

The Wild Woman: Notes on West Coast Writing

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What was the path she took?
As winding as her gut
with the pain in it?
Along the beach?
To the caves in the hill?
Path of her mind turning
on symbols. Civility and
the Wild Woman's scream.
And horror. Horror.
Path to the beach
at full moon at last
joy of that mean water,
the manic ride out in the bay.

(Phyllis Webb, "The Place is where you find it"¹)

Phyllis Webb's poem, "The Place is where you find it," appears in her 1980 volume, *Wilson's Bowl*; its origin lay in the suicide of a woman who lived in the Gulf Islands and who had been deeply and emotionally involved in the study of Coast Indian lore. I introduce it to begin my discussion as one of the crucial themes of West Coast writing because of its reference to the terror associated with the Wild Woman, a figure in local myth projecting the threat which the Indian peoples always felt was present in the environment and especially in the great rain forests that came in many places down to the edge of salt water. As Phyllis Webb's poem itself suggests, this sense of the environment as malign and threatening has re-emerged among non-Indian writers on the coast, and though it is only one of the many thematic elements in British Columbian writing, it is among the most persistent.

Let us begin with the Wild Woman herself. She was known among the various peoples of the coast by many names, but the most familiar is Tsonoqua, as she was called by the Kwakiutl. A masked dancer represented her in the Kwakiutl winter ceremonials, carrying the basket in

¹ Phyllis Webb, *Wilson's Bowl* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1980), 68.

which she took away children to eat them, and she personified the nameless perils that made the Indians fear the forest and enter it with caution except on their spirit quests. Her form was also carved into figures which stood on the edge of Indian villages, and it was in such a setting that Emily Carr, perhaps the most striking interpreter of the coast forest in both paint and words, first encountered her in a half-deserted settlement.

Her head and trunk were carved out of, or rather into, the bole of a great cedar. She seemed to be part of the tree itself, as if she had grown there at its heart, and the carver had only chipped away the outer wood so that you could see her. Her arms were spliced and socketed to the trunk and were flung wide in a circling, compelling movement. Her breasts were two eagle-heads, fiercely carved. That much, and the column of her great neck, and her strong chin, I had seen when I slithered to the ground beneath her. Now I saw her face.

The eyes were two rounds of black, set in wider rounds of white, and placed in deep sockets under wide, black eyebrows. Their fixed stare bored into me as if the very life of the old cedar looked out, and it seemed that the voice of the tree itself might burst forth from that great round cavity, with projecting lips, that was her mouth. Her ears were round and stuck out to catch all sounds. The salt air had not dimmed the heavy red of her trunk and arms and thighs. Her hands were black, with blunt finger-tips painted a dazzling white.²

Being a spirit of the wild, Tsonoqua was regarded by the Kwakiutl as ferocious but also a little stupid, so that the children she put in her basket would sometimes outwit her. Other peoples, like the Salish, had tales of similar cannibal giantesses inhabiting the forest and mountainsides, and some of the tales about them tell elaborately how their victims escaped, sometimes even slaying the wild woman and making off with her wealth. Men, it was implied, could live with and even overcome natural calamities by learning to understand them.

When Europeans came to the coast, they experienced for themselves the states of mind that were created by the encounter with a landscape which, because of its vast, brooding, jungle-like forests, was quite unlike anything else in Canada. Not many of these people saw the setting through images created by the native peoples, as Emily Carr and Phyllis Webb have done, for until recently it was only a tiny minority even among British Columbians who took the trouble to make themselves aware of the native mythologies. They tended to see the forces of nature and their own reactions to them in less personified but at the same time in more subjective ways. The landscape was out there, a reality they did

² Emily Carr, *Klee Wyck* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1971), 33.

their best to observe objectively, and of course to tame physically; their mental reaction to it was inward, subjectively apprehended, and there were no myths to mediate between these two conditions.

Yet the fear was still there, as it had been among the Indians. I shall never forget my own first experience, almost forty years ago but a century after the first white travellers, of a primeval rain forest on Vancouver Island. There was, of course, the sheer physical difficulty of making one's way through it; the great deadfalls, six or eight feet thick, which would sometimes collapse into punk as one tried to scramble over them, so that one's legs might be trapped up to the knee; the thickets of barbed and spiny devil's club that one would skirt cautiously, trying to avoid the slashing of a thorny branch stepped on by accident; the dank and stinking marshes where the leaves of skunk cabbage grew into tropical vastness. But worse than all that labour of slow progress — though that became exhausting as well as exasperating — was what Howard O'Hagan described as "the awful silence that was about [us] like the threat of a word unuttered."³ Not a bird sang; the snapping of twigs under our feet and our own panting were the only sounds. I felt fear building up, the fear of the woods that the Greeks called panic and ascribed to the Great God Pan, their own equivalent of the wild woman. And then, on the edge of a marsh, in that awful silence, we saw the footmarks of a bear, so fresh that the water was just oozing into them. In that setting they seemed far more than the spoor of a mere animal; unreason took over, and we turned and made our painful way back as though we were fleeing some frightful supernatural being. Had we been Indians, we would have personified that fear which built into a presence as Tsonoqua or one of her kin.

That kind of nameless fear recurs in writing on the coast, and John Newlove expressed it with a special eloquence in a poem called "In The Forest," though his forest, unlike mine, was not silent. A storm had filled it with menacing noise.

The forest is not silent,
water smashes its way,
rocks bounce, wind magnifies
its usual noise
and my shivering fear
makes something alive
move in the trees,

³ Howard O'Hagan, "Ito Fujika, the Trapper," in George Woodcock, ed., *British Columbia: A Celebration* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1983), 185.

shift in the grass
10 feet above me.

I am too frightened
to move or to stay,
sweating in the wind.

An hour later
I convulse unthinking,
and run, run, run down the cold road.⁴

The fear of the unknown! The unreasoning panic! Our reactions to places whose threats seem real but cannot be defined, and for that reason are all the more fearful. We run, not for cover, since it is the shadow of the forest that contains what terrifies us, but for light, for the open coastline where the sun dispels the darkness and makes the outlines clear. But here we encounter the physical and tangible threats of the environment, those that emerge from a direct encounter with the forces of nature and call on all the strength of our humanity to overcome them. One of the most mordant and powerful of West Coast writers in this area was Ethel Wilson.

One's immediate impression of this highly controlled writer is that of an accomplished and sensitive novelist of manners, and in books like *The Innocent Traveller* Ethel Wilson was precisely that. But her vision of life and the way we live it is neither easy nor facetiously optimistic. It is through difficult and contorted human relationships that her heroines, in novels and novellas like *Swamp Angel*, *Hetty Dorval* and *Lilly's Story*, come eventually to self-understanding and to control over their lives. And there are many occasions in her fictions when something more ruthless and powerful than conscious human activity determines the fates of her characters. The strong flow of the Fraser River sweeps away a girl who is trying to rescue a dog. A fog brings death to an old Vancouver woman. Three men and an Indian boy are drowned when a fishing boat sinks in a storm off Vancouver Island.

What is distinctive about Ethel Wilson's stories of death through natural forces is that often she introduces an element of unreasoning human wilfulness, a brutish mindlessness that conspires with the impersonal malice of nature to precipitate the tragedy. The old woman in the fog suffers her fatal injuries when she is knocked down by young thieves who are running away after they have robbed and killed a Chinese storekeeper. And in the shipwreck story, "From Flores," the final episode is

⁴ John Newlove, "In the Forest," in B. Littlejohn, ed., *Marked by the Wild* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973), 111-12.

turned from danger into certain calamity by the mindless wilfulness of one of the characters, Ed the crewman.

But now the storm rapidly accelerated and the waves, innocent and savage as tigers, leaped at the *Effie Cee* and the oncoming rollers struck broadside and continuously. The little boy made sounds like an animal and Jason, in whom for the first time fear of what might come had struck down all elation and expectation, took the child's hand and held it. The little plunging boat was now the whole world and fate to Jason and to Fin Crabbe and to the Indian boy but not to Ed who had no fear. Perhaps because he had no love he had no fear. Standing over the wheel and peering into the dark, he seemed like a great black bull and it was to Jason as though he filled the cabin.

Ed turned the boat's nose towards shore to get away from the broadside of the waves. Fin Crabbe shouted at him to be heard above the storm. The boat had been shipping water and Jason, crouching beside the shaking child in a wash of water, heard the words "Ucluelet" and "lighthouse" and "rocks" but Ed would not listen. The skipper went on shouting at him and then he seized the wheel. He pushed the big man with all his strength, turning the wheel to starboard. Jason and the Indian boy saw the big man and the little man fighting in the small space, in the din of the ocean, the howl of the wind, for possession of the wheel. As quick as a cat Ed drew off and hit the older man a great blow. Fin Crabbe crumpled and fell. He lay in the wash of the water at Ed's feet and Ed had his way, so the fishboat drove inshore, hurled by the waves on to the reefs, or on to the hard sand, or on to the place that Ed knew that he knew, whichever the dark should disclose, but not to the open sea. Captain Crabbe tried to raise himself and Jason crawled over towards him.

The skipper could not stand in the pitching boat. He looked up at Ed who was his executioner, the avenger of all that he had ever done, driving on against death for sure.

... Ed, bent over the wheel, knowing just where they were, but not knowing, looked only forward into the blackness and drove on. The sea poured into the boat and at the same moment the lights went out and they were no longer together. Then the *Effie Cee* rose on a great wave, was hurled upwards and downwards, struck the barnacled reef, and split, and the following seas washed over.⁵

Sometimes in British Columbian fiction, particularly when it moves in the shimmering light between fantasy and magic realism, the link between human and natural agencies is even closer, in the sense that not mere human mindlessness but an actual human intent may appear to be involved in what nature does. Such an eventuality is hauntingly suggested in *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, one of the semi-Gothic

⁵ Ethel Wilson, "From Flores," in *Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1961), 41-43.

fantasies that Jack Hodgins has set in Vancouver Island. When the novel opens, Joseph Bourne is a famous poet who has gone to earth in a small coastal town called Port Annie, where he lives in a wretched shack and makes his living as a radio interviewer. One morning of customary rain and mist Joseph looks out from his cabin window at the town and the mountain curving around like a huge green wall, "as if the whole thing were a giant amphitheatre,"⁶ and as he looks he envisages a kind of curse upon the town.

In this place it rained every week of the year, it rained for at least part of each day, and sometimes it rained day and night without cease for as long as a month and a half. Enough to make you feel you were drowning, or ought to develop gills. Twice now he had seen it rain so much that one of the mountain streams had got clogged up with logs and mud, starting a small avalanche which gathered other trees and mud with it and pushed right down into the town, shifting houses off their foundations and littering the streets and overturning cars and burying trucks in mud up to the axles and even higher. A terrible mess. Everybody had to move out. He thought the place had died for sure. But those crazy people put everything back exactly the way it was and moved into their houses and forgot all about the hill at their backs. Some even forgot about the rain which fell every day on their heads and on the mountain and into the streams that continued to work their way down the slope. Some day it would happen again.

Brooding . . . , Bourne felt crabby enough to enjoy the thought of a new slide happening. Let it wipe the town right off the mountain in a single blow this time! One long sweep down into the inlet. . . . The mud. The stones. The buildings smashed. The terrified faces. . . .⁷

All this in fact does happen at the end of the book; the curse seems to be fulfilled on the day when Bourne, after many strange adventures and an apparent return from the dead, vanishes from Port Annie to re-enter the world of fame, and Larry Bowman, the town librarian, looks up from his car and sees "a piece of the mountain's face begin to slip, trees and all, as if an invisible knife had sliced it away."⁸ This time Port Annie is really destroyed.

There is another kind of contact with the menacing natural world that occurs in fiction about the West Coast: encounters with inhabitants of the wilderness, mostly supernatural beings in the case of Indian stories, mostly animals in the case of fiction written by non-Indians. Confrontations with bears and wolves and other dangerous carnivores are rather

⁶ Jack Hodgins, *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1979), 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

obvious ways of presenting the conflict between man and nature, but in *Wooden Hunters*, his novel about the Queen Charlotte Islands, Matt Cohen does something much more subtle. Laurel, a white girl, is going through the forest with the Indian Johnny Tulip on their way to sabotage a logging company's plant, when they encounter a deer, and we observe a strange interflow of fear between animal and girl, an empathy in terror.

The doe[']s eyes pulsed in the light, expanding and contracting to the beat of her heart, the green deepening as the blood was pushed through it, and Laurel could feel her own heart drumming in time with the doe, so scared that the fear and the beating of her heart weren't things that were part of her but had become everything, her body pounding in time with the pulsing of the doe's eyes, the light from her eyes now seeming much brighter, coming from somewhere inside the head and passing through the irises as through a shattered crystal window, passing through the doe's eyes and through Laurel's eyes to some place in the back of her brain which now started to pulse too, pushing its answering signals back into the night, towards the doe, which now, suddenly, startled, leaped it seemed straight up in the air, its front hooves flashing forward like small sharp jewels. Then the doe was coming right at her and Laurel was pushing herself up, her fingers pushing off the cold ground and just brushing against the doe's fur as it swept by, its feet somehow missing her as it passed her. In one bound it was off the road, crashed briefly into the underbrush, and then was silent, swallowed in the darkness.⁹

When such an episode appears in fiction, it already begins to beg the question: how far is our fear of the environment an externalization of inner turmoils? And, to give a further twist, how far are inner turmoils caused by our encounter with the environment? When I lived forty years ago on the edge of the wilderness on Vancouver Island, being bushed was a matter of regular conversation and widespread apprehension. It happened to people who lived too far and too long away from human company. It led to mental confusion, sometimes to hallucinations, at worst — one believed — to madness. The best of all accounts I have read of this condition, better than any prose account I know, is Earle Birney's poem actually called "Bushed." Like so many of Birney's poems, it tells a vivid story, beginning with the way the hermit peoples his mountainside and lakeshore with presences and eventually moves closer into himself, his cabin, his overbearing fear.

When he tried his eyes on the lake ospreys
would fall like valkyries

⁹ Matt Cohen, *Wooden Hunters* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975), 72.

choosing the cut-throat
 He took then to waiting
 till the night smoke rose from the boil of the sunset

But the moon carved unknown totems
 out of the lakeshore
 owls in the beardusky woods derided him
 moosehorned cedars circled his swamp and tossed
 their antlers up to the stars
 then he knew though the mountain slept the winds
 were shaping its peak to an arrowhead
 poised

And now he could only
 bar himself in and wait
 for the great flint to come singing into his heart.¹⁰

Earle Birney's friend, the novelist Malcolm Lowry, went a step further. He suggested that the fears we experience in the environment are wholly subjective, generated within ourselves. In his great Mexican novel, *Under the Volcano*, the volcano is the physical symbol for the hell that is within the mind of the Consul, the central figure of the novel: the hell that propels him to his death. In Canada, when he lived and wrote in a little cabin on the shore of Burrard Inlet, Lowry hoped desperately that he had found a paradise to balance the Mexican inferno in his life. But even here he met fear in the landscape, or perhaps rather in his response to it.

The finest thing Lowry wrote about Canada is the novella called "The Forest Path to the Spring." The narrator, who seems to the reader to be Lowry very thinly disguised, goes to the spring every day to fetch water for his cabin. He realizes that he ascends the forest path blithely enough, but always on the way back a dread encompasses him. One day a curious thing happens. Coming down the path, he sees a cougar, or mountain lion, perched in a tree. To his own surprise he finds himself acting nonchalantly towards the great cat, and the cougar, faced so frankly, turns and walks away.

But that night as we lay in bed, and the moon shone through the window, with my arms around my wife and our cat purring between us, I saw that the only reason I had not been afraid of the mountain lion — otherwise I must have been a fool and I do not for this reason escape the charge — was that I was more afraid of something else. . . . I must have been afraid — I mean I must have been afraid in some way of the lion — but at the hill on the spring path have been already gripped by the anticipation of a so

¹⁰ Earle Birney, "Bushed," in *The Collected Poems* (2 vols., Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975), I, 160.

much greater fear that the concrete fact even of a lion had been unable to displace it. What was it I feared? . . . It was as though I had entered the soul of a past self, not that of the self that merely brooded by night, but an earlier self to whom sleep meant delirium, my thoughts chasing each other down a gulf. Half conscious I told myself that it was as though I had actually been on the lookout for something on the path that had seemed ready, on every side, to spring out of our paradise at us, that was nothing so much as the embodiment in some frightful animal form of those nameless somnambulisms, guilts, ghoulis of past delirium, wounds to other souls and lives, ghosts of actions approximating to murder, even if not my own actions in this life, betrayals of self and I know not what, ready to leap out and destroy me, to destroy us, and our happiness, so that when, as if in answer to all this, I saw a mere lion, how could I be afraid? And yet mysteriously the lion was all that too.¹¹

“And yet mysteriously the lion was all that too.” Obliquely, Lowry is admitting that the objective factors in the environment could not after all be dismissed. The forest *was* there, indubitably, and the animals, and the elements, and in the end the artist had to reach a reconciliation with them.

What seems to be happening recently, in a generation of writers mostly younger than those I have been discussing, is a moving beyond recognition and reconciliation to the acceptance of what once seemed threatening in the environment as now familiar, and beyond that to the contempt that comes from familiarity, to the urban man's implicit rejection of all that complex of alienation and identification which represented the various stages of pioneer man's relationship with wild nature. In some instances this appears in the ironic acceptance of the tamed and settled wilderness as the benign but essentially indifferent setting for the fiction of manners, as happens in Audrey Thomas's beautifully crafted and bittersweet stories of passions and pretensions among the gentle tides of the Gulf Islands. Among other writers who have recently come to attention — and perhaps Leon Rooke is the most interesting among them — the cultivation of metafiction, of literature that derives its point from reference back to other literature and to the exposure of its own mechanics, is the main preoccupation, and here the question of the environment does not really enter in, and it is ignored. In yet other writers one sees the landscape treated as a kind of abstract background constructed from conventional images, as in an excerpt from Keith Maillard's novel, *Motet*, which David Watmough included in his recent anthology, *Vancouver Fiction*. It begins in this way:

¹¹ Malcolm Lowry, “The Forest Path to the Spring,” in *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (London: Johathan Cape, 1961), 263-64.

Good morning, little schoolgirl — Pigpen's line, old hippy joke that Steve had been singing to himself for the last hour as he'd floated the van in a random search pattern through this tree-lined genteel neighbourhood, giggling like a bona fide cretin getting off on the same dumb twist long after everybody else had given up on it and gone home. He rolled the window down and stuck his head out to catch the drift of the hazy rain, saw his own grin like the Chesy cat's fading away behind the gauze scrim of this nostalgic Chinese landscape painting, everything flat and featureless, the mountains nothing but paper cutouts, broad streets of mildew and missed connections, stucco boxy doll houses arranged neatly in a swamp, city of fanatical gardeners, six-inch slugs, and dripping conifers smelling of gin — Vancouver. Yeah, you come cheap these days, he thought, amusing yourself in the Taoist rice-paper void.¹²

The rest of Maillard's narrative has nothing to do with the landscape; it concerns an encounter between a young man and a younger girl and her choice as an independent person to swing her life back to the safety of conventional behaviour.

An odd air of squareness or straightness, according to the noun of one's generation, seems to characterize much of the work of an even younger generation of West Coast fiction writers, a return to plain and functional narrative with little metaphor, and a rejection at the same time of the generation before last's obsession with the natural environment and the more recent generation's preoccupation with art or literature as an autonomous, self-sustaining activity. All these elements, to give an example, come together in a story, "For Clara," by a little published writer, Nancy Roberts, which was included in a recent Pulp Press anthology, *New: West Coast Fiction*. It ultimately concerns the rejection not only of a preoccupation with the natural environment but also of the kind of creativity that goes into its imaginative interpretation.

Juliet, the protagonist of this story, becomes the artistic success her father had never been, and then, facing his barely concealed resentment, gives up painting and resumes it only in secret. At the end of the story she finally rejects both her art and the natural world that has helped to inspire it in an act of symbolic destruction.

It was not yet summer and the evening was cool. Outside, she walked quickly to keep warm.

In this neighbourhood people had such flowers. There'd never been anything like this back home. Julie had spent her first fall in Vancouver wandering the back lanes, picking up the abandoned fruit: plums, apples, pears, amazed at the abundance. Amazed at the bounty which she could bring

¹² Keith Mallard, "Motet," in David Watmough, ed., *Vancouver Fiction* (Winlaw, B.C.: Polestar Press, 1985), 96.

home. She had also sometimes taken flowers. These were picked surreptitiously, at night. Saul used to wake up to see vases of tulips, daffodils, lilac and flowering cherry all over the house.

She didn't take any flowers that night. Once, she pulled a branch of lilac to her face, but the gesture reminded her of Saul pulling her towards him and she let go. She wanted to be that secret, that unseen. Her watercolours were in an old portfolio, one that she'd used in high school. She kept it out of the way, near the furnace where she hoped no one would notice it. She got a can of house paint, the white they'd used on the trim last summer, and with a big brush began, with thick smooth strokes, to cover the pale flowers. Cover the pastel petals, the open mouths, their stamens extended like hungry tongues. Stroke after stroke and they disappeared. The colors, the textures, the forms, all were dissolved in absolute whiteness. Opaque, blank, these surfaces satisfied her as the others hadn't. Now she would be able to sleep.¹³

When I read that passage, I was reminded of the great Canadian painter, Paul-Emile Borduas, who collaborated in the famous iconoclastic manifesto, *Refus Global*, and then embarked on a course of non-representational painting that ended in uniformly black canvases. Julie's whited-out canvases in "For Clara" serve the same purpose. Having rejected all conventions, including the convention of a hostile or benign natural world, the artist — writer or painter — stands alone, muse and victim of her or his own creation. The Wild Woman is internalized.

¹³ Nancy Roberts, "For Clara," in *New: West Coast Fiction* (Vancouver: Pulp Press, 1984), 74.