

## Beauty and the Bestial (2000-2004)

Κάλλος 

αἰσχος 

*The turmoil of separation and divorce, although not directly referred to in these pieces, is a key contextual determinant.*

**Chartreuse-haunted:** 

The last time I tasted Chartreuse was in April, 1974. I was reminded of that when looking through old journal notes a few days ago. The details of the last weeks before final departure from my natal province are somehow suffused with the taste of that French herbal liqueur: slightly bitter with subtle undertones...

With half a mind to begin transcribing those old notes into digital text, it occurred that another taste of Chartreuse might serve as an *aide de memoire*, in a modestly analogous manner of Proust's Madeleine cake.

I decided to buy a bottle for this weekend. Every time I drove past Westwood St. liquor store though the week, a tiny trill of anticipation in that intention was tweaked.

Yesterday afternoon with the work week behind, I eagerly pulled into the Westwood strip mall. Not anticipated was the jab of gloom felt in passing the Roger's video store—where last September I rammed the car over a concrete post. It was thereafter that I resolved to foreswear all luxuries up to the value of the \$1200 lost in repairs. After 5 months, much of that debt for reparations remains.

So, it was with a slightly sour taste that I made my way to the liqueur aisle. Both green and yellow Chartreuse were available—in both full and half sizes. But \$30 for a half bottle? I picked up the half bottle of the green, tentatively jiggling it and even sniffing the cap. Plainly, I was still not ready to appreciate it.

I left the store with empty tote-bag and a tiny satisfaction for holding to my austerity vow. Yet before crossing the parking lot, the swell of rectitude had already deflated...

Still, last evening I did allow myself the 3 bottles of Black Label beer (the cheapest brand available) pushed into the back of the fridge since Christmas.

I drank them in accompaniment of the library video of '*Last Tango in Paris*'. That movie, too, has a connection with memories of 1974. It was the movie first seen during the ugly breakup with the college girlfriend.

The beer was slightly skunky, and the tease of sadomasochistic erotica was the last thing needed. Still, I glumly let the tape squeak through to the end.

With soured stomach, I dropped the empties in the corner of the garbage-reeking garage. I then went back into my work alcove to shut off the humming computer. I had left it on since morning in the hope that I might possibly get around to beginning the '74 notebook transcription.

Yet I'd pissed away the afternoon on web-surfing and the evening on a tormenting old movie. So it was, I turned off the light even more deeply haunted by Chartreuse.

*2000, February*

fwt

*Of a razor-sharp conviction:* 

Insomniac on the downstairs sofa at 11:30 PM after the late shift, I flipped through the TV remote. Sore-eyed from the commute back from the 5-hour shift, I settled on the *Showcase* channel, expecting something a little risqué. Instead, I landed in the midst of a documentary about care home workers. Short clips of their interviews were interspersed with on-the-job scenes.

One young orderly with a straggly moustache who seemed speech-impaired was shown cleaning a vegetative-state patient and his soiled bed. From the patient's floppy white legs and the tongue-lolling squint—right to the ordure-stained sheets—the camera spared no detail. From changing sheets, the scene cut to the orderly with 2 other green gowned workmates by a coffee machine. They were sniggering about their charges whom they referred to as '*Brussels sprouts*'. While it was some of the most sickening footage ever witnessed on TV—I watched until the commercial break.

While shamed by my ogling—at least behind the burning eyes there jolted a razor-sharp conviction: yea, I would never live for more than an hour in the capacity of a Brussels sprout...

*2000, March*

*Of alien beauty:* 

The downtown venue of a college-wide ‘Professional Development Day’, allowed for a change in the usual transportation. Instead of crawling in the traffic along Hastings St. this afternoon—I took the West Coast Express.

I had a comfortable seat and a north facing view. With gathering speed, we glided along the waterfront of East Vancouver though warehouses and the looming cranes of the port terminals. In emerging from ravine in the east side of Burnaby, the train snaked along the wooded shoreline of the Burrard Inlet. The spring sunshine set off a dazzling contrast of the blue water with the green North Shore Mountains rising behind. The blur of lighter green below the tracks confirmed that trees would soon be in leaf. What landscape in the world was more beautiful than the northwest in springtime?

As shadows of Burnaby Mountain flitted though the opposite window, the train showed in the approach to Port Moody. I rested chin on my bookbag. Hard as I try to cultivate a passion for this adopted home—these scenes will never move me as they may inspire one native to this soil... So it was that excitement fell as abruptly as it had taken flight...

The mood was a little more wistful as hour later when TE and I set out from the apartment with Chihuahua Romeo, on his leash for a quick circuit of Lefarge Park.

“Is spring your favourite time of year?” I asked.

My 13-year-old nodded.

“It really is wonderful to see the leaves coming out again, I gushed. “Mostly around here, though, we have evergreen trees.” I pointed across to the park. “Mostly cedars, pines and firs. They are majestic in their own way, of course—but not beautiful.”

In cocking his leg in the shrubbery, Romeo provided me a moment to clarify.

“What I mean, honey, is that trees here in Canada just cannot compare in beauty to the palm trees of the tropics. Do you remember those graceful coconut palms outside our guest house in Bali—swaying and rustling in the wind?”

In the silent moment after referring to our trip together last year—I remembered the inspiration of the choosing of her very name: ‘*Beautiful as a palm tree...*’

“Do you remember?”

“Yup,” said the tall and graceful beauty, tugging our sniffing pooch onwards.

*2000, April*

*Of enduring impressions:* 

“There’s a big pile there. That’ll cost at least \$60 to haul away. That’s just the weight—not even countin’ the labour.”

I stood muddled by the open back door as Steve, the backyard fence builder, turned his nose up at the pile the rotting boards.

“I coulda taken that whole thing down in sections. It wouldna takin’ me more than half an hour. Now we gotta pick up all them separate boards. It’s a way bigger job!”

“Shit,” I seethed, “I guess there was some misunderstanding when we talked about this over the phone.”

With crowbar and hammer, 15-year old MT and I had sweated for 2 hours tearing down the old fence, board by rotting board. Grunting and heaving, we had risked splinters and tetanus only for my hope of saving on labour and cartage.

“So now you say it’s gonna cost me \$30 more?” I said with a steely smile.

Steve wiped his forehead with a half-smirk. “Yup, that’s another hour’s labour. You see how fast we tore down that other section? It’s way easier to haul sections away.”

“Shit.”

I ran my hand over the top of top of my head, clammy with sweat.

Still, there was some consolation in remembering an old poem by Robert Frost: “*Two Tramps in Mud-time*”. In it, Frost ruminates on his encounter with a tramp who mocks his wood-splitting efforts. Frost is indignant that another man should try to claim for himself the manual work which the old poet so deeply enjoys...

While the hoary poet was not chastened by soft-handed awkwardness in the world of practical men—the ESL teacher certainly was.



When the sections were hauled away, the old boards designated for firewood still had to be broken up and shorn of dangerous nails. I thought it an ideal Sunday afternoon father-son project. It started out well enough, with the 8-year-old MH steadying the boards over the concrete block while I kicked them apart. The tougher boards were left to be sawed—an effort that was almost immediately frustrated by the dull blade.

“Godammit!”

Even as I cursed, MH bravely held his end with pursed lip concentration. When a board sprang back and struck my knee, I had had quite enough self-punishment.

“Sweet stinking Jesus!”

“MH’s eyes widened.

“I just can’t go on with this!”

“Yeah, you’d better stop,’ said my 8-year-old sagely, “it’s making you cranky.”

“Sorry, M.—this just isn’t me.”

Silently we gathered up the tools.

“I’m gonna ride up and see if Devin’s home, OK, dad?” said my son, relieved to be freed.

“That’s fine, honey. just don’t forget your helmet.”

Watching him bolting away towards the garage to get his bike, I was chastened again by the reminder that images such as those forged forth today may be recalled long after my final exit. Hopefully, the father most vividly remembered will be neither the one cursing a dull saw nor the one scowling before his computer.

*2000, June*

*A place at the card table:* 

With 2 weeks of the vacation gone and the planned projects still untouched—in mid-morning I escaped the basement and drove off to drop off books at the library.

Arriving at the branch 45 minutes before the opening, I walked over to the mall with the excuse to buy stamps. With the orgiastic Christmas season appetite recently sated, the main concourse was nearly deserted. Those few faithful who did show up on a Monday morning in mid-January were drifting towards the Walmart. Joining them, I nodded to the red-haired Downs Syndrome greeter and wandered to the electronic section at the back. Noting the bank of monster TVs all displaying the same cartoons, I was momentarily envious of their size compared with my home screen. On the wall behind was a notice advising of Walmart's easy credit plan. Just what depths of self-loathing would need be plumbed before surrendering to such masochistic temptation?

Unable to bear more of the dim florescence, I exited the rear portals and made my way through the drizzle across the parking lot. With 15 minutes to spare until library opening, I waited in the foyer. In an anteroom to the left of the washroom, was the open door of what appeared to be a drop-in area for seniors.

The large inner room was furnished with plastic tables around which the hoary and infirm were drinking coffee or playing cards. It occurred that these were the largely the folk who had literally missed the boat or the road ship. They missed out on the indexed pensions or wealthy barber investments by which luckier retirees sit in the sun outside their Winnebagos or line up at the cruise ship buffet table.

Still, in enjoying company, the elders of the seniors' center were considerably luckier than those behind confined to care homes drooling before TVs—however immense the screens.

Stepping closer to the door, I took note of the check-in desk, the coffee machine and a table piled high with old magazines.

I shuddered in the reminder that even if my health holds up—I could count on little more than a decade of work in my current *shtick*. If I could accrue 20 years in the college pension plan perhaps, I would get 60% of the full pension. I'll certainly have to count on that given the hummingbird-sized nest-egg assured by a lifetime of pound-foolishness.

In the meantime, why should I feel guilty about planning a getaway winter vacation on my own next year? If I am to end up in a rooming house on a dog-food diet—why not take a few more tropical dives while a little strength holds?

In the meantime, no desire yet to reserve a place at the card table.

*-2001, January*

*The silver apples of the moon:* 

“So, what happens to someone’s writing if someone finds it after they die?”

Helping TE tonight with her grade 12 poetry assignment, I mentioned how Emily Dickenson’s poems were discovered in her drawer after her demise. I segued from that to the anecdote of Max Brod’s decision to go against Franz Kafka’s instructions to burn his writings after his death.

” Is that fair?” she asked.

“It’s a difficult question, honey. It’s hard to come down on either side.”

Sensing her fear for my safety during my trip to Cambodia next month, I pursued the subject no further. Before she fell asleep in her sleeping bag, I did, however, read to her the Yeats poem, ‘*Song of the Wandering Aengus*’ which I used as a frontispiece to my ’81 journal:

*I went out to the hazel wood/ because a fire was in my head/ I cut and peeled a hazel wand/ and hooked a berry to a thread...’*

In her intent listening, I shivered in gratitude. What greater gift could be desired than a daughter who loved poetry?

*2001 February*

*Of an unexpected gift:* 

Seconds after emerging from the darkness of the apartment underground into brilliant sunshine, I beheld a young woman stopped on the sidewalk at the corner of Lefarge Park. What struck me in waiting for the traffic light was the bouquet of lilacs she held against her hip. As I was making the left turn, she smiled to herself and shook her shoulder length hair—tawny and lustrous in the morning sun.

It was but a few seconds before the light turned green but that was enough to bring to mind another glimpse of the female form divine. That was of a delicate woman in a Khmer headscarf in Battambang who shyly glanced towards me as she cycled past.

Any visual artist would have been surely been inspired to ‘capture’ such sublimity and grace. As for me at the intersection by Lefarge Park this morning, just as on the sidewalk in Cambodia 2½ months ago, there was only eye-misting gratitude for the unexpected glimpse of beauty.

*2002 May*

*The most magical night of the year:* 

Rare it is to have sunshine on summer solstice in the northwest. Instead of the usual ‘Junuary’ gloom on this most achingly ephemeral day of the year, from dawn to dusk today, the sky was cloudless.

I awoke at 5:00 AM with sun filtering through the drapes and eyes still moist from a dream of youth with a soundtrack of *‘All the Diamonds in the World’*. Remembering it was summer solstice, I hurriedly dressed and headed out for the morning jog.

At 5:30, AM, I was halfway around Lefarge Lake in the morning sun, softly singing to myself the lyrics of the haunting song from the recent REM sleep: *‘Like a crystal sun in a sea of jade/ his ship comes shining...’*



Being a non-teaching Friday, I was in no hurry to drive to the office. Still, in order to lighten the usual weekend stress, I spent nearly 6 hours between my windowless office and the departmental resource room. I left the college early enough to avoid the Friday afternoon rush.

At 5:00 PM I gobbled leftovers with the intention of heading out for a long evening walk. With the kids staying over at their mom’s all weekend, I had planned to even stop off for a drink before circling back to the apartment.

Instead of heading out immediately, I sat out on the tiny balcony. For about 1 ½ hours I read an old *New Yorker* filched from the office and even managed to look though a few student writing tests. The intention was to wait until 9:00 PM before driving up to Burnaby Mountain to behold the sunset from the druidic stone circle in Discovery Park.

Around 8:30 PM, in the slight chill of twilight, I came inside to my desk. Unfortunately, I then fell into the usual habit of aimless web-surfing.

It was 10:30 PM before I tore myself away from the computer. There was still a glow in the patch of western sky visible from the balcony.

I remembered the solstice night back in the early ‘90s when the I camped out on the balcony with my little girls. Through the short night, I woke to behold the shifting patterns of the stars. Then in the deep blue dawn, a hummingbird whirred over the red sleeping bags in which MT and TE were mummied...

For a moment, I was tempted to keep an old promise of stealing out with sleeping bag and spending the shortest night of the year staring up at the sky from some grassy bank. Yet I was already tired. Maybe next year?

At 11:00 PM, I was under the sleeping bag on the sofa soothed by a recurrent dream-time sequence. I was wading through the overhanging branches up that mysterious and familiar jungle stream when I fell asleep...

*2002 June*

fwt

*The latest peripatetic:* 

“So, when did language become like what it is today?”

While hiking up the north trail behind the Minnekhada dam, I was deeply impressed by MH’s intelligent questions. To further encourage the budding curiosity of my 10-year-old, I tried to follow my answers with probing questions or comments. As for the origins of language, I offered a simplistic version of the theory of the genesis of language from a hunting communication advantage of early humanoids. I then pointed towards the mossy cedars.

“Imagine hunting here 5,000 years ago. Imagine standing behind that tree when you see a grizzly bear coming towards you. What chance would you have if you were alone or just couldn’t shout out a warning to others nearby?”

“I get it.” He softly smiled.

As we stepped further up the rocky path, I caught a still forming image that might impart to him a shiver of warmth long after my departure.

*2002 July*

***Lonely reconnaissance:*** 

With neither TE nor MH staying over, I spent the last Friday evening of the summer in a whirlwind reconnaissance tour of a few local bars, wondering if any might offer some cheer some rainy evening later in the fall...

Starting off a half-hour before sunset, my first stop was the Wild Duck Inn by the Pitt River bridge. It was disappointing to find the notorious biker hangout is now only a rundown rooming house seemingly on the verge of for demolition. Kicking a beer can into the tall grass near the rotting steps, I thought of the afternoon in which old railroader buddy JL had invited me therein to catch the strippers' shower-act.

Next, I drove along the Mary Hill bypass to the Gill-Netter pub. Although the air was redolent with pub-food and good cheer, it was not the atmosphere I sought. Neither was that of the nearly empty French Quarter Pub, in Maillardville nor the Golden Spike in Port Moody where a lone guitarist strummed before an empty dance floor of whirling coloured lights. By the time I stopped in the doorway of Jake's Landing in Port Moody, I was well-practised in the gestures of scanning for an absent friend and checking my watch before exiting.

The final try was the Golden Ears Hotel lounge in Port Coquitlam. The 20-second scan of the beer parlour where the overhead TV was reflected in the lugubrious eyes of 2 old men. I was reminded of the *Lonely Planet* observation that the most desolate places in Canada are the cavernous beer parlours.

Still, there a lady in blue jean jacket at the back. She glanced up with what seemed lonely eyes just as I turned. I hesitated just long enough to be reminded that my very presence would likely add to the dreariness of a place that already held more than its share.

In driving back to the empty apartment, I felt that the reconnaissance could be proclaimed a success. All doubt had been vanquished that an evening spent in one of these pubs would be any less itchy than one spent alone in the apartment.

*2002, August*

*Of the latest haplessness:* 

It started with the broken toe—stabbed in the middle of the night on the corner of the bathroom door. Even in its incessant throbbing, I was able to get the end-of-term marks in on time and pick up Christmas goodies for the kids. All that remained yesterday morning was a quick trip to Superstore after which I looked forward to taking a painkiller and lying back on the sofa until Boxing Day...

I had just hobbled back to the underground parking stall and swung my 2 bags of groceries into the back seat of the van. In reversing out, the jabbing pain at the side of my foot made awkward working the gas pedal. Still, I focused on the rearview mirror in the reminder of a previous Christmas ruined by failing to see a car parked behind me while backing out from a Burnaby liquor store. Then within a heartbeat of that reminder came a 'whump' from the left front. Fucking Christ! I twisted the wheel too late. I had already stuck the protruding sharp-angled metal edge of a garbage receptacle. This time, I had failed to check the blind spot on my *left*.

Too sickened to even get out to see the damage, I exited the underground parkade, crossed the road and turned right into the mucky Lordco parking lot. Despite the winter chill, sweat was already pouring from my brow.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and peered out at the left side. The doubled fist-sized crater behind the left headlight could have been punched in by a steel ramrod. Viciously, I slapped the side of my face...



Back in the underground parking space of my apartment, I limped towards the elevator, putting as much pressure as I could bear on the broken toe. I deserved to pay in more ways than one for my stupidity...

I opened the door and dumped the grocery bags on the counter. TE was still sitting in front of the computer in the corner of the living room where she had been an hour before. MH was lying on the sofa listening to his Walkman.

“Goddammit!” I punched the counter, “why can’t I can’t stop screwing up?”

TE’s jaw dropped and MH pulled off his headphones.

After I gave them the details, MH rolled his eyes.

“O no—not again dad!”

“This time is the last straw. I’m just gonna have to sell the goddam van and start taking the bus.”

MH, sighed, no doubt wondering how he would get to his soccer practices. TE glumly stared back into the untroubled world of the Sims...

Chastened that I was casting gloom over their Christmas, just 2 days hence, I retreated to the bathroom. In the mirror, I touched the red mark still burning on my left cheek. Will I *ever* learn to drive? In a spasm of helpless rage, I sharply struck a matching blow to the right cheek.

The remainder of the morning was spent supine on my cot staring at the crack in the wall... When I emerged from the bedroom around noon, TE, understandably, had gone back to her mother's house for the night. MH was now at the computer.

"You didn't want to go with T.?" I asked.

"I wanted to stay here with you," he said.

I hugged him, then whispered, "You deserve a dad who isn't so goddam stupid!"

"Let it go, dad," my 10½-year-old counselled.



With the body shops closing on Christmas Eve, I had just a few hours to get repair estimates. In the accompaniment of the loyal MH, I began the search. In the front of the first shop on Westwood, we stood by glumly as the scrawny body man in blue coveralls poked his fingers around the bashed in fender.

"I'd say you're lookin' at about \$930 plus tax,"

MH, no less stunned, than I, blew out a sharp breath.

"What kind of discount can you offer?" I asked meekly.

He scratched his grey brush cut. "Well, most of this is labour. I can't cut corners on that. And paint. There's probably a couple hundred in paint there. I 'spose I could make it \$900."

"I'll give you a call," I said before muttering '*fuck that*' behind his back.

The next stop was at the 'Dent Doctor' shop in Port Moody where I'd visited after the last parking scrape in May. In a *deja-vu* of the last visit, the long-haired Aussie looked at the damage with a whistle and a 'tsk'.

"No way," he exclaimed, "that's definitely an auto-body job. And I'm afraid you're going to be shocked when you hear the estimate."

“I’ve already been shocked.”

“Well,” he said pointing, “you can try the shop on the corner there.”

After waiting nearly 5 minutes at the empty counter of Mega Autobody, I was about to exit when a young guy came in through a side door pulling off his paint goggles. He had flecks of blue paint in his hair.

“We’re closed until next week,” he said in a Polish accent.

“Can you just take a quick look?” I pleaded. “I don’t need the repair right away—I just want a fair estimate.”

He looked at his watch and nodded.

A moment later he crouched fingering the damage, while Mike and I watched from the sidewalk.

I caught his eye. “How about doing it for \$600—cash?” I glanced over at MH. “That would really make our Christmas.”

He nodded.

“So, I bring it in next Monday?”

“8:30 AM. You pay up front?”

“I will.” Having expected a counteroffer of no less than \$800, I gratefully shook his hand.



I slept fitfully though the long night—kept awake not by the throbbing toe but the looping sound of the sickening crunch.

At least I managed to save \$300. Still, \$600 is no small bloodletting. It will have to come from savings that might otherwise have purchased a getaway air ticket. It might even have gone towards the Disneyland trip so long promised the kids...

Blinking in the darkness, I calculated that the cost of repairs on the van over 3 years amounted to more than half its purchase price. Still, considering my sloppy driving, I should consider myself lucky... Yet could I really rely on the bus to get to work? Could I even maintain my joint custody without a driving license? Thus, the taunting continued though the low solstice night.

I waited until the grey dawn before rising. Padding softly to the living room so as not to wake MH in his shared bedroom, I plugged in the lights on the plastic Christmas tree. From my bedroom closet I brought forth the crudely wrapped gifts for the kids.

Even with the ounce of flesh yet to be collected—I was determined that the next 48 hours would be of good cheer and celebration...

*2002 December*

fwt

**Rhodesian Sinbad:** 

At 10:45 PM, I wearily swung my bookbag inside the apartment door. A week into the new class and I was still struggling for credibility. But then amid the nightly lesson post-mortem came the note on the table:

*'Wake me up for a story'*

No sooner did I lift the paper than the khaki mummy on the sofa stirred.

"Dad, did you get my note?" said MH sleepily.

I turned on the lamp at the head of the sofa then leaned down to kiss the top of his head.

"I did, honey. I'd be glad to read you a story."

I pulled forth from the bookshelf the old copy of '*Arabian Nights*'. It was picked up at a discard book-sale at a mission school library in Zimbabwe in 1983. A relic of old Rhodesia, the inside cover was inscribed: '*to Paul from Bobby, Xmas, 1955*'.

As MH pulled his fleece cover down to his chin, I stretched back on the floor and began reading the segment of '*Sinbad the Sailor*' in which the barefooted porter, Hindbad, is asked by Sinbad's servant to enter Sinbad's mansion. The humble porter is offered a place before the grave and white-bearded master at his sumptuous banquet table.

The old sailor puts at ease the humble porter before beginning his first tale. By that juncture, my work anxieties had vanished along with those of Hindbad the Porter.

Softly I read the opening to the First voyage of Sinbad even though my listener was already asleep.

*2003 January*

***Marginally improving street smarts:*** 

However keen to avoid taking lunch in the college cafeteria with other attendees of the dreary Friday workshop, I might have known there were risks in eating on a park bench across from the Kingsgate Mall.

This time, it was a swollen-faced native guy hawking a handful of pendants. Before I finished my second bite of my peanut butter sandwich, he swooped in swinging a crudely beaded pendant, like a hypnotist's watch, before my face. When I shook my head he just scowled and walked away.

Yet just as I was brushing away crumbs, he appeared again from behind.

“So, are you still here, you clown?” he said plopping down on the bench beside me.

“Just finishing lunch,” I said, pointing to my throat.

“You don't mind me calling you a clown?” he leaned towards me.

Guessing from his grin that he was not bad-humoured, I looked directly into his eyes.

“I'm really not a clown,” I said. “I'm a fairly regular guy.”

I had not misjudged—he was still grinning.

“So, what do you say, buddy. Just 20 bucks. Handmade.” He swung the pendant faster.

“Gee, that looks like real nice work,” I said, “but I'm broke right now.”

“15 bucks?”

“Sorry,” I lied, “I don't even have enough for bus fare.”

“Shit.” He tossed the pendants between his hands and scanned around the park.

“Sorry, I gotta go,” I said standing up stiffly. “Good luck, man.”

In rushing away, it occurred that my nervousness in encounters with First Nations guys on the street was not unlike the tenseness of Boers or Israelis in confrontation with the ‘other’...

In a glance backward, I saw the handicraft seller making his way back to Broadway Ave. Maybe next time, I should ask the ‘other’ if he'd like to go for a beer...

*2003, April*

***The latest stumble:*** 

I was jolted awake from a Friday afternoon nap by the jangling telephone. In bleariness, I assumed that TE had forgotten her key and was waiting by the front door intercom.

Jumping up from the sofa to slide open the balcony door in order to check the entrance below, I was momentarily oblivious of the coffee table. Tripping over it, I toppled forward like Saddam's statue. My bare knees skidded into the carpet while my forehead struck the open glass door of the TV cabinet. Despite the star-shooting slap of pain, I was not quite knocked out. Staggering up clutching my head, I weaved towards the balcony.

"TE!" I shouted down weakly, noting blood on fingers.

I collapsed back on the sofa, cursing my luck.

In the throb from both forehead and right knee, I hobbled to the bathroom for an aspirin. In the mirror the scrape did look ugly. It was slightly to the left of the scar received from the metal sign with which I collided in Zimbabwe Sept. '85, in jumping off the back of a pickup truck on the afternoon of MT's birth. I fumbled into the drawer for Band-Aids.

My students will probably think I fell drunk in the bathroom! At least with the long weekend, I had 4 days before appearing in front of a classroom.

Indeed, I grimly reflected in unpeeling the Band-Aid, it was not uncommon for the old and solitary to fall in the bathtub. Sometimes they strike temples against the sink. Occasionally their bodies lay undiscovered until neighbours complain about rotting smells.

Shivering in this thought, I limped back towards the sofa with aspirin under tongue.

After further doses of aspirin through a fitful night, the phone rang again at 8:00 AM. This time it was TE asking to be picked up from her mom's. She apologized for not showing up for dinner saying that she had gone with a friend to a movie.

"What would you do if you called and I never answered the door?" I asked.

She hesitated.

T.?"

"I don't know," she said.



*4 days later:*

Coming down the concrete stairwell of the college at 5:10 PM every step rubbed pant leg against raw flesh. Fitting probably that the vanity of worrying about a scab on the forehead 4 days ago would be overwhelmed by the throb in my knee. Several times throughout the woozy afternoon, I was tempted to dismiss the class early and drive to the clinic if not the Eagle Ridge Emergency. Can the risk of sepsis be ignored?

With pant leg rolled up on the drive back, I decided not to go directly to the Coquitlam Centre North Road clinic, but instead to London Drugs in the mall where I spent \$25 on gauze, Polysporin ointment and hydrogen peroxide. Only at 6:30 PM did I arrive back at the apartment. In applying the ointment to the pus-encrusted wound, I winced as much in anger as in pain.

What to hell was going on? How could I have become so susceptible to infection? Not a single cut or scrapes received over 10 years in the topics (including a nasty fall from the bike in got infected in Zimbabwe) got infected. Yet here in the 'developed' northland a scrape on the carpet can lead to blood poisoning!

In winding the gauze, I was stabbed by a bitter old suspicion: what else could it be but an allergy to my northern soil?

*2003 May*

*Of tranquility, almost unblemished:* 

At 9:00 PM I woke from an early Saturday night flake-out to hear the TV barking. In barging out of the bedroom to tell the kids to turn it down, for once I restrained the impulse to yelp. Instead I asked MH to show me on his electric guitar a couple of the songs he earlier said he was learning in music class.

After the TV was turned off, TE checked her Microsoft Messenger on the desktop computer and MH plugged in his guitar and began strumming. When he began chording *Country Road* in the key of 'C' I pulled forth my harmonica. For a few delightful minutes, we played in harmony.

Afterwards, I dished up both fledglings ice cream with hot caramel sauce. As soon as the dishes were rinsed, MH lay on the sofa and asked for a story. From our green cloth-bound Grimm's tales, I selected "*The 3 Magic Gifts*". With sheet to chin, the 11-year old listened intently. When at the end, the thieving innkeeper was beaten by the magic cudgel and the magic tablecloth restored, he clapped.

If I had thought better of forcing the 16-year-old TE to turn off the computer before her song download was completed—it would have been an evening of unblemished tranquility...

*2003 July*

***Rubbing the nose in deprivation:*** 

For several evenings this term, I have taken my half hour evening class break in walks through the alleyways east of the college. I have varied my direction— but all routes seem to pass among similarly forlorn low-rises behind sagging fences.

Last night, as never before, the air reeked and the dumpsters were overflowing. The broken toys and ugly furniture seemed to bear testimony to the despair of the denizens of a neighbourhood deemed as one of the poorest in the province.

Most striking tonight was the dumpster diver whose bare white legs and work boots wiggled so precariously over the edge of the bin as he (or she) scavenged head-first...

By walking in a different direction, I might have avoided this sordid spectacle. I could have rested on a nearby park bench amid a view of the north shore mountains lit by the sinking sun...

Hard to remember amid an alleyway of East Vancouver, the splendor of a tropical reef or of Kilimanjaro in moonlight. It occurred that the latter-day gravitation to scenes of squalor was a manner of rubbing my nose in such deprivation...

So it was that the backward glance at the dumpster diver was accompanied by a breath-catching stab of desolation...

*2003 July*

*One of Willy's girls?* 

In aimlessly downloading Country Western songs from the '60s-'70s, I happened upon one which I hadn't heard since July, 1974.

It was one of those catchy tear-jerkers: a country western fairy tale of a wayward girl hooking up with a kindly country boy. It begins at a bar rail where a girl with "hardened knowing eyes" teases a yokel new to the city. After 3 choruses of "*Hello, country bumpkin/ how's the frost out on the pumpkin?*" the song climaxes with the same woman 30 years later on her deathbed comforted by the erstwhile yokel—now her faithful lifelong partner—along with their son:

*"Good-bye, country bumpkins/ now the frost's gone from the pumpkin..."*

I certainly would never have remembered this soppy cornpone had it not been blaring in the sleazy downtown east side pub where I nursed a beer one night soon after my first arrival in Vancouver. Unforgettable was the native girl who leaned drunkenly over the jukebox pushing in coins to for multiple replays of '*Country Bumpkin*'. As she sang loudly along with the refrain, her eyes shone.

In hearing the song again tonight—a darker thought came to mind:

Perhaps it was also in the same era that a most peculiar bumpkin from a Port Coquitlam farm began cruising the pubs of the downtown east side.

In a cold shiver it struck that the native girl with the beatific smile at the jukebox in July '74 might have become an early victim of mass murderer, Willy Pickton.

*2003 August*

*Newcastle's disease:* 

When I awoke at 5:30 AM with a septic throat I should have called a sub.

Still, getting though a morning of testing with the aid of Fisherman's Friend lozenges seemed tolerable enough. Anyway, coordinating with a sub—especially explaining testing procedure—tends to be more onerous than just dragging oneself though the day.

Still, I did not anticipate how mercilessly the virus would invade the sinuses. By 10:00 AM, my nose was dripping like the beak of a chicken with Newcastle's Disease. I sat at the teacher's desk with wad of tissues jammed in my face trying to avoid the coughs that sent hot jabs through enflamed bronchi.

My sheer force of will, managed to bear up until class dismissal at 12:45 PM. Back in the apartment at 1:30 PM, instead of collapsing in bed I forced myself to rough out a lesson plan in case I could not avoid a sub for the morrow.

Still uncertain about whether to call one immediately or wait until the early morning, I drew a bath as hot as I could bear it. Bobbing in the steam, I thought again of my dying chickens in Nigeria, circa '78: their heads nodding, bluish lids shivering closed and the clear drops of fluid accreting at the tip of their beaks...

Despite the hot bath, when I collapsed onto my futon at 4:00 PM, I was chattering with malaria-like shakes. Still, I resisted calling a sub. It seemed easier to dose up with Contac 'C' and drag myself through the day. Besides, after tomorrow there was the whole weekend for recuperation. I decided to hold off the decision until 6:00 AM.

With sleeping bag wrapped tight and ears roaring like a waterfall, into the feverish brain their popped a verse of William Blake: '*Some are born to sheer delight/ some are born to endless night...*'

*2003 October*

**More karma to atone for:** 

In following web links tonight commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination, I stumbled upon *celebritymorgue.com*. Lingering there, I ogled grey images of JFK on a morgue table. There was the 46-year-old President with gore-matted hair a flap of open skin the back of head and exposed brain.

As if that frisson of the macabre were not disgusting enough, I scrolled further down to the corpse of Marilyn Monroe looking puffy and middle aged at only 36. Then there was Lenny Bruce at 40, sprawled naked on a bathroom floor. The corpse of outlaw John Dillinger was on a pallet surrounded by gloating lawmen. Then there was Che Guevara, with head tilted up by one of his captors, displayed like a big game trophy.

More recent necro-porn included colour photos of the remains of a female Palestinian suicide bomber beside the twisted chassis of a bus. The hair of her decapitated head was still neatly tied in a bun.

It was more than 20 minutes before the shame was suffice to unbind the mouse-clicking finger from the morbid magnetism.

Still, the images haunted after lights out.

The photo of the suicide bomber (disseminated by the Israelis authorities?) had been especially unnerving. It struck me that that the fear of death is lesser than the imagining of one's corpse being displayed. In such imagining, the dissection of one's body in an autopsy seems so less horrific than the ogling of one's corpse mutilated in a blunt trauma. In the latter horror (e.g. a plane crash) one can only wish that one's body be instantly incinerated or smashed into unrecognizable bits.

Again, I thought of poor JFK, whom I have already outlived by 7 squandered years. How many millions of others have viewed those autopsy photos? With each ogling a further indignity is visited upon his memory. For such voyeurism, I shivered, there ought to be heavy karma to atone for...

*2003 November*

***Of zillion to one lotteries:*** 

The conversation started after I'd coaxed MH to turn off the TV and listen to the second instalment of the Brothers Grimms': "*Two Brothers*".

I had just finished reading the segment wherein the huntsman brother aided by his menagerie slays the 7-headed dragon and then in exhaustion, falls asleep. Although his animals were instructed to keep watch— one by one the animals nodded off— including the lion. The evil marshal, who covets the princess, then sneaks up and cuts off the sleeping huntsman's head...

I paused to fetch a glass of water. Upon my return to the sofa and clearing of throat for reading the next scene, my 12-year-old suddenly asked:

“So, what do you think happens when you die?”

I hesitated. “OK, before I give you an opinion— I’d like to hear what you think.”

He flicked his finger on the corner of the turned over book. “Well, I think when you die you get reincarnated. But you can’t remember your previous life.”

“So, what comfort can you get from that?”

“What?”

I settled back on the sofa. “Well, if the only ‘you’ you have even known has disappeared, what comfort can reincarnation on those terms give a person? How is that any better of a deal than eternal sleep?”

“I don’t know,” he said, looking a little fearful.

I touched his shoulder. “Still, why should we be any more scared of being dead than being asleep?”

“When you sleep you can dream. And you wake up.”

“But when you sleep very deeply— you’re aware of nothing, right?”

“Right.”

“Anyway, it is the instinct of every living creature to avoid death as long as possible. But what’s the point of being scared of what’s inevitable? I think we just have to keep reminding ourselves what an amazing gift life is in the first place! Just being alive is having won a zillion to one lottery. It’s pointless to fear death but certainly not to fear wasting your life— not using your gifts...”

My son then seemed more at ease.

Still, before I turned back to the Grimms' tome, MH asked:

“Where do you want to retire, dad?”

“Well, you know honey, for a long time I was hoping to retire in a tropical place. Now I’m not so sure. Depends on where you kids live. What about you? Where do you think you’ll live when you grow up?”

“Hopefully, somewhere close to you.”

Giving him a hug, I turned over the book... *Regarding zillion to one lotteries— how lucky am I?*

In the comfort of that thought, I continued reading the next chapter in which the hare fetches the magic herb and reattaches the huntsmen’s head to his body whereby he wakes up, refreshed from his deep sleep...

*2004 January*

### *Ghosts of 1974:*

On a Saturday in which I would normally wait until 11:00 AM to drive downtown for the mercenary English-level rating sessions, today I avoided the opportunity to update my journal and left 2 hours early. Since it was nearly 30 years to the month that I first arrived in Vancouver, I decided to do a nostalgic walking tour of downtown before reaching the testing venue.

After parking, I drifted first towards the West End where my first residence in Vancouver upon arrival in '74 was in one of the many shabby rooming houses, long ago torn down.

Most of the buildings and businesses along Davie St., gateway to the West End, were unrecognizable. The wafts from exotic bistros and goat stenches of homelessness were unfamiliar but the atmosphere hadn't changed. The air still held something of the loneliness of myriads of new arrivals.

After circling back north on Granville, at the Georgia St. stop light I was stunned by a familiar sound. There was no mistaking the tinny mouth organ even before seeing who was blowing it. Halfway across the intersection I caught sight of him: the bandy-legged panhandler first seen in the summer of '74.

His black hair had gone white, but he appeared to be in the same cold sweat. He still swayed to the feeble tootings from his cupped hands. Whether he was trying to play '*Ave Maria*' or '*How Great Thou Art*' he was still witnessing for Jesus. The donation box on the curb behind him was still draped with a crucifix...

In passing, I wondered how many pedestrians recognized him. He was just one of the scattering of eccentrics of which no city is deprived.

I shivered in remembering just how often I crossed this intersection 30 years ago. How was I seen? Is it remotely possible that in some mind over the last 2 hours, a glimpse of me tweaked a memory of a nervous young fellow with a hook striding through here long ago? Such a mind—real or imagined—would certainly have shuddered in a fleeting observation: '*How old he has become!*'

*2004 April*

*A scene from Twin Peaks?* 

At 7:30 AM, the young woman in a cocktail dress was making her way down the alleyway behind Pipeline Rd. She was looking down, wincing. Perhaps her discomfort was more about having woken moments before in a strange bed than in the pinch of her high heels. She looked rather like the blonde girl, Laura Palmer, in 'Twin Peaks'.

When she looked up— I was just stepping out of the gate from Inlet Drive.

In seeing me, her mouth dropped and she froze. I stepped aside and looked away in an effort to signal that a guy headed out for a morning jog posed no danger...

Yet when her eyes darted back to my side, she bolted like a deer.

As she disappeared around the corner, I hesitated in the fading sound of the clip-clopping heels. Would she have reacted the same way to any stranger met in an alleyway on an early Sunday morning? Probably not.

Before shaking off the role of a David Lynch freak, I snorted a bitter laugh.

*2004 May*

*Appreciating my earliest education:* 

I woke late and thus failed to meet the solstice dawn as planned on Burke Mountain. Still, by 7:30 AM, I was slogging up the rocky trail above the gun club. After 40 minutes of wending steeply through lush mid-summer foliage, the down slope ridge opened to the view of the Pitt River 800 metres below....

Leaning on my hiking pole and mopping away sweat, I drank in the magnificence.

Yet even in the tranquility of moment, there popped a slightly unsettling image. Looking down the dark blue river, I remembered the haunting news of the likely suicide of a locally famous artist a few months ago. Apparently suffering from terminal cancer, he cart-wheeled his Cessna into the Fraser River not far from here. It stuck that he took that final plunge in awe of a vista of mountains, forest and riverscape very similar to this... If confronted by sheer hopelessness—what better place could be chosen to soar forth into the void?



2 hours later and another 800 metres higher, I reached the ponds marked as the Lily Pad Lakes on my terrain map. Amid the fecund humidity it was hard to believe that just over a month ago, the near tropical lushness was locked in mountain ice.

In the vibrating croak of mating bullfrogs, I dropped to haunches and savoured the sounds with closed eyes... From earliest awareness, nothing was more relished than mucking about ponds and swamps in late spring and early summer. Even as a 6-year-old, I all but swooned in the whizzing of dragonflies and the wiggling of pollywogs against the shins.

Whatever I missed of Latin and Greek—could any child have been luckier than having an early education such as that?

*2004 June*

**Reflections on the food chain:** 

The walk with TE in Coquitlam River Park this afternoon was a joy despite the initial scare. As we were parking, a coyote trotted out of the underbrush with snout lifting towards the open car window from which Romeo's little head was protruding. TE snatched up our chihuahua as the coyote outside the window seemingly waited for a ready meal. Only when I honked the horn did it shoo back into the bushes.

Moments later on the trail, TE held Romeo in her arms rather than on the leash.

“Do you think a pack of coyotes would attack us?” she said darting her eyes left and right.

“Don’t worry, honey.” I said. “Running into a crazy person out here is far less worrisome than meeting a wild animal. Animal behaviour is usually predictable.”

TE was just letting the dog down on its leash when suddenly she swooped him up again.

“What’s the matter?”

“Look,” she whispered, nodding towards the steep bank ahead on the right. “There’s a bear up there.”

“TE, honestly.”

“No, really.” She pointed.

Then I saw it, too: a black bear lopping through the bushes at the top of the bank, just a stone’s throw ahead. Then there was another black form rustling through the underbrush to join the first. From our safe distance we watched.

“They are not going to attack, are they?” said TE taking another step back.

“Not likely. I don’t see any cubs.”

We waited until the rustling stopped then set off again along the riverbank trail.

“If you ever see a bear, T.,” I said, “Just freeze as we did back there. Never turn and run... That might trigger their predatory instinct.”

“Would a bear even try to kill a person for food?”

“I chuckled, “Not very likely with black bears. There are probably a few cases when a bear is sick or starving.”

“That’s horrible.” She tightened up on the leash.

We walked along, lulled by the rushing water and bird twitterings.

After several minutes just to make conversation, I asked. “Is being eaten by an animal the worst end you can imagine? How does that compare with having your body cut up by some creepy doctor in front of a room of gawking medical students? Getting eaten by an animal at least gets your body directly back into the food chain. That’s the natural life cycle. Isn’t there something almost comforting in that?”

“It’s creepy.” Again, she picked up and cradled the dog.

“Anyway,” I smiled, “no need to think any more about that on a day like this!”

I patted her shoulder confident that the thoughtful 17-year-old was quite accustomed to a father with a weird sense of humour...

*2004, August*

**Stoned at 53:** 

The plan was to wait for a night alone before ingesting the cannabis cookie purchased on Commercial Drive. Yet concerned that one of the kids might discover it in the back of the fridge, I decided to eat it last night before bed.

MT was working and TE was out with friends. MH was home but content to spend his Saturday night on Microsoft Messenger. He did join me after supper in watching the library video of the magnificent '*Chariots of Fire*'. In its closing credits, I excused myself and repaired to my cubicle with the cookie. After consuming half of it, I looked through my pile of old *National Geographic* magazines. 30 minutes later feeling no effects, I ate the other half of the cloying coconut chocolate.

Still trying to read old magazines an hour later, it was hard to tell if the growing wooziness was the effect of cannabis or just fatigue. Yet a sour taste and thirst signalled that some unusual chemical was in the blood.

It didn't hit me all at once—but soon after I was enveloped in a drearily familiar cloak of paranoia. As I lay in the dark, the 53-year-old brain was tickled by the same demons that tormented the THC altered mind-body upwards of 35 years ago:

My thoughts circled darkly around my relationships—and unpardonable sins of omission therein. As in shivering from air beaten forth by the wings of vampire bats—the heart thudded in guilt for cruelties inflicted upon others.... At the same time a merciless self-assessment informed that save for some Scrooge-like epiphany and a begging for absolution—the despair would only deepen...

Still, the battered old constitution was just tough enough to regard this state of consciousness, *in toto*, as an 'experiment'. In that context, the effects of cannabis on the 53-year-old mind-body were no less unpleasant than that remembered from a quarter century ago. The 'illusion of selfhood' aside, it was curious it was that after several complete replacements of every cell in the body, the psyche remains no less fragile—or possibly no less allergic—to THC.

At least, I have put to rest any notion that I could ever 'enjoy' getting stoned.

*2004 September*

*Three glasses of red wine:* 

I finally opened the bottle of *Piat D'or* red wine gifted from a class back at the end of April. Its primary use was intended for the spaghetti sauce—but after a cupful was stirred into the large pot, two-thirds of the bottle remained. Although quite satisfied to remain exclusively a beer drinker—I justified drinking the rest of the bottle in a similar manner of having ‘experimented’ with the THC cookie last month.

With the spaghetti sauce on the simmer, I slurped away the rest of the bottle while munching a baguette.

Every mouthful was delightful. Chewing and sipping, I thought of how bread and wine has been relished by some portion of humanity from ancient times. I briefly thought of the philosophical notion of ‘*qualia*’: the uniqueness of experienced sensations. In the taste of wine, I begged to differ. It seemed that the same sensations in tongue, nose and palate experienced at that moment *have been* precisely experienced by others. The numbers of those fellow tasters lost to oblivion far, far outnumber those still living. In that poignant thought, I remembered that poor DC, the former Department head who died suddenly 6 months ago, was a lover of red wine...

Before emptying the dregs of that bottle of *Piat D'or*, I also felt that I was somehow paying homage to all those who once relished the same sensations. I felt that by partaking in a glass of wine, enjoying a piece of music, feeling the caress of sun on the neck or witnessing a shooting star—one was somehow making a connection with all of humanity. The connection was not only with the dead—but with those unborn who will relish the same aesthetic experiences long after one’s passing...

Unfortunately, I was to wake on the sofa after supper with a sour taste in mouth and mild throb in the temple. The sensations of hangover, it occurred, could neither be discounted amid the universal experience of imbibers past, present and future...

*2004 October*

***Investing in a greater hope:*** 

“So, can you tell me who the ‘you’ is in this poem?” I asked TE, who had asked me about the first stanza of ‘*Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*’, a poem she was studying in her Grade 12 Advanced Placement English course.

Sitting up on the sofa and turning down the volume on the TV, I delivered a hoarse monologue on the odiousness of popular culture, that insulted the tory-minded T.S. Eliot.

For a few moments, an old excitement was reawakened—the sense that every idea gleaned from the desultory readings in literature was another piece of a puzzle. Fitted together, all the pieces would breathtakingly reveal great mysteries...

If only one of my precious fledglings could feel even a glimmer of the same excitement! What consolation that would be for my own abandonment of that path...



After perusing my 30-year-old paperback of ‘*The Inferno*’, in response to TE’s request for information on the ‘*Guido*’ allusion in ‘*J. Alfred Prufrock*’— I spent an hour squatted behind the artificial Christmas tree, rearranging my bookcase.

Digging through the double-shelved dusty classics, I moved to the front the gems most deserving to be reread in the coming months. Even if I never again crack the covers of the precious texts of my youth— there is the hope that they may tempt one of the kids...

*2004 December*

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