

Tombstone Chronicles (1991-2011)

Introduction:

No doubt there are many who have abandoned the pursuit of fiction after the devastating failure of a novel...

The plot of mine involved a librarian (who is an anthropology buff) on a trip back to his village of origin accompanied by his foreign-born wife and baby daughter. Having lived abroad “in exile” for more than two decades, the first-person narrator is unexpectedly assailed by various tensions. In an effort of distraction, he takes extensive “field notes”. He is particularly drawn to the village cemetery where he confronts “unappeased ghosts” ...

Only a few times have I had the stomach to look at that manuscript over the last quarter century. Every time, I found it more cringeworthy. The plot hardly moves, and the style is ponderous. I am baffled why I had such hopes for it. It was essentially shit.

Yet a recent review of journal notes kept during the midwifery of that miscreation has led me to believe that its backstory could be more readable than the doomed manuscript was able to be.

The following is a chronicle of the writing of that novel and the lingering impact of its failure in the months and years thereafter. Names of identifiable persons, publishers— even the title of the manuscript itself— have been fictionalized.

Finally, I wish to stress that I have great respect for all identifiable persons herein— particularly for the poet and academic referred to as Ted C.

-2020



A few months after I got my first computer and began learning Word Perfect, I felt ready to try my hand at a longer work of fiction. A particularly fertile source for a project, it seemed, were the extensive notes taken during a trip back to my natal province the previous summer.

No more excuses:

After three hours piddling about the bookshelf, I pulled forth the neglected blue folder containing the notes from the New Brunswick visit. While frowning into the hodgepodge of scrawled cross references—a modest proposal came to mind: why not copy the notes and begin shifting bits around? By so doing, a coherent story may emerge.

Thus, I began to peck away. By the end of the afternoon, I still hadn't finished copying all the notes, but the production achieved in a fairly short time was encouraging. The ease of word-processing compared with typing is incredible. Still, unlike the typewritten page, the amber squiggles on the computer monitor can all too easily vanish into the ether. Heeding the standard warning, I am making a habit of hourly saving the text to the floppy disk.

In developing this new word-processing ability, there is a bittersweetness that this technology has come so late. I was always hindered by an inability to type. I was unable to develop speed or accuracy, even on the Smith-Corona electric typewriter I acquired in the early 1970s. I was able to use it only for labourious copying—with constant use of Wite-Out.

Now with the magic of word processing, I am taunted by the thought that had this tool been available fifteen years ago, I might have used it to make a living. At forty, and working only in spare time, there is limited room for catching up...



Later in the evening, similar thoughts resurfaced in hearing the TV news item on recent brain research. Brain cells, it seems—especially those of males—begin to atrophy in early middle age...

So, while there still is solid footing on the edge of this precipice, I cannot fail to take advantage of what may be a final opportunity. The time may be ripe as never before to fully engage with a creative project. There are no more excuses—no more whiny regret for creative potential already dribbled away...

1991, April

In the first draft, the transcribed notes from an awkward visit emerged as a novella:

The Deer Lake resolution:

I worked slowly but steadily at the WordPerfect file for three hours on Saturday morning and then for another squirmy hour after lunch. In that time, I completed a rough draft of an opening chapter that was about six pages long.

There was no magical breakthrough: the rest of the journey is sure to be a labourious slog. Still, the hope is that in the remaining 3½ weeks of vacation, I can finish a rough draft. The working title of the emerging novella is *'Tombstone Depot'*.

In slogging forward, I can take heart in the advice of the French psychotherapist heard on the radio on Wednesday afternoon. I was waiting in the car with TE while T. renewed her driver's licence at the Deer Lake government office in Burnaby. As little TE slept cradled in my lap, I listened almost mesmerized:

'Long after his absence,' the psychotherapist said, 'one must learn to resist the voice of the tyrannical father that mocks from within'...

Never had advice seemed so explicitly relevant! Indeed, several times yesterday morning before the keyboard, I heard a taunting voice: *'What in hell do you think you are doing?'* it sneered, *'A 40-year-old man, leaving a wife and children upstairs and piddling around alone in the basement!'*

Yet the mockery was countered by a softer voice: *'Keep going... You have always wanted to finish a novel. The worst you can do is to never have tried...'*



No, this time, I must not be left with a stack of index cards, and a few scratched over pages (As in Zimbabwe, *circa* March, 1986). This time there is just too much at stake.

In that moment I knew there were no more excuses. Whatever the outcome: it really is time to put up or quit dreaming...

1991, June

Before engaging further with the 'Tombstone Depot' notes, I worked on a short story as a dry run. Based on notes taken in the early 1980s in Zimbabwe, the story was tentatively titled 'At the Mission Gate'.

Of camps never built:

I laboured nearly three hours before the monitor on 'At the Mission Gate' before hitting a block. It came at the end of page two, in the uncertainty of how much to reveal about the background of the white teacher.

Taking a break from the amber glow, I squeezed out from my desk in the staircase nook under the staircase. Blinking like a mole I trudged up to the living room. I opened a can of Coors and leaned back on the sofa with swollen feet stretched across the coffee table.

I had long promised myself that one day I would make creative use of my notes of a strange encounter with an old lady outside Gokomere Mission back in 1983. I naively assumed that the story would almost 'write itself'. But what a slog it was just to squeeze out those two pages! I had never expected to be so unsure about style and tone... Still, too many times, I have abandoned work on the edge of a breakthrough. Such a defeat this time would be crushing!



Reaching with aching shoulder for the beer can, I almost heard amid the chatter of the T.V., the ghostly knocking of a hatchet. It was the sound of a boy of about ten, pounding a spike into a wet plank. How many times had that kid promised himself that he would build his own secret camp in the woods? How many times after a sweaty and frustrating morning, did he give up?

'This time', I muttered to myself, 'the little camp *will* get built!'

1991, June

Those rough boards did get nailed together over the next few weeks. Pleased enough with the result, I sent the story to a small literary journal. Within two weeks, I received my first 'purple heart':

To add to the weekend's ignominies:

Back from work, I was startled to find open on my desk the same RSAE (reply self-addressed envelope) I had sent to Kingston, Ontario two weeks ago. I jerked out the contents. Attached by a paper clip to the front of my eight printed pages was a cover letter bearing the little magazine's letterhead over a few typed lines: *'We've pretty much reached our fiction quota for the year—sorry, we can't use it. Lots of energy, but rather confusing...'*

In a hot flash of shame, I snatched up the papers and wheeled round. T. had just slipped down the stairs and was leaning over the dryer behind me.

"Why did you open this?" I held up the envelope.

T. chuckled. "I just wanted to see if you got a big cheque."

I smirked. "I would have been lucky to get fifty cents."

"They didn't want your story?"

"Editors hardly look at stuff that comes from names they can't recognize."

"Can I read your story?"

I ignored her question. "So, when exactly did this come?"

"It just came with the mail— can I read your story?"

"Was there any other mail?" I affected nonchalance.

"Nothing," She then said softly. You never let me read anything you write."

"I don't think you'd like it. It's just a hobby."

I pulled out my scissors from the drawer, and commenced cutting papers for my ESL beginners' lesson-plan... T. watched me curiously for a moment then tsked before emptying the dryer. Bearing an armload of clothes, she turned towards the stairs. I stared after her.

'Why should self-esteem depend on the judgment of the editor of some little quarterly read only by a few English professors and the writers they groom? How many of them have such a beautiful family?

While consoling myself, I concentrated on cutting the cartoon paper strips as evenly as possible.

1991, August

Despite the short story rejection, I turned attention back to the 'Tombstone Depot' draft. Over a period of three months of steady spare-time effort, the novella began to take shape. Meanwhile, there came the surprise of my wife's pregnancy. In the months thereafter, I often felt in the midst of two pregnancies...

Casenbaum and Dorothea?

The troughs and peaks of T.'s moods seem to be skewing more precipitously as the pregnancy progresses. Like the northwest winter weather, her giddy interludes have become as rare as the breaks between low-pressure fronts. She often stays stone silent though the days. Of late, it is only when the bedside light is switched off that she is given to speak. As she did last night after a long sigh:

"Every night I pray to God", she whispered, "I pray that I do not have to live like this. One day, one day you're going to come home and find me gone forever."

"Don't talk like that," I gulped. "Please, honey."

"Don't call me honey."

"O.K., let's just get to sleep. You'll feel better in the morning."

With that she flinched away.

I pulled the pillow over my head. Maybe it's just U.V.S.: Ultra-violet deprivation syndrome. Maybe it's not so much my neglect...

Yet again I thought of Edward Casenbaum, the old scholar in Eliot's *'Middlemarch'*. He was the cadaverous baldhead who scrivined away on his "Key to All Mythologies" while his loyal young wife, Dorothea, pined away. Only upon his death (his ponderously empty work, of course, unfinished) was Dorothea released from his gloom. Only with the stopping of Casenbaum's hard heart did his young widow reclaim her natural joy ...

Stretching over my foot, I touched T.'s calf.

"Don't cry, T., please?"

"Don't pretend to care."

The bed shivered in her heaving sobs.

How many more nights can I lie visualizing tombstones while my wife cries herself to sleep? Damn the fucking project— family must come first...

1991, November

Amid the rise and fall of domestic tensions, I continued spending most of my weekends at my desk in the converted storage area under the ground level stairwell. As I came closer to completion of the first draft of the novella, it became harder to rein in fantasy about its potential...

The glory of completion:

Wet pant legs flapping in the wind, I edged down the Burnaby Mountain short-cut in my predawn hike to the bus stop. In the driving rain, the ribs of the umbrella strained. Yet instead of focusing on the mucky path in the wavering beam of my penlight, I was fantasizing a review of my novella in '*the Vancouver Sun*'. I was imagining the shock of colleagues when a slick patch of mud jerked me to attention.

With umbrella billowing inside out, I dropped to my knees like a drunken Cossack. A half-second more of inattention and I'd have surely sprained an ankle... Carefully, I rose and resumed down the slick path in a sting of embarrassment.

Was my near obsession of late anything more than an eccentric hobby? I thought of the display of the model railroad enthusiasts in the Burnaby library to which I had taken the girls last Sunday. Behind the little trains zipping around double-helix trestles and through whole villages in miniature, were middle-aged men, bashfully smiling.

Then there was the retired civil servant, shown in a recent photo in the Burnaby community newspaper pointing proudly to a scale model of a Bavarian castle. He had apparently constructed it in his basement—painstakingly over five years—and entirely from toothpicks... Ironic, that I smirked in reading of his achievement. Who knows how many half-built Bavarian castles of toothpicks lie abandoned in corners of dreary basements? At least that one was actually *finished*.

Slogging down from the muddy path onto the firmer footing Forest Grove, I made a vow: even if my basement project be no more consequential than a Bavarian toothpick castle— it *will* be completed!

1991, November

The satisfaction in completing the draft of the novella was short-lived.

A tiny victory?

In the aisle seat of the bus on the ride back from work this afternoon, I gloomily scanned through the pages of the first two chapters of the manuscript... Had I been gulled by the amber text on a screen? It seemed that only in print were the flaws revealed: not only typos but stilted patches! Was it even readable?

A half hour earlier in headless chicken mode, I had been pacing the departmental office. At the entrance to the Union meeting in the auditorium, I was tapped on the shoulder by boss RC:

"Can you drop into my office after the meeting?" he had whispered.

After an hour of sweating (a student complaint?) outside his empty office for him to show up, I left a note for him to call me at home.

Still, on the bus ride back, the greater concern was whether the domestic tensions which I left in the morning had worsened.

T., now in the sixth month of her pregnancy, left the bed in the middle of the night to sleep on the sofa.

"I'm sick of being treated like shit!" were the words she left ringing in my ears when I left for work in the morning.

I called several times through the day, but she did not pick up. Sucking a shivering breath, I dropped my eyes again to the pages on my lap. *Just what will be the real cost of producing this drivel?*



In turning the key to the lock, my heart leapt in the sound of MT's giggle. Both she and TE were at the table colouring. Guiding them, T. did not look up, but I could sense her mood was lifting.

Soon thereafter, the return call came from boss RC: he was merely requesting that I fill in a government survey form about faculty qualifications. So palpable, was my relief that I gulped two beers before the supertime TV news...

Sitting with TE on my lap, I even felt a little less jaundiced about the prospects of 'Tombstone Depot.' Even if it does come to nought, surely there was a tiny victory in just finishing it. Even if it is stillborn, at least there will no longer be delusions of a missed career. Without further misgivings, I can put more heart into the humble work by which my family is fed...

But then maybe (the blood alcohol raced), just maybe—I am nailing down something really significant...

1992, February

After another round of editing, I was still chary about sending out the manuscript unsolicited. Reluctantly, I decided to send the draft to an old university friend for her feedback. Surreptitiously, I printed it in the faculty resource room.

No more bloodletting?

At the resource room cutting board at 7:30 AM, I jolted in the sound of the opening door. As fellow early bird, DM, blurred past, my thumb jerked on the edge of the blade. Even in the sudden sting of a cut, my concern was for the manila envelope across the table— the envelope containing the photocopied pages of the manuscript. Thankfully, they were not exposed...

“You OK?” DM raised his eyebrows.

“Just a little nick,” I chuckled, digging for a Kleenex. “Still waking up!”

“Be careful— that’s sharp,” he said, squinting at the photocopier panel.

Squeezing my bleeding thumb into the tissue, I casually slipped the envelope among my photocopied worksheets. At the same time, I gritted teeth in the close call. Had DM come in the door just 2 minutes earlier, he’d have seen the sheaf of ‘*Tombstone*’ pages, spread on the worktable.

Imagine the snickers around the staffroom desks! (‘*Can you guess what I saw F. doing this morning?*’) All that risk, just to avoid spending a few bucks in a print shop...

Tightening jaw, I picked up my armload of papers and clomped to my shared desk in the anteroom. The brown manilla was safely in the bottom of my bookbag, ready for mailing.

In opening my lesson plan folder, I wondered how many other colleagues sneak into the resource room at odd hours to photocopy their precious ‘literary’ efforts. I was very likely not alone in fantasizing a career change...



Back home in late afternoon, I hunched over the top of the washing machine, sorting those photocopies. Several warts on the final copy were detected: mangled italics, missing articles, inappropriate caps and punctuation...

Indeed, the ‘precious’ manuscript was far from ‘word-perfect’... Yet instead of risking again the use of the office printer, I decided just to employ the bottle of Wite-Out bottle on the draft for WS in Montreal. I would tell her that there are typos still to be fixed. Only the general readability, I will ask her to comment on.

After the parcel is in the mail, I will take a few days break. No more bloodletting!

1992, February

As soon the draft was sent off to the college friend, I decided to seek the advice of an authority with contacts in small publishing:

The eminent authority was Ted C. (name fictionalized) a renowned academic and poet in the province of our common origin. I had been fortunate to have been one of his students. We met again when he was a visiting professor on the west coast. Thereafter, we sporadically corresponded.

I had been out of touch with him for several years. Requesting the Professor Emeritus to look at my manuscript, I felt, would be both an avenue for reopening our correspondence and possibly getting a recommendation.

Out of the basement:

Shuffling the pages of the updated manuscript (this time copied in the print shop) I recalled the letter received from Professor Ted C. in 1983 in response to the story I had sent him. It was thinly disguised fiction about a long-term expatriate experiencing culture shock upon return to Canada. The kindly Ted opined that he liked the piece much better than poems I had earlier sent. He urged that I polish it up and then send it to ‘*Fernwood*’, the literary quarterly he founded back in the 1950s. He said he would put a word in to the magazine’s then managing editor. Averse to being potentially identified with such personal material in the old insular college town, I declined to follow up.

So why now am I prepared to expose myself to even greater vulnerability?

At the same time, I am not really convinced that this work is any better than the short story I sent Ted in 1983. That piece was raw—but it was *lively*. As for ‘*Tombstone Depot*’: how long can anyone’s attention be held by dreary speculations about a Maritime province’s graveyards?

Adding to the despairing turn was the discovery of more typos. At least six of the one hundred and three pages will have to be reprinted. Should I phone WS in Montreal and warn her beforehand? At least I caught the glitches before sending the manuscript off to Ted C.

1992, March

The professor welcomed my request for him to look over the manuscript. I immediately sent it. Within a couple of weeks, he responded.

How far over the top?

There it was on the doormat when I arrived back from work: a brown envelope, slightly torn at the corner. Smiling grimly for T. who stood at the top of the stairs, I was glad to have been able to snatch up the packet before she saw it. I tossed it on the basement desk and pulled off my jacket. A little queasy, I thought of waiting until after supper before opening it. Then on impulse I clamped teeth on the torn corner and ripped it open. Out spilled my manuscript, with a typed letter from Professor Ted C.:

"...Both G. [his poet wife] and I are agreed that the MSS for 'Tombstone Depot' is not only the best work in MSS that I have read in my life, and I have read a great many, but it is also better than any of the novels of David Adam Richers [sic.]..."

I was stunned. I had hoped for approval— but the over-the-top praise was strange and troubling. Was the name, 'David Adam Richers' deliberately misspelled so as not to be confused with the much-acclaimed regional novelist? Flashing to mind was a reference in one of his last letters received in Zimbabwe. His much younger wife, he revealed, struggled with manic depression. Was the letter written under the influence of alcohol or some manic flight of reason? Mind reeling, I drew a bath to calm down.



Lying in the tub, I shifted knees to avoid sloshing water on the floor... What was I really to make of Ted C.'s response?

He was a deeply generous person. He had always encouraged my writing. I was deeply grateful to be among his pen friends, who no doubt number in the hundreds. Indeed, I knew he had a reputation for being a soft touch for would-be writers of all stripes. I recalled an article read years ago in a "Books in Canada" magazine: "Ted C.'s Green Thumb" it was called. He was depicted as a smiling gardener watering a tangle of blossoms and weeds. A caricature of another Canadian professor-poet, who questioned Professor Ted's 'let a thousand flowers bloom' approach stood by with crossed arms, frowning...

Pulling the plug, I wondered just how often Ted C. similarly praised those he presumed to be in dire need of approval. Yet even while scourging false hope— I could not suppress tremors of excitement. Even if he was patronizing— why should I fail to take his offered opportunity?

Still sitting as the bathwater drained away, I made the decision: I would follow Professor Ted's urging and send off the manuscript to 'Blue Loon Books', a little magazine in eastern Ontario run by one of his many friends. But not right away. I would at least spend the weekend carefully proof-reading. I could smooth out the stilted bits— perhaps even add some detail... Of course, Ted C.'s praise is overblown. But even if there is a smidgeon of sincerity in it— then the manuscript is worth tweaking.

I groped at the towel rack in another trill of anticipation.



"Look at this letter I just got from one of my old professors."

Still with towel around neck, I tossed the letter into T.'s lap. My dear wife picked it up. After slightly scowling for a minute, she commented: "I don't understand this."

"Oh," I chuckled, "it's just about a manuscript I sent to him. That's his reaction. I'm not sure how to take it."

"You sent another story?" She scratched the arm of the sofa.

"A short novel—just under a hundred pages."

"What's it about?"

"Actually, it's not quite finished. I need to work on it more. When it is ready, I'll show you."

She wiggled her nose, unimpressed...

1992, March

fwt

Despite misgivings, I sent a slightly revised version of the manuscript off to 'Blue Loon Books'. At the same time, I began working on a new version of the manuscript—expanding it from 'novella' to 'novel.'

Summarizing the process:

Jogging back along the pipeline trail behind our Pine Ridge housing complex this morning, I reflected on the writing process:

'However one might be tricked to assume the clarity of thought— it is only the discipline of composition by which the cogency of ideas is tested. Yet composition not only requires disciplined focus— its outcome is often unpredictable. No sooner is a phrase encoded on paper or on screen than the urge comes to sharpen or qualify— if not to delete it...

When whims of free-association are brought tentatively to text— the result is invariably disappointing. There is always bitterness in the first reckoning of the raw language born of 'inspired' thought: how pedestrian, half-baked, crude it seems! Yet there is also often an accompanying intuition, in the first deep breath— a feeling of what is salvageable and malleable within the raw stuff.

Thereupon begin the first hammerings. After the work of reshaping, perhaps only a germ of the raw stuff remains. Perhaps nothing at all is recognizable in the result. Often the raw material is merely a catalyst— a point of departure...

What of those who attest to lightning bolt inspiration? What of the claim sometimes heard that characters "took over" the writing of a novel— or that a novel "wrote itself?"

No such claim could be more at odds with the fiction writing process, as I have recently come to discover. I would venture that the final shape of a novel emerges labouriously as raw language is refined...

Satisfied with the summation, I sprinted through the turn around the salmonberry bushes back towards the basement to continue the 'Tombstone' revision...

1992, April

Within 3 weeks after sending the manuscript off to 'Blue Loon Books', I received a reply.

Gall rising:

Just home from work, I held up the white envelope that T. placed in the middle of my desk. Displayed in blue letters under a winged silhouette in the corner was *'Blue Loon Books.'* T. had already opened it—slitting open one side like the ragged belly of a cleaned fish. Good news? Breathless, I shook out the folded page. It was a form letter:

Dear Mr. F. (my name was misspelled). 'Due to our backlog of work and our policy of reading manuscripts in the order of submission, we regret to inform you that...'

So, the bastards did not ever look at it! Before I threw it down, I read the note scrawled at the bottom: *'Since your MSS did not include an RSAE. please forward \$3.50 to cover return postage. \$7.50 to expedite its return...'*

I winced. So, I forgot the return self-addressed envelope. How ridiculously presumptuous that must have seemed!

Crumpling the envelope in my hand, I rolled eyes upwards. Can T. to keep her mouth shut? I thought of the phone calls expected later in the week from my sister in Ottawa ("*F. wrote a book*", I heard T. saying. "*He sent it to a publisher, but they sent it back.*")

Gall rose in my throat. Face it: the manuscript will almost certainly be rejected. Is it really worth throwing away another \$3.50 to get it back? Nearly \$20 has already been spent on printing and postage. Maybe I should just write back with a note: *'if you can't use it—just dispose of it. If you are unable to shred it, please tie it up in a plastic bag before dumping.'*

Shuddering, I thought of the muffled cry of an abandoned new-born, left in a dumpster.

1992, April

Just a week and a half after I sent the money order for postage, the RSAE (return self-addressed envelope) came in the mail.

A clout in the head:

Still punch-drunk from a full day on my feet with my Upper Beginners' class, the last thing I needed to find on my desk was the self-addressed brown manila I'd sent to 'Blue Loon Books', Dunvegan, Ontario.

Tearing it open, I barely glanced at the rejection letter before dropping the packet into the wastebasket. For a few moments, I held the crumbled letter and stared blankly at the world map pinned on the wall. Just one more among seeds uncountable doomed to oblivion! The image that drifted to mind was of a tail-whipping spermatozoon butting futilely against the elastic egg...

Blowing out a long breath, I flattened out the letter on the desk and read again, the few lines:

We publish only nine titles a year: only the strongest of the hundreds of manuscripts we annually receive..."

What else was to be expected from a small press probably dependent on Canada Council grants?

My temples pounded in the rhythmic thump of the washer. Maybe my most cynical speculations about the Ted's note was spot on. Maybe even some of his poet-professor friends wonder if he's going batty....

I thumped the desk is immediate self-censure. How dare I think ill of a man who has been so generous! But though he certainly meant well, that doesn't change the fact that he's probably out of touch...

Hopefully, G.G., his poet friend who runs 'Blue Loon', wasn't shocked— or amused— that Ted would give my manuscript such a glowing recommendation...

In a sting of embarrassment, I recalled my daydream yesterday on the bus ride home:

"Now we are in the brave new world of word processing," I leaned over the microphone in the radio interview, "Many hidden away gemstones will be finally brought out for polishing..."

Yes, the clout in the head could not have been more deserved! Crumbling the form-letter again, I tossed it in the wastebasket, on top of the manuscript. I then unbuckled my book bag strap and slid out the dreary file folders to start on a lesson plan.

"Thank god," I murmured, "thank god I have a job!"

1992, April

I wrote back to the professor informing him of the 'Blue Loon' response. I also told him that I was rewriting and expanding the novella, in the hopes of making it more appealing to a publisher.

The quieter voice:

Even while nursing the bruising of last week's brick on the head, this afternoon I licked another manila addressed to another of the Canlit mags recommended by Ted C. This time I included only a precis and the first chapter of my revision. If they like it, I can tell them I can send the entire manuscript in a few months...

Carefully writing in the Ottawa address, I wondered how I could best prepare for more potential rejections. How could I prevent my head from exploding like a rotten papaya?

I thought again of Ted's over-the-top praise. I wondered just how many other of his former students regularly seek his blessing or approval of their brain children. Perhaps in facing mortality, he chooses to offer effusive praise to all...

Still, I reaffirmed my commitment to finish the new draft. The fleshed-out novel *will* be better than the bare bones novella. But it could take months to finish. Was I doubling down when I should be cutting losses?

Meanwhile, the girls have barely started school and the new sister or brother is on the way. How at a time like this can I justify a vanity project that keeps me— in the few hours I am at home and not in bed— huddled at my desk under the stairs?

In a shudder of gloom, I pushed the thick manilla into my bookbag. The quieter voice had grown fainter but it still urges: *'Keep plodding ahead. You can still pull this off'!*

1992, April

With the arrival of a third child came more pressure to address job insecurity. I knew I ought to finish the revision quickly then turn attention to bolstering job qualifications. Yet even in devoting most spare time to the novel, the work went much slower than expected.

Of momentary euphoria:

Taking an afternoon break from my desk, I helped T. in rearranging the tiny upstairs bedroom to make way for the cradle of the baby boy. With the trunks and containers stored at one end, the challenge was how to get rid of the old hide-a-bed sofa we bought days after our arrival in Canada. Loathe to spend money on junk removal, I decided to pull it apart into pieces small enough for the dumpster.

That hideous sofa! Armed with claw hammer, I pried and bashed at it for upwards of an hour. Throughout the efforts, I recalled its grim associations. First to mind was the look of old friend, JL, when he showed up with his truck at the back of Value Village in August 1988, in order to help us move the sofa to our rented apartment. He was plainly shocked that I would buy a piece of junk that would not even be taken from a curb side... T. did her best to hide the vomit-hued fabric under a red-striped cover but even the Lysol- dousing did not get rid of its uric odour. At least it had no bugs.

I came to associate its smell with the haplessness of the first dreary months back in Canada. More than once, I hunched on the squeaky cushions staring out into drizzling skies after a futile morning checking the job boards at Canada Manpower. More than once, T. lay on that sofa wailing in despair.

When our luck began to turn and we moved into the coop townhouse, JL, who helped us move again, was even more surprised that after a couple of years of steady income, I would not throw away the Value Village sofa. Although we bought a new sofa set, we pushed the smelly Hideabed into the corner of the upstairs room piled with cardboard boxes. Our luck could change again, I feared...



With T.'s tailoring shears, I ripped through the rotting upholstery. I pried up the rows of staples and nails, then kicked apart the wooden frame. When bare nails scratched the back of my hand and gouged the wall, I thought of a demon thrashing against the spray of holy water.

When the broken boards and cushions were in green garbage bags at the bottom of the dumpster, I was drenched in sweat—and momentarily elated. Ridding the household of that ugliness was a tiny but significant victory.

Yet the euphoria abruptly evaporated. Back at my desk pecking away at Chapter #3 of my revision, I could not fail to grasp an irony. Would I ever have imagined upholstering that hideous old sofa?

1992, May

I sent Ted C. a sample chapter of the expanding redraft. The kindly professor immediately replied and even provided more suggestions of small publishers where I might try my luck.

The consolation of Jose Carreras:

"It's for you, dad!"

MT came under the stairwell yesterday afternoon waving a letter. Leaning forward from my desk, I immediately recognised the letterhead of my undergraduate university. It had to be from Professor Ted C., but how could it have been delivered on a Sunday afternoon?

"Where'd you get this honey?"

She handed it to me. "It just came in the door."

I immediately noted that it had the wrong unit number (#4 instead of #14). It must have come to the neighbour's on Friday. When I teethered it open, out fell the missing page I'd sent. Paper-clipped to it on Department of English stationery was a note in Ted's ragged longhand: *'The new material is very interesting...Very competent, harsh, and hard-hitting. I don't particularly like it.'*

I winced. So, was that comment an indication of sober second thought? Meanwhile, sample chapters have already gone out to two Canlit publishers!

I turned over the paper. On the reverse side was a typed poem, titled: *'Jose Carreras:'*

*'When with Pavorotti and Domingo
you sang, your voice in volume pitch and tone
Matched theirs, but I, watching, felt you alone
Lacked the full oneness that the others know...'*

Lacked the full oneness? In a pinch of suspicion, I continued:

*'You join the strength of struggle to your voice.
It adds what others do not have whose grace
Comprises only what is natural...'*

'The strength of struggle'? It was a fine poem, but I could not restrain the poke of paranoia: Being well practiced in consolation of the unpublished over the decades, Ted's selection of this poem for me was anything but random. I turned the page back over to his closing comment: *'Best of luck with the revised version.'*

Best of luck— how was that that to be taken? Surely old Ted would not assume I need to feel as 'special' as a March of Dimes poster boy leaning on his crutches! (*'Hang in there, Timmy boy— you're doin' just great!'*)

In a flush of embarrassment, I pushed the letter into my drawer.

1992, July

Three months later than needed—I received feedback on the first version of the manuscript from my college friend.

Of torture by punctuation:

‘There was no reason for not responding earlier apart from the fact that I’ve been running in circles between driving my boys to their various sports and my volunteering...’

After a lengthy and worrisome silence, I finally heard from WS in Montreal. Her letter came today inside a parcel along with a thoughtful gift for the new baby. Tied in a plastic grocery bag was the first draft of ‘Tombstone’. She’d had it since February.

‘I marked up your manuscript a bit, but here it is after four months... I finally got around to it last week in MacDonald’s waiting for the end of my sons’ swimming lessons...’

I sank on the sofa, teeth clenched.

‘...The old adage of ‘show, don’t tell’ seems to apply... The beginning was weak, but it got better from there... The language is a little lush for my taste. I was reminded of Thomas Wolfe...’

Globules of sweat rolled into my eyebrows. If I’d only waited for this honest critique. I would never have sent it to ‘Blue Loon Press’!

‘The punctuation was onerous (were too many commas, colons) but I thought the structure was complex... It’s definitely worth keeping, adding too, tightening up...’

She did end on this hopeful note... Judging from her pen marks, it must have taken at least three hours to proofread it. What an imposition on a working mom!

I reached for the plastic bag, on impulse to immediately dump it. Then with a click of the tongue, I opened it up again and flipped through the pages. Indeed, the loyal WS did read through to the very end. It would be unfair not to look closely at her editing. Isn’t that what I had asked for?

With the incriminating pages stuffed back in the plastic bag, I trudged for the stairs...



Back before the humming computer, I stared blankly at the wall. I was certainly in no mood to piddle around with punctuation. At the same time, I was gnawed by the same regret that has taunted me for more than a year. If I’d taken graduate courses instead of gambling on ‘Tombstone Depot’, right now I might be working on a thesis...

Shaking head, I tried to focus on the amber screen. *‘Just finish up the goddamn thing. Get it over with and then forget about it forever!’*

1992, June

However shaky in faith— I plodded ahead with the expanded manuscript.

In search of a plot:

Stopped by the tiny creek behind the complex, I waited for 5-year-old TE wobbling behind on her bike.

At the same moment, I was struck by a panic of a fundamental flaw in my project. Why should any reader have the slightest interest in an anonymous voice that that essentially talks to itself? The novel might be ‘clever’, in some offbeat way— but it’s boring!

Meanwhile, TE with her yellow helmet bobbing, peddled on ahead. In a growing despair, I started along slowly behind her. Maybe I’ll making a reckless gamble. If the goal really is to get published— surely, I could have come up with a more *entertaining* story... Why haven’t I tried my hand at dark comedy?

At that moment, an idea popped into mind:

‘An old bachelor diagnosed with cancer, is torn about what to do with the work of his lifelong hobby of wood carving. Despite being a churchgoer in a conservative village, he has a basement full of secret carvings. Among them are blasphemous depictions of Christ: idiot Christs, quadriplegic Christs, manic-depressive Christs, amputee Christs’...

Yet what would be the plot?

Just then TE, still pedalling lopsidedly, looked back at me smiling.

“You are doing great, sweetie”, I urged, “Keep going!”

1992, July

The rejection of a sample chapter of 'Tombstone' by a small press in Ottawa came with the consolation that it was never even read.

Failing on its own terms?

I had almost forgotten about the plot precis and sample chapter sent to *Titania Press* in Ottawa. The RSAE came rustling through the mail slot as I was at my desk yesterday afternoon, butting against a tricky paragraph in the revision of Chapter Three. T. handed over the brown envelope with her eyebrows quizzically lifted.

"It's from one of those little magazines," I mumbled.

"There's a big cheque inside?"

"Don't be funny." With a dismissive wave, I tore it open.

The form letter contained a single typed paragraph:

'... Please be generous enough to accept this letter. We used to give a personal answer to every writer who sent us a submission, but our budget and the sheer volume of submissions no longer allows us the kind of personal encounter we would prefer... However, we generally find that a manuscript is rejected because it fails on its own terms, that is, it does not achieve what the writer set to do...'

Unable to work, I switched off the monitor.

Does everyone who opens that form letter feel the same rabbit punch to the gut? *'...Fails on its own terms'*... That is the phrase that *really* stings!

So where do I go from here? Excluding old Ted's manic response, the rejections of *'Blue Loon'* and now *'Titania Press'* (not to mention the feedback of WS), should leave no doubt... How many rejections before I take the hint? *'Writer's Digest'* probably has advice for the coping with rejection. Rather like counselling for the dying stuck in the stage of denial...

I stared at my reflection on the black screen.

No, I have to believe that I can still breathe life into it. Improvements have already been made on the draft rejected by *'Blue Loon'*. Then there is the consolation that the *'Titania'* editor saw only chapter #1— and maybe barely glanced at that... No, I have to have faith in the revision: I've come too far, gambled too much to quit now...

So, within fifteen minutes, the envelope and the form letter were torn up and stuffed in the waste basket and the monitor turned back on.

1992, August

In the fall of 1992, a period of earned vacation provided a rare opportunity. With wife and baby son on a visit to her homeland, while at home with my young daughters I had time to write an expanded version of 'Tombstone'.

From Dr. Frankenstein's notebook:

I felt a rare excitement this morning at 6:45 AM in walking to the Loughheed Highway to catch the bus:

In the coming month, the focus must be on making the work *entertaining*. Sharper detail is needed. Superfluity needs to be cut. Mangled sentences must be untangled and smoothed out.

Still, I need to preserve the spirit of the original. In such regard, the work is less of creation than of midwifery.

Of course, there is trepidation in uncertainty of either creating something unique— or failing that— siring something loathsome... In keeping with the Frankenstein analogy (watching too many horror movies on TV of late?) until the final proofread copy is printed— I cannot proclaim that *'IT lives'*...



When finished, where do I send it?

If the manuscript is accepted, I certainly prefer that it be by a local publisher. But then again what chance have I— an unknown? Still, even with Ted C.'s blessing, I am nervous about sending it back east to *Duckwalk Press*. The fact that its office is located just an hour away from the natal village is particularly unsettling. Still, if it offers the best shot at publication— why not?

1992, October

After six weeks of progress, I was more hopeful about the prospects of the expanded manuscript. Even in the risk of foolish presumption, I could not resist bringing up the subject with a few friends.

Perils of the loosened tongue:

I woke up this morning with a hangover. It was not from the two beers over the evening news— but from the phone call soon afterwards with old buddy, JL, in Cranbrook.

Most of the chat followed the usual pattern—recommendations for music and movies along with laughs over stories in the news... The awkward turn in last night's call came in a tongue-loosened segue amid the usual banter— recalled as follows:

"So how did you manage with the girls while T. was in Zimbabwe? You must have had a handful."

"Actually, it went pretty well, J. Sure, they missed their mom, but we had a good time. Then when they were in school, I had a chance to write."

"Oh yeah? You were working on the great Canadian novel?"

"A long way from that," I chuckled, "But I am close to finishing a manuscript. Can't say it's great but it might be decent enough. I'm putting a lot of work into it."

"What's it about?"

"Well, it's a novel of sorts. If it's accepted for publishing, I'll send you the galley proof— an advance copy."

"So, you'll be feted from coast to coast?"

I laughed. "Not even in my wildest fantasies. But if it is published, I could make a few enemies in the Maritimes."

"Maybe you'll have to do into hiding like Solomon Rushdie."

"Well, I doubt they'll organize hit squads. But then I might have to watch out for letter bombs."

"You'd better use a *nom de plume*".

"I'm considering that... Seriously though, if anything ever comes of it, I'll send you a copy."

"Well even if nothing comes of it, I'd like to read it. Sounds interesting."

"Sure, J."

Wincing in his (gently mocking?) tone, I parried on as the banter shifted to Ross Perot and the US election... At the end of the call, I was left squeezing the phone in self-castigating gloom. Through mindless chatter, I might have not only jinxed the manuscript but left an impression of self-delusion...

1992, November

With the reuniting of my family and the completion of the expanded draft, I enjoyed a brief interlude of peace.

Almost relaxed:

Ears immersed in bathwater, I blinked against images of dancing letters on the monitor screen to which I'd been glued all day. I tilted back forehead and bobbed deeper in the steam. In the balm of hot water, for the first time in months—I was relaxed—at least for a few minutes...

Yet lying there, I slowly began to taunt myself with details by which I might have made 'Tombstone' even better:

'...I could have made more of the theme of the "failed quest," as an ironic reversal of the Jungian hero's journey... I might have better illuminated the narrator's inability to consolidate 'powers' attained in the outside world... Imagery of the Tarot—particularly of 'the Fool' and 'the Hanged Man' could have been better evoked... In Chapter, Three, I could have more explicitly—'

"Bullshit!"

With ears below the surface, my whisper sounded eerie. No, it was pointless to second guess. The novel could not have possibly worked if stuffed with so much 'preciousness.' It would have been a jerry-rigged mess!

Draping the washcloth over eyes, I bobbed deeper. So yes, tweaking and proof-reading remain—but no more major revisions. It's time to put it to the test... Why not try 'Duckwalk Press'?

1992, November

Back at my regular work duties, spare time editing and proof-reading took longer than expected. Still, by mid-December, the MSS was mailed off to 'Duckwalk Press'. On the night after mailing it, I looked at the hardcopy again:

Post facto misgivings:

Last night I could not resist pulling out from the file cabinet my hard copy of 'Tombstone Depot'. In just two-three days, a copy of the manuscript would be landing on some desk back in an office in the old provincial capital. What would be the impression?

Although I vowed not to waste another thought on the manuscript—I began turning pages, imagining viewing the text as an editor might...

The first shock came on page four: a sentence fragment! Then on page eleven, there was a misplaced phrase. Flipping deeper, I picked up at least a half-dozen typos. Worse, was what seemed a feeble ending of chapter One. Without no hook into Chapter Two, there would be no interest in reading further.

Why to fuck didn't I notice all this earlier?

As I turned pages, the gloom deepened. In the redrafting did I ruin the novella which old Ted praised? I had assumed there was some virtue working in isolation. Maybe I was blindly giving in to some self-destructive will... Too late now!

In the pinch of a broken promise—I put the fat folder back in the drawer.



Still, the apprehension circled through the whole night's dreaming:

In one sequence, I shot a pistol several times at a bit of paper whirling down a drain. As each time I missed, a background voice intoned:

"Is there any better evidence of the omnipotent evil genius?"

I woke at 4:30 AM with a vile-tasting mouth. Unable to get back to sleep, I slipped down to the kitchen. At least it was a non-teaching Friday.

Waiting for the kettle to boil, I thought of a face-facing plan. Instead of going into the college early to plan for next week—I could fix the typos in the first few chapters. I could then send the updated pages along with a note of apology:

'Please insert these new pages into the manuscript of 'Tombstone Depot' which I mailed to you a few days ago. Also, please remove the old pages which they replace. The old pages were of an earlier draft.'

After morning tea, I set about combing through the hard copy of the manuscript, circling typos and writing some rephrasing in the margins. I then made the corrections in Word Perfect. By mid-morning, I realized the sending too many pages would cause confusion. Going on the premise that a reader of an unsolicited MSS was likely to only read the first few chapters closely (if read at all) before skimming the rest— I decided to include only corrected pages from Chapter One to Three.

By 11:30 AM, I had reedited seven pages and printed them on my home ink jet printer (the type-face match was close enough). The new pages were slid along with an accompanying note into a manilla envelope. Within an hour later, the envelope was in the mailbox at the mall.

The first jab of regret came moments after dropping it off. I was only drawing attention to sloppy proof-reading! Standing at bus stop a few minutes later, I closed my eyes and took ten deep breaths. For better or for worse, the errant brainchild is on its own. It is time to turn full attention back to my *real* children...

1992, December

fwt

During the two-week break for the Christmas holidays, I did manage to avoid looking at the manuscript. Still, waiting for the reply from “Duckwalk” felt rather like fearing the results of a blood test...

Of intruding drear:

The hour before dinner last evening could not have been cosier:

I was on the sofa with a rum-laced eggnog. T. was in the kitchen with a glass of wine humming along with a Christmas CD. Our three fledglings were rollicking like bear cubs around the Christmas tree.

"Dad," yelled MT, "look at M.— he's trying to open presents!"

She grabbed her baby brother's legs to pull him back from under the boughs.

"That's good, honey. Keep watching him. We don't want him to chew on wrapping paper."

Little MH squirmed away from his big sister and crawled back towards the tree before she pulled him back again. How many 7-month-olds are so lively? No wonder T. can hardly believe she has a baby so perfect...

"Da-ad!" TE skipped forward.

"Yes, honey?"

"MT said we aren't going skating tomorrow."

"I didn't say that. I only said the skating rink might not be open."

"It's a family tradition for Christmas Eve," said MT bounding up beside us. "Just like sleeping by the Christmas tree tonight. You promised!"

"Just you and TE. The baby needs to sleep in his crib."

TE, still waiting for her answer, blinked uncertainly.

"Don't worry, honey", I hugged her shoulder, "If there's public skating tomorrow morning, we will go... Hey, why not help mummy in the kitchen? You girls set the table. I'll watch the baby."

I set down my glass of eggnog and picked up MH.

From the tape swelled *'Hark the Herald Angels Sing'*. Leaning from the kitchen hatchway, T. grinned and began singing along: "Glory to the new-born MH!"

Jostling our son on my lap, I blinked into the Christmas tree lights. In a moment when the cup was truly running over— from whence came the sudden shiver?

It came in the thought that on some dreary afternoon a few weeks hence, I will come back from work to find the reply from 'Duckwalk'. Will the reply come in a letter or in the return self-addressed envelope? As much as I hope for glad tidings, I need to be steeled...

For the moment can I not forget about the goddam manuscript?

"Daddy, daddy!"

MH, running from the kitchen, kneeled down to pull her baby brother off my lap. "Can you take a picture with me holding MH? This is his first Christmas. I want to remember this forever!" Her eyes shone.

By writing these details this morning, I pledge to honour this memory no less...

1992, December

fwt

While I nervously awaited news of the manuscript's fate, finding in the staffroom a novel published by 'Duckwalk Press' was a jarring coincidence.

A coincidence:

Gleaming under the florescent lamp on the resource room worktable yesterday morning, was a paperback stuck with a Post-It note from one of the evening instructors: *'feel free to borrow'*. On the right side of the cover was a darkened picture of a Nigerian bronze figurine. At the top of the orange stripe on the left was the title, *'Fatima.'* At the bottom of the stripe was the name of the author, one JM.

I turned the paperback over to read the bio-blurb: *'JM is an award-winning writer of fiction whose stories have been anthologized in Canada and the United States... This is her first novel.'*

It was further stated that JM had *"...taught at a girl's secondary school in Nigeria."*

Could we have been teaching in Nigeria at the same time? A coincidence more jarring was the publisher's logo: *'Duck Walk Press'*.



Settling in for the bus ride home, I pulled the borrowed copy of *'Fatima'* out of my shoulder bag. The half hour ride home provided enough time for a general impression:

The plot seemed to involve the conflicts of a Muslim girl in a dominantly Christian school in southern Nigeria and that 'corruption' was a central theme... The narrative was largely conveyed in dialogue—much of which was in Nigerian pidgin... JM's prose flowed along fairly smoothly... (A lot more smoothly than the text of *'Tombstone'*) ... Also, JM had the good sense to avoid a 1st person narration...

At the same time, I was struck a certain audacity—if not a naivete—of both writer and publisher. How much credibility does a white Canadian woman really have in writing a novel set in Africa in which the primary character is an African girl? However sympathetic in its intentions, such representation of an African could be insulting to many. Did writer and publisher even consider the politics of appropriate representation?

I flipped back and forth through the two hundred and eighty pages of close print. Of course, I'm being a little hypocritical. I mustn't forget *'At the Mission Gate'*, which I sent out last year. Whatever its flaws, I suppose I could claim that it made no attempt to appropriate an African point of view. In any case, the comment from the little magazine that sent it back still cuts: *'Lots of energy, but rather confusing...'*

As I pushed my way up the aisle towards the exit, the more taunting question was: is the press that published *'Fatima'* likely to be taken by *'Tombstone Depot'*? Undeniably, just a half hour with *'Fatima'* left me a little queasy about my chances of success.

1993, January

An announcement at the beginning of a faculty meeting made clear that there was much more to worry about than another rejection slip.

A promise:

"What's wrong?" Asked T. just seconds after I stepped into the living room.

Whether it was in my face, or the very footfall on the stairs, she sensed bad news. Indeed, just an hour before at the monthly faculty meeting a bombshell had been dropped. The college was expecting funding cutbacks in the new fiscal year. Sinking to the sofa, I broke the news of my potential layoff.

She crouched beside the playpen, eyes welling with tears. "We have nothing. Nothing to give these children!" As little MH stood smiling, pulling at the gauzy netting she went on. "Your friends who were teaching with you in Zimbabwe have secure jobs. Look at NL in Japan and FM, now a vice-principal. Both of them have their Master's and you don't. If you lose that job, we'll have *nothing*!"

"T., please!" I dropped on my knee and put arm around her.

"I feel trapped. You really disappoint me, F." She sniffled.

"Please, T. I'm not the lowest one in seniority. I would probably get cut back to half-time before getting laid off. Even then I could sub."

"But we can't survive on half a salary. Not with three children!"

"Look, it was just a warning. Nothing's confirmed. The college could get some new funding from the government."

"But if you had your master's degree you could get a better job."

I shook my head. "It's seniority, not qualifications, that's life or death around there. Anyway, where will I get the time to study? I'd have to take night classes. If I do stay on full-time after April it will probably be on a night shift. Even a split shift."

"But you make time to write your stories," she squinted in anguish. "And they always get rejected... And the bastards don't recognize my qualifications here. I can't do anything to support these children. Nothing!" She began sobbing.

"T., please," I stroked her cheek, "Please, I'll do whatever it takes to keep working full time. I promise."

"You have to start working on a master's degree. You have to. We depend on you!"

"Please, T. Please have a little faith in me."

I hesitated for a moment, patting hand on her quaking back. Then I spoke from the heart: "I promise, honey... You know that manuscript I sent off just before Christmas? I'm expecting an

answer any day now. If it's rejected, I'm done with trying to get published. That's it. No matter what— I will try to get into a master's program. I'll start asking around in the next few days..."

Encouraged by the ceasing of her sobs, I continued. "I really am sorry for spending so much time in the basement. There are promises a person makes to himself. I just had to try to finish a novel. I finally did it." Sighing, I stood up.

T. wiped her eyes and turned to the playpen. MH was squeezing his happy-face toy carrot.

"I just pray God our children will get a good education," murmured T., "I pray God they won't end up struggling like us."

"Don't worry about that." Silently avowing the promise, I kissed her cheek.

1993, February

fwt

As weeks passed without a response from 'Duckwalk', the suspense rose.

Of preparation:

Every day upon coming home from work, I brace myself before opening the door. Yesterday it was the parcel under the mail slot that gave my stomach a wrench. Was it the returned manuscript?

Gritting teeth, I picked it up. It was for T. Dropping the parcel back on the chair, I hunched into my office cubicle under the stairs and swung my bag onto the desk. Hopefully, the reply from 'Duckwalk' won't come on another afternoon when I have a sore throat and a tricky lesson plan to prepare...

Wearily pulling off my raincoat, I thought again of the most likely outcome that I ought to prepare for. It will probably be a polite letter to the effect: *'As much as we'd love to publish your work, budgetary constraints this year will not allow it...'* That would be bullshit, of course...

What if they were to tentatively express interest, but asking me to resubmit about some major revisions— would I take the time to do that? Certainly, I would!

In the meantime, it's been two months— that can't be a bad sign. If they were rejecting it flatly, wouldn't they have sent the RSAE back by now? In that flicker of hope, I trudged up the stairs.

1993, February

fwt

If previous rejections had been slaps in the face, the 'Duckwalk' verdict was by comparison, a hammer-blow to the forehead.

Stripped naked:

I was catching up on my journal on Friday afternoon when T. came around the corner of the basement. Without a word, she flopped the packet into my lap, turned and headed up the stairs.

It was the RSAE from 'Duckwalk'. I wiggled a finger into the corner of the plastic seal and tore out the cover letter. It was not the usual form letter. This time, the returned manuscript came with four paragraphs of typed feedback. It could have been a lab report confirming a long suspected and possibly incurable illness:

"Essentially, what made the piece somewhat more than a trip down memory lane was a treatment of the old 'you can't go home again' theme."

This time there was no face-saving excuse—the manuscript *had* been read. The favour to Ted had been granted. It seemed that the very awkwardness of that favour showed in the impatience of the tone:

"The use of inverted sentences was distracting almost to the point of being a joke."

Only for a moment, was I inclined to defend my brainchild. Sensing an undeniable frankness, I almost immediately shrank, like Dr. Frankenstein, from the monstrosity of my creation... How could I have believed—even for a moment—in the literary merit of a desiccated turd?

"Our reader was distracted by the desire to identify the name of the village setting. By the process of elimination, she finally did—so your tracks were not well covered."

In that sentence, the chest thudded. Why didn't I use a pseudonym? Maybe my surname was recognized! Maybe the reader even knew someone from "the village." In a stab of shame, I imagined some future banter in a bar:

"Hey, do you happen to know so-and-so?"

I should have known better! In my gut, I *knew* sending the manuscript to a publisher in the old college town was bad faith. I *knew* it was pathetic to grope that far into the past for approval...

'Our reader commented that the writing must have been therapeutic—in the sense it was emotionally raw.'

In that line, I squeezed the letter into a paper ball. Where was my bullshit detector? Why in Christ's name was I taken in—even for a minute—by Ted's first letter? He had to have written it amid a temporary *folie à deux* with his manic wife. If I write him back at all—I ought to quote from these paragraphs—give him a shot of reality...

Grabbing a yellow Superstore bag from the shelf of empty bottles, I stuffed in both the balled-up letter and the manuscript. Holding one end in my teeth, I tied the top of the bag. My chest was

still thumping when I glanced over to the monitor that displayed a WordPerfect text of my latest journal notes. Leaning over the keyboard, I typed: *'Hiatus'*.

Calmly, I exited the program and with outstretched foot, flipped the switch on the power bar. As the hard drive whirled down into silence, I stared towards the open doorway. What will I tell T.? I need to immediately apply for the masters' program. I need to keep that promise...

Should I renounce the journal, too?

Just then, I heard the outside door open and the girls running up the stairs.

No, the journal is essential 'therapy', to borrow a word from the smart-ass *'Duckwalk'* editor. It is my private space for unburdening without conceit of literary pursuit. Still, if I am to combine night classes with full-time teaching, journal entries will have to be briefer...

Plopping the yellow bag into the wastebasket, I picked up my lesson plan file folder and shut off the basement light. At least I still have a job.



"Button this, daddy."

At the bottom of the stairs, TE was struggling with her overalls button.

"Wait, honey." I came out of my alcove and knelt before her. Shaking, I had to fumble for more than half a minute at the button before it slipped into place. As so often, I looked into her face in wonderment.

"I am so lucky to have you, sweetie," I croaked, hugging her tight.

1993, March

In the aftermath of receiving the RSAE, I felt liberated—however temporarily...

Gilgamesh or Dan Conner?

There was an unfamiliar giddiness in yesterday's family outing at Burnaby Mountain Park. Amid spring sunshine, I raced T. to the Druidic 'stone circle' while bellowing out the Beatles' *'Hello Goodbye'*... Even though the girls chided my antics ("People are looking, dad!") I was determined to ignore even the most blatant stares. The sense of liberation was due to more than the relief from winter...

T. seemed to share the mood. Stopping with MH's stroller before the stone circle as the girls hopped around the warming stones, she suddenly reached for my hand...

Then at the wheel on the drive back down towards our Forest Grove, she surprised me with a question: "You remember the *'Roseanne'* show late night?"

"I wasn't really paying attention," I said, well knowing she was referring to the sitcom that she sometimes watched just after supper. While that show was on last night, I was turning pages of a *'National Geographic'*.

Don't you remember how Rosanne and Dan were so sure they were going to win the song-writing contest?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, that was a bit like you," she smiled, "You really thought you were going to get that novel published, didn't you?"

Normally, I would have taken offence. Instead, I took T.'s comment as gentle teasing with a dollop of balm. "Yeah, I was being silly. Like Rosanne's husband, I guess."

She reached over and patted my lap.

For a moment, I thought of another snippet of TV, recently seen. It was Joseph Campbell, interviewed by Bill Moyers on the PBS series, *"the Power of Myth."* On that segment, the hoary mythologist was describing how the hero, Gilgamesh, discovered—too late—the sweetest of the world's blessings:

'...Love the child who holds your hand. Let your wife delight in your embrace. For these alone are the concerns of man...'

Yet for the moment, I did not dispute that the vanity of my hopes was far more in league with the fantasy of slobby Dan Connors than with the quest of the hero-king Gilgamesh...



Back home, I left a phone message on the office voicemail with GMJ, now a sessional lecturer at SFU. We'd first met at the university in the summer of 1985, during my 6-month break between Zimbabwe teaching contracts. He also met T., who was then pregnant with MT. We had run into one another again a couple times in the strip mall near our first apartment. In one of our impromptu chats, he encouraged me to apply to the graduate program in the faculty of Education.

"Hi G., this is F... Hope this finds you and your family well. I was just wondering if you could give me some information?"

On the first of two tries, I exceeded the time limit and was cut off. Fortunately, there was a 'review and erase' option so on the third try I was able to keep the message under a minute. I managed to ask about the process for applying for entry into the graduate program and which courses he would recommend...

On the face of it, my request seemed innocuous enough— but on another level it felt grubby. Was I not badgering yet another 'old contact' for help with matters that I should well be handling on my own?

1993, March

fwt

In the shift of mood from acceptance back to bitterness, a message of reassurance was unfortunately taken with suspicion.

Another trick?

The letter I dashed off to Ted C. after receiving the RSAE two weeks ago, jolted me awake late last night in a welter of guilt. In the clarity of midnight, it occurred that I had probably given him the impression that I blamed him for ‘leading me on’ in submitting a manuscript before it was ready... If he has taken offence at the unfair insinuation, then I should not be surprised never to hear from him again...

So, the rapidity of his reply was something of a shock. Picking the letter up from under the mail slot yesterday, I was at first embarrassed to open it. Inside was a single page on Ted’s Department of English stationery, written in his crabbed longhand in red ink:

"... I meant every word I said about your MSS and I still do."

Dropping my heavy bookbag on the floor, I flattened the page on the freezer top and squinted closer.

"By all means, continue writing. You have things worth saying and sooner or later, if you persist, you will find a publisher who will see this and act accordingly."

My eyes almost misted. How could I have been so harsh?

On the back of the letter was a poem: *"The wild Wolverine."* Wiping nose, I read:

*'A wild wolverine
gnawing his paw in a trap
can defeat his bonds...'*

'Gnawing his paw'... I shivered in the relevance of the verse. Good old Ted really nailed it...



Yet if Ted’s message was aimed to console, the effect was short-lived. By the time, I was setting out my file folders to begin a lesson plan, resentment had already wormed to the fore:

What was the *real* story? The *real* story was not about the merits of ‘*Tombstone Depot*’— but about the pathos of my seeking approval for a precious brain turd from a professor from whom I took a class, more than twenty years ago. I then recalled a short story idea that came to me last week in insomniac tossing:

A middle-aged loner, diagnosed with cancer, desperately seeks a prostitute he visited several times twenty years before... After a long search though city slums, he finds her still

streetwalking. She is old and emaciated— but still remembers him as an unusually easy-to-please John...

Just one more among the zillions of spermatozoa that thrash away in oblivion...

1993, April

fwt

After 3 months of licking wounds, I decided to gamble again on a final make-or-break revision:

Renewed hope from dark stories?

Tell us a Captain Morgan story, dad!”

Both the girls love the pirate story that I have been spinning in episodes for the last several months. Tonight, when I turned off their light and sat on the bed, my sleepy head was taken by a very different narrative. Perhaps it was triggered when MT mentioned the ‘Arctic theme’ her class were working on this week.

“I would love to spend a night in an igloo,” she said.

“You really think you could sleep on a bed of ice?” I asked.

“I don’t mind the cold,” she said. “You can warm up with hot chocolate.”

“Do you want to hear a story about what cold is really like? A story from when I was a kid?”

Taking silence for consent, I closed eyes and began:

“...You are lucky, girls, living in a place where the winters really aren’t that cold... Not nearly as cold as where I grew up. I remember the winter when I was in Grade Three (same as you are now, M.) all the pipes in our house froze solid. For a few days we couldn’t wash and couldn’t even flush the toilet. Finally, my father hired some ditch diggers. They had to dig down through the frozen ground, hard as rock, just to get to the frozen pipes. They tried to thaw the pipes with hot water from a smoky old machine called a ‘steam donkey’.”

“Like a real donkey?” MT sleepily asked.

“No, more like an old dirty smokestack on wheels... Anyway, the boss of the diggers was a fat man with a piggish face. My father called him “Herbie the sewer man”. Anyhow, something went wrong, and the sewer pipe burst open in the cellar. Herbie and his ditch-digger crew came right through the house in their mucky boots. They pumped hot water into the cellar and the raw sewage spurted all over the dirt floor.... I was in the kitchen looking down the trapdoor into the cellar and the front door was wide open. It was bitterly cold but there was the most horrible smell you can imagine. It was the smell of sewage mixed with coal smoke. That stink got into everything— clothes— even into the bed sheets...”

"Ooooh, I can see it, dad- I can even smell the horrible poo!" said MT kicking beneath the blankets, “I don’t like that story.”

Tomorrow can we have Captain Morgan again?” peeped up TE. I thought she had been sleeping.

“Of course, honey,” I whispered before the good night kiss...

Even for kids familiar with Grimm’s’ tales, wasn’t that *too* dark?

Down at the kitchen table waiting for the kettle to boil, I realized that I had allowed my private musing on the '*Tombstone*' narrative to intrude on the kids' story-time. I had been thinking earlier of 'Herbie the sewer man' as another potential anecdote that I could have worked into the frame-story... The 'sewer man' anecdote could be continued with details which, fortunately, were spared the girls:

The narrator would recall a Saturday morning a couple of years after the burst sewer pipe, when he was among a group of villagers watching a house burn down. It was the shack of Herbie the sewer man. Along with his family, old Herbie was looking on in shock. The narrator would recall how a white-faced Herbie would suddenly collapse in the snow. Only when Herbie's daughter began wailing over her father's body, would the 9-year-old boy who was to become the narrator— turn away in shame...

In a flurry of excitement, I felt I could come up with at least a half dozen such anecdotes which the narrator would recall when recognizing names on headstones. But is the corpse not already buried with a stake in its heart?



Lying in the dark a couple of hours later, I accepted again, that the reader at '*Duckwalk*' had not been unfair. The frame-story of '*Tombstone*' is worthy enough— but more colour is needed in the palette of detail...

It there is such potential— why should I abandon the project right on the cusp of a breakthrough? It will probably be January before I can begin the education studies. That gives me six months to work on it— the last chance to get it right. If I *really* am satisfied with it, I will send it off again. But next time, I will not ask for help...

So, it was before sleep that I decided to give '*Tombstone*' one more big push...

1993, May

However taunted by the dog returning to its vomit, I pushed on with the third major revision of the thrice-rejected manuscript.

Scanning for rhythm:

The interview with Mickey Hart on CBC radio yesterday afternoon was fascinating. I would never have guessed that the Grateful Dead drummer was something of a Rock renaissance man.

He spoke of recording the San Quentin Prison choir along with Buddhist monks. He said that he had to dispose of the Tibetan skull drums used in the recording due to their “*bad vibes...*”

Of his friendship with the late mythologist guru, Joseph Campbell, he said: “*Joe was an incredible man to the end, an athlete—he could talk all night.*” Hart went on to describe his collaborative research with a neuroscientist into the innate capacity for hearing musical patterns...

I heard most of the interview with earphone plugged into my little Korean-made radio while with little MH in the stroller, T. and I waited for the girls in the Blue Mountain Park playground. When Hart made the fascinating claim “*We are coded to scan for rhythm*”, TE and MT had climbed onto one of the play horses attached to a climbing wagon. I pulled out the earphones to give the girls a hand getting down from the painted horse's slippery metal back.

“Push me on the swing!” cried MT.

With radio in pocket, I followed her as she scampered across the sawdust to the swing set.

At the same moment, I was humbled by the Grateful Dead drummer's genius. How many can claim such accomplishment? I could not fail to be reminded that I was still spinning wheels on a manuscript already deemed hopeless. In terms of spiritual development, Hart might well place me among some of those San Quentin prisoners he described:

“They are trapped and unbalanced souls... Most of them have who never finished anything in their lives...”

Meanwhile, ME was tugging at the chains, waiting for her push.

“Com'on, daddy!” she grinned.

For his gifts— all his enlightenment—had Mickey Hart children as beautiful as these?

1993, June

In one of darker nights of the time, the 'Tombstone' manuscript seemed like a "necrophiliac obsession."

Before a hell-day:

It was not only the sloppy finish to the dreary day with the lower-beginner's class that had me twisting long into the sweaty night. In the successive time checks, the red diodes on the clock radio jumped from 1:45 AM to past 3:00 AM. All the while the mind churned in angst:

How can I find a way out of teaching literacy? Some days it feels like I would be doing less harm to my brain by sniffing glue... Yet as a college bottom feeder, I have little choice... Would better qualifications really make any difference in a workplace governed by the iron rule of seniority? Still, if layoffs were to come, an MA would matter a lot to my resume... If I had only started studying part time two years ago—I would be almost finished. Even last year, why didn't I apply when I had day work?

Rolling in the sweaty sheets, I thought again of that first response of Ted C. to the 'Tombstone' manuscript. If only he'd written something like:

'I found your novella somewhat interesting—but the truth is that it is difficult to get any fiction by unknown authors published these days... Of course, if you are really desperate to see your name in print, there are always the vanity presses...'

Yes, such a pinch of comeuppance might have been exactly what was needed... Yet in half-believing that I was half-way to some literary accolade—two years later I am still floundering in futile revisions...

I was still twisting when the first the grey light showed through the blinds. The split-shift literacy "hell day" was just hours away and odds were even as to whether I could stay on my feet. Even in the bleariness of a nearly sleepless night it was clear that teaching duties—no less than parenting and spousal duties—were incompatible with a necrophiliac obsession...

1993, July

As self-imposed deadlines drew closer, the 'Tombstone' obsession continued to take collateral damage.

Of innocent victims

Late Saturday afternoon I was leafing through '*Steppenwolf*', unread since adolescence. The copy was picked up for twenty-five cents at a morning garage sale near Como Lake. On my peripheral left, I sensed the approach of T., wearing something black. I looked up from the sofa:

"What's to hell's that?" She was wearing a black cocktail dress, low cut and short.

"Don't you think I look good in it?" Smiling, she pulled at the bodice.

"Where did you get that?" I was not quite so callous as to say it looked a little tight.

She sighed and tsked.

"So where?"

"At Eaton's. It was on sale."

"How much?" I talked into the book.

"\$60.00."

"What?" I looked up. "You spent \$60.00 on that—on your credit card?"

She nodded. "I have nothing to wear if we ever go out somewhere. When is the last time we went out for dinner?"

I puffed my cheeks. "How many times have I told you that I could be laid off anytime? Just think of what it would be like, no money coming in and having a big VISA bill... You know how much interest they charge? Jesus!" I looked back into '*Steppenwolf*'.

A few seconds later, she was pulling out of the dress.

"What are you doing?"

She stepped back in bra and panties as silky dress slithered to the carpet. She crossed her arms, angry. "I thought you would be proud to your wife dressed in something nice for a change. Yes, I must be a bloody fool."

"T., don't misunderstand." I dropped the paperback. "You look great in it, really. I just don't think—"

"Nothing— nothing I do pleases you." She shook her head. "Nothing."

"Please, T."

She flinched away from my hand. “Don’t worry mister, I’ll take it back.”

Swooping up the dress, she twisted around and grabbed her purse from the top of the stereo speaker in the corner. With dress under arm, she fumbled out her wallet. Pulling out the VISA card, she sent it flipping across the floor. “You know what you can do with that, mister... I am sick—sick of your bullshit!” She turned for the stairs.

In a gulp of misery, I tossed *‘Steppenwolf’* aside and sank back onto the sofa. So, my poor wife, too, feels the bitterness of rejection!

1993, September

fwt

Finally registered for night classes beginning in January, I took my final vacation weeks of the year to complete the expanded draft. Meanwhile, further collateral damage is sustained.

Of the monkey's clutch:

I spent yesterday afternoon almost without interruption, fiddling with the 'Tombstone Appendix' only to abort nearly half the text. The essay on cultural anthropology written by the narrator after his return from the village, just does not yet ring authentic...

Afterwards, I climbed the stairs in stiff kneed defeat. Four hours pissed away. I might well have stayed upstairs with the kids watching Roadrunner cartoons. There are just two weeks left. Will I manage to get the monkey off my back?

I was in no mood to trip over the toy xylophone. I kicked it away. "It looks like someone threw a goddam hand grenade in here." I grimaced at the toys and clothes scattered on the living room carpet.

T. was staring sullenly out the kitchen window. "Think it's messy? You clean it up yourself. I'm tired. Don't expect your bloody house girl to make supper. There's leftovers in the fridge."

She tromped up the stairs. A moment later, there came an exclamatory jerking of the bathtub taps. I could also hear the voices of the kids, playing in their room.

"You girls," I shouted at the foot of the stairs. "Will you get down here and clean up your mess?"

MT came to the top of the stairs holding her stomach. "I'm sick. I have a tummy ache."

I leaned up the stairs. "Just clean up your toys and then you can be sick."

"Your father doesn't believe anyone can get sick," T.'s voice echoed above the sound of the running taps, "Only him."

Hold it! I was about to bellow a reaction to what seemed a taunt when I froze. Was I prepared for the down-spiralling into another domestic blow up? Could I not see what is the *real* mess? Fortunately, MT and TE did come downstairs, and we cleaned up the toys together. Although T. stayed in the bedroom, the kids did eat the leftover chili and by 8:00 PM were ready for their bedtime story.

Afterwards, I came back in the living room and listening to a calming classical CD. There was no point in going back to the computer. For tackling the appendix again, I needed a fresh mind. I had two weeks left. After returning to work in November, I will still have weekends for final tweaking.

Before Christmas, the claws must be finally and forever pulled loose...

1993, October

With the final revision of the manuscript almost finished, I received another tempting offer of help from the professor poet friend.

Consolation and another offer:

It was a relief to hear back from Ted C. Back at the beginning of September, I let him know that I was racing to finish a final revision before starting the part-time studies. Unfortunately, I also wrote about lingering shame of the ‘*Duckwalk*’ rejection. In the much longer than usual delay before his reply, I was gnawed by the worry that he was fed up with my little drama... So, when the envelope bearing his Department of English letterhead appeared under the mail slot this afternoon, I immediately tore it open. Standing by the door, I read his ragged longhand:

'...the reason I haven't answered your letter of September 4th, is that for the last month, I have battling the worst form of flu I've ever had in my life...'

It was sad to be reminded that Ted is over seventy-five. At the same time, it was touching that he should privilege me with personal details about his details about his tribulations... Such humility!

After the opening, he dealt with the query and commentary of my letter. First, he countered my remark that I might have better luck in submitting my MSS with an “exotic sounding” pseudonym. Rather than chiding my caustic comment—in his gentle manner he disarmed it:

'I have never heard in my life of regional publishers screening authors in the manner in which you suggest... What is happening is more and more MSSs, and less money from governments.'

Finally, in responding to my comment that I wouldn’t make the mistake again of submitting the final draft to a publisher before it was “good and ready”, he offered more help. He suggested that a couple of his friends could look over the manuscript and offer suggestions.

One is Ms. AW, who had been both an editor and a member of the Canada Council Grants board. She is apparently now retired in the toney Marpole neighbourhood of Vancouver. The other is RG, also a Professor Emeritus from Ted’s own Department of English. I vaguely remember seeing Professor RG in summertime in the park across from the provincial legislature. He was usually on a bench smoking pipe and buried in a book.

Isn’t that a little *too* awkward? Whereas with AY in Marpole, anonymity was ensured. RG in the frog pond of the old provincial capital— might even have some vague memory of me passing in a university corridor or darting glances at his park bench. Would I not be setting myself up for deeper embarrassment?

The analogy that came to mind was of a sufferer of some embarrassing ailment choosing to anonymously seek treatment from a walk-in clinic rather than from his family physician...

As to whether to send the manuscript only to Ms. AY—or to both her and Professor RG—I decided to sleep on the decision...



Meanwhile, I am not quite sure how to take Ted's comment about my journals:

"Don't on any account stop your journals and hang on to them. Some of your best writing is in them..."

Of course, he was referring to the excerpt from the fall of 1981 which I typed up and sent him from Zimbabwe. In my last letter, I mentioned that my confidence was so shaken by the rejection letter from *'Duckwalk'*, for days afterwards I was hardly able to write in my journal...

What should I read between his lines? If he had been in touch with his friends at *'Duckwalk'* or *'Blue Loon'* they could have flatly told him they were surprised that he should have recommended my manuscript (Of course, I cannot assume that he strongly recommended it) ...In any case, is Ted—perhaps with restored lucidity—now saying that *'Tombstone'* is certainly *not* my best writing?

Still, it was moving that Ted, frail himself while struggling with his wife's illness— would generously offer consolation, a little balm for paranoia— and another pat of encouragement.

However patronizing, it is appreciated...

1993, October

With the final revision completed, I turned more attention to family, evening studies and day job.

Of puppy baskets, run over:

As uncomfortable as I am with observers, when the Assistant Department Head asked if I wouldn't mind having the visiting bureaucrat sit in on my Upper Beginners' class, I was quick to comply. With my neck on the chopping if CEIC (Canada Employment and Immigration Commission) goes ahead with program cutbacks, the incentive was clear.

I prepared for a lively session and arrived early yesterday morning to double check all the components. Armed with handouts, funny pictures and tape recorder, I wheeled my trolley into the fray. I had a half-hour for the warm-up...

Precisely at 9:00 AM, A slight mid-thirtyish woman in black leather jacket tapped on the open door. With a soft handshake, she introduced herself as SM from CEIC, then took the empty seat left for her at a back table. Smiling pleasantly to the students on both sides, she stretched back with clipboard on lap...

At the end of the designated hour with students drifting off to the cafeteria, she came forward for a few questions (e.g., "Do students like to change teachers?"). Then with an elfin smile, the official who presumably held the fate of the department in the stroke of her pen, slipped out the door.



"SM said your lesson was wonderful!"

There was relief, of course, in the proclamation of the Assistant Dept. Head, who caught me as I passed by her doorway.

"Well, I just hope she sees the value of the program," I said in a good soldierly manner...

The satisfaction in going to bat for the team, lasted into the afternoon. Even though the program (and my job) is no less in jeopardy—it felt good to do more than just worry for a change...

But moments later, slogging in the rain up to the bus stop on Dundas St., the view darkened:

So why didn't the Assistant Dept. Head pick one of the department's show horses for the observation? While she may have seen relative competence, the CEIC bureaucrat could have been dazzled. But clearly the Assistant Dept. Head's pick was not about showing off whiz-bang teaching...

I stopped up, kicking at the curb-side detritus.

If I weren't known as a low seniority 42-year-old with immigrant wife and three cute babes— would my lesson have been "wonderful"?

No, in her shrewdness, the Assistant Dept. Head deliberately put before the bureaucrat a face of one who would be put out of work if the contract is cancelled. Now Ms. SM will be forced to weigh her decision with a measure of guilt... With a snicker, I thought of the old '*National Lampoon*' cover from the early 1970s: a soft-eyed mutt with a gun to its head under the banner: '*Buy this magazine or we will shoot this dog!*'

I straightened a bent rib of my umbrella. Ms. SM probably saw through the pathetic ploy. In any case, she will probably drive over a basket of puppies, if necessary— especially if she is a hire of the former Tory government...

A half block down from the bus stop with rain coming down harder, I stepped into the doorway of the laundromat.

So how does it feel to be cast as a 42-year-old poster boy of affirmative action?

In a squirt of gall, I realized that my lesson was no more “wonderful” than my first '*Tombstone*' manuscript was “*masterful*,” as described in that gushing letter of Ted C... If, on the other hand, a piece of my writing was to be genuinely liked by someone to whom I was both anonymous and faceless—that would be a *real* achievement!

1994, January

fwt

A few months earlier I had written Ted telling him that I appreciated his offer to have both his friends look over my newly revised manuscript. I told him to ask them to give their informed opinion on a straight question: is it publishable?

A humbling:

The letter received in the afternoon from Ted C. was no less sobering than the news of the assisted suicide of the courageous Sue Rodriguez...

In his disarmingly humble manner, Ted apologised for not having replied earlier to the letter I sent last fall. He then gave details of a sordid episode involving a slashed cheek inflicted by his disturbed wife who subsequently smashed up his car and ended up in a psychiatric ward. In that detail, an image came to mind of Bertha, the secreted mad wife of the kindly Mr. Rochester in *'Jane Eyre.'*

'I'm emotionally numb', poor Ted wrote. On the back of the handwritten letter was a poem titled *'Ship-wrecked Sailor'*:

*The end of every story
to each one in turn
is simply the end; true glory is
to do, feel, and learn...*

A lump swelled into my throat. Amid all the indignities, his poet's heart beating as fiercely as ever...

The last thing he needed was another wheedling request. Yet even with all his adversity, he took time to care about my little concerns. He assured that his two friends, Ms. AY and Professor RG, will provide the "straight answer" about the manuscript which I hope for.

I set the letter on the bookshelf. How humbling these glimpses of real suffering beyond this little corner...

1994, February

After receiving the addresses of Ted C.'s editor friends, I sent notes to both. They both replied with offers to look at my manuscript. I sent off copies and within two weeks, the retired editor in Marpole sent back the RSAE.

Better than many?

Mercifully, I waited until evening before reading the note from Ms. AW that accompanied the returned manuscript. The readings for Thursday evening's 'Educational Objectives' course and the morrow's lesson plan were both finished. I was steeled for the worst. But then the worst turned out to be worse than steeled for:

'...nothing happens, all the characters speak in the same way- which is highly unrealistic... There is a very irritating overuse of "I"- if this is intended as a device, it fails...'

When Ms. AY replied to my introductory note sent before I sent the manuscript, she had forewarned that that she "could be brutal." She outdid herself in honesty. There were circled words, pen marks, and a few sarcastic marginal notes ('Does the reader need to know when the narrator wiggles his fingers or scratches his face?') As with the 'Duckwalk' editor, I sensed an annoyance. Maybe AY thought by brutally discouraging me, she was protecting her harried old friend from other suppliants and scroungers... Her markings showed that she had not read much beyond the first two chapters, yet her summation was blunt:

If this is a first novel, then it's better than many... It is not publishable, certainly not in its present form...'

Even in the sting of that, I knew that the shock was fitting. A sugar coating would have more repulsive. I needed the straight truth that however polished—my MSS was still a turd...

Methodically, I emptied the bottom drawers. I dug out the copies of all four drafts and all the earlier correspondences from publishers. All of it went into a green garbage bag. Only the floppy disks were spared for later use after erasure. Savagely, I twisted the top and tied up the bag. I took it outside and across the parking lot to the green dumpster. In the throb of anger, I swung the bag into the open maw.



I woke at 2:00 AM, still roiling in the judgement of the editor in Marpole:

'If this is your first novel, it is better than many...'

Would I have taken some consolation had she written: 'better than most'? I had, after all, agreed that I wanted the *straight* truth... Still, the gambler who's lost the farm can feel no worse. To think of the months—the years—wasted! Even years wasted in debauchery must have a few redeeming memories of pleasure... Even in the premonition that it would end like this—there was always the wisp of hope...

There was still the faint hope of Professor RG's assessment— but it was nothing to ease me back to sleep...

1994, March

fwt

The verdict of the professor-poet friend of Ted C., received a week later, was equally unambiguous.

Final verdict:

There was hardly any sting in the letter from Prof. RG. He found the novel thin of plot—little more than an episodic account of a visit to a dying village. He compared it unfavourably to the work of local legend, ‘David Adam Richers’ [sic.] whom Ted had so oddly referenced in his initial response.

Yet the professor’s rambling, impressionistic response seemed almost gentle in contrast to the cold poke of Ms. AW’s begrudged sentences. His descriptions of the shortcomings of my manuscript were more of a sedated colonic probe than a rough prostate exam...

‘The fact that I managed to read only eighty-eight pages should tell you something...’

Only for a moment did I believe that the professor-poet had missed the best parts. Fleeting, I thought of dashing off another letter—urging him to read the final chapters whereupon he would discover how the plot comes neatly together—how in the final pages the themes are realized... Yet if the first eighty-eight pages of Tombstone had failed to engage him in any credible way—how could he possibly be drawn into the remaining one hundred and seventy pages?

Professor RG had obviously performed a duty out of stoic loyalty to his old friend, Ted C. Tedious task completed, he graciously signed off:

‘...But I will continue to read and will send you a further report if I find... As to whether it could be published—I have my doubts.’

Unlike the electro-shock of Ms. AY’s letter, his judgement was absorbed with resignation. This time, I did not even squeeze the paper into a ball. I even thought of sending the professor a thank you note in a similarly polite tone. After sliding it into the same manilla envelope where I put Ted C.’s letters, I headed for the door. I needed fresh air...



Along the transmountain trail behind the coop complex, I took stock:

Yes, there was a gut sense that it was folly to expect that Professor RG or Ms. AY would respond any differently to the manuscript than had the editors of ‘Blue Loon’, ‘Titania’, or ‘Duckwalk’. Still, further self-recrimination is useless. It is time to move on...

But what will I tell T.? At the very least, she deserves the assurance that I will be a reliable provider. She needs to know I will not fuck up on my job. She needs my commitment to complete the education studies—even if the upcoming courses are as dishwater-dull as this first one...

Before turning around on Underhill Ave., I stopped to look up into the budding trees. Maybe the months weren’t entirely wasted. At least in typing out that monstrosity, I have become more adept at

word-processing. Maybe when shame subsides, I will try a creative writing project again. But that will certainly take a few years...

1994, March

fwt

I had earlier informed Ted about Ms. AY's feedback. He wrote his reply before I reported on the feedback from his professor-poet friend.

A brief relapse of bitterness:

The letter received from Ted yesterday must have been written within hours of his receiving mine. He obviously got the embarrassing impression that I was in need of handholding:

'I disagree with AY, he wrote, 'I think your MSS was several cuts above the average...'

What cheer is there in the consolation that my manuscript is now “above average”? That is certainly a comedown from “*the best work I have read in MSS*”. The good news is that in getting away from his mad Bertha wife, Ted seems to have recovered his senses...



The relapse into bitterness continued on the drive back from work. During the rush-hour snarl along Lougheed, the CBC local news was reporting on a decline in the BC film industry. Although half listening, I perked up to an oddly familiar voice:

"If film production costs are lower in Australia, that's where they'll go to shoot— it's simple economics..."

Before the speaker was identified, I knew exactly who it was: TC, formerly from the Eastern Passage of Nova Scotia. The last I had heard of him he was working in the set-up crew in the Burnaby film studio. Now the erstwhile hippie tree planter was a partner was in a local film production company...

I harkened back to an encounter in a noisy pub, fifteen years ago, where another former acquaintance, introduced me to his fellow Nova Scotian. At that time, TC was a student in a film studies program at SFU. I recall an exchange of witty barbs revealing mutual suspicions of ambitions somewhat uncharacteristic of Maritimers. Yet clearly TC had the gumption and grit to realize his dream... The shameful truth was that I felt no more inclined to toast his success than to jeer it...



Back home I scribbled out short letters to old friends, NV in Sault Ste. Marie and DC in Calgary. It is embarrassing that I had hinted to both a few months ago that I anticipated “good news” about a writing project. Hopefully, they had forgotten my cryptic reference. Still, it was difficult to avoid an impression of gloom. It was even difficult to compose a simple letter. It may be weeks before the pen no longer feels as awkward as a singlehandedly wielded shovel dragging sideways.

1994, March

Enrolled in the part-time studies in Education, there was relief in finding the work and study schedule manageable. Yet even modest success aroused more of suspicion than of satisfaction.

Of the taunting of 'A' grades:

In walking back down the slippery path to Forest Grove from the university, I was momentarily buoyed by the feedback on my first Directed Studies assignment.

Moments earlier, it was handed over by Professor GS, my newly appointed taskmaster. As I sat before her desk, she held up the paper.

"Most students would make a mess of an assignment like this", she said. "But you get to the heart of a piece of the research and write about it clearly."

While I was much relieved, I took her words in wariness. Professor GS, nearing retirement and known for impatience, definitely prefers working with 'mature' students. Perhaps she is even drawn to those who seem roughened up yet somehow sensitized by experience. As for her praise— might there be a little *déjà vu* here? A risk of falling again for the Ted C. folly?

Reeling in a sudden shift of mood, I stopped up on the path.

It seems unlikely that a piece of academic writing which took no more than three weeks to write (while teaching two half-time split shift classes) would show more of ability than a novel sweated out over nearly three years...

Yet even if I'm better at academic writing than fiction, is it not rather late to make such a discovery? That ship has long ago sailed. I can do without the taunting of a missed academic career (that is, one so imagined) added to the failure in creative writing. Maybe getting 'B' or 'C' grades for the upcoming assignments might be less cruel than 'As'....

Jesus! Stumbling at that moment— I barely avoided turning my ankle. That was another apt reminder of the primary necessity of attention to the here and now...

1994, May

I wrote Ted back with news of the feedback from his professor-poet friend and told him of my intentions to suspend my writing and focus on Education courses. His reply came during a visit from my nephew, just finishing doctoral studies in Toronto.

Resisting a confession:

"This is really the first time we've had a long chat. It was nice. Hope to see you again."

Nephew MM, in shaking hands at the airport curb side where we'd dropped him, was sincerely grateful for our hospitality. I'd certainly enjoyed his company, too, during his brief visit. It was touching to meet the cultivated young man who grew from the little boy with a blonde Beatle haircut.

In addition to his academic achievement, the 24-year-old doctoral student in chemistry plays piano and sings in a Gilbert and Sullivan choir. He has even published a series of poems about his memories of summer visits to his family's lakeside cottage in New Brunswick. Although his poems are not quite literary quarterly fare, the two-page spread of his poems in the weekend supplement of the *'Telegraph Journal'* was a proud achievement, especially for his grandparents...

In our walk along with T. and the kids through Stanley Park, we chatted amicably about movies, computers and his polymer research—which he was impressively able to explain in layman's terms.

Yet with such rare pleasures—why was there relief at the end of the visit? Of course, that had nothing to do MM's company. It was only relief that I had resisted 'confessing' my multiple disappointments in attempting to get a manuscript published...



The temptation arose several times during the visit, but it was strongest just after we returned to Forest Grove from our downtown outing. We were standing at the head of the stairs when we heard the sliding sounds of letters dropping inside the door.

"Here's another letter from your professor friend," said T. coming back up the stairs from the mail slot.

'I'm quite sure you're heard of Ted C., the poet and long-time publisher of the 'Fernwood' literary journal? Well...'

Fortunately, that introduction was swallowed back. Instead, I swooped the letter up quickly before my nephew, standing directly behind me, would see the Department of English letterhead...

I hurried into my alcove under the stairwell and threw the letter on my desk. Knowing that Ted was responding to my dreary report of the verdict of Professor RG, I was hesitant to open it...

Of course, my nephew would have been fascinated to hear about my long correspondence with one of our former province's most venerable living poets. Yet the upshot was undeniably pathetic. To think that my nephew might innocently pass on the anecdote to his mom—my sister—was mortifying!

So merely holding my tongue at a critical moment was a tiny victory...

1994, August

fwt

The letter from Ted was to be the last. I never wrote back.

The end of a long correspondence:

Only after this morning's tea at 5:30 AM did I open up yesterday's letter from Ted. I deserved a reprimand for the whininess of my last letter and braced to receive it. Instead, he offered more of the usual support:

'...In the novella you had something to say about the cultural differences and prejudices, about the painful difficulty of communicating within family relations and you said what you had to say with understanding and compassion...'

I was touched, as always, by his generosity. Yet at this point his encouragement tends to taunt more than console. Still, I folded the letter, and slipped into the zippered pouch on my bookbag to read more closely on the bus to work...

Twenty minutes later, squeezed into the window seat by a fellow in beach shorts listening to his Walkman, I pulled it out:

'... I agree with you about the good work being done in Canadian prose fiction these days, but I think you would be dead wrong to be ashamed of the vision displayed in your work. Therefore, it seems to me that in your case, self-recrimination is a useless exercise...'

I looked out the window in a tingle of embarrassment. Just how dejected does he think I am? Certainly not enough to need any of the solace he freely dispenses over decades of consoling the unpublishable...

Off the bus and halfway across the rubbish-strewn Pandora Park, I took an even darker view:

"I still disagree with RG... I found your work balanced, perceptive and clear and I still believe it..."

So, I get a pat on the head for sincerity and effort? Bullshit! Why in Christ had I not followed the gut-sense to send the MSS out anonymously—without the poisoned chalice of his endorsement?

At the crosswalk at the corner of the park and Dundas St., I waited for the light. As the morning traffic whizzed toward downtown, a girl emerged from the tenement doorway across the street. Dressed in short shorts and wearing a red cowboy hat, she looked up and down the street. A hooker?

I looked away. The worst conceivable outcome, it occurred, is not even the humiliation of multiple rejections. What is far more haunting is the prospect of somehow ending up as a footnote in Ted's biography. No matter how glowing, any well-researched biography would have to touch upon Ted's overly generous green thumb... If somehow my letters are dug up—one of them could well be used as an example of a particularly persistent—yet unpublishable—suppliant of Ted's generosity. How richly ironic if the biography be a *'Duckwalk Press'* production!

Should I write back for the last time, leaving Ted a final request? Starting across Dundas St. on the green light, I thought of how such a bitterly satisfying letter might be framed:

'... I appreciate your kind words, but the judgement of several others is diametrically opposed to the generous assessment you provided... The sum of undeniable evidence is that my manuscript was mediocre at best...

...I apologize for continuing to bother you with requests for further assistance long after I should have absorbed that truth. But can I ask one last kind favour? If you haven't already— could you please destroy my letters?

...At the risk of sounding paranoid, it is deeply troubling to imagine that my effort to produce a decent work of fiction achieved nothing more than a passing reference in your future biography...'

The girl in the red cowboy hat was far down the street, her rump joggling in her gait. At the same time, at the corner of the strip mall adjacent to the school parking lot, a ragged man was loading cans into the back carrier of a rickety bike...

No, that would be cruel. Best just to lapse into silence...

1994, August

fwt

Six months later, in the pressures of writing a thesis and full-time teaching, the humiliation of 'Tombstone' had largely faded. Clues that other acquaintances secreted Purple Hearts of literary failure were oddly reassuring.

Good company in misery:

I was hurrying along down the hallway of the education annex after dropping off an assignment under the door of Professor GS, when I saw that the office doorway of GMJ was open. Eager to get home for supper, I hoped that he would not see me.

"Hey, F!"

Yet his shout out was neither surprising nor unwelcome. Now a faculty lecturer and PHD candidate, the friendly Welshman had offered helpful advice when I contacted him last year about the graduate studies program.

Grinning, GMJ swivelled around from his Macintosh.

"How's it going, G.?"

He held up an unsealed padded envelope. "They sent it back to me."

"What's that?" I leaned into the doorway.

"My poems. A whole series. Poems in both English and Welsh with translations. I had hopes for these little buggers."

"Worse than a kick in the gut, isn't it?" I smiled.

He slid the packet into a lower shelf. "To hell with publishers!" He swivelled back to his computer. "I'm tempted just to blast my poetry right out there into cyberspace."

"Why not?"

"Think I'll have a pint at the faculty club before heading home," he said. "Where you headed?"

"Down the hill," I dropped my eyes, "I'm working on my thesis proposal."

"I heard from G. that you might be researching Gadamer."

I was a little jarred that my name would have come up in a hallway chat.

"I'm still working out the plan," I said. It'd like to apply Gadamer's ideas about language to the teaching of English. I'll need to look deeper into *'Truth and Method.'*

"Applied hermeneutics, he boomed, "That'll be more fun than riding an elephant across the African savanna." He winked. "Like in the good old days, eh?"

I laughed.

"In the meantime, here's something that might interest you."

From a top shelf he pulled down a copy of *'Malaise of Modernity'*. I wondered if it were coincidental that Professor GS, my thesis advisor, had recently recommended Charles Taylor.

GMG thumbed through the thin paperback. "These essays are from his recent Massey Lecture series." He handed it over. "Here you are, my good man."

This is wonderful! When I'm through, I'll just slip it under your door."

"Consider it a gift," he said.

"This is so kind of you... I just hope you don't associate me with your rejection slip."

"F.," He rose and pushed in his chair. "I'll always associate you with *wonderful* memories."



What an opportunity lost!

Fifteen minutes later, twisting through the fog down Gaglardi way, I regretted not taking up what seemed an oblique invitation from GMJ to join him for a beer... GMJ is one of the few people I would trust to 'confess' the humiliation of rejection... I could even have offered to read his rejected manuscript and let him look over the *'Tombstone'* draft. At least the final chapter...

Suddenly catching the folly of such a notion, I snorted. Would such an exchange not be rather akin to the 6-year-old propositioning a playmate: *'You show me yours—and I'll show you mine?'*

1995, February

It seemed ironic that the completion of coursework along with a thesis took less time than the drafting of 'Tombstone Depot'. I was no less wary of the authenticity of either effort.

Closure without the exotic use of commas:

"You went into the cave—you struggled— but you came out with it." Professor GS smiled. "Congratulations!"

I was in in her office this morning, handing in the final copy of the thesis in which the recommended edits from the review committee were incorporated. 4-year-old MH, along for the ride, sat on my lap quietly playing with his Hulk Hogan figurine.

"This will go in the library and you will receive your own bound copy," said the professor, adjusting the fold back paper clip. "You did a superb job."

"Well, I could never have done it without you help," I said in the embedded wariness of inflated praise.

She went on for a few minutes, grumbling as customary about "the false paradigm" which she supposed was informing too much of the recent research in Applied Linguistics...

"This cognitive machine model that dominates— it makes me angry. I never read anything in SLA [second language acquisition] theory these days. Most of it is crap!"

She then proposed that I write a paper based on the theoretical framework of my thesis.

"You have a gift for clear summary. Just explain the importance of ontology to language learning. The 'TESOL Quarterly' should publish it."

The nudged temptation immediately subsided. Didn't I promise myself a rest from this bullshit?

'I'm not expecting any vacation before July,' I tousled MH's head, "but I'll think about it."



The segue I'd waited for, presented itself at that same moment Professor G. made her suggestion that I write a paper on 'ontology'. In following a crazy notion that came to me in the middle of the night, I had brought along in my bookbag, a copy of the final chapter of 'Tombstone'. I had thought that GS might be interested in reading an excerpt of the doomed project which, in an odd manner, may have paved the way for the thesis...

Hugging MH closer, I leaner forward.

"You know, G., I would have started these studies earlier, but I wanted to try my hand at writing fiction. I took nearly three years working on a novel in my spare time and over vacations. It didn't get

published but I think I learned a lot from working on it. It was tough going—tougher than finishing this thesis."

"I see."

She smiled tightly but made no comment. It occurred too late, that she had expected me to say that writing an unpublishable novel was *nothing* compared with the rigours of her supervisory demands.

A little embarrassed, I lifted MH off my lap and took his hand. "I guess my point is that finishing that project made the writing of another extended text less daunting."

She was already glancing toward a paper on her desk. My twenty minutes was up.

I rose. "Well, I can't tell you just how much I appreciate your help and support... Umm, I was wondering if some time in the spring or summer you might like to join my wife and I at our place for lunch. We just live down on Forest Grove within walking distance from here."

"Thank you."

I knew that my offer was as awkward for this suffer-no-fools taskmaster as my pulling out the chapter of *'Tombstone'* would have been. Fortunately, I had the presence of mind not to do it... At the very least, she would have been irritated again by the "exotic use of commas".

1996, February

fwt

Within a year after the final closing of the 'Tombstone' file, I was becoming able to look back less in embarrassment than in self-effacing humour.

Best Sportsman:

"So where do we have to go next Friday?" asked MT.

We were on the trail behind the coop looking for salmonberries. MT was holding the margarine tub and I was pulling down the bushes for her to reach.

"It's the graduation ceremony at the university. Don't you want to see your old dad wearing one of this funny hats and gowns? You mom thinks it's a good idea."

"How long will it be?"

"Probably a couple of hours... Let's try closer to the playground."

"Slowly we moved along the trail with MT holding the tub in both hands.

"Mom said you're getting an award, dad."

"Well, they liked my thesis. Honestly honey, at my age, I take it as a booby prize."

"What's a booby prize?"

"Well, it's sure not for coming in first." I laughed. "I'm reminded of a prize I got when I was around eight years old..."

Hey there's a bug in here!" MT tilted up the tub.

"Don't spill them, honey. Just blow it out..."

We stopped up as she softly blew.

"You want to hear about my booby prize?"

"Sure, dad," she indulged me.

"You remember that pond behind the railroad station near where your nana lives?"

"The dam?"

"Right. Every spring, when I was a kid, there was a fishing derby there. The dam was stocked with trout just for that event. I always participated but I don't remember ever catching a fish... Anyway, this one year, after they blew the siren to start the derby, maybe one of the judges was standing nearby. While kids around me were pulling out fish, I was trying to get my line untangled... Anyway, when they gave out the prizes, I couldn't believe it when my name was called. I hadn't even caught a minnow but they gave me a prize. Can you guess what award I got?"

“The booby prize?”

“Well, they gave it another name. They called it ‘The Best Sportsman Award’. I got a fishing net and even got my name in the local paper along with the kid who caught the biggest fish.”

“Well, that’s nice.”

“You think so? Anyway, that’s like the award I’ll be getting on Friday— a Best Sportsman’s Award for a thesis written twenty years too late.” I chuckled.

"Can you reach that big ripe one over there?" MT changed the subject with the tact of the bright 10½-year-old that she is ...

So, at the age of forty-three, is her father finally getting his line untangled? On tiptoes I reached for a fat ripe salmonberry— nipped again by the big fish that got away...

1996, May

fwt

After 'Tombstone', I do longer attempted fiction. I still had hopes for non-fiction projects but between insecure work, fatherhood and sloth (mostly the latter) no project was ever brought to fruition...

I sometimes wondered what had become of Professor Ted C. The poetry collections he'd sent me many years before remained prominent on my bookshelf. For vague want of closure, I thought of writing him again... I did not.

An apparition from the past:

I was on the futon leafing through the 'Georgia Straight' weekly and just about to turn off the lamp when I was startled by an item in the 'Upcoming Events' section. A poetry reading at the Vancouver Public Library featured, along with two eminent B.C. poets, none other than Ted C.!

It was incredible to hear that Ted, now in his eighties, was still going strong. Is he now living in Vancouver? I remembered him once referring to his younger daughter who lived in B.C. Maybe he is now staying with her.

In a thud of excitement, I thought of attending—it was Wednesday evening at 7:30 PM... I could do my lesson plan after class and then hang around downtown for a few hours. I could leave a Costco casserole for the kids to heat up for supper. Even if I didn't get home until 11:00 PM, just one night thrown off my sleep routine wouldn't kill me... This would certainly be the last chance to see Ted. There might even be a chance to exchange a few words...

If I were to attend, would I come forward afterwards to introduce myself? From other poetry readings I'd been to at the library, I doubted there would be more than thirty in attendance... The B.C. poets would be the bigger draw, but a handful of expatriate New Brunswickers might also show up to see the venerable Ted. At the end of the session, he would probably be surrounded by admirers. If I were to come forward, he may not recognize me... We haven't met face to face since the mid-1970s.

For a moment I visualized coming forward at the end, saying my name and shaking his hand. Even if there were half a minute to talk—what could I possibly say?

"...I'm separated now with shared custody of my kids... Still teaching English to immigrants... No, I haven't done much writing for the last ten years..."

I imagined his expression. He would smile—but there would be awkwardness. I would not be able to greet him as a member of the secret fellowship of sensitive souls (the 'star people' of one of his early poems). The literary aspirations have been long given up...

No, even if I do go, I will just slip in and out of the room, hopefully unnoticed.



I then imagined an alternate (and crazy) scene:

In the midst of Ted C.'s reading, a middle-aged bald man in the back of the room bolts to his feet. He points a shaking finger at the shocked octogenarian poet and howls like the chain-rattling ghost of Dickens' Marley:

'Remember me? I am one of the thousands you led on by your patronizing praise! By a few frank words you might have spared me years of self-delusion!'

I tossed the newspaper onto the floor and switched out the light...

I could not possibly show up.

2003, November

fwt

In the early 2000s, I conceived plans for a couple of book-length non-fiction narratives. I failed to follow through.

A bid for a welterweight title?

For the last week, I have been unable to get started on the monograph that could be based on thematic journal entries... The thread with which I hope to hold them together is the mystery of causation. I intend to draw on the Aristotelean distinctions of four causes (material, formal, efficient, and final) before zeroing in on the '*Causa Efficiens*'— the working title.

Still, all the shifting around of rough notes has not made the opening sequence any easier. Always on the verge of plunging in, I am stalled by distractions or excuses. With the third week of the four-week vacation already pissed away, I despair of even drafting the first chapter before the return to the classroom.

Regarding the distractions:

Along with the usual web surfing, yesterday I reread some the journal entries from the time of the birth of MT which coincided with the writing of the '*Tombstone Depot*' manuscript...

After the multiple rejections, I was taunted by the possibility that I ruined the original 68-page novella by expanding it to two hundred eighty ponderous pages. It almost seemed that the rewriting effort was driven by some masochistic will to defeat...

Yet when looking though the journal record yesterday, I was struck by the fact that I reworked the original draft only three times. What of the claims of writers that no fewer than *ten* drafts are needed to produce a work of quality? Maybe I gave up too soon!

Of course, it is pathetic to whine on about '*Tombstone*' a decade after its failure. Still, I have yet to fully absorb its hard lessons. If I am to finish '*Causa Efficiens*' during vacations and weekends in the coming year, motivation to write will certainly not come from self-lacerating pressure and guilt.

I just need to keep to a modest routine: say, three hours of writing every morning during vacation. More importantly, I need confidence that the work is worthwhile and that my abilities are equal to it. I need to ditch the melodrama that greatness or shameful failure are always in the balance... Realistically, I am only taking a shot at a welter weight title—not a heavyweight championship....



Little surprise that the boxing analogy should come to mind:

In channel surfing last weekend, I fell upon a National Film Board documentary: *'The Yvon Durelle Story'*. It was fascinating to hear the broader life story of the great Acadian boxer from northern New Brunswick.

Most touching was the reminder of Durelle's legendary light heavyweight championship fight in 1958 against the heavily-favoured Archie Moore. In the first round, the 'fighting fisherman' delivered what looked like a knockout punch. Yet instead of delivering the *coup de grace*, Durelle hesitated... As history records, Moore got his second wind and went on to win the match on a technical knockout...

As recalled from childhood, the story of that fight was told almost as a tragic fable. Durelle had the raw talent—but at the decisive moment, he was unable to follow through. Was he cheated of greater fame or did he succumb to some tragic flaw to which all Maritimers were prone? That question was only implied and left as speculation for the listener... That there apparently were several other boxers from the Maritime provinces who like Yvon, narrowly missed glory, may not be coincidental...

In any case, the documentary left me with even greater respect for the courage of a fellow countryman of old. I would be wise to learn from his seemingly self-sabotaged triumph...

2004, March

fwt

In the early 2000s I began to review old journals with the intent of identifying bits that had potential for further development. Yet even that activity— primarily a diversion from the projects at hand— often led to slippery pathways of avoidance...

A grisly analogy:

After spending the morning, perusing journals from the early 1990s, I distractedly fell into a website for ‘mortuary supplies’. After clicking through the images of topical cadaver disinfectant, restorative wax, flesh tone dyes, suturing implements and embalming pumps— I scrolled through the tips for the novice mortician:

“Consider that the manner in which you remove the remains from a rest home will either cost or provide you further business...”

But the counsel was not all from a stuffed tuxedo. The same site which advertised the grisly accoutrements of the funeral trade, also included ads for tee-shirts depicting pharaohs and pyramids, modelled by busty girls. So, it seems that contrary to stereotypes— ‘dignified’ morticians can also be a self-joshing and fun-loving bunch—hopefully, not on the job...

A link on the same web site led to information about training programs for those who aspire to the trade. The basic requirement appeared to be a six-month course (which could even be taken through correspondence) followed by an apprenticeship in a funeral home. According to the promo, within a few years a successful novice could become a decently paid and a respected member of a community. Presumably it is more the desire for respectability than the fetishism for corpses that drives the appeal of Funeral Services Education courses...

In any case, the fact that I should linger on such a site today—speaks to the particularly dark mood.



At the same, perhaps the ‘mortuary supplies’ site teased me with some insight for my dilemma about whether to tidy up or delete old journal notes.

The entries viewed this morning were particularly discouraging. The often-stilted text was rife with first person pronouns and inverted sentences—undeniably similar stylistic awkwardness that irritated the editors whom Ted. C. pressed to read the ‘*Tombstone*’ manuscript.

If I do choose to preserve journal entries— the work of rendering such disjointed text readable might be akin to the mortician’s art of making battered corpses presentable...

2004 June

In the procrastination of the writing of the non-fiction monographs, I was reminded that whatever a monstrosity the 'Tombstone' manuscript may have been, it had at least been successfully carried to full term.

Potential preface?

This morning, I thought of how the right tone for 'Causa Efficiens' might be set by immediately acknowledging why the very process of composition was itself so torturous. I considered a preface, such as the following:

'... I first planned a novel at the end of undergraduate studies in 1974. It was to be about a dwarf escaping from a claustrophobic New England village with dreams of working in the movie industry... He ends up in San Francisco where, desperate for work, he is reduced to performing live porno in raunchy bars...

The only section that even reached a rough draft stage was the dwarf's internal monologue before he leaps off the Golden Gate Bridge...

Ten years later, a second novel was planned (working title: 'claustrophobia'). It was about a shy young man with a harelip, who shoots in self-defence the drunken father who is his life-long tormentor. After the killing, the son hides in the empty tank car of an idling train. The train pulls away but just an hour west of the village he dreamed of escaping, the young man succumbs to toxic fumes...

That project suffocated in the crabbed and crossed out detail on every file card in a thick stack of notes....

In the early 1990s, aided by the wizardry of word-processing, I finally managed to complete a work of fiction. The plot was based on the meditations of a librarian about the death rituals of his childhood village which he was visiting after a long absence...

Upon each rejection by several small publishers, the manuscript was expanded from a sparse novella to a novel which grew as ornate as the headstones, ponderously described therein... Finally accepting that the manuscript was hopeless was rather like passing beyond the denial stage of grievance...

After a decade of wound licking, I am finally ready for further masochistic indulgence. Yet this time, I am not hobbled by the artifice of fiction. I am finally ready to write straight from the gut....'

If 'Causa Efficiens' does make it to fruition, one thing is dead certain: I will ask not anyone who knows me to look it over. If I need feedback or proofreading, I will pay for it... Only when I am thoroughly convinced it merits audience, will I send it out. Enquiries will be limited to publishers within this province. I will no more consider sending another RSAE to 'Blue Loon' or 'Duckwalk' than submitting to castration with white hot tongs...

2004 October

A few months later, I stumbled upon sad news. As with the passing of too many old friends and acquaintances, the news came too late to take part in any memorial.

A late tribute:

It almost seemed like a premonition that nudged a search last night into any recent information about Professor Ted C. I wondered whether he was still in B.C. or had given any other poetry readings since the one at the Vancouver Public Library more than a year ago. ...

The first entry to come up from a search of his name was the reference in the on-line Canadian Encyclopedia which I had seen before. The next was attached to '*Fernwood*', the literary journal to which he has long been associated. In bringing up the '*Fernwood*' website, I was startled by the cover illustration of its most recent edition. It was a sketched portrait of Ted C. Below it were the dates: 1917-2004.

It was one of those instants when a faint fluttering is heard from the edge of peripheral vision...

Releasing the caught breath, I scrolled further down on the website. There was the painful detail that Ted died in Vancouver, back in June. That was followed by the notice of a memorial service held on September 24th at the university where he was Professor Emeritus. Then on the right side of the page, beside his portrait, were the titles of the contents of the current issue. Leading among them were tributes to Ted and a few of his poems...

Since only the title page was visible online, I needed to see an actual copy of the Autumn 2004 issue of '*Fernwood*'...



After dropping MH and two of his buddies at Mount Seymour for snowboarding, I drove up to Burnaby Mountain Park and parked. From there it was a 15-minute walk through the woods to the SFU campus library.

I went directly to the 'F' shelf of the periodicals room. Finding the current issue of '*Fernwood*', I took it to a rear carrel.

There was a commemorative editorial followed by short tributes: '*A Knight for Poetry*'; '*A Listening Ear*'; and '*A Caring Heart, Mentor and Friend*'. The commemoration by Professor RB (whom Ted once pressed to look over my unreadable manuscript) was especially touching... I wondered whether Ted would also have appreciated a tribute from one of the unpublished for whom he valiantly advocated...

More moving than the tributes were the quotes from Ted's own poems:

*Some joys we never notice till they're gone
Others bite so keen that the nerves
Prolong their transport*

Those lines were taken in with pangs of regret. If I'd attended his poetry reading last year, I could have got his phone number and arranged to visit him. I missed the chance to say goodbye...

Sleepless in the dark a few hours later, I reflected on the images looping though the Cartesian projector:

There was the poetry writing workshop in 1972 where Ted set the example of taking pains to encourage every creative effort... Then there was the chance encounter with Ted in 1974 in the library of the University of British Columbia, where he was visiting Professor. That led to a meeting for lunch downtown and a later invitation to dinner with Ted and his wife in their rented house near the university...

From that time onward, our connection was solely through letters... First, he wrote a thoughtful reference for my application to teach overseas. Over the following decade and a half, I sporadically corresponded from a succession of African schools. He unfailingly and promptly answered every letter. He sent signed copies of his published books, and I sent poems and a few sketches which he always commended...

But then in the early 1990s, came the *'Tombstone'* debacle...

After each rejection, Ted consoled, reassured—and sent further recommendations. Yet my bitterness veered into suspicion and wild speculation... I should have apologized for my whiny reactions—or at least joked about my oversensitivity. I should have at least written a final letter of gratitude. The callousness with which I cut off our correspondence will forever haunt...

Sometime before sleep finally came, I thought of what I might have written in a *'Fernwood'* tribute—or even spoken in a eulogy had I attended his memorial back in September.

Only imagined—unshared—I still record it here:

'I was very fortunate to have known Ted as a teacher, a poet and a friend privileged with his correspondence. The intimacy and trust he imparted in every letter are not the least diminished by acknowledging his gift to have made hundreds of acquaintances over decades feel they were equally special to him...'

2004 December

Years after his passing, some of the poetry of the late Ted C. took on a renewed relevance...

A heritage remembered:

Last night I pulled from the bookshelf, the copy of Ted. C.'s collected poems which he sent me in Africa. Still assimilating last week's impressions of New Brunswick (first visit since the late 1990s), I wanted to read again his sonnets about country folk remembered from his boyhood in the St. John River Valley.

Ted's sonnets present cameos of human frailty in rural New Brunswick of the 1930s, tinged with irony both gentle and harsh. Canlit critics have compared his early poems to some of the nineteenth century Edwin Arlington Robinson of Maine... There is a slight awkwardness in some of his poems. He probably did not have perfect pitch or natural rhythm. It is understandable why he is not ranked among the greatest regional poets of Canada. Still, his poetic vignettes still ring true— at least to those acquainted with his settings...

I once told Ted that my late mother grew up in a family farm in the St. John River Valley. She was a decade younger than him, but her droll stories from her girlhood reflected something of the setting and characters about which he wrote.

In that same conversation back in the mid-1970s (over soup at a café near the Vancouver Public Library) he seemed delighted when I mentioned how much I liked 'George Ernst'. That poem is about a farmer in the depths of depression forced to sell his beloved team of work horses.

Last night, I read it again. The imagery of the farmer's mute anguish, was as haunting as ever:

*He stood and gripped the bridles in his hands
I never saw a man who looked so old*

I told Ted that the poem reminded me of my maternal grandfather's attachment to his pair of Clydesdales. He laughed when I told him that my grandfather, who 'peeled pulp' up until his late sixties, used to coo to his horses, endearments probably never proffered to his wife...



In rereading his poems of trapped misfits of farms and villages, I wonder how Ted himself had fit in as a boy— having been a bookish fellow with a speech impediment. I wonder what he might have endured for his supposed eccentricities... Even with his illustrious accomplishments, perhaps he never failed to see himself as one of the 'stunted strong' who "grow up slow and endure for long..."

I still wonder what Ted might have seen in me apart from our common provincial origins.... Maybe he saw me as one who rejected an assigned role in a village and made a bid to break loose... Perhaps he even thought of me as one who (in somewhat quixotic manner?) had a certain (blind?) audacity to grapple with 'heavy' themes.

Could he have sincerely liked the Tombstone manuscript? Twenty years later, I have no doubt he would never have praised that manuscript, had it come to him anonymously...

2011, August

fwt

A few months later, I was curious about whether a biography had yet been written about Ted. While no such publication was listed at that time, a few startling discoveries were made:

Another absence for the record:

Last night, I saw for the first time, the on-line ‘*Vancouver Sun*’ obituary for Professor Ted. C. who died more seven years ago. It began thus:

‘...beloved father, grandfather and a mentor and friend to hundreds of poets and writers, died peacefully in Royal Columbian Hospital on 20 June 2004 after a short illness... ..’

It was startling to realize that poor Ted had not passed in Vancouver— but in New Westminster— just a 20-minute drive away. At the same hospital where my son was born!

I checked my journal entry for June 4th, 2004. I was off work that day, wallowing in the Internet. Had I known that my old teacher lay dying—I could have gone to the hospital. His daughter would probably have appreciated a former student of Ted’s showing up— especially one with roots in the same county of the home province so beloved by her dad...

‘...a prolific poet and published over forty titles of his own work... awarded the Order of Canada for his contribution to Canadian literature...’

I was touched to learn for the first time of Ted’s Order of Canada award. Few men of such accomplishment were ever so modest...

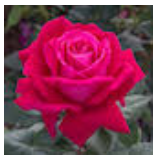
‘The day before his death he offered to give up his bed in Palliative Care to a person who couldn’t afford one, concerned that others might have greater need... He died with his poems around him.’

Good old Ted— defender of the underdog and big-hearted to the end... In the sting of regret, I imagined visiting his bedside in the Palliative Care ward:

In one slim volume of his poems called ‘*Pearls*’, he described in wrenching verse the intensive care ward where he sat at the bedside of his eldest daughter. His dying body like hers—would probably have been hooked up to tubes...

If he has been awake, I would have first spoken of my deep gratitude for his generosity. Then, (maybe with some levity), I might have apologized for pestering him with that hopeless manuscript... Even if he were unable to talk, he might have squeezed my hand. That would have been taken as a blessing.

If his eyes had opened, would he have recognized me at all?



Restless, I did another search. This time I Googled: '*Ted C. + correspondence*'. What jarringly came up was an index of the main library of the provincial university of his long tenure.

In fine print, was an alphabetized list of names of writers, poets and authors with whom Ted C. had corresponded up the early 1990s. Most, but not all, correspondences were from his years as publisher and editor of '*Fernwood*'...

Among the names recognized of the multi-page list, was that of LG, a high school acquaintance from Saint John, N.B. LG had dreams of becoming a filmmaker but in last contact, some thirty years ago, he was a lonely mail sorter at Canada Post. In his adolescence, LG had the distinction of having a poem published a 'young poet's' special edition of '*Fernwood*'.

In scrolling down, I recognized along with the illuminati of Canlit, several names of college acquaintances who had either produced chapbooks of poetry or made submissions to '*Fernwood*'... It took more than fifteen minutes to scroll through the hundreds of names. All had received at least one personal letter from Ted...

My name was not among them.

In a tingle of shame, I remembered the anxiety felt after the multiple rejections that somehow one of my letters might be "used" as example of Ted's patience and generosity with the unpublishable... So, there was relief that none of the '*Tombstone*' correspondences from 1992 were archived to be reviewed by some future biographer. Yet there was also an odd sadness...

2011, October

The day after discovering the library index, I reread old letters of Ted C. I was left with a greater sense of ambiguity than of closure.

Affirming the unrecorded:

Still troubled yesterday morning over the previous night's search, I went to the basement to open the battered metal trunk. I dug out a brown envelope with 'Ted C.' scrawled across its front in blue felt pen.

Between 1976 and 1995, I exchanged upwards of thirty letters with Ted C. Some were lost in multiple moves and a few were even thrown away in the bitter aftermath of the 'Tombstone' rejections. I did save about half of them.

After removing the brittle rubber band from the sheaf, I sorted them in chronological order. Then I read through them all again...

The first was his acknowledgement of sending a personal reference and wishing me the best in teaching overseas... Then there were blue airmail letters I received in Africa over the subsequent years. His comments and observations reflected how closely he has read my letters. When I married in Zimbabwe, he offered support and later congratulations on the birth of my children.

His letters often included his recent poems. He sometimes revealed painful details: the death of his elder daughter and wife, the mental illness of his second wife— even admission of his struggle with depression. It was an honour to be trusted as a sympathetic ear....

But then came the 1992-1995 letters responding to my appeals for his help with auditioning my shitty manuscript. Reading those letters yesterday morning was no less difficult than when they were first torn open...



So, did Ted C. destroy my letters to him? I suspect so— but certainly without any attendant malice...

It seems likely that in his last years, Ted would have been asked by a potential biographer for access to his correspondence. He would likely have prioritized letters from known authors. Excluding letters from the unpublished might simply have been a practical matter. At the same time, he might well have chosen to keep off the record personal letters which exposed vulnerabilities. In such regard, letters written in response to over-the-top praise extended during a period of personal crisis would be especially disposable...

Paranoia aside, the more reasonable speculation is that my letters would not have drawn any attention whatsoever. They may have been scattered amid hundreds of letters of other non-entities to be dumped into the recycling bin...

Still, it is incredible that Ted was able to be so personal to so many. Even the tribute in his obituary that he was: *'a mentor and friend to hundreds of poets and writers...'* was understated.

Throughout his long life, he probably touched thousands. Even would-be poets who received a single thank-you note for a rejected *'Fernwood'* submission probably felt his glow. It is possible that several others received equally touching letters from him on the same day as did I. Making so many feel like special friends; maybe more than his teaching or his scholarship— maybe even more than his poetry— that was his rarest gift.

Feeling something akin to reconciliation, I put the letters in a new envelope labelled with a neater inscription. In storing them back in the trunk, I realized that I had better tell my wife and my kids about them. When it comes time to clean up my junk in my absence, they should understand that those letters are not to be thrown away...

2011, October

fwt

End note:

Recently I came across an on-line biography of Ted C., from 2012. Written by an academic from the smaller college that neighbours Ted's old university, it was only sixty-three pages in length. Even in its brevity it was respectful and interesting— especially in the details of Ted's early life.

There was reference to his massive correspondence. An appendix even included a few letters to Ted—appropriately from Canlit notables. There was, of course, no room for a broader selection...

I was struck by the detail that Ted frequently included poems in his personal letters. Thereupon, I pulled the envelope out again and reread from the back of one of the letters, 'Ship-wrecked Sailor':

*The end of every story
to each one in turn
is simply the end; true glory is
to do, feel, and learn...*

Incredible that sixteen years after his passing, an old teacher can still inspire a former student, now an old man himself. Such is the magic of crafted words, recorded and shared...

-2019



A few of the letters:

The following are a few samples of letters from the professor-poet-friend:

19 March, 1992

Dear [REDACTED],

Both [REDACTED] and I are agreed that the MSS. [REDACTED] is not only the best work I have read in MSS. in my life, and I have read a great many, but it also better than any of the novels of David Adams Richers.

Do send it to [REDACTED] Books, R.R. 1, Dunvegan, Ontario, K0C 1J0. I am going to write a letter today to [REDACTED], whose wife runs this press, saying exactly what I have said to you in the first paragraph of this letter.

It must have been a wonderful feeling to have done so well, so intelligently, and so masterfully, what is so fine a study of [REDACTED] and its people filtered through the intelligence and sensibility of the kind of person you have become. If I could envy any one, I'd envy you at this moment.

We send our best wishes to you and yours.

Sincerely yours,
[REDACTED]

25 July, 1992

Dear [REDACTED],

Thanks for your letter of 7th July. I am extremely disappointed in [REDACTED], from which I had hoped better things. The only thing worse than what they have done is for you to let that affect you. You must send out that MSS. right away again. Why not try [REDACTED] N.B., ESB 1B1? They have been having some godd luck lately with local novels and short stories.

Failing that, you could try [REDACTED] in Ottawa.

I read over the poem on Wilson and I think it is a good poem of its kind and is certainly publishable.

From what I have seen of your diary--you sent me some years ago--I feel there is plenty of good material in it. YOU do have, the semi-fictional novel finished though, and therefore I think you should get busy trying to find a publisher for it.

My own guess about the MSS. reception at [REDACTED] is that it was not read at all.

Congratulations on a new son. I'll not add, though, that I hope you will have many more.

We are still suffering in terms of weather from the effects of the volcano eruption last year in the Phillippines. Would like warmer nights and a little less raub,

With all good wishes. Let me know how things go with [REDACTED].

[REDACTED]

