



DAPHNE MARLATT / from *The Given*

to feel at home in just that particular light before haze moves in—moments only—brightens Spode blue shoulder of Grouse. against their steady presence the restless filigree of leafless birch. waver, tremble. still getting used to this particular sense of history as missed story, shadowing place.

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and then I'm there: halfway up Grouse Mountain on that block, rainy firs dripping staccato time on a peak roof. black steel trunks on bricks in the basement lying like tombs with P&O steamship labels on them, wartime letters folded inside with cello packets of mothballs, peanut butter and grape-jelly the newest snack (*all right but don't you dare touch that knob with your sticky fingers*), we lie on the floor, three sets of ears tuned to woven speaker fabric fronting the console before us, three sets of eyes focused on its tiny amber navel as if to conjure what our ears anticipate, the opening chords of *Mystery Theatre*, its scary elsewhere, while the house settles down around us, not Canadian, but almost.

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Dearest Mother—Thank you for yours. We are more or less settled, which gives me a chance to write a decent letter. The house is (well, what can I say?) typically Canadian I suppose—heated by burning sawdust, if you can imagine—Charles finds this appropriate since he is working for a lumber firm! The rooms are on the small side—such a shame! The wardrobes we shipped from Malaya won't fit anywhere but in the cellar. But there is a sweet little Church of England—known as Anglican here—just a few doors away & a few shops on the corner of Lonsdale—rather like a High

Street. On the other hand, one absolutely has to have a car—because of the distances. Fortunately the girls can walk to their school—which has the rather poetic name of “North Star”—a bit quaint don’t you think? But then we are living halfway up a mountain & almost in the wilds!

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surrounded by bridges, backed up against mountains. inching forward in long commuter lines to the Lions Gate toll booths.

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Splendid, he declared of the mountains, writing home to England. Particularly on a clear day when we drive back from the city over a rather fine suspension bridge.

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Twin mountains they are, lifting their twin peaks above the fairest city in all Canada . . . so Pauline, beginning to tell the story of “The Two Sisters”—a name “absolutely unknown to thousands of Palefaces who look upon “The Lions’ daily.” now i have a name for what we are. i know the secret name and story of those mountains to tell my two sisters.

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near St. James (looks like a bastion not a church, she said, but then I suppose it has to look like that here) where the North Van ferry used to dock, we rolled from the car deck onto streets thick with foghorn sound. she told us to keep our windows up, not because of the rain but because of the men staggering off the curb (for heaven’s sake, he’s just asking to be hit!) in the neon glow of pub and diner. she drove straight towards the ruddy glow of that giant W, its bright aisles, sale items ringed by pushy women, its ping of cash registers. wove her way deftly from one crowded aisle to the next as we tagged behind (where’s Lucy? I told you to hold her hand!), picked up this and that, assessed it, measured it against us. as we trailed out

at last with our parcels to gaze at the wonder of Christmas windows, a blind man who sat on a campstool shook his tin of pencils at us. Here, she said, giving us each a nickel to drop in his worn cap she told us not to touch.

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driving along Marine Drive, we could see the silver spires of the Catholic church gleaming on the reserve, but that was there, we never turned down there.

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on the radio now, the final bars of Chapman's "Grouse Mountain Lullaby"—solemn, funereal. what ever happened to *that jolly chairlift?*

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looking up as we drove past on the old bridge, we imagined we could see Donna's father behind the flare of a blowtorch on one of the girders vaulting their giant-legged way across the Narrows.

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the city rubbed out. only dripping trees for company. if I leave the ironing and walk to the other side of the house, the bridge will be gone, and the rest of the world with it. does anyone exist out there?

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reading in the tree-shadowed cool of the den when the phone rings. Suzie? it's Donna. have you heard?—her voice sounds strange—it's really bad. the bridge just collapsed.

which bridge? Oo *that* one. thank God it's not the one Charles comes home on.

ambulance sirens down the hill. the radio reports scores of rescue boats—crushed steel, crushed men—(i call Donna and Wade says they haven't heard anything yet)—

doctors and nurses are volunteering, people calling in to give blood—switchboard at the hospital has no information—a crowd has gathered onshore, many with bowed heads—some ambulances are going to the General overtown—(i call again: Wade says they still haven't heard and Donna's putting the little ones to bed).

stop making a nuisance of yourself, Mom says, you're just tying up their phone line.

the first span, the one with the big overhang, came down . . . men hurtling toward water . . . as the first span settled in a cloud of spray, the second one began to fall . . .

the count: 16 men dead, 2 missing, 20 hospitalized.

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all that vainglory, all that talk of triumphing over the Narrows. in the end it all comes tumbling down like dominoes. a broken W in the water. does nobody see it? W for will. that's what it means, collapsed will. as if I didn't know . . .

and there was Pauline's story shadowing the news about *black murky waters* where the diver drowned, looking for bodies. it was the salt-chuck oluk's stain. had Pauline fudged the Chief's ending? perhaps the Tenas Tyee hadn't really cleared that *trail of blackness*.

a rotten shame, he said. those lives lost and all that money down the drain. we taxpayers will have to foot the bill of course. no doubt some engineer is going to have to pay for this.

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how can the sun be shining? Margo and Lucy batting the shuttlecock around on the grass and laughing. the world feels odd. there's the wrecked bridge in the harbour and

Donna's dad gone and the whole world just carries on. there's sky and the close-up smell of grass growing—right through an empty space that none of us can see. is this what Donna's thinking?

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we're wading into the rushes at the far end of Princess Pool, away from the smell of suntan oil and beer, away from wisecracks and cannonball jumps from the dam. Donna's quiet, the trees around us are quiet. what is she thinking? i've found a job, she says, i start tomorrow. where? at the Safeway on Lonsdale, a real job, i think. Cashier, she says, i'm good enough at math. but you're not old enough. i told them i was sixteen. just for the summer? maybe, she says. you can't leave school, i say, you just can't.

CENTENNIAL ACTIVITIES GEARING UP

North Van aims to celebrate

it's good practice for you. Dad sounds encouraging as we drive onto the old Second Narrows Bridge, its metal deck-work slippery in rain. just remember to keep the wheel steady. my knuckles white against skidding. the wreck of the new bridge looms beside us. keep your eyes on the road, he snaps. this bad luck bridge, this bad luck crossing.

you're going to stall, he's tense beside me. give her more gas. i can't, we'll skid. gear down then. is the lift section going to rise? keep going, you have a green light.

we jerk along, my foot hovering between accelerator and brake, slow / fast / slow, towards the solid bulk of the grain elevators there on the other side.





Jim Breukelman, *Moodyville Park, with Grain Elevators*, 2008
Chromogenic print on Kodak Endura, 126 x 150 cm
Courtesy the artist and Republic Gallery, Vancouver