

## Beauty and the Bestial (2005-2014)

Κάλλος



αἰσχος



*Vignettes of darkness and light from the final decade before retirement; from post-divorce to renewal.*

### ***In the absence of grace:***



Waking on the sofa at 3:45 AM, I felt for the TV remote in the hope of falling back asleep. Flipping through channels in the dark, I stopped in the midst of a sermon of TV evangelist, Kenneth Copeland. It seemed as useful as a tab of melatonin, for which I could have to search the bathroom cupboard.

The old preacher, slick dyed hair and nattily dressed, was sitting at a desk before an open bible and quoting scripture. A moment later he looked up with a weird-eyed smile and invited viewers to kneel before their TVs and pray with him.

“Your abundance,” he gestured broadly, “your abundance is bought and paid for by Jesus’ blood...”

With shivering eyelids, Brother Copeland beseeched viewers to touch their screens for his blessing. In a mellifluous voice, he assured that no blessing was out of reach of those with even a semblance of such grace as he bountifully enjoyed. Crippling debts or cancerous tumours could shrink and disappear; a prayed-for Hummer might even materialize in the driveway.

A telephone number flashed on the blue screen. Another voice, fast as an auctioneer’s, announced a limited time special offer of a free copy of *‘Prosperity: the choice is Yours!’* “An \$8.99 value for the mere cost of return postage.”

The viewer was urged to include their special requests for collective prayer, led by Brother Copeland himself. Any donation, however modest, would go towards “God’s work around the world” by the Copeland Ministries. That assurance was bolstered with a photo of smiling African child holding up a bowl of gruel. There was no mention of the expectation of the devout to ‘tithe’. That trickier pitch presumably comes after the free book. Even if less than 1% of the audience who take the bait get hooked, the sheaves of tithes guarantee continuing grace in abundance for Brother Copeland!

As the blue screened flashed a mailing address along with the telephone number, I imagined spread fingered palms pressed against TV screen and eyes squinting to conjure Copeland’s cargo cult vision.

What could be crueler than making the sick, old and beaten down feel even more miserable? Could the purveyor of child porn be any more despicable than the hucksters of prosperity gospel? As if the poison of Calvinism weren't toxic enough without its brewing in a Texas cracker barrel...

I flipped to the shopping channel and muted the volume. Turned away from the TV, I still seethed in its ghostly flicker....



Several hours later in the kitchen, I heard banging from the blue dumpster at the front right corner of our unit. Opening the door, I saw a fellow in a black rain hat climbing down the side of the bin.

From his collection bag, he clinked a few bottles into the makeshift carrier on the back of an old bicycle propped against the dumpster.

As I hesitated in the open doorway, he turned in the icy drizzle. His over-sized glasses were fogging up.

“Hey, I don’t mean to suck-hole or nothin’,” He wiped his nose on his sleeve. “But do you have any bottles to spare?”

I hesitated. He did not appear to be mentally ill or otherwise unpredictable.

“Well, we usually save ours for the boy scout drives,” I said, “I think they collected just before Christmas.”

The truth was that a bulging bag of empties was in the storage shed just a few metres from where he stood. Yet if opened in his presence, he would see the camping equipment stored therein.

“I’ll look inside,” I said.

“Well, I’d appreciate it. I’m a single dad with 3 kids.”

“Just wait a minute.”

Back in the flat, I went under my desk to check my change purse. There were only pennies and nickels. I had only a \$10 bill in my wallet. Might over-generosity encourage him to come back?

Under the sink there were a few beer bottles. I brought them to the door and slid them into his open his garbage bag as if handing out a Halloween treat.

“God bless you, sir,” he said.

Through the kitchen window I shamefully watched him pedalling away in the rain. Just imagine how grateful he'd have been for the \$10! Who in hell am I to be revolted by prosperity gospel?

*2005 January*

fwt

**Monstrosities, great and small:** 

I was shaken last night by the documentary about the Florida serial killer, Eileen Wournos:

While the recent Hollywood movie, '*Monster*', capitalized on her infamy, the exploitation of Eileen Wournos began almost from the moment she was popped into the world.

Abandoned by an alcoholic teen mother, she descended into petty crime and low-life hooking. After 12 years on death-row for the murder of a string of Johns, she was sick of the appeals.

It was her interview on the eve of her execution which was particularly disturbing. For more than 10 minutes the interviewer, Nick Broomfield, had his camera trained close up on Eileen's face. Her skin was pasty, her hair stingy and her teeth crooked. She was plainly paranoiac. The flashes of torment in her eyes were heart-rending.

She spoke of "sonic pressure on my head since 1997." She detailed other psychological tortures she was convinced that her tormentors designed: "to drive me crazy so no one believes anything I say..."

When asked how she felt about dying on the morrow, she said with a wincing smile: "I'm prepared. I'm all right with it. God is gonna be there; Jesus Christ and all angels are gonna be there!"

Then when pressed by Broomfield about the motive for her killing spree, her dark eyes pinpointed in rage: "Serial killer? I was too sloppy for that. I was a hitch-hikin' hooker runnin' into trouble!"

As psychotic as she surely was ("I think tomorrow's gonna be like *Star Trek*: beamin' me up into a space vehicle, man!") she had no illusion about the obscenity of the public fascination with her story. In the bitterness of that, she left the ogling world with a damning glare and withering scorn:

"Thanks a lot society for railroading my ass!"

In a political aspect of that railroading, the baby-faced Florida Governor, Jeb Bush, signed her death warrant to establish his tough-on-crime creds in a reelection year. Yet most obscene was the profiting from her story by news media and the movie industry. Even Bloomfield, who apparently gained a germ of her 'trust', was in the end damned along with the rest of humanity:

"Yer all gonna get your asses nuked in the end and pretty soon its comin'!"

How could any honest voyeur see Eileen give the world that middle finger without being pierced by the guilt of complicity?

For a glimmer of cosmic justice, it seemed appropriate to hold this image along with that of Charlize Theron, a year ago, in receiving her best actor Academy award last year for her eerie portrayal of Wournos. As the beautiful blonde in sparkling gown gushes her gratitude

and blows kisses to the *glitterati* one ought to picture the real Wournos in prison jumpsuit cutting shorting her last interview

Led away with hands manacled behind her back, she looked back in disgust: “You just don’t take human life like this, rip it apart and say thanks a lot for all the fuckin’ money I made offa ya!”

Surely, most viewers would be left with the question: Where lies the greater monstrosity?

*2005 May*

fwt

**Nearing the High Solstice:**  

The raptor that swooped down towards Romeo along the north trail at Minnekhada was probably a red-tailed hawk. For a few tense seconds, it soared close to ground level with talons outstretched. As the little dog jerked his head up and strained to the side, the hawk veered off like a Nazgul-bird wheeling back to Mordor. Shaken, I pulled Romeo to my side. It was a sobering warning that in the wild, even on a leash, a gopher-sized Chihuahua was a tasty meal for the snatching.

A half hour later, wary of coyotes lurking the tall grass alongside the marsh, I picked up Romeo again. Holding him in crook of arm, I stopped to listen to the croaking of the bullfrogs.

In earliest memory, the first chirping of the frogs was not heard the dusk of late May. Even as deliriously exciting that harbinger of summer—it was *early* spring that was most magical...

Spring came late in the Canadian Maritimes—the numerous false starts between March and mid-May seemed like dirty tricks from a sadistic weather god. It was probably that frustrated impatience which gave rise to a peculiar springtime fantasy:

Around the age of 10 or 11, I imagined myself a ‘General of Summer’, charged with the regional responsibility to execute battle plans for changing winter into spring. I remember walking around my village in a spitting snow of late April berating my troops. I imagined TV interviews in which I issued apologies or self-congratulation, depending on the weather...

For years after the end of that fantasy, winter still seemed a life and death struggle. One could awaken to a landscape of deathly white even into mid-May but the sight of bare ground in the morning after an April rain was a joy indescribable...

In another deep draught of the swampy air of Minnekhada, I caught an image of a child no older than 8, squatting by a duck pond in early June, absorbing the smells of emerging life. Almost without self-consciousness he was a creature as intensely sentient as the mating ducks, frogs and dragonflies...

Closing eyes in the sunshine, I tried to suffuse the dense odours—to lose myself in the croaks, hum and whir. For a Zen-like moment, I *was* almost unself-conscious... Yet awareness flickered back in the reminder that within 2 weeks, the days would begin to shorten...

2005 May

### **Reaching Dennett Lake:**



In starting early this morning from the steep trail up the south side on Burke Mountain beginning at Quarry Road, I finally found the long sought for route to Dennett Lake:

In the first attempt in April last year, I was forced back by the deep snow at the top of the ridge. In the next try a couple of months later, I reached the magical stillness of Munro Lake but it was too late to safely continue up the overgrown path. In turning back, I vowed to make it the following year...

So today I started off at 6:30 AM and got to Munro Lake before noon. However nervous about making it back to drive MH to baseball practice at 4:00 PM, I continued to follow upwards the intermittent trail markers. In a landscape rather like the habitat of the mountain gorilla, I slogged through underbrush, over slippery logs, through bogs and shin-deep mud. In the squeezing through the thickest bushes, I yelled to warn off bears. Several times, I came close to an ankle-turning fall but pressed on.

Around 12:45 PM, on the verge of turning back, I emerged in a boggy clearing. Behind it and below a rocky cliff was the sparkling blue emerald of Dennett Lake. Even for the scrapes and jarring falls, beholding that gem was deeply satisfying.

Back in my 20s, I would not have imagined that at the age if 54, my lungs and legs would remain so reliable. It occurred that at this point onward the body had to be maintained like an old car: on the second—or third—rounding of the speedometer...

Crouching with my water bottle at the edge of Dennett Lake, I wondered just how I would have felt in childhood in beholding such beauty. Of course, neither joy nor fear at this age could possibly be felt as intensely as it was then.

I then remembered a fear of dying in childhood that was so intense that I dared not fall asleep... I wondered whether such panic not in a terror of oblivion but of missing a taste of a wider world... At which point, I tsked, does an incredibly lucky old man become disgusted by desire for more?



Within 10 minutes, I was on my way back to Munro Lake. Keenly aware that the risks of falling were greater in the downward hike, I slid cautiously over the fallen trees and carefully planted my hiking pole before the slipperier steps. It was a 2½ hours before I reemerged from the thicket at the trail bottom.

Pleasantly exhausted on the dusty drive back along Quarry Road, I looked forward to asking TE if she's like to join me on a trip back to Dennett Lake before summer's end. She had plainly enjoyed our hike together around the Diez Vistas circuit last month. I had certainly appreciated her company however inhibited in the usual habit of talking to myself.

We hadn't talked much, but silences are rarely uncomfortable with my middle daughter. Still, a day long hike up to Dennett Lake would be an opportunity to discuss her course

selection in the upcoming first year of college. There is fledgling hope that in years to come our hikes become ever more like Peripatetics—opportunities to talk gently of books and ideas...

Decades from now, perhaps TE might occasionally dream of following a father up a steep trail to dizzying vistas. Perhaps even an old hiking pole, such as the one that brought me down safely today, might become a treasured keepsake...

*2005 July 10*

fwt

***Just deserts by the blue dumpster:*** 

In a heavy bump on the outside wall, I rushed out the front door in sock feet. By the blue dumpster, an urchin was swinging a stick. I stepped around the corner to check for damage. Fortunately, there were no fresh gouges on the shingles.

“Are you trying to break our windows?” I growled.

“Wasn’t me.” The boy pointed behind the dumpster, where a bigger savage was crouching with a rock.

“Get to hell outa here before I phone the cops!” I yelled.

He stood up, sneering.

The pair retreated down the lane with the younger boy still whipping his stick.

Watching them disappear through the side gate into the alley, I realized that my response might have ensured a return visit. Parked just a cat’s swing from the dumpster, my green van was a particularly inviting target...

Yet the rock-throwing was not to be the day’s only reminder of the squalor just outside our door:

Near dusk, I looked out the kitchen window to behold an old sofa protruding from the dumpster. Scattered on the ground below it and trailing outward from the driveway was a carpet of Styrofoam pellets.

“What the hell are you doing?” I yelled to the 2 little girls, not older than 9, who were scooping up handfuls of what looked the stuffing from the sofa.

“We’re trying to protect the environment,” said one little girl. “Those kids up there did it.” She pointed to the unit across the driveway, “We saw them.”

The 2 sisters from the Kurdish family who recently moved into the unit grinned down from an open upstairs window.

In fetching the broom to clear the dirty Styrofoam pellets from under the car park canopy, I remembered again the disappointment of the kids when I took this rental. Little wonder that MH never gets dropped off here when he gets a ride with his friend’s dad from baseball practice. So just for the sake of saving a few dollars: how much longer am I prepared to endure my kids’ embarrassment?

At the same time, it occurred that in some masochistic manner, I *sought* this ugliness. Having ‘invested’ by savings on a failed mediator and a divorce lawyer— what better housing was I to expect? Yes, in just deserts there is perverse satisfaction!

*2005 September*

*In want of common sense:* 

Who to fuck's that guy?"

To get a bit of fresh air in the dim afternoon before my long evening class, I took a stroll along Commercial Drive. Having been walking faster than fellow pedestrians on the crowded sidewalk, I was momentarily blocked by a pair of Rastas walking slowly ahead. Waiting to sidestep, I caught a snatch of their conversation. They were talking about the wives of King Solomon and disputing whether the biblical king had Ethiopian concubines along with his African Queen Sheba.

Curious, I hesitated just long enough for one of the Rastas to catch something suspicious.

"I hate guys walkin' behind me," he wheeled round. "What are you up to, asshole?"

I feigned a look of surprise before galloping past. Not looking back, I rushed through the intersection at 1<sup>st</sup> Ave. barely making the yellow light. Circling back 6<sup>th</sup> Ave. towards the college, even in the winter chill my ears were tingling in embarrassment. Could my increasing departure from common sense be a sign of early onset Alzheimer's?



Recalling this incident on the drive home at 10:30 PM, an odd and seemingly unrelated image popped into mind: It was that of a young beggar with Rasta locks once seen in a Nigerian marketplace. He was standing on his knees which was shod with squares of tire tread wrapped with sisal twine. His feet were folded under him but the one protruding looked like the wing of a bat. He held up cupped hands giving every passerby a 'sannu' greeting along with a beautiful smile...

*2005 December*

*In the comfort of Newtonian physics:* 

The power cut after supper serendipitously provided an opportunity for a memorable chat with 14-year-old MH. In the light of 2 candles on the coffee table, he urged me to ask him questions from the file cards he had prepared for his upcoming science test.

Despite the wincing reminders of just how little I remembered from high-school Physics and Chemistry, I obliged.

His answers came as sharp and swift as his fastball. He knew his stuff! At first, I wondered whether he was already beyond where I could assist him with science homework any more than I can help with his pitching practice. Still, the questions tweaked my own curiosity in refreshing the basics.

At the same time, I interspersed the questions with more general comments:

After ‘*Name the 6 groups in the Periodic Table and give one example in each*’, I mentioned how discoveries in chemistry have some basis in the mediaeval arts of magic and alchemy, of which Newton was himself a practitioner ... From ‘*Define Newton’s 3 laws of motion*’ I segued to the idea of multi-dimensional space, apparently supported by mathematical modelling... I then quoted the line famously attributed to Heisenberg, pioneer of quantum mechanics: ‘*Not only is the universe stranger than we think, it is stranger than we can think.*’

“That is really weird,” said my son, eager to get onto the next file card.

In such manner we continued through the questions about the visible and invisible spectrum, sound waves and elementary particles. Without hesitation, he recited his answers to each. In reaching near the bottom of the deck, I handed them back.

I think you are really going to ace that test,” I said.

He looked at his palm under the flickering candle.

“When’s the power coming back on? I can’t read in this light.”

“Hopefully, within an hour. Nothing we can do about it.”

I leaned back on the sofa and sighed. “You know honey, I often wish I had studied a science. I remember nights lying in bed as a kid trying to imagine the edge of the universe. Trying to understand the big questions of physics has always inspired me.”

“Maybe you can still study it,” he said.

“No no— it’s too late to do that seriously. Maybe when I retire, I could make it a hobby. Maybe I can start with borrowing your science textbook!”

“No problem.”

“Seriously though, it’s really exciting how the frontiers of science are gradually pushed further back. Even in my lifetime there have been incredible discoveries. In 50 years—who knows? There might be evidence of life outside our planet. Probably very primitive—but still that would be earth shaking. No chance I’ll be around to see that—but it might happen in your lifetime. Unless we screw up and destroy the planet.”

I yawned. “So, what do you think, M.? Will your generation save the world?”

He shuffled the cards, head down. I touched his arm. “M.?”

He caught my eye. “That’s scary. I’m scared to die.”

“But you are so young. You have your whole life ahead of you.”

He wiggled fingers under the candlelight. “I don’t know, I just wake up at night and get really scared of dying.”

“Don’t worry, you’re healthy, you have a long life. A lot of adventure to come.”

“He sighed, shuffling the cards...

Could you do just a few more, dad?” He held out the deck.

“Sure.” I picked one at random. “OK—define both potential and kinetic energy”.

He rattled forth his answer, the safety of the stable Newtonian universe momentarily beyond the terrors of quantum uncertainty...

*2006 May*

### **Thoughts on Body Worlds:**

The date with C. tonight was a tour of the much-hyped *Body Worlds II* exhibit at Science World.

Lining up in the foyer with fellow voyeurs, we dutifully read the ‘educational’ handout. Under the heading ‘*Take an eye-opening tour under the skin!*’ was the colour photo of a skinless model with its hide draped over arm like a matador’s cape...

Inside the foldout brochure the process of plastination© was described whereby the ‘specimens’ were prepared for the show. Essentially, the bodily fluids of cadavers are replaced by polymers before the plasticized remains are dissected or shaped into models. The final paragraph of the brochure emphasized that exhibition of models adheres to the highest ethical standards. Anonymity of the specimens is strictly protected and the pre-plastinated donors have explicitly consented: ‘... that they are donating their bodies for medical teaching and information purposes and that they agree to the sale of specimens manufactured from their bodies.’

So, with this assurance, we edged forward in the lineup.

The portable dividers through which viewers were directed into the galleries were emblazoned with inspiring quotes. The words of Hippocrates, Shakespeare, and Goethe assured that the exhibition would be tasteful and uplifting ...

As in an art gallery, one could keep moving along the cordons or momentarily linger before the galleries. The models were arranged on softly lit pedestals—each accompanied by a description of the biological functions displayed. Some models were stripped down to artfully reveal a particular bodily system (circulatory, digestive, skeletal *et. al.*). Exhibits that featured solo organs (heart, lungs and brain) included both healthy and diseased specimens. In one display, a model held its brain like Hamlet pondering his jester’s skull. In another a completely detached brain and spinal cord trailed lengthy tendrils of ganglia like some alien jellyfish...

The exhibits were hardly recognizable as parts of actual human bodies. One notable exception was the plastinated muscles. Their ropy striated texture was vaguely suggestive of cuts of flank steak. Yet bereft of the squishy gore of real flesh, most of the *Body Worlds* artefacts were no more ‘realistic’ than the plastic models in high school biology labs. Even 5,000-year-old mummies bore closer resemblance to the forms of the once-alive...

Throughout the tour, my curiosity grew not in the wonders of human biology but in the vision of the *Body Worlds*’ creator, Gunther Von Hagens. He clearly took pains in presenting his exhibition as a celebration of the anatomy of the “human form divine”.

Thus, on the wall behind the spread-eagled cadaver balancing on one hand while holding aloft in the other the organs from its empty chest cavity—was lines of the poetry of Goethe. Inspirational, quirky or just creepy? Impresario Von Hagens cannot be unaware of the age-old appeal of the freak show...

The final gallery most openly flirted with that coarser fascination. The plastinated tumours and aborted foetuses, while not floating in jars of formaldehyde, could well have been displayed in a carnie tent. Yet so close to the exit, most of the visitors were fidgeting and pulling out their cellphones. Even C. was patting a yawn. I wondered whether it would have been more fitting to have begun with the freak show...



Back home before bed, I sought more information about Von Hagens:

On Wikipedia, I discovered that the inventor of Plastination© is of East German origin and is an anatomist by training. His Institute of Plastination in Heidelberg, despite claiming itself a non-profit organization dedicated to medical research, has been accused of unethical practices. Apparently, there was some evidence that some of its specimens had not been obtained by donor consent but purchased from a hospital in Kyrgyzstan...

Not unexpectedly, the world-touring *Body Worlds* exhibition had been condemned by a number of religious organizations (including the Catholic church) for undignified public display of human remains. For dodging such attacks, the tone of lofty humanism in the exhibition seemed all the shrewder.

A further discovery was of the notoriety Von Hagens has gained by performing public autopsies. Some have been broadcast on German and British TV. Von Hagens sports a black fedora while demonstrating his dissection technique. He claims it to be in tribute to the 17<sup>th</sup> century physician in Rembrandt's painting: '*The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp.*'

That fact, left me even more dubious about the animus of Dr. Von Hagens... Is it really in devotion to pure science that he prods at dead flesh? Might he be testing his own squeamishness? Might he have an obsessive need to master his terror of death? He may well be sweating under his fedora...

As for his mission of plastination: by having proclaimed his intention to donate his own body—he is at least pardoned from an accusation of hypocrisy. Still, one wonders whether he would expressly consent to be displayed as one of the more whimsical plastic art objects in the *Body Worlds* portfolio.

Finally, the on-line article mentioned that Von Hagens is preparing a *Body Worlds* exhibition of animals including chimps, lions and even a giraffe. Then there was an illustration of one of the plastinated models on display in a German museum of erotica showing a human couple in a creative position of coitus. It would be grossly unfair to suspect Von Hagens of the sadistic impulses of a Mengele. Still, the fascination with dissecting and preserving cadavers cannot simply be a noble scientific undertaking...

“Could you imagine your body in one of those displays?” I had asked C. on the drive back.

“Well it really wouldn’t matter to me, would it?” she laughed.

Into the creepiness of such imagining, there flashed an image of a lion once seen in an African game park. The most memorable details—the gore in the mane, the stink of rotting meat or the buzz of flies—could certainly not be captured by plastination© ...

*2006 Nov.*

fwt

*Willy's tape:* 

It was disturbing to hear today the actual voice of serial killer, Willy Pickton. It was on the just-released segment of an audio tape letter which he had recorded in 1991 for an unknown woman (given the fictitious name 'Virginia') in a lonely-hearts bid.

Punctuated by the scrape of a frying pan and the yelp of dogs, the thin voice sounded like that of a simple yet practical man, detailing a workaholic history. He spoke of fixing cars, driving trucks and framing houses after "the market went sour" on his family farm ventures. He stitched together his rambling narration with expressions like: "*those were tough times but that was alright.*"

Listening, it was almost impossible to believe here that there was anything out of the ordinary about him. His simple-mindedness seemed much more due to marginal literacy than mental deficiency. If nothing else, the audio tape blew out of the water the defense's contention that he is incapable of premeditation. No doubt along with many fellow listeners, I was reminded of the expression of Hannah Arendt in reporting on the 1960 Eichmann trial: "the banality of evil."

While the voice of Willy Pickton recorded in 1991 seemed innocuous, other details that have emerged depict a life more grubby than banal. Willy cut his teeth on dirty work: demolition, junk collecting and vehicle chopping along with his notorious pig slaughtering. Meanwhile, undergirding their 'business ventures', Pickton and his siblings had a land inheritance. As the cash rolled in from sales of parcels of the family farm to suburban developers, it could hardly be surprising that the Picktons hosted wild parties.

With his "smarter" younger brother, Dave, consorting in the biker world of guns, whores and cocaine, it seems that Willy wanted to prove that he was he was also a 'bad-ass.' Lest any visitor to the cluttered farm be tempted to rip off tools, drugs or loose cash, Willy's reputation for violent craziness was even more effective security than the tusked boar which guarded the exterior fence... So it seems that in such a milieu, a simple-minded farmer went completely to the dark side.

Whether or not that innocuous voice recorded in 1991 was already that of a serial killer is as yet unrevealed. With much of the trial proceedings in secrecy, one can only speculate on the timeline of Willy's first appearances on downtown east side, trolling for prostitutes to lure back to his Port Coquitlam farm. Perhaps the murders began after the unsent cassette was thrown among the detritus of his slovenly trailer.

In any case, in the 1991 tape letter, the pig farmer who was to become the most prolific murderer in Canadian history speaks of his desire "to build a house and raise a family." One might well wonder if Willy had worked up the courage to send the tape, 'Virginia' might have been impressed. Willy might well have married her and led the very mundane life for which he once professed to yearn...

In such an alternate universe, at least 50 young women would have been spared. No matter how much more lurid detail come to light—the brutality of their murders will remain unimaginable...



Meanwhile, I grow increasingly uncomfortable with my near obsession with the coverage of the Pickton trial. Despite the ongoing self-castigation, I have been unable to resist the voyeuristic appetite for details. I have been devouring every crumb which the local media dishes no less avidly than did the London press in reporting the 1890s Whitechapel murders of Jack the Ripper.

Of course, the titillation is swollen by the reminder that the Pickton farm is so close to our neighbourhood. Yet apart from imagining horrors transpiring a block away from the Costco where we regularly shop, what is the deeper impetus of this queasy fascination?

Perhaps the answer lies in the expression ascribed to the Roman playwright Terence: “*Nothing human is alien to me.*” Such evil perpetrated by a person whom one might have easily passed on the street is particularly haunting. Yet however gruesome the crime, the shared humanity with the perpetrator cannot be denied...

Tendencies of my pre-adolescence haunt me still: a fascination with gunpowder, fire and the torture of frogs. Mercifully, a belated empathy for all creatures great and small developed along with the changes of puberty. Still, at some nightmarish depth, I can imagine a Pickton to be an evil twin. It was not by amazing grace by which I was saved in early adolescence—but only by the luck of different circumstances. Therein may well lie the unseemly allure...

*2007 March*

***Beware the pinched nostrils!*** 

I woke at 3:30 AM to the shaking of my lampstand and a pounding against the wall. That was followed by the squeaking of mattress springs.

“Don’t put it *there!*”

The female voice accompanying the yelp and groan, was almost certainly that of our neighbour. In our unavoidable doorway passings over the last 3½ years, the next-door neighbour and I have been stiffly cordial. I have gathered that the blondish woman with thick glasses is a single mother of 2 preteen daughters whom my daughter has referred to as “trashy.”. However annoyed by the partying noises from her open doorway, I have never complained to the complex manager. But last night I was tempted to knock her wall with a broomstick.

Instead, I lay frozen with grit teeth—waiting for the noises to die down. At the same time, I recalled a night in a hotel room in Kuala Lumpur, awoken by similar sounds through an even thinner wall. Yet in the torment of that night in Malaysia I did not imagine the mystery woman in the next room to be stocky, of middle-age or having bad teeth...

I managed to doze off until the grey of dawn, when jolted up by a slamming door and male voices. I rolled over and peeked out the window blind. In the neighbouring driveway, two young men were standing beside an Econoline van. They looked like twins: both baby-faced and red-haired. So, my neighbour has a taste for frisky threesomes? No shame even with her girls sleeping under the same roof?

I shuddered in the thought of the 15-year-old MH sleeping in his tiny bedroom on the back side of our low-rent townhouse. At least his room does not adjoin her wall. Still, neither he nor his sisters deserve any more of this squalor. No more delay: we have to move out of this dump! I rolled back on the bed in a shiver of disgust.



Since it was still too early to wake the kids by knocking about in the kitchen, I turned on the bedside lamp. From the night table I picked up from among the magazines, Mackie’s ‘*History of Scotland*’, an old paperback which has served as a soporific as well as a source of a few insightful titbits...

Thumbing to the bookmark, I recalled the descriptions read a few nights ago of the Highland Clearances of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. That tragic uprooting began when English overlords drove the Highlanders from their patches of ground to make way for their genteel estates. That displacement would lead to the immigration of so many Scots, both Highlanders and Lowlanders, from poor farms and villages into the wider world.

As for those who stayed on (even for a few more generations) most managed to adapt rather well to the order—especially the Lowlanders. Many served the English masters in their armies, offices and estates. Mostly Calvinist Protestants, the Lowlanders were inclined to attribute their ‘getting on’ to boot-strapping pluck guided by divine will. They would have

had little common cause with the dislodged Highlanders who straggled into their towns, even if only on the way to seaports. Rough-mannered Catholics were not accorded Almighty Grace in the Calvinist dispensation...

In reviewing this history, I have wondered whether some of that enmity crossed the Atlantic and its remnants persisted through succeeding generations. I have wondered whether some faint inter-tribal animosity, underlay the social divisions of my native village where Scottish surnames were common.

In my fossilized memories of the mid-1960s, my New Brunswick village had a curious class-structure. In a ‘company town’ where the majority of workers carried black lunchboxes, the social order was not based on religion or ethnicity. The deepest rift was between the self-respecting and those whom the self-respecting deemed slovenly...

Self-respect did not entirely depend upon wealth. A family might be needy, but they still could try to feed themselves though garden, fish or game. Only the slovenly resorted to welfare. Most importantly: the self-respecting needy could always afford soap...

For particularly pious villagers, not only did slovenly dwellings stink—but the very names of the slovenly bore a certain foulness. More than 40 years later, I wonder whether it was the descendants of Calvinist Lowland Scots whose noses were so sensitive...

My thoughts turned back to my neighbour:

I do not intentionally scowl in passing, but the impression is undeniably of tight-assed disapproval. A few weeks ago, I even turned up my nose when 2 of her female friends, sitting outside her open door, asked me to join them for a beer...

“You need to be friendlier, dad,” said MT recently, “those teenage girls or their dodgy boyfriends could key your new Prius!”

Pushing back *‘The History of Scotland’* into my night table, I resolved to smile more in greeting. However loud the carport parties or thumps in the night—there was no excuse for petty snobbery. However unlikely I will be asked again to join her carport gathering for a beer—I would certainly never again turn up my nose.

*2007 August*

***Saluting ghosts of Christmas, '88:*** 

It is almost a miracle that I am no longer dreading the advent of winter. In the anticipation of more cozy evenings with C., my friend and lover, winter in this grey clime might even become my favorite season...

The new-found companionship seems even more miraculous in the glimpses of the roads twisting behind. That came poignantly into focus last evening, when we drove up the side streets of West Coquitlam. We were on the way back from picking up Starbucks when I detoured through an old neighbourhood to see whether the extravagant light displays remembered from Christmases long past were maintained by a new generation.

What was not expected were glimpses of the ghosts of December, 1988:

At the bus shelter in the dark corner of Como Lake and Schoolhouse Rd., we passed the ghost of a 37-year-old with a heavy shoulder bag, shivering in the rain. Having just narrowly missed an hourly bus, he was on his way back from another futile visit to Canada Manpower. Meanwhile back at the frowsy apartment on Smith Ave., his 2 infant daughters played on the bare carpet while his young immigrant wife stared at the TV wondering how much longer she could endure a jobless husband in a cold and hostile land...

As we slowed down before gaudy lawn ornamentation on Blue Mountain Rd., ghosts of the same mixed couple momentarily loomed up in the headlights. The skinny white man was carrying a 3-year-old on his shoulders while his black wife held their toddler. The older girl was pointing excitedly at the carousel of twirling elves...

A few blocks below, on North Road, I caught another glimpse of the same family. They were coming from the Christmas tree lot in the corner of the bus loop where they have just bought the cheapest tree available. As the parents lugged the scrawny boughs between them, the older child skipped ahead...

In the chunk of the wind shield wipers, I blinked salutes to each of the passing specters: '*Just keep slogging along. It'll all work out. Yes, it will be by the skin of your teeth—but you will muddle through!*'

When we turned back east towards Coquitlam Centre, C. touched my knee in a look of concern. She wondered why I was blinking away a tear...

*2008, December*

***The latest skirmishes with paranoia:*** 

In my walk back from an early afternoon jog at the Inlet Park, reason was locked in the ugly struggle with paranoia:

Just moments before, a woman pushing a baby stroller was seemingly terrified by me. She certainly would have passed several other joggers, cyclists or walkers, but when I came around the corner, she gasped. Her eyes then flitted to my vulnerable side upon which her hand shot to her mouth, as if suppressing a scream. Was that a *fact*?

Whether or not my appearance had actually triggered a phobia—it *felt* like she had seen Freddy Kreuger with a meat cleaver hand. Yet why should I give a damn? As much as reason tried to sooth, the imagining of what she may have perceived clouded over a spring day that had started in brightness...

As I approached the coffee shop just across from our doorway, more bitter gall rose in the throat. It came in the glance up at the window of the Real Estate office on the second floor. It was from that window that the office secretary surveyed the parking spaces across from our townhouse.

The same woman had phoned Coquitlam Towing last month resulting in my Prius being towed away. While waiting for a space on the street to open up, I had been parked for no longer than 2 hours in one of her company's customer spaces. Other neighbours were using the same spaces regularly.

The white-haired secretary had passed me several times on the block. She knew I drove the blue Prius having seen me numerous times backing in and out of the garage across from her window. Once I even turned from locking the front door and saw her scowling down through her window blind...

As soon as I realized that the car had been towed, I phoned the building property manager whose business card was in the building foyer.

“Nope, I never called Coquitlam towing this afternoon,” he said. “Coulda been the gal in the office. I told her to look out for long-term violators.”

“But I am not a long-term violator,” I fumed, “I was only there for an hour. She could have warned me. I’m your next door neighbour, for christakes!”

“You’re a neighbour? Too bad!”

I had not expected an apology but did get a confirmation of what I had immediately suspected: that the secretary had made the phone call. I would not even have been angry if there were solid evidence that her selection of a scapegoat was *not* personal. Yet I could not ignore the specific memory of her glance of loathing in one of our passings. Whether or not that perception was inflated by paranoia, the \$150 towing charge was a bitter fact!

Inside the doorway, I sat down on the stairs, chest pounding. My blood-pressure was soaring. The car-towing unpleasantness, I reminded myself, was a month past. The continuing frustration over it was wreaking far more damage than the mere loss of \$150!

I duly counted 10 breaths and rose. In 4 hours, I would be pushing my trolley into the classroom. Whatever troubles I brought from home would be plain in my face. That had to be erased...

*2009 April*

fwt

*Of November light and darkness:* 

“The sunsets this time of year are so gorgeous,” said C. holding my arm as we walked along the Inlet path with C. yesterday afternoon. “Fall has always been my favourite season.”

I wisely held my tongue.

Yet as we walked along comfortably in our own thoughts for the next few minutes, I considered why the wane light of November held such a special dreariness...

Reminded of an old poem by Emily Dickinson I had to read again, as soon as I got back to the basement alcove, I pulled from the bookshelf my old ‘*Penguin Book of American Verse*’:

*There's a certain Slant of light,  
Winter Afternoons –  
That oppresses, like the Heft  
Of Cathedral Tunes...*

Yet why not November afternoons? It occurred that Dickinson’s choice of ‘winter’ may have been more for sound than for sense. November light is certainly as bleak as that of February without the consolation of slowly lengthening days. In November, spring is too far away for even a flicker of anticipation...

The thoughts then turned from the bleakness of days to the despair of recent nights:

Too often in these last weeks, I have lain sleepless in the pitch black, counting breaths. Too often in the middle of the night, the mind has endlessly looped through the foibles of the day: careless words, mishandled situations; fear of failure...

Can such dread, sucked deeper with every cold breath be any less oppressive than the sense of death?

*... When it comes, the Landscape listens –  
Shadows – hold their breath –  
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance  
On the look of Death –*

The final stanza of the ‘*Certain Slant of Light*’ left me shivering. That the thoughts of an 19<sup>th</sup> century reclusive spinster should so intimately touch mine, was breathtaking. The historical gulf seemed irrelevant: her light into the shadow of death was timeless.

In digging on my shelf for a bookmark, I recalled the 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard, also had insights into the ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ that could be far more relevant now that they were in earlier years. I remembered a copy of ‘*Sickness Unto Death*’, that might still be stored in my trunk of old books...

It also occurred that there was another choice: instead of seeking some solace on Kierkegaard, I could find quiescence in some pharmaceutically induced brain fog. No thank you, Doctor!

In readying to look through my trunk, I wondered how many potential Kierkegaards or Dickensonians of our time were lost to Paxil...



This morning at 6:00 AM on the drive to work, I remembered that in southern Africa, November had been my *favourite* month. After the long dry season, November was the month of rising heat and humidity when thunderheads began rolling in from the east. November was the month when the moist air was redolent with the scent of blossoming jacaranda. For an instant, I caught a ghostly whiff of that honey-like fragrance...

Before reminding myself of the checklist for the workday ahead, I blinked a tribute to that tiny memory and the myriad of others deeply embedded in the olfactory dimension. From the stink of burning mittens on a wood stove to the fragrance of Jacaranda blossoms: who can be luckier?

*2011 November*

fwt

*A nostalgic turn for an armchair tourist:* 

In the austerity of the last few years, I have become an armchair traveler— mostly through old *National Geographic* magazines and *Lonely Planet* guides.

I have always been fond of the breezy *Lonely Planet* style. When I have actually used the guides for travel, I have found their recommendations worthy. So even if I never get to a city such as Makassar, Sulawesi (once a bucket-list destination), I am still curious about its budget hotels and restaurants... Yet it was not for armchair travel that I recently picked up in Value Village a *Lonely Planet* guide to the Canadian Maritime provinces.

The curiosity for that purchase was in finding out how my natal turf might be described by a non-Canadian travel writer (The inside cover bio-blurb identified him as Australian). Of course, an Aussie perspective was not nearly as interesting as that of a Papua New Guinea travel writer would be — but he still had the fresh eyes for little observations which a native would miss.

Leafing through the same guide before bed last evening, I was intrigued by the description of Saint John, New Brunswick:

*“...It takes a bit of imagination to appreciate the natural beauty, obscured as it is by the smokestacks of a pulp mill, an oil refinery and garden variety urban blight...”*

While not much given to nostalgia, I was a little stung by that description. There was no doubt that Saint John has always been always raw-boned and bleak. As a 17-year-old from a provincial village, my first impression of the old port city was also of the stink of the pulp mill. Still, within weeks of my residence, I had adopted the attitude of many natives—a few of whom had become high school friends. Yes, Saint John was superficially ugly—*“but it had soul.”*

I thought of a celebrated painting by the under-rated Saint John native artist, Miller Brittain, depicting grim-faced stevedores of the depression era against the backdrop of dun brick walls. Before his early death, Brittain went on to paint surrealistic visions inspired by Blake... Such exterior drabness cloaking a tormented inner life seemed emblematic— even to a 17-year-old without the words to express it.

Perhaps it was something of that gritty “soul” of Saint John that engendered a fantasy I sometimes indulged while dwelling there. In last adolescence I had had numerous infatuations but never a ‘real’ girlfriend. Yet the soulmate I imagined was as beautiful as Bob Dylan’s *‘Girl from the North Country’*:

*If you’re travellin’ to the north country fair,  
Where the winds hit heavy on the border line,  
Remember me to one who lives there—  
She once was a true love of mine...’*

She looked rather like the girl who leans on Bob Dylan's arm on the cover photo of '*The Free-wheelin' Bob Dylan*', my favourite album at the time. I imagined that she would appear out of the cold fog when I was walking alone through King's Square after an empty Saturday night in late fall. She would be shivering and clutching her coat picking her way along the shabby street. I imagined that her long hair would be brown or raven-back and her eyes wistful. Her drab coat and the foul air would accentuate her beauty. I imagined that when we met, we would instantly discover that we were moved by the same music and poetry...

The truth was that even if I had exchanged soulful glances with such a girl; even if she sat down across from me on a park bench, inviting my approach—I would have been too shy to make a move. So it was for a few more years, I sheltered in a hopeless longing for the imaginary soul-mate...

I then remembered the name of Suze Rotolo. She was the real woman whose photo was on the old Bob Dylan album. She apparently went on to become an artist and activist. That information came from a report of her obituary a couple of years ago. She died at 67, without ever managing to shake her fame as the 20-year-old Dylan's girlfriend. In the photo accompanying her obit taken a few years before her death at age 67, she was certainly unrecognizable as a girl from the north country...

Still flipping through the *Lonely Planet* guide, I looked for the description of Fredericton, New Brunswick. Despite its reputation of being "*a head without a body*", it was a pleasant enough place to have spent college years. It was there that I had a first 'real relationship.'

That bit of personal history made me curious about how the smart-ass Australian would describe that 'exotic' Canadian locale...

*2013 July*

**Willy's farm in early morning light:** 

As much as I love our new neighbourhood with its nearness to the mountains and the river trails—one aspect of this locale will always stir disquiet. That is the fact that now we sleep only two blocks away a big-box parking lot sized pasture that still belongs to the notorious Pickton family. It is the site of the most horrific serial murders in Canadian history.

For the last two months nearly every morning I have jogged though the pathway between the two fenced off sections where the shambolic farm buildings once stood. The south side of the property is still in dubious operation as the '*Poco Valley Cattle Co.*'. Even at dawn a dozen or more Hereford cows are seen ambling out of the open aluminum-sided barn or ranging across the grassy fields. Their presence, apparently, is a legal maneuver by the still uncharged younger Pickton brother to hold off the forced sale of the land. The yet uncollected lien imposed by the Crown would cover only a fraction of the cost of the investigation and murder trial of his older brother, Willy, 15 years ago...

On the north side of the walkway behind a high wire fence, is the remains of Willy Pickton's pig farm. The trailer and barn where as many as 50 women were brutally murdered have been long torn down. With rusting conveyors amid the detritus of decaying building materials and wrecked cars, the property has the appearance of an abandoned mine site. The end of the taller conveyor hangs like the jaws of a tyrannosaurus over overgrown mounds of tangled bushes. These mounds were the residue dumps of tons of soil that was sifted for traces of DNA...

On the fence are tied pieces of clothing and drying bunches of flowers. For a few weeks, what appeared to be a faded yellow blouse hung from the neck of the conveyor. Such mementos, regularly taken down by the Pickton property manager, are presumably left by relatives who sometimes come to quietly mourn. Yet for the most part, the site seems like a sprawling vacant lot around which suburbia has sprung. Some of the residents of the new townhouses that abut the east side of the fence probably know nothing of the dark history of these grounds. There are no rumours of Stephen King-like hauntings...

In my morning jogs along the fence, I cannot fail to acknowledge the unrequited spirits. The overgrown mounds are still as unsettling as were the shrine of killing-fields skulls once beheld in rural Cambodia. The effect is most chilling in the silhouettes of early dawn against the backdrop of the black peaks of the Golden Ears...

Last month in the predawn, I saw a coyote sitting atop one of the mounds. He ignored me when I passed directly below the fence. He seemed to be protecting the mass grave upon which he crouched...



Just two mornings ago, I approached the walkway as the sun was rising from a clearing sky still drizzling to the west. For a moment, the hulking conveyors were bathed in an eerie amber glow. From the glow there gradually emerged a rainbow. The rainbow stretched across the brightening sky from Burke Mountain to the city railyard on the south. Then even more astonishing were the three seagulls, dazzling white, which appeared to fly directly through the rainbow's arch.

Stopped up spellbound, I would have been no less moved to have witnessed the same phenomenon over the gates of Auschwitz.

*2014 Sept.*

fwt

*A tiny shine:* 

With dark clouds on the west, I had been rushing toward the dyke with Pancho in order to get in our short walk along the river before the rain.

As we approached the trail entrance, a maintenance worker in orange overalls was bending over the garbage bin changing the bags. As she swung a full bag into the back of the white municipal truck, I was surprised that a woman with somewhat slight features was engaged in such heavy work. As we drew nearer, rather delicately she began removing her rubber gloves. More notable as I stepped closer was the whiff of floral perfume.

In that same instant, I saw her face. She was pretty! With a shake of loose brown hair, she returned my smile. I muttered 'good morning' and looked away...

There had not been the slightest tweak of carnal curiosity such that often passes between younger bodies (How long ago was that felt?). I was just a geezer yanking along a sniffing dog and she—probably no older than 40—going about her indelicate work. Still, I sensed that she was pleased by my innocent greeting. I was in no manner threatening. Still, I had acknowledged her not just as a fellow citizen in the uniform of a sanitation worker—but as an attractive *woman*.

Pulled up the bank by the straining pooch, I wondered if I might have put a tiny shine on her morning as she had on mine. How very little effort it takes!

*2014 Oct.*

*A vow taken on the dyke:* 

Halfway along the dyke in the mid-morning dog walk, I stopped up in the sudden cacaphony of honks. Funneling in from the northwest horizon were Canada geese—possibly thousands in number. In a mass swirling blob, they swirled and veered over the Pitt River...

Sensing another presence, I looked up the bank to my right. High in a cedar tree was a lone eagle. In silhouette, he cocked his head towards the shifting blob of geese...

In a shiver, I realized just how lucky I was to be in such a landscape just a 15-minute walk from my doorstep. What else in suburbia would such magnificence be so accessible?

Waiting for Pancho to sniff the grass, I vowed to come this same route through the coming winter. With rainproof gear, I was well prepared for even the most miserable weather... In the same thought there rose the customary tweak of dread anticipation. I swallowed it back. I must never again wish for a season to end—I must never again rue winter!

With a tug of the leash, I vowed that from now onward, whatever the weather, I will wish for every hour to move slowly. I vowed that from now onward I will try to nurture a love for every season equal as that always felt for spring. I will expect that every beautiful day be haunted by the sense of ephemerality and every wasted day mourned...

In those same moments, the massive flock of geese had spiralled away into the west and the sound of their honking had grown fainter. I looked back towards the eagle, still holding sentinel from its eyrie.

Oddly, I recalled the haunting photos in an old issue of *Granta* magazine reread a few weeks ago. The photos were of bodies in a German morgue. There was a strange dignity in each of the reposing faces. One looked to be faintly smiling.

In his introduction, the photographer wrote of how he had expected nightmares when taking on the project, but instead he had been profoundly moved. He wrote that the subjects of his photo study had brought him a new understanding of ‘*coming to rest*’...

I shivered again in gratitude. I had just one more month before retirement, after which my time would be my own. There was very much work to do before coming to rest... Could I possibly have found myself with better tools or in a more beautiful place?

2014 Dec.

