

Susan Crean / SURFING THE ZEITGEIST

Ten days after my fiftieth birthday, my father, hale and hardy and still playing tennis at eighty-four, had a stroke and within a few weeks was dead. His exit marked the end of an era for me in a way that seemed almost brutal at the time. I have seen it happen in other families, of course; the disappearance of one member breaks the chain, or the spell binding the unit together, and it disperses. The dislocation most often comes with the passage of one generation and the assumption of seniority by another. Like the turning of a kaleidoscope, the pieces shift to form another pattern — or patterns as modern lifestyles and the laws of multiplication predict.

We forget that the family is in constant motion. As a social institution it may seem immutable as iron, but the real thing and one's ultimate experience of it are doomed to transformation given that its members are habitually aging and will all eventually die. Among other things, the demise of the elder generation in my culture signals the end of childhood for the next, the end of any memories of it, save one's own and those of one's contemporaries. Those adults who knew us as little kids depart taking with them a wealth of familial stories, anecdotes and secrets about how we all lived together, leaving a few snapshots, some letters and artifacts, but nowhere and no occasion for these to be shared or relived.

So the end of an era in my family time constitutes a severing or diminishing of the personal connection with the past. Moreover, being literate and addicted to paper, we have come to rely on documents to do our remembering for us, and in strange ways to validate our existence. We can't actually claim to be alive — or dead for that matter — without a certificate to prove it. Even more bizarre, if you think of it, say, from the point of view of someone raised in an oral culture, is the way we interact with our past in libraries where few people ever find more than passing reference to their flesh-and-blood ancestors. Perhaps this absence of history explains the late twentieth

century's obsession with documentation. People have taken to recording themselves with gusto, using every conceivable device to immortalize themselves, their progeny, their trips, their triumphs and occasionally even their crimes. Idiot-proof video cameras and desktop publishing programmes would make amateur producers and publishers of us all.

Life the movie has arrived, yet life the Quotidian Event carries on in its usual messy, unprogrammed fashion, ebbing and flowing in cycles. Like families, like cultures, it seems. Both can be dysfunctional or successful, or the two combined. It is possible to talk about a society in terms of its creative vigour and general health. Some definitely are stronger than others, more expansive and more likely to bring out the best in their citizens. Some have suffered terribly in war, or from poverty and prejudice. It has been recognized, for example, that aboriginal societies all over the globe have encountered devastating cultural repression at the hands of invading civilizations.

Calamity, though, is not the only reason cultures change. As history demonstrates, cultures, like languages and the people who speak them, are neither inert nor immortal. Some flourish, others don't; some die young, others being genuinely toxic live too long. On this subject, cultural critic and political philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis once wrote (in 1979 in the French journal *Sociologie et sociétés*)

The death [of a society] is not necessarily or usually instantaneous, and its relationship to the new life, for which it may be a precondition, is each time a new enigma. The "decline of the West" is an old theme and, in a profound way, false. For the slogan masks the possibilities of a new world that the decomposition of the West may set free, and ignores the potential of this world by covering a political affair with a botanical metaphor. . . . We are not interested in establishing whether the flower will wither, whether it is withering or already withered. We want to understand what is dying in this socio-historical world. We want to understand what is dying and possibly why. We want to discover, if possible, what is in the process of being born.

It usually *is* difficult to see your own historical era clearly, and it is

especially hard to predict where the zeitgeist is blowing you when it feels like it is blowing you off your feet. That is certainly the sensation I get when I contemplate the bungled attempts at constitutional reform by our political leaders over the past few years, or the backlash against government which threatens to destabilize bedrock institutions like medicare and the CBC. For artists, watching the desertification of arts programmes — by committed and uncommitted governments everywhere — is to experience the proverbial Nightmare at High Noon. Public funding for the arts never was very secure, but now the paradigm has shifted and public allegiance to the very idea of state intervention in support of cultural objectives is apparently losing currency. The mainstream media dismiss nationalist actions as protectionism and victim coddling, effete behaviour in a REAL country, instead of the self-assertive and quite normal activity it actually is. Arts organizations and artists' unions are disparaged as greedy special interest groups and grants are described (by the neo-con elites yet) as a tax on the poor to benefit the rich — presumably meaning those who appreciate art. The degree to which that picture is true, I suppose, is the degree to which arts policies have failed in the task of creating institutions which reflect the art of most Canadians, or motivate Canadians to learn about the art their fellow citizens create.

Our *fin de siècle* is developing a remarkable hostility for minorities, artists included, and it is easy to understand the individual disorientation, despair and depression. Whether this is the end of an Era or not, it is the end of a distinct period in the cultural history of the country. At the same time, other endings loom: Confederation is on the brink of fundamental restructuring if not wholesale disintegration, and Canadian society itself seems to be in full blown transition. With precious little leadership to inspire confidence or courage, or even to mediate the process, we are left with the anger and the confusion. I find myself thinking of Gérald Godin's poem "Mal au pays," written a few years after he was jailed for two weeks without charge or bail during the War Measures Act in 1970 thanks to his open advocacy of Quebec independence. The poem rages at the corruption and ineptitude of politicians and the political system infecting his country. *J'ai mal à mon pays* goes the refrain. I am sick for my country. English cannot convey the sense of physical affliction Godin expresses here,

although that sort of body and soul weariness occurs in all cultures and every language. What always strikes me about the verse, though, is the unquenchable passion for Quebec which flickers between the savage wit and combative assertion. "For the garbage cans of Canada my country my profits/ For the hucksters of people/ in the pawnshops of nationhood/ My country aches."

Godin went on to become a politician himself, running for the Parti Quebecois in the 1976 provincial election when he beat the incumbent Premier Robert Bourassa in the multi-ethnic downtown Montreal riding of Mercier. For the next eighteen years, until his death in 1994, he was continuously re-elected and continuously worked toward the dream of sovereignty in a vibrant Quebec, making common cause with Quebeckers from all backgrounds, native and newcomers alike, and from time to time with Canadians like myself who had similar dreams for Canada within North America. That dream — for me, anyway — has been fading since 1988 ushered in the age of Free Trade. For the agreement between Canada and the United States, rhetoric about protecting Canadian cultural sovereignty notwithstanding, ended up guaranteeing the Americans their revenues from Canadian audiences and readerships while forcing Canada in advance to pay compensation should any national initiatives cut into the American share (anywhere from 75-97 percent) of our cultural markets. *J'ai mal à mon pays*, all right.

To return to Castoriadis' horticultural metaphor, the withering flower eventually does become something else. Every waning year, or story, or century offers possibilities for the phoenix's return. Godin was right, I think, to turn from defeat to poetry, for the best defence in such circumstances often is defiance, to continue to produce art in the teeth of adversity. Personally, I have concluded now is a good time to tune out of the official debates in the hope of regaining some psychic equilibrium, to transform myself, in a word, by feeding what is creative and regenerative in my own work and in my surroundings. Thus, with the distance that transformation provides perhaps we will decipher the enigma of our era's becoming. It certainly makes it easier for us to get the garden planted.