

## **A Horse, a Bible, a Woman; or, Reflections on the Fall; or, From Being Mennonite to Becoming Writer**

I've worried a lot over the past few months, since I was told of this event, about the meaning of the word lecture. And I have to tell you, I have a troubled relationship with the word. My father used to lecture when I was a boy. That's what I told my friends. He gave me a lecture. Sometimes before, sometimes after the strap. I had run off with Luke on a Sunday afternoon to collect a few empty pop bottles from the Creek Road ditches. To exchange them for a chocolate bar at the Wiebe's corner store a mile down the road from my house. In contravention of the fourth commandment. Thou shalt not work on Sunday. It hadn't occurred to me yet that this gathering of pop bottles would be considered work. My father lectured. Delivered his considerable opinion of my misdeeds and shortcomings.

I should explain. In those days, in the 1950s, when you brought an empty bottle to the corner store you collected a two-cent refund. The bottles would be sent back to the factory and refilled with Pepsi or Orange Crush. And sold again. And with five empty bottles, you could trade for a ten cent Coffee Crisp chocolate bar. ?You wonder about the commandment part of this? Anything to do with trade and purchase on Sunday counted as work.

Now you might think that collecting pop bottles and exchanging them for chocolates on a Southern-Ontario Sunday afternoon, is no big deal. But I can assure you that it is. Especially if you get caught. And you probably doubt my mathematics. How, you say, could he possibly remember those two and ten-cent figures after fifty years of further toil and trauma? Let me remind you. Those numbers were impressed on my rear end in a way that will last much longer than fifty years. Ah, the love of chocolate. My ignorance of the commandments. They say that ignorance is bliss, but I can tell you it's not true. In my experience ignorance is blisters.

My father lectured when he found out I'd gone on a date with Jacquie. In contravention of the eleventh commandment, I suppose. My Christian ancestors had by this time constructed one further commandment to cover the host of sins not mentioned by the original ten. And most of those sins, I might add, have to do with love and sexuality.

Yes, I went on a date with Jacquie. Several dates actually. Ah, a year's worth of dates—I

kept it secret as long as I could. I went to a movie with Jacquie and someone saw us. Dating and movies both mentioned somewhere in the eleventh. Though I admit, I often get my commandments confused. We danced at Jacquie's on Saturday nights. And sometimes one of the other boys snuck in a mickey of rum for us to sample. The eleventh commandment again and again. I don't know who squealed on me. But my father found out.

What Jacquie and I did was innocent enough. We kissed. Long, lingering kisses. Gentle, probing kisses. Ah, Jacquie. And in my naiveté, at age sixteen, I don't think I'd imagined anything more than heavy kissing with Jacquie. You say you don't believe me, but I argue that it's true. My father certainly didn't believe me. In the few days since he'd found out about the movie, he'd imagined much more than kissing. Jacquie's older brother and sister both had imagined more than kissing, and that was the problem. Both had produced foetal evidence of their imaginings.

I'm not sure, at that age, whether I had a clear understanding of what this meant. It was a quick lecture, my father's. Just a few words. I had no trouble understanding, no difficulty focusing my attention on his words. Thou shalt not anymore! My friendship with Jacquie was over.

My new partner lectures too, over korma and paneer at the East India Company Restaurant. It's our third date. She's trying to impress me with the ideas of Ken Wilbur and his integral psychology. I'm trying to impress her with what a good listener I am. This kind of thing, you see, still happens early in relationships; even at my great age.

My new partner believes in the need for a balanced and interconnected approach to all the elements of our lives. The integral approach. And incidentally, to all the elements of our relationship. I listened attentively. But I had a growing sense that this lecture threatened my already faltering sense of self. When you grow up with five sisters on one hand, and a commanding father on the other, you often feel your self to be under siege.

Lectures. Lectures leave me feeling defensive. Or bored. I'd like to be a good listener but I'm not. I can't seem to pay the necessary attention. I've attended a few good lectures in my life. Yes, at the university. But until today, the task of delivering one, a lecture, has somehow eluded me. By which you can gather that I haven't been a conventional father. Nor, my one great shortcoming in life, apart from the problem with commandments, nor, have I lived in academia.

I see in the dictionary, when I look up the word lecture, such words as scold, dress down, call on the carpet. Preach, admonish, rebuke. But relax! I'm having fun with you. There'll be no chastening or commanding today. I should warn you though. I wasn't able to settle easily on a topic for tonight's discussion. So instead of writing one lecture for you, I've written twenty-four.

Maybe we'll have time for all of them, and maybe not. I'll call this last one, the one I just read to you, I'll call it, **Genesis**.

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This next lecture, the second, I'll call **Exodus**. Several months ago, as part of a course I was taking here at the university, I was asked to bring to class a symbol of my culture of origin. To prepare to talk about that symbol for five or ten minutes. Our instructor was trying to impress on us that we all, despite the kind of monism that our dominant North American culture encourages, that we all carry with us cultures of origin. Whether they be Ethiopian or Japanese, whether Anglo-Saxon or Mennonite, whether of wealth or of poverty, whether so-called professional or labour cultures, university educated or not university educated.

Just how much we bring to our everyday lives assumptions that influence our work, our conversation, our relationships. That many of these assumptions, often the ones we think least about, derive from our cultures of origin. That these culture-of-origin assumptions often delineate power differentials. Between men and women. Between races. Between rich and poor. I gained a new respect in that class for the impact of power differentials in people's lives.

But back to the assignment. A symbol of my culture of origin. I remember thinking, in the few moments of silence after the assignment was announced, as we classmates began to digest the task. I remember thinking: What in the world will I ever bring to class as my symbol? I thought of violins. I thought of birds. I thought of the paintings that hang at home on my walls. I thought of my two grown children. But none of these had anything to do with my origins. And before I'd thought for even a minute longer about possibilities, I already knew that I would choose the old German family Bible. A bible! A symbol of my culture of origin. (deep breath.) I felt I'd been struck by lightning.

An ancient book, this Bible. Published in Estonia in 1896. After the German translation by Martin Luther. Given to my parents as a wedding gift in 1931. With brown and brittle pages. With a damaged binding, and poorly repaired. A list of my parent's eight children inscribed on one of the back pages. With birth dates. And one death, my oldest sister. Susie. Gestorben. Lena, Manitoba. May 26, 1934.

The family bible. I grew up in a very Mennonite home, a religious home. My family went to church every week, usually more than once a week. A large red brick church. With square

towers. Heavy. Well-defined. Looked more like a fortress than a spiritual haven. What did we worship there?

We went to church. We prayed at mealtime. We had devotions as a family most evenings. Where someone, usually my father from his place at the head of the table, read from the Bible. We children attended a Christian high school. We believed our bible to be a sacred text. It was the core symbol of the kind of family we were. Our lives, our behaviour, judged by a Mennonite understanding of the Bible. My life, and my behaviour. And often found wanting, I might add. Ignorance, you remember, causes blisters.

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Robert Kroetsch, in his celebrated *Seed Catalogue*, writes:

*How do you grow a poet?*

*For appetite: cod-liver oil.*

*For bronchitis: mustard plasters.*

*For pallor and failure to fill the woodbox:  
sulphur & molasses.*

*For self-abuse: ten Our Fathers & ten  
Hail Marys.*

*For regular bowels: Sunny Boy Cereal.*

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The lecture called **Ruth**.

When we still had our old barn in Niagara, and before we bought the red Farmall A tractor in 1954, we did all the farm work with our one horse. Molly had a brown coat. A black mane and tail. Long white hair round her hooves. She taught me to love the smell of horses. She taught me to love the touch and shudder of her skin.

We hitched Molly to the cultivator—a small one, maybe six tines. A shiny green cultivator. With two handles so my dad could walk behind. And we cultivated between the rows of asparagus. My dad followed with the leather reins around his shoulders, hands pushing down on the cultivator. I sat on Molly's back, I enjoyed riding on Molly's back. I held onto her collar. I felt Molly's muscles and joints against my bottom. I got a sore bottom. My legs got sore from spreading so wide. I felt Molly's sweat against my bum. My pants soaked up her sweat.

My dad said, Gee, Molly!

He said, Haw, Molly!

He said, Whoa, Molly!

In peach season we hitched Molly between the shafts of a trailer. She stood waiting in the orchard while we took empty baskets from the trailer. One back leg bunched. You may have seen how horses rest. We filled the baskets with peaches. We set them back on the trailer. When the trailer was full, my dad drove Molly to the yard for a load of empty baskets. Some days Molly slept between trailer loads. Other days she got hungry. If she saw a basket of peaches on the ground nearby she took the trailer along and went off to eat peaches.

Whoa, Molly!

Back, Molly!

Molly loved peaches, but sometimes she smashed the trailer into a peach tree. We had to put a nose bag on her. We had to fix the trailer.

Molly. Galloping through my days and dreams. In spring the way she pranced and carried her head. Her feathered mane. Her flowing tail. Nothing abstract about Molly, nothing you could confuse like you could the commandments. I asked my new girlfriend about equine psychology. What do you know about the psychology of the horse, I said. And she spun to look at me. She raised her eyebrows high, and then she giggled. That left me confused. I haven't been able to figure out why she was laughing. What was it about my horse question? Nor can I figure out, in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, what to call her. Girlfriend, partner, mate? Surely not Muse.

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The **Matthew** lecture.

The first book I touched with my hand was certainly a bible. This same German Bible. It lay on a low shelf in the corner of the dining room where I would have groped with my fingers in my progress from crawling, to standing, to toddling. The shelf, to the bible, to the chair. The first book I heard read aloud was also a bible. I heard it read in church, and at home. Yes, read in German.

We were a family of readers. My father read a variety of newspapers, Mennonite as well as secular. Evenings and Sundays. Days he couldn't work. He sat in the large cushioned chair in the living room. Sometimes his glasses slipped down his nose and he fell asleep.

My mother read letters. At the dining room table, with a writing pad at her right hand. Letters from her brother. From her nieces. From uncles and aunts. From friends. All those letters from Manitoba.

My sisters read too, in their bedrooms. Lying in bed with their heads propped on one elbow. Story after story, book after book. Passing from sister, to sister, to sister. My one brother didn't read. The books I grew up with were all for advanced readers. I don't remember children's picture books at all. I was the youngest, and I felt crazy sometimes finding everyone's nose pressed to a collection of papers.

I was crazy to learn how to read. Even before I started off to school. Once I memorized the letters I could sound the words off of the page. After that I only needed practise. I practiced. Sometimes my sisters helped me. I learned to skip the words I didn't know; I became a reader. After a while even the difficult words began to make sense.

I read Hardy Boys. I read Nancy Drew. I read Rin Tin Tin. Even Danny Orlis. My elementary school kept three shelves of books in the front of each classroom. I read those. In Grade 2, I read the Grade 4 books; in Grade 4, I read Grade 6 books. *My Friend Flicka*. *Call of the Wild*. *Black Beauty*. Any book with a dog or horse in it was sure to catch my attention. My teachers sent me to the principal's office to borrow her books. She kept a few bookshelves of her own. *White Fang*. *Treasure Island*. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

I read at night before I went to bed. And I read under the bedcovers with a flashlight. I read at school when I tired of the teacher, a book hidden on my lap. Remember my poor listening skills. I got in trouble for that. Some commandment or other. I tried to read at supper but my father threatened to strap me. Sometimes I snuck a book into church and read there. A risky thing to do.

I read. I devoured books. And each book I opened seemed to take me one step farther from the family bible. Reading *is* dangerous.

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Now the **Daniel** lecture.

When that old family Bible poked its covers from the dust a few months ago, I felt as though I'd been struck by lightning. When I left home in my late teens to attend school in Manitoba I left everything behind. I left my family behind. I left my Mennonite culture behind. And I certainly left the bible behind. I felt that Mennonites had fallen from their original

understanding of the bible anyway, that they'd betrayed the Bible.

When I arrived in Manitoba I met Margaret Laurence. Well, I didn't meet her, but I met her books, that was powerful enough. I don't know how that happened. Those books seemed to fall like manna from heaven. They appeared under Christmas trees. They fell from birthday boxes. They seemed to show up everywhere.

Ask any Canadian reader what her first Canadian reading experience was? Ask any Canadian reader of the seventies who his favourite Canadian author was? I imagine most of them would answer, Margaret Laurence. Everyone read Margaret Laurence. We have one Canada before Laurence, and another Canada after Laurence. The time after Laurence's earliest publications brought an explosion of Canadian writing. When I read Laurence I felt like someone had stuck a needle in my spine.

Margaret Laurence, I say, was our Canadian writing mother. Like babies, we cut our teeth on the pages of her stories. Like Rachel, in *A Jest of God*, we came of age and found a fragile selfhood. Like Stacey, in *The Fire-Dwellers*, we were trapped, imprisoned. We burned and battled to escape. Like Vanessa, in *A Bird in the House*, we explored the cruelty and the sorrow of our childhoods. With Hagar, *The Stone Angel*, we fought and bled for love. Laurence's truth in parable and paradox, in images and stories. Those stories, we discovered, told the stories of our lives. Stories full of broken commandments, they told the story of my life.

With Laurence we Canadian readers abandoned more practical lives to become writers. Margaret Laurence told the Canadian story. And Margaret Laurence gave us a voice. In 1981 words came to me in my sleep. Out of the dark night, in 1981 I began to write.

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Robert Kroetsch again:

*How do you grow a poet?*

*This is a prairie road.  
This road is the shortest distance  
Between nowhere and nowhere.  
This road is a poem.*

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## A lecture of **Lamentations**.

What is it that separates one particular family member from all the others? That causes one sibling to leave all that he knows, to run off and live two thousand kilometres from the rest of the family? To leave his culture and place of origin, while his siblings remain comfortably settled in church and community? What is it pulls or pushes him away? He, or she. Turns one sibling into a poet, while the rest of the family remain teachers, accountants, housewives. This one always choosing the contrary.

If you've travelled in sheep country. Iceland. South Africa. If you've travelled in sheep country, you've no doubt noticed. A flock of a hundred or two white sheep. And there, lost, but conspicuous, in the middle of the flock, one shrill black sheep.

When I was a boy I told my mother I thought even Hindus, if they were good Hindus, should be allowed into heaven. I suppose I meant if they obeyed the commandments. I thought she might be pleased with my generosity. She wasn't. Our church at home sent missionaries off to India to evangelize these Hindus, to turn them from their pagan ways. To make them Christian. Hindus in heaven? A dreadful heresy, in a childhood where even Catholics or Lutherans wouldn't be granted that privilege. I don't know where I came up with such an idea. Maybe I'd gone to church once too often.

The family black sheep. Where does the black sheep event come from? Is it genetics? Is it DNA? Is it normal? Is it aberrant? (*Aberant*) Is there one moment in childhood when the course of the black sheep child's life changes? The sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.

Psychology texts define the black sheep as the member of a rigidly triangulated family who holds the rest together by being identified as the bad/sick/deviant one. The one who causes all the family problems. And the family rule enforcer is charged with the job of keeping the black sheep in line. From revealing the family secrets.

Ah, the family secrets.

I don't imagine many of you are poker players. John Silveira, a poker player, writes in his poker notes. (Yes, on the internet.) Every poker game needs a black sheep. He's the one who makes the rest of the poker players get along. Without a black sheep the game falls apart.

In praise of black sheep!

Obviously a dark-wooled ruminant himself, Silveira goes on. There are benefits for black sheep, he writes, stepping from poker to everyday. They have the freedom to do whatever they



want, to be whoever they want to be. And they're always the centre of attention to their concerned families.

The pariah status of the black sheep, says the Globe and Mail, is undergoing an image makeover. Hordes of amateur genealogists today surf websites like Ancestry.com to dig up notorious relatives. Black sheep, says Tyler Schulze the originator of Blacksheepancestors.com. Black sheep, he says, can make the family tree so much more appealing.

And the Isaiah lecture. I begged my father for a horse but he wouldn't buy me one. If we're going to keep a horse we need a pasture, he said. He meant that our farm wasn't big enough for horses.

I told him that our old horse, Molly, didn't have a pasture. Remember? I said. Before we sent her for glue? My dad must have forgotten and now he needed to think of a new excuse. Or, I said, we could pull out a few of those old peach trees. We could plant a pasture. I hated peach trees anyway.

And who's going to take care of it? my father said. And who's going to pay for it? The horse? And the feed?

I will, I said. I'll take care of it. I'll get a job, and I'll pay for it.

Some people the other side of Virgil kept a red pony and they said I could borrow him. I bicycled three miles to their house on Saturday. I saddled and bridled Red. I stretched out the stirrups. I led him out of the barn and got on his back. The owners had warned me. As soon as I got on his back, Red tried to lie down and roll over. This was his trick but it didn't work with me. I poked him with my heels and pulled up the reins. And then Red and I went for a ride. We went riding with Paul and Lady. Sometimes we took beans and wieners so we could stop near the railroad track for a cookout.

Every Saturday that Red tried his trick on me; he never quit trying. Stubborn old Red. But it didn't work, even once. I rode him till my legs almost dragged on the ground. I told my uncles he was a Welsh pony. I said, Welsh ponies are bigger than Shetlands. They said, maybe he's Welsh, and maybe your legs are far too short for a real horse. They teased me because I looked so big on Red's back.

I started back up on my dad again; I told him I needed my own horse to ride.

I recounted this story for my partner and she thought about it for a while. In integral thinking, she said finally, the horse is a poem. Is that what you wanted me to say?

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## A lecture of the **Song of Solomon**.

Sometime in 1981 or 82, I wrote my first poem. It wasn't so much that I decided to write a poem. Though I admit I harboured a secret wish to turn my pen to something that could be read by others. But it wasn't a decision; to sit down and write a poem. Finally, to become a writer. I couldn't even imagine the career of writer as a possibility. I'm not sure I can imagine it now.

You probably all know the Charles Dickens line: *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times*. In my case that wasn't so. It was clearly the worst of times. The early 80s. A time of confusion and trauma. I had relationship trouble. I'm sure you'd delight in the details but I'll save them for another time—they're rather clichéd in any case. And in my relationship turmoil, I began to wake in the middle of the night with phrases and sentences on my tongue. I know—silly as it sounds, it begs the notion of the biblical prophet, of divine inspiration. At least for someone with my upbringing. And I confess I was tempted to that notion.

I'd wake in the morning, having forgotten my visions, and feel I'd lost something valuable. This message from beyond. What were those words? What did they mean? I began to keep pencil and notepad beside my bed. When I woke in the dark night I'd scribble a few words on the paper. I'd sleep, and wake again. Scribble again. In my waking free-time I began to organize those scribbles, to pair them, and move them around on the page. I'd hardly even read poetry, but now I had the gall to write it. A time of foolishness. Lots of troubled sleep, lots of scribbling. Soon I had lots of poems.

I packaged some thirty of them and took them to a writer-friend of mine, a professor at the university. He said he'd be happy to look at them and asked me to come back in a week.

I did. I came back a week later. He said, John, it's great you've become a poet but these are terrible poems. So much for the notion of divine inspiration. He dictated a long list of poets to read. B.P. Nichol, Michael Ondaatje, Phyllis Webb. Cummings, Whitman, Dickenson. Zwicky and Atwood. The list read on and on.

He said my poems were too abstract, that he needed my language to be more physical. I didn't even know what he meant. He said he didn't want me ever to use the word lonely in a poem again. He said if I wanted to write about loneliness I should set a man eating his dinner at the kitchen table, and then place an empty chair across from him. That's how you write about loneliness, he said. Or write about a light bulb, he said, hanging in the middle of an empty room. He talked about physicality, about images. I puzzled about that for the next few years.

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Physical poems. Robert Kroetsch again:

*How do you grow a poet?*

*Son, this is a crowbar.  
This is a willow fencepost.  
This is a sledge.  
This is a roll of barbed wire.  
This is a bag of staples.  
This is a claw hammer.*

\* \* \*

The lecture of **Ecclesiastes**.

If you look at the writing of Eduardo Galeano in *Memory of Fire*, or Kristjana Gunnars in *The Prowler*, or Dany LaFerrière in *An Aroma of Coffee*; you see a prose that tells its story in fragments. Short chapters of a page, or a half-page, even a quarter-page. Hundreds of short chapter fragments. A book-length collection of them.

You notice the leap from one story fragment to another, one thought to the next; and wonder about connecting syntax. You wonder about the absence of explanation, of the lettered bridge of bones that would trace the evolution of a story from the first fragment to the second. From the second to the third, and so on. You wonder about a missing link. You notice the reticence of plot and storyline. As if the story, after a paragraph or two, loses its way. As if it needs to take its first steps over and over. To always begin again. As if the writer were more concerned with beginnings than connections and conclusions, than with meaning.

My partner asks about this. Remember her concern for interrelatedness, for the connection between things. We're out for Ethiopian food; lamb and lentils, injera, wat and tibs. No forks or knives. Fun to eat that way, with your fingers. Why, she says, lifting a handful of chicken. Why do writers do this? This scattered kind of writing. Why don't they tell the whole story?

Maybe our writers have had too many difficult days at the computer, or notepad, and grown lazy; Gunnars, and Galeano, La Ferrière. Too lazy to write the fillers their fragments require, to engrave connecting paragraphs. Their eyes hurt, their wrists and elbows. Or maybe they're too much the poet, envisioning each paragraph of prose as a complete work in itself, begging no

explanation. Do they feel that their writing best reflects the nature of our lives, fragmentary, and inconclusive? Or that the notion of neatly intertwined warp and weft, of complete and chronicled tapestry, is too fixed for the range of their experience?

The connecting paragraph, our writers seem to say, draws conclusions and interpretations too easily, too tightly; where the absence of connector allows more subtlety and a greater complexity of meaning, even paradox. They seem to question the very idea of genre, creating a text that defies convention and definition. Perhaps they place both themselves and the reader in the gap between stories; an invitation to discovery, to question, and imagination. The body of the reader drawn into the gap between story fragments. Perhaps they enjoy the honesty of revealing the holes in their stories and lives. Perhaps, since everything's interrelated anyway, they feel they don't need to bother with the obvious. Or perhaps they resist the literalists and the concrete of their Holy Scripture.

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The **Esther** lecture.

This horse was named Lady, and she was a crazy horse for sure. She never stopped dancing and prancing, frothing at the mouth. She wanted to run. She lived to run.

Paul said I could take her for a ride so I slow-galloped her down a gravel road a couple miles from home. Nice day for a ride. The spring sun above. The breeze against my face and chest. The squeal of the saddle. My boots. And me, on a full-sized horse. I wished my school friends could see me. My uncles too.

I say a slow-gallop down the gravel road. It was more a demented and dancing spiral. Foam slashing from her mouth. Feet lifted high, and neck arched. This crazy horse. The reins in my hand stretch tight as guitar strings. She wouldn't tire, and she wouldn't settle down. I thought I'd give her a taste of what she wanted. I gave her a bit more rein.

Have you ever ridden a quarter horse? The fastest creature in the quarter mile. From dancing circle to full speed in about two and a half seconds. Gawd! That was Lady. After a hundred yards, she only seemed to run harder. Faster and faster still. I pulled on the reins and leaned back to stop her, but she wouldn't stop. Lady ran. I sawed back and forth on her bridle. She ran. The road she ran on had deep ditches either side or I would have turned and raced her in a big circle round a field.

I got scared, there was a paved road crossing about a mile ahead. Reins, I knew, could be torn, and that would surely be the end of me. I didn't dare pull back any harder. I decided I'd wear her out—I leaned forward and dug my heels into her ribs. I might have prayed too. I don't know if you've ever been on a runaway horse, but it's a sensation like no other.

I finally did manage to get her stopped. More accurately, she managed finally to wear herself out. Lucky the road was long enough. But when I got off her back my knees shook so I could hardly stand.

That Lady horse didn't bow to holy scripture, mine, or my Dad's, or anybody's. She was her own scripture. I wasn't her lord at all, but she was mine. The smell of her. I loved that horse, and she terrified me. I'd never been so frightened in my life.

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The lecture of **Job**.

I have an apple story to tell you. I know what you're thinking, but you're wrong. This story has nothing to do with nakedness, or almost nothing. And there's no snake in the story. Unless you read the physical manifestation of the strap as a snake.

It wasn't that difficult to get the strap at my house. I don't know about my siblings, my friends, and I don't know about you in your childhood; but I got the strap quite often enough. My father kept a piece of gray buffalo leather in the basement. An inch wide, twenty-four inches long, a quarter inch thick. My sisters and I agreed it was buffalo because of the way it stung. Buffalo must surely sting more than cow.

The apple? One of those green apples, the Granny Smith kind. The soil on our farm wasn't much good for growing apples, but we traded each year. Peaches for a bushel of apples. With a farmer living closer to the Niagara Escarpment where apples flourished.

My father found a Granny Smith apple in the orchard with three small bites out of it. Child-sized bites. And he took us all, his children, into the basement and lined us up, oldest to youngest, against the wall. Our basement always smelled damp and mouldy. It was dark, and the ceiling hung low.

He asked my brother. Did you take a bite out of this apple and throw it in the orchard?

My brother said, No.

He asked the sister who was next. Did you take a bite out of the apple and throw it in the orchard?

My sister said, No.

He asked the next two sisters. They said, No.

I was last. My father asked me. Did you take a bite out of an apple and throw it in the orchard?

The temptation was great. Or maybe I really hadn't done it—I don't like Granny Smith apples to this day. Did I throw that apple in the orchard after tasting it? The temptation was too great. No! I said. I thought it would work but maybe my hands were shaking.

I was the one who got the strap. One for wasting an apple and two for lying. It was probably a test anyway. I can't remember which commandment that was. I hadn't stolen anything.

One Sunday I got the strap because I refused to pray. We had company, all of us sitting round the table ready to eat. No apples on the table anywhere. My father asked me to pray, just a simple verse we always used. I shook my head.

I must have been angry with him; he must have said something to make me mad. Maybe I felt shy because of the company. He asked again. I just turned, lowered my eyes, and stared at the floor. I don't know how I dared. Then he took me in the basement where I lowered my pants and bent over so he could thrash me. Honour thy father and thy mother.

That day I learned that my father ruled not only my hands and feet, what I did; but even my mouth, the sounds I made. He seemed always to have his big blacksmith hand on the back of my neck; for steering, and control.

I need to confess that I've been lying to you. That business of the girlfriend, the woman partner, who keeps showing up in these notes—I confess that she's pure fiction. I'm as single today as the day I was born. And the business with the two cents and ten cents, I'm not sure that's accurate either. It might have been one and five. Nor the dimensions of the buffalo leather. The runaway horse was true enough. Though I can't remember whether I really did lean forward and give her the heels to make her run faster. But it's a good story that way. And the twenty-four lectures for this evening. Another fabrication. Telling lies. Breaking commandments, you see how easy it is. If you start young, and once it catches in your blood.

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Robert Kroetsch writes in his *Manifesto*:

*I became a writer many times. One of the first times I became a writer*

*had a great deal to do with not being tall enough to see. I had to reach with my right hand, blindly, into a holy water font.*

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A lecture called **Revelation**.

A curious thing happened when my father died. In North American culture, the stereotype suggests, when parents die, all their grown children get together to quarrel about furniture, and dishes. About family heirlooms. About money. Who gets what. It doesn't seem to matter what the will says. In some cases, what the will says only makes the bickering worse.

Among my siblings, I'm sure this post-funeral process of dividing the remains of my mother and father's life together was a relatively simple one. I say I'm sure. I don't know because, being the black sheep of the family, I wasn't there. When my father died at 92—my mother having died twenty years earlier—he still lived on his own in a small apartment in Niagara. And he left only a few small rooms of belongings. My father wasn't a collector. There wasn't much to argue about. And nothing of value. Hardly a couch, or a dresser, that anybody wanted.

There were hundred pound bags of flour and rice in the back storage. My father, in his teens, endured the famine in Ukraine following the Russian Revolution. He always thought about backup. But this rice now was infested with bugs, as was the flour, and nobody wanted them either. I wasn't there, and neither was my dad, to remind them that, should famine come, they'd be happy to eat rice, bugs and all.

When the rest of my father's possessions had been divided, after a few hours I imagine, they came to the two family bibles. Large books both of them, one English and scarcely used, the other German. And I suppose, suddenly realizing that with everything divided they'd forgotten to leave anything for the prodigal, my siblings decided to send the bibles to me.

Imagine my surprise! And they all churchgoers and practising Christians. They didn't want the bibles, those symbols of their belief. Now, I hear your mental gears churning. I hear them working, grinding. You think it was a kind of manipulation, a hope that they would somehow, by sending me the bibles, turn me from my ungodly ways. But I choose not to think so. I think they recognized that in my appreciation for books, for word, for text, in my vocation as writer, I would have more use for the two family bibles than any of them.

And so these two bibles have come to rest on my bookshelves. And some days I take them

from my library to look up a story. When some biblical character appears in my dreams. Demands to enter my I'm writing. The story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. The story of Noah and the flood. The story of Ruth. I look up the narrative. I compare the nuance of language or translation. I wonder at its images.

I'm always looking up favourite stories. Stories by Alice Munro. Or Cormac McCarthy. By Isabel Allende and Carol Shields. I look for technical solutions to my own writing problems. I look for images. I look for hope. Is this a story of redemption, or a story of despair.

These bibles still resting on my bookshelves. Symbols of my culture of origin and, I suppose, symbols of my current culture. No longer the sacred texts they once were, but symbols for all that's sacred in text and story, symbols for the holiness of story. There they lie, two bibles on my bookshelves, with all those other books.

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And finally the lecture called **Judith**.

Why do we tell these stories? Why do people tell so many stories? Why do we gather round the fire? Or the kitchen table, or the bar, to talk? Why do children find joy, or comfort, in their parents' histories? Tell me about when you were little. Why does the room go quiet and everyone lean forward to catch the words?

My grandfather, when he reached the age of ten in Scotland, chased all his older brothers over the ravine...

The sky turned dark. All the farmer's chickens came to roost in the middle of the afternoon...

My great aunt, Matilda, in Australia thought she was a kangaroo. She sewed herself a pouch for her belly and started off to hatch a tail...

And the band played Waltzing Matilda...

Stories, imagined, or remembered, if there's really any difference. The world bursts with stories, with egg and seed, and people telling. The world lives by story, breathes it, bristles with it. The television. The radio. The library. Computer. The wires and the wind whispering with story. The leaves telling a tale.

Sometimes it can be the wine. Or the moon. The time of day. Sometimes it's love. We call it love. A friend we haven't seen for thirteen years. Someone asks a question: Do you like horses?



Horses! The question bumps me to the back of my chair. And I begin. The story. It's a moment of love, of anger.

Sometimes I wish I could just be healed. Now! Sometimes the anguish is more than I can carry. Why do I tell the story? What would happen if I stopped?

I'm playing with a pail and shovel under the giant willow tree while the cicadas (sicaidas) sing in the branches above. A hot day, sunny, and I pull a story from deep in the sandbox. I wipe it clean, try to, with my hand. Hold it under the spout of the hand pump for water. Wipe again. But the dirt won't wash away.

I wake one morning in a tent in Taman Negara, in the heart of Malaysia, and discover a chronicle standing by the side of the bed. A fabled shape, dark, amorphous, with tentacles. Before I can jump up and chase it away, it speaks to me. Here is the story that story tells.