

THEA BOWERING / The Daughter Library

As certain as these rows of books
carry me from house to house,

arrange me to their will. I
squat for an hour, eye level

to those books, saying I will
read this, or I will read this,

& this way never succeed
in reading my self...

—George Bowering, “The House”

1.

I got the call nearly eight years ago. My father had taken the first offer. My father had always moved faster than my mother and me: through books, museums, decisions. In two weeks he was emptying out the family home I had grown up in, the house he'd lived in for nearly thirty years with my mother, and I needed to get down there to help him box it up. I stared into the U of A grad-lounge phone receiver. My sleepy west coast roots had become real estate in the blink of a child's eye.

Ours was a turn-of-the-century rather grand corner-lot house that my parents had bought in 1973 for what you would now pay for a nice Honda. It was built by one of Vancouver's first lumber barons; the dark-patina wainscoting was as tall as your forearm and you could see the second-growth trees in it. It sat facing an even grander shingle-roofed Anglican church with real bells. For years I spent summers atop our squat granite gatepost watching the early procession of wedding-goers

followed by the afternoon of mourners. I critiqued their outfits, betted on their chances, and evaluated life success via coffin finishings. Occasionally my father would come see what I was doing. If it were a large wedding party out front, he would coach me to yell: “You’ll be soo-rrreey!”

As a child, I had little investment in the procession of life. I was the house’s lover. I lay on its warm hardwood foyer floor, both of us sun-worn to the colour of crème caramel. Dust particles glittered and held in the living-room light. Leaf shadows from the surrounding hundred year-old chestnut trees notated a sleepy irregular hymn over us. We did not live in time, in our house.

When I arrived home, my father told me he was allotting two days for the books. The books lined nearly every room of the house. Only the bathrooms, the dining room (lined with LPs), a solarium (lined with plants), and an eating nook off the kitchen had been spared. The books narrowed our long hallways and gothicized the already lofty rooms. Snug against ceilings and running the length of walls, they were as built in as the bookshelves themselves. A home library, I had learned, was not a collection of individual works to be idly titled out and leafed through—in fact, I never did this—books were fortress walls. They did not carry us from house to house. The idea of moving them seemed as ridiculous as dismantling the pyramids or the Parthenon. I grabbed onto a giant Faber and Faber, *T.S. Eliot—The Complete Poems and Plays*. It clung with familiar years to its neighbor. I yanked and Eliot’s neat and tidy blue sleeve ripped a little. I felt like a schoolyard bully. Like a Prime Minister or Christian soldier at Alexandria, I would be both custodian and destroyer to decades of accumulated knowledge, turn history to rubble.

What was it like growing up surrounded by all those books? people sometimes ask. How do I know? I always want to answer. I had the opposite question in mind when I visited my friends’ houses that were bookless but for an outdated atlas or dusty pun book on the back of a toilet. Booklessness frightened and depressed me. In an early poem, my father wrote, “marriage is a boat.” When the seas are rough “we must hold / not one another /but our own positions.” For me, rows of books made up the vessel that held our family: each member dreaming in her own room, her position, his fragment of a house.

This does not mean I was always reading. My father noticed a waning when I turned into a teenager. He pulled bricks from the house and laid them on my bursting bookcase of outgrown children’s stories: first, Carson McCullars’ *The*

Member of the Wedding; then, Hemingway's *The Nick Adams Stories*. They sat lifeless and more dangerous than a bathroom punbook. Pulled from the whole, these solitary paperbacks suggested I had been living, not inside a protective vessel, but amongst a crowd of silent strangers: thousands of discrete, dormant minds waiting to be reanimated in me. Titles blurred into focus, were too many—thick ones: *The Life of the Mind*, *The Odyssey*; ones in difficult shapes, that should be for children but weren't: comics by a bp; multi-coloured box-like flipbooks by a McFadden and Curnoe. I began to envy people who grew up in houses with a reasonable number of regular shaped books in them, who maybe even had to go searching for a book with which to forge their reading pathway.

For years I employed various subconscious strategies to escape Fate—aka, my parents' book empire. I tried not to wake the books. As a child, I walked around the house on tip-toe. This left me with premature arthritis in my toes. Then, I developed a ghoulish fascination with books that weren't books: ones that were secret compartments for old treasures, or swung around to reveal hidden stairwells on *Scoobie Doo*. I gravitated towards stories of dismemberment: Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Poe's *House of Usher*. I huddled in the tepid waters of our claw foot tub while my father sat cross-legged against a stark wall, reading me Helen Adam's long poem *Memory*—the story of a druid tree that convinces the family members living beneath it to kill one another, so it can drink their blood. I was thrilled.

My mother tried to teach me that books were like stars in the universe. There will always be more than you can see: that is the wonderful thing about them, she said. This did not comfort me. My father designed games to deal with the book universe: read twenty-six books by authors whose last names begin with, say, F; then, record them in a school scribbler whose pages are made up of twenty-six lines, one for every letter of the alphabet. When Dad was done, the unlikely Fielding would disappear off the kitchen table and become another brick in the ever-fortifying wall.

I had neither the awe of my mother nor the discipline of my father. My eyes ran across the spines that made up fifty years of my parents' reading life. Ibsen... Olson... Watson... Williams. I had two days. What parts of my parents' conjoined large and curious mind was I keeping? Certainly, I would lobotomize some essential part. I was not trying to salvage family history from a café menu or a farmhouse ledger. I had too much. I wish I could, like my father, narrow my focus. "A... Just A." Then leap off and go.

2.

Eight years later, thirty boxes of books arrive in Edmonton. The first thing I wonder is whether the books are going to kill me. My father has a habit of beginning a book by running his nose up the inside with a loud snoof. In the eighties, people discovered the government-approved insulation west-coasters had lined their attics with was responsible for mouse genocide. Cancer. A loose layer of plastic was taped over our built-ins and the insulation installers ripped out the cancer.

I open books that have not been opened for decades and feel a pang in the chest and find it hard to breathe. What spores have been crouching in the dark, dug-in atop the line: “[w]hen Tess had passed over the crest of the hill he turned to go his own way, and hardly knew that he loved her still?” What risks are we willing to take, what gamble for that Hardy? Physical books are difficult and moody. They cling to the past, do not lend themselves to being cleaned up, wiped fresh like family silver.

“You can’t keep all of those,” my partner says when he sees the boxes. “Where do you plan to put them all?” He’s right, I know, though I’m tempted to mention the band t-shirts taking over the laundry room. Still, what I chose in a blind rush back then confounds me now. Despite my love of contemporary essays, few have made it, while all that’s left of Ancient Greece has arrived intact, and three copies of *The Mirror and the Lamp*. My Mid-Master’s-degree anxiety has left me with a collection of aging criticism, and books kept for their “One Day” appeal. I will likely never read *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, though I’ve paid to store it for nearly a decade.

There’s also a box dedicated to everything ever said about Dostoyevsky. I pick out a seriously embossed volume: *F.M. Dostoyevsky* by V. Yermilov, MOSCOW. It falls open to a dedication:

To my beloved Angela
whom I belove
1/12/62
—G

The letters are fully formed with a straight up-and-down schoolboy correctness. My father claims he drops a letter from his signature every few years. He must do

this with most words, as I barely recognize the legible handwriting. The book was given to my 22-year-old mother on my father's 27th birthday.

I reach back into the Russian box and this time grab *The Possessed*. Another inscription, and early evidence of a lifelong joke between G. and A.:

To A. Maia (!) Luoma (?)
for Nov/62
from
G. Harry (Ahghh!) Bow—

They shared a hatred of their middle names; and my mother had not given up her maiden one easily. Not only did my father have to court my mother with books she was studying at UBC, he also had to ask several times before she said yes.

My father tries harder. In *The Collected Fiction of Albert Camus* he writes:

This is for
Angela, for
making such
a nice lunch,
etc. . . .
Nov 5/62.

Had he already rifled through William Carlos Williams and come across the cold sweet plums?

Meanwhile, inside *Caligula*, my father rhymes:

Camus to Yus,
George.

Ok, I can understand my mother's cold feet, though she would go on to teach *L'Etranger* the rest of her teaching life.

At the bottom of the box is a little red Penguin Classic. *The Devils*:
MRS. Angela Bowering
For Feb/63.
—G.

Success! No wonder my parents' first dining table had been a wooden door, their first Christmas tree a coat hanger wrapped in green cellophane. It seems between 1962 and '63 whatever money there was, was spent on books.

Amongst my mother's Russian titles is my father's 1971 copy of Viktor Shklovsky's *Zoo or Letters Not About Love*. There is an * at the top of page 80, and below, these underlined words:

Art, if it can be compared to a window at all,
is only a sketched window.

In the margin my father has written: *intertextual*.

The books in my father's fragment of a house had taught me about this sketched window. "You are a poet." "That's my house." Words said by me, but not remembered by me—remembered instead by the poem. The daughter, learning to read, views herself through the etched eyes of the house, darkly. Often the window is bright with fatherly love, but I am still slightly terrified that turning the page will bore me back into the House of Books.

"Life with her
was always like this"

A broken line is a stick my father held out to teach me to walk, and then let go of, though I kept walking until I noticed his arm not with it, and dropped. How can opening a book be anything but a fall from Grace?

I pull the last book from the box. Inside *Dostoevsky: Twentieth Century Views* my father has written:

To George (Mrs.) Bowering
2 wks prior
to promulgation
—from
(Mr.)

On the facing page, beneath the promise to "present the best in contemporary critical opinion on major authors," my mother rushes in pencil:

I TOOK THEA FOR
A PEE, 2:30

I laugh. I came along some time in the decade between this faceoff, and am proof that Dostoevskian angst comes second to getting your kid to the toilet. I feel a sudden lifting of my particular anxiety of influence. The wall of great literature, and my own muse-like sense of responsibility to it, is made manageable by this familial special collection: books baring the marginalia of daily life and the early inscriptions of my father. These inscriptions, on books not written by him, are the unpublished, unpublic lines of young love. They are his early pen marks without death in them, without a separation from the world. In one sense they want to be married to it, and are marks that led to the making of me, the real me, in the world.

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George and Thea Bowering on Granville Island, 1970s.
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