

SOMETHING TO WRITE ABOUT

Alden Nowlan

I WROTE MY FIRST POEM when I was eleven years old. I don't know why. Why is an apple? I could give you its first stanza, but I won't. I wrote detective stories. One of them was entitled *The Case of the Howling Dog* and when a little later Erle Stanley Gardner published a book of the same name, I felt cheated. I wrote romances about knighthood that developed over the next few years into erotic fantasies. But the poem came first. A ballad in doggerel rhyme. Any eleven-year-old could have written it if he had wanted to. Why did I want to? I suppose for the same reason that I wanted to draw, cut out and colour armies of paper soldiers, and for the same reason that I wanted to learn to play the mouth organ. It was something to do.

When he was drunk, my father sometimes recited "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" and "The Cremation of Sam McGee". I suspect my earliest verses were unconscious imitations of Robert W. Service. When I was thirteen or fourteen I read *The Pocketbook of Popular Verse*, discovering Edgar Allan Poe and delighting in things like "How We Brought the Good News From Ghent to Aix" and "Sheridan's Ride". We were poor, ignorant, isolated (but isolated from what?). Our house contained no plumbing except a makeshift kitchen sink that drained onto the ground outside, no electricity, no heat except from a couple of woodstoves, no telephone (I was nineteen years old before I used a telephone), and of course we possessed no refrigerator, no washing machine, no car. However, we did have a radio that worked so long as my father could afford batteries. I all but worshipped that radio.

I didn't *feel* particularly poor, ignorant and isolated until I was about fifteen and the outside world, that until then had seemed half-mythical, began to be wholly real to me. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps even the majority, of Canadians lived much as we did in those days. (I was born in the worst year of the Depression when my father worked in the woods for \$30 a month.) It wasn't unusual for a working class boy to leave school, as I did, without finishing Grade V. The only extraordinary thing is that I became a writer.

Periodically, middle-class sociologists (and what other kind is there?) go down

into the lower class and come up with books that read like studies of the Papua-New Guinea highlanders. It would be fun to write about the curious habits of the bourgeoisie as observed by a spy from the lumpenproletariat. There's an old joke to the effect that God segregates the Baptists in Heaven because He can't bring Himself to dispel them of the illusion that they're the only people there. The middle classes suffer from much the same delusion. To take one example, they say there's been a Sexual Revolution when the middle classes start doing what the lower classes have been doing all along.

There was a time when I wanted to be a Prophet ("the words that the Lord God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob spake unto His servant, Alden"), and there was a time when I wanted to be a King or an Emperor, but there was never a time when I "wanted to be a writer." Subjectively, it was always something I was, rather than something I aspired to become. During my adolescence, I kept diaries, I wrote pompous letters to the editor, I wrote essays, short stories, novelettes, filled exercise books with verses. All of this no better and (aside from its pretentiousness) no different from what any other kid in the village could have done. I wrote in the way that other lonely and imaginative children invent imaginary playmates.

I wrote (as I read) in secret. My father would as soon have seen me wear lipstick. Books belong to The Big Man, he would have said if words had not come so painfully to him, and not to poor folk like us. It was not so much that he was humble as that he was pathetically proud of his capacity to endure. Aping The Big Man was absurd and could be dangerous. The sight of his son reading a book frightened him. So I hid from him, as I hid from the men (many of them actually were children, like me, between fourteen and eighteen) with whom I worked in the sawmills, the hayfields, the gravel pits and the pulpwoods.

Even today, if someone came into the room while I was working on a poem, I'd probably put my hand over the paper. As an adolescent, I was as secretive about writing as about masturbation, and I sometimes suspect that the two acts are still linked in my subconscious.

When I was sixteen I discovered the Regional Library in the nearest town, separated from our village by eighteen miles according to the geographers but at least a thousand miles away if distances were measured by their effects upon our lives. On Saturday nights, we kids paid fifty cents each to ride into town in a box on the back of a half-ton truck. I'd come home with a knapsack crammed with books: Whitman, Rupert Brooke, Jack London, H. G. Wells, Shaw, even Darwin and, God help us, Herbert Spencer. Often there would be as many as twenty of us packed into that box, swaying in the darkness as we rumbled and lurched along the dirt road, the girls on the boys' laps. The memory of those books, waiting to be read, pressing hard against my body, is as sensuous as the memory of a sleepy young girl's head against a young boy's shoulder, his lips in her hair.

The old *Family Herald* published a classified advertisement offering a sample of a short-lived publication called *The Canadian Writer and Editor*, from which I learned that there existed magazines that published poems. My first acceptance came when I was seventeen; when I read that letter, I almost fainted literally, the darkness rose in clouds around my feet. In gratitude for that moment, I must mention the name of the magazine, *The Bridge*, and of its editor, Len Coffield, who published it on a mimeograph machine out of Eagle Creek, Oregon. Its being printed on the other side of the continent in a village probably larger than mine strikes me as being both appropriate and mysterious, as does the fact that my second acceptance came, that same year, from a little magazine published in Lake Como, Florida.

Indirectly, I've been making a living from poetry since I was nineteen. If I hadn't been a poet I'd not have become a newspaper reporter, as I did in 1952. My self-education was a product of my desire to write. For instance, I'd bought a second-hand typewriter through the mail and taught myself to type (without ever having seen anyone use a typewriter) because I'd read somewhere that editors would not even attempt to read longhand manuscripts.

In the early 1950's I was an American little magazine poet. There were practically no outlets for poetry in Canada then. I came along too late for *Northern Review* and *Contemporary Verse*. So I published all over the United States in magazines with names like *Curled Wire Chronicle*.

It was fun. Most of us have to write badly before we can write well. And very often it's important that some of the bad work be published. Once someone else has accepted it, the writer himself is freer to reject it. For a very young writer, the publication of a poem or story may be of great importance simply because it means that, emotionally, he's got rid of it. The size and quality of the magazine are almost irrelevant.

TWO CRUCIAL EVENTS in my life as a writer took place in 1957. I went back to spend a month in my native village and I met Fred Cogswell.

Fred and I were living only seventy miles apart; I was working for a weekly newspaper in northwestern New Brunswick and he was teaching English and editing *The Fiddlehead* at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton. But (and both of us have been telling the story with delight for eighteen years) we first became aware of one another's existence through the contributors' biographical notes in a little magazine, *Miscellaneous Man*, published in San Francisco.

Fred Cogswell was more than the first poet I'd ever met; he was the first person I'd ever met who read poetry. He gave me magazines, and books by people like Louis Dudek, Irving Layton and Raymond Souster, through whose work I found

my way to people ranging from Catullus to William Carlos Williams. He gave me postage stamps, sent me the names of new magazines; we drank beer together and, most importantly, he listened. My mental film clips of those early meetings show me getting drunker and drunker, talking more and more, while Fred sips from his glass, puffs on his pipe, and listens. I was twenty-four years old and, in one sense, I had never before had anyone to talk with.

During my month in Nova Scotia a surprising thing happened (surprising to me, then): for the first time I saw the people and landscape of my native place as entities separate from myself. Before that I'd written mostly what I've since come to call palpitating eternity poems, like most kid-writers attempting cosmic pole vaults when I was hardly capable of jumping a mud puddle. Now I looked around me and tried to write down what I sensed, intuited and thought about it. Aside from one or, perhaps, two even earlier verses, the best poems I wrote that fall are the oldest that I still take seriously. Fred published some of them in 1958 in a Fiddlehead Chapbook, *The Rose and the Puritan*.

So far I've talked mostly about myself. I suppose I'll be expected to say something about the Maritimes. People keep asking me, in effect, why did I choose to be born in the Maritimes and why am I a Canadian writer when I could as easily have chosen to be born, grow up and become a writer in England, the United States or even Hungary. Because I don't wish to appear stupid I keep trying to think of a plausible reply.

Because they must treat it as a Subject to be taught, critics and professors are more or less obliged to make believe that literature, like hockey, can be organized geographically (or otherwise) into leagues and teams. Perhaps there's no other practical way to teach it, especially to those students to whom the academic process is largely an exercise in unresisting boredom. It harms nobody to pretend that there is a Maritime school of writers and spares both teacher and student a good deal of possibly painful and probably wasteful effort. If I were a critic or a professor I more than likely would have devoted this article to an imaginary Maritime school, listing its outstanding practitioners and distinctive characteristics. It wouldn't be necessary for me to lie, merely to be highly selective in handling the truth. And I'd have had great fun doing it, since like most bookish people I enjoy such intellectual games — enjoy them so much, in fact, that if I'd gone on to acquire a Ph.D. instead of dropping out of elementary school I might have ended up as the most egregious pedant in Canada. (Sometimes I suspect that if Al Purdy, Milton Acorn, John Newlove and I had completed our schooling, as the saying goes, we might now all four be competing with the present holder of that title.)

There is no Maritime school, no Fredericton school and no Fiddlehead school, although it happens that more good poems are being written in Fredericton than anywhere else in Atlantic Canada, and that certain writers living in Fredericton

gather once a week in a funny little white doll's house called McCord Hall on the U.N.B. campus to read and discuss each other's latest work and that certain of those same writers, together with certain other writers, periodically assemble, often at my house, to sing, drink, shoot the bull and found organizations such as the International Flat Earth Society, the Stewart Monarchy in Canadian Exile and the Loggerhead Shrike Preservation Society. Myself, I spend so much time writing or thinking about writing that when I'm not writing or thinking about writing I want to talk about almost anything else. It seems to me sometimes that the writer compares with the critic the way the lover compares with the gynaecologist.

Possibly, we writers who happen to live in the Maritimes ought to manufacture a literary movement, complete with an enemies' list and a series of unreadable manifestos. I'm being reasonably serious when I say this. The TISH group, whose official pronouncements were, as one of its leaders cheerfully admitted to me, "mostly bullshit," succeeded in attracting attention to some important principles and some admirable poetry. I've no doubt that the work of Maritime writers would receive wider publicity and inspire greater respect if we organized a political-literary party. Since there actually are hardly two of us who work in the same way toward the same objectives, this would involve an enormous amount of flim-flam and gooblygook; but I'm confident we could carry it off, if only we could keep from laughing.

The best thing about living and writing in the Maritimes, as far as I'm concerned, is that there's no place on the continent where so broad a range of social and human relationships is so readily accessible. When I meet writers in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, writers I admire, I'm continually reminded of the narrowness of their experience. Most of them have lived all their lives in one sub-caste of the bourgeoisie. The jobs they list on their dust jackets were in reality only roles that they played briefly during the summers on their way from high school through graduate school. They were students and now, for the most part, they are teachers and their friends are teachers who write or writers who teach. There are writers like that in the Maritimes, too (and writers unlike that outside the Maritimes), but it's more difficult to segregate one's self here because our provinces are so small that it requires considerable determination to maintain an impersonal relationship with anyone. I have friends who can't read or write, friends who can read and write in six languages, friends who are fishermen, farmers, bikers, waiters, professional soldiers, professional athletes, semi-professional thieves, cabinet ministers, priests, nurses, actors, painters, whores, musicians, friends who are doctors, lawyers and Indian chiefs, friends ranging in age from seven to eighty-seven. Living in the Maritimes, one not only meets and gets to know other people who live here; one meets and gets to know an astonishing percentage of the people who visit here. At 4 o'clock one morning I was walking

along King Street in Fredericton, pleasantly disoriented by Moosehead ale, and in the company of the Premier, the Mayor and Stompin' Tom Connors, whom moments before I had introduced to other remarkable friends of mine, known as Rat Bat Blue and The Bear. Except as a surrealistic fancy, I can't conceive of something similar happening on Yonge Street with Bill Davis and David Crombie as participants.

You don't have to tip a Fredericton cabbie, unless you feel like it, but if you're a Frederictonian you don't leave him out of the conversation while you're a passenger in his cab, any more than you'd leave him out of the conversation if you were a guest in his house. Not because we're inherently more sociable than Torontonians, but because he's not merely an automaton who controls the steering wheel, gas pedal and brake, but Bud, who likes Navy rum, or Terry, who's mad about the Black Hawks, or Dick, who raises dogs, or Jim, who just got out of the hospital, or shy, gentle Claude, who has the same first name as my father-in-law.

It's true that most of the fiction I've published to date has dealt with the lives of poor, rural people, but that's partly because my early life was spent among poor, rural people and I'm the kind of writer who has to let his experience ferment before he can bottle it in fiction, and partly because almost everyone else writes about the urban, middle classes. (I can't resist mentioning that three reviewers of my novel *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien* obviously hadn't read the book. I don't object to that, as I've done the same thing myself. But while one of the three was ecstatic, another was only so-so and the third was savage. I believe that a reviewer who writes his review without reading the book is morally bound to praise it.)

Being a Maritimer doesn't make it any more likely that you'll write well, but it sure as hell improves the chances of your having something to write about.

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