

At Home or Nowhere

In Memoriam – Pat Sharp in Edmonton; Marretje van Herk
in Edmonton; Robert Kroetsch in Leduc

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During the years between 2008 and 2011, I made a triangular pilgrimage frequently enough that it began to take on the shape of a ritual, at times a curse, sometimes a mantra. The journey was in the nature of a requirement, but it was also a pleasure, a practice, a series of epiphanic conjunctions, and it traced that time of my life in a strangely triangular way.

Every week or two – sometimes more often and sometimes less – I would drive from my home in Calgary’s foothills up the Queen Elizabeth Highway north. I have become an adamant Calgarian, and my journeys to Edmonton were undertaken from a foreigner’s perspective and with an alien’s reluctance. Although I had attended the University of Alberta in Edmonton and found there both ardent love and foundational inspiration for my writing practice, Edmonton itself is a city I am wary of, visitor rather than originary. Calgary is where I feel at home, and Calgary is where I intend to live until I die, whether that event is soon or distant.

My visits to Edmonton were an exploration into the heart of oldness. I do not mean that vague category of the aged combined with euphemisms about “senior,” “golden,” or “latter” years, but another oldness, its frailty and frustration, its dread caducity, which can itself be traced to an older time, the eighteenth-century French *caducité*, from the Latin *caducus*, or “liable to fall.”

Falling identifies the cross-over zone between aging and old, the tipping point between self-sufficiency and danger. Falls are the occasion when the old grow intimate with mortality, for the medical profession attributes to falling morbidity, or conversely, attributes morbidity to falling. The whole metaphor of falling is itself laden with misery: the fall of man, a fall from grace, the fall or autumn of life before the discontents of winter and the inevitable conclusion of death. The connection between this chronic expectation and sin, transgression, lapse or wrongdoing is too obvious, but it speaks to the language and the

presumptions that attend our current attitudes toward the old and our fearful and apprehensive attitudes toward their presence. The discourse of prevention and fear attends our “care” for the aged, to the extent that they are themselves infected by the very fear of falling that we fear for them. In the name of prevention, we reduce the scope of movement for older people and terrify them with the spectre of injury and bone fracture. The resultant “care” that we wield as threat and fret over elder parents and acquaintances becomes its own prognosis, and the fall assumes the magnitude of a curse or prediction as confining as the slowness of the aging body itself. The event of the fall argues for a liminal moment that declares competency, and it marks the transition between independence and the need for extended care. The accident – and how many of us have fallen accidentally, from our childhood onward – then decrees a new limitation for the old. We attribute to the fall infirmity, and in loading so much meaning on the slip, trip or over-balance, we inscribe and confine the elders we should encourage to keep moving. The “taxonomy” of falling and the need for prevention of injury resulting from falling then corral the old behind an invisible fence that adds to their isolation and fearfulness.

My own trips up that relentless highway to Edmonton performed a similar and repeated fall, into the past, into the future, into a hiatus of elder care that seemed separate and isolated from the hustle of my current life, my work, my writing, and my personal passions. The best drives were those my husband and I took together, for we had then three intimate hours to talk, to tell jokes, to share our close experience of this changing genealogy and our history together.

As the years passed, my mother and mother-in-law, both elderly, if never old, exerted different pressures and demands, on me, on other members of family, and on the life that they had left to live. They anticipated falling and yet refused to fall. My father, before he was placed in a care home, did fall, frequently (low blood pressure and diabetic symptoms), which terrified my mother, as she struggled, impossibly, to get him back on his feet. My sister, an implacably practical nurse, told my mother to leave him lying on the floor until he could get up – he was safer there than anywhere else because once he was on the floor he could not fall. But our human impulse is to push people upright, to get them on their feet, as if to reassure ourselves that the fall is both avoidable and erasable. After my father had fallen many times, he was placed in a care home, where he was monitored and provided with a walker, and where he did not again fall until he suffered the fatal stroke that finished his life.

That care home was new, cheerful, and well appointed, with many social events and relatively good food, but my father hated it more passionately than the many other hatreds he had harboured in his life. He sat at his desk in his room and read, wrote notes about his life, and yearned to escape. He was happiest when we took him for a drive out into the country; he seemed to immerse himself into the landscape that he had loved and worked for so many

years of his life, the canola fields stretching yellow and lush, and the green swaths of wheat and oats rippling in the Alberta wind. On movie nights, he went down to the social room and got a box of popcorn, which he took back to his room and ate while he watched the news. He was, to quote Robert Kroetsch writing about his own father, “lonesome for death” (*Completed Field Notes* 7), and death came to him ultimately as a kindness, an escape from his body and his enclosure in that pleasant but imprisoning institution. His was the first death, and although I did not yet know, a prefiguration of my triangular and persistent years of driving to visit my mother-in-law, my mother, and my friend Robert Kroetsch.

My mother was the oldest of this trio but was the most overtly furious, and she made a point of expressing her disappointment with the indignities of aging as vociferously as she had lived. Although my father had died in the care home, she was adamant that she would not, and she continued to live in her own apartment – their own apartment – until just before her death. She went directly from that place to a hospice, refusing medical intervention for her cancerous tumour, and she died very shortly thereafter, at 93. Despite her seething impotence in the face of increasing age and disability (she had macular degeneration and was virtually blind), she was relatively lucky, although she would not have claimed good fortune. She was enraged by age, enraged by time’s passage and her blindness, a woman who devoured books throughout her life and in her last years read the library books delivered to her door with a magnifying glass as large as a cookie sheet. She put her thumb into her cup to gauge the level of the liquid, she checked that the stove burners were off by feeling the positions of the knobs, and she refused to carry a white cane or any marker of her disability. “I am not blind,” she declared, as if the very words would deny her condition.

Her indignation was the culmination of a long life of hard work and incredible privation. Eloquent and acerbic, her humour balanced a toughness that she had learned from multiple displacements. She was twelve when her mother died, a loss she grieved her whole life; powerfully intelligent and curious, she had to leave school to take care of her brothers and sisters; she learned the skills of gardening and cheese-making in the Netherlands under the harshest of conditions; she married my father in the first days after the defeat of the Dutch by the Nazis; she gave birth to two children during an occupation that subjugated and starved the entire population; she welcomed Canadian troops as liberators in 1945; she immigrated to a bewilderingly unfamiliar Canada with three children and my father, without knowing a word of English except potato; she travelled by train from Pier 21 and Halifax to Alberta without knowing where or how far Alberta was; she lived in a granary and worked with my father for \$60 a month; she had three more Canadian children; she taught herself to read and write English from my siblings’ elementary schoolbooks; and she worked every day of her life to keep her family clean and fed. She poured into

our brains and our bloodstreams one word and one desire: education. “Study all you can, and you will always have something to fall back on.” Her fierce pride and rage are my inheritance; when I see or experience injustice, I feel the white-hot incandescence of her intense fury at the stupidity and oblivion of people who have lived a life spoiled and indifferent, especially if they are cowards or unconcerned with the pain they cause others.

Visiting my mother meant I had to meet and respect her long-simmering anger, listen to her stories, and talk to her across the chasm separating our experiences, our different lives, my life as a writer and professor a virtual daydream to her.

And I would ask again, “Mom, wouldn’t you be safer and more comfortable in a home?”

“No.” Said with a fierceness that was as decisive and absolute as a boulder of granite.

“But you’d have company.”

“I don’t want company. Why would I want to talk to a bunch of old people?”

“You’d get your meals, and they’d make sure you took your medication.”

“I can cook. I know how to take my medication.”

The circular logic of my mother was more than stubborn; it was irrefutable. She was difficult and demanding and definite, and she loved to argue with me, about every possible subject and position. Argument made her feel alive, and language was a country where she left behind the various infirmities of her body and her age and became all eloquence, as potently expressive as she had been throughout her life, despite her shift from her mother tongue to English, despite her limited formal education. Her refusal of a care home was certainly traceable back to her profound sense of independence, nurtured by a lifetime of certainty that she had to be self-reliant, that nothing and no one would rescue her or come to her defense. Her uniqueness was bolstered by her self-reliance, and that same self-reliance would have been compromised by a care home, even if she might have dared to enjoy the luxury of being waited on. And in retrospective gratitude, I secretly know she would have turned the place upside-down, bedeviling staff and residents alike. My mother had that capacity for chaos, side by side with a sturdy pragmatism. It was the same prescient realism that made her say, as I was leaving the hospice one evening, “Goodbye, Aritha.” She was telling me that she would not see me again, that she was going to die. I refused to believe her, but she was right. It was goodbye.

The difference between my mother and my mother-in-law decries comparison; the journeys of the aged are as divergent as their lives. My husband’s mother rambled from the large home where she had lived for some forty years with my father-in-law to, after his death, ten relatively independent years in a tidy up-and-down condo. The stairs finally persuaded her to relocate to a retirement home, called “assisted living,” with her own apartment, where meals

were provided and some nursing care was available. But for all its glossy patina, that “assisted” living place was mostly interested in assisting well-off elderly clients with disposal of their funds. The food was faux-gourmet, pre-prepared by a broad-line food facilities service, and consistently mediocre. The place suffered from poor ventilation and infestations of bedbugs – facts that were artfully concealed. The nursing care was casual and more or less limited to a stethoscope and a thermometer, along with speed dial to emergency services, ambulances readily carting the elderly to hospital for actual treatment, where they were treated with grudging attention, the murmured incantation of “bed-blockers.”

A bird-boned figure erect as her Scottish heritage, my mother-in-law grew increasingly frail, and it was only a short time before that inevitable fall and serious injury, a broken hip incapacitating her to the extent that the “assisted living” facility would not assist, and she had to be moved to a nursing home, euphemistically called a “compassionate care centre.” It claimed a beautiful, wheelchair-accessible patio area overlooking a natural ravine, but I never saw a single resident using that space. The nursing home had repurposed an old building, tottering on its legs worse than its residents, and it could not expunge the smell of death and defeat, the urine-soaked history of its defeated *dénouements*. Walking through its automatic doors never failed to make me want to turn and run away, jump into my car, and drive straight into a concrete abutment.

Visiting her was increasingly challenging as her world narrowed, from a room to a high-backed recliner chair to a fully mechanized hospital bed, connection made more difficult as her physical health declined. She was, like my own mother, cognizant and aware, with not a trace of dementia, but her body slowly renounced itself, curling into frailty as if she were a desiccated bird bone-cage. That gradual diminishment was a process as humiliating to her as it was dispiriting to us, visiting her as often as we could, bringing fresh flowers, photographs, reading the paper with her to keep her abreast of the world, bringing her tempting food beyond the potage she was offered, and trying to release her, as well as we were able, from the prison of her confinement. She too did her valiant utmost, but her physical ability did not match her desire, and eventually the very “care facility” that claimed to offer hope had nothing to give but a disconsolate solicitude.

The care home was a well-meaning but dreadful establishment; there is no other way to summarize its creaking fabric and locked stairwells, its smell of old potatoes and plastic drugs. Nothing is worse than a social hour hosting queasy renditions of “The Old Rugged Cross” sung to a half-tuned piano, or crumbs of aged slab cake meant to celebrate birthdays. The staff, mostly immigrants reduced to working at jobs they were overqualified for, were kind and generous, and their humanity did much to counterbalance the ghastly atmo-

sphere of the institution, but even their best intentions could not disguise the sheer immanence of life's closing doors or the attendant hopelessness of those who will never again feel direct sunlight on their faces.

I did not want my mother-in-law in that facility, and my husband and I did all in our power to persuade her to move to a private place in Calgary, close to us. She did not want to be in that nursing home either, but she resisted with every bone of her weakening body the idea of leaving Edmonton, the city where she had lived for more than 70 years. Her own stubborn cognizance refused to countenance moving, and her increasing frailty worked in tandem with a shortage of long-term care beds and a vilely incompetent health-care system. By the time we got her moved up the long list of "available beds" into a "nicer" nursing home, she was entirely too frail to be moved. I came to believe that decrepitude conspires with demand.

So I would leave each visit as dispirited as if I had been imprisoned with failure in a debtors' prison as maggoty as a Dickens novel. My own mother was full of fight, mouthy and resistant, but my mother-in-law's passive refusal was impossible to turn toward hope, and all I could do was turn the nose of my trusty little Jeep south down the Calgary Trail toward home, aware that the journey would repeat and repeat until she faded into her own extinguished breath.

But between 2008 and 2011, I always made one last stop on my drive south. I would pull into the parking lot of a retirement "home" located on the west edge of Leduc. With an increasing sense of relief, I would press the security intercom for #325, to be met with a whirl of industrious pleasure, Robert Kroetsch declaring, as only he could, "Let's go for ice-cream!" or "Let's go for a drive," brandishing a blue aluminum cane that seemed more for decoration than safety or assistance.

When I first heard that Robert Kroetsch (possibly the largest projection of writerly vitality in Canada) had relocated himself from Winnipeg to a retirement home in Leduc, I was quite simply shocked. I could not conceive of him in a closing chapter of life or of him voluntarily acceding to agedness or to any version of care. When I called and asked him what he was thinking, and how he had arrived at this migration back to Alberta, he answered with inscrutable and certainly poetic deliberation, "I am practising up how to get old."

He took to the life of a retirement home with the style of a man who enjoyed domestic ritual and regular meals and yet cherished his privacy and his difference from others. It was a new facility and seemed more secure apartment complex than care home, although nurses and doctors were on call. Most of the residents had no idea that he was a famous Canadian writer. He shared his meals with them in a communal dining room, played cards, and even went on excursions. One of his sisters, who lived not far away, helped with errands and laundry. He invited no one from the home, he said, having invited

me, into his small private apartment, where he had a comfortable armchair, a small bookcase, and a window overlooking a gas station across the road. In the bedroom was a desk with an ancient computer, and in the narrow kitchen, a table where he ate toast in the mornings.

It was difficult to discern whether he was happy. His own careful choosing of a place where he felt, it seemed, reasonably safe and that met his simple standards of care, was a measure of his awareness. He was a man of a generation not well acquainted with self-sustenance, and a kitchen was alien territory to him. While he was not disabled, he had, he told me, begun to fall, and he knew that he would need increasing medical attention. The bradykinesia and tremors associated with Parkinson's were growing worse, and his own relentless attention to poetic detail certainly attuned him to the increasing frailty of his body. He had returned to the Parkland of Alberta, the place that inspired his brilliant poetry and fiction; he had company if he wanted, family close to him, and he appeared to face the spectre of "old" head on. I attribute to him a clear-eyed realism in facing old age, but that could be my own invention, one I rely on to comfort myself. He continued to write, he had myriad visitors, and he loved excursions and trips.

One summer day, sitting on a bench outside his favourite ice-cream source in Leduc, he said, "I've found the title for my new book of poetry. Guess what it is!" And when I waited, expectantly, he announced, with a gleeful relish that encompassed all the pleasures and regrets of a life brimful of event, if not quiet happiness, "*Too Bad!*" We both burst out laughing, aware of that ironic phrase, its emphatic rejoinder, its sheer audacity, as if he were saying to age itself, "Just don't go overboard with the gratitude or the constative evaluation." Life perhaps regrettable but now beyond retrieval.

And when he died suddenly, just before his 84th birthday, in an automobile accident, he seemed, for all his cane and his Parkinsonian tremor, younger than any of us, more prepared, more adaptable, and more aware of the conjunction of care with independence. My visits with him in those last years revealed no resentment that he was growing infirm, that he needed to live in a care home, that he was alone, and probably lonely. We played with language, told one another stories, and talked about literature; his enthusiasm for his own long relationship to writing never faltered, and so, although I suspected he was deeply sad, he performed an ongoing role with practiced gusto.

His last reading, at the Canmore artsPeak Literary Saloon on Sunday 19 June 2011, was met with a standing ovation for a poem on risk, and he said to the organizers later that evening, as they report without a trace of irony, "If I die now, I'll die happy." Just two days later, he was killed.

My triangle was broken. All three of the old persons I pilgrimaged toward and away from are dead. I grieve them equally, if in different ways. Their staunch engagement with life despite the challenges of aging, and their own

particular rejections of and experiences with care were salutary, yes, lessons about how we “practise up” to get old. Their associations with care, whether to accept help or to resist, their passivity or their activity, declared far more than their characters but gestured toward that baffling liminal territory between one life and the next.

They waken me sometimes, from a dream of my own care in my old age, all insisting they had little choice, but were mere pawns in the wager of time against time.

WORKS CITED

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- . *Too Bad*. U of Alberta P, 2010.