

Daphne Marlatt / FROM *ANA HISTORIC*

"Watch Carter when the 'donk' (his donkey!) has got up steam—its first steam; and when the rigging men (his rigging men!) drag out the wire rope to make a great circle through the woods. And when the circle is complete from one drum, round by where the cut logs are lying, back to the other drum; and when the active rigging slinger (his rigging slinger!) has hooked a log on to a point of the wire cable; and when the signaller (his signaller!) has pulled the wire telegraph and made the donkey toot . . . just think of Carter's feelings as the engineer jams over the levers, opens up the throttle, sets the thudding, whirring donkey winding up the cable, and drags the first log into sight; out from the forest down to the beach; bump, bump! Think what this mastery over huge, heavy logs means to a man who has been used to coax them to tiny movements by patience and a puny jack-screw . . ."*

history the story, Carter's and all the others', of dominance.
mastery. the bold line of it.

soon it will be getting dark, soon the kids will be coming in from outdoors, Mickey breathless and exuberant from hockey practise, Ange drifting in the door with studied boredom and the latest "grunge" about school. and what will i have done with my day, this endless day that unites and separates us? it is the kind of waiting you knew.

moving around in a maze of things to be done, the little ones that never get finished because there is always more i should, i could be doing . . . the rotting walls of resolution, good intention, will power.

how you repainted them. Bapco apple green, primrose yellow. painting them over and over. Kematone blue. blue willow covering up the cracks, the tears in the wallpaper. faultlines. faults. so fix your hair, mend your ways. to fix up a home is fixing up yourself. Practice Makes Perfect, over and over. the smell of turps in the rusty red Blue Ribbon can, later the latex and rollers. you loved it, we said, not knowing. "love." the constant reek of it, the glazed feel on your skin, transformation via aching arm, something achieved at last: long hours of the mind alone in its trap turning the wheel.

i remember you with flecks of paint, hair wisps escaping from under your peasant scarf (kerchief, we said, we wore them to school with the others practising femininity). i work like a peasant, you said. your peasant scarf then, that made you look severe except for the soft line of your cheek, paint sprottled on its down. always the frownlines etched deeper between your eyes, etched by trying, arm in the air for hours, to paint a ceiling, paint a face, paint over the cracks in the whole setup.

holes. there were holes in the story you had inherited. holes in the image. Canada: romance of the wilds, to which you brought:

a trunkful of woolly underwear. Mounties in red coats and Rose-Marie. the loons, the lost lakes. a pas-de-deux, glittering white, under the lights of theatre marquees and furs...

not knowing there was first of all:

"a clearing three hundred and fifty yards along the shore, two hundred and fifty yards into the forest, boxed in by tall trees; damp, wet, the actual clearing littered with stumps and forest debris, and a profusion of undergrowth, including luxuriant skunk cabbage."*

not knowing there was first of all a mill and then:

"three hotels: Deighton's, Sunnyside, and Joe Mannion's; one grocery store, and Chinese wash house, and lock-up"***

to elaborate:

beer parlours separated into men's and ladies-and-escorts. movie houses and oyster bars. the everpresent five-and-dime. skid row churches and drunks and countless patrol cars careening, sirens wailing, traffic flickering in the growing night.

and that was 1950, that was what we came into, Ina, stepping off the train into mythic snow one dark November afternoon. and

Harald was there and the bridge was there and all those flickering lights, a necklace looping us into the North Shore of our future.

the trouble with you, Annie, is that you want to tell a story, no matter how much history you keep throwing at me.

and i know what that means, you who used to accuse me of "telling stories" when you thought i'd lied.

you've forgotten how many stories i used to tell you when you were small.

but then you stopped telling them, or told me to stop telling them—"telling stories again?"

it was you who changed. you grew up. you learned the difference between story and history.

i learned that history is the real story, the one men tell, of all the important events in the world. the tale of their exploits hacked out against a silent backdrop of trees, of wooden masses. so many claims to fame. so many ordinary men turned into heroes. (and the ordinary women with them, nameless, blameless of course in the silent space of the page.) city fathers (where are the city mothers?), city fathers bragging about what they've done, "our gang," building a town out of so many shacks that were going to be some place when it grew up: the Western Terminus of the Transcontinental, Gateway to the East. all these capital letters to convince themselves of its, of their, significance.

"A world event had happened in Vancouver . . . On the eve of the Queen's Birthday, 1887, the Canadian Pacific Railway . . . closed the last gap in the 'All-Red Route,' and raised the obscure settlement on the muddy shore of Water Street, sobriquetly termed 'Gastown,' to the status of a world port.'"*

all the figures, facts to testify to their being present at it:

"I had 400 men working 140 in a tented camp one-third mile west of the hotel. I built the two and one-half miles of the C.P.R. from Hastings to Hastings Sawmill. . . ." John ("Chinese") McDougall*

"I hauled logs with oxen down Gore Avenue, also out of the Park at Brockton Point, had a logging camp at Greer's Beach (Kitsilano), and another on Granville Street at False Creek." H. S. Rowlings*

I/my laying track in the form of facts rescued against the obscurity of bush. and the women moving about their rooms all day in the rain, the women remember:

"The first piano on the south side of Burrard Inlet was one which was part of the cabin furniture of the barque 'Whittier,' Captain and Mrs. Schwappe. Mrs. Schwappe sold it to Mrs. Richards, school teacher, who lived in a little three-room cottage back of the Hastings Mill Schoolhouse. . . ." Alice Patterson*

what is a "world event"? getting a piano was a world event in that "obscure settlement" because years later somebody still remembered it, even remembered where it came from and who bought it. Mrs. Schwappe. Mrs. Richards. a ship's piano suddenly landed in an out-of-the-way spot, this little three-room cottage.

these are not facts but skeletal bones of a suppressed body the story is. falling apart. there's a story here, Ina, i keep getting to. it begins:

. . . at the other end of a square of light cast on the dark outside, unknown trees, sawdust and stump debris, she was sitting at an oil-cloth-covered table, blue and white check (no, that was the picnic cloth you used to use—did they have oilcloth in 1874?). perhaps she brought a lace one with her when she came over, one of her mother's (we know nothing about her mother). she was sitting in the pool of light, yellow and rather dim to our eyes, the coal oil lantern cast. sitting and writing in that journal of hers that later, years later would be stored in the dustfree atmosphere of city archives. she was writing what would become a record, but then, then her hand hovered, her mind jumped. she could have imagined anything and written it down as real forever—

"Such rain here?—It rains day in and day out, a veritable curtain falling all around my Cabin. The trees weep, paths slip into small bogs, the chickens look as bedraggled as I feel my muddy skirts to be. I am orphaned here at the end of the world—Yet I feel no grief, for I am made new here, Father, solitary as I am—nor am I entirely so; daily a garrulous blue-black bird keeps me company. The small cedar spared by my front door dips to greet me. Neither of these tell me what I must be, nor how I must hold my tongue."

she writes as if she were living alone in the woods, her vision trued to trees and birds. she filters out the hive of human activity in which her "cabin" sits, a tiny cell of light, late, after the others have

been extinguished. in the dark (i imagine her writing at night, on the other side of a day in England she already knew) she can overlook the stumps, the scarred face of the clearing that surrounds her, and see herself ab-original in the new world (it is the old one she is at the end of). but why she had to erase so much is never given. it is part of what is missing, like her first name, like her past that has dropped away. we cannot see her and so she is free to look out at the world with her own eyes, free to create her vision of it. this is not history.

and this is why, perhaps, they think her journal suspect at the archives. "inauthentic," fictional possibly, contrived later by a daughter who imagined (how ahistoric) her way into the unspoken world of her mother's girlhood. girl? even then, teaching at Hastings Mill, she was said to be a widow, though young. but she married again, didn't she? she married Ben Springer and moved across the inlet to Moodyville, Moody's mill, the rival one. and her daughter? we know nothing of her, this possible interpreter of her mother's place in that world. it's hardly a record of that world, is it? no, it's Mrs. Richards' private world, at least that's what they call it. that's why it's not historical—a document, yes, but not history. you mean it's not factual.

what is a fact? (f)act. the f stop of act. a still photo in the ongoing cinerama.

Mrs. Patterson, say, with her crocheted mitts and bonnet, the very picture of a "Dame Hospitaller." there is no image of Mrs. Richards. but if there were, she would be caught with a tiny frown between her eyes, lower lip dented by an apprehensive finger, pen idle before her, thinking:

"My keenest pleasure is to walk the woods, despite their scolding me most roundly as to it its dangers. I do not hold stock in their stories of Bears!—The Siwash do not seem to fear them but wander as they will. If need be, I will lie face down as if dead, as they have told me.

"More I fear their talk about me, their Suppositions. Perhaps because they understand me to be a Widow, the men think me most eager for their company. Capt. Soule yesterday insisted on escorting me, pointing out this and that—D'ye see those two peaks beyond the Inlet? he says, Sheba's Paps they call 'em. I did not know

whether to shew myself insulted, for surely a School Mistress should be above reproach. Yet it was laughable—what did he imagine Sheba to be? I merely remarked that Burrard's Inlet must look very different from the Nile, which gave him the occasion to boast, Indeed ye'd get no timbers the size of ours from that desert. And so it passed. Should I have shown displeasure at a remark a gentleman would not utter in the company of a lady? And he a member of the School Board! Or does he speak freely because he sees me wandering of my own free will? I cannot keep only to drawing rooms and the School! I am not a Proper Lady perhaps."

Proper, she says, Lady capitalized, and it is barely sounded, the relationship between proper and property. the other Ladies at the mill would be wives or daughters-about-to-be-wives: Mrs. Alexander, Mrs. Patterson, Miss Sweney. she alone is without the "protection" as they would say, the validation of a man. subject, then, to sly advances under the guise of moral detection. subject to "agonizing" (your word, Ina), subject to self-doubt in a situation without clearly defined territory (because she is no one's property, she is "free" without being sexually free), she feels her difference from the other women, hopes the Captain recognizes it as freedom of intellect (suspects he doesn't), is at home only with things without language (birds, trees) in a place she struggles to account for in her own words.

words, that shifting territory. never one's own. full of pitfalls and hidden claims to a reality others have made.

lady, for instance. a word that has claimed so much from women trying to maintain it. the well-ironed linen, clean (lace at the cuffs, at the collar), well-tailored dresses and wraps, the antimacassars, lace tablecloths, the christening bonnets. beyond that, a certain way of walking (sedate), of talking (discreet). and always that deference, that pleased attention to the men who gave them value, a "station in life," a reason for existing. lady, *hlā̆fdige*, kneader of bread, mistress of a household, lady of the manor, woman of good family (lady by birth), woman of refinement and gentle manners, a woman whose conduct conforms to a certain standard of propriety ("lady airs"—singing true again).

i imagine the ladies of Hastings Mill spent hours when they got together discussing the merits of various haberdashers in Victoria, New Westminster, centres of culture by comparison with Granville and the mill store with its red flannel. so hard to get anything

"decent," they complained. for a decent lady kept herself well-covered, her sexuality hidden. no flag to taunt "vigorous" men with. for if men couldn't control their desires, women could. women knew the standard of what was socially acceptable in conduct, behaviour, speech. just as you spent hours, Ina, shopping for bargains, shopping department store basements or poring over Sears catalogues, dismissing things that looked "cheap," vainly trying to clothe us with the class you had in the tropics where your clothes were handsewn by Chinese tailors and our intricately smocked dresses came from the School for the Blind. now there was very little money and Harald wore good suits that "lasted" ("slightly out of date, poor dear"), you tried bargain dresses ("dreadful—people here have no idea of fashion"), and struggled with our running around in jeans ("they're so unfeminine")—unladylike you meant. exactly. skirts meant keeping your legs together as you so often told me (i didn't realize *why*), skirts meant girdles and garter belts and stockings...

and i suppose it wasn't *your* crinolines i had to starch?

i remember. crinolines and white bucks.

and i suppose it wasn't you who pestered me for high heels?

but it wasn't that i wanted to be a "lady," i wanted to be like the other girls, sexy but not too much, just enough to be "liked," just enough to be "cute."

and what about "nice"?

yes, "nice girls don't..." i didn't realize the only alternative to "lady" you knew, was "tramp," though that was a line i heard often enough on one of your records. tramps were girls who smoked in the bushes behind the corner store (doo-wop, doo-wop). tramps loved Chuck Berry and "Little Darlin'," wore pencil-line skirts with kick pleats, wobbled their hips, inked initials on their arms. tramps cut school or left it because they "had to." i was fascinated with their flouting all the rules, but i didn't want to be one. "tramp" was a word nice girls used to brand those outside their group—tramp, slut, bitch.

i came home to "Red Roses for a Blue Lady," the last pop song you bought. i came home to the peculiar silence of your growing naps, your obsessive washing the kitchen floor, your chronic exhaustion (sleep, the one great unsatisfied desire). "that damn dog, they deliberately leave it out all night to torture me." "hell's bells, will no one give me any peace?" peace. a lady's respect for tranquility.

Oh, Jemima, look at your Uncle Jim,
He's in the duck pond, learning how to swim;
First he does the breast stroke, then he does the side,
And now he's under the water, swimming against the tide.

Of course Jemima looks on, only looks on, silently, as Uncle Jim demonstrates his prowess. i didn't hear then what kind of stroking was meant. bathing was what you called swimming, as if to sanitize it. what did you do with all that pent-up energy? (besides paint walls). you taught us your fear, you taught us what you knew about where even uncles were not to be trusted.

you grew more afraid as our sexuality came budding to the fore—foreground, fore-body, carrying these forward parts of our bodies. ladies do not draw attention to themselves. (is that you speaking or your mother or all the mothers?) ladies keep to the background. ladies *are* the soothing background their men come home to.

"The man suggests that he would like chicken for dinner. It is not a command, yet such is the harmony between them that his wishes are hers," says one of the how-to-heal/how-to-fix yourself books (caught in a fix, castrated—what is the female word for it? i mean for the psychological condition?) Soul has "positively no wishes of its own, no preferences. It stands forever as the servant of the Spirit" and in this it is "similar to a happy home."* the standard. Soul: generic feminine. it is the man who is Spirit, has spirit. what does Soul, what does a woman do with her unexpressed preferences, her own desires? (damned up, a torrent to let loose.) and this is what you were trying to live up to. the neuter.

SOURCES

PAGE

- 14 Ralph Andrews, *Glory Days of Logging* (New York: Bonanza, 1956).
- 15 Both quotations are from Major J. S. Matthews, *Early Vancouver*, 3 vols. (Vancouver: private publication, 1932) vol. 1.
- 16-17 All quotations are from Matthews, vols. 1 and 3.
- 21 Frederick W. Bailes, *Your Mind Can Heal You* (New York: Dodd, 1956).