

## MICHAEL TURNER / Rewriting Lowry for Lowry

*An Inhabitation of the Grammatical Structure of Malcolm Lowry's  
December 12th, 13th, and 29th, 1939 Vancouver Province Articles.*

Somewhere in Dollarton a squatter sprawled across a table. Around his head a hangover. In his swimming trunks he seems beached.

This man, a writer, despite his unlikelihood, a writer. So was what he received from Cheshire, as writing. As one who reads but doesn't believe, news of his freedom, a chance to manage his own affairs.

Scene of the refinery and the volcano alike; the town where Boris Karloff helped build the rollercoaster, where Marie De Carlo's daughter tried, unsuccessfully, and in advance of a name change, to repeat the success of Baby Peggy, Vancouver the Superfactual, where Chaplin could perform in the Orpheum from Siwash Rock, and fish and chips are served with catsup, had been consumed in this instance by the efficacy of gin.

How close he was to the failure of his earlier work. With their Hey, what the fucks! It's *The Ship Sails On!* as they laughed him off the planet. Now everyone laughed. Though nowhere as hard as on the inside of his head.

It was his syntax, this spawning ground for clauses, the prolix bits he refused to give up on, or even the false starts, brought on by the effects of Bols, with, inevitably, its own cheap mix, which affected him: there was also the elements. Jimmy Craige, making a boat, but unable to do so without hammer and saw. Margerie, his wife, with her red pencil lipstick; the shack, turned upside-down. The Canadians, with their French, and their talk of poutine sarnies.

The forest behind him, full of cedar and fir, held their birds quietly, warmly, fitfully, as when the wind blew. Not that the wind was unfriendly! Because, as Margerie pointed out, this section would be better at the beginning of the novel, then, a moment later, it was blown off altogether, boxed in her red pencil.

And none of this, apart from Jimmy Craige's tools, the smell of burning turps, the burp lodged in his throat the past week, reduced the elements to nothing less than the afterglow of a pearl grey day, so that inevitably he was his own writer, or someone sprung from him, steeped in what comes next. Did it not appeal to him, he asked, on such short notice, mere factuality?

The consequent infusion was self-sustaining to whatever Dollarton protruded, slow and molten.

One saw a smoked Vancouver, a sort of Pango Pango, wreathed in British values, a city as pure as a sausage-and-mash tostado; and at the southern border, that tipsy immigration officer too weak to finish his bottle.

One saw a North Vancouver, sloping northward, a city and a district, which ignored its Injuns, and which built its homes around them, an inverse wagon train of static Victoriana filled with paled-faced Scotch trade-unionists and mums with bitten lips, loping up Lonsdale, hauling bags of ship-soiled laundry, the lights atop Grouse Mountain.

One saw, too, the two-pronged Lions, the Holy Grail of Sunday painters, which art suppliers everywhere would offer meat to if it meant they'd birth another, provided it looked just like them; the air between each spur, like a measure, an ingredient, this imperfect caryatid, incapable of elevation, praise, only pinching effort. Yet if Dollarton, a summer spot animated by year-round lease-holders, converting those holders into ornamental hermits, has been right in anything, it is the right to look back on those coming ashore, as if from another planet, a planet that, in spite of its distance, declares "We come for nothing other than what we know," and then asks if we have pitchblende? But whatever, it is nothing, and we have that in abundance. A recent note from Aiken, impatient for a new Romantic poetry, inspired these words: "If the totems that prolong us were made of concrete and not cedar, if they stood not in forests or on beaches but alongside urban towers, if they were occupied by Martians, aliens from a red planet, participating in their own spectacles, we would treat them no less different than if they crossed the sea from Asia." And from this mediocre passage let us pass on a "whisper" to the enemy within, that Canadians are elves.

I am Malcolm Lowry.

If in response to what I am doing here, in Dollarton, let me say that the Depression has been a long one, and has nothing to do with economics. Or, if still unsatisfied, and in need of seasoning, it is not the war that has exiled me but the war I have made of self. To myself I have always been my writing.

It is wise, I think, to spend time with oneself, and if it takes the odd glass to get me there (and back), let it be known that I am a swimmer. A skill I was born with, like breathing, feeding, sleeping—the verbs that make us. And I, like Aitken or Grieg, am no exception. You may run screaming when you see me, drinking, but you will never catch me drunk.

So yes, it is I, and if you want to know where I stand, it is here, in Dollarton.

At the edge of Pango Pango, under Seymour Mountain, an oceanfront shack, one of the shore's finest, if not best, domiciles, built by better men than me, men who move like broken gates and stand alone like trees. It is good for writing, and Margerie thinks so too.

My days, and by days I mean my nights also, are devoted to writing; thinking, pecking, stopping to look at passing ships, the \_HELL sign, the jagged trees beyond. When not writing I take exercise, charging up the path from our door, or the ocean before us, a jackknife off the pier.

Last night, while drinking, Margerie confessed; she said she was frightened and wanted to know if I was real, and not sent by something otherworldly, like that man I told her about in the forest that day, Thomas Stansfeld-Jones, disciple of Aleister Crowley, warlock. He goes by the name of Frater Achad, I told her, reciting his magical name, pleased with myself for having remembered it! He has offered to teach us the Cabbala, I went on to say, noting that our Consul is becoming something of a mystic, and that Achad's knowledge of the black arts, however he came upon them, might prove useful to our character's development. Margerie was calmed by my response, I could tell, letting me know in that subtle way of hers, the way the corner of her mouth goes from dash to comma, her tiny hand reaching for the bottle, filling my glass with her own.

So it was with no small degree of serendipity that who should we find on our pier this morning but Achad. Racing down to meet him, eager to share the





coincidence, I felt my left foot catch and what remained headed for a crop of barnacled rocks, a starfish on the largest. Having resigned myself to the inevitable, I asked, Will I walk again? Will I need a cane?

And then a most peculiar thing, something that has happened only once before, as a boy, while boarding at Caldicott, racing after a butterfly—a Grizzled Skipper, quite large, with magnificent tips—along the crest of a hill whose edge came out of nowhere, like the hand that grabbed me, pulling me to safety, as Achad's did when he saved me from those rocks.

Margerie saw the entire episode. And later, after Achad had excused himself to visit the latrine, she told me, in some detail, how my rescuer seemed to have travelled thirty feet in a single second, as if propelled by a force unknown, catching me within an inch of the starfish.

Upon Achad's return, I asked Margerie to recount what she had told me, for I was most impressed with her telling, finding in it a syntactic structure unusual for her, but one which I wanted to encourage, in the hope that she might recall it when reading a passage I had finished moments before Achad's arrival, where the Consul flees a dog.

Unfortunately it was at that very moment Margerie spotted the Birneys coming down the path, and up she jumped to greet them. I called after her, in a whisper that came off as a rasp: I'm sick!

As it turned out, they had only come by to drop off Earle's new book, a volume called *David & Other Poems*, "David" being something he had read to us on a couple of occasions, the story of a fallen mountaineer who asks his fellow climber to push him over, because he will never walk again. I told the story to Achad, and he laughed. Not the response I had imagined. It was then that he reminded me of what had happened on the pier.

It was not long after the Birneys left that Achad pushed off himself, declining my offer of a walk to the bus stop, but not before asking for a glass of water, so he might recite a few lines of his own:

Behold, a new Aeon  
Shed your clothes and receive rebirth  
The Book of the Law is for all to read  
But do not abuse its ciphers . . .

I forget the rest, though Margerie took inspiration from the second line, donning her swimsuit before racing outside for a dip.

Okay I get it, I hear you now, my future's called "The Monster"?  
And my past of course this horror show, with boys who called me Lobster.  
In-between is where I sleep, in a bed that's ever-shrinking  
And no matter how I hold myself: it's the bed that does the sleeping.  
Okay, no more, I need my rest, my eyes have caught on fire,  
But do they have to turn to ash for me to be not tired?  
Margerie, we've shared so much; only you know what I fear,  
The things that keep me paralyzed, that drives us both to tears!  
I recall that day in Hollywood when you offered me a brandy  
How the weather turned the liquor's notes "from history to candy."  
We spoke of books we'd read about, the one that you were reading,  
Do you recall how suddenly you accused us of competing?  
I'm tired of all the fights we have, they seem so fabricated,  
Let's change the course of alcohol and boo the decorated.  
A gentle walk, just you and me, the forest path is waiting,  
Please come with me to Cummins' Store and pretend that we are dating,  
The way we did in Malibu, when the ocean's waves stood still,  
And that fisherman who called to us and asked, Are you two ill?  
Such is love without a brake, the power to transform,  
That turned our sunny faces grey as sickness seeks a storm,  
A rain of tears fell from our eyes, as lightning struck our hearts,  
It hurt to feel the way we did though never did we part,  
Tightening our grip instead we vowed to meet up soon.  
(Am I a fool to behave like this, a howler at the moon?)  
I bring this up because it hurts, and hurting is still living  
Because the love you've offered me is mine to keep on giving.  
Now if you please, I'd like us both to walk to Cummins' Store,  
Not to buy the things we need but to get us out the door,  
Into air that's fresher than what our shack's providing,  
Another second in this place, I'll feel that I've been hiding.  
And you know for me to feel like this is to conjure up my father,  
Who hardly ever looked my way and when he did was bothered –  
Annoyed that I might love him! Wake up and let us go,  
I will kick The Monster from our path and chase those boys for show.



