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IMAGINING A GEOMETRY OF THE SOUL

Abstract

My essay tracks a process whereby, through the interplay of questing and creative activity in my own life I have discovered what I can only call an inner geometry – a kind of constellation of the soul – which mirrors the outer universe.

I begin by establishing a sense of time and place, then move back through memory to enduring images which have echoed, or to which I have been magnetized, throughout my life. The significance of family stories is explored – stories filtered through the magical thinking of childhood, and which later seem impossible to verify.

The dynamic between fact and fiction, biography and autobiography, and the mixing and weaving of these genres, is examined throughout, exemplified in part by the works of Franz Kafka, W. G. Sebald, and Primo Levi. The roles of imagination and of research are discussed in the context of my own novels, and of travel seen as soul retrieval journeys to places of irresistible inspiration. A contrast between the virtual and the actual runs through the essay, ultimately suggesting a paradoxical and irreconcilable universe fraught with bewildering concepts which crumble in the face of human experience, and recognized partly as a legacy of World War II, and partly as a consequence of the manifestation of technology in everyday life.

The concept of a “geometry of the soul” is discussed, suggesting a dual process of soul-making and soul-guidance as a collaboration between the temporal self and an enduring part of the self. (For the technologically minded, soul-guidance can equally be seen as a GPS [global positioning system], plugged into one’s car).

The historical span of the essay runs from the European Renaissance, focusing primarily on the post WWII period, in which I grew up, with its increasingly rapid rate of change. The nascent 21st century is revealed as a time of intense inquiry wherein the mixing of literary genres mirrors a global dialectic which struggles eternally towards the ideal of unification.

Key words

Technology; geometry; memory; imagination; fiction; soul; travel; prison; story-telling; Chaos Theory; writing from the body; Franz Kafka; W. G. Sebald;

Ralph Abraham; Anna Lanyon; Andreas Vesalius; Primo Levi; World War II; Renaissance; Prague; Berlin; Manchester; Terezín

Anything vividly imagined becomes inseparable from reality.

–Wilder Penfield

Fiction results from imagination working on experience.

–Ursula LeGuin

Fiction reveals truth that reality obscures.

–Ralph Waldo Emerson

I sit at my desk to begin a story I have been moving towards all my life. Under my fingers a laptop computer – to my left the Salish Sea stretching north to the Pacific Ocean, ahead of me, through the window, a woodshed built with a friend now dead in a car accident. To the right are stairs leading to a loft bedroom and on the red wall a three inch square image – a river spanned by bridges, mist rising – a gift from a friend who wishes me to become intimate with a landscape dear to her. I live on an island in a community of 800 people in the gulf between Vancouver Island and the British Columbia mainland. Our island is part of the Wrangellia arc which began as molten lava south of the equator 350 million years ago and travelled north on the back of the Pacific Plate, reaching the latitude of present-day Mexico about 170 million years ago. Volcanic eruptions formed the island's bedrock – pebbled conglomerate from the tumbling hillsides, honey-combed limestone gathered on the continuing journey north – until 10,000 years ago, the receding seas began to reveal the island. Vegetation sprouted and by 5,000 years ago indigenous coastal people had begun to populate the island. These are “facts,” read in authoritative pages footnoted with sources. As I walk the seashore do my feet feel where the stones have been, how the land was formed?

I lied. I write this in Toronto in a room in a house in Wychwood Park high above the city which slopes down to Lake Ontario, and when I walk here there is sandy soil beneath my feet, from the receded shores of the lake. I live in many places, all my thoughts and feelings stored inside a technological rectangle which travels with me and is my portal. It is my most valued possession, a container for my life, like my body. So, although I lie, there is a paradox. It is indeed true that the sea is to my left, the woodshed in front, reminding me of the dead, the stairs rising to my dreamspace – a panoply of images and the sound of the waves inside me wherever I am.

The Wired Boy: Somewhere in my youth an image entered me – I believe it came from a radio play about a boy alone in a room, bound to a chair, his hands on the arms of the chair, his feet firmly planted a foot apart, his head connected by wires to a machine. He was motionless, an expression of ecstasy on his face, or perhaps if not ecstasy then something so totally absorbing, so com-

pletely concentrated that there might be no other word for it. Perhaps he was in the grip of something much larger than himself, something painful that could not be denied or broken from. We could call it addiction, or sexual ecstasy which so much resembles pain. The radio play was about a boy hooked to a machine that perpetually stimulated the pleasure centre of his brain. I don't know what the larger picture was, who controlled the boy, who had put him there, why, for what purpose (as most people do not comprehend the larger picture, or who or what controls them), but the image of this boy is etched on my imaginative memory. And as Wilder Penfield says, "Anything vividly imagined becomes inseparable from reality." I have remembered him often as our world has moved increasingly into the technological and thus virtual. He struck me I suppose because to a child ecstasy must involve movement, sound, all the senses engaged in running and laughing, breathless with joy, thirsty for life – and this boy was motionless, all the life inside him contained in the silence of his corpse-like body. *Pure* pleasure. He struck me too, and I felt akin to him because he was, at least outwardly, a mirror for myself, a child stunted into silence, obedience.

My sister at age 72 tells a story of us four siblings in Kendall's department store in Manchester with our mother. She herded us into a corner and said, "Stand still, and don't talk to anyone till I come back." This was a familiar command. When she returned we were taken for lunch. In the restaurant a friend of the family came over with her own children and our mother talked with them while we remained silent. Afterwards she reprimanded us, said how ashamed she was of our social ineptness. "That silence and stillness always live in me," my sister says, despite the fact that she chatters and bustles constantly, a vibrant woman who has fought to revive her repressed life. But that's another story, serving only to emphasize that there is always more than one way of dealing with a deep impression – as in Franz Kafka's story, *In The Penal Colony*, where a machine, theoretically speaking, writes a man to death, the lesson engraved on his body by many needles until it penetrates his soul in the final realization of death, although it is all hearsay and the machine when put to the test breaks down and mangles its victim without the hoped-for transformation. My own version of our childhood lesson came in a dream some years ago. We four were seated around the kitchen table, our mother hovering over us. It was our brother's birthday. Mum bound our mouths with cloth soaked in lighter fluid, then she struck a match and lit each of us, like candles on a cake. Some time later, when the cloth came off, our lips were permanently sealed with scar tissue. What impressed me about this dream was the anger I felt from my brother after our silencing, and how personally I took it. Why was he angry with me? What could I, the youngest, have done?

My father, a faithful member of the British Union of Fascists, spent the war years in prison, part of it in solitary confinement, leading the virtual life of sensory deprivation. Perhaps that is why prison culture, and how I imagine it, has always held sway over me. He was absent, so I had to imagine him and, so it seemed to me, I was there with him in his prison cell. The command to be still and silent helped to transport me to my father's side, and though he was released

after the war he lives there eternally in my imagination. Boarding school too seemed a form of prison – three month sentences with intermittent paroles – lasting a total of five years. I always wanted to be free – it was a goal to be magically fulfilled somewhere in the future. When I began to write at age 28, during my first year of university, it was a painful though passionate process. I was confused by my own persistence in the excruciating writing and re-writing of the stage plays with which I began my writing career. I had early recognition with the Board of Governors' medal for drama in university, a one-act play staged in Montréal, a teaching post at Concordia University, and establishing a theatre company with a collective in Toronto. My pain was alleviated by intermittent border-crossings into the world of visual art. I had a visa and travelled back and forth for many years. Finally, over the course of two wet winters in my island retreat, I retrained myself and learned, through a series of exercises from writers' self-help books, to enjoy writing, or at least to manoeuvre my way around the pain sufficiently to follow my passion at a brisk trot. I designed a course based on my experience of liberation and called it *Writing From The Body*. I have been teaching this course for many years. It is what brought me to the Czech Republic to teach at Masaryk University, leading the students to encounter their inner critic and form an alliance with him/her before embarking on a journey within to visit the compost pile of experience, sifting through memory, searching in the shadows for clues in a collective journey of reconstruction and transformation. We write of our greatest sorrows, of secrets that have never been told, we stir memory and where we can't remember we imagine, discovering that indeed we often know more than we think we know as "imagined" material proves to be reclaimed memory. This knowledge, stored in the body, will out in one way or another – in dreams, in "fiction," in spontaneous writing, as we work to escape the control of the censorious mind. We engage, through writing, with family characters, drawing on the knowledge of ancestors and of all the writers who have gone before. As Margaret Atwood notes in *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, each time we sit down to our lonely task we are in fact engaging with a vast community of souls.

During the Renaissance, on the verge of a new age of scientific proof and materialism, anatomists searched for the soul as a vital organ, but it has remained elusive as one of those mysterious concepts which defy consensual definition, so in speaking of the soul I must clarify (in a necessarily speculative manner) that what I think of is that part of us which endures, perhaps from one life to another, gathering experience, burning karma – or a lingering presence, a perfume remaining in the world when someone dies, a long shadow cast in the haunting of a place dwelt in intensely – or a manifestation in the memories and lives of those who allow the dead to live through them by remembering them, imitating them, or speaking for them. The soul is seen variously from a theological perspective as the enduring spirit of the disembodied dead or, according to the Kabbalah, as a gradual emergence of spiritual force accompanying the development of altruistic desires and belief in a divine creator, while Thomas Moore writes in *Care of the Soul*:

We know intuitively that soul has to do with genuineness and depth, as when we say certain music has soul or a remarkable person is soulful. When you look closely at the image of soulfulness, you see that it is tied to life in all its particulars – good food, satisfying conversation, genuine friends, and experiences that stay in the memory and touch the heart. Soul is revealed in attachment, love, and community, as well as in retreat on behalf of inner communing and intimacy. (1992: xi-xii)

Moore also comments, interestingly, that, “[d]efinition is an intellectual enterprise anyway: the soul prefers to imagine” (1992: xi-xii).

There’s travel, there’s tourism, and there are pilgrimages. Travel is for me an urgent, deeply desired adventure. I am drawn to particular places at specific times, and I’ve realized in retrospect that my travels have been pilgrimages – soul retrieval journeys which have inspired novels. In 1996 I travelled to Rose Harbour on the southern tip of Haida Gwaii in northern British Columbia, first stop on a ten-week journey to the Yukon and Alaska (a journey which took me north of Dawson City, along the Dempster Highway towards Inuvik, until snow at the end of August forced me to turn my truck and head south on the Alaska Highway). I went to Rose Harbour to visit a friend who lives on the site of the whaling station which closed during World War II when the Japanese were interned. The station could not run without the Japanese flensers, the men who make the first cut with their long flensing knives. Haida Gwaii is powerful and magical, shrouded in mist, intensely atmospheric, and Rose Harbour is a particularly haunted place. The land rising from the harbour holds the bloody history of a whaling station where butchery, murder and horrific accidents were commonplace. I walked the shores of the former station where 80 or so early 20th century Japanese and Chinese immigrants earned their keep in hell. I identified the foundations of each building – bunkhouses, haul-up slips, rendering vats, bone-storage sheds. I had no intention of writing a novel. The first character who came was Yamamoto Kazuo, followed by Lee Sun, then Nora Slaney, the manager’s grief-ridden wife, distraught after the death of her four-year-old son. I wrote in my journal, my own words, as I thought. It was only when I returned home, fleeing the early snow, and read my full notebook that I realized I was writing a novel, that I had been entrusted with stories of such deep and unresolvable suffering that they had to be told. My own unresolved grief resonated with that of the former inhabitants of the whaling station, and drew me like an iron filing to a magnet. *Sounding the Blood* is shelved as Canadian west coast historical literary fiction. My name is on the cover, but the story is told by ghosts speaking through the voice of the land. There were times when my fingers couldn’t type fast enough to record the movie that unreeled in my “imagination.” When I returned to Rose Harbour two years into the writing I became disoriented as I walked the landscape where I had been living in my imagination. I was unable to find certain places that I had imagined to be there, which I “remembered.” There was a disconnect between memory and imagination – I had crossed a border of no return – I was lost. It was

a disturbing experience for a first-time novelist until I learned that many writers experience this phenomenon. I was not alone. Joan Goddard, the grand-daughter of the former manager of Rose Harbour whaling station, was spooked by my novel. “How did you know all this?” she asked, of my fictional account of a family based on her own. I came to realize the peculiar collaboration I was involved in, with the land, with the dead, and with the power of my own imagination. I was seeking resolution for people who had died without giving voice to their lives, engaged in imagining what I could not remember but felt so strongly as I walked the blood-soaked earth of Rose Harbor, part of the Wrangellia arc.

In earlier days I had travelled to Mexico and Guatemala, had become involved with Guatemalan refugees in Toronto during the 1980s and had later formed a close relationship with a Mayan family in Vancouver, so it was no surprise when Paméla walked into my second novel (already well under way), complete with her own historical sub-plot starring Hernando Cortés and Malinche, his translator and mistress. Paméla, a Mayan adoptee, raised in Toronto and on a quest to Guatemala to search for her birth-mother, jumped the queue, insisting that I tell her story in what became *The Reddening Path*. She is a fictional character (though her story has become a familiar one with the growth of international adoption), but Paméla, arriving in Guatemala City for the first time, discovers a real place – a convent where her mother lived while pregnant, a hotel where I myself stayed, the national palace where she finds her mother living in a secret apartment with the General. She visits the office of a woman that I visited and questioned, as Paméla questions her – factual research embedded within a fictional framework.

Neither imagination nor fiction is pure, nor are they what we have come to think they are. There is much to react to in a world full of urgent messages which render us fearful, guilty, desperate, doomed, yet ever hopeful that someone (else) will do something. While we wait with Leonard Cohen for “the miracle to come,” the reality is that what we anticipate has already happened. During the rapid changes of the past century the nature of everything has changed. Our environment is in a crisis caused partly by a way of living reliant on the technology which has changed us irrevocably (Beneath my fingers a technological rectangle studded with letters – portal on the world). Every change *feels* like a crisis, but in effect the crisis is over and we are tilting at windmills. Everything must be reassessed in the scramble to catch up with a situation that already exists whilst governments ponderously anticipate it. As writers we respond instinctively to our environment, walking the frontier between what, according to the marketplace, are two separate countries, fact and fiction, but which are in reality one continent with an ever-diminishing border as they realize their relationship. Fact and fiction are the blood of conjoined twins, pumped by two hearts through one body. The reason for drawing the line in the first place (at least as far as the publisher/bookseller world is concerned) – creating genres, labels, categories – is to conform to a marketplace which must know on which shelf to place a book. In most bookstores the sections are labelled to guide browsers in their search. Now we gather to explore these boundaries, to analyze them, and perhaps to discover that in many

cases they are false – that our commercially-driven desire to categorize actually dictates and shapes the products to fit those categories. But of course you can never get everyone to conform – the cream will rise. A case in point and a prime example of transgressive writing is W. G. Sebald with his quirky, heartbreaking mix of auto/biography, travel, meditative essay, his exploration of individual and collective memory dotted with unassuming black and white reproductions of archival photographs and postcards. Sebald's genre-indeterminate books, which include *The Emigrants*, *Vertigo*, *The Rings of Saturn*, *Austerlitz*, *On The Natural History of Destruction*, document the devastation of a generation in the wake of World War II. In a world where the truth of human behaviour is revealed as increasingly stranger than fiction the definitions break down. The kind of barbarous cruelty which Sebald examines is not new, but the willing examination of it is, in a time when memory is able to surface finally, exposing our idea of a civilized world as a monstrous fiction. It is not the writers who determine the transgressive structure, but the world we depict. Form must be compatible with content in order to hold it. Transgressions are defined as sins and crimes which overstep the bounds, which are excessive, and which violate laws and offend conventions. According to this definition, we live in a transgressive world. Academia, from the time of Plato, has been a haven for thinkers engaged in the rigorous and timely examination of what might be an enduring truth about the human species. Do we find within a transgressive structure a paradoxical, time-dependent truth?

After *The Reddening Path* was published I returned to Guatemala City to thank the people who had helped me. Although I had an experience similar to my Rose Harbor dissonance, this time I was familiar with the syndrome. An important part of this journey was to visit Herlindo Hicho in whose home I had stayed in 1988, sleeping in the room of Irma Marilú, his disappeared daughter. Herlindo had spent his life working with a human rights group in the city, searching for his daughter, but her continued disappearance over a period of 19 years had defeated him. He died unexpectedly, the same day that I left Guatemala. I will never forget him, standing at the bus-stop, waving goodbye to me. We must travel in order to find certain people with whom, it seems, we have karmic appointments, people who impress us so strongly that we are moved forward in the discovery of something vital yet indefinable. From Guatemala I travelled to Mexico where I visited La Iglesia de Jesús Nazareno, a church close to the central Zócalo. The church is built on the site of the Jesus Hospital, one of the first hospitals built in “the new world,” by Cortés for his wounded men. To the left of the altar the bones of Hernando Cortés are immured, invisible except for a small plaque to indicate their placement. He was real and as I stood before the plaque I believed that his bones were indeed in the wall behind it. It was, I felt, a place of resonance. Paméla stands there too and has a bitter epiphany about her true patrimony as she begins to understand the bloody foundation of her newly discovered heritage. But perhaps I lie to you. One of multiple web search results informs me that in August 1882 there was a proposal to move Cortés' remains from the church and place them next to those of heroes of the Mexican War of Independence, but that

this caused an uproar with attempts to desecrate his tomb, so his remains were removed to a secret secure site. What is true and what is false? And how can we know in the midst of an information deluge? Perhaps the (mis)information regarding Cortes' bones has acted as a placebo for Paméla's epiphany and for my own impression. Which raises the question, does it really matter? Fact or fiction, we are each moved forward on our fool's journey by moments such as this, no bones about it. Outside the church, a little way up the street, is a plaque to mark the meeting place of Cortés and Moctezuma, recorded digitally by so many tourists that they have become a collective eye blinking at the plaque, affirming its veracity. Cortés changed the course of history and was discarded once his mission was complete – a hero unwittingly utilized by the *Weltgeist*, according to Hegelian historical theory, although in practice it was the Spanish king, Emperor Charles V, who passed him over once the conquest was accomplished. Malintzín (the original name of the woman we know as Malinche) is barely mentioned in the history books so of course I had to imagine her until I found Anna Lanyon's well-researched book, *Malinche's Conquest*, which upset my imaginary applecart and necessitated Malintzín's appearance as a ghost through the latter part of my novel. I had written her life well beyond 1528, the date of her early death, provided by Lanyon. Following Lanyon's travels in search of Malintzín, to the Gulf of Tehuantepec where she was born and grew up, I realized that I had been there years before I knew of Malintzín and that the place has remained vivid in my memory with a mysterious question as to what had led me there. Why recall one place over another, why connect a particular thought with a particular place? Is there a geometry of the soul which guides us unconsciously from place to place, gathering into our bodies knowledge which will out in fiction, in one form or another?

When I speak of the geometry of the soul, as opposed to a geography or landscape which might be more defined, I think of a limitless expanse of interconnecting points, such as one might imagine of a harmonizing universe connecting the astronomical world with the terrestrial (as above so below), and the musical harmonic scale with the planets in a repetitive and perfectly ordered, though apparently chaotic, pattern of eternal recurrence. Ralph Abraham, Professor of Mathematics at the University of California at Santa Cruz (known for his contribution to chaos theory and its applications in numerous fields including medical physiology, ecology, mathematical economics and psychotherapy), has worked with mathematics and computers to create a surprising order out of chaos, an order which reveals, "a miraculous advance in the capability of mathematics to represent our metaphysical experience where words fail" (Abraham 1991). Through a synthesis of information using math and computer technology Abraham concludes that, without the necessity of understanding each other's separate models, we will be able to understand their union in a technological synthesis, "a virtual reality which is our construction and which is the genius of our time and our science and technology" (Abraham 1991). Geometry is defined as "[t]he branch of mathematics that deals with the deduction of the properties, measurement,

and relationships of points, lines, angles, and figures in space from their defining conditions by means of certain assumed properties of space” (“Definition of Geometry”). I never excelled in mathematics, but I do think of the exercise books we pored over as children, connecting dots on a night-sky page which eventually revealed a familiar image. (Another favorite of mine was the page permeated with invisible color which appeared magically, defining an image, as one applied a wet paintbrush to the paper – cheap magic is enough for children, still too sensitive to bear the beauty of sophistication. Perhaps the Kabbalists are right when they say that the soul emerges over time.) And how do we connect the dots of the soul? What indeed are we here for if not to walk around, interact with other people, tell stories?

The facts – Cortés met Malinche, she translated for him, they became lovers and had a child, he betrayed her and married her off to Juan Jaramillo, then took their bastard son from her and sent him to Spain. With these scant pegs I have held down my elaborate fantasy of the inner lives of these two dead people, their whispered words as they lay together, their fights over the fate of their son, their individual dreams and passions – all conjecture, truth seeking, sense making – a hybrid shelter which I dreamed beneath, pacing its perimeter, panicked as I realized my arrogance in entering into the intimate lives of real historical personages, knowing well that *once imagined, a story becomes inseparable from reality*. A woman came to my market stall to buy an audiobook of *The Reddening Path* for her hospitalized father. She thought it was non-fiction, a true story of an adopted girl. When I told her it was fiction she exclaimed, “Oh no! My father only reads non-fiction.” After some discussion she decided to buy the audiobook anyway and I said to her, “Tell your father that there’s really no difference between fact and fiction.”

After I had launched Paméla into the world I returned to that novel which was to become *My Sweet Curiosity*, another quest story, a medical story with a historical sub-plot featuring Andreas Vesalius, long lodged under the lid of a pot on my imaginative back-burner. As a child, in the fifties, I collected magazine articles about natural childbirth. At age 12 I underwent an appendectomy. Around that time I began to menstruate. I was getting anchored in my body which remained at the centre of my father’s grey prison cell. There is a window there, high up in the stone wall, four iron bars criss-crossing it. There is no glass. The recess reveals the thickness of the stones. I can feel the sun on my face for a brief spell in the late afternoons, but not in summer for the sun is then too high. This is my father’s castle. He is the king, but he is absent. I write of the sun entering the castle because I have today been walking through the house in Toronto where I live temporarily, noticing how the sun enters each room at different times of the day. Sensory experience blends with imagination and with my own vital imagery to create a new room, a virtual room, the one where I reside with my father. I have created this room because I had to. It was the only way to gain access to my father. He is my prisoner, I am his. Some prisoners cannot survive on the outside. They reoffend and return. I am content in this virtual place. It works for me. It makes sense for

me to share his sentence. There is something timeless about the prison cell, the stripped down nature of it, the simplicity of deprivation.

Medical matters have always been vital to me. With my penchant for graveyards and a taste for the macabre, I sent the heroine of *My Sweet Curiosity* on a quest to find Vesalius' grave on the island of Zante. She exhumes his skull and carries it, bundled inside her jacket across what I imagine to be a mythic landscape of olive trees, laurel (the nymph Daphne turned to a tree as she fled from Apollo), and resinous mastic, this landscape being at least generically accurate, because I've been to mainland Greece and several of the islands, though not to Zante. She returns Vesalius' skull to the University of Padua where he'd held the chair of anatomy while dissecting and mapping the body accurately for the first time in history. In the final scenes of the book she stands, as I have stood, in the centre of the operating theatre where Vesalius did his dissections, ringed by tiers of medical students observing the practice. I had myself been on a quest some years previously, to Southport where my father lived out the last years of his life. I walked the Great Orme (a prominent limestone headland on the north coast of Wales, near Llandudno), on a blustery raw day and found rabbit bones high on a cliff. I saved one in my pocket and transferred it later to a small silver box given to me by my sister. Our father had walked the Great Orme and had stood high on a cliff (although which cliff precisely I could not know; the Great Orme is extensive, true to its name), in his last minutes. His suicide took him off that cliff into the ocean where he lost his head to the blade of the Liverpool-Belfast ferry propeller. He had already lost his head in a sense to fascism, to solitary confinement, shouting "Heil Hitler!" in our family church at the end of the war, thrusting his arm into the shocked air.

As a child I was both frightened and fascinated by the Frankenstein monster. It was his collaged nature that intrigued me and I made repeated attempts at drawing him, his face a patchwork of colored crayon joined by crudely stitched incisions, which recalled my own appendix scar, the black catgut springing from my belly, holding me together. The monster visited me in the night, kept me awake, and in the morning, bleary-eyed, I would draw him again, over and over. In my mid-years I created a group of sculptures – torsos and vital organs, collaged from a variety of materials – paper, seaweed, cheesecloth, spruce roots, wire and glue. This work culminated in "My Father's Head," seaweed stretched over a translucent mixed media skull inscribed in red ink with a poem to my lost father. Bloodwriting, I called it, and I built a light box and painted it red like a jack-in-the-box and exhibited him like that, all lit up. As children we went for our summer holidays to Blackpool, famous for its beach and for the illuminations which made us gasp each night as they were switched on. Blackpool is a half hour up the coast from Southport. I don't know if what I have told you is true, the part about my father's head that is, whether it was sliced from his body by the ferry or whether it was simply dashed off on the rocks as I had always believed until I found a newspaper cutting with the other story. They are all stories, all equally true, and I tend to hold onto the rock-dashing because I have held it

so long – it’s had way more hits than this other version – and you can’t believe what you read in the newspapers anyway, or even what your own family says. In the spring of 1983 I left Canada for a three-month research trip to England to interview my family about my father. What I learned was that everyone had a different story and that each story revealed more about the narrator than about my father. What I knew of the power of family silence, of taboo and censorship, was reinforced by my mother’s attitude and by my own feeling of guilt as I pressed her for answers. She was the mother-lode and I was like a fool in love, ravenous for the mere sound of his name, for all the stories she held close, but even the little she revealed spilled over and escaped me unless I wrote it down immediately, and when I read it later I could barely believe it. Perhaps I already had such a firm impression of my father, the man in solitary confinement, star of my inner movie, that he could have no life outside of our cell. At any rate, what my mother said was that his decapitated body had been washed up and she’d had to go and identify him, which she did by locating a mole on his chest. This detail caused me to imagine their intimacy, sharing a bedroom, lying together, or simply walking on a chilly English beach, gooseflesh pocking my father’s bare chest. After visiting the Great Orme I drove in a rented car up the coast to Southport which is a distance away, and just outside the town I walked on the beach where his body had been washed up and discovered by a young mother with her toddler. I filled my pockets with shells from the beach. The shells in England, the sea creatures, are different from the shells and creature casings on the west coast of Canada. The beach in front of my house is littered with oyster and clam shells. When I took my father’s shells and placed them there they were strange, out of place. Each story has its place, connected to the particularities of that place, and the telling is an unacknowledged collaboration. To tell you the truth I don’t know if I did find a newspaper cutting about my father’s suicide, or if I made that up as part of an unpublished story called *The Secret Chest*. I must have got that information somewhere, long after many imaginings of my father’s head being dashed off on the rocks, lying somewhere on the bottom of the ocean, and integrated it into story. But who told me? Did I see a cutting? Distress creates a great confusion in the mind, necessitating some kind of transformation of the information into an acceptable form, stashed in a safe container where it can be held in perpetuity, taken out, re-examined, repeated until it becomes totemic, lifted out of the banal by ponderance. Ursula LeGuin says in *Steering the Craft*, “[f]iction results from imagination working on experience. We reshape experience in our minds until we can live with it – until it makes sense. We force the world to be coherent – to tell us a story” (1998: 264). Everyone knows the experience of suffering a humiliation, failing to speak out in defence of oneself. A sleepless night follows as one goes over and over the incident until a suitable defence has been built with appropriate words springing uncensored from a righteous and uncomfortable anger. This is a rehearsal for the next time. This is the healing nature of “fiction.” Next day the dreamer may recount the story of her unpleasant encounter to a friend, and she may lie in the

service of her self-esteem, saying ... “and then I said” ... reciting her fabrication.

In that same story, *The Secret Chest*, there is an anecdote about the only time I “remember” seeing my father. He came to visit at our house when I was about seven years old and played the piano for me. He was a fine pianist. His grand piano dominated our living room and we all played. There are layers of memory – telling, re-telling, listening, writing, re-writing. I no longer know if I have a vestige of original “memory” remaining. I know that this story is part of family lore, told probably by my mother, who was the only witness (now dead) to this event. I know that I have “remembered” the story many times, delving into it, digging down to the bone, scraping for evidence in my own body. And each time I have discovered something, perhaps of memory or imagination. In desperation, pressed for an answer, a child will suddenly recall or “imagine” the required information. I know that I have written our encounter into *The Secret Chest*, that I have rewritten the story over and over, each time perhaps entering further into “story” and “imagination,” drawing further away from original “memory” in which I was, or perhaps not, involved bodily. There were no words to recall. I was a silent child, and my mother was in any case standing guard over our encounter. There are a few carefully chosen words on my father’s part – either uttered by him or put into his mouth by me, the adult writer. This incident is for me an archaeological site, ribboned off as work-in-progress, revealing all the layers of excavation that have been worked over my lifetime to date. And they exemplify a common process of delving into memory, assisted (or interfered with) by imagination, supposition, creativity – call it what we will. Original memory, questionable at the best of times, becomes like the imagined façade of a house not yet visited. Just as the façade disappears once the house has been seen and entered in real life, original memory also disappears – fading or bleeding – at any rate becoming indistinguishable from the imagined, retold, reheard, rewritten elements surrounding it. I see my original encounter with my father as a scrap of faded material flapping in the wind of a November day in our back garden where we played cricket, learning from our brother who had learned from our father – or as a fragile scrap of material in an exhumed grave, perhaps clinging to a long bone – and I am afraid to touch it because I know it will disintegrate, turn to dust, blow away on this windy day. I can only stare at it from a distance and watch as it disappears over the remaining years. When it is gone it will no longer be needed.

The curious questing life of Andreas Vesalius intrigued me to the extent that I spent five years of my life researching and imagining him, aware some of the time that I was merging with him, using him to express my own concerns. The facts are that Vesalius followed in his father’s footsteps, became a doctor, served Charles V as his personal physician, married, sired a daughter, died at sea and was put ashore on the island of Zante. He was born in Belgium, studied and worked all over Europe, including Paris, Padua, Madrid and Brussels. Caught up in the spirit of the Renaissance, he discovered the inner workings of the human body and documented them in his *Illustrations*, the first accurate map. How could I know

the inner life of this man? I could not. I imagined him on a spiritual quest, akin to my own. I gave him all the passion and curiosity which reside in me. I gave him also the tunnel-vision that often accompanies a driving passion. I gave him a rich sexual life, a bewilderment concerning the heart, a hot temper and a sense of entitlement. For a brief moment our lives merged – biography and autobiography. It is surprising that people will read novels about real historical characters and, even though they know that much of the inner substance of these lives is imagined, will absorb what they read as truth. Yet how can they not, given what Wilder Penfield has advised us of? My customer's hospitalized father obviously knows enough to guard against such confusion – he reads only non-fiction, as do the majority of men, apparently. The major fiction readers are women. Reluctant to engage in direct conflict with the self, we wage our personal battles through fictional characters, fostering compassion and forgiveness, and by talking, telling stories. Within the characters and their conflicts we discover our own humanity. The men who think they have nothing to learn from fiction are perhaps the same impatient and unpoetic men who would rather get lost than stop to ask directions from a human being familiar with the area.

As a child in a world of chaotic emotion, I was a stickler for the truth, desperate for parameters to help locate and conduct myself. Children have no sense of history; it is something that develops, along with the critical faculty. My mother loved to tell stories, albeit somewhat mocking stories, often about her own children. She loved to exaggerate – anything to get a laugh from her audience – and I, a serious, earnest child, would undercut with, “No, Mummy, that's not what happened.” She would laugh it off, but later, when we were alone, she would reprimand me. “Don't you dare to contradict me in public!” Now that I have experienced the healing powers of story I can understand my mother's need to exaggerate, to fabricate and tell her “white lies.” She was a superb transgressor – she didn't even know she was doing it – she could hold an audience and that was what mattered. Aside from my righteous indignation at the crossing of the fact/fiction boundary I suppose I was jealous of the attention she garnered. But every dog has its day. Story-telling is tradition. It is heritage. I am the first in my family to do it professionally, but I had many role models, all female. Auntie Mary, who had been married to a GI and had lived in California, would chatter to me as she sat at the dressing table in her Welsh cottage brushing her hair, perfuming and bejewelling herself. “She's telling stories again!” my mother would exclaim, implying lies. Story-telling was not encouraged in children, who were to be seen and not heard, but it ran rampant in the adults, and significantly in the women, who led frustrated lives. Granny's stories were the most dramatic. I imagined her to be an actress, a vaudeville star, because as we all knew she had *wanted* to go on the stage. We often ate lunch together on trays in the living room and she would tell me stories about the musical theatre she had seen as a girl, starring Lillie Langtry, the Jersey Lily, who had been the mistress of Edward VII and whom Granny had once met. I was an annoyance to her, an accidental child conceived on prison leave during the war, but I was her audience.

I believed in her and gave her power. Alcoholism and drug addiction caused her body to turn against her in a slow decline, but oh how she dominated the family in her mother-role as her virtual career dwindled into a pastiche of the imagination – tales told, tremulous songs sung over lamb chops and mint sauce as her sensibly-shod feet tapped, kicking a little dance. At 12, quite unsuitably, I took on her desire for a career in theatre and determined to manifest it in my life. Burdens carried for the ancestors, unwieldy fictions and unfulfilled dreams taken seriously by earnest children.

Facts are the stuff of obituaries. They rely on embodiment. You are born, you die, and in between you travel, work, reproduce, sing, play the violin, plant roses ... In a virtual, de-materializing yet paradoxically materialistic culture, have we become our own culturally-produced fiction? Are we already dead? Upstairs in his room sits the wired boy, hunched in front of a computer screen, engaged in a virtual conversation on a chat-line, or acting out the Second Life of his customized avatar in a 3D virtual world. He is the mutant in the house of any typical “developed world” family. Motionless, bathed in reflected light, his eyes are pinpoints into another world, an inner world of the imagination from which he is unable to respond – he is not responsible. Only his hand moves, his index and middle fingers clicking the mouse. (Does this, like novel-reading, provide a way to process emotional struggle or is it simply fantastic escapism?) His parents are in a restaurant eating their meal while talking on cell-phones, not to each other, but to two absent people. They are, like their son, completely focussed in some no-man’s land of the head, removed from bodily sensation. When people talk to me I often do not hear what they say because I am mesmerized by their body language, by their energy and vibration which speak louder than their words. Harold Pinter said, “[...] speech is [...] a constant stratagem to cover nakedness” (1977: 14). Language is a kind of silence, a smokescreen; truth is behind the words. And Emerson writes, “[f]iction reveals truth that reality obscures.”²

I arrived in Prague for the first time with a lifetime of imagery gleaned mostly from the works of Franz Kafka – imagery which is forever changed now that I have been there, the experience entering my body, felt rather than imagined. The friend who had given me that three inch square image took me to the Vltava River, stood with me in the dawnlight before the crowds gathered on Karlův Most – the Charles Bridge that spans the river. It was a while before I remembered the picture on my bedroom wall and realized its magnetic ability to draw me to a place that has always existed in my imagination, but which I had failed to recognize because I had not been there. Going to the Czech Republic was in a way like going home. It was familiar though different from my mother country. I felt I had arrived somewhere that I had been travelling towards for a long, long time. I felt cradled, welcomed, recognized without being “strange”. My stumbling attempts at the language were tolerated, even appreciated. Born in August 1944, into the dark suffocation that blanketed England in the final critical nine months of that madness which had begun in the heart of Europe, infecting it with a disease which spread throughout the world, I was finally located in the place that had

always existed in my mind, now a bony cradle aged into a landscape pocked with concentration camp museums.

I took a bus an hour outside Prague, to Terezín, a town of 8,000 souls, which had been converted into a concentration camp during WWII. On the outskirts of the town is a fortress which was used as a prison for offenders, the most significant of whom was Gavrilo Princip, the Yugoslavian Serb who assassinated Archduke Ferdinand of Austria on 28th June 1914. His action set off a chain of events which led to both world wars, the cold war, and the rise of communism. When we arrived and stood before a grassy vista of red roses springing up between gravestones which stretched seemingly endlessly to the prison in the far distance, I realized that it had all been much worse than I had been able to imagine because what had happened here was unimaginable, inexpressible. Everywhere we walked on graves, bones, the unspeakable terror of a time that can never be swallowed or forgotten, only chewed on until all the generations have passed. We entered the fortress and, keeping silence and distance, stood in chilling rooms listening to statistics – 12 to a tiny cell, 600 in a barracks lined with wooden shelves. I asked the guide how it affected her to work in that place and she smiled and said not at all. There was something dead in her, deadened by her job. I thought of how the body will betray us, how much care it needs, and how it can be used against us by simple neglect. Hunger and temperature will do it all – heat, cold, filth accumulated over time, breeding lice and fleas. The body is a host for natural torture – and if not the flesh, then the mind. The imagination can be a torturer. Of course I thought of my father, the fascist, in his own eternal cell which I have somehow never distinguished from all the cells of all the camps. He was in a workcamp on the Isle of Man when he came unhinged and switched allegiance from Oswald Moseley to Adolf Hitler. The Isle of Man is in the Irish Channel, close to where he ended his life. Even geography makes sense, pulling us into its close embrace, clasping us as we drown. There is a perfect and predictable order to events in retrospect, and the chilling knowledge that we may frequently pass unknowingly by the site of our death. “They give birth astride of a grave,” Pozzo says in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. It was all about that war I was born into and which framed my existence as I grew into the aftermath, the entire backdrop leading everyone into some kind of prison – of loss, or guilt, or denial. Perhaps life is a sentence, the soul imprisoned in the body, lured there by the promise of music, ecstasy, all the joys of embodiment, and then betrayed. The WWII concentration camp occupies a large part of our collective consciousness – with the footage filmed at the allied liberation of the camps, with Primo Levi’s accounts – *If This Is a Man*, and *Truce*, which documents his long journey home to Italy after his liberation from Auschwitz – with Anne Frank’s diary of her family’s entrapment in an Amsterdam loft. As I stood in one particular cell of the Terezin fortress – at the end of a long courtyard where I could see in my movie-mind’s eye prisoners standing in the hot sun or shivering in winter rags – all my imagined scenes of the holocaust merged with the physical experience of being there, standing where the prisoners had stood, and I felt strangely at home. It was as I imagined facing death would be –

something inevitable, frightening, much anticipated, but finally quite ordinary, in fact almost banal. (The Frankenstein monster was after all a poor creature who only craved care.) And it was in my body now. I was different from before, yet I could still remember how I had imagined it because the imagined prison and the real prison had merged – they were the same. The holocaust has been accurately described, engraved upon collective memory as numbers were tattooed on the arms of the Jewish people in a crude attempt to quantify and control the chaotic proliferation of life, and as the lesson was to be engraved on the body of Kafka's prisoner. Kafka in his prescience knew that when we are all offenders we must search for the crime, as Josef K searches fruitlessly in *The Trial*. Surely the crime is our presence here on this earth where circumstantial atrocities have occurred since the beginning of time. If so, it is a crime without possibility of redemption while life continues, and the paradox is that we must continue to struggle and believe in that struggle in the face of futility.

After the fortress we were taken into the town where, even on a Sunday afternoon in 2009, the streets were empty. We filed into the museum and gazed up at a wall of Jewish children's art, depicting what to the children would seem normal as they adapted to camp routine, too young to resist or remember, making the best of a cold morning, shivering naked at the wash-trough in the company of mothers, sisters, aunts and grandmothers. I thought of Sebald's character Austerlitz in his book of the same name, and how his mother had perished in Terezín – a real or a fictional character, or a real person trapped in a fiction? In the book Austerlitz suffers a complete loss of identity when he is removed to Wales on the kindertransport at the age of five. Later in life he slowly and painfully realizes his true identity and faces the personal consequence of repressing all memory of losing his parents, his language, his national identity. The story is accompanied by Sebald's signature enigmatic photographs, making it unclear as to whether the story is documentary or fictional. The power of Sebald's narrative is its matter-of-fact tone. There is nothing in the telling to rob the reader of the power of response to her own discovery of the depth of devastation in a life such as that of Austerlitz. It is chilling and intimate, it scars the memory, and perhaps the soul.

As we travel, groping for comparisons, memories are evoked. I remember my first night in Berlin, walking with Renata and her friends, along a dark canal to Checkpoint Charlie, beside the former east-west wall. I walked ahead of the young women who chattered in German as I remembered the WWII films I'd grown up on and how they had captured my imagination with their night scenes, imminent danger, spies, the sense of doom into which I'd been born with nowhere to hide – and yet there must be, the mind scrambling, believing in magic and invisibility – where you'd always be caught in the end. *Finally ... in the end ...* that was what it was about, that sense of ultimate doom. I was reared on it, amongst the bomb sites of Manchester which seemed to a child like suitable playgrounds. Does place hold its history, or do we evoke it, or is it an interplay between place and individual? I think of Sebald's account in *The Rings of Saturn* – the resonance he gives to the English landscape as he walks across East Anglia,

travelling through history in his mind. I've walked amongst the Neolithic stones and Druid circles of Britain, the Channel Islands, Brittany. Central Europe was the cradle of Celtic culture – from there my ancestors spread out on their journeys – a diaspora – to France, England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales. I was pulled back to this source by a three inch square image, to the dark history and shifting borders of a country where I walk Kafka's narrow cobbled streets with towering buildings closing in, darkened by the long shadows of what has transpired. How different Prague must have been before the war, before communism, before tourism. How the city is robbed daily of historical resonance, its past paradoxically obscured by repeated regurgitation until the tour guide's history-by-rote renders its own topic meaningless by mass consumption – and what irony that I am in the Czech Republic at least partly as a tourist. I sunbathe like a lizard on a stone bench outside the Castle, seeking stillness in the centre of the buzzing crowds. Once again I am the outsider, placing myself there, straining to hear some small echo of an era which can only be accessed through a combination of imagination and research – the writer's tools. The recent past is realized in stories of schoolchildren volunteering for the harvest, of a man imprisoned because he took a winter coat to an elderly convict, in the drabness and passion of that Communist era seen on video in the Museum of Communism next door to McDonald's. You can see the impact of 1960s rock and roll and the phenomenon of the Beatles in Czech emigré Peter Sís' graphic document of his childhood, and how music led to the development of a postwar political renaissance as a new generation emerged from the cold war. But have I really been to Prague? Is it still possible to travel to the world's wonders when tourists – cameras dangling from their wrists – obliterate with their desire to capture digitally. We are destroying the world in so many ways and tourism is its own form of terrorism, holding populations hostage to economic benefit. I saw multiples of my three inch square in Wenceslaus Square. When I arrived home and stood before that image on my bedroom wall I recognized it because it was inside me. I had seen it, walked it, absorbed it as sensory memory, and now it was emblematic.

In *Writing from the Body* we write about a time when we had magical powers. We had a magic circle in our childhood garden where the grass grew greener and higher. This circle of earth has become my entry to the underworld. The circle is protection, a guarantee of return to the world of the living. My first dream was of an elephant in the centre of the circle, touching its trunk to the place between my eyes as I stood on the edge of the circle. It was a blessing from a creature which represents memory. In the next dream steps appeared inside the circle and I descended to an earthen tunnel at the end of which stood my father. I walked towards him and when I reached the end he allowed me to climb onto his shoulder and rest there, just like in the photo of us when I was perhaps two years old. My father is silent, as the dead always are, but he lets me sit on his shoulder once again, trying to remember him with my body, with our gesture.

The garden is always bright, my brother poised at the wicket with his cricket bat waiting for me and my sisters to bowl for him, our father sitting at a small

table on the back porch, squinting into the sun, his fingers on a typewriter, behind him the french doors flung open to reveal the grand piano he will later play for me. The brick wall cascades with fragrant purple wisteria entwined with the darker flowers of a clematis. Through the foliage I see the dining room window which will be broken by a burglar leaving a trail of blood through our house as he goes upstairs and roots in my sister's bedroom, stealing a charm bracelet, a necklace, a locket, leaving splashes of reddish-brown blood dried on her white leather jewel box. Our mother said it was our father who had broken in, but I didn't believe her. I knew he was no different from us, only caught in a strange time where personal and collective responsibility had become unclear – where innocence and guilt had become meaningless under the crushing weight of the evidence. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps he did break in and steal his daughter's jewels which, with the evidence of blood, seemed squirmingly odd to me at the time – something I felt but could not name. Perhaps it was just the cold weather that drove the burglar to break our window. Christmas followed closely on the burglary and we left milk and biscuits for Father Christmas even though we had no father in our house. You must leave food for the dead or they will cause mischief. They are hungry ghosts.

I will return soon to the Pacific coast to write my difficult story and I will use anything at hand in my attempt to elicit what is needed. I have been ashamed to speak of my father. I thought I had somehow to defend and exonerate him – an impossible task. But now I recognize myself part of a generation burdened with similar guilts and fears, no longer alone, free to speak out without the need to take a stand – simply to bear witness to what has been endured so long in silence. It was only a matter of time until we became aligned geometrically in our particular constellation. If indeed there is a geometry of the soul, imagined or otherwise, it is a living thing, not a fixed entity. Like all patterns and shapes it forms and reforms in kaleidoscopic configurations. It is not to be controlled, but simply to be recognized, felt, tumbled with. I will stand under a huge sky and breathe the air of a continent that, until the New York “suicide attacks” of September 2001, had never sustained the kind of damage wrought by modern warfare. But in my imagination I will always stand in the shadow of that European war, shrouded in the smoke of the crematoria, dusted with the rubble of London, Hamburg, Coventry, Dresden ... my innocence lost before birth.

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Notes

- 1 I cannot find a source for these sage words of Wilder Penfield, despite the fact that this quotation has long been familiar to me. I have been in touch, through a friend, with Penfield's grandson, who likes the quote but also has no knowledge of its source. After researching a bibliography of Penfield's books I am of the opinion that a likely source might be *Mystery of the Mind: A Critical Study of Consciousness and the Human Brain*.
- 2 Source: <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Ralph_Waldo_Emerson>.

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