

On the Border

Before I knew about the absurdity of American gun laws and inadequate health care, I knew about the border. It cut a wide swath through the bush, between Tsawwassen on the Canadian side and Point Roberts on the American, and we could reach the western end of it by walking south along an agate-strewn beach. A boundary marker declared the power of division here (the Peace Arch, by contrast, at the Douglas-Blaine crossing a few miles further to the east, intoned an odd insistence on dependency: “Children of a Common Mother”—a stone engraving that led readily to infantile ribaldry). If we climbed up the cliff beside the beach and strolled along the right-of-way, we would come out between the two customs houses. “How long have you been away?” the guard would ask (an entertaining, enigmatic question). Had we in fact ever been “away,” wandering back and forth across a shrubby numbered parallel, or had we just been pushing a little at an almost unseen, only half-appreciated edge?



Consider the clichés: *Threshold of Opportunity*, *Key to the Future*, *Window on the World*, *Gateway to* (fill in the blank). Nice notions. But where are the sidelines to the frontier, the exits from loss, the keyholes to the outposts of civilization? Conventions make us think along *worn paths*, *easy routes*, *well-travelled thoroughfares*; and even *the other path in the woods* and *the road not taken* have come to seem like *bromides* and *old saws*. If there’s a window on the world, who’s looking back? If there’s a gateway

opening in one direction, why does it so often close against those who travel the other way? Inside these conventional paradigms, ego seems to construct the world. Those who seek aggrandizement, the extension of their own power boundaries, *claim* alternatives as their right, the prerogative of self, and at the same time they will not *permit* alternatives (by whose authority, these verbs?) to others. “I” may declare “myself” separate from “you,” say the pompous, presumptuous, and power-preoccupied, but “they” (now in “my” command) may never separate themselves from “me.” This world of planned perimeters shows the danger of the unexamined platitude, the toothy smugness of the Barnum smile. And yet we seek—even need, depend on—borders. Are they the same as boundaries? Perhaps borders line the edges of possibility, and boundaries the edges of permission. Perhaps borders declare a guarantee of shared values, the codes of community—and boundaries assert the limits of a self-declared centrality of rule, the codes of hierarchy and authoritarianism.



Before I knew about neighbourhood, I knew about the house next door. The old woman who lived there uttered crusty imprecations at the universe, grouching daily about other people’s children and generations of impending change. Once, when the group of us were playing softball on the street, she even took an axe and chopped away the bridge that crossed the ditch in front of her own home, to keep us from using it as first base. Perhaps each of us put a different face on this act, this occasion. I saw it contradictorily as threatening and comic, vindictive and absurd; I remember it now as sad. She cut herself off, blaming others for a self-inflicted wound. Maybe she even construed what she did as *saving her own skin*; certainly, living in a shell, she kept mistaking the way out for a way in. *Refusal, rejection, denial*: she saw contact as a danger, touch as an attack, connection too uncertain to endure.



Grey areas: the slippage zone between cup and lip, the flank that got left behind (and then left out of the history books), the blur between adjoining rooms, activities upon the pale but not quite yet beyond it, the difference between listening and hearing, looking and seeing, can and could. Could still.



Before I knew about the Ottawa River, I knew about the muddy Fraser, and the untrustworthiness of surfaces and seafoes. If at all, we swam there warily, conscious (we told ourselves) of the movement of the unattended booms, our apprentice skill (we said) at birling the giant Douglas fir logs, and the dour tales (our parents told us) of entrapment and death by drowning. Undertow. We are not always prepared for the way the current rips, however, nor for the ambiguities of what looks at first like choice. Desire connects more complicatedly with daring that we sometimes admit. Decisions are fixed inside the slanted limits of available (or is it *made-accessible*) information. What distinguishes the regional, then, from the parochial? familial relationship from enforced apart-hood? interactive understanding from overactive authoritarianism? Identity is real, or real enough positively to affect people's lives. Yet the parochial *categories* of identity are mirages, illusions concocted by the politics of rule, in the name of purity and in the shape of slogans. They, too, can alter people's lives, but seldom in the cause of freedom. The free flow of communication is far more often dammed, distorted, caulked, contained, curtailed, restricted, tied. The bars of ostensible purity are often overt, and coded for praise; yet the barriers to freedom they carry with them are often hidden.



Indeterminacy. The round earth's imagined corners yield surprises, not the least the ones that juxtapose experience and myth. We live inside perimeters of trust and faith, distrust and fear. It is ignorance, not stupidity, that separates us. The problem is that faith can be as ignorant as fear, distrust as thick as trust, the brink disguised as centre, with centres already dispersing.



Before I knew about the meniscus (early chemistry class confirming yet again the unlikelihood of physical behaviour), I knew how to reach a milk-glass brim, and knew that it divided the cautionary *about to spill* from the active (and reactive) *already spilling*. We know this space between, in other words. For we often live there. Naming it is just a way of reminding ourselves we can resist the easy binaries of boundary lines and the temptations of a so-called "perfect" separateness. There is no such thing as perfect separateness. There is only contiguity, which keeps changing, placid and confrontative, equable and arranged. "At this juncture," we say, constituting

each moment as the site of consequence. “From here on in.” “Never before and never again.” We speak memorized lines, playing on the verge of absurdity, giving credence both to brain and membrane. As in film.



Both/and (instead of/in addition to) *either/or*. It is the difficult, ambiguous rhetoric of living with and without borders. Repeatedly we need a sense of circumference to secure that which we share, recognizing always that we usually share more than we think we do, and that the margins move. And still, still, repeatedly we need to walk close enough to the borders to recognize where they lie, sometimes to cross them if we can, if only to know that they can be crossed, to affirm that, while the world is not picture-perfect, we also know we do not constrict the world we already accept by the way we (and others) draw the frame. W.N.

