

THE UNYIELDING PHRASE

Patrick Lane

MY FATHER WAS BORN ON A FARM near Fort McLeod, Alberta, in 1908. He was not an educated man. My grandfather took him out of school when he was nine or ten and made him work in the fields until, at thirteen, he ran away to make a life for himself. In the next ten years he worked in a warehouse as a handyman, as a rigger in the oil-fields, and as a rodeo cowboy on the small-town circuit of the western plains. His rodeo name was *The McLeod Kid*. I was born in 1939. In 1941 my father went to fight in the Second World War. I never saw him again until 1945. What little I knew of him is what I have told you. He was my hero then. I appropriated his nickname, using it in my boyhood games of Cowboys-and-Indians. In 1978, ten years after his death, I wrote a poem called "The Witnesses":

To know as the word is known, to know little
or less than little, nothing, to contemplate
the setting sun and sit for hours, the world
turning you into the sun as day begins again

To remember words, to remember nothing
but words and make out of nothing the past,
to remember my father, The McLeod Kid
carrying the beat, riding against time

On the rodeo circuit of fifty years ago
the prairie, stretched wet hide
scraped by a knife, disappearing everywhere
to know The McLeod Kid was defeated

To know these things
to climb into the confusions
which are only words, to climb into desire
to ride in the sun, to ride against time

The McLeod Kid raking his spurs on the mare
the cheers from the wagon-backs
where the people sit to watch the local
boy ride against the riders from Calgary

To spit melon seeds into the dust
to roll cigarettes, to leave them hanging
from the lip, to tip your hat back and grin
to laugh or not laugh, to climb into darkness

Below the stands and touch Erla's breast
to eat corn or melons, to roll cigarettes
to drink beer, bottles hidden in paper bags
to grin at the RCMP, horseless, dust on their boots

To watch or not watch, to surround the spectacle
horses asleep in their harness, tails switching
bees swarming on melon rinds, flies buzzing
and what if my words are their voices

What if I try to capture an ecstasy that is not
mine, what if these are only words saying
this was or this was not, a story told to me
until I now no longer believe it was told to me

The witnesses dead? What if I create a past
that never was, make out of nothing
a history of my people whether in pain
or ecstasy, my father riding in the McLeod Rodeo

The hours before dawn when in the last of darkness
I make out of nothing a man riding against time
and thus my agony, the mare twisted sideways
muscles bunched in knots beneath her hide

Her mane, black hair feathered in the wind
that I believe I see caked mud in her eyes
the breath broken from her body and The McLeod Kid
in the air, falling, the clock stopped?

I called that poem "The Witnesses" because that's what I was doing, witnessing an event out of oral history, writing down what I imagined. I took the images of small-town rodeos from my own experience, building out of them the possible history of my father. He was one of those who drew his name when he signed it, a man who sat with a book in his lap in the evening and read it so slowly I believed he could only love single words. Now I know he couldn't read at all, but only imitated the ritual of reading. Was he ashamed? I don't know. I know that my becoming a writer is part of his illiteracy, my witnessing the events of his past and my past and the past of my own people something so crucial I can barely talk about it.

That's why I've started this paper with a piece of my personal history. It's because that's what history is to me, something personal. Just as I can't separate the content from the form of my poems, so I can't separate history from my life. Poets and novelists use history differently from scholars, academics, and historians.

The worlds poets create are imaginary ones. They are worlds designed to instruct both the intellect and the spirit, guides leading toward a new perception of people and things. They work against the abstract, and against what a scientific mind might call the facts.

THE TRUTH FOR A WRITER is not factual truth, but truth as it is imagined to be. A writer like Margaret Atwood can take Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It In The Bush*, first published in England in 1852 and purporting to be a "true" account of life in the wilderness of back-country Upper Canada, and transform it into a sequence of poems called *The Journals Of Susanna Moodie*. Atwood has replaced one fiction with another, she has re-imagined it. No one, of course, believes that the original book was anything more than a fiction although it purported to be an autobiography using fictional techniques, characters, and anecdotes used to represent what Moodie's life was like at the time. Susanna Moodie felt that she was telling the truth. As she herself said on the title page of *Roughing It In The Bush*:

I sketch from nature, and the pictures true;
Whate'er the subject, whether grave or gay,
Painful experience in a distant land
Made it mine own.

The distant painful land she spoke of is my own though for years I thought I lived somewhere else, that Canada was only a temporary place, somewhere I had been dropped off by accident. I was one of those children who believed he must have had another beginning, people more real, and not these ordinary folk who lived in a non-existent place, a place out of time. My people came to North America in 1632 landing at Jamestown, Virginia. They fought on both sides of the American Revolutionary War, my side of the family defeated and drifting north to Upper Canada as Loyalists to the mad King George III of England. That is what my family remembered, that was their pride. The place where we did this remembering was another place altogether, the far West of Canada on the edge of the Monashee mountains in a valley known only to ourselves.

For the generation of writers who came of age during the post-War years Canadian history became an obsession. Their desire was to write it into existence. As they explored their imagined place they created a new image of Canada. This remaking or reimagining transformed the official record, the facts as they were known. To these writers history had to be revised. Of course, that's what writers have always done, bringing history into the immediate world, making it accessible through the medium of art and language. In the early sixties John Newlove says in "The Pride," a poem from his book *Black Night Window*,

we seize on
 what has happened before,
 one line only
 will be enough,
 a single line
 and then the sunlit brilliant image suddenly floods us
 with understanding, shocks our
 attentions, and all desire
 stops, stands alone;
 we are no longer lonely

we stand alone,
 but have roots,
 and the rooted words
 recur in the mind

It is that shock to our attention, the flood of understanding, that the writer tries to achieve. In both Newlove and Atwood, as in all writers, it's that immanent moment they seek. In the case of history it is to have roots, or as Newlove goes on to say in "The Pride,"

the knowledge of
 our origins, and where
 we are in truth,
 whose land this is
 and is to be.

But it is not only a knowledge of the factual roots of our history he is speaking of. He is speaking about the way a phrase or a line of poetry can change us by its cadence and by its measure, "the unyielding phrase, / in tune with the epoch," which is a quote from an obscure pamphlet by Leon Trotsky. As Newlove has it, "it springs upon us / out of our own mouths, / unconsidered, overwhelming / in its knowledge, complete—." He is speaking of the heightened response we associate with words when they are said in such a way as to move us deeply. What Newlove and Atwood and so many others did in their poems was to shock a whole generation of readers with a sudden recognition of place. A great American poet, William Carlos Williams, called this "a local pride." It was this new pride of place that writers wanted to create. Suddenly there was an emotional, a spiritual pride in what it was to be a Canadian. Who we were became legitimate within the framework of art, an articulated present that questioned what had gone before, and questioned what was to come. But the questions were raised in a new and distinctive voice, a voice never heard before, cadences and measures that were our own, separate and unique.

In the forties and fifties Canada seemed to be a history-less place, particularly in the West. The town where I grew up did not exist a hundred years ago. What Canadian history there was always paled against the history of other nations and

other times. What there was of it also seemed to have happened somewhere else, the mysterious East of Ontario or Quebec, the Maritimes, or even farther away, England and Europe. Even the America below us had a history. The mythography of their West was everywhere in books, films and magazines. A Canadian writer like Howard O'Hagan, the author of *Tay John*, a brilliant and illuminating novel of the Northwest, wrote endless short stories for the American pulps of the thirties and forties. He had to change all the place names in his work before they could be published. The editors knew that American readers needed their own particular identity of place. So Alberta became Montana, Saskatchewan became Utah or Oklahoma, British Columbia became Oregon. The Cree and the Blackfoot Indians became Sioux or Cherokee or Apache and the RCMP became Texas Rangers. It was a legitimate demand. The American reader was an American after all. The great loss to the Canadian reader of those same magazines was that he never knew his own world was being revealed to him, sub-textual, hidden behind another people's nouns and verbs.

WHEN I WAS A BOY GROWING INTO A MAN, everywhere I looked there were only mountains with a few small towns and villages in the valleys. There were still a few people alive who could remember when it began. And then there were the Indians. They could remember what it was like before though they never told us and we never asked. I remember as a boy wanting desperately to go West where I could see real cowboys and Indians. This, in a town which still had hitching rails, buckboards, and enough cattle ranches, cowboys and Indians to make a thousand books. But it was the imagined past I wanted, not the real one I saw everywhere around me.

I remember reading through the popular histories of the time trying to find myself in them, trying to locate my place among the many words. That I didn't exist and that no one else around me did either seemed very important. The town I lived in wasn't mentioned, the valley wasn't, even the mountains didn't exist, the Monashee Range an absence, the Cariboo country non-existent. The newspapers we read came from Vancouver and arrived a day late. Even the present was the past and we weren't there either. All our movies came from America along with all our books and magazines. There was no evidence to suggest we were real. There was no present, past, or future, except in the oral stories of the people, men and women who talked of the old days in other countries, other places, other times.

It's very difficult for most people to understand what it is to live outside of history. It's not only your geography that doesn't exist, you don't either. Andrew Suknaski, a poet from Wood Mountain, Saskatchewan, a tiny, almost deserted town north of the Montana border near where Sitting Bull spent his last safe days after his Pyrrhic

victory over Custer, wrote his town into existence in the book *Wood Mountain Poems* published in the mid-seventies. In the poem, "Indian Site On The Edge Of Tonita Pasture," he writes about the discovery of Indian Tent Rings on the land. He says:

where I grew up — i claim these things
and this ancestral space to move through and beyond
stapled to the four cardinal directions
this is my right
to chronicle the meaning of these vast plains
in a geography of blood
and failure
making them live

It's important to understand what Suknaski means by "a geography of blood / and failure." For Suknaski and for Newlove and so many others a great loss was suffered when the continent was subdued by Europeans. The "ancestral space" is spiritual space, a spirit represented by the original inhabitants, not only the Indians of our imagination, but the land itself, its animals and plants, its wind and stones.

Margaret Atwood writes of this when she rewrote Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It In The Bush*. Atwood's *The Journals Of Susanna Moodie* was a re-imagined text, a revision of the original seen from a place one hundred and twenty years forward in time, Upper Canada of the 1970's. Atwood writes about the essential failure of our first immigrants to come to an understanding of the new world they had entered. In the poem, "Further Arrivals," she says:

We left behind one by one
the cities rotting with cholera,
one by one our civilized
distinctions
and entered a large darkness.

It was our own
ignorance we entered.

That "large darkness" was a continent as well as the back-country of nineteenth-century Upper Canada. It was the edge of European civilization, a place populated by Scots and Irish settlers, some of them the unwashed rejects of another world and others petit-bourgeoisie like the Moodies who could not live at the accustomed level their class demanded of them in England. In the 1830's Susanna was living in the interface, on one side the unknown world of the wilderness with all its perceived barbarity, and on the other her memory of England and Europe, civilization with its rituals and customs of the known world. For Atwood, Susanna Moodie's failure is her inability to cross over, her inability to change, to be transformed. What happens to Moodie is a failure of the imagination. It is this failure and the resultant loss Atwood laments.

In "Departure From The Bush," Atwood writes of a Moodie as a kind of Noah's ark inhabited by the landscape, the plants and animals of her imagination. But Moodie cannot accept them, she cannot give up her imagined history and allow it to be replaced by the new. For Atwood, Moodie is living in an Edenic world where consciousness must be radically altered in order to adjust. Atwood writes in this poem:

He wrote, We are leaving. I said
I have no clothes
left I can wear

The snow came. The sleigh was a relief;
its track lengthened behind,
pushing me towards the city
and rounding the first hill, I was
(instantaneous)
unlived in: they had gone.

There was something they almost taught me
I came away not having learned.

The loss is a North American one, the failure to re-imagine a world. Instead, for Atwood, the immigrants imposed upon Canada a European consciousness, refusing to give up the baggage of their past. She ends *The Journals Of Susanna Moodie* with an admonition, a kind of biblical imperative: "Turn, look down: / there is no city; / this is the center of a forest / your place is empty." She tells us we carried an alien history and imposed it upon Eden, corrupting and destroying a possible innocence we might have achieved had we had the imagination to risk it. On the surface this seems simple romanticism but it is really a demand for identity. It is a refusal of the past in favour of the present, a new beginning, another Canada.

Al Purdy writes of this same place, Susanna Moodie's place, the rocky inhospitable country on the edge of the Canadian Shield. It is a place of abandoned Loyalist farms, a land the wilderness has taken back. In his poem "The Country North Of Belleville," from his book, *Being Alive*, Purdy says this land is

a little adjacent to where the world is
a little north of where the cities are and
sometime
we may go back there
to the country of our defeat

* * *

But it's been a long time since
and we must enquire the way
of strangers —

But it was not the land that defeated us, it was ourselves. It was our memory that defeated us, our loss of dreamed original place, and our desire to impose it upon

what we saw as an alien world. Our farms, our cities, towns, and villages, were re-creations of European space and time. Our language itself imposed forms and structures upon this new place, an architecture of sound whose echoes were of England and France. We wanted what we had lost, not what we had found. William Carlos Williams's frustration with Pound and Eliot was based upon what he saw as a betrayal of the American voice in favour of a European one. What Williams demanded was a cadence and a measure uniquely American, a poetry built of "a local pride." In that sense his poetic was as great as Whitman's. It is the same for Purdy, Newlove, Atwood, Suknaski, and others. Theirs has been a new making, something never seen before, done at great risk.

Geographically we are the second largest country in the world but we are a small place with a population huddled along the border of the United States. There are those who think it is because we are afraid of our own space, but the truth is it's as close to the sun as we can get. Behind our backs a great land stretches north to the pole and Russia. It is a sere place of great and remarkable beauty but it is not empty. It is a land full of legend and myth, a place whose history is as old as the world itself, but it is also a new land just as all the Americas are new lands still. John Newlove affirms this in his poem, "The Pride," when he says:

they are all ready
to be found, the legends
and the people, or
all their ghosts and memories,
whatever is strong enough
to be remembered.

This is what is needed, a memory, for place does not exist unless we imagine it. My father and mother and the fathers and mothers before them have a right to exist in our imaginations. It is not to refuse our ancient heritage of civilization, but to see it from where we are, not where we were. My father was an ordinary man, just plain folks, but he is as real as my mind, this thing inside that still sees him in his chair pretending to read Zane Grey. His illiteracy was mine. His pretence and his shame my own. It took me forty years to see with new eyes and to speak with a new voice. When I was a young poet in my twenties my father asked me what it was I intended to do to make a living. I told him that was what I was doing, *making* a living. I still believe that. I spoke of that belief in "Rivers Never Seen," a poem from a book of mine called *Old Mother*:

Outside, the new
land waits for history, a people
whose past is here, whose first pain
is the river seen and cupped
in hands that know no other place,
the new look in first eyes
knowing no other face.