

# Nature/Culture

## Scenes from a North American Boyhood<sup>1</sup>

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### Neither Annal Nor Chronicle, & Certainly Not History

Edges lit to glowing by a hot light. Dust? Aprons?

A pig was buried in a kind of fire, feasted on later, when the cowboys  
returned on horseback: ¡*comemos!* let's eat!

Scenes come to mind as if they never were not, like these that might have  
happened after the slow closure of his fontanelles.

Where was he then?

Someone with his name took part, and at the time a same someone called  
Juanito too.

Mexico, then? the mountains near Anáhuac, three, maybe four years old?

Butterflies uncrumple neatly into being, unlike kleenex, say, or rumours of  
memory.

*Jesus loves me yes I know for the Bible tells me so.*

What you don't know, the saying goes.

He was said to be south of the Rio Grande when the Berlin Wall went up  
and when two years later JFK went down, north again of 49 for sure when  
miniskirts, Apollo 11, and still later Paul Henderson.

Here and there in the late Holocene.

### 59/60

He would have crowned like his own sons, dropped in headfirst and blood-  
ied, been praised (briefly) for crying.

Hardly the last time he'd be a body o' trouble.

*Faint Cries Heard in Mountain Search*, said a birthday headline, confirming  
the horoscope: *Conditions change so be alert.*

*Perhaps you are a figure conscious femme*, the ad suggested, angling for any-

thing, or there's a new infant about. Well then, watch Baby gro-w-w-w with this silly-faced clown: just pull down his feet and oops! a metal tape that stretches to six feet high, quality that lasts—and figuratively speaking here's the way to regain your precious form: a do-it-at-home do-it-yourself beauty kit with beautibells and beautiboos, a whole new way to relaxation and loveliness.

This was a baby boom, and he was a late discharge, circumcised pro forma, unaware that China'd gone nuclear or that in the city of his starling birth a museum had acquired the Skagit Atlatl, its showpiece of local "prehistory."

The Greeks meanwhile were making an unexpected collective comeback: demography, democracy, numbers as the really real (no matter what, the clock picks up the pace).

*Hungry Asian Child* . . . was a picture on Page Five, asking *can science fill her rice-bowl?*

Not Homer but the Harbourmaster catalogued the flags of convenience in English Bay that November, the big canoes gone, spoils for export.

A creased photograph taken in the months after US Explorer VI shot the earth from 27,000 km shows a baby on a beach attended by a radiance he felt once rather than saw, called *Mum* when words.

### **Spare the Rod & Spoil the Child**

Male circumcision was once a mainly religious ritual, or what we might now call a cultural practice, though for a short time in the mid-twentieth century and mostly in well-to-do North America, it was a routine medical procedure—i.e., a cultural practice. Like much that we consider "Western," the business of surgically uncapping the penis may have had its origins in the eastern and south-eastern mediterranean region, not too far from where the notion of Truth with a capital *T* was likely invented. This Truth was once imagined as a naked woman hidden by a veil that was destined to be torn triumphantly away by the ablest of chaste-minded Truth-seekers, but in our time a better image might be that of the ungraspable which lies at the empty heart of a multilayered heritage onion—Peer Gynt's, I mean, though who knows what genetic engineering will do to our metaphors here (onions with artichoke hearts, maybe). Still, if we want to be true to the cultural history of Truth, then what better image than that of an uncapped penis tucked away behind figleaf or boxer shorts? As for the technical term *circumcision*, it comes to us through the Latin, a dead tongue whose imper-

ial and bureaucratic reach remains uncircumscribed even today. The word thus shares the verbal cutting floor with a set of adjectives that combine very neatly to conjure up the manly man: precise, concise, incisive, and (yes) decisive—which makes me wonder why I have yet to hear the outstanding male members of our society praised for being so *circumcisive*. Charlemagne for one was certainly decisive, which might explain why he rescued the world's most famous foreskin for display in Paris. The numinous tissue in question belonged to Jesus, who lost it naturally—that is, for cultural reasons: his parents were Jewish—little knowing how valuable it would become as a medieval Christian relic. I have no idea where my own run-of-the-hospital-mill cutting is now—gone the way of all flesh and medical waste, I'd assume, like the placenta I shared with my mother, or my umbilical cord, tonsils, adenoids, appendix, wisdom teeth, and left femoral head. If I were of another mind, though, or living in another era, I'd probably wonder whether I might get this and all the other parts back with the Resurrection of the Body. These days, as I learned when my own sons were born, parents get a choice and a pamphlet, the latter taking care of the necessity of informed consent. And why would an agnostic gentile now consent to a *secular* surgical procedure performed without anaesthetic? Newborn babies, it seems, were not conceded the capacity to feel pain, which put them in the same leaky categorical boat as much of cartesian Nature and non-Euro-american culture. The practice is no longer recommended, except (yes, you guessed it) *for cultural reasons*, since the Canadian Pediatric Society says it knows of no medical benefit to circumcision—and besides, it costs extra. Apparently, medical science has discovered that regular washing will keep the penis clean. But then washing, I suppose, was the problem in the first place, since cleanliness, which was once next to godliness, raised the business of moral hygiene, or, to put it in an even more outdated idiom, of handling sin—and who wants to do that? (I know, I know: almost everyone, and not just since 1960, when Lady Chatterley and lover came out in Penguin paperback, officially unashamed.) The mid-twentieth-century North-American cultural practice of routine hygienic circumcision, then—and this is the moral you've been waiting for, for what is history without its lessons?—belongs to a peculiar historical moment from which we have not yet entirely escaped: a moment in which a long-standing obsession with the *unnatural* (*contra naturam*, as some Christian theologians have said for centuries) unveiled itself as part of the unnamed Western war against Nature—which is another way to read the phrase *contra naturam*

(*nature control*), and this of course means that the back-to-Nature movements dear to my uncircumcised heart are caught in the same historical eddy, though they have the admirable distinction of trying to love the Enemy, whose ranks include not only singing whales and baby seals, but ticks and flesh-eating bacteria. Maybe that's what Beckett's Estragon meant, when he said *You and your landscapes! Tell me about the worms!* Vladimir unfortunately couldn't (*We've tried that*, he said, when Gogo suggested turning *resolutely towards Nature*), and I can't quite tell you either, except metaphorically (as here), but Darwin could—his least famous ground-breaking book was called *The Formation of Vegetable Mould, through the Action of Worms, with Observations on Their Habits*. In this respect, Rachel Carson was a better guide than Didi, since she'd read her Darwin. Her *Silent Spring* was first published in 1962, only a year after the great white hunter Hemingway killed himself and barely two years after I was fixed for life, and its title raises a related matter—whether in the midst of our war we'd notice a natural silence anyway, what with *walkmans* and the volume of ambient noise in the cities where most of humanity now lives. When a baby cries without anaesthetic, does anyone hear it, and if so, do they hear it as pain? Thalidomide was one of the many *don't worry, be happy* drugs our culture has a passion for developing, but like laudanum it went to the mothers first, not the babies. I don't remember my own circumcision, so I don't know what I felt, but I think I remember something else from a black-and-white news clip of a few years later when the space race was shifting into earth-abandoning overdrive, or maybe from a TV documentary I've seen more recently: the decisive way in which the precisely crew-cut (and circumcised?) chemical-company scientist proved to us viewers that DDT was safe by eating a handful himself. The trouble was, the guy didn't lay raptor eggs.

**60/61**

Sudden light from the dark, water streaming through puzzled fingers, a baby brother out of the blue.

Kitchen cupboards too opened onto whole other worlds: nothing more ungraspable than what's at hand, nowhere stranger than this here.

Nowhere.

Feet first, and the hands are freed for mischief like the toothed mouth, open to everything.

He could always touch the sky but was so slow to realize—out on a limb before he knew it, just like a toddler.

A queer fish, you could say, finless panhandler on the deep sky's floor, his  
element broken air—which broken another way might be music, or  
mockingbird song.

The clock, though, only picks up the pace, not the pieces, and puzzles  
remain despite altered knowing.

Inklings of a former cloud chamber.

## 61/62

Words followed in walking's wake, and it was suddenly coup time on the  
home front.

4,000 miles overseas for a family visit when he said he was leaving for  
Canada on foot, misguided already.

*Keek-o.*

Never saw his parents' parents again.

*Och, mo chràdh!* and the fireman came to free his head from the railings.

This means, maybe, that Augustine was right: the mind like the will is too  
narrow to contain itself entirely—both godlike and childlike.

Not a fin-tailed two-tone caddie, but a grey Morris Minor, the car was just  
big enough to hold the four of them as they set off for Mexico, his father  
*transferred.*

*¡Cuidado niño!* the grown-ups would shout for the next two years.

Gaelic, Spanish, Glaswegian slang, amongst other tongues while his was tak-  
ing shapes.

*Skookum* was not Scottish in the end, but Chinook jargon—*yukwa wawa*,  
home talk and time travel.

Was this what the horned toad knew on its journeys in his shoebox?

## Yes & No

*No is the wildest word we consign to language* said Emily Dickinson, which  
must explain why children learn it as one of their very first and use it so often.  
A human infant is after all nothing less than a wild creature facing the same  
fate as our ancestors imposed on the dog more than 10,000 years ago. Yet the  
very instrument its elders use to help domesticate it is what one day gives  
that child an evolutionary leg up on the obedience-schooled canine—whose  
own leg up (a hindleg, of course) mostly allows for the fluent territorial  
expression of a terse and scented, graffiti-like idiom: *Dogboy was here.* No  
less than dogs and their human masters, language too has wild roots, and these  
can turn up unexpectedly, exposed sometimes even by the boustrophedonic

ploughblading of agribiz prose, like a mare's nest of soil-sweetening worms or a den of feral housepets catching a whiff of old joys and suddenly homing in for a taste of what was. The leash-chain of kindergarten and greenhouse syntax teaches us a convenient social discipline, certainly, but its binding sequentiality can also and fortunately morph abruptly into unforeseen Ariadne's threads winding their alternative ways out of our institutional labyrinths towards aphasia, say, or freedom, other worlds, black comedy—the old arrangements now disclosed as an underground dancefloor of rhizomes ramifying into ecstatic self-undoing, or maybe a divining rod or kite-string pulled towards visionary openings by other kinds of fluency. Even the mindless spellchecker looped into my wordprocessing program offers glimpses of wild hybrids in its staid semantic fields: try *haggis*, it suggests, or *your Highness*, whenever it wants to weed out the unknown *Higgins*. Who knows but *nix to that* might sometimes mean *right on to this*, since *yes—and yes I said yes I will Yes*—can be as wild a word as *no*—just ask Molly Bloom. Yet for those of us prone to *yes-and-no-ing* or *maybe-so-ing* our way about the world such wide-open wildness inhabits the future conditional, like those tantalizing displacements of answers to childhood questions: *I'll explain when you're older*. In my case the cagey adult shilly-shallying to which I am given between, say, *I will* and *I won't*, *I want* and *I can't* might be glammed up as a bent for contradiction. *There is a place* said Blake *where Contrarities are equally true*, and I (maybe) am it: a mere generation away from the Victorians and a kid in the sixties. Then again the *yes-and-no-ing* might be put down to delayed cultural influenza. As a child after all I was exposed not only to the denatured viruses of the obligatory vaccines, to which I owe my survival—fourteen BC children had already died of polio the year I was born, including a Mission boy the day before my birth (some four decades earlier my father lost one of his two sisters in childhood, though all seven children in my mother's family survived their early years). I was also exposed to attenuated fragments of Gaelic, the language of my mother's lost island world. One of the oddities of her other language, which is as strange and wild as any human tongue, is that it lacks both *yes* and *no*—hence (no doubt) my failure to distinguish between them. But then in Gaelic *I love you* comes out as *(there) is love at me on you* and *cracas* is the word for conversation. See what I mean? Then again—again—my unBlooming hedging might be the result of a curious fact: my earliest memories are of a wildness experienced in a language I gave up as well as lost when we returned from Anáhuac to Burnaby, where suburb and school

alike had no space for a pair of blond-haired brothers and their secret foreign code, their *espantoso español*. The horned toad I still feel in my hands right now had another name for me then, and my English is no match for that mute and coarse and living dryness I lugged about in the shoebox. In an old story the silver-tongued devil who lures the naked innocents out of paradise waits for them *squat like a toad*, but if my toad could speak it might take me back to that hot dry garden I carry nameless within me like a set of stills from a silent home movie, the kind American dads in those days shot with their 8mm cameras. That other world is still there, yes, but no I can't touch it with words. Even before I turned six Spanish no longer worked to open unknown worlds to me as it did that day in Mexico City when at foursomething I took my threesomething brother for a private tour on a public bus. I remember nothing of the hotel where we stayed but the bus stop in front, and I remember nothing of the bus but getting on and duping the driver who saw us as wee lost gringos till I spoke the now-forgotten magic words, and I remember nothing of our ride into the urban wild but I do remember crossing a busy downtown street after we'd gotten off somewhere for no particular reason, helped across by a traffic cop who noticed the hotel key sticking out of my back pocket and kept us at his kiosk till the angry gods arrived—and yes I'm sure the living hell we got came in both English and Spanish sprinkled with the odd *och, mo chràdh!* (*oh, my torment!*). Maybe I really do know what the removable toad learnt on its shoebox journeys, no?

### 62/63

Flashes of almost-memory, like inner constellations glimpsed in a gone sky. It looked like a strange paw with its thick white wrapper, but his father couldn't use the hand till the burn healed, let his sons wash the good one. How many sleeps till the hoped-for arrives?

Eyes tied when the piñata burst, he'd had to settle for the handed-over, the still ungrasped.

Dailyness unfolded endlessly, line, circle, and spiral at once, so one pursuit was trying to grasp the invented sequences.

You could call that bright cluster a bear, a plough, a wain, or a dipper, depending.

*¡Cerveza, por favor!* he demanded, having burnt his misapplied mouth.

Curiosity led to the wagon when the Mennonite farmer came to the door, and suddenly he was off on another excursion, rescued as usual by the cop on horseback.

All eyes like a potato, all ears like a maize, all thumb (tongue) like a beached whale—a wishful handful like any kid.

**63/64**

A rattlesnake, a stick, a shotgun blast—and nothing more except the snake halves in my mind now winding their disconnected ways away from the gone moment of truth itself.

Decades later I missed seeing the rattler my older son at almost the same age saw in a California desert.

If writing is, like any bodily pursuit, an aid to an untongued and housebroken memory, then memory might be an aid to writing, and here perhaps the displaced hunt returns to mind, led by the hand.

He took a dead duck to bed, having pulled the trigger of a gun bigger than himself, but I can't recall whether death was the puzzle then it is now, the dried blood almost gone from our flesh, or was this an embrace of historical dispossession, natural kinship?

All these were one once, or seemed so before I'd read the required writing, and are one again now: a cow, a cat, a hot milky stream, and his *me-help-too* hands.

The pronouns remain as slippery as ever, as if some coyote'd tossed us this ars grammatica, tail winking in homage to Penelope's shuttle.

The world was like what in my unclocked tongues, and how would I know? Blood on his brother's face till the face all but vanished, and the dog was put down.

Grown-up arguments in a room, two brothers clinging to each other in salt-teared uncertainty.

Not only poetry gets lost in translation.

**A Dog's Life**

The idea was simple to the point of idiocy. Take rats and spin them blindfolded on a record player to see if they got sick, and if so, what would stop their motion sickness beyond scrapping the experiment itself. I never found out. I left the lab before the trial was over, wishing I'd gone to Ellesmere Island instead—since as I know now that untaken journey might have led me to another life. I'd been offered a summer job on the island as a radio operator and handyman with a geological survey. The trouble was, I was supposed to be someone else. Wild Bill, in fact, the fifth-year mining engineer who lived next door to me in the UBC dorm and lugged his life about



in a crumpled midden of a suitcase, books, beer, and all. He'd decided to scamper off to something else and so talked me into wearing his deserted shoes (boots actually, bashed to a fine tenderness, the laces never tied). But I couldn't do the Mr. Bill thing, I thought, not as a second-year life-sciences student about to specialize in physiology, and besides I wasn't from Alberta, which was one of the other conditions of employment. I could recite the Krebs's Cycle, sure, but that was hardly the *Kalevala* or *The Cremation of Sam McGee*, and I could explain how to get alcohol from an aldehyde (in theory anyway), but the last rocks I'd bothered to study had been thrown at me. Escape from Ellesmere came in the form of another offer, and this time I was supposed to play myself (sort of). I'd done pretty well in a course on biopsychology—they didn't call it psychobiology for obvious reasons—and the prof thought I might like to monkey around with rats. I thought so too, or rather, since I had no other job on the horizon, I thought rats would unmask me less quickly and flagrantly than rocks—after all, I'd caught chickens by the ten thousands for pocket money in high school (the chickens themselves never went to school, of course, and neither did some of my co-workers, though a small few did do regular jailtime on weekends). I'd maybe forgotten how I'd gone vegetarian more than once during my stint on the chicken farm—or maybe I just didn't expect to see the rats again in meatmarket cellophane. The turntabled rats were the workaday white kind familiar from newsclips, bred to be compliant even in the hands of a white-coated cyclops, but mine were two-tone, hooded like klanrats, jumpy and aggressive. Good thing I had to cut their gonads out, male and female both, the chosen rodents neatly etherized upon a table in the lab. They did get their purloined hormones back, but through a needle, in measured doses, after which I dropped selected "subjects" into a lilliputian glass arena to study the link between sex and aggression. It was hormonal all right, but since rats have no cerebral cortex, venerated traditions, or compulsory schooling, my results would likely have had little human use. I did learn one thing, though: to duck whenever I opened the boxes they were shipped in or the cages in which they were stored between bouts. I'd crack a new box open in Storeroom 101 and *whoosh* a squealing furball would rocket straight out at me, its hairless reptilian tail lashing like a pygmy bullwhip. I almost never saw the flying rat, though, and not just because the adrenal rush of terror always hit me first. I saw something else instead: that snarling white-toothed dogmouth lunging like a flame at my brother's still-undamaged face.

**64/65**

Trailing clouds of glory and suchlike.

That can't be said now (Chernobyl, Bhopal, ozone holes, the blazing shuttle).

A TV documentary I surfed through recently showed the oozy Xochimilco where we'd floated once, its Gardens pumped dry, but suburban lawns were good and green, gringo.

When fall came they must have packed up, headed north.

Then Disneyland apparently, since slides exist of a visit, though I remember nothing.

Everytime a gas station revealed itself on the long interstate home he had to pee, taken his father said by the wonder of flush toilets.

Yes, the world they re-emerged in had a way with things.

The first night back was spent in the crib from a forgotten life (already), and others after till boys' beds were bought.

Hardly a day disappeared without the night intervening.

This was the house his father'd built (four years ago), the appletree he'd planted then (Cox's orange pippin).

What he liked best was his new-friend's-dad-across-the-street's backyard chicken run, the warm eggs sticky in the straw.

Cosmos is another word for order come to think of it.

**65/66**

Unexamined lives were not for the living, which meant school.

*Ink pink you stink*, but they were neither Native nor Doukhobor, he and his brother, so fitting in was practically easy.

*Use your fists like this*, his father explained, and the lesson worked, mostly.

Conjuring up the smokes was easy after you'd gathered enough empties—*A packet of Player's for my mother, please* and Howie just handed them over—the trick was getting rid of the invisible smell.

A new bike remade the horizon he was learning by heart, but the first horse he rode had its own domain, and threw him.

The trolley-bus took them to Dr Chow's.

*Mummy, look at the garbagemen!* he said, seeing the staff in their medical whites.

*Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war* was sometimes a lullaby against the dark, the puzzled clock.

Birthday cards came from overseas addressed to young "Master" so-and-so,

and could lead to surprises—*The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, for instance, his first 78.

*DP, wop, kike, dago, jap, chink*—mystery words that emerged in the suburban woodwork, but got forbidden at home, unheard now for how long? The engine on the family car had to be cranked first, yet this was already “the sixties,” the end of an era.

### **Worlds Worlds Worlds**

It's an open question whether the world is more puzzling than another person, at least if you accept that every living being might be a microcosm of the all-encompassing whole. But then it's an open question whether the cosmos itself is the whole caboodle, like, say, a plucked apple before we've bitten into it or let it rot in the fruit bowl, since we can't know, can we? whether we can ever even think ourselves outside of this vast garden that's home to our own backyard world-tree—or for that matter, whether we can even think ourselves outside of ourselves, beyond our own bodyself's bonsai shrub. It's the old archimedean-point thing, which the pointy-headed like myself tend to locate in our own starry-eyed cranial planetariums—as if a leap of the imagination could move the world. The funny thing is, though, it can, if mostly by moving us so that the world then seems altered ever after. But maybe those altering shifts ensure that *for us* the world continues to exist, just as the unnoticed saccadic flickerings of our primate-predator eyes allow us to go on seeing whatever we happen to be looking at (a dinner date, for instance). We are after all not only in the world but also consciously and even sometimes physically at a distance from it, and need ways to keep reminding ourselves of its existence, its nearness. Physiology has neatly confirmed this distinctive inside-outness of ours, since researchers have discovered what they call the blood-brain barrier: a sort of bodily baffle that keeps some things from reaching the brain, much as an important politician's handlers work to shield their boss from whatever messes up the party line. This socio-physiological barrier has its psychological comrade in our uncanny ability to detach ourselves from ourselves, so that we can think or act without accepting responsibility for the consequences. One name for this self-detaching self-doubling is story-telling, and you can probably think of others. Our brain, then, is partly a place apart, but a place hidden within an encompassing body that happens to be open at both ends and everywhere else besides—and this means not only that our brain is in the world, but that the world is likewise in our brain. The organ would in fact die if the

transformed sky didn't insist on entering it with its red-blooded gift of oxygen. On this account, the search for other worlds reveals itself as misguided as soon as it starts by looking for them beyond the earth. A plurality of worlds already exists, and we are some of them.

NOTE

- 1 These reflections are adapted from a longer text written in response to overlapping events where nature and culture meet: the birth of children and the death of parents. In the context of the present issue, it seemed fitting to offer an editorial that had trouble with some conventional boundaries—in this case not only between prose and (quasi-) verse, but between the academic, the playful, and the autobiographical. The remembered experiences encompass a Mexican as well as a Canadian boyhood in an immigrant family.

