



Mary Elizabeth Donaldson, (1908-1966)

Mary Elizabeth Donaldson was born in Brandon, Manitoba, in 1908. She received a B.A. from the University of Alberta in 1928 and a B.Sc. in Library Sciences from the University of Toronto in 1929. From 1951 until her death in 1966, she held the position of Provincial Librarian for Saskatchewan. In addition, she served as president of the Canadian Library Association in 1957.

**For the Saskatchewan Library Association
Mary E. Donaldson Memorial Lecture, April 7, 1995**

Truth be told:
Coming Out as a Writer

Let me begin these remarks with a short preamble to explain something of the origins of this talk, and something about its composition, which was, for me at least, unusual. I drafted it on a flight I took earlier this week between St. John's Newfoundland and Vancouver. I liked the idea of having a stretch of more than 8 uninterrupted hours that would take me from one end of the Canada to the other, to write a speech that would be given more or less plumb in the middle of the country. I've taken the title from a conversation I had with Bonnie Burnard. I interviewed her for CBC Radio in Toronto in November of last year. She lives near London, Ontario at the present moment, but is still, she told me, pleased to identify herself as a Saskatchewan writer, so the source seems apt for this occasion. I was struck by her use of the phrase "truth be told." I'd heard it before of course, and often; but for some reason, on this occasion was I particularly taken by the archaic grammar and Biblical roll of the words. *Truth be told*. It came to roost in the shallow folds of my brain, where I registered it with the department of future use. That future proves to be now. I've called this talk "Truth be told: Coming Out as A Writer."

April 3 / 1995. Leaving St. John's.

We are buckled in and our table tops have been raised to the upright position. Somewhere, out of view, lumpen food that has been scorched to a uniform shade of beige is being reheated. Video screens descend from above, and we all watch irrationally happy passengers assume emergency landing positions, and position the oxygen mask over their mouths and noses. In the old days, when these demonstrations were given by the flight attendants, I would pay rapt attention, for fear of hurting their feelings. Now, I feel free to give in to distraction. Now, I look around.

Sitting ahead of me, one bank of seats over, and two rows in front, is a man I take to be, for just a split second, Roy Stokes. Roy was the Director of the School of Librarianship, as it was then called, at UBC when I went there as a student in 1978. Looking back on that time now—and this is something I'm not much inclined to do—I remember how Roy saved, if not my life, then at least my sense of sanity over the two grueling years it took to obtain that coveted credential, the MLS.

I was one of those guileless individuals who wanted to become a librarian for all the obvious and wrong reasons. I wanted to be a librarian because I couldn't feature myself as a teacher, and because I wanted to work in a clean, quiet place out of the rain and the wind where I could carve out a fortress of quietude. I wanted to work in libraries because, during a stint as

a library assistant at the Winnipeg Public Library, I had come to admire my licensed colleagues who were, to a one, smart, funny, widely-read, far-seeing, liberal folks who were committed to the democratic ideal of the public library. I thought somehow that if I followed the career path they had taken, I would somehow become like them. And most of all, I wanted to be a librarian because I liked books. I liked everything about them: their heft, their smell, the parade of print, occasionally even the meaning the text bore on its back. Alice Munro, in *Lives of Girls and Women*, writes of how her heroine Dell was happy in the library, because the evidence of so many created worlds was a comfort to her. I was—in fact, I still am—very sharing of that sensibility.

When I went to the interview the school required one endure in order to gain admission, I was canny enough to dress up in something sporty—I wore in fact, a powder blue polyester leisure suit, and somewhere I have the photos to prove it—and I had the good sense to know that I should answer the questions about why I was so keen on pursuing this field of endeavour with something a tad more baroque than the unvarnished, monosyllabic truth. I was quite sure that I like books would not have been sufficient to my examiner's needs. I can't remember precisely what I said, but I think I must have bagged on with a certain missionary zeal about the library as a temple of self-improvement and fulfillment and about how I was desperate to aid and abet the efforts the populace made to better itself by coming through our portals.

I found on my arrival that I had signed on for something that had much more to do with information and media management than it did with literature and literacy; and although I can't say that took me wholly by surprise, and while I will admit that there were some things about the relevance recall ratio and selective dissemination of information that I quite enjoyed, I nursed a kind of disappointment that data bases, with all their binomial sex appeal, were running roughshod over books.

This was mitigated in considerable measure, however, by the presence of Roy Stokes. He was the head of the school—white-thatched, scholarly, erudite, kindly, mischievous at times, and always a great pleasure to listen to, with his rich, plummy voice, and the magnificent roll of his R's. He had a presence that made him seem at times ministerial. I will never forget him leaning into his lectern as though it were a pulpit, rolling his eyes to the Heavens and saying with Knoxian fervor “Public Lending Right—how long, oh Lord, how long?” Roy, who taught the courses in bibliography, made no secret of the fact that he was in it for the books. Computer applications, policy debates, querulous discussions over intellectual freedom: he recognized the need for these, of course. But he wanted to discourse about water marks, and bindings, and vellum, and rag paper, and Caxton: and he could do, too. Brilliantly. Going to his classes was rather like stumbling across an oasis in an otherwise arid landscape.

Roy, who died very recently, delivered the Mary Donaldson Memorial Lecture twenty years ago. His speech, “I had forgotten about the wind”, like all his writing, was beautifully thought out, and artfully crafted. It was full of light and learning: as was he. I can't tell you how unsettled it makes me to appear on the same bill, as it were as Mr. Stokes; and to join such distinguished company as Pierre Berton, Frances Morrison, Andreas Schroeder, Patrick Lane, Emma LaRocque, Adrienne Clarkson, John Gray, and Stephen Lewis. Their intellectual and literary accomplishments are all so much more substantial than mine; and the breadth of their vision and scope of their learning make mine shine with a kind of 40 watt glow. They can talk about sweeping national and international issues. I can only cast my pale light back on my self.

This is what I found myself thinking on the plane as it left the St. John's airport, only a few minutes ago, rising up through an April snowfall, breaking through the low hanging clouds, banking over the Atlantic, and heading west. This is the way I was fretting when I looked up and, truth be told, imagined I saw Roy Stokes: saw him from the back, saw the fall of snowy hair, saw something in the manner of carriage and bearing that broadcast his name. In the instant it took my brain to process the information that this could simply not be so, that I had simply turned some stranger's skull into a kind of palimpsest onto which I could superimpose the being of my old teacher, the man in front turned and put a swift lie to this trick of the mind by revealing his very un-Roy like profile, and the ghost I had made flew up and out of the roof of the airplane, leaving me irrationally disappointed and breathless.

I should tell you that I have two rules in my life. One is “Say yes to everything you are offered.” Hence, for instance, my presence here. The other is “Pay attention to signs and symbols.” Both are stupid rules to live by, and they've landed me in more trouble than I can tell. But now, as we approach a cruising altitude of 39,000 feet, and as the weird sense of visitation lifts off me, I think that perhaps this was a sign of a sort. And if it was a sign, then it is up to me to interpret it. And so I will choose to understand it as a benediction from a man who loved books, and a man who loved and respected the word, and who was himself a master of usage. I choose to understand it as a sign to damn the torpedoes and go ahead. I choose to read it as a sign that perhaps it is finally time for me to stop being mealy-mouthed and cowardly and self-denigrating about the work I do. Perhaps it is time for me to come out as a writer.

Truth be told, I've been working up to this moment for some years now. Truth be told, this is not my first coming out, and I can't really talk about one without talking about the other. They are closely linked, and I think that neither would have unfolded in quite the way it has, were it not for libraries.

I am taking it that we are all, in one way or another, familiar with the term “coming out.” In its classical sense, if it can be called that, it referred to the

lavish parties given debutantes when they were ready to take their place in society. I remember one story of a rich southern gentleman who imported thousands of brightly coloured butterflies from the Amazon, and suspended them in nets over the ballroom where his daughter was being feted. At a given moment, the nets were whisked away, and thousands of butterflies, dead from the rigours of travel, dead from asphyxiation brought on by the heat rising from the revelers, rained down their still and waxy wings on the guests below.

The gay and lesbian community, always eager to pirate some of the more overblown and ludicrous aspects of the culture and milk them for all the camp value they contain, appropriated the term “coming out” and applied it to the business of emerging from a cocoon more widely called “the closet” and into the full and revealing light of day, wings spread and ready to fly. Coming out, in this sense, is a public act: an act of affirmation, of rebellion, of pride, of daring, fearful and joyful both. Coming out is about coming into self.

Coming out can't be spoken of in general terms. Every experience—and by now, I've heard a great many stories—is different. By and large, however, it's safe to say that coming out is not an immediate process, accompanied by discernible outward signs: a shift in posture, a change in complexion, a mark on the forehead. Coming out happens gradually, in stages, and over time. It happens when you say the words out loud for the first time, to yourself, in the mirror, in the bathroom, with the shower going to block out the sound. It happens when you tell friends, parents, family, colleagues, and when you gauge their various reactions. It happens when you challenge the boss when he or she makes a homophobic joke, or when you march in front of TV cameras on Pride Day, or when you tell Aunt Lucille that you're unlikely to be dredging the gene pool any deeper and would she please stop asking. It happens when you learn that it's not such a big deal after all, and that no one else in the world thinks your sexuality is as important or as interesting as you do.

My own coming out as a gay man, which was, I think, the necessary precursor to coming out as a writer, really began the same year I went to library school, 1978. Truth be told, my decision to register for a course of study that didn't exist in my home town of Winnipeg may have had as much to do with sex as it did with vocational interest. I was 23. Hormones were gunning their engines, and tearing up and down the Indy race course of my system. I was tired of looking in the mirror and mouthing the words “gay” or “homosexual” or, in my more self-flagellating moments, “faggot” or “fruit.” I was exhausted by a denial that seemed ever more pusillanimous, frustrated with the knowledge that my body was capable of all manner of stunts that it would require very little training to perfect. At the same time, I couldn't imagine going downtown, going into the Mardi Gras restaurant, a notorious gay hangout, just to see what might happen. What if someone saw me? What if someone told? What if someone guessed? What would the neighbours say?

I had to get out. I had to go to Vancouver. Now, it seems a long way to have traveled, just to get laid.

Lest you think me a creature who was entirely driven by base impulses, I should add that in my more rational moments, which were few, I had also reasoned that libraries were about as comfortable a work place as a gay person could find, outside, say, of a ballet company or a high end restaurant. A friend of mine who teaches social work at UBC tells his classes that their profession was built on the backs of lesbians—that among the pioneers of modern social work who were laying the ground rules for the discipline early in this century, was a statistically disproportionate number of sapphists. I've never quizzed him on his sources for this information; and I could never substantiate with anything more concrete than intuition my own hunch that the same could be said about librarianship. It is, after all, a profession that has always been dominated by women—although I appreciate that it's only in recent years that women have been accorded admittance into the upper echelons of management. And it was not so very long ago that women librarians were compelled to be spinsters, forbidden in many cases, like school teachers, to marry. It was as though the obvious taint of sex would somehow sully them and by extension corrupt the minds they were meant to improve and safeguard. It does not seem too much of a stretch for me to imagine that women who might not be drawn to the emotional and conjugal rewards and pleasures of married life, might choose such a profession as a secular, salaried way of exempting themselves from the social normalcy of entering a procreative union.

Let me be clear about a few things. I'm not saying that I think there was some bizarre cabal among our foremothers to turn the libraries of their future into gay-positive havens. I'm not positing a behavioural or genetic link between same sex attraction and a vocational urge, in the contemporary world, to become a librarian. No doubt there are numbers of happily married librarians here tonight who will be relieved to learn this. Nor am I suggesting there is a universal impulse among librarians that makes them kindly disposed towards gay and lesbian people, or towards any of the other groups that are popularly identified as “minorities.” But there is such a thing as a sociology of professions, and I have noted—again, anecdotally—that tolerance and compassion, and a belief in some equality of access to information that will allow people to make considered choices—are qualities that are found more often than not in the library world. I saw this among my colleagues all those years ago at the Winnipeg Public Library. I have seen it time and again since then, in every system where I came to roost.

I remember reading somewhere our growth spurts, during childhood, happen in our sleep. I think that much of the growing we do subsequently, when our bodies have achieved their maximum heights (if not, alas, girth) also happens when we're looking elsewhere. I didn't know it then, but those days years ago at the Winnipeg Public Library, before I was able to publicly

speaking any of the words in the lexicon of homosexual sensibility, were the beginning of both my coming out, as a gay man and as a writer. On my lunch hours and coffee breaks, I would sometimes sneak covert glances at the magazine *The Body Politic*, which was published in the heady, early days of the so-called gay liberation movement. Concurrently, I began to both read and write poetry. The poems I wrote were without exception dreadful spillings of post-adolescent angst. But the poems I read changed my life. I would scour the 820 range of the literature shelves, and pull down volume after volume, indiscriminately. I read, for the first time, Elizabeth Bishop and Wallace Stevens and Philip Larkin, and Robert Lowell. Most importantly, I read James Merrill.

James Merrill died about six weeks ago—just around the time of the passing of Roy Stokes, now that I think of it. Merrill was certainly the most accomplished poet of his generation, a brilliant technician and a clear-eyed visionary. I found him by accident, and read his poems with a galloping excitement. Although there were no give away pronouns or names in his poems, and although I knew nothing of his life at that time, I could tell, intuitively, that the lovers of whom he wrote were men. Here's his poem "Between Us."¹ It tells of waking in the night, adjusting to the dark, and the strange apparitions that seem to loom up out of it.

*Between us
A . . . face? There
It lies on the pillow by
Your turned head's tangled graying hair:
Another — like a shrunken head, too small!
My eyes in dread
Shut. Open. It is there,
Waxen, inhuman. Small.
The taut crease of the mouth shifts. It
Seems to smile,
Chin up in the wan light. Elsewhere
I have known what it was, this thing, known
The blind-eye slit
And knuckle sharp cheekbone —
Ah. And again do.
Not a face. A hand seen queerly. Mine.
Deliver me, I breathe
Watching it unclench with a soft moan
And reach for you.*

Over time, I learned something about his life: that he was independently wealthy, the scion of the founder of the Merrill Lynch brokerage firm; that he led a cosmopolitan life, drifting between Greece, Key West, New York, and his home base of Stonington, Connecticut. And I learned that he shared his

life, and had done so for many years, with a man called David Jackson. I wish I could tell you how relieved I was to discover these things. This was not even 20 years ago, remember, and outside of major metropolitan areas I think it's safe to say that most gay people lived with the sense of alienation that comes over you when there is nothing in the visible culture that validates your own experience or sense of self. Where could I look to find role models? Where could I look to find recorded instances of men who had loved each other deeply and well? In Winnipeg, I can assure you, they were not thick on the ground. But in the poems of James Merrill, which I had taken randomly if not accidentally off the shelves of the public library, I found something like comfort. Here was a life that was vibrant and fully lived. If such a life was possible—why, I might have one, too.

I mention this in part because, unless things have changed drastically from the time I worked in libraries, there is a pressure brought to bear, in these fiscally challenged times, to justify and validate the continuation of one's existence and the service one provides, by showing numbers. How many books checked out? How many questions answered? How many people through the door? Numbers and statistics, which are surely the most easily manipulated of indicators, are a vastly over-burdened measure of the truth. What statistical device is there to show what I received in the library—the gift of hope for my future? There is more good happening around all of us, more good over which we have no control, than any of us will ever know.

There was something else I found through James Merrill, too. Although I was certainly no stranger to reading, it was by way of immersing myself in the solace of that poet's elegant, crazy vision that it occurred to me that writing was a way of making something like sense of the world. I redoubled my efforts at scribbling. When I moved to Vancouver, and safely out of view of anyone who had known me, began to attend meetings of the university gay group, and to otherwise consort with like-minded guys and gals, I kept writing, quietly, keeping it to myself. I think my secrecy about writing grew commensurate with the social ease I felt as I disclosed the pent-up secret of sexuality. I found one of my poems from those days not so very long ago. I wrote it shortly after arriving in Vancouver, after a windy walk on the sea wall. When I read it, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, and in fact did a bit of both. It goes:

*Today there was no one by the sea
But a madman, three white gulls, and me.
The wind kept the others away at home.
So, all but unseen the waves drove down
And littered the sand with their poor gifts:
Bottles, wood. A second thought would make them lift
Them back to the dark and acid hush.
It didn't matter. They left enough*

*Of their secrets there for me to know
That most I had guessed, or somehow been shown.*

*There was little there for me to learn.
Now, there was home to deal with. I turned*

*And heard through the wind's and the wave's harsh meeting
The mad man shouting, the gull's wings beating.*

The one chord of truth that sounds for me in that awful poem is the line “there was home to deal with.” Home was very much on my mind. Coming out, I’ve said, is a long process. Nonetheless, if you ask people for a coming out story, they can usually pinpoint one that is in some way emblematic, that stands out above all the others. Here’s mine. I was back in Winnipeg—which I still thought of as home—for a few weeks in the summer after my first year at library school, which was also a year of politicization around gay issues. I was determined that I would tell my parents. I knew that I had to do that if I wanted to live a forthright and honest life. We were not a family much given to conferences or frank discussions. It never occurred to me to ask them, “Would you sit down, there’s something I want to say.” Rather, I waited for the opportune moment to arise naturally out of the flow of everyday events. That never seemed to come. Whenever I found my mother and father together, they were always watching the *Bob Newhart Show*, or playing Scrabble, or were engaged in some similarly absorbing pursuit, and I just couldn’t feature busting in and wrecking it for them. Finally, I couldn’t stand it any longer. It was a Sunday afternoon. My mother and I were sitting at the kitchen table, having a cup of tea. Company was coming. There was large hunk of cow browning in the oven. We were talking of this and that, and I just blurted it out.

My parents had two cats at that time, Chuck and Ralph. Chuck was sitting on my lap. No sooner had the words spilled from lips than Chuck tumbled from my knee, and vomited, copiously, three times, on the kitchen floor. Never was a cat more aptly named. It was the best thing that could have happened, really. It was so grotesque and comic that it defused the tension of the moment.

When order was restored, my mother had two things to say. She said that she loved me and that my happiness was what mattered most to her. That was important to hear. And she asked me not to tell my father. He wouldn’t, she thought, understand. For almost ten years afterwards, I respected her wishes. For almost ten years, I led an oddly bifurcated life around my parents. And when the circumstances of my life were such that I could no longer protect my father from what his wife thought would be a truth more awful than he could bear, and when I finally did tell him the facts of my life, when I was worn down with duplicity, and couldn’t see that there was anything to be gained from preserving this ruse, he proved to be loving and understanding, and hurt that I had felt I couldn’t take him into my confidence. How strange,

I thought then, and think now, how strange and how telling that we both underestimated him so needlessly. Once he knew, and had proved that he could accommodate the information, I felt a tremendous sense of freedom. I could speak freely in the world. There was no one left I could surprise or hurt.

That was 1986. By the time I had opened the book of my being to my father, I was that much further along the path to the coming out statement I am making tonight; that is, to stand before you and say, My name is Bill Richardson. I am a writer. That too, had happened when I wasn’t looking. That too, I owe in large measure to libraries, and in more direct ways than those I’ve described so far.

I graduated from UBC in May, 1980, and began to work immediately as a children’s librarian for the Okanagan Regional Library system. This was never what I had planned. Over the course of my training, I imagined myself, when I imagined myself at all, sitting Buddha like at a reference desk, smilingly reaching for the source that would list the fathers of confederation by death date, or reveal to the curious patron the value of the *escudo* relative to the pound in 1932. Curiously, no one rushed to offer me such a position. But because I had taken children’s literature and services courses from the redoubtable Sheila Egoff, and I think because the idea of a man working as a children’s librarian struck my prospective employers as such a novelty, I was offered the job in Kelowna, and up I went.

Truth be told. I have not met a great many librarians who knew from the moment they leapt from their mother’s wombs, that a librarian is what they wanted to be. Note that I say I have not *met*. They may well be out there in droves. The information I’ve gleaned over time, however—and again I stress this is anecdotal—is that very often it’s a career choice that may not be precisely *faute de mieux*, but which comes to mind when other options have been considered, or tried and discarded for whatever reason as unsuitable.

In my deepest heart, I always wanted to be an actor or a writer or a musician. But I felt sure that I simply didn’t have the wherewithal, the raw talent and grit necessary to make it in any of these dodgy professions where the wannabes vastly outnumber the ones who make it. Imagine my delight when I realized that as a children’s librarian, I had acquired the latitude to do and be all these things, but without the awful necessity of staking a professional claim on those turfs. I loved the puppetry, and the pageantry of my new job. I was able to release the ham within. To promote a summer reading club with a jungle theme, I dressed as a gorilla and had a colleague with a jeep drive me from school to school. Teachers were either amused or annoyed, depending on whether or not their children were traumatized by my King Kong entrance. There was a picture of me thus adorned in the *Capital News*, right beside a story whose headline read: “Tertiary Syphilis On Increase.” Best of all though, was that I began to tell stories; to think of myself in a conscious way as a storyteller. I learned folk and fairy tales by Grimm, Andersen, and Joseph Jacobs. Innocent of voice appropriation, I told native

stories, women's stories, Haitian and Persian stories and Bible stories. I had a simple rule: if I liked it, I told it. I told stories in my own library, in schools, and at festivals. I told them over and over again, until the words literally became part of me, until their words and rhythms and simple structures had a home in the shallow folds of my brain.

It was through the library that I received an invitation to tell a story on the radio, and that experience changed my life again. Sitting in the bland, bleak, beige and hermetic environment of a CBC studio, speaking the words to "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" into a microphone, I was visited by the odd and happy feeling that I had come home; that I was where I belonged. I decided I wanted to stay there, that it might be possible for me to stay there, and that the best way to ensure that it happened was to persevere with what got me in the first place. I would keep on telling stories. By then, I was so full of the stories I had memorized, they were spilling out in my dreams. By then, I was beginning to see the whole spill of my days as a story in the making.

And so, I began to write in earnest. I wrote when I came home from the library. I wrote on my lunch breaks. Sometimes, I would write when I was supposed to be scanning an issue of *The Horn Book*, or *Canadian Library Journal*, or *The Bulletin of the Centre for Children's Books*. I established a few contacts at the CBC, and once a week, I came up with short, funny little stories to tell on the radio. I wrote about comic books, and pets, and family legends and festivals. I wrote compulsively, and even if I wasn't writing fluently, I found that the work I'd done with folk tales, and the learning by heart of more literary stories, had instilled in me a sense of structure and flow. I wrote and time would be absent. I wrote and my heart would grow full.

It took me over a year to realize that what I had been writing was the story of my own childhood; that I was effectively applying a salve, a poultice, and drawing to the surface through creative will and associative word play, the component parts of who I was. That sounds so dreadful in the telling, so self-serving and inbred. But as I turned these dull tales into narrative, I hope I was able to generalize them so that they weren't wholly solipsistic and self-referential; I think that for the most part, there was something in them with which listeners could identify. I hope so. I wanted more than anything to write something people would like. It turned out that coincidentally, without trying, and without knowing it, I was also discovering a way of making sense of the world, of ordering experience, of holding it in my hands, turning it over and over, looking at it from all its sides, seeing how it had been, how it might have been, and how it could work better in the rehashing. I was learning to embroider a pattern, and make it my own. When school boards were wrestling with the question of whether or not to install condom dispensers in high school washrooms, I wrote:

"It's a hot summer day, the August before I start school. It's a time of green-leafed innocence. All is well with the world. They are dropping bombs in Nevada, but it's a long way away. Kennedy has not

yet gone to Dallas. The Beatles are playing basements in Liverpool. The big star on Ed Sullivan is still Topo Gigio. On this hot, hot day, my mother has been making the furniture shine and smell like lemons. Now, she is relaxing. She is sitting on the front steps with Stella, her best friend. They are chain smoking Matinee cigarettes and swilling black coffee. It is Winnipeg. It is summer. It is 1961. I'm bored. Bored with the sandbox. Bored with my bicycle and its training wheels. Bored with opening the snapdragons to see if any bees are trapped inside. It's time for excitement. It's time for exploration. It's time to sneak into my parent's bedroom. Oh, it's an Aladdin's cave of delights. Look! There's the closet, all dark and rusty and all full of mysterious musty smells. There are Mommy's high heels! She gets mad if you wear them, but I'll try them on anyway. She'll never know. I'll teeter across the room and back again. They sure are tricky! How does she walk in them, anyway? Oh, let's bounce for a bit on Mommy and Daddy's great big bed, the one you get to crawl into when you've had a nightmare, and where you get to lie down and drink ginger ale as a special treat if you've had the flu. Over there is their dresser. On top is the pretty velvet box where Mommy keeps her jewels. Open it up. There's the brooch you bought for her last year at the Children's Bazaar. Why doesn't she ever wear it? Right beside the jewel box is the little cedar box where Daddy keeps his handkerchiefs, and his cuff links, too. Here is his sock and underwear drawer. Where is the funny pair of long underwear, the ones where the bum part unbuttons? There they are, right at the bottom! And look! What's this underneath? Balloons? Yes! Balloons! Oh, funny Daddy. No sooner do I pick one up than evil thoughts run through my mind. The devil speaks in my ear. He says, "Bill." This is new. It's the first time the devil has used my name. "Bill," he says, "take that balloon to the bathroom. Fill it with water. See how big it can get. Wait for further instructions." I do what I'm told. The devil is right beside me. I can feel his heat. He gives me a jab with the fork he carries, just like he does in the comics. He says, "Bill, take that balloon upstairs and go to the window." I do. The window is open. The air outside is hot and full of the low sounds of my mother's and Stella's voices on the steps below. The devil says, "Bill. Take that balloon and throw it out the window." I do. The next sounds are the splattering of the balloon and the piercing cries below. What happens next is a bit of a blur. Suffice it to say that these were the days when corporal punishment was still fashionable. The moral of the story is plain. Early exposure to condoms will undermine a child's moral values. I'm glad I was caught and punished. Had I got off free as a bird, I would probably have continued on the wayward, devil-led path. Probably, I would be doing time even now, for breaking into safes."

Eventually, there were books. But I still didn't think of myself as a writer. I was a librarian who did some writing on the side. I was a radio producer who occasionally got published. I was a broadcaster whose writing was incidental to work done on radio or TV. Somehow, I just couldn't admit to being a writer. Tell people that's what you are, and you take on a burden of proof. Tell people you're a writer, and the question they'll ask themselves, even if they never voice it, is "Oh yeah? Why haven't I heard of you?" To say, "I'm a writer" is the most colossal vanity. It's as if you're putting yourself in the company of the great makers of the canon. It's as if you're saying, implicitly, "I have something to say and you should listen to it." It's easier to present yourself as a casual hobbyist. It's safer just to say it's something you "do on the side." It exempts you from commitment. It exempts you from the terrible prospect and embarrassment of failure.

But after a time, if you keep on doing it, all that begins to ring a little hollow. After a time, it sounds like you're ashamed, like you're trying to shirk responsibility for what you've made. If you set something loose, you owe it a debt of responsibility, you have to acknowledge parentage of this thing or these things that, for better or worse, are making their way in the world. After a time, you have to look at yourself in the bathroom mirror, and mouth the words, "My God. I'm a writer." Truth be told, one day you have to say it out loud.

I'm writing this on a plane, flying between St. John's and Vancouver. On the west coast, we will all be disgorged. Some of us will get into cabs and cars and head home. I'll go to my office at the CBC, which is directly opposite the new central library. It's a beautiful and witty building, with its Coliseum inspiration. I will look from my window onto the end stages of its construction, and reflect on how it's also become for me a symbol of how our pasts are always with us. Ghosts, some more substantial than others, are always drifting by, reminding us of who we were and from where we've come. When I'm in Winnipeg, as I often am these days, I walk by the mall that stands where the gay hangout called the Mardi Gras used to be. I remember how I would stare into the restaurant, hoping for something, anything to happen. Now, when I see my own pale reflection, 25 years down the line, looking back at me from the mall window, I am visited once again by the ghosts of those fears and that shame that crippled me for so long. Even now, they are waiting to rattle their chains. Welcome back, I whisper to myself as I pass by. It's easy enough to come home again.

This plane will leave Vancouver and make its way to Seoul. It strikes me there is a kind of homonymic irony in that name, Seoul, given that the clouds outside have a decidedly ghost-like, photoplasmic quality to them, and given my earlier visitation from Mr. Stokes. I can't help but think that souls are visiting the plane before the plane visits Seoul. I remember too, that last night, in my hotel bed in St. John's, a whole country away from my home, I dreamed of my mother as a ghost. She was flitting neurasthenically around

a house that was neither hers nor mine, trying and trying to tell me something I couldn't make out. She wore a party dress that made her look like a faded southern belle, very Amanda Wingfield. Truth be told, I am beginning to feel as though the ghosts around me are more populous than the living.

Every so often, Captain McCormack comes onto the PA to tell us that we're flying over Lake Huron, or north of Winnipeg, where my mother, very much still in the flesh, lives. Now, we are over Saskatchewan. I can look down through the breaks in the furrowed clouds and see the incredible geometry of the spring fields. Somewhere down there is the road where, many years ago, I came as close to achieving ghosthood as ever I hope to in this lifetime. Somewhere down there is the Saskatchewan road where my mother almost killed us all: my father, my brothers, herself and me. It was one of the two times in my life I saw her scared.

We were on a camping holiday, destination Victoria. Mom was at the wheel. She was a good driver, comfortable with the tedious urban hither and yon of grocery shopping and attending meetings; well-practiced at chauffeuring her brood to and from swimming lessons and orthodontist appointments. But she was a novice on the highway. A long, flat ribbon of steamy asphalt. Several tons of Dodge. And 60 MPH. Here were three balls she'd never thought of juggling. Somewhere near Regina, she pulled out to pass on a two lane stretch and found herself playing chicken with an oncoming truck. She cranked hard left, aimed the car towards the gravel shoulder, and brought it to a halt in mercifully dry and shallow ditch. There was no visible damage to the Dodge or to us. In fact, we three boys, pre-adolescent and self-absorbed and resilient, were thrilled with the heart-lurching ride. It was better than the roller coaster at Winnipeg Beach! We began to babble straight away about how we couldn't wait to get to Victoria and tell our recently retired grandparents about our close brush with death.

It was only our mother's chalky face and her quiet, repeated insistence that we keep the news of this little detour to ourselves that made us understand something of the gravity of the situation. She moved into the passenger seat. Dad took us the rest of the way to the coast and all the way home again. As near as I know that was the last time she ever drove. And that was the first time I saw her scared.

The second time was just about two and a half years ago, in the hospital, on the night before her mastectomy. The cancer had been found in a random, haphazard way. A few weeks after her retirement, when she was in a mood to do some of the things she'd been putting off for 35 years, she went to the doctor. Over the course of a routine physical, her physician found a lump my mother had never noticed, or else had discounted as trivial. The biopsy told its nasty tale. Surgery was scheduled. She didn't say much in the day or two before the operation. She said, "For Pete's sake! My mother lost both her breasts. I should have been paying attention." She said, "Mammograms! I'd like to see a man get his balls checked over by one of those things!" And in

the hospital, on the night before the surgery, she said, with uncharacteristic candour, "I'm scared." I was visited by an uneasy memory, then. Myself, age 8. A cool, grey afternoon. The hospital. And a tonsillectomy slated for the morning, the prospect of which was barely mitigated by the prospect of endless vats of ice-cream. These were still my mother's driving days, and it had fallen to her to deliver me up for the slaughter. She rooted around in her handbag for her keys when it was time for her to leave. I said, "I'm scared." "You'll be fine," she said, "you'll be fine." And naturally, she was right.

But what words could I comfort her with, as she prepared to enlist, needfully and unhappily, in that army in which so many women now march? "You'll be fine?" No. That was a sure enough prophecy for her to have made, way back then, when I was still a child, and fear had not yet tracked her down. Now, it made no sense. She knew that I knew that no one knew how much stupid damage had been done by the disaffected, delinquent cells. What do you say when, for the first time, in your adult life, you feel like a parent to your parent.

"I'm scared," she said.

"Me too."

Outside her room, the city. Beyond the city, the prairie, mountains at the margin. Somewhere, on the other side, the future packed its furtive bags. Two years and a bit down the road she was traveling, my mother would be active, healthy, and knock on wood, cancer free. But then, the outcome was wholly obscure. In that moment, we were just scared grownups, looking all at once into the face of something very big and very dangerous, perilously near, thundering along a random crazy path, coming at us very fast.

There's something about the combination of 39,000 feet and all these tonnes of metal that makes all this seem very close. It seems impossible to me that something as huge as this Boeing 747-400 can stay aloft, that something as incomprehensible as physics is keeping us from plummeting onto the prairie, onto that road, that only a thin membrane is between all of us and the outside high altitude temperature of minus 90 degrees Fahrenheit. I find it easier to believe that ghosts keep us up here: ghosts, and the flimsy thread of our collective trust and the sharp eyes of mechanics and the absence of pilot error. It's not so very much to go on. Still, it's all we have. That's what I have to rely on, until I get back home. And all I can do between the immediate here and the looming there, is write it down. Truth be told, this is the work I have to do. My name is Bill Richardson. Truth be told, I am a writer.

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