

Colin Browne / ALTAR
(A Working Narration for a Film)

ALTAR

Introductory song: Richard Strauss, op. 27 No. 4

Morgen!

*And tomorrow the sun will shine again
and on the path I shall follow
it will again unite us, joyfully,
on this sun-breathing earth...*

*And we shall go down quietly and slowly
to the wide shore, with its blue waves;
speechless, we shall gaze into each other's eyes
and on us will fall the mute silence of bliss...*

John Henry Mackay (1894)

What is left to forget?
Language has swept us all away.

Did we not want freedom?
Did we not want to unload ourselves of ourselves forever?

On our way down Skull Rock, latitude 49° 30', longitude 123° 20'. My daughter Susanna is five. There is no hand-holding.

Dry moss and yellow grass grow from the cracks and ledges that plunge to the sea. The causeway, a jawbone of boulders far below us, is dark with sea foam.

But it is sunny and windy halfway down the face of Skull Rock and I try to revive our pirate game. Her friend is laughing; I reach for her hand. Susanna slithers by us to a clump of snowberry. She hits a patch of shiny grass and suddenly slips from view.

I lurch forward. A scrawny little juniper has broken her fall. She has seized the trunk with her fingers and hangs there as if she'd planned it all along.

She looks up. "Dad," she says, giving me a chance to catch my breath, "Dad, if I *fell* you'd go ahead of me and be there so I could fall on you; you'd catch me, wouldn't you, so I wouldn't hurt myself?"

This with an eye on her friend.

An editorial from the *Times* of London, March 8th, 1919, not quite a year after you were born: "...discipline to an army is what honour is to a woman. Once lost it can never be restored." ¹

On the river, round pebbles in the yellow cut-banks.

Do you know the story of Sedna? Every man for miles around wanted to marry her, but she turned them down, one by one. Her father was furious. He instructed her to marry the next man who came to the door.

Before too long a handsome stranger knocked on the door. Sedna obeyed her father. She married the young man and consoled herself with the thought that he was not as ugly or ill-suited as some. After a terrifying journey on the icy sea she arrived at the barren rock where the young man lived. As he stepped ashore he changed his shape. It was Storm Petrel.

He led Sedna to their new home: a nest of sticks littered with fish skins, bones and soiled feathers. Sedna remained loyal to her father, and did her best to make a new life as Storm Petrel's mate. More than once she regretted her stubbornness.

After a year her father realized his mistake and came to rescue his daughter, searching all the islands in the ocean. He found her at last, squatting in the evil-smelling nest, and they set off together for home.

Returning at sunset, Storm Petrel discovered her betrayal. He flew out to sea where he found and attacked their kayak. The father paddled backward and forward, trying to outrun the shrieking bird. A storm blew up. The boat was taking on water.

With his life in peril, the father grabbed Sedna and flung her into the sea, crying, "Take my daughter, she's yours!"

Sedna tried to climb back in beside him, but he brought his paddle down on her fingers—Wham! He shattered off the first joints. These fell into the ocean and became seals. Sedna tried once more to climb in and he slashed at her fingers again, this time severing them at the second joint. These dropped into the ocean to become walruses. Once again she pleaded for her father's mercy, but he continued to smash and smash at her fingers, this time slicing off the third joints, which dove to the bottom of the sea to become whales.

Sedna followed, corkscrewing through the radiant darkness.

In the yellow cut-banks, pale blue stones.

“THE SOLDIER’S DILEMMA”

“It is sometimes alleged that obedience to Military Law may be in conflict with a soldier’s duty as an ordinary citizen....a soldier is required by Military Law to obey the commands of his superior officer. This obligation extends only to lawful commands; and a soldier is not liable in military law for disobeying an unlawful order. But how is the soldier to judge the lawful character of the order? He has not the time to weigh up its merits, even if he has the inclination and the ability to do so. His training makes compliance instinctive. Unlawful injury, inflicted as the result of such compliance, renders him liable to criminal and civil proceedings. He cannot plead obedience to the order of his military superior, because no such defence is accepted by a civil court. If the order of the superior is, in the soldier’s opinion, unlawful, he disobeys it at the peril of being court-martialled for a serious military offence, and runs the risk of the court-martial not accepting his view of the order’s unlawful character. Moreover, unless the order is wholly unreasonable, it would prejudice military discipline, if strict compliance were not enforced by military law. A soldier, therefore, ought to obey orders, at the peril of civil proceedings being instituted against him for the resulting act. If such proceedings result from obedience to the order there is some authority for saying that, if the order is not manifestly unlawful, he cannot be made liable.”²

What is left to forget? Poppy, anemone?

The air pushed forward by your shuffling in the halls. Your hair, thin and yellow, your sweet smile, your lips in need of Vaseline; your stoop. Your curiosity — deferential — preoccupied with something beyond us: St. Elmo's fire on the humps of acrobats, continents of colour and greatness, song and bravery, women and the bright shaking of poplars.

I carry the hair I clipped from your scalp that thin starry night in March when you slipped away between the trees. I used the little pair of Chinese gun-metal scissors attached to the key chain. I want to say *flew away* between the trees.

Bright shaking of poplars

Bezelel, son of Uri, hammered the vessels from new bronze: the pots, the shovels, the tossing-bowls, the forks, the firepans.

*"The basin and its stand of bronze he made out of the bronze mirrors of the women waiting at the entrance to the Tent"*³

In this basin Aaron's sons were washed. In their "*turban(s) of fine linen, the tall headdresses and their bands all of fine linen, the shorts of finely woven linen, and the sashes of finely woven linen, embroidered in violet, purple, and scarlet,*"⁴ they established the hereditary priesthood, standing erect before the basin of plundered mirrors.

The pasture rises over the creek near the hospital. Cross over in the sun, in the cold air: swollen canes, yellow bark, the disappearing footprint in the gravel and up the far bank onto the high field beyond where the winds blow free of tangles, four firs rise ragged out of thicket, two on either side. Cross here; cross over, spring over gurgle and gleam, up onto the high field, Dad, wave-light in hay, bleached gold, this metaphor no artifice but a true thing.

Juniper, crocus, ocean spray.

“Every person subject to military law who commits any of the following offences; that is to say,

(1) Shamefully abandons or delivers up any garrison, place, post, or guard, or uses any means to compel or induce any governor, commanding officer, or other person shamefully to abandon or deliver up any garrison, place, post, or guard, which it was the duty of such governor, officer, or person to defend; or

(2) Shamefully casts away his arms, ammunition, or tools in the presence of the enemy; or

(3) Treacherously holds correspondence with or gives intelligence to the enemy, or treacherously or through cowardice sends a flag of truce to the enemy; or”⁵

“The world is a corpse-eater. All the things eaten in it themselves die also. “Truth is a life-eater.”⁶

I asked the learned professor to tell me what he knew about recent events in the mountains. It was a delicate subject; could he speak freely?

I recalled to him the volcano's green flank as the sun fell away, its analytical shadows.

In the town (Latitude $1^{\circ} 20'$, Longitude $77^{\circ} 15'$), life seemed normal enough, but I'd had the distinct impression from the moment of my arrival that I was witnessing an impressive dumb show, that each man, woman and child was acting out a vital part in an austere, joyless pantomime. Not one foot was out of place; not one stitch dropped. At first I thought my imagination must be enflamed by the fever and amoebic bleeding.

A boast in a café, for instance, uttered by a new acquaintance, would suddenly fold itself inside out — and shatter in mid-air. A fraction of a second before the shattering, the entire room — to a person — lifted its head, as if, in the distant future it was somehow overhearing the terrible whistle of eternity. Then, a subordinate clause would sweep the conversation up again and my acquaintance would chatter on as if nothing had happened at all.

On one occasion a bevelled mirror on a public scale held my likeness in its peeling glass for a full second after I'd dismounted.

Watching an old man search for his hearing-aid one afternoon in the municipal swimming pool, I could have sworn he glanced to either side before quickly pulling up a corner of the foliated scene behind him. When he caught my stare he dropped it and fell to examining a pile of clothes he'd already tipped upside-down twice.

This incident encouraged me to accept for once the evidence of my own eyes. These energetic citizens, it appeared, devoted every moment of their lives to the task of *concealing* a world that seemingly ran *parallel* to the world I shared with them. When a mother bent to inject herself with insulin beneath a canopy of plane trees in the

central plaza, an identical mother bent to inject insulin at the same angle and with the same measured pressure on the plunger under an identical canopy in the parallel world a thin scrim's distance away.

Was this a trick of mirrors — perhaps of many mirrors — like the glittering row of reflections that runs along the sink tops in a public washroom?

When the old man searching for his hearing aid lifted the flap of the world behind him, I perceived an identical old man behind him, tugging at the flap of his own backdrop to reveal . . . but what I saw there I dare not say, except to relate that it was the subject of my question to the learned professor that leafy afternoon this past summer during a not-entirely chance encounter, to which he replied, yes, it was not impossible although he was only going by what he'd been told, of course, although he clearly chose not to speak about his own experiences except to relate an anecdote about a grisly ceremony held prior to building a bridge near Urubamba which seemed like common knowledge or, at least, related to a commonly-held suspicion, but soon he was speaking to me about a particular moth in his garden which was threatening his lilacs and a recent article by a colleague in a medical journal on the subject of amoebic dysentery he'd be willing to translate and send my way, for which, I replied, of course, I'd be most grateful.

In the garden of the *oubliette*
there is nothing to forget;
the executioner strives to keep intact
each sunbeam, every glowing fact.

Your beak, in bed, could you hear us? Our memoirs of indiscretions, couplings, cocktails, predatory imperialists? How the order of things granted a visiting British officer immunity to feel up your wife in the kitchen while his mates guzzled your booze in the living room? A boat: the *Sine Wave*. Playing a salmon at the edge of a storm; the revenges of wives; details stitched together from rugs and uniforms and uneaten food, spilt hair under barbers' chairs; a spring day in Ottawa, the day your brother came home in 1945. "There's nothing to drink in this house," he said. Later on, you two exchanging uniforms, perched in the little hallway inside the front door on Delaware Avenue demolishing a quart of gin.

"Mother I see thee still."

What is left to forget?

What was it you skimmed over, in school, in your textbook, that afternoon in late June, was it, four years ago before all hell broke loose?

*"When the young voyager plots his course on the adventurous sea of life, and examines his chart for the ways marked easy and lucrative, and his parents look over his shoulder to point out the passages of health, safety, advancement and social standing, let the mentor of life, ripe with the experience of ages, and young with the hopes of the future, speak and advise youth to nail to the masthead the pennant of service. Whether one sweeps the streets, teaches the young, or grows bread for the hungry, his occupation is created, not that he shall live, but because his is a needful work for mankind in general. Public service is the real measure of one's vocation."*⁷

“Y*ou are the knights errant of our tragic modern world,”* said the Princess to the microphone, *“who were ready ‘to ride abroad redressing human wrongs.’”*⁸

Atropine, every three hours. Breathing hard, breathing scared. Marian’s father saying of Susanna as she learned to speak words: “She’s working as hard as she’ll ever work in her life.”
This breathing, Dad, its rival.

Beneath pale-blue stones, feldspar; water.

“Every person subject to military law who on active service commits any of the following offences; that is to say,

(1) Without orders from his superior officer leaves the ranks in order to secure prisoners or horses, or on pretence of taking wounded men to the rear; or

(3) Is taken prisoner, by want of due precaution, or through disobedience of orders, or willful neglect of duty, or having been taken prisoner fails to rejoin His Majesty’s service when able to rejoin same; or

(4) Without due authority either holds correspondence with, or gives intelligence to, or sends a flag of truce to the enemy; or

(6) In action, or previously to going into action, uses words calculated to create alarm or despondency; or

(7) Misbehaves or induces others to misbehave before the enemy in such a manner as to show cowardice”⁹

“An Indian pupil is hard to teach. He or she rarely answers a question, and certainly never asks one. The most amusing situations never provoke a smile. Of what is the little Indian thinking when he looks straight ahead in school? Perhaps he pictures the mossy logs and murmuring streams of the deep and solemn forest, through which he glides with bow and arrow.”¹⁰

The overhang, white roots, the noise of water!

It must not be seen to be a table, although it is four square as a table is and owes its shape to — or perhaps precedes — a table. It must be made of acacia wood. The altar will inhabit the volume of a table, if not the mass of a table, without being a table, yet it must behave as a table behaves.

What else resembles this? Anything a word stands for, to begin with. Your name, you.

In the valley of moraines, egg-shaped, speckled boulders . . .

"There are three main classes of immigrant: those from the United Kingdom, whom we most prefer, but who are often poor and without experience in pioneer life; those from the United States, who have sold their farms, and have moved across the border to find cheaper land; and lastly, the Europeans and Asiatics, who are foreigners in the real sense. The peoples who have come since 1901 are largely the following:

"British, Americans, Japanese, Austrians, Chinese, Germans, Russians, Hindus, Jews, Italians.

*"To induce these people to come to our country, the Government spent \$18,000,000, or more than five dollars for each. Steamship companies were given \$4.86 for each suitable settler they secured, and half that amount for children; advertising was carried on in the main centres of Europe, and agents in the United States received \$3 per man, \$2 per woman and \$1 per child, on genuine settlers for Western Canada."*¹¹

*“ . . . to make the castle of Liebenstein fast and impregnable, a child was bought for hard money of its mother and walled in. It was eating a cake while the masons were at work, the story goes, and it cried out, ‘Mother, I see thee still,’ then later, ‘Mother, I see thee a little still;’ and, as they put in the last stone, ‘Mother, now I see thee no more.’ ”*¹²

Oh, the red-tipped grasses!

“Every person subject to military law who commits any of the following offences; that is to say

(1) Causes or conspires with any other persons to cause mutiny or sedition in any of His majesty’s military, naval, or air forces including any Dominion force; or

(2) Endeavours to seduce any person in any such force as aforesaid, from allegiance to His majesty, or to persuade any person in any such force as aforesaid, to join in any mutiny or sedition; or

*(3) Joins in, or being present does not use his utmost endeavour to suppress, any mutiny or sedition in any such force as aforesaid, shall, on conviction by court-martial, be liable to suffer death, or such less punishment as is in this Act mentioned.”*¹³

We'd all turned in, slumped in chairs around the room. You were breathing hard, working hard, the pneumonia drilling through you unchecked.

Twice we gathered round you, like a clam shell, to comfort you, to wish you God's speed.

Mother I see you.

Father, am I a cannibal?

“When a chief is greatly dissatisfied, he takes a trip to London to see the Great White Father, the King. While we are anxious for the Indians to learn our ways, and to become useful factors in our civilisation, we should never forget that these children of Nature possess many noble qualities which we would do well to consider.”¹⁴

Not that you can give it your full attention, guys, but there are some exciting things going on back home right now with instant coffee and kitchen cabinet design, modular sink sets and raisins in cereal.

Under the dappling summer leaves in Katyn forest, near Smolensk, another four thousand four hundred and forty-three lie. Bayonet, bullet in the back of the neck.¹⁵ Latitude 55° 50", longitude 32°. And now, as we lie here, Srebrenica, Zepa, Gorazde. . . .

You gave one almighty snort! That was it. Thrust from our
chairs, we fell to your side.

Bright shaking of poplars.

You summoned the god.

The mortal frame is a heavy load.

I opened the window to release you through the fir gates into the high meadow.

What you leave behind grows colder. Your heat warms the air around us.

Oak, pine, acacia, maple.

The nurses stop by to touch your face, arrange the sheet, saying how peaceful at last, you've earned your rest. How they seem to love you!

*"If, upon representation made to him, it appears to the Attorney-General of Canada that any person sentenced to death, after being convicted on indictment of an offence against section 3 of this Act, was at the time of the commission of the offence a member of the armed forces of the Crown, or of the armed forces of any foreign power, including an enemy power, the Attorney-General of Canada may, by direction, substitute military death by shooting, under the appropriate military Act, for civil death by hanging, a more ignoble way of dying."*¹⁶

“The world came about through a mistake. For he who created it wanted to create it imperishable and immortal. He fell short of attaining his desire. For the world never was imperishable, nor, for that matter, was he who made the world. For things are not imperishable, but sons are.”¹⁷

Just before dawn I ditch the half pound of butter that’s cooling in the window, that I think of as having greased your exit, that I think will now be impure from your passing over.

Your face is changing.

It is becoming a young man’s face: the skylit face on the poster of a young airman, a sailor in an old cracked photograph, his eyes — your eyes — bright with anticipation.

You alone know the depth of our treachery. You know how little we sold you for.

"Gott ist die liebe!" they sing downstairs, "Take thou my hand, O Father." *"Gott ist die liebe!"*

Why these elegies? Where does this sadness come from? How do you lug these holocausts up into the hills above Kamloops?

“Put an X opposite the most correct statement.

10. An intelligent boy should stay in Canada because:

- (a) The country needs his services.
- (b) There is bound to be big development in the future.
- (c) He can live at home if he does not secure employment.
- (d) It costs the country \$5 to get an immigrant to take his place.”¹⁸

“There were three buildings specifically for sacrifice in Jerusalem. The one facing west was called ‘the Holy.’ Another facing south was called ‘the Holy of the Holy.’ The third facing east was called ‘the Holy of the Holies,’ the place where only the high priest enters. Baptism is ‘the Holy’ building. Redemption is ‘the Holy of the Holy.’ ‘The Holy of the Holies’ is the bridal chamber.”¹⁹

Bridegrooms! Atten-shun!

A few snaps, Dad. Apart from these, pages of weather, sailing directions in the Night Order Book; that's it. Perhaps you didn't know how I'd cherish a few off-duty lines. Perhaps some things can't be written down. Perhaps the language didn't exist.

Perhaps by the time this Halifax May morning's sunlight mapped your cheek you'd erased your names, your homes, your futures, your pasts. If not in so many words.

"That wonderful band of brothers," you called them from across the divide of your dementia. You'd have given your life for any one of them.

A sacred economy. Not an altar of holocausts but a holocaust of altars.

England expects every man to do his duty.

Poppy, anemone, oleaster driven into the burned hillside.

Europe, you're a maggot in my skull. I cannot be where I am.

You have sweetened my heart with your death camps, your death god, your death love. Sweet death, I am in love with you.

Homeless and fawning, how can we imagine our own graves here among the ashes of those we've murdered?

Bridegrooms, you were groomed, all right. No one can steal your glory from you.

But who do you serve?

*“We have come upon beautiful lakes full of fish; the country all round is covered with abundant grass; the mountains are reduced to low hills, sparsely timbered, but thickly covered with pasture, where the horses enjoyed themselves immensely. At sunset our tents were pitched in the middle of that beautiful scenery, and next morning, a rustic altar having been built by our young men, the sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ was offered for the first time on these lonely hills.”*²⁰

What of the sage thrush, the cougar, the horse fly, the red ant crawling on hot moss? The black bear, the eagle, the Kamloops trout? How dare we bring our god’s loneliness here, his altar of holocausts?

*“God is a man-eater. For this reason men are [sacrificed] to him. Before men were sacrificed animals were being sacrificed, since those to whom they sacrificed were not gods.”*²¹

What is left to forget?

I forgot to ask for his blessing. I forgot to ask for his forgiveness.
I cut a slip from his hair and wrap it in a piece of paper, grey on white.

I leave the room I will never leave.

Wand of willow; blue camas, death camas. Here too.

September, 1943. From Alderman H.W. Vaughan of Yorkton, Saskatchewan, a contribution from that city to His Majesty's Canadian Ship *Orkney* included "*an electric washing machine, six hot plates, two cases of phonograph records, five cases of stationary, several thermos bottles, a carton of sock dryers, carton of magazines, a carton of games and a silver tray and matching cocktail shaker from the Yorkton Civil Service Club.*"

"*A movie projector, some toasters and several more hot plates are on order and will be sent to the ship in the near future.*"²²

14 September 1996
Vancouver, B.C.

NOTES

- 1 Dave Lamb, *Mutinies: 1917-1920*. Oxford & London: Solidarity, n.d., p. 23.
- 2 Burrell M. Singer & Lieut.-Colonel R.J. S. Langford, *Handbook of Canadian Military Law*. Toronto: The Copp Clark Company Limited, 1941, p. 35.
- 3 Exodus 38:8. *The Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha*. Oxford & Cambridge: Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- 4 Exodus 39: 27-29.
- 5 Singer & Langford, pp. 232-233.
- 6 *The Gospel of Philip*: II, 3. James M. Robinson, (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977, p. 144.
- 7 R.S. Sherman & E.W. Reid, *The Canadian Industrial Reader*. Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1929, p. 320.
- 8 "Princess Elizabeth Responds to the Toast by the Governor General of Canada" in *The Royal Tour: Canada 1951*. Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1952. n.p.
- 9 Singer & Langford, p. 233.
- 10 Sherman & Reid, p. 312.
- 11 Sherman & Reid, pp. 289-290.
- 12 Edward Burnett Tylor, *The Origins of Culture*. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1970, pp. 104-105.
- 13 Singer & Langford, pp. 235-236.
- 14 Sherman & Reid, p. 313.
- 15 Mikhail Heller & Aleksandr M. Nekrich, *Utopia in Power: The History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present*. New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1992, p. 405.
- 16 Singer & Langford, p. 16.
- 17 *The Gospel of Philip*: II, 3, p. 145.
- 18 Sherman & Reid, p. 346.
- 19 *The Gospel of Philip*: II, 3, p. 142.
- 20 "Across the Mountains to Williams Lake," *Kamloops Wawa*, September 1895.
- 21 *The Gospel of Philip*: II, 3, p. 138.
- 22 The *Victoria Daily Colonist*, September 1943. *HMCS Orkney* was commissioned on September 18, 1943.