

THE HEART OF MY FATHER

Thomas Asplund

Who knows what an electronic microscope might do to the great gulf fixed between faith and knowledge? I suppose that one day some chemical mechanic under the flickering death of fluorescent tubes will find deep within the coiling chemistry of my island body a germ of that narrow dirt road

which ran through summer's miasma of sweet clover between a beaten windbreak of dusty cottonwoods and an irrigation ditch

where once

my father ran down tripping ruts of clay

in flight and play

to the straight

gray sanctuary of home. I must say it plainly without the rhythm of convention without the rhythm of history because I sense in my patterned cells the tentative cry the first unmeasured measure of a melody

carried by the constant wind which ran down the road with my father and over the paintless clapboards and over the wagon-breaking buffalo wallows in the prairie beyond and over the stamped sod of the dugout where my grandfather kept

in the close dark room of earth

his

wife and children during their first winter as prairie creatures

and near the wind the formless exhortation of Prophets

"Brother, the Church has contracted with the Canadian Government to carry out the construction of an Irrigation Canal just east of

Our Cardston settlement. The Lord would like you to assist Us in this Important Endeavour."

IMMIGRANTS AND SETTLERS
200 MILLON ACRES OF CHOICE FARM LAND FREE

The Canadian Government will give settlers in Western Canada up to 160 acres of land at no cost. To obtain title settlers must cultivate a minimum acreage, construct a building on the land and establish residence.

APPLY: Department of Citizenship and Immigration,
 Ottawa, Canada or the Territorial Land
 Registration Office.

Blessed are the Meek, for they shall inherit the Earth.
 Blessed are the poor in spirit.
 Blessed are the poor in beauty.
 Do you know the geography of a hard search for Beauty?
 the mint patch by the ditch

gold and purple flags blooming early
 at the sheltered side of the house

strawberries

and hard clabber

glass marbles with secret swirls
 and bubbles

a new issue of the Free Press (with coloured comics)

trees

a watermelon that ripened before frost

Oh, this sounds like a catalogue of bathos in our jungle of beauty in our riot of restraint in our supermarket of enlightenment where it is impossible to know the difference between sentimentality and hunger. The hunger of waiting for things to grow

for snow to melt
 for visitors to come
 for wind to stop
 for the promised coming of a father who left to preach the gospel or to build a canal or to follow the sheep-shearing or to join a threshing crew.

Welcome Beauty, welcome, welcome
*"Welcome, welcome, Sabbath morning.
 Now we rest from every care.
 Welcome, welcome is thy dawning
 Holy Sabbath, day of prayer."*

The stage is set with high dark leather chairs, the saucy chorale of a pump organ and the Bishop, hatless white-haloed forehead and leather face, tending

"Bless the leadership of Thy Church from the Prophet and General Authorities at the head thereof, down to the least and last ordained."

my boot is cracking right there by the lace

"We pray for the Missionaries in the field and in distant lands across the sea. Lead them to the doors of the Honest In Heart."

brother ramsbotham's milking overalls are sticking out under his Sunday pants

"Help us to go about our various activities this Day in a manner which is pleasing before Thee."

sister harris took the sacrament with her left hand

"And return us to our various places of abode in Safety."

Where have you builded your abode? The foolish man built his house upon the sand. But the wise man built his house upon

160 acres of unbroken prairie. Rough-sawn spruce. Poplar fence posts. One unfloored room. You work on the irrigation canal six days each week. On Saturday you try to finish early, ride 25 miles and with the horse and hand-plow break the new land which you have selected for its black richness

and for the handful of Mormon neighbours.

Ten acres to qualify the first year whether it grows or not. Work through the long prairie twilight each Saturday night. Rest on the Sabbath morning and take sacrament with your neighbours in the nearby home of Brother and Sister Anderson, before the long ride back.

But one silver windless day in June the ground is singing.

Enough land has been broken to qualify and all but one acre is seeded. A small acre open and ready.

But there is no ox, and too much sunshine to find a mire.

Lord, forgive me

For my life rests in the abundance of Thy Creations

My joy is in the seed of my loins: I am Thy Hostage, But when the Earth blooms my loved ones can come to dwell with me again

And we can be one; even as the Father and Son are one.

So you begin to plant the seeds quickly

letting them fall where

they may. And you work quickly to mitigate the offense until you are hailed to a startled stop by a Mounted Policeman in his hard red coat.

Hello, he says.

hello

I've noticed you working this place the past few weeks. Where are you from?

i'm working a team on the irrigation canal near Stirling.

A Mormon, eh?

(that involuntary twitch of fear) yes.

From Utah then?

yes.

Your family still there?

yes. i'm trying to get the place ready for them.

(The Law speaks with a soft English accent, sounding casually direct and official. It looks like General Kitchener.) *Did you know it's against the law to work land on Sunday?*

(Perhaps you can pretend righteous ignorance but guilt prevents the further sin.) yes.

I'm sorry. I'll have to give you a summons. We don't generally worry about a little Sunday work, you understand; but Anderson your neighbour saw you this morning and swore out an official complaint. I don't like it you understand. It will only be a small fine.

(I was a stranger, and ye took me in; I was sick and ye visited me, in prison and ye came unto me.)

Hope your family enjoys it here, says the Mountie as he wheels his horse away.

In the silent lightless winter morning you can enjoy the small warm spot in your bed, buried beneath the comforting weight of quilts and flannel sheets, knowing that it is not your turn to rise and milk the cow or fill the reservoir in preparation for the coming day. But the hour is coming when all must rise

and struggle to the warming
kitchen and dress stiffly before the dull yellow lamplight is
smothered by the dull yellow daylight

the reluctant dawn.
My grandmother sinned weekdays in a stained teacup. And on Sundays she worried about dressing

and feeding
and facing neighbours
and the Church of the Devil
and the Poor Lost Tribes
and the Great and Dreadful Day

but her faith was elsewhere.

Always she listened in the wind
for the whisper of God.

For by Grace are ye saved through faith

lest anyone should boast
and she searched in the dust for the blessings of God

taking from
shattered clay the fruits of toil

reaping where she had sown and
storing up her treasure. Each harvest was a battle

a bitter war
with the late spring, the wind, the early frost. And each September
her kitchen was filled with green tomatoes, wrested from the killer
clear night of first frost
to ripen in the safety of her redoubt

But sometimes she fasted. And sometimes she prayed. She knew her enemies.

Her youngest son was a frail and beautiful child when she first travelled to the Canadian wilderness. At the urging of a wealthy aunt,

the child was left in the safety of that childless Utah home to avoid the rigors of settlement. He was a fair and quiet boy, whose unspoken needs returned blossom and grace to careful love given. When the aunt suggested that an adoption be arranged so that she could raise the child with security and advantage, my grandmother sensed another enemy and in reflex gathered that which she claimed for her pain to the safety of her affection. But her affection was not sufficient and the child died. Thereafter my grandmother watched more carefully for her enemies

and her quick
hands and her quick eyes were always ready.

Her marriage, as I knew it, was chiseled, hard
marked by the
erosion of wind and frost. It was not reconciled or shared

but like
genuine virtue it was unconscious of its success and its toughness.
Happiness, as such, was not an issue.

There were too many important
things to worry about. Fair share of irrigation water. Horses in
the garden. Potato bugs. Children playing near the well. Stinkweed.
The milk cow going dry. Grandma worried. Knotting her hands in her
apron she darted to the kitchen window

at each sound
at each silence
when the wind knocked

when the wind whispered
and when there was nothing
more to worry about my grandmother died.

My grandfather, on the other hand, had an accommodation with the land. He treated it kindly, accepting respectfully whatever it chose to give. He could taste its sweetness touching a handful carefully with his tongue-tip and leaving a few stray bits hanging on his moustache. He could divine its secret waters with a willow branch.

Hey, said Raymond Knight (rancher and gentleman of wealthy Utah family), you're supposed to be out at my place digging that well.

Grandpa was leaning on the sunny store front on the main street of the town named for Brother Raymond. He examined the board sidewalk, pulled his moustache, bit his tongue.

i can't dig that well anymore.

But I've already paid you, said Brother Raymond.

(not looking up) i can't dig that well anymore.

You promised that well for this week. I've got stock coming in five days and I need the water, said Brother Raymond.

(still not looking up) i can't dig that well anymore.

Why in the Sam Hill can't you, said Brother Raymond.

(looking at the sun and squinting tightly)
i can't dig that well anymore because it's got four feet
of water in the bottom of it.

and thus did my grandfather play with life and its secrets (faith
without laughter is dead) The tough armtwist with fate (for laughter
suffereth long; is not puffed up; Beareth all things) And in the game
my grandfather kept his eye to the sun and secret stream

the dark and dazzling depths
the silent sinews of the scarlet-slashed Book of Life.

In the beginning was the Word

and the Word was made flesh
and dwelt among us full of grace and truth
the secret stream of words
and the anxious hand that broke the back of the Book of Life
light by light

in the yellow night

my grandfather read The Book

a book

any book.

His scriptures had been worked till they lay limp on the sideboard.
But with equal care he would read the backs of fertilizer sacks.
Corn-flakes boxes. The Watchtower. Pocket novels. At tomato-picking
time he would stop to read the old newspapers that his wife had used to
line the boxes. With hand-held glass he gleaned and pried from every
journal a richness of names and places . . . Cordoba, Pretoria, Nanking,
Addis Ababa, Blanchard, Graziani, Cambrai, Jutland, Haig, Shensi, Neuve-
Chapelle, Coral Sea, Salonika, Smuts, Manchukuo, Anzio.

And on a large coloured map hanging by the telephone he plotted
and counselled the armies and generals and their wars and rumours of
wars. In those moments with his grown sons or priesthood brethren,
when Grandma and the women were elsewhere

and nothing of practical

importance needed to be said

he could blossom with passionate two-
handed gestures to argue the dark ways of history and the glorious
ways of God.

But he floated gently

backwardly

through old age to death as

one will who doesn't like to fight. His funeral was the first I had
ever attended. It was an afternoon of passionate Words that he would
have enjoyed, the Words of Redemption and Salvation and Unseen Worlds
and peace that now seemed too real and too practical for his quiet
folded hands

the hands that once bounced and cradled me in blessing

If there are any of you with children to be blessed, would you please bring them forward.

a name and a father's blessing

for the blessings of the

father will prevail

If there are no more ordinances to perform I will open this meeting for the Bearing of Testimonies by members of the congregation. Brothers and Sisters, the Time is yours to use as you see fit.

now i am alone in my wilderness of time the vast, dry prairie of time the lonely winter night of time

time the temperer

time the temptor

If thou be the son of thy father command faith in this broken bread, and angels will bear you up.

is it not written?

yes is it not written in my forehead?

in the Book of Life? is it not written in the chemistry of my blood

the blood which is the life thereof?

the time is mine

but where there be time it shall perish for

time

majestically

magically

melts

like the wind it is always here

and never

and always beyond

and where there be faith it shall

once I huddled with other boys in

the chapel's last bench during a summer fast and testimony meeting.

A young sister of the Ward who was plain and backward stood suddenly

beside her mother at the piano and sang "If I Could Hie to Kolob"

then sat down leaving the congregation in a vast shoe-watching

silence. We sat in stunned, forced reverence. No one ever sang a testimony.

She sang her testimony. Using the words of another person. Composed.

A testimony should not be bound by structure, it should be a unique

expression of one's own faith.

My father's prayer before the Sunday feast that day was

quiet, deliberate, unusual in its phrasing. After we seated ourselves

and broke our fast my father told us of the meetings of his childhood.

Meetings of faith. Of saints who bore testimonies in unknown tongues.

Of saints who bore testimony by prophecy and the interpretation of

tongues. Of times past. And my heart turned to my father.

He spent almost a dozen years in the glorious paradox of

service as a Bishop. Once, in a spasm of fear, a long-inactive member

of my father's Ward summoned him to her death-bed. Her grieving

husband, a member of the small congregation of another struggling sect,

had invited the ministrations of his own pastor. The Minister and my

father came to the quiet house at the same time. As they waited together

in the close atmosphere of pain and anxiety, the woman died. That issue being settled, the Minister immediately raised the next item of business—in which church would the funeral be held?

The Minister presented a carefully balanced case with fervent civility and structured conviction. There was little doubt that the husband of the deceased was the principal beneficiary of the oblations of the Church—and his wife had not really asserted her religious impulses; indeed, she had frequently attended her husband's church meetings. But he fortified his careful logic with a forthright testimony; *We are only a small Church. But the children of God have always been small in number.*

I waited for the lightning of my father's reply
for the majesty of His Priesthood
for the great white tumbling stone of his faith
for the star of the morning
the crumbling drums and trumpets
the voice of angels

we believe all people are the Children of God, said my Father.
and he yielded to his adversary

The funeral was held in the Church of the Minister. My father attended as a faceless mourner.

And my heart turned to my father and I sensed
in the blood that poured through my turning heart

the pain of hunger
the pain of time
the pain of faith
the chemistry of faith

And I prayed for my naked and bloodless soul in the coming of that
great and dreadful day.