the bohemian aesthetic
provocant, intelligent et gratuit—pas la revue de votre père

writing susanna

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I was talking recently with a young woman who was biographically inclined. (By "young", I mean about thirty-five; that is, she didn't remember panty girdles, stockings with seams up the back, having to wear white cotton gloves in summer, Elvis as a youth, the advent of the indoor clothes dryer—*that* young.) I puzzled this young woman, or certain facts about my life puzzled her. "But why," she said, "why would you take a job as a cashier and counter server in a coffee shop?" (Which I'd done, in the summer of 1962, in what is now the Venture Inn on Avenue Road.) The well-known author, already equipped with an A.M. from Radcliffe, mopping up the soda counter, dishing out the Bunn coffee? She couldn't fathom it. Maybe I had done it for "the research"?

I asked the same question of a woman of my own age who was sitting beside me at dinner. "Why would I have taken a job as a cashier in a coffee shop in 1962, when I was 22?" I asked her. She didn't even blink. "Because that was the only job you could get," she said. Correct. And lucky, I might add, to have it. Not that I was very good at it. The cash register kept getting stuck, I routinely spilled the coffee. Oh, well. I needed the money.

My point being that I wasn't the well-known author then. I was a semi-educated semi-child with inadequate life skills and large, and—in the eyes of the sort of folks who owned coffee shops—somewhat crazed ambitions, which I was cunning enough to keep under cover. The A.M. was bad enough, but a poetess? Gimme a break, eh? It wasn't the first nor the last time I got a job by being less than frank about the rampaging word-addicted Ms Hyde concealed beneath my how-may-I-help-you Miss Jekyll exterior.

Three years earlier, I'd met Charles Pachter, in the course of another summer job. I was the Nature instructor at Camp White Pine, a Reform Jewish establishment where I'd landed in much the same way as I'd ended up in the coffee shop—through a combination of necessity (needing the money) and luck (I knew something about frogs and toadstools, I met someone who needed someone with this knowledge). I was nineteen; Charles was sixteen, and had hair then, and was the assistant to the Art Instructor. He thought I was exotic, which, in that setting, I was. I thought he was a mercurial scamp with a serious talent kept well-cloaked.

And so we went on. He got the silk-screen equipment on which I'd been making the odd dollar by turning out university drama posters, I got the benefit of a running commentary on his tumultuous life. Soon enough, I was teaching grammar to Engineering students at the University of British Columbia ("Why would you …" etc. "Because it was the only …" etc. "And lucky to have it.")

Meanwhile, he was a graduate student at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. As a byproduct of having learned to make paper out of old rags, he decided to hand-print a group of poems in the livre d'artiste tradition, and asked if I had anything. I sent him a suite of seven poems called "The Circle Game", and he went to town on it, grinding up his blue jeans for the endpapers in the process. This—both poems and book—later became thought of as Art; but, at the time, it was just a couple of kids experimenting. There are many laudable things about being "famous"; but, at that age, it's much better not to be. You can do what you like, and be less nervous about it. Nobody's looking. Not that we didn't take ourselves seriously. Or not ourselves—what we were doing. There is a difference. The next year I went back to Harvard. When I'd been there before, from 1961 to '63, I'd had to study American Literature and Civilization in order to pass that section of the Comprehensives, and I'd been lucky enough—there's that word again—to take Perry Miller's American Romantics course. Miller was a raucous, larger-than-life figure who drank too much, but he was brilliant, and his course was taught in the mornings, before he was truly what my aunts would called 'oiled'. Still, he was oiled enough to be astonishing. He made Fenimore Cooper into a tragic figure instead of the droning bore I'd supposed him to be, just for instance.

Through his example—his work on the American Puritans, The Raven and the Whale, and so forth—I'd got it into my head that we in Canada had been short-changed. We'd always been told—well, everyone *knew*—that Canadian literature, if any, was second-rate, and we must, therefore, confine ourselves to the good-for-us English variety; but if the Americans at Harvard were studying third-rate Puritan doggerel and what amounted to Puritan laundry lists in search of the origins of their soul ("A city upon a hill, a light to all nations"—sound familiar? Ronald Reagan was quoting), why couldn't we study our own laundry lists in aid of a similar quest? Once you really delved into them, there might be a lot more there than just laundry. Thus, I was silly or homesick enough to write my paper for Miller on the Canadian Charles Mair's long poem "Tecumseh". I got some sort of a B, as I recall. I dedicated The Handmaid's Tale partly to him, hoping that, in case of an afterlife, he might get a cackle out of it. Though the real dedication ought to have been to Survival: if books have grandfathers, he's certainly one of them.

Perry Miller was dead by the time I got back to Harvard in 1965. I was finishing The Edible Woman by then, and studying for my Orals; "The Circle Game" was about to come out from Contact Press, with a cover designed by me from Letraset and stick-on dots. ("But why did you design so many of your own book covers?" "Because a real designer would have cost too much money," etc.) I was also planning another novel, doing some reviewing, and writing poetry in my spare time. I kept all of this literary activity as secret as I could. My degree would be, I hoped, my day-job meal ticket: I would, however grimly, teach (though not at Harvard, where women were barred from the English Department). But the academy was not a hospitable place for would-be writers then, especially not poetesses, and they would have been called that, derisively. I felt the same need to conceal my identity there as I had at the coffee shop.

Somewhere in around here I had a vivid dream about Susanna Moodie, who was already embedded in some dim substratum of my brain, having been on my parents' bookshelf, and also in the school reader in Grade Six with her house burning down. I dreamt I'd written an opera about her. (Was it James Reaney's "Night-Blooming Cereus" that was at the back of my mind? Possibly. The stage in my dream looked a lot like the one at Hart House.)

An opera was out of the question for me—I couldn't write music—but on the theory that you shouldn't snub such an insistent dream, I did get Moodie's books out of the library. I found them disappointing; she seemed...well...dumpy. So circumspect. There was so much she wasn't saying. But then I started to write poems spoken by her, and then more poems. It was the unsaid in her work that I found compelling. (I didn't have the benefit of her letters, then; just how much was left unsaid in her published work we now can more than guess.)

Many of the things I've written have begun—and, indeed, have continued—against my better judgment. Susanna Moodie? Serious poems? Surely not. Studying this area was one thing, but writing about it, or out of it...it wasn't the sort of subject you were supposed to write about. (Though it *was*, soon after this.) But I kept on with the poems, or they with me; I was still writing them (or, at least, working on them) in Montreal in 1967.

Finally, they were finished—or as finished as they were going to be—and I gave them to Charles Pachter. By this time, he'd produced several other hand-made books, including a blood-smeared, serigraphed "Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein". The name of my new sequence was "The Journals of Susanna Moodie", and Charles was ignited by it. The mockup he produced was a many-colored thing of splendor, but it was much beyond his financial capabilities to print himself, and beyond everyone else's, too, as it turned out. My by-then most-of-the-time poetry publisher, Oxford, couldn't afford it. Neither could my other poetry publisher, House of Anansi, and neither could Coach House Press. The Canada Council turned it down for a publishing grant, as they turned down, over the years, several other proposals made to them by Charles. (He was too mouthy, is my bet. Artists were supposed to be mute. And I'd won the Governor General's at too early an age. Squash them like bugs.) So, Pachter's version sat there until he could finally print it; and, after that, until now, when it could be reproduced; and I did an Oxford version with black-and-white collages, made out of nineteenth-century prints supplied by my editor, Bill Toye, with scraps of my own fuzzy watercolors pasted on. Much cheaper.

So, there's that story. The Oxford book came out in 1970, by which time my thirty-five-year-old would have been nine, of an age to have taken it in high school by the time she got there. Of an age to have been bored by it, perhaps, in the way I, myself, was once bored by Susanna Moodie, as I took her book off the bookshelf, glanced into it with scant interest, put it back, not knowing she was biding her time.

As for Susanna, I suppose she was my youthful Ms. Hyde, and I was the Miss Jekyll through which she manifested herself—made of my anti-matter, a negative to my positive, or vice versa. She was appalled by the wilderness, I by the city, once upon a time. Both of us were uprooted. Both of us were far from home, both anxious, both scrabbling for cash, both under pressure. Both knew the space between what could be said safely and what needed to be withheld from speech. I said for her what she couldn't say, and she for me. It's often over such distances, such emptiness and silence, that the poetic voice must travel.

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