

NOTHING DOING

OPENING A CHRISTMAS CRACKER a few months ago, I came suddenly into the possession of several trifles: a plastic top, a paper hat, and a motto. The temptation is to read such mottoes as if they were fortune cookie fillings, as signs of the times if not necessarily counsel for the future. Was it Fate or happenstance, therefore, that gave me a motto in the form of a riddle: “What is the most annoying thing in the world?” I forget the solution that was actually given on the curled pastel slip. I just remember regarding the question as Editorial Nemesis, and answered for myself: “typos.” Typos “annyo.” They can also embarrass, for they sometimes construct unintended messages; and though Malcolm Lowry, in his poem “Strange Type,” averred that the printers’ devils that cause mistakes occasionally construct “bitter” versions of truth, no author and no editor is happy unless the text being printed is error-free. Like other editors, I’ve had my share of failures, and had to try to mend fences with contributors whose work gets unintentionally mangled between manuscript and issue. In the matter of proofreading, as in some other endeavours (as the wag would have it), nothing succeeds like excess, I suppose, but even several pairs of eyes do not always see mistakes. I caught one error once before it actually appeared, when an article on a writer’s career “as columnist” got into galley proof investigating his career “as communist.” But then missed the large title capital letter mistake that misspelled Margaret Laurence’s name with a bold-faced W. Never mind, Laurence wrote me once on this subject; none of her works, she said, were printed error-free. Individually or collectively we may dream of the perfect text, but perfection eludes us, in a variety of ways. At the same time, we have to be wary that cynicism does not so completely replace the dream of error-freedom that we self-select mediocrity or failure. To the question “Do you *expect* an error-free text?” we may confidently answer “Nothing doing.” But that’s not the same as doing nothing, in editing or anything else.

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The recent republication of Rachel Carson’s *The Sea Around Us* should serve as a reminder of the need to respond actively to some things before nothing is all that is left. (The usual phrase in a sentence like this would be “timely reminder,”

but as time is one of the agents in the process of ecological mismanagement that Carson has examined, the need for “reminding” is already a confession of delay, and therefore of likely decay.) Purifying the sea is no mean ambition, but not the sole responsibility of an omnipotent Nature. Conserving trees, for the sake of the air around us, is likewise no mere act of faddish enthusiasm. (Propaganda in the service of conservation, as in the collective book of paintings, *Carmanah*, assembled by the Western Canada Wilderness Committee, can even sometimes rise to evocative artistry.) But how many trees are cut for cracker mottoes and cookie fortunes, one might ask, or for art books, or for literary journals, or for books on ecology? The usual response, faced with this challenge, is to justify one’s own job, praise art, and commend the necessity of exchanging information. But we indicate only that we know nothing (and have nothing to communicate) if we blithely accept that resources are readily renewable, that the seas will be inexhaustively able to absorb waste, that the air is immune to industrial pollution, that the contamination of food will have no effect on health — or that all industries are therefore bad.

In Canada we are altogether too sanguine about the St. Lawrence’s capacity to absorb contaminants, and seem both to ignore the impact that the Great River (as Mrs. Brooke once called it) — now fouled perhaps beyond reclamation, say some — must have, as it empties into the ocean, upon the fisheries and upon the health of all people who depend upon it for water. It is not the sole example of how skewed social priorities in Canada diminish the quality of life. Political authorities recurrently spend money advertising their most unpopular and unproductive moves, their complaints about expense, debt, and the cost of community; yet when it comes to saving, they repeatedly tax social well-being, cutting away at the very services that should generate productive lives. To diminish support for health, for example — by refusing to ensure clean water, clean air, and an equitable access to health systems across the country — is to guarantee a waste of human as well as environmental resources. To refuse to support equitable access to education is to perpetuate a different kind of expensive debt and plainly to mismanage nature. Those who design such schemes of social denial are thinking (if it can be called “thinking”) not clearly but with clearcut minds. They are able to dream of the future, but they imagine it as their private preserve, and they do not or cannot see the consequences of their immediate acts on the world that others share. Squanderers of human resources, they give lip-service to community, but every action they take works to undercut community in nothing flat.

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The disappearance of imagination seems to follow on a decay of language. For when the verbal institutions — radio, television, newspapers, journals (even while

praising the virtues of literacy) — take less and less care with words, a cavity forms where clarity once stood. Solecisms stumble from the lips. Approximations substitute for exact explanations and arguments. (If you know what I mean. If you catch my drift. You get the idea.) In political pronouncements, tautologies take the place of communication, and people wonder why they don't understand the world around them the way they think they used to. The pretence that tautologies *are* communicating something (more, that is, than the hollowness of those who utter them) stands in the way. Where there should be a kernel, there's only a pit. Substance and meaning are identified with image and presentability, and the refusal (or the reluctance) to distinguish between these two sets of categories constructs a system of values that elevates pretence and presumptuousness over thoughtfulness and thought. The communities that fail to make this distinction end up devoid of purpose. And when the vacancy rate is encouraged in people's minds — because it's politically expedient not to tell the truth plainly — it does not take long for communities to die. Whole nations can be given away in the name of some eloquent but ill-explained virtue — preservation, perhaps, or progress, or international success, corporate efficiency, order, or universal truth. None of these is “nothing.” But doing something that invites disintegration is generally worse than doing nothing, no matter what name is given it. People — “leaders,” even — can name without knowing, sign agreements without thinking, speak without connecting ideas. Know-nothings, they serve their society badly. But whole communities can be equally hampered by inarticulateness of desire. The society that does not mean what it says is vicious; the society that cannot say what it means is lost.

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Absence may make the heart grow fonder — or may not. Absences, like silences, certainly communicate, though what they communicate is sometimes difficult to define. Gaps can construct a myriad of meanings. Spaces can waylay. But refusals to act are not always negative, refusals to speak not always signs of suppressed rage or inarticulateness, nor are they necessarily inactive. Sometimes such refusals declare a stubborn faith in sensitivity, a sensitivity that lies beyond the grasp of crabbed conventions but not beyond the reach of relationship. Love does not have to be stated to be known. The not stating, moreover, is not nothing. But this same sensitivity can also recognize when love itself has gone missing, when the powers of understanding and appreciation have been co-opted by ambition, when desire and selfishness turn into one. What is communicated then? In the service of selfishness, language itself can be clearcut of meaning, and what's constructed is no mere typo of the heart. It does more than annoy. It kills. Emily Dickinson knew it best; it advertises emptiness, touches zero, at the bone.

W.N.