ENVIRONMENT

Dead Poet's Society

Helping trees flee climate change

BY TKTK
ILLUSTRATIONS BY TKTK

We were all gathered in Calgary's Queen's Park Cemetery at his grave, where script on a simple wooden cross read, "Murdoch Burnett, poet." He had attempted suicide before, so his death hadn't come as a surprise. A Chinook arch pushed the clouds east. Two of the Burnett brothers were there, one of them a dead ringer for Murdoch, giving us the unsettling impression that he was attending his own funeral. A lost RCMP officer in full dress uniform approached as Murdoch's sister, a minister, was performing the service. We turned to look at him, and his younger sister said, "You're too late."

After the ceremony, we all went to the sister's home and ate sandwiches and drank coffee and told stories—and did what every funeral demands: resurrect the best of the deceased and leave the rest in the ground.

I met Murdoch in grade twelve. I was a new kid, having arrived in Calgary from Winnipeg a few weeks after school started. He quit the day I showed up. He came in to the diner across from the school; many students ate lunch there, and I was sitting tentatively at a table, trying to fit in. His brow was furrowed in anger, and he looked like one of the monsters from *Where the Wild Things Are*. He yelled to those assembled, "I'm quitting this fucking prison, and if any of you have half a brain, you'll quit, too." He slammed the door, and we went back to our lunches. I didn't see him again until months later, when a friend introduced us. He said he was a poet, an exotic concept in that oil town.

In my father, I discovered not the outlaw hero I'd dreamed of **but a bitter fifty-year-old man who lived from debt to debt *and* dated teenage girls.**

An admirer of the Beat writers, he helped bring Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs to Calgary for readings. He was a gregarious man who thought Dylan Thomas was a role model rather than a cautionary tale, with his drinking and writing and raging. He wore a series of dark thrift-shop suit jackets and was always doing something with a cigarette: lighting it, putting it out, waving it as he railed about local philistines or Rod Stewart selling out.

Friends formed a band, and Murdoch wanted to be the drummer. He had never played before and lacked any natural talent. I would sometimes drop by his practice space and hear him banging away in a small room with the door closed. Few things sound as angry as someone learning to drum. He looked the part, at least. Spiky hair and the face of a Celtic street tough. He wanted to turn his poems into songs and watch young women melt in his presence. The band practised in a garage, drank a lot, and played around town. Like most bands, it flared briefly, then died.

After I moved east, I saw less of Murdoch. He would sometimes come to Toronto and stay with me. I went to see him read his poetry at a Queen Street bar and felt envious of the attention he received. I hadn't written much at that point: I'd been published in a few small magazines and rejected by a dozen larger ones. Sitting in the audience among all the dark poets, like crows in their black jeans and black jackets, I looked like Murdoch's parole officer. After the reading, a goth girl approached to tell him she, too, wrote poetry, and maybe he'd like to read some of it. Off they went.

Those days, before cellphones and social media, the city was a network of rumour: a warehouse party where David Byrne might appear, an absent-parent party in a Rosedale mansion, a speakeasy where Dan Aykroyd was tanking up. We'd canvass the city for excitement, wandering from a rooftop party filled with poets to a Queen Street bar, where we'd drink beer and wonder whether the tattooed, dead-eyed waitress had a boyfriend.

Murdoch's drinking flourished and became a serious concern. It always had been, really, but when you're young, excessive drinking looks like exuberance. At some point—around thirty, maybe—it starts to look like alcoholism, dull and grey and grinding. He alienated many of our old gang as he became increasingly difficult. One winter night, a friend whose car had died knocked on his door. Murdoch answered, and the friend asked if he could call him a cab. "Fuck you," Murdoch said and shoved him down, kicked him, and slammed the door. He left lovers and friends behind. He wrote less, drank more. At one point, after taking a job on a landscaping crew, he came into a party shouting, "Does it bother anyone that one of the country's best poets is laying sod?"

He tried Alcoholics Anonymous but

You Are Not Going To Come Trillium

BY MADHUR ANAND

But I do come to Trillium. To the Cardiac
Short Stay Unit where you've been sent for the second stent,
where free sanitizer prevents the spread of panic.
We laugh. Everyone is half-naked in I-See-U.

Behind a grey curtain, a thump and quiet invoke
Code Blue. We uncover your bottom-line, the Left Main
of a black-and-white heart, hand-drawn, and the occlusion
coloured-in about eighty-percent with a blue pen

by the cardiologist who speaks of fine mesh tubes,
"flexible, supportive, capable of expansion,
biocompatible", and of small and large balloons.
I think rubber, but it will be metal or fabric.

Code Red shuts down elevators, even when it's just
a computer screen at the nurse station giving off
smoke. Smoke. Mother, you think of everything. *See my
room, beside sewing machine, pink one*, which signifies

the sari for the funeral, gold coins in the bank.
You won't be noted for lack of effort, for cruelty,
or deforestation. You've never tasted red meat.
I'll wear your rabbit-fur and watch the Brazilian

Forest Code green future landscapes, and you'll be happy
I came. That it's all spoken for now (for when). On May's
verge, I decode what's become of White —violent
patients, perennial, narrowing the running trail.

How things won't be contained. Arrival of disorder
in a burst or its opposite. *Gagar me sagar.*
The sea in an earthen pot. Your approval of our new house
based solely on the grandness of its entrance.

didn't stay, said he wasn't really an AA guy. He wasn't interested in anyone else's story, for one thing, and didn't believe in a higher power. The coffee sucked. And he didn't stop drinking. To dry out, he went to a clinic, where he was surrounded by skinny meth-head bikers. It wasn't a success, but he tried another clinic, and eventually he did quit. He migrated to Comox, British Columbia, on Vancouver Island, and lost touch with most of his old friends, myself included. Years slipped by. I heard he had throat cancer, was in a bad way, came back to Alberta, though few people saw him. I wondered if he would be one of those friends who quietly faded from my life.

It was a surprise when, a few years later, I received an email from Murdoch that included a photograph of an idyllic house on a tropical coast. He was living in Bermuda, of all places. While recovering from cancer, he had reconnected with a woman he'd known for years named Susan Mulligan. They fell in love and got married. She was a lawyer and had applied for the job of crown counsel in Bermuda; to her surprise, she got it. They moved there, to a pink house on the ocean. After a life of basement suites, black jeans, and marginal employment, Murdoch was in paradise.

Several years went by with emails that included pictures of egrets, sunsets, and tropical flowers. He had stumbled into the most unlikely of second acts. Life was good in Bermuda, though his eyesight was failing, he wrote.

Before long, this second act came to a close. His drinking escalated from heavy to disastrous. He ranted and yelled and withdrew. An old pattern repeated itself: a fabulous woman finally threw in the towel after years of heroic service. They both agreed he should go back to Canada for a while. He returned to Vancouver Island because he was familiar with its medical and rehab systems. In January 2015, he tried to kill himself by stepping in front of a semi-trailer truck. He broke multiple bones and spent weeks in intensive care, but he survived.

In April, he sent me an email. Part of it was structured as a poem, whether by habit or as the result of his failing eyesight or a formatting anomaly:

> No excuse but my eyesight is bad
> I still should be in touch more often
> I was in the psych ward when I heard about Michael [Green, a mutual friend who died in a car accident]
> And am still banged up from the suicide attempt.
> I am hanging in best I can
> And sending you
> Best thoughts.

He could no longer read books and newspapers. Reading emails was a struggle. "I listen to books on tape and keep up as best I can with (the always grim) news but man o man it is hard... I always found writing difficult but as my eyesight failed it just became too hard and so my whole

sense of myself just tanked." No longer gregarious, he'd become a recluse. "I probably will survive," he wrote. "I suck at suicide, best efforts notwithstanding."

He still spoke to his wife, Susan, regularly but had contact with few other people besides his therapist. He was almost blind. The cancer surgery left him with a speech impediment, which made him self-conscious. Writing became impossible. "I feel like I have a book in me," he wrote, "but as you know, man, even on a level playing field writing is a bitch, and blind and sad and often drunk and can't talk so pretty ... Yikes." His last email came later that month. "I am going to look at your note word by word," he said. "But again I have to remind you it is a bitch to read so keep your brilliance short."

In September, he killed himself. I phoned old friends. That poor tortured man, we all said. He was found in his apartment, full of valium, a plastic bag taped over his head.

After he died, I reread his emails and then went to his website. "I study despair," he wrote on his blog. "It is part of my job." He studied his own. It was the closest, the most abundant. He wrote about the plight of the blue-collar worker: bad teeth, less money, less education, fewer opportunities. "Almost everything conspires when one is born to the working class to beat the genius out of us."

He held on to the notion of his own genius for a long time. It was one of the buttresses of his life, publicly unflagging. He had once been a pioneer and mentor, having helped establish an arts scene in Calgary. He published eight books of poetry. His portrait made the cover of the city's first alternative arts magazine, *Last Issue*. And he had the makings of a gifted teacher: charismatic, passionate about poetry and literature, well read, and inspiring to others.

In *Dead Poets Society*, Robin Williams plays that teacher, exhorting his students to seize the day, quoting Walt Whitman, telling them not to die filled with regret. Did they live enough? Love enough? What would they leave behind? Williams hanged himself at the age of sixty-three. He left some brilliant performances and some sentimental kitsch, a remarkable talent overcome by darkness. His mentor Jonathan Winters was also a groundbreaking comic, one who made a few visits to what he called "the loony bin." He incorporated it into his comedy. But some madness always lurked at the edge.

For millennia, a link has been perceived between art and mental illness in its many forms. Aristotle observed, "Why is it that all men who are outstanding in philosophy, poetry, or the arts are melancholic?" The connection has historically been cast in a romantic or tragic light: Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Dylan Thomas, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Hart Crane, Spalding Gray. Ludwig van Beethoven might have been bipolar; Edgar Allan Poe was depressive; William Blake might have been mad.

In the last few decades, scientists have determined that, regardless of psychopathy, authors face a greater risk of suicide. One Swedish study, by researchers at the Karolinska Institutet, tracked almost 1.2 million people who had various mental illnesses, were alcoholics, or had killed themselves. The results, published in 2012, noted that writers were almost 50 percent more likely than members of the general population to commit suicide. For a control group, they used accountants, who are, unsurprisingly, alarmingly sane.

Perhaps they don't feel defined by what they do. Murdoch's sense of self was inextricably bound to his writing. When he could no longer work, he was adrift, even from himself. Accountants deal with the finite; there are no loose ends. Art is nothing but loose ends.

As a sub-group, poets are even worse off. In his book *The Price of Greatness: Resolving the Creativity and Madness Controversy*, published in 1995, psychiatrist Arnold M. Ludwig reports that of the eminent poets he'd looked at, roughly 20 percent had committed suicide, versus 5 percent for all other artistic professions. (The year after the book was published, the rate in the general US population was about 1 percent.) A 2003 study by California psychologist James C. Kaufman with the ominous title "The Cost of the Muse: Poets Die Young" notes that poets have the shortest life expectancy among writers: 62.2. years (Murdoch was 61.9). According to Kaufman, poets are more introspective, more emotive. The shorter lifespan is evident throughout history and across cultural and ethnic borders.

The romantic interpretation of writers' predilection for madness is that art shoes us a world we can't quite glimpse, and the explorers who take us there pay a price for that journey. But Kaufman suggests an inverted causality—that artists were using their work to self-medicate. If this is true, it poses an obvious problem. What happens when the medication is no longer effective—when your book is panned, when your poetry is neglected?

After Murdoch died, I reread his poetry. When he was young, he revelled in youth, but he abandoned that quickly. By forty, he was speaking of himself as a grizzled veteran of the art world. "I have learned," he wrote then, "and probably too late, that life is not a poem. It is money and taxes and visits to the doctor and getting enough exercise and not smoking a zillion cigarettes and not drinking all the vodka in the world. Now here I am, forty-four years old, crinkly faced from a zillion cigarettes, red-faced from all the vodka in the world, and I realize that no poem can save me." But he was saved. Susan rescued him and took him to paradise.

Still, that dark hole in the centre loomed, as it does in many of us. What have I done with my life? And after that drudging inventory, we're left to contend with the realization that there is still so much to do. Murdoch couldn't write that book—or much of anything, finally. Small pleasures disappeared from his life. And as blindness descended, his perpetual twilight soon became total darkness.

The day after the funeral, a celebration of his life was held in a theatre. A slide show of photographs scrolled across a large screen as we listened to a recording of Murdoch reading his poetry. The 158 pictures ran by chronologically: the eager, smiling 1950s schoolboy, the sullen adolescent, the emerging poet, and, finally, the bloated sixty-year-old ambushed by middle age. The younger photos are the most compelling. In them, Murdoch is laughing or defiant or pensive, a poet still convinced of his impending greatness, the arc of every imagined life.

ONLINE Don Gillmor on the early days of the Alberta oil patch, at *thewalrus.ca/the-roughneck-diaries*.