

Fate

by Paul Christensen

I recall some years ago standing in the Plaza Garibaldi in Mexico City, where the mariachi bands went around singing to newly weds. Down the street were all those little shops catering to girls about to turn fifteen, the *quinze anos* girls. The dresses in the windows were like confirmation gowns, all white and frilly, with intimations of marriage written into their lace and ribbons. A girl coming of age requires all sorts of symbols and myths to bring her into womanhood. Now that she reached that ripe state the old men with bass guitars wandered about singing to her, while a shy, wasp-waisted husband in roomy trousers and white shirt, stood by feeling idle and useless.

To the side was a kind of hot house, all glass and steel, building under which were big kettles of tripe steaming away. Cramped counters hugged each stove and men dished out bowls of cooked tripe to the workers who had shoved their way to a stool. I was waiting too timidly, and never was served. It was around eleven at night, and much of the market behind us was closed down. The tables were littered with vegetable leaves, peels, stumps of things. A smell of fish still lingered where high-pressure hoses had swept away the fish guts, scales, hacked fins. Now the air was heavy with dampness and cigarette smoke.

I kept hearing pounding nearby, but couldn't see the cause. It was a boom sound, with little reverberations soon after. A great hard pound, wet and thudding, and then metal rebounding with a tinny echo. Maybe some sort of night renovation in progress, or a pile driver digging up another subway tunnel. I waited some more, saw others coming off a shift—mainly haulers with big webbed ropes around their shoulders. They had been hauling carcasses for the butchers, or blocks of ice. They were starving, and aching for a toke of pulque, perhaps. They didn't stand around like me; they shoved, prodded, dug their fingers into backs and hips, and made a wedge in which to squeeze ahead. Soon enough they would look around with sleepy, half-lidded eyes spooning in heat, tanginess, uriney tripe smells, and gulping down a smudgy glass of dark beer. It was day's end, and they were distant, ethereal at this hour.

The boom came, then the low roar of the counters smothered it. Somewhere in back, around some partitions, I guessed. Tearing up this old shed to make room for another glass building, perhaps. I finally got someone to hand me a beer, and I sent up a wad of pesos that passed from hand to hand to the counter. I drank slowly, felt my bladder fill suddenly. I put down the glass, and asked for the toilet. It was around the corner, I was told.

When I came around the dirty gray wall, I saw a hauler still wearing part of his

webbed harness, a kind of judo shirt and loose work pants cut off well above the man's ankles. He wore sandals made of tire tread and coarse leather, and his feet were black from the day's work. He looked at me, or past me, with red eyes. He was grinning without humor. He looked around as some of the men standing in line for the toilet observed him neutrally. Then, the hauler drew in like a bull calf, put himself into a crouch and sprinted straight for the retaining wall leading to the toilets. He lowered his head as he came near and threw himself powerfully into the wall. His whole body took the shudder of impact and seemed to dissolve him. Then, he would fall back, slumped and weak, walking backward again. He had a bottle of pulque by the opposite wall, which he bent to retrieve, took a long double swallow of the stuff, and put it down again. Wiped his large mouth with his sleeve, and studied the wall. All along one level of the wall were thin red circles from where his scalp had broken and left a bloody imprint. He was doing his best to kill himself, and the men along the side, in the toilet line, were like spectators of some public sport.

Maybe this time he would do it, crush his skull and die. He seemed to understand that his suicidal attempt this evening was a public ritual, and that it was normal to have others standing by to observe. Not to cheer him on. The occasion was solemn. The air around him was heated and tense, and no one could possibly talk to him. He was alone in the universe, his universe. The rest of us were at the window of our own. No communication could reach from any normal mouth to his crazed ears. He was sure he was doing the only thing necessary at this hour. He could have jumped in front of a train, or a bus. He could have plunged off a bridge.

But the frenzy of the counters, the clutter and noise of the closed market, the filthy degraded sidewalk around the toilet seemed adequate context for a death. Men came out zipping up who had witnessed earlier runs, and surmised how long he had to go to finish the job. It might take another ten heaves to weaken his skull. He was still working on the cushion of flesh, but it was splitting apart. His hair was matted, his blood vessels had broken open and were dribbling thick, healthy blood into the roots of his hair. He was part of the way of jostling the brains inside enough to slide into a coma.

But he was intent on the whole thing, the break. So he reared up again, one sandal swung backward to propel his other foot. And off he went in some mocking display of athletic ability—a runner leaping off the blocks, headed for the bleak metal wall ahead of him twenty paces. This time he bounded off directly, and the thud was a bass note. He hurt that time, and staggered back, looking about with his stop sign eyes. He had reached some new depth, I suppose. It was a moment in which half the men felt he had gone far enough. They turned to go, not having had their chance at the urinals. They didn't want to see another good leap; it might actually spill his head down the wall. I left, too. I heard a thud as I felt my way through the last throngs at the counters onto the dark street. One more bass drum going short on the echo.

The pulque had poisoned him. But he had also had enough of lifting eighty pound crates of oysters, hundred pound blocks of ice. He knew as long as he could move he would be lifting. Maybe his back was going, his knees were failing. He looked to be about forty-five or so, about the time kidneys, liver give you trouble. He was powerful, still; iron boned, marble faced. His filth was like some sort of oil mist that had blown over a locomotive fender. It wasn't in him, just on him. He was pure inside, a pure hard poor and hapless man in a city without mercy. So tonight he was cashing in his chips, splitting the organ that had not done him any good.

And like much in his life, he would fail. His head would refuse another leap at the wall and he would curl up under a cart and sleep in the gutter, awake to the roar of

traffic, pull on his webs and start lifting again. All the way to noon, to the first knock back of pulque and the craze of the afternoon, and then evening — and the wall. Maybe his head would be so battered this time he wouldn't try again. He would wake with that hangover that reaches down into the buttocks and knees, and leaves you dazzled at your own pain.

The city was so old and battered with disaster it hardly noticed a peon's despair or feeble attempts to do himself in. It went on like the mountains around it, eternal and unmoved. Coming through the crowd of workers were certain beautiful women in sequined dresses, escorted by equally beautiful men in black suits with pale ties and equally pale colors of shirt. Their faces were cultivated, long thin noses and mild lips, languid eyes that did not dart or blink, but merely bathed the immediate air with attention. They were so clean and lovely that everyone else, even me, parted instinctively so as not to soil them. They came through with lustrous angelic detachment, to reach cars that were parked in the garage opposite the eating shed. They took the short cut partly to demonstrate the inequality of life, to enjoy the differences between themselves and us. And they moved along the paths of unsoiled ground as if they were catwalks in hell, and this was Dante and that was Virgil.

Their heads were as thin as eggshells and would have dashed out white, sophisticated brains on the first heave at the wall. Their brains would be as bright as cauliflowers, and would disintegrate at the touch of a finger. Inside such brains would be images of champagne and polished tables, echoes of thin chamber music, and equally thin laughter. These organs would have absorbed the world around them with less thirst than a ball of cotton. They had taken in only that fragment that moated them in luxury, in mildness. That was how they moved now, with their weightless satin coats draped like fog over their arms.

They carried the other end of the rope from the hauler with his bashed head. Between them dangled the whole world of my experience, with no way of reaching the ends that each hand grasped. That was the extreme, and I was somewhere in the middle, in the long loop dragging through the glittering scum of the market floor. It wasn't that I felt the scum, or was dampened by the filth. I was just hovering over the bottom of things, like a curious sort of trapeze artist with no sense of balance and no desire to fall off. I dangled between, and one fifth of my blood was drained through the same meshes as were these sophisticated tyrants in silk, and another fifth was pumped through the gutters of the market place, where the hauler wanted to die. Between lay the essential ambiguity of me, three fifths an ordinary, untried man.

I went back to my hotel, the Monte Carlo, on the Avenida Uruguay, up a broad staircase to a landing with a few old couches here and there, some doors going off to the street, others leading you to caves of darkness over the airshaft. D.H. Lawrence had occupied the room to the left, over the street, where he wrote *Mornings in Mexico*, his coffee and parrots prose. He too had three fifths of blood that had not been tested, or sufficiently exposed to danger. His prose resented it, and tried to find that place on earth where the sun roasted human blood and irreversibly catechized the soul into being pagan. His whole life was a preparation for being transformed, and he went home and died like Keats, with his lungs busted by tuberculosis. Malcolm Lowry occupied a ledge in the dark of Cuernavaca where he wrote *Under the Volcano*, and artificially transported his spirit by booze. He also went unchanged, largely unaltered to his death.

That is what I feared trudging up the steps, taking the right landing opposite Lawrence's room, to sulk away the last hours of night by myself. A table lamp was all the

illumination required to feel solitary. Being of unmalleable earth is a strange curse. The poor hauler couldn't alter himself even by heaving his full strength against a wall; the rich thought they had reached a point of refinement where all change could stop. But the women, two stately blondes with long necks, allowed their eyes to grope among the dark flesh of the men around them, and to make tentative love to them. They longed for the very dirt that had been scrubbed away from their world by brooms of money. They too couldn't change.

So there we were, all of us in the Mexican night, weighted with our identities. Only in our dreams do poor girls change into princesses. The little *quinze anos* girls were already fully made by childhood, and their final unfolding was from permanent flesh and soul—the woman was always inside. She would carry her village with her into marriage, and all her memories and connections to her youth would remain active, and fleshed as relatives, friends, sisters, brothers, parents' phone calls. A man must know that when he tries to steal love by seduction, a desire to take a little flower away from her and not her whole village. Love means the village, the past, the heritage all come with the woman you love. And the man, cutting off all ties to his life every time he gets a knife, must accept that he is a stranger in his wife's communal world. And neither will change their natures no matter how hard they try to adapt, to give in, or to convert the other.

In the morning, the Plaza Garibaldi is golden with sunlight. The pavement has been swept, the market removed except for the glass shed with its pots steaming. No customers on this bright ten o'clock Tuesday. The rumbles of night are far away. The wall has been washed down where the scalp had printed itself the night before. The poor hauler was already at work, invisible among his peers as they shoved beef sides into a freezer. Then, he would go off to pile tomato crates, and finish the workday with blocks of ice for the fish stalls. He might get extra work shaving the ice down, filling the bins.

By nine he would be blindly moving toward the counters, already half full of pulque for the night ahead. He was as determined as Sisyphus to transcend his fate, and his fate was as tense as the rusty, riveted girders supporting the glass roof over him. The iron world of the city was already transparent with messages to him, but he was the innocent among us, illiterate and gullible, an idealist worthy of Emerson's friendship.

I sat in the park and had my shoes shined. A newspaper was offered to me and I began to read about the drug gangs in Guadalajara, all the news back then. Their enormous profits were too much for the local banks to launder; the money had to go to offshore investment houses, get disguised as investments and circulated all through the world of money, from here to Hong Kong before it could come back and be useable as cash to build a mansion and swimming pool, to outfit the gangsters' wives and children. Then, and only then, could they clamber into the roomy backseat of a Rolls and cruise slowly toward the outskirts of the city to visit friends, to eat with that silky indifference of the rich on some splendid balcony overlooking the lawns and gardenia bushes.

And as they reached a hand out to fork up a slice of kiwi sprinkled with lime, to place it on an oversized dinner plate where it graced other shaved, sliced, peeled things, the hand still possessed its blood history, its scars. They could not be washed away. The palms had pulled roots in a field once, or yanked the handles of a wheelbarrow at some construction site, or bullied the wheel of a dump truck. Now it plucked kiwi disks from a platter, and was essentially cultivated and manicured, and stained with its own identity.

Is the function of money, which has no master, to dissolve one's history and liberate you into a self-made present? Is that why even death is not too high a price to pay to be reinvented? Their limos go by slowly, windows tinted opaque, the purr of money all through the silence of the moving vehicle, as it cruises into mauve shade and parks under the wild fig trees. The softness, the silk textures, the rare dawn colors of the limo's upholstery, the equally soft suede of the woman's jacket as she alights, all this is the attempt to alter by a micron the fate of being oneself. But her accent is the ghost of her true story, and it lingers in her teeth, on her tongue. She flattens her vowels; she calls forth on her breath some rustic and broken village origin never to be diluted. No Liza Doolittle here. That is a dream, like waking the marble up and holding the goddess only partly carved into the stone. She remains herself, buried under the luster, the soft surfaces. The smile is the same one that formed in her lips the first time she opened her eyes and took a step in the logy earth. She toddled toward her uncle, and he grabbed her up with a squeal of delight. She smiles that way now at the sight of jewels, or the sound of gravel under the approaching tires of a visitor.

"I can change," says the bad husband with his last chance before him. He tells the judge he won't strike his wife, and drags his mouth to say *ever again*. But the x-ray of his chest shows deep scoriations from a youth of beatings, so his hand is timed for more violence. He might drink instead, might run away, but he carries in him the written record laid down at his first trauma. He will be back. Everyone knows, but the hope, the faith in democracy, the vision of a new age all confirm the illusory gospel of a change—that he can alter himself by so little and become what he wants. So he reenters the house with sheepish expectations of a new life, and the clock ticks dreadfully inside him.

Maybe it's the city that gives us this perpetual hope that we too can rebuild. The cranes overhead are always swinging wrecking balls at the powerful sides of some stone tower, whacking at the resistant figure of the past as it withstands all the attempted destruction. And when it falls, it merely retreats into itself and ceases to be part of consciousness. But it hasn't changed, and the city has only replaced one form of towering loneliness with another. The new building will not invent a second use of the air, but merely fill it with anxiety and frustration, and the day to day routines of mere work. The city remains unalterable, even while its shadows keep rising and falling away. The city means some scripted fatefulness of human use or waste and nothing one does can reinvent the city.

Mexico grinds its poor, elevates its rich to the revolving restaurants, and leaves everyone else in the lower descents of the rope loop, in the middle. The middle is where there is every chance of falling, and yet it is crowded with all the hoppers and dreamers of modern democracy. I have my hands out there holding, too; and I believe fervently in the gospel that with more work, more hard thought, more nights on the edge of a hotel bed with the table lamp on to its dimmest power, I too can change. Keep at it, says the voice of my father; you'll make it, boy. Are you practicing still, says an old school friend, his voice slightly moist from having been replayed too often in memory.

Sure, sure, I say. You know me, always at it.

Perhaps that is what makes us kill nature in this century. It is half its strength and diversity, half its breadth over the planet, and we mean to finish the job of quartering that power by the time the governments cry foul. If you clear out land that was permanently forested before, you create a new world. You build huge towers and recirculate the life of the woods into them. All that will give you a new consciousness, a new economy,

a new hope in the power of man to change the flow of fate. And the peasants invent stories about the ghosts of trees that live in the foundations of the building, and sleep in heaps of family on the floor of their new apartment, and the indelible ink of history seeps through the new carpets and discolours everything in a year's time.

The despair of the suburbs is not so much the loneliness that comes with lawns and fortified, inward house forms, but because this mode of existence rides on the unconvertible wildness of hinterland. It can't change, even though bald, toothless, lawn-sprinklered, and asphalted. It is dead on its surface, but in its heart is the ferocity of the past, unwounded even though head-shaved. That is the peon's sore head, these pitched roofs and carpet lawns, and the wall that it would heave against is more subtle, a disintegration of marriages, the alienation of the young, the disappearing senses as food becomes tasteless, and mystery evaporates from experience. All the weakening ties to life are the upward pressure of the forest's memory, the shrub-tangle's insistent desire to be alive again. Nothing forgets, everything is an irredentist struggle to take back the original root home.

Nothing can be invented; it must all be drawn out of the well of fate. Nature is the very soul of repetition. Evolution is a script that exaggerates the leaps of nature toward some new species; it is the human script laid over nature to justify, root the idea that democracy is different, a magical form of governing in which old worlds trade in their peasant clothes for new technical utopias. And the new steel utopia slides around, drifts as if going forward, but has no force of will to continue its course. The past is fate, and will survive all feeble attempts to deny it.

Democracy is that vision of the common world, giving each one a chance to rise. But to what? To the memory of an old, oppressive aristocratic regime? Is that the commoner's dream? To invade the closed circle of an elite and rule with the same iron fist those below? If so, then no job is right, and no life is whole. Everything is open-ended; everything is a stairs leading higher. No road is long enough, no house big enough; no job pays enough. No kid is bright enough; no wife or husband is sufficient in themselves. Everything is temporary, a means of getting to something better. This lamp is for now, but wait till you see the one I put on layaway.

It was a stroke of pure market genius to begin with a simple computer whose technological development was minutely serial and endless, so that the customer would continually upgrade with each new mini-generation of circuitry, and end up paying vast sums of money to arrive at the end of a small tunnel of improvements that were added in a pace equal to greed, aspiration, and the myth of democratic rewards. Everyone is here for the moment, anxious to move up. No job is cause for joy, or merely a static means of living. The rest of life suffers accordingly because spare time is the time to invest in moving up. So life becomes empty all around; the job, the marriage, the family are nothing to the future's promise. Every moment is only a bridge to a better moment.

The loss of the past not only includes the disappearance of other forms of life, but also a vision of stability before everything turned to means. The other world was smaller, darker, more cramped and difficult. But it also had large clearings of the day in which to enjoy mere existence. The laughter was stronger, more earthy and sustained. The knowledge of each one's foibles and sins was intense, enriching. The need to walk, to allow time to do cooking, the obligation to fix the things one bought—all made life an intensity with focus. A man's basement was filled with implements for maintaining the house, the car. A kitchen was a wonder of pots and utensils for the making of food—with ethnic roots to it, and flavors that had molded the tongues and personalities of those who

partook of it. A room was more than a place to sleep; it was decorated with the dreams, the fantasies, the longings of kids who spent time there—in their diaries, or lolling about on beds with all their erotic fantasies burning inside them. The room was saturated in human idleness and dreaming.

The future is this endless watery promise that makes everyone swim harder, even when the place one occupies is enough. Almost any life is enough now, as it is.

The possessions are plenty, the house big enough, the mate essentially all one needs or deserves to make a good life. But the power to accept is gone; there is only the demand for more. The last small countries where fate is taken seriously are falling to the relentless fires of democratic ambition.

So the hauler comes to his wall again and surveys its density, its thick bolts and moorings in concrete, and shrugs his shoulders finally. It is useless to make another night of it, and he sits down with his quart of pulque, his sacking for the night's rest, and allows the gutter to rise up to his lips like a dark mirror in which all he can see is his true self again. The drink only softens the glow, dissipates the glare. He is born to this use of his back, and only when his organs fail will he walk away. He lives at the ink edge of democratic theory; he occupies the illiterate halo of twilight around every spoken ideal. He knows he is the very fastness of the universe, its magnetic web of stars and galaxies. Change him and the whole sky will start dissolving. Accept what he is, and all that he suffers, and you begin to let nature back into the world again, flower by flower, weed by stubborn weed.

There is no escape from fate, only a possible paradiso in acknowledging its victories. Let life take its own step, and your body follows, effortlessly, like a man shadow boxing with weightless legs and arms in a rundown playground in Beijing. If the hauler had danced instead of trying to kill himself, I would have stayed until he went to sleep. I would have encouraged him with my heart, not even knowing why I should feel such joy at his capacity to both suffer and transcend it with that magical power of the body to dance under the blows of fate.