

A Canadian Fantasy: The Solemn Romance of His Youth and Death
by a Toronto Bourgeois

Peter Simpson died at twenty-four. He had not told anyone about the cancer.

There was no will, but there was a short letter of last wishes found in his wallet, apparently written before he found out he would die. It was addressed jointly to several of his close friends, and contained three requests.

First, Rupert Cummings was "heir" to Peter's "papers". Rupert was a brilliant, if lazy, doctoral student of English history. He found his new "material", frankly, embarrassing. A previous appointment as Official Biographer now seemed a rather sad joke. The inheritance consisted of a filing cabinet filled with old university notes and essays, a great pile of newspaper clippings on assorted topics, and various items of juvenalia - all of which went straight into the garbage. There were also a few bad poems, fragments of a nondescript play, and numerous emotional unmailed letters which Rupert kept. Rupert had twice refused one of the others, Ed Paterson, when he asked to see the letters. He hated Ed, a psych grad gone business admin three-piece mind and all, who could only want to read the horrible stuff to search for compliments for his insatiable vanity. Rupert knew it was perverse; there was nothing worth reading in any of them.

The second request was that the four friends constitute themselves a committee to dispose of Peter's money. (The very fact that he thought

of such a thing is proof that beneath the spiritual drede was the sordid heart of a bourgeois.) Peter's father turned over ten thousand dollars, "much against his better judgement", mainly inheritances Peter had not yet received. The letter said: "My imagined wishes should not enter your deliberations. I only ask that each of you take a full and active part in reaching a decision to which you can all heartily subscribe." They all knew the meaning of this. Peter had often regretted the fact that his closest friends did not get along. So now he was forcing them to get together. Their three meetings had so far produced only a testy impasse.

The third was the longest and obviously the main point of the letter. "Take my ashes on a journey, either real or token, away from civilization into the north, and there from any rocky and deserted shore, on a September evening, scatter them to the wind and the waves. I know that by this wish I will be accused of attempting to make my death more attractive than my life. But death is at least as important as life. My wish is simple - to rejoin that which has given me the strength of life. When the sincerity of a moment passes it becomes at best symbolic. This ^{solitary} wish and your assistance are only sincere moments in our lives. I entreat you not to linger in the memory of these moments least they be rendered symbolic. I ^{assert}, nevertheless, that being dead I am more than an ever diminishing echo of being alive, more ^{than} that last chapter of living, the dying and departing. The sincerity of the infinite succession of the moments of my death will be my eternal secret. I welcome the presence at this time of any friends who understand that my "passing", whether early or late, is not a sorrow-filled occassion. It is a happy time for me, not a different and more difficult kind of burial. Ed Paterson is in charge of whatever service he thinks appropriate for city friends and relatives. He may conduct the service if he wishes. Should there mourning let it be here; such things are for the living not the dead. I will be washed by

the waves not the tears, and dried by the wind not the grave."

They left mid-morning, paddling east across the lake and down the meandering river that drained it, an easy trip with the wind and the current, a hard one for city-soft shoulders and hands.

Actual departure was a relief. The four had passed the night self-conscious and anxious. They wanted to be finished, but not without some ritual of dignity. They wanted to be started, for in the final analysis their journey was sincere, and not a grudging last favour. Once underway, stroking at first unsteadily, effort imposed its order. The task was begun and it would end. They were away, away from the privileges of doubting. Perhaps without this specific job they would never have come here. But it would not have been without some imagined regret for each honoured the aloneness of the north, though no one except their friend loved so much its eternal silent howling.

They paddled hard and wearried quickly. Effort transfixed them in space; time dissolved. The scene overwhelmed them; angry bulbous clouds stampeding accross the sky, knarled trees struggling to keep footing, the afternoon lake like a sea of jewels, and through this picture like the sun through the forest roof were streaks of joy. They thought at last that they understood; they were carrying their friend back to his spiritual fountain, where the boy learned to master the master of us all, to be with the first illusion, to be the challenge to, to watch forever, man becoming. Knowing, but only partly knowing, they stroked with growing confidence. It was a glorious place to be now and forever.

So simple a meaning, but does it really mean anything at all.
We forget so much.

In view of the facts the idea was something of a joke. Peter was no woodsman, he just played at it. His "wilderness experience" was limited to a lazy summer camp. Certainly he was no athlete, though a good swimmer. He had been on few canoe trips. And even Peter himself came to laugh at his pedestrian romance with the Group of Seven. But then what does the "evidence" ever tell about the deeper tumult.

Where and when did this person start? Answer this and you will know the meaning. He was born in the lake when he learned to swim, ~~will know the meaning~~ and baptized by the wind when he learned to sail. The camp was an army of a hundred heroes. First consciousness was in the test of strength between himself and the elements. How different ~~from~~ the child whose first consciousness is in art, the manifesting of fantasy rather than strength.

Years later he had remembered the camp in a poem that sadly condemned the gap between the camp's illusion and its reality.

Beginning was when I arrived there.

But the real beginning, the ~~for~~
the founder's urges and first orders,
lost in dust ^{with} ~~was~~ dead prep masters
haunted younger faces.

The camp was a summer illusion of nature's discipline,
an echo of ^{the} echo of its harshness.

A gentle toughness lurked in night tent-shadows,
in strong boy-fathers' muscled arms
in boxing gloves and ropes.

Nobody spoke it now: silent tradition:
obeying momentum of older ambitions:
making boys "wise strong and honest" -
training for the struggle.

Mightily paddling canoes into their sunset
old ideals, luxuriously diluted, ~~haunted~~
haunted younger faces.

Is the man ever ~~separated~~ from the little boy?

We say a wistful no. Walking on distant rocky shores and beaches,
gathering smooth stones, we remember. He wanted to swim to Grand Island,
casually one afternoon, instead of Red Cross classes, and row back with a
friend for supper.

Our larger sophistication indulges this gentle sentiment - but
does not honour it. We believe that we are larger than we were, with
ambitions both different and greater. Is this the truth, or are ^{we} ~~we~~ prisoner
of another illusion?

We are banished into manhood by the habits of daily existence.
Little by little the pains of that first fierce pride slips from us. The
loss is an anguish at twenty-five when we really know little else. This
eulogy at the end of youth is written as if the death were real. But then
it is. Of course there is a life ahead, which, with good fortune, will be
filled with love. The sentiment at sixty-five will be of a different quality.
But before love, and after it, there is a different substance to existence,
and ~~this~~ ^{this} is the meaning - the power of which we are fashioned and to which
we must return.

Through life we will guard a memory of that smaller self and its heroic dreams of adventuring men. The north is an echo chamber of younger illusions which we can ignore, at our peril, but not disgrace. Here we conquered space before we knew the burden of time. Our object was not so much to ~~master~~ as to slip unnoticed into its raw turbulence and steal strength. The north was cold and dark. We were infinitesimal stars in the cold dark sky. By day we baked our skins brown like haughty Indians, storing up power. By night at the campfire we bested our imaginary foes. Fire is home, the flickering brest round which we danced.

First friendships burned white hot. Another poem Peter had written in his late teens remembered this.

In the grey dawn of life we did descend
Manhood awakening. Did we first perceive
Each other's hopes and fears, and share that need
Of innocent and unprotected spirits for a friend?

Youth's deep communion personal and pure,
Prior to pride's suspicion, to manhood shamed,
Which now holds prison silent souls - forgotten, dead, or maimed.
Does even a hope of love in cowering corners still endure?

This haunting hope - love across time's distance - all unsaid -
A memory. I fear to believe that once - do I pretend -
Do you still hold sacred that ~~first~~ first awareness, this dream defend?
Is this a childhood echo still pursued though dead?

I do not know you now. The cruel oppressive years destroy.
My pride and shame obscure all chance of innocence in friends.

But hope endures; it never wavers, never bends.-

Strength made of hope, a vision blurred, our last resources to employ -

A courage ever present to inspire

A weary lonely soul to reach much higher.

The sun faded and the wind slowed. Hurry up, please, it's time, time for closing, time for parting, time for home. They reached a sheltered bay which they followed to a rocky point where the westerlies still rushed down the lake. They cooked and ate, then rested in the closing of the sun's golden eye. It grew darker and colder.

Rupert emptied the contents of the little box high over the water in a coronation gesture. Down showered the jewels of strength and pride, and the thorns of responsibility and sorrow, down to the bosom of the earth.

The grey ashes caught the wind and danced alone the shore in the gentle chaos of the evening breezes. Some faded quickly into the soft darkness of the dusk, grey into grey, black into black, the infinite shelter of deep invisible oblivion. Some lingered in the last rays of the sun, catching its fire, and for an instant or two, glittering gold in the murky purple of the beginning night. Some floated, drifted down, onto the backs, into the fingers of the waves, made their tiny stain, then they and their impression dissolved, carried away along the shore, out into the lake, and down, down to the dark depths and breadth of the north.

Like the young boys they danced round the setting sun telling fantastic tales. They swam the waves from crest to crest and dived through the horizon. Racing through the trees they dodged and darted into the darkness. Some lingered in the spotlight of the fire, vying for one attention in solemn imitation of manly struggle. Others hung in dull corners. Then one picked his spot, plunged with determination, and took possession. Then another, and another. The tribe attacked and conquered. And as full warriors they joined the larger infinite, princes all.

The body is now broken and passed to the tribe. The ashes are devoured by the dancing waves and the singing trees. Another king returns, another link is forged in the unending chain. In the continuance of death we find eternal life, for death is renewal. The north is father to my fears and the mother of my dreams, the substance of my strength, the mirror of my soul, the family of my secret pride. The north and I - we rule each other.

Turning away from the lake Rupert threw the little box into the fire and they watched it burn. From the fire more ashes spiralled into the darkness carrying with them the straining vision of the four bearers. Up they rose as the body into the firmament of first stars, then down again into the darkness of the forest, across the lake on the breezes of the night, down to the waves, to the water, into the darkness, as the spirit.

The box was quickly consumed, but it burned longer in their minds. What was gone from their transitory world was now invisibly permanent in an untouchable image. Their thoughts pursued into the darkness, following the ashes to all imaginable places; but for the living there

is no escape. Only death transcends the cold and the dark, only death frees the living into this magic whirl. The wind and the waves do not carry away the living, only sweep round their shadows, splash, and make them cold.

Close by, or far away, a loon cried again and again. The four starred silently into the ever-darkening, ever-expanding grave.

Winter freezes, but the ash grows in the spring. June storms and hurls violence, but the power is stolen. Summer burns, scorching leaves to dry yellow, ashes of ashes. In September the winds tear the leaves free. They follow the breezes and ride the waves, till the cold ^{overwhelm} and the dark overwhelm them, till the water sinks and dissolves them, till the forest snow buries them into permanence.

The transparent eyeball in a million pieces watching paddlers visit and campers huddle, always in transit, rests forever, warm with the mother, in the wildness of the north, in the place where I remember thinking, I am alone.

We are the dead, washed by the waves that numb the fingers of the paddlers, dried by the winds that chill the bones of the living. We are the darkness sleeping, the snow that covers; we are the quiet and the howling, the growing and decaying, the warm cold; we are the sternness of the forest; together, ashes and ashes, we are alone together in these lonely lovely places, forever to remind you.