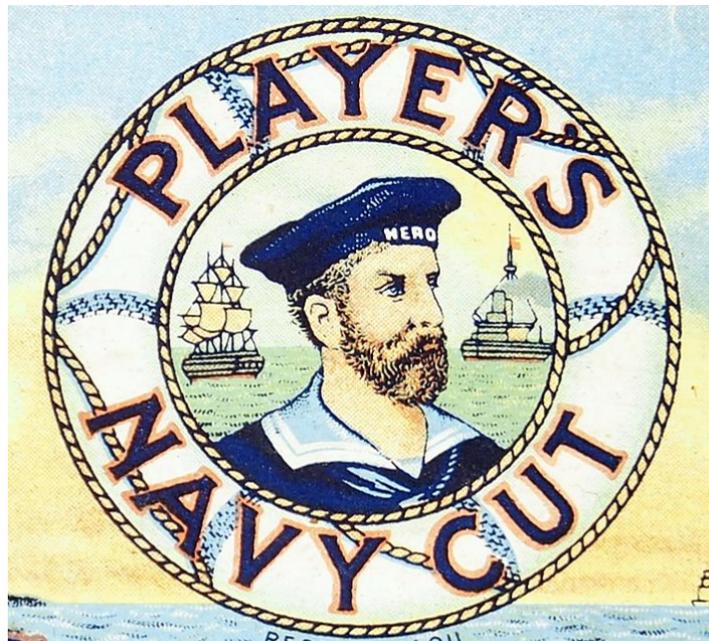


The Man Who Was Not There: A Writer's Memoir of Self

Peter Unwin

York University

The story begins in a kitchen with an ashtray on the table. The ashtray is congealed with the ash of my mother's cigarettes. She is barely real, my mother, but more real than me. It was her who filled the ashtray with her cigarettes; the Players Navy Cut without filters, with the rugged, bearded sailor on the front. In my story, I once wrote that I believed this man on the front of the cigarette package was my father (my father was in the navy, he must be that man!), but those were just words that I wrote, and I don't think I ever believed this man was my father. He was just a cartoon man painted on the front of a package of cigarettes that my mother smoked.



Player's Navy Cut Cigarettes Medium. Source: Alf van Beem. 2013, Digital Image. Available from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Players_Navy_Cut_cigarettes_Medium.JPG#/media/File:Players_Navy_Cut_cigarettes_Medium.JPG

Perhaps I am the smoke that rose from my mother's cigarettes. My destination was to rise to the heavens that mingled with the smoke, but the kitchen ceiling got in the way, and as my life passed I grew more convinced that I had not risen to heaven. Heaven stood outside my reach, outside of the room filled with smoke and the stories my mother once told me of terrible things that children shouldn't know. I am no longer sure if that child was me. I cannot see him. I see her. I see the hand going to the mouth to plant the cigarette between her lips. I see the red, somewhat obscene, stain of her lipstick on the tip of the cigarette and I know that those things are real. But of myself I see nothing, I don't see myself there in that kitchen, appearing and disappearing between the smoke. I see a clock on the wall, or at least I think I do, and a small deep fryer on the counter. I do not recall the pleasure of food in that kitchen room, but there is something that lingers: the taste and the colour of roasted potatoes, greased in beef fat, more sumptuous and perfect to me than candy. Between the smoke that rose into heaven and the exquisite greasy skin of my mother's roast potatoes, I find a trace of myself, a boy, a boy child, a boy who is capable of tasting and of seeing, but a boy I cannot see.

II

I know now that I was born into words. That is who I am and who I was. I was born with the burred and beautiful bits of words already broken in my mouth.

*There was a man
Who was not there
Who was not there
Who was not there
Every day he was not there.
Oh how I wish he'd go away.*

My father spoke these words from the bedside. It seems to me as I write this that I can feel the presence of his body on the edge of my bed. Everything is dark. I want the truth of his words to come to me out of the dark. But the truth of words is the impossible truth of an existence made out of words, the words that the world is made of. I was the boy who was not there. Who was not there. Who was not there.

When the bombs first fell my father was a boy. The city was lit up with the great burning fires and he saw the underbellies of the German bombers as they flew above the city. He saw the city too. For the first time in many months he saw the city, for the city was under blackout during the night, and he saw nothing. Then the massed bombers came and the searchlight sought them in the sky and the city was on fire and illuminated the night and he was shocked to see it; the city assembled like a great mass of words made incarnate and the bombs that fell and lit the great fires that made the language of that night possible. These nights informed and coloured the words that my father spoke to me. The terror, the excitement, and the mystery of the man who is never there, and yet refuses to go away. There was a man who was not there. I know this man. I am this man.

III

There is no good or bad way to tell a story. It is by stories that we are destroyed and by stories that we live. I know many stories, I have told a few of them, perhaps too many. I have committed them to writing. Spoken them. Whispered them. Some of my stories were lies. That does not stop them from being stories. I told them enough times that I am have come to believe that they are true. I am the sum of these stories, but I am also the sum of the silences, and the dark rooms of children at night when things have gone wrong and wrongness becomes the standard for attempting to understand what's right. There is no story that sticks out, but there is the story that all of us live, which is our birth narrative, the story of our creation. Adam and Eve were forced from the back of a turtle and made to live in a garden filled with treacherous snakes and deadly fruit. Finally, with the aid of a magic apple they were set free, and the world and the world of stories, which are the same world, had its first happy ending. We know this story. In the desert, filled with rage, we meet a man and we murder him. This man is our father. We know this story. An otter or muskrat surfaces from the water with mud in its mouth and the earth is born. We know this story. These stories are what we are born into. A multitude of stories woven into a basket from which the sun was stolen by a crow or a raven. We know that female hands sent this woven basket drifting down the Nile River so that it would not be destroyed. Our stories are woven together to make the history of the world, which is also me, or you. By knowing these stories, we come to know the history of the world and of me and you. We come to know... I have no idea what it is we come to know.

*I do not know who I am.
I do not know who I am
I do not know who I am
Oh how I wish I would go away.*

IV

My name is Peter Unwin. I am the British ex-ambassador to Hungary. I was born in 1932. I did not write the book *1956* although that is the year I was born. I published a book about Lake Superior in the same year that Peter Unwin published a book about the North Channel. People say to me, "are you Peter Unwin?" I say, "No. I am *Peter Unwin*." They say the same thing of him. I'm sure of it. I know who I am, to this extent; I am not the British ex-ambassador to Hungary. I'm the other guy. I was born of smoke, of the gods of tobacco, on a table. I believe I was born on a kitchen table. That's the way it was done then. I was told that story and so I believe it. I was born in the country of the word, the country of poets, to a woman who had been brutalized. I met the man who brutalized her, her father. He told me brutal stories that were coloured with the *bleedin* and the *effins* of that industrial city. The sediment of mustard gas lay deep in this man's lungs. The gas of war brutalized this man. It sat in the lungs of my grandfather; the names of exotic European battle places where the gas appeared in the morning like mist and entered the mouth and lungs of the young men who are my fathers. The blood, it entered the blood, became the blood. The blood was passed on to the next generation. This memoir is an attempt to consciously allow that blood to flow, to flow like the smoke of our passage into heaven. My mother smoked the filter-less Players cigarettes until the cancer forced

her into a milder, more modern brand. It was not the cancer that killed her but the blood. The blood, the smoke and the liquor of the Hudson's Bay Company. She was a child when she went underground to escape the bombs. When she came out the soldiers whistled at her from the back of trucks. Today when I smoke, when I live and die in the smoke, I commemorate her. My mother.

My people followed the great migration across the great ocean. We came in converted cattle boats of the Greek Line and were processed in the immigration sheds of Halifax, Nova Scotia, in a country called *Ca-na-da*. I have no first memory. I have told myself that I do, I have even written this memory down, which is perhaps why I consider it my first memory. I am standing under the long drooping beans of the catalpa tree, in the land of the Onondaga and Cayuga and the Tuscarora, with a baseball glove in my hand. I have called this my first memory. I have commemorated it, fixed it in writing as my first memory. I have no way of knowing it was my first memory. The darkness was great, and it remains great. The man who was not there, he is still not there. I am not capable of making him go away. He stands waist deep in water, with the other young men. The bodies, dead for some time, float toward me. They push the corpses away with the butts of their rifles. But why should my father be doing this? He was a radio operator, I thought? On the *HMS Dido*?

The strands of smoke and shadow cannot be entirely separated and I sense now that the story of who I am is the story of who other people are. Of my father and mother and my sister, of the many people I do not know, of Atotarho who had snakes emerging from his head and was subdued by Hiawatha, the other Hiawatha, the real one, the nation builder.

V

I locate myself on this planet by the colour of dandelions, the colour of sun, and of butter. We have crossed the great ocean. We are here. The massive steelworks of the new world; Stelco, Dofasco, their chimneys belch forth the soft white clouds that make the summer possible. Squat grey figures appear on a grey screen called "teevee." Everything is dark, not completely dark, but the dark of black and white television. Something is wrong. It will come to me years later that heaven has a crack in it. Heaven itself. What if that white fluffy substance pouring forth from the great stacks of Inco and Dofasco are not clouds after all, but something else, something that contains a poisonous seed? There are many questions, but we are young; we bound through the woods and forests, eating the hard wild pears, crushing the fragrant green shells of the walnut. The buds of the sumac burn as bright as votive candles and the smell is unforgettable. The deer and the owls live alongside us. Salamanders lie beneath the rock. We live the outdoor life of children. We are children of the earth, running and turning brown in the woods. We engage in the initiation rites of the forest. We know the feel of the earth under our feet, and the many paths that run through the woods. The woods abound. The woods sustain us. Occasionally a derelict trainman appears suddenly in the woods wearing the stripped hat of his trade. He goes by the name of Barnacle Bill, or Big Red, or something similar. We run from him in fear, but the joyous fear of boys. These are the men, we are told, who *do things* to boys. We do not know what these things are, we don't care. This threat exists for the sole purpose of allowing us to run, marvelous and howling through the sinewy paths of the woods.

VI

I locate myself but I do not know myself. I locate the rock and the water, the ravines, the moss, the pine, the prickly membrane of the chestnut and the long bean of the catalpa. There are things going on in the living room. Voices raised, unnatural voices. The blood of war has seeped across the ocean; it has found a home in the next room. I share this room with the man who was not there. My spirit brother, my totem. I have no brother. My totem is the word. The man who was not there has taken up residence inside me. He is me. You are not there, he says to me. No, I say. I am here. It is you who is not there. It is a crucial argument, but fruitless. The day comes and I am there in the sun, beneath a catalpa tree, playing baseball. The high, chain-saw sound of the cicada floods the brilliant day and burns itself into my memory. This is what it means to be alive, this is what I am; the sound of that sex-starved insect emerging after thirteen years to scream for a mate. The distinct sound of a tennis ball being hit by a baseball bat. Above all of us, the awe-inspiring singing of the cicadas.

VII

From an early age, I felt the power of books. At the age of fourteen, my mind was made up. I would join the fleshless community of authors. I would become of the word and the word would become of me. I had just finished devouring Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*: I had no choice. Realism, American realism had knocked its fist against my chin. I felt the power of it soaring beyond the lurid, addictive paperbacks that bore the name of Edgar Rice Burroughs. What could be more manly, more adventurous than the name Edgar Rice Burroughs? Asimov, Bradbury. These were sour men; I did not know that then. Dreiser, perhaps more sour than any of them. But for the first time I felt the life of words that were driven by the power of lived experience, not by an author's desire to sell books, not flying to Mars following an after-death-experience, but standing on a street corner in the snow, ringing the Salvation Army bell. The world I lived in and the lived word. They would come together in me the way they come together in all of us. The sunshine of those day and years, the sheer adrenaline and sumptuousness of youth as we lay naked in the woods and the owl flew low over our exhausted bodies and clapped its great wings in approval. I am the people of the owl, my totem is the owl. Or the bear. Its enormous shit is there on the ground in front of me, the size of a football, blue and purple with blueberries. I step in it by accident while hauling wood from the woodpile to the stove.

VIII

My mother passed first. She had given birth to me on a table and took the great journey across waters on the *SS Columbia*, then boarded the immigrant trains at Halifax bearing westward across the land. All of memory mingles in the smoke of her cigarettes. They say that all lives end badly. She died in a room that was filled with her demons. She died cursing the curtains, and the broadloom and me and her long gone husband, her daughter, even the vodka that no longer did the job the way that particular job must be done. Her raw red laughter is my

blood and longing, her hair is my hair, her crushing and killing dependencies crush and kill me. Something about the death of our parents forces us to be born.

IX

My children came to me out the sky. Two of them. Two girls
 Who made me weep while I stared upward through the pines.
 They grinned at me and laughed. They felt the bark of the trees
 And declared them rough. "Rough," they said, but I think
 They meant the ruff ruff of the barking dog.

X

Everything has fallen apart. The hospital has been bombed. The old quarry where we swam naked has been turned into a dumpsite for hazardous waste. The white phosphorous has been dropped from airplanes on to the backs of screaming children where it will burn for the rest of their lives:

On the second floor of a hotel
 In Quebec City my daughter
 Screams in her sleep.
 She has overcome
 The terror of childhood but the world
 With its men who drop phosphorous
 From airplanes confuses her.

She has put her faith in animals;
 Horses and dogs in particular and refuses
 to believe that Santa has come to a bad end.
 She is a girl of great beauty but the brimstone
 Of cheap language fills her brain
 With the business of war and tonight
 She makes wounded noises in her sleep.
 Beneath her Montcalm clutches the fatal bullet
 At his chest. Wolfe is there among the dying
 And she joins them in a cry that rises
 Above the busker singing *La Vie en Rose*
 From the boulevard below.

From the memory of regret I find the ashes from which no mythical bird will rise. It is not easy. My mother sits at the living room table smoking one cigarette after another. To smoke is to be next to god. She wants only to bring happiness to the people in her life, even to the dog. She will be denied this, she will barely exist in photographs, she will leave almost no trace of her

passing, but why should she leave a trace of her passing? Why should anyone leave a trace of their passing? She will live forever in the smoke, in the indigenous smoke of a day that is coming, a better day. I know this day. This day was given to me by her. I once read a story in which the narrator describes his father's dead body as twisted like the root of a tree. This is how I imagine my father at the end, in the room in which he died. Mary did not want me to see him. "No," she said, "don't come, I don't think you should come." And so I stayed home. Grandpa is dead I said to the children, and they had no words to say to this.

XI

I feel this life, which never really began, coming to an end. I am old. Not venerably old, but beyond the vigour of the game, especially the game played at its most elite level. This is all I wanted. My body is where I lived. My body inhaled the smoke that rose to the heavens. I have watched the Word grow old. I see it now hanging from the wires like tossed sneakers. Its contact is lost. My fingers rarely touch the paper, the calf skin, or the pulped rags that formed the surface of my profession. The word went into the wire and became exhausted. This has been the great event, the great transformation of my life. Everything has changed. The smoke no longer rises to the heavens. The smoke will prevent us from breathing.

And so the stories, which are us, are siphoned from the smoke, from the air, from the water, from the blood, and from the great blue scats of the bear that has feasted on blueberries. In my way I was put here to smell this wind, to cry out this simple warning which it is already too late to heed. *You* know me, but I do not know me. I know you, no, I don't really know you. I have memories. I am free now to invest these memories with fondness. The man who was not there is now everywhere. We call him Mr. Surveillance. He lives over top of us and underneath us. O how I wish he would go away. But he will not go away. He has come to take ownership of the smoke and of the words. He has no use for me, or for my ilk. My daughters grow, they are nearly young women now. It is more crucial than ever that we keep our memories nourished by the earth and the excrement of wild animals.

Toronto, 2015