint smell of burning oil reminded me of our folly in not getting the vehicle checked by a mechanic. I had taken T.'s word that our neighbours, B. and her husband, selling their belongings before leaving for Alberta, were both trustworthy.

As I motioned T. between the parking lines, I heard what sounded like the vile 'n' word hurled from behind. It had to have come from the pudgy boy gawking from the middle of the playground.

In a jolt of rage, I strode over and shook a finger in his weaselly face. "I know who you are."

Cornered, he snarled back. "Who am I? What's my name?" In the dull eyes was an animal hatred.

I glared back, sensing he knew my threat was empty.

"Listen, I've seen you around here before. I *know* who you are."

"You *don't* know why am!" he mocked.

I measured the dun features. Such coldness of the voice of a boy no older than 10! He could well be the spawn of the hillbilly hamlets of my native province.

"You better be careful, kid. You'll get yourself in a lot of trouble."

Utterly unfazed, the feral boy smirked back. Meanwhile T. had parked and little TE was toddling forward, pressing her face into my side.

"What's the matter?" T. asked, looking towards the street rat.

"I'll tell you later," I whispered.

I trundled my innocents up the back stairs to our apartment, vowing that never again—not for 5 minutes—would I allow the girls to play in this wretched concrete playground. At the same time, I wondered about the likelihood of slashed tires.

Still, how badly I dealt with the situation! Was that not a missed opportunity to have planted a tiny seed? In a twinge of sadness, I realized that an authentic teacher would have taken that as a teachable moment.

1989, December

Sleeping beauties: 

At 6:15 AM, with buttoned overcoat and just a minute away from the bus stop, I paused at the foot of the bunk beds. So as not to wake my sleeping beauties, I lightly patted the quilt on the top bunk where my 4 1/2 year old slept. I then crouched to see her 2 1/2 year old sister curled in the bottom bunk. For a breathless moment, I watched my infant daughter's sleeping face in wonderment:

"15 years now, some lucky young fellow's heart will surely beat wildly in the mere thought of this girl..."

Gently, I leaned forward and kissed near the part of her hair where a purple plastic barrette was fastened. Could I have ever dreamed for daughters more beautiful?

1990, March

fwt

First hint of spring on Burnaby Mountain: 

In the glory of budding branches and birdsong, I paused midway up the hydro line slash and looked down Burnaby Mountain. The ease with which I climbed the steep trail stirred hope. How could I have so much energy while harbouring a growing malignancy? Even with a second needle biopsy of the swollen node scheduled for next week—this morning was the first time in two months that the gnawing fear was absent...

In a surge of excitement, I made these promises to myself:

‘I *will* learn how to defeat fear and torpor... If I am spared to advance to middle age or beyond, I *will* rue the wasting of time... I will *not* hope for more time when my presence is no longer needed by others...’

“OK?” I said aloud, startled in the sound of my voice, “OK?”

Pressing on up the cut towards University Drive, I felt for a moment like the De Niro character in *The Deer Hunter*, stalking the stag on the mountain. Just as he spared the deer locked in his rifle sights—any reprieve I am granted will require some very personal sacrifice...

-1990, March

The following are excerpts from 1990-1994 notebooks. This period encompassed a move to a better neighbourhood, an ongoing struggle for job security and the welcome of a brother for two older sisters:

Encounter on North Road: 

With the AMC Eagle lemon parked until we are able to unload it for a pittance of what we spent in repairs over the year—we are back to taking the bus.

"Why do we have to take the bus, daddy?" whined MT as we waited at the North Road intersection for the light to change, "I hate the bus."

"I hate it too, honey—but the car's broken."

T., holding little TE's hand, stared stonily ahead. I scuffed at the curb. "Don't worry—we're going to get another car soon—a nice car this time."

MT, reaching for my hand, planted her other thumb in mouth and flinched in the roar of a passing mag-wheeled Jeep that blasted heavy metal rock.

Finally, the pedestrian light turned. "OK, T., let's walk," I shouted.

As the four of us holding hands, stepped into the crosswalk, an oncoming red sedan veered towards the turning lane. A leering youth with backwards baseball cap stuck his head out the window.

"Get those fuckin' half breeds out of the road!" he yelled.

My heart pounded. "Did you hear what that asshole said?"

"No," said T.

"He called our kids half-breeds." I pointed toward the car as it made a right turn into the strip mall. We stood frozen on the sidewalk as the doors of the red sedan flung open and the two youths climbed out. They walked toward the liquor store.

T.'s eyes narrowed, she-bear instincts bristling. "I will talk to those bastards." She pulled TE's hand toward the strip mall entrance.

I jerked MT's arm forward to catch up. "No, no—please, T. that's not a good idea." I held her elbow. "They could be drunk. They're probably itching for an excuse to kick our heads in—not that it's personal."

"The bastards," she flared, "it's racism—it's against the law!"

"Of course, it is," I said, "but do you want to take the chance of confronting a drunken yahoo? Fuck them—let's get out of here."

As we walked together back toward the greenbelt safety of Burnaby Mountain, MT chided:

"Daddy are we going to get a new car? Really?"

T. scowled. What was more bitter for her: the vile words or my timorous reaction?

"I promise we will honey," I said, in a jab of shame.

1990, August

fwt

Beauty on a slippery path: 

After 6 months living in Pine Ridge, I have found a shortcut that gets me down to the bus stop on Lougheed Highway within 15 minutes. The scramble down the muddy path at dawn this morning was the highlight of the day:

After crossing the road below Pine Grove, I wound past the same bushes (now bare and frost-rimed) where the girls and I picked salmon-berries last spring. From that point, I skirted the coop townhouses down to the clearing where mist was rising in the early light. About 200 meters further down a steep path—across the open expanse of a park was a panoramic view of Mount Baker. At 7:45 AM, that northern sentinel of the Cascade Range was silhouetted before a rose-tinged horizon.

The beauty of this morning's sunrise evoked a memory from the bleak December of 2 years ago:

I was just stepping off a crowded bus at Lougheed loop after hours of futilely dropping resumes in downtown Vancouver. At that same moment, the whole western sky was glowing orange in the solstice sunset. My eyes teared in gratitude. I wondered if such beauty was *only* revealed to those in despair...

I was still in the warmth of this reflection as the view of Mount Baker receded into the treetops and the path grew darker. Then suddenly one foot slipped, and I was flailing for balance. I barely missed an ass-over-teakettle tumble! The only casualty was my shoulder bag which flew off and splatted into the mud. Yet far from the sulllying the moment—I took the near miss as another of the myriad practical lessons bestowed in the last year...

1990, December

Following boot prints: 

Dutifully in single file, my 2 girls followed me through the dazzling snow along the trail behind our townhouse complex.

I glanced behind at my 3-year-old. She was chewing on her mitten while picking her way along my boot prints. Bringing up the rear, my 5-year old asked:

“Are we going to make popcorn when we go home, da? You promised!”

“Yes, I promised,” I said. “But let’s not think about later right now. Let’s just enjoy the walk.”

We plodded on a little further in silence before she piped up from behind.

“I’m cold!”

“Me too,” said her younger sister.

In a twinge of disappointment, I crouched down and squeezed MT’s red-mitten hand.

“Just listen for a minute,” I said gently. “it’s not good to always think about later. You can always find something nice about *now*— wherever you are. Just look!” I nodded toward the patch of snow ahead, illuminated in a stripe on pale light. “Isn’t that beautiful?”

Tentatively, MT nodded.

“Look at those trees,” I went on “look at their branches. Don’t they look like arms reaching up towards the sky?”

Both girls looked forlornly, arms pulled up into sleeves.

“So even though winter isn’t your favorite time of year—winter can still be beautiful. You just have to look in the right places. Magic is everywhere— you just have to look carefully not to miss it.”

“Magic— like in Sleeping Beauty waking up?” asked MT.

“Even more special than that,” I said. “Like remembering a long time from now going on a walk on a sunny winter day with your dad and sister. What do you think?”

“I think it’s a magic day and a beautiful day,” she said dutifully.

“Yu don’t have to say what I say,” I said, rising to my feet, “I just hope you’re glad about this time together.”

“I’m gonna repeat everything you say, dad,” she said. Rocking side to side through the crunching snow, she called out in a singsong voice:

“It’s beautiful magic... It’s a beautiful day... Very, very beaut-i-ful....”

I laughed, reminded for a moment of the old poem by L. Cohen: ‘*God is alive and magic is afoot...*’

So, what do you think, TE?” I asked my 3-year old.

For her part, little TE was intent on lifting each foot into the big boot prints without breaking edges.

1991, January

fwt

Of the appetite for ‘aishron’: 

At 4:00 PM, I was hunching in the shelter at Kootenay Loop after 5 hours with an unhappy class.

Having just missed my connecting bus by one minute—I had at least 29 minutes longer to endure in a urine-tainted quarter, once deemed by the *Georgia Straight* to be among “the 5 most depressing places in Vancouver.”

I looked up from kicking at the oil-soaked gravel just in time to see a First-Natives girl just 3 meters away, lean into the garbage bin and vomit. Too late to tear eyes away from the backsplash on the ground beside her, I stepped further away from the sour whiff.

Stepping deeper into the shelter, I noted that the faded green wall was scored with graffiti. Apart from the conventional obscenities, much of it was illegible. One notable exception was a stick-figure drawing of a crucifix under which was scrawled in fresh black marker pen: ‘*Save me holy mother Mary, fellating Christ on the cross...*’

In further morbid curiosity, I stepped back outside and looked across the bus lane. Among the passengers lining up were a diminutive couple—the slick-haired gent in plaid jacket and his pudgy gal in pink slacks. What pity that Diane Arbus—if not Pieter Bruegel—can’t be here to capture this moment? As they, in turn, stole glances at me—it occurred that others passing here are just as likely to view me as the *piece de resistance* of this afternoon’s Kootenay Loop grotesquerie...

A half hour later, headed down Holdom St. towards Forest Grove, I wondered why, in over the last 2 years, the empty seat next to me was invariably the last one taken. It was certainly not that the fat leather bag clutched on my knee contained a bomb or a bulging catheter tube...

Looking out the smeared window as we turned into the greener environs of Greystone Drive, I took a slow breath. Surely, there were glimpses of beauty missed! Surely there would not have been such appetite for ‘*aishron*’ this afternoon had it not been for the sloppy lesson plan...

1991, February

Of the want of street smarts: 

When I scurried across Broadway Avenue toward the bus shelter, a burly native Indian man in baseball cap stepped toward me.

"Are you a fuckin' reporter?" he growled.

I pretended not to hear but couldn't help myself from looking behind.

"Hey, you!"

I turned my back, pretending to read the posters in the bus shelter. Yet again it seemed I had a target pinned to my back.

"Hey!"

Reeking of cheap wine, he lurched towards me.

"Hey, I know you're a reporter." He tipped his forehead towards my bulging bookbag. "All you want to write about is the bullshit goin' on in Kuwait."

For a few seconds I hoped he was a friendly drunk—eager to talk with any random pedestrian who would hear him out. Maybe he just thought I looked approachable. But then he thrust his face menacingly closer, piggy eyes narrowed:

"Well, let me tell you there's a lot of worse shit goin' on right here in Vancouver. Why don't you jackasses write about that?"

Unwisely I turned away.

"You won't talk to me?" He roared, "You think you're better than me?"

A glance in both directions revealed only a timid Chinese fellow and a tired old white woman also queuing up to the bus. Both of them pretended not to notice.

Too close to make a quick break, I faced his scowl.

"Listen, I'm not a reporter. I'm just waiting here for a bus. I don't want any hassles."

"What did you say, you fuckin' jerk?"

He took a step forward, clenching fists. I hopped backwards, turned and sprang away.

"You fuckin' jackass!" he bellowed after me as I jogged down Broadway, shoulder bag flopping. "Come back here and I'll smash your fuckin' face in!"

Neck hairs tingled but I dared not turn around. As the taunts dissolved into the roar of traffic, I slowed down.

Why in hell didn't I just ask him what he thought about the war? All this unpleasantness for the want of rudimentary street smarts!

1991, March

fwt

Neighbourhood vigilante: 

With the mid-May sunset past 8:30 PM, this evening I had my peanut butter sandwich on a bench in the tiny park behind the school parking lot.

For the remainder of the short dinner break, I intended to listen to the latest tape letter from old neighbour, Wolf, in Germany. Having borrowed the kids' red Walkman, I donned the headphones and set about deciphering his latest guttural rant. It was the usual scree: the perfidy of Gorbachev in betraying the Soviet Union; glorying in the antics of the IRA; the treachery of German feminists... Within moments, I was aware that someone had lurched from the periphery and dropped beside me on the park bench.

With a "pardon me, sir?" smile, I half turned to see the face of a grizzled man of uncertain age, wearing paint-spattered green coveralls. His eyes, behind Coke bottle-thick glasses, looked addled either by drugs or by madness.

"Those bitches over there hate me!" he muttered pointing his nose towards the low-income apartment building on the east side of the park.

I patted the headphones and turned away. Looking towards the distant grey wall of the sugar refinery, I pretended to be concentrating on my tape.

Still, I could not help flinching when the bench sharer growled:

"What do ya need ta listen to someone else's voice for? Can't ya listen ta what's goin' on in your *own* fuckin' head?"

When I did not respond, he made a buzzing sound, as if playing a trumpet. "I *know* what I'm talkin' about. Dope makes your mind clear, ya know."

Smiling tightly, I looked down over to the bottom of the park. Near the Wall St. fence, a couple of chubby women sat on a blanket with a baby stroller parked between them. I might just as well be alone.

"You stupid fuck!"

I could pretend to ignore him no longer. With the Wolf's political rant still droning in the headphones, I pushed further away on the bench:

"Excuse me, sir?" I asked with feigned calm.

"Stupid fuck," Behind the smeared lenses his dilated eyes twitched. "There's someone around here killin' old ladies. I'm lookin' for him and I'm gonna catch him!"

As Wolf's taped voice railed on, I was eerily transfixed by the mad voice outside the headphones. It pulled like some lethal electro-magnetic field.

"I'm gonna catch 'em, and when I do— I'm gonna kill 'em. I'm gonna kill 'em on the spot!"

In a testicle-retracting instant, an imagined knife flashed forth. I hit the pause button and dropped the earphones onto my neck. Feigned a yawn, I then rose and sidestepped onto the path. When I glanced behind from a safer distance, I saw that the neighbourhood vigilante had moved to the opposite side of the bench.

1991, June

fwt

Lesson on Leviticus: 

Before the Thanksgiving dinner to which we were invited by JR, my teaching colleague—T. and were seated at the backyard table beside our host's neighbour, Betty. A long-time resident of Maple Ridge, the 70-year-old button-holed T. with the usual questions ('Where are you from? How long have you been here? Do you like it here?'). When hearing that we were expecting our 3rd child, old Betty seemed mildly shocked. After asking T. how many weeks along she was, she launched into a 'lecture' on the ethics of abortion:

"I used to belong to an evangelical church," she pulled back a grey thatch behind her ear, "and I had many questions about the abortion issue at the time. I wanted to go right to the *source*. My pastor helped me get in touch with a Jewish scholar in Vancouver. Actually, he was a Rabbi." Her neck quivered in a nod of authority. "The Rabbi said the answer is right back in the old Testament: right back in the Pentateuch..."

With a rinsing swig of Kokanee, she continued:

"The Book of Leviticus describes the kind of beast that Jehovah demanded for sacrifice. It couldn't be an unclean animal like a pig or dog. Even the sheep or cow chosen for sacrifice had to be clean. It couldn't have any flaws or defects... God's warning came after some members of the ancient Hebrew tribes tried to offer up their old beasts. Even ones with cleft palates or missing limbs. They tried to keep the best animals for themselves. You think Jehovah would let them get away with that?" She shook her head. "Of course not. He was *furious*!" Her upper arms jiggled in emphasis. "So, you see—the Book of Leviticus is essentially Jehovah's warning to His people. Only perfect beasts—physically flawless—are good enough for Him."

The old woman wheezed and took another meditative sip of beer. "So, you see the connection? The same law went for His faithful. If you read between the lines of the Holy Scripture—the Book of Leviticus—you will understand that that ancient Hebrews knew that bringing a deformed child into the world dishonoured Jehovah. It was just like bringing a defective beast for a burnt offering... Excuse me!" She coughed and swiped her mottled nose. "What I got from my studies of those ancient texts is that God wants his faithful to bring flawless babies into the world. To honour Him and be raised in His image, human beings should begin their lives pure and whole..." She smiled. "Does this make sense? Sorry, I know it's a complicated subject."

I looked at T., She was smiling too, apparently just being polite. Yet Betty wasn't quite finished.

"What *was* that?" She wiggled fat fingers to coax forth another titbit. "Yes, there's even a sacred Hebrew text—I forget which one—which states exactly when the soul enters the body. I believe it's 24 months."

"You mean 24 weeks?" I suggested.

She squeaked the rim of her beer glass. "No, I'm pretty sure it was 24 *months*."

Just then JR's wife, M., leaned out of the door to announce that dinner was about to be served. Creaking up from our patio chairs and moving towards the buffet offerings on the kitchen table, I grinned to Betty:

"Well honestly, I'm not Christian but I am interested in history. I appreciated your information about the Old Testament."

Well, I'm studied it long and hard," she said gravely.

I squeezed past her to the side of T. who was filling paper plates for MT and TE who would be eating with JR's kids at the kids' table. I lightly patted her back. She touched her belly, protective of our own new seed, growing.

1991, October

fwt

William Blake on Burnaby Mountain: 

"Look at this blade of grass. Just see how exquisite it is."

On a picnic table at Discovery Park, I twirled a sprig of green between thumb and forefinger under the eye of 5-year-old TE who dawdled on my lap. Several metres away, her older sister, MT, pulled her mother towards the railing. As they look downed over the soaring panorama of Burrard Inlet, T. held one hand over her swollen middle. Any day now our third baby will arrive.

Twirling the grass and fleetingly thinking of William Blake, I murmured. "A very famous poet believed that that every single grain of sand can hold both heaven and hell inside it."

"What are you talking about, dad?" said TE, snuggling into my side.

"Just think of it, honey: there's a universe without and a universe within!"

Whether from the momentary transportation of sublimity or from the rising anxiety of the days to come— my head was whirling. In the fear of blacking out, I pressed palm to forehead and took slow deep breaths. It was an instant either on the edge of schizophrenia or of epiphany...

1992, April

fwt

Amid the bright tableau: 

Holding margarine tubs half-filled with the season's first salmonberries, MT and TE walked home beside me along the Forest Grove trail. As we drew up beside a clump of buttercups, I plucked up a spray. Touching the tiny flowers to MT's chin, I asked:

"What do you call a bunch of buttercups, honey?"

Well acquainted with the invitation to play a little word game she smiled:

"It's a *wedding* of buttercups. That's what it looks like to me."

"A wedding? That's great, honey! TE, what does it look like to you?"

As is her habit, my 4 ½-year-old hesitated.

"T?"

"A birthday party."

"A birthday party of buttercups. Wonderful! Now it's my turn. Let me think." I looked up the trail. "OK, I see a *riot* of buttercups."

Holding her plastic tub tightly, MT tugged up another buttercup. Holding it close to her sister's face, she chanted: "Open your mouth and close your eyes and you will have a big surprise."

"No, honey." I waved my hand. It might even be poisonous."

Amid the green moistness, we ambled on. It was a perfect spring afternoon.

"Did I ever tell you the story about the spring day I nearly poisoned a friend of my older sister?"

"You told us that story, da," said MT.

Undaunted, I warbled on. "I gave her a piece of the root of a plant we called 'Indian turnip.' It wasn't deadly poison but just one bite of it would make a person's mouth feel like it was jabbed with hot needles. I was a *horrible* little boy—I thought it was funny. Poor girl. Her father sure was mad when he heard about it."

"Her father beat you, right?"

"He probably should have."

"Dad, how do you remember all that stuff?"

I shook shoulders. "Well, you have to work at remembering details. I write a lot of stuff down. I hope you do that too, M."

We moved on silently for a few minutes from the canopy of green into the open field. We momentarily stopped over the culvert looking down at the rust-tinged creek.

"You must have had a really happy childhood."

I was startled as much by her prescient tone as by the comment itself.

"Well, honey." I said, "You can't forget the bad stuff, but good memories do tend to be stronger. A day like today with the whole summer to look forward to can become a wonderful memory..."

I stopped and caught MT's eyes. " Maybe 20 years from now— this will a happy memory for you, honey? What do you think?"

Without answering, she bent to scoop up a handful of pebbles from the path. Over the culvert bank she tossed the stones into the tainted water.

"Are you having a happy childhood?" I asked her after the satisfying splash.

"Maybe."

"How about you, T.?" I asked TE, a little guilty for not drawing her in earlier.

"Yes."

"What did you say honey?"

"I said yes, daddy."

I squeezed my TE's hand, as the three of edged out of the bright tableau of the unforgettable— back into the blurry periphery.

1992, May

A Snow globe, perhaps to be shaken: 

While 5-year-old TE held the penlight, I rolled up a fat cigar of dirty snow—dead leaves and all.

"Ready with your snowball, M.?" I asked her 7-year-old sister.

Our snowman which was taking shape was just a metre from the bushes where we gathered blackberries 5 months ago.

"O.K., let's go down to the stream to get 2 stones for the eyes."

After MT brought the eyes, TE pushed in the nose—a carrot we'd brought from the fridge.

Brushing my jacket, I stepped back to assess our work. The head was a little lopsided, but the face bore a rictus grin.

Each in turn, the girls gave their snowperson a kiss.

"Let's throw snowballs, on the way home," said MT, skipping ahead.

Slogging after the squealing sisters, I lumbered like a zombie, snowball poised.

"Run, T., run!" shouted MT to her giggling sister. Still squealing, they ran ahead through the dusk.

So what if I should be working on tomorrow's lesson plan? Swallowing back the sour reminder of duty, I caught a shimmer of a shaken snow globe, 30 years hence...

1992, December

Among the delicious moments: 

The dark blue of Boundary Bay was hazy. With the tide slack, the tidal flats below Crescent Beach stretched out for more than half a kilometre. In a blazing sun of late May, 9-year-old MT and I sloshed through the lukewarm tide pools, slowly making our way towards the tower-like structures exposed by the slack tide.

“Look at the bubbles!” said MT.

“Those are clams,” I said. “If you dig fast enough you might get a live one. In the meantime, careful not to step on the broken shells. They’re sharp.”

“That’s why T. was scared to come out here,” she said.

“She’ll want to come later when you tell her about all the neat stuff you saw in the tide pools.”

Back on the beach, 7-year-old TE, sitting with her mom and baby brother MH, were undiscernible among the scores of sunbathers.

“Look, here’s a really big one.” MT knelt to pull up another clamshell.

I scanned the hazy littoral, relishing the warmth. “Amazing to think, M., ‘but did you know that our ancestors—hundreds of thousands of years ago—were shore dwellers?’”

“What are shore-dwellers?”

I stopped to wiggle my foot into the mud. “People who lived by the seashore. They spent their time gathering clams and crabs and oysters and birds’ eggs. They fished. It was a good life—don’t you think?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t take too many, honey.” I slid my foot across the slippery seaweed. “Don’t you love this feeling on your bare feet?”

“Yeah.” She shook the mud off the top shell. “It feels good.” She picked her way around the stretch of broken clamshells.

“It’s like taking your feet to the movies and buying them a big popcorn.”

“What do you mean, da?”

“That’s just a metaphor honey.” I glanced up at the wheeling seagulls.

“What’s a metaphor?”

"Just a comparison."

"Hey, daddy, another clam squirted at you!"

"He's just trying to breathe," I squinted away from the white-hot sun, "Just like we are."

As MT wiggled her toes in the tidepool, I looked around from the still receding tide to the beach. It was certainly a panorama to be captured and savoured—especially on the darkest of winter days...

1993, May

fwt

Of collegiality: 

"One strength of this department has been its collegiality. That's why I love working here."

The Assistant Department Head, running for a second term, was speaking before the bare quorum of faculty who showed up in the cafeteria after work for the formality of her re-election.

"Before you think of yourself as senior faculty with opposing interest of junior faculty—or vice versa—just look around. Most of the people here are about your same age. You could be working with these same people for the next 20 years. That's why our collegiality is so important."

Ignoring the discomfort, she went on. "Don't think I'm knocking seniority rules. In fact, I believe that it is absolutely critical to maintain seniority when it comes to cut-backs and lay-offs. That's where it really matters. Maybe with holiday scheduling, though, we can be collegial. Maybe sometimes individual circumstances can be taken into account."

At that instant there was the crackle of turning pages of the *Vancouver Sun*, nonchalantly read by the cadaverous SE, who resided near the very top of the seniority list.

"Remember too," warned the soon to be re-elected Assistant Department Head, "if there are bumpings into this department from outside—then some of you who considered yourselves senior before—might suddenly become junior... But anyway," she gave her stiff smile, "Anyway, I'm happy for the opportunity serve for another term... Is that all?"

She looked nervously towards the shop steward who on cue, jolted up to distribute the ballots...

A moment later, I dropped my ballot in the box, with a smile to the Assistant Department Head.

Indeed, I was quite pleased to support a supervisor who would dare question the inviolable sanctity of seniority in even a minor aspect. After all, 'seniors' and their privileges here are as untouchable as made guys in the Mafia.

In a rueful turn, while trudging up the stairs to the resource room I thought that she really could not have believed her remarks about "collegiality." Maybe she was making more of a plea than stating an opinion. Whether or not the better angels will more readily reveal themselves here—maybe there is hope. At least there is no shoving around the photocopier...

I then thought of the *Vancouver Courier* clipping that the Assistant Dept. Head had recently placed on the copy room notice board. It was a report about a single woman terminally ill with a rare cancer. What was most heart-rending was that the woman had briefly worked in this department. She had been hired around the same time as was I, but she disappeared just a month later.

In the article, the terminally ill woman was quoted: "*Dying isn't so bad—it's just dying in degradation and leaving behind young children.*"

Under the clipping was a sympathy card and a paper pocket beside it with a pointing arrow and caption: '*Suggested \$10 donation.*' Out of 40 potential contributors, there were as yet only 5 signatures.

1993, June

fwt

Poverty redeemed: 

On the carpet with 2-year-old MH on my lap, I listened to the stereo while catching the last rays of the sunset through the balcony glass door. If MH had not been dozing, I would certainly have been bellowing along with the L. Cohen CD borrowed from the library. It was '*Lady Midnight*', heard for the first time in years, that brought me nearly to tears.

Rocking MH gently and nuzzling his soft hair, I shivered in an almost epiphanic certainty: so, *this* is what I've been missing! With just a weekly infusion of beautiful music—all the dreariness of work—all the foul smells, and growls and blaring noises would probably be much more bearable...

At the same time, there was a chastening for the worry of money that has so troubled of late: car payments, fees for boring Education courses—all while supporting the family of 5 on insecure ESL settlement work. It struck me that the only *real* poverty to dread was the absence of these sublime aesthetic moments... Meanwhile, in hearing beautiful music amid a beautiful sunset with one's infant son sleeping on shoulder—who could be richer?

Ad. Note: Recall taking carrying little MH though the balcony door 2 nights ago to touch for the first time in his life—snow. By his look of sheer delight—a day otherwise dreary—was redeemed.

1994, February

fwt

Tenderfoot Wiccans at summer Solstice: 

Marking the summer solstice with a hop around of the stone circle on Burnaby Mountain has been something of a family tradition. Even in the middle of a work week, the ritual was not to be ignored.

However anxious about tomorrow's lesson plan, I drove up to the park after supper with the girls while T. stayed home with little MH. Just as last year, I watched the 2 girls hop around the stones while making their "secret" wishes for the coming year.

MT went first, stopping for a few seconds on each stone to make her wish.

"Careful, don't fall!" I warned as she wind-milled after jumping the widest gap in the stones.

"Your turn, honey."

Next TE, more cautious, stepped down onto the grass between the longer gaps. When she completed the circle, I took my turn—loudly whispering my 'wishes' (for family health, continuing employment, domestic peace etc.) before each hop anti-clockwise around the 20 stones.

Afterwards, I sat back on the grass. TE dove down and ducked her head under my arm and MT sat quietly on my right side. The 3 of us looked down the ribbon of Hastings St. towards the fuzzy Mordor of downtown Vancouver. It was a beautiful evening. With the clear sky, the sun would not set until at least 10:30 PM.

"This is one of my favourite places," I said, "and this is my favourite time of year. It's just a little sad that tomorrow the days start getting shorter again."

But summer is still coming, isn't it?" asked MT, a little worried.

"Of course—you won't notice the days getting shorter for at least another month."

The girls looked serious.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we could stay here all night to celebrate? What do you think, M?"

"I think we might get itchy in this grass," she said, scratching her arm. "But we could sleep on the balcony."

"Yeah, can we do that?" TE pulled my arm, "MH could sleep between us!"

"Let's see what you mom says. I'll have to go to bed early."

"You always go to bed early," admonished my eldest.

"Just wish I didn't have to work tomorrow!"

I rose in the jab of tomorrow's unplanned lessons.

Still, on the walk back to the car, I felt a modest surge of the pagan blood. As the girls ran ahead, I looked back to the circle of stones. Very likely the Wiccans will come here at dusk and cavort until dawn. Were it not for the grind—would a middle-aged tender foot really dare to steal back here and join them?

1994, June

fwt

Whither tenderness?

" How did your raincoat get dirty? Who pushed you down?"

T. was half-watching the dinner hour TV news while I was kneeling at the side of the sofa filling my bookbag. I was just 15 minutes away from heading out for the evening shift.

"What do you mean? I told you I slipped in the mud, running to catch the bus."

My wife's style of banter in listless boredom was not unfamiliar.

"So why didn't you get back last night until nearly 11:00 PM? Your class ends at 9:30 PM, isn't it?"

"I told you, T. If I miss the #152 bus, I have to wait for a half hour for the next one."

She leaned forward on the sofa and touched my back. "So why do you carry so much cash in your wallet?"

"What in hell are you talking about?

With a chuckle and shake of head, she began fiddling with the pile of children's books on the coffee table. "You know what I'm talking about!" she said, with a teasing finger jab.

Just what was she imagining? Did she really suspect me of having some Jekyll and Hyde transformation by which I partook of vices in a nocturnal netherworld? Did it not occur that such a fantasy could not possibly allow for a 2-hour commute and a 6-hour nightly teaching grind?

Meanwhile, we both turned to the TV report featuring the demonstration of infrared cameras mounted in helicopters. Such technology, the reporter claimed, would soon be used to search wilderness roads for the bodies of missing persons.

"Why don't you just go to the police and confess?" T. leaned forward again with another playful poke.

"That's not funny, T."

"It's not a joke." She went back to straightening the kids' books.

I rose, swinging the heavy bag over shoulder. "Ok, I confess," I sighed, "It *was* me. I committed all the unsolved murders going back 40 years. All the ones you know so much about by watching 'America's Most Wanted'"

"Yes, I know you have more victims than Henry Lucas", she said. "You better go straight to the police station. I'll just tell the kids that daddy's going away for a long, long, time..."

"OK, See you in 100 years."

She turned her cheek towards me for a kiss. Whither tenderness in the barbs of these playful pokes?

1994, November



fwt